



SPECIAL SECTION: THE POLITICAL WORK OF NEGATIVE AFFECTS: A VIEW FROM POST-REFORM CHINA

## Developing indifference

### Youth, place-making and belonging in a transforming urban China

Maria NOLAN, *School of Oriental and African Studies London*

This article examines the social impacts of urban change among a generation of people for whom it is the norm: youth in Beijing, where decades of redevelopment have led to large-scale demolition of older neighborhoods and a perpetually changing cityscape. Studies have shown that redevelopment has led to the breakdown of traditional social bonds in China's cities, and that citizens relocated from older to newer neighborhoods may feel both a heightened sense of privacy and a greatly diminished sense of attachment to their surroundings. Today's urban youth, however, were born into such rapidly evolving and increasingly privatized environments. Drawing from twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork, I explore the extent to which these youth, accustomed to privatized and digitalized home lifestyles, experience a lack of attachment to their urban environs, and illustrate how such feelings may be articulated. Ongoing urban redevelopment, taking place alongside shifts in social life facilitated by digital media, can, I argue, produce in young urban residents a sense of place characterized by learned indifference.

Keywords: contemporary urban China, urban redevelopment and transformation, place affects, Chinese youth, indifference

I had arranged to meet Ge Fei outside his neighborhood's subway station one weekend afternoon in the spring of 2017. It was around lunchtime, and he suggested we go for a bite to eat at one of the neighborhood's restaurants, a small place that served spicy lamb skewers. Unfamiliar with the area, I was happy to go along with his suggestion. We walked away from the busy station entrance, past several large residential compounds, before arriving at a strip of small restaurants. Ge Fei stopped outside one of them, an outlet with boarded-up windows and a note pasted on the door. I followed his gaze to the façade above, where removal of the restaurant's signage had left "ghost" characters. His lamb skewer spot had disappeared. All that remained of it were the dusty outlines of characters describing what was no longer being served. Ge Fei spun around without comment and gestured towards one of the other restaurants nearby.

This is a common scenario for residents of Beijing, a city where change has become the norm. From roadside fruit vendors and bicycle repair services to restau-

rants, bars, and hair salons, any small business, it seems, may cease operations abruptly and without fanfare, often simply vanishing and leaving behind only space soon repurposed for other endeavors. This phenomenon speaks to a transience that is often considered a condition of "modern" cities in general; in Beijing, as in many other Chinese cities, it is one aspect of a broader process of seemingly relentless urban change that has taken place since the country's reforms were initiated in the 1980s and which has resulted in the city's transformation from a relatively compact center to the expansive metropolis it is today. The scale and speed of change during this period has been such that many urban neighborhoods have been completely transformed and may be unrecognizable even to people who grew up in them.

Ge Fei was a twenty-five-year-old project manager and native of Beijing. Like other young residents I came to know during my fieldwork in the city from 2016 to 2017, he had spent his early childhood in single-story housing in an older neighborhood destined for drastic



change. They now live in high-rise buildings located in apartment compounds in newer neighborhoods, like most of Beijing's population of over twenty million residents. As I navigated the constantly shifting city with them, I became intrigued by their perceptions of it and relationships to it. Studies have shown that redevelopment in the post-reform era has led to the breakdown of traditional social bonds in China's cities, and that citizens relocated from older to newer neighborhoods may feel both a heightened sense of privacy and a greatly diminished sense of attachment to their surroundings (Cockain 2012; Hewitt 2008; Miao, Wu, and Sun 2019; Zhang 2008). In Alex Cockain's research, young residents of newer neighborhoods in Beijing and Shanghai, while appreciative of the greater privacy and materially better infrastructure afforded by their new surroundings, expressed intense nostalgia and an "unsettling sense of loss" (2012: 34) in relation to the older neighborhoods which they had left behind or which had been demolished.

The young urban residents in my research were all between the ages of eighteen and thirty and as such were part of the generation born under China's one-child policy; the majority were only-children. While the research was located in Beijing, not all participants were natives of the city—some hailed from other cities in China—however almost all were long-term residents of the capital. Like the youth at the focus of Cockain's study, they have come of age in an increasingly prosperous China and have enjoyed privileges their parents could not have dreamed of having in their own youth. All were university educated or pursuing a university education, thus all came from families with adequate financial resources to pay higher education fees. By virtue of being more recent, my research was conducted among youth who had overall less lived experience of a pre-affluent China without globalizing influences, and less experience of life in older neighborhoods. Many were very young when their families moved away from them—too young to have cultivated any great sense of attachment to them. And there were few reminders: urban renovations have by now eradicated most, if not all, physical markers of their childhood days there.

I found however that, among the young people I encountered in Beijing, there was an indifference in relation to the newer neighborhoods in which they lived, a finding which resonates with that of the "feelings of emptiness" (Cockain 2012: 33) experienced by the youth in Cockain's research in relation to the neighborhoods to which they had moved. For example, Fan Rong, a graphic

designer who had been living in a large residential area east of central Beijing for roughly five years when I met her, told me that she did not have any particular feeling towards the area around her home and did not pay any attention to the changes occurring within it. She originally chose the apartment, she said, because of the location. When I asked if she would like to move to another part of Beijing, she said she would not, citing only the reason that the apartment compound was a convenient distance from her workplace.

Cockain suggested that, as residents of the high-rise buildings he was writing about had by then only occupied their apartments for a relatively short time, a sense of attachment to their surroundings had not yet had time to develop. Among the young residents I met, some had relocated multiple times within the city, and this may have facilitated a lack of attachment to any particular neighborhood. Others, however, had lived in the same newer neighborhood for the majority of their lives thus far. Lack of attachment was evident regardless of the length of time spent living in a particular neighborhood. For example, Zhao Yue, a twenty-six-year-old business development assistant, had been living in a gated compound on the outskirts of Beijing with her parents since moving there in 2003. She told me that she felt no sense of community in or around the compound, and that she never spoke with other residents, except members of her aunt's family who lived in one of the other buildings. She minimized the time she spent between her apartment and her workplace, which was a thirty-minute commute away: "I basically always go straight home [after work] . . . and won't emerge from home after that, except to buy food, go to the supermarket, things like that."

Based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing, this article attempts to account for the indifference I encountered among youth in the city in relation to their neighborhoods, as well as to shed light on the spaces that are more meaningful among them. Drawing on Edward Casey's notions of "thick" and "thin" places in everyday life—"thick" places being those characterized by a density of meaning, affect, habits, memories, relations and practices (Casey 2001)—I argue that it is the continual "thinning out" of neighborhoods brought about by ongoing redevelopment in Chinese cities such as Beijing, alongside shifts in social life facilitated by digital media, that produces in young urban residents a sense of place characterized by learned indifference. Indifference in relation to environments is often conceived of in negative terms, as it is, for example in João Biehl's (2013)



work on disregard and social abandonment in Vita, in Brazil. However, in the context of young urban dwellers in contemporary Beijing, it is conceived of in neutral terms indicative more of “low-intensity” feelings (Highmore 2017, drawing on Berlant 2011) than of those that are unambiguously negative.

