

**Entrepreneurial Aspiration:  
Money and Social Life among Rural Migrants in Shanghai**

**De ambitie voor ondernemerschap:  
Geld en Sociaal Leven onder rurale migranten in Shanghai**  
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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## Contents

Introduction	1
1. “Seizing the opportunity:” Mind, Fever economy, and Timing	25
2. “It’s a Money Society Now:” Equivalence, Morality, and Money	53
3. “Dead Money” and “Live Money:” Wage labor, Freedom and Entrepreneurship	82
4. Eating bitterness: Memory, Hard work and Sacrifice	114
5. “Everything can be forged:” Money, Speech and Fraud	147
Conclusion	180
Bibliography	191
Abstract	207
Acknowledgement	210



# Introduction

## Rural-Urban Migration and Socio-economic Restructuring

Rural-urban migration in China has arisen along with the socio-economic restructuring of the country since de-collectivization and economic liberalisation in the early 1980s. People from villages and small towns have been flowing into cities, despite the constraints of the household registration system (*hu kou* 户口), a particular institutional legacy of Maoist socialism which controls the distribution of important welfare goods (education and health insurance, for instance) and the movement of people. Scholars have striven to grasp how rural-urban migration reflects the great socio-economic transformations that have occurred in contemporary China, from socialism to late socialism (Zhang 2001), planned economy to market economy (Solinger 1999), and socialism to neoliberalism (Yan 2008). Rural-urban migration raises two important issues about these transformations: the first is how the socialist state negotiates its relationship with the emerging market economy and society, while the second is how to connect these transformations as they have occurred in China with the general pattern of capitalist modernity. Rural migrants in cities are often seen as victims of both state power and capitalist development. Based on an ethnography of rural migrants in Shanghai, my dissertation presents an analysis of their own understandings of the great socio-economic transformations that have taken place in contemporary China.

There are two models for describing the socio-economic configuration in China. The first model takes the form of a critique from the angle of political economy. Taking rural-urban migration as an example, the critique proceeds in two different ways. One group of scholars is concerned with the politics of the redistribution of public goods. This line of inquiry often comes to the conclusion that, although migrants cultivate an alternative social space for

themselves through emerging markets and informal social networks (Solinger 1999, Zhang 2001), the authoritarian state still holds a great deal of sway through the household registration system. Another group of scholars presents a critique of capitalism by writing about resistance and subaltern identity-formation from below. This body of research addresses how migrants become the victimized underclass of the neoliberal logic of the market and state, as well as how they act in the world through resistance and criticism (Pun 2005; Yan 2008).

The second model for describing recent socio-economic developments can be described as the moral economy approach. This too takes two different forms. One group of scholars looks at how specific values orient economic practices. Hill Gates (1996) tries to locate the motor of Chinese capitalism in the culturally specific dialect between household-based petty capitalism and the state-based tributary mode. Scholars have also written extensively about the entanglement of personal network (*guan xi* 关系) in the post-Mao market economy (Yang 1994; Osburg 2013b). Recently Julie Chu (2010) has introduced cosmology into the study of transnational migration in Fujian. Her point of entry is cosmologies of credit: “by speaking of ‘cosmologies of credit’ rather than ‘cosmologies of capitalism’, I aim to move beyond an examination of value production as accumulation, growth, or surplus to a broader inquiry into credit-able practices that include such activities as the personal assumption of loss and the collective generation of karmic debt and its repayment” (7). A second group of scholars investigates transformations of morality in the context of the expanding market economy by exploring the relationship between economic development and moral anxiety in contemporary China (Liu 2002; Osburg 2013b).

The political economy and moral economy approaches both follow the paradigm of social embeddedness: that is to say, they situate the economy in its social context. Here the “social” is defined by either the political or the moral. For many anthropologists, Karl Polanyi’s (2001) description of the great transformation in the Europe of the eighteen and nineteenth centuries

establishes a paradigm against which economic transformations in other places and times can be measured. Social embeddedness is our default position, one that counters the utopia of the self-regulating market promulgated by economic liberalism. The disciplinary separation between economics and anthropology or sociology also justifies our concentration on social embeddedness. We now seem to be too complacent about reducing our analysis of the economy to a moral-political critique. However, this has not always been the case. In his writings on the history of European economic thought, Albert Hirshman (1992) notes that the eighteenth century had a quite positive attitude toward economic activities as taming mankind's destructive passions; scholars only came to a very critical view of the market under the circumstances of the nineteenth-century triumph of capitalism.

If we do not assume on the one hand that society is constituted by morality and political power and on the other that the economy is not easily identified as capitalism or neoliberalism, we can ask the classic question of the great transformation anew. Instead of identifying a social context (such as post-socialism, neoliberalism, or capitalism with Chinese characteristics) in which to embed the expanding economy, in my dissertation I seek to demonstrate how my informants understand the emerging socio-economical configuration and their position within it. For my informants, the economy has still not been differentiated from society; money always spills over its economic function and spreads into the different spheres of social life. For my informants, money economy is sometimes negatively embedded in their social lives. If there is no money, one cannot have a harmonious family or become a full member of one's home town and society at large. My informants' response to this negative embeddedness of money in social life is not collective politics and solidarity, but an embracing of entrepreneurship. They find the possibility of their inclusion in society not through political movement but through entrepreneurial aspiration.

China scholars have captured the emerging form of the entrepreneurial, self-motivating, desiring, risk-taking subject in contemporary China (Rofel 2007; Yan 2008; Ong and Zhang 2008), often attributing the entrepreneurial self to the governing effects of neoliberalism and state power. Anthropologists have also noted that entrepreneurship even becomes a policy of development to remove poverty from the poor and marginalized (Dolan 2012). Is the rural migrants' embracing of entrepreneurial aspiration a pathological condition of our neoliberal era? Is it our task just to provide yet another critique of neoliberalism? My dissertation argues that rural migrants' entrepreneurial aspirations should not be understood as the power effects of neoliberalism on subject-making; rather they are related to their understanding of the emerging society and their position within it with reference to the money economy. Critiques of neoliberalism often make the individual "subject" the starting point of the social analysis, assume the totalizing power of the market and define society narrowly as an imagery of collective political action, failing to take into consideration our informants' own understandings of the relationship between the economy and society.

### **Entrepreneurial aspirations between society and the economy**

The emergence of a market economy and, in particular, capitalism introduces a new problematic into our understanding of society at large. Sociology and anthropology were developed out of attempts to understand the socio-economic configuration of modernity. In his grand work *Economy and Society*, Max Weber (1978) attempts to develop an understanding of the modern economic order from the meaning of action. He first distinguishes economic action from economically oriented action. Many types of action are economically oriented, such as the direct appropriation of goods by violence. He also makes a great effort to distinguish the economy from technology. He argues that economic action is not defined by the meanings they have for human action. Ultimately he defines economic action as the peaceful

exercise of an actor's control over resources, which has as its main impulse an orientation toward economic ends.

Anthropologists have long been interested in understanding the economy and the meaning of economic action comparatively. Are they contingent on universal rationality in terms of means and ends, or on a specific social-cultural context?<sup>9</sup> In the famous formalist-substantivist debate, formalists attempt to apply a general premise that individual actors make rational choices under conditions of scarcity; the substantivists often make general arguments that the economy is embedded in other social-cultural institutions and that the rational model in classical economics has little relevance for non-industrial society. As Chris Hann and Keith Hart (2011) remind us, the old formalism-substantialism debates in economic anthropology have comparative economics in mind. Since the 1980s, the cultural turn has denied the possibility of comparison, since “material life everywhere was structured by incommensurate local symbolic orders, of which bourgeois economics was just one” (84). Leaving aside the debate on the rationality of economic action, anthropologists have often either criticized the assumption of rationality or escaped to its supposedly non-rational counterparts, such as morality and the normative order. They have only reached a tentative consensus via their common rejection of utilitarianism and, more recently, of neoliberal ideology. In contrast to economists' unified frame-work of maximum utility, anthropologists claim, their own analyses should “focus on the historical changes, cultural norms, and socioeconomic institutions that constrain the choices possible for different groups of people at particular places and times” (Chibnik 2011:2). Sociologists and anthropologists actively engage in critiques of economic society put forward by classical economists<sup>1</sup> by attempting to develop a more value-sensitive theory of action that goes beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Historian Daniel Immerwahr (2009) notes that Talcott Parsons, Karl Polanyi, and, quite surprisingly, the famous management consultant Peter Drucker all engaged in the criticisms of economic thinking and attempted to study the noneconomic bases of society in the middle of twentieth century. He records the genealogy: “In Europe, Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1925), and Richard C.Thurnwald's *Economics in Primitive Communities* (1932) had already offered influential portraits of humans

the mode of rational action, thus reaching a consensus on the paradigm of social embeddedness.

But, as the economic sociologist Jens Beckert (2009:44) notes, “embeddedness characterizes a general answer to specific problems without identifying the underlying problems themselves”.

This conceptual frame is related to their underlying social formation. The normative conception of the economy has been developed in response to the supposed loss of meaning and freedom that comes with the expanding economic rationality. Classical writers such as Mauss and Polanyi aspire to restore society as unity in the midst of industrialization and social conflict. As Keith Hart (2014:41) remarks, “Mauss’ chief ethical conclusion is that the attempt to create a free market for private contracts is utopian and just as unrealizable as its antithesis, a collective based solely on altruism. Human institutions everywhere are founded on the unity of individual and society, freedom and obligation, self-interest and concern for others”. Against the economic determinism brought about by the utopia of self-regulating market society he describes, Polanyi (2014) stresses the normative dimension of free institutions: “Freedom finds its institutional expression in the prize set on personality, integrity, character, and nonconformity...it is not for the economist, but for the moralist and the philosopher to decide what kind of society we should deem desirable” (37). The anthropological recourse to cultural value could be seen as solution to the problem of meaning brought out by the socio-economic differentiation of modern society. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann keenly notes that social differentiation leaves its meaning for society as a whole open: “the saving formula since the mid-nineteenth century has been values. But they are exposed to the same process of corrosion. Once in the world, they allow discussion of the ‘reevaluation of values’ or ‘value change’” (2013:282). Anthropologists now see social embeddedness as a factual description of the socio-

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behaving in emphatically noneconomic ways. Such ideas were picked up in the United States by Boasians Margaret Mead and Melville Herskovits, among others” (2009:453).

economic configuration and forget that social embeddedness is a moral response to the social differentiation of modern society.

Anthropologists have recently been finding different ways to go beyond the paradigm of social embeddedness. Inspired by social studies of science, scholars of the market and finance have suggested that we move beyond a social constructivist approach to look carefully at how the assemblages of knowledge and technology contribute to processes of economization (Caliskan and Callon 2009). Anthropologists have begun to look at the mediating roles of economic techniques and devices from financial model to graphical user interface (Zaloom 2003). In his ethnography of security trading in Japan, Hirokazu Miyazaki (2005) investigates the materializing potentials of financial theory in the trading room. He suggests we should not just investigate the relationship between economic theory and economic realities, but also consider different forms of the objectification of economic theory, such as learning, justification and extension. Beyond the focus on economic theory and trading technologies, other scholars have also explored how economic practices are mediated by ethical reflection (Keane 2008) and temporality (Guyer 2007). Arguing against the assumption of the abstractness of the economy, these studies make it possible to theorize the materialization of the economy, which should no longer be understood from the predetermined social frame but from its internal operations.

This shift in focus from the social embeddedness of the economy to its materialization is also accompanied by recent reflections on the relationship between culture/value and action. By bringing in third dimensions such as “aspiration”, “creativity” and “reflexivity”, scholars have driven a wedge between value and its actualization. In his reflections on poverty reduction, Arjun Appadurai (2004) brings in the idea of the “capacity to aspire” to break the simplified dichotomy between culture and economic development. He argues that we should situate the capacity to aspire and a form of futurity in our conceptualization of culture. David Graeber (2001) argues that the impasse of contemporary social theory is its inadequacy in imagining

people being able to change society purposefully. His solution is to reconstruct the theory of value, “to look at social systems as structures of creative action, and value as how people measure the importance of their own actions within such structures” (230). Recent writings on ethics also reveal the limitations of morality defined as principle and as a stable order, as well as highlighting the contingency and reflexivity of action. Joel Robbins (2007) introduces a distinction between morality (social production) and ethics (freedom), and thus problematizes the normative certainty and stability of social action. Research on the moral economy is not about locating collective political resistance to abstract capitalism but about investigating multiple moral frameworks of action and reason in economic systems (Palomera and Vetta 2016).

The recent “materiality turn” and “ethical turn” pose important problematics. These reflections keep reminding us that we should not jump into various transcendental frameworks such as culture, value and morality, but investigate the mediating process in the middle ground. I agree that we should de-centre capitalism and look more carefully at the operation of the economy itself in order to understand its complexity. We should also highlight actors’ capacity, creativity and reflection in order to theorize the contingency of human action. My ethnographic analysis takes my informants’ entrepreneurial aspirations seriously, as they should not be understood as the effect of totalizing socio-economic transformations such as neoliberalism, but rather as providing us with an opportunity to look at the complexity of the economy and human action.

The entry point into understanding entrepreneurial aspirations is money. Even though ordinary people are not encountering a monetary economy for the first time,<sup>2</sup> scholars have never failed to capture how money mediates the changing social and moral orders in contemporary China.

In his ethnography of business practices in southern China, the anthropologist Liu Xin notes,

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<sup>2</sup> Even though the socialist ideology harbours hostility toward money and the planned economy in the high socialist period attempted to limit the use of money to the least possible, the state has never succeeded in eliminating the market and money.

“Money is not always the content of everyday conversation in the sense money comes to function as an essential element in the reconfiguration of a new discursive surface that it is being discussed; rather, money had become the code of everyday conversation only by which it is possible to talk about life. Money is the colour of everyday life rather than the portrait of it. It is an image, an impression, an impulse, a condition of possibility for speaking” (2002:133). Below I discuss examples of anthropological descriptions of money in studies on China to illustrate how descriptions of money at different times are related to different scholars’ understandings of the economy and of society at large.

In her Morgan Lecture on the social meaning of money, based on her fieldwork in Taiwan between 1969 and 1975 and “contemporary fieldwork” in the United States, Emily Martin puts China and the United States in a comparative frame work. She argues that money creates social integration in China, but social disintegration in the United States. In China, money articulates with forms of exchange based on kinship and community, thus checking the potential disintegrating effect of money. Even though she admits that China and the United States are both state societies with highly developed markets, in making her comparison, she reapplies Morgan’s evolutionary scheme (*societas-civitas*) to characterize the two societies: personal relations dominate and determine property relations in China, whereas property relations dominate and determine the nature of human relations in the United States. In the three spheres of local life in China, namely labour, marriage and rotating credit societies, there is a different logic than that of capitalism. In the historical juncture of modernization in Taiwan, Martin still recognizes the existence of a warm relationship between employers and their workers. In the rotating credit society as in marriage, money is intended to build pure interaction and provide liberty at the same time. The circulation of money in the local system helps people build connections with their equals at the expense of their links with the dominant classes and state institutions, which involve a degree of exploitation. Money is circulated around

social networks; at the same time, it also has a personally liberating aspect. The money circulating in the local community is intended not so much for profit as for translating one sphere of exchange (cash) into another (commodities that people could produce directly). Martin tries to link money to cosmology. For example, the three categories of spirit money correspond to three major spheres of exchange in imperial China: local transactions were made in copper cash, taxes were paid in silver, and large payments or ceremonial treasure in gold.

Nearly three decades later, Julie Chu set out to explore how capitalist development and modernity are lived in post-Mao China among transnational migrants in Fuzhou. In her ethnography, the comparison of different cultural systems is left out, and the world has converged in capitalist modernity. However, the cosmological perspective is brought back in again after several decades of politico-economic criticism of capitalism. Here she pays great attention to the circulation of American dollars. She identifies her starting point as “the very materiality of monetary notes as they were perceived, felt, handled, and exchanged in the making of distinction in Longyan” (2010:174). Different forms of currency (distinctions between U.S. dollars and Chinese currency, and between spiritual and market currencies) are circulated in a hierarchy of different spheres (ancestor, God, human). While Martin was interested in the cultural meaning of money, Chu, inspired by the recent “materiality turn” and “ontological turn”, looks closely at how the physicality of the currency mediates its value. While RMB notes are often scrutinized for flaws, American dollars, which are mainly given and received as loans, repayments and remittances from the US, are transferred smoothly and quickly without inspection or any suggestions of mistrust.

Chu is now interested in money as things-in-motion in a cosmological order. She notes, “things themselves were never just instruments or prostheses of the aspiring migrant. Rather, as I will show, by commingling their own semiotic and material properties with those of the person, such things as shipping containers, passports, luggage, and dollars all actively worked as agents

to consolidate mobility as a discernible sign and ready index in the valuation of various people, their relations, and their worlds” (2010:15). Monetary wealth still has to be put in a cosmological hierarchy: “the initial line of divine credit made all other accumulations of wealth—money, karmic merit, and otherwise—possible for the living and in this way anchored the entire mortal sphere of value production to the more basic and generative logic of an encompassing spiritual economy...Monetary wealth...might be better understood as the material manifestation of one’s spiritual solvency, as an extension of good credit, if you will, from gods who could never truly be paid back” (2010:191-2). Although the cultural meaning of money is replaced by money as a thing-in-motion in Chu’s conceptual frame,<sup>3</sup> we see a consistent effort to put money in a cultural or moral context.

While Martin still anchors the specific cultural and moral meaning of money in the comparative frame of societies, Chu attempts to examine “the pervasive sense of momentum” that has taken hold of “subjects” with transnational destinations on their horizons. This question of the subject “horizon” reminds us of Max Weber’s formulation of the meaning of economic action. Here Chu acknowledges that she offers a riff on Max Weber’s famous thesis about the Protestant ethic and capitalism. She also wants to stress that the cosmology of value is anchored in religious imaginations. The difference is that Fuzhounese migrants can now negotiate with human and nonhuman authorities in altering their fate and fortune and can channel their human energies beyond the nation state and global capitalism, while pre-destination plays a key role in people’s understandings and enactments of value in Weber’s formulation.

However, Chu leaves out an important aspect of Weber’s understanding of capitalism—the social dimension. Weber does not develop his conception of economic action along the subjective, technical or cosmological dimensions but along the social dimension, hence his

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<sup>3</sup> The entry “meaning” is missing from her book’s index.

grand book *Economy and Society*. According to Dirk Daecker, Weber's interest in religion lies in question of how religious ethics "help to shape the civilizing, or taming, of orgiastic passion into temperate emotion, supported in that respect by arts and sciences embedded within the social structure of cities, which force people for the first time in human history to live with each other without personally knowing each other and thus to change values without any possible solution of conflict among one another for problems seeking their mutual understanding" (2007:29). Realizing the possible use of violence for economic ends, Weber poses the important question as to how the peaceful disposal of economic means is socially possible.

Chu's flight into subjects and things is also accompanied by a new conceptualization of society. Scholars are now beginning to realize that we cannot occupy a transcendental position in society to figure out the causalities of the social world. As the transcendental causality of society disintegrates, the social can also be reassembled. In their assessment of the new social in China's peculiar neoliberal configuration, Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang write, "instead of locating the exercise of sovereign power and self-sovereignty in two separate domains, we propose a concept of 'the social' as emerging through the complex interrelationships and interactions between the two. This interlacing of the public and the private, the political and the individual, requires that we problematize the notion of 'society'" (2008:13). Arguing against China scholars who often view Chinese society in term of a binary framework of interpersonal relationships and the state apparatus, they set out an approach that "identifies multiple connections between everyday practices and state policies" (2008:13). Only highlighting multiplicity, however, has little analytical value: empirical observations can always produce endless differences and multiplicities. It is better to realize that we social scientists actually rely on the binary framework to make our observations. In Ong and Zhang's (2008) case, they have replaced the old binary between interpersonal relationships and the state apparatus with a new binary between the

everyday and the state. Rather than constantly deconstructing the binary frame and multiplying the framework, we should ask how our informants understand society and what distinctions they themselves use in their understandings of it.

My ethnographic analysis demonstrates that money mediates my informants' understandings of the emerging society. With labour migration and the expanding money economy, an ambivalent "society" emerges from family, community and state. The economy---the operation of the market (Chapter 1), the circulation of money (Chapter 3), the organization of labour (Chapter 4)---overlaps with family and state and destabilizes the moral unity and power hierarchy of them respectively. Money here is not the specific medium of the economic sphere but enables the emergent society to develop its own contingency. The emergent society promises inclusion through entrepreneurship but also involves dangerous frauds (chapter 5). The relationship between the economy and society should not be understood in terms of moral embeddedness and the control of power but in terms of contingency.

This understanding flies in the face of our assumptions expressed by both scholars of the social embeddedness of economy and recent writings about the economy's materiality (Maurer 2006). In the theoretical vein of social embeddedness, the relationship between the economy and society is often understood in term of morality and power: society is either the moral anchor of the economy in terms of the moral economy or the victim dominated by the market. Inspired by the recent materiality turn, the recent anthropology of economy often criticizes the paradigm of social embeddedness and focuses instead on the instruments and techniques of the economy, while often losing track of the economy's connection with society. Both approaches would fight against the economists' assumption that economy is a self-organizing economic system. While the former approach often assumes that the self-organizing economy should be embedded in society and attempt to find empirical evidence for this, the latter approach insists that we should at least investigate empirically how the economy and economic agents are constructed. Both

approaches would agree that economy is not an abstract and self-organizing system but an embedded system.

For my informants, the economy overlaps with society through the mediation of money. Their problem is not that economy becomes an increasing self-regulating system outside of society. On the contrary, the economy as a self-organizing system--money generating more money--is a dream that my informants endeavour to realize through entrepreneurship. My informants' entrepreneurial aspirations should be understood neither as the individuating effect of economic neoliberalism nor as ethical cultivation on the subjective level. Rather, they should be related to the reciprocally enhanced contingency between the money economy and the emergent society.

### **Contingency, Observation and Representation**

Simmel noticed long ago the difficulty in understanding society in the formative period of sociology. He compares the understanding of society with the understanding of nature: while the unity of nature comes about in the observing subject, the unity of society is realized by its own elements. He notes: "Society, however, is the objective entity that does not need an observer not included within it" (2009:41). There is no external observer of society; the observer of society is also included within it. Simmel also developed his sociological programme with his observations about the money economy. In his *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel stresses the epistemological implications of the money economy, i.e. relativity: "It is then perfectly acceptable that our image of the world floats in the air, since the world itself does so. The inherent necessity for our minds to know the truth by proofs either removes the discovery of truth to infinity, or leads it into a circle, so that one statement is true only in relation to another one; this other one, however, eventually only in relation to the first"

(2004:104). Social scientists are still trying to grasp the contingency of modern society and its epistemological consequence---the relativity of proof and validity--- in general.

Unlike the villages or communities in which anthropologists so often work, the cities in which my informants find themselves immediately pose a challenge to our anthropological understanding. As Peter van der Veer has noted, “ ‘the urban’ is a theoretical object and just as difficult to define as other theoretical constructs, such as ‘society’ or ‘culture’ or ‘religion’” (2016:3). He has revealed the utopian and aspirational ways in which urban planners attempt to design cities. Scholars have highlighted the experiment (Roy and Ong 2011), and the multiple intersections among actors, materials and affect (Simone 2009), as well as the possibility of future action (Baxstrom 2008) in urban life. This line of inquiry challenges the singular causal relationship between the capitalist model of production and the development of cities and has thus enabled us to inquire into “the possibilities within which we reimagine, remade, and 15ushi15ainese15 urban conditions and the notion of the urban itself” (Roy and Ong 2011:10). Tropes such as “complexity”, “contingency”, “indeterminacy”, “ambiguity” and “uncertainty” are constantly introduced by anthropologists to destabilize our object of study, concepts and methods. The semantics of the “occult economy” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) and of “invisibility” (van der Veer 2012) mark the difficulty of observing the economy and society in general. Uncertainty is not only described as a new structural phenomenon but is also used as a solution to our theoretical impasse. Scholars first describe the uncertainty and precarity of our era and attribute them to the retreat of the welfare state and the arrival of the neoliberal economy. But later there is a new wave of investigating how uncertainty conditions new possibilities or different ways of fashioning life ethically.

However, we should not stop at highlighting contingency and uncertainty as unprecedented phenomena in our era. Anthropologists have actually been dealing with the question of

contingency on both the epistemic and theoretical levels for a long time. The concept of culture initially provides anthropology with the possibility of observing and understanding a contingent world. Even people on remote islands have “culture”: their different ways of living their lives should be understood in a culturally specific way. “Culture now no longer meant the cultivation of...but a special mode of observing with an eye to the possibilities of comparison” (Luhmann 2013:225). Anthropologists often forget the dimension of comparison in the mode of culture and easily fall into cultural determinism.

The challenge here is to reconstruct our anthropological observations under conditions of contingency. It is not very interesting to come to a conclusion that everything is culturally specific and that the world is contingent. Rather, we should ask how we can continue to observe and understand the world despite the contingency. Anthropologists have been dealing with the contingency of understanding for a long time. As Geertz asks, “if we are going to cling—as, in my opinion, we must—to the injunction to see things from the native’s point of view, where are we when we can no longer claim some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification, with our subjects?” (1984:56). He continues: “The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive ‘with’—or ‘by means of,’ or ‘through’...or whatever the word should be” (ibid.:58). After providing three concrete cases of the notion of the person in Java, Bali and Morocco, he resorts to the hermeneutic circle to solve the problem of understanding: “hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explication of one another” (ibid.:69). After Geertz, anthropologists began to shift the question to the politics of the power-laden fieldwork encounter, writing genre and production of knowledge in the 1980s. Anthropologists are now more sensitive to the operation of power as a research topic and a

condition for the production of knowledge. The concerns about how to represent the other's experience, however, still linger.

Anthropologists have continued to wrestle with the questions of the contingency and complexity of the other's experience and our understanding of it. They have also begun to reflect on the limitations of cultural relativism and social constructionism, two important modes of thinking we have often relied on. The recent focuses on materiality and ethics are different ways of reflecting on the cognitive programmes of anthropological knowledge and the problem of representation. Aiming to shake off the entrenched dichotomy between subject and object and the separation of sign and material world, Webb Keane develops "an approach to signs for which the practical and contingent character of things is neither subordinated to, nor isolated from, communication and thought" (2005:183). He cites Peirce's theory: "Peirce offers a way of thinking about the logic of signification that displays its inherent vulnerability to causation and contingency, as well as its openness to further causal consequences, without settling for the usual so-called materialist reductionisms" (ibid.:186). Recent writings on ethics have reflected on the normative assumption of agency and attempted to include potentiality and reflexivity in the human actor and subject. Keane also highlights the importance of focusing on ethical reflexivity on the level of social interaction: "For social interaction is the natural home of justification, excuses, accusations, reasons, praise, blame, and all the other ways in which ethics come to be made explicit" (2016:26). The materiality of language/sign and the ethical reflexivity form the excluded third between subject and object, thus marking the lost congruence between our cognition and object, sign and external world on the epistemological level (cf. Luhmann 2013:178).

To solve the cognitive or representational gap, anthropologists have introduced various nonrepresentational devices--affect, cosmology, ontology, materiality, ethics etc. Sometimes we are so convinced by these conceptual devices that we seem to displace the cognitive gap: a

means becomes an end. Instead of finding a conceptual device to solve the epistemological question in anthropological understanding, we should reflect on our conceptual devices.

Arguing against the universal modelling based on the naturalistic idea of neuro-cognition, Peter van der Veer (2016) has recently reconstructed anthropological understanding from the vantage point of comparison, encouraging us to reflect on our conceptual framework, as well as on how our object of study is constituted. Anthropological comparison involves a double act of reflection: a reflection on the conceptual frames underlining our study of society, and on the formation of society.

Here I continue to translate the comparative challenge of anthropological understanding into empirical inquiry into my informants' understandings. We should thus not only focus on the double reflection on our scholarly concepts and their underlying social formation, but also inquire into how our informants understand their society by means of conceptual devices. Like our scholarly understanding, my informants' understandings are also contingent on conceptual devices and abstractions. Ethnographic research is a process of the communication of understanding, rather than digging out secrets and gossip as data. We should not take our informants' words as a literal representation of the society outside themselves, but recognize their capacity to understand their own situations and communicate their understandings of them. Our ethnographic observations are inevitably second-order observations, that is, observations on our informants' observations and communications of their own situations. Anthropologists have recently moved in this direction by highlighting their informants' ethical reflections, intentions and use of rhetoric (Steinmüller 2013a). Of course, it is not easy to acquire access to our informants' intentions and ethical reflections, and they face the same difficulties in acquiring access to ours. I treat this difficulty not as an obstacle to our understanding, but as an open question that can condition continuous efforts to understand against all the odds.

My ethnographic analysis highlights my informants' observations and understandings of opaque socio-economic transformations. Their observations and understandings are not only subjective activities but are also related to the great socio-economic transformation in which they are participating. As they migrate out of their familiar rural communities, they now have to engage with different social spheres such as the state, market and friendship. The fact that the contingency of the emerging society cannot be controlled by the interpersonal relationships and morality (cf. Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997) conditions my informants' observations on opportunity (Chapter 1), morality (Chapter 2) and frauds (Chapter 5). This observation further enhances the contingency of the emerging society. My informants' observations and the contingency of the emerging society thus condition each other reciprocally. The self-perpetuating contingency makes the moral and political integration of society and the full identification between individual and society difficult. Anthropologists' recent resort to the ambiguous semantics of "uncertainty"/"indeterminacy" and "subjectivity" indicates the difficulty of understanding society and human beings' positions within it.

My informants do not understand themselves as working-class workers in a class society: my ethnographic analysis demonstrates that they understand the emergent society with reference to the money economy, which creates the contingency of the emergent society and their position within it. They solve the problem of this particular contingency with reference to money and its possible self-perpetuation through entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurial aspiration is thus not the effect of the retreating protection of society under neoliberal capitalism, but an answer to the perplexing modern question of the individual's contingent position in society.

### **Fieldwork: Place and Time**

The main part of my fieldwork was carried out in Shanghai in 2013. Since 1990, Shanghai has been recreating itself from a socialist industrial city to an international economic, financial and trade centre. According to the 1991-1995 Five-Year Plan, with its more favourable investment policy, greater autonomy and direct financial support granted by the central government, the municipal government aimed to develop commercial infrastructure, financial organization, real estate, tourism, and information services. Like other global cities (Sassen 2001), Shanghai has been witnessing the decline of manufacturing and the growth of a service economy on the one hand, and the influx of migrant workers on the other. According to figures released by the Shanghai Statistics Bureau at the end of 2013, of its 24 million residents, around 9.9 million are migrants or, according to the government's definition, a "floating population" whose official household registrations are outside Shanghai.

During my fieldwork in 2013, I lived in an urban village where many migrants live. I first went to the urban village in 2010 at the invitation of a friend working for a NGO that was setting up a community centre promoting health education to migrants. Relying on the help of another friend I had known since 2010, I rented a one-room house and moved into the urban village in 2013. My residence there did not immediately guarantee my inclusion in the urban village. Many migrants were quite sceptical of the presence of a self-proclaimed student with an ambiguous source of livelihood. I was often marked by the locality of my home town (Anhui), my family background (my parents' occupations and family composition) and educational status ("university student"). Everyone in the urban village is both a participant and an observer at the same time. Time and co-presence help build relationships, but they cannot dispel all doubt. As I developed a closer bond with some informants, I also visited their rural home towns on the occasions of ceremonial rituals and agricultural harvests. Beyond the urban village, I also went to interview migrant entrepreneurs around the city via my personal network. Though the latter often guaranteed their friendliness at our first encounter, it was very difficult

to participate in their everyday lives. Our ethnographical observation is always conditioned by the inclusion-exclusion dynamic.

Besides the social dynamic, my field research was also conditioned by a temporal dynamic.

The main period of fieldwork was preceded by my occasional research when I was a student in Shanghai and was also followed up by return visits during the 2015 and 2016 spring festivals.

Tracing their lives through time prevents me from attributing their momentary understanding and communication to a static context.

In terms of the social categories of my informants, I do not follow those anthropologists who only focus on one type of worker, such as factory workers or domestic workers; I also do not follow the assumed distinction between worker and entrepreneur, but include them both in my field research. The social division of labour should not be seen as a pre-existing framework but as a series of distinctions enacted and understood by ordinary people. Many of my informants define their positions in terms less of their present occupations than of their future mobility.

This is thus not an ethnography of one particular group of migrants defined by occupation, or migrants in one urban village (Zhang 2001), or migrant workers in workplaces such as factories (Pun 2005); it is an ethnography of our informants' understandings of society beyond the community. It is thus not enough to reflect on the power dynamics in the fieldwork encounter or to celebrate the possibility of attaining an ultimate rapport with one's informants. The question is how our informants' understandings of society at large are constantly reintroduced into our interpersonal encounters in the field. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will demonstrate how complaints about suffering and suspicions of fraud in interpersonal encounters are related to my informants' understandings of society.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation describes how my informants understand the socio-economic transformations in which they find themselves, but which are difficult to observe. In this dissertation, I also demonstrate how my informants use concepts and distinctions to understand socio-economic configurations. I aim to draw an analogy between their understandings and anthropologists' understandings of configurations between society, the economy and the individual.

The first chapter investigates how my informants understand the operation of the market and their position in the emerging market through the formula of opportunity. Their understandings of the brain power and of the market fever create uncertainty in the operation of the economy. One's position in the economy is not mediated by one's social status or position but by opportunity and chance. This formula of opportunity enhances the sense of temporally lagging behind the market and the possibility of catching up with it at the same time.

The second chapter looks at how my informants understand the ambiguous "society" outside the family and the state through the metaphor of money. Money introduces social contingency into different spheres such as the family, friendship, market and state, fracturing the moral unity and hierarchy in these different social spheres. At the same time, money also externalizes the conflicts in these different spheres into the ambiguous "society". "Society" is thus both inclusive and dangerous.

The first two chapters set up scaffolding for a new understanding of the relationship between economy and society. I show how my informants understand both "economy" and "society" as highly contingent spheres. This immediately poses the question of the connection between economy and society--the social institution of the economy. The distinction between capital and labour provides a starting point for the description of the social institution of the economy in capitalism. In Chapters 3 and 4, I investigate my informants' understandings of the two

dimensions in the social institution of the economy—money and labour with reference to their arrangements of their own working activities.

The third chapter investigates my informants' distinction between dead money and live money with respect to the social organization of labour and work. Scholars have often understood the latter from the point of view of a distinction between men and women, rural and urban, capital and labour; one's position is often understood in terms of social inequality and the hierarchy of power. Guided by these distinctions, scholars have understood the current socio-economic configuration in terms of neoliberal capitalism and precarious individualization. This chapter demonstrates how the distinction between dead money and live money transforms the question of social inequality and the power hierarchy into a question of how to realize entrepreneurship in the future.

The fourth chapter investigates how my informants understand their labour through the metaphor of bitterness. I demonstrate how the bitterness of labour generates the socialist utopia, entrepreneurial aspiration and the hope for a familial future, as well as romanticize the discrepancies between reality and aspiration, present and future. The hardness of labour is thus not understood as exploitation and suffering that requires voicing and justification, but rather as bitterness that always conditions a different future. The communication of bitterness crystalizes it as the structural memory of society which generates a meaningful difference between past and present and invests the present with an aspirational force. The memory of bitterness introduces aspiration into society, as well as enabling people to deal with the ensuing social disappointment.

The fifth chapter looks at how the familiar/unfamiliar relationship is refigured via the widespread apprehension of fraud in the context of migration and the expanding money economy. It is taken for granted that interpersonal familiar relationships are important in Chinese society, as highlighted in the widespread use of the idiom of *guan xi* in scholarship on

China. Rural migrants still rely on the mode of interpersonal familiar relationship in their engagement with urban neighbourhoods, markets and state institutions. This mode of familiarity is mediated by the appearance of persons and things. Mediated by money and speech, however, the values of persons and things are not seen as a natural but as a forgeable appearance. Fraud and artificiality conditions the moral criticism of society, as well as enabling social boundaries to be crossed. Rural migrants aspire to reach for the emerging society beyond their familiar networks, but they are also suspicious of the emerging society at the same time. The apprehension of fraud is less the result of moral decline and social inequality than of my informants' normative expectations of society.

The conclusion compares my informants' understandings of the relationships between society, economy and person with scholarly understandings of the relationship. This comparison makes explicit the connection between my informants' entrepreneurial aspirations, their understandings of society and their positions within it.

## Chapter 1

### **“Seizing the opportunity:” Mind, fever economy, and timing**

Cui, a 33-year-old house decorator from rural Jiangsu, was my neighbor in the urban village where I did my fieldwork. He worked for other contractors, as well as subcontracting decorating jobs by himself. Whenever he had work to do, he would go off on his electric bike in the very early morning. In his spare time, he often came to my room to talk about history, corruption, sensational news, and his own business. Sometimes, his words exuded a sense of optimism: “People on the same level of ability have the same opportunity. There are a lot of opportunities; it depends on whether you can seize them.” But in May 2013, he was in low spirits. He did not have much work to do and often just stayed at home. In our compound, where male artisans were their families’ breadwinners, staying at home for several days in a row required explanation. He complained more than once that he had chosen the wrong occupation and that his hard labor would not bring him much money; artisanship like being a painter could only guarantee a stable life. Only entrepreneurship could offer more possibilities: “you might earn 50 yuan today. But you could earn 500 yuan tomorrow.” He claimed he wanted to follow one of his friends into the apparel business. Another day, he came to me with good news. According to the horoscope, he would have good luck in August; besides, according to the horoscope, as a Sagittarius, he would also have good luck this year, “I may win a 5million lottery prize.”

