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*IN SEARCH OF THE GOOD LIFE  
IN  
CONTEMPORARY CHINA:  
STORIES FROM SHENZHEN*

TUNG-YI KHO

Dissertation submitted for the degree of PhD

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Department of Anthropology and Sociology  
SOAS, University of London

## Abstract

What makes a good life? And, specifically, what makes a good life in China today? The question is relevant because in the course of the past thirty-plus years, China sustained a historically unprecedented economic growth rate that averaged roughly 10% annually, lifting over 800 million of its population out of poverty. In line with these developments, urbanization proceeded apace throughout the country, precipitated by large-scale rural-urban migration. With an estimated 440 million rural-urban migrants in the 30 years since 1979, China's urban population exceeded its rural population for the first time in 2011 and has only continued to increase since. Such radical economic and demographic transformation of what has historically been an agrarian civilisation has led to talk of a civilisation-switch that has widely been celebrated as a monumental success. But have these coeval meta-level processes of modernization, implied by economic progress, development, and urbanisation, yielded the good life?

While asking about the good life has been the perennial quest of philosophy, this inquiry is based on a grounded empirical investigation. Essentially, my project has deployed the methods of anthropology to furnish an answer to what is a philosophical question. My study was based on ethnographic research conducted in Shenzhen, South China, over two extended stints totaling some twenty-four months. The city, which is in the Pearl River Delta region (*zhujiangsanjiao* 珠江三角), was the field-site of choice for my ethnography because it was the country's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and also its most successful. My interlocutors were all rural-migrants who had left home for Shenzhen in search of the supposedly good life. Did they find it? My research sought to find out, in the process, shedding light on the nature of modernity and our prospects of attaining the good life within it.

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## Chapter 1 China, Modernity, and the West

### 1.0 *The good life in China*

This project grapples with the question of *what makes a good life in China today*. While inquiring into the good life has been the perennial quest of philosophy, this project has sought clarity on the question not by way of philosophical introspection but through a grounded empirical investigation. My study was based on ethnographic field-research conducted in Shenzhen, South China, over two extended stints totaling some twenty-four months (2011-2012, 2014-2015), supplemented by follow-up visits approximately every two months lasting until 2017. Shenzhen, which is in the Pearl River Delta region (*zhujiangsanjiao* 珠江三角), was my choice as the field-site for the ethnography because it was the country's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and, unarguably, also the most successful. My interlocutors were all rural-migrants to Shenzhen and I had come to know of them in the course of my settling into life in the city.

What is a good life? And, of particular relevance due to the shifting global political-economic equations of our times, what is a good life in China today? As we approach the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> C, much is made in the popular media and intellectual circles about the place of China, and by extension, Asia, in the world. The impact that China is having on the Asian continent and on the world as a whole has been so significant over the past three over decades, especially since its reforms and opening-up (*gaige kaifang*), that some have heralded the arrival of the “Chinese Century” (Pieke 2014; Stiglitz 2014) or, if not, the “Asian Century” (Asian Development Bank 2012). Such a prospect of Asian dominance was also anticipated by Frank (1998), who referred to the impending period as the “Asian Age”. These designations are analogous to the characterisation of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as America's and Britain's respectively. Unsurprisingly, labelling the present 21<sup>st</sup> century as “Chinese” or “Asian” has to do with the projected global dominance of China in the fields of politics and culture if current economic trends continue.

In keeping with the modern interstate system first instituted by the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, our polities continue to be constituted as nominally sovereign nation-state units that are interlinked within a world-system (Wallerstein 1974). Within this system, the national economy categorically remains an autonomous unit of fundamental significance in determining a nation's place within the world-system (Greenfeld 1993). Accordingly, in highlighting the arrival of the Chinese Century, Stiglitz (2014) was drawing attention to the

fact that the Chinese economy had surpassed that of the United States and was entering 2015 as the world's largest economic power.

With the economy growing at a sustained average of 10% per annum since market reforms began over thirty years ago, China has seen more than 800 million of its population lifted out of poverty (World Bank 2017).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, President Xi Jinping reiterated at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 2017, the Party's two centenary goals: first, of China becoming "a moderately prosperous society in all respects" by the 2021 centenary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and, second, of China becoming a "modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" by the time of the centenary of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049.<sup>2</sup> The logical implication of these commitments, of course, is that existing national policies of poverty alleviation will continue and even intensify into the foreseeable future. Since these accomplishments and visionary declarations are highly impressive in and of themselves, it is not unreasonable to infer that the Chinese are well on their way to attaining the good life, if they have not already. Indeed, optimism, hope, and exuberance would seem like rather reasonable reactions when examining macro-level indices of China's economic performance.

But are these overwhelmingly positive macro-indicators synonymous with the realization of the good life in China? While they are undoubtedly impressive, it would not be amiss to ask how such macro-indicators translate into life on the ground. How does a spectacular growth rate of 10% per annum translate into the life of an average Chinese person? What does it mean and how could it feel in the lived realities of Chinese citizens today? Perhaps the visual, aural, and olfactory overstimulation that one encounters on the typical street of any medium-to-large Chinese city offers a sense of what 10% annual economic growth feels like. Indeed, anyone who has had the chance to visit any moderately-sized Chinese city would attest to the prodigious and effusive human energies being expended in the domain of economic life. Are these not but the palpable expressions of a collective Chinese desire to improve material standards of living? Do they not constitute the quest for the good life? Indeed, the purpose of my ethnography is to clarify whether and how such macro-indices of economic growth and development have found expression on the ground, particularly in the lives of my interlocutors.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>. Last accessed, March 10, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_3411522.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_3411522.htm). Last accessed, March 10, 2018.

There are other signs and measures of large-scale investments of Chinese energies too, along with their consequent transformations of the Chinese socio-cultural political economy. One example is the internal migration taking place within the country. The institution of economic reform and opening-up in the post-Mao era is said to have resulted in some 440 million Chinese rural-to-urban migrants in the 30 years since 1979 (Chan 2013: 1), typically moving from the country's rural interiors to its coastal regions. Considering the relatively short, thirty-year span in which such a massive movement of people occurred, this volume of rural-urban migration is likely the largest in human history (Chan 2013). At any rate, this rural-urban migration has resulted in a majority of the Chinese population in 2011 at 51%, living in the cities. By the end of 2012, this figure had increased to 52.6%. In marked contrast, just over thirty years ago in 1979, the percentage of the Chinese urban population was just 19%.

Presumably, this large-scale migration of people across the Chinese landscape in such a short period is being undertaken to realize their aspirations for the good life. If we are to assume that humans are sufficiently rational to pursue courses of action which they believe beneficial for them, then it would appear reasonable to think of China's rural-urban exodus as a large-scale collective search for the good life, albeit one undertaken and realized individually. It appears reasonable to think that the daily preoccupations of the Chinese are, like for all of us, the means by which they attempt to live better. Presumably, these are efforts intended to usher in the good life.

If China's sustained growth and large-scale internal migration of the post-Mao era are historically unprecedented, so, apparently, are the societal transformations they are instigating. Pieke (2014: 123) notes that, "with the disappearance of the planned economy, a whole range of structures, networks, organizations, and practices has emerged at the interface of state and society. Moreover, Chinese society is shaped by globalization, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism to a degree never seen before." It should be emphasized, as such, that it is not just the fact that many social developments in China today are unprecedented; it is also the magnitude and breakneck speed at which they are occurring.

Breman (2010) argues that the changes occurring in China are no less than civilizational, submitting that they constitute some sort of "civilizational-switch" in Chinese society, where a rural and agrarian way of life is giving way to one that is increasingly urban and industrial. Visser (2010:1) has been similarly intrigued by such a transformation, raising the question of what happens culturally when those in a historically agricultural civilisation start to identify primarily with the city. She notes that urbanisation is now dominant in China, both

demographically and ideologically. As such, China, which maintained a rural population of nearly 90 percent for millennia and had a culture characterized by an attachment to the soil (Fei 1992), is now experiencing dramatic change in which both the soil and the values associated with it are swiftly being transformed.

The transformation occurring in China today is therefore of both the physical and socio-cultural landscapes. In line with this, modes of livelihood are changing, as peasants and shepherds are becoming wage-workers and profit-seeking entrepreneurs. And as the Chinese rural hinterland is being “hollowed out” of its productive workforce by way of their migration to the urban centres, agricultural fields are increasingly becoming neglected. Meanwhile, many of those belonging to the category of the “unemployable” - the old and very young - are left behind in the village in arrangements that invariably result in the former caring for the latter.

In the cities, on the other hand, we witness a frenzy of urban development as old structures are demolished at breakneck speed only to be replaced as quickly by glitzy skyscrapers that transform into hotels, shopping malls, office buildings, condominiums, and the like. All seems rosy, for in the wake of such vigorous human activity across the country, the media reports that China’s GDP has hit the 10% mark for yet another year. Incidentally, this national average is being boosted by the 20% growth rate in the Pearl River Delta region in the South, where my field-site of Shenzhen is located (Liauw 2012).

Given the speed and scale of change amidst the sounds and sights of demolition and reconstruction, it is hardly surprising that a general sense of optimism prevails within and beyond China about its continued development. These simultaneous and overlapping processes of rural-urban migration, urbanization, modernization and development are thrusting China to the forefront of global economic and political prominence. According to the teleology of developmentalism (Wolf 1982; Escobar 1995; Easterly 2007), these are but sure signs of success. In other words, the unfolding of the above processes constitute the standard yardsticks by which to measure a country’s progress along the path of modernization. And with China’s apparent and ongoing achievement of them, it would be reasonable to infer that the country was well on its way to attaining the good life.

Nevertheless, despite such claims of success, I wonder what they mean for those who have made it all possible. That is, China’s economic growth may have been sustained at around 10% for over three decades, but does this necessarily imply the attainment of the good life? I am interested to know what such growth does for the countless men, women, and children whose collective efforts and sacrifices produce such national economic

accomplishments. To put it differently: the growth of China's economy and global stature may be extraordinary, but what does it mean experientially for the average Chinese citizen on the ground? It would seem that it is one thing for a country to be growing and developing economically, another that its people are living a good life. The task of my ethnography is to bring to light how the supposedly spectacular macro-level developments in China express themselves at the micro-level of people's everyday lives.

What is the good life in China today? And what is the good life in general? The goals of my ethnographic project are twofold. First, it is to document what in today's China is generally believed to be - or to bring - the good life, and then to evaluate it. Second, it is to glean general lessons from the specific Chinese experience of modernization and modernity so that, possibly, it could offer some guidance to us in our efforts to live better and to attain the good life.

### ***1.1 Foregrounding the good life: Modernity and the West***

The multi-dimensional nature of human being and becoming imply that economic improvements cannot be assumed to translate into qualitative life improvements. In other words, human needs are not purely material. This recognition stems from the fact that although the human body has a biological constitution, what makes humanity is not biology - since our reduction to mere biology would render us no different from animal and plant life - but culture and morality/spirituality. As Whitehead (2003:82) has noted, "There is a quality of life which lies always beyond the mere fact of life; and when we include the quality in the fact, there is still omitted the quality of the quality." Accordingly, human needs are not just material but also cultural-symbolic, an insight consistent with the biblical dictum in Matthew 4:4 that "man shall not live by bread alone".

There is research offering evidence that human realization cannot be founded on material inducements alone. As Searle (2008: 1) has observed, "Increases in income may improve mood for a short while but over the longer term the initial 'high' mellows out as the newfound wealth just becomes a part of everyday living and desires and expectations lead to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction." Indeed, the limits to which well-being is enhanced by material progress has been quite well-noted, with the correlation between GDP per capita and well-being distinctively breaking down beyond a certain point (Schyns 2002, Layard 2003). This could be why many have argued for economic success to at least be measured against the social and environmental detriment it causes (Scitovsky 1976, Hirsch 1977). Meanwhile, Layard (2003, 2005) reports that happiness levels have more or less

remained stable throughout the twentieth century – and that throughout Western Europe in general, *increased prosperity has not resulted in any greater experience of happiness over the last 50 years* (emphasis mine). There appears to be an increasing consensus in the West that a sense of well-being does not emerge from objective material possessions but from subjective resources and social comparisons. In other words, well-being and “good life” become a function of relative social standing, derived from comparisons of ourselves to others. (Scitovsky 1976). It would appear that the tendency for making self-other comparisons merely affirms the primary human need for symbolic and subjective realization; it attests to the agency of being human.

The pattern emerging here from Western experience should be clear: material improvements in the standard of life *qua* modernisation do not constitute a sufficient condition for an improved life; beyond a certain threshold, they may not even be a necessary condition. It may in fact be worthwhile considering an even more radical proposition: that excessive improvement in material standards may actually undermine life quality and human well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Yet despite existing knowledge about this nuanced relationship between economic growth and human well-being, the tendency to equate material progress with the attainment of the good life persists. This is hardly surprising, for the association between material abundance and progress seems to be grounded on the worldview of philosophical and scientific materialism that defines our epoch – the modern age, a cosmology that has been preponderant for roughly the past four hundred years (Tawney 2004 [1920], Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999, Kanth 2005, Marglin 2008).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is the still ubiquitous, modern obsession with material growth that has compelled the Skidelskys (2012) to title their work, *How Much Is Enough?: Money and the good life*.

Directing their message about “the constituents of a good life” (2012: 3; 4) chiefly at “the rich parts of the world”, the Skidelskys urge a consideration of how materialist-induced

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<sup>3</sup> This proposition seems to resonate with the following statement by Stephen Marglin, a dissident economist, who directed it especially at those in the developed countries who have been able to escape impoverishment: “We may have good reason to dismantle the engine of growth – not because growth is a threat to our relationship with nature, but because it is a threat to our relationships with one another.” (2008:4).

<sup>4</sup> The aforementioned worldview of materialism, in both its scientific and philosophical incarnations, is one that regards matter as the basis of reality. See Merchant’s *Death of Nature* (1980) for an account of how the Enlightenment-inspired scientific revolution propagated such a mechanistic worldview, displacing the erstwhile organic cosmology that had been dominant in Europe up until the 16th C. See Schumacher (1977) for a fuller critique of this worldview he refers to as “modern materialist scientism” (13); also, see Guenon (1945) for an appreciation of how this worldview is connected with the modern penchant for quantification.

insatiability could be undermining the possibilities for a good life. The point the authors are making coheres exactly with my counterintuitive proposition above, prompting me to again ask: *Does the modernist commitment to infinite material progress impede our prospects of a good life?*

The simultaneous invocation here of material progress, good life, modernity, and the West is both apt and timely, for these are overlapping issues central to discussions about the good life in general, and, the good life in contemporary China specifically. As has been made apparent in the foregoing, beliefs about the good life in China tend to be associated inevitably with ideas of economic growth, development, urbanization, and modernisation. In a word, good life in China is equated with the general process of Westernisation across all spheres of life (Latouche 1996), with the West here enjoying hallowed status because, rightly or wrongly, it has been seen as the provenance of modernity.

In light of this, the reasoning about the good life in China can be explained to run as follows: since good life is associated with modernity, which in turn is connected with the West, there appears to be the belief that it comes about by way of the synonymous processes of modernisation and Westernisation. In a word, nay, equation: good life in China = modernization/westernization. Indeed, mundane examples of this phenomenon will crop up repeatedly in the ethnographic materials that follow. It should be noted that my stating these correlations does not imply my commitment to their veracity: I am merely offering what could be a viable explanation for what appears as commonsense, not adjudicating its truth content. Be that as it may, the important issue now seems to hinge on the question of how such Chinese common sense came to be. How was such popular consciousness formed? What accounts for the Chinese tendency to associate the good life with the overlapping, if not, synonymous, processes of development, modernization, and Westernisation? Why is the West and modernity simultaneously implicated in discussions about the good life in China?

These are historical questions, to be sure, and it seems like the foregoing dialogue between anthropology and philosophy could benefit by including history as another interlocutor. The following section thus delves into the history for why Chinese common sense about the good life came to be so readily associated with the processes of development, modernization, and Westernisation.

## ***1.2 The background: cultural change, colonialism, and the sino-western encounter***

This introductory chapter began by citing statistics relating to Chinese rural-urban migration flows and, correspondingly, the percentages of the changing rural vis-a-vis urban populations

since 1979. The date is hardly arbitrary, for 1979 marks the beginnings of the post-Mao era under the tutelage of Premier Deng Xiaoping (Mao passed away in 1976). In retrospect, one can reasonably say that the central feature of the post-Mao era occurred in the domain of the economy, involving reform (*gaige*) and opening-up (*kaifang*) to re-link the Chinese economy with the capitalist world-system. The re-integration of a country as populous as China into the world-system can only be expected to have momentous implications as much for the world beyond China as within it, economically and otherwise. As it turns out, the world outside China became a voracious market for its goods while China and, more specifically, the Pearl River Delta Region in the South, effectively became the world's manufacturing centre. As already noted, China's economy would grow at historically and globally unprecedented rates over the next thirty years. The massive internal, rural-to-urban migration of people ensued, arguably, as a symptom as well as a cause of the economy's dazzling growth.

Economic stimuli invariably entail consequences that transcend the realm of the economy. Given the embeddedness of economy in society and the dialectical interpellation of politics into economics and vice versa, this is hardly surprising. Correspondingly, the momentous rural-urban exodus (i.e. a social phenomenon) can be seen as a consequence of policy efforts made by the state to institutionalize the market (i.e. an economic phenomenon) into the fabric of Chinese society. Post-Mao economic reforms engendered a societal transformation that was revolutionary in nature. Indeed, the rural-urban exodus that is currently ongoing has been spoken of in terms of a "civilizational transformation". With a small but swiftly expanding majority of the Chinese population now constituted by urban residents, the touted transformation involves a switch from a rural-agrarian to an urban-industrial mode of life and work. Seen in this light, one could say that even though the catalyst and object of the post-Mao reforms may have been economic, the consequence has been social, cultural, even civilizational.

To be sure, the changes occurring in China today are ostensibly of a civilizational nature because they involve a wholesale, structural transformation of Chinese society. It would not seem unreasonable, in fact, to suggest a parallel between China's current societal transformation today with that which occurred in Britain at the dawn of the latter's industrial revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> C. Then as now, with peasants vacating their lands in the countryside, whether voluntarily or by dint of force, and moving into the centres of economic growth, a rural mode of life was giving way to one that was urban, as community came to be replaced by society - *gemeinschaft* by *gesellschaft* (Tonnies 1957) – along with their

respective ancillary institutions. As in the British case, the Chinese transformation has been cast teleologically in terms of a process of modernisation where the backwardness of rural life is to be supplanted by the glitz and allure of modern urban existence.

While British and Chinese experiences of modernization may be comparable in nature and outcome, one should be wary of pushing such comparisons too far. After all, the two experiences of rural-to-urban modernisation are separated by some two to three centuries and are distinguished by unique and vastly different historical circumstances. The British experience occurred *circa* the mid-18<sup>th</sup> C when England was the foremost imperial power globally and where the imperatives of incipient industrial capitalism were just beginning to be felt at home. It has been said that in this context the rural-to-urban migration which ensued and that fed workers to the fledgling industrial factories were instigated by land enclosures and the expropriation of the English peasantry (Polanyi 2001(1944); Dobb 1946).

In contrast, the Chinese rural-to-urban exodus, is a late twentieth-century, post-Mao phenomenon. By this time, the world had seen and felt the effects of some two-hundred years of industrial capitalism. The Chinese themselves had direct experience of the potency of industrial technology, perhaps for the first time between 1840 and 1842. To be sure, when the Chinese Emperor's attempt to shut down British opium-smuggling in Guangzhou did not go down well, they were haplessly subjected to the first-hand experience of wanton brutality unleashed with the efficiency of modern industrial technology. Over the next two years, in the name of free-trade and the belief in the propriety of its self-conferred right to pay for Chinese tea with opium appropriated from Bengal, Britain would turn its warships and rocket launchers upon the forces of the Chinese Dynasty. Owing to the technological mismatch, the Sino-British Opium War unsurprisingly came to a swift conclusion in Britain's favour. The British victory took not quite two years and 69 British lives compared with the loss of between 20, 000 to 25,000 on the Chinese side.

Additionally, as losers of the war, the Chinese were forced to commit to a series of concessions and reparations, which were formalized with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in August 1842. These included the cessation of Hong Kong to Britain to serve as a hub for the opium trade thenceforth, the opening of five further Chinese ports to foreign trade, compensation to Britain for loss earnings from the opium trade during the war, and for the cost of the war itself. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> C, the Chinese had become well-aware of the power of industrial technology, especially when deployed for military ends. Without the capacity to resist the onslaught of industrial munitions throughout this period, China under the Qing Dynasty was repeatedly forced to capitulate to foreign

powers. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, China had become severely semi-colonized and was partitioned into territorial concessions under the control of the British, Russian, French, German, Japanese, the United States, Belgium, Portugal, Italy and Austro-Hungary. In any case, having seen and perhaps felt the power of industrial techniques first-hand, the importance of industrialization for mere national survival would have likely been unforgettable for the Chinese. Victors may write history but the vanquished never forget the oppressions that entail its making.

I provide this brief historical vignette neither to raise indignation at the depravities of colonialism nor to demonstrate the hypocrisy behind the hoary slogan of “free trade”; rather, it is to reinforce my caveat about drawing too many parallels between the British experience of modern industrialisation in the late 18<sup>th</sup> C, and the Chinese experience today. Indeed, the historical aperitif served above is to underscore the point about the uniqueness of historical circumstances: whereas the “great transformation” in Britain *a la* Polanyi (2001[1944]) occurred during its tenure as a global imperial hegemon, the “civilizational switch” happening in China today occurs with recourse to the collective Chinese memory of having been subjugated by the violence of British and more generally, Western, colonial assaults.

Accordingly, the erstwhile development of modern industrial capitalism in Britain would have been approached with the self-certainty that came with its being the leading imperial, economic, and technological nation; that is, with its status as a *maker of History*, literally. In contrast, because China’s first palpable encounter with modernity occurred by way of its unpropitious subjugation by Western aggression, modernization in China has from the beginning been evaluated from their perspective as their being *victims of history*.

The Chinese pursuit of modernisation has therefore been regarded as an existential issue, undertaken as an imperative for Chinese national survival. This predicament is well illustrated by the reformist Qing bureaucrat, Zhang Zhidong’s late-19<sup>th</sup> C proposal to embrace “Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as means” (*zhongxueweiti, xixueweiyong* 中学为体 , 西学为用). I shall henceforth abbreviate and refer to this formulation of Zhang’s as *ti-yong*, in which *ti* signifies “foundation or essence” while *yong* connotes “practical means”. At any rate, Zhang’s proposal is a fitting revelation of the sense of desperation and confusion that prevailed among Qing ruling elites about China’s conundrum in the face of unrelenting Western colonial incursions. Unable and unsure as to how to resist the West, Zhang could only utter platitudes to the effect of adopting

Westernisation without appearing to become “Western”; hence the mealy-mouthed dissembling about being nourished by a diet of “Chinese” foundational knowledge.

The point to note concerns the political asymmetry between China and the West in the modern era. One could sum it up thus: whereas the British “made” History, the Chinese were forced to react to it by entering it as a “latecomer” and having to play “catch-up”. This is in fact a historical truism that more generally describes the relationship between the West and the non-West since the dawn of the modern age. As Hoffman (2015) has noted, “Between 1492 and 1941, Europeans had conquered 84 per cent of the globe, establishing colonies and spreading their influence across every inhabited continent.”

The history-making of Western colonialism resided in its irrevocable disruption of the original trajectories of non-Western societies. Whether erstwhile indigenous paths were Edenic or dystopic, modern or non-modern, righteous or decadent, emancipatory or oppressive, is not quite the point; the fact is that the violence, looting, destruction, and death foisted by the West upon non-Western societies compelled them to choose historical trajectories and social formations not consonant with their intentions, or worse still, not compatible with their traditional cultural propensities. The perniciousness of colonialism resides in the coloniser’s negation of the subjectivity and agency of the colonized, denying the latter the right to choose, even to be “wrong”. Coloniality is therefore predicated on the colonizer playing God, or at least assuming a god’s-eye-view of the world, having little tolerance for deviance.

It should be remembered, accordingly, that the non-Western world’s decision to modernize, as signified by the acceptance, in part if not in whole, of European reason, economy, religion, culture and social formations, often emerged out of utter desperation and was acquiesced to at gun-point: modernisation was usually conceded to as a last resort; it was a means to survive.

The Qing reformist Zhang Zhidong’s *ti-yong* (essence-means) formulation, which was a rhetorical, “face-saving” effort to prescribe Westernisation while simultaneously claiming to maintain the holistic integrity of Chinese culture, nicely encapsulates the early Chinese ambivalence to modernity. Shakespeare’s Hamlet may have asked, “To be or not to be?” but, alas, such could not be the Chinese question with regard to being modern. After a wave of ignominious defeats by the West beginning with the conclusion of the first Opium War in 1842, the question had to be reformulated into the plea: “How to be and not to be?” In Chinese, this conundrum is concisely expressed by the symmetrical aphorism: *budebu* (不得

不). This, in a nutshell, was Zhang's Zhidong's impossible project, which was to accomplish Modernity without becoming Western. The impossibility of Zhang's project of "Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as means" is highlighted by the fact that the Chinese are today, over a century later, dealing with the same conundrum. *Still*.

The Chinese have long recognised the scientific, technological and economic dimensions of Modernity to be a material necessity, yet the fact that there remains a psychological yearning to identify Chineseness with Modernity perhaps underlines a deeper awareness of it as a de facto alien culture. Indeed, the longing to reconcile Modernity with Chinese identity is perhaps spawned of a subconscious awareness that Modernity in China – or alternatively, Chinese Modernity – was hatched in the throes of Western colonial domination and corresponding Chinese humiliation. The realization that Chinese Modernity could at once be a source of pride as well as shame might well engender its own discomfitures; hence, the regularity of Chinese ideological appropriations centred around re-packaging old wine in new wineskins: hence, "socialism with Chinese characteristics", "China Dream" etc. It is conceivable – and Freud would have concurred here - that the psychological burden of colonial ignominies needs to be relieved by way of overt expression.

The Martinican psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, well understood the pathologies that plague the culture and the subjectivity of the colonized. Recognising colonialism's evisceration of the local culture, Fanon noted: "Colonialism is not content merely to impose its law on the colonized country's present and future. Colonialism is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. By a kind of perverse logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it." (Fanon 2004: 149). And along similar lines: "The sweeping, leveling nature of colonial domination was quick to dislocate in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. The denial of a national reality, the new legal system imposed by the occupying power, the marginalization of the indigenous population and their customs by colonial society, expropriation, and the systematic enslavement of men and women, all contributed to this cultural obliteration." (Fanon 2004: 170).

Cohen (2005), whose research interest lies in understanding the changes in Chinese society since the 17<sup>th</sup> C, provides a description of some of the major turning points in Chinese historical development over this period, which appear to attest to the sort of colonial disruption Fanon describes. I here offer vignettes of the major historical turning-points from his account.

First, while being sure to clarify that culture “continually changes in all human societies”, Cohen establishes the presence of a certain distinguishing “Chineseness”, arguing that there has existed a strong historical continuity between late imperial China (i.e. the Qing dynasty, 1644-1911) and that of contemporary Chinese culture and society (Cohen 2005: 1). In this, therefore, he appears to share with Fei (1992) the view of Chinese culture as being a distinct phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> About life during the Qing, he writes (2005: 39), “Embedded in China’s late imperial culture was a representation of that country’s social and political arrangements so strongly developed as to convey to the Chinese people a firm sense of their development in them. Indeed, China’s society and polity were represented as dimensions of the cosmos itself. Being civilized, that is, being Chinese, was nothing less than proper human behavior in accordance with cosmic principles.” Cohen notes that there was in China a common culture based upon shared behaviours, institutions, and beliefs in late imperial times, adding that this common culture was also a unified culture in the sense that it provided standards according to which people identified themselves as Chinese (op. cit.: 40).

Moreover, Cohen appears to adhere to my interpretation of historical events that led to the collapse of the Qing and the revolution Chinese consciousness, noting (2005: 1): “Major and unprecedented dislocations were set in motion starting with the mid-nineteenth century assault on China by Western powers, later joined by Japan. So, by the time of the dynasty’s fall, important sectors had already begun to experience a process of change in response to these new outside forces, one that was to intensify through the twentieth century.”

Taking modern Chinese history and cultural change up until the liberation of 1949, he notes, “Such changes continued through the 1912-49 era of the Republic of China. The establishment of the PRC in 1949 marked the expansion of major cultural change to the entire population, encompassing both the vast rural sectors and inland urban centres where, prior to Communist rule, dominant cultural patterns in areas such as family life and religion were still largely of late imperial derivation.” (ibid).

It is apparent, as such, that the dramatic events of history are never behind us; rather, their memories, like old scars, endure into the present. This suggests that all social practices

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<sup>5</sup> For his part, Fei (*ibid*) described traditional Chinese society as fundamentally rural, which provided the foundation for all Chinese social life. For instance, according to Gary Hamilton and Wang Zheng (1992: 20), Fei posits that Chinese social formation is characterised by *chaxugeju* (差序格局), which consists of “overlapping networks of people linked together through differentially categorised social relationships”, rendering Chinese society to be akin to ripples resulting from a stone thrown into water, a society constituted by dense and overlapping networks of relations. In contrast, Fei compares Western society to straw collected from a haystack; that is, as an aggregation of autonomous agents.

have historical contexts that render them meaningful. As there is no social creation *ex nihilo*, social histories warrant closer examination if we are to have a more critical understanding of the practices and institutions they have spawned. After all, the present can only be understood with reference to the past.

Our review of China's modern history has allowed us to understand why Modernity and the West are intertwined and implicated in discussions about the good life in China today. In particular, it gives us the context to appreciate why the signifiers of the good life in China tend to take on a Western appearance.

### ***1.3 Civilizational and cultural change: superficial and deep***

Our long view of history would appear to suggest that the Western colonial intrusions which compelled modernisation in China continue to play a significant role in the civilizational change taking place in the country today. They affect how Modernity and the West are perceived in China, in turn, wielding considerable influence over contemporary Chinese ideas and practices concerning the good life. In this section I discuss the implications of this history of Western colonialism for China's present civilisational trajectory. As China is said to be undergoing a civilizational switch (Breman 2010), I wish especially to highlight the two dimensions in which I believe this could be occurring.

Given the role played by the West in foisting a modernist trajectory in China, I believe the "civilization shift" in China to which Breman (2010) refers can be understood in two senses of the term. That is, the civilizational transformation can be understood, first, in terms of a mode of production at the objective, material level; and, second, in terms of consciousness at the subjective, psycho-social and nonmaterial level. Hence, the civilizational switch occurs along the material, explicate as well as the nonmaterial-implicate orders of our reality. Indeed, Breman's use of the term, "civilisation switch" (2010) could be more potent than he intended, or is aware of. Allow me to elaborate.

Breman's invocation of "civilization switch" to refer to the transition from a rural to urban mode of life and work is clear enough: it implies a change in the mode of production from one that is agrarian to one that is industrial, even post-industrial. The change is obvious and explicit and its scale, quantifiable, which is why I refer to this as a civilizational transformation at the material level.

But if we are to examine the historical disruptions of Western colonialism in China more carefully, we are afforded an additional perspective on what such a civilisation switch could mean. Indeed, if Western colonialism had resulted in the institution of Euro-modern

practices in China at the expense of the latter's autochthonous social development, as Fanon (2004: 170) argues above, then it would be true that whatever developments that subsequently unfold in Chinese society would occur as a function of that historic colonial intrusion, whether or not the colonised are conscious of it. In other words, the autonomy of that society has been violated and the trajectory it takes henceforth will not be one entirely of its making.

Furthermore, if such colonial impositions transpire at the cost of psychological and cultural displacement for its victims, which Fanon (2004) also suggests likely, then it would appear plausible that the lives of the colonised are but colonised lives. There is the prospect of human subjects without subjectivity and lives that are but a simulacra of life. If, still as per Fanon (2004), the consequence of colonialism is the disfigurement and destruction of the past, it is possible that the colonised might not quite know what to make of the future, or more accurately, what future to make: for the past presages the future. It is likely that the colonised will have to dig into the repositories of their past to salvage the cultural relics they deem "worthy", and with them, construct its future in tandem with the "technics" of the coloniser. If good fortune should prevail and things go as planned, the result would be some variant of "Western learning as means, Chinese learning as essence", as Zhang's *ti-yong* prescription had it.

In any event, Westernisation, whether as means or ends, has via the earth-shattering consequences of Western colonialism, become a standard feature of virtually all societies today. This is not hyperbole, for there are traces of the colonial even in places that were spared formal colonization. Hence, as in the case of Thailand (Harrison and Jackson 2010), we witness that even countries never formally colonised by the West are spellbound by it. It is perhaps owing to such circumstances that Marglin (2008: 36) writes, "In the twenty-first century, modernity has spread well beyond the Atlantic heartland. The elites of Lima and New Delhi are as Western in their culture as the elites of New York and Paris and as far from the nonmodern cultures of the pueblos of the Peruvian Altiplano or the villages of rural India as are the Americans or the French. The modern West is no longer only a place; it is also a frame of mind."

It is here on this notion of the West as a "frame of mind" that we come to the second meaning of China's "civilizational switch" (Breman 2010). I deploy the term here specifically to refer to a civilizational transformation occurring at the nonmaterial level of culture and consciousness, in the invisible and implicate realm of the psycho-social and subjective. In this case the civilizational switch refers to the desires, dreams, and

imaginings that had their making in the seething cauldron of China's colonial encounter with the West. Hence, the "cultural obliteration" that was described by Fanon above as a consequence of colonialism would have involved a civilisational transformation unfolding in the domain of everyday popular consciousness and cultural practice, which likely continues today. This Westernisation of culture and subjectivity would have amounted to a civilizational switch in the deepest sense.

In China such change was first instigated by the literati who, after witnessing China's humiliation at the hands of the West, lost complete faith in the traditional values of their own civilisation. They launched into calls to revolutionise all aspects of Chinese civilisation along lines laid out by the West: language, dress, hygiene, sexuality, subjectivity etc. (see, for eg., Rogaski 2004, Harrist Jr. 2005), initiating a civilisation shift in mundane cultural practices.

This account is affirmed by Tu Weiming, who observes: "Since the Opium War of 1839, the impact of the West has elicited fierce nationalistic sentiments against imperialism in China. But it has also generated a great desire to absorb Western learning. Rejection of the Chinese cultural heritage was believed to be a precondition for Westernization and modernization. Despite her glorious history over the centuries, in recent decades China has suffered from a loss of memory, amnesia and forgetfulness." (2011: 267).

The philosopher Ci Jiwei appears to be thinking along a similarly long historical time-frame in his analysis of modern Chinese realities. In *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism* (1994), Ci casts China's successive experiments with communism and capitalism as part of an ongoing iconoclasm to break with its cultural traditions that were long believed to be the source of the country's weakness and held responsible for its defeat by the West. He writes: "A China that has suffered from chronic disjunctions of consciousness since the Opium War has at long last let go of its insistence on having its own cultural self-identity and opted for what it considered the only remedy that could bring the cure – wholesale Westernisation." (1994: 61).

An implication to follow from the collective insights of Tu (2011), Ci (1994), and Fanon (2004) is that China's civilization switch (Breman 2010) would not only be occurring at the material level; for example, *qua* the displacement of an agrarian mode by an industrial mode of production. This shift would simultaneously be unfolding in the nonmaterial realm of Chinese consciousness and subjectivity. In effect, Ci (1994) and Tu (2011) are proposing that this civilization switch in the realm of Chinese subjectivity and consciousness has long been happening in China, ever since the conclusion of the Opium Wars.

Our outline of China's "civilisation switch" in these two possible dimensions and meanings allows us to distinguish between the nature and extent of change observable in the country today. Such changes can be differentiated according to whether they are superficial or deep, visible or invisible, quantifiable or ineffable, objective or subjective. Indeed, I have made a point to differentiate these two conceptions of civilization shift – one material, the other nonmaterial – to suggest that in our example, the explicit and preponderant change from a rural to an urban mode of life and work in China is but a material manifestation of a deeper, nonmaterial transformation of the culture. Moreover, this deeper civilisational-cultural transformation is that which furnishes the scale of values specifying what makes the good life.

It might also be productive here to introduce the related notion of "deep" vis-a-vis "surface" culture, whereby, for instance, the values that furnish meaning may be said to constitute a society's "deep culture", which can be opposed to the mere appearance – the "surface culture" - of their expression.

Correspondingly, just like the Western appearance of urban built-environments, a mode of production may be thought of as a form "surface culture": it is the visible product of the "deep culture" of a society that presumably believes in the superiority of Western over other types of aesthetics. Along such lines of thinking, China's ostensible civilization switch - by way of the apparent processes of rural-urban migration, urbanization, development and modernization – can all be said to be undergirded by a set of meanings about what makes the good life. These meanings, arguably, are furnished by what I am referring to as contemporary Chinese society's "deep culture".

My conceptual delineation of the two possible dimensions of civilisation switch - and of culture - can be anticipated to become useful when I examine cultural phenomena in the field, not least when apprehending the general milieu of the Shenzhen environment.

Of relevance when confronted with apparent signs of change is the question about whether such changes are superficial or deep. For instance, as the built environment in my field site of Shenzhen is characterized predominantly by Western signifiers, we might ask if this apparent Westernisation is a general phenomenon across the culture. That is, to what extent can we speak of a Westernisation of Chinese culture? How deep is such Western influence? To what degree have the Chinese of today come to define the good life according to the standards of the West? More provocatively, to what extent has Chinese culture become

Western?<sup>6</sup> The distinction between material and nonmaterial civilisation changes - and between “surface” and “deep” culture – can serve as a rough measure of the nature of apparent changes observed in Chinese society.

A related and important issue concerns how supposedly superficial phenomena affect deep culture, and vice versa. This could be asked about China's accelerating urbanization as much as the Western architectural mimicry that ubiquitously marks its urban landscapes. After all, despite appearing as technical practices in their manipulation of the physical milieu, urban and architectural practices are not without socio-cultural consequences. In constructing spaces that in turn affect the nature of human interactions and relations, they can be said to constitute a form of social engineering. Along these lines, one might ask: how and to what extent does an urban mode of life become responsible for producing deeper changes within the culture, not least in the ways people relate? Does large-scale urbanisation precipitate the dissolution of community? Does China's continuing modernisation engender a more rationalist and individualist mode of interpersonal relations, what Tonnies (1957) labels *gessellschaft* and that is arguably in line with the modern experience of the West? Upon an examination of the evidence, what can we make of the civilisation changes unfolding in modern China today: can they be said to contribute to, or hamper, the good life?

In sum, my attempted conceptual clarification of civilisational and cultural change here allows us to better grasp the nature and extent of present day changes in China, which are tendentiously believed to engender the good life. Such historical understanding is important in order to evaluate China's conspicuous modernisation, and to ascertain whether or not it actualises the good life.

#### **1.4 Significance of research**

The present investigation of the good life in contemporary China can be understood as an inquiry into the nature and experience of Chinese modernity. It may be seen as a project that could contribute to a larger comparative civilisational project, whose aim would be to allow for a *comparison* between the various experiences of modernity across the globe. In line with

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<sup>6</sup> In a recent piece, Babones (2018) offers exactly such a thesis about the Americanisation of the Chinese then proceeds to argue that Americans have nothing to fear about the Chinese being a geopolitical threat. He offered that “Chinese people would rather go to school in the U.S. than invade it.” What he says is true at one level, but as is probably typical of a worlds-systems meta-perspective, it lacks a grounded – much less, fine-grained - analysis of the everyday situation of Chinese life. As a consequence, Babones speaks in broad generalities which fail to adequately account for everyday Chinese realities on the ground. This is a lacuna I intend for my ethnography to fill.

this aim, the present inquiry may be interpreted as laying the foundations of a Chinese installment of such a larger civilisational study.

There remains the widespread, general tendency to conflate modernity with the good life. This attitude inheres in the belief that modernity represents the best of all possible worlds (Pinker 2018). Because modern and modernist ways of being have proliferated across the globe for reasons already discussed, such a comparative study would enable us to find out if we are indeed on the right path to living well and to accomplishing the good life.<sup>7</sup> Such an inquiry can help ensure that we are not consciously “mis-living” or, worse, “being lived” instead of “living”.

The significance of such a query about the good life and what it consists should therefore be apparent. Gaining insight into the human condition seems very necessary, particularly when many of us appear today to be at the mercy of structural and institutionalised economic and political forces much greater than we are able to control. Even worse, because many of us tend to be powerless when confronted by such forces, the realization of our human potentials is compromised as concerns about mere economic survival ensures that much of our waking hours are spent on the treadmill of capitalist reproduction. Prevented from moving beyond the concerns of daily physical existence, let alone be given room to aspire to higher attainments of culture that defines our humanity, we inadvertently remain at the biological level of animals. In this mode, our daily strivings are completely devoted to ensuring subsistence. Whereas “working to live” is no doubt necessary and even admirable, it is important to distinguish it from “living to work”. The latter invokes life as a mere biological process that represents life at its barest and most meagre, to be sure. This enduring condition of bare biological-material reproduction is tantamount to our being reduced to automatons, the result of which is our complicity in the reproduction of the very mechanisms and institutions responsible for the condition we find ourselves. For example, owing to the radical economic uncertainty unleashed by the forces of rampant commodification and globalization, we often end up working in jobs we would not otherwise do if we were afforded more security about the future. And, so, the hamster-wheel turns.

The institutionalisation of scarcity in our lives, especially by way of present-day, neo-liberal austerity programmes around the world, has spawned actions and behaviour in the name of economic necessity. Sustained by way of an ideology that asserts the superiority of

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<sup>77</sup> By “modern” here I am referring to the infrastructural, to the forms of life given to us by the science, technology, and the monetized economy that is so central to the present age; in contrast, my invocation of “modernist” or “modernism” is a reference to the *logos* that spawned such institutions.

the market in the mediation of human affairs, many of these practices are fuelled by fear, anxiety, and insecurity, on the part of employers, workers and the self-employed alike. Under such sub-optimal, personally disempowering circumstances, the following questions bear continued relevance: *Are we living well? Are we approaching some semblance of the good life, or are we somehow mis-living, or even being lived by the circumstances?*

Since these questions, which border upon the meaning of life, are fundamental to human existence, I feel that the findings of this research will have implications and relevance for people not just in China, but across the globe, living their everyday lives under the conditions of a global modernity.

The proposed research therefore has far-reaching relevance, for it seeks to prompt an examination and consideration not just of contemporary Chinese developments but of the general human condition today. It is especially hoped that its findings will initiate further reflection about modernity and, at a more personal level, prompt a reflection on our individual and collective lives. I believe the potential that these findings could serve as a possible guide for our troubled times is ample justification for the research. But the proposed research can also be justified on more professional academic grounds.

From an academic disciplinary perspective, my proposed study of the good life in China will have relevance across a number of disciplines. In the first instance it will be relevant to all scholarship with an interest in China as a region, what could broadly be classified as China studies. In addition to this regional focus, the present research would be of relevance to the general disciplines of anthropology, sociology, development studies, studies of modernization and modernity, urban geography, and even philosophy, particularly in its original incarnation as a “love for wisdom”. I anticipate that the themes implicated in the proposed research will also be of relevance to scholars and activists concerned about the fate of the world’s postcolonial societies.

This research would stand as a contribution to that strand of work produced in the anthropology and sociology of China literature that deal with the far-reaching societal effects of the post-Mao reforms beginning in the early 1980s, particularly concerning the themes of individualization, consumerism, privatization, ethics, rural-urban relations, self-society understandings, etcetera. Some of the relevant authors whose works deal with such concerns include Davis (2000) on consumerism, Yan Yunxiang (2003, 2010) on individualism and individualisation, Yan Hairong (2008) on migrant women domestic workers, Li Zhang (2010) on class-making via private residential consumption, Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (2008) on the admixture of socialism and capitalist, and Halskov Hansen and Svararud (2010) on the

process of Chinese individualization. This research supplements the work of these authors, but while their writings deal primarily with the profound transformations that have occurred across Chinese social life in the post-Mao and post-socialist era, taking the Cold War binary between socialism and capitalism as an analytical cleavage, my focus differs from theirs, as already noted. Perhaps more in line with the interpretation of Cohen (2005), Ci (1994), and Tu (2011), I take a longer historical view and tend to see continuity – more than rupture - between Maoist and post-Maoist phases, understanding them to be different strategies at accomplishing the same unchanged goal of modernisation. Moreover, my belief in the similarity of these two phases is also grounded in the view that the socialism associated with erstwhile Maoism and the capitalism associated with post-Maoism, share the same ontology, namely, a faith in technology, a belief in progress, and a commitment to unlimited productivism. These two visions, socialism and capitalism, seem mostly to differ in their respective proponents' views about who is best placed - the state or the market - to oversee the goal of maximizing production, which, in turn, carry implications for how its proceeds are to be distributed.

Perhaps more so than an engagement with the discourses of socialism vis-a-vis capitalism, therefore, my work could be better placed in discussions about modernity, particularly on questions about the nature of modernity. On this front, Lisa Rofel's *Other Modernities* (1999) is a work that shares considerable parallels with mine in its attempt to grapple with "a cross-cultural study of modernity".

Rofel poses her query as follows (ibid: xi): "The history of colonialism has made "modernity" a global phenomenon. But what exactly is meant by that statement? Does it imply that modernity arose as a discrete set of practices in the West and then was simply mimicked in the rest of the world? Does it mean that certain places remain that still need to arrive at this selfsame identity – or, to the contrary, that the globe has congealed into transnational homogeneity? Finally, should we think of modernity as indigenous practices established within discrete cultures with their own histories?"

Rofel's response is unambiguous, for she writes: "Discussions have led me to propose a cross-cultural approach to modernity that, as against the aforementioned notions treats it as a located imaginary, arising from and perpetuating relations of difference across an East-West divide. I am most interested in the "other" modernities necessarily produced by those who have been the objects of the world history of the West. These other modernities are neither merely local enactments nor simply examples of a universal model. They are forced

cross-cultural translations of various projects of science and management called modernity.” (ibid: xii).

Although Rofel’s project shares similarities with mine insofar as it entails a concern with modernity, it is very apparent from her statements that her focus and underlying thesis are counterposed to and somewhat of a direct challenge to mine. This is so even as she recognizes that colonialism has rendered modernity a global phenomenon. Hence, despite acknowledging that the “impositions” of colonialism “made ‘modernity’ global” (ibid: xi), she hastens to add that these “other modernities are neither merely local enactments nor simply examples of a universal model” but “cross-cultural translations”. She puts her case across eloquently, but one has to wonder if there is anything beyond language.

How, after all, does one adjudicate between “cross-cultural translations” and “examples of a universal model”? At what point does the “example of a universal model” cease being just that and starts being a “cross-cultural translation”? What cultural hybrids are involved in such crosses? And what are the criteria by which such judgments are made? If colonialism did indeed play a part in imposing modernity, then is it more conceivable than not, that for all mention of “cross-cultures” and “other” modernities, some degree of “transnational homogeneity” would exist? Chinese Capitalism could be very different in form from the Anglo-American variety, but would they not be similar if characterised by a practical and structural logic that identifies them as “capitalist”?

It seems, then, that Rofel’s claim about the existence of “other” modernities takes on the appearance of a language-game, one that is predicated on discursively celebrating the difference of particulars rather than identifying the similarities and systematic nature of structures. And differences can always be found. My concern is that her claims of “other” modernities could be more the result of a form of intellectual affiliation, of an identification with a poststructuralist tradition than with a phenomenologically-grounded evaluation of “things-as-they-are” (cf. Eisenstadt’s (2000), Gaonkar (2001), and Grossberg’s (2010)).

I also have the concern that insisting on different modernities when they are not, downplays the history and politics of colonialism that gave birth to the modern epoch. To call the modernities of others “cross-cultural translations” seems almost to suggest a sedentary process of benign and equal exchange. It connotes a certain political parity between the agents of modernity and their acolytes, which obfuscate what, historically, were forced cultural conversions accomplished on the back of cunning, chicanery, and outright coercion. It is apposite to recall Arturo Escobar’s (2008: 347) description of the problem here: “It seems to me that in many recent anthropological works modernity is,

first, redefined in a way that deprives it of historical coherence let alone unitary, social and cultural logic; and then, second, found ethnographically everywhere, always plural, changing, and contested. A new balance seems necessary. After all, why are we so ready still to ascribe to capitalism powerful and systematic effects, while denying modernity any coherent and dominant cultural logic?”

Naturally, I do not believe political apathy is Rofel’s intent. On the contrary, it is apparent that her declared interest “in the “other” modernities necessarily produced by those who have been the objects of the world history of the West” (ibid: xii) is explicitly political, a gesture meant to empower these “objects” and to render them “subjects” or “agents” of their own fates. Yet inadvertently and ironically, this well-meaning aim to affirm the agency of “victims” undermines itself when one downplays the significance of historically-determined structural parameters within which such agency operates. It is therefore important that I distinguish my approach from Rofel’s in this regard: I believe that social structures are real and obdurate in time, a claim that is verified by the fact that we are unable to change the existing social system on account of our individual efforts, for we inherit a collectively-made-world verily of already-existing structures that precede and are greater than the sum of “us”.

### ***1.5 Key arguments***

The bases for the key arguments of this project have been articulated in the foregoing discussion concerning the historical background of China’s contemporary civilisational transformation and its perceived relationship to the good life. I offer here, below, a concise and schematic summation of these arguments, with supplementary comments where relevant. Argument #1: Common sense, popular aspirations, and many everyday practices believed to engender the good life in China appear to take after Western modern experience.

As alluded to above, a compelling explanation for this process of Westernisation in China and beyond is the widely-held belief that the West was the first to have become modern. It is important to add, moreover, that proponents unequivocally regard the latter as a positive accomplishment which signified historic progress. It was this claim to modernity as well as its material actualization that has historically set the West apart from the non-West, ideologically as well as materially (Ferguson 2011). From the perspective of the non-West in general and China in this case, becoming modern has therefore implied undertaking what is inevitably a process of Westernisation. As both modernisation and Westernisation were believed to be synonymous because of their historical entanglement, the pursuit of these twin

processes represented “development”, which was thought indispensable for the attainment of the good life.

But development of what? And to what? Despite the cultural uniqueness of the Western experience of modernity, its proponents denied both its historical and cultural specificity and claimed its universality. “Development” was therefore invoked to signify a universal process of progress, involving the movement from darkness to light, from the backward to the advanced. Development thus implied a linear trajectory and implicated a teleology of salvation, albeit secularized and without reference to its religious underpinnings. In other words, “development” here meant no more than the development of a society in accordance with the trajectory of the historical experience of the modern West.

It was believed that these twin revolutionary processes had to be enacted in the realms of epistemology and ontology, in ways of knowing and of being, in thought as well as in praxis. And on all societal fronts too. It is this all-encompassing nature of the modernist project that is taken up as my second key thesis.

Argument #2: Westernisation and modernisation in China are processes that cut across all domains of life, visible and non-visible, material and not. The relevant domains implicated are socio-cultural, economic, and political, which can be said to correspond to the realm of consciousness and subjectivity, the realm of material reproduction, and the realm of socio-political organization, respectively.

Argument #3: Modernity in China – as elsewhere – inheres foremost in the elevation of economic affairs of a very specific nature, specifically those characteristic of a money-production economy. It thus prioritises the development of the economy above other considerations.

It is for this reason that economic accumulation at both the collective and individual levels signals the good life in the modern age. Drawing inspiration from Enlightenment ideas, the modernist project is undergirded by a materialist cosmology, economic productivism, and an unstinting faith in technological progress (Kanth 2005). Alongside these orientations, it is important to note that the modernist project is also prescribed as a mode-of-being.

Specifically, it is a mode-of-being predicated on an ontology of individualism that celebrates the rational individual as society’s fundamental unit, its historical agent of history. This feted individualism is one that regards the individual, ideally, to be liberated from the constraints of a collective system of morals so that s/he may freely pursue the above named techno-materialist-productivist goals. Because Chinese modernity is an ontological derivative of the

modern experience of the West, I expect it similarly to demonstrate some, if not many, of these characteristics.

Given that socialism and capitalism both share this same materialist ontology foundational to modernism, both systems, which have traditionally been cast as antithetical, may be said to be more similar than different. Arguably, they are but different sides of the same coin since they operate on the same ontological basis that exalts ever-increasing technological and economic progress and differ only in their visions of the ideal societal mode-of-being, collectivist rather than individualist, and vice versa. No wonder that socialism and capitalism should turn on the question of how productive output ought to be distributed.

It can be seen within this context then that while China's post-Mao reforms could be said to represent a "break" from its Maoist socialist past, this break should be qualified. It needs to be noted that while the post-Mao reform and opening resulted in the diminishment of the state in favour of a greater role for market forces in the determination of economic Chinese affairs, the ultimate modernist goal of greater economic growth and development remained unchallenged. If anything, it became highlighted as an issue of even greater urgency than before.

Argument #4: A conception of the good life which is predicated on economic accumulation and growth militates against the very attainment of well-being.

Unlike most analyses of contemporary Chinese developments, which take issue with China's post-Mao reforms and opening up as a sharp departure from its Maoist- socialist past, I am - for reasons just stated - more ambivalent about highlighting rupture than noting continuity between the two historical phases. While I appreciate the differences between the Maoist and post-Maoist phases, I believe that highlighting the disjuncture between them plays too much into a Eurocentric Cold War narrative that only cares to contrast the "virtues" of capitalism with the "evils" of socialism. Not only does this pre-fabricated, cookie-cutter interpretation fail to take history seriously, it fails to consider there is a history outside the West, to say nothing about historical burdens imposed by the West.

Indeed, reading the post-Mao reforms as a radical break from the Maoist phase of Chinese history implicitly rehearses the hoary debates in classical political economy between free-market champions such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo against its opponents such as Karl Marx. Yet this is surely but an internal European affair, a domestic argument, to be sure! Indeed, that historical events in the non-West are typically interpreted through the ideological prism of Western political economic and intellectual history merely underscores the extent to

which there is a reliance “on European ways of representation and their concepts”, arguably confirming the “dominance of European reason.” (Heidegger 1971: 15).

So, in order to counter the problems of conscious and unselfconscious Eurocentrism in interpreting global historical events, I have attempted to understand the Chinese predicament from their point of view, beginning at the time they became the “victims of history”. This necessitates taking a long-view of history and returning to the point when the circumstances leading to Chinese feelings of victimhood began, specifically, in the aftermath of the fateful Sino-Western colonial encounter *circa* the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C. Accordingly, what is required is not just a historical interpretation but a political one too.

Therefore, unlike most typical readings that regard the Chinese national situation as a self-contained internal affair of deciding on one ideological position or another, my interpretation is based on a world-systems, geo-political perspective of China as a postcolonial society with anxieties befitting its historical experience of the past two centuries. Consequently, in taking this long-view of history, I do not see post-Mao reforms as constituting such a radical “break” from its Maoist or even pre-Maoist past as much as I see continuity in the Chinese aspiration to become modern. I see continuity because the historical memory of its “century of humiliation” has meant that Chinese modernisation has been pursued with the determined aim to buttress the country’s defences against potential colonial incursions in the future, and to safeguard national sovereignty. The striving for “Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as means”, which began in the late-19<sup>th</sup> C, has not changed, nor has the ultimate aim of becoming modern. Certainly, what has changed, and changed conspicuously, is the method or means of “getting there”, with a state-dominant economic approach of the erstwhile Maoist period giving way to a market-led one in the post-Maoist phase today.

My seeing continuities between the Maoist and post-Maoist phases of history is not to deny the potentially dramatic changes that post-Mao reform and opening-up policies have introduced across the spectrum of Chinese society. I have insisted upon a longer-view of history because it affords us a broader perspective so critically necessary in helping us understand and evaluate the present, and to understand the origins and nature of a China said to be modern. Adopting a longer historical view also enables us to understand how and to what extent Chinese modernity represents an “alternative” or “other” modernity as claimed by some (Gaonkar 2001, Rofel 1999), or whether it is but another variant of the Western prototype, as argued by others (Dirlik 2003).

Regardless of where one stands in these debates, it bears remembering that these meta-level discourses do not take away from the profound and dramatic socio-cultural consequences in China that have been engendered in the wake of post-Mao reform policies. In fact, as stated, one of the key purposes of my ethnography was exactly to document how these reforms have played out on the ground, which in themselves would move me beyond the discursive level and these grand catchall categories juxtaposing “modernity” against “tradition”, Maoist “socialism” against post-Maoist “capitalism” etc., towards a finer-grained account of how the average Chinese person is engaging in the practices supposedly described by these rubrics. Hence, it is by way of the ethnography I conducted in Shenzhen amongst its typical residents that the playing out of these grand discourses of modernity and tradition, socialism and capitalism etc. have been illuminated. As the ethnographic materials ahead will show, my ethnography moved my emphasis away from these conceptual signifiers towards the phenomena they signify, thereby uncovering where things have or haven’t changed, and how “tradition” has become “modern”, or not.

