Vulnerable yet resilient: representations of migrant workers in contemporary Chinese prose

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Chapter 3

The struggle for subsistence: city-based migrant couples

The present chapter will shift the focus from the rural to the urban space, concentrating on the literary representation of city-based male-female migrant worker couples who live in the city without children. I will start off with Liang Xiaosheng's 梁晓声 1995 short story "The Abandoned Home" (《荒弃的家园》) as a prelude in order to outline the phenomenon of such couples in the city. Then, by close-reading several texts from the first two decades of the 21st century, I will examine typical features of migrant worker couples in the city, and how these features are related to the larger picture of migrant workers' urban subsistence in literature.

Prelude

In 1995, Liang Xiaosheng's short story "The Abandoned Home" was published in the prestigious literary journal *People's Literature*. It tells the story of the village leader, old Guangtai, a venerable old man, who strives for the benefits of his villagers even at the expense of confronting the higher-level officials, but still fails to retain the young villagers in the countryside due to the exiguous income from farming. In a parallel narrative, it tells the story of a young rural female, Qianzi, who plans the murder of her paralyzed mother, because taking care of her mother prevents her from leaving the village to *dagong* in the city. Through the two parallel characters, a failed old hero and a young renegade, Liang's story shows the lack of attractiveness of the countryside and the eagerness of rural young people to leave the countryside and *dagong* in the city, underlining the rural-urban disparity in contemporary China's capitalist development.

The discourse about China's rural-urban disparity has a long history. In her 2006 book *Rural Women in Urban China,* Tamara Jacka finds that, in various discourses, the countryside is "denied temporal equivalence with the cities" (Jacka 2006:36). That is, in terms of time, the cities represent the goals of the national project of modernity, pointing to the future, while the countryside symbolizes an old society that belongs to the past. Similarly, in Liang's story, place, time, and people match: while the countryside is on the decline and so are the old people, the city

is full of vitality and attracts young people. Thus, like in the protagonist Qianzi's case, the rural characters' abandonment of the rural home is not simply leaving a place that points to the past, but an abandonment of family members in the countryside, especially the elderly.

Although the protagonist Qianzi's murder of her elderly mother is an extreme case, it highlights a structural conflict between the traditional family ethics and rural-urban migration, or more precisely, the contradiction between traditional values of filial piety on the one hand, and individual freedom in the rural migrants' transition from agricultural to industrial labor, on the other. In Liang's story, the prerequisite for becoming a migrant worker is to get rid of the family burden, such as supporting the elderly parents or raising the children, which explains the existence of migrant worker urban families that consists of only a man and a woman. And, as it takes a lot of energy and money for migrant workers to bring non-laboring family members to the city, the commercialization of rural labor often leads to long-distance family separation.

This is corroborated by sociological research. First of all, economic gains are the main motivation for migrant workers to migrate to the city (Zou 2005, Xiong 2007), and the financial cost of bringing non-laboring family members with them is not in line with their economic intention. Second, data also show that the wage level of migrant workers, who are mainly young and middle-aged (Bai and Li 2008, Feng 2019), is relatively low, and they can hardly support non-laboring family members to live in the city (Li 2012, Kong and Wang 2013). Furthermore, the institutional barriers established by the city, for example in medical care and education, prevent non-labor members from entering the city (Xu 2015). In a nutshell, objective constraints such as low income and institutional restrictions combine with subjective choices such as migrant workers' economic pursuits to render long-distance families a common phenomenon.

Family is an important social institution that facilitates the stabilization and prosperity of a society, and plays a key role in providing emotional support, regulating sexual activity, reproduction, and socializing children (Horwitz 2005). When family members move outside of their roles, it leads to social problems. For example, the social issues caused by the long-distance families of Chinese migrant workers, such as problems of the rural left-behinds, have generated a lot of debate (Lu 2018). Popular media discourses tend to take an urban perspective and see migrant workers in instrumental terms as simply producing labor but also causing issues like traffic congestion, housing shortage, energy shortage, environmental pollution, and public security problems (Florence 2007). By contrast, sociological scholarship often takes the

perspective of the family, and regards migrant workers as family members and human beings. However, they often focus on the countryside, and assume that that is where "home" and "roots" of migrant workers remain. Consequently, the conflict between migrant workers' professional ambitions and their family obligations is attributed to migrant workers' personal choice. Hence, the ethical dilemma between personal freedom and filial piety, is the deadlock faced by the character Qianzi in Liang's short story. In order to break this deadlock, it is necessary to consider that in fact, migrant workers may become "rooted" in the city, even if they will never be city natives. This enables us to examine the living conditions of migrant workers from the perspective of the urban family rather than the countryside-based long-distance family. Since rural-to-urban migrants are mainly young and middle-aged laborers, their "family" in the city are often limited to two adults as a couple, with both partners working.

This chapter focuses on the literary representation of such couples. It does so from the perspective of urban family and urban space, discussing the urban survival of migrant workers and their complex relationship with the city. It poses the following research questions: In migrant worker literature, what are salient features of city-based migrant worker couples? How do these features shed light on migrant workers' lives in the urban space, including their interactions with "native" urbanites, and their perceptions of the urban social world?

To discuss these issues, I will examine three texts: Wei Wei's 魏微 short story "Mr. Zheng's Woman" (《大老郑的女人》2003), and Jing Yongming's 荆永鸣 novellas "Breathing Loudly" (《大声呼吸》2005) and "Leaving Beijing" (《出京记》2016).

Wei Wei was born in Jiangsu province in 1970. She is a professional writer who first entered the literary arena with avant-garde writing, and then turned to writing of "daily life" (Gao 2007). Influenced by writers like Xiao Hong 萧红 and Wang Zengqi 汪曾祺, the language of Wei's writing is simple and fluent, forming a recognizable style that has been called "essayized fiction" by critics (Cui 2012). "Mr. Zheng's Woman" tells the story of two migrant workers who live together in the city while they both know that the other is married and their spouse lives in the countryside. Unlike those focusing on migrant workers in large cities such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, Wei's story is about migrant workers in a small city, where the urbanites live a relatively easy and comfortable life, and they do not have the same strong sense of superiority as in larger cities (Lai 2008). Also because it is a small city, the migrant workers here are not the typical assembly-line workers in factories, but self-employed,

small business owners whose material conditions are comparable with if not better than those of the urbanites.

Jing Yongming, the author of "Breathing Loudly" and "Leaving Beijing", was born in 1958 in Inner Mongolia, where he worked in a coal mining company for more than 20 years (Xu 2011). In the late 1990s, he quit his job and opened a small restaurant with his wife in Beijing, where he became famous as a literary author (Lu 2019). His novels draw extensively on his life experience (Jing 2015, Zhang 2011), writing about migrant workers who are making a living in Beijing, including self-employed small business owners in addition to waiters, construction workers and so on. He is good at describing Beijing from an outsider's perspective (Xu 2011, Zhang 2011), and particularly concerned about migrant workers' living space.