In August, Cui did get a subcontract. He invited me to visit his workplace and treated me to dinner. But after that, he still stayed at home more often than his neighbors did. He once emphasized to our neighbors that he was discussing a project with a potential customer, which ultimately he did not manage to get. During a lunch with Cui and another neighbor at the end

of October, Cui excitedly told me that lottery had given out fifty-eight five-million prizes the previous day. He asked rhetorically why he had not been given one, and then said, “Some people have a lot of opportunities in their whole life. Some have none. The lottery provides more opportunities than the world does.” In his own trade, he often regretted that the golden year of opportunity, when a lot of new building was awaiting decoration and customers were ignorant, had already gone. Now he had to guess carefully what was in his customers’ mind to win a contract. However, he still assured me that his hard work and good skill would ultimately earn him trust and money, and that opportunities presented themselves only to those who were fully prepared to take them.

Some of his relatives and friends had recently become entrepreneurs. His brother-in-law, to whom he had been apprenticed and with whom he later worked, was now running a profitable painting materials factory. Cui explained the reason why his brother-in-law had become an entrepreneur, “He had a very good opportunity.” Facing the enlarging income gap, he stressed the importance of adjusting one’s heart: “When you see other people making a lot of money, you would feel unbalanced in your heart. Maybe it is because you do not have an economic brain (*jīng jī tóu nǎo* 经济头脑), or simply because you just have not encountered a good opportunity. But you could encounter an opportunity sometime. The probability is one percent of ten thousand or even one percent of one billion. It’s just like the lottery. Every time, among our 1.3 billion people, only two or three people win a prize.”

Despite the slim chances of winning a prize, he still insisted on buying lottery tickets, which he saw as a more productive investment than gambling: “Some people smoke, they have to spend at least 200 yuan on it, and smoking harms their health. In spending around 300 yuan on the lottery, I may get a 5 million yuan prize.” He adopted a playful attitude towards the lottery and often claimed that this was his small contribution to national welfare. During the countless occasions when I helped Cui check the winning numbers online, his anticipation slipped into

regret about the numbers he had failed to choose. He once mentioned that he had recently won a 200-yuan prize though on another occasion he had said that the prize was actually 20 yuan. It does not matter whether Cui has won any prize; buying a lottery ticket could at least help him demonstrate his own potentiality—he nearly made it; only one number was wrong. He always encouraged me to study the pattern of the winning numbers, even though he told me that the state manipulates the lottery: “When you purchase a lottery ticket, the state keeps a record. There is a computer in the headquarters of the lottery. Every day the computer registers all the numbers people have chosen. They count and see which numbers people have not chosen. OK, that is the winning number. Of course, they sometimes let you win a prize, encouraging you to continue buying.” After another loss, Cui said he would go to a bigger lottery shop next time because it had big chart showing all the winning numbers in the past; he also said it would be better to have software to analyze each number’s chances of winning, immediately adding that, since the lottery was manipulated, it might defy any technical analysis. Every time he bought tickets he would choose some frequent winning numbers as well as less frequent winning numbers.

Over the course of the year I was his neighbor, I gradually came to note Cui’s fluctuating sense of opportunity (*jī yù* 机遇) with reference to his personal ability, his relatives’ and friends’ entrepreneurial success, luck, the market and the lottery. Given the intrusion of large corporations into his trade, his lack of social welfare protection and his fascination with the lottery and horoscopes, his life seemed to fit the image of marginal figures in precarious and occult neoliberalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Johnson 2012). At the same time, we can also connect Cui’s understanding of opportunity to a cultural paradox that scholars have long noted in Chinese society: people have a strong entrepreneurial ethic and work very hard (Herrell 1985), yet they also acknowledge fate and luck and sometimes gamble very heavily (Oxfeld 1991). In their ethnography of underground lotteries in villages in south China, Joseph

Bosco, Lucia Huwy-Min Liu and Matthew West (2009) link the neoliberal aspect with the cultural logic in order to explain the contradiction between work ethic and luck or fate in the lottery. Villagers stress the need for smartness and the ability to discern a pattern from hints, yet they also believe the lottery is rigged. Bosco et al. argue that the cultural logic of luck and fate justifies their continued participation after losses, while also explaining the contradictory logic as a hidden script of resistance to the neoliberal economy. In his ethnography of gambling in rural China, Hans Steinmüller (2011) criticizes Bosco et al.'s totalizing approach in which they jump to total contexts such as cultural logic or neoliberal economy to make explanations. By investigating the local idiom of 'social heat' in gambling, Steinmüller tries to demonstrate the ambiguous social boundary revolving around gambling: there is both an internal boundary between entertainment and gambling in the local forms of sociality and an external boundary between the official modernist discourse and local practice. Since I did not see any systematic proliferation of gambling and lotteries during my fieldwork, I am not interested in gambling, the lottery or the uncanny per se, nor interested in extending the metaphor of gambling and lottery to produce a understanding of the economy in general. Rather, I am interested in the fact that gambling and lotteries constantly surprise scholars as paradox, contradiction and ambiguity, stimulating their reflections on the difficulties in observing society and economy from the all-encompassing perspective of capitalism (whether its earlier rational version or its later neoliberal version) and culture.

If both the economy and society are full of paradox and cannot be understood by adopting an overarching approach, how can our informants understand them? The aim of this chapter is to investigate rural migrants' understandings of the emerging market and their position within it. This question is inspired by recent reflections on the limitations of the classical social embeddedness paradigm in the anthropology of the economy. Anthropologists have argued that we should not assume that the economy is an abstraction, nor should we describe it from

the point of view of the encompassing society (Maurer 2006). Anthropologists thus place greater attention on how the economy materializes itself through devices and techniques. Caitlin Zaloom (2016) argues that in American evangelical churches the household budget acts as a double device connecting market volatility with divine mystery: the spiritual becomes economic and the economic becomes spiritual. Annelise Riles (2010) argues that legal documents in financial markets act as placeholders which link one moment with the next, fold the future into the present, and have a kind of double temporality. To describe the market system in a more contingent environment, anthropologists have shifted from a consideration of social embeddedness to emphasizing aspiration, spirit (Appadurai 2011) and hope (Mayazaki 2006). These studies have reoriented our focus towards the materializing process of the economy and enabled us to de-totalize our understanding of it. Inspired by this move, this chapter will investigate my informants' observations about the market and their understandings of their position in it. Simmel has pointed out the difficulty of understanding society in comparison with our knowledge of nature synthesized by an observing subject: the observer of society is also included in society. Anthropologists' and their informants' understandings of the economy also share the same epistemological difficulty: they understand the market while operating within it. Our anthropological understanding of the economy must thus always include our informants' observations and understandings of it as well.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how my informants understand the emerging market in terms of opportunities. In the first part, I analyze how they attribute their position in the market to the effect of have a smart brain and an idea; in the second part, I analyze how they observe the operation of market as a temporary fever. With these double moves, the market is understood as the function of a closed yet flickering brain and fever. The self-closed character of the brain and business fever conditions the uncertainty that can be observed as opportunity. The notion of opportunity destabilizes the social boundary between success and failure. In the third part, I

analyze how opportunities are embodied in the figure of the honorable person on the one hand and externalize the individual on the other. This chapter argues that we should not describe the economy from the perspective of social embeddedness, nor should we only focus on it as a performative device. Rather, we should include our informants' observations of the economy and their understandings of their own practice and position within it.

### **“Relying on your brain”: the power of mind and idea in market experiment**

I once invited Zhi Guo and his wife to lunch on the Fudan University campus. Walking through the campus, Zhi Guo showed his suspicion of the intellectuals who obviously surrounded us: “They have smart brains; they could be very evil and kill people invisibly.” Having provided a home internet-installation home service for a year, Zhi Guo had not formed a good impression of the intellectuals who were his customers: “They spit in our eyes.” In the middle of the lunch, he suddenly asked his wife to fetch his notebook and then showed me a flow chart he had outlined. It depicted an integrated system of commodity circulation, the idea being to produce quality agricultural produce and sell it to the urban market via the internet. This was the culmination of his recent reflections on food safety, logistical infrastructure and new models of development, all current hot issues in China. I challenged him that this grand idea should be the business of Ma Yun, a famous internet entrepreneur whom Zhi Guo and I often talked about, but he strongly disagreed: “Ma Yun might not be able to do it.” Later, he asked me rhetorically, did the Communist Party come to the stage late or early? Then he continued, “There were a lot of strong warlords at that time, but eventually the Communist Party won.” He also cited Mao’s victory to validate the hope of victory by small players: sometimes guerrilla entrepreneurs could take over big corporations. Since I met Zhi Guo for

the first time in the summer of 2009, I have lost track of the number of the projects he has considered starting. Even though he had switched from one job to another and lost money in several small business projects, he nevertheless said that his brain could still be well in tune with our times, and his ideas had never lagged behind those of successful entrepreneurs. Since I was about to leave for Germany again, Zhi Guo, as always, encouraged me to learn more about what those people “with a brain” (*you tou nao* 有头脑) were doing in Germany and learn more about what we did not have in China. One day, he said, I might achieve a distinguished career when the opportunity comes.

Like Zhi Guo, who argues that aspirants with a smart idea can win, my informants highlight the importance of having a smart brain and clever ideas. Many rags-to-riches stories I heard in the field are about how ordinary people (*lao bai xing* 老百姓) achieve business success through their smart ideas. My informants are not interested in the mystical entity that is brain per se; rather, they attribute business success to having a smart brain. My informants often said that one’s economic success relied on one’s brain, though they never specified the criteria for defining a smart brain. An educational degree is an easy way of determining if one has a smart brain. As a Ph.D student, my informants sometimes predicted that I would make a lot of money since I have “brain” and “culture” (*you tou nao you wen hua* 有头脑有文化). But sometimes they also rejected the equivalence between educational achievement and a smart brain. One shopkeeper said that her son was not good at studying in school but his brain was clever; he was savvy in everything he did except for schooling. A man running a recycling workshop said of one rich friend: “He does not know how to use a computer. He only finished primary school, but his brain is smart. He knows how to use his personal relationships and make valuable friends.” My friend Yu Lan also advised me not to do business in the future “Only those who do not have ‘culture’ have a ‘business brain’. You understand more theory and reason than them, but they would see you as a nerd.” She sometimes complained that her

husband could not do business because “his brain is dead” (*si nao jin* 死脑筋). Once she also said if she had her husband’s brain, she would have gone into business. I said that was a contradiction, to which Yu Lan replied: “He has ‘culture’ and is clever. But he is not good at doing business. He is too honest and only knows how to labor. But it is useless to rely on your hard labor.” The brain is thus an invisible and flexible signifier, which can refer to many personal character traits.

One’s smart brain cannot be detected immediately; it is often the result of attribution. A house decorator said of one of his clients from Zhejiang, “His house is worth millions. At the very beginning, he did not tell me he ran a shop; he only told me later. I used to think one could not make much money from a shop. You see what a brain he has; he is really rich.” He then attributed the success of the merchants from Zhejiang to their smart brains and bravery. My informants use the complexity and ambiguity of the brain to explain the surprising way in which wealth can be accumulated and thus reverse presumed hierarchies such as educated-  
uneducated, big business-small business, or aspirant entrepreneurs-established entrepreneurs.

The internalized operation of one’s brain power affords my informants the leverage to make claims regarding their learning potential. They often told me that they had learned to understand the outside world only after they came to Shanghai. In her ethnography of Fujianese migrants, Julie Chu (2010) also records a man who failed to arrive in the USA after several smuggling attempts, yet highlighted the valuable experience and knowledge he accumulated along the way: “He described how he had broadened his horizon by learning about other people’s customs. He had learned to ‘use his head’ (*dong naojin*) and discriminate between trustworthy people and those who only ‘ate others’ (*chi bieren*)” (250). The brain can also generate a surplus of ideas. One can constantly learn ideas from TV news or an overheard conversation.

Migrants thus have opportunities to represent themselves as savvy navigators in the urban economy. In the competitive market for decorations, Cui had to face choosy customers and big contractors. Not having signed a contract before a project, he had to make a great effort to collect the payment afterwards, which was often postponed in order to carry out quality control. The big contractors or customers sometimes tried to reduce the payment by picking out slight defects. However, he was quite proud of his smartness in solving these conflicts: “I never use violence; I use my brain.” I once had lunch with Cui and Hui, another painter living in our compound. Cui emphasized how much he could earn: “I earned 50,000 yuan in two months last time.” I asked him how he could earn so much. He said, “I rely on my brain.” When Cui left for a while in the middle of the lunch, Hui told me his doubts about Cui’s words: “I do not think his business is that profitable.” In everyday conversations, one has to recognize the second person’s brain power to his face; it is insulting to address the other directly by saying, “You do not have a brain” in the second person. Though Hui was suspicious of Cui’s earning capacity, he also emphasized the importance of having a smart brain on another occasion, “It is useless to have good skill. If your brain is so smart, you do not need to do the work, you just hire people to do it for you.”

While Cui and his artisan friends often attributed business success to the power of the brain, small entrepreneurs often attributed their entrepreneurship to their own ideas as well. When I asked Pang, the owner of a small restaurant, why some of his former colleagues still worked in restaurants, while others like himself had already started their own, he said, “Everyone’s idea is different. Some are content with their own situation and satisfied with the several thousand *yuan* they earn every month.” Wu is the boss of an online-selling company. In a chat with him and his wife, the latter first attributed her husband’s entrepreneurial success to his brain and his smartness. Wu also acknowledged that one should rely on oneself. But after I asked a series of question concerning his business decisions, he finally said, “Some entrepreneurs boasted about

their capacity to plan to do things at the very beginning. Sometimes, it is just coincidence. You do not have to think things through. You just let it run its course. It is not because of my smartness and ability; it is sometimes a matter of luck.” These entrepreneurs’ stress on a smart brain is less a matter of making intelligent decisions than of embracing coincidence and legitimating their wealth.

Like Wu reflecting on the limitations of ideas, many workers also know that ideas and concepts are not enough to set up a business. When I asked an electrician whether he had ever considered starting a business, he said, “Of course, but if there is no money it is only an empty thought.” But the real trick is to bring an empty idea to fruition with empty hands. If one can “tie a white wolf with one’s bare hands” (*kong shou tao bai lang* 空手套白狼), one will become a legendary figure. Though Zhi Guo failed in his barbershop and never succeeded in starting a business again, he can still claim that his idea and his brain never lagged behind those of others. He also recognized that it was difficult to translate one’s idea into a concrete business, though for him the gap between an idea and its materialization is not an obstacle but an opportunity.

In their ethnography of underground lotteries, Bosco et al (2009) note how villagers refuse to acknowledge that the winning numbers are random and instead stress cleverness in picking numbers and guessing from clues: “Cleverness involves not just intelligence, but a kind of creative street smarts” (38). In this way, they turn the lottery into a serious business. Since they believe they can work out the right number with their skill and cleverness, they always have a sense of just having missed it when they lose, giving them the hope that they might figure it out properly the next time. In her ethnography of Wall Street, Karen Ho has keenly noted the culture of smartness among financial players: “Smartness means much more than individual intelligence; it conveys a naturalized and generic sense of impressiveness, of elite, pinnacle status and expertise, which is used to signify, even prove, investment bankers’ worthiness as advisors to corporate America and leaders of the global financial markets” (2009:40). Recent

anthropological studies of finance also help us better understand the performative function of ideas, models, and knowledge in the market (see Miyazaki 2005). The performative character of the economy demonstrates the extent to which the market and wealth are based on uncertainty (Esposito 2013). For my informants, the opaque brain provides them with a vantage point for understanding the uncertainty in the market while also helping them exhibit their potentials.

Brain and mind have also long been the means by which we make explanations. In his cultural history of causality, Stephen Kern (2004) has noted in modern period a tendency toward identification of the cerebral location of mental functions and the guilty mind in murder stories; this generates “more complex and probabilistic judgments of criminal responsibility and new epistemological uncertainties” (227). Revolutionizing consciousness is also an important technique of socialist experiments (Verdery 1991; Watson 1984). In contemporary China, Yan Hairong (2003a) has noted that the transformation of consciousness is embraced as a strategy for solving the problems of poverty and development via a discourse of quality or *35ushi* (素质), which, however, she reduces to the function of an intangible operator in the economic production of surplus value under neoliberal governmentality. The valorization of consciousness and ideas is not easily explained in terms of a neoliberal rupture. Andrew Kipnis (2007) highlights the continuing influence of pre-modern and socialist traditions in shaping the individual. Kipnis (2003) notes that Mao’s high socialist experiment also tried to replace organizational power with ideological revolution and “thought work:” “as power in concrete contexts became more and more dependent upon an individual’s ability to convince others that he or she had the best interpretation of the ideology in question, politics became more and more subjective” (280). Leaving the debate on historical continuity and discontinuity between socialism and post-socialism aside, I suggest that we should not reify the brain or any reference to individual consciousness and value (such as risk-taking and self-responsibility) as the

consequence of neoliberal governmentality. By referring to the opaque brain, my informants explain wealth accumulation and validate their own potential.

### **Fever economy**

It was the 2010 Expo that first brought me to the urban village where I did my fieldwork. The village is just three subway stops away from the Expo pavilions complex, from which many migrants were evicted because of the construction. Walking back and forth between the Expo complex trumpeting “City makes life better” and the shabby urban village where the migrants were living, I felt there was no better place to investigate the irony and contradictions of urban development. However, migrants in the village had no time for the irony but were busy selling fake Expo souvenirs around the pavilion complex. After Expo, Luo and other vendors returned to their usual businesses. I did not expect the imagery of Expo to stay with them ever since, but in 2013 Luo still vividly recollected his memories of it; several times he heard some rumor about another upcoming fair similar to Expo and asked me to help him find the information online. We either could not find it or found out that the rumored fair was just an ordinary commercial exhibition. Luo’s mother-in-law also kept fond memories of selling Expo souvenirs: “Once a black man wearing a necklace gave me 20 yuan; I then gave him some mascots. He said he did not need them and thanked me. He gave me the money as a gift. Another time, another black man gave me 50 yuan as gift.” She could earn 300 yuan a day at that time. Now, because of her age, many employers refused to hire her. Even though a small workshop finally employed her, she could only earn 60 yuan a day, only half the wage of a young or middle-aged female laborer. Since the Chinese pavilion was still standing there, she went there several times to check the situation: unfortunately, there were few tourists now.

Besides gossip over its return, the Expo event also left material manifestations behind it. Once when we passed a red car parked on the road, Luo told me that its owner was his former neighbor whose family made 400000 yuan out of a souvenir wholesale business during Expo. Afterwards, her family bought a car and an apartment in her hometown. Beyond the urban village, I also heard stories of fortunes being made out of Expo. Once I was having tea with a return migrant and his friends in his shop in a county seat in Anhui. Suddenly a man entered the shop. The return migrant attempted to introduce him to me, but he showed no interest and left the room after staying a while. After he left, the return migrant began to tell me his story: “He made some strange fortune. He made a fortune out of the Shanghai Expo. Before Expo, his company had subcontracted the sanitary service of one street outside the Expo site. After Expo, his company got the assignment of clearing the Expo site.” He made millions. Now he was investing in real estate in his hometown and providing loans at a lower rate of interest to friends. The return migrant continued: “He could earn two million from interest every year. We all joked that he really makes a fortune. He said he hoped another big fair would come along again.” Several acquaintances present in the room all marveled at this unexpected wealth. The return migrant later also told me that the man first went to Shanghai with an introduction from a Shanghainese man who had once been sent down to his hometown in Mao’s period; he set up a sanitary company and subcontracted sanitary services with the help of the educated youth. Before Expo, he was already earning around 400,000 yuan per year.

The lingering memory and conspicuous material manifestation made Expo live long in the memories of the urban village and beyond. For Luo and many of his relatives, why was the Expo so attractive that its return was constantly anticipated, despite the constant harassment from the city inspector and the small profits they made that grueling summer? In retrospect, Expo is an ideal entrepreneurial moment for them. First, it symbolizes the abundance of opportunity. With the bustle of human flows from all around the country, Expo really

materializes the crowd as market. During the Expo period, even though the public media were concerned with the unruly crowd, Luo and his fellows enjoyed the “hot and noisy” (*re nao* 热闹) sociality (cf. Steinmüller 2011) and tapped into the human flows to make some money. He was happy to learn from TV that the number of visitors had reached new heights in the morning, meaning that he would have a prosperous business in the afternoon. Second, it brings one unexpected and sudden wealth in a short period of time. Third, selling at Expo involves only a low-entry barrier and is thus very inclusive, even though there is inequality between big players and small players; nearly everyone in the urban village could participate with just a little start-up capital. When I was in the urban village in 2013, the media were reporting an investment fever in gold. Some of my informants regretted that they did not have enough money to participate in the gold fever. Fourth, it celebrates smart and daring entrepreneurs. As Luo said of his sister-in-law’s great success in selling Expo souvenirs, “She is illiterate but very daring. She just dared to ask for a very high price. An Expo passport is only worth 10 yuan. She could ask for 100 yuan.”

The post-Mao economic reform has been accompanied by the unprecedented moving of human crowds and different types of business fever. In his ethnography of private business households in Sichuan in 1987-1991, Ole Bruun found that “Since private businesspeople are already marginalized by their label, there is little encouragement to establish a truly original business or otherwise venture out into the unknown. Yet everyone wishes to link up with the endless waves of fashion and public expressions of modernity in Chinese society, suddenly bringing a certain type of consumption into focus”(1993:195). Ellen Herz (1998) also vividly describes the stock-market fever of 1992: besides the big players (*da hu* 大户) and the state (*guo jia* 国家), many scattered players (*san hu* 散户) also joined in it. Herz argues that the newly created Shanghai stock market is not a means for the production of wealth but an avenue through which issues of urban identity and intra-societal dynamics are negotiated. Both large

and small investors see the stock market as one of the few truly egalitarian forums for making money. In the stock-market fever, the traditional counter-hegemonic ethos within the tributary mode of production meets the egalitarian rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution, creating a strong sense of bottom-up egalitarianism. Herz argues that it is the stock-market fever that stimulates the desire to make money rather than the other way around. The sign of business fever, however, is not as obvious as Herz has suggested. Even though Expo exuded an obvious sign of such fever in retrospect, it was still not easy for Luo to notice and join in the crowd at the very beginning. There is no easy way to interpret the fluctuating fever. Most of my informants regretted that they had missed a business fever or admitted that they just caught its tail-end at most.

There are constant attempts to observe the fever and trends in the market. For my informants, business is not a “vocation” but a series of epochal events, hence they take part in many different trades. One simple method is to observe what other people are doing and how much money they are making. Business information is often mediated by personal networks. In the urban village, migrants became Expo sellers through their personal networks. In Luo’s extended family, his sister-in-law was the first to sell Expo souvenirs among his relatives. At the very beginning, he was undecided whether he should follow suit. He asked his sister-in-law how much she could earn one day, which, she replied, was 200 yuan. Luo thought it was not that profitable compared to his recycling business. Only later, when he heard that his sister-in-law had already made 100,000 yuan, did he begin to sell at the Expo site. That is why he always complained that he entered the business too late and also why he anticipated another big fair and hoped that I could get information about it from the internet, the high-tech gadget which, Luo said, could help give him access to information about lucrative business opportunities.

Though personal networks play an important role in mediating the signs of business fever, my informants had an ambivalent attitude toward it. Since most of the businesses my informants

engage in have low entry barriers, fever business often slips into ruthless competition, and the profit margin becomes increasingly slim. Besides, one's personal network also overlaps with one's reference group for success and failure and thus involves intense competition and secrecy. Though all my informants recognized the importance of personal networks, some also saw them as a less sophisticated way of acquiring business information. Some migrant entrepreneurs would often call their trade a "traditional business" (*chuan tong huang ye* 传统行业) because they relied on information from their personal networks rather than on modern technology. Some informants want to acquire signs of business fever by resorting to more abstract forces such as knowledge, policy signals from the state, and even foreign models.

Ying, an entrepreneur owning several wood-floor factories, suddenly switched from being a seafood wholesaler to a building materials wholesaler in 2003. In 2011, he recalled how he had made the decision, "It was at the spring festival in 2003. While talking with a fellow villager, I heard that his relatives were making a million yuan a year. This information stimulated me. If you could earn a million yuan a year, I could earn it too. You could earn more than me just because you chose a different trade and route. The villager's relative was selling sanitary ware. I also decided to do business related to real estate. From 2000 to 2010, the housing market went like fire (*huo* 火). After the spring festival, I went back to Shanghai to do some research. I asked some of my county fellows working in different building materials shops how their shop worked. I finally decided to sell floor boards." Ying knew very little about floor-boards; but he succeeded in assembling many colleagues and money through his personal networks (mainly relatives and friends). After the success of his wholesale business, he extended it into the production sector. As his business expanded, personal networks revealed limitations in steering a larger organization in the market. He admitted that his family firm had been in stagnation all these years because of the many management problems. Now he tried to learn more about accounting, management, marketing, finance and the art of production. He constantly stressed

the importance of knowledge: “If you do not read, you cannot control your business. Your wealth depends on how much knowledge you have.” Ying’s valorization of knowledge results from his reflections on the limitations of personal networks.

Zhang, the owner of a logistics company, told me he had no friends and did not know what to do in the city when he first moved to Shanghai in 2001. Before that, he was the driver-cum-owner of a bus transporting migrant workers to Shanghai. When his bus arrived in Shanghai at two o’clock in the morning, he saw the city still lit up. He was immediately attracted and later moved there. After settling down in Shanghai, he read the local newspaper every day to locate business opportunities. He especially focused on the advertisements sector and called to ask the price of each advertisement. His idea was that if one trade was prosperous its advertisement must be expensive: “I learned that one advertisement for logistics costs 8000-9000 each time. If they could not make money, how could they afford to put out an advertisement?” He then managed to enter the business and ran a quite prosperous logistics company. Later, the county government in his hometown invited him to invest in a new industrial zone in the county seat. He accepted the invitation and started a textile factory. I asked him why he suddenly switched to a totally different trade. He told me he had listened to a friend’s advice: as the textile factory was being phased out in Shanghai; he could buy cheap machines from there and start a textile factory in his hometown and hire cheap labor there. But in the end, he failed to take advantage of the local difference. The profit margin was narrow, and it was very difficult to hire skilled workers. In 2008, his attention switched back to transportation business again. During his years struggling in his hometown industrial zone, he missed the boom in the logistics industry with the rise of online shopping. By the time we were sitting in his apartment in the summer of 2011, the logistics industry had changed a lot since he first entered it: “You see, those big companies would find investment partners and go to the stock market. Then they would go into real estate.” He had a sense of regret: “If I had stayed in Shanghai, my business there would have been

quite prosperous. When you miss this kind of opportunity, it does not come again.” He studied the models of the dominant companies in his logistics industry and came to a conclusion: entrepreneurial success depends on ‘timing, location, and public relations’ (*tianshi, dili, renhe* 天时,地利, 人和). More than a decade ago, when he first came to Shanghai, he came to find opportunities; in retrospect, he said he did “catch the tail” of opportunity in the logistics business. Despite failing to replicate the Shanghai textile model in his hometown, Zhang still encouraged me to learn more about foreign business models and copy the successful ones in the future.

From personal networks to knowledge and foreign business models, there is no clear sign of business fever. The fever of a particular trade is always unclear and unstable. Some informants thus resort to crowd psychology to make sense of the fluctuating business. One return migrant who had joined the boom in raising pigs told me how he had had to deal with the ups and downs of the business: “This year’s price is very low. Next year the price may be the same. The year after next, the price may be good. When the price is low, people abandon the business. Well, when the price has already risen, it is too late for you to raise the pigs. So I have to keep going.” Resorting to crowd psychology indicates the difficulty in joining a fever and observing it at the same time: there is always a temporal gap.

This temporal gap brings us to the temporality of business fever. My informants, be they small-time business players like Luo or successful bosses like Ying, all stress their lagging behind. There seems to be no one getting the timing right. They all have a sense of lateness vis-à-vis the epochal fever. As the return migrant raising pigs reflected on his many missed opportunities, “We human beings do not have eyes in both the front and the back.” If we had eyes in the back of our heads, we would see the present clearly in retrospect. However, with eyes only in the front, we cannot see present opportunities clearly, but only see a vanishing horizon. With the gentrification, professionalization and corporationalization of economy in Shanghai, my

informants, who usually ran their businesses in the urban margins, often anticipated their business ending at some point (cf. Miyazaki 2013). Even those who had the good fortune to make millions a year still said that their children would definitely not inherit their business. Dong, a 43-year-old business man, ran a land rental agency providing service for small companies. As the city government had imposed increasingly strict regulations on unplanned land development in peri-urban Shanghai, Dong felt opportunities in his business diminishing. In his business, he had to guess local officials' thoughts and interests swallow large amounts of alcohol and take massages with local officials and business partners (the record is six massages in a day!). During our lunch, he complained that his poor health now prohibited him from enjoying many a delicacy; he jokingly said, "I used to exchange my body for money; now I use my money to protect my health." He did not think his son could do that, and he also hoped his son would not have to do that. In reflecting on his career, he concluded that business was full of risk, competition and hardship, and that a peaceful and stable life would be a good life. Chen, the boss of a wood-recycling factory, also told me that he did not want his son to follow him in the business. He characterized his trade as a "traditional business", which would disappear at any time. Anticipating the disappearance of their businesses conditions the relentless pursuit of the next fever.

In fin-de-siècle Berlin, swept by rapid urbanization, Simmel interpreted fashion as a significant sociological form, arguing that it is its rapid disappearance that makes a fashion possible. His sensitivity to the tempo of fashion is insightful. He writes, "Fashion always occupies the dividing-line between the past and the future, and consequently conveys a stronger feeling of the present, at least while it is at its height, than most other phenomena" (547). Ellen Herz (1998) also argues that those participating in the stock market fever have a strong sense of being in sync with the times. Yet, my informants have never achieved this synchronicity in terms of temporality. This aspiration for synchronicity always conditions their sense of temporal lag.

Even established entrepreneurs, who symbolize the proper opportunity at the right moment for the people around them, claim that they only seize the tail end of an opportunity.

### **The figure of the honorable person: luck and the movable boundary of fortune**

As China scholars have often noted, fluctuating family fortunes bring a strong sense of uncertainty and a strong desire to discern a pattern: “what is happening next” (Stafford 2007). However, it is difficult to live in uncertainty and discerning a pattern within it. Tracing social change in Lu village, where Fei Xiaotong once did fieldwork, Laurel Bossen (2002) notes, “Fei found class differences in Lu village based on land and family history. Some families were early settlers and owned land, while others were more recent arrivals or transients lacking landed property and social networks. The system was fluid, with healthy families losing fortunes for various reasons such as death of expensive caravan mules from disease, opium addiction, or division of land among too many sons. In fact, Fei felt that success sowed the seeds of its own destruction when wealthy families raised more sons than the poor, reducing the inheritance for each son” (191). In Liu Xin’s (2000) ethnography of his 1991 fieldwork in rural Shanxi, villagers often explained the emerging social-economic stratification in terms of social connections. Even though some people are seen as better farmers than others, villagers still refused to explain the stratified society in term of individual capabilities. He then suggests, from the villages’ worm’s-eye view, that “there is no need to explain the creation of wealth; what needs to be explained is simply its distribution, which is seen as wholly independent of the organization or reorganization of social and economic production within one’s own community” (162). The formula of family fortune and social connection can be seen as perspectives of observing and justifying success and failure in a situation where fortunes are fluid. How would my informants explain their own and others’ fluid fortunes?

For Zhi Guo, the star entrepreneurs' success depends on their entering a business at the right time. Reflecting on his own failed entrepreneurial experiments, he said that success does not depend on one's intentions but on whether you are in the right place at the right time. While Zhi Guo's father, a veteran and a worker in a pharmaceutical company, often expressed his nostalgia for Mao's period, when people cherished their dignity and integrity, Zhi Guo was more interested in Mao's rebellious spirit. Mao's career revealed to Zhi Guo that "Everyone is the same. In some particular moment, when the opportunity comes, you could be anyone. Even though he is a great man and a saint, he is just the product of the particular historical period."

At a lunch in Zhi Guo's house, Zhi Guo's father told us how some people took advantage of the privatization of state-owned enterprises to accumulate large amounts of wealth with their bare hands in the early 1990s. Even though he was a village cadre and very influential at that time, he explained, his conscience prevented him from participating in crude primitive accumulation. After hearing his father's reminiscences of his glorious past and criticisms of the present, Zhi Guo comforted his father: "My father did not have good opportunity. Otherwise, he would have achieved much." Zhi Guo then added, "No matter how good opportunities were in the past, the good opportunities always lie in the future. In the past they could only make a small amount of money. Did they have Microsoft and Baidu then?" Zhi Guo said entrepreneurs like the boss of Baidu--a famous Chinese search engine--are really lucky, "He seized the right time. It was the time of developing the internet".

Zhi Guo's father said that, when an opportunity or luck comes along, you need to combine your personal talents with luck to exploit the opportunity; otherwise, the opportunity just passes by. I said sometimes we just do not know if it is an opportunity. Zhi Guo's father agreed: "Opportunity is just like God's arrangement in a blink of eye." Trying to give him a sociological explanation of opportunity, I said that an opportunity sometime comes from one's social

network and the information circulating within it. Zhi Guo's father told me that is not an opportunity; what is an opportunity is what comes from heaven. To seize an opportunity, he told me, we all rely on the help of an honorable man (*gui ren* 贵人). He then took my career as an example: "even though you are an intellectual, in your whole life, besides your professional skill, you have to rely on opportunity most of the time. Luck and chances are especially important for me because I do not have special skill. For you, luck may help you get better results." He told us that he had had a good opportunity to be promoted to be a cadre in the army when he was a soldier. He met all the selection criteria, but he did not pass the final written examination: "If I had seized the opportunity, my career would have been different". Despite the personal failure, Zhi Guo's father insisted that luck runs its course: "As old people often said before, luck turns around. That is why people say I have bad luck. Everyone has his luck. God is equal toward everyone. If you have talent, you will seize your opportunity." I asked what I should do if I feel I am having bad luck for a long time. Zhi Guo replied, "Yes, I feel that way too". He asked how many years Zhi Guo had been in Shanghai. Zhi Guo replied six years. His father said, "Your luck should turn this year."

On a previous occasion Zhi Guo told me that his father once doubted his ability after he had failed in several small businesses; he said he felt very sad that even his father valued his worth according to the amount of money he contributed to the family. Now Zhi Guo's father predicted that Zhi Guo's luck would improve after carefully calculating the time Zhi Guo had spent in Shanghai. Zhi Guo also attributed his father's current unsatisfactory condition to his father's lack of opportunities. By attributing their unfulfilled potential to the lack of opportunity in the past and imaging future opportunities, Zhi Guo and his father both suspended judgments about themselves. Their own personal characters are externalized from the story.

For Zhi Guo's father, opportunity comes not from our personal connections but from an honorable person. My other informants also stressed the importance of gracious help from an

honorable person, a stranger in a better position with whom one develops friendship beyond status considerations. The shopkeeper Jian Fu drew an imagery of such honorable person: “You are an ordinary person. He is rich. If he does not despise you and even lend you money to invest, then you really have met an honorable person.” He admitted that encountering an honorable person was a rare occurrence: “Most friends just use each other: they all have to take care of their families and cannot help each other.” Once an informant took me to dinner with his friend, who was running a small restaurant. My informant exaggeratedly depicted my bright future (such as earning at least 10000 yuan a month) to his friend. Later his friend offered a toast: “We sit down together; you are our honorable person. You could acquire first-hand information from above. We know little about the trend and the information from the above. I may have to bother you in the future.” Though the boss’s attribution of the category of an honorable person to me was exaggerated, he did describe such a figure: distant yet approachable, with access to first-hand mystical information from the high up and thus knowing future trends of development. Social differences condition the honorable person, who yet goes beyond one fixed position. So Zhi Guo’s father rejected my banal sociological analysis of opportunity and claimed that the honorable person is not someone from one’s social network but from God’s design at a particular moment.

A helpful honorable person sometimes emerges from some surprising social encounter. After having worked for a boss for several days, Luo described the boss to me: “At first sight, he just did not look like a boss, but he is really a boss. He used to do a recycling business like me; after ten years, he rose from an ordinary person (*lao bai xing* 老百姓) to a rich boss. He is a good talker (*hui shuo hua* 会说话).” Asked how the boss became rich, Luo explained, “It depends on luck. You have to encounter a boss, a kind person, a kind boss. He met a boss. He gambled, ate and drank with the boss. Even though he was poor, he led a rich man’s life at that time. His wife told me that he once lost more than 100,000 at gambling. They nearly divorced.”

Even though playing poker or mahjong is popular leisure activity, gambling is often seen as a vice damaging one's fortune. Most of my informants-cum-players would insist that they gamble mainly for the sociability of playing within one's close circle. Several migrant entrepreneurs I met voluntarily mentioned their history of losing all their fortune in gambling. Ying, the boss of the wooden floor factory I mentioned earlier, gambled away the money he had earned from his vegetable and transportation business in 1997, but he regained his wealth because of his network of fellow gamblers: "Even though I met some veteran gamblers I should not have met, I also met some useful fellow gamblers. Because of their connections, I started a seafood business." Now he still played mahjong, but he said it was not pure gambling but for play and leisure. It is very difficult to make a distinction between gambling and playing, or between an honorable person and a dangerous stranger. The honorable person is an ambiguous figure personifying the contingency of opportunities: it could be any one. Many aspirants told me that they might have met an honorable person, but these imagined honorable persons often fail to present one with any opportunity.

