

New Sociality and Transformed Discrimination in an Urban “Paradise” : Rural Migrants’ Communal Living in Urban Churches and Their Alternative Lifestyle in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Rural-to-urban migration has constituted a significant part of urban landscapes in contemporary China. Much of the research on Chinese rural migrants focuses on how their urban life has been determined by structural constraints imposed from governmental regulations and employers; even if they may find a pleasant moment of forming their subjectivity in making free choices in consumption, ethnographers still pointed out that was just a ruse of capitalism or a mirage of modernity. Their leisure life was often portrayed as individualized pursuit of modernity and acquirement of certain cultural taste; consumption seemed only an economic practice based on self-interest materialism. To enrich our understanding of life of rural migrants in contemporary city, the study aims to shed light on a little-studied aspect of rural migrants: their communal living in urban churches. By doing so, I would like to show how consumption is mediated by a moral community that can possibly bestow meanings on the same behavior of consumption. In addition, the unprecedented experiences of participating into a voluntary association outside of family, state and market may help to forge a new way of sociality, which may form the infrastructure of civil society.

By entering a church, the subjects possessed similar motivation to “go explore city and earn money.” However, modern city seemed more like sinfully scaring Sodom than glamorous Disneyland, consisting of unfriendly strangers and crafty frauds. Instead of going out to explore the dazzling metropolitan life, they chose a simple and single-minded lifestyle, and desire to find a home-space place. Their way into urban churches was self-described as a homecoming, tear-dropping experience. This religious space was characterized by indistinct love among “brothers and sisters,” as opposed to the

contemporary Chinese city with little social trust and morality among city dwellers. Moreover, rural migrants were encouraged to freely share their thoughts and feelings in this group of egalitarian relationships. Also, they learned to voluntarily and collectively participate in various church activities, gradually fusing into a moral community imbued with responsibility and obligations. However, even within the “paradise” haloed by religious teaching, one may still detect the hidden hierarchy and subtle discriminative practices that distinguished “the more urban” and “the more rural,” a difference reproduced yet transformed from the past cultural division between urbanity and rurality.