

A Journey into the City Migrant Workers' Relation with the Urban Space and Struggle for Existence in Xu Zechen's Early *jingpiao* Fiction

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Abstract In contemporary China, rural-urban migrants constitute a new urban subject with entirely new identity-related issues. This study aims at demonstrating how literature can be a valid field in investigating such evolving subjectivities, through an analysis of Xu Zechen's early novellas depicting migrants' vicissitudes in Beijing. Combining a close reading of the texts and a review of the main social problems characterising rural-urban migration in China, this paper focuses on the representation of the identity crisis within the migrant self in Xu's stories, taking into account the network of meanings employed by the writer to signify the objective and subjective tension between the city and the countryside.

Keywords Xu Zechen. Contemporary Chinese literature. Urban literature. Chinese rural-urban migrants. Identity.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Xu Zechen. – 3 Identity Crisis and Marginalized Recognition. – 3.1 Vulnerability and Exploitation of the Migrant Body. – 3.2 Language, Muteness, Incommunicability. – 4 Countryside, Home, and Return. – 5 Concluding Remarks.



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1 Introduction

Urbanisation and labour migration are two central, distinctive and mutually influencing features of contemporary China. The post-socialist socio-economic order is marked by global metropolises and by an increased labour-related mobility from rural areas to newly developed cities. A thriving urban literature has resulted, and new social problems, including those pertaining to migrant workers, have been the object of its constantly growing interest, offering an original literary view on the complex inter- and intra-spatial relations in a changing China. This paper will try to address a specific case of social problems intersecting with an author's artistic sensibility, expressed through works of literary fiction that deal directly with migrant-worker lives.

The re-sharpening of the rural-urban divide, according to Wang Hui 汪晖, has been instrumental in providing a large and cheap migrant labour-force that was much needed to China's accession to the global neoliberal order (Wang 2006; Pozzana, Russo 2006). Migrants are variously termed 农民工 *nóngmíngōng* (peasant-workers), given their double-faceted and unresolved identity, or 打工 *dāgōng*, a Chinese verb meaning 'working [for someone]' ('the boss', according to Pun 2005; for a discussion on the cultural translation of *dagong*, see van Crevel 2017). They are also called the "floating population" (流动人口 *liúdòng rénkǒu*), given their constant existential and working drift. Recently a new derogatory term, "low-end population" (低端人口 *dīduān rénkǒu*), has appeared, mainly referring to the massive evictions of migrant workers in Beijing in the winter of 2017 (e.g. Li, Song, Zhang 2018). The main problem migrants face is the 户口 *hùkǒu* (household registration) system: as they are often unwilling or unable to give up their rural registration in order to register as urban citizens, they do not have access to the city's social and public services, are subject to social stigma as bearers of low 素质 *sùzhì* (moral quality; see Kipnis 2006), and develop feelings of non-belonging.¹ Yet, migrant workers account for 70% of the population increase in urban population (Zhang, Song 2003), although they are usually forced to live in the outskirts, under a sort of "residential segregation" (Wang 2013), and at the margins of urban society (Wang, Ning 2016). Compared with the older generation, younger migrants are pushed not

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¹ Dutton 1998; Franceschini 2014; Huang 2016; Jagusick 2011; Pai 2012; regarding the *hukou*, see Kam, Buckingham 2008.

only by the prospect of a better income, but also by a subjective desire to settle in the city and share its advantages with the city-born (Franceschini 2014; Huang 2016; Xu Fayin 2015).

There are many ways to read social reality, and literature is one of them. Contemporary urban fiction has produced fine examples of literary representation of city reconfigurations since the late seventies, as well as urban subjects' individualisation as a result of the transition to 'market socialism' (e.g. Song 2015; Visser, Lu 2016). In addition to this, against the aforementioned background, the scope of artistic creation in China has also included the subjectivities and social life of the *nongmingong*: human and social issues *vis-à-vis* migrants' impact with the *hukou* system feature prominently in 'subaltern' (底层 *dīcéng*) fiction (Li Yunlei 2014; Rampolla 2017), and an extremely fecund literature has been produced by migrants themselves, mostly in the form of poetry, uniquely exceptional in its representation of its authors' existences, problems, anxieties and dreams (see Liu 2012 for one of the most comprehensive studies on the topic).

This article attempts an analysis of works of urban fiction by Xu Zechen 徐则臣, dedicated to the lives of migrant workers in Beijing; these works are taken as a case in which some of the social issues outlined above fall at the centre of literary creation. Of course, it would be wrong and far too reductive to consider writers who deal with social life as if they were mere reflections of such reality, as if each concrete social problem automatically had its literary rendition. The strength of this 'intersection' between literature and society, which is what interests me, lies precisely in its creating a new and original interpretation, stemming from the fecund encounter between social life and the author's subjective sensibility. Literature can be investigated from multiple perspectives, of course, and my analysis of Xu's fiction concentrates mainly on its interaction with the social reality of its migrant and urban characters, on how it influences their own growth in the stories, and on how it appears to be perceived and read by them.

2 Xu Zechen

Xu Zechen is a relatively new star in China's contemporary literary scene. Born in 1978, he belongs to the 七零后 *qīlíng hòu* generation of writers born in the seventies, who grew up in the reform era and came of age during the wave of liberalisations of the nineties. He is a migrant himself, having left his native Jiangsu province to attend university in Beijing, where he currently lives and works as an editor at the literary journal *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学. An extremely versatile and cultivated writer, whose works range from urban fiction and social life to memory, psychology and coming of age, he has been

awarded China's most prestigious literary prizes, including the Lao She and Mao Dun Prizes, for his 2014 novel *Yelusaleng* 耶路撒冷 (Jerusalem). Well-versed in foreign literature, he has attended writing programmes in the US and has been invited to book fairs and festivals in Europe. Despite this, he still attracts relatively little interest from English-speaking academia, as basically no dedicated study on his writing has yet been produced, with the notable exception of Pamela Hunt's article on masculinity (Hunt 2016).