In what follows, I begin by situating my argument in relation to literature that has highlighted the experiences of residents who have moved from older to newer neighborhoods in the context of China’s post-reform urban redevelopment, with particular reference to Cockain’s work among youth. I then examine briefly the notion of attachment to place and what this means in the context of an urban Chinese neighborhood, drawing on work conducted in China by anthropologists who have highlighted relatedness among individuals or households as central to identification with and feelings of attachment to a neighborhood. The following sections draw on my research in Beijing in order to illustrate my argument that indifference is in evidence among urban youth in relation to their physical surroundings as their lifestyles become more home-centered. In particular, I focus on the experiences of Ge Fei and Zhao Yue, which help to illuminate certain patterns of behavior and attitudes in relation to the use of space that I observed among the youth I encountered.

The first of these sections identifies shifts in notions and practices of home in post-reform era China that have facilitated the emergence of a trend towards home-centered lifestyles in cities like Beijing. Drawing on my encounters with Ge Fei and his flatmate Zhang Yong, this section illustrates the various ways in which the home may be for youth a central site of interaction and consumption. The second of these sections examines the nature of participants’ identifications with the areas surrounding their homes by focusing on their lack of engagement with those spaces. I argue that urban redevelopment has inhibited the cultivation of relatedness among residents who have come of age in an environment where change is normal and expected. This section also highlights the role of digital media in facilitating among participants reduced engagement with the physical environment of the city. These offline and online developments, I argue, work in tandem to produce circumstances wherein indifference to one’s immediate surroundings is normalized. The final section discusses the effects of these developments in relation to youths’ agency, bringing the focus back to the spaces wherein agency may be sought and recaptured and wherein relatedness with others in their lives

is anchored—the home and other primary institutions such as the university, and the particular online spaces that have come to be embedded in their everyday lives.

### From older to newer neighborhoods

Ge Fei finished work early one day, and we arranged to visit the older neighborhood in central Beijing where he had lived as a child. We met at the nearest subway station and set off walking along a broad commercial street south of the *hutong* (胡同)<sup>1</sup> area. It was a summer’s evening and the street was buzzing with activity. On lanes at each side, there was an endless stream of bicycles, with electric bikes blasting them out of the way. Cars honked their horns at each other and moved slowly in the rush hour traffic as we walked along the street’s crowded, narrow footpath past shops and restaurants. Pop music blared out of a small cosmetics shop; the queue in the noodle restaurant next door to it stretched out onto the path, where a group of children were chasing each other and a woman standing in line was scolding them. Further on, a group of elderly men were playing *majiang* (麻将)<sup>2</sup> on a small table on the side of the path near the bicycle lane, seemingly oblivious to the bustle around them. Another man was standing, looking at their game, hands clasped behind his back. Ge Fei, following my gaze at that moment, laughed a little and said, “this is the real Beijing.” Shortly after we arrived at the corner of the *hutong* area where he grew up.

Ge Fei comes occasionally to this area in order to visit his grandmother and other family members at their apartment compounds. The area also has a lot of restaurants and snack shops with cheap, tasty food. I followed him to a noisy canteen where we each had a bowl of fried sauce noodles, a traditional Beijing snack. Afterwards we took a

1. A network of narrow alleyways in traditional residential areas particular to Beijing and other northern Chinese cities. In Beijing, *hutong* traditionally comprise alleyways and residential courtyard compounds (四合院). Before 1949, most housing in Beijing was of the compound type, built in the Ming and Qing dynasties (fourteenth to nineteenth centuries), each occupied by a single family (Knapp 2000). In the decades following 1949, under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, many compound residences were destroyed or utilized as mass housing complexes as all urban land became the property of the people (Davis 1993).
2. A popular Chinese game played, usually by four people, using a set of rectangular-shaped tiles.



couple of shared bicycles and cycled through the hutong, some of the alleys quiet, others noisy and choked with people and their bicycles and motorbikes and here and there a fruit seller, a steamed bun vendor, a hair salon, a shop selling soft drinks and cigarettes. The whole area had been transformed since Ge Fei was young and when I asked him to point out where he used to live, it seemed that it was hard for him to remember what was where exactly. His family had long since moved from the courtyard home they had inhabited somewhere beyond one of those tall gray brick walls.

As I later learned, Ge Fei did not spend much time reminiscing about his early years in the multi-household residence which no longer existed. He was just nine years old when his family left it. While he obliged when I asked him to show me the area where he grew up, it was clear that he saw little point in discussing his childhood there, giving short responses to my questions. Although the hutong and surrounding streets still showed some signs of “the real Beijing”—the majiang players, the snacks he ate as a child—renovations had eliminated almost all physical aspects of his childhood past, and the impression he gave me was that, by virtue of it being the past, it was not worth talking about. The memories he did share with me about the multi-household residence he had run around and played in as a child were not particularly fond: it was dusty and attracted insects, there were no private toilet facilities, and, living together with seven other families, it was noisy and—most unbearable for Ge Fei—there was no privacy. “You would always be disturbed.” Moreover, everyone knew everyone else’s business. “After lunch, [the families] liked to talk with each other . . . in the yard . . . just chat about domestic trivia . . . gossip about others . . . they *liked* to do this! I can’t stand this . . . others talking about me, coming into my private space.”

Ge Fei’s attitude towards the older neighborhood in which he spent his early childhood contrasts markedly with those of the urban Chinese youth at the focus of Cockain’s (2012) study, who had spent much more of their youth in older neighborhoods. Cockain’s research drew significantly from data generated in Beijing among participants in their late teens and early twenties from middle-income families in the years up to 2010. It discusses participants’ experiences of living in newer neighborhoods and the older neighborhoods from which some had only recently moved. Two aspects emerged most prominently in the discussion of life in older urban areas: lack of space, and close contact with neighbors. The cramped living conditions within the low-rise, densely occupied

housing of older neighborhoods facilitated a tight-knit social fabric within which, as Cockain remarks, distinctions between inside and outside and between private and public space were blurred. Naturally enough, life lived in such close proximity with neighbors was often felt to be claustrophobic among youth in Cockain’s study, and they greatly appreciated the more modern infrastructure of the new neighborhoods, which offered space for privacy.

After moving to the newer neighborhoods, however, these young people expressed intense nostalgia for what they had left behind. Prominent in their recollections were the everyday interactions with other people in their surroundings. Participants recalled with warmth the intimate contact with neighbors with whom they would often eat, and friends with whom they played in the indoor and outdoor spaces of the neighborhood. Feelings of warmth in relation to the older neighborhoods set in contrast those of “emptiness” in relation to their newer surroundings (2012: 33). Without social ties in the high-rise buildings to which they had moved, they were without any sense of community in their newer neighborhoods, the lack of contact with neighbors prompting one participant to view community as “a relic of the past” (2012: 33). As Cockain remarks, the greater space and new levels of privacy afforded to residents of the high-rises, as well as their more substantial economic and material resources, meant that they were not obliged to interact with or be involved in the affairs of their neighbors, and had less need for their support.

Feelings of loss and emptiness in relation to the older and newer urban areas respectively have been discerned by others, for example Hewitt, who observed that for residents in Beijing, leaving the older neighborhood meant leaving everything familiar, “the scattering of an entire way of life” (2008: 14), and Evans (2020), whose work has documented the drastic effects of urban transformation on the lives of the inhabitants of one of Beijing’s poorest neighborhoods. Zhang, in a study conducted among residents of newer neighborhoods in the city of Kunming, found that they felt isolated and “sense[d] a lack of any social and cultural cohesion among the residents” (2008: 34). To each other they were “merely ‘strangers’ surrounded by walls and gates” (2008: 32). Zhang noted that in both “middle-stratum” and lower-income neighborhoods, the lack of familiarity felt by residents towards their new surroundings was accompanied by a latent sense of insecurity. While lower-income residential areas were more open and without the high walls and



security cameras of more upscale compounds, fear of theft in these neighborhoods was such that individual families were motivated to install metal bars over their windows and balconies—security measures that would become ubiquitous in residential areas across urban China.