As a writer, Jing is neither a traditional elite intellectual nor a typical migrant worker. Both he himself and his works operate in the gray area between migrant workers and elite intellectuals, indicating that the division between migrant worker writers and professional writers can be fuzzy. Owing to his in-between identity, coupled with his focus on concrete life experience, his works provide us with a third perspective that differs from both (Zhang 2019). His works grasp important aspects of the urban life experience of migrant workers, neither shying away from describing misery, nor overemphasizing the rural-urban conflict (Ni 2006). While expressing his sympathy for migrant workers, he is also critical of them. In "Breathing Loudly" Jing tells the story of two migrant-worker couples trying to survive in Beijing. Living in a cramped and oppressive space, they feel like strangers in the city and are struggling to find a place of their own. From the perspective of migrant workers, the urban space looks unwelcoming and forbidding. In "Leaving Beijing", Jing tells the story of a female migrant worker who is married to a native Beijing person but gets divorced because she is not accepted by the native-urban family due to her rural provenance, as a metaphor for the rural-urban divide at large.

All three texts highlight what I identify as typical features of migrant workers' urban families as represented in literature, and the power relations that shape them: the temporariness of their relationships, their oppressive living spaces, and the complexities of rural-urban marriage.

1. The temporary couple

The first typical feature of migrant worker couples is the temporariness of relationships. In Chinese social science scholarship or newspapers, "temporary couple" (临时夫妻 *linshi fuqi*) refers to an extramarital cohabitation relationship. One or both parties in the cohabitation are married to another person, but because they are unable to reunite with their legal spouse, they temporarily form a couple-like partnership with each other (Li 2016). This cohabitation relationship is characterized by its temporary nature, that is, the two parties reach an agreement of not breaking up with the original family, and tacitly admit that their cohabitation relationship will not develop into a legal husband-and-wife relationship in the future, but can be terminated through negotiation when needed (He and Cao 2014). Temporary couples are not uncommon among migrant workers. Sociologists often define this as a social problem, studying its causes, social effects, and solutions (Wu 2011, Xu 2015). By contrast, Wei's story does not stress the social problematic nature of temporary couples. By using literary means, she ingeniously combines discussion of the daily life of the temporary couple and shifting standards of morality, offering an original view of the living conditions of migrant workers in the city.

1.1 Scrutiny of the Other: who is the woman?

In his discussion of Wei's writing, critic Gao Yuanbao 郜元宝 points out that Wei is good at writing about ambiguous relationships (Gao 2005). Wei's "Mr. Zheng's Woman" is about such an ambiguous relationship, in a temporary couple. The protagonist Mr. Zheng is an atypical migrant worker, a self-employed craftsman, who comes to the small city where the I-narrator lives to conduct business. Zheng rents two rooms in "our" house with his three younger brothers, while his wife and two sons still live in the countryside, in a different province. Later, Mr. Zheng brings a woman to the house, and the two become a temporary couple. The story revolves around the mystery of the identity of this woman and the daily life of this temporary couple.

Wei delicately handles the true identity of Mr. Zheng's woman, shrouding it in secrecy until the revelation. This subtlety thrusts the woman into the role of the Other. Upon her arrival, suspicions arise within the narrator's family due to her ambiguous relationship with Mr. Zheng. The narrator's mother confronts Mr. Zheng, discovering that the woman is from the nearby countryside and has been living in the city since her divorce. As the narrator's family clandestinely observes the daily interactions of this temporary couple, they gradually come to

accept their unconventional living arrangement, recognizing their deep affection for each other. However, it's not until the unexpected appearance of the woman's rural husband, who believes his wife works in a factory in the city, that the truth is unveiled: the woman provides wife-like services for a fee. Through the lens of the narrator's suspicion, covert investigation, gradual acceptance, and unforeseen revelation, akin to a detective novel, Mr. Zheng's woman is cast under scrutiny as the enigmatic Other from the outset, seemingly harboring secrets and perhaps posing a threat.

In addition, Wei's first-person narrative also helps to push Mr. Zheng himself into the position of the Other. The I-narrator is also the focalizor of the story, or "the holder of the 'point of view'" (Bal 2014:18), which means that all the information received by the reader comes to them in the perception of the narrator. As a result, the reader is assimilated into the "us" of the narrator's side, while the Mr. Zheng and his woman become the Other.

The narrator's identity also casts a scrutinizing gaze upon the outsiders, Mr. Zheng and his woman. As the landlords of Mr. Zheng, the narrator and her family hold a position of formal authority over them. Thus, the family's surveillance and monitoring of the couple can be seen as a form of inspection influenced by these power dynamics. Renting out part of their living space entails more than just a commercial transaction—according to societal norms, they share a common entrance and a semi-private courtyard with their tenants. Consequently, the narrator's mother experiences embarrassment upon learning about Mr. Zheng and his woman's extramarital relationship: "If others know about it, I don't know how they will gossip about it. They might think that my yard is filthy" (64). Importantly, the landlord family's scrutiny of their tenants also stands for the urbanites' default mode of "inspection" vis-à-vis migrant workers as outsiders. The natives tend to regard the migrants as the Other who invades the urban space, and only through recognition by the former can the latter be accepted as one of "us".

In Wei's story, the urbanites' scrutiny of migrant workers seems to be gender-biased, as they are harsher on women. Some researchers have pointed out that in most discourses, female migrant workers are more welcome than male migrant workers in the city because they are regarded as less dangerous (Jaguścik 2011). However, in Wei's story, the narrator's family not only quickly accepts Mr. Zheng and his three brothers, they even speak highly of Mr. Zheng: "he is honest and respectful, and looks gentle . . . he usually doesn't talk much, but does things decently and in order" (61). It is the woman's arrival that arouses doubts and anxiety. People are

more tolerant of the married man, Mr. Zheng's looking for a partner: "for a married man whose wife is not around, it is normal for him to occasionally do something sneaky" (64). However, for the woman, when her true marital status—married rather than divorced—is revealed, the narrator's mother says that she cannot accept such tenants. Then, she drives the temporary couple out of her house. This is certainly because their extramarital cohabitation challenges conventional ethics, but it is worth noting that the moral condemnation falls mostly on the shoulders of the woman, and that this story is emblematic for the bigger picture of patriarchal society.

In "our" native-urbanite family's scrutiny of the temporary migrant worker couple, the family hold the power, while the couple are powerless and vulnerable, and can only move away obediently when asked. That said, migrant workers can also be seen to engage in resistance. First of all, their cohabitation is a survival strategy for adapting to the urban life. Mr. Zheng is a businessman whose wife is not around, and the presence of the woman compensates for this and performs a family function. For the woman, her home is in the nearby countryside, and while her circumstances have forced her to leave home, she doesn't want to leave too far. As Mr. Zheng' temporary wife, "she is paid for it, but they both are happy" (69). Although temporary couples violate traditional family ethics, such a lifestyle is arguably beneficial to both of them and makes their city lives more comfortable.

Additionally, this temporary couple also has strategies for self-protection against possible moral punishment. Here, I draw on the work of Zhang Deli 张德礼, who uses Carl Jung's concept of "persona" to understand the behavior of Mr. Zheng and his woman (Zhang 2009). The "persona" is the social face the individual presents to the world—showing an image that is beneficial to oneself in public places, and makes one's interaction with others more pleasant and relaxed. Zhang argues that Mr. Zheng's woman is using the persona of "a helpless, poor, and divorced woman" to make herself more acceptable to the narrator's family.

