

Hiding a “Garbage Village”:
Changes in Urban Governance at the 2008 Beijing Olympics

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Abstract

This paper examines the social and political implications of the governance of rural, migrant workers in suburban, migrant enclaves in Beijing at the 2008 Olympic Games. The fieldwork site, Yue Village (*Yuecun*), where most of the migrant residents worked as ragpickers or recyclers, has been referred to by some local residents as a disorderly and troubled “garbage village.” Its existence, which has been the target of regulations, conflicted with the modern image that China hoped could be debuted to the world. Just as the city was preparing for the Olympics, rumors about evicting migrant workers and demolishing their shanty towns began spreading. My fieldwork observations, however, offer contradictory findings. On the one hand, the previous invasive and violent governance of migrant enclaves was dropped in favor of subtle surveillance methods to hide rather than outright demolish these embarrassing migrant enclaves. On the other hand, the Beijing government still toed the party line regarding migrant communities, emphasizing political stability and national safety as fundamental principles. The social spaces that migrants occupy have yet to represent a level of power that threatens the government.

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Situating Migrant Community in China

That sunny day in July seemed to be too ordinary and tranquil to signal the forthcoming Olympics in this suburban migrant community. A while after I had left the “garbage village” with a foreign photographer, I received an emergency phone call from Principal Han, a middle-aged, migrant entrepreneur. With a threatening voice, he pleaded, “You must come back now, with the foreigner and all of the photos. If you don’t come immediately, the police will shut down my school, and I will be thrown in prison for ten years. Then, you will never see me again! Come quickly!”

This incident happened about one month before the Opening Ceremony for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Three hours after I ventured to a migrant enclave (*nongmingong jujuqu*) in a neglected corner of Beijing, accompanied by an Austrian photographer, the police confronted my informant, Principal Han, and accused him of “undermining the Olympics Games and subverting the state in collaboration with foreigners.” Principal Han of Qinxue Migrant Children School, flustered and frightened, called me. The intrusion by a white, foreign man, and me, a Taiwanese, graduate student, not only broke the community’s tranquility but revealed the extraordinary character of migrant communities in China as well as the hidden tensions between migrant workers and the post-socialist state.

The Household Registration (*hukou*) System, an institutional legacy of the socialist regime, makes the social group “migrant workers” empirically and theoretically meaningful. Before the economic reforms of the 1980s, the *hukou* system strictly differentiated urban citizens from rural

peasants and restricted their mobility from country to city (Cheng and Selden 1994). As a consequence of the Reform and Open Policy, hundreds of millions of peasants have left their hometowns to find better employment in Chinese metropolises. Their labor has been increasingly indispensable to both the national and international economy. With their contributions, China has experienced dramatic industrialization and urbanization. Their economic participation has even made China “factory to the world.”

The migrant worker as a social category, however, is also the very epitome of unequal development and social inequality in China. Due to the *hukou* system, a hidden institutional structure distributing social welfare, peasant, migrant workers in the cities have had many fewer entitlements than state workers. Neither peasants nor urban citizens, they were seen as strangers in the city, labeled “unmanageable” or “floating” people who burdened city infrastructure and brought social problems to the city government (Zhang 2001). The government’s concern with security makes them subject to frequent and severe regulation.¹

Regulations targeting migrants primarily focus on their communities. The suburban areas outside the Fifth Ring Road in Beijing, for example, are where many migrant workers gather and build themselves temporary homes. Migrant living places are usually interspersed among Beijing’s rural houses with shanty-town appearances and poor urban infrastructure. The media and local, non-migrant, residents often despised these crowded spaces as dirty, disordered, and inferior corners. The Chinese government is haunted by the fear that subversion and criminality may happen in the migrant concentrating areas, especially during important events in Beijing, such as National Day (Guang 2005).

