"Snail Households": Containerization of Migrant Housing on Shanghai's Fringe

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Introduction

Chinese media has used the term *dingzihu* 钉子户 (nail household) since the beginning of the 2000s to describe individual households that refuse to leave their dwellings, sometimes even when electricity and water supplies have been cut off, to delay the advance of bulldozers and negotiate with local governments or real estate developers for better compensation. Observers suggest that such confrontational acts represent a new form of consumer citizenship derived from private property ownership after housing reforms (Zhang 2004; Davis 2006).[1] Recent studies of homeowners and their collective actions amid housing-related disputes in big cities also show the central role of private property in shaping right consciousness and identity formation among a rising middle class (Tomba 2005, 2009; Fleischer 2007; Zhang 2010; Qin 2013).

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However, the eviction of tens of thousands of migrant tenants right after a deadly fire in November 2017 in Daxing, a southern suburb of Beijing, invites critical reexamination of the property-enhanced citizenship rights discourse. It is hard for the public to know exactly how the migrant tenants and their landlords reacted to the abrupt eviction order.[2] Given that Daxing and nearby migrant communities were effectively dismantled within days, the extent to which they resisted was very limited.[3] This eviction remind us not to presume that all Chinese citizens bear equal status as subjects worthy of recognition and protection in the housing market. The western liberal framework of property and citizenship applied to "nail households" misses and even conceals sociospatial differentiation and inequality embedded in subject formation in state capitalism. The development of the real estate market and private property regime, built on rounds of ruthless accumulation and biased investment, has produced highly differentiated experiences and subjectivities in uneven urban spaces.

Based on ethnographic data collected between 2016 and 2018, this article showcases container housing on Shanghai's urban fringe to examine the unequal processes of homeownership. The accelerated demolition of urban villages has significantly reduced affordable living spaces for migrant workers. Removable cargo containers and prefabricated metal shelters have become an alternative for those seeking cheap accommodation. In contrast to the applauded, almost heroic imagery of "nail households" that confronts the joint forces of state and capital, the *woju* 蜗居 (snail household),[4] as Chinese media sometimes call container housing, looks rather timid. They represent a submissive coping mechanism among migrants to stay put on the urban fringe amid demolition and eviction.

I demonstrate how container housing exemplifies the state capitalist mode of accumulation through exploitation of migrant labor and monetization of state-owned land. The socialist *hukou* 戶口 (household registration) system continues to contour labor mobility after three decades of massive internal migration. Caught between entrenched rural-urban divides and regional disparities, millions of migrant workers are stuck in low-paying jobs, deprived of social security, and subject to widespread discrimination (Solinger 1999; Chan and Zhang 1999; Swider 2015). They can only reduce living costs and delay gratification in order to survive and save in cities. Tied

to their registered home villages, they also have to resort to rural-bound retirement and place-specific homeownership when they grow old and worn out. Migrant housing providers, many of whom are migrants as well, are also in a vulnerable position in the land use right market. State monopoly of urban land and its tiered, fragmented use-right lease system determine that container units are subject to constant state surveillance and manipulation, hence remain rather immobile despite their assumed portability.

Container housing symbolizes migrants' precarious position in China's exclusive urban citizenship and place-specific property regime. The containerization of migrant housing exposes a process of sociospatial reconfiguration of migrant livelihood that has become increasingly cellularized amid China's economic restructuring under the impacts of globalization and information technologies. During the process, migrants' mobility and sense of entitlement are highly contained, which contributes to the lack of resistance and collective action amid forced eviction.

