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The Netherlands

Innovating China: governance and mobility in China's new economy

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Citation

Tan, Y. (2022, June 29). *Innovating China: governance and mobility in China's new economy*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3421000>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter Six Living a Better Life in the Chinese Silicon Valley?

Spatial Mobility and Housing Strategies in the Urban

Renovation

Appropriating the term *liudong renkou* (流动人口 floating population), which defined the floating population without urban residence permits in Shenzhen in the 1990s, my friend and informant Luan Jiwu told me that “since my colleagues and I came to Shenzhen, we have always moved from one place to another. I am a *liudong renkou*. Only recently, I settled down and signed a one-year rental contract with a landlord.”

It seems that the newcomers to Shenzhen have similar living patterns to the floating population of the 1990s. However, newcomers like Jiwu also have different hopes for a better life in the current social context. The current ease of trans-regional mobility is accelerated by a series of spatial reformations in the name of “urban renovation,” a policy that aims to turn Shenzhen into a highly modern and creative city with innovative industrial parks and decent residential areas. Following Shenzhen being de-industrialized and upgraded to become a “high-tech” global city, increasing numbers of young graduates, rather than peasant workers, are coming to Shenzhen. As discussed in chapter three, the fear of social immobility created a mindset in young migrant professionals that they needed to chase their “better and successful lives” in the global, high-tech city. In situ, “the better and successful life” is tied to and materializes into (1) a form of property, especially housing, manifesting one’s ability to work as a professional knowledge worker/entrepreneur in the innovation economy, and (2) life in a decent gated community, surrounded by qualified professionals and good urban infrastructures. Shenzhen is treated as a magnetic space, the South China Silicon Valley, to valorize their living a “better and successful life.” In the search for social mobility by entrepreneurial newcomers in the innovation economy, housing is a key term, mentioned frequently when my informants talked about their dream of Shenzhen.

Chapter five depicted how young migrant professionals are often motivated to go to Shenzhen by anxieties of “becoming successful among peers” and “recognition from family.” Following from this, this chapter aims to discuss how the space making of the Chinese Silicon Valley creates the expectations new immigrant professionals have about living a mobile and flexible life in Shenzhen, and how these professionals negotiate and justify their mobile lifestyle in terms of the urban renovation agenda. This chapter attempts to argue that the state-led creation of an innovation city contributes significantly to their justifications of housing strategies, embodies their highly-mobile

life patterns, shapes their productive expectations for a better life, and leads them to linger in Shenzhen.

In this sense, chapter six entails a space-centered analysis of mobilized urban life in the context of Chinese urban renovation. This chapter examines the kinds of spatial changes that conditioned the common sense of Shenzhen's urban milieu and created the spiritual stimulus for young professionals to chase a mobile life in the city. It examines how mobile living conditions are negotiated, normalized, and naturalized through the construction of Shenzhen as a Chinese high-tech metropolis. Furthermore, I consider how, in order to realize or sustain their social status, many young professionals are actually suffering from imbalances of life and work in Shenzhen. These "imbalances," in my informant's words, are represented by a certain paradox: they "work as white-collar professionals, but live like peasant migrant workers (农民工 *nongmingong*)."

This chapter begins with a brief overview of mobile life in Shenzhen through the periods of industrialization and de-industrialization. This is followed by an analysis of how young migrant professionals produce new mentalities and practices to negotiate and balance the dilemmas and paradoxes of mobile life in the period of urban renovation, during which industrial facilities have been gradually turned into infrastructures of innovation economy. The third section examines the dilemmas presented by the living conditions in Shenzhen for new migrant professionals. Specifically, how the new housing problem, contributed to by state-led urban gentrification, is treated as a source of shame that drives these young people to make changes to their lives in Shenzhen. Conversely, this social problem also creates stimulus and market forces to invest in the new economy which, ironically, is a channel of gentrifying the urban space in Shenzhen and in China.

In the last chapter, I analyze how young professional migrants give meaning to their work through their pursuit of business success and economic fulfillment in the new working space of the new economy. Overall, this chapter intends to highlight how younger generations create meaning through their adaptive living strategies in the midst of the urban renovation/gentrification agenda. In many cases, they actually transform their housing struggles into a strong motive to renovate and a means of adding value to their mobile lives and working patterns in Shenzhen. I argue that their pursuit and imagination of new space in Shenzhen reflects, and is mobilized by, the local government's policy of urban renovation.

6.1 In the Shadow of the Urban Renovation: Land, Mobile Life, and Urban Informality Under (De-)industrialization

The historical change of Shenzhen as an urban residential area explains why new migrants must deal with the paradox of "working as white-collars, living like 'peasant migrant workers,'" and how space-making could influence the migrant mindset and

their strategies regarding mobility, especially to the extent that space-making becomes a tool to govern mobility. One significant urban change after the market reform is the commodification of space in Shenzhen. The use of land, as the material ground of space, can now be purchased thanks to the urban land regulations. The cost of living has also risen after the state opened the space to real estate companies who are able to design and sell the space to the public relatively freely, even though they have close relationships with public enterprises. This contemporary commodification of space also entails the development of urbanization in Shenzhen, as shown in empirical studies, urbanization is often accelerated by the industrialization after market reforms. “Today, the making of a new spatial order and the restructuring of urban communities are increasingly carried out by the emerging coalition between corporate developers and government agencies” (Zhang 2012: pp162).

During the first round of my fieldwork, I lived in an apartment that was in a residential block located in Osmanthus New Village, a lineage village that had hosted both official staff working for state-owned sectors and peasant migrant workers in the 1990s. My residential block was also rented as a dormitory for the Civil Affair Bureau of Nanshan District Government. They have shared the right of land-use with Osmanthus New Villagers since the beginning of the 1980s. In the local narrative, the Osmanthus New Village was established by Ye/Yip kinship in the period of early modern China. The surname of the land owners and tenants living in the village was Ye/Yip (see Figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1

©http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_687248140100rd9s.html (2011) The façade of Ye ancestral hall.

The Osmanthus New Village was established by Ye/Yip kinship beginning in the Ming dynasty. A group of Teochew merchants from the east side of Guangdong Province

came to the special economic zone, rented the space from this village, and constructed their living infrastructures in Osmanthus New Village. Due to disadvantageous local circumstances and business opportunities in the South China Sea, Teochew people have expanded their diaspora and business network in Southeast Asia since the 19th century. In Chinese historiography, Teochew merchants are tagged as a renowned business group (Hu and Chen 2015).