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was one of the most significant events in contemporary Chinese history. Holding such a large-scale event symbolized China’s growing international influence and

¹ Differentiation in social rights and political entitlement is discussed by Solinger (1999) and Wu (2010).

power, politically and economically. The government displayed the nation’s modernity by constructing opulent buildings. At the same time, it wanted to remove negative images such as the migrant shanty towns near the Olympic Village that could embarrass it. Consequently, the media surmised that migrant workers would be evicted and many migrant enclaves would be torn down for a better city image and for national security (Wang 2008:9-10).

During my fieldwork in the summer of 2008, however, large-scale evictions and demolitions did not take place. Instead, the government preferred control and surveillance tactics that were subtle and indirect. While media predictions proved wrong, many questions remain. How do the new surveillance methods and techniques differ from those of the past? How effective is post-socialist governance of problematic migrant communities? What are the implications of changes in urban surveillance? How does it signal changes in relations between migrant workers and the post-socialist state?

This paper focuses on the changing governance in Chinese migrant urban enclaves through an analysis of everyday life in Yue Village (*Yuecun*), a migrant enclave in Beijing. I begin with a profile of Yue Village, where I conducted fieldwork and then offer an analysis of the events that occurred during the Beijing Olympics. Finally, I will discuss the theoretical implications of the case study to speculate on the changing dynamics of migrant communities in China. I argue that instead of demolition and eviction, a façade was built to cover the migrant enclaves. Moreover, ethnographic observations on the interactions between migrants and local officers show the migrants’ strategies to avoid the control and reveal weaknesses in surveillance. Nevertheless, the government still takes a firm stance toward governance to protect the national image and public safety. The political atmosphere in China may be increasingly tolerant and liberal during this economic transition. New social spaces created by migrants, however, remain under surveillance.

Yue Village: A “Garbage Village”

Yue Village epitomizes the thousands of migrant communities in Beijing which have undergone changing rural-urban relations born of Chinese economic reform policies. Since the 1990s, more than hundreds of millions of migrant workers have left the countryside and entered cities to seek job opportunities. While they could not afford living expenses in downtown areas, suburban, agricultural land met their needs for less expensive living. During the city’s rapid urbanization, new urban development policies increasingly reduced the amount of land devoted to agricultural use.² Local, Beijing peasants, unable to support themselves by farming on small lots or by using the compensation they received for their agricultural land, started to rent their houses and any remaining land to migrant workers or migrant entrepreneurs for added income.³ Thus, migrant worker demand for housing and Beijing peasants able to supply it transformed these areas into the living spaces primarily for migrants. According to interviews with a government official in 2008, there were about 20,000 migrant workers and only about 1,600 local Beijing villagers living in Yue Village.

Yue Village’s recycling businesses and marketplaces were its distinguishing characteristics and made the small village politically sensitive. Many of the migrant workers in Yue Village worked as recyclers and recycling markets occupied the largest area in Yue Village. Hence, the town was referred by some as a “garbage village.” Due to its location, situated only five kilometers north of the Olympic Village, it had a reputation as a blight on the city’s modern image, especially before the Olympics. This political context of migrant enclaves in modern China will serve as a background for understanding the meaning of events in the next section.

² In Yue Village, the Beijing government took back most of the land to increase the green zones and build city parks for the upcoming Olympics.

³ Local villagers’ practice of renting their own houses and land resulted in the formation of migrant enclaves in contemporary China. Although the Chinese shanty towns were comparable in the poor living conditions to Peruvian squatters (de Soto 1989), the former differed from the latter in the conspiracy between migrants and local villagers.

Yue Village’s landscape is composed of migrant housing compounds (*dazayuan*) interlaced with the original houses of local residents. The compounds were usually owned by local Beijingers or migrant entrepreneurs. My chief informant, Principal Han, was one of the “landlords.” He and his brother-in-law managed a compound and the Qinxue Migrant Children’s School.⁴ In his migrant housing compound where I lived while conducting my fieldwork dwelled twenty households. Most of them came from Henan province and were chain migrants brought to the area by relatives, though some migrant workers came from Anhui, Shandong, and Yunnan. The migrant families usually had two children and had been in Beijing for more than ten years.⁵

Hiding and Covering up: Subtle Surveillance at the Beijing Olympics

In this section, I analyze three dimensions of the events that represent interactions and tensions within the migrant community during the Beijing Olympics. Before the Opening Ceremony there had been speculation about severe enforcement of regulations by the city government. One conjecture was that the government would tear down most of the illegal migrant enclaves, thereby expelling migrant workers. In contrast to razing the enclaves, the government opted to hide the troublesome area instead. My observations show the dynamics of migrant-state power relations: the government was not necessarily the winner, nor were the migrants necessarily losers.