Bifurcated Homeownership in Uneven Spaces

China has become "a country of homeowners," with more than 70 percent of urban local residents owning homes since real estate market reforms started in the late 1980s (Huang and Li 2014: 3). Local residents could obtain accommodation and property by being assigned to *gongfang* 公房 (public housing) from their work units and acquiring ownership at subsidized prices,[5] purchasing *shangpinfang* 商品房 (commodity housing units), or participating in the subsidized Economic and Comfortable Housing Project. In addition to the rise of personal income amid rapid economic growth, city governments have invested billions of yuan to provide quality housing to their local residents. In Shanghai, the government's spending on housing supply increased from 0.2 billion yuan (USD 28 million) in 1978 to 43.4 billion yuan (USD 6.1 billion) in 1996 (Wu 2002: 157). Dwelling area per capita of its urban residents rose from 6.6 square meters in 1990 to 18.1 square meters in 2015 (Shanghaishi tongjiju 2016).

In contrast, migrants' housing conditions have improved little. Less than 13 percent of migrants live in a unit from the formal housing market, according to a twelve-city migrant survey in 2009 (Liu and Wang 2014: 109).

Since the majority of migrants are in the low-income strata, they cannot afford market-price *shangpinfang* within a clearly defined property structure. They live in crowded dormitories provided by employers, informal units in urban villages, subdivided apartments, and underground shelters in old public housing compounds (Fan 2011; He 2015; Huang and Li 2014; Huang and Yi 2015). Lacking legal protection, they have to move at short notice and receive little compensation in the face of eviction. Because of the place-specific *hukou* system, migrants remain outsiders and have limited access to public services, including housing subsidies. Although the Public Rental Housing Program, launched in major cities since 2010, began to include nonlocal residents as intended beneficiaries, the program aims only at educated professionals (Huang 2012; Huang and Ran 2015). Low-income migrant workers suffering from poor housing are excluded from government-subsidized affordable housing programs.

Local regulations not only neglect migrants' need for urban housing but also blame them for driving up housing prices and hindering local residents' *gangxu* 刚需 (rigid demand) for homeownership (Wang 2018). Big cities have repeatedly imposed restrictions to prevent nonlocal residents from purchasing apartments in the hope of controlling housing prices. In 2016, the Shanghai municipal government required that nonlocal residents pay income tax or social security for five consecutive years (previously two years) to be eligible to purchase an apartment. Since most migrant workers work on short-term contracts or in informal sectors, the emphasis on such state-sanctioned qualifications discredits their participation in and contribution to urban economy and contributes to the deprivation of their eligibility for homeownership and property rights in their adopted cities.

The celebration of urban homeownership conceals unequal distributions and exploitative processes of real estate development in late socialism. Stories of successful property owners emphasize their competence and savvy in taking advantage of economic reforms. Such a celebratory discourse overlooks structural inequality and contributes to what Pun Ngai (2003: 469) called "subsumption," the process "whereby the extraction of the surplus value of labor is hidden and suppressed by the overvaluation of consumption and its neoliberal ideologies of self-transformation." Migrant workers, whose labor is essential to build houses, decorate apartments, and keep gated communi-

ties clean, beautiful, and safe, are missing in this celebrated discourse about consumers. They have been systematically channeled to live in factory dormitories, urban villages, subdivided apartments, and underground shelters that are marked by crowdedness, poor hygiene, and lack of legal recognition. And such negative perceptions of migrant dwellings in turn justify their forced demolition and eviction.

Containerization of Migrant Housing

Reported usage of cargo containers for migrant housing in Shanghai can be dated to the early 2000s, when the city geared up its urbanizing process in preparation for the 2010 World Expo (Xu 2013). Similar practices were also reported in major migrant-receiving cities (Wang and Yi 2016; "'Guizu'" 2010). I came to know of the existence of container housing through my long-term interlocutor Tan, whose family moved in the early spring of 2016 to Settlement A, which was hidden inside an old factory compound in northern Shanghai (fig. 1). The family of five (including the parents, Mei and Guo, and three children, Tan being the eldest daughter) used to live in a one-room brick-and-concrete shack in a remodeled warehouse on the fringe of a neighboring urban district for almost a decade. Yet escalated urban expansion has gradually erased such underregulated migrant enclaves. In the early spring of 2016, Tan's family moved into a prefabricated container made of steel plates and polyethylene board painted white and blue. Each container, three meters by six meters, was divided by the landlord into two units. Each unit, installed with an iron cast door and two barred, plastic steel-framed windows, asked for a monthly rent of 1,000 yuan (USD 150). The alternative of renting a one-bedroom apartment in nearby public housing compounds built between the 1950s and 1980s would easily cost 2,500 yuan (USD 375). Tan's parents chose the container option without hesitation.