In my view, in addition to the active deception of displaying the sympathetic "persona", Mr. Zheng and his woman also adopt another passive resistance strategy: silence. On the day of the woman's arrival, the narrator's mother tries to ask them all sorts of questions, but Mr Zheng and his woman's silence makes this almost impossible. In daily life, the woman is also very silent in front of the narrator's family: "when she sees us, she will smile as usual . . . but say nothing" (65). Because of the couple's silence, the narrator and her family can only observe them

and cannot extract any information from direct dialogue, including the true identity of the woman. Notably, while silence is sometimes regarded by official media discourse as signaling a lack of literacy for migrant workers, or their inability to articulate themselves (Yan 2008, Jaguścik 2011), silence here is actually an effective and important strategy for self-protection.

1.2 "Us" as the observers: changing through seeing

Those performing the act of inspection in Wei's story are mainly the narrator and her family, as well as the local urbanites they represent. In the process of "observing" and "surveilling", "we" unconsciously and passively participate in the life of "other" and gradually understand their situation. First of all, "our" moral values are slowly changing while observing the daily life of this temporary couple. Whereas the narrator's family know that Mr. Zheng is married and (are told that) the woman is divorced, their attitude towards their extramarital cohabitation is becoming tolerant as they see the changes in the lives of Mr. Zheng and his brothers:

> 她在房间里坐着，房间里也到处都是她的气息。[. . .] 也真是奇怪，原来我们看见的散沙一样的四个男人，从她住进来不久，就不见了，他们被她身上一种奇怪的东西统领着，服从了，慢慢成了一个整体。有一次，我母亲叹道，屋里有个女人，到底不一样些，这就像个家了。而在这个家里，她并不是自觉的，就扮演了她所能扮演的一切角色，妻子，母亲，佣工，女主人. . . . . .
>
> She sat in the room, and her presence filled every corner of. [. . .] It's also strange how the four men we once saw, scattered like loose sand, disappeared shortly after she moved in. They seemed to be governed by something peculiar about her, submitting and gradually becoming a cohesive unit. Once, my mother sighed, "Having a woman in the house really makes a difference. It feels more like a home." And in this home, she didn't seem aware, but she played every role she could—wife, mother, servant, mistress... (66)

"We" see that Mr. Zheng and his brothers look more like a family under the care of the woman. "We" also see that Mr. Zheng and the woman accompany and take care of each other like true lovers: "she and Mr. Zheng can be regarded as an affectionate couple" (66). The observation of their daily life then has an impact on the observers themselves. "Our" attitude toward the couple

shifts from being shameful and judgmental to understanding their situation and finally accepting it.

The narrator's sympathy for the temporary couple continues even after she learns that the woman is not divorced. She implies that the urbanites' attitude towards, and their evaluations of, the woman are prejudiced, which affects what they see. Tellingly, in the early days, everyone in the family agrees that the woman is too plain to be a prostitute; but after knowing the true identity of the woman, they claim to be able to tell from her manners that she is in fact a prostitute:

> 凭心而论，虽然女人的作派和先前没什么两样可是我们都看出一些别的来了。就比如说[. . .] 大老郑说话的当儿，她把眼睛稍稍往上一抬，慢慢的，又像是不经意的。 [. . .] 反正我是怎么也描述不出来，学不出来的。[. . .] 我母亲拿手肘抵抵我，耳语道，真像。
>
> In fairness, although the woman' demeanor wasn't much different from before, we could see some other things about her. Like [. . .] when Mr. Zheng was speaking, she would raise her eyes slightly, slowly, as if casually [. . .] Anyway, I couldn't describe it or learn it. [. . .] My mother nudged me and whispered, [she] really looked like [a prostitute]. (69)

The woman has not changed, but "we" magically see the difference and come to a completely opposite conclusion. What motivates this change is the observers' assumptions and their self-righteous moral standards.

The narrator then swiftly exposes the hypocrisy of people's moral judgments by recounting the story of their neighbor, Grandma Feng. Grandma Feng serves as the urban equivalent of Mr. Zheng's woman. Having once supported herself and her two children by cohabiting with other men while her husband was away in Taiwan, she now enjoys a respected status as a revered elder in the community. The narrator highlights the double standards in society by contrasting "our" differing attitudes toward Grandma Feng and Mr. Zheng's woman: "we can't tell what the difference between the woman and Grandma Feng is. However, we can understand and accept Grandma Feng but can't forgive the woman" (69). The crucial disparity lies in the fact that Grandma Feng is a native urbanite, while the temporary couple are newcomers to the city. For fellow natives, "we" have no choice but to accept them, while for

newcomers, “we” assert the authority to impose higher standards or expel them. Thus, the dual moral standards of the urbanites ultimately expose the inequality between native urbanites and rural newcomers, and the disparity between those who were present first and those who arrived later.

In a nutshell, the warm and harmonious daily life of Mr. Zheng and his brothers, ethical norms against extramarital cohabitation, and the local advantage of the urbanites combine to shape the narrator and her family’s attitudes toward the temporary couple. Whereas the narrator’s family finally drive the couple away from their house, they do not reach a consensus on this matter:

> 她们和娼妓相比，自然是有区别的，和一般妇女比呢，就有点说不清楚了。照我看来，惟一的区别就在于，在通过恋爱或婚嫁改善境遇方面，她们是说在明处的，而普通妇女是做在暗处的。因此，她们是更爽利，坦白的一类人，值不值得尊敬是另一说了。[. . .] 有一次，我父亲因想起他们，就笑道，这叫怎么说呢，卖笑能卖到这种份上，还搭进了一点感情，好歹是小城特色吧，也算古风未泯。我母亲则说，也不一定，卖身就是卖身，弄到最后把感情也卖了，可见比娼妓还不如。
>
> They were of course different from prostitutes. But when compared to ordinary women, it’s a bit hard to articulate. In my view, the only difference lies in the fact that, when it comes to improving their circumstances through love affairs or marriage, they do so openly, whereas ordinary women do so covertly. Therefore, they are a more straightforward and honest type of people, [but] whether they deserve respect is another matter. [. . .] Once, my father, recalling them, chuckled and said, “How should I put it? Selling smiles [*an expression for prostitution*] to this extent, and even investing a bit of emotion, it’s quite characteristic of our small town, a relic of the past.” My mother, on the other hand, remarked, “Not necessarily. Selling oneself is selling oneself. If in the end, one sells off one’s emotions too, it’s evident that they’re worse than prostitutes.” (70)

The narrator assumes that Mr. Zheng’s woman is more straightforward than ordinary women; the father thinks that she is at least more honest than the prostitute, while the mother believes that the woman is worse than the prostitute. In this way, Wei’s story uses these three different voices to suggest the absence of judgement, or the refusal of a final verdict: “who can judge these things, we just discuss them in private” (70). The urbanites spy on the daily lives of outsiders out of

distrust, but the observations accidentally provide them with a window for understanding and interacting with the outsiders. The emotional and moral dilemmas they see in Mr. Zheng and his woman in turn make the narrator and her family, and by extension the reader, realize the complexity of the situation.

The theme of married women as temporary prostitutes or other people's temporary wives, whether voluntarily or forced by circumstance, appears early in modern Chinese literature, such as Rou Shi's 柔石 "Mother as a Slave" (《为奴隶的母亲》1930), Luo Shu's 罗淑 "The Remarried Wife" (《生人妻》1936), and Han Sha' s 含沙 " The Rental Wife" (《租妻》1936). In these works, cohabitation outside of marriage is often associated with women's tragic fate and symbolizes a morbid social injustice. Wei's story is different. Some critics, such as Zhu Lihong 朱李红, point out that the moral standards are vague in Wei's story, and the moral criticism is absent (Zhu 2013).