The lineage villages in Shenzhen were not only hubs for migrant life, but also enclaves for migrant economy—the initial informal economy—after the market reform (1978) in urban China. The Osmanthus New Village was registered as a share-holding real estate company in 1988. To earn money at the beginning of the 1990s, they remodeled surplus space into factory dormitories and rented these dormitories to peasant migrant workers as short-term, flexible accommodation in Shenzhen.

In this way, villages like the Osmanthus New Village played an important role in hosting migrants, like the peasant migrant workers and migrant merchant groups, enabling the informal economy that supported them during a period when direct governmental control over mobility was harsh. The expansion of urban village space was determined by the original residents (landlords) and the rising number of migrants (tenants), cultivating a patron-client relationship. The original residents in these villages protected migrants without urban citizenship from the direct supervision of local government in Shenzhen.

After the marketization of state-owned sectors and the state-led commodification of urban residential areas in 1998, the patron-client nexus between local authorities, such as *cunzhang* (村长 village chief), and the residents in urban villages dispersed and new social relations were established in Shenzhen's urban villages. When the Osmanthus New Village became administrated by urban-street government, the *cunzhang* of the Osmanthus New Village was nominated as a sub-governor. Local real estate developers remodeled or reconstructed villages into *xiaoqu* (小区 urban gated-communities). After becoming rich from their original stock, most of the original residents bought new housing in gated-communities or, as part of a well-known merchant community in South China with a strong overseas Chinese network, chose to migrate to countries where their relatives lived.

In recent years, French anthropologist Anne-Christine Trémon has studied that the lineage networks of the urban village are constantly being renovated by the urban village's inhabitants in the urbanization of Shenzhen (Trémon 2015). Other authors have explored how the rural-urban culture divide in the Pearl River Delta has been reinforced by contestation among villages, immigrants, and urbanites (Siu 2007; Bach 2010). Still others examine the negotiating power that urban villages and the informal economies within them has created for community governance in urban China (O'Donnell 2008, 2013; Tang 2015). A step further and taking the perspective of a new immigrant in the midst of current urbanization, I focus on how immigrant flows were mobilized and reoriented via the negotiation between local property owners and local

authorities, and how these new immigrants develop life strategies and forge new subjectivities in response to the fierce urban renovation in Shenzhen.

Urban space-making has continually influenced the flow of mobility after the urbanization of villages in Shenzhen. The migrant workers cannot afford the rising rental prices in the gentrified urban villages. Likewise, the price of housing properties for purchase has increased. In short, when the manufacturing industries moved out of the urban areas of Shenzhen, peasant migrant workers migrated with them.

Under the government slogan of “constructing a garden city and high-tech city without villages,” urban villages were granted urban administrative status. In this sense, villages gradually became part of urban communities, which could be directly governed and re-planned by urban street governments. The obsolete manufacturing areas surrounded by urban villages were made into high-tech industrial parks. Newcomers— young, post-1998 graduates without the support of state-led *biye fenpei zhidu* (毕业分配制度 graduate job assignment and talent allocation institution)—have gradually replaced the peasant migrant workers as the new immigrant workers, working in tech-based high-end service industries. The Osmanthus New Village became a populated residential area just 1.5 kilometers away from working spaces for these knowledge workers, such as Nanshan High-tech Industrial Park and Qianhai Free Trade Zone.

State-led gentrification in the name of “renovation” in 2004 and 2014 eventually turned Shenzhen into an expensive city. As early as the “Twelfth Five-Year Plan” period (2011-2015), Shenzhen’s government announced that they would no longer provide urban/commercial/residential land, leaving new land for developing public welfare and the Social Housing Policy (保障性住房政策 *baozhangxing zhufang zhengce*). This also means that the urban “renovation” approach regulates most land in the Shenzhen real estate market. Rental prices, especially for short-term housing, in gentrified urban villages and gated communities, has increased. In addition, the Administrative Measures for Commodity House Leasing, released in 2011, formalized both the flexible patron-client relations between landlord and tenants, and the urban housing lease system.

Although Shenzhen’s government released Social Housing Policy, the housing is only distributed to Shenzhen *hukou* (户口 resident permit) holders, or people with non-Shenzhen *hukou* who are tenured workers in large companies and state-owned enterprises. However, the majority of my informants, the new migrant professionals, are actually temporary workers (e.g. one-year contract holders or self-employed “entrepreneurs”) working in the organizations such as small companies, big IT companies, government sectors, and NGOs. By the end of 2016, Shenzhen’s non-household population was 8,063,200, accounted for 67.7% of the permanent population. Among them, a large number of migrant workers had been living in the city for a long time, but their inclusion in housing security policies was limited. They needed to find housing in the rental market and sign short-term contracts with landlords and real estate agents. This contracted tenancy has been gradually monopolized by the real

estate agents who are supported by local real estate companies. These institutional changes have created a real problem for young graduate immigrants in recent years. The tension between the formalization of the tenancy market and the increasing demand for affordable flexible housing has contributed to new forms of flexible accommodations in the space of urban gated communities. The third section will analyze how this spatial change relates to young people's choice of spatial mobility pattern in Shenzhen.

6.2 Formalization of the Informal

In the decades after the Reform (1978), urban villages cultivated a secure environment for the migrant-driven urban informal economy in Shenzhen. The rising informal economic forces, created by peasant migrant workers and trans-urban migrant entrepreneurs under marketization in mainland China, drove scholars to start connecting the long domestically discussed "urban-village issue" to the broader academic vision of China's informal economy since the mid-1990s (Hu and Zhao 2006; Huang 2009).

As the forerunner of urbanization in mainland China, Shenzhen attracted many researchers. Human geographers rushed to analyze how Shenzhen's high-speed urbanization was supported by the infrastructures of urban villages, as informal urban sectors, in the social context of the state's weak welfare offerings for mobile subjects (Yin, Xue and Yan 2006; Wang, Wang and Wu 2009, 2010; Zhang 2011). This scholarship assumed the autonomy of informal urban sectors in the early urbanization after reform and marketization. However, the story through more recent urban change and political institutionalization shows that after the new state-led urban space-making agenda, informal economic forces created in high-speed, rural-to-urban and trans-urban mobilities have been gradually formalized. As depicted in chapter three, grass-roots maker communities are being registered and re-organized into social enterprises or social associations.