My vacillation between the conceptual and the empirical, the general and the particular, the signifier and the signified, has nevertheless been made apparent in this exercise. It has in fact been somewhat inevitable, for it is as Whitehead (1926:192) noted, “We think in generalities, but we live in detail. To make the past live, we must perceive in detail in addition to thinking of it in generalities.” So, even though my concerns revolve around larger questions about the general human predicament that engage meta-level discourses about modernity, globalization, capitalist development etc., at the end the aim has been to find out through a grounded empirical examination of my Shenzhen interlocutors’ everyday lives whether Chinese modernisation and westernization have resulted in the attainment of the good life. Indeed, the key virtue of ethnography lies precisely in its ability to uncover how these overarching institutional and structural processes unfold on the ground.

### ***1.5 Key research questions and methodology***

In light of the foregoing discussion, the key empirical research questions that animated my ethnographic inquiry in Shenzhen were as follows:

*What does it mean to have a good life in China today?*

*How have my interlocutors sought to accomplish such a life?*

*What have these large-scale, societal wide transformations that occur under the labels of modernization, urbanization, and development meant for Chinese social relations in general, and for family relations in particular?*

*What is the nature of my interlocutors' participation in the abovenamed processes, or conversely, how have the latter processes been expressed in my interlocutors' lives? Have the abovenamed processes brought about the good life, or have they detracted from it?*

Given that the ethnography required my immersion and settling into life in Shenzhen before I was able to observe and document the preoccupations of my various interlocutors, the specific method deployed had to remain contingent upon and attendant to developments on the ground. Accordingly, methods were determined *in situ*, by necessity, and *pari passu* my explorations of the city. It was therefore a case of deploying an appropriate method for the specific inquiry at hand. Because of this, the reader will find me frequently referring to methodological developments wherever appropriate in the individual chapters that follow. Such customized, case-by-case methodological improvisations aside, I deployed the otherwise standard ethnographic practices of living among, observing, and interviewing my interlocutors, often iteratively, to obtain a sense of their preoccupations and their good life aspirations.

It is relevant for me to briefly explain how I came to know of my interlocutors and how they fit within the progression of my research. As is to be expected, my circle of interlocutors grew over time and increased the longer I had been in the field. By the time I left Shenzhen after some two years, I was having ongoing conversations and conducting interviews with eight interlocutors, with an even distribution between the sexes. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, I have only been able to feature just three of them in this dissertation, all of whom are women. I had not initially intended to skew my ethnography towards women but as I began analyzing my ethnographic data, I became fascinated by the under-appreciated role and almost invisible manner that women, especially those having to perform work in the home, play in sustaining the formal money-exchange economy. This women-only focus thus allowed me to observe a pattern, namely, the mechanism by which women's contributions are expropriated by the system without due acknowledgement or compensation, thereby exposing the implicit gender bias that functions in the formal economy.

## **1.6 Outline of work**

Chapter 2 is closely related to this introductory chapter in its historical appreciation of the Sino-Western colonial encounter and its legacy on contemporary Chinese notions of the good life. The chapter features an introduction of the city of Shenzhen by way of the Hong Kong-Shenzhen (HK-SZ) immigration border. By using the HK-SZ border as a site to tell the story

of the intertwining histories of the two cities and their relative standing to each other in the imagination of their respective populations, this chapter gives us a sense of contemporary Chinese perceptions of the good life. Given the chapter's historical orientation, it also reveals how the 19<sup>th</sup> C Sino-Western colonial encounter gave shape to such ideas about the good life and, simultaneously, produced the differences that are responsible for the fraught relations between HK and the Chinese mainland today.

Chapter 3 proceeds to document my early experiences settling into life in Shenzhen. The chapter features my observations of two primary phenomena: first, is the aesthetics of the Shenzhen urban milieu that I discovered in the midst of apartment-hunting and, second, the forms of sociability observable in interpersonal interactions in the city today. As regards the latter, the chapter offers a glimpse of various contemporary Chinese forms of sociality, ranging from *guanxi* reciprocity typically associated with Confucian aspects of the Chinese traditional culture, to the use of contracts that are emphatic of the rights-bearing individual personifying the West after Descartes. I believe the chapter reveals the ongoing tussle, the tug-of-war, between the cosmologies of Confucius on the one hand and Descartes on the other, putting at stake alternative paradigms of the good life.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are similar in that they feature biographic-oriented accounts of three interlocutors, Wai, Yan, and Madam Chao. The chapters document various aspects of their lives by drawing on my observations of what they do as well as our frequent conversations. The issues most prominently and frequently emerging in our discussions were workaday, bread-and-butter issues that included: the notion of home, the comparison of life in the city vis-a-vis the countryside, children and larger family matters, and, last but certainly not least, work and money-earning opportunities. I believe assembling these discussions about their preoccupations produces a picture of what the typical Chinese person is concerned about in present-day China, in turn, revealing the nature of general Chinese conceptions of the good life. Additionally, alongside their individual life-accounts is a concurrent story developing through these chapters, and it is that of the rapid development and modernisation of Shenzhen.

Chapter 7 shifts gears and changes scales. As I expand my research spatially to explore other parts of the city, my focus moves from the micro-interiority of individuals to the macro- and institutional-level of the city's urban milieu. This chapter provides an account of my urban explorations and my inadvertent discovery of Shenzhen's "margins", what I subsequently find out are the city's "urban villages" - *chengzhongcun*, or literally, village-within-the city. The urban village's marginality is demonstrated foremost by its absence from

media and popular representations of Shenzhen. Yet as the chapter demonstrates, the urban village's underrepresentation is inversely proportional to the significant and indispensable role it has played in the history of Shenzhen's development. Moreover, the Chinese authorities' ambition to transform Shenzhen into a hi-tech, high-value added economy is today being served as justification for urban renewal and the demolition (*chai*) of the city's urban villages. Why is the urban village so maligned despite its functional importance for the city? This chapter explores the question, examining what the urban village's neglect says about Chinese notions of the good life, not least at the institutional level. Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation.

## Chapter 2: A Tale of Two Cities and the Good Life

*The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet only because it is ugly;  
The whole world recognizes the good as good, yet only because it is bad.  
Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;  
The difficult and the easy complement each other;  
The long and the short off-set each other;  
The high and the low incline towards each other;  
Note and sound harmonize each other;  
Before and after follow each other.*

Tao Te Ching, Verse 2 (translated by D.C. Lau)

“The ‘Schoolmaster’ is indeed ‘abroad’, and may now carry his lessons to the doors of those who never yet left home. *There* is a real British colony (no Portuguese counterfeit) planted on the very threshold of China. There they may see commerce flourishing in the absence of restrictions, property and person secure under the protection of equal laws, and, in a word, all the best fruits of science and civilization transplanted direct from the European headquarters. The good or evil we may do there will, by the law of inevitable necessity, react upon ourselves.”

John Francis Davis, Former governor of Hong Kong on the island’s prospects<sup>8</sup>

### 2.0. Introduction

This chapter offers the reader an initial and tentative sense and appreciation of the life priorities in the PRC today. It does this by way of my experience in the country’s southernmost city and first special economic zone, Shenzhen. As many of my initial experiences of Shenzhen occurred by my crossing into Shenzhen via Hong Kong, this chapter begins with an ethnographic account of some of the social phenomena occurring at and around the Hong Kong (HK)-Shenzhen (SZ) border. Apart from the fact that the HK-SZ border was one that allowed for my initial forays into the PRC and was in itself of ethnographic value, it was also felt that the border was worthwhile examining to address general questions about the “good life” in contemporary China. Perhaps it was not inappropriate to ask why there was a border between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, given Britain’s “return” (or “handover”) of Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997. Hong Kong had been a British colonial outpost since 1841, having been ceded by the Qing dynasty upon its defeat by the British in the First Opium War of 1839-1841, only to be “returned” some 150 years later. In short, the British had acquired Hong Kong in 1841 by means of war; it was returned to the Chinese in 1997: why did the HK-PRC border still exist?

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Munn, Christopher (2001). “ ‘Anglo-China: The Opium War and the British Acquisition of Hong Kong’”, in John M. Carrol and Chi-Kwan Mark (eds.). 2015. *Critical Readings on the Modern History of Hong Kong*. Vol. 4, p. 1303. Leiden: Brill.

Apropos, the HK-SZ border is more than simply an innocuous crossing or immigration checkpoint. It was a border with an underlying history, not least of China's encounter with the West. The HK-SZ border was therefore a fitting object of study capable of throwing light on the history of China's political and colonial relations with the West, with all its ensuing cultural implications, including notions about what constitute a "good life".

Corresponding with my movements to and fro between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, therefore, this early chapter will include observations from Hong Kong and Shenzhen to examine some of the life activities and preoccupations that occur around the border. Although alluding to an historical past, the ethnographic nature of the account necessarily grounds the phenomena it describes in the present, with the chief concern being to obtain a sense of what makes the good life in China today.

A word about method seems appropriate here. The ethnography is anthropological and phenomenological in inspiration, "selecting" as its objects of investigation phenomena that were conspicuous and stood out during my time in the field. Accordingly, the Hong Kong –Shenzhen border at Shenzhen Bay became a site of research interest because I had used it exclusively to cross from Hong Kong into Shenzhen. And because the very rich social phenomena/events occurring around it tended to compellingly suggest themselves as intriguing objects to be researched, the Shenzhen Bay border inevitably became a part of the "field" itself, an important part/element of my de facto field site. This development appears to be faithful to the phenomenological method in anthropology, an approach whereby the topics, the questions, and even the field-locations, of one's research are constantly being offered up, modified and reformulated as contingencies based upon what one encounters on the ground.

Consequently, it may be said that even though the present chapter is ethnographic (and descriptive) in persuasion, it is also historical (and explanatory) insofar as it offers the political and socio-cultural context for understanding good life aspirations in China today.

### **2.1. *The HK-SZ Border: Shoppers, Schoolchildren and Parallel-traders***

I have in the Introductory chapter cited some secondary, macro-level data of Shenzhen but it is evident that they are of limited use or help here. When I stood outside the gigantic, modern-looking structure that housed both the Hong Kong and Chinese immigration checkpoints, it became apparent to me that such information captured and relayed only a sliver of goings-on in Shenzhen.

As I stood pondering my next move, I witnessed before me what was a seemingly chaotic ground-level reality that appeared different and detached from the Shenzhen represented by the media, the Shenzhen that was celebrated for its growth rates, changing economic structure, rapid urbanization, and the like. But I knew too that such seeming detachment between the empirical reality before me – mundane, rough and unruly - and common representations of Shenzhen – modern, clean and orderly - was an illusion. An epistemic illusion spawned by our representations of things for ease of analytic understanding. Ontologically, there was no separation between the seemingly chaotic, micro-level and apparently more orderly, macro-level realities as such; *au contraire*, one knew there was wholeness and micro-and macro co-existence. After all, it would seem that that the throngs of people before me would have been a part of the micro-reality that accounted for Shenzhen’s celebrated economic growth and urbanization rates. In any case, it should be noted that the disparity between re-presentations of Shenzhen and the ground-reality I was witnessing speaks to the limits of such representations, which are invariably always selective and incomplete; more significantly, the limited nature of representations underscores the gap that exists between the signifier and what it is meant to signify. I shall discuss this in greater detail in a later chapter (See Chapter 7).

This brief diversion of thought about my erstwhile situation at the Shenzhen border and its relation to established understandings of the city prompted a proliferation of further ideas. Having been alarmed by the realization that I did not have a pre-defined site and was feeling uncertain about where or how to proceed, I had foresworn to momentarily dispense with the abstract and theoretical to attend to my pressing material circumstances. But this moratorium on the conceptual was not to last. The intrusion of ideas could not be thwarted; instead, the scene of the densely crowded border-crossing proliferated a multiplicity of thoughts - a stream of consciousness - as one idea flowed after another in rapid succession. It was the overwhelming temporal and spatial experience of the Shenzhen Bay border-crossing that appeared to instigate the onslaught of ideas. It seemed that experience had here become the basis of knowledge.

I describe my experience of the border-crossing as “overwhelming” because I felt the visual and audio stimulation overwhelm my senses. To begin with, there was the sight of the sea of people moving through the immigration check-point; a number so large it can only be appropriate to describe it as a “multitude”. I had on this day endured standing in line for a

total of about an hour-and-a-half to complete immigration formalities/procedures at both Hong Kong and Chinese checkpoints, an indication of the size of the crowd at the border.<sup>9</sup>

Now that I had finally made my way past both the Hong Kong and Chinese checkpoints and had exited the gigantic immigration building on the Shenzhen side of the border, I could pause momentarily to reflect on the fraught nature of the border-crossing. More specifically, I was able to witness and appreciate the numbers of people crossing the Shenzhen Bay border, exiting Hong Kong and entering Shenzhen, and vice-versa. In fact, so great was the flow of people that I had to move to an obscure corner upon exiting the building to avoid impeding – or more accurately, avoid being run over by - the oncoming multitude. Yes, “overwhelm” and “run over” seemed like a useful way to describe the scene and my own experience of it. Since it is the point from where I crossed into Shenzhen, allow me first to describe my experience of the Hong Kong side of the border.

In hindsight, I felt the frantic tempo around the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border as soon as I arrived at the Shenzhen Bay bus-interchange on the Hong Kong side. I was compelled to force-march as soon as I alighted the bus and made my way to the immigration building two-hundred metres away. The feeling was one of being buoyed and propelled by the tidal wave of people on my heels, and that if I should suddenly stop in my tracks, would suffer the fate of being trampled under. I had arrived at the border at around 11 o'clock in the morning on a weekday, supposedly outside “peak” hours. But it was busy and crowded all the same, with an imminent sense of urgency in the air.

My fellow travelers and I were single-mindedly racing towards the same destination, the Shenzhen Bay immigration building that housed both Hong Kong and Chinese checkpoints. This rush felt much like a competition that turned us somewhat into adversaries. The aim, of course, was to try to get to the front of the queue, to have our travel documents stamped to record our departure from Hong Kong so that we could proceed to do likewise on the Chinese side fifty-metres away, this time to gain entry into China. No effort was spared but, naturally, some were able to move at speeds considerably faster than others. After all, my co-travellers were a motley crew comprising of people of different ages: there were working

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<sup>9</sup> As subsequent experience would reveal to me, the length of time it takes to get through immigration is very much contingent on the time of the day one attempts it. While it took me over an hour crossing the border at 11 a.m. this morning, it has also taken as long as two-and-a-half hours and as little as twenty-five minutes. The best times to cross would be around its opening at 6 a.m., around noon (lunch-time), or just before the border shuts closer to mid-night; generally the worst-times would be at around 9 a.m. or between the hours of 4 and 6 p.m. in the evenings.

men and women, parents with young children, students, middle-aged individuals with large suitcases and shopping-trolleys, and also elderly retirees.

When I subsequently had the opportunity to cross this border at different times of the day, I learned that the size of this multitude would vary, ebbing and flowing depending on the time. Unsurprisingly, because of the rhythm of the typical workday, the longest queues occurred from 0730 hrs to 1030hrs in the mornings and approximately from 1630 hrs to 1930 hrs in the evenings on weekdays. For obvious reasons, it was generally ill-advised to be attempting to cross the border on weekends. If I remember correctly, the Shenzhen Bay border-crossing opened at 0600 hrs and closed at midnight; naturally, these were the ideal times to be crossing the border since there were hardly any queues. With only a few people, it would usually take no more than minutes to move from Hong Kong to Shenzhen or vice-versa.

Interestingly, I also found from my experience that the weekday mid-afternoon crowd was augmented by school-aged children, as young as four years old (kindergarten age), who were accompanied by their adult minders. I subsequently found out that these children lived in Shenzhen but, with their minders, made the extraordinary daily effort to attend school in Hong Kong in part because many believed the latter's educational system to be superior.<sup>10</sup> Many Chinese parents believe that attending a Hong Kong school promises improved/enhanced career prospects for their children, if not simply a better education all around. (Among the several factors involved was the fact that an English-speaking environment was far more prevalent at school in HK than on the mainland). Similarly, following the same reasoning, it is widely believed that an education received in the West is superior to one obtained in China. While it is understandable that certain forms of educational certification are more recognizable and carry greater currency than others, what in fact constitutes a "better" education is often ambiguous, based upon perceptions and presuppositions that are seldom explained or clarified. Naturally, it behooves one to ask if any attempt is being made to be discerning on such matters; to raise the most obvious/fundamental of questions: what makes for a "good" – or at least, a "better" – education? Is Hong Kong's school system necessarily "better" than China's to justify Shenzhen's children and guardians crossing the border everyday just to go to school?<sup>11</sup> Was

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<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1341456/more-mainland-chinese-parents-want-children-travel-school-hong-kong>. Accessed June 27, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> I refer to Alan and Josephine Smart's (2012: 108) essay, which makes passing reference to the quality of the HK educational system vis-à-vis the mainland's. They report that their HK interlocutors, petty capitalists, had

Hong Kong's school system perceived to be better because of its cultural proximity to the West vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China?

One afternoon, upon seeing ten or so noisy kindergarteners with their guardians at the Fu Tai bus-stop in Hong Kong's New Territories awaiting the arrival of B3A, the bus bound for Shenzhen Bay, I struck a conversation with the person behind me in the queue, having exactly such a question in mind. It was just past noon, school was over for the day, and these Mandarin-speaking children and guardians – the giveaway that they were from the mainland – were waiting for the bus to take them back to the border. Ironically, my smartly-dressed interlocutor turned out to be a postgraduate student in Hong Kong from the Chinese mainland. She expressed admiration for the sacrifices these children's parents were making for them, and for the dedication demonstrated by the children themselves, all to which I concurred. Yet when she offered that their extraordinary efforts to come to school in HK were made along the lines I described, that is, with the aim of receiving a better education than was available in China, I feigned surprise and quizzed the widely-held assumptions being made about the Hong Kong educational system. In fact, playing the devil's advocate, I said rhetorically: "Why, is Hong Kong's educational system better?" Knowing the often fawning, pro-West predilections of many young Chinese, I pushed her further: "I understand that many people see it this way but is an education from the West necessarily better?" Naturally, I felt somewhat qualified to be posing such a question, having been the product of a Western education myself.

"Isn't that obviously the case?", she said to me matter-of-factly. My newfound Chinese friend must have considered me odd and rather clueless, oblivious to commonsense. Be that as it may, it appeared that we were some distance yet from a critical discussion about schooling and education. If this was the response of a postgraduate student, what else could ordinary moms and dads - those waiting in-line for the bus with us – with nothing but their children's best interest at heart be thinking?

Was this revealing of a geo-politics of knowledge that was uncritically being reinforced, one that we uncritically reproduce? If so, the hierarchy of supposed educational value seemed to be ranked from higher to lower, superior to inferior in the following order: EuroAmerica - Hong Kong – China, keeping in mind here that Hong Kong was historically

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decided against the opportunity to relocate their operations across to the mainland in the 1980s despite the economic benefits such a move would entail because of the concern that "their children would follow them across the border and have to cope with the inferior mainland educational system." The assumption of "inferiority" here was not problematised, just accepted, a taken-for-grantedness that I am here drawing attention to.

the gateway to the West and so bore an intermediate position. Strikingly, such views about HK appear to affirm the former HK governor's prophecy about the island colony, cited at the start of the chapter. He is to have said in 1843: "*There* – in HK – all the best fruits of science and civilisation transplanted direct from the European headquarters". By the 1860s the acting governor had the following explanation to offer about the causes of migration from the Chinese mainland: "Year by year the colony continues to improve its political and commercial status, while its position as a port of general convenience is as readily admitted now as heretofore. Something of this prosperity is due to geographical location, something to accidental circumstances, and a considerable part to the professional enterprise of British and Foreign merchants... The natives of the mainland flocked to Hong Kong in crowds after some few years' experience of it. Doubtless they did so from seeing means of trade, but plainly also because they saw here a difference in Government and consequently a superiority in British over Chinese forms."<sup>12</sup> It had become increasingly common among the advocates of British civilisation and empire to attribute Hong Kong's success to British colonial rule, taking as evidence the popularity of migration from the mainland to the island colony.

Accordingly, such views about the superiority of Hong Kong vis-à-vis the mainland have been circulating since the former became a British colony in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. And because this presumed superiority was believed to stem from its association with European civilisation and its institutions, Hong Kong was ostensibly thought to be better than the mainland because of a generalized "superiority in British over Chinese forms". Given the history of colonialism and its attendant belief in Western superiority, it was perhaps unsurprising to discover that my Chinese interlocutor turned out to be of a similar persuasion, even if only in matters pertaining to education.

But as the above quotations from the proponents of empire suggest, more was at stake than simply the concerns of schooling and educational standards: there was the faith in the general superiority of the British vis-à-vis the Chinese in all social domains. Western civilisation and its respective institutions were thought to hold out the promise of a "good life".

Hence, although the above offers an example of the educational aspirations of the mainland Chinese, the demonstrable willingness of those Shenzhen Chinese parents to subject themselves and their children to an arduous daily commute across the border and

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in Mann, Christopher. 2001. " 'Anglo-China': The Opium War and the British Acquisition of Hong Kong", in John M. Carrol and Chi-Kwan Mark (eds.). 2015. *Critical Readings on the Modern History of Hong Kong*. Vol. 4, p. 1303. Leiden: Brill.

back again simply to attend school in Hong Kong, was revealing of what they believed made for a “good” education. Yet it is clear from the recounted history above that the idea of the “good” taking such form and being constituted as such, was not naturally given. The assumption of the “good” as being predicated on Western civilisational institutions was neither independent of the Sino-Western encounter of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century nor of the ideological confections that have been propagated since.

#### ***2.4 The Present As History: The Hong Kong-Shenzhen Border***

Among the different groups crossing the border, the most conspicuous and slow-moving, understandably, were those lugging suitcases and trolleys. When alighting the bus at Shenzhen Bay on the Hong Kong side, I had seen people transferring the contents of their shopping bags into empty suitcases and carts beside them on the ground. It was apparent that all sorts of goods were being purchased in HK and brought into China, from edibles such as milk powder, chocolate, medicines, cookies, to everyday products such as baby diapers and cosmetics, to clothing, shoes, and luxury fashion items. I later found out that many of these persons were engaged in cross-border parallel trading activities, arbitrage involving the purchase of tax-free goods on the HK side for sale at a higher price in China across the border.

It was going to be a little longer – a good several months into my fieldwork - before I would fully understand what I was witnessing, but when I did it was largely through Hong Kong media reports and the personal testimonies that certain Hong Kong acquaintances offered to me. By such time, I had reason to think that these media reports bore a mutually dependent relationship to the personal accounts of many Hong Kongers. In other words, the media seemed to be feeding popular opinion as much as performing their ostensible duty of “impartially” reporting on the prevailing state of affairs. It was these accounts that alerted me to the fraught nature of the relations between the citizens of Hong Kong and those of China, with the parallel-trade described above becoming a flashpoint during the period of my fieldwork, adding fuel to already strained cross-border relations.

“There were just too many people at the shops today,” was a common complaint I would hear from some of my Hong Kong friends, especially on the weekends. I soon learned to interpret such statements as being coded, for they were meant as expressions of frustration/annoyance at the presence of the large number of mainland Chinese tourists

without being too explicit about it. In other words, the deployment of such code was an effort to veil one's xenophobia.

### ***2.4.1 Treaty-ports and Special Economic Zones***

What seemed to be the matter? For reasons already articulated, since Hong Kong became a British colony at the conclusion of the Opium War, it has been portrayed as being superior to, and as such, a more favourable place to live than the mainland. This view continues to carry much currency among many, if not most, Hong Kongers until today. Unsurprisingly, it is also a view shared by many Chinese on the mainland. Indeed, this HK-PRC rift is consistent with the modern political-economic histories of Hong Kong and China and their concomitant ideological representations. It may be explained by Hong Kong's erstwhile status as a British colony and its integration as an important node into the British Empire's extensive trading, commercial and financial networks since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C.

As illustrated above, the Hong Kong that we know of today has from its historic beginning, post-Opium War, been considered and represented as an outpost of the West, clearly designed to operate in the interests of British and, more generally, Western, capitalist commercial and economic interests. This was to be contrasted not only with the Western colonial representation of mainland China as a backward, feudal society but, subsequently in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> C Cold War, with the embargo the West - led by the U.S. - placed on Maoist/Communist China. This embargo effectively excluded the People's Republic of China from the global (capitalist) economic and political community for some twenty years (1949-69) and was imposed based on the allegation that it was an aggressive and expansionist power threatening its noncommunist neighbours. While it can be said that the pronouncement of such threats during the Cold War was in keeping with the ideological divisions/antagonisms of the period, it is useful to contemplate their impact on perceptions of the PRC by the West and its subalterns, including HK, until this day.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, because this conjunction of political-economic circumstances meant that the People's Republic languished during the Cold War while Hong Kong flourished economically via its fortuitous position as an entrepot within the global capital circuit, the favourable perception of Hong Kong vis-à-vis the People's Republic was affirmed and consolidated. In fact, the realities of Hong Kong's mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> C (circa 1960s-1990s) economic success have tended to give succor to the British colonial enterprise

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<sup>13</sup> See: [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1950\\_us\\_china.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1950_us_china.htm). Last accessed 15 August 2016.

retrospectively, leading some establishment/court intellectuals to conclude that colonialism was “good”, or at the very least, “benign”, thereby spawning a revival of the popularity of the notion.<sup>14</sup>

We have traced HK-PRC relations to Cold War ideological differences that in turn produced actual material disparities between the two regions. Yet if we are to recall the historical account further back to inquire how Hong Kong fell into the ambit of the British Empire, as we already have, we discover that it resulted from the settlement of the first Sino-British Opium War. Having been defeated in its resistance to Britain’s opium smuggling along China’s south coast, the Chinese under Qing rule had to cede Hong Kong to the British in 1842. This cession of Hong Kong to Britain was but part of the settlement specified under the Treaty of Nanjing at the conclusion of the war, which also demanded that the Qing create and open “treaty-ports” in Canton, Fuzhou, Ningbo, Xiamen (Amoy) and Shanghai to foreign “free-trade”, not to mention its having to pay a total of 21 million silver dollars for Britain’s cost of the war and the losses of opium revenues that resulted from it (Teng 1944).

Not unlike the way modernity was spread in the past and continues to be propagated today, this historic Sino-British episode reveals the disruption of Chinese life to have been externally instigated, occurring no less than through the violent subjugation of the hapless Chinese population.

Certain apologists for colonialism have sometimes self-referentially cited the corruption and insularity of the Qing Empire as the reason for Chinese stagnation and foreign invasion. As Munn (2001) has noted, the enthusiasts for empire purportedly believed that China was in a state of decay, held back from the progress and fulfillment of which it was capable by a corrupt, oppressive and alien Manchu (Qing) government.

Not surprisingly, the line of thought pursued within this genre alludes to the colonial enterprise as one of paternal beneficence, one in which the colonizer rescues the colonized from themselves. Here, it is reported that British empire-mongers felt that the industrious Chinese, “most thoroughly imbued with the spirit of commercial enterprise, were receptive to enlightened western influence, and needed only sustained and extensive contact with the west to help them transform their civilization.” (Munn 2001: 1288)

Hence, the decisiveness of Britain’s victory in the Opium War allowed missionaries to cast the war as a necessity for China’s salvation:

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/so-brits-are-proud-of-colonialism-clearly-they-need-some-lessons-about-the-reality-of-the-british-a6825666.html>. Accessed 16 June 2016.

“The leaven of humanity – sometimes, in the present state of the world, to be administered by the strong hand of war, - so it seems- very often breaks up old prejudices, and opens out the way for the milder and all-subduing influences of truth – that truth which will and must eventually prevail over all error.”<sup>15</sup>

John Stuart Mill echoed this view, referring to China as a stagnant civilisation and writing in *On Liberty* (1859): “... they have become stationary – have remained so for thousands of years; and if they are ever to be improved it must be by foreigners.” (cited in Gray 1998: 80).

In early 1841, upon completing an excursion by boat around the island, a report of a small group of (mainly American) Protestant missionaries summarized in a report what many regarded as the usefulness of Hong Kong to the European presence in China. They wished that the island would “form a substantial foundation, in the providence of God, on which to establish, under the auspices of the flag that now waves upon its summits, the true principle of commerce, justice, and the Christian religion, where protected these may flourish untrammelled, until this nation be enlightened and saved!” (quoted in Munn 2001; op. cit.: 1296. Author’s emphasis).

As Munn (ibid: 1295) has noted, therefore, the early vision of Hong Kong was that it serve “as a model ‘of English institutions, brought under the Chinese eye as an example of civilized freedom... an example of European government, benign, just, and happy.’”

Meanwhile, the Bishop of Calcutta is reported to have said the following in his Thanksgiving Sermon for the Peace with China:

“But even the Chinese will ere long recognize that a connection with England and the Western world is the greatest of blessings, and will be thankful for the events which opened to them the floodgates of European civilization and knowledge, and raised them in the scale of nations. For commerce itself will be the herald for many various blessings. The arts of life will follow in its train, especially agriculture and medicine. The equal administration of justice will soon succeed, upon which there will be reared the framework of law for the security of person and property.”

While it would probably be ill-advised to attempt to disabuse ideologues of their ideologies, there is something to be stated on this matter about which we can be certain. And it is this: howsoever unpleasant life under the Qing regime/dynasty in the mid-nineteenth century may have been- and however venal the regime in fact was – neither could have given

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<sup>15</sup> Cited in Munn (2001; op cit.: 1290).

moral justification for Britain's colonial predations in China, which verily led to the disruption of Chinese autochthonous developments in the realms of polity, economy, society, and culture. Naturally, one should not neglect to mention that the external impetus for the Chinese to change course was also given by the imminent and real threat of similar encroachments posed by Britain's colonial rivals, which later included Japan. By way of its encounter with the West, Japan – as the first and only non-European nation - became a late inductee into the modern, Machiavellian project of empire. It is interesting to note that in virtue of this, Japan has the distinction of being the “exception that proves the rule”, namely, that modernization *a la* the West invariably results in a grasping, predacious coloniality.

As Smith (2010) has perspicaciously observed, it was because of Japan's and China's fateful encounters with the West that “they suddenly understood themselves not as they were but as ‘late’.” Indeed, whether in the case of Japan, China or Hong Kong – and this modest list could be expanded to go beyond East Asia - the “good life”, after Western colonial intimidation and coercion, was conceived of in somebody's else's terms: the West. It is specifically in this sense that I understand Westernisation and Modernisation, two processes that I see to be ontologically homologous, along with their symbiotic relationship to Eurocentrism, which is at once their impetus and *sin qua non*.<sup>16</sup>

Fabian's (2014) work, *Time and the Other*, offers a critique of how anthropological discourse creates its traditional object through what he terms a “denial of coevalness”. The latter is said to involve a privileging of the temporal frame of anthropologists and their readers while relegating/banishing the Other to a lesser temporal frame, thus rendering the Other a ‘primitive’, ‘savage’, ‘lesser developed’. Nonetheless, whereas this is a critique undertaken at the level of epistemology, concerning itself in the production of (anthropological) knowledge – hence, its academic and insular nature – the more serious shortcoming of Fabian's work lies in its failure to locate the source/origins of anthropology's power to engage in such epistemic violence.

Happily, the foregoing discussion of Westernisation and Modernisation addresses the lacuna by revealing/uncovering where the source of this power lies. Indeed, it is by way of the organizing principle/structuring power of Modernisation in the first place – an adherence

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<sup>16</sup> Despite their intimate relationship it is useful here to draw a rough distinction between Modernity and Modernisation. In the first instance, whereas the former is a condition and state of being that is mostly associated with intangible human subjectivity, the latter is a process mostly associated with the transformation of external – hence, objective - social domains as exemplified by the state, the economy and their cognate institutions. In any case, both are informed by the enterprise of economic rationalisation that Latouche (1993: 88) describes as involving “a veritable rape of tradition and of ancestral values.”

to linear time as defined by the historical development of the West, with its attendant civilisational cornerstones of science, technology and economy – that confers the epistemic currency to expunge the Other from the pages of history. Hence, Fabian is correct to understand “anthropology as an inherently political discipline – a discipline that at once constitutes and demotes its objects through their temporal relegation” (Bunzl 2014: viii) – but he falls short by confining such politics merely to the realm of producing knowledge, and anthropological knowledge at that. This is limited and limiting, for it understates the seriousness of what is at stake in the realm of global politics while seeming to inflate the importance of an intellectual skirmish within the anthropological discipline.

Indeed, the politics at the heart of the issue transcends the bounds of epistemic skirmishes. As such, it is not the politics of anthropological knowledge per se that is “constituting” and “demoting” its objects but the entrenched politics of the world-order and its *logos* – an irrepressible and predacious Modernisation/ Westernisation - that is. It is Westernisation/modernization - foremost a process of coloniality involving the material, moral and cultural transformation of the world in accordance with the historical experience of the West – that is conferring the anthropological enterprise with the power to define the meaning and value of progress and regress, Self and Other, the good life, according to parameters of its choosing. The anthropological enterprise is but a bit-player within this larger colonial matrix of power.

Accordingly, in view of this brief snapshot of history and of historiography, we may better or more clearly understand what the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border represents. We can also understand why among their respective populations, HK and the PRC are often imagined to be so different from each other; why, for instance, the meanings evoked by such diverging imaginations persist despite Hong Kong’s “return” or “handover” to China in 1997, nearly twenty years ago.<sup>17</sup> And why it would seem paradoxical that we are still having to speak of a “border” separating Hong Kong and China despite this “handover”. Indeed, for those liberated from the lessons of history - or those who are less aware of its weight/burden on the psychology at both the individual and collective levels - it would seem fair to ask: Is HK now not (again) a part of China? Are they not the same country? If so, why a quasi-national boundary within a national boundary, a border within borders?

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<sup>17</sup> Whether one describes the event as a “handover” or a “return” seemed to depend on where one stands on the issue.

Ultimately, a cursory study of the past would reveal that the HK-PRC border that was carved/instituted out of an unjust, historic act of coloniality demarcates the ostensibly clean from the unclean, truth from error, and the good from the bad. This colonial demarcation was first imposed physically – via the cession of Hong Kong from the mainland – then ideologically, by way of representing Hong Kong vis-à-vis the Chinese mainland differently in virtue of their association to civilized Britain and, hence, to civilisation en generale . Through such representation by the colonizer, extant since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C, the rift has hinged on an ever changing (usually growing) ideological divide over what is “good” and “true”, pitting the good life against its alternative. Since this was how Hong Kong and the PRC have historically been juxtaposed and represented, the struggle between the one vis-à-vis the other wages on till this day, in tandem with the added complexities of individual and collective memory. The physical border, meanwhile, is but a reminder of the historically-instigated cultural and ideological conflict that seethes beneath.

## **2.5 *The Anatomy of HK-PRC Relations: The Good and Not-So-Good Life***

Our representations of history are almost always controversial, rendering collective amnesia a seemingly attractive way out, an exit, a panacea. But it is highly probable that such self-conscious forgetting can only be a placebo, since it is in dealing with the past that we invariably obtain our understanding of the present, howsoever difficult and ideologically-tainted such a process may be. Certainly, it is with recourse to the events of modern Chinese history that we become enlightened on the question of the physical borders separating Shenzhen on the Chinese mainland from Hong Kong at the various checkpoints: Shenzhen Bay, Futian, and Luohu. Although these physical borders are bona fide immigration checkpoints, looking into the past would explain that they are not merely physical barriers. Instead, behind their physical existence lies stories of past injustices, present grievances, and future aspirations - dreams of the “good life”, no less.

The Hong Kong-Shenzhen border-crossing may come across as just a checkpoint and is likely to be considered as such - a pesky, time-consuming nuisance - by the tens of thousands, if not more, who use it daily. But it is actually an historical artefact, a political-administrative apparatus of the present Chinese state that conveys the political-economic and cultural vicissitudes of its history, especially with the West. One could say that the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border is a physical border but it is also a cultural and political signifier weaving together a constellation of micro-histories of a political, economic and cultural nature that have as their origin the mid-nineteenth century Sino-British colonial encounter.

If we are to unpack this constellation of histories, we realise that because of this nineteenth-century Western disruption of Chinese developmental trajectories, Chinese concerns cannot be spoken of in isolation from more globally-oriented ones. Hence, if Chinese ruling elites had once sought to cast the Chinese Empire, the supposed Middle Kingdom (中国), as a self-determining civilisation pursuing a course of its own making, Western dominance since the mid-nineteenth century has certainly put paid to such an ambition, irretrievably altering the course of Chinese history. Henceforth, the West was more than ever imbricated in the East, certainly more than the case vice versa. With the creation of Special Treaty Ports on Chinese soil under the immediate control of western colonial powers upon the conclusion of the Opium Wars, the penetration of the West into China had now been irreversibly set into motion. Being at the forefront of these developments, Hong Kong as a British colony, was an important site of such historic Chinese capitulations. Clearly, it is because of these historical linkages since the mid-nineteenth century that Hong Kong has been the West's foremost gateway, a bridgehead, to China.

It is here, consequently, that our Hong Kong-Shenzhen border-crossing is so symbolically significant. The border is significant because it is today evocative of a history that may broadly be demarcated into two phases, one pre-modern, the other, distinctively and self-consciously modern. The earlier, pre-modern history the border commemorates is of China's defeat and humiliation by the West beginning in the mid-nineteenth century; in contrast, the latter-day history may be thought to commence from roughly the mid-twentieth century and speaks to China's nationalist restoration and rejuvenation under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. When viewing Hong Kong-PRC relations through such a lens, we may note that the border serves as a fitting historical signpost/marker, juxtaposing the late nineteenth-early twentieth century dynastic China, perceived as degenerate and decrepit – the Sick Man of Asia - against the robust modern Chinese state that has jubilantly come of age in the last thirty years. In this latter regard, Shenzhen – touted as the Miracle of China – has prominently been avant-garde, at the cutting-edge.

### **2.5.1 *Mainland Chinese Perceptions of Hong Kong vis-à-vis the West***

In light of this foregoing historical account, the existence of Hong Kong is something of a source of discomfiture in the Chinese mind. Chinese feelings about Hong Kong have been mixed and continue to be so until the present, involving suspicion on the one hand and admiration on the other, even though the latter is diminishing by the day with the PRC's

elevation on the global scene. While Hong Kong has been seen as a reminder of China's supposedly feeble and degenerate dynastic past, weaknesses that ostensibly resulted in its cession by the West, it has at the same time, owing to its colonial linkages to the very same West, been perceived as being economically, politically, and culturally more "developed" than the mainland. For instance, the proprietor of a bakery I once patronised, Mei, a Shenzhen native who moved to Hong Kong in the late 1990s after her marriage to a Hong Kong man, once said to me (in early 2011): "Life in Shenzhen is improving, perhaps getting better than in Hong Kong, where things have become too expensive. But what's good about Hong Kong is that there is rule-of-law."<sup>18</sup> Presumably, the inference I was supposed to draw was that the PRC, in contrast, was lawless and so rife with disorder. Strikingly, this was exactly in line with the rhetoric spouted by colonial administrators about Hong Kong's place, highlighted above.

Such contradictory Chinese perceptions/feelings about Hong Kong have tended to produce a certain Chinese ambivalence that is revealing of the psychology of the (partially?) colonized. This psychology of ambivalence is predicated on Chinese feelings of suspicion about Hong Kong as an erstwhile British colony on the one hand, while at the same time, on a sense of awe about it. To be sure, the awe seems to have spawned a certain aspiration for the very perks that have accompanied Hong Kong's place as a highly successful colony within the Western capitalist world. In other words, Hong Kong, as seen through Chinese eyes, would appear as a paradox: being perceived with some resentment by mainland Chinese as a place that historically put paid to Chinese sovereign and nationalist ambitions while, simultaneously, approved as a place believed to symbolize the "good life", being furnished with all the requisite accoutrements for it.

It is perhaps such ambivalence that explains the love-hate attitude that many mainland Chinese harbor towards Hong Kong. Because of the PRC's rapid re-emergence onto the (capitalist) global economic and political stage over the course of the past three decades, however, such a sense of awe about Hong Kong has diminished in recent times. In any case, it should be noted that whatever suspicion or resentment the Chinese appear to harbour

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<sup>18</sup> Mei closed her bakery in Geng Fung (景风) in the New Territories in mid-2011, where she had operated her business for some ten years. The reason she gave for her closing the business was that rental expenses had become so prohibitive that running it was no longer worthwhile.

<sup>19</sup> Curiously, this latter view reverberated all the way to the UK, where I heard it echoed by my landlady, Jie, also a native of Shenzhen who had migrated to and was now settled in London: "The problem with mainland China is that there's no commitment to the rule of law or democracy – it's government by dictatorship."

against Hong Kong pales in relation to their more positive regard for it, mostly for its perceived liberal economic, political, and civil-society accomplishments, in roughly that order. Our brief discussion of Chinese perceptions of Hong Kong's and the West's superiority in education offers an illustrative case in point. Perhaps the Chinese admiration of and wish to emulate Hong Kong's material success is unsurprising, for with the Cold War over and the Chinese population being indigent during much of it, many Chinese today are primed/eager/hungry for a materially better life. Furthermore, such a way of life is one that has been explicitly encouraged by the post-Mao policy of reforms and opening-up of China beginning in the late 1970s. Deng Xiaoping's slogan, "to get rich is glorious", for instance, is an apt revelation of new Chinese institutional priorities in the post-Mao era, serving not only as official endorsement but as catalyst for the populist pursuit and realization of such a singularly economic preoccupation. As is widely known in China and abroad, the experience of Hong Kong has been exemplary insofar as such single-minded economic objectives are concerned: it became a so-called Asian Tiger in the 1980s, an exclusive member of high-performing Asian economies alongside South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore in what the World Bank christened as the "East Asian Miracle" (World Bank 1993). By most accounts, it is widely known that Hong Kong had shown the way to the "good life" for some time before China began re-establishing ties with the capitalist world.

Nevertheless, Chinese attitudes towards Hong Kong today are in flux and remain extremely fluid, especially becoming negative after the protracted, student-led anti-Beijing, street protests known as the "umbrella movement" in the latter half of 2014. While the protests were ostensibly aimed at Beijing for what is widely believed/seen to be its undue interference in Hong Kong's governance, they inevitably took on a xenophobic, anti-PRC and anti-mainland slant, resulting at street-level in the thuggish harassment, even intimidation, of Chinese tourists and shoppers in Hong Kong's shopping malls and on its streets. As revealed above, it is a commonly-held sentiment among Hong Kong residents that Chinese from the mainland have crowded their city and placed an undesirable strain on the city's already overburdened resources. Because the Chinese presence has been perceived as such, it has resulted in many in Hong Kong feeling resentful of their mainland neighbours.

It does not take much for hostility at such a popular, societal-wide level to be palpable, and in light of these events, some of my Chinese interlocutors have expressed their wariness of Hong Kong and its people. "What Hong Kong people lack is empathy; they are cold and uncaring. If you are doing research, you should go study them and understand why that is the case," Ah Wah, a Chinese neighbor and small business owner in Shenzhen

animatedly said to me. He felt indignant about the Hong Kong street protests and the increasing abuse being directed against mainland tourists. Xiong, a Chinese PhD student in Sociology at the University of Hong Kong, confessed that he had never experienced Chinese nationalism nor felt nationalistic until he came to Hong Kong.

### ***2.5.2 Empire and the Politics of Language and Culture: Perceptions of the PRC in HK***

Even I got to personally experience the discrimination the average mainland Chinese has to endure in Hong Kong: after being mistaken for a mainland shopper for speaking Putonghua (Mandarin) instead of Cantonese – Hong Kong’s lingua franca – I was refused service to buy a Chinese-branded DVD player when I neglected the salesman’s recommendation to purchase a pricier foreign model, a Philips. “They’ll laugh at you when you return (to the mainland) with this,” he sneered. Having failed to coax me into purchasing the more expensive model despite stating that my “face” (pride) was at stake, he immediately lost interest in me as a customer, proceeded to ignore me, and went back to chatting with his colleague. Perhaps selling the cheaper Chinese model had zero impact on his commission-based salary. Whatever the case may be, the episode was especially revealing to me of the contempt many Hong Kongers have for their mainland counterparts. Again, such contempt has often been explained in terms of Beijing’s ostensible political intrusion since taking over Hong Kong in 1997 but I have always thought that there was more to it, having something to do with China’s global resurgence as well.

Following this incident, I was subsequently advised by my Hong Kong friends that I should always use English when getting around in Hong Kong. In truth, I had spoken Putonghua (Mandarin or literally, common language) in the hope of showing some ethnic Chinese solidarity. After all Putonghua was the official national language and cut across all regional, ethnic, and local linguistic differences. It served very much as a unifying linguistic convention facilitating cultural communication across much of the PRC.

But Hong Kong was an exception and I had woefully underestimated the politicized/political nature of even the most mundane of social conventions: language. The use of Putonghua in HK was seen by some as a sign of political capitulation to Beijing. Such was the fierce political determination to resist what was seen as Beijing’s undue and undesired political interference. On that note, my Hong Kong friend’s advice to speak English was intriguing, since it was in no small measure because of Hong Kong’s legacy as a colonial outpost that the English language carried currency and commanded back-stiffening respect. Yet even though it is clear that the ready acceptance of the English language is an

effect of coloniality in the classical sense, there was in contrast not a whimper of objection, to say nothing about political resistance. On the contrary, as my friend suggested and I duly discovered, speaking English in Hong Kong elicited deference and was a marked contrast to how Putonghua was received. Indeed, speaking Putonghua in Hong Kong in the present climate only seemed like a sure way to invite sneers of contempt, discrimination, even abuse. Undoubtedly, this was related to the fact that after the return/handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the language policy saw the promotion of Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) as the medium of instruction in public schools (Eng 2012).

The contempt for all things Chinese in Hong Kong seemed for me like a sorry state of affairs. And not because I felt nostalgic about some sort of imagined Chinese solidarity, or that I harbored some aspiration for Chinese political unification/integration of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan - even if my name 统一 literally means “unification”, and had in the past irked some Taiwanese acquaintances. Such grand political aims are too abstract to be personally meaningful. Rather, my feelings of pity stem from having once had the squirmish experience of witnessing what seemed to be the visceral, corporeal reactions to the legacies of power – the facial and body twitches – that in this case, arguably, may be attributable to the legacy of English colonial power in Hong Kong. Allow me to recount this experience.

I had just left my office at the Hong Kong university where I once held a temporary position and was steering my bike along when, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a campus security guard approaching me from behind. At that moment, I had just entered a maze-like footpath that extended from the ground-floor of the building and snaked along the perimeter of a pond before it reached the university’s entrance. This meant that all exits were now closed off until I had arrived at the other end. Having had previous encounters with security personnel, I had hoped to avoid him and entertained the idea of changing course. Security staff, I found, do their jobs simply by imposing their presence. As “security” seemed to be predicated on the idea of a constant physical, policing presence, it followed that such personnel were paid verily to get in your way. To put it in other words, their intrusions seem to be warranted by the pretext that it was always their business. And, so, I made it an effort to avoid them at all costs.

But, alas, it was now too late. I was hemmed in by the maze-like footpath and could only get out at the other end. I picked up my pace but in my peripheral vision noticed the guard to be in pursuit; he too had entered the maze and was quickly closing in on me. “Oh, trouble,” I thought to myself. Before long, the moment that I dreaded but anticipated came to

pass. “Nei lei lei dou zou mat?”, I heard a voice intone in Cantonese, in large part a commanding query. Translated, his question amounted to: “What are you here for?”, or more literally, “You come here to do what?”

As I noted, guards seemed to be given institutional support for making a career out of minding that which should be no concern of theirs, although this was possibly a trend more prevalent in Hong Kong than anywhere I’d previously lived. Was this the outcome, the corollary, or the prerequisite of a society governed by the rule-of-law: that law-enforcement had to be constant and unrelenting? And was this tendency more severe in Hong Kong as a legacy of empire? Latouche (1996) has suggested something to this effect, writing: “The desire to copy the masters, or simply to survive, set the imagination going indefinitely: grotesque in some institutions and modes of behaviour, sinister in the undoubted mastery of techniques of people control, oppression, the handling of weapons and policing. What began as innocent imitation has become a distorting mirror reflecting the truth about ourselves.” (1996: 23).

Hence, although I was on the premises of a public university and, hence, effectively in public space, the guard made it seem as if I was trespassing. Did I have a reason to be on the grounds of a public university? Was I, indeed, trespassing? Was I somewhere I didn’t belong or wasn’t supposed to be? If not, did I have to justify myself? Does one have to explain one’s presence in public places?

Whatever the case, I remembered my friend’s counsel about my language choices. “I have an office upstairs,” I said firmly in English. I had tried to avoid eye-contact but at that point, I looked up to see my interloper. He looked surprised by my response and straightened his posture, as if coming to attention. With a few nods of the head signaling agreement, he then stuttered in English, “Oh, office... office here.” It seemed that he spoke little English but knew enough to understand me. At this point I noticed that he suddenly became agreeable and deferential. His attitude softened. Then, appearing to have more urgent matters to rush off to, he even attempted to humour me, complimenting me on my bike as he passed. The latter was sheer hyperbole/flattery, for mine was a bike close to being two decades old, with all the chipped paintwork and rust to show for it.

The situation had palpably changed and I read his newfound/sudden amiability as an effort to redeem himself for mis-identifying me. My interloper appeared to me to have gone from being somewhat of a bully to a lackey, his tone had shifted from being authoritarian and interrogative to being congenial, even deferential. While I benefited from the softening of his attitude towards me, I felt a certain sense of humiliation by his metamorphosis, which was

agonizing to witness but even more painful to vicariously experience. I had previously felt recalcitrant; I was now contrite.

I have reflected upon the above incident several times in order to make some sense of it. Inevitably, it made me feel bad - and as I noted above, sorry - on several fronts. While the guard's attitude of suspicion at the beginning was certainly unwarranted and inviting of conflict, what remains most memorable about the incident was how the micro-politics of the encounter were upended as soon as I made clear to him - in English - my right to be there. Perhaps that was all he needed to know to be appeased, in which case, it could be that he singled me out on the basis of my appearance - t-shirt, faded shorts, and old bike - plausible signs of my (inferior) socio-economic standing, and ruled me to be out of place. It was only when I responded in English, a language of empire and, as such, signifying "proper" class credentials, that I was apparently redeemed. In fact inscribed in my memory is the image of how he viscerally came to attention as soon as I spoke, not unlike how the military recruit is meant to straighten his posture on the sudden appearance of a superior. My linguistic choice seemed to catch him off guard, appearing to affirm my local friend's advice: speak English in Hong Kong and receive preferential treatment.

Hence, that which apparently began as a form of class-based discrimination revealed itself to be far more complicated, with the inevitable interweaving of social class, education attainment, and language proficiency being a reflection of the legacies of empire. It thus became evident on the basis of my experience in Hong Kong that social class was inextricably implicated in a web historically linking education, language, and empire/coloniality. It is owing to this history that the ability to communicate in English was a signifier conveying the desirable class-credentials. This impression is affirmed by Eng (2012: 8), who observes that in Hong Kong, "Many schools and parents continue to view English as a superior language that ensures greater career opportunities and security."

As my experience to buy a DVD player demonstrated, this was a marked contrast with the social status and treatment granted to those speaking Putonghua (Mandarin). On reflection, this should hardly have been cause for surprise given the history of Sino-British relations and the intermediate, comprador-like role that Hong Kong has played, and still plays, therein.

Indeed, although my speaking English proved beneficial to me in this instance, it was saddening to realise that I had to employ the language of Hong Kong's former colonial masters to be treated appropriately. Aware that the English language enjoyed the privileged status it did only because of Britain's historical colonial presence in Hong Kong, I deplored

having now to resort to similar instruments of colonial power. I resented being implicated in perpetuating the same asymmetric relations.

I had used the “instruments” furnished by my supposedly privileged colonial education to have my way but such an outcome came at my interloper’s expense. My “prevailing” in this instance was, in other words, attained perversely at the cost of his humiliation. I still recall the sight of his emaciated but slightly bent frame being jolted, of the chemistry in his face change. It appeared to be a visceral, conditioned response of fear and deference. My intellectual and class privileges that were products of my own entanglements with empire, pretentious and affected, were the basis of his humiliation, real and corporeally manifest. His reaction was painful to witness and now, in recalling it, even more agonizing to contemplate.

Why did I have to deploy the markers of colonial and class privilege just to be treated decently? It appeared that he had on the other hand been hoping to foist upon “lesser” others what he was himself subjected to by those “above”, which was disappointing. Why did he willfully adhere to such logics of coloniality despite being, for the most part, a victim of them? Maybe this was inevitable, for such a Hobbesian, dog-eat-dog milieu was likely the only one he was brought up to know.<sup>20</sup> And, after all, it was now his job to perpetuate it, the means by which he would eat.

### ***2.5.3 Colonialism, the West, and the Good Life in China and HK***

It seems reasonable to conclude from our accounts that such a shared colonial history and its logics structure the difficult, schizophrenic relations between the West, Hong Kong, and China. Hence, although there has been growing ambivalence, I noted that many Chinese were generally still positive about Hong Kong, especially in regards to its economic accomplishments. Still, the above accounts reveal that such feelings are not, on the whole, reciprocated, and that the mainland Chinese appear more sympathetic towards Hong Kong than is the case vice versa. In fact, as we also noted, Hong Kongers have become increasingly blatant in their hostility towards Beijing, a sentiment that unfortunately gets taken out on the random mainland Chinese person on the street.

On more careful examination, this general absence of mutual street-level goodwill between the peoples of the two regions should be unsurprising, for a central reason ascribed

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<sup>20</sup> As John Dryden (1687) once put it: “By education they have been misled, And so they believe because they were so bred.”

by China's own intellectuals for the Qing Empire's loss of Hong Kong, and China's capitulation to the West more generally, was weakness stemming inherently from China's ancient, feudal culture. Thus began the long-history of Chinese contempt for its own culture, a contempt originating and being perpetuated from within as well as without. Gasster (1969) has referred to the decade of 1895-1905 to be that inaugurating China's modern period. He writes, "It was in this decade that men who were clearly and unequivocally more dedicated to Western-style modernization than to the preservation of traditional institutions, values, customs, and beliefs began to dominate Chinese life. It was in this period that the goals of revolutionaries such as Sun Yat-sen began to become national goals... They were groping to understand what modernity was and how modernization in China could be accelerated." (Gasster 1969: xix; xxi).

Although lamentable in many quarters, therefore, Britain's colonial annexation of Hong Kong would understandably have been seen to be propitious by those pragmatic-minded Chinese who saw it as an opportunity to disavow their degenerate culture and to ride on what they believed were the superior cultural coat-tails of the British Empire, which until the second-world war was the world's indisputable hegemon. For them, British colonialism accrued a positive externality, involving an acceleration towards modernity. Accordingly, whereas China, and particularly its culture, were henceforth seen as anachronisms, throwbacks to the past, the modernity of Britain and the West was thought to show the way forward, enticing the Chinese - as well as other subjugated colonial peoples of the now "underdeveloped world" - with the promises of salvation, and the particular vision of the "good life" that it implied.

In the Chinese context this perception was clearly vindicated during the Cold War of the mid to late twentieth century, in the keenly fought battle between the Enlightenment/modernist-inspired political projects of Communism and Capitalism respectively. Apropos, when the "free world" - led by the US and Western Europe - imposed economic sanctions on China during this period, Hong Kong was inadvertently profiting from its place within the Western colonial orbit. Notwithstanding its status as a colonial outpost, Hong Kong flourished economically while the PRC - despite being sovereign - struggled even to produce enough food for its population. Not unexpectedly, each side of the conflict was subjected to a relentless stream of Cold War propaganda/rhetoric inflating the virtues of its political economic system vis-à-vis the other: hence, of the superiority of liberal capitalism over Chinese communism in Hong Kong, and of the reverse in the People's Republic. Arguably, nostalgia for Empire remains attractive for some in Hong Kong not least

because the latter's economic take-off occurred during the period of its colonial relationship with Britain whereas its stagnation and decline has coincided more or less since sovereignty was returned to the Chinese.<sup>21</sup> The colonial flag has been revived by these groups even as they call for Hong Kong's independence and self-determination.

