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# The Metropolis and Mental Life Today—Shanghai 2018

> When, so to speak, one examines the body of culture with reference to the soul, as I am to do concerning the metropolis today—the answer will require the investigation of the relationship which such a social structure promotes between the individual aspects of life and those which transcend the existence of single individuals. It will require the investigation of the adaptations made by the personality in its adjustment to the forces that lie outside of it.
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> —(SIMMEL, 2010[1903]: 103)

The question that brought us and our colleagues to Shanghai at the beginning of the twenty-first century was not so different from the one that George Simmel addressed at the start of the twentieth, in his classic lecture on the metropolis and mental life. We frame it a little differently: how is subjectivity shaped, judged, enacted, constrained, and disrupted, both for and by those who today move from villages and small towns to make a different form of life for themselves in cities and megacities? What languages, techniques, forms of judgment, as well as ideas of normality and pathology, enable individuals to make sense of this experience to themselves and to others, to render its pleasures and their distress into thought, speech, and action, and with what consequences, for who? How is the migrant experience folded into the soul?

We focus here on Shanghai, a city whose population grew from 17.8 million in 2005 to 24.2 million in 2014, largely through the arrival of some 5.6 million people from the countryside.[1] Yet, despite this influx of migrants, and unlike the situation in São Paulo, Lagos, Mumbai, Delhi, or almost any other expanding megacity in the Global South, migrants in Shanghai, like those in other Chinese cities, do not live in slums or shanty towns. Some, a minority, live in apartments or rooming houses in 'the city,' that is, in the seven inner urban districts that make up what one might think of as 'old Shanghai.' However, most rural migrants live, not in the central city, but in the outer districts of Pudong, Minhang, Jiading, and Songjiang, often in dormitories owned by the factories in which they are employed or in basic apartment blocks close to their place of work. Some—far fewer than in other expanding Chinese cities such Guangzhou and Shenzhen—live in 'urban villages' (of which more below) that have arisen in areas of farmland enclosed by the expanding city. These urban villages are in the outer central districts and in the suburbs "mostly located close to the elevated highways and well-connected street networks, which allows for high levels of accessibility" (Wang and Ning, 2016: 98). It is clear that we cannot easily extrapolate to Chinese migrants from the epidemiological and ethnographic studies of slum life that we examined in the previous chapter. Further, it would be misleading to speak of 'migrants to Shanghai' as if they formed an homogenous mass of people. We must try to make sense of the multiple experiences, milieus, and modes of life, as well as the relationship of all of this to mental health, in these very different urban environments.[2] But before we do that, we need to examine three more general questions: (1) the character of rural to urban migration in China over the last two decades or so; (2) the current evidence on different forms of migrant life in China, linked in particular to different types of employment; and (3) the changing ways in which mental distress is being understood and managed in contemporary China.

## Migrant Nation

For Mao Zedong, founder of the People's Republic, the life of the countryside was privileged over that of the city. And yet, in a few short decades, China has moved from being a nation in which—in Mao's famous phrase—the countryside would encircle the cities, to a country in which the ever-growing cities seem to swallow more and more of what was once a largely agrarian landscape. One of the most important engines for the growth of

those cities, over a thirty-year period, has been rural-to-urban migration. Dorothy Solinger's detailed account of the dynamics shaping the movements and experiences of this 'floating population' (this somewhat derogatory term is remarkably persistent in the literature, including in Solinger's account) focuses largely on the period up to the mid-1990s. This is the period during which the process of migration was managed by the Chinese state and its bureaucracies, when China was moving toward a partially market-based economy, and in which the lives of families—in terms of food, housing, medical care, welfare, and security—were no longer secured by the *danwei* system, which had long been the locus of most forms of support for individuals and families (Solinger, 1997; Solinger, 1999: chs. 2, 3, and 4). In this first wave of migration, while the decision of a member of a family to migrate was an act of choice, such choices were undoubtedly shaped and constrained by other forces. As Solinger puts it, "theirs was an agency that was somewhat hobbled or bounded . . . mediated both by state policies and practices and by the specific ecosystems formed by native-place geography, resource endowments and locational situation" (Solinger, 1999: 13).[3]

The decision to migrate was undoubtedly shaped by local and regional characteristics, which varied from region to region and locality to locality. In many areas there were just too many people to work the available land; or the land was often unfertile and unproductive and agricultural labor hard and unrewarding; young people in particular were often surplus to agricultural requirements, and there were few alternative sources of employment in their home districts.[4] Further, it was clear to many that they were on the wrong end of a large income differential between countryside and city. But there was also the perception that prospects were brighter in the city, not just the availability of employment, but that work in the cities would lead to an improvement of their lives. Many thought that this improvement would not only be experienced when they were actually living in the city, where life was more varied and interesting, but would be sustained when they returned home. In some cases, they might use the money saved to start their own business. In others, they would send remittances home, some of which would be used to build a substantial house where the whole family would live. Sometimes, people living in rural areas were actively recruited by authorities to work in state-owned enterprises. Others were encouraged by networks of relatives and acquaintances from their own villages who had already migrated; they tempted them to move, made their journey itself relatively easy and cheap, and facilitated their access to employment. And so people moved, in the millions.[5]

The experience of working in the city was different for those with different skills: it was very different for those obtaining work in State-owned enterprises, those joining existing groups of construction workers, or those going into domestic labor. Employment possibilities were highly gendered, types of work were very different for male and female factory workers. They were also differentiated by region of origin; for example, factory workers from eastern regions of China were often considered to have finer skills and to be more capable of delicate work. But one thing was common to all migrants from the countryside: the planning system enshrined a whole series of divisions between migrants and more long-standing urban residents, with the former denied many of the rights and privileges of urban citizens. Yet despite their political and social exclusion, the presence of so many migrants, with their distinctive lifestyles, their social networks, and their informal organizations, reshaped the Chinese urban experience in many different and unpredictable ways (Solinger, 1999: chs. 6 and 7).

Migration not only transformed large cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, but also smaller cities that acquired skyscrapers, factories, ring roads and traffic jams, transport systems thronged with people, and soaring pollution levels—the whole urban experience. This process has been especially striking in the Pearl River Delta, in the southeast of the country. Lesley Chang, in *Factory Girls*, charts the influx of young women to Dongguan in the early years of this century (Chang, 2009). Dongguan is a prefecture city in Guangdong Province, whose official population at around 7 million in 2008 was widely believed to underestimate the actual population by omitting up to 2 million migrants who, at any one time, were working in, and jumping between, hundreds of factories, producing everything from parts for mobile phones to high-end trainers. The growth of Shenzhen, to the south of Dongguan, is even more remarkable; it grew from a settlement of around 30,000 people at the start of the 1980s into a city with an official population of around 13 million by the end of 2018, swelled to up to 20 million by large numbers of unregistered migrants living in the city at any one time (Zacharias and Tang, 2010; Keith, Lash, et al., 2013).[6]

Central to the experience of rural-urban migrants, from the period studied by Solinger up to the present day, is their *hukou*—China's system of household registration that also distributes state benefits according to whether a person lives in an agricultural area. Indeed, as far as official figures are concerned, migrants are defined, and governed, in terms of their *hukou*. "Under the *hukou* system, in operation from the mid-1950s, each individual was registered in one place of residence, and was categorized as a rural or

urban resident on their *hukou* status" (Li and Rose, 2017: 21). Cindy Fan, in *China on the Move*, gives a detailed account of the origins, motives, and successive transformations of the *hukou* system as a means of state management of migrant labor flows as State priorities for economic development changed (Fan, 2007: ch. 3). The *hukou* system has been undergoing a gradual reform since the late 1980s, when the central government first allowed migration from rural areas to cities without the need for the migrants to transfer their *hukou*. From 2003 onward, the central government began to accord some basic rights to rural migrants, and since then "a series of policy reforms have taken place in many cities to provide some public services to them, and increasing numbers of small and medium cities have begun to grant rural migrants local *hukou* status on certain conditions" (Li and Rose, 2017: 21). Nonetheless, as in the period Solinger studied, those without an urban *hukou* are still stigmatized by local residents, they are also unable to access certain social welfare and housing services in the city, and, as we shall see, they are particularly vulnerable to changes in State economic and labor policies that modulate the need for urban migrant labor.