I argue that Wei's story is not mainly about morality or people's behaviors that challenge the moral norms. Instead, it uses an ethical dilemma to foreground changing social realities in a particular era. In the process, it foregrounds the struggle of migrant workers in the city and the complex interaction between them and urbanites in the context of internal migration in China.

1.3 The small city: both us and the other

Wei intertwines the narratives of Mr. Zheng and his woman with that of the narrator and her family. Together, these dual perspectives weave a tale of a small city undergoing transformation, not just in its physical space, but also in its social dynamics. Because of the arrival of outsiders, the small town that has remained unchanged for a century becomes modern and prosperous. The inner part of the small city, the social relations, are also changing: "you can feel something is changing. It has changed. It is happening in our lives, but we can't see it" (65). The urbanites of the small city are slowly understanding and accepting new things, albeit with curiosity, doubt, and confusion, just like the narrator and her family's gradual acquiescence to the extramarital cohabitation of Mr. Zheng and his woman. Whereas the story of the temporary couple has come to an end in the narrator' eyes, as they are driven out by the narrator's family, it is likely that Mr. Zheng and his woman are now living in another corner of the small city, changing the mindset of another family. In this sense, the small city is both "ours" and "theirs", and "their" role is greater

than “ours”. Not only do they influence the small city by bringing prosperity, they also reshape the mindsets of the urbanites as well as their social relations.

Wei’s story focuses on daily life, especially the family life of migrant workers. Although the narrative is from the perspective of the urbanites, it does not condescendingly blame the social problems of the city on migrant workers; instead, it recognizes the contribution of migrant workers, admitting that the small city becomes modern and prosperous through the arrival of outsiders. Moreover, in Wei’s story, the interaction between outsiders and urbanites is a two-way communication. Observations such as these are rare in migrant worker literature. In my view, the story being set in a small city instead of a metropolis is crucial here.

It was not until the 1980s, following the 1978 introduction of the Reform and Opening Up policy, that China began its large-scale and rapid urbanization, so the urbanites of many small cities were farmers not long ago (Hou 2020). As such, they often don’t have a strong sense of superiority over the migrant workers or farmers. As the Chinese saying goes “Who is not a rural person, if you go back three generations?”. In addition, China’s *hukou* system is especially strict in first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, while most smaller cities have a relatively loose control on migration and some have recently completely abolished settlement restrictions (Zou 2019). Under such circumstances, it could be that although social discrimination against migrant workers still exists in small cities, it is certainly much less severe than in big cities. Moreover, different from the typical migrant workers who work in factories, restaurants, or construction sites in large cities, migrants in small cities are mainly self-employed business people with better economic conditions (Wang and Wang 2020), like Mr. Zheng in Wei’s story, whose income is much higher than that of most ordinary urbanites. Last but not least, the lower cost of living in small cities also make migrants’ lives less difficult than in big cities (Liu 2020).

All these above-mentioned traits of China’s small cities make Wei’s text a special one that differs from the literary representations that describe the suffering of migrant workers in big cities, such as the texts by Jing Yongming which we are now moving on to.

2. An oppressive living space

Different from Wei’s “Mr. Zheng’s Woman,” which shows migrant workers from the perspective of the urbanites, Jing Yongming’s “Breathing Loudly” is about migrant workers’

urban survival experience from their own perspective. Whereas Wei describes the relatively affluent life of the temporary couple in a small city, Jing zooms in on the physical consequences for the bodies and psychological trauma of migrant workers living in a metropolis, because of the cramped and oppressive living space, which I have identified as a second feature of migrant worker couples in the city.

"Breathing Loudly" tells the story of two migrant worker couples: domestic workers Wang Liushuan and his wife Daidi, as well as restaurant owners Liu Min and his wife Xiuping. The Wang couple work for a housekeeping company and the core of their urban experience concerns their lack of private space. The Liu couple run a small restaurant in Beijing, and while their economic conditions are better than those of ordinary workers, they lack a sense of belonging in the city because of their oppressive living space and a generally hostile public space. Jing's story highlights the intertwined relationship of material circumstances, urban space, and human spirit.

2.1 The Wang couple: from lacking private space to rights deprivation

The protagonists of "Breathing Loudly," Wang Liushuan and his wife Daidi, are migrant workers employed by a housekeeping company that has separate dormitories for its male and female employees. As a result, the Wang couple are forced to live apart. Despite being legally married, their living situation and strict dormitory rules create a distance between them, turning their relationship into a co-worker dynamic at the company. Due to crowded living conditions, each dormitory houses more than a dozen people, and the couple find it nearly impossible to spend quality time together, not to mention engaging in intimacy.

The lack of private space leads to an instance wherein the couple improperly use a working space when assigned to clean a client's new house. The Wang couple, who have not had privacy for an extended period, borrow the client's bed to make love. They are caught by the sudden arrival of the client, resulting in an embarrassing and shameful scene. This can be read as a metaphor for the Wangs' relationship with the city at large. As migrant workers in the city, they are curious and envious of living conditions and lifestyles of the urbanites they serve. They find they are not privileged enough to enjoy the urban space they inhabit.

In *Escape Attempts*, Cohen and Taylor find that people will create fantasies to resist a sense of alienation. That is, they will create an alternate self-identity, or a more desirable self, so

that they don't feel coerced to play a role they can't control or get out of (Cohen and Taylor 1992). The Wang couple's inappropriate intimacy in their client's home can be seen as an escape attempt, transforming a space in which they are servants into a space which now serves their needs for intimacy. This also allows them to temporarily escape their identities as migrant workers, offering them a chance to own and enjoy a piece of urban space, however briefly and furtively. Furthermore, this also serves to restore an original husband-and-wife relationship between the two, who have been forced to play the role of mere 'co-workers' rather than life partners, due to lack of personal or private space.

To some extent, these protagonists do escape their daily roles, constructing a desirable self by appropriating their client's bedroom. However, this escape can only be temporary and the Wang couple inevitably return to reality, caught in extreme embarrassment with the client's arrival. In his analysis of Jing's writing, critic Ni Wei 倪伟 says that "'embarrassment' can be understood as a dilemma or a state of alienation from both the environment and the self" (Ni 2006:41). The embarrassing situation of the Wangs shows their alienation from urban space as their true existential situation in the city.

Their improper appropriation of client space leads to catastrophic interactions between them and urbanites, embodied in the client, police officers, and boss of the housekeeping company. The client feels insulted and calls the police, casting the Wang couple into the disastrous position of being suspected as criminals. This underlines their enjoyment of urban space as one no longer of resistance to norms they are forced to succumb to, but an invasion of private space, violation of other's rights, and an assumption of other people's identities. The policeman is partial to the client, warning the husband Wang Liushuan with handcuffs to "be careful in the future, don't do it wherever you want like a dog" (145). Comparing Wang Liushuan to a dog is an extreme case of popular discourse that distinguishes native urbanites from migrant workers by labeling the latter with having low *suzhi*, or moral quality (Yan 2008). The boss of the housekeeping company has his eye on Daidi, so he takes this opportunity to fire Wang Liushuan, forcing Daidi to continue working in the company. While the Wang couple cannot even have sex as husband and wife due to lack of private space, their boss abuses his power, forcing Daidi into a relationship with him at his company, a space under his control. The Wang couple's plight illustrates the detrimental effects of being deprived of private space. In interactions with the urbanites, the Wang couple are vulnerable, powerless, and worthy of

sympathy, although not completely innocent, as they do invade other people's private space, violating others' rights. They are caught in a vicious cycle, vulnerable and powerless to have space of their own, and needing to 'borrow' the space of others instead.