Ideological posturing aside, there was little to debate insofar as material well-being and economic realities were concerned: Hong Kong grew despite being a colony, while the PRC remained largely impoverished in spite of having formal sovereignty. The causes that produced such an outcome were naturally manifold and there is not the space here to examine them in any detail. But be that as it may, because of the fierce opposing ideological battles waged by both sides during the Cold War, an impartial understanding of the causes of Hong Kong's prosperity on the one hand and the PRC's poverty on the other was rendered virtually impossible. Any attempt to understand was reduced to a common sense that was in turn inevitably obfuscated by ideology. Accordingly, an equivalence and a causal relation – was usually posited between wealth, or the lack thereof - and the extant social system operating in the country in question. Hence, by the post-socialist era of the early nineties, it became common sense that Hong Kong was prosperous because of laissez faire capitalism whereas the PRC was impoverished because of the excessive state-intervention associated with communism. These were understandings undoubtedly filtered through the ideological

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<sup>21</sup> Although this is putting it somewhat sketchily/simply, the proposed chronology/timing and fact of Hong Kong's rise and subsequent decline with respect to China is more or less correct . See Smart and Smart (2012) for a more careful explanation of the rise and subsequent decline of Hong Kong – especially via the contribution and marginalisation of its petty capitalist investments. It is interesting to note in their account how HK's petty capitalists kick-started China's much-touted miracle when the reforms began in 1979, but were marginalised as China's export economy became more sophisticated and more integrated into global commercial networks, roughly from 2001 onwards. The story is ultimately one about the rise and subsequent fall of the fortunes of HK's petty capitalist class, much in line with the narrative I am offering here about Hong Kong's contemporary fate. The following passage, excerpted from Smart and Smart's (2012: 114) essay, appears to be a fitting description of the fate that has befallen HK:

“What can be described as the Guangdong model was pioneered in the Pearl River Delta, relied on tactical alliances between local government and ethnic Chinese residing outside the PRC, and persistently pushed the limits of what was acceptable to the Chinese government. However this development strategy may have reached its limits in Guangdong itself. While similar forms of production are being transferred to less developed parts of China, and will continue, the richer parts of Guangdong are increasingly struggling to find new paths to maintain their rapid economic growth. Limits to this development model have created challenges for Hong Kong's small and medium entrepreneurs. New developmental regimes are being explored in Guangdong and China more generally that leave little room for the kinds of contributions that they have made in the past. Rather than relying on technologically unsophisticated foreign investors, China has become much more interested in fostering its own industrial national champions, preferably producing high-tech products... While Hong Kong entrepreneurs facilitated the mobilisation and exploitation of China's advantages in cheap labor and land, generating greatly needed hard currencies through their networks and knowledge that allowed China to access export markets, these advantages are now less valued.”

templates of the Cold War. Yet, while the truth was far more complicated, such obfuscations were verily in the nature of the prevailing ideological battle.

It is owing to such an historical politico-ideological context and the understandings they produced that I wondered about the extent the Cold War played in fomenting the anti-China and pro-Western sentiments that are widespread in Hong Kong still today. Such sentiments are made apparent in the contrasting reception that the English language enjoys vis-à-vis Putonghua, for instance. And I found these sentiments to be so prevalent/ubiquitous they prompted me to ask: what are the psychological effects of one hundred and fifty-plus years of British colonial rule in Hong Kong on its people, and on those living on the Chinese mainland? Perhaps the guard's visceral reaction when I began speaking English was an apparent outward expression of colonialism's effects?

And this was just one particular instance I have cared to mention. The default assumption about the superiority of Western schooling highlighted above, suggests/reveals itself to be yet another outcome of the historic Sino-Western colonial encounter. Indeed, one of the colonial encounter's evident effects seems to be the tendency for Chinese "good life" imaginations to take on a distinct Western appearance.

#### ***2.5.4 Cold War Legacies in HK and the PRC***

As history would have it, the Cold War would come to an end in the early 1990s, with Capitalism prevailing over Communism and some of its more fervid adherents jubilantly declaring the "end of history." Perhaps they felt that there was cause for triumphalism, for not only did the Soviet Empire collapse, China's ruling elites had taken significant steps towards integrating with the capitalist world-system, demonstrating their seriousness by instituting market reforms across large swaths of society.

In the meantime, many Hong Kongers would have felt vindicated by being on the "right" side of history, howsoever marginal or inadvertent their role might actually have been to such an outcome. Hong Kong's economy grew rapidly through the 1960s and 70s and by the late 1980s had become a developed industrial economy. Understandably, its people would have taken great pride in such an accomplishment, a sense that would have been inflated by the fact that the PRC was now trying to emulate its accomplishments and doing so by way of similar, market-driven and export-oriented, measures. Yet because of historic Cold War-instigated enmities and the steady stream of anti-Communist propaganda to which they would have been subjected, many among Hong Kong's population would have tended to consider their way of life superior to that of their mainland neighbours. By way of their very

association with the West, they would have considered themselves to be living the “good life”, a view that would undoubtedly have found consensus among their mainland neighbours. And these same personalities were likely to have felt smug about Hong Kong’s prosperity while remaining scornful of the latter’s poverty and supposed lack of cultural sophistication.

Moreover, such contempt for what the PRC represented would have been exacerbated by Hong Kong’s “return” to China in 1997, since such a *de jure* political reunion under the conditions mentioned could only have signaled to many in Hong Kong a regression in political, cultural and economic terms. It is perhaps for these reasons that, as a young teenager growing up, I witnessed the snobbery and resentment of my Hong Kong friends towards their mainland peers. “They are not like us – they are from China,” I recall a Hong Kong acquaintance saying about two sisters on his sports team. I did not understand such discriminatory sentiments or the reasons for them at the time: I don’t suppose the young speaker did either, for he was likely merely echoing what he had heard the adults say, but I certainly do now.

### ***2.5.5 Reforms, Reversal, and Ressentiment***

What transpires thereafter is well-known. As highlighted at the start of this chapter, China’s policy of reforms, opening-up, and integration into the capitalist world-system has turned out to be a roaring success. Moreover, it has been headlined by the rapid development of Shenzhen right next to Hong Kong. But in the context of our foregoing discussions about HK-PRC relations, such a development has resulted in an ironic twist. Whereas Hong Kong’s economy was previously one after which China could aspire, rapid Chinese and Shenzhen economic growth and development over the past thirty odd years has allowed the mainland to forge ahead. The result has been a classic “reversal of fortune” in which the Chinese economy now overwhelmingly dwarfs Hong Kong’s. As of 2010 the Chinese economy became the world’s second-largest after the United States, with one of its ensuing consequences being the emergence of a new Chinese middle-class endowed with the unprecedented wherewithal to consume.<sup>22</sup>

As my ethnographic observations at the border attests, there has been a great influx of Chinese shoppers into Hong Kong, where the latter’s relatively weaker currency and duty-free prices have turned it into an ideal and convenient shopping destination for China’s

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>

voracious new consumers. In effect, this radical “reversal of fortune” can be seen as an inversion of the narrative thus far, whereby large numbers of the Chinese population have gone from previously being mired in poverty/deprivation to suddenly finding themselves endowed with a newfound capacity to consume; in extreme cases, at levels exclusive only to the world’s wealthiest and most privileged strata.

Yet, because the economic domain was certainly one area in which Hong Kong had historically performed “better” and formed the basis for feelings of “superiority” among some Hong Kongers viz. their mainland neighbours, the success of Chinese development has not necessarily been welcome. On the contrary, the fact that there was an ideological rivalry between the two regions since at least the Cold War (and possibly before) meant that when Chinese development became so advanced that it began improving the lot of some mainland Chinese conspicuously beyond the levels of Hong Kong residents, a sense of envy and resentment surfaced. When accompanied by the steady but sure stagnation/contraction of Hong Kong’s economy, the conditions for Sinophobia were ripe, resulting in widespread hostility towards Beijing and the PRC<sup>23</sup>: “We are not Chinese!”, the cries of protest ring out. Because little effort was made to differentiate between the government of the PRC in Beijing from ordinary Chinese citizens – a tendency that perhaps owes its legacy to the Cold War - such anti-Beijing sentiment tended to be expressed in the form of abuse directed at hapless mainland Chinese tourists visiting the city.

Indeed, mainland Chinese shoppers in HK have been derogatorily compared with parasitic “locusts” (蝗虫) for coming to the island and buying up supplies of everything from jewelry to milk-powder. Instead of being seen as boosting Hong Kong’s economy, such actions have earned the ire and opposition of locals. Although these acts of cross-border consumption are evidently the explicit expressions by the Chinese of what they believe to be the “good life”, they are regarded in Hong Kong as being zero-sum, being detrimental to the interests and well-being of the local population. Another term of denigration that has been levelled at mainland Chinese, especially the *nouvea riche*, is “*tuhao*” (土豪). The term references a rural tyrant, suggesting that the person in question to be wealthy (*hao*) but is culturally unsophisticated by virtue of his links to the earth (*tu*); in short: s/he is a philistine. Evidently, the insult involves an invocation of unambiguous prejudice against rurality and all

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/economy/article/1944573/hong-kong-hits-four-year-low-quarterly-economic-growth>. Accessed June 30, 2016.

with which it is associated. (This perception anticipates what qualifies as the “good life” and is a point to which we will have ample opportunity to return).

But be that as it may, it is difficult to separate such antagonism towards the PRC from a bad case of *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment* involves the deployment of a system of values that ascribes “inferiority” to the Other; it is motivated by envy of the Other’s de facto accomplishments, employed as a defense mechanism in order to avoid having to deal with one’s own insecurities. Hence, in the eyes of those Hongkongers invoking such epithets, the Chinese *nouvea riche* are deemed to be objectively inferior on the grounds that they are *tuhao*: “uncultured”. But such a move is of course rich with irony and cynicism. Moreover, the claims about culture are overblown. For it appears that those Hongkongers who hurl such insults partly do so not only to compensate for the fact that they themselves are without such wealth, but to assert their “superiority” because they have “culture” – when they would dearly wish to be granted the very same pleasures afforded to those they are disparaging. Therefore, if there should be any discussion of culture in such circumstances, it should be underscored by the very equal distribution of it or its lack: whether in Hong Kong or across the border in the mainland, a (non)culture of money-based consumerism seems to rule the roost. The degree to which such a *modus vivendi* constitutes the imagined “good life” in the PRC is a topic we will return to explore throughout the rest of this dissertation.

## **2.6. CODA: HK as Exception, Now as Rule**

And, hence, we return to the HK-PRC border at the Shenzhen Bay checkpoint. Why does it still exist despite HK’s “return”/ “handover” to China? Is Hong Kong not a part of China? The answers to these questions are now clear.

My having to cross the HK-Shenzhen immigration checkpoint raised the question of why there was a border in the first place, especially in light of HK’s “handover” to the PRC in 1997. This compelled me to offer a brief account of the respective histories of Hong Kong vis-à-vis the PRC to shed light on their different trajectories and the somewhat fraught relations between Hong Kongers and their Chinese neighbours. Indeed, the fact that ethnic Hong Kong Chinese often ask to be distinguished from their mainland Chinese counterparts – sometimes going so far as to deny being Chinese - reveals the depth to which feelings run on the subject.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on the conundrums of identity in HK, Eng (2012) has noted, “With the historical handover in 1997, the people of Hong Kong were presented with an historical challenge to their identity, culture and sense of belonging. This challenge could be posed by the query: Are you a Chinese or a Hong Konger?” It appeared that

Thus, I attempted to weave into the ethnography a brief account of the historical factors/conditions that gave rise to the differences and cross-border hostilities/tensions evidently extant between Hong Kong and the PRC today. As my ethnographic materials in the chapter demonstrate, these HK-PRC differences run deep and cut across the gamut of socio-cultural life. How could a people so apparently similar in ethnicity differ so radically just because they were located on opposite sides of a seemingly arbitrary border? These differences are implicated in mundane everyday experience and work their way into biases, preferences, and decisions about children's education, language, and the pursuit of the good life in general.

In short, the chapter's ethnographic content reveal that the HK-PRC rift is foremost a cultural divide, a divide over ways of knowing and being. These ways of living invariably involve normative valuations, for they are predicated on implicit beliefs about what is "good", "true", and "beautiful": in a word, on what makes the "good life". Not surprisingly, there was little doubt whence these virtues came. As one apologist for empire said at the dawn of Britain's annexation of Hong Kong: "Even the Chinese will ere long recognize that a connection with England and the Western worlds is the greatest of blessings, and will be thankful for the events which opened to them the floodgates of European civilisation and knowledge, and raise them in the scale of nations." Indeed, it is owing to such self-validating claims that Hong Kong was, by way of its association with Britain, believed to be the miniature embodiment of the latter's, ostensibly superior, civilisation.

Our perusal of the modern historical record of China thus suggests that the cultural divide between HK and the Chinese mainland owes its origins to Britain's colonial adventures in China. For better or worse, Britain's foray into the Chinese civilisational polity had the effect of altering forever Chinese historical trajectories, with the island-colony of Hong Kong coming under the formal political control of Britain and the West, whereas mainland China was cast as being in political and ideological opposition to them, first in the form of the Qing dynasty then subsequently as a Communist People's Republic. It is the institutionalization of this opposition between the West and mainland China that continues to this day – with Hong Kong being for much of this period ensconced politically and ideologically in the West, one of Britain's spoils of the war as decreed by 1842's Treaty of Nanjing.

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one had to identify with the Chinese of China or that of Hong Kong with its roots in British colonization. Implied in the question was a challenge to choose an identity as well as social and political affiliations. (Eng 2012: 6). On a related note, Smith asks, "What did it mean that people would try to destroy all traces of their past and lose all relation to it? Where does such an impulse originate?" (Smith 2010: 117).

Accordingly, notwithstanding Hong Kong's "handover" or "return" to China in 1997, the border remains, physically, if not also ideologically. In other words, Shenzhen Bay immigration checkpoint, along with those at Futian, Luohu and Huanggang, exist not only as physical borders/check-points restricting the flows of people and goods but as symbolic barriers as well, signifying an ideological and cultural divide that commemorates the historic, watershed Sino-Western encounter of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C.

It is against this historical background that we can better understand the border's continued existence as well as the cultural differences existing on either side of it. To be sure, the border is a cultural border entailing normative valuations about what is "good", thereby creating practices on one side that tend to be different from the other. Consequently, the historical background proffered also allows us to better appreciate how these differences oftentimes become a catalyst for cross-border tensions and resentments. I have in the chapter suggested that these perceived cultural differences were attributable to the rhetoric of the British Empire, which hailed rule of law, good governance, and, of course, prosperity via free trade, against their antithesis on the Chinese side. Naturally, there was also modern medicine and hygiene, the blessings conferred by modern science. These were the symbols of Western civilisation that supposedly separated one side of the border from the other, Hong Kong from the mainland.

Cast in the light of its history, we may thus understand the border as historically marking out the West from China, the ostensibly civilised from its opposite. Thus, it is arguably Hong Kongers' status as a more immediate heir of Western civilisation – albeit as colonial subjects - that they have often laid their claims of cultural superiority over their mainland Chinese counterparts.

Towards the end of the chapter, however, we noted that the resurgence of the PRC had today undermined the basis for Hong Kongers' claims of being more "civilized". On the back of historically unprecedented growth, averaging 10 per cent annually over the past three decades, the PRC has become somewhat similar to, even surpassing HK: it, too, was enjoying so-called civilisation as evaluated by its everyday material and technological paraphernalia. Meanwhile, growth in the HK economy had waned over this time, which was characteristic of a mature, industrialised economy. This reversal of their respective fortunes was significant, giving rise to sentiments of *ressentiment* on the Hong Kong side.

Hong Kong's economic development had in the past been exceptional but the single-minded focus on economic development had now also become the rule throughout the PRC, with the city of Shenzhen being its lead expression/experiment in the post-Mao era.

Hong Kong had been expropriated as a bridgehead to open China to the West in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C; hence its being exceptional to the mainland Chinese and their tendency to view it with suspicion. However, by the 1970s, Hong Kong's exceptionalism had not only become normal on the mainland, it was desirable, with Shenzhen verily becoming the expression of the apparent gestalt shift, the change of worldviews, especially among the Chinese ruling elites. Thus began the single-minded conviction to turn Shenzhen from the modest backwater it was to the world's industrial manufacturing centre, an ambition that, for the most part, had been accomplished by the time I arrived in 2011.

Thus has been the account offered in the chapter to explain the present and the history of the Hong Kong-Shenzhen/PRC border, including ethnographic content of the more conspicuous social activities taking place around it, with the "good life" being implicated in them. With this historical reflection about the HK-Shenzhen border, I have set the socio-cultural background for understanding "good life" aspirations in Shenzhen. The following chapter describes my efforts at settling in.

## Chapter 3    Descartes Meets Confucius in Shenzhen

### 3.0    *Introduction*

This chapter consists of accounts of my early explorations and social encounters in Shenzhen, beginning with the circumstances surrounding my search for a place to rent. It was, after all, under circumstances of having to meet the basic needs of shelter and food that my immersion into the immediate socio-cultural landscape of Shenzhen began, and my relations in the field would develop. Because the chapter captures the scenes and processes of negotiation involved in the search for a rental apartment, it offers a general introduction to the city's urban landscape as well as a glimpse into the nature of social interactions governing everyday life. Although this study of the city's urban landscape and of the interpersonal relations governing its everyday life is in line with the way my field experience unfolded, there is a further justification for proceeding as such. I regard the city's urban landscape as a kind of cultural hardware that is conspicuous and visible to us, and the social relations that govern the conduct of its everyday life as its software. Since the city's cultural software may not be so apparent, catching a glimpse of it would generally require more time and one's further immersion into the life of the city. It is thus appropriate to regard Shenzhen's urban landscape as its "surface culture" and the preponderant modes of social relations governing its life as its "deep culture", notions I have introduced in Chapter 1.

Nonetheless, it is neither the city's urban landscapes nor the drama of my rental negotiations per se that this chapter intends to highlight: one should not be taken in by things only as they appear to us. Rather, in continuing with the discussion of the previous two chapters, the ethnographic details of these moments are to be appreciated for what they signal and reveal about the nature of China's unfolding modernity in the post-Mao era. In other words, the main intention of these ethnographic descriptions is to capture the complex socio-economic - and, most importantly, cultural-civilisational - transformation in China that Pieke (2014) and Breman (2010), among others, have drawn our attention to.

Pertinent here, of course, is the discussion, first raised in Chapter 1, surrounding the nature of Modernity. Hence, while my ethnographic descriptions of Shenzhen's increasingly post-modern urban environment offer an account of an objective physical landscape at one level, one should inquire what such urban aesthetics signal about the nature of societal transformation in China today. Similarly, my description of interpersonal interactions in the course of renting an apartment unit should not be seen merely as the record of an interesting

sociological encounter but as an illumination of the changing nature of interpersonal relations accompanying the wholesale resuscitation of market society in the post-Mao epoch.

The questions to be entertained constantly throughout the chapter, therefore, pertain to the general cultural condition of contemporary China. That is to say, whether expressed in the form of urban architecture or in the ways that people relate i.e. sociality, I ask about the cultural provenance of these manifestations and their evolution: what explains such practices in the forms that they appear - be they aesthetic, techno-architectural, or relational? Are these practices characteristic of modernity? And, if so, do they exemplify a generalized modernity, or do they uniquely characterize a Chinese variant of it? And if we are indeed witnessing the manifestation of the Chinese modern, it is only natural to ask: what happened to tradition in the process? To what effect has Westernisation *a la* Latouche (1996) played in China's ongoing transformation; to what effect on its own autochthonous cultural, societal, and civilisational development? What happens when Descartes meets Confucius at the level of cosmology; when an individualized rationality encounters an embodied and collective relationality?

And that is not all but the start. At stake in such discussions is the follow-up question of whether these manifestations signal the good life: do these emergent social forms and practices contribute to the good life, or do they detract from it?

With this as the background, this chapter deals primarily with phenomena connected to my early efforts at settling into life in the city. Two moments - implying two phenomena - stand out, and they are to constitute the present chapter's highlights. The first revolves around my experience house-hunting in Shenzhen and pertains to the nature of its built-environment. It is here where I am given an early, firsthand impression of the city, not least of its architectural aesthetics. The second phenomenon pertains to the realm of interpersonal relations, consisting of my experience in Shenzhen of the different ways social interactions were conducted and relational order, accomplished. My observations of the different yet co-existing socialities in Shenzhen were drawn, first, from my experience negotiating over the conditions of my rented apartment, and thereafter, from my experience of the kindness rendered by the real-estate agent during a minor mishap occurring immediately after I moved in.

While these two phenomena are no doubt particular instances unfolding at the micro-level of reality, I believe they help us contextualize the above meta-level discussions about modernity in China today. At the least, they demonstrate the flux and many-sided socio-cultural transformations taking place on the ground. In fact, they could well serve as the

everyday, empirical instantiations of the abovementioned meta-level discourses about modernity. Needless to say, such a ground-level appreciation is invaluable since it informs and substantiates our discussions about the good life in contemporary China.

### **3.1 *Appreciating Shenzhen's Modernity I: Built-environment***

This section opens with my house-hunting experience in Shenzhen, which provided me with the opportunity to discover the modernity – some would argue, hyper-modernity – of the physical urban environment of Shenzhen on the one hand and the city' ineffable yet intoxicatingly vibrant economic milieu on the other.

I will offer a general impression of the nature of Shenzhen's built-environment based on my experience apartment-hunting. This is important since I believe human-made habitats are conceived, designed, and engineered to actualise desires of the good life. In other words, the built environment is not autonomous or innocuous but a material project of social engineering in which the visions of its planners, designers, and architects are inscribed into the landscape. More often than not, such visions are configured by elements that make up the prevailing *weltanschauung* of the society in question (Mannheim 1952), not least about what makes the good life. This interpretation takes after an understanding of aesthetics as a way of seeing and perceiving the world and extending it to the realm of the urban landscape. Hence, urban aesthetics disclose to us the prevailing cultural consciousness about what makes life good. Accordingly, since the urban landscape constitutes the stuff of dreams made manifest, a general appreciation of the nature of Shenzhen's built-environment is useful as it would reveal important information about popular Chinese imaginations of the good life.

Because of popular representations of Shenzhen as a modern city, I had assumed that I would be looking for a high-rise apartment when it came to a place to stay. After all, I had seen neither free-standing residences nor the agricultural fields supposedly of the not-so-recent past during my early forays into the city. My early impressions were of a landscape marked by one or other of the following: gigantic mounds of concrete and mangled steel that were the remains of demolished old(er) buildings, construction sites with their cranes and steel frames, or glistening new buildings piercing the skyline. Each of these images represented different phases of a process and practice that resembled Schumpeter's (2003[1942]) concept of "creative destruction", and they seemingly involved the iterative acts of razing to rebuild, flattening to erect, and destroying to create.

One thus became accustomed to seeing, almost on weekly intervals, Shenzhen in the different successive states of its metamorphosis: rubble, construction pit, swanky urban

skyscraper. And it was the frequency and scale with which one encountered such scenes that the object of Shenzhen's modernist ambitions became clear: it was to build upwards, higher, with yet more steel and glass. Moreover, such trends were confined not only to Shenzhen; a visit to other major Chinese cities, large or small, would yield a similar observation too.

The preponderance of high-rise buildings in general and modern apartments in particular led me to assume that the only available housing in Shenzhen took the form of the high-rise apartment. The feeling that my housing options were so confined was moreover reinforced by the experience of frequently being accosted by real estate agents, particularly around the residential areas of Nanshan district, the site of my early explorations. The photos in their shop-front windows displayed a good variety of apartment units, with prices varying according to a number of discernible factors: size of the unit, number of rooms, and the particular condominium in which the unit was located. Typically, as soon as I would approach the window to have a closer look, an agent(代理人) or two would emerge, directly asking: What sort of apartment are you after? How many rooms? What is your budget?

Not wanting to risk falling prey to their potential ruses, I would be laconic in reply: “*zhi shi kan kan*” (“just looking”), uttered with the leisurely air of one simply curious, not in need. Perhaps my blithe demeanor could have given them the impression that I was considering the purchase of a second or third property, that I had time on my side. And I would hurry along. I avoided saying more or interacting further, aware that any detectable hint of an “outsider's” accent could lead to the disclosure of my actual circumstances: as a foreigner in need of shelter. My cautiousness was on display here. It was unbeknownst to me at the time, but I would later discover that within certain bounds accented Putonghua was the norm rather than the exception in Shenzhen, with the latter being the “destination” of so many migrants from all over China.

I was unduly cautious – paranoid, in fact - but that tends to be the inevitable fate of the vulnerable. Needless to say, my early attempts at house-hunting were largely inefficient. I was merely trying to gather information on the types of accommodation on offer but had little early success. And so my initial preconceptions persisted. Within certain budgetary constraints, I knew I had many choices: the city was awash with apartments, but all else was a blur: where, how big, how much, etcetera.

It became apparent that my attempts to avoid real-estate agents were self-defeating. Besides, it was not as if one stood a realistic chance of avoiding them. After all, it was often

the case that I would quicken my pace to evade being solicited by the agents from one agency only to find myself in the path of opportunistic agents from another.

Presumably, Shenzhen's rapidly developing economy had engendered a booming property market, in turn fuelling the expansion of the FIRE – finance, insurance, real estate – industries, multiplying both the number of real estate agencies and their employees. This gave rise to a climate that was rife with opportunity on the one hand and fiercely competitive on the other. One only had to peek into the typical real estate agency to get such a sense. Ordinarily, one would catch sight of a small office whose space would be fully utilized with desks laid along its entire length and breadth. Along it would be crammed twenty-something year-olds, seated shoulder-to-shoulder with one another staring into computer screens. It was likely the intensity of the competition between agents that compelled some to solicit business on the street outside. And so, sometimes in groups of two or three, sometimes individually, they would wait outside the agency touting their apartments to anyone showing the slightest signs of interest.

It was therefore no exaggeration to say that one could be accosted by several agents in the course of an afternoon of apartment-hunting, for such merely reflected the competitive nature of the real estate market in Shenzhen, a market that was simmering because of the aerial as well as geographical transformation of the city. Unsurprisingly, the properties that were predominantly marketed by these agencies tended to be apartment units in such high-rise private property developments.

When I eventually got to viewing some apartments, the general impression of the city as an experiment in avant-garde hyper-modernity seemed to hold sway. Befitting the city's modern image, the apartments I saw at the beginning appeared to be relatively new, averaging between 5 to 10 years in age. It was not uncommon to find that they bore European-sounding names, like *Azure* or the *Champs Elysee*, as if to promise views of the deep-blue sea or of an aesthetic experience of Europe. Although such promises were not realized by virtue of their being unrealizable - chimeras, so to speak - it was nonetheless clear, usually, that considerable effort and expense had been invested into creating and engineering spaces that sought to induce the ultimate aesthetic experience. It was as if beauty was believed to soothe; appearing, therefore, to be the necessary criterion for offering one a sense of "home" as a dwelling- place. And it was as if one were supposed to find equanimity there. In keeping with such aims, the landscaping of the public compounds in these condominiums were often impressive, with well-hydrated and sedulously manicured shrubs that were complemented by a rich variety of lush tropical plants and flowers.

From what I could make of the city's general urban environment, I could detect a *weltanschauung* that associated being modern with being Western, with the latter involving an adoption of Western appellations and aesthetic motifs. Nevertheless, as one finds out soon enough, such architectural simulations would come with a significant price tag.

At the time that I was looking (in early 2011), the rental cost of a two-bedroom unit of about 80 square-metres in the Houhai area of Nanshan district relatively close to the Shenzhen Bay border was about 5,000 rmb per month. This would have been roughly the monthly income of a manager working at a small Shenzhen factory of about forty employees; by comparison, a factory worker would have been earning approximately 1,500 to 2,000 rmb per month. The unit in question was in the relatively moderately-priced but exotically-named, *Azure* condominium – *weilanhaian* (蔚蓝海岸), in Chinese, whose translation would have amounted to something like Blue Shores. In comparison, a stylistically comparable but perhaps smaller-sized unit in the district of Futian, near the heart of Shenzhen's city centre, would likely have cost twice that because of its location. It is my speculation that an equivalent apartment in the aforementioned *Elysees* condominium, also in Futian district, would have costs even more, likely in the 15,000 rmb price range, with the higher price justified on account of the condominium's immaculate gardens as well as its ornate European motifs, its wrought-iron gates and railings, its fountains and the like. It was indeed evident that the more exotic-sounding the condominium's name, the more elaborate its signifying architectural embellishments, and accordingly, the dearer the apartments in question.

Hence, despite the discourses of “multiple” (Eisenstadt 2000) or “other” (Rofel 1999) modernities, being modern in China seemed still to require a Western referent. Perhaps it was a paradox, but the visual accomplishment of Chinese modernity relied on the deployment Western symbols, if not through the adoption of European names, then by the imitation of their architectural forms.

The predilection for specifically Western appellations and architectural motifs in Shenzhen is noteworthy, for it represents an example of the Western-oriented architectural imitation that has swept through much of contemporary China. This trend is the subject of Bosker's (2013) work, in which she comments: “While the device of architectural and urban mimicry is typologically not unique, the uses to which it is put by a given culture at a given time are often distinctive in the sense that they satisfy a specific set of symbolic and pragmatic agendas and are symptomatic of shifts in the “deep” structure of the society in which they circulate”. (7).

Hence, while it may not exactly be Eden or even the *Jardin du Luxembourg*, the intention of such prima facie attempts at mimicry can probably be understood. Indeed, the signifier is not the signified, for it is all but simulacra; but perhaps we can accept that simulacrum comes close enough. After all, we should not forget that we are not in Europe but some 10, 000 km away in Shenzhen, South China. Nevertheless, Bosker (ibid) has claimed that these attempts at architectural mimicry symptomize “shifts in the deep structure” of Chinese society: what structural shifts could these be?

I will return in Chapter 7 to analyse the possible “symbolic and pragmatic agendas” to which Bosker (ibid) refers. For the moment, I not only can affirm the Chinese tendency for deploying specifically Western signifiers in their architectural practices but, additionally, offer that this practice is but a typical example of how modernity is accomplished in China. Moreover, I submit that the shifts in the deep social structure Bosker is alluding to are verily constituted by this pro-modernist and pro-Western transformation. And even though she does not adequately address why such practices take on a distinctively Western nature, the reason why they do can be inferred. Evidently, the Chinese seem to think that modernisation in regard to the built-environment should entail nothing less than the adoption of a Western architectural sensibility, at least on the face of things. In other words, irrespective of whether it is true on a material level, the West *symbolizes* the modern and vice versa, making it true at an ideational level. Despite proclamations to the contrary, then, the link between modernity and Westernisation is inextricable, at least insofar as our Chinese example is concerned.

I would submit that paying attention to the nature of Chinese aesthetic mimicry is important since it is revealing of the nature of contemporary Chinese aspirations with regards to the good life. Here, the specific deployment of Western signifiers is suggestive of a restive Chinese imagination conceiving of the good life as originating from elsewhere, specifically, the West. I will further explore this issue of Shenzhen’s Western-inspired urbanization and analyse how it is relevant to contemporary Chinese ideas about the good life in Chapter 7.

Notwithstanding the considerable variety of Western architectural motifs deployed in the city’s residential developments, there was a feature they seemed to all share in common: they were gated, private, and exclusive residential complexes. Though other types of housing in Shenzhen existed, these private residential apartment complexes were the only kind I knew at the time, in large part because they were for me typical, just like many of the private apartment complexes I had encountered in Australia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, where I lived. Perhaps this vindicates the notion that one knows only as much as one is equipped from past experience to know.

Be that as it may, the fact of such apartments being gated revealed them to be the sort of exclusive, private housing that were proliferating and being popularised throughout post-Mao China. Indeed, my observation of the commonplace existence of such private housing in Shenzhen affirms Zhang's (2008) findings of their consumption as a way of class-making in the post-Mao era. This point about class-making via the consumption of private-housing is important given our foregoing discussion about shifts in the deep structure of Chinese society. That is, insofar as it has a literal and direct bearing upon the ways that we live, modernity is here implicated not only as technic or aesthetic, in the form of Western-designed high-rise residences, but as a social-relational form exalting an ethos that celebrates the individual, the private, and the exclusive, at the expense of other more communally-grounded orientations.

My early survey of the Shenzhen urban landscape thus left me with the impression that Chinese modernity was not only constituted by a Western aesthetic sensibility, in its being contingent upon and productive of socio-economic class disparities, it was characterised by social exclusivity, and hence, involved a tendency towards social exclusion too. This yields a more general insight about modernity that is implicated in the Chinese case without being limited to it; namely, modernity is a condition involving not only material-technological transformations in the material sphere but also non-material, qualitative changes in the realm of sociality. In other words, modernity has implications for how people relate to one another. Henceforth, I would refer to such relationalities as "socialities". It is the further exploration of this topic that I take up in the following section.

### ***3.2 Appreciating Shenzhen Modernity II: Guanxi or Contract?***

This section is composed of two relevant scenes, with the landlady, the real-estate agent, and myself as their main protagonists. The first scene occurs at a real estate agency, the site of negotiations that eventuated in my rental of an apartment unit whereas the second takes place at the newly-rented unit itself, where on one occasion shortly after my moving in, I find myself trapped because of a malfunctioning door-lock. These scenes offer an opportunity to examine the practical expression of different, existing socialities, in turn, illuminating the nature of modernity in China today.

#### ***3.2.1 Vignette 1 - Rental negotiations at the agency***

We were crammed into the backroom of the agency, a confined space no longer than 4m in length and 3m in width that had been partitioned out of the main office, itself a space appearing too small to accommodate all the agency's twelve or thirteen staff. The office was

not unlike other agencies I had seen in Shenzhen: cramped, scantily furnished, an assemblage of desks, chairs, computers and, typically, young human labour. No doubt, it was a site of intense exploitation, the cramped confines serving as a visual metaphor for the sacred managerial principle of “efficiency”, an ideal realized by the act of attempting to squeeze the most out of the least.

We are inclined to think ourselves a long way from the brazen exploitation of early industrial capitalism that Marx wrote about, and somewhat removed even from Shenzhen’s more recent history as a gritty economic zone peppered with industrial parks and sweatshop factories. Indeed, the real estate agency and its associated activities signaled a Shenzhen that was in the process of transformation, from industry to services, from factories to FIRES (finance, insurance, real estate services), what otherwise was referred to as “industrial upgrading”. Nevertheless, despite the greater appearance of gentility what did not seem to change was the profit orientation, the *r’aison d’etre* of business enterprise.

Actually, what the real estate agency and the services sector of which it was a part reminded me of was the nature of our times, the age of neo-liberal globalization, in which profits derive predominantly from the performance of “services” and the proliferation of contractual transactions. Toward this end, the sight of so many, primarily young and energetic, employees working with such intensity in an office barely large enough to accommodate them appeared to exemplify the attempt to maximize revenues while simultaneously minimizing costs. The agency’s object was to squeeze as much from extant, available means. More crudely, it was to exploit the resources – human and non-human – at its disposal, and to do so efficaciously. Efficiency had been put to the service of profit generation, producing an ambience at the agency that was tense and on edge.

If my account and analysis of the climate at the Shenzhen real estate agency strikes the reader as a fitting description of capitalist enterprise just about anywhere else, then I believe my purpose in providing it has been achieved. It is relevant here to recall and revisit the discussion of “other” or “multiple” modernities as well as Latouche’s thesis of Westernisation, both of which were introduced in Chapter 1. Contra the notion that Chinese modernity could be a kind of modernity *sui generis*, the foregoing is an empirically-grounded revelation that insofar as its underlying logic is concerned, Shenzhen is typical of capitalist modernity elsewhere, not least in its most developed centres in the West.

Certainly, it could be argued that because of Shenzhen’s astounding success, the Shenzhen “model”, has become a prototype, an example for the rest of China as well as for the world. In fact, it is perhaps the exceptionality of the Shenzhen experience that O’Donnell

et. al. chose to title their recent work about the city, “Learning from Shenzhen” (2016). And perhaps it is by way of a similar recognition of the fact that China is transforming the world that Pieke (2014) speaks of an updated anthropology of China having an effect on the discipline as a whole. But be that as it may, this, again, is not to affirm that Chinese modernity constitutes a radical departure from western modernity, for I submit that the putative differences between modernities lie more in style than in substance, in degree than in kind. And, indeed, my above ethnographic descriptions, first, of Shenzhen’s built-environment, then of the competitive milieu of the real-estate agency, have sought to offer an empirical demonstration of what I consider quite characteristic of modernity.

Of course, the particularity of the Shenzhen experience warrants the following caveats. First, Shenzhen’s built-environment, along with the concomitant proliferation of the FIRE industries disclose a Chinese modernity that is undoubtedly now rather advanced; it is a modernity that is surpassing its gritty industrial phase toward one that is post-, ultra-, or hyper-modern. This transformation is signified as much by the impressive glass-and-steel aesthetics of its built-environment as it is by the expansion of the “fire” industries, which was the reason for my offering ethnographic descriptions of them in the first place. Further, it is important to note that this transformation does not dispense with the capitalist motive for profit but instead entrenches it; with profits from erstwhile low-end, low-value, “manufacturing” activities gradually being replaced by much higher-value “services”. Consequently, in regard to Shenzhen’s and China’s modernity, the desire for profit has remained unchanged, and if anything, has only become more voracious in the process of its transformation.

The sordid realities that accompany the enterprise of profit, therefore, set the background for our rental negotiations. Mr Ye, the agent who had shown me the apartment in question came out of the agency to receive us. I say “us” as there were two others with me: Bobby, a Hong Kong friend, a relatively successful petit-bourgeoisie with business concerns in Shenzhen, and Mr Ze, his trusted factory manager who was to help negotiate on my behalf. As a matter of fact, my interest in the particular Xili apartment unit owes entirely to these men, since they had introduced me to the area. This part of Nanshan was the location of the small toy factory where they worked. Bobby, who happened to be a small shareholder in the business, worked as a designer of fine children’s toys, whereas Mr Ze was the factory’s general manager.

Because I had until that point little success with my apartment-hunting, I was naturally grateful for their timely intervention. Their intervention was in fact testament to the

crucial but understated role that serendipity plays in the field since their recommendation of where I should consider setting up “home” essentially helped define my “field”, and what and who I would encounter in the city, especially at the beginning.

The agent, Mr Ye, ushered my companions and I into the back room of the agency. I was nervous about the thought of meeting my prospective landlady and having to negotiate with her. It was the thought of having to haggle with a stranger while simultaneously making sure I stayed within acceptable bounds so not to cause offence. The need for moderation and compromise was apparent, for if the transaction were successful, one would have to maintain good relations, to be able to “live” with the other, so to speak.

But what was “acceptable” in this culture? What is “proper” in a culture known for its millennia-old emphasis on traditional rites of propriety but that were now, possibly, in the process of dissolution in a highly market-oriented society? The agent, Mr Ye, had informed us that the rental price of the unit was 3,800 rmb per month when he showing it to us four days ago. In subsequent phone exchanges, he had said to Mr Ze that the price was negotiable. I had come hopeful about being able to bring it down to 3,500 rmb but was apprehensive. Compounding my anxiety was the fact that while I wished to bargain, I was barely in a position to do so. My position was weakened by having to live out of a suitcase for the better part of the past two months. And I was beginning to feel weary.

Comically, as a bumbling academic in such social circumstances is wont to do, I thought of academic works propounding well-known ideas about the Chinese reciprocal relations of *guanxi* (关系) as articulated in Mayfair Yang’s (1994) “Gifts, Favours and Banquets” or *lishangwanglai* (礼尚往来) as articulated by Chang Xiangqun (2010). I understood from these works and my own life experience that *guanxi* involved mutual gestures of goodwill to build trust and a sense of interdependence, especially early in a relationship. The thought of the Chinese tendency towards mutuality was uplifting; it made me optimistic about how our negotiations would turn out. I suddenly felt upbeat, cheered by the general Chinese tendency to compromise, not to mention that of constructing fictitious kinships to get along. Some of these kinship constructions supposedly even had transcendental explanations; the owner of another apartment I viewed, for example, invoked destiny, saying that it was “fate” (*yuanfen* 缘分) that enabled our meeting.

But my mind was still racing, keeping pace with my heart. I was thankful I had company: in fact, I had asked my companions to come along with the hope that they would

offer the needed moral support, for they were supposedly equipped with the cultural understanding and experience of conducting business in what was reputed to be the rough-and-tumble, cutthroat business environment of China. I was again buoyed by this idea, for Bobby had informed me that Mr Ze, the factory manager, was a skilled negotiator. Certainly, Mr Ze's stern disposition struck me as someone who would give no quarter. And it occurred to me that there was a physical factor working in my favour as well. It was a perverse thought: Mr Ze was thickly-set and appeared to be built like an ox; certainly not the sort that I would like to run into in an alleyway. But I would not object to someone else meeting such a fate. The rational, calculating agent in me felt that his brawniness combined with his business experience could potentially tip the imminent negotiations in my favour.

There were other factors that offered cause for optimism. Given that we were not too far removed from the sub-prime mortgage disaster that engulfed the US from 2007 to 2010 and subsequently spread across the globe, there was news going around that the Chinese property market was overheated and due for an imminent correction. No less an entity than the Chinese government was attempting to cool the market by applying various disincentives to curb excessive speculation. I was hoping that the landlord had received news of the impending global economic, thereby striking fear and uncertainty into her heart.

It is said that there are opportunities in crises. Perhaps nothing conveys this better than *weiji* (危机), the Chinese term for crisis, which is literally made up of two composite words: *wei* (危), denoting danger, and *ji* (机), implying opportunity. Perhaps the landlord's potential loss could be my gain? Evidently, I was being carried away in my thoughts and indulging extravagantly in hope.

Moments later a petite lady appeared at the entrance to the room. I stood up to greet her as we were introduced while my companions nodded their heads in acknowledgment. She was introduced to us as Ms Peng. We exchanged all the typical formalities - or *keqihua* (客气话), as the Chinese would say - which felt strange given the imminent "hostilities" that were to ensue. Indeed, the situation became immediately awkward because I suddenly sensed certain apparent disparities: we outnumbered her three to one, and not only that, the gender imbalance was stark. I began to feel that I had committed a serious tactical error.

Fortunately, Mr Ze stepped in to speak, and in his no-nonsense manner, cut to the point: “Mr Xu<sup>25</sup> here likes your apartment but there are a few problems with it. It is not very well maintained, the walls are in need of a fresh layer of paint, and the furniture is somewhat old. In view of this, we would ask you to consider our offer of 3,400 rmb.”

True to form, Mr Ze had impressively fired off the opening salvo. It seemed that it had been pitched to signal my intentions – interest – without coming across as being too interested. He seemed to possess the instincts of a haggler. The intent, I suppose, was to give the appearance of strength and to issue a veiled threat: we are interested but only marginally, think hard about our offer or risk it being rescinded. Our statement was bold and our posture, arrogant. But for reasons already mentioned, they were gratuitous, and without justification. Interested, but only mildly? No great urgency? This, of course, was a bluff bordering on recklessness.

I had been exhausted by the temporariness of my housing situation of the previous couple of months and my experience shuttling between HK and SZ with a young family in tow had induced a yearning for some semblance of “home”. Hence, contrary to the impression Mr Ze was attempting to create, my wish to rent the unit was urgent. I was in fact rather desperate. It is a matter of speculation to say whether the landlady had picked up on this. Certainly, she appeared unmoved.

“I’m sorry,” came the firm response, “the price is 3,600 RMB.” Glaring at our housing agent, she added, “In fact, Mr Ye here revealed to you something he should not have. 3,600 RMB is the lowest I am willing to go: it is my reserve price. He should not have settled on it without first attempting to obtain my asking price – or seeking my permission to reduce it. And I had asked for 3,800 RMB.”

At this, the housing agent, Mr Ye, who appeared to carry out his duties with the enthusiasm and assiduousness of a young man on his first assignment out of school, lowered his head. It was likely that he was wishing he were elsewhere.

If the property market were headed for a deflation, the nature of the landlady’s response certainly did not reflect undue concern. Was she even aware of the situation? Did she not care about the prospect of her apartment staying vacant? I wondered if she were aware of the looming “dangers”. Or, was she like us, simply playing “tough” to elicit an impression of strength? If we weren’t desperate enough to acquiesce, then neither was she, it appeared.

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<sup>25</sup> To be clear, the Chinese *pinyin* version of my name is Xu Tongyi.

But Mr Ze was undeterred, and on my behalf, escalated his offensive with a litany of demands: “There’s also an issue with the general cleanliness of the apartment, the state of some of its amenities, some of which need to be changed. Would you ensure that the apartment is properly cleaned before Mr Xu moves in, or bear the expenses if he should hire someone to do it? Additionally, would you also be able to replace some of the amenities, the toilet seats for instance, which are old and dirty?”

“The apartment was cleaned after the previous tenant vacated. I inspected and approved of the job that was done. Perhaps it needs to be swept once more since it’s been vacant for almost a month now. If there’s anything you’d like to change, you can but it is your decision and at your own cost,” came the reply.

Although the negotiations had only begun, it was clear that our efforts had already been foiled. And while the landlady had effectively ended all further discussions about the price, she did so in a way that downplayed her culpability in it. By highlighting the housing agent’s mistake, she was indicating that she had already compromised – against her will. Mr Ye, our housing agent, served as her alibi: her obdurateness was therefore not the result of unreasonableness on her part but from his fumbling incompetence, which she felt had cost her.

Having failed to persuade her, I raised my next concern. There was considerable uncertainty and apprehension at my end about the move to Shenzhen. Since my family’s China visa applications were being processed, I was unsure if they would obtain visas of sufficient duration to permit their residence in China. What if they were given just three-month visas, or even worse, what if their visa applications were completely rejected? And this was to say nothing about their ability to adapt to life in Shenzhen. Evidently, any of the above scenarios was possible and I was operating under conditions of fundamental uncertainty - in the realm of the unknown and the unknowable. But since the contract specified a year’s lease with a punitive forfeitable two-month deposit in the event of its breach, I inquired if she would agree to a shorter, more flexible contract. I reproduce below the dialogue that ensued:

Tyi: “As I’m currently faced with some uncertainty about the type of visas we’ll receive, is it possible for me to sign a six month contract?”

Ms Peng, who was by now looking suspicious, shakes her head to disapprove.

Mr Ze, representing Tyi: “If Mr Xu should sign a year’s contract but is unable to see it through, would it be alright if he found tenants to replace him? Can his deposit be returned without forfeiture? Of course, this is only a worst-case scenario given the uncertainty about

his family's visa applications. It's possible that there won't be a need for such a provision and they'd stay the entire year."

Ms Peng, reticent. Again, shakes head.

Mr Ze, in exasperation: "Are you prepared to negotiate? Are you willing to compromise on anything at all?"

In hindsight, Mr Ze's speech-act here is nothing less than hilarious, for it resembles an actor going through the motions of a fight-scene but who quits midway through because his supposed opponent refuses to co-operate in acting out the scene. His exasperation reveals the performative nature of the negotiations and, more significantly, of the self-awareness he had about his performative role in it. Mr Ze's frustration at his failure to engage Ms Peng in negotiations is suggestive of the generally co-operative nature of all human encounters, including those that are supposedly adversarial.

At this point, Mr Ze turns to Bobby and I to remark that we were wasting our time: we had hit a stone wall. Indeed, we had hardly even begun but our hopes of obtaining a more favourable agreement on our terms had been completely extinguished. After half-an-hour, the landlady had not yielded an inch.

Her response was unambiguous: "The apartment costs 3,600 yuan per month, and the terms of the contract are clear. What is the purpose of the three of you attempting to pressure me in this way? Are you men attempting to bully me, a woman?"

It was clear our meeting was coming to its denouement. Whether intended or not, Ms Peng's remark was cutting. I believed it definitely embarrassed each of us. Had we tried to intimidate her? Somewhat shamed by the suggestion, I attempted to explain to her that our collective presence owed to my diffidence in negotiating in Chinese. Mr Ze stepped in, somewhat mellowed by Ms Peng's counter-offensive, "It is not what you think. He is new to the country and is unfamiliar with how things are to work. Besides his Chinese is not adequate to the task and we're merely here to assist him."

No matter. The damage had been done. The landlady's remark had taken the wind out of our sails and our efforts were dead in the water. There was no hope left for goodwill. As someone with a young family of her own, I had mistakenly believed that she would empathise with my domestic situation, but it was not to be. So much for my misplaced hopes about Chinese *guanxi* in this case: it seemed that the landlady had spurned the opportunity for goodwill by denying me any flexibility at all, even when it came at virtually no cost to her. Bobby later remarked that she was simply adhering to the "letter of the law" so as to benefit from it. We proceeded to sign the necessary papers and concluded the meeting.

Thus was the experience of my first major economic transaction in Shenzhen. While it involved a failed attempt to bargain down the rent of my apartment unit, it resulted in my signing of a twelve-month rental contract. It also granted me some early observations about the socialities that lubricate contemporary Chinese society.

The following section analyses what has transpired, particularly by examining the underlying standards of value and societal conventions governing the conduct of interpersonal relations in *gessellschaft*, that is, in modern contractual society.<sup>26</sup> In so doing it continues with the line of questioning that has preoccupied us in this chapter: In what ways are Shenzhen – and by extension, post-Mao China - modern? How is modernity in post-Mao China the same, or different from, that of the West? And, finally, what can we say about the relationship between modernity and the good life?

Since modernity as a condition is all-encompassing and encroaching upon many spheres of our reality, it should be apparent and worth reiterating that we are here, specifically, examining the effect it has in the domain of interpersonal relations. Does the condition of modernity affect our socialities? Indeed, what modes of sociality does the modern condition imply?

### **3.2.2      *Analysis: Modernity and the ideologies of individualism and the good life***

It is of course a truism that the nagging uncertainties and their unknowable consequences I raised with the landlady were mine - and mine alone, for the world we inhabit, including post-Mao China, has increasingly become one in which the individual is thought of as the fundamental social unit. As Margaret Thatcher famously said, “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.” (1987). But Thatcher was likely only drawing from her mentor, Austro-Hungarian Nobel Prize-winning economist, Friedrich Hayek (1960), who believed that civilisation began with “the individual in the pursuit of his ends.”

Owing to the processes of neo-liberal globalization at the end of the Cold War, which saw (liberal) capitalism prevail in the ideological battle against communism, this social order that is spawned of an autonomous and rationalist individualism has spread to become the exemplar of the “good” society across the world. Especially following the collapse of state socialism, the dominance of this social order was so complete and indubitable that some were

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<sup>26</sup> It is useful to note, following Tonnies (1957[1887]), that *gessellschaft* -“society”- categorically refers to social formation in the modern age. It is to be distinguished from *gemeinschaft*, or “community”, which refers to pre-modern social forms.

hasty to declare humanity's arrival at the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). Deng Xiaoping's leadership in taking China down the path of radical reforms and opening-up constituted the significant Chinese contribution to this supposed development, and it served merely to boost the triumphalist account of liberalism's global success.

At any rate, in sanctifying the market as the arbiter of social relations, this eschatological vision conceives of the individual as history's rational subject and society's fundamental unit. This was a vision that gave an appearance of symmetry across the gamut of social life, in affairs of economics as much as politics. In economic matters, the individual was the primary economic actor, where every dollar spent was ostensibly a vote in the marketplace signaling one's consumer preference. In political matters, the citizen exercised political sovereignty by casting his (or her) vote at the ballot box in periodically organized elections.

The striking parallel between this sort of individualized economic participation *qua* the market and popular political participation *qua* the system of representative democracy was not accidental. The consumer in the marketplace voting with his dollar-purchases was deemed to be analogous to the citizen in the political arena casting his vote at the ballot-box. Each was implicating individual sovereignty; each was seen to be participating in an exercise of economic or political democracy where s(he) was "free to choose", as per the unfettered exuberance of a Friedman (1980). Nevertheless, the symmetry between individual-rights-based political and economic systems resided in this supposed freedom of the individual to choose, which in turn seemed to confer a sense of equality in terms of an individual's political and economic participation. Characterised by this ideology of individual choice, Thatcher was perhaps right to say that there was "no" society", for the social order was seen to operate simply on the basis of individual choices.

It bears repeating that the individual was conceived of as the rational agent of history and the fundamental and atomistic unit of society, as articulated by the likes of Thatcher or Friedman above, who have simply followed in the tradition of a long line of Western intellectuals such as von Mises, Hayek, Menger, Ricardo, Mill, Smith, Kant, Locke, Hobbes, and Descartes, to name but the most prominent. Indeed, these secular conceptions of reality have had a long history and are foundational to the birth of the modern West; that is, post-Reformation and post-canon law Europe (Tawney 1926).

To be sure, in referring to the felicitous symmetry between individualized economic and political autonomy, I am but rehearsing the idealized story adhered to by the proponents of Western modernity. Still, notwithstanding its cultural specificity, it is a story that has spread

and has been accepted by a considerable many outside its geographic and cultural birthplace, including in China. Chapter 2 has demonstrated the important role that Western colonial engagements have played in seeing to the “acceptance” of such ideologies in the non-Western world, including in China. In addition, Latouche (1996) has also elaborated on Westernisation as a historical global process, giving rise to the worldwide spread of Western-inspired ideologies. Be that as it may, it is unsurprising that such a happy liberal story about the fortuitous coincidence between individual economic and political empowerment should find a ready Chinese audience. Indeed, China’s post-Mao economic reforms of the past thirty-plus years were verily about “liberating” the individual on the economic front, while the most widespread and commonplace criticism of the Chinese government by its detractors, both inside and outside the country, seems to be that these reforms did not go far enough. The reforms are criticised for being incomplete, offering “economic freedom” without “political freedom” and spawning a supposed instance of “capitalism without democracy”, which, as a consequence, falls short of the Gold Standard of liberal dogma. Of course, it is not often asked if democracy with capitalism could be a non-starter in the first place. Nevertheless, there is no argument about the extent to which the modernist principles of liberalism have already worked their way into, and transformed Chinese society, especially since the early 1980s.

That my prospective landlady was not only uncompromising and unsympathetic to my personal circumstance, but, instead, so blithe in referring me to the stipulations of the contract is perhaps a good reflection of how such ideas have been taken up in the wake of the reforms. The Chinese socio-cultural transformation ensuing from the reforms is particularly noteworthy. As Boland (2006: 304-5) has observed:

“As most arenas of economic and social life are affected by the shift to increasingly legalized modes of interaction, we see in the construction of new legal subjects and relational identities the symbol of law being used to signify and promote a departure from the socialist past... In cities, where market-based institutions increasingly mediate social relationships the legal norms, discourses, and practices associated with marketization are establishing new social patterns and displacing old ones.”

The process of deploying written legal contracts, moreover, meant that the Western cultural ontology of individualism was surreptitiously being ensconced into the Chinese socio-cultural world and normalized as a part of it. It was normalized as part and parcel of the reconfiguration of Chinese *gessellschaft* – society – instigated by the reforms.

Adas (1989) affirms this point about the critical role that the deployment of law has had in the Westernisation project; he writes:

"Though the vast majority of Europeans may indeed have considered themselves superior to Africans or Asians, significant numbers did not see or express this superiority in racist terms. For many of these the conviction that they possessed vastly better tools and weapons and attitudes toward work and discipline, or that they knew better how to treat women and *to write legal codes*, was sufficient to justify European conquest, commercial expansion, and efforts to educate and uplift the "benighted" peoples of the non-Western world." (342; italics mine).

It was as if the preponderant Euro-American ideas about the individual, the self and society, and especially, the place of the self in society, have come to define the "good life" around the globe. Indeed, it was as if the Western, Enlightenment-inspired idea of the individuated and autonomous individual had become the universal fate of all humanity. In light of this, it seems reasonable to ask: Is globalization not but the spread of this cultural vision of humanity? Is the "good life", popularly touted to come by way of globalization, not in turn predicated on a *Gesellschaft* constructed upon a modern ontology of individualism?

As the market reforms of the post-Mao era have typically been understood only in terms of their material economic consequences, it is worthwhile paying attention to this individualist – and hence, (a)social, even anti-social - cultural predilection. After all, the supposed freeing up of the individual is arguably the precondition for rampant marketisation and explained as an important factor responsible for the splendid growth performance in post-reform PRC, as Yan (2003, 2010), Liu Xin (2009), Kleinman et. al. (2010), Halskov Hansen and Svarerud (2010), Zhang and Ong (2008), et. al. have variously documented in their works. It was likely for all these reasons that my prospects of earning Ms Peng's favour did not seem at all bright.

### 3.2.3 *Gesellschaft, rational will and its sociality*

I left the meeting chagrined; more disappointed about what I felt was the landlady's uncompromising attitude and unwillingness to be helpful than my inability to obtain what I had bargained for. Perhaps such disappointment was unjustified. As our analysis of *Gesellschaft* above reveals, there was in principle nothing wrong with the landlady's attitude; she had the right to hold me to the contract as much as I had the right not to sign it. I was, after all, a sovereign individual endowed with agency. Since I was "free to choose", perhaps

my expectations were unreasonable, and I was holding her to a higher standard of social and moral conduct than was warranted.

When the landlady and I met again the next day to inspect the apartment, I encountered a radically different person who offered assistance in all manner of ways. She referred to my family and invoked friendship: “If there should be anything your wife needs, especially since she’s new to Shenzhen, please feel welcome to call me. I hope I can be a friend.” It was difficult to know what to make of her posture, for it seemed to be the antithesis of what it was just the day before. Was this *guanxi* behaviour on display now only because I had signed a contract with her? I thought again about my friend’s observation the previous day: she had been unprepared to compromise because she was not legally bound to do so, plus there was the possibility that she stood to benefit from it. That was perhaps why I felt so disappointed, and which made her latest overtures of help appear so unconvincing. The “objective” meaning of her statement conveyed kindness – “objective” in that her words were apparent expressions of kindness - but I had reason to believe that its “expressive” meaning - her underlying intentions – were something altogether different (cf. Mannheim 1952).

It is true in principle I had no reason to be disappointed. There were no legal or formal strictures requiring my landlady to be helpful or kind: in essence, I had no right to expect either from her. If they had been demonstrated, it would have been entirely a matter of good fortune. This is not to suggest that kind acts need to be made mandatory either, for acts of kindness cannot be demanded without violating what it means to be kind. So, herein was perhaps the reason for my disappointment: when actions depend on formal, rational, or legal reasoning as the impetus for their being undertaken, virtues such as kindness, empathy, helpfulness, generosity, considerateness etc. cease being virtues in themselves but become instrumental acts that are subject to reasoned calculation and self-interest. Under such circumstances, kindness is not produced and displayed as an end in itself but because the person who engages in it seeks to profit from it. In this case, the landlady was unrelenting despite the opportunity for compassion. She was not bound formally in any way to be kind, and so acted apathetically. What I had witnessed was the ethics of *gesellschaft* - instrumental reasoning - in its everyday workings: it was not a system of morals invoked for its ethical considerations but one conceived entirely in rational self-interest against the competing claims of an alien and adversarial Other.

