# Pursuing 'Freedom' in Beijing's Urban Waste Economy:
# Desire, becoming, and loss of rural migrant waste workers in China

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# Abstract

While a growing body of case studies acknowledges the significance of waste labour in global contexts and examines their disadvantaged situations, there is a lack of ethnographic work on the embodied experience of waste workers in urban China, especially concerning internal migrants from underdeveloped rural areas. Despite the hardships of waste labour and the exclusive migrant governance, migrant workers positively assert a unique sense of 'freedom' in engaging in the urban waste economy. Based on fieldwork conducted among migrant waste pickers and traders in Beijing, China's capital city, this dissertation seeks to unpack what generates and embodies their pursuit of freedom' within the shifting context of contemporary Chinese societies. By critically engaging with the concept of desire in migration scholarship, the notion of freedom' revealed in this investigation embodies an affective engagement that directs migrants toward desirable futures. Their lifelong pursuit of 'freedom' (re)directs their navigation across various social and spatial fields but can also risk morphing into a deeper, related sense of directionlessness. In doing so, this dissertation sees 'desire' as viably socialising the often-mechanistic approach to examining the generation of (im)mobilities, and calls for more attention to the disconnections that arise from increasing mobilities today.

**Keywords: waste labour; desire; subjectivity; rural migrants; China**

# 1 Introduction

In the northwest corner of a suburban waste market in Beijing, China's capital city, approximately thirty temporary dwellings cuddle together (Photograph 1). These small makeshift homes line a narrow alleyway with a small yard at the far end. Behind these dwellings, a colossal steel waste processing machine looms, owned by the waste market's operators. Outside each room are heaps of various, assorted waste items: refrigerators, clothing, and plastics.

A casual observer might struggle to distinguish these dwellings from the waste market; only the posters decorating the windows and clothes hanging in the yard offer a clue that people reside here. Ms. Chen, a waste worker in her fifties, shares a small room with her husband and their three-year-old grandson. They moved in five years ago, relocated from a nearby waste market that the municipal government had demolished. According to Chen, that de-facto eviction marked their eighth move since arriving in Beijing from a rural village in Henan Province in the late 1990s. Despite these axiomatic hardships and uncertainties, for Chen, her life as a migrant waste worker in Beijing embodies a sense of *freedom* (　　, *ziyou*).



**Photograph 1.** The residential area of a waste market in suburban Beijing

Chen's assertion of *freedom* is far from unique. Pursuing a sense of freedom is a major motivator for China's rural migrants to engage in the urban waste economy. Like Chen, most waste workers in Beijing were rural migrants from rural areas in Henan and Anhui provinces in central China. However, responses varied as I further explored their interpretations of freedom.' Their interpretations of freedom intertwine with their tumultuous life experiences, everyday navigation across different urban spaces, and visions of the future. For them, pursuing *freedom* implies a life project involving leaving their families and embracing possibilities and uncertainties in their rural-to-urban ventures. This self-pride of *freedom* among waste workers in Beijing sometimes turns into a sense of directionlessness, especially when they feel unrecognised by their rural social relations. In this sense, the 'freedom' here does not align with neoliberal concepts of individualism. My initial interest arises: what does this pursuit of freedom' imply and embody for rural migrant waste workers in contemporary Chinese societies?

I situate this dissertation within the recent debate in migration scholarship regarding how migrants generate alternative subjectivities in cities. Varying from most existing studies on waste workers emphasising the socioeconomic factors that lead to their exploitation and discrimination (Prahalad and Hammond, 2002; Hayami, Dikshit and Mishra, 2006; Samson 2009), my focus on 'freedom' claimed by waste workers complements more recent literature highlighting their resilience and agency (Furniss, 2017; Millar, 2018; O'Hare, 2018). By inquiring why waste workers in Beijing do not prioritise urban membership but rather assert their 'freedom' and situate their future in rural homes, this investigation also resonates with broader global cases where migrants engage in reshaping the normative confines of urban membership (Hall, 2013; Mushonga and Dzingirai, 2020; Biehl, 2022). However, I also note that waste workers in Beijing experience a sense of *directionlessness* in their lifelong pursuit of 'freedom,' which reveals their 'in-between' status facing 'cities that won't let us stay and villages to which we cannot return' (Cho, 2009; Zhan, 2015). This aspect establishes my analysis of Chinese rural-to-urban migration as a comparatively unique ethnography. It also necessitates a cautious examination of the underlying forces contributing to the nuanced understanding of the 'freedom.'

To bridge a coherent analysis between existing structuralist examinations and migrants' subjective experiences, I employ *desire* as a helpful concept in unpacking how migrant waste pickers experience, perceive, and practice in the city. Drawing on Collins' (2017) valuable investigation into this concept, I posit desire as an embodied and affective force that encompasses individuals' future planning, opportunism, and fancies, contributing to individuals' process of *becoming*. In addition, given that my participants are mostly rural migrants who embarked on migration during the late 1990s and the early 2000s when China underwent rapid market transition and integration into the global economy, it is important to investigate the formation of their understanding of 'a desirable future' within China's post-socialist contexts. Responding to this context, my approach to examining waste workers' disenchantments in their pursuit of 'freedom' aligns with what Ferguson (1999) calls an 'anthropology of decline[1].' It also incorporates Yan's (2009) analysis of China's post-socialist 'individualisation without individualism.' Indebted to Collins' framework of *desire* and other approaches outlined here, this dissertation seeks to unpack the role of desire in shaping migrant waste workers' lifelong venturing, everyday navigation, and their deeper sense of loss.

