

Migrant Identity Defined through Aspirations: Analysis of Xiaolu Guo's *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*

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Abstract

*This paper delves into the idea of the aspirations of a woman and the process of migration in the contemporary world. It takes into consideration Xiaolu Guo's novel, *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*. Xiaolu Guo, through her varied works, has brought to focus the lives of Chinese women who travel across spaces in search of a better life and the novel I have attempted to analyse is a portrayal of one such woman named Fenfang. This paper traces her movements from a small unknown village to Beijing and analyses it against the backdrop of Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly's essay, "Lifestyle Migration: Escaping to the Good Life?" It examines the instances of Fenfang's negotiations in the process of constructing her identity in the vast urban space where she has migrated to. It uses Harald Bauder's work on migrants and the production of social identities and Louise Beynon's study of rural Chinese working women and their hopes and dreams.*

Based on the above-highlighted works, the aim of this paper is to explore the construction of a migrant identity that relies on escaping from the drudgery of the space they were born into and towards something that the migrant woman considers to be more fruitful. Through Guo's depiction of Fenfang's struggles to become a Beijing-er, this paper also highlights the transactions of a migrant woman with the urban space that she aspires to belong to and an undefined identity that she is left with when the metropolis denies her the same.

Keywords: Aspirations, Lifestyle Migration, Urban Spaces, Good Life, Identity.

“My youth began when I was 21. At least, that's when I decided it began. That was when I started to think that all those shiny things in life – some of them might possibly be for me” (Guo 2008:9).

Fenfang, the central character of Xiaolu Guo's novel *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, is a migrant from a remote village in China whose youth begins in Beijing – a city where she starts her quest to find the "shiny things in life". It is the idea of 'shiny things' that the paper attempts to explore. Fenfang's life in Beijing is a movement towards attaining something that she could not find in her village. Her youth begins with a decision – a decision to pursue these 'shiny things' that life supposedly has. This paper also analyses Fenfang's life in Beijing, her interactions and negotiations with spaces and people located within this urban space to map her journey searching for the 'shiny things.' It looks at the notion of 'shiny things' and explores it in relation to the aspirations that direct an individual's movements and actions and, through it, their life. It also examines how the city influences Fenfang's life, and the impact urban life has on her aspirations. Through this the paper aims to use these explorations to understand how a migrant identity is constructed through the negotiations of personal aspirations and the expectations of the city and study whether these aspirations succumb or survive in urban spaces or take a new shape.

The primary question that concerns this paper is: what constitutes 'shiny things', and is there a way to define them? To understand this, it becomes important to delve into the idea of aspirations. Dev Nathan relates aspirations to “how people want to be in the future” (Nathan 2005:36), and it is this thought of how an individual works toward shaping their future to shape themselves that helps in defining the 'shiny things' in life. Fenfang's quest for 'shiny things' represents the

quest to realize the dreams of a peasant girl who does not want to be defined by her rural background. Fenfang's story starts with a decision – a decision to begin her youth. For Fenfang, the rural life is where peasants go "straight from childhood to middle age with nothing in between" (Guo 2008:9). Time blends into nothingness – an empty routine of going to the farm and coming back home. In this context, Henri Lefebvre talks about the rural world, where life is cyclical and contains a slow rhythm (Conley:2012). The nothingness of rural life for Fenfang is the repetitive everyday that constrains her within its cyclical motions of farming. The city represents an escape from this rural space where there is no youth to speak of and towards recreating her everyday life. It represents Lefebvre's concept of a lived space – the idea that the individual is actively a part of constructing their everyday life, "of a lived experience of a space" (Schmid 2008:40). The city is the center of recreation for Fenfang. It is the first step towards the 'shiny things' – the dream of a future, of having a youth. Fenfang's resolution to move away from her village alludes to her actively constructing a future. Though Fenfang, through the course of the novel, never portrays a concrete idea of the shiny things that she wants; it suggests an aspiration to have a life not being defined by the nothingness of peasant life.

However, entering the urban space is not the end of the quest for shiny things. Fenfang's first nights in Beijing are spent in the Hutongs – "The Hutongs. . . Countless alleys packed with countless homes where countless families lived. These old-time Beijing residents thought they were the 'Citizens of the Emperor'. They didn't seem so noble to me" (Guo 2008:13). For Fenfang, the Beijing she dreams of is built of tall buildings and bright lights. It is a "brave new world" (Guo 2008:12), constructed on images of drinking cold cans of Coca-Cola and shopping – the representative pictures of urban life for a young Fenfang. The part of Beijing that she first steps foot in is not

what she dreamt of Beijing to be. It is a part that is still not touched by the forces of globalization, occupied by the citizens of the Old Emperor, where the image of drinking a can of cold Coca-Cola does not appear. In Fenfang's eyes, the space isn't noble because it doesn't fit Beijing's picture that she had imagined. Modern-day China has been looked at through globalization and the impact of market forces on its citizens. With the rapid commercialization, contemporary urban China and its urban migrant populace have been studying market values and lifestyle choices based on modern markets (Jacka 2006, Shen 2019). It is then less of a surprise that Fenfang's early thoughts of the city and her aspirations are tied to this commercial notion of modern life.