For many migrants from villages and small towns, the 'urban village' is where life in the city begins. Urban villages appear in rapidly growing cities in two main ways. In some cases, privately owned land that has been surrounded by the developing city and is now in a downtown area has been turned by landlords into densely populated housing blocks. In other cases, parcels of communally owned farmland in peripheral areas are engulfed by urban sprawl and are subsequently developed into blocks of cheap housing for rent to migrants. Such urban villages, often surrounded by new, modern skyscrapers, have a bad reputation, carrying much of the general stigma faced by many migrants in China. The term 'village' should not conjure up a rural scene (indeed, nor do most rural villages bear much relation to the idyllic scenes of peasant life captured by the Chinese YouTube star Li Ziqi).[7] The buildings in which migrants live provide very basic amenities, and are crowded together around shopping streets, where small shops, food stalls, restaurants, and repair shops are interspersed with closed markets for food and other essentials. Yuting Liu and her colleagues point out that, because of their "crowded and cluttered material landscape, their apparently unhealthy living environment, and the resulting security and social problems, "urban villages in Chinese cities are widely condemned by the media, the government and even academia" (Liu, He, et al., 2010: 136). Yet, amid such hostility, these villages do not merely provide shelter for those who inhabit them; they offer a space and a place to find a new mode of life, to develop new habits

for the inhabitation of a radically different environment. As Yan Yuan points out in her ethnography of one such urban village, in Wuhan (the capital city of Hubei province in central China), urban villages are not simple enclaves, but places of "fluidity" within the network of migrant trajectories that constitute the Chinese megacity; in that experience of constant mobility, "life routines are readjusted, the sense of place is reconfigured, the belongingness to place is renegotiated, and mechanisms in space ordering and regulations are reinvented" (Yuan, 2014: 19–21).[8]

There are urban villages in Shanghai, but most migrants live neither in these nor in the old center of Shanghai, but rather in the ring of 'new towns' that have grown around the periphery of metropolitan Shanghai. These towns, though formally part of Shanghai, are often one- or two-hours' drive from the tourist center, with its nightlife, its colonial history, and its famous Bund; they are also often beyond the reach of the expanding Shanghai metro system. Migrants on the periphery may live in temporary accommodation in building sites, in factory dormitories, or in purpose-built blocks with relatively basic facilities. Not all live there, of course: others find rooming houses in the center of Shanghai, working in restaurants or as domestic workers. For all, however, whatever their form of employment, precarity is a constant feature of existence. This precarity intensified in the second decade of this century, as Shanghai tried to move 'up the value chain,' away from the low-wage, cheap-goods economy that has underpinned its recent growth. Official attempts to curb low-skilled migration to the city sometimes involved sudden and drastic interventions, for example, without warning, factories making cheap goods for export that provided migrant employment were razed to the ground. As we shall see later in this chapter, drawing on our own and our colleagues' research in one such situation, many factory workers shrug their shoulders and move to find work in another area of the city. But the shops, markets, and restaurants run by other migrants are left behind, now bereft of customers, and having to seek new ways to make ends meet.

Migration in China is rarely a matter of cutting ties to the past. Most rural-to-urban migrants maintain strong connections with their home village or town throughout the years that they spend in the city, travelling home on holidays and for special occasions, sending remittances home to maintain family members in the village. In fact, through the houses they build, and the businesses that they establish on their return, they 'urbanize' their place of origin, not least though maintaining the connections that they have made while in the big city (Tang and Feng, 2015; Liu, Wang, et al., 2017). State

authorities are now seeking to stem the massive tide of migrants to the major cities by making it easier for migrants to move semi-permanently to small and medium towns that can grant them *hukou* status. But most migrants to megacities such as Shanghai envisage their stay as temporary and retain their rural *hukou*. This imposes many limitations on their rights in the city. A migrant without Shanghai *hukou* may struggle to access healthcare, housing, and other services, for themselves and for their children, and indeed they often pay to place their children in private schools established specifically for migrants. The *hukou* system thus produces a particular form of social exclusion that "builds a wall between urban residents and rural migrants in their social interactions" (Li and Rose, 2017: 21). This nexus of economic, social, and 'subjective' exclusion in turn generates a set of 'stressors' that may help us to understand mental health problems among migrants in China's megacities. But we need to make matters more precise. Let us start by taking a closer look at some of the different ways of life of those we perhaps too easily group together as 'migrants.'

## Migrant Labor

The urban experience of those who migrate from the countryside is significantly shaped by the kind of work they find. As Sarah Swider points out, migrants can be "porters, food preparers and servers, domestic workers, nannies, cleaners, retail and street vendors, sanitation workers," as well as factory workers and workers in construction (Swider, 2016: 2). Here we focus on three specific pathways that exemplify some of the most challenging situations encountered by rural migrants to Chinese megacities: life in the factory that is the destiny of most young women migrants, life in construction that is the destiny of many men, and last, the lives of those women and men who make their lives as local entrepreneurs.

### *Manufacturing Migrants*

In Shenzhen, southern China, at two factories owned by the electronics manufacturer Foxconn—actually the Hon Hai Precision Industry Company—13 young workers tried to take their own lives between January and May 2010, "bringing a public relations crisis and a crisis of corporate responsibility to virtually all Foxconn's image-conscious customers, including Apple, Dell, IBM, Samsung, Nokia, Hitachi and other electronic giants" (Chan and Pun, 2010: 2).[9] As it became 'the workshop of the world' in the closing decades

of the twentieth century, Chinese factory labor provided a large proportion of the electronic goods that supported a global economy of technological desire, one that many Chinese also came to participate in, of course, along with improved access to mobile and digital devices. But the labor, and sometimes the lives, of hundreds and thousands of Chinese migrants from the countryside were required to fuel this economy. According to Jenny Chan and Pun Ngai, at the time of their research in 2013, 85 percent of the 900,000 strong workforce of Foxconn were young migrants from rural areas. Like many such migrants, they mainly lived in factory dormitories—in this case, there were ten dormitory buildings within the gated compound; more than 50,000 other migrant factory workers lived outside the gates in village houses that had been turned into collective dormitories. Certainly, it is possible to over-interpret the Foxconn suicides as quasi-political acts of resistance[10]—nonetheless it seems self-evident that they were not isolated acts stemming from individual mental illness; while some may have arisen from personal troubles, most are merely the extreme manifestation of a labor regime of long hours, low pay, poor conditions, and the constant stress of just-in-time production (Chan, 2013).[11]

While a range of measures have been introduced by the Chinese government to improve the situation of migrant factory workers—minimum wage legislation, some rights for workers to obtain welfare benefits, and so forth—it is not clear how much impact they have had on the actual working conditions of most factory laborers, or if they alleviate the stress that they experience. Foxconn presented itself as a "warm family with a loving heart," and in the view of Foxconn CEO, Terry Gou, the workers who committed suicide were experiencing 'emotional problems' before they arrived at the factory gate. His response was not only to install 'suicide nets' outside all the dormitories, but to require "all job applicants to complete a psychological test with 36 questions" on the grounds that the earlier troubles had their source in "fragile spirits" with a "weak capacity to handle personal problems" (Chan, 2013: 98).[12] Jenny Chan gives us a compelling glimpse into the demands placed on the life and labor of those who work on these production lines, whose dreams turned sour, and whose education was no path to advancement toward a much-desired urban lifestyle. But not every migrant experience of factory work is the same. Each of the 'factory girls' in Dongguan whose stories are told by Leslie Chang claimed to know of at least one migrant who found her way to wealth and happiness in the city; such stories inspire many of these young women to 'jump' jobs from factory to factory, learning new skills, reading books on self-improvement, and

repeating self-help mantras, in the hope and belief that by effort, diligence, and a certain amount of luck and cunning, they can become the creators of their own life story of success (Chang, 2009).

For the first generation of rural-to-urban migrants, "moving to *dagong* was not only a major trend (when a person successfully moved out to *dagong*, the whole village would follow) but also a means of realizing one's economic goals . . . These goals included building a new house, financing a sibling's education, marrying, and setting up a small business" (Pun and Lu, 2010c: 9).[13] But according to the surveys quoted by Chan and Pun, many of the next generation of migrants, those who moved in the first decade of the new millennium, were the 'left behind children' whose parents were part of the first wave of rural-to-urban migrants. The young women and men of this later generation migrated with dreams and aspirations about the possibilities of escaping the dull monotony of their rural lives and enjoying the wealth, lifestyle, and possibilities for self-advancement in the cities. In the words of Pun and Lu, this generation, born in the period of reform, were "better educated and better off materially, but spiritually disoriented" with a "structure of feeling" and a way of life characterized by less loyalty to their work, growing individualism, consumerism, the pursuit of personal development and freedom (ibid.: 3).