The dissertation is structured as follows. I first provide a contextual analysis of the labour patterns and spatial transformations of Beijing's informal waste economy since the 1980s, establishing Beijing as a comparatively unique and worthwhile case study among others globally. Next, I critically review existing research on waste workers in cities, politics of urban membership in migration scholarship in both global and Chinese local cases, and develop a framework centred around the concept of *desire*. Following this theoretical analysis, I provide a detailed account of my ethnographic fieldwork. In the empirical sections, I first decode the embodied implications of 'freedom' based on migrants' narratives of their life experiences. I then compare the spatial practices of three migrant waste pickers and traders, including their journeys from rural hometowns, their navigation through unseen spaces in central Beijing, and their establishment of homes within the suburban waste

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[1] In Ferguson's (1999) ethnography, he traces the lives of workers who inhabit the Copperbelt but face little choice but to return to the rural areas after Zambia's economic crisis. Notions such as 'post-socialist affect' (Schewenkel 2013) also highlight the disconnections and disenchantments after the market transition.

market. My purpose is to illustrate how 'freedom' operates as a transformative force that enmeshes desired migrant bodies within diverse social assemblages. I also observe that 'freedom' sometimes veers into its opposite, leading to a sense of directionlessness. To interpret the transformation from *becoming* to *loss*, I analyse how migrants' notions of 'desirable futures' were shaped by discourses of a collective good in the context of China's post-socialist market transitions. This dissertation concludes by suggesting that the framework of 'desire' shows potential in *socialising* the often-mechanistic study approaches of studies on 'want' and 'motivate.' I also call for reflections on both the opportunities and disconnections generated by mobility flows today.

## 2 Situating Migrant Waste Workers in Beijing

Beijing's urban waste economy involves a significant number of rural-to-urban migrants. In 2014, nearly 300,000 migrant populations engaged in the various stages of waste picking, sorting, and recycling, with each waste recycler serving an average of 100 Beijing residents[2]. While this dissertation does not address the broader histories or socio-economic organisation of informal waste work in Beijing, it does address a body of labourers who work within it. Drawing on existing literature and local reports, this section aims to provide a contextual analysis of the labour patterns and spatial transformations of Beijing's informal waste economy.

These high numbers can be traced to the transformation of Beijing's urban waste economy since the early 1980s. The *Reform and Opening Up* period (1978-), instituted by Deng Xiaoping, facilitated a process of privatising China's state-managed recycling system. These post-socialist arrangements eroded the BRC's monopoly and pushed it to lease its properties to private businesses. Meanwhile, from the mid 1980s, rural migrants began entering Beijing pursuing employment opportunities in waste picking. Although some state managed depots still operated, residents more often sold their waste to migrant waste pickers, as doing so outsourced sorting work and yielded greater returns. Migrant waste workers' value increased: in time, whole communities and commercial buildings paid such recyclers to collect the waste, rather than 'selling' to them (Wu and Zhang, 2019).

These post-socialist arrangements encouraged more waste recyclers to migrate from remote rural areas and establish an informal, solid waste recycling system in Beijing. China's *hukou* system, which limits household registration to non-locals, complicates migrant recyclers' residency and work permits (Chan, 2010). By the end of 1990s, informal networks had bypassed the BRC and become integral to Beijing's solid waste recycling system. Migrant waste workers provide millions of tons of material inputs to China's industrial production. Despite these benefits, migrants are granted no legitimacy by the state. Corroborating Ghertner's (2015) findings on slum

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[2] m.thepaper.cn. (2018). *(Forty years of recycling in Beijing)*. [online] Available at: https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2200479 [Accessed 10 Jun. 2023].