In the 2000s, Xu Zechen published a number of short stories and novellas on the lives of migrants residing in Beijing, known as 京漂 *jīngpiāo* (floating to the capital) or 北漂 *běipiāo* (floating in the north), and their complex relationship with the city. Although they do not fit into the category of the socially critical 'subaltern' fiction (Xu, interview with the author in Beijing, 11 November 2017), his stories provide a valid literary representation of and voice for the existences of those who are at the margins of urban society – the 边缘人 *biānyuánrén* (Li Dan 2013; Meng 2013; Zhang Na 2013). Li Yunlei 李云雷 (2014, 224) remarks that, as opposed to the main trend of *diceng* fiction, which is mainly focused on "hardships and inequality", Xu's writing explores his characters' "general condition of existence, or their 'whole' life". In his own style of literary creation, he mirrors the complex relationship between subjects and the city, the reconfiguration of migrants' identities, the construction of new social and affective ties among them, as well as their attitude towards mobility. His characters are usually migrants working at or beyond the fringes of law, but rather than presenting them as criminals, he observes how this shapes their self, informs their relationship with the city, and influences their agency. According to Julia Lovell (2012, 22), he is then successful in giving his migrant subjects "a convincingly human literary voice". They also generally undergo personal and subjective growth, to the point that these stories have also been read as *Bildungsroman* (Song 2015, 333). This is reinforced by a plain and simple language, in an effort to reproduce the characters' own voices.

Story lines show many similarities, often setting off with the main character's arrival or return to Beijing, with rare properly happy endings. Illicit love stories, strong friendship bonds often broken by mutual resentments, abrupt and often tragic epiphanies on the main characters' relationship with the city are often parts of the plots. Furthermore, the fact that Xu often, but not always, employs a first-person narrative (where the narrator is sometimes a witness who takes little or marginal part in the events), the many similarities between the stories, the constant presence of culture in migrants' lives (for example, their loving good literature and cinema, or being university students), and the use of the same environments as the theatres of action (Haidian, Zhongguancun, the university district) suggest that his works may be at least partly autobiographical, and that the mate-

rial from which he drew inspiration to reproduce the *jingpiao*'s lives was directly collected first-hand, though just in part, in real close contacts with migrants living in Beijing.

One of the original elements in Xu's *jingpiao* fiction is his use of metaphors, literary devices and strongly symbolic experiences to build a network of figurative meanings associated with the social conditions it represents and suggesting further layers of analysis. Reading his fiction and exploring this network of meanings can be useful for delving into vital questions concerning China's contemporaneity and the key, albeit subaltern, actors of its economic development.

3 Identity Crisis and Marginalized Recognition

Xu Zechen's characters try to become part of the urban society in a never-ending hand-to-hand combat with the city, which, however, rejects them. Urban space relegates migrants to its periphery, preventing them from achieving the full integration they aspire to; nevertheless, they never surrender, bringing about an inextricable impasse. In dealing with 'space', the Author is indebted to its Foucauldian interpretation as the *locus* where spatial configurations and social relations intertwine: space calls into question simultaneity and juxtaposition, near and far, the side-by-side and the dispersed (Foucault 1986).

In Xu, as in other authors of post-socialist Chinese literature (Cai 2004), travel, (labour) mobility, self-ownership and resilience are means of effecting a negotiation between subjects on the one hand and space and norms on the other, as they are perceived as ways to break free of social constraints and pursue the self's subjective fulfilment in post-reform China, where previous social networks and ideological codes are in crisis (Hunt 2016; Knight 2006; Visser 2008; Zhang Na 2013). However, throughout these stories, migrants lack a sense of belonging either to the city or to the countryside (Zhang Qi 2009). The city exerts a mysterious, irresistible appeal, as wonderfully depicted in this passage, when Bian Hongqi, the protagonist of the first novella "Ah, Beijing" 啊, 北京 (Ah, Beijing, 2004), first arrives in the capital:

大客车在傍晚时分进了首都, 边红旗激动得哭了。[...] 尽管笼罩在沙尘暴下的北京没有想象中的雍容和繁华, 边红旗还是十分满足, 借着沙尘暴的借口, 一直把眼泪流到车站。[...] 后半夜的路上车辆和行人少了, 他走得有些清冷, 但是感觉很好, 满肚子都是诗人的情怀, 觉得路灯下的影子也是诗人的影子。然后他来到了天安门前, 见到毛主席的巨幅画像时, 眼泪又下来了。[...] 像做梦一样。

When, at dusk, the coach entered the capital, Bian Hongqi was so thrilled that he cried. [...] Although Beijing, shrouded in the

[sand]storm, was not as composed and prosperous as he had imagined, Bian Hongqi was excited and used the excuse of sand [in his eyes] to keep crying until the coach reached the station. [...] Deep at night, cars and people grew rarer and rarer, and Bian Hongqi started feeling a bit cold, but he was still enthusiastic – poetic emotions filled his belly and his own shadow under the lamp-posts looked to him like the shadow of a poet. When he arrived in Tian'anmen Square, in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace, seeing the big portrait of Chairman Mao, he couldn't help but shed tears again. [...] It was like a dream. (Xu Zechen 2015a, 15-16)²

This appeal is however opposed to the harsh conditions that Hongqi actually has to face when trying to find his own place as a proud member of the urban society. As he does not have an urban *hukou* nor a temporary residence permit, he cannot look for a regular job and is forced to earn a living by driving an old 三轮车 *sānlúnchē* (a sort of pedicab). The difference between this precarious job in the city and his previous job as a teacher in his hometown is striking, as the forced renunciation of intellectual work is Hongqi's first setback in his attempt to enter the city (Wu Zechen 2016, 107). Another defeat comes soon thereafter as his sanlunche is confiscated by the police for lacking proper documents, Hongqi is permanently barred from having a regular or legal job. His only way to stay in the city is to sell fake documents.³ Only after several vicissitudes, including the city lockdown in the midst of the SARS epidemic and a marital crisis generated when he has an affair with Shen Dan, a Beijinger, does the final fall come, with his wife taking him back home following his arrest for fraud.

