

## **The Struggle for Subsistence: City Based Migrant Couples in Jing Yongming's Fiction**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With China's rapid modernization and urbanization in the 1980s, hundreds of millions of farmers have flocked from the countryside to the cities in search of jobs. They are internal migrant workers. Since rural-to-urban migrants are mainly young and middle-aged laborers, their 'family' in the cities is often limited to two adults living as a couple, with both partners working. This paper will focus on the literary representation of such couples, further discussing the urban survival of migrant workers and their complex relationship with the city.

By closely reading Jing's two novellas: "Breathing Loudly (*Dasheng huxi*)" written in 2005, and "Leaving Beijing (*Chujingji*)" written in 2016, this paper will explore the salient features of city-based migrant worker couples in Jing's fictions. In doing so, this paper examines how these features shed light on migrant workers' lives in urban spaces, including interactions with native city residents, as well as migrant workers' perceptions of the urban social world. I argue that city-based couples in literature not only reflect migrant workers' struggles for existence in the city, but also imply how migrant workers' desire to seek a better life in the city is at best, to borrow Berlant's term, a 'cruel optimism.' This fantasy of the 'good' life with economic gains, a place of one's own, and social equality often proves to be unachievable.

**KEY WORDS:** Chinese migrant worker literature, urban life, cruel optimism, couples, spatial studies, socio-economic disparity

### Introduction

Rapid Chinese modernization and urbanization from the 1980s onwards sees hundreds of millions of farmers flock into cities from the countryside in search of jobs. These internal migrant workers are indispensable to China's economic growth, and yet they are a socially disadvantaged group, living and working in deplorable conditions and often denied basic civil rights, being socio-economically and culturally perceived as second-class citizens. The new subjectivity of migrant workers, as well as new social problems pertaining to them, have led to

an explosion of literature depicting the lives of this demographic in a rapidly changing China. This paper will attempt to contextualize literary representations of migrant workers within a discussion of their urban survival and complex relationships with their new urban environments.

One prominently visible social issue associated with migrant workers is that of long-distance family separation. Data shows a relatively low wage level for migrant workers, who are mainly young and middle-aged (Bai and Li 2008). They are hard pressed to support non-laboring family members to accompany them to the city. Furthermore, institutional barriers are established in the city, with medical care and education opportunities denied to non-labor immigrants (Xu 2015). As a result, commercialization of rural labor often leads to migrant workers' long-distance separation from their family, as young and middle-aged couples work in the city, while their elderly parents and young children remain behind in the countryside.

Concerning this issue of migrant workers' long-distance family lives, most critics focus on the countryside, assuming this is where the "home" and "roots" of migrant workers remain. Consequently, conflict between migrant workers' professional ambition and their family responsibilities is attributed to personal choice, resulting in an ethical dilemma perceived as a choice migrant workers' make between their personal freedom and family obligation. It is important to consider that migrant workers may, in fact, grow 'rooted' in the city, however difficult it may be for them to fit in as native. This enables us to examine living conditions of migrant workers from the perspective of urban couples, a nuanced perspective that shifts focus from countryside-based long-distance family members.

This paper will focus on literary representations of city-based migrant couples, analyzing works by Jing Yongming (1958-2019) that give space and development to the lives of migrant-worker couples in Beijing. Jing Yongming was born in 1958 in Inner Mongolia, where he worked in a coal mining company for more than 20 years. In the late 1990s, he quit his job in Inner Mongolia and opened a small restaurant with his wife in Beijing, where he became famous as a literary author (Zhao 2010, Lu 2019). His novels draw extensively on his life experience (Jing 2015,

Zhang 2011), writing about migrant workers who make a living in Beijing, including waiters, construction workers, and self-employed entrepreneurs. He is good at describing Beijing from an outsider's perspective, while being particularly concerned about migrant-worker couples and their living space. This paper will explore salient features of city-based migrant worker couples' life-styles in Jing's fiction, closely reading Jing's two novellas: "*Da sheng huxi* (Breathing Loudly)" written in 2005, and "*Chu Jing ji* (Leaving Beijing)" written in 2016. These features shed light on migrant workers' urban living spaces as pertains to their interactions with city urbanites, as well as upon their perceptions of their new urban social environment.

#### An oppressive living space: "Breathing Loudly"

"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.

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

The protagonists, Wang Liushuan and his wife Daidi, are migrant workers employed by a housekeeping company offering separate dormitories for its male and female employees. As a result, the Wang couple are forced to live separately. Despite being legally married, their living situation and strict dormitory rules create a distance between them, veering 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, much less engage 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 is readable 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 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 city 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" (Jing 2012: 145). Comparing Wang Liushuan to a dog is an extreme case of popular discourse that distinguishes urbanites from migrant workers by labeling the latter with 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 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 circle, as powerless to have space of their own, needing to 'borrow' the space of others, exposing them as vulnerable and powerless.

