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UNPREDICTABILITY, SOCIALITY, AND DECISION-MAKING IN AN ACCELERATING CHINESE CITY

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UNPREDICTABILITY, SOCIALITY, AND DECISION-MAKING IN AN ACCELERATING CHINESE CITY

Megan Amanda Steffen

A DISSERTATION
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ABSTRACT

Based on 25 months of ethnographic fieldwork research conducted between March 2013 and March 2016 in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province, this dissertation focuses on the influence of unpredictability on how people make social relationships and decisions in the People's Republic of China (PRC). After Reform and Opening Up in 1978, the PRC underwent an unprecedented transformation from the largest remaining planned, socialist society to the world's fastest growing economy with a GDP second only to the USA's. By working with people from many different backgrounds—including migrant workers, entrepreneurs, wealthy housewives, urban villagers, white-collar workers, and students—this dissertation examines how people deal with the accelerating social, economic, and geographical shifts associated with liberalization. It investigates these shifts in several different realms of life, such as within the real estate industry, with agents or middlemen, and among family members.

Each chapter documents specific examples of accidents, social practices, and serendipitous windfalls as well as changing explanations of these events. Through a longitudinal study of personal narratives, I analyze the psychological processes through which people create and then revise the meanings they give to events and to their lives. I argue that the PRC's recent rapid infrastructural, economic, and social changes have created unexpected outcomes that people must interpret, explain, or—in some cases—willfully forget. While some people are left behind by the PRC's new narratives of progress, others embrace the future's radical indeterminacy by embracing a presentist conception of time and a sense that things haven't yet become fixed in place. By

developing unpredictability as an analytical concept, this dissertation contributes to classic anthropological studies of causality, as well as more recent work on emerging capitalist markets, risk, and uncertainty.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandmother, who grew up in a small village in Taishan, left just after the revolution, and never went back. My grandmother had to teach herself to read and write in two different languages. She gave me a dollar for each "A" I earned on every single quarterly report card until she passed away. Though I usually find financial metaphors pernicious, for some reason it makes me happy to think of this as a way of finally paying her back for her investment, for her bravery in coming to the United States, and for, in her own way, introducing me to the idea that I would later call Chinese magical realism. Po-po always said she swam from Taishan to Hong Kong. This cannot have been true. She fled the Mainland with my aunt, who was a toddler and had to be carried, and by all accounts she did not know how to swim. I know this cannot have been true, and yet, somehow, it is.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract……....iii
Acknowledgments……..…v
Contents……...xii
Figures……...……xiii
Preface and Chapter Summary……...……..……....xv

Chapter 1 - Toward an Anthropology of the Accidental……1

Part I: Sociality
Chapter 2 - Power Outages…….……..69
Chapter 3 - The Secret Hoarders……131
Chapter 4 - Traffic of the Heart……..…..……214

Part II: Acceleration
Chapter 5 - Uncivil Processes…….……283
Chapter 6 - The Cost of Believing It Anyway……336

Part III: Decision-making
Chapter 7 - The Value of Emptiness……..383
Chapter 8 - Willful Times……..412

Conclusion……..…….437

Works Cited…….448

FIGURES



Figure 1 The potential transformer station lot between the Most Expensive Mansion Complex and Mulberry Tree Village where retirees were said to be protesting empty on May 16, 2014.



Figure 2 Protesters block the sun with Eternal Glory flyers beneath a "BE A CIVILIZED PERSON; DO CIVILIZED STUFF" PSA.

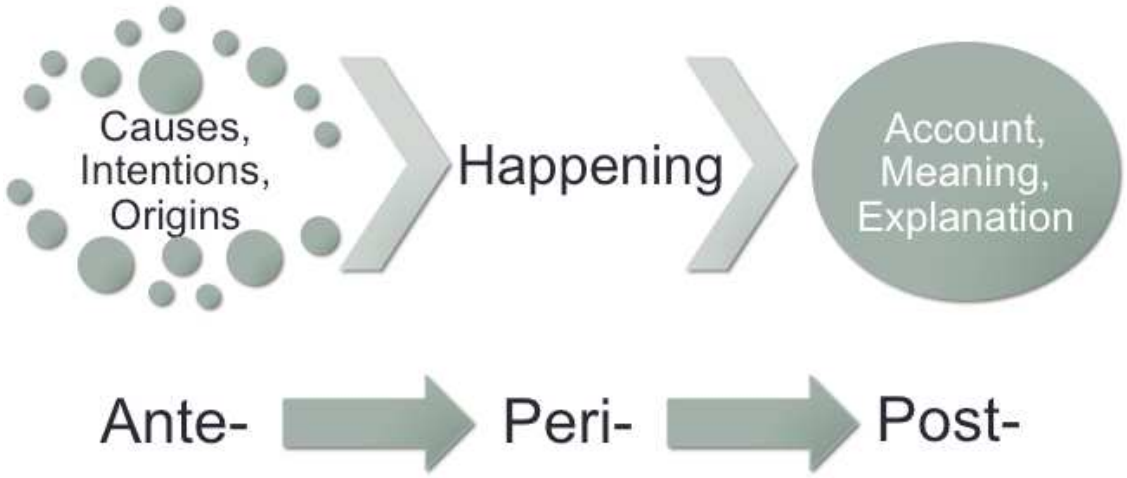


Figure 3 A model of how happenings become events through interpretation in the post-period

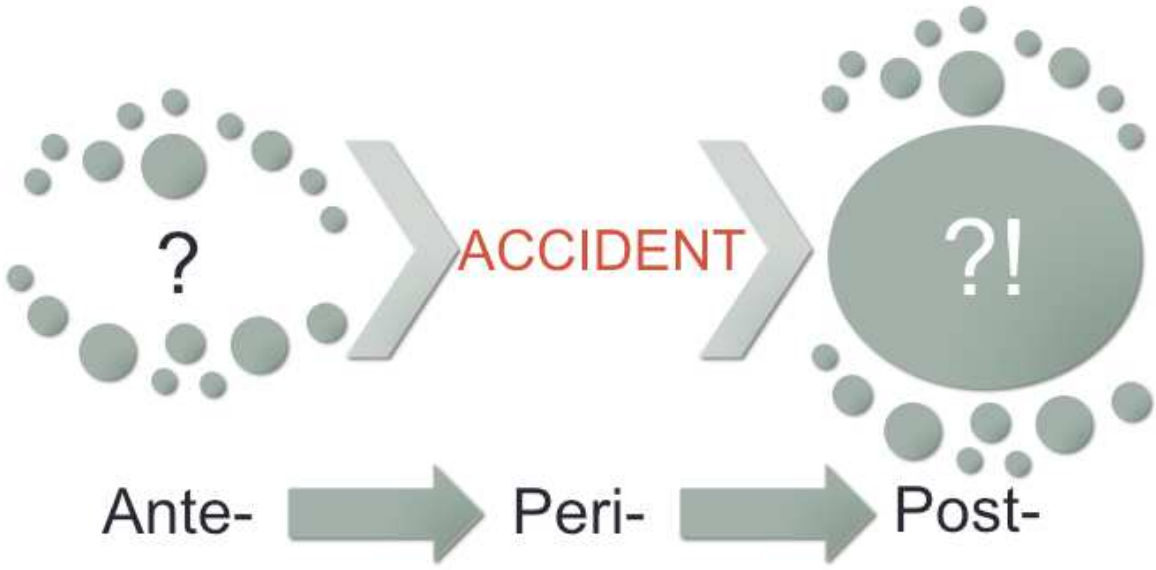


Figure 4 A model of how in the case of an accident, ambiguity in the ante-period leads to a proliferation of accounts, meanings, and explanations, which are represented by the additional circles in the post-period.

PREFACE AND CHAPTER SUMMARY

When I arrived in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in July 2013 to begin doing fieldwork on unpredictability, two expatriate friends came to greet me at the airport. All three of us had been living in the PRC off and on since 2008. All of us were familiar enough with the structure and rhythms of Beijing International Airport to know without discussing it that we were going to trudge down the electric ramps, past the expensive taxis, past the overpriced airport express train, and toward the reasonably priced 16RMB (2.39USD) long-distance bus that would take us within a block of their western Beijing neighborhood. As we boarded the bus, one of my friends wryly noted the way the driver had laid his head down in exhaustion on the steering wheel as soon as he had opened the door for us. "Our driver's asleep!" my friend Paul declared with a knowing smile, "Good sign."

Laughing, we moved to the last, elevated row of the bus and spread our backpacks and ourselves across the five seats. I sat by the right window, Paul sat by the left one, and my friend Maya—who'd lived in Beijing the longest out of any of us—sat in the very center seat. Most of the other passengers stayed near the front of the bus, and in our relative isolation we spoke freely in English, teasing each other and telling stories about the last few months of our lives. We hadn't even made it to the fourth ring road yet when the bus jerked suddenly to a stop with a crash that made Paul and I bump into the padded seats in front of us but sent Maya flying down the center aisle of the bus. As her body arced through the air, she managed to twist around while grasping at the seats on either side of her and landed, mostly harmlessly, flipped around on her bottom so that her

shocked expression faced us. In just seconds, she'd collapsed completely onto her back and was laughing so hysterically that she was wheezing and gasping. The other passengers on the bus stared at her with increasing concern.

"Get up, Maya, get up! Everyone on this bus thinks you're dead," I urged her. Together Paul and I pulled her to her feet. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine—but what *happened*?"

"It was definitely an emergency stop of some kind," Paul stated blandly. With the other passengers, the three of us turned our attention toward the front of the bus. Only at that moment did we realize we were in an accident. Our drowsy driver had rear-ended a SUV at what I later, looking closely at the bent back door and shattered back windshield, would surmise must have been quite a speed. Remembering that I was not just an anthropologist but also an anthropologist trying to write a dissertation on accidents, I dashed up to the front of the bus to take pictures of the driver, rubbing his face and staring glumly at the sparkling wreckage spread over the asphalt. The other passengers also recovered from their initial shock and began to remember themselves. One older woman dressed in a sparkling purple outfit and seated in the row second from the front began speaking to me in English without even bothering to go through the usual rigmarole of asking me precisely which foreign country I was from.

"What is he *doing*?" she asked, leaning out over my shoulder. "He should just get the person's number and *go*. It was his fault! He was too tired and didn't stop. We all know this."

This is not what happened. Instead, after a few moments, the police arrived and began taking their own pictures to confirm, officially, what everyone already knew: that

the accident was our driver's fault. As I watched from inside the bus, a passenger pushed past me. Holding only a small black rollaway and a square plastic bag with the logo of a popular brand of *baijiu* (sorghum liquor) on it, he walked onto the side of the expressway. He yelled something at the driver (who, focused on the policeman, ignored him) and began gesturing unsuccessfully for one of the passing cabs to stop. The older woman who'd spoken to me in English muttered to her travel companion in Mandarin that all these bus companies have insurance (*baoxian*) and that this should be a simple matter; why couldn't we just go?

She got her answer when the policeman boarded the bus with the chagrined driver in tow and announced that the driver had an insurance sticker for 2014 but that his paperwork was only good through 2013. The driver, looking miserable, pulled into the unoccupied space between two merging lanes, and under the watchful eyes of the policemen we all sat in the air-conditioned bus until another bus pulled up behind us. One by one the passengers exited the bus and transferred our luggage from one bus to another as cars continued to merge onto the ring road just inches from us. Even as they collect their bags on the side of the freeway, the older woman who'd spoken to me in English defended the bus in Mandarin to her friend against the subway, which was in her words "both slow and expensive."

"She's right," Paul added to Maya and I in English (all of us speak Mandarin), "The subway airport express is 30RMB and usually takes longer. The bus is just 16 kuai for speed *and* a show!"

Paul, Maya, and I were the last three people to get on the new bus, which was full of people. Unbelievably, the only open seat left when Maya reached the end of the rows

was the middle seat in the back row, which we now all knew was the most vulnerable seat on the bus. “Only with you do things like this happen,” Maya laughed as she settled in and braced herself in advance against the backs of the two seats in front of her.

“I’m sorry,” I said from my seat squished between a man and a window a few rows up, “On the bright side, I’ve only been doing fieldwork on accidents for two hours, and I’ve already gotten my opening anecdote for my dissertation’s introduction!”

For a few months, that was true. Then, in October 2013, I was hit by a car. So it goes. Or, as the people I worked with often say, things are just that way: *shiqing jiushi zheyang*.

This is a study of unpredictability, sociality, and decision-making in the PRC. Through a longitudinal examination of specific people’s experiences and understandings of unexpected happenings, I demonstrate how the accelerating process of social and economic change in the PRC has influenced the way people relate to each other and make financial decisions. After Reform and Opening Up in 1978, the PRC underwent an unprecedented transformation from the largest remaining planned, socialist society to the world's fastest growing economy with a GDP second only to the USA’s. By working with people from many different backgrounds—including migrant workers, entrepreneurs, wealthy housewives, urban villagers, white-collar workers, and students—this dissertation examines how people deal with the changes and shifts associated with liberalization. I examine how people who became wealthy relatively quickly are adjusting to their unexpected wealth, how new hierarchies attempting to govern bodily behaviors

are competing with each other, and how those people who did not immediately become rich have oriented themselves toward an as-yet unrealized future.

I began by describing this encounter both because it was improbably ironic (what are the chances of beginning a study of accidents by getting into an actual accident while leaving the airport?) and because it highlights several of the methodological and theoretical presumptions that inform this study. It was difficult for me to find unpredictable events to study because, by definition, I did not know when they would happen. Unpredictability—as the name suggests—is a condition created by what a person can or cannot know to expect. This is partly why, when searching for certainty about the future, we turn to experts, whose training and superior mastery of knowledge is supposed to endow them with powers of prediction (Daipha 2015). And yet, as Paul's knowing reference to our driver's fatigue before boarding the bus shows, one can be perfectly aware that the conditions of possibility for an accident are in place and still not be able to predict exactly when, how, or whether the accident will happen. Or, to put it another way: one can be totally ignorant of what the conditions of possibility for an accident to occur even *are*, and this too will have no bearing on whether it occurs or not. This study examines the culturally specific ways people explained and interpreted unpredicted happenings. It also explores how, in a country that has changed radically in the past 40 years, people make decisions knowing that they cannot be aware of which conditions of possibility are in place and that even if they were, it might not make a difference.

In this study, I take a long and large view of what kinds of outcomes can be said to be unpredicted and who can be said to have failed to predict them. For instance, in the encounter above, my main interlocutors are Paul and Maya, two foreigners, and

throughout this dissertation, I draw on the experiences, speech, and actions of both foreign and Chinese citizens living in the PRC as evidence. Part of what I am implicitly arguing is something similar to what Max Gluckman set out to demonstrate in his "Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand" (1940). In his now classic article, Gluckman demonstrates that both the colonizing whites and the colonized blacks in South Africa were in fact part of the same social system. Particularly for a topic like unpredictability, which is a research object defined not by culture or language but by external circumstances, it makes sense to treat both foreign and Chinese citizens as part of the same system. At the level of experience, both foreign and Chinese passengers of the bus found their lives disrupted by the accident; at the level of reaction, their interpretations may vary, but these variations may have as much to do with culture as personal upbringing and position. By including foreign citizens in this study, I hope to push back against the mythic ideas of a pure, unified "Chineseness" that can be mobilized for nationalist causes (see Chun 1996; Chow 1993). This is also why I try to refer to the People's Republic of China as the PRC rather than the more easily glossed "China"; I am trying to contain my claims within the specific political territory where I observed them.

If I seem especially sensitive about this, it is because in the PRC I fall into a strange category: *hunxue*. *Hun* is a multivalent word that, in this context means "mixed"; however, it can also mean "to pass for," "to muddle along," "recklessly," and, in my favorite new usage, "to get up to no good with somebody." ("We are going to *hun* together all day," my more daring interlocutors would say provocatively.) *Xue* is the word for blood. A hunxue is a person of mixed-race. "I do not want to talk about my blood with anyone who is not a doctor," I would sometimes say, much to the

bemusement of my interlocutors, who insisted that hunxue was a neutral term. “Hunxue are so pretty,” Ya, my closest friend in the field, would say to me, “I think hunxue is a compliment. I want to have a hunxue baby myself!”

Because I am a hunxue, my attempts in the field to disavow a personal affiliation to the “Chineseness” I’m now resisting analytically were socially useless. People would ask me where I was from, and when I said America, they would press me to find out where I was *really* from. I would recite a refrain from memory: America is a country of immigrants, so every kind of person can be American. Usually, the person I was meeting would continue poking around until they found out what they wanted: that my maternal grandparents were from Guandong, that they had left before China became the PRC, and that my mother was born in America. If I was unlucky, the conversation would then turn to calculating what percentage of my blood was a Chinese person’s blood—fifty percent? Twenty-five percent? “One-third,” I would deadpan, in a sly reference to the impossible heritage of Gilgamesh (two-thirds god and one-third man). No one ever got the joke; instead, in what sometimes might have been an effort to be cosmopolitan and other times might have been a polite refusal to admit I’d said something that made no sense, people would agree. “Of course,” they would exclaim, “Your blood is one-third Chinese blood, and two-thirds American blood!”

These interactions were, in many ways, better than the ones I had when I came to the PRC for the first and second times in 2003 and 2008. As always, I was betrayed by my appearance. I *looked* like a person who could speak Chinese, and people punished me when I could not. Though my linguistic inability was an unpredicted outcome for the

people I met in those early days, their criticism and insults became an expected and routine part of life in the PRC for me. Things were just that way.

This study is based on roughly 25 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province, in two protracted periods between March 2013 and March 2016. Specifically, I spent a few weeks in Zhengzhou getting affiliation at Zhengzhou University in March 2013, lived in Zhengzhou from July 2013 to October 2014, and then again from June 2015 to March 2016. At certain points, I also draw on the three months of preliminary fieldwork I conducted on trains throughout the PRC during the summer of 2012, and other experiences I had while living in the PRC before beginning graduate school. In *Tristes Tropique*, Claude Levi-Strauss writes,

> Not only does a journey transport us over enormous distances, it also causes us to move up and down in the social scale. It displaces us physically and also—for better or for worse—takes us out of our class context, so that the colour and flavour of certain places cannot be dissociated from the always-unexpected social level on which we find ourselves in experiencing them. (2012[1974], 86)

I arrived in Shanghai in January 2008 as a study abroad student attending college on full scholarship and almost immediately fell in with a group of Swedish club promoters who introduced me to a strange, smoky world of trilingual models sedated by ketamine, import export tycoons, and thin men in bespoke suits with impossibly smooth hands.

This study is not based on any of those experiences, which I do not recall very fondly. I mention them here because what remains consistent across my time in the PRC—regardless of whether I was in Shanghai, Beijing, or Zhengzhou—was that the people I met intuitively moved me up in the social scale. For better or for worse, the class

shift I associated with the PRC was upward. Most of the people whose voices you hear in this study are either from the city's upper strata or else had access to its periphery. In a country where the gap between rich and poor grows more and more extreme every year, I failed to straddle the chasm and instead found myself on one side, among the wealthy. Many of my interlocutors are mobile socially and geographically—one woman held identity cards for Hong Kong and Singapore and was a year away from getting her US green card. I waited in Zhengzhou while my interlocutors took long trips to Italy, France, and Germany—all places on the European continent that I myself have never had the opportunity to visit. On top of that, many of these women—and my interlocutors are mostly women, or else the husbands, boyfriends, or business partners of women I knew—were older than me, part of the post-70s generation. There are important exceptions to this, including a group of post-90s women I traveled with and close friendships with several post-80s women, but they were busy working, traveling, and getting married. Even though my field site was a large city of several million people, I adopted the methods of earlier village ethnographers, who would wander around and speak to whoever was free; the people who had the free time to spend with me were well-established post-70s women.

Because of this, I felt my lack of comparable experiences "back home" in America acutely. Often, when describing what I found strange or novel about my interlocutors' lives, colleagues push back with the assertion that these are not "Chinese" characteristics but rather rich ones: issues the wealthy confront everywhere, regardless of national provenance. When an interlocutor explains to me that she fired her personal financial manager (*licai*) because he only cared about his own interests, I had no ground

against which to compare the experience. No one I knew growing up had a personal financial manager, and none of the other scholarship students I went to college with came from families with enough wealth to need managing. This was not, however, always obvious to my interlocutors, for whom my foreignness itself was (wrongly) assumed to be a form of expertise on their new wealth (the reasoning, as far as I could tell, was that America was richer than the PRC; therefore, Americans should have an innate or better understanding of how to be wealthy). In one hilarious conversation, a female entrepreneur about to start the third iteration of a restaurant empire asked me whether I thought an industrial blender sold at Costco in America was high quality enough to justify the price. I told her that the supermarket down the street from me sold a generic brand for a fifth of the price—why didn't she just buy one of those?

She stared at me in awkward disbelief until our hostess, Vivian, the CEO of two separate Fortune 500 companies and the owner of Cardboard Coffee, the cafe that became one of my research home bases, intervened. "You need to remember, Megan is still a student," she said softly, "She hasn't yet completed her own family (*chengjia*). She is not yet the mistress of her own home."

As I will explore in later chapters, this formulation of the haven't yet (*hai meiyou*) informed many of my interlocutors' attitudes toward the future and the unpredictable; I mention it here because it also defined many of my interlocutors' attitudes toward me. During our time together, they often found themselves pointing toward the incomplete nature of my existence. I had not yet married, had not yet earned my Ph.D., had not yet become wealthy, had not yet become a mother, had not yet become explicitly useful to them—not yet, anyway. At conferences where I presented preliminary work from this

study, people asked me why my interlocutors were willing to share such intimate details with me, and at least part of the answer has to do with the fact that many of these people were cultivating relationships with me in the hopes that I would eventually become a resource to them.

Another part, however, has to do with the fact that many of these conversations and disclosures my interlocutors made to me were prompted or followed by disclosures and intimate details about my own life. My interlocutors shared their own fears, doubts, and secrets with me because they were party to almost all of mine. In America, particularly among scholars from other, more distant social science disciplines—economics, demography, statistics—people ask me if this means I "went native" while other ethnographers sometimes question my judgment or my ethics. Were these disclosures on my part just an effort to elicit salacious information from my interlocutors? While I can't completely speak to my unconscious intentions, I can at least say that, in the moment, it never felt that way. It felt, instead, like I was 25, 26, 27, and finally 28 years old, living amongst people older, richer, and more experienced than I was. Sometimes, I was asking for advice because I needed it. Other times, I couldn't have explained myself if I tried. I was just that way.

This study is divided into three parts, each of which emphasizes a different aspect of unpredictability. (Like many trilogies, it begins with confidence, muddles through a confused second episode, and regains coherence in the finale.) Part I focuses on sociality, or the way people relate to one another. The three chapters examine both how

unpredictability influences sociality and how certain ways of being social can create unpredicted situations for others. Part II focuses on acceleration, or the increasing rate at which change has occurred. The two chapters draw on the PRC's changing railway system to show how accelerating, unpredicted changes have impacted the way people understand themselves, their trajectories, and their positions in the PRC. Part III focuses on decision-making, or how people make choices about the future, specifically about how to use their resources. The two chapters explore what people consider "safe" investments in an unpredictable milieu, how people evaluate potential sources of unpredictability, and what kinds of decisions people consider risky. Each of these three parts highlights a different aspect of how experiences of unpredictability are understood, generate or disrupt narratives, and shape everyday life.

The first chapter of this study, "Toward an Anthropology of the Accidental," frames the following three parts. This first chapter lays out in detail the broader historical, economic, and social context for this study. It describes the demographics of Zhengzhou, my field site, and explains why I have chosen to pursue certain methods and not others. In this chapter I also review and critique anthropological studies of events and processes; I argue that to study not just accidents but also quickly changing societies, anthropologists should adopt a processual approach that takes change into account. By drawing on classic ethnographic work on how people explained accidents through witchcraft and other occult concepts, I highlight how accidents can generate meaning and competing theories of causation. I bring that older anthropological literature into conversation with newer work on emerging capitalist societies, Actor-Network-Theory,

and the anthropology of law. Finally, I use my experience of another accident—getting hit by a car—to discuss the role of humor in the rest of the chapters.

The second chapter of this study, "Power Outages," begins the section on sociality. It chronicles a series of events that unfolded after blackouts began to trouble business owners in a new, residential high-rise complex I call the Most Expensive Mansion Complex. The Mansion Complex had been plagued by problems ever since it was sold for the highest amount any real estate company had ever paid for a piece of land in Zhengzhou. Not one but two development companies fled the high-rise complex without completing construction. After Eternal Glory Real Estate agreed to finish the twice-aborted project, residents and businesses began to move in during the summer of 2013, when the power outages began. In this chapter, I document how different people dealt with the unpredictable blackouts. I trace how different theories of causation gained traction among different people. This second chapter introduces a number of themes related to unpredictability that appear in the rest of the study, including the reason behind the reason (*beihou de yuanyin*), the impact of the real estate industry on personal wealth and political stability, and the way widespread secrecy creates incredible credulity or a willingness to believe in what might otherwise seem unbelievable.

The third chapter, "The Secret Hoarders," explores how the control of information—in addition to contributing to the credulity described in the previous chapter—creates unpredictable situations for others. I argue that the conditions for unpredictable events are created by the practice of keeping, revealing, and selling secrets. I focus on three different kinds of people who profit from controlling information: fortunetellers, *zhongjie* or middlemen, and family members. From comments and

interviews with interlocutors, two main principles about knowledge and what can be known in Zhengzhou emerge. The first is the idea that people will withhold knowledge *just in case*; the second is that people tend to believe that everything can be known and that, for almost everything, *somebody knows*. Whether an outcome appears unpredictable to someone in Zhengzhou depends largely not on objective or exogenous factors about the outcome but rather on whether or not they are in the circle of people who know. I draw on the psychoanalytic concept of magical thinking to define "Chinese magical realism," a term that describes how some people's thoughts are permitted to define an experience of reality that is approximate but not actual. This chapter makes the theoretical point that while many unpredictable circumstances are such because their ultimate causes lie beyond human control—e.g. earthquakes—unpredictability can also be *created*, commodified, and sold.

The fourth chapter, "Traffic of the Heart," describes how the unpredicted demographic shift from urban to rural impacts people's experiences of urban sociality. The presumption that others are keeping crucial information hidden makes the actions of others unpredictable, and much of Zhengzhou's social practices are devoted to trying to achieve certainty or "real" social bonds. By moving from the issue of Zhengzhou's collapsing roads and infrastructural uncertainty to my interlocutors' fixation with determining what is real and what is fake, I show how realness becomes both a rare commodity and a way to secure a sense of safety (*anquan gan*). I also explore the bind of urban villagers who, because of shifting urban and rural categories, became wealthy in unpredictable ways but find their wealth largely condemned by urban residents who view it as undeserved. By giving examples of how both people and the city itself produces

unpredictable situations, I show how people become "used to" (*xiguan le*) accidents of all types. Finally, I describe various metaphors of the heart demonstrate how views of what one can know about the minds of others have changed people's understanding of their own emotions as the city grows more crowded.

The fifth chapter of this study, "Uncivil Processes," begins the second section on acceleration. It delves more deeply into the unpredicted consequences of the PRC's literally accelerating economy by focusing on how Mary, a migrant I knew in Zhengzhou, changed over the course of the three years I conducted fieldwork. I show how Mary's relationship to her origin limits her social mobility, whereas other people willfully forgot their origins, history, and recent past in favor of embracing what hadn't yet (*hai meiyou*) happened. The insights of Norbert Elias' study of *The Civilizing Process* (2000) inform this chapter, as I show how "phoenix men" (*fenghuang nan*), who accumulated wealth but not the "culture" that the PRC's emerging class hierarchy demands, have become a figure out of step with those attempting to define high society. This chapter distinguishes between "culture," "civilization," and "self-consciousness," all of which are key aspects of the civilizing process defined by Elias; I weave these claims in with the recent, sometimes repressed history of the PRC's railway system. I contend that by building new stations and eliminating crowdedness (*ji*), the railway system is becoming increasingly segregated—much like the PRC itself, where empty space and silence produced by exclusion have become luxury goods.

The sixth chapter, "The Cost of Believing it Anyway," expands on the idea that accidents can generate multiple interpretations by interrogating theories of hermeneutics, myths, and progress. This chapter also draws on the fieldwork I conducted on trains

between 2012 and 2016. Though trains here act as a marker of the PRC's acceleration and change, they are not metaphorical; I address how specific train workers have dealt with the unpredictable dissolution of the Ministry of Railways and how they understand the impact of the new high-speed rail. I explore the Wenzhou Incident—a high-speed collision that killed 192 people on July 23, 2011—and the Ministry of Railways' spokesman's widely mocked contention that he "believed [the state's narrative] anyway." This chapter returns to the idea of "the reason behind the reason" (*beihou de yuanyin*) introduced in the second chapter and relates it to the anthropological literature on occult explanations and rationality. I also examine moments where state myths of progress have either broken down or else are strangely absent; I connect these moments to people's anxiety about whether or not their lives are viewed as worthy or valuable.

The seventh chapter, "The Value of Emptiness," begins the third and final section of this study on decision-making. It addresses the culturally specific elements of unpredictability that characterize the PRC's real estate market. I examine a tendency by Chinese homeowners to keep the houses they buy empty and unrented. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among homebuyers, real estate developers, and renters in Zhengzhou, Henan—one of the most notorious "ghost cities" visited by western journalists—to argue three main points: first, that the use of empty houses or price-rent ratios as a metric of bubble-ness is misguided; second, that analysts should evaluate the risks, resources, and vulnerabilities of consumers buying houses not as individuals but as family units; and third, that emptiness is *not* the same thing as vacancy or a signal of inefficiency. This chapter shows that in an uncertainty-riddled Zhengzhou, emptiness in general is seen as desirable, safe, and clean, particularly when compared to the

uncertainty of "expected houses" (*qifang*). Finally, I argue that "pressure cooker" may be a more apt metaphor for the PRC's economy than bubble; I demonstrate the connection between empty houses in the PRC and unoccupied luxury condos, apartments, and mansions in places like Vancouver, New York, and Southern California to show how the "empty house" as a cultural phenomenon is proliferating even in other markets.

The eighth chapter, "Willful Times," revisits some of the earlier chapters' questions about how unpredictability is created, how people think about time, and how the PRC's market outcomes are all seen as tied to policy to make an argument in favor of "unpredictability" over "risk" as an analytic concept. By analyzing the concept of "willfulness" (*renxing*) and several other ways of not thinking about the future, I show why, even in the face of an economic downturn, my interlocutors continue to start businesses and take risks. I return to some of the literature on responsibility, agency, and process referenced in "Toward an Anthropology of the Accidental" to show how presentist practices—like waiting till the last minute to make a schedule, plan, or decision—among entrepreneurs in Zhengzhou are not as risky as they may appear. Instead, I argue that these presentist practices are ways of exerting one's will in the most effective way possible by waiting for the moment of no return to make the decisions. This chapter also explores generational differences to demonstrate how experiences of the PRC's shift from socialism to liberalization shaped people's expectations for the future.

Finally, in my conclusion, I connect the idea of an anthropology that makes nothing happen from this introduction to the concept of investing in one's own agency from the eighth chapter. I also address one of the major themes of this research, which is that, contrary to work in other places, many of my interlocutors refused to articulate

theories of causality for unpredicted events because talking does not change the facts. By recounting several encounters with Ya, one of my main interlocutors and confidants, I explore cultural ideas about silence and what silence makes possible. If unpredictable events create a problem for people's ability to tell stories that represent reality, then refusing to speak provides one way to resolve an accident.

To comply with my IRB, I do not use the legal names of any of the people I worked with in Zhengzhou; however, in most cases, my interlocutors chose their own pseudonyms. Many times, people chose an English name that they actually do go by or an English name they wish they went by, which is why so many of the people in this study have names that do not sound "Chinese." In Zhengzhou, I also went by several names. Some people called me by my English name, Megan, and some people called me by a variation of my Chinese name, Lin Yuping (林玉屏), such as Xiao Lin (Little Lin) or Yuping if they felt more familiar with me. I have done my best to be sensitive to the dynamics of each encounter and record which name my interlocutors used when addressing me. Proper nouns of specific places—e.g. The Capitalist Pig, XX Bar or Cardboard Coffee—have been changed, also usually with the owners' input. Road and place names—e.g. Rising Sun Road or the Most Expensive Mansion Complex—have also been changed to obscure and protect the people involved, but district and landmark names—e.g. Zhengzhou Main Station or the New East District—have not been changed. During fieldwork, I often took notes in real time, made audio recordings, or reconstructed encounters narratively the day after. While I have done my best to represent my own version of what happened, I expect the people I worked with have their own, differing versions of the events I share in this dissertation, and I hope, one day, to read them.

CHAPTER ONE

Toward an Anthropology of the Accidental

When I woke up, I did not think, *Today is the day I am going to be hit by a car*. I did not decide to take my pedal bike instead of my electric bike (*diandongche* or e-bike for short) because I thought if a car was going to hit me, it should be at a slower and safer speed. I did not fasten my helmet—an exotic item that often caused complete strangers on the street to ask me if I was a professional biker—because I thought it would protect me later when I was hit by a car. And I certainly did not decide to ride through my host university because I thought if I had to be hit by a car, campus was the best possible place. The pedal bike, helmet, and route through campus: all these choices were inflected by an unconscious admission on my part—*on any day at any moment you may be hit by a car*—and meant to prevent or reduce the likelihood of the event or, at the very least, the likelihood of serious bodily harm in the event.

And yet, I did not choose them thinking, *Today you should do these things because today is the day you are going to be hit by a car*. If I had, I would not have neglected to toss my cell phone and passport into the backpack holding only my laptop computer a few hundred pink Renminbi. If I had, I would not have reminded myself that cars are not allowed on campus and allowed myself to relax once I entered the South Gate of the university. If I had, I would not have viewed the bright pink Suzuki Swift approaching toward the same T-intersection I was with bemusement—*what kind of person would buy such a pink car?!*—instead of alarm.

As it was, I anticipated that the bright pink car would probably turn left, toward the South Gate (and toward me). I moved further toward the right. The road was wide enough for two cars and a bike to pass each other comfortably, and besides, the car had a stop sign. I wasn't worried. I coasted closer to the intersection, keeping the sidewalk a few inches from my right side. Only in the instant before impact—as the driver made not the wide, slow left onto the other side of the street prefaced by the stop I expected but instead a tight, quick left against the sidewalk directly into oncoming traffic, which, at that moment, was composed only of me—did I finally think: *How weird! This car is going to hit me*.

Background: Culturally Specific Conceptions of Unpredictability

The accident I describe above could have happened anywhere, at anytime. As it was, it happened on October 24, 2013 in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Between March 2013 and March 2016 I conducted 25 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Zhengzhou, most of which was completed during two long-term stretches: one from July 2013 to October 2014 and the other from June 2015 to March 2016. I went to Zhengzhou to investigate how people there understood unpredictability—the characteristic of not being able to determine the specific shape of the future and future outcomes—and how those understandings influenced their daily lives. Although anthropologists have historically studied the reproductive, the functional, and the structural, this study asks how a focus not just on events but also on unpredicted events might change ethnographic methods and alter anthropological theory. Accidents are generally experienced phenomena, but in the PRC, people respond to these events in

culturally specific ways. What can accidents illuminate for anthropology in general? What can they reveal about life in the PRC in particular?

This study is based in Zhengzhou, a city of around nine million people in what's called the Central Plains (*Zhongyuan*) region of the PRC; it was conducted during what will probably become known as President Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign or the beginning of the Xi Era (to use a common way of distinguishing years among contemporary PRC specialists). Regardless of how scholars eventually decide to name it, this period was characterized by sudden, nonnegotiable, top-down changes which were immediately evident in Zhengzhou, where many social, political, and economic structures were intertwined with a branch of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) that is currently being reorganized. This project investigates the relationship between unpredictability as an analytic concept and other concepts, such as risk (*fengxian*), luck (*yunqi*), and fate (*mingyun*). My interlocutors translated "unpredictability" either as *bukeyucexing* (the quality of not being able to be predicted) or as *bukeyuzhide* (what cannot be foreseen). My examination of unpredictability led me to several other ideas that, in Zhengzhou, were seen as connected to what could and couldn't be known in advance: the Buddhist idea of predetermined serendipity (*yuanfen*), suspect intentions (*xinyan'er*), realness and fakeness (*zhende jiade*), belief and trust (*xiangxin xinren*), responsibility (*fuzeren*), the reason behind the reason (*beihou de yuanyin*), a sense of safety (*anquangan*), and willfulness (*renxing*). These ideas appear repeatedly throughout this study as my interlocutors connected them to their understandings of the unpredictable or—as was often the case—to why they viewed a particular happening as predictable even though they themselves had not predicted it.

Many of my interlocutors will also make multiple appearances in this study. Before going to Zhengzhou, I knew only one person from their—Gloria, who I'll mention again in this chapter—but she was already living the bulk of her life in Canada. Gradually, I expanded my social circle until I had met hundreds of people, some of whom became regular interlocutors who met with me on a weekly basis, and some of whom I never saw again after our first encounter. With the interlocutors who remained, I held both formal and informal interviews if I felt a topic needed clarification, but mostly I engaged in participant observation. In other words, I hoped to learn about people's relationship to unpredictability by going about the predictable daily business of living—eating, shopping, talking, laughing, and crying—together in Zhengzhou.

On top of participant observation, I also engaged in focused discussions and informal interviews. I asked interlocutors a series of several questions, such as: What do you think the most important thing is for becoming successful in the PRC today? Do you think outcomes are determined by luck, fate, or something else? What is the most unpredictable thing that has ever happened to you? Ultimately, these interviews were less revealing than what I learned by simply listening to people have conversations with each other as they sat with me in cars and coffee shops, but many of these answers appear in this dissertation at moments when I think they illuminate a difficult to describe point. For instance, during one conversation, when I asked a husband and wife what they thought the most unpredictable thing that had happened in the PRC was, they listed a number of things that had changed their lives in ways they hadn't imagined (*xiang bu dao de*): smartphones (*zhineng shouji*), wireless internet (*hulianwang*), high-speed trains (*gaotie*), traffic (*duche*), and the proliferation of cars (*che pubianhua*). When I pointed out that

these had been part of the modernization process in many places, including the United States, the couple argued that they were *more* unpredicted in the PRC because there had been no slow build-up and little development period. Instead of candy bar phones gradually morphing into flip phones into smart phones, almost all technologies were coeval; they had appeared at roughly the same moment, and expressed not different steps of technological advancement, but different class statuses.

The man also mentioned smog (*wumai*). I recorded the conversation, and on the tape I can hear myself stop the man when he mentions smog: "From what year did the smog appear?"

"Seems like it was from when, that guy, the one who was also Chinese," he fumbles around trying to remember, "Your ambassador! From when he started publicly broadcasting the smog."

The man was referring to Gary Locke, who was the U.S. Ambassador to the PRC from March 26, 2009 to August 1, 2011. He was wrong to attribute the US Embassy in Beijing's broadcast to Locke's tenure; in fact, the now-notorious Air Quality Index (AQI) broadcasts began in 2008, in anticipation of the Beijing Olympics, though people may have only become aware of it under Locke's tenure (see Roberts 2015). On the tape, however, I do not correct him—instead, I hear myself laughing and sputtering in the repetitive, staccato Mandarin that always emerges when I am confused by something.

"It's not possible (*bu keneng*)!" I say.

"It is, it is (*shi de shi de*)," he counters. "It was after—what's his name?"

"Gary."

"After he said the Chinese Mainland has a smog index that we had smog."

"Before was it that there wasn't smog (*zhiqian meiyou wumai*)," I ask, "or did no one realize that there was smog (*meiyou ren yishidao you wumai*)?"

"We didn't know this was called smog!" the woman insists on the tape. "Before we thought it was fog (*wu*)." She laughs. "There was one day I realized I hadn't had to bring a parasol. It used to be that if you went out during the day you would need it."

"But also before there wasn't that much," the man says. "It was after he said it that there was more and more smog (*wumai yue lai yue duo*)."

I can remember listening in astonishment and trying to process the man's train of thought. On the tape, the woman maintains that the smog had been there before Locke, but the man digs in and insists that the influence of Locke cannot be ignored. "Anyway, I remember before he said it, we didn't notice," the man asserts, "but afterwards it was more and more fierce, more and more fierce (*yuelaiyue lihai*)." He laughs, perhaps realizing the absurdity of his claim. "Maybe she is right. It's possible there was pollution before, but no one thought this PM2.5 would hurt people so seriously (*shanghai zheme yanzhong*). After he said it, we all wore face masks."

This dissertation asks what implications of different theories of causality—such as this man's contention that Locke had some kind of causal role in increasing air pollution—have for daily life, economic decision-making, and sociality in Zhengzhou. Though this man's argument may seem strange, the formal operation he was making by privileging the epistemological status of a phenomenon—whether he *knew* about the smog—over its ontological status—whether it *existed*—was quite common in Zhengzhou, where many people believed that what they were not aware of was not relevant to their experience. This widely held but culturally specific conviction that one

did or did not defined reality more than what we might think of as the facts on the ground greatly influenced how people conceived of unpredictability. It also influenced how I was able to study unpredictability. Ethnographers are comfortable relying on participant observation, but in a context where revealing what I knew or believed might substantially disrupt not just people's understandings of their experiences but the experiences themselves, I found myself asking exactly what kind of participant and observer I should be.

The Study of Events: Method and Theory as a Mutually Constitutive Process

On one level, participant observation is particularly suited to study unpredicted and unpredictable objects. Participant observation is, as many scholars have pointed out, an unpredictable method in and of itself because the ethnographer generates knowledge precisely through surprise and by ceding control to her interlocutors during the encounter (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009, 3; Tsing 2005, x; see also Bernard 2011, 256-290). In fact, the long-term, participant observation anthropologists engage in now emerged not from the accumulated best practices of anthropologists but out of the exigent and contingent demands of war. Even Bronislaw Malinowski, who is often credited as the "star fieldworker" of early anthropologists (Barth 2005, 16), spent such a protracted period of time in the Trobriand Islands not because of the demands of science, as he claims in his introduction (Malinowski 1922), but because of the unpredicted impact of World War I on his ability as a Polish citizen to remain in the British territory of Australia. Similarly, Fei Xiaotong, the father Chinese anthropology or—depending on whom you ask—Chinese sociology, conducted his ethnographic fieldwork in Yunnan not because he thought it the ideal field site but because it was where he (and many other famous

Chinese scholars) ended up after fleeing the Japanese invasion during World War II (Fei 1992; see also Li Ji's account in Li 1977, 121-127). In spite of the historical reality that unpredictable circumstances contributed to the *creation* of their method, these early anthropologists did not take unpredictability itself as their object of study; rather, they focused on how culture (or structure or society) acted to *solve* the ruptures generated by unpredictable events and helped to return people's world views to a presumably natural stable state. This contention was motivated by a theoretical commitment to studying social reproduction, structure, and the functional, and it discouraged ethnographers from considering the irregular, exceptional, or unpredicted as data because those instances were not, by definition, representative.

There is one major exception to this tendency to shy away from moments of rupture, accidents, and exceptions: E. E. Evans-Pritchard's 1937 study of Zande witchcraft.[1] Almost in spite of himself, Evans-Pritchard spends an inordinate amount of time in his now-classic chapter, "The Notion of Witchcraft explains Unfortunate Events," working out the at times minute differences that distinguish different types of unpredicted

[1] Though it may seem strange to go to the anthropology of North Central Africa in an ethnographic study of the PRC, my goal is to engage with the precedents for my research on unpredictability. Following the discipline's early trends and—most likely—the evidence on the ground, much of the anthropology conducted on the Chinese Mainland before 1949 focused on social reproduction, kinship structures, and functionalist interpretations of local customs (e.g. Fei 1992; Hsu 1971). After 1949, not only were foreign scholars not permitted to conduct research within the newly founded PRC but also anthropology was declared a bourgeois discipline and condemned by the state (for more, see Guildin 1994). Throughout the 1970s, the so-called anthropology of China drew mostly on ethnography conducted in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or among overseas Chinese populations, and these anthropologists problematically asserted an eternal, ideal Chinese culture in order to maintain continuity with historians, literary scholars, and other area studies experts working on Chinese topics (e.g. Baker 1968; Freedman 1966; Wolf 1972; for a critique, see Chow 1993, and for a particularly strange and late slip into eternal modes with a reference to "the imperial capital" in lieu of Beijing in the late 80s, see Sangren 1987, 11). Because of these historical circumstances, questions about unpredictability and accidents did not flourish in the anthropology of China, which at times was devoted to trying to fix an unobservable object; by inflecting and framing my study with questions from other area literatures, I hope to reveal new phenomena and new approaches to the anthropology of the PRC.

happenings from each other. His first concrete example of witchcraft comes from a boy who tripped over a stump and cut his foot in a way that would not heal—the result, the boy claims, of witchcraft. "I always argued with Azande and criticized their statements, and I did so on this occasion," Evans-Pritchard begins (20). Over the course of their argument, the unnamed boy defends himself against Evans-Pritchard's comically insensitive charges of carelessness and maintains that even if he were to have been careless, carelessness itself cannot cause a cut to fester while witchcraft can (20). Further on, Evans-Pritchard outlines the fine distinction between a granary that collapses because of termites undermining the structure and a granary that collapses because of termites undermining the structure that also injures the people who happen to be sitting beneath it. While there is "nothing remarkable" about the former happening, the latter is characterized by a coincidence of "two events" (a granary collapse and people sitting beneath it) occurring at "a precisely similar moment in time and space"; only witchcraft can explain such a coincidence (23). As he attempts to explain how witchcraft reproduces the Zande social, Evans-Pritchard ends up creating an index of the unpredictable by describing in detail a number of both unfortunate accidents that demand occult explanation (such as the boy tripping over the stump and ending up with an infected foot, the granary collapsing on people, the beer hut burning to the ground, and the skilled craftsmen's pots or stools breaking for no reason) and also unfortunate events that can be explained by the shortcomings of people acting directly (such as adultery, murder, lying, theft, and the "stupidity" of children (29)).

This index of unpredicted events and the idea that they could be explained by competing theories of causality proved to be extremely generative, particularly in the

field of legal anthropology. One of Evans-Pritchard's most successful students, Max Gluckman, presented his own reading of Zande in the introduction of an edited volume dedicated to Evans-Pritchard, *The Allocation of Responsibility*:

> When a Zande suffers a misfortune, he divines to find out who is the witch who caused it: this is divination into the alignment of maleficent occult forces in the past and the present…Evans-Pritchard points out that these consultations embody a view of time different than ours: the future is not fixed, but is conditionally there in the present; for the present includes an alignment of occult powers (among the Azande, usually of witchcraft) which may threaten future. (1972, xii-xiii)

Though Gluckman claims that this conception of time is "different than ours," it is in fact very much his own. The idea that within the present moment a potential future (and the forces of geographically distant pasts) is legible is on display in his own best-known contribution to the anthropological literature: the extended case method or (as it was originally called) situational analysis. In a recent essay on the history of event analysis in anthropology, Bruce Kapferer points out that Gluckman's ethnographic insights and the method that grew out of them were distinct from other anthropologists of the time because his work "was built around the idea that human realities are in constant flux: change rather than stasis is their circumstance" (2015, 7). Throughout this study, I develop this idea that concepts of time and particular temporal practices influence both ethnographic analysis and people's decision-making. Like Zande divination, within his work's detailed descriptions of the then-present, one can trace out many strains of conflict and complicity that made conditional what would become future of South Africa,

which anthropologists working now confront as the present (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 282-285).[2]

That said, Gluckman's commitment to a methodology that can detect traces of the future in the present is implicit rather than explicit; Sally Falk Moore, who collaborated with but also debated with Gluckman (see her own contribution to *The Allocation of Responsibility*), expresses the point much more strongly in much of her work on processual ethnography and the use of diagnostic events (1987). From the time she began publishing in the early 1970s until now, Moore has remained firmly committed to the fact that the reproduction of culture, behaviors, and customs was not, as earlier anthropologists had assumed, the result of a natural, functional predisposition toward stability but rather "the product of effort" (1987, 727). Although ethnography "is inevitably and obviously carried on without knowledge of the future," Moore argues that ethnographers still must ask, "What is the present producing? What part of the activity being observed will be durable, and what will disappear?" (731, 727). In an essay that reflects their long history of respectful disagreement, Moore contends that the bridge opening ceremony Gluckman used to establish what would become the extended case

[2] Gluckman's view is different from Malinowski's, with whom Gluckman had several public disagreements over how South Africa should be understood anthropologically (e.g., 1949) but ultimately admired as a great ethnographer committed to collecting empirical data. Malinowski admitted that empirically observable instances of rupture, "sociological strain," or death are occasions for cultural practices (like divination, magic, or the telling of myths) but assumed that these situations were not necessarily representative of the fabled "native's point of view" as it was most of the time (1948, 126; 1922, 25). In contrast, Gluckman's stance was that an unusual event, like the bridge-opening ceremony that brought together different groups of people, "crystallised some of the social structure and institutions of present-day Zululand" (1940, 13). Unlike other anthropologists, Gluckman did not shy away from or attempt to erase the historical conditions of colonialism he was observing; instead, within the ritual togetherness and then habitual (and strictly enforced) separation of Zulu laborers, Zulu chiefs, and white colonial authorities, Gluckman found he could "trace separation and conflict, and co-operation, in socially defined modes of behaviour" and demonstrate that whites and blacks were part of the same social system (14). The "equilibrium" observed at the bridge ceremony is notable both because it may represent the "equilibrium of Zululand social structure at a certain period of time" but also because it is tenuous and ever shifting into and out of different particular "equilibria" (28-29).

method described in was not, in fact, a situation or a case but "could more appropriately be called an 'event'" (2005, 255). Unlike cases, which require long-term work in a particular, bounded field in search of connections, events as Moore understands them may be singular and happen only once but can prove revealing if contextualized through time by considering both past and future happenings.

Moore is far from alone in returning to and reinterpreting Gluckman's famous 1940 article, which continues to be a generative touchstone in anthropology.[3] T.M.S. Evens memorably claims that Gluckman used "situation" to mean "trouble case" or else the way it's colloquially used in Hollywood action movies: "We've got a situation here!" (2005, 50). He describes the ontological implications of Gluckman's method

> …in which humans can be seen not simply as determinate functions of a social order but as a meaningful social dynamic, the principal constituents of which are situated beings who are condemned to make and remake themselves unceasingly, for life and for a living. (57)

Similarly, Don Handelman argues that the extended case allows ethnographers to document micro-histories or "meaning-in-its-making through time" (2005, 74). Anthropologists practicing the detailed, in-the-moment data collection that Gluckman championed had to admit "that actions, relationships, and social formations were only sometimes (perhaps rarely) anticipated by or predictable from initial conditions" and become "sensitive in tracing the processual, indeterminate character of living" (66-67, 75). In a recent review of the anthropological literature for the introduction of an edited volume on events, Bruce Kapferer puts forth his own philosophically complex methodology for event analysis, which would incorporate Gilles Deleuze's idea of

[3] Both the Winter 2005 issue of *Social Analysis* and a more recent volume edited by Bruce Kapferer and Lotte Meinert (2015) are devoted in some way to Gluckman's extended case method.

"becoming," but (in a gesture just shy of anachronism) credits Gluckman as approaching the ideal sense of openness and becoming in the extended case method (2015). Kapferer is working against the use of events to illustrate, exemplify, or establish of a conundrum; he describes his approach as new, though he references a number of anthropologists who practiced in the USA—including Clifford Geertz and Veena Das—who have all analyzed events but come up short. In particular, Kapferer dwells the work of Victor Turner,[4] whose commitment to studying the ritual process combines both the repetitive nature of ritual as an ideal and also their tendency to, in practice, go awry.

In a peculiar oversight, Kapferer never cites Moore, perhaps the most important theorist of process of her time. Moore's description of events as leading the ethnographer "like a sunburst, in all directions" should have appeared familiar to someone so committed to Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of rhizomatic structures and lines of flight (Moore 1987, 735; Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 1987). It is a particularly strange omission given that Kapferer devotes an entire section of the introduction to praising Marshall Sahlins's *Islands of History* (1985)— a work that Moore, in her 1987 piece "Explaining the Present," criticizes fairly, convincingly, and on strikingly similar terms

[4] While Turner focused primarily on ritual events, whose outcomes may not have been predicted but whose occurrence were at least regular and expected, this study looks more broadly toward unpredicted events that do not necessarily fit into a predetermined social structure. Regardless of whether a ritual was efficacious or not, it was presumed to have a certain meaning and to have been undertaken with a specific intention—for example a marriage *means* two people *intend* to end up married. They may not achieve this outcome (if the bride runs away, if the witnesses do not act correctly), but it is understood as the event's original *intent*. In contrast, the outcomes examined in this study are often unintended, which makes their meanings more easily contested. For example, the appearance of air pollution—or people's sudden awareness—is an event and a process, but it's unclear what it means. It could mean that the economy is doing well; it could mean that the government is willing to sacrifice the health of its people for economic prosperity; or it could mean that Gary Locke wants people to wear facemasks.

as Kapferer himself.[5] Kapferer finds this approach inadequate because in Sahlins's work "the idea of conflict and contradiction as being integral to systems (the Manchester position) is…underplayed" but still praises how it remains "irreducible to any one cultural or social order and simultaneously is in effect a site of emergence out of which novel articulations of practiced reality arise" (2015, 14). Compare this with Moore's work, which is based on the very notion that change, conflict and contradiction are integral not necessarily to systems but to what she describes as the object of all ethnographic fieldwork: "a society in process" (Moore 2005, 257). Consider Moore's comparison of Sahlins with Gluckman in this 2005 article:

> …for Sahlins, events matter because they enter the cultural scheme and modify it…His interest is in the way each event, each action in practice, contributes to the burden of meaning carried by the cultural categories it refers to or employs…If the symbolic order is not taken to be the primary focus of analysis, and it certainly did not have primacy in Gluckman's thought, one is in a different intellectual domain from Sahlins's analysis of Captain Cook's story. (259-260)

Or examine how, in her reading of Sahlins in 1987, Moore asserts that

> …event today is not simply an instantiation of existing structure in the manner of the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*. An event is not necessarily best understood as the exemplification of an extant symbolic or social order…Events may show a multiplicity of social contestations and the voicing of competing cultural claims. (1985, 729, emphasis in original)

[5] In *Islands of History* Sahlins uses a series of happenings—the misapprehension of Captain Cook as the god Lono by the Hawaiians, his accidental return to the island, and his murder by the Hawaiian nobility—to demonstrate how the theory of structuralism, as proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, can accommodate change. To do so, he moves analogously from Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of language as a system to culture as a structure (1985, 148). For my purposes, Sahlin's most enduring contribution is his insight that "The event is a happening interpreted—and interpretations vary" (Sahlins 1985:153). Nevertheless, I don't feel the need to take the linguistic analogy as far as Sahlins does, where event, happening, and interpretation would correspond to sign, signifier, and signified. A large part of what this study hopes to demonstrate is that even beyond the idea that "interpretations vary," experiences themselves not only vary but also diverge and—through the processes of recollection, revision, and repression—change. This strikes me as being much different than Sahlins' event-as-sign, where there is always presumed to be a stable system or structure against which interpretations can be measured or, perhaps, which determine possible interpretations.

Kapferer, whose goal is to convince anthropologists to take up "the event as a singularity of forces in which critical dimensions of socio-cultural existence reveal new potentials of the ongoing formation of socio-cultural realities"—language lifted almost directly from Deleuze's work—seems to have missed an important progenitor (2015, 2).

I point all this out not to catch Kapferer in the act of not reading—quite the contrary. It will become evident throughout the rest of this introduction how indebted I am both to his scholarly insights and to this particular review, which covers an impressive amount of literature and has been an indispensable reference for me. I point all this out because I am frustrated by the fact that anthropologists often do not recognize their own contributions to the theoretical—or perhaps philosophical—literature. Like Gluckman before her, Moore repeatedly refers to her own arguments as methodological (e.g. 2016, 81-82, 254-255) or only hints at their theoretical significance. For instance, in her 1987 article, "theoretical dilemmas" appears in the title but in the text itself she claims her argument is "methodological" and her mentions of theory all reference the work of others (1987, 729, 728-729). Like Gluckman before her, Moore leaves others to tease out the theoretical implications for her the way Evens and Handelman did for Gluckman. It is her student, John Borneman, who insists in the foreword to a recent book of Moore's essays that she "independently and rigorously developed a theory of 'process'…far beyond the number of citations she receives for her concepts" (2016, xv-xvi). What counts as theory and what anthropologists count as theory puts me in mind of an essay written by Sarah Ahmed (2008). Ahmed is distressed by the way current feminist scholars dismiss the work of earlier feminists rather than engaging with it:

> What is evident here is an uneven distribution of the work of critique, which is after all a labour of love. To be blunt, male writers (who are also usually dead and

> white) are engaged with closely, while feminist writers are not. What does this uneven distribution of attention and care actually do? (30)

The target of Ahmed's admonition is feminist scholars allied with the "New Materialist" turn, but a similar question might be posed to anthropologists. What does it do to look to the philosophers of the day for—of all things—methodological contributions rather than to other anthropologists?[6] I do not mean to imply that the invocation of philosophers by anthropologists is anything new (see Benedict 1966, 249 for definitive evidence that it is not), but especially now when anthropology has established a large and theoretically rich literature, what does it mean to give our labor of love not to work written by each other or our predecessors but to inattentive others in other disciplines?

What I hope it doesn't mean is that anthropologists—in a rush to create theoretical contributions that can be easily cited as key words—no longer value the kind of careful, detailed ethnographic work associated with fieldwork or (worse) can no longer bring themselves to love it. Although philosophers, novelists, poets, and economists will appear throughout this research, in this chapter I have made a concerted effort to engage the anthropological literature and think through my own project as it relates to anthropological work. Through my own labor of love I have learned more facts about land transfers in Tanzania under socialism, Zande divination, and Sri Lankan sorcery than might be expected of a scholar who works in the PRC (and plans to continue working there); however, I also learned something beyond the explicitly expressed empirical evidence. Anthropological fieldwork tends to generate material whose rhetorical force is

[6] This is what Kapferer's introduction to *In the Event* does in the end—he calls for a theoretical reorientation, and the theory he has drawn from Deleuze, but the reorientation would be, in practice, methodological as it would require not just a new way of emplotting evidence but of gathering it as anthropologists followed the flow of events into the future; this is one reason why he identifies so strongly with Gluckman's Manchester School. For more see Kapferer 2015.

mostly mimetic. That is, what anthropologists learn through participant observation accomplishes more by *showing* than by telling.

A methodological commitment to observing and understanding change through time—whether it's called processual ethnography, situational analysis, or the extended case method—and then *showing* it through description, becomes a theoretical preoccupation that produces extremely detailed work for Gluckman, Moore, and their students. For Gluckman, who apparently could be a ruthless scholarly interlocutor (see Barth 2005, 38), the purpose of such detail was something analogous to what quantitative social scientists today might call replicability. As Kapferer explains, for students at Manchester under Gluckman, "a major objective of the emphasis on apparently excessive detail over and above the analytic or interpretive needs of the ethnographer was to enable reanalysis by other anthropologists in order to test the veracity of both the argument and the observation" (2005, 4). For anthropologists who now study the production of knowledge this may seem naive, but especially at the time, this acknowledgment of the bias of the ethnographer was innovative.[7] Moore, for her part, is a bit more measured in her assessment whether or not anthropologists can ever achieve something like transparency.[8] Moore's work on events often spans decades and takes into account shifting lineages, changing laws, and "spontaneous events, even unusual ones" (2005, 271). These events often spool out, like the sunburst she invoked in 1987, rolling back into the past and stretching toward the future; though Moore preferred the term process to

[7] Keep in mind that Gluckman began developing situational analysis in 1940 and Malinowski's controversial diary wasn't released until 1967 (see Firth 1966; Geertz 1967).

[8] In an implicit critique of Gluckman's belief that detail could redeem ethnographic objectivity, she writes, "I have had a strong hand in organizing the facts to provide a glimpse of a historical process…Telling it like it is does not guarantee an unedited product. There is no such thing in human affairs as a simple description" (Moore 2005, 270).

practice (1987, 729), through her writing a commitment to a specific theory of temporality and change mimetically becomes method in practice.

Even more crucial for the question of how we value ethnography is the fact that the descriptions produced by Moore and Gluckman's are a move away from the "thick description" championed by Clifford Geertz. As Handelman observes, Gluckman's "social situation opens not a window, as in Geertzian usage, but axes of practice *in particular contexts*" (2005, 64). In other words, the social actions and processes are observed and recorded in field notes not to reveal some underneath or to be looked *through* to some distant meaning but rather to be analyzed for what they *are*. This is a refusal to engage in a certain kind of interpretive work that substitutes the clever use of metaphors for analysis about *what actually is*, the best example of which is of course Clifford Geertz's article on the Balinese cockfight (1973).[9] Geertz's substantial contributions to anthropology notwithstanding, I follow Handelman's insight and distinguish his approach from an intellectual lineage that has similar effects—most notably the commitment to producing detailed, descriptive accounts of field work—but is motivated by a very different set of theoretical presumptions about what kinds of

[9] Though the essay does several things (among them, describing in great detail the treatment, training and grooming of cocks, disagreeing with Jeremy Bentham's idea of "deep play" as "irrational," and outlining the rules for which cocks may or may not fight), its main contribution to anthropological theory is to argue that if the cockfight's function "is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves" (448). Geertz's cockfight then becomes "the cockfight as a text," which allows him to make it analogous both to Balinese social life *and* to other texts—such as *Macbeth* or *David Copperfield* (449). Geertz claims that transforming the cockfight from a rite to a metaphor allows him to access certain aspects of the Balinese emotional experience, but it strikes me that those likely would still have been available to him if he had simply studied it *as actual experience*. Even rereading it now, it's not clear to me what Geertz accomplishes through this shift besides escaping the then-prominent anthropological tendency to need to explain the *function* of every rite or event. By making the cockfight into a metaphor and treating it as a text, its uselessness or inefficacy in terms of evolutionary or functional explanation becomes legible to those who may have otherwise dismissed it as an example of irrational primitive behavior.

arguments ethnographic field work makes possible.[10] This study is heavily indebted to phenomenological approaches to ethnography (see Desjarlais and Throop 2011), especially since I try to track how people process their initial perceptions of unpredicted and senseless events and turn them into meaningful experience.

If I seem overly invested in this question of what ethnographic description does for theory, it is because I myself came relatively late to anthropology and—more importantly—to the idea of doing fieldwork. Before I became an anthropologist I was encouraged to cultivate my interpretive skills by scholars working with literary, visual, and historical sources. During my conversion to anthropology (and I think "conversion" is the correct way to describe it), I learned to take seriously the idea that working with people was different than working with texts. I am drawn to Moore in part because of the way she rejects Sahlins' work on the grounds that "the linguistic analogy is an inadequate metaphor" for social processes (1987, 729). She is right; if the history of social theory should have taught us anything, it is that, confronted with actual social life, *all metaphors are inadequate*.[11] While social life in Zhengzhou is often shaped by the use of metaphors—many of which I record, analyze, and pore through—I do not believe the production or scaling-up of a metaphor substitutes for social analysis.

[10] For instance, in "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," Geertz argues to circumscribe the types of broad, comparative arguments anthropologists are capable of making, a complicated stance that is perhaps best summed up by his contention that "One of the most significant facts about us may well be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one" (Geertz 1973, 45). In contrast, both Moore and Gluckman were committed both to comparison and to making comparative arguments (e.g. Moore's article "Comparisons: Possible and Impossible" argues in the end for comparative analysis in spite of its problematic nature (2016, 44)).

[11] To make the point briefly, here are a few examples of proposed and abandoned metaphors-as-theory: Herbert Spencer's theory of society as a biological organism (1860), Alfred Kroeber's theory of society as molecules (1949, 120), Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's theory of society as cells (1952, 190).

This does not mean that within this study I will not employ or attempt to use metaphors to illuminate what I learned in the field, but it does mean that when I do, I feel a great ambivalence about it; metaphors-as-analysis always make me think of Alice Munro's short story, "The Ottawa Valley." The narrator—who is, like Munro, an author whose mother dies of multiple sclerosis—ends the story suddenly, by breaking the fourth wall:

> If I had been making a proper story out of this, I would have ended it, I think, with my mother not answering and going ahead of me across the pasture. That would have done. I didn't stop there, I suppose, because I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could…The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of her; and it did not work…and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. (1974, 246)

To mark off, describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of all I felt, learned, and experienced in the field: much of this study was written precisely to achieve those goals. In many instances, I have failed; some people, relationships, and experiences do not lend themselves to becoming proper stories. In the putatively methodological literature reviewed above, I found a theoretical rationale for living with my failure, for accepting that the process of social life often exceeds the metaphors we make to rein it in, and for not falling back on what tricks I know to keep from having to make an argument. A method that recognizes the spontaneous, exceptional, and accidental as a valid object of study is theoretically prepared for the irregular nature of everything I could find out, remember, and bring back. Rather than try to make a proper story, I want to acknowledge in what follows that "what is being inspected in fieldwork is a moving thing" whose edges melt and flow (Moore 2005, 255). What I want for this project is for it to be not a

demonstration of how many tricks I know but rather a measured argument about what was actually happening in Zhengzhou while I was there.

Rather than continue to review the substantial literature on the ethnography of situations, events, and processes, my focus will be how I began my own study of accidents—events that are widely considered non-representative, irregular, and outliers by definition—and why I chose accidents instead of customs, rituals, or bounded communities. Before I left for the field, I knew that catching unpredicted happenings in the moment would be the most difficult, uncontrollable, and important part of my fieldwork. To observe, analyze and record enough detail over time to adequately show how a happening *became* an accident through the interpretations of those involved, I would have to *be there*; there would be, as Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi argue, no substitute for the physical presence demanded by the encounter (2009). And yet, even though I knew accidents would be methodologically generative for my project and was inspired by Moore's call to consider "accidentally encountered small-scale fieldwork experiences" (2005, 269), I never imagined I would be hit by a car.

Fatty's Accident

All of these methodological and theoretical concerns were far from my mind on October 24, 2013. The crash itself happened "in a flash"—or at least that's how I described it in the field notes I wrote down later that afternoon:

> In the moment of flight, there is impact, disbelief, and then impact. I can't remember seeing anything. I must have closed my eyes. The next thing I knew (now one can see why this turn of phrase is so cliché) I was on the curb, my bike between my legs, and head on my arms. My first thought, honestly, was about the computer in my backpack. I went to get it, felt how hurt my body was, and gave up, resting my head on my arms again. Probably I swore.

This "probably" is a generous reconstruction; I am *certain* I swore, both in English and in Chinese, especially as the driver revealed herself by exiting the bright pink Suzuki and rushing toward me. "Don't touch me!" I shouted, first in English and then in Mandarin. The woman stepped back, considered, and then began inspecting her car's driver's side mirror, which was hanging by a few wires from the door. "Stop caring about your car, care about *me*," I shouted, unaware of how clearly contradictory my commands were.

In retrospect, my shouting in English and audibly accented Mandarin must have been what drew the crowd. This was not the first time I had been involved in a car accident in Zhengzhou, and it was not even the first time I had been involved in a collision between two-wheeled and four-wheeled vehicles. On July 15, 2013, the day I arrived to begin my long-term fieldwork, Huang Na, a teacher at my host university had gotten her husband to pick me and my luggage up from the high-speed railway station. Ironically, they were telling me about the young girls (*xiao guniang*) and young men (*xiao huozi*) on their e-bikes, riding as though they did not care for their lives (*bu yaoming*). As we made a right turn away from the East Gate of the university and toward the apartment I would eventually rent for three months, an e-bike tried to zip past on the right side but failed. The sound and sense of the impact shocked me, but not as much as the teacher's husband, who sat, frozen, with his hands on the wheel and the car stopped just where it was on the corner.

Huang Na reacted fastest. "Open the door," she commanded to her husband (the car's doors automatically locked when it was in drive). From the backseat I could see him look at her in astonishment, and then relent. Huang Na got out, and I watched her try to help the dazed girl lift her scooter, which had fallen onto her right leg (much like my bike

would pin my right leg). Huang Na was yelling something, and I got out as I realized they somehow couldn't do it together.

"Fatty, move the car forward," Huang Na was shouting at her husband, using her pet name for him. The car was too close to the scooter for us to tip it straight up, and the scooter was too heavy for the two of them to lift off the ground on our own. "Fatty, move the car."

But Fatty didn't move. He sat staring straight forward, and we might have been stuck like that for hours if a tanned and wrinkled man hadn't intervened just as I placed a hand on the scooter. He easily lifted the scooter and then walked away.

"*Na, ni man yidian'er*," Huang Na said kindly to the girl, "Go slower, will you?" The girl said nothing. She drove off stoically without making eye contact, though I privately thought it looked like she would burst into tears as soon as she was out of our sight.

Huang Na and I got back into the car and immediately began talking about how scary the experience had been. Fatty had the most to say.

"From my perspective, I was scared the girl would tell the police and I would have to pay something," he exclaimed, driving forward slowly, "But it was her fault! In America, do you have such unfair laws (*bu gongping de falü*)?"

I found myself unable to answer the question because I didn't understand it. Why was the law unfair? Huang Na intervened and explained: If there is an accident and the police come, the person driving the car will have to pay no matter what because the other person will say they are hurt even if it is their own fault.

"That's why when my wife was telling me to get out, I was really unwilling to get out of the car," Fatty added.

"That wasn't what I meant," Huang Na corrected, "I was trying to tell you to pull forward so we could lift up the bike. I wasn't asking you to get out of the car. I just wanted to help the girl and see if she was hurt. She's only a teenager (*shiji sui*)—that's why I told her to go a bit slower. She was probably just so scared."

"Also," I ventured, "If you are polite to them, maybe they won't call the police."

Here I should note that throughout this text, readers will find me vocalizing my own—often incorrect—interpretations. I am instinctively reactive and—in an effort to avoid what George Devereux calls "complementary behavior" (1967, 234)—I would purposefully refuse to act according to my interlocutors' expectations. Because I was above all else an American in their eyes, they often expected me to be critical of the PRC and of Chinese people's "moral quality" (*suzhi*), which my interlocutors sometimes imagined themselves cultivating according to an international standard precisely so they could demonstrate their "high quality" to me (see Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006; and on standards, Osburg 2013, 134-135). In my notes, I've recorded that Huang Na seemed to want to disagree with my generous (and purposefully naive) analysis but then demurred: "That's right, if you are nice, it's okay."

Fatty was more vocal in his opposition. "I still wouldn't have wanted to get out of the car," he insisted. "Some men and women are so angry they don't care whose mistake it was, they are certain it's your fault." He began telling a story about being in a cab in Shanghai on a very narrow one-way street. A woman on an e-bike tried to pass them and the cab ended up knocking her off the e-bike. His friend got out of the cab to be polite

and see if she was hurt, but the woman began to scream at him that it was his fault. When he explained that he hadn't been driving the cab, the woman screamed louder, and the man grew very angry.

"He started cursing (*jiang zanghua*)," Fatty laughed, "He cursed so fiercely (*lihai*) that the woman drove off!"

All three of us chuckled at this, even Huang Na. "A lot of e-bikes try to pass cars all the time," she eventually added, "but they usually cannot." I nodded; I was in Zhengzhou for only the third time in my life and I had been there for less than 24 hours, but I somehow felt I understood.

Zhengzhou: A Traffic (Accident) Hub and an Accidental Capital

Though this study is not about traffic accidents in particular but unpredictability in general, it's still worth mentioning how e-bikes (and their tendency to be involved in accidents) have changed people's ideas of the unpredictable in Zhengzhou. In 2008, while writing about an as-yet-unrealized policy to register e-bikes, journalists reported that Zhengzhou had 500,000 e-bikes on the road or seven e-bikes for every ten people (e.g. Shangdu 2008; Xinhua 2008). A more recent article from 2014 reports that the number has more than quadrupled; according to the police department's official statistics, Zhengzhou now has more than two million e-bikes on the road or (when adjusted for population) 22 e-bikes for every ten people (Rule of Law Weekend 2014). For comparison, Beijing—where authorities recently declared e-bikes "road killers" (*malu*

shashou) (Beijing Daily 2016)— has only 20 e-bikes for every ten people.[12] According to Zhengzhou police, the rise in the number e-bikes began in 1997, when the city began restricting the number of motorcycles that could be registered, and really took off in 2007, when there was a complete ban on motorcycles in the city (ibid 2014). In 2000, the government classified e-bikes as bicycles, which means that, unlike motorcycles, e-bike riders are not required to wear helmets or pass a drivers license test (Cherry and Cervero 2007). In addition, e-bikes' affordability—a used e-bike can cost around 800RMB (121USD) while a new, high-powered model might cost upwards of 5,000RMB (762USD)—as well as advancements in e-bike technology have also attracted consumers. Despite clear government regulations that e-bikes should go no faster than 20 kilometers per hour, many e-bikes on the road could reach speeds of over 80 kilometers per hour and were much heavier than the recommended 40 kilograms—advancements that increase the likelihood of injury in the case of a crash. These injuries are also increasingly likely; in 2010, road injuries were ranked the number one cause of death for adults between the ages of 15 and 44 (Khan 2014).

Nevertheless, people continue to buy e-bikes, ride e-bikes, and get into accidents on e-bikes in Zhengzhou. People rode e-bikes to escape Zhengzhou's oppressive gridlock, and people believed that the number of e-bikes on the road exacerbated that gridlock by causing accidents. When I first arrived in March 2013, I assumed people rode

[12] Lest the reader question my math abilities, let me confess that I, too, find it strange that there would be more e-bikes in each of these cities than there are people to ride them. Several things might have led to this seeming surplus of e-bikes. One is that there is a near constant circulation of stolen, fenced, and resold e-bikes that guarantees thousands of e-bikes in rider-less limbo at any given moment. Another is that authorities may be counting e-bikes more accurately than they are counting people. Zhengzhou and Beijing are both not *supposed* to have as many migrants living in them as they actually do and these people, referred to broadly in the literature as the "floating population" (*liudong renkou*), are often not registered in the cities where they live and ride e-bikes. This is just a guess, however. For more on the floating population, see Zhang 2001.

e-bikes because Zhengzhou's subway system was not yet open; however, in the weeks before the first line of the subway opened in December 2013, people told me over and over again it would have no impact on traffic because people were used to (*xiguan le*) riding e-bikes. E-bikes were, riders maintained, too convenient (*tai fangbian*) to give up. My interlocutors often declared that there were more e-bikes per person in Zhengzhou than anywhere else. When I asked one friend where she had gotten her information, she snorted at me, "Just look at the road! In no other city in China do you see this many e-bikes and no other city do you see them so unafraid to die (*bu yaoming*)." Sophy, who came from the nearby city of Luoyang, expressed her dissatisfaction this way: "Even in Luoyang, you would never see anything like what we have in Zhengzhou because there is a traffic cop on every corner in Luoyang. In Zhengzhou, where are the traffic cops?"

While Sophy's question is worth addressing—where *were* all Zhengzhou's traffic cops?—I want to focus instead here on the way she frames it. For something to be expected "even in Luoyang"—a smaller, poorer city of 6.5 million people to the west of Zhengzhou—but not in Zhengzhou was to add insult to injury for the rapidly expanding provincial capital. There were e-bikes in Luoyang too, but there were nowhere near as many as there were in Zhengzhou and—not coincidentally—nowhere near as many accidents. Within the PRC's hierarchy of cities in which Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen are said to be "first-tier cities" (*yixian chengshi*), residents of Zhengzhou often oscillated between identifying their city as a second-, third-, or—as the more mathematically creative joked—second-and-a-half-tier city (*erdianwu xian chengshi*). Even though Zhengzhou was the capital of Henan Province and its wealthiest and most developed city, many people felt a great deal of ambivalence about living there. During

my fieldwork, Zhengzhou had the ignominy of being the provincial capital with the worst average AQI reading in the PRC by both the official (and presumedly censored) standards as well as the "uncensored" standards published by U.S. consulates throughout the country. This study addresses why people continue to settle in Zhengzhou despite these widely acknowledged trade-offs.

Henan Province itself was also a source of ambivalence. Nationally, Henan is associated with poverty and with the production of thieves and scam artists (there is no evidence I could find that the latter is true). During the Cultural Revolution (1965-1976), Henan's primarily rural composition combined with its proximity to the national capital made it a destination for many famous intellectuals and other political targets who were unwillingly "sent down" to do manual labor in the countryside (e.g. Yang 1983; Fogel 1987, 34). In the 1990s, the province's reputation was not helped when it became the center of a devastating HIV outbreak caused by predatory blood merchants using contaminated equipment and convincing cash-strapped farmers to sell their blood (see Shao 2006). While Henan is still one of the PRC's most populated provinces with 94.36 million inhabitants spread over 167,000 square kilometers, there is evidence that the population of Henan has actually *decreased* between the 1990s and now. Between 2000 and 2004, the population grew from 94.88 million to 97.17 million before falling in 2005 to 93.80 million (NBSC 2014). The more striking demographic shift, however, has been from being a primarily rural province to an urban one as migrants move from the countryside to cities (though not necessarily cities in Henan). In 2005, 65.05 million of Henan's 93.80 million (69.34%) people lived in rural areas and only 28.75 million (30.66%) lived in urban areas; by the time the 2014 census data was collected less than

ten years later, 51.71 million (55%) people still lived in rural areas but the number of people living in urban areas rose to 42.65 (45%) million (NBSC 2014). A little more than nine million of those people officially live in Zhengzhou, though government officials told me unofficially that the real number was probably closer to 11 million people, depending on the season.

These were all things I found out long after I had committed to Zhengzhou as a field site, however; Zhengzhou initially attracted me because it was the perfect site for a completely different project on the sociality within train compartments. Located at the intersection of the east-west Longhai railway line and the north-south Jingguang railway, Zhengzhou is a national transportation hub (*jiaotong shuniu*). When I first began doing preliminary fieldwork in 2011, the Ministry of Railways was making its first foray into the world of online ticket sales, and the earliest tickets could be purchased was 11 days before the trip at either its origin or destination station. The Beijing-Shanghai high-speed rail (*gaotie*) had only just opened on June 30, 2011, and Zhengzhou had only one station, through which over 300 trains passed per day (I counted 336 scheduled stops in 2011). When I first visited it in August 2011, Zhengzhou Station seemed like an ideal place to conduct research on how people of different class backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses interacted on the country's railway system.

By October 2016, things could not have been more different. Following a high-speed railway crash in Wenzhou on July 23, 2011 and charges of endemic corruption (Osnos 2012), the Ministry of Railways was dissolved. In September 2012, Zhengzhou East Station, which served only high-speed trains, opened, and in December 2012, high-speed rail service from Zhengzhou to Beijing and Zhengzhou to Guangzhou

began. The new Chinese Railway Corporation tentatively expanded from selling tickets a maximum of 11 days in advance to 18 days in advance, and then to 60 days in advance; finally, they allowed people to buy railways tickets through third-party mobile phone applications, like WeChat and Zhifubao (like PayPal or Samsung Pay but exponentially more integrated into everyday life). In a period of just a few months after Zhengzhou East Station opened, I watched as my ethnographic object—the strange interactions between people as different as migrant laborers and multinational executives forced into hard seat train compartments by the constrained circumstances of ticket buying—disappeared, almost entirely. I realized that any project I undertook in the PRC would have to consider the impact accelerating rates of change has had on everyday life and social processes; I shifted my focus to unpredictability, with a more nuanced approach to the connections between mobility, acceleration, and change.

Even though unpredictability is a generally experienced phenomena, this recent history of dramatic change in the PRC is what makes it a particularly revealing site for the study of unpredicted and unintended events. Anthropologists working in many different places have, in a move reminiscent of Weber's 1930 study of the connection between religious and economic beliefs in the United States, related a recent rise of occult beliefs to the mysterious mechanisms of the state's interference in everyday life (Taussig 1997; Aretxaga 2005; Siegel 2006), but these connections are especially conspicuous in the PRC (cf. Harrell 1987:98-99), where the state's interference in daily life—as in the Cultural Revolution and in the enforcement of the one-child policy and hukou system—has been particularly intimate (Yang 1994; Greenhalgh 1994; Chan and Zhang 1999). Recent ethnographies indicate that explanations for the same kinds of

phenomena now lack a rehearsed, central structure; today unexpected outcomes in the PRC are as likely to be explained by luck, fate, ghosts, or local gods as by individual decisions and hard work (Harrell 1985; Mueggler 2001; Sangren 2012). In the wake of tremendous change, many outcomes, including successful ones, appear to be the result of accidents (e.g., Liu 2002:100-102, 2009:127-129). Throughout this study, I will highlight how the liberalizing policies of Reform and Opening Up in 1978 ushered in a series of unpredicted outcomes, some of which are explicitly economic (see Hertz 1998) but many of which had a direct impact on family, medical, and even sexual matters (Yan 2003; Lora-Wainwright 2010; Zhang 2015). The speed of these changes is evident in the extreme diversity of opinions expressed by my interlocutors, many of whom identify themselves generationally as either born post-70s, post-80s, or post-90s. This study seeks to understand how such a rapid modernization process has inflected and changed the way already existing cultural explanations for the unpredictable—such as fate (*mingyun*), serendipity (*yuanfen*), and luck (*yunqi*)—are invoked.

Zhengzhou, as it exists today, is a particularly unanticipated city. Like Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province that usurped the more established Baoding in 1968, Zhengzhou owes its current political and economic success both to the chaos of China's bloody twentieth century as well as to its location within the PRC's railway system. Though there is new archaeological evidence that Zhengzhou is one of the so-called "Eight Ancient Capitals of China" in the early Shang Dynasty, for much of Chinese history Zhengzhou was overshadowed by two other neighboring dynastic capitals: Luoyang to the west and Kaifeng to the east.[13] Zhengzhou's administrative

[13] Some commentators even maintain that the title of "Eighth Ancient Capital" was paid for by the government of Henan rather than driven by archaeological evidence (see Sina Blog 2016).

status alternated between county (*xian*) and city (*chengshi*) in the 1920s and 1930s as warlords, the Nationalist (KMT) army, and other interests vied for control of the area. After Chiang Kaishek blew up the Yellow River dams at Huayuankou just north of the city in 1938 in an attempt to stop the Japanese army from taking control of the railways, Zhengzhou became the temporary administrative capital of the province. Even then it was only because the ensuing flood devastated the majority of the province, including the previous provincial capital, Kaifeng (Muscolino 2015). For the next nine years after the Chiang destroyed the dams, water from the Yellow River flooded 32% of Henan's cultivated land, displaced 17.3% of Henan's residents, and killed 4.8% of the population (Muscolino 2016). In 1953, the PRC government moved the capital to Kaifeng but returned it to Zhengzhou in 1954, finally turning Zhengzhou into an official rather than accidental provincial capital.

As I prepared to leave the city in 2016, new plans to expand Zhengzhou into an aviation hub and merge with Kaifeng grew into a popularly held conviction that the provincial government would move to Zhengbian—a district directly between the two cities as they are currently defined. For the vastly outnumbered Zhengzhou natives (*bendiren*) who don't plan on leaving, the question is whether power will—once again—shift eastward. Just as studying these unpredicted demographics and administrative shifts can reveal what may be predicted, so studying the accidental allows anthropologists to gain some insight not just into what is being reproduced but what new orders may emerge. Throughout this study, my interlocutors orient themselves toward the *hasn't yet* (in Mandarin, *hai meiyou*). The capital *hasn't yet* moved to Zhengbian; Olivia, a key interlocutor and close friend, *hasn't yet* married; Ya, another important interlocutor,

hasn't yet become rich enough to travel abroad. Scholars and theorists are used to reading about what is *always already*, but accidents as an object of study attune ethnographers instead to what *hasn't yet* materialized, come, or been achieved; it also highlights that these events, however anticipated, *may never* happen.

The moments after an accident

In a place where people have grown inured to sudden, unexpected changes not every accident has the force to attract people who are not involved. A crowd did not gather at the scene of Fatty's accident on July 15, 2013. Accidents like these were paradoxically unpredictable (you could not know exactly *when* or *if* you would hit an e-bike while driving a car) but also expected (no one would be surprised to find out you had hit an e-bike while driving a car). Although Fatty's collision with the hasty e-bike came as a surprise to *him*, fender benders between cars and e-bikes were common enough in Zhengzhou that none of the numerous pedestrians on University Road bothered to stop and gawk.