In a paper based on research in the 1990s, Pun recounts the case of Yan, a *dagongmei* (working girl), who left her hometown in Hunan and her job in the forestry department to follow her older sister to Dongguan. "When her sister married a local citizen there," writes Pun, "their hukou, or household registries, were transferred from their hometown to Dongguan, at a cost of five thousand renminbi for each person to the local government" (Pun, 2000: 543). But Yan left her first job as a secretary after a friendship with her boss turned into a demand for sexual relations. Subsequently, she found herself working in an electronics factory in Shenzhen, and her despair at her situation, her chronic bodily and mental pain and trauma, exacerbated by the toxic and noxious chemicals used in the production process, were expressed in the form of a nightly bout of screaming, which, for Pun, was an expression of anguish common to all the women workers in that enterprise. Yan found herself in an impasse: she did not have the *guanxi*—the networks, connections, and relationships—that would facilitate promotion in the factory, she no longer had hukou in her hometown so could not return to a job in local government, she "had no more choice. When I'm wandering about the streets of this big city, I know it is not my place, it does not belong to me. But I have

to stay. I see people selling stuff at the side of the road. . . . I wonder whether my life will end up like that" (ibid.: 543).

We do not need to follow Pun's own Marxist/psychoanalytic analysis of Yan's situation to appreciate the impasse this young woman found herself in, and the ways in which it was transmuted into bodily and cerebral form. Yet, even events such as the 1993 fire in a toy factory in Shenzhen that killed more than eighty workers and seriously burned and injured over one hundred more, could not, it seemed, deter hundreds and thousands of young migrants, mainly young unmarried women, from taking the long journey by train or long-distance coach from their home villages to the industrial centers. Especially after the Chinese New Year or the Spring Festival, throngs of people arrive in Shanghai, hoping that their lives will be transformed by the opportunities offered in the city, rather than having to follow the predictable path of married life in their husband's home village. Crowds of these hopeful migrants hang around the stations, or in areas surrounding the local factories, hoping to be chosen for work, perhaps on the basis of relatives already employed, and their possession of the right documents—national identity cards, secondary school graduation certificates, certifications of unmarried status, and entry permits for the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (Pun, 2002).

Pun and Lu argue that while the first generation of workers turned the pain and trauma of their experience inward, those of this second generation were turning it outward, finding themselves unable to access their urban dreams of upward mobility; theirs was a state of resentment, and their distress and suffering were transmuted into anger and rage, turned into multiple acts of resistance against their employers:

> As new labor was needed for the use of capital, Chinese peasants were asked to transform themselves into laboring bodies, willing to spend their days in the workplace . . . Yet, as disposable labor, when they were not needed, they were asked to go back to the villages that they had been induced to forsake and to which they had failed to remain loyal . . . If transience was a dominant characteristic of the first generation of migrant workers, rupture characterizes the second generation, who now spend much more of their lives in urban areas. Transience suggests transitions, and so encourages hopes and dreams of transformation. Rupture, however, creates closure: there is no hope of either transforming oneself into an urban worker or of returning to the rural community to take up life as a peasant. (Pun and Lu, 2010a: 11)

Within that cyclical process—leave the village for the factory; leave the factory because of dissatisfaction and the recognition of exploitation; return to the village to set up some kind of farm or enterprise; return to the city on the failure of that enterprise—the migrant becomes stranger both in village and city. Pun and her colleagues argue that a process of proletarianization is thus taking place, in which these migrants, building on the collective experience that factory work has produced, turn their rage and frustration into consciousness of their exploitation, and their personal frustrations into political action. Anger at poor working conditions, low wages, and lack of rights, and the sense of profound unfairness that they experience, leads to collective action: they argue that a new Chinese working class is forming, no longer a class-in-themselves, they become a class-for-themselves, "as historical agents who have participated in making their own social change while China has evolved into the world's workshop" (Pun and Lu, 2010c: 21).

Have we witnessed the formation of a new, self-conscious, working class contesting the forces of capital and the state as Chinese migrant factory workers protest against their exploitative conditions of labor? Perhaps we should be cautious before mapping the Chinese experience in the twenty-first century onto E. P. Thompson's narrative of working-class formation in Europe in the nineteenth century (Thompson, 1963). Have "anger, frustration, and resentment" led to "the emergence of the workers' consciousness and their shared class position" (Pun and Lu, 2010c: 4)? Is it the case, as Pun predicts, that migrant workers on the factory floor and the construction site, will no longer internalize their plight in the form of mental distress and mental ill health, but will be protagonists of radical social change (Pun, 2017)? Or is it that most migrants find a way of life, and a relation to that life, which is neither that of political resistance not of mental disorder, but a somewhat stoic mode of self-management in conditions of uncertainty, underpinned by a firm belief that however difficult their life in the city might be, it offers something that is better than a monotonous existence in one's hometown.

In Pun's portrayal, migrants are treated as mere fuel in a strategy of Chinese modernization that seeks reintegration into a global capitalist economy through attracting foreign investment, and via super-exploitation of a 'reserve army of labor'—made up of migrant labor power under total control of their bosses, subjugated to disciplinary regimes, during the day in Taylorist factories and confined at night in factory dormitories.[14] But Lesley Chang, whose stories of the 'factory girls' of Dongguan we discussed earlier, is not alone in suggesting that the interior lives of migrants are more

nuanced—that not all feel defeated, devastated, and overwhelmed with negativity (see also Ash, 2016). It is true that Kaxton Siu finds evidence of a pretty miserable experience of life in the letters written by factory workers in the 1990s—letters that also repeatedly spoke of loneliness, fatalism about their lives, low aspirations for their future, and the desire to return home, even if that meant being enmeshed in the rigid social roles and gender stereotypes of the countryside (Siu, 2015).[15] However, Siu suggests, things changed from around 2000 with the development of urban villages. Those locals who lived close to these factories saw ways to make profit for themselves from the influx of migrants and cleared their land in order to build multistory buildings of apartments which they could rent to migrant workers. Migrants moved to these apartments, with their rents subsidized by their employers, as the factories could not afford to build the number of dormitories necessary to accommodate them. The original villagers became rentiers. Further, their villages, and other villagers, profited from the rents that the factories paid in order to lease their sites, as part of the rent was distributed to each local who held a share in the village commune. The funds enabled new streets to be constructed, and new shops and restaurants to emerge, often themselves run by migrants, to serve the migrant population. New communal facilities and even parks were built with the funds the village received in rents.

Not that this led to harmony: now different challenges emerged, with new divisions between locals and migrants. Indeed, in the village in Southern China studied by Siu, the original villagers—now less than 2 percent or the total population—moved to newly built mansions in 'gated communities' protected by walls and security cameras (Siu, 2015: 51).[16] But for the migrants themselves, new communal relations developed, supportive social networks outside the control of the factories and their disciplinary regimes, using mobile phones to maintain connections with relatives and friends, play online games, join online communities, and share gossip. Their wages enabled them to begin to participate in Chinese consumer culture, to visit bars and department stores, and to live a certain kind of urban life. Many were also able to save, even though many factories retain some earnings to reduce the high turnover rate. Some came as married couples, sometimes with their child, and sometimes with a grandparent who cared for the child while the parents were at work; many had family responsibilities for relatives who have migrated to the same area.

The images of subjugation, domination, discipline, and super-exploitation that characterize accounts of Chinese migrant labor in the 1990s may or may

not have been the general experience for that first wave that came from the countryside to work in the ever-expanding cities. But in any case, by the end of the first decade of the new millennium, Chinese migrant factory workers were increasingly authors of their own lives. While some are no doubt fatalistic, and others still seek to fulfill their dreams of achieving a life of wealth and status in the city, the majority live lives that, to quote Elizabeth Povinelli, are "ordinary, chronic and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis laden and sublime" (Povinelli, 2011: 132). Indeed, as the research by our colleagues Lisa Richaud and Ash Amin showed, even in circumstances that would appear objectively depressing, precarious, and full of uncertainty, Chinese migrant lives contain moments of satisfaction and even of joy.

