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Gifting as governance: NGO service projects and disciplinary power in rural migrant settlements in China

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Abstract: In contemporary China, migrant workers have gathered in urban villages and formed communities of their own. The regulative power of the state has not fully penetrated these enclaves, thus creating opportunities for NGOs to shoulder many of the ongoing welfare responsibilities. The primary goal of this study was to explore how NGO service projects can generate a new type of disciplinary power through give-and-take practices. I argue that service projects allow the givers to transform their economic power and social resources into political power, through which social inequality is obscured, legitimised, and translated into the delivery of “love”, “caring” and “compassion”. Such political power also delivers middle-class values and lifestyles to rural migrants, who feel obligated to transform their subjectivities in order to reciprocate.

Keywords: urban villages; governance; NGOs; gift exchange; China

Introduction

A reformed China has witnessed a vast influx of rural migrants in the Chinese major cities (Gregory 1997; Li 2004; Pun and Lu 2011; Liang and Ma 2004; Liang and White 1996)¹. Partially due to the fact that these migrants have left their social benefits at their places of origin and do not have full access to urban amenities and social welfare (Chan 2009; Liu 2005; Mackenzie 2002)², these newcomers often gather in urban enclaves where local villagers have constructed and rent out rental properties for profit (Chan 1994; Chan and Zhang 1999; Zhan 2015, 2018). In these cheap rental communities, the rural migrants often outnumbered the local peasants by 40 times (Zhan 2018). In the popular language, these enclaves are called “*chengzhongcun*”, which directly translates into ‘urban villages’. In contemporary Beijing, the capital of China and the most important city in the densely populated Beijing-Tianjin Corridor, there are over one hundred of these villages in and around the city that host a total of nearly four million rural migrants³. Likewise, in other Chinese major cities, for example, Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Shenzhen, these same urban villages function as one of the primary living quarters for rural migrants as well (Song *et al.* 2008; Zhang 2001; Ma and Xiang 1998; Bach 2010; O’Donnell *et al.* 2018).

Urban villages operate at the margins of the state. Despite the fact that most urban villages are located in the heart of urbanised areas, they have what Bach (2010) calls a “relative autonomy” as their land is still recognized as rural collective land and thus controlled by local village committees. In many cases, these urban villages have become “non-state places” in Xiang Biao’s sense (Xiang 2005). The meaning of being a non-state place is two-fold. First, as Zhang Li (2011) points out in her study on the reconfiguration of state power in urban villages, public power is often “privatized” by a small number of village cadres and elites without any monitoring from the state. Second, this lack of state regulation has resulted in rapid development of informality in these urban enclaves. Informal markets thrive in these locations and provide both job opportunities and services for rural migrants.

Nevertheless, urban villages are not in a power vacuum. Rather, they contain very complicated processes where disciplinary power toward rural migrants is constantly produced and reproduced. For instance, the lack of formal state regulation in these urban villages further paves the way for the active involvement of volunteers and NGOs in the villages (Kamart 2004; Qin 1998). Since the late 1990s, student associations from universities have started to facilitate service programs in the urban villages in Beijing. After that period of sporadic and spontaneous

¹ My indebted gratitude goes to the staff, volunteers and rural migrants I encountered in urban villages without whose generous help I cannot complete this research. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2016 AAS meeting in Seattle. I have benefited from Professor Lisa Hoffman and Erica Bornstein’s valuable comments. My gratitude also goes to two anonymous reviewers. Support from Richard T. Antoun Fund is also greatly appreciated.

² This condition is due to China’s household registration system, or *hukou* system. See Chan, K. W. 2009. The Chinese Hukou System at 50. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50 (2): 197–221.

³ This number is a rough estimation; it draws on the data from an unofficial report in 2014 by a Chinese NGO called the Social Resource Institute. The report can be accessed online. <http://www.csrglobal.cn/publications.jsp>

development of non-profit undertaking, NGOs⁴ have set up offices and activity centres in the villages to implement their programs. Due to the active role of NGOs and volunteers, the ways of engaging the state change, and new space for social interaction and action is created.

This article explores the formation of disciplinary power through an ethnographic investigation of NGO-supported service programs in the urban villages located in contemporary Beijing. It is important to note that NGOs are of various kinds in terms of their funding resources, missions, visions, and political orientations. In this paper, the focus is primarily NGO-led service programs. Despite the differences among NGOs, service programs often share a similar underlying moral discourse because of the evident give-and-take relationship enabled through the service programs. In this sense, service programs are quite different from NGO advocacy programs, where the logic of gifting is often unseen or less important.

Unlike previous studies that have tried to understand NGO programs within the framework of “civil society” and “empowerment” (Tang and Zhan 2008; Cooper 2006), this article pays particular attention to the role of virtues in implementing the NGO service programs and tries to understand these programs as a form of gifting in the anthropological sense. In so doing, it argues that the gifting relations enabled by NGO service projects are crucial to understanding the formation of disciplinary power in the Foucauldian sense in urban villages. To be more precise, while responsabilisation and moral conduct (doing good and being a good citizen/person) is encouraged largely through these programs, the mechanisms of social control can actually be traced down to microtransactions of gifts, in particular, the recognition by both parties of the obligations inherent in the gift. Indebtedness in this case is creating a form of speechlessness, and debts receivers accrue are repaid through taking on the middle-class values of the givers.

To unpack this argument, the paper first discusses the theoretical implications of conceptualising NGO service programs as a form of gifting practice in contemporary China. The next section introduces my fieldwork and methodology. Then a brief discussion of the development of NGO service programs in the past decades in Beijing is introduced. The several sections that follow then provide detailed cases where gifting from middle-class citizens to rural migrants can be translated into a particular type of governance, or disciplinary power, at the site of the NGO-mediated service. Before the brief conclusion, the paper discusses how service projects operate in light of and, in turn, serve social inequality in China.