Formalization here does not mean that robust urban informal economic forces are weakened and suppressed in current urban space-making. Indeed, the current state-led urbanization does involve the decline of the informal economic kinship-bound patron-client nexus cultivated in the 1980s. It, however, involves the rise of a new informal economic workforce and the IT-intensive community depicted in chapters three and four. The formalization of the informal economy means that the state actively joins in the production of robust new informal economic forces through building urban infrastructure. It is the government who defines the boundary of the formal and the informal by its socio-political governance of the current market economy. Under the governing logic of market economy, economic forces created in local networks are conceptualized as informal institutions (Tsai 2006; Perry and Heilmann 2011; Fan 2015). Legitimized as informal institutions within the formal governing body of the

market economy in current institutional reforms, the currently registered companies and associations, and “the entrepreneurial spirit” bound to them, are highly supported by the local government. In the mind of local government, entrepreneurship and innovation is an important force to drive employment. Thus, subsidies for entrepreneurship are framed as an important public service in policy schemes. As analyzed in chapter three, registered startups and social associations can apply for innovation and entrepreneurship subsidies from local government.¹⁰⁵

Until recently, in order to develop such collaborative governance, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China issued an official document to recognize the role of private entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs-to-be in the development of China’s market economy in 2017. However, I argue that far from being autonomous, the informal urban entrepreneurship created by migrant populations are actually strategic agencies surviving in the tight corner created by the social and political definition of the formal and the informal. By creating new circulations and governance of mobile populations and capital through urban space-making, the Chinese state has gradually formalized these informal economic forces and turned them into “informal institutions” of socioeconomic governance. Consider the social consequences of the urban renovation project: the upgrade of urban villages in Shenzhen was actually the creation of a new urban milieu that influences how migrant professionals conceive their urban life and respond to the city of Shenzhen. However, compared to the migrant workers and migrant entrepreneurs of the 1990s, these newcomers seem to hold different hopes and expectations when relocating their lives into the state-led urban renovation project. Moreover, they actively join in inventing a “modern” code of urban life to justify their uncertain mobility in the changing city.

6.2.1 Renovating the City Milieu in Shenzhen

The idea that Shenzhen was a dangerous city and full of fake goods was circulated, at the turn of the millennium, by foreign tourist websites, social news in Chinese official media, and some street tabloids. In a chat with a close friend in Amsterdam, I was told that he lived in Shenzhen for two weeks in 2002. The first time I discussed my fieldwork with him, he was amazed that I was alone in that “dangerous and desirous city.” He depicted it as full of thieves, rich old Hong Kong men, prostitutes, informal red-light zones and casinos, especially in the borderland zones like Luohu Port and Futian Port. The social construction of desire and fluent society at the beginning of 2000s has already attracted scholars conducting research on sex workers (Ding and Ho 2008;

¹⁰⁵ There are four main subsidies that startup runners can apply from Shenzhen Human Resources and Social Security Bureau: Subsidies for Entrepreneurship Drives Employment; Subsidies for Renting Innovation Space; Subsidies for Social Insurance; Subsidies for Starting-up. Please see: <http://hrss.sz.gov.cn/ztfw/cjy/cyfw/cybt/>. (Retrieved: 20 April 2020)

Kaufman 2011), Hong Kong mistresses, and the “second wife” community (Lang and Smart 2002; Xiao 2014, 2016) in Pearl River Delta.

However, during my stay in Shenzhen, the “dangerous, desirous and full of fake goods” discourse about the city was replaced by a more ambiguous “not so easy but free, anxious but full-of-opportunities” discourse shared by many young Chinese migrant professionals. It seems that the political-economic distress in Hong Kong and the local state’s anti-pornography and anti-gambling stance in recent years contributed to dampening the informal sex and gambling industries in Shenzhen. As I was told by an informant in his late 30s, “Shenzhen is not interesting now.” He said flatly that the entertainment industries had been purified by the police.

The linguistic turn and transition in the social sciences also contributed to “the emotion turn” of social analysis (Williams 1977; Pred 1983; Trift 1996). The discourse of how people define their feelings and emotions about living and working in a city can express more than literal meaning. Feeling, an abstract personal impression aroused by simple and general face-to-face interviews, should be understood in the concrete social contexts that each individual is immersed in. When informants tell me their feelings about working and living in this city, they always answer immediately with simple, generalizing adjectives. It should be noted here that these feelings about urban life from individual experiences are not simply individual reactions to the world around them. It is also the institutions of social management and the mentality underpinning this social management that incarnated these collective feelings in everyday urban life.

6.2.2 “Not so easy, but free”: Deconstruction and Reconstruction

If the discourse of “dangerous, desirous and full of fake goods” depicts a past experience of rapid capital accumulation under high-speed, export-oriented industrial modernity in Shenzhen, then the discourse of “not so easy but free, anxious but full-of-opportunities,” propagated by Shenzhen’s expatriates, foreshadows how the city is more than just a tourist site or an easily objectified site to experience “other modernities” (Rofel 1999). Rather, it is a site for the newcomers to embed themselves, living and fortune-hunting.

The feeling of “not so easy” refers to the dark side of urban life in Shenzhen. It has become an expensive and inconvenient city since the urban renovation campaign was launched by the local government. The area of Shenzhen city was enlarged due to the large migrant population rush after 1978. Many migrant-constructed social enclaves, or urban villages appeared. Teochew people, Overseas Chinese, Hakka, and south-ward officials (南下干部 *nanxia ganbu*) were the main newcomers to build their physical communities at the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up, when the state presented Shenzhen as a relatively stateless sector. These urban villages were originally founded based on “religion,” “old lineage,” or *danwei*, and formed to set their own spatial rules and establish property rights “from below.” Once well established, they also offered

later newcomers, young newly graduated professionals, a place to reside in the city, especially after 2000 following the surge in housing prices.

As depicted and widely discussed by Chinese sociological intellectuals, urban villages are well-established urban communities that have revived the urban entrepreneurialism of the 1980s and 1990s. They sustained place-bound migrant enterprises in Beijing (Zhang 2001) and offered comparatively cheap housing, in the form of informal economic sectors that the Beijing government could not offer to the migrants. The social connections of migrant leaders, kinship ties and patron-client networks shape the “informal” economic spaces, such as household clothing production sites in the urban villages of Beijing. And even though urban villages were stigmatized as dirty, messy, and less-qualified (脏乱差 *zang, luan, cha*) spaces, in Beijing they actually generated lobbying power between the central state and the local state through the “big men” in urban village enterprises (Xiang 2005).