As a stranger emerging outside one's ordinary social circle in a surprising way, the figure of an honorable person symbolizes the extraordinariness of opportunities. The social boundary between success and failure is destabilized. A 40-year-old street shoe vendor told me that success and failure may be just 100 meters apart. He told me he had once run a shoe shop, but it had failed: "Sometimes, one shop closes, but another shop 100 meters away runs very well. They are just 100 meters apart. Success and failure depend on whether you can seize the opportunity. Anyway, I have acquired some experience." He added in particular that it was not that he believed in luck; business itself is luck. Sometime he made his first deal several minutes after he had set up his stall, sometimes it took much longer. Can we change our luck? He said it depends on a particular person. He said there might be a fate for a person. Even though you made a million at one moment, you might still be destined to be a poor man on your deathbed.

Despite the fact that he had gone several times to consult a fortune-teller, he still insisted that it was impossible to fully calculate one's fate. He was still thinking about switching into a more profitable trade since one's luck is still contingent on seizing an opportunity.

Zhi Guo's luck did not turn in 2013 as his father had predicated. At the end of the year, before my departure for Germany, he was planning to quit his job, but he did not have a clear plan for the future. He told me he was fearful sometimes: "The more you think, the further the dream goes away from you". He also told me that his mother had dragged him to a fortune-teller she had known for quite a few years. Since on one occasion I witnessed Zhi Guo dismissing religion as an illusion in front of his mother, a churchgoer, he told me the story with caution. He first asked whether I believed in fate (*ming* 命) and then stressed that it was his mother who had forced him to go to the fortune-teller. When he told me that the drawing of lots had predicted an auspicious future for him, he also stressed his doubts about the process: "I asked the fortune-teller whether all the lots in his ballot box are auspicious. He then let me see some other lots in the box, most of which were bad." The fortune-teller also pointed out a problem in his life: it will not go smoothly while he is young. He advised Zhi Guo not to think too much about wealth and predicted that his life would become easier when he became older. The fortune-teller's words give him a sign of his potentiality. He told me it was very difficult for a young man to start a business, even though his idea might be right. Zhi Guo was still very interested in modern agriculture. His idea was to introduce scientific knowledge, the internet and talented people into agriculture. In 2014 and 2015, he was living in his hometown but did not manage to start any agricultural business as he had imagined doing. He found a lot of people had moved ahead of him in his hometown in Jiangsu. He said he was disoriented: a good opportunity was waiting for him ahead, but he could not bring it to fruition. Nonetheless he told me that the best opportunity was always yet to come and that this was a transitional period in his life.

The figure of an honorable person personalizes the emerging market as well as opportunities within it. One's fortune is thus contingent on other persons one encounters, which destabilize the social boundary between success and failure, now and future. The enhanced contingency related to persons confirms the personal potential of seizing an opportunity, and displaces the unlimited burden of personal failure and constant disappointment.

### **Conclusion**

Social scientists often have to tame luck, chance, and opportunity in the social context; whenever a chance factor emerges, they expand the social context or its complexity (Lukes and Haglund 2005). As Jakeson Lear (2003) notes in his history of luck in the US, the religious and secular idioms both allowed room for a paradoxical coexistence of free will and determinism, and both denied the very existence of the random. Social scientists thus analyze a person's position in the economy with reference to their social class or status, as well as acknowledging one's agency. In his field research with manual workers and low-level white-collar workers in 1969 and 1970, Richard Sennet (1972) also notes their aspiration for becoming entrepreneurs and records their discourse of opportunity; however, he immediately tames the discourse of opportunity on two levels: "Whenever we had a chance in Boston to talk about the idea of opportunity, we felt engaged on two levels of discourse. On the surface, there would be a declaration from a person that if he had had the advantages middle-class people enjoy, he would have been able to make what he wanted of his life. This was an affirmation among these men that they could be just as strong, just as free, as anyone else if they had the chance. There would, however, be something hidden below this surface feeling. These were, after all, people who had experienced frustration, who had suffered from a gnawing sense of powerlessness, who had been treated for most of their lives as indistinctive. All of that experience, which had to do with the structure of class, had presented itself to them as a problem in the structure of their own characters; and so there lay an unspoken distrust of themselves below the surface, a

feeling of doubt” (182). Using the distinction between surface and depth, Richard Sennet puts the discourse of opportunity in the dialectic between freedom and class structure. Recently anthropologists have noted the enchantment of capitalism and begun to highlight the contingency of economy. In China, Liu Xin (2009) argues that, as an invention of tradition, the concepts such as chance, luck, fortune and misfortune have recently been introduced to help people make sense of marketization. Liu Xin attributes the question of chance to a conceptual eruption between revolutionary China and contemporary China: “In one case, the praise of the future produced a contradictory effect in the conception of the existing order of things, for it led to an invitation to imagine a better or a different tomorrow...the relationship of the present to the future became one of uncertainty and changeability.... Nevertheless, in the present age of the People’s Republic, it seems that the future has already melted into the present order of things, which reproduces itself as a face of the future” (120).

This chapter has argued that chance and opportunity can neither be attributed to the encompassing structure such as capitalism, nor to the social transformation and rupture such as neoliberalism. Rather, it is related to my informants’ understandings of the emerging market and their positions within it. To describe the economy, scholars have debated whether we should do so from an external position like society or from the internal economic techniques. My informants observe the emerging market and operate in it at the same time, occupying both an internal and an external position. They attribute their position in the market to the power of the mind and temporalized form of fever. The highly self-regulating and opaque mind and fever conditions the understandings of the market in terms of providing an opportunity. One’s inclusion in the market does not rely on one’s social origin and position but on one’s ideas, mind and timely seizure of business trends and fevers. This formula of opportunity enhances the sense of temporally lagging behind market and the possibility of catching up with it at the

same time. The theme of opportunity creates social and temporal asymmetries and displaces them at the same time.

## Chapter 2

### “It’s a Money Society Now:” Equivalence, Morality, and Money

Zhi Guo came to Shanghai in 2003 to join his parents, who arrived there the previous year. His first job was to wash cars in a Taxi company. His manager promised that he would get subcontracting jobs the next year. However, he quit the job to follow his cousin in becoming an apprentice in his uncle’s barbers’ shop. After working for his cousin for two years in Beijing, Zhi Guo borrowed some money from him and started his own barbers’ shop in Shanghai. The business failed, but his cousin never asked him to return the money. Zhi Guo said the debt is not only about the money but involves brotherly affection, and he often mentioned his gratitude to his cousin to me. A minor conflict, however, erupted during his wedding. Zhi Guo acknowledged that his cousin had carefully arranged a convoy of vehicles and made a great effort to make his wedding a splendid affair. However, his cousin’s mother later showed off his family’s contribution to Zhi Guo’s wedding to relatives, to which Zhi Guo made a response that was considered ungrateful. The cousin reprimanded Zhi Guo, and their relationship cooled for a while. Zhi Guo told me: “Now I understand, if he is able to help me sometimes, I would not accept. Even if I were a beggar, I would not follow him in doing business. You see, we are brothers; if anything goes wrong, we might ‘tear each other’s faces’ (*53ushi lian* 撕破脸). I hope to retain our affection. If he ran into any difficulty, I would help him. If he were riding high, I would not ask him for anything.” This episode of disappointment seemed to have passed when I met Zhi Guo the year after, as he was cooperating with his cousin in a business project.

Zhi Guo was hoping to start his own business one day. He made explicit his aspiration for wealth at our first encounter. He also told me that it is the current “money society” that is

pushing money to the fore: “It’s not my fault; society is vain. It’s a money society now. Without money, you cannot do anything.” But business is not only about money. He sometime phrased his entrepreneurial aspiration as an aspiration to contribute to society. He criticized the fact that in our society everyone only thinks about themselves, their families, and their short-term interests; nobody cares about society. He never underestimated the complexity of society and the limits of our ability to change it: “Society is very complicated. In different occupations, rules have been inherited from time immemorial. It is unrealistic to change it in one or two generations. You cannot control everything. You have to accommodate yourself to the situation outside.”

Zhi Guo’s narrative is full of money. Yet he also has deep experiences of life without money. The shortage of money first overwhelmed him when his sister fell seriously ill in Shanghai in 2008. He said he then realized: “Even though this world is much clearer without money, the reality is that you cannot survive in Shanghai without money. If you don’t have money, when you become ill, society doesn’t give a shit! ” His sister died and has haunted the family’s memory and dreams ever since. In a lunch at his house, his mother and Zhi Guo told me that they both had dreamed about his sister. Zhi Guo’s mother told me that in her dream her daughter walks past her and ignores her. She wondered: “Is it because I did not buy a proper tomb for her?” In Zhi Guo’s dream, his sister tell him that that she is short of money. Zhi Guo’s mother denied this: “There’s no money in the afterlife. After you die, you turn to ashes. I dream of her several times each year.” The failure of his barber’s shop—his first business project—also left Zhi Guo with a deep memory of the shortage of money. After he closed his shop, he ran out of money and fell into debt. His parents kept asking him to find a job while he was still thinking about starting another business; they therefore had a lot of conflicts. He became very sensitive at that time: “I was thinking, when you have money, you belong to the family. When you don’t have money, you don’t belong to the family.” Now he gave his wages

to his parents and wife. He said that, even after one year's work, he still did not have spare cash to buy a new mobile phone, let alone to buy a car, even though he had been thinking about buying one for a long time. But he said he felt peaceful: "I do not waste my money. Last time I went to my wife's home, I went to see her grandma. I had already bought her some gift. But when I saw her living alone, I gave her some money. I am not rich. I earn this money bit by bit." Zhi Guo told me that if he could contribute to family and society, he would have no regret when he was old.

For my informants, leaving school or one's own kinship network and entering the urban job market are the important markers of entering into "society." "Society" is an ambiguous domain outside one's family and community, often evoking an ambiguous sense of danger and opportunity among my informants. Zhi Guo often imagined and envied friendship at school, which was simple and pure; friends in society, by contrast, are realistic and utilitarian. When he mentioned his cousin's sophisticated way of dealing with people in society, he pointed out a key principle: "Do not treat people in society like your family members!" He justified his aspiration to be an entrepreneur as an inevitable adaptation to this "money society." Entrepreneurship, however, is not only about having large quantities of money, but also about the promise to find a footing in society. He told me several times that if he made a fortune one day he would make a glorious return to his own home town, visit his ancestor's home town, reunite with relatives his family had long lost contact with, and make his own contribution to society.

This chapter investigates how my informants extend the metaphor of money to understand society in the context of the expanding money economy and migration. Anthropologists have demonstrated that we should never take the boundaries of society as a self-evident fact. In the context of socialist Vietnam, Markus Schlecker (2005) has demonstrated how the state tries to construe society (*xa hoi*) and encourage people to recognize their membership in it beyond their families. Since the state simplifies the heterogeneous nature of local communities, it sees

*xa hoi* as environment or milieu, as the object of a plan that gives a priority to projected configurations of impersonal relationships. Hans Steinmuller and Wu Fei note the different meanings of “society” in official and popular discourse in China: “when party officials and intellectuals use the word ‘society’, they imply solidarity and cohesion. The promotion of the idea of ‘society’ as a moral community is intended to inspire a sense of stability and legitimize government policies. In popular discourse, however, ‘society’ is often a jungle—a space of coldness and indifference” (2011:12). These scholars have highlighted the different actors’ understandings of “society” and human relatedness.

To investigate our informants’ understanding of “society”, we should first reflect on our own scholarly understandings of society. The discovery and understanding of society is a moral project in the social sciences. In his narrative of what he calls the “Great Transformation” in Europe, Karl Polanyi (2001) records the discovery of society in the context of the emerging market system: in Adam Smith’s era, economic and commercial society emerged as a new realm distinct from the political state. However, with the development of the market and the realization of the problem of poverty, people began to realize the grim realities of economic society and attempted to reintegrate it into the human world. In the nineteenth century, to counterbalance the rigid law of Nature in the self-regulating market system, “society” was rediscovered and differentiated from market.

The development of sociology is also based on a norm-centred concept of society (cf. Luhmann 1995:326). In the tradition of the sociology of western society, scholars have asked how a modern and differentiated society can be an integrated one. “Solidarity” is often a normative answer to this question. Anthropologists pursue the modern project of discovering and describing society in non-western societies. In the tradition of anthropology, the unity of society has been imagined from the perspective of gift exchange. In Polanyi’s and Mauss’s formulations, the gift and its reciprocity provide an imaginative point from which to criticize the

self-regulating and utilitarian market and to imagine the solidarity of society. The model of the gift relies on a distinction between gift (premodern, nonmonetary, nonmarket, local) and commodity (modern, monetary, market, global). When money intrudes into the local world, the distinction becomes blurred. Anthropologists are now still attempting to extend the mode of gift and different spheres of exchange in understanding modern money economy. In their edited volume *Money and The Morality of Exchange*, Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (1989) replace the distinction between pre-monetary culture and modern monetary culture with the distinction between the domains of the long- and short-term transactional orders within cultures.

It is no wonder that anthropologists have long attempted to describe Chinese society from the vantage point of interpersonal relationship mediated by gifts (Yang 1994, Yan 1996). This culminates in the fetish of the local idiom of *guan xi*. Another way to describe society in contemporary China is to look at the possibility and impossibility of civil society with regard to the emerging market and socialist state (cf. Hertz 1998:190). In his ethnography of Beijing during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Frank Pieke (1994) captures society as an ambiguous sphere whose unity was fragmented by market, state, and individual in the expansion of the circulation of money in the early reform period. He describes the emerging form of society as “capital socialism”: “Under capital socialism, interactions that take place on the basis of a market-type or interpersonal common moral and cognitive order have grown sharply but have been only partially emancipated by the reforms. Beijing society is almost the exact antithesis of the ideal-typical market or bureaucracy. The embeddedness in private social relations of the market and the bureaucratic spheres is compounded because both exist side-by-side, semi-autonomous, yet not independent” (1994:514). Pieke notes that, even though the market does not take over, money becomes the universal currency in both the bureaucratic and the personalized spheres.

There are different modes of understanding the ambiguous realm of “society”. While scholars often extend the gift model and interpersonal relationships in order to understand society, my informants extend the money metaphor to understand and describe “society” in contemporary China. This chapter investigates my informants’ description of society as a money society. Here we should first of all not assume that we already know the boundary between interpersonal relationships (such as romantic love and friendship), market, state, and society. Rather, we should investigate how my informants formulate their concept of society in relation to various spheres such as intimate love, friendship, the labour market, and state institutions. When migrants go to the cities, they engage in a social world beyond that of their families and must deal with various social spheres such as family, friendship, the market and the state. Money is not differentiated as the medium in the function of the economy; money, as a form of abstract equivalence, highlights the internal fractures of every sphere. At the same time, money externalizes these fractures to the ambiguous sphere we call “society”. Society cannot be integrated as a moral community; it is the ambiguous sphere of opportunity and uncertainty. Aided by the imaginary construction of the money society, my informants make their inclusion in society possible and displace their moral agency.

### **Marriage, money, and love**

The involvement of money in marriage is a contested topic among both scholars and my informants. In his detailed research on private life from 1949 to 1999 in a North China village, Yan Yunxiang (2003) demonstrates the tendency towards independence, romantic love, and conjugal freedom among villagers since the Mao period. He notes the early division of the family and the transfer of family property through lavish bridewealth payments. He writes: “The bridewealth is no longer a ritualized gift (or payment in some cases) by one family to

another; instead it has become a way of distributing wealth from one generation to the next” (2003:157). Revealing the monetary logic of bride wealth, Yan arrives at a pessimistic conclusion that the recent development of individualization in China is an extreme form of egotism without a commitment to civic duty. In Liu Xin’s research in rural Shanxi in the 1990s, he also peels off the moral and cultural veneers of bridewealth by exposing the internal economic reasons for it: “Whatever cultural forms the marriage negotiation takes, the variations are simply means to secure an economic interest. In the process of marriage as discussed above, what we witness is a true material interest dressed up in gifts” (2000:71). In contrast to the material analysis, Emily Martin explains bridewealth from the perspective of debt and morality. She suggests that the transfer of money should not be considered as buying and selling the bride, because “the inextricable connections between a woman and the bodies, lives, and efforts of her family do not allow her whole being to be compensated by a single payment, no matter how large” (2014, Lecture 1). However, she also notes the moral ambiguity involved: “If the bride’s family sends fewer goods with her than the bride price would buy, it is called ‘taking money from people’; if a bride comes from a very poor family that sends no dowry, it is called ‘buying’ her. Or if the groom is flawed in some way, talk of buying and selling can enter” (ibid.). The two different perspectives actually share the same animosity toward economic logic and the same tendency to moralize money. While Martin tries to see the transfer of money transfer as cultural practice, Yan Yunxiang and Liu Xin try to reveal and criticize its economic logic.

My informants, however, are not shy of drawing an analogy between marriage and business. A young female migrant extended the metaphor of running a business to marriage, her argument being that we should make the same effort in maintaining a happy marriage as in running a good business. One young man playfully explained to me his relationship with his wife’s sister’s husband at our first encounter: “We do business with the same family.” My informants often calculated openly about the potential expenditure for their sons’ future marriages. After

attending the wedding of his uncle's son during the Chinese New Year, Luo told me that his uncle had spent 400,000 yuan on the marriage. He then commented: "Everything drops its price, only the bride wealth does not fall." While the price of scrap in his recycling trade kept dropping, the bride wealth always went up. Though he was sometimes overwhelmed by the increasingly inflated bridewealth, Luo still told me that taking care of his sons' marriages is his duty. However, he did once mention about another possibility, namely an uxori-local marriage, which would not require bridewealth from the groom's family. He said it would be acceptable if his second son should have an uxori-local marriage. Probably realizing the stigma attached to such a marriage in a patrilineal environment, Luo immediately justified it: "Now it does not matter. Young people do not care whether their partners are rich or poor; they only care whether their emotions fit (*gan qing he de lai* 感情合得来)."

In the autumn of 2013, I accompanied Luo to his wife's sister's son's wedding. On our way to the wedding, Luo made a comparison between earlier marriages and present-day marriages: "People used to get married first and then develop their affections [for each other]. Sometime you even did not see each other before the marriage. But now people let their affections grow and then get married." Thirteen years after Luo's marriage, marriages for the next generation may not be so different. It was arranged that Jia, the nephew, would meet his bride during the spring festival of 2012, and they became engaged immediately. Jia's father told me it was also the result of "predestined affinity" (*yuan fen* 缘分). Like Luo, Jia also sent money, pork, cigarettes, beer, and liquor to his wife's house before the wedding. In the first round of payments for the engagement, the "small sending" (*xiao song* 小送), Jia's family paid 10001 yuan, which signifies "one in 10,000"---the bride is a real find! On the day before the wedding, Jia's father told me he was so anxious about the very details of the ritual that he could not sleep soundly. He was especially attentive to the quantity and quality of the gifts given to the bride's family. He took liquor as an example. He was proud that his banquets offered the best liquor

in his village; he also sent the same good quality liquor to the bride's banquet even though the two banquets were hosted in different places and for different guests. He explained to me: "If I use this liquor at my banquets and send bad quality liquor to them, they will despise me when they find out. So I send them out the same liquor."

On the wedding day, when the bride approached the threshold of the groom's house, a small ritual was held. The household manager (*jia zhang* 家长) was supposed to sit on the threshold to receive the new couple and give them gift money. When the bride calls the groom's parents "father" and "mother," the groom's parents have to give her gift money to change the form of address (*gai kou fei* 改口费). After arriving at her newly decorated marriage room, the bride checked the furniture and noticed that one piece of furniture did not meet the promised standard; she expressed her anger, and the groom immediately came to explain that the current one was better.

Guests slowly flowed in. Money was visible from the moment one entered the house. The gift money was carefully counted and kept in the booking desk near to the gate of the house.

Before contributing my gift money, I asked Luo to find a red envelope for me to wrap it in. He laughed and said it was not necessary. He then led me to the booking desk. The accountant carefully counted my gift money, asked my name, and recorded the amount of my gift in the book under the observing eyes of many bystanders. There is no need to be embarrassed: the amounts of gift money, especially those from relatives, used to be shouted out by the accountant, Luo told me. The food for the banquet was excessive. Some guests later also carefully counted the number of dishes, an important criterion in evaluating the host's generosity. On the night of the wedding, Jia's father insisted I take a look at Jia's marriage room again. He told me: "When the light is turn on, the atmosphere is different." Later he could not help remembering his own marriage: "When I got married, I threw away the old furniture.

Now my son gets married, I threw away the old furniture and bought a new set. We should follow the time (*gen zhe shi dai zou* 跟着时代走).”

The family is often treated as a different moral sphere from society. For my informants, it is important to treat one’s family members and people from society differently. But families also need to absorb new members from society through marriage alliances. Marrying a partner who is too close—say, within one’s extended kinship network—is also seen as ill-reputed “barter marriage” (*huan hun* 换婚). Marriage involving a partner from afar also stirs up suspicions of having bought a wife from elsewhere and fuels concerns about the sudden disappearance of marriage partners. Though migration provides more opportunities for romantic encounters between people from different areas, most young migrants still marry partners from their home town through arranged dating.

Ritualized exchanges of money and gifts play an important communicative role in the whole process, from the engagement to the wedding. Since decisions regarding engagement and marriage are often made in a short span of time, the couple do not have much time to get to know each other and develop emotional attachments before marriage, which always entails great risk. That is why a match-maker is needed in order to communicate background information. But my informants also said match-makers are not always trustworthy because they are eager to make a match. Money becomes an important medium for observing and communicating each other’s intentions. That is why Jia’s father had to be so nervous and meticulous about the circulation of money and gifts at the wedding and Jia’s wife became very angry when she noticed that the furniture was not what had been promised. On this festive occasion, money and materials were carefully calculated and observed. Compared to scholars like Yan Yunxiang and Liu Xin, my informants are less concerned about the intrusion of money into marriage arrangements.

My informants, however, also acknowledge money can easily start conflicts within the family. They thus also carefully avoid the directly communicating monetary calculations. When recollecting how their family proceeded to arrange his engagement after a meeting with future wife, Da Yu, had been arranged, Luo told me: “Her family asked for 10000 yuan in cash. This is the deposit.” After Luo had paid his “deposit,” his parents-in-law promised to buy him a three-wheel truck when they got married one year later. Ultimately, however, Da Yu’s family did not keep their promise to buy him a truck. Luo told me that the bridewealth he had paid funded Da Yu’s brother’s marriage. When Luo told me about the broken promise, he specifically asked me not to talk about it with Da Yu. He told me Da Yu once got angry when he mentioned the episode. Actually Luo got married after his younger sister; in variance with the conventional order, this might also indicate that Luo himself used part of his sister’s bridewealth to fund his own marriage. When we were discussing the marriage and wedding customs, I once asked Da Yu generally whether a bride’s family could make any money out of the bridewealth they received for her. She acknowledged the possibility and said that it was understandable to keep some of the money since a family had had to make great efforts to bring the girl up.

My informants understand very well that family life is closely connected to society through economic livelihoods. They understand the possible conflicts money might bring into the family. After the wedding, Jia and his wife lived with his parents in the city and worked together in their family business. Jia’s mother managed the money. But conflicts within the family soon emerged. In 2016, I heard from Luo that Jia’s mother had even threatened to leave the family; Jia’s wife argued that Jia’s mother treated her worse than before because the latter now did not give her any money to spend. Luo was not surprised and showed his understanding about the conflictual situation: young people aspire for economic independence.

After many small family conflicts, Yu Lan thought about ending them by divorcing or simply disappearing. She had met her husband in Shanghai; he was also from Sichuan but from a different town. There was no bride-price or other ritual arrangement involved. While some acquaintances were envious of Yu Lan's romantic marriage, Yu Lan once regretted: "If a man does not spend money on marrying a woman, he will never cherish the woman." In 2010, when Yu Lan complained about her conflicts to an acquaintance and myself, the acquaintance suggested that she and her husband might not emotionally attach to each other anymore. Yu Lan denied this, and blamed their conflicts on the increasing pressure on her husband to earn money after the birth of their son. After they moved back to their own home town, their economic situation deteriorated; Yu Lan lost money in gambling and later also lost her control over the family income. Now taking care of their children and his mother and lacking pocket money, Yu Lan once told me she had also considered disappearing. When I expressed my shock at this, she justified herself by saying that "it was not my intention to escape. It's because of the environment. It is because of a lack of money." She said she was not greedy, otherwise she would have married to a local Shanghainese man. Unlike her own brothers, who were involved in criminal activities and "loiter in society" (*hun she hui* 他们混社会), she told me, her husband was simple and honest, and she once aspired to lead a proper family life with him.

When family conflicts erupt, my informants would often blame them on money. This blame creates a space for reconciliation within the family. My informants would suggest that if it is only a money problem, it is not a big problem: when a couple fights over money, they at least then share some emotional bond. The money problems can be attributed to the grim reality of society anyway.

## Friendship and money

Modern society poses a problem for social solidarity and the moral order. Civil friendship is thought to an important way of generating solidarity beyond one's family. According to sociologist Allan Silver (1990), Adam Smith proposes that the commercial society in the eighteenth-century would bring with it a morally superior form of friendship--voluntary based on 'nature sympathy,' unconstrained by necessity. The commercial society makes possible a distinction between sympathetic relationships that normatively exclude the ethos of calculation and utility, and relationships oriented to instrumentalism and contract. This development both enhances the moral quality of personal relationships and frees them from exclusive solidarities expressing pervasive competitiveness. Friendship and other sympathetic bonds integrate individuals into the wider society, helping shape a civil society free of exclusive relationships that are hostile to or suspicious of others.

To counter the ideal of non-calculating friendships, anthropologists have demonstrated the ambiguity of friendship. In his study of friendship among Chinese college youth, Michael Strickland (2010) argues that affect and instrumentalism converge in close friendships. He demonstrates that material aid is a normal and expected part of close friendships. Although young men in his case claim that their friendship is based on mutual feelings, they do not exclude the possibility of instrumental aid and even expect their friends to provide material aid such as lending them money. Although these youths sometimes make a distinction between instrumental and affective friendship, Strickland argues that "instrumentalism does not necessarily denote self-interest or a lack of regard for one's partner, and yet this is often taken as its implication" (2010:105). Material support, however, does not generate close friendships automatically. He records a case in which Chen Zhong invites Tai Jiang for dinner at an expensive restaurant and pays the bill. The generous gesture is taken lightly by Tai Jiang. He explains that, as Chen Zhong's father is a local official, Chen Zhong could thus have the cost

reimbursed from his father's office's funds. Strickland then argues that the more that an act constitutes a sacrifice, the more meaningful it becomes. Material aid might be seen as a form of sacrifice but also as a form of instrumental exchange. The ambiguity reflects the observer's interpretation of money and affection.

My informants would often say: "When you are at home, you rely on your parents; when you are away from home, you rely on your friends." Friend is a very inclusive category. In the second-hand market, Luo would call familiar customers "old friend," even though he did not know their names. Once, Liu, a security guard in his forties, took me to his former colleague's newly opened restaurant to have dinner; his colleague came to join us and ordered more dishes for us. After one round of drinks, his colleague told me: "If you need my help in the future, just tell me. We are friends now." Friends never hide the instrumental dimension; rather, they often amplify it. In my first encounter with Luo's relative, he told me: "Let us become friends. One day I might go to your hometown and need your help." For my informants, instrumental interest binds friends in society.

The overemphasis on the instrumental interest in society also stimulates my informants' aspirations for pure and affective relationships. Since most of my informants had very limited experience of school, they often had a romantic imagination of friendships at school. They were often envious that I managed to make some genuine friends at school. Zhang, the owner of a logistics company, often regretted that he did not have many friends from school since he did not even finish elementary school. He insisted that his son attend university, even though the latter had no interest. One reason for insisting was that his son would then have a circle of friends from the university. He then compared friends from school and friends from "society." Friendship in school is based on genuine affection; even though you fight with each other, you are still good friends. Friends from society have short memory and are mainly oriented to interest; if you do not contact them for a while, you forget each other. Partially realizing the

fragility of friendship from “society,” some of my informants ritualize their friendship into fictive kinship.

I met Feng, a 46-year-old welder, through an introduction by Luo. I addressed him using the kinship idiom of uncle at the very beginning. As we became closer to one another, Luo suggested that I should call him “brother.” Feng happily agreed to the suggestion. At our first dinner at his house, Feng said: “We three met together. Let me use a superstitious trope--this is because the arrangement of god. It is the predetermined affinity (*yuan fen* 缘分).” Luo said: “We’ve become friends. We do not care whether we are rich or poor; we only care whether we get along with each other (*tan de lai* 谈得来).” Feng agreed: “If you really cared about your family background, I would not sit with you.” Feng’s family is richer than Luo’s. On other occasions, Luo sometimes guessed at the Fengs’ savings. The Fengs were obviously uneasy with the financial differential. Ms Feng once humbly said to Luo: “We two make money; you alone make money to support the whole family.” Since the Fengs worked very hard, Luo sometimes teased their hard-working spirit and over-accumulation of money. Feng explained that he still had to earn money for his daughter’s education. He apologized for not spending much time socializing with me, but he told me: “You are in my heart.” When I left for Germany, Feng told me: “If you are very busy outside, it is enough for you to call me sometime. When I feel your affection, it is enough.” At the same time, he slipped several hundred yuan in my pocket, saying the money was for me to buy some drink on my trip. When I called him from Germany, he was so concerned at my cost to me that he nearly hurried me to hang up the phone.

Zhi Guo was the friend I first met when I began to do research in an urban village during 2009. Zhi Guo had lost contact with his friends in his home town; he also rarely made friends in Shanghai. He explained: “people in society are very phony. You could drink and talk nonsense with them. But who would have a heart-to-heart talk with you (*tan xin* 谈心)?” He said it was

meaningless to make a lot of friends; our era and society only focus on money and interest. When I said that money cannot determine all the friendship, he cited his father's analysis of friendship: "When your economic power is the same, you can keep up the affection. But if you drift too far away-- say you become a leader-- you will ignore me." Despite the harsh social reality, Zhi Guo still yearned for deep friendship. He once told me he was thinking about whom among his family and friends would not despise him, even though he became poor. There were not many. He included me in the list. But he immediately added: "Now we do not have a relationship of interest. If interest were involved in our relationship, I do not know what would happen." He later asked me to lend him some money when he was planning to open a restaurant. I agreed, but in the event he did not take it up since the restaurant project never really got started. Zhi Guo later told me how embarrassed he was to open his mouth to make the request.

When Zhi Guo was a child, his father, a village cadre, had a lot of friends; Zhi Guo was often taken to attend banquets. When his father was working with his friends in the grain business, one of his friends absconded with the money. Zhi Guo's father was in debt and later went to Shanghai to find work. Reflecting on his past, Zhi Guo's father said: "When you are riding high, you are surrounded by a lot of friends. When you are at your lowest, where are your friends? Human affection is just like fresh water (*ren qing ru dan shui* 人情如淡水). When you are in a dire situation, and someone comes to help you, he really is your friend and brother." He said genuine friends would not care about background and status differences. But he also said this is just the ideal situation and is not the reality in society; society is wild and people in it are oriented toward material interests. He attributed my friendship with Zhi Guo to God's arrangement.

My neighbour and friend Cui often stressed that friendship is built on equality and mutuality. He often illustrated his ideal of friendship with an example of his friendship with his father's

friend's son. At one point Cui hired the friend to help him with his sub-contracted business: "I told him we should not care too much about the amount of money. When my money is tight and I give you less, you should not mind. If I give you money, you should not think this is what I should do. We are equal; we should treat each other equally." As his friendship was often entangled with economic cooperation, I often heard his complaints about his friends in our compound. He once complained that Shen, a decoration worker in our compound, was ungrateful and always wanted more money. He once gave Shen and his wife a cleaning assignment. The price he offered was the market price--400 yuan. But he offered Shen and his wife lunch. He said: "If I hire other workers, I do not have to take care of their lunch. But we are friends; I treated them to lunch. You have to keep this in mind; you should not take it for granted." Another friend, Xu, once asked Cui to work for him for two days for 400 yuan. Cui only needed half of the second day to finish his work. After giving Cui his wages, Xu asked him to pay a 100 yuan phone bill for him. Cui guessed Xu wanted to extract 100 yuan out of his wages since he had finished his work in one and a half days. He was irritated by Xu's precise calculation.

Feng, Zhi Guo, Zhi Guo's father, and Cui all understand how social-economic differences can intrude into friendship. That is why they desire pure relationships. Zhi Guo's father and Feng invoked the imagined role of god and yuan fen to justify our meeting and subsequent friendship; Cui suggest real friends should not care about money. Actual friendship, however, is always entangled in society through various instrumental functions which often provoke conflicts.

It is not very surprising to suggest that friendship is always entangled with material interest in non-western society. It is a social fact that friends cooperate with each other in business and provide material aid to each other among my informants. Material sharing is one of the social expectations of friendship. With limited material resources, my informants sometimes have to

face a low threshold of monetary calculation and conflict. This often leads to interpersonal accusations of a lack of proper reciprocity and caring about money. In projecting these money conflicts onto society, my informants preserve the potentiality of friendship: friendship still has the potential to be a form of pure relationship and lie outside of society. When the money society is to be blamed, my informants can still be reconciled with their friends. Though my neighbour Cui often accused his friends of caring about money too much, he was still prepared to cooperate with them in different subcontracting projects.

### **The market, the moral economy, and money**

Unlike other state-supported channels of migration, such as joining the army or attending university, peasant' migration was a practice with a bad reputation at the very beginning, the last resort for those who could not make a proper living at home. When Hong Xia, a woman migrant from Sichuan, first went to work in a factory in Guangzhou in 1989, she stirred up a lot of rumours in her home town: "They thought my family was short of money and had sold me out. They also thought working outside was fraudulent." When she and her sister went back from Guangzhou, her fellow villagers were envious of their fashionable clothes; most importantly, the villagers had heard that they sent money back every month. Villagers began to ask them to take their children along with them too.

When Yu Lan worked as waitress in Shanghai in 1995, she had an opportunity to work as a domestic worker in a Shanghainese family. Her job was supposed to be taking care of an old couple. She hesitated: "At the beginning, I was not willing to go. As shown on TV, domestic workers are often sexually abused. People in my home town said it was a bad job." Yu Lan eventually gave it a try, explaining that her Shanghainese employer was paying her 600 yuan a month; that was the main reason why she decided to take the job. To give me a sense of what 600 yuan meant at that time, she explained: "I only earned 300 yuan in my previous job. My

husband only earned 700 yuan as an air-conditioning repairer, and his wages were quite high among the men.” She also highlighted her good relationship with the Shanghainese family. She claimed that taking care of her employer’s parents was just like taking care of her own parents and that her employer was very polite. However, on another occasion she also told me that the employer’s family and she were not the same kind of people, since their sense of privilege went deep into her bones. When I once asked her whether she liked the domestic job, Yu Lan became impatient and told me: “It does not matter whether you like it or not, it is to make money.”

Though my informants always acknowledge that their achievements are limited by their low educational credentials and nonlocal status, they would say that the urban market provides them with an opportunity to make pure calculations based on monetary gain. A clothes vendor explained why he had come to Shanghai: “When you set up some small stall at home, your folks say you are a loser. Here, you see, if I were a scrap-picker, I can still dress up and go home. Who knows? When you are living outside, you can put down your face (*mian zi fang xia* 面子放下) and start from the lowest level.” Of course, this urban freedom is exaggerated and often out of reach for most migrant workers. In the workplace, my informants often have to confront the strict organizational discipline, negative discrimination as out-of-towners (*wai di ren* 外地人) and competition among co-workers. Money provides them with a diversion from workplace politics and conflicts.

Wu Kou, a recently returned migrant in a market town, complained that the economy in his rural hometown was constrained by local networks and considerations of “face”. Pointing to outdoor mah-jong-playing groups, he commented that people in his market town had too much leisure time: “Some may think that if they work hard and overtime they are making money for their boss. But when you work in the city, you would think that you are making money for

yourself.” He proudly told me about his strict management when he had been the only non-local manager in a private factory in Ningbo (a port city near Shanghai): “I once scolded some local people so much they cried. I said you should not be angry with me. You do not have to give me any face (*mian zi* 面子), you just have to give face to money. I can stand my boss’s scolding because I respect money. If your work is not good enough, I will scold you; that’s my duty.” Though he first showed his admiration for the objectivity of urban employment, he later also told me that one of the main reasons he decided to come back to set up a pig-raising business: “When you labor for the boss, you have to work yourself to death for him. It is entirely realistic: if you do not work hard today, you will have to work hard to find a job tomorrow.”

In her Morgan Lectures in 1986, Emily Martin observes a warm employer-laborer relationship in Chinese communities: “The employer-laborer relationship was to some extent a relationship between whole persons. If work was not strictly controlled, neither was it strictly limited: laborers could be ordered to do errands or other household tasks... Meals were expected in addition to wages” (2014, Lecture 1). In practice, personal connections such as kinship, patron-client relations, and friendship still play an important role in organizing labour. But money always provides another perspective; in the mirror of monetary interest, the moral economy can be renegotiated.

On the employers’ side, many migrant entrepreneurs also claimed that they did not want to hire employees through their personal networks. Fu, the boss of a scrap steel-recycling workshop, once hired his cousin to manage procurement in his workshop. After half a year, the cousin asked for a larger share of the profits. Fu refused, and the cousin left without giving him information about scrap-selling agents and set up his own recycling workshop. Fu then had to pay higher prices to obtain scrap steel from new agents. When the network based on trust failed, he insisted that money could solve the problem: “When an agent sells at 2000 yuan, and

I give him 2100, he will definitely sell to me. People now recognize not affection but money.” Even though he argued that money makes his cousin redundant, he still hired workers from his hometown in Fujian. Some migrant entrepreneurs often complained that they were overwhelmed by the moral expectations, as workers from their home towns would often assume that their bosses are in debt to them.