NGO Service, Gifts, and Indebtedness

Even though NGO-led service programs can be seen as a response or reaction to the lack of state-led welfare delivery, they cannot be considered as equivalent to the welfare services provided by the state. Besides the obvious difference in scales, funding resources, formality, and more, the most important difference is that the contract for NGO-supported service

⁴ In the official language, a more commonly used term to refer to these organizations working in urban villages is “social organization”. Other than “NGO,” other terms such as social enterprises and civil organization are also used in people’s everyday conversation. For the sake of convenience, this paper uses the term NGO to refer to organizations that are not for profit.

programs is not between the citizens and the state as it is with social welfare. Rather, it is a contract between various groups of people and different entities, namely, the donors, the NGOs, their volunteers, and the rural migrants. As a result, service delivery in urban villages is not seen as part of the rural migrants' basic rights, or something they even deserve as Chinese citizens. Rather, they are often perceived as gifts given by altruistic and loving citizens out of a "loving heart" (*aixin*).

With the greater circulation of this discourse of "love", "care", "good deeds" and the culturally specific virtue of the "loving heart" (*aixin*) (Zhan 2011), NGOs, especially those that are doing service programs, are perceived as agencies that are "doing good" (*zuohaoshi*). In this context, charity-minded volunteers and donors at the top are viewed as givers and the rural migrants and their families at the bottom viewed as receivers by both parties involved in gifting practices; the service is seen as a gift that is being passed down from the good-hearted urban middle class to the vulnerable group of rural migrants.

Any anthropological discussion on gifting would inevitably lead us back to Mauss and his classic work on gift exchange in 'archaic' societies⁵. Mauss's central formulation was the notion of reciprocity. Based on his studies among indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest and other such societies, he (1990 [1950]) argued that the relationship between the giver, the gift, and the receiver always requires the receivers to give back, and failing to reciprocate in that manner means losing honour, status, and even spiritual authority and wealth (Mauss 1990[1950]; Cheah 2005; Weiner 2002). Following Mauss' line of thinking, anthropologist Weiner (1992) broadens Mauss's argument by introducing the notion of "inalienable possessions" in her studies of gifting practices among people in Oceanic societies from Polynesia to Papua New Guinea. In her discussion of inalienable gifts, Annette Weiner associates gift giving with the production of inequality and social control. She argues when one accepts a gift that one also accepts that the giver has rights over the receiver. Weiner highlights the issue of hierarchy, using the notion of "keeping-while-giving" (Weiner 1992). For her, hierarchy resides at the very core of any reciprocal exchange. What motivates reciprocity is its reverse, namely, the "desire to keep something back from the pressures of give and take" (Weiner 1992, 30).

Graeber (2014, 65) points out that "hierarchy is a permanent relationship between unequal parties. The rhetoric of reciprocity disguises the working principle, which is precedent". In other words, reciprocal relations do not result in hierarchies, but rather result from hierarchies. Graeber's argument is important in the sense that it transforms our understanding of the relationship between reciprocity and hierarchies. According to Graeber, hierarchies can be and should be the starting point where we examine reciprocity, which means that researchers whose work focuses on hierarchies and inequality in modern societies should pay attention to gifting practices, reciprocity and the role of morality.

In recent years, anthropologists who study inequality in the age of neoliberal globalisation have given a lot attention to gifting (Fassin 2007; Muehlebach 2012; Rajak 2010; Chika 2015a,

⁵ Gift exchange is one of the oldest subjects in social science that attracted massive attention among prominent anthropologists until the 1970s. In recent years, specially after the 2008 economic crisis and largely to David Graeber, Mauss has been rediscovered and reinterpreted.

2015b; Stirrat and Henkel 1997; Bornstein 2001, 2012). For example, Muehlebach explores the rise of what she calls “ethical citizenship” after the retreat of the welfare state in Italy and how a moralised community-based welfare has not only taken shape in, but also contributes to, the conditions of neoliberalism. Morality, though often perceived to be at odds with the logic of the market, is actually indispensable to marketisation and privatisation processes. Rajak’s work, through a careful examination of the Cooperate Social Responsibility (CSR) movement in South Africa, reveals that moral imperative and market discipline intertwined with each other (Rajak 2011). In a study of philanthropy in India, Bornstein (2012) focuses on the impulse of philanthropy and pays more attention to the givers in contemporary India. She argues the traditional Indian notion of *Dān*, a type of pure gift that implies no moral obligation on the part of the receivers, has become more popular in the neoliberal condition. (Bornstein 2012, 2001; Laidlaw 2000). Weller et al. (2017) offer a careful reading of the gifting principle in religious philanthropy in the Chinese context. They argue that “doing good” has acquired new meanings in recent years. “New goodness rests on a conception of selfhood as universal, cosmopolitan, and fundamentally individual, and on an industrialized social organization of philanthropy mediated by the state.” (Weller et al. 2017, 217) Weller et al. point out that there is a tension between the creation of new social constructions of goodness and older systems of social capital in Chinese philanthropy.

As shown in the above works, the gift is not a uniform economic category of exchange in modern societies. It is something structured by different economic principles and moral rules (Graeber 2014, 65). Thus, the morality of reciprocity is not universal, but it arises after people have been succumbed to debt relationships. Hence the moral imperative to return the gift can be seen as a form of government itself, that is however a consequence of violent submission into debt relations.

In the context of China, the logic of “gratitude” penetrates into state governance through the prevailing paternalism and patron-client relationships in Chinese society. In other words, “gifting” in the case of China was never confined to the private domain. The reciprocal relationships are also prominent in both public and private domains (Yang 1989; Yan 1997; Kipnis 1997).