Still, mobility is configured as a subjective drive to leave the rural space, considered backward and narrow, to experience the life and possibilities of the global metropolis. 世界一下子离我近了 *shìjiè yīxiàzì lí wǒ jìn le* (All of a sudden, the world has come close), says Hongqi, and he continues saying that youth from his hometown have left to venture in the big world out there (Xu Zechen 2015a, 14). For Hongqi, going out into the world is actually a way out of a bounded life that would be no different from the one of 蒙上眼睛拉磨的驴 *méngshàng yǎnjīng lāmò de lǘ* (a blindfolded donkey pulling the millstone) (26). Financial motivations and hardships are the primary driving reasons in other stories. In “Weizheng zhizaozhe” 伪证制造者 (The

² All the translations are made by the Author except where stated otherwise.

³ Up to this point, the story shares many similarities with Lao She's 老舍 *Luotuo xiangzi* 骆驼祥子 (1936), namely an upright and optimistic outsider as protagonist and the sanlunche/rickshaw as his vehicle for subjective existence in the urban world. As a matter of fact, Li Yunlei cites Lao She, along with Ba Jin 巴金 and Cao Yu 曹禺, as examples of writers very close to the contemporary *diceng* literature (Li Yunlei 2014, 24).

Certificate Counterfeiter, 2006), a man identified only as 'Uncle' has come to Beijing to earn more money – a goal that later, following his wild and imprudent spending on trivialities luxuries, develops into the need to pay off his debts and sustain his family; Song Jiali in "San ren xing" 三人行 (Three People Travelling, 2005) makes it clear that she has no other choice but to come to Beijing if she wishes to achieve any form of upward social mobility; Kuang Shan, a secondary but important character in "Paobu chuanguo Zhongguancun" 跑步穿过中关村 (Running through Zhongguancun, 2007) complains that in the remote, hinterland countryside no gold or silver can be found (Xu Zechen 2015f, 46).

A similar dream also moves Dunhuang in "Paobu chuanguo Zhongguancun". He, however, does not properly 'come' to the city; rather he 'goes back' to it, as the story opens with his release from prison. Curiously, also in this case the 'first' impact with the city happens in the midst of a sandstorm, a natural event not rare in Beijing's spring, but also a literary device used by Xu Zechen to signify the 'floating' condition (Hunt 2016, 15). After he leaves prison, Dunhuang immediately heads back to the metropolis, as once its gates are open, he will usher in a myriad of possibilities to make his dreams of wealth and success come true. These dreams do not materialize, though, as he takes up a precarious and once more illegal job selling pirated DVDs.

This enthusiasm is balanced by the cynicism of other characters. The I-narrator of "Ah, Beijing" is depressing and traumatic in a sense:

北京怎么这么旧呢，跟电视上完全不一样哪[。] 那是的海淀完全可以说是荒凉，和我生活的那个小城的郊区没有任何区别。大学四年我几乎都待在校园里，不想出去。

Beijing was so old! And totally different than what we saw on television. [...] Back then, Haidian was a really desolate place, not so different from the town I was from. I spent my four university years almost entirely inside the campus. I had no wish to go outside. (Xu Zechen 2015a, 16)

Although the narrator admits that he eventually came to like Beijing (6), his approach is much more cynical than Bian Hongqi's and similar to Uncle's from "Weizheng zhizaozhe"; Uncle is aware he cannot make as much money as he would like, but also knows that Beijing is the only place where he can earn something for his son's studies by selling fake documents (Xu Zechen 2015c, 121).

As the (migrant) self is able to exercise its autonomy and affirm its existence through travel, it is by no means represented as a mere victim of a certain socio-economic determinism, but rather is equipped with a certain degree of agency. This is essentially what Sabina Knight terms "self-ownership" and describes as the possibility for

subjects to carry out their moral action and exert subjectivity (Knight 2006). Self-ownership as a concept centring on individual action and moral responsibility is a distinctive feature of the post-socialist cultural self, which has left the previously dominant collective dimension behind it. This is particularly true for Bian Hongqi; but Dunhuang and Kuang Shan, for example, are also particularly aware of their self-ownership as they see themselves as some sort of self-made 创业 *chuàngyè* (entrepreneurs) (Xu Zechen 2015f, 27) and consider travel, living for today and small illegal activities as exciting thrills in their lives. In their case, the break from social norms and family networks results in a life characterised as 无牵无挂 *wú qiān wú guà* (no ties or worries) (85). This glorification of self-ownership reaches its peak when Uncle in “Weizheng zhizaozhe” becomes the leader of a small team of counterfeiters, who call him by the pretentious title of 老板 *lǎobǎn* (boss), something that leads him to say that he could finally have 点领导的味儿 *diǎn lǐngdǎo de wèi’r* (a small taste of leadership) in his life (Xu Zechen 2015c, 142). Self-ownership is thus realised, but it is extremely limited, marginalized at the periphery of urban society, hindered by the *jingpiao* characters’ condition as migrants and by their lack of an urban *hukou*, i.e. the lack of recognition from the city.

Here we need to go back to space and its web of social relations. As their interspatial mobility falls within a predetermined set of socio-cultural conditions, subordinating their full integration into the urban space to social determinants, migrants have to negotiate their possibility to exercise an agency in the city. In other words, they struggle to obtain what Henri Lefebvre (1996) notably termed “the right to the city”. Such a right, however, is only attainable through recognition from the urban space. Recognition here is what allows the subject to properly have a space of existence in a certain system, without which the subject is, borrowing Jacques Rancière’s concept (2010), a “part of those who have no part”, someone who can find no place in the constitutive framework of a given social order. Moreover, according to Alain Badiou (2011, 58), “existence is a transcendental degree indicating the intensity of a multiplicity’s appearing in a given world”, but if the intensity is minimal, “this multiple does not exist in this world”, to the point that “[i]ts existence is a non-existence”. A “right to centrality” as an “existential and political right” (Merrifield 2017) is central also in Lefebvre’s discourse.