demolition in Delhi, urban authorities in Beijing categorise migrant recyclers as incompatible with China's pursuit modernity. Migrant workers in Beijing, and their living spaces, are equated with 'dirty, messy, and deficient (        , *zang luan cha*)'. In official discourse, implications that their recycling activities could be arbitrarily prohibited or suddenly relocated for 'building the modern Beijing city' are widespread.
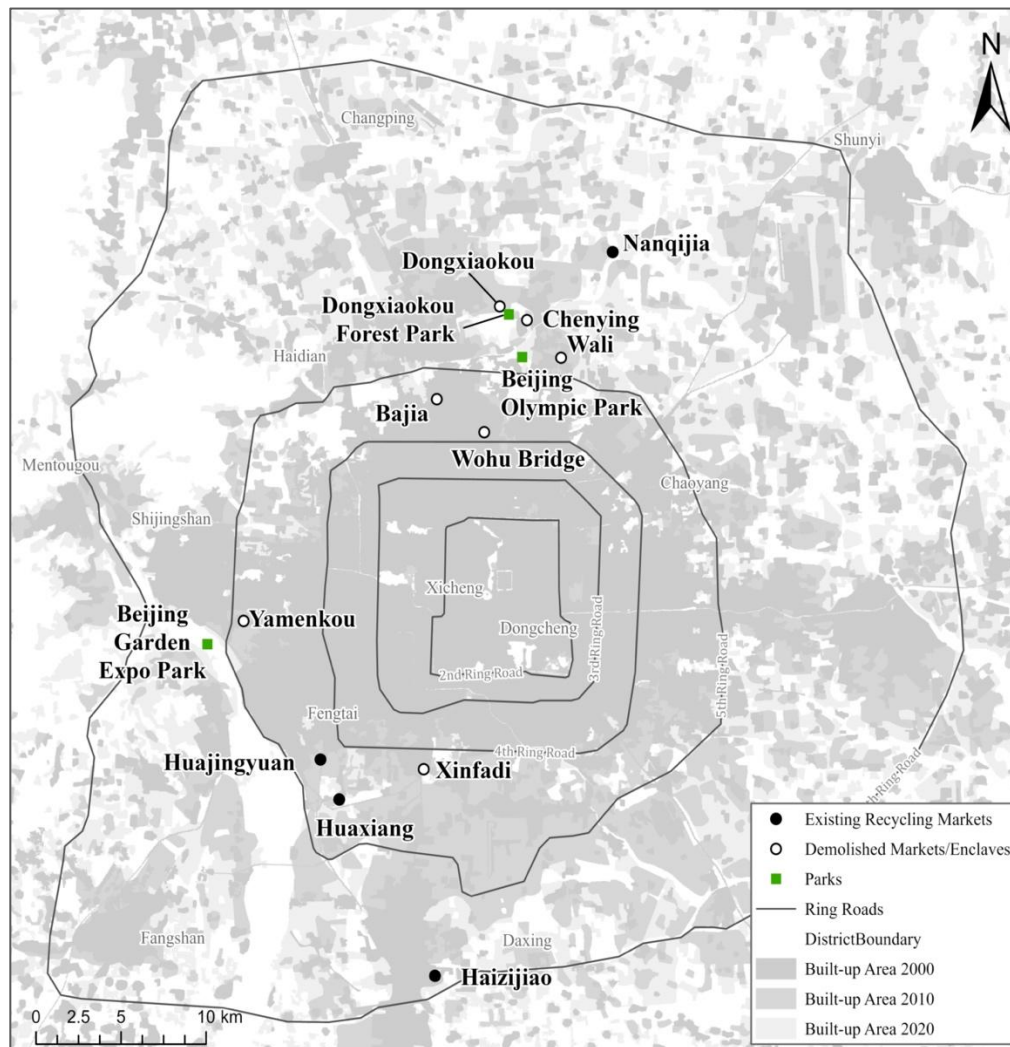


**Map 1.** The expansion of Beijing's urban built-up areas and the spatial (re)location of some major waste markets within the 6th Ring Road [3]

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[3] This map is made by the author. I gained information about the locations and relocations of the waste markets through interviews with migrant waste workers who have been engaging in the waste economy in Beijing for more than 10 years. I further cross-examined the authenticity of this data through interviews with two managers of registered recycling companies. For the existing markets, I replaced their real names with the names of the residential district areas where they are located to protect privacy..

To help my readers understand this context, I now demonstrate the temporal and spatial changes in Beijing's major waste markets. Map 1 illustrates how waste markets where migrant waste pickers worked and inhabited have been continually moved to the urban margins, due to expanding urban development. In particular, Beijing's *Green Olympics Operation* (2008) is helpful for understanding how state policies that pursue environmental protection and urban development have reinscribed the marginalised situation of the informal recycling system[4]. Under the Olympics' waste management policies, Beijing's municipal government signed contracts with state-owned recycling enterprises, granting them temporary monopoly over their respective areas. Following those Olympics operations, Beijing has continued to promote urban greenbelt policies, which relocated suburban villages to build parks and middle-class real estate (Shin and Zhao, 2018), thereby squeezing the very living space of migrant waste workers. As demonstrated in Map 1, suburban waste markets, such as Wali, Dongxiaokou, and Yamenkou, were gradually replaced by suburban parks.

Goldstein (2021) regards Beijing's solid waste management changes as directly influencing the precarious livelihoods of migrant workers in Beijing's waste economy, and sees 2017 as the year Beijing's migrant waste economy entered its final incarnation. Most crucially, the managerial authority over the recycling system transitioned from the Municipal Commerce Bureau to the Municipal Urban Management Commission (MUMC) in 2017 (Goldstein, 2021). The latter soon promoted a new waste regime that merged recycling and trash management into a single comprehensive system[5]. Unlike pickers in some other cases, who collect waste through garbage dumps and recycling bins (Millar, 2014), Beijing's waste workers had, before these changes, secured their sources from urban residents and utilised the established network to sell waste outside the city for profit. Therefore, the MUMC's

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[4] Independent Environmental Assessment: Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. United Nations Environment Programme. (2009). Available at:
https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/7882/BEIJING_REPORT_COMPLETE.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y. [Accessed 5 Jun. 2023].
In the 2001 bid, the 'Green Olympic' required Beijing to develop 10,000 hectares of urban green space and establish a secure urban recycling system capable of recycling 30% of solid waste by 2008.
[5] www.ndrc.gov.cn. (2017). *(Advice on improving the municipal recyclables system)* - . [online] Available at:
https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/hjyzy/zyzhlyhxhjj/202102/t20210226_1315389.html [Accessed 5 Jun. 2023].l

regulations since 2017 have threatened migrant recyclers' market advantage and business space.