In Chinese urban villages, NGO-led service programs also revolve around the logic of gratitude. Rural migrants are not exempt from the obligation to reciprocate to the NGO they are serviced by. More often than not, they are expected to show “gratitude” (the intention to pay back) or pass down the “*aixin*” (loving heart) they have received when they are able to do so. As such, responsibilities and burdens are generated on the receivers’ end, meaning that the migrant workers and their families constantly feel indebted and obligated. A migrant child once expressed her feeling of indebtedness in her personal report to Development Support as “the best way to repay these volunteer teachers is to study harder. I will pass down their loving heart (*aixin*) to my students if I become a volunteer myself one day.”⁶

From a Foucauldian perspective, NGO service programs and the gifting relationship enabled by these programs can be conceptualised as a mode of control built on existing hierarchical

⁶ Quote from a migrant child Lele’s report in “little scientists summer camp”.

relations. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault argues that modern society is a “disciplinary society,” in which a new form for “disciplinary power” can be observed in administrative systems and social services. Foucault considers three processes the key of discipline, namely surveillance, normalization and examination (Foucault 1977, 187). This means that power in our time cannot be monopolised by the state. Rather, it is largely exercised through disciplinary means in a variety of institutions, including prisons, schools, hospitals, militaries, etc. Moreover, the modern system of governance no longer solely relies on force of violence, as people internalize the dominant values and behave in expected ways.

NGO service programs in urban villages produce disciplinary power not only when they deliver services, but also when they transfer both their knowledge and values to the rural migrants. Since rural migrants as the receivers feel obligated and in debt, they are expected to listen, learn, follow the rules set forth by the givers, and transform themselves to embody the values of the givers. As long as the need for reciprocity is unfulfilled, the giver always has power over the recipient in some way. Moreover, as recipients, rural migrants are often deprived of any agency to speak for themselves and are subjected to the evaluation and education programs of the NGO service projects.

In this manner, the service programs surveil, judge and evaluate the subjects of their programs, and thus produce a disciplinary power that relies on both interpersonal interactions and institutional mediation. The social control through gifting differs from the bureaucratic control discussed by Weber, or the class-based political control discussed by Marx. It depends on and enables citizen-to-citizen actions. It also creates a social relationship that is at the same time voluntary and involuntary for rural migrants.

Fieldwork Sites and Methodology

This study took place in migrant enclaves in Beijing, which are commonly known as “*chengzhongcun*”⁷, or directly translated as urban villages. Chinese urban villages were originally rural villages. Due to the influx into cities of migrant workers in the 1990s as part of Chinese rapid industrial expansion, local farmers on the edge of Beijing halted agricultural production to capitalise on the rural migrants’ demand for housing. Farmers built informal rental housing for rural migrants on their assigned housing plots and farmland to maximise cash income and from these, inexpensive rental communities were formed. In contemporary Beijing, the capital of China and the most important city in the densely populated Beijing-Tianjin Corridor, there are over one hundred urban villages in and around the city. Nearly four million rural migrants are living in these informal rental apartments. In other Chinese major cities, such as Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Shenzhen, urban villages function as one of the primary living quarters for rural migrants as well (Song *et al.* 2008; Zhang 2001; Ma and Xiang 1998).

⁷ A reformed China has witnessed a vast influx of rural migrants in the Chinese major cities (Gregory 1997, Li 2004, Pun and Lu 2011, Zai and Ma 2004, Zai and White 1996). Partially due to the fact that these migrants have left their social benefits at their places of origin and do not have full access to urban amenities and social welfare, these newcomers often gather in urban enclaves where local villagers have constructed and rent out rental properties for profit (Chan 1994, Chan and Zhang 1999, Zhan 2015).

Most of the data used in this article were collected during 18 months of fieldwork in Beijing from 2013 to 2014. This fieldwork time was spent mostly in two urban villages⁸. The larger of the two was *beiwucun*, an urban village hosting more than 60,000 rural migrants in northeast Beijing. Since 2005, Development Support has set up a migrant worker activity centre and has begun delivering service programs in *beiwucun*. The other village was *bicun*, located on the east side of Beijing and hosting more than 30,000 migrant workers. Laborers Association has been implementing service programs there since 2007.

Several organizations implemented programs in these two urban villages since 2007. Some of these organisations identify themselves as non-governmental organisations, while some of them consider themselves as social enterprises. I worked with five organisations during my fieldwork and the data used in this article mainly concern two of these: Development Support and Laborers Association. Development Support was officially registered as a non-profit social organisation (*shehui zuzhi*) with China's Ministry of Civil Affairs in 1995. The founder of this organisation was a high school teacher in New York City who was raised in Taiwan and migrated to the United State in the 1950s. Its donors were mostly overseas Chinese who felt motivated to change the education condition for rural young children. Their programs were originally carried out in rural villages, and then expanded to urban villages. Laborers' Association was registered with the Bureau of Commerce in 2003. Most members of this organisation migrated to cities in the first migration wave in the late 1990s and consider their organisation's major goals to be to encourage self-help, self-service and self-education. They use the term "new workers" to refer to migrant workers and promote what they call "the value of work" and "dignified politics."

It is important to note that Chinese NGOs are of various missions, visions, funding resources, and organisational structures. They also offer more than just service programs. This article pays special attention to the service programs only and will not cover all of the NGO -organised activities in urban villages. It is also worth noting that the use of the term NGO in the Chinese context is different to the common usage of the term in the West. For instance, Development Support was officially given the title 'social organisation' by the office of Ministry of Civil Affair. In media, they are often categorised as a charity organisation (*cishan zuzhi*). However, they tend to use the term "NGO" quite often in their everyday practice, especially in urban villages. On the other hand, Laborers Association seems to be very careful about using the term NGO as they believe the western origin of the term may be unfamiliar to rural migrants they serve⁹. People from Laborers Association identify the organisation as a social enterprise, However, for the sake of convenience and clarity, I will use NGO to refer to these two organisations in this paper.