Walls and gates have long served as symbols of spatial ordering and of place in China, as Friedmann (2007) pointed out. They had the function of keeping unwanted others out, but also of organizing those within. In imperial China, architecture was based on the compound household form, a structure enclosed by walls which was endlessly replicated, extending from household forms to urban design (Dutton 1998). In the decades following 1949, under Communist Party rule, work unit compounds were walled and gated, and, in a reworking of traditional household relations, communities were formed behind the high walls and guarded entrances. With reforms, a new “walled culture” emerged in Chinese cities (Yang 1998: 210).

As with older compound walls, newer ones segregate and promote an insular orientation; however, the above studies found there to be no significant sense of community or social solidarity emerging behind newer walls. In spite of attempts made by municipal governments to stimulate bonds between neighbors in newer residential areas through, for example, building neighborhood service centers and implementing community service policies, it seems that residents have generally been unresponsive to bureaucratic efforts to construct solidarity and strengthen the sense of place around their homes. Cockain made the point that social solidarity would take time to develop, and suggested that in fact newer neighborhoods were “in some ways conducive to communal experiences” (2012: 32). While in older neighborhoods space was visibly limited, newer ones tended to provide more designated spaces for leisure, such as parks, for the kinds of communal experiences that would contribute to building attachment to a neighborhood. As the later sections of this article aim to show, there is little sense, from the perspectives of young residents of these neighborhoods, that such attachment has emerged.

### Place and affect in contemporary urban China

In considering what facilitates attachment to places, it is useful to draw on Edward Casey’s notions of “thick” and “thin” places in everyday life. Casey introduced these concepts in an attempt to probe the connection between affect and place. Thick places are those that facilitate a deepening of meaning and of affective experience—

those that present opportunities for the self’s “concernful absorption” (Casey 2001: 684–85). They are characterized by a density of meaning, affect, habits, memories, relations, and practices. Thin places, in contrast, lack “the rigor and substance of thickly lived places” and are “open to continual reshaping” (Casey 2001: 684) such that they inhibit the building of attachment. Places, as Thrift (2004) has pointed out, may evolve and mutate affectively in accordance with the various practices and encounters experienced within them. It is in the context of this relational understanding that Casey attempts to account for the varying degrees of affective intensity.

While Casey’s work has provided little clarity on how and why thick places emerge, Cameron Duff (2010) suggests that affective engagement with place—the embedding of feelings, memory, and capacities—creates an intensity that facilitates the creation of thick places, with affect residing in the dynamic between places and bodies. In Duff’s exploration of the experiences of place among youth in Vancouver, thick places were identified not only in conventional contexts such as school and home, but in all kinds of marginal spaces, such as stairwells and public parks, which “thread[ed] local places together,” facilitating a sense of community and belonging (Duff 2010: 893).

Building attachment to place requires work, as other scholars (i.e., Massey 2005; Tilley 2006) have also pointed out. Massey (2005) argues that it is through the ongoing construction of relations that space is made meaningful. Based on this proposition, space can be further understood, according to Massey, as acquiring meaning through “the possibility of the existence of multiplicity,” that is, through the gathering together of multiple distinct, open-ended trajectories (2005: 9). Space is thus dynamic and always unfinished: “precisely because space . . . is a product of relation-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made” (2005: 9).

This understanding resonates with the idea put forward by Stephan Feuchtwang (2004) in work on place-making in China, that places are continually made and remade as centers of belonging. Following this logic, Feuchtwang argues that in the context of globalization, “deterritorialisation . . . is in reality always in the service of a reterritorialisation, either that of a state project or that of a capitalist economic project, usually both” (2004: 3). State projects may destroy or empty that which was centered and meaningful, but place is always “re-made out of such emptying” (2004: 3). Places are usually identified by



names, and, as other scholars including Massey have also pointed out, they are marked and bounded in different ways by the people who refer to them and live in them. Thus it follows that there are degrees to which people feel a sense of (belonging or attachment to) a particular place.

In the context of China's hyperrapid urbanization and urban redevelopment, place is eroded and remade in the imagination of the state authorities. If we accept however that place is constituted by interactions and is continually under construction, we can infer that places in this context may be recreated as those to which its inhabitants build attachment over time. As Feuchtwang notes, "even under the most forceful state projects . . . place-making is possible in negotiation with the state" (2004: 3). Place, in Feuchtwang's sense, involves a centering that is potentially unbounded. It is the centering—of interaction—that gives place interiority, or, as Casey would put it, "thickness." Central to this process, then, is communication among people who know each other.

If, as Cockain suggested, newer neighborhoods in China's cities are somewhat conducive to sociality on account of the spaces provided in them specifically for interaction and experience, what might be inhibiting sociality in these spaces such that feelings of emptiness towards them may persist? Place-making is of course a process that takes time, and it would be absurd to expect that such depth of social solidarity as that associated with older neighborhoods could have already emerged in newer neighborhoods. Hutong have been part of Beijing for at least five hundred years and those living in them had created a depth of interiority such that the term "hutong" became synonymous over time with the distinctive way of life there. Like older neighborhoods throughout urban China, hutong are conceived and remembered by the particular configuration of social relations maintained through what Stafford refers to as *laiwang* (来往, literally "come and go"), the "back-and-forth" movement between nonkin who have a relationship of mutual assistance (2000: 46).

That newer neighborhoods lack such patterns does not mean that there is an absence of sociality or that solidarity is not emerging among some groups within them. In many of the parks and squares of newer neighborhoods in Beijing, for example, older residents can be seen engaging in forms of sociality such as ballroom dancing. It is not my intention to argue that newer neighborhoods hold little or no meaning for all of the inhabitants of them. This article is specifically concerned with the experiences of young residents, among whom there

is little or no experience of older forms of sociality and who are habituated to physical environments characterized by change. What inhibits attachment from developing among young residents, I argue, is this continual disruption, or "thinning out," of their surroundings that has taken place alongside important shifts in relation to the structures and practices of home and developments in digital media, which will be discussed below.

### Intensification of home-centered lifestyles

When we met, Ge Fei had been living with a friend, Zhang Yong, for two years in an apartment compound on the eastern outskirts of Beijing. They had both attended the university nearby, and had lived on campus throughout their undergraduate studies—normal practice at mainland Chinese universities, even for students whose families live locally. By the time their final year of study was drawing to an end, they had decided to split rent on a spacious, affordable two-bedroom apartment they found in a neighborhood in the same district. Not long after getting settled there, they both found jobs in the Central Business District. Ge Fei invited me to have lunch at their apartment one Saturday afternoon, on one of several visits I made to the area to meet with him and his flatmate. He met me outside the nearest subway station, and after a short bus journey north, we walked down a quiet residential street towards a large entrance gate.