### *Constructing Migrants*

While much research has focused on the lives of those migrants who come from the countryside to labor in urban factories, another image of the migrant experience in China often comes to mind—that of the typically male construction worker in the informal economy, working, living, and sleeping in the scaffolding surrounding one of the hundreds of high-rise buildings—fancy apartment blocks and offices—springing up in every Chinese city. There is, as Sarah Swider has documented in her study of 'the new precariat'—as she terms those involved in construction work in contemporary China—a somewhat complex network of employment in the construction industry (Swider, 2016). While most of the senior and management positions are held by those with urban *hukou*, almost all the actual work of construction is done by teams of migrants, some of whom do have a registration permit to work in the city, but the majority of whom are unregistered. While many of those migrants who are registered for work have proper contracts and are employed in the formal sector of the industry with decent safety standards, many others are hired informally, with irregular wages, constant insecurity of employment, and difficult and dangerous working conditions (ibid.: 35). Many of these workers live on the construction sites, in dormitories made up of bare concrete, cell-like rooms, with bunk beds and few amenities for washing and cooking, seldom venturing out into the city beyond, but sending remittances back home and returning to their villages for festivals and marriage ceremonies.

In their study of Chinese construction workers, Pun and Lu found that these workers' lives were suffused with an ever-present undercurrent of violence. "The working lives of construction workers are . . . deeply affected by

quarrels, individual and collective fighting, attempts to damage buildings, bodily abuse and even suicidal behaviors" (Pun and Lu, 2010a: 145). Yet, despite these seemingly dire working and living conditions, Sarah Swider paints a rather different picture: she found that "construction workers' lives were filled not only with bitterness, difficulty and struggle but also with love, laughter and companionship." All those interviewed by Swider tell versions of the same story: conditions are poor in their hometown; construction work offers the opportunity to make more money, to buy a motorcycle, to save, to marry and have a family, to pay for the education of their children, to build a new home back in their village of origin, to pay for the healthcare of their aging parents. Indeed, this is what we and our colleagues found in our own informal conversations with migrant building workers in Shanghai: we visited several sites and talked with foremen and workers, most of whom greeted us enthusiastically, and some of the construction workers willingly showed us their accommodation. These were fleeting encounters, of course, which we would not wish to over-interpret—but we did not get an impression of lives perceived as terrible by those who lived them. While accommodation was indeed spartan, as described above, no one to whom we spoke expressed any regrets about their migration and their working conditions. Some of them went back to their villages for short periods at the end of one episode of construction work, but chose to return again and again to Shanghai, to take up jobs in construction as the market for upscale apartments in fancy tower blocks boomed, especially for those luxurious properties being built along the Huangpu River.

Not all construction workers live on the sites where they work. Many of those who have come to the city through existing social ties with relatives or those from their own areas live in the kinds of urban villages that we have already discussed: in 2005, one large urban village in Beijing accommodated more than one hundred thousand migrants. In these urban villages, migrants share rooms, usually in shabby apartment blocks, not much better than the construction site dormitories, although some have tiny kitchens and washing facilities. Most apartment complexes are built around a courtyard, often with a vegetable garden as well as clothes lines and a parking area. The streets have shops, bars, restaurants, cafes, massage parlors, internet cafés, electronic shops, hairdressers, and thinly disguised prostitution services, often run by migrants, as well as street stalls where migrant vendors sell vegetables, food and drink, second-hand goods and much more. They create "an environment that supports existing social networks and fosters the development of new social networks, both of which shape the lives and

work of migrants who work informally in service, retail, and construction" (Swider, 2016: 64). Many of these migrants actually settle in these urban villages for long periods, developing friendships, bringing their families, and sending their children to migrant schools where, in neat uniforms and pristine classrooms, they practiced writing and basic mathematics, learned languages (especially English), exercised in well-equipped play areas, ate their lunch and their snacks, and enjoyed afternoon naps.[17] Nonetheless, the adults remain unregistered temporary migrants, with no rights to urban citizenship and constantly under threat from government campaigns for enforcing regulations, with spot checks for permits, cleansing areas of those who do not have the right to remain, and sometimes taking individuals into detention until they pay a fine for their release. Despite the apparent hospitability of such enclaves, the lives of the construction workers who live within them are difficult and few can tolerate such working arrangements beyond middle age: as they approach this age, they must either return to their villages, find other, less demanding employment or, as Swider puts it, "end up destitute, decrepit or dead" (ibid.: 81).

Hard as lives may be for construction workers who live on site, and for those who have formed networks in urban villages, the situation is even worse for those who come to the city without a preexisting arrangement with contractors, and without family or friends. They find employment on a casual basis, waiting every morning at 'labor markets' on street corners or small parks, where contractors looking for particular kinds of work may hire a few men for a day or two to work on a specific building project, to do bricklaying, electrical work, tiling, or some other task for which they have a particular immediate need. These laborers are the worst paid, and the most exploited, the most indebted to corrupt and despotic local agents: they exist in the most precarious of situations. The consequences for the mental health of the male migrant construction workers caught in such situations are seldom discussed in the literature, but pathogenic levels of anxiety, fear, and trauma—physical and mental stress—seem to be woven through their lives.

### *Enterprising Migrants*

Of course, most migrants work for others, in factories, building sites, in domestic labor, or in other low-status jobs. But not all. Around the apartment blocks and dormitories where migrant workers live, in the urban villages and even in some inner-city areas, enterprising migrants have set up restaurants and bars, internet cafés, flower and vegetable stalls, dumpling

carts and other forms of street food, second-hand electronic goods shops, hairdressers, massage parlors and prostitution services, and much more. Migrant-run covered markets are crammed with meat, fish, and vegetable vendors who often buy their products from wholesalers or sometimes from their home villages. In other parts of the market, one can find sellers of spices, oils, knick-knacks, mobile phone accessories, and domestic goods. These markets are thronged with migrant laborers—or at least they are until their factories are destroyed, and the laborers are forced to move on.

Such, indeed, was the situation in 2016, in the Tongli Road in Jiuting in the Songjiang district on the South-West outskirts of Shanghai, where Lisa Richaud and Ash Amin carried out some of the fieldwork for our project (Richaud and Amin, 2019; Richaud and Amin, 2020).[18] When we first visited, this street, also known as "*Jinhui* shopping street," was marked off from its surroundings by elegant 'gateways' built at each end. Its construction seems to have been an initiative of the first generation of migrants, who obtained legal title to the land and whose ownership enabled them to profit from rents. For example, one first-generation migrant owns a local apartment building, rather grandly known as the Residential Centre for Floating Populations, where rooms are available for rent. The street itself is quite wide, and is flanked on either side by small buildings, two or three stories high, with small restaurants, clothes shops, DVD shops, and other shopfronts displaying their goods and services. In front of the shopfronts are stalls, many selling hot food. There was a large fresh food market, where migrants rented stalls to sell their products, and the locals came to shop, to meet, and to gossip. Behind the street, on each side, accessed by small semi-paved alleys, were dormitories where factory workers and others lived: blocks of single rooms, usually bare concrete with the minimum of decorations, each with several bunk beds and a small space for washing and cooking. Behind these dormitory blocks there was an agglomeration of small factories and workshops where many of the migrants were employed. Other migrants set up small workshops to repair tools or clothes, or worked as street sweepers and security guards. Some had their child with them, and there is a local migrant primary school, although education beyond primary school requires children to return to their home village. Many of those who live and work in and around Tongli Road have relatives who have also come to Shanghai, some living close by, some in other areas of the city.

But a few months later, when our colleagues started their intensive fieldwork, the Tongli Road had been transformed, as part of the new strategy of the Shanghai city authorities to reduce the numbers of migrant workers.

As Richaud and Amin report, "a campaign known as *Wuwei sibi* (literally, "five bans and four obligations") . . . was launched by the municipal authorities in the name of a better quality of life in the city," which aimed to "attract and develop high technology industries that will rely on educated, 'high quality' (*suzhi gao*) workers" (Richaud and Amin, 2020: 81)—and enacting this strategy meant, in the first place, bulldozing the factories that employed the workers who supported the vibrant life of Tongli Road. For many of those employed in these factories, this was by no means a new situation, and their response was to pack up and move to another area where unskilled work was still available. But in so doing, they left behind all those others who had depended upon their trade for their own living. How did they cope? What were the consequences for their mental health? We shall return to these questions later in this chapter. But at first glance, it would surely seem that people in this situation would form a part of what has often been called China's mental health crisis.