There is another point to note in Fenfang's observations of the Beijing residents – the notion of being ‘Citizens of the Emperor’. The urban-rural divide is stark when it comes to the treatment of migrants within Chinese urban spaces. Yiran Zheng talks about the Beijing floaters – a migrant population who are not officially registered as Beijing citizens but come to the city “to find work, seek a better life and more opportunities for success” (Zheng 2016:108). They are a part of the metropolis providing labour, and working in the service or entertainment industries but are marginalized because they are not of the city – not born out of the families that have lived here from the time of royalty. Fenfang’s words that Beijing residents did not look like nobility remain important because, in her eyes, the Hutong residents are similar to the rural residents she had left behind – they look like they follow the same cyclical, slow rhythm of life she is running away from. Though they are recognized as Beijing residents, they are stuck in the old times – the Hutongs represent the past times that are fading in the rapidly changing modern China.

The rural-urban dynamics that Fenfang is a part, influence the

construction of her identity. One of the major reasons for China's internal migration movement from its rural parts to urban cities is the lack of resources and opportunities due to its restricting policies and neglect (Pai:2012). Hsiao-Hung Pai in *Scattered Sand: The Story of China's Rural Migrants* has recorded multiple Chinese migrants who move from their villages to provide for themselves and their families as there is no little money, work or healthcare. China's rapidly growing cities then become the hub for these migrants to try their luck. But the 'Hukou system' has proven to be detrimental to migrant mobility. Hukou refers to the residential registration that each Chinese citizen has, corresponding to their place of birth. To transfer one's registration from one place to another is difficult and, in most cases, an impossible job. Many rural migrants are illegal residents who risk losing their social security by moving to cities as "*liudong renkou*" – or floating population, the ones who move to cities without any corresponding registration (Jacka:2006).

These rural migrants or floaters are often subject to marginalization due to their illegal status and their peasant background. Their migrant identities are defined through their marginalised position and not by official documents. The ones without any documentation are looked down upon and treated as criminals rather than being part of the urban space that they help to build. Fenfang's urban identity is also defined by this struggle of being recognized as a true Beijing-er. Merely occupying a space does not make her an official member of that space. For the most part, her life revolves around attaining a number that would make her an official city resident. One way to become a resident, as Fenfang believes, is by getting an education - an urban education that would make her a productive member of the urban society.

“All the money I was earning went towards my re-

education. In exchange, I gained a load of certificates and diplomas. These credentials demonstrated that I was a useful member of society and that I was modern and civilised. Ah, finally, I was something” (Guo 2008:26).

Fenfang begins her journey in the city, working as a waitress in a restaurant and then as a wage worker in a tin factory. This follows the trajectory of the migrant narratives that have been studied around Chinese internal migration. For example, Yan Hairong has carried out research on women who migrate from villages in China to cities like Beijing, working in factories and restaurants. They move away from their homes because they want to be free and independent (Hairong 2008).

This independence comes at the cost of low wages and no recognition. They are also aware of the differences between them and urban citizens who have different lifestyles. Hairong also points out a rapidly growing market economy that demands labour capital in rural migrants and attracts them through promises of freedom and better work opportunities.

In this context, Kathy Charmaz, building her argument on Johann Strauss’ concept, states that humans are “viewed as active agents in their lives and their worlds rather than as passive recipients of larger social forces” (Charmaz 2006:7). Therefore, this commercial market industry also influences Fenfang’s early aspirations though she is not a passive recipient of these attractions. On a different note, Masja Van Meeteren states that aspirations are “a conceptual bridge between structure and agency, fed not only by needs and wants but also by perceived possibilities and constraints” (Van Meeteren 2014:219). Fenfang’s endeavour to gain education, and to become a part of society by actively contributing to it is an attempt to be accepted by the urban space. Her certifications make her modern and urban. Unlike the rural villagers, she had left behind her family to fulfil her aspirations. In this context,

she says – “Educating myself had allowed me to apply for permanent citizen status in Beijing. Now I was a person with multiple skills, all of which I was expected to dedicate to building the increasingly glorious reputation of my new home” (Guo 2008:26). Fenfang makes Beijing her new home and becomes an active agent that makes her a contributing member of society through her work.