Tan's family moved again in December 2017 because the land of Settlement A was taken back for some municipal infrastructural project. On the third day of no electricity or water supply, they relocated to another container unit in Settlement B. Installed on a small triangular piece of land between a railway track[6] and a factory compound, Settlement B was much smaller and harder to find than A. Mei learned about this newly built settle-

Figure 1 A recyclable collection station inside Settlement A, June 2016. Photograph taken by the author.

ment from her coworker, who had heard about it from a *laoxiang* 老乡 (fellow villager). Guo checked out the settlement after work and immediately put down three months' rent and one month's deposit to secure a vacancy. The couple hurried to pack and move in on the same night. Each unit in Settlement B cost 1,200 yuan (USD 125) per month and had a small sink and built-in squat flush toilet. Although Mei complained about its remote location and the extra distance she had to travel to work, she appreciated the convenience and privacy of the indoor sink and toilet, which was unavailable in Settlement A (fig. 2).

Container housing caters to the strong need of migrants for cheap accommodation. As of June 2019, Tan's family was still living in the unit in Settlement B and wanted to stay there as long as possible. When asked why they continued to live in a container despite the fact that Guo makes more money

Figure 2 A rental unit in Settlement B, June 2017. Photograph taken by the author.

through his part-time delivery job and their grown-up children have become financially independent, Mei insisted that they need to stick to cheap housing, saying:

> I never gave much thought to what kind of place I would like to rent. So long as it's cheap, I am okay with it. It can't be expensive. The expensive ones can easily cost over three thousand yuan every month for just accommodation! How much can you save after that? Even though my kids no

longer ask me for money, I still need to save more. When I get old, I need to have *yanglaoqian* 养老钱 (money for old age). I can't just sit there and spend no money.[7]

The anxiety over retirement and elderly care is acutely felt among migrants who have been working as unskilled laborers on short-term contracts or are self-employed, situations that offer little pension or medical insurance. Once injured or hospitalized, migrants can easily fall into poverty and have a hard time recovering from adversity (Cho 2009). Coming from poor families in rural Henan, both Mei and Guo received little education and had few options other than to work as manual laborers after migrating to Shanghai in 1998. Mei has been working as a cleaning lady. Guo took odd jobs on construction sites and recycling stations, and started working as a contract-based street sweeper in 2015. The couple has minimized spending, prioritizing absolute necessities. They avoid seeing doctors and taking medicines so long as their illnesses, such as back pain, varicose veins, and high blood pressure, are bearable. They also chose not to go back to their home village in the past decade during the Lunar New Year, the biggest holiday for family reunions, to save traveling costs.

While the urge to save is widely observed among first-generation migrants around the world, Chinese migrants are particularly fixated on saving largely due to the political economic structure that prevents them from doing otherwise. Scholars have pointed out how structural inequality and institutional bias have made rural-to-urban migrants "second-class citizens" and put them at great disadvantage in the urban labor market, locking a majority of them in the bottom strata of low-paying manufacture and service jobs or self-employment in the informal sectors (Solinger 1999; Chan and Zhang 1999; Swider 2015). More importantly, their nonlocal *hukou* status denies them access to local welfare and public provisions, including medical insurance and social security. Denied of equal rights and privileges enjoyed by local urban residents, migrants are compelled to accept substandard housing arrangements to save for old age. Container housing is just another example of their precarious existence under state capitalism.

"We Seldom Stay at Home Anyway"

The forced sense of self-reliance leads to the perpetually poor housing condition that may appear to be actively pursued by migrant workers. In addition to their incentive to save more, migrant tenants often reason that they do not have time to enjoy any better housing anyway. As Mei put it, "We *dagongde* 打工的 (people selling labor) rent a place to stay. We don't ask for much, so long as there is a place to shield us from rain and keep us inside while we are sleeping. We are all busy and seldom stay at home anyway."