⁸ The names of villages and people appear in this article are pseudonyms.

⁹ Many Chinese NGOs directly use the English abbreviation NGO, which can be confusing for migrant workers who do not have the knowledge or language skill to make sense of the term,

Service Programs in Urban Villages

Service programs in urban villages have gradually developed in the past two decades in Beijing. When rural migrant settlements started to proliferate in the 1990s, the service programs targeting rural migrants were quite random, sporadic and limited. The key contributors or facilitators were student associations in the universities. For instance, in 1997, students from Beijing Normal University founded an organisation called “Sons of Peasants” (*nongminzhizi*). It was quite successful in recruiting volunteers to provide free and quality educational services at many migrant children schools in urban villages.

Since most of these student volunteers were untrained and inexperienced, they often deliver the services without formal training or much preparation. Even so, education aid programs have gained many positive responses from migrant families and become the most popular programs. Even after the professionalisation and diversification of service programs following the mid-2000s, education aid programs continue to be the most common ones delivered.

There are many reasons for the popularity of education aid projects. First, compared to their parents who are disparaged as being of “low *suzhi*” (quality) (Yan 2008; Kipnis 2006; Annagnost 2004; Jacka 2009), migrant children are seen to be innocent and vulnerable with greater potential. The underlying rationale is that although migrant workers “have lost their chance to achieve in life and have no other option but to live in slum-like places, their children still have potential.”¹⁰ Even for NGOs that reject the *suzhi* discourse, they still consider migrant children to be the most important target for exercising their goals of consciousness-raising or educating “well-rounded persons.” As a result, education for them is seen as more legitimate and even urgent. Second, the people in charge of the education programs find it easier to recruit volunteers, as many people assume anyone who is better educated than migrant children is qualified to teach in the programs. Third, there is an actual demand for education programs, not only because migrant parents are often concerned with education quality, but also because many migrants work double shifts and do need extra help with childcare.

Service programs in urban villages began to evolve to become more complex and sophisticated around 2003 when rural migrants as a disadvantaged social group began to get more public attention. At the beginning of the year, a college student named Sun Zhigang was beaten to death by police because he did not have his identification card with him and thus was mistaken for a rural migrant. This incident was widely publicised and provoked numerous public discussions on discrimination against rural migrants (Hand 2006). Later that same year, then Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, personally demanded an employer compensate for deferred pay and underpayment on behalf of a rural migrant family. Once again, the media publicity put the disadvantages and challenges faced by migrant workers in the spotlight.

Since then, NGOs have extended their work in urban villages and have gradually become the primary actor for providing service programs to rural migrants. For example, around 2006, Development Support set up a migrant worker activity centre in *beiwucun*. One year later, Laborers Association registered as an independent organisation and set up their office in *bicun*. Compared to labour NGOs in migrant settlements (Chan 2013; Franceschini 2014), service-

¹⁰ A comment made by a migrant parent during my interview with him on July 22nd, 2014.

based NGO programs have drawn much less attention from academia. However, they have quickly changed the landscape of service delivery in urban villages. To be more precise, the active engagements of NGOs had led to the increased professionalisation and stabilisation of service delivery. For instance, in the past when student volunteers were the main service providers, coordination among volunteers was much harder, and service programs were often cancelled if one or two individuals quit. There was little to no evaluation of the service provided. However, once the migrant worker activity centre was set up, the after-school tutoring program could develop a more detailed schedule. The migrant worker activity centres would also evaluate and train their volunteers before assigning any task to them to serve the migrant children.

Also, due to the participation of NGOs, these service programs have started to differentiate and cater to the multi-dimensional needs of rural migrant families. NGOs have offered services ranging from free health check-ups, thrift shops, free legal consultation to entertainment programs and more. As migrant workers often live a very frugal life and save money for their future (Zhan 2015), they are very inclined to consume cheap products, including second-hand merchandise from thrift stores. As a result, it has become increasingly common for NGOs to set up these stores in recent years.

In 2011, Laborers Association set up its own thrift stores in *bicun*. The thrift stores accept donations of clothing from mainly middle-class urban people in Beijing and then sell the donations to migrant workers in *bicun*. The store was quite successful and soon another chain store was opened in the same village. Later, Laborers Association mobilised social media to widen their donation channels and they have set up donation boxes in middle-class residential districts. Similarly, in *beiwucun*, Development Support collects second-hand clothing and sells it to migrant families. Every other week, staff in the migrant workers activity centre take out the donated second-hand clothing and hang it outside the activity centre. Migrant workers then stop by and shop for items.

Other than the fact that there is a need for cheap clothing among the low-income families in urban villages, NGO-operated thrift stores also thrive because they generate revenue. As the thrift stores rely mainly on donation and voluntary work, the cost of running such a store is often quite low. For certain small grassroots NGOs, the revenue of thrift stores accounts for over half of their income. By introducing more varieties of philanthropy programs, NGOs brought more actors to urban villages. In addition to student volunteers, white-collar workers, professionals, and intellectuals all connect to urban villages through such programs.

The following sections discuss how service programs resemble gifting facilitated by NGOs in Chinese urban villages. In the analysis of these concrete citizen-to-citizen actions, I elaborate on how social control is realized through the moralised discourse of obligations and indebtedness.