At this point, it becomes important to draw attention to the notion of ‘work’. As mentioned earlier, work opportunities are a reason for migrant movement to cities. Fenfang, too, starts like many others in the service industry but soon ends up being a part of the film industry. She begins working as a reserved artist in films and believes that after being stuck in the rut of industry's low-wage jobs, she was finally getting closer to the shiny things through films. Films and the film industry have a visible impact on many migrants in Beijing, especially the generations of floating artists that come seeking freedom to cities and express themselves through films. Jia Zhangke says:

"We come to the city and share the opportunities provided by the city. We release our power at this time, and no more live a traditional life. This is the Generation of Floating, the generation of pursuing freedom and self. I embody all these feelings in the film" (qtd in Zheng 2016:116).

This can be applied to Fenfang as well. Fenfang, through the course of the novel, is portrayed as a reserved artist in films such as, *Female Number 300*, *Woman Waiting at the Platform*, a maid to the princess. She plays nameless, voiceless characters in commercial films that hardly have any significance. Similar to the invisibility of a low-wage worker, her multiple roles do not amount to anything. Her role is only visible to Huizi – a man she is friends with – who writes scripts for B-grade films. For Huizi, small scale artists need a

voice, but he is also aware that films on invisible voices would never sell in the industry. Yet inspired by Huizi, Fenfang starts writing her first script. In the fast-changing Beijing, Fenfang feels lost, stationary and unchanging – “Beijing was moving forwards like an express train, but my life was going nowhere. Okay, so I was getting lots of work, but it was all the same” (Guo 2008:61). The listlessness arising from being stuck is visible again. There is work available, but the excitement is lost. Fenfang's aspirations seem to have come to a standstill.

The script that Fenfang starts writing is again a movement towards adapting to circumstances and transforming what ‘shiny things’ come to mean for her. She writes of Hao An, a man with a “trivial life” (Guo 2008:62). Hao An stands for the empty life that Fenfang and many others share – “I started to watch nameless men and women in the street. We were alike: none of us heroes, just ordinary people – extras – drifting through messy streets in a vast, messy Beijing” (Guo 2008:61).

When the script is finished, Fenfang shows it to a film director who rejects the film, saying that it was not the kind of film people would want to see, that there was no hero or any message in the film. Fenfang accepts that the film will never be her breakthrough and starts writing a different script – a sci-fi story that emulates *The Matrix*. This script is seen as promising by an investor, but he does not buy it. It is only in “*Fragment Nineteen*” that Fenfang's script gets sold – it is Hao An's story. Fenfang's first script was bought by an underground director who makes underground films for a mere 5000 yuan. This is a significant trajectory that reflects in Fenfang's life. It is not just the script she writes but the process of showing them to others that display the same pattern of ordinary individuals who want to be the unlikely hero, trying to adapt to commercial life and the movement of being only accepted by the outliers. If Hao An's story ever gets transformed from

words to motion pictures, it is unknown, but it becomes unimportant – “I thanked him and then I thanked him again before I sank into the darkness of the stormy Beijing night” (Guo 2008:121). The darkness of Beijing swallows these stories – the ordinary people remain ordinary, Fenfang’s ‘shiny things’ remain undefined, and her aspirations become even more of an abstract notion as she nears the end of her time in Beijing.

For the major portion of this paper, the focus has remained on Fenfang’s aspirations of establishing her migrant identity concerning the urban spaces she occupies and her work. But Beijing is also a space where she forms connections with others. Zlatko Skrbiš looks at migration as a process where the migrant individual is linked to new experiences like forming new attachments, adjusting to new spaces, settlement, renewing the sense of belonging, and new beginnings and endings, all of which Skrbiš points out are strong sources of emotions (Skrbiš 2008:236). Two relationships are significant to Fenfang’s Beijing identity. The first is her first boyfriend, Xiaolin, who Fenfang meets on the set of a film. They go on a date, and the next day Fenfang moves in with his family in a one-bedroom apartment occupied by seven people and two dogs. There is no romance, according to Fenfang, in her relationship with Xiaolin. They are two different individuals, and Fenfang soon realizes this:

"But most of the time, Xiaolin was either angry or zombie-like. He was stuck in a rut. Get up, go to work, go to bed. Never any change. . . There was no oxygen left in the room; I was worn out. It was like being back with the rotten sweet potatoes. I wanted to run and run and run" (Guo 2008:20).