A compound with eight high-rise residential units, a car park, and an internal public space for residents with an open play area for children, it was a typical example of the kind of gated compound that has become the predominant residential pattern in Chinese cities. Guards provided a security presence at the gate, and a key card was needed to enter the compound. Residents, from my observations, did not acknowledge each other as they passed each other at the gate or while walking inside the compound. Ge Fei told me he knew none of the other residents. Once inside, a digital code was required for access to each residential unit. The hallway in the unit where Ge Fei and Zhang Yong lived was large and empty and provided no evidence of the unit's occupancy. There were two sets of doors to their top floor apartment.

Shoes came off in the hallway between the two sets of doors, where Ge Fei and Zhang Yong changed into slippers to wear inside the apartment. The living room was large and barely furnished: just a sofa—the site of discarded packaging from online purchases—and a



cabinet supporting a flat screen TV, both of which were covered in dust. The view from the living room revealed clusters of low-rise and high-rise apartment blocks stretching for miles into the distance. Zhang Yong emerged from his room and we chatted over a lunch that Ge Fei and I had set out. Ge Fei joked that Zhang Yong had never cooked anything for himself; his meals were generally ordered online to be delivered. Ge Fei himself was also a frequent user of Eleme, the food delivery app, and only cooked on the occasional weekend. Zhang Yong, who spent much of his free time playing online games at home, soon excused himself and disappeared back into his room.

Ge Fei also played online games, but mostly on weekends. On weekday nights, by the time he had eaten supper and finished up any extra work on his computer, he would try to sleep early so as to get up early and avoid the most crowded subway carriages on his commute to work. On weekends, his preference was to stay at home. While sometimes Saturday or Sunday was partly spent having lunch or dinner with family in their neighborhoods, or meeting friends at a restaurant, he liked to spend at least one full weekend day in his room. Upon waking on such a day, he would spend the morning scrolling through WeChat posts, watching funny short videos, and checking out his favorite live-streamers. He would usually plan to spend weekend afternoons reading books and articles, particularly those that might help him in his work, but he would often spend the rest of the day watching downloaded movies, or playing his new favorite multiplayer battle royale game with friends online. Sometimes he would forget about dinner, and, after darkness had descended on the compound, he would order dumplings or a rice dish online.

Ge Fei's room, in contrast to other areas of the apartment, was decorated with great care. He told me that he had purchased most of its contents on Taobao,<sup>3</sup> aside from a couple of pieces of furniture that were already there when he moved in. In one corner under the air conditioning unit, there was a long white desk on which was placed a humidifier, his computer, and a pile of books he planned to read. A large sofa with cushions lined the wall on the other side of the room, providing a comfortable spot for long gaming sessions. His room, Ge Fei told me, was the place where he felt at his most comfortable and relaxed. A junior employee at his boss's company, he worked long hours during the week and greatly valued time spent at home where he could relax and engage in

3. An online shopping website.

his favorite activities. At the same time, Ge Fei had no particular feelings of attachment to the apartment itself or to the compound, and told me not long after we met that he was thinking about moving. He figured he could now afford to live somewhere that would make his work commute a bit less time-consuming. One of his colleagues had told him about an app for apartment leasing which is aimed at young professionals. Ge Fei loved the app and spent hours on it at home looking at photos of various apartments and rooms all over Beijing.

The emergence of a trend towards such home-centered lifestyles as those enjoyed by Ge Fei and Zhang Yong can be traced back to the early years of China's post-reform urban redevelopment. It was only in the 1980s, with the onset of mass construction of private urban housing enabled by reforms, that acquisition of a private home became a possibility for urban residents. For families who could afford to do so, buying a private home was the first step in creating an intimate, family-centered sphere beyond the realm of the party-state as well as "a domestic lifestyle in which the home is the central site for social interaction and consumption" (Fraser 2000: 27). Extensive privatization of housing and ensuing shifts in the urban landscape throughout the 1980s and 1990s drastically altered notions and practices of home for citizens. As the party-state continued to encourage the development of a consumer culture and citizens amassed new wealth, new consumption practices emerged, facilitated by a vast expansion and proliferation in all forms of media, which provided powerful messages about what appropriate home-making practices should be.

In his interpretation of Shanghai real estate advertisements in the late 1990s, David Fraser showed that while luxury housing advertisements in the city foregrounded the feature of "oasis," advertising for lower-income housing complexes used a rhetoric that emphasized the opportunity to create a "lifestyle apart" from the noise and bustle of the city environment (Fraser 2000: 33). While noting that "oasis" could hardly be considered the dominant social aesthetic in contemporary Shanghai, Fraser argued that it was something its residents dreamed about. City dwellers, he emphasized, sought an enhanced domesticity which allowed for creative use of time, space, and personal resources. Li Zhang observed similar advertising in the city of Kunming, noting its rhetorical emphasis on the prospect of new "distinct lifestyles" centered on notions of privacy, comfort, and security (2008: 39). According to Zhang, housing segregation, and in particular the rise of upscale gated communities, was creating a dual process:



“the spatial differentiation of people by community based on private wealth, and the atomization of individual families within each housing compound based on a heightened sense of privacy” (2008: 35).

This was the environment into which Ge Fei and his peers were born and in which they spent their formative years—a context wherein the older housing and neighborhood were seen as lacking and the modern, private apartment as enabling a way of life to be desired and strived for. Ge Fei’s attitude towards the shared residence in which he spent his early childhood years aligns with prevailing attitudes of the post-reform era in this regard—that such places were best left behind. The excitement of moving to a new apartment and the vastly different experience of residential life there dominated and shaped his childhood memories of courtyard and hutong life. The apartment to which he and his parents moved was described as everything his previous home was not: modern, clean, spacious, private. The family would move several times over the years until Ge Fei left home for university, however this move was the most significant. For the first time, Ge Fei had a room of his own, and was living in a place where neighbors were restricted from coming into the family’s home, where “[neighbors] won’t disturb each other.” Unlike among Cockain’s participants, there was no painful sense of detachment upon leaving the older neighborhood for Ge Fei, as he was not much attached to it in the first place—he was too young to have cultivated there the kinds of lasting social ties that made leaving older neighborhoods painful for those who had spent more time in them.

Ge Fei and other urban youth who were born in the 1980s and 1990s grew up in an environment in which the ideal home was one that provided the opportunity to create a “lifestyle apart” not only from neighbors but also from the outside generally. A modern home provided an escape from noise, crowds, and concerns regarding safety which had become heightened among long-term urban citizens in the post-reform era as restrictions on spatial mobility were lifted and tens of millions of people from rural areas arrived in cities, legally or illegally, for work.<sup>4</sup> Concerns regarding security in Beijing’s residential areas, whether upscale or not, have intensified over

4. Economic migrants, constituting the so-called “floating population” in cities, have long been viewed with suspicion in China (Dutton 1998; Barmé 1999). In an article about a large migrant settlement on the outskirts of Beijing, Zhang (2001) writes that, in the social imagination of most Beijing residents, economic migrants were free

time. This is evident from the now widespread presence of surveillance cameras in these areas. It was also reflected in the high level of attention to security at the compound where Ge Fei and Zhang Yong rented their relatively ordinary, inexpensive apartment. With little sign of any communality within the compound, it appeared that its primary function was in providing layers of security for residents’ homes. Security was also a major feature of the apartment to which Ge Fei eventually moved, which had digital security on doors including on that of Ge Fei’s own room—a feature which provided reassurance to Ge Fei who was nervous about the prospect of moving into an apartment with people he did not know.