1. Hiding a “Garbage Village”

To present a modern and clean city is to cover inconvenient street scenes. In Yue Village, the main target of the cover up were recycled materials, the piles of garbage in the marketplaces.

⁴ A migrant children school (*nongmingong zidi xuexiao*), it is a private school catering to migrant children. The migrant children from non-Beijing provinces usually face many obstacles in attending a local public school due to the *hukou* system. There is often more than one migrant children’s school in large migrant enclaves. Yue Village has at least five, including Qinxue.

⁵ Despite this long period of residency, their social networks were very narrow and restricted to a few relatives and neighbors. Their isolated social lives were associated with their rootless settlements and share similarities with Siu’s idea of “grounding displacement.” Her study of urban villages in Guangzhou, South China, found that the local villagers were trapped by the *hukou* system and named this phenomenon “grounding displacement” (2007: 345-346).

When people were walking on the main street of Yue Village, they could easily see the mountains of the trash behind the gates of the marketplaces. From July 20, 2008 until the end of the Olympics, however, the bosses of the markets were to shut all the gates. The garbage remained in the marketplaces but by closing the gates it remained out of sight.

Even on ordinary days, the “veiling and covering” tricks were too familiar in migrant enclaves. In May 2008, three months before the Olympic Games, senior government officials inspected Yue Village. Two days before the inspection, all migrants and local villagers were mobilized to clean up the residential compounds, schools and streets. A big trash can suddenly appeared on the street to collect household waste, which was usually thrown away outdoors. Migrant women busied themselves tidying up the compounds and covering up recycling materials, while men hid their trucks in the alleys. Some migrants even started to paint walls to give officials a favorable impression of the town. All provisional cleaning and covering was to hide unpleasant living conditions from the officers.

The government has applied the same logic of strategies to the migrant laborers by limiting their working opportunities. In early 2008, my interviewees expressed much anxiety over whether they would lose their jobs, since their jobs in the informal economy, such as vendors, pedicab drivers and ragpickers, “damaged” the modern image of Beijing. While rumors about losing jobs became commonplace in Yue Village, most migrants there chose to stay in Beijing rather than return to their hometowns. They decided to work and earned money day-by-day until officials took action against them. At first, their “guerilla” strategies worked well as the illegal vendors and pedicab drivers were hyper-aware of the prying eyes of officials and tried to operate out of their view. They feared otherwise they would face penalties or have their illegal vehicles confiscated.

Truck drivers and ragpickers were not so lucky. In order to provide foreign guests with clean air, starting on July 20th, only half the usual vehicles could enter Beijing city each day. Old trucks, which were blamed for air pollution, were strictly prohibited from entering the city. The regulation led to the suspension of construction work and the unemployment of many migrant drivers. On the same day, the gates and entrances of recycling marketplaces were closed. Trade in recycled materials was prohibited during the two-month Olympic period. By suspending the markets, ragpickers had no place to sell their goods and consequently ceased to work.

Implementation of the above rules and regulations helped construct a façade and delude visitors into believing Beijing was a great city without filth or disorder. Still, the migrant compounds did not disappear, nor did vendors, pedicab drivers, or ragpickers. As Broudehoux (2004) noticed, the Beijing government tended to hide the poor areas behind façades rather than actually improving them. In the case of the Beijing Olympics, the National Stadium, for example, was China’s Potemkin Village, hiding the shanty towns as well as migrant workers behind them.