Yet it is persistent low wages, due to the continuous supply of migrant labor driven by entrenched rural-urban and regional disparities as well as lack of labor protection and social security, that makes it almost imperative for migrants to work "voluntarily" for long hours. For over a decade, Mei cleaned one shopping floor's toilets and offices in a department store on a twelve-hour shift for two days followed by a one-day break. Once she reached age fifty in 2017, the labor agency that supplies workers to the subcontractor to which the department store outsources its cleaning jobs refused to sign a regular annual contact with her any longer. She has been paid on a daily basis (170 yuan per day) since then. To maintain her income level, Mei works as many days as possible, taking only one or two days off per month. She also filled in for others' shifts during the 2019 Lunar New Year holiday while they left Shanghai for family reunions. Her response to discrimination against middle-aged female migrant workers by taking more shifts reinforces the exploitation of her labor as designed by the day-by-day noncontractual employment structure.

To increase income, Guo joined the growing army of couriers in late 2015. China's express delivery industry has boomed with the aid of mobile technology, infrastructural expansion, and a growing consumer appetite for convenience. The low entry barrier, the temporal flexibility, and the immediate payment appear attractive to many migrants, including Guo. He picks up orders via smartphone applications, such as Meituan and Elema, and delivers takeout after finishing his eight-hour shift as a street sweeper from 4:00 a.m. to noon or from noon to 8:00 p.m. and taking a short nap. He rides on his electric motorcycle for an average of four to six hours per day. The platforms pay couriers by order (roughly from one to four yuan per order

depending on the riding distances). The more orders one completes, the more money one makes. Guo, an inept smartphone user, trained himself with the help of his children to *qiangdan* 抢单 (fight for orders). Once, on a rainy afternoon around 2:30 p.m., Guo got back and excitedly showed me the record on his phone screen of orders he had completed within two hours while eating lunch—plain noodles with a few frozen dumplings with raw garlic as seasoning.

The daily excitement of seeing commissions grow and the weekly ritual of transferring earnings to his bank account give Guo a strong sense of achievement that I seldom saw in this reserved man over the past decade. However, the exhaustion and risk behind his excitement cannot be overlooked. These smart phone applications use GPS tracking technology to record each order's process and completion time by the second and may deduct payment for a few minutes' delay. The piece-by-piece run-by-the-clock system, which has been widely adopted in China's export-oriented manufacturing factories following Taylorist scientific management to improve labor productivity (Pun 2005), has now extended to the sales and delivery of products, and has taken on an extreme form of exploitation enabled by information technologies.

The booming delivery industry that has generated millions of part-time jobs also contributes to the decrease of sociality in migrant communities. Most male tenants living in Settlements A and B have joined the delivery army, either part-time or full-time, to earn more money. The need to ride constantly on the road reduces significantly their time spent in the settlement for rest, entertainment, and socializing. Although Mei and Guo came to know a few neighbors adjacent to their units after moving to Settlement B, they seldom chat and interact with each other. Tired after long hours of work, they stay inside the cellularized units for rest, eating while watching television or playing with their phone for cheap entertainment before dozing off.

Cheap container housing is no more than a basic shelter that allows for the reproduction of cheap labor. What Mei said about how she grew used to her container unit placed right next to a railway is telling here: "The floor would shake, and the bed quiver. But once you get used to it, it is fine. We won't be home in the morning and when we get back, we are too tired to be bothered by the sound and the quiver. It even helps." While

adjusting to such poor housing conditions, Mei embodies a collective "slow death"—referring to "the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (Berlant 2011: 95). Under Chinese state capitalism, everyday endurance of fatigue and pain has been normalized by millions of migrant workers whose labor has been exploited for the sake of economic development.