Human activity in Chinese cities has become ever more concentrated in the home in the years since these changes to urban life took hold. Among youth, a tendency towards home-centered lifestyles has been particularly driven by a reduction in the number of spaces for leisure, as will be discussed in the following section, along with developments in Chinese digital media that enable young people like Ge Fei and Zhang Yong to chat and play games with their friends, order meals and shop for virtually any item, and engage in a host of other communication and entertainment activities, from participating in a work conference call to livestreaming and online dating, without leaving their apartments. For both, home provided respite from pressured work environments where they both often worked overtime, and once at home, there were few reasons to leave unless again for work or for other obligations such as a family get-together or the occasional meetup with friends. In this context, the neighborhood and the broader outside environment fades in relevance, and home becomes something that can be recreated in another neighborhood with relative ease, as it was in Ge Fei’s case when he moved to a new apartment.

### **Lack of engagement with neighborhoods and wider urban environments**

Among youth who have relocated multiple times within a city (as in Ge Fei’s case) or between cities (as was

---

from the moral accountability they had in their distant hometowns, and stories that circulated about their illegal activities fed into perceptions of them as a threat to the existing urban social order. As Lu (2018) observes, the migrant population continues to be regarded by local authorities as a homogeneous, high-crime group and their spaces and ways of life at odds with the city’s official modernizing and civilizing projects.





the case for participants who came to Beijing from elsewhere), a lack of attachment to a particular neighborhood is perhaps unsurprising. If a feeling of attachment to a particular environment is something that is developed over time, it would appear that intention to remain in that environment also plays a role in this process. Among participants who had spent much of their lives in the same newer neighborhood, however, a similar lack of attachment to their surroundings was evident. Twenty-six-year-old Zhao Yue was one such participant.

Until she was nine years old, Zhao Yue lived with her extended family in one of Beijing's older neighborhoods. In 1999, she moved with her parents to an apartment they had bought in a newer neighborhood. It was small and cramped, and in 2003 they sold it and bought a more spacious home. The three-bedroom apartment to which they moved was located in a compound with eight six-floor buildings. As their apartment was situated on the ground floor, they had a small garden in which her mother, who had planted flowers there, enjoyed spending time, observing the comings and goings within the compound. Zhao Yue was still living there with her parents when I met her, having left only for a period while attending university.

Like Ge Fei, Zhao Yue spent almost all of her free time at home. On weekdays she would usually leave the office where she worked by 6 p.m., going straight home. After dinner with her parents, she would try not to "waste time online" by watching TV shows or playing online games but try to research strategies for improving her performance at work. But some evenings, if she was feeling tired, she would join her parents in the living room to watch a movie, or get into bed and watch a TV show on her tablet computer. Watching TV shows was Zhao Yue's favorite way to relax, and her favorites included a Chinese version of a talk show created in the United States in which celebrities are mocked, and a Chinese spinoff of a popular South Korean talk show where a panel of foreigners living in China discuss topics in Chinese to audience laughter. At weekends she would usually spend the morning in bed on her phone, checking new WeChat posts, watching short videos on social media platforms Weibo and Douyin, looking at recipes, and messaging with friends including a new male friend she had met recently while playing an online game. Occasionally she would go to meet a friend for lunch, but more often she would stay at home, doing chores and preparing dishes for dinner with her parents and aunt's family.

Zhao Yue told me that while her mother, who had been retired for five years, knew everyone who lived

in the building, she herself did not know or speak to anyone who lived in the compound apart from her relatives who lived in the adjacent building. "The people living [in the apartment] opposite us . . . They must be living there for ten years [but] I have never gotten to know them. We don't have anything in common." She went on to say that it was normal in Beijing for people not to know their neighbors. Her mother liked to greet other residents while outside, she said, "[but] I don't have this kind of communication with them."

Indeed, other participants spoke similarly of a lack of interaction with neighbors, regardless of the length of time they had been living in their neighborhood. Deng Li, a young professional who had been living with his parents in their apartment for approximately six years, said that he only saw neighbors in the hallways when using the elevator and rarely spoke with them. To talk with them "would feel a bit weird (奇怪) . . . awkward (尴尬)." Another participant joked that, although he had been living "for a few years" in his apartment, the list of names that would appear on his device when connecting to his Wi-Fi network was the extent of his knowledge of the other residents in his apartment building. Far from craving a stable, supportive neighborhood network as the youth in Cockain's study did, participants seemed to experience the lack of interaction positively. A good neighbor was often considered to be someone who was not noisy, and, as one female participant, a postgraduate student, put it, "someone who doesn't bother others."

While Zhao Yue spent little time engaging with the people and spaces of her immediate outdoor surroundings, it was also the case that she spent little of her free time in any particular spaces in the city. She was not averse to traveling to different parts of the city, for example, to go on a date or meet a friend at a café or restaurant, however these outings were infrequent and it seemed that she had little interest in particular locations. When on several occasions we agreed to have a meal together at a restaurant, my suggestion that she choose the restaurant was always met with the suggestion that we choose whatever restaurant was "trending" on Dianping<sup>5</sup> in an area equidistant from our locations. The ideal spot for her was somewhere highly rated and near a subway station to minimize time spent walking in

5. A popular dining app that directs users to the most highly rated restaurants in a particular area, allows them to access the location of a restaurant on a map, read reviews, see pictures of its most popular dishes, reserve a table.



the streets. Zhao Yue felt a latent insecurity while in unfamiliar locations in the city. This was a pattern I noticed particularly among the female participants. Streets and other outdoor spaces were often perceived as unsafe, owing to the possibility of theft or other street crime occurring. Most uncomfortable, for Zhao Yue, were those spaces which were “completely unfamiliar” and in which the mass of people consisted of “all sorts” (什么样的人都有).

Cockain reported similar feelings among the participants in his research—part of a general ambivalence towards city life. While the young people he encountered were enthusiastic about the range of leisure and shopping opportunities available to them, “the rather more dominant impression to emerge was that cities were felt to be frustrating, and were typically seen in rather more negative terms” (2012: 39). Aspects of urban life such as noise, pollution, and crowds contributed to these dystopian feelings towards the city, however a sense of “wariness, suspicion and fear” also permeated, emerging, Cockain suggested, as a response to the juxtaposition between old and new, or, referencing de Certeau, “those manifestations of ‘extremes’ and ‘brutal oppositions’” brought about by urban redevelopment (2012: 48). Cockain outlined various strategies these youth employed in order to distance themselves emotionally from the city, including avoiding spaces experienced as alienating or dangerous, and mediating the city through the use of devices to, for example, listen to music, which helped them to create what one participant described as “a private shell which protects me” (2012: 48). Such behaviors were motivated by youths’ attempts to obtain a sense of security in an urban environment experienced as alienating and potentially unsafe.