## China: A Mental Health Crisis?

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, researchers, professionals, and the popular press began to suggest that China was 'in the grip of a mental health crisis' with a combination of high and increasing rates of mental ill health, shortage of psychiatric facilities and personnel, and a lack of psychotherapeutic services.[19] This perception of a mental health crisis took a further turn when the Chinese media discovered that the country was experiencing an 'epidemic of stress' focused on its rapidly growing cities—the stress of rapid social transformation, the stress of finding a way to live in a newly competitive society where the party no longer prescribes the rules for living, the stress of pressures at work, the stress on children of China's highly competitive education system . . . In 2012, under the title 'Worry and Stress Rise in China," a Gallup Poll reported that 75 percent of Chinese workers described an increase in stress over the previous year (compared with a global average of 48 percent). Stress was reported to be high, not among migrants, who were not mentioned in this Poll, but among white-collar office workers, working long hours, struggling with high costs of living in the big cities of Beijing and Shanghai, and facing rising expectations about lifestyle that are often hard to meet. Of those polled, 27 percent reported that they had worried a lot the previous day and 40 percent reported that they had felt a lot of stress, although, intriguingly, the levels of worry and negative emotions were actually higher in rural China than in the cities.[20]

Are migrants also experiencing an epidemic of stress, suffering from undiagnosed mental health problems, ground down by the combination of intense demands on them in unrelenting workplaces and the uncertainty of their living situations? Are they too 'psychologizing' their distress, even if they do not seek professional help? We have already remarked, in chapter 2, on the pitfalls that are likely to affect those who use Euro-American diagnostic systems to identify mental health problems in migrant populations living in contemporary megacities in other regions of the world. But what 'gaze' should we adopt then? What language, what criteria, what forms of judgment should we use to identify mental ill health? Should we use the diagnostic criteria developed in the United States and published in the various editions of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the criteria used in the chapter on Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders in the ICD, the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, which is widely used in Europe, the indigenous language of everyday life used in China, the self-reports of individuals or their families, or their communities? From our perspective, in understanding the emergence of a therapeutic or psychological culture in China, the task is less about deciding between these options than about understanding their mutual entanglement in the ways that experts and laypersons have come to make sense of mental distress in contemporary China.

Let us take one international epidemiological category: depression. Psychiatric epidemiologists tell us that China is experiencing an upsurge in diagnoses of depression. But when can we say that the '*yali*' reported by many migrants is actually a mental disorder called 'depression'?[21] We can trace the broad outlines of the issue at stake here by focusing on a single paper. Sing Lee has argued that depression was "almost an unknown category in China until the early 1990s" and that "the term 'depression' (*youyuzheng* or *yiyuzheng*) or 'depressed' (*yiyu* or *youyu*) was rarely used" (Lee, 2011: 177). He points to the fact that national epidemiological surveys in 1982 and 1993 showed that fewer than 0.5 percent of those surveyed were diagnosed with depression when interviewed with the World Health Organization Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI) to assess major depressive episode (MDE) according to *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-IV*) criteria (Lee, Tsang, et al., 2009). Suffering, he suggests, was expressed in other ways, notably through physical symptoms such as headaches, insomnia, and physical pains that, in China, were termed neurasthenia or 'weakness of the nerves' (*shenjing shuairou*). As we

described in chapter 2, neurasthenia was a familiar diagnosis in nineteenth-century Europe, where it was usually applied to the malaise of the wealthier classes. Lee draws on Arthur Kleinman's well-known work in Hunan in the 1980s, and Kleinman's argument that the physical symptoms of neurasthenia are actually 'idioms of distress' in a political climate in which individuals were required to repress external evidence of their emotions. On this basis, Kleinman argued that the majority of those diagnosed with neurasthenia would have been diagnosed with depression in the United States (Kleinman, 1982; Kleinman, 1986).[22] In the familiar terms of transcultural psychiatry, neurasthenia was reframed as a somatization of depression, a somatic means of expression of interpersonal distress within a culture that discouraged or prohibited the expression of feelings—where the mind dare not speak, the body became the means of communication of suffering and anguish.

It would be wrong, however, to disparage a belief in the reality of neurasthenia as merely part of Chinese 'folk psychology' or to suggest that when the migrants of Tongli Road speak of their response to their situation in corporeal terms it is because they do not think it appropriate to openly 'express their emotions.' Howard Chiang and his colleagues have argued that "Western behavioral sciences and psychological treatments [were] repudiated as 'bourgeois' in the Maoist period (1949–76)" (Chiang, 2015: 13), but Chinese experts and popular knowledges of the mind have a long and complex history, and one that has always been linked to practices of intervention and remediation. In the early years of the twentieth century, such beliefs and practices were influenced by psy experts from America and from Germany, sometimes mediated via Japan, asylums had been established in major cities, psychoanalytic ideas began to be taken up by radicals and spread into popular debate, as did ideas of mental hygiene; there was the beginning of a professionalization of medical psychiatry as well as various forms of psychology and psychotherapy (Hsuan-Ying, 2015). By the first half of the twentieth century, the reality of neurasthenia was widely accepted by most of these professionals and understood in terms of a weakening of the nervous system following excessive nervous excitement, leading to a variety of somatic symptoms. The somatic and the mental were deeply intertwined in professional expertise as well as in lay thought. Wen-ji Wang has described the ways in which, from the 1920s onward, *shenjing shuairuo* provided a fertile ground for the involvement of psy professionals in the management of malaise: "emergent Chinese neuropsychiatric and mental health professionals eagerly entered the already vibrant culture of neurasthenia and provided their explanations" (Wang, 2016: 1). There were a variety of

explanations and treatments for neurasthenia, including those that focused on strengthening the nerves through diet, injections of various substances, fresh air, and exercise. Many Chinese psychiatrists and psychologists took up and reworked themes from Euro-American styles of thought about the causes and consequences of minor mental troubles. There was healthy pluralism and debate between neuropsychiatrists, sociodynamic psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, and "certain psychologically minded social elites [who] championed the cause of mental hygiene or mental health" (ibid.: 5). But most of these approaches were characterized by a familiar mix: a strong belief in a hereditary basis of the susceptibility to mental disorder, an emphasis on mental troubles as 'disorders of civilization' that could be precipitated in those susceptible by all manner of nervous excitement, or by bad conduct such as masturbation and fantasizing, together with a concern that such mental pathologies might weaken the race with dire consequences for the future of the nation.

Things started to change in the 1980s. Following the publication of Kleinman's research, a number of Chinese studies were conducted, initially with the aim of disputing this overlap between neurasthenia and depression, not least because of the bad consequences for the doctor-patient relationship that were feared to result. But 20 years later the position had reversed. The third edition of the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders*, published in 2001, based its descriptive definitions on the *Clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines* of ICD-10 and also sought to align itself with the *Research Criteria* of ICD-10, and the *DSM-IV* (Chen, 2002).[23] It stated that the diagnosis of neurasthenia was to be utilized only when all other diagnoses such as depression, anxiety, and disorders with an identifiable physical basis have been excluded. Predictably, by 2009, researchers were pointing to the heavy burden of depression in China. For example, when Michael Phillips and his colleagues conducted an epidemiological survey in order to update the data on the Global Burden of Disease through a "comprehensive country specific analyses of the perceived needs, available resources, and potential barriers for mental health care" (Phillips, Zhang, et al., 2009: 2042), they found that while 1,034 cases in their sample met the DSM diagnostic criteria for major depression and a further 404 for minor depression, there were only fifteen cases of neurasthenia in their sample of over 16,500. This is hardly surprising, given that neurasthenia could only be diagnosed after excluding cases that met the criteria for any other disorder! Nonetheless, the extrapolations that Phillips and his colleagues drew from their study made for grim reading: "Projection of our results to all of China suggests that 173 million adults

in the country have a mental disorder and 158 million of these have never received any type of professional help for their condition" (ibid.: 2052).[24] Soon, one major study was claiming that depression was the second leading cause of disability in China (Yang, Wang, et al., 2013). Disputing the claim in previous research that "Along with Japan, South Korea, and Mexico, China seems to benefit from lower rates of major depression, anxiety disorders, and low back pain than do other members of the G20" (ibid.: 2013), the authors commented that "this finding, however, has been challenged; true rates might be higher."[25]