In my reading of Xu’s stories, it is under these conditions that self-ownership soon reveals its limits, mainly through the fact that the subjects exercising it remain outsiders with respect to the city’s social architecture. The heroic ‘floating’ rootlessness thus eventually leads to an *impasse* in Xu’s migrant characters *vis-à-vis* the definition of their identity. These limits are mainly due to failure to attain recognition from the space where agency is effected.

The obsession with documents in *Ah, Beijing* is particularly evocative of this, and may be read through the lens of Badiou's discourse on existence. As Perocco remarks (2017, 28), migrants' social rights are subject to their holding a document (either working or residential); and the document here can be seen through Badiou's analysis as the crystallisation of recognition, the permit to exist. In the story, Bian Hongqi seeks a number of 'documents' that may certify his belonging to the urban society. The first of such documents is the 暂住证 *zànzhùzhèng* (temporary residence permit), which he does not have (he actually does not know that such a thing even exists), and he cannot look for a job through official channels as a result. Lacking this document is the first negation of his right to the city, and this is actually made explicit by another 外来者 *wàiláizhě* (outsider) who tells him, speaking half Anhui dialect and half *Putonghua*, that he had better not get caught by the police without that paper (Xu Zechen 2015a, 17-18),

The second document, this time metaphorical, is his relative's *sanlunche*, which he can use to work and earn a living in a legal way: through it, Bian Hongqi can finally taste a sip of his right to the city. The pedicab eventually gets confiscated because it lacks the proper documents to travel, producing a kind of epiphany in him:

唯一能和北京发生关系的凭证丢了，他第一次发现北京实际上一直都不认识自己，他是北京的陌生人，局外人。[...] 一辆破三轮一下子就把他送回了苏北的一个小镇上。

The only certificate that could allow him access to Beijing was lost, and he realised, for the first time, that Beijing had actually never known him, that to it he was a stranger, an outsider. [...] An old *sanlunche* had been enough to send him back to a small village in northern Jiangsu. (19)

The third document is the marriage certificate. Hongqi is married to a woman that he leaves behind in their hometown, starting an extra-marital relation with Shen Dan in Beijing. Her parents are opposed to their relation unless Hongqi divorces his wife, thus ending his floating life and bringing him finally to settle down (38). A marriage certificate would give Shen Dan's family the surety that the *hukou*-less Hongqi would not leave Beijing, but it would also be beneficial to Hongqi himself as it would allow him to finally become an urban citizen, obtaining the recognition he is longing for. His unwillingness to permanently leave his wife (for reasons that will be elaborated further on) results in the collapse of his relation with Shen Dan, i.e. in the failure of his attempt to access urban society.

3.1 Vulnerability and Exploitation of the Migrant Body

The contradiction between the smallness and vulnerability of the *jingpiao* characters on the one hand and the dizzying, bulky might of the impersonal metropolis on the other is a central feature in this representation. Recurrent in Xu's fiction is the *jingpiao* feeling like 'ants', tiny and weak. The metaphor is first used by the narrator in the first pages of "Ah, Beijing", where he says:

觉得自己像只蚂蚁, 和一千多万只的其他的蚂蚁一样。蚂蚁太多了, 拥挤得找不到路了, 找不到也得找, 不然干什么呢。

I feel like an ant, identical to millions of other ants. We are too many, so many that we cannot even find our way, but we must keep on seeking it, otherwise what would there be left for us? (6)

This rather gloomy perception of vulnerability and subjective drowning in an indistinct mass of people with no other choice but to keep trying to access urban society is at odds with the optimism of other categories of migrants towards their urban dream of success and wealth (Huang 2016; Kan 2013). This is also shown in Bian Hongqi's final rendition of his poem to Beijing, originally intended as an ode to the city, but, after several unsuccessful attempts, eventually completed in a drunken night as a song of disillusionment:

啊, 北京
我刚爬到你的腰上
就成了蚂蚁

Ah, Beijing
After climbing up to your belly
I have become an ant. (53)

Ants carrying big loads of food can be compared to *jingpiao* migrants' hardships in struggling for survival (Ding 2012), while their multitude speaks to the migrant work-force's essence as a "reserve of the reserve army", an expression used by Perocco (2017, 27) drawing on Marx. In other words, everyone appears unessential and disposable, an easily replaceable part of one single 'assembly line'. This is what Bian Hongqi apparently thinks after his *sanlunche* gets confiscated by the police, when he realises in dismay that if he died that day no one would know it (Xu Zechen 2015a, 19).

An extreme metaphor for non-belonging, peripheral labour and exploitation is prostitution. For various reasons, often but not always coerced, prostitution is constantly present in migrations, and this is true also for international migration in South-east Asia (Graeme 2017) as

well as for rural-to-urban migration in China (Sapio 2011). Symbolic or actual episodes of street labourers and fake-document sellers selling their body are recurrent metaphors in Xu's stories. Characters resort to this metaphor consciously: for Bian Hongqi, this is a degrading and humiliating activity, but in the end acceptable as a means to the end of urban integration:

人一旦降低了自己,就无所谓了,就像妓女,卖一次就想着卖第二次,然后第三次,这东西搞不清楚,它一定是有快感的。

[A] man should not torment himself if he is forced to go down for a period. He's like a prostitute - after selling her body for the first time, she wishes to do it a second time, and then a third one, and eventually she finds pleasure in it, although even she doesn't know why. (Xu Zechen 2015a, 18)

In another passage, the eventual transition from illegal to legal work, although it never comes true, is symbolised as 从良 *cóngliáng* (prostitutes who get married and leave the street) (65). This metaphor becomes literal when Song Jiali from "San ren xing" engages in prostitution to pay for her younger brother's wedding expenses (Xu Zechen 2015e, 274), as her ordinary job does not allow her to earn enough money for it (271).