Case 1: When a good student meets a “bad” one

“Why can’t you just behave and finish this math problem?” Fifteen-year-old Xiao Zhang was talking to another boy in the migrant workers' activity centre in *beiwucun* on a sunny day in

July 2013. Xiao Zhang looked at the ten-year-old boy angrily and frowned. The boy he was talking to was a third-grader named Xiong Xiong, who totally ignored Xiao Zhang's instructions and kept running around in the activity centre. Xiao Zhang raised his voice further:

It is your responsibility to learn and make progress, not mine! I am here to help, and I do not owe you anything. I hope you understand that. Why don't you just stop being lazy and let me help you? I have never seen someone so undisciplined. You need to work harder, so you can change your future.

This was the first day that Xiao Zhang had volunteered in an education aid program sponsored by Development Support. His task that day was to tutor Xiong Xiong on his homework. But as Xiong Xiong did not behave well, Xiao Zhang lost his temper. He blamed Xiong Xiong for being lazy, not having the proper attitude and having poor learning habits.

Xiao Zhang's bad temper partially came from his feeling of superiority at being a "good" student in the Middle School affiliated with Peking University, an elite school with the highest ranking of all the middle schools in China. Since his parents are professors at Peking University, Xiao Zhang was admitted to this school without an entrance examination. On his way to the migrant workers' activity centre that day, he assumed that Xiong Xiong would be eager to learn. He also assumed his own "capability" and "passion" would have had a positive impact on a migrant child-like Xiong Xiong. However, the reality of the situation taught him a lesson. Xiong Xiong refused to work with him and gave him a really hard time.

While Xiao Zhang was blaming Xiong Xiong for being a lousy student, his parents were waiting for him outside the centre. Having little experience in urban villages themselves, they were worried about their son's safety. "We have to accompany our son here. We will not interrupt his work and please just consider ourselves invisible", Xiao Zhang's mother told me. However, their presence was not invisible at all as their Audi SUV was blocking the traffic on the narrow street and was producing a lot of complaints from the local residents.

Xiao Zhang's parents were supportive of Xiao Zhang's volunteer work for two reasons. First, they believed the experience of witnessing other kids "eating bitterness" (*chiku*) (Gaetano 2012) in an urban village would make Xiao Zhang cherish his own opportunities and transform him into a more grateful person; Second, they were aware that the volunteer experience in urban villages would make Xiao Zhang's profile stand out when he applied to U.S. universities in the future.

The encounter between Xiao Zhang and Xiong Xiong was meant to be brief. In ten days' time, both Xiao Zhang and Xiong Xiong would start their summer vacations. However, their plans for the summer were drastically different. Xiao Zhang would travel with his parents to Europe. His father, who was a professor in the Chemistry Department at Peking University, would take the whole family to several countries in Europe after giving a talk at the University of London. Xiong Xiong would return to Henan Province and visit his parents' home village for the first time.

However brief it was, the encounter in *beiwucun* was still an uneasy one for both youngsters. Xiao Zhang felt hurt because he thought his skills, knowledge, and kindness were rejected for no reason. He was still upset when he left the centre, and said the following words to me in private:

I am here for him, with my whole heart. It is not like that I am charging him for anything or asking him to pay me back in any way. I see no reason that I should beg him to learn. If he does not want to change his fate, nobody can help him. If he wants to repeat his parents' life and live in urban village when he grows up, that is his choice. Nobody can help him.

Xiong Xiong was unhappy too. He was not at all “grateful” for Xiao Zhang’s help, as many people had expected he would be. Rather, he sensed the unspeakable shame and uneasiness when he met Xiao Zhang. Without access to public education in Beijing, Xiong Xiong was only enrolled in a school for migrant children called Red Star right outside *beiwucun*. Since July 2014, Beijing has tightened its control over migrant children schools. It was rumored that the Red Star was about to be shut down. Xiong Xiong’s education could be discontinued or at least interrupted at any minute. Even if the school continued to operate, the education in migrant children schools was an inferior quality. Xiong Xiong’s mother told me that migrant children schools tended to encourage “grade inflation” in order to increase enrolment and make more profits. She was not happy about the education quality:

The education quality is terrible here. Xiong Xiong will not be able to compete with those from good schools. Not to mention that Xiong Xiong has to return to our hometown for a college entrance exam due to a policy restriction. The competition in our province is even worse. We sure hope that Xiong Xiong does go to college in the future. But if he is not that kind of material, we do not blame him.¹¹

This case demonstrated that an unequal social structure had placed Xiao Zhang and Xiong Xiong in unequal social positions. The social and economic advantage of Xiao Zhang's parents had translated into Xiao Zhang's privilege of being an elite student at an elite school. Xiong Xiong had also “inherited” a certain position, namely, social disadvantages from his family.

Even though the tutoring program organised by Development Support intended to “help” the disadvantaged kids like Xiong Xiong and even though Xiao Zhang considered his compassion for others to be innocent and harmless, the unequal social relations of the situation could not be completely obscured and superseded by their intentions to help. In the course of this service project, even though no one directly acknowledged or questioned the structural inequalities between tutors and their students, they were experienced by both parties and produced uneasiness. Even worse, the issues related to the structural inequality were almost magically converted into a moral judgment. If somebody is behaving like a “good student” or “bad

¹¹ Interview with Xiong Xiong’s mother on September 15th, 2014 in Beijing.

student”, the presumption was that Xiong Xiong’s inadequate academic performance was largely a result of his bad attitude and bad learning habits.

In the course of his volunteer efforts, Xiao Zhang found himself in a position to judge and also teach a fellow young boy about the meaning of being a good student, a responsible individual, and even a good person. At that moment, Xiao Zhang’s advantage transformed into a disciplinary power, through which he could communicate the standards of “right and wrong” conduct with another boy only five years younger than he was.

Case 2: “Why Can’t He be a Responsible Parent?”