This was not the case in the moments following my accident on October 24, 2013. That the bright pink Suzuki had hit a bike was unremarkable but that the person riding the bike was foreign made it a sight worth seeing. As I shrieked and toggled between English and Mandarin, a small crowd began to form, drawing in retirees from the nearby running track, onlookers from the street, and even students from the university's physical education classes. One older woman approached me and asked in slow, carefully articulated English, "Are you okay?" I can't remember what I said. The woman who had been driving the bright pink car began chattering loudly, as though performing for the

crowd: “I was turning left! I had my blinker on! Maybe you didn’t see it (*ni keneng kanbudao*).”

“Of course I saw!” I snapped angrily, “I just thought you would stay to the right like you are supposed to. Look how close to the left you are!” The woman stared at me blankly and I realized I’d been yelling in English; I repeated myself in Mandarin for her benefit, and her eyes began to dart nervously between her car and the curb. “Maybe you didn’t see me,” she repeated once, and, then again, with only slight variations between each iteration of her claim.

I got up slowly. The front wheel of my bike was bent almost in half, warped beyond use. People helped me stand it up while I sat on the curb. The woman continued to fiddle with her dangling driver’s side mirror. For weeks after, I would think of the mirror as the dark bruises on my left shoulder changed from a deep black to a bright purple and then, finally, a sickly green. In the moment, however, her attention to it made me angry though, and I yelled again in both languages about how I couldn’t believe she cared more about her car than my body. The older woman who had spoken to me in English told her not to worry (*bu guan*) about the car. Hurt, surprised, and sitting on the hard, concrete curb, I felt tears welling up in my throat. As I began to wail, the crowd tightened around the car, the driver, and me, as though this was the spectacle it had been waiting for all along.

Accidents and a Modern, Pre-Modern, and Perpetual Problem of Causality

Why study accidents? In the sections above, I have tried to trace the history of different rationales for studying events, and in the following section, I will develop why accidents—as a particular type of event—are of interest. What is an accident? In

colloquial English, accidents are unexpected and unintended incidents that typically result in misfortune, damage, or injury. Pressed to define it further, I might begin by listing commonly experienced examples of accidents: collisions (*I accidentally ran into her*), falls (*he became paralyzed after the accident*), and misplaced items (*I lost my keys by accident*). These reflexive word choices—claiming the outcome was not achieved on purpose—are in fact assertions excusing the people involved from blame. They are, as J. L. Austin might argue, attempts to create extenuations for involvement in an undesirable course of action that cannot be denied (1991, 2-3). While this study remains attentive to the intricacies of language, by tracking changing explanations through time I hope to move beyond the cynical performative approach, which can sometimes fail to address any intrinsic truth behind what can be observed on the surface and in which—because intentions are presumed inaccessible—every outcome of human action can be seen as accidental or incidental.

At first glance, the vehicular negotiation I found myself unwillingly conscripted into on October 24, 2013 should count as an accident of the first type. I did not set out to crash into the car *on purpose*. Instead, I would say that the consequences of the collision happened *by accident*. The accident and its specific results were unintended. I can say with certainty that I did not *mean* to take off the driver's side mirror with my left shoulder just as I did not *mean* to end my bike ride to a nearby cafe early, in tears, and covered in bruises. And yet, in spite of colloquial English speakers' tendency to gloss any kind of traffic collision as an "accident," a car crash in and of itself is not necessarily accidental. Although people often do, one cannot pass the mangled recent wreckage of an automobile and cry out with absolute certainty, "What a terrible accident!" What appears

to be an accident by virtue of its trappings may, under closer scrutiny, turn out to be something else entirely.

Accidents are defined by their unmotivated and unintentional nature, and intentions are rarely ever clear, even to those who supposedly possess them; take, for instance, the case of suicide, a situation in which an otherwise legible outcome (death) becomes suddenly controversial because of the possible intentions (self-harm or self-annihilation) that leads to it. As Emile Durkheim wrote in *Suicide*, "Intent is too intimate a thing to be more than approximately interpreted by another. It even escapes self-observation. How often we mistake the true reasons for our acts!" (2002[1897], xli). Durkheim resolves the conflict between observable eventual outcomes and unobservable original intentions by defining suicide as "*all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result*" (2002, xlii, emphasis in original). Were a man to die from standing unknowingly beneath a tree limb that fell and crushed him, this would be an accident; however, were he to die from knowingly hanging himself from the same tree limb, this would be a suicide. Even then, explicitly intentional acts—such as the political suicide of the menstruating woman Bhubaneswari that troubles Gayatri Spivak's revised essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"—are often misinterpreted (Spivak 2010, 63). Beyond that, the problem of how to determine if a victim *knows* he will die continues to trouble whether many happenings—such as single-vehicle car crashes—should be considered accidents or suicides (e.g. Peck and Warner 1995; Pompili et al 2006). Particularly in the PRC, increased suicide rates have raised questions of whether people *intended* to die or whether they were "gambling" and miscalculated during familial power games (Fei

2010). Nevertheless, as the linguistic anthropologist Alessandro Duranti points out, more recently there has been a strong resistance to acknowledging the difficulty of determining intentions among people studying human cognition "because human beings are typically distinguished from other species for being *intentional* subjects" (2015:3). Accidents, then, pose a problem for cognitive scientists, who, unlike ethnographers, can control for the contingent in laboratory settings.

In this study, an accident is defined as an event without a perceivable provenance. In other words, an accident is any happening that is later interpreted as a meaningful event whose origin, cause, reason, or relation to other happenings is contested and whose outcome people view as unpredicted. This also includes happy accidents—everything from getting hit by a car to winning the lottery. The complicated circumstances of accidents can be seen in the second example of an accident listed above: falls. Falls are a genre of action that include everything from a toddler misjudging the height of a step and tumbling head over heels to a construction worker slipping out of his safety harness and plummeting ten floors to the ground. Nevertheless, these two falls are very different. Unlike the toddler, who may be hurt but under normal circumstances will quickly recover, the consequences of the construction worker's fall are disproportionate; in certain contexts, it is difficult to accept that an unplanned, unintended action could result in death, disfigurement, and disability. It would be different if, as in the single-vehicle suicide attempts, intention could be recovered and the verb could be shifted from "fall" to "jump." Similarly, if the construction worker was pushed, the ensuing wreckage would not have happened for no reason but because of someone else's intentions, and the "fall" would transform into either an actual or an attempted murder. The malevolence of others

may not be a just reason for a person to spend the rest of their life in a wheelchair, but it is, at the very least, a reason. Accidents can generate many competing explanations because they "raise questions of responsibility that can never be fully resolved" (Malaby 2003:142). In an accident, by definition, the ultimate cause can never be fully recovered or made socially legible.

When considering these two examples—the bumbling toddler and the plummeting construction worker—there's a temptation to pinpoint modern technology as the driver of the two falls' incongruous outcomes. Indeed, many scholars have associated accidents with the process of modernization, which is not to be confused with the theoretical morass of modernity (e.g. Beck 1992; Giddens 1992; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). The unintended consequences of many technological advances, such as the skyscraper that creates the conditions for a devastating fall, the car whose speed outpaces its driver's reaction time, or the pharmaceutical factory that in the process of producing life-saving medicine poisons people living nearby with runoff, have increased the risks of injury and accident that people now face but may not know they face. The rise of uncertainty in everyday life correlated with increased faith in the market's "invisible hand," which demands that causes of "benefits as well as risks be hidden, irreversible, and involuntary" (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982:28; cf. Petryna 2002; Miyazaki 2003; Graeber 2012). In other words, the advances of science and technology have come at great costs, a fact Guido Calebresi expresses bluntly in his 1970 book *The Costs of Accidents*: "Our society is not committed to preserving life at any cost" (17). As a judge and legal scholar, Calebresi's question is not theoretical but practical: given that there will be accidental damages, injuries, and losses, what costs exactly should people expect

society to pay? Calebresi's outlook reflects a tendency observed by S. Lochlann Jain in her 2006 study of injury, technology, and tort law. In the United States, people tend to understand workplace injuries like the construction workers fall "not as a structural premise of capitalism and a condition of its possibility but as an accidental side effect—a problem that can be rectified at the level of the individual and the particular facts of her case" (Jain 2006:3). Implicit in Jain's statement—and explicit throughout the rest of the book—is the idea that injuries and accidents *should* be understood as a structural premise of capitalism, which requires the sacrifice of human life and limb to build markets that support the very skyscrapers that construction workers may then accidentally fall from. In other words, e-bikes cannot be involved in 40% of all traffic accidents in Beijing if the market does not generate both the technology and the demand for labor that makes people search for a faster, more flexible alternative to public buses (Beijing Daily 2016; Cherry and Cervero 2007). Though Jain's argument is meant as a critique, it strangely buys into one of the central claims of capitalism, which is that uneven outcomes are a natural effect (or trade-off) of development.[14]

Nevertheless, while capitalism and new technology may create the conditions that make certain kinds of accidents possible, a strong version of this argument strikes me as anachronistic; accidents and the problem they pose for peoples who would like to account for them precedes the availability of the automobile to the masses and even, in some cases, participation in the types of market economies scholars like Jain now broadly call "capitalist." In 1992 Mary Douglas argued that even quantitative explanations, like probabilistic risk theory, was like witchcraft in that it too could lead to a moral rejection

[14] I am grateful to Sebastián Ramírez for sharing this insight with me.

of "the idea of a natural death" (16), an idea picked up by James Laidlaw (2010) in a recent essay on agency and responsibility.[15] In cases of extreme, undeniable loss, collective liability can even diffuse responsibility and allow accounting to continue interminably (Borneman 2011). Indeed, almost since the outset of the discipline, anthropologists have been interested in how people dealt with the fact that accidents happen for no obvious reason. This research question led to a discussion that can now be called the rationality debates, where arcane, ethnographic distinctions (e.g. do Huli have a word or concept of coincidence, Goldman 1993) were seen to have tremendous, potentially dehumanizing stakes (for more, see Fortes 1959; Horton 1967, 1993; Rasmussen 1989; Tambiah 1990).

Though echoes of the rationality debates may appear in this introduction, I do not want to revisit them here; like modernity, rationality as a concept has been used in so many different ways for so many different purposes that it's no longer especially helpful to me analytically. Instead, I want to return to one of the earliest works that set off this debate to explore how anthropologists have approached theories of causality through the study of accidents. In 1923, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl writes in his *Primitive Mentality* that one of the main distinctions between the so-called primitive and the "we" he imagines as himself and his reader is the way they conceive of accidents. For the people he reads about in missionary accounts from African colonies, Papua New Guinea, and elsewhere (which are sometimes dated from the early 1800s), "nothing ever happens by accident, properly speaking. What appears accidental to us Europeans is, in reality, always the

[15] Laidlaw's article is both a refutation of practice theory a la Ortner and an attempt to modify ANT by adding the emotional experience of social obligation (a modification that undercuts most of Latour's ambitions).

manifestation of a mystic power which makes itself felt in this way by the individual or by the social group" (43). To explain what he means, Lévy-Bruhl works his way through an impressive number of examples, only a few of which I'll list here: a spear thrown by a medicine-man at a tree ricochets off and strikes a man standing some ways away, killing him (44), a crocodile approaches a three women doing laundry in the river and eats the one standing in the middle (52-53), and a number of fish are caught by one fisherman and not by his friend, who is fishing nearby (49). In each of these cases, Lévy-Bruhl argues that the "primitive mind" does not perceive the spear, crocodile, and fish as the cause of the unexpected, uneven outcome; instead, these are secondary causes, "merely the agents of the occult power," which is the "real cause" of the event (43, 53). In each of these cases the accidental misfortune—whether it be the death of the man by spear, the death of the woman by crocodile, or the man's inability to catch any fish when there are clearly fish to be caught—"explains itself" or else "serves to explain something else," such as which person in the community bears the victim ill will (44).

Before proceeding further, I should probably note an argument often used against Lévy-Bruhl with which I am in agreement: His division of people into either "us" or "primitive" helped support the dehumanizing colonial apparatus at work in the many of the places where missionaries generated the ethnographic accounts he harvested for his arguments.[16] Also, on many points, he is wrong. He is wrong to argue that for a person who believes in witchcraft, "second causes are negligible" for such a person "never troubles to inquire into causal connections which are not self-evident, but straightaway refers them to a mystic power" (53, 36). When Evans-Pritchard shows that Zande people

[16] Among other traces of violence, the accounts Lévy-Bruhl draws from are filled with matter-of-fact descriptions of slavery and slave ships by white European missionaries (e.g. Lévy-Bruhl 1923, 52).

may disagree about whether or not something was caused and that they understand the "natural" causes of misfortunes (e.g. 1937, 78), one of the things he is doing is refining Lévy-Bruhl's argument by demonstrating that "Belief in witchcraft is quite consistent with human responsibility and a rational appreciation of nature" (1937, 30).[17] Lévy-Bruhl is also wrong about Europeans, whom he describes as having "complete confidence in the immutability of natural laws" (35). Even in his home country of France, ethnographers observed belief in witchcraft well into the 1970s (e.g. Favret-Saada 1977). Implicit in Lévy-Bruhl's address of what he presumes is a homogenous readership is the disconcerting assumption that they all agree on a single theory of causality; in other words, if asked why an unexpected outcome happened, reasonable (white or European) people will always give the same answer.

Even without delving into the literature of legal anthropology (which is, among other things, a record of how frequently people within seemingly homogenous communities *do not* agree on theories of causality), it is easy to see how empirically untrue this kind of assumption is; even among social scientists, theories of causality rarely go uncontested.[18] Examine, for instance, another approach that has taken accidents as an object of study: Bruno Latour's Agent-Network Theory (ANT). Latour's ruthless empiricism leads him to insist that objects be treated if not as agents or actors then as

[17] For more on Evans-Pritchard's relationship to Lévy-Bruhl's work, see Stanley J. Tambiah's Magic, Science and Religion and the Scope of Rationality (1990), especially chapter 5 (84-110). Ultimately, Tambiah ends up reaffirming Lévy-Bruhl's dualistic thinking by reducing modes of thought to participation and causality; the former is associated with magic and the primitive mentalities analyzed by Lévy-Bruhl, the latter with science and modernization. Though Tambiah makes a weak (and thus more palatable) version of this argument (see for example his caution through the use of the word "predominantly" on 109-110), this study hopes to avoid making a similar "there are two kinds of people in this world" argument.

[18] Hayden White, for instance, notes that "history differs from the sciences precisely because historians disagree, not only over what are the laws of social causation that they might invoke to explain a given sequence of events, but also over the question of the form that a 'scientific' explanation ought to take…Among historians, no such agreement exists, or has ever existed" (1973, 12-13).

participants: objects capable of "making a difference" in a set state of affairs (2005a, 71). He elaborates:

> This, of course, does not mean that these participants 'determine' the action…ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things 'instead' of human actors: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call *non-humans*. (71-72)

Latour turns to moments of unpredicted failure as the ideal site in which to observe non-human objects acting in their own right. In "accidents, breakdowns, and strikes," Latour contends that objects suddenly transform from mere "intermediaries" to "full-blown mediators" (81).[19] As part of ANT's radical empiricism, Latour strives to keep this emic controversy from becoming an etic one; that is, while Latour acknowledges that contestation over exactly *why it happened* exists, he stands firm in his conviction that for a social scientist studying the event, the objects must enter the account as actors without controversy because they have *done* something.

As Latour himself is often quite playful about questions of who gets to be "a Modern" (1993), I doubt he would mind me arguing that his objects-as-actors approach

[19] As an example, Latour offers the *Columbia* space shuttle, which exploded on February 1, 2003 and which, through the official enquiries that examined each piece of wreckage to determine the cause, revealed how objects could come to "make a difference," in this case between life and death (81; see also Latour 2005b). The *Columbia* disaster seems similar to what Victor Turner described as a "negative instance" of sense making where, in the face of failure or unexpected outcomes, an event whose meaning is generally not contested suddenly becomes a site for contestation and thus for studying how people make sense of events (1975, 33). Another scholar who has made a generative use of accidents and the search for an acceptable theory of causality to explore how meaning gets made is Peter Galison (2000). Galison traces causal chains as they are outlined in reports on airplane crashes and concludes that the reports themselves are torn between diffusing explanations (that point toward systemic and human causes for the crash) or localizing explanations (that find a specific material failing). As an historian of science, Galison is interested in analyzing particular causal chains as they formed; as a social scientist working longitudinally in the present, my focus is trying to capture *how* these causal chains are formed. While this temporal distinction may seem fine, I argue throughout this dissertation that it is crucial; Galison's causal chains present themselves to him already formed, whereas the ones I trace are emergent, emerging, or in the process of being repressed.

produces not a new epistemological paradigm but rather an inverted version of Lévy-Bruhl's "primitive mind." Latour's Actor-Network-Theorists focus only what Lévy-Bruhl called secondary or natural causes and find other, non-material causes negligible. In both there is what Laidlaw describes as a situation "where human arrangements and relationships create a possible separation between the causally effective doer of a deed (or the proximate cause of a state of affairs), on the one hand, and, on the other, its responsible author" (2010, 148). Just as the people in Lévy-Bruhl's accounts refused to recognize the crocodiles as anything but the agent of a witch who is likely by the rule of participation to have been present (1923, 56-57), so Latour privileges the effects of the object examined and (also by the rule of participation) those present or connected to the object instead of recognizing that there may be some other "ultimate" or real cause effecting the object.[20] This is a deliberate attempt to reverse what Latour believes is a common theory of causality among social scientists where the social is the source of rather than the result of practices of association (for example, law; see Latour 2009, viii).

Latour's ANT approach may seem far from Durkheim's 1897 attempt to deal with the unobservable nature of intention, but I would argue that both scholars have at least as much in common with each other as they do with Evans-Pritchard's boy with the festering foot: all three parties are trying to find a way to determine the *real* cause of

[20] This is to some extent what happens in Latour's ethnography of the Conseil D'Etat, where he creates a "flat description" of how the colored folders that (materially) makes the law move through the building and remarkably little time connecting their transit to the people producing the actual *content* of the laws in those folders. He explains his outlook: "Far from being what should provide the source of explanation of those phenomena, what we loosely call 'the social' is rather the result of what has been produced by types of connection" that are called legal or made out of laws (Latour 2009, viii). In other words, the legal is to the egg as the social is to the chicken, and Latour very much believes that the egg—and other eggs like it, such as the scientific, the economic, etc.—must have come first.

things. One of the theoretical advantages of studying accidents is that it methodologically gives anthropologists a way to see how people make, revise, and contest different theories of causality; one of its pitfalls is that it reveals just how much interpretation is involved in all explanations, even those of anthropologists. As Laidlaw points out, "when anthropologists engage in the business of deciding whose presence and interventions have been causally significant…they will not find themselves alone…We all do this all the time" (2010, 146). Eventually, techno-ontological theories (where accidents happen *because* certain modernizing technologies or objects make them possible) become subject to the same type of contestation as accidents themselves. It is one thing to observe, as many recent ethnographers of liberalizing societies have, that theories of causation, far from trending toward transparent materialism, have remained cultural, contested, and occult (e.g. Geschiere 1997; West 2005); it is quite another to argue that this is happening *because* of market liberalization as John and Jean Comaroff do in their recent work on the occult economy (1998, 2000). The thing to keep in mind is that while changing markets may be a factor in theories of causality everywhere, those theories continue to be culturally specific. Put another way, even after the rapid and dramatic liberalization of Reform and Opening Up, there are still no zombies in the PRC, and for anthropologists, the differences implied by their absence—in people's conceptions of life and death, in their ability to engage politically, in their desire to accumulate material wealth in this life or others—are ethnographically and intellectually significant.

These differences exist not only in a comparative register across field sites but also on an intersubjective level between the ethnographer and her interlocutors. As Evans-Pritchard observed, in the case of accidents, the facts do not explain themselves

(1937, 24). When anthropologists privilege their own answers to what Moore calls "the vexed questions of causality" (2016, 34), they may find themselves in a state of constant disagreement with the people they study, just as Evans-Pritchard was and Lévy-Bruhl's missionaries were reported to be (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 20; Lévy-Bruhl 1923, 44). This was certainly what happened to me in Zhengzhou. Throughout this text, readers will find me disagreeing with, arguing with, and at times fighting with my interlocutors about why exactly certain accidents happened and—sometimes—over whether certain happenings should be called accidents at all.

Similar to Latour, I went to the field as a naive empiricist. I believed that unpredictability was an etic or exogenous trait and would be recognized as such by my interlocutors. Instead, I found that what can be considered unpredicted is defined by context; in other words, I was wrong. My wrongness imbues much of this study, in which I have attempted to describe, honestly and reflexively, how my interlocutors explained their own understandings of accidents to me. "Explanation is intentional," Laidlaw observes,

> …whether any causal account in fact illuminates and explains always depends on whom the explanation is for…Something different will need to be said, in order to explain an event, to someone for whom it is an unprecedented outrage than to someone who was expecting and looking forward to it all along (2010, 146)

Something different indeed! Many of my interlocutors reminded me in retrospect of the people described by Lévy-Bruhl. Whereas I was constantly outraged by the unpredicted (even though I was putatively there to study it), my interlocutors could not be surprised (Lévy-Bruhl 1923, 57). Even as I raged against sudden power outages, horrific car crashes, and the sudden disappearances of my interlocutors' family members and colleagues at the hands of the Communist Party disciplinary committee, they searched for

the "something different" I needed to hear to accept these events. Frequently, they settled on some variation of a shrug and a sighed half-explanation: "This is China. Anything could happen here (*zai zheli shenme dou keyi fasheng*). This is already not strange (*zhe ge yijing bu guai*)." Unlike the future-facing trajectories that hadn't yet (*hai meiyou*) materialized, the existence of the accidents themselves were already (*yijing*) commonplace, the explanations already canned and ready to go.

In Zhengzhou: Accusations as Explanations and Extenuations

Needless to say, I was not very amenable to many of these well-meaning explanations during the weeks after getting hit by a car in October 2013, but they poured in anyway after I posted about the incident on WeChat. One exchange with Gloria was particularly revealing. Gloria was visiting Zhengzhou from Canada in the summer of 2013, and initially, she had wanted to avoid long bus rides between places by buying an e-bike. Both her father and her in-laws had dissuaded her because she was both "not used to" (*bu xiguan le*) local traffic and also because e-bikes in general were too dangerous. Once, however, Gloria had ridden on the back of *my* very slow, lithium-powered e-bike from a mall to an apartment I was renting. When I reported that I had been hit by a car (*bei che zhuang le*), she and the vast majority of people assumed I must have been riding an e-bike.

"Don't go so fast on your e-bike!" she messaged me from Canada, which prompted me to protest that I'd been riding my pedal bike.

"Well the streets are dangerous," she responded, "The traffic is crazy and there are so many cars!" I told her I'd been hit on campus, not on the street.

"Wow," she said finally, "I guess that really is just bad luck! You should be more careful." Gloria's attempts to explain my accident to me ended here, and so did my protests. Who could say there was not some alternate scenario in which I'd taken more care and failed to be hit head on by a car turning left into the opposite lane of traffic? There is no counterfactual for being careful. Even beyond the cultural practice of criticizing to show one cared—for example, Gloria might tell me I wasn't wearing enough clothes not to imply I wasn't capable of dressing myself but to demonstrate that she would be worried about my health if I caught a cold—Gloria's attempt to put the blame on me reminded me of historical precedents in Chinese history. In her book on Chinese nationalism and failure, Jing Tsu argues that taking the blame was an important part of how Chinese intellectuals rationalized their setbacks during the semi-colonial early twentieth century (2005). Intellectuals who participated in the May 4th Movement of 1919 protested not just the way the Treaty of Versailles divided and distributed Chinese territories to foreign powers but also the Chinese government's *weak response* to the treaty. By rationalizing failure as "something they brought on themselves…in this way, they continued to invest in an identity of themselves, even if disparagingly" (Tsu 2005, 8). This is not to say that Gloria and early twentieth century Chinese intellectuals can be flattened into one, homogenous group, but I think the two reasoning processes have some convincing continuities. May 4th intellectuals blamed themselves for China's failures and thus avoided living in a world where they are helpless before the colonizing forces of the West; Gloria assumes I must have done something wrong to get hit by a car and thus avoids living in a world where anyone can be hit by a car at any time regardless of what they do.

This study asks what such a ruthless sense of personal accountability does for people's social relationships and their explanations of unexpected outcomes. Gloria's ultimate invocation of luck should be read not only as a diplomatic way to end a line of questioning that likely had not—as she may have hoped it might—comfort me but also as a political act. Luck—either good or bad—is not a neutral or innocent concept. At the end of an edited volume on honor and grace in anthropology, Julian Pitt-Rivers argues that beyond their personal significance for the people involved, explanations of events have political implications. Fate, luck, grace, providence, fortune, witchcraft, Prenatal Destiny, and even probabilistic risk calculations are what Pitt-Rivers calls "meditative concepts" that "interpret events in accordance with the prevailing values of society, putting the seal of legitimacy on to the established order" (1992:244). In the PRC, where social stability depends on how the distribution of wealth is perceived (see Whyte 2010), the ability of meditative concepts to justify the status quo—or not—has far-reaching political implications.

In retrospect, what impresses me about Gloria's reaction beyond the theory of how meditative concepts might scale-up to larger political issues is how *expected* the accident appeared to her. If Alexis de Tocqueville's now classic counterintuitive claim that political revolution was the result not of misery but of *rising* expectations, Zhengzhou was a place where expectations of positive outcomes were managed almost into nonexistence (1955). This was on display not only in the explanations people gave me when I told them I would be hit by a car (of which Gloria's was perhaps the most generous) but also in the very language people used to describe accidents.

Modest Expectations: Different Degrees of Accidents in the PRC

In Zhengzhou, my interlocutors distinguished between two different Mandarin words for accident: *shigu* and *yiwai*. Fatty's collision with the e-bike on July 15, 2013 was a shigu. Although it was unintended, it was not incomprehensible; its cause, origin, and motivating factors were perfectly understandable. A person might even *expect* to find oneself involved in such an incident at some point. In Zhengzhou, traffic accidents (*jiaotong shigu*) were simply an inconvenient fact of life. Before a business meeting in January 2016, a CEO's assistant dashed upstairs to the restaurant where the meeting was supposed to take place and explained that her boss would be late because his car had just hit an e-bike while parking on the street; when the CEO himself came up the stairs moments later, he immediately launched into his elevator pitch and seemed surprised when I asked him if he was hurt. "Why would I be hurt," he asked, and then smiled in comprehension when I mentioned the accident, which he appeared to have forgotten. He explained that the rider of the e-bike had made an illegal U-turn in front of him when they'd collided, demanded 5,000RMB (around 750USD) in compensation, and then sped off as soon as the CEO pulled out his iPhone to call the police. For a person like the CEO—though not for the e-bike rider he collided with—accidents were a common pest, like mosquitos. And, like a person plagued by a mosquito, the CEO didn't care what the ultimate cause of his collision with the pest was—he cared only that it had ultimately gone away so he could go to his meeting. To the CEO, the accident, which a traffic cop in the PRC would classify as a "simple accident" (*jianyi shigu*), was resolved the moment the e-bike left the scene and did not merit additional examination.

In contrast, yiwai describes not simple accidents but what PRC traffic police would classify as "major accidents" (*zhongda shigu*). Both shigu and yiwai were

unpredictable but one was expected and the other was, my interlocutors insisted, something unthinkable (*xiang bu dao de*). “A shigu is when my car hits another car and I am a little bit hurt,” a woman explained to me as we drove on a four-lane elevated road through the eastern part of Zhengzhou, “Maybe I do not know it will happen just then, but I can imagine that it could happen. A yiwai is different.”

For a while, she struggled to articulate an example of a yiwai, so I offered my own guess: “A yiwai is when the truck in front of us is full of fireworks, which explode, causing the elevated road to collapse in front of us so our car falls down and we die?”

“Okay,” she laughed uncomfortably with both hands on the wheel, “That is unthinkable. That would be a yiwai.”

The interesting thing was that I hadn’t thought of my example either—not exactly. I was referencing an incident that had actually happened. In February 2013, a truck carrying fireworks actually did explode and cause a stretch of elevated highway near Sanmenxia in Henan to collapse; 26 people died (Li 2013). I read about the accident as part of the routine news analysis I did as part of my field research. Like so many things I will describe or recount in this study, this was an accident so totally unexpected and bizarre that I would not have been able to make it up.

This quality of being indescribable or unable to be made up is at work in the character composition of the two words for accident. Shigu is made up of two characters: 事故. *Shi* (事) is an extremely multivalent word in Mandarin. It can mean, matter, thing, affair, or business as a single noun, as in “I have too many things going on right now” (*xianzai wo de shi tai duo le*). It can refer to trouble or accident, as in “he’s had an accident” (*ta chu shi le*). It can also mean work or something to do, as in “I’m looking for

work" (*wo zhao shi zuo*).[21] Finally, it can indicate someone's responsibility or involvement in a situation, as in "what involvement do I have?" (*you wo shenme shi*?). *Gu* (故) also has multiple definitions but is not nearly as common as *shi*; *gu* can mean happening (as it does in *shigu*) and it can also refer to a reason or intention (as in the word for intentionally, *guyi*). What's poetically but perhaps not linguistically interesting about *shi* and *gu* is that the characters usually appear reversed: *gushi* (故事) means story or plot. A shigu then could be a happening in which the order of things is backwards but legible; like a story told in medias res or backwards, the plot can still be teased out despite the fact that the order and manner of its telling differs from straightforward experience.

This idea illustrated itself to me one afternoon in March 2013 during my second visit to Zhengzhou when, on the way back to the city from the university, traffic on the elevated road came to a complete stop. "It must be an accident (*shigu*)," the woman driving remarked before casually shifting her car in reverse and driving down one of the onramps, backward. This alone was surprising to me, but the fact that without hesitating all the cars that physically could followed her astonished me. When I protested—citing either the legality or the safety of the action, I can't remember which—the woman maintained that if she hadn't done it, someone else would have: "Besides, I am doing them all a favor. If we didn't go the wrong way, no one would be able to go anywhere at all." In the face of an accident, the woman had made an unexpected but, she felt, understandable decision.

[21] A slight variation of this sentence—*wo zhao shi le*—could also be interpreted as, "I'm looking for trouble."

The difference between shigu—which can be generative in an at times harmless or even fun way—and yiwai is clear as soon as we break the latter into component characters: 意外. *Yi* (意) expresses several related and abstract concepts. It can reference meaning, idea, or thought as in the verb for "pay attention" (*zhuyi*); it can mean wish, desire, or intention as in the previously mentioned "intentionally" (*guyi*); it can also express a suggestion, hint or trace as in "connotation" (*hanyi*); and finally, it can mean expected as in the word for "unexpected" (*buyi*). *Wai* (外) generally refers to things outside, beyond, or external. A yiwai, then, is something that happens *outside* of meaning. It exceeds expectations, and goes far beyond original intentions. As an adjective, yiwai could describe both unexpected losses (*yiwai sunshi*) and windfall profits (*yiwai lirun*). As a noun, however, yiwai always referred to a negative accident: a disaster, mishap, or mistake.

One thing this semantic distinction between shigu and yiwai does is normalize certain types of accidents and increase personal responsibility. If I must expect that at any moment a car may hit me, of course I am responsible for being hit—I should have been anticipating the collision and actively avoiding it. Up until actual explosives are involved, it is difficult for people in Zhengzhou to muster outrage, shock, or even interest in accidents as mundane as mine—a reality reflected by the fact that, unlike local newspapers in the United States, Zhengzhou newspapers rarely report on fatal pedestrian or e-bike accidents. In a recent essay on ordinary ethics and how something becomes extraordinary—or unexpected—Veena Das argues that "concepts acquire life in the give-and-take of ordinary life" as people learn what a concept *means* by experiencing its use (2015, 62). Yiwai as a word and concept is interesting not only because it demarcates

not only what is unthinkable but also what often was unspeakable. And yet, it is precisely the unspeakable yiwai that was meaningful enough to speak of while the shigu—which we might think of, in Das's terms, as everyday accidents—was often left *unspoken*.

Olivia, one of my best friends and most important interlocutors, knew that I was studying the unpredictable and for months kept the fact that she was involved in an insurance settlement dispute with an e-bike rider who had T-boned her from me. She did not keep it from me not because she was ashamed of the accident, which, according to both her and a neutral lawyer who spoke to me privately about the case, wasn't her fault; rather, she kept it from me because she thought it was boring or, literally, not meaningful (*mei yisi*). It is almost impossible to impress a person in Zhengzhou with an account of a shigu, and something truly extraordinary has to happen for an e-bike crash to become a yiwai. That something could be a foreigner's involvement, but it could also be something that pushes straight through the definition of the accidental, past yiwai and into the malevolently intentional.

For instance: I did not intend to participate in the chain of accidents that led to me being hit by the bright pink Suzuki in October 2013. I cannot say the same thing for the person driving the car, however. If, as in security video footage from Chengdu a friend showed me in January 2016, the car continued to push forward and take down every pedestrian unlucky enough to cross its path, my own injuries would not be the result of an accident but of a serial assault. If, as a man named Zhao Xiaocheng allegedly did in Taizhou (Sun 2006), the car responded to the accidental collision by continuing to roll back and forth over my body five times until I died, it would be more difficult to say it happened by accident. If, as when a toddler named Xiao Yueyue was hit and killed by a

truck in 2011, the driver claimed she thought my body was a "bundle of rags" (Osnos 2015, 296), my injuries would once again appear accidental. The difference is expressed not in terms of effects—in all these cases, the first, unavoidable outcome is that someone has been hit by a car—but in terms of intentions. Just as the main character in Kobo Abe's story "An Irrelevant Death" continues to shift a corpse dumped in his apartment in an attempt to avoid being implicated in its murder increases the likelihood of his being blamed, so one happening that began accidentally may escalate, quickly, into something more sinister all while being rationalized as "doing the very same that thing everybody else is" (Abe 1991, 23).[22] These incidents all began as accidents but then transform into something else, something that attracts journalists and iconoclasts of both Chinese and foreign descent.

In a way, Gloria was right. I was unlucky but not fatally so. My accident did not resemble any of these horrific scenes (and there were many others I also could have cited). To some extent, my shock—which was manifested by yelling—attracted a crowd of witnesses and saved me from the possibility of being the victim of a second hit in the minutes after the accident.

A Laughing Matter: Notes on Tone

Later, of course, I realized there had been little danger of being seriously injured in any way. In retrospect, I find the entire episode of getting hit by a car funny. The urge to laugh at misfortune is by no means universal, and it seems especially scarce in scholarly communities. When I have publicly presented parts of my work, people often ask questions that imply my tone is inappropriate. Why, people ask me, are my

[22] I am grateful to Perry Sherouse for listening to me talk about these depressing instances and bringing this story to my attention.

interlocutors laughing at such serious matters? Why am I *still* laughing at such serious matters? People are particularly puzzled by the way I approach material in the first and fifth chapters of this study, which I find uproariously funny but which troubles people who tend to worry about things like displacement, democracy, and whether or not the global economy is doomed. Concepts, theory, and even ethnographic findings travel; tone, particularly my own flavor of irreverence, sometimes does not. I have tried to be self-aware and sensitive to this, but I have my limits. During a dinner after a postdoc interview where I'd used the example of Gloria blaming me for getting hit by a car as an example of the types of interpretations my project used as data, an ivy league professor spent a good part of the first course telling me why he too thought it was my fault I had been hit by a car. I laughed to his face at his unrealistic faith in his own ability to control the world; I also didn't get the postdoc.

Moore felt a similar shift in tone years after completing her fieldwork in socialist Tanzania. She writes that while she experienced "much fear" during her fieldwork, both of political persecution of others and of herself, "today the whole story reads like a mediocre vaudeville comedy" (2005, 264). Although I don't have Moore's decades of distance from her fieldwork, I think something similar happened for me and I think fear had a lot to do with it. During much of my fieldwork, I felt afraid. Sometimes that fear was warranted; other times, it was not. Regardless, many of my interpretive frames, such as the idea of "Chinese magical realism" developed precisely as defense mechanisms to keep me from being too frightened to continue doing the work I felt I had to do. Of course, much of my work dealt with things that are serious and even depressing: the forced demolitions of urban villages, the degradation of trust through secret keeping

between familiars, the difficulty people had approaching relationships in a way that felt real or sincere, the disorientation produced by the PRC's increasing class segregation, the fear of unpredictable others that keeps houses from being rented, and the willful ignorance of young entrepreneurs that, in its strongest form, could threaten the entire nation's economy. In their wonderfully nuanced study of the traumatized children of World War II survivors, the psychoanalysts Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudilliere observe, "Survivors of extreme situations bear witness to the fact that the line between the tragic and the comic is unpredictable. It takes nothing to pass from laughter to despair" (2004, 14). When I felt I had to choose between laughter and tears, I have almost always chosen laughter.

The tone of what follows largely reflects this choice, and a personal conviction that there must be a way to deal with depressing topics besides the sympathetic magic approach of just getting depressed. Though I have not read enough to truly trace its genealogy, I think the serious tone of many ethnographies has to do with a kinship with activism or, at the very least, with the hope that ethnography might "become a motive for change," which is fine and good but not—like Joel Robbins' call for such an ethnography to transform into an anthropology of the good—for everyone (2013, 456). It is certainly not for me both because of my precarious position as a junior, American researcher in the open but still authoritarian PRC and because of the history of the PRC itself. Many of my interlocutors' parents and grandparents were politically persecuted during the Cultural Revolution for performing or expressing an incorrect politics (for background, see Goldman, Creek and Hamrin 1987), and I am generally suspicious of any scholarly undertaking that has a mandatory politics. If anyone should be skeptical of the inherent

goodness of leftist, utopian ideals, such as the ones that motivated Alain Badiou (2008) to dismiss the intimate violence of the Cultural Revolution as the cost of the communist experiment,[23] it is an anthropologist working in the People's Republic of China.

Nevertheless, the anthropology of the PRC has not shied away from making normative claims and producing prescriptive arguments; instead, it has embraced them. The question of morality—of what does and *should* constitute a "good life" to the people in the PRC—has defined many recent ethnographies about the PRC. Though several ethnographies written in English based on fieldwork conducted after Reform and Opening Up examined how moral values were changing (e.g. Yang 1994; Croll 1994; Rofel 1999), the first and most obvious embodiment of what is not (but could be called) the anthropology of China's "moral turn" is Yunxiang Yan's *Private Life Under Socialism* (2003). In the conclusion of the book, there is a sudden tone shift as Yan describes how the state bears responsibility for creating "the freak of the uncivil individual" (226). Yan sees the "collapse" of socialist morality as leading to a rise in egotism, which is bad and needs to be counteracted (234). In the introduction to his recent monograph, *Communities of Complicity*, Hans Steinmüller also identifies Yan's conclusion as having an "implicit moral intent" (2013, 12). Steinmüller positions his own work differently, but other ethnographies not only engage with but also follow Yan's moralizing trajectory. To name just one recent example, John Osburg's ends *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich* (2014) with a proposition that morality and charity may, in the future, emerge as a status signal for the new rich who continue to search for newer ways to assert their superiority. It's an almost apologetic

[23] I bring this up only because Badiou's horrific thesis was recently reprinted in 2015 (!).

salvo of the subjunctive when considered against the whirling dervish of boozy banquets, sexualized business transactions, and if not corrupt then suspect system of gift exchange he spends the rest of the book describing. Though the turn seems out of line with the rest of the book, it is very much in step with the anthropology of China as a field.

In this way, Yan's work—and that of many other anthropologists of China—is more closely aligned not with the discipline of anthropology this introduction has engaged with but rather with a long history of enlightenment critique within China. I should note that tensions between enlightenment ways of thinking and ethnographic accuracy between not unprecedented (see, for example, Chakrabarty 2007, especially 97-108) and that social science that generates or results in moral outrage is not particular to China (for a review of recent moral anthropology, see Heim and Monius 2014); even Durkheim's work was motivated by the belief that his contemporary "morality…is in the throes of an appalling crisis" (1984, 339). What I find interesting is that this particular vein of moral outrage in the PRC seems to be associated with an historical and cultural genealogy that is specifically Chinese. This affinity is made explicit in *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*, a volume in which Yan is also involved; in the collectively written introduction, the authors invoke Liang Qichao, an early twentieth century Chinese intellectual and reformer, as an earlier precedent of the idea of the "divided self" that explains Chinese people's immoral behavior (Kleinman et al 2011, 8-9). Like Yan, Liang's writings frequently critiqued or, at the very least, seemed motivated by concern for the moral character of the Chinese people (see, for instance, Levenson 1967; Tsu 2005; Schwarcz 1986). There is (or perhaps should be) a major difference, however; Liang was writing about China from within China in the hopes of *changing* China.

Consider this famous passage by Lu Xun, a contemporary of Liang's, when explaining why he decided to become a writer:

> "Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn?" "But if a few awake, you can't say there is no hope of destroying the iron house." (Lu Xun 1922)

In many ways, this metaphor of China as the iron house and as the intellectual as the lone conscious inhabitant who must cry out and awaken the masses to their fate or else perish became a touchstone and defining image for Chinese enlightenment discourse.[24] Though Yan and his colleagues (several of whom also contributed to 2010's *Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience*) do not explicitly articulate it, much of the anthropological work on Chinese morality strikes me as also beginning from an assumption that the PRC today remains an iron house and that anthropological work could—like Lu Xun and Liang's writing's did in the past—serve as the impetus not to destroy but to *change* the conditions of the iron house.

While much work written from this perspective has been generative, brilliant, and inspiring, this is not an assumption that I am particularly interested in making. A different reading of Lu Xun's analogy might ask whether social scientists—who often are distinguished from their interlocutors precisely by, if not their ability to leave their field sites, then their ability to appeal to an intellectual existence *outside* of whatever they study—can presume that they are the only person superior enough to have woken up in the doomed house. To make "immoral behavior" into a research object—as Yan

does—requires the anthropologist not only to follow the "widely agreed upon" moral judgments of the "ordinary people she studies as Yan claims (2014, 460-461) but also to agree with those judgments herself. In an ambitious article, Yan glosses the "professional ethics" that may prevent anthropologists from writing about immoral behavior (485); he does not, however, address the *intellectual* and *political* convictions that might make social scientists cautious to have too much confidence in their own assessment of what is moral and what requires reform.

In fact, Yan draws on the same work by Fei Xiaotong (1992) that I do later on in this study to explain the cultural and historical reasons people in China and then the PRC found it difficult to trust strangers (Yan 2014, 479-480). Rather than taking Fei's insights as proof that people in China were operating according to a *different* conception of moral relations than the Judeo-Christian beliefs that produced the concept of "Good Samaritans" that he analyzes, Yan instead doubles down and declares them *immoral*. He takes the failure of these relations to scale up in an increasingly mobile PRC as evidence of a "moral breakdown" (2014, 482). This is, I argue, the type of judgment that should remain the exclusive privilege of our interlocutors; in other words, it is one thing for Yan to have quoted an interlocutor describing a moral breakdown but quite another for him to have done it himself. Yan seems to be allying himself with Durkheim's professed fears of moral crisis and breakdown, but for Durkheim, these fears were framed in terms of the first-person plural: a society where "*our* first duty…is to fashion a morality for *ourselves*" (Durkheim 1984, 340, emphasis mine). For Durkheim, who was writing about the France he lived in, or Yan, whose interests in morality stretch back to his youthful

[24] Lu Xun's work was so powerful within the Chinese cultural imaginary that he was even conscripted (anachronistically) by the Chinese Communist Party as embodying the correct type of political critique

experiences in the Heilongjiang countryside, these may be fair and even accurate judgments. Nevertheless, they are not judgments I would dare to make myself.

Besides, I do not want to write an ethnography that castigates the behavior of the people I observed even if at times I suffered because of those behaviors, as when I was hit by a car or assaulted by one of my interlocutors. Instead, I want to turn to W.H. Auden. In his elegy for W.B. Yeats, Auden writes that "poetry makes nothing happen," a quote Geertz also invokes during his interpretation of the Balinese cockfight (1973, 443). Geertz is using the quote to celebrate the fact that the Balinese cockfight violates the vulgar functionalism of the times; unlike other ritual activities, it does nothing, changes nothing, and yet—like other, more familiar forms of art—does the imaginative and emotional work of representing the Balinese to themselves (448). This is not necessarily a misreading of Auden (I am not here to police poetry), but it is a decontextualization. The full stanza reads:

> You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
> The parish of rich women, physical decay,
> Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
> Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
> For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth.

Note how Ireland, Yeats' homeland, figures into Auden's claim that poetry makes nothing happen. Though Auden implies that nothing has changed for Ireland, in fact, over the course of Yeats' life, Ireland went from being part of the British Empire to the Irish Free State and then—in 1937, just two years before he died—to the independent nation of

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artists and intellectuals should express (see Yu 2011).

Ireland that it is today. I take Auden to mean that whatever political transformations occurred in Ireland, they may have caused Yeats to write but they were not the *result* of his writing. Poetry makes nothing happen, but it does *do* something: "it survives" the poet and "it all." Poetry does not make the political happen, but the political can generate poetry; here we have Auden's own theory of poetic causality, and it's shot through with a striking humility.

Anthropologists often talk about humility in relation to their interlocutors but not in relation to their work. While it is not true that every ethnography makes nothing happen, it is absolutely the case that no matter what story I tell here, urban villages will continue to be demolished, officials accused of corruption will continue to disappear, the PRC's richer citizens will continue to move their families and wealth abroad, migrants will continue to struggle to integrate into cities, and, more broadly, people will continue to die. Under the circumstances, it makes no sense to me not to find the humor in what I saw when I can. Laughter and other forms of irreverence are not, as anthropologists sometimes assume, always expressions of privilege, power, or even protest; sometimes what they communicate is sympathy, discomfort, or—in my case—a conviction that taking life too seriously does not make it easier or more righteous. Throughout this text, the reader will find me laughing uncomfortably, telling jokes that fail, and often trying desperately to get my interlocutors to laugh with me. At times, the reader will hear them chastising me: "Why are you laughing? *This is not funny*." And for them, it was not. For me, some events had to be funny, or else I could never have written about them. As it was, I barely survived several accidents, some of which I do not write about here. Much

of what follows is, to paraphrase Hayden White, an attempt to re-emplot my own life as a Comedy—the only genre I've ever found livable (1977[1975], 7 and 10).

But I don't want to dwell on the importance of humor for me personally. Instead, I want to steal some of the exuberant energy Geertz exudes when arguing that the cockfight does nothing; I want to begin from the premise that an anthropology that makes nothing happen might be done for no reason, for its own sake. In the Communist stronghold under Mao Zedong at Yan'an, the most subversive, condemned, and punished works of art and intellectual output were those that did nothing for the task of liberation (Mao 1942; see also the secret execution of Wang Shiwei as described in Dai 1994). If the chapters that follow reflect my ambivalence toward revolution, liberation, and action in general, then I hope they also express the admiration I feel for the people I worked with and the passion I feel for the theoretical questions I address. Auden also famously quipped, "History is, strictly speaking, the study of questions; the study of answers belongs to anthropology and sociology." This study may fail that charge as it often asks more questions than it answers; however, it does provide some provisional ways of thinking through the existence, creation, and contention of unpredictability.

Denouement: The End of the Accident

As I sat on the curb crying, the woman who had been driving the bright pink Suzuki tried, fruitlessly, to reason with me. "I am a teacher at the university," she kept telling me and, after I mumbled that I was a visiting scholar at an on-campus institute: "We are in the same work-unit (*danwei*)." She got me to my feet. The woman who had been speaking English with me promised to have a friend take my bike to the teacher's office, where she would pay to have it repaired. She said she would go with us and got

into the front seat of the car. Later, my friends—including Gloria—would criticize me for not insisting she call the police, but all I wanted in that moment was to find someone I knew; I wanted to find Huang Na. The teacher helped me into the backseat of the Suzuki and drove me to the institute office, where the receptionist recognized me.

"It's okay," the receptionist said, "This woman is also in your work-unit, you don't need to worry. Let her take you to the clinic."

Like a child who has enjoyed a day at school but upon seeing his mother remembers that he misses her and begins to bawl, the familiar face was enough to make me start crying again. Like a mother, the receptionist grew stern and chided me: "Don't be upset (*nanguo*). Don't be sad (*shangxin*). She didn't do this on purpose (*ta bu shi guyi de zuo de*)."

In the conclusion, I will return to this question of crying and how disruptive it is in Zhengzhou; here it became clear that by crying, I had shifted the responsibility onto myself. The receptionist and the woman who spoke English walked us down the stairs to the car and urged me to go to the clinic. Huang Na was not there anyway, and so I obediently slunk into the backseat of the Suzuki again. At the clinic the teacher tapped her feet nervously as we waited for the doctor. She insisted on holding my backpack as we waited. A red-faced nurse led us into the examining room, and the woman began pelting the doctor with facts and questions.

"She was hit by a car and she is a foreign exchange student," she said, "We just want to see if she is okay."

"The person driving the car that hit her ran, right?" the doctor asked, and I burst out laughing. The way the woman has phrased her introduction implied that she was a

helper of some kind—like the woman who spoke English and helped take my bike away. The woman gestured uncomfortably, and both of us indicated that it was her who hit me. The nurse and the doctor spent a few minutes quietly commending her for bringing me there.

The doctor looked at me. "Tell her to take off her shirt," he said, and I said I could understand, which also caused some consternation and faint praise.

"What do you study," the doctor asked as he examined the bruises on my legs and shoulders.

"Unpredictability and accidents," I whispered in a small voice, and the nurse started to laugh hysterically. I laughed too, and the doctor smiled. Even the woman standing nervously in the corner allowed her eyes to widen in surprise.

"This is good," he declared, "You have had a real, embodied experience (*tiyan*). Now you can tell people how you discovered that Chinese drivers are more flexible (*linghuo*)."

"What do you mean," I asked.

"This is a cultural difference (*wenhua chabie*)," the doctor smiled: "If there is a space, a Chinese driver will just fill it! There is a joke: There was a Chinese man in America who had an American girlfriend. One day he is driving and runs a red light when no one is there. The girlfriend breaks up with him, and when he asks why, she says, 'If you dare to run a red light, then you'll dare to do anything (*ni shenme dou gan*)!' So after that, he goes back to China and gets a Chinese girlfriend. One day he is driving and he waits at a red light even though no one is there, and the girl breaks up with him. When he asks why, she says, 'If you don't dare to run a red light, then you won't dare to do

anything (*ni shenme dou bu gan*)!' It just means when you're in Rome, do as the Romans do (*ruxiangsuisu*). Next time, be more careful!"

The doctor smiled at his own joke; he did not laugh, and neither did the nurse. Even with her surgical mask pulled up all the way to her eyes, I had been able to tell that the nurse's mouth had fallen open into a disbelieving grin after I said I studied accidents. Her laugh had been a great and inexplicable source of comfort for me that had somehow transformed the accident from something large and frightening to something fitting and ironic. As the doctor moved my legs, arms, and feet in an examination that would eventually pronounce me free of all harm but a few deep tissue bruises, I looked pointedly at the nurse. I was waiting for her to laugh again. I waited for what felt like a very long time.

PART I: SOCIALITY

CHAPTER TWO

Power Outages: Tracking Blackouts, Protests, and Credulity on Nobleman's Lane

The power outages began in November. We'd known they were going to come for a long time before that, though. Everyone knew that there were simply not enough power stations to provide electricity for Zhengzhou's growing population, and ever since August, there had been talk about the protests over the planned power converter station that was supposed to be built nearby, at Mulberry Tree Village.[25] Back then, the Most Expensive Mansion Complex seemed far away from the rest of the city. Even the close friends of the few foreign entrepreneurs who were opening bars and restaurants along the complex's cosmopolitan pedestrian street—named, apparently without irony, Nobleman's Lane—whispered conspiratorially to me about how inconvenient the location was in those first few months. From the comfort of our shared taxis they clucked disapprovingly at the dust-filled landscape of unfinished roads and half-conceived apartment towers. "The problem is this place is so far away," they'd confess, eyeing the cab's gradually rising meter, "We will still come to support our friends and to eat good food, but that might not be enough to sustain a business."

The business they were concerned about was a small, American Southern barbecue restaurant called The Capitalist Pig Barbecue Restaurant or The Capitalist Pig for short. The Capitalist Pig's founder was an American from Atlanta, Georgia named Taylor, who'd come to Zhengzhou to teach English short-term and—like many of the

[25] The name of this village and all the other people and places in this chapter are pseudonyms. In many cases, my interlocutors chose their own pseudonyms (or the pseudonyms for their businesses), but for the villages and apartment complexes I tried to find translations that approximated the meanings or styles of their actual names.

members of Zhengzhou's expat community—ended up staying after he met and married his wife, Sophy. He had a wicked sense of humor about making the Central Chinese city his home—as evidenced by the restaurant's pseudonym, which he chose because it was what he originally wanted to name the real restaurant—that occasionally blossomed into full-blown tantrums or angry rants. Sophy, Taylor's wife and Zhengzhou's best private SAT tutor, was the Capitalist Pig's owner and the bilingual glue that kept the enterprise together. Along with a host of other hopeful first-time business owners, they rented spaces on Nobleman's Lane, a pedestrian street splitting the two courtyards of high-rise apartment buildings that made up the Mansion Complex.

From the time the restaurant opened, in July 2013, to the time I completed my second period of fieldwork in March 2016, I worked closely with Sophy and Taylor as they struggled with some basic challenges facing most small business owners—such as staff turnover and ensuring consistency of experience—and some challenges that were decidedly more peculiar.[26] In this chapter, I follow happenings as they unfolded on Nobleman's Lane between the street's opening in July 2013 and my final departure from Zhengzhou in March 2016. I record both how unexpected outcomes were understood at the time and how new revelations caused people to revise their interpretations. Because so many of the events on the Mansion Complex happened for opaque reasons, I argue that Sophy, Taylor, and other business owners and observers became overcome by a tendency I describe as incredible credulity. No matter how far-fetched, unlikely, or

[26] In the interests of honesty, full-disclosure, and reflexivity, I should probably say that my own parents opened their own small business just before I was born and that I basically grew up within its walls. I am sure that at least part of what unconsciously drew me to Sophy, Taylor, and the issues they faced with day-to-day management of the Capitalist Pig was the sense that the kinds of conversations we had felt very normal. In a city where nothing felt like home, at the Capitalist Pig I found myself having the versions of the same conversations—about taxes, staff, and broken toilets—that I've been having over my parents' dinner table for my whole life.

paranoid of an explanation was offered for the situation on Nobleman's Lane, Sophy and others could not entirely discount it; the experience of managing the Capitalist Pig and other enterprises had driven home to them the idea that in the PRC, anything could happen. As Jane, the Pig's long-term hostess, waitress, and floor manager told me in January 2016, as she ignored my pleas to watch a series of workmen carried a disassembled doors, window frames, and walls up the stairs of the Capitalist Pig, "In China, this is already not strange."

Indeed, several similar conflicts between real estate companies, residents, and the police have been documented by other social scientists (e.g., Zhang 2010, 187-210; Chuang 2014), and readers of those works will find many common elements here. What this chapter tries to highlight, however, is how the people involved in the conflict constructed and then changed their understanding of the facts on the ground. Accounts of conflicts like these are almost always written with the authority of hindsight; here I want to preserve the uncertainty and instability of the happening as it unfolded rather than reinforcing its outcomes, which appear, at this point, inevitable, but never seemed that way at the time.

In addition, this chapter introduces several important themes, industries, and culturally specific concepts that will be explored more in later chapters. The power outages at the Mansion Complex led me to my focus on the real estate industry. As the business owners organized, I saw how class, education, and personal habits influenced people's ability to trust each other. And circulating the competing theories of causation ultimately made me complicit in the practices of information hoarding and secret keeping among intimates that I ended up critiquing in another chapter. Taken alone, a power

outage might seem like a small and banal happening; however, at the Mansion Complex, because these power outages were unpredictable, repetitive, and possibly motivated, they became generative phenomena that quickly united the business owners of Nobleman's Lane into a community and then—almost as fast—caused that community to splinter apart.

Demolishing the Present for the Future: Urban Villages and Hukou

People who'd grown up in Zhengzhou also initially described the Most Expensive Mansion Complex—whose name came from the exorbitant price the real estate developer had paid for the right to use the land, which at the time was the highest any company had ever paid in all of Zhengzhou—as being remote (*pianyuan*). Ya, one of my friends, told me she still remembered when the land was part of White Horse Village, her classmate Nana's mother's village. Sitting by the window in a posh cafe on the pedestrian street, she told me how clever the people in the village were. The neighboring electronics market we'd just come from was also built on their land. To prove how clever the White Horse villagers were she cited the appearance of the market, which was somehow already old and worn-out. The age and general wear of the buildings meant they'd been making money by developing and then renting their land for longer than anyone else, she maintained. In contrast to the people of Mulberry Tree Village, who had decided not to develop their land, White Horse villagers were quite well off. Selling their land to developers meant they were entitled to compensation (*chaiqian*).

"When we were growing up, Nana's mom paid a lot of money to make sure her children had city *hukou* (household registration)," Ya explained, "But once they started

developing the land, she paid a lot of money to switch their hukou back. Now every year Nana gets several thousand RMB in compensation for being a member of the village."

Like most of the conversations I had with Ya, this one surprised me. Before going to Zhengzhou, I had the impression that within the PRC's household registration system citizens with rural hukou were at a disadvantage compared with those who had urban hukou. An urban hukou comes with opportunities, access to state welfare programs, and can determine future success; people with rural hukou living in urban areas suffer because the governments of those urban areas are not obligated to provide them with basic services, like elementary school education (see Chan 2009; Zhang et al 2015). Like many things in the PRC, that impression was true but only in some places, not all (see Chan and Zhang 1999, 835-838 for specific examples of these local difference in the hukou system). As Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang point out in an article examining changes in the hukou system, a person's hukou confusingly includes information not just about their residential location but also their socio-economic eligibility; the latter is a holdover from the command economy and used to determine whether or not the person was eligible for state-subsidized grain. People who had agricultural hukou and access to land that produced grain did not; people who worked for work-units in non-urban areas that were non-agricultural did. I never asked Nana whether her mother had agricultural or non-agricultural hukou, but I knew her family lived in the city, in between the elementary school Ya and Nana met at and the provincial government office where Nana's father worked. Converting a hukou is possible but difficult (Chan and Zhang 1999), and until

that moment it had not occurred to me that it might be advantageous to change it back to a village hukou.[27]

Nevertheless, there was another, less technical reason for my surprise. Ya had always been very clear about disapproving of people with rural village origins, but Nana was one of her oldest and best friends. I was surprised to hear Ya disclosing Nana's rural origins in a non-pejorative way. When I pressed her, Ya laughingly admitted that it still wasn't *good* to be from White Horse Village, but it was clever to be from there on paper if you could be.

"There are a lot of *tuhao* from that village," she said, using a satirical word that literally meant "local tyrant" but now referred to the PRC's emerging class of crass, nouveau riche (for more on tuhao, see Liu-Farrer 2016). Ya began ticking off the types of cars she'd seen Nana's uncles driving and the types of clothes her cousins might buy. Her classmate, Ya said, was exempt from this kind of class judgment mainly because her father was an official and originally from Guangdong. And in fact, every time I ever met her classmate, she cheerfully talked about herself as an archetypal southern person who liked cooking and eating southern cuisine, never once mentioning White Horse Village, her legal hometown. Together the three of us would laugh about the thousands of RMB she got in compensation every year, and occasionally she'd weigh in on my speculations about problematic real estate developments near White Horse Village by reporting good-naturedly, "All I know about that complex is that when it's finally finished, my aunt will have six houses in it!"

[27] This moment in my fieldwork came well before the publication of Julie Y. Chuang's (2014) article documenting how villagers who relinquished their rural and agricultural *hukou* also gave up their right to rightful resistance.

Today little is left of White Horse Village, depending on how your define it. None of the original "village" structures existed when I arrived in Zhengzhou in the summer of 2013. The dirt houses, enclosed courtyards, and corn or wheat fields had long since been replaced by the tightly packed white-tiled apartment buildings that characterize urban villages (*dushi cunzhuang*) in Zhengzhou.[28] These apartments were built by individuals, without permits or "not according to plan" (*mei jihua*) with varying standards of safety and sanitation on the space villagers' homes used to occupy. Often, villagers would rent the first floor to vendors, the upper floors to migrants who came to work in the city, and live what city-dwellers like Ya viewed as an indolent and unproductive life on the second and third floors, depending mostly on rent for income. When I left the field in the spring of 2016, the few remaining villager-built buildings were in the process of being torn down, and the electronics market, which had been built some time in the early 1990s, was rumored to be next on the demolition list.

And then, of course, there was the Mansion Complex, a private commodity real estate development built on village land. Because Zhengzhou's construction boom came comparatively late, real estate developers and officials in Zhengzhou had learned from the mistakes of earlier high-profile construction projects in cities like Beijing where demolitions had resulted in the deaths of many protesting villagers and—worse, from their perspective—a hail of bad media coverage. Rather than seeing their land lease rights as a carte blanche to bulldoze whatever they wanted, developers in the late 1990s and early 2000s got very good at negotiating compensation packages with villagers according to the square footage of their existing houses. In some cases, the developers would build

[28] In Zhengzhou, urban villages were referred to not as *chengzhongcun* as they were in Beijing and other places but as *dushi cunzhuang*.

separate resettlement housing (called *chaiqian fang* or *anzhi fang*) in addition to their main commercial real estate complex. The result was that as the prospect of demolition became imminent, villagers began building vertically to increase their square footage and thus their compensation. Through a clever fudging of names and deeds, a single family of villagers might end up owning more houses in a new resettlement housing complex than was technically legal.

While I was doing my fieldwork, a neologism to describe this kind of wealthy person emerged: *chaierdai*. It belongs to a genre of words that allow people to speak somewhat derogatorily about the source of others' wealth while at the same time emphasizing that wealth. Like *guanerdai*, literally "second generation official," and *fuerdai*, literally "second generation rich," chaierdai was a pejorative term to describe the "second generation demolishees" or people who'd gained their money through demolitions. Ya was the first person to define the term for me. Ya herself was a no-longer-rich fuerdai, the heiress of a seafood business empire that had collapsed due to a family tragedy in the early 2000s, and she didn't mind guanerdai, who she saw as being the most sophisticated class in terms of dress, behavior, and other standards of propriety. "I would like to be like a guanerdai, but I am too fuerdai and incapable of buying normal clothes," she'd once admitted sadly while wearing stylish (but absurd) gray wool harem pants. The problem with chaierdai, she explained, was that they had the money of guanerdai and fuerdai but no real respect for it. "We city people all look down on them for the way they act," she explained. "We also think they did not work to earn their money—why should they be rich? They do not *do* anything."

At the time, the fact that her boss at the clothing shop where she worked was chaierdai was a source of consternation and anxiety for her. Her boss was from a village that had been demolished to build the new campus of the university I was affiliated with, and the ensuing compensation package had made her and her family absurdly wealthy by giving them both cash and income-generating houses to rent out. Nevertheless, her boss acted in what Ya described as a "bad" way without realizing it was bad—rather than investing her money or spending it on her children's education, she would gamble and play mahjong games where each hand was worth 100RMB (15USD). Even worse, she had refused to get married and was instead allowing one wealthy man to "raise" her (*yang*—a euphemism for getting an allowance in exchange for a relationship) while simultaneously sleeping with several other men. During one particularly uncomfortable afternoon, Ya's boss's visibly pregnant best friend had come to the shop to ask me whether I thought she could make it to America before the baby was due in two months and have the baby there. "If a baby is American, your government will take of it, right?" Completely misunderstanding her meaning, I had laughed and told her to wait until she had her next baby—no airline would let her on seven months pregnant and plus she didn't have a visa. After she left, Ya told me that the baby was not, as I'd assumed, her and her husband's, but her and her married lover's. She wanted to go to America to abandon the baby, which she would have aborted if her lover's wife had offered her enough money to do it.

"To bargain over aborting a baby!" Ya moaned. "It's bad! She doesn't even need the money, she is chaierdai! She is already rich. These chaierdai are too bad."

By the time Ya and I were sitting in the posh coffee shop on the pedestrian street discussing the finer points of how to identify a tuhao (hint: frequenting post coffee shops without knowing how to drink coffee is definitely on the list), the complex was well-integrated into the city. Zhengzhou is well known within the province for not having a clearly defined center; unlike nearby Kaifeng or Luoyang, Zhengzhou's ancient city wall and square had not been well maintained, and so without physical constraints the imaginative center of the city could easily shift. In 2013, a series of things happened to close the imaginative (if not physical) distance between the city's center and the Mansion Complex in just a few months: the city had completed a major construction project connecting the wealthy east district to the remote but semi-wealthy northern edge of the Mansion Complex's district by express tunnel; construction on both north-south thoroughfares in the south (and previously central) edge of the Mansion Complex's district had made shopping, eating, and parking there unpleasant or impossible; and finally, the ban on foreigners in the bar district.

An Ambivalent Cosmopolitanism

The ban on foreigners in the bar district started in mid-September and lasted until the very end of October. Zhengzhou's bar district is wedged between a People's Liberation Army (PLA) base and Henan Province's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) headquarters. The city's habit of renting storefronts on the street regardless of what might lie behind the shop front meant that many of Zhengzhou's oldest and rowdiest bars were embedded in buildings owned by the PLA or CCP. This important fact was lost on most of the city's foreigners, who for the most part were composed of English teachers on one-

or two-year stints in the city.[29] In September, the influential owners of XX Bar and Mao Bar, two of Zhengzhou's most popular expat bars, coincidentally happened to be out of the city at the same time. Within days of their departure, military police swarmed the bar district, forcefully closed many of the bars—including XX Bar, Zhengzhou's first bar—and physically blocked anyone foreign-looking from entering the remaining establishments. After the first week of confused confrontations (most expats in Zhengzhou don't speak Chinese), the ban on foreigners in the bar district was enforced by frightened word of mouth and by the bar owners themselves, who had been told they'd lose their business licenses if foreigners were found patronizing their bars.

Seeking refuge and a stiff drink, the confused foreigners flocked to Nobleman's Lane, the Mansion Complex's pedestrian street. Suddenly, the street started to look like a cosmopolitan paradise and a foreign sanctuary: there was a bar run by an Irishman, a Korean barbecue restaurant run by a dapper South Korean man, and an American southern barbecue restaurant run by Taylor, an American from Georgia, but owned by his Chinese wife, Sophy. Foreigners came to the southern barbecue restaurant—affectionately called the Capitalist Pig for short—to eat, drink, and speculate wildly about why the government might have chosen this moment to crack down on foreigners. Stories of a forgotten incident from April reemerged: three extremely inebriated expats (by then all returned to their home countries) had decided to climb a wall across from Zhengzhou's bar district. Unfortunately for them and all the other foreigners in Zhengzhou, the wall enclosed Henan Province's Communist Party

[29] As in other Chinese cities, foreigners were defined as anyone without Chinese citizenship regardless of country of origin and referred to broadly as *waiguoren* or *laowai*. The foreigners in Zhengzhou were of a similar type, class, and confused cosmopolitan as the ones documented in Henry 2013.

Headquarters, and when one of them drunkenly fell off the wall onto the wrong side, he was almost immediately apprehended and escorted off the premises. The ban was the provincial government's way of collectively punishing all of Zhengzhou's foreigners for causing the province to lose "face" (*mianzi*, though the foreigners telling the story did not necessarily know the Mandarin translation). This was the most popular theory of causation among foreigners because it had the most appeal. It had an element of conspiracy and trickery (the government had plotted its punishment for months!) and it took the strangely self-congratulatory view that Zhengzhou's expats were strong enough to be a threat to the government. Another rival theory was that many government officials had invested in a new bar district closer to the Mansion Complex, and the ban was merely an attempt to drive expats' business there. As with most sudden policy changes in Zhengzhou, the exact reason for the ban was unknown, but imaginative speculation occupied the few expats who still dared to go out and meet at the Mansion Complex.

In September, the street was barely ready for so many customers. The businesses all moved in and opened at a staggered pace, so during the first few months of the summer of 2013, your expensive Korean dinner might be punctuated by the thrill of hearing a jackhammer enthusiastically thundering in the space adjacent. As patrons walked down Nobleman's Lane, they'd find themselves dodging projectiles as workers nonchalantly tossed construction debris out the door. By October, though, the street seemed to have settled out. Those businesses that were run by wealthy hobbyists were either already out of business or well on their way, and those that were being run in earnest had begun to hit their stride and attract a clientele outside of the friends and relatives of their owners. Taylor and Sophy built a following among the city's bolder

expats and among the middle-class Chinese people who liked to go to bars to meet and observe foreigners (and who quickly learned that the Capitalist Pig was their new best bet for getting dinner and an exotic ethnographic show as foreigners ate, drank, and danced among them). At the end of October, an uncontrollable traveling Halloween party hosted by foreigners declared a raucous, unofficial end to the ban on foreigners in bars, and for a while life for foreigners was richer than it ever had been. Not only could they go to their old haunts in the bar district but they could frequent the foreigner-owned establishments at the Mansion Complex, too. A few expats who had been in Zhengzhou for many years rented apartments in the Mansion Complex to be closer to the action. Taylor optimistically declared that he thought the place would turn into an international village, and for a while, it looked like he might be right.

But then in November the power outages began. At first, the business owners blamed themselves. "We must have forgotten to charge our electricity card," they'd declare apologetically to customers before scurrying off to find a representative of the building management (*wuye*).[30] Each time they went to pay for their electricity, though, something strange would happen: the door to the room that held the electricity meters would be locked or the building managers would refuse to tell them how much credit they still had left on their cards. After the building managers began taking cell phone pictures of the amount on existing meters so that they could be replaced, the business owners began to suspect that something more than a failure to pay the bills was behind

[30] This term can also be translated as "property management" as it is in Li Zhang's *In Search of Paradise* (2010, Chapter 7). Here I translate it as "building management" largely because that's how my interlocutors translated it.

the blackouts, which were coming more frequently as the weather got colder. Word spread that the Mansion Complex was being run on temporary power.

The Winter of Their Discontent

When I first heard this, it seemed too absurd to be true. How could this giant, luxury apartment complex, the home to tens of flourishing businesses and thousands of upper-middle-class residents, not be connected to the grid? Business owners laughed at the naivety of my question, and pointed out that their reliance on the nine generators running—and then breaking down and then running again—in the basement parking garage wasn't even the worst of it; the worst indignity was that the power those generators produced would go first to the unfinished phase of the Mansion Complex where it powered the construction machines. Of course the generators would sputter to an indignant stop after a day of powering construction elevators and cranes, they laughed bitterly.

Meanwhile, December came. It grew colder. Even the promise of dinner by candlelight couldn't lure in customers who knew they'd also be dining in the cold when the electricity needed to power the heating function of the restaurants' air-conditioning unit went out. First one business folded. Then another. By early January, the building management had come up with a system: residents would not have to pay for power, but power would go out from 2PM to 5PM. Residents living above the pedestrian street were, for the most part, pleased with the arrangement since the majority of them were out during the afternoon; business owners, though, balked. They were still forced to pay mysterious electricity fees for absent meters, and the absence of electricity in the afternoon made basic business operations impossible for many of them. "We can't smoke

the meat," Sophy complained. Several times that winter I wandered down the pedestrian street only to find Taylor angrily shoving wood into his back-up smoker in front of the dark, electricity-less Capitalist Pig.

But January is a bad time to demand accountability in the PRC. The Spring Festival was approaching, which meant that all government agencies and most private companies would soon be closed for at least a month. In Zhengzhou, January is always characterized by a mad scramble to go to banquets and sign contracts with as many leaders as possible; there is little time for anything else. So the business owners on the pedestrian street either found ways to work around the outages—by smoking their meats outside with wood-powered stoves, for example—or else threw in the towel, closed the doors to their shop, and took their trips home to see their relatives a few weeks early. The Mansion Complex's towers grew dark as one by one the residents of each apartment packed up their belongings, bought their tickets home, and turned off their lights, leaving the generators in the basement whirring for fewer and fewer people.

One week of February was lost to the Spring Festival; another to the lethargy of people recovering from or traveling back from the Spring Festival. I spent the rest of the already short month wandering the few remaining urban villages scattered throughout Zhengzhou. They looked similar to what White Horse Village must have been like before it became an electronics market and then the Mansion Complex. I could tell I was entering an urban village because the distance between the blocky buildings would shrink from yards to feet or, in some cases, inches. No matter how narrow the street or alley was, it would be speckled with tens of flashing red signs calling out various discounted services: Massages! Photo! Laundry! Birthday Cake! Motel! Each urban village was a

surreal collection of people, who had each been drawn by the cheap rent. In one alley in Closed Tiger Village, I met a clown who had appeared on television as both a Mao Zedong impersonator and the Monkey King but now made his money selling flower bouquets. During the day, people sat on the narrow, uneven streets talking, laughing, and preparing food in the open; as evening fell, young women walked back and forth between their shared rooms and the public baths, their wet hair covered by small towels, their shampoo hanging from plastic baskets against their hips. On several afternoons in Weeping Willow Village, I ended up sitting with young sex workers at metal carts filled with hot, spicy grease; together, they dipped their kebabs in the scalding oil, laughed at me, and added me on WeChat but refused to answer any of my questions. At night, food vendors illuminated the crowded street, powering their noodle, stew, and dumpling carts with either small tanks of propane or electricity stolen from the mess of wires dangling above.

And, oh, those wires! I spent hours with my head tilted back, staring upwards with wonder and horror at those terrifying tangles of wires, imagining all the accidents waiting to happen. Often the wires hung only just out of reach, literally knotting their way around each other on their way to this blocky villager-built building or that one. When I finally got up the nerve to enter one of the apartment buildings and satisfy my urge to see for myself how people inside were living, the kind, middle-aged doorwoman confessed that while rent in the building was cheap, electricity bills were unreasonably high. Unlike in a residential complex (*xiaoqu*), most urban villages were not on the State Grid, which (for the most part) regulated electricity prices. Instead, the villagers-turned-landlords would use the haphazardly strung wires to surreptitiously

siphon electricity off from the grid and charge residents whatever they felt like charging for it, which was usually two times the market rates.

Protests at Mulberry Tree Village

As March approached, discussions at the Mansion Complex grew more heated. The forgotten nearby Mulberry Tree Village, with its protesting villagers who were less clever and less rich than those of White Horse Village, became an urgent topic of conversation again. To power the Mansion Complex, the State Grid needed to build a new power converter station, and they'd chosen to build it on a lot between the Mansion Complex and the complex where Mulberry Tree villagers still lived. The Mulberry Tree villagers, however, believed that the radiation from the station would threaten their health and, more importantly, their grandchildren's health. Ever since the spring, the old people of Mulberry Tree Village had taken turns camping on the lot and preventing construction by physically occupying the space the State Grid wanted to develop. It was already March, and the protests were still ongoing; a whole year had passed, and the old people were neither tired nor swayed by the offers of compensation being offered by the grid. Or so people said. Each time I walked by it was empty (figure 1).

In theory, Sophy explained to me, a new building could only use temporary power for two months; any time period longer than that is in violation of the law. In practice, there are too many new residential developments and too few power stations, which is another way of saying that there are either too many people (or that developers have gambled that there will be that many people) in Zhengzhou for the existing resources to meet the need. I once sat incredulously through lunch with a woman who worked for the State Grid as she expounded on how much better the PRC's grid was than the USA's. "In

America, your power goes out all the time," she said, "If there's a little bit of rain, it goes out! If it gets a little hot, it goes out!" I guessed that she was referencing the Northeast blackout of 2003 and the prolonged outages after Hurricane Sandy, and smiled thinly as she continued: "That never happens here! If you want electricity and you have paid your bills, you will have it."

As the blackouts at the Mansion Complex grew more and more frequent and the business owners grew more and more frustrated, I wondered how this woman could have possibly made those pronouncements with a straight face. Granted, there was an element of performance for my benefit. This sort of patriotism that borders on chauvinism was a genre of interaction I thought of as the State of the Republic Address, and it inflected many of my interactions with unfamiliar people in the field. The woman also lived in an apartment complex built by the State Grid for State Grid employees, so it was unlikely that she would experience the type of outage issues that plagued the rest of the city. Nevertheless, those issues were undeniable, and I left the dinner convinced she was somewhat delusional. Even at my own complex, which *was* on the grid, I could count on losing power without advance notice at least once a month. Sometimes the problem was specific to our complex—as when the odd numbered floors lost power but the even numbered ones bafflingly remained unaffected—but other times the problem was obviously systemic. One morning in December, I woke up to no electricity and trudged, unbathed, down the stairs to find a handful of workers tearing down the existing lines and replacing them with new ones. As if watching five men struggling to unroll a bright blue ten-foot tall spool of electric wire was not surreal enough, my bus ride across the city through three different districts that day was punctuated by multiple overheard cell phone

conversations; each time the passenger confessed apologetically that they could not resolve the matter today because the power was out (*ting dian le*). As I walked up to my destination—a small coffee shop on the other side of town—I wondered whether power was out in the entire city. As soon as I ordered my coffee, the lights went out, and I stopped wondering.

The Problem of Expectations

Zhengzhou is not the only place in the world where the electricity goes out suddenly and without warning (see also Coleman 2008). What distinguishes it, however, from other cities with similar infrastructure problems is the expectation expressed so forcefully to me by the State Grid employee over lunch: If you want electricity and you have paid your bills, you should be able to have electricity. The reality of Zhengzhou's beleaguered, unreliable grid was at odds with the belief of some residents—though notably not all—that having paid for electricity meant they will have electricity, full stop. Unlike my neighbors—former urban villagers who would shrug off the power outages by insisting rightly that there was nothing they could do about it—the business owners at the Mansion Complex remained convinced that, having paid the building management company double the market rate for electricity, they should have it. The business owners were, of course, not all of one type—they came from a variety of backgrounds, some foreign, some local, some from far away provinces in the southwest—but for all of them their businesses represented a possible new phase of life. For a post-60s retired PLA colonel, his high-end teashop was his attempt to regain the prestige and income he'd lost after leaving the military. For James, a former coal miner-turned-English teacher from Pingdingshan (a smaller city to the south of Zhengzhou), the coffee shop he'd opened

with coworkers was the logical next step up the ladder in a life-story characterized by mobility and striving to reach an imagined social top. For Sophy and Taylor, the Capitalist Pig came to embody both their hopes for personal legitimacy—if the restaurant succeeded they would have finally proved to their families that they were, in fact, capable adults—and their dream of a more cosmopolitan Zhengzhou. If Zhengzhou could become the kind of place that would accept and celebrate a southern barbecue restaurant, then maybe it could also become the kind of place that would accept and celebrate a marriage between an American man from Georgia and a Chinese woman from Luoyang. Each time the lights flickered and then failed, the moods of these business owners darkened as the new lives they were pursuing became more and more difficult to see while their own impotence in the face of these difficulties became clearer and clearer.

But by then it was April. The weather was getting warmer, which meant people weren't using their electric air-conditioning units to heat their apartments anymore. Power use went down, and power outages grew less frequent. The building managers at the Mansion Complex busied themselves tending the garden and taking advantage of those few weeks of the year in Zhengzhou when flowers are able to bloom. The business owners had new troubles to contend with: simultaneous construction projects on the main north-south roads on either side of the complex had resulted in a widely-repeated radio announcement advising drivers to avoid the area entirely. Suddenly the Mansion Complex seemed farther away from the city's imaginative center than it had ever been. Most nights, the pedestrian was empty. In the absence of foot traffic, those businesses that had survived the first wave of closures in the fall began to shutter their doors and replace their "Help Wanted" signs with "For Rent" signs. The savvy owner of the Korean

barbecue restaurant made cuts to his menu with an eye to cost; an order of the once bountiful seafood stew now only had one or two pieces of cheap, previously frozen squid, and the pieces of raw beef were sliced thinner and thinner.

For the owners of the Capitalist Pig, those kinds of cuts were impossible on principle. Sophy and Taylor were committed to doing things "right," which often meant according to a set of expectations that simply could not be met by the building management of the Mansion Complex. In spite of working under what Taylor viewed as compromised circumstances, the restaurant was doing well and attracting not just Zhengzhou's expats but also many enthusiastic local patrons. I myself ended up turning it into a sort of base of operations for my fieldwork. Because people in Zhengzhou saw both the restaurant and me as "American", it was one of the few places in town where I was allowed to reciprocate with my interlocutors and pick up the tab (*qingke*) when we ate. In most other restaurants, my interlocutors' host privileges meant that there was no possible way I would be allowed to pay for the bill, even if the reason for the meal was that I needed a favor or help with my research. At least once or twice a week I would take an hour and a half long bus ride across town, walk through the construction site for Zhengzhou's third Wanda (another combination mall and residential complex), and sit in the coffee shop above the restaurant while writing and waiting for my evening appointments to arrive. Taylor and I got into the habit of getting coffee together during those afternoon hours before the Capitalist Pig opened. We discussed everything from his relationship with his in-laws to President Obama's policies. He described his struggle to keep his frustration with the inefficiency and lack of professionalism of the people he worked from turning into a disdain for Chinese people in general. At least, Taylor said,

things at the restaurant were going well enough that he and Sophy would be able to get away for a while. First, they would go to see his family in Georgia at the beginning of June and then he would continue south to Brazil for the World Cup.

As May approached, the air all over the city filled with tiny, floating cotton balls—seeds from the cottonwood poplar trees that the city had failed to get rid of in the 1990s. May also brought the first truly clear days of the year as the pollution lifted with the rising temperatures, and the cottonwood seeds sparkling in the first rays of sunshine anyone had seen for months gave the normally gray and dystopian city a strange, ethereal feel. I kept doing my rounds around Zhengzhou, but my mind was already elsewhere; at the end of the month, I had to return to the U.S. to renew my visa and my excitement about my impending return home had already displaced any anxiety I might have felt about the state of things in Zhengzhou. Taylor seemed to feel similarly as he prepared the Capitalist Pig's kitchen so that it could run smoothly in his absence. The bartenders, waiters, and assistant cooks listened dutifully to his instructions; meanwhile, the generators in the basement whirred.

Power Siphoning: The First Incident

By the time I returned to the Mansion Complex after renewing my visa and conducting research on trains, it was already July. The city was dead, the way it gets to be in the summer when the heat makes the air so thick you feel like you're swimming through it. I took an almost empty bus through the strikingly empty streets and waded, sweat-soaked, to the Mansion Complex. The pedestrian street was bright with ruthless sunlight, and the few other customers clung to the few shadows near the sides of the buildings. In the coffee shop above the Capitalist Pig, the air-conditioning was on full

blast, and the waiters were all spread out on the couches, trying to sleep through the hottest hours of the day. I settled into my usual position and watched with interest as the Capitalist Pig's assistant chef came up the stairs behind me with a long extension cord.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Stealing electricity," he grinned. I laughed, as I often do when I do not understand something or find it strange. "I'm not joking," he retorted sternly through the same strained smile, and tossed the other end of the cable over the balcony to the other Capitalist Pig workers waiting below. "The building managers think we are using too much electricity, so they won't let us buy anymore. We are buying it through the coffee shop because the building managers will still sell to them."

"That sounds complicated," I said, thinking about how predictably furious a development like this would make Taylor. "Do Taylor and Sophy know?"

He grunted noncommittally. "I've been under a lot of pressure recently (*zuijin yali hen da*)," he said, and then scurried back down the stairs before I could ask anymore questions. A few weeks later, he would cite that same "pressure" to police as an excuse for trying to strangle his girlfriend before fleeing to his hometown in the south. At the time, though, I found his position sympathetic; in the absence of Sophy, the restaurant's owner, he was doing the best he could to find a solution to a problem he lacked the authority to solve.

An hour later, the power went out. The napping waiters woke up and moved quickly to shut the doors and keep as much of the cool air in as they could. I went outside to see how much of the Mansion Complex was blacked out and found the previously empty street dotted with business owners standing outside their darkened storefronts

doing the exact same thing. No one seemed surprised, but everyone seemed irritated. Emerging from inside the restaurant, the assistant chef used a dirty rag to wipe the sweat from his forehead and grinned.

The Capitalist Pig was unable to open that day and eleven others throughout July due to power outages. The State Grid had failed to negotiate a settlement with the protesters at the nearby village—business owners street increasingly suspected that such a settlement was impossible and that the villagers could not be bought—and had yet to break ground on the transformer station necessary to connect the Mansion Complex to the grid.