While employers show how the market now runs on money and that their kith and kin are redundant, they still use their personal networks and the ideology of gratitude to organize labour. Migrant workers also use the rhetoric of money to make the moral economy contingent and to justify their “betrayal” or “ingratitude.” When Luo was working in a garden company, the boss of a rival company attempted to poach him. She asked Luo how much he could earn. Luo told her, “500.” Then the boss told him that she could give him 700 yuan for a month. At first Luo was reluctant: “My original boss was very nice to me. But the second boss came to me every day. She taught me a trick: I could tell my original boss that I had to go back home for some family event. Then I thought that the purpose if coming to the city is to make money. So I went to work for the second boss.” My informants no longer hesitate to justify their job choices by means of a monetary calculation, sometimes even exaggerating its role in the process of decision-making.

One can certainly be criticized for being too calculating and shrewd, but if you do not take your own money interest into account, you only make yourself look like a fool. Zhi Guo worked as a delivery man in a recent start-up online shopping company. Since the business had still not picked up, he could not earn very much. His boss was also a very passionate young woman, always encouraging workers to treat the company as their home. Zhi Guo was also very engaged with the company; he sent phone messages about the company’s operations to his boss. But the meagreness of his wage was still his concern. He rhetorically asked: “The boss asks us to treat the company as home, but how could I do that if I do not have the corresponding material

condition?” He cited the communist revolution as an example: “Mao promised to divide the land. He also granted the title of general to his colleagues.”

Both Marx and Simmel describe the emergence of the wage labor system, noting the alienation and objectification of labor. While Marx focuses on the potential for exploitation with the emergence of wage system and factory, Simmel captures the possibility of freedom opened up by the money economy. He notes that, compared to the serfdom, wage labor allows the separation of the total personality from work activities. He writes: “The growing self-confidence of the modern worker is the result of the fact that he no longer feels subordinate as a person, but rather contributes only an exactly prescribed amount of work—prescribed on the basis of its monetary equivalent—which leaves the person as such all the more free, the more objective, impersonal and technical work and its regulation become” (2005: 335). For Marx, a monetary equivalent, as a form of alienation, is exploitation; for Simmel, a monetary equivalent, as a form of objectification, brings relief and freedom. We can see that the monetary equivalent in the form of a wage has already introduced a paradox regarding industrial organization at the end of nineteenth century. While scholars often moralize over the alienating effect of a money wage, my informants celebrate its potential for freedom. As their occupations come low in the moral hierarchy or even immoral sphere of society, they attempt to decouple the connection between morality and the economy. It is redefining society as a money society that makes this decoupling possible. My informants would often ask about the quantity and source of my own wages. This is a reminder that we all live in the same money society; it would be impossible to claim the moral superiority of my intellectual work.

### **State institutions: exclusion and inclusion**

From my informants’ perspectives, state or public institutions such as the army and university are supposed to be outside of “society.” Since I am a university student, my informants often

said I still lacked experience of and knowledge about “society;” some informants also assumed that I would be working for the state rather than for the market in the future since I would have a doctoral degree. Though government officials and teachers should live outside “society,” my informants also noted that they take gifts of money from people in society. My informants thus often criticize officials’ and teachers’ corruption. Cui, a demobilized veteran, argued that the army was even more corrupt than “society,” his evidence being that soldiers had to pay money to get admitted to the Communist Party.

In China studies, scholars often describe how one particular state institution—the household registration system—has material effects on migrants’ everyday lives in terms of employee benefits and children’s education. In the context of urban neighborhoods where rural migrants and marginalized urban citizens encounter one another, the rural-urban divide is reinforced by state governing practices (Siu 2007; Cho 2012). My informants had a deep experience of their unequal treatment in the workplace, such as wages and social security, as well as urban life in general. After a few days’ futile search for a primary school for his children, one migrant asked, “if we all use the same RMB (Chinese currency), why can’t my children attend the same primary school here?” The unity of state currency provides a vantage point for a critique of the institutional exclusion of migrants’ children from public schools in Shanghai. Some informants even exaggerated the effect of money to deny the power of the household registration system, arguing that money could fix everything. One male migrant explained: “If you have enough money, you do not need social welfare benefits. You can then find ways to put your children into schools. You can also return home to enjoy life, and then you do not need the Shanghai household registration at all.” Many informants often claimed that they had come to Shanghai mainly for money; they would say: “If I had enough money I would stay in my home town”. However, for those migrant entrepreneurs who have become relatively rich, they always get a household registration through money and personal connection. For them, Shanghai

household registration could signify personal worth. Compared to migrant workers, several university graduates I met, who had bought an apartment in Shanghai yet still had not received the Shanghainese household registration, grumbled more loudly about the household registration system and social inequality more loudly. Rather than resorting to solidarity politics or resistance to obtain recognition, rural migrants often resort to the medium of money to achieve inclusion.

Institutional exclusion, however, is materialized in everyday encounters. In the urban village, the leisured local Shanghainese have become a symptom of institutional inequality. These local Shanghainese— former peasants turned landlords— now lived off migrants’ rents. Most local Shanghainese had moved out and were living in gated communities elsewhere. There is a discursive distinction between Shanghainese (*shang hai ren* 上海人) and out-of-towners (*wai di ren* 外地人), a distinction made with reference to personal conduct and status. My landlord told me that the urban village was much cleaner when the migrants went back to their home town during the spring festival. My friend Cui made an indirect argument: “If we did not rent their houses, they would have nothing to eat.” Since most Shanghainese are house-owners, they are obviously richer. But my informants can also moralize about their wealth. Some informants said their wealth had not been earned by their hard work but came from relocation compensation. Zhi Guo told me that the local Shanghainese, who care too much about money and are indifferent to sentiments of kinship, would fight for property among brothers and sisters and take each other to court, reflecting their moral inferiority and lack of conscience.

Though my informants argue that Shanghainese are immoral because they use the state’s law to solve family issues, they must now also accept that law is part of their urban lives. They sometimes admitted embarrassingly that they were working in a legally ambiguous area. As a waste-recycler, Luo also had to run his business in a legally ambiguous way since some waste

products were probably profitable stolen property. One night, when Luo and I were watching a crime investigation on stealing on TV,<sup>4</sup> he commented: “When they can’t make money in the city, you see, they consider stealing. Thieves exist all the time. Human beings die for money, birds die for food.” I weighed in, “But there should be an ending at some point, right?” Luo disagreed, “There is no ending. No ending in the human heart. When you have money, you always need more. What can they do?” Here Luo was attributing the motivation of stealing to the natural human desire for money and thus decoupling stealing from morality.

In 2013, his uncle was sent to prison for, Luo explained, “accidentally killing a person.”

Accordingly his uncle’s crime has a connotation of immorality and stigma; our mutual friend had to lower her voice when discussing Luo’s uncle’s case. Once when he came to ask me to reply to a letter to his uncle, he told me, “If I were rich, I would save my uncle from prison. It requires 600,000—how could we get that amount of money? If 100,000 were enough, I could do it, 600,000 is too much.” He then sighed and said: “Shanghai is a money society. If you do not have money, you cannot do anything.” Actually Luo did not have any precise information about how much money was needed to save his uncle from prison, he just accidentally heard the price when someone once offered to pay him to be a substitute prisoner some years ago.

Actually even his uncle’s requests for a small amount of money would often put him in a quandary, as he had to use his meagre income to take care of his conjugal family. However, in blaming his uncle’s prosecution on a money problem, Luo rejected his uncle’s stigma as a killer and attributed his doing time to the lack of money. He also expressed his willingness to help and care for his uncle, his failure to care also being attributed to the hard reality of a lack of money.

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<sup>4</sup> I spend a lot time watching TV with Luo at nights. As Luo could not get access to the country-wide cable television, which charged a fee, he watched free local Shanghai TV programs instead. During that period, various anti-Japanese war and spy war dramas were popular. Luo also watched news programs such as Media Report Search (媒体大搜索), Eastern 110 (东方 110) and Legal Case Concentration (案件聚焦), programs that work with the police and often provide a dark and dramatic description of Shanghai.

One night, Luo told his wife Da Yu about a minor altercation between an acquaintance of his and a female neighbour. Da Yu said, “The woman is also very tough.” Luo replied, “It is useless to be tough; can she win by fighting?” Da Yu rejected the power of fighting and said, “Is there no law that can punish him?” Luo answered, “The law is useless. He is not afraid of the law. He is not afraid of spending money or staying in prison” While Da Yu recognized the power of the state’s law over physical violence, Luo denounced the power of the state’s law, highlighting instead the power of daring to spend money. When Luo had to deal with his family’s violation of the state’s birth control plan, he chose to spend money finding a mediator to fix it, rather than buying gifts and hosting banquets for cadres directly.

Now the police come to the urban village to resolve conflicts, and criminals are brought to justice in TV programs. If the law is now stricter in our lives, a sixty-year-old waste-recycling migrant asked me, why is there more crime now? He told me that there had been less crime in Chairman Mao’s era. I told him that some would argue that people have become morally corrupt. He refused the morality thesis and explained: “It is because we are in a money society now. If you do not like him, you can crash him to death. You just need to spend some money. You had to substitute your life for his life before.”

Simmel (2004) notes that in urban areas dominated by economic interests, the value of a human being is most likely to be interpreted in terms of a sum of money on the one hand and the increasing inadequacy of money as a form of atonement on the other. He keenly captures the paradox that money defines the sphere of justice while rendering itself inadequate as a way of fixing injustice. The rhetoric of money helps my informants level various distinctions reified by state institutions, such as local Shanghainese versus out-of-towners, legal versus illegal. Money is used to symbolize a form of justice beyond state intuitions. But states officials can also take receive money as bribes. A well connected boss can get a government contract and earn a lot of money. The dark side of money is now compensated for by the moral discourse

of state corruption. But my informants are ambiguous towards the government's anti-corruption campaign. One builder, who had criticized the civil servants' corruption, also blamed the difficulty of getting a job on the anti-corruption campaign. He explained to me that, if there was no corruption, there was no way to get a bank loan approved and thus there was no construction business.

### **Conclusion: Money society as a self-description of society**

There are different ways of discovering, describing, and organizing society in the modern period. Douglas Howland (2000) notes that elite Japanese scholars discovered "society" as reified organic things through translating Herbert Spencer's sociology in the Meiji period of the 1870s and 1880s. The elite scholars' discovery of society revealed to them that political controls over the people had begun to dissolve: "with the class system of the Tokugawa age dismantled and the simple equation of status, occupation, and moral standing undone, the new unit---society---began to take form in the 1880s" (2000:80). The question of poverty could now be understood as the division of society, a division that also could be corrected by granting equal rights to the poor. The concept of society facilitated the possibility for political praxis and gave new guidance for social development. Ming-Cheng M. Lo and Christopher P. Bettinger (2001) note that in modernizing Japan, the abstract metaphor of the family becomes a means through which individuals define their roles in modern society; it is a form of civility which establishes a potentially unlimited membership for civil society.

Modern Chinese scholars also attempt to redefine society in a comparative perspective. Starting from the ambiguity of the category of family, Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong argued that Chinese society is based on a "differential mode of association" (*cha xu ge ju* 差序格局): each individual is surrounded by a series of concentric circles, with each circle spreading out from the centre. Conversely, he argues, Western society is based on an "organizational mode of

association” (*tuan ti ge ju* 团体格局): every one participates in some organization, each organization has its own boundaries defining who belongs to it and who does not, and the relationship of each individual to the organization is defined by its constitution. Following this tradition, China scholars have attempted to describe Chinese society from the vantage point of interpersonal relationship and ethics (cf. Yang 1994; Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997). In her ethnography of an emigration village in Fujian, Julie Chu has keenly captured the contingency of everyday moral conduct brought out by the outflow of men and inflow of US dollars. She notes the anxiety about the moral reliability of women and their misuse of hard-earned remittances. In the end, she still invokes the notion of face as a form of mediation through which material resources (money) are circulated: “it was a social valuation of persons that accrued and expanded through the circulation of things-in-motion from migrant bodies themselves to their various extendable and convertible substances: labor power, dollar wages, overseas remittances, immigration documents, temple donations, holiday gifts, housing renovations, respectable clothing, lavish home-cooked meals, spirit money, ritual blessings, and so forth” (2010:255).

This chapter has suggested that it is very difficult to resort to the ethics of interpersonal relationships to provide a description of society and its increasing contingency in the context of the expanding money economy and migration. When migrants go to the cities, they engage a “society” beyond their families; they have to deal with various spheres such as family, friendship, market and state within “society”. My informants amplify the money dimension for a description of society that is increasingly differentiated from interpersonal interaction and its moral binding.

Money introduces contingency to “society”, making the moral hierarchy contingent while instigating social conflicts in these different spheres. At the same time, money essentializes society as a realm of conflictual material interest, into which social conflicts and fractures can be

externalized. Money society is an inclusive society beyond all the moral hierarchy as well as a morally ambiguous society that is often blamed for its corrupting influence. My informants' description of society should inspire us to reflect on our own scholarly definitions of society. In our analysis of the relationship between economy and society, we often assume that money is the medium of exchange in the economy; the communication of money is often reduced into the economy and is thus banned in society in general. The society is often normatively defined by solidarity and always has a positive connotation. The alienation of society by capitalism should thus always be criticized. This chapter has discussed a scenario in which the communication of money has still not been reduced into economy alone but is still diffused in society at large. Here the main question is not how money is embedded in society or the social meaning of money; rather, it is how the meaning of society is mediated by money. Provided we do not treat money with moral repugnancy and society with moral approval, we can see the contingent relationship between money, society and morality. We have neither to repeat the old nostalgia that money commodifies all social relationships nor to agree that the money is always morally situated by social relationships. In this chapter, we have seen how the social dimension of relationships is simultaneously made contingent and becomes stabilized by money. Money provides an abstract and concrete way of understanding the ambiguous social expectations conditioned by the money economy and migration.

## Chapter 3

### “Dead Money” and “Live Money:” Wage labor, Freedom and Entrepreneurship

In Shanghai in the spring of 2009, Feng Hu, a woman migrant from rural Anhui, quitte hawking vegetables and switched to being a car-wash worker in a car shop. Even though her income from selling vegetables was a bit higher than her wages in the car shop, she had become tired of being a hawker. As a hawker, she had to stand in the wind, rain and sun just as if she had been working on her farm, and she had to play a game of cat and mouse to avoid the city inspectors and the vagaries of their uncertain “cleaning up” activities. In the car shop, she said: “The wages are low, but it is better than staying at home. Those who have connections could do business for themselves, but we can only work for a boss.” Compared to the cleaning job she had once tried in a super-market, she said the car-wash job was better: “It is free. When you finish the washing, you can sit there and have a rest. Nobody comes to give you orders. In the super-market, you have to always be mopping the floor. The manager orders you to do this and that. It’s irritating.” Because of the 2008 financial crisis, her husband, a worker in a steel factory, and she both worried about losing their jobs for there were rumors of downsizing in their respective work places. Though she complained that every day the whole family spent all the money they had earned that day and that they managed to save little money, she insisted that this was not the time to return to their hometown. She explained: “The money earned here is much more alive (*huo* 活). In our village, relying on your land, you can only obtain some food to eat, you can’t earn any money. In the city living costs are high, but you can still earn some pocket money. I will not return as long as I can still move around in Shanghai. But I am not sure whether Shanghai will prohibit us from working here one day.” Her husband agreed, saying: “What can we do in our hometown? We are not going to farm, and there is no

factory in our rural home town. Our home town is also far from the nearby market town, so there is also no opportunity for us to start a business.” One year later, Feng Hu was still doing her job in the car shop. She was also considering renting a stall in a food market to sell vegetables. She explained her intention to switch: “You can only earn dead wages while working for a boss. It’s better to work for yourself--the money you earn is much more alive, and you will have more freedom.”

Like Feng Hu, my informants’ working trajectories defy any neat occupational classification or class differentiation; they often go through a variety of occupations and improvise their ways of earning an income. Despite the various work activities they go through, they often understand the organization of labor by making a distinction between dead money and live money. Working in one’s rural home town only brings dead money because first, earning money entails long periods of time and risk, especially in the agricultural sector, and secondly, it is not dynamic. The money earned as a migrant worker in the city is alive because of its regularity and immediacy. For many aspiring migrants, even urban wages have become dead: the quantity is fixed, there is no freedom in working for someone else; and only entrepreneurship can make it possible to earn live money and the freedom that goes with it. The aspiration to live money often entails moving from one’s rural home town to the city and from wage labor to entrepreneurship. However, this is not a lineal process from dead money to live money, rural to urban, laborer to capitalist. In the case of Feng Hu, she switched from being a hawker of vegetables to being a car-wash worker, and then aspired to become a hawker again.

On the surface, my informants seem to embrace the triumphant logic of capitalism in which money produces more money, their entrepreneurial aspiration being sadly complicit with the entrepreneurial subjectivity governed by so-called neoliberal capitalism. Scholars have often assumed that capitalism is the main paradigm of the social organization of work and labor, the factory the main site in which to investigate labor regimes (Lee 1999; Pun 2005). The

assumption is that the current position of migrants in the social hierarchy of occupations conditions the possibilities for their identity-formation, their identity often being realized in politics--the politics of resistance, if not collective politics. This approach often recursively reinforces their identity as workers. The social organization of work is thus often understood in terms of social inequality and power relations manifested in a series of distinctions between man and woman, rural and urban, capital and labor.

Scholars have recently turned to neoliberalism as a context in which to examine the current organization of work; they attempt to capture new forms of flexible organization of work through a new distinction--neoliberalism versus the subject. In this neoliberal or flexible capitalism, workers have lost their life-time labor contracts and become precarious, while management gurus have used projects, creativity, and autonomy to promulgate a flexible style of management (Mulcahy 2016). Anthropologists have contributed a nuanced understanding of how power, affect, and morality mediate between the subject and neoliberalism in specific cultural-historical contexts. In his ethnography of casual labor in the Indian company town of Jamshedpur, Andrew Sanchez (2012) demonstrates how the Bengali managers exploit the idea of paternalism and cultural prejudices to justify the neoliberal casualization of labor. In the Italian context, Noelle Molé (2010) argues that workers are not part of the normative protectionist work force, nor do they fully inhabit the new neoliberal order; there is both a sensory and an experiential apprehension of neoliberal change. China scholars have noted that neoliberal flexibility articulates with the specific role of the socialist state. Lisa Hoffman (2006) notes that young college graduates in China highlight their expertise, experience, and ability in their careers, while also stressing their responsibility for their family, country, and society: they thus link self-development with the Maoist ideal of state-strengthening. The working experiences of rural migrants are conditioned by neoliberalism, the rural-urban inequality sanctioned by the state and the gender inequality sanctioned by the patriarchal family (Pun

2005; Yan 2008). While these scholars often understand the workers' agency and experience with reference to the neoliberal regime, they also constantly pose the question of the possibility of collective politics. Where is the revolution? Where is the protest? Most of the time, scholars have to explain why these collective politics have failed to emerge and why the hegemony of capital and flexible capitalism is being reproduced (Mollona 2005; Kofli 2016).

This chapter suggests that it is not enough to understand the social organization of labor and work in term of the distinction between neoliberalism and subject. We should not characterize any organization as a totalizing form such as neoliberalism or flexible capitalism, nor should we reduce the organization's social dimension to subjectivity and political agency. Reflecting on the limitations of human-centered and politically ascribed ideas of agency, scholars have recently demonstrated how actors rely on non-human calculating devices (Zaloom 2016), cosmological force (Chu 2010), hope (Mayazaki 2006) and social dependence (Ferguson 2013) in pursuing their economic livelihoods. This makes it possible to investigate the mediating process in the organization of economic livelihoods. This chapter highlights how my informants' understanding of money mediates the organization of rural migrants' labor and work.

Following the previous chapter, in which I argue that money is an important medium in understanding society, this chapter demonstrates how my informants make a further distinction between dead money and live money in their understanding of the social organization of labor and work. Money creates a common basis for gender, rural-urban, and occupational differences, as well as constantly encouraging organizational differentiation. The distinction between dead money and live money transforms organizational differentiation into the possibility of actualizing entrepreneurial aspirations. While critiques of neoliberalism often assume that entrepreneurial aspirations can be understood as the effect of social exclusion under circumstances of neoliberal flexibilization, this chapter suggests that rural migrants' entrepreneurial aspirations reflect an attempt to claim a stake in social inclusion in the face of

their organizational exclusion by the household, market, and state. As scholars often understand the social organization of labor in terms of power, they assume that social movements and collective politics are the only progressive move toward social inclusion. This chapter suggests it is inadequate to understand social inclusion and exclusion only in terms of political mobilization and organization; we should look carefully at how social inclusion and exclusion are mediated by forms of social organization. In this chapter, we see how my informants use the distinction between dead money and live money to construe the organizational form of labor and work. In this way, they destabilize the organizational hierarchy along the lines of gender, rural-urban, and occupational distinctions, thus creating an opportunity for social inclusion.

### **Gender difference, dependence, and independence**

Scholars have often demonstrated how the inside-outside or private-public distinction obscures women's contributions to the household (cf. Gal 2002). However, in the urban setting, it is difficult to maintain this distinction. In the urban village, the wives of migrant workers are often wage-earners themselves. Even those who had to take care of their children at home also know that they can earn money and often told me they would prefer to work because they were fed up with the tedious housework and their dependence on their husbands.

Women play an important role in managing the family incomes, even though they might not work and earn money themselves. This is generally in line with the notion of the increasing power of women in households observed by both anthropologists (Yan 2003) and my informants. Though there are various family strategies for managing money and it is difficult to see who is really in charge empirically, we could at least say that both sides have a say in controlling the family's wealth. The topic thus always stimulates guesses and debate.

On one occasion in the summer of 2010, I was chatting with Yu Lan and her friend Xiao Rong. Yu Lan asked me who managed the money in my family. I said my mother. I then asked her about money management in her family. She said: "I manage the money. In the countryside, men manage the money. When you come out to work, women manage the money." I asked Xiao Rong whether this was the case in her family, and she immediately denied that she managed her family's money. Yu Lan laughed and teased her: "She has the bankbook in her hand. You just ask her whether she would allow her husband to send money back to his family in the countryside." Despite the fact that she cannot take a full-time job, Yu Lan still took some opportunities to earn some cash. During the Shanghai Expo, for example, she occasionally took odd jobs in Expo pavilions. Her husband was not happy with her working outside. After a quarrel with her husband, Yu Lan told me: "He said, 'Why did not you go out to make money to support the family?' What he really means is that I did not take good care of his son and I should not go out to work." Yu Lan was nostalgic for a period when she could also earn her own wages. In 2013, when I met Yu Lan again, she had moved back to take care of her children and her husband's mother in her husband's hometown. Her husband was still working in various construction sites around the Shanghai region, as the whole family lived by the money he sent back. Yu Lan had lost the occasional opportunity to earn some extra cash as she had done in Shanghai, and later became interested in gambling at poker, losing not only the money earmarked for house decoration but also money she had borrowed from her friends. When her husband later found it out, she lost her right to control the family income. Yu Lan constantly told me she wanted to work in the city and earn money herself.

Having spent five years taking care of her two children at home, Luo's wife Da Yu finally began to take freelance cleaning jobs in 2015. Da Yu's fellow workers were all women; her daily wage was around 150 yuan. When she became responsible for finding workers for her boss, she could also earn an extra fee per hired worker. When I met her in the spring of 2016, she told

me she was happy to be working again. She can now tease Luo about his previous accusation of her dependence on his income. As the recycling business was in a bleak period, Luo also had to work at odd jobs and earned an average daily wage of 200 yuan. When I jokingly told Luo that Da Yu's wage was very close to his wage, Luo told me: "Her wage is dead money. She can only get the same amount every day." Luo told me he would earn live money while running his recycling business: "If your business goes well, you can earn 100, 200, 300, or 500 yuan. This money is live money. A wage is dead money; there is no increase." Da Yu said Luo once also took occasional cleaning jobs, but no longer did so because of the low wages. Luo actually did not particularly dislike cleaning jobs. He excitingly led me to discuss a cleaning project with a client on Da Yu's behalf; he told me he would work with Da Yu on the assignment if they could subcontract it.

Just as Luo dismissed his wife's wage as a "dead wage," Cui, the painter, dismissed his wife's wage in a silk factory in his hometown as "pocket money" (*ling hua qian* 零花钱). He told me that he would pay for his children's education and other big family expenses. He also highlighted the fact that he could control his own money. I teased him that managing the money is a burden for him. Cui disagreed: "If my wife controls the money, one day, for example, we two have a nice conversation and suddenly decide to go out to have a dinner, I have to ask her for money. It would be embarrassing. She would ask me why I wanted the money. [If I do not control the money,] I have no face (*mei you mian zi* 没有面子)." One's face reflects one's influence in one's extendable social network, and it always entails one's material investment. My male informants often reminisced about their independence and freedom before marriage; they could have fun with a group of friends and spend their wages. After marriage, their wives would often expect them not to divert too many resources away from their conjugal families. As their wages are monitored by their wives, they have little money

to contribute to their extended families or to build up their personal influence with their networks.

Self-employed entrepreneurship offers an opportunity to find a loophole in the family's control of money because it is difficult to keep track of the live income. Wages from employment are increasingly seen as a form of dead money partially because they are easily calculable and traceable. Xiao An, a divorced man, ran a private taxi business and recently moved in with a divorced woman. The woman asked Xiao An to hand over all the money he earned each day to her. Luo, Xiao An's friend, worried that the woman would abscond with all the money. He offered a suggestion: "You should keep some money for yourself. You are not like those who do labor. Their wives know how much money they earn every day, but your girlfriend does not know exactly how much you earn every day." Male migrants have a greater stake in becoming entrepreneurs. This aspiration originates partially from their deep connection with their original family and patrikin. Especially after marriage, they are expected to take care of their conjugal household and to maintain their connection with their home towns and patrikin. After marriage, women are not expected to take care of their family of origin even though they often do; it is also easier to justify their dependence on their husbands.

Beyond the family, male workers now often have to work with female workers, earning more or less the same wages, especially in low-paid urban occupations. This fuzzy distinction often encourages male workers' aspirations to become independent entrepreneurs. Ying, now the owner of several wood-flooring manufacturers, first came to Shanghai in 1992. One Shanghainese friend helped him find a job in a food workshop owned by Wenzhouese merchants. After he had worked there for seven days, he asked his boss about his wages. His boss told him that he could earn six yuan on average every day. He left the job immediately. He especially explained to me that six yuan a day was the same that a female worker in the factory received. Sitting in his office, he recollected his decision to quit his first and only factory

job in Shanghai: “I have to take charge of my fate.” He finally borrowed some money from his relatives and set up his own vegetable business, bringing his wife and other relatives to help him with it. He proudly told me he was actually running the small business as a family firm, even though he was not familiar with the idea of a family business at that time: “We ate together. I took charge of all the money and gave every family member a dividend at the end of the year.” He thus escaped the situation in which his wage was equivalent to a female worker’s wage in a factory. When I asked him how he set the dividend policy, he told me assertively: “The one who starts the business should initiate it. The money was in my pocket.” Ying admitted that most of his relatives had gone on their own; he regretted that the innocent years when family members were only concerned about their survival had long gone.

While an entrepreneur can assert his independence, his household still provides a reference point for observers. At Luo’s niece’s wedding in his hometown in September 2013, Luo met his niece’s uncle Ping again. Ping had once also worked in Shanghai and now ran an aluminum alloy shop and a hotel in Harbin. Ping told us that he started with 200 yuan his parents had given him, made some money in Jinan and Shanghai and then went to Harbin, where, he proudly told us, he had his brother-in-law at his back. Luo congratulated Ping on his business success. After Ping had left, Luo told me Ping only made a fortune after he had separated from his brother-in-law and started his own business. But Luo told me that Ping’s success relied on the help of his brother-in-law: “His wife’s brother has been in Harbin for two decades. Ping could not make money without him.” Luo also pointed out the fact that Ping was not actually the family head (*dang jia* 当家) and that his wife held the power: Ping could only get some bus fare from his wife when he came back to attend the wedding; he did not have any spare money of his own. Though Luo deconstructed Ping’s independence by revealing Ping’s dependence on his wife’s family, Luo actually also followed his father-in-law in starting a scrap recycling

business. Many small entrepreneurs often asked their wives to stay at home; they can assert their image of independence.

There is always a contradiction between patriarchal freedom and dependence on their wives' connections and contributions. Because they share the same reference group, agnatic ties are often full of competition and tension; I heard of more conflicts than cooperation between them. Affinal ties actually play a more important role in business cooperation than agnatic ties. Entrepreneurship and live money can obscure relations of dependence. Though Boss Ying relied on labor and monetary contributions from his wife's family, he could now conclude that family cooperation is only suitable for the early phase of a business. He thus attributes the development of his business to his restless pursuit of profit.

Having a monetary money income introduces a common ground on which men and women can evaluate their respective contributions to their households. As women enter the labor market and their social networks begin to play an important role in entrepreneurship, men and their wives are becoming increasingly interdependent. Though the household still plays an important role in organizing work and labor, this hierarchy between husband and wife within the family can no longer be taken for granted. This is why there are always debates about who should control the family wealth and constant speculation about who actually controls it. Here my informants transform the power question, that of control, into a new differentiation between live money and dead money. As both men and women now have earning potential in the urban market and play active roles in controlling the family income, wages are increasingly seen as a form of "dead money"; only entrepreneurship can bring one flexible "live money". The distinction between dead money and live money introduces a contingency into the household control of wealth. The contingency can be appropriated to prescribe gender inequality and hierarchy. After Luo's wife Da Yu entered the labor market, he defined his wife' income as "dead money," while defining his own income as "live money." But the contingency of money

can also be used to reverse the hierarchy and reveal dependence. In the encounter with his acquaintance Ping, Luo pointed out that Ping cannot control his money, even though he is now a businessman.

### **The household between village and city: the paradox of return**

When older migrants recollected their pre-migration rural lives, they said that cash incomes from agriculture varied seasonally; they were constantly short of money and had to rely on credit for important ceremonial events. In the 1970s and 1980s in their villages, raising pigs and poultry was an important source of “live” money—i.e. cash. One informant told me how the money he got from selling pigs helped him pay school fees. A 58-year-old migrant told me: “After Deng Xiaoping started the reform, we had enough food to eat but did not have spare cash. Then people began to come out to find jobs. I also came to Shanghai to do recycling and transporting business. At that time, rice only cost 4 cent/kg. I could earn 100 yuan a day. If you raised a pig at home for a year, you could only earn 100 yuan.” In the earlier phrase of post-Mao migration, urban wage labor offered quicker and more certain remuneration to many rural people. It is not only the earning potential but also the immediacy of wage payments that encourages rural-urban migration. My informants often complain about wage arrears and their over-reliance on credit in their home towns. A private taxi-driver told me he had been a veterinarian and run a clinic in his home town. His clinic was credit-based; what he got at the end of every year was not cash but credit in an account book. He then decided to come to Shanghai.

In the earlier period of migration, wage labor was seen as a supplement to agricultural work; the wage was a form of “live money” besides the income from agriculture. In the opening story, Feng Hu refers to rural income as dead money and urban income as live money. Compared to

their risky, inconsistent income from agriculture before migration, the income in the city is more stable, the payments also come on time. Feng Hu's husband, who worked in a steel factory, told me: "In your rural hometown, you would only get money after the harvesting of crops. It would take several months. Now every month the factory deposits your wage on your bank card. The money is much more convenient and more live now. I can get the money whenever I want."

China scholars have often connected rural-urban labor migration with rural-urban inequality sanctioned by the state institution of the household registration system. Even though migrants can work in the cities, they are often excluded from urban social welfare benefits such as social insurance and public education. They have to go back to their home town when they are unemployed or seriously ill, and they leave their children in the hands of their parents back in their home town. Despite the institutional separation, the rural and the urban are connected by households that are stranded between the villages and the cities. In retrospect, my informants told me they originally planned to make enough money and return to their rural home town soon at the very beginning of their journey to the cities. But money is not always enough, so they still keep working in Shanghai and can now only plan to go back home when they retire someday. The home town sometimes also provides them with psychological comfort when faced with constant relocation in the city. They can always say: "We will move back to our home town soon!"

Migrants still arrange their children's marriages, and host and attend ceremonial events in their home town. Their connection with the rural home town often facilitates a kind of romantic imagination of security about it--a home community remote from the market and society at large. Migration and the differentiation of production from the rural community romanticize the home town as a secure community, as well as intensifying the integration of rural livelihoods with the market through consumption. My informants now have to face ever increasing

spending in their home town. A key task of a household--arranging their son's wedding and a house for his marriage--is still connected to their rural home town. I often heard complaints about large levels of expenditure after their return trip to their home town. The ceremonial and festival moments regenerate migrants' connections with their rural home town, but they also have an alienating effect. When I visited Zhi Guo during the spring festival of 2015, he told me that he had to buy more expensive cigarettes to keep up appearances in his home town. As all his cousins had driven their cars back home, he was also desperate for a car. Even though there are the same job opportunities and wage standards in the home town, many migrant workers still choose to work in cities in order to escape their burdensome family obligations there, such as attending too many ceremonial events. My informants also find different excuses to avoid going back for the spring festival. The experience of returning to their home town accentuates their experience of the dead money there.

The circulation of money within Luo's family is an example that illustrates the changing dynamic between their rural home town and the city. The home town as a symbol of security is validated by the fact that Luo still saves his money in his home town bank. Every time he goes back to his home town, he brings back the cash he has earned. When he travels from his home town to Shanghai, he takes a small amount of money with him for everyday expenditure. He then continues to work, earn money and save it for his next return. Every return to his home town also starts a new round of incremental accumulation in Shanghai.

After selling his wheat, I accompanied Luo when he deposited his money in the bank in his home town in the 2013 harvest season. He again repeated his calculations of expenditure on his two sons' weddings, which revealed a huge gap between his savings and the anticipated expenditure. As the banks only paid a very low interest rate, he could earn little from his savings. He also could not invest his savings in a business, as this would put the whole family at risk. He was considering building a house for his son's marriage, even though his son was only

eleven years old. His wife also supported the idea: she said if they did not build a house, their savings could be borrowed by their relatives. Luo did build a house the next year. Unlike the booming urban market, a house built in his rural home town would bring little monetary gain. Those who could afford to buy a house in the nearby county seats or municipal cities could cite the current rise in the housing market and treat their houses as an investment—a smart way of combining family obligation, status competition, and making money live.

After staying at home for a month during the 2013 spring festival, Luo's father-in-law, a 61-year-old scrap-recycler, complained that “you only spend money at home but not earn money. You spend one cent and you lose one cent (*hua yi fen shao yi fen* 花一分少一分), while in Shanghai, you could earn it again soon after you have spent it.” Since his father-in-law still farmed his own land in his home town, I said: “You plant wheat at home and can make some money in the harvest season.” His daughter, who was present, immediately explained: “You can't make a fortune out of farming. You can only earn some pocket money. We have had a drought this year. It costs 80 yuan to hire an irrigation vehicle each time. If you have a long period of drought, how much money will you earn?”

This is not a simple picture of the “spectralization of the rural” (Yan 2003b) resulting from post-Mao capitalist accumulation. For my informants, the rural economy is dead not because of the increasing rural-urban disparities but because of the articulation of the rural with the urban economy in the context of migration and the circulation of money. This articulation is often mediated by the household and the circulation of money within it. Despite occasional nostalgia for the non-commercial subsistence life of rural areas, my informants now told me, with a sense of surprise, that when they have to buy food in their rural home town, the prices are nearly the same as the urban prices. Stranded on both the rural and urban sides, my informants find themselves budgeting against rising expenditure on both sides. Many migrants have to postpone their original plan to return to home town after a period of urban accumulation. Many are also

afraid to go back home because it often entails a large amount of expenditure; they also have to leave their children to be cared for by the grandparents in the rural home town because both husbands and wives have to work. While many migrant workers have to suffer the separation, established entrepreneurs I encountered would often travel back and forth between their home towns and Shanghai and often mobilize their resources to let children stay in Shanghai.

Though my informants often complain that the economy is dead in their home town, the gap between it and the cities also presents entrepreneurial opportunities. It is considered admirable if one can take advantage of the skills and money one has accumulated in the city to start some enterprise in the home town. Many of my informants aspire to set up some small business in their home town and be reunited with their families.

In a hilly village in southwest Anhui, where the majority of villagers migrated out to such coastal cities as Shanghai, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Fujian, I met several migrants who had just returned to set up enterprises in their home town. As migrants who had spent most of their adult lives in the cities, they occupied an awkward position in their rural home town. They complained that the economy there was too dead and slow. As the farm lands were so close to them, they made a great effort to avoid them. Wang Dao, a carpenter who now set up a business raising cattle and chickens, did not support his wife's agricultural work but encouraged her to spend more time in commercial chicken-rearing. He said: "Agriculture can't bring you any money. If you have money, you have status. If you have money, you can buy rice and other things." His wife later complained of the tiring agricultural work and her husband's decision on return: "If we were in the city, we would earn at least several hundred yuan every day." In retrospect, Wang Dao also said he returned because he had harbored illusions about his home town. He still insisted that the animal farm was a promising business, even though he might have to abandon it next year and go back to work in the city. He said that the main obstacle is that rural people are shortsighted and not willing to invest in long-term projects. Even though

he was disillusioned with his home town and often criticized the rural economy and way of life, he told me: “Actually life in the city is not that good. It’s a simple life, but not a good life. If you have the ability, you should set up a business at home. Or for those who have an educational degree, they could set up their own business outside.”