For the youth in Cockain’s research, positive aspects of city life were associated with specific spaces for leisure or entertainment, such as shopping malls, coffee shops, karaoke bars, Internet cafés, and pool halls, which provided a separation from the chaos of the streets. Among the youth I encountered, cafés and restaurants were the most popular spaces for leisure. This was the case among both university students and young professionals. For example, Li Wei, a first-year undergraduate student, and his dorm mates would join other students for dinner once a week at a restaurant outside the campus (where the food was considered better than that in the university’s canteen); this was their main weekly social outing. Liu Rui, a postgraduate student, preferred to socialize with friends in her or their room on campus, however when she did leave the campus, her preference

was to go to a café or restaurant where she and her friends could chat over a drink or a meal. The regularity with which participants posted food-related content on their WeChat accounts—a phenomenon that reflects the digitally-enabled “foodie” (吃货) culture that has emerged in China in recent years—also attested to the popularity of such spaces among them.

Such spaces are altogether less specifically youth-oriented than those utilized by the young participants in Cockain’s study. Cafés and restaurants may be frequented, in Chinese cities as elsewhere, by people of all ages. That these are the urban spaces to which participants were most likely to gravitate is, I argue, a consequence of the wave of developments in digital media that have occurred alongside ongoing redevelopment leading to a reduction in youth-oriented spaces in China’s cities. Online shopping, during the period of Cockain’s research, was becoming an increasingly popular activity in China as is evident from a surge in the use of websites like Taobao during that time. Such websites have provided youth with alternative ways to consume while allowing them to avoid the negative aspects of spending time in the city, bringing about a decline in the importance of shopping streets and malls and in behaviors like strolling or “window-shopping” (逛街). And the Internet café, once an extremely popular hangout space among young Chinese, has faded in significance as gamers favor playing on their own digital devices at home over paying café subscriptions.

Additionally, a particular strain of city life commonly associated with youth—bars, night clubs, music venues, and similar establishments—has been specifically targeted in redevelopment drives in recent years. In Beijing, such spaces first emerged in the 1990s, with a massive expansion in the quantity and variety of establishments across the city by the early 2000s which attracted growing numbers of both foreigners and Chinese youth. As the historical inner-city hutong neighborhoods became increasingly popular tourist destinations, they sprouted numerous stylish cocktail bars, cafes, and restaurants, as well as music venues. Over the years I spent living part of my own youth in Beijing I often frequented these spaces and encountered in them young people from cities and provinces all over China who had come to Beijing to pursue study or work. By the time I was conducting this research in 2016 and 2017, many of these businesses had closed due to targeted renovations. Districts catering to bars and other nightlife establishments have, since their emergence in Chinese cities, been associated with



disorderly urban excess, even deviance, but they were also spaces where youth subcultures flourished. The demolition of individual premises over time had the effect both of breaking up these subcultures and “thinning out,” as Casey would put it, for youth a place with which they had engaged.

Fan Rong, a graphic designer who had moved to Beijing from her hometown in Guangdong province five years before I met her, was particularly affected by these changes. After she had moved to and settled down to life in Beijing, she was drawn to the hutong neighborhoods where some of her friends and acquaintances lived and socialized. She spent many an evening in the small, smoky bars and music venues that were scattered around the older neighborhoods north and northeast of the Forbidden City. A majority of these places no longer exist. She told me: “I don’t enjoy [living in Beijing] that much now. It’s not the same as before. There aren’t so many events, interesting things going on . . . [with the demolition of] a lot of hutong, [the city has] a very different feeling now.” Fan Rong, however, had a stronger opinion about the diminishing number of hutong bars and night spots than those of other youth with whom I interacted, particularly local youth. It occurred to me that this was perhaps because, as an “outsider” in Beijing, she sought a sense of connection and belonging in these spaces; and with all of her family in distant Guangdong, she was more removed from family expectations and obligations than youth who lived with or near their families. It was also telling that photos she would post on WeChat of herself in and around bars and other nightlife establishments or that placed her in such spaces would be “hidden” from her family, who, she told me, might disapprove of her being in them.

In light of the dwindling number of youth spaces in Beijing, it is hard to disagree with De Kloet and Fung’s point that redevelopment has led to the “constant deterritorialization” of youth in China’s urban settings (2017: 26). Such a process has also had the effect of lending a particular transience to cities that would inhibit cultivation of attachment to specific spaces—Ge Fei’s blasé attitude to the sudden disappearance of his favorite neighborhood kebab spot was apt for someone who has come of age in this environment. At the same time, digital media are actively reshaping the nature of youths’ relationships with their physical surroundings. While enabling people to engage in leisure activities as well as conduct much of their everyday lives without leaving their homes, digital media are also facilitating a reduction in engage-

ment with spaces outside the home when people do leave them, with mobile apps like WeChat facilitating a digital overlay of the physical environment and everyday urban situations. One only needs to observe the behaviors of people on subway carriages, streets, or in any other public spaces in Beijing to see the extent to which collective attention is absorbed by smartphones and other digital devices. The development of a digital overlay has changed city behaviors, enabling continual connectivity with close ties and changing our sense of presence in relation to our surroundings (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012; Manovich 2006).

In addition, time spent in spaces outside the home is potentially minimized through the microcoordination of offline social activities through digital media. Zhao Yue’s preference to offload to Dianping the task of choosing a location and restaurant in which to meet provides an example of this. Following a face-to-face meeting with two other female participants, Yang Qiuyi and Liu Yang, I reflected on how our use of apps to coordinate and conduct the meeting effectively minimized both time spent in the outdoor urban environment as well as everyday encounters with unknown others. On our WeChat group, we decided on a time and area in which to meet, and, after agreeing to have our discussion at a restaurant, posted suggestions from Dianping for restaurants in the area. After making a booking at a particular restaurant, we met at the reserved table. No time was wasted wandering around the area, looking for a suitable restaurant, or waiting in line for a table. Once seated, we ordered dishes through the restaurant’s mobile ordering system, which minimized our interaction with restaurant staff. En route from my home to the restaurant by subway, much of my attention was absorbed by my phone. After the meal, Liu Yang used Didi Chuxing, a mobile transportation app, to arrange her transport home, which reduced time spent outside. In all of these ways, digital mobile technologies absorb attention and facilitate tight coordination of social activities such that the possibility of unplanned or chance encounters with people, places, or things in the urban environment can be greatly reduced.

Such technologies have been blamed for disconnecting people from their surroundings and from people around them (see, for example, Turkle 2011). However, as de Souza e Silva and Frith (2012) have argued, people have been using personal mobile technologies to “filter out” their surroundings and avoid interacting with others at least as far back as the popularization of the paperback novel. These scholars, along with others (for



example, Evans and Saker 2017) attest to the position that usage of mobile technologies does not necessarily involve users being removed from their surroundings. De Souza e Silva and Frith (2012) point out that, by working as interfaces to public spaces, mobile technologies enable people to control and manage how they interact with their surroundings; moreover, location-aware mobile technologies, they argue, facilitate in strengthening people's connections to spaces by helping them to locate others and things. New types of spaces emerge—those which are “findable” on mobile interfaces—to which people attach meaning and contribute sociability.

I would argue, following Coyne (2010), that location-based technologies render the city disorienting precisely because through their use one does not need to know how to orient oneself. Their use as part of the tactics of everyday urban living indeed may not necessarily involve people withdrawing from their surroundings; however, it is difficult to dispute that they greatly facilitate in minimizing people's interactions with them. In the context of urban China, they enable people not only to inhabit their own privatized public spaces but also to navigate environments that may not be considered safe and that are continually made unfamiliar through redevelopment. Navigating the urban environment without such devices may be perceived as highly inefficient, stressful, and even dangerous. The cultivation of meaningful spaces remains difficult in the context of continuing redevelopment, and developments in digital media have done much more to facilitate the intensification of home-based lifestyles and of indifference towards urban surroundings than they have in enabling the creation of meaningful urban spaces in this context.