On the pedestrian street, increasing power outages resulted in an uncomfortable clarity about each business' vulnerabilities; each new failure was a revelation. Without electricity, you can still keep a restaurant lit with candles, but all the candles in the world cannot keep your refrigerator cold and your goods preserved. The Mansion Complex's building managers hit upon a new strategy to both satisfy their residents and preserve their generators: outages every night from 11PM to 4AM. Like many courses of action in Zhengzhou, the outages were planned but not announced, which meant that for the first week the owners of the restaurants and convenience stores along the pedestrian street came to work each morning to find weeks worth of meat, seafood, and other perishable goods spoiled without knowing why.

Power outages not only caused the Capitalist Pig to be closed for eleven days throughout July but also caused it to lose tens of thousands of RMB worth of goods. Taylor and Sophy returned to Zhengzhou at the end of July to find their assistant chef gone mad, their staff completely demoralized, and their refrigerators filled with rotting

meat. At the beginning of August, Sophy pulled me aside to tell me that they'd had enough. She and the other business owners were going to take action against the building management. Every night, as the temperature fell from 30 degrees Celsius to 28, she and a handful of major players met in whichever storefront could still run their air-conditioning to discuss possible courses of action.

Another Failure, Another Building Management Company

This was not the first time Sophy had gone head-to-head with a building management company. Earlier in the year, the steam-powered floor heating at the apartment she and Taylor rented had exploded. The ensuing flooding had caused a tremendous amount of damage. Taylor's collection of expensive Clarks shoes, Sophy's library of English books, and boxes of irreplaceable memorabilia from their weddings in Henan and Georgia: all these things were ruined. According to PRC law, the real estate developer—the company that physically constructed the building—must also run the building management—the service that physically maintains the building after construction finishes—for the interim period after construction is finished (Zhang 2010, 189). In theory, Sophy explained, the law was supposed to make sure that building managers would take responsibility for deficiencies in the building rather than saying these were the fault of the developer and had nothing to do with them. In practice, it often meant that both the developer and the building management had increased incentives to pin responsibility for problems on residents and thus eliminate the need to compensate residents.

Ironically, Sophy and Taylor had chosen to live in that particular residential complex because its building management company had a reputation for the being the

best in the province. Their complex was located in Zhengzhou's wealthy New East District, and their neighbors were media moguls, the children of important officials, and powerful lawyers—people with no patience for incompetence. Unlike my complex, Sophy and Taylor's power and water never went out without warning; instead, Sophy would receive an apologetic text message days in advance warning of the inconvenience. The building managers had, in fact, done everything they were supposed to do; just days before the leak, a maintenance man had come to make sure the heat was working fine and had checked the very pipes that ended up exploding. Perhaps because of this sense that it was a true accident and not actually their fault—or maybe just because of general ideas of thrift—the building management company didn't want to pay Sophy the actual cost of the goods destroyed. For weeks, Sophy juggled her full-time job as a SAT teacher at an elite high school's English program, work at the restaurant, and negotiations with the building management company over the amount of compensation she should receive. Ultimately, Sophy and Taylor got a fair amount of money for their trouble and moved—to an apartment in the same complex and managed by the same company. It's because of the perverse logic of Zhengzhou's increasingly stratified housing market that I absolutely understood why they didn't feel they could move anywhere else; even though they knew the failings and weaknesses of their current complex, it was somehow still the best the city had to offer. There was nowhere else to go.

There was also the added benefit of being known within the complex—the building managers were not likely to mess with Sophy again. Taylor recounted with pride the way she had called one of the managers a "thing" (*dongxi*) during negotiations and ordered him out of their apartment. "She just has this way of making people feel stupid,"

he said, grinning. The two of them were counting on Sophy's sophistication and eloquence to organize the other building owners into a reasonable and effective course of action against the Mansion Complex's building management company, but the ex-PLA owner of the pedestrian street's high-end tea shop soon became the movement's de facto leader.

The teashop owner and his relationship to the other business owners soon became an object of fascination for me. On one level, this was a simple case of gender norms prevailing, but on another, it revealed something about the impossibility of subverting existing ways of structuring power even as the business owners planned a protest. The teashop owner was a mid-ranking PLA officer; of all the entrepreneurs on the Mansion Complex's pedestrian street his background was the "thickest" (*ta de beijing zui hou*), which meant he was perceived as having the most connections and the most powerful connections. He was also, significantly, one of the oldest business owners. Taylor groaned about how, at the organizing meetings, the teashop owner would repeat himself over and over again in heavy dialect without letting anyone else respond. Sophy was more measured in her assessment. "People who are used to being leaders will talk like leaders," she stated neutrally, "The important thing is to make the building management understand."

So the teashop owner became the de facto leader because of all the business owners he was the most legible ready-made leader. Of course, the mimicking of existing power structures did not stop there. Jacob, who co-owned the coffee shop with James, the former coal miner, became the movement's de facto second-in-command. Jacob was the well-educated son of a wealthy, well-known businessman. He got into the habit of

making eloquent, angry speeches at the top of his voice at all the organizational meetings in an effort, I guessed, not only to raise the spirits and emotions of the gathered owners but also to relieve his own substantial frustrations. Sophy described him as having grown up privileged enough to develop principles, which could not be compromised. The coffee shop he owned with James was failing for other reasons—a tendency to overstaff, strange, mismatched decor, and an inability to decide whether it was a coffee shop, restaurant, or bar—but he could not tolerate the outages' effect on his already meager business. If he was going to fail, Sophy ventriloquized wryly, it would be on his own terms and no one else's.

The coffee shop owner wasn't the only one who was frustrated by developments at the Mansion Complex; Taylor would return from the meetings of the business owners frustrated by how bureaucratic the proceedings has already become. "They are having meetings about having meetings!" he vented to me at the coffee shop above the Capitalist Pig. "They have to do things 'the Chinese way'! They have to get together and have their meeting and say the same thing over and over again when really someone just needs to make a decision." Taylor wanted to sue the building management company, which struck me as being his version of having to do things "the American way" but which also seemed like a smart move. In theory, the case would be pretty straightforward. Each business owner would catalogue their damages and provide a record of when the outages had occurred; the building management was in violation of a law that said a complex could only be on temporary power for two months, and they would be held responsible for the damages. In practice, things would not be so simple. Sophy and many of the other business owners worried that the building management would begin destroying evidence

faster than they could collect it. They also believed, like most people I spoke to in Zhengzhou, that if you had to go to the courts to settle a grievance, this already meant that you would lose; people who could win in court had enough connections and social capital that they did not *have* to go to court, a sentiment similar to what Li Zhang (2010) documents in Kunming. As the meetings (and the meetings about meetings) progressed, the business owners resolved that they would not sue the building management company right away; instead, they would protest.

Trouble on Nobleman's Lane

On the first day of August, a power outage disrupted a busy dinner rush and led to him having to throw out pounds and pounds of filet steak. The next morning, he went to the building management and broke every single one of the pictures they had hanging in their office. "They told me, 'We're going to call the police,'" he snarled, "And I said, 'Well when they get here, you know where to find me.'" The police never came, but that night was Qixi or Chinese Valentine's Day. As couples flooded the street to claim their reserved table at the Capitalist Pig, the power to Taylor's block—and only Taylor's block—went out. It stayed out for the rest of the night. Taylor spent the hours between 7PM and 11PM alternating between apologizing to customers in Mandarin as he turned them away and swearing up a storm in English in his dark, non-functional kitchen. Taylor wasn't the only one resorting to rage and recklessness, and the building managers probably didn't want to have to call the police more than once a week; just a few days earlier, the Korean owner of the Korean barbecue restaurant had gotten into a similar conflict. He was an older man distinguished by both a wavy mane of salt-and-pepper hair and a tendency to wear ascots. ("He looks like a star from a Korean drama," Jane, the

waitress at the Capitalist Pig, swooned each time he came into the restaurant.) While he had been arguing with the building management about the electricity, one of the building managers had—perhaps intentionally, perhaps accidentally—kicked him. The Korean barbecue owner had very slowly taken off his round, tortoise shell glasses, handed them to his pretty assistant, and wound up like a pitcher before slapping the manager square in the face. He then, Taylor told me laughing, sat down and waited calmly for the police.

The Korean barbecue owner and Taylor were natural allies in the proceeding. Beyond sharing if not the same style of dealing with their frustrations then the same basic contempt for the building managers, they also shared an economic interest. Taylor rightly pointed out that many of these business owners had far less skin in the game than he did. The power outages had caused the Capitalist Pig, the other restaurants, and the few grocery stores on the pedestrian street to suffer substantial financial losses because a concrete, calculable amount of inventory had spoiled. The impact of the outages on other kinds of shops—hair accessory shops, massage parlors, and shoe stores—was harder to calculate. For instance, the pedestrian street's one yoga studio could technically still operate if the power was out, but the real estate agents' office, strangely enough, could not—without power, they had no internet, no computers, and no way of looking up listings for their clients. These types of damages were easier to deny than pounds of perishable goods, and Taylor believed that owners of these kinds of business were not committed to the cause. "For them, if they get anything it will have been worth it," he raged, "They're just waiting to get picked off with a small payout, and the restaurant owners like me who have lost real money will be left high and dry." It was these business owners who were resisting Taylor's preferred plan of action, which was to hire a lawyer.

Through a friend, Sophy and Taylor had found a lawyer from one of Henan's largest firms who was one of the best real estate lawyers in the province; he'd agreed to take their case, which he thought was a slam-dunk. Upon hearing the price of his retainer—which would be around 10,000RMB per business owner if all of them participated—many of the owners balked. Why pay so much money when you could protest? Lawyers were expensive; taking to the streets was free.

Protests at the Most Expensive Mansion Complex

One hot, wet, Saturday morning that first week in August, Sophy, the rest of the business owners, and the few employees who could be convinced to go outside in the rain marched from the pedestrian street of the Mansion Complex to the sales center of Eternal Glory Real Estate. Eternal Glory Real Estate had not been the first company to develop the Most Expensive Mansion Complex. The land-use rights for the development that eventually became the Mansion Complex had originally been bought by a subsidiary of a Hong Kong real estate company. After many people had bought expected houses (*qifang*) and construction had already begun, there was an accident (*chushi le*), and the developer fled. In a practice called "accepting the plate" (*jiepan'er*), agents of the local government took over the development and its obligation to homeowners. This does not happen to every development that runs into problems, and though I tried my best find out from real estate professionals what exactly had motivated the government to do so in this case—the high-profile nature of the land-use rights auction? The demographics of the people who'd purchased houses?—no straight answer was forthcoming. The government (defined only as the vague all-encompassing term *zhengfu* by my interlocutors) had then found a second real estate company to take over the completion of the apartment complex. In

what my experienced entrepreneur interlocutors laughingly described as an unthinkable (*xiangbudao de*) turn of events, the second real estate company *also* fled and left the government to accept the plate for a second time. At that point, no other real estate company wanted to take over the project; somehow—perhaps, my interlocutors speculated, as part of a negotiation over land use rights for a *different* development—Eternal Glory Real Estate had been convinced to finish it. Probably because of this, it was not Eternal Glory's best work. The shifts in responsibility were visible in the slight variation in the marbling and color of the stone facades on the outside of each of the towers; like lines in sedimentary rocks, they revealed each phase's age and origin.

Nevertheless, Eternal Glory Real Estate was *currently* responsible for the Mansion Complex, and it was their employees who made up both the bumbling building management and the salespeople responsible for selling the next phase of the Mansion Complex's as yet unfinished residential towers. Eternal Glory, like most real estate development companies in Zhengzhou, had many complexes scattered throughout the city each with their own sales centers, but this one was both within walking distance of the business owners' businesses and also directly connected to the strain on the generators in the basement. "If they are allowed to sell Phase Three without first connecting to the grid, we'll have no way of living," Sophy told me grimly. The business owners already guessed that many of the power outages had to do with the volume of electricity monopolized by the construction equipment, but even that would be nothing compared to the amount used if just 30% of Phase Three's residents moved in. I did not make it to the first protest, but Sophy showed me pictures she'd taken on her phone: there

they all were, holding white banners with black text, huddled beneath the bus stop overhangs. She said that a few men had come out of the office and shoved some of the older women around. This was, to some extent, expected, and though Sophy didn't say so, I knew it was, from a certain perspective, also a stroke of luck—the pictures and videos of physical harm would help them portray their adversaries as villains. More disturbing to Sophy was the fact that people had still entered the sales center, presumably to buy houses, while the protests were going on. Knowing what the protesters knew, how could people still considering buying houses from these people?

Sophy invited me to the next protest, which would be held the following Saturday. Taylor, as a white foreigner, couldn't come because Sophy thought he would attract too much attention or become the object of a crowd outburst of some kind. I, on the other hand, looked enough like a Chinese person to be able to blend in, and I was unlikely to be speaking enough for people to be able to parse my foreign origin from my accent. It was a viciously sunny summer day. Through my wincing squint, I could see that the pedestrian street was full of people—in fact, it was the most crowded I'd ever seen it. Part of that was due to the protesters, who were being staged in front of the high-end tea shop, but another part of it was due to groups of middle-aged women and old men who were circling the street inquiring excitedly of each other: "Has your power also stopped?" "Where will they go to protest?" "Have you spoken yet to the building management?" Jacob, the principled, well-off owner of the failing coffee shop, seemed startled to see me hurtling down the street between the curious cliques. "What are you doing here so early?" he asked. It did not occur to him that I would be there for the protests, and I didn't feel like explaining, so I mumbled that I was looking for Sophy.

Sophy was late. In the meantime I slunk closer to the high-end teashop. The owner was not there, but the manager of a troubled Brazilian barbecue restaurant was. He wore skin-tight black lycra top and workout pants, which swished as he paced back and forth before the assembled protesters. Many owners were there, but the majority of the bodies—and they would be used in the protest almost purely as bodies—belonged to employees who worked on Nobleman's Lane. The most undignified of these were workers from the street's Chinese fast-food restaurant. They came fully outfitted in their bright orange and yellow work uniforms and stood, resignedly, holding the corners of banners across their work aprons. There had to be at least 100 people waiting in front of the high-end teashop—substantially more than the 50 Sophy had told me participated the week before. Later, Sophy would tell me that real number of participants was closer to 160. Gradually, the banners were all laid out in a line and various employees shepherded—sometimes by taking them by the hand and physically moving them—until each banner was being held by at least two people. I could hear the women complaining about the sun, which would damage their skin—several of them held the banners up with one hand while squatting in its shade.

The banners themselves presented an interesting aesthetic departure from those I had seen in other protests against real estate companies, mostly by urban villagers resisting demolition. Urban villagers' banners (*tiaofu*) tended to be written in black on white cloth, and the handwriting—which to me embodied the obviously unofficial nature of the message—had been part of what had drawn me to the scene and made me decide to get off the bus a stop early the first time I went to visit. The desperate handwriting on urban village banners echoed the style and sentiment of the graffiti scrawled on the

construction site walls across the street from my favorite outdoor night market: "BLACK-HEARTED REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS, WHERE IS MY HOUSE? BLACK-HEARTED REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS, YOU ARE DEMOLISHING US TO DEATH." In contrast, the Mansion Complex's banners were printed in a neat, sans-serif type on a plastic material. The business owners had even dared to replicate the aesthetics of the state and printed one banner not in black-on-white but in yellow-on-red, the colors the Communist Party used for its official missives to the people. It was a clever visual rhetorical move, meant to use the aesthetics and tone of authority to cut off any accusations of unpatriotic sentiments at the pass. "WE SUPPORT THE COMMUNIST PARTY," it read in bright yellow, "WE PASSIONATELY LOVE CHINA. PLEASE, GOVERNMENT, GIVE US JUSTICE." From the banners alone, I could tell that the tone of this protest was going to be much different than the ones I'd witnessed among urban villagers I'd interviewed, who tended to make a case against the government for demolishing their villages in the same breath as a rant about how unfair it was that the government was trying to penalize them for having three children. The Mansion Complex business owners were drawing clear line: they were good citizens interested in fixing one issue and one issue only.

When Sophy arrived, I was weaving in out between the banners, trying not to get overwhelmed or draw too much attention to the fact that I did not belong. "Traffic!" she exclaimed with exasperation, and I nodded—traffic was Zhengzhou's only true constant, and being late because of traffic was both expected and excused in advance. She began pointing out her favorite banners to me as the employees stood there holding them dumbly before the onslaught of her rapid English. The one she was proudest of was a

personal call-out against the head of the Eternal Glory Real Estate Company. “His name is Wei Yongkai, and his brother, Wei Yongtao, is the head of Henan’s biggest real estate development company,” she said conspiratorially. “They used to work together but then they had a fight and now they don’t speak anymore.” I wanted to ask, “A fight about what?” but I instead opted for the more basic question: “How do you know that?” Sophy shrugged: “Everyone knows that.” She pointed to the banner: “WEI YONGKAI, DON’T COME TO ETERNAL GLORY’S COMPLEXES! ETERNAL GLORY’S COMPLEXES DON’T HAVE WATER OR ELECTRICITY.” I laughed out loud, and the young men holding the banner looked down at it and smiled, getting that I was getting the joke. They used it to block their faces as I took a photo with my phone.

Many of the Mansion Complex business owners’ banners had a similarly joking tone. Granted, the majority were serious. “WE JUST WANT TO EAT, WE JUST WANT TO SURVIVE,” one declared. “THE LYING BULLIES ARE HIDING AGAIN; AS PROMISED IF YOU FART YOU END UP SITTING ON DIRTY BLACK-HEARTED MONEY; LIKE AN ASSHOLE,” another raged. Several of them were so petulant I could not pass them without laughing: “GARBAGE BUILDING MANAGEMENT BEGINS WITH ETERNAL GLORY,” one declared, the few bold characters taking up the banner’s full length. “BUY AN ETERNAL GLORY HOUSE, REGRET IT YOUR WHOLE LIFE,” another warned melodramatically. As the protest moved out of the pedestrian street and, to the dismay of all passing traffic, into the real street, it began to have a carnival atmosphere. The Brazilian barbecue manager, Jacob, and Sophy ran up and down the line trying to make sure all the bodies were positioned in the right way to block the street safely and effectively, but the people holding the banners did not seem to

share their sense of urgency. Young men were laughing and slapping each other on the back, young women sidled up to one another and linked arms so that their banner sagged between them. Cars honked in anger as the protesters turned a two-way street into a one-way street. As the protest reached the end of the block, the people holding the front banner quivered. In front of them was Rising Sun Road, one of Zhengzhou's busiest east-west boulevards; were they meant to march in that too? As if to answer the question posed by their hesitation, the owner of the high-end teashop ran to the front and picked up the limp center of the front banner himself. Emboldened, the protesters turned onto Rising Sun Road and blocked the entire right-hand lane—usually used for bikes, electric bikes, and three-wheeled vehicles—and most of the middle lane, where car traffic began.

As I walked alongside or in front of the protest taking pictures, it became easy for me to figure out which protesters were employees and which were business owners. The former were likely to be smiling, pleased by their own disobedience, and the latter were more likely to be sporting serious expressions. Sophy had inserted herself between two women who were chatting side-by-side while holding up opposite ends of a banner, and while the banner still wasn't completely taut, it was at least legible. When the protest reached the Eternal Glory sales center, there was a scramble and confusion as the high-end teashop owner, Jacob, and Sophy all tried to arrange the banners in a line down the sidewalk in front of the building. In one of the most bizarre moments of the morning, the assembling protesters ended up facing a mirror vision of themselves; an appliance store had paid a dozen people to stand on the opposite corner and wave pink-and-yellow signs advertising a limited-time-only sale. From across six lanes of traffic, the advertisers

looked bored even as they stopped waving their signs and instead leaned forward against them, as though trying to get a better look at our side of the street.

There was less and less to see on our side of the street. Many of the employees had abandoned their banners by hanging them on the sidewalk railing and were squatting in the shade behind the bus stop. “Get up!” Sophy yelled in Mandarin. “No one can see you back there!” She ushered a group of girls out from the behind the bus stop and into the sun, where they threw their hands up to block the light from striking their faces like vampires in an old silent movie. “This is like herding sheep,” she complained in English to me. “Their bosses didn’t tell them what they were here to do. They don’t understand that this is serious.” She explained that she, Jacob, the high-end tea shop owner, and one other woman were all part of the protest’s “think tank:” the group of people the business owners had nominated to negotiate with Eternal Glory on their behalf. Only the teashop owner was absent.

Now the protesters were standing in the street, directly in the path of oncoming traffic. Where there had once been three lanes, two for cars and one for electric scooters and bikes, now there was only one. Cars slowed and then came to a complete stop as they began negotiating what was now a necessary merge into the left-hand lane, but the scooters, used to being able to weave in and out of almost any obstacle, resisted. One came right up to the edge of the human roadblock and, without making eye contact, began trying to thread his bike through the crowd. Sophy saw him from the center of the crowd and pushed forward until she was right in front of him. “I’m sorry, but you can’t go through here,” she said in Mandarin. As though he’d been waiting for an excuse to snap, the man began yelling at Sophy: “You should leave! You should get out of here!

Whatever you're protesting it doesn't have to do with me!" Sophy, her long braid falling half the length of her barely five-foot frame, drew herself up to her full height and pointed her finger aggressively at the man: "If you were standing here, would you leave? Why don't you come and stand here with us?" Within seconds of Sophy raising her voice, Jacob pushed his way over to her side of the crowd and began yelling at the man on the scooter with her. The man on the scooter put his head down and just began accelerating so that the protesters had to part or else be hit (as several of the less-vigilant of them were).

"Stand closer together," Sophy ordered angrily. The protesters obediently packed themselves a little closer together. The business owners stood closer to the dangerous edge of the human roadblock than the employees, many of whom seemed to be wilting under the combined light of the sun from above and heat from the pavement below. From a hundred yards away now, we could see the cars in the right-hand lane already stopping resignedly and nosing their way into the left-hand lane, but the scooter drivers remained baffled. They'd come right up to the crowd as though to test both their ability—*could they really not pass?*—and our resolve—*would we really not yield?* Most ended up waiting their turn, nosing into the left-hand lane around us with the rest of the cars, but one woman carrying another adult women and two children—one squished between the two of them, one in between her legs and the handlebars—smiled crazily as she approached. "Hello! Hello! Sorry!" she announced as she barreled toward the protesters at a jogging pace, and the protesters seemed to surprise themselves by parting before her down the line that would have separated the middle lane from the right-hand lane. Now there was a path for the scooters, and they were quick to take advantage of it, zipping

through the gap at a speed that made the protesters step back instinctually and widen it even more.

"Come here!" the Brazilian barbecue manager barked, "Stand here!" Within seconds the two thinning phalanxes of protesters combined into one long, dense phalanx occupying the middle lane. With their lane finally free, the scooters whizzed by on the right while the cars continued to trickle by—punctuated by terrifyingly large buses—on the left. Regardless of whether they were driving a car or a scooter, however, everyone who passed turned their head to look and read the signs, still hanging on the bus stop railing—in my photos, not a single driver is looking at the road in front of them. One well-dressed young woman took the edge of a banner from a young man, and her friends gathered around her, laughing, taking photos from the street, and ignoring the scooters, which narrowly missed them. In fact, everyone had their phones out—both the protesters and the Eternal Glory employees, who at the sight of the blocked van had finally emerged from the office. There was a sense that everyone was gathering evidence to be marshaled to eventually prove their point to a higher authority, although it was unclear to me how photos taken at the same time of the same event would be able to support both of the radically different narratives Eternal Glory and the protesters were bound to adopt.

The Police as a Metonym or, The Second Power-Siphoning Incident

From behind the gate to the parking lot, the Eternal Glory employees stared at us and made phone calls. "That one is the main manager," Sophy told me, pointing to an older woman wearing a dress and an especially sour look. "They are probably calling the police."

The police! "Should we be worried?" I asked, and Sophy shook her head. "Just don't say anything."

The police arrived shortly. They were not just any police but the traffic police (*jiaojing*). At first, only one of the officers tried to engage with the protesters. He stood in front of the gate and very quickly got into a shouting match with Jacob. From my vantage point within the crowd of protesters, I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I could see Jacob gesturing wildly, his accusatory index finger just inches from the policeman's face. The policeman responded in kind, waving his finger just as angrily as the assembled protesters snapped cell phone picture after cell phone picture. Sophy smiled at me grimly: "Only in China can you yell at the police. What would they do to you if you did this in America? Shoot you?" I laughed sadly; if it had been a few weeks before I could have said no, definitively, but Michael Brown had been shot six times in Ferguson, Missouri just days before and I myself was unsure. "I don't know," I said, "Probably they would just beat you up." Sophy nodded: "They won't dare to do that here." I pushed closer to the shouting match, where I caught the tail end of an exchange between Jacob and the officer:

> **Policeman:** "You cannot block the street (*du lu*), it's illegal!"
> **Jacob:** "Last week we were beat up! Isn't that also illegal?"
> **Policeman:** "Yes, but blocking the street is illegal and the government is responsible for stopping you."
> **Jacob:** "Why does the government care about this? Our electricity is temporary, and that's illegal too! It's all illegal!"
> **Policeman:** "Your electricity being temporary has nothing to do with the government."
> **Jacob:** "It has nothing to do with the government? Did you hear that? Our electricity being temporary has nothing to do with the government!"

Jacob made that last pronouncement to the crowd of protesters, who found it as ridiculous as he did. How could the government disavow its responsibility for one illegal action

(keeping the Mansion Complex on temporary power) while at the same time cracking down on another illegal action (blocking the street)? Like protesters elsewhere in the PRC (Lee 2007), they believed they were right and protected by the existence of *weifa*—illegal, or against the law—activities.

Nevertheless, I felt sorry for the traffic cop. He was, after all, a traffic cop; he was charged with keeping the streets clear, not with ensuring access to the State Grid. In the eyes of the protesters, however, he was a representative of the government, period; it was almost as if they could not distinguish between different departments, could not see why a traffic cop would care about them blocking the public street but not about the constant power outages in a private apartment complex. Any state actor became a representative of the entire State by default; as soon as they'd arrived on the scene, the policemen had already been abstracted by the protesters. At the very least, the protesters knew that to get what they wanted they at least had to *perform* a belief in this abstraction.

And indeed, the police did, reluctantly, step into the role of representing the entire State by acting as mediators. After the high-end tea shop owner had gotten his chance to yell at the policeman, he turned around and commanded the protesters, who had been moving toward the right-hand lane to better hear the commotion, to move back into the street. Behind them, a public service announcement on the bus stop that was present throughout the city suddenly took on new meaning: "BE A CIVILIZED PERSON; DO CIVILIZED STUFF." As if things couldn't get more absurd, an enterprising protester had gone into the Eternal Glory office, grabbed a hundred or so of the thick, colorful flyers advertising the third phase of the development, and distributed them among the protesters, who sat on them and used them to block the sun from hitting their faces

(figure 2). I sat down too, laughing as my butt covered the diagrams meant to explain each apartment's layout to prospective buyers. The woman sitting next to me introduced herself to me as Lulu; she ran a coffee shop inspired by her home province of Guizhou in the space above the high-end teashop. "If there's no power there's nothing for me to do," Lulu laughed, "I can't open my shop without power. I also don't want to sit here and do such a miserable thing. But they keep putting it off—even according to their own words, they've been putting it off." I nodded sympathetically, and together we sat on the flyers on the pavement.

The policemen stood between the crowd and the left-hand lane so they could guide the now substantial traffic around the unmoving protesters. The further away the protesters were from the oncoming traffic, the less serious they were; at the very edge of the protest, a handful of young employees wearing hats made out of Eternal Glory advertisements were laughing and playing a card game. Sophy shook her head: "They're acting like it's a picnic not a protest!" That may have been the case, but every once in a while there was a moment that served to remind us we were in the middle of something more fraught than fun; an SUV approached with a middle-aged woman hanging out the passenger side window and yelling obscenities at the top of her voice at the police. The police began yelling back, which made the woman yell louder, which made the protesters laugh. "What was she saying," I asked Lulu, but she shrugged: "She was just releasing some frustration (*fa piqi*)."

On one side of the crowd, Jacob and a few other men were having their own confrontation with a few other police officers. Sophy and the police on our side continued talking in a comparatively civil way. Speaking at a rapid fire pace to a bemused officer,

Sophy explained why and how the building management had failed to address their concerns, and the policeman again insisted that this had nothing to do with the government and that they should not be blocking the street. Sophy accused the police of collaborating with the leader of the building management, and the policeman laughed. “I am responsible for the streets and for this traffic you’ve made! Do you think that if you blocked the streets in front of the government’s offices they would say their leader was gone and hadn’t come to work? Of course not! They would immediately come out and solve this problem. You know this, right?” Sophy laughed too, and the two of them seemed to have reached a type of detente in their agreement that Eternal Glory was the true party at fault here.

I whispered in English to Sophy that I thought she was brave to confront the policeman like that. She said that a standard police tactic at protests like this was to start arresting people and picking them off one by one to scare off everyone. “But it’s different for me,” she explained, “If I am arrested, my boss will find a way to break me out. There is no one else who can teach SATs at our school. He needs me.” The police also seemed to sense that they could not intimidate Sophy into submission and so they began trying other strategies.

“Why are you out here, pretty women?” they cooed, appealing to an imagined sense of vanity, “You’ll be burnt black (*shai hei le*).” Each time a car approached, they claimed it was Eternal Glory’s leader’s car: “There it is! He’s arrived.” Eventually, the announcement was true, and Sophy rushed with the other members of the protesters’ “think tank” to the gate, where the woman with the sour expression was begrudgingly allowing a handful of people to enter. I followed, and Sophy pressed the keys to the

Capitalist Pig into my hands: “I don’t know when I’ll be out, so you’ll have to help Taylor open.” She called Taylor and told him not to take Rising Sun Road “otherwise you’ll be stuck in the traffic I’ve made.” As he crossed into the offices, the Brazilian BBQ manager directed many of the employees and owners to wait outside so that the threat of a crowd remained, milling in the parking lot and able to return to the street at any point. Not everyone stayed, though; I walked back to the Mansion Complex with the owner of a hot pot restaurant who said he hoped there was power so he could open for lunch. There was not. Not, at least, until 3PM when Sophy and other members of the “think tank” finally emerged from their fruitless first negotiations with the leader of Eternal Glory. In the Capitalist Pig, Taylor prepared for the dinner rush with the few hours remaining to him. “I still think we should just sue them,” he complained.

The Censor and the Developer: Reactions to the Protest

The business owners at the Mansion Complex did not ever sue Eternal Glory’s building management. Instead, Sophy watched as her worst fears materialized and individual owners began to be picked off one by one. In late August, I took a young lawyer friend to the Capitalist Pig for dinner, and she advised Sophy not to take the protests any further. Sophy wanted to start bringing together people from all the new apartment complexes that were occupied without being connected to the grid; this, my friend argued, was making trouble (*dao luan*). “If you are protesting one company, the government can tolerate it because this is a problem they can solve,” she explained, “but if you are going across to other places and pointing out the bigger problem that they cannot solve, they will not tolerate it. So you must keep playing this game you are playing now.” My lawyer friend herself lived in a high-end complex that also was not yet

connected to the State Grid; however, her building management would notify them when outages were going to occur and she in fact found them incredibly sympathetic *because* they were using temporary generators. "They really care for us!" she exclaimed, "Do you know how expensive it is to run a generator? There is nothing else they can do (*mei you banfa*). Zhengzhou just does not have enough power. There are too many people and too many new buildings."

In mid-September 2014, I met Sophy for lunch. Calls from the lawyer they'd conferred with punctuated our conversation—at that point they still hadn't paid his retainer, and he was no longer recommending they sue. She couldn't understand why some of the owners were refusing to pay the lawyer's retainer, and she was worried about how the evidence they needed for their case was probably disappearing with each passing day. When I left in October, Sophy drove me to the train station. Over lunch she told me that the business owners' de facto leader, the owner of the high-end teashop, had been bought off by Eternal Glory. "No one knows for how much, only that he definitely got money," she said glumly. Others were following, and only the Capitalist Pig, the Korean barbecue restaurant, and few of the grocery stores that had lost too much inventory to ignore still remained united. "You just wish it could be otherwise," she said, "That it wouldn't always be this same narrative. It's so predictable." In November 2014, when I'd already returned to Princeton, Taylor texted me to tell me that his only remaining strategy was to hold out and recoup his losses by never paying the building management fee ever again. It wasn't a lot but it was something.

In a way, the protests at the Mansion Complex produced more for me than they did for the business owners involved. For the last two months of my fieldwork in 2014,

the protests were all I wanted to talk about with anyone. People seemed bemused by my obsession; mostly, they wanted to know—as they always wanted to know—how a foreigner could have gotten access to this kind of situation. For me, though, there was a larger question at stake. I wanted to know whether other people in Zhengzhou felt, like I did, that the Mansion Complex were going after the wrong opponent by protesting Eternal Glory. Eternal Glory's building management was just the first link in a long chain of responsibility—after them came the State Grid, after the State Grid came the Mulberry Tree villagers protesting the transformer station, after the Mulberry Tree villagers came the larger, national policies that encouraged people to move to cities whose infrastructure could not yet support that number of people. Mostly, people did not want to have this conversation, either because they had nothing to say or—as one of my friends said—there was nothing to say because it already didn't matter what the reason was.

There were, of course, exceptions to this. After a formal interview with a friend of mine who worked as an internet censor for the city, I turned off my voice recorder and asked him what he thought of the situation. "There is a contradiction (*maodun*) here in how they are thinking of the government," he said thoughtfully, "The building management has broken the law, and according to the law, your friends should sue them. Your friends do not want to sue the building management because they do not trust the government to handle the case, so instead they break the law too by blocking the street. But even then, even though they do not trust the government, they are still relying on the government (*kao zhengfu*). To speak to the leader, they needed the police to come and call him. So in fact, there is a contradiction." The internet censor sighed, and continued: "I work in the government, and so people get very angry with me. They think that I am

supposed to represent everything the government does all the time. In fact, we're not that powerful. And if people continue to have this contradiction and not follow the law, there is only so much we can do. They are responsible too."

The internet censor was one of the most serious and intellectual people I worked with in Zhengzhou; he was prone to having political debates with me on WeChat and sending me long analyses of what he saw as the true source of problems in the PRC. Citizens' misconceptions about the government were high on that list; he believed that because of the Cultural Revolution, when the government really *did* try to control every single detail about daily life, people still believed that the government was omnipotent. "We are trying to draw a line," he said, echoing the language of Mao Zedong as he gestured on the table, "The government must draw a line. Everything on this side is our responsibility, everything on that side is the people's responsibility. Otherwise the government will not be able to function anymore." The internet censor argued that in fact the government could no longer be responsible for all the aspects of life that the people imagined it to be controlling. Even well educated, cosmopolitan friends of mine like Sophy were easily convinced by conspiracy theories. Theories that placed the government as the central and sole cause of misfortune were the most predictable and—one some level—comforting.

In late September, a few days before I left the field, I took my friend's parents to lunch at the Mansion Complex's Korean barbecue restaurant. The father was one of the most interesting people I've ever met anywhere. The lunch was a last ditch attempt to get him to agree to a formal, recorded interview—because I'd helped his daughter, he'd said he would help me with anything I needed for my research, but so far he'd evaded all my

requests for an actual formal interview. “You study success and unpredictability,” he said laughing, “You have bad timing. Right now, everyone is worried about this, it’s very sensitive. Everyone wants to stay on the down low (*didiao*).” Although I never got him to recite his complete biography in front of the recorder, I knew it basically by heart, from hearing his daughter tell it and his daughter’s awe-struck friends repeat it. He’d graduated in the 1980s with a degree in agricultural science and started a business selling grain for animal feed. In the early 1990s, he’d taken a risk and become one of Zhengzhou’s first real estate developers, but he had decided in the early 2000s after his own company “had an accident” (*chushi le*) that he’d made enough money, and effectively retired at the age of 40. As we walked through the still-active construction zone for Phase Three of the Mansion Complex, he looked up at the facades appreciatively and named each type of stone. The quality of stone on Phase One was better than the quality on Phase Two and Three, he said, and together with his wife they tried to remember which Phase their friend was living in—Phase One? Phase Two? In an effort to show off how much I’d learned during my time in Zhengzhou, I told him that the building management here was—

“Bad?” he laughed.

I started. How did he know?

“If someone starts talking about the building management they are certainly going to say it’s bad. If it was good, they wouldn’t talk about it.”

Through lunch, all my attempts to demonstrate my proficiency and insight—to let him know that I was already in and that his interview could only add to my already substantial knowledge—were similarly dismissed. He already knew about the power outages at the Mansion Complex because he knew about the villagers protesting at the

transformer station site. Desperate, I turned to a story about Old Duck Village, an urban village protesting their impending demolition. Before I could even get past the name, he cut me off—"Old Duck Village is also protesting."

"How did you know?" I exclaimed in an attempt to mask my irritation with excitement.

"Because they blocked the road (*du lu*)!" he roared, laughing. "Everyone who drives knows about Old Duck Village. Whenever there is a situation the government cannot resolve, people will block the road."

At this point, his wife intervened. She said she was from a military family in Zhengzhou, which was her way of saying she'd been there a long time, longer than most. "You should know that even we city people do not necessarily think this development and demolition is a good thing," she explained, "Because now many of the places where I made my childhood memories are gone." Her husband stirred uncomfortably; he asked me whether I thought America or the PRC was more developed. "Not this!" his wife exclaimed. "When we were driving across America, we kept having this argument. He says China because Shanghai and Beijing are so much more developed than America, but our daughter says America because even remote places (*pian de difang*) will be at the same level of development."

My notes don't say what opinion I put forth; I imagined I tried, as I often did during these types of discussions, to find the middle ground and take it. The truth was that if Henan continues to develop at the rate it is now, even so-called remote places might soon reach a level of development similar to those in Zhengzhou. Everywhere I went in Henan I saw new apartment complexes with strange names evoking distant

places popping up: Rancho Santa Fe, Vancouver, Manhattan, etc. I do not know what life in each of these new luxurious complexes was like; all I know is that at the Mansion Complex, the power outages began in November of 2013. As of November 2014, they continued and showed no signs of stopping—each flicker a sign of rupture, a broken segment of a line the government is desperately trying to draw.

Coda: The Only Objective Thing

Or so I thought when I left the field in October 2014. After nine months, in June 2015, I returned to Zhengzhou to complete ten more months of fieldwork. The power outages at the Mansion Complex had, strangely, stopped. I say "strangely" because the transformer station had not yet been completed. This was the same transformer station the Eternal Glory Real Estate employees insisted had to be built before the Mansion Complex could connect to the State Grid; this was the same transformer station that, logically, should have been a prerequisite for stable power at the Mansion Complex. A short walk around the area between the Mansion Complex, White Horse Village, and Mulberry Tree Village revealed that where the transformer station should be there were no protestors and no station: just a hole in the earth. Over the next few months, a blue aluminum wall blocking observers from seeing the hole in the earth went up, but every so often the gate was left open, and I could see clearly that if progress was being made on the station, it was being made at a glacial pace.

Even so, no one was suspicious. Not even me. Not even Sophy and Taylor. Mostly, they were grateful that the outages had stopped. Just after the Spring Festival in 2015, James and Jacob had finally decided to give up on the coffee shop, which was right above the Capitalist Pig. Sophy and Taylor took over the rent, expanded into the upstairs,

and remodeled the restaurant so they had twice as many tables. The added square footage meant added expenses, and though the electricity was no longer a problem, Sophy and Taylor still seemed stressed.

One day in December 2015, I was eating dinner with Ya in the Capitalist Pig when she suddenly reached across the table and grabbed my wrist. "Yuping, I need to tell you something," she said urgently, "But I will only do it if you don't tell Sophy. I don't want her to tell Taylor. I am afraid it will make him mad." Ya's English was far from fluent, but she had frequently witnessed Taylor's frustrated outbursts, whose anger needed no translation. Ya had recently taken a job working at Heaven Coffee, a very successful cafe in a different apartment complex built on White Horse Village land. The owner of Heaven Coffee had, for a brief period of time, had a cafe on Nobleman's Lane as well; when he'd been forced to close it because of rising rents, he'd hired a popular journalist to write a detailed exposé of the ordeal to make the experience into an object lesson about Zhengzhou's real estate market (and promote his remaining coffee shop).

The manager of Heaven Coffee had worked for her boss for five years and had seen the cafe on Nobleman's Lane go under in real time. She and Ya had become close, and she'd confided in Ya that in the Mansion Complex everything was not as it seemed. "Don't you think it's strange that there are no power outages when they have not finished the transformer station?" Ya pressed me, and I shrugged, not understanding what she was getting at. Sighing, Ya told me what Heaven Coffee's manager said the boss had told her: The reason construction on the transformer station had been delayed was *not* because of the protests of the Mulberry Tree villagers. It was because the State Grid *had not wanted* to build the transformer station.

"Think about it," Ya urged me, "The State Grid is right. Maybe this area does not need a grid. There were lots of people using electricity here before the Most Expensive Mansion Complex." She pointed out that there had been a high school, a university, a hospital, two densely populated urban villages, and the electronics market, all coexisting without an additional transformer station for decades.

"What my boss told my manager is that Eternal Glory wanted the State Grid to build a transformer station because they are worried the new Wanda complex will use too much electricity when it opens," Ya continued, "So they let the power go out. Eternal Glory *wanted* the business owners on Nobleman's Lane to protest and block the road. Then they could go to the government and say, 'See? Look at what a problem this is! We really *do* need a transformer station.' They made the power outages *on purpose*." She shook her head: "They're really too smart (*tai congming le*)!"

I sat there, dumbfounded. "How did your boss know this?" I asked, finally growing skeptical again.

"The owner of the high-end tea shop told him," Ya said, "That owner was cooperating with Eternal Glory. He got everyone to protest didn't he? And when he stopped didn't everyone else stop?" She shook her head. "My boss said Eternal Glory gave the tea shop owner lots of money. No one knows how much."

For me, however, there was not enough evidence. I knew Ya would never mislead me on purpose, but she had heard the story third hand. I decided to ask Lily, the first woman lawyer to open an independent, private law firm in Zhengzhou, what she thought of the story. Was the reason behind the reason for the power outages the conflict between Eternal Glory and the State Grid?

Lily hummed for a moment, as she often did when she was trying to decide how to put a sensitive topic to me not just delicately but also in words simple enough that I would be able understand. “Yuping, the reason behind the reason (*beihou de yuanyin*) is not important here,” she said finally, “What’s important is whether a transformer station is needed or not. This is objective (*keguan de*). Next is the question of who pays (*shei fudan*). The reason the transformer station is built is not important. What’s important is who will build it, and who will pay for it.”

“Won’t the State Grid pay for it?” I asked, and Lily laughed.

“Probably Eternal Glory is paying for it,” she said, “To get a new transformer station built, you have to wait or else you have to pay the government. That is certain. What is uncertain is *how much* they paid.”

“But why would they go about it in such a roundabout (*rao*) way?” I asked. “Do you think the power outages stopped because Eternal Glory got the government to agree to a price?”

“Not necessarily,” Lily said. “Yuping, you are not understanding. Chinese people will always feel there is a reason behind the reason. Even though I didn’t personally deal with this case, I will still feel there is a reason behind the reason. For it to be roundabout is not unusual (*rao bu qiyi*). And it is not important. What is important is that if the transformer is needed, it will be built. That is the only objective thing.”

I kept pressing her, and Lily kept pushing me off. “You don’t understand China!” Lily insisted, “Ordinary people (*laobaixing*) are not like you. They will not investigate why there are no power outages now. They only care that now they do have electricity. They put their feelings into practical actions (*shiji xingdong*).”

As though to prove her point, the city was in the midst of another opaque reorganization that was neither well planned nor well publicized. It was December 12, 2015. In three days, the city of Zhengzhou—in what was an unexpected boost to its national standing—would host the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting. For the past week, the city had scrambled to replace broken street lamps, repaint lane markers, and even clean high-rise windows. To protect the world leaders and foreign dignitaries who would be visiting the city, rumor had it that residents in the Central Business District had been paid up to 1,000RMB a night to vacate their homes, which were within sniping range of the place where the meeting was set to be held. There had also been "rehearsals" during which sudden road closures had literally prevented much of the city from getting to work. The reason Lily, her high school friend Ann, and I were able to spend the afternoon in an expensive tea shop on the east side of the city was because no one at Ann's company could go to work—their office building had been ordered shut by the Zhengzhou police department. Ann had not been participating in our conversation about the Mansion Complex because she was worried that she would not be able to pick her daughter up from school on the south side of the city if the roads were closed that day.

Lily casually tossed Ann her gold iPhone 5S. "Call my husband," she commanded, "Ask him."

Ann laughed and looked at me nervously.

"It's fine," Lily said. In an aside to me she said: "My husband is a police chief."

Lily's husband picked up the phone immediately and was understandably surprised to find Ann instead of his wife.

"Jiefu," she said, calling him the term for her elder's sister's husband, "will Zhongzhou Road be closed today?" There was a beat. The police chief must have said something ambiguous, because Ann grew impatient. "The government will publicly announce it at 3PM? Jiefu, do not tell me that fake stuff! Will the roads be closed or not?" She smiled as she hung up. "He told me the real thing. They won't be closed!"

Triumphant, the three of us got into Ann's car and went to pick up her daughter. The streets were, as Lily's husband promised, open, but more than that they were empty—an uncanny sight in normally congested Zhengzhou. The empty roads made Lily's point for her. By *not* explicitly stating that the roads were open, the police had managed to do what they would have accomplished by explicitly announcing they were closed, and kept them clear. Sometimes, to be roundabout—to conceal that the reason for the power outages was not the unfinished transformer station and that the reason for the unfinished transformer station was not the protesting Mulberry Tree villagers—was to be effective. The protests, the meetings, and the rumors of collusion—none of it mattered. In the end, the transformer station was being built; in the end, the roads were still open if we dared to drive on them. Those were the only objective things any of us could say about any of it.

Revised Interpretations and Incredible Credulity

Ya was not the only person fixated on the high-end teashop owner in the winter of 2016. His fortunes had changed drastically since opening the shop in July 2013. Even after the power outages stopped, few businesses on Nobleman's Lane had survived, and there were a dozen vacancies on the pedestrian street. Sophy, Taylor, and the other business owners guessed that his business had hit hard times because he and his wife had

moved in to their shop; every night after 10PM, Sophy told me conspiratorially, there was a U-lock holding the doors closed from the *inside*. Flight was not an option for him, however; he had signed an agreement with the owner of the retail space to rent both his shop on the bottom floor and the space on the second floor for five years. Lulu—the owner of the minority-themed coffee shop who sat with me at the protest—sublet that space from him, and her business was not thriving but she was doing better than the teashop owner. Just before the Spring Festival, she had completed an expensive (and impressive) renovation of the space. She put down real wooden floorboards, had antique wooden windows shipped in from Guizhou, and designed a colorful tile mosaic for one of the remaining walls. Because of the vacancies, when she went to renegotiate her lease with the teashop owner, she expected him to lower her rent to meet market rates or keep it the same; instead, the teashop owner raised her rent and refused to renew her lease unless she accepted it.

"He thought I could not leave because of all the money I spent renovating," Lulu sighed, "The truth is I was already prepared to leave." It was late January 2016. We were sitting at a table in Cardboard Coffee with its owner, Calvin. A few nights before, I had been eating dinner in the Capitalist Pig with Jane, the long-time hostess who had moved on to another job teaching English, when something strange began to happen. A man came through the door bearing a wooden latticed window on his back and marched straight up the stairs. He was followed by another man carrying an ornate door, and then another with an antique mirror. Jane had played on her cell phone, bored. "You weren't here at Christmas last year when Taylor and the Korean boss threw all the building

management's Christmas Trees in the fountain," she said, "In China, this is already not strange. Anything can happen here."

Soon, Sophy emerged to explain: rather than renew her lease and agree to its insulting terms, Lulu had decided to move out. In a fury, the tea shop owner told her she wouldn't get any of her deposit back unless she returned the space to him exactly as he'd rented it to her, meaning with blank walls, concrete floors, and no fixtures whatsoever; he then left, supposedly for his ancestral home (*laojia*). Lulu had begun demolishing and moving her furniture out, but she ran into a problem: the building management wouldn't let her remove anything from Nobleman's Lane. The building management claimed they needed a signed form from Lulu's landlord saying she had moved out to remove the property so they could be sure she wasn't stealing his property. Lulu explained that she wouldn't be allowed to move out until all the furniture and fixtures were gone and that this was a contradiction (*maodun*), but the building management did not care. Infuriated by the building management's obstinacy, Sophy had stepped in and told Lulu to store her furniture, fixtures, and other equipment on the porch of the Capitalist Pig until they gave up or forgot about it. I had asked Lulu to meet with me to explain what exactly had happened, and Calvin, who had seen Lulu's cafe not as a competitor but as an ally ("The more coffee shops there are in Zhengzhou teaching consumers how to drink coffee, the better it is for the market," he explained) had wanted to catch up. Rather than the interview I had imagined it would be, the conversation quickly took a different turn as Lulu asked Calvin, the more experienced businessperson, for advice.

"I want to sue him," she told Calvin, who shook his head. "Not for money, but to broadcast this."

"Why would you sue him for this," I asked, "but not the building management for the power outages?"

"Because you want revenge (*baochou*)," Calvin said. "But what you need is just to admit that you and him are not the same kind of person. He doesn't have anything to do with your world. You can't change this person. You have to understand why he is this way and in the future only do business with grown people (*chengnian ren*)."

"He is old enough to be my father!" Lulu protested. "How is he not grown?"

"Look at him!" Calvin countered. "He is living in his shop. Do you think he is grown? Do you think he is happy? You should thank him. This person educated you. This is a tuition fee (*xuefei*)." He continued. "As a person who does business, do you know what I am scared of? I am not scared of losing money, because money's cost (*chengben*) is the cheapest. I am scared of losing money and not learning anything."

Lulu nodded, but I was still stuck on my original question. "But during the power outages," I said, "Everyone got together and blocked the road and then no one was compensated—"

"And then things were just that way (*ranhou zhe ge shiqing jiu zheyang le*)," Lulu smiled, understanding.

"Because no one sued," Calvin explained.

"No one sued," Lulu confirmed. "The cost of protecting your rights is too high (*weiquan de chengben tai gao*)."

"There was no compensation because no one sued, and no one sued because they could not sue," Calvin interrupted. He began to laugh as he talked, and he was laughing at me. "In America, you can sue. Lawyers will come to you and say, 'All 50 of you have

no power? You don't even need to give me money and I will sue!' But in China, lawyers are not willing to do that. They're making trouble (*daoluan le*)! And then, even if you win, how will you split the money? Making trouble again!"

I couldn't help myself; even though Ya had asked me not to tell people, I began to tell Lulu how I had heard the teashop owner colluded with Eternal Glory, who *wanted* the business owners to protest so that the government would force the State Grid to build the transformer station.

"Don't you think it's strange that the power outages stopped but the transformer station isn't finished?"

Lulu paused. "I never thought about it," she admitted, "I don't know how they got power in the end. I thought maybe they used a different transformer station."

"They say the tea shop owner *was* compensated," I continued, "They said he was working with Eternal Glory. Do you think it's true?"

Lulu thought for a moment. "It's possible (*you keneng*)," she admitted, "One of the security guards told me he'd gotten money. And it would explain why the building management was so willing to keep us from moving our furniture out." Her dampened response confused me. It was not because she was numb; a few minutes later, she became angry again when describing how the building management refused to let her take some cheap aluminum scaffolding off of Nobleman's Lane. "I told them, 'It's not worth anything!'" she shouted, raising her voice to reenter the memory in front of Calvin and me, "'It's trash just like you are trash!'"

The next day, Sophy and I went to eat Japanese noodles together. In the car, on the way back to the Capitalist Pig, I told her Ya's theory that Eternal Glory had

orchestrated the protests with the tea shop owner's help. She waited for me to finish, and then, still staring straight ahead at the road began to speak in calm, measured English: "I guess all I have to say is that if this is true, life is really like a movie. You were there the day that we protested and negotiated with the Eternal Glory leader and the government. They were real government officials! And it was the real leader. They did not say anything about this." She paused. "But the tea shop owner was not there. And after that, the power outages did stop. And the transformer station is not finished."

She turned to look at me at a stoplight. "Do not tell Taylor this," she said, her voice serious, "He will be too angry." I promised I wouldn't. When we arrived at the Capitalist Pig, Lulu was there helping the wait staff set up the refrigerator she'd sold to Sophy and Taylor. Sophy and Lulu began conferring quickly in Mandarin about the teashop owner, his collusion with the building management, and Eternal Glory's use of their protests to manipulate the State Grid. Taylor attended to some other part of the restaurant, none the wiser. Within less than a day, the two women had already accepted this new interpretation of events and integrated it into their understanding of reality. Their credulity was incredible to me, but it was, as Jane the waitress pointed out, no more incredible than their reality.

As the two women chatted about the transformer station and how strange the timing of the power outages had been, Taylor picked out a Mandarin word—*tingdian* or power outage—that he recognized. "What's that about power outages, baby?" he called over to Sophy from behind the bar. The energy in the room shifted; all of us believed that if Taylor found out, he would fly into a rage, and that Sophy would invariably bear the brunt of it. Lulu tried to lock eyes with Sophy, but she was looking at me pointedly. As I

shifted uncomfortably under the weight of her stare, she put her feelings into practical actions.

"Nothing," she said firmly in English, "Don't worry about it."

CHAPTER THREE

The Secret Hoarders: Fortune Tellers, Middlemen, and Family Members

The fortuneteller wasn't exactly where Shaoshao thought he would be. It had been years since Shaoshao had lived in Zhengzhou, and though she remembered very clearly passing them every day on the way to middle school, it had been even longer since she'd revisited her childhood neighborhood. "We live in the New East District now," she said, "We have ever since I started high school." In four more months, I wouldn't be able to hear an admission like this without immediately speculating about the person's background and how they were able to afford to live in that expensive, sparsely populated district of the city. But on the day we went to find the fortuneteller, it was July. I had only been in Zhengzhou for a week. As Shaoshao gave her father directions, I sat dumbly in the back of the car and wondering at how similar the scene outside was to illustrations on the covers of American science fiction novels. Eventually, I would grow to know Zhengzhou's network of streets and elevated roads even better than many of my interlocutors in the city, but on that day they could have taken me to Mars and I never would have known the difference.

In spite of her status as a "Zhengzhou Person" (*Zhengzhou ren*)—someone who was born and raised in the city—Shaoshao's disorientation was similar to or perhaps even worse than mine. I at least had spent months back in Princeton studying maps of the city and trying to decide where to rent an apartment. When the elevated road we were on curved toward a stretch of suddenly green canopy punctured by Ferris wheels and roller coasters, I thought of a patch of green I'd used to orient myself on the map and asked if

this was People's Park. Shaoshao immediately said no, but her father spoke up in dialect. "He says it is," she explained in English, without seeming to be troubled by the correction. Shaoshao is one of my oldest friends in China, and I have always found the way she could admit ignorance without getting defensive to be one of the most hilarious and appealing things about her. When we lived together in a "mixed" dormitory—half foreign students, half Chinese students—in Beijing in 2008, one of our mutual friends would make a game out of teasing Shaoshao about all the things she didn't know about China and about her life. Shaoshao was different from the other students in the dorm, many of whom came from poor or middle class backgrounds. Her family was wealthy enough to pay for her to study abroad, but when questioned in 2008, she had no idea what her father did for a living. Her mother, she knew, worked in a bank, but her father? "He travels a lot for meetings, but when I ask him what he's doing he never tells me," she admitted once in 2008, and our mutual friend immediately declared that he must be a spy for the government—the kind of over-complicated explanation that over-implicates the PRC's exotically undemocratic government and that only an American college student studying abroad for the first time would believe. But Shaoshao, for a time, accepted it along with the rest of us, nodding and laughing along when we'd tease her about her mysterious spy-father.

On that day in July 2014, sitting in the backseat of his car six years later, I'd find that the truth was, of course, stranger than any fiction the 20-year-old versions of ourselves could have possibly dreamed up: Shaoshao's father was a loan shark for a private lender (*danbao gongsi*). He too had once worked at the same state-owned bank as Shaoshao's mother but left after Reform and Opening Up and now used his financial

expertise to provide high-interest loans to people looking to purchase used cars. He did not admit this to me himself, but Shaoshao explained it gamely in English, after she'd asked him to satisfy my curiosity. Shaoshao herself had studied finance at a college in America and was planning to try to find work at a bank in Canada, where her husband—another person from Zhengzhou—was pursuing a master's degree in engineering. While she waited for her Canadian work permit to be processed, she was spending a few months in Zhengzhou, seeing her family, and catching up with old friends, like me. Her father had insisted on driving her to meet me for lunch that morning even though it was a weekday. "Doesn't he have to be at work?" I asked—a question I'd discard almost entirely as time went on and I realized that above a certain socioeconomic line few people in Zhengzhou ever *really* had to be at work.

"He's supposed to be," Shaoshao considered, "but then he just doesn't go and it's okay."

During lunch—roast duck, the compulsory meal one shares with foreign guests, even if they'd been living in China for years—a friend of Shaoshao's father from high school happened to be in the same restaurant. She came by the table to say hello and announced that Shaoshao looked exactly like her mother. Shaoshao smiled in embarrassment.

"Is this what Zhengzhou is like?" I asked, "Is it like a small town?" Shaoshao said it was not nearly as bad as the even smaller town where she'd gone to college in America, but that yes, people did know each other and would see each other around. This was what made her marriage so amazing; even though they were both from Zhengzhou (he from

the West, she from the East), they'd met not here, where it would be ordinary, but in far away Beijing. "It was *yuanfen*," she said, "How do you say *yuanfen* in English?"

Fate. *Yuanfen* is one of the many words there are in Chinese for fate. When I said this, though, Shaoshao shook her head: "No, fate is bad. *Yuanfen* is good." Serendipity, then? While she considered it, I told Shaoshao that in fact I was in Zhengzhou to study fate, luck, and unpredictability, but even I had a hard time combing out the finer philological differences between *mingyun* (personal fate determined by heaven) and *yuanfen* (a Buddhist concept of a fated meeting of people). I asked if she'd seen a fortuneteller *suanmingren*—literally, a person who calculates fate—before getting married. "No," she laughed, "I don't really believe in that kind of stuff." She translated our exchange in English to her father, who also laughed and set his cigarette down.

Whenever I asked about fortunetellers the first time, this kind of reaction—a laughing disavowal—was common. Another mutual friend of Shaoshao and mine who had also lived in the same dorm as us in 2008 had responded similarly when I brought up my research just a few weeks before. She maintained that she thought many fortunetellers were fakes, and her husband agreed. But then again, she mused, she had a friend studying the Yijing (I-ching) with a well-funded master and her mother-in-law would consult a fortuneteller before she and her husband chose a wedding date. The problem, she declared finally, was that to get an accurate reading, you had to pay even more. The more money you paid, the more accurate (*zhun*) the reading would be.

I related our friend's analysis to Shaoshao, who laughed even harder but then got an idea: What if she took me to a fortuneteller that very afternoon? On her way to middle school she used to walk by a place where they would tell fortunes on the street, and street

fortune tellers weren't expensive she assured me—only 20 or 30RMB (under 5USD). Did I want to go? It had been raining earlier that morning, but other than a fear of being caught in inclement weather, I couldn't think of a good reason why not, and so we ended up back in Shaoshao's father's car, whizzing through the still-alien landscape on our way to a place Shaoshao was sure she'd know when she saw it. She didn't, or maybe her father didn't believe her—either way we ended up getting out of the car a block or so away from where Shaoshao thought we should be. She lightly and swiftly chastised her father while simultaneously apologizing to me for making me walk. We were on one of Zhengzhou's busiest east-west roads, and we were headed toward the city zoo. Before we got there, though, we had to clamber over construction detritus beside a high-end mall and Shaoshao saw an ad for Kiehl's Facial Products that launched her into a rant about how much money her friends were wasting on designer products. "We're young! We look good in whatever we wear! We don't need to spend so much," she declared in Mandarin. She grew more thoughtful: "I think this is the biggest difference in me after I went to America. Now I can see when something is not right." I nodded, feeling as though I knew exactly what she meant. "Do you tell people when you think a thing is not right?" I asked. She paused. "Sometimes. About clothes, yes."

We neared the spot where the fortunetellers should be, and Shaoshao started to get nervous. "I don't know if they'll be out today because of the rain," she confessed, but then we walked a little further than she thought we'd have to and there they were: two men and one woman, with red mats spread out on the dirt in front of them, just the way she'd said they'd be. The woman was in the midst of a reading, so we approached the men. At the time, I was unsure which of the men was the fortune teller; later I realized

they were probably both fortune tellers working the same stretch of street and that one was visiting the other's mat, the same way one coworker might stop by another's cubicle to break up the monotony of the work day. "Don't say anything," Shaoshao warned me in a probably futile attempt to keep the fortuneteller from realizing I was foreign. As she negotiated the price, he was already sizing me up, probably noting my strange clothes and my obvious inability to adjust to Zhengzhou's climate.[31] Agreeing on a price—10RMB to ask one question or 30RMB to get my entire fate calculated—took a long time, not because it was unreasonable but because the fortune teller was speaking a dialect Shaoshao could not really understand. She asked for it cheaper, which I thought was a little ridiculous, and then ran over to the other woman to ask her prices. The woman—rightly, I think—waved her off irritatedly, and so we sat down with the man, who made unceasing eye contact as he read my fortune.

Though I was put off by the man's eye contact at the time, later it became clear that he was reading my fate in my face. This is just one of the many techniques fortune tellers in Zhengzhou can use to calculate your fate, particularly the portions of your past that you may not even know about or—to put it differently—be conscious of. People in the PRC disagreed as to whether my face could even be read. When I reported the results of my reading to my friend's friend in Beijing who was studying the I-Ching, she said that because I was a foreigner my reading would be inaccurate. No fortune teller I ever met ever used this phenotypical argument to refuse to read my face, but many of the laypeople I spoke to used it to dismiss the validity of the more disturbing parts of my

[31] I spent most of the first two months of my fieldwork sweating uncontrollably—eventually a Chinese medicine doctor diagnosed my stomach as the problem and prescribed a tea made of Job's Tears; the sweating stopped.

reading. Face reading's accuracy can also be limited by face and eyebrow repair (a euphemism for plastic surgery) and many of fortune tellers who have "closed" operations (meaning they do readings exclusively by referral) will only do face readings in the morning, when faces are fresh and unburdened by the concerns of the day.

These were all things I'd learn later, though. In the moment, I was just sitting on a small, foldable stool between the road and the zoo wall while an old man stared at me and told me things about myself in a dialect I could barely understand. I kept looking to Shaoshao for translation or explanation, but the fortuneteller interrupted her attempts to intervene: "You can understand me," he insisted, his eyes still locked on mine, "We understand each other." After all three of his methods—face reading, palm reading, and card reading—were exhausted, the fortune teller indicated that my reading was over. Shaoshao moved as though to pay him, and he shook his head: It was my fate that had been calculated and so I had to pay. I did. I gave him my business card and asked if I could come back to ask him more questions about my research, and he handed me his own colorful business card. "I have an office, but usually I am here on the road," he chuckled, "If we have *yuanfen* I'll be happy to help you." He asked Shaoshao if she had any more questions, and she frowned and shook her head. We walked around the corner and stood underneath a tree trying to record all the contents of the reading in my notebook while it was still fresh in our minds. As we finished, it began to rain. Even now, I can still see the warped places where drops of water tell onto the page before we found refuge in a passing taxi.

Uncertainty Without Borders: Connecting Ways of Knowing in Central China

My memory of that day, which came so early in my fieldwork, is still colored by disorientation. I now know where the zoo is, where the road is, and where the mall—which I would later discover was Zhengzhou's biggest and best high-end mall—is. Nevertheless, I never once managed to replicate the walk the two of us took past the mall and around the edge of the zoo during the next 15 months I spent in Zhengzhou meeting with interlocutors in that very same mall. Part of that has to do with structural changes; in January, major construction began on a second subway line, and the area in front of and around the zoo was effectively destroyed as earthmovers excavated what will eventually become a subway station. Even if I had wanted to find the spot where I'd first had my fortune told, it likely no longer existed as of when my fieldwork ended in March 2016. Part of that also has to do, though, with the strangeness of the experience; I left with the sense that this old fortuneteller, with his unintelligible dialect and unblinking, light eyes, in a place I had never lived before somehow *knew* me. I would get my fortune told three times over the next year and each time I would walk away with a similar sense of being exposed or found out. Each time it took days for me to rationalize what the fortuneteller had told me, to move backwards in my mind from his declarations to the evidence I must have been revealing to lead him to his conclusions. This particular time I was leaving for Qinghai the next day, and I spent much of a five-hour delay in the Zhengzhou Airport reciting my fortune to my traveling companions and asking them whether or not they thought it was accurate.

"Xiao Lin, you are thinking too much," Huang Na, a forty-five-year-old once divorced but now-remarried woman I met through the university told me. "Some fortune tellers can be really accurate (*zhun*), but maybe not exact (*zhunque*). I think fortunetellers

are mostly for comfort. He says you will be married later, in two years. What you should think is, 'I will get married!' and then relax, and then maybe you will be married in three or four. Otherwise, if you think too much and believe you will get married in two years, and then you do not, you will be disappointed."

Unlike Shaoshao, Huang Na never directly said she didn't believe in fortune telling. I knew from a dinner with her and her second husband, Fatty, during my first visit to Zhengzhou that at the very least her second husband was a big believer in the practice. He told me his father had been a fortuneteller—not professionally, just to friends—and that in a stroke of rebellion he'd refused to believe the ability was real until after his father's death. At that point, a friend had dragged him to see a fortune teller who had won him over by not only telling his fortune accurately but also by telling him the exact amount of change he had on his person. "Down to the last *mao*!" Fatty exclaimed, "Even I did not know how much money I had on me down to the last *mao*." That encounter with a fortune teller had been the first step on what was becoming a long, spiritual journey for Fatty in the wake of his father's death; after that, he'd become an adherent of Buddhism, or at the very least invested in many bracelets, jade pieces, and good luck charms that were becoming popular among wealthy business people in Zhengzhou.

From the skeptic's perspective, the trick to fortune telling is both to keep statements vague and aphoristic enough so that they could be true for almost anyone and to keep a large repertoire of these statements on hand so that you do not repeat yourself. Strangely enough, when I visited fortune tellers, they tended to tell me shades of the same thing: I didn't care about money, I would get married later, I was better at caring for my friends than I was at caring for my family. Nevertheless, these are pretty obvious

statements. Anyone who's paying to have their fortune told is not necessarily smart with their money; any single woman above the age of 24 in Central China assumed to be anxious about her already late marriage; and finally, from the perspective of a person born and raised in Henan, the mere fact that I was foreign and living so far away from America and therefore my family was evidence enough that I did not care for my parents. Even my outwardly skeptical friends would hedge, however, when I came to them with these rationalizations. Most fortunetellers are just good at reading people, they'd say, but some really can see your fate. The problem was that the people who were really able to see your fate would suffer for it; it was well-known that for every accurate fortune you told you gave up a little bit of your own life. Real fortunetellers died young, my friends told me. It's a punishment for looking at those lines drawn by heaven—lines that human beings aren't meant to see. Fortunetellers defy the cosmic limits on knowledge set by divine forces.

In this chapter, I explore how the people I worked with in Zhengzhou dealt with epistemological limits: secrets, revelations, deceptions, and other unreliable or possibly dangerous types of knowledge. I argue that people's theories of knowledge can often already accommodate things that are false, hidden, or not actual and that these realistic but not real elements help people manage negativity or realities that disrupt more acceptable versions of the social order. By comparing fortunetellers, *zhongjie* or middlemen, and family members, I illuminate how the production, concealment, and revelation of knowledge become not just a personally generative process but also an economically profitable one in Zhengzhou. By comparing the practices of fortune tellers, a category of people anthropologists traditional associate with the occult, and zhongjie, a

seemingly rational, modern economic profession, I show how systemic theories of knowledge collapse divisions between the supernatural and the secular and even between the public and private.

This collapse is not unique to Central China; anthropologists working elsewhere have also found that in spite of the spread of scientific and other forms of knowledge associated with enlightenment, local superstitions continue to persist and thrive (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1998, 2000; Geschiere 1997; West 2005). Far from answering people's questions about how and why things happen, I argue that the speed of the PRC's economic liberalization left people with tremendous gaps in their knowledge. Zhongjie emerged to fill those gaps by selling people the knowledge they need to embody fully their new status—whether it's as the citizen of a new country, an international exchange student, or a successful entrepreneur. Operationally, fortunetellers do essentially the same thing by selling the unknown known to customers. From comments and interviews with interlocutors, I extract two main principles about knowledge (and what can be known) in Zhengzhou. The first is the idea that people will withhold knowledge *just in case*; the second is that people tend to believe that everything can be known and that, for almost everything, *somebody knows* or at least could have known. While my interlocutors connect these two parallel theories of knowing back to the precariousness of the Cultural Revolution, I link them to the generation gaps produced by Reform and Opening Up and the chasms that exist even within tightly-knit family units. Ultimately, keeping or telling secrets in Zhengzhou is a way of exerting control in an environment where uncertainty reigns even in—or especially in—life's most intimate realms.

Shaoshao's Old Apartment: Secrecy as a Kind of Comfort

In the cab, after leaving that first fortuneteller, Shaoshao admitted that she regretted not speaking longer to him. “I wanted to ask him a question about my future,” she confessed in English, “but if the answer was bad, I couldn’t bear it.” I could tell she didn’t want to reveal the question to me, but I also couldn’t help myself. “Was it about your personal life? Your career? Or just your future in general?” She hesitated. “It was about my marriage. I feel that my husband and I got together too quickly, and I am worried we made the wrong decision.” I smiled indulgently. Shaoshao and her husband and dated long-distance for years while she was in America and he was in Canada. Once, she’d spent Thanksgiving at a mutual friend’s house in North Carolina, and he’d called me to complain that all she did the whole time was talk to her then-boyfriend on QQ (a Chinese instant messaging service). “Why are you worried about this?” I asked, “Just because you were long-distance for such a long time?” Shaoshao looked out the window of the cab at the rain, as though considering. Then: “Even our other friends don’t know this, but two years ago my mother died.”

One of the things that’s always puzzled me about old kung fu movies from Hong Kong and—more recently—action movies from the PRC is the way the tone can suddenly shift. One minute, the hero is involved in a drunken brawl, where slapstick humor followed by pun after pun causes the audience to roar with laughter; the next minute, he returns home to find the villain and his cronies cackling together after they’ve raped and murdered his wife and three daughters. People who survive unthinkable disasters know that the line between laughter and tears is less clear than one would imagine. I thought of those Kung Fu movies and the face of the hero as it bends from smugness to horror as I struggled to respond appropriately to Shaoshao’s disclosure, to

forget that just moments before we'd been giggling beneath a tree in the rain, united by the ephemeral joy of shared confidences and an encounter with the occult. "Oh, Shaoshao, I'm so sorry," I said finally.

"It's okay," she continued, "I am better now, but when you said I seemed thinner—that's why. My husband and I—all this is part of the reason we got married so fast. We were only together for two years before we got married even though we knew each other for five years. I still think it's very fast."

"It's not so fast," I said slowly, carefully, trying to feel my way toward something that could be comforting without condescending. "I think that when there is something serious—like a death or another kind of tragedy—you get to become intimate and close with someone much faster. You can know them faster."

"I do think he cares about me a lot," she said, "And I am very lucky because his parents—my in-laws—are like a second set of parents for me. It is so complicated to get married in China right now. It is not just two people, it is two families."

"It's like that everywhere," I said, thinking of a cutting speech my aunt had made at my grandparents' 50th anniversary party (the punch line had been "I'm not sure I would marry the man again, but I would definitely remarry the family"). "When you marry someone, you also marry their family. People who don't believe that suffer."

Silence. I was overwhelmed by the sense that we had not closed the issue yet, that there was something more to be said. So I asked: "How is your father doing?" Shaoshao smiled. "I think he is okay now. When we decided to get lunch with you, we also decided to get dinner tonight with my future stepmother. Really it is okay. We are all moving on."

A few weeks later, she'd tell me that at the dinner that night her father revealed that this woman was not her future stepmother but her present stepmother. She and Shaoshao's father had been married months ago, but he hadn't wanted to tell Shaoshao at the time because—well, Shaoshao didn't know why. Shaoshao didn't know why her father did many of things he'd done. She said she guessed the reason was that they were afraid she wouldn't accept the marriage.

"They should have told me earlier," she said in English.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I was just shocked," she reported. Then, after a moment: "I can already accept it."

That summer, Shaoshao and her father were not living in the same house; according to what she described as Chinese tradition and also her own preference Shaoshao was staying with her husband's parents, in the room they set aside in their apartment specifically for their son and his wife. Shaoshao's father had prepared the house where he lived with her mother for show, so that when Shaoshao first arrived in Zhengzhou she would not suspect anything drastic (such as a marriage to a woman she'd never met) had occurred, but once the marriage was revealed, the two of them had effectively abandoned the house. Once, Shaoshao and I spent the night there. Even though there were three empty rooms, Shaoshao insisted we sleep in the same bed and leave the other doors unopened. "I'm glad you're here," she said as she gave me a pair of her deceased mother's pajamas to wear, "It's too sad alone." Shaoshao and her father had decided not to rent the apartment and to keep it exactly as it had been when her mother

was alive. When we left the next morning, we made sure to turn off the water, gas, and power and to erase all other possible signs of our presence. We sealed it up like a tomb.

When Shaoshao's mother first became sick with ovarian cancer, Shaoshao was at university in America. As far as I can tell, it's quite normal throughout the PRC for parents Shaoshao's father's age—people who were born in the 1950s and 1960s—to withhold information about family illnesses, financial difficulties, and tragedies from their children, especially when those children are in school. The logic seems to be that children should not be burdened with knowledge that will weigh them down and influence their schoolwork, which will affect the trajectory of their entire future. Once, I was with a teacher of mine—a man from the countryside born in the early 1980s—when his mother called him to tell him one of his cousins had drowned while trying to save her younger brother, who had also drowned. He reacted not with sadness but with intense anger. "Why would she call me to tell me this?" he barked at me, the only other person in the room, "She should know that I am busy and teaching—there is nothing I can do! Why should I have to know this?" Again, I tried to find something to say just south of comforting: "Probably she is very sad herself and needed to share this with someone she loved." He glowered at me. "She is being selfish! And those stupid kids—why would they go into the water? How could their parents be so dumb as to not teach them how to swim?" He put his head down on the desk. I left the room.

Shaoshao is different from my teacher; she was raised in the city not the countryside, and she would rather have known about her mother's illness and all associated grief from the outset. Most educated, urban, middle- to upper-middle-class people in their 20s and 30s I spoke with described this as being just one of many beliefs

that separates their generation from the one that came before. That said, when I asked directly whether they would tell their children if they were sick, many of them hesitated and said they would have to see what the situation was like when it arose. What is clear is that most of them continue to live within the constraints created by the older generation's tendency to be secretive; a friend of mine in Beijing once spent three stressful months in a conspiracy to keep her husband's cousin from discovering his father's terminal cancer, which, it turned out, was misdiagnosed and nonexistent. When I asked why they were bothering to go through all this trouble—at one point the situation was so ridiculously complicated that time we spent together was implicated in a lie that would explain her uncle-in-law's absence when he was at a doctor's appointment—my friend explained that since her husband's cousin was going to university in Shanghai and so assumed to be under a lot of pressure, they didn't want to bother him. "So when will he find out?" I asked, "When he graduates? When his father dies?" My friend laughed at the inappropriateness of my question—even educated, cosmopolitan urbanites can be made uncomfortable by a direct invocation of death—and said she didn't know. For now, it was enough that her husband's uncle did not want his son to know he was sick, and they were all going to do everything they could to respect his wishes for as long as possible.

Though I didn't do extended fieldwork on death and dying, I noticed that family members of dying people often sustained and embodied the wishful fantasies of their ailing relative at great personal cost to themselves. Lisa, a woman born in 1975—so older than Shaoshao and my friend in Beijing, but a few years younger than Shaoshao's mother and father—began free-associating about caring for her father, who was dying of cancer, when I mentioned that I had been in Beijing in 2008. "That summer I was in Beijing too

getting my father treatment at a famous hospital," she murmured dreamily. Lisa spoke for a few more minutes before finally admitting what I'd already intuited from her tone: her father had, in spite of her best efforts and the relocation from Zhengzhou to the nation's capital, died. "I still remember each time the doctor would tell us the bad news about his surgery I would go outside and cry," she confessed, "And then I'd have to go back upstairs and smile to my father's face and pretend that everything was good."

"Why couldn't you cry to his face?" I asked, "I feel like if it were me, I would be upset if my daughter did not cry! I would think, 'Is she not upset that I am dying? Will she not be sad when I am gone?' Do people just not cry in China?"

Lisa smiled weakly. "This must be a cultural difference. We will cry, but not to people's faces." She continued: "My older sister was in Canada at the time, and she had just started a new job when he got really sick. She didn't know if she should come back or not, but her church group—she is Christian—they told her she could find a new job again but she would never have another chance to care for her father. My older brother though"—she paused—"he was in Japan, and my father refused to tell him how serious it was until his very last surgery. I think he must have known somehow, because he'd done two other surgeries that were just as dangerous before and never told me to call my brother, but that time he asked to talk to him on the phone and told him to come home. But even though Japan is so close, it took a day for my brother to get his airplane tickets and leave work, so by the time he got here, our father was already gone."

She sighed. "My older brother will regret that for the rest of his life."

"What about you?" I asked, feeling that she bore some responsibility since she helped keep the secret. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"Because my father didn't want us to," she stated matter-of-factly, "He was afraid it would influence his work."

Lisa was not an exceptional case. Shaoshao's mother and father made the decision to keep the illness not just from Shaoshao, who was at school in America, but also from all of their relatives. "This is what I cannot forgive," Shaoshao told me once in English, over coffee, "It should not have happened! We have money. We have relatives who work in hospitals! I don't know why they kept it a secret. Everyone could have helped us!" Shaoshao's mother even kept her sickness from Shaoshao's aunt, who Shaoshao said was her mother's best friend and closest confidant. It was this aunt who called Shaoshao in America and told her that her mother's suggestions that she come home for spring break were not—as Shaoshao had thought—unrealistic and expensive whimsies but a last request born of a desire to see her daughter one more time before she died. In March, Shaoshao flew back to Zhengzhou. By then her mother was too weak to be transported back to America for treatment, as Shaoshao had hoped. In the weeks just before the end of Shaoshao's spring semester, she died.

That summer Shaoshao came back to Zhengzhou. She had an internship at the bank where her mother had worked, and she lived in the work-unit housing—the same one that the two of us had carefully resealed after spending the night—that the bank provided to all of its employees. She had wanted to work elsewhere, but she shrugged: "These were where all my connections were." Although the bank is an important and powerful one, it is not large. All in all, there were maybe 200 apartment units in the entire complex for the bank's employees. When one died suddenly of cancer, the rest of them all knew. (Through entirely separate channels, I met another woman who lived in the

same complex, and when I mentioned that I had a friend whose family used to live there until her mother died, she immediately recited Shaoshao's mother's name and reported how disturbed they'd been by the loss.) Unlike in commodity housing, where Shaoshao could have returned and reintegrated in relative anonymity, there was no chance of that so long as she lived alongside her mother's work unit. "I couldn't bear their sympathy," she told me. "Everyone would look at me and feel like they had to care for me. I could not be responsible for it." She spent the summer miserable, hot, and trapped in on all sides by people's best intentions. By the next time she came back, she and her husband were engaged; as soon as they could, they registered their marriage. Even though Shaoshao's main worry that summer that she spent with me during my fieldwork in Zhengzhou was her inability to find a job in Canada, she swore she would never work at her mother's bank ever again. And after our afternoon with the fortune teller, when her father revealed his marriage—yet another a tremendous secret that he'd been keeping from her for months—Shaoshao knew that as a married woman she'd never have to pretend she wanted to live with her father ever again.

Trust and the Just-in-case Mentality

The idea at the heart of Shaoshao's story—that one should keep harmful or unsettling information from one's children—is quite common across different cultures, but the tendency to try to keep impossible secrets—secrets that would eventually be revealed no matter what with extreme effects—was pronounced among the people I knew in the PRC. For example, another one of the students who lived with us in 2008 had always dreamed of studying abroad in France. Throughout the entire time I knew her, she looked down on all the other students slaving over their English textbooks and spent her

time watching *Amelie* and memorizing French. She scoffed when foreigners asked her what her English name was because her foreign name wasn't English; it was French. Her family wasn't as wealthy as Shaoshao's, but she knew that if she pushed, her parents could make the finances work. She persisted for years after college, taking night classes in French at a private training school and searching for a program that was affordable. When she found one and was accepted, all she needed was to provide her birth certificate and other documentation for her student visa. For weeks, she hounded her mother: Where is my birth certificate? When will you give me my birth certificate? Why haven't you given me my birth certificate yet? Finally her mother cracked: We don't have your birth certificate because you weren't born here—not in Beijing, and not to us. You are adopted, and your real mother is in Sichuan, and we never wanted to tell you because we were worried if you knew you would not care for us when we got old.

I wish I could say that this revelation had no impact on my friend's attitude toward her parents, that she adjusted, found a different way to get her French visa, and continued living her life as she had planned. In reality, though, the information left her not devastated but completely transformed. She quit learning French. She told me she felt that her parents had already spent enough of their hard-earned money on raising her and she didn't want to waste any more of their resources on herself. She broke up with her boyfriend of five years. She signed up for three different credit cards and used them to buy an expensive camera and go on a long, elaborate solo vacation in Fujian because, as she told me while showing off the pictures, "Why save when you never know when your whole life will change?" She grew more openly dismissive of her father, who sounds like an alcoholic with shades of abuse she's never fully articulated to me; she grew more

protective of her mother, whose infertility had drawn her into the family. She dated one older man, who was bad for her. She dated another younger man, who was good for her, and married him almost immediately. I stayed with her and her husband just before returning from the field. She was pregnant. During a conversation about how congested and unlivable Beijing's subway system was in the morning, I asked idly if they were willing to live anywhere else besides Beijing. "Of course," she snorted, "There's nothing in Beijing I couldn't leave."

From the perspective of substance, my friend's relationship with her parents seems to have a lot more in common with the complications and vicissitudes of adoption in the PRC than with Shaoshao's ambivalence and outright anger toward her father. Nevertheless, I'd argue that at their most basic, narrative level, both situations are of the same type; both were driven by what Shaoshao describes as the "just-in-case" mentality.

I want to take a moment here to interrupt my narrative and say thank you to Shaoshao directly; I do not know how I would have adjusted to life—both emotionally and practically—in Zhengzhou without her. When I arrived in Zhengzhou, I stepped off the train and immediately agreed to sublet a room in an apartment near the university I was affiliated with. It was an arrangement I had thought was facilitated by the university because a teacher, Huang Na, had helped me make the transaction; later, I would discover that she'd done so as a personal favor to me and that my two male roommates came with absolutely no endorsement from the university whatsoever. Also, one of them did not appear for months. Two months, to be exact. I spent those two months wondering why the third room in our three-bedroom apartment was always locked and empty and failing to make friends with my other roommate and his strangely silent girlfriend. In the

meantime, though, I became a local celebrity in our complex, which was one of the last remaining work-unit housing complexes left on the block. Everyone who lived there either was a retired teacher at a nearby middle school or else the relative of one. Everyone who lived there knew each other, knew me, and, after just a few preliminary questions, also knew that I was paying twice as much as I should be paying for rent. "You are probably being cheated (*bei pian le*)," the middle-aged residents would tell me without fail upon hearing how much my one-room cost per month. No one in the small complex of only seven doorways with seven floors of apartments knew my roommate the way they knew me, and, similarly, no one could confirm that my second roommate existed.

I told Ya, who then was still an acquaintance and not yet a friend, about the situation. One of the doormen, a kind older man with a talking bird I'd really taken to, told me outright what the rent in each apartment was. When I reported this information to my roommate, his immediate response was not to explain why our rent would be higher but to ask me whom I'd heard this from. "You shouldn't have told him the name of your doorman," Ya told me, shaking her head, "It may come back to him and he will be less likely to help you in the future." Anxious that I'd ruined one my first (and only) friendships in Zhengzhou, I asked Shaoshao if she thought I'd made a mistake—she said maybe, but there was no use worrying about it. "Many people will think the way your friend thinks," she said in English, "They will not want to tell people things just in case."