Privacy is a basic human right allowing individuals to exercise control over their personal lives. Jing's text shows how a lack of private space can have significant impact on migrant workers like the Wang couple, leading to a range of negative consequences affecting their personal relationships and overall well-being, as they are deprived of fundamental rights and autonomy.

2.2 The Liu couple: cramped and oppressive living space

Compared to the Wang couple, who reside in dormitories, Liu Min and his wife Xiuping enjoy a modicum of privacy by renting a room near their restaurant. However, their living space is far from ideal. It is small, crowded, and dim, and in fact little more than a night shelter. Whereas the small, rented room gives the Liu couple a measure of privacy, it fails to give them the isolation and protection a private space should provide. One of their urbanite neighbors suffers from heart disease, asking the Liu couple to be quiet. As migrant workers, the couple seeks to avoid the trouble of moving, as well as possible homelessness. The Liu couple dare not offend their neighbors and thus try their best to live a silent life, even watching TV in silence. As a result, they feel depressed, rather than at ease or relaxed in the rented room：

> 总之，在所有与声音有关的事情上, 哪怕是上床睡觉啥的, 都一律小心着, 克制着。[. . .] 屏声敛气的刘民, 憋得心脏咚咚直跳，实在是压抑。

> In short, when it comes to anything related to sound, even simple actions like going to bed, they were always cautious and restrained. [. . .] Liu Min held his voice and breath, while his heart thumped loudly. It was really depressing. (136)

Forcing himself to live a silent life brings Liu Min mental and physical discomfort. Similarly, his wife Xiuping also suffers from this depressing living space. After a quarrel with her husband, Xiuping wants to cry loudly to vent her negative emotions, but the neighbor's demand for silence makes her desperate:

不一会儿，秀萍便头抵南墙，身体开始像蛇似的蠕动。[…] 秀萍不是什么肚子疼，而是憋气，心难受。[…] 她说她就是想哭，想大声地哭一会儿。[…] 刘民下意识地看了一眼隔壁，觉得秀萍的想法真是幼稚。[…] 在他看来，这也太奢侈了。秀萍忍了一会儿，还是不行。她恳求地说，再不让她哭出来，她就得成精神病了。她一边说，一边呼呼地喘着气，缺氧似的，连呼吸都困难了。

Soon, Xiaoping's head leaned against the south wall, and her body began to squirm like a snake. […] Xiuping was not suffering from stomach pain, but suffocating and feeling desperate. […] She said she just wanted to cry, to cry loudly for a while. […] Liu Min instinctively glanced at the neighbor's room, thinking Xiuping was too childish. […] To him, it would be too extravagant to cry loudly. Xiuping constrained herself for a while but failed. She pleaded, saying that if she didn't cry it out, she would go crazy. As she spoke, she was gasping for air, as if lacking oxygen, even having difficulty breathing. (167)

Even though Xiuping has her own private space, she is still compelled to suppress her emotions, to the extent of causing severe physical discomfort and mental distress. The issue lies in the disheartening atmosphere of her living conditions. This appears to be caused by their poor living arrangements and an un-soundproofed space. However, social interactions are intrinsically intertwined with the way people interact with their living environments. The Liu couple's frustration with their living situation reflects their interaction with native urbanites on a social level. As mere tenants and temporary sojourners in the room, the Liu's, like other migrant workers in the city, lack a true sense of ownership and belonging. The social dynamic with their urbanite neighbors further exacerbates their frustration, as any conflict could lead to eviction from their rented space. Their previous rental experiences also show that the rented room never really belongs to them, that there will always be problems. Thus, Xiuping says "only if we make big money in the future and buy our own house, then we can do whatever we want, and no one can bother us" (136). This again emphasizes the link between a genuine sense of ownership over private residence and a sense of belonging in the city.

Although the Liu's feel depressed in their private space characterizing a lack of belonging in the city, their life in the city is not as hopeless as that of the Wangs. This is mainly due to the spaces they have, allowing them to relax and maintain their hope of fulfilling expectations in the city. For Xiuping, this special space is the restaurant. She is co-owner of the

restaurant, and its space is a means not only for her to earn a living and justify her struggle in Beijing, but also a place she controls, a comfortable space belonging to her in Beijing's large and repulsive environment. In addition to the restaurant, her husband Liu Min also enjoys a public space, the city park, which helps him escape their oppressive living situation. As restaurant owner, Liu Min has leisure time, allowing him to join an amateur choir in a nearby park, of which he becomes the conductor. This unexpectedly gives him the opportunity to interact with native urbanites and to integrate within the city's public cultural life to some extent.

However, interactions between Liu Min and urbanites are full of difficulties, primarily because his leisure time is subject to unpredictability. It becomes uncertain and difficult to guarantee his presence at every scheduled rehearsal when an employee asks for leave or the restaurant has other emergencies. The essence of his scheduling difficulties concerns his priorities, as his wife Xiuping says "if you think business is important, you stay, and if you think singing is important, you go" (138). Inevitably, Liu Min's business takes precedence, leading him to occasionally arrive late for rehearsals, resulting in an unpleasant interaction between Liu Min and old Hu, a native urbanite in their choir. As the conductor of the choir, Liu Min is humiliated in public by Hu:

> 老胡说，他[…]就是想问问他在什么单位里工作。[…] 刘民告诉老胡，他是开餐馆的，他说是个小餐馆。他觉得没什么可掩饰的，一点都不可耻。老胡点点头说，这就对了。彭梅不解地看着老胡，问他什么叫"对了"。 老胡说，您没瞧他指挥时的架势呀，一掂一掂的，嘿，他妈整个一掂勺！老胡一边说，一边模仿着炒菜掂勺的动作，一挺肚一挺肚的，特别滑稽。众人哄然大笑。刘民顿时怔住。他感到全身的血液都刷地涌到了脸上，涨得他很想说一点什么。但他什么也没说。

> Old Hu said that he […] just wanted to know where Liu Min worked. […] Liu Min told old Hu that he ran a restaurant, a small restaurant. Liu Min felt that he had nothing to hide because it was nothing to be ashamed of. Old Hu nodded and said, that's right. Peng Mei looked at old Hu in a puzzled manner and asked him what 'right' means. Old Hu said, didn't you see, when he conducted, he was shaking and shaking, like a fucking cook was cooking! As he was saying this, old Hu imitated the action of cooking, with his stomach bulging, which was very funny. Everyone burst into laughter. Liu Min was startled. He felt all his blood rushing to his face. He wanted to say something. But he said nothing. (151)

Old Hu is an urbanite who enjoys the superiority of his status as a Beijing native. When he finds out that Liu Min is an outsider, he deliberately asks about Liu Min's occupation to humiliate him. Old Hu's personal attacks and the laughter of other team members hurts Liu Min's self-esteem, in a deeply unpleasant interaction with the urbanites. Seeing through old Hu's deliberate provocation, Liu Min disdains to argue with him. Instead, picking up on Hu's reference to cooking, he says he will go back to the restaurant to cook, and quits the rehearsal. Because Liu Min is irreplaceable in his role as conductor, the choir expels old Hu, apologizing to Liu Min, and inviting him back.