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 profoundly deprived of fundamental rights and autonomy.

#### 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 poor in condition. It is small, crowded, and dim, 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 quietly not disturb them.

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.

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, and his heart thumped loudly. It was really depressing. (Jing 2012: 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:

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 uncomfortable (...) She said she just wanted to cry, to cry loudly for a while (...) Liu Min instinctively glanced at the neighbor's room, thinking Xiuping's idea was too naive (...) 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. (Jing 2012: 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 underlying issue lies in the prevailing and 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, and that there will always be problems. Thus, Xiuping says, “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” (Jing 2012: 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 urbanites and to integrate within the city’s public cultural life to some extent.

However, interactions between Liu Min and city residents 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” (Jing 2012: 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:

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 said, 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. (Jing 2012: 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 invites 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 indelible to his personal experience. Thus, his experience of public urban space is ambivalent, with both joy and suffering.

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.

#### Rural-urban marriage: "Leaving Beijing"

"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 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.

#### 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 (Jagućik 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, "She is slender and beautiful. She has a nice voice and a warm smile, which makes people feel friendly and comfortable" (Jing 2016:6). Zhong Ming's admiration exemplifies the male gaze, and this helps the reader get a sense of Wu's outstanding appearance and natural affinity with people. 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 workability, integrity, and 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.

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, an informal job due to its short-term nature. 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 thinking 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. These varying attitudes show 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:

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 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 or white-collar worker or something. But a waitress?! How can you introduce her to our relatives, friends, or the neighborhood? (Jing 2016:12)

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, without any pause, and full of rhetorical questions and exclamations, which shows the speaker's 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 married, Wu's rural status will bring Yang Pu's family all the troubles she has enumerated. In fact, most of her dissatisfaction is, to borrow 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 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. This contrasts with Liu Min's public choir, where cooperation is paramount, providing an 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 in love (Pan 2015). However, the opinion of family members can matter a great deal, and in Yang Pu's case, his mother holds more influence than he does. Given Yang's unstable employment and low income, he lacks independence to live on his own, 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 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 mainstream media representations emphasize that migrant workers should improve their personal ability to conform to modern and socially superior lifestyles of the city, 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 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 bread winner, giving him pocket money and providing him with popular and fashionable gifts. Thus, traditional male and female roles are changed due to an economic imbalance between the two.

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" (Jing 2016:19). 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.

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 deeply ingrained societal norms and biases still exert influence. 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 possession of Wu's personal agency by 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” (Jing 2016:22). This sees Wu 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.

#### A mirror: the moment of awakening

The fatal blow to Wu Yueyue’s urban dream comes when, 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 pregnant Wu could be overly disturbed by their ire. They subject her to heartless accusations and curses,

solely because her mistake violates their prearranged plan for the dog:

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! (Jing 2016: 29).

The dog's situation serves as a profound 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:



Yang Pu's curse 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 can never integrate into this family. The end will come sooner or later. Towards Yang Pu, towards this family, towards everything, she would no longer hold any hope or illusions. She has completely emptied her past soul and made a decision about life and destiny—she will 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 more closely related to her despair and helplessness. The fetus 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 the author 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

Jing's two novellas demonstrate that serious literary works give a great deal of attention to the exposure and critique of social problems, offering us valuable opportunity to reflect upon the rural-urban migration, class segregation, and urban marginalization of migrant workers in contemporary China. These two texts also foreground what I identify as typical features of migrant worker couples in literature: oppressive living spaces and rural-urban marriage. These features represent migrant worker couples as far from ideal and even flawed according to social convention. These couples live in cramped and oppressive living spaces, made to feel insecure and vulnerable in their new urban spaces, while the rural-urban marriage is fragile due to unequal social status. All these problems are related to migrant workers' identity as 'outsiders,' ultimately pointing to economic and social barriers in rural-urban interaction, as well as toward obstacles in urban integration of migrant workers.

For most of these protagonists, economic adversity is their biggest obstacle to survival in urban spaces. Whereas most scholars point to China's notorious urban-rural division system as a significant cause of the plight of migrant workers in cities (Pun 2016, Sun 2014), the literary representations of migrant workers' struggles show the need for more nuanced analysis. In the urban life experience of these three couples (Wang Liushuan and Daidi, Liu Min and Xiuping, as well as Wu Yueyue and Yang Pu), crowded living spaces or the failure of the urban-rural marriage are to some extent related to poor economic conditions of the migrant-worker protagonists, indicating that economic constraints serve as newly apparent obstacles to the urban integration of migrant workers, foregrounding these obstacles as more worthy of our analysis than even institutional restrictions.

The problem emerges that the income of migrant workers is structurally low (Li 2012), making it almost impossible for them to live a comfortable life in large, metropolitan cities. In other words, literary representations 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 for a better life through *dagong* (leaving the countryside to work in the city) is, at best, an unachievable fantasy of the good life promising economic gain, a place of one's own, and social equality.

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