Being at Home Later and Elsewhere

As shown above, urban dwelling for Chinese migrant workers is oriented toward labor reproduction in immediacy. The colloquial expression *dagong zhuanqian* 打工赚钱 (migrating to work and make money), a lived motto among first-generation migrants (also see Zhan in this issue),[8] expresses aspirations for a better life through migrant labor, though the realization of which is in an indefinite future. The emphasis on *yanglaoqian*, as Mei mentioned, similarly adopts a future-oriented outlook that induces migrants to endure exploitative conditions at present and envision good retirement back in their hometown. As they adopt "the 'technologies of patience' that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now,*" they embody "the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it" (Berlant 2011: 28). The failure of urban housing in mediating migrants' reproduction of family and social life forces them to contain their efforts of continuing family and kinship in home places instead.

While living in a container unit that is less than eight square meters in size on Shanghai's periurban edge, Mei and Guo put down in 2016 460,000 yuan (over USD 90,000) in cash to purchase a three-bedroom apartment in their home town, which has remained undecorated and empty so far. The couple envisions the apartment as a place for retirement. The couple also purchased it as a potential wedding apartment for their son. The persistent patrilineal preference for sons and the emphasis on intergenerational transfers between parents and sons (Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011) puts pressures on parents to help sons provide an apartment or a house in order to get married. Mei and Guo hoped that the apartment would give their twenty-

two-year-old son some advantage in the competitive marriage market. The couple was unsure whether their son, who has grown up and been schooled in Shanghai since the age of two, would live with them back in Henan in the future. They nevertheless felt the imperative to buy the apartment, as many of their fellow villagers did, to fulfill parental obligations and meet social expectations. The reproduction of family and social life is contained outside of their residence.

Migrants' huge investment in village houses and hometown apartments derives from and acts on the rationale of state-promoted urbanization. The state has actively promoted development of small towns and cities by relaxing or even removing *hukou* restrictions and promoting real estate development in those places. Meanwhile, it has tightened population control in big cities such as Shanghai. It has been much harder for migrant workers to settle in these big cities since the 2014 *hukou* reforms. Low-income migrants are ineligible to apply for Shanghai's residential status to enjoy its associated benefits, as the municipal government only welcomes elite migrants who are young, educated professionals, or entrepreneurs who pay taxes and generate jobs.[9] The high living cost, especially the skyrocketing real estate prices in big cities, also makes it almost impossible for them to obtain urban homeownership.

Meanwhile, most migrants still have agricultural *hukou* that gives them collective land ownership in their home villages. This partly explains why a large number of migrants put most of their savings into building or rebuilding their village houses even though they might be working away from home for decades (Zhan 2015). (Re)building a big house on assigned *zhaijidi* 宅基地 (residential quarters) not only signals one's social status but also serves the instrumental function of enacting and keeping their "birth right" to collective land ownership in order to prevent land grabbing (Cho 2009).

The countryside has been designated by policy makers as the destination for migrant workers faced with retirement or adversity. Meager earnings from small-scale farming nevertheless make it hard for migrants to enjoy a comfortable retirement there. Although the New Rural Social Security System and the New Rural Cooperative Medical System introduced in the first decade of the twenty-first century aim to provide more security to rural residents, they are widely perceived to be inadequate and cumber-

some, especially because of the place-specific restrictions when it comes to reimbursement.[10] Mei and Guo have been paying for the New Rural Social Cooperative Medical Insurance back in their home village since 2015. They nevertheless remain dubious about its usefulness, seeing it as merely "better than nothing." The small amount of premium and lack of confidence in administration impel them to work long hours and delay their gratification in the city. Saving for *yanglaoqian* remains a priority that orders their everyday life at present.

Contained Mobility of Container Housing

Besides the strong demand for cheap housing among migrant workers, the desire to reduce costs and minimize losses among landlords has contributed to the emergence of container housing. The strict criteria and cumbersome procedure of applying for *jianzhu xukezheng* 建筑许可证 (official construction permit) determine that most migrant housing compounds are illegally built and thus vulnerable to demolition. Landlords receive little compensation for construction on their leased land. Therefore, the portability of containers is particularly appealing to migrant housing landlords. Those who used to build shacks and multistory buildings for migrants now purchase or rent cargo containers or prefabricated metal structures, so that they can disassemble and remove the units at short notice.

