Marie Bellot – PhD candidate in sociology, Université Lumière Lyon 2, Triangle UMR 5206, under the supervision of Laurence Roulleau-Berger, research director in sociology at CNRS

PhD presentation, LIA workshop July 18th 2016

Cultural, cosmopolitan aspirations and the production of symbolical social and physical space

So called "Youth spaces" that were the main place of my PhD fieldwork are very urban places: they are relatively new structures, apartments converted into places of speech, exchanges, conferences and even life, are till now only the fact of large Chinese cities, generally in universities areas because of the presence of populations that are more favorable to come, that is to say students with relatively flexible schedules and young workers.

The coming to Beijing specifically, or to other majors Chinese cities also, is for young graduates in China the opportunity to access plural professional opportunities; possibility that is put together for some of them with aspirations to access some forms of culture and cosmopolitanism that are proper to these big cities (Guo et Xing, 2009). However, their conditions of work and life in these early years of entry into the labor market may not allow access to these forms of culture and cosmopolitanism occupying physical and social spaces that are relatively central (Zheng Jie, 2004; Zhou Jianming, 2005). Some of them then engage in "youth spaces", markers of their registration in these urban worlds, and produce thus symbolic social and physical spaces, whose arrangement and aesthetics are involved in this symbolic production and marking shared aspirations.

Young graduates, spatial and geographic mobility and entry into the city

We first want to give some background elements. First, there is currently a structural disqualification of Chinese diplomas. Between 1998 and 2011, the number of people entering university in China has increased by 8, while the number of the total population of people being old enough to enter university has not increased. This has resulted in a disconnection between ideas of "entering university" and "change fate " (Li Chunling, 2013). Moreover,

there is also a structural element of increased flexibility of the labor market with which everyone is trying to "make do", means of plural experiences for the one with the better diplomas, horizontal mobility for the less well endowed. The background of young graduates workers are put together around spatial and professional mobilities. Among the best endowed, including the " better qualified [1]" (Li Chunling, 2013), professional mobility can be quite common in these first years of entry on the labor market, frequency that is revealing the conditions of Chinese labor market as well as individual aspirations for social mobility; however, they are usually in the forms of continuity in professional mobility, that is to say leave one job for another in the same industry or the same branch. Among the less well endowed , including the less "well qualified ", professional mobilities (often related to spatial mobilities) are in the form of discontinuities , that is to say job changes for others who are not in the same area and do not require the same qualifications (Roulleau-Berger, 2009, 2015).

For those that are highly integrated with employment, that is to say being in a job matching their qualifications and expectations, stable, the registration in the city is done primarily through it. For others, often those who do not have this strong integration through work, or are in some work regimes of lower legitimacy, taking place in the city is made through a multiplication of discoveries in the megalopolis, either by urban walks, cultural activities, and this, especially since they are from small towns or rural area and / or from families less favored in terms of economic, social and cultural capital.

When expectations of a richer life, of a very strong urbanity by the arrival in Beijing are not met in employment, strategies to circumvent this by extra- professional bias, sometimes linked to professional aims thereafter are implemented by these individuals, strategies that are not free from a possible reversibility. For example, HS, from a village in Shaanxi, a few kilometers from Gansu, is disappointed in his soldier's job, where every single day at the same time he has to do the very same thing, in the same place, the barracks, living in a kind of isolation, as it could have been anywhere in China without any difference with village life or the one experienced later in college he said. "The only compensation is those moments of exploring the city, discussion, culture." If his professional life seems to him as devoid of any

---

[1] For "better graduates", we do not mean a higher but a better recognized diploma. In the words of Li Chunling , following the massification of higher education that began in the late 1990s, the university entrance is no longer a guarantee of qualified employment and in line with his qualifications, provided that one's must still enter a "good university" (LI Chunling , 2013)

local ties and benefits that he thought he would get by coming into a large megapolis, to " get out from the monotony of the village ", it implements other strategies to break that monotony he got back, to take place in the megalopolis, whether by regular coming to the "youth space", or by walking, or other cultural activities. Moreover, he is not considering his future in Beijing or another large city in China, but in his village.

Taking place in the city come under both professional and off-work elements, those letter can be disjointed and thus reveal social spaces that highlight in a more or less symbolic way their city.

"Youth spaces" and the production of a social and physical symbolic space

In the "youth spaces" that have been the scene of the PhD fieldwork, there may be time dedicated to certain "activities" such as conferences, "gatherings", sharing experiences times, readings. Apart from these more defined times, the spaces are open to anyone who come without necessarily having a specific purpose or a desire to occupy his time in a "useful" way. While being both knowledge space and space where you can "hang out" these facilities is therefore built on relationships of mutual acquaintance, but also on ways to define a space, to put oneself in a local space by expressing values, concerns, etc. (Collet, 2015)

Those being honored in youth spaces are both those of culture, erected in a cardinal way through the multiplication of books and shelves with them in different given places and that of a youth and cosmopolitism (Graffiti on some walls, bookshelves made of recycled cartoon, Tibetan flags, photos of foreign countries or English-Chinese bilingual billboard) , thus generating the symbolic production of a space made of social markers and of a kind of registration into the city by answering cultural aspirations of proximity, and by assuming a stronger differential compared to its town or village of origin.