In Shenzhen, the urban villages tell similar stories in the context of the Reform and Opening-up. Most of the “old Shenzhen people” (老深圳人 *lao shenzhenren*), who are defined as people living in Shenzhen for over 20 years, hold memories of “life in urban villages.” The well-established urban villages always support newcomers with cheap and convenient spaces to live in.

The “urban village issue” is widely debated in local intellectual circles and several Chinese and international research institutes have initiated research projects to do fieldwork in these urban villages. Many intellectuals hold the opinion that if cheap places are renewed through local state-led “urban renovation” or “urban purity” programs, the urban social balance will be broken because the low-income workers, who support the everyday functions of urban service sectors, will leave. They tend to hold the opinion that capitalist urban development allows these workers to leave, and further, from the arguments of local anti- “urban-renewal” activists, preservation of urban village communities is necessary for urban justice and development. In late November 2015, I visited a maker space in Baishizhou, an urban village¹⁰⁶ in which many manufacturing factories were established in the 1980s. After the urban administrative reforms in 2004, the de-industrialization and renovation of Baishizhou factory zones was placed on the developmental agenda by urban planners and local authorities in the Nanshan District Government of Shenzhen. The de-industrialization following 2004 did not work out well in the Baishizhou factory zone. The production of a “Silicon Valley” in abandoned manufacturing areas tells a more complex story about how post-industrial modernity is performed in China. Due to complex property rights involved in land expropriation, many abandoned industrial spaces remained in Baishizhou. It was only recently that the local government launched a new reconstruction project to “upgrade” these abandoned industrial spaces into cultural

¹⁰⁶ Urban villages in Shenzhen are totally different from the urban villages intensely researched in North American or South American metropolises. Urban villages in Shenzhen are similar to other naturally formed villages in rural China. However, after the reform of Shenzhen’s Urban Administrative Divisions in 2004, no village administrative system remained. (See, Wang, Wu and Wang 2009)

clusters in Baishizhou; clusters to welcome and house new creative young professionals and graduates.

Local NGOs launched an anti-deconstruction (反拆迁 *fanchaiqian*) campaign in Baishizhou. These detractors saw the newly released Urban Old Town Renovation Policy as an accelerator to turn the factory zone into “Silicon Valley.”¹⁰⁷ Local scholars saw the demolition and reconstruction as a dangerous imitation of neo-liberal ideology. However, this appeal of anti-capitalism in urban space was in vain, because the mobility of populations and space is not only regulated by capital, but also by the innovation of urban governance. Newly released state-sponsored urban plans play an important role in accelerating the financialization of land (use) and the cultivation of indifference to the so-called social imbalance among the original landowners of urban villages in Shenzhen. In order to counter these top-down land reforms, the original urban village residents empowered themselves with “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012), such as rebuilding an ancestral hall to legitimate their living space. They turned all urban villages into shareholding companies in the early 2000s. After earning a large amount of money, the original residents moved out of urban villages, buying better and more luxurious homes elsewhere, while low-income migrant workers remained. They rented their properties in urban villages to other newcomers for a decent price. When the “urban renovation” project was launched by the local government, the chairmen of the board of the urban village Co. Ltd., and the mostly male stockholders, who lived outside of the urban villages, were happy to wait for both economic compensation from the local government, and for new tenants. I interviewed an urban village landlord in the Hague. In addition to having a Dutch resident permit, he continued to hold a Chinese passport so that he could benefit from renting his house to tenants in Shenzhen. Ironically, the marketization of land-use created and strengthened the contemporary formation of the tenant-landlord nexus rather than the formation of local residential communities in solidarity.

Nowadays, Shenzhen is experiencing a further step in urban village reconstruction. In order to re-engineer the valuation of urban land(use), the local government has launched urban-renovation projects and beautified old residential areas into high-end innovation hubs. Visual differences also contribute to the mental hierarchy of space in the everyday experience. Mary Douglas describes how the structuring of purity is always combined with the danger of social indifference (Douglas 2003). The practice and mentality of constructing a “civilized city, smart city, and creative city” (建设文明城市, 智慧城市和创新城市 *jianshe wenming chengshi, zhihui chengshi, chuangxin chengshi*) is not only constructing an expensive liberal metropolis, but also an uneasy one: the low-end urban life supported by low-end spaces is being mentally and practically demolished. Another example of the entanglement of top-down and bottom-up dynamics, which I have emphasized throughout this project, is that this demolition is not only because of the state’s dogmatic developmentalism,

¹⁰⁷ This renovation attracted a lot of attention from media. As reported in <http://www.infzm.com/content/103213>

but also because young newcomers do not want to consume low-end urban life anymore. Urban villages are seen as less developed representations of the “old Shenzhen.” The newcomers who consider themselves as middle-class professionals prefer high-end gated communities as their residential spaces, although the rent in these communities is double that in the old urban villages. However, the reason these young newcomers choose xiaoqu is not because the living environment of xiaoqu is safer, but because xiaoqu is more decent, respectable. The undemolished urban villages are stigmatized as low-end spaces with low-qualified (低素质 *di suzhi*) populations. My informant Yan stated, “I understand the rent in high-end communities is more expensive than in urban villages, but I think the living environment in xiaoqu is better than urban villages. I cannot even find a girlfriend if she knows I am not living in a xiaoqu, but an urban village.”

The feeling of “freedom” pertains to the deregulated governance of the state’s demographic strategy to deal with mobility in this special economic zone (SEZ). The Chinese state regulations regarding domestic migration were highly stratified in the period when the *hukou* system—an instrument the socialist command economy used to regulate and identify the population—was invented to limit domestic migration. The implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy by local urban governments in the 1980s, made it difficult for a Chinese citizen to migrate from one place to another. Widely discussed in academic research, the *hukou* system has played an important role in regulating the stratification and opportunities of Chinese people, especially after the economic reform (Whyte and Parish 1985; Wu and Treiman 2007). However, local practices of the *hukou* system are geographically diverse. The deregulated policy in SEZ has relaxed governmental control over the labor-recruitment of local enterprises. It has become easier for privatized enterprises in Shenzhen to offer surplus “informal” workers (from rural areas, bankrupt state-owned sectors, and pools of tourist-visa foreigners) with temporary resident permit (暂住证 *zanzhuzheng*) residence and work in Shenzhen. This caused multiple geo-economic imaginations of SEZs. Mass media and Chinese TV dramas also circulate these imaginations and cultivate collective expectations on “rites of passage”: go to the liberal land—Shenzhen.