Consequently, while the “objective” meaning of my landlady’s latest overtures may well have been “kindness”, it is not unreasonable to suggest that its “expressive meaning” –

her motivation - was “self-interest”. This would be the likely conclusion to draw, especially if we are to make interpretations based on her overall conduct, and it would seem to render her latest overture disingenuous.

It was this realization that yielded a personal sense of disappointment and loss. I did not so much sense a material loss associated with failing to attain what I had sought; it was more a loss one derives from perceiving a sudden sundering of the *sociality* that binds Self and Other through common-feeling and empathy. The sense of loss was therefore emotional, psychological, and affective, the stuff that makes us human.

When fully realized, our sociality has the potential to take the form of a community or *gemeinschaft*; where “I” am part of “We”, Self is inseparable from the Other, and where there exists the cognisance that one’s well-being is inextricably bound to that of others. In *gemeinschaft* sociality there is the recognition that what is at stake is a fate that is shared – *yuanfen* - as the other landlady had overtly declared.

In contrast, one had through these negotiations been left with the feeling that the Other was thought of as a Hobbesian brute that was not only estranged but also antagonistic to one’s interests. The logical outcome is a beggar-they-neighbour approach to social relations. What is more, because of our inherent anthropic capacity for socialization, such a premise for sociality is not confined to its perpetrator but is instead perpetuated. This mode of sociality becomes infectious, preponderant and mutually reinforcing. In short, it becomes established as the dominant mode of social interaction. And one apprehends the other as one is apprehended: with wariness, fear, and suspicion; in short, paranoia becomes the tendency. Is it unexpected, then, that as the traditional order of *gemeinschaft* in China gradually erodes and a milieu of uncertainty looms over the horizon of the future, particularly in the cities, one should hear calls for greater “order”, “rights”, and “rule of law”?

It is perhaps only natural that one witnesses the emergent forms of Chinese sociality exhibiting some characteristic features of *gesellschaft*: individualism, competition, social polarization, alienation and antagonism. While Chinese sociality under such circumstances may still be governed by apparent relations of reciprocity and, hence, be justified in terms of *guanxi*, I submit that it increasingly takes on a form that adheres to the calculating logic of market transactions. Accordingly, if we are to again invoke Mannheim (1952), it may be said that whereas the objective meaning of certain acts of reciprocity may be explained in terms of *guanxi*, their expressive meanings are likely to have changed as a consequence of China’s radical economic reforms.

These cultural developments are not without precedent, for if we are to have gleaned anything from the considerable history of social scientific studies of the history of modernization and capitalist development, from Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867), Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gessellschaft* (1957[1887]), Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), Polanyi's *Great Transformation* (1944), Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man* (1964) or Latouche's *Westernisation of the World* (1992), it should be the consistent and implicit viewpoint that the process of marketisation is more than just an economic phenomenon: it has profound cultural consequences. As Margaret Thatcher, the doyen of free-market economic individualism, readily admitted, "Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul." (1981).

So, too, it is to be expected that accompanying China's economic reforms would be cultural and social transformation, processes expected to change "the heart and soul" of Chinese life. Here, the Qing bureaucrat, Zhang Zhidong's syncretic idea of borrowing from the West while maintaining the integrity of China's traditions - "Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as means" - is again exposed for the chimera, the wishful thinking, that it is. As Thatcher (1981) noted above, everyday practices can change the soul.

In the wake of post-Mao economic reforms, such changes seem to have involved no less than the transformation of a traditional *gemeinschaft*-like social order towards a mainly market-oriented economy. It has been a metamorphosis that has seen a "social organism", arguably governed predominantly by relations of mutual reciprocity, transform into an "economic machine" whose primary concerns are exchange and exchange-value. To be sure, *gemeinschaft* - a collective entity - was to be reduced to a capitalist market economy predicated on an ontology of rationalist individualism.

It would be of interest to note that whereas many of the classical sociological works cited above were studies dealing exclusively with the marketisation and commodification processes of Western societies beginning as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> C, Latouche's (1992) importantly deals with the ensuing spread of such trends to the rest of the globe, encompassed within a process he calls "Westernisation".

Within this limited purview, my ethnographic project in Shenzhen work may therefore be cast as an attempt to examine the process, if not the consequences, of Westernisation in China. Here, the background of these sociological works nicely avails us of the opportunity to undertake historically-informed, comparative, cross-civilisational research, work that may be animated by the following questions: is Polanyi's (1944) "great transformation" of society

also being experienced in the contemporary China; is there also a “double-movement”? Is there a repeat of history here? Is the “natural will” of traditional, community life being gradually displaced by the “rational will” of *Gesellschaft a la* Tonnies (1957[1887])?

It should be borne in mind here that I invoke these concepts not as fundamentally essentialist categories but as heuristic devices, as ideal-types, to understand the movement and change of dynamic social systems. Are there the same obsessions in regard to profit, the same capital-labour antagonisms and the same “commodity fetishisms” as speculated by Marx (1867)? Is there also the mono-dimensionality *a la* Marcuse (1964)? Where lie the similarities with the West; and where, the differences in all these matters? Finally, where and how does Chinese culture intrude?

### 3.2.4 *Confucian relationalities*

Pioneering Chinese anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong (1992), spoke of Chinese society having fundamentally rural foundations, where the individual is ostensibly constituted by his relations. Indeed, it is said that such practices of sociality have been emphasized in the everyday cultural life of China since time immemorial, deriving from the Confucian tradition. Citing the *Analects (lunyu 论语)* 12:1 (克己复礼为仁), for instance, the neo-Confucian scholar, Ames (2011: 87), points out that: “One *becomes* human by cultivating those thick, intrinsic relations that constitute one’s initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of one’s life force within family, community, and cosmos.” The relational dimension in the Chinese cultural life-world is further highlighted by Ames’ invocation of “relational virtuosity”, along with its association to *ren* (仁), the Confucian aspiration of becoming “consummately human” (op. cit.: 91). The Confucian tradition is thus of the view that becoming human is a process that is accomplished in a person’s relational becomings. Ames (2011) thus endorses Fei’s (1992) proposition about the relation-centredness of Chinese culture, pointing out that in the Confucian tradition, “we need each other”, and “becoming consummate in our conduct (*ren*) is something that we *do*, and that we either do together, or not at all.” (op. cit.: 87). It is this relational emphasis so foundational to the deep culture of the Chinese that explains the common practices of *guanxi* (interpersonal relations) and *lishang wanglai* (mutual reciprocity). Accordingly, it is not unreasonable to think that traditional Chinese good life conceptions would have included the achievement of “relational virtuosity”.

But does the traditional good life of “relational virtuosity” still exist in China today? Do the Chinese, especially in an urban setting, still adhere to such practices despite

modernisation? The question is apt in light of China's aggressive economic reforms, with market forces having now been unleashed on the country for over thirty years. Certainly, the above ethnographic vignette documenting my rental negotiations calls into question the relation-centred characterization of Chinese cultural life.

But lest my encounter with the landlady paints too grim a view of the decimation of traditional Chinese relational norms and its displacement by the rational will of *Gesellschaft* (Tonnies 1957), I offer here below a contrasting vignette to conclude the chapter.

The story offers empirical affirmation for the claims of Fei (1992) and Ames (2011) about the relation-centredness of traditional Chinese socio-cultural life and revolves around a small mishap that occurred within days of my moving into the Shenzhen apartment. Taken together with the account of my rental negotiations, I believe the story helps to paint a more accurate and complex picture of Chinese modernization and the state of contemporary Chinese social life. The scene's central protagonist turned out to be none other than Mr Ye, the real estate agent who had helped broker my rental of the apartment.

### **3.2.5            *Vignette 2: A friend in need?: Confucian and non-market socialities***

I had moved in just three days before and was about to leave the apartment on the fourth morning when I discovered the spring-loaded lock on the main door to be jammed. I made several attempts tugging at the latch but to no avail and we were effectively trapped in our apartment.

Not having anyone else to call, I rang Mr Ye, the real-estate agent, who had so far appeared affable, supportive, and sincere in our interactions. I felt a certain sense of solidarity with him too as I had seen him being subjected to Ms Peng's harangues. As it turned out, my instincts proved more perceptive than I had imagined at the time.

On receiving my call, he immediately left the agency to come to my apartment, which was a five-minute walk away. When he arrived outside my door, I could make out that he had company. From what I could gather, the security guard had accosted him all the way from the condominium's entrance. Now, after verifying for himself the purpose of Mr Ye's visit, I could make out that the guard was also rendering assistance. Still, neither of them could do anything immediate, hands-on, to free me from the apartment unit. They were in fact rather powerless, for we were separated by two doors; first, the aluminum gate, followed by the door that kept me locked in. From the other side, Mr Ye rings to inform me that they had called the neighbourhood locksmith, who was on his way.

The security guard had departed by the time the locksmith arrived and I was grateful for Mr Ye's continued presence, for he was able to offer information on my behalf. In fact it is difficult now to imagine what I would have done without his help. He had helped me communicate not just with the locksmith but also with the landlady, going back-and-forth between them, then reporting back to me. He also mediated the subsequent disagreement Ms Peng had with the locksmith over the price.

What was very impressive was the fact that even though he had no economic or professional stake in the matter, Mr Ye hung around until we were freed from the unit. The matter took virtually the whole morning and he had stayed to oversee its resolution. This was clearly outside the scope of his work and responsibility as a real-estate agent and he knew there would not be any pecuniary compensation for his time and effort. Worse, staying around meant foregone opportunities at work – as the Shenzhen slogan goes, time is money – and he surely knew that the time he was spending was at his expense, perhaps even putting his job at risk. Given all these professional considerations, it is apparent he could easily have excused himself after contacting the locksmith on my behalf.

Yet he stayed on, as if compelled by some higher purpose. It could have been a sense of obligation or compassion or empathy, but it definitely was not economic rationalism. In any case, it was evident that he stayed to attend to our well-being, at the expense of foregoing his personal interests.

Consequently, it is only appropriate that the disappointment I felt from my earlier negotiations with Ms Peng be contrasted with this act of extreme kindness from Mr Ye. At the least, I believe that it offers a more complete picture of my early Shenzhen experiences and of the nature of socio-cultural life in the city. I offer here, below, an interpretation of these two contrasting vignettes.

If Ms Peng had come across as being uncompromising, I felt Mr Ye's conduct was quite the contrast. I thought his capacity to go beyond the call of duty was on display throughout the whole incident. Whereas Ms Peng had demonstrated the rational efficiency of *homo economicus* in my dealings with her, Mr Ye had transcended his market role as a real-estate agent to serve as a friend during my time of need. One might say that his demonstrable concern stemmed not so much from being professional at work, which invokes a individually-grounded rational instrumentalism, but from being ethical in life, which implicates a sense of human relational ethics. Indeed, against the individualist rationalism displayed by Ms Peng, Mr Ye's conduct affirms the Confucian cultural emphasis on the

relational aspects of being human (Ames 2011, Fei 1992). Naturally, this was all the more impressive in light of the rapid modernization I have claimed China has undergone until now.

Ms Peng and Mr Ye therefore seemed to display through their conduct different modes of sociality that govern contemporary Chinese group life. Corresponding with the metaphors or ideal-types of *gessellschaft* and *gemeinschaft*, we may describe these contrasting modes of social relations as being contractual, formal, and rational on the one hand, and customary, non-formal, and affective on the other.

In addition, it may be said as per Tonnies (1957) that whereas contractual social formations implied by *gessellschaft* correspond with market-oriented and individualistic society, *gemeinschaft* involving customary and kinship social practices seem to be aligned with community. Noting that Ms Peng's behavior apparently adhered to the logic of competitive, contractual, and market *gessellschaft* relations, I had inquired about the fate of relation-centred sociality of traditional Chinese culture.

From an analysis of the incident recounted above, it seems reasonable to say that such traditional cultural commitments are alive in today's China too, not least exemplified by the generous manner with which Mr Ye came to my aid. I believe that the very fact of his presence at the scene, which was entirely voluntary and did not entail or promise any pecuniary benefits, bears testimony to the deep (relational) commitment to others that many Chinese demonstrate in their everyday social affairs. That this was a recurring - hence, I feel, characteristic - feature of Chinese social life is something that I would come only to discover subsequently. Nevertheless, it appears to be a mode of relations that affirms the notions of *guanxi* (Yang 1994) and *lishangwanglai* (Chang 2010) that undergird Chinese social practices of mutual reciprocity. There will be more instances of such a relational mode of conduct in the ethnographic materials that follow. These socialities are so commonplace in everyday Chinese experience that I have found it reasonable to consider them integral to any Chinese vision of the good life (Ames 2011, Fei 1992), whether or not they are consciously or explicitly acknowledged as such by their practitioners.

Additionally, as Vignette 2 above demonstrates, these practices of sociality often transcend the remit of one's professional conduct and render ambiguous the distinction between the private and professional domains characterising urban and modern economic life. And when such aspects of the personal intrude into the professional realm, formal market exchanges are transformed into moments where giving and sharing - rather than exchange - become possible. The prevailing form of sociality moves from being transactional to relational. Whereas the former is self-centred and focused on pecuniary gain, the latter is

other-centred and motivated by a spirit of empathy, compassion and consideration. The one involves a posture of acquisitiveness, the other inevitably tends towards a mode of giving.

The fact that Mr Ye's conscientious efforts that afternoon were voluntary – neither being compensated for, nor motivated in the main by the prospect of compensation - suggests that the intrusion of personal sentiments into professional affairs produces actions that are often not priced in the marketplace. Such actions are priceless in deed. Their value is unquantified not because they are unquantifiable and cannot be priced per se but, importantly, because they transcend rationalization and the economic value it produces.

### 3.3 *Conclusion*

The ostensible connection between modernization, westernization, and the good life in China has been established in Chapter 1. Inquiring into the extent to which these processes had transformed Chinese socio-cultural life, the modus of research in this chapter was ethnographic. I sought to discover the degree to which China had modernized and westernized. I tried to do this firstly by observing Shenzhen's urban landscape, then, secondarily, by trying to gain an appreciation of the way people conduct their everyday interactions. In other words, is the preponderant mode of sociality contractual, as is typically associated with the individualistic rational will of *gessellschaft* (Tonnies 1957) in line with the experience of the modern West, or was it by and large still governed by *guanxi* (Yang 1994) relationalities typically associated with the traditional Confucian influence on Chinese culture (Ames 2011, Fei 1992)?

The concepts of “surface” and “deep” culture (see Chapter 1) are useful in questions pertaining to cultural change, for they help us to distinguish the appearances of change from their meaning, form from content.

Hence, the Shenzhen built environment reveals a significant degree of Westernisation by way of the prodigious deployment of Western architectural aesthetics. In line with Bosker's (2013) description of such urban architectural trends as “mimicry”, it seems reasonable to consider these changes to be occurring at the surface culture of Chinese socio-cultural life. For reasons already discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Western symbols are here simply equated with the good life. But what about matters at the level of deep culture?

This is where the chapter turned towards an examination of my interpersonal encounters: first, with my landlady, followed by that with my real estate agent. The goal was to obtain a sense of the predominant modes of sociality governing interpersonal interactions in the city. Since a society's modes of sociality constitute the “glue” that holds that particular social

formation together, it may reasonably be said to reflect the deep culture. At any rate, our ethnographic data here revealed two contrasting modes: first, an individualist rationality as per *gessellschaft* on the one hand; and, second, a shared relationality of *guanxi*, as emphasized by the Confucian-and-rural foundations of the Chinese cultural tradition on the other. Descartes seems to have met - nay, collided with - Confucius in Shenzhen. Accordingly, the question of Chinese cultural change is more ambiguous and complex at the level of deep culture.

While attempting an analysis of the processes and consequences of modernisation and westernisation is bound to be messy since there are no neat boundaries to delineate where *guanxi* relations end and where market relations begin, my early ethnographic experiences in Shenzhen, depicted in the two vignettes above, reveal the simultaneous - if not sometimes opposing - forces of modernization, westernization, and syncretisation at work in the pro-market thrust of post-Maoist Chinese society.

What are we to make of this confluence? The ethnographic data above seem to offer a way forward for understanding/interpretation.

First, the seemingly increasing shift towards legalized modes of interaction (Boland 2006) strongly suggests the normalization of an individualist cultural ontology in the socio-cultural world of post-Mao China. This affirms a conspicuous and distinct movement towards the rational, contract-based *gessellschaft* society described by Tonnies (1957). In this sense, Chinese modernity is not a modernity *sui generis* but is similar to all modernities that have, unconsciously or otherwise, taken their cue from its prototype in the West.

Second, Chinese modernisation, like all modernizations is an ongoing, open-ended, cultural process. It is in the course of its unfolding in time that has led to the simultaneous existence of *gessellschaft* - or one could say, Cartesian - elements alongside traditional Confucian ones that are indigenous to the culture. From my analyses of the above two vignettes, I would propose that it is the practice of Confucian modes of relationality, as demonstrated by the likes of Mr Ye, that is mitigating the rationalist and individualist excesses of *homo economicus* in modern China. In other words, although largely unacknowledged, it is likely the deep culture of traditional Confucian ethics – not the rampant materialist economism of modernity – that renders the good life still possible in the country today.

## **Chapter 4 Wai and the Wholesale Fashion Market**

### **4.0 Introduction**

The present chapter describes my immersion into the life of my newfound home in the Xili neighbourhood of Nanshan district. It was a gradual process, first, occurring through my observations of the life of the neighbourhood community, then, by way of my participation in the latter, led to the development of acquaintanceships from which a number of my interlocutors would emerge.

The chapter opens with an introduction to Wai and Yan, sisters-in-law and neighbours at my apartment complex. It then proceeds to focus on various aspects of Wai's life, which include the nature of her relations with family and her life's preoccupations. In the process of re-counting Wai's life-story, which is derived partly from conversations with her (and with Yan in Chapter 5) and partly from my up-close observations of her life, I hope the reader will obtain a sense of a few of life's mundane preoccupations in the booming southern city of Shenzhen at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. The chapter's ethnography thus seeks to provide an empirical account of Wai's lived experience of China's unfolding modernity some thirty years after market reforms were first instituted, leading to China's re-integration with the global capitalist economy.

This chapter thus offers a template for the manner with which I engage and dialogue with my interlocutors in Shenzhen. It is a template which will also be deployed in the next couple of chapters; it will involve my inquiring into the lives of my interlocutors in the following respects: who they were, how I got to meet and know them, from where they had come, what they were doing in the city, and what the nature of their lives in the city was like. These interlocutors had begun as strangers when I met them in the course of my everyday activities – living, banking, shopping, eating, going to the doctor's, etcetera - and they were gradually drawn into my life and research over time.

In other words, it was through the unfolding process of my life in Shenzhen that the interlocutors of my project emerged, which is a note to be made about the time-dependent, mundane, and wholly uncertain nature of ethnographic undertakings. In that sense, calling ethnography a method is probably a tad pretentious, for the ethnographic process seems, in the first instance, to be about life and living before it is about conducting research. To be sure, the research aspects begin when the researcher attempts to document such life processes "systematically", accounting for how he makes his way in the field, what the field consists, who he talks to, and what they tell him. In its entirety this is a process that contains

supposedly objective, subjective, as well as inter-subjective elements of my field: the places, things, people and events that make up the Shenzhen environment I now found myself. Such an effort to apprehend the unfolding reality before me thus involved sensory appreciation as well as hermeneutic understanding, observation as well as interpretation.

Although the many dimensions of the ethnographic experience are reflected here, Wai's life-story undoubtedly constitutes the chapter's primary focus. The reason for this biographic orientation should be obvious; it is to obtain a sense of the good life as expressed in the lives of my Chinese interlocutors. Such ethnographic and empirical verification was predominantly accomplished through observation as well as oral accounts, via both an examination of my interlocutors' observable everyday lives as well as what they told me.

Where possible, I have also inserted methodological fragments into the chapter. I previously suggested that the ethnographer's field site should be the "locus of the everyday". This aversion to pre-specifying and distinctly marking out the boundaries of "the field" is seemingly against orthodoxy, for it renders the field as something of a moving and changing location. Yet the approach is one that is wholly consistent with my objective of investigating and understanding the constituents of the good life in China. Still, my reticence about providing a specific address for my field site could be a source of ambivalence, if not be plainly irksome, to less sympathetic readers: "But where is your field?", I hear them protest, raising, again, the question about the appropriateness of my methods. It is the need to respond to such a query that I occasionally digress into short discussions about method and methodology.

From my observations of the various forms of sociality implicated in contemporary Chinese society in the previous chapter, I begin here to examine the unique life-stories of my interlocutors. Wai is the present chapter's sole protagonist but she will be succeeded by others in the following chapters. Methodologically, this constitutes a move from the panoramic and impressionistic views of the Shenzhen social landscape (of Chapters 2 and 3) to the close-up views of the unique and particular life-stories of the individuals who populate it.

As to be expected with any ethnographic project realised over time, my interlocutors are first drawn from the immediate environment of my Xili neighbourhood before my field expands to incorporate a larger terrain, and along with it, additional interlocutors.

The primary concern here is to amplify the voices and lives of those who make up the diversity of Shenzhen's population in order that we may shed light on what it means to have a good life in China today. Hence, even though the ethnographic lens in these chapters turns

towards, closes in, and focuses on the unique and particular life-events and stories of each of my interlocutors, it should be noted that this approach inherently consists of a dual purpose. The close examination of the life-stories of my individual interlocutors serves a heuristic function insofar as it simultaneously points towards their social circumstances, uncovering the social, political, economic and cultural background against which their lives are set. Hence, with every individual story, every biography, every text, there is an evolving con-text given by the dynamically changing social milieu of contemporary China. It is my intention and hope that the ethnography that follows will help throw light on both these dimensions of our reality.

It is therefore a premise of the present work that since micro realities are implicated in macro realities and vice versa, it is inevitable that the ethnographic examination of social phenomena in its micro-level particularity casts light on the encompassing macro-structural reality. Consequently, it is the everyday lives of my interlocutors and their dialectical relationship with, and contingency upon, the ever-changing socio-cultural polity of contemporary China, which I hope my ethnography illuminates.

#### ***4.1 Introducing Wai***

It is not difficult to recall the circumstances of my getting to know Ah Wai since she was a neighbour in the Shenzhen condominium I had moved into. We lived in the same block, which was a relatively low-rise building of a total of six stories. My family was in a three-bedroom apartment on the fourth floor of Block Two, whereas she and her husband and son were on the second floor. It is probably because the building was of relatively low-density, consisting a total of twenty-four apartment units that we frequently ran into each other through the course of the day.

Ah Wai became a companion rather early on during my time in Shenzhen. I recall her to be a highly dependable source of help at times when the cultural unfamiliarity threatened to be overwhelming. Perhaps it is apt, as such, that my most vivid memory of Ah Wai comes in the form of her knocking on my door at ten o'clock in the evening offering medicines for my sick one-year-old. The congeniality and concern, or simply the neighborliness, at such a time of crisis and initial culture shock is something that I will fondly remember. Certainly, there is a parallel here to the actions of Mr Ye, the real-estate agent, as seen in Chapter 3.

I had in the previous chapter attributed such a mode of conduct to the relationality that undergirds traditional Chinese society, and which persists into modern Chinese social life even in spite of its dramatic transformations. Insofar as my observations of Ah Wai's

generosity are concerned, this Chinese emphasis on relationality was being affirmed once again, and there was more evidence for the invocation of such thick kinship ties.

Ah Wai was a woman in her late thirties or early forties when I first met her in 2011. She was small and slightly pudgy and spoke imperfect, slightly accented Mandarin. This, together with the fact that she had a prefix “Ah” to her name revealed that she was Cantonese. She had a son who was 5 years old at the time, an age similar to my older daughter and perhaps a factor contributing to our frequent interactions. My daughter would sometimes play with her son and his two cousins – Wai’s nephew and niece - in the playground downstairs. Indeed, the existence of these two other children in the family, an extended family, brought Yan - or Ah Yan – into the picture.

Yan was Wai’s sister-in-law and mother to a boy of 4 and a girl of 14 months (in 2011). Because of the social opportunities their presence engenders, it can be said that our children are catalysts or social intermediaries helping us establish relations with our neighbours. Invariably, children seem to be the perfect alibi for starting conversations and, subsequently, for maintaining relationships that have been formed.

Wai was the oldest in a family of six, having two sisters and a brother to whom Yan was married. Her immediate family, consisting of husband and son, was at the time living in my block in a two-bedroom apartment. To be sure, I use the term “immediate family” to refer to the conjugal, nuclear family unit consisting of two adult-parents and their children, and “extended family”, to any blood relations extending beyond that nucleus.

Meanwhile, her two unmarried sisters lived with their brother and his wife, Yan, and their two children under one roof in a separate two-bedroom apartment in Block Six. I later found out that Wai and her siblings owned the Block Six apartment whereas the Block Two apartment in which she and her immediate family lived was rented. At the time of our meeting in early 2011, they had been looking to purchase another apartment in the area to meet their growing housing needs. But they were hesitant, dissuaded by the high prices produced by an ongoing property boom that began a few years prior.

The following section proceeds to examine Wai’s practices of family-making by way of her housing and living arrangements, thereby hinting to us the central role that the notion of (*jia*) prefigures in Chinese commonsense.

#### **4.2 *Family as the nucleus of everyday life: reproducing relationalities***

The fact that Wai and her siblings lived within the same condominium seemed to reveal their close adherence of the traditional Chinese custom and desire of having family – both “immediate” and “extended” - live under one roof, and if not, at least, in close proximity to one another. Interestingly, in what must seem like a rarity especially in our globalized age of modern, urban living, where it is not unusual to find families strewn across the planet on different continents, Wai lived in close proximity to the two nuclear families to which she belonged: her original, biological family constituted by her siblings, as well as the one that she became a part of after marriage. I will interrogate the idea of “family” in light of such living arrangements in a moment, but it was because she was just a two-minute walk away that Wai frequently had her meals with her siblings at their apartment. From what I observed, she spent most of her waking hours there with her son, who had the company of the other two children, his cousins.

Such living arrangements meant that both Wai and Yan could share parenting duties and divide the labour of child-minding between them. There would be times when one woman would have to leave for a part of the day to run an errand and the other would stand in her place to mind the children. Hence, so long as one of them was around, the three children of the two families would be cared for. It was because of their shared child-caring arrangements that my deepest memory of Wai and Yan consists of the sight of either one or both of them together, with their three young children trailing behind.

Whereas it is through the modern conception of the patrilineal family - specifically the “nuclear”, conjugal variant - that I have considered Wai’s and Yan’s respective families to be distinct units, resulting in my designation of the children as belonging to “two families”, it seems reasonable to infer from my observations that such a limited conception of family is here inadequate. Indeed, to conceive of the family unit in the conventional “nuclear” sense of being constituted by a married couple and their children is probably more the result of a modernist bias than it is an accurate portrayal of the Chinese situation. For if we are to examine Chinese living practices as exemplified by Wai here, we will see that no apparent conceptual delineation between the two families exists for her, for I witnessed Wai and her son spending as much, if not more, time at her siblings’ than at the conjugal home she shares with her husband.

Owing to the cultural legacy of patrilineality, it is a common practice in the PRC still to find a woman going off to live with her husband and his side of the family after marriage. But in this regard, Wai was an outlier. Not only was she not living with her in-laws, but she

seemed to be spending more time at her siblings' home than at the conjugal home she shared with her husband, often returning only in the night.

But perhaps this is speculation in which I should not engage, for the conversations I have had with Yan suggest practical reasons for this that are mitigating. Because of the pioneering and path-breaking role Wai played as the oldest child of the family, being the first to leave home in the early 1990s to come to Shenzhen in search of economic opportunity, I was told that she had made a considerable contribution towards purchasing the apartment her siblings shared.

I made out from this that if the apartment had been bought with their pooled collective resources, her contribution would likely have been the largest. Again, this would not have been surprising. For since she had been the first member of her family to leave home in order to work in Shenzhen, it only stood to reason that she was the one to have accumulated the most in cash savings. Given that Wai's contributions had likely been indispensable for the purchase of the family's apartment, her spending so much time at her siblings is understandable, since the home was certainly also hers, belonging as much to her as it did to any of them.

Whatever the case may be, the fact that Wai has striven to ensure that her pre-marital and post-marital families lived in such proximity reveals the importance that family relations have for her. If such were the case, my evidently clumsy attempts here to distinguish between her pre-marital family from her post-marital family is probably ill-conceived, having very little relevance for the reality she was living. Indeed, the frequency and seamless manner with which she moved between the two households, the two homes, and the "two" supposed families, suggests that she did not view her pre-marital family to be any less important than the family resulting from marriage. As noted, my observations could in fact suggest the converse to be true.

At least, she did not appear to think that her relational commitments to either of these two families should be different or distinct, greater in one instance than in the other. For all intents and purposes, she seemed to regard family with the intimacy it is generally associated, regardless of its derivation, whether by birth or marriage. In this view, the "two" families did not seem to exist so much as the one family of her birth expanding through marriage to incorporate another circle comprising of more members. Fei Xiaotong's (1992: 63) depiction of Chinese social relations as being akin to concentric circles (*tongxin yuan*) emanating from oneself, just like ripples in a pond caused by a pebble, come immediately to mind. Yet, with

my awkward efforts to speak about her life revolving around her “two families”, pre- and post-marital, I revealed my difficulty grasping Wai’s fluid practices of family-making.

This failing is perhaps an example of rationally and formally-derived Western sociological categories being unable to capture the fluidity of Chinese realities of relationality. I had attempted to think in terms of “immediate” and “extended” family, but such categories remain equally rigid and were also conceptually inadequate to account for the realities of Wai’s familial practices. Formally, marriage transforms one’s erstwhile immediate family into an “ex-immediate” or “extended” family, just as one’s newly-established family now becomes “immediate”. Note that in all these cases the referent is given by the model of the modern nuclear family. Hence, while referring to one’s family as “immediate” or “extended” is reasonably useful in providing a measure of family relatedness and the particular family’s order of importance, such a pattern has not been shown to hold in Wai’s case.

However she might have conceptualized the notion of family, which was not visible, Wai’s practices were observable and can thus be said to be empirical. These practices clearly demonstrate that for her it was constituted by a set of intimate kinship relations that extend from her biological family to her conjugal family. There were no observably clear distinctions how one was separated from the other. On the other hand, the modern and Western norm to which I have alluded elevates the primacy and priority of one’s marital family over one’s biological family following marriage (Fei 1992).

After all, is marriage not an institution conceived for legitimate pro-creation, the establishment of another family unit to permit what is supposedly the orderly perpetuation of the human species? Insofar as this is the case, it seems normal to expect post-marital life to be devoted to one’s spouse and children, and to do just as one’s parents did before. Moreover, it would be expected that such newfound obligations would typically occur to the diminishment of those responsibilities one shouldered as a sibling and child in one’s biological family. In other words, by virtue of the fact that we can only be at one place at any one time, establishing a new family in the capacity of a spouse and parent is somewhat mutually exclusive of our erstwhile roles in our pre-marital biological family, in which we exist as siblings and children. This was a logical progression in the trajectory of life, and seemed to be a well-accepted convention.

Wai’s practices diverged somewhat from this. Instead they appeared to adhere to the view that one’s obligations as a wife and mother towards one’s conjugal family was not to compromise those as sister and daughter in one’s biological family. For Wai, it seemed as if

there were not two distinct families as such, but a continuation, or more accurately, an enlargement of one's familial roles and responsibilities that came along with married life.

Fei Xiaotong's (1992) observation about the contrasting interpretation of "family" in the West vis-a-vis China is instructive; he writes, "Families in the West are organizations with distinct boundaries. If a Western friend writes to you saying that he will 'bring his family' to visit you, you know very well who will be coming with him. In China, however, this sentence is very ambiguous. In England and America, a family will include the man, his wife, and his children who have not yet grown up.... In Chinese, the word *jia* (family) is used in many ways... *Zijiaren* (my own people) may include anyone whom you want to drag into your own circle, and you use it to indicate your intimacy with them. The scope of *zijiaren* can be expanded or contracted according to the specific time and place. It can be used in a very general way, even to mean that everyone under the sun is a *jia* (one family)." (62).

Whereas the foregoing analysis of Wai's relations with family is based on inference, what was beyond doubt was the demonstrable importance that family had for her, regardless of its changing configurations. Although unspoken, it was evident that Wai's family's living arrangements adhered to a traditional form of familial and kinship sociality, with the notion of family living "all under one roof" or in close proximity to one another, clearly a preference. While we know such preferences to be prevalent in rural China (Fei 1992), they seemed to apply here in the urban context too.

The preference for family being physically nearby was also observed in one of my conversations with Yan, who expressed her hope that her son, now still only 5, would be attending university nearby, at least within the province. Projecting even further into the future, she also expressed her wish that he would settle-down with family not too far away after getting married.

Fei (1992: 84) has noted the following about lineage in rural Chinese society: "The family must have continuity. It must not break up when the children grow up and must not end when individual members die." Apparently, my interlocutors' projections of hope onto life-events considerably far into the future merely attest to their practical adherence to this rural cultural tradition, now perpetuated in an urban context. While it might not be spoken of much as an explicit aim, it was evident that the Chinese good life was in part predicated on the maintenance of robust and intimate familial relations.

### 4.3 *Transnational ideas of the good life: property*

Having observed Wai's practices of family-making and their importance in her life, this section proceeds to examine the content of some of our conversations. It is hoped that in so doing, they will disclose some of Wai's more self-conscious beliefs about what makes the good life.

It has already been mentioned that being the oldest of the family's four children, Ah Wai was the first among them to leave their village near Zhaoqing (肇庆) to come to Shenzhen. The distance moved was relatively short, since both locations were in the province of Guangdong and were some 250 kilometres apart. She began as a worker in a toy factory but then moved on to becoming a street hawker. From there she accumulated enough savings and connections to go into the business of selling Christmas decorations, which often found their way to the West as their ultimate destination.

When I met her, she and her siblings were in the wholesale clothing business, in which they had been engaged for roughly a decade. They were relatively successful and operated two stores in Shenzhen: one in Huaqiangbei in Futian district, central Shenzhen, while the other was in Nanyou Wholesale Fashion market in Nanshan district. At the time that I met Wai, these shops were being managed by her siblings as she had taken time off from the business to focus on raising her son.

Not having been overseas before, my companions were naturally interested to learn more about the world beyond China.<sup>27</sup> Knowing that I had lived in Singapore, Australia, and the U.S.A, before coming to China, Wai and Yan engaged me in conversations covering a wide range of issues but which frequently gravitated towards the subject of my life experiences. There were also eager to know where I found it "best" to live. In other words, the question of where the "good life" could be found was often at the core of my companions' curiosity, and their questions were often revealing of their own preconceived ideas. They asked me about the countries where I previously lived and whether I liked them. Importantly, they wanted to know how they compared with China. Invariably, they were surprised that I had come to China, asking questions of the following nature: "Isn't America good? I hear that homes in the U.S. are extremely cheap. Why have you chosen to come here?"

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<sup>27</sup> Wai had been to Hong Kong but Yan had yet to cross the border when we met in 2011.

This was in early 2011, and the point about cheap homes, of course, had in no small part to do with the U.S. sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2008-09 that crashed the U.S. property market, leading to the foreclosure of millions of U.S. homes, before sweeping across the world and inflicting upon it a full-blown global financial crisis.

“We’ve heard many good things about Australia, too. We have some friends who will be moving there soon. We hear that prices of homes and land are low there, is that true?”

It was in part because such countries in the West were increasingly becoming popular tourist and migratory destinations for an ever growing Chinese middle-class that they came to be of interest to my companions. The considerable numbers who now had the wherewithal to leave China for supposedly greener pastures in the West, were having an effect somewhat similar to the waves of migrants, numbering roughly 440 million since 1979 (Chan 2011), that had flocked to Shenzhen from other parts of China. Although the size of this migration from China to countries of the West was undoubtedly smaller, incomparable in number, its effect in instigating interest, curiosity, and potential emulation was perhaps just as powerful. After all, if Shenzhen were the heart of the supposed Chinese miracle, what could leaving it suggest but the existence of destinations elsewhere that were more special, more miraculous, and had more to offer? If others were leaving Shenzhen putatively to pursue a better life in the West, should they not do so too?

For the random Chinese person I encountered, questions of the “good life” entail mundane concerns about what to eat, where to live, how and where to find a decently well-paying job, etcetera. In a word, the good life seemed to revolve around how best to reproduce one’s daily existence. While the process of Westernisation has led to a general fascination with the West, such a notion for the average person pertains to how well the West meets such problems of subsistence. Not uncommonly, the notion of Westernisation is one that involves the assumption that life lived in the West is “better” than one outside it, even as there exists a continuum along which such perceptions lie.

These perceptions range from the extreme that sees the West as a mythical Eden, to less ideologically resolute versions of this sentiment. My companions’ assumptions about life in the U.S. being “good” and their “hearing” similarly positive things news about Australia attest to some of these general, commonsensical perceptions of the West seemingly held by many Chinese. In this form, there remains a certain attraction to the West – since it is by default the standard bearer of what is modern. Yet because such commonsense is mostly based on hearsay, along with their sustained reinforcement through the mass media, it lacks the assurance of firsthand experience. Correspondingly, such Chinese pro-Western

predilections are sometimes prone to doubt and uncertainty, though this is not to suggest that all such hearsay-derived commonsense is off-the-mark.

Oftentimes, there are very real material conditions that sustain such favourable views of the West. For example, Wai's impression that land and property prices in Australia are low is correct relative to the situation in China, where owing to the nature of property rights and the tremendous size of the population relative to available land, there is virtually no chance in any Chinese city to purchase a home of either the size or quality typically found in the U.S. or in Australia.

Indeed, since all land in China belongs either to the state or to collectives - with the state owning all urban land and the collectives owning rural/agricultural land – freehold titles in land do not exist. Since purchasing property in China merely means buying the structure built upon the land and the time remaining on the 70-year lease arrangement, computed from the time the structure was built, it is no wonder why countries such as the U.S. and Australia, with the existence of freehold titles, are so attractive for many Chinese. Moreover, with a population in excess of 1.3 billion people and a land-area of just over 9.5 million square kilometers, competition for space in the People's Republic of China is relatively intense. According to the United Nations, its population density in 2015 was 146.05 people per square kilometer, which may be contrasted with the population densities of the U.S. and Australia, at 33.7 people per square kilometer and 3.09 people per square kilometer, respectively.<sup>28</sup> These population density figures of China vis-a-vis the U.S. and Australia offer an explanation for the bustle, the congestion, and the crowdedness I experienced in South China. And it seems reasonable to think that the prospect of having more open space would be a component of the good life, perhaps explaining why my interlocutors were enticed by the prospect of life in the West.

#### **4.4. *Growing food or increasing profits***

Reduced congestion and lower population density could in themselves be important requisites for the good life. But perhaps the prospect of open space and freehold land possession were but a means to furthering economic ends? Could it be that freehold land ownership signaled opportunities for its economic utilization that were unrealizable for Wai in China today?

This was speculative on my part, but Wai was certainly getting excited about the prospect of investing in either the U.S. or Australia, simply by the very thought of it. "Hey, is

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<sup>28</sup> <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/DataQuery/>. Last accessed May 16, 2017.

it possible for us to buy a house or a farm there? Why don't I buy a house with lots of land and start growing crops?"

The thought caught me by surprise. After all, many Shenzhen residents had left their *laojia* (ancestral villages/homes) in the countryside to move away from a life that depended on farming as a means of livelihood. It was common knowledge as well as experience that farming paid too little and, as such, their coming to Shenzhen was motivated by the desire to leave farming behind, and in its stead, to take up urban employment, which paid better. If like most, Wai had come to Shenzhen to augment her income, what could she have been thinking with her proposal to be re-engaged in agriculture? Was it not the case everywhere that agriculture ranks lowest in the typology of economic activities, yielding its practitioners the lowest economic returns as compared to secondary and tertiary economic activities such as industry and services respectively? I recall other Chinese interlocutors frequently reminding me that agricultural work was the “most bitter” of all forms of work: *shizuikude* (是最苦的).

The price distortions resulting from government subsidies in agriculture, in China as well as around the world, are in part responsible for the paradox that inheres in an essential, human activity being so poorly remunerated. But that is only a part of the story. The situation of poor returns to agriculture, a primary industry, relative to secondary and tertiary sectors is exacerbated by the fact that whereas the former is dependent upon the natural biological rhythms of life and, therefore, contingent upon the natural passage of time in consummating economic value, the activities of the latter sectors, primarily urban-based, seek to realise value through the subordination of nature and via the mere act of human exchange. Hence, for instance, whereas value in agriculture is produced/generated only in the time it naturally takes for a seed that is sown to develop into crop, value in the financial markets of today is multiplied or destroyed, sometimes exponentially, through the very act of exchange in the virtual reality of the financial market-place. Whereas the former is grounded in the real-material processes of living, biological nature, therefore deriving value from the processes therein, the latter is seemingly unbound in either time or space, operating in virtual reality. Yet by the very virtue of its existence in an intangible reality, it proliferates economic value unrestrained by any objective limits. At the risk of repetition, all this is simply to say that whereas the creation of value in agricultural production is limited by the natural temporality of biological-life processes, no such natural temporal constraints exists in the contrived world of finance; in the latter, value is simply created and multiplied in proportion to the number transactions occurring in the market-place.

I have mentioned the role of state subsidies in agriculture as a general phenomenon. As it turns out, China's agricultural concerns following the 1949 revolution that spawned the new socialist People's Republic had been devoted to helping accelerate Chinese industrialization in the urban centres. This had inevitably come at the expense of the rural areas, which was in keeping with the general aims and prescriptions of the socialist project, thereby instituting and institutionalising the rural-urban divide we witness in China still today (Chan 1994). It was this rural-urban institutional asymmetry that saw to China's rural interior subsidizing urban development, or to put it differently, agriculture subsidizing industry. Arguably, it is this institutionalized rural-urban disparity that can in part be said to account for incommensurate returns to agriculture in general and in China in this instance.

Although this observation would be of concern to peasants, having had profound historical consequences for them, the underlying causes of such problems are institutional and lie largely outside the ambit of personal control. This makes any such discussion somewhat academic. Policies concerning agriculture are matters of state concern, for since they pertain to considerations about how and how much food will be produced, they involve implications for the country's food security. Unsurprisingly, such matters, although obviously critical at the collective level of the state, are seemingly of scarce relevance in the eyes of many individuals, not least my companions.

Indeed, I soon realized that Wai was not so much interested in farming for its sake as she was in the possibility of undertaking farming as a profitable enterprise, in contrast with her own experience in the Chinese countryside. In her view, the reason that farming in China and in her home village in particular was not profitable was because of the inadequacy of land to generate economies of scale. As this was due to the nature of land ownership in China, with agricultural land belonging to the collectives and, hence, only available via leasehold in the form of small landholdings distributed roughly in accordance with the size of one's family, Wai had understood the economic unviability of agriculture in China as a problem of scale. The distinction between peasant and farm-owner is implicated here, with the former cultivating on a small landholding primarily for subsistence while the latter, operating a large-scale agricultural concern largely with an eye for profit. Wai's aspiration to acquire freehold land to undertake intensive large-scale agriculture has therefore to be understood against this background.

It was only when I mentioned that much Australian and U.S. agriculture was controlled by large transnational agribusiness - always looking to expand their market dominance and

rendering life for the average small farmer an incessant struggle - that Wai decided to dispense with the idea.

But this merely led to her inquiring about other economic opportunities in the West. The longstanding idea - or idealisation - of the West as a place teeming with economic opportunity, if not as a place whose streets were paved with gold, seemed to endure among my Chinese companions. Perhaps this owed to the fact that we were only a few years removed from the Wall Street financial debacle of 2008/09, with the full consequences of the crash yet to fully play out in the U.S., much less be known by those who admired it from afar. In light of this, my companions' unawareness about the severe economic hardships faced in the West during this period, not least by the millions in the U.S. who were losing their jobs and their homes even as we were speaking, can perhaps be understood.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, since the Chinese economy had appeared to contain the fallout associated with the Wall Street crisis relatively better than many other economies, the severity of the originating crisis in the U.S. was perhaps underappreciated by most ordinary Chinese. After all, one can only know what one experiences, and since my companions appeared very much to be swept along a socio-economic trajectory that was trending upwards, looking every bit to be members of the upwardly mobile segment of the Chinese population, it was only reasonable to expect their views of the future to be rosy. In fact, since arriving in China I had yet to meet anyone who was not feeling hopeful about the future. This is certainly not without reason: a rough measure of my companions' optimism can perhaps be grasped from the fact that since 1978, China has seen some 800 million of its citizens being lifted out of poverty.<sup>30</sup> Having been a part of this experience of sustained, rapid national economic growth, that at around 10 percent per annum over a thirty year period was historically unprecedented on a world-scale, I suppose it would have been difficult for them to be anything but hopeful.

“How about starting a Chinese restaurant overseas?”, she enthused. “Or, what about selling clothes?”

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<sup>29</sup> An index of the severity of U.S. home foreclosures associated with the 2008/09 sub-prime mortgage crisis may be gleaned from the following Brookings Institution report, titled “The Ongoing Impact of Home Foreclosures on Children”: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0418\\_foreclosures\\_children\\_isaacs.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0418_foreclosures_children_isaacs.pdf). Last accessed, May 24, 2017. It has been estimated that some 10,000,000 families had lost their homes as a result of the 2007-08 crash. See: <http://www.unz.com/mhudson/another-housing-bubble/>. Last accessed, May 27, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>. Last accessed: May 25, 2017.

#### **4.5 *The paradox of economic growth and livelihood***

The fact that our conversations constantly descended on the topic of economic opportunities and possibilities suggest an ever-present anxiety about livelihood concerns prevailing among average Chinese citizens. This was generally the case despite what I have said about China's celebrated economic development and the general sense of optimism that my companions exuded. Indeed, as will be seen in my conversations with my other interlocutors, the issue of economic livelihood is ever recurring and a seemingly irrepressible topic of conversation. I could only conclude that it was the central concern of my interlocutors, a matter that constantly weighed on their minds.

This overriding concern with the economy in general and one's economic affairs in particular could be seen to be paradoxical, for if the economy had done as splendidly as it had to lift roughly two thirds of the population out of poverty, in the process growing at an average of 10 percent over three decades, then it was reasonable to think that one's economic well-being would cease being a source of worry. At the least, one would think such worries should recede. One would expect questions of livelihood to be receding rather than remaining a problem. Certainly, it would not be unreasonable to expect such questions to be superseded by questions of a more philosophical nature, not least about how to live better, and ultimately, how to live a good life. After all, is such a de-emphasis on economic concerns at the individual level not what Abraham Maslow (1943) proposed in postulating his so-called "hierarchy of needs"?

But this diminution of economic concerns was not revealed by my research. Rather, my companions appeared to be burdened unrelentingly by concerns about economic reproduction despite their relative and absolute economic success. Inevitably, this raises the following, rarely-asked question: does economic development in general, especially of the sort enjoyed by China in particular, free us from the problem of livelihood, or does it intensify our livelihood concerns? Paradoxical though it might seem, the question is worthwhile pondering: does being lifted out of poverty liberate us from the realm of the economy, or does it in fact sink us further into it? In turn, such an inquiry prompts further questions about the general cultural milieu that engulfs contemporary China in general and Shenzhen in this case: what is it about the general milieu of contemporary China that keeps issues of livelihood at the forefront of popular consciousness? Moreover, is this an environment that fosters practices that contribute to, or undermine, good life?

#### **4.6 Shenzhen, the SEZ (Special Economic Zone): What's special?**

In the frequent conversations we had as our children played together, usually as we strolled through the apartment compound in the evenings, Wai and I often discussed the various economic opportunities that China offered. These opportunities were seemingly plentiful, though most entailed some entrepreneurial zeal requiring a healthy appetite for risk-taking. After all, most of these opportunities circulated around the plethora of economic activities associated with China's established status as the world's manufacturing centre, the so-called "factory of the world". As this coincided with my discovery of Jack Ma's Alibaba e-commerce portal, which put direct producers from throughout the country in touch with wholesalers and retailers around the world, I was naturally quite thrilled.

Since the late 1990s and the early 2000s, when I was beginning to notice all manner of my daily necessities being produced in China, I became increasingly intrigued by China's rapidly developing economy and its growing status as the world's manufacturing centre. I thought that the Alibaba website attested to the country's phenomenal manufacturing capacity, as they featured thousands of manufacturers of every conceivable commodity advertising their wares to the world. The commodities for sale ran the entire gamut, ranging from textiles and footwear to construction metals to electronic hardware. Moreover, the robustness of the country's manufacturing economy and Shenzhen's role in it, was revealed to me by the voluminous circulation of goods, which was on ample display on a constant, everyday basis.

The circulation and distribution of commodities is plainly noticeable on the streets of Shenzhen, as couriers on foot and on electronic bikes proliferate, weaving in and out of pedestrian and vehicular traffic everywhere, on the city's pedestrian sidewalks and roads. These nimble couriers are typically engaged in the business of delivering goods bought online by individuals and households, and they constitute an important segment of the Chinese logistics force. But with much of their business being conducted on foot and bike, these couriers were predominantly concerned with serving the needs of the Shenzhen domestic population.

There is also that sector of the logistics and courier business that attends to the commercial relations between internal and external markets. Logistics operations here see to the distribution of goods inter-provincially as well as internationally. Without conscious attention, the logistical operations at this level would tend to be missed by the street-level ethnographer, since the distribution of goods on this scale occurs on the country's highways,

railways, shipping ports, and air terminals. It was by sheer chance that I was able to witness a sliver of it, an experience which turned out to be highly memorable.

The occasion occurred when I was returning to my apartment late one night after I had gone to the airport to pick up my visiting parents. On our way home, we suddenly found our taxi entrapped in heavy traffic, paralysed on a six-lane highway. It was most unusual, for it was at around one o'clock in the morning and the traffic was apparently worse than at peak-hour. I looked around and realized that we were one of the few automobiles in a vast sea of container trucks, with lines extending as far as the eye could see. It was surreal but offered the observer a rough measure of the volume of goods that circulate within and beyond China. It was this scene that cemented in my mind China's status as the world's factory and Shenzhen's reputation as one of its foremost economic nodes. For me this experience gave concrete meaning to the notion of China as "the world's factory". While it was one thing to learn from textual sources about the tremendous power and size of the Chinese economy, it was another to have a tangible, firsthand experience of it.

The experience prompted me to recall Adam Smith's (1776) *Wealth of Nations*, which discussed the revolutionary transformation of English society that took place with the rise of industrial capitalism. Perhaps I was witnessing the unfoldment of a similarly revolutionary phenomenon here in Shenzhen, except on a much larger scale and occurring at a much greater speed and intensity. Perhaps being stuck in traffic at one in the morning, hemmed in by trucks bearing merchandise making their way to local and overseas market, was how ten percent GDP growth per annum, an abstract notion, finds expression on the ground?

Furthermore, it was easy to be buoyed and be infected by the effervescent nature of such a rapidly expanding economy. The consistency and frequency with which the economic theme propped up in my conversations with Wai and my other Chinese interlocutors was therefore unsurprising, even understandable. Everywhere one turned, economic opportunity seemed to abound, and one could barely help being swept up by the zeitgeist of the moment. With so many, if not the majority, of the world's goods being manufactured in China, economic opportunities abound. Mass production along Fordist and Keynesian principles invariably affords opportunities for the masses; and it can be said to be the mid-wife of China's new middle-classes, as much as it was in the West during capitalism's so-called "golden age", the post-WWII long boom lasting from 1945-73 (Marglin and Schor, 1990).

In such a milieu, one with a little bit of savings could also conceive of the possibility of being self-employed. One had the opportunity to become a trader, a member of the petit-bourgeoisie. Additionally, with online commerce just beginning to take off in 2011-12, it

appeared that conditions were becoming conducive for one to work from home, without having so much as to change out of one's house clothes.

To be sure, we were entering the second decade of the twenty-first century, some thirty plus years after Deng's market reforms had begun. Given that so much statistical information has already been publicized about modern China's economic growth, I was eager to observe how such impressive numbers translated into everyday life on the ground. Accordingly, I interpreted the unrelenting everyday bustle on Shenzhen's streets as affirmation of these striking growth figures. But my experience of the vigour of entrepreneurial activity did more than just serve as corroborating evidence for Chinese growth figures, it was so infectious that I too had a slight yearning for a slice of the action. I began to wonder what it would be like to be involved in the entrepreneurial activities responsible for much of the logistical activity described above.

"There are gains from trade," I thought to myself, as if to echo a line – the standard Ricardian line touting the principle of comparative advantage – found in elementary Economics textbooks. But it was particularly the uncertainties – the unknown risks and rewards - associated with the wheeling and dealing of the business world that I found enticing. Moreover, I was curious about the processes involved in the capitalist industrial manufacture and trade of commodities; I was interested to know how things were produced, then circulated and sold, and how the people involved at these various stages, suppliers and consumers alike, came to know of one another and co-ordinated their efforts.

Wai had just inquired about the possibilities of expanding her clothing business to foreign markets. The export of textiles and garments is surely an old trade. According to the taxonomy of industrial development, the manufacture of clothing is considered a "light industry", a primary industry that is fundamental in a country's accomplishment of fully-fledged industrialization. In such a scheme, primary industries such as textiles serve as indicators of a country's fledgling industrialization. Indeed, textile, clothing, and footwear industries typically represent a country's foray into the process of industrialization. In China's case, these sectors would presumably have experienced rapid expansion on the back of FDI (foreign direct investments) following the institution of market reforms. Indeed, it was a result of these FDI flows that China had become the largest apparel-exporter of Western brands, a development that directly implicated Wai's clothing business too, I noticed all of Wai's merchandise to bear well-known Western fashion labels.

In retrospect, it is clear that Shenzhen's status as a Special Economic Zone inhered in just such an export-orientation, which in turn set the conditions for China's opening-up or re-

integration to the capitalist world following its post-Mao pro-market reforms. As a quid pro quo for foreign technology and U.S.-denominated foreign reserves, Chinese enterprises were offered incentives by the state to produce for export, specifically for markets in the West. I now understood that it was precisely because of such institutional arrangements that I was able to pay less for an I-phone in the U.S. than in Guangdong, China, where it was produced. Ditto with Western fashion brands. With the rise of Chinese incomes in recent times, however, the consumers of these goods, whether abroad or at home, have increasingly become the Chinese themselves. Be that as it may, it is my assessment that the growth of these industries in China peaked a while ago, perhaps in the eighties and early nineties.<sup>31</sup>

With the fascinating array of goods being produced in China today spanning the entire industrial chain, ranging from low tech to high-tech, I was thinking of trading in something higher up the industrial-value chain. I had, since my arrival in Shenzhen, been particularly intrigued by the electric bicycles weaving in and out of traffic around the city. They appeared highly efficient: so swift yet so silent, and without the pollution generated by the typical diesel engine. Incidentally, such a product, along with the recent emergence of Huawei and Xiaomi in the global marketplace for telecommunication technologies, and BYD in the electric car market, reflected China's movement up the industrial-value chain.<sup>32</sup> And I felt that the electric bike would constitute a much welcome product in overseas markets, particularly in the West, where there was an increasing social awareness and concern about environmental sustainability.<sup>33</sup>

But my entrepreneurial aspirations are another matter, I mention them here only to highlight the infectious pro-economy, pro-business environment that I discovered in China in

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<sup>31</sup> It is useful to note while China is still responsible for producing much of the world's garments, rising Chinese wages mean that a large share of the textile and clothing industry has since relocated to Bangladesh, which now trails China as the world's second-largest apparel exporter.

<sup>32</sup> Such instincts about China's gravitation towards high-tech at the time seem to have been vindicated with time. By the time of writing, in June 2017, Huawei was placed third behind Samsung and Apple in the global smartphone market with almost a 10% share. See: <http://www.idc.com/promo/smartphone-market-share/vendor>. Last accessed, June 9, 2017. Meanwhile, a new report from the International Energy Agency (IEA) issued at the time of writing has noted that 2016 saw a 60 percent increase in the global stock of electric cars over the previous year, with China being the largest electric car market, accounting for more than 40 percent of such vehicles sold in the world. See: <https://www.rt.com/business/391378-electric-car-sales-surge-iea/>. Last accessed, June 9, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Incidentally, perhaps as an indication of how far Shenzhen had come and where it was heading along with its significance as a special economic zone, it is relevant to mention that Huawei and BYD are both companies that had their start and maintain their corporate headquarters in Shenzhen. Huawei was founded in 1987 while BYD, in 1995.

general and Shenzhen in particular. Having described Wai's domestic situation at home, we proceed now to take a closer look at Wai's clothing business, which was conducted from her shop at the Nanyou Wholesale Clothing market where I visited her on numerous occasions.