The shift in psychiatric discourse from neurasthenia to depression is intertwined with its contemporary corollary—the increasing prescription of so-called antidepressant medication—although a study in *The Lancet* claims that less than 6 percent of those with anxiety, depression, and other mental afflictions seek help due to stigma or lack of access to resources (Charlson, Baxter, et al., 2016). No wonder some market research companies see a vast untapped marked here, predicting growth in China's market for antidepressants of the order of 20 percent year on year.[26] And yet neither the rise of Euro-American diagnostic language among professional researchers, nor the increasing use of 'western' psychopharmaceuticals, tell us the whole picture—even more than elsewhere, multiple explanatory systems for one's afflictions exist side by side in China. Alongside the growth of the medically trained psychiatric profession in China, increasingly adopting Euro-American styles of thought, there has been a rapid growth of the other psy professions, of counselors more or less professionally trained and credentialed, of the entry of psychological technologies into the human resources departments of many enterprises, and of the presence of psychological help and advice on the internet, television shows—including 'confessional' shows where individuals speak of their personal problems and are offered advice, and psychology self-help literature. In what is often referred to as a 'psycho-boom' (*xinli re*) (Hsuan-Ying, 2015) we can see a rather different style of explanation and intervention, drawing on a longer Chinese tradition for understanding the ailments of everyday life, which prioritizes, not the brain, but the heart.

Thus, in her study of *ideas of* mental health in China, and the practices of mental health professionals, the Canadian trained anthropologist Jie Yang argues that "The heart is a fundamental component of being and a key precept in traditional Chinese medicine. As the seat of cognition, virtue and bodily sensation, the heart is the origin of all emotions and the grounding space for all aspects of bodily and social well-being . . . Indeed, psychology is

translated in Chinese as *xinlixue* (the study of the heart's reasoning)" (Yang, 2015: 12). Some of the key elements of the idea of neurasthenia live on in much of Chinese thought, both popular and professional (Yang, 2017). Mind and body are not viewed as separate entities, and distress is understood as arising from social and intersubjective experiences, Jie Yang reminds us. The perspective of the heart (*xinli hua*) and the belief that the heart is the key organ where those experiences impact, is thus central to both explanation and treatment. The heart is where the rush to competition and self-advancement take their toll, the heart is where spiritual emptiness is felt, the heart is where the pressure (*yali*) of demands in the workplace and outside it are felt, the heart is what speaks out to the individual of their sorrows and disappointments, and depression (*yiyu*) is as much an emotion of the heart as it is a disease of the mind. The body and mind are open, permeable to outside forces, whether material, social, or interpersonal. When students complain of low spirits, exhaustion, frustration, and meaninglessness in their lives lived in endless pursuit of grades, Jie Yang tells us, University psychological counsellors do not diagnose 'depression' but *kongxin bing* (empty-heart disease), a psychological disorder caused by the collapse of one's value orientation due to the external pressure exerted by the exam-focused educational system, which is neither amenable to drugs nor psychological therapies (Yang, 2017: 70).

It is clear, then, that we cannot understand the nature and experience of mental distress in China, let alone explore questions about city effects, about the role of migration, and so on, without understanding the emergence of a very specific kind of 'psy complex' in that country in recent decades, not just in relation to serious and disabling disorders, but also in relation to the everyday, low-level, and yet pervasive ailments that often are placed under the sign of *stress*.

## 'Stress' and the Psy Complex

While, as we have seen, there were 'psy' precedents from the pre-1949 period to call upon, from the 1980s onward, for some Chinese citizens at least, a new 'psychological' language for shaping, organizing, understanding, and expressing one's afflictions became available: "the terms 'psychological' (*xinli*), 'stress' (*yali*), 'mood' (*xinqing*), 'feeling' (*quingxu* or *ganjue*), 'unhappiness' (*bukaixin* or *buyukuai*), 'feeling bad' (*nangua*) and 'depressed' (*youyu*)" (Lee, 2011: 186).

These new vocabularies, and modes of introspection, forms of judgment, and personal aspirations are linked to an "awakening interest in psychology

books, biographical documentary films, counselling, psychological idioms of distress, psychometric methods, and training in psychotherapy . . . these big city, middle-class interests represent a set of quests for meaning in everyday life among ordinary Chinese that holds the potential to transform Chinese culture and society" (Kleinman, 2010: 1075). While some of the growth of the psy industry has resulted from traditionally trained individual psychotherapists (Chang, Tong, et al., 2005; Deng, Lin, et al., 2013) or family therapists expanding their practices and gaining more public recognition for their work (Deng, Lin et al., 2013), much has been market-driven, created by entrepreneurial individuals who, even when altruistic in their wish to ameliorate unhappiness, have also seen a market opportunity (Zhang, 2017). There has also been a remarkable rise of counseling services delivered face-to-face, by telephone, or via the internet. Psy professionals now star in television talk shows about emotional problems, marital difficulties, and parent-child relationships (Yang, 2017). Many training courses for psychological counselors have been established. Some of these are officially authorized programs delivered in universities and other educational establishments and leading to certification from the Ministry of Labor, with a license awarded on the basis of an examination. Others are of dubious provenance set up for profit and attracting gullible individuals who themselves see 'counseling' as a new and potentially profitable vocation for themselves.[27]

Some authors who have documented this trend have suggested that this amounts to the emergence of 'therapeutic governance' in China—a state-encouraged strategy to achieve political stability and economic growth, taken up enthusiastically by the growing psy professionals and incorporated into many workplaces, to manage the problems of living, not by changing material circumstances, but by defining and teaching the psychological capacities to optimize the relation between subjective states and economic requirements, transforming the consequences of sociopolitical policies into individual troubles, and hence masking and legitimating their political and social causes (Hsuan-Ying, 2015; Yang, 2015; Hizi, 2017; Yang, 2017; Zhang, 2017). Thus, Li Zhang has argued that "psychological intervention, often in the name of *guanai* (care), has gradually become a useful tool of managing the population and governing society in postsocialist China" (Zhang, 2017: 6). and that "psychological counselors and other psychological experts are becoming a new form of authority, an indispensable part of creating and managing knowable, stable, and governable subjects for the military, the police, schools, and enterprises (ibid.: 7). However, while the phenomena analyzed by these authors are real enough, it is not clear that the hidden hand

of the state is directing them all—let alone the visible and invisible hands of the strong Party State of China.[28] We need more nuanced analytical tools to understand these developments in which a whole range of authorities, with different relations to the formal political apparatus, are involved in the government of conduct, drawing on regimes of knowledge and expertise and articulating novel self-technologies underpinned by beliefs about desirable forms of life and subjectivity. They may be better understood as the consequence of a number of interrelated events that are reshaping the subjectivity of Chinese citizens: new ways of thinking about the unease of the soul in China, new ways of acting upon it, and the emergence of a heterogeneous array of 'engineers of the human soul' (Rose, 1989; Rose, 1996). Further, as we have seen in other regions of the world, it would be misleading to regard individuals as docile recipients of these ways of thinking about and acting on themselves, far less as 'dupes' of a set of pacifying practices. If these practices of the self have proliferated through the everyday lives of so many, it is because they connect with the dissatisfactions and desires of individuals, who do not merely subordinate themselves to them, but are active agents taking up and transforming these new techniques of governing themselves.

There are certainly a number of formalized and organized psy practices for managing subjectivity carried out at the behest of authorities in government agencies such as the police and the military, in state-owned enterprises and in some non-state enterprises. Indeed, the workplace has been one key 'surface of emergence' of these new psy technologies. For it is in the workplace that human relations staff have sought to deploy the practices of psychological counseling to mitigate the stressful consequences of onerous working conditions, job insecurity, and the anger generated by poor wages. As we have seen, prior to the economic reforms, the *danwei* or work unit was the locus of most forms of support for individuals and families, from housing and childcare to health and advice. In today's marketized and urbanized China, where offices and factories are the workplaces for the majority of Chinese adults, these support mechanisms have to be provided in other ways, and the workplace has become the site both for the appearance of many of these problems of living—experiences of sub-acute physical problems, anxieties, and the absenteeism and 'presenteeism' that result[29]—and for their therapeutic amelioration. As in Japan, where the increasing rates of mental ill health attributed to workplace stress have become a major public issue (Targum and Kitanaka, 2012; Kitanaka, 2016), psychotherapists and counselors in the workplace exist in the tension between care for the individual and maximization of productivity for the enterprise. Teaching the skills of

well-being and stress management not only symbolizes an institution that cares for its employees, not only often offers some self-technologies through which individuals may be able to improve their personal lives, but also, or so it is hoped, reduces the costs to the enterprise of illness and low productivity. The genealogy of 'human relations' in China has its own characteristics and is undoubtedly distinct because of the highly politicized endeavor to create profitable market-based enterprises; nonetheless, as at an earlier moment in Europe and the United States, "psycho-social expertise has acquired a vital place in the diverse attempts to link individuals subjectively and emotionally to their productive activity" (Miller and Rose, 1995: 457).