Similarly, another sexual metaphor is employed as the I-narrator of *Ah, Beijing* sees his first novel altered by the publishing agent to make it more exotic and attractive to the urban public (on the exoticization of migrants in mainstream media, see e.g. Jaguscik 2011; Dooling 2017). As he protests against the alteration, he is told by the agent:

你看现在的作家,为了成名不时地让别人骂他糟蹋他,不然怎么过上好日子呢,稿费这两天就兑现了,你看钱都拿到手了,还有什么好说的呢,我再次无话可说。那感觉,就像被强奸了一回。

"Can't you see that today all writers have to be ready to be insulted and trampled on if they want to be famous? You can't possibly hope to become successful otherwise. We gave you all we owed you in the last few days, you've got the money, what else do you want?" I was speechless. I felt as if I had been raped. (Xu Zechen 2015a, 67)

This feeling of being raped derives from an urban entity (the publishing agent) exploiting and forcibly altering the author's own creative product, which is tied to his non-urban identity both because he is a migrant and because it talks of migration. In this sense, it may be read more generally in terms of the alienation felt by migrant workers towards the jobs they do in the city, especially by those who have to sell their own manpower at a very cheap price, obtaining in return only a minimal part of the resources for their social reproduction and earn-

ing no way out of their peripheral existence. Urban society, Lovell remarks, is seen as a force taking sexual advantage of migrant labourers, eventually dumping them (Lovell 2012, 22).

The body is the ultimate means for expressing subjective agency in “Women zai Beijing xiangyu” 我们在北京相遇 (In Beijing We Met, 2006), too. Sha Xiu’s negative experience in the story is full of symbolic meanings associated with rural migrants’ frustration with and alienation from urban life, epitomised by her never fully getting used to the busy city life and the noise of its streets. 沙袖又迷路了 *Shā Xiù yòu mílù le* (Sha Xiu had got lost again) (Xu Zechen 2015d, 159) is the very first sentence of the story, introducing the condition of the woman, who always loses her way while getting on and off different subway and bus lines in an unsuccessful search for the bus to go back home. Such disorientation is also readable as a disorientation in life and agency, originating from the sense of rootlessness lingering in Xu’s stories. The plot evolves in parallel with her destructive frustration towards a city she feels no attachment to and cannot orient herself within, let alone find any sense of belonging. Sha Xiu’s desire to recover her lost agency finally explodes in an individual act of vengeful rebellion against her fiancée, Meng Yiming, for bringing her to the city by cheating with Bian Hongqi (characters from “Ah, Beijing” reappear in this story), getting pregnant and seeing in her unborn child her only vehicle for existence in the (urban) world:

我什么都没有了，一想到还有个孩子在我身体里，我才觉得我还有点东西是自己的。你知道吗，我在这里总觉得飘着，脚不着地，它让我实在一点。

I have nothing left, but then, thinking of the baby I’m carrying, I realised that there is still something that belongs to me. You know, I always feel like I’m floating and unable to touch the ground, but he makes me feel a bit more real.⁴ (215)

Her ‘revenge’ eventually dries up as she gets an abortion and finds in Meng Yiming’s sincere commitment to marry her a new way to negotiate her existence, but now 除了你，现在她什么都没有了 *chú le nǐ, xiànzài shénme dōu méiyǒu le* (she has got nothing now, except you) (218). This puts an end to her individual rebellion and shows that her agency and self-ownership is *de facto* limited by her concrete conditions, as she resigns herself to living in the city with him.⁵

⁴ From a comparative perspective, the relation with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* is apparent.

⁵ One more comparison may be seen here with the character Nora from Henrik Ibsen’s *Doll House*, well-known by cultured Chinese readers, and the object of a severe and brilliant critique by Lu Xun.

3.2 Language, Muteness, Incommunicability

Multiple episodes and passages throughout Xu's *jingpiao* stories (Xu Zechen 2015c, 120; 2015e, 257) see migrants struggling with what appears to be a language barrier between their own local dialects or accent and the strictly *Putonghua*-speaking city. This is not surprising, and it also comes from social reality. Data show that the poor level of *Putonghua* spoken by migrants from both the old and new generations, despite the latter's generally better education, often leads to discrimination, misunderstanding and even incidents in the workplace, not to mention that it limits the possibility for autonomous negotiation on the part of the migrants themselves (Xia, Xie 2013). According to Pun Ngai (2005), the linguistic barrier can also become one of the major obstacles to the building of a network of solidarity among migrants. As a result, this linguistic trait that accentuates their outsider origin is widely perceived as a stigma by urban citizens – and this is particularly true for Beijing, from which *Putonghua* originates (Dong, Blommaert 2009).

In “Women zai Beijing xiangyu” this is functional to the progress of the plot. When Sha Xiu grows tired of staying home doing only housework, she finds a job in a bookshop. She only endures a few days, however, because of the constant fights with the shop's owner, who complains that her strong Dongbei accent makes communication with customers more difficult. Following her refusal to adapt her language to *Putonghua*, eventually the situation becomes unbearable and she quits the job. This only adds to her sense of disorientation and non-belonging, leading to a quite explicit reflection on language-based discrimination:

北京越来越像上海了，口音不对就欺负你。上海我没去过，听说开口不“阿拉”一下，坐车都受歧视，是乡下人。北京公交车的售票员，耳朵也越来越挑剔了，听到外地口音的就把你归入民工行列，问路都爱理不理的，儿化音重得都有点阴阳怪气了。

Beijing looked more and more like Shanghai, having the wrong accent was enough to be discriminated against. I had never been to Shanghai, but I had heard that, if you did not put some ‘*ala*’⁶ in your speech, you would be looked at as country folk even on the bus. Bus ticket-sellers' ears were getting more and more nitpicking, hearing an outsider's accent was enough for them to throw you in the category of *mingong*. They were cold and peevish also when you asked for directions, and they would speak with such a

6 Shanghaiese for ‘I’.

strong *erhua*⁷ that it would even sound a bit eccentric. (Xu Zechen 2015d, 179)

While this passage may sound like a sort of denunciation of the serious social problem of language barriers and differences, Xu Zechen adds his own creative touch to the reason why Sha Xiu refuses to learn a more correct *Putonghua*. Her refusal is motivated by her impression that Yiming, speaking *Putonghua* without his strong accent, 一下子就远了 *yīxiàzi jiù yuǎn le* (suddenly sounded far away) (178). She misses the 地瓜干味 *dìguāgānwèi* (dry sweet potato flavour) of his native accent, using a food typical of their home province, Shandong, as the signifier of this disharmony, unveiling her obstinate unwillingness to separate further from her rural identity.