While helpful, the studies cited above have overlooked that 2017 also marked the beginning of Beijing's efforts to *cleanse* the city of its *low end population* in the name of controlling urban density. Although the state-led project of *Upgrading Beijing* did replace the discriminatory word cleansing (*qingli*) with dispersion (*shujie*) in formal documents, the goal remains unchanged: dispersing 'non-capital functions' from Beijing, relocating general industries (including waste sorting centres and suburban waste markets) and rectifying villages at the urban fringe (including the villages where recyclers resided). As such, regulations of the waste economy, urban space, and migrant population are unified into a single framework. Today, such reforms and upgrading actions are still evolving, posing significant challenges for both itinerant and market-based recyclers. My interviews corroborated local reports: since 2017, over ten waste recycling markets around the 5th Ring Road have been closed, nearly half of the migrant recyclers have left this industry, and approximately 30% of them have left Beijing[6].

By reviewing ongoing transformations in Beijing's waste economy, I situate migrant waste workers within the shifting urban geography of Beijing. This analysis establishes Beijing as a unique and worthwhile case study among others globally, as the situation of waste workers is associated with intertwining changes in the municipal solid waste management, urban redevelopment, and the governance of rural-to-urban migration. This section also explains recent regulatory changes and the new challenges this causes mobile recyclers' everyday navigation. However, my aim here is not to cast migrant waste workers as victims of these transformations. Rather, I am interested in how they position *themselves* in the face of these social and political exclusions. I ask: why do a considerable number of rural migrants join or continue to stay in the waste economy, despite these hardships? To build a helpful framework that explores these inquires, I will now present my literature review.

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[6] m.thepaper.cn. (2018.) *(Forty years of recycling in Beijing)*. [online] Available at: https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2200479 [Accessed 10 Jun. 2023].

# 3 Literature Review and the Concept of Desire

This section reviews key literature to explore its most relevant themes and develop a theoretical frameworks that will provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and practices of migrant waste workers in Beijing, and as such informed my decision-making during my investigation. In concert with the contextual factors shaping the urban waste economy in Beijing analysed, a substantial body of literature on urban waste workers provide macro-level analysis of the socioeconomic factors causing their informal, exploited, and stigmatised conditions. However, a growing body of more recent literature has shown interest in exploring their resilience and agency. In order to further explore the diverse interactions between migrant waste workers and other social actors, I then situate my investigation in recent academic debates on migrants' subjectivity making in cities. By recognising that existing research in this field has not unpacked the forces of affect that bridge migrants' future positioning and their mobility practices, I employ *desire* as the core concept of my analytical framework.

## 3.1 Waste workers in the Global South

In cities worldwide, an estimated 24 million people make a living by salvaging recyclables from waste[7]. Many are elderly, female, and/or formally unemployed — and a great deal are migrants working in precarious conditions without formal recognition or social protection (Medina, 2007). Economists often perceive their work as labour-intensive, low-technique, and low-paid, conducted within family units (Hayami, Dikshit and Mishra, 2006). Hence, waste represents an opportunity for low-skilled and informal migrant workers and their families to supplement their income (Thieme, 2013).

A substantial body of literature highlights the informal nature of waste picking activities. The informal waste sector operates outside formal regulations and

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[7] www.ilo.org. (2013). *Sustainable development, decent work and green jobs*. [online] Available at: https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/previous-sessions/102/reports/reports-submitted/WCMS_207370/lang--en/index.htm.

sometimes outside legal frameworks too, posing challenges to urban sanitation conditions and placing it at the centre of policy discussions. However, some scholars have argued that informal waste work serves as a helpful, supplemental service for residents lacking access to effective formal recycling systems (Prahalad and Hammond, 2002) and thus plays a significant role in reducing government disposal costs. Regarding the reasons for the informality of recycling work, some scholars explain it from a neoliberal perspective, suggesting that a decrease in the formal recycling sector pushes individuals to seek informal opportunities (Miraftab, 2004). However, this neoliberal concept does not universally explain the entry of migrant workers into the waste sector, as in some countries in the Global South, such as China and South Africa, formal recycling systems have historically relied on informal circuits (Samson, 2009; Goldstein, 2021). Furthermore, this perspective has faced criticism for its limited impact on addressing the exploitation of informal workers and changing their disadvantaged conditions (Meagher, 2013).