A self-made businessman called Boss Wang, originally from rural Anhui, learned about the container rental option from other businessmen and identified online a company as his provider. In 2015, he acquired the sublease of the land use rights of Settlement A. He rented two dozen containers measuring 6 meters long, 3 meters wide, and 2.4 meters tall, with a monthly rental fee of 180 yuan (USD 26) and a deposit of 6,000 yuan (USD 878) for each container. He then subdivided each container into two units with metal boards, each unit being about nine square meters in size. These subdivided containers housed over sixty migrant households, including Wang's own family (fig. 1).

Container structures make the relocation, rebuilding, and recycling process much faster and easier. In June 2017, when Settlement A was evicted, Wang called the provider to send cranes to lift away the units at 400 yuan

each, after a discount. The whole process took less than a day, and he was able to get most of his deposit back. However, no matter how mobile containers can be, they are structures that take space and need a place to be located. Wang talked repeatedly over the years about the difficulties of finding affordable places to install his housing units. Shanghai's rapid urban expansion has made it harder for small-capital landlords to access and secure empty space for cheap migrant housing projects.

More importantly, the opaque and fragmented urban land ownership system prevents container housing from being really mobile. By law, land in Chinese cities is state owned. In practice, a myriad of "socialist land masters" composed of government agencies, party organizations, military units, and state-owned enterprises, in addition to the municipal government, exercise de facto ownership rights (Hsing 2006). The market-oriented land reforms separated land use rights from land ownership and enabled the commodification of land use rights and the development of the real estate market while keeping state land ownership intact. Sales of land use rights to developers have become the major source of revenue for municipal governments and local "socialist land masters." The development of a private property regime in urban China can be seen as a process of capital accumulation for the party-state.

During the process, entrepreneurs exploit the divisions between different "socialist land masters" to access underused land through money and *guanxi* 关系 (social connections). Boss Wang actively socialized with local agents of the land masters through wining, dining, and playing mahjong to gain inside information and conduct backdoor transactions. Although he was often called by the tenants in Settlement A an *erfangdong* 二房东 (second-tier landlord), he actually was a fourth-tier landlord with two more layers of intermediaries between him and the landowner. Settlement A is inside a bankrupt state-owned factory compound, which has been put under the control of a property management company affiliated with the district government during SOE restructuring reforms. Through his connection with a retired official who was connected to the property management company, Wang and his partners obtained access to the factory's open space by paying three years of rental fees up front, a total of over 600,000 yuan (USD 87,000).

In such a layered and fragmented state-owned land system, individuals are vulnerable in negotiating for land use right deeds. Technically, the land use rights for commercial purposes can only be leased through bidding, auction, or public listing. These three official channels are nevertheless prohibitive to most small-capital businesspeople involved in migrant housing projects. Relying on personal connections and implicit agreements, migrant housing landlords are fully aware of how treacherous such arrangements can be. Wang admitted that he was gambling on such subleases, and it turned out that he did not win in the case of Settlement A. In the spring of 2017, one year into the lease, he was told to remove all the containers because the district government planned to use the land for some public infrastructure project. Although Wang managed to negotiate for a few months' extension to reduce his monetary loss, the once crammed compound became empty in June.

Besides implicit sales of land use rights, local state agents can extract money by charging fees, in addition to gifts and kickbacks, from migrant housing landlords because they maintain the monopoly over *shenpi* 审批 (examination and approval) of land use plans. For Settlement A, Wang had to file numerous papers and went through rounds of inspections for almost three months before installing containers and getting tenants. Approvals from both the property management company and various bureaus in charge of electricity, public security, and sanitation and environmental protection were sought to avoid fines and potential eviction. As the rent collector of Settlement B, who was the landlord's relative from rural Jiangsu, commented, "For us who do land sublease business here, (we know) the *jiedao zhengfu* 街道政府 (street-level government) knows every detail of these places. Even if you just dig a toilet pit, people from the sanitary and environmental bureau will come over and impose limits on your rented place. You could easily lose a few hundred thousand yuan."