### Indifference and belonging

It is also evident from the discussion so far that, with regard to place-making in China's urban environments, participants are positioned within what Sianne Ngai has referred to as a “situation of restricted agency” (2005: 2). In the context of the urban place erosion and remaking that occurs under state initiatives to create a modern, civilized China, the actions of ordinary young Chinese in relation to place-making are inevitably limited. This is not to say that place-making cannot or does not occur among them; as Feuchtwang (2004) has pointed out, such action is possible even under the most forceful government initiatives. However, it is ultimately the state

that decides which kinds of spaces may become meaningful for youth. The small hutong neighborhood bars to which Fan Rong was attached and which were demolished were considered by Beijing's authorities to have no place there. The cultivation of attachment to places, a process that, as noted, requires work, is inhibited by such actions, and more generally by perceptions of the city as characterized by ongoing, rapid change among a generation of people who have only known it in that way.

Such conditions generate a situation of “passivity,” as Ngai (2005) may describe it, in relation to youth place-making. If emotions are necessarily involved in forms of action, as Ngai suggests, then minimal engagement with urban spaces will generate feelings towards them that are defined by “a flatness or ongoingness” and by a “weak intentionality” (2005: 7, 22). While blocked or thwarted action may bring about irritation or paranoia or other mildly negative feelings of the kind that Ngai describes, avoidance, as an adaptive response to long-standing blocked or thwarted action, will give rise to feelings of indifference that are not negative but neutral. Feelings that arise from situations of passivity, Ngai writes, not only illustrate the situation but are critical to the functioning of it, “the very lubricants” (2005: 4) of it. Ngai cites as an example the feelings of disenchantment that once characterized situations of alienation from the system of wage labor, which are now integrated into contemporary capitalist production itself in the form of, for example, insecurity about losing one's place. These weakly intentional feelings are unsuitable for “forceful or unambiguous action” (2005: 27). With even less valence, feelings and attitudes of indifference that exist among youth in relation to the physical environment in urban China allow for minimal disruption of state place-making, and help to perpetuate the passivity that results from conditions of restricted agency.

One clear effect of this “situation of restricted agency” in relation to the physical urban environment is the seeking and recapturing of agency in other spaces, most notably, online spaces. With the “thinning out” of urban space for youth comes a “thickening” of particular digital spaces where time is spent, where connections with people are made and maintained and where affect comes to reside. Online gaming worlds such as those which engaged Ge Fei and Zhang Yong, and many other participants, provided spaces through which they gained a sense of their own agency through fighting foes and achieving goals alongside other players as part of a team. While such worlds provided opportunities to set aside feelings of



pressure in relation to study or work—to forget about “real-life society” (现实生活社会), as Zhao Yue put it—they also facilitated deep interactivity with other young people. Zhao Yue described how she loved the feeling of being in a team, of working hard together to achieve a goal: “you will feel it’s really interesting!” Players actively inject sociability into their communication in these worlds in different ways, whether through interacting with strangers, maintaining relationships with friends, or cultivating new kinds of relationships, such as a potential romantic one, as was the case for Zhao Yue. Such platforms were meaningful spaces for participants who spent long hours in them, and as such acquired a “thickness,” replete as they were “with all manner of enriching moments” (Duff 2010: 892).

Other online spaces which youth gravitate towards and which may provide agency, interactivity, and feelings of belonging, are social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin. No digital platform has done more to facilitate the shift of relatedness away from offline spaces in China than WeChat. While Weibo and Douyin, as more public-facing platforms, provide opportunities to engage in particular forms of self-expression and informal sociality that are virtually inaccessible offline, most participants used them only to browse content; it was WeChat that dominated as the space in which they spent time interacting with others, cultivating relationships, and expressing themselves. While facilitating interactions between both strong and weak ties, the multipurpose app provides a personalized space for each user through which content may be shared. Participants spent a great deal of time scrolling on their WeChat timelines, checking out, “liking” and commenting on others’ content such as photos, video clips, or links to articles, and posting their own content. Their WeChat profiles were spaces both to interact and express their identities through the posting of their thoughts, ideas, and opinions in the content they shared or “liked” or commented on. Their profiles, built on over time, housed memories, and were deeply meaningful to participants, who often referred to them as representations or records of their lives. Such shared content contributed in the building of relatedness among users. Relationships are strengthened on WeChat, as they were between participants and me, because, as one male participant, Teng Yi, a twenty-four-year-old native of Hubei, put it, “we can see each other’s daily life.”

While the particular concentration of youths’ activity in online spaces and in the physical space of the home arise in part, I argue, from conditions of restricted agency,

such activity effectively perpetuates feelings of indifference that may arise from these conditions. In this context, the physical environment outside of the home becomes increasingly irrelevant. This is not to say that the city is without any meaningful spaces for young people. For example, Ge Fei, after graduating from university in Beijing, liked to visit the campus every so often just to stroll around it and maybe join the students there for a game of basketball. This was a place he had lived in and identified with for three years, and, even though he had already graduated and no longer had friends on the campus, he liked the feeling of being there: it was a place embedded with warm memories, particularly in relation to the close friendships he had made there. Ge Fei’s feelings of attachment to the university influenced his decision to seek an apartment with Zhang Yong after graduation in the vicinity of the campus. Once his classmates had left, however, and his interactions with them came to be conducted almost exclusively online via WeChat groups, Ge Fei felt little connection with the neighborhood, knowing no one in it, in spite of having lived in it for three years.

There was a high degree of affective intensity for high school and university among most of the young people with whom I communicated. While university was usually associated with feelings of happiness, high school more often brought up intense but ambivalent feelings: those of immense pressure to succeed in the college entrance examination, but also those of warmth and belonging that came from being part of a tight-knit class group who spent long hours together every day. Feelings of attachment to these institutions emerge in part because these spaces are stable when contrasted with other youth spaces—they have a relative permanence that allows attachment to develop over time. They are also relatively controlled, contained environments which promote feelings of security and belonging, characteristics they share with that “thickest” of places—the home. Along with online spaces, these primary institutions separate youth from a physical environment continually made unfamiliar and in which they lack a sense of control.

## Conclusion

Indifference is a theme often found in urban social theory, classically in work by Georg Simmel, where urban life is often characterized as isolating, anonymous, and corrupting of social ties. The urban alienation thesis advanced by Louis Wirth, Simmel, and others puts forward



the idea that features of modern cities—overcrowding, overstimulation, complexity—overload the individual psyche and strain social relations. Simmel argued that people adapt mental and behavioral adaptations in response to urban overload: a blasé attitude that consisted not only in indifference, but also “a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion” ([1903] 1997: 179). While critics of this thesis have rightly pointed out that this is a somewhat generalist viewpoint, this type of indifference—indifference as a social relation—is not the kind to which I refer here. Instead I have attempted in this article to highlight indifference as a geographical or urban relation, an adaptation characterized by low-intensity affects resulting from processes of alienation from urban environments.