To transform the disadvantaged situation of waste labourers, an increasing number of scholars call for increased focus on the social and structural factors that have led to their exploitation and marginalisation. These researchers highlight the challenges waste pickers encounter, such as physical confrontations while attempting to access garbage dumps, and the risk of being arrested by urban police for collecting materials in public spaces (Moreno-Sánchez and Maldonado, 2006; Samson, 2009; Coletto and Bisschop, 2017). Some sociologists attribute these exclusions to the processes of capitalist value creation at the national level. Samson (2015) uses Harvey's (2003) concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' to highlight how states revalue waste and transform landfills into resource mines, capturing new accumulation areas generated by informal workers. Similarly, Gidwani and Maringanti (2016) suggest that capitalist value creation in urban India is anchored in the often-invisible processes of waste disposal and circulation. These analyses synthesise to present a Marxist perspective that systematically explains the exploitative conditions experienced by waste workers through the circulation of waste within dynamic socio-economic relations.

Moreover, urban waste workers experience stigmatisation related to the symbolic meaning of waste as dirt and pollution. Mary Douglas (2002), renowned for her classification of dirt as 'matter out of place,' stands as one of the most influential anthropologists in exploring the cultural connotations of waste. According to Douglas, cultural classification precedes and shapes individuals' distinctions between cleanliness and impurity. This analyses may seem distant from the current situation faced by waste pickers in cities, but they provide valuable insights into the production of social stigma toward waste workers in modernised urban landscapes influenced by these cultural legacies of 'waste.' In line with these analyses, I have demonstrated in the preceding contextual analysis the persistent stigmatisation experienced by migrant waste workers in Beijing, including negative labels such as 'dirty, messy, and deficient,' produced by the municipal mainstream discourse.

Moreover, the marginalised position of waste labourers in urban society further stems from reshaping social and spatial order in modernity under modern norms. The French philosopher, Michel Foucault, introduced the concept of 'governmentality,' (Foucault, 2008) which entails cultivating normative behaviours among large populations through indiscernible social categories. However, the techno-scientific procedures emphasised by Foucault appear absent from some cities in the Global South. For instance, Ghertner (2015) argues that Delhi in India exemplifies a different mode of spatial and social governance, where the strong political determination of who and what belongs to the city is primarily based on an aesthetic regime towards a modern city branding rather than data and archives. India is not the sole case in the Global South, as evidenced by the urban beautification in Beijing and Rio de Janeiro during those cities' preparations for the Olympics, involving the clearance of suburban waste villages and *favelas* (Zhang and Zhao, 2009; Gaffney, 2015). These studies offer a valuable perspective that situates the situation of waste workers within the state's processes of modernity that integrate aesthetic governance and spatial production.

While these studies focus on a macro-level analysis of the disadvantaged circumstances and underlying socioeconomic factors waste workers face, a group of

studies highlights the importance of examining how they organise and assert resilience within such contexts. This perspective challenges the binary stereotypes that portray waste workers as predators or victims, recognising their interactions with other urban actors in the waste economy. Gutberlet et al. (2017) present how waste pickers in Brazil and Argentina have engaged in selective waste picking services and established connections with municipal authorities in the industry. However, this line of inquiry focuses on waste pickers' potential integration within, or contribution to, formal recycling systems, thereby still positioning them as a group needing recognition within existing institutional frameworks. In contrast, some other literature explores a more radical manifestation of the resilience of waste workers. Dinler (2016) investigates how street pickers in Ankara, Turkey engaged in conflicts and negotiations, and articulated moral demands to the local government. Similarly, Shankar and Sahni (2018) elucidates how self-organised recyclers reclaim the 'waste rights' monopolised by municipal formal actors. These varying analyses shed light on the institutional context within which waste workers navigate their operational space and seek profit opportunities. Despite my purpose in this dissertation is not to unpack these institutional factors, these findings reveal an hierarchical network in urban waste economy that underlies the everyday navigation of urban waste workers.

Recent research has moved beyond the debate surrounding the informal nature of migrant waste workers and their entitlement to urban rights, but instead focusing on their agency in forging alternative subjectivities. Furniss (2017) examines how Egyptian Christian minority waste workers mobilise conceptions of 'cleanliness' to underscore their indispensable role as urban cleaners. Likewise, OHare (2018) observes the transformative process wherein waste pickers in Montevideo, Uruguay, reclaim their stigmatised identity as *rummagers* by proudly adopting the term *classifiers*. Millar (2018) delves into the intricate nuances of waste pickers' perspectives, elucidating their embracement of the freedom inherent in waste work. Nguyen's (2014) ethnography of migrant waste traders from Northern Vietnam exemplifies how individuals endure the dirt-associated stigma within the city to establish homes and attain social standing in their rural hometowns. These findings shed light on the agency of waste workers, demonstrating their active reconfiguration

of the meaning of their labour, as well as their social positions.

By presenting these studies, I have systematically reviewed the most relevant literature on urban waste labourers in the global South, particularly in locations where migrants significantly participate in the informal waste economy. Overall, studies have highlighted the precarious, exploited, and stigmatised conditions of waste workers and analyses underlying macro-level causes lead to these conditions (Prahalad and Hammond, 2002; Samson, 2009). Despite valuable in addressing the socioeconomic factors in shaping waste workers livelihoods in cities, these studies often disregard the active interactions between waste workers and other urban social actors. In response, recent studies have focused on the resilience and agency of waste workers, manifesting as negotiation, collaboration, contention, as well as cultivating a destigmatised self-perception in their everyday practices with waste (Dinler, 2016; Gutberlet et al., 2017; Furniss, 2017; Millar, 2018).