2. Non-confrontation and Soft Surveillance

In addition to the concern over urban aesthetics, rumors in Beijing revealed the second concern of the city government: the threat of “unruly” migrants. To decrease apprehension, the local government made a survey and registration of the migrant village’s population a priority with the goal of controlling migrants by checking on the number and basic conditions of the dwellers. Given that there was no systematic method of assigning house numbers and addresses in the shanty towns and that informal migrant workers changed jobs frequently, the survey’s utility was limited.

I witnessed the first survey in my compound in April 2008, four months before the Opening Ceremony. One afternoon, a middle-aged, Beijing female official showed up in Yue Village. She

tried to collect then confirm information from all migrant women living in our compound. I was interviewing the owner of a room when she knocked on the door to ask about birth control. The migrant women, though a little disturbed by the official, did not feel this kind enforcement was a big deal. Most of them answered questions perfunctorily, and some even claimed that they did not have their identification at home. After conducting the survey for two hours, even though the official looked very exhausted, she could not accomplish the mission. Thus, before she left, she moved on to the Qinxue Migrant Children School and asked Principal Han to help fill out the questionnaire. Although this survey was only aimed at the birth control practices of migrant women, any government acts prior to the Olympics were bound to lead to questions about the survey’s purpose and whether migrant families who violated the one-child policy would be evicted.

Nine days later, the local police officers came to the Qinxue Migrant Children School for a second round of registrations. They asked the teachers to pass out questionnaires to all students.⁶ All students and their families, even kindergarten students, had to complete the questionnaire within two days. I asked a teacher about the potential purpose of the questionnaire. She replied that families in informal jobs would be evicted from Beijing. I was curious about the information the migrant families gave on the survey. When I tried to borrow the questionnaires from a teacher on the next day, she gave me a heavy sigh and told me that her mission was essentially a failure. The questionnaires which she handed over to me were badly creased. Some of them were even damaged. Most answers were difficult to read due to messy handwriting. According to the teachers, the police collected only a few valid questionnaires but ignored the majority of them.

That the survey was conducted prior to the Opening Ceremony was not a coincidence. No

⁶ The questionnaire, “Registration and Information of the Population Visiting Beijing” (*lajing ren yuan xinxi dengji biao*), asked about family information and migrant working conditions.

one in Yue Village doubted the connection between the survey and the forthcoming Olympics. The conflict between local officials and migrants, however, reached a standstill. The officials could not successfully conduct the survey due to the complexity and disorder of the migrant shanty towns. The passive attitude of the migrants made investigation even more difficult. The police seemed to have no way around the migrants’ perfunctory answers on the questionnaires. Noticeably, migrants were no more daunted by the unexpected survey than they were by police raids in the 1990s.

In addition to small-scale actions like the surveys, the city government also enforced some large-scale practices and regulations before the Olympics. Passengers had to cross station checkpoints and have their belongings inspected by X-ray machines prior to boarding the subway, buses, or trains. Remarkably, security installations remained in place after the Olympic Games closed. They have become part of everyday surveillance in Beijing.

In addition to the obvious measures, some subtle regulations, which I call “soft” surveillance, attracted my attention. These practices took an indirect and nonviolent form. First, there were red banners and posters everywhere in Beijing about public safety during the Beijing Olympics. The slogans focused on ensuring national safety for a successful Olympics.⁷ Second, several elderly people in each village or community “volunteered” to maintain the public order and safety in every corner, rural or urban, of Beijing. These watchdogs wore red sleeves on which “public order volunteer” (*zhian zhiyuanzhe*) was embroidered. They gathered in the entrance of the community or the main meeting place in every village. While they would often appear to be casually chatting and hanging out, in fact, they were spying on every suspect action and person.

⁷ For example, one slogan stated, “Join hands to welcome the Olympics, join hearts to protect public safety” (*shouqianshou yingaoyun xinlianxin baoanquan*).

With strict practices and subtle surveillance, the sense of an anti-terrorism campaign was in the air during the Olympics. The government defined hosting a successful Olympics an issue of national security. Any action that threatened the Olympics was equivalent to a threat to the country’s safety. The slogans and volunteers proved the importance of national safety in this special time. Security and safety became the responsibility of every citizen. Thus, there must be direct as well as subtle surveillance, especially in a “problematic” area.