Thus, the conflict ends with Liu Min's victory, which can be regarded as a sign of Liu Min's successful integration into city life, as the team has expelled a native Beijing person to win his favor. In public cultural activities, personal talent can matter a great deal in influencing social relations. However, old Hu's arrogance and sense of superiority as a native Beijing person, as well as the humiliation Liu Min suffers as an outsider, are ingrained in his personal experience. Thus, his experience of public urban space is ambivalent, with both joys and sufferings.

In *China's Urban Transition*, John Friedmann states that two important traits of personal autonomy in contemporary China's cities are disposable leisure time as well as a home of one's own (Friedmann 2005). Both reflect an individual's economic conditions. The urban life experiences of the two couples in "Breathing Loudly" also reflect material well-being as a main factor affecting their survival in the city. Firstly, access to private space in the city hinges on personal economic conditions. The Wang couple are poor, so they cannot have their own private space, indirectly leading to their disastrous interaction with urbanites embodied in the house owner catching them out, which leads them to finally leave Beijing. The Liu couple have slightly better economic conditions, but still do not possess either a house of their own or disposable leisure time. Thus, their experiences of urban space are ambivalent. They can survive in the city however much they lack a sense of belonging in it. In ways such as this, Jing's stories highlight a profound connection for migrant workers between spatial ownership and a sense of belonging to a city in which they work.

3 Rural-urban marriage

"Leaving Beijing" is another novella by Jing Yongming, exploring the complexities of rural-urban marriage through the life of Wu Yueyue, a female migrant worker married to a native Beijing resident who ends up getting divorced. Wu Yueyue's romance, marriage, and family life are all directly shaped by her struggle to pursue an urban life in order to change both her status and destiny. In "Breathing Loudly," exchanges between protagonist Liu Min and native urbanites in the choir are more characteristic of interactions in a public setting, where an individual's ability matters enough to influence social relations. In "Leaving Beijing," Jing situates interactions between migrant workers and urbanites in the private space of a family, demonstrating inequality between people caused by socioeconomic differences. The family becomes a miniature of society, as inequality and conflicts within such families reflect unequal relationships between migrant workers and urbanites, coupled and intertwined with the impact of socioeconomic differences.

3.1 Wu Yueyue: a "phoenix" among migrant workers

Protagonist Wu Yueyue, a migrant worker in Beijing, is a waitress in a restaurant. Unlike common literary representations of female migrant workers who are either tragic victims that deserve sympathy or innocent angels in need of protection (Jaguścik 2011, Dooling 2017), in Jing's work protagonist Wu is an outstanding worker who is beautiful, smart, and capable.

At the beginning of this novella, the narrator describes Wu's outstanding talents in detail from the perspectives of employers Zhong Ming and his wife Guiping. For instance, Zhong Ming's first impression of Wu is particularly good, if profoundly gender-stereotypical and exemplary of the male gaze: "She is slender and beautiful. She has a nice voice and a warm smile, which makes people feel friendly and comfortable" (6). Zhong Ming's wife, Guiping, the picky proprietress, is so impressed by Wu's personal charm, that she waives the trial period and immediately hires her. After Wu goes to work, Guiping finds she is very capable. In addition to basic tasks of waitstaff, such as welcoming guests and serving dishes, Wu has her own ideas on how to recommend dishes to customers as well as how to appease fastidious customers who deliberately make things difficult for the restaurant. In the eyes of her employers, Wu is a perfect worker, and they take the initiative to promote her, increasing her salary twice in a year's time. In this way, the omniscient narrator skillfully portrays Wu's excellence by detailing her keen

observations as well as behaviors of the employers, lending credibility to their admiration and praise of her.

Ultimately, the narrator employs a powerful metaphor to elevate Wu's excellence to its pinnacle. On her birthday, the chef carves a gift for her from a pumpkin, in the shape of a golden phoenix, a lucky bird in Chinese culture, a symbol of talented people, serving as an extremely high compliment. In short, the narrator reiterates Wu's beautiful appearance, excellent work abilities, integrity, as well as kindness, presenting to readers a nearly perfect person, a 'phoenix' among migrant workers. In her discussion of the function of repetition in narratology, Mieke Bal explains that iterative representation is "often employed to sketch a background, against which the singular events are highlighted" (Bal 2004:111). Here, the narrator's iterative representation of Wu's success in the workplace functions as a foil, highlighting her failure in later family life.

3.2 Romantic relationship: dreams of being an urbanite, and difficulties

"Wu Yueyue is in a relationship" is the first sentence of the novella, which is also a major turning point in the protagonist Wu's life in Beijing, when her dream of becoming an urbanite begins to come true. Her boyfriend, Yang Pu, is a Beijing native who often goes to the restaurant Wu works at. He is a temporary assistant at a police station. Interestingly, the narrator does not directly describe the details of the romantic relationship between the two, but rather provides third-party evaluation and anticipation of their relationship, through which reactions to their urban-rural status difference are demonstrated.

After learning of their relationship, proprietress Guiping is quite optimistic about their prospects, although she thinks Wu is much better than Yang Pu in terms of personal talent and charm. However, boss Zhong Ming is not optimistic, believing their diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic differences will get in the way, however charming and outstanding Wu may be. The couple shows divergent views on the question of whether personal talent can offset the disadvantage of having a rural background.

Within Yang Pu's family, his mother, also a native resident of Beijing, is the main antagonist when it comes to Wu's romance with Yang. In her view, the disadvantages of rural status are multiple：

> 千好万好，可惜她是个乡下人！[…] 她不会像北京姑娘那样，给你带来房子，带来车，钱就更甭说了！结了婚，这家里不成了乡下人的旅馆和接待站才怪 […]最大的问题是，

有了孩子上不上户口怎么弄？[…] 退一步说，就是政府将来真有了政策，孩子可以上城里的户口，你想想，她连个爹妈都没有，将来谁帮你们带孩子？你们就光指靠着我啊？再说说她的工作，要是个金领白领什么的倒也罢了，啧啧，餐馆服务员！你跟亲戚朋友街坊邻里能说得出口吗？

No matter how good she is, unfortunately, she is a country girl! […] Unlike Beijing girls, she will not bring you a house or a car, let alone money! If you get married, our household will become a hotel and reception center for her country folks. […] The biggest problem is how to get a registered urban residence for your child? […] To take a step back, even if the government implements a policy in the future to allow your child to be registered in the city, think about it, she doesn't even have parents. Who will help take care of your child in the future? Are you going to rely solely on me? And let's talk about her job. I would let it go if she is a gold[17] or white-collar worker or something. But a waitress?! How can you introduce her to our relatives, friends, or neighbors? (12)

These are Yang Pu's mother's remarks to her son after she learns of Wu's rural status. Her language is strong and intense, and full of rhetorical questions and exclamations, which shows her puzzlement, astonishment, and strong feelings. Yang Pu's mother believes Wu's rural status, which is correlated with a lack of monetary prosperity, the burden of social relationships, and the pressure of public opinion, renders her personal charm useless. She assumes that, if Wu marries Yang Pu, her rural status will bring his family all the troubles she has enumerated. In fact, most of her dissatisfaction is, to borrow Rebecca Blank's terminology, "statistical discrimination or profiling." This is to say that her discrimination against the individual Wu is "based on overall assumptions about members of a disadvantaged group" (Blank et al. 2004: 55). Statistical discrimination sees that personal talents and charms are ignored, while personal future development is also excluded from consideration.