"Just in case what?"

Shaoshao laughed. "Just in case! Maybe they don't even know what."

Shaoshao was my only real confidant in those early months—the only person I felt I could really trust to be on my team throughout all the twists and turns of my strange living situation. It was she who called my landlord and asked about the rent; when they told her it wasn't their business but negotiated by the lease-holder (my roommate), it was she who told me it seemed fishy and was probably motivated by something a little more specific than the "just-in-case" impulse. At my request, Shaoshao came to my house, met my roommate, and had a long conversation with him about where he had gone to school in Beijing (a Party school for journalism) and why he'd come back to Henan and changed industries completely (he was now working as a salesperson for a pharmaceutical company). She told me she thought he was quite charming, but confirmed my sense that his girlfriend was a little strange—while we were all talking in the living room, his girlfriend came in the front door and without a word shut herself up in my roommate's room. When my roommate told me our second roommate was home for a festival, she was the one who heard about it; when he changed his story a week later and said that in fact he was home because his wife was having a miscarriage, Shaoshao was the one who comforted me by admitting that it was a strange turn but not necessarily unheard of. "Why wouldn't he just tell me why he was gone directly?" I asked with an indignation that I now recognize as wildly naive.

"He may not have known," she explained. "Oftentimes, people do not want to talk about these kinds of bad things, like illness or death. Maybe your other roommate didn't tell him until now."

Maybe. But as the person living in close-quarters with someone I was increasingly unsure I could trust, I was not in a position to be as generous as Shaoshao

was. From my perspective, the mystery of my missing second roommate was a first strike, the fact that I was paying enough in rent to cover the cost of a third empty room was a second strike, and when I realized that my first roommate's weird girlfriend had effectively moved in without saying a word to me, I was ready to read that as the third and final strike. Shaoshao acted as a mediator and translator for the two of us as I explained to my roommate that it was simply too much for my rent to be double what our neighbors thought it should be, for our second roommate to be gone, and for his girlfriend to be living in the apartment secretly and rent-free. My roommate protested that his girlfriend had only moved in temporarily while she studied for the extremely competitive Civil Service Officer Exam, that the business with the second roommate and his ill wife was really not his fault, and that he himself had no idea the rent was too high until I'd told him about it. He added that he, too, felt misled; he'd thought I would teach him English, be gone regular hours throughout the day, and not go out at night as often as I did. In the end, Shaoshao suggested we part ways, amicably. She wrote out an agreement on two pieces of paper in English and Chinese stating that I would forfeit half my deposit if I could break my contract and move out by the end of the month. Both my roommate and I signed it, though he did so with scorn: "Do you really think this is legal?"

Shaoshao brushed off his skepticism. "It's just to make things clear for both of you," she said in her impeccably standard Mandarin, "Americans like for things to be direct and clear."

Afterward, at a coffee shop near my house, Shaoshao asked me if I was sure I really wanted to move out. "It is such a convenient location," she reminded me, "Could you just tolerate his weird girlfriend?"

I knew she had a point, that I may have been overreacting, and yet still I shook my head. "It's not just about his girlfriend," I explained, "I feel like I cannot trust him. I do not want to have to live in the same apartment as someone I can't trust. I'd rather take the time to find a new place and spend the rest of the year feeling safe and comfortable at home."

Shaoshao looked toward the window thoughtfully.

"I wonder who I know who will rent you a house."

Zhongjie: Middlemen as Epistemological Control Mechanisms

At that very moment, Shaoshao was on her own search for an apartment—not to rent but to buy. She and her husband had saved up some money, and she wanted to invest it by buying a studio apartment in an expensive, upscale complex fittingly called—and this is its actual name—Manhattan. Both of us spent her last month before returning to Canada discovering Zhengzhou's real estate market separately and then reporting our insights to each other during our weekly rendezvous in malls and coffee shops throughout the city.

"My uncle used to be in real estate," she explained, "so he told me what to do. The only thing the real estate agents have that you don't is information. He said that when I go to see an apartment, I should try to get as much information as possible: apartment numbers, car license plates, anything!"

The word for real estate in Mandarin is *fangdichan*: *fang* means house, *di* means earth or place, and *chan* means production or property. The word for real estate agent in Mandarin is technically *fangdichan daili*—with *daili* meaning proxy—but I never heard anyone in Zhengzhou use that word. Instead, real estate agents were more commonly

referred to as *zhongjie*: middlemen or intermediaries. *Jie* means to introduce or to stand between; *zhong* is the same "zhong" as in China (*Zhongguo*). *Zhong* means middle, center, and—in the Central Plains dialect spoken throughout Henan Province—okay, fine, or good. In Henan, *zhong* appears in almost every aspect of life. "Do you want to go to dinner tonight?" someone might ask. "*Zhong*!" a person from Henan might reply. "How is the food at the restaurant?" "*Zhong*, *zhong*," a person from Henan might say, indicating it's passable. "Will you sign the contract in the morning?" "*Zhong zhong zhong zhong zhong*," a person from Henan might babble, his head nodding vigorously with each syllable. A joke told both about and by people in Henan is that the more times a person says "*zhong*" the less likely the thing they're ostensibly agreeing to is to happen.

A similar ambivalence underlies people's attitudes toward zhongjie. There are zhongjie not just for real estate but for almost every other industry as well. In Zhengzhou, I personally knew people who owned *zhongjie gongsi* (middle-men companies) that facilitated immigration through investment scheme, applying to American and Canadian colleges, and finding foreign English teachers. In each of these cases, people in Zhengzhou understood that much depended on which zhongjie company you hired. All zhongjie within a single industry would claim for competitiveness' sake to offer essentially the same services, but the execution of these services could vary wildly from company to company and even from zhongjie to individual zhongjie within the same company. Much of a person's success—in business, in education, or even in personal relationships (since matchmakers are yet another kind of zhongjie)—depended on their ability to select a capable zhongjie.

For example, once at tea with a group of wealthy housewives I work with, the subject of immigrating to American through investment came up. Several of the women were either in the process of applying for their green card through the EB-5 program or else already had obtained it (for more on emigration among the PRC's rich, see Liu-Farrer 2016). I asked one of the women what she had invested in, and she laughed: "I have no idea! The zhongjie handled it for me and all my relatives." I said that I thought the EB-5 program was a scam by the US government and told them a story I'd heard recently, from a family living in the New East District. They were on their third attempt at immigrating through investment; the first time something had gone wrong on the American end, and the second time they'd decided to abort in favor of switching cities. The women were taken aback—three times? "Who has that much money," one of the women wondered aloud, in a moment of supreme irony since one of the other women sitting at the table was May, the wife of the nephew of the richest man in the entire province. "He must be an official and not care because it's not his money." I laughed at her disdain. All of the women there were the wives of private entrepreneurs: men who *earned* their money rather than getting it through corruption. "Actually, he's in coal," I reported, and the women all groaned in understanding. "Coal! No *wonder*!"

May, the wife of the nephew of the richest man in Henan, intervened. She had gotten her green card years ago, just in time to be in America when she gave birth to her twin girls, now four years old. "The problem is probably with their zhongjie company," she said expertly. Her zhongjie, she explained, was the best one in the entire province. One of the women who'd just left was also working with him when there'd been a problem with her case. The partner in America had tricked the zhongjie and run off with

the money. “He was really responsible (*fuzeren*),” she reported, “He went to America himself and hired a lawyer to get all the money back. He only recently returned. She got all her money back—she just ended up wasting a little time, that’s all.” Another, less well-connected woman whose face bore the signs of a recent chemical peel interrupted: This story about the responsible zhongjie—hadn’t this been in the papers? Hadn’t it actually been a company from Henan, not America, who ran off with the money?

May ignored her. “With something like this, you cannot do it by yourself,” she continued. “You need a zhongjie. You cannot invest at random (*suibian touzi*)! If I or even you go to America, how can we know what to invest our money in? The risks (*fengxian*) are too large. You need someone to help you control the risk (*kongzhi fengxian*).”

At the time, I was struck by how May associated zhongjie with expertise, risk control, and responsibility. Up until that moment, the only zhongjie I’d had experiences with were in real estate, and I found them to be my least favorite kind of people in the entire city. During my hunt for an apartment, the most consistent piece of advice people had given me was to avoid zhongjie at all costs. The best thing to do was, as Shaoshao suggested, rent a place owned by a person you knew; the next best thing to do was to rent a place from an individual (*geren*). Any place managed by a zhongjie was bound to be overpriced, poorly maintained, and carry the dreaded *zhongjie fei*: a middleman fee that was usually around half of a month’s rent. On the websites I used to hunt for apartments, the listings were labeled either *geren* (individual) or zhongjie; nothing was more frustrating than calling the number for an individual listing and having a zhongjie at Red Star Real Estate answer. I tried a few times to work with zhongjie. Each time I found

them to be duplicitous; they would call and claim to be showing me one kind of apartment at a particular price, but when I arrived, it would be a different kind of apartment for a much higher price. I shared the sense that Shaoshao had, that if only I could just know what the zhongjie knew and call the landlord myself, I could get what I wanted much more quickly, cheaply, and honestly than I could with the zhongjie at the wheel. In real estate, I somehow felt the zhongjie were redundant, less a bridge and more an obstacle standing between me and the thing I wanted.

As my conversation with the wealthy housewives shows, however, this was not the case in every industry. Real estate is unique in that the information that zhongjie are responsible for—the precise location of apartments and the lowest price a landlord or seller are willing to accept—require no special skill to decode. Even I, a foreigner who'd just moved to the city, found these facts legible with no extra effort and felt I could have negotiated for an apartment on my own without the help of a zhongjie. The only reason I *needed* a zhongjie was to provide me with information, not to interpret it, which is why real estate zhongjie are so secretive: their monopoly over information is their only leverage in an extremely competitive market. In other industries, however, the information zhongjie traffic require a certain level of expertise. People hoping to immigrate to America through the EB-5 program needed zhongjie to help them navigate the complex legal, financial, and logistic hurdles the program required. Immigration through investment was further complicated by the fact that the majority of the people immigrating did not even speak English. A zhongjie needed to be someone who possessed all the linguistic skills and expertise you lacked, but even more than that, they needed to be someone you could trust.

Eventually, May introduced me to the zhongjie who'd helped her get her green card. He was not just the best zhongjie for immigration-through-investment but also the oldest; his company had been the first one in Henan to offer these services. Ironically, he was the same one handling the case of the family in the New East District I'd described at lunch; they had also been part of the bundle of cases that went wrong in Chicago, and they too had gotten their money back after he'd personally gone to America to file a lawsuit. (Zhengzhou never felt smaller than it did among the super-rich, who were somehow unable to see the financial and logistical chains connecting them to each other the way I could.) Over an expensive Japanese dinner, the zhongjie discussed his most recent business trips to small islands none of the people present had ever heard of. "It's so small, you could drive around it in a day!" he reported incredulously, "It's smaller even than Zhengzhou. Much smaller!" He was moving into the island business because his clients were driving him to do it. There was a class of people, he explained, who were collecting as many passports as they could. "Why?" I asked, and he laughed: "Maybe they don't even know!" I heard in his answer echoes of Shaoshao's just-in-case philosophy; for reasons unclear even to his clients, having as many passports as possible was seen to be advantageous, and so they wanted them, just in case. Sensing that I still didn't understand completely, May elaborated: People with enough money to invest it in that many immigration schemes had to have gotten it illegally. They lived in fear, and having more passports meant having more places to flee to once they were caught.

The zhongjie didn't speculate about his clients' motivations. He himself had a Canadian green card, though he spoke barely any English at all. After dinner, he drove me to the subway station so I could get home, and I asked him whether or not he'd agreed

to be formally interviewed. He hedged. “I don’t know if that would be appropriate,” he told me, “In this industry, we like to stay on the down low (*didiao*). What we hope is that no one notices what we are doing—not the foreign governments and not our own governments.” I tried to explain that I was not a journalist but a Ph.D. student—whatever he told me would be disguised by a pseudonym and whatever I wrote would honestly not reach a very wide audience. Still, he resisted. “There are many other zhongjie doing this business in Zhengzhou now. Maybe you can speak to them.” He said he was willing to talk to me, but only about how foreigners felt about their countries’ immigration policies: “This is something I’m very interested in.” Disappointed, I promised to get in touch with him as I got out of the car. I never did.

I did, however, hear in January 2016 that he had already begun advising clients *not* to go to America. “He is going around telling people the political climate there is bad for immigrants,” a mutual friend told me. I also ran into one woman who had reapplied with the same zhongjie after the scam in Chicago, just before leaving in February 2016. The process was almost over for her; had he done a good job as her zhongjie in the end?

“Who knows!” she laughed. “The first time, the cheaters sent us flowers, folders, all these pictures and presents. This time, they’ve sent nothing. The first time, it seemed real but it turned out to be fake. This time, I just hope I get my green card.”

How to Know a Person: *Zhongjie* and the Collapsed Personal/Professional Distinction

The zhongjie was right about at least one thing; Zhengzhou was flooded with people claiming to be able to facilitate immigration-through-investment. It was difficult to make money as a real estate zhongjie; the information you relied on for leverage was

too easily stolen and the money you made from it—either five percent of a sale or half a month's rent—was too small to justify the time you often spent with clients who weren't serious. In contrast, there was some sense among the group I'd call my peers in Zhengzhou—people who were college educated and born in the 1980s—that there was still gold left in the hills when it came to an industry like immigration-through-investment. One girl I met was working as a zhongjie for a zhongjie—she was paid on commission for wealthy clients she referred to the boss of an actual immigration-through-investment agency. She spent her days sleeping off the nights she spent drinking in bars and at private pleasure clubs in an attempt to befriend more wealthy clients. "That girl is looking for rich people as though her life depends on it (*pinming zhao youqian ren*)," Ya muttered contemptuously after it became clear the two of us were (bafflingly) part of her scheme to develop her web of relationships with Zhengzhou's upper class. Another friend who was a lawyer described how her firm was actively losing money in its attempt to set up a branch in America that would specialize in EB-5 cases. "But you are *lawyers*," I said incredulously, "You're experts! Why can't you charge more?" She looked at me condescendingly. "Don't you know? There are way too many zhongjie in Zhengzhou competing in this industry. We just have to bear this cost for now, and once the office in America is established, we'll make it back."

Personally, I believe my lawyer friend's faith is misplaced and that her firm will not necessarily make the money back. The zhongjie business model does not seem to be sustainable simply because the more clients a zhongjie helps, the more competitors she creates for herself. Immigration-through-investment is somewhat immune from this in that the level of expertise needed is so high that even a person who manages to be helped

by a zhongjie—like May—will not necessarily have the skills needed to open up her own EB-5 zhongjie shop simply by virtue of having an American green card. That said, the number of new zhongjie company claiming to offer EB-5 services will likely lead to a high number of people getting burned and leave just those few agencies with good reputations—such as the oldest zhongjie in Zhengzhou—able to secure the wealthiest and most profitable clients.

Other agencies, though, are dealing with information where the expertise required to interpret it can be gained as soon as clients complete the process themselves. Take zhongjie who help students apply to schools abroad. The clients in this industry are putatively students but actually parents: older people who choose their child's zhongjie not necessarily because they're confident in a zhongjie's knowledge of foreign educational systems but because they feel they can trust the zhongjie, have friends who have used the same zhongjie, or personally know the zhongjie and the zhongjie's family. There's a medium-essentialist argument to be made here, namely that parents choose a zhongjie based on their network of relationships (*guanxi*) because that's how people decide everything in the PRC, but my sense is that parents are choosing zhongjie according to those standards less because they're essential and more because they're the only one available to them. In other words, the parents of children who want to study abroad have no other method of evaluating a zhongjie's efficacy besides how or whether they know them. Unlike their children, who are studying English constantly, many parents only speak Standard Mandarin or their local dialect. Many of Zhengzhou's wealthiest people—those who could afford to send their children abroad—did not necessarily have college degrees and had not necessarily lived an extended period of time

abroad themselves. Their children, though, return from studying abroad—for one year, two years, four years, or more—either with the expertise needed to interpret the information study abroad zhongjie traffic in or else with the appearance of having that expertise. Though the hopes for young people going abroad are vast and varied (see Ong 1999; Fong 2004), for every batch of students that a study abroad zhongjie sends to America, Canada, or the UK, there will be at least one who returns and, capitalizing on that experience abroad, decides to hang her own shingle.

Evelyn was an example of this kind of zhongjie. Like many of the people I worked with, Evelyn was from Henan but went by her English name not only when dealing with foreigners but also when operating professionally. Being able to introduce herself with a difficult to pronounce English name already created a boundary between herself, the cosmopolitan expert who'd studied abroad, and her clients, wealthy parents who trusted her to send their children to a country they'd often never visited. Evelyn and her husband had studied abroad together in the UK; when they returned, her husband had gone into a vaguely defined "business" and Evelyn had become a zhongjie, first for a larger, nation-wide chain and then for her own company. I met Evelyn through Olivia, a friend of mine who was the day-to-day manager of Zhengzhou's most famous local private language training school. Olivia and I had met in XX Bar, Zhengzhou's oldest expat bar, where a certain segment of Zhengzhou's grittier elite and its disastrous expat population would gather to drink side-by-side (though they'd rarely mingle). Evelyn and I met when Olivia convinced me to give a public speech at a promotional event for Evelyn's new zhongjie company. I mention all of this not just to give you a sense of how I gained access to this weird side of the education industry in Zhengzhou but because part

of what's interesting about zhongjie and the need for zhongjie is this idea that introductions—how you meet someone, where you meet someone, why you meet someone—are crucial to how the relationship eventual plays out. In other words, in Zhengzhou, a relationship's origin story can determine the shape and structure of its future.

Before I move on to Evelyn, let me give you another example. The success or failure of the Capitalist Pig Barbecue Restaurant turned on whether or not its owners—a woman from Henan named Sophy and her American husband, Taylor—could find a reliable supplier of high-quality pork ribs. Eventually, they settled on a place called Priceco, a Costco-style bulk goods store in the city's industrial southeast. The problem was that Priceco's butcher's department was wildly inconsistent with the cuts and quality of the meat they supplied to the Capitalist Pig. There was no doubt that Priceco had access to the best cuts of meat in the city, but depending on the mood and whims of the workers, it would enter Sophy's hands at various states of usefulness. Once, Sophy told me in frustration, all ten of the racks of ribs they'd ordered arrived frozen together in a giant meat tower. They were absolutely unusable unless Sophy defrosted the entire batch and then refroze them individually, which would decrease the quality of the meat (and create hours more work for Sophy and Taylor).

Sophy endured months of this as she slowly worked through the process known as finding a person (*zhaoren*). Whenever you have a problem with an institution in Zhengzhou, Sophy explained, your first step should be to find a person within the institution who can help you find the person who will solve your problem. First, she found the head of Priceco's membership services. With Taylor, she arranged for him to

have a special outreach night at the Capitalist Pig where foreigners would sign up for Priceco memberships. When this favor still did not give her the social capital needed to demand consistent service, she asked her friends who they knew at Priceco and discovered that one woman who owned a cafe she frequented knew the head of the butcher's department. The day I left Zhengzhou, Sophy came to my house straight from a meeting with the butcher. "It's so frustrating," she told me as we negotiated Zhengzhou's ever-present heavy traffic, "We keep telling him we want to treat him and the staff to dinner at the restaurant and he keeps saying it's not necessary. I *know* it's not necessary. Technically I do not even *need* a formal introduction to him because I already know him through the cafe, but I still feel I have to take him to dinner because I don't know how else to get him to do his job. I know they must be so miserable working there and I just want them to come to the restaurant so that they can understand what we are doing and feel they can be proud to be a part of it."

Sophy's sense that she could only demand someone do their job well if she had been formally introduced and had a personal connection to that person does not exist everywhere in the PRC. I'd hesitate to say its peculiar to Henan or to Zhengzhou but I can say for sure that it does not exist in, for example, a city like Beijing. When I related stories of this kind of inefficiency or inconsistency to my friends in Beijing, their response was derisive laughter. "If you do not do your job well here some poor person from a village in Hebei will replace you," my friend spat contemptuously, "This is why Zhengzhou is so backward (*luohou*)." In general, I am skeptical of this particular friend's analyses because they are often motivated by snobbery and prejudice, but there was something regionally specific here, and its specificity was due to the conditions of the

local market. In Zhengzhou, professionalism alone—the principle that one should do good work and possess a certain level of competency simply because one was getting paid to do it—was not enough to motivate most people. And unlike in Beijing, where the lure of living in the well-developed capital meant that a practically infinite number of skilled workers from both local and distant places waited to replace you, in Zhengzhou there was no such competition driving workers to perform. Instead, people did only the work they wanted to do; the only way you could demand professional accountability from the people you worked with was, ironically, if you could convince them you knew them personally.

But back to Evelyn, the study abroad zhongjie. I met her through Olivia, who knew her professionally back from when she used to work for the nation-wide chain zhongjie company. In all her dealings with me and when introducing me to others, Olivia made it clear that the two of us were friends. Unlike many people in Zhengzhou, she had easy access to foreigners since her private language school was employing at least seven as teachers at any given time. Part of Olivia's commitment to clarifying that I was not her employee was social—she gained more prestige by simply being friends with a foreigner than she would by paying one to accompany her—but another part of it was logistical—at the events she took me to her announcement made it clear that I was to be treated differently, less as a resource and more as a person, and I had fewer obligations to perform than her employees. For my part, I liked Olivia. I found her to be one of the most interesting and smartest people I met in Zhengzhou; besides me, she was the only person I knew in the city who could rattle off the things I was studying and why they all fit together. She was a key interlocutor, the person who knew who to introduce me to and

why. She was, in some ways, my own personal zhongjie, without whom the information I needed to do my dissertation would have remained ever unreachable and—worse—uninterpreted.

So when Olivia asked me to give a speech at a promotional activity for Evelyn's new company, I immediately agreed. At the compulsory congratulatory lunch banquet after the event, I asked Evelyn and her partners how they'd gotten into business together. Evelyn proudly said that they'd all been friends while working at various different zhongjie companies. In fact, between all four of them they'd worked at every major zhongjie company in the city until finally they decided to open their own company. "Really everyone knows each other in this industry," Evelyn smiled. "But if people move between companies so often, doesn't that make it difficult to trust your coworkers and employees?" I asked, stupidly. It was September 2013; still early enough in my fieldwork that I had not yet registered just how awkward direct questions posed in public settings like this were. Evelyn looked to her partners, all of whom were male and frowning at me. "Yes," she said finally, "that can be a problem."

Handling Wolves with Empty Hands: Networks of Knowledge, Reciprocity, and Suspicion

Later, in the car on our way to a different social event, Olivia told me what she honestly thought of Evelyn and zhongjie like her.

"Evelyn has known me for a long time and her company is new," Olivia said while I took notes and she navigated Zhengzhou's ruthless rush-hour traffic, "I can help her find students. I can organize this event for her. But she is different from us. So many zhongjie are *kongshou tao bailang*. Do you know this saying?" I admitted that I did not.

"I'm such a good Chinese teacher!" she exclaimed in charming, unironic self-congratulation, the way she often did. "Write this down. *Kongshou* means empty hands. *Tao* means trap. *Bailang* means white wolf…maybe it's the most difficult wolf to catch? I don't know why it's white. But the idiom means to try to catch a wolf with nothing in your hands. If you have nothing in your hands, how can you expect to get the wolf? This is how many people in Zhengzhou are today. They want to make a lot of money and catch the wolf, but they do not want to do any work. In fact, they have nothing to offer. Like the zhongjie, they are just selling information or maybe not even that. I like Evelyn, but I also think she is *kongshou tao bailang*."

Eventually, Olivia's ambivalence toward Evelyn turned into outright scorn because of the way she dealt with me. I'd never felt like Evelyn truly liked me, but periodically throughout my time in Zhengzhou, she would invite me to strangely intimate gatherings—to her house, to the swimming pool where she was a member, to a dinner with a man who wanted his son to marry me because he thought American women were more reliable and "conservative" than Chinese women (this episode deserves its own chapter). These visits eventually culminated in an uncomfortable job offer. "You can come sit in our office the same way you sit in Olivia's office and we will give you 2,000RMB a month," she told me while one of her partners fidgeted nervously. I explained that by law I couldn't work for money and that since I was doing research, I couldn't donate my time like that. "You don't have job, how can you be so busy," her partner sneered, and so I sat quietly for the rest of the lunch, waiting for the interaction to end.

As with many of the exchanges, offers, and proposed deals I witnessed in Zhengzhou, I felt there was no way to refuse directly in the moment. To reject an offer without ruining a relationship, one had to retard the timeline of one's response; I did so by saying I had to consult with Olivia, who was furious. "This is inappropriate (*bu heshi*)!" she cried out in disgust, "You are *my* friend. She knows you through *me*. And just recently I called her about something else and she did not call me back! This is too much (*tai guofen*)." She turned to me seriously. "We are different from them. We are a language school. We want students to study better and do well on their tests. These zhongjie, they just want to take students' money for nothing. Students give us money to take classes. Students give them money and maybe they don't get anything. When you sit here, in my office"—as I often did, writing my field notes—"I say, 'This is not one of our teachers, this is my friend.' It will be obvious to all our students that you do not teach classes, that you are just here to talk to them. She wants you to sit there so you look like one of their zhongjie but really you are not. It is a trick." As far as I could tell, Olivia's outrage had two sources: the first was her disdain for zhongjie in general, and the second was her anger at having been ignored even though she was origin of Evelyn's and my relationship. Ironically, Evelyn the zhongjie—the professional introducer—had made the mistake of believing she could transcend the way she was introduced to me. Just as Sophy had attempted to do with her meat supplier, so she was trying to rewrite the origin story of our relationship, to make it personal, of a first rather than second order, so that the job she wanted me to take became an offer I could not, morally and personally, refuse.

With Olivia's help, I rejected the revision. Later that week, I went to my first "shift" for the job at her company I would never take. In the stairwell between talking with potential clients—I could see what Olivia meant by how it was a trick—I told Evelyn there was no way I could take the job. Her facial expression transformed into one of dire concern and for a moment I wondered whether my hurried and harried Mandarin had failed me—was she misunderstanding me? Surely she couldn't be that upset over something like this—but then I was saved by the elevator doors opening and a mutual friend of ours entering. We chatted for a bit and then I made an excuse and retreated to Olivia's office, which was in the same building. It would be more than a year before I would see Evelyn again.

I should say that not all zhongjie are like Evelyn, and even Evelyn did not appear to most people to be the Evelyn I knew she could be: shrewd, calculating, operating from a position just east of honest. The mutual friend who rescued me from awkwardness that day had known Evelyn for years; in fact, Evelyn had been the zhongjie who helped her write her ultimately successful application to attend a private high school in Canada. Through me, the mutual friend had also met Olivia, and she told me once that she preferred Evelyn. "You're joking," I said in English, "Olivia may be brash, but at least she's direct." The mutual friend shrugged. "Maybe it's because Evelyn's older?" I shook my head: "They're the same age!" "Well then maybe it's because Evelyn's married and has a child," my friend mused, unworried by my disagreement (and growing horror at her evaluation of these two thirty-one-year-old women by restrictive gender norms). "She just seems more mature."

In a way, my friend was right to like Evelyn better than Olivia. Olivia was a great manager and leader but a mediocre zhongjie. Olivia was often direct, demanding, and rightfully dismissive—all qualities I personally appreciated, especially in Zhengzhou where I found them in short supply. Being a zhongjie required more delicacy. Evelyn had carefully cultivated a sense of calm, maternal authority. Where Olivia might have publicly chastised an underling for failing to complete a task correctly, Evelyn was all smiles; don't worry, she was always saying to stressed students and concerned parents, we can handle this. Of course, not everything can be handled. I never saw Evelyn disappoint a client directly, but I did observe her spinning dissatisfied students' narratives when they related their isolation and loneliness in America to me.

"It's not just that way," she urged one girl who described her average day as a high schooler in America as getting up, going to school, and then coming home to wait alone for dinner as her host family busied themselves with the stuff of their lives, which went on regardless of her presence. "Tell Megan how your host sister works at Disneyland. You can be proud of that." It was unclear to the girl (and to me) why her host sister's after school job was something to be proud of, but she told me about it gamely and did seem to feel a little better after having been handled by her zhongjie.

Sophy—the owner of the Capitalist Pig—had also worked as a zhongjie after earning her masters degree in the UK. She'd gotten into the industry, she told me, by accident. She'd meant to apply to work at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and the man in charge of hiring for the position set her resume aside and called her in. The Embassy was never going to hire her because she didn't have a Beijing hukou, he told her, and offered her a position in his private international education consulting company—a fancy name,

Sophy said, for zhongjie company. Her boss eventually lost his position at the Embassy after US officials discovered he was using the connections he was developing through official Embassy work to benefit his private enterprise, but even now Sophy speaks of him and her years working for him with reverence. He taught her everything she knew about how to tailor an application to an individual client's needs, how to find a school where they'd *actually* be happy and not just one that looked good, and how to teach students to be the best versions of themselves, both in life and for the foreign service officers deciding whether or not to approve their visa applications. She'd left the company on understandably poor terms—she was his only representative in Henan, her engagement to the man she'd returned to Henan for had fallen through, and she'd grown tired of working for two different competing companies and so accepted a full-time position from one of them—and she still speculated with some anxiety about whether or not she'd ever be able to repair her relationship with her former mentor.

And anyway, Sophy had left the zhongjie business for the most part. Aside from moonlighting as the owner of the Capitalist Pig, her main job was as a SAT teacher for one of Zhengzhou's best high school's international programs. Before getting this stable day job, she'd tried freelancing as a tutor and zhongjie. The experience had soured her toward doing business in Zhengzhou. She described her relationship with one woman who'd befriended her after she returned from marrying Taylor in America and promised to help her build a network of clients. "She took me to tea so many times at her friend's place—now I'm sure she wasn't even paying for it," Sophy recounted bitterly in English. Every time the woman gave her a number it was either disconnected or wrong—facts that the woman would react to with surprise before moving on to ask more questions about

what her son should do to apply to college successfully. To a zhongjie, however, revealing this information without being paid for it amounts to theft. In the end, the woman had stolen from her—none of her contacts ever came through, and she never paid Sophy a single *mao* for the services she offered. "These people, they are so smart and terrible. They make you believe they are the nicest people and then use you for information. Information you need to make money and survive! They make me wonder how I still manage to survive in this society. I should have been eaten up long ago."

Sophy was one of my favorite people to talk to in Zhengzhou. She was smart, insightful, self-possessed, capable, and complicated. She was well known within a certain segment of Zhengzhou's young educated people as being a classic beauty and the epitome of a lady, and yet she also smoked and had been active in Beijing's heavy metal scene before moving back to Henan. She was one of the busiest and most competent people I knew, and yet we spent one afternoon walking back and forth between her car and her classroom searching for keys she eventually found in the purse she'd shouldered the entire time. She was modest and private, but if you caught her husband Taylor alone he would start bragging about how her mother was one of the first women from Henan to get her degree in a specialized medical field. During my last month in the field, Sophy made time during her lunch break at school to do a semi-structured recorded interview with me. We sat in the back of her car as she smoked a cigarette and answered my questions eloquently, in English. When I asked her if she believed in fortunetellers, she paused. She said an educated friend of hers who she respects always goes and tells her how accurate they are, but that she doesn't believe them—probably because of her mother.

"My mom hates those people. And ever since I was little she's been telling me about the tricks they will play on you. They would hire people you know and just do a whole background check on you before you go in. That's why they could be so accurate."

On the recording, I scoff: "No way."

"But sometimes they do that. At least in her village."

"That seems more expensive," I hear myself sputter on the recording, "That seems like they'll *lose* money on a reading."

Sophy persists. "They have connectors…They always have these agents, and those agents are their ears and eyes. Like Miss Marple. Do you know that character?"

On the recording, I admit I don't. Sophy explains that Miss Marple is a character from Agatha Christie's novels, an old woman who sits around knitting, gossiping, and appearing harmless so that people will always confess to her. "She always has the most information!" Sophy exclaims and continues. "So they have those kind of people going around, and then you get to know certain things about them and then you're prepared. But that's my mother's version of fortunetellers and how it works. But I don't see how in this day and age"—on the recording she considers—"you could still do it, you have internet, but at the same time, it's also a really advanced psychology skill. Also a social skill. Like you know how to actually detect people's reactions and read people's facial expressions. And if you have seen so many different types of people, you can kind of deduce what kinds of decisions they're going to make and what kind of life they're living at the moment, so it's a very complex set of skills."

At this point, Sophy regroups, continues. "First, I don't believe there are people who possess special skills that they would get to know fate and they would know god and

others wouldn't. I don't believe that. I just think there are just people who have an amazing array of skills to be able to tell you things that you tend to want to believe in. It's all psychological influence. I don't believe in fortunetellers because I *don't want* to believe in them. Selfishly I don't want to believe in it because I would envy those people—Why do you get to see these things? And even if you get to see these things, why do I want to know? I wouldn't want to know these things because then—that's like suicide."

I interrupt with what I now see is a misunderstanding: "Yeah, then it's all boring." On the recording I am hearing her declaration that knowing her own fate would be "like suicide" as being born of her skepticism—to live life already knowing what was going to happen to her would be like being dead already. In fact, though, the statement also works within the logic of the fortune tellers themselves: a fortune teller who does too many readings dies young; a person who knows too much about their own fate might as well kill themselves or, more troublingly, may be driven by that knowledge to kill themselves.

On the recording, though, Sophy doesn't correct me and doesn't lose steam. "Yeah! Then all I want to be doing is just to fight it and go a different path. What's the point in going if you don't believe in it?"

"Somebody Knows" and the Consequences of Certainty

The funny thing is, many people go to fortunetellers who don't believe in them. It's a little different from how Shaoshao might consult with a real estate zhongjie even though she has no intention of buying one of the overpriced apartments they're selling, but the spirit of ruthless pragmatism at the heart of the decision is similar. You don't *want* to use a zhongjie to buy but the information you'd gain from the meeting will be

useful; similarly, you don't necessarily *believe* in fortune tellers but the information they can give you might help you make a decision. And many people in Zhengzhou live in a world like Shaoshao's, where potentially life-changing knowledge—such as your mother's terminal illness—can exist within the world but remain secret, withheld from you by the people you're most intimate with. In a world where things may be kept from you by the people you trust most, a strange, supernatural other is as likely to be the source of the revelation you need to know to make an important decision as your aunt. And even beyond that, there was a sense in Zhengzhou that *somebody knows*—perhaps it's not you, but somebody knows everything that needs to be known. During our interview, Sophy articulated a version of this when she described the envy she would feel if fortunetellers really *could* tell the future: "Why should they be able to see these things and not me?" If somebody knows, why should it be that person and not her?

Toward the end of my fieldwork, I began asking people what the most unpredictable (*bu ke yuce de*) event in their lives had been. What I was looking for were narratives of car crashes, serendipitous meetings with business partners, or sudden windfalls; what I got instead was hours and hours of taped interviews in which people argue *against* the idea of unpredictability, period. "If I am in a car crash," one woman insisted, "Maybe I do not see it coming so it is unpredictable to me. But if there is a cop standing on the side of the street, *he* sees it coming. To him, it is not unpredictable." The woman doesn't know she's about to be in a car crash, but *somebody knows*—in this case, the cop. The "somebody knows" idea and the "just-in-case" philosophy that Shaoshao described to me are parallel ideas. Both are fixated with who gains knowledge and how it is transmitted; both assume that knowledge is crucial to success and can be dangerous.

It's not hard to pin down the origin of the "somebody knows" paranoia. One woman in her forties I spoke to blamed it on the Cultural Revolution. She came from a rare fourth-generation Zhengzhou family, and her grandparents had been wealthy intellectuals. Once, while sitting in her living room, I admired a pair of two large ceramic vases with a purple glaze—a product I knew was distinctly Henanese. "Ai," she sighed, "These are all machine-made, and they're no good. You should have seen the ones we had before! They were all made by hand. We don't know how to make things like that anymore, and all of those things were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. My grandfather told me he took a hammer and smashed them all himself." During my fieldwork, recollections such as these were rare and upsetting for people who shared them and those around them; her husband left the room as she began to free associate about the cultural treasures her family had smashed with their own hands to prevent others from using their wealth and association with so-called feudal traditions against them. "Even after Reform and Opening Up, we were worried," she recalled, "We lived in a one-story house with a courtyard, and I remember my grandfather used to go out in the middle of the night and buy bikes. He used to bring these brand new bikes back at three in the morning and cover them with dust (*shamo*) in the courtyard so they looked old! So people didn't know we could buy a brand new bike. If I remember this, it must have been in the 1980s, already after Reform and Opening Up. Even then, we were still afraid."

"Afraid of what?" I asked, "If it was after Reform and Opening Up, what was there to be afraid of?"

"Of some consequence (*houguo*)," she replied. "I don't know. I just remember the adults being very secretive. I was a child and I would ask my aunt where my grandfather was, and she would say, 'He is buying a bike—shhh!'"

In a social field where historically justified secrecy and paranoia reigns, both the zhongjie and the fortune teller occupy a position of being able to know more than others but not without some consequence. For the fortuneteller, the consequence is cosmic and clearly fatal: if you know too much, if you tell too many fortunes, you will die early. For the zhongjie, the consequence is secular and political in origin and thus more opaque, more complicated: think of the immigration zhongjie whose only wish was to stay on the down low (*didiao*) and remain unnoticed by authorities. Like the woman's grandfather covering the bikes in dust, the zhongjie is not sure of what exactly he's afraid of but he's certain he's right to be afraid. Even Evelyn operated in a way that seemed below ground by using my presence in her office to make it seem like she was a somebody who knew the things I knew—how to get into Princeton University—and charge clients for it. If both zhongjie and fortune tellers belonged to the class of "people who knew" things, then fortune tellers emerge as the more trustworthy of the two. For example, the family in the New East District—the one whose main breadwinner worked in coal and whose EB-5 case had been handled by the oldest zhongjie in Zhengzhou after the scandal in Chicago—decided to consult a fortune teller when deciding between universities for their eldest daughter. Even though they had already paid a study abroad zhongjie to complete the application process for them, they did not turn to the zhongjie for advice but to a fortuneteller. Even though they too felt, like Sophy, skeptical about the whole process of fortune telling, they also felt that on a certain level seeing a fortune teller couldn't

hurt—that the added knowledge would only help. And besides, this family was one who knew something about secrets, and about how exactly what you don't know can or can't hurt you.

"Failed" Families and Untold Secrets

I met this family, who I'll call the Li's, through an American acquaintance who knew I was studying mobility and wanted to pass on a tutoring job to the family's oldest daughter, Mia. Mia had been enrolled in the New East District's most expensive international program for high school students but had, like many high school students who were going to go abroad for college, "come out to study" (*chulai xuexi*), which was a euphemism for no longer going to classes. The idea was that this would give her more time to study for her SATs, IELS, and AP tests full-time. In exchange for free IELS tutoring, Mia and her family agreed to be part of my study, an arrangement I ultimately felt I got the better end of as Mia's score stayed roughly the same before and after my tutoring. Like many of the people I worked with, Mia had no set time commitments, period: no job, no school, nothing. The added flexibility was supposed to give her more time to study, uninterrupted, and most people in Zhengzhou who are preparing for an important test would, under ideal conditions, find a way to study under similar circumstances; however, I observed that the unstructured time, rather than increasing people's efficiency, just made them more anxious.

Even before I knew Mia's father worked in coal, I knew the Li's were rich because they lived in one of the first gated communities to be built near Zhengzhou's Central Business District (CBD). Each building was 12 stories high and it had one of the most meticulously cared for gardens and koi ponds I'd seen in the city. They also lived in

one of the community's rare penthouse apartments. Their apartment was on the very top floor and it was two stories, with at least four balconies overlooking an adjacent man-made canal. For months, it was the most lavish house I'd seen in Zhengzhou (eventually May's villa usurped the title). On my first visit, I spent the entire first hour getting up the courage to ask if I could take pictures, and Mia laughed out loud at the way I scrambled from room to room, overwhelmed by the trappings of wealth that somehow existed in the same city as the impoverished migrant and former villages my own apartment complex bordered. The apartment was decorated in a style known in Zhengzhou as "European" but was unmistakably Chinese. Bulbous pink-and-yellow striped couches rested on their carved wooden feet while an elaborate wrought-iron stairway wound itself up to the second floor. A sun clock designed by Mia during elementary school hung above a 55-inch flat screen in the high-ceilinged living room. Even the bathrooms were unbelievably decadent—the one devoted to Mia's sole use had a toilet imported from Japan and a trashcan with a motion sensor that would open and close as your hand approached it.

That first day, Mia met me at the bus stop near her house. She was a pale girl with wide-eyes in the style fashionable among Zhengzhou's rich at that time and long, pretty hair. She told me we'd eat a lunch prepared by the family's *baomu*—a word Mia struggled to locate in English before finally settling on "babysitter." A baomu is more versatile than that, something closer to an all-purpose domestic servant, but I appreciated Mia's attempts to connect the baomu with her five-year-old sister, who wasn't there (for more on baomu, see Yan 2008). At the elevator doors, which opened up into their apartment's private entryway, Mia's mother greeted us. Mia's mother was pale, thin, and

incredibly young looking. Mia herself had just turned 18 the day before, and Mia's mother did not look like she had many years on her daughter. Over lunch, I explained my research to Mia's mother in Mandarin to make sure she didn't mind me writing about what I learned, who waved her hand in assent to everything as Mia elaborated: "Win-win." I asked which schools in America Mia was applying to, and Mia herself couldn't even name them all; her mother said the zhongjie had picked them out and consulted a file that had information on almost a dozen colleges.

On the way back to the bus stop, I mentioned how young-looking Mia's mother looked to Mia, and Mia found it funny how much of an impression it made on me. "Many people believe we are sisters," she told me, and added, "All she does is stay at home all day and do spas every day. How could she not look young?" The Li's were originally from Luoyang and had only moved to Zhengzhou when Mia was eight years old. Her sister, who was five, still slept in bed with her mother in a separate room from her father because "he comes home too late at night." Of all the trappings of the Li's house, in my notes I seem to have been struck most by a horrifyingly photorealistic oil painting of Mia's parents in which Mia's father, a somewhat portly man, stands besides his beautiful wife, who is taller than him. "I look forward to meeting the husband," I've written in my notes from that day, "I can't wait to see how the two of them are together."

I would never meet the husband, even though I'd go to Mia's house many times over the next few months and stay late, sometimes till nine or ten at night. I enjoyed the tutoring sessions and would often draw them out, lingering longer than I needed to. Mia was pretty, smart, and best of all funny: All of her prepared IELS answers were about how much it sucked to study for the IELS and how much she would enjoy life after she

was done taking the IELS. I spent as much time laughing at how clever Mia was as I did correcting her grammar; rarely was I in a hurry to leave their penthouse apartment, which was a quiet, clean oasis in the middle of my chaotic, Zhengzhou life.

Once, Mia's mother had to drive me to a bus stop in Jinshui District so I wouldn't have to chance missing the last bus. The IELS test was in three days; it was to be my last tutoring session with Mia at her house. Mia's mother apologized for not driving me all the way home—"We never go to the West Side, and I'm afraid I wouldn't know my way back"—and I said it was fine, I was used to buses anyway. To fill the time, she began telling me about her younger daughter, who was too unruly (*tiaopi*). I said this probably had to do with her age, and she said it was more serious than that. "She's so fierce (*lihai*)," she complained with a hint of pride, "If the boys try to bully her, she'll pull their ears till they bleed and hit them till they cry." Even I had to admit this was a five-year-old who was rough beyond her years. "She may grow out of it," I tried to counter, never wanting to come off as being complicit in people's criticism of their loved ones, "Was Mia like this at her age?" In my notes, I didn't record the way Mia's mother hesitated, but I remember it clearly even now. She took a moment to look at the road before finally saying, "No, when Mia was her age she wasn't like this at all." Mia, she said, used to fight with her a lot right when they first moved to Zhengzhou, but only for a few months. She was, at the very least, nothing like her younger daughter whose classmates called her *Lao Da*, or Old Big One, a nickname usually reserved for oldest brothers and gangsters.

Thinking of how such a child would adjust to elementary school in America, I asked Mia's mother when they planned on moving now that they had started a new EB-5 case. She said sometime after her younger daughter had completed elementary school so

that they could be sure she was fluent in Chinese. “Mia’s father had the idea to send her to America for university because we think the environment in China is really too bad,” she said, and I nodded; just that day the city’s AQI had been around 400, well above what one needs to breathe healthily. “When you go abroad as often as we do, you feel like everywhere is basically the same,” she said softly, “You can get used to anywhere.” I heard a hint of doubt in her voice, but also a truth at the core of what she was saying: When you are as rich as the Li’s are, your quality of life will be roughly the same in the PRC, the USA, or the south of France. The super rich are super rich everywhere.

Since the IELS test was that week, I thought that would be the last time I saw Mia and her family, but I was wrong. Mia and I kept meeting up socially when the two of us could find time. Her mother, perhaps fearing what she would get up to with so much unstructured time or perhaps tired of having her in the house constantly, signed her up for a number of classes at various private schools—dance classes, cooking classes, and make-up classes. “The make-up classes are the hardest,” Mia groaned. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing: Why did she need to take classes for make-up? As my female interlocutors often did when I made pronouncements about health and beauty that sounded stupid to them, Mia looked me up and down, noting, I guessed, my lack of make-up and fashionable clothes. “Because in America I’ll have to do it all myself! No one will be there to teach me.” We were sitting in a Starbucks at the same mall where Shaoshao had first taken me to see the street fortune teller; the stretch of dirt where the fortune teller had spread his mat was already gone, cordoned off by tin construction walls covered in ads and propaganda for President Xi’s Chinese Dream.

In the public, anonymous space of the Starbucks, Mia began to tell me all the things she couldn't speak about when we met in her house, such as how all throughout high school she and her classmates had hopped the fence surrounding their dorms and taken cabs to Zhengzhou's nightclubs. Muse, Song-song, and L7: "I've been to all of them," she told me dismissively, "We all have. We just realized that if you didn't wear a backpack, no one knew you were a high schooler." She also had a boyfriend, even though she wasn't allowed to date. He was older and going to college in Nanyang, but they had a plan: Next year, when she was in America, he'd apply to go to New Zealand on exchange to learn better English and then apply to get a master's degree in America the next year. The plan made no sense to me, but I let it go—I was impressed by how rich her secret life was. I too had kept secrets from my parents during high school, but I couldn't remember anything so elaborate as making a life plan with a partner my parents had never met. It was almost the Spring Festival, and I knew her boyfriend would be home from college, so I asked where he lived. She paused, and then began naming two places in the city: one where his father lived, and one where is mother lived.

"His parents are divorced?" I asked. When I lived in Beijing in 2008 among an admittedly less wealthy group of university students, those whose parents were divorced struggled both to disclose it to others and with the stigma that accompanied it. Those post-80s students never would have casually mentioned that their parents were divorced. "Is this normal?"

She looked at me with something just slightly softer than scorn but more judgmental than surprise. "Yes, it's normal. Wait, did you actually think the woman you met at my house was my real mother?"

I indicated dumbly that yes, I did.

Mia shook her head. No, that was all wrong: The "mother" I had met was in fact her third mother. Her first mother had left (*zou le*) when Mia was just a baby. "I don't know why," she stated without emotion. Her second mother was "a bitch," Mia enunciated in English, her teeth clicking together with satisfaction after the last consonant. She'd left and taken the son she'd had with Mia's father with her before they'd even come to Zhengzhou. "So I have a brother somewhere out there but I don't know where," Mia said without concern. This mother, her third mother, had come into their lives some time around when they'd moved to Zhengzhou, and Mia liked her well enough. I was doing a bad job of hiding my shock, and so to drive home how "normal" it was, Mia began listing off all the other people she knew in similar situations. One of her best friends discovered her father's affair on his phone but can't tell her mother because she needs her father's connections to get into a first-tier university. Another friend's mother was trying to cut her father's son from a first marriage off from financial support even while he suffered from a terminal illness; her friend was trapped between loyalty to her vengeful mother and her genuine care for her dying half-brother. "All my best friends are in a similar situation," she concluded finally.

"Why," I stumbled, trying to process what I'd been told, "Why would your mother lie to me about this?" Mia looked confused, so I continued. "She was telling me about your little sister and I asked her if you were like her when you were young. She said no, but really she wouldn't know, would she? Because she didn't know you until later?"

"She and my dad don't like other people to know," Mia explained. "They are worried people will judge me because of my family circumstances."

"But if it's so normal, then doesn't it not matter?"

"Yes, that's what I think," Mia nodded, "But my father—he thinks he's a failure as a father."

"Why?"

"He's gotten married three times and only succeeded once!" she laughed, "I think he's okay though."

As we parted, Mia invited me to go with her family on their Spring Festival road trip to Sichuan; I wanted to go but in the end couldn't make it. Throughout the spring, both Mia and I were busy—she with her classes, me with the pursuit of a new group of interlocutors working in marketing for real estate. We didn't meet again until April, when she faced the decision that would drive her to go to the fortuneteller. The American universities Mia had applied to had released their admissions, and Mia now had to choose which school she was going to attend for the next four years. She messaged me on WeChat, and I again took the two hours bus ride from my house in the southwest to hers in the New East District. I was greeted at the door by Mia's notorious little sister, who did not disappoint. As soon as we sat down for lunch, she began her (seemingly practiced) spiel about why she needed to keep all the baby teeth she was losing so that she could string them all together into a necklace.

"You want to wear your teeth as a necklace," I verified in Mandarin, and Mia's little sister nodded seriously. "That is hilarious and terrifying," I told Mia, laughing, in English. "I think this child will do great in America," I told Mia's stepmother in

Mandarin. She sighed and rubbed her daughter's back; her daughter, for her part, kicked her legs and grinned at me, thrusting her tongue through the hole where her two front teeth had been.

As the baomu began setting lunch out on the table, Mia and her stepmother explained their dilemma to me. Three universities had accepted Mia. Two, however, were conditional offers, which meant that Mia would have to arrive on campus a few weeks early to attend additional English language training classes. One was not, and it had the added benefit of being a place someone Mia knew already attended; to Mia and her stepmother, the fact that she would arrive there and already have a friend was a bigger factor than the ones I urged them to consider: place, size, private or public. Money, at least in my presence, was not a factor. Over lunch, we managed to eliminate one of the conditional offers because it required Mia to get a certain score on her TOEFL after only a month of additional training. The other two universities lingered. Nothing—not my descriptions of the thick Midwestern snow at one or the rich city life of the other—seemed to be helping her decide. Mia would go from saying, "It seems the first one is better," one moment to repeating, "But I have friends at the other and I could go with a friend who's already decided." At the end of two and a half hours, both Mia and her stepmother said they felt the same about each of their two choices. They laughing said they should just draw straws or flip a coin, and I joined in, joking: "Or you could go to a fortune teller (*qu suanming*)."

Immediately, Mia's stepmother latched onto the idea. She began telling me about a fortuneteller she knew. He was, she explained, not like the ones you would find on the street and pay 30RMB to—"Those ones aren't accurate (*zhun*) at all"—and he wouldn't

calculate the fate of just anyone. He would meet you only if you were properly introduced (*bei jieshao*) by a friend; you had to know someone who knew him and be legible within his social network as a friend of a friend. He was, she maintained, so serious that he would only do face readings in the morning because otherwise the weight of a day could make your face look different and his readings less accurate (*zhun*). She said once her friend's eyebrows had been repaired (tattooed on, as was the style with women of a certain age in Zhengzhou), and he said he might not be able to tell her birthdate. In the end, Mia's stepmother gushed, he was only off by a day or two.

Excitement filled the ornate living room where we sat as Mia's stepmother continued to attempt to declare her allegiance to the objective narrative of secular authority while at the same time breathily explaining how she'd been seduced by evidence of a world still enchanted. "I don't believe these things (*wo bu xin*)," she admitted, "I think these are superstitions (*mixin*) and we should look to science (*kexue*), but he's really very accurate (*zhende hen zhun*)." She said that one of the things this fortuneteller would do was make you write a word and put it facedown on the table; he would then on his own piece of paper write two. When she'd gone and the cards were flipped, the result was that they'd both written (*xinxiang de xiang*): thought or desire. Once, something even stranger had happened: Mia's father's friend had written the number one in roman script (1), and the fortune teller had written it as a character *yi* (一). "One was in roman characters and one was in Chinese," she said breathlessly. "I don't believe it, but he's too accurate (*tai zhun*)." He could tell you anything about your past, but the things he said about your future—well, she demurred, half those were accurate. But none of this could take away from the most important thing he'd calculated, as far as

Mia's stepmother was concerned. "It was he who told your father to study mining and the earth if he wanted to make money," she said, turning to Mia. Superstition or not, here we were, in the penthouse apartment purchased with the fortune her father had made from coal.

Mia said she also didn't believe in superstitions like this but agreed to have him tell her which college to choose. "Don't ask a question like that," her stepmother urged, "It's better to ask something different—like what kind of work you should do. And don't ask for the last name of the person you're going to marry because it can interfere with your marriage." She laughed suddenly and brought her hands together in a gesture of delight: "But I can ask! I can ask and just not tell you." They walked me to the door gesturing animatedly about how they would make plans and of course I could come along—it would be helpful for my research and it had been my idea, after all—and I said I could make it to the bus stop by myself. Within just a few minutes—before my bus could even cross out of the New East District and into Silver Stream District—Mia messaged me to say we had an appointment to see him at his office on the West Side around 3PM the next day.

The Fortune Teller as Zhongjie, Party-State Agent, and Family Therapist

The next day, the Li's were late. I'd asked them how they planned to get to the address on the West Side they'd sent to me, and they said they'd come by subway. The address, however, was just a few blocks away from my house, which meant it was at least a kilometer away from the nearest subway stop. Reasoning that I could afford to wait more than I could afford to emphasize their ignorance of the West Side's geography, I picked a spot on the corner and prepared to wait. The neighborhood was a strange one,

even for the West Side, which was notorious for mixing genres in its urban landscapes. On my side of the street, there was a low, one-story building with blue aluminum rolling doors covering stores who sold various things—tools, electronics, rolls of hard plastic—in bulk. On the north side of the street was a new residential development. During nine-months of fieldwork I had completed, I'd learned how to decipher the building's sand-colored art deco facade; even without getting close to it, I could already tell which of Zhengzhou's development companies was responsible for the architectural atrocity. Still stranger, though, was the southwest corner of the street, where the remains of an urban village continued to be occupied, mid-demolition, by the street-side shop owners. Pedestrians came up to the half-demolished structures and purchased cakes, clothes, and other goods without seeming to register the red *chai* 拆 written on the cracking concrete walls.

Eventually, Mia and her stepmother arrived in a cab that screeched to a halt in front of my corner. Mia hopped out and began apologizing, but I waved her off—don't worry about it, really. Mia's stepmother finished paying, slipped out of the cab, and looked around in confusion. "There weren't so many doors before," she announced to herself and pulled out her cell phone to call for more directions. We followed as she picked her way gingerly through the e-bike covered sidewalk and past the blue aluminum doors until finally we reached a set of red metal doors with ornate bronze-colored handles. Mia's stepmother knocked, and an irritated security guard let us in after she said the fortuneteller's name and then her husband's name. "This is Mia's father's friend's cable factory," she told us as we stepped over the threshold, "The fortune teller is a friend of his, so he is allowed to stay here." She stopped before turning a corner into a courtyard

so she could prepare us for what was about to happen: We would go in one at a time, first Mia, then Mia's stepmother, then me, although Mia could go with me if I needed help with translation. A curtain would be up, and we would have to sit quietly while he did the reading. "Even I cannot be there while Mia talks to him," her stepmother insisted sternly.

What actually happened was much different than that. We entered the fortune teller's office through a pair of sliding glass doors; a quick survey of the room, which included an ornate desk, a large empty birdcage, and a hard bed pressed against the wall, revealed that it was also his bedroom. There was a sour-looking middle-aged woman there, and the two of them looked irritated about the interruption as we walked in. Mia's stepmother floated to the front of the room gracefully: "Hello, Master Zhang, I'm President Li's wife. Thank you for making time for us. My daughter and her American friend are here to get their fates calculated (*suanming*)." The fortuneteller eyed me. "An American, eh?" I looked back at him. He was a few years over sixty, I guessed, though his oiled back hair was still the inkjet-black of Jackie Chan's signature hair dyeing shampoo. He wore a white button-down shirt with short sleeves and black slacks belted well above his waistline: the business casual of PRC men in power. I thought, as I tried to look past them into his eyes, that he must have the same eyeglass frames as former President Hu Jintao.

In fact, the trappings of CCP power—or a certain generation's imaginations of them—were everywhere in the high-ceilinged room. In addition to calligraphy brushes, paper, ink, and an ink stone—the so-called four treasures of the study, which every upwardly mobile or aspiring family had in their living room—his desk also boasted a giant, jade cabbage—an oversized replica of the *Cuiyu Baicai* that remains the National

Palace Museum in Taipei's most sought-after artifact. The walls were covered in calligraphic scrolls and group photos of rows of similarly dressed men holding official, red-and-yellow banners: "THIRD ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON YIJING STUDIES." Finally, on the back wall, above the bed and facing the sliding glass doors, was a hologram poster that alternated between showing the face of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, depending on where in the room one stood.

"Who will go first?" the Master Zhang asked.

"My daughter," Mia's stepmother announced without hesitation.

"Your daughter!" Master Zhang exclaimed as he directed Mia to sit on the bed (thoughtfully covered with a towel). He began an exchange he'd repeat several times throughout the reading, almost slyly: "She really doesn't seem like she's your daughter."

"She is," Mia's stepmother said politely.

"But you look so young!" he gushed.

Mia's stepmother smiled tightly. "Do I look younger than when I was here a few years ago?"

Here, the strangeness of fortune telling for friends of friends, fortune telling for people within your clique or social circle (*quanzi*) emerges. Master Zhang didn't need to have access to mystical powers to deduce that Mia's stepmother is not her birth mother. He should have—as Mia assumed I could—been able to tell just from looking. And if what Mia's stepmother was saying was true—that he was her father's friend's friend—then this fact should already be known to everyone in their circle. He wouldn't even need, as Sophy had guessed fortunetellers did, agents or town gossips to tell him this. Marriages, extramarital affairs, the real reasons for second or third marriages: all of

these things are frequently *known* but rarely spoken about even among friends in Zhengzhou, but Master Zhang had to play the dual role of being a social actor within an existing network of friends and a fortune teller. As a friend, he shouldn't embarrass Mia's stepmother by speaking of the fact that Mia's existence predated her marriage to President Li, but as a fortune teller—a professional revealer of secrets, the *somebody* in Zhengzhou's "somebody knows" formulation—pretending he was ignorant of such facts would undermine his own authority. As it was, he could only do what he did, which was dance around the issue with Mia's stepmother again and again throughout the afternoon, demonstrating that of course he *knew*, of course nothing was hidden from him, but he still respected her secret in public.

Master Zhang peeled two post-it notes off a pad and handed one to Mia and was about to begin when Mia's stepmother protested: "Shouldn't we leave the room? Won't we influence you?"

"No, no," Master Zhang said with irritation. "It doesn't matter."

"Who is that?" Mia's stepmother asked, pointing to the woman who was now sitting sullenly near the door.

"An employee at the factory," Master Zhang said without looking at either of them. "She likes to watch when she doesn't have anything else to do."

I thought their relationship looked a lot more complicated than that; much of Master Zhang's life appeared to be complicated. Mia told me over WeChat that he had just gotten off a train that morning and had to make a plane that night. Even though Mia's stepmother had insisted we go in the morning so our face readings would be accurate, at

that moment it was almost 4PM just because it was one of the only hours he was sure to be in the city.

Mia's stepmother wasn't wrong about everything, though. As expected, Master Zhang began his session by seeing if he could write the same character as Mia. Casually, he scribbled something on his post-it and turned it facedown; then he asked Mia to write a word on hers. He looked at what she'd written and immediately crushed his post-it before any of us could see it. "We'll try again," he announced, "If I can't get it the second time, I won't do the reading (*suan*)." He took a new post-it, scribbled, and held it facedown while Mia wrote the word for happiness: *le* 乐. He revealed his character—a loose configuration of barely legible lines—in triumph: "See? It's the same!" Then he repeated the trick, taking a new post-it and scribbling something down on it while asking, "What's your birthday?" As Mia answered, he flipped the pad to show that he'd written that date, exactly. I began scanning the room for mirrors, cameras, anything that would explain how he knew what to write, but there was nothing there that I could see, and plus he'd done all the writing *before* Mia had lifted her pen—even if there were cameras, there was nothing for them reveal. My shock increased when he announced, correctly, that she had two siblings—which was not difficult or impressive since he did know her father after all—but then said, "You also had one sibling who miscarried (*liuchan*). If you don't believe me, go ask your father when you get home." Mia laughed—a hard laugh from the back of her throat—and seemed to accept this. In a family with so many secrets, it's not hard to believe that something like this could have happened without her knowing, but it's also hard to see how it could matter.

As the reading continued, however, Master Zhang convinced me of his talents in other ways. “The boyfriend you’re with now is not the one you’ll marry,” he said sternly, and Mia reacted without hesitation: “I don’t have a boyfriend.” I looked worriedly at Mia’s stepmother, who seemed disinterested but was of course hearing every word. “Okay,” Master Zhang continued, “But this boyfriend not the one.” Mia dug in. “There is no boyfriend. I’m not allowed to have a boyfriend.” Master Zhang seemed unimpressed by this muted drama. “Fine, but you will not meet the one you’re supposed to marry here. He’ll be in America.”

Both Mia and her stepmother leaned forward. Mia asked the question she’d come to ask: *Where* in America? Where was she meant to go to college?

Master Zhang leaned back. Somewhere cold. Somewhere in America’s middle—he looked to me and began listing fake amalgams of foreign-sounding place names, and I shook my head. There was nowhere in America by those names.

“Anyway,” he continued, “It’s a place where you already know someone.”

Mia perked up. This must be the large state school where she already had one friend and could go with another! That’s what he meant, right? Master Zhang shrugged, noncommittally, and Mia pressed: “But what if I go to the other school? What will happen? The other school is also good, right?” She said the name of the school. “Will going to that school influence my fate (*ming*)?”

Master Zhang looked bored. “Then you will go to that school! It does not matter where you go to school. You will go to school in America and work in America, but you will raise your family here, in China.”

Mia sat back, and the reading continued quickly, as though Master Zhang were trying to bring it to a close. Mia's stepmother was insistent on getting the full treatment, however: "Don't you have any other questions to ask?" Mia shook her head. "I know I will go to that other school," she said. Before I knew it, there was a shuffle, and I was sitting on the towel on the bed between Mia and Master Zhang. "An American," Master Zhang muttered to himself, and then to me: "Your friend will help you if you do not understand, okay?" I nodded, and he peeled off two post-its. He scribbled his character and flipped it, while I struggled to think of what to write. I felt like the character trick had something to do with the unconscious, that it was some strange reverse Rorschach Test where Master Zhang told you what you saw in the ink blot before the ink blot even appeared. I struggled because for me there was no unfettered access to the unconscious through characters, no way to react immediately and write out the unknown known; for me, the Chinese character had to be consciously selected from a limited repertoire of words I could trust myself to write correctly.

In the end, I chose the word for heart or mind: *xin* 心. He flipped his scribble of incomprehensible strokes over in victory: "It's the same!" Mia glanced at me with skepticism but said nothing. We continued. He scrawled a "9" crossed with a "1" and held it up for me—"Your birthday?"—and I nodded dumbly, as I was indeed born on September 1. The trouble began, though, when he got to my family. "You have two siblings," he declared, and I shook my head. I have only one—a younger sister. He smiled, tilting his head upward so his glasses caught the light. "You have another sibling who has the same father as you but not the same mother." Mia's stepmother gestured to me urgently: "Do you understand? It means your father had a child with another

woman!" I laughed and looked at Mia. "The chances of that," I said slowly, "are very very low." Master Zhang moved on—he wanted to talk about my current boyfriend, and again I laughed. "Isn't there anyone? Even if they are not officially your boyfriend?" Mia asked, and I shrugged embarrassedly—not really, not for this whole year. Master Zhang looked irritated. "Well," he said, "Your old boyfriend will find you when you get back to America and you will have to decide what to do about it." I must have looked ashen, because Mia touched my knee in concern. "He may be wrong," she whispered in English. "I hope he's wrong," I replied.

Secrets Kept in Plain Sight

Suddenly, two men carrying a sack came through the glass doors. The sour-faced woman rose to her feet to greet them. I assumed they were there for her, but I was wrong. Very wrong. The men nodded to the woman but did not stop on their way to the desk where Master Zhang sat, calculating my fate. He turned away from me, said a few words, and then watched as the men began unloading stacks of pink hundred RMB notes onto his desk. In my notes, I've guessed an amount—500,000RMB—but I know it's arbitrary, that I had neither the expertise nor the presence of mind to calculate the amount of money being passed across the desk. Master Zhang watched as they arranged the stacks in rows and counted out loud. I said something—maybe "should we leave"—and everyone ignored me. No one else seemed surprised by this sudden exchange but me. Mia, Mia's stepmother, the sour-faced woman—all seemed to be doing their best not to look like they noticed anything. The reading fell apart after the money changed hands. Master Zhang was distracted, and rightfully so. The men had indicated that they would wait for him in the adjoining room, and we could hear them laughing and smell the smoke from

their cigarettes as he asked me irritatedly if I had any other questions. I shook my head, but Mia's stepmother urged me not to hold back. "How will my career be?" I finally asked weakly, and he laughed. "You'll be rich," he said, "Aren't we all rich?" Mia's stepmother told us to wait outside. I thanked Master Zhang and followed Mia through the glass doors and into the courtyard of the cable factory. "Do you believe him?" I asked Mia in English.

"Not really."

"What was all that money for?"

"Why would I know?"

Mia's stepmother, visible displeased, stepped through the door.

"How much did you give him?" Mia asked, excited.

Mia's stepmother curled her lip: "One hundred RMB for each of you." Mia gasped—it was more than you would give a street fortune teller but much less than you should give a "closed" fortune teller with a reputation and a network like Master Zhang's—but Mia's stepmother continued: "I don't think he did a good job. He was not paying attention." I agreed, but pointed out that we'd accomplished our mission: Mia now knew which school she was going to. "I think it was good we went," I told them both in Mandarin, "It seems like you had decided where you wanted to go before we went, but you might not have known until he told you the wrong one."

Mia's stepmother seemed comforted by this. "It's true," she said, "You had decided even before we came, you just didn't know you'd already decided."

Outside, on the crowded sidewalk, we had to make a decision about where to go. It was almost 5PM—did they want to eat? I asked. Mia said shyly that she wanted a

burger from Burger King, which she'd never been to, and I knew there was a Burger King just a few BRT stops away—did they want to go by bus? They agreed, and together we went through the turnstile and waited for the bus, which was of course packed with rush hour traffic. Mia's stepmother nearly lost her footing as she rooted around in her purse for a wet wipe to delicately wipe down the pole she eventually steadied herself with. The ride was short, but uncomfortable. "I've never been to this part of town," Mia declared as I pointed out the weirder architectural marvels on the way to Burger King. At Burger King, I asked Mia's stepmother about the stacks of cash. "Oh," she said, "Many of Zhengzhou's officials go to him for help when they are making policies, and they like to find ways to thank him. I am sure he makes lots of money. But I don't know what that was for." The two of them ate quickly, and Mia's stepmother thanked me for my help with public transportation but thought it would be easier for the two of them to take a cab to the subway. "You live near here, right?" she asked, and I verified that yes, I did, and they shouldn't worry; I would walk home. I watched as they flagged down a cab and zipped away from the West Side and the lingering strangeness of the afternoon.

Chinese Magical Realism and Other Ways of Perceiving Difficult Knowledge

Often, when forced to confront something that appeared incomprehensible to me during my fieldwork, I would postpone trying to make sense of it by instead making a private joke to myself. I would write the words "CHINESE MAGICAL REALISM" in the margins of my notes, as a hash tag on my social media posts, with a wink in my electronic journals. Part of the joke is that magical realism is a literary genre, not a category for social theory. It's not ritual, politics, kinship, gender, narrative, or religion; it doesn't come from reality and it's not, by definition, something that would necessarily be

legible to me as a social scientist. And of course, magical realism as a literary genre is associated with Latin American literature, a different region entirely, with its own particular history. Another part of the joke is that to call something "Chinese Magical Realism" is to make an idea travel not just from fiction to reality but from one place to another: it's inappropriate and insensitive and, probably, I should know better.

Yet in so many instances I didn't know any better, couldn't have known any better. The third and final part of the joke was always that as inappropriate as "Chinese Magical Realism" might have been in theory, in practice it was accurate—the only thing that came close to describing my sense of disorientation in the face of practices that seemed mundane to those involved. "Chinese Magical Realism" got the region, discipline, and politics wrong, but it got the tone right. Watching the money pile up on Master Zhang's desk, I thought "Chinese Magical Realism" and gave myself permission to find the humor in something that might have otherwise frightened me because I could not understand it. As Master Zhang hurriedly wrote a note, opened a drawer to retrieve a credit card, and passed them over to the men, I replaced my sense of dread with one of primitive wonder as Mia and Mia's stepmother sat in the same room watching the same scene without changing their expressions. They might have been as frightened (or as tickled) as I was, but they knew better than to show it; like characters cooing over ice in a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel, people saved their wonder for things that were ordinary to me, like Whoppers, and appeared to face what I found exceptional without letting on that it was extraordinary even if—as Mia admitted—they knew as little about what was happening as I did.

For many months, I struggled with the fact that the people I was working with in Zhengzhou—whether I considered them friends, clients, or more distant interlocutors—were not necessarily lying to me but certainly omitting things. Big things, like Shaoshao's mother's death or her father's remarriage. I took these revelations, when they occurred, too personally. Each new piece of information, such as Mia's family circumstances, struck me first as a shock and then as a betrayal. These omissions, as difficult as they were emotionally, made sense to me intellectually; the "just in case" mentality was at work here. What made less sense, though, was the way people kept even what they *didn't* know a secret—think of Mia, watching the money change hands with stone-faced stoicism, or of my first roommate, not admitting he didn't know the real reason that our second roommate hadn't returned until I was already leaving, or even of Evelyn, first claiming she could handle every problem before she even understands the scope of it. For a time, I wondered if the logic here was binary: in a social field divided up between somebodies who knew and somebodies who didn't, you are better off not admitting you fall into the latter category, just in case.

Looking back on it now, however, it seems clear that all the knowledge people gladly disavowed was—or could be seen as—negative. If it wasn't negative on its face—such as the grandfather's side hustle selling bikes—it could *become* negative if disclosed to the wrong source or, in recent experiences during the Cultural Revolution, had been negative. Deaths, divorces, illnesses, sudden gains or losses of money, even a refusal to complete a proposed business deal: these were the things people refused to disclose to each other, or even consider aloud to themselves. Logan, a friend of mine who had been born female but identified as a man, was extremely superstitious. We went to

fortunetellers and temples together several times; once, Logan walked out of a reading because he was so upset by the fortuneteller's assessment (the fortune teller told him his girlfriend would never return the money he had lent her to open a bar; the fortune teller was right). In the middle of my fieldwork, Logan shifted from acting as a guide, middleman, and chaperone for rich women getting plastic surgery in South Korea to acting as a semi-legal plastic surgeon who made house calls. "I like this work because I only need one or two clients a month to cover all my expenses for three months," he told me smugly. When I asked why people would hire him instead of going to a hospital, he said it was because he was cheaper without hesitating; when I asked whether the surgeries were risky, he paused.

"I cannot even say this out loud," he said finally. "Of course it is risky. I may only need one client to live for three months, but I only need one client to have an accident (*chushi*) to be ruined for my whole life." He shuddered. "It's their face! Their eyes. How can you say how much you might have to pay in compensation for that?" I was walking Logan to his car. As he unlocked the driver's side, he looked at me accusingly. "I feel very bad after saying that to you," he muttered, "These are things you should not talk about! If you talk about them, maybe they will happen."

Logan's belief that his thoughts about misfortune could create actual experiences of misfortune was not unique. Each time I went to a fortuneteller I'd recount the fate that had been calculated to friends like Ya, who'd advise me to only think about the good things. "When I go to a fortune teller," she told me, "I only believe the good things. The bad things—I don't hear them!" She would do the same thing when reading me my zodiac, which she'd do periodically out of boredom. As she read, I could hear her

stopping mid-sentence and starting again at a more auspicious clause. Frequently, I would ask Ya about her life and she would end up complaining to me about her family, her poor work situation, or her dissatisfaction with specific Zhengzhou government officials. Each time she finished speaking about something negative, she'd press both her hands to her cheeks and moan with regret. At first, she framed her feelings in terms of nationalism: "When I tell you bad things I feel I am not patriotic enough because you will think China is bad from what I'm saying." Eventually, however, she framed her regret in terms of our personal relationship: "When I really like a person, I feel I shouldn't tell them unhappy things because I do not want to make them unhappy." Negativity, unhappiness, and misfortune: all these were like diseases that could spread from person to person as soon as they were articulated. I reassured Ya that I wanted to listen to her no matter what kind of things she had to say, but as time went on I began to see that she had a point; by my ninth month in Zhengzhou, I could no longer contain every bad thing that people shared with me. I too wanted to disavow all the knowledge of badness I'd gained throughout the year; I too only wanted to hear the good things people told me. Like the hungry infants and other subjects Sandor Ferenczi draws on in his essay "The Problem of Acceptance of Unpleasant Ideas," I had honed my unconscious into a "reckoning-machine" bent on denying the existence of the disturbing objects that made up reality unless the pain those objects caused was too much to ignore (Ferenczi 1926).

In Ferenczi's reading, this tendency to self-censor by avoiding the negative is not done for political expediency but for personal protection and, in psychoanalytic terms, to preserve *pleasure*. I think more than pleasure is at stake in the delusions coloring personal interactions in Zhengzhou, however. A belief that one's thoughts can control or

influence external reality—such as Logan's belief that talking about surgical accidents would bring them into being—is an example of what psychoanalysts call magical thinking. Thomas Ogden links magical thinking back to Sigmund Freud's exploration of omnipotent thought in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 1913, 86); he observes,

> Magical thinking has one purpose and one purpose only: to evade facing the truth of one's internal and external experience. The method employed to achieve this end is the creation of a state of mind in which the individual believes that he creates the reality in which he and others live. Under such circumstances, psychic reality eclipses external reality…Consequently, emotional surprise and encounters with the unexpected are, as much as possible, foreclosed. (Ogden 2010, 320)

As a psychoanalyst, Ogden's work is normative and prescriptive; he is concerned for patients who engage in magical thinking because, though it is convenient, "it does not 'work'—nothing can be built on it or with it except additional layers of magical constructions" (2010, 322). What I found so strange about the magical thinking of people in the PRC was that, somehow, it *did* work. Or at least it *appeared* to work. Not in the sense that people were able to better deal with experiences, traumas, and unexpected outcomes, but in the sense that people were able to *preserve* their sense of omnipotence because no external forces existed to contradict them, particularly within families.[32]

[32] This was not true in every case, of course, but even in those inherently unbalanced or antagonistic relationships—such as those between a tenant or landlord or an employee and boss—yielding to the magical thinking of the person who was technically superior often gave one an advantage. For instance, in the next chapter, I show how Ya performed a deference to her boss that she did not feel to avoid conflict when refusing demands. I often suffered because I refused to give up my own version of the facts when dealing with others just to preserve a sense of bonhomie. My landlord, Mr. Zheng, and I parted on particularly acrimonious terms when he refused to return my deposit to me. When I got angry and insisted that while he was capable of withholding the money, he was wrong to do so, the conversation turned from a discussion of what the facts were—whether I did in fact owe him the money or not—to the consequences my refusal to yield to his version of the facts would do to our relationship. "How will you come back here and look me in the eyes and say we are friends if you are angry like this?" Mr. Zheng asked me multiple times. I told him we had never been friends, that friends did not steal money from each other, and that I would never come back. Until the very last moment I left the complex, Mr. Zheng continued to insist loudly and publically that he was my friend and that I was wrong for being angry. What was at issue for Mr. Zheng was not reality or the facts on the ground, but whether I would be rude and uncouth enough to give them the appearance of being disputed; at that time, I was. Even Sophy disapproved. "With older people, you should just nod and let them think they're right," she admonished me as we drove away, with Mr. Zheng still standing there at the gate of the complex, smiling and waving, "It's not worth it to fight."

Much has been written about the importance of Chinese families, Chinese kinship and the theoretical interdependence of each person within the family upon the other to constitute their social reality (e.g., Hsu 1971[1948]; Freedman 1966; Sangren 2013), though of course, in practice, people labor with and against the yoke of the ideal Chinese family (see Yan 2003). Ironically, the secret-keeping of parents—people like Shaoshao's mother and father, Mia's stepmother, the grandfather dirtying the bikes after dark, the woman keeping her father's illness from her brother in Japan, and my friend in Beijing's adopted parents—is meant to be a form of protection. Like Logan and Ya's magical thinking, these parents believe that so long as their children do not know the facts, the facts cannot hurt them. But they can; they do. The deaths, divorces, illnesses, financial gains and losses: all these secrets end up congealing in a sticky film of magical thinking that obscures the reality of the most important relationship—the one between parent and child—in many Chinese people's lives. The constant possibility of hidden pernicious information creates not a new reality, but a new form of lived realism: an experience that *appears* true to life but only *represents* a reality that isn't true at all. It is a magical realism reinforced by social consensus, as people appear to yield to the magical thinking of others. Pretending not to see the cash changing hands over Master Zhang's desk creates a parallel realistic—but not actual—experience of the event in which neither I, Mia, or her mother have to be complicit in the potentially dangerous and definitely sketchy exchange taking place. Similarly, resolving never to confront your parents about their failure to disclose certain crucial pieces of information or speak about their failures in general generates a parallel and more acceptable version of the relationship that is not real but is experienced as though it were because of its *realism* as performed by the

continued discretion and keeping of secrets between parents and children. Secrets, meant to protect children, instead become a means of keeping them separate from their origins, from their parents, from what, to paraphrase Louise Glück, they love deeply (1997).

When Logan was a small child, his older sister died in a car crash. Logan was also in the car; as the second daughter who was supposed to have been born a boy, he was already a disappointment, and after the death of his sister, his guilt—for having surviving, for being neither the son his parents had hoped he would be nor the daughter they'd lost—overwhelmed him. He was kicked out of middle school for fighting. He took up different strange jobs, drinking, doing ketamine. During the worst of his depression, he stayed in a studio apartment he was renting in Zhengzhou just watching movies for nine months. Some of this I knew because Logan told me; most of it I learned from other people who had known him longer than I had. One of Logan's favorite things to do with me was drink coffee, smoke, and let me interview him. He would wax eloquently about Zhengzhou society and his opinions for hours and hours as my tape recorder whirred. "My memory is so bad," Logan would often exclaim in these exchanges when I brought up older answers that contradicted his newer ones, "I really cannot remember anything! This is why I need friends like you to tell me how I am. Otherwise I will forget." One of the things Logan never managed to remember in an interview with me was the car accident that killed his sister. Even though I was always interviewing Logan about the unpredictable, accidents, and traffic, Logan never brought it up. Like everyone else we knew, I pretended not to know. I did not know how Logan would react if I suddenly confronted him with this experience he might not have "worked" through; I did not want to take the chance that inciting such work would ruin our relationship or, worse, that

Logan was not *capable* of such work. Through magical thinking, Ogden writes, "history can be rewritten at will" (2010, 322). For Logan, it was.

Sometimes I felt like the only people who were real with Logan were the fortune tellers we met, who were willing to send him spinning, teary-eyed, into the street. Reality and realness, as I'll show in the next chapter, are in short supply in Zhengzhou. Think about the strangeness of zhongjie, of an entire economy built on the idea that you can make a fortune keeping people one step away from the information they need to live. Or the precariousness of fortunetellers, who are as relied upon as often as they are disavowed. Both zhongjie and fortune tellers are selling, in their own way, bits and pieces of a deliberately repressed reality; what do you get from either of them, after all, but bits your own unconscious? Zhongjie and fortune tellers are taking the unknown knowns, the decisions you can't admit you've already made, the knowledge you could have dug up yourself, and turning them into cash. Maybe you're not supposed to go to a fortuneteller too often because you'll anger the gods, or maybe you shouldn't go because venturing too often into the unconscious is dangerous. Defense mechanisms are, after all, like an immune system for the mind; yes, they occasionally must be broken down because they can make you seem sick, but destroy them entirely and find yourself vulnerable to a ruthless reality. Either way, Zhengzhou's professional secret keepers will be there, calculating fates and hoarding information, selling your unconscious back to you piecemeal.

Shaoshao's New Apartment: Good Lies, Bad Secrets, and Different Stories

The week before Shaoshao left Zhengzhou, she bought an apartment. She told me she wouldn't have time to meet up with me because doing the paperwork was taking up

all her time; I told her I didn't care. She was my only friend in Zhengzhou, and I was willing to sit with her in whatever bureaucratic hell she was on her way to if it meant spending the afternoon with her. Shaoshao told me to meet her in an hour at a coffee shop in the north of the city during lunchtime, when all the government offices were closed. My e-bike was out of battery and getting a cab at that hour was impossible—eventually I ended up hailing an electric tricycle and hoping for the best. The man driving the tricycle had no idea how to get to the coffee shop. As I tried to navigate with my phone, we discovered together that one of the roads on the map was gone—swallowed up not by a road improvement project but rather eliminated by a new real estate development project. Cursing, the driver took me all the way around the now blocks-wide construction site; in just a few months, the skeletons of residential towers would rise up but for now all that could be seen was rubble, ghostly chunks of concrete bones and porcelain flesh. I was late to the coffee shop, but Shaoshao didn't mind. We ordered lunch, and Shaoshao began to tell me all about how she'd snagged the apartment in Manhattan right from underneath the zhongjie's nose. When not one but three zhongjie called within a few hours to say they'd found a woman with a house in her price range, Shaoshao wasted no time. She got online and began searching real estate websites until she finally found the ad with the same description. She called and said she was an individual looking to buy a house.

"I told her I was from Zhengzhou, because I knew she could tell from my accent anyway," Shaoshao recounted excitedly, "I said I was buying the house because I didn't want to live with my parents anymore."

"But that's a lie," I pointed out.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter," Shaoshao moved on. The woman agreed to meet her at the apartment, and Shaoshao, knowing that the woman would have many other offers since she was selling so far below market rates, brought a contract with her. In person, the woman said she'd liked the sound of Shaoshao's voice on the phone. Shaoshao wasn't sure how to translate what she'd said into English, but it was something about how the tone of her voice had revealed her to be a good, honest person. The woman told her she was selling the house so cheaply because her son was getting married and the woman needed cash fast for the down payment on his marriage house (*hunfang*) for him in the New East District. Shaoshao had been the first individual to call her (there had been plenty of zhongjie) and plus she liked her. They signed the deal right there and then. That afternoon, Shaoshao had to go to another office and complete one last bureaucratic task before the apartment could legally be hers; she'd come to the coffee shop to wait out the long summer lunch hours when the office was closed so that everyone could take an afternoon nap. Together we trudged through late September heat to the BRT stop.

If it had been September of 2014 instead of September of 2013, I'd have known from the way Shaoshao avoided articulating what she needed to do at the office that it was something fraught, important, or dangerous; as it was, I remained ignorant and glib, punctuating our ride on the sweltering BRT with constant patter. In Chinese aesthetics, there's a saying called *hongyuntuoyue*. It means to "set off the moon by painting the clouds," and it refers to the way ink painters can reveal the shape of the moon through the absence of ink. By painting the clouds around the moon, the moon appears in the only bit of untouched paper; in this way, the focal point of the painting is, ironically, the only part of the painting unarticulated or untouched by the painter's brush. Now people use

hongyuntuoyue as a metaphor to talk about how writers provide foils for their main characters, but I thought of it often during my fieldwork as people continued to communicate significance to me through negative space, silence, and absence. In the coming months, I'd learn to listen less to what was said and more to what wasn't said, to evoke narratives out of silence and its observable, atmospheric accompaniments: averted eyes, shifting postures, and low hums of uncomfortable ambivalence.