#### **4.7 Ah Wai, entrepreneur extraordinaire**

When I first met Wai as a neighbor in 2011, she was a stay-at-home mom, who together with her sister-in-law, Yan, managed the affairs of their respective households and jointly cared for three young children. By 2013 Wai's son had already entered Primary School and she had returned to work. Since I had by this time moved out of the neighbourhood, I was initially surprised when learning of this development.

Although her siblings were already operating two shops, with her sisters running one in Futian in the city's central business district (CBD) and her brother operating the second at the Nanyou Wholesale Fashion Market in Nanshan, Wai found an additional unit at the latter address. She decided to rent further shop-space to operate yet another outlet of their business, impressively expanding to three the total number of shops they were collectively operating. This affirms my earlier observation about the general pro-business environment of the city: the start-up, fixed costs of doing business still seemed reasonable enough to enable those who had accumulated some savings to have a shot at executing their plans. Although on the rise, rents in 2011-12 still seemed reasonable enough, suggesting that real estate developers had not yet completely engulfed the city, a situation which would soon change.

In any case, Wai's latest business venture made me reflect on those other business proposals she had playfully discussed with me over the past year. It was apparent that with the available capital she had, she been considering alternative investment options, which explained her inquiry about the viability of purchasing a farm in the U.S. or Australia. Additionally, because she had been renting the apartment unit she shared with her husband and son, I was aware that during much of 2011, the period we were neighbours, Ah Wai had sought to purchase an apartment in Xili, preferably within the same apartment complex. Unfortunately, the sentiment was that prices had already risen too high, enough to ward off the risk-averse. In 2017 we would learn with the benefit of hindsight that property prices in 2011-12, even though unprecedentedly high, were only moderate, for what was to come had not been anticipated. But, of course, knowledge is only ever perfect in hindsight.

At any rate, it was in this climate of speculative investment fervor amidst uncertainty that I myself was submerged and affected by, to the extent that I too toyed with the idea of investing in the Chinese property market. However, because Shenzhen property prices were

already beyond reach for most, I recall accompanying Ah Wai one afternoon to view some new property developments in neighbouring Huizhou ninety-five kilometres away. The seductive logic of financial and property speculation in such a milieu of ever increasing asset prices had permeated our consciousness. But that was perhaps understandable. There may be something amiss and reprehensible about reaping without sowing, but, conversely, who in their right minds would choose to see the value of their financial portfolio decline? Was it necessarily avarice – and not insecurity - that was motivating the typical investment decisions of the average Chinese person? Could one choose to play another game? This is a topic to which we shall return.

Wai was clearly an accomplished and experienced business woman. She was reticent about how she had arrived at her present station in life but I subsequently learned from Yan that she had begun virtually from “scratch”, leaving her village in Zhaoqing in the early nineties to come to Shenzhen, where she started work in a toy factory.

Contrastingly, she was now a business woman and a Shenzhen citi-zen, having changed her *hukou* (household registration) status from rural to urban, and furthermore owned an apartment and a car, two much sought-after assets that are regarded as status symbols in today’s China. Indeed, I have mentioned her ownership of the Xili apartment in which her siblings lived; I later learned that she owned another smaller apartment unit in Longhua, north of Nanshan, which she was letting out for rental income. Furthermore, in around mid-2011, approximately six months after I got to know of Wai, the family – that is, Wai and her siblings - made purchase of a late-model Honda CRV, spending in excess of 250,000 rmb. This was hardly an insignificant amount, considering that the manager of a small-factory in Shenzhen in 2011 was earning between 5000 and 8000 rmb per month.

Since the ownership of an apartment and a car had become the de facto symbols of middle-class status, hence, arguably a sign of the “good life” in today’s China, it was clear that Wai had “made it”. The extent of this achievement is all the more remarkable if we are to reflect on her beginnings in Shenzhen.

According to Yan, Wai had arrived in Shenzhen when she was in her twenties to find employment. She began work at a toy factory before venturing out on her own as a street-vendor, beginning with selling vegetables. The sight of vegetable vendors displaying their usually home-grown vegetables on the pavement for sale was still prevalent in Shenzhen and Hong Kong when I arrived and remains common even today. Presumably by iteratively re-investing her savings, she then moved from selling vegetables to selling simple manufactures, eventually trading in X’mas decorations that primarily found their way to the West, which

were captive markets for such goods. In the same manner that she invested her savings, Wai gradually brought one sibling after another from her family home in Zhaoqing to join her in Shenzhen. It was when competition in the X'mas decorations market intensified that Wai made the shift into the clothing industry. In 2011, they were approaching their tenth year in the industry, highlighting Wai's family's relative success.

#### ***4.8 From factory to bazaar to boutique: Nanyou wholesale fashion market***

I went to see Ah Wai one day in late 2014 at her place of work, the Nanyou Wholesale Fashion market, with the intent of recruiting her help for the present project. It was not my first but perhaps my fourth or fifth visit there. The first time I visited was approximately two years before in 2012 and was last there about a year and a half before, in early 2013. What struck me most about the place on this 2014 visit was the fact that the entire area had been renovated and upgraded. Ah Wai's shop was in block 111 but because the entire area had been given a significant facelift, I did not recognize it and had to call her to verify her address. Apart from the addition of a water feature – a massive fountain – at the entrance, the block had been noticeably embellished, as had the shops in it. Some had their interiors renovated, with the addition of elaborate furnishings and the installation of soft, micro-LED interior lighting to evoke the desired ambience.

I recall from my previous visits that the shops were not so elaborately decorated. The fashion market was originally an industrial park - perhaps the size of over ten football fields. Its industrial nature was given away by the presence of unglamorous three-to-four story-tall buildings in rows adjacent to one another. In their grey, symmetrical drabness, their form was not unlike the buildings leftover from the socialist era that I saw while passing through Bratislava, Slovakia in the late 1990s. Their appearance evokes the sense that once upon a time they had served as factories involved in some form of light-industry, in footwear or textiles manufacturing, or the assembly of electronic components.

Indeed, I recall now that as Wai brought me there for the first time in 2012 and showed me around, she had confirmed that the industrial park had formerly been home to many textile and clothing manufacturers. The park had previously been the site of many factories, small and large. Since the dramatic increase in Shenzhen property prices, however, most of these factories had relocated to the city's various peripheries, only to have their erstwhile premises sub-divided and partitioned into smaller units, then re-occupied by clothing wholesalers. It was a landscape that was in a constant state of flux, but its legacy as an industrial-park previously dedicated to the manufacture of clothing and textile was still

evident, for along the periphery of the park was a row of haberdasheries selling buttons, zippers, thread, needles, pins, and the like. I supposed that with the park now occupied by clothing wholesalers, these items were still needed if minor alterations had to be made.

As Wai was driving around in search for parking, I was able to see how inadequate the fashion market's parking facilities were. Cars, many virtually brand new, were double-parked, set on kerbs, or simply squeezed into where any modicum of available space could be found. It was somewhat chaotic. This phenomenon of the number of vehicles outstripping the available infrastructure provided to service them corresponded with the fact that car sales had been skyrocketing since 2008, and remain a force propelling the Chinese economy forward.<sup>34</sup> I supposed that the relevant planners would soon catch on.

Anticipating my thoughts, Wai said, "Previously no cars could enter. It was an industrial park and only commercial vehicles and those with special privileges could drive in. All other vehicles had to be parked outside, and transportation from one building to the next, would occur on foot, by bike, or using a trolley. Moving larger quantities would often be done by a human-powered *tuolaji* (tractor)." But now that the predominant function of the place had shifted from manufacturing to sales, expectations about the facilities it should provide had changed too. The place had become more consumer-oriented, and with many of the business owners like Wai owning their own automobiles, there was now the need and demand for increased parking spaces. There was some irony in this "good life" of material progress: the more one had, the more one seemed to need.

I also recalled from that first visit what the shops were like. Like many traditional Chinese shops, many appeared simply to be spaces where merchandise could be placed and stored, and if space still permitted, displayed. After all, it was a wholesale clothing market. One was not amiss to think of it as a bazaar, a traditional marketplace where one met to trade and haggle over prices. Like many such places, it was meant to be a site without the frills of architectural embellishments.

The memory of Wai's shop from my first visit in 2012 appeared to fit such a description. The shop was literally an empty space. It was undecorated, with the entire shop's contents visible through its glass panels at both its front and back. Moreover, it was not a big space, perhaps around 15-20 square metres in area, with a rack of clothing running along each side. Under the items hanging from each of these racks, mostly women's blouses and dresses, were bundles of merchandise stacked atop one another. There was more of the same against the

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/233743/vehicle-sales-in-china/>. Accessed September 19, 2017.

glass panel at the back of the shop: there was a box full of blouses still in their plastic wrapping; on the box, a few loose pieces of varying designs, perhaps a sample of the contents in the box. The lighting in the shop was provided by four fluorescent tubes hanging from the ceiling. In all, the space was functional and resembled something of a small warehouse. It is relevant to mention that the shops surrounding Wai's were similar in their sparseness.

I also recall from that visit Wai chatting with the neighbouring shopkeeper, who had seized a momentary lull in business to come over briefly for a quick chat. Wai offered her a snack from home - her *laojia* – while they exchanged quick notes about pressing business issues of the day. While leaving that evening shortly after closing time, I saw through the glass panels of a neighbouring shop a mouse trap. Presumably, it had been laid as the shop's proprietor had closed up and left for the night. Such was the unpretentiousness of the place.

But it was clear on this 2014 visit that within the span of the past couple of years, things had changed considerably. Because of the mentioned refurbishments, there were now few shops that were as austere as Wai's. Now, with the elaborate furnishings and the strategically- positioned LED-lighting, it seemed that these shops had been converted into boutiques. The people operating them also appeared to have had makeovers. Whereas a certain simplicity of dress – t-shirt, jeans, and sandals - reigned in the past, a considerable many managing shops now dressed like aficionados of *haute couture*, complete with make-up, coiffed hairdos, stilettos, almost as if they had stepped off the fashion runway. But perhaps this was to allow them to blend in with and match the newly refurbished *milieu*. Meanwhile, the items on sale also reflected an “upgrade” of consumer tastes and demands, suggesting that the “fashion district” was now targeting a different, more affluent, market segment.

Finally, after locating Block 111 amidst the fashion market's new decorative monuments, I ascended the flight of stairs at its entry and found Wai's shop once more. I was surprised to find her little shop in roughly the same state as I had last seen it, its austerity made all the more prominent now in light of the architectural upgrades occurring around.

#### **4.9            *Wai's thoughts about the good life***

We exchanged greetings and as it was a fair while since we last met, I briefed her on my life's developments. I explained the recent beginning of my SOAS research project but noticed, as I often do, that academic work is generally incomprehensible to most non-academic folk. Moreover, it was usually not even the topic of academic research but the purpose of research enterprise itself that was little understood by them. In other words, for

many academic work appeared to border on pointlessness. In a word, it was academic; the latter term in its meaning as “impractical” thus seemed here a very apt description, especially in a China caught up with the humdrum practicalities of wholesale modernisation. As discussed in Chapter 1, with faith in technological progress, economic productivism, and scientific materialism undergirding the modernist project, one could not be modern without being “practical”. I could only recall Zhang Zhidong’s *ti-yong* formula: it had been a call to be “practical”, to employ Western technics.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that in our conversation, Wai turns the tables on me so that the “observer” suddenly becomes the “observed”. I believe what follows in our conversation is intriguing for it reveals what Wai believes constitutes the good life. For this reason, I am allowing Wai’s thoughts to bring this chapter to a close.

Wai: “Why do you want to do this research? What is the purpose of studying so much? You’re not young anymore.”

TY: Silence. I couldn’t quite respond. After all, after considering what my family has had to endure in the course of my studies and not earning an income, I realized that she was to some degree right.

Wai: “Look at Li Ka Shing, he didn’t have to study so much.”

For those unaware, the person mentioned was Hong Kong’s richest man and just about the twentieth richest person on earth. Li was an octogenarian of Teochew (Chaozhou) descent from eastern Guangdong province. Indeed, he was a school drop-out, but despite that has managed to have entire campus buildings of the most prestigious universities in North America, the U.K, and in Asia named after him.

Wai: “How much do your fees cost?”

TY: “About 13,000 British pounds, roughly 115, 000 yuan”

Wai: “Oh that’s way too much. Do you have a scholarship?”

TY: “Yes, a small stipend... about 60,000 yuan a year”

Wai: “Aye, but it’s not enough... you still have to spend and to live... Why don’t you just find a job?”

I again tried to explain the purpose of my work and reiterated my wish to understand contemporary Chinese perceptions about the “good life”.

But still unable to comprehend why questions of such an abstract and impractical nature would detain me, Wai responded by asking who it was that asked me to conduct such research. When I replied by expressing my interest in writing books for posterity, thinking

that it would make for a more understandable response, she asked how much I'd expect to make from the sale of my books.

Ah Wai turned out to be as difficult an interlocutor as she was a kind and giving neighbour. When I sought her acquiescence to be "formally" interviewed so she could recount her life-story, she immediately became suspicious, evasive, and insisted there was nothing about her life worth knowing about. This is despite her having known me for nearly two over years and sharing many a conversation throughout that time.

I changed the subject and mentioned my difficulties recognising the building she was in, noting that it had been substantially renovated, along with many of the neighbouring shops. Wai: "Yes, upgraded. And many of the original tenants have leased out their units. If I subdivided my shop space into half, I'd be able to let the roughly 10 square metre space out for 40,000 rmb a month."

I was quite stunned to hear about the inflation in shop rents. After all, I knew that Wai's rent for her 20 square metre space was only about 15,000 rmb around the time of my last visit in early 2013. Rentals had therefore almost quadrupled since, in a span of less than 20 months. Nevertheless, since her contract for the shop at 15,000 rmb/month was effective until around July 2016, for almost another two years, there existed the opportunity for her to subdivide her shop to profit from the spectacular inflation in rents. This was indeed what many of her previous neighbours had done, thus explaining my inability to recognize any of them today.

The inflation of rents in the wholesale fashion market turned our conversation towards the topic of development and progress. Wai attributed the inflation of rents to progress. Indeed, I added, it was the cost of progress.

Wai: "But at the same time, if there were no progress, one wouldn't strive to improve and one would be 'left behind' and be 'backward'."

I was struck by the extent to which Wai's views about progress and backwardness echoed those of another of my interlocutors, who compared the trajectory the Chinese nation was on to being on a high-speed expressway. I remember his comments vividly. Referring to China's rapid economic growth, he expressed a sense of helplessness as he said, "Now that we've travelling on the highway, we can't slow down. We just have to keep going." I figured that the inability to stop was the price of progress, too.

Wai then stressed the importance of having money, adding that without enough of it, one could not access good medical treatment when ill, echoing a fear common to several of my interlocutors. Who could deny that access to healthcare necessary for a decent, much less,

a good life? Indeed, one needs money for health: such a statement was true to the extent that when the care for one's health comes to be dependent on institutionalized medical services, then the consumption of those services would require one to have the only medium of exchange such institutions recognize as currency: money.

In light of obvious evidence of urban gentrification and inflation in Shenzhen, the logic tying modernist progress with the need for money could not be refuted. The link between such economic progress and money was, accordingly, a commonsense in Shenzhen and China today. Given this commonsense, which is coherent with modern capitalist logic, it was only normal for my rural migrant interlocutors to call into question the worthiness of farming as an economic activity, at least in the form their ancestors have practised it. In line with this attitude, Wai said to me, "There's no money to be made. What's the use of farming?" Certainly, such small-scale agriculture, which they were now writing off as unworthy, would have been the sole preoccupation of the generation just before theirs as well all previous generations extending deep into time. Wai's comment about farming speaks for many of her generation and it is a reflection of the severe abruptness of China's civilisation-switch (Breman 2010).

Nevertheless, I know that in 2012-13 Wai and Yan found some vacant land adjacent to a housing complex across the road from where they lived and began to grow some basic crops on it. They would tend to the plot daily, in the spare time they had between dropping off and picking up their kids from school. Hence, despite what Wai has said, her effort to cultivate demonstrated a deep-rooted understanding of the value of agriculture. I shall offer an account of their farming practice in the following chapter.

Wai ended our conversation by remarking, "You might think you do not need money but without it you won't be able to buy the latest gadgets. What's good about such a life?"

I was speechless.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

In this chapter, primarily featuring Wai, we witness what some of the individual "good life" pursuits of my Chinese interlocutors in Shenzhen involve. In my dealings with her, I was able to observe a robust but unspoken emphasis on her social relations with others, which most significantly begin with her family and then radiate outwards to include her circle of friends, acquaintances, and companions. Indeed, it was undoubtedly owing to such deep commitments to relationality in the Chinese cultural world, as demonstrated by Wai in particular and my other interlocutors in general, that allowed me access into their worlds.

I had mentioned this in Chapter 3 but it is worthwhile reiterating that even though this relational commitment to others was observed to run deep in the culture, being typical and widely demonstrable in everyday life, it was not something my interlocutors declared as life pursuits or as a goal they consciously strived after when asked about the “good life”. Certainly, the importance of harmonious relationships to well-being was obvious, but perhaps it was because it was so deeply embedded in the Chinese common sense, literally a thoroughly embodied aspect of individual and collective Chinese social life, that its existence was assumed, and its perpetuation taken for granted.

It was evident that the mutuality of self-other relations, at once individual and collective, was indispensable to social life, let alone good life, in China. Yet it was not self-consciously articulated. I felt this to be instructive, since the more profound cultural elements in life – deep culture - tend to be instinctual rather than rational, embodied in deed rather than spoken about in word: they are unconscious, implicit, and interwoven into the fabric of the implicate order. Perhaps this is an example of what was alluded to in Chapter 3, a case of embodied Confucian practices prevailing over Cartesian rationalism. We shall see in the following chapter whether this thesis bears out, and examine whether and how this sense of mutuality plays out in the lives of my other interlocutors.

As a relatively successful businesswoman Wai was constantly on the lookout for business and investment opportunities in China and abroad, especially in the West. This was Shenzhen, after all, the birthplace of China’s pro-market experiment and home to the slogan, “time is money, and efficiency is life.” Be that as it may, this seemingly unending search for viable economic opportunities is revealing of the paradoxical nature of modern economic life: success leads to a life of plenty but, paradoxically, is accompanied by the perceived need for still more. Within such a scheme, the good life appears to be forever in a state of deferral; in the making but always “yet to be”. I will in the following chapter examine if this phenomenon is also witnessable in the lives of my other interlocutors.

The present chapter also revealed a number of features about the general SZ environment. Certainly, it offered phenomenological confirmation of Shenzhen’s reputation as a bustling manufacturing and commercial hub. But it also revealed an already rapidly-developing city in the flux of yet more change. I was able to observe it in the city’s ongoing economic transition: the visible move from industrial manufacturing to high-tech and FIRE (finance, insurance, real estate) services. We see this not only in the general urban development of the city, but closer to home, in the development of the wholesale fashion market where Wai has done business for roughly a decade. I had noticed a conspicuous

“upgrade” of the wholesale market, whose shops had initially been direct conversions of obsolete factory space, hence their concrete bareness. Today, these two-to-three story, erstwhile factory blocks remain, but their exteriors have undergone substantive facelifts, resulting in the installation of water fountains and other such aesthetic features at their entrances. Many of the shops within them also appear to have undergone a process of re-decoration and renovations over the past three years. The unmistakable sense one gets is that the wholesale market has gone upmarket: it remains a wholesale market in name and in its business operations, but its appearance suggests that it has now to cater to a more affluent and demanding clientele. Corresponding with these aesthetic embellishments is the fact that shop rents have increased dramatically over the same period, underlining, again, the urban redevelopment process underway to keep pace with Shenzhen’s structural economic transition. The sense that Shenzhen’s continuing development and modernisation is proceeding apace is not in doubt. My interlocutors see it as progress even if they feel their lives to be somewhat slipping out of their control. But the good life beckons: there’s the latest gadget money can buy. Aha, consumer rights! What more can one ask?

## Chapter 5: Yan and Parallel-trading across HK-SZ

“It’s Blood-Sweat Money (血汗钱): You want their money; they want your life.” Bus-driver, No. 81, Nanshan District, Shenzhen.

### 5.0 Introduction

Having in the previous chapter introduced Wai, my neighbor in Xili who was a key interlocutor and companion facilitating my adaptation to life in Shenzhen shortly after my arrival in the city, this chapter will feature the story of Yan, her sister-in-law, whom I thought similarly displayed the attributes of strength and independence despite being bound to and accepting of the longstanding patriarchal order of the Chinese tradition.

I make such claims as Yan was married into Wai’s family and adhered to the longstanding tradition that has tended to prevail in such arrangements, moving into the home of her husband and their siblings, and in consequence, shouldering much of the responsibility for the domestic chores that came with it. In this regard, Yan’s post-marital living arrangements were a world apart from that of Wai’s. It was observed in the previous chapter that whereas Wai seems to have retained much of her personal autonomy after marriage by continuing to hold the reins of the family business, this chapter will reveal Yan’s post-marital preoccupations to revolve predominantly around the domestic sphere. This predominant homemaking role, meanwhile, implied that she was dependent upon her husband and other members of her now extended family to “bring home the bacon”, that is, to earn a money-income outside the home. This division of labour between the “domus” and the “market”, between the “informal” and “formal” realms of the economy, appears for the most part to be affirmed, but as the chapter will reveal, this is only one part of the story.

We also see in what follows Yan’s adventurous and entrepreneurial spirit, raising questions about the general attitudes towards life that are adopted by China’s post-Mao, particularly post-80s, generation. Yan’s case is interesting, for as someone born in the early 80s, she would have lived her entire life in a milieu of dramatic market reforms. This would have been a period whose singular emphasis was on giving market forces the predominant role in the mediation of everyday economic and social life.

As the People’s Republic of China has been governed by a single political party in the form of the Chinese Communist Party with its erstwhile, constant interventions in the everyday social provisioning process, marketisation could only occur with a corresponding retreat of the state. Yet the expansion of the market over the state in the social provisioning

process would have implied increased individual responsibility in the safeguarding of one's economic well-being. While this meant that families, individuals and households could choose their life goals (Halskov Hansen and Svarverud 2010, Zhang and Ong 2008), the increased "choice" was double-edged at best, fictitious at worst.

After all, the dominance of market forces institutionalized a monetary economy that immediately spelled uncertainty in questions about one's subsistence. Money was required to live but one's access to it in the form of a monetary income was in turn placed at the mercy of capricious market forces, for employment opportunities had become a function of market demand and supply. And since it was the necessity of subsistence that ultimately compelled one's participation in the formal monetary economy, it was apparent that "choice" was at best limited. Choice was only confined to the nature of activities to pursue in exchange for money. One could, to some degree, choose what to do for an income, but there was virtually no choice about alternatives to the formal money economy. It becomes apparent, here, how the modern development of the economy, by way of the simultaneous processes of marketization and monetization is inimical to choice: it becomes the only "economy" around. With these twin processes occurring, it could reasonably be argued that there was in fact a loss of choice: one had to become a market participant to earn money or potentially go hungry, for money was quite exclusively the currency of the formal economic system.

By virtue of the capriciousness of markets, marketisation therefore also meant that China's post-Mao market reforms effectively institutionalised a sense of insecurity in the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens. Because the market was now handed the predominant role in determining economic outcomes, individuals now would have to earn their bread in essentially unpredictable market conditions. The basic subsistence question of how to make a living – *zenmeyanghuo* (怎么养活?) - was, therefore, constantly up in the air. Employment was necessary in order that one may eat; but in a society governed by impersonal market forces it simply could not be guaranteed. This would be a conundrum that individuals had to confront and resolve on an ongoing basis. The need to sustain and re-produce oneself in market-society spared no one from the employment question, inevitably rendering it the fundamental problem of worldly existence for every individual, regardless of age.

Whereas the subsistence question was previously resolved within the confines of the home, as given by the fact that the term "oekonomia" (economy) in the original Greek referred to "household management", its resolution today is almost universally believed to be found in the money-based, "formal" economy, outside the home. Corresponding to this, it is

the money-based economy that the term “economy” invokes today. The meaning which the word it was once associated - “household management” - has all but disappeared from popular consciousness, largely surviving only as a historical footnote.

Meanwhile, the imperatives of existence in market-society have led to the tendency for individuals to seek out and engage in paid, “formal” work outside the home, a phenomenon that has literally lured individuals away from their homes and families in search of opportunities in the national and, increasingly also, the trans-national marketplace. The consequence has been none other than the surreptitious elimination of the household as a viable, self-sustaining sphere of economic reproduction.

This combination of the market, the uncertainty it engenders, and their coercive effects on individuals is one that should be recognized as a corollary and characteristic of the marketization process. Such recognition is important, not least to underscore the market’s historical role, particularly in the historical experience of the West (Polanyi 2001[1944]), in engendering a culture of competitive, asocial individualism. This was an asociality and individualism that were not just figurative but literal. Indeed, it may be said that the sundering of the individual from his larger social integument by market forces - in order that s/he might go to “work” in the “formal” economy – has produced such a society of atomistic, asocial individuals. It is for this reason that in market-societies, it is the individual that has come to be regarded as the fundamental social unit.

The singular move to grant the market exclusive role in regulating a society’s economy not only accounts for the categorisation of the “individual” as its basic unit, it also renders the “transaction”, its essential mode of relations. In short, it is owing to such tendencies that market reforms can be said to have paved the way for a fundamental re-shaping of society.

The foregoing account of markets and marketization contains general truths that have been borne out particularly by the experience of the West (Polanyi 2001[1994]). Undoubtedly, they anticipate how market reforms in China would destabilize and reshape Chinese society too. But how is the foregoing scenario related to my discoveries in the field? To what extent have the described trends played out in the Chinese experience? To what degree has the economic imperative of *yanghuo* (养活) - “supporting a life” - resulting from China’s market reform strained at the traditional, family-centred, social order? And how has the institutionalisation of the market, the purpose of post-Mao reforms, shaped or altered Chinese notions of the individual vis-a-vis society? What should I make of my interlocutors’ life priorities and their conceptions of “good life” amidst this?

I would like especially in this chapter to give particular consideration to and contrast the two following social domains affected and transformed by the reforms: the home as the realm of the “original” economy on the one hand, and the formal economy of monetized reproduction on the other. I would especially like to draw attention to the relationship between these two domains, believing that a contrast between them illuminates contemporary Chinese good life predilections while raising questions about the constituents of the good life in general. The emphases given to these two domains will be inflected through my ethnographic observations of Yan’s life as well as my conversations with her.

### ***5.1 Oeconomia: household management***

Yan was also a neighbor at my apartment complex in Xili. As mentioned, I had come to know her through Wai, since they were sisters-in-law. When I first met Yan, she was, like Wai, a full-time homemaker, having to care for young children who were of roughly the same age as mine. I suppose it was the age similarity of our children that cemented our friendship, leading to our frequent interactions.

What I always found interesting about Yan was her status as an in-law, the fact that she had become a member of this close-knit family through marriage. Her position was particularly a source of fascination because though she was a member of the family, she would also have been on the outside of it, especially as seen from the perspective of Wai's siblings. She was not related by blood but had become a member of the family by marrying into it. Her status was somewhat similar to that of Wai's husband.

But unlike Wai's husband, it seemed, Yan was a woman operating within the constraints of a patriarchal order. Hence, unlike Wai's husband, who appeared to lead an existence quite independent of his wife's family's livelihood activities, Yan could not - did not enjoy the freedom to - do the same. By virtue of her position as a woman in a patriarchal cultural order, she could not simply detach herself from the mundane affairs of her in-laws' family but was inevitably caught and swept up in the thick of reproducing them. Apart from taking care of the children, I observed that she also shouldered much of the responsibility for household chores in the apartment she shared with her husband, children, and sisters-in-law. Ostensibly because the other adults in the family were engaged in employment outside the home with the family' clothing business, I observed Yan being responsible for the following activities: cleaning and cooking for the family, sending the kids to school, going to market, preparing lunch, picking the children up after school, making dinner, etc. I recall Yan often telling me

about the never-ending stream of chores to perform, “There’s always so much to do; it’s never ending!”

It is important to note that this was not said in the manner of a complaint. Rather it came across more like a matter-of-fact recognition of the unending tasks and responsibilities that come along with being a housewife, said in a tone of resigned acceptance. There was certainly a sense of inevitability in her voice. Hence, whereas paid employment outside the home occurred within the pre-specified nine or ten-hour workday, work that occurred within the domestic realm was unpaid apart from being unlimited by any temporal constraints. Housework was performed out of necessity, on a need-to-do basis. And, certainly, I could see that the tasks Yan was responsible for were absolutely necessary. Although she received no monetary compensation for them, Yan was performing everyday the role of reproductive labour, repeatedly producing the conditions necessary so that members of her family could engage in paid work outside the home. It was here that the divide between the formal and informal realms of the economy was drawn: between home and the marketplace, the domain of unquantifiable reproduction against that of GDP-enumerated economic activity.

Because reproductive work performed at home was unquantifiable and did not augment the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it was not typically considered a form of employment, or as constituting formal “economic activity”. This stood in contrast to employment in the so-called formal economy, typically signified by paid work performed in the marketplace, and which added to the country’s (GDP-based) economic growth. Because the bias towards recognizing pecuniary employment as “work” occurs to the neglect of other non-market forms of employment, not least “housework”, it was unsurprising that the latter would be widely viewed in modern society as being of less value.

Indeed, it is a widespread perception across the modern world that only paid employment constitutes proper economic activity, a perception that has been institutionalized by the ubiquitous acceptance by all UN members-states to adhere to a system of GDP accounting as a measure of progress of their national economies. Indeed, the institutional bias of the modern capitalist world-system resides in the fact that only money-based economic transactions are considered legitimate, while non-money transactions are not. There is some irony contained here, of course, since *oeconomie* originally implied household management, the very sort that was implicated in Yan’s everyday household chores. The meaning of “economics” today has deviated so much from this original conception that it has for the most part ceased to stand for anything remotely associated with the affairs of the home.

It should be noted that while Yan accepted her traditional familial obligations with a sense of resigned acceptance, she was also conditioned by the social environment in which she grew up. Given that we all are to some degree a product of our historical social circumstances, this was unavoidable and, hence, unsurprising. And, here, the milieu in question was none other than that of the heady post-Mao economic reforms of which we have already spoken so much about, instilling throughout the country an unmistakably distinct culture of economic rationalism. Undoubtedly, Yan would have been shaped by this environment too. In being a member of China's 80s generation – that is, as someone born in the 1980s - she would have witnessed and experienced the dynamism of Chinese economic reforms and sustained growth all of her life. This also meant that she would have been inured to a discourse of “economism” – the idea that the economy and its growth and development, were the *raison d'être* – of life. This certainly seemed to be the preponderant idea that best animated China's era of economic reforms.

It was perhaps owing to such a background that I discovered in Yan someone who was adaptive and resourceful, having no difficulties embracing the traditional responsibilities demanded of a Chinese woman – a wife, mother, and manager of the household – while at the same time maintaining the career and moneyed-ambitions of the modern age. I had the sense that she was as adept working at home as she was outside it. And, hence, it turns out that Yan, too, had left her village to come to Shenzhen to work in a factory. “I was recommended by someone from my village who was already here, and I came after completing high school. I came to know of my husband when working at the factory,” she said to me. “He was working at another factory, but we met through a mutual friend's introduction.”

## **5.2            *Working with nature: farming, fresh food and the good life***

There were a couple of occasions where I was able to witness Yan's impressive, many-sided, life-skills. I recall, in particular, one warm summer-day when Yan and her children were taking a stroll in the garden downstairs with my family. It was already late in the afternoon, the sun had set, but the stifling humidity along with the stillness in the air drenched the children in sweat. Sensing their obvious discomfort, Yan drew out a fruit knife from her handbag and got to work on a small palm tree growing by the kerb. With a few swift but controlled movements that demonstrated a well-disciplined dexterity, she managed to convert a palm-leaf into a hand fan. With another few slashes, she turned out another, and then another. By the end of it, she had made fans for all of us.

On another occasion, one late afternoon, I ran into Yan as she was leaving through the back-gate of the apartment compound. This happened around my thirteenth-month in Shenzhen, towards the end of my lease of my Xili apartment. She had a straw hat in her left hand and carried in her right what seemed like a wooden stick. On closer inspection, it turned out to be a hoe.

“Where are you going?” We asked each other, seemingly at the same time. The fact that I was coming into the apartment compound made her query rhetorical. I waited eagerly for her response.

“We found a plot to cultivate nearby and have planted some vegetables. Would you like to come have a look? It’s about five minutes away.”

Yan took the lead and I followed closely behind. I was amazed and naturally intrigued. My time in the field had revealed life in China to be filled with surprises of this sort; here was another out of the blue. Besides, I had at the time already lived in the area for approximately a year and was unaware of any farmland in the vicinity. Including Xili, where I lived, gentrification had been carried out as far around as the eye could see. I did not consider the absence of farmland to be surprising, for this was Shenzhen after all.

We crossed the main thoroughfare (Chaguang Road) that ran outside our residential compound, walked through a small, unmanned, side-gate before arriving at what seemed like a wide, sizeable plot of land. Given that we were still feeling the heat of the sun, we quickly took cover under some medium-sized trees which, by virtue of their height, were clearly the most prominent plants on the plot. Because of the presence of these trees, the patch was inconsistently lit. It was darker in some areas and brighter in others, so it was evident that Yan had to be selective when choosing a spot to cultivate. The presence of several already cultivated plots implied that there were a few others also farming there. I noticed a fence partitioning the strip, marking off the property of a residential complex on the other side. And so I realized that this strip of land, now opportunistically and ingeniously deployed by nearby residents for agricultural purposes, was effectively public or state land. My examination of the strip of land – easily done by walking its 20m by 40m breadth and length - revealed that there was a small canal adjacent to it. In fact, I noticed that the strip was adjacent to a two-way, single-lane road (Longjing Road) but one side was partitioned and obscured from the other by 12-feet of dense plant-life: trees, shrubs, and weeds. Little wonder that I had no knowledge of such an improvised agricultural plot. From the road, one simply could not see through the thick overgrowth. Perhaps because of this insulation, the place felt somewhat Edenic. It was an oasis of calm greenery amidst the otherwise bustle of motorised traffic.

“How did you find this?” I asked enthusiastically.

“Our friends who are growing some vegetables here told us, and Wai and I came down here last weekend to clear a patch for ourselves. I have been coming consistently since, clearing a bit more everyday, ploughing it, watering, and preparing it for cultivation. In fact, we have already planted some seeds, which have begun to sprout.” Yan proceeded to guide me to the exact location of their patch.

“I’ve been coming here after sending the children to school. It’s still cool after I drop them off at about 8 o’clock, then I come here to work until about 10 or 10.30 before returning to prepare lunch. When I need to go to the market, I might come here after, or in the afternoon before picking them up from school, but it’s often quite hot at those times, just like it is now.”

I was impressed by the ingenuity and resourcefulness of both Yan and Wai, and took my hat off to Yan for her conscientiousness. It was not as if she did not already have enough to do. This certainly did not come across as a passing whim, a liberal, middle-class impulse to “go green” and “save the environment”. Rather, by all appearances, the inspiration for it seemed to come from a deeper place and was spawned of deeper conviction.

I recall that each time when getting ready to leave after visiting their apartment, they would offer me some kind of food to take away. At times, it would be fruit; at others, fresh or dried vegetables, but invariably, they would inform me that the foodstuffs had come from home (Zhaoqing) on their last visit and brought back to Shenzhen. More often than not, the foodstuffs would have been homegrown. I recall one occasion when they had brought several live fish back from their pond at home. These fish, which were nearly a metre in length, were kept alive in plastic basins in the bathroom until it was time to have them cooked for a meal. But little did anyone know: one of them had hatched a get-away plan. Overnight, it jumped so vigorously it landed outside the basin before wriggling its way into the latrine, never to be seen again. It seemed to me not an insignificant loss, for the considerable effort had been made to transport it alive all the way from the village to Shenzhen, only for it to disappear into the city’s sewers.

“Wow, you actually took the trouble to bring them back,” I said to Yan after hearing the story.

“It’s no trouble. It’s only four hours away. My husband fishes them from the pond and packs them into bags, making sure there’s enough water, and then gets on the bus. He leaves in the morning and arrives by mid-afternoon. It’s near and really no trouble at all.” The

family had relied on public transport to facilitate visits to and from their *laojia* (ancestral home) in Zhaoqing before the family acquired a private vehicle.

The point of my recounting this amusing incident is to highlight the importance that Yan and her family attach to food, and fresh food, at that. When it came to food, whether it was vegetables, meats, or fish, it was clear that freshness was of utmost importance to the family, as it was to many Chinese people I encountered during my time in the field.

“If it doesn’t move, don’t buy it.” I recall Wai once giving me advice about how to buy fish. “If you want to buy chicken, you should buy the live chickens that you can see in the cage, not the frozen ones. Live chickens cost a bit more but taste much better.” It was probably owing to such advice that one frequently encountered the sight of people returning from my neighbourhood market with a clear plastic bag of water and a fish in it. Judging by its size, it was unlikely that the fish was intended as a pet. Even more extraordinary was the sight of one returning from market with a live chicken, its feet securely fastened to the end of a long wooden stick. These were somewhat commonplace scenes at the time of my arrival in Shenzhen in 2011, though I notice their sightings have diminished over time, in no small part having to do with the (2013) demolition of the Xili neighbourhood wet-market I used to shop at. In Chapter 7, I will discuss how such a process of demolitions (*chaiqian*), conspicuous throughout the city today, are connected to the explicit programme of the “urban renewal” of Shenzhen. But to be sure, for now, I invoke these moments to highlight the importance of fresh food and of eating well in the everyday lives of ordinary Chinese people.

It was likely that this same concern about being able to eat high-quality, fresh food was that which motivated Yan’s newfound urban-agricultural practices. Although not often mentioned explicitly, these observable culinary practices surely indicate that good, freshly prepared cuisine constitute an important aspect of good life for Yan’s and Wai’s family.

I believe Yan’s initiative to practise agriculture in such an urban setting in Shenzhen was revealing of their ideas about what a good life should consist of. Yet at the same time, I was quite certain that such “good life” pursuits would have been viable only for those who have had experience of life outside a strictly urban-capitalist environment. Perhaps more than that, it would have been conceivable mainly for those who had a rural upbringing. It is they who would have found the inspiration and gumption to deploy the necessary material and knowledge resources to do something as novel as this, putting idle-land back into productive use. Indeed, one would have required previous agricultural experience to know how and where to begin. In this regard, Yan demonstrated expertise that came with her experience of working the land. She had come the previous day to clear a patch for farming, turn the soil

over, sow some seeds, and to water the soil. Today she had come to do more, hoping to cultivate another row she had cleared. I helped a bit before she sent me to the well 30m away to fetch water.

Yes, it was a well that was operational, a well that I had only ever read about in children's storybooks during my lifetime but never seen. It was not only a thrill lowering a bucket into the well to see it filled up with water when hauled up; it was a tremendously joyful experience attaching the buckets of water to each end of a 1.5m bamboo pole balanced across my shoulders, then walking back the entire 30m while ensuring not to spill too much of their contents. I had thought myself up to the task, but it turned out to be an immense challenge. My knees wobbled under what felt to be the 30+ kilos I was shouldering while the flesh on my back on which the bamboo pole rested, burnt intensely. The water in the buckets moved violently and some began to spill out. I soon realized that it was not only strength but also balance and stability that were required for the task. Feeling the weight of the buckets, their movement, and the severe physical discomfort in my back, my gait became unsteady, causing the buckets to swing wildly. Even more water spilled out.

My physical struggles did not elicit sympathy. On the contrary, my inaptitude drew boisterous laughter from Yan, along with two elderly female farmers nearby, who had now put aside their activities to enjoy the spectacle. The skin around my upper-back now burned so much I could barely look up. But I tried to appear stoic, and so I persisted, moving one foot forward, then the next, while I felt the bamboo pole and the bucket of water on the right side pull me in one direction, before that on the left pulled me in the other. As if things could not get worse, with my balance compromised and my arms fully preoccupied, I was then set upon and assailed by a swarm of mosquitos, some stinging me around the ears while others circulated around my face. I was easy pickings. "Zzzz", I could hear those ambulating/circulating around my ears as they landed leisurely, at will, and fed at whim. The ease with which they preyed on me merely added insult to injury. I must have looked outrageously silly, barely able to bring two buckets of water under my physical control, while swinging my head from side to side in quick, abrupt fits, attempting to ward off pesky mosquitos. It was an afternoon's humour for all present, at my expense.

"Haha. Tongyi, have you never done farm work before? Never drawn water from a well before? Are you sure you can you manage?" Yan teased, drawing giggles from the other women.

I had just witnessed these women carrying out the same task, and despite being around 10cms shorter than I, as well as being considerably older, they demonstrated poise, bringing

things fully under control. They were a model of physical sturdiness, while I staggered, teetered and tottered, suddenly becoming aware of the cost of my sedentary, deskbound profession: “I think, therefore I am,” Descartes’ error reverberated in my head. Perhaps it was simply a question of the body having first to adjust and adapt to a new permutation and distribution of unfamiliar forces. I was tempted to say as much, but today, under the circumstances, such exculpatory explanations were probably not appropriate. At least, it did not seem appropriate for me to be offering them. I was reminded that novices should desist from saying too much to seasoned veterans; it would have been redundant, for the latter are likely to have chartered the same paths. I ate humble pie and laughed along at my own apparent ineptitude.

It had been a terrific experience, particularly the opportunity of having an agricultural experience in a hyper-modern urban setting such as Shenzhen. Who would have imagined farming in Shenzhen today, much less, manually drawing water from a still-operational well in the course of it?

Perhaps there was also something to be said about Yan’s enthusiasm, that it derived not merely from a wish to grow one’s food but was impelled by a deep, implicit awareness that a good life also consisted of productive relations with the land, with nature? Indeed, perhaps this physical working of the land, with the land, was ultimately the expression of a deep psychological and emotional yearning for something? A search for meaning and purpose, the meaning of life? Perhaps for Yan there was already an inherent awareness that a good, meaningful life involved re-creation, to be understood literally and metaphorically, but which began with processes attached to the land?

The manner with which Yan cut and folded the palm leaf and turned it into a fan seemed to be a fitting demonstration of her intuition about this nature-centred process of re-creation, a process encapsulating play, work, and ingenuity, involving both nature and its technical manipulation. Perhaps this was Yan’s intuitive attempt at gesturing towards the good life, with her particular orientation having something to do with her biography, particularly her experience of a childhood growing up in the countryside? Perhaps farming in Shenzhen was an opportunity to re-create the “good life”, to re-mind herself that the attainment of a supposedly good life was still within reach, lying, literally, in one’s hands?

### ***5.3 Post-Mao Chinese socialism: the non-contradiction of contradiction***

I have in the foregoing offered a biographical sketch of Yan, revealing her to be multi-skilled, at ease in the traditionally gendered activities of homemaking and farming. I have also

suggested that she was equally adept in the role of a formal economic agent, a market participant. She had, after all, come to Shenzhen in the early 2000s to work in one of the city's many factories. Having documented her domestic abilities in the section above, this section focuses on her efforts to augment the family's monetary income outside the home.

The fact that Yan was born in the 1980s is probably significant in explaining her apparent ease working inside and outside the home, playing the role of housewife and seeing to the reproduction of the necessary material conditions in the household, while also being ready to become a wage-earner by earning a monetary income in the money-based economy. After all, the 80s was the decade that marked the end of the PRC's international isolation and the country's re-integration with the capitalist world-economy, which was spearheaded by the West. To be sure, it was Nixon's visit to China on the political-diplomatic front in 1971 that signaled this turn of events. In the view of the world's leading capitalist nations, institutions, and corporations, however, China had to introduce and institute market reforms if it were to become a useful member of such a world-system. Indeed, what use of a billion-large population if it were not yet a market, if nothing could yet be sold to it – or bought from it?

Just as important were matters brewing on the ideological front. It was felt that the PRC had also to abandon its erstwhile, if inadvertent, status as the world's leading proponent of anti-imperialist struggle, a status that had been bequeathed to it by the revolutionary character of Maoist ideology. Indeed, by the 1980s, the PRC would be undergoing yet another revolution. However, it would be a revolution not aimed at expunging the bourgeois forces and relations of production as previously attempted by Mao, but, ironically, one concerned with revivifying them in society.

Hence, the post-Mao policy of *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening up) was taken up by Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, and proceeded – some would say, contradictorily - under the banner of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Yet the PRC in the 1980s in which Yan grew up would have been exactly such a period of ideological ambiguity, of China being nominally socialist but otherwise subjected to the uncompromising workings of market forces. I believe it is in such a climate of unrelenting change that Yan learned to adapt reflexively to the times and to cultivate an ability to make seamless transitions within a complex landscape of ever changing socio-economic and political circumstances. It appeared that one had to be practical, not ideological, to survive.

#### 5.4 *Daigou: background of an informal-formal economy across ShenKong (SZ-HK)*

Yan's ability to seize the opportunities of the day may be best exemplified by her *daigou* business venture, an enterprise involving arbitrage and her crossing into Hong Kong occasionally to purchase all manner of commodity items on behalf of friends and acquaintances. *Daigou* (代购) may be translated literally as "representative buying". In the form of a noun, it describes one acting in the capacity of a "purchasing agent". A less flattering description of the activity, albeit one that is widely used, particularly in Hong Kong, is "parallel trading", which gives it a negative connotation of illegality. To refer to it as parallel trading in fact invokes the idea of "smuggling", which in turn explains the simultaneous use of the auxiliary pejorative, *shuihuo*, (水货), denoting "smuggled goods".

I have already mentioned the informal economy in regards to unremunerated work performed at home, but here was informality of another sort, and at another level. Unlike the non-monetised work performed around the house by the average homemaker, informality here referred to economic activities that even though monetized, did not bear the official stamp of legitimacy. Indeed, the informal was implicated here because there was a "shady" or "grey" aspect to *daigou* that resided in its involving parallel trading, the buying of goods on the Hong Kong side of the border for re-sale at a higher price on the PRC side: it was no more and no less than arbitrage.

The illegitimate aspects of parallel trading may not be obvious if it were described as such. Indeed, did the average commercial and trading enterprise not aspire to the identical goal of buying low and selling high, to profiting from arbitrage? Did *daigou* not constitute rational economic behaviour, the very sort of behaviour as defined and prescribed by the doyens of modern economic thought? Why was parallel trading considered shady, and who, exactly, was crying foul about it?

It turns out that like almost all affairs taking place in the social world, perspective matters. And since it was impossible to obtain or sustain a view from nowhere, points-of-view were never neutral but depended upon position and vantage-point. Perspectives, in other words, were predicated upon privilege – the popularity they enjoyed, in fact, often proportional to the extent of power giving succor to them. In other words, the more dominant a view, the more it tended to be backed by powerful vested interests. Consequently, it was inevitable that all forms of social knowledge would suffer the unfortunate intrusion of partisan and political interests. Here, again, the politics of knowledge and representation

insinuated themselves into the proliferation of popular, if not also populist, views that associated *daigou* with informality and illegitimacy.

I have in Chapter 2 already discussed the Shenzhen (PRC) and Hong Kong SAR border and the prevailing tensions characterizing and hampering relations across it, casting such relations of angst, mistrust, and animosity as a legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup>C Sino-British Opium wars. I have also already discussed the different material political-economic realities that emerged out of this historic colonial enterprise, with Hong Kong emerging to global prominence first as an important trading post of the British Empire, then as an economic neo-colony of Pax-Americana post-WWII. It is this apparent continuity in the quest for global colonial control, extending from Pax-Britannica in the mid to late-19<sup>th</sup> C to Pax-Americana after WWII in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> C, that makes it meaningful to talk about the colonial hegemony of the West in general, and of Anglo-America more specifically. Despite - or because of - its vassalage, Hong Kong flourished as a free port while it remained within the ambit of this Anglo-American alliance. In the meantime, China languished, first, as a semi-colonialised polity under the aegis of an enervated Qing dynasty, then, post-1949, in the form of the People's Republic of China (PRC) - a liberated and ideologically socialist, modern nation-state. Despite having accomplished liberation, the PRC remained indigent, with its self-identification as a champion for Third-world and anti-imperialist struggles naturally resulting in its exclusion from the flows of capital that greased the circuits of the modern world-system.

It was especially in the post-WWII era that the rise of Hong Kong picked up speed, as it reaped the benefits of its now historic standing as an important commercial node within the sphere of the capitalist West. Since Hong Kong was a free-trade port engaged in entrepot, goods within the Western world moved freely to and through it. In contrast, the PRC was made to endure a trade embargo by the West in 1951, the latter occurring against the backdrop of the Korean War. Undoubtedly, it was an embargo imposed because the PRC had fallen into the socialist camp under the lead of the world's other competing imperialist nation, the Soviet Union.

In the Korean War, China was aligned with the Soviet Union in supporting the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North, whereas the U.S., leading the West, gave its backing to the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South. Thus, while goods from the rest of the world flowed uninhibitedly into the free port of Hong Kong, the same could not be said about the PRC. The latter was indigent even as it aspired to

industrialise and was now a recipient of aid and technical transfers from the Soviet Union, which ended by around 1956 owing to a chilling in Sino-Soviet relations.

I have given a broad and sketchy description here of the geo-strategic and political-economic realities during this period of the Cold War, a period in which both Hong Kong and the PRC were on opposing sides and, as such, were each inured to the two major competing ideologies of the day vis-à-vis the ideal form of social organisation: Capitalism versus State Socialism, Market against the State. Yet there was nothing ideological about the fact that Hong Kong was a “free port”, one through which all goods circulating within the sphere of influence of the West could pass readily. Similarly, there was nothing ideological about the fact that during this period, the PRC was an impoverished and needy country, desperate for capital to realize its goal of industrial modernisation, but which was constrained by an embargo imposed by the West.

The unique historical circumstances Hong Kong and the PRC faced vis-a-vis each other may have emerged on the back of ideological differences, but the circumstances that prevailed were not mere ideational fancies but historically contingent outcomes: Hong Kong was the destination for a plethora of goods owing to its colonial status as a “free port”, while the PRC remained impoverished because it had to endure a trading embargo initiated against it on political and ideological grounds, denying it access to many much needed material and technological resources. Such political realities notwithstanding, the ideological divides that characterised the imaginations of these different polities continued to furnish the more popular explanations about them. Perhaps they were popular for being conceptually straightforward, but to greater or lesser degree, they revolved around the following: Hong Kong prospered because the form of its economy adhered to the liberal idea of a free-market; the PRC did not because it was shackled by a strong authoritarian state intervening against otherwise natural market forces.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the motif implicitly running through the standard (liberal) interpretation was that Hong Kong stood on the progressive side of civilization while the PRC wallowed in despotism, as signified by the authoritarianism of its single-party state. Such biases continue to inform popular opinion despite the scintillating developments in China over the past three-plus decades.

Given the all-encompassing nature of ideology (Althusser 1971), it has been - and remains – difficult to understand the past without being subjected to its distortionary effects. Moreover, since we understand the present only by way of the past, ideology invariably intrudes into and distorts our readings of the present. To be sure, given the weight of history,

it would be somewhat inevitable that the *daigou* activities of PRC shoppers be interpreted through the longstanding and ideological frameworks mentioned above, arousing with it the concomitant feelings of *ressentiment* which, as seen in Chapter 2, involved certain groups of Hong Kongers ascribing “inferiority” to Mainland Chinese out of envy of their new found economic wealth. On the other side, mainland tourists tended simply to be elated at being able to purchase imported foreign items tax free.

It is because of the widespread discriminatory attitudes that Hong Kongers have historically held towards the PRC and its people that the *daigou* activities of mainland shoppers have so readily been associated with “parallel trading” and its negative connotations. In more extreme instances, the prodigious purchasing power of more extravagant Chinese shoppers has led some resentful Hong Kongers to denigrate them as “locusts” which swarm and “drain” a place of its resources. While such derision was also directed at mainland Chinese mothers who crossed into Hong Kong to give birth, arguably putting a strain on the city’s public healthcare system, or Chinese students crossing the border to study in the city’s schools, arguably using up precious educational resources at the expense of local HK residents, the hyperbole and hysteria accompanying such allegations should be apparent. Once more, the ideological prejudices of the past weigh heavily upon any rational attempt to evaluate and understand the present. History weighs heavily on the present: but whose history is it?

The charge that Chinese shoppers in HK “drain” the city’s resources is at best a case of incomplete accounting and, at worst, an instance of willful, xenophobic scare-mongering. As is well-known, any transaction occurring in the money-exchange economy, is invariably a two-way affair. The “outflow” of a certain material resource is always “offset” by an implicitly agreed-upon, usually market-determined amount of money that constitutes its price. Such are the fundamental conditions of commodity-exchange under capitalism. In other words, an “inflow” of monetary revenue occurs to complete the transaction, with their corresponding multiplier effects for the economy as a whole. One could object to the terms of trade, or, more fundamentally, to the exchange of real, tangible resources for abstract, symbolic money. Alternatively, one could sustain a deeper, underlying critique of the entire system of money-based exchange, of the systemic features that define modern capitalism. But these were not the critiques that were forthcoming.

Instead, dominant critiques rested on the claim that resources were somehow being “depleted” by mainland tourists, as if to imply that a process of expropriation - *sans* compensation - was proceeding apace. There was some disingenuousness in this. After all, if

inventories were running low, was it not the result of the workings of market forces, of demand outstripping supply? *Daigou* – or parallel trading - may have exhibited the venal, consumerist excesses of modern capitalism, but it was certainly a stretch to draw a parallel with plunder, or that it was the reason for the depletion of inventories, especially in the age of just-in-time production and real-time supply and logistic chains.

As Yan noted, “Those HK residents may protest against mainland tourists coming to the city to shop. But don’t they see that we are supporting their economy? Did the Hong Kong economy not suffer tremendous losses in tourist revenues due to the sharp decrease in visitors during the several months that the recent ‘Occupy Central’ movement took place (in 2014)?”

The ‘Occupy Central’ movement to which Yan was referring was primarily a HK student-led movement that occurred at the end of 2014 protesting what was perceived Beijing’s excessive political influence in the governance of Hong Kong. The protests had led to the occupation and closure of key sections of Hong Kong island in Admiralty, Mongkok, and Causeway Bay for a total of seventy-seven days. While it was ostensibly a reformist movement pushing back against Beijing’s undue political interference in HK politics, it naturally included more radical voices calling for Hong Kong independence, not to mention “localists”, who took the opportunity to vent their xenophobic prejudices against the influx of Chinese tourists.

According to the standard (liberal) view of the macroeconomy, Yan’s reasoning was spot-on. In this view, national income and growth, as given by the following Keynesian identity,  $Y = C + I + G + X - I$ , were determined by a number of important variables, of which consumption (C) was one. Consumption was said to be good for the formal economy, for, like investment (I), discretionary government spending (G) and exports (X), it exerted an expansionary effect, while import spending (I) was the only contractionary variable, a “leakage” out of the economy. Indeed, were these not fundamental economic principles that had facilitated Hong Kong’s economic success in its modern history? Meanwhile, if we should invoke the cherished ideologies of our time, were we not here witnessing “free enterprise”, the very virtue for which Hong Kong was most often celebrated? Perhaps history was encroaching again, and now proving burdensome?

Moreover, if the concern with parallel trading or *daigou* were really about its legality, are we not obliged to remember that Hong Kong’s free port status had its origins in something undeniably more dubious, legally and as well as morally? Was the free port of Hong Kong not the result of an illegal drug trade - initiated by Jardine and Matheson and supported by the British imperial state - which culminated in the Sino-British Opium Wars?

Does historical responsibility not at least demand a sense of proportion, if not a more complete and well-rounded perspective? If the alleged illegality of parallel trading poses a contemporary moral problem for Hong Kong, are we not compelled at least to reflect on illicit activities as they have pertained to Hong Kong in the past, which gave rise to the free-trade port it is today? Has Hong Kong's success not come by way of its historic role as a free-trade port facilitating entrepot, illegal or otherwise? Or does excavating the past in this way pose too many complexities for the present, and render history a bane, the bearer of inconvenient truths?

In contrast to the far-reaching nature of state-supported drug-trafficking programmes, why and for whom is the relatively more innocuous activity of parallel trading a problem? To be sure, *daigou* or parallel trade involved the purchase of foreign, especially Western, imported commodities in a tax-free zone with an aim toward arbitrage; that is, for the goal of resale at a higher price in a non-tax-exempt region. If it should be a worry, should it not be of greatest concern to those at risk of losing out on the collection of import-duties; in this instance, to Chinese tax collectors specifically, and the Chinese state authorities more generally?

Perhaps another faction with a legitimate axe to grind in the *daigou* business would be mainland Chinese retailers of foreign imported goods, for they were losing a good slice of the mainland Chinese consumer market for foreign imports to their Hong Kong counterparts. Yet there was not a whimper of protest from them. Instead, the most vociferous resistance to *daigou* or parallel trading activities appeared to be coming from those with the least of a direct and immediate stake in such activities. Ironically, it was neither state authorities nor Chinese retailers protesting the supposedly illicit activities of Chinese parallel traders, but a segment of the local Hong Kong population who appeared resolute about drawing physical boundaries around the city, as if to say "Hong Kong for Hong Kongers only". Importantly, it appeared that the boundaries they sought to impose were not only meant to limit the number of non-locals (read: mainland Chinese citizens) visiting the city; there seemed also the wish to see such boundaries restrict the amount of tax-free goods non-local (read: mainland) visitors could purchase from and take out of Hong Kong.