The regional deregulated regulation of mobility continues in the innovation economy. Compared to other big cities in China, Shenzhen is still imagined as the most marketized and liberal, especially as it borders Hong Kong, the exotic capitalist world that mainland Chinese and non-Chinese people can physically and freely enter. For Henk, a self-employed Dutch professional working in a startup partnered with an American teacher and several young Chinese professionals, Shenzhen is his best and first choice as “the city where I want to live in China. It is an open city and young city. Here you can meet a lot of young Chinese people, like you, from different places and with higher educational backgrounds. It is easier to communicate with people in this city. Most well-educated young Chinese can speak English.”

Henk elaborated upon the meaning of “freedom” during an after-meal chat in Huaqiangbei Electronic World, the largest mall for electronic communication products,

one day in December 2015. “China has been widely reported as a country without free speech. But it is free to live here! Nobody really cares about what you really do. You just need to show them ‘hey, I have done this and that. ’It is the most important experience I gained from my ten years of business experience.” In his discourse, the emotional feeling of “free” means he can escape something and relax in China. Just as depicted by Angela Lehmann, many foreign expats seem to enjoy free life in Xiamen, a metropolitan Chinese city, instead of being trapped in “previous cultural signifiers of identity, social rank and structure” (Lehmann 2014: 46).

Nevertheless, it is the less regulated urban management milieu created by local government that makes this feeling of freedom possible. There are thousands of private border agencies that deal with resident permits and insurance issues for Chinese and non-Chinese workers in this borderland. “You do not really need to apply for them by yourself. You can just pay an agent, then you can stay. It is even very convenient for foreigners who hold short term visas to live in Shenzhen, because they can extend their visas in Hong Kong through cheap agencies.” My informant Farhad told me.

The insurance agencies in Hong Kong also play an important role in creating social feelings of freedom in the circle of self-employed startup runners in Shenzhen. Hong Kong has had a financialized social insurance scheme for a long time. There are increasing numbers of mainland Chinese buying Hong Kong deposit insurance as a kind of investment. “Buying insurance” is not only recognized as “buying safety for the future,” but also “buying future economic freedom.” This highly marketized insurance system offers self-employed Chinese and non-Chinese people chances to buy their freedom in the future.

6.2.3 “Anxious but full of opportunity”: Location and Relocation

Young people have already cultivated the binary imagination of high-end and low-end living and working spaces. However, the cost of urban purification and gentrification is actually paid by newcomers. Newcomers, who intend to perform more like members of the middle-class/high-end population, have to earn more and consume the products of high-end urban life. In the words of my informant Yan, a certain anxiety is caused by the feeling of “be unfit for a higher post but unwilling to take a lower one” (高不成, 低不就 *gaobucheng, dibujiu*). Their changeable working patterns are also in line with the global trend of “flexibility” in the working patterns of the new economy (Harvey 1991; Tsing 2000; Benner Fairris and Ruser 2008). In social-anthropological analysis, the current dynamics of globalization are driven by flexible economic accumulation and working patterns rather than the Fordist system of the unified shop-floor. The fragmented global supply chain requires more and more employees to become part-time workers or temporary workers to take on fragments of outsourced projects from around the world. Taking Qu’s case as an example, his startup is sustained by taking on “stable” projects outsourced from the IT tycoon Tencent.

Qu stated that he always has anxious feeling (纠结 *jiujie*). He said he feels anxious when he stretches further to grasp opportunities and success. Together with the positive feeling “full of opportunity,” a collective “anxiety” is formed. In his ethnographic work *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich* (2013), John Osburg opens up discussions on how middle-upper classes produce values and moralities through network building in post-reform China. In his analysis, the male-dominated creation of social networks of capital and power through shared experiences of leisure (banqueting, drinking, and gambling) sheds light on the formation of the struggling middle-upper class, who must drastically extend and maintain the social relationships within and outside of their groups. In their minds, the tighter these relations are, the more sustainable their social status is.

Rather than tagging my informants—the tech-entrepreneurs-to-be—as a middle class forming in anxiety, I intend to argue that it is “the becoming of middle-upper class,” as a teleology of safety-life in a “changeable” risk society (Beck 2002), that makes their anxiety possible. It remains a debatable issue whether professional workers struggling for “opportunity” are driven by “safety first” (Scott 1976) or by “risk first.” At the very least, the tension created in their quest for opportunities in an environment of changeable working patterns can be seen as a symptom of the current risk society in China.

On one hand, there seems to be a tension that the young Chinese and non-Chinese professionals have anxieties caused by their deep fear of being “left-over” or “knocked-out” (a type of social immobility); on the other hand, they ease their lives into the “free” and “full of opportunities” urban milieu of Shenzhen. However, individual anxieties and collective expectations about opportunities and successful futures are not contradictory feelings. In the following stories about how my informants have turned themselves into tech-entrepreneurs, it is their anxieties and expectations that drive them to undergo their rites of passage in Shenzhen. In their stories, anxieties and expectations are mutually constitutive.

Qu, an informant running his startup with a high-school classmate, offered another vivid explanation of what “full of opportunity” means. His explanation is closely related to the local industrial transformation through innovation: “In Shenzhen, the industrial upgrading drastically and quickly happened within a night! The fast-changing industry requires more and more professional workers who can quickly obtain innovative skills and adapt to the changeable situation. In Shenzhen, the unchangeable thing is ‘the change’ per se. Like me, I was working as a project manager in an export-oriented trading company. Now, I am a technical consultant in R-Tech Co. Traditional trading enterprises are declining. If you do not want to be left over, you should learn new innovations and follow up the new trend of industrial upgrading in Shenzhen. This is the only way to grasp the opportunity in the new economy.” In his discourse, the ongoing industrial upgrading resets the conceptualization of “opportunity” and the pattern of work in the new economy. His analysis can also partly explain why high-frequency job-hopping is more acceptable in Shenzhen than in other places, where

families often want their children to get a “stable” job after graduation. The everlasting drive to follow and learn “new things” is one explanation of why social training centers are booming.