In July 2014, Development Support received a small earmarked donation of 10,000 *yuan* (1,500 USD) for migrant children’s development in *beiwucun*. Since the tutoring programs were suspended during the summer, the NGO workers had to come up with another way to serve the children. After a two-hour meeting and a heated discussion, they decided the best option was to support migrant families by having them watch movies in an Imax movie theatre.

The idea was to help migrant families acquire “valuable experience” through a “service of culture”. Li Jun, a volunteer from Beijing Normal University, suggested that the “migrant workers themselves were excluded from culture activities in Beijing due to their meagre incomes. They would never spend eighty *yuan* to enter the movie theatre.” According to many NGO workers, valuable experience is crucial for “culture enhancement” or “cultivation” in the migrant population. Li Jun continued, saying that “this will be one of those opportunities when they can encounter a completely different world. Such an eye-opening experience will transform the children.”

Also, the NGO workers in Development Support believed that such a program would allow migrant families to enjoy “parent-child quality time” (*qinzishijian*). “Parent-child quality time” is an adopted notion that Chinese middle-class parents believe to be widespread in Western countries. In contemporary China, among many urban middle-class parents who often work over time, the importance of “parent-child quality time” is raised to remind them to slow down and share their time with their families, especially their children. In commercialised childcare centres in urban China, “parent-child quality time” is consistently reinforced and is considered one of the most important elements of good parenting skills.

Nevertheless, “parent-child quality time” has hardly received discussion among working-class people who have to work for long hours just to make ends meet. For migrant parents, time with their children is a luxury, considering the fact that many have to leave their children behind with the elderly in rural villages so the parents can afford to go and work in their adopted cities¹². Even those rural migrants who move to the cities with their whole families often have very limited time for their children. Interestingly, through the work and efforts of Development Support, the notion of “parent-child quality time” has “trickled down” from the urban society proper to the urban migrant enclaves.

¹² There is a vast amount of literature focusing on Chinese “left-behind children” as it has become a recognized “social problem” in contemporary China.

One week after Development Support had their meeting, a migrant worker, Lao Liu, was offered four free movie tickets to see the American movie *Transformers*. To make sure that all of Lao Liu's family were included in the activity, Development Support was generous enough to provide them with four tickets, two for Lao Liu and his wife and two for their two children.

Lao Liu's daughter, Xia Xia, was eager to go to the movie that day. However, after working as street peddlers the entire day, Lao Liu and his wife were too tired to go anywhere. The movie theatre was nearly a one and half hour bus ride from where Lao Liu's family lived. Instead of taking the whole family out to see the movie, Lao Liu went to bed at 10 pm that night as usual.

The next day, Lao Liu rose at 5 am and started his busy day as usual. Xia Xia went to the nearby migrant children school which was a fifteen- minute walk from her home. That afternoon, Xia Xia met Li Jun and told him that she did not get to go to the movie theatre after all.

Later that month, staff and volunteers at the migrant workers centre held a second meeting to evaluate the movie night project before finishing their report to the donor. At the beginning of the meeting, Li Jun shared Xia Xia's story. Right afterwards, three more volunteers shared similar stories where the parents had "wasted their chances for culture education for their children."¹³ According to the volunteers and staff, there were, at least, five migrant families that failed to take their children to the theatre. Li Jun blamed the parents for being "irresponsible"¹⁴. Li Jun stated, "Why can't they be responsible parents? After all, it does not cost them a dime to cherish this learning opportunity for their children."

Another volunteer Wang Hong also gave her opinion on this matter:

Many of them may still not know the importance of the parents' role in their children's education. They assume they can just leave their children to the school and the teachers once their children turn seven. They do not know how important it is for all parents to do meaningful things together with their children.

Similar comments continued. For these staff and the volunteers, the movie tickets had multiple meanings. First, they signified the donors' goodwill. Also, they reflected the NGO workers' idea of cultivation and good parenting. These NGO workers expected that they could communicate their values to Lao Liu through the free gift of four movie tickets. Had Lao Liu taken his family to the movie theatre, their values and good intentions would have been

¹³ Fieldwork notes on July 26th, 2014.

¹⁴ Fieldwork notes on July 26th, 2014.

accepted. However, he not only failed to use the gifts, but from the perspective of the NGO staff he also refused the implied love, care and knowledge that came with the gifts.

This case proves once again that service projects in urban villages can generate a disciplinary power that plays a particular role in the subjectification process of both parties. Through discussions about what are proper gifts and by giving out movie tickets, NGO staff and the volunteers realised their transformation to being moral citizens. Further, they also educated and evaluated the rural migrants' role as parents by introducing the notion of "parent-child quality time" as a norm. Service programs are therefore not just concerned with providing comfort or expressing compassion, they can also send messages to the recipients about who they are and who they should become. Thanks to the reciprocal relationship implied the gifting practices, expectations from the NGO staff act as a form of disciplinary power or a mode of social control towards rural migrants, communicating a moral hierarchy.

Case 3: Thrift Stores and the Negotiation of Dignity and Shame

Lao Qi is a construction worker who has worked in Beijing for over twelve years. From time to time, he visits charity stores to buy cheap clothing. When I first met him in the thrift store in *bicun*, he had already picked up a jacket and held it in his hand. When he saw me, he seemed a bit embarrassed and put the jacket down. I tried not to make him feel uncomfortable and left the thrift store immediately. One month later, I met him again in the thrift store. This time, I initiated a conversation and asked him if he came to the thrift store often. He responded: "No. I only come here for work clothes." As a manual labourer, Lao Qi's clothes wear out easily. However, his answer to my question went beyond his obvious need for durable clothes for his work. The undertone of the conversation was that he felt ashamed to be shopping in the thrift store. He had to make it clear to me that he did not buy all his clothes here. By making a distinction between work clothes and "real clothes", he wanted to assure me that his cheap and second-hand clothes said nothing about who he really was.