Even though the state and the market still organize labor hierarchically through the household registration system, rural villages are increasingly integrated with the cities, with people, money, and commodities circulating between them. The household as a budgetary unit controls spending and saving in both the home town and the city. The rural-urban relationship is mediated by the circulation of money within the household, which, although it is uneven, cannot simply be understood as an aspect of rural-urban inequality. Both the home town and the city now find common ground over money. Living in these multi-sited households, my informants observe the rural and the urban situation at the same time. As the rural-urban hierarchy is transformed into a distinction between dead money and live money, the rural-urban gap is understood as providing entrepreneurial opportunities.

### **Occupational status and labor organization**

It has been argued that in China the socialist period of welfare has given way to the neoliberal ideology of flexible accumulation in the post-Mao period (Pun 2005; Yan 2008). This narrative of the global trend toward precarious and flexible employment (Rose 1999), however, does not adequately capture rural migrant workers’ understandings of the organization of labor. The socialist experiment in Mao’s period was aimed to reconstitute the social relations of production by redesigning a new labor organization and wage system. While wages and welfare of all kinds provided great security for people in urban areas, those in the countryside were left out of the secure wage system. Wages were once seen as a privilege of government officials and urban citizens; only those working in the state sector would receive a regular wage and various

supplementary payments in money and kind. In the People's Communes of Mao's period, peasants' remuneration was based on a work-point system. The socialist experiment did not eradicate social-economic inequality but still maintained the hierarchy between rural and urban, socialist workers and peasants. As Martha Lampland (1995) demonstrates in her research on the reorganization of landed properties and the Soviet-style planned economy between 1945 and 1956 in Hungary, remuneration on the basis of work units in socialist planning reinforced the logic of calculation: people become disappointed with the insecurity endemic in the system of payment for cooperative work, as the monetary value of a work unit can only be determined at the end of the year. Recollecting his life on a commune in the early 1970s, a 60-odd-year-old male migrant said: "You could not get any money. You could only receive some food. There was no money." Since the teachers in his village received a monthly wage from the state, his family would earn some cash by selling eggs to them, which he then used to buy everyday necessities such as salt. Later his produce team allowed them to go out to work under the condition of paying fifty cents a day.

Wu Yiching has described how the Shanghai government initiated the worker-peasant system, which recruited peasants to work in factories in slack agricultural seasons during the Great Leap Forward: "In the chaotic process of increasing production typical of the late 1950s, many enterprises vastly expanded their labor force by hiring temporary workers from the urban unemployed, as well as peasants in nearby villages. Lacking the elementary benefits enjoyed by regular workers, these workers tended to be assigned to the most backbreaking types of labor but received much lower wages"(2014:102). The rural-urban migration system in the post-Mao period has its precedent in the peasant-worker system in Mao's period in respect of its flexibility. The flexible labor regime is thus not just a neoliberal invention: from the height of the socialist period to the post-Mao reform period, peasants have been consistently excluded from the security provided by the state.

Today labor migration provides opportunities for my informants to access jobs in the city. Jobs in state sector have lost their aura and the sense of privilege of the past, and their pros and cons can now be discussed and debated. But a job in the state sector is still seen as a good option by many migrants. In one village, Zhong, an unemployed migrant who had returned from a city near Shanghai, complained that he had to spend his savings while staying in his home town. He then turned to the principal of the village school, who was also present in the room, and said: “We are not like you civil servants. You still have your harvest, no matter whether there is drought or flood [meaning you have a secure income].” I said: “You earn more money than the principal.” He responded: “You shouldn’t say that. Their wages are like a spring, flowing steadily. The clock ticks, and they have money. Our wages are like the flood in the river. Sometimes it comes. Sometimes it does not come. Teachers only have to work for around one hundred days every year; they have holidays.” Another returned migrant present also agreed that civil servants had a light work load and even had a lot of leisure when at work. The attraction of a job in the state sectors lies in the combination of security and flexibility. Many civil servants have side jobs based on their personal connections and influence, and they can also easily obtain credit from the banks. The disparity between wages and incomes in the state sector is a public secret; the image of invisible benefits and extra-wage income in the state sector encourages not only accusations of corruption but also the desire for government jobs.

When I mentioned my ambition to be a university teacher to my informants, they gave me mixed responses. A young clothes vendor pointed out that a teacher can only earn a “dead wage” (*si gong zi* 死工资). His friend then pointed out a pension and holidays as the benefits of my possible future as a teacher, the clothes vendor immediately dismissed the attraction of government jobs and said he preferred to be a businessman: “If you work as civil servant, there is always someone higher than you. Doing business is different. I mean being a boss, not a small merchant like us. When you are the boss, you will have a lot of people making money for

you.” He also did not forget to amplify the importance of money, with which one could, for example, buy a position in government.

My informants are excluded from the state sector, and most of them have also failed to achieve the status of being a boss. They have to make a living in a competitive and precarious “society.” They also have to depend on precarious interpersonal relations. Personal connections first play an important role in finding jobs and recruiting workers, and the employer-employee relationship is also often mediated by the idiom of personal relationships. My informants, however, have mixed feelings about their interpersonal relationships. Some informants would reminisce about their warm and intimate relations with fellow workers and their employers. Some also complain about their sufferings in their work places. Two sayings my informants often use to describe their maltreatment in the work place--“taking hints from others’ eyes” (*kan bie ren yan se* 看别人眼色) and “bearing anger” (*shou qi* 受气)--refer to the subtle psychological suffering that results from interpersonal interaction. As there are no union organizations or written contracts in many work places, my informants rarely invoke the legal protection of employment rights. To protect their autonomy and benefits at work from being violated by the arbitrary exercise of power, migrant workers often have to resort to personal connections.

Lao Liu, a 50-odd-year-old security worker, first complained to one of his former colleague and me that a new department leader had tried to exploit him and gave him a heavier workload. But because of his familiarity and connection with those higher up in the company, he could take it easy and ignore him. Now the new leader had to pacify him by constantly giving him cigarettes. His former colleague said, “You are familiar with the place, you do not have to bear anger (*shou qi* 受气).” Liu also told us that his connections higher up gave him extra benefits:

he could work more shifts and thus make more money, as well as sleep while working the night shift.

Personal connections, however, cannot break the vicious circle of arbitrary power in an organization. Many of my informants found that they had to face organized forms of inequality. Feng Chang was a freelance welder working on various construction sites; his wife Hong Xia was doing a recycling business. They had both worked in a cotton factory in Jiangsu. Hong Xia told me that most of the workers were locals and that the job was paid by piece rates. But the local managers would favor local workers when they distributed assignments. The locals' salaries were thus twice as high as Hong Xia's wage. Hong Xia decided to leave after fighting several times to be given more work. She said: "The manager did not let us go and asked what had gone wrong. I said I had some problems, but you were not able to solve them. We abandoned one month's wage and left immediately." When Hong Xia realized that the disparity in wages was based on the organized hierarchy between the locals and the outsiders and that even the manager could not solve the problem, she and her husband chose to leave. Since then, they have never worked in a factory again.

This organizational inequality often leads my informants into a heroic rejection of wage labor and formal organization rather than to embracing solidarity and political mobilization. A hotel maintenance worker who was considering running a private cab business told me he despised all forms of salaried work except for that of the CEO who could earn millions a year. While they can neither become the manager of an organization nor set up their own enterprises, they can at least embrace a more flexible labor organization. My informants would tell me that they do not want to fall into the trap of working for one boss and hope they can retain the freedom to exit. They do not need a contract because they want to be free to leave their job if tomorrow they find another at a higher wage or are not happy with their bosses tomorrow. One construction worker told me that the only principle in his work is money, even though most of

his employers are familiar to him from his home town. Employers are also partially complicit with the flexible labor system since through it they can reduce labor costs. Many employers now only have to pay the official minimum wage as a basic wage and make additional payments contingent on performance. Workers also partially accept the flexible labor system because they can make their wages “alive”.

Flexible labor regimes have become a common managerial practice. My informants often see their current jobs as transitional in their working trajectories. In terms of personal satisfaction and social status, their jobs offer little sense of “calling.” Their work experience and expertise are rarely valued, so many of them switch from one trade to another without a sense of having a progressive career. The unskilled jobs also bring with them the specter of precarity. My informants thus often aspire to learn a skill or set up some small-scale enterprise. A skilled occupation has long been seen as a way of guaranteeing a secure livelihood and independence. Craftsmanship is not valued as a skill for its own sake but gauged against the entrepreneurial potential of starting one’s own business in the trade.

When Zhi Guo worked in an internet installation company, he would get assignments from the company in the morning and work in different customer’s houses. His income was contingent on the assignments he received. Zhi Guo told me that the live wage system was understandable: if he were the boss, he would also use the policy because a “live wage” (*huo gong zi* 活工资) could motivate people and give employees a sense of development. At the end of 2013, after working in the internet installation company for more than a year, Zhi Guo was planning to quit, complaining that he was fed up with the job. After a large internet reconstruction project, his assignments and income both declined. At the same time, the company increased the managerial discipline, and Zhi Guo was even fined once for not wearing a safety helmet. As his job entailed entering customers’ houses, he also complained about the often tense relationship with his customers. He once discussed the possibility of quitting his job with his mother. The

latter said she understood the difficulty of doing service jobs. She told us that she and some fellow sanitary workers in the park worked hard for five days to prepare for an inspection by some high-ups who eventually did not come. She then said: “There is no way out. You are doing service job.” Zhi Guo did not agree with his mother. One possible exit route he often discussed with me was to start his own business. A few months later, he left the company “voluntarily”, without any severance pay. He eventually stayed in his home town for two years and could not work up any enthusiasm for the next job. Luckily, his son was born. Even though he can now justify his long-term break by referring to his family obligations, he was also coming under pressure to resume his working life. At the same time, he also told me that he did not want to find another dead-end job, as he had before. Now two years away from the internet-installation job, he attributed his tiredness with it to his money problems: “It was just because I could not make good money in the business anymore. Take you as an example. If you could always make money out of giving lectures, you would never get fed up with your job.”

In his two years in limbo, Zhi Guo once had the idea of learning house decoration skills with his cousin’s friend, even though he had already tried and abandoned the hair-dressing a few years ago. He told me that he would also have an opportunity to subcontract some business after finishing his apprenticeship. He added: “This could also count as working for myself.” After trying for a few months, he gave up his apprenticeship because of the slim opportunities to subcontract projects. He later returned to Shanghai to juggle two delivery jobs for an online shopping company and a food-delivery company. Inspired by his participation in the booming food-delivery business, he also began to discuss with me the entrepreneurial possibilities connected with it.

Scholars often criticize the retreat of the welfare state under the current neoliberal regime and suggest progressive political intervention and better social protection as a solution. The Chinese state does intervene in labor issues in a progressive way through the law. The implementation

of a new labor contract law in 2008 and a law contract legal amendment in 2013 has limited the proportion of temporary workers in companies, and many temporary employees are now required to be transformed into contract employees with employment benefits and social security. Since many of my informants were temporary workers with flexible hiring terms, they were supposed to benefit from the change to the law. Yet my informants were suspicious of these political changes. First of all, they would rather be given a more substantial wage than have to contribute to the social insurance scheme. Secondly, they worried about being replaced by the local Shanghainese workers if their labor costs increased. Their hesitation and doubts reflected the uneasy coupling of the economy with politics, though scholars have often demanded more regulation of the economy. Social security payments were seen as the state appropriating their incomes. They complained that these insurance fees were deducted from their wages, and they were doubtful whether they would receive a pension after they retired.

Scholars often start with a distinction between capital and labor in seeking to understand the social division of labor. Migrants are often pigeonholed in the labor category, and scholars attempt to understand how relations of power and inequality operate in the labor process. Though scholars have described the transformation of organizational forms under the current neoliberal regime, they still tend to highlight how the new flexible labor regime governs the working subject. My informants understand occupational differentiation and the motivations of work and labor in term of money rather than power. They also use the distinction between dead money and live money to understand the different occupational status (dead wage: live income:: employment: entrepreneurs) and to introduce contingency into the organization of labor. This leads them to embrace a flexible labor system. Their solution to the asymmetry of power is not to resort to organizational membership guaranteed by legal contract but to move on to self-employed entrepreneurship, which promises a secure life plan and a sense of freedom.

## Money, entrepreneurship and freedom

In the previous three sections, I demonstrated how the household, the state and the market still organize work and labor through gender, rural-urban, and occupational differences. Money introduces a common ground between these differences: both men and women earn money; money also integrates villages and cities; both government jobs and factory jobs are remunerated by money. At the same time, the distinction between dead money and live money is also made. It is very difficult to describe the characteristics of the two: they are neither categories that can be indexed to a social distinction nor two alternatives that you can choose, but a distinction that always introduces contingency. An older migrant who has spent most of her life in risky agriculture in her home town could still say that earning a wage in a factory is “live money”, as the wage brings her freedom and relieves her from dependence on her children. Housewives also aspire to take jobs because their wages will allow them to keep some cash in hand and relieve them from their dependence on their husbands. But for many young migrants, wages are increasingly becoming a form of dead money; only entrepreneurship can bring them live money and concomitant freedom.

The imagination of freedom has been built into the imagination of being a boss for my aspiring informants. During the spring festival of 2015, I met Lai Li again in his home town. When I first met him in 2010, he had just married and was working as a security guard in Shanghai. He told me that he felt embarrassed to work for others at the very beginning. It was a hopeless and temporary job, he told me, and his long-term plan was to learn some skill or start a business. Having learned welding and finished a two-year stint as a welder, he was now planning to leave this skill behind and hoping that he could set up some business, as doing business can give one more freedom. I said that being a boss would not relieve him from providing a service for another, bigger boss. Lai Li told me: “That’s different. You would have someone working for you.” Kun, his friend and a builder, immediately liked a friend’s idea of posting his information

online to attract potential customers. Now he had to rely on his acquaintances to find job opportunities: “If I could attract more businesses, I could hire several workers. I then would not have to work and I could still earn money.” From the perspective of aspiring migrants, entrepreneurship would provide them with an opportunity to leave someone else’s orders and work.

From the observer’s perspective, an entrepreneur’s freedom is not to exit one’s social network but to connect oneself to the expanding social network and influence. One house decorator described his brother-in-law’s recent birthday celebration to me. His brother-in-law was running a business in veterinary medicine. This was his fortieth birthday: “He has money and does not care. He threw a banquet with 40 tables. He spent 16,000 yuan on cigarettes and liquor. If you include the food, he might have spent 32,000. He only received gift money of 6000 yuan from relatives. He did not receive any money from his friends. He invited them to eat and play. He relied on his friends to do business. Why did he spend money on the banquet? To attract more people. A lot of bosses came up to the stage and gave a speech. His business is very lively.” He described his brother-in-law as being well-behaved (*hui zuo ren* 会做人). Migrant entrepreneurs would often go back home for the Chinese New Year and Tomb-Sweeping Day. These festivals are an important arena to show off before one’s reference group. A lot of migrant entrepreneurs also have business investments in their home town and buy real estate in local urban centers. In one village, the father of a small-scale entrepreneur pointed to a house not far away, saying: “His family makes the greatest fortune. His son has earned millions. Why is he the richest? He bought a house in the county seat; it costs four or five million. My son is OK; he is not short of money. But my son cannot be compared with his son. When our local leaders go to Shanghai, they visit his son.”

One’s entrepreneurial success does not just connect one to an expanding social network; it also symbolizes the merit of good opportunities and luck. During the Chinese New Year of 2016,

Hai, a worker in a factory, met his cousin, who ran a very profitable company in Shanghai and had driven his new car back that year. Hai, by contrast, had failed in his construction business and was now working in a factory. The cousin had asked Hai to join him when he first started the company, but Hai did not do so because he did not want to rely on his close relatives. Now on this festival occasion, the cousin asked Hai, “Where are you making your fortune?” (a common conversation starter). Hai told me he felt embarrassed and could only compliment him in return: “Now you are the big boss.” The cousin humbly replied: “I am also working for others.” Hai soon left after a few more exchanges. Hai later told me he would follow his cousin to Mount Jiuhua, a sacred mountain for Buddhists. I might have showed some surprise since he had not been interested in temples before. He immediately justified himself: “You have to believe in it. My cousin first went to Mount Jiuhua with another relative several years ago. Since that visit, his business has boomed. Now he has bought a house and a car. There is no scientific explanation for this.”

Enterprises with slim profits attract aspirants to capitalize on their skills, savings, labor, and social networks. After working in different restaurants for a decade, Lou Yu and her husband finally set up a small restaurant in 2011. Lou Yu told me this had been the happiest event for her in the past ten years. She then proceeded to explain: “Now I do not have to stick to the dead wage. The dead wage is not stable; it may stop at some point. This is my career (*shi ye* 事业). I can stick to it. If you work for others, you cannot stick to it as you like. Even though it is a bitter business, I would still stick to it. A dead wage would be gone as soon as it comes. You have to pay your rent, and you may have illnesses to be cure.” However, she did calculate their income. In several occasions, both Lou Yu and her husband complained that they could earn the same amount of money working in a large restaurant. Now they earned 40,000 or 50,000 yuan a year. Before he set up the restaurant, her husband’s wage in a restaurant was 4000 yuan a month. Lou Yu also often complained that they could not save much money. She told me

that this was an experiment and that someday she would find a better place to open a good restaurant with her own recipes. I asked why she did not try out some recipes in this restaurant. She told me that she was focused too much on her slim profits and did not have time to think about other things.

In some case, informants lose money once they become entrepreneurs. Wu Kou, the returned migrant I mentioned in last chapter, earned less from his pig farming than from his managerial job in the factory. He still tried to justify his decision: “When you are doing waged labor, you take another’s money. You have to throw your life in for him. To be worthy of your wage, you have to make your effort for others. It’s very realistic. If you do not work hard today, you have to work hard to find a job. When you are doing business on your own, you have more freedom and can lay the foundations of your future. Even though I am now earning less, I may earn 600,000 yuan next year, 100,000 the year after next and then 2,000,000. When you work for a boss, 60,000 is 60,000. You earn 60000 this year and you earn the same amount next year or the year after. The boss could give you a rise. For example, you may get a wage of up to 70,000 yuan. But the wage only rises step by step.” Though he was promoted to be a middle-level manager, as a migrant without a college certificate, he had reached his limit in the factory. Like him, my informants are often excluded from following a professional career in an organization. Entrepreneurship provides them with an opportunity to make a career for themselves.

My informants do not understand entrepreneurship only as a step towards their self-realization, but also a step to their home-coming and full inclusion in society. Business failures can be seen as a useful experience and a learning process; an entrepreneurial future is anticipated despite constant disappointment. After the failure of his barber’s shop in 2007 and his restless yet futile pursuit of another entrepreneurial project in all these years, Zhi Guo, now a delivery man, told me in 2016 that he was confused and had had a sense of passivity for some time. After discussing with me the possibility of his setting up a food-delivery business, he explained why

he still insisted in pursuing entrepreneurship: “It was not only about the large quantity of money. Your enterprise is like your home, a place where you can find your footing in society. If you can make a profit, you can also distribute resources equally.” Zhi Guo told me several times that if he made a fortune one day he made a glorious return, visit his ancestor’s home town and reconnect with the relatives his grandfather had hoped to reunite. In his current situation, his family avoided going back home for the spring festival, even though they visited their home town when there was no festival.

Even though many aspirants envied migrant entrepreneurs’ their freedom from the observer’s perspective, migrant entrepreneurs themselves also anticipate their exit from their business. As John Osburg (2013b) observes in his ethnography of entrepreneurs in Sichuan, many people endeavor to become entrepreneurs in the pursuit of hopes and dreams. Being an entrepreneur entails immersing oneself in intensive business entertainment--banquets, Mahjong, KTV. However, entertainment and play do not bring them the playful freedom as they once imagined, but often become their main job and an excessive burden. Despite investing heavily in social networks, these entrepreneurs paradoxically wanted to leave them. But exiting from the social game would undermine the basis of their wealth and power--their social networks. Some migrant entrepreneurs I met often complained that they still have to obey the orders of others and must rely on luck and opportunity. They hoped their children would not have to make such an effort to make money and could lead a secure life.

Scholars have noticed the rise of the individual and entrepreneurial self in post-Mao China (Zhang and Ong 2008; Yan.Y 2010) and attributed the phenomenon to the effect of (neoliberal) capitalism and Chinese state. Instead of mourning the alienating effect of the market and the modern organization of work and labor (whether it be exploitation or precarity), we should look at how my informants understand their position in the organization of work via the distinction between dead money and live money. They do not understand their positions with

reference to a hierarchical factory system but with reference to potential entrepreneurship. The entrepreneur is not an innovator in a new economic field (Brouwer 2002) but a person who is included in society and yet maintains his freedom. Becoming an entrepreneur is an unrealized aspiration for many rural migrants.

### Conclusion

Anthropologists have noted the emergence of flexible labor regimes around the world and that social collectivity and solidarity have been fragmented into precarious subjects. The vision of the entrepreneurial self, however, is nothing new. Our shock at the flexible regime partially originates from our nostalgia for a stable Fordist past. Our attention could be drawn to a comparable American case described by Richard Sennett. In their research on the American working class in the late 1960s and early 1970s—a period that would later be described as the Fordist phase of capitalism, Sennett and Cobb had recorded the aspirations for independence and autonomy among American working people. Even though capitalist forms of organization had reduced the chances of achieving independence, Sennett and Cobb remind us, “Chinoy’s study of auto workers in a medium-sized Midwestern city in the 1950’s showed that many of those who came to work at the auto plant thought of their jobs as only temporary, as a kind of way station before they could strike out on their own...the persistence among middle-aged workers of this particular dream of a gas station or small store or farm of one’s own can perhaps be explained by the fact that these are about the only forms of self-employment open to those with little education” (1972:228). In their own research, they note that the ideal of independent proprietorship and self-employment slowly shifts to the ideal of professionalization: “If one can convince others that one’s skills are unique, that one is the expert whose decisions can not be challenged, then one can become insulated from the commands of others” (1972:236). They also see professionalization as a form of rebirth: “By changing your personal actions, by developing capacities within yourself, you change your social circumstances in this

dream; but you are then cut off from the creature who needed to dream of freedom...In this position of being free to be yourself, the weight of your experience will be lost, and between the man who you want to be and the you who has suffered there is no continuity” (1972:236). They note that, even though the opportunity for the sons of manual laborers entering the professional class is slim, those manual laborers still maintain this hope: “The reason the dream is so strong is that only in the professions does the man of action, exerting his abilities, appear united with the real self” (1972:229). This dream of independence plants the seeds of social inequality, power and the divided self: “The real self is permitted to be a reality only if you can manipulate others for what you believe is their own good” (1972:233).

In his recent research on flexible capitalism in the wake of professionalization, Sennett rediscovers the unanticipated benefit of organized capitalism and its routine in the past: “routinized time had become an arena in which workers could assert their own demands, an arena of empowerment...workers sought to routinize time, through savings in mutual aid societies, or through mortgages on homes gained through building societies” (1998:43). He continues: “we are hardly disposed now to think of routine time as a personal achievement, but given the stresses, booms, and depressions of industrial capitalism, it often becomes so.” Through the routine schedules of time, older generations of workers crafted a positive narrative for their lives. “Routine can demean, but it can also protect; routine can decompose labor, but it can also compose a life” (1998:43). Professionalization thus does not solve the old problem of capitalism–routine versus freedom, but it enhances uncertainty in its flexible form. The flexibility weakens one’s personal character. From the “rebirth of self” (1973) to the “corrosion of character” (1998), Sennett starts from the “self” to describe the contradiction of capitalist organization and its ensuing unfolding.

The paradoxes of independence and dependence, security and insecurity, routine and freedom, are intrinsic to the social organization of the economy, and contingency and uncertainty are its

fundamental characteristics. The critique of neoliberal capitalism overstates flexibility, insecurity, and precarity as novel organizational forms of the contemporary economy. This mode of thinking often replaces understanding the present with a critique of the present. Extending the mode of criticism in a more culturally nuanced way, anthropologists have recently criticized economic rationality and reflected on the normative assumptions of the liberal notion of the autonomous self. James Ferguson (2013) notes how South African blacks become a surplus population and aspire for social dependence. He criticizes the emancipatory liberal imagination for assuming that dependence is bondage or unfreedom, and argues that the freedom that existed in such a social world came not from independence, but from a plurality of opportunities for dependence. In his investigation of social welfare programs targeting the poor, he argues that, while these programs offer material assistance, they deal less with social and moral needs. Ferguson then argues for socially thick recognition. His ethnographic discovery inspires us to rethink the cultural frame of personhood and the social frame of action; however, the quick fly into the ethics of social recognition obscures the exclusive effect of the moral economy.

Instead of providing sweeping characterizations and criticisms of the current organizational forms of the contemporary Chinese economy, this chapter has investigated my informants' understandings of the social organization of labor and work along the lines of gender, rural-urban and occupational distinction. I suggest that my informants understand the social organization of labor and work through money, which introduces contingency into the organization of labor and work. The gender, rural/urban, and occupational differences cannot be understood as moral or power hierarchy sanctioned by the household, state, and market. This, of course, does not lead to an equal and flat world. The distinction between dead money and live money is produced and reintroduced to steer the contingency in the social organization of labor and work. It is therefore not enough to describe contingency as social

exclusion manifested in the loss of life-long careers and the rise of perpetual insecurity (Rose 1999). The contingency also makes inclusion in society possible for my informants. The entrepreneurial aspiration is thus not the subjective effect of neoliberal forms of governance but a diffused organizational form that deals with the paradox of the social organization of work and of the economy in general.

## Chapter 4

### Eating bitterness: memory, hard work and sacrifice

Feng Chang, a 46-year-old welder, was working on a construction site in the sweltering Shanghai summer in 2013 while his wife rode on a tricycle running her recycling business. When our mutual friend Luo, a waste-recycler, suggested that Feng Chang should not work on the construction site and “eat bitterness” (*chi ku* 吃苦) in such high temperatures, he took it easy, saying “it is impossible to eat some bitterness when you work in the industry.” Feng Chang’s other friends often praised the Fangs’ strong work ethic, but they also said the Fangs did not have to work so hard since they only had one girl to raise. When Luo once relayed the praise and subtle peer pressure to Feng Chang’s wife in my presence, she responded, “You need money to eat and drink. No investment, no enjoyment. We are country people. We do not have pension. No matter how much you can do, if you work every day, you feel safe and satisfied in your heart. When you grow old, you cannot work even if you want to.” Feng Chang also chimed in, “If you can move and eat, you have to work. Now, since I can move, I can make some money. When I become old, I can afford to buy some vegetables in the market. Of course, I could ask my daughter for money – she would certainly give me some. But I don’t want to be a burden on her.” On another summer afternoon, while I was chatting with his wife, I asked how Feng Chang’s work was going. She told me he was working for several bosses on different construction sites at the same time; he had freedom but had to expend too much physical strength. She also recollected days in the earlier 1990s when Feng Chang also had to expend too much physical strength in an underground mine for a state-owned coal mining company. When I praised Feng’s work ethic, she blamed her husband for being too honest;

otherwise he could have obtained a permanent contract and then switched to a comfortable position in the company by bribing some cadres.

Working in the underground mine is often seen as a typical example of what is called “bitter labor”, that is, labor that often entails toil and physical strength. Mine workers have to straddle the border between life and death. Feng Chang told me that his senior colleagues would often say, “When you go to work, you think you’re dead. Only when you come back home do you realize you’re still alive.” After participating in half a month of searching for a dead body in the aftermath of a mining disaster, he would often recall the scene of his colleagues’ deaths, imagining how they entered pit and how their life then ended, “just like in a movie”. When his second contract ended, he decided not to renew it but to return to his rural home village, despite the possibility of his obtaining a permanent position and pension. In the mid-1990s, when he began to settle down in his home village, village cadres were ruthlessly levying different kinds of fees and taxes. He spent the next seven year firing off petitions against corrupt cadres in his home village rather than taking up his wife’s suggestion that he open a store selling building-materials. After going back and forth between the government’s petitioning system and the public media, he finally brought the cadre to justice, though the seven-year petition cost most of his savings. He liked sharing the story of the people and events he had encountered over the course of these seven-years with me. In retrospect, he said, he could have earned millions if he had embarked on a prosperous building materials business; life could have been different, with more leisure and more money. However, the Fengs had no regrets. His wife said: “He did it for the good for the poor. So I supported him. We were relieved of seven years of taxes. Those cadres were very corrupted. We work hard and bitterly and could not earn much money. They stay at home and do nothing, but still have money to gamble.” Bitter labor has a moral power that always demands justice.

Over dinner, Feng Chang explained to me why he cannot have more leisure time with Luo and I, “I have to earn school fees for my daughter. My time for leisure is very limited”. He told us that when his daughter went to college and he saved enough money for her school fees, he would like to travel around and go and see his friends. The week before I left the urban village, his wife and he had to recycle waste on a construction site from 3 am. In my farewell dinner with him and Luo, he seemed to be exhausted and could not drink alcohol as usual. He said his head ached. I suggested he should have more rest. Luo agreed, saying “It’s because of the tiring work. You work very hard, stay up later and wake up too early.” A few months later, Feng told me that he had been diagnosed with brain tumor. Fortunately, it was mild. Three months after surgery in his home town, he returned to Shanghai to work again, but now avoided heavy construction work to be a security guard instead. In 2015, Feng’s daughter graduated from high school and enrolled in a college. When I met Feng in the spring of 2016, he told me that he would give 2000 yuan to his daughter every month and hoped that she would become a teacher in the future.

Like Feng, many informants would often highlight their capacity to endure hard labor and “eat bitterness”, as well as stressing their present bitterness as a sacrifice for their children. Many of my informants also verbalize the noun “bitter 苦”. For example, they would say “bitter some money (ku dian qian 苦点钱)” instead of “earning some money” or “bitter business (*ku sheng yi* 苦生意)” instead of “doing business”. Given the fact that they often make a living out of dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs in cities, we might take their narrative of bitterness as a literal representation of their urban experience. In the Indian context, Jan Breman (2013) argues that the word *coolie*, widely used in the colonial setting, is still an apt term for the men, women and children who are stuck at the bottom of the informal economy in our era. My informants still use the Chinese word “苦力” (*ku li*, pronounced like the English word “coolie” and literally meaning “bitter strength”) to refer to those laborers who engage in dirty, dangerous and

unskilled jobs. However, While they can label themselves coolie (*ku li*), they rarely call a person coolie (*ku li*) in his or her presence. This second person avoidance demonstrates the stigma associated with hard physical labor and the ambiguous status of bitterness.

Research on rural migrants in China has also recorded their widespread narrative of bitterness. Scholars who are interested in the politic potential of the bitterness narrative often link it to the political genre of “speaking bitterness” (*su ku* 诉苦) in the context of the socialist mobilization and education of Mao’s era. Tamara Jacka (2006) has noted the complaints of women migrants have several similarities with the Maoist genre of speaking bitterness in terms of emotional function: 1) a sense of empowerment; 2) an assertion of worth as human beings; and 3) a sense of community belonging. She also notes the frustration behind the contemporary genre of speaking bitterness: “There was little sign, though, that speaking bitterness might serve as a platform from which these migrants could move from complaint to collective resistance against the state or the status quo. Rather, there was a sense that power was so overwhelmingly stacked against them that there was nothing they could do to improve the situation” (269). In her ethnography of domestic workers in China, Yan Hairong (2008) also traces the continuity and discontinuity of “speaking bitterness”: “For peasants and workers in the 1940s and 1950s, the public act of speaking bitterness symbolically transformed them from being subjects of the subaltern realm in the old social order to being subjects of liberation in the new socialist order. Speakers learned to organize and articulate fragmented and disparate experiences into a coherent whole...The speaker could articulate a new subjectivity in opposition to past adversity and realign herself with the revolutionary present” (202). However, in the post-socialist moment, “unlike the bitterness spoken before, the bitterness to be experienced today is understood as the agency of the market, playing the role of a necessary evil that tests the will for the individual self’s transformation and furnishes the necessary foundation on which the subaltern can build herself into a modern subject. In speaking bitterness, Yang Feng [a

domestic worker] does not place herself in opposition to bitterness, but champions it as a catalyst that tempers her and integrates her subjectivity into the logic of development” (233). In the light of the socialist past, the contemporary form of speaking bitterness is just a decayed survival trapped in the contradiction between the specter of class and the governmentality of neoliberal self-development. There is no political mobilization any more – only some scattered and meaningless complaints!

This passive inaction points to a general late-socialist paradox: the state can still claim legitimacy for itself, even though people constantly articulate complaints and dissatisfaction. In the context of socialist Cuba, Martin Holbraad (2013) argues that the paradox is based on the fundamental ontological premise of liberalism—people have an existence beyond the political forms to which they are subject, and they can choose one political form among others. Instead of highlighting the contradiction between the socialist ideal and the reality, he suggests that socialist politics should be understood as a political cosmology different from meta-liberalism. The political ontology of revolution entails a particular form of engagement: the task of the state is to obviate the very distinction between state and people, to forge the new socialist man and to bring about a new consciousness in the individual in an open-ended project of moral development (such as voluntarism and public service). He notes, “two seemingly opposite existential revolutionary outcomes—becoming a New Man, or dying for the revolution—come down to same thing; an essentially ascetic, self-transformative readiness to sacrifice what one is in order for the world—or at least society at large—to orchestrate itself in a new way” (377). The self-sacrifice reverses the liberal view that people exist independently of the political forms to which they are subject. The total quality of revolutionary politics admits no outside position from which to oppose or question. People’s complaints and opposition can be understood as a revolutionary act from within; they can articulate their discontent toward the revolution, yet still make sacrifices for it. The revolution thus becomes immune to opposition.

Instead of stressing the ontological distinctiveness of socialism, I suggest that the late-socialist paradox of complaint and complicity reflects the general dilemma of justifying human suffering for political legitimacy in secular politics. Max Weber has defined the justification of meaningless suffering as an important political question: how can we embrace a redemptive goal in solving the problem of meaningless suffering? In the political sphere, his answer is charismatic leadership constrained by an ethic of responsibility. For Weber, however, it is not only the political infliction of suffering that requires justification. In the economic sphere, the disposal of all kinds of economic means also implies the dark side of violence and suffering (slavery, for example). As Dirk Baecker (2007) notes, Weber connects religious ethics to the economy in order to investigate the premiums “called upon by these religions to enforce sacrifice, to endure hardship, and to promise reward, considered as frames to enter into business, to capitalize on its outcome, and to legitimate its possible profits” (29). Here it would be better not to limit the suffering and bitterness to being only a political question, as it actually marks a more general question of justifying suffering in modern society. Weber is at least ambiguous about the question. As Tamsin Shaw (2013) argues, Weber adopts a theistic way of justifying suffering: in a monotheistic universe, an omnipotent and omniscient God is ultimately responsible for everything that happens. At the same time, she also points out that Weber comes close to drawing the conclusion that a secular worldview would not demand a holistic justification for suffering, but ultimately refrains from doing so. With this doubt, Weber formulates the political calling in a paradoxical way: romantic passion constrained by an ethic of responsibility.

This chapter suggests that bitterness is diffused in different spheres of society. The question is not to justify bitterness and suffering and thus to legitimate power. Society has lost its center or principles for justifying the suffering it has created. Instead of focusing on the speaking of bitterness as either a specific genre of political action or a literal articulation of social suffering, I

focus on the social communication<sup>5</sup> of bitterness in different social fields such as the state, the market and the family. I suggest bitterness is diffused in different spheres of society, crystalized as the structural memory of society. Every generation would recount its recent past as bitter and the sense of bitterness is enfolded into everyday life via materials, laboring body, and speech. The memory of bitterness is not about the recollection of past events or some strategic reconstruction from and for the present: it is about generating a meaningful difference between past and future. When the past is remembered as bitter, every present moment is seen as overcoming some past bitterness; the difference between the bitter past and the present and the crossing from past bitterness to the present maintain the potential for a regenerated future. I argue that it is the structural memory of bitterness that generates the socialist utopia, entrepreneurial aspiration and family continuity, as well as romanticizing the discrepancies brought about by unfulfilled political, economic and familial aspiration. The bitterness and its complaints are thus not a social paradox entailing justification, but rather a paradoxical structure introducing aspiration into society and dealing with the ensuing social disappointment.

### **Bitterness, Revolution and Socialist Utopia**

In the socialist reform period in the 1950s, the state promoted “speaking bitterness” as a form of class education. Liu Xin (2009) notes that speaking bitterness became a habit of the heart during Mao’s period; the bitterness was remembered in order to carry out the Maoist mission of transforming the countryside. Rural elders were asked to tell the bitterness of their youth, workers who had worked in Soviet work places to speak of the bitterness of their former days in Soviet Union. The state encouraged people to discover the bitterness of family history, and

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<sup>5</sup>There is no doubt that the experience of bitterness depends on consciousness and perception. Here, however, I am less interested in subjective feeling and consciousness than in the way in which the highly subjective bitter feeling is communicated socially.

promoted the virtue of thrift and hardship. In her research on mass mobilization in Mao's period, Liu Yu (2010) notices that the drama of speaking bitterness entails victimization, redemption, and emancipation. Through the drama of speaking the bitterness of "old society", socialist mass mobilization highlights the evil of exploited class and thus defines class enemies; the state also promoted enduring bitterness as redemption and as a socialist virtue.

In the period of Great Leap Forward, the *People's Daily*<sup>6</sup>, the official newspaper of the Communist Party, had to argue that "socialist bitter labor" (which is for the whole of society and is thus happy) was different from the exploitative "capitalist bitter labor" (which is a form of slavery). The slogan of this period was "bitterness first, sweetness later." Around the period of the Cultural Revolution, the utopian mobilization of bitter labor during the Great Leap Forward was criticized as smacking of utility and selfishness; the new revolutionary discourse shifted to "enduring bitterness for revolution and people". Daring to eat bitterness is highlighted as a form of revolutionary spirit: "first, do not be afraid of bitterness; second, do not be afraid of death". Enduring bitterness becomes a form of revolutionary sacrifice.