Nevertheless, these studies often situate waste workers within the analytical framework of urban waste management, thereby disregarding their ongoing interactions with other social actors within or beyond the city they inhabit. My contextual analysis of Beijing's waste economy have showed the situation of waste workers in Beijing is reshaped by the intricate interplay of capital accumulation, urban expansion, and the governance of migrant populations. Moreover, as evidenced by Nguyen's (2014) findings on migrant waste workers in Vietnam, their activities of self-repositioning in the city can associate with their circulated migration and relevant material flows between rural and urban spaces. Therefore, it is imperative to include research on migrant experiences and engagements in the contested urban environment to enhance the understanding of the status and agency of waste workers in cities.

## 3.2 The Contested Citizenship in Global and Chinese Cases

Scholarly investigations into migration governance shed light on the wide use of categorisation as a technique, enabling state and urban authorities to classify individuals as either citizens or migrants, locals or newcomers (Osborne and Rose,

1999; Gamlen, 2008). These categorisation techniques are evident in the imposition of limitations on migrants' access to infrastructure and public services, the mobilisation of xenophobic sentiments, and the implementation of diverse forms of anti-immigrant governance (Knowles, 2014; Misago and Landau, 2022). They are also rooted in temporal differentiation, whereby states portrayed migrants as incapable of participating in and sharing a modernised future (Isin, 2002; McNevin, 2022).

A growing body of research endeavours to unpack multiple interactions between migrants and cities they inhabited, shedding light on their roles in reshaping social, spatial and political dynamics. Schiller and Çağlar (2011) examine intersecting factors, such as gender, race, class, and legal status that collectively shape migrants' access to resources and their engagements within the urban landscape. Moreover, Hall (2013) introduces the concept of 'migrant urbanism,' emphasising its transformative influence on identity production, network constructions, and global connections. These findings illustrate how heightened mobility and diversity of migrants contribute to the reconfiguration of urban fields. In efforts to build their livelihoods in cities, migrants navigate obstacles and opportunities presented by established social and political categories, thus opening up new fields of actions.

Citizenship is an important aspect of migration governance, but it is also important to note that migrants seeking livelihood in cities do not always prioritise acquiring citizenship. Recent studies have explored how migrants navigate and reconstruct their positions and subjectivities. For instance, Mushonga and Dzingirai (2020) examined how Nigerian entrepreneurs establish a cosmopolitan realm from below, through their focus on claim making. Likewise, Biehl (2022) investigates the reluctance of migrant entrepreneurs in Istanbul to formalise their businesses, even when it could potentially grant them citizenship through legitimate means. Citizenship is, therefore, not universally inclusive or desired among migrants, as they may create alternative senses of belonging and aspire to a better future elsewhere (Zacca Thomaz, 2022). These findings highlight the complexities of migrants' self-positioning within the urban landscape, revealing the formation of alternative subjectivities through individuals' calculations and rational choices. Cities, therefore, become sites where

citizenship is redefined by growing mobility and hybridity.

It is worth noting that urban 'membership,' exemplified in China as urban household registration (　　, *hukou*), is also a key concern in established literature on Chinese rural-to-urban migration. The Chinese urban membership system is built upon and reinforced by this household registration system, which grant urban citizens privileged access to enhanced educational, healthcare, and other public services, while excluded those lacking urban *hukou* from these services (Murphy, 2002; Cho, 2009; Chan, 2010). Furthermore, this registration system engenders a dual governance of land and housing between urban and rural spaces (Zhan, 2015), whereby migrants leave behind their political rights and social welfare in their rural homes when migrating to cities. This implies that rural migrants in China not only lack citizens' rights and benefits, but also face uncertainties concerning their rural security. In this sense, this rural-urban division regime, rooted in the category of urban membership, establish the internal migration in China as a unique case study from other global cases of internal migration (Zevalla, 2011; Sities, Burns and Akabwai, 2014). Rural migrants in contemporary China do not move across international borders, but face institutional impediments that are comparable to those experienced by transnational migrants.

These existing studies on Chinese internal migration show valuable findings that under the regulations of dividing *hukou* system, rural migrants do not actively engage in pursuing urban membership. Instead, they make a living and endure hardships in cities while situating their future in their places of origin, particularly by building or purchasing housing in their village or counties. Scholars have presented divergent analyses for this distinctive attitude towards the urban membership system showed by Chinese rural migrants. Some scholars offer a structural analysis, positing that policy reforms over the past decade have gradually narrowed the urban-rural *hukou* disparity, thereby enhancing the perceived value of welfare benefits associated with rural *hukou* (Chen & Fan, 2016; Zhou et al., 2022). Conversely, other scholars cautiously examine the role of these reforms in actually reducing the practical welfare gaps between urban and rural *hukou* statuses. Cho (2009) and Zhan (2015, p. 416) interpret this

phenomenon where rural migrants prioritise investing in housing in their rural origins as an expression of 'homeownership as urban membership.' Hence, by prompting migrants to situate their future elsewhere, the nation state manages to impose more constraints on rural migrants. In this way, the state sustains the role of rural migrants as merely workers rather than consumers and citizens in urban spaces, thereby limiting their status as 'floating population' (Cho 2009).

