



Between the worlds: Shanghai's young middle-class migrants imagining their city



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I use the case study of Hui, a young woman who lives in suburban Shanghai, to explore the migration experience of educated Chinese youth, who come to live, study or work in this city. A young middle class enjoys privileged access to China's global urban modernity. They are also increasingly sharing space with the "global classes" of transnational privilege. However, the image of common urban space, in which the aesthetic distinction between global-elite lifestyles and local aspiration is increasingly blurred, does not necessarily translate into common access to this space and to its hierarchies of hospitality and opportunity. Middle-class migrants are aware of their status as outsiders, whose successful integration in the city hinges not only on strategies of emplacement but also on performing the exclusive cosmopolitan repertoire that Shanghai has built for itself. Despite promises of safe bourgeois arrival, they often remain "in-between", with a sense of vulnerability in a competitive urban environment, and struggle with divided emotional and social attachments. In this paper I look at emerging suburban lifestyles in Shanghai, which are becoming part of the Chinese urban repertoire. Many young professionals are being squeezed out of the housing market in central locations. While some may choose to continue living with their parents to save money for home ownership, others buy apartments further out. Though replicating many of the bourgeois dreams that have informed "Western" suburbia, the urban form that is developing in China is also different and its middle-class imaginaries are less readily connected to the sensorial promises of the Chinese global city.

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1. Introduction

I first met Hui in 2007. She was 26 at the time and was studying towards her final year of a postgraduate degree in English at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade (SIFT). Originally from Zaozhuang in the south of Shandong Province, she had gained her BA in English from Qufu Normal University in Shandong and had arrived in Shanghai together with her classmate and boyfriend, Jie, in 2005. In 2008, she graduated, got married and became employed as an English teacher for undergraduate courses at SIFT. She worked at the university's Songjiang campus, which was part of an expansive new university town south of Shanghai's city centre. In search of affordable housing in an increasingly unaffordable city, she had chosen an apartment outside of central Shanghai and had moved

into a modern and spacious housing estate built immediately around one of Songjiang district's new metro stations.

When I visited her in her home during a warm and sunny Saturday morning in autumn 2009, she was expecting her first child. She picked me up from the metro station wearing a loosely-fitting purple jumper covering her already visibly protruding belly. The metro connection had made our meeting much easier and more pleasant to arrange than it would have been a few years earlier; yet my journey from the central Jing'an district was still more tiresome than I had expected, involving several train changes and crowds of busy commuters jostling past each other to reach platforms. I was aware of the fact that some construction was still being carried out around the new line to Songjiang but was nonetheless surprised it was taking me roughly two hours before I arrived.

Walking over from the giant, gleaming white Shanghai University Town metro station (Fig. 7) to Hui's apartment complex (Fig. 1), we crossed over multi-lane traffic, interspersed with carefully planted trees and green spaces, and passed an over-sized square embellished with some sculptural art in an artificial pond. The

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Fig. 1. Songjiang District residential estate I (October 2009).¹¹

residential buildings were towering in the background; conventional Chinese high-rises with the standard generosity of big windows and inviting balconies. The predictable monotony and overwhelming scale was being broken by a friendly yet impulsive blend of architectural moods, which included a water canal, with a small leisure boat moored to its bank, and a commercial tract of a European, red-roofed building-combination enclosing a small

square with a bright sculpture of jazz musicians walking on a saxophone (Fig. 2). Further away, the dome of the imposing main office of Shanghai International Studies University was coming into view, and a group of red cranes was hovering above another construction site composed of small cottage-style houses. In another direction, however, Hui's compound was flanked by a much more modest setting, with flat, open fields stretching into the far distance



Fig. 2. Songjiang District residential estate II (October 2009). Description for Figs 1 and 2: View towards one of Songjiang's middle-class residential compounds where Gu Hui and her husband own an apartment. In Fig. 2, construction cranes are clearly visible in the background.

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