As for the couple, Yang maintains his relationship with Wu in defiance of his mother's wishes but shares his mother's sense of superiority regarding his Beijinger status. Ironically, his so-called urban status does not bring him any substantial benefit, since his economic condition is

[17] Gold-collar worker refers to highly-skilled professionals in high-demand fields such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and scientists.

very ordinary, without even a stable job. However, Wu accepts the urban-rural inequality and internalizes this discrimination against her rural background. Among numerous suitors, she pragmatically chooses Yang Pu as her boyfriend, viewing the relationship as a gateway to an urban life, as well as an opportunity to improve her social status and change her destiny through marriage. In contrast to Liu Min's public choir, where cooperation is paramount, here the emphasis is upon individual ability and talent. From the perspective of the restaurant owner, Yang and his family, and even to Wu, herself; it becomes evident that in the more intimate context of marriage and romantic relationships, personal talent cannot compensate for the disadvantage of having a rural background.

In narratives of free love, marriage can be a private affair decided on by people on the basis of romantic feelings (Pan 2015). However, the opinion of family members can matter a great deal, and in Yang Pu's case, his mother has more influence than he does himself. Given Yang's unstable employment and low income, he lacks the independent means to live on his own and is forced to live in his parents' home even after marriage. Consequently, Wu's acceptance into Yang's life extends beyond gaining his approval. She must also win the favor of his parents, particularly his mother. Thus, the relationship between Wu and Yang is no longer a private affair between them, but a family event involving a power struggle. The struggle of love between Yang and Wu, objections from the mother-in-law, and Wu's internalization of discrimination against her rural status all combine to turn their relationship into a battlefield between urbanites and rural migrant workers.

Whereas media representations emphasize that migrant workers should improve their personal ability to conform to modern and socially superior lifestyles of the city (Yan 2008, Jaguścik 2011), protagonist Wu Yueyue's experience clearly questions this view. She is nearly perfect in terms of personal ability and charm. However, Wu still finds herself disadvantaged in her relationship with Yang Pu, with her ability and charm ignored, while her low status as a rural migrant is emphasized.

To get the approval of Yang Pu's family, Wu Yueyue quits her job as a waitress. With Yang's help, she finds a new job as a real estate consultant, which Yang considers decent. With her intelligence, Wu quickly adapts to her new job, and her income significantly increases. During the peak season, her monthly salary is more than 10,000 yuan, which is four to five times that of Yang. Yang still maintains his sense of superiority, however, to psychologically

counteract the inversion of a traditional men-women dynamic caused by Wu Yueyue's higher income. Yang Pu spends more time in the domestic space, taking on housework traditionally performed by women. Wu Yueyue, on the other hand, takes on the role of primary financial earner, giving Yang Pu pocket money and popular and fashionable gifts.

With Wu Yueyue's higher income, Yang Pu's superiority as an urbanite grows to be questionable, if not laughable. For example, he doesn't dare to enter the real estate sales center where Wu works because, as the narrator implies, "it hurts the self-esteem of a man who can't afford to buy a house" (19). Yang's sense of superiority due to his urban status starkly contrasts with his sense of inferiority in economic terms. The increase in Wu Yueyue's income not only strengthens her relationship with Yang, but also wins the mother's recognition, as she finally agrees to their marriage. In Wu Yueyue's case, where personal ability fails to mitigate negative impacts of rural status, economic advantages succeed to some degree in offsetting the disadvantage of her rural status, thus gaining recognition for her in the city.

3.3 Marriage and family life: the practice of becoming an urbanite

Marriage is often seen as a symbol of recognition and acceptance, but it fails to guarantee true equality, as societal norms and biases in the area of gender run deep. Yang Pu, eager to celebrate their wedding with many friends and showcase the family's appreciation for Wu, faces a significant hurdle. Despite his efforts, Yang's mother remains troubled by Wu's rural background, insisting on a simple wedding. In her eyes, Wu's marrying into an urban family does not automatically grant Wu the same status. Rather, she believes the family risks being seen as "contaminated" by Wu's rural origins. This attitude underscores the existence of a social divide, where economic benefits alleviate some disparities, but do not eliminate underlying inequalities in social status between the urban and rural.

To make things worse, Wu Yueyue's economic advantage disappears not long after their marriage, as the Yang family suddenly gets rich through the compensation of a government construction project. Wu resigns at Yang Pu's request, leaving her job as a real estate consultant, retreating entirely to the domestic family space. Yang requests this to prevent Wu's exposure to potential suitors in her line of work, which threaten Yang's self-esteem. Here we see the rural-urban marriage failing to increase Wu's agency, or to transform her status into that of an

urbanite. Instead, the marriage facilitates the complete usurpation of Wu's personal agency by the husband and his family.

If Wu Yueyue's romantic relationship with Yang Pu initiates her dream of becoming an urbanite, then the family life developing out of marriage can be regarded as the actual, sobering realization of her dream. The first challenge Wu faces is in learning the Beijing dialect. Language is closely related to identity, and this is very much visible in the case of China's migrant workers. To make her fit in as a native Beijing resident, her mother-in-law personally undertakes Wu's linguistic rehabilitation, training her to speak the Beijing dialect, forbidding Wu to speak her hometown dialect. The ability to master a Beijing dialect becomes emblematic of gaining acceptance and fitting in as a true "Beijing person." Failing to learn the Beijing dialect well enough, Wu is forced as filial daughter-in-law to be obedient to her mother-in-law, and to speak as little as possible while at home, responding to everything with silence and a smile, "like a guest in a stranger's home" (22). This requires Wu to act in a vastly different manner than she did as an assertive and capable worker in her job. In remaining silent, Wu hides certain aspects of her rural identity to gain acceptance from her urban mother-in-law, and to be seen as part of the family. This situation exemplifies the complex relationship between language and identity, where societal pressures and the pursuit of acceptance can lead individuals to suppress parts of themselves to conform to the expectations of others. The language barrier and the cultural adjustments that Wu navigates represent a struggle faced by many migrant workers in China as they attempt to integrate into urban communities.

Wu's silence, like the Liu couple's "silent life" in their rental room, reflects a similar plight. Both situations reveal a disadvantaged position in relationships with urban residents, leading them to suppress their true selves. Wu's silence illustrates her identity's subjugation within her urban family, while the Liu couple's hushed existence is driven by the fear of offending native neighbors and facing potential eviction. In both cases, silence becomes a coping mechanism by which to navigate interactions with urban dwellers. This shared sense of

constraint shows how individuals from rural backgrounds may feel compelled to please others and conform to societal norms in exchange for acceptance and stability in urban settings.