During my fieldwork, the young immigrants that I met in Shenzhen always cited the same main reason for choosing to come: it is a city full of opportunity. The dominance of this mentality in Shenzhen corresponds with the massive tide of domestic migration after the economic reform. Thanks to the existing research on post-reform Chinese society, I realized that this discourse, “full of opportunity,” has lasted for more than 40 years in Shenzhen. Shenzhen makes far more sense as the city of opportunity than as a policy-made city, and it is seen as a migration destination in post-reform China. This fits all too well with the official marketing of Shenzhen.¹⁰⁸ In ethnographic narratives of the post-reform period, searching for the opportunity is a *zeitgeist* for urban immigrant workers hoping to break the existing social hierarchy (rural/urban, development/less-development, mobility/no-mobility) promoted by socialist social engineering (Solinger 1999; Friedman and Lee 2010). Contemporary young migrant professionals in the context of de-industrialization have discourses and mentalities about their life tracks very similar to the rural-to-urban migrant workers in the context of industrialization: only the SEZ can offer them a chance to avoid being “surplus” labor in their home towns.

The personal choice to migrate was not decided by “individualization” processes of capitalistic modernity (Beck 2002) but supported by the institutional changes in the specific policies of (de-)industrialization. Seen through the lens of contemporary Chinese social history, the large-scale domestic immigration was actually driven by market-oriented policies, rather than “the market” in post-reform China. Domestic mobility and the autonomy to pursue individualistic dreams are shaped through policies such as loosening the Hukou regulations and the Graduate Job Assignment System.

If we say that the *zeitgeist*-like post-reform zeal for “life opportunity” was realized by the state’s loosening grip on the market economy, then the current *zeitgeist* is being shaped by the state’s planning of regionalized industrial clustering on the global edge. In this planning, industrial clustering should follow each new global (de-)industrial tide to the extent that the ever-changing supporting policies of de-industrialization and innovation offer professionals, seen as surplus labor in “less-developed” areas, chances to fit into their desired enterprises. Yang, who has a master’s degree in Electronics and Engineering from Zhejiang University, told me that he cannot find a “suitable” job in his hometown of Jining, a small county of Shandong Province. He said there were a lot of IT training centers, rather than IT enterprises, there in 2008 when he was graduated from Zhejiang University. He did not want to “waste life in training new generations of IT coders or working in state-owned heavy industry which is the best sector for local

¹⁰⁸ In the national media outlet Xinhuanet, Shenzhen was marketized as a city of dreams in 2005. Please see: http://news.xinhuanet.com/report/2005-08/22/content_3388353.htm

people to enter.” After graduating he went to Shenzhen and is now working in a privatized research institute for electronics.

6.3 Mobilizing Life in Shenzhen

6.3.1 “Work as white-collar professionals, live like ‘peasant migrant workers’”:

Locating Life in Shenzhen

It was a wet summer afternoon after a rainstorm. Zhang, a 27-year-old junior IT engineer working at a local advertisement company, and his roommate Liang, a senior undergraduate interning as an industrial designer in a robotic-tech company, took me to see the apartment they were renting from a Shenzhen-born Hong Kong landlord. Zhang and Liang shared this studio apartment because of the high rent (4800 RMB/month = 608 Euro/month). They used a curtain to separate their single-beds. “Rolling up the curtain, it is okay!” Zhang said to me. There were two single IKEA bunk beds against the wall. IT training books and design drafts were piled on the table. Unclean clothes were packed but dropped on the floor. There was no privacy unless the curtain was rolled down. “It is like we are still continuing our dormitory life at university,” Zhang said. “In my family’s eyes, I am a good kid with a high-paying job who could buy an apartment for myself. Yes, I bought an 80m² apartment in my hometown Wuhan, but I have a 1 million RMB (127,500Euro) loan from the bank. This is the reason that I have to live and share this studio with Liang in Shenzhen because I have around 6000 RMB in monthly loan payments in Wuhan.” “Will you go back to Wuhan one day?” I asked. He answered: “I do not know. At least, not now.”

Both Zhang and Liang are from Huazhong University of Science and Technology, a highly ranked national university in Wuhan, capital city of Hubei Province. Zhang came to Shenzhen after he graduated from the university because the biggest IT industry clusters are located here. Following his alumni, Liang also chose a big IT company as an internship site in Shenzhen. As depicted in chapter two, the current wave of middling migration driven by these young professionals in South China is similar to the wave of peasant worker migration in the 1990s, when many newly established export-oriented manufacturers sought to hire peasant “surplus labor” from rural China. Like their migrant counterparts in the 1990s, these young graduates relocated their lives and work to this area.

The state-supported expansion of university enrollment from 1999 orients rising numbers of professional workers for new industries and Chinese students to the universities but comes with the unintended consequence of an increased rate of graduate-unemployment (Bai 2006). Job-hunting has become continually more complicated due to marketization and the scaled cluster effect of new industries. As a consequence of the big cities becoming high-tech financial clusters, young graduates

with professional degrees migrate to these cities to find jobs that suit their educational backgrounds. After he graduated from Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Zhang packaged all his luggage and went to Shenzhen. “I was lucky to find an IT job in this advertisement company. The day I left my school, 30 percent of my classmates did not find their job. Shenzhen is a city full of job-hunting opportunity.”

Zhang rented his apartment from the landlord Chen, whose Hong Kongese relative bought it in 2002. The apartment is in Hong Kong Garden, a gated community that was developed by a local construction company in 1998. The development company belongs to Guangcai Corporation, a private company owned by Hu Deping, the son of Hu Yaobang, who was a high-ranking official of the Chinese central government and a strong supporter of market reforms in the 1980s. The gated community, Hong Kong Garden, was established to meet the rising demand of trans-border Hong Kongese immigrants at the end of the 1990s. The financial crisis in 1997 pushed these immigrants to “escape” and relocate their lives in Shenzhen. Chen explained that “buying an apartment in Shenzhen was a good deal for a Hong Kongese in the late 1990s.” The average price for Hong Kong Garden was 4600 RMB/m² (582 Euro/m²) in 1998, and 22000 RMB/m² (2787Euro/m²) in 2014, 54000 RMB/m² (6841Euro/m²) in 2017. In the current situation, gated communities like Hong Kong Garden have become a new hub for young immigrants flocking to Shenzhen.