## Measuring and Managing Migrant Mental Health

Finally, let us return to migrant life. Are migrant workers among those being diagnosed with depression or anxiety and prescribed psychiatric drugs? Are they consumers of psy expertise, either in person or via their smartphones? Is their mental health being monitored and managed in the workplace? If we think of migrants as a 'reserve army of labor' in traditional Marxist terms, we would not expect their mental states, no matter how bad, to become a matter of concern to authorities: the constant supply of migrant labor ensures that there are always many others to replace those who fall by the wayside, and whose irregular conditions of employment mean that they can easily be dispensed with, cast back into the city and thence to return to the villages from whence they came. However, as we have seen from discussion of events at Foxconn, things are not so simple. The mental health of migrants, at least as it impacts upon the urban factories that employ so many, has indeed become a matter of concern.

Over recent years, psychiatric epidemiologists in China have come to identify the mental health of the rural-urban migrant as something to be researched, even if their lives outside the workplace have not yet become a key focus of organized therapeutic intervention. Researchers have sought to document, if not explain, the mental health consequences of migration from the countryside to the towns. This work "has been particularly focused on the comparison with the population in their hometown or host society, and the effects of different dimensions of social exclusion as stressors" and particular attention has been paid to the *hukou* system (Li and Rose, 2017: 21). The results do not present a clear picture. While one synthesis of the research on the mental health of Chinese migrants suggested that they experienced a greater severity of most psychiatric symptoms than the

general population (Zhong, Liu, et al., 2016), a second, more recent synthesis painted "a complex and contradictory picture, both for the mental health status of migrants in relation to non-migrant residents in their locality, and for migrant mental health status in relation to their rural counterparts" (Li and Rose, 2017: 22): some studies showed migrants had better mental health than did those from the areas from where they migrated, but others showed the reverse, depending on the scales used, the nature of the comparison, the regions and cities in question, and much more.

These differences are not surprising, given the variations in the migrant journey and experience that we have already discussed, the dates of the surveys, the particular population of migrants surveyed, the diverse scales and measures used to assess mental health or psychiatric symptomatology, and the circumstances in which the assessment was made—in a migrant's own quarters, a professional's office, or, in some cases, in a room in a factory with managers looking on. Nonetheless, Li and Rose suggest that we can glean something from this research: dimensions of social exclusion, such as limited access to labor rights and social stigma from their host communities, when these were explicitly specified and analyzed, did have negative consequences for migrant mental health, as did aspects of migrants' own self-identity, such as their perception that they were 'outsiders' and distinct from 'locals.'

Following that review by Li and Rose, our colleagues in the School of Public Health at Fudan University carried out a number of studies using conventional mental health measures, and they did indeed find that these showed higher levels of mental ill health among migrants in China.[30] Thus, a survey of 3,286 workers in work units in Shanghai using a number of standardized scales found that migrant workers had a slightly higher prevalence of depression than non-migrant workers, with a notably poor mental health among participants over age forty-five (Li, Dai, et al., 2019).[31] A cross-sectional study of 3,038 migrants conducted in five cities from June 2017 to Spring 2018—Shanghai, Zhengzhou, Xinzheng, Xingyang, and Baoji—found that there was a strong relationship between subjective well-being and high levels of perceived social cohesion, and that the relationship between perceived social exclusion and poor mental health was much higher than that of their counterparts (Zhu, Gao, et al., 2019). A further study of 4,648 migrants to Shanghai recruited from five factories and public places in different districts in Shanghai found that "Chinese migrant workers who were younger, had insufficient self-rated income, had worse self-reported health, used alcohol and were unmarried had a high risk of mental health disorders" (Wang, Chen, et al., 2019: S45).[32] These results undoubtedly suffered from

the kinds of methodological problems we remarked on earlier, in their use of a range of scales and measures, and in the sites in which the questionnaires were administered and the assessments were made. Nonetheless, the results from migrants' self-assessments are suggestive: perhaps what is happening here is that the surveys and scales are translating the everyday experience of hardship, and the tensions of the migrant life, into the language and diagnostic categories of psychiatry. Hence the findings point beyond the bare statistics to the need to explore the experiences of the migrants themselves and how they viewed their own situation.

Did these migrant factory workers themselves feel the pressure of their precarious working circumstances, of their fraught relations with the 'locals,' of the dislocation from the settled lives that they could have lived back in their villages? Are their contemporary experiences similar to those described by Pun and Chan, who paint a bleak picture of suffering and exploitation, relieved only, for some, by overt, or somatized, acts of resistance? Or was the experience more like that described by Bao-Liang Zhong and colleagues, who carried out focus groups with a number of urban migrant workers in Shenzhen: stress—work-related stress, family-related stress, financial stress, and the stress of feeling that they did not belong in the city that they now inhabited (Zhong, Liu, et al., 2016). The troubles expressed by members of those focus groups were not framed in the language of mental health, but neither were they framed in the language of subjugation and resistance. People complained of the effects of noise, traffic, crowds, polluted air, and strange tasting water, and ascribed various medical conditions to them. They complained about the harshness of their working environments, strict discipline, and penalization of those who violated regulations on time or output quota. They worried about their parents left behind in their home villages and about their children's academic performance. And they felt the burden of the demands placed on them by the need to provide financial support for their family back home. Many mentioned their feelings of distance from other urban dwellers, not least because they were often forced to move from city to city. As one man put it, having done more than twenty jobs in many different cities: "For many, many years, in many many cities, I work, I get fired, I start a new job again, and I get fired again . . . I look like someone loses his heart, work here, work there, come here, and go there. . . . I never know when there is an end to my wandering" (ibid.: 10). For Bao-Liang Zhong and colleagues, the common theme here was "acculturative stress" caused by the disjuncture between the natural environment of rural existence and that of the city, the disparity between agricultural production and factory

work, and the conflict between traditional Confucian values of loyalty to family and modern urban individualism—people no longer felt that they belonged either in their home villages or in the cities to which they had migrated. Their unmet psychological needs, concluded the authors, should be dealt with by specialized mental health services for migrants, focused on "dynamic evaluation of rural-urban acculturative stress and health education on stress management, and, when necessary, individual psychosocial assessment and treatment" (ibid.: 12).

Whether such a 'psychologization' of the ailments of migrant workers is desirable or not, we saw few signs of it in own research in Shanghai. Indeed, the issue of migrant mental health hardly featured at all in the priorities of either healthcare professionals or public health researchers, despite the fact that around one-third of the city's population at any given time was made up of rural-urban migrants. It is true that some migrants who were perceived as disturbing public order were hospitalized.[33] In the 1990s, as Lu and colleagues suggest, you "had to behave quite 'crazily' in order to gain access to medical care, and so most migrant workers in that period remained silent sufferers" (Lu, Lee, et al., 1999: 102). However, even then, 'socially intolerable' behavior did result in hospitalization, usually with a diagnosis of 'schizophreniform psychosis,' and often treated with chlorpromazine.[34] But because migrants lacked health insurance, and employers were unwilling to pay for extended treatment, they were often discharged from hospital against medical advice—while it is not clear what then happened to them, in the absence of any other community treatment it is likely that they were fired from their jobs and returned to their villages (ibid.: 102). More recent studies, however, show that migrant workers do have a higher risk of hospitalization than non-migrants. For instance, a study of patients hospitalized with acute schizophrenia at four psychiatric hospitals in Changsha, in Hunan Province, showed that "Chinese migrant workers, especially women and older male migrant workers, have higher risk of hospitalization for schizophrenia, and greater severity of symptoms once hospitalized, than local residents" (Zhu, Hu, et al., 2018: 97), no doubt because, as in the earlier studies, most migrants lack insurance coverage and delay access to formal mental health services for as long as they can.