Since Hong Kong's tax-free status had become a celebrated aspect of the city's global and historic identity, could it be that there was now a heartfelt sense of civic-duty among some of its residents to protect such freedoms from abuse, not least, ironically, by those who have historically been denied them? Perhaps some of Hong Kong's so-called localists had come to recognise that freedom was not such a good thing after all, especially if pertaining to

consumption that an increasing number of their mainland cousins had the means to partake of, while they could not? Rather than opposition to *daigou* on the basis of social, moral, or even legal considerations, was this not simply an epidemic of individual *ressentiment*, a wish to deny the Other on the grounds that one had been denied? Perhaps this was not so much a noble cause taken up by the powerless against the depravities of institutional power, more of an ugly case of victims playing oppressors, a case of *les sans culottes* turning on one another?

Nevertheless, however one is to conceive of *daigou*, whether in its more innocuous expression as “*daigou*” or more cynically and pejoratively as “parallel trading”, Yan was unperturbed. As far as she was concerned, these were needless semantic distinctions, and she was not quite sure what the fuss was about. As observed, she had interpreted the problem rationally, merely as an economic issue, not a political or identity-conferring one. Her approach to the matter was entirely realist: was it not obvious that Hong Kong and its people would stand to lose from any efforts to curb Chinese consumption in the city? Were these people not destroying the economic fortunes of the city, and as a consequence, shooting themselves in the foot? No doubt, these seemed like rhetorical questions for her.

Could I, too, have made much meat of the matter? After all, given the multi-sided character of the matter, it was inevitable that what was one person’s shady parallel trader would be another’s valued customer. In the same way that she has come to deal with the challenges and opportunities that her life has thrown her, Yan was unfazed and undeterred by the negative depictions in Hong Kong of those engaged in *daigou*. It was likely because Yan was of the 80s generation and, hence, a child of post-Mao and reformist China that she appeared immune or oblivious to any Sino-British colonial hangover. As a consequence, she saw herself as someone bringing business to Hong Kong’s retailers while simultaneously performing a valuable favour and service for her friends and acquaintances back in her village. Obviously, she stood to earn a small monetary income for herself, which merely underscored her perceptions of *daigou* as a win-win undertaking, an enterprise with beneficial outcomes for all: HK retailers, her friends back in Zhaoqing, and herself. Indeed, it was not just a matter of personal gain but of everyone involved having the opportunity to share in its benefits.

I had found this to be a common tendency in dealings with my Chinese interlocutors. This tendency, which I have come to regard as a constitutive aspect of the Chinese culture on account of its deep-rootedness, seems to conceive of everyday interpersonal affairs as an opportunity to generate virtuous social circles of mutual benefit for everyone involved. I was gradually coming to the view that this was characteristic of the Chinese practice of social

relations, a cultural practice constantly at work when relating to and with others. Perhaps it was underlining once again the idea that a good life had its basis in shared existence, and was not to be imagined apart from the involvement of others? If so, the exclusionary views and aspirations of the Hong Kong localists offer up a contrast that is worth reflecting on.

### 5.5 *Connectivity and good life possibilities*

The reason for Yan's involvement in *daigou* was straightforward. It was functional. She was in effect performing the role of a purchasing agent, with the responsibility of going to Hong Kong to purchase items on behalf of those who had requested her to.

Compared with the typical principal-agent transaction, however, what was perhaps different about Yan's *daigou* enterprise was the fact that her "clients" – "principals" in the transaction - were mostly friends or acquaintances from her village in Zhaoqing, which is typically where they would place their orders from.

As Yan informs me, "Generally I decide on the date that I'll be making a trip to Hong Kong and publicise it over Weixin (instant messaging service). This way, anyone in my network who wants something can contact me. So, usually, by the time I make the trip, I would have a long shopping list that comes through by instant messaging."

And so, Yan would come to HK, purchase the requested goods and lug them back across the Shenzhen border. From this point they would be dispatched to their respective village destinations using China's now highly elaborate network of high-speed courier services, with the latter constituting an important element of the country's developed communications and logistical services. One only has to have had the experience of online shopping in China to have a sense of how well connected the different parts of the country is today. It is not unusual, for example, that goods ordered from Guangdong in the south are received in Beijing in the north, 2000km away, by the third day.

The deeply integrated and interconnected transportation and communication networks existing between places, things, and people today owe much to the expansiveness of transport networks as well as the connective speed of modern information technologies. These transportation and communication networks, in turn, are the result of large-scale infrastructural investments since the country's reforms began. It is evident that the development of these networks of connectivity throughout the country were part and parcel of what is broadly termed, "Chinese modernization" and "economic development". Moreover, it would be reasonable to think that they would have contributed significantly to the dazzling growth rates of the Chinese economy over the past three decades. In any case,

the sheer scale and speed of all this connectivity in China today leaves one with a sense of the country's irrepressible techno-economic progress.

At the level of the individual, the indispensable technological device needed to become a *daigou* agent like Yan has to be the smartphone. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Yan's *daigou* business was made possible only with the emergence of smartphone technology, with its ability to transmit instant messages, photographs, and now, even cash, through Apps such as WeChat, though this latter facility was not yet available at the beginning (2011) of my research.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, it was the smartphone and its ancillary software technologies that allowed Yan to solicit orders by sending out messages on Wechat, informing friends about any forthcoming shopping trip to Hong Kong. In fact, given the capability of the messaging system to dispatch and receive text and images in real-time, she could still take orders after arriving at the stores in Hong Kong.

As Yan told me, "Sometimes when I get to the shops in Hong Kong and see some interesting items, I will immediately take photos to send to my circle of friends, asking if there is any interest. Sometimes I send a reminder letting them know that I'm in HK. I do this in case there's something someone might suddenly want. It's so easy with the internet these days; they simply need to send me a photo of what they want: style, model, colour, size, etc. Of course, in such circumstances I'll only take orders from people I personally know or am connected with since I'll be paying for these items in advance on their behalf."

Indeed, in line with the general optimism associated with technology, it is easy with the internet. Yet it should be recognized that that the technology-induced convenience described here amounts to little more than the facilitation of consumption, and one might add, consumerism. To be sure, the connectivity enabled by technology has multiplied consumer possibilities and essentially allowed consumerism to explode throughout China. Hence, if the post-Mao reforms unleashed a consumer revolution in urban China (Davis 2000), it is clear that the further technological modernization of China's IT-based communication and logistical networks since, has only served to bring this revolution to the Chinese countryside. And Yan's *daigou* enterprise documented here consists but an aspect of this consumerist revolution sweeping the country. Be that as it may, it is unsurprising that such techno-material developments and their implications for consumerism seem only to affirm what

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<sup>35</sup> As an indication of how rapidly technological developments on the lookout for imported consumables in China were proceeding, the WeChat (or Weixin) App had become ubiquitous among at least the urban population by 2015. By the middle of 2016, cash transfers and payments using the Smartphone was commonplace, facilitating payments for all sorts of transactions, from purchases of furniture to buying dumplings and steamed buns from the street-hawker.

many in China and around the world believe constitutes the good life. Technology derives conveniences while stuff supposedly promises material comforts: what more is there to ask?

### 5.6 *Consumerism and westernisation*

By way of Yan's attempts to augment her family's cash income, I have in section 5.4 discussed the political-economic circumstances behind the controversy brewing in Hong Kong around the *daigou* activities of mainland Chinese shoppers. Let me now attempt to offer an analogous account of the situation "on the other side", in the PRC. I will deal with the general conditions that have created Chinese consumer demand for *daigou* services and also examine the types of consumer items sought after. I believe such an investigation to be important since the consumerist tendencies animated by the Chinese trend of online shopping and Yan's *daigou* enterprise further exemplify the civilization shift in China discussed previously. In particular, such consumerism demonstrates the nature and immense scope of the touted civilization switch. By way of technology-induced consumer practices, urban and Western ways of life are penetrating into the Chinese countryside in ways never before.

*Daigou* emerged only relatively recently as a viable economic activity for those like Yan. While there are many things one could say about such a development, it is at least a clear sign of the rising incomes and changing consumer preferences of the general Chinese population. While this trend of private consumption and increasing consumerism was already observed by Davis (2000) to be on the rise among the Chinese urban population as early as the 1990s, it has only escalated in scope, now reaching deep into the country to affect its rural population as well. Such changing consumer tastes constitute the qualitative effect of having millions lifted out of poverty over the past few decades, not to mention the ensuing emergence of a Chinese middle class, and to a smaller degree, a Chinese leisure class.

Owing to these dramatic socio-economic developments, many on the mainland not only express display their desire for but now also have the wherewithal to consume imported commodities. To be sure, the imports relevant to our discussion here refer specifically to Western or Western-style consumer items. As Yan reveals about her shopping requests, desired consumables have tended to include shoes, cosmetics, wrist watches, health supplements, cookies, diapers, milk powder and even smart phones.

There is no space here to elaborate on why increasing incomes and standards of living should so readily be associated with the consumption of foreign, Western consumables. Are these foreign imports necessarily better such that their consumption automatically leads to an unambiguous improvement of Chinese living standards? Is the consumption of foreign

consumables expected to lead to the “good life”? The voracious Chinese appetite for foreign products as a result of rising incomes certainly appears to suggest the latter connection.

The reasons for the Chinese predilection for the Western, in this case, Western consumables, are many. These include the undeniable fact that, historically, the quality of Western commodities has tended to be better. But as the evaluation of quality is not contingent only on supposedly objective criteria but constituted by a subjective dimension, it is reasonable to expect such preferences to derive from and be influenced by the more general phenomena of how the Chinese have tended to view China and themselves vis-à-vis the West. This is an issue that has been already been dealt with extensively throughout this work.

By their nature, preference and predilection are the function of psychology and subjectivity, certainly more so than they can be that of rational and objective considerations. Moreover, it is clear that the psychological and emotional condition of persons - no less, the nature of individual and collective consciousness and subjectivity - owe greatly to the processes of socialization through time. Indeed, it is the recognition of the ability to manipulate popular consciousness that has led to the marketing industries and the mass media emerging as the most influential organs of information and propaganda today: he who controls the state of human consciousness controls human agency; he who controls human agency, in turn, controls the fate of humanity. Similarly, he who controls the narratives of the “good life” determines the direction in which human energies are channeled for the realization of such a life.<sup>36</sup>

Accordingly, if Western civilisation *qua* modernity were, for the historic reasons already noted, touted as representing the apotheosis of human achievement, it is only normal to expect large-scale human commitment to its pursuit. Yan’s clients’ consumer preferences for foreign goods are but one everyday example of such an inclination. The opportunity for a taste of such a supposedly good life had for so long appeared accessible only to the denizens of the West; yet, now, because of three-plus decades of explosive Chinese economic growth it was also attainable in China, available by way of one’s consumer purchases/choices.

This flourishing of Chinese consumerism, reaching as far as the country’s villages by way of purchases from global metropolises like Hong Kong, therefore, offers a mundane example of how modernity and westernization have been able to blithely penetrate China’s interior. In fact, modernisation and westernization are in this case so unselfconsciously being

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<sup>36</sup> The gender bias here is intended on account of the fact that such projects of manipulation and control are largely patriarchal, having historically been hatched and dominated by one side - the male half - of humanity.

perpetuated that one has to be highly sensitized to even be aware of its occurrence. After all, consumption here is apparently an individual matter involving an exchange of money for goods. Presumably, the acquired consumer items derive satisfaction and pleasure for the buyer. But that is barely the problem, for although the act of commodity acquisition could be individual, the effects of their consumption, even if undertaken individually, are not. As Scitovsky (1976) avers, well-being does not derive from material possessions but from social comparisons. Additionally, Veblen (2009[1899]) noted that under a regime of individual ownership - which is the world of post-Mao China – the most ready means of visibly demonstrating success is the ostentatious acquisition and accumulation of goods, which, in turn, breeds envy and invidious comparison, followed by further pecuniary emulation. A case for the creation of such class distinctions can be seen in the consumption of private housing (Zhang 2010), but given that the latter constitutes a significant investment requiring a large capital outlay, it is only reasonable to expect ostentation and class-making to be more commonplace in the consumption of everyday consumables, the very stuff Yan's *daigou* business trades in. Accordingly, facilitated by info-tech-enabled connectivity, it appears that the spread of consumerism into the Chinese countryside is likely to have opened the floodgates to an endless cycle of insatiable psychological wants.

In line with these unfolding processes of modernisation and westernisation, Yan's *daigou* activities also offers a revelation of the nature of China's civilisation-shift (Breman 2010; Visser 2010). Indeed, it is through the mundane, understated everyday activities of individual consumption that we can see the China's historically predominant agrarian civilisation transitioning into an urban one.

## 5.7 Conclusion

This chapter cast its focus on Yan, a member of China's 80s generation, who, likely as a result of spending her entire life in the milieu of the country's market reforms, was well adapted to traditional familial demands as well as the imperatives of the formal economy. As a woman married into the Luo household, there was the expectation according to the Chinese cultural tradition that Yan would fulfill her role by performing her duties at home. By all appearances, she accomplished this in her capacity as mother and homemaker.

Yet, simultaneously, the central feature of the modern economy is such that "time is money", a conundrum in which there is never enough of either, for both are perpetually scarce. It is the institutionalised scarcity of money – leading in turn to the supposed scarcity of time - that gives rise to the perceived need of having to be on the constant lookout for

additional sources of money income. Indeed, the economic pressure looms large always, sparing nobody, not even homemakers like Yan, whose work typically involves the “re-production” of the family in the home, beyond and above the rules of the money-exchange economy. Whereas work performed outside the home was remunerated in the form of a money wage, that which was performed at home was not; the expectation, it seemed, was that homemakers were to survive on the positive responses their labour elicited, responses that were foremost emotional: love, affection, and gratitude. Hence, whereas the money-exchange economy was a political economy of self-interest, the household was expected to operate as a moral economy, of selflessness. Nonetheless, even though the homemaking in which Yan was engaged can be said to constitute such a moral economy whose prime currencies were love, affection, and caring, gifts that had to be dispensed regardless of the state of the money-exchange economy, it did not exist outside the realm of the latter, since material inputs such as food, clothing, rents, to name the most rudimentary, were monetised commodities that had to be purchased. In other words, by virtue of the all-encompassing money-exchange economy, the moral economy of homemaking was not - could not be - de-linked from it.

But homemaking lay “outside” the money-exchange economy only insofar as the homemaker remained unremunerated; in other words, labour at home was not commodified.<sup>37</sup> Because of this, homemaking tended to be discounted and de-valued as “non-work” even as it was indispensable to the viability of the money economy outside the home. This blind-spot in regard to traditional women’s work arises not because housework involves no “work” - quite the contrary! – but because of longstanding cultural and patriarchal biases against it, which have become institutionalised. Because of its indispensability in reproducing daily the conditions necessary for wage labour to return to the marketplace, unremunerated work performed in the home could be seen to constitute a *de facto* subsidy paid by the homemaker to the money-exchange economy. Understood within the frame of a more holistic conception

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<sup>37</sup> This is not to suggest that I consider the commodification of housework desirable. Rather, my point merely seeks to highlight that the commodification that occurs within certain spheres of the modern economy is predicated on the existence of other spheres where such commodification is absent. One such sphere is the household, another would be the natural environment: both are externalised from the economy “proper” and are non-monetised, with the result being a material transfer of value from homemakers and nature to the money-exchange economy without their contributions being accounted for. Hence, the labour of homemakers and the bounty of nature are enjoyed by society as positive externalities, a result of an expropriation of value. In this way, “value” in the money-exchange economy is created out of the “non-value” of production at home and in nature. In this light, it should be clear why the captains of the money-exchange economy would generally prefer to see these sectors remaining uncommodified, for insofar as they remain so, they represent a free transfer of value that is not factored into the costs of production in the money-exchange economy. Of course, those with the ability to somehow establish monopolistic or oligopolistic control in these spheres by their commodification would tend to subscribe to a different view.

of the economy, the non-remuneration of homemaking can be said to amount to an outright expropriation of the value it produces.

Since women constitute the backbone of the household, this institutional bias against homemaking is simultaneously a bias against traditional women's work, depriving it symbolically and materially of due recognition for its contributions to the money-exchange economy and to society at large. It is in the institutional failure to recognise the home as the foundational basis of the economy, and the traditional work of women - its historical guardians – as having value, that our economic system is fundamentally gendered, patriarchal, and sexist. This lack of societal recognition and status, along with the unrelenting pressure imposed by the scarcity of money, would seem to serve as compelling factors for women to seek wage employment outside the home. Indeed, it is probably under such circumstances that Yan's involvement in *daigou* can be understood.

Naturally, this underscores the inherent tension generally existing between housework, performed without pecuniary remuneration at home, and paid work outside it. It foregrounds the institutional bias against "oeconomia", specifically, in its traditional meaning as "household management", in favour of its modern conception which implicates the money-exchange economy and the activities associated with it. It may be said, therefore, that Yan's story brings to our attention two different economies simultaneously existing alongside each other. These two modes of production can be described in turn by the following dichotomies that seem to characterize the nature of contemporary Chinese, if not also other modernist, realities: the formal against the informal, the economy against the family, the modern against tradition. Indeed, although the importance of the family unit to Chinese cultural life has been highlighted in previous chapters, it has become clear that the economism generated by the reforms has inadvertently introduced certain preoccupations that militate against just such an orientation towards family and relationality.

## Chapter 6: Madam Chao and the Homewares Store

### 6.0 Introduction

The previous two chapters have examined, up close, the lives of Wai and Yan, and through their everyday life-practices, cast light on some of the preponderant life concerns and preoccupations of rural-urban migrants to Shenzhen. These individuals pursued various practices or projects as a way of attaining the good life. Hence, while there may have been a trade-off between the present and the future, involving a sacrifice now, the general belief seemed to be that the pay-off in the future would be worth it.

In this chapter, I expand my study to include the stories of another interlocutor, Madam Chao<sup>38</sup>, with whom I had constant interactions during my time in the field. I knew of her as Madam Chao and the title stuck, despite getting to know her reasonably well. As I have done with Wai and Yan, this chapter tells of her story.

We have seen in Chapter 5 Yan grappling with the challenges posed by the pressures of the external money economy on the one hand and the endless but thankless demands of non-pecuniary domestic reproduction on the other. And we observed how she adroitly managed them, balancing her obligations at home while also engaging in *daigou* to generate a cash income outside it. But to what extent is such a conundrum present in the lives of others in Shenzhen? How have they coped with this apparent tension between a gift-based *oeconomia* (household management) on the one hand and the money-based economy on the other? And how has their management of such a conundrum contributed to or hampered their attempts to attain the good life?

In this chapter I will examine if and how such concerns play out in the life of Madam Chao, the proprietor of the neighbourhood homewares store. It is relevant here to mention that despite being employed in different occupations, my interlocutors shared their status as China's internal migrants, people whose ancestral homes (*laojia*) were located somewhere other than Shenzhen, who had arrived in this southern coastal city after it had been designated a Special Economic Zone. In her case, Madam Chao had come to Shenzhen after the city had established a reputation for its burgeoning economy. I believe her migration to the city on economically-motivated grounds rendered her a fitting interlocutor for my inquiry about the Chinese good life, since her move appeared to be instigated by a search for

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<sup>38</sup> Unlike Yan or Wai, who were introduced to me on a first-names basis, I was introduced to Madam Chao by her maiden surname. I added an honorific and have been calling her this way since.

something “better”, a goal that seemed to coincide with the city’s trajectory of moving towards things bigger and better.

### **6.1 Introducing Madam Chao, Proprietor of homewares shop in Xili neighbourhood**

I got to know Madam Chao, whom I referred to as *laoban niang* (老板娘) - or, literally, “female boss” - in the course of being a frequent customer at her shop. She owned a homewares store that was located on the street adjacent to one of the entrances of my apartment complex, and I was almost a daily visitor at her shop to purchase household necessities immediately after moving in. Hers was the only store of its kind in the long row of shophouses. It was captivating because it appeared to overflow with items; hence, the Chinese term, *zawudian* (杂物店) or, “sundries-store”. It stocked and sold all manner of things, including pots, pans, brooms, children’s toys, socks, footwear, blankets, light bulbs, cigarettes, bottled drinks, cutlery, crockery, mosquito coils, floor mats, blankets, buckets, frying pans, and so on. There was also agricultural produce – specifically, corn - for sale at the storefront, something Madam Chao had been doing since around 2010 to augment income.

Because of the myriad things that seemed to pour forth from it, my family and I always found the shop interesting and inviting. Add to that the vivaciousness and jovial nature of Madam Chao and the store became one of the main attractions on the street for us. My daughters would often enter the store and lose themselves in the stuff that filled every square-inch on the shelves and the floor of the store. Perhaps the experience for them was not unlike that of having discovered the apocryphal treasure chest. I would frequently stop by on my way home late in the afternoons, often to pick up something and sometimes, just to exchange greetings with the owner, who would stand around the entrance. This practice created the opportunity for conversation and not long after a few such interactions, we became well-acquainted and on friendly terms with Ms Chao and her husband, enough to regularly stop by to ask for directions or other such advice.

I gradually learned from this the value of small, traditional commercial practices such as Mdm Chao’s neighbourhood store: patronizing her store was not just an economic occasion but a social one as well. The economic occasion in this local context was an opportunity to grease the wheels of sociality and improve relations within the community, howsoever unwitting. This may be contrasted with the impersonal transactions in the modern

day 7-11 or big-chain department store, with employed cashiers who have neither a deep connection to the store nor to the community in which it is located.

Madam Chao and her husband were in their late-thirties to early forties when I met them. The burdens of life seemed to have taken their toll as they were entering middle-age but one could tell that they made a striking couple in their younger days, with her generally chatty and pleasant demeanor and him, tall with hair swept to the back, looking slightly like a Chinese version of the late Elvis Presley. Because she was the more vivacious and talkative of the two, it was she whom I got to know better.

Madam Chao was from Hunan, the neighbouring province to the north of Guangdong from which Mao derived, while her husband came from Guangxi, another adjacent province on Guangdong's north-west. The couple had two sons. When we initially met, the older boy was attending school at her husband's *laojia* and was being cared for by her in-laws, while the younger was in their care and going to school in Shenzhen. But by the time I left the field, the younger son, too, had gone to Guangxi for his secondary school education.

I soon understood the reasons for the children leaving Shenzhen and in the process, separating from their parents, to attend school back home in Guangxi. As they held *hukou* (household registration) in the latter, it was where they were entitled to a free education. In contrast, going to school in Shenzhen without having the city's *hukou* meant that they would have had to pay for schooling. There were other education-related benefits to schooling in Guangxi too: it overcame the institutional discrimination of having to perform better than Shenzhen-*hukou*-registered students for the same university placements in the *gaokao* (university-entrance exams) at the completion of high-school. It was in weighing up these relative costs and benefits in regards to their children's future educational prospects that Madam Chao and her husband decided that their sons should return home, even if this implied prolonged familial separation. It is perhaps important to contrast the situation here with that of Wai and Yan, who are evidently considerably better off, and as such, can have their children and the entire family living under one roof in Shenzhen.

While the separation of parents from their children described here has become commonplace in post-Mao reform China as a result of large-scale rural-to-urban flows of labour migration, I have constantly wondered about the effects such separation has had at the various levels, psychological, familial and societal, especially in a culture that has had a longstanding and deep recognition of the importance of family as the fundamental social unit.

Indeed, the pervasiveness of this phenomenon has already produced a plethora of research on the predicament of left-behind children (*liushou ertong*), much of which has demonstrated its detriment to the children (Murphy, Zhou and Tao 2016; Ye and Lu 2011), to say nothing about the other dysfunctions it engenders at the various levels of family, community, and social life. The phenomenon of left-behind children is indeed a nationwide issue: data from the Sixth National Census report conducted in 2010 report that over 61 million children younger than 17 years were left behind. Of these ‘left-behind’ children, 46.74% had both parents working away, 36.39% had a lone migrant father, and 16.87% had a lone migrant mother. Left-behind children amounted to 37.7% of all rural children and 21.88% of all children in China (figures cited in Murphy, Zhou and Tao 2016).

Was this among the unaccounted costs of economic prosperity? And were my interlocutors themselves considering such questions? Whereas economic success was perhaps measurable in terms of the increased value of one’s assets, were such familial or relational costs quantifiable? Where and how, indeed, would one begin to attempt such an accounting? Was this possibly incalculable/non-quantifiable cost the price to be paid for the pursuit of the ostensible good life in the cities? How did this “good life” materialize for Madam Chao and her husband anyway?

It is typically not difficult to discern what family and children mean to the average Chinese person. One could tell even by looking at Madam Chao’s conduct around children. Whenever my kids and I go to her shop, Madam Chao would invariably offer them a drink, underscoring again the special place that children have in Chinese society. At the same time, this also seemed consistent with my portrayal of Chinese society as being devoted to the goal of cultivating mutuality or relationality or, what could otherwise be called a *shurenshenhue* (熟人社会) - a society based on familiar relations.

Madam Chao was initially hesitant about discussing her life-story, citing her lack of qualifications as a potential impediment: “Oh, there’s nothing to interview me about, with me doing this line of work. I’m afraid that I won’t say it well (*shuodebuhao*). Also, I might say something wrong, something I’m not permitted to say.”

When I asked how long she’d been in Shenzhen, she was evasive, saying that she had been in the city for many years, but it was just that she hadn’t managed to earn enough money. I would subsequently discover that she had been in the city nearly 20 years, coming to Shenzhen in the early 1990s. I thought this to be an opportune moment to explain my

interest to hear personal stories of migration to Shenzhen in the wake of China's reforms and opening-up. It was only when she heard this that Madam Chao seemed to relent.

"Please come in and have a seat."

## 6.2 *Childhood and home in Hunan province*

I learned that Madam Chao was born in 1970 into circumstances of relative and absolute poverty. This was consistent with the previously mentioned fact that the PRC faced a harsh embargo for being on the supposedly wrong side of the Cold War, thereby finding itself lacking in supplies of basic necessities at a time it sought to accomplish national industrialisation.

"Our circumstances were so bad in the countryside we were forced to come out. Of course, this could only happen after the reforms were introduced. The reforms were supposedly instituted in 1978, but I didn't know of them when it happened and only learned about them from the news when I was older. And it was in the 80s that we were allowed to come out (*chulai*). People like us came out because our circumstances at home were harsh (*ku*, denoting bitterness)."

Madam Chao proceeded to describe those circumstances of impoverishment growing up in Changde, Hunan, circumstances that compelled her to seek greener pastures when she grew older. "I didn't have so much of an education, but I remember what it was like when I went to school. Everyday we'd have get up before sunrise, at around 5 a.m., fry some rice (left over from the previous night's dinner) for breakfast, then walk to school, which was about 4 km away. I'd do the same in the evening, walking a total of 8 kilometres a day. Lunch was taken at school. We'd have to bring lunch to school, then warm it up there. We'd fry some dishes and bring it to school; there'd be some rice in school. We'd give the school a certain amount of rice at the start of every week, and they would cook it for us. Those students whose parents had money would pay 20c for white cabbage (*dabaicai*) to be eaten with rice; otherwise, we'd have to bring dried pickled vegetables from home. And the leftovers that were fried in the morning would be had for dinner with the family in the evenings."

She continued, "From this, you should be able to understand what our circumstances at home were like. We were so poor our clothes were patched over and over again."

Madam Chao revealed that her family's trying circumstances prompted her to give up school in order to attempt making a living away from home. "I didn't want to continue with my studies any further since our life circumstances were so tough." Consequently, she left at

15 after completing a year of middle school. A factor contributing to her decision to leave school prematurely included the fact that her family had to pay school fees costing about 40 rmb per term, on top of having to furnish money for basic amenities, such as her school desk and chair. Another factor was her extremely poor performance in the English language, which became compulsory in middle school. Scoring only around 20% for English for the year, it became a tremendous source of personal embarrassment. “The teacher would glare at me, and I couldn’t bear to look at her.” Madam Chao admitted that leaving school was for her a way of escape.

Her family also had to pay taxes to the state, which for most rural households took the form of agricultural produce (*gengliang*), which was calculated based on the number of people in the household. Because the area in which Madam Chao lived was mountainous without much arable land, they did not produce enough crops to fulfill their tax obligations. “We barely produced enough food for ourselves, so we had to pay our taxes in cash instead (*tiliu* 提留).” For her family this involved manually cutting down bamboo, processing them into bamboo products, then selling them off in exchange for cash.

It was evident from her explanation that none of these processes was easy. Bamboo had to be chopped down by hand, carried home on one’s back, then worked upon to be sold for cash at the weekly local market. Taxes were imposed at the rate of roughly 120 rmb per head annually, amounting to some 600 rmb for her family of five, which included two other siblings, her parents, and her paternal grandmother. It was the totality of these factors, not least the weight of such economic burdens, which impelled her to consider leaving home to find work.

### **6.3 *Dreams of employment in the city***

Upon leaving school, Madam Chao spent a year at home helping around with household chores before her mother suggested that she learn a skill. For this reason, she became an apprentice to a seamstress in the village. “My family paid her 100 rmb to take me on as an apprentice and I went to work with her for a whole year, learning the skills necessary for the trade.” Even then, this was no guarantee for paid work. “I was full of confidence at the completion of my apprenticeship but, unfortunately, still failed in my efforts to leave the countryside.” Yet this was not because of a lack of work opportunities but the cultural constraints imposed by rural society at the time.

In fact, not long after she had completed her apprenticeship, Madam Chao had seen on (black-and-white) TV an advertisement placed by the Changsha Trading Cloth Manufacturing Factory (*Changsha Waimao Zhiyi Chang*) calling for applicants with sewing skills.<sup>39</sup> The employment opportunity seemed ideal and Madam Chao made the application, caught the bus to Changsha four hours away, passed the requisite tests and was recruited. But when it boiled down to moving out of home to take up employment in the city, her parents intervened and objected to her going. This was something that Madam Chao conveyed with a sense of regret; it was a sense of disappointment about not having the chance to put her training to full use and to realize her potential.

Because her attempt to work in Changsha never materialized, Madam Chao stayed home to work as a seamstress for roughly a year in the village. Her customers would bring her cloth and ask her to make Western-style clothes (*xizhuang*), such as dresses and trousers, for which she would charge roughly 5 rmb as labour cost (*shougong fei*).

It turned out that leaving home was not so straightforward because of the relatively conservative attitudes prevailing around marriage at the time, particularly in rural society. According to Madam Chao, her parents were afraid that she would get mixed up/involved with the wrong company, which would then would jeopardize her chances of marriage. While this might appear on the surface to be an overreaction, it was in fact a significant rural concern, one whose seriousness could only be understood with respect to the mores and modes of reproduction of rural life.

To begin with, Madam Chao's acquiescence to her parents' wishes on the topic of marriage is consistent with Fei Xiaotong's (1983) observation that it was typical for village boys and girls to give their parents control of their marriage affairs. Furthermore, Fei (1983) also notes that the Chinese patrilineal tradition in rural life meant that a girl could not be retained in her parent's home for too long, for she had no inheritance rights to her parents' property. Accordingly, her future and livelihood could only be safeguarded through marriage. This being the case, it was understandable why Madam Chao's parents reacted as conservatively and cautiously as they did.

Moreover, unlike many whom she knew had successfully relocated to the city, her family did not have relatives already established in the city who could recommend her to an employer. This practice of kin-based referrals as a means to secure urban employment was the standard procedure at the time for those wishing to find work in the cities. It had also

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<sup>39</sup> Changsha was the capital city of Hunan province.

been the means by which Yan as well as Wai's siblings, whom we encountered earlier, were able to make their start in Shenzhen.

Eventually, Madam Chao's conundrum of lacking the necessary contacts was resolved when the county's (*xiancheng*) labour ministry (*laodong ju*) made all the necessary logistical arrangements for her employment, taking Madam Chao and considerably many others out from the province. Madam Chao's first employment stint was in Jiangmen, which like Shenzhen, was also in Guangdong province. The county's labour ministry was responsible for taking care of all aspects of their life and work, including housing and healthcare. And if they had to return home for some reason, the ministry would help make sure they would return safely to the county. As local county-level banks were looking for depositors, employees from the local branches even went to Jiangmen to organize for their wages to be deposited directly into their accounts back home.

But Madam Chao worked in Jiangmen for only about three to four months before returning home. She had worked at a plastic flower factory, doing what she tells me was the unskilled, "ordinary" work (*pugong*) of attaching flowers to stems. She had left the job in part because of the laborious nature of the work and also due to the frequent misunderstandings that occurred between workers from Guangdong and Hunan. These stemmed from vernacular differences, which caused frequent conflicts. "Not everyone from Guangdong understood Putonghua (Mandarin), and while most from Hunan could speak it, it was often not proper, giving rise to frequent misunderstandings and fights between the two groups."

According to Madam Chao, these were conflicts whose participants took sides purely on the grounds of their ethnic and village affiliations. They were, in other words, tribal in nature. Often the actual cause of such conflicts was lost upon those who participated in them. Not that it mattered since self-preservation seemed to be at stake. As Madam Chao pointed out, "We could not allow our people to get bullied; we were outsiders and could not let the locals bully us."

#### **6.4 Early 1990s: Coming to Shenzhen**

It was not long after returning home from Jiangmen that she came to Shenzhen. The year was 1992 and she was able to come to the city after a distant relative, specifically, her uncle's wife, who was by then working in the city, recommended her. She began work at a factory making bags in Nantou, just within the borders of the Special Economic Zone.

As Madam Chao recounts, living conditions were difficult, again deploying the adjective “*ku*” (bitterness) to describe her situation. She had to live in a worker’s dormitory adjacent to the factory and recalls not having adequate running water. Water had to be rationed, with each person receiving only a bucket a day: “Don't you think it was *ku*? One bucket of water and one had to use it for washing clothes as well as washing ourselves. We stayed in a dormitory with 10 of us altogether. The toilet was common and shared by everyone on the floor. But things gradually got better every year.”

There was a factory line (流水线) and, as such, a division of labour that organized the work process. Those who took care of the bag’s zippers managed only zippers. And those who attached straps onto buckles did nothing else. Wages were calculated on the basis of the quantities she produced since there was a per piece wage rate for everything. Hence, the more one produced, the more one got paid. Work started at 0730 hrs every morning and the shift would run for 8 hours.

“The latest we could wake up was 0700 hrs, when we would wash our faces, brush our teeth, and quickly have our breakfast, often while walking to the factory. But there was overtime (*jiaban*) everyday, and the workday effectively ended at 2300 hrs. We worked overtime everyday except for the day we received our wages. So it was extremely hard,” she said rhetorically. “After we finished, we would have to shower and wash our clothes before going to bed.”

“And we had to use our water rations sparingly, making sure to save enough for washing up and brushing our teeth the next morning. We had to bathe with the water we washed our hair in,” she said with a laugh. “What else could we do? (*Mei banfa*) There was not enough water.” It seemed that the demands of the fledgling factories were greater than the city’s planners could deal with initially. “There were thousands of people there. In my four-story tall dormitory alone, there were some 1000 people. Add to that the needs of all the factories around.”

But things began to improve after several months, and some six months later, there was adequate water running into the area with the installation of bigger pipes. According to Madam Chao, such water shortages were likely occurring because the growth of the city was constantly exceeding projections. And accompanying such growth were concomitant increases in the population. “That was quite a remote place with a small population initially. But the number of people kept increasing year after year. It was a relatively poor area compared with other areas. ”

It was evident that the hardships Madam Chao encountered at home were not, if at all, mitigated after her arrival in Shenzhen. At least, it was apparent that she still faced considerable challenges going about the everyday life necessities of life, reproducing her physical existence, to say nothing about the 17-hour days she had to endure in the course of it.

In any case, Madam Chao worked at the factory for a total of nearly two years, which was a stint spread over a period of three or four years as she had left Shenzhen to get married, then bear a child. It is to this subject that we now turn.

### **6.5 Courtship, marriage, family, children**

The question of marriage, the same issue that prevented Madam Chao from initially going to work in Changsha, was an ever-present aspect of her reality. It was not long – a year or two – after she had arrived in Shenzhen to begin work that the issue of finding a compatible partner emerged. As was still a common practice at the time, especially among people from the countryside, Madam Chao had met her husband by way of a friend’s introduction. She explains:

“My husband is from Guangdong province and when we met, he was working at a big hotel in Baoan district, not far from the factory where I worked. I was in the Special Economic Zone whereas he was just outside it. We were introduced through a friend of mine, who casually asked if I had a boyfriend. When I told him that I didn’t, he simply said he would make an introduction, without specifying when. Naturally, I thought he was just joking.”

“Then one day, without warning, he brought along a man to one of our usual gatherings, which on this occasion consisted of over ten of us. It was a mixed group, with some coming from my *laojia* and some from his. In any case, this person turned out to be rather inquisitive, asking me several things about the nature and conditions of my work, whether I had to work overtime, etcetera. Not too differently from the way you’re interviewing me now. I responded to his questions and when the evening came, he went to get us some food and refreshments. At this point I began to wonder to myself: I hardly know this *xiaohuozi* (lad); why is he asking me so many questions? I ate with everyone, and when I was on my way home that night, realised that he could be the person my friend had said he wanted to introduce me.” Indeed, he was. And Madam Chao discovered subsequently that her friend, the matchmaker, was in fact his brother-in-law.

In any case, there was attraction and interest between the newly-introduced couple, and this quickly led to courtship. “I was 25, of marriageable age, and so was he, being just three years older. We soon decided to get married,” Madam Chao recalled. “And since we didn’t have phones at the time like we do today, I wrote a letter home informing my parents of my plan.”

But, alas, there was opposition to the proposed marriage from her parents. And, again, it seemed to be spawned out of fear of the outside. “Unlike today, there was at the time still relatively few marriages taking place between people hailing from different provinces, and since my family thought he came from too far away, they were afraid that I was possibly getting duped. Similarly, on his side, too, his family thought that I could be pulling a fast one on him,” she recounted.

Apparently, since their homes were a considerable distance apart, the fear was that one or the other could just leave after having children. According to Madam Chao, this was still an occasional occurrence even today. It was to avoid such risks altogether that both their families initially disapproved of their marriage. Yet the couple found a way to overcome the objections of her parents. He accompanied her home to Hunan to celebrate the Spring festival (Chinese New Year) that year. It was 1995.

In fact, sensing marriage as an impending inevitability, Madam Chao had resigned from her Shenzhen factory job before returning home for the Spring festival. She elaborates: “I knew the time for me to get married had come. If my now-husband did not agree to return home with me, my parents had arranged a potential suitor at home anyway. We had yet to meet and had only exchanged photos, but I was prepared to see where it would lead. If it didn’t work, I would have had to make other plans. Since it was very possible I would not return to Shenzhen, I quit my factory job.”

But as Madam Chao further explained, “But my now-husband decided to come back home with me so that my family could meet and get to know him. They were still reluctant to let me marry him but since he had accompanied me home, I thought it was only proper that I did. We came back to Shenzhen briefly after the Spring festival and in June or July that year, returned to his home in Guangxi to get married.”

## **6.6 *Returning to Shenzhen, 1997***

It would be in late 1997 before Madam Chao would return to Shenzhen again. She remained at her husband’s for almost two-and-a-half years, falling pregnant not long after their marriage, bearing a son, and nursing him until he was almost 2 years old. At this point

Madam Chao and her husband return to Shenzhen, leaving her son under the care of his grandmother, while they attempted to re-join the work force in the city.

Their efforts, however, were marred by her chronic poor health. Her weak health, which she regards as the consequence of the draining effects of childbearing from which she had yet to recover, impeded her ability to maintain a regular work schedule and forced her into taking frequent and prolonged periods of leave. Eventually, her continuing poor health left them with little choice but to return to Guangxi so that she could convalesce.

When they came back to Shenzhen several months later, it was mid-1998 and they realised that she could no longer sustain the long-hours and intensity of factory work. It was at this point that their economic trajectory takes a different turn.

“Both of us began learning how to do small business and we started hawking on the streets.” She used the term, *baiditan* (摆地摊), which literally means “setting up a stall on the ground.” Such street-vendors are still a common sight/feature across Shenzhen, with their “stalls” constituted by little more than a display of their wares scattered across a groundsheet on a pedestrian sidewalk.

It was in this manner that Madam Chao and her husband got their start in their homewares business, though she was quick to stress that it was not something they planned so much as eventuated by dint of circumstance: “Given my health and my inability to work, it was forced upon us (*jiu shi bei bi de*). We would go to many places to display our wares, transporting everything on our bicycle. We would go buy the goods wholesale then bring it back to re-sell. Slowly we built the business up from there. Initially we didn’t know how much to buy, but it was a case of learning by doing. Every time we earned a bit, we would invest a little more and buy a little more.” Madam Chao deployed the term, *manmangun*, which is to “slowly roll along”, invoking the notion of a snowball effect, a gradual increment of knowledge and capital in the process.

In taking note of the significantly changed business environment of the present, especially the proliferation of online businesses on the internet, Madam Chao remarked that what they did would no longer be possible today: “With the number of online, virtual businesses growing by the day, I feel that we’re on the verge of being eliminated.”

While her statement, which was said with a hint of nostalgia, did seem somewhat inflated, it reflected once again the rapid pace at which Shenzhen, and perhaps the country as a whole, was developing. One needs only to recall that making a phone call home was still an inconvenience around the time Madam Chao and her husband became street vendors. Now,

within a span of seventeen years, she was pondering the economic viability of maintaining her physical homewares stores in the wake of the recent proliferation of online stores. We were living through an age when advanced developments in information technology had established a pervasive techno-culture that made buying and selling on the internet an everyday reality.

Hence, progress was undoubtedly in the air, at both the personal and macro-societal levels. From Madam Chao's personal account, it is conceivable to think that she would be counted among the country's 800 million who have been lifted out of poverty over the past thirty years. Nevertheless, was it not slightly paradoxical that even though she had made significant economic progress, Madam Chao still had to worry about her economic future? And to be sure, she had no expectations of a future lived in the lap of luxury, simply the chance to continue with their business.

### **6.7 *Shenzhen economic development: growth, urbanization, and inflation***

It was evident from their own economic progression, from street-hawking to establishing and sustaining a physical store for over the past decade, that Madam Chao and her husband had made very concrete, notable, and admirable strides in their economic undertakings. By any standard, the longevity of their business signals success that accompanied the city's growth and development. Madam Chao offered an account of how far things had come, not least in our neighbourhood in Xili:

“In 1998, much of this place here was predominantly agricultural. I was somewhat afraid of coming here in the 1990s since it was largely still farmland, with lots of trees, mountains, and few urban landmarks. It was easy to go past one's bus-stop without realizing it. When I rented a home here in 1998, much of it was still farmland. It is only since that they began building these residential neighbourhoods (*xiaoqu*). And it has developed very quickly, with the place changing from one year to the next.”

She was right about the pace of development. I looked out of the shop and within three metres of her its entrance, adjacent to the pedestrian footpath, was a temporary wall that had been erected to conceal ongoing construction work. Behind it, work was being carried out on the *ditie* (地铁), Shenzhen's underground system, which was to pass through the area. The wall had come up just a month before. Five months ago, when I had just moved in, it had not existed and there was a deep, fifteen-metre buffer zone of vegetation that stood between the sidewalk and the main road. All that green-space was gone now. I tried to imagine what

the place would look like when construction was complete, but it was anyone's guess, really. Given the sort of changes I had already seen in my short time in the city, I realised that the landscape which was to eventuate was quite impossible to predict without access to the plans of the city's planners.

Madam Chao recounted these developments of our neighbourhood and of the city of Shenzhen more generally with the sort of vividness only those who have had personal, firsthand experiences could have. Yet because she had such experience of the city's dramatic and rapid changes, with their corresponding effect on property prices, I was curious to know if she had purchased any property, especially the shop-house from which she lived and plied her trade. Her response was quick and emphatic, "We are renting this. Of course, renting it."

Then she elaborated, offering an explanation that likely reflected the typical circumstances of the average rural-to-urban migrant:

"We don't come from families with any background (*meibeijing*). And so, when we got married we had to depend entirely on our efforts to get things done. No one could help us. See, even in our most difficult circumstances, I was sick and still had to support our child. How could we have had the money to buy anything? Of course, we didn't – and we couldn't. Buying a home at the time would still have cost at least a few hundred thousand *yuan*. And, of course, the situation is even more difficult now. With the inflation of prices, it's even less possible to buy."

This was a reasonable, objective, and commonsensical statement about their erstwhile circumstances, a comment that would be all too familiar to those inured to the challenges of modern urban life. Certainly, Madam Chao's comment here forcefully underscores the following question: what is one in the modern world without money? This is a rhetorical question, to be sure, and it is one that recapitulates the harsh and uncompromising lifeworld of today's P.R.C and of global modern capitalism more generally.

Yet, even though such a view of our modern economy is predominant and holds much currency, it is worthwhile noting with reference to our earlier discussion (see Chapter 5) that it is but one particular conceptualisation of the economy and of economic life. It is particularly a latter-day formulation of the economy that subverts its classical meaning of "household management". This economy is one whose sustenance is mediated by the social institutions of exchange, money, and a general division of labour across different sectors of society, not least, of course, the rural-urban divide that Madam Chao and all my other interlocutors have had to grapple with. It is indeed through such institutionalised forms of mediation that the re-production of our everyday economic lives become abstract, where

producers are divorced from the output of their labours, and where one's wherewithal to consume can have little, if anything, to do with one's contribution to production. It is a world in which money and exchange – a catalyst in one instance, and a means to an end in the other – have ultimately become ends in themselves. They have become the *raison d'être* for economic activity. Unsurprisingly, it is in such a money-centred system that their lack of money left Madam Chao and her husband feeling powerless.

If Madam Chao's situation above appears to corroborate Marx's description of proletarian powerlessness under capitalism, it is perhaps because the post-Mao reform and opening-up policy was verily intended to re-vivify the capitalist tendencies that had been rendered dormant during the Maoist-socialist phase of the country's history. As already mentioned, post-Mao China had seen a conspicuous re-introduction of pro-capital and pro-market institutions into society, fundamentally altering social relations in the Chinese polity, and effectively reconstituting society in accordance with the cultural values of capitalism. *Apropos* it is true that being *sans* property in a capitalist system deprives one of power within it, recalling that capital economic system is in the first instance predicated on exclusion on the basis of property. Madam Chao's self-understanding of their situation would appear roughly correct.

### **6.8 Chinese peasants as *petite bourgeoisie***

While one might be inclined to consider Madam Chao and her husband's predicament viz. the lack of property ownership as a vindication of the validity of Marxist analysis in the Chinese case, there is an important caveat to note. While powerlessness in the Marxist analysis results from the proletariat lacking a proprietary relation to the means of production, it is worthwhile observing that the category of "proletariat" did not quite apply to Madam Chao or her husband. They were peasants and not strictly of the working class-category of the Marxian schema. Whereas the latter category refers to that class of "free" labour in the West – otherwise expropriated peasants "freed" from their agricultural landholdings during the incipient phase of Western capitalism - Madam Chao and her husband had not been expropriated. They were not yet "freed" from the means of production, which, to be sure, should be here taken as a blessing. Instead, like many other rural-urban peasant migrants of their ilk who retained small landholdings in the village, they could be said to be members of the *petite bourgeoisie*, a fact further underscored by their being small-business owners in Shenzhen. Power and powerlessness, in other words, are relative conditions.

Hence, for all that can be said about their so-called powerlessness in the city, Madam Chao and her husband were in an economic situation categorically unlike that of Marx's typical proletariat, for their connection to the countryside as peasants has endowed them with small landholdings and a permanent *jia* (home). This was a legacy of Mao's revolutionary land reforms, which now secured their home in the *nongcun* (countryside) as a buffer, a safe haven to which they could retreat if their luck in the city should run out. Although often neglected, it is this symbiosis between the Chinese city and its countryside that is the defining feature of rural-urban migratory relations in China. Indeed, it is arguably this symbiotic relationship between the Chinese rural and urban sectors - with the former serving as a "refuge" for the latter - which has mitigated the often severe conditions of exploitation in the cities, softening their blows. The fact that there is always a recourse in the countryside, a way-out, has meant that rural-urban migrant workers are able to fulfill their desire to augment their cash incomes despite the various hardships their jobs could entail, for such employment stints are often regarded as merely transitory.

It is also the uniqueness of the Chinese rural-to-urban migrant outlined here, viz. his proprietary relationship to land in the countryside, which differentiates him from the typical worker in the West. This difference between the Chinese rural-to-urban peasant-worker and the categorical worker in the West - who emerged historically as an expropriated, landless peasant - should forewarn against the uncritical imposition of Western teleologies of development, Liberal or Marxist, on non-Western contexts in general and China in this case.

As in all efforts to understand socio-cultural phenomena, history and context matter. The typical Chinese migrant worker and the Western worker bear rather contrasting relations to the so-called means of production simply because of the unique historical circumstances surrounding their emergence. In the Chinese case, rural-urban migrant workers are no doubt a consequence of post-Mao China's policies of reform and opening up. Yet it is crucial to note that such pro-market policies of the contemporary era, which opened the floodgates to migratory flows of labour from countryside to city, have been instituted on the back of Maoist legacies, not least Mao's land reform in the wake of national liberation.<sup>40</sup>

Mao's land reforms bequeathed its rural, overwhelmingly majoritarian, population with land and safeguarded their access to the basic fundamentals of economic provisioning.

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<sup>40</sup> This otherwise obvious fact is underscored here because of the prevailing tendency among liberals, within and outside China alike, to re-write history and to depict and discredit the Maoist era as a sorry aberration and Mao as a monster in the league of Hitler, Stalin and other such figures in the pantheon of Western demonology. Although the capitalist-socialist Cold War is behind us, such a reading regrettably appears to be still ensnared within its ideological clutches. See Vukovic (2012).

In short, it was a result of such land reforms that the Chinese rural population was conferred access to, what in Marxist terminology, would be referred to as the means of production. As we know from the works of Thompson (2013), Polanyi (2001), and Dobb (1946), this was a marked contrast to the situation of the majority of the peasant population in the West, who played their revolutionary role in birthing capitalism as the dispossessed victims of largescale land expropriations. It was through such a dispossession of the peasantry that led to the emergence of the worker in the West, Marx's revolutionary agent. Yet, to be sure, he was an agent who had been alienated, an agent with a malformed agency: an agent of history in need of a crutch, one *sans* access to the means of production, to speak again in the Marxist vernacular. It is in light of the different historical circumstances of the Chinese rural-urban migrant viz. Marx's proletariat in the West that we may better understand contemporary trajectories of socio-economic development in both China and the West.

Along such lines, I believe that neglecting the fundamental relationship between the rural and the urban in China leads to a misreading of the Chinese developmental experience. In the current age of neo-liberal market fundamentalism, the invariable tendency has been to credit market liberalisation *tout court* for the success of China's development. This common sense is reflective of the dominant liberal ethos of the age we live in (Wallerstein 1995). It is a product of the four-plus-century long Western dominance of the world-system I have already alluded to. Nonetheless, the imbrication of the rural with the urban - that is, the symbiosis of the rural-urban relationship uncovered here - suggests that this liberal, pro-market explanation is incomplete, if not also misleading.

I would argue that for our purposes there is an even more serious consequence of adhering to such a liberal interpretation, and it is that it results in a myopia that limits our appreciation of the available options for well-being and the good life in China and elsewhere. In other words, it obfuscates the possibilities of human well-being and good life that are on offer to us. Incidentally, it is on this point about the liberal neglect of the role of the countryside that my assessment of Madam Chao's self-understanding turns.

### **6.9 *Subsidising modernisation: rurality, home, women***

I could not help but notice that while Madam Chao had understandably internalised the logic and values of the moneyed urban economy, she had completely neglected the role of the domestic realm, which, in her case, implied the countryside. As already alluded to, such an understanding of economic reproduction which stresses the formal money-exchange economy at the expense of informal reproduction at home (*jia*) marks a deviation from, if not

an outright violation, of the original meaning of “oekonomie”. Significantly, as highlighted in the previous chapter, this leads to a devaluation of the economic activities performed at home. Since this dominant episteme is that through which Madam Chao understands her own predicament, it is unsurprising that she should speak of being unable to obtain help even in their worst of circumstances, recalling that she and her husband they still had to support their child when ill and were unable to work. Of course, she was not taking issue with the absence of “help” per se, but more, with the absence of “monetary” assistance. Money was therefore here like the proverbial elephant in the room: unspoken of but implicitly understood.

Assessing her situation through the values of the money-exchange economy, Madam Chao has, surely even if inadvertently, omitted and hence devalued the role of *jia* (home) in alleviating her difficult circumstances. Yet the fact that *jia* (home), the *domus* and its auxiliary elements, did ameliorate her situation is without doubt. It needs only be recalled that *jia* in the countryside had served as a refuge to which Madam Chao and their husband retreated each time they were without paid work. This occurred for the two years immediately after marriage, which included the period before and after childbirth, and again when, due to poor health, she had to return to convalesce. And this is not to mention the fact that her children had at various times stayed at home, and were in fact now at home again, coming under the care of *nainai* (paternal grandmother).

Despite its unquantified and probably unquantifiable contributions, *jia* in the countryside has served the indispensable function of facilitating domestic reproduction, which has in the process created the requisite conditions to then allow for Madam Chao and her husband to pursue their pecuniary economic activities in the city.

The reproductive activities performed in the “home” as an economic space are therefore similar to what we observed earlier of domestic work traditionally performed by “women” as a function of their sex. This homology is unsurprising given that what is produced at “home” has traditionally been - and still usually occurs - on the backs of women, on the pretext that it is “woman’s work”. It is by way of such a relation that the “home” has symbolically been “gendered” and seen as the “woman’s” sphere of economic production. It is thus unsurprising that the fate of the economic value produced by the homologous categories of “home” and “woman” is the same: it is value that is expropriated but not accounted for. It is through this surreptitious act of expropriation that such work and the value it produces is conceptually rendered “non-work” and “non-value” respectively.

This institutionalised sexism in modern economic relations was already pointed out earlier but it is rehearsed here in light of Madam Chao’s unselfconscious remark. My

reiteration of this point is intended also to facilitate the extension of my analysis of the mechanisms of value expropriation and transfer in the modern urban economy. This extension of my analysis is what follows.

### **6.10 *The rural-urban symbiosis: the “rural” as source of value for the “urban”***

If we are to consider the fact that most rural-to-urban migrants resemble Madam Chao and her husband in terms of their relations to the means of production, with economic portfolios entailing landholdings at home in the village, we might then extend the analysis and analogy to another level, since another conspicuous pattern begins to emerge.

Hence, just as we witness the sexual division of labour between female and male, and the social division of labour between the *domus* (home) and the market, there is also a geographic-sectoral division of labour between the rural and the urban in contemporary Chinese society. Each of these instances pertains to life at different levels of social existence, and in each of them, value is transferred from the former to the latter spheres without either commensurate recognition or compensation. And it is this that engenders the vicious cycle in which conceptual non-recognition justifies non-remuneration, and non-remuneration, in turn, consolidates non-recognition.

Consequently, the contributions of the woman, home, and the rural subsistence economy as social categories are epistemically unacknowledged within modern conceptions of the economy. A prime example of this is the GDP index, the supposed measure of a nation’s annual economic production of goods and services. While GDP measures the monetary value of all goods and services produced in the money-exchange economy, it neglects all subsistence and, hence, non-monetary based production, such as that occurring in the above named domains (Waring 2004). Because these activities occur outside the money-exchange economy, they are not counted as “production” and effectively considered by the system to be of “zero” value. Because this conceptual blind-spot renders these entities invisible, the value they produce is simply expropriated by the system without acknowledgement. What this effectively amounts to, then, is a subsidy paid by the traditional and informal reproductive economies of both the gendered household and the rural sector to the systemic formal money-exchange economy. In other words, it is the largely uncommodified re-production occurring within the gendered household as well as the countryside that passes unacknowledged. Yet such re-production is indispensable since it undergirds and sustains the informal domestic economy, only after which is the functioning of the commodified, formal money- exchange economy possible.

From this it becomes apparent that to the categories of “woman” and “home”, we may now add the “rural sector” as another sphere that the modern economic system denies symbolic and material recognition.

Accordingly, seen in terms of the rural-urban divide and the fact that China’s population has been predominantly agrarian until very recently – with the roughly 700 million today living in Chinese cities and towns more than tripling the nearly 200 million in 1980 (Chan 2014), it seems only reasonable to infer that the rural sector has made historically substantial contributions, thereby allowing Chinese urban development to occur on the cheap. In fact, it can conceivably be argued that such an extractive transfer of value from the rural to the urban has more generally been the *sin qua non* of Chinese economic development, if it has not been verily decisive in bringing about what has been celebrated as the “Chinese Miracle.” This has been affirmed by Chan (2013: 1), who argues, “The total stock of rural migrant labour, estimated at around 155 million in 2010 (Cai et. al. 2011: 18), has been the backbone of China’s export industry since the mid-1990s. In export centres such as Shenzhen and Dongguan, migrant labor accounted for the great majority (70-80%) of the labour force in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

As we have seen in Madam Chao’s case, the *laojia* in the countryside has served inadvertently as an economic safeguard, a bastion of guaranteed economic provisioning for rural migrants as they faced various sorts of hardships and uncertainties in the city. It was very likely the rural migrant’s awareness of the existence of a refuge at home in the countryside that made their often harsh exploitation in the city more bearable, knowing that it was all but temporary. For example, we can see that for Madam Chao, it was the indefeasible right to home in the countryside that enabled her to resign from her first factory job in Jiangmen after just a few months. Similarly, when her poor health after childbirth hindered her from continuing with paid employment in Shenzhen, she was afforded the choice of leaving the high-cost environs of the city to convalesce at her husband’s home in rural Guangxi.