After describing the process of relocating his life after graduation, Zhang told me that he is “working as an entrepreneur, but living like a peasant migrant worker.” Some informants shared similar views about the alienation of working and living in Shenzhen. In their minds, white-collar jobs may give them decent middle-class salaries and lives, yet they continue to live in small shared rooms with other white-collar workers similar to the former peasant migrant workers in Shenzhen. *Nongmingong*, the peasant migrant worker, is a widely used term to define the Chinese peasants who rushed to South China’s export-oriented urban industrial zones seeking low-skilled jobs at the beginning of the 1990s. Officially denied residency and holding temporary residence certificates in the cities, they became a “floating population” of internal migrants without urban citizenship (Solinger 1999; Chan and Zhang 1999). Influenced by the world market, export-oriented manufacturers produced many seasonal and short-term jobs for peasant migrant workers to flexibly work in different manufacturing factories. Due to their mobile and flexible working mode, *nongmingong* were perceived as “rats” living in the city: like rats, they flocked to places with jobs, no matter how hard and nasty the jobs were. Their way of living was also stigmatized. They had to rent short-term and cheap housing because of their flexible jobs in different export-oriented manufacturing assembly lines. They found it difficult to cultivate a consciousness of home from such mobile lives working in the big cities. Considering the long-held binary imaginations of “developed and clean urban China” and “less-developed and sloppy rural China,” “living like peasant migrant workers” is a stigmatizing discourse for the new migrant-professionals to define their disgraceful and highly-mobile living conditions.

However, the current emerging floating population in Shenzhen has a different mindset than the peasant migrant workers of the 1990s. Defined as highly-skilled workers in the valorized innovation economy, my informants hold strong opinions about how they could settle down and realize a middle-class dream. Ironically, it is not *hukou* policy, but the expensive living conditions and spatial regulations in the city that make them a floating, flexible group in Shenzhen. Trying to escape from this bind, young professional migrants cultivate various strategies to survive in the expensive city.

6.3.2 Escape from Suspension: Renovating the Meaning and the Strategy of Mobile Life

The practice of space-making in current urbanization results in young migrant professionals realizing that their living conditions are not as decent as they anticipated prior to coming to Shenzhen. In the past two decades, Shenzhen has gradually “updated” and “renewed” itself to become a “clean and civilized city.” Under the newly released urban planning agenda, urban areas have been ordered but sprawled, and urban life has been mobilized and relocated. Old “disordered” urban areas, such as urban villages, have been gradually gentrified into respectable gated communities. That new migrants find they can hardly afford a “real” middle class life in gated communities, yet continue to search for better lives and mobility in these communities, is somewhat puzzling.

The stories below will show how, far from living like the respectable middle class and “searching for the paradise” (Zhang 2012), the new migrant young professionals encounter different living conditions and create different strategies and discourses for locating their lives which are highly influenced by the current urban renovation project.

Living in a *xiaoqu* (小区 gated community) rather than in urban villages is treated as a requirement for young migrant professionals to relocate their lives, “because living in *xiaoqu* makes me live with a group of good qualified people. Both me and my neighbors are highly-skilled professionals working in the tech-industrial industry. Even though I cannot afford a 40000RMB/m² apartment in Shenzhen, I still choose living in the apartment,” Yan explained. Seven years ago, Yan came to Shenzhen and moved into an urban village. “The rent was cheap and the landlord was nice. However, I found out that most of my neighbors were *nonmingong* who came to Shenzhen to do construction work for the new *xiaoqu*. My girlfriend at that time persuaded me to choose another place. She said if I get used to living with lower strata people, I would lose any ambition to live a better life in Shenzhen.” Within these seven years, Yan changed his residential area several times. He had a high-paying job. He even bought an apartment in this hometown while not being able to afford the skyrocketing housing prices in Shenzhen.

The emerging IT industry in current urban spaces reinforces anxieties arising from pressure to “work as white-collar professionals, live like ‘peasant migrant workers’” and stimulates expectations of “living decently.” IT startups collaborate with real estate companies, appropriating young people’s anxiety and inventing new marketing strategies for housing.



Figure 6.2

©Author took the photo of the poster of online rental platform “ziru.com” in the metro station of Baishizhou, 2016.

Notes: The caption on the poster for this IT startup says: “the first year after I graduated from university, I decided to work in Shenzhen. In the second year, I decided not to live in Baishizhou urban village. What you want should be created by yourself.”)

To live a more decent but expensive life in *xiaoqu*, young migrant workers must cultivate new strategies to support their mobile lives. The current version of mobile life in Shenzhen has become a process of strategic searching for relocation in the so-called liberal city.

Taking myself as an example, it was very difficult to rent an apartment for the four months of my second round of fieldwork in Shenzhen. This was not only because there were few landlords who wanted to rent out their apartments to temporary residents, but also because the existing temporary apartments with formally contracted tenancy are considerably more expensive than those that a student doing fieldwork could afford: 3500-5000 RMB/one-room depending on the market.

Liao Yamei, an informant working in an entrepreneurship training institute, recommended temporary dormitories (短租公寓 *duanzu gongyu*) to me, popular among young graduates and white-collar workers in the early stages of their careers. She had come to Shenzhen two years beforehand and rented a bed in a small room in an apartment in a middle-class gated community. I followed her suggestion and found

a flexible bed on an online housing rental platform. Like Zhang and Liang, who rented and shared a studio in the gated community Hong Kong Garden, I eventually rented a 1300 RMB/month bed in a studio with two other girls working in startups in the nearby Nanshan High-tech Industrial Park.

The studio was one of the living-rooms in an apartment owned by Xu, a landlord born in Shenzhen but living in Hong Kong with a Hong Kong residence permit. Xu divided his apartment into three studios and rented them out as temporary dormitories for young graduates. Our neighbors were three junior staffers at a local IT supply company and a couple from northeast China who ran their own advertising startup, taking outsourced advertisement contracts from local IT companies. When their working contract ended, they planned to move to another living space closer to their future workplaces. We shared a toilet, balcony and washing machine in a very limited space. The kitchen was abandoned as the roommates had no time to cook. Social life felt highly compressed. We could only meet one another after 10:00 pm, as these young people always worked overtime in this city. No wonder that my neighbor Jian told me that he has no time to have fixed relationship (谈恋爱 *tanlianai*). My roommates only slept for seven hours a day. We were all awoken by the phone clock at 7:00 am and went to work.