Language occupies a likewise important place, though with far larger symbolic implications, in “Xi Xia” 西夏 (Xi Xia, 2006). The story tells of a mysterious mute girl who suddenly enters the life of Wang Yiding and quickly places herself in his house, behaving as if she was his wife. They are both migrants, although while Wang Yiding works in a bookshop and is renting an apartment, Xi Xia has nothing – no house, no job, apparently no provenance, and even no voice. She is completely denied access to discourse.

There are, of course, many ways to read “Xi Xia” and the muteness in it that do not directly involve language and migrants’ relationship with it. The story has been discussed along its themes of life possibilities and unpredictability, migrants’ existential solitude, and psychology, as well as in its distance from Xu Zechen’s previous realist writing (Shao, Shi, Zhao 2007). From a different point of view, Pamela Hunt has analysed the story starting from its portrayal of gender roles performed in Wang Yiding and Xi Xia’s house, and within this frame the girl’s muteness signifies her need for a man to express herself and to give him the role as her “voice” (Hunt 2016, 22).

In my opinion, trying to locate this story’s place in my attempt to examine literary renditions of migrants’ social problems, Xi Xia’s muteness is interpretable also as the most extreme form of the *jingpiao*’s inability to speak *Putonghua* properly, and therefore to negotiate their existence within the urban space. Xi Xia is, after all, described as being 无根 *wúgēn* (rootless) and merely 悬浮 *xuánfú* (floating) (Xu Zechen 2015b, 105), terms that Xu usually associates with migrants. Because of her muteness, Xi Xia cannot adequately respond to the landlady’s harassment and accusations, nor can she find a job on her own. On a broader scale, this may also mirror the marginalization of migrants’ voices in the official discourse (Jagus-

⁷ *Erhua* is a phonological process typical of the Beijing dialect. It refers to the presence of a retroflex *er* sound at the end of a syllable.

cik 2011). Social muteness is present also in the powerful verses of the *dagong* poetess Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼: “a voiceless life, | This nameless, sexless life, this life of contract” (Zheng 2017, 102). Voiceless subjects are condemned to political silence, subalternity, and therefore to inexistence, a grim condition reminiscent of the 无声的中国 *wúshēng de Zhōngguó* (voiceless China) in Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 words. At the end of the story, it is revealed that Xi Xia’s muteness might be cured, and so she might eventually be able to autonomously negotiate her own place in society.

Language contributes to re-articulating the border between city and countryside not only as a geographical border, but also as a deep cultural and identity gulf directly affecting the self of migrants who attempt to overcome it. Sha Xiu’s refusal to learn *Putonghua* is a desperate effort to resist the disorientation produced in her by the city, and her obstinacy to keep her native dialect and accent, despite the cost in terms of job-finding and stigma, is clearly a consequence of her attachment to her rural origins. Whereas for Bian Hongqi living in the city means getting closer to the world, from the point of view of language, city and countryside actually appear as two different worlds on their own, and serious situations of incommunicability may occur.

4 Countryside, Home, and Return

The identity of Xu Zechen’s characters is thus caught in a seemingly never-ending process of redefinition and re-articulation through their negotiation with the urban space, following the departure from (and the impossibility or unwillingness to return to) the hometown in the countryside, and the desire to fully become part of the city. The progress from the existential ‘before’ to the ‘now’ of his *jingpiao* characters’ lives following their migration, according to Wu Xueli’s 吴雪丽 scheme (2016), is hardly a fixed or linear movement. The ‘before’ is always present and lurking in their ‘now’, as the native countryside constantly lures them with its promise of plain life away from the anxieties of the city, toward family solidarity and warmth, and sense of belonging. There are cases when the ‘before’ – the countryside – becomes also the ‘after’ for the characters, as in Bian Hongqi’s forced expulsion from the city in “Ah, Beijing” and the narrator and Song Jiali’s voluntary return home in “Women zai Beijing xiangyu” and “San ren xing” respectively. Alternatively, the ‘now’ can become a prison (both imaginative and actual), as both Uncle and Dunhuang’s stories begin with their release from jail, and end with their new arrest, sending them back to the starting point. As they attempt to obtain the city’s recognition or to find their own place in the urban space, the *jingpiao* engage in a bidirectional relation with

the countryside they come from, characterised by constant, and often increasing, tension.

The symbolic rendition of the separation between city and countryside is a common trait of both post-May-Fourth literature (Hunter 1984) and post-eighties fiction (Pesaro 2009). Countryside has also been represented in contemporary literature as the place where the traditional values and forms of family and solidarity still survive, as opposed to the marketization and atomisation of life in the city, where everyone is on their own (Gao 2002).

That Bian Hongqi's reason for leaving his hometown is the promise for adventure and the desire to break free of social norms, in addition to better economic prospects, has already been mentioned. The city is close to the world, whereas in the country 生活在世界之外 *shēnghuó zài shìjiè zhīwài* (the life seemed out of the world) (Xu Zechen 2015a, 26). Rural life for Bian Hongqi is monotonous and narrow, but also stable and warm at the same time, compared to the perilous life in Beijing. This is made evident in the very different descriptions of Shen Dan, his urban lover who represents the city, and his wife, who represents the countryside also in her unwillingness to leave it. Shen Dan is

长相还行, 头发有点干枯, 后来细看一下, 不是干枯, 而是焯油焯的欠火候, 成了干涩的土黄。

not particularly beautiful, and her hair was dry, but on looking more closely, I realised that it was not dry, rather it had been made arid and given a yellow colour by a low-quality hair product. (10)

By contrast, the wife

给人的感觉却很好, 眉眼清爽闲静, 尤其身上的某些气质, 是都市里的时装饰不出来的, 朴素, 大方, 很有女人味。看到你你就不自主地会想到温暖的家庭和幸福的生活。

would give anyone a very good impression - her clean and peaceful look and, even more, her posture were marks of a simplicity and a generosity that no urban fashion make-up would have been able to reproduce, and that gave her a strong feminine tone. Looking at her, it was impossible not to instinctively feel the warmth of family and the joy of life. (57)