These findings on Chinese internal migration that migrants do not prioritise pursuing urban membership and situate their future elsewhere contribute to the above discussions of broader global cases. By reviewing and comparing these cases of transnational migration and the internal migration in China, I note that the urban membership embodies not only a technique of migration governance, but also a contested space where migrants perceive and negotiate their positions. In short, migrants can avoid experiencing further institutional obstacles and discrimination in cities by aspiring toward a better future elsewhere. In this way, they cultivate an alternative subjectivity that exists beyond the confines of urban citizenship, (re)directing their spatial practices across diverse territories and reshaping urban spaces and politics. These findings have sparked my interest in exploring the subjectivity making of migrant waste workers, as manifested in their asserted sense of freedom, and examining the processes and specific practices through which it emerges across dividing rural and urban spaces.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the existing gaps between these findings and my observations of rural migrant workers in Beijing. Specifically, established research offers two main explanations for why migrants do not prioritise pursuing citizenship. One perspective attributes it to migrants' rational calculations (Mushonga and Dzingirai, 2020; Biehl, 2022), while the other attributes it to the enduring structural impact of the urban membership system (Cho, 2009; Zhan, 2015). Nevertheless, I argue that a more nuanced approach is necessary in rethinking these dichotomic analyses of agency and structure. Therefore, I further question: What affect, efforts, and struggles do migrant waste workers in Beijing undergo, either within their 'in-between status' (Cho, 2009, p. 52), or in Zhan's (2015, p. 418) words,

in 'cities that won't let us stay and villages to which we cannot return'? How do these shape their embodied practices in traversing rural and urban spaces? To investigate these inquiries deeply, *desire* is a valuable framework to generate a coherent analysis between migrant workers' asserted *freedom* and their various mobility practices.

### 3.3 Desire as a Concept

The term *desire* has been widely used in migration studies but remains an underdeveloped concept. Ravenstein's statement in *The Laws of Migration* (1889, p. 286) indicates that desire has been a focus in migration discourse since its initial conceptualisation. However, this early perspective limited *desire* as synonymous with 'motive' and 'want,' primarily associated with the assumption that individuals seek material improvement through migration. This viewpoint reflects an economic understanding of migration caused by uneven resource distribution, where migrants intentionally seek to address these disparities for themselves, their families, or their communities (Castles, 2013). However, migration is a multifaceted reality that can be managed, experienced, and imagined. In this regard, recent scholars have introduced the concept of 'aspiration,' capturing a two-stage process that involves mind-dependent intentions and body-dependent plans that shape future arrangements (Carling, 2014; Carling and Schewel, 2017; De Haas, 2021). Nevertheless, these concepts situate migration decision making at a singular point in time, thereby reducing migrants to a 'figure without its own history and social force' (Nail, 2015, p. 4).

In contrast, Collins' (2017) valuable framework employs the concept of desire to comprehensively understand the initiation of migration through a spectrum of conscious and subconscious influences. Building upon Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) understanding of desire as constitutive of the human condition, characterised by continuously striving to affirm one's status as a becoming subject (O'Shea, 2022), Collins posits desire as an embodied and affective force that encompasses individuals' future planning, opportunism, and whims, which manifest in movements aimed at attaining or avoiding (un)desirable futures. From this perspective, desire differentiates

itself from the concepts of 'motive,' 'want,' and 'aspiration' by redirecting attention towards pursuing possibilities deemed good simply because individuals desire them rather than vice versa. Therefore, utilising Collins' reconceptualisation of desire, I now elucidate why I find *desire* to be a useful concept for understanding the self-perception and everyday practices of migrant waste workers in Beijing.

Desire offers a valuable perspective for exploring multiple temporalities in migration. Recognising that desire is shaped by specific social contexts and invested in the anticipation of future formations is essential (Smith, 2007). Scholars such as Nyamnjoh (2011) and Bredeloup (2013) have highlighted that, even in the absence of specific spatial preferences, the act of 'leaving home' can be a practice embodying societal and personal desire for the future. These findings demonstrate that migration involves more than a simple pursuit of economic gain but is intertwined with complex future imaginaries and expectations. By embracing this expanded understanding of migration, this notion of desire is helpful in capturing the process where past, present, and future are folded together in the emergence of migrant lives (McCormack and Schwanen, 2011). The concept of desire also enables me to grasp the uncertainties of migration. Like waste workers specifically, migrants in cities often find themselves engaged in hazardous and stigmatised occupations, navigating an invisible aspect of urban life. These uncertainties generate diverse encounters between mobile and local subjects that shape the process of *becoming* among migrants.

More importantly, a focus on desire draws attention to how migration is embedded within dynamic social and political assemblages. Understanding the impetus for migration solely in terms of specific goals, such as monetary gain or social status, is insufficient. Desire is shaped by discourses that prescribe certain actions while prohibiting others, continually moulding what goals and opportunities are deemed more or less desirable (Holland, 2010). For instance, networks of kinship or friendship, brokers and intermediaries, or shifts in the sense of locality that enlist migration (McKay, 2007; Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; Chu, 2010) play roles in facilitating this production of discourse. The imagination of a desirable future can also be constructed by nation-states seeking to activate mobility to address labour

shortages and other development goals (Ong, 2007; Yan, 2009). These analyses facilitate the connection between individual desires and the underlying forces that shape the patterns and dynamics of mobility, thereby offering a contextualised framework for comprehending the specific subjectivity pursued by waste workers and explaining the socio-political forces behind their pursuits.