In addition, both settlements in this study relied on state providers for electricity, water, and waste collection, which made them more vulnerable to regulatory interventions (Ling 2021). Unlike many informal settlements in other developing countries, where public infrastructure is poor and bureaucratic neglect is rampant, container housing arrangements in Shanghai are much less informal than media or casual observers like to assume.

Like their tenants, migrant housing landlords are placed in a structurally precarious position. Although Wang claimed that his team lost over 2 million yuan (around USD 282,000) because of the demolition of Settlement A, he chose not to petition to get compensation for the broken lease. As he said, "A loss is a loss. Better get yourself out of this. What else can you do?"

The sense of helplessness came from both his friend Ma's failed petition and migrants' collective experience of discrimination in everyday life. Ma, another businessman originally from Anhui, built a five-story migrant housing compound on a subleased plot. In early 2018, his building was torn down and the electric wires and lamps were taken away. Agitated by the violence of the demolition team, he threated to commit suicide in the hope of delaying the eviction. After being persuaded by a street committee member to give up the suicidal threat, he was instead detained in the police station for days because his suicide attempt was considered open defiance against local governments and laws. Once released, Ma tried to seek justice and redress by filing a petition with the street committee, but he received no reply. He appealed to the district-level *xinfangban* 信访办 (Letter and Visit Office), where where citizens file complaints for official intervention, but was told to petition with the municipal-level *xinfangban*. He tried again, but there was no result. Such stories of bureaucratic agencies shifting responsibilities to each other are so common that they have become normalized. As Boss Wang stated to me in an interview:

> Don't even try to reason with the government, because you don't even know which agency is in charge and which you should turn to. Laws are made by the state. Yet law enforcement is another story. What the central government says is one thing; what each department does is another. How can we common people even have the guts (to appeal)! If the government wants to demolish (a place), even Heaven can do little.

Being a migrant makes landlords like Wang even more disadvantaged. The nonlocal status makes it imperative for them to seek local patrons to conduct business, as Wang reported: "People like us who try to do business here, you know, have to know people who have connections with officials. Otherwise you as a *waidiren* 外地人 (nonlocal, outsider) could not make a

fortune in Shanghai even if you bring 10 million yuan with you to the city." The keen awareness of being a *waidiren* underlines the precarity of migrant businessmen during the process of accumulation in state capitalism. They have to adopt guerrilla strategies of minimizing loss and moving fast to seek the next possible place and business opportunity.

Such recognition of and submission to the precarious status of *waidiren* is shared, though in varied manners, among Wang's tenants who have been working without much legal protection or social welfare coverage. The growing practices of outsourcing and subcontracting make it even harder for migrant workers to form alliances and organize protests (Swider 2017; Lee 2019). The high participation rate in the delivery service sector among tenants in Settlements A and B testifies to the rise of the precariat, despite economic growth.

The restrictions against the portability of container housing symbolize the contained sense of entitlement among both migrant tenants and landlords. They have little faith in the formal legal and justice systems and demand little from them. Instead they resort to removable containers to survive in obscurity under state regulations and formal legal frameworks. Yet such container housing does not help increase group solidarity or class consciousness. As migrants relocate due to constant evictions, their social circles often become smaller and more dispersed, their sense of community weaker, and the possibility of collective action even lower.

Conclusion

Contrasted to the well-studied Zhejiang Village in Beijing in the 1990s—where migrants, largely from rural Wenzhou, formed a close-knit migrant community and business network (Zhang 2001; Xiang 2005)—the scattered container housing clusters in Shanghai today represent the cellularization of sociospatiality of migrant livelihood, which has become increasingly isolated and precarious. Even though container housing provides a cheap and flexible dwelling for migrants, this article shows that the portability of containers is highly contained and unattainable. These container settlements are allowed to exist when local "socialist land masters" can profit from the illicit sublease of underused lands. They survive by staying out of sight, submit-

ting to local state surveillance, and conforming to the exploitative logic of state-capitalist accumulation. Once they are perceived as standing in the way of infrastructural building or real estate development, these small enclaves have to disappear, and their tenants disperse at short notice.

If stand-alone "nail households" fuel the imagination of popular resistance against a predatory state-capital coalition and convey a sense of heroic defiance to protect individual rights to private property among Chinese residents, "snail households" made of containers and hidden inside factory compounds or besieged by gated communities highlight the limits of celebrating private property–based citizenship rights. Given that homeownership is often *hukou*-place-specific and low-income migrants are denied purchase rights as well as access to housing subsidies in their adopted cities, such citizenship rights are inherently exclusive, reinforcing sociospatial differentiation and disparity.

Container housing reifies migrants' precarity in China's state capitalism. The absence of state provision has forced them to bear the costs of labor reproduction. Living in cheap, unstable housing arrangements, they endure everyday wear and tear that proves counterproductive to their hopes for a good life of comfort in the future. The administrative and affective attachment to collectively owned land in registered home villages determines that migrants' physical and socioeconomic mobility is rural bound. They are systematically channeled to invest in properties in the countryside, even though they have been working and living in cities for over one or two decades. The more they send remittances to their registered villages and purchase township apartments for future retirement, the less they ask from their current city dwelling and municipal governments. The more exploitation they allow of their labor, the more attrition their bodies endure, the less entitled they feel to enjoy the present, and the less likely it is that they will fulfill their dreams of a good old age.

Notes

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1 China introduced its first Property Law in 2007, which gave legal recognition of private property and enabled homeowners to negotiate compensation and file litigation in housing-related disputes.

2 State-sanctioned media have underreported and removed records of discontent and resistance among migrants. The *Wall Street Journal* reported a few brief protests in Beijing villages condemning forced evictions. These protests lasted a few hours and appealed to human rights rather than property rights (Dou 2017). Short, blurry clips on Facebook showed some migrants walking on a street and arguing with the police, but these clips never made it to mainstream Chinese media under state censorship.

3 I do not mean to negate strategies used among local landlords and migrant tenants, such as feigning moving to escape harassment from public security forces. Yet the success of such strategies seems very limited, given that the affected communities remain deserted, according to a series of news reports one year after the fire. See Yang 2018; Keegan 2018.

4 *Woju* has also been used to refer to tiny, overcrowded apartments. I use "snail household" to emphasize not only the smallness but also the portability of container housing.

5 When the provision of welfare housing ended in late 1999 to stimulate the development of the real estate market, local urban residents could buy out the property rights of their apartments assigned by their work units or pay higher rent. The rent and sale price of such public housing are still below market rates.

6 The railway is only used for cargo trains that create rumbling sounds at specific times.

7 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

8 New-generation migrants (*xinshengdai nongmingong*), those born in the late 1980s and 1990s, differ from older generations in that they tend to receive more education, migrate at a younger age, have much less attachment to the countryside, and have higher consumer demand and aspirations for urban life (see Han 2012; Lan 2014; Ling 2020).

9 Shanghai has introduced a point system (*jifenzhi*) since the early 2000s to allow qualified migrants to apply for a Shanghai residence card and enjoy its associated rights and benefits if they accumulate 120 or more points, which are calculated based on age, education, occupation, home ownership, professional qualification, tax payments, and so on.

10 These systems were launched in the early 2000s in pilot counties and became established nationwide by 2010. Local governments contribute to each participant's account. In 2017, the annual insurance fee for the New Rural Cooperative Medical System was 180 yuan (USD 26), and state subsidy 450 yuan (USD 66), based on the national average. Regional variations are large, though, and procedures for reimbursement and subsidy are often inconvenient.

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