

# The Metropolis and Mental Health: Migrant Lives in Shanghai

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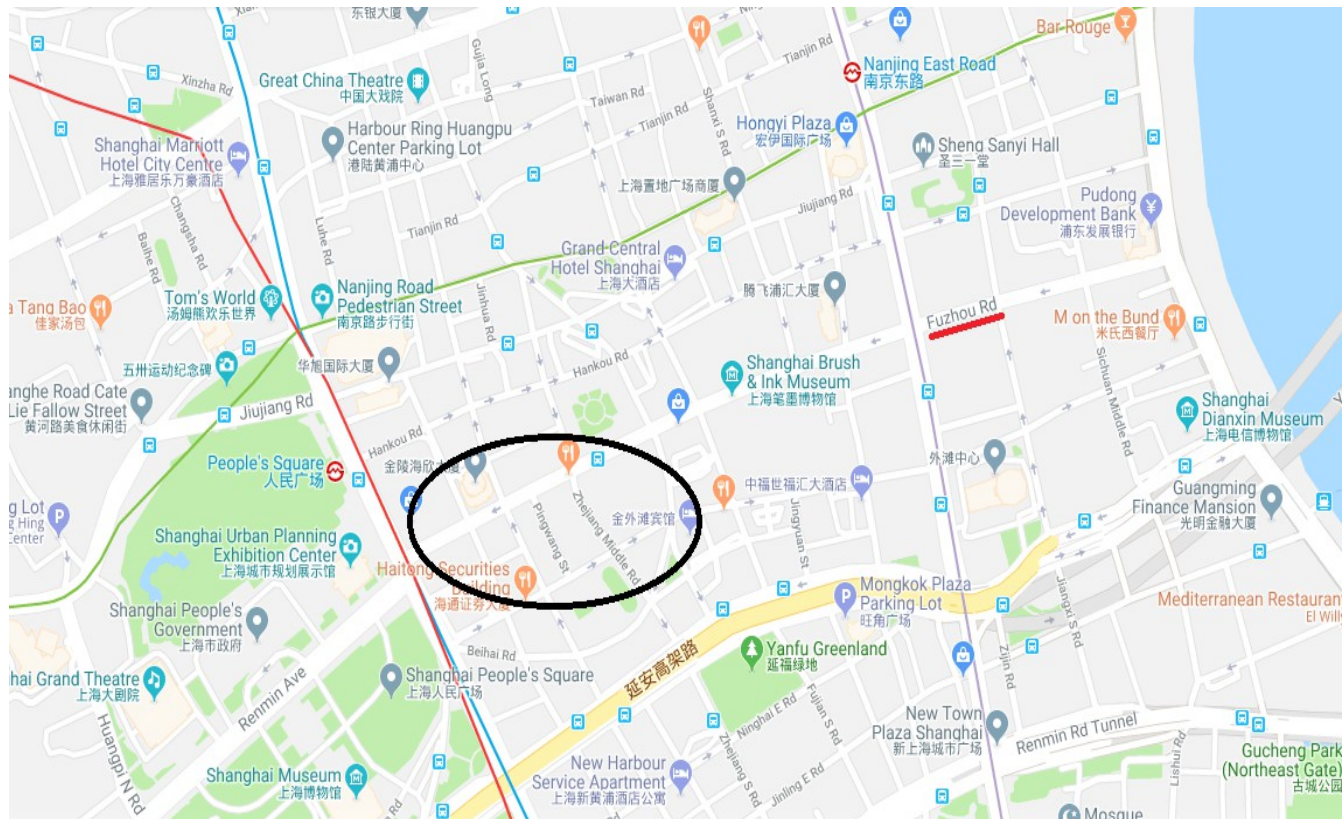


# **Mental health and the metropolis: theoretical premises**

- How to move beyond the city seen as an inherently stressful environment correlated with poor mental health?
- In what sense is the city 'a heterogeneous, non-deterministic [...] milieu' (Söderström et al.), the site of embodied, corporeal practices (Fitzgerald, Rose and Singh), subjectivity and mental health formed in the urban experience?
- An urban ethnography of pressures and precarity not passively experienced but negotiated through the living of the city: mental health as the accretion of many 'moments of being' (Virginia Woolf) made in the situated negotiation of the habitat.