The genre of speaking bitterness, though intended as speaking out about the exploitative past before Liberation in 1949, could also slip into a criticism of the socialist present. In Huang Shu-min's (1998) oral history of a party leader in a Fujian village, the village leader recounted a comic section of speaking bitterness in a socialist education campaign around 1965. The campaign was called "Reminiscing Bitterness, Thinking Sweetness" (*yi ku si tian* 忆苦思甜); its purpose was to familiarize youngsters with the harshness of life before Liberation, and to compare it with the good life the Communist Party had brought to them. A retired serviceman from the army who came from an exceedingly poor farming family was invited to give a talk. He came and gave very graphic descriptions of the bitterness of life before Liberation: no food,

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<sup>6</sup> This section is based on my documentary research on the discourse of "bitterness" in the People's Daily data base (1946 to the present).

no clothing, and no shelter when he was a child; he was beaten by his master, the master's wife and son, and other senior servants. Then he began to talk about the good life after Liberation, depicting the improvements made in the early 1950s. To the astonishment of the organizers, this old fellow didn't stop as he was supposed to; he began to describe the difficult time he experienced after the failure of the Great Leap Forward: how much hunger he had suffered during that period, and how many people he had seen die. The comic effect conveys the difficulty of controlling the diffuseness of bitterness narratives.

Socialist revolution encourages the genre of "speaking bitterness" in order to articulate past exploitation and cultivate a class consciousness; the state, however, also had to encourage people to do hard labor in the present. The high socialist experiment is full of contradiction and paradox: "it is a combination of the ascetic rejection of materialism and a utopia of material abundance; despite the failure of the Great Leap Forward, Mao's charismatic leadership still kept the revolutionary momentum" (Van der Veer 2014:134). The socialist experiment also includes contradictory approaches. There is a materialist approach to labor and development, in which, for example, the division of labor still existed, as did the wage differences. There is also a more radical and utopian approach to socialist labor: in the light of Maoist heroism, labor was no longer understood in term of materialist labor theory, but in term of revolutionary sacrifice.

In the post-Mao period, the bitterness is used to justify the wealth: those who are capable of eating bitterness (*chi ku* 吃苦) would become rich first. In the early post-Mao period, the state had to deal with the increasingly unequal distribution of bitterness. "Visiting Poor Households and Asking About Their Bitterness" (*fang pin wen ku* 访贫问苦), once a project of socialist class education in Mao's period, has been slowly transformed into a project to aid the poor. In the aftermath of the reform of state enterprises in the earlier 1990s, the *People's Daily*

presented some stories about how laid-off workers had gone through a process of bitterness and become entrepreneurs. The post-Mao state continues to promote a spirit of heroic bitterness: these model workers dare to eat bitterness, treating their own health and kinship ties lightly. College students are encouraged to eat bitterness and to work in developing areas: “bitter place, risky place is the good place for you to build your career”. In an era of material abundance, debates about the pros and cons of the spirit of enduring hardship still often feature in newspapers. There is also a concern that the spirit of enduring bitterness would disappear in the new generation.

From this cursory review of the rhetoric of bitterness in Mao’s socialism, we can see that speaking bitterness should not be considered a consistent political genre or form of mobilization alone. The communication of bitterness actually codifies double projects: criticisms of past injustices and a justification for present suffering, the present hard labor and a frugal life as opposed to a future of material abundance. The communication of bitterness does not take an ideal form, but rather it takes a paradoxical structure. It instigates a dream for a socialist utopia and deals with disappointment at the same time. The speaking of bitterness was used as a technique of socialist education, but it also provided an opportunity for critique of the socialist present. The partial failure of Mao’s high socialist experiment does not prevent the speaking of bitterness.

### **Memory of bitterness: materials and the laboring body**

In her writing on rural women’s memories of the collective past, Gail Hershatter has also demonstrated that women who had lived through the collectivist years of the Mao period had much bitterness to speak. One woman had such a story to tell: “My third child once said, ‘mom, the porridge we eat is so thin that we can see the reflection of bamboo leaves’. I was sad whenever I recalled this. I would just grind a bowl of rice into paste, then add some water. The

five of us just drank this... This was in the 1970. Life was really hard at that time... No matter how good the labor in your family was, one person alone could not make it, no matter how hard she worked. One workday was only worth 0.20 yuan” (2011:151). This woman finally lived a good life: “In 1984 she left her position as women’s chair in village T and began a reform-era career as a peddler in Baoji city, eventually providing work for several of her children there as well. When we [author and her companion] met her in 1997, she had just returned to the village and was caring for a grandchild while her parents continued to earn money in the city” (ibid.). This bitterness narrative still resonates in my fieldwork, even though speakers may have come of age in post-Mao China are describing not the Maoist past but the post-Mao era.

My informants often understand their past bitterness in relation to its material and bodily aspects. When I had meals with Luo, the waste recycler born in 1976, the food on the table often reminded him of the food he used to eat in his home village. Food made of white flour was very rare in his childhood; his parents had to hide the food gifts they would send out in case their children would find them and “steal” them. Luo taught me how to peel a potato without losing too much substance; he also showed pity towards the oil left in the pan when he finished his cooking. Life used to be very bitter (*ku* 苦), he told me: “You could only eat meat at festivals”. The rural past was also remembered as bitter because of the lack of cash at that time. In the post-Mao reform period, the heavy agricultural tax (which was lifted in 2003) and rising everyday expenditure had already put many rural people in debt before they left for the cities. Some told me that they went to earn money in the cities to repay their debts. When recollecting his days tilling land in his hometown before 2003, Wang An, a fifty-odd-year-old shopkeeper, told me: “It was great bitterness. The agricultural tax was too high. One year, our land was flooded; but we still have to pay 270 or 280 yuan per person for the tax. When you

harvested some rice, you could only sell at 0.6 yuan per kilo. After you paid your tax, you could not earn much money. I was always in debt before I left for Shanghai.”

Past bitterness is also remembered via the laboring body. Lin Lin, Aunt Gao’s daughter, told me that her mother endured so much bitterness that she became slightly hunchbacked; her mother’s back once bled from the baggage she would carry while recycling waste. When they talked about the past bitterness, many informants also mentioned a lack of sleep. My informants see whether one can eat bitterness through one’s bodily presence. A day laborer immediately commented on a woman he had just met: “She is not the kind of person who can eat bitterness”. My informants also often connect the illness of their friends and family to the bitter labor they had done (cf. Lora-Wainwright 2009).

When it comes to the vague but recent past, my informants would often describe it as bitter. If we just restrict the memory of bitterness to Mao’s period or the Great Famine of 1960, we may fail to see how a sense of bitterness traverses through time and pieces together fragments of memory. The bitterness is not just a matter of defining a form of remembrance or the representation of a past event. As Veena Das (2006) notes in her study of the partition of India, the memory of suffering cannot be defined by a particular historical period or a particular event; rather, it permeates everyday life. By reading the material and bodily bitterness into the past, my informants introduce a comparison with the present. Every present moment is imbued with some past bitterness. As one informant told me, “I do not know how I have overcome the bitterness”. After recollecting how short of money she was in the past, one old woman concluded, “It was really poor in the past. But we live in the present. All our children have been brought up.” Arrival in the present seems to be an enigma and a surprise.

Thus material developments cannot obviate the memory of bitterness. The materially coded memory of bitterness makes the present contingent on future oscillation--material abundance

or scarcity. In the harvest season in Luo's hometown, his relatives and he would often remember the drudgery of the harvest season in the 1980s. Thanks to the introduction of machinery, they do not have to perform this drudgery now. His uncle, who was born in 1964 and is now also a migrant, told me: "Mao Zedong once said we would complete mechanization in 2000. You see how much change has happened here. I do not know what life will look like in the next few years. In the city, now nearly every family has a car. In the future, every rural family will have one too". For him, Mao's socialist utopia has not failed but is realized in post-Mao development.

Of course, not all my informants present such a progressive history. Certainly they acknowledged the fact of material development, but the new material abundance also leaves a trace of scarcity. After remembering his past of escaping flooding, working in a factory, and starting his own business, a shopkeeper told me, gesturing toward those happy children running around us, "You see, these kids seem to be very comfortable and happy. They now drink milk; they even do not care to eat rice. Maybe one day they will have to live the bitter life. Then the world would come to an end. They do not know where wheat and rice come from. I did not expect the world to change so quickly". Facing a rapidly changing society, he cannot help wondering whether the bitterness he had experienced may take its revenge. Some informants also worry that their children cannot bear bitterness, as they have become lazy and fragile. Some harbored a sense of nostalgia for the bitter past. They would say that food now is abundant, and nobody need go hungry as they used to. However, the quality or taste of food is not as good as it was earlier. After telling me of her hunger in her youth, a fifty-odd-year female food vendor told me, "Food used to be delicious. Now even you eat meat, it is not delicious". She was nostalgic for days of her youth, when her friends and she did bitter labor in the fields: "It was much more interesting. Now I only stand here doing my business." Now everyone can easily

obtain some ready cash, but my informants also complained that their money becomes “dead” under the shadow of the increases in everyday expenditure and marriage costs.

### **Community of bitterness: hard work, freedom and romantic experience**

Entrepreneurs I met were willing to tell me about their experiences of “eating bitterness”.

Several informants told me that their epiphany in deciding to change jobs came in a moment of physical exhaustion. After Ying, the entrepreneur I introduced earlier, left his job in a factory, he first set up a small vegetable business with his relatives. He also ran a transport business with his tricycle. He later decided to buy a truck and switch to the vegetable wholesale business. He explained that the decisive moment came when he was riding his tricycle over a steep bridge. He felt a wave of blood from his chest bursting into his mouth. When he was a child, he had already heard how the body could be seriously damaged by exerting too much strength. Sitting on the bridge, he himself felt the lightness of life; he decided to give up the transport trade and small vegetable business. Later he asked his relatives to pool money for a new truck. Sitting in his office, Ying was now the boss of a factory producing wood plate. He recounted his early hardships and bitterness with calm triumphalism, saying that his bitter past was the necessary step to his future success.

Wu, the thirty-odd-year-old boss of an online-selling company, had risen up from a poor family background. His wife, a college graduate holding an accounting degree, started her husband’s success story with a hint of depreciation: “He had no certificate, he looks just average.” With an introduction from fellow villagers, he found a job as a grass-cutting boy: “He thought, no matter that he was acting like a cow or a horse, he had to keep his job.” He was finally promoted and worked very hard: “He sometimes did not sleep at night.” When he set up his own business and went on a business trip to Xin Jiang, “he only had some steamed buns on the twenty- hour

trip.” She concluded the story of his success with a popular Chinese saying: “If you wish to be a successful man, you must suffer the bitterest of the bitter.” When I later met Wu and mentioned the bitter journey his wife had told me about, he said: “It is good to have some memory; the process makes life interesting. If you just got millions by winning lottery, is it interesting? Money could not buy this experience. I built up my business step by step.”

Enduring bitterness, like character-building in the American Gilded Age (Hikey 1997), is romanticized as experience and capital. Many bosses told me that their strength lay in enduring bitterness. Overcoming bitterness and rising from being penniless to being prosperous can help the entrepreneur build up his charisma and legitimate his wealth. The hagiographic texts of famous entrepreneurs often highlight how they overcame bitterness in their past. Enduring bitterness, like asceticism in Weber’s account of capitalism, is represented as a potential social force. It deflects suspicion and lends some aura to their wealth. Some migrant workers make a distinction between those bosses who had experienced bitterness and those who make fortunes without making any effort. One informant proudly told me that one of his fellow villagers had risen from a poor and bitter background to become a successful boss.

Bitterness is also a legitimate discourse for workplace discipline. As they still participated in laboring themselves and personalized the spirit of enduring bitterness, some bosses disciplined their workers by setting an example. One told me, “When you work hard by yourself, they would be embarrassed if they do not work hard.” Even though they would like to include “daring to eat bitterness” as a criterion for recruiting workers, entrepreneurs’ attitude toward bitterness is at the least ambiguous. They hoped their children would attend university, upgrade occupations and escape from eating bitterness in their own trades.

Job advertisements still include the criteria of being able to eat bitterness. My informants also told me that they did not have any educational degree but were willing to “eat bitterness” and

work hard. Among migrant workers, one's ability to work hard and to endure bitterness is also judged by family members, friends and neighbors and employers. One's inability to endure bitterness, reflected in idleness, would often earn one harsh judgments behind one's back. Migrants in the urban village often judge each other in terms of whether one is capable of eating bitterness. When they form temporary work teams for some subcontracting work, they often include acquaintances prepared to eat bitterness. Some migrants accept a lower wage because working is better than idling at home. As a young and idle man living among working people, I was initially seen as a dangerous element. One informant later explained to me the illegitimacy of my idle existence: "We do not know who you are and whether you are short of money". Bitter labor and earning one's livelihood is one's passport to a community of strangers. "Eating bitterness" is not only a criterion of one's inclusion in these temporary work teams or the transient urban community; it also plays a role in normative criticisms of other groups. Migrants often compared their readiness to endure hardship to the "lazy" laid-off Shanghainese workers—a vulnerable group under conditions of economic reform. Possessing wealth without bitterness is also suspicious. Zhi Guo's father expressed a sense of grievance toward some entrepreneurs who had taken advantage of privatization in the post-Mao reform period, saying, "Their money is earned without effort. They did not experience any bitterness in getting the money. They got it from high up." When migrant workers compare their hard labor to local Shanghainese laziness and the way the rich effortlessly obtain money from the state, they are demanding a kind of recognition that goes beyond legal rights.

The capacity to endure bitterness and work hard is less an ideal virtue than a performative quality. Workers show their willingness to eat bitterness I outsiders. One summer afternoon in 2013, I joined Zhi Guo and two other friends in a job installing the internet. When I met his friends, one of them said with a sense of self-deprecation: "You come to see how we endure

bitterness”. Their work process, however, was full of banter and mischief; the whole afternoon was full of laughter.

Even though migrant workers often showcase their ability to eat bitterness in front of outsiders such as intellectuals or their employers, they also allow some playfulness within their own community. My informants were happy to share with me stories in which they fooled rather than worked hard for their bosses. Working too hard for a boss is thus suspicious. One day Luo came to me to complain about his friend Mao Jie’s excessive work ethic. Mao Jie was reputed to be a man who was extremely capable of eating bitterness in my urban village. Luo usually praised his ethic of hard work and considered it sacrifice for his four sons. On that day, Mao Jie asked Luo to work with him for a boss. At 12:50, the lunch had still not arrived, and Luo was hungry and became impatient. The boss said he was not hungry. Luo said, “He did not work, of course, he was not hungry.” He blamed the late lunch on his friend Mao Jie: “He was too devoted to work and the boss. The boss might give him several thousand yuan. But you should not let your workers feel hungry.” This time Luo saw his friend Mao Jie’s habit of working hard as selling out.

Older generations of migrants would often shake their heads and sigh over the younger generation’s inability to endure bitterness. Young migrants are said to switch from job to job and squander their wages. Zhi Guo told me that, when he stayed at home unemployed after the failure of several entrepreneurial projects, his parents constantly asked him to find a job. He felt that his father doubted his capacity to work and his worth. He then found a job in a removals company. Zhi Guo knew the degraded status of being a manual worker; he was even embarrassed to inquire about the position at the very beginning. This job was not his first choice. He told me his original plan was to find a job as a ball boy in a golf club. He imagined he could learn some great idea from all those rich people playing golf. He even paid 100 yuan for a training program for applying as a ball boy, only to find that a lot of aspirants had also

enrolled in the program and that there were only a few vacancies. He told me that his job was quite like coolie's job in the docks of colonial Shanghai, but he had demonstrated his worth as a family member by enduring hardship. He told me he would contribute most of his wages to his parents and never buy expensive clothes, shoes or a mobile phone for himself.

As Ruth Gomberg-Munoz (2010) demonstrates in her ethnography of Mexican immigrants in the US, by demonstrating their willingness to work hard and cultivate a team culture of working hard, these migrants seek a sense of autonomy and respect in the workplace. This signature of working hard and enduring bitterness also sets up a barrier to hierarchical intervention. My informants would often tell me that they would rather eat bitterness and work hard by themselves than be subject to a boss's orders. Zhi Guo told me that, even though the job in the removals company entailed bitter physical labor, it was better than light-duty jobs such as being a waiter or a security guard; he could acquire useful social experience (*jing yan* 经验) for his future entrepreneurship. In 2013, when I met him again, Zhi Guo had left the removals company and was now working in an internet-installation company. He had not managed to set up his own business, but he had achieved one important thing—getting married.

Like Zhi Guo, Hui, a 28-year-old house painter, did not like his present occupation very much and hoped he could quit at some point. He told me about his bitter apprenticeship in the past and also how he had now had to abandon his comfortable life in his home town for higher wages in Shanghai now. He asked rhetorically, “Is it interesting? No. It is an exercise. I once watched a movie called ‘Kung Fu dream’. The master asks his disciple to undertake an action for a few months: throwing his clothes on the ground, hanging them up and then putting them on. His disciple feels very bored, but actually this simple action implies a lot of Kung fu skill. In real life, you may not see this at the very beginning; you might give up in the middle of doing it.” As a husband and the father of two children, he insisted that whatever bitterness he had to suffer now, he would take good care of his wife and children and not let them “eat bitterness.”

Aspirants like Zhi Guo and Hui knew that becoming an entrepreneur relies on luck, one's family background and personal connections. Enduring business is a way of establishing one's membership in the family and community, as well as maintaining some autonomy and keeping up one's hope. Even though wealth might not come from labor, the hard work involved is still full of surprises. Recent studies of neo-liberalism have demonstrated that hard labor is devalued and that people's imagination has shifted to a kind of occult and magical generation of wealth (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). China scholars have noted the moral ambiguity of hard work. In his ethnography of a Chinese village, Hans Steinmuller (2013b) has located the gap between the state-promoted discourses of hard work and the lived experience of success and failure. As Anna Lora-Wainwright (2013) notices in her ethnography of rural Sichuan, people, especially young, increasingly have ambivalence about hard work. On the one hand, aware that less strenuous alternatives to making a living are available to those with better social networks and education, villagers resented the continued necessity for hard work. On the other hand, when they attribute the cause of cancer to hard work, they also recognize that hard work played a key role in reproducing the family and community relations. Bitterness is both a factual category encoding labor and a normative category encoding social inclusion and exclusion. Migrant workers use bitter labor to define their community, and their autonomy in the market, while entrepreneurs romanticize their past bitterness and justify their wealth and power. The social inequality between workers and entrepreneurs is eradicated through the communication of bitterness. Young aspirants romanticize their hard work as experience and hope to be able to set up a business one day. When their dream has not been realized temporarily, they get married first. The family provides another form into which the fantasy of bitterness can be channeled.

### **Sacrifice for children: bitterness and hope**

In his study of middle-class homes in industrial Chicago from 1872 to 1890, Richard Sennet has noted that “it used to be fashionable to ascribe to the great city the capacity to break apart the home, and lead even respectable young men astray in pursuit of an unbridled freedom”(1970:105). But his research demonstrates that young people “did not leave a gap between shelter in their parents’ home and the founding of their own homes” (1970:104). While those middle-class men in industrializing Chicago had to wait until their thirties to prove their ability to be husbands and then get married, most of my informants get married earlier, usually before establishing any career. My young informants got married in their late teens or earlier twenties. One informant told me: “we are not like your guys. You can make your career first and get married later. We do not have a career now, so we get married first.”

Family obligations are an important motivation and justification for changing jobs. Zhi Guo’s two legitimate escapes from his dead end jobs were to prepare his marriage and to expect his baby. Having provided an internet-installation service for more than a year, Zhi Guo told me he had been considering quitting his dead-end job in the second half of 2013. His mother obviously did not support his idea. Zhi Guo later told me that he had been doing very demanding physical labor all these years and was now very tired. His wife was still not pregnant, and he was worried that something might be wrong with his body. At the end of the year, he quit his job, claiming that his wife and he had to improve their physical conditions and prepare to have a baby. He then took a two-year break in his home town. When Zhi Guo was expecting his baby, he carefully thought about his or her name. He first toyed with the characters meaning heaven and filial piety, implying his great expectations of his son. After consulting a diviner, he chose the character Mountain 山 to name his son because his son was said to lack the earth element in his life. Zhi Guo also explained to me later that he abandoned the idea of heaven and filial piety because he did not want to demand too much from his son: “He can do

whatever he wants to do. I only teach him to be a good person”. Sons are thus objects not of utility but of moral education.

In the urban village, my middle-aged informants always cited their children’s education and marriage as the main purpose of their hard work; at the same time, they understated their expectations of their children. They would often say that they could not enjoy life until they had fulfilled their duty to support their children’s education and marriage; their bitter money was not for themselves but for their children. They were concerned over their children’s consumption, especially the possibility that it might lag behind that of their peers. Because of the policy limits placed on attending public school and the parents’ need to work in Shanghai, many children are left in the care of their grandparents in their rural home towns. The separation involved often created emotional turmoil and doubts about the attachment between parents and children. Luo told me that his wife Da Yu’s tears streamed down her face on the bus from his home town. When her daughter asked when they would be coming back, they always had to lie and say: “In several days’ time.” Da Yu explained to her daughter that she had to earn money to buy snacks for her, to which her daughter replied that she would rather have her mother present than snacks. Like many mothers, Da Yu worried that the long-term separation would dilute the emotional attachment between parents and children. Absent from their children’s growing-up most of the time, many of my informants felt that their children were no longer close to them, having had little to share with them, and some even failing to recognize their parents after years of separation. The separation between parents and children amplifies the desire to make sacrifices for one’s children. Children’ education and marriage are two different spheres in which they demonstrate their proper sacrifice.

My informants often claimed that they were committed to giving their children education. As Feng said in the opening story, he had to earn money for his daughter’s school fees. He also used his need to pay school fees as an excuse to demand the wages his boss owed him. The

year before his daughter attended the national university entrance examinations, Feng once told me that he would send his wife back home to take care of his daughter in her last year of high school; he said that they were willing to sacrifice some income to do so. But his wife did not go back in the end. For those parents who put their children into schools in Shanghai, they had to decide whether they would send their children back to their home towns school and whether the mothers would take care of their children in person in their home towns. Though they always stressed their unlimited support for children's education, when it came to these decisions, parents also had to weigh their money-making activities, the husband-wife bond, and their children's prospects. Many informants often expressed the hope that their children could attend university, as a university degree was supposed to give them a less bitter office job or an "iron rice bowl" (i.e. a stable job). This entails a long-term and risky material investment. My friend Luo once told me that it cost time and money to attend university and he would rather let his son work earlier. A female informant told me that, though she hoped her children would go to college, her decision whether to move back home for her children's education would depend on her children's performance in junior high school. Though proclaiming their commitment and their hope to give their children a college education, migrant workers also had a vague sense of their children's slim life chances. Some attributed some essential characteristics to their children at an early age. One young mother predicted that her three-year-old son might not be good at studying because he was too naughty. Successful migrant entrepreneurs often committed resources to registering as Shanghai residents, giving their children the privilege of attending Shanghai public schools and taking college entrance examinations. However, this material investment cannot always guarantee satisfactory results. A poor migrant worker's children might pass the examination, while a rich migrant entrepreneur's children might not. The risky investment and uncertain returns provide a way of demonstrating parents' sacrifices or making an equal playing field for upgrading status. Both migrant workers

and migrant entrepreneurs characterized their occupations as “bitter” and shared the same hope their children would not stay in their occupations. They would often justify their expectation with a customary saying: “Every new generation should be better than the older generation”.

Besides demonstrating their willingness to invest in their children’s education, my informants often highlighted their material investment in their sons’ marriage as duty and understated their expectations regarding their sons’ care of them in their old age. They thus demonstrated that their contribution to their children’s marriage was more of a matter of sacrifice than of reciprocity. They also stressed their sense of sacrifice with some complaints. Middle-aged parents often complained about their sons’ performance while praising their daughters for their sensitivity in taking care of their parents. They also often complained about their sons’ ever increasing expenditure on marriage. However, for those migrants who had recently seen their children married, they would often highlight their generosity and their readiness to spend money by referring to the excessive amounts of food for the banquet and the many gifts. On the night of Jia’s wedding, which I attended, I congratulated Jia’s father on his achievement in arranging his son’s marriage. Jia’s father replied: “Everything is oriented towards my son”. Jia’s father occasionally expressed his dissatisfaction with his daughter-in-law to his relatives, but still demonstrated his unfailing commitment to his son’s wedding. He told me: “I only have one son. I have to first fulfill my duty [arranging son’s marriage] and then see whether I can enjoy some food and drink.”

My informants continued to invest in their sons despite the cost and the decreased utility of doing so. The son is a bittersweet burden. A son’s marriage entails much more complicated procedures and higher levels of expenditure than a daughter’s marriage. After their sons’ wedding, my informants often said they had a sense of relief, which is also a sense of fulfillment. My informants would often deny the son preference and said it was an old rural tradition. I

only learnt what a son meant to a family from those who did not have a son. Zhong was a house decorator in his fifties. His wife had given birth to ten girls until she could not bear any more children. He kept two daughters and sent the rest to be adopted in other families. In his village, he was the only man who does not have a son. He told me how he was despised by his parents and fellow villagers for lacking a son. When he had arguments with his fellow villagers, the latter could attack him with a simple curse: “You would die lonely, without descentdants”. He told me he had seriously considered about divorcing and marrying another woman in his middle age; but in the end he did not do so. He happily acknowledged that his daughters treated him very well and always brought him gifts. He also knew about the burdens of raising a son. But he told me, if he had had a son, he would not have gambled away 70,000 yuan last year, and would have been more motivated to make money or would not have gambled if he had had to spend time taking care of his son’s children. Girls were still excluded from being recorded in the lineage genealogy book, meaning that his family would only have a short life span in the history of his lineage. He said he felt excluded and angry. A small recent joy was that he finally got his driving license despite the fact that his friend warned him that he was too old to pass the test. He was planning to buy a car and travel to Beijing some time.

A son thus provides motivation and justification for wealth accumulation--for his marriage, his building and his future. As we saw in the opening story of this chapter, Feng Chang had to make great effort to justify his hard work and his accumulation of wealth since he only had one daughter. Zhong also attributed his gambling to the lack of a son. Many of my informants describe their sons and their marriage house as the anchor of their life plan. Sacrificing for their sons enriches their own social status and also legitimizes their own competition for social status. Though his son was only eleven years old in 2013, Luo had been talking about preparing a house for his marriage for quite a while. He said his son wanted to build a house at home,

rather than buying an apartment in the town. During the harvest period in June, when we went back to his home town, his mother also pushed him to build a house and buy modern appliances such as a fridge. She also said that Luo's son wanted to build a house at home, and was always mentioning causally who had already built a house in the village. A house is the most important possession for one's personal reputation, and the style of the building always entails delicate social competition. In his home town, Luo carefully observed the various building styles. His mother told me that Luo's new house should be wider than his neighbor and cousin's house, which is eight meters wide, so Luo's new house should be at least twelve meters wide. Though the house was important for the family's social status in the village, both Luo and his mother told me that it was Luo's son who actually wanted to build a house at home.

In Luo's village, I met a man in his seventies who was working on some bridge- building sites around his village. He told me that he still had to do the bitter labor since he was in debt after building a new house for his grandson's future marriage. His grandson was only ten-year-old at that time. I said that his house might be out of fashion when his son got married since a marriage house should always be in the latest style. He said that that was not his concern. He admitted he had built the house partially because of the social competition: "Everyone builds the two-story house." This was the last time he would build a house in his lifetime, so he wanted to make it solid and enduring. He hoped that this house, built with the money he had earned from bitter labor, would still be standing after his life was over. This hope obviously contradicted the current custom, as every new generation was now tearing down the last generation's houses and building new ones.

My informants often downplayed the bitterness they had experienced in the past and were experiencing now, and expressed the hope that their children would not have to suffer such bitterness. This hope contradicts everyday evidence, since every generation would have to

endure some form of bitterness and retain a sense of bitterness in their memory. Posterity thus has a religio-metaphysical status. No wonder that my informants would attribute agency to their children, even if they were too young to take decisions on, say, their future marriage house.<sup>7</sup> Kipnis has suggested that the model of sacrifice forms part of the parental investment and the intergeneration relationship: “Some parents explicitly state that as they have only one or two children, they purposefully devoted much ‘human feeling’ (*ganqing*) to each one so that the child will be filial (*xiao*) when they are older. This feeling does not necessarily involve spending a lot of time with the children, as the above discussion of the desirability of closed schools and boarding schools suggests. Rather, it is a matter of sacrificing (*xisheng*) one’s own life or happiness for that of the child and making sure that the child understands that this sacrifice had taken place. This sacrifice is on display both in the hard physical labor that rural parents do on a daily basis, and in the constraints they place on their own consumption to save money for their children” (2011: 214). Kipnis argues that Chinese parents still find existential meaning in their sacrifices for their children. Love as sacrifice does not belong only to the Chinese family. In their field research on American working people in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb have also noted how people use the morality of personal sacrifice to wrest dignity from the hurt of class. They hope that their life full of struggle will be redeemed by their sacrifice for the children: “There is created in many families a kind of exchange relationship, a series of unspoken, individual expectations of obligation toward each other based on the respective sacrifices of each” (1972:129). The image of transformation across the generations invites the child to desert his past, to leave it and the parents who have sacrificed for him all behind. Loving as sacrifice thus always brings a strong sense of generational conflicts and betrayal.

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<sup>7</sup> In the urban village, those parents who kept their children with them were often addressed as the father or mother of their children. My friend Luo was often called “Wang’s father” (Wang is his son’s name) by his neighbors. Minor conflicts between children can escalate into conflicts between their respective parents.

Sennett & Cobb's and Kipnis's modes of sacrifice reveal the two sides of sacrifice. For Sennett & Cobb, sacrifice is an interested exchange, and thus it is ultimately, if not impossible, full of conflicts; while for Kipnis sacrifice is an existential obligation. The contrast touches upon the paradox of sacrifice that anthropologists have long noted: "Sacrifice can only be consciously enacted and understood in economic terms. It is always understood as a passage through suffering and death, with an end in sight... True sacrifice, however, is necessarily an-economical; it can have no future orientation or expectation of result. It has to be beyond all calculation, lest it be construed as self-serving" (Mayblin 2013: 346). For my informants, their sacrifices for children and their money-making activities are mutual constituted. Parents do have their own intentions and calculations. Some of my informants also accused their parents of bias and instrumentality. As Da Yu's daughter said, she might need company rather than snacks and money. Many parents are also concerned about their long-term separation from their children and its unexpected effects. Though they often highlighted their swiftness and generosity in sending their children money, some parents also reflected on the limitations of care through material investment. Being aware of something missing in the separation, my informants continue to invest heavily in their children, especially their sons, to demonstrate their sacrifices for their children as well as understating their expectations and demands.<sup>8</sup> In this way, they attempt to maintain a proper manner of bitter sacrifice for their children. The structure of bitterness obscures the doubts over the parents' actual intentions and calculations, and generates their hope for a different future for their posterity.

### **The utterance of bitterness: speech and silence**

The above account may leave the impression that my informants are constantly complaining about their bitterness. As a strange student and researcher, I did hear a lot of complaints about a new acquaintance's personal bitterness. Indicating a sense of bitterness is a convenient way of

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<sup>8</sup> Parents I met began to stress a less demanding and more sensitive parenting style.

protecting oneself in front of an ambiguously motivated stranger. As a disposable stranger, I was also treated as a sympathetic listener. On several occasions, informants I had newly met would reveal the deep bitterness of their lives. My informants sometimes assumed that I had the cultural power to voice their suffering,<sup>9</sup> encouraging me to write about their bitterness and official corruption when I published my research results in the future.

However, their stories of bitterness are also supposed to stay within their intimate networks. On one occasion, when a woman was recounting her and her family's bitterness, her son, who was within earshot, showed awkwardness and embarrassment, then tried to change the subject. Speaking too much about one's own bitterness can easily be seen as fragile or bragging. In his research into people's memories of the Maoist past, especially of famine, in Fujian, Stephan Feuchtwang notes that his informants are quite cynical in talking about the suffering of the famine, claiming that "it is success in having overcome a past of suffering and having gone on to accumulate wealth that gave you a right to be heard, both lacking human, moral depth" (231).

My informants often told me that they would reserve their experience of bitterness for themselves. There is internal silence about the bitterness each one has suffered within the family. Zhi Guo told me that he rarely told his parents about his hardships outside the home. What they discussed around the dinner table was the bitterness of those who were not present. One day while I was having lunch at Zhi Guo's home, his mother told me that the beans we were eating had been planted by her father. She then told a family story of how his father had fed her four sisters and brothers and had let one relative adopt her after her mother's early death. She then said: "The life of human beings is really tiring. You just think about how much bitterness he has suffered." Even though he had known little about the detail of his parents' work, Zhi Guo always recognized that it had been tiring and bitter. But Zhi Guo told me he

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<sup>9</sup> They often did not distinguish between academic research, journalistic reports and government research.

never expressed his care for his parents' tiring work directly: "We all have to sustain the family. I could not let them stop."

Despite the lack of dramatic performances of bitterness, there is an implicit understanding of each other's bitterness and sacrifice. Hui, the painter, showed me his rough hands, and said he never told his family about his bitterness, but he said his family far away can sense his bitterness in the city. The last time his cousin came to Shanghai from his home town, he asked his father, a butcher, to send him some meat. When his cousin brought the meat, he found it was all lean meat. He told me, "My father knows that I do not like fat meat. He is worried about my eating bitterness here." This implicit understanding of bitterness even obscures the obvious hurt from an outsider's point of view. Lin Lin, Aunt Gao's daughter, was asked by her parents to drop out of school to take care of the family as a thirteen-year-old when her parents went to work in Shanghai. As she recalled, her grades were quite good; the main reason for her dropping out was that she should take care of her litter brother and sister. The brother finally got into a college. Her parents' intention to use her labor is obvious: "Taking care of family means cooking and washing clothes for them". She did not blame her parents' bias, but attributed her dropping out of school to the impoverished condition of her family and its bitter past, which she also described to me. While most of the episodes she related were quite similar to Aunt Gao's version, she especially pointed out the bitter labor her mother had endured.

The high expectations placed on each implicit understandings of each other's bitterness nearly make the bitterness incommunicable. After much disappointment with her current situation as a housewife and her bad relationship with her husband, my friend Yu Lan told me, "Only you yourself can understand your bitterness." She implied that her sacrifice for her family had not been recognized by her husband. Some of my informants told me that they only began to understand their parents' bitterness slowly after they had had children of their own and become

mothers themselves. The failure to recognize each other's bitterness within the family might erupt into public accusations---an awkward moment for a family.

When the communication of bitterness goes beyond the intimate community and targets outsiders, it often takes a more dramatic form. That is why some informants encouraged me to dramatize their bitterness. Petitions seeking redress from the state is also another example, as this often involves submitting letters to and visiting the government (*xin fang* 信访). In considering these letters of complaint, Stephen Feuchtwang writes that they, "reveal a great and significant variety of modes of address to higher authority, indicative of a multiplication of moral discourses, including a Maoist legacy of addressing the higher authority of the party-state... They mix together engagement in other kinds of temporality, of familial reproduction, genealogical continuity, sacrifice for children and grandchildren and the self-reliance that is achieved through the making of interpersonal relations, with the temporality of historical progress led by the party" (237). Speaking bitterness to distant others and the state thus shares many similarities with ritual communication. Especially in petitions to the state for the redress of grievances, the bitterness is often communicated through written texts.

Everyday communication of bitterness has to strike a balance between silence and performance. In Northeast Brazil, Maya Mayblin also notes, "a good sufferer is therefore somebody who is able to render their suffering public in conventionally subtle ways, without appearing overly dramatic, boastful, or manipulative.... It presents the narrator not as a victim but as someone with a productive capacity and special talent for suffering... Ideally, suffering is not simply something that happens to a person, something that is experienced passively, it constitutes a skill, an ability---above all a capacity for endurance that pertains to some but not to others" (2010: 74). In contrast to the speaking of bitterness in socialist mobilization, most of my informants rarely talk about their bitterness directly, even within their families, mainly talking instead about the bitterness they endured in the past. They reformulate their present bitterness

as a sacrifice for their children, who are absent from them, or they just recognize an absent third-person's bitterness. Parents do not always tell their bitterness to their children, and migrants also hide the bitterness they have experienced outside from their parents at home. One's bitterness is recognized by others--family members, friends, and neighbors. Speaking the bitterness of parents who have been dead is thus a classic form of family remembrance.

When an eighty-odd-year-old woman from Luo's father's village came to visit Shanghai, she told me that how intimate she is with Luo's mother and -with a sense of recognition rather than of condescension - how Luo's family was poor, their lives bitter. Luo's father-in-law also joined us later for dinner. They were meeting for the first time. Luo's father-in-law praised the old woman's healthy condition. She congratulated him repeatedly on the achievements of his family, even though she did not mention the precise content of the achievements. She said, "You can now enjoy a happy life." Luo's father-in-law humbly replied, "I have got enough to eat." The old lady then told us that one of her sons had died in a mining accident and that she had brought up all her grandsons. She told me that her children and grandchildren treated her very well, often forcing her to a gift of money despite her constant rejections. She said, "I have endured some bitterness before. I could say I have realized my dream." In this interpersonal encounter between the old man and old woman who had both experienced much bitterness of life--hunger, death and hard work, they congratulated each other on their respective happiness and achievement.

In interpersonal interactions, one might praise another's capacity to eat bitterness, yet one should avoid referring directly to the other's bitterness to his face. It is better to compliment the other on his or her achievement. The speaking bitterness entails placing one's the present in abeyance; the speaker often referring to one's own past or someone who is absent. The bitterness is reserved in the memory of society beyond the present interaction.