Considering Xu's use of his different female characters as metaphors for the opposition between urban and rural life (Li 2013; Zhang 2012), a tension is produced between the adventurous escape to the stimulating and thriving, but fake and frequently hostile city on the one hand, and the plain and warm, but monotonous, genuineness of the

countryside, where one would live, like a blindfolded donkey pulling the millstone, on the other. According to Zhang Na 张娜 (2012, 39), the 朴素低调 *pǔsù dīdiào* (silent pureness) of the countryside, embodied by the wife's plain and clear look, prevails over the 心高气傲 *xīngāo qiàos'ào* (arrogant pomposity) of the city, showing to what extent the countryside remains the spiritual destination of this group of city outcasts. The following passage clearly affirms this subjective state of mind:

我在听到边嫂的声音时, 有一个强烈的感觉就是, 边红旗其实还是属于苏北的那个小镇的, 那里有他的美丽贤惠的妻子, 有他的家, 有永远也不会放弃他的生活, 那些东西, 应该才是最终能让他心安的东西。

Every time I heard Mrs. Bian's voice, I had the strong feeling that Bian Hongqi, after all, still belonged to that village of northern Jiangsu. His lovely wife with her good principles, his home, the life he would never renounce, were all waiting for him. These were the things that would have been really able to comfort and encourage him. (Xu Zechen 2015a, 73)

Despite its negative meaning in terms of prospects for personal affirmation, economic success and subjective realisation, the countryside also maintains a positive meaning when it comes to the values of family and solidarity it represents. The exact opposite goes for the city, but this negativity is expressed through its misrecognition of migrants as urban subjects. It is precisely in this negativity that the lure to return to the hometown fits in. Renouncing Beijing and returning to the countryside actually becomes a possibility in their darker moments of discouragement, as shown by the gloomy thoughts of the narrator in "Women zai Beijing xiangyu":

几年了, 我在北京到底干了些什么? 北京对我的意义到底在哪里? 过去不是没想过这个问题, 但都是一闪念, 过一下脑子就忘了。是啊, 为什么偏要留在北京? 为什么那么多人削尖了脑袋要在北京占下一块地方? 大家就那么爱北京么? 我想肯定不是这么回事, 但是, 为什么很多人混得已经完全不像样了, 还放不下这个地方?

After all, what had I done in Beijing during all those years? What did Beijing mean to me in the end? It was not that I had never given it a thought, but it had always been like a rapid flash, and I had forgotten about it right after. Really, why does everyone want to stay in Beijing? Why do so many people torment themselves to stay here? Do they love it so much? I'm sure that is not the point, but then why do so many people wear themselves out trying to get by, and still cannot leave this place? (Xu Zechen 2015d, 219)

This notwithstanding, Xu's characters cannot easily make the decision to give up their urban dreams and go back, as frankly put by Kuang Shan:

我们都出来五年了, 回得去吗, 拿什么回去?

We have been away for five years, do you think we can just go back now? With what? (Xu Zechen 2015f, 46)

This is a clear reflection of migrants' unwillingness to leave the city despite their hardships because doing so would be an admission of defeat and make them lose face (Kan 2013). Nevertheless, Xu Zechen seems to suggest that such an impossibility is not only due to the objective misrecognition by the city, but also to a subjective, subconscious attachment to the countryside. This is a possible reading, for example, of Bian Hongqi's unwillingness to divorce his wife, because it would be a divorce from his origins as well. The Chinese helps us to build an effective parallel: Shen Dan's persistent urge for him to 'really leave' his wife, 真离(婚) *zhēn lí (hūn)*, sounds extremely similar to 'really leave' his place of origin and hometown, 真离(开) *zhēn lí (kāi)*.

Misrecognized in the city, some of Xu's characters enjoy some sort of recognition in their hometowns. When Bian Hongqi goes back to get a divorce, a local newspaper seeks him for an interview and calls him "a model for the youth" who belongs to "the first generation of the youth of our town who have gone to work in Beijing and achieved their early successes" (Xu Zechen 2015a, 46) – quite ironic, as his only success consists in landing an illegal job and having an affair, but this irony adds to that of a fake document-seller looking for documents that may attest his existence in Beijing. This is made explicit in the following lines from "Women zai Beijing xiangyu":

母亲说: "北京有什么好? 呆在家里我都能抱上孙子了。再说, 就这么漂着也不是个事, 没个根。眼看着三十的人了, 你不急我和你爸还急。"

[...] "大家都说挺好的," 她说。"我们这边很多人都知道你哪。"

她的意思是说, 在北京我不怎么样, 但在我们这个小地方, 也大小算是个作家了。真让我哭笑不得。

[...] 我无话可说。有时候我也在怀疑, 现在留在北京对我的意义到底是什么? 是一种朝圣还是一个仪式? 或者仅仅是一个蒙骗自己的形式和借口? 我说: "我再想想。"

"What's so good about Beijing?" asked my mother. "If you were home I would have grandchildren to hug. And also, floating like this is meaningless, you have no roots. You're over thirty, Dad and I are worried about you, even if you don't care."

[...] "Everyone thinks highly of you," she added. "Many people here know about you, you know?"

She wanted to say that, even if I didn't have a great time in Beijing, here, in our small strip of land, I would still be considered a writer. Tears came to my eyes, and I didn't know if they were tears of sadness or joy.

[...] I was speechless. I'd also had my doubts - after all, what reason was there for me to stay in Beijing? Was it a pilgrimage, or a rite? Or was it maybe just a way to deceive myself, an excuse?