3. A Bottom Line of Security

The regulations and practices above were not as violent and forceful as some predicted which did not mean that the government would tolerate anything. Instead, a hidden bottom line was safeguarding the country against threat and danger. My experience helps reveal the Chinese government’s chief concerns about national security.

A month before the Opening Ceremony, a close friend from Beijing asked me to accompany an Austrian amateur photographer, whom I had not previously met, to take photos in Yue Village. My friend, who could not come himself, also asked Principal Han of the Qinxue Migrant Children School to be our tour guide. The photographer was especially interested in ordinary lives in China; therefore, Principal Han brought us to the migrant children’s school and to the recycled material market. The huge marketplace was divided into individual recycling shops, each like a small plaza where recycled materials were stacked. Aside from photographing the spectacle of piles of used bottles, paper, timber, and steel, the photographer also took some photos of the migrant workers in the plaza. Meanwhile, some migrant workers were concerned about the unfamiliar foreigner and our intent. Principal Han tried to mollify them by telling them that it was not a big deal to be photographed.

Unfortunately, their concerns turned out to be valid. After we left, officers of the local

public security bureau came to Principal Han and asked him to hand over the photos we took and name the photographer. He was scared and called me for help (as I quoted in the beginning of the paper) because the photos would “undermine the Olympics and subvert the state,” according to the officers. I immediately telephoned the friend who introduced the photographer to us and tried to connect with the foreigner. In the meantime, the friend asked me to withdraw temporarily from this event because my Taiwanese nationality at this critical moment would further complicate the situation. Although I felt that I was at fault, there was nothing I could do at that time.

While my friend tried to find the photographer, Principal Han was placed under house arrest in the school. Despite his good personal relationships with the local, police security bureau and the cadres of Yue Village, Principal Han was still treated as an outsider (*waidiren*) who had no connections with the village and could easily escape. Two days later, the photographer’s statement and two of his friends from Beijing brought an end to the event. The photographer, who had already gone back to Austria, stated to the local Bureau that he was simply an amateur with no malicious intent and promised never to publish the photos. His friends, who brought the statement to the local office, also guaranteed the truth of his statement. The police finally accepted it and “released” Principal Han.

This event helped uncover the darker side of life in a migrant enclave. In spite of the seemingly peaceful life of Yue Village, as a migrant enclave it was still the target of governance. Its squalid “garbage-village” image deeply contrasted with the beautiful metropolitan image of China. Since the embarrassing Olympic torch relay in Europe in early 2008, the Chinese have seen the Western media as an enemy. Chinese authorities feared that any negative photos would harm the Olympics and even national dignity and safety. Foreigners as well as the migrants were

seen as possible dangers. Principal Han, for example, had operated the school in Yue Village for four years and had close personal connections with local governments but was still helpless to save himself when he was seen as a threat to national safety. In this event, the powerful principal suddenly became just another member of the “floating population.” He was seen as an untrustworthy outsider who did not belong to the local village and would attempt an escape.

Discussion: Changes of State Surveillance in China

The series of events in Yue Village before the Olympics are strongly reminiscent of the histories of *Zhejiangcun* (Zhejiang Village), which was established in the early 1990s by migrant entrepreneurs from Zhejiang province and later developed into the most important garment trade center in Northern China. In 1995, the migrant housing compounds in *Zhejiangcun* were largely torn down by the local government. *Zhejiangcun*’s physical appearance, which did not conform to “late socialist urban aesthetics,” was to blame for the demolition (Zhang 2001: 4, 165). Thirteen years after, interestingly, a migrant “garbage village” survived the Beijing 2008 Olympics. In this section, we will examine the implications of the changes in the relationship between the state and the migrant society by comparing *Zhejiangcun* and Yue Village.⁸ I argue that while the techniques and methods of governing migrant enclaves later favored subtle surveillance, the Chinese government still held fast to strict principles of governance with regard to migrant communities.