The thrift store in *bicun* is located by the Northern gate of the village. Every week, donations from hundreds of families in Beijing come into the storage yard in *bicun*. More than twenty volunteers sort the donated goods and put price tags on each piece. The goods are then put into the thrift stores. On each price tag, there is a slogan that says, "Consuming with dignity and supporting our just and progressive social enterprise."

While I was chatting with Lao Qi, Xiao Xin came in and went through the clothes. Xiao Xin was in his late twenties. By the time I met him in *bicun*, he had already worked in Beijing in a nearby furniture factory for about two years. Holding a dark T-shirt, Xiao Xin asked, "How much is this one?" The clerk took a look at the shirt and said, "Fifteen *yuan*". "How about ten?" Xiao Xin tried to bargain with the clerk.

"Please do not bargain in our store. We are not one of those regular stores that make a lot of money. We are a non-profit store, and all our profits are used for non-profit purposes. Sorry, but please do not bargain with us." This clerk was Sun Yu, one of the long-term members of the Laborer Association.

“If it does not cost a dime for you to get these clothes, why can’t you cut the price for us? I am one of the poor. You are just trying to make more profit!” Xiao Xin exclaimed.

“What we do is to encourage ‘dignity consumption.’ Even though we get these clothes for free, there is a cost for transporting and sorting them. Besides, people won’t feel good about themselves if they just take free stuff from others. Paying a few *yuan* for these clothes will allow our consumers to retain their dignity”, Sun Yu replied.

Sun Yu's words did not convince Xiao Xin. But he also ran out of words to respond to Sun Yu. At that moment, Lao Qi joined their conversation with a raised voice. With one of the price tags in his hand, Lao Qi said: “What the hell is ‘dignity consumption’ anyway? Are we not allowed to bargain here? I thought charity stores are supposed to help us, instead of taking money from us. If you ask me, I will say that the peddlers selling clothes on the streets are doing a better job of providing us with cheap and affordable things. A shirt like this would only cost ten at most.”

This time, Sun Yu stayed silent and did not respond to Lao Qi. Five minutes later, both Lao Qi and Xiao Xin left the store. Sun Yu then told me that they received comments like these a lot because migrant workers are used to bargaining. He then continued, saying, “People still need some time to understand the nature of NGOs. They have lived in a commercialised world for too long, and they are not familiar with an organisation like Laborers Association.”

In this instance, Lao Qi and Xiao Xin’s were very direct in expressing their negative feelings. In China, second-hand clothing carries a lot of stigma. As a result, thrift stores are unpopular and rarely seen. The thrift stores in *bicun* are unique because of their aim to encourage dignified consumption. In the thrift stores for rural migrants, the NGO expects them to take (and in this case pay) and be grateful, they are not expected to voice their feelings or misgivings and are expected to shop in a middle-class manner. Lao Qi felt ashamed because he found himself in the position where he had consumed items that people of a higher class no longer needed. Xiao Xin felt ashamed mostly because he was unable to afford to be one of the “dignified consumers” in a second-hand store for just three more *yuan*. In other words, because he wanted to save three *yuan* (0.5 US dollar), he could not be as “dignified” as other middle-class citizens. Again, love and good deeds from moral citizens produced unsettling encounters. Instead of feeling grateful for the deeds motivated by the good intentions of donors and NGO staff, these migrant workers felt confused, humiliated, ashamed and even angry.

It is also worth noting that part of the reason for the migrants’ uneasy feelings in thrift stores was due to poor project design. Other than serving the migrant workers by delivering cheaper merchandise, thrift stores also wanted to generate revenue for themselves. In the case of Laborers Association, their thrift stores generate about 150,000 *yuan* for the organisation each year, and that is more than one-third of their total annual revenue. Perhaps, servicing the migrants and profiting from the migrants is a contradiction.

Governing Through Gifting

In these NGO-mediated encounters between donors, volunteers and rural migrants, the feelings of indebtedness were very much anticipated on the recipients’ end and worked to regulate their

conduct and actions; the NGO's gifting of goods, services and the indebtedness the gifts created therefore provide a means through which the NGO governed its clients. I thus argue that the meaning of governing through gifting has three purposes: Release the state from its welfare responsibilities; govern social inequality; and communicate middle-class values with rural migrants in order to transform them into more "responsible" and "reliable" subjects.

Welfare Delivery

As many scholars have already pointed out, numerous NGOs have risen in response to neoliberalisation in the global context since the 1970s when the welfare state retreated from actual welfare delivery (Harvey 2005; Petras 1997, 1999; Brown 1995). To a large extent, China also underwent neoliberal transformation/urban reform in the 1990s when the socialist *danwei* (work units) ceased to provide comprehensive service to its members in order to enhance their "competitiveness" in the market (Shue 1994, 1990; Solinger 1995). Housing, education, and medical care have been privatised to a certain degree (Zhang and Ong 2008). Meanwhile, the state has encouraged social organisations, including both a government-organised NGO (GONGO) and NGOs to shoulder some of the responsibilities of welfare delivery to the impoverished and the marginalised in rural China.

In the beginning, the NGOs' aid and developmental programs were largely confined to the rural areas. It was not until the late 1990s that these NGO programs started to enter migrant settlements in the cities. Development Support migrant workers activity centre was first set up in 2006. Laborers Association thrift stores opened in 2007. These were the first generation of NGOs that were based in urban villages. They are state-like agencies because they are providing services that are traditionally within the ambit of the state: education services, medical services and other related services.

In this sense, NGO service projects now fill the shoes of state welfare delivery. It is important to note that when the central government started these "social construction" projects nationwide, services projects designed by grassroots NGOs were often incorporated into the larger state-led projects of social construction to deliver social welfare to the fringes of the city.