3.4 A mirror: the moment of awakening

The fatal blow to Wu Yueyue's urban dream comes when she is pregnant. Distracted by chatting with an acquaintance while walking the family pet dog, Lele, Wu Yueyue fails to notice or prevent Lele from mating with a street dog. Upon learning of the accident, Yang Pu and his mother are furious at Wu, completely disregarding the fact that this confrontation might adversely affect Wu's pregnancy. They subject her to heartless accusations and curses, solely because her mistake violates their prearranged plan for the dog:

> 他们本来不想让乐乐生育，即使生也要找一直符合育种系统的纯正公狗进行交配。否则生出的幼犬就无法在育种协会领取相关的证明。可做梦也没有想到，乐乐竟被一直草狗给奸污了。[…] 真要是怀上，还不知道会生出一窝什么样的怪胎呢！

> They didn't want Lele to breed. Even if she did, they insisted on mating her with a purebred male dog that strictly adhered to the breeding system. Otherwise, the puppies would not be able to obtain relevant certificates from the breeding association. They couldn't have imagined that Lele would end up being violated by a random stray dog […] If she got pregnant, who knows what kind of mutants she might give birth to! (29).

The dog's situation serves as a metaphor for the human experience, especially for Yang and his family. Lele, the precious pedigree pet dog, symbolizes Yang Pu's status as a true Beijing person, while the puppies from a "stray, hybrid, inferior dog" represent Wu's future child, who will face challenges in obtaining registered permanent residence in Beijing due to Wu's rural identity. Wu herself embodies the characteristics of the "stray, hybrid, inferior dog." Initially, Wu was admired and esteemed as a nearly perfect individual in her workplace, akin to a shining "phoenix" among migrant workers. However, in the urban family she eagerly seeks to integrate into, she undergoes a transformation, descending into a lowly figure, enduring hurtful curses and insults from her husband and mother-in-law, as if she were a stray dog. The stark shift underscores challenges faced by migrant workers who, like Wu, endeavor to find their place in

urban society. Contrary to the notion of providing freedom and agency, Wu's rural-urban marriage exposes her to further exploitation, oppression, and violence.

This metaphor, presented by the omniscient narrator, draws attention to stark disparities and discrimination based on social status and background. Characters in the story may not explicitly recognize the analogy between humans and dogs, but Wu's husband and mother-in-law's derogatory remarks make her acutely aware of her inferior status within the family. The metaphor functions as a mirror, reflecting the harsh reality of the original sin of rural identity, exposing the institutional discrimination that perpetuates it. Wu Yueyue comes to the painful realization that she can never truly integrate into this urban family and wakes up from her dream of becoming an urbanite through a rural-urban marriage:

> 杨浦的咒骂，深深伤害了她作为一个人的尊严与感情。[…] 直到现在才明白，再努力，再坚持，再忍耐，她也融入不了这个家庭。该结束的迟早会结束。对于杨浦，对于这个家，对于一切的一切，她再也不会抱有任何希望与幻想。她彻底清空了以往的灵魂，做出了一个关于人生和命运的决定，她要堕胎！
>
> Yang Pu's cursing deeply hurt her dignity and feelings as a person. […] Only now did she realize that no matter how hard she tried and no matter how persistent and patient she was, she could never integrate into this family. All this would come to and end sooner or later. Towards Yang Pu, towards this family, towards everything, she would no longer hold any hope or illusions. She completely emptied her past soul and made a decision about life and destiny—she would have an abortion! (Jing 2016: 30).

Ironically, while Wu Yueyue's struggle of integrating into the city encounters various restrictions, her decision to leave Beijing faces no obstacles; except for one crucial aspect—the abortion.

The literary representation of reproduction and abortion is a rich area of metaphor and imagery. Wu chooses abortion and divorce, finally leaving Beijing, a signal that her dream of becoming an urbanite through marriage is shattered. Although abortion often represents women's power, freedom, and self-realization in literary works (Hunt 2007, Weigarten 2014); in Wu Yueyue's case, the abortion is primarily related to her despair and helplessness. The foetus for her is a new life, the next generation, a hope for the future, and a chance to be accepted by an

urban family, forming a strong connection with the city. In a desperate attempt to connect with the city, she uses her own flesh and blood to realize her dream. However, in the end, she faces dire physical consequences and profound psychological trauma. This serves as a powerful critique of naturalizing the socioeconomic rural-urban divide. The choice of abortion underscores deep emotional toll and sacrifice Wu makes in her pursuit of acceptance and belonging. It exposes the harsh reality that despite her aspirations, Wu's rural status remains a significant barrier to her full integration into urban life.

According to Jing Yongming, his novella was originally titled "Abortion," and the editors renamed it "Leaving Beijing" as a euphemism (Jing 2016). However, the choice of titles holds significant implications. While "Leaving Beijing" appears neutral, pointing to the physical separation of people and a place, it also conveys a sense of agency and mobility in the action of moving. On the other hand, the original title "Abortion," evoking a graphic and harrowing image of death, signifies a personal trial deeply intertwined with the failure of a relationship, highlighting harm inflicted on the female body. Jing's original title goes beyond mere relocation and delves into the painful consequences of his protagonist's choices. The shift from "Abortion" to "Leaving Beijing" through the use of a euphemism is a poignant commentary on how society often masks and avoids confronting harsh realities faced by marginalized individuals.

Conclusion

The four texts under consideration demonstrate that serious literary works keep paying attention to the exposure and critique of social problems, and offer us valuable inspiration to reflect on rural-urban migration, class segregation, and the urban marginalization of migrant workers in contemporary China. "The Abandoned Home" highlights the contradiction between traditional values of filial piety and individual freedom in the rural migrants' transition from agricultural to industrial labor. It also explains the existence of migrant worker couples in the city, and the left-behinds in the countryside. The other three texts foreground what I identify as typical features of migrant worker couples in literature: the temporary couple, oppressive living spaces, and rural-urban marriage. These features show migrant worker couples as far from ideal and even as flawed according to social convention: the temporary couple challenges traditional family ethics, the couples in the cramped and oppressive living space feel insecure and vulnerable in the urban

space, and the rural-urban marriage is fragile due to unequal social status. And all these problems are related to migrant workers' identity as "outsiders", which ultimately points to economic and social barriers in rural-urban interaction, and the obstacles to the urban integration of migrant workers.

Furthermore, for most of the protagonists, economic adversity is the biggest obstacle to their survival in the urban space. Whereas most scholars point out that China's notorious *hukou* system is an important cause of the plight of migrant workers in cities (Pun 2016, Sun 2014a), the literary representations of migrant workers' struggles show the need for a more nuanced analysis. In the three couples' (Wang Liushuan and Daidi, Liumin and Xiuping, and Wu Yueyue and Yang Pu) urban life experience, the crowded living space and the failure of the urban-rural marriage are to some extent related to the poor economic conditions of the migrant-worker protagonists. While the temporary couple violate the traditional ethics and need to conceal their marital status, their daily interactions with the urbanites are harmonious and their life is also the most comfortable due to better economic conditions, indicating that economic constraints become the new obstacle to the urban integration of migrant workers, even more so than institutional residential restrictions. Sociologists have also found that there is a positive correlation between income and life satisfaction among most Chinese migrant workers, as migrant workers with disposable income are more optimistic for future social mobility (Chu and Hail 2014).

The problem is that the income of migrant workers is structurally low (Li 2012, Pun 2016), and it is almost impossible for them to live a comfortable life in large, metropolitan cities. In other words, literary representations of the typical features of migrant worker couples not only highlight their struggle for subsistence in the city but also imply that, as a low-income group in China's capitalist development, migrant workers' desire of seeking a better life through *dagong* is at best, to borrow Lauren Berlant's term, "cruel optimism," (Berlant 2011)—an unachievable fantasy of the "good" life that includes economic gains, a place of one's own, and social equality.