The couple told me that they believed that living in urban villages is more reasonable for social beginners but that “the landlords in existing urban villages are increasing the monthly payment after more and more urban villages are demolished by the local government. And living in *xiaoqu* makes us believe that one day we could eventually buy a home in *xiaoqu* and live a decent life!” Jian told me. Importantly, the key factor that drove my young peers to choose mobile lives in Shenzhen is actually the expectation that is brought by mobile life per se. In their mindset, mobile life does not bring uncertainty but chances of social mobility. “We are still young enough to work hard and make money in Shenzhen. Sometimes I feel too tired to continue, but when I consider that there is still a lot of interesting and profitable work that I could do, I go for it,” said my neighbor Fan explaining why he adapted to the highly mobile life mode of this city.

My own experience of finding rental housing and living with my informants provides further stories. Before I started my fieldwork in Shenzhen, an informant introduced me to a strategy to quickly find short-term housing. This strategy required that I post my demand on the online platforms rather than spend copious time negotiating with housing agencies. I posted my information to an online group called Shenzhen Housing on Douban.com, one of the biggest social media platforms for Chinese young people. Ten hours later, I received several responses from netizens who were currently working in Shenzhen and looking for roommates. I chatted with several people, checked the information and photos of the apartment, and paid Wang, my new roommate, a deposit via WeChat Purchase. When I arrived in Shenzhen, Wang was waiting for me at Exit A of Taoyuan Metro Station. I shared a three-room apartment with two young men and a young woman. The apartment cost us 5500RMB (800Euros)

a month, and I lived in the smallest, 8m², room which cost me 1200RMB/month. The two male roommates, Wang and Qing, shared the biggest room, 15m², and the other girl lived in the remaining room.

The paths leading my roommates and I to Shenzhen represent different life experiences of mid-20s Chinese graduates in this city. Although we all identified as “new migrant white-collar workers,” we actually had diverse personal reasons to live temporary and mobile lives in this apartment. Expectations of a distinct way of working and living (for example: escaping family burden, earning more money, finding jobs in the high-end tech-industry) drive young graduates to come to Shenzhen. My roommate Huang Nuannuan was born into a Teochew merchant family. After the market reform (1978), her family ran a private factory in Jieyang City, a small city in the southeast of Guangdong Province. As an elder sister in a Teochew family, Huang’s father expects her to find a stable job, such as a teacher or a government official, in a state-owned organization and to marry a Teochew man. However, after graduating from Hanshan Normal University, a local university in Jieyang, she left her family and came to Shenzhen. Wang and Qing shared a larger room because of the expensive rent. “I feel we are living in a dormitory at the university,” Qing told me. He is a 30-year-old Guangxi man working as an accountant in a real estate agency, helping newly rich Chinese buy property in Australia and New Zealand, which have become hot spots for Chinese migrants in recent years. This is his second job. After graduating from Jinan University in Guangzhou with a bachelor’s degree in accounting in 2008, he worked in an elementary school in his hometown of Yulin, a small county neighboring Guangxi Province. He explained that it was hard to find a job after he graduated from the local university in Guangzhou. Except for the offer from the public elementary school in his hometown, he did not receive any job offers. After two dull years working as an elementary school accountant, he decided to come to Shenzhen. “Here you earn much more than working for a local public elementary school.” He is preparing to take the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) examination to get a professional license to work in financial companies. “I need to pay the mortgage of my apartment in my hometown. So, I need a highly-paid job.” Wang is an engineer who was working in a formerly state-owned design institute that was marketized at the beginning of the 2000s. He was fired when the institute went bankrupt. “Because of the decline of the real estate market, there is no profit space for us. I heard a rumor that the ‘design institute’ system in Shenzhen fired half of their employees.” He was searching for a job in a startup in the Qianhai Area, where many new tech startups are registered. Like Qing, he also bought an apartment in his hometown of Jinzhou, a fourth-line city in Hubei Province, with a 400,000RMB (52,000Euro) mortgage. As a female fieldwork researcher who had just finished her proposal and gained fresh curiosities, I was trying to find “myth” and social consequences in the newly released state-supported “mass entrepreneurship and tech-innovation”. When I introduced them to my research in broad terms, Wang asked whether my research would benefit from the policy around “mass entrepreneurship and innovation.” I answered frankly that I was an academic green-horn, in training and with

no power to negotiate or change anything, even during my internship in the local government sector. He felt pity for me and tried to persuade me to study finance and economics which would make it “easier to pick up jobs in Shenzhen than for overseas students majoring in Social Science.”

These individual personal choices made us flow into Shenzhen to work as white-collar workers in the upgraded urban innovation industries. From the perspective of my generation, only the mobile life *in* Shenzhen can train young people to be smart, savvy Shenzheners. Far from trapping us in deep anxiety or uncertainty, mobile life is accepted as a normal way to overcome life suspension in this fast-paced city full of opportunity. “frequent shifts make a tree dead but a person prosperous” (树挪死, 人挪活 *shunuo si, rennuo huo*) my roommate Qing said to me after I ended my contract with the landlord and finished the first round of my fieldwork.

6.4 Conclusion

The young professional migrants I spoke to have a strong sense of identity distinct from *nongmingong* (农民工 migrant workers), their counterparts in the 1990s. Unlike the rural-to-urban migrant workers, contemporary young migrants, who relocate to the big cities to make a living, hold stronger desires to chase their own creative careers. The urban renovation agenda has influenced how they form expectations about mobility and modernity. Responding to social and spatial changes, this young generation of newcomers adjust their housing strategies and create new discourses to legitimate uncertain and mobile life in Shenzhen. Notably, the active invention of meaning in their new lives actually echoes the state-led urban renovation agenda. As the construction of a high-modern “Silicon Valley” in South China, the urban renovation of Shenzhen is understood as a new chance for young people to accelerate their social mobility.

It is worth noting here that young migrant professionals are not negatively adapting to the housing problem in Shenzhen but rather strategically working at it. The social requirement to release the living anxiety corresponds to the increasing market of housing, health, finance and life technology per se, witnessed as alternative strategy to create a better life in China.