## Conclusion

Studies of rural migrants have focused on identifying genres of resistance and conditions of action by capturing their immediate experiences, especially their laboring experiences. In Pan Ngai's ethnography of women factory workers, she has to resort to the painful body as a genre of resistance: "the painful selves are never the defeated bodies, but the transgressive subjects" (2005: 194). These diagnoses often depict a gloomy picture of frustrated self-struggling within power.

Recent research has linked the question of suffering to criticism of the liberal approach to agency and politics. Anthropologists have suggested that we should go beyond the suffering subject and move towards an anthropology of the good (Robbins 2013), or theorize the ethical form of agency in relation to the capacity to endure and suffer (Mahmood 2001). Peter Van der Veer (2009) suggests that ascetic discipline and self-inflicted pain should not be seen from the negative side of freedom; rather, it enables new ways of self-understanding. The self-understanding of pain has played an important role in reflections on modern politics. Max Weber has noted that the use of legitimate violence in the hands of human organization always raises the question of the paradox of politics: political measures always stand in a paradoxical relationship to their original purpose. He at last comes to the idea that meaningless suffering in the modern politics may require a delicate balance between moral conviction and moral responsibility. As Iain Wilkinson (2013) has keenly observed, Weber's concern is related to his romantic nostalgia toward a golden age of a unified world of ethics and action.

This chapter has focused on migrant workers' self-understandings and utterances of their bitterness and suffering. Bitterness here is seen not as an immediate experience through which to access the political agency, nor as an ethical realm in which to negotiate questions of virtue, but rather as a structural memory of society. The communication of bitterness creates a form of

structural memory in two senses. First, every generation remembers a bitter past, and secondly, it goes beyond personal experience to connect social fields such as politics, the market and the family. The social communication of bitterness introduces a comparison (past bitterness with the present) and a contingency in the present and invests the present with an aspirational force. Rather than demanding social justification, the diffused structure of bitterness temporalizes social discrepancy and generates the socialist utopia, entrepreneurial aspiration, and patrilineal eternity. Of course, though sharing a common basis in the diffused structure of bitterness, the aspirational forces of different fields are not equivalent to each other. Because of the shared ground, they expropriate each other's language and sometimes have intense conflicts with one another. When one complains of one's bitterness in China, one is not necessarily speaking only to the state or resisting one's present situation.

## Chapter 5

### **“Everything can be forged:” money, speech and fraud**

On a September afternoon during the 2010 Shanghai Expo, I was introduced to Luo by Yu Lan, a woman migrant I had met in a community center set up by an NGO. Yu Lan told me that Luo was working on the Expo site. I asked Luo what kind of work he was doing, and he said he was a volunteer. Yu Lan and Luo then burst into laughter, leaving me confused. To save my embarrassment, Yu Lan told me that Luo was actually selling the Expo mascot Haibao on Expo site; she asked Luo to take me there to “widen my vision.” Without hesitation, Luo agreed. An hour later, I went to his house, where he put up a green military uniform and leather shoes, with the mascots hidden under the uniform. Wearing a military uniform, he could pass as a security guard and avoid the city inspectors’ unpredictable “cleaning up” activities. He thus called his business “guerrilla.” The city inspectors justified their “clear-up” as crackdown on infringement of the Expo trademark. Luo also had his justification for his goods: “Some customers also asked me whether the Haibao is authentic or fake. I tell them there is no such thing as authentic Haibao, an authentic Haibao should be of blood and flesh; nobody ever sees an authentic Haibao”. Luo admitted that his goods may be of inferior quality to those sold in the official shops, but his price is also lower.

Luo not only denied that there was an authentic mascot but also actively unmasked various fakes and frauds. I learned from him for the first time that there were fake eggs, fake soft drinks, and fake policemen; he also bemoaned the fact that people had lost their naivety and simplicity and now liked to cheat each other. There is a general apprehension of fakes and frauds among my informants. The word “apprehension” here has different layers of meaning: anxiety, anticipation, and understanding. Over the course of my fieldwork, as a young student with an ambiguous source of livelihood, I was also suspected of being an insurance salesman or a child-

trafficker. When I did my research in an urban village in 2010, some families warmly invited me in for the first time but refused to talk to me for the second time. Only in 2013 did I learn that these families were concerned they had given me too much information. They suspected that I might be a child-trafficker, and their impressions of my kindness enhanced their suspicions. A woman shopkeeper expressed this widespread suspicion of fraud starkly, as follows: “Everything can be forged. A couple could kill each other for property. Only your money is real. This is our society.” Despite the apprehension of fraud, my informants also extend their trust beyond my imagination. In Chapter one, I mentioned that they hoped to receive help from distant and honorable strangers. My work also relies heavily on their willingness to trust in a stranger.

This chapter investigates my informants’ understanding of fraud. Anthropologist Yan Yanxiang (2009; 2012) has reported the widespread fear of poisonous and fake food, and stories of the extortion of Good Samaritans from the very person being helped in contemporary China. He connects the suspicion of food safety and extortion scams to increasing social inequality, particularistic morality (hostility toward strangers), and the arrival of the (modern) risk society. Other scholars have argued that the Chinese have developed a different moral sensibility from the Western ideology of sincerity. As Susan Blum notes, sincerity is based on a Western language ideology: “the notion that words must match inner states comes from a Western model of a self, with its own individual, unique, and contextless feelings and thoughts. In speaking, this person must produce words that transparently reveal those thoughts, no matter what the consequences or pressure to do otherwise” (2007:162). She argues that the morality of deception in China can be traced to a specific language ideology according to which speech is judged against the context and its social impact. As Andrew Kipnis (1997) suggests, in contrast to the West, where an ethic of accurate representation entails both emotional “sincerity” and “honest” speech, China can be described in terms of a nonrepresentational ethic. In his

ethnography of a Chinese village, Kipnis argues that villagers base their moral evaluations on the propriety of *guan xi* (personal connection): “To be ‘sincere’ with one’s *ganqing* (感情) is to be serious about and to live up to the obligations incurred in the *guanxi* that *ganqing* involved” (1997:108). These arguments in studies of China generally echo diagnoses of the global spread of occult economies and crises of trust. Scholars have attributed the occult discourse and suspicion either to (neoliberal) capitalism and its abstraction (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) or to the global spread of the modern ideology of transparency and sincerity (Jiménez 2011).

In this chapter, I suggest that understanding my informants’ apprehensions of fraud in terms of social inequality or a specific cultural ideology/morality is insufficient. The two approaches often assume a totalizing form of society, language, and ethic – that is, unequal society, a risk society, or a nonrepresentational ethic – and leave no room for our informant’s understandings of emerging society. Here we should trace the issue of fraud to the old question about the contingency of the modern social order. Talcott Parsons posed the social order question by contrasting it to Hobbes’ state of nature, namely “a situation where every man is the enemy of every other, endeavoring to destroy or subdue him by force or fraud or both. This is nothing but a state of war” (Parsons 1968:90). Even in the simple social interaction between ego and alter, there is the question of how one actor orients him- or herself to the contingent actions of the other. Parsons argues that values and norms regulate situations of interaction, while culture regenerates social order in the long term (Vanderstraeten 2002). To address the question of the integration and meaning of modern society, Parsons relies on a hierarchical order of control: “a control hierarchy preserves the position of a sovereign for the cultural subsystem” (Habermas 1981:191). S.N.Eisenstadt and L.Roniger (1984) play off the construction of the social order (the regulation of power and the construction of meaning) against the market mechanism (and the division of labor). They note that elites exercise their control by combining the structuring of trust, the provision of meaning, the regulation of power, and the division of labor; at the same

time, the institutional process is full of tensions and thus stimulates the search for areas of pure trust.

Semiotic ideology, cultural value, and trust can be seen as different ways of controlling the contingency of the social order. This chapter highlights how my informants understand the contingency of “society” in the context of an expanding market economy and migration.

Inspired by Ferdinand Tönnies’ distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, in the 1940s the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong (1992) argued that Chinese society was a rural society and that familiarity was its fundamental characteristic: people knew each other and different aspects of their lives intimately; the idea of “learning” (*xue xi* 学习) is to make the unknown become familiar. This mode of description has been ingrained in the semantic of *guan xi* in China studies.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how rural migrants still rely on an idiom of the familiarity or otherwise of relationships in their engagement with the urban neighborhood, the market, and state institutions. This idiom of familiarity is often mediated by personal relationships, money, and speech in interactions. At the same time, I argue that the mediation of money, things and speech introduces uncertainty and encourages suspicions of familiarity and expectations of fraud. This enhances the image of “society” as an ambiguous region that cannot be defined by the familiarity/unfamiliarity idiom. The expectation of fraud introduces another reality into “society”: it constitutes expectation against empirical evidence. The apprehension of fraud is thus not a direct effect of social inequality, nor a particular language ideology and morality; rather, it is a normative expectation by which people understand emerging “society” in the context of migration and the expanding money economy. It also destabilizes the naturalness of the social order and one’s position within it, enabling entrepreneurial aspiration and moral criticism at the same time. The expectation of fraud thus evokes a theme I have contrived to

convey in previous chapters: my informants' ambiguity toward the emerging "society" that has increasingly been disconnected from the familiar community.

### **"Going out the door:" inside and outside**

My informant called migration "going out the door" (*chu men* 出门). Charles Stafford has noted the symbolic significance of the door in the Chinese social landscape: "doors and gates thus constitute an 'open' borderline or threshold between the inside and the outside. By definition, they serve as a mediating space between members of a household, a nation, and so on (i.e. members of any 'inside' group) and those in the 'outside' world....doors are therefore, in the end, a site of considerable ambivalence" (2004:88). Out of doors a landscape unfolds of both excitement and fear. Migrants' memory of their first contact with cities often involves episodes of fraud or the apprehension of fraud. When I asked a woman shopkeeper about her fresh contact with Shanghai, she told me she was concerned at being cheated: "In your hometown, everyone is your neighbor and familiar to you. This sets your mind at rest. But here outside you worry about being robbed." When I asked her whether her earlier experience of attending a training school for waitresses in Beijing had helped her, she said: "When you attend school, you are accompanied by your fellow students. They won't steal your stuff. In society (*zai she hui shang* 在社会上), you worry about being cheated."

My informants often assume that travelling to another place and living elsewhere rely on the help of those one is familiar with. In the urban village of Shanghai, "fellow villagers" (*lao xiang* 老乡), or people from one's home town, provide a sense of familiarity. However, this is a very flexible category: my friend Luo would call all strangers in the urban village "fellow villager." It is also an overstretched category. Yu Lan once jokingly told me: "fellow villagers used to be excited when they meet each other; now they stab each other in the back whenever they meet." Even though migrants still have to use the category of "fellow villagers" from business

cooperation to small talk, they are also suspicious of people from their home town. Locality is no guarantee of trust. At the same time, negative stereotypes based on locality are both created and deconstructed. After sharing a story with me about several cheating craftsmen from Anhui (my home province), my neighbor Cui (from Jiangsu province) did not forget to add: "Every place has good people and bad people. Our Jiangsu also has this kind of people." This qualification is usually added when regional stereotypes are expressed. Morality (good/bad) here provides a more universal and individualistic reference that makes familiarity based on locality contingent.

Physical proximity within the urban village has the same ambiguous effect: being a neighbor does not produce immediate trust. Before the family next to me went back to their home town for the spring festival, the husband, a food vendor from Jiangxi, asked our landlord to seal his tap-water pipe outside his house because "We are not living with our 'fellow villagers' and people might use my water." Noticing that I was present, his wife immediately corrected him and told our landlord that the pipe would be frozen if he did not seal it. Neighbors are suspect, but a minimal interpersonal respect is also carefully maintained. Though my informants were alert to their neighbors, they also avoided living close to their own close relatives. Da Yu said she preferred to live some distance away from her parents and relatives, even though she often visited her mother's house. She explained: "If you do not live close, you will be closer with each other." Her brothers, sisters, and parents lived together in a place several kilometers away; they helped each other, but also slipped into minor conflicts. One day, her sister gave her brother's son a cake; unfortunately the latter fell sick later. The brother's wife blamed the cake. As her gift was seen as poison, the sister felt angry and called Da Yu to complain.

The ritual of interpersonal interaction is also renegotiated in the urban village. When a young woman said she was not sure whether she should call a new acquaintance "sister" or "aunt", the middle-aged acquaintance said: "We did not have to stick to the generation order outside. In

my home town, we have to stick to the generation order.” Thus generation and age cannot guarantee trust in the urban village either. A forty-odd-year-old woman migrant told me that people were now not as innocent as they used to be when she first came to Shanghai in 1997. She especially pointed out the fact that young people now often changed jobs and did not work hard to make money. While young people were often suspect, seniority cannot guarantee full trust. When her shoes and clothes went missing, a young female shop-keeper suspected an old waste-recycler of having stolen them.

Visiting, another important ritual in relationships of familiarity, is also renegotiated in the urban village. Yu Lan told me that people in the urban village did not “string doors” (*chuan men* 串门), that is, visit each other. In the summer of 2010, Yu Lan often chatted with Bing Bing, a woman from Jiangxi in the community center; but Yu Lan told me that they never visited each other’s houses. She explained: “We are not from the same town, we are not relatives. Even relatives do not often visit each other here. Here we have only one room. If you come to visit while my son is sleeping, you may wake him up. In Shanghai, we do not visit each other. The room is too small.” Yu Lan had lost contact with the friends she had met in different places she had worked and lived: “When you move, you lose contact. No matter how good your current relationship is, when you move, everything is gone.” Only children would hop from one house to another with little concern for the “door”, thus forming bridges connecting their parents. At the same time, they readily fight each other and provoke conflicts between their respective parents.

Despite my informants showing suspicion of outsiders and strangers, they also aspired to reach out to outsiders. A Good Samaritan, a kind person who offers help, should be a stranger from afar. Yu Lan did not believe in the idea of free service when a community center was first set up by a NGO in the urban village: “I had been in Shanghai for more than ten years. I just did

not believe that such a good thing would happen.” She later became a volunteer and also asked her friends to join. Even after working for the community center for a while, she was still confused by the idea of a free community service: “Who opened the center? Why does it provide free service? If you don’t make money, who will trust you?” As foreigners occasionally visited, his first speculation was that they donated the money because “Foreigners are rich. Our Chinese are not as rich as them”. If it had not been set up by foreigners, she told me, it might have been set up by the leader who occasionally came to inspect it. The so-called leader was actually a program manager in the NGO. While imaging foreigners and leaders from afar as Good Samaritans, Yu Lan had an ambiguous relationship with the local manager of the center, a college graduate married into a local Shanghainese family. As Yu Lan recruited more volunteers from her home province of Sichuan, the manager suspected her of secretly forming a Sichuan gang and of profiting from volunteering. Their relationship later fell apart. Yu Lan accused the manager of caring more about money than friendship. With a sociological analysis of power relations in my mind, I pointed out the hierarchical relationship between them. Yu Lan said that their work would have become more enjoyable if they could have become friends. She attributed their broken relationship to the manager’s hostility toward nonlocal outsiders.

Scholars have long noticed the prevalence of the inside-outside distinction in Chinese society. Mayfair Yang writes, “the inside/outside dichotomy is an important feature of Chinese cultural ideology, perhaps because Chinese culture is rooted in a kinship-based sedentary agricultural society” (1994:193). Yang also points out that the boundary is porous. Strangers can be transformed into friends through the art of *guanxi*: “hence the emphasis on ‘shared’ (*tong* 同) qualities and experiences that shape the identities of classmates (*tong xue* 同学), or persons from the same county or province (*tong xiang* 同乡), colleagues (*tong shi* 同事), as well as kinfolk, teachers and students, masters and apprentices, and so on. Familiarity, then, is born of the fusion of personal identities” (1994:193). This inside-outside distinction reflects less a

cultural ideology and practice than a general dialectic of social inclusion and exclusion. Though my informants still build up familiarity based on shared qualities and experiences in their interpersonal relationships in urban life, there is also a strong suspicion that there are frauds behind the familiarity. Though a lack of familiarity is feared, it can also bring a sense of possibility and opportunity. A sense of familiarity with the locality and the person is still important, and it is quite possible to extend the idiom of familiarity to turn a stranger into a friend. But the code of familiarity/unfamiliarity with reference to locality and person is no longer capable of regulating “society.” Though physically the urban village is really one of local Shanghainese peasants, my informants cannot live in a community of familiarity any more. Migrants come from different places with their own histories; they venture into the market outside the village, and “leaders” also come into the urban village from the outside. They now live in a more differentiated society beyond one’s family and community of familiarity. One’s family, home town, and personal relationships cannot define one’s position in society. The next few sections will explore the fragmentary inclusion and exclusion, intimacy and strangeness, of different social spheres.

### **The market: “bullying strangers” and “killing familiars”**

Familiarity plays an important role in the market. When selling to a waste-recycling workshop, Luo, a waste-recycler, relied on a familiar relationship to guarantee a fair price. After he had sold scrap iron to a workshop he was unfamiliar with, he told me that the boss only offered him 1.6 yuan instead of the normal 1.8 yuan per kilogram. He explained to me: “When the boss of a waste-recycling workshop knows you, he will not drop your price and cheat you with the scales. The price is 1.8 yuan per kilogram in workshops I am familiar with.” I said: “You could tell him that you know the market price.” Luo said, “It doesn’t work. He treated me like a stranger. I told him that I had just moved here and that I would come back if he gave me a good price. Then he offered me 1.7 yuan per kilogram.” Luo told me that bullying strangers

happened in every trade: “When you go to a new place, they will bully you. If you have someone at your back, nobody will dare bully you.” In the encounter with an unfamiliar boss in an unfamiliar place, Luo strove to convince him that he had just moved there and would come back to sell again.

Encounters between strangers are inevitable in the urban market. Once I took Luo to a new place to collect my friend’s broken extractor hood. Luo had to sell it to travelling waste-recyclers in this unfamiliar place. He hid his own identity as a waste-recycler and pretended to be an innocent and accidental seller: “Master (*shifu* 师傅), I got this from the family I had been working for. I originally thought I would bring it home. But it’s too heavy.” In this unfamiliar scene, both sides were cautious. When Luo asked a middle-aged appliance-recycler to offer a price, the man pretended not to be able to communicate: “We can’t reach an agreement.” He then asked Luo to offer a price. After several rounds of bargaining, they ultimately failed to reach an agreement. Luo then bargained with another appliance-recycler in a very loud voice on the street. Later the recycler found that the brand of extractor hood was not that shown on the packaging. He became wary and reduced the price he had offered. Actually we had just put the extractor hood in a random box, which accidentally was also the packaging for a famous brand of appliance. Luo did not bother to explain. He accepted the reduced price with a playful gesture that he would take an extractor hood part away, thus demonstrating that the value of the extractor hood was being underestimated. While the appliance-recycler was paying him the cash, Luo tried to ask for more money: “Fellow villager, give me another 5 *yuan*”. The man eventually gave Luo 2 *yuan* on top of the agreed price.

In the regular Sunday second-hand market, Luo would not hide his identity as a waste-recycler, but would rather stress his ignorance of the market value of things to build up an image of innocence. Luo once collected some stones from an abandoned garden and sold them in the Sunday second-hand market. Luo would tell his customers: “I am not a professional dealer in

stones. A boss gave these stones to me as gifts. I am selling them blindly.” He also attempted to create a sense of scarcity and urgency: “I only have these stones. You won’t be able to buy them next week.” He cited an auspicious sign (the number 8) in offering a price. A customer showed his interest in a necklace but claimed to be ignorant about necklaces. He offered to buy it at 15 yuan. Luo said: “You should at least give me 30 yuan. The last customer offered 25, but I did not sell it. I am a scrap-recycler. The necklace was given to me by a boss. The lowest price I could offer is 28 yuan. You become prosperous (the word “prosperous”发 has a similar pronunciation to the number “8”) and I become prosperous. Some spend several hundred yuan on necklaces. I don’t value this stuff. I like money. I can use money to buy food.” The man finally accepted the price. In the interpersonal bargains in the market, Luo often mentioned categories of social relations (“fellow villager”, “friend”, “boss”) or customary lucky numbers to negotiate the price.

This moral economy based on familiarity makes it possible to get around rational and rigid calculations and locate entrepreneurial opportunities in the market. Migrant workers would celebrate their little victories over “the boss” (*lao ban* 老板) through network of familiars. Once when they transport building materials for a boss, the driver of a truck told Luo and his fellow workers, who were responsible for filling the bag: “Fellow villager (*lao xiang* 老乡), don’t fill the bag to the brim. I will buy you cigarettes and water.” In this way, the driver could make more trips and earn more money. On another occasion, Luo told me a story in which his friend earned some quick money. A security guard in a warehouse was ordered by his boss to clear up the warehouse. The security guard sold the waste to Luo’s friend. There was no procedure to value and weigh it, so the entire transaction was based on a rough calculation. Luo’s friend offered a price and then bought the security guard some liquor and cigarettes. He made thousands of yuan in a day.

Even though my informants still use the categories of familiar relationship such as “friends” and “fellow villager,” it becomes increasingly difficult to deal with those one is actually familiar with in the market. Luo once complained about a fruit vendor he knew in our urban village: “She did not allow you to bargain. She did not notice whether you were known to her or a stranger.” But when others claimed familiarity with him in market transactions, he also became suspicious. While we were buying vegetables in a market in his hometown, a female vendor told us that she was not making any money. Luo became impatient and began to scold her: “If you don’t make any money, why do you come here? I also do business, but I never claim that I’m not making money.” Merchants in small towns often claim that they make no money from a transaction; the market transaction is phrased in the language of favor between familiars. Luo was obviously not convinced by this moral language.

The ambiguous attitude toward familiarity is also evident in many of the small trades my informants engage in. Let me take the house decorating market as an example. The market for interior decoration used to rely heavily on relations of familiarity. Since the quality of the interior decoration is difficult to discern immediately it has been done and problems are only uncovered in the future, house-owners will often hire craftsmen who are known to them to guarantee quality and future maintenance. My neighbor Cui asked me to help him introduce some potential customers when my friends wanted to decorate their new house. But several friends, young house-owners, had complained that they were being “killed” by craftsmen they knew. One friend subcontracted his decorating to a craftsman his parents were familiar with. The craftsman hired several workers to do the decorating work. My friend witnessed how much the craftsman paid his workers on the spot and then realized that he was actually earning quite a lot. Another friend complained that a subcontractor known to him first offered a low price and then added to the budget as the decoration proceeded.

Cui said that house-owners were now too shrewd. He explained to me: “A decade ago those customers had just bought their first house and they knew little about the decorating market, but now they have acquired enough experience to decorate their second or third house. Young people now have more information about decoration from the internet. They also watch TV. Some TV programs say craftsmen substitute shoddy materials for good ones.” Cui told me that ten years ago house-owners would offer them afternoon tea, a small gesture of respect toward craftsmen that had recently been lost. He once told me that a house-owner secretly smoked his cigarettes in a separate room, so he later charged him a higher price to teach him a lesson. Even though Cui did not smoke, he cited the moral language of respect and sharing to justify his maneuver. Highlighting customers’ shrewdness and their lack of reciprocity, Cui called his customer strategy “gambling” (*bo yi* 博弈): “I did not cheat honest people, but nor am I afraid of big men. When I find out you are playing with me, I will definitely play with you.” If market exchange is a fair game, the “play” –strategic predation – is allowed.

As large house-decorating companies had been intruding into the trade and customers increasingly trusted them, Cui also blamed their inevitable frauds on the large companies and their unequal distribution. He explained: “If a client contracts with a decoration company, the company first gets its 30% profit. The leader of the decoration team also wants to earn some money. When it comes to individual carpenters and painters, they do not have much to earn, so they have to think where they can get more money.” He said all the companies in his trade were actually cheating. Their managers relied on their sales talk to get contracts: “All contracts are based on cheating. They get the contract, but it is the workers who do the work. The companies make money. Their managers are not trustworthy”. Cui saw systematic fraud as a hidden rule (*qian gui ze* 潜规则), which he acknowledged is a universal phenomenon: “Every trade has its hidden rule.” This universal hidden rule justifies his complicity in many fraudulent activities in his own trade, as well as evoking a suspicion of fraud in the market in general.

Though he complained that the big decorating companies were now edging them out and they also relied on cheating, Cui himself had no more faith in the small shops in our urban village. He suspected that they were full of fake materials from intermediate merchants. The supermarkets obtain their goods directly from the producers and are also too big to fail: “If a supermarket sells fake stuff, its reputation is ruined.” Although he claimed that supermarkets were more trustworthy and that he often bought his everyday necessities there, Cui would buy his paint from a specific market rather than from the supermarket. He explained: “A tin of paint costs 400 yuan in the supermarket. But if I go to the building materials market, I give the shop the brand mark, and the shop gives me back 170 yuan. A tin of paint only costs around 200 yuan, and the quality is nearly the same. This is the hidden rule.” When I expressed my suspicion that some people might produce fake paint bearing these recycled brand marks, Cui tried to explain away my suspicion of fraud: “There is no fake paint. Some paint is shoddy or short of quantity.” Though Cui suspected that there were a lot of fake materials in the market, he said there was no fake material but only some understandable hidden rule in his own trade.

My informants still rely on the idioms of familiarity in their market encounters. The distinction between those one knows and strangers is still made in the market. However, the familiarity here is not based on a moral consensus but on performance. My informants are concerned with being bullied as strangers in the market; but the idea of a familiar relationship is also an overstretched category that creates its own ambiguity. The contingency of the market cannot be controlled through the distinction between those one is familiar with and strangers. Their suspicion of the shrewd minds of others and of universal hidden rules increases the possibility of fraud being committed in the market, and this justifies their own complicity in fraud and their maneuvering.

## State, institution, and trust

Urban life entails dealing with various institutional regulations, which are attributed roughly to the impact of the state by my informants. Institutional regulation often takes the form of documents, credentials, laws and direct interventions. ID cards first came into my informants' lives when they departed for the cities. A lot of urban occupations have legal regulations about credentials. Feng, an experienced welder, only got a license several years after he came to Shanghai. He once expressed his wonder at the document: "I used to think, if you are capable of welding, a boss will hire you. But society is not like this. If you don't have a license, they don't hire you." In the urban village, there are a lot of advertisements about forging documents. Zhi Guo bought a high-school diploma, but he jokingly said his writing style would immediately expose his actual ability. The forging makes possible their passing as well as exposing their fragility.

As a non-Shanghai citizen is not allowed to register as a legal cab driver with taxi companies and run a cab business, migrants can only run unlicensed cabs. But Kui, a thirty-odd-year-old migrant, had a different idea. After being released from prison, he managed to become a cab driver by renting a cab from a Shanghai driver. He later found a more profitable way. He obtained a cloned cab, a cab with the same exterior as legal cab, and ran business on his own. Now he did not have to pay rent to the cab company and the Shanghai driver. The passenger cannot detect the difference, except that the cloned cabs do not have the card-payment device provided by the cab companies. Kui obtained the cloned cab through an exclusive network. He explained to me why the cloned cars should be kept in an exclusive circle: "If the cloned cars increase, some law will be passed prohibiting the business." The media had already reported the dangers and overcharging of cloned taxis and encouraged passengers to report them to the police. Kui's cloned cab was also reported to the police later. Kui's sister, Luo's wife, told me that the informant could receive a 5000 yuan

reward. She guessed: “Someone who knows him reported him.” Luo added, “Or those around you who were envious of your wealth.” Kui later spent 10,000 yuan finding some “familiar” connection to get his cloned cab back.

As the law and various regulations enter into their urban lives, most of my informants realize that they are straddling a legally ambiguous boundary. There is nothing shameful in this. Some proudly claimed that they can run an illegal business because they have a personal connection in the bureaucracy. Luo told me that running a waste-recycling workshop relied on a personal relationship in the police, otherwise you wouldn’t dare buy stolen yet profitable materials, called “private commodities” (*si huo* 私货). If the police find out, the recycling workshop could be accused of handling stolen goods. Luo also handled these stolen goods on street corners. As he did not have a personal connection in police, he was exposed to great risk. One day, Luo’s father-in-law, a waste-recycler, was fined 100 yuan by two young inspectors, who asked him where his iron came from. His father-in-law said it was from a boat, but the boat had left. The inspectors told him his tricycle would be confiscated, or else he would be fined 100 yuan if he could not find the owner. He chose to be fined. Luo later suspected that the inspectors were fake and that the two young men were just impersonating city management staff and trying to cheat money out of old men. As any legal gap can be bridged by fake documents, and regulations can be avoided by smartly bluffing, the legally ambiguous realm can also be taken advantage of by fake authority. The legal ambiguity is then translated into a fraud initiated by young men, which feeds into the widespread inter-generational suspicions of my informants.

Boss Chen and several hundreds of his fellows from the same county ran their wood-recycling workshops on the outskirts of Shanghai. His fellow villagers would often come in for a chat. It seemed to be a close community at first sight. When he told me about how they had set up business in Shanghai, Chen proudly told me that how they successfully got around the strict regulations on industrial production by bribing government officials. However, he also

complained that he and his fellow villagers were constantly forced to relocate their workshops to more marginal areas of the city because of the strict regulations on the manufacturing sector in Shanghai. I asked Chen how he and his fellows dealt with the government when it came to relocation and compensation. He told me they had once petitioned the government, but to no avail. They also thought about suing the government since their land lease had still not been completed. However, the police would arrest them if they did not move. He shook his head, saying “This is Chinese law.” He also complained about the lack of cooperation among men from his county: “Our people are not cooperative like those Fujianese merchants. I have suggested that we pool some money and set up an organization to deal with these kinds of things, but no one responded. You see, the Fujianese have different associations. Our people often play a trick behind each other’s backs. We only attend banquets or chat together. There is no real cooperation in business.” After complaining, Chen said I did not need to put this point in my dissertation: “This is just a conversation among people from our home town (*jia li ren* 家里人).” Actually Chen should not have been embarrassed by his fellow villagers’ lack of cooperative spirit. A Fujianese merchant running an iron-recycling factory told me that they did have an association, but its main function was to arrange travelling. He also admitted that he did not want to cooperate with fellows from his home town, even though they were concentrated in the business. He also complained that fellows from his hometown were not honest.

Wang Dao, a carpenter who had returned to his rural home town to start his own business, complained to me that rural society is darker and more corrupt than urban society. Wang Dao insisted that city people were more familiar with the law, while rural people were too ignorant and not familiar with law or government documents. He then illustrated his argument by citing the evidence of pricing. He went to buy some building materials in a shop in the county seat of his hometown. He found the price tag in the shop was not from the commercial bureau: “The style of the character was different. The character on the bureau’s price tag was written with a

fountain pen. This could not happen in the city. In the city, bureau officials often come to inspect, at any time, and sometimes in plain clothes.” Actually customers in rural areas and small towns rarely stick to the price tag and simply trust in their own bargaining ability. Here Wang Dao seems to be extrapolating from a trivial detail to stress the corruption of local society. He specifically asked me to write more about the local bureaucrats’ dark side. At the same time, he was obviously very proud that he could detect the sign of the state and the gap between the state law and its local practices.

My informants engage the state bureaucracy through the idiom of familiarity, mediated by personal relationships, gifts and money. They would shake their heads and sarcastically say “This is Chinese law.” The gap between state/law and local/familiar practice can create an intimate local community, a community of complicity (Steinmüller 2013a). Sanjay Srivastava (2012) also notes that fraud and counterfeit documents play an important role in making a community and including others among urban poor of a Delhi slum. He writes: “I would like to focus upon specific senses of community, neighborliness and trust that permeate the acts of narratives of faking and passing. This includes ideas of etiquette or protocol, the necessity of one’s own in order to provide care against the arbitrary callousness of outsiders, and assimilating and making intimates of strangers” (2012:87). Despite the various forging and fraudulent activities that make an intimate community, they also translate outside power into doubt and suspicion within a community of familiarity. The ability to detect the gaps between law and local practices and the possibility of frauds is a crucial social skill.

### **Money, credit, and credibility**

The last three sections have demonstrated how migration, the market, and the state have destabilized communities of familiarity and led to an apprehension of fraud. My informants often blame the widespread frauds on money and the current “money society”. In market

exchange, as Julie Chu (2010:202) has observed, RMB notes are often scrutinized for signs of flaws and counterfeiting. On the other hand, trust could also be bestowed in RMB if they are being circulated within one's intimate network. In a money transaction between relatives I witnessed, a man gave the money to his wife's brother and said: "10,000 yuan. Count it!" The man's wife immediately corrected her husband, "There is no need to count it. You would not take one piece out." She seemed to blame her husband for mentioning the word "count." The wife's brother took the money without counting it. Now money is not only circulated as credit and debt among kin and friends; state banks and private market are also creating a debt/credit market. This section looks at how the circulation of money is entangled with the communication of fraud and credibility.

As my informants are often excluded from the institutional credit of the state and market, they rely on their familiar networks to borrow money. Among relatives and friends, interpersonal familiarity still mediates relations of debt and credit. As relatives are now dispersed in different places, this familiarity is not only based on existing kinship connections, but also on reputation and information. Luo's cousin called to borrow 20,000 yuan, claiming he was running a factory in Fujian and was short of money. Da Yu, Luo's wife, refused. She explained to me, "We have not contacted him for quite a while. His brother said he was not conducting his life properly and was spending money extravagantly. He now lives far from us. If he were close to us, we would know what he is doing." Despite the lack of information, Da Yu still offered to lend him 5000 yuan for "giving credit to his face". Luo's cousin did not accept the offer, thus possibly demonstrating that his credibility cannot be bargained over either.

Now it is debatable whether one should charge interest when money is extended as credit among relatives and friends. When Cui returned his friend's loan, he added some extra money, which his friend did not accept. Cui said that he cannot smooth his heart because his friend's money embodied his friendship, so he then bought his friend some liquor and cigarettes. Cui

told me that his mother now distrusted his father's sister because of the credit/debt. When Cui's father's sister was going to build a house, Cui's family lend her 8000 yuan. No interest or return date were specified. His father's sister returned the money six years later without interest. Cui's mother complained that the same amount of money was now worthless. The decision to charge interest between relatives is now posed as an open question. A creditor can at least argue that she deserves some interest, since she could have invested the money elsewhere in a context of significant inflation. When another house-painter from Cui's region borrowed money from his uncle to buy a house, they had to pay a higher amount of interest than they would have paid to the bank. The uncle explained that the interest should be higher than what the bank charged because the bank would provide better security. The house-painter's wife, a woman from another province, accused her husband's uncle of lacking human feeling. She told me that they would not charge their relatives interest in her home town in Guizhou: "If you charge interest, it seems to be too cold and strange (*sheng fen* 生分) and short of family affection. If you charge your relatives interest, how can you call them relatives?" She also cited her husband's sister as a good example, as the latter had not charged them interest. When they returned the money four years later, she asked them to postpone the return and keep the money. This unmarked date and unspecified obligation is an ideal situation for credit/debt circulation between relatives.

State banks and markets now also extend credit. For migrants, it is very difficult to get bank credit, which often requires a house as collateral. In their hometown, one also needs several civil servants as guarantors if one wants to apply for a loan from the banks. The uneven distribution of credibility also provokes distrust, suspicion, and criticism. One return migrant who had set up a pig farm complained: "If you do not have *guanxi*, you cannot borrow money from the bank in our home town. If you have good connections with civil servants, you do not need to borrow money from the bank; you just ask them to give you the money." He complained everything in his hometown relied on personal relationship (*guan xi* 关系) and face

(*mian zi* 面子). He pointed out those enterprises in the industrial park: “The state supports them. They get the credit from the bank and make money from it. Only we do the actual damned work.” Zhi Guo said that Liu Qiangdong, the boss of a famous online shopping company, was “cheating” his money from stock money, as his company was actually in debt. His mother regretted that people had now become frauds, as they borrowed money to buy apartments and cars and no longer lived frugal lives.

Despite the moral criticism of the credit market, my informants are not against the boom in commercial credit. Some migrants lent money to merchants in their home town and charged a higher interest than the banks, lending that was often arranged through an intermediary. This commercial credit channel was often connected with my informants’ home town. This again demonstrates the importance of familiarity in building trusting trust even in commercial credit-debt relationships. When the due debt cannot be returned at the promised time, face-to-face communication is often expected, which demonstrates the continuing importance of “face”.

I witnessed a scene in which a female debtor and her husband came to my informants’ house to explain why she could not pay off a debt that was due. Through an introduction from an intermediary, my informants had lent her money at interest. She explained that she had still not received the bank loan. My informant then told her that his wife had put pressure on him at home, and that he lent her money not at interest but to support her business. Face-to-face communication still retains its potential for generating trust, despite the practice of defaulting on one’s promise. Many small-loan business networks in my informants’ home towns also fell apart. In Zhi Guo’s hometown in northern Jiang Su, a small loan business was organized through familiar networks, with people from all walks of life participating in the chain of borrowing and lending. Zhi Guo’s parents once considered whether they should lend some of their savings. Several months later, several big debtors found that they could not pay off their debts and disappeared.

In the urban village, migrants are more hesitant in extending credit. Many small shops in the urban village would post a written sign, “We do not give credit!” Wages are also expected to be paid in cash immediately. This anxious anticipation and immediacy, however, did not prevent my informants from extending credit. Even in the small shop, it is still difficult to refuse a request of credit from a familiar customer interpersonally, so the owner had to put up a written sign. Many workers also extend credit to subcontractors, and small subcontractors also advance credit to big contractors. My neighbor Cui and his fellow craftsmen still lent each other money. Though their borrowing and lending were still often based on oral promises, the due date was often specified with caution. When a carpenter borrowed money and did not return it at the promised time, Cui became very nervous and complained that he was not trustworthy. Despite the carpenter having borrowed money from Cui and returned it, what had happened in the past was still no guarantee that the debtor could be fully trusted. Cui jokingly said that he would call the carpenter’s boss to humiliate him. Of course, Cui did not make the call, and in fact the carpenter returned several days later and paid back the money. Though I often drank tea with my landlord, he became very anxious when I missed his many calls on the day my last month’s rent fell due.