Shaoshao and I arrived at the police station before it opened and had to sit on the dirty front steps. We weren't the only ones there, and several other anxious, impatient people milled about in the limited patches of shade beside the locked door. I bought two tiny glutinous ice cream balls for Shaoshao and myself. She began telling me about how long this particular bureaucratic procedure was taking. This was her third time at a police station. "The thing I hate the most about this is how people tell me different stories," she explained. At a different police station, a woman had told her to prepare her documents one way, but when she went to turn them in, a man had told her she had to redo them. To complicate things even further, her marriage certificate was in Canada with her husband, and each police station (*paichusuo*) was split on how to deal with it.

The seconds dripped away until finally the blue aluminum door opened and the crowd gasped for breath before pressing its way in through the narrow opening. Shaoshao rushed in with the rest of the people to grab a number. I found two seats near the air conditioner. "Seven!" she declared as she rejoined me in the back row, "Not bad." Together, we watched people go up to the desk one by one, argumentatively, resignedly, or hurriedly. One man lingered near the back of each person at the desk and seemed

confused each time the woman didn't call him next. "Does he still not get that he has to get a number," we wondered; finally, he did.

Shaoshao's business took moments. She walked up alone, presented her hukou, seemed to be describing her situation, and then waited while the policewoman typed a few things up, took the hukou to the back, and returned. "Wow, so fast," Shaoshao wondered, showing me the hukou. The hukou is a really simple document—like a red bankbook with only three or four pages and no pictures. Now that it was over, she seemed in a hurry to talk about it. "My father and I should have done this months ago, but—well we couldn't bear to," Shaoshao explained to me as I examined the hukou. Shaoshao's business had to do with the law restricting the number of properties one family could own. To own the house, Shaoshao needed to shift the property deeds around within her family; the apartment in the New East District was still in her deceased mother's name and was affecting Shaoshao's status as an owner. All the policewoman had done was take Shaoshao's mother off of her hukou and print a new one. All it had taken was a piece of paper, some ink, and a few staples to make Shaoshao into an eligible homeowner. Just like that, the secret was out, and the origins of the most difficult story in Shaoshao's life were open to the public, no longer obscured from view. Just like that, Shaoshao's mother was legally dead.

We stood there for a minute, wondering at the document before moving on with our day. We had a lot to do. I still had to find a new house to live in without my secretive roommate, and Shaoshao still had to buy a suitcase to take back to Canada with her. But there was a sense that something important had happened, that some strange, magically real episode had finally come to a close. After she finally put the hukou away, I could

feel Shaoshao relax. We spent the rest of the day shopping and discussing my housing search. In the picture we took at the BRT station while parting, she smiles, looking happy, free, and ready to start living the next chapter of her life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Traffic of the Heart: Searching for a Sense of Safety in the City

In retrospect, my falling out with my first roommate was perhaps the best thing that happened to me in those first few months of fieldwork. My search for a new apartment drove me to explore the city with a renewed sense of urgency. I now had an excuse to spend hours riding my newly purchased electric bike around Zhengzhou, which gradually began to make sense, take shape. Like puzzle pieces, places like the restaurant Shaoshao and her father had taken me to began to fall into place alongside the real estate ads I scrolled through desperately every morning. As I zipped from one appointment with a potential landlord to another, I felt I could finally see how everything was fitting together (or not). And, in classic anthropological fashion, my occasion of need created an opportunity for new acquaintances to help me and embed me in networks of obligation that, after months of feeling like I was unable to trust anyone besides Shaoshao, I was more than happy to entangle myself in. People like Ya and Mary—an acquaintance of an acquaintance in Beijing—rearranged their days so they could spend entire afternoons looking at unfurnished, unheated, and unwelcoming apartments with me. Even during the most discouraging moments of my housing search I never despaired; instead, I felt, for the first time since coming to Zhengzhou, like I had friends.

When I focused my apartment search on the southwest part of the city, even my new friends—especially my new friends—couldn't stop themselves from objecting: "Are you sure you want to live there?" I heard variations of this question from everyone who heard I was searching for a house on the West Side (*Xijiao Qu*). "Are you sure you do not

want to live in the New East District?" residents of the New East District would ask, citing its comfort and comparative lack of crowds. "Are you sure you do not want to live in Jinshui District?" residents of Jinshui District would ask me, citing its abundance of other foreigners like me and relative safety. "Are you sure you do not want to live near the North Ring Road in Huiji District?" residents of Huiji District would ask me, citing its newer housing and cheaper rents. Often I found myself defending my preference for the West Side—which included the railway-dominated Erqi District and factory-defined Zhongyuan District—not only to residents of these other, posher sections of town but also to residents of the West Side, who agreed that an American academic such as myself probably ought to be living elsewhere.

No one asked me why I didn't want to live in the Guancheng District, known for being the official district of Hui minority (Chinese Muslims). During my first visit to Zhengzhou in 2013, I spent my one free day wandering the Shang Dynasty Ruins (*Shangdai Yizhi*), a strange, looping park tracing the original outline of the old city. That first trip I was struck by the contrast between the older sections of the wall, which were made out of the same yellow dirt that piled up when construction sites dug up new foundations on the site of demolished houses, and the newer sections, which were being restored and reinforced with brick so that they looked more like walls from the Ming Dynasty than the Shang. On that first trip, I sat with other residents who used the wall as a kind of park, listening to one man play the *erhu* and commiserating with another about how the old, dirt walls with their grass and trees and ancient dust were better. I could not have known then that I was being duped, that in fact those "older" segments of the Shang Dynasty Ruins were part of not a 3,000-year-old development project but a 30-year-old

one. The "older" segments had been reconstructed some time after Reform and Opening Up as part of Zhengzhou's attempt to develop its identity and its public spaces. Guancheng District was where one could find a 1980s reconstruction of 3,000 year old city walls being replaced by a 2010s reconstruction of 3,000 year old city walls; it remains one of the weirdest places I've ever been.

Originally, I wanted to live in Guancheng District. When I mentioned this plan to the teachers and professors at the university where I was affiliating, however, all of them discouraged me in their own way. They told me that I was better off living in Jinshui District (far from the university but close to the other foreigners) or in Erqi District (close to the university and the train station). Most were vague about their reasons, although Huang Na eventually did admit to being frightened of letting me live near so many Muslims who, she told me, were known for fighting. I ended up living in Erqi District, where I still saw my fair share of fights; I lived a block away from a lower-level KTV (karaoke) bar, and it wasn't unusual for me to see fights or shouting matches developing on the corner from the inside of my cab when I made my way home late at night.

Erqi District is one of the cities four original urban districts; it was developed first and so has dilapidated fastest. Ya told me that she associates Erqi District with migrants, hooliganism, and underworld (*hei shehui*) activity. During my time there, I saw nothing beyond the fights (which I also saw in every other district besides the New East District) to verify her prejudice; nevertheless, if there is a criminal or creative extralegal entrepreneurial element at work in Erqi District, it likely has to do with the history of the city and the district's proximity to the railway station. The legacy of the railroad is everywhere in Zhengzhou, written into the very names of things. "Erqi District" gets its

name from a famous strike in 1923 by railway workers that occurred on February 7 ("Erqi" means two seven). The strike, which did not last very long but did manage to disrupt the railroad for some period of time, originated in Zhengzhou and over the past nine decades has been memorialized by at least two different incarnations of an Erqi Tower built on the same spot. As the railway developed, changed, nationalized, and expanded throughout the 20th century, so too did Zhengzhou. Unlike other railway hubs such as Hebei Province's Shijiazhuang, which reacted to the expansion of the high-speed rail by investing the majority (maybe even, as many residents grumbled, too much) of its public funds in a tunnel project that ensured the additional tracks would not permanently disrupt traffic in the city, Zhengzhou still strains beneath and against its legacy as a railroad city. Zhengzhou is located exactly at the main intersection of the Jingguang and Longhai Railways, which partially accounts for its rapid economic growth; however, the same railway lines that pump goods, people, and capital into the city also sever the city's few main traffic arteries, effectively ensuring that all movement within the city remains in a constant state of gridlock.

Infrastructure and Intimacy in Zhengzhou

When I told friends, teachers, and acquaintances from other parts of the PRC that I was going to do my fieldwork in Henan, they reacted in the same way Zhengzhou people did when they heard I was going to live in the southwest of the city. First they would try to persuade me to go elsewhere. "Why there? Wouldn't you rather be in a big city, like Beijing? Beijing is a good place (*Beijing shi ge hao difang*)." (No one, not even people from Zhengzhou, wanted to argue that Zhengzhou was a good place—that was reserved for other, older, and quieter cities: Kaifeng, Luoyang, or, even better, far off

places like Kunming.) Several people urged me to abandon the idea of living in Henan in favor of studying their hometowns in Shandong or Hebei. Even social scientists that worked in the PRC—whether their countries of origin were the USA, the PRC, or elsewhere—would sometimes raise their eyebrows in an ambivalent mixture of horror and respect upon hearing that I lived in Henan for prolonged periods of time. There was an unearned sense that to be living in Henan is to really be roughing it.

Certain things were difficult about living in Henan, but it was by no means what's sometimes called hardship anthropology. There was no real inclement weather. After a brief, five-week hiccup, I ended up having heat during the winter. My internet connection was censored but fast. And things in Zhengzhou were really good compared to the surrounding smaller towns and cities. During the summer of 2014, it was widely known that Henan was in the midst of a severe drought. Even then, however, trucks still patrolled the streets of Zhengzhou during the hottest mid-afternoon hours, blaring bizarre, ice-cream truck versions of popular American songs (e.g., Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence," "Happy Birthday," or "Silent Night"), and spraying the streets down with water in an effort to reduce pollution and dust. We were in the midst of a drought, but water still *appeared* to be plentiful. When I visited Dengfeng, a town just 15 kilometers away from Zhengzhou, in July, I was horrified to find the local water supply so depleted that there was no longer any water left to flush the public toilets. "We still have water to shower," a woman on the street told me grimly. "It just doesn't come from the pipes." So Zhengzhou obviously had more resources than other places in Henan Province, the same way that other places in the PRC were obviously better off than

Henan Province. One of the main ways the people I worked with spoke about these hierarchical distinctions between places was by invoking the city's infrastructure.

Recent anthropological literature has increasingly focused on infrastructure to examine how people deal with political authority, envision their aspirations, or else as a way of accessing a place's materiality (e.g., Chu 2014). As Jonathan Bach pointed out in his 2010 piece on Shenzhen in *Cultural Anthropology*, cities in the PRC often become a place where people work out hierarchical distinctions between cultured and uncultured, civilized and uncivilized, and urban and rural in order to make sure the population is committed to the larger national narrative of progress (Bach 2010). Unlike these scholars, I am drawn to infrastructure not because of its physical or semiotic properties but because of the way it was spoken about. Throughout my fieldwork I noticed that people connected their descriptions of the external landscape with their conceptions of their own internal landscapes. In this chapter, I'll draw out the connections between the way people spoke about the structure of Zhengzhou—its constant construction projects, ensuing traffic jams, and unreliable roads—and the metaphors people used to speak about their interpersonal relationships. Beyond just shaping the texture of their everyday lives, Zhengzhou and its problems as they were imagined also functioned as something close to a metonym for issues related to intimacy and social relations among my interlocutors. Throughout my fieldwork people uncritically used the category of urban and rural to police who belonged to the city and who did not; ultimately, the city itself and the methods people used to habituate (*xiguan*) themselves to it decided which of the PRC's new social classes people were identified with.

Nevertheless, Zhengzhou's status as a comparatively "new" city or at least an old city with a newly exploding population means that the division between urban and rural is empirically unstable. In a setting where categories such as urban-rural can become indistinct, so too can the distinction between other supposed opposites, such as real and fake. Road construction projects become one of the most visible sites of uncertainty, corruption, and collapse; infrastructural uncertainty is, I argue, connected to interpersonal uncertainty. An expectation of failure in one realm of your life—such as the knowledge that a newly built road may collapse—can influence expectations of failure in other, seemingly completely unrelated realms of your life—such as your love life. Finally, I examine how religious beliefs and a ruthless belief in personal accountability were often distributed along economic lines amongst the people I worked with in order to better understand the PRCs new class formations. In a city where larger questions of accountability—such as who should be held responsible for failed infrastructural projects, high levels of seasonal pollution, and widespread inequality—cannot be answered, people turn to a ruthless ideology of self-determination and personal accountability as a way of investing, viciously, in their own ability to control at least some aspects of their lives.

Habits, Class, and Traffic: A Question of Speed and Origin

Traffic jams are one of the most unpredictable and yet expected part of everyday life in Zhengzhou, and, maddeningly, they only seem to be getting exponentially worse as time goes on. Part of this has to do with the increased number of cars on the road, but a lot of it had to do with, my interlocutors insisted, bad habits (*bu hao de xiguan*). When I moved to Zhengzhou in July 2013, the first line of the city's subway system was—after years of delays and setbacks due to a nationwide corruption scandal about the quality of

the tracks being used in all of the country's second and third tier cities—scheduled to open in December. For my first few months of fieldwork, I made a habit of asking people I met in passing—cab drivers, waitresses, fellow bar patrons—whether they thought the subway line would relieve traffic congestion at all. No one ever said yes.

"This is about people's habits (*xiguan*)," Olivia, the manager of the private training school, told me, "One subway line is not enough to change people's habits. If you live in Zhengzhou and you have an electric bike, you are already used to (*xiguan*) riding your bike directly to where you want to go. Why would you walk to take the subway?" Olivia herself owned a car; she was used to driving places and found the traffic outside her vehicle more tolerable than any of her other options. "I don't like those things," she'd said, wrinkling her nose in disdain, when I asked her whether she'd ever ridden an electric bike.

Electric bikes or e-bikes were the most popular method of transportation in Zhengzhou while I conducted my fieldwork by far. When I bought one myself—a slower model, with a lithium battery and the option to pedal if it should run out—a friend of mine reacted with envy. "You must get places so fast!" he exclaimed, "I am always sitting in traffic, looking out the window and watching the bikes pass me. Sometimes I wish I could ride one too!" This statement was, on a certain level, disingenuous. E-bikes offer people a faster way to weave in, out, and around the gridlock that automobiles have to endure, but they're also—as I noted in Chapter One—substantially more dangerous. Most of the middle- and upper class people I worked with in Zhengzhou wouldn't be caught dead on an e-bike. E-bikes, it's commonly understood, are for the young and the poor. My friend, an entrepreneur in his late 30s with a PhD, family, and several

investment apartments throughout the city who I'll call Dr. Zhou, had already aged and earned his way out of the bracket where it would be acceptable for him to ride an e-bike; sitting impotently in traffic was another consequence of his upward mobility. There's a tremendous irony at work here in the idea that a consequence of getting rich in the post-Reform and Opening Up PRC—a process that usually depended on an entrepreneur's quick decision-making and often happened as though overnight—resulted in an over all retardation of life's rhythms. ("In the 1990s I used to be able to handle three things in a day," a lawyer told me, "Now I can barely do one because traffic is so bad I cannot make it to my appointments!") On another level, there's nothing ironic at all and it makes perfect economic sense. After all, the rich, the up-and-coming, and the well established can afford to be late; the poor, the recently arrived, and the uneducated cannot, and they risk life and limb zooming through traffic to make sure they make it to their multiple part time jobs (*dagong*) on time.

Even those categories—rich and poor, native and newcomer, socially mobile and uneducated—were not empirically stable in Zhengzhou, however. Like most of the people I worked with, Dr. Zhou was not from Zhengzhou. He grew up in a village near Zhoukou, another city in Henan Province. Even though the fact that we had originally met in America distinguished him as a more cosmopolitan and mobile person than those typically described by anthropological literature about migrants, I still thought of him the way Ya, who was raised in Zhengzhou, would have: as a perennial outsider squatting in the city. Once he was driving me home from dinner with his family and was surprised to see people lighting things on fire in the street on nearly every corner. He asked what they were doing, and I explained that if these people were like the ones in my neighborhood,

then they were observing the first day of the lunar month and burning paper money for their dead relatives in the underworld. In my neighborhood, the approach of the first day of the lunar month was heralded by the sudden appearance of paper money, paper boats, and *baijiu* (sorghum liquor) at my local vegetable market. After dark, people would draw circles on the ground in chalk with the name of the deceased or sometimes just their kinship role—e.g., Wang Li, Wang Li's father, Wang Li's grandfather, Wang Li's great-grandfather—in it along with an opening that pointed approximately in the direction of the person's grave.

"I think if they were living in the villages they're from they would just go to the graves directly and do it," I speculated as he swerved to avoid fire after fire.

"This is a stupid custom!" Dr. Zhou said angrily in English. "Look at all the smoke! As if the pollution weren't already bad enough. And then they have to block the street! Where are these people from? They don't have this stupid custom in either my or my wife's village. I wish they would go back to wherever they are from, they are ruining my city!"

As an imagined and fluid category of discrimination, the urban vs. rural dyad remained important for my interlocutors as they highlighted distinctions and hierarchy among themselves, but as an analytic category, it's completely undone by the structure of the city itself. In recent decades, anthropologists working in the PRC have typically identified themselves either as urban anthropologists working in the city or else as rural anthropologists working in the countryside. This division is not arbitrary; rather, it mimics PRC state policy, which throughout its history has divided people through the hukou system and then offered different services based upon this urban and rural

categorization. Anthropologists working in the PRC have similarly found that customs, everyday practices, and belief structures vary along the same lines and have aligned themselves accordingly, setting up their ethnographies to highlight the clash between urban and rural ways of life (see, e.g., Lai 2014; Lei 2003; Yan 2008). Zhengzhou is a city of migrants if we define migrants as people who under the *hukou* system were born elsewhere, but they are migrants of such varied backgrounds that it's hard to make any generalizations about them. Practices that may have originally been considered "rural"—such as burning paper money for ancestors every month—block traffic on even Zhengzhou's busiest urban streets. And as Dr. Zhou's exclamation demonstrates, residents of the city can simultaneously identify as rural—they don't have this stupid custom in *my* village—while at the same time distinguishing themselves from more provincial migrants by identifying as urban—they are ruining *my* city. As Lili Lai points out in a footnote, white-collar workers like Dr. Zhou are not—like the "floating population" of people perennially perceived as "rural"—usually glossed in the literature on migrants, though they can also lack hukou in the places they live (2014, 550, footnote 7). Nevertheless, one of the striking things about Zhengzhou is that the people described by Lai's footnote seemed to make up the majority of the city's population. Even if they gained a Zhengzhou hukou, they were haunted by the idea that, because they were not *originally* from Zhengzhou, they would be outsiders forever.

Even Ya, who I began to think of throughout my fieldwork as the Zhengzhou native par excellence, wasn't *really* from Zhengzhou. Yes, she was born and raised here, identified entirely with the city, and had a wider network of local contacts of anyone else I knew in their 20s, but on the other hand, both her maternal and paternal grandparents

still lived in two different rural villages near Zhoukou. Her stories about growing up were as likely to feature the shops and streets of Jinshui District as they were to feature the sunny spot in front of her grandmother's village courtyard where she would obstinately wail as a four-year-old. Zhengzhou relies upon migrants such as Dr. Zhou and—arguably—Ya for its urban identity. Without the influx of people from the surrounding villages, counties, and even other cities in Henan, Zhengzhou would not be the growing metropolis and center of industry it is today. Unlike other more frequently studied cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai, Zhengzhou has no substantial old guard or old customs to be threatened by these relative newcomers; or, if it did, those people and customs are already outnumbered by its residents, the majority of which are relative newcomers (the comparatively new city of Shenzhen may present a similar, higher-profile case, see Bach 2010; Lindtner 2015). Even the most established families in Zhengzhou often built their networks through the PLA, which dates their arrival in the city to some time post-1949. It's extremely rare to find people in Zhengzhou who are able to say they are natives of the land through and through, back for more than one or two generations.

Natives and Outsiders

Rare, but not impossible. During my panicked search for a new apartment, Mary—herself a migrant from a village just an hour north of Zhengzhou—and I took to riding from complex to complex, asking if there were empty houses. At one bright, white, new-looking complex, Mary popped her head into the building management office: "Any empty houses?" The woman replied with a resolute "no" before I'd even dismounted from my bike. "Are you sure there will never be any houses?" I moaned petulantly in

Mandarin, “It seems like everything here is new and empty!” The woman did a double take: Where was I from? America?! Why was I here? She reconsidered: maybe there were empty houses if they were for an American. She made a phone call, and a thin man in his late 60s or early 70s slunk around the corner. “Who is renting the house? Just you or her too,” he said suspiciously, pointing at Mary.

“Just her!” Mary replied cheerfully, “I’m here to help! A friend.”

He led us up to the apartment, which was, without a doubt, the best one I’d seen in the district so far. It was huge, bright, and clean—no one had ever lived in it before. The old man, whom I’d call Mr. Zheng for the rest of my time in Zhengzhou, explained that this was just one of the few apartments he owned in the complex. While we sat in the empty apartment I’d eventually end up renting, Mr. Zheng assured me that he and his family were not provincial bumpkins; they too had money, had gone abroad to South Korea, and knew what it was like to have to rely on friends like Mary. “When you are outside (*zai waimian*), you can only rely on friends,” he said sagely, through clouds of cigarette smoke. I asked Mr. Zheng where he was from. Ashes fell onto to the pristine white tiles as he jerked his hand up and down, pointing at the ground: “Here! We are from this very piece of earth. We are natives (*bendiren*).”

I thought of that moment often as time went on. The way Mary had been so quickly dismissed by the building manager disturbed me. Why had the house only appeared when I, the obvious foreigner, poked my head into the office? Mary got her friends from church to help me move in two weeks later, and over lunch I asked them what they thought. “It’s discrimination (*qishi*), right?” I asked in Mandarin. Mary refused to admit that, but the Christian men she’d brought to carry my things were a little bit

more receptive. “Probably it is a kind of prejudice (*pianjian*) against outsiders (*waidiren*),” they explained. And indeed, across the city I found landlords more willing to rent to me once they discovered I was foreign: so outside as to be outside the outsiders. Chinese migrants or outsiders, these landlords maintained, were terrible tenants who would get grease stains all over the apartment whereas foreigners were believed to truly care for their things and those of others. Even the apartment I ended up living in was rented to me with the belief that I would not change it; it was meant to be a marriage apartment (*hunfang*) for his 7-year-old grandson. Middle- and upper class Zhengzhou people I spoke to said they preferred to provide their children apartments that were either newly remodeled or had never been lived in before, and yet this was not the first future marriage apartment I was offered during my search. I can only speculate that as a foreigner my presence in the apartment was presumed not to count or leave marks the same way that a Chinese person’s would. In a statement echoed by several landlords who offered to rent me their apartments, Mr. Zheng maintained that he’d rather let the apartment be empty than rent to a person of low moral quality (*suzhi*)—a person who, I speculated, he might imagine as looking like Mary.

Reading the City

It was Shaoshao, not Mary, who helped me in my final negotiations with Mr. Zheng. She admitted that he was too clever for her to be able to get any kind of discount, but she again felt I could trust him as much or more than my previous roommate. There was, she warned, something weird about the apartments—they were built and sold at an extremely cheap price to people from the village. I was confused. “What village?” I asked in English, and Shaoshao struggled to explain: “You know, the village that was here

before." The apartment complex was surrounded on all sides by other apartment buildings, a bank headquarters, telecom provider offices, and a school; where would the village have gone?

The apartment that I rented was resettlement housing (*chaiqian fang*) for the village that had once occupied the space where the bank, school, and telecom provider now stood. The apartment complex I lived in was built not by reluctant developers but by the villagers themselves, who banded together to create their own real estate company and construct apartments to their own specifications. It's one of the reasons the complex was so small and seemed so new. In fact, its construction had been completed at least ten years before, long before even the telecom offices had been built, but without financial incentive or public pressure the government—either the Zhengzhou government or, more likely, the more local Erqi District government—had waited until that moment to connect water, electricity, and the other utilities needed to make the building habitable.

Historically, Zhengzhou had four urban districts: Guancheng District, Erqi District, Zhongyuan District, and Jinshui District. To borrow a metaphor from one of my most intellectual interlocutors, an internet censor who'd lived all over the PRC, Zhengzhou developed like a *jianbing* or thin Chinese pancake. It began with these four districts densely packed into the center like batter and then gradually spread further and further out, swallowing rural land and villages as it grew. By the time I moved to Zhengzhou, Erqi District extended to the south far beyond the location of my apartment complex. When choosing my apartment, I never thought I was doing something strange. According to the map, I was well within the city limits. Nevertheless, people who visited me hesitated to recognize my neighbors—all former residents of if not this particular

urban village then other also demolished urban villages within the city—as urban. "This is not a good complex," people would tell me when they came over for the dinners I hosted. Olivia refused to visit me outright, claiming that there was nothing worth driving to the West Side for, not even me. The so-called "good" areas of town people had pointed me toward—the New East District, Jinshui District, and the Huiji District—were all on the comparative edges of the city. They were centers of newer development and part of what seems to be the evacuation of wealth from the old city, which is in effect being left to poorer migrants like Mary, aging retirees, or stupid foreigners like me.

What's strange is that my neighbors weren't poor; they were rich. Almost all of them had other, unoccupied replacement apartments that they rented out for more income. The money wasn't the problem, my friends from other districts insisted; it was their habits (*xiguan*). They maintained so-called backwards practices, like letting their children poop and pee all over the non-draining tiles in the communal parking lot, and spent their new money on tacky, expensive things, like color-changing cars, the way a crass nouveau riche person (*tuhao*) would. They even burned wood during the winter—"Contributing to the pollution!" Dr. Zhou exclaimed in disbelief—so that they could keep warm during their midnight mahjong games. Gambling and the rest was bad enough, but the most damning thing about them to the upper-class people who visited me was that they were not well educated and did not even seem to *value* education. Even Mary, like many residents of Zhengzhou, spent much of her free time memorizing English vocabulary and trying to practice English with me whenever she could. Many of my neighbors who claimed to want me to tutor their children in English abandoned the plan almost as soon as they'd conceived of it: they were too busy, their children weren't

interested, they'd never be able to pay my fee (which was a home-cooked meal per hour of lesson).

If the existence of the urban villages and of residents in dark-colored quilted jumpsuits burning fires next to color-changing BMWs in the complex next to a bank's provincial training center is somehow too abstract to communicate how Zhengzhou exceeded the limits of the urban-rural dyad, then all I can do is offer up my landlord, Mr. Zheng. Here was a man who had grown up in a village but now made his living as a landlord in the city. "You're so clever," I told him once after he helped me bargain for furniture, "Were you in business?" He started. "No, I was just a common worker." His son started a business and married a primary school teacher. Mr. Zheng was the second of his parents' four sons, two of whom also lived in the village's complex. He or at least his wife had been instrumental in negotiating the real estate deal that would provide them with rent-generated income hopefully for the rest of their lives. As part of Zhengzhou's rapid annexation of the urban villages, Mr. Zheng's household registration or hukou remains rural, but his income comes from renting urban apartments, which he was entitled to *because* of his rural hukou.

This slippery ontological and legal boundary between the urban and rural became crystal clear to me when I went to register at a Zhengzhou city police department (as all foreigners are required to do) and found that the property I lived at *did not exist in the city registers*. After I called him in a panic, Mr. Zheng convinced the police to allow me to register even though the village would technically not be incorporated for another five years. Mr. Zheng identified with me, a foreign, cosmopolitan person who "also traveled," and looked down on Mary, who had obviously come from the countryside not unlike

himself. In terms of the "habits" (*xiguan*) my upper-class friends were constantly using as valences, he was decidedly rural. In terms of the anthropology of China, much of his experience resonates with the narratives of migrants, but Mr. Zheng is, as he says, a native of the very piece of land he rented me. Instead of moving to seek change like Mary, an admitted migrant, would do, parts of the migrant experience came to Mr. Zheng as he was doing his best to stay still. It doesn't matter that Mr. Zheng did not go to the mountain of sweeping social change in the PRC; that particular mountain had come to Mr. Zheng and all of the other former villagers in my complex.

Asking at this point whether Mr. Zheng is a rural or urban citizen is completely beside the point; the theoretical distinctions between rural and urban, between modern and traditional, and between many other commonly invoked analytic dyads tend to disappear against the backdrop of a quickly changing urban center like Zhengzhou. In 2014, officially, Zhengzhou had a little more than three million legally registered residents with urban *hukou*. Officially, the government admitted that an additional four or five million people with rural *hukou* live in the city, bringing the total population to around eight or nine million. But even government officials admitted that in reality, their estimates are probably too low; Zhengzhou was actually home to somewhere closer to 11 million people, many of whom have been living unregistered and uncounted within the city for years. Who, under such conditions, can claim to be a *real* native of the city? And how many people are there whose claims, when pressed, turn out to be fake?

Corruption, Construction, and the Question of the Real

This anxiety about how to tell the difference between what was real and what was fake in Zhengzhou's external landscape permeated people's internal landscapes. Olivia,

who was 30-years-old and single on top of being a business success, described it to me in terms of belief. “Now when I hear something, my first reaction is to say, Real or fake (*zhende jiade*)?” she complained, “It doesn’t matter what it is, when I hear it the first time I do not believe (*xiangxin*) it. I have to ask.” Zhengzhou residents are not unique; many anthropologists and intellectuals have written about the disappearing distinction between real and fake in the PRC (see, e.g., Anagnost 1997, 45-74; Yu 2011; Yang 2013). What is particular or peculiar about Zhengzhou is the way this epistemic uncertainty so often expressed in speech becomes an ontological uncertainty in the very structure of the city itself. To put it more plainly, while it’s one thing to be unsure whether or not the story someone is telling you is real or fake, it’s another to be unsure of whether or not the elevated road you’re driving down is made of real or fake concrete, of whether or not it will still exist by the time you reach your off-ramp. I say “fake” rather than another more commonly used anthropological term like “imagined” because of the materiality of the deception and the often-pernicious intentions—or carelessness—motivating it. An imagined off-ramp would exist in a mental space as an *image* and require reverie and detachment on the part of the perceiver; a fake one would, more dangerously, appear as an *artifact* and present itself as real to the perceiver until the very moment it crumbled.

I’ve already mentioned my misguided outrage when I came across remodeling of the Shang Dynasty Ruins, which, it turned out, had been remodeled at least once already. The Shang Dynasty Ruins project was one of the least pernicious construction projects I saw during my time in Zhengzhou. More common were long, drawn-out, and disruptive road projects. Many Zhengzhou residents believed these projects were corrupt (*fubai*). It was commonly known that road improvement projects were one of the easiest ways for

city-level or district-level officials to skim from the public purse. Local officials would propose a road project, get funding, take bids, choose one from a contractor they knew would give them a kickback, and then leave the contractor to complete the project with depleted funds. Some people I spoke to described this cycle with cynicism while others looked at it in resignation; none could honestly outright deny its existence.

"I sympathize with the contractors," Ya told me once as we clambered over some construction debris that had replaced a sidewalk we used to frequent. "They have a difficult choice! If they ask for too much money, *they* will be accused of corruption, but if they ask for too little, they won't be able to repair the road. And then if they repair the road too well, they will be in trouble because they won't make any money and they won't have to repair the road again for many years!" As always, Ya's perverse logic made me laugh because somehow she was right. Given the constraints of the system, the contractors were doing only what they were expected to do. They were making money hand over fist while doing it, but still, they couldn't be faulted for playing by the rules set by corrupt officials.

Earlier, I described the historical and structural reasons for Zhengzhou's chronic traffic problems. Constant and uncoordinated roadwork only exacerbates these problems. Some of these projects were real and needed—such as the subway project—but the reasons for others were less apparent. The most maligned type of construction project was pipe replacement. A main road could end up losing two lanes at a time as workers dug up the asphalt to replace the giant, ten-foot in diameter concrete pipes that moved the city's water, gas, and other utilities from place to place. The shelf life of these pipes was five to ten years—not nearly long enough according to many of the people I spoke to.

Pipe replacement projects rarely had a public end date (unlike the subway project, which always had end dates that were never met), and, maddeningly, residents could rarely catch workers in the act of *working*. Instead of sitting in traffic for hours next to a busy construction site as one did when a new elevated road or subway stop was being built, people ended up sitting in traffic for hours next to a closed lane where no one was ever *doing anything*. Information about planned roadwork would circulate days in advance of breaking ground on the city's most popular radio shows and have immediate effects on local businesses and residents. In July 2014, I went from having houseguests every week to none at all. People apologetically told me that while they loved eating my home-cooked food, they couldn't bear the traffic caused by two unrelated and intersecting projects just half a kilometer from my apartment; couldn't we just meet at one of Zhengzhou's many centrally located malls?

For obvious reasons, I was never able to verify my suspicions that certain construction projects, which I watched in consternation from my seat on a delayed public bus, were motivated not by public need but by graft. I did, however, interview a man who worked in the Henan Provincial Ministry of Transportation—a man I'll call Mr. Wang. In the eight years he'd worked there, Mr. Wang told me, two different leaders of the ministry had gone to prison for corruption. (From Dr. Zhou, I heard that this was not technically true. The second leader had been on a private jet when it crashed with several other ministry officials, the boss of Henan's top construction company, and a handful of young women during an unexplained trip to Indonesia funded, of course, by the construction company; there were no survivors.) I asked Mr. Wang why he thought corruption was so rampant in the ministry, and he laughed and said it was his ministry's

special characteristic (*tese*). "Do you know how they decide to build highways?" he asked me. By doing some research? I guessed. He guffawed and slammed the table with his fist, spilling a bit of spicy oil on the white cloth. "No! Three leaders (*lingdao*) stand in a room and look at a map of Henan that has all the highways on it. Then they say, 'Hey, look, there is no highway between this city and this city. Okay, let's build one!'" The young woman he'd brought to dinner—who I discovered in an awkward moment was not, as I'd guessed, the mother of his child—smiled embarrassedly. "They must have other reasons," she demurred. "Trust me, they do not!" Mr. Wang said, still laughing.

The bald-faced arbitrariness of which roads get repaired and when baffled me, but most of the people I worked with shrugged it off. Early on in my fieldwork, I asked some professors at the Institute for Public Management why two main, parallel roads were under construction at the same time. They did not understand the question. "If both the North Ring Road and Jinshui Road under construction at the same time, then traffic will be worse than if they waited for one to be done before moving onto the next one," I tried to explain, "Why do they do them both at the same time?" The professors laughed: Why would they know? "Well you are experts in public management! Don't they ask you for your advice?" The table shifted uncomfortably as the young female administrative assistants giggled nervously at my lack of tact. "We are experts," the male senior professor at the table who'd dominated the conversation admitted finally, "But they have the power. It does not matter what we think." For a while, I continued to maintain that there should be a better way of doing all of these repairs, and my dogged persistence in discussing what I only later realized was a sensitive and extremely political topic

probably had something to do with the way the institute eventually distanced me. I was not invited to any more lunches after that one for the whole year.

Eventually, one of my interlocutors told me that the road construction of recent years had to do with the new mayor, a man who really had a vision (*xiangfa*) for Zhengzhou. But even without him, constant construction in Zhengzhou was part of its identity. Many people responded to my frustrations by reciting a popular joke-poem: *Zhengzhou, Zhengzhou, / tian tian wa gou / Lian yi tian bu wa gou, na jiu bu shi Zhengzhou* (Zhengzhou, Zhengzhou, / day after day digging holes, / If even one day they don't dig holes, / then it just wouldn't be Zhengzhou!). One thirty-year-old man who'd lived in Zhengzhou his whole life told me that the government had been repairing the roads since he was "this small," gesturing to the height of our knees. Another popular joke went like this: In 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao was on his way to visit the earthquake victims in Sichuan. His plane landed, and as he stepped off onto the tarmac, he was surprised to see rubble, ruins, and general destruction everywhere. "Look!" he said, "We've arrived in Wenquan already! Let's bring aid to the people." His advisors laughed embarrassedly and pulled him back on to the plane: "Sir, this isn't Wenquan—this is a layover, in Zhengzhou." Whenever I heard the joke told, the people listening would groan as they laughed (if they laughed): "So cold (*hen leng*)!" A cold joke is one whose humor comes not from being funny but from making you uncomfortable giving you a chill that could only be mitigated by laughter. When I began repeating it toward the end of my fieldwork, this joke was often declared to be one of the "coldest" ones I told.

So construction and its accompanying corruption was just another part of the cold realism Zhengzhou's residents lived with daily. They were already used to it: *xiguan le*.

Only when disaster struck did they dare to articulate the question Olivia couldn't stop asking: *Zhende jiade*? Is it real or fake? Is it needed or not? In a way this question is about origin—is this project motivated by necessity or graft, is the *reason* for this project legitimate—but it's also about outcomes. Interrogating a project's past can help people predict its future. A road motivated by graft is less likely to be built well and more likely to turn against the citizens who unknowingly and out of habit—*xiguan*—dare to use it. Just a month before I left in September 2014, one of Zhengzhou's newly finished elevated ring roads collapsed during a heavy rainstorm. No one died, but pictures circulated of a car that had plunged into a sudden, sand-filled sinkhole. More than any of the other scandals (and there were many) that Zhengzhou endured during the first 15 months I spent there, this enraged me. My friends, my interlocutors, all the residents of Zhengzhou deserved better. How could people be expected to go about their everyday lives—to eat, sleep, and go to work—if they had to live in constant fear of the ground giving way beneath their feet? How could people be expected to deal with not knowing whether something was real or fake?

As I've already mentioned, this uncertainty about what was real (*zhende*) and what was fake (*jiade*) existed both on this infrastructural level and on an interpersonal one. The two were in fact, intertwined; Zhengzhou's notoriously bad traffic was always an uncontested excuse for letting someone down. In the same way traffic jams were a constant and expected yet unpredictable part of everyday life, so too was what we in America might call flaking or being a flake. If you failed to show up for an appointment with someone—particularly if you'd failed even to call and say you wouldn't be coming until the last moment—you were said in Zhengzhou to have released that person's pigeon

(*fang ta de gezi*). Interestingly, idioms of abandonment often invoked animals. To release someone's goat (*fang ta de yang*) was to renege on a gambling debt, and I frequently left the mahjong table in my apartment complex without my winnings, thinking whimsically of my metaphorical goat, free, and wandering the city without me. When I first began doing fieldwork, I took these failures to keep commitments quite personally. Only when I'd already been in Zhengzhou for a year—long enough to be enmeshed in a network of competing obligations I'd never be able to meet completely—did I feel the freedom in being able to release someone's pigeon without consequence. In general, people will not openly criticize each other for flaking, although once I was with Olivia when she got an obscure text from a friend she was supposed to meet for lunch. "What do you mean by 'how are all the pigeons you're raising,'" she asked him on the phone, and then turned a bright shade of red as he crowed on the other end of the line, "Well you've released my pigeon so many times that I assume you must be raising a lot of them!" Simultaneously tickled and chastised, Olivia promised to meet him for lunch next week, this time for real: *zhende*.

Relational Realness

In Zhengzhou, saying you'll be somewhere and then not appearing is a low-grade strain of deception. Even though flaking has reached epidemic levels, there are other, much more pernicious ways of leading others on; I heard nightmare stories about botched contracts, terms set during boozy banquets but changed in the morning, and an inability to refuse someone's request in person leading to financially catastrophic misunderstandings. One of my interlocutors had a formulation to explain the reason for these conflicts. "In Henan it's very difficult to do business," he told me, "what people

want (*xiangde*), what people say (*shuode*), and what people do (*zuode*) are all three completely different things. But in their own minds, there will be no contradiction (*maodun*). They will have done no wrong." This particular interlocutor was a wildly unreliable narrator—he was an aging celebrity from Taiwan who made marketing campaigns for real estate companies that capitalized on his exotic obesity, and he told me all this in front of his young, female secretary from Henan in what seemed like an effort to make her uncomfortable—and so I expected other people to repudiate this formulation. To my surprise, people instead agreed earnestly. Ya nodded without reservation. "*Kanren*," she said, a phrase that literally means "look at the person," practically means "depends on the person," and which I interpreted as meaning that that it depends on a person's character.

"Yes," I replied, "*kanren*. Some people will and some people won't."

"No, it's not your *kanren*," she corrected me. Ya was always irritated when the flaws in my language comprehension showed, and this time was no exception. "My *kanren* is different from your *kanren.* You mean some people will do it and some people won't. I mean I need to look to which person I'm talking to." She gave me an example: say her friend Nana wanted her to go to the mall, but she had plans with me. She would just directly and rudely tell Nana she couldn't, she already had plans with Yuping today. She could do this, she reasoned, because even if she and Nana were to fight for a whole afternoon, they could still meet the next day and their relationship (*guanxi*) would be fine. "But with my boss I have to be very indirect," she explained, "I have to say I want to do it, act like I am working very hard for her, but know that this has nothing to do with the

reality that I will leave after the Spring Festival. The more polite you are to someone, the worse your relationship (*guanxi*) is."

Both these examples were grounded in recent experience. Ya had, many times, flaked out on Nana, her friend since childhood, for me because she knew that one of my strange American quirks was that I did not like to change my appointments. And her situation with her new boss was more complicated than ever. She was working as a salesgirl at a small boutique-clothing store in Jinshui District. Many of the strange, barely patronized boutique shops littering Jinshui District's streets were Zhengzhou's emerging class of wealthy people's hobbies as people decided they should "do something they liked" (*zuo ziji xihuan de shi*). The owners of this particular shop were a married couple. The husband used to be a contractor who sold construction materials to the government; he had made so much money over the years that he'd bought the storefront for his wife to manage as a hobby. The strain of his job, however, had driven him to retire early, at 35, and now he and his wife were unwisely trying to make the shop their main source of income. Even so, they were so rich that it was income they didn't really need; Ya said she'd applied for the job specifically because it was low stress and low pressure. "They don't care if I'm late," she'd said one day over coffee with me, fifteen minutes after she was supposed to be at the shop. "They are very good to me."

Within just a few weeks, her sense of the situation had changed completely. She and her boss had communication problems (*goutong wenti*), she reported. A customer had tried to haggle with Ya for a shirt, and her boss had refused to give Ya permission to lower the price; when the customer left without buying anything, her boss said that Ya was responsible. "How could it be my fault?" Ya protested to me, "People want to feel

that they've gotten something at a discount because they feel better about it. If I cannot give a discount, I cannot make her buy it!" On top of that, her boss was trying to pressure her into tattling on her coworker, a girl Ya described as having "bad habits" (*bu hao de xiguan*). When pressed, Ya had a hard time elaborating what she meant—she would just tell the same story over and over again about she would get Ya to buy them both night market food for dinner but never offer to pay. Even though she also did not like her coworker, Ya felt she was not her responsibility. "I already know from my previous jobs I cannot really manage people," Ya complained, "Plus my boss only gives me an employee's salary and I'm only six months older than that other girl. Why should I manage her?"

To be honest, Ya admitted, all of this she probably could have tolerated. What really made her mad was that the boss had inquired about her background (*beijing*). It had begun innocently enough—what do your parents do—but with Ya this is not a simple question. Ya's family was connected to a medium-legal seafood business in a way that she's reluctant to speak about with people she doesn't trust. At first, Ya told her boss her parents didn't do anything. Her boss kept asking, and Ya explained that they used to sell seafood but didn't do it anymore. The questions didn't stop there, however—her boss even wanted to know which of Jinshui District's apartment complexes she lived in. Ya was loath to admit that she lived in railroad work-unit housing because this would connect her to her mother's live-in boyfriend, whom she hated. But her boss had persisted, and Ya had reluctantly revealed the information.

"Then she called me to say she wanted to buy seafood and wanted to know if I could get her a discount."

I interrupted: “But isn’t it not your store anymore?”

Ya waved her hand. “That isn’t a problem. I just called my older sister and said that she was coming, to give her a discount, but not to pay for it ourselves. The problem was that she was looking to make sure what I said was real. She didn’t trust me.”

That was the first strike. The second one came another afternoon when her boss had called saying she needed the key to the store immediately and was right outside Ya’s apartment complex; could she just come down and give it to her? The fact that this woman would come up such a facile excuse to make sure Ya wasn’t lying about where she lived infuriated Ya. “This woman will not relax (*bu fangxin*),” Ya said angrily, “I know what I have to do. I have to keep my relationship with her good until the Spring Festival when I can take the bonus money and go.” She said that her boss had even asked her if she would open the shop today, on her day off, and that she had lied. She said she had made arrangements with a whole lot of people and maybe couldn’t rearrange them. She’d made a big show of walking outside for a bit as though she were making a phone call, and then coming back inside saying it couldn’t be helped, she couldn’t open the shop. “Why not just tell her directly?” I asked, and Ya said it had to do with face (*mianzi*), with her goals, and with knowing that she had to make her boss *believe* she would have opened the shop if she could. “*Shuo shi shuo, zuo shi zuo, shishi shi shishi*,” she laughed: What’s said it’s what’s said, what’s done is what’s done, and the facts are the facts.

The third strike came quickly after that. An old woman, around 60 years old, had come into the shop, and Ya had to help her take a blouse off. Ya’s watch had brushed the woman’s eye, and the woman had yelled in anger. Ya apologized, the woman left, and Ya

thought nothing more of it until the woman returned the next day declaring that her eye had a problem and demanding to be taken to the doctor. Ya was irritated—"I thought her eye had a problem before. Why didn't she tell me the day of?"—but she'd agreed to take her. Ya had immediately found a person (*zhaoren*)—a doctor who told her in advance that he'd make sure it wouldn't cost more than a few hundred RMB. Ya and the woman went to see the doctor, who reported that the woman was suffering from allergies and had exacerbated an allergic reaction by rubbing her eye. "The most ridiculous thing is that she said she hadn't eaten lunch, so I also treated her to a meal," Ya said in disbelief. "And then the next day she came and said that she'd had to take the day off work and wanted 50RMB of salary. I told her if she wanted to call the police she could call the police but that was not my responsibility!"

"And so what happened?" I asked.

"She left and didn't call the police!" Ya said. "I can't believe that I, who have already lived in Zhengzhou all these years and has seen so many things happen would encounter a *pengci'er*."

Even I had to admit that the situation was pretty ironic. Originally, it had been Ya who'd warned me about pengci'er: conmen who pretend to be hurt or—more terrifyingly—actually do injure themselves to extort money from passing Good Samaritans. Ya assumed her urban identity—with its associated worldliness—would protect her from pengci'er. The word itself comes from bumping into porcelain and breaking it, and the phenomenon is now so common that 2014's mind-numbingly mainstream Spring Festival featured not one but two skits making fun of it. Usually the con happens on the street; the pengci'er was structurally complementary to the second-hit

car drivers I described in Chapter One. In a classic pengci'er scheme, a car and a pedestrian will bump into each other and the pedestrian will take a dive and make a scene. Ya once described a scene outside her complex where a woman trying to parallel park had nudged an e-bike carrying a mother and her six-year-old child. The mother started screaming and crying immediately: "If you've hurt my son at all there's no amount of money you can pay me to make up for it!" Her son, Ya laughed, was too innocent (*chun*). Even as his mother carried on and drew a large crowd with her histrionics, he stood, tugging at her shirt: "Mama, don't worry, I'm fine! Nothing's wrong with me. Don't cry, Mama, I'm fine!"

Ya kept interrupting her own narrative of the pengci'er in the clothing store to tell me how other people thought it had been very stupid of her to take the woman to the hospital. I said it seemed like the right thing to do, but I was apparently in the minority. One of Ya's friend's had told her she was too quiet and spoke too kindly. "He says if I am always saying 'it's fine' (*mei guanxi*) I am just letting people in step by step," Ya recalled. He argued that she needed to be strong and hard (*qiangyin*). Taking the woman to the hospital was already admitting fault; if the problem had been more serious, she could have been in real trouble. Ya had accepted this criticism gamely, but when her boss told her she shouldn't be so afraid of things (*bu yao pa shi*), she'd grown angry. "I'm not afraid of things," Ya maintained, "I just think it's a lot of trouble (*hen mafan*)." Ya's boss may have had a point; Ya couldn't bring herself to endure their communication problems and stay at the job through the Spring Festival. Less than a month after we had this conversation, Ya quit. It was the fourth job she'd gotten and then left during the first 15 months I lived in Zhengzhou.

The Problem with *Pianzi*

Anyone who wasn't from Zhengzhou wouldn't be surprised to hear that Ya had encountered a pengci'er. Pengci'er are just one genre of conmen (*pianzi*); throughout the rest of the PRC, Henan Province has a reputation for producing most of the country's pianzi. The aging Taiwanese celebrity's comment about how what Henanese people said, thought, and did were all different was made against the backdrop of this notoriety. His was a light version of a common critique from people of other provinces who claimed that everyone in Henan were cheats, less human, one friend from Hebei warned me, than dogs. "Have you figured out why people are such cheaters?" one friend asked wryly after I'd spent a few months in Zhengzhou.

I hadn't. Not because I hadn't tried but because there simply weren't that many conmen in Zhengzhou, or at least not that many conmen targeting *me*. And I know something about conmen in the PRC. In 2008, when I first spent a semester studying abroad in Shanghai, a group of students and I were taken in by a Tea Scam on our second day in the city. Tea Scams are in the same genre as Art Student Scams, Chinese Acrobat Show Scams, and Black Taxi Scams; all these scams are directed toward foreigners and outsiders. They take advantage of the mark's lack of familiarity with local customs, places, and—most importantly—prices. In Shanghai, my classmates and I had gotten off easy. We'd spent a few hours with several charming, English-speaking Chinese men who'd offered to treat us to tea at a shop in a back alley where photos weren't permitted because it was "part of the Forbidden City" (unbelievable, I know) but then immediately caved once we insisted on footing the bill. We left our pianzi in good spirits, with a strange feeling, but uncertain we'd even been conned. Only later, after we discovered that

100USD was *not* market price for a pot of flower tea and saw the same conmen picking up a Russian woman traveling on her own at the same spot where we'd been identified as marks did we realize that we'd been had. I thought 100USD, split among five of us, was a pretty cheap way to learn a valuable lesson about trust and local customs; few of my classmates agreed, but few of them lingered long enough in the PRC to hear other, more horrifying stories.

There was nothing like this in Zhengzhou. The closest thing I saw was the phalanx of beautiful and pliant-seeming women who were perpetually lining up at the central train station's east exit, purring to lone male travelers not to worry, that they knew where the cheapest hotels were, but I'd seen women like them at nearly all of the train stations I'd been to in the PRC. Their presence was, weirdly enough, nothing extraordinary, and as far as I was concerned they were irrelevant; they ignored me because I wasn't a promising mark for them. A character like me belonged to a different genre of scam. When I visited Zhengzhou in the spring of 2013 and told the story of being Tea Scammed at a banquet, my companions—Huang Na, Fatty, and Fatty's air force colonel friend from Shanghai—laughed and laughed. "All of China's most talented people go to Shanghai," the colonel said, wiping tears from his eyes, "All of China's most talented pianzi must go there too!" I told them I liked Zhengzhou because none of the pianzi bothered with foreigners, and the entrepreneur said this was just another example of Henan's backwardness (*luohou*): "Our pianzi have not even figured out how to make money from rich foreigners yet!" Even the aging Taiwanese celebrity admitted that after all these years of doing business there, he'd never been cheated in Henan, not

exactly; all the conflicts he related were more like a series of misunderstandings and misdirections than they were like deliberate scams.

HIV, Henan, and Metonymic Origin Stories

After all those months spent in Henan, I still don't have a very strong explanation for why Henan has such a terrible reputation outside the province. One guess is that this has less to do with actual pianzi and more to do with a generalized fear of Henanese people because Henan was the epicenter of the PRC's HIV outbreak in the 1990s (see Shao 2006 for one of the only ethnographic accounts of the crisis in English). People in Zhengzhou generally agreed that if Henan had a reputation for being pianzi, they certainly weren't responsible for it; if there was anything to it, surely those impoverished scoundrels from Zhumadian were responsible because everyone knew they were the worst in all of Henan. I had to hear this theory articulated several times by several different people before I finally connected it to the HIV outbreak; within Henan, Zhumadian was the center of the outbreak, which was caused by a plasma-selling scheme with insufficient regulation and hygienic measures (Gittings 2001). Even people from Henan who had lived through the outbreak were sometimes completely ignorant of the reason it occurred, though the incident and its effects continue to have a spectral presence in daily life. In December 2014, a news story emerged that a real estate developer had hired a demolition crew of HIV-positive people to scare away resisting residence (Taipei Times 2014).

Once, Ya and I got into a fight because she was criticizing people from Zhumadian and calling them poor, lazy, and dirty; finally, I asked if she knew the place's recent history. She didn't. All she knew was that there were entire villages of orphans

there because she'd read a story about it in the paper. This is how censorship in the PRC goes. People are allowed to know that entire villages have been orphaned but not why. You can speak about the plot of the story but not its origin. This is also how prejudice is passed on from one generation to the next; parents and grandparents might warn their children to be careful of people from Henan or, if they were from Henan, from Zhumadian but neglect to say why. What's left is the story of an event whose cause remains muffled but whose effects linger. To identify the origin of a story is to make oneself vulnerable to demands for accountability; like Ya agreeing to take the old woman to the hospital, to allow people to know the reason why something happened is to admit that there is someone to blame. The origins of the HIV outbreak and the poverty that followed in its wake were successfully covered up for the most part, which means that while the reason people are afraid of Henanese people has disappeared the fear and disgust—now vague and overgeneralized—remains.

This theory—that people in the PRC believed people from Henan were pianzi because of the repressed history of the HIV outbreak in the 1990s—is not convincing to everyone. Many people I shared it with offered their own, often more straightforward explanations. One man from Dalian—a city in the Northeast, which people from Henan frequently (and strangely) mock—insisted the HIV outbreak couldn't be the reason because Henanese people's reputation as tricksters and con artists went back to at least the Republican Era. A woman from Zhumadian refuted my theory and instead blamed Henan's poor reputation on Luoyang, another city. "Every year they have the Peony Festival there," she explained, "It is so crowded and draws so many outsiders, but it's also known to be the world championship for pickpockets. I think a lot of people only

ever come to Henan for the Peony Festival, and when the thieves steal their stuff, they blame it on all Henanese people." Another woman looked at it like a numbers game: "There are too many people (*ren tai duo*) in China, and Henan has the most people out of all that. When people read the news and something crazy has happened, it is more likely that a person from Henan will be involved because there are so many of us, but the news is never going to talk about all the rest of us doing normal things!"

If the HIV-outbreak theory can't be right, then this last explanation appeals to me most. There certainly were a lot of people in Henan—93.88 million according to the PRC's 2011 census—and a lot of people in the world from Henan. One older professor I met insisted that one in every 60 people in the world was from Henan, which can't be true; later I learned that he was doing some creative accounting so he could include even people like me, whose ancestors had the last name "Lin" (林), which can be traced back to the Shang Dynasty in Henan. Henan, many people reasoned, might be full of pianzi, but it was also the cradle of Chinese civilization. People tried to perform this kind of pride to me, the obvious outsider, but I always found it to be shot through with ambivalence, with the knowledge that in the grand scheme of things Henan was no longer a good place (*hao difang*) in spite of its long history. Several people told me that I was right to do my research in Henan because Henan was a metonym for the PRC. Developmentally, they explained, Henan stood in the PRC's domestic hierarchy about where the PRC stood in the world's hierarchy; it was a place where I could learn a lot. I never pushed people on this analogy, but I found it troubling and self-defeating. The reason people found the analogy uplifting was because of the narrative of progress: as the tide PRC inevitably rose within a hierarchy of nations, so too would Henan's beleaguered

ship. In fact, though, so too would all the other ships. Henan was unlikely to benefit from the PRC's rise; as the PRC rose as a whole, so too would Beijing, Shanghai, and the other more developed areas on the eastern coast. Instead of Henan overtaking Shanghai or Beijing just as the PRC passed up Japan, Henan would continue to play catch-up to these "more developed" domestic rivals along the eastern coast, which would continue to leave Henan behind.

Even without knowing why they'd been saddled with it, the people I worked with in Zhengzhou attempted to wrangle their ambivalence toward their own origin and the derision—real or imagined—of people from other provinces. In movies, the lampooned character of rural migrant laborer always had a Henanese accent. After viewing one such movie, Olivia admitted that it bothered her. "I know they are just using Henanese because it is close to Standard Mandarin and everyone can understand it," she said, "But it is bad for Henanese people's self-confidence." During part of my fieldwork, I accompanied a group of train conductors on their route to and from a western city; more than other people, these Zhengzhou-based conductors were vulnerable to the prejudices of outsiders as they passed through three different provinces on the way to their destination. Once, in the dining car, I heard the youngest and prettiest member of the work-unit—it was widely known that she was not yet, as she claimed to be on her work papers, 18—holding court to the older men working the train: the policeman, the cook, and the head conductor (*liechezhang*). "I am from Henan," she spouted proudly, with a practiced air, "Being from Henan is not a problem. If you think it is a problem, then that is *your* problem." The older men all nodded sagely in agreement: *She's right about this! This is the right attitude to have toward this*.

In the months since, I've thought a lot about that moment on the train. Because I lived in Zhengzhou and worked with people who were from Henan and had stayed in Henan, I seldom saw people confronting (or preparing to confront) outsiders. On the eve of the CCP revolution, sociologist Fei Xiaotong maintained that Chinese society as being driven by "egocentrism" where the "self is always at the center…surrounded by others who come under the influence of the center" (1992, 68). The hierarchy of social relationships, he argued, could be traced all the way back to Confucius and meant that Chinese people "would sacrifice their families for their own self-interests, their party for their families' interests, their country for their party's interests, and the whole world for their country's interests" (Fei 1992, 69). This distinctive encounter on the train, occurring almost 70 years after Fei's writing, still reinforces aspects of his argument. One generation reinforced the defenses of another against the inevitable and unjust tide of popular opinion; two generations abandon their divisions to side with another against the rest of the nation. It's driven by the same metonymic logic that makes Henan into the PRC of the PRC, the same metonymic logic that in Confucius' *Analects* makes the relationship between a king and his subjects analogous to that between a father and his sons. The key is to draw your circle carefully, to analyze correctly whether in any given situation you were the king, the subject, the father, or the son.

Love in the Time of the Trust Crisis

The proliferation of pianzi—both real and reputed—in the PRC makes interpersonal relationships and everyday life feel precarious. When she was explaining he obsession with discovering whether something was real or fake, Olivia told me that many of the business people she worked with were concerned not about the real estate bubble

or corruption but about the so-called "trust crisis": *xinren weiji*. "I don't know why this is," she wondered aloud, "Maybe there are just too many people in China and we've been tricked (*bei pian le*) too many times." We were sitting in a coffee shop near her office, trying to complete a formal interview for the third time—our other two attempts had been interrupted by urgent business Olivia had to attend to once and by the arrival of a client she was taking to dinner. She had just finished a five-day Human Potential training program for business people run by an 60-year-old American expat—"Who would have thought an American could understand so much about China!" she exclaimed to me several times without irony—and the warm optimism of the camp and of being included among its rich and powerful attendees still infused all of her answers. ("People talk about brain-washing (*xinao*) as though it is bad," she gushed, "But sometimes it is good to wash your brain—your mind can also get dirty!")

Olivia was one of the first friends I made in Zhengzhou and over the 15 months I lived there, I watched her attitude shift constantly, from optimistic to pessimistic, from militantly joyful to inconsolably frustrated. Earlier in the year, over drinks at XX Bar and between firing off volleys of WeChat messages to other people, she'd been in a similarly good mood because she was mulling over the possibility of marrying a close friend of hers. "He is not the type of man I usually like," she admitted, her face lit up from the blue glow of her cell phone screen, "But he will not *fengchangzuoxi*. Do you know this phrase?" I said I did not. "*Fengchangzuoxi*. *Fengchang* means to come to an occasion, *zuo* is to play or mess around, *xi* is what actors are in—like a performance." I typed the word into my phone, as I often did when the people I worked with were explaining what they felt to be important concepts to me. "Nowadays you hear men saying this to their

wives when they are at banquets with young, pretty women—'Do not worry, I do not *really* like that beautiful girl, I am just *fengchangzuoxi*,'" she spat in her best biting imitation of a sleazy businessman. "It means they are just pretending because they have to, for business, but often they are pretending to their wives because they have to. This man"—she returned to the thought of her friend she was considering transforming into a suitor—"he does not have to pretend. He is not complicated (*fuza*). He's simple (*jiandan*). Nowadays everyone is complicated; I want to marry someone who can be simple with me, who does not *fengchangzuoxi*." Over the next few months, even as this friend in particular fell out of favor as an object of fantasy and others slipped in, Olivia consistently maintained that what she wanted above all in a mate was honesty, simplicity, and for him not to be threatened by her career.

In the time that I knew her, Olivia went from being a capable businesswoman who was 30 years old and single to being a capable businesswoman who was 31 years old and single. Because marriage is not just expected but also *necessary* for women in Zhengzhou to become fully constituted as social persons, everything Olivia did was read teleologically by her friends, colleagues, and family as having to build toward her eventual marriage. An urgency underlay all her conversations with married women, remarried women, and—especially—her parents. Olivia never articulated out loud the possibility that at 31 years old, without ever having a real, socially recognized boyfriend (though I gathered from our sometimes extremely candid conversations in her car that she'd had many private ones), she might never get married. She never said it out loud, and yet I knew that the possibility was like deep, dark cavern beneath the thin layer of reality supporting her feet, a source of infinite anxiety that she could fall into at any

moment if it weren't repressed. Olivia had a set repertoire of reasons to give friends for why she hadn't yet married: all the single men she knew were threatened by her success; all the successful men she knew were parents of students and thus already married; all the foreigners she knew—and foreigners, everyone knew, were a status jump above Chinese men, exotic, the out of category outsider, and thus exempt from the expectation that they earn more than her—were unreliable or strange and plus she didn't want to marry a foreigner anyway. "There are too many cultural conflicts (*wenhua chongtu*)," she explained, "Not everyone is like you! You are open, you can accept everything. Most of the foreigners I see can't do that—they won't even eat Chinese food!"

Marrying a foreigner would not be simple (*jiandan*); it would be complicated (*fuza*). Marrying a man who was divorced would not be simple; it would be complicated. Marrying a man who was less successful than her would not be simple; it would be complicated. Often, during these circular and self-defeating discussions about Olivia's theoretical simple marriage, I found myself wanting to shake her: Life is not simple, it's complicated! Love is not simple, it's complicated! And marriage! I'd never seen a long-term partnership that was simple, even if it looked that way from the outside. All of them are complicated in their own ways.

Olivia, though, was a manager. She was used to managing her employees, her private training school, and her social life; if she married and failed to keep things from becoming complicated (*fuza*), she would have only herself to blame. If she failed to marry, she would have only herself to blame. And not only that: Everyone she knew would likely blame her too. Once, when I was describing my visit to Master Zhang, the well-connected fortuneteller from the previous chapter, she interrupted me. "I want to go

see him," she demanded, "Will you bring me?" In a moment of impulsive vulnerability, she told me she'd been to see a fortuneteller just a few months before, to ask about her marriage; in fact, her recent trip to a Guanyin temple in Fujian had also been motivated by a desire to appeal to god—or any of the gods—to help her get married. The trip had been a bust; her sudden spirituality had not been rewarded as far as she could tell. And her visit to the fortuneteller? "He told me I was supposed to meet the person I'm going to marry after the Spring Festival," she said anxiously, "Come spring, we would decide if we were meant to be together. But now it's already April! Where is this person? No such person emerged (*chulai*)."

With some reluctance, she told me the most troubling thing the fortuneteller had related to her: "He said I had to make myself better (*rang wo ziji hao yidian*), otherwise I would miss this opportunity (*yaoburan hui cuoguo jihui*)." In retrospect, I'm impressed by the cleverness of this particular fortuneteller, who has built the failure of his prediction into its text and in advance placed the blame squarely on Olivia's shoulders. In the moment, though, I was overwhelmed by Olivia's obvious anxiety, her belief that this mysterious man she was fated to marry had not emerged because *she* had failed to make herself better. "He said there will not be many more opportunities," she murmured dolefully.

The Rich, Roads, and Ruthless Personal Accountability

Olivia—like many other middle- to upper class people I worked with in the PRC—is both constrained and buttressed by her own ideas of personal accountability. Just as Ya saw a landscape littered with strangers who could scam her at any moment and thus blamed herself for being unprepared when faced with a pengci'er she should have

been prepared for, so Olivia sees herself traveling through a land of marriage opportunities that she's somehow failed to exploit and thus blames herself for not getting married. Though similar to the idea of "self-reliance" (*zili*) whose genealogy Yang Jie traces in *Unknotting the Heart* (2015, 68-70), I never saw any evidence that the ruthless personal accountability I examine here was prescribed by the state; instead, it seemed to be something particular people cultivated, on purpose, as a way of protecting themselves. Like a less extreme form of the magical thinking I describe in the previous chapter, a belief in personal accountability reflected a worldview in which the self was if not omnipotent then at least not totally subject to the whims of uncontrollable, structural forces.

This philosophy of ruthless personal accountability did not, however, stop at the self. Among middle- to upper-class people in Zhengzhou, there was a tremendous lack of sympathy for people who in America I might describe as "down on their luck." Over expensive pots of high-end tea and at the city's most popular upscale restaurants, I'd relate stories of people I knew whom I found sympathetic: a migrant mother who lived in a shed near my house with an extremely disabled son she couldn't get into school; a former sex worker whose escape from the industry meant only that she could replicate the abuses she'd suffered by inflicting them on her new coworkers; a man whose marriage was called off because his fiancée's father had been arrested in the anti-corruption campaign and the fiancée and her mother had fled to America. The word for sympathy is *tongqing*: literally "same feeling." That said, translations for the idea of empathy remain

elusive and unpopular,[33] and I rarely heard people claim they could feel, intimately, exactly as others felt. You either felt sorry for someone or you did not, and often when I told these stories, the well-off people I was speaking to did not.

"I have seen that mother before on the way to your house," Ya declared after hearing me talk about the migrant mother and her disabled son, "She is not cleaning her son or taking care of him. Of course people will look down on them and not help them. It serves her right (*huogai*)."

"Why did she become a prostitute in the first place?" Olivia asked me, when I told her the story of the sex worker failing to readjust to life outside the sex industry, "And why would you bother with such strange people? Megan, you have to control your environment. If you seek out people who are unhappy, you will become unhappy!"

"You really cannot say that these people connected with corrupt officials are sympathetic," a lawyer who—among other things—helped real estate tycoons launder money abroad murmured diplomatically, "You can say only that they are unlucky. For many years, they have benefited from corruption, even if they did not know it; now they will be punished for it. It is unlucky but fair."

While empathy was in short supply, there was, however, no shortage of envy. Ya in particular admitted that the real reason she no longer got along with Leggy, a friend of hers from elementary school, was that Leggy's family had only gotten richer as time went on. Leggy was also constantly engaged in suggestively ambiguous (*aimei*) relationships with men, while Ya feared herself incapable of having a boyfriend. She would often

[33] One possible translation proposed by psychologists is *tongxin*, which literally translates as through the heart or open heart; unfortunately, it uses the same characters as the word for macaroni noodles (*tongxin mian*).

present me with a list of Leggy's deficiencies but then admit, "I know if Nana did this I would not mind, but Leggy's family situation has only gotten better and better while mine has gotten worse and worse, and I cannot bear it." In some ways, Ya's refusal to empathize with those who were suffering was a complementary position to her willingness to see herself as commensurate with someone superior to herself (and thus justify envying them). It also fed into the tendency of people to avoid negativity and embrace positivity. One should not admit one's similarities with the poor because to do so would concede or even highlight one's vulnerabilities, but identifying with the rich and imagining their wealth as your own—as envy invites one to do—could be part of a long-term strategy for an upwardly mobile person.

There were exceptions to this ruthless attitude, of course. One woman who was part of the same circle as May, the wife of the nephew of the richest man in Henan, devoted herself to doing charitable works. Once, the two of them got into an argument just a few months after they took separate trips to Tibet. It was fashionable in the summer of 2014 for people of a certain class in Zhengzhou to *zhuangshan*: to make a pilgrimage around a sacred mountain in Tibet. People did this regardless of whether they were Buddhist or not, spiritual or not; like a more physically rigorous version of going to the Maldives, you did it to prove you could afford to do it. May returned from Tibet disgusted by dirt and waste. "If you want to know where all of China's money is," she proclaimed in a voice that was the closest I ever saw her get to angry, "just look at the roads in Tibet!" She passed me her phone, which, rather than being filled with the uncomfortably orientalist pictures of smiling Tibetan children as I'd been expecting, instead featured shot after shot of perfectly paved highways. "Henan has way more

people than Tibet, and we don't have a single road like this!" she continued, "How can Tibet, which is supposed to be so backward, have such better roads than us? How can they want independence when they're even better treated by the government than we are?"

The woman involved in charitable works and I made uncomfortable eye contact across the table. "It's not just about roads," she said finally, "It's about religion. Did you know that there is a limit on the number of Tibetan people who can make the pilgrimage you made?"

May admitted she did not.

"It's true!" the woman devoted to charitable works exclaimed, emboldened. "All the people driving your car and helping you in your hotel—it is their religion, their mountain, and they cannot even go. *You* can go, and you do not even have faith! What do they care about roads when the government controls them and keeps them from their faith?"

Like most people in Zhengzhou, however, May remained fixated on roads, which were the main factor in the texture of her daily life. If the people in Tibet could still be unhappy while having such great roads, they had only themselves to blame. Most of the people I worked fell somewhere between her socioeconomic bracket and Ya's. They were comfortable, they owned one or more apartments throughout the city, they had invested in the right kind of capital at the right time and managed to scramble their way up and through the PRC's fiercely competitive educational system, by hook or—in many instances—by crook. I did, however, know people who were poorer, people who would self-deprecatingly refer to themselves as the bottom floor of society (*diceng*). I had

trouble working with these people because unlike with Ya or Olivia, at no point were the differences between us allowed to evaporate into good rapport. For instance, the migrant mother of the disabled child and I lived next to each other for a year, spent entire days together traversing the city searching for a school for her son, and talked constantly; at no point did I cease being "the American" who was "so rich and so educated." Even after multiple bus rides from the very south to the very north of the city, she couldn't stop wondering why would I talk to a bottom layer person like her. It's not unusual for anthropologists to have to face the inequalities between themselves and the people they work with, but for me it was unbearable; I often found myself grinding my teeth in embarrassment as her anxious patter accompanied me and her son from place to place.

That is part of what made working with poorer people in Zhengzhou difficult. What made it easier was the way that their sympathies aligned with mine. When I would tell Mary, who was poorer than the majority of my interlocutors but worked with other foreigners in the city and was more accustomed to dealing with difference, these stories about the migrant mother, the sex worker, and the corrupt official's daughter's fiancée, she did not jump to blame the people in question. Often, these stories of the trials and tribulations people faced came to me through Mary, who would hear about them at her church, where such vulnerabilities were attributed to other causes besides personal failures. Like Olivia, Mary was another key interlocutor for me; she was as committed to making sure I understood life as it was in the PRC as I was. Like Olivia, she was unmarried and in her early thirties. Unlike Olivia, her anxiety about marriage was almost completely hidden beneath the Christian rhetoric of her pastor, who worked with a congregation that included real estate tycoons, migrant construction workers, divorced

women, young couples, and schizophrenics: “If I do not get married, I am fine. It is God’s plan.” Eventually, this formulation eventually fell apart into another, less-workable version of the magical thinking I described in a different chapter. Until then, though, she was unique. Unlike Olivia or Ya, she didn’t want to censor her accounts of people’s troubles; she didn’t need to, because she didn’t assume the troubles people faced were their own fault.

I am spending so much time on Mary because—in the period from July 2013 to June 2014—she struck me as an exception to the so-called neoliberal rule. Much has been written about neoliberalism in the PRC (see for example Yan 2008; Hu 2012; Rofel 2007). Rather than say this idea of ruthless personal accountability was created by conditions of neoliberalism, which some scholars even doubt is the appropriate term to use in the PRC (see Kipnis 2007), I would like to make a more measured claim and say that it was connected to people’s specific economic conditions and their potential to *change*. Most of the people I worked with seemed bound by the kind of ruthless ideology of personal responsibility I described above, but, then again, most of the people I worked with were of a certain class and social background. During my fieldwork, I tried to reach a broad constituency of interlocutors, but I think it’s important to acknowledge the gaps in my research, the places where I failed, and the lingering bits of evidence indicating that these ideas of personal responsibility and self-control really only apply to the upwardly mobile middle- and upper-middle-class. For a person like Olivia, who without any of the capital to justify her position stands at the threshold of what may eventually become Henan’s high society, the belief that she was in control of her own fate, that even the fate calculated for her by a fortune teller might be changed or altered by her own

failures (a tricky cosmological contradiction to swallow since it goes against the very essence of the idea of immutable divine fate), turns out to be a necessary and comforting one. Olivia cannot and does not live with the idea that her life is governed by the precarious whims of her various clients and patrons. To paraphrase William Ernest Henley, she must be the master of her fate; she must be the captain of her ship.

Religion, Wealth, and a Sense of Safety

Not all my interlocutors depended so desperately on an unexamined ideology of self-determination; several of them also explained to me directly why different economic and social classes of people were drawn to different religions or ideologies. At the midpoint of my fieldwork, I began asking people about tuhao or the nouveau rich; unlike *baofahu*, a term for the suddenly rich (Osburg 2013, 13), tuhao carries both a fraught historical valence—it was the name for a certain class of wealthy landlords during the Communist Revolution—as well as a more specific contemporary distinction. Tuhao are defined largely by their crass consumer habits. Once, a woman in her late thirties or early forties (I never could tell, and I wouldn't ask) and I were discussing my interest in tuhao when she snatched her phone. "I posted the funniest thing on WeChat last month," she explained as she scrolled through her Moments, "Didn't you see it?" I hadn't, so she sent it to me again: it was a list of things you'd do if you were a tuhao. Number one was become a Buddhist by buying as many of the then-fashionable expensive beaded Buddhist bracelets as possible. "Why do they all become Buddhist?" I asked, scrolling through my mental list of everyone I'd seen wearing those beads (the list was long and, as the woman predicted, wealthy). The woman shrugged. "I think," she offered, "that it's because they have so much and so they don't have a sense of safety (*anquan gan*). Maybe

they know from the way they got all their money that it could be gone soon at any moment and so they need faith to comfort themselves. The poor need faith also, because they have nothing and they need to believe that some god will help protect them and give them more." She laughed lightly. "Not me! Not us, in the middle. I have just enough. I have a sense of safety (*anquan gan*). I don't need religion to give me that."

This sense of safety eluded most of the people I worked with. People I worked with in Zhengzhou were particular focused on projects of self-development (*fazhan ziji*) with guidance drawn from psychological texts and principles. Calvin and Vivian—the owners of Cardboard Coffee, where I conducted much of my research in 2015 and 2016—were high-ranking members of a PRC offshoot of a Human Potential training program and had made their cafe into a base of operations for their "small groups." Like the program Li Zhang examines in Kunming, Calvin and Vivian's training program drew heavily on Satir family therapy (Zhang 2014; 2016, 126). Training programs were expensive, however; self-development did not have to be. Ya in particular read self-help book after self-help book. When we met for coffee in the afternoons, as we often did, she would expertly tick off the things that had occurred in her life to make her lack of a sense of safety (*anquan gan*): her father's coldness, his sudden death, and her mother's focus on her "uncle" or unofficial stepfather. Ya was not alone; Lynn, a single woman in her 30s, described how in the wake of her divorce her sense of safety had evaporated, leaving her vulnerable to depression and the vicissitudes of other people's judgments of her. (Later, I'd find the timeline of this narrative was not strictly true; even before her divorce, Lynn had suffered from anorexia and a host of other psychological issues.)

The most extreme case, however, was Mary. After reading a self-help book about living in the present moment, she decided to become an adherent of what I—at the time—thought was a mostly harmless Christian cult. Her teacher mixed together elements of Christian theology with Buddhism and—ironically—translated American New Age texts, which originally were translations of Chinese texts. "We are all just parts of one soul before we're born," Mary told me dreamily in the weeks after reading the book, "All god wants is for us to remember who we are." After joining the cult, Mary became extremely pleasant to be around. She was never angry, sad, or irritated. "Everyone who does wrong to me is my benefactor (*enren*)," she insisted. She spoke about her life before meeting her teacher as though reflecting on a poorer, more miserable cousin.

"Back then, I had no sense of safety (*anquan gan*)," she said, "I needed people to like me. Now I know better." Mary certainly felt better, but I couldn't help feeling like it wasn't a sustainable position. It was another version of the magical thinking perpetuated by many of the families I worked with (Ogden 2010; see previous chapter), but it was even less workable because there was no social consensus propping it up, no caring community or set of amiable children agreeing to accept Mary's vision of reality as omnipotent. Somehow, Mary had taken this idea of personal responsibility to its delusional and magically real extreme. Mary was entirely accountable for her reactions to her external environment; any dissatisfaction she felt was a result of her inability to remain faithful. The Christian cult didn't last; within six months, Mary had become an adherent of the prosperity gospel teachings of an American life coach who'd expanded his predatory services into the PRC after being arrested for alleged sexual assault in Canada; it's an uncomfortable episode I explore in more detail in a different chapter.

Nevertheless, for a few months at least, Mary remained blissfully unruffled regardless of what befell her. “Whenever I am angry or sad, it is because I have forgotten that we are all one soul,” Mary maintained in the face of my gentle protests. “You and I and whoever hurts me are the same. Whenever I lose my sense of safety, it is because I have forgotten who I am.”

Language of the Heart

This logic of ruthless personal accountability meant that, as I have described in a different chapter, even when I was hit by a car in the first few months of my fieldwork, people assumed I must in some way have been responsible. “Be more careful,” they would say. The word for “be careful” is *xiaoxin*: literally “small heart.” Many scholars have examined the psychological, physical, and political impact of Chinese conceptions of the heart as mind (see Yang 2015; Zhang 2014; Lee 2010). Here I examine the rhetoric of caution, defensiveness, and self-preservation that orbits this language of the heart. Just as psychologists in the PRC tend to understand their patients emotional distress holistically as part of a “mind–body-society nexus” (Zhang 2014, 287), so I argue that ordinary people in Zhengzhou understand their hearts through metaphors that emphasize physicality. I consider the language of the heart not as a window into somatic illnesses or Chinese conceptions of health but to see how those figurative conceptions of emotions are inflected by the physical environment. As the physical conditions of people’s environments have changed, so too have the meaning of the metaphors that communicate people’s conceptions of their hearts and how to care for them.

Physical metaphors to describe psychological states are abundant in Standard Mandarin. A relaxed person can *fangxin*, literally put down or release their heart without

worrying it will be damaged. In contrast, the word for worry is *danxin*: literally to shoulder the heart. In Beijing, an automatic recording of a woman's voice on public buses urges you to "Be careful, the doors are opening" (*kaimen, xiaoxin*). For months, I laughed at what I felt was an accurate revision of this empty rhetorical maneuver on Zhengzhou buses, where the woman instead urged you to "Be worried, the doors are opening" (*kaimen, danxin*), an apt reaction to the dangerous e-bike traffic one often stepped into when exiting the bus. I recounted this observation to three people before one finally pointed out that I was mishearing the recording; it said not *danxin* but *dangxin*: literally to manage the heart but practically to watch out. My friend thought this refuted my joke, but instead I found "Watch out! The doors are opening" to be even funnier, an especially apt warning as one stepped off the bus's ledge and into Zhengzhou's unmanageable traffic conditions.

In the contemporary usage of these words an assumption that in a place like Zhengzhou the heart needs to be shouldered, to be made small, and to be managed is countered by an ambivalence about people who overdo it and thus make the situation worse for everyone around them. Jianguo, a male interlocutor, explained that one of the problems with doing business in the PRC was how people would *liu ge xinyan'er*. For months, I struggled to understand this word. *Liu* means to retain or keep; *xinyan* means "heart eyes" or conscience. To have *xinyan* meant you were considerate or careful with others, but once the colloquial *er* was added, the word suddenly transformed. *Xinyan'er* were not moral principles but baseless suspicions, private intentions, or schemes. Over a two-hour long formal interview, I made him revisit the phrase. "Are xinyan'er bad?" I

asked. “No, not necessarily,” he responded in English, so I pressed. “So then they’re good?”

He shook his head, grabbed my coffee cup, and placed it next to his. “Xinyan’er are like this: You and I are going into business together. You need cups for your end of the business; I am supposed to get the cups for you. But I am not sure if your business is going to work out, so when I am giving you the cups, I take this one”—he pulled his own cup away behind his back—“and keep it for myself. I am not necessarily hurting you by taking this, because you still have the cup you need.” He slid mine back across the table toward me while wrapping his other hand around his original cup. “I am keeping this to myself, liu ge xinyan’er, because that way even if your business fails and you lose everything, I still got something from it.” He held his cup up, shaking it. “I still got some benefit (*de li*).”

“So then it’s good, like an insurance policy?”

I can still see in my mind the way Jianguo closed his eyes in frustration before continuing to explain. “When I say someone *liu hen duo* (a lot of) *xinyan’er*, I might be impressed, because it means he is very smart, but I also might not want to do business with him. A person who *liu tai duo* (too many) *xinyan’er* cares too much about their own interests (*li*).”

Many of my interlocutors shared Jianguo’s concern about how people were too focused on their own benefit. This language of the heart is shorthand for talking about the motivations of people who, on a more crude level, were selfish, only concerned with their own interests (*li*). Xinyan’er and the related *xinsi*—literally heart thoughts—were hidden intentions, plans, or even desires. One group of friends of mine in Beijing used similar

language when telling me that a woman I'd met had broken up with her fiancée. They'd gone as far as having the entire marriage apartment remodeled according to her specifications and even getting the engagement photos taken (for many post-80s people I knew in the PRC, this is often a more important public ritual even than the registration of the marriage or the wedding itself). Then, suddenly, they hadn't heard from either of them for two months. When the woman finally emerged from her period of radio silence, all she said was that they had broken up (*fenshou*)—and nothing else.

"What do you think happened?" I asked, shocked that the story had taken such a dramatic and mysterious turn.

"Who knows," my friend laughed, "But it's good! She has a new boyfriend, and anyway, we never liked him. That man had too many thoughts (*tai duo xinsi*). Once he bought an expensive car without asking her! How could he make such a big decision without even talking to her? He kept too many thoughts to himself (*liu le tai duo xinsi*)."

That said, having too few xinsi or xinyan'er was not good either. Just as Yan Yunxiang observed that straightforward honesty (*laoshi*) had gone from being a virtue to an undesirable trait in a spouse (2003), so people understood that a certain amount of xinsi and xinyan'er were necessary to survive in the PRC. Once, Ya and I were discussing Jianguo—whom she also had met through me—and she told me she didn't like him because with her he was too guarded: *jiebei xin*. *Jiebei* means to guard against, *xin* is, again, heart. Against what, I found myself asking, and heard again Shaoshao's voice: *Just in case*. The idea of the guarded heart becomes even more of a liability when contrasted with the word for happiness, *kaixin*: literally, an open heart. I thought of the Jianguo I knew, of the way he'd sat in the coffee shop with me for hours, looking down

from the second story window onto the street. “Look at them!” he spat. “They only care about their own benefit. That e-bike, it should stay to the right, but instead he will only think about his own benefit *li* and ride side by side and then the car behind him will have to stop and honk, and the e-bike behind him will go onto the sidewalk so that he can go even faster and almost hit people walking. No one cares about anyone else. As soon as you step outside, it’s like stepping into a war!”

Jianguo had studied, lived, and worked in New Zealand for 11 years before coming back to the PRC to do business. Unlike many of my interlocutors who’d never left Henan, he was from the PRC’s northeast and lived normally in the well-developed south; he was sensitive to the differences between first-tier cities like Beijing and Shenzhen and “third or second-and-a-half tier” (as he put it) cities like Zhengzhou. I knew that with other people he could be cold and distant, but I also knew that he felt close to me and, at times, protective of me. Once, after attending a party at my house, he’d pulled me aside. “Yuping, you’re bad at making friends,” he declared. “All of those people are strange. If your dissertation is based on what they have been telling you, you are in trouble.” As I remembered all of this, I turned to Ya. “Maybe he is not always guarding his heart (*jiebei xin*),” I offered. “Maybe it depends on the person. *Kanren*.” Ya had been at the party, but of all the people there, Jianguo had given her his most generous reading: “She seems very young.” At 20, she was. When I told her what he’d said about how everyone at the party was strange, Ya laughed. “He is really right about that. You are not very good at making friends,” she continued, “He’s very honest with you. Maybe it is smart for him to guard his heart (*jiebei xin*) with others.”