"I'll think about it," I said. (Xu Zechen 2015d, 204-5)

The rural home is speaking to the narrator here. Towards the end of the story, the returned narrator looks at his image in the mirror, and sees himself as 还像模像样 *hái xiàngmóxìàngyàng* (all in all presentable) (220), opposed to those who 混得已经完全不像样了 *hùn de yǐjīng wánquán bù xiàngyàng le* (wear themselves out trying to get by) in the city (219). The mirror reappears in "Paobu chuanguo Zhongguancun", as Dunhuang stares at his reflected image after a sandstorm and a night spent homeless, when he is covered in dust and sand. Recalling that sand (and sandstorm) is one of Xu's preferred images for floating, we can attempt a metaphorical, and vaguely Lacanian, interpretation of the two mirror scenes: on the one hand, Dunhuang sees himself literally devoured by the sand, i.e. defined by his own condition as a floating migrant and a marginalized person trying to achieve his right to existence in the city, although he apparently does not find this condition fully acceptable, as he seems not to recognise himself (37); the narrator, on the other hand, can finally identify with a self ("all in all presentable") that has embraced his rural origins, given up Beijing and floating, and settled down in his hometown.

In "San ren xing", a refined element of intertextuality enforces the concept. Song Jiali's constant, looming sense of non-belonging to Beijing, as opposed to Kang Bosi's brighter prospects in the city in his capacity as an educated migrant rather than a poorer *dagong* like her, eventually results in her decision to permanently return to the countryside to care for her family (again, traditional values at play). The story ends with a quote from Shen Congwen's 沈从文 *Biancheng* 边城:

"这个人也许永远不回来了, 也许'明天'回来!"

"Perhaps this person shall never come back, or perhaps 'tomorrow' he shall". (Xu Zechen 2015e, 288)

What is interesting here is Xu's reference to a writer who notably upheld country life as an element of 'Chineseness' itself, against the decadence, corruption and 'foreignness' of the modern city (Zhang Yingjing 1995). It might just be a cultivated literary reference, or perhaps a subtle nod to affirm Xu's conscious affinity with a literary tradition emphasising the good of the countryside, or even both. It

is however possible to trace an evolution in Xu's treatment of rural return: tragic in, *Ah, Beijing* spiritual/performative in Xi Xia (as the mute woman recreates a 'rural' life in Wang Yiding's house), explicit and joyful in "Women zai Beijing xiangyu".

Finally, despite recurring admissions of vulnerability through the use of several symbols, Xu Zechen's *jingpiao* characters are drawn as morally positive and marked by integrity, compassion and friendship (Zhang 2013). According to Gao Xiuqin 高秀芹 (2002, 122-3), within contemporary literature, the city, with its market practice and atomised individuals, has also signified an erasure of family and inter-family solidarity, which is proper to the countryside as well as to traditional forms of collective life that carry the marks of their rural cultural origin. In Xu's fiction, against a social background where the traditional family structure is undoubtedly in crisis, migrants nevertheless activate new forms of solidarity that amount to what Knight (2006, 224) considers moral actions to overcome the individual and individualistic pragmatism typical of free market societies. In *Ah, Beijing*, after his arrest, Bian Hongqi is rescued by the selfless efforts of the narrator; in "Xi Xia", Wang Yiding eventually welcomes the young mute despite his friends' opposition and his knowing virtually nothing about her; morality is featured prominently in "Weizheng zhizaozhe", as Uncle feels morally compelled to help his fellow forger in jail, with references to 道上的规定 *dàoshàng de guīdìng* (moral rules) shared by counterfeiters (Xu Zechen 2015c, 124); the whole plot of "Paobu chuanguo Zhongguancun" revolves around Dunhuang's promise to find and take care of his jailed friend's wife. Evident cases of a selfish profit-oriented attitude are also present, especially as Bian Hongqi and Uncle are betrayed respectively by their friend and lover to escape arrest, but they are never left entirely alone. As Hunt (2016, 10) observes, Xu's characters are alone before their arrival to the city, after which they build a new network of affections and friendships.

5 Concluding Remarks

Xu Zechen's own creative touch in writing the relationship between the urban space and its non-urban subjects offers valuable inspiration to reflect on the influence of globalisation on contemporary Chinese (and not only Chinese) lives, rural-urban migration in China, and the urban marginalized. Migrants' subjectivity in their journey to and through the city in Xu's *jingpiao* fiction are vividly represented through a number of situations, including illegal labour, and articulated in an original network of symbolic meanings, where an artistic use is made of factors such as identity, travel, gender relations, body and language to delve deeper into the migrants' self in crisis, caught between desires and socio-economic determination. Migrants' daily

lives, interpersonal relations and urban anxieties stand at the centre of the scene, revealing multiple layers of marginality in the city. Xu's characters live in an era of unprecedented economic progress for China, usually walking among the very symbols of its technological achievements in a global metropolis *par excellence*, and yet can enjoy only small bites of its wealth. Their stories often end with their existence either remaining invariably peripheral and frequently illegal, or experiencing failure (arrest, expulsion, retreat). Both this paralysis at the margins of the urban space and the negative changes are configured as a result of urban misrecognition. The *jingpiao* subject's self-ownership and autonomous agency in Xu's fiction thus appear as simultaneously upheld and strongly conditioned by the tension between recognition and misrecognition, a tension generally present also in *dagong* literature (Liu 2012, 6). If their right to the city is denied by the *hukou* system, they have no part in urban society, to use Rancière's words, and they are inexistent in that space, to use Badiou's.

Furthermore, Xu's work emphasises another aspect of the *jingpiao*'s complex subjectivity, i.e. the influence of the rural code of values. He stresses his characters' subjective inability or unwillingness to get rid of their rural origins, as the latter are shown in a good light and associated with positive values, above all solidarity (and family), in opposition to economic backwardness or adversity. Whereas mainstream media representations reduce migrants' journey into the city as an individual effort at conforming to a more modern and socially superior *suzhi* (Jaguscik 2011), Xu Zechen clearly questions this view, and the rural *suzhi* of his characters is anything but backward. In other words, this constant presence of their rural origin, both as a set of positive values and a shared condition, informs his *jingpiao* characters' moral agency, which is able to carve out limited, marginal spaces for existence in the city, notably with new social bonds, but remains peripheral and limited by the very social architecture of the metropolis.

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