These are but individual instances of the sort of dynamics that characterize rural-urban migration in today’s China. There is movement from the countryside to the city to earn cash, but when such opportunities dry up or when employment conditions become unpropitious, the existence of home in the countryside allows for the possibility of movement back in the opposite direction. Seen in a macro-structural and institutional context, then, the countryside thus serves as a buffer against the various potential crises that constantly loom large in the urban money-exchange economy. The nature of such crises could be individual,

as exemplified by Madam Chao's experience, or structural, as demonstrated by the 2008-09 Wall Street-instigated global financial crisis, which abruptly put more than 20 million manufacturing workers out of work (Chan 2010). There was also a similar large-scale displacement of workers a decade before in the wake of the so-called Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. In these latter instances of structural macroeconomic crises, the countryside was able to absorb the millions of retrenched migrant workers from the urban centres, thereby stabilising both the Chinese economy and society.

Therefore, although it is officially unacknowledged, and certainly absent from mainstream explanations of Chinese development, the Chinese countryside has historically performed the *de facto* institutional economic function of mitigating the worst effects of large-scale economic and social crises modern China has faced, offering displaced migrant workers a place of refuge, at least until the particular crisis in question has passed.

In this manner, the rural can be seen to be indispensable to the workings of the urban in modern China's historic development: it is a site of low-cost economic reproduction that affords rural residents the option of moving to the city to increase their cash incomes, and returning when conditions become unfavourable. It is precisely this indispensable yet monetarily unquantifiable function of the countryside (*nongcun*) that Madam Chao seemed to have neglected in her comment lamenting the absence of financial help.

In short, one could say that it is the reproductive functions performed by the countryside that make urban economic developments in China possible. Moreover, like traditional woman's work in the home, these contributions are typically unquantified and still largely uncommodified.

We can therefore see that although the term "economy" seems to invoke the "formal", money-exchange economy to the neglect of "informal" (re)production in the home, the relationship between the formal and the informal, urban and rural, waged and unwaged, is in fact co-existent and symbiotic. Although conceptually discrete these spheres are in practice enmeshed within each other. Insofar as actual (material) economic provisioning is concerned, the urban is inextricably imbricated with the rural, and vice versa, despite the attempts to conceptually demarcate them. Indeed, as the above has attempted to highlight, it is non-monetised or partially-monetised rural reproductive activities that subsidise the monetised urban economy of commodity production.

Naturally, this revelation about the historical symbiosis between the rural and the urban, particularly the under-acknowledged notion that the countryside could shelter the rural migrant from the angst and anxieties of urban life inevitably casts a different light on

questions about the good life and well-being in China and elsewhere. But this is a point to which we will return at the chapter's end. For now, we resume our conversation with Madam Chao about the challenges she has had to confront working and living in Shenzhen.

### **6.10 On property, work, and wealth**

If we recall, Madam Chao had made a comment about her supposed condition of helplessness before I interjected. She lamented that nobody had been able to help – financially - when she was ill and unable to work; it was a most difficult period. I had taken exception to her uncritical adherence to mainstream urban values, the unmistakable logic of the market *despite* her personal experience of an alternative mode of being. In this case, it appears true that our categories of knowledge order and make meaningful our experiences, allowing us to see only what we know. While it is true that she had grown up in indigent circumstances, she also had the experience of the countryside as a place of refuge when she was needy, not least when she was ill. Hence, against widespread perceptions of the countryside as a site of hopeless backwardness – “as the urban’s devalorised Other” (Yan 2008:viii), my point was simply to set the record straight on it, to point out the invaluable contributions it has made and continues to make to the celebrated development of urban China and of the country as a whole.

Madam Chao’s lament was an oblique response to my query of whether she had bought or rented her shop-house. In a sense, Madam Chao’s unwitting point about money is on the mark as a critique of the life-world that post-Mao China has become. It is now a world exclusively mobilized by the wheels of money and finance, without which one is rendered property-less and somewhat helpless. Yet it is worthwhile observing that in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> C, this is not just the world of the Chinese but of much of the globe. Modernity has been globalised, rendering this relationship between money and property an indelible fact of life. It is what one might call “global modernity” (Dirlík 2003). Returning to our conversation regarding wealth and property acquisition in Shenzhen, Madam Chao elaborates:

“Those who can afford to pay the deposit on the property purchase will of course buy; they’ll borrow the rest from the bank. It is said that the poor deposit their money in the bank but the rich use the deposits of the poor to invest in homes. Isn’t it like this? In general, those who are able to buy homes are people with some kind of background (*you bei jing de ren*). Those without the requisite background simply don’t have that possibility. If you have no

background, and are just relying on an ordinary job (*da pugong*) and on *sigongzi* (literally, “dead wages”), you won’t be able to afford it.”

“You see, the severity of the present anti-corruption campaign has shown that many of those who have resorted to improperly acquiring money are able to buy property. [She was speaking of President Xi Jinping’s anti-graft campaign, which he initiated upon coming to power.] Those who’ve held official and government positions have had the means to acquire more and more property. And they’re also able to buy property at prices much lower than the average person. Besides, the money is not something they earned but that came to them in the form of great profits. Where does the average citizen stand a chance?”

At this point a customer comes into the shop asking if Madam Chao sold any children’s toys. He picks up a rattle, shakes it, and asks for the price. 4rmb came the reply, to which the customer offered 3rmb.

This was a poignant moment, since it highlighted the very predicament Madam Chao was just describing. It underscores the contrasting economies co-existing simultaneously in China today. It was a scene rich with irony. Here was potential revenue of 4 yuan from selling a child’s rattle, but even such a measly sum was not exempt from being haggled over. I wondered how much Madam Chao stood to earn from its sale. How many such items would she need to sell to raise the few millions required to purchase a home in Shenzhen today? The unfolding scene brought home her point about one’s economic background, offering a striking contrast between the wages of labour, including revenues of small business like hers, and the profits of the speculative FIRE (finance, insurance and real estate) industries, which I have observed to be a growing and an increasingly important feature of the Chinese economic landscape. Indeed, the scene speaks to the circumstances of the unfolding economic transition Shenzhen (*zhuanxing*) was already in the midst of, with its move up the economic-value chain, shifting from a real economy of physical production to one increasingly focused on hi-tech and services, not dissimilar to the economic structure found in the most advanced economies of the West.

These two economies, one of Shenzhen’s recent past and present, and the one to which is transitioning, could alternatively be termed “industrial” and “post-industrial” respectively. The contrast between them may be put as follows: whereas in the industrial economy, value is accumulated in small increments involving the production, movement, and exchange of actual physical products; in the post-industrial economy, value is by and large divorced from physical production per se and tending to emerge from the transaction - the mere act of exchange - itself. In other words, monetary value is created and expanded in ever

greater layers of mediation; the greater the number of transactions, the greater the “value” produced. Moreover, in the postindustrial economy, time was literally money – there was no time to waste – and value multiplied exponentially in the act of exchange itself. The possibility of the global financial markets creating or losing billions within hours, even minutes, of the trading of intangible financial “derivatives” or “futures” duly exemplifies the nature of value-creation and destruction in the postindustrial economy. Clearly, such high monetary-value multiplying activity is a world apart from the economic world in which Madame Chao operates, with the latter involving not just tangible goods but, as we have just witnessed, revenues often not exceeding 10 *yuan* (approximately US\$1.5).

But the fact that such value-inflating activities are a world apart from Madam Chao’s does not mean that they are separate, nor does it mean that she is immune from them. As we have seen in Chapter 5, there exists a very real relationship between *oeconomia*, the non-monetised realm of the household, with the monetized domain of the formal economy. Even though those partaking of domestic reproduction may not be of the monetised world, they are inevitably ensnared in it. Hence, although Yan’s labours in domestic reproduction are unremunerated in monetary terms, the material inputs needed for such reproduction e.g. shelter and food, particularly in the urban milieu of Shenzhen, can typically only be attained via purchase with money. The unwritten law of the modern money-exchange economy seems to be thus: from those who give, more will be taken. Such seems to be the expropriative, exploitative, and predatory nature of the modern economic system, and it seemed non-negotiable.

Similarly, an analogous relationship exists here between the high-value sectors of the postindustrial economy and the low-value industrial economy of which Madam Chao is a part. While the revenue that trickles in with every item sold from her business is typically counted in ones and tens of *yuan* at a time, as witnessed above, she has, for as long as she chooses to remain in Shenzhen, inevitably to deal with the inflation of the Shenzhen real-estate market arising from the speculative excesses of the emerging postindustrial economy. The nature of such property inflation, involves not increases in tens or hundreds of *yuan* (dollars) but in multiples, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 4 with the case of rental costs at Wai’s fashion market. Madam Chao was right: the average citizen relying on an average job (*dapugong*) for a “dead” wage – *sigongzi* – hardly stood a chance to acquire property in Shenzhen today.

Given that we were on the subject, I took the opportunity to inquire about the rent Madam Chao had to pay. Renting the premises cost her just over 3000 *yuan* monthly, which

she seemed to regard as reasonable and that she attributed to having been a tenant for roughly ten years, since 2004. Nevertheless, Madam Chao spoke about the fact that it had been going up every year. As the following reveals, she is well aware of inflation, the incessant increase in the general level of prices:

“Previously, one’s monthly wages was 400-500 yuan. Now if you don’t pay 300 yuan a day, basically nobody would do the work. And even at 300 yuan a day, the worker can have two meals, a couple of drinks, pay for transport and he won’t have much left. Things are getting more expensive by the day.”

Additionally, Madam Chao also compared the present situation with the past, offering insights that by and large corroborate my proposition above about the simultaneous processes of marketisation, commodification and the general intrusion of money into all areas of the social provisioning process. She notes:

“In the 1970s it was very difficult to earn any money at all, even 20 cents. There wasn’t much work to do that could earn you money; many economic activities were regulated. Now, as long as you’re willing to work, you can find money even though it may not be much... Aye, it’s all the same: we used to earn much less, but the costs of things were much lower and we could purchase quite a bit with what little we earned. In the past a simple meal at the canteen would cost around 30 cents; these days that simple meal costs between 15 and 18 yuan.”

Then she added: “In the past one didn’t necessarily have to go to work and could still eat: one simply had to grow some food at home (in the countryside). Now, especially in the city, if you don’t work, you don’t eat. Many people don’t have land today so if you don’t work, you really don’t eat. And you can’t buy any land in the city. So, the pressure is great.”

The above passages reveal that Madam Chao appears to have seen through the money illusion; that is, that money per se does not constitute “real” wealth in the sense that the more money there is in the system, the higher the prices will be with no net benefit in more goods and services. Correspondingly, she also seemed to have come to an appreciation of the countryside, especially as a site that provided a means of subsistence outside the realm of the money economy. Although her under appreciation of the countryside was something I had earlier taken her to task for, her comments here implicitly suggest that she was actually aware of the life possibilities it could offer. Could this have been the result of our conversations, which compelled her to compare her life experience in the city vis-a-vis the countryside? At any rate, her seemingly newfound appreciation of the countryside can be observed in the following piece of advice:

“I think if you still have land in the countryside, you should not sell it. If you sell it, you have money but that tends to be used up quickly. There are lots of people who have sold their lands, and not having seen so much money before (hundreds of thousand yuan), they’d spend it quickly. Some of these men have left their wives for younger women, some have gambled it away. Some have left their families just because they’ve gotten rich suddenly. There’re many such cases in China today. But if you keep land in the countryside, you’ll always have a root (根 *gen*) there. It’s a place you can always return to.”

### **6.11 Conclusion**

This chapter tells the story of Madam Chao, the owner of the neighbourhood homewares store. Concurrently, the chapter also tells of some of the more prominent macro-social historical developments taking place in Shenzhen, which forms the background against which Madam Chao’s life plays out after her migration to the city.

Like my other interlocutors, Madam Chao had left her home in rural Hunan to Shenzhen for economic reasons. In her case she had hoped to discover greener economic pastures in the city to escape the grinding poverty at home. Nonetheless, her early days in Shenzhen were harsh. Her life in the city began in a factory where she worked an average of 17 hours a day. Nevertheless, it was in Shenzhen where she met her husband-to-be. They returned to his home in Guangxi to get married and, after staying approximately a total of two years during which she also bore a son, returned to Shenzhen to resume their search for an improved economic future.

Given their humble beginnings as factory workers, Madam Chao and her husband would rightfully be considered successful. Not only had saved enough to leave factory work and become small business owners, they had, at the time of my meeting them, sustained their business for nearly 15 years. It was success by most, if not all, measures. Certainly, Madam Chao would likely have counted among the 800 million who have been reported to have been lifted out of poverty in the 30 years since the reforms began.

Such relative and absolute success notwithstanding, it remains questionable if Madam Chao and her husband can be said to have achieved the good life. They certainly do not see it that way. Moreover, technological developments and rising costs in the city have prompted her to wonder about the viability of their business. As alluded to previously (Chapter 4) and affirmed in this Chapter, the unrelenting processes of modernisation, development, and urbanization of Shenzhen have led to rising property prices that not only put the acquisition

of real estate beyond their reach but placed considerable pressure on the general level of prices to rise.

Relevant to this point, the chapter draws particular attention to the fact that Madam Chao operates a business very much rooted in the physical production economy, involving the trade of low-value commodities and, as such, income streams that trickle in, several *yuan* at a time. The nature of their business in low-value physical commodities may be contrasted against the high-value postindustrial economy to which Shenzhen is in the midst of transitioning, an observation already made in previous chapters. This contrast is instructive in helping us understand the nature of the challenges faced by those, like Madam Chao, dealing in the trade of low-value physical goods in an economic climate increasingly geared towards hi-tech and FIRE services. To put it differently, the contrast can be seen as one between the industrial and the post-industrial economies, which allows us to understand what happens in the course of continuous development and modernisation, not least to sectors of the economy that these processes have putatively surpassed.

As the hi-tech, high-value sectors of the post-industrial economy tend towards the exponential expansion of monetary value, they exert a significant inflationary effect on input costs throughout the economy, not least on rents, whose level determine whether those like Madam Chao are able to continue operating their small businesses. Consequently, in the face of such inflationary pressures, Madam Chao can only hope to sustain her business by continuing to be able to afford the rent. It is only natural that such unrelenting economic challenges should underscore the questions: What is one without money? What can one do without money?

Even if they have sometimes been left unsaid, these have been the enduring questions that have echoed throughout conversations I have had with each of my interlocutors. What one can do without money is indeed a very real problem under the conditions of modernity. It is an existential problem, to say nothing about loftier ideas about having a good life.

It could perhaps seem paradoxical but the economic successes of both Madam Chao and Shenzhen, respectively, have brought about the ever-increasing need for more success. In other words, an increase in monetary wealth has only spawned the need for yet more money. There is undoubtedly a sense that the appearance of progress based upon monetary increase is but an illusion.

At any rate, it is the paradoxical nature of such ostensibly continuous advancement, such unceasing progress, which has planted the seeds of doubt in Madam Chao about the sustainability of their business in the city. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that their success

has been purchased at considerably high personal and familial costs. Just like millions of other rural-migrants in the city, Madam Chao and her husband have pursued their business operations in Shenzhen while living apart from their two sons, who are now going to school at home in Guangxi. This parental-child separation was a fate Wai and Yan, featured in the previous two chapters, could escape because of their relatively better economic standing, but it was a separation borne by the majority of my interlocutors whose stories I was unable to include here. At any rate, such familial separation can reasonably be said to constitute a significant yet unscalable cost of the post-Mao Chinese modernisation project, not least in a culture whose Confucian tradition gives primacy to the cultivation of thick relations believed to constitute one's life force, beginning with family. Clearly traditional Chinese ideas and practices of kinship have had to give way to the modern priority of economic growth. Perhaps one salvaging aspect to such childcare arrangements lies in the fact that their sons are being cared for by *nainai*, their paternal grandmother, in the countryside, thereby maintaining the possibility of familial and inter-generational enculturation.

The chapter also took issue with the conditions of domestic reproduction that allow rural migrant parents to pursue economic accumulation in the cities while their children are cared for by grandparents in the countryside. While we have just referred to the separation between parents and children as one of the unaccountable costs inflicted by post-Mao Chinese modernisation, there are yet more unacknowledged costs. Notably, Madam Chao's economic pursuits in Shenzhen are possible only because "home" and "grandparents" in the countryside are available to serve as the site and labour of the children's reproduction. Another reasonable way of interpreting this phenomenon, in other words, is to cast such unaccounted cost, borne by grandparents in performing unremunerated work, as a subsidy to Chinese modernisation. In these and other ways, I have argued that rural China and those who populate it constitute a non-moneyed informal economy that has effectively produced value which is expropriated by the modern, moneyed and formal economy.

Indeed, the perspicacious reader will see that this phenomenon is not too different from that previously encountered in Chapter 5 in the discussion of women's reproductive work at home. In short, the pattern observed to have emerged from these chapters is one in which the modern, urban, moneyed, commoditised and formal, extract from the non-modern, rural, non-moneyed, uncommoditised and informal, without acknowledgement of the latter's contribution. It is an expropriation, to be sure. Insofar as women are typically associated with the work performed in the latter sectors, such an exploitative system as that spawning capitalist modernity can reasonably be described as patriarchal.

With our discussion of the various conditions militating against the attainment of the good life in the city, the chapter ends with Madam Chao revealing her insight about the illusory nature of money, while seeming to come to a renewed appreciation of the life possibilities the countryside can offer.

## Chapter 7 Shenzhen's Centre and Margins

### 7.0 Introduction

The previous three chapters have dealt with ethnographic materials obtained close to home. These materials were primarily collected around my Xili neighbourhood from interactions with neighbours in the course of my settling into life in Shenzhen. Owing to the everyday circumstances from which such information emerged, they have illuminated various aspects of quotidian life and, in the process, alluded to what makes the good life for the average Chinese today.

Having settled into life in the city, I began to wander further afield, first out of Xili *zhen* (market town), then eventually, even of Nanshan *qu* (district). This manner of proceeding with research - first, beginning close to home, then, expanding further afield - is revealing of the nature of ethnography and offers methodological insight. With ethnography requiring the immersion of the researcher in the field, it becomes evident that knowing is as much corporeal as it is an intellectual process. Moreover, one's embodiment in the life-world implies that knowledge-making is a contingency, necessarily dependent on one's physical reproduction first before one may proceed with knowing. Hence, contra Descartes' syllogism, "I think, therefore I am", which postulates that the act of thinking provides the surety of one's existence, the knower's embodiment required by the ethnographic method highlights that the case is rather the opposite: "*I am* therefore I know"; my physical existence has to be reproduced before I am in the condition to know.

This chapter describes that experience of spatially expanding further afield in my ethnographic research. It thus changes the emphasis of the previous three chapters by moving from the "subjectivity" of my interlocutors, notably their feelings and life-stories, to the "objective" material structures of the city's urban landscape. It also marks a change of scale involving a shift in research focus, where I move from the "micro" to "macro" dimensions of our reality, from the "interiority" of the human person to the "exteriority" of the physical environment. This movement necessitated the widening of my geographical explorations in Shenzhen, compelling me to go beyond the spatial boundaries of my neighbourhood to apprehend Shenzhen more generally.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Again, methodologically, this was a sequential process, possible only after I had been able to put down roots and settle in.

Of course, neither of these spheres - the micro or macro; subject or object; interior or exterior - is mutually exclusive since the person is inevitably embedded within a larger environment where one is always mutually affecting the other, and vice versa. Hence, neither of these is an autonomous or discrete domain; instead, the object is inextricable from the subject, the macro is embedded within the micro, and the interior is imbricated with the exterior. Consequently, one still hears in my supposedly objective urban, macro-level ethnography the subjective micro-level voices of various interlocutors. Of course, the chapter will also offer glimpses of our intersubjective interactions.

But this chapter is in the main about the larger, physical Shenzhen urban environment, particularly its aesthetics and what they convey about Chinese popular consciousness about the supposed good life. It begins with the premise that the urban environment is not an autonomous realm but an institutional manifestation of certain cultural and political priorities that convey ideas about the good life in China today. In this regard, it re-visits, builds upon, and complements the ethnographic information about Shenzhen's urban milieu that was presented at the opening of Chapter 3. It would be reasonable to expect a more comprehensive account of Shenzhen's urban milieu here, for I have sought to probe beneath the layer of surface appearances and initial impressions to better understand the historical process of Shenzhen's urban development.

This chapter thus begins with my discovery of an aspect of Shenzhen that I was unaware of and as such, did not know I was missing because it lay beyond official and popular accounts of the city. To be sure, it is an aspect of the city omitted from official accounts. Since I had arrived in Shenzhen with second-hand information about it as China's largest and most successful Special Economic Zone (SEZ), I had come with the expectation to see impressive glass-and-steel skyscrapers and modern apartment buildings. And, of course, I did. *Seek and ye shall find*, but here also lies the danger of *a priori* knowledge, especially that which emanates from official media sources. Even as we are able to corroborate what is already known with each affirming instance, we remain in the dark about what we don't yet know.

Accordingly, I submit that the foremost aim of the ethnographic project is not so much to corroborate what is known as it is to *discover* and *learn*. It is significant to note that discovery here entails no presupposition of *a priori* knowledge; the point is simply to find out what we don't know. Again, this underscores the case for ethnography as a mode of knowing that proceeds from the *immediacy* of *in-situ* discoveries. In other words, the demand that ethnography places on the knower to be around, literally, present to witness events,

ameliorates the problem of distortion and wholesale omission that comes with second-hand, *mediated* forms of information. Since there is the tendency for *a priori*, established categories of knowledge to become so entrenched they prevent us from seeing emerging realities, ethnography could be a salve. It has the potential to keep us on our toes, attendant to the flux of ever changing realities. In this way, ethnography's goal is epistemic, concerned with yielding better, more truthful, knowledge.

This Chapter consists of four main sections featuring several ethnographic vignettes followed by their analysis. It opens with an account of my inadvertent discovery of uneven development in the city. I felt that my discovery of such urban "unevenness" was telling given that it was made without me leaving the boundaries of Nanshan, my residential district. I had stumbled upon the city's unspoken-of (unspeakable?) "margins", thus offering disclosure of the city's unevenness. Despite Shenzhen's seemingly ubiquitous ultra-modern built-environment, which is the first impression one gets on arriving in the city (see Chapter 3), it was gradually becoming apparent that the city was not everywhere the same. These differences are what give rise to the city's unevenness, a rift between what I am calling its "centre" and "margins". I was to find out that the so-called margins I had chanced upon were known as *chengzhongcun* - urban villages – which presented a stark aesthetic and phenomenological contrast to popular representations of the city.

But exactly what are these differences that distinguish Shenzhen's centre from its margins? What separates the Shenzhen of popular imagination and understanding from that I was discovering on the ground? The topic is therefore taken up in section 7.2. My stumbling upon Shenzhen's largest urban village, Baishizhou, prompted many subsequent return visits, rendering it my primary fieldsite towards the latter stages of my research. This included a two week-long stay at one of the many relatively cheap guesthouses to be found. I draw upon these experiences to offer a phenomenological description of the urban village, and to compare it with what is more popularly known and celebrated about the city.

My account of the urban village also instigated further efforts to seek out other such sites across the city. It turns out that urban villages litter the Shenzhen urban landscape, even as many of them are slated for demolition today on the pretext of "urban renewal". At least it should be acknowledged that they are no less pervasive than the skyscrapers for which the city is known. As a matter of fact, if history should matter, it can be pointed out that the urban villages were there before Shenzhen's skyline of hypermodern architecture appeared, giving it a rightful claim to historical precedence, even indigeneity. In other words, the urban village can reasonably lay claim to being first-born.

In a culture where time is of utmost value, one would think that this attribute of indigeneity would mean something. Yet Shenzhen's urban villages are conspicuously absent from popular representations of the city, much less from official historiography. Hence, the typical media exaltation of its hypermodern skyline on the one hand, but silence about its urban villages on the other. To the extent that this has overwhelmingly been how Shenzhen has been re-presented, it is the prevailing commonsense that the city is *symbolised* by its postmodern architecture - and that postmodern architecture is the symbol of Shenzhen. Indeed, as seen in Chapter 2, the city's historical status as the vanguard of post-Mao reforms meant that it was typically regarded as a symbol of the Chinese future.

But it still needs to be asked why the celebrated symbols of the city carry such valences. Whose valences are they? Who gets the right to represent the city? Whose representations should carry more weight and prevail to shape popular consciousness?

In this chapter I ask why the centre is symbolically elevated at the expense of the periphery. At stake is the central question of what makes the supposed good life. But because what is implicated occurs with regards to Shenzhen urban policy-making, the question of good life is here posed and answered at the institutional level, among those who envision, plan, then execute those plans in regard to the city's development. The Chinese imagination of the good life is here disclosed by the ambitions and priorities of officialdom – government leaders, policy-makers, urban planners, and the like. In other words, it is that variant of the good life as seen from the perspective of the country's political-economic and cultural elites. This, unsurprisingly, is the social strata at which decisions about the country's future are made.

In the process of analyzing Shenzhen's urban village phenomenon, I cast light on the nature of the city's and of China's urban development more generally. Significantly, I show that the city's centre and margin exist not just at the level of symbolic representation, but also as a material reality. I bring to the fore the political economic interests that govern the interactions between the city's "vaunted" centre with its "neglected" periphery. To be sure, these are political economic relations that confer different meanings to different spaces, eventuating in an asymmetric structuring and production of space whereby certain zones are reified, deemed symbolically and materially more valuable, whereas others are dismissed and considered worthy for demolition (*chai*). These spaces of contrasting value are what I have designated as the city's "centre" and "periphery" respectively.

In my ethnography I discover how the centre and margin of the city are coeval in material terms; and what is more, learn of how the periphery might well be the *sin qua non*

for the centre. Such an analysis is a response to Massey's (2005: 10) admonishment to understand space as an ongoing product of interactions.

One of the key observations in this chapter is that the urban centre's historical dependence on the urban periphery for its own material value. This is to suggest that the Shenzhen of note –its “centre”, as configured by those celebrated aspects of the city - owes much to those aspects that have been consciously downplayed. In a material and functional sense, Shenzhen's hypermodern urban milieu is inextricably connected to the urban periphery that the city's authorities and planners hope to demolish.

Since the good life as signified by Shenzhen's ultra-modern urban aesthetic is undergirded by the supposedly not-so-good, symbolised by its urban villages, we are compelled to revisit questions about institutional and official Chinese conceptions of the good life, and to re-evaluate them. Because official positions wield tremendous influence on popular opinion, the good life aspirations of the dominant classes tend to become those of society at large. In other words, the ruling ideas tend to be the ideas of the ruling classes.

## **7.1 Discovering Heterogeneity in Shenzhen**

### *Vignette I: The Global-Centre and the Local-Margins in Nanshan*

I have been on this impressive and grand boulevard, *Shennan Dadao*, (深南大道) in Nanshan district, before. Multiple times, in fact, and by various modes of transport, public and private; motorized, mechanical, and corporeal: by bus, car, bike, and on foot. It is impressive because like so much about the planned urban-landscape in China, it evokes a sense of spacious grandeur, with some five or six lanes of traffic running one way, a median strip of dense plant-life in the middle, and another five lanes of vehicular traffic running in the opposite direction. The greenery populating the median strip between the two roads is so lush one cannot see beyond it, effectively obscuring the road on the other side. Then there are the expansive (perhaps twelve-feet-wide), tree-lined, pedestrian footpaths running alongside the road, which for me pleasantly evoke memories of the *Champs Elysees*.

The evocation of Paris is no coincidence, for when one gets near the metro-station of *Window of the World*, perhaps the most prominent of Shenzhen's several theme-parks and a well-known tourist-spot, one cannot help but catch sight of a miniaturized replica of the Eiffel Tower piercing the Shenzhen skyline. A short fifty-metres away, this Parisian landmark is complemented by a row of classically European-looking buildings. European landmarks in Shenzhen notwithstanding, *Shennan Dadao* is also impressive not least because

across the road from the mini-Eiffel is the five-star hotel, the Westin, and immediately adjacent to it is the ultra modern building that is the *Yitian Shopping Mall*, which signals the promise of four-stories of ostentatious luxury-goods consumption.

On one of the giant advertising billboards that graces the exterior of the mall and looks out onto *Shennan Dadao* is the visage of the celebrated American actor, Nicholas Cage, who has lent his face to marketing designer watches; while on another, the aging but perennially suave Hong Kong actor, Chow Yuen Fatt, is looking sartorially immaculate in a maroon Hugo Boss suit. I have also seen Scottish tennis star Andy Murray peering out onto the boulevard from the same spot: if my memory serves me correctly, he, too, was hawking timepieces.

Celebrity entertainment, professional sport, and luxury consumption appear to be the signature modes of leisure in our times – not just in Shenzhen but also globally, making for a heady transnational cocktail of fetishistic distraction that seems to effectively drown out our day-to-day sorrows, 24/7, whether we are in Bern or Bangkok, L.A. or Bombay, Paris or Prague, Sydney or Shenzhen. With the preponderance of this admixture of intoxicants that appears global in both character and scope, one certainly cannot help but to think that these pursuits could hold the key to the good life. The implicit yet unmistakable message seemed to be: Consume, Be Happy, and Be Silent.<sup>42</sup> And the silence is deafening.

It could be because of their considerable potential in offering up the “good life” that these conspicuous physical and symbolic elements in the Shenzhen landscape combine to convey a certain sense of exclusiveness and exquisiteness about this area of Nanshan district. For me these symbols of Shenzhen’s transnational connectedness appear to announce its place in the world as an important node in the circuit of global capital and cultural circulation in the early twenty-first century, in turn, conferring it with a certain cosmopolitan respectability. Indeed, the name “Window of the World” seems to refer to a vantage point from which to look out onto and apprehend the world. It appeared to be hinting at Shenzhen’s arrival as a city on the world-stage.

In any event, these symbolic cultural, commoditized, and consumptive elements combined to ensure that this part of Nanshan exuded a certain sense and standard of material affluence and middle-class refinement, a sense that seemed to correspond with the general image of Shenzhen as a young, aspirational, and emerging cosmopolitan city. Although I was also living in the Nanshan district, it was clear that the neighbourhood where I had taken up

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<sup>42</sup> I owe this succinct formulation to Kanth (2015).

residence could barely compare in terms of the complex, globally-inflected, material and cultural entanglements described here. There were not the pretensions to cosmopolitanism in my neighbourhood as that being witnessed here; neither was there the same degree of conspicuous material affluence. After all, my life experience seemed to reveal that there was a price, mostly but not exclusively economic, to be paid for having global connections and credentials.

The history of capitalist development had revealed that the successful material development of certain regions had always been predicated on the material deprivation of others. Experience had taught me that the fruits of development were never distributed evenly and that some, more than others among the population, inevitably had to bear the costs of development. Perhaps being foregrounded were the symptoms of uneven urban development, allusions to the center and the margins of Shenzhen city? I could only infer that Nanshan district was not all the same: I lived in the poorer and shabbier quarter whereas the area around Window of the World was *avante garde*, upmarket, and exclusive. But I would soon discover that there were “margins” even closer to the “centre” than I thought.

At any rate, perhaps it was owing to my positionality of having lived for considerable periods in the East as well as the West and my being alarmed by the surreptitious cultural uniformity that was enveloping their social – and, necessarily, cultural - spaces that I found the cosmopolitanism around the vicinity of Window of the World to be banal. After all, what could be more fitting a symbol of the global culture of our times than a major shopping complex (Lash and Lury 2007)? Moreover, there was an air of sterility to the Yitian Shopping Mall in the fact that it housed the standard global luxury brands. It did not seem too different from similar malls I had encountered elsewhere in the world. When inside one could just as well have been in Sydney or Singapore, for the shops were the same here as there, as were the product lines and marketing campaigns. In a general sense, it is not unreasonable to claim that if one has seen one of these, one has seen them all. One could not help but sense the homogeneity that was distinctive of capitalist-driven global modernity: if there are alternative modernities, then the alterity is certainly not to be found here. Nonetheless, as noted, global connectedness which finds expression in the currency of modernist commodification tends commonly to be the basis for celebration, not regret. Indeed, it seems that city centres are often defined by their very ability to demonstrate such global and cosmopolitan affinities.

Given this context, it was to my surprise that while exploring the area on foot one day, I would accidentally stumble upon a somewhat obscure footpath running off the pedestrian walkway along the main boulevard.

A pause is warranted here, for there are a couple of points worth reflecting on, if only to gain an insight into the nature of ethnographic research. It had taken eight months for me to make this particular discovery, which underscores the importance of giving oneself enough time to research in the field. This is a point to which we will return in the following section. And, yes, given the obscurity of the footpath – with the twelve-foot wide pavement narrowing fourfold - it was probably only by walking that one could have discovered it. This underscores to us the corporeal and embodied nature of ethnographically-based knowledge-production, another point that will be taken up in the following section.

At any rate, the “lesser” quality of the footpath was discernible, bearing cracks and holes one could feel underfoot. [Subsequently, in the light of day, I discovered them to be discoloured and marked by stickers advertising cheap healthcare insurance.] The narrow pavement initially ran on the same level alongside the flat driveway entering the parking garage of the Yitian Shopping Mall before it rose at a relatively steep gradient, extending beyond the side of the building. By now I could see others walking up as well as down the pavement, which piqued my curiosity further.

Where were those walking in the opposite direction coming from? And what about those going up the slope with me: where were they heading? It was already evening and it was dark in contrast to the vicinity of the Yitian Shopping Mall that we had just left. There did not seem to be street lighting, or if it did exist, the street-lamps must have been a considerable distance apart. Moreover, the large trees planted along the pavement only accentuated the blackness; it was the same sort of semi-darkness that descended on the grounds of my apartment complex in the evenings.

In such conditions of bare visibility, people existed only as figures and one was guided along the footpath by the movement of the figures immediately in front. Meanwhile the occasional chatter between friends served as a form of reassurance, contributing to the sense that even though it was dark, one was safe and in the company of fellow-travellers. One could see in the near distance the darkness being punctuated by bright lamps. Apparently, some street hawkers had set up shop along the pavement and were displaying their wares on the ground, illuminating them with their portable LED lamps. With these street-hawkers and their displays of merchandise appearing in sequence several metres apart from one another,

there was an element of excited anticipation that greeted my every step. What next? I asked myself as I proceeded along.

To my surprise and delight, by the time I had walked a further thirty metres, the darkness had become a feature of the past, subsumed by the bright yellow light that was being emitted from the many mobile carts on the street. My fellow pedestrians, who until this point were merely silhouettes, emerged from the dark; many appeared to be working folk returning from their day spent at work. The street-hawkers, to whom the carts presumably belonged, sold an astonishing variety of merchandise: food, fruit, clothing, footwear, even pets. There were also more permanent businesses that occupied the shophouses lined up along both sides of the road. Meanwhile, the patrons of the food carts were seated on stools and foldable tables that had temporarily been set up along the street. The place was abuzz, teeming with life.

Where was I? It seems that the obscure pavement had led me to a vibrant hub of no-frills, locally-flavoured social, cultural, and economic activity. Certainly, this was a marked contrast from the upscale restaurants and cafes of the Yitian Shopping Mall nearby. Here, there was stool-seating in the open-air on the street; there, plush cushions with temperature control. Here, the roads were pockmarked, dirty, and apparently overwhelmed by the attrition of vehicular and pedestrian traffic; there, polished marble floors and sometimes the privacy of one's dining-room. Here, I had the sense that I was in the company of the city's working class, whose outfits appeared to suggest that a considerable number held office jobs. There, the *latte*-sipping patrons of the mall did not only dress like members of the leisure-class, the cost of their lattes suggested that they were, or at least, had to be relatively affluent or upwardly socially mobile.

In any event, I was thrilled by my discovery, even if it were at such a "late" stage of my field research. This sense of lateness highlights again the importance of ensuring one has ample time when undertaking fieldwork, for the latter simply cannot be rushed: discoveries do not adhere to institutional timelines. But returning to my chance encounter, I had to ask: had I stumbled upon Shenzhen's "margins" here in the heart of the city's centre? It appeared likely but I would have to return later to investigate.

### *Vignette II: History and histories*

The main exhibit at the Shenzhen Museum is a commemoration of Shenzhen's relatively short history. In this case, I believe the commemoration is felt to be justified precisely on the basis of how "short" this history has been. One senses that there exists a tremendous sense of

pride, at least among Chinese officials, in thinking that they have successfully “compressed time” as far as Shenzhen’s development is concerned. After all, it is visibly apparent that the city has achieved much in the relatively short, thirty-plus-year time-span since its inception. The well-known Shenzhen refrain, “Time is Money, Efficiency is Life” comes to mind, as does the slogan, “Shenzhen speed”.

I was just recalling that the Shenzhen History exhibit at the Shenzhen Museum is intended to be quite a highlight (as of June/July 2015). It is difficult to avoid this feeling when one observes the extent of resource investment - monetary, labour, and time - into the enterprise. Beginning at four every afternoon, and in half or quarter-hourly intervals, the Museum offers guided tours of its Shenzhen history exhibit. Young, enthusiastic female guides usher visitors through the exhibition halls and offer a well-rehearsed oral account of what is ostensibly “official” Shenzhen history.

An excerpt of the Exhibit’s Preface reads, “In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CPC Central Committee started a new era of Reform and Opening-up. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping, the chief architect of the Reform and Opening-up, creatively proposed to established special economic zones. It was a great experiment of exploring the way to build socialism with Chinese characteristics. 30 years has passed quickly, and Shenzhen has grown into a beautiful modern city from a backward small frontier town, whose overall strength ranks at the top of China’s big cities. Because of its rapid development and tremendous changes, the city has attracted worldwide attention and is called the ‘Miracle of China’. The development and accomplishment of Shenzhen highly epitomizes and vividly reflects the historical reform and great achievements of China since the launch of the Reform and Opening-up policy. With its success, Shenzhen exhibits to the world the vigor and bright future of socialist China.”

This triumphalist account attributing Shenzhen’s high-speed development to the country’s market reforms seems to capture much of what is popularly believed, both at home and abroad, about the city. Shenzhen is undoubtedly the poster-child of post-Mao China, a testament to the extraordinary success of the country’s reform and opening-up. Accordingly, sustaining the image of Shenzhen as having developed into a “beautiful” and “modern” city is crucial, for as noted in Chapter 2, it had become the model to be emulated by the rest of the country.

## 7.2 *Identifying the city's margins*

My learning about the city's unevenness in the heart of one of its celebrated tourist destinations suggests that the terms, "centre" and "margin", do not refer to geographical locations literally. They are not to be found on a map. Rather, it should be evident that the terms "centre" and "margin" are signifiers on an intangible cultural grid loaded with *symbolic value*, with the centre designated as being of greatest value and the margin, of least.

It is natural to follow-up by asking where the centre obtains its symbolic meaning. What makes the city's symbolic centre its "centre"? Conversely, what de-values and relegates a particular urban space to marginality? The above account of my Shenzhen discoveries seems to have offered an answer, alluding to certain factors in determining the symbolic value of urban spaces. To begin with, the supposed centre has to be clean and orderly; additionally, there seems also to be the expectation of a certain aesthetic. We can infer from Vignette II that this urban aesthetic is particularly one characterized by modern Western motifs, which owing to the historically enduring processes of Westernisation across the world (see Chapter 2, Latouche 1996), is now identified with globalisation and cosmopolitanism. In other words, a place seems to attain the credibility of being a symbolic "centre" if its built-environment is distinguished by the celebrated hallmarks of Western-inspired modernity. Naturally, this image of the centre would include the standard glass-and-steel towers, glitzy shopping malls, modern apartment buildings, and the like, features that I've already described about Shenzhen.

But the account in the previous section speaks of a very different urban milieu, one which would pass as a "marginal" area of Shenzhen, at least on aesthetic grounds. I offered an ethnographic description of one of these symbolically peripheral zones, which I then contrasted with the city's supposed "centre". My interlocutors subsequently informed me that such places were pervasive and were scattered across the city. I also learned with subsequent research that they were known as *chengzhongcun* - "urban villages" – or, literally, "villages in the middle of the city". Indeed, they were villages encircled by urban expansion, enclaves within zones of formal urban development.

The previous section dealt with Shenzhen's marginal urban spaces as I encountered them in experience. But it is worthwhile noting that my perception of it as constituting the city's margins has come by way of inference, which involved my apprehending the city in its totality, followed by a comparison of the different zones within it. Hence, certain wealthier sections of the city were foregrounded against those that were visibly less affluent. Also involved in such a comparative exercise was the juxtaposition of official accounts of

Shenzhen, such as that offered by the Museum, against the data of our ethnographic explorations.

The purpose of comparing between different representations of the city was to identify and grasp the central features of the city by holding up our experience of it in the light of popular - primarily media and official - representations of it. In line with this, we might ask which representations of Shenzhen are best corroborated by our ethnographic investigations. Is the city structured by an underlying, unifying *logos* inflecting a common sense and consciousness of the Chinese “good life” despite the surface appearance of urban diversity? Does a coherent logical scheme exist to allow us to understand the priorities of Shenzhen and Chinese developments, notwithstanding the many ways it appears to us?

As the preceding section has demonstrated, this ethnographic-cum-textual approach has allowed us to clarify what is meant when one speaks about the city’s “centre” vis-à-vis “margins”. It has helped us to understand that such categories as “centre” and “margin” are invoked fundamentally as symbols, which operate as metaphors reflecting what is desirable and, concomitantly, what is not. It appears that in the context of Shenzhen’s urban environment, the “centre” and “margin” are antithetical categories that implicate an underlying cultural logic, a logic that seems to characterize not only Shenzhen’s socio-economic development, but China’s as well. Indeed, I have proposed in Chapter 2 that my study of Shenzhen is but a microcosm of what is transpiring throughout greater China. This centre-margin distinction is one in which the “centre” generally refers to urban spaces connected to the networks and rhythms of global capital, while the “margins” or the “periphery”, to those spaces bereft of them. And what appears to stand out from our discussion of urban development and aesthetics is the issue of the “good life” in China at the institutional level.

My ethnography reveals that one of the significant ways institutional ideas about the good life in China are made manifest is through the urban environment. In particular, such ideas are conveyed in the visual form of the country’s urban development, notably through the symbols of the city’s built-environment. Within this scheme the implicit logic governing the symbolism of a desirable “centre” against “margin” - with the former desirable and the latter an object of disapproval - is perhaps why one is unable to find in popular accounts of the city any mention of the city’s margins, as manifested in the form of Shenzhen’s urban villages. It can only be inferred that the city is considered best represented by the metaphor and symbols of the “centre”, even if such a term is not explicitly invoked. Yet, to be sure,

these are invariably official representations, tending to be narratives of the genre offered by the Shenzhen Museum.

Indeed, much is revealed by the fact that the meaning of “centre” is implicit in the popular stories told about Shenzhen. The signifier, “Shenzhen”, is to be immediately associated with the “centre”, thereby, silencing all other aspects of the city, including its “margins”. We are reminded here that things for which there are not the knowledge categories to represent them become invisible. Ultimately, what such official narratives reveal is the desire to inflate the city’s cosmopolitan credentials. The tendency, therefore, has been to highlight only those aspects that give credence to Shenzhen’s touted global success while downplaying its more indigenous and local Chinese elements.

Evidence of such one-sided mis-representation is given by the noticeable efforts of the Shenzhen Museum to draw attention to the city’s material accomplishments, and little else. Along these lines, Shenzhen is declared to be the “Miracle of China” because it has within three short decades gone from being a so-called inconspicuous fishing-village to becoming one of the key centres of global manufacturing. Furthermore, the omission of the notions of “centre” and “margin” from standard Shenzhen historiography is self-consciously suggestive of the desire to control representations and public perceptions of the city. This has tended to consolidate the myth of a monolithic and homogeneous Shenzhen - a city to be celebrated for its appearance of cosmopolitanism - at the expense of a more holistic appreciation of the city, one that is constituted by peoples from different and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. It is evident that the particular Shenzhen being feted is one characterized by the motifs of global capitalism. From the official perspective, the good life is undoubtedly thought to be urbane, thought to reside in the modernist logic of successful urban development. Such aspects of the city are emphasised to the neglect of those areas that fail to meet such a criterion.

Given this asymmetric focus on Shenzhen’s material accomplishments, it is no wonder that the city’s “margins” would be given short shrift. As the Shenzhen Museum exhibit demonstrates, little attention is granted to those aspects of the city that do not fit neatly into the narrative of Shenzhen as a success story of modern Chinese development. If the city’s margins are mentioned, it is often done so in a negative light. For example, the issue of urban villages is often raised in the context of discussions concerning urban policy and planning, where they are likely to be regarded as imminent targets of “urban renewal” (*chengshigaizao*), sites to be razed and refashioned according to modernist and futurist fancies. In this case the attention being cast on Shenzhen’s urban villages is obviously

negative and the attitude, one of disapproval. This attitude is captured by the slogan, “zang 脏, luan 乱, cha 差” (Dirty, Chaotic, Inferior), which can be seen often to emblazon banners and billboards in public spaces. Whatever else one might think about this posture of opprobrium towards such places, it is revealing of Chinese official thinking about what promotes the so-called good life and what does not. Unsurprisingly, that which is not thought to symbolize the supposed good life is invariably marginalized. This seems to be a reasonable explanation for why Shenzhen’s urban villages are underrepresented in popular media accounts of the city.

I therefore attempt to make up for this lacuna here with an investigation of the city’s “periphery”. I do this with a more careful exploration of the site I chanced upon in Vignette I. Upon further research and several return visits to the site, I learned that I had indeed stumbled upon an area that the city’s officials and urban planners would generally consider to be “out of bounds”. I had wandered into a *chengzhongcun* (城中村) - an urban village - and, fortuitously, it was Shenzhen’s largest, with an estimated 150,000 residents at its peak.<sup>43</sup>

I subsequently found out that despite its omission from most accounts of the city, urban villages were a recurring feature in the landscape. I gradually learned and deployed a strategy to locate urban villages around the city, doing this whenever I found myself in new, unfamiliar territory. As I gained experience moving about the city, I realised that finding the local urban village usually involved simply stepping off the main thoroughfares and going in search of more obscure but well-worn footpaths. I learned to avoid areas displaying signs of gentrification. This especially included those areas and streets, almost always adjacent to main thoroughfares, where impressive large-scale, avant-garde building structures were to be found. Shopping malls were certainly to be avoided. Essentially, I felt that such urban and architectural developments were an effort to eradicate, or if not, then to put temporal and cultural distance from (pre-)existing local social and architectural formations. Since this amounted to an attempt to foist the “centre” upon the “margins” to accomplish the “good life”, so to speak, I felt that they were not places where one was likely to locate the urban village. I became relatively successful deploying this strategy of pursuing old beaten paths,

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<sup>43</sup> The actual size of the population living in Baishizhou, Shenzhen’s largest urban village is difficult to pin down and is a matter of considerable speculation owing to the fluid manner in which people move in and out of it. Shenzhen anthropologist, Mary O’Donnell, has put this number to be as high as 250,000, though officials at the village committee level have told me that the figure stands closer to 150,000. I have erred on the side of caution by citing this smaller figure. See <https://shenzhennoted.com/tag/shenzhen-population-density/>. Last accessed 28 August 2016.

for it allowed me to discover the local urban village on most occasions. This was the case despite increasing gentrification. After all, Shenzhen Municipality had originally begun being constituted by 320 administrative villages (Huang 2017: 81).

Moving from paved boulevard to narrow concrete pavement – and oftentimes, the humble bitumen of the road – was a phenomenological experience. It elicited a different feel to begin with, to say nothing about the alternative landscape it opens up to our visual perception. In this sense, the movement from boulevard to bitumen was metaphor for moving from the “centre” to the “margins” of the city. I could immediately feel the ground go from “smooth and polished” to “rough and rocky” underfoot. Whereas the boulevards are wide and well maintained, the pavements I refer to are narrow and evidently of poorer construction. Furthermore, such pavements tend to open up to streets and spaces that are a contrast to the luxurious but staid settings of Shenzhen’s ultra-modernist urban environment. Whereas there seems to be a carefully cultivated order in the city’s ultra modern milieu, there is a carefree, unregulated and uncontrollable vitality emanating from the life that thrives on these streets of the city’s “periphery”. As I observed in Vignette I, the streets of the urban village are often filled with an anarchic energy I did not experience in the more regulated and newly developed “centres” of the city. In other words, in contrast to the mild-mannered sterility of its various symbolic “centres”, the urban village, which I am referring to as the city’s “periphery”, was a site bubbling with human and social vitalities. I submit that one of the reasons these energies were allowed to flourish is because of the absence of the restraining and sedating effects of ultra-modern built-environments. Compared with the city’s “centres”, the streets and the general milieu of the urban village could indeed be seen as being somewhat “chaotic”.

Vignette I has described the urban village as a place teeming with life. This social feature is not unrelated to the density of its built environment, which contrasts with the spaciousness of the city’s many designated “centres”. What is immediately visible about the urban village is the tight clustering of its five-to-six-story buildings, with some being eight to ten stories tall. I return to this issue concerning the variability in the heights of urban village buildings (see section 7.4). But, typically, they are built within an arm’s length or two from each other, hence, their nickname, “handshake buildings” (*woshoulou* 握手楼): they are constructed in such close proximity that one only has to reach into the adjacent balcony to shake the neighbour’s hand. Based on my repeated visits to *Baishizhou*, the site described in

Vignette I, I examine additional features that render such places the “margins” of popular imagination. My observations are offered in the vignette that follows.

*Vignette III: Ambience - zang (脏), luan (乱), cha (差) [dirty, chaotic, sub-standard]?*

Especially in the evenings the streets of the Baishizhou urban village are lined with fruit-sellers, food-carts, and street vendors selling all manner of merchandise, from socks to cellphone covers to clothing items. These street hawkers complement the rich array of services already provided by the more permanent businesses operating out of the shop-houses along the street. There are sundry shops, supermarkets, restaurants, shoe and clothing retailers, hairdressers, hardware stores, beauticians, acupuncturists, massage parlours, and more. The vivacity is such that pedestrian traffic spills onto the middle of the road as cars, electric bicycles, push-carts and people compete for use of the road. The machines attempt to weave their way around the throng of human pedestrians and we hear the impatient beeping of cars and electric bicycles. There is a sense and outward appearance of chaos but for all intents and purposes, traffic flows, largely uninterrupted and without incident.

I later found out that the obscure footpath that led to this thriving scene was on Jinhe Road, a bi-directional two-lane road that turned off from *Shennan Dadao*, ran along one-side of the Yitian Plaza and then made a loop through *Baishizhou* only to reconnect with *Shennan Road*. I have referred to *Baishizhou* as an urban village but to be precise, *Baishizhou* was the name of the general area constituted by four urban villages, including Xiabaishi, Shangbaishi, Tangtou and Xintangcun.

I have previously described the Yitian Plaza, the upmarket, cosmopolitan shopping mall that sits on the edge of *Baishizhou*. In contrast to the seemingly orderly and uneventful flow of automobiles that emerge from the underground parking facility of the Yitian Plaza, the movements of vehicles on Jinhe Road that runs through the *Baishizhou* urban villages is signaled to us by the din of incessant honking, especially from electric bicycles. Unlike the procession of luxury cars emerging from the Yitian Plaza flowing into *Shennan Dadao*, the vehicles on Jinhe Road are usually transport vehicles, especially electric bicycles, impatiently weaving in and out of traffic, negotiating the seemingly ill-disciplined meanderings of pedestrians on foot. Despite being narrow, the single-lane, bi-directional road is shared – or, more accurately, fought over - by motorists and pedestrians alike. It appears that this unequal encounter between man and machine stems from the fact that there are no designated footpaths. The obscure footpath I mentioned previously “disappeared” the further up one went along Jinhe Road, as if swallowed up. It turns out that this was due to the attempt to

maximise the living-space of urban village buildings. Since these living-spaces run virtually up to the edge of the road, they leave no more than a mere metre-wide separation between building and road.

Indeed, the ground-floor shophouses of urban-village buildings end virtually where the road begins, forcing pedestrians to use the bitumen road as footpath in competition with more mechanised forms of traffic. This adds to the general feeling of chaos, to which the term *luan* on official posters seemingly refer.

And the chaos (*luan*) does not recede. Continuing uphill along Jinhe Road towards Tangtou village, one comes to a section where about seven to eight large rectangular rubbish bins are parked. One also sees cleaning implements such as brooms and dust pans, and several push-carts placed against a concrete wall. Presumably, the push-carts were used to transport trash collected from nearby streets, then disposed of in the large bins. There was also a heap: an assortment of old furniture, including chairs, wardrobes, and several mattresses, piled one on top of another in what was a veritable mess. Evidently, this was a rubbish dump, with its bins, cleaning implements, and the large pieces of unwanted furniture taking up nearly one lane of the two-lane road. The pedestrians, who at this particular time of the day (mid-afternoon) were primarily grandparents and mothers accompanying their grandchildren and children home from the nearby village school, seem unconcerned by the rubbish dump in their midst. They sauntered past the dump nonchalantly, suggesting that the scene was all rather humdrum and was one they were well- accustomed to.

Perhaps this was the *zang* (脏 “dirty”) that the public banners was referring to? With the community rubbish dump often in full public view in the urban village, perhaps the term *zang* was deployed as a direct critique of the extant standards of hygiene in such places? It could of course be argued that the streets were at least being cleared and the community’s rubbish, disposed of. Indeed, although unsightly it is true that the dump signalled the existence of local management for the maintenance of public hygiene in the urban village, in this case, by the *jiedaoban*. I later found out that the community’s trash was collected and disposed of on an everyday basis.

Being one of the key arteries running through *Baishizhou*, what I witnessed was unsightly and certainly *luan* (乱 messy) but one could contest the notion that it was *zang* (dirty) as well. After all, I had seen worse, especially in the more obscure areas of the village. For example, it is not uncommon to see litter along the narrow alleys of handshake buildings, or in the spaces at the back of them. Presumably, the maintenance of such areas was the

responsibility of individual buildings' occupants, not the *jiedaoban*'s, resulting in the tendency for such litter to remain and accumulate. It is probably such uncleared trash that the term *zang* (dirty) on public announcements was referring. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling that the intent of these public notices was verily to justify an official campaign for urban renewal.

Still, based on the appearance of things, it was not difficult to find agreement with the gist of the city's urban renewal campaign. When one's attention shifts from the life at street-level to the physical built environment, especially the urban village's low-rise hand-shake buildings, one sees and feels severe building density, with structures packed one next to the other, lined up like blocks of dominoes. In itself, the domino-like arrangement is not unlike that of some of the modern residential buildings I had seen in Shenzhen's supposed centre. But it was infinitely denser here. Besides, the difference in building quality was immediately obvious. Also, the residential buildings of Shenzhen's centre were typically sky-scraping whereas handshake buildings were a mere six to eight stories tall.

When looking upwards from street-level, there was throughout the urban village, a hard-to-miss feature of the urban village that added to the sense of *luan* (messiness). One would catch sight of dangling "webs" (驻蛛网) of electrical and various types of cables running haphazardly from one building to the next. Invariably, they seem to converge and intersect at the utility pole on the street. It is not clear to the casual observer where the cables begin or end, or how many there actually are. Suffice it to say, it is an awful mess. It is reasonable to think that such messiness has resulted because of the paucity of proper regulation. The households that occupy the handshake buildings appear to have had to install these cables individually, at different times, as and when the need arose.

I subsequently learned that this had in fact been the case. It turns out that the upper floors of the handshake buildings – and often, the buildings themselves – had come into existence as demand for housing in Shenzhen skyrocketed, particularly from the early 1990s onwards. Incidentally, this periodisation seems to corroborate the account of Madam Chao (see Chapter 6), who spoke of the various shortages – electricity, water, even housing – she experienced upon her arrival in Shenzhen. And it is the ensuing unregulated construction of handshake buildings to meet this sudden upsurge in housing demand to which the messy webs of electrical cables bear testimony. Certainly, these messy webs of electric, fibre-optic, and other types of wiring suspended from handshake building to utility pole to adjacent handshake building and so on, gives the inevitable sense that much urban village construction

has been unregulated, “do-it-yourself”, and, as such, *cha* (sub-standard). Indeed, *cha*, the subs-standard nature of handshake buildings is exactly what the aforementioned public campaign seeks to highlight in making the case for urban renewal and gentrification. I address the issue of Shenzhen’s urban renewal in section 7.5.

In the following vignette, I give a description of the interior of a typical handshake building to offer one a sense of what it is like in a unit of a typical handshake building. I feel this is important since Shenzhen’s urban villages continue to be an important site for the majority of newly-arrived rural-to-urban migrants in the city, which explains the following popular refrain: one cannot claim to have been to Shenzhen without a visit to *Baishizhou*. The saying aptly conveys the *de facto* importance of the urban village.