"Gigantic crowd in the subway, all are crumbling under winter coats, frigid crowd. Arriving in the warmth and liveliness of the "youth space". In the evening when I come out it's full of joy, polar night, the rumble of passing trains. I like to walk alone in the quiet, rethink a word, a sentence. (...) I, who remains in Beijing, that can hardly be shaken, with my hard skin , the only things that keep me in suspense now is that, this privileged place, a few others too, wonderful and gracious breath. Those who have

not lived in the countryside and small towns can surely not imagine. "(Interview with WS)

It is also to mark a social position by the features assigned to the decoration and furniture of the place. In the youth space of Beijing, Wuhan and Chongqing, large crowded bookshelves line the walls. These books can be borrowed for free for a given period; some are hard to find in mainland China since not allowed in the country, and were therefore brought by that one and this other one, bought in Hong Kong or Taiwan, or obtained in a roundabout way, not very officially on the continent. However, few would come and borrow one of those thousands of books. Whatever was the willingness boasted by linking these places to small libraries, the practice of individuals coming here do not find it in use although it promotes such an environment, such aesthetic clearly indicating a desire for social positioning attached to culture and cosmopolitan values.

However, there is a selective relation to the practices of these spaces. Some of them are generally praised though different depending on the experiences and social backgrounds of individuals. It may be noted in this respect two distinctive elements: the practice, and discourse on the dormitory and the broader case of practices experienced by each one in those spaces.

For the first, the only individuals having contrasted thinking on life in these dormitories of "the youth space" are those whose social origins are the more modest, emphasizing the recall for them on the living conditions in collective (Ren et Pun, 2006) or in less decent housing during their cohabitation with their parents before university, emphasizing also the promiscuity as troublesome, enjoying going home. For others, collective housing is presented as a "shift" or a "way to know how to shift" compared to factory dormitories or dwellings shared by economic necessity by many young workers in Chinese big cities, underlining the importance of mutual acquaintance in these places, as a culture lifestyle. For these individuals, graduates of Chinese higher education, even "well qualified ," and often in times of job transition (unemployment, time between two jobs), living in those kind of dormitories is not only a way of highlighting practical or economic benefits, but the possibility of conversion of acquaintanceship resources into possible professional opportunities. Moreover, in these cases, the boundaries of private space and public space, working hours and time off-work are overlapping the one another

"It is convenient to live here because there are people coming so I can meet lots of new people and make new friends, have links with interesting people from all backgrounds, why not find people who have set up projects or job leads."(Interview with SHY)

Thus, if the experiences in those spaces can be seen as a temporality and the fact of a physical space circumscribed in relation to working hours, although in connection with other times and other registration sites in the city for the "less skilled", the social boundaries of these spaces allow more room for continuity for the "better qualified" who found ways to " make do" with their jobs. Such is the case for example of two young comedians who come especially to " feed oneself on liberated words , less smooth, that echoes different background" or a young worker in IT that offers from time to time his skills to add content on web pages related to one "youth space".

Thus emerge social and symbolic boundaries of this physical space that are more or less clear depending on shading off opportunities to convert these resources into professional use and apprehensions of the city that are not necessarily aligned between employment times and times off-work.

Conclusion

"Youth spaces" are markers of taking place in one the city for some young university graduates and workers and form social and physical symbolic spaces in which social and symbolic boundaries are more or less strong according to a distance gradually marked with the established places of employment, and territories plus social background of origin of the individuals involved. They are means to take place in the megapolis that coordinate with other city spaces more or less central and reveal an entrance and an inscription in the city informed by enrolling in professional paths more or less stable, more or less legitimate, and a relation by rural / urban, including the reversibility of the latter.

Collet, Anaïs. *Rester Bourgeois: Les Quartiers Populaires, Nouveaux Chantiers de La Distinction*. Collection "Enquêtes de Terrain." Paris: La Découverte, 2015.

Guo, Xinghua, and Chaoguo Xing. "Gao Xueli Qingnian Liudong Renkou de Shehui Rentong Zhuangkuang Ji Yingxiang Yinsu Fenxi -- Yi Beijing Shi Wei Lie." ("Situations de

reconnaissance chez les jeunes diplômés de la population flottante et analyse des facteurs d'influence") *Zhongzhou Xuekan (Revue académique de la région centrale)* 6 (2009): 103–8.

Li, Chunling, and Yunqing Shi, eds. *Jing Yu , Tai Du Yu She Hui Zhuan Xing: 80 Hou Qing Nian de She Hui Xue Yan Jiu (Experience, Attitudes and Social Transition: A Sociological Sutdy of the Post-80's Generation)*. Di 1 ban. Dang Dai Zhongguo She Hui Bian Qian Yan Jiu Wen Ku. Beijing Shi: She hui ke xue wen xian chu ban she (Editions de l'académie des sciences sociales), 2013.

Ren Yan et Pun Ngai, « Sushe laodong tizhi : laodong kongzhi yi kangzheng de linglei kongjian » ("Système de travail et dortoir: contrôle au travail et espace alternatif de résistance ») Kaifang shidai (Epoque ouverte), no. 183 (2006): 124–34.

Roulleau-Berger, Laurence. "Circulations, disqualification, autonomie des migrants en Chine continentale." *Espace populations sociétés*, no. 2009/3 (December 1, 2009): 419–38. doi:10.4000/eps.3786.

Roulleau-Berger, Laurence. "Incertitudes, Inégalités et Rapport Au Travail Des Jeunes En Chine." In *Travail, Luttes Sociales et Régulation Du Capitalisme Dans La Chine Contemporaine*, 178. Capitalismes, éthique, Institutions. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2015.

Zheng, Jie. "Family Socio-Economic Status and Possibility of Students' Employment." *Beishida Xuebao Shekeban (Journal Académique En Sciences Sociales de L'université Normale de Pékin)*, no. 3 (2004).

Zhou Jianmin, « Qianxi woguo daxuesheng jiuye zhengce de lishi bianyan » (« Premières analyses d'un regard historique sur les politique d'emploi des étudiants en Chine »), *Liaoning gongyuan xuebao : shehui kexue bao*, *(Journal académique de l'institut du travail du Liaoning)* n°1 (2005)