To hear Ya criticizing someone else for guarding their heart (*jiebei xin*) was disorienting. Ya was, to some extent, the most guarded person I knew in Zhengzhou. She wasn't like Mary, whose shifting delusions were a type of proactive defensiveness, a method of protecting the self constantly and actively in an environment that assumes encroachments will be made, and she wasn't like Olivia, whose robust personal and professional network enabled her to engage the world with a fierce, renewable confidence in her own competence. Ya's way of protecting her heart was to never entertain the possibility of vulnerability, to withdraw completely. "Either I will do something the best or I won't do it at all," she'd frequently declare; the result was that more often than not, her projects, jobs, and new friendships were abandoned, quit, or left unattended to for long stretches of time. Ya insisted she would never get married or else that she would marry a homosexual man and get divorced right away (the practice of marrying a homosexual is widespread enough that it has a special term to describe it: *tongqi*).

"I would do it just so I could say I got married," she maintained, "Just so people couldn't tell me I was strange." Ya was strange, though. She had strange ideas and operated according to a logic that even other Zhengzhou residents found opaque. Once, she told me she'd decided what she was going to do with her life: she was going to study English. "So you can study abroad in America?" I offered. She shook her head; no, she was going to study English so she could study abroad in France. I guffawed; surely she knew they spoke not English there but French? "Yes, exactly," Ya nodded vigorously, "That way my English does not have to be that good because theirs is also not so good."

When I describe Ya fondly to others, this is the story I tell. It takes people a minute to process her logic, to decide whether they think her strategy makes sense or not.

Of course it makes sense, I always find myself arguing, if your highest priority is to protect yourself from failing by managing expectations and—more importantly—from the dangers of becoming close to others, of course studying English so you can go to France makes perfect sense. Ya's twisted logic was innovative but somehow not enough to protect herself and her heart completely. A few months after my return to Princeton, she messaged me on WeChat forlornly. She'd gotten a job working for a coffee shop owner who believed they were fated to work together because of serendipity (*yuanfen*) but then abruptly fired her to hire a relative instead. "I'm just okay," she wrote when I asked her how she was doing, "Every day I wake up and feel I haven't done anything with my life yet. Maybe I never will."

Narrating the City

Many things changed for me and for the city between the period I spent finding a new apartment on the south side of the city in August 2013 and the moment I left the field in October 2014. The first line of Zhengzhou's subway was completed in January 2014, a few weeks behind the modified schedule and years behind the original one. A construction project connecting the wealthy area near the elevated North Ring Road to the wealthy New East District via tunnel opened to almost no fanfare—the first few times I took the uncannily empty road it was with wealthy friends who tentatively entered the tunnel, having heard about its existence from friends of friends. Every single main north-south thoroughfare was under construction, which made getting from my house on the south side to the north side (where all my most important interlocutors lived and worked) into a daily two-hour odyssey. And the knowledge I gained during my month-long search for an apartment made me famous among friends of Olivia, who made

me perform what she thought was my best bit over and over again. “Tell them,” she’d demand at banquets, in the back of chauffeured cars, and during lulls in long business meetings, “about the districts,” and I’d oblige. If someone in the room claimed to be from Zhengzhou, I’d ask them which district they grew up in; nine times out of ten I could tell them what their parents did for a living after hearing the answer. Olivia never tired of this. She’d laugh every time one of her friend’s or business partner’s eyes widened in disbelief upon hearing a foreigner guess correctly that their father was an official, a factory worker, or a railroad employee. “How did you know?” they’d ask, and I’d tell them it was simple: Erqi District was for railway workers, Zhongyuan was for former factory workers, Jinshui District was for officials, Huiji District was for rich urban villagers, and New East District for the rich, regardless of how they’d gotten their money. “The only one I don’t know about it Guancheng District,” I’d admit sheepishly, and people would chuckle. Oh, they’d say, that’s the old city, or, Oh, that’s where the Muslims (Hui) live.

During my time in Zhengzhou, I only ever got to know one person who’d grown up in Guancheng District, and he wasn’t a Muslim. He also didn’t like to talk about his childhood, and by the time I met him, I was no longer a person who liked to pry. Eventually, Ya told me the real reason Guancheng District wasn’t being redeveloped was because developers could not afford to negotiate with Hui people who lived there—perhaps having learned from earlier examples in other cities (see Zhang 2010, 154-155). The lack of engagement was starkest in Zhengzhou’s dense shopping area between Zijingshan Road and Erqi Square, where the Erqi District side of the street was

home to a brand new luxury shopping complex that faced Guancheng District, represented by a block of older four story apartments without closed glass windows.

In spite of the stark stratification, I still liked to go every once in a while to the old Shang Dynasty walls. I still liked to walk through the wiry black trees growing out of mounds of dirt, trees that I knew were not thousands—not even hundreds—of years old. I liked to wave from the top of the wall at people milling about in a block of brick houses. The houses had windows but no windowpanes, and I liked to remember how I had once stupidly thought that I would live there. The people never waved back. The reconstructed wall and the people it attracted meant that even on the third and fourth floor their pane-less windows exposed them to the attention of others, and they were probably practiced in the art of ignoring, repressing my existence as easily as all these east, west, and northern residents of the city repressed the existence of all the residents of Guancheng District.

Visiting the old city was not what people who lived and worked in Zhengzhou liked to do, however; they liked to flee the city, to escape. Urban life was associated with uncertainty, dirt, and danger. There was some sense that if there had been an alternative—and the countryside, with its limited infrastructure and lack of jobs, did not really present itself as a tenable alternative—people would have been happy to flee, to leave behind this city that they'd occupied for maybe two or three decades. Often, I felt as though the middle-class were waiting for the American suburbs to be reinvented in the PRC; people were just waiting to be able to flee the luxury gated apartment complexes where their children still had to breathe the air polluted by factories, power plants, and cars as they played in the courtyard filled with rare plants. The truly wealthy could afford

not to wait, to move straight to places like Pasadena or La Jolla, and upon each return to Zhengzhou remark about how big it was getting, how much dirtier and louder it was than how they remembered it.

Traffic of the Heart

It wasn't always bad, though. One pleasant day in July of 2014, the pollution was low, with an AQI of 75 as opposed to the normal 150 (according to the USA Environmental Protection Agency, everything above 60 is unhealthy). The weather was reasonable for summer or maybe it was just that the sudden appearance of the sun—which one would often go for weeks without seeing—made the heat, its origin finally visible, bearable. I went to lunch with Fred, a Christian man in his mid-thirties, and his four-year-old daughter to conduct an interview about faith, trust, and belief: *xinyang*, *xinren*, and *xiangxin*, a trio of closely connected words in Mandarin. The *xin* here is not the same *xin* as in heart, but *xin* as in to believe, to profess, to have confidence, and, in a slight departure, mail or letter. This man went by his English name Fred but spoke to me mostly in Mandarin; he had spent over a decade in America before returning to Zhengzhou to get married and start a family.

"Everyone lacks a sense of safety (*mei you anquan gan*)," he told me quietly, when our waiter was out of earshot. "Both the rich *and* the poor. Poor people don't know when their houses will be demolished. The leaders are also afraid—they don't know when they'll be changed, so they grab money as if their lives depended on it, first to gain face, second to take the money abroad.

"It's no wonder so many Chinese people are believers (*xinzhu*, a euphemism for Christians)," he continued. "I'm not afraid of not having money and not having a house

because I already experienced this. This government just reminded us that this world, this house, this money—*bu shi nide, bu shi wei ni*." He smiled at his own pithiness and switched into English: "This world is not yours. It's not for you."

Fred was an obviously biased voice. He was Christian, he was straddling the line just between middle- and upper-middle class, and he was also—for good, personal reasons—deeply suspicious of the government. His father was one of the first people to become rich in Zhengzhou in the 1980s as the leader of a bank. Using his position at the bank, his father had lent himself the money to build some of Zhengzhou's first non-work-unit housing complexes in what was then the most desirable part of the city: the border between Erqi District and Zhongyuan District, right by the university and the library. After a representative of a powerful CCP family had approached Fred's father and offered to take over the bank, he'd refused; the result was that they'd taken the bank anyway. In the aftermath, the family emissary had tried to take Fred's father to dinner to show there were no hard feelings, but Fred's father refused. He spent the next eleven years in a black jail for giving himself an illegal loan and breaking a law that had not existed when he broke it. Fred had been in America, studying, converting to Christianity, and then working illegally while all this had happened, and his disgust over the government's ex post facto prosecution of his father only increased after her returned to the PRC. "It is so ridiculous," he told me. "How can we trust them if they do something like this?"

That said, Fred was not alone in his sentiment. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I'd met a wealthy real estate developer, who had said essentially the same thing. "Your body is yours," he'd declared over a lavish banquet he was holding in honor of a business

deal he was doing with a friend of mine, who was an architect. “Other things can all become other people’s, but only your body always remains yours.” Less than six months later, I met him again and found him utterly transformed: the deal with my friend was off, his company had ceased all development amid charges of corruption, and he himself had disappeared from the local social scene for months in an effort to escape the commitments he’d failed to keep. “In this society, all of my things aren’t actually mine,” he announced over a drink my friend bought him. “My house might be demolished, my money might be taken by the government, even my life—“

“Your health is yours!” I interrupted. “You were the one who said your body is the only thing that is yours.”

“My health,” he smiled grimly, “Even my health depends on the doctors, who depend on the government. If the government doesn’t build enough hospitals, I can’t see a doctor, and then what happens to my body?” Facing my silence, he went on. “Everyone is irritable (*jizao*) and restless (*fuzao*). It’s too hard to estimate and evaluate what will happen next. In China, life has no regulations (*guize*)! The things you’re afraid of can happen at any moment. People have no way to control it (*Ren wufa kongzhi*).”

Fred’s Christian faith and its promise of heaven, a world that would belong to him, made him in some ways better equipped to handle the reality of life in Zhengzhou than the real estate developer. After his declaration against human agency, the developer had lapsed into a discussion of various conspiracy theories about China and Japan and the missing MH370 flight; he’d made his companions so uncomfortable that within an appropriate but brief amount of time they’d all made excuses and left. (“Why are you talking about these things,” Olivia had muttered in disgust as he began his screed.) In

contrast, Fred finished his speech about the futility of believing in personal property by suggesting we take advantage of the weather by driving to the Yellow River. With his daughter and two of her friends, we piled into his SUV and headed north, through Jinshui District and into Huiji District.

Huiji District was distinguished from others in Zhengzhou by its unfinished look. In July of 2014, President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign—which I'll discuss in detail in a later chapter—had put many real estate development projects on hold, and the result was that driving through Huiji District was like driving through the country after a war. On your right would be wheat fields, but on your left would be the ruins of the village that, instead of housing the people meant to tend to the fields, had been demolished for a project that might never be built. For the benefit of both me and the children in the backseat, Fred began explaining that before Chiang Kai-shek blew up the dams at Huayuankou, this whole area had been filled with villagers. Those who didn't die by the flood were forced to flee by foot to Xi'an, where they remain today. "So all the people living here are outsiders (*waidiren*)," he said, as he began driving off-road, on the riverbed itself, on the dry flat patches of dusty loess beneath the bridges. "They are not like the villagers south of the city. Most of them have only been here a few decades." He pointed out which developments were obviously illegal, thrown up by the fake "villagers" on the flood plain. "They cannot build here, but no one comes here, so no one sees." That year, Henan was experiencing an extreme drought, and the river was the lowest it had been in years; I wondered, as we passed these elaborate illegal, unplanned (*mei jihua*) developments—the only ones on which construction was actively taking

place—what would happen to them during wetter years, when the river bed expanded well past its normal width.

We stopped the car on a sand dune so the children—bored by the history lesson—could run up and down, squealing as they burned their feet again and again. As we tried to find our way out of the dunes, we happened across a makeshift pen filled with, of all things, camels. As the camels stared at us indifferently, a terrifying pony-sized dog began barking fiercely from within a cage. Upon hearing the dog, an old man wearing a straw hat emerged and began yelling at Fred and the children until he saw me. "Are you hungry?" he asked, his tone suddenly changing, "Thirsty?" He disappeared into a nearby patch of green and emerged with two small watermelons, which he cracked expertly in half. He handed one piece to me, one to Fred, and several smaller chunks to the children, who closed their eyes in pleasure as the juice trickled messily down their chins. It was the sweetest watermelon I'd ever tasted. We thanked the old man, who told us how to get back to the road, gave us one more melon, and refused to take any money. "I don't think he would have been as kind to us if you hadn't been here," Fred said. "Chinese people are only kind to foreigners, not to each other."

"But he didn't even say I was foreign!" I pointed out.

"It is obvious," Fred said in Mandarin. "You're so bright (*guang*) and open (*kai*). I have lived in this country all these years, and I've never eaten free watermelon, so it must be that you're so bright." The motion of the car put the children to sleep, and Fred and I sat in silence for a while. As soon as we got onto the highway heading back to the city proper, the car hit a patch of slow traffic, crawled along, and finally stopped. The children woke up. Fred's wife called him from Beijing, where she was on a business trip,

and I listened uncomfortably as he neglected reporting my presence to her until she overheard my voice quieting one of the children. He hung up and sighed. “Life is better in the countryside. Sweeter. *Zai shiqu limian du le, daochu du le, lian xinzhong ye du le*.” He laughed, pleased at his own cleverness, and translated the sentence into English. “In the city, there’s traffic everywhere, even in your heart.”

Containing the City

There’s another phrase for being clever and crafty that belongs to the same genre as liu ge xinyan’er and jiebei xin: *chengfu hen shen*. *Chengfu* means the space contained by a city wall or courtyard, and *hen shen* means very deep. Literally it means that the area enclosed by walls is very deep, but literal meanings don’t help here; *chengfu hen shen* is a metaphor, and its meaning is figurative. To say someone is *chengfu hen shen* is to say that they’re smart, but in a bad way, similar to English’s shrewd. Olivia taught me this word, and she herself had to look it up. “It means when you deal with things, you have a lot of *xinji*,” she read from her phone. *Xinji*: literally it meant heart plans, but practically it meant schemes. “People who are chengfu hen shen will liu haoduo xinyan’er,” Olivia said cheerfully.

For a while I thought chengfu hen shen must be a *chengyu*: a type of Chinese idiom that distills the moral of an ancient story or fable into four characters. As I searched for the origin of the phrase, I found that it was simply a metaphor and that there was an alternative, positive interpretation. To say that someone’s chengfu was very deep could mean that their heart was quite open, inclusive, and capable of understanding and having sympathy for other people without giving too much away or burdening others with their desires. This interpretation could be read as close to what psychoanalytically

informed anthropologists would call containment (Borneman 2014). The idea of having a deep, psychological or emotional courtyard might mean that you could accommodate not just the plans of your own heart but also those of others.

What interests me here is the way that the city acts as a metaphor for the psyche, and what the shift in the metaphor says about ideas of the self. In the positive usages of *chengfu hen shen*, the city—one's mind—is a refuge for others and the more it can contain the better; in the negative usage, that sense is lost. The psychological city walls serve not to connect you to others but to isolate you, to make your intentions opaque and you untrustworthy to others. The psyche has gone from being a place in which to contain, understand, and protect others to being an impenetrable fortress, filled with potentially damaging schemes and viewed with suspicion by those on the outside.

The irony of exploring this metaphor of deep city walls in Zhengzhou was not lost on me. This figurative fear of people with deep psychological courtyards has come at a time of unflagging urban expansion, when the area enclosed by the city's limits is the deepest it's ever been. The story of Zhengzhou after Reform and Opening Up has been one of expansion, of pushing the limits of the city further and further out, of taking the actual city courtyard and making it as deep as administratively and physically possible. Zhengzhou has grown like the thinly spread batter of a *jianbing*, absorbing the rural areas around it and imposing urban identities on villagers like my landlord without ever bothering to understand them. The majority of Zhengzhou is new; it's a city in which the periphery of the area enclosed by the "old city"—those Shang Dynasty "Ruins"—can be walked in the span of an afternoon. This is the city, my interlocutors kept telling me, that was containing the heart-plans of all the people in Henan, which in turn was containing

the heart-plans of all the people in the PRC. Whatever the possible positive connotations of discussing someone's chengfu were, the people I worked with mostly understood it in a negative sense. To live in Zhengzhou, amid the ruins of its former urban villages, its unfinished luxury apartment towers, and its either congested or else crumbling roads does not make one feel contained, protected, or understood. Instead, within the deep, deep courtyard of the city's metaphorical walls, one ends up feeling trapped. To be a resident of Zhengzhou is to be responsible for outcomes in a corrupt reality you cannot control. To live in Zhengzhou is to be just one complicated heart among many, trying to guard against both the real and the fake, and never knowing for sure whether you're truly safe.

PART II: ACCELERATION

CHAPTER FIVE

Uncivil Processes: Origins, the Haven't Yet, and Ideas of Progress

We were going to Guilin in Guangxi Province for the Mid-Autumn Festival. It was Mary's first high-speed railway trip, and our tickets were 646RMB (roughly 100USD in September 2014) both ways, well over what she could have afforded on her own. The trip, however, was my treat: a thank you to Mary for being a real friend for the fifteen months I'd spent in the field up to that point. We met at Zhengzhou East Station, which claims to be the largest train station by area in Asia and looks from the outside like a galactic courthouse from a Hollywood science fiction movie. Everything is white marble, clean lines, and tall, irreproachable ceilings. Like most of the new high-speed railway stations that came into service between 2011 and 2014, Zhengzhou East Station was located in the newly developed section of the city, surrounded by skyscrapers and luxury apartments built on what had been farmland just nine years before, and connected to the rest of the city by a newly finished subway line. As I got off the subway five minutes later than our scheduled meeting time, my phone quaked with a series of nervous WeChat messages from Mary. Where was I? Would I know how to find her? How would we get onto the train?

I could not share Mary's anxiety. By the time we took the trip, I'd already been studying trains in the PRC for three years. The upside of Zhengzhou East Station being the largest in the PRC was that it was also the least crowded train station I've ever been to; I knew I'd be able to pick her out of the crowd of passengers, which were diffused throughout the gigantic waiting hall. In spite of the massive space potlatch built into the

center of the station where an area the size of an American football field remained open and empty, constantly tended by janitors chasing long, rectangular mops to ensure the marble tiles never stopped reflecting the symmetrical pattern of lights on the ceiling, there was no danger of losing someone in a crowd; it was the one station in the PRC where you could always count on finding a seat. In the fall of 2014, it was also one of the least secured stations in the PRC's vast railway network. To enter, I did not need to show my ticket or my ID, and I walked without interruption to our gate where Mary was already waiting, guarding the seat next to her for me (unnecessarily since the five across from her were also empty).

It could have gone differently, however; security on the PRC's railway system was characterized by uneven and inconsistent enforcement. By the time I left the field for the second time, in March 2016, even that had changed and even the restaurants were cordoned off in a zone restricted to people whose tickets and identification papers were examined at a set checkpoint. Since 2011, every train ticket issued is supposed to be attached to an ID number—most of the time this means a *shenfenzhen* or national ID card number, but in my case it meant my U.S. Passport—and a name. In theory, everyone entering a train station should have to show their ID, their ticket, and present their baggage for examination. At Zhengzhou Main Station, an older, not yet completely renovated station, this rule was enforced to draconian effect; many times I had stood in line at security as a woman wailed about missing her train while a stone-faced security person searched her bag. At newer, high-speed railway stations like Zhengzhou East, however, part of what you paid for in the comparatively exorbitant price of your ticket was the privilege of waltzing up the escalators unmolested. Ironically, the Harmony Rail

service lines—which include all of the high-speed G-class trains and most of the D-class ones just below it—were the first to implement the real ID policy (China Daily 2012). Like many widely publicized and broadly implemented policies governing the PRC's railway system, however, this one had suddenly changed several times during the three years I'd been studying trains, and I'd never been able to get a good explanation as to why.

It was one of many questions that went unanswered over the four-year period from 2012 to 2016 during which I periodically did research on the PRC's railway system. Trains are emblematic of the PRC's progress and—especially after the Ministry of Railways split into three parts, one of which was distinguished as a *corporation*—of the privatization process that defines the PRC's postsocialist landscape (Zhang and Ong 2008). This chapter examines the evidence, narratives, and consequences of progress I observed on the PRC's trains while working with passengers, train attendants, and conductors; it compares this technological progress with people's personal narratives of progress. By examining how people tried to reject, contest, or repress both personal and national origin stories, I illuminate how people conceive of the malleability of possible future versions of themselves. I draw on official handbooks defining "civilized" behavior, longitudinal person-centered studies, and conversations with people of different generations to gain insight into how people are dealing with social transformations. Because changes in the PRC have happened quickly, people who experienced them are still alive. Nevertheless, I observed how a reliance on a particular mode of thinking about change as progressive—what I call the temporality of the *haven't yet*—de-historicizes phenomena. Through an exploration of bodily prohibitions, hobbies, and other emerging

markers of social mobility, I illuminate how people—especially the nouveau riche—are using their wealth, education, and relationships to shape themselves into a person they *haven't yet* become. Unlike the deconstructionist always already, the *haven't yet* is inflected by a refusal to consciously consider how structural forces—of language, inequality, and social origins—are shaping the PRC's present processes. It is also premised on the idea of excluding others from accessing that future and disguised that exclusion with the idea that others simply *haven't yet* met the bar for entry. Even as I gained access to people's lives, to the PRC's railway system, and to the progressive conception of the future it sold to its customers, I became increasingly aware of the reasons people created to justify leaving others behind.

The Train to Guilin

On that day in particular no one bothered even to run my backpack through an x-ray machine; this was an exception. In my notes, I've written with some regret that had I realized sooner how little security there was I would have taken advantage of the station's new Burger King. Zhengzhou East Station opened in January 2013, just a few months before I began my fieldwork in the city. The last time I'd been at the station in March 2013, there'd been no restaurants at all, but by September 2014 Zhengzhou East was finally beginning to look less like a stern, sterile place where justice was meted out to all the free peoples of the universe and more like a larger version of all the other high-speed railway stations I'd passed through over the years. There on the second floor was the McDonald's, the KFC, and the obligatory "local" noodle place, but here on the way back from the subway was the city of Zhengzhou's third Burger King: a real harbinger of decadent luxury.

We didn't have time to get Burger King. Our train was leaving at 8:30AM, and we were supposed to meet my friend, a train policeman I'll call Officer Li, before getting on the train. It was 8AM. "Does he know where to find us?" Mary asked as I stripped off my backpack and settled into the seat she'd saved for me. As I started to answer, Officer Li materialized before us. "Xiao Lin!" he thundered, using "Little Lin" (a diminutive, gender-neutral or semi-masculinized version of my Chinese surname) and startling many of the other sleepy passengers in the waiting area. Several of them eyed us with suspicion or perhaps with a sense that something sinister might happen. Ever since the attack at the Kunming Railway Station on March 1, 2014, I'd had a hard time on trains in Henan and even at my local vegetable market. Somehow, my face, with its vaguely Eurasian features, was the closest thing many people in Henan had seen to a Uighur, the ethnic minorities who were reported to have perpetrated the attack. Once, at Zhengzhou Main Station, I'd been turned away twice by security personnel who yelled out "Xinjiang! Xinjiang! Xinjiang!" to the special security forces who'd been dispatched to all train stations in the week after the attack. Even my U.S. Passport hadn't been enough to convince the over-anxious security personnel that I was not, in fact, an ethnic minority, and I'd been trapped in a loop of paranoia as the special security forces cleared my passport and sent me to be searched, only to have the local police officers doing the search cry out, "Xinjiang!" before sending me back to the special security to begin the cycle again. It was a case of mistaken but sticky racial origins, and as Officer Li embraced me, I realized what an unlikely group we must have appeared to be from the outside: a Uighur or foreigner traveling with an obvious migrant, who was suddenly hugging a police officer.

"This is my friend—" I stumbled, aware of my audience and forgetting Mary's Chinese name under the pressure, which she repeated for Officer Li's benefit.

"Let's go!" Officer Li commanded, and Mary and I clumsily and hastily re-donned our backpacks and scrambled after him across the slippery marble floor. "These are my friends," Officer Li declared in a clipped voice to the woman preparing to check tickets at the gate, and she swooshed open the waist-high electronic gate and waved us forward uninterestedly. In three years of studying trains, it was the first time I'd been able to board a train before the general call for passengers, and I relished the unhurried and uncrowded descent down the escalators, the luxuriously slow pace of our stroll across the tracks to the train itself.

"Where are your seats?" Officer Li snatched my ticket from my hand. "Second-class! It's too crowded there. Sit in the dining car, there are fewer people here, and we can talk. You can do your research." He leaned in toward me and lowered his voice. "Later I can take you to the front of the train! Foreign friend (*waiguo pengyou*), you have to see the business class! But your friend can't come. Don't tell her, it will make her uncomfortable." As though to undermine his own attempts at sensitivity and secrecy, however, Officer Li pulled away and immediately looked at Mary, turned the edges of his lip down in disgust, and shook his head. I struggled to understand, not for the first time, what it was that made Officer Li dismiss Mary as unworthy so quickly—her tan skin? Her obviously unaltered almond-shaped eyes? Her bright but off-brand clothing? If Mary noticed Officer Li's look, she appeared to be, as she almost always did, unperturbed.

We entered the dining car. As we settled into a booth, Mary and I watched a family of four—mother, father, daughter, and grandmother—settle into the booth across from us. Another railway worker wearing a reflective vest (in my notes I've guessed that he's a mechanic) helped them settle in and they thanked him effusively as he left. Outside, people rushed down from the gate, which was finally open, trying to make sure that in those few moments they were able to get to their designated cars. Inside, the family packed their substantial baggage Tetris-style into the overhead shelf. As they finally settled, the train began to pull out of the station. "They must also be friends of people working on the railroad," I murmured to Mary.

Mary nodded. "How did you and Officer Li become friends?"

"Oh," I struggled to think of how to explain myself. I never knew, when these questions about the origin of a relationship were asked, how deep to go, how honest to be. All of my relationships in the field were new enough that I remembered down to the last detail exactly how and why I'd met each person, but maybe this was not what people wanted to know and, more importantly, maybe this was not what I was supposed to tell. "I used to do research on a different train that he also worked on and we discovered that we got along very well (*liaodelai*)."

I was about to explain more, but there was a mild commotion at the booth across from us. A train attendant (*chengwuyuan*) came over and asked to see the family's tickets. The grandmother began explaining that her husband worked in such-and-such train department, and the train attendant exploded. "This does not work now!" she announced, "This does not work on the high-speed rail (*gaotie*)! And even then, only one, not four! It's a holiday weekend."

Had it been earlier in my fieldwork, I might have grown anxious about the excessive emotion in the outburst, but as it was, Mary and I just watched together, bored. The train had already left the station. The grandmother *was* the wife of someone important; the train attendant would gain nothing by throwing her or her family members off the train at the next stop, and no one was going to come and forcibly extract money from her the way they might with someone who couldn't be placed so precisely within the social network. The train attendant was just, as my interlocutors often said, *fa piqi*: releasing some pressure and allowing the pent-up, generalized displeasure generated by stressful jobs with mediocre pay to focus upon one specific target. The grandmother, for her part, continued smiling up at the train attendant until the younger woman left, petulantly spitting, "*Taoyan*!" (a lower stakes, frequently feminized form of "I hate you!" similar perhaps to an American teenage girl in the 1980s declaring that the offending party could "Gag me with a spoon!") through her pretty red lips.

"Things are really changing," the grandmother declared matter-of-factly to her family, and I wondered how, after a year of an overt, disruptive anti-corruption campaign by President Xi Jinping that began, in some sense, with the dismantling of the Ministry of Railways, she could still manage to sound surprised.[34] Mary's attention was elsewhere, though.

"That train attendant is so young!" she breathed. I explained that all the train attendants on the Harmony Rail trains were young.

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[34] One could also argue that it began with the arrest and trial of Bo Xilai, but that strikes me more as elite politics at their most public rather than the true shift in governance the anti-corruption campaign seems to be bent on producing. For more on the dismantling of the Ministry of Railways, see Osnos 2012, Osnos 2013, and Wang 2013. For more (speculation) on the connection between Bo Xilai's trial and the anti-corruption campaign, see e.g. Gao 2014.

"Because it's such hard work (*xinku*)?" Mary guessed.

"No," I smiled, "Compared with the other trains, it's the easiest. It's because they are beautiful."

"Wow," she said, "Just like flight attendants! Beauty is really useful (*meili hen you yong*)."

I laughed and wrote the exchange down in my notebook. In the opposite booth, the daughter had begun to fidget already—she was two-and-a-half but already so tall that I guessed she was four-years-old when asked. "She'll be a professional basketball player when she grows up!" I declared. "For a little girl, you should say she'll be a model," Mary corrected gently. Outside, Henan Province whizzed by at 300 kilometers per hour. In the next seven hours, we'd cover nearly 1,300 kilometers in a trip that just two months before took 13 hours to complete. In September 2014, this was the PRC's newest high-speed rail line, and already its passengers looked bored, its attendants irritated. Across from me, Mary laid her head down on the table. She spent the first hour of her first ever high-speed rail trip fast asleep.

History, Progress, and the Always-Already

Change, acceleration, mobility—the impact of all these things was what I hoped to study when I began doing research on trains in the PRC. Change, acceleration, mobility: all of them worked against me once I arrived in the field and tried to make these temporary, moving villages into something resembling a field site.[35] In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, one of the metaphors Michel de Certeau uses to describe trains is a prison

[35] One anti-model for me was Paul Theroux's *Riding the Iron Rooster* (1988), in which Theroux essentializes both himself and the people he interacts with on trains (and ends up hating Chinese trains in the process).

that, paradoxically, moves. “A traveling incarceration,” he declares with wonder, “Immobile inside the train, seeing immobile things slip by. What is happening?” (de Certeau 1984, 111). Many times, I agreed with de Certeau. Yes, I thought as I huddled for three hours on the muddied floor of an over packed train delayed by snow on the day before the Spring Festival, truly a train is nothing if not a prison you’re lucky to see travel. Other times, though, I found his metaphor lacking. No prisoner ever felt the joy that took me over on those trips to Beijing when I knew that in just three hours I’d see old friends, people who’d known me for years already. No prisoner had ever gazed with as much relish as I had upon the Hunanese hills whizzing by at 350 kilometers per hour on my very first high-speed rail trip. No prisoner had ever leaned into not the *always already* that characterizes French critical theory but the sense of *haven’t yet* the way I did when I registered, during a particularly fun conversation with fellow passengers, that we hadn’t yet arrived (*hai meiyou dao*), which meant the exchange could continue and was still a site of possibility where anything might happen.

In this chapter, I highlight the *haven’t yet* pattern that I picked up in people’s speech as an alternative to the *always already* perspective that dominates much postmodern and critical theory. As a temporal frame, *always already* puts us in mind to recognize what is constantly present but repressed; it is the refrain of those who refuse to look away from the inevitable ethical compromises that make up both intellectual work and life in late capitalism. For example, in *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur maintains that his argument that human action can be narrated is based on the reality that “it is *always already* symbolically mediated” (1954, 87, emphasis mine). For Ricoeur, this *always already* makes a hopeful premise—that human action can be made meaningful

through symbolic interpretation—inevitable; it stands in stark contrast to the pessimistic *always already* is invoked by a thinker like Jacques Derrida, for whom any invocation of any symbolic order is an act of violence, obliteration, and mere approximation.[36] While *always already* expresses a bounded, ineffectual state of being before intractable realities, the very act of articulating it—of acknowledging that some things *always already* constrain the possible—also performs a subversive critique. Take, for instance, de Certeau's invocation of the adverb when trying to describe the strange paradox Freudian thinkers would call *nachtraeglichkeit*, where an old memory is only be able to emerge after exposure *new* experiences: "Perhaps memory is no more than this 'recall' or call on the part of the other, leaving its mark like a kind of overlay on a body that has *always already* been altered without knowing it" (1984, 88, emphasis mine). What *always already* constitutes and shapes our lived realities—such as language or past experiences—cannot be undone, but it *can* be critically examined and understood.

The *haven't yet* invoked by people in the PRC is, as I've said, quite different. It's inflected especially by not a naive but an embodied *experience* of progress. Please do not misunderstand this observation for an endorsement; I too am skeptical of narratives of progress, and analytically I prefer to use the word *process* to speak about change, but even I cannot deny that ideas of progress define people's perceptions of the PRC in general and its railway system in particular. Since the PRC began its transition from a planned economy with rationed commodities, assigned work units, and socialized housing to the liberalizing, economic powerhouse it was when I began preliminary

[36] See, e.g., "Structure, Sign, and Play" where Derrida maintains the process of signification substitutes for the presence of the thing signified and has "always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute" (1978, 353).

fieldwork in 2011, the government has tracked and enforced its narrative of progress by monitory and projecting ever-growing GDP numbers.[37] Those who were born after 1970, 1980, or 1990 experienced this economic growth as a visible change in certain aspects of their standard of living. Before, people told me, they could only eat meat and get new clothes during the Spring Festival; now they ate beef-laden banquets whenever they wanted and shopped idly in the many malls whenever they had spare time. The liberalizing policies of Reform and Opening Up began in 1978, and many of the people I worked with deliberately never looked back. For instance, I often went to dinner at the house of Olivia—who was post-80s—to talk with her father about his youth during the Cultural Revolution. Each time Olivia would immediately stand up as soon as we began talking, declare, "I don't want to hear you talk about this subject," and then leave the room until it was time to eat. Once I asked her whether or not she realized that most of the socialites we met came from families that had been classified as rich peasants (*funong*) or big landlords (*da dizhu*) during the Cultural Revolution.

"I didn't know that," she said, "and to be frank, I don't want to know that. We know that back then China's leaders made the mistakes, and that's why America is so much more developed than China. That has no relationship to right now (*Na ge gen xianzai mei you guanxi*). I don't need to know (*Wo bu xuyao zhidao*)."

In many ways, Olivia's refusal to know is a gesture similar to those performed by many other, ahistorical ideologies. Because her social landscape is *always already* constituted of the tumultuous circumstances of the Cultural Revolution, it does nothing for her to acknowledge that constitution; like language's symbolic order, this tumult is

[37] For an example of the skepticism ordinary people can feel about these markers of progress, see Liu 2009, especially 1-66.

inseparable from her experience, whose historical nature she does not have to acknowledge for it to exert influence on her. What's striking, however, is that the history she refuses to be aware of is so recent that many of the people who acted as the agents behind it—including her parents, who live with her—are still alive. In January 2016, I interviewed the civil engineer who oversaw the completion of the first modern automotive bridge to cross the Yellow River to Zhengzhou (before there had only been a one-lane bridge that could only accommodate vehicles going in one direction at a time or else the railway bridge). He was born in the 1940s and told me he considered himself part of a lucky generation; unlike Olivia's parents, who were born in the 1950s and missed out on the opportunity to go to college because they had to be active in the (mostly rural) political campaigns of the Cultural Revolution, the engineer graduated with rare technical knowledge just before the universities stopped disseminating it. By virtue of his birth year, he became part of a protected class of experts who were exempt from political criticism.

"At that time, it was very strange," he said, "The Zhengzhou Yellow River Bridge project started during the Cultural Revolution. The leader was a worker (*gongren*). He didn't have any culture (*meiyou wenhua*). So I had to do everything in his name. I did it for eight years, and nothing got done. They would start to do the bridge (*gao qiao*), but then they'd have to do a political campaign (*gao yundong*). It was like that for eight years—do the bridge, then do the campaign, do the bridge, then do the campaign. So I had to wait until Reform and Opening Up to start building the bridge in earnest." After a trip to several countries North Africa to learn about the latest engineering technology, he was given control of the project and told it was a priority. He finished it in 1986—in only

three years. “I studied for so long only to be put aside for ten years,” he said. “There was no excuse for it. My generation had a taste of being bullied by the Japanese, and I knew our country had to develop. As soon as I could, I built bridges. It was something I could do for my country.” The Zhengzhou Yellow River Bridge was the first of more than a dozen bridge projects he completed between his early 40s in the post-Reform and Opening Up period and retiring when he reached his 60s.[38] I asked him what he would tell people like Olivia who didn’t think understanding recent history was important, and he bristled righteously.

“Why don’t you want to know this history?” he asked, confronting an imagined interlocutor. “You need to know about backwardness (*luohou*) so you can develop (*fazhan*). You have to accept this historical education. You should know these things. The history of humanity, its successes and its failures, all need to be taken seriously (*zhongshi*).” He sighed. “My leaders during the Cultural Revolution were all soldiers. These people didn’t have culture (*meiyou wenhua*). There had been cultured leaders, and those were comparatively conscientious (*laolaoshishi de*), but during the Cultural Revolution they were all overturned. These post-80s people need to understand how important education is. It’s the only reason China was able to develop.”

Later, the post-70s woman who arranged for me to interview the engineer told me he took his own role in the progress of the PRC even more seriously than it had appeared in our three-hour conversation. Unlike many of my younger interlocutors, the engineer was focused on larger, *national* narratives of progress, not personal ones. “At a banquet

[38] Retirement is not exactly the right word for what the engineer currently does, though. He continues to be active in university communities, and I conducted my interview with him the day before he planned to leave for Hunan Province to give a series of lectures to young engineers there.

to celebrate his professional achievements, he gave a speech, he spent the entire time talking about the Japanese in World War II, the history of the Communist Party, and the need for young people to be objective and scientific," she laughed, "He didn't mention his wife or family once! This is a person who really has structure (*zhen you geju*)."

Geju—which can mean set-up or pattern but which I have translated here as "structure"—was a word that began to emerge among my interlocutors in 2015. A person who had geju, people explained, had a plan, a target, and a large direction for their life. "You really have geju," Ya told me once, "You are very clear that you are here to do your research, write your dissertation, and get your PhD. A person who does not have geju will not know what they want to do. They only see a small thing and they cannot see the larger pattern. Maybe they will do many things without understanding how it fits in with the big view." Ya sighed. She had recently signed up for and then quit a program to certify her as an accountant; it was the third educational endeavor I'd watch her pay for and abandon. "I can say that maybe I am a person who does not have geju!"

Phoenix Men: The Civilizing Process Arrested in Medias Res

As a professional working in the education industry—as the manager of a private training school and as a consultant for people seeking education abroad—Olivia arguably understood better than most (or at least better than Ya) the importance of education. She was very sparing in her criticism of her major clients, many of whom were tuhao (the derogatory term for nouveau riche with tacky tastes that once meant "local tyrant") but even she would occasionally repeat the euphemism used by the engineer: they had no culture (*meiyou wenhua*). Translated more idiomatically, it means that people were uneducated. I frequently heard people use this language to describe themselves. "Even

those of us who don't have culture (*women meiyou wenhua de ren*) can take care of our foreign customer (*waiguo guke*)," Officer Li insisted vigorously during one of the many conversations we had on our first 20-hour train trip together. My attempts to interview migrant workers, urban villagers, or even the parents of post-80s friends were often retarded by a repetitive refrain: "Don't interview me, I have no culture (*meiyou wenhua*)." By invoking "culture" and education as a marker of one's place in the hierarchy, people in fact portray that hierarchy as not fixed but malleable. One can always study more; one can always gain culture through learning. Unlike many others focused on the PRC's progress on average or as an aggregate, national level, however, Olivia saw clear, fixed barriers to entry. "I cannot say to children, 'Only rich people can go abroad for school,'" she moaned, "I cannot bear to say such terrible sounding words (*bu haoting de hua*). But these are the facts."

The use of the word "culture" (*wenhua*) to stand for education rather than just using the word for education (*jiaoyu*) was curious to me. Initially, I misunderstood the term and took it too literally, too anthropologically. "Everyone has culture (*wenhua*)," I would protest philosophically, holding court before migrant workers in hard seat train compartments across the country. "Without culture you wouldn't have customs or language or thoughts, and you have all those!" This was not what people meant. They meant it the way an English speaker might say someone is uncultured to indicate that they have bad taste or that they fail to live up to certain class standards. This is a different definition of culture than most cultural anthropologists are used to engaging with, of

course.[39] In many ways, Pierre Bourdieu is the obvious theorist to turn to when engaging with the question of taste, culture, and class, and in his recent ethnography of wealthy elites in Chengdu, John Osburg does just that. Osburg critiques Bourdieu's concept of "distinction" as the main maker of class by arguing that the uniformity of taste among wealthy people in the PRC actually reflects a need for "recognition" among elites that trumps a need to cultivate individualized taste (2013, 117-119). While this argument may not diverge as far from Bourdieu's original thesis as it appears to, what's clear is that, in what is perhaps a reflection of the sheer speed at which the PRC's nouveau riche emerged, wealthy people would not be judged if they did not know *why* they should own a designer wallet; they merely needed to have it.

My own wealthy interlocutors often expressed a similar sentiment (though without citing Bourdieu). Apple, a post-70s woman who managed a computer business with her husband, asked me over lunch at the Capitalist Pig BBQ restaurant why I didn't own any designer goods. I didn't have a good answer on the spot, which was no impediment to Apple, whose real motivation for bringing up my lack of designer goods was to make a larger point about what she thought foreigners were like.

"I read this article interviewing French women about why they don't buy designer handbags," she told me and the woman sitting across the table, who was her good friend and the wife of an even wealthier entrepreneur, "These goods are even cheaper there than they are in China, but they say it's not about the money! If they wear a Chanel bag, they think they should also wear designer shoes. If they wear designer shoes, they should not

[39] That said, there is evidence of Alfred L. Kroeber having to remake the distinction between culture "in the sciences" and culture as performances and demonstrations of refinement as late as 1949 (see Kroeber 1952, 118-135).

take the bus, they should go in a private car. If they go in a private car, they should not drive, they should have a driver!"

She and her friend laughed at this infinitely expanding if-you-give-a-mouse-a-cookie scenario. "Is this true?" she asked me, and I had to say I didn't know; I had never been.

"Can you imagine!" she continued, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, "We really don't have this kind of awareness (*yishi*) in China. You go on any public bus in Zhengzhou and all the young girls will have Louis Vuitton bags!"

Apple continued to complain about designer goods. She told a joke about how you knew a Louis Vuitton bag was real and not a fake if it broke after a year of use. I asked her why she bothered to buy the goods if she thought they were such a hassle. "To do business," she said, suddenly grim, "If I am meeting a client and I do not have a new designer bag, they will think I do not have money and my business is bad."

Apple's exasperation and Osburg's observation—that it is more important to be recognized as being able to afford being *on trend* than it is to have a distinct style—reminded me not of Bourdieu but of another great sociologist of elite behavior: Norbert Elias. In *The Civilizing Process* (2000 [1939]), Elias tracks the development of behavior among the upper classes in what is now France and Germany through time by doing what must have been grueling research on instructive pamphlets on manners. Elias demonstrates how and when certain acceptable or even mandatory actions—such as spitting—became rude. "Strictly speaking, there is almost nothing which cannot be done in a 'civilized' or an 'uncivilized' way," Elias writes, before concluding the concept of civilization "expresses the self-consciousness of the West" (5). Elias contrasts the

normative urges of civilization, which he traces to its French roots in *civilisation*, with the stress on national identity manifested by culture, which he traces to its German roots in *Kultur* (31-43, 5-11). Elias's study is wonderful for many reasons, one of which is how clearly it relativizes contemporary triggers of disgust, actions that cross what he calls "the threshold of repugnance" (51). Where Elias's contemporaries might have felt nauseated at the sound of someone spitting, he documents quite clearly how their ancestors would blanche at the sight of someone daring to swallow their own spit.[40]

From at least 2011, when I began making yearly trips to the PRC, similar terms—culture (*wenhua*), civilization (*wenming*), and self-consciousness (*zijue*)—have defined the discourses on both national identity and normative behavior. Unlike the diachronic but ultimately stationary texts Elias works with to understand the civilizing process as it occurred in the *past*, such processes in the PRC were very much in motion in the *present*. Obviously the Mandarin terms for these concepts have their own distinct histories that are very different from the ones Elias traces in German, but I was stuck by the similarity with which they were deployed. In the 2010s in the PRC, civilization (*wenming*) was the choice term of those associated with ruling, just as it was in the second half of the eighteenth in Europe, when it was associated with France and, crucially, French, the language of the courts (11, 27, 31-43). This was a specific use of the word *wenming*, which can be both an adjective and a noun; when people spoke of China's thousands of years of civilization or of Henan as the cradle of Chinese civilization, they also used *wenming* as a noun. As an adjective, however, it became part

[40] Interestingly, the act of spitting seems to be particularly generative to social theorists. In Marcel Mauss's classic essay, "Techniques of the Body" (where he first proposes anthropologists study "habitus" and declares that there is no "natural" way for people to engage in bodily functions), he too focuses on the strangeness of encountering a girl who did not know how to spit (1973, 84).

of the scripted diction of the state. From at least 2008—when Beijing had to persuade the citizens of its city to be good hosts for the summer Olympics—onward, it became common to see red banners with yellow type proclaiming the need for people to be civilized (*wenming*). One of my favorite public service announcements that began appearing in Zhengzhou after I arrived in July 2013 was the ambiguously worded "Be a civilized person, do civilized stuff" (*zuo wenming ren*, *zuo wenming shi*). Though the exact meaning of *wenming* was elusive, as it was deployed by the state, *wenming* called for a specific set of concrete behaviors. In "Guidebook for Civilized Tourism" (*Wenming Lvyou Chuxing Zhinan*), a booklet issued by the National Tourism Administration before the weeklong National Day holiday in 2013, Chinese citizens are warned not to pick their noses (13), leave footprints on toilet seats (15), or "relieve themselves in random places" (13). The stern handbook maintains that these are uncivilized behaviors and should be—note the normative urge to control the body that Elias identifies with French *civilisation*—eliminated for the sake of national reputation and character.

In contrast, culture (*wenhua*) and self-consciousness (*zijue*) were words ordinary people used to police each other. When Elias uses "self-consciousness," he associates it with self-constraint and "the pressure exerted from above towards a stricter regulation of impulses" (2000[1939], 116, 117-119). Paradoxically, the call to be conscious of one's *self* is actually a plea for one to be conscious of how one appears to and effects *others*. For example, on a tour bus in Xinjiang Province, I witnessed our tour guide begging the middle-aged women on the tour to be self-conscious (*zijue*) and not fight with other passengers. Signs on buses often implored people to please self-consciously disembark (*qing zijue xiache*), which meant do so by not pushing others. The "Guidebook for

Civilized Tourism" reminds travelers to "please self-consciously turn of their flashes" in places where flash photography is prohibited (2013, 15). When I first heard this use of the word zijue, I was confused; I associated *zijue* not with polite, considerate behavior but with the degrees of political self-consciousness required by communism, the May Fourth Movement, and other twentieth centurt enlightenment intellectual ideologies (e.g. Fei 2015, 39-48). I rarely heard this second sense of the word; instead, to ask someone to be self-conscious increasingly meant for them consider how others perceived them, how their behavior impacted others, and how they should discipline and regulate themselves.

As I have already noted, to lack culture was to be uneducated; however, one could be well educated and still not self-conscious. During the three years I knew her, Olivia expressed an ambivalence about her boss, Old Huang, whom she described as a "phoenix man" (*fenghuang nan*). Phoenix man was a popular term for a man who had risen up from his poor rural origins to be educated in a prestigious university in the city but still had not managed to adopt the values of the urban elite, who continued to reject him—as a suitor for marriage or as a social equal (see TMA 2016).[41] "To come from a poor village in the countryside, study hard, and go to Peking University is not easy," Olivia explained, "But to do this, maybe he could not learn anything else about how to behave. He still gives much of the company's money back to his family in the countryside. He is not very professional. You see the situation with his son!"

[41] Initially, I understood the figure of the phoenix man to be something similar to Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Both phoenix men and Willy Loman embody the allure and the dangers of the Chinese Dream and American Dream, respectively; the difference is that Willy Loman's life is undone by delusion (he has in fact failed to achieve all he claims) whereas the phoenix men's accomplishments—going to top-rate universities, starting successful businesses, owning houses in the city—are *real*, not fantasies. In a way, this makes their inability to fully enjoy what should be the rightful fruits of their labors—belonging, acceptance, and social capital—more maddening.

I nodded; I had seen it. At the end of 2015, Old Huang's wife had allegedly given up on raising their second son (the first was safely disposed of at a high school in San Diego), and Old Huang began bringing his chubby, nine-year-old son along to business banquets. At one I'd watched as Old Huang got progressively drunker and his son had struggled to recognize both characters and English words during an iPad game; he was, I later learned, unable to read both English *and* Chinese, a remarkable feat for a child whose father owned one of Zhengzhou's most prestigious foreign language training schools. Teachers who worked for Old Huang told me the son was so underprepared for classes that he'd often throw himself onto the floor and lie there, like a starfish, until another teacher could be summoned to drag him out of the classroom. "We are in the education industry," Olivia moaned, "and even his own son is like that! He is not self-aware (*zijue*). He cannot see how this looks!"

There were phoenix men scattered across the social landscape in Zhengzhou, where it was quickly becoming clear to everyone that fiscal capital was not the same thing as culture, civilization, or self-consciousness. They had the culture, the designer shoes, and the money, but they either did not have the ability to police themselves or did not believe they should have to do so. They were not self-conscious. Li Zhang has insightfully pointed out that due to the uncomfortable and violent legacy of rhetoric about class (*jieji*) in the Cultural Revolution, people in the PRC now prefer to speak about *jieceng*, which translates more closely to a society's stratum or hierarchy (2010, 6). People like Olivia, who had entrée into a social circle they could not technically afford to be a part of, refused to talk about class or money as a marker of prestige at all; instead, they focused on these things they could control more than the balance of their bank

accounts: habits (*xiguan*), education (*jiaoyang*), and manners (*limao*). Reading Elias and stories about phoenix men side-by-side, I couldn't help thinking that in the PRC I had happened upon something extraordinary: the civilizing process, happening not over the course of two hundred years but within the span of a few extremely driven men's lives. Having culture was not about having money; it was, as the figure of the phoenix man made clear, about origins and whether or not people could shed them convincingly once they had money. From the perspective of the 1930s, Elias writes that contemporary freedoms are "a relaxation within the framework of an already established standard" (2000[1939], 119). In the PRC, the standard is in the process of being established, and those who either relaxed prematurely or were never aware of the developing standard began to physically embody the PRC's uncomfortable recent origins. As the threshold of repugnance moved forward for people like Olivia, it was these bodies—that still spit in public, squatted on sitting toilets, and allowed their children to defecate in random places—that believers in the PRC's narrative of progress were desperate to leave behind.

The Crowd as a Repugnant Origin

In the railway's narrative of progress, crowds and the experience of crowdedness define the past and, in the teleological narrative, the origin the PRC is moving away from. When I began studying it in 2011, the PRC's railway system was ruthless but equalizing. It flattened class, social background, and even citizenship by absorbing all passengers into the same anonymous crowd. Travel by train in the PRC used to be defined by crowdedness. Each crowd in each train waiting hall has contributed to a growing repertoire of an object I might call the "railway crowd" in my mind. Every crowd was an iteration of the others, and recognizing each crowd's particularity and specificity requires

as much effort as picking out each individual person from within a large crowd of passengers. I don't hesitate to call these passengers "crowds" because they are all united by a momentary but shared sense of urgent uncertainty. Just before the digital screens in each waiting room inform us that we're "NOW BOARDING" or "LATE FIVE MINUTES" or—in the worst case scenario—"LATE." Everyone in the waiting room is drawn together by the same desire—to board the train—and yet simultaneously split by the knowledge that the simple fact of each other's physical existence may prevent us from reaching our shared goal.

In large stations, like Beijing West, Zhengzhou Main, and Guangzhou Main, accomplishing this goal is complicated by the fact that the gates leading to the stairs that then lead to the platform are only opened only a few minutes before departure. If the train is running late or only scheduled to stop for two minutes, you can't afford to waste any time waiting in an orderly line. Frustrated by being pushed, shoved, and elbowed as crowds tried to squeeze into the narrow, individual-body-sized metal aisle where attendant waits to check our tickets, I would often yell, "Don't crowd don't crowd (*Bie ji bie ji*), we're all going to the same place!" Sometimes people would laugh, but more often, they would ignore me; they knew as well as I did that while we might all intend to go to the same place, there was no guarantee that all of us were going to make it.

I am drawn to this particular crowd in Beijing West Station in the summer of 2012 because something strange happened. As the sign declared that we were "NOW BOARDING," the crowd began to push forward. A railway waiting room crowd usually works like a liquid—persons move slowly, molecularly, to fill every possible corner of the container as they drip through the metal gates. Which is why I was so surprised when

the person in front of me suddenly swerved to the right and created an opening I nearly stepped into before I realized that it was occupied by a beggar, prostrate on the ground. The appearance of the beggar took the crowd, which had already been physically unified once by a shared desire to board the train but emotionally split by the competitive logic of the boarding process, and physically split it while unifying it with a shared desire—in this case, an aversion to the beggar—for a second time.

When this happened in 2012, it was interesting enough for me to make a note of it. It was not, however, extremely unique. It was the sort of thing that, back in 2012, could have happened in any of the PRC's large, urban railway stations. Crowds still defined experiences on the PRC's railway system. When I first began studying trains in 2010, the earliest passengers could purchase train tickets was ten days in advance. On top of the time constraint, they could only buy them at a train station or at one of the designated official ticket offices scattered throughout the larger cities or clustered near the largest and most expensive hotel in town in the smaller county seats. (In the villages I visited throughout Henan, often the closest train ticket vendor was a half-an-hour mountainous drive away. "Why," one interlocutor of mine asked me, with impeccable logic, after hearing my shock that there were no nearby ticket vendors, "would we need one? We don't have a train station here anyway.") And as if that wasn't enough of a constraint, passengers could only buy tickets from other destinations at designated "Entire Country" (*quanguo*) windows at the railway stations themselves; tickets departing from other destinations could *not* be purchased from the more conveniently located designated vendors. Often, this meant that passengers would show up at their destinations

and immediately rush into the ticket-selling hall to fight for a return ticket, which could not otherwise be bought.

All that changed in 2011, when the Ministry of Railways—which had not yet been dissolved—launched a website, http://12306.cn, which allowed people to buy tickets online, also ten days in advance, but only between the hours of 7AM and 11PM PRC time. By the time I began my fieldwork in Zhengzhou in 2013, the time period for selling tickets had doubled to 20 days in advance online but only 18 days in advance at the designated vendors or station. As of January 2014, tickets can now be purchased 60 days in advance online. In August 2015, I impulsively purchased a train ticket to see a friend in Dingzhou, a small county seat in Hebei, with a designated 12306 app on my iPhone; I paid for the purchase without leaving my bedroom through my iPhone's Zhifubao app, the Chinese version of PayPal. Compared to pushing, shoving, and praying in line that tickets would still be available, the experience was a revelation.

By the time I resumed my studies in July 2013, the establishment of the high-speed railway system had changed much of what had once been the unifying, sweaty, and bodily-odor-inflected experience of train travel. When I began working with people like Officer Li, many of them had difficulty explaining exactly what had changed, but it was clear that something was different. Now they worked for the China Railway *Corporation*. Their work-unit obligations were being honored, but new employees were not being offered the same security. For example, attendants on the new, high-speed trains used an entirely separate hiring process: younger, better-looking attendants were hired on three-year contracts without a guarantee of renewal.

The high-speed railway distinguished itself not only by using a different system for its human resources but also a completely different type of train technology: EMUs or electric multiple units. The infrastructure to support this new technology, which had been at the center of the corruption scandal that I describe in a different chapter, began to bloom in spite of the graft. All across the north of China, separate high-speed railway stations opened in each of the large cities, usually near the city's new or planned Central Business District. Usually their names reflected the spatial and social geography of the city. For instance, the new station in Zhengzhou was called "Zhengzhou East" and invoked the high status locally associated with Zhengzhou's New East District, where the rich and powerful lived in newer luxury apartment complexes.

These new high-speed railway stations are uniformly modern, with surreal swaths of white, shining marble. Each station is nearly identical, as though designed by someone who had read Marc Augé's *Non-Places* (1995) and mistaken it for an inspirational architectural manifesto. The dozens of high-speed railways stations I've visited have been new, pristine, and bereft of history; they appear pure. As we know from the work of Mary Douglas (1966) and others, however, where there is purity, there is the threat of pollution. I argue that the crowd—whose constant presence and changing composition at older railway stations guarantees that those stations will *never* be completely clean—is the source of that pollution. The high-speed rail stations are designed to ensure that it can *never* be crowded the way older stations are crowded—thus the constant sweeping, and thus the tremendously striking "waste" of space. Even during the Spring Festival Migration in the newer Guangzhou South Station, I found myself working my way around clumps of people (because "not crowded" in the PRC still doesn't mean "empty")

and wondering at how manageable the amount of people was. It stood in striking contrast to Guangzhou Main Station, where just days before I'd had to forcibly escape from the temporary holding pens the station had built to protect passengers from the weather as they ended up trapped outside the muddy, over-capacity station, like cattle. Guangzhou South is a high-speed railway station; it is a site of progress and more importantly of speed. Crowds decelerate. They slow us down. Through its newly segregated train system, the PRC has foisted that slowness and deceleration onto those who can least afford it: the young, the poor, and the far away from home.

The word for crowdedness in Mandarin is *ji*. Beyond acting as an adjective, it can also be used as a verb to describe the action one frequently has to deploy in these older, more tightly packed, non-high-speed railway stations. It could be translated as to thrust oneself through a small space, to pack, to jostle, to cram. Train travel in the PRC used to be defined by the equalizing experience of ji as recently as 2013. To travel on a train, no matter who you were, how much money you had, or what kind of social background you could claim, you had to ji—to abandon your dignity and press your way through with the rest of the crowd to the train.

In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias highlights how, as rulers demanded restraint and discipline from their subordinates, bodily functions began to be relegated to a "sphere of secrecy" (2000[1939], 127). He observes that "with the advance of civilization the lives of human beings are increasingly split between an intimate and a public sphere, between private and public behavior" (160). In the societies Elias studies, this split happened gradually and evenly, with certain rules—e.g., don't spit—only gaining the consensus they needed to become the widespread platitudes people take for granted after decades or

more. Elias was writing just after the outbreak of the First World War, which at that moment must have seemed like an aberration or exception; in Europe, in the materials he worked with, change happened slowly. Consensuses had time to grow into "a typical civilizing curve" (116). In the PRC, a series of relocations and redistributions in the twentieth century—first by war, then by the intimately invasive socialist government, and finally by the demand of the liberalizing economy for labor—disrupted the hierarchical structures that might have built such behavioral consensuses. The engineer waited eight years to be able to tell workmen how to build the first bridge to Zhengzhou across the Yellow River; he was certainly not in a position to tell them how and where to blow their noses. There was no civilizing curve; there was no unified threshold of repugnance.

The result of all this accelerated change is peculiar. Instead of a normative hierarchy of accepted behaviors, there is a *plurality* of accepted behaviors in the PRC competing for dominance in an emerging hierarchy. It is common to see people urinating, defecating, and vomiting openly on the street in Zhengzhou but, crucially, *not all people*. Olivia would never spit. My post-80s friends in Beijing insisted their parents dress their son in diapers rather than let him pee and poop at the base of trees in the sidewalk, as they had growing up, but confessed they could not trust their parents to do so. These multiple standards of behavior and their distinct constituencies did not just coexist; they competed with each other for dominance, and they divided generations along lines not defined by decades but the span of a few years. On a high-speed train to Beijing in 2015, a post-80s college-educated, female friend of mine nearly got into a fistfight with a grandmother who let her grandson poop in the center of the train aisle. A foreign friend of mine had gotten used to following the local custom of leaving her garbage in the hall

overnight until she took it down on her way to work in the morning; after living in the same complex and doing the same thing for seven years, she was shocked one morning to be greeted by not just her garbage but a note imploring her to stop doing such an unself-conscious (*bu zijue*) thing. The beggar physically split the crowd in Beijing West, but in fact that crowd had always already been split by not the curves but the fissures of the PRC's civilizing process. Nowhere were these fissures more obvious than in the railway crowd, where the more or less controlled bodily fluids of rural migrants, the urban middle class, and the nation's elite all had to crowd (*ji*) in one place, like magma pushing together an unlucky set of tectonic plates and threatening to erupt into something violent and destructive.

The experience of ji is the origin against which progress is defined; ji is what the PRC's wealthiest train passengers are paying to escape. The new high-speed railway system allows passengers to buy their way out of not just the crowds of the main stations but also the crowdedness of the compartment; the exorbitantly expensive "business class" compartments of the high-speed rail charge up to 50USD for a 40 minute ride in a compartment with only six other similarly wealthy people, each sitting or reclining in their own pod-like cone of silence. Of course, there are always exceptions. Beijing West Station, where I experienced the crowd-splitting beggar, has remained refreshingly unpleasant to pass through. Even the connection of a subway in 2013 has not improved the circulation of crowds through its labyrinth set of fragrant fast food restaurants, sawdust-covered waiting halls, and baffling bowling alleys.

For Zhengzhou, these transformations in train travel occurred incredibly quickly and that speed has contributed to growing generation gaps. Once, Olivia and I were

sitting in her office with Zhang, the confident 20-year-old son of the owner of Zhengzhou's most popular chain of hot pot restaurants. I mentioned that I'd be taking a trip to Beijing the next day. Zhang assumed that I'd be traveling by high-speed rail. "Which train are you taking tomorrow?" Zhang asked me, scrolling through the schedule on his phone, "We can take it together!" When I told him he'd never be able to get tickets for my T-class hard-sleeper the day before, Olivia laughed: "Zhang does not know about any of this. He has never had to take a hard sleeper." She turned to Zhang. "Have you even taken a train from Zhengzhou Main Station?"

Zhang admitted he had not or if he could, he couldn't remember it. Olivia laughed and so did I, overwhelmed by the absurdity. Zhengzhou East opened in September 2012. We were having this conversation less than two years after its opening, and already Zhang claimed he could not remember it; for him the high-speed railway station had always already existed, had always already constituted the base level of the PRC's current progress, except that we all knew it hadn't. It's worth remembering that, beyond being a master of deliberate repression herself, Olivia is kind of a snob. Usually she'd roll her eyes at me when I told her about taking slow, hard seat trains. I'd never heard her admit to taking any train besides a high-speed rail one until this moment, when she aligned her experiences, habits, and expertise with mine and—more importantly—with the post-80s generation still capable of remembering the past. Zhang spoke fluent English. He had an American driver's license. After being kicked out of junior high in Henan for fighting, he'd gone to San Diego to finish high school. He was used to being able to bypass things—school requirements, rules, even older generations. In this moment, Olivia triumphantly demonstrated that while she may have been born ten years

too early to study abroad, she knew something about how the world worked that Zhang still did not.

Zhang spent a good amount of time that afternoon being surprised that he could not get a ticket for my train before finally giving up and buying the high-speed train ticket from Zhengzhou East Station we had urged him to purchase in the first place. He was in for an even ruder awakening when his own high-speed train arrived in Beijing West Station. "This is the worst station I have ever been in," he messaged me on WeChat, "I have never seen this many people or been so crowded. It is nothing like Zhengzhou East Station. I cannot believe there is no way to get to the capital from Zhengzhou except through this station." Later, when we met up, I told him the story of almost trampling the beggar in Beijing West. "How do you do it?" he asked before exclaiming hyperbolically, "It's *ji si le*: Crowded to death."

I nodded in a way that was not unpatronizing. Only two years before the way into every major city in China had been like that: ji si le, crowded to the point where you thought you would die or at least not make your train but somehow survived and made it anyway. The problem with progress is not just that it's teleological and always gesturing toward an ultimate aim or, as in a train trip, its final destination; the problem is also that, as in a train trip, progress is only tolerable if one remembers one's point of origin and why one left in the first place. Zhang, in his inability to remember the equalizing experience of crowds, embodies the problems inherent in the PRC's breakneck progress. The railway system and the PRC itself are transforming so quickly that it is already eliminating memories of the slower, decelerated past, which also serves as the origin against which progress is defined. To appreciate the new stations, these shining white,

blissfully empty cities on a hill, one must remember one's nasty, brutish, and (hopefully) short absorption into the repugnant crowd.

Tuition Fees: the Price for Entry

Return for a moment to de Certeau's encounter with railway technology. Even while acknowledging the train's prison-like qualities, de Certeau delights in gazing out the window onto the silent world, the "pleasure of seeing what one is separated from" (1984, 115). The theorist who is best known for making a fine distinction between tactics and strategy is nothing, however, if not aware of the complications that accompany that pleasure. "To get in, as always, there was a price to be paid," he admits, "The historical threshold of beatitude: history exists where there is a price to be paid" (1984, 114). De Certeau remains clear-headed about the social and economic segregation technology creates, not just between the passenger observing from inside and the observed immobile person outside but also between different classes of technologies; airplanes, he observes, give one a "more abstract" and "more perfect" view of the world "for a few dollars more" (1984, 114-115). De Certeau may be being playfully poetic here, but it's provocative poetry nonetheless. What kind of history exists when one pays for separation? What kind of price? And who will be the one to pay it?

These questions—or versions of them—preoccupied many of my interlocutors, whose competing theories of how to demonstrate they had culture most clearly manifested themselves in the hobbies, interests, or non-professional activities they adopted. Mary, who, for reasons I was helpless to pin-down was always identified as a migrant, devoted herself fiercely to developing her self (*fazhan ziji*) through studying (*xuexi*). I was unable—or maybe unwilling—to understand what it was about her that

prevented her from escaping her origins in a society where—in theory—hierarchical standards of behavior hadn't yet been fixed and she was so devoted to learning them. Over the three years I knew her, Mary took weekly English lessons with multiple teachers simultaneously, began learning the piano, and enrolled in driver's educational classes even though she did not own—and did not plan to buy—a car. I watched as, over the course of our weekly meals together, she made herself comfortable cutting meat with a knife and fork. Mary's experimentation with these expensive hobbies would not be remarkable if she were a white-collar worker like Olivia earning a salary of somewhere around 9,000RMB (1,350USD) or even Zhengzhou's average 4,000RMB (600USD) a month. As it was, however, Mary was frequently unemployed, and even when she did take jobs—as a live-in nurse for a woman with multiple sclerosis or a dorm manager for other migrant workers—she was often compensated in room and board, not cash. I knew how Mary was able to afford her dinners at the mid-level Capitalist Pig BBQ restaurant (I paid for them); how, I wondered, did Mary pay for all her other weekly activities?

Other women I knew paid for them in cash or experiences. Apple, the wealthy computer vendor, once took me to her friend's apartment in the Most Expensive Mansion Complex. "This is a complex where tuhao live," she told me as we went up the elevator.

"Then why does your friend live here?" I asked, picking up on the derogatory connotation of tuhao but not Apple's playful tone.

"Because she is a tuhao!" Apple laughed. The apartment was renovated with granite floors and wood paneled walls; it was decorated with antiques Apple's friend had collected. There were two bedrooms; one was furnished with elaborate, uncomfortable-looking wooden furniture, and the other was used for storage.

"Where do your children sleep?" I asked Apple's friend, and Apple laughed.

"Megan, this is an investment apartment (*touzifang*)! No one lives here."

The woman nodded. "This is like a museum. I keep all my treasures (*baobei*) here."

As she spoke, she unlocked a combination safe and revealed several liters of velvet-lined Tupperware containing jade jewelry. Eagerly and familiarly, Apple snatched the best ones and insisted I hold them. "The jade in this box could buy *seven* investment apartments," Apple bragged excitedly. The woman was more measured; she spoke calmly about the jade, most of which were carved into either bangles or Buddha and Guanyin charms that could be worn on a necklace. She remembered the origin story of each one—where it came from, when it had been carved, and who had sold it to her. As I watched her trace the veins in the bangle and explain their meaning, I marveled at her knowledge.

"How did you learn to tell if they were real or fake?" I asked.

The woman grimaced. "I bought a lot of jade," she said, "and I paid a tuition fee (*xuefei*)."

"You mean you hired a teacher?" I followed up, and Apple laughed.

"No! She means she spent a lot of money on fake ones while she was learning to tell if they were real!"

Apple and her circle of post-70s wealthy women used "tuition fee" (*xuefei*) as a metaphor to neutralize the losses they incurred while developing hobbies, skills, or techniques later in life. Instead of saying she'd been cheated or tricked by people selling fake jade, Apple's friend simply chalked it up to a sunk cost or a tuition fee: a natural

cost she'd had to bear during the process of learning. I heard others invoke "tuition fees" as they taught themselves to play the stock market, sell foreign products online, or open restaurants. As a metaphor, "tuition fee" evacuates the predatory intentions of others from people's experiences. If the woman had been attending a class on how to identify jades, she would not have thought of her teacher as a predatory; even though she had not *asked* to be taught a lesson by the people selling her fake jades, by calling it a "tuition fee" she implied she was grateful—or at least not resentful—to have learned it. It was an unpleasant but built-in part of the process of becoming cultured.

Nevertheless, sunk costs, tuition fees, and expensive high-speed railway tickets were privileges only for those who could afford them. The real reason Apple had brought me to her friend's decadent, unoccupied apartment was to ask me advice about how to immigrate to America through investment, a process that cost at least half a million USD and two years of life. In a hushed aside on our way down from the apartment, Apple told me her friend actually already had residency cards—for Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia. ("Even with all that she still does not have a sense of safety (*anquangan*)!" she whispered, scandalized.) If they could afford to participate in the EB-5 program, they could afford to pay a few thousand RMB to a scammer or two. Certain losses associated with doing things yourself and learning from practice—rather than from a friend or from an *actual* course—was a privilege reserved for the very rich. A person like Mary could not afford it—or perhaps, in her terms, could not *yet* afford it. So how was she doing it all anyway? Where was the money from her tuition fees coming from? As history was being made all around us, who was paying the price for her entry?

Origin Myths and Accelerated Class Anxieties

When we met, Mary worked for a Christian charitable organization in Zhengzhou that received some foreign funding and employed a few foreigners. One of my friends from Beijing—a Christian woman from the UK I'd met back when I doing my preliminary fieldwork in 2012—had begun volunteering at the organization as an intern, and as part of the last few months of her work she'd come to Zhengzhou to help the branch there restructure some of their practices. We arranged to meet once she was done with her duties, and it was with a start that I woke at 7AM to a call from her—could she come over, now? Of course, I said, and sent her my address over WeChat. As I rushed to clean my apartment, my phone rang again. They were here already, she and a friend from the organization who had driven her all the way from the North Ring Road on an electric bike.

"Tell your friend to come up and have some tea!" I offered impulsively. "It's so far away, and she should rest."

My friend's friend turned out to be Mary. Together the three of us sat, speaking Mandarin and sipping tea. Mary couldn't stay for too long. Her church, which was just down the road from my house, was having an event and she had to help organize it; would I like to come? "She's not a Christian," my friend from the UK offered awkwardly, and Mary shrugged; it didn't matter, I was welcome to come any time. I thanked her, and we exchanged WeChat information. For the next year, we'd meet at least once a week. More than once, Mary wondered aloud at the circumstances of our first contact. "What if I hadn't come up for tea?" she'd muse, "What if I'd let our friend take the bus? What if I'd been too busy?"

Whenever she got into a subjunctive mood like this, she'd smile and shake her head. "Truly it was fate," she'd say, ironically mixing *yuanfen*, the Buddhist term for serendipity between people, in with her Christian outlook, "Truly it was arranged by God (*zhen shi Shangdi anpai de*)."

Throughout my fieldwork, I learned to keep tabs on exactly how and when I met people not just out of a desire to be ethnographically rigorous, but also because it was a habit the savviest of my interlocutors in Zhengzhou cultivated. Olivia—the post-80s, well-connected, single manager of the city's most prestigious private language school—did not always choose to tell me exactly how she'd met the people she introduced me to, but I knew that in her mental rolodex she kept a detailed account of the provenance of each phone number or WeChat account. It was she who taught me that maintaining a relationship was as much about the stories and memories you kept to yourself as it was about the ones you shared out loud. For Olivia, a woman who'd been doing business in the same industry for over ten years, artfully appearing to forget the origin story of her relationship with, say, a woman who'd gotten her start in teaching by being the live-in girlfriend of a foreign teacher or in industry by being the mistress of a powerful tycoon was as important as asserting publicly that they were "old friends" (*laopengyou*).

Not everyone had to hustle like Olivia and myself, however, and being able to not care about someone's origins was a distinct privilege of the very rich and, once one reached the economic level where the origins of everyone's wealth was dubious and strange, an absolute necessity. When I returned to the field in 2015, Olivia herself made a point of no longer explaining how she knew people to me. She had become confident in

her position and her status, and it was no longer appropriate for her to relate origin stories. “It’s not suitable (*heshi*) for me to ask someone I’m doing business with a question like that,” she told me lightly, when I asked if an official she’d made a deal with was from Zhengzhou. She considered, looked to see if anyone was listening, and then added, “Very probably he is from the countryside.” Later, in 2016 I was trying to remember the names of a few of the employees she managed when she interrupted me. “You do not need to know everyone’s names,” she chastised me, “If you need to contact them, you can ask me. Okay?”

Once, during an English lesson where I was explaining why, in certain American contexts, it can be seen as rude to ask someone what they do for a living, May, the wife of the nephew of the richest man in Henan, confessed that she too hated these people who openly searched for clues that would fix her within a class hierarchy or social network.

“My mother gets so angry with me when I forget what people do,” May told me, “She says, ‘How can you forget that so-and-so is a civil servant at such-and-such work-unit? We’ve known his parents since your father and I worked at the factory!’ But I think these are her friends, not mine, and even with my friends I do not care what they do. Why should I have to remember all these things? They’re not important.”

Had she been present, Olivia might have disagreed, but I wonder whether she would have dared to do so out loud. It was as important to remember the origin stories of your relationships with people as it was to appear to have repressed them. May herself seemed to have repressed the origin story of the most important relationship in her life. Many times, sitting in the passenger seat of her Audi or in her luxurious two-story villa replete with an indoor rock wall leading up to the balcony should she grow tired of using

the stairs, I'd ask her to tell me the story of how she and her husband met. I never got an entirely straight answer. I knew she had been involved in a printing business of her own with a female college classmate before they'd gotten married, that she'd moved in with him after dating for only three months, that he hadn't been "like he is now," by which I assume she meant rich. "Back then I was so young, my ideas were so simple (*sixiang hen jiandan*)," she would say while artfully making a left-hand turn across a six-lane intersection or staring toward their vast first-floor courtyard. "I hadn't thought anything through, I just thought here is this man and I will marry him. At that time, I also was not this kind of person."

At that time, I also was not this kind of person: *Na shihou, wo ye bu shi zheyang de ren*. This willingness to reflect on herself and how she had changed was one of the things that distinguished May from other people I worked with. May was self-aware—not in the sense of the "self-consciousness" that involved policing the self in the name of civilization, but in the sense of being self-reflexive in her interpersonal interactions. May's parents had both worked in an oil refinery, and May often recalled growing up there among the children of the other workers fondly. Driving through the comparatively uncrowded East District, with its restricted building heights, May gestured at the new apartment complexes with something like despair. "When I was growing up, it wasn't like this," she sighed, "We lived in one-story houses (*pingfang*). We knew all our neighbors, and they knew us. Sometimes I think at that time we were happiest."

It was a strange thing for a woman with a rock wall built into her villa to say, but it wasn't an uncommon sentiment among the rich.[42] A real estate tycoon whose company

[42] Xin Liu records similar sentiments among his interlocutors in *The Otherness of Self* (e.g., 2002, 168).

was notorious for taking on urban village redevelopment (i.e., forced demolition) projects expressed something similar to me at a small restaurant that functioned like a club for the city's entrepreneurs. "Before I was rich, I felt happy," he said over the din of other people drinking, celebrating, and working, "Now I am so anxious (*jiaolv*)." I couldn't help smiling—in a comedy I'd seen a few weeks before, *Devil and Angel* (2015),[43] "I am so *jiaolv*" is the refrain uttered by the evil real estate developer, and it ends up being the password to the vault where he's hidden the documentation of his crimes, which are the secret of his success (and the cause of his cathartic fall at the end of the movie). In front of me, however, the developer misinterpreted my expression and began to explain: "I know this is ridiculous (*kexiao*). But poor people have poor people problems and rich people have rich people problems. I am rich. These are my problems."

As a man, the real estate tycoon was lucky; his problems were his own, and they were circumscribed by his gender. May faced even more problems as someone who was rich but who was also a woman and a wife. Osburg (2013) documents how wives of entrepreneurs came to be abandoned or neglected by their husbands, and May, who was the mother of two ebullient twin girls, was determined not to let that happen to her. Olivia was always praising May because of her self-awareness, her willingness to change, and her desire to develop herself. "May is not like other wives," Olivia would say proudly, "She knows that she also has to find something to do (*zhao shi zuo*) to stay with her husband. She is willing to study (*ta yuanyi xuexi*)." May and Olivia spent a lot of time discussing possible joint ventures: starting a bilingual school in America or in

[43] *Devil and Angel* (*Egun Tianshi*) was a poorly received comedy movie directed by Yu Baimei and Deng Chao and starring Deng Chao and his wife, Sun Li; I enjoyed it immensely and found the criticism of it largely unfair.

Zhengzhou. None of these plans were realized before May went to live in America full-time, and at a lunch in January 2016, a mutual friend told Olivia that May was "so busy" with work in Los Angeles.

"Work? Where is she working?" Olivia asked sharply.

The mutual friend sighed. "She's working at her own company, okay?" she said, following the noun *hao* with the particle *ba* to signify her exasperation. Olivia nodded and said nothing, but both of us knew what this meant: she was working for the American branch of her husband's company. She still had not found something of her own to do. This was a rich woman's problem, but it was a problem nonetheless.

Mary and Those Left Behind

I began to worry about Mary in July 2015, after she told me she'd tried to sleep in the McDonald's at Beijing West Station.

"I went to the station and couldn't buy a ticket back to Zhengzhou," she told me, not responding to the growing horror on my face, "So I thought, I will just buy one here and leave in the morning. Then I was tired, and I thought, I will just buy a coke and try to sleep in this McDonald's until the morning." Mary described how she had tried to sleep in the 24 hour McDonald's but had been disturbed by men who came by asking her if she was a Christian and inviting her to come to their church with them. "After a while, I thought, I just cannot stay here with these people," she continued, "So I took my bags and left. For a while they followed me, but then they stopped."

It was not the first strange or worrying thing she'd done. In August 2014, just before our trip together to Guilin, an American missionary at her church had introduced her to his younger brother. The missionary, his girlfriend, his brother, and Mary had

travelled through the picturesque southwest of the PRC together; Mary and the missionary's brother quite naturally paired off and became close. After the missionary's brother returned to America, they texted every day for a time and it seemed like they might begin courting—the preferred term in Mary's church community for dating someone seriously, for the purpose of marrying them. In the meantime, however, I knew she'd begun to follow a "teacher" who was an adherent of Bijan Anjomi, a former Mr. Universe of questionable repute who had spun his bodybuilding success into an international spiritual counseling empire. Bishang—as Mary called him—preached a type of prosperity gospel, in which nothing was impossible and good things (cash in particular) would come to those who put good thoughts out into the world. Mary kept her new spiritual influences a secret from her church, and when I left Zhengzhou to spend nine months in Princeton on a fellowship in October 2014, Mary was focused exclusively on getting a visa to follow me to America and visit the missionary's brother. In November, she sent me a message asking me to write a letter to the U.S. Embassy saying she would be coming to America to visit me; I said I would only do it if she actually planned to visit me, which she was welcome to do. She did not write back.

When we met, Mary was 32 years old and had never been married. Nevertheless, she was one of the most emotionally stable people I knew. She was both goal and task orientated, and rarely took social slights personally. She was learning English so she could marry a foreigner—maybe, she thought aloud sometimes, one she would meet through me. This was not, on its face, a realistic plan, but it gave her structure; she had geju. It was quite an accomplishment given her family background. She was the oldest of three siblings born during the period when the One-Child Policy was most strictly

enforced. When her younger sister was two years old and she was four, her mother became pregnant with her younger brother. Mary's parents sent Mary away to live with her maternal aunt in a village 25 minutes away by motorbike; they told the local officials in charge of regulating the population that Mary was dead.

"None of this was told to me directly—I only know it because I heard big people talking about it," Mary explained to me matter-of-factly. It was the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2013, and we were sitting on top of the roof of her parents' house in the village, looking at the harvest moon. "When I came back, I felt confused and I used to not like my parents. I fought with my brother and sister all the time. I didn't study well at all. When I was in Zhengzhou studying special education, someone brought me to hear a preacher, they told me that after you die you go to heaven or hell, and that Jesus sacrificed his life for our sins. I was very moved and I began to believe in God and read the Bible. After that, I learned to forgive myself and to forgive my family. Now I love them and I want to help them, especially my mother. I think she's very hard working. When we were little, my father transported coal and made a lot of money, but he was never home, so my mother raised us and worked the fields. I really admire her. Even now she takes care of her parents and helps the rest of her family tend their fields."

The next morning, we woke up early and helped Mary's mother and the aunt that had raised her harvest the family's remaining corn. At that time, Mary seemed devoted to this narrative of her life, in which she had grown up legally dead but had, by the grace of God, forgiven the parents that killed her as she was reborn through Jesus Christ. It was a difficult origin story but Mary seemed, at that time, to have bucked it. At that time, she was not the kind of person who would sleep in a railway station McDonald's.

The thing about origin stories, however, is that it's hard to know where they stop—they can also unspool and progress further during other tellings, at other settings, in other situations. On the bus back from the wedding of a mutual friend in the countryside in 2013, I asked Mary if it had been hard to adjust to living life in the city. She paused for a minute before answering.

"No," she said finally, "the bigger difference was between the village and the county-seat (*xian*)."

I knew from other conversations that the moment when she transferred from the village elementary school to the middle school in the county seat had been difficult for her. The comparatively urban students bullied her for being from the countryside. She lived in a worker's dormitory with her father and felt scared by the grown men around her. She was desperate for friends. When an older boy told her he liked her, wanted to be her boyfriend, and asked if she wanted to drink alcohol with him, she said yes—even though she was only 12 years old. Over homemade chili at my house in Zhengzhou on another occasion in 2013, she smiled at my shock.

"At that time I was confused," she explained, "Maybe if my parents had given me more love, I wouldn't have looked for it elsewhere." Her teacher called her mother. Mary remembers being so drunk that when her mother rode to pick her up on a bicycle, she misremembered and believed that her mother had driven a car to come get her and her mother had to guide her to the bike. When she got home her father hit her across the face, and her grandmother had, upon seeing this, cried and wondered how her son could be so cruel to her grandchildren.

"For a long time, I couldn't even think about this thing without getting sad (*nanguo*)," she said quietly. "Now I can bear it."

The reason Mary could bear to think about her difficult origins was because she believed that her conversion to Christianity constituted progress. Within the new narrative her faith provided her with, she was sure she was better than before. At a certain point in 2014, however, her progress started to plateau; she was more likely to arrive at my house near tears because of something careless someone had said to her at church. This was when she began reading Bishang's books and meeting, sometimes weekly, with her teacher. Her mantra, she told me, was "I am happy, I am blessed, I am content." "If I say it, it feels true!" she laughed. Eventually, she'd been discovered by her church, where she was condemned as a cult follower and idol worshipper. The American missionary forbade his younger brother from contacting her. She applied for her visa to America, was rejected, and—without waiting even a full week—reapplied for the visa and was rejected a second time. This was one of her worst times, but she took comfort in the support of her eternally optimistic teacher, who encouraged what I now see could probably be described as magical thinking (Ogden 2010).

It was this teacher who told her to sleep in the McDonald's at Beijing West Station. She had entered a period of unemployment and decided to go to the offices that run Bishang's organization in Beijing and ask to work for them. They refused her, but she—as Bishang had taught her in the seminars she'd paid 10,000RMB (around 1,500USD) each to attend—wouldn't give up and continued to think positively. "I called my teacher and asked him what to do," she reported cheerfully. "He told me to keep

trying, but I thought I had brought too much luggage, and that was why I wanted to buy a ticket back to Zhengzhou."

The next morning, after not sleeping and (probably) escaping being trafficked by the men in the McDonald's, Mary had used her English to help a foreigner from Ghana find his train in Beijing West. They'd traded contact information, and almost no time at all, Mary had arranged to travel alone with him on a nearby mountain.