Indeed, the urban village seems commonly to be the requisite point of transit, the standard site for a layover, as one arrives from the countryside in search of the so-called good life in Shenzhen. Hence, although the urban village is inconceivable as a place associated with the good life – hence, deemed “marginal” - it functions as a necessary and indispensable aspect of the city. I return to address this apparent contradiction and the functional importance of the urban village in section 7.4.

#### *Vignette IV: Inside a Handshake Building*

Despite its marginal status and the characteristics of *zang*, *luan* and *cha* ascribed to it, it was undoubtedly the liveliness of the urban village that constantly drew me back to it. My attraction to the urban village grew in such a way that it became more than just a field-site of my research; the complexities its existence revealed about Shenzhen were so compelling that it quickly became the place I enjoyed most about the city. It became for me what was most interesting, meaningful and even exciting about the city, particularly in contrast to the Shenzhen represented by the tendentiously formulaic accounts of official historiography. Given this, I was pleased to have had the opportunity to stay for an extended period in *Baishizhou*, where I rented a room in a modest guesthouse.

The budget hotel in which I was staying occupied two floors of an urban village building in *Baishizhou*. Unlike many of the handshake buildings I had seen, the interior of the guesthouse was bright, thanks to a surfeit of fluorescent lighting. A red rubberized mat ran from the entrance at the bottom of the staircase and extended all the way to the first floor, where an unassuming little cubicle - the reception - was found. This much was visible from the street. There was no lobby, nor was there a lift, signaling exactly how unassuming the guesthouse was. Like most amenities to be found in the urban village, the services offered

here were rudimentary and minimalist. It was for those needing no more than a place to sleep. At 90 yuan per night, one was not supposed to expect more. Importantly, the slight interior modifications and lighting had been adequate to give the guesthouse the appearance of being bright and clean.

I have mentioned the absence of a lobby or general reception area, with the management of the guesthouse being administered through the small cubicle by the stairway. When inside the building, one could see why: space was too precious a commodity to be put to such extravagant and superfluous ends. The two floors of the guesthouse were lined with rooms of various sizes. The room I had rented was tiny, being no more than 3 metres long and 2.5 metres wide and consisting of a bathroom and a single bed. There was also a tiny desk on which I was just able to place my laptop computer.

It was when I closed the room door behind me that I had a sense of the darkness that typically engulfs the occupants of handshake buildings. Despite it being mid-afternoon, I realised that one had to constantly keep the fluorescent lights in the room on, for the proximity of one building to the next meant that even during the brightest part of the day, no more than a stream of light would fall into the two-metre space separating adjacent buildings, keeping the apartment units in them in a state of perpetual darkness.

Another feature of the urban village I could attest to was its liveliness. I have already given an account of the liveliness as felt on the street, but this vibrancy was palpable even in the room. The village was teeming with activity virtually on a round-the-clock basis. It would come to life most intensely from the early evening onwards and would remain so until the wee hours of the morning. At these times, the streets downstairs would be packed with hawkers selling food and other items, while workers returning from work would be out having dinner, shopping, and generally having a good time. From my room I could notice the noise from the street below waxing and waning in keeping with the abovementioned times, reflecting the sudden flurry of street activity, its intensification, followed by its diminishment when the responsible agents retire for the night.

Accompanying the cacophony was the smoke transporting various food smells into my room, for that, too, very clearly increased in the evenings. If I had been working at my computer oblivious to the passage of time, the generous waft of steam carrying the pungent odour of smelly tofu through the window would signal the time for dinner. The smell would persist until around midnight. The noise from the crowd downstairs, on the other hand, seemed to increase the later into the evening it got. One night, as I slept fitfully, I was awakened by the sounds of men shouting, followed by the shattering of glass. It was as if a

riot had broken out. It must have been one or two in the morning before the noise finally died down and I was able to return to sleep. While there was an incessant buzz, which furnished a constant sense of excitement, I found it a considerable challenge to get good rest. And it was not just because of the audibility of the sounds from the street: these noises evoked a rhythm of unremitting movement and constant action that invariably affected both mind and body. The quiescence needed for rest and repose seemed near impossible.

### 7.3 *Common perceptions of the urban village and the good life*

“I first came to Shenzhen with my parents when I was a small child but because of economic pressure, my family returned home, which is just four hours away by bus. I returned again a couple of years ago to attend school here. Little did I imagine that after the four-hour bus-ride, I would find myself in an environment here in *Baishizhou* that is so similar to home, with wires and rubbish everywhere. Since I heard that the city has plans to demolish *Baishizhou*, I thought it would be useful trying to understand more. I’d like to see how they improve *Baishizhou*... and maybe my home village can be improved in a similar way too.

[Speaker A]

“I live in *Huaqiaocheng* (Overseas Chinese Town), just a couple of stops away from *Baishizhou* on the *ditie* (mass rapid transit) and am a second-generation Shenzhen resident. As a child growing up in *Longgang* I would hear about the dangers of the urban village. So, despite having lived in Shenzhen for thirty years, I’ve never really explored the urban village to understand its situation, much less attempt to examine how its residents live.” [Speaker B]

“I come from Shanwei (汕尾), Guangdong province, and when I came to Shenzhen my expectation was to see high-rise buildings and skyscrapers (*gaoloudasha*). But when I visited *Baishizhou* I noticed an environment that was just like home. It was distinctly familiar.”

[Speaker C]

“My *jiexiang* (home village) is a small *zhen* (镇) (township). When I first visited *Baishizhou*, it was as if my home village had moved to Shenzhen, with one difference: whereas property prices in Shenzhen are generally high, prices in *Baishizhou* are considerably lower.” [Speaker D]

D]

“What’s the relationship between the *chengzhongcun* and our lives in the city?” [Speaker E]

“Most of us who’ve grown up in Shenzhen, and even in its urban villages, have never really sought to understand it.” [Speaker F]

The above are noteworthy comments from interlocutors - all migrants to Shenzhen – that were made at a meeting organized at Handshake 302, a community art-space located in Baishizhou. It was a planning meeting for a project that sought to examine residents’ perceptions of Shenzhen’s development, especially the place of its urban villages in the city. The comments were made as participants reflected on their experiences of the city.

Evidently my interlocutors’ views of Shenzhen and its urban villages seem to cohere with the discussion of the city and its putative margins introduced in section 7.1. Hence, even though the dichotomous language of centre and periphery is not explicit – it never seems to be - it is apparent that such a distinction features commonly, if not predominantly, in my interlocutors’ understandings and experiences of the city.

For example, Speaker A expresses her surprise at discovering *Baishizhou*, which reminds her exactly of “home” (*laojia*), with the presence of “wires and rubbish everywhere”. Going against her expectations of Shenzhen as a symbol of high-modernism, the proliferation of electrical wires and rubbish witnessed in *Baishizhou* seem to confirm the official portrayal of such places as *zang*, *luan*, and *cha*. While appearing to have expected this of her hometown, it was not of Shenzhen. Speakers C and D seem to have held similar expectations of Shenzhen too; hence, their surprise at discovering a place like *Baishizhou*, which they felt bore a great resemblance to home. For them the conditions at *Baishizhou* were like those found at home, seemingly well- described by the terms, *zang*, *luan*, *cha* (filth, chaos, and sub-standards ), which merely gave succor to calls for urban renewal and more extensive urban development.

Furthermore, in anticipating the lessons that Shenzhen’s ongoing project of urban renewal would have for the improvement of her home village, Speaker A was merely adhering to the commonly held idea that the putatively more developed would always show to the less developed the image of its own future. This was none other than the standard prejudice of developmentalism, implicating the dichotomous categories of developed and undeveloped, advanced and backward, found in developmentalist ideology. In this case Speaker A had cast Shenzhen as the vanguard of modernism whereas the *laojia* was deemed backward and in need of the tutelage of the “advanced”.

Consonant with our discussion in 7.1, Speaker B mentions the alterity, the “otherness”, of urban villages in the Shenzhen landscape, thereby invoking the dichotomous categories of the “centre” and its “periphery”. Moreover, because the supposed alterity of the city’s so-called periphery was deemed “dangerous”, she admits to neither having had any interactions with nor visiting, much less, exploring the urban village previously. This was

despite her being a second-generation Shenzhener who had lived in the city for some three decades. We therefore witness the phenomenon of representations largely determining praxis, consequently, producing a reality given by the conceptual. It thus becomes a case where representation determines reality rather than the case vice-versa, thus highlighting the very power of representation and ideology. In the case of Speaker B, the image of the urban village as signaling “danger” leads her to avoid such places, thereby leaving her prejudicial attitude towards them unverified and intact. From a methodological viewpoint, this once again underscores the importance of the ethnographic and phenomenological vis-à-vis the rationalist and analytic in the production of knowledge.

Consequently, contra the official narrative, the above perspectives reveal the multi-sidedness and complexity of the city along lines of socio-economic difference. As my interlocutors and I have discovered, the city is constituted by the concurrent existence of multiple Shenzhens whereby the city of popular imagination, of modern buildings and skyscrapers, co-exists alongside its supposedly messy and unmentionable urban villages. In other words, Shenzhen is not monolithic but socio-culturally heterogeneous and messy. When one simply takes the time and effort to look, study, and reflect, it becomes apparent that the city is characterised by the de facto existence of its contrasting aspects that we have designated as “centre” and “margins” respectively.

As Speaker E points out, such an insight into the city’s heterogeneity uncovers a relation which has often been obscured, prompting the apt follow-up question: What is the relationship between Shenzhen’s urban villages and the life of the city in general? What, in other words, is the relationship between its urban centre and margins? Such questions are seldom asked - perhaps owing to the fact that official narratives have represented Shenzhen as a redoubtable success-story of post-Mao reform China. Because the global post-socialist and neo-liberal milieu of the past three over decades has reified markets, we have been made to believe that Shenzhen’s success owes predominantly to the Chinese state’s enthusiastic adoption of market institutions in regulating society. While there might well be some truth to this explanation, it is worth bearing in mind that its all-encompassing simplicity detracts from other explanations, not least those implicating the relations between regions, spaces, and classes (Massey 2005). Along these lines, Speaker F appropriately points out that the relations between the city’s centre and margins have seldom been examined and understood, not least by many of the city’s own residents.

Yet the lack of effort made to understand centre-periphery relations is neither surprising nor unexpected, not least among members of Shenzhen’s population. For even

though such matters ultimately entailed long-term material implications for the city and its residents, they would have come across for the moment as being somewhat academic, abstract, and even irrelevant, for most. It should be borne in mind that many in the city would have had more immediate bread-and-butter concerns. Whereas the concern about urban development is a continuing long-run macro-societal issue, the imposing reality of having to earn one's bread would have posed a pressing concern for any individual in the city. As demonstrable in any capitalist milieu, it is the short-run and the reality at the individualised micro-level that take precedence over more collective and long-run concerns. Indeed, it may be said that the reshaping of social reality to prioritise both the short-run and the individual was verily the intended goal of the market reforms instituted in China during the post-Mao, Dengist, era.

Hence, while understanding the nature of the city may have been a concern of urban planners, policy-makers, urban geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and other such scholars, it would hardly have registered as a concern for the average person, especially if s/he had come to Shenzhen in pursuit of the good life. I am here reminded of my interlocutors and their economic preoccupations (see Chapters 3-6). As for the abstract nature of such macro-level societal concerns, I am reminded of Wai (see Chapter 4), who frequently demanded that I justify my continuing status as a student: "Who's asking you to do research? Does it earn you anything? What's the point of studying so much?" I felt that Wai's pragmatism seemed to hint at what many of my interlocutors believed constituted the good life.

Consistent with the aims of post-Mao Chinese reforms, the supposed good life revolved around the monetary economy. It should be apparent from the previous Chapters that Wai was not exceptional in this regard. In *Baishizhou* itself, I found Ms Li, the thirty-something year-old proprietor of a blind-person massage business, to be even more forthcoming. Having moved to Shenzhen from rural Hubei in the North, she did not hesitate to tell me what the "good life" involved. "To have lots of money," she proclaimed.

Ms Li first left home in search of cash employment in 2009. She first began work in Dongguan, South China, in a shoe factory, where she met her husband-to-be, also a Hubei native. After returning to Hubei to get married where she soon also bore a son, they returned to South China again, this time to Shenzhen, where they sought alternative forms of employment. Ms Li's husband found work in another factory whereas Ms Li ventured into business. With the help of a blind cousin who had established a blind-person massage business in *Baishizhou*, she opened and managed another shop in a separate location within

the urban village. Moreover, because her husband was employed in a factory in Longgang district in the city's north, they lived apart despite both working in Shenzhen. He lived close to his workplace, while she to hers, in *Baishizhou*. These living arrangements allowed them to meet only when their schedules allowed, which was primarily on the weekends. And while they were in Shenzhen to earn an income, their children – a son and daughter aged 6 and 3 respectively (in 2015) – remained at home in Hubei and were cared for by Ms Li's mother-in-law.

I offer these details of Ms Li's personal life merely to draw attention to the disruptions that supposed pursuits of the good life entail for domesticity. As the past few chapters have demonstrated, conceiving of the good life in predominantly economic terms has been the rule rather than the exception among my interlocutors. It has been the defining characteristic of modern life in China. And the costs of such a mode of life have been shown to be similar. After all, Ms Li's familial situation was common among many of my other interlocutors.

Given the immediacy of economic, specifically money-centred, preoccupations on the one hand and the incessant struggle to maintain family on the other, it is unsurprising that many of my interlocutors would seem apathetic to more mediate macro-societal concerns. The priority for most of my interlocutors, it seems, was to maintain the delicate balance between earning money outside the home while keeping the family intact. The recalibration of the meaning of "economy" to imply a pecuniary economy ultimately occurred at the expense of its previous meaning of "household management". Consequently, the "good life" as implied by economic success often jeopardised the possibility of a good life furnished by intimate relations of domesticity. The considerable challenges posed to family life by the supposed economic imperatives of a good life were therefore often so great as to render considerations beyond the personal secondary.

Little wonder that my queries about urban renewal and the prospect of *Baishizhou*'s demolition should have been met with shrugs of indifference. The issue of Shenzhen's urban renewal seemed too distant and abstract to be a matter of immediate or personal concern. It turns out that because *Baishizhou*'s proposed redevelopment was being stymied by negotiations between developers and native urban villagers as well as non-native apartment owners over compensation, Ms Li seemed to think that time was on her side. Indeed, because negotiations had become protracted with no sign of an immediate resolution, she felt confident that it would be a while before *Baishizhou*'s redevelopment would begin. At any rate, if it were to come down to that, Ms Li said that she would simply find another urban

village to relocate to. This sentiment was shared by Ah Hua, a hairdresser from Guangxi, who with his wife and two young sons, had lived and operated his business out of a small shophouse in Tangtoucun since roughly 2005. I found this attitude to be rather typical among the business owners in the urban village. As most of them were rural migrants, their primary concern was to ensure that rents stayed affordable and that their small businesses could remain viable.

#### **7.4 An overview of the political economy of Shenzhen's urban villages**

There is no space here to comprehensively deal with the details of the history and political economy of Shenzhen's urban village development. Suffice it to say such an account would uncover the conditions that complicate the said negotiations surrounding *Baishizhou's* proposed renewal. Because urban village expansion mostly began in the late 1980s and continued until the early 2000s, when the city's booming industrial economy spawned a dramatic rise in housing demand, handshake building construction and expansion took off throughout this period, before regulations could keep pace with developments on the ground. A member of the Tangtou village committee told me that the most feverish period of construction occurred between 2000 and 2003 when many buildings were expanded to reach an average of ten stories.

It is conceivable to think that authorities would have initially welcomed the constructions since they helped deal with the city's housing crisis at a time of massive population inflow. Moreover, it was a solution that incurred no financial costs to the authorities. However, with the evolution of the city's political economic circumstances, such tolerance of informal urban village development would change. Hence, from 2004 onwards, it became illegal (*weijian*) to expand handshake buildings any further.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of such a policy is questionable, for the same village committee member informed me that the booming Shenzhen property market was often impossible to resist, leading many reward-seeking investors to continue building illegally anyway and to bear the risks that came with flouting the law. As in any inflationary asset market, the potential windfall gains of speculation were too tantalising to be missed, generally exceeding any costs that came with breaking the law.

For the natives of Shenzhen's urban villages, the sudden demand for housing constituted, in the first instance, an unprecedented opportunity to earn rental income. Accordingly, handshake building construction was first undertaken by the city's urban villagers, who added several floors of apartment units onto their original single-story

dwellings. As housing demand continued to soar, some non-locals were also drawn into the construction boom as investors. They contributed the requisite capital and, as such, became partial - or co-owners - of urban village property. Non-natives could also own such apartments via market purchase but it is important to note that non-native ownership was *de facto* rather than *de jure*. Because of the idiosyncrasies of Chinese land rights in the PRC, the state owned all urban land while each building, which was formerly a single-story dwelling, possessed only one property certificate (*daquan*, or literally, “big right”). Accordingly, it was only natural to expect that the relevant property certificate would remain with its original *de jure* owner: the title-holder of the original single-story dwelling, who would have been a native villager. This particular idiosyncrasy of Chinese land rights meant that investing in and purchasing urban village property entailed considerable risks, especially if it did not confer one with the title deeds to show for it. What, after all, were proprietary claims without the ability to prove them?

It was therefore the confluence of several factors that complicated and gave rise to the current stalemate in negotiations over urban village renewal. These include the paucity of official property rights/certificates on urban village residential property, the illegal – or at least ambiguous - status of handshake building constructions, the current and future rental income streams generated by handshake apartments, and the number of contrasting political economic interests involved.

Undoubtedly, the major sticking point in these negotiations concerned money, hinging on the issue of compensation, namely, the amount that native urban villagers and other, non-native, *de facto* property owners felt they should be receiving as a *quid pro quo* for acquiescing to the state’s urban redevelopment plans. Bearing in mind that many native Shenzhen urban villagers had become landlords renting out their handshake building apartments as a means of livelihood, any acceptable compensation package for them would have included not only a replacement of the home they would lose and compensation for lost rental earnings during the period of redevelopment; they would have had to include provisions allowing them to continue rent-collecting as a source of income. Agreeing on an appropriate compensation package acceptable to all parties would therefore have been the central difficulty of the negotiations.

Whereas urban village owners would certainly have factored in future streams of expected income in the consideration of any such package, property developers wishing to lower their costs would, in contrast, have sought to discount such earnings, perhaps challenging that the properties responsible for them were “illegal” in the first place. Needless

to say, those not in possession of a title deed had most to lose here. I especially have in mind the non-native investors and owners of urban village apartments whose status as “outsiders” would have marginalized them from the negotiations in the first place.

The reason for why plans for the redevelopment of Shenzhen’s urban villages have reached a stalemate should here be obvious. Not only are there many parties with competing interests involved, there remains a plethora of fundamental issues - beginning with claims about who owns what – first in need of clarification.

From this brief account above, we can see that the plans for the redevelopment of Shenzhen’s urban villages involve the following primary interest groups: first, the Shenzhen city government, whose goal was to clear out the urban villages in the interest of upgrading the city (*zhuanxing*); second, the private or state-owned property developers, whose aim was to negotiate a compensation package that did not adversely affect profitability while being sufficient to appease the compensation demands of urban village property owners; third, urban villagers and non-local property owners, whose goal was to attain maximum compensation; and, finally, primarily rural migrant renters, whose central concern would have been for rents to remain affordable.

### ***7.5 Razing the urban villages: Shenzhen’s economic transition, urban redevelopment, and the good life***

There is neither the space nor the intent here to probe more deeply into the political economic complexities of Shenzhen’s proposed urban redevelopment. The purpose of my brief sketch merely seeks to uncover the nature and complex trajectory of Shenzhen’s urbanization and urban development and their relevance for understanding Chinese conceptions of the good life at the collective and macro-institutional levels. As opposed to the micro-level, life-story accounts of my interlocutors, this chapter has revealed how good-life aspirations are conveyed in policy-making as well as in popular culture. In particular, it has allowed us to see how good life desires manifest in the urban landscape and in the representations of it. Such aspirations are also conveyed by the city’s plans for urban redevelopment.

Indeed, it is because of the very particular, modernist, imagination of what constitutes the “good” that we see the standard mass-media and official representations of Shenzhen take the form they do. The aspect of Shenzhen that is depicted and celebrated in these representations is its “centre”. I have referred to it as “centre” for lack of a better term, yet I believe the term calls up the necessary meanings for us, referring to a modern city whose built environment is aesthetically marked by sky-scrapers and tall-buildings. The “centre”

invokes a cosmopolis that serves as an important node within the circuit of transnational capital. Significantly, these media accounts are not explicit about their selective representation of the city. They do not deploy the term “centre” since such an association is taken for granted: Shenzhen is simply equated with it, and marked off by the symbolic and phenomenological features of capital and its transnational connections.

Because of this implicit bias, we have observed that aspects of Shenzhen not bearing the symbolic qualities of the “centre” tend to be overlooked, hence, my referring to them as the city’s “margins”. They are evaluated as such as measured by the cosmopolitan cultural standards of the centre. One cannot avoid noting here a developmentalist logic being implicated, particularly in the distinction made between developed and undeveloped, modern and backward, the global and the local.

In this regard, I hope to have demonstrated that Shenzhen’s urban villages in general and *Baishizhou* specifically, constitute the city’s supposed margins, even if they are located in the city’s geographic centre. Again, “centre” and “margin” are not geographic but symbolic categories. Nonetheless, even as its urban villages are considered to be marginal, their contribution to the material development of Shenzhen as the officially touted Miracle of China is beyond question.

In the first instance, the urban village has been an invaluable site of affordable housing and services for the countless who have migrated to the city. Certainly, the urban village may be regarded as a site where rural migrant workers are able to reproduce themselves at a lower cost than can be found elsewhere in the city. Through these functions, the urban village can be said to be effectively subsidising the development of Shenzhen. It becomes a case of the city’s supposed margins reducing the costs of the “centre’s” development, allowing its class of workers – primarily constituted by rural migrants – to subsist more cheaply in the city than would otherwise be possible.

Despite this the urban village remains overlooked in most historical accounts of Shenzhen. This would not be because its contributions were thought insignificant but more likely due to the fact that the urban village simply does not cohere with predominant - official and popular - ideological visions of what makes the good life in China today. I submit that the urban village is deliberately starved of recognition since its continued existence is felt to be a taint on Shenzhen’s avante-garde status in post-Mao China. In other words, the urban village cannot be allowed the institutional or official recognition as a site of value lest it gives rise to doubts about the city’s *raison d’etre*. Certainly, there should not be the (mis)perception that the urban village aptly represents Shenzhen, or raise doubts about what

the purpose of the city or its people ought to be. In these matters, the telos of modern developmentalism is never too far away.

Consequently, as Shenzhen undergoes a structural economic transformation (*zhuanxing*) by shifting the bulk of its primary economic activities from low-end, labour-intensive industrial manufacturing towards higher value-added hi-tech activities such as robotics and A.I. – itself a vindication of the logic of capitalist development - the legacies of its industrial manufacturing past are also gradually being phased out.

One of the legacies of its manufacturing past is of course the low-cost urban village and its rural-migrant population, which when seen from a macro-systems perspective, are considered now to have outlived their institutional economic function. In other words, as Shenzhen continues along a capitalist path of development and is redeveloped and reconfigured into a high-value, hi-tech city to usher in the putative good life, the urban village and its low-cost amenities have become anachronisms that are incompatible with the emerging futuristic city. The continued existence of urban villages becomes widely seen as a taint on Shenzhen's reputation as a modern cosmopolitan city signalling the future - and the "good life" that accompanies it. Hence, the intent of the city's planners to eradicate them and engineer their transformation into "centres" befitting the (post)modernist imagination. It is the future and its alluring promises of the "good life" that beckon in Shenzhen today.

## Chapter 8 Epilogue

This dissertation project has sought to understand what it means to have a good life in contemporary China through an ethnographic project conducted in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen. Although ethnographic in its approach, the project was grounded in concerns that cut across philosophy, history, and social and political economic theory. I thus saw the project as a symbiotic dialogue between these disciplines, with each playing its role enriching the conversation. Hence, in initiating the question of what makes the good life in China, philosophy furnished the purpose of the project; history provided the requisite background understanding against which to understand the Chinese present; ethnography sought empirical documentation of current on-the-ground realities, while social theory was ever ready to proffer explanations for the phenomena observed in the field.

I will first briefly review the dissertation's historical and theoretical arguments, which provide the project's contextual framing. And then I will proceed to discuss its ethnographic findings. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

### *8.1 History and theory*

Drawing theoretical and historical insights from these different disciplinary orientations, I have argued that the processes of modernization and westernization began in China at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> C in the aftermath of the Sino-Western colonial encounter. The latter brought an ignominious end to the millennial-old Chinese dynastic system, convincing the Chinese elite, especially the literati, of the inherent weaknesses of their culture.

Chinese modernization was, accordingly, undertaken in the first instance as a national project of self-strengthening hatched in the throes of Western colonial domination. It was this experience of colonial defeat in the hands of the modern West that instituted a change in Chinese subjectivity and self-understanding, notably, of the inferiority of Chinese native culture on the one hand and the superiority of the modern West on the other.

This inevitable association of the modern with the West led to the automatic equation, in China and elsewhere, of modernity with the West. Its acolytes would come to regard the West as the Gold Standard of modernity while becoming modern would be considered to be the apotheosis of development. Taking this line of reasoning to its conclusion, it was apparent that becoming modern necessitated becoming Western, thus giving rise to the teleology of development, or what could be seen as a secularized version of the trinity: the modern, the western, and the developed, with each seemingly reducible to the other and constituting a

source of personal salvation. These historical associations led its adherents and followers to equate development with modernization and modernization with westernization, and vice-versa.

Western modernity was thus a wholesale societal and civilizational project involving a cosmology – a mode of thinking and being – which, through the West’s global colonial engagements, was inevitably foisted upon the rest of humankind. Predicated on an ontology of materialism and individualism, modernity entailed an unwavering faith in technological and material progress, accompanied by its insistence on the freedom of the rational individual to its pursuit, freed from the cloisters of any collective moral restraints. Modernity thus involved a social condition in which the infinite progress of the material realm – the money-exchange economy - was exalted by its proponents and followers and became the central pre-occupation and meaning of life.

While some Chinese may have had reservations about modernity, personal doubt was collectively unaffordable. China’s *de facto* semi-colonial status meant that becoming modern was not a choice, for it had become an existential imperative. It was widely held in China at this point that national survival depended on becoming modern, henceforth leading to the common belief in China that the good, the true, and the beautiful - of which presumably encompassed the good life – would eventuate as a result of the pursuit of these overlapping processes. Accompanying such developments in Chinese self-understanding, moreover, was the henceforth taken-for-granted assumption that the West symbolized the good life. This posture marked a change in Chinese subjectivity, for it was a mark of China as a postcolonial society dealing with the legacy of colonialism.

Yet, not unexpectedly, an explicit acceptance of wholesale westernisation would have brought too much of a discomfiture to the Chinese mind, for it signaled acceptance of the idea that one’s culture was inferior. So, the issue now was of becoming modern but not Western, and on this, the question was: how to be and not to be? This conundrum found its solution in leading late-Qing bureaucrat Zhang Zhidong’s slogan of “Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as means” (*zhongxueweiti, xixueweiyong*). The proposed solution was vague in terms of its practical implementation, to say nothing about its possibility, but its gist lay with the idea of adopting westernization as a means to modernize China while keeping the integrity of Chinese culture intact. Chinese modernization, in Zhang’s view, was thus to be a syncretic process blending both Chinese and Western elements. It seems reasonable to think that this view of syncretism has persisted until the present, as may be

evidenced by declared Chinese improvisations such as, “Socialism with Chinese characteristics”, the “China Dream”, etc.

While the products of culture are transportable across space-time and thus can be copied, there is no reason to think that they are usually copied whole. And even if that were the desire, complete mimicry is seldom possible because of the enduring nature of the prevailing native culture. For this, Zhang Zhidong would have been grateful. More generally, while the physical products of culture may be copied, their meanings tend to be more evasive. It is in this sense that we might distinguish the *products of culture* from the *process of culture*: whereas the former is inert and “dead”, the latter is vital and “alive”, taking place in the mind as a dynamic process, and, as such, amenable to adaptation and improvisation. Cultural products tend also to be visible, if not also tangible, whereas the always unfolding cultural processes, occur in the realm of consciousness and are not.<sup>44</sup>

It is this open-endedness of the ever-unfolding cultural process in general that defines humanity on the one hand, and that allows for socio-cultural deviance on the other. It is also this distinction between culture-as-product and culture-as-process that renders possible Zhang’s ambitious plan: Western technologies (or modern technics) - as products - may be borrowed and copied, but the logos (ie. the cultural process) - that give its meaning need not, there is the possibility for the process to run its own course. It was, therefore, perhaps possible for China to westernize without the Chinese culture, much less, the civilization, undergoing transformation. After all, the signifier is not the signified.

Another way I attempted to make this distinction between a symbol and its meaning was to invoke the metaphors of “surface” vis-a-vis “deep” culture. Hence, I would consider the Chinese adoption of Western sartorial codes or urban architectural aesthetics to be an example of Westernisation at the level of “surface culture”, but do not believe that these explicit changes necessarily imply further transformation of the culture, not least in regards to its intangible elements belonging to the realm of thought, praxis, and subjectivity, a domain I am referring to as “deep culture”. In other words, changes in the explicate reality do not necessarily imply changes in the implicate order: things are often not what they seem.

But what relationship in fact holds between “surface” vis-a-vis “deep” culture? Can China modernize/westernize without becoming “western” in its pursuit of the good life? Is

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<sup>44</sup> This understanding of the distinction between culture-as-product and culture-as process has been influenced Greenfeld (2014).

Zhang's proposal of "Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as means" viable, or as I noted previously, merely a face-saving rhetorical flourish?

These are empirical questions to be sure. And as history and theory have done their bid connecting modernization and westernization with the good life, thus providing the contextual frame for these questions, the burden of marshalling empirical evidence to provide an answer now falls upon ethnography.

Besides, the foregoing discussions of Chinese growth, development, modernization, and westernization, have taken place at a meta- or macro-level seemingly quite removed from the lives of people on the ground. How, in the first place, are the residents of Shenzhen implicated in these processes that supposedly yield the good life? What does being modern and partaking of modernization involve for them? Can my claims of a Western colonial legacy in China, supposedly resulting in a desire for Western-style symbols and institutions, even be verified? I now turn to a summary of my ethnographic observations to find out.

## ***8.2 Key ethnographic findings***

Chapter 2 takes off from where the above discussion about Sino-Western colonial relations end, for it involves a study of PRC-HK interactions using the HK/SZ border as a starting point of inquiry. The border, which is a direct legacy of the Sino-British Opium Wars, has been maintained despite HK's "handover" or "return" to China in 1997. Based on my ethnographic observations of deep-seated historical as well as contemporary anti-PRC sentiment in HK, the chapter concludes that the border has served as a divide, not only physically, but symbolically, regulating the flow of what is believed to be "good" on the HK side from its supposed antithesis on the PRC side. Such a perception is a direct colonial legacy, with HK deemed ostensibly superior because it claimed to be a more immediate heir of Western civilization, given its status as an ex-British colony. The exceptionalism of Hong Kong in China - being the most Westernised part of the country devoid of the historical baggage of socialism - thus served as a model for the PRC, and especially Shenzhen, when it became China's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in 1981. The chapter ended by noting that whereas Shenzhen was once the exception as a site experimenting with market forces, it has since, following its breathtaking success, become the norm for the rest of the country. Westernisation as means-and-ends seems to have scored the first goal against Chinese learning.

If one were to take a longer view of history, one might discern a wickedly provocative twist in all this. After the British colonial assault leading to the secession of Hong Kong in

the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C, and Mao's successful expulsion of capitalist imperialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> C, one might ask: was the late-20<sup>th</sup> C decision to model Shenzhen after Hong Kong an act tantamount to welcoming back that very *logos* inspiring the British incursion in the first place? Does making Shenzhen the model for the rest of the PRC not signify the spread throughout China of that very *logos* Mao supposedly battled, then successfully exterminated? Has there, indeed, been a civilization-switch here in terms of how the Chinese view the good life?

The first part of Chapter 3 and the whole of Chapter 7 reveal Chinese imaginations of the good life by way of Shenzhen's urban landscape, which is marked by the construction of apartment buildings across the city bearing Western names and architectural motifs. In Chapter 7, we also discover Shenzhen's symbolic "margins", its urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) that have been omitted from official and standard narratives of the city. It is reasonable to think that Shenzhen's urban villages have been marginalised because their environments, sometimes described as *zang, luan, cha* (dirty, chaotic, inferior), do not meet the modern cosmopolitan – primarily, Western-inflected - standards the city aspires to. Chapter 7 reveals this to be the case especially now, as Shenzhen is in the midst of a structural economic transition, attempting to dispense with its past as a gritty industrial zone by moving on to hi-tech and higher value-added industries. Moreover, as Shenzhen undergoes so-called urban renewal to create an urban environment fitting for a futuristic, high-value, service-oriented economy, urban villages are being targeted for demolition (*chaiqian*). These observations leave little doubt about conceptions of the good life at the institutional level, good life imaginations as envisioned by its policy-makers and city-planners. The sense that the good life comes from plunging deeper, into yet more advanced stages of modernization, is here unmistakable. Westernisation opens the scoring with two quick goals. Westernisation 2: Chinese Learning 0.

In addition, Chapter 3 cast light on how modernization and Westernisation have affected modes of sociality in Shenzhen. Whereas the invocation of kinship and relational networks in the conduct of everyday life was very much alive – Confucius scores a goal here - there was also the increasing use of legal codes and contracts in transactions. I believe that the increasing deployment of legal codes and contract is a "deep culture" phenomenon, for it effectively and surreptitiously ensconces an ontology of individualism into the Chinese socio-cultural world and normalizes it. Besides, the contractual society verily signifies *gessellschaft* as per Tonnies, taking after the historical experience of the West. It is also an affirmation of Hobbes' vision of human nature. My observation of such a societal predilection towards *gessellschaft*, against the traditional model of sociality involving *guanxi* reciprocity, has led

me to describe the chapter as involving an encounter between Descartes and Confucius for the very different cosmologies they represent. Still, Chinese Learning gets on the scoreboard. Westernisation 3: Chinese Learning 1.

The remaining Chapters - 4, 5, and 6 - featured biographic-oriented accounts of my rural-urban interlocutors Wai, Yan, and Madam Chao respectively, all of whom had left home in the village to come to Shenzhen in search of better economic prospects. My three women interlocutors were all self-employed as small-business proprietors.

Wai is clearly the most established and successful of the trio, running a wholesale clothing business with her three other siblings. She can be described as a rural-urban migrant to have “made it”, co-owning with her siblings, residential properties and a vehicle in Shenzhen. Because of her relative economic success, which may in part be attributable to the fact that she and her siblings were able to pool their collective resources together, she is able to be with her son and the rest of the family in Shenzhen.

As witnessed in the case of Madam Chao, this is a privilege not afforded to many rural-urban migrants. It is rather normal for rural-urban migrants to be working in the city while their children attend school at home in the countryside and are cared for by paternal grandparents, giving rise to the post-Mao social phenomenon of “left-behind children” (*liushou ertong*). Apart from Madam Chao, this was also the situation with several of my other interlocutors I was unable to feature in this dissertation due to space constraints. The ability to establish significant property relations, not least an apartment, to allow a rural family to be working and living together in Shenzhen is today a rapidly diminishing prospect, especially in light of the city’s escalating property prices.

I believe this scenario explains two things: first, is the obvious fact that a considerable amount of money, at least by the standards of rural Chinese, is required to sustain a family in Shenzhen. Perhaps this explained why Wai seemed always to be looking for other economic opportunities apart from the business she was running. This appears to be one of the central paradoxes of the capitalist system: of individual and collective insatiability. This view affirms my understanding of modernity as a condition that gives precedence to unceasing economic growth as the sole preoccupation in life, suggesting, in turn, that the good life might always be beyond one’s grasp. The score? Westernisation 4: Chinese Learning 1.

Second, the case of Wai continuing to live in such proximity to her siblings despite having established her own family post-marriage attests to the traditional cultural importance

that Chinese place on the cultivation of thick relations, beginning with one's family. In fact, Wai's living arrangements in Shenzhen seem very much like a conscious attempt to replicate village life, where all consanguineous family live in the same village. What is more, Wai's family example demonstrates the considerable economic prowess, monetary as well as non-monetary, that is potentially available when family resources are pooled together. Although not entirely removed from present day realities either in China or elsewhere, family-centred economic organization appears to be a phenomenon of an earlier, less advanced, economic age. It seems to have diminished as a phenomenon, especially in our times of modern urban economic life dominated by the logics and practices of transnational corporate capital.

Correspondingly, popular visions of the good life in modern China increasingly involve individuals finding success in projects of economic growth instigated by large institutions, be they state or private-sector, corporate entities. These projects are tied to capital and it is reasonable to claim that this preoccupation is not confined to China but is worldwide, being characteristic of capitalist modernity on a global-scale. While this integration of China into the global world-system of capital is verily the desired object of the post-Mao policy of reform and opening up, it necessarily militates against the traditional Chinese notion of "family" as the grounds of well-being and the good life.

Indeed, it was the very allure of individual economic success – a central promise of the modernist project – that over four hundred million of the population have participated in Chinese rural-urban migration in the thirty-plus years since 1979, oftentimes leaving their rural homes and their families in the process. Imaginations of the good life in the post-Mao era appear to be situated in the commodified, globally-connected urban economy, not the non-commodified realm of the household, or for that matter, the partially-commodified rural economy. It is exactly this general cultural orientation that explains why peasants have flocked to the cities in search of jobs and money, in the process, producing an apparent tension between work and life, bread-winning and family-raising. Family and community are taking a beating as individuals and individualism are let loose from the cultural constraints that previously held them in check. *Gessellschaft* waxes, *gemeinschaft* wanes. Westernisation 5: Chinese Learning 1.

In Chapter 5, we saw Yan adeptly managing this tension. As noted, Yan was born in the 80s and so, has lived her entire life under the post-Mao regime of market reforms. I believe this background accounts for her entrepreneurialism as well as her ability to adroitly manage

domestic affairs. Hence, as a mother of two, Yan was taking care of the children as well as performing the domestic chores of the entire household. She had also begun doing some small-scale vegetable farming on a patch of land they discovered near their apartment. When time permitted, she would occasionally engage in her *daigou* (parallel-trading) business, which involved her crossing the border into HK to purchase tax-free Western imports for resale on her return. Her client-base was significantly comprised of friends and family networks back in her village. In Yan's adept management of all these activities, what seemed like a contradiction - between the concerns of non-monetary re-production at home and monetary production in the economy - was resolved in harmonious improvisation, a rather typical Chinese solution.

The ethnographic materials gathered in my interactions with Yan highlighted the informal, non-mercenary, economy that her life was centred around. In particular, it brought to light the term "oeconomia" and its original meaning as "household management", which seemed offer a fitting contrast to the aims of the formal, money-exchange "economy", whose object was to maximize profit and maintain continuous growth. I believe the two conceptions suggest radically different visions of life and good life possibilities, a point to which I return below.

Meanwhile, it was clear that Yan's *daigou* (parallel-trading) business meant not only the flourishing of individual consumerism but the spread of modernization and westernization to the Chinese countryside as well. In this, it is important to note that Yan's client-base for her *daigou* business was entirely constituted by friends and family within her village networks, demonstrating the prevalence and importance still, of these networks among rural-urban migrants. The new information technologies, built into smart-phone and logistical networks, have thus given rise to the accelerated modernization and westernization of rural China.

Westernisation 6: Chinese Learning 1.

Finally, the ethnographic materials pertaining to my interactions with Madam Chao revealed that while she and her husband were moderately successful insofar as they were able to sustain their homewares store for over past decade, they found themselves unable to establish more permanent property relations in Shenzhen. For instance, buying a home in Shenzhen was beyond reach, and it was only getting more difficult with Shenzhen's year-on-year inflation. Madam Chao and her husband were therefore resigned to staying and maintaining their business so long as they were able to continue affording the rent, something

about which they are unsure given present inflationary trends. Of course, to make things worse, their situation was compounded by familial separation, not unlike the case for millions of other rural-urban migrants. Their sons were living and going to school in Jiangxi while they continued to earn their livelihood in Shenzhen.

Madam Chao's increasingly precarious situation is revealing of the nature of the processes of modernization and urbanization. In my account of Shenzhen's continued urban development throughout this dissertation (see especially Chapter 7), what has become evident is the trend of inflating costs as the city becomes more "developed" and seeks to transition into a high-value-added, post-industrial society. In Chapter 7, we witnessed that the city's aspiration to become China's Silicon Valley has meant the need to gradually clear out its urban villages and its "low-value" populations. This, of course, is a general phenomenon of capitalist development, with London offering a good antecedent example. The tendency to drive out "low-value" populations naturally raises ethical questions about who is welcomed into the city and who it exists for.

I am here reminded, for instance, of my children being refused access by guards to use the toilets in grandiose Leadenhall Building in the City of London, only to find relief near some shrubs at St Helen's Church in Bishopsgate. What need does a society have for a Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid building if it is bereft of an idea of needs and, worse, devoid of basic human consideration and compassion? Undoubtedly, urban development is capitalist development, and capital is exclusionary of those who do not add to it. And this impetus of capital to exclude is intensified as it seeks higher profit-value, which is implied by Shenzhen's structural economic transformation from industrial manufacturing, which involves the masses, to high-value services, which seeks to dispense with them.

Will Shenzhen go the way of another London or Paris in this regard, employing guards to turn away those in need of a toilet in the cold of winter? It might be too early to tell, but the city's urban renewal project, involving the planned demolition of its urban villages, with its social implications of social exclusion, does not bode well. Capital accumulation has no need for those who make no contribution to its augmentation. Here, we witness on the one hand the tremendous power of the modern capitalist system to produce monetary values – *quantities* – but its complete incapacity on the other to provide meanings – *qualities* – that are necessary for a meaningful life. Perhaps it is *a meaningful life* – not mammon – that makes a good life? Perhaps a good life is given by quality, not quantity? In any case, Madam Chao's

predicament of an uncertain future hinged on her ability to afford rent in the city, which was directly implicated in these processes of Shenzhen's urban development.

### **8.3 Implications**

From the evidence I have mobilized from the field, it is clear that Westernisation has trumped Chinese learning. The score stood at 6 goals to 1 on my last count. The civilization-switch is undoubtedly also under way, with consumerist desire now spread into the countryside. The overlapping processes of modernization, development, and urbanization, have swept across and revolutionised post-Mao Chinese society. My interlocutors have all actively participated in these processes and have had their lives shaped, if not determined, by them, moving to Shenzhen from the rural interior in the hope of finding economic success. To varying degrees, my interlocutors have been successful and, admittedly, are materially better off now than ever before. But they are reticent when asked if they have attained the good life.

My sense was that the more they earned, the more they felt they had to earn. In any case, their apparent need to continue to accumulate seemed to be endless and without limit. As my Hui interlocutor once told me, "Now that we're travelling on the highway, we can't stop. We can only keep going." Hence, while my interlocutors were materially better off as a result of development, the pressures placed upon them to repeat their economic performance was incessant. And my interlocutors conveyed a sense of powerlessness: "*Meibanfa* 没办法," (cannot be helped, we have no choice), they would often tell me. This reveals a great paradox, if anything. After all, the votaries of the post-Mao reforms argue that market forces have liberated and empowered the individual, yet what my interlocutors are expressing here is exactly a sense of disempowerment, a diminishment of human agency and an example of what Simmel (1978: 255) identifies as "the reduction of the concrete values of life to the mediating value of money."

Perhaps the liberation that the market reforms are supposed to have engendered are more limited than its proponents care to admit, confined only to the realm of consumption but not to production. Hence, full consumer rights are granted, one can choose what to consume as long as possessing the wherewithal; but as for production, one chooses not to produce in the money-exchange economy only at the likely expense of going without shelter or food, given that these necessities now exist in the capitalist economy as commodities purchasable with money. In other words, in a modern money-exchange economy, one insists on choosing the

rights of production at the expense of one's survival, which makes it a non-starter. So, consumer rights must be secured, but producer rights? The silence is deafening. And no wonder. It is clear that not all rights are equal; the same can be said about choices and freedoms.

The helplessness my interlocutors express when saying "we don't have a choice", essentially refers to their inability to make viable choices in regard to production. Since money is the institutional medium through which they obtain life's necessities, it is in pecuniary production they must continually engage themselves with to obtain it. *So, it is on the hamster-wheel they - nay, we all - must run.* Hence, even if it were a question on which they have remained reticent, it is apparent that a good life for my interlocutors is impossible for now, not least when human agency or potential is so severely diminished. So hard are we compelled to run in the rat-race that few among us will ever have the opportunity to entertain a life beyond mere biological re-production. Work, eat, sleep, and defecate, and the wheel turns. I believe the foregoing affirms my opening thesis that a modernist conception of the good life predicated on material accumulation hampers the attainment of well-being, to say nothing about the good life.

Moreover, my dissertation has demonstrated that modern economic life involving incessant material accumulation is not only an imposition on its direct participants. It has revealed this way of life to also rely on the extraction of those placed outside its conceptual boundaries, and it tends to be even more exploitative of them. For instance, my ethnographic materials in Chapter 5 pertaining to Yan, and Chapter 6 concerning Madam Chao, offered a glimpse of the institutional functions that both domestic and rural re-production perform to make such developments in the realm of the money-exchange and urban economy possible. It was revealed that the value produced by these two social categories, women in the household and peasants in the countryside, are transferred into the (formal) money-exchange (urban) economy without institutional acknowledgement or remuneration.

It is essentially an act of expropriation. Furthermore, the expropriation passes without these groups seeming to recognize it as such because its occurrence has been institutionalized, thereby rendering it "normal". Hence, since only goods and services produced for monetary exchange are counted as "value" in GDP income statistics while non-pecuniary re-production, such as work produced by women at home, are not, they are effectively considered to be of "no value", even while they are indispensable in real terms.

Similarly, it was not unusual among my interlocutors to discount and dismiss the value of agrarian production in their homes in the countryside because of the relatively low monetary compensation such activities yield vis-a-vis urban-based production. It is apparent, therefore, that because the modern capitalist economy is predicated on wholesale commodification, it effectively institutionalizes a bias against non-commodified and non-pecuniary activities in the realm of reproduction. And the effect of this bias is to furnish conceptual categories by which we distinguish value from non-value, work from non-work, while obfuscating the real relations that exist between them. The obfuscation arises because when money becomes the medium, there arises among its users the tendency to confuse form with substance, nominal values with real values, the signifier with the signified. It is for all these reasons that economists sometimes invoke the notion of a "money illusion".

Hence, since domestic reproduction is non-monetized, it is diminished in a world whose currency is money. It is nominally rendered "non-value" because the institutional conceptual categories of the money-exchange economy define it as such. But, indeed, this is an obfuscation of the underlying reality, and it is one instigated by the very concepts with which we have chosen to conceive of the economy. After all, in real terms, it is apparent that the money-exchange economy could not exist without domestic reproduction in the first place. The worker has to rest and recover, essentially be re-produced, before he returns to the workforce the next day. It is therefore egregious to claim that those involved in getting him ready for work are not performing "work", for if he were labour, then they are under-labourers. Given that it is typically and traditionally women, like Yan, who are engaged in such work, what this amounts to is an institutional refusal to recognize the economic contributions of women constituted as a social category of reproduction, effectively denying agency to women when they assume their traditional roles in the home. And the same may be said about the role of peasants and the work they perform in the rural economy. Upon a consideration of this, is it any wonder that women and peasants should be so eager to leave the home and the land to become wage-workers? While exploitation is certainly still involved, the fact that they are doing work is at least institutionally recognized.

What has become apparent in the foregoing is that the good life associated with the money-mediated processes of development, modernization, and urbanisation should not simply be reduced to the apparent glitter of its accoutrements. Nor can it be said that the modern good life is self-sustaining. Rather, it is clear that modern economic accumulation, growth, and development is predicated on nominal conceptual exclusion and the denial of the

agency of certain marginalised entities on the one hand, while simultaneously sponging off the value they produce on the other.

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, these sectors have been shown to be constituted by women and peasants, though it is clear that our analysis could easily be extended to encompass nature as well. Essentially, whereas women's work in the household and peasant's work in the countryside are institutionally discounted as being of little or no value, they in fact provide the baseline material conditions upon which the formal, money-exchange is able to operate. Value produced in the household and the countryside, not to mention, the urban villages (in Chapter 7), are thus expropriated without acknowledgment or recognition of the fact as such, being sifted out without commensurate compensation. This expropriated value essentially serves as a gift from these marginalized informal economies to the formal monetary economy. It is upon such an institutionalised conceptual demarcation between the economy and the household, the formal and the informal, the pecuniary and the non-pecuniary, men and women, the urban and the rural, the modern and the backward, society and nature, that the modernist mechanism of value expropriation rests, ensuring that value produced by one flows the way of the other. It is also by way of such a mode of expropriation that renders the process of modernization exploitative. The foregoing is merely an introductory and rudimentary analysis of seemingly analogous phenomena observed in the ethnographic content of Chapters 5, 6 and 7 and makes no claim to completeness. Nevertheless, it attempts to outline how value is created and expropriated under conditions of modernity and may suggest the way forward for more comprehensive analyses in the future.

In sum, I believe my dissertation has shown that modernity, in the form of a sanctification of techno-material productivism, reigns in China today. I have argued that this commitment to westernization and modernity – involving an ontology of techno-materialist development - was begun by the Chinese state following its defeat in the Sino-British colonial encounter of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C. My ethnographic materials have demonstrated that the vestiges of Western colonialism endure in a superficial as well as in a deep sense, implicating changes in Chinese subjectivity and self-understanding.

At the superficial level, I have seen that Westernisation is apparent in the desire for imported Western products (Chapter 2, 4, and 5) as well as a belief in the superiority of a Western, especially English, education (Chapter 2). Westernisation at the level of appearance is also evident in the aesthetics of Shenzhen's built-environment (Chapter 3 and 7).

At a deeper level, Westernisation is gradually transforming Chinese modes of sociality. In the city environment at least, there is the increasing deployment of legal codes vis-a-vis Confucian ideas of reciprocity (Chapter 2). Significantly, whereas legal codes underline the vaunted Western profile of the abstract, rational, rights-bearing individual living in fundamental antagonism with other such individuals as per Hobbes, the latter Confucian perspective understands that there is no “me” in isolation, for I am the totality of the roles I live in relation to specific others (Rosemont 1999). Whereas the Western view of the individual is spawned of the Cartesian *cogito*, the Confucian view is of a relationally-constituted person; the former strives after a rational order, the latter, an aesthetic one. In contrast to the Western – Cartesian – view of the person that sanctifies a cosmology grounded in a foundational individualism, the Confucian view highlights a processual cosmology, *yiduobufenguan* (一多不分觀) that is given to “the inseparability of the one and the many, uniqueness and multivalence, continuity and multiplicity, integrity and integration.” (cited in Ames 2011: 83). In short, the Cartesian conception of the individual is *rational* whereas that of the Confucian is *relational*. One strives to assert the rights of the individual as a means to attain rational order, the other seeks aesthetic compromise founded on communion and communication with others. It seems reasonable to infer, then, that Westernisation, by the simple deployment of contracts in everyday transactions, is inevitably and surreptitiously giving rise to an emergent Cartesian cultural ethos of disembodied rational individualism. Even if unselfconscious, such everyday practices are surely challenging the traditional cultural order sustained by practices of Confucian relationality. I believe this signals a “civilization-switch” presently occurring in Chinese society. But it is a civilization-switch that radically exceeds what Breman (2010) intended to mean by the term, as a change in China’s dominant mode-of-production. I hope to have demonstrated that the changes currently occurring run much deeper. Thatcher (1987) had said, “Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul.” Perhaps it is that level of change, the change of the Chinese soul, which we are witnessing.

A caveat seems appropriate here. It should be noted that whereas the Chinese modernist project was previously pursued under the rubric of Maoist socialism, which was a commitment to a programme of collectivism to be sure, post-Mao reforms have seen the significant withdrawal of the state in the economic domain, giving market-forces considerably greater reign and institutionalizing the ethos of individualism in historically unprecedented ways. Hence, on top of the commitment to techno-materialist productivism

that presumably began following Zhang's *ti-yong* (Chinese essence- Western means) proposal, we now have, with post-Mao reforms, the state-led unleashing of a rampant individualism throughout Chinese society, thus indicating, at the institutional level at least, the Chinese embrace of all the key ontological pillars of modernity and its ensuing ways of life: materialism, productivism, and, now, individualism.

This brings us up-to-date on where Chinese modernity currently stands. Based on my ethnographic findings, I have already in my analysis above alluded to why the good life is unattainable under conditions of Chinese or, for that matter, any other modernity. Now, with rampant individualism in China tearing at the social fabric, it is not unreasonable to think that the prospects of a good life in China have dimmed even further. The attempt for China to modernize and westernise following after the historical trajectory of the West looks quite likely to end in considerable grief. But can beauty be salvaged from the wreck? I realise that such a dire diagnostic is not the way to end, so allow me to conclude on a brighter note by proffering a salve, if not an antidote, for the misanthropic dead-end of modernity and perhaps re-vive the possibilities of a good life. But before that, allow me to point out the error that lies in the modernist conception of humanity, which resides, first, in the claim of (wo)man's materialist/biological constitution, and, second, in her/his individualism.

To begin with, neither materialism, productivism, nor individualism, whether individually or taken together, has the capacity to realize our humanity as symbolic, meaning-seeking animals. Yes, we need to eat, maybe even produce to eat, but such a materialist conception of humanity as mere biology fundamentally reduces humans to bare life and equates us with animals and plants. In its materialist-biological determinism, the modernist conception of humanity involves an egregious misunderstanding of our nature, since apart from being constituted by biology, a trait which we share with animals and plants, we are symbolic-cultural beings. To put it otherwise, our nature is culture.

The fact that we have life implies that we have a biological constitution. Nevertheless, we are not limited to it. The following quote from Whitehead (1926a), underscores this point and offers an apt description of that ineffable cultural-symbolic quality of being human, that quality which exceeds the facticity of our biology: "There is a quality of life which lies always beyond the mere fact of life; and when we include the quality in the fact, there is still omitted the quality of the quality."

It is, therefore, not our biological constitution per se that defines our humanity, but our ability to partake of the cultural process. This cultural process is predicated on symbolic intercourse, involving the use, production, adaptation, and transmission of symbols and their meanings. And since meanings are central to this enterprise and are always shared, the cultural process is by nature shared, necessarily involving the participation of Others. Stated differently, and to sum: *humanity is a cultural endowment*, not a biological one as the modernists, after Descartes, have (mis)understood it. Second, our humanity is anthropologically characterised by a shared existence, marked by the search, production, and transmission of meanings between co-respective persons; as such, the claim that humans are individually and autonomously constituted has no anthropological bearing but is built upon an ideological fantasy that has been perpetuated also since Descartes.

Having highlighted the cultural endowment that is humanity, and pointed out the flaws in the foundational cornerstones of modernity, I now proceed to the hopeful aspects of what I noticed in the field.

Rosemont (1999: 73) has argued that despite a century and a half of Westernisation and Marxism, the traditional Confucian view of humans as relationally-constituted beings remains dominant. But Rosemont's evaluation was offered nearly thirty years ago, and things have changed tremendously since. Nonetheless, based on my field observations, I would agree with his statement with a slight modification and state that, if not dominant, the Confucian conception of the person remains alive and well in China today. Better yet, I would in fact attest that because the Confucian project is not so much a conceptual philosophy than an applied practice, something I have documented in my interactions with Mr Ye (Chapter 3) Wai (Chapter 4), Yan (Chapter 5), and Madam Chao (Chapter 6) above, these Confucian *practices* continue to make possible the felicities of everyday life despite the aggressive cultural evisceration of rampant global modernisation. So, while I might have been disenchanted by the behavior of my landlady, it was more than made up for by the kindness and consideration Mr Ye, the real-estate agent, later showed to me. Similarly, I remain touched by the memory of Wai knocking on my door at 10 o'clock in the evening to offer herbal medicines for my sick child. And what about the hilarious afternoon I spent with Yan on her makeshift vegetable patch, hauling buckets of water from the well? And the many long chats I've had with Madam Chao in her shop?

Are these not the kinds of social occasions, mundane yet thoroughly meaningful and blissful, that one lives for? Are these not the stories one lives to be able to tell? None involved money, consumption, self-interested one-upmanship, or gain. One simply lived the moment with others and tried to maximize the possibilities that the circumstances would allow. And the joy such occasions brought invariably furnished a meaning to life beyond anything money can buy. Was this not the good life? I did notice that each of my interlocutors held deep resources within them in this regard. It seemed to involve a deep ethical responsibility towards others. Where did it come from? A Confucian upbringing that involved the nourishing of self-other relations? Whatever it was, it constituted a paradigm and vision of the good life exceeding what the modern project appears capable of offering. And it seems to be a possibility available to us, lying within us, for it is surely past time that the good life be reclaimed, re-imagined in aesthetic cultural and moral cultivation befitting our nature.

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