A focus on desire also calls for focusing on moments of disenchantment and loss. Desire does not always lead to a predetermined or fulfilled outcome, as disappointment can overshadow it. Bredeloup (2017) and Kleist (2017) both examine the experiences of African youth migrants leaving their homes, only to feel shame and loss over their failure to reach Europe. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all forms of disenchantments are attributed to personal inadequacies but are intertwined with sweeping socio-economic and geopolitical changes. In the post-socialist era, desire has enabled individuals to transcend nostalgia and actively navigate the challenges of market transitions, manifesting as efforts to construct a positive future (Lindquist, 2006; Pedersen, 2012). Put simply, when the promises that a shift to market capitalism could bring people into a global condition of mobility and prosperity failed to materialise, people felt disconnected from the claims of progress. As Schwenkel (2014, p. 255) identified, this complex understanding of (un)fulfilling a claimed prosperity presents a manifestation of 'post-socialist affect,' or in James Ferguson's (1999) words, an 'anthropology of decline.' By acknowledging the nuanced interplay between personal aspirations, socio-economic shifts, and geopolitical forces, I develop a more nuanced framework than those that came previously, to capture how intertwined senses of desire and disenchantment shape the experiences of Beijing's rural migrant waste workers in an evolving Chinese society.

# 4 Methodology

## 4.1 Methodological Approach

Most research focusing on rural-to-urban migration in China predominantly has employed massive quantity surveys and census data to explore rural migrants' living conditions in cities like Beijing (Liang, 2001; Chan, 2010). While such approaches have provided insights into social and economic structures that shape and perpetuate migrants' status as evidenced in the above contextual analysis, I challenge whether these data could accurately examine migrant waste workers' experiences. As confirmed during the literature review, migrant waste workers often navigate the invisible façade of the city and experience frequent relocations. Their high everyday mobility causes considerable information to be absent from the official regional-based census data. Indeed, a growing body of studies has shifted attention from macroanalysis to migrants' everyday practices. Social anthropologists have taken an ethnographic approach to investigate the power relations and ethnic networks in suburban migrant enclaves (Zhang 2001; Xiang 2004; Zhan 2015). By exploring multiple social interactions and affective engagements, the ethnographic approach offer a nuanced lens to understand the embodied experience of rural migrant waste workers in Beijing.

Therefore, this dissertation attempts to build on and contribute to this nascent methodological advancement, and interpret the everyday practices and associated desires of rural migrant waste workers in cities. It does so by analysing ethnographic insights derived from fieldwork conducted in Beijing. The course of my fieldwork comprised: (1) a one-month stint around a waste recycling market in Chaoyang District in March 2021 (with its name anonymised for privacy); (2) a one-month research residency living in the village next to the recycling market from March to April in 2023; (3) and a follow-up visit in May 2023.

## 4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

During the latter two cycles of fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation with 2 managers in two private recycling companies and more than 20 migrant waste pickers and traders who have migrated to Beijing and participated in the waste economy for at least five years. The range of issues raised during these conversations and observations was extensive. As this dissertation explores the politics of shaping the lived experiences of self-employed rural migrants in urban waste work and how migrants understand these experiences as a life project, it broaches a range of historical and topical material that would outstrip the scope of an academic piece this size. Therefore, when collecting and analysing the data, I focus primarily on their everyday spatial and social practices within their recycling work and question how they feel to be waste recyclers in Beijing.

My fieldwork spanned various field sites: alleys and streets in the city centre, municipal recycling stations, and private-owned waste markets in the suburban areas. I approached potential participants in these sites by tracing the circulation of solid waste in Beijing alongside the everyday navigation of waste pickers and traders I encountered. Through personal connections, I first gained access to the municipal recycling station in Xicheng District – a model zone for Beijing's new waste governance – and conducted a close observation. I followed the business routes of one individual paper recycler, transporting the waste to a waste market in Fengtai District for further sorting. Based on the fieldwork conducted in 2021, I also visited Chaoyang District to meet an interlocutor I had met earlier again, only to find that he and the waste market he worked in had been relocated to a village in Changping District, outside Beijing's 5th Ring Road. The field sites I selected covered the major circulation systems of waste recycling in Beijing: the southern one represented by routes from Xicheng to Fengtai; the northern routes from Chaoyang to Changping. In doing so, I traced the everyday navigation of migrant waste workers, which enabled me to develop nuanced understanding of their embodied experiences across different spaces in Beijing. Map 1 (page 10) shows the distribution of these municipal districts

in Beijing without specifying the markets' name, to protect the personal information of my interviewees.

**Table 1.** Information and Pseudonyms of Participants interviewed in this Study

| Category | Name(s) | Origin | Position |
|---|---|---|---|
| Managers | Mr. Feng | Anhui | Manager of the recycling company A in Xicheng |
| | Mr. Du | Henan | