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Temporary migrants and public space: a case study of Dongguan, China

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ABSTRACT

The development of the labour-intensive manufacturing sector in Dongguan, China, stimulated significant inflows of temporary migrants. However, their temporary status limits migrants' mobility and restrains their access to public resources available in the city. The community square in proximity to factories provides space for temporary migrant workers and their families to congregate, socialise and exercise during after-work hours. Grounded in theoretical discussions of the precarity of temporary migration and the intersection of migrants and urban space, this study uses participant observations and semi-structured interviews to examine the following questions: (1) What are the spatial and temporal patterns of temporary migrants' use of the community square? (2) How do temporary migrants' use of the community square indicate social inclusion or exclusion from the destination society? (3) How do temporary migrants experience precarity in spatial and temporal dimensions? The research findings suggest that the temporary status of migrants and fast-paced work schedules of manufacturing factories limit migrants' options for after-work leisure activities both spatially and temporally. The research has broad implications for the integration of temporary migrants in Chinese cities and the development of public space to enhance social belonging among underserved migrant populations.

KEYWORDS

Precarity; temporary migrants; public space; China

Introduction

At a few minutes past 6:00 pm on a Wednesday, Meng, originally from Hubei Province but now an assembly line worker at a shoe manufacturing factory in Dongguan, China, walked to a community square about five minutes away from the factory to relax and exercise. The city of Dongguan is often referred to as the 'World's Factory' or 'Migrant City'. In 2017, Dongguan hosted around 4.39 million temporary migrants, more than twice the population of registered local residents (Dongguan Statistical Yearbook 2018a). Like many other migrant workers in Dongguan, Meng lived in the dormitory built on the factory premise, a common spatial arrangement employed by factory managers to increase production efficiency and oversee factory workers (Pun and Chan 2013). The community square was one of the very few places that Meng visited to escape briefly from crowded working and living conditions that were the norm for migrant workers. Like Meng, the

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temporary status of many migrants heightens their precarity (Chacko and Price 2020) and limits their spatial mobility and access to public resources in destination societies.

The new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006) argued that scholars should bring together the study of human mobility at the global scale with everyday concerns at the local scale. Migration processes are mediated not only by regulations and policies at the state level but also by everyday encounters in cities and neighbourhoods where these regulations and policies must be negotiated. Many scholars have examined the intersection of migrants and cities from both spatial and temporal dimensions. Spatially, human geographers view the city not as a bounded container but, rather, as a relational configuration for migrant populations. Scholars argued for everyone to have the right to the city (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1996; Mitchell 2003). Singer (2004) and Price and Benton-Short (2008) discussed the concept of 'immigrant gateway cities' and emphasised cities as critical entry points, nodes, and urban settlements. While existing scholarship has examined the role of cities in the migration process and the different modes of incorporation for migrants, less attention has been devoted to the everyday constitution of urban space and the role of temporary migrants as urban actors. A second strand of literature focuses on the temporal dimension. Bailey et al. (2002) coined the term 'permanent temporariness' to explain the transnational experiences of temporary migrant workers from El Salvador. Collins (2012) further expanded this term into conceptualizations of urban spatiality by discussing how the presence of significant numbers of temporary migrants produces 'both passing and more long-term transformations of the urban built environment' (322). The concept of 'permanent temporariness' offers an analytical starting point to consider the urban implications of such temporary mobility.

This research aims to advance the literature on the spatial and temporal dimensions of precarity and (im)mobility experienced by temporary migrants in non-Western context. Based on semi-structured interviews with temporary migrants and participant observations at a community square in Dongguan, China, this article focuses on the spatial and temporal dimensions of migrant precarity in relation to public space. Specifically, this study aims to understand the following: (1) What are the spatial and temporal patterns by which temporary migrants use the community square? (2) How do temporary migrants' uses of the community square indicate social inclusion in or exclusion from the destination society? (3) How do temporary migrants experience precarity in spatial and temporal dimensions?

In the following sections, the article will provide an overview of the relevant literature that examines the precarity of temporary migration and its relations to urban public space. Following a contextualisation of temporary migrants in China and an explanation of the research methods employed, the article will analyse the research findings according to uses of space, social inclusions and exclusions in the locality of the community square, and the destination society.

Literature review

The precarity of temporary migrants

Traditional migration studies were anchored in the analysis of permanent migration, ignoring, until recently, non-permanent migration and its effects on economic and

socio-cultural landscapes (Baláz, Williams, and Kollar 2004; Parreñas 2010; Robertson 2014). While some scholars believed temporary migration might transform into permanent settlement, initiating chain migration and the establishment of ethnic communities (Castles 2006; Hugo 2003), others argued that the restrictive policies and regulations in destination societies prevent temporary migrants from moving into permanent settlement (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). Meanwhile, the dichotomy between temporary and permanent mobility was challenged. King (2002) argued for a deconstruction of the binary of migration and pointed out that there are 'different degrees of temporariness' (King 2002, 93) rather than clear-cut distinctions between temporary and permanent migration. Moreover, the idea of 'permanent temporariness' suggests the ways in which the temporary status of migrants has both a passing and long-lasting effect on 'bodies, families, and social fields' (Bailey et al. 2002, 139), as well as urban space and the built environment (Collins 2012).

Embedded in the temporality of migration are the restrictions imposed on temporary migrants by the receiving societies. Migration status is associated significantly with the rights and identities of residents (Joppke 2007). The precarity of temporary migrants is reflected in various spatial scales, including international, national, city and neighbourhood levels (Chacko and Price 2020). Immigration law structures 'the vulnerability of those who enter by assigning them to various categories of precariousness, ranging from illegality though permanent temporariness, transitional temporariness, and permanent residence to citizenship' (Macklin 2010, 332). Castles and Davidson (2000) described the 'differential exclusion' of migrants in some host countries, which encourages migrant workers to be temporary sojourners rather than long-term residents. Their temporary status turns migrant labourers into precarious workers over whom employers and managers have particular and wide-ranging mechanisms of control (Anderson 2010; Lewis et al. 2015).

On the scale of urban life, the temporal restrictions also influence temporary migrants' everyday migration experiences. Temporary migrants are usually not entitled to local citizenship (Smart and Smart 2001) and are restricted from obtaining more affordable public housing, medical services, public education, and pensions, which are available only to permanent residents (Fan 2002; Solinger 1999). While some scholars believed that integration could be achieved over time (Alba and Nee 2003; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997), other researchers argued that barriers such as language differences, discrimination, and lack of educational qualifications would prevent the full integration of temporary migrants (Gans 2007; Portes and Zhou 1993). In short, the temporary status of migrants is likely to put them in precarious and uncertain conditions and limits their social and spatial mobility in destination cities.

The intersection of temporary migrants and public space

Acknowledging the precarity of temporary migrants is not to suggest that migrants do not have any influence over the ongoing constitution of destination societies. The migration-development paradigm perceives migrants as agents, rather than instruments of development (Muniandy and Bonatti 2014). While the challenges and hardships experienced by temporary migrants have been examined quite thoroughly (Anderson 2010; Lewis et al. 2015), less attention has been paid to temporary migrants' roles in reproducing and

contesting urban space (Bork-Hüffer 2016). Temporary migrants, as a group of urban dwellers, are constantly restructuring space–time relations (Bailey et al. 2002). Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009) examined various pathways for migrant incorporation and the interrelations between migration and urban transformation. Similarly, Tardiveau and Mallo (2014) maintained that temporary migrants actively shape the urban space in both temporary and permanent ways.

Among all urban space, public space is viewed as a 'third place', in addition to work space and living space (Oldenburg 1989). Yet, the functions and meanings of public space are different across cultural traditions and may be experienced very differently by various groups (Németh and Schmidt 2011). As an essential component of cities, public space could be inclusive of all residents ideally. While there is abundant research on the structural exclusions experienced by temporary migrants as a result of their temporary status, only recently have scholars begun to explore the social inclusions that temporary migrants experience in relation to public space. Social interactions between strangers in public space can be meaningful and conducive to social cohesion in a multicultural society (Peters 2010).

Meanwhile, public space not only provides opportunities for people to congregate, socialise and recreate, but it is also reshaped by the everyday involvement of its users. In their study of female domestic migrant workers in Singapore, Yeoh and Huang (1998) investigated the spatial segregation of marginalised groups as well as the strategies migrant workers employed to use public space and negotiate their own identities in the process. The public space in the Central District of Hong Kong is contested through its use by both Filipino migrant workers and cosmopolitan professionals in the post-colonial cultural landscape (Law 2002). Thus, temporary migrants are making and remaking transient urban spaces through their presence in, visits to, and uses of public space. My research brings conversations about the precariousness and influence of temporary migrants to bear on the scale of neighbourhood and public space.

As stated by Bell and Ward (2000), population movement involves both temporal and spatial dimensions. This paper aims to examine the intersections of temporary migrants and public space from the perspective of space–time and people-place relations. Grounded in the literature on the precarity of temporary migrants and the intersection of temporary migrants and urban space, this study enhances our understanding of how the uncertainty associated with the temporary status of migrants is mitigated or strengthened through visiting and using public space, as well as how migrants' uses of public space affect their senses of belonging and the locality of the destination city.

Temporary migrants in China

In China, the temporary status of internal migrants is not determined by the length of their stay, but rather by the country's household registration system (*hukou*). Under this system, temporary migration is defined as 'migration that involves no change in migrants' official household registration' (Yang and Guo 1999, 935). The system serves as a tool to regulate migration within China, especially rural to urban relocations. These temporary moves are likely to be self-initiated and involve migrants of low skill levels and social-economic statuses (Li 2006; Sun and Fan 2011). Despite living and working in urban areas, most rural-urban labour migrants retain their official permanent residence in

places of rural origins. On the one hand, the receiving cities are highly selective regarding migrants' skill levels, human capital, and socio-economic statuses, making it difficult for temporary migrants to officially obtain urban *hukou* (Zhu and Chen 2010). The change of residency status also has implications at the local and state levels, as it involves a 'transfer of welfare entitlement' (Li and Siu 1997, 65) and the associated government obligations. On the other hand, the risks related to migration and the uncertainties of employment prospects may also influence temporary migrants' intentions to permanently settle in the destination (Yang and Guo 1999). Zhu's (2007) survey findings indicated that job stability, income levels and availability of social insurance are the three major underlying factors that affect migrants' intentions and capability for permanent settlement.

Temporary residency status not only has far-reaching influences on migration experiences, but also on settlement patterns and urban forms in the destination cities. According to Lawrence (1995), housing availability, affordability and residential environment are the major characteristics that define housing quality for migrants. To increase work efficiency, many manufacturing factories build on-site dormitories to manage the production and reproduction processes of their workers (Pun and Chan 2013). Self-help housing in Chengzhongcun (*urban village*) (Zhang, Zhao, and Tian 2003) also enables temporary migrants to settle temporarily in rapidly urbanising city centres. In migrant cities such as Dongguan, factory dormitories and rented apartments have become the housing choices for temporary migrants due to limited access to other housing options (Wu 2002, 2004). Scholars have shown the relationship between the working poor's unfavourable housing conditions and an increasing desire for public and open space in the city (Shaw 2004; Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014).

In addition, the temporary mode of migration affects the spatial arrangement of family members. The ineligibility for public education and the high expenses of child-care put more pressure on temporary migrants, leading to changes in household strategies that result in either split households (Chang, Dong, and MacPhail 2011; Ye and Lu 2011) or the chain migration of relatives (Yang and Guo 1999). Consequently, the transient population and their lack of access to social welfare indirectly leads to changing demographic profiles in destination cities.

Earlier studies on the everyday migration experiences of rural-to-urban migrants in China focused largely on their working environment and housing conditions (Jiang 2006; Shen and Huang 2003). Recently, scholars started to pay attention to aspects of their after-work leisure life. Chen (2007) observed migrant workers' participation in square dancing in Beijing and found that the improvised uses of urban spaces in streets and community parks helped enliven urban space and engage temporary migrants. Due to the lack of high-quality public facilities in urban villages, residents' nightlife activities were constrained to low-end commercial and recreational activities in public space that had access to lighting and required few expenses (Song, Pan, and Chen 2016).

The community square analysed in this paper is located in Tangxia Town of Dongguan (Figure 1), which hosted 368,983 temporary migrants in 2017, more than six times that of the locally registered population (Dongguan Statistical Yearbook 2018b). Located in the Pearl River Delta region and the Guangzhou-Shenzhen economic corridor, Dongguan benefitted from policy incentives during the country's economic reform in 1978 and has become a major recipient of foreign investment in the labour-intensive manufacturing sector. The increasing demand for cheap labour stimulated waves of migrant workers from

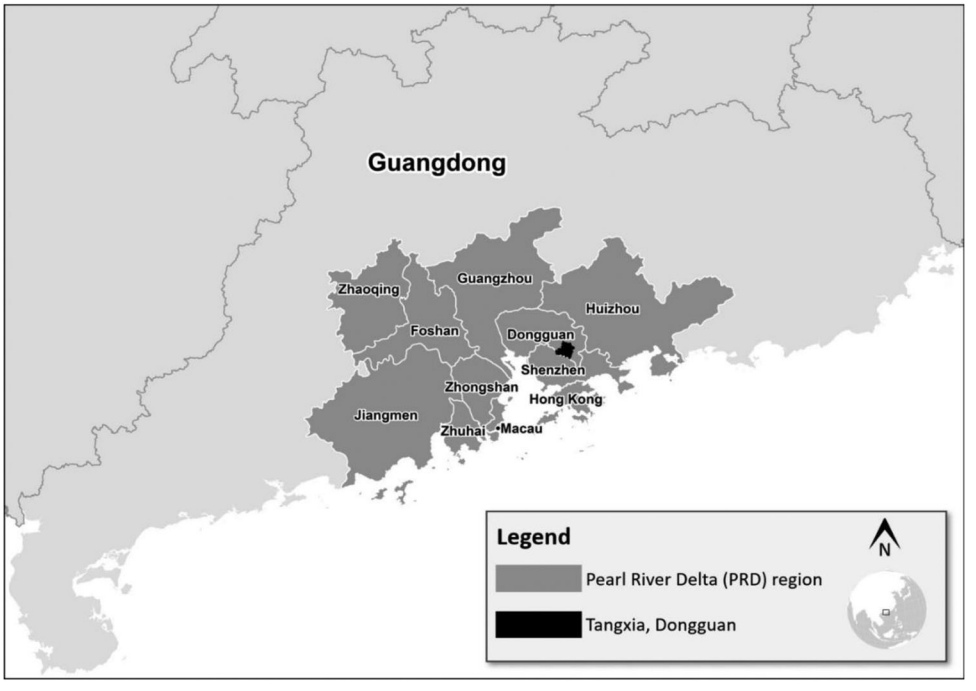

Figure 1. Location map of Tangxia Town in Dongguan, China.

other parts of China, and large numbers of temporary migrants facilitated the development of labour-intensive manufacturing industries in the city. In 2017, around 79% of the employed persons in Dongguan worked in manufacturing industries (Dongguan Statistical Yearbook 2018c). Therefore, the demographic and economic structures of the city are highly intertwined and may have significant implications for its urban and social landscapes.

Methods

This study employed participant observation and semi-structured interviews to gather primary data. I visited the community square at different times of the day (8 am, 12 pm, and 5 pm to 9 pm) to observe the uses of the space. When visitors started to congregate in the square at night, I spent time observing and taking notes regarding approximate numbers of visitors, the physical appearances of the visitors, their uses of space and their interactions. In total, I spent 85 h in the community square to collect data from participant observations. There were times when I was having conversations with interviewees and they were greeted by acquaintances and started conversations among themselves in Mandarin Chinese. The conversations may or may not have had direct relevance to my research questions, but observing their tone and body language when they were interacting with each other provided valuable information about their perceptions of the spatial and social dynamics of the public space and the destination society.

Interviewees were identified using the purposive sampling method to ensure that a diversity of temporary migrants was represented. I approached these migrants while

they were using the square. Participants were selected to maximise representations in age and gender among the migrant population and also to represent the diversity of usage patterns of the space, including participation in group dancing, playing badminton and table tennis, using exercise instruments, sitting, using cell phones, etc. During conversations, I not only introduced myself as a student of migration studies, but also told them my own story of growing up in a migrant family and how my father used to work as a temporary migrant worker in Dongguan. My personal story helped me quickly gain rapport and trust with the interviewees.

Between December of 2016 and January of 2017, I collected 16 valid semi-structured interviews in Mandarin Chinese. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 min. Some of the interviewees said that they could not stay long for interviews because they needed to go back to the factory for the night shift. The relatively shorter interview time was supplemented by the time I spent in the square observing usage patterns and interactions. The interviewees' demographic profiles varied in age, gender, occupation and educational attainment. Ranging in age from 20 to 63 years old at the time of the interview, the participants included seven males and nine females. None of the interviewees had a college degree. Their occupations included housewife, worker in a factory assembly line, owner of a small business and other worker in the labour-intensive manufacturing sector. For dual-wage families, children were mostly taken care of by grandparents, who either stayed in the hometown or became migrants themselves and sometimes found jobs at local factories or started their own businesses.

All of the interviewees either lived in dormitories built on the premises of factories or rented apartments that were close to their workplaces. Among the 16 participants, nine lived in dormitories and seven in rented apartments, a common arrangement for migrants who lived with their family members. None of the interviewees had private cars, and their movement in the city was highly dependent on public transportation, walking and biking. Fourteen participants reported walking five to twenty minutes to the community square, while the other two said they used bikes to commute between the square and their primary residence.

The interviewees were asked about the frequencies and lengths of their visits, the distances from their living/work places to the square, their activities and usage patterns in the space, their social interactions with other users, the influences of visiting the square on their migration experiences and future settlement plans, the effects of their visits to the square, the neighbourhood and the city. I recorded the interviews and then transcribed and translated them into English for further coding and content analysis. A hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches was employed to create coding schemes (Charmaz 2000). First, I manually developed the coding structure based on research questions and theories. For example, codes such as 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' were created to capture the experiences of migrants in the community square and the city. Then, I used an inductive and data-driven coding strategy that allows for themes and patterns to emerge from the fieldwork. For instance, I created 'children-related networks' as a new theme that emerged from conversations with participants and my observations in the square.

Spatial and temporal uses of the community square

Spatially, the community square was divided into different uses, such as exercise equipment and sports courts, open space, a sunken plaza and berms next to the green space.

Each of the areas catered to the diverse needs of different user groups, serving visitors with a variety of demographic profiles and leisure behaviours. The basketball and badminton courts on the east side of the community square engaged both active and passive uses, with some participants playing while others watched. The designated uses of the space were simultaneously accompanied by improvised uses, reflecting the initiatives of urban residents and 'a revival of civic spirit' (Talen 2015, 145).

There was an immense contrast between the uses of the community square during the day and at night (Figure 2). The community square was almost empty during the day and started to receive more visitors after 6:00 pm, which was the typical time for factory workers to be released from work. In a manufacturing town like Tangxia, the temporal rhythms of work, life and leisure for temporary migrant workers are closely related to factory schedules. After work, the migrant workers came to the community square either alone or in small groups, each navigating their own way of using the space. Hua and Ling both came from the same province, and they worked at assembly lines in a factory that manufactures suitcases and travel bags for export. They each earned 2,000 RMB a month, in addition to the free meals and lodging provided by the canteen and dormitories built on the factory premise. Although the living costs were minimised for Hua and Ling, the conflation of work and living space limited the spatial boundaries of their daily movement. 'What are your after-work activities?' I asked. Ling said,

> Mostly I would just spend my after-work time with my phone in my room (in the dormitory) to watch shows and movies and listen to pop music. The work itself is tiring. Sometimes we have nightshifts when the factory gets a big order and needs it done quickly. I don't have much free time, and even when I do, there is not much to do. Well, there are some shopping streets and supermarkets 20 minutes' bus ride away. I would sometimes go there. But I come to this square more often. It's just a few minutes' walk away from my factory, and it has open space and trees, which are good for health.

Hua nodded and added, 'factory life is boring. The square gives us a little break'. Within walking distance from several factories, the community square provided migrant workers with an opportunity to escape temporarily from the segregated and stressful life of the factory during short periods of time away from work.

The temporality of square visits was reinforced by the families of migrant workers, who also tended to visit the community square much more often in the evenings even though

Figure 2. The community square during the day (left) and at night (right). By author.

they were not restricted by factory schedules. When I met Huifang a few minutes past 7:00 pm, she was sitting and watching her child play with other children in the square. Huifang was a housewife in her early thirties. She met her husband in Dongguan and quit her factory job after getting married. Her husband was a manager at an electrical firm and could contribute 6,000 RMB a month to the household income. After paying for rent, food, and other expenses, they also needed to send remittances to assist with the education of Huifang's brother-in-law. Although not confined to work space during the day, Huifang was still more likely to visit the square in the evenings. She said that the presence of other visitors enhanced her experience,

> I go to the market to buy groceries in the morning and then prepare food for my family. Then I do some laundry and play with her [signalling to her daughter who was playing with a girl of her age while I conducted the interview] for a while before she takes a nap. My life is mostly trapped in the small one-bedroom apartment that we rent, and I sometimes feel I am disconnected from the outside world. Visiting the square becomes a good way for me to see other mothers and talk or simply watch the kids play.

Huifang intentionally waited until after 6:00 pm to bring her child to the square to get together with other children and their parents. Visiting the square was a temporary escape from her unfavourable residential space. Although Huifang no longer worked in a manufacturing factory, she was still part of the temporary labour migration. Her living situation was affected by that of other migrants, particularly her husband, and even non-migrants such as her brother-in-law.

During the interviews, the migrants sometimes brought up that they 'chose to' visit the square at night. However, the time that migrants chose to visit the square was largely constrained by external factors, such as the work schedules of factories, institution regulations and urban development in the host society. The work schedule of the factory town impacted not only the timetables of the temporary migrant workers but also the daily schedules of their family members. The temporary residency status of migrants and their relatively disadvantaged socio-economic positions limited their options for housing and after-work leisure activities and their use of space in the city.

Illusive inclusion

Social integration is a process rather than an outcome (Penninx et al. 2004). The interviewees indicated that they knew very few local residents and their social interactions in the community square were mostly with other temporary migrants. For example, Huifang said she mostly talked with other mothers who shared similar migration background. Likewise, Meng told me that he had not interacted with any locals in the square. The lack of social interactions between temporary migrants and locals partly resulted from the temporary migrants being the dominant population in the city. Jin, who worked at an electrical factory and had lived in Dongguan for three years, mentioned that she faced a language barrier when socialising with locals because she could not understand Cantonese, a local dialect in Guangdong Province. She said,

> I know some of the seniors in the square are locals, but I never talk to them. I can't speak Cantonese, and they don't speak Mandarin. My friend is from another part of Guangdong province, and she can understand it, so I guess it is easier for her to adapt to life here in general.

Yet, the language barrier did not seem to be a hurdle for all. Mr. Zong said,

> Dongguan has such a high number of migrants from all over the country. We all have various dialects and accents, but most of the time we have no difficulty understanding each other speaking Mandarin Chinese.

In a city where temporary migrants far outnumber local residents, the language difference is less likely to be a barrier to migrants visiting the community square. Instead, the users of the community square were connected by other linkages, such as children and common interests in group activities.

During my observations and interviews, I was impressed by the children-related social networks and economic entrepreneurship. Parents or grandparents who brought children to the community square found it easier to get to know and socialise with other parents. Sometimes my interviews were interrupted by greetings between my participants and other parents who visited the square at the same time. The local government also encouraged children's visits and uses of the community square by only issuing business permits for children-related activities, such as toy cars, air-filled castles and mini fishponds. At 5:00 pm every day, Mr. Zong, the owner of a business that rents toy cars, set up the cars in the square, waiting for children to come to play. Mr. Zong was in his sixties and had lived in Dongguan for about twenty years. His two daughters migrated to Dongguan for jobs in the late 1990s, and he followed them two years later. At first, he helped take care of his grandchildren. As the grandchildren grew up and moved to other cities for school, he bought toy cars and rented them out for children to play with in the square. Over his two decades' stays in Dongguan, Mr. Zong transitioned from raising his own grandchildren to enriching the lives of other temporary migrants' children. Mr. Zong came to Dongguan as a part of chain migration, and his involvement in the toy-car renting business also affected the lives of other migrants. Owners of the children-related businesses were temporary migrants themselves, and their entrepreneurship illustrated further economic integration into local society. However, their social connections and economic activities were strongly space-based and could not be easily transferred out of the context of the community square once temporary migrants left the space.

In addition to children-related networks, the temporary migrants who visited the community square were also connected by group activities such as square dancing and ball games. For example, the open space in the centre of the square provided venues for square dancing from around 7 pm to 9 pm every night, serving as the hub of social networks. Square dancing, a form of group exercise in urban China, not only attracted visitors, especially women and seniors, to participate in the activity, but also appealed to audiences who simply enjoyed watching others dance. The local government hired two dance instructors to lead the square dancing every night, suggesting that they were motivated to encourage more females and seniors to visit the square, as well as more flexible and diversified uses of the public space. After retiring in her hometown, Fang, in her fifties, moved to Dongguan to help take care of her grandchildren. For Fang, participating in square dancing every night was not only a form of exercise, but also an opportunity to socialise and get involved in urban life, 'I used to feel I didn't belong to the city when I first came here. All I had were my children and grandchildren. Now I feel I have met more people and know more things'. However, the social connections established among temporary migrants were closely tied to their presence in the community square

and were likely to vanish as soon as they left the space. Except for one interviewee who said that she sometimes visited the square with her neighbours, all other informants stated that they would meet and greet other visitors in the space but barely kept in contact with them after they left the square, indicating the temporary nature of integration into Dongguan's urban life. Nanhua, a housewife who had lived in Dongguan since 2010, said,

> Yeah, I have met a few people here, but we didn't really keep much contact afterward. If we bump into each other in the square, we would say hi, but that's it. You know, with the high turnover of people here, it is difficult to maintain contact when we move with our jobs frequently.

Ling, who had just arrived in Dongguan, expressed similar feelings,

> I usually come to the square with Hua. We are laoxiang [meaning: people who share the same hometown], and we now work in the same factory. There are some faces that I frequently see in the square, but I never really know them. Well, if I see them again in supermarkets, we may greet each other. But you know, I never make plans with them to go to supermarkets together. Not even once.

For temporary migrants like Nanhua and Ling, the community square served as a social hub for them to congregate, socialise and participate in group activities. Visiting the community square created a sense of belonging that enabled temporary migrants to escape from work and household chores and to be integrated into urban life temporarily. Nevertheless, the social inclusion experienced by temporary migrants in the community square was rather illusive. Spatially, the social connection established among temporary migrants in the community square was not likely to be transferred to other social occasions in other parts of the city. Temporally, the social connection was formed when migrants visited the square, but it quickly disappeared after they left the space. The illusive nature of the social inclusion experienced by temporary migrants further highlights the scaler and temporal dimensions of precarity.

Structural exclusion and the permanent temporariness in migration

Although all the interviewees agreed that visiting the community square enriched their after-work migration experience and improved their health conditions, it did not necessarily lead to full socio-spatial inclusion into the destination society (Antonsich 2010). Instead, the study confirms the spatial immobility experienced by temporary migrants (Joppke 2007). Their decisions on where and when to go for after-work leisure activities were structured largely by external factors such as factory regulations and the urban environment. Economic conditions and long working hours limited the temporary migrants' options to travel further and enjoy more diversified urban lives in the destination societies (see also Parreñas, Kantachote, and Silvey 2020). As a result, the community square in close proximity to their primary residence and workplace became the 'third space' (Oldenburg 1989) for them to have a temporary escape from their highly stressful and segregated lives.

Their spatial immobility was also coupled with social immobility that further constrained them. None of the interviewees had a college degree, and their temporary migration status was reinforced by their low levels of skills and educational attainment. The labour-intensive manufacturing factories in Dongguan provided job opportunities

for the low-skilled migrant workers. However, although the temporary migrants benefited from factories' hiring demands and policy relaxations during the first stage of their migration, they did not enjoy many opportunities for upward mobility in their post-migration experiences.

The possibility to transition from temporary migration to permanent settlement was largely dependent on migrants' economic opportunities and the institutional regulations on the *hukou* system. Yanping, a 33-year-old migrant worker, had a sorrowful look in her eyes when she brought up the separation between her and her family. Due to the restrictions of the *hukou* system, her children were not eligible to attend public school in Dongguan, and the private school was too expensive for her family to afford. She said,

> Well, my children are still back in the hometown, a 20 hour train ride away. My parents-in-law take care of them. They visited here during their summer breaks, but I couldn't afford for them to go to school here. You know, I don't have a Dongguan hukou, so my children are not able to go to public school. They are really frustrated.

The left-behind children in the hometown and separation from family members have prevented some migrant workers from settling permanently in Dongguan. Chunhua expressed her feeling of hopelessness in becoming a permanent resident of the city,

> The city wants more educated and skilled migrants. I barely finished middle school and now end up working in assembly lines. There's no way I can be qualified for applying for the hukou here. For now, I just save as much money as I can before I eventually return to my hometown.

Both Yanping and Chunhua had lived in Dongguan for about two years, and both worked as assembly line workers in the same garment manufacturing factory. Although the community square provided them with space to relax and integrate into the city's urban life temporarily, they were still structurally excluded from gaining access to Dongguan's educational resources and higher wage job opportunities.

The permanence of temporary migration was demonstrated at both individual and national levels. For migrant individuals, although the availability of manufacturing jobs that enabled temporary migrants to work and reside in cities seemed to strengthen their mobilities, their potential for upward mobility was hardly realised. The provision of accessible public space in close proximity to migrants was influential in shaping their everyday movement patterns and improving their migration experiences; however, their ability to settle down depends more on institutional factors, such as restructuring the household registration system, improving public welfare and public education, and providing adequate training for temporary migrants to improve their competitive strength in the job market. Otherwise, it is difficult for temporary migrants to end their temporary status and move into permanent settlement.

At the national level, the existence of the *hukou* system and the regional differences in social and economic development also fuel the sustaining flows of temporary migration across regions. In recent years, as the manufacturing sector in Dongguan has undergone restructuring, the traditional labour-intensive industries have been phased out in the city's economic structure. Many manufacturing operations were relocated to inland provinces where both land and labour are relatively less expensive. Mr. Zong had lived in Dongguan for twenty years, although he was still registered as a temporary migrant. He observed that

the number of temporary migrants has decreased sharply in the past decade, and the number of visitors to the community square has also declined accordingly. Similarly, Feng said that compared to a few years ago, an increasing number of labour workers from his village were willing to seek job opportunities in cities closer to their hometown instead of moving a long distance to Dongguan because the income gap between the two places had gradually narrowed. The slower growth in Dongguan's temporary migrant population did not suggest the ending of the temporary migration flow in the country. In contrast, the rising number of destinations for temporary migrants in other parts of China illustrates both the permanent temporariness and precarity of low-skilled labour migration at the national level.

Conclusion

In China, the movement of people, including temporary migrants, is closely regulated by the government and the household registration system. Some of the restrictions imposed on the temporary migrants directly result from institutional regulations, while others are the outcomes of economic immobility, low educational attainment and skill levels. When examining the everyday immobility and uncertainties experienced by temporary migrants, restrictions are evident in both spatial and temporal dimensions.

Through an examination of the intersections between temporary migrants and public space, this paper focuses on the everyday uses of the community square by temporary migrants and examines the people-space relations exhibited in the process. Spatially, the low socio-economic status of temporary migrants limits their travel options and circumscribes the boundaries of urban space they may reach in the destination city. Temporally, the fast-paced work schedules of manufacturing factories limit the availability of time to enjoy leisure activities after work. Despite constraints emanating from income level, after-work time and commuting options, many of the temporary migrants chose to visit the community space, as it was unlikely to incur extra costs. The community square in this study was in close proximity to factories and, thus, served as a critical venue for temporary migrant workers to spend their free time after work.

The visiting schedules of temporary migrants created a contrast between the landscapes of the community square during the day and at night. The presence of temporary migrants and their engagement in activities in the community square during after-work hours enlivened the space and enhanced their own wellbeing. Since these leisure and social activities were place-specific, the transformations of the space were closely tied to the visit times of the temporary migrants. Nevertheless, as the flow of temporary migrants into Dongguan is relatively continuous, the impacts on the urban environment tend to be long-lasting. Yet, the temporary migrants only experienced a temporary integration into urban life during the time they visited the community square and were more likely to return to their segregated urban life afterward. Finally, although visiting the community square was likely to enhance the positive migration experience of the temporary migrants, they were essentially excluded from full integration into local society by structural forces. As a result, the temporary status of migrants was likely to become permanent.

These research findings contribute to the literature on cities and migrants by examining the spatial movements of temporary migrants and their uses of public space. The study

also expands the literature on 'permanent temporariness' from transnational immigration studies to migration studies, and confirms the immobility and uncertainty experienced by temporary migrants that results from their temporary residency status and its associated social disadvantages. The research findings also highlight the active roles that temporary migrants play in reconstructing the public space in the receiving societies.

In addition, the study was conducted in the context of Dongguan, a migrant-receiving city in China. The definitions of temporary and permanent migrants in China are highly associated with the country's particular household registration system. As public space is experienced differently across cultures, the intention of the study is not to build a new model for Asian cities, but rather to illustrate the diversity of experiences in different geographical locations. Unlike in similar studies of public space and migrants in cosmopolitan cities such as Singapore or Hong Kong, the city of Dongguan is undergoing rapid urbanisation as a result of globalisation. The economic and social dynamics exhibited in the case of Dongguan may be applied to understanding the everyday interactions between migrants and cities in emerging economies.

The findings of the study will help local policy makers and planning institutions to design and maintain public spaces in a manner that better accommodates all residents, regardless of their residence status, class, age and gender. The study also informs local governments regarding the need to balance the economic and social development of temporary migrants and engage transient urban residents with more opportunities to experience urban life. There is no homogenous way of using public space among temporary migrants. Age and gender are two critical variables that may influence the visiting experiences; women and seniors are oftentimes even less privileged within the temporary migrant populations. Different usage patterns of the community square existed between families with children and migrants who were single. In future work, more studies could focus on particular groups of temporary migrants and examine how temporality is highlighted in their interactions with others in public space.

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