Even though Xiaolin is a Beijinger, he portrays the exact life that Fenfang is running away from – the monotonous rut that

leads nowhere. Fenfang's relationship with him is one of seeking comfort, where the love arises not from romance but from wanting security in a place that is not home. But this notion of comfort turns inhibiting for her. Fenfang's relationship with Xiaolin is a mix of finding new attachments and remaining tied to a skewed feeling of a past she is running from. In the end, this relationship becomes stifling, and Fenfang moves out, finding an apartment where she could live alone and away from Xiaolin.

Xiaolin and his family's move is important as it breaks the cyclical everyday monotony that follows Fenfang. It also brings back a sense of freedom for Fenfang. Louise Beynon talks about Chinese migrant women's attraction to "gaining a sense of autonomy and independence through making a "space of their own" in the city" (Beynon 2004:138), this notion is starkly visible in Fenfang's portrayal. But this is contrasted with the patriarchal societal expectations for young women to get married and settle down. Fenfang never settles down – her relationship with Xiaolin resembles the nothingness that she is running away from. She doesn't see a future with him. For a long time, though, Xiaolin hounds her, calling her at odd times, at one point breaking into her apartment and destroying her furniture.

In contrast to this, Ben, a Ph.D. student from the U.S. living in Beijing, is in a relationship with her. The time she spends with Ben is brief, but there is a sense of freedom attached to it, she thinks of running with Ben instead of running away from him – "‘Maybe we should just run away,’ I said, with hope. ‘Why not? China is big. We could hide in any corner; we don't have to be in Beijing. Yes?’" (Guo 2008:74). But it is Ben who runs away, returning to his country. The relationship ends, but Ben remains on the periphery, connected by long-distance phone calls – "a fuzzy long-distance echo" (Guo 2008:79). These

relationships can be read as a metaphor for elements of Fenfang's life itself – the stifling nothingness that threatens to sink upon her and the aspirations for 'shiny things' that she sees for a moment but disappears into a fuzzy blur on the periphery.

The 'shiny things' remain an abstract notion as Fenfang moves through her time in Beijing. Even though she works hard for a registration number, she never gets it. She longs to be recognized in the industry she works but remains an unnamed character in a movie and a script that never materializes into a film. The companionship she seeks is also something that she doesn't get in the span of the novel. The dreams contained within this idea of 'shiny things' also change through the novel's course. In the last fragment, Fenfang packs her life in Beijing in twelve boxes and gets ready to store them in a warehouse. She thinks of where she wants to go next:

“Perhaps I would go to Yun Nan in the south and live on a mountain. I could ask the locals to teach me how to find mushrooms in the forest. Or I could go to Da Lian, the seaside town, and discover the Yellow Sea and its fishing boats. Or perhaps I could go to Mongolia, to live in a tent, look after sheep and lie in the grass looking up at the big sky” (Guo 2008:122).

These places are so far away from the urban spaces that she wanted to settle herself in. In her quest for shiny things, she moves from crowded spaces that threaten to swallow her to thinking of empty places where there are barely any people and speaking of rural life. It is almost a circular motion. It could have been a Sisyphean movement of returning to where you had started from, if not for the 'shiny things' – “I wanted to see if I could find the shiny things in life all by myself” (Guo 2008:123). Fenfang's life portrays a struggle for independence, craving for comfort yet wanting to achieve something greater.

The last lines of the novel are words that Huizi had told Fenfang, which Fenfang repeats for her 17-year-old self – “Fenfang, you must take care of your life” (Guo 2008:125).

The search for a better life, in Fenfang’s case, is unending. Her identity is not defined by her past or present state but by the constant moving forward to attain something she spends her life looking for. This notion of aspirations defines the migrant identity, the endeavour to take care of one’s life on one’s own terms. Fenfang does not become a permanent part of the city, which she left behind in her village long ago. But her identity becomes a building process of the things she learns and the people she makes a part of her life. It is an identity that moves beyond notions of spaces and registrations and is imbued with desires and movement. Fenfang’s aspirations are about living life itself, moving beyond regular expectations, and creating something for herself. She does not find the ‘shiny things’ in her youth, but her pursuit of it establishes her identity.

Migrant identity, as a norm, has been understood in relation to the spaces that the migrant travels to and the work that they perform. By looking at Fenfang and the quest for ‘shiny things’, this paper has worked towards bringing to the forefront the idea of aspirations that fuel a migrant’s movement. Lefebvre’s idea of lived spaces speaks of experiences that an individual has in their interactions with the spaces they come to occupy. These lived experiences build an individual’s self. Fenfang’s youth speaks of her own lived experiences through which she tries to make Beijing her own city. She does not succeed at becoming an official Beijing-er. However, her experiences make her an independent woman whose dreams are not restrained by the rural monotony or the namelessness in Beijing. Her sense of self and identity becomes defined by her never-ending aspirations and her will to seek those ‘shiny things’.

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