1. Changes in Urban Governance: From “Clean Up” to “Hide Behind”

Less use of violent methods has been one of the remarkable changes in the current-day

⁸ This comparison is significant for two reasons. Despite that empirical studies of *Zhejiangcun* established a sound base for research into migrant communities in Beijing, the subjects discussed in the literature, were migrant entrepreneurs rather than grass root ,rural, migrant workers (Ma and Xiang 1998, Xiang 2000, Jeong 2000, Zhang 2001). Also, studies of *Zhejiangcun* were conducted in the 1990s, and thus failed to consider recent changes, especially the results of abolishing the “Rules for Detention and Deportation of Vagrants and Beggars in Urban Areas” after 2003. Thus, investigating changes in regulations across the decades would enhance our understanding of the state-society relationship.

governance of migrant enclaves. Governance in Yue Village prior to the Olympic Games was far less violent than the demolition of *Zhejiangcun* in 1995. According to Li Zhang, forty thousand migrants were forced to leave *Zhejiangcun* as part of the “cleaning up and reordering” campaign, which implied that the squalid residential area should be tidied up and chaos controlled, especially rising crime rates (2001: 159). In the past, the Chinese government tended to tear down compounds and houses and evict vagrants and migrants to sweep under the rug whatever it did not want foreign guests to see. An informant described this tactic briefly as “slicing off” (or complete destruction regardless of any potential loss).

But in 2008, despite the anxiety about demolitions and evictions, most suburban migrant communities I visited remained intact.⁹ Instead of direct demolition, the government is now inclined to hide undesirable social groups. Still, this does not mean that the Chinese government allowed migrant enclaves to become political vacuums. On the one hand, indirect regulations and practices, like the surveys, slogans and surveillance mentioned in the previous section, were carried out as a substitute for direct intervention. On the other hand, local surveillance still adheres to the national-security guidelines laid down by the central government.

There are plausible reasons for these changes. First of all, the potential media reaction was cause for concern. Rumors predicting forceful actions were already in the air prior to the Olympic Games. Had the Chinese government made the rumors a reality, the media would have seized the opportunity for criticism. Demolishing the “garbage village” and poorer areas would hamper the public image of the Beijing Olympics. The government had to find a more subtle way to ensure stability. Still, a more significant reason for the changes in governance tactics was the indispensable role migrants played in Beijing. Migrant workers were working everywhere as

⁹ According to interviews in five large migrant enclaves in Beijing, including Yue village, only about twenty percent of migrants had gone back to their hometowns due to a lack of job opportunities during the Olympics in July and August.

construction workers, peddlers, nannies, cleaners, recyclers, and so forth. As a Beijing resident once said to me, “If all the migrants were driven out of Beijing, the city would be immediately paralyzed! There would be nobody to cook us breakfast or lunch. We would have nothing to eat.” Thus, instead of the harsh “slice off” policy, the Chinese officials opted to “veil and hide” the migrant communities for better control.

2. The Bottom Line: National Safety

In spite of the new “hiding” tactics, assuring political stability and national safety were still the primary goals in governing migrant enclaves. These guiding principles served as an invisible political border around migrant communities. Any action that crossed the border and threatened the principles would be inspected immediately and regulated. Just as the photographer and I were not permitted to take photos in Yue Village during the Olympics, strong migrant power developing in *Zhejiangcun* would not be tolerated. Regardless of whether it was *Zhejiangcun* or Yue Village or 1995 or 2008, the bottom line of the Chinese government remained the same: the autonomy of the local community was constrained by and subject to the state’s authority. While migrants in *Zhejiangcun* enforced the local order themselves in the 1990s, the municipal government expressed growing alarm over the level of autonomy and potential disorder. Despite the enormous contributions Zhejiang’s migrants made to Beijing’s local economy, upper-level government determined to “slice off” the migrant area and spared no expense in reestablishing political stability.