Up until this point, I had preserved my neutrality. I felt that as an anthropologist, it wasn't my place to intervene in Mary's life; she was, by that point in the fall of 2015, 34 years old. Unlike Ya, who was younger than me and often asked for advice, Mary was a grown woman. She could do what she wanted. But upon hearing that she had no job prospects while eating in a mediocre Italian restaurant in the middle of the city, I finally lost my temper and spoke to her bluntly, as a friend.

"Mary, ever since you started following Bishang, you just think if you are positive, you will get money," I snapped, "When I met you, you had the clearest target (*mubiao*) of anyone I knew. You wanted to go to America. What is your target now?"

To my surprise, Mary began to cry. "I cannot say anything (*wo bu neng kengsheng*)," she sobbed, "My life is really messy (*luan*). I have been so sad (*nanguo*) ever since I came back from the mountain. I thought I could replace the missionary's brother with this foreigner, but I did not like him as much. And I do not want to work because I am worried I will disappoint people. I just need to be further away from the people in my church. They aren't like you. They will judge me."

I tried to backpedal. “I do not want to judge you, but I also do not want you to be trafficked (*mai*) by people in the McDonald’s at Beijing West,” I said, hoping it sounded comforting.

She wiped away her tears. “I didn’t even think about that,” she said softly. “My teacher says if there is something to be experienced, I should experience it. I thought sleeping in the McDonald’s was an experience.”

“This is bad advice,” I retorted, unable to control my anger, “He is not protecting you. You need to protect yourself.”

Mary was barely listening. “I only just now realized I am not happy (*kaixin*),” she mumbled into her plate, “I just want to go to a place where no one knows me.”

It was an extreme but common sentiment for people whose situations could not match their visions for themselves and whose communities did not—as people did in the chapter on Chinese magical realism—consent to let them persist in their delusions. I heard it from a woman ashamed to be going through her second divorce, from a man who explained why he’d stayed in New Zealand for ten years, and from a young college student who was ashamed of failing an exam. As the psychologists Li Zhang works with point out, in the PRC people’s psychological problems were inseparable from the stressful dynamics created by their social relationships (2014, 292). People like May and, to a lesser extent, Olivia might erase the origin stories of their relationships to facilitate their social mobility, but for a person like Mary, whose origins were unable to be concealed, the only way to move upward and onward was to erase the relationships themselves. The myth of the fresh starts was just that—a myth—but it was not the only one Mary believed in fervently.

“Cold is a Belief System” and Other Paradoxes of Progress

My emotional lunch with Mary was not the last time I saw her, but I later marked it as the beginning of a kind of end. Unlike many of the people I met weekly in Zhengzhou, who had their own ideas of what they would gain from a friendship with me, my relationship with Mary had always been refreshingly non-instrumental; I refused to make Mary into a resource, and she—I thought—didn’t see me as one either even if I did make a habit of treating her to train trips and meals. This changed when I helped get her a job at the Capitalist Pig Barbecue Restaurant. Mary was happy to take the job because it meant she could keep practicing her English, and I was happy because I thought it would help refocus Mary. In retrospect, I realized I had projected a narrative of progress onto Mary; I wanted her to keep being the stable, reliable Mary she’d been when we’d taken our bucolic trip to Guilin together in 2014, and I somehow thought that resurrecting her goal—the trip to America and marriage to a foreigner—might be the way to do it. As it was, the job pushed us further away from each other. The other waiters and Mary often fought.

“I don’t know what it is,” Sophy, the owner of the Capitalist Pig, told me after Mary left the restaurant in tears one night.

“Could it be class differences?” I offered.

Sophy said she didn’t think so; it was true that one of the waiters was from a well-off family, but the other one was from the same county seat as Mary. I didn’t openly disagree with Sophy, but I remembered the middle school students at the county seat who had bullied Mary in her childhood. When I ate at the restaurant, Mary would often stop at my table, breathless between serving ribs to customers, and relate a terrible swear word

or insensitive thing one of the other waiters had said earlier that day. Gradually, I realized the problem may not have been class-based but generational and personal; Mary was ten years older than the other waiters. She didn't understand the easy way they joked with each other and they didn't understand her own desperation for the approval of others. Finally, after four uncomfortable months, Mary resigned, much to my relief.

We kept meeting, but we were never as close as we had been on the train trip to Guilin. She was living with her sister rent free that winter, and they hadn't paid to turn on the heat, so we met in malls and movie theaters, places where it would be warm enough to banish the perpetual chill form her bones. When she told me she wanted to go to a concert in Shenzhen, I helped her buy the train tickets to go on my phone. When she returned, she told me she loved it there. "It was so warm," she said. "I am cold, I want to go to the south!" She smiled. "I'm this way now, so be it! Anyway, cold is also a belief system (*xinyang xitong*)."

I started. "What?"

"It's something Bishang said," she smiled, "You should see it! He came here in January and went for a walk outside. There was snow and he was wearing only a tank top, but he was sweating. He says if you are happy and warm inside, you cannot be cold. I tried it once. Really!" I must have looked dubious, because she doubled down. "Sickness and death (*shenglaobingsi*) are also a belief system. If I have a positive attitude, I will not get old or sick."

As her friend, I could barely tolerate such statements, but as an anthropologist, I saw in Mary's statement a refusal to admit her vulnerability to reality. It was similar to Olivia's refusal to learn history, May's refusal to remember origin stories, and Zhang's

refusal to admit that the high-speed railway had not always already existed. For those people whose pasts were constituted of real experiences that were simply too difficult to accept—like Mary or the phoenix men trying to reconcile their lives in the city with their lives in the country—it was perhaps easier to refuse the past in favor of the future, which had only gotten better and better. Like its trains, the PRC is seen as moving ever forward, ever faster toward a better, future version of itself. Post-40s people, like the bridge engineer, have seen this forward motion with their own eyes as Chinese bridges went from being sore points to symbols of national success; even post-80s Olivia has witnessed, to some extent, the transition from the dark, hot, crowded morass of Zhengzhou Main Station to the bright, white empty marvel that is Zhengzhou East Station. A person like Mary, who before our trip to Guilin didn't ride the high-speed train would not phrase it in terms of being a person who *never* takes the high-speed rail; rather, she would say she *hadn't yet* done it. To my interlocutors, even those wary of their own value in the eyes of others, the future was not over determined but up for grabs. People embraced the future's radical openness and leaned into what they *hadn't yet* achieved and thus still might.

For Mary, this leaning in meant moving to Shenzhen: a place where no one knew her. We met one last time before she left for Shenzhen for the second time, without either a plan to stay or a plan to return. We talked about, among other things, the period of time when she had applied for a visa to the USA two times in one week. "I don't know why I did it," she said, "At that time, I think no one could say anything to me. I wouldn't hear them." We embraced and promised to keep in touch, but aside from a few WeChat messages here and there, we did not. At first, it was hard to know if it was me or Mary

who had left the other behind. As the months wore on, however, and other members of Mary's church asked me for news of her, it became clear that it was Mary who had left, and not just me but everyone.

One of the questions the progressive temporality of *haven't yet* poses for the anthropology of the PRC is one of personal identity and continuity. If a person perpetually *hasn't yet* become who they imagine themselves to be, then who are they now? How can you know where you are going if you can continually reject your origins or even who you happen to be now? What kind of relationship can you possibly have with someone if you are always prepared to leave everyone who knows you behind? Mobility in the PRC is not just about having a lot of money or riding the uncrowded, high-speed rail; it is about, as Osburg points out, making your new place in the country's hierarchy *legible* to others. Because many people believe they *haven't yet* finished their progressive narratives, the task of making their projected destinations accessible to others becomes even more difficult.

For example, the way I, as a friend and anthropologist, accessed a person like Mary's world was very different than the way she wanted to be in the world. I always imagined Mary as an emotionally stable, grounded, and practical person because she seemed—unlike my other interlocutors—to have a very strong grip on the reality of her past. Nevertheless, this was not perhaps how Mary imagined herself, and as time went on, it was clear she didn't see her inability to erase her origins as an asset. Mary's vision of her future—which involved her relying on the grace of God to marry some foreigner she *hadn't yet* met and then move to some country she *hadn't yet* visited—was untenable from the beginning. When she turned 33 and then 34 without growing any closer to her

"target," Mary began again this constant struggle to imagine herself and her future anew. It is a struggle many people of her generation were engaged in, but it was a struggle she clearly didn't think she could undertake with me or anyone else who had known about her past as a witness. In Shenzhen, she could inhabit the *haven't yet* fully, without anyone there to contradict her or remind her what had been.

I myself don't need any reminders; I think about Mary and our strange rendezvous before leaving for Guilin every time I go to Zhengzhou East Station. When I sat in the empty waiting hall in March 2016, waiting for the high-speed train that would take me away from Zhengzhou and back to the USA for the second time, I tried to note of what had changed since September 2014. The signs for the Burger King were still there, but where the restaurant once stood there was only a darkened collection of white tables, covered in dust: a decadent dream deferred. The white floors in the main hall, however, were even brighter than usual. It was, I realized, the result of yet another technological upgrade. Instead of chasing rectangular mops on foot, the janitors now rode tiny electric cars that dragged the mops behind them. They made laps up and down the station's football field worth of vacant space and chatted with each other in microsecond bursts of conversation when they happened to be at the same latitude. Though I watched them ride back and forth for a full hour, I couldn't decide if it was a sign of progress or not.

CHAPTER SIX

The Cost of Believing It Anyway: Accounting for the Accidental in the PRC

Eventually, over the course of the more than fifty train trips I took between 2011 and 2016—trips of all sorts of lengths, in all classes, at all times of the year—I began to come up with my own metaphors, to analogize in the language of trains. Maybe taking a train trip was like reading a text. Like a text, a train trip has limits; it can only travel along the already established tracks to a set number of destinations, the same way a text can only offer you the words already inscribed and fixed in place. Like a text, the time it takes to finish a train trip varies; it's unclear at the outset what kind of delays—emotional, meteorological, or otherwise—one will face before its conclusion. Like a text, readers and riders may remember it differently—depending on who they were with when they read or rode it and depending on what vistas or resonances were revealed to them during the experience. And, like a text, a train contains an almost infinite number of interpretations. Just as the same text can mean something different for each reader, for each passenger, the same trip—the same set of bumps, delays, and vistas—can have a different purpose, carry a different meaning, and hold a different position within the larger plots of their lives.

Once, in the hard seat compartment on a slow, overnight train from Changsha to Shanghai in the summer of 2012, I found myself sitting across from a Hewlett-Packard employee wearing an expensive suit and speaking perfectly fluent English. Why, we asked each other, had a person like us ended up on a train like this? My answer was simple: research. His was not. His father-in-law had passed away. Both he and his wife

were only children, which meant all of the elaborate, local funeral rituals required his presence since he was now the only male in the family. The death had been so unexpected and the length of the funeral so difficult to predict that when he'd finally rushed to the station to buy his ticket in person, this had been the only ticket left that would get him back in time to go to work the next morning. "Usually," he explained, "I'd fly, but in this case it was too sudden." I nodded in understanding. It was the week before the Dragon Boat Festival; there were no tickets. As he drifted off to sleep finally, around five in the morning, I wondered at how differently he'd remember this trip than me or even the other passengers around him, several of whom were blasting terrible Taiwanese rock music all through the night. To expect this train trip to mean the same thing to all of us was like expecting everyone to read a novel the same way.

In this chapter, I explore how people's interpretations of accidental happenings—such as unexpected deaths or train collisions—are inflected by changing national narratives (see Anagnost 1997). Many of these mythic narratives—for example, of a unified, harmonious nation or of perpetual progress, where one's children's lives will always be better than one's own—make sense out of the world for many of the people I worked with in the PRC. During my fieldwork, I tried to find situations and happenings where a narrative either was perceived as not needed or else was breaking down. Accidents in particular, I argue, generate competing narratives, which the PRC—because of its need to argue that the party-state acts as one, unified, and deliberate author of events—is unable to address, accommodate, or appease. What, I ask, does such a disconnect between an authority who insists there can only be one narrative and a reality that generates multiple stories do to people's theories of explanations? How can these

competing narratives illuminate the process of meaning making in general? Which culturally specific ways of accounting for unexpected misfortunes prevail and which are silenced?

To answer these questions, I draw on trains as a symbol, as historical artifacts, and as I experienced them. Trains are emblematic of some of the PRC's most important national myths. They embody the PRC's ability to produce innovative technologies, as in the high-speed railway. They represent unity because they connect even the country's most "remote" territories to the center of power (a fact driven home to me when a friend's mother sang an ode to the Tibetan railroad, "Heaven Rail" (*Tian Lu*), in a karaoke one night). Finally, with their tiered ticketed system, they can represent personal mobility as people buy more expensive tickets on ever-faster trains through the railway's notoriously fair but difficult to work ticketing system. In his essay, "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes famously celebrated the prominence of readers over the writer and observed that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination," in the different ways different readers *interpreted* the text (1977[1967], 148). Like the novel, which enabled the same text to transform the inner lives of many different readers, so each train is shared amongst different passengers but can mean something different to each one. There is the same text, those same tracks, in front of you, but then here is all the rest of your life, with its deaths and depths, reading and riding along right beside you and expanding beyond the car, onto the landscape you gaze into as the train rolls inexorably forward.

In the end, these are just metaphors. Maybe they're clever, maybe they help us understand something a little better, maybe they open up some small window of insight

that we wouldn't have had otherwise, but they aren't enough. At the end of 2013, in the midpoint of my fieldwork, I realized that all my attempts to "read" the PRC's railways like a text were bound to fail. Even the rails were not fixed, and the meaningful actions of my interlocutors were so often lost, as they themselves were, within the shifting social landscape. The temptation to interpret social life as a text always dangled, tantalizing, throughout my fieldwork, but the complexity of experience exceeded my attempts to harvest interpretations as though through hermeneutics.

Rescuing the Author: Hermeneutics, Accidents, and Anthropologists

In "The Model of a Text: Meaningful action considered as a text," Paul Ricoeur argues that meaningful social action—the object of social science as defined by Max Weber—can be interpreted like a text (1973). Ricoeur believes that writing and social action not only should be closed but also are in practice closed by the tendency of intention (noesis) and interpreted meaning (noema) to "coincide or overlap" (101). For Ricoeur, it's not the fickle diversity of interpretations but distance and complexity that are the main barriers to a coincidence of intention and meaning; though sometimes "our deeds escape us and have effects which we did not intend," he presumes that for "simple actions" effects and intentions will be the same (101). Ricoeur never defines what he means by a simple action—why would he? As the long, last section of the essay makes clear, Ricoeur's focus is not all social scientists but those engaged in Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist readings of myth (110-117); this is a strange target for an essay on social *action* since structuralists work not with actions but with *texts*. Structuralist analysis must have appeared to Ricoeur as a maddening exercise in excising texts of their authors and intended meanings as they searched for the exact shape of the

collective unconscious.[44] Because structuralists focus on the collective unconscious, they by definition ignore the intended meaning, which is to say that for Ricoeur they miss the point of interpretation entirely.

It's in part these insights that Clifford Geertz picks up in his essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973). No fan of structuralism,[45] Geertz argues, among other things, that "there are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms" (1973, 20). "Rescue" is also one of Ricoeur's choice words. In his analysis of what the absence (not Barthes' death) of the author does to the noema or intentional meaning of texts, Ricoeur observes that "only the meaning 'rescues' the meaning…But to say that the meaning rescues the meaning is to say that only interpretation is the 'remedy' for the weakness of discourse which its author can no longer 'save'" (1973, 95). Ricoeur uses scare quotes here precisely because he

[44] I don't have time to go into my own interpretation of what Lévi-Strauss's interpretations of myths actually do, except to say that I think Ricoeur's analysis misses the point a little. Ricoeur is trying to point out how, to be analyzed, the myths must still have some "ultimate 'referent'" (Ricoeur 1973, 113). He stops just short of jumping on board with Lévi-Strauss's claim that such a referent would ultimately be the structure of the human mind. Where Ricoeur and Lévi-Strauss seem to differ is not just on the strengths of argument about the psychic unity of mankind, but also in their idea of readers of myths. For Lévi-Strauss, a myth was always legible as such to anyone who heard it. In his 1955 essay, "The Structural Study of Myth," he writes, "myth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech" (209). Later, in a 1960 essay called "Structure and Form: Reflections of a Work by Vladimir Propp," Levi-Strauss goes on to argue explicitly that "myths and tales (each of them itself a language) are 'hyperstructural'; they form a 'metalanguage' in which structure operates at all levels" (1984, 186). In contrast to ordinary languages, like Chinese or Arabic, which consist of actual speech (parole) occurring in non-reversible time and the language system (langue) existing in reversible time, myths exist on a "third level," where the narrative is told in diachronic time but the structure of the mythical pattern is revealed by examining the narrative synchronically (1955, 210). Myths are "both a sequence belonging to the past—as to the historian—and a timeless pattern which can be detected in the contemporary" by absolutely anyone (209). In contrast, Ricoeur, eventually decides that *genuine* understanding "requires a specific affinity between the reader and the kind of things the text is about" regardless of whether it's a mythic or ordinary text (Ricoeur 1973, 113).

[45] See, for example, Geertz's acrobatically written takedown of Lévi-Strauss in "The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Levi-Strauss" (1973, 345-359).

disagrees with this bleak assessment;[46] Geertz, an ever-eager champion of lost causes, embraces it. In "Thick Description," he follows Gilbert Ryle's example and explicates a wink to show how complicated interpretation can be for even the simplest social action (Geertz 1973, 6-9), but he departs substantially from Ricoeur by disavowing the importance of the authors. "The *kula* is gone or altered," he states coolly, "but, for better or worse, *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* remains" (20-21). And here the problem of interpretation presents itself yet again, for while Geertz probably meant the statement to be a jab at Malinowski, it reads—to me—as callously indifferent toward the Trobrianders, whose "point of view" Malinowski's *Argonauts* strived to capture (1922, 25). This indifference appears again in Geertz's "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," where Geertz describes culture as "an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (1973, 452). Here, the action disappears from the (observably) active cockfight, and the text goes from being a model for social action to a metaphor for culture to a much stronger claim that leaves even ephemeral bursts of blood, beaks, and feathers fixed and readable to the ethnographer.

What's always struck me about the straining-over-the-shoulder metaphor is how inconvenient the presence of the native is within it. If only the native would move, clear the way, and stop obstructing the view of the anthropologist! This sense of prurient frustration is not, I think, accidental; because Geertz has a decidedly less naive view of the correspondence between intention, meaning, and interpretation than Ricoeur, he

[46] Throughout the essay, he argues that the intended meaning of both texts and human actions can be detached and interpreted "according to its inner connections," which are inherent, undeniable, and simply require the right kind of reader (see e.g., 98, 113).

understands that the people he works with cannot necessarily tell him what they mean. In other words, in both texts and social action, there is often something unconscious, unintended, or excess. As is always the case with Geertz, this nuance appears mainly in his parenthetical asides. He splits a subjunctive clause which implies that "human behavior is seen as […] symbolic action" with the following: "(most of the time; there *are* true twitches)" (Geertz 1973, 10). Ignore, for a moment, the absurdity of a twitch—an involuntary action—having to prove itself as true, and note that this is no small concession. Whereas Geertz is passionate about interpretive projects but agnostic on the validity of those interpretations, what I have always admired about Ricoeur's work—even as I disagreed with it—is his consistent devotion to proving that meaning is *inherent* within texts, social action, and life. For instance, without citing him—or the host of scholarship that follows his lead—Ricoeur argues against Barthes while reinforcing his contention that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes 1977[1967], 147). Limits are *precisely* what Ricoeur is after. He insists that just as "the text is a limited field of possible constructions," so "human action, too, is a limited field of possible constructions" (Ricoeur 1973, 108). Within such a limited field, an intrinsic meaning can be teased out "according to its inner connections" (98). Train tracks, too, provide a theoretically limited field of possible destinations, but even for trains there are occasionally, to borrow Geertz's phrasing, true twitches. After all, another way to think of a twitch—that involuntary convulsion of muscles that could so easily be misinterpreted as a wink, with potentially awkward consequences—is as an accident. For a train, such a twitch can send hundreds of people off the rails and the consequences are almost always catastrophic.

Twitches All the Way Down: The Wenzhou Incident

On July 23, 2011, a little less than two years after the Ningbo-Taizhou-Wenzhou High Speed Rail (*Yongtaiwen Gaotie*) had opened for commercial use, a bolt of lightning struck a signal box near Wenzhou. The damage from the lightning and the interference of the storm caused one train, the D3115, to shut down completely. As the D3115 sat on the tracks, waiting for instructions, another train—the D305—approached at a speed of 300 kilometers per hour. The conductor of the D305 failed to hear the warnings of the dispatcher over the interference of the storm and collided with the stopped D3115.[47] One hundred and ninety-two people were injured; forty died.

In July 2011, I was in Beijing completing an advanced intensive Mandarin training program. My teachers and classmates knew I planned to study trains, and three days after the crash, one of my teachers suddenly stopped a regularly scheduled one-on-one practice session to make something clear to me. "Did you hear about Wenzhou?" she asked, and I said I had. I began to say something vague, cliché, and probabilistic—that it was awful, but that like airplane crashes, these kinds of accidents were rare and trains were still safer than cars—when she stopped me.

"I will never ride the high-speed rail," she said firmly, "I will never let my relatives ride the high-speed rail. And I don't think you should ride the high-speed rail either. It is too dangerous (*tai weixian*). After this, how can we trust (*xiangxin*) them?"

This outburst astonished me. I knew this teacher to be not strikingly but typically nationalistic. She took her perceived responsibility to represent the PRC well to her students seriously, and—more than many of the other teachers in the program who had

[47] Much of this account is drawn from Evan Osnos's tremendous report, "Boss Rail." See Osnos 2012.

already lived abroad—she often resisted the 19-year-old white American men who always used class as an opportunity to criticize the PRC (the fallibility of the PRC is a favorite myth for peoples of a different nation). I, too, chafed at their charges, which were not nuanced, fair, or well-researched, and so I expected her to join me on my cautious middle road between acknowledging the horror of the accident and maintaining that it was a *technical* failure not a particularly Chinese one.

In retrospect, I should not have been surprised; for many people in the PRC, this was a moment when even fervent nationalists could no longer excuse the government's behavior (Osnos 2012). In the hours immediately after the crash, the officials in charge of the rescue operation and accident investigation literally began to cover up the evidence of what had happened by burying substantial portions of the wreckage. Under normal circumstances, the Chinese language internet is rife with paranoid conspiracy theories railing against sometimes actual, sometimes fantastic injustices perpetrated by the government, which was (incorrectly) viewed as omnipotent. What made the theories different this time was that they were backed up by facts that, as time went on, were undeniable. A few hours after the crash, the Ministry of Railways declared that there were no survivors and began to move the derailed cars around in an attempt to bury them (see Zhihu 2014, Ding 2011). Twenty-one hours after the crash—after the rescue operation had already been called off and the officials had begun literally covering up the evidence—a two-year-old named Xiang Weiyi was found in the wreckage, very much alive (Wang 2011). At a press conference held on July 24, 2011 (the day after the crash), reporters asked Wang Yongping, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Railways, to explain how the rescuers had found the toddler *after* the search had been abandoned. "It's

a miracle (*qiji*)," Wang said flatly (see Youku 2012). When outraged reporters yelled that it was *not*, in fact, a miracle (the implication being that it was evidence of negligence), Wang calmly responded: "I can only answer you. This happened. We truly did find a girl who was alive. This is the just way things are (*shiqing jiushi zenmeyang*)" (Ding 2011).

Watching the wreckage disappear beneath mounds of dirt and heavy construction equipment was already chilling to many observers who feared the government was deliberately covering a larger chain of negligence (China Daily 2011), and Wang did not make it easier for them with his next statements. In response to a question about why the trains were being buried (*yanmai*), Wang said he was aware people were speculating that the physical burying of the trains was an attempt to cover-up (*yanmai*) the news. "Why would there be such a foolish question?" he recounted with wonder, "Can an accident that the whole world knows about really be buried?" (Kan Dongfang 2012; Ding 2011). He then claimed that the ground was too muddy for the rescue to take place without burying parts of the damaged cars and uttered a strangely worded phrase: "Whether you believe it or not is up to you. I believe it anyway."[48] The phrase "I believe it anyway" (*wo fanzheng xin le*) quickly became a meme on the Chinese language internet, and a more awkward translation of it—"I negative positive believe," playing off of the literal meaning of the Chinese word for "anyway" (China Digital Times 2016)—even caught on in select English language circles.

Though the Ministry of Railways fired Wang less than a month after the crash (LaFraniere 2011), in his own way, he was a perfect spokesperson—not for the Ministry,

[48] This now famous quote has been translated as "Whether or not you believe it; either way, I believe it" (Ding 2011), but I am rewording it here for idiomatic purposes. For more, see the China Digital Times 2016.

obviously, but for the common people (*laobaixing*) he spoke to. In two sentences, Wang managed to sum up the absurdity of the logical operation asked of people in the PRC, many of whom understand that they live under conditions of censorship but tolerate it anyway. Here, though, was an affront to that tolerance. Much of the commentary on Wang's press conference focused on how the statement was either insulting to people's intelligence or else showed how deeply he'd managed to delude himself. What I read in Wang's statement was a challenge to an implicit sense people had that the government needed them to react a certain way to remain credible. In fact, Wang showed, popular reception of the official story was irrelevant. Regardless of what happened and whether or not the explanations for it were remotely believable, the choice was always to believe it or not. Authorities and the media began to refer to the collision as the Wenzhou Incident (*Wenzhou Shijian*). *Shijian* can be translated as incident, event, or happening; unlike using the word for accident (*shigu*)—which Wang also used during the press conference—calling the collision an event or a happening seemed like an attempt to obscure both its fatal outcome and the lack of control it revealed. To put it in Wang's words: *shiqing jiushi zenmeyang*; this is just the way things are. No other narrative would be forthcoming.

What Wang and his handlers perhaps did not realize is that the ability to generate multiple, competing narratives is part of what makes accidents so distinct in the PRC and elsewhere. In the aftermath of an accident, theories of causation abound because the material causes of an accident are rarely enough to make meaning or sense out of the happening. For example, after the disappearance of the plane MH370 on March 8, 2014, many of my interlocutors wanted to share with me their theories of causation. "This is

your government's conspiracy (*yinmou*)," the urban villagers in my complex told me as we huddled around a makeshift bonfire in the parking lot. "This happened because there was a Chinese spy who had uncovered the identity of an American spy in Malaysia and the Malaysian government couldn't let them disclose it," a real estate tycoon told me over drinks in XX Bar. "This happened because the plane was full of Chinese citizens," a coffee shop event planner told me while trying to recruit me to give a lecture, "If it had been 220 Americans on the plane, it never would have happened." I often told people that sometimes the simplest explanations were the most correct, but I was dismissed both because I was American and could not be trusted to be neutral after my government had engineered such an ingenious feat and also because I was missing the point. As long as the actual reason the MH370 disappeared remained mysterious and opaque, the happening created an opportunity for people to create their *own* explanatory origin story for the incident.

In both the MH370 and Wenzhou incidents, speculation about not just what but *who* the real cause of the accident was began and did not stop; just as the Zande boy with the festering foot assumed a witch was responsible for his misfortune, so the government, media, and people of the PRC clamored for a human agent to blame (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 20). This impulse was not restricted to Chinese observers of the Wenzhou Incident. Even Evan Osnos, who was then a Beijing-based American journalist working for *The New Yorker* magazine, concluded that the *real* cause of the accident was not the unlucky lightning strike but the careless corruption of Liu Zhijun, the former leader of the Ministry of Railways (2012; 2014, 232-247). Osnos reports that Great Leap Liu, as he was called, "preached haste above all" and that the signal that failed in the Wenzhou

crash had only been in development for six months before being installed across the country by the Ministry (2014, 239-240). According to Osnos and the professionals and investigators he interviewed, the Ministry's "obsession with speed" under Liu created the conditions for the crash (240). Osnos's analysis is in agreement with the government's official report on the crash, which limped out three months late and blamed Liu and 53 other people for the accident. In March 2013, the government announced that it was dissolving the Ministry of Railways as part of an effort both to increase accountability and reduce wasteful spending. In July 2013, Liu went on trial. He was convicted and sentenced to death (a sentence that was, after just a few months, commuted to life in prison).

For people like Osnos (and many Chinese observers) who felt the Ministry under Liu embodied "a culture of entitlement run amok" (2014, 247), Liu's condemnation was the logical outcome of the Wenzhou Incident; however, in other ways, the decision to focus on him is counterintuitive. In his study of aviation crash reports, Peter Galison argues that when determining the ultimate cause of an accident, "it is *always* possible to trade a human action for a technological one" (2000, 39, emphasis in original). In Galison's history, competing interests and agencies often create causal chains that end not just with human actions but with a specific human performing a particular human action: an identifiable inspector at San Francisco International failing to see a crack, a pilot with years of experience intuiting the correct response to an engine failure no one had ever even thought to simulate. In contrast, Liu was, in a very real sense, completely detached from the material causal chain that led to the scene of the accident. Five months before the Wenzhou collision, he had *already* been arrested for other charges of bribery

and corruption. When the D305 was racing toward the D3115, Liu was being held in an undisclosed location. Even as the trial sought to undo the persona of omnipotence Liu had cultivated and projected by convicting him, it in fact reinforced the perception that high-level leaders are all powerful and all controlling by beginning from the premise that he could and should be responsible for an accident that had occurred *after* he had already been deposed, for the failure of a signal box that he had likely never even seen.

It is not, on its face, strange for the leader of a major bureaucracy to be held accountable for a major failure of that bureaucracy. As John Borneman notes *Political Crime and the Memory of Loss*, when facing a fatal event such as the Wenzhou Incident, people in many different places turn to different modes of accountability—such as retribution (e.g. Liu's death sentence) and compensation (e.g. money given to the victims)—to "refigure their losses" (2011, 3). Borneman explores, among other things, holding people *collectively* responsible for specific losses can end up prolonging accounting indefinitely as no particular agent can ever sufficiently account for the losses (2011, 11-13). Here, a particular agent did emerge in the form of Great Leap Liu, and he was—depending on how you read his commuted death sentence—held responsible through retributive accounting. Nevertheless, people perceived the "real" loss of the collision as *exceeding* the 40 lost lives and 192 injured victims; the real damage of the crash was done not just to the passengers on the D305 and the D3115 but to the people of the PRC collectively. Osnos argues that the Wenzhou Incident

> struck at the middle-class men and women who had accepted the grand bargain of modern Chinese politics in the era after socialism: allow the Party to reign unchallenged as long as it was reasonably competent. The crash violated the deal, and for many it became…the iconic failure of government performance. (2014, 246)

In that case, the *real loss* was not the loss of life or property but the loss of particular confidence and a specific trust. How, though, can one compensate for the loss of trust? What kind of accounting is demanded when an event generates generalized losses that people many degrees removed from the actual experience of the happening can claim as their own?

The Reason Behind the Reason and the State as a Witch

Evidence of this feeling of generalized loss can be seen in how openly and angrily people contested the official narrative given to them by Wang (who in the moment acted as a metonym for the government). If, as Osnos claims, the Wenzhou Incident, its handling by Wang, and the culture of speed created by Great Leap Liu's corruption represented a violation of a collective deal or contract, then it should be no surprise that Liu's conviction did not end people's sense of loss, anger, or skepticism. Though Liu could be seen as the ultimate agent behind the causal chain that eventually led to the signal box failure, he was not the ultimate agent behind the violation of the "grand bargain" or behind the literal cover-up of the wreckage in the hours just following the crash. Drawing on a memory of recent historical experiences of socialism in which the government really *did* attempt to exert control over all aspects of life, people I met in the PRC—through friends, on trains, or in coffee shops—assumed that something like the Wenzhou Incident could not have happened if the government did not allow it to happen. There had to be something larger at play, something they called the *beihou de yuanyin*. *Beihou* literally means "behind," *de* is a possessive particle, and *yuanyin* literally means "the original reason." A beihou de yuanyin was the reason behind the given reason. Only a beihou de yuanyin could explain how something as horrific as the Wenzhou Incident

had been permitted to happen; only a beihou de yuanyin could explain why the train wreckage had been buried. Again, this assumption that there must have been a good reason for the accident reinforces a belief in the state's omnipotence even as it resists specific agents of the state. When people parodied Wang's "I believe it anyway," they lampooned not only his credulity and his assumption that people would accept his incredible story but also the very *idea* that a state as powerful as the PRC's would settle on such an implausible and unbelievable explanation.

This conviction that there must be a beihou de yuanyin performs an operation similar to the one performed by witchcraft; it creates the possibility for the existence of an alternative explanation of a situation whose driving motive otherwise would be opaque or random. In his reading of E.E. Evans-Pritchard's work on Zande witchcraft, Bruce Kapferer notes that while witchcraft was historically considered evidence of irrational or unscientific beliefs it is in fact the result of a hyperrationalism (2002, 7). In other words, the presence of magic and witchcraft is totalizing; if *some* human actions can control outcomes, then *all* outcomes must be the result of human agency. Kapferer maintains that this conviction, which then makes sense out of every outcome no matter how chaotic, is not irrational but *overly* rational; what is irrational is a world in which humans can empirically be held responsible for some outcomes but not others (Kapferer 2002, 7).

Kapferer is not alone in his insight; James Laidlaw also observes, "Witch finding, as a practice of allocating responsibility, turns what might otherwise be an accident or random misfortune into an action. It therefore creates agency" (2010, 157). The hyperrationalism identified by Kapferer bears some resemblance to Ricoeur's analysis of the "overflowing" and diffuse concept of responsibility where, "At the limit, you are

responsible for everything and everyone" (2000, 12). Both Laidlaw and Ricoeur are drawn to legal cases of workplace accountability, which the latter describes as having a "perverse effect" as the hunt for someone to hold culpable produces "suspicion and mistrust" while simultaneously obliterating "the subjective link between an action and its author" (Ricoeur 2000, 25-26; see also Laidlaw 2010, 160-161). It's no surprise that Ricoeur, the champion of meaningful action and intention, should find himself uncomfortable with holding people responsible for unintended accidents; it is, as Laidlaw points out, strange to see how much contemporary mechanisms for diffusing responsibility—such as statistical analysis—have created a moral climate in places with strict workplace accountability laws similar to that of Zandeland (Laidlaw 2010, 161-162).

What's important in the PRC, however, is that not every situation can create the kind of excess or overflowing agency that people signify when they invoke a beihou de yuanyin. In the same way that the Zande people would not accept witchcraft as an explanation for every kind of misfortune, as some misfortunes people *did* bring upon themselves (Evan-Pritchard 1970, 26), so there were some events that the people I worked with in the PRC agreed did not need to be explained by a beihou de yuanyin. Interpersonal conflicts, like the ones I deal with earlier in this study, had their own explanatory idioms, and if someone were to say there must a beihou de yuanyin for someone being unkind or rude, the person listening would likely accuse them of thinking too much (*xiang le tai duo*). That said, the beihou de yuanyin for a particular situation might be interpersonal. Once, while driving past a series of protest scrolls (*tiaofu*) on a street of soon-to-be-demolished shops, Vivian casually told me that the beihou de

yuanyin was that a top official had sold the land-use rights at a discounted rate to his wife, who had been terrible at business and thrown up the single-story shops in a hurry (and thus failed to maximize her profits by building up). The official had been arrested for corruption, and the wife had fled to Hong Kong, and in her absence the building management company in charge of the street had gone under, so the land had been resold and the shops were going to be demolished. The protesters, she rightly concluded, would not be successful because there was no responsible agent left to respond to their demands, regardless of how just those demands might be. When I asked her if she'd read about this in the news, she laughed and said of course not: "This is not open (*bu kaifang*)." Her husband's mother's middle school classmate was the mother of the fallen official, and she'd disclosed the story just before fleeing to Hong Kong. Vivian and her husband were part of a group of entrepreneurs that promoted ethical and professional business practices, and she collected these stories to use as object lessons. "If you stick around I can tell you all kinds of stories like this," she said, shaking her head in irritation, "There are too many!"

The incidents that generated stories that required beihou de yuanyin tended to be connected to real estate, finance, the court system, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), or any of the other arms of the government; in other words, they were mostly located in the opaque sectors of life determined by the mysterious (or even magical) mechanisms of the state (Taussig 1997). "Those things are not transparent (*bu touming*)," Gwen, a friend of Vivian's, told me, "They all have their own reasons behind the reason (*ge you ge de beihou de yuanyin*) for doing things, and you cannot know!" In his call for a "Museum of Accidents," the philosopher of speed

Paul Virilio argues that while liberal democracies overexpose people to accidents and disasters, totalitarian regimes "opted for underexposure and the radical occultation of any singularity" (2006). The result of this in the PRC is that whatever accidents or unpredicted events might emerge are expected to be covered up, and any ordinary outcome might, in fact, be an already-covered-up singularity. Though not explicitly occult as in the Indian Railways (see Bear 2007, 8 and 257-284), the invocation of the beihou de yuanyin functions similarly to occult practices. It disguises a giving up or abandonment for certain kinds of causes with a conviction that those causes are so strange, revelatory, or magic that they can never be consciously known. Like the person accused of witchcraft in Zandeland, the people accused of substituting a false explanation for the "real" beihou de yuanyin cannot plausibly deny it. They also cannot plausibly offer a true account of the beihou de yuanyin, whose power comes from its imagined components, its inability to be defined.

Importantly, the use of the words "beihou de yuanyin" by my wealthiest interlocutors—like Vivian—was not automatic but prompted by me. I learned to ask about the beihou de yuanyin from other, less established interlocutors, and I brought this diction to the powerful, who did not deny it but would rarely use those words themselves. The exception was Lily, who as a lawyer had been privy to more backdoor deals than she could count and often spoke about beihou de yuanyin. I would ask her about strange occurrences or unexpected outcomes in Zhengzhou. "My friends think there must be a beihou de yuanyin," I would say, "Do you think they are right?" Almost without exception, she would laugh and say the same thing: "I cannot say there is not! It's possible (*you keneng*)." Being close to the center of power—that opaque place where the

real intentions behind events were created—meant that Lily knew better than most that there could always be a reason behind the reason; she was also more likely to know what exactly it was but, crucially, she could never reveal both whether she knew and—if she knew—what it was.[49] Ya, who unlike Vivian and Lily was young and not well connected, was one of the people prompting me to ask my more powerful interlocutors certain pointed questions about why certain businesses had failed. When I would return with strikingly mundane explanations—usually some form of "the chain of investment broke" (*zijin lian duan le*)—[50]she would flip her hair and declare that either the person I asked was not as well-connected as I thought or else they were lying and withholding the real beihou de yuanyin. Like a person accused of witchcraft, either they did not know they were a witch (but were in spite of their conscious intentions) or else they did know and their denials constituted the lie.

Either way, the insistence on the continued existence of unconfirmed and unable to be confirmed beihou de yuanyin had the perverse effect of making every account of state interference in ordinary life insufficient. An explanation that relies on principles of randomness—such as Wang's claim that finding the girl in the wreckage was a "miracle" (*qiji*)—appears to be a disingenuous denial of the power the state had both over the rescue operation and over the high-speed rail in general. And while people may be right to dispute this explanation, there is, in some sense, no explanation of the Wenzhou Incident that could possibly have been satisfactory. The high-speed railway project had

[49] More cynically, one could read Lily's evasiveness as *performing* a closeness to the center of power to attract more powerful interlocutors as Osburg writes about in his chapter on Li Zhen (2013); however, due to my own alarming experiences dining with Lily and some of her business associates, I am inclined to believe her own assessment of her proximity to power.

[50] "Chain of investment" is also an interesting metaphor, as it suggests a progressive "chain" of interrelated enterprises and deliberately obscures the origin of the breakage. Regardless of which "link" in the chain breaks, the chain is useless without it.

been so well funded, so high profile, and so high-stakes for the government that no "accident" could possibly be *entirely* accidental. Like the production teams that achieved "Model Village" status during the Maoist period and then were tautologically successful because a Model Village could not fail by definition, the high-speed railway project was, in its own culturally distinct way, too big to fail. That it did either indicates that there must be something else going on—some kind of beihou de yuanyin—or else (more terrifyingly) that the people responsible for the PRC's breakneck development cannot control it. The literal burying of the evidence increased the likelihood of this more terrifying, second explanation, and in Wang's "I believe it anyway" one can hear both the absurdist self-delusion identified by commentators and netizens but also the exhaustion of a man who knows that whatever he has to say will not be good enough. There would never be a way to settle this account fully; no matter what explanation was offered, there would be at least one person offering a contrary, beihou de yuanyin, one person unable to be dissuaded from the conviction that there must still be a witch at large.

The State of the Republic: Views from the T1118

For my Chinese teacher in Beijing, the Wenzhou Incident was the last straw. For many other people I met, the event became an object lesson, a piece of evidence for people to call up when they were telling me about what the PRC was *really* like. These long lectures, which were generally given to me, as an American, in front of others by men over a certain age (usually in their 40s or 50s) who had only just met me. By the time I moved to Zhengzhou in 2013, I was no stranger to this genre of interaction, which I began thinking of as personalized State of the Republic addresses. Just as I ended up eating more Beijing roast duck per month than most Chinese people did per year because

new acquaintances all felt it was the best way to share Chinese culture with a foreigner, so I ended up listening to people talk about so-called big things (*dashi*)—politics, society, and economics—far more than other Chinese people. Generally, bystanders tolerated these tirades but not always. After one particularly militant State of the Republic address from a soon-to-be-rejected suitor, Olivia was angry. "Who talks politics like that with two young women here!" she huffed, "He only talked like that because you were there. Because you are American! He's just boasting (*chuiniu*)!"[51] My reading is a little more generous than Olivia's; I think that beyond whatever ego boost men got from lecturing me, they also thought they were giving me a gift by representing their country (albeit reductively) to me for my research.

So when I ended up on the T1118 in a four person soft-sleeper compartment with a man, his wife, and their rambunctiously sweet nine-year-old daughter on July 24, 2013—two years and a day after the Wenzhou Incident—I was not surprised when the topic of conversation quickly turned to the man's bleak assessment of Chinese morality. It was going to be a difficult train journey. My presence on the train was already the result of a series of unpredicted disasters. I had been traveling in Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province in the western PRC, when an earthquake had damaged the railway lines to the point where my original train back to Zhengzhou had been cancelled. At the last minute, a train transporting members of the PLA Air Force from Xining to Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province, had allowed people to buy tickets, and I had just managed to get a bed in a largely empty hard-sleeper car, where my only companions were Air Force colonels (*xiaozhang*), who spent the whole trip flirting with and boasting (*chuiniu*) to me.

[51] A hipper translation of this wonderful idiom, which literally means to blow cattle and is used almost exclusively to describe a man's way of talking about himself to others, might be mansplaining.

I spent the night in Lanzhou and bought the last ticket available on the T1118 train out of Lanzhou, only to discover that because of heavy rain, mudslides, and flooding unrelated to the earthquake, it would be delayed. Nevertheless, the four of us soon found that we got along, and prolonging our trip together on the T1118 wouldn't be a terrible inconvenience; each time the man said we haven't yet arrived, the news was met with smiles rather than sighs.

"Heaven helps a good man (*Jirentianxiang*)," the man, who I'll call Mr. Cui, said after I told him my story of failing to outrun the natural disasters. He said he and his family had been in a cab during the earthquake, a white lie his daughter immediately disputed.

"We were in a bus not a cab!" she shouted, and her mother shushed her. "The important thing is we were in a vehicle (*che*)," she said, "so we didn't feel it."

The outburst over, Mr. Cui continued, unfazed. "My friend called to ask us if we were okay," he reported, "When he said there had been an earthquake, I didn't believe him."

Mr. Cui's light exaggeration—moving from a bus to a cab—was characteristic of what I read as his attempt to impress me. He spoke largely in *chengyu* or four character idioms partly, I think, to impress me and partly to help me study; my notes from this day are full of his neat handwriting as he passed the time by writing and explaining *chengyu* to me. The Cuis were based in Xuzhou, an industrial city in Jiangsu Province. They spoke with a light accent that was unfamiliar but not unintelligible to me, and they laughed and smiled often. "We are strangers meeting by chance like duckweed blown on the water

(*pingshuixiangfeng, su bu xiangshi*)," Mr. Cui declared happily, "Our meeting is serendipity (*yuanfen*). It was our fate (*mingyun*) to meet."

Suddenly, a train attendant's voice called for a doctor to please go to car 12. "There is a sick person on the bottom bed in car 12," the voice said calmly, "Please find the attendant in car 12."

"What kind of sickness is it?" I asked Mr. Cui worriedly.

"They didn't say," he said, "If it's really serious, they will get off at Baoji or the next station." He smiled. " If an American on a plane gets sick, the plane will land regardless of how many people it makes late and no one will say anything. In China, it's very rare that the benefit (*li*) of many Chinese people will be sacrificed for one person."

"I don't know," I hedged, which encouraged him to continue to try to convince me.

"Think about all the people who die in accidents getting coal, oil, and gold in China!" he exclaimed. "No one cares! People are prepared to give money to compensate them. There are too many Chinese people, so the value of their lives is ignored!"

Rocking their daughter in her lap, Mr. Cui's wife quietly agreed. "Chinese people are worthless (*Zhongguoren bu zhiqian*)," she murmured.

"There are so many people that die in accidents," Mr. Cui continued, "Every few days someone will die in accident! Or get hit by a car. If people are crossing the streets in America, the cars will yield to them. In China, it's not like that."

"It's not like that everywhere in America," I laughed, thinking of the years I spent dodging cars on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston.

Mr. Cui did not immediately respond to my attempt to shift the tone. “But more people die in China,” he insisted. “In America, almost everyone has a car, but in China, if everyone had a car it would be *bengkui*!”

Bengkui literally means falling apart or crumbling but more idiomatically expresses the sense of craziness or chaos endemic to Chinese cities—it was a verb I often heard in Beijing, though not in Zhengzhou. Mr. Cui clapped his hands. “Let me tell you a joke!” he said. “Two astronauts are looking down at the PRC from space. One of them tells the other, ‘Look, it’s the Great Wall!’ The other replies, ‘That’s not the Great Wall—that’s a Chinese traffic jam (*na bu shi changcheng, shi Zhongguo duche*)!’”

I laughed uncomfortably. “We have traffic in America too,” I reminded him, “Every country has its own problems.”

A train attendant entered the compartment, checked the railway-provided thermos, and took it away to refill it with boiled water. Mr. Cui jumped on the chance to make his point about the particular Chineseness of the PRC’s problems. “Do you see that?” he gestured after the train attendant. “Before the Ministry of Railways was split, you could never see good service like that on a train. Now they cannot be corrupt, and they need money. They need to attract people to trains, so they will provide good service (*hao de fuwu*). In America, it is not like this.”

I didn’t argue with him. Regardless of whether he was right about America, it was true that a visible change had taken place since the Ministry of Railways was dissolved just a few months before in March 2013. Later, I went to the dining car to get a mediocre and overpriced (but hot) meal, and overheard a train attendant trying to settle a dispute between two men. Both men claimed to have a ticket for the same hard-sleeper bed.

Because of national automatic ticket selling system, such an error should have been impossible; however, because the ticket dispensing machines at Lanzhou Station were broken that morning—an unfortunate reality I had also experienced firsthand—the first man hadn't been able to print the ticket he'd purchased in advance online. To be able to board the train, he'd bought a hard seat ticket at the window and then rushed to the train, where he figured he'd sort it out onboard. The problem was that when he used his ID number (*shenfenzhen*) to buy the second ticket, the computer system had automatically relinquished his first ticket—which the second man had, at the last second, then purchased. As the men sat next to each other, irritated and confused, the train attendant called the ticket office in Lanzhou.

"I am not talking about responsibility (*zeren*)," she said over and over again in what seemed like an effort to calm the person on the other end of the line, "I just want to know what to do."

The reason I took note of this interaction was that it was unusual to see train attendants taking this much care with passengers. I had seen in the past how fraught the process of buying, returning, and exchanging tickets was. *Bupiao* literally means "replacement ticket," but in this context it refers to buying a ticket after the normal time; it's similar to when you arrive at the airport and ask, just before boarding, for an upgrade to first class and offer to pay the difference. A bupiao transaction can only be conducted on the train that a customer is already boarding; you cannot bupiao into a higher class of train (though you can *gaiqian* at least an hour before boarding). A *pukuaiche* is the slowest of the PRC's six train classes. When you buy a ticket in the PRC, you can tell from the train's letter and number what class of train it is. The fastest trains have numbers

that begin with the letter G—for instance, "G576" or "G83"—with "G" standing for *gaotie* or high-speed rail. The next class down is the *dongche*, whose train numbers begin with the letter "D." The *dongche* is part of the China Rail High-speed service or Harmony Rail that also includes the *gaotie*. Both the *dongche* and the *gaotie* are powered using electrical multiple units (EMU), and their main distinction from each other is their top speeds; the services they offer are essentially the same, and if you are taking a D- or G-train, you can expect it to be clean, with young, pretty train attendants, and—I only saw one exception to this—with seats instead of beds.[52] The rest of the trains—T for *tekuaiche* or "especially fast," K for *kuaiche* or fast, and Z for *zhidaoche* or express—will usually have four different types of tickets—standing (in the hard-seat compartment), hard-seat (the same price as a standing ticket, but with a seat), hard-sleeper (usually around double the price of hard-seat, it includes one bed in an open compartment of six), and soft-sleeper (the most expensive, it gives you one bed in a closed compartment of four). *Pukuaiche* tickets are distinguished from all of these other train classes by the fact that their trains do not have a letter in front of them.

As a *tekuaiche*, the T1118 was a respectable train class; not as expensive as the high-speed rail, but it also was no *pukuaiche*. As the Ministry of Railways dissolved, was forced to become profitable, and tried, desperately, to eliminate the corrupt, clientilist practices that had previously defined it, ticket sales and exchanges became a site of negotiation, conflict, and reconciliation as different generations of Chinese people

[52] Only one time did I see a Harmony Rail train with beds, and it was specially labeled as a "bed seat" train. Customers were *not* permitted to lie down on the upper level beds because of the train's high-speeds and instead had to sit, three to a bed, facing three other people sitting on the opposite bed, which was bizarre. All the passengers in my compartment on that particular train agreed that this was the worst way to go, but given that the distinction only appeared on the ticket once you'd retrieved it (and not on the boards or website where you purchased the ticket) there was no way to actively avoid being placed on such a train.

processed the consequences of the PRC's breakneck transformations. Sometimes they process resulted in open disdain—as with the older woman and the young train attendant on the high-speed train to Guilin—but other times it meant slowly trying process, in real time, exactly what had happened—as when the train attendant sat patiently on phone on the T1118, the rain pouring down the windows of the dining car and obscuring the outside world from view. "Do not worry about responsibility," she repeated, "Just tell me what I should do."

Spectres of Value

Here is a way a train is not like a text: In theory, when you read a text, regardless of whether you're rich or poor, the same words present themselves to you on the page. Should the text be missing pages, obscured, or censored, we might describe it as an altered text or a different text. In theory, the hermeneutical transformation of those words into something meaningful and something different from what your neighbor, reading the same text, might see in them happens within your mind, at the level of interpretation, not at the level of structure.[53] When you ride a train in the PRC, you know from the outset where you stand in the nation's new social and economic hierarchy; the differences occur at the level of structure. K-class trains have low ticket prices and are given equally low priority within the Fixed Train Timetable. On K-trains I often found myself waking up in the middle of the night, moved to wakefulness by the slow realization that the train was no longer moving. Once, on a K-train between Beijing and Changsha, I woke up long enough to hear a few like-minded passengers muttering resentfully. They told me that we

[53] There are of course genre exceptions to this, like choose-your-own-adventure novels or even children's pop-up books, where the structure can vary according to the behavior of the reader. In general, however, I think this holds true for what we think of as a fixed text.

had probably stopped to let another train with more expensive tickets and richer passengers pass, and it wasn't long before that train materialized, invisible in the darkness but marked by an unmistakable whoosh that rocked our train back and forth. Minutes later, we felt our train pitch forward again. We arrived at every subsequent destination late. A friend of mine who met me at Shanghai South Station two hours after I was scheduled to arrive admonished me in similar terms. "I knew you were going to be late," she said with exasperation. "If you take the K-train you can expect to be late."

Events like the Wenzhou Incident reveal that a passenger on the PRC railway's system risks losing much more than their ability to be punctual, however. The tracks a K-train races down may be the same for each passenger, but they are mediated by the physical conditions in each train compartment and, more importantly, by the way each passenger is treated depending on where in the train they are sitting. And even then, the seat—or the value of the seat—might not be a reflection of reality but of aspirations. Part of what the Wenzhou Incident laid bare was the reality that in the PRC, even wealth was not enough to make you into an individual worth recovering by the state. You could not buy your way out of your background (*beijing*); even the remains of those passengers who had been able to afford the comparatively expensive tickets on the D305 and D3115 had been buried, covered-up, and devalued. They were, as Mr. Cui's wife observed, treated as though they were worthless. Even though they had money, *it was not enough*: to be safe, they needed to be connected to the murky, opaque center of power, the place from which intentions and beihou de yuanyin came. The real miracle would have been if some official's child had been on one of the Wenzhou trains; that would have been the only way to ensure that as many of them as possible would have been saved.

This spectre of value—what is a person's life worth? Who decides? And who will pay?—haunts the monetized relationships people make with each other in the PRC, especially marriage ones (see Y. Yan 2003; Zhang 2010, 163-186). It also haunts the anthropological literature, in a way that's especially apparent in discussions of *suzhi*. Suzhi has been translated as value (Anagnost 2004), habitus (L. Zhang 2001), and quality (H. Yan 2003). Many of these studies have focused on how suzhi became a fixation of state discourse, which agonized over the "low" moral quality of its population, particularly its rural population; in other words, the "low" quality of rural migrants like Mary, who accompanied me to Guilin. Ann Anagnost (2004) argues that raising a college-educated child with high suzhi was a goal of middle-class parents, but by 2015, I rarely heard the term used that way. In fact, among ordinary people in Zhengzhou, I only ever heard suzhi used in a derogatory manner, to refer to how low someone's quality or value was. While people looking down were likely to speak of the suzhi of those below them, those they were speaking of—who identified themselves as being the putative bottom layer (*diceng*) of society—never spoke of their own low suzhi. Instead, as I've written elsewhere, they said they lacked culture (*meiyou wenhua*), which I've analyzed above as an appeal to a non-fixed trait—education—rather than an explicitly instrumental and implicitly exchangeable one, like value.

It's these people, however, who are most at risk for having the actual value of their lives revealed to them in the form of compensation money. Accountability through compensation was so common and accepted that desperately impoverished people in the PRC sometimes found ways to stage accidents so that their families could receive money after their death, a distressingly direct exchange of a person's life for cash. Over a lunch

where he uncharacteristically drank not one but two tall bottles of beer, Officer Li confessed that he had not always been a police officer.

"Before I did this, I was a train driver," he said, his face turning redder with each sip of beer. "For three years after leaving the PLA. Back in the 1980s."

"Wow!" I exclaimed, "What was the strangest thing you saw?"

"Crushing a sheep to death!" he answered quickly, as though he had prepared, "Crushing a dog to death!"

He sat quietly for a moment and then began to babble quickly: "At that time, it was not like it was now. The tracks weren't closed (*fengbi*). Now they are all closed, but then they were not." I listened nervously as he repeated the point over and over again. "People would release sheep (*fangyang*) and release cows (*fangniu*)," he said, "They would walk onto the tracks and be crushed to death (*bei ya si le*). It would happen all the time! It was very normal (*hen zhengchang*)."

"Would the train stop?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," Officer Li nodded. "The train conductor had to fill out of a form and take the corpse (*shiti*) off the tracks and drop it at the next station. The person could go there and get compensation money."

Then: "I hit a sheep and a dog a few times."

And then: "There were also people (*ren ye bei ya si*)."

"Was it on purpose?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They didn't know," he said quietly, his face still red.

At a loss, I kept digging for information, automatically, thoughtlessly: "Did you pay compensation?"

"Of course!" he yelled, suddenly reanimated. "It wasn't me who paid, but they were paid." He stopped again, and returned to my earlier question. "At that time, people were so poor. Maybe it was on purpose (*guyi de*). I don't know. They would get money. Tens of thousands of RMB. At that time, it was not a small amount of money." I shuddered, but Officer Li didn't notice—he just kept going. "Now it is different. At that time, the tracks had not yet (*hai meiyou*) been closed. Now they are closed."

"How many times," I asked finally, "did you hit a person?"

"Twice," he said. He was staring into the greasy remains of the fish hot pot we'd been eating. "One time the person had not yet died (*hai meiyou si*). That was the most pitiful (*zui kelian*)."

We sat in silence for a while. It was just past noon, and the restaurant was emptying. I offered to pay, which was against protocol; as the older person, the man, and the person who had picked the restaurant, Officer Li should have paid. But when the bill came, he didn't move, and the waitress unceremoniously shuffled off with my wad of pink hundred RMB bills. Officer Li was an unlikely and unfortunate representative of authority. Our friendship had begun with him giving me an exuberant State of the Republic address, like the one performed by Mr. Cui, but it was ending with this whimpering window into the practices of a party-state whose time had passed and yet still haunted him. His son was my age (at that time, 27) and a constant source of anxiety. Officer Li had used his connections to get his son a position in his work-unit in the railway, but his son had rejected it in favor of graduate school. Railway police, Officer Li explained, were no longer even being hired by work-units; instead, they were being brought on as contract workers, with no security and very little training. In a strange way,

even the present Officer Li was living was already past. As we parted at the restaurant's front door, Officer Li turned to me. "Now it is different," he repeated again, adamantly. It took me a moment to realize he was referring to the train hitting people and animals. "At that time, the tracks hadn't yet (*hai meiyou*) been closed. Now it never happens."

Creating Value through Debts

As his daughter pattered idly and unselfconsciously away on the T1118, it became clear to me that Mr. Cui and his family had splurged on tickets for the soft-sleeper compartment where I met them. Mr. Cui said he "did business" (*zuo shengyi*)—a euphemism often used by entrepreneurs who didn't want to get into specific sources of income with strangers—but his daughter quickly pointed out that he was not a boss (*laoban*) and that he worked for someone else. He was, I guessed, probably a mid-level manager at the company where he worked, and his strategy for achieving promotion was the same one he (needlessly) employed to court me: he would *qingke*, or treat others to food, dinner, and other services. "Baba," his daughter declared at one point, her arms wrapped winningly around his neck, "Baba, when we get back home, I don't want you and Mama to fight anymore. Will you promise not to treat people to meals (*qing ren chifan*)? Or only do it once a week? Please, Baba?"

Mr. Cui explained that treating people to meals was an important part of what he did: a fact about business culture in the PRC that is, by now, well documented by the ethnographic literature (e.g. Yang 1994; E. Zhang 2001; Liu 2002; Osburg 2013). Rather than engage the substantial literature on social relationships, *guanxi*, and banquet etiquette (for a recent review, see Osburg 2013, 22-26), here I want to elaborate on an interesting phenomenon noted by many ethnographers, which is the *delay* between

treating someone to a meal and asking for a favor. This is similar to how hopeful immigrants in Fujian build credibility and trust through future oriented debts (Chu 2010). Just as two passengers on a train in motion are constantly aware that the train has not yet arrived (*hai meiyou dao*), so two people engaged in treating each other to a meal or a service know that the outcome of the exchange has not yet arrived (*hai meiyou dao*). This was particularly obvious to me as the beneficiary of many people's generosity, none of which was *truly* non-instrumental. Even my best friend in Beijing—whom I've known since we were both college roommates in 2008—confessed to me that she and her husband continued to treat me to meals in the hopes that I would eventually teach their then still unborn child English. Thought they now have a baby, he does not yet speak, so that favor has not yet (*hai meiyou*) materialized, but I know to wait for it—perhaps to dread it—each time I fail to physically grab the bill from a server before they do.

One of the reasons I think my wealthy interlocutors could afford to be so uncurious about accidents was because they were focused on the future. Discussions of the beihou de yuanyin were for people who had either mastered the past—like Lily—or were stuck in the it—like Officer Zhang. Just as May—the wife of the nephew of the wealthiest man in Henan—did not want to focus the origin stories of her relationships because they might be uncouth or embarrassing given her current social status, so Mr. Cui *had* to focus on those origins so he could know when to activate them at the right moment to help him gain social status. To be focused on the past is a weaker position; the future of the PRC belongs to those who can afford to focus on it exclusively. When I ask about a relationship's origins, I am, like Ricoeur, privileging the past, original intent (noesis) over whatever I might observe in the present. When May refuses to disclose an

origin story, she is, like Barthes, holding out for the future; like a text, the unity between two people "lies not in its origin but in its destination," in the places the relationship *hasn't yet* gone (1977[1967], 148). And besides, under the new conditions created by the Anti-Corruption Campaign, revealing them might also be dangerous. In his article on the Sichuanese practice of *goudui*, Everett Y. Zhang points out how humiliating it is for male entrepreneurs to have to ask for favors from officials (2001; see also Osburg 2013); however, it was embarrassing for women too.

During 2014, it became fashionable for the wealthy, stay-at-home wives like May to turn their trips abroad into profitable enterprises by selling foreign products to their friends back home through WeChat. May went to Japan to see the cherry blossoms and returned with a suitcase full of colorful, plastic, BPA-free thermoses. Over a long lunch at the city's most fashionable Sichuan restaurant, I watched her pass the green, pink, and blue translucent bottles of different sizes from one friend to another for inspection. As they cooed over the products' obvious quality and safety, I could not help but think of Barthes' observation from his 1974 trip to the PRC that the ubiquitous, colorful thermoses were a "fetish object" (2012, 7). Soon, May had sold out of her initial stock of thermoses and had to order more from her supplier in Japan.

A month later, however, things suddenly changed. Three shipments of her products—including not just these cups and thermoses but also cosmetic products from Japan—were detained (*kou le*) by the province's customs bureau. Other women reported being investigated in the same way. Over another lunch at another high-end restaurant (this time one that specialized in Henanese cuisine), another woman who was selling designer shoes from America to her peers through WeChat reported that she'd been

accused of evading taxes (*taoshui*). Later, while creating a timeline of my field notes, I would realize that this crackdown was related to the detention of a friend of a friend's husband who worked at the airport during the formation of Zhengzhou's aviation logistics hub, but at the time the sudden enforcement of rules that had previously been ignored seemed arbitrary and—most importantly to these women—irritating.

"Can't you just give them a present (*songli*)?" I asked, using the common euphemism for bribing.

The women looked at each other across the table. "It's not so simple now," one explained with a tired smile. "If your relationship isn't family, it won't work (*guanxi bu dao jia jiu bu xing*)."

May had been shipping the products under the auspices of her husband's food company, and even she'd run into problems. "They said, 'What kind of company is this,' and their tone (*yuqi*) was completely different," she agreed before adding, "Now giving gifts (*songli*) is really troublesome (*mafan*), it won't necessarily solve the problem."

She paused. "The Dragon Boat Festival is coming," she added thoughtfully, "I might try to give him some *zhongzi* (a seasonal rice dumpling associated with the festival) or something."

Months later, I asked about the customs issue and whether it had been resolved at a different, high-end western restaurant in the New East District. May laughed. She explained that she'd given him the *zhongzi* and said they should meet so she could treat him to dinner and thank him in person for getting her products released.

"He called me a week later and asked if I could give him three more boxes of *zhongzi* for his friends and family," she quipped, and the other wealthy woman who was

with us also laughed. “That kind of person you don’t have to talk about eating with or being friends—give him gifts and it works (*songli jiu xing*).”

Part of what May was saying was that this was a comparatively simple exchange relationship, involving very little of the emotional labor Osburg (2013) documents among his entrepreneurs. Having May in his debt had been an opportunity for the official to create value for himself, but for whatever reason, he hadn’t wanted to do it. The official had, as my interlocutors often joked about each other, set his price too cheaply (*ba ta ziji zhan tai pianyi*). The other part of what she is saying, however, has to do with the closing of the future potential that usually turns a simple meal into a journey. Between May and the customs official, there was no sense that something still lay in wait that might thicken or deepen their relationships; there was nothing that hadn’t yet (*hai meiyou*) happened. Whatever journey the two of them may have departed on together was already over; May would get her thermoses through customs, and the official would get his *zhongzi* for free, whenever he wanted them.

The Myth of Backwardness: Crossing the Southern Border

In October 2013, I decided to travel to Hong Kong by train. The MTR Intercity Through Train takes passengers back and forth between Guangzhou East Station and Hung Hom Station in Kowloon. Tickets were available for purchase online well in advance, but I tried to buy a round-trip ticket from Guangzhou East to Hung Hom, I came up with an error message. In fact, tickets were available for advance purchase *only* for people traveling from the Hong Kong side. Planning, it seemed, was a privilege reserved for people based on the island; people based on the mainland had to scramble to buy their tickets as soon as they arrived at the station, the way they had before the PRC’s China

Railway Corporation had revamped their online ticket system. While the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region may have belonged to the PRC, on the MTR, the future still belonged not to the PRC but to residents of the island. After becoming accustomed to life in the PRC, it seemed to be a shocking step backward from the progress I had seen in other parts of the railways system.

As I've pointed out, trains are emblematic of the PRC's *progress*: its forward or onward movement toward a destination. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals have recorded an anxiety about the opposite of progress: backwardness (*luohou*). What is past, what has arrived, and what is completed is not in front but behind; it is associated with backwardness. In the anxieties I have recorded above—about who one was, what one can be to another, and how much one is worth—there is a fear of slipping backward or of falling behind. If people could find the *true* and *believable* cause of the Wenzhou Incident, they could ride the high-speed railways without fear of accident or—at the very least—without the fear that their broken body might be buried alive. If people could understand the original request that drove a relationship, they might be able to anticipate those demands that haven't yet been articulated. If people knew ahead of time what exactly their value was, maybe they could leverage themselves better against their clients and employers. These are all attempts to keep the unpredicted, unpredictable, and uncertain aspects of life from threatening to hold one back. The impulse to determine a person's value, to fix and limit a relationship's origin story, and to find an accident's cause: all of these searches are searches for a paradoxically *ultimate* origin, the origin behind the origin, the origin that becomes the final destination of the retrospective journey. One cannot, of course, have progress

without an origin, just as Ricoeur reminds us that one should not have meaning without an intention.

But here I side with Barthes, who tackles the question of meaning most clearly in his work on myth. He emphasizes myth's tendency to interpellate its reader, who can happen upon the myth unintentionally. In "Myth Today," Barthes describes seeing a Basque house in the middle of Paris, where, out of context, it becomes not just a house but also a *statement*. Upon seeing it, Barthes writes,

> …I feel as if I were personally receiving an imperious injunction to name this object a Basque chalet: or even better, to see it as the very essence of *basquity*. This is because the concept appears to me in all its appropriative nature: it comes and seeks me out in order to oblige me to acknowledge the body of intentions which have motivated it and arranged it there as the signal of an individual history, as a confidence and a complicity: it is a real call, which the owners of the chalet send out to me. (124-125)

Barthes can refuse to answer the owners' call to his person. Similarly, one can refuse to answer calls made to one's personal telephone, but that does not change the fact that the calls were made. Unlike linguistic signifiers, which are arbitrary, mythic speech is always motivated; in myth, "everything happens as if the [form] *naturally* conjured up the concept, as if the signifier *gave a foundation* to the signified" (Barthes 1972, 129-130, emphases in original). Myth is semiological system mistaken for a factual one; it is a Basque chalet standing in Paris as if it were the most natural thing in the world (131). Though Barthes admits myths are created by a "body of intentions," he also defines them as "speech justified *in excess*"—an excess that makes their intended meaning suspect (Barthes 1972, 124-125 and 130, emphasis in original). In reality, there is often meaning that goes beyond or is made *without* a corresponding intention; there are calls that are refused; there are true twitches.

Part of what I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter is how often twitches occur in the PRC and how rarely they are recognized as such. One strange exception is a popular explanation for the wealth that accrued after Reform and Opening Up that argues it should be viewed as a twitch. In both *The Otherness of Self* (2002) and *The Mirage of China* (2009), anthropologist Xin Liu relates the story of the unwitting peasant who becomes rich by accident after falling asleep in front of a door where stock option lottery tickets were being distributed (100-102; 127-129). A mysterious man appears, offers the peasant ten thousand dollars for what appears to be a random paper, and leaves. The peasant then wanders around the city and is roped into buying real estate by a beautiful woman who advises him to sell his new investment to a corrupt official; the peasant returns home a millionaire. It is not by accident that the story is a rationalization for something that happens for no reason; it is not by accident that this story is about accident, about an incident that happens to someone in particular for reasons they cannot remember or recover.

In *Naming the Witch*, James Siegel explores the nature of accidents in connection to the anthropological literature on witchcraft. He goes back to the work of Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, and Marcel Mauss to find the origin of the witch. He concludes that the pure gift, which should not exist since the gift is always invested with an obligation from somewhere, "would not be recognized as such"; instead,

> Whatever we received "for no reason" would seem to come to us accidentally. The roll of $50 bills we find on the street comes to us by chance. It is an accident, not a gift, unless we think that luck, a word similar to *hau*, is with us. What happens to us accidentally could be considered a gift, though not necessarily one we enjoy receiving. (Siegel 2006, 8)

Here, Siegel deftly connects the accident, the "pure" event without origin, with the impossible pure gift, the gift without origin, the true twitch that possesses one unbidden. No one *intended* for the Wenzhou Incident to happen, but it did, and the results were too calamitous to appear pure; in the search for the origin of this polluting event, both the people and the state settled on Great Leap Liu.

But let's return to Xin Liu's unwitting peasant. In the first telling of the story, the accident is interpreted as a gift and luck is invoked as the only plausible explanation for a series of events that otherwise would be incomprehensible. "The key component of this story is its reliance on the idea of luck," Liu explains, "the person involved did not know what was going on, and it did not even matter that he did not know" (2002, 102). In his later telling of the same story, however, the interpretation much more pessimistic:

> The key component of this story is its reliance on the idea of fate for its narrative emplotment. The person involved clearly did not understand what was going on—and that did not even matter. He would get rich anyway if he were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. This is the message of the story. It is also the general meaning of the Chinese developmental story, according to which there are two basic ways of "getting rich first": one by power or corruption, the other by luck or chance. The notion of fate is in opposition to that of will. It is the idea of fate and luck—forces that are external to human determination—that have become a main theme of the new developmental stories. (2009, 129)

Corruption, though present in the first telling, was not emphasized nearly as much as it is here, and whereas before the peasant's sudden fortune is given to him basically for nothing, here it is given to him by fate in exchange for his free will. In this new interpretation the only way to get rich in the PRC without intentionally being corrupt is to be unwittingly complicit to corruption; where before, Liu had interpreted the story as showing "that people did not believe that the increasing economic disparity could be a result solely of effort" and that one "must be prepared for chance" (2002, 102), here

effort disappears. Fate smiles arbitrarily upon the unwitting and the corrupt while unjustly ignoring the industrious; in this later telling, there is nothing you can do of your own volition to change your luck but cheat.

Because of Liu's ethnography, when I went to the field in 2013, I expected to find unpredictable events explained by fate, luck, and other "meditative concepts" (Pitt-Rivers 1992, 244). Instead, I entered a social milieu where attempts to explain the recovery of a survivor from the Wenzhou Incident as "miraculous" were met with disdain and where people used the beihou de yuanyin to reject the mediation such concepts might have offered. There are probably several reasons for this. The first is that Liu's fieldwork was conducted almost a decade before my own. While the fictional, unwitting peasant may not have been able to discern the very not-random role corruption played in making his fortune, the people who had come after him—the Vivians, Lilys, and Mays of the PRC—could and did. When they first began in 1978, the unprecedented effects of Reform and Opening Up seemed to come—like the pure gift—from nowhere. Nearly 40 years out, it is still not entirely clear why certain people were more successful than others but theories of causation proliferated: it was not only because of corruption (*fubai*) but also because of people's background (*beijing*), foresight (*yanguang*), and intense work (*nuli*).

Nevertheless, explanatory idioms that privileged the principles of randomness over personal qualities remained—for some. Over hot pot with Betty, a post-80s woman who also knew Vivian and Lily, she confessed that though she respected them for being fierce women entrepreneurs, she did not believe such wealth awaited her. "For their generation, it was so easy," she told me, "At that time, it was enough to pick one thing

and persist (*jianchi*)." Betty worked at a safe, salaried government job. Although it was a Saturday, we had just come from a mandatory work event, and I knew she would have to go in to work the next day too. She sighed: "I persist. I am always working. But I will never have as many houses as they do." In a separate conversation, Gloria, my post-80s friend who had moved to Canada, agreed with Betty's generationally based analysis. "There are all these shows now where people who got rich after Reform and Opening Up give advice to the younger generation," she told me over coffee in English, "But I think it's useless. That time is over. We cannot do what they did and succeed. They were lucky."

Explanations like these trouble the narrative of continual progress that the party-state commits to in its ever-rising GDP goals, its rhetoric about increasing the value of the population, and even its infrastructural development projects, like the high-speed railway system. What each of these examples reveals is how remarkably, drastically, and *unevenly* economic liberalization policies effected the PRC. This unevenness is reflected by the way charges of "backwardness" ricochet between people and places in a hierarchical manner. When I took the T1118, I was fleeing from a catastrophic trip to Qinghai Province, where my traveling companions had declared the locals to be backwards; they, in turn, had been called backwards by my friends from college in Beijing; and even my friends in Beijing found themselves abstracted and at the mercy of the relatives and friends I met in Hong Kong after I scrambled to buy a MTR ticket and board a train to Kowloon at Guangzhou East Station. The reasons for the charges of backwardness varied—my Henanese companions claimed the hotels in Qinghai were not clean, my Beijing friends claimed the people in Henan were insincere liars, my Hong

Kong relatives thought Beijingers had bad manners—but each time something or someone was declared to be backwards, it in effect asserted the speaker's own forward motion and their superior position in the PRC's unevenly distributed narrative of progress.

Return for a moment to the Basque chalet that disrupts Barthes' Parisian stroll. The chalet's call is made with the myth-consumer in mind; it is structured so as to appear factual, natural, and persuasive. As a myth, the chalet "*hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (Barthes 1972, 121, emphasis in original). For Barthes, any artifact can be analyzed as a myth; myth "organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves" (143). Nevertheless, things do not mean something by themselves, and the world imposed on us by myth, Barthes maintains, is not the reality of the world but rather an image of it (141). Myth "transforms history into nature" (129); by asserting the timeless nature of contemporary phenomena, myth makes its viewers *forget* how they came to believe in the myth in the first place.

The PRC's high-speed railway system is, like the Basque chalet in Paris, also a myth. The transformation of the PRC's railway network into a class segregated, two-tiered system came not for no reason but is designed to appear to have come from nowhere, to have always already existed, and, paradoxically, to represent the PRC's progress as a nation even as it deliberately excludes the poor and the rural from enjoying the fruits of that progress. The myth of the PRC's high-speed rail—formed by the body of intentions of the party-state—calls for people to accept it as a marker of progress, a sign

of Chinese superiority, and a point of nationalist pride, and, mostly, people did. This is why the Wenzhou Incident was so upsetting. An accident is if not an event that moves backward then a retarding one. The image of the world projected by the myth's excess meaning is disrupted by the accident. Through the accident, the world, with its true, unintended twitches, intrudes upon the mythic narrative. When Wang told the assembled journalists "I believe it anyway," he was insisting in the integrity of a myth that everyone could see was battered and about to be buried.

Accidents, as I have said, generate meaning-making, but it is a different kind of meaning than the excess meaning of Barthes' myth. People attempt to generate meaning in the wake of an accident the same way the human body generates scabs and scar tissue in the wake of an abrasion: to protect an area revealed to be vulnerable or to reinforce a belief that might not have been stable in the first place. But mythic meaning does not need something as dramatic as a train collision to produce doubt; even something as simple as a ticket system glitch preventing passengers traveling from the mainland to Hong Kong to buy tickets in advance will do the trick. In some ways, the search for the beihou de yuanyin is an interpretive quest to find the not just the reason behind the reason but also the motivation for the myth. Someone, Ya was often speculating, wanted her to believe something improbable, and the only *real* question was why.

Soon, the high-speed railway will expand again. Even now, despite the danger of graft, construction continues on a line between Zhengzhou and Shanghai, which will cement Zhengzhou's position as a hub connecting the east, west, north, and south. The expansion presents a call to the people of Zhengzhou: to accept the high-speed rail as the very essence of national progress and their own city as the very symbol of connectedness.

In your country and your city, regardless of whether you are powerful or not, you can rest assured that the lives of your children will be better than your own, the myth insists. Whether the people of Zhengzhou will choose to answer that call and believe it regardless of anything else remains to be seen.

PART III: DECISION-MAKING

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Value of Emptiness: Zhengzhou's empty houses and the PRC's housing bubble

It was two weeks after the Spring Festival in February 2016 and all anyone at Cardboard Coffee wanted to talk about was real estate. Cardboard Coffee itself is located in a converted first floor apartment in an originally posh but rapidly aging residential complex just south of the North Ring Road in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Its customers are a mix of residents, walk-ins, and friends of Vivian and Calvin, a married couple who own the coffee shop as a side venture. When the complex was built in the early 2000s, few people in Zhengzhou could afford to buy more houses than the one they planned to live in. Calvin described selecting the apartment that holds the cafe with a sense of bemusement: "At that time, if you said you wanted to buy a house, the agents would rush you over to the plan and say, 'Which one? Pick any one you like!'" These days, he knew, apartment locations in up-and-coming complexes were assigned by lottery, and there was little chance he would have been lucky enough to snag one in such a desirable location.

On that afternoon in the cafe, Xiao Wei, a barista, was complaining about the lack of affordable apartments near the North Ring Road. Before the Spring Festival, he'd thought he could afford a down payment, but now he wasn't sure.

"At that time there were a lot of houses, and I thought, no need to be impatient, I'll buy it after the Spring Festival," the 20-something barista confessed to Yan, a 40-something woman sitting at my table, "and then when I asked again, they were all sold out."

"Don't be impatient," Yan exclaimed. "It's absolutely not normal. It's definitely a bubble (*paomo*). I don't believe it. I think Zhengzhou's market hasn't been right for two years. Besides," she added with outrage, "Who's buying houses as soon as the Spring Festival is over?!"

We didn't have to wait long before Xiao Wei's boss, Vivian, emerged with the answer. Vivian had just returned from a suburb of Beijing where her daughter went to boarding school. She'd gone planning to use the money she'd earned that year to buy an apartment for when she visited her daughter. In the showroom, a saleswoman informed her that the policy preventing people from taking out multiple housing loans had been lifted. She decided on the spot to split her money into two separate down payments, take out two loans, and purchase two apartments.

"This is what we call an invisible rich person," Yan guffawed as an aside to me, before continuing: "In fact, buying a house near Beijing is okay. The capital is going to move outside the city, and if it's near your complex, the government just has to say the prices will go up and they'll go up!"

"You don't even know!" Vivian laughed in exasperation. "The saleswoman told me that if I'd bought the house when I was there four days ago, I would have paid ten thousand less (1,500USD). Ten thousand less!"

It is no secret that the real estate industry has generated both wealth and social change throughout the PRC over the past 15 years. Economists estimate that people who owned houses in second tier cities earned an average rate of return of around 13.4% on houses they owned between 2003 and 2013, while those who owned houses in first tier cities (like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen) earned the enviable rate of

15.7% during the same period (Fang et al forthcoming, 35-36). Recent ethnographic work on migrant workers, forced demolitions, and anxiety among the newly wealthy all in their own way address the concrete consequences of the PRC's construction boom and its discontents (Zhang 2001; Erie 2012; Osburg 2013; Chu 2014; Chuang 2014;). Nevertheless, not everyone has suffered from the boom, and the privatization of the urban residential housing market has allowed many people in the PRC to acquire the assets to enter the middle class or even surpass it (Zhang 2010). In this chapter, I examine why people buy houses and then keep them vacant and unrented in a practice that Chinese real estate professionals call "keeping houses empty" (*kongzhe fang*).

Though the people I worked with worriedly pointed to the concrete shells of high-rises and wondered who will live there, existing housing prices in Zhengzhou have done more than maintain their values; they've gone up. Especially after the PRC's stock markets crashed in June 2015—an unexpected event that left many people bankrupt and many of Zhengzhou's wealthiest residents unable to liquidate assets—smart, well-informed people like Vivian continue to believe Zhengzhou's real estate market is the best place to invest. In Zhengzhou, an ever-increasing population of people from outside the city, culturally specific ideas about homeownership, and the intertwined nature of access to social welfare programs (such as access to public schools) with a household registration (*hukou*) tied to the house one owns justify—both morally and economically—housing prices. While empty houses may appear uncanny to commentators evaluating the PRC's economy, to homeowners in the PRC, emptiness signifies not a bubble but something else entirely: cleanliness, control, and a sense of

safety (*anquan gan*). The opposite of an empty house is not an occupied house, but rather a house that may never exist.

This chapter builds on other anthropological research outlining the symbolic importance of houses, which can stand for ideas such as personal redemption, financial stability, and the possibility of continuity (Stout 2016; D'Avella 2014; Douglas 1991). My work reveals the distinct ways people in the PRC's housing market respond to sudden, nonnegotiable regulations meant to prevent the emergence of a bubble (see Yao et al 2014; also Deng et al 2010). Under these circumstances, seizing an opportunity to buy a house and then keeping it empty becomes a way to invest not just economically but also emotionally in one's own ability to shape future outcomes. I argue three main points: first, that the use of empty houses or price-rent ratios as a metric of bubble-ness is misguided; second, that analysts should evaluate the risks, resources, and vulnerabilities of consumers buying houses not as individuals but as family units; and third, that emptiness is *not* the same thing as vacancy or a signal of inefficiency. On the contrary, keeping houses empty as a form of occupation has a particular cultural significance in Zhengzhou where empty houses stand for an elusive sense of safety.

Evaluating Bubbles, Emptiness, and Belief

The dominant model that's been used to evaluate the PRC's housing market is the bubble. The epistemological qualities of bubbles have attracted the attention of anthropologists and economists alike. In *Anti-Crisis*, anthropologist Janet Roitman unpacks narratives of the American housing bubble and argues that though the grounds for the crisis were already laid and *known* long in advance, the bubble only became clear in retrospect, after it popped (2014). This insight is similar in many ways to the Freudian

idea of *nachtraeglichkeit* or "afterwardsness" where the trauma (or crisis) can only be known as such after the event as it is remembered. Roitman, the commentators she analyzes, and psychoanalysts are not alone in their belief that the interrogation of such crises is "necessarily post hoc" (Roitman 2014:8, 10). Even economists specializing in bubbles and price stability admit that before the moment of crisis, "bubbles cannot be identified with confidence" because bubbles are defined by a gap between an asset's "fundamental value" and its market price (Brunnermeir and Schnabel forthcoming). In the case of a "nascent market" like Zhengzhou's, which has only existed since the early 1990s and only in its current, commodified form since 1998, fundamental values are difficult to determine because there is no historical precedent for how much the market price of a particular house *should* be (Fang et al forthcoming). Like all bubbles, the PRC's housing bubble will only be identifiable as such *after* it's already burst.

In spite of this widely recognized epistemological limit, commentators have been predicting the collapse of the PRC's housing market since 1998, the very first year citizens were permitted to buy and sell their own homes (Ramo 1998). Scholars continue to write speculative papers searching for the perfect metric that will allow them to predict a bubble (Liu et al 2016). One such metric is the price-rent ratio: If the price of rent goes up at the same rate as housing prices, it means that people are willing to pay *more* to live in houses; thus, the fundamental value and the market price of houses are not diverging and the market is not a bubble.[54] According to this metric, the PRC's particularly low occupancy rate appears abnormal to economists. By reducing the supply of available

[54] In one article from 2004, Yulay Xiu and Hongyu Liu invoke price-rent ratios in the USA as a standard of a healthy market to argue that the PRC's housing market is *not* a bubble; ironically, the USA's own bubble collapsed a little more than two years after the article's publication.

houses, purposefully empty houses distort the market price for rent, which represents the fundamental value of living in the house. If the market were fully efficient and rational, the argument goes, all available houses would be listed, so rents would likely drop. From this perspective, empty houses in the PRC are not just inefficient; they are also economically suspect, almost as though people could be refusing to rent their houses just to keep driving the price of rent—and thus, the perceived value of their houses—up.