Managing Social Inequality

One of the central tasks of neoliberal governmentality in contemporary China is the managing of social inequality. As the statistics have shown, in the past thirty years or so, income disparity has widened drastically in China (Kim 2010; Guo and Cheng 2010). Unrest and social protest caused by social inequality also has raised questions about the legitimacy of the government in China (Lu 2009; Leung 1998). The fast growth of the third sector and the rise of moral citizenship, in many cases, are efforts to ameliorate social inequality because they involve taking from the wealthier and privileged groups and giving to the disadvantaged and the poor.

However, social inequality has not necessarily been challenged as much as many people have assumed. First of all, service projects are in fact preconditioned to be based on social inequality. In other words, it is social inequality that makes the service projects feasible and meaningful

in the first place. As shown in the above-cited cases, service projects enable a symbolic exchange of *aixin* and gratitude. Since they create a social obligation and indebtedness on the recipients' end, at the moment of service delivery, the hierarchical social relations that made a gifting practice possible in the first place are once again confirmed and acknowledged.

More importantly, as shown in these cases, NGO service programs tend to bypass the larger structural cause of inequality and attribute social inequality to personal qualities and characteristics. For instance, rural migrants are generally considered to be low quality, irresponsible, “with bad manner” and “lazy”; while donors and volunteers are deemed to be moral, knowledgeable and devoting. As a result, in the course of NGO -mediated gifting in the form of service projects, the basic structural inequality remains unquestioned. On the contrary, at the moment of gifting, that inequality is transformed into a moral privilege on the givers' side and a moral obligation on the recipients' end. Disguised in a discourse of love and care, these service projects have obscured and further legitimised social injustice and social inequality.

Communicating Values

In his study on humanitarianism, Fassin (2007) has proposed the notion of “politics of life” to refer to those humanitarian actions where human life is given specific value and meaning. Fassin's analysis offers two important insights. First, he highlights the fact that humanitarian work sets up a binary based on the social positions in humanitarian programs, separating humanitarian workers and those who receive their aid. Second, Fassin foregrounds the role of values in humanitarianism, pointing out that humanitarian actions are largely about the communication of values.

In keeping with Fassin's analysis of humanitarian projects, NGO donors and service providers are political subjects, actors in the world whereas migrant workers are often represented as passive victims of their circumstances. NGO services are usually a reflection of their own values and knowledge. As the ones who control social resources, the NGOs decide which gifts are proper and suitable for the migrant workers and their children. They also decide how and when, and under what conditions they give these services to the migrant workers and their children. In so doing, they generate an opportunity to communicate ideas and values to the rural migrants, telling rural migrants what a good life is and how to live a meaningful life. In other words, service projects allow the givers to transform their economic power and social resources into a new type of political power, through which actual governance can be realised.

The cases discussed in this paper show that service projects enable the communication of specific values. In the cases discussed above, NGOs and their volunteers often aimed to educate the migrant workers about learning attitudes, learning skills, parenting skills, self-cultivation, dignity consumption, and more. In some cases, the communication of values was direct; while in others, it was much more subtle. In the most common service projects, such as education aid programs for migrant children, migrant children are constantly exposed to values regarding education, work and success. In the case of the night movie projects for migrant families, several notions shaped the design of that project, including the globalized notion of “parent-

child quality time”, “responsibility”, and more. In the case of the thrift store, the idea of “dignity consumption” was at the core of the design and implementation of the program.

These values and notions are mainstream values in contemporary urban China today. Most of these ideas reflect the concerns of people with an economic background that is middle-class and upper middle class. Some of the values even have to do with the global circulation of values.

To sum up, governing through gifting differs from governing through a state apparatus. In the process of gifting, disciplinary power is not communicated through coercion or violence, but rather through the communication of values, moral obligations, and sentiments. In other words, a disciplinary power has trickled down from the state-directed apparatus to the NGOs and moral citizens. At the moment of these encounters between moral volunteers and migrant workers, governance is realised through a confirmation of unequal social relations, as well as through the education in and communication of their knowledge and values.

Conclusion

In this paper, I counter the assumption that NGO programs in underclass communities are bridging the gap between the rich and the poor. Based on detailed case studies of NGO-supported service programs in Chinese urban villages, I argue that service programs often do not change the disadvantaged position of migrant children nor do they bring about structural change to the society or in this case, to the migrant and already marginalised population. Instead, these programs help to maintain, or further contribute to, migrant marginalisation. In other words, service projects are operated on the basis of unequal social relations and can be understood as a reproduction of those relationships through gifts. The universal value of love, in these cases, fails to really “help” the disadvantaged groups as it tries to claim. Ironically, it helps justify existing social relations and power dynamics, and further obscures ongoing class conflicts.

Equally important, I argue that the implementation of service projects in urban villages can be understood as a particular way of governing because normative rules and values are reinforced during direct encounters with NGOs, middle-class donors/volunteers, and migrant workers. As shown in the above three cases, citizen-to-citizen actions have become increasingly important in communicating normative values in underserved communities. Since service programs are often understood as gifting out of *aixin* in the Chinese context, like all reciprocal exchanges, these programs involve a payback in the shape of transformed subjectivities. Since migrants are often in a position to take and thus obligated to return, they often are under pressure to embody the knowledge and values handed down from middle-class volunteers and an NGO staff. They are expected to subscribe to the neoliberal logic of “self-responsibility”, “competition”, and individualism.

Last but not least, services programs do allow us to reflect on the potential and limitations of the Chinese middle class in terms of transforming social inequality. Even though the encounter between rural migrants and gift givers can be upsetting and unsettling, in many cases, the encounter can also be uplifting. Even though service programs are unlikely to bring about

structural change to social inequality as many have hoped, many of them do bring positive changes to migrant children' life.

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