In the urban village there were also many stories of people disappearance. Bosses disappeared and absconded with their workers’ wages, tenants moved out in the middle of the night and failed to pay the rent for the last month, and even friends disappeared with unpaid debts. This often created an expectation of insecurity. One bicycle repairer lent money to his friends, who claimed they needed it for an emergency, and they simply disappeared afterwards. He said: “People now have no conscience. They get your money and disappear. They don’t remember your kindness. They even think that you are an idiot.” When they complained to me about the debts that they had not recovered, my informants often cited a popular saying: “When you borrow money, they call you ‘father’; when you ask for a debt, you have to call him

‘grandfather’.” As Gustav Peebles (2010) notes, there is a widespread understanding that the creditor stands in a higher position than the debtor in the hierarchy of most societies. The reverse hierarchical order signifies moral corruption and the danger of being ridiculed.

The concern with disappearance also partially demonstrates how one’s credibility is recognized by appearances, especially the appearances of persons and things. A private car has become an important possession making one’s appearance seem credible. Some craftsmen in my compound also argued that a private car is useful for your business since it helps create a credible image of you. One house-painter said: “When you drive a car to discuss your business, other people think you can really do the business. If you just ride a bicycle, they might think you are not capable.” Mao Fu, now the owner of an iron-recycling factory, bought his first car in 1999. He recollected: “It was very important to have a car. Nobody would recognize you if you rode a bicycle. If you did not have a car, you were not allowed to enter those work units (*dan wei* 单位). If you had a car, you could borrow two hundred thousand yuan from a local Chinese. You also had to buy Zhonghua (a famous brand) cigarettes, even though you did not have money. I often kept two packets of cigarettes at that time. I gave the average cigarettes to the workers and Zhonghua cigarettes to the bosses.” Even though Mao Fu acknowledged the importance of the physical appearance in business, he also criticized the inflated image of things. How would he judge the credibility of a businessperson now? He explained to me: “Now it is useless to look at their cars. Even though he has a BMW or a Mercedes, his business may be on the way to bankruptcy. Now you should instead see whether he has been in the business long enough and whether he has might and power (*shi li* 实力).” Mao Fu also admitted the adulteration and bribing that took place in an earlier phase of his business. This was the past, he said; now he was manufacturing a genuine brand.

Material appearances are also easily inflated and imitated. There is always a concern about the “genuineness” of one’s appearance and a search for a new ground beyond its mere appearance (Simmel 2009:335). But the “genuineness” should also be mediated. Established entrepreneurs now proclaim the importance of value and trust, which should still be made evident through the scale of the business and brand. In his ethnography of entrepreneurs in Chengdu, John Osburg (2013b) notes the constant doubts about the details of material things. Ostentatious consumption is necessary among their peers, but visible wealth provokes the search for new distinctiveness. Some entrepreneurs seek recognition from unseen, unknown others who are also presumed to be hostile and sometime rig the game – the foreign businessmen, European aristocrats, overseas Chinese, and the more established nouveaux riches. These entrepreneurs thus make a fuss of international standards, manners, and religious beliefs.

Credit and debt relationships are often connected with society’s regulatory mechanisms in the anthropological literature (Peebles 2010). Money facilitates the credit and debt relationship, while also being criticized for corrupting the original trust within it. The circulation of credit/debt still overlaps greatly with networks of those one knows, and the trust in it is mediated by interpersonal familiarity. In the context of migration and of the rapid development of the credit market, the circulation of credit also gives rise to debates about credibility. In judging credibility, the power of the personal familiarity and one’s material appearance (“face”) is kept intact and even sanctified, despite suspicions and criticisms of fraud. Reliance on the appearances of persons and things also introduces the mere possibility of fraud (cf. Rappaport 1979:229).

### **Speech and communication**

My informants rely greatly on familiar relationships, those which are also mediated by speech. They often highlight speaking ability as an important social skill. When recollecting their earlier

days in cities, many mentioned their nervousness in communicating with others, but they also acknowledged the improvement in their speaking and communication skills after many years in the city. Young parents are anxious about their children's speaking skills, especially their speed of reaction, standard pronunciation, confidence, and strategy. The older generation of parents is less anxious. When a fifty-odd-year-old woman migrant commented on the character of her son, a college student, she said, "He is honest; he does not like talking." Young parents not only stress the importance of speaking skills but also have doubts about honesty. If a person is too honest and is not good at talking, they would often say, he finds it difficult to adjust to society.

It is not the case that *laoshi*, or simplicity and honesty, are becoming increasingly devalued qualities in urban China (Blum 2007:32): *laoshi* and sincerity are still praised as virtues among family members and friends. Respect for the sacredness of one's words and speech is often shown among one's close circle: the circulation of money credit and debt is still often based on oral promises rather than written contracts. When one migrant criticized his relative's character, he said, "She always uses the flowery speech. What she says is dependent on the person she is speaking to." But honesty and sincerity are incommunicable virtues. My informants thus often expose them as flaws of their own characters. Zhi Guo once confessed that he was too direct. He once deconstructed her aunt's boastful and "fake" claim about her contribution to his wedding. He was later criticized by a lot of relatives. After the incident, Zhi Guo told me that he still appreciated straightforwardness and honesty but was now afraid of speaking the truth: "You should see who you are talking to. Sometimes speaking the truth ruins your relationship. When you meet people, you should speak human words; when you meet ghosts, you should speak ghost's word. If you speak human words, the ghost cannot understand." While over-performative speaking skills can betrays one's lack of character and substance among one's

intimate relatives and friends, playing with skill in speaking is an admirable social skill in society beyond one's intimate circle.

A house decorator told me, "The ability to speak is very important for business. You should react quickly if you want to get money out of someone else's pocket. You should know what others think. My wife is very good at talking. When others say something, she can immediately respond. I am a bit slow. In discussing business you rely on first impressions." A young entrepreneur proudly told me: "You need to brag at the very start of your business. You should demonstrate your potential." Speech is seen as an interpersonal etiquette and a technique of self-representation rather than as a voice from the heart. A cook commented on his previous boss: "He is well-behaved. But his heart is black. A dish of meat only costs him eight yuan, but he sold it at fifty-eight yuan. He earned quite a lot of money. He asked his relatives to help. He only needed to hire one waitress." I asked him how a man can be counted as behaving well if he has such a black heart. He then explained to me that if you are good at speaking and dealing with interpersonal relationships, then you are well behaved. Here speaking skill and the art of personal relationship (*guanxi* 关系) are increasingly differentiated from morality.

A skill in speaking is also increasingly being decoupled from one's natural character. Even though my informants often humbly claimed that their speaking skills were not good enough, they often acknowledged that they had improved their speaking skill since coming to the cities. After visiting Luo's hometown, Luo's father-in-law told me that his villagers praised my being good at talking (*hui shuo hua* 会说话). He also had his own explanation about my speaking skills, "Your father is a cadre. He has guests. You participated in different kinds of social events. You understand the situation." Though my informants still connected the style of speaking with established social distinctions such as educated-uneducated, rural-urban, and cadre-commoners, they also debated whether speaking style marks one's social position and whether the ability to

speaking was innate or achievable. Many young migrants do not see speaking ability as an innate quality but a trainable skill. One young migrant was not confident in his speaking skills and asked me whether, as some people suggested, a sales job can help train one's such skills.

In discussing etiquette and banquets, Andrew Kipnis (1997) notes the importance of speaking skills in the production of *guanxi* (*personal connections*). Emily Martin (1981) also notes, in discussing Chinese ritual and etiquette, that knowing how to talk “implies skill with words and ability to express respect, but it can also imply such intimate knowledge of the system of etiquette that the speaker can get the result he intends literally by saying the right thing” (32). The urban setting enhances rather than decreases the importance of the etiquette of speaking. Encounters with a wider group of strangers in the city are mediated by interpersonal communication and speech. Promises are still made orally rather than recorded in writing. The reflexive stress on interpersonal self-representation and speaking skills increases the doubts about appearances in everyday life. Cui immediately chimed in when one of his fellow house decorators argued for the importance of talking: “Some people appear to be nice, but they may kill you behind your back.” There is a constant search for more concrete signs. Chen, the owner of a wood-recycling factory told me that the first step to judging a man's credibility is to communicate with him: “Some just brag and talk nonsense. So first he has to be honest. He has to understand our trade and should not brag”; then you should visit him and see whether he has real strength. This discernment, however, is first conditioned by language and interpersonal communication.

### **The specter of pyramid-selling schemes**

During my fieldwork, pyramid-selling schemes (*chuan xiao* 传销) constantly appeared in my informants' narratives about the past, its specter shadowing everyday encounters. I met Lao Liu, a security guard, when we were both waiting at a shoe-repair stall. He was friendly and willing to

talk to me. Later I asked him why most people in the urban village were vigilant and he was so open. He told me he always liked making new friends, and that people were vigilant because there were a lot of pyramid-selling schemes. The suspicion of rampant pyramid schemes is not based on empirical evidence. My informants would often indicate many new business areas involving personal relationships and information as pyramid-selling schemes. Zhi Guo once commented on the emerging mobile commerce platform on which people sell through their Wechat social network: "It is similar to the model of the pyramid scheme. It is an ambiguous field involving some deception." If a stranger treats people too well, he might be suspected of being connected with a pyramid scheme and of being interested in recruiting people.

Various pyramid-selling and multilevel marketing schemes arose in China in the 1990s, a time simultaneous with rapid migration and market reform. Several informants were actually first brought out of their town by pyramid schemes. Recalling the fever over these schemes in the mid-1990s, Wang, now a computer shopkeeper, said: "It was like a wave of wind at that time. Everyone wanted to make a fortune. There was no legal regulation; people were just playing ball on the edge. They cheated each other." In 1999, Wang quit his typing job and embarked on his first long trip out of his home town after a friend offered him a position as a computer engineer in Guangxi, a province in the south. After he arrived in Nanling, the capital of Guangxi, his friend took him to eat, play, and attend lectures about massage machines. The job opportunity his friend had promised him turned out to be as an investor in these machines. The main goal of the investment was not to sell the machine but to recruit more people. If he succeeded in recruiting one member, he would get five hundred yuan. The lecturer claimed that this was a new business model from Taiwan and that it was supported by the central government. His friend said computer engineers could not make a lot of money and that this investment opportunity could make quick money. The friend promised that they would go home by airplane rather than by train at the end of the year; two years later, each of them

would be able to buy a car and rebuild their houses in their home town because their incomes would have increased exponentially. He stayed there for a week and then left because he felt cheated by his friend. Only in retrospect did Wang realized that this was a pyramid-selling scheme. At that point, he knew nothing about pyramid scheme. He said that if his friend had candidly told him the job opportunity was a pyramid scheme, he might have stayed there.

Pyramid schemes have been banned since 1998, and they are also now morally tarnished.

Those who join in pyramid schemes are ridiculed for not being socially sophisticated and not being able to detect fraud. These schemes are also ridiculed as an immoral and frantic way of gaining wealth. Some informants are embarrassed to mention their past experiences with them and blamed their involvement on others' deceptions. The legal and moral accusations of fraud, however, obscure the attraction of such schemes.

Pyramid schemes in different forms continue to flourish. They are often justified in terms of their interpretation of state policy, symbol, and intention. One informant was once invited to attend a pyramid scheme in Hefei, the rapidly developing capital city of Anhui province; he was told that the state supports the project and that the new but still empty city had actually been built for them. Even the state's legal ban can also give off a positive signal. Various pyramid schemes now even play with the government's ban, claiming that the state bans it officially because it wants to support it secretly as a project for a secretive and selected community. Since wealth accumulation always entails secrecy, the state does not want its pyramid scheme to go public.

Some informants also acknowledged pyramid-selling schemes' value in a technical sense. They provide a platform allowing participants to learn and deploy business skills such as speaking and networking. Chen, the wood- factory owner, attributed his unusually scrupulous habit of making a note of his everyday actions and plans to his earlier training in a pyramid scheme. He

explained to me: “This habit was instilled in me when I was in a pyramid scheme. The pyramid scheme is not a bad thing. It trains your spirit of perseverance and speaking skills. We do not utilize it well in China. You can apply this kind of training in your business. The training is very similar to communist propaganda. I learned quite a bit in that year. I also recruited more than a hundred members.” Besides this training in personal skills, pyramid schemes also provide communal intimacy and a transparent system of rewards.

I was only invited to attend Amway training once by a young woman migrant called Tian. It is still debatable question whether Amway, a direct marketing brand, should be counted as a pyramid scheme. Participants distinguished it as “direct marketing”, while outsiders argued it was pyramid scheme. This ambiguity reflects the difficulty in delimiting the boundary of pyramid schemes. Tian led me into a family Amway meeting one sweltering afternoon. Most of the participants were laid-off Shanghainese aunts; they told me there were more young people in the evening family meeting. Everyone was asked to introduce him- or herself. The veterans usually started by expressing gratitude to the hostess and praising their highest leader, who was living abroad somewhere, and then proceeded to introduce themselves. A veteran, a woman migrant, then introduced the Amway products. The group leader encouraged us to become good consumers of Amway before becoming salespersons. The most important activity is encouraging newcomers like me to join their team. We were promised the opportunity to travel to attend the company meeting in Guangzhou and Macao this summer. All the veteran members explained at length their “perfect wage policy” and helped us understand its many characteristics: 1) everyone starts equally. No matter when you join the team, you have the same chance to succeed; 2) the results are equal. It is said that there are two satellites monitoring the sales on earth, so everyone should receive a reward; 3) the wage incentive is transparent; 4) this is an inheritable career, in the sense that you can pass your rights to rewards to your appointed inheritor (usually your children); 5) there is a world of unlimited

opportunities. You can always recruit new members, and their sales can add to your performance; 6) there is no risk.

Tian specifically stressed to me how Amway provides a platform for learning knowledge and experimenting with entrepreneurship. This opportunity is just like any other marketing opportunity except that it is even better. Amway provides a “genuine” community that is different from the ambiguous society in which they are living. It is a transparent and equal system, though with a mystical leader living far off. It brings together two groups of people who are otherwise hostile toward each other: laid-off Shanghainese and migrants. It highlights mutual help and provides a sense of communal intimacy that is often lost in cities.

Observing the multi-level marketing movement (MLM) in urban China in the 1990s, Lyn Jeffery (2001) writes: “Through duplication and inclusion, MLM contained the possibility of upsetting typical Chinese urban/rural and current class power dynamics, by privileging newly imagined locations within the network over former visions of the local. It was possible for articulate, savvy ruralites and urban working class people to be at the top of huge networks, and a few became extremely rich, famous, and powerful in the *chuanxiao* world. They served as models for their former peers as well as tributes to the supposed equal opportunities of the network” (38). During my fieldwork, I also observed how this potential for inclusion can be transformed into widespread suspicion of fraud. Pyramid-selling schemes are everything and nothing. My informants suspected that fraudulent pyramid schemes lay beneath business opportunities, yet they also had great difficulties in delimiting the boundary of pyramid schemes. People connected with pyramid schemes were said to cheat familiars and controlling their minds through persuasive speaking. Given the assumed importance of the social capacity to use one’s mind (see Chapter 1) and of the moral capacity to make a distinction between those one knows and strangers on the part of my informants, pyramid schemes invoke

uncertainty toward “society” and “morality” in the context of migration and the expanding money economy.

### Conclusion

While overemphasizing the cultural specificity of *guanxi*, or interpersonal relationship, intellectuals in China have constantly been concerned at the failure to develop public morality and trust in modern China (cf. Fei 1992). The sociologist Jack Barbalet (2014) even argues that the concept of trust does not apply to the Chinese context. He argues that trust presupposes the freedom of participants from prior role obligations or commitments to others. The trustworthiness that is held to be pervasive in *guanxi* relationships does not correspond to the self-willed freedom to choose that is associated with the concept of trust as understood in the specialist literature and in vernacular usage in European societies. Rather, it is associated with the habituated behavior expressive of role obligation in which signals of sincerity or estimableness are conveyed through the reassurance of familiarity generated through repeated and close contact. Besides his culturalist argument, Barbalet connects the question of trust/distrust to the emerging property of society, a hidden third element going beyond the relationship between ego and alter. He argues that considerations of face introduce a third element into the relationship in providing all *guanxi* exchanges with a triadic form. Other scholars have connected the widespread crisis of trust to a more abstract property of society, for example, risk society (Yan 2012).

This chapter has demonstrated how my informants’ expectations of frauds are related to their understanding of the ambiguous nature of “society”. Hans Steinmuller (2013) has argued against the totalizing description of Chinese society and noticed the representational gap between intimate local communities and the state. Steinmuller (2010) notes how indirect modes of utterance such as cynicism and irony play an important role in drawing the boundary

of community in contemporary China; those who can understand such indirect expressions based on a shared experiential horizon form a community of complicity. Here Steinmuller still understands inclusion/exclusion in the context of the community of familiarity. In this chapter, I have shown that my informants do not understand “the social” in terms of a community of familiarity based on shared experience in the context of migration and the expanding market economy, nor do they understand “the social” in terms of the abstract society designed by the state. Familiar relationships still play an important role in their engagement with the ambiguous society. This mode of familiarity is mediated by interpersonal relationships, money, and speech. The porous mediation of relationships, money and speech condition aspirations to cross the unfamiliarity but also the apprehension of frauds and fakes in society. While the natural state of force and fraud is the foil for discovering and building a modern social order in the sociological tradition (Parsons 1968), fraud is a constitutive force of society for my informants; understanding fraud is an important social capacity and skill. Their expectations of fraud should thus not be seen as a consequence of neoliberalism or risk society or as a literal representation of moral anxiety in contemporary China. Rather, it is a way of understanding and communicating the ambiguous boundary around the “social”.

## Conclusion

The post-Mao social transformation in reform-era China has been variously described as late socialism, post-socialism, capitalism and neoliberalism. The socialist state and the capitalist market are the important parameters delimiting the social context of contemporary China, where the individualizing subject (Ong and Zhang 2008; Yan 2010) emerges. Descriptions of the contemporary transformation of Chinese society are also conditioned by its recent socialist past. The lack of an ethnographic record of that past also facilitates the myths about it—its equality, collectivism, and moral certainty, myths that are partially stirring recent criticisms of the social inequality and moral crisis of contemporary China. Excluded by the state's household registration system and capitalist market, rural migrants are often seen as the symptom of China's pathological transformation. However, as my ethnographic analysis suggests, these migrants also understand the great socio-economic transformation as an opportunity for entrepreneurship. The embracing of entrepreneurial opportunity among those who are assumed to have been marginalized by the market poses a dilemma for critiques of capitalist transformation in China and of capitalism in general.

In his ethnography of entrepreneurs in Sichuan, John Osburg notes that those who are excluded from the networks of elite male entrepreneurs—recent college graduates, struggling shopkeepers, female entrepreneurs, salaried workers—are more likely to champion the ideal of the meritocratic free market: “They saw their success impeded by dense webs for elite men and individuals with ‘background’ structuring business and state power to their advantage” (2013b:188). Osburg argues that capitalism in China is embedded in power structures and their corresponding moral economies of personal networks. He also argues that capitalism in China is not particularly shaped by Chinese particularities but mirrors actually existing capitalism in the US. Despite this actually existing parallelism, he concludes that we should not take the ideal of free market at face value: “Instead of seeking markets as abstract, homogenizing forces

imposing their own logics of efficiency, we should empirically investigate the ways in which markets are grounded in ‘specific practices and locales that can be thickly described’ and in culturally and historically specific structures and ethos” (2013a: 827).

Observing how poor women are mobilized by global corporations to become entrepreneurs in Bangladesh and South Africa, Catherine Dolan suggests there is an “bottom of the pyramid” (BoP) paradigm in which entrepreneurship is promoted as a solution to poverty at the bottom of society. Dolan admits the ambiguity of the “bottom of the pyramid” (BoP) paradigm: “it is tempting to treat the BoP as little more than smoke and mirrors...I have listened to women recount personal testimonies of transformation...it is hard not to be moved by the force of such claims” (2012:7). Despite the ambiguity, however, she ends by posing questions of exclusion and inequality: “Beneath the meritocratic ideal of entrepreneurship runs a current of inequality: not all women have assets—financial, social and bodily—to pursue an entrepreneurial venture or are ‘lucky enough’ to be chosen even if they do...even those who flourish in BoP networks, reshaping themselves into the ideal ‘development entrepreneur’, find their futures hitched to the capriciousness of consumer markets and to the very real possibility that their anticipated futures will be short-lived” (ibid.:7).

At least neither Osburg nor Dolan criticize the embracing of entrepreneurship as ideological smoke, but are willing to take their informants’ ideas seriously. However, they still cannot help but detect the power structure and social inequality beneath the entrepreneurial ideal. Here anthropologists have to reconcile their recognition of their informants’ ideas and actions with their general criticisms of capitalism. Some anthropologists have recently brought in the semantic of precarity to characterize the specific form of entrepreneurial subjectivity that exists under the neoliberal regime, revealing the social exclusion made manifest in its affective, psychic and temporal dimensions (Molé 2010; Kwon 2015).

Aspirations and dreams, however, are not the opium of the excluded alone. In his ethnography of professional financial traders in Japan, Hirokazu Miyazaki (2003; 2006) has demonstrated that financial traders are also committed to dreaming and imagining economic techniques and theory. Miyazaki has noted how Japanese financial traders extend financial models to their own life choices, understandings of society and critiques of capitalism; the gap in and failure of this extension constantly regenerate hope. The financial model maintains the temporal orientation of an incomplete present and anticipates an eschatological moment of market efficiency. The utopian logic of extending the model does not only happen among financial players: anthropologists have also extended the category of the gift in different areas of anthropology, and Miyazaki draws an analogy between them. Behind the respective extensions of the financial model and the gift model, Miyazaki suggests, lurk excitement and the dream. Without the dream, academic and financial projects are impossible to conceive. Despite the nightmares produced by the recent financial crisis, Miyazaki finally highlights the importance of conversion and dialogue.

While scholars like Osburg and Dolan connect entrepreneurial aspirations to the critiques of social exclusion, Miyazaki takes financial traders seriously as thinking subjects and recognizes their utopian extension of the economic model in the form of the person dreams that traders and anthropologists both share in their knowing and engaging with the world. My ethnographic analysis also takes my informants' understandings seriously and links them to the question of the emergent society, instead of immediately resorting to criticism of society and its exclusionary effects. My ethnographic analysis has demonstrated that entrepreneurial aspirations are neither the effect of social exclusion nor personal dreams; rather, they are related to my informants' understandings of the emergent society and their positions within it with reference to the money economy.

My ethnographic analysis is inspired by recent theoretical debates in anthropology, especially the theoretical challenge posed by the recent “ethical turn” and “materiality turn”. The background to the theoretical problem is that the world becomes a non-totalizing assemblage across different scales; moral frameworks are now pluralized, and actors become more reflexive (Zigon 2015; Steinmüller 2013a). As the overarching critique of power and the encompassing description of cosmology have lost their credibility, anthropologists have looked at how technology, affect, the body (Zaloom 2003), language (Keane 2008), and rituals (Robbins 2015) mediate the relationship between signifier and signified, culture and action, value and its actualization. The focus on “mediation” is driving a wedge into the binary understanding.

My ethnographic analysis takes into account mediation processes through which my informants understand the complex emergent society in which they find themselves. It is impossible to understand this society beyond the spatially rooted and culturally encompassed community in a holistic and immediate way. Neither anthropologists nor their informants have natural authority in assessing the emergent society, and they have to rely on selective media through which to understand it. While anthropologists have often highlighted media technologies ranging from machinery to semiotic ideologies (Eisenlohr 2011), my ethnographic analysis instead stresses the conceptual medium that enables persons to understand each other and society at large. Instead of delimiting society as “Chinese society”, “post-socialist society” or “civil society”, or simply deconstructing the concept of society itself, I suggest that we can redeem the notion of society by carefully reconstructing our informants’ understanding of it with reference to the money economy and juxtaposing their understandings with current scholarly views of the relationship between society and the economy more clearly.

Anthropologists still treat the relationship between the economy and society in term of social embeddedness. The congruence of morality with the social is often assumed, hence the moral

economy approach. Some scholars also equate the social with the political, hence the long tradition of writings on the political economy. Morality and power are the complementary medium through which anthropologists and sociologists understand “the social” within the paradigm of social embeddedness. This also roughly corresponds to two analytical modes of describing society: one is to look at the culture/value of society, while the other is based on criticism of society.

Scholars have recently begun to reevaluate their conceptualization of society from two sources. One is empirical phenomenon: we should look at the retreat of the welfare state and the reconfiguration of the social under the neoliberal regime. The other is epistemic: scholars have now begun to realize that we cannot occupy a transcendental position in society to figure out the causality of the social world, suggesting instead that we move beyond a totalizing understanding of society. This reconfiguration of society in both the empirical and epistemic senses is leading to a new understanding of the relationship between the economy and society. The increase in socio-economic inequality under the neoliberal regime poses a challenge to the encompassing framework of the moral economy: how can we still reconcile the latter with such brutal economic inequality? Of course, scholars can resort to furious criticism: the neoliberal market dominates society and forces people to become individuals. Some scholars also stick to the model of the moral economy by pluralizing moral frameworks and treating economic inequality and capitalism as one moral sphere among others (Kofli 2016). In this way, the model of “moral economies” becomes more dynamic and can still be used as an encompassing approach. Inspired by the epistemic reflections on our inadequate conceptualization of society in social studies of science (cf. Latour 2005), some anthropologists have looked carefully at the role of artifacts and devices in the materialization of economy (Zaloom 2003, 2016). The question of society is dismissed, thus obscuring the further question of the relationship between the economy and society.

My ethnography nonetheless demonstrates that it is still interesting to ask questions about the relationship between the economy and society. Instead of assuming that the economy is always encompassed in society, my informants see the relationship between the two as contingent. Chance now plays an important role in the market. The operation of the market is oriented less to class or status differences than to the self-perpetuation of ideas and temporary fever (Chapter 1). Physical labor introduces the memory of bitterness into society and also the possibility of overcoming bitterness for a better future (Chapter 4). The operation of the economy introduces a contingency into society which can no longer be fully controlled by the family and the state.

My ethnographic analysis demonstrates the difficulties in equating the “social” frame of the economy with “morality” and “power”. Moral codes such as interpersonal ethic (Chapter 2) and credibility (Chapter 5) are made contingent with reference to the money economy. While the social organization of the economy cannot be understood in the form of a moral economy, nor can it be understood in terms of a power hierarchy between men and women, rural and urban or labor and capital (Chapter 3). Through overemphasizing the effects of money, my informants level the moral and power hierarchy of society and enhance the latter’s contingency. It is not that morality and power are unimportant: my informants still make moral criticisms of social inequality and complain about the power effects of state institutions. But money here provides a more universal language through which my informants construe the emerging society in the context of migration and the expanding money economy (Chapter 2). Money here not only acts as the medium of the economic sphere, it also mediates one’s relationship with different spheres such as the family and the state. While anthropologists often try to provincialize money and situate it in its social and cultural context, my informants generalize money’s connecting effect within society. In this way, my informants indicate the contingent and emergent society that is neither a moral community nor a political society. Given the

exclusive effects of the moral economy and of state power that my informants have experienced (Chapter 2), here money provides a more generalized medium through which my informants construe a more inclusive society. Here scholars need to reflect on our habit of conceptualizing society in terms of power relationships and moral solidarity. Money is my informants' answer to the classic Hobbesian question of how society and the social order are possible.

Critiques of neoliberalism often assume that individuals used to be fully included in society and protected by it in the recent welfare past. The emergence of the entrepreneurial self is attributed to the effects of the retreating society under neoliberalism. The entrepreneurial self is thus often understood as a form of social exclusion. Our conceptualizations of social inclusion and exclusion are still oriented to the political question of power: scholars often attempt to understand a person's inclusion in society in term of "agency" and "action". We always ask when marginalized people protest, take collective action, or at least resist. There is a long tradition of locating the potential civil society as being against the power of state. Recent writings on ethics have attempted to arrive at a more complex understanding of action and agency. This sometimes entails reflection on the concept of agency, which is often shaped by the liberal notion of freedom or narrowly equated with resistance. The semantics of ethics now introduces possibility and ambiguity in action, but it also has to deal with its uneasy relationship with the question of politics and critique. Saba Mahmood, who exemplifies the ethical approach, can only urge us to "hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when we first embarked upon the inquiry" (2005:39). Besides the "ethical turn", scholars inspired by science and technology studies have also problematized the agency of the human actor and the reification of society (cf. Latour 2005). This also opens up the question of the human being's relationship with society.

My ethnography has highlighted the fact that my informants' observations and understandings of society mediate their position within it. China scholars have noted the rise of individuals in

Chinese society (Yan 2010); the discourse of personal quality or *Su zhi* (素质) is often seen as evidence of the individuating effects of neoliberal governmentality in contemporary China (Yan 2008, Anagnost 2008). My ethnographic analysis demonstrates that the widespread reference to individual characteristics and experiences among my informants—smart brain (Chapter 1), work ethic (Chapter 4) and speaking skills (Chapter 5)—does not indicate the individualizing effect of neoliberal power and the death of society: rather, it indicates and also enhances the contingent relationship between individual and society. The smart brain and speaking skills make each person opaque, creating uncertainty in interpersonal encounters. One can perform to one's potential while also remaining suspicious of the other's fraudulent performance. Resorting to the work ethic also introduces temporal contingency—a different future—into society.

As individuals now participate in different spheres such as the family, market and state, their position within society also becomes fragmentary and contingent. While they are often excluded by the state through household registration, the market provides them with the possibility for inclusion through opportunity and chance (Chapter 1). The person's position within society can no longer be understood in terms of his or her inclusion or exclusion. Neither the collective identities (“migrants”, the “working class”) nor the more ambivalent category of subjectivity can adequately describe their position in society. My informants understand society with reference to the money economy and highlight the role of money in mediating interpersonal relationships and their own positions within society at large. The person is included in society not through moral solidarity and political action but through entrepreneurship.

A common concern about entrepreneurial aspiration is whether most of my informants will succeed or rather face the possibility of failure and disappointment. During the course of my fieldwork, I have not witnessed any upward mobility among these aspiring informants. Zhi Guo,

a main character in my ethnography, was a worker in a moving company when I first met him in 2009. He juggles two delivery jobs for two different companies. Despite the constant disappointment, he still retains his entrepreneurial aspirations and is always thinking about his next entrepreneurial project. As scholars often see entrepreneurial aspirations as a pernicious individualist tendency, we cannot help locating personal failure and waiting for our next opportunity for criticism. As Miyazaki (2006) has noted of Japanese financial traders, who also actively criticize capitalism and even anticipate its end, my ethnographic analysis also demonstrates that my informants now actively criticize social inequality and complain about suffering (Chapter 4), as well as engaging in moral criticism of the artificiality of society (Chapter 5). But we should not take my informants' criticisms literally as an expression of political resistance. Rather, these criticisms, complaints and doubts enable society to develop its own contingency. Their complaints about their suffering introduce a meaningful distinction between the bitter past and the present, thus generating the aspirations for a different future (Chapter 4). Criticism of the widespread frauds also destabilizes the distinction between familiarity and unfamiliarity within society, enabling my informants to aspire to reach for the emerging society beyond their own familiar communities (Chapter 5). My informants' criticisms and discontent build negative expectations into society and enhances its contingency. Their disappointments and failures in the market cannot be attributed entirely to the stratification and inequality of society but to opportunity and time (Chapter 1). Their entrepreneurial aspirations are not personal dreams, nor the specific cultural practices of particular groups, but a structural feature of the great transformation of society in contemporary China.

China scholars have often attempted to capture Chinese society through its transformation, which is characterized by the dialectic between the universal logic of capitalism and local specificities. Society is often characterized as moving towards increasing social stratification and inequality. Another trend is that scholars have attempted to describe China's transforming

society in term of the plural normative orders (Erie 2016) and moral frames (Steinmüller 2013a) produced by the tension between the state and local communities. My ethnographic analysis demonstrates that my informants understand the emerging society with reference to neither increasing social inequality nor multiplying moral frames, but to the money economy.

The money economy generates a process of the differentiation of society from the family, interpersonal relationships and the state, as well as connecting these different spheres to society. Here the story is neither one of capitalism dominating the society, nor one of society having become increasingly unequal and thus requiring reconstruction of its moral solidarity. For my informants, the money economy and society greatly overlapped. The transformation of society is better described in terms of the differentiation and connection made between the economy and society by money.

My informants' understandings of the social transformation in contemporary China encourage us to reflect on our normative assumptions about the great transformation of capitalism and the relationship between society and the economy. Guided by Karl Polanyi's normative critique of the great transformation in Europe, anthropologists often treat the economy as a self-organizing system that has been disembedded from society, attempt to encompass the economy in its social context, and criticize economic rationality. Recent scholars have penetrated into the process of economization more carefully, enabling us to see the machine and the spirit inside the economy (Appadurai 2011). These studies still fail to capture how the economy and society mutually condition each other's contingent formation. We seem to forget that the understanding of economic operations plays an important role in construing society in the modern period. Polanyi (2001) also notes that the concept of society was only discovered in the great economic transformation of eighteenth-century Europe. Liberalism is also inspired by the calculation of costs: "if only all people would take into account, as costs, the burdens their actions impose on themselves and others, then only socially compatible action would take place"

(Luhmann 1995: 382). Anthropologists have recently criticized the neoliberal economy for its catastrophic effect on society, as well as liberalism for its assumptions about agency and freedom. After his earlier critique of the anti-political impact of development programs in Lesotho (1990), James Ferguson notes that South African blacks aspire for dependency, and then argues for the recognition of social dependency (2013). These are constant demands for a society based on thick political and moral engagement.

Here we should see the relationship between society and the economy as an empirical question that has been formulated in response to the increasing differentiation of the economic system out of society and the economy's contingent relationship with society. My ethnographic analysis suggests that this process of differentiation has never been completed. The expanding money economy and the formation of a labor market through migration also redefine the boundaries of society and rural migrants' understandings of it. For my informants, the money economy has not been differentiated out of society and become a self-regulating system; rather, it over-integrates society. Their engagements with the state and the law, with friendship and market, as well as other spheres of social life, all seem to be mediated by money. Money here generates possible conflicts and dangers as well as enabling the emergent society to go beyond the moral and power hierarchy of state and family to become more inclusive. Instead of responding with critiques of the economic system and the search for the moral solidarity of society, my informants resort to entrepreneurship and its self-generated contingency to deal with the contingent relationship between society and the economy. Their aspirations for entrepreneurship open up a space for us to reflect on our understandings of society and human beings' unsettling positions within it.

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## Abstract

Since de-collectivization and economic liberalisation in the early 1980s, people from villages and small towns have been flowing into cities in China. The rural-urban migration has arisen along with the great socio-economic restructuring in contemporary China. Excluded by the state's household registration system and capitalist market, rural migrants are often seen as the symptom of China's pathological transformation. However, based on an ethnography of rural migrants in Shanghai, my dissertation suggests that these migrants understand the great socio-economic transformation as an opportunity for entrepreneurship. My dissertation argues that rural migrants' entrepreneurial aspirations should not be understood as the power effects of neoliberalism on subject-making; rather they are related to their understanding of the emerging society and their position within it with reference to the money economy.

My dissertation presents an analysis of rural migrants' own understandings of the great socio-economic transformations that have taken place in contemporary China. With labour migration and the expanding money economy, an ambivalent "society" emerges from family, community and state. The economy--the operation of the market, the circulation of money, the organization of labour--overlaps with family and state, and destabilizes the moral unity and power hierarchy of them respectively. My ethnographic analysis demonstrates that money mediates my informants' understandings of the emerging society. Money here is not the specific medium of the economic sphere but enables the emergent society to develop its own contingency. The emergent society promises inclusion through entrepreneurship but also involves dangerous frauds. The relationship between the economy and society should not be understood in terms of moral embeddedness and the control of power but in terms of contingency. The person is included in the emergent society not through moral solidarity and political action but through entrepreneurial aspiration. Entrepreneurial aspirations are not

personal dreams, nor the specific cultural practices of particular groups, but a structural feature of the great transformation of society in contemporary China.

**Keywords:** ethnography, economic anthropology, rural-urban migration, China, entrepreneurial aspiration, money, socio-economic transformations, emergent society, contingency, understanding

Als gevolg van de collectivisering en economische liberalisering hebben veel Chinezen hun dorpen op het platteland verlaten en zijn naar de stad getrokken. Deze migranten worden vaak als slachtoffers van de economische verandering in China gezien, omdat zij uitgesloten worden van het stedelijk registratiesysteem en daarmee van toegang tot voorzieningen. Bovendien nemen zij een marginale positie in het economische systeem in. Dit proefschrift laat zien dat de migranten zelf de sociaal-economische transformatie als een grote uitdaging voor ondernemerschap zien. Het argument in dit proefschrift is dat de aspiraties voor ondernemerschap niet het effect zijn van neo-liberale vormen van subjectiviteit, maar voortkomen uit de manier waarop migranten de veranderende samenleving en hun eigen verhouding tot de monetaire economie begrijpen. Geld speelt een belangrijke rol in deze conceptualisering van verandering door migranten. Dromen van ondernemerschap zijn geen individuele dromen noch specifieke culturele praktijken van specifieke groepen, maar een structureel aspect van de grote transformatie van de huidige Chinese samenleving.

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