In the context of urban China, this type of indifference is rooted in changes that were initiated early on in the country’s post-reform processes of modernization: housing reform, the idealization of a private, modern apartment, and the promotion of enhanced domestic lifestyles that set in disregard the traditional housing forms, the bustling street, the “thickly lived” social fabric of older neighborhoods. This article builds on previous post-reform studies which have highlighted the breakdown of traditional social relations and lack of attachment to newer neighborhoods experienced among urban residents. It has shown that among a generation of Chinese youth that came of age in such contexts, there is minimal affect associated with neighborhood environments. In cities that never stand still, spaces are experienced as transitory; they do not become implaced with memory, feeling, and potentialities, with the affect through which thin places become thick and “replete with all manner of enriching moments” (Duff 2010: 892).

The circumstances described in the previous sections—the “deterritorialization” of youth in urban environments, along with developments in digital media—further contribute to the cultivation of feelings of indifference in relation to the physical urban environment. This is not to suggest that cities are devoid of any meaningful spaces for young people, but that youth place-making—outside of the home and other primary institutions, and online spaces—is diminishing as affect is concentrated within those spaces. It is clear that the type of indifference to which I draw attention here can be described as arising from state-induced “situations of restricted agency” (Ngai 2005: 2). It is generated as a response to such circumstances. In a recent book, *Cultural feelings*, Ben Highmore (2017) highlights the involvement of social and historical

factors in the shaping of moods and feelings: “the world of feeling that is generated by a generation is produced within circumstances that are inherited from the past” (2017: 156). We are all, Highmore writes, involved in the specific work of producing moods and feelings, and we produce them under circumstances directly encountered. The type of indifference that emerges in the context described above is particular to that space and time. It is produced through the practice and habit of distancing oneself from concern in relation to the environment, and through practice and habit it becomes part of the ongoingness, the rhythm, of everyday life in that environment.

As Highmore (2017: 41) suggests, one condition for a particular mood or feeling becoming part of a dominant structure of feeling is that it is unemphatic. Indifference, characterized here as low-intensity, emerged as an undercurrent in the context of China’s growth and development—processes threaded through with patriotic fervor and a forward-lookingness mobilized by state propaganda. Indifference prevails in the context of the state’s current growing concern with and promotion of strong positive affects such as happiness. Public service advertisements promoting “positive energy” in Beijing convey a message that happiness is a normative emotional state which one should take responsibility for nurturing through performance, regardless of one’s circumstances (Wielander and Hird 2018). However, as Highmore points out, cultural feelings “can’t simply be orchestrated by command” (2017: 62). They are ways of processing change, or, following Lauren Berlant (2011: 20), “adjustments to the present.” Indifference is a learned response, one that is appropriate to the conditions in which it emerged.

One clear effect of this low-intensity learned response, as alluded to above, is an intensification of affect in relation to those places that matter. With the “thinning out” of urban space comes a “thickening” of particular places—most notably, of course, the home. In the context of urban alienation and experiences of the urban environment as unstable and unpredictable, the home may also be experienced as a source of respite, among young people in particular, who often face high pressure in relation to education and work. Young urbanites like Ge Fei and Yang Qiuyi, both working long hours and enduring long commutes, are often happy to retreat into their homes and enjoy their free time in their own private and comfortable spaces, and digital media developments facilitate ever greater concentration of everyday activities within the



home to the extent that there is no need to venture outside the home unless for work. The home, the site of increasing concentration of energy and intensification of affects among urban youth, is also, naturally, the space over which they can experience the greatest sense of control.

## References

- Barmé, Geremie R. 1999. *In the red: On contemporary Chinese culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Biehl, João. 2013. *Vita: Life in a zone of social abandonment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Casey, Edward. 2001. "Between geography and philosophy: What does it mean to be in the place-world?" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91: 683–93.
- Cockain, Alex. 2012. *Young Chinese in urban China*. London: Routledge.
- Coyne, Richard. 2010. *The tuning of place: Sociable spaces and pervasive digital media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Davis, Deborah. 1993. "Urban households: Supplicants to a socialist state." In *Chinese families in the post-Mao era*, edited by Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell, 50–76. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- de Kloet, Jeroen, and Anthony Y. H. Fung. 2017. *Youth cultures in China*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- de Souza e Silva, Adriana, and Jordan Frith. 2012. *Mobile interfaces in public spaces: Locational privacy, control, and urban sociability*. New York: Routledge.
- Duff, Cameron. 2010. "On the role of affect and practice in the production of place." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28: 881–95.
- Dutton, Michael. 1998. *Streetlife China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, Harriet. 2020. *Beijing from below: Stories of marginal lives in the capital's center*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press.
- Evans, Leighton, and Michael Saker. 2017. *Location-based social media: Space, time and identity*. Cham: Springer.
- Feuchtwang, Stephan. 2004. *Making place: State projects, globalisation and local responses in China*. London: UCL Press.
- Fraser, David. 2000. "Inventing oasis: Luxury housing advertisements and reconfiguring domestic space in Shanghai." In *The consumer revolution in urban China*, edited by Deborah S. Davis, 25–53. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Friedmann, John. 2007. "Reflections on place and place-making in the cities of China." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31 (2): 257–79.
- Hewitt, Duncan. 2008. *Getting rich first: Life in a changing China*. London: Vintage.
- Highmore, Ben. 2017. *Cultural feelings*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Knapp, Ronald. G. 2000. *China's old dwellings*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Lu, Bu. 2018. "Adding insult to injury: Beijing's evictions and the discourse of 'low-end population.'" *Chuangcn.org*. <http://chuangcn.org/2018/01/low-end-population/>. Accessed on January 9, 2019.
- Manovich, Lev. 2006. "The poetics of augmented space." *Visual Communication* 5 (2): 219–40.
- Massey, Doreen B. 2005. *For space*. London: Sage Publications.
- Miao, Jia, Xiaogang Wu, and Xiulin Sun. 2019. "Neighborhood, social cohesion, and the elderly's depression in Shanghai." *Social Science & Medicine* 229: 134–43.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2005. *Ugly feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Simmel, Georg. (1903) 1997. "The metropolis and mental life." In *Simmel on culture*, edited by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, 174–85. London: Sage.
- Stafford, Charles. 2000. "Chinese patriliney and the cycles of Yang and Laiwang." In *Cultures of relatedness: New approaches to the study of kinship*, edited by Janet Carsten, 35–54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thrift, Nigel. 2004. "Intensities of feeling: Towards a spatial politics of affect." *Geografiska Annaler, Series B* 86: 57–78.
- Tilley, Christopher. 2006. "Introduction: Identity, place, landscape and heritage." *Journal of Material Culture* 11 (1–2): 7–32.
- Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wielander, Gerda, and Derek Hird, eds. 2018. *Chinese discourses on happiness*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Yang, Dongping. 1998. "Changing compounds: From compound household to work unit." In *Streetlife China*, edited by Michael Dutton, 208–13. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.





Zhang, Li. 2001. "Contesting crime, order, and migrant spaces in Beijing." In *China urban: Ethnographies of contemporary culture*, edited by Nancy N. Chen, Constance D. Clark, Suzanne Z. Gottschang, and Lyn Jeffrey, 201–22. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. 2008. "Private homes, distinct lifestyles." In *Privatizing China: Socialism from afar*, edited by Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong, 23–40. Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press.

Maria NOLAN recently completed a PhD in Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where she currently teaches.

*Maria Nolan*  
*mn29@soas.ac.uk*