Remarkably, the new tactics are operating in tandem with a stale but strong ideology of control. Despite that surveillance of migrants has recently been less harsh, what is unwavering is the social boundary line between the insider and the outsider. Consider the aims of the surveys, the threats from the foreign photographer, and Principal Han’s house arrest, migrants are clearly

outsiders and treated as potential “troublemakers.” Another example is the changing effects of the temporary resident card (*zhanzhu zheng*) which had functioned as a mandatory identification card for migrants before 2003.¹⁰ It is true that since then the influence of the temporary resident card has faded away. Still, migrant workers lacking a temporary resident card worried that they might be “kicked out” of the city before the Olympics’ arrival. The residential registration, which was conducted prior to the Olympics in migrant communities and targeted specific groups of people, was also a legacy of the temporary resident card system, which treated migrants as “outsiders.”

Conclusion: Searching for a New Social Space

This paper has investigated the dynamics between the state and migrant communities at the Beijing Olympics by comparing two migrant enclaves, Yue Village in 2008 and *Zhejiangcun* in 1995. Through analysis of the events in Yue Village, this study has shown two characteristics of modern, migrant, community governance. On the one hand, the tactics of control have become nonviolent and subtle to hide and cover up what should not be seen rather than demolishing it. On the other hand, the government’s ideology of control remains unchanged. Political stability and national safety remain of utmost importance.

One of the issues that emerges from these findings is the formation of a new social space. When migrant communities first appeared and then rapidly developed in Beijing in the 1990s, the focus of early literature was on discovering and verifying a new social space that resulted from the migration process. Apparently, rural, migrant workers, who belong neither to urban nor rural areas, have challenged previous simple distinctions between the state and society. The theoretical question, however, is whether a local community established by rural, migrant

¹⁰ The temporary resident card system has produced a social stigma attached to rural migrants which has resulted in economic loss even death for migrants. A 2003 scandal associated with official abuse of and later death of Sun Zhigang, a college graduate working in Guangzhou, finally brought an end to the unjust law.

workers can have real civil power that represents opposition to the authoritarian government.

The answer might be that it cannot, yet. On the one hand, the agency of migrant workers has been most demonstrated by their mobility. The techniques aimed at checking the population of migrants has just about failed. Despite official efforts, the surveys and questionnaires discussed above were never entirely completed. Moreover, after the “Rules for Detention and Deportation of Vagrants and Beggars in Urban Areas” was abolished in 2003, migrant workers without temporary resident cards could no longer be arrested or evicted, limiting the authority of local governments and demonstrating great progress in migrant rights.

On the other hand, migrants’ agency for collective action has been strictly limited despite surveillance of migrant workers is now more lax. The migrant community is still viewed as a troublesome, unstable, and uneasy space. As the case of Yue Village shows, the government prefers to hide the negative image of “garbage village” and supervise it through “public security volunteers” rather than to improve the poor public infrastructure in the shanty towns. For the same reason, Principal Han had to be held hostage to the principle of public safety when foreigners, such as the Austrian photographer, threatened the government’s desired image of a modern urban space. The Chinese government retains a deep distrust of new social spaces formed by migrant workers. Local power and collective action is still seen as subversive even in this new more permissive climate, making it difficult to establish an empowered social space for migrant workers.

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Glossary

dazayuan	大杂院	migrant housing compound
laijing ren yuan xin xi deng ji biao	来京人员 信息登记表	Registration and Information of the Population Visiting Beijing
nongmingong jujuqu	农民工聚居区	a migrant enclave, where rural migrant workers congregating and living
nongmingong zidi xuexiao / dagong zidi xuexiao	农民工子弟学校/ 打工子弟学校	a migrant children school; a private school for the rural migrant children
shouqianshou yingaoyun xinlianxin bao anquan	手牵手 迎奥运 心连心 保安全	join hands to welcome the Olympics, join hearts to protect public safety
waidiren	外地人	Outsiders
Yuecun	乐村	Yue Village
zhanzhu zheng	暂住证	temporary resident card
Zhejiangcun	浙江村	Zhejiang Village
zhian zhiyuanzhe	治安志愿者	public security volunteer