People in Zhengzhou are not doing this. Neither are they victims of "belief distortion," the term behavioral economists use to explain why people continue investing in something they know is probably on the verge of collapse by convincing themselves "this time it's different" (Brunnermeier and Oehmke 2013). The truth is that in the PRC, both empirically and historically, nearly each time someone alive today has gone to buy a house, *that* time it has been different. Perversely, the fact that the PRC managed to liberalize its economy almost within the span of a single generation means that people in the PRC know better than most what Karl Polanyi meant when he wrote, "Regulation and markets, in effect, grow up together" (1944:71). In the PRC, one could even say that regulation and market *prices*, in effect, *go up* together. Economists have devoted themselves to outlining the rules of the free market so that it appears rational, but no one in the PRC believes the market is rational or free, especially not people who owe their wealth to it. To those people, the empty house represents something else entirely: physical safety, psychological safety, and financial safety.

To foreign observers, already worn down by years of economic hardship and fluctuating property prices back home, the sight of empty residential housing complexes in the PRC evoke similar scenes from elsewhere: rows of unused houses in Spain, iconic

"FORECLOSED" signs in the USA, and new developments with boarded windows in Ireland. Recall that in Sigmund Freud's original essay on "The Uncanny," the German word he used was *unheimlich*, literally "unhomely" (Freud 1955:220). Throughout the rest of the world, the empty house—the house that somehow cannot be a home—embodied the housing bubbles and economic patterns that otherwise might have remained abstract. In the PRC's empty houses, foreign observers find a return to something "long familiar" that "arouses dread and creeping horror" (Freud 1955:220, 219). The Chinese housing bubble piece *par excellence* is Leslie Stahl's March 2013 *60 Minutes* report, aptly titled "China's Real Estate Bubble" (2013). The highlight of the report is when she visits a complex of empty houses in Zhengzhou's New East District. A housing bubble occurs when *too many* people buy *too many* houses for *too high* a price; like the wide boulevards Stahl and Tulloch stroll across in the *60 Minutes* report, the bubble values are *empty*. To journalists like Stahl, the physical emptiness of Zhengzhou's houses signifies that their fundamental value must also be empty; the market must be a bubble.

The View from the Showroom Floor

None of these discussions about the PRC's housing bubble are happening in a bubble, however; people in Zhengzhou are very aware of what journalists like Stahl say about the city. During a September 2015 interview, Liu Hao, a well-known socialite who has sold residential complexes for 14 years, brought up the report unprompted. He asked me if I had seen it, and when I confirmed I had, he nearly snorted with disdain.

"They came to Zhengzhou during the Spring Festival," he emphasized with disbelief, "Of *course* it was empty. Everyone went home! At that time, even Beijing is a

ghost city!"[55] Liu Hao went on to explain that Zhengzhou's ghostliness during the holiday demonstrates why Zhengzhou's real estate market is so robust. It indicates Zhengzhou attracts *waidiren* (people who were born outside the city), which is good for the real estate market because those people continue to buy houses in an effort to feel safe.

"In China, if I don't have my own house, I feel I haven't entered the city," Liu Hao explained, "I will still consider myself a waidiren. *A gold house or a silver house still isn't as good as one's own dog house*, or *even if I only have the tip of a needle, it's enough*.[56] If you have a house, you have a sense of safety (*anquan gan*)."[57]

Ironically, the same empty houses used by Stahl to demonstrate the extreme instability of the PRC's housing market represent stability both to Liu Hao (who interprets them as indicators of his industry's ever-increasing clientele) and to their owners (who feel safe knowing that the property they'll return to after the holiday is theirs). That said, there is also a sense among many people in Zhengzhou that the housing market is "not normal" or "too crazy." To say Zhengzhou is not a ghost city is not the same as saying that the ghost cities as Stahl describes them in the report do not exist; they

[55] During the Spring Festival and the weeks before and after it, people in the PRC usually find a time to return to their *laojia* or paternal home. While the two months before the festival are characterized by a flurry of business activity, people generally relax after the festival, which is why Yan is so shocked at the beginning of this article to hear that people are buying houses.

[56] 金窝银窝还不如自家狗窝 and 立锥之地就行了, respectively.

[57] This term, *anquan gan* (安全感), could be translated as security but I am calling it "sense of safety" to distinguish from other uses of security (such as international security).

do.[58] Wen Lijing, a 28-year-old man real estate professional, readily conceded that ghost cities were real.

"There is that one in Inner Mongolia," he said in a reference to Ordos (see Day 2012; Sheehan 2015), "but those people are nomadic and anyway Inner Mongolia's population is so low." He smiled: "In Zhengzhou, we do not have that problem. We have a lot of people."

Wen Lijing agreed with Liu Hao that Zhengzhou's ability to attract waidiren increases demand for housing. Both real estate professionals are themselves waidiren who have invested in houses (Wen Lijing embarrassedly confessed he owned only one). Both admitted that many of houses built by the city's ubiquitous construction projects remain empty long after they're sold, but both also argued that the practice of keeping a house empty (*kongzhe fang*) was rational. Even though too many empty houses might be a problem for salespeople, who fight a widespread perception that empty complexes will be bad to live in, they insisted the practice was not bad for the industry overall. "As long as my product is good," Liu Hao declared, "people will buy it."

The Opulence of Emptiness

Other people who had already left the industry seemed less confident. In September 2015, Janice, a millionaire who made her money running an advertising

[58] To Stahl's credit, one empty shopping complex they visit does remain catastrophically empty except on the floor near its sole profitable attraction (a movie theatre). The Baolong Power Plaza, however, was often by invoked entrepreneur interlocutors as an object lesson of how horrible facilities management (*wuye*) could lead to the failure of even the most well located enterprise. Baolong's problem seemed quite situational—instead of continuing to manage the property after it was finished, they instead sold each of the spaces to private individuals. The result was that they were able to quickly make a bunch of money without having to deal with the costs or bother of management as most malls do. Baolong's failure did not stop Wangfujing (a multinational mall developer) from beginning a project in the same neighborhood, which is scheduled to open in March 2016. Residents of the area told me they were looking forward to the Wangfujing mall and effortlessly ticked off the international brands they'd heard had already signed leases.

agency that catered to real estate companies from the late 1990s to early 2010s, claimed she would never buy a house.

"The place we rent now is 4,000RMB (620RMB) a month," she murmured as she drove her BMW past a new development. "Even for people like me, this is a lot of money. How could people working as waiters ever hope to afford it? Of course it must be a bubble."

Janice was gesturing to one of the most basic intuitions about housing, which is that there should be a connection between the incomes of people who live in houses and market prices. Her insight also contains a hint at one of the inconvenient truths of the PRC's housing market—that the excess of empty housing reflects the reality of the PRC's rising wealth gap. Even as Janice sympathizes with people working as waiters, she sets herself apart from them.

The sheer number of people like Janice who became rich only within the past ten years distinguishes Zhengzhou from other second-tier cities. Beyond being the most developed city in Henan, Zhengzhou a traffic hub for the rest of the country's aviation, railway, and logistics systems. As Henan has gained from the large exodus of factories from Guangdong Province, where the cost of labor is rising, Zhengzhou attracted the province's richest people, many of whom want to live comfortable, cosmopolitan lives near the sources of their wealth, which are often related to manufacturing. Though many of Zhengzhou's residents are not officially registered as city residents, migrants can in effect "buy" the *hukou* or household registration they need to access social welfare services in the city through purchasing a house. This is not the case in every city, but its importance to Zhengzhou's local market should not be overlooked. Liu Hao is, in some

way, *underselling* himself when he says that waidiren who buy a house in Zhengzhou are buying a non-material sense of safety; more practically, they are buying the right to attend public schools for their children.

My rich interlocutors admitted that while Zhengzhou may be overpopulated, over polluted, and overwhelming, it was worth living in because if you wanted to make money, you could make *a lot* of money. Many people pointed out that the majority of the cars on Zhengzhou's streets are Mercedes Benzes, BMWs, and Audis. "Do you know why," they'll ask and then, without waiting for an answer, recite the same phrase: "Because rich people in Zhengzhou are *really* rich." The reason so many houses in cities like Zhengzhou are empty is because many people who can afford to buy second houses in Zhengzhou can *really* afford to buy second (and third) houses in Zhengzhou. They buy them with cash.

This is why real estate developers like Liu Hao and Wen Lijing continue to believe in the strength of Zhengzhou's market in particular. "These reporters are saying there is a bubble because they are looking at the entire country, but that's not how markets work," Wen Lijing explained, "Each area is different. Luoyang isn't like Zhengzhou. Even Henan isn't like Shandong Province. In Shandong, people who have graduated from university or have ambition can choose to go to several developed cities, like Qingdao or Jinan—they will separate. In Henan, they can only come to Zhengzhou."

The more I investigated the market, the more I agreed with Wen Lijing, and the more difficult it was to find someone who believed the market was a bubble. In February 2016, I approached Janice and told her I wanted to talk more about why she would never buy a house. "Oh, but I did buy a house last month!" she laughed, "A villa at Liu Hao's

complex.[59] I went with a friend from the Public Security Bureau because they get a discount. I liked the houses, and I signed the paperwork right then. My friend didn't even buy one yet." When I turned in disbelief to our mutual friend Apple, she shrugged. "Janice has money," she stated, "She can do what she wants."

The Expected House vs. the Empty House

Janice's sudden change of heart speaks to the power of Liu Hao's understanding of his clients' psychological desire for safety; however, it also reveals the cavalier way some of the wealthy treat their resources. Janice's impulsive decision was, if anything, representative of her peer group. On another occasion, an accountant and mutual friend of Janice, Apple, and mine named Lisa asked the group whether a receipt was enough to prove that her mother owned a house in court. Her offhand question quickly spiraled into a conversation that ended with several uncomfortable revelations, one of which was that the house her mother had bought for over 400,000RMB (61,630USD) a few years earlier not only had never been completed but also might never exist. Lisa's mother's house was unfinished. The construction project had an accident (*chushi le*), and the government had decided not to take over the project. There was nothing she could do.

The conversation's conclusion came as a surprise to both Lisa and me. During the six months we worked together, I made it clear I was interested in the practice of keeping houses empty. I kept a close count of how many houses my interlocutors owned and whether they were lived in, rented out, or kept empty. In November 2015, Lisa and I had

[59] A "villa" (*bieshu*) is what in the United States would be called a condo or a duplex, and it's considered extremely decadent and the most private space a person can have in a city like Zhengzhou. In Zhengzhou, people use the word *fangzi* or "house" as shorthand to describe all kinds of housing. Unless otherwise noted, the word "house" in this article refers not to a standalone structure but to what would be considered an apartment in the United States.

a conversation where she named her mother's house as the third of her three apartments. Although the apartment was in her mother's name, she thought of the apartment as her own because her mother would likely never leave Lisa's house. At that time, the question had been whether or not she would renovate the empty house, not whether or not it *existed*. Over the years, it had never occurred to Lisa to go see the house—if she had, she would have seen it covered in protest scrolls (*tiaofu*) written by more attentive buyers. Lisa's mother's house was not an empty house but an expected house (*qifang*).

As the conversation in February 2016 continued, Apple turned away. "It's too terrifying," she sighed, "To people thinking about buying an expected house right now, I say why don't you buy a second hand house (*ershou fang*), because new houses (*xinfang*) and existing houses (*xianfang*) are all basically sold out… It might even be more expensive than a new house, but it's comparatively safer (*bijiao anquan*). At the very least secondhand houses have already been handed over and the property rights can be attained."

In her analysis, Apple intuitively ranked the different legal states of houses available to purchase by risk and cost. New houses and existing houses are houses at newly finished residential complex that have never been bought or lived in. A secondhand house may have been lived in or at least held for many years in a complex that's not necessarily new. Crucially, these houses have the property rights ready. Finally, an expected house is just what it sounds like: the promise that a house will be constructed eventually. Note Apple's emphasis on safety. Analysts often assume that the empty house stands in contrast to the occupied house when, in fact, the alternative to the empty house is the expected house. Against a backdrop of stories like Lisa's, buying a house appears

not as a choice between participating in an inflated, bubble market or not but as a choice between buying a house that exists (*xianfang*) or a house that may not (*qifang*).

The Economy of Storage: Houses as a System for Hoarding Futures

Just as not all houses available for purchase are created equal (or created at all), not all empty houses are interchangeable. There are four legal categories of housing in the PRC: commodity housing (*shangpinfang*), work-unit housing (*danweifang)*, welfare housing (*fulifang* or sometimes *zhengcefang*), and resettlement housing (*chaiqianfang*) for people whose houses have been demolished. Commodity housing is the only category of house that can be bought and sold freely to anyone, at an unregulated (and typically higher) market price. These other three categories are all sold at regulated prices, to regulated buyers, for regulated purposes. Legally all work-unit housing is supposed to be treated like commodity housing, but in practice developers and work-units often work together to provide housing that is generously subsidized for those people lucky enough to be working for state-owned or non-profit enterprises (Zhang 2010).

The result is that arbitrage is built in to the PRC's real estate market. The bubble pattern assumes an unregulated free market. In the metaphor, the bubble's film represents the asset's market price, which is pushed upward by consumers until either an outside shock—a news event acting like a needle—or else the natural atmospheric pressure of the market cannot contain it any longer: Pop! But in the PRC's housing market, there is no free market determining prices and there is no natural pressure at which a bubble would burst. The game is rigged and, crucially, everyone knows it. Everyone also knows that if a house is empty in Zhengzhou, it is likely to be one of three types: resettlement housing (*chaiqianfang*), marriage housing (*hunfang*), or investment housing (*touzifang*).

Resettlement housing might remain empty for years as owners wait for the city to connect essential utilities to the complex; as the chapter on power outages at the Mansion Complex demonstrates, without a profit motive, district governments have little motivation to make new complexes habitable. Marriage housing describes apartments that people buy for their sons to offer as a dowry for their future wives; what's strange about this practice is that houses were sometimes bought long in advance, when a son or grandson was only six or seven. Investment housing is exactly what it sounds like—apartments that were bought by people who planned to use rising commodity prices to make a profit. While resettlement housing was empty only when and because it were uninhabitable, marriage houses and investment houses were often kept in an uninhabitable state on purpose. Owners of marriage and investment houses would refrain from renovating the apartments they'd bought and instead keep them as naked houses (*maopifang*). Maopifang—literally semi-finished housing or naked housing, to be contrasted with fully renovated housing (*jingzhuangfang*)—are kept exactly as the developer left it. The idea, as far as I could tell from discussions with my interlocutors, was to protect the house from possible pollution from renters.

For the owners of empty marriage houses in particular, this seems to be the case. These parents (and grandparents) of sons were keeping their houses empty and not renovated in an effort to keep their houses pure. Much has been written about how, after the economic liberalization of Reform and Opening Up, single men felt increased social and economic pressure to accumulate a number of assets to attract single women (and win over their future in-laws) (see Yan 2003; Jiang et al 2015).[60] A house is foremost

[60] For a closer analysis of gender and the market see Zhang et al 2012.

among these, and, in some cases, can even act *in place* of a marriage for couples in unconventional arrangements (Zhang 2010). Keeping a house empty and naked meant that once the owners of a marriage house's son did find a woman he wanted to marry, the woman would be able to renovate the house according to her own specifications as though it had been purchased new with her specifically in mind. In a way that a house that had already been rented or renovated could never be, the empty marriage house's slate remained virginal: pure, untouched, and clean.

That purity comes at a cost. Keeping a house empty means foregoing years of rental income, and in the case of a marriage house, the period of foregone rental income cannot be determined in advance. Like the year a beloved son will be married, it can be estimated but not predicted. Culturally, keeping a marriage house empty makes sense—people keep it empty because it's for a specific cultural or even sentimental purpose: a son's future. A son's future is invaluable; its worth cannot be measured against potential rental income. Keeping an investment house empty is more difficult to explain.

In his essay on Soviet-style "economies of storage," Serguei Oushakine draws on the works of Bronislaw Malinowski and Annette Weiner to argue that, like the Trobrianders who *withheld* perishable possessions from exchange in order to challenge or create social status, the Soviet-style passion for accumulating things that would never be used was a way of "generating forms of social and geographic connectedness, establishing social hierarchies, and framing rituals of recognition" (2014, 225-226). Something similar, I think, is happening with the hoarding of empty houses in Zhengzhou. Though the newly built houses being collected by the wealthy today have

been evacuated of their link to the past and ancestors, they have once again come to be the primary symbol of wealth to people in Zhengzhou (see Hsu 1971 [1948], 40). Rich people often spoke about how many houses they had as a way of crudely bragging about their wealth. Importantly, in spite of their ubiquity and importance to people's financial assets, houses were not always seen as a legitimate source of wealth. Olivia, who had a prolonged, on-and-off flirtation with a real estate tycoon, spoke about his houses with anger and disgust because she associated them with corruption. "How does he suddenly have a new car?" she asked me rhetorically, "I will tell you how! It's because of all his houses. And how does he have so many houses? Because all of these people in real estate are too complicated. To get rich, they'll stop at nothing (*buzeshouduan*)!"

Nevertheless, "a house" became a kind of shorthand unit for value among the wealthy, as in, "You could buy several houses for the price of that car!" or "That necklace is worth as much as three houses." This colloquial use conveys the imagined liquidity of the pure, empty house. Though in what follows I do address straightforward economic concerns about how the costs of renting and renovation might exceed the profits, I want to emphasize that these monetary concerns may not illuminate the real reasons why people are keeping houses empty. In contrast to the Soviet-style economy described by Oushakine where planners admitted that value and use-value were "not automatically linked" but failed to imagine exchange-value (2014, 220-222), in Zhengzhou, I argue that the unrenovated or unlived in empty house's potential to be exchanged with less friction than a renovated one is precisely the source of its value. The empty house is not necessarily wasteful or at least it is *not only* wasteful; it is also a safe, easily transferrable alternative to a different, more dangerous option.

Emptiness as an Alternative to Chaos and Crowdedness

In September 2014, I rented a resettlement house (*chaiqianfang*) in a complex for an urban village (*dushi cunzhuang*). More than other homeowners in Zhengzhou, my landlord Mr. Zheng appreciated the fact that an empty house was not making any money. Urban villages were notorious for the way buildings stood tightly packed together on what were once individual housing plots but had—with a little ingenuity and a lot of illegal contracting—become multiple story buildings the villagers rented out. After the demolition and expropriation of their property, many former urban villagers relied almost entirely on the income they made from renting out resettlement housing, and delays in its redistribution could have devastating effects (see Chuang 2014).

Mr. Zheng was tightlipped about his finances but outspoken in his belief that renting a house to the wrong person was far worse than leaving it unrented. A fellow villager owned the apartment next to the one I rented, and Mr. Zheng often spoke disparagingly of his neighbor's decision to hire a middleman (*zhongjie*) to find tenants. "If you do it that way, it's too chaotic (*luan*)!" he told me, "With us, I know you, you know me. You're only one foreigner. You won't have so many people crowded (*ji*) in one room like *waidiren* do!" Mr. Zheng and I had an arrangement between individuals, not middlemen. "Middlemen don't care who rents the apartment, they just want the money!" Mr. Zheng insisted.

Underlying Mr. Zheng's statement is the presumption that the middlemen *should* care about something else besides money, or, at least, that he himself values something more than money. What homeowners like Mr. Zheng might pay in lost rental income, they get back in this currency of feeling like they have control over the empty space. The

emptiness of an empty house stands in opposition to the crowdedness of a house with too many tenants or the densely populated urban villages Mr. Zheng's resettlement housing complex had replaced; the sterility of a house that has never been lived in contrasts directly with the chaotic messiness Mr. Zheng associated with the waidiren tenants found by middlemen.

Even though Mr. Zheng wanted his apartments full, he understood that crowdedness and chaos were not desirable. In fact, they sometimes inspired fantasies of annihilation. On my last day in Zhengzhou before leaving the field in 2014, Sophy—the owner of the Capitalist Pig BBQ Restaurant and a high school SAT teacher—drove me to the train station and ranted about the city's chaotic structure.

"Look at this!" she exclaimed in frustration, gesturing at the industrial buildings mixed with high-rise residential towers, "This makes no sense. Why is it like this? If I get rich, I want to drop a bomb on Zhengzhou so that it has a chance to start over. It's just not right."

Even after I reacted with horror, Sophy held her position. It would be better, she admitted, if the hypothetical bomb could be dropped without killing everyone, but regardless the city still needed to start over with a clean slate. Chastened, I watched as she wove the car through the tangled snarls of cars, electric bikes, and pedestrians that defined life on the densely populated West Side and drove into the New East Side. The journey itself was one from old to new and from crowded to empty. At the scale of the city, my interlocutors associated chaos and crowdedness with poverty and backwardness while emptiness and cleanliness were saved for the wealthy and modern. Since the early 2000s, Zhengzhou's development gradually shifted east and north. While the crowded

West Side fell into disrepair, Zhengzhou's wealthiest families moved to the New East District, whose empty boulevards had so transfixed Stahl.

Commentators like Stahl seem to be mistaking the invention of the Chinese suburbs for an economic anomaly because high-rise apartments do not appear suburban. The emptiness of those boulevards in the New East District are not alienating but appealing; just as white, middle-class families once fled the perceived chaos of the American city for suburbia, so Zhengzhou's richest residents have found themselves drawn to the seeming luxury of the New East District, with its lack of traffic and abundance of greenery. Others have had to settle for what they can afford. In September 2015, I was talking about real estate with Ms. Xu. Like the rest of her coworkers, Ms. Xu was a waidiren and had bought a house in Zhengzhou. In fact, she'd just bought a second house: a school district house (*xuequfang*) to allow her daughter to attend a good elementary school in the north. When I encouragingly said that was a nice area, she scoffed at the price she was paying to live in next to an urban village. "To be honest, I wish I could live in a ghost city like Luoyang's New Development District," Ms. Xu sighed, "Zhengzhou is too chaotic and crowded. If I could live in a place that doesn't have any people! How comfortable."

The Empty House as an Occupation

As Ms. Xu's purchase of the school district house shows, buying a house can be—as it is in many other places—a strategic decision. Jin Bing, a former real estate salesman in his mid-thirties agreed with Liu Hao's sentiment about needing a house to enter the city in a separate conversation. "When people buy houses in China, it's not just about living in it, it's about occupying the place (*zhanyong difang*)," he explained, "I

think in America you don't have this feeling of needing a house to be in a place, but in China we do. You buy a house and maybe it is empty because you live somewhere else, but when you go there, the place is yours."

Jin Bing's observation highlights an important but not entirely obvious aspect of the Zhengzhou's real estate market's logic: A place can appear empty and yet be occupied. Failed business owners will often continue to pay rent on empty storefronts for months as they wait for someone willing to pay the handover fee (*zhuanrangfei*). In 2014, I heard of handover fees as high as 800,000RMB (123,500USD) for a first-level space on a busy bar street.[61] One could even see the compensation urban villagers get as a kind of handover fee to acknowledge that they occupied the place first.[62] Within the logic of a system in which developers buy not land but the right to use or, in other words, to *occupy* the land for 70 years, it makes sense to think of housing not as something that belongs to you in perpetuity but as a necessarily temporary claim to the space. The value of owning a house is not the rental income or even the ability to use it; it's the *option* to occupy. And besides, who knows what kind of handover fees selling it will bring?

The Trouble with Renting

Once I asked Vivian directly why, if the purpose of an investment house was to make money, she didn't want to make *more* money by renting it out. She did not explicitly tie her preference not to rent with her desire to exert control. Instead, she gave

[61] Business owners told me that many restaurants failed because they began deep in debt after paying an exorbitant handover fee to the tenant who owned the rental rights; others bought ailing businesses and allowed them to limp along while waiting for someone to pay them a handover for the right to rent.
[62] It's a fee that's often viewed as inadequate and forced upon people who'd rather continue to occupy the place. For more, see Erie 2012 and Chu 2014.

me the same answer I'd hear from homeowners all over the city: "It's too much trouble to manage it (*guanli tai mafan*)."

Unlike Mr. Zheng, Vivian was too polite to state the obvious: she did not need the money. She did not need it both because she was already rich and also because in the PRC property is not taxed until it's sold, which means there is no holding cost for keeping the house empty. During an interview, Wen Lijing explained the rationale behind not renting an investment house more bluntly:

> If you want to rent, you have to renovate. Even the simplest renovation will cost you 60,000 or 70,000RMB (9,000USD and 10,700USD)[63] and that's if you're using the cheapest materials. Every year, if you charge 2,000RMB (300USD) per month for rent, you're only getting 24,000RMB (3,700USD) per year, less than the renovation cost. And then when you go to sell the house, you might have problems because the person buying it won't want to live with the cheapest materials—they're going to have to demolish it all and renovate again, and they will want to pay less. Especially for rich people, it's not worth it to rent an investment—the truth is, you don't make any money from renting.

Buying a house and letting it languish until a buyer like Xiao Wei comes along ends up looking, to wealthy people like Vivian, like an attractively low energy investment. Buying a house wasn't risk free, but neither was anything else—people often told me that they bought houses because they were afraid their money would depreciate if they left it in the bank. A house, empty or not, seemed like a better investment than a savings account, where over 2003 and 2013 people earned an interest rate of 0.01% (Fang et al forthcoming, 4).

In addition, people living in Zhengzhou understand that the policies influencing the market are often personally motivated. Once you get to a certain level of wealth in the city, everyone knows someone who knows the people implementing these policies.

[63] Other people I spoke maintained that this was an exaggeration; in fact, you could renovate it for 30,000RMB (4,600USD) if it was a small apartment and you didn't buy furniture for it.

Everyone also knows that even the people with their hands on the strings might not know exactly what the next policy will be or why. In July 2013, I told a friend of mine not to buy an investment house because I'd heard there was a bubble. She laughed and told me her uncles were officials and had invested in houses, so even if it were a bubble, she was sure they wouldn't let it pop.[64] In March 2014, a group of wealthy women I worked with started scrambling to sell their properties; they'd heard that a property tax might be implemented in the next few months. The tax was abandoned after the housing industry's numbers began to slide, and the women followed the officials they knew and kept their houses.

Zhengzhou's emerging class of wealthy elites is all too familiar with how quickly the policies and officials that govern their lives can change. Things that can be controlled—an empty house, a child's education, and what one knows about others—are coveted and guarded with increasing urgency, to the point of refusing to contemplate that these things may not be as stable as they appear. One afternoon I asked Sophy what she thought would happen if the housing market collapsed. Dreamily, she began to list the possible effects. All her students' parents' money was tied up in investment houses, without which they wouldn't be able to send their children abroad for college. Without going abroad, the students wouldn't need to learn English, and so she wouldn't have her job as a SAT tutor. The business she ran with her husband—the Capitalist Pig—would also fold as people cut back on expenses. The buildings they lived in would deteriorate

[64] Her conviction reinforces an insight by Fang et al who surmise that housing markets have persisted because "the heavy reliance of local governments on land sales revenue for their fiscal budget might have emboldened many households to believe that the housing market is too important to fall and that the central government would institute policies to support the housing market if necessary" (Fang et al forthcoming, 6).

because no one would be able to spend money on upkeep. It would ruin her whole life. Only later would I realize the strange resonance between Sophy's reactions to the housing market's hypothetical collapse and her proposal that Zhengzhou be bombed. The bomb would never happen, and, she insisted forcefully, neither would the housing bubble. She too explained to me that all the officials and real estate tycoons she knew still had their apartments. "These are the people who control the system," she told me confidently, "They wouldn't let it happen because they would suffer too."

Market Prices and Familial Resources

Even after hearing all the horror stories about expected houses, projects gone wrong, and real estate agents from hell, the people I worked with continued to buy houses. One of the dreadful aspects of the collapse of housing bubbles in other countries is the demographics of the people who suffered because of them (see Stout 2016). As the encounter I described at the beginning of the article between Xiao Wei and Vivian demonstrates, however, Zhengzhou's real estate market prices are driven by people from the city's upper economic tiers, not its middle or lower ends. Vivian later described the transaction's other details: She'd bought the pair of two bedroom apartments for 14,000RMB (2,200USD) a square meter. The total cost of the two expected houses was just shy of two million RMB (300,000USD), of which Vivian had paid half outright (150,000USD). To put this in perspective, the average salary in Zhengzhou is a little more than 4,000RMB per month or around 7,400USD per year (NBSC 2014).

As Janice observed, it would be impossible to buy a house on a waiter's salary, and I didn't hear of anyone who did because buying a house was a decision people made as a *family*, not as individuals. Like Lisa and her mother, Xiao Wei's resources were

pooled together with his parents', and the family would shoulder the risks and reap the benefits together. While asking for help in the Cardboard Coffee WeChat group, Xiao Wei declined several offers to buy clientele's houses because "my parents won't agree." As excuses went, it was polite, but it may have also been honest; even my better-off interlocutors, such as Olivia who made 9,000RMB (1,400USD) per month, had to endure the endless compromises that came with choosing a house that pleased their parents. Less than a week after purchasing a secondhand house chosen by her mother, Olivia vented about how she would rather have bought a new house further east. "But I couldn't, because even though it's my money, it's their house!" she fumed.

The purchase of a second or third house frees people from the obligation of these familial compromises and, more importantly, gives them a sense of control. In September 2015, Professor Bai, who jokingly proclaimed himself a poor person but was more likely middle-class, was taking me to lunch near his university when I started talking real estate. As we sat at a stoplight across from a complex of residential high-rises, he gestured toward the complex.

"I bought a house there and remodeled it three years ago, and it's been empty ever since," he said, "Probably I've lost—at 3,000RMB (460USD) a month, times 12, times three…" He paused. "Around 100,000RMB (15,400USD) in rent."

"That's a lot of money!" I laughed, and he agreed. "Does no one want to rent it?"

He shook his head. "No, a few people have asked me to rent it, but I said no. Originally I wanted to live here, but it was inconvenient for my child's school."

"So why don't you rent it?"

It was his turn to laugh. "I'm just not willing to. It's my house! Why would I rent it?"

Marketing Metaphors: The Pressure Cooker vs. the Bubble

Recent events, such as the PRC's stock market crash in 2015, have highlighted both how much money people have to invest in the PRC and how difficult it is to find reliable investments. While a refusal to acknowledge the potential fragility of one's finances is not the same thing as financial security, it may be time to admit that the metaphor of the bubble does not work in the PRC both because the constraints on who can purchase homes are so particular and also because the metaphor's basic premise is simply untrue in the PRC.[65] Remember that the metaphor of a bubble presumes that the market's invisible atmospheric pressure will eventually allow the bubble to burst. Under the PRC's economic system, there is no incentive to maintain the fiction that invisible forces govern the market; in fact, President Xi Jinping's recent invocations of the government's "visible hand" demand the international community recognize that in the PRC such forces do not (2015). Instead, a more apt metaphor to describe the PRC's housing market as it existed during my fieldwork might be a pressure cooker, where policies constrain consumers and ultimately drive them out of the country, into other, more predictable markets like those in New York, Los Angeles, and Vancouver—places Zhengzhou's real estate agents declare to be "so cheap!" in comparison to the PRC. Wen Lijing maintained that these markets—or "*your* markets," as he put it to me—were the ones in danger of being turned into bubbles by Chinese investors who buy houses abroad

[65] Unlike in Spain, foreigners cannot directly invest in the market and, unlike in the United States, restrictions on financing, including down payments around 35% make a similar subprime mortgage crisis unlikely (Fang et al forthcoming).

and then—unsurprisingly—keep them empty (see Lee 2015). In 2014 I helped May, the wife of the richest man in Henan's nephew, read the documents she needed to buy a house in Pasadena, California. When I asked her if she planned to rent it while she was in the PRC, she said of course not—why would she let a stranger live in a house that she planned to live in herself?

For many months, I didn't understand why May would want to immigrate to the USA. In Zhengzhou, she had money, family, friends, and a villa with an indoor rock wall! Why would she leave? "Because we have no control here," she told me glumly, "When things change, all we can do is tolerate it." As if to prove her point, in February 2014, just months before she left for California, Zhengzhou's government declared it would demolish all the urban villages by the year's end. The city argued that urban villages were too chaotic and crowded; they were hotbeds for illegal activities. There were protests, but ultimately the government prevailed. By January 2015, both housing and rent prices had increased by 50% as villagers scrambled to buy new houses with their compensation and the waidiren who'd been living in the villages searched for new rentals.

In September 2015, I asked Liu Hao pointblank the demolition of the urban villages was done protect Zhengzhou's housing market. "You've read on the internet about '*Chaina*,'[66] right?" he smiled, "It's true that rent and prices went up, but it's not a bubble. In Zhengzhou people have a rigid demand. We can just say that consumers who had a long-term plan to buy a house in the future decided to buy it sooner."[67]

[66] A combination of demolish (*chai*) and take (*na*). For more on this pun, see Chu 2015, 354.
[67] I agreed to some extent; it's likely part of a pattern that sees emptiness and annihilation as key to developing the city and citizens. For more on urban villages, see Bach 2010.

There are reasons to dismiss Liu Hao's claims as braggadocio; later, during lunch, he admitted he had lost five million RMB (772,000USD) in the stock market. "I am too patriotic," he said sadly. We were sitting in the province's Communist Party Training School cafeteria because Liu Hao thought it would be funny to bring an American to eat there. (It was.) He gestured at the white tiles and walls: "All my friends are in the government! I trusted the government, so now I just have to leave the money. I love my country; it will go back up." Even with his connections, Liu Hao hadn't made it out of the market intact.

Given the way a policy can change people's lives and addresses overnight, it makes sense that people want to exert control where they can. In an environment like Zhengzhou, preserving the ability to leave a space, like an empty house, and return a year later to find it unchanged is not irrational; it is invaluable. In the meantime, people continue to control what they can, including their houses. Remember that after the policy changed and she was presented with the option to buy two houses instead of one, Vivian did so without hesitating because houses seemed safe. They signified physical safety for her when she visited her daughter, psychological safety for her family who could now occupy the city, and financial safety when compared with more volatile investments. When I asked what Vivian planned to do with the houses, which were expected and a few years away from being completed, she shrugged. One she would remodel and keep empty for her family, but she wasn't sure about the second one. "Will you rent it?" I asked, and she cocked her head before answering: "Maybe." Vivian's circumspect response did not surprise me. With her husband, Vivian owned a small boutique coffee shop, two Fortune 500 companies, a smaller management consulting company, and five other houses in

Zhengzhou that I knew of, two of which were empty. She was a savvy businesswoman who knew *exactly* how much emptiness was worth to her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Willful Times: Events, Unpredictability, and Willfulness Among Entrepreneurs

In June 2015 the stock market in the People's Republic of China (PRC) crashed, and continued to crash, repeatedly. My interlocutors took this as a sign, and what were once thought to be temporary concerns about the environment at large (*da huanjing*)—a euphemism for changes caused by President Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Campaign—gradually morphed into more directly invoked fears about the market at large (*da hangqing*). Instead of conserving resources, however, many of my interlocutors decided this was the perfect time to start a business. On February 4, 2016, I asked Calvin, an entrepreneur who was born after 1970, why so many people were risking so much if the economy was so bad. To answer, Calvin invoked his favorite hobby: deep sea diving. "When I am under the water," Calvin began, "I can get below these giant schools of fish, swimming in a circle. Beside them are two sharks, also circling. Sometimes, a shark will eat one of the fish, but the fish do nothing. They don't try to escape. They just keep swimming. Chinese people are like that."

"You mean they think it probably won't happen to them because there are so many other fish?" I asked.

"No," Calvin snapped, "I mean they are not even *thinking*. All they are doing is swimming. Chinese people are like that. They don't even think."

Calvin's analogy is obviously problematic, but I am repeating it here because he's pointing to something important, which is that there is a culturally specific way of *not thinking* that carries my interlocutors toward the future. Between March 2013 and March

2016, I conducted 25 months of participant observation fieldwork research in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province. I investigated the influence unpredictable events have on how people form social relationships and make decisions. Following both local tendencies to organize people by birth year and other anthropological work on generational differences in the PRC (e.g. Rofel 1999), this chapter examines why entrepreneurs born in three different generations—post-1970s, post-1980s, and post-1990s—continue to make what appear to be risky economic decisions even in the face of what they admit is an economic downturn.

Unpredictability and Event Analysis: An alternative to risk

As many anthropologists have recently argued, distinguishing between "danger, risk, and uncertainty, both analytically and anthropologically" is crucial for the study of events, which can do more than simply illustrate ethnographic conundrums (Samimian-Darash and Rabinow 2015, 1; Kapferer 2015, 1-2). Other works have focused either on specific professions charged with anticipating future events (Daipha 2015) or on how specific unanticipated events are framed through post hoc narratives (Roitman 2013; Petryna 2003). This chapter contributes to and builds on these studies as well as other methodological arguments by proposing the use of unpredictability as an analytic when tracking change over time (Gluckman 1965; Moore 1987).

Social theorists who initially explored risk explicitly linked it to a division between "modern" and "pre-modern" societies. Risk was supposed to have grown out of the environmental dangers associated with modern industrialization and to have resulted in the replacement of spiritual explanations of contingency with the secular idea of chance (Beck 1992; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Luhmann 1979; Giddens 1990). By

explicitly positing "risk" as the scientific, secular, or modern alternative to occult explanations of misfortunes (such as witchcraft, Prenatal Destiny, or *fortuna*), these thinkers implicitly echoed the logic of early anthropologists who claimed the people they studied were indifferent to the material causes of accidents (Lévy-Bruhl 1923; Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]; Fortes 1959). While those studies have been criticized both for buttressing imperialist projects as well as for maintaining a false dichotomy between so-called primitive societies and what was perceived to be a modern, rational, and implicitly western society (e.g. Rasmussen 1989; Goldman 1993), risk as a concept has remained strangely exempt from such condemnation.

In fact, risk has grown as an analytical concept in both sociocultural anthropology and other social science disciplines. Studies in economics and economic anthropology have repeatedly attempted to associate "risky behavior" with poverty or else with related factors such as food insecurity to rationalize such behavior (see Tucker 2012 for a discussion of such studies). Mary Douglas's early attempt to establish a cultural theory of risk describes it as rising, in a Durkheimian fashion, from a sense of vulnerability among people "liberated" from their local communities (1992, 15). Risk today is not only future oriented as Ulrich Beck originally indicated but can also double as a predictive method (1992, 33). The mathematical "risk" of an event happening is epistemological, something that can be known but loses its usefulness as soon as the event happens (Reith 2004, 386). In this way, risk—the so-called scientific answer to modern life's vicissitudes—is not so different from fortune telling.

Nevertheless, scientific thought, industrial development, and modernization are not prerequisites for the empirical existence of actual unpredictable events.

Unpredictability is the quality shared by accidental events, by which I mean everything from a car crash to winning the lottery to earthquakes to bumper crops. Whereas uncertainty may be a temporary state of not knowing that can change as time progresses and one learns more (just as risk disappears after the event), unpredictability as an analytic category exists before and lingers long after events happen. Unpredictability can describe not just an epistemological property of the event—that it was unanticipated—but also its ontological status—that things being the way they were, the people concerned could not have anticipated it.

Beyond that, unpredictability allows social scientists to be precise about which data are produced when. For instance, when forensic anthropologists are confronted with skeletal remains, they categorize physical trauma according to when it happened: antemortem trauma is damage inflicted before death, perimortem trauma occurred during death (and likely caused death), and postmortem damage took place after death (Byers 2011, 243; Sauer 1998). Following Marshall Sahlins, who argued that in *Islands of History* that "the event is a happening interpreted" (1985), I think ethnographers can use similar ante-, peri-, and post-period categories to analyze how and when a happening becomes an event through people's interpretations. While forensic teams sometimes have difficulty distinguishing between antemorterm, perimortem, and postmortem damage (Pickering and Bachman 2009, 145), ethnographers conducting participant observation have a comparative advantage in that they merely need to note exactly *when* their interlocutors said and did what while writing up. In my proposed model (figure 3), in the ante-period there is a cause, origin, or intention that leads to a happening, and that then

results in people making an account, meaning, or explanation for the happening in the post-period, which turns the happening into an event.

An accident or an unpredicted event is distinguished by the fact that the ante-period is characterized by ambiguity (figure 4). To borrow an example from E.E. Evans-Pritchards's classic account of Zande witchcraft, people may know the *material* causes of a granary collapse (termites), but the fact that it collapsed at the very moment people were beneath it demands an additional *social* explanation; only witchcraft can explain "the coincidence of these two happenings" (Evans-Pritchards 1976[1937], 22-23). Witchcraft is one possible cause in a "plurality of causes" that makes an unexpected happening socially legible as a misfortunate event (Evans-Pritchards 1976[1937], 26). The ambiguity of the accident in the ante-period creates an excess of explanations, narratives, and accounts produced in the post-period as people attempt to fill in the ante-period with socially acceptable "theories of causality" (Rasmussen 1989, 124). In other words, accidents can be generative; they prompt people to make sense out of something that is not necessarily sensible on its face. In the PRC, these possible, competing theories of causality can cause distress, and—as I will show—people sometimes resist articulating their interpretations of unpredicted or anticipated events.

With this understanding of events, the advantages of unpredictability as an analytic become clear. Risk not only focuses on negative outcomes but also is only relevant in the ante-period, before the projected event. Accountability—another concept frequently evoked to analysis events—is similarly limited because it only appears *after* the event (in the post-period) and is largely concerned with negative outcomes. Uncertainty about projected events (which may never actually happen) can be tracked in

what may become an infinite ante-period. Finally, narratives—through which many people interpret happenings and transform them into events—can multiply as people anticipate, react in real time, interpret, and then revise the meaning they give to events and to their lives; narratives may also disappear as people become unwilling to engage with multiple, contradictory accounts. Unpredictability not only contains all of these concepts but also allows ethnographers to deploy them in a more precise way.

In addition, categorizing happenings as unpredictable—rather than fortunate or misfortunate—allows events as seemingly different as suddenly getting fired or meeting the right investor to be analyzed together. As I will show over the course of this article, the people I work with in Zhengzhou often withheld judgment on the goodness or badness of unexpected outcomes in their own lives and did not think of their own decisions in terms of future dangers, risks, or uncertainty; they also did not feel a compulsion to account for unexpected outcomes and preferred to let possible, competing theories of causality remain unspoken in the post-period. Many anthropological studies are based on a functionalist assumption that people will naturally "attempt to create *certainty*" (Samimian-Darash and Rabinow 2015, 2, emphasis in the original; see also Chibnik 2011, 60-89). Instead of beginning with that presumption, this article asks: What does planning look like in a milieu where people have *given up* the struggle for certainty? What kind of decisions are people making if they actively *disregard* trying to predict the future? And what historical, economic, and cultural factors might have led people to this point?

Risk in the Time of Liberalization: Presentist practices in the PRC

In 1978, after three decades of famine, political struggle, and forced relocation under Maoist socialism, the liberalization of the PRC's economy began in a series of policies referred to broadly as Reform and Opening Up. Much ethnographic work has been done on the impact of this liberalizing (or, perhaps, neoliberalizing) process in the PRC (see Kipnis 2007); however, there is considerably less work theorizing the effect these sudden changes to everyday life have had on abstract but crucial cultural beliefs, such as people's conceptions of the future. An exception is Xin Liu's 2002 book, *The Otherness of Self*. Liu argues that people in the PRC reconfigured their internal, moral space "through a new conception of time" (2002, 134). To demonstrate this, Liu divides Chinese conceptions of time into three distinct epochs: the traditional, the revolutionary, and the modern (2002, 144-156).

Liu's argument strikes me as both admirably ambitious and strangely derivative. What Liu describes as the traditional—when people live "in a reversed time…that orients toward one's ancestors in and of the past" (2002, 144)—must somehow stand for thousands of years of history in a geographically and culturally diverse territory. Similarly, the sense of urgency felt by early twentieth century advocates of enlightenment and revived by college students in the 1980s (see Schwarcz 1986; Fewsmith 2001) is either gone or else flattened into the revolutionary, which Liu defines as an orientation toward the communist future (2002, 150). Finally, Liu's modern is characterized by the absence of progressive, linear change; this might instead be called "the post-modern" by critical theorists, who have for decades questioned narratives of progress through time (e.g. Lyotard 1979; Giddens 1990). Nevertheless, Liu's main insight is essential: shifts in everyday temporal practices in the PRC are inextricably tied to shifts in the larger

political situation. As the territory we now call the PRC transitioned from a collection of war-torn states in the first half of the twentieth century to a planned, socialist economy after 1949 to now the country with the second-largest GDP in the world, the ways people experienced time also changed.

The PRC is not the only place where temporality and the political economy mutually influence each other. In a 2007 article, Jane I. Guyer outlines an historic convergence between two different temporalities: the economic and religious (2007:414). The result is a sense of time as "punctuated" by dates-as-events, where the "tomorrow is an other day, completely other, in which the passing of the date inaugurates new absences as well as new presences" (Guyer 2007, 416). Liu characterizes the PRC's modern (or post-modern) temporality as not punctuated but as discrete; he records an experience of the present to end all present-ness, what he calls the "today-ness of today" (2002, 161). Among entrepreneurs in Beihai, "the life of everything is its here and now" (Liu 2002, 180); future dangers or—in other words—risk can wait.

Risk grows out of a particular conception of time in which "the past loses the power to determine the present" because the desire to avoid catastrophic future outcomes governs present actions (Beck 1992, 34). As Gerda Reith observes, "when we talk about risk, we are talking about the future: Trying to work out what will happen next, and what we can do to avoid or expedite it" (2004, 386). In other words, risk is a *predictive* analytic concept; it assumes people have an interest in calculating the impact their present actions may have on their future. Like Liu's businesspeople, many of my interlocutors made decisions in what I call a presentist time frame. This should not be confused with fatalism, which is characterized by submission to forces beyond one's control; in

contrast, presentist practices *emphasize* the agency of the people concerned. My interlocutors put off future decisions until the future arrived as the present and no longer required prediction. Rather than passively accepting a predetermined future, my interlocutors instead embraced the future's radical *indeterminacy* and delayed making decisions until the last possible moment, when they would know for sure what their best option was. This may be one reason investors in the PRC remain so focused on short-term gains: only what you can grasp in the present is ever truly yours.

Because of this, I argue that unpredictability may be a more generative analytic than risk in the PRC. While the concept of risk exists, many of my interlocutors do not act in a way that is easily explainable by previous theories of risk. They are neither impoverished nor justifying their risky decisions as a trade-off with opportunity; instead, they see opportunity as opposed to prevailing opinions. In addition, many outcomes in the PRC are influenced not by people's individual choices but by unrelated and unpredicted events. That said, people I worked with did not presume those unexpected outcomes would necessarily be bad. In contrast to other, more hopeful populations (Miyazaki 2004; Kirksey 2015), people in Zhengzhou cultivated not detailed future visions but rather an openness to the future, which could be both unpredicted and also beneficial. More than risk and uncertainty, unpredictability captures that openness and encourages ethnographers to analyze unexpected outcomes regardless of whether they are good or bad. In what follows, I will track the unexpected effects of four macro-level unpredictable events—urbanization policies, Reform and Opening Up, the stock market crash, and the Anti-Corruption Campaign—on individual people's attitudes, situations, and decisions in Zhengzhou.

Calvin: Post-70s and keeping time in the wake of urbanization policies

Everyone who knew Calvin admitted he was special. Most people in Zhengzhou engaged in the presentist practices described by Liu; they were somehow always busy without ever making appointments (2002, 156). Calvin was different. He and his wife had made a fortune through two Fortune 500 companies and by investing in real estate. He kept a detailed iCal synchronized across his iPhone 6 Plus, iPad Air, and Apple Desktop Computer.

"While you're doing your research, you should ask people to show you their calendars," he told me one afternoon in Cardboard Coffee, a boutique coffee shop he owned with his wife. "They'll be busy every day, but they won't have anything in their calendars." When I asked him why, he answered matter-of-factly: "Because China did not industrialize like America, and we never learned this as children." To demonstrate, he turned to a group of post-70s women who were sitting at a nearby table: "Hey! Which of you had a schedule at school?"

"What do you mean?" Jenny, a manager at a State-Owned insurance company, asked tentatively.

"When you were a child," Calvin continued, "Did you have a schedule telling you what to do every day?"

Jenny laughed: "Of course not! We just looked at the sky (*kantian*)."

"You see?" Calvin said triumphantly, turning back to me, "This is the problem. We still think like farmers (*nongmin*). This is how a farmer decides what to do. He looks at the sky—if it's raining, maybe today he will not go out to plant crops. He lets the sky (*tian*) decide for him. Thirty years ago everyone in Zhengzhou was a farmer!"

Calvin is referring to one of the most unpredictable mass transformations of the twenty-first century: the PRC's shift from being a largely agricultural, peasant society to a predominantly urban country. In 1990, only 26% of the PRC's population lived in cities; by the end of 2015, just 25 years later, that number jumped to 56% as policies and economic opportunities encouraged more than half of the country's 1.3 billion citizens to move to urban areas (NBSC 2015; Zhu 2014). It's important to remember that this shift was unpredicted. China had been an agricultural society for thousands of years, and many people—including ethnographers working on the mainland before 1949—expected it would remain that way (Fei 1992[1948]; Hsu 1971[1948]). In fact, a peculiar feature of socialism under Mao Zedong was a focus not on urbanization but on *ruralization*. From 1966 to 1976 during the Cultural Revolution—a ten-year period from 1966 to 1976 characterized by violence and political campaigns that followed the devastating famine of the Great Leap Forward—millions of urban youths were sent down to the countryside to work (UNDP 1999, 37; Unger 2002).

Few scholars have explicitly argued—as Calvin does—that there is a connection between the PRC's relatively recent rural past, the policies that brought people to its cities, and the presentist practices that now defines everyday life in those cities. Although I like the boldness of Calvin's claim, I remain skeptical of historical explanations if only because they so often seemed selective. For instance, after invoking kantian, Calvin continued to lecture aggressively:

> For five thousand years, it was the same. Someone would come to Henan and say, "Now it's the Ming Dynasty." And the farmers would say, "Okay," and then plant crops, harvest crops, and eat crops. Then someone says, "Now it's the Qing Dynasty." And then the farmers would say, "Okay," and go back to planting crops, harvesting crops, and eating crops. Finally someone says, "Now you're a Japanese colony." Only then did the farmers pick up their weapons and fight!

While China's dynastic history and what the PRC officially calls the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (World War II) are very present in Calvin's narrative, the PRC's more recent, Maoist past—which I have highlighted—is curiously absent. Calvin's selective deployment of history reinforces the idea of the discrete "today-ness of today" and encourages precisely those presentist practices he claims to be resisting (Liu 2002, 161).

Lily: Post-70s and floating through the market's metaphors after Reform and Opening Up

Remember that Calvin is exceptional; in his own analogy of Chinese society, he is neither the unthinking fish nor the predatory sharks but the observing diver positioned outside the system. Calvin himself pointed out that because he contracted for multinational corporations, he had learned to keep time like his counterparts in Japan, Germany, and the USA. Lily is a far more representative post-70s businessperson in Zhengzhou. After graduating from university in the early 1990s, Lily tested into a position as a judge in a county-level courthouse. She had only been working for three years when she decided she wanted to practice law privately.

Official positions like hers were coveted and leaving one was, especially at the time, unusual. When she describes the reasons for her decision, they sound vague and distant: she did not want to live in the county seat forever; she was bored. When she describes her decision to start her own law firm, however, she grows excited, as though its effects still surprise her: "At the time, no one thought it was a good idea, but I just thought, 'I have to try it!'" The result was that she grew rich as the first woman in Zhengzhou to open her own law firm, while her colleagues at the county court remained

underpaid. “Succeeding during Reform and Opening Up was about three things,” she told me, “seeing opportunity, seizing opportunity, and executing opportunity. Many people can do one or two, but very few people could do all three.” Note that Lily does not—like professionals elsewhere (e.g. Orta 2013; Miyazaki 2013)—automatically pair risk with opportunity in her description; instead, she puts opportunity in opposition to public opinion (“no one thought it was a good idea”). In her own interpretation of her life, Lily’s willful disregard for prevailing social norms led directly to her current success.

It’s worth remembering that people who advised Lily not to start a private firm had very good reasons to do so. In 1974, the year Lily was born, the Gang of Four launched its last campaign during which cadres seized the poultry, family vegetable plots, and other so-called private enterprises peasants used to survive (Unger 2002:16-17). Between 1949 and 1978, there had been dozens of other campaigns, many of which were contradictory. The most striking example is 1956’s the Hundred Flowers Campaign, when people were encouraged to share their criticism with the Party; it was followed immediately by 1957’s Anti-Rightist Campaign in which those who had written critiques were punished as enemies of the state (Spence 1990, 563-573). Even as Deng implemented reforms, disassembled State Owned Enterprises, and openly encouraged the country’s first entrepreneurs, the most cautious members of Lily’s generation remained skeptical. They continued to live out their failure to understand that seeing the presence of an opportunity was a third of what it took to succeed in Deng’s new China; meanwhile, Lily became a millionaire.

I met Lily through Olivia, a post-80s consultant who was helping Lily’s daughter apply to boarding schools in the USA. Lily was one of Olivia’s best friends but most

high-maintenance clients; nothing either Olivia or I could say would reassure Lily that all the schools she was considering were basically the same. “The problem is Lily thinks life is like this,” Olivia said, drawing a series of branches in the condensation on the table, “Once you go in one direction you can’t go back. For the post-70s generation, it really was that way. After Reform and Opening Up, if one decided to stay at the State-Owned-Enterprise and one decided to do business (*chuangye*), the consequences really were different. The second one got rich. No one knew what they were choosing at the time but now there is no going back.” She sighed. “This generation has only ever floated (*piao*) through life. They really do not like to make choices.”

For Lily, this was especially true. On WeChat, she went by the handle *Piaojie* or “Floating Sister,” and she was notorious even within her circle of similarly busy socialites for “releasing people’s pigeons,” an idiom for canceling appointments moments before they were supposed to occur. The importance of abandoning intention and allowing oneself to “float” through life for post-70s entrepreneurs is encapsulated by two metaphors from the post-Reform period. The first, “jumping into the sea” (*xiahai*), emerged after Deng’s 1992 Southern Tour, a trip meant to reassure investors shocked by the events of June 4, 1989 (Fewsmith 2001, 62-63). People who began private businesses were described in both brave and foolhardy terms as having jumped into the sea of commerce. The second is a phrase also usually attributed to Deng: to cross the river by feeling for the stones (*mozhe shitou guo he*). For Deng’s reformers, this metaphor described the careful, step-by-step, and yet fundamentally unplannable process of market transition. These two waterlogged and seemingly contradictory metaphors create a shared sense of the consequences of marketization. Regardless of whether you engaged with the

reforms suddenly—and risked drowning—or deliberately—and risked getting stranded midstream—one thing was certain: you were going to get wet, and your life would be changed in ways you could not predict. Lily hadn't decided to practice law because she wanted to be rich, but it had happened anyway.

For Lily, this experience of unpredicted outcomes had led to a conviction that in the future anything could happen regardless of what she intended, but Lily was clear that she wanted a different kind of future for her daughter. Lily never mentioned uncertainty (*buquedingxing*) or risk (*fengxian*) while researching her daughter's future; instead, she highlighted the irreversibility of the future's unpredictable nature. "As a mother, I think all I can do is provide her with whatever she needs to go abroad," she confessed, " Maybe she will turn into an American! Who can say?" Watching *The Words*, an American movie from 2012 about an author who decides to plagiarize, had recently moved her. "Afterward, I just sat there in bed until 2AM thinking," she said, "The movie is right. Making a decision is not hard. What's hard is living with its consequences." She sighed. "I look at my daughter, and I think she is like me. She is stubborn and willful, but so was I. I just hope she can live with the consequences."

Carrie: Post-80s and recovering from the 2015 stock market crash

Because I did not do fieldwork until 2013, it is difficult for me to evaluate Lily's case according to my ante-, peri-, and post-period categories; everything I know about how Lily feels about Reform and Opening Up is inflected by retrospection and recreated in the post-period. In contrast, over two years I was able to watch Carrie—a post-80s erstwhile entrepreneur—change firsthand. Carrie and I met in July 2014 at XX Bar, a social nexus for foreigners, well-established post-70s businesspeople, and people who

appreciated the fact that it was the city's oldest bar. Her parents owned a drug store in a county-seat three hours from Zhengzhou, and she spent her days studying for a pharmaceutical certification she needed to inherit it from them. I asked her how she could afford to not work (and to spend not a small amount of money on drinks each week), and she laughed (she frequently laughed): "I used to do business (*zuo shengyi*), but I sold it to someone else. I am retired." When I said she was smart—doing business these days seemed difficult—she corrected me. "Doing business wasn't easy back then either," she declared, "It was exhausting. I just want to pass this test and then I can really rest!"

In October 2014, when I left the field, Carrie was preoccupied with studying for her pharmaceutical exam; by the time I returned in June 2015, her priorities had shifted drastically. Her mother had fallen ill, and she'd gone home to care for her. When we met for dinner in Zhengzhou in September 2015, I barely recognized her. Reacting to what I assume was my shocked expression, she explained quickly: "My hair was falling out, so I cut it short. Lately, I have been under a lot of pressure (*yali hen da*)." I said I was sorry about her mother, but she shook her head; I had not recognized the real source of her distress. "No," she rasped, "I played the stock market (*wan'er gupiao*)." Stunned, I asked if she'd lost much (*pei le hen duo*), and she nodded wordlessly. She had a house in Zhengzhou that was not renovated or furnished, and she was back in part to finish it so she could live in the city without paying rent. "Did you pass your test?" I asked, and she looked at me oddly.

"No," she began, "But it doesn't matter. My family's pharmacy is not making money anymore anyway. I used to have enough money to never worry, but now I have enough to either start another business or go abroad for a year. Maybe to Australia."

This plan of Carrie's was the first of several different iterations that she expressed to me during the post-period following the stock market crash. Although she would ignore my attempts to get her to explain why she'd invested in the stock market by grimacing and saying, "Everyone already does not want to discuss this," she was very open to talking about the future and her next possible steps. In October 2015 she asked me to find her an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) teacher; in November 2015, she asked me if I knew of any medical equipment in America that wasn't sold in the PRC; in December 2015, she told me she'd reconnected with an old colleague who would help her find business opportunities; in January 2015, she told me she no longer wanted to go abroad. In February 2015, just before I left the field, Carrie invited her colleagues to come listen to a band at a lounge with us. As we waited for them, I asked how the business was going.

"Not good," she admitted between sips of mojito, "But I will find something else." I asked her if it was different than when she did business before. "I was so lazy then," she said, "I was making so much money that I would only sell something when I needed money, and then rest for a month. But then I got busy because there was some trouble with taxes, and once I had finished handling it, I thought I wanted to rest a little." She laughed. "I never thought I would rest for three years! Originally, this year I was going to start fresh, but maybe too many things happened and now I'm here." She laughed again: "No matter what, I can't bear it anymore!"

"When I met you, you said you were already retired," I reminded her.

"Right," she smiled, "and if it weren't for the stocks, I could have continued living my great life. But it's okay." She began to tally her losses. She'd invested

700,000RMB (108,000USD). Of that, she'd lost more than 300,000RMB (46,000USD) and another 200,000RMB (31,000USD) was tied up in stocks that could no longer be sold. She had only managed to grab a bit more than 100,000RMB (15,000USD); the rest was lost (*kui le*). I asked her which stocks she had originally bought.

"Let's not talk about it (*Bu shuo le ba*)!" she laughed, "There were too many. At that time, it was crazy. You saw how much money the stocks were earning, and you put all the money you could into it. If you didn't do it, you felt like an idiot (*shazi*)!"

Markets in the Short-Term: The herd mentality and "frying"

Not everyone Carrie's age had felt that way, of course. Fred, a post-80s business manager in his mid-30s, told me he'd never invested in the stock market. "I knew the stock market was a scam because the government told us to invest," he told me in January 2016, "Just last month the government said everyone should buy houses, so I am selling all my houses. Whatever the government says to do, I do the opposite!" Like Lily, Fred paired opportunity not with risk but in opposition to other people's opinions; those people, he explained, suffered from "herd mentality" (*congzong xinli*). In February 2016, Fred told me he had begun buying foreign currency from friends in Hong Kong who needed RMB for their businesses in the PRC. When I said I thought that was illegal, he nodded; this was precisely his point. "If the government doesn't want us to do it, it must be the right thing to do," he declared.

Nevertheless, Fred was not as different from Carrie as he might like to think; he was also engaged in "frying" (*chao*). Frying—the unified metaphor for buying and selling with a focus on short-term gains—seems to have defined the PRC's market since its establishment in the 1990s; it's the same verb people use to describe how they quickly

cook vegetables and meat in oil in a wok over high heat (Hertz 1998, 141). Everything can be fried. People fry currency (*chao bi*), stocks (*chao gupiao*), houses (*chao fangzi*), and even futures (*chao qihuo*). Jenny, Calvin's friend who managed the State-Owned insurance company, told me that she'd recently found records of her first market trades while cleaning her office. She'd bought stock in Maotai, a company that makes the country's best-regarded sorghum liquor.

"Good choice!" I exclaimed, but she shook her head ruefully: the next recorded trade is one day later, when the stock went up eight mao (.12USD). She said she did the same thing with her first house, which she bought for 3,000RMB (460USD) a square meter and then "fried" four months later for 3,500RMB (540USD) a square meter. In retrospect, it's clear she would have earned more if she held the house longer—in Zhengzhou it's now rare to get a price lower than 8,000RMB (1,200USD) a square meter—but she told me each time she fried a house or a stock she'd felt a tremendous amount of satisfaction.

"Maybe I am not as rich as Calvin," she said, "but I am happy enough." She framed her investment choices not in terms of possible risks but as sources of present pleasure. Her gains may not have been huge, but they were positive, they existed in the moment, and that was what mattered to her. Calvin himself was an avid fryer of stocks. Once, he was explaining his strategy to me—he would invest most of his "recreational money" (*xianqian*) in companies he admired, like Xiaomi—when Jenny interrupted.

"How much money do you have for recreation?" she demanded.

"Four hundred thousand (62,000USD)," Calvin replied.

"That's your *recreational* money?!" Jenny clicked her tongue in admonition, "So rich! So willful."

Ya: Post-90s and willfully trying something throughout the anti-corruption campaign

When Jenny chastises Calvin or Lily describes herself and her daughter as "willful," the word they use is *renxing*. Usually, renxing is used to describe children who are stubborn or poorly behaved; however, in the fall of 2015, I noticed that renxing was being used among my interlocutors to describe each other. "Renxing is when someone decides to go to Paris in the middle of the semester," one teacher told me. "Renxing is when my daughter says she doesn't want any dumplings but then eats half straight off my plate once they're done," a working mother explained. "Renxing is another way of saying you're rich," a wealthy housewife laughed, "You're rich, so you can do whatever you want. You can be renxing."

Renxing applies not just to the rich but also to young people who acted stubbornly, as though they were already rich. In the 1990s, willful behavior correlated to some extent with success. Because Lily was renxing, she succeeded; for people born after 1990, however, to be renxing in money matters was foolish. As they began to enter the workforce, members of the post-90s generation became an object of scorn. "Everyone in the post-90s generation wants to be a leader, but they don't know how to do it because they've never held a job," Lulu, a post-80s coffee shop owner told me while complaining about her employees. Meanwhile, members of the post-90s generation looked starry-eyed on the wealth their predecessors had accumulated without meaning to, as though by

accident. They had no reason to doubt that if they willfully tried something in spite of public opinion, they too would succeed.

No one embodied the post-90s generation's new willfulness more than Ya. Ya was born in 1992. She and I met in July 2013 when she was working as a waitress in a bar to get revenge on her mother. She only lasted for four months in that job, but it would turn out to be one of her longer gigs. During one particularly unstable period from June 2015 to December 2015, Ya applied, interviewed, and went to different jobs; she managed to get and then leave 15 jobs that I knew of, usually after doing the job for three days. "You are too renxing," I told her in October 2015, "You have to think about what you really want to do in the future."

"I really want to be in a restaurant's development department and research how to open new restaurants," she sighed, "But people in the restaurant industry tell me that with the market being so bad no one dares to open a new location right now."

The statement interested me not because of its content (this was the first and last time I heard Ya articulate this desire to work in development; it was probably invented on the spot to stop me from nagging her) but because it was the first time I had ever heard Ya acknowledge the impact larger market forces had on her. Unlike many of the people I worked with, Ya did not feel a tremendous amount of economic pressure, which was why she could afford to be willful. Before his early death, Ya's father, a former People's Liberation Army officer, had helped develop a fish market as part of his semi-legal seafood business. The fish market was part of a controversial development on PLA land. Technically, the shops were illegal and any money made should have gone back to the PLA—not into private hands. Nevertheless, for years the remnants of her father's once

vast business empire continued to pay dividends to Ya and her two siblings in the form of rent checks from the market's current tenants.

For others, however, the execution of what will probably be called President Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign very quickly made business difficult. "Business is terrible for everyone, even us," Apple, the woman who sold high-end computers, told me, "Many people who had money now don't, and everyone who has money is afraid to spend it because people will ask where they got it." Ya looked at the campaign more wryly, and in October 2013 told me a joke circulating around the fish market: A businessman wants to eat seafood with an official. "No, I can't," the official protests, "It's too expensive and if I let you pay I'll be accused of corruption." The businessman laughs: "Don't worry! The most expensive seafood this restaurant has is seaweed." The joke, Ya explained, was both that seaweed is actually the cheapest type of seafood that exists and also that these formerly high-and-mighty men were reduced to eating it.

A little more than a year later Ya found herself similarly reduced. In March 2014, Xu Caihou, one of the top-ranked generals in the PLA and the former political commissar of the PLA's Jinan District—which includes Zhengzhou—was investigated for corruption. During what I might call the peri-period, Ya reported these unexpected events to me as they happened but without relating them to the protection the fish market enjoyed; only in the retrospective, post-period did Ya realize his fall signaled the end of her profitable family connection to the PLA. On December 14, 2015, Zhengzhou hosted the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting. As part of the effort to clean up for Premier Li Keqiang, who disapproved of the PLA developments associated with Xu, the

market where Ya's father had made his semi-legal seafood fortune suddenly closed. The merchants moved, and their landlords were left without any recourse or reimbursement.

Ya was surprised but remarkably untroubled by this development. She quickly came up with a new idea: she would borrow money from her older sister and open a shop. When I asked her what she would sell, she said bags but came back from her first trip to the bulk market with 5,000RMB (770USD) of clothing. For two weeks she tangled with the idea of renting a space in a dying basement mall that was 30% vacant. I asked her why she would rent there if she herself admitted that it was not popular. "Because the rent is only 1,500RMB (232USD) a month, and I think if the shop fails, I can bear the cost," she told me. Ya's best friend, Nana, and I spent hours over dinner trying to convince her to choose a better location. When Ya said she didn't know of any, I pointed out that she had not done any research, at which point Ya refused to continue discussing it. "Forget about it," she said with her hands flat on the table and her chin pointing upward, "Pretend I didn't say anything." Later, on the bus home, I asked Nana if she thought Ya's shop would succeed.

"To be frank, it's unlikely," she smiled, "She just wants to try something and see if she's suitable for doing business (*zuo shengyi*). So she hasn't thought about whether she'll earn money, she's only thinking that she doesn't want to lose too much. But if you've never thought about earning money how can you succeed?" In January 2016, the three of us met again. Ya had already moved into the empty mall, and she spent much of dinner complaining that no one ever came to the store. I asked if she thought the store would still be there after ten years.

"After ten years!" Ya wondered, "Honestly, I've never thought that far. I just thought that I could pay the rent and just try something for a while." After I kept pressing her, she grew irritated and tense: "It's already over. I signed the lease. Let's talk about something else."

Conclusion: the upsides of unpredictability

In a way, "willful" perfectly describes the presentist practices of my interlocutors. Although looking at the sky, jumping into the sea, living in the present, frying, and being willful all come from different historical contexts and generational experiences, they strangely all have similar effects, which is to allow my interlocutors to exercise their will—in other words, be willful—when it counts: in the present. In this chapter, I have shown how opinions, attitudes, and understandings of unpredictable happenings can change throughout time. To be legible to others, narratives must be linear, consistent, and non-contradictory; however, the people producing those narratives have no such obligation. When ethnographers rely on people's accounts to represent reality, they must remain open to the fact that those interpretations, like the people who produced them, are not fixed. I have used several unexpected macro-level events—the PRC's urbanization, Reform and Opening Up, the stock market crash, and the Anti-Corruption Campaign—to demonstrate how unpredictable outcomes outside of people's locus of control influenced their decision-making. While these events may have pushed people to make decisions faster or differently, they did not make them more cautious or more aware of the risks they faced. Instead, people turned to different ways of *not* thinking about future dangers. While it's not clear this willingness to leave the future open till the last second makes my interlocutors better businesspeople, it at times strikes me as a more realistic way of

thinking about one's influence in and on the world. Against a future that remains empirically undetermined until the moment it occurs, all of us are similarly constrained; the best option may be to willfully keep swimming, past the dangers and unexpected outcomes, into the open and unpredictable future.

CONCLUSION

Ya and I were eating dinner at the Capitalist Pig Barbecue Restaurant for the last time when she finally broke down. Though Ya, as I have described in other chapters, held an ambiguous position within Zhengzhou's social hierarchy, her appetite for western food was one of the persistent ways that she distinguished herself from her less cosmopolitan peers. Ya especially liked to eat hamburgers (*hanbao*), and like me, she agreed that the hamburgers at the Capitalist Pig were much better than the ones at Burger King for basically the same price.

In this study, I have tied together several different aspects of life in Zhengzhou through unpredictability, such as real estate, finances, class markers, and familial relations. Methodologically, I relied on longitudinal participation-observation, which is another way of saying that I kept seeing the same people over a long period of time. I am concluding with this story because I think it brings together the dissertation's main themes: how people base their decision-making on precedents that seemed common but may already be impossible to replicate; how people within families keep secrets and create unpredictable situations for each other; how circumstances have accelerated and changed society so much that it is difficult for people to find their footing. Ya was one of the people I worked with longest, and I was there not only to eat one last hamburger with a friend, but also to follow up on something I thought might be ethnographically interesting. In October 2015, Ya's mother had suddenly bought a house. I say "suddenly" because she did it without speaking to either Ya, Ya's older sister, or Ya's younger brother, all of whom lived at home.

Like many people I worked with, Ya's family situation was complicated. When she was young, her father had supported both his nuclear family and his extended family through his vast semi-legal seafood empire. Ya's surname was uncommon, and when she said it out loud, older Zhengzhou residents would know to associate her with the clan that held the seafood monopoly in the province after Reform and Opening Up. Though the family was rich, they were troubled; by the time Ya was born, her parents were no longer living together, and Ya was raised mostly by her maternal grandmother. When Ya was in elementary school, her father had grown bold and—in what would have been a stroke of extreme prescience—decided to expand his business into Hainan. He had no sooner opened a restaurant in Hainan that he suddenly fell ill with cancer. Ya never told me which kind. Within a few weeks, he was dead and Ya's mother had become the de facto ruler of the business empire. She closed and sold the restaurant in Hainan because she—and the rest of Ya's family—believed the restaurant had killed him.

"He was the same Chinese zodiac sign as me," Ya said, "He was made up of the element wood. That was why he was so successful at selling seafood: wood floats. But when he opened the restaurant, the fires from the restaurant burned him up."

Ya's mother did not prove to be a competent manager of the empire. She delegated the western portion of it to her sister, who moved to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, to sell crabs. Without her husband's strong PLA connections, the family lost the threat of violence that had been holding the monopoly in place, and business started to falter. One of Ya's paternal uncles took over the day-to-day operation of the remaining seafood stores in Zhengzhou, and Ya's mother looked desperately for investment opportunities. This, Ya explained bitterly, was how their fortune drifted away. Ya's

mother was prey for men Ya called "uncles" (*shushu*)—vague blood relatives or army friends of her father's—who would convince Ya's mother to give them money and then disappear. Sometimes they would say the enterprise had an accident (*chushi le*); other times there'd be no explanation, and they would just take the money and run (*pao le*).

"Why did your mother trust them?" I would ask in disbelief each time Ya recounted a different episode. There were many such failed "investments": a gold mine on PLA land, a clothing store, another seafood restaurant.

"They would say, 'I am your husband's this' or 'I am your husband's that,'" Ya groaned, "How could she not trust them?"

"In America, we say when something sounds too good to be true, it usually is!" I said, and Ya laughed.

"You say this, but in China, things like gold mines and people suddenly getting rich—it really did happen (*zhenzheng fasheng guo*)!" Ya said, "How could my mother know it was not going to happen, every time?"

Regardless of why Ya's mother had distributed her money to these unreliable uncles, the result was that by the time Ya was in middle school her family was not destitute but greatly reduced in stature. Their only remaining assets were their connection to Ya's father's clan, who continued to support them out of loyalty to Ya's father; the rent they got from the seafood market, which by 2016 had been closed down in the Anti-Corruption Campaign; and a marriage house, which Ya's father had bought for Ya's younger brother when he was only two years old. That was when Ya's mother got involved with her Shushu.

This Shushu was different from the other uncles Ya's mother had given money to.

Ya's mother dated Shushu for several years before he and his son from a previous marriage moved in with Ya, her older sister, and her younger brother in an arrangement that had Ya and her sister sharing a room and Shushu's son sleeping on the enclosed balcony. Ya's mother wanted to marry Shushu, but Ya and her siblings had all protested; Ya's mother backed down, but when Shushu's son became engaged to marry a woman, she offered Ya's brother's marriage house to the couple and did not budge. Ya's brother agreed that he did not need the house yet and said it was fine so long as the house returned to him once it was time for him to marry; Ya, on the other hand, became furious and stayed that way. Ya and her family were living in a rented house, which, for a person in Ya's social circle, was already shameful enough. For them to give up the only house the family owned to a person who wasn't even blood was too much (*tai guofen*).

This was the main source of conflict in Ya's life when we met in July 2013, and it continued to bubble up throughout the time that I knew her. Ya was constantly connecting her mother's affection for her with money. "I was angry at my mother, but then she gave me 200RMB (30USD) this morning and I know she cares for me," Ya might say on a typical day. Perhaps because of this, she took her mother's division of the family's remaining assets personally; she protested her mother's loyalty to Shushu, rebelled against her authority, and generally tried to make life difficult for Shushu. Shushu, she explained, was a railway worker. He was dirty and not from the same class as her family. Her father had been a clean man who showered every day; she was lucky if Shushu showered once every three days. Beyond that, she believed Shushu did not really love her mother. She was convinced he was using her for her money. One night, over dinner, Ya had yelled at Shushu's son that she could not believe he would dare to sit at

the same table as her without shame since he was taking the money and eating the food a dead man had left for his children; Shushu's son walked out of the apartment and never came back, but renovations of the marriage house continued, directed by his bride. Ya's mother continued to collect the rent money due to Ya and her siblings before they could get it themselves, and continued to play dumb when Ya asked her for it. Ya assumed her mother—who was also an inveterate gambler—was broke.

So when Ya's mother suddenly bought the house in October 2015, she was caught by surprise. "To be honest, I had no idea my mother had this much money saved up," Ya laughed, "It's quite fierce (*lihai*)." Within a few weeks, however, problems emerged. Ya found out Ya's mother had bought the house for 30% above market rate; the electric wiring shorted out every time someone tried to use a kitchen appliance; and, most importantly, Ya's brother hated the location. "She says, 'I bought this house for you,'" Ya mimicked to me, "She bought it for us, but she never asked us what we wanted! She did not even do any research. She just looked for three days and then bought a house—what kind of person does that?"

The answer, as I have described in the last chapter, was a person like Ya. Ya did things like that, repeatedly, in her own business enterprises. But this mess was not Ya's to clean up. In December 2015, the person who'd sold the house tried to force Ya's mother to pay the entire thing off before the Spring Festival ("His business is in trouble, like everyone else," Ya observed dryly), and the family used this as an excuse to renege on the deal and move out to another rental while searching for something Ya's brother approved of. In our last meeting, in March 2016, I wanted to follow up on the rest of the story. What had happened with the house? Did they get back their down payment?

Ya said she didn't know. "You know it's been years since my mother has bought herself a new winter coat?" she told me. "Years! And how much is a new coat? Maybe a good one is several thousand RMB, but a cheap one is only a couple hundred. I think I really want to buy my mother a new coat, but I don't know!" She paused. "Lately all the money I've been getting is from my older sister," she continued, "I ask my mother, 'What happened to the money for the house,' and she doesn't say a word (*bu kengsheng*). I don't know where it went." She sighed. "And meanwhile, all my aunties and uncles are criticizing me, telling me my mother is so bad at this and so bad at that."

I gestured to indicate that this made no sense to me, and Ya nodded. "I know!" she exhaled, "Because what can I do? Everything I do is useless (*meiyou yong*)!"

Ya had tried everything she could think of to change her mother's mind. She tried reasoning with her, not speaking to her, yelling at her, threatening to break with her, and threatening never to leave her. None of it had made a difference. I knew she loved her mother, but that it was a love that pained her; sometimes, apropos nothing, in the middle of a shopping mall, Ya would suddenly declare that she felt so sorry for her mother, who was so isolated from all their friends and relatives. Haltingly, Ya told me another story of betrayal. One year, her father's brother had given her and her older sister several tens of thousands of RMB one year. Her mother had come to them and asked if she could use the money to send her little brother to the military. Ya agreed. Later, her uncle had asked her where the money he gave her went, and Ya said she'd given it to her mother for her brother; angry, her uncle told her he'd already given her mother that money. Everyone claimed not to know where any of the money had gone, even Ya's mother.

"Before I told you the most unpredictable thing in my life was that my family had

become poor," she told me as her hamburger grew cold, "Now, though, I think the most unpredictable thing is that my mother has been cheated (*bei pian le*) by this person, my Shushu."

"Come on," I said, trying to be comforting, "He is not cheating her. Your mother would not let him cheat her in such an obvious way. Like the house last year. That was not cheating, that was a gift to your Shushu's son. She is trying to make you all one family."

Ya shook her head. "That house is empty," she said, "My Shushu's son is living in his work-unit housing. That house was too far away from the train station."

"So why did he make such a fuss about it for such a long time?" I asked, shocked. "The property deed is in your little brother's name still at least."

"Actually, this is the most ridiculous thing," Ya said between bites of hamburger. "My mother put the property deed in my uncle's name."

"Real or fake?" I exclaimed.

"So that year," Ya continued, "that's why I was fighting so much with my mother. For this reason. I never thought of it. But then we went there and the property deed was in my Shushu's name—" She stopped. "But also I have no way of talking to anyone about this thing. I also think it's really disgraceful (*diuren*)."

Ya stared at her half-eaten hamburger. "But it's not your fault," I began, "Ya, I have been here all these years. I *saw* you. Nobody can say you didn't try hard. You tried so hard! Don't you remember the reason we met?"

"It was because I was working two jobs," Ya answered.

"It wasn't just that you were working two jobs," I laughed, "It was that you were

doing it to make your mother mad! I think you've tried really hard. You communicated with her, you stopped communicating with her, you tried to persuade her—you've done all you could. You shouldn't think this is a disgrace. It's not a disgrace. You tried really hard. Now the only thing you can do is take care of yourself."

Ya, who'd been staring straight ahead as I spoke, suddenly began to cry. "It was all useless (*dou meiyou yong*)," she whispered.

I sat, frozen, for a moment. Like spitting, crying was a behavior for which there seemed to be no consensus in Zhengzhou. Because I am a pretty openly emotional person, I often cried in public if I was overwhelmed. People usually reacted with uncomfortable laughter or anger, and I learned to cry strategically (at the police station, for example) because something about the sight of me crying made people desperate to get me to stop. (My most successful cry was at a cell phone shop in Beijing, where a salesman had sold me a phone with a faulty microphone; when he refused to exchange it after an hour of negotiation, I began to wail and the manager immediately flung a new phone down on the table.) As far as I could tell, these angry, uncomfortable reactions represented one view of crying that saw it as disgraceful (*diuren*) to be so uncontrollably emotional.

There was another view emerging, however. Vivian, Calvin, Apple, and the wealthy people who frequented Cardboard Coffee cried frequently, to demonstrate the sincerity of their feelings. It was something they'd learned to do in the Human Potential trainings they went to, where they engaged with Satir family therapy, and during my last meeting with them, I also cried (genuinely) only to have them applaud me, which was disorienting. This changing view of emotionality was spreading even beyond the circles

of the super rich; Mary had cried several times in front of me. She seemed to hold a view close to the women at Cardboard Coffee because people frequently cried at her church as they shared their stories of loss and conversion. Even Olivia had brushed tears away once or twice while discussing her failed courtships.

Ya, though, had never cried in front of me. She had sat stone-faced by my side while I cried after being hit by a car. She had described her father's death without emotion. She had spoken about these exact same family issues in almost exactly the same way—the only thing different this time was that I had told her what I thought, which is that she had already done everything she could do.

As I conclude this study, I want to focus on Ya's upsetting admission that everything she did to persuade her mother was useless (*meiyou yong*). What I take her meaning to be is that all of her actions did not do anything. She had tried so hard and yet made nothing happen. Throughout my research, I saw people trying to avoid being in situations where they had to admit that they were useless. Take the presentist practices I describe in the eighth chapter. Putting off making a decision or a plan until the last minute was a way of making sure that plan would actually happen. Both the belief in ruthless accountability in chapter four and the desire to record losses beyond the injuries and fatalities in the Wenzhou Incident reflect a growing confidence in the ability of people to do things deliberately, without incident. The sense of safety that was so sought after by people was made manifest by those people who could truly say that every decision they made had its intended effect. Even the refusal to recognize the existence of unpredictability documented in chapter three and chapter five's rejection of origins preserve the illusion of efficacy and of being useful.

Several times, Ya had told me about a middle school teacher who had a tremendous influence on her. To me, he sounded like a poisonous cynic, but to Ya, he gave a life motto. "He always said, 'Do not be afraid of being exploited (*bei liyong*),'" she repeated to me, "If someone can exploit you, it means you're still useful (*youyong*)." In Mandarin, the words for "exploited" (*liyong*), "useful" (*youyong*), and "useless" (*meiyou yong*) all revolve around the word for "to use": *yong*. Like many of the people I worked with, Ya was always trying to make herself useful to others and put herself in situations where she could be both used and exploited. "I think if I am exploited (*bei liyong*) at least I have done something," she said. Paradoxically, Ya was willing to be used by the people she knew but treasured the relationships she had with the few people who would not use her: Nana, her older sister, and—she said—me.

Throughout this study I have documented how, through specific theories of causality and explanations, people confront the uncertain and unpredictable aspects of life in the PRC and invest in the idea that they are in control. One of the most interesting and troubling things I saw during my fieldwork in Zhengzhou was how fervently devoted people were to downplaying the constraints they faced. Unlike in America, where an awareness of one's victimhood or structural constraints can be weaponized as a form of moral righteousness, my interlocutors in Zhengzhou—who arguably lived under constraints that were more severe—did not like to acknowledge the constraints they faced. This is not a natural, functional, or logical result of living in an uncertain or unpredictable environment; rather, it is, as Sally Falk Moore observed, a product of effort (1987, 727). That effort often became visible when people refused to speak out what was inconvenient, incriminating, or inconceivable by not saying a word (*bu kengsheng*),

laughing, or crying. The implications of these refusals—for political reform in the PRC, for modes of accountability, and for trust in everyday life—are vast and troubling.

I cannot know exactly what it was about our interaction that made Ya finally cry, but I think it had something to do with clearly articulating that she was useless in this situation with her mother. I slid over to the other side of the table. I hugged her, but her body grew stiff.

"I didn't say these things to make you cry," I said, my voice desperate with uncomfortable laughter, "I just wanted to praise you (*kua ni*)!"

We sat in silence for a while. I watched Ya's bloodshot eyes follow the waiters, foreigners, and other Chinese customers in the restaurant, trying to see who else had noticed her disgrace. I began to babble, aimlessly. I told her about a mutual friend who'd made fun of me for something recently; I told her I thought she could put her energy into her store and use all the money to take care of her mother. "And not give any to my Shushu," she whispered. I nodded. We sat there for a while longer in silence, each of us greeting the unexpected outburst by refusing to explain it. Ya eventually relaxed, laughed, and talked about something else. I, on the other hand, continued to sit there feeling, as I often did in Zhengzhou, useless.

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