# China's internal migrants in the Fuzhou Road area in Shanghai



- Like elsewhere, these migrants are without local residential rights or *hukou*, registered in their provinces of birth, lacking various social rights (education, social security)







# An ethnography of stress and its management

- An ethnography of stress that moves beyond 'emotional talk' to focus on lived experience
- Describing 'moments of being' in the city: Three ecologies
  - (1) Silent Loitering
  - (2) Respite for Self-Help
  - (3) Landscape of Aspiration
- Beyond a 'duo-tonal condition' oscillating between 'being at ease' and 'being alarmed' (Brighenti and Pavoni)

# (1) Silent loitering





Sitting in front of a computer screen, with his personal belongings displayed on his desk – a small towel, a backpack, a flask, food – a man vigorously scratches his swollen legs; his computer on, a one-armed man is sleeping on his desk. (...) Outside the glazed door, in the main reading room sits a short, stocky man I also noticed before, with his flask on the table; he's busy reading newspapers (...) About half an hour later, he grabs his flask and returns to his desk in the computer room. He immediately curls up on the desk, his head laying on his folded arms. Many others are sleeping. (...) A mid-aged man in a khaki jacket – another regular – arrives in the room and takes a seat. His headphones on, he spends a while making himself some tea out of small tea-leave bags he keeps in a plastic bag. (...) Eventually, he walks into the computer room where, with a playful expression on his face, he stands behind another man half-lying on his desk, enlacing him. The other man stands up, and they pretend to bully each other, laughing and talking for a few seconds, although only reasonably loudly. 'Let's go', says one of them. They both come out of the computer room and walk towards the toilets (...). Throat-clearing noises become more and more frequent. As they come out of the toilet after about five minutes, each returns to his seat. (...) (edited fieldnotes, October 2017)

# Silent loitering, or stress held in 'self-abeyance'

- A form of 'loitering' (Wafer) but neither watchful nor aspirational
- 'Being alone together': public inwardness and rest
- Absence of control: Accessibility of comfortable public spaces in the heart of the city
- A distinct ecology of self-abeyance where repair is fleeting





## (2) Respite for self-help



On the immense fourth floor of the bookshop 'City of Books', Ningning is sitting among English books and dictionaries. (...) Few days earlier he had been fired for the second time in a very short period as a café waiter (...) Among all of Lisa's informants Ningning, aged 25, stood out as the only one who admitted to suffering from, in his own words, dread, thinking too much, and depression. This state is a reflection as much of his difficult childhood and his struggle to cope with the 'bitterness' of city life as a solitary migrant from one of the poorest areas of China (Guizhou), as it is of his circumstances – including living far away from the city centre with a cousin he has no affinity with, losing jobs, lacking in confidence and feeling awkward amidst social interactions. Perched on the edge of a small cabinet covered with piles of textbooks, Ningning is immersed in a book about China's most famous entrepreneur Jack Ma (the creator of Alibaba), written by Ma's private secretary. This is the second day he has spent in the bookstore after losing his post. Ningning is looking to the book to learn about what makes the 'strong at heart' who they are and how they attain commercial success. (...) A few months after this meeting, and one more in-between position in a restaurant that smelled of stale oil rather than fresh coffee, Ningning resignedly returned to his village in the mountains.



# An ecology of doubtful respite

- 'Success Studies':  
Learning entrepreneurial skills
- A rehearsal space for impermanence and transition to an ill-defined end
- Enduring disappointments and existential anxieties in a more gentle and hopeful space



### (3) Landscape of aspiration





# **Ecology of aspiration in a Shanghai café**

- 'Self-development' and quest for cosmopolitan citizenship
- The present discursively construed as a stepping stone in the process of self-making and advancement
- Capacity to endure small injuries experienced through the everyday
- The ambivalence of workplace routines: Between self-improvement and the comfort of repetition; stress as an outcome of both

# Concluding remarks

- Spatial experience, skillful navigation of public spaces, and the singularity of the moment of dwelling, matter in the management of self in the city
- But this subject-space relation is ambivalent in its affordances ('cruel optimism'), and partial in its grip on mental health
- Yet the pedagogy of practice, the learning gained from negotiating the plural and arduous can mount up as form of endurance