Outside hospitalization, it seemed to us that migrants rarely, if ever, made use of the services of the Shanghai Mental Health Centre, which provided 'out-patient' mental health services from assessment to medication monitoring. There were drop-in sessions one afternoon a fortnight in some of the Health Centers in the areas where migrants lived, but it was not clear how

widely such sessions were publicized, and they seemed to be sparsely used. And while migrants made such extensive use of their mobile phones that some researchers have identified a high level of 'problematic smartphone use' bordering on addiction, and suggested that usage might be linked to one or other mental health diagnoses (Wang, Lan, et al., 2019), there is little evidence that Shanghai migrants used their phones to access psychological support; rather it seems that smartphones were used to call friends, access social networks and social media, to surf the internet, play games and watch videos.

It is not as if migrants to Shanghai, especially those of younger ages, were unconcerned about the effect of migration on their mental lives. Thus, for the adolescents aged around seventeen and eighteen who participated in the study of perceptions of health and health-seeking behavior conducted by Chunyan Yu and colleagues in a migrant community in Shanghai in 2011, mental states were certainly an issue (Yu, Lou, et al., 2019).[35] "Nearly every adolescent talked about frustration, low self-esteem, mood swings and other issues related to mental health when being asked about their prominent health challenges," they report, and indeed they quote one adolescent as saying that mental health would be their priority for "a program to improve the well-being of floating adolescents in this community" (ibid.: 342). Not that this young woman was very clear about the problem with mental health, although she was apparently wiping tears when she explained that: "Life is really had for migrant parents and it would definitely affect their children . . . Parents are tired and kids would feel unhappy every time when they see their parent's fatigue" (ibid.: 342). Another young woman, enumerating the health problems that migrants have, said "the first one should be smoking, second is violence, and the third is psychological problems" (ibid.: 343). However, the young people interviewed believed that mental health was a personal matter; they were reluctant to seek support from counselors or use community facilities, especially if they involved traveling from their own neighborhood. Those working in factories believed they would get no help from their employers even for physical injuries, let alone for mental health issues, and fear of discrimination meant they were very unwilling to approach any formal health services. Both subjectively and structurally, for good or for ill, they were excluded from the expanding realm of 'therapeutic governance' in China.

Let us return to the Tongli Road, where our collaborators Lisa Richaud and Ash Amin carried out part of the ethnography that was part of our wider study of mental health and migration to the Chinese megacity. As

we have already mentioned, the situation of the migrants in Tongli Road in late 2016 was one of great uncertainty, constant change and insecurity, not just because of the normal migrant experiences of demanding but insecure working conditions, low wages, and so forth, but also because the policies that sought to move urban labor 'up the value chain' required sustained efforts to reduce the low-skilled migrant population by outlawing the factories that attracted and employed them.[36] Following the destruction of the factories that had brought so many to the Tongli Road and provided the wages that they would spend there, one shopkeeper commented to Richaud and Amin: "There used to be so many people around here, you couldn't even walk through the street, but now business is no good, everybody has left." As Richaud and Amin report, "over and again, as we walked from one shop to another in June 2017, we heard of the 'pressure' (*yali*) caused by economic collapse and existential uncertainty. Yet revealingly, we also heard of the futility of fretting and feeling low. We witnessed the persistence of routines and lively sociality alongside and within uncertainty, confirming our sense that the destructions, laid over years of tough living as rural-to-urban migrants, fell short of generating sustained and severe mental distress" (Richaud and Amin, 2020: 78).

The remaining inhabitants of Tongli Road were thus not passive in the face of the destruction of their previous way of life. Despite the fact that "for the many rural-to-urban migrants living, working in, or running a business in the neighborhood, everyday life has unfolded since amidst fields of rubble," our colleagues did not find an outbreak of symptoms of stress-related disorders, anxiety, depression, and the like. And despite the undoubted feelings of pressure and strain that they experience, the remaining inhabitants of Tongli Road did not look to the internet psy experts for advice and guidance as to how they should manage their mental health in these situations of 'pressure' and uncertainty. Everyday practices of endurance and fortitude seemed to prevail. Despite references to 'pressure' (*yali*), the management of the everyday was made up by a range of mundane activities—playing cards, joking with others, filling empty time, but not dwelling on one's misfortune: downplaying bad moods with a view that "dwelling on one's suffering was of little help" (Richaud and Amin, 2019: S11). Thus, the inhabitants of Tongli Road adopted a variety of minor tactics to manage themselves in the present in the face of an undecidable future: "'small scale,' and 'barely perceptible' practices of endurance producing moments of being that potentially enable those who find themselves stuck in a destroyed yet still place to feel and act otherwise" (Richaud and Amin, 2020: 79). It is not, of course, that they were

unaware of the challenges they might face at any moment: uncertainty is a constant topic of conversation. They certainly say that they feel pressure, but they suppress distress, "swallow it back into their heart" and practice endurance, while finding ways of making life manageable, tolerable, and even sometimes enjoyable notwithstanding the objectively dire situation in which they find themselves.

"Migrant lives," as Lisa Richaud and Ash Amin argue, "are not only lived through difficult experiences and perceptions relating to institutional and material circumstances, social status and belonging, hopes and expectations, or inner deliberations over the 'meaning of migration' . . . The minutiae of the everyday [disturb] easy equations between urban life, stress and mental health, they may well constitute the very site through which migrants learn to negotiate their precarious conditions, rendering them more habitable" (Richaud and Amin, 2019: S12). Reflecting not merely on the situation of these specific migrants but of others, they conclude:

> even for workers in the fast-paced service industry, or for those in the motor factory, where the noise of industrial equipment and the 'squalor' . . . challenge the senses of the newcomer, there is room for adjustment. Habit (*xiguan*) is invoked as a key process through which endurance is forged, as one learns to disattend or dis-sense, as well as to undertake small acts of self-preservation, finding ways to erect boundaries, albeit often porous, between one's body and polluting matters. And, in between moments of fatigue, there are the shared meals with fellow workers, the outings to a nearby shopping area, the evening dance gatherings, the cigarette breaks and all that can offer temporary reprieve. (ibid:. S11)

Perhaps, then, rather than re-interpreting what migrants tell us of their lives in terms of psychological or psychiatric notions of 'mental health,' we would do better to think of the range of techniques for interpreting and managing oneself that are deployed by those living in situations that are uncertain, precarious, and nerve-wracking, making their lives in milieu that are unpleasant, sometimes dangerous, often polluted, and sometimes frankly toxic. The challenge is to understand the ways that subjective states are shaped within these forms of inhabitation through which people, often collectively, make their lives bearable in deeply precarious modes of urban existence replete with biopsychosocial exposures that threaten their bodies and souls.

Migrant experience in China, whether in the factory, the construction site, or in the face of everyday challenges such as those of Tongli Road, thus entails constant states of 'pressure' or, in the words of the resident of Kaula

Bandar (KB) who we quoted in the previous chapter, of 'tension'—a tension that is sometimes so intense that it can injure, and even kill. Would it be legitimate, then, to think of this pressure, this tension, in terms of the English word with so many similar connotations: stress? And if we were to do so, might we not be able to reopen the dialogue among epidemiologists and ethnographers by focusing on the ways in which those in difficult and uncertain situations manage that stress? Surely stress is, if nothing else, a useful way of describing the experience of migrants, and indeed of many if not all those caught up in today's megacities. And surely stress and health are intimately connected. While a little bit of stress might be motivating, who does not find continued stress enervating and exhausting, damaging to both our physical and our mental health? Perhaps, then, stress can provide a helpful route into understanding more about the mental lives of those who move to, are born in, or live in megacities. Indeed, if we wanted to identify the ways that so many laypeople and experts, in India, China, the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, have blurred distinctions between brain, mind, body, and environment, tried to encapsulate the embodied nature of the experience of adversity, as well as the pressures of urban life, we might look no further. Stress, it seems, is both an objective feature of urban life and an experience of almost anyone who lives, works, or tries to travel in megacities. Stress is not just a part of the language with which they describe the feelings of pressure, anxiety, tension, strain, and hassle that pervade urban existence; nor is it only a state of mind, but it is also a state of the body—of blood pressure, hormones, nerves, and neurons. So let us turn to examine the thorny issues that have long surrounded this word that has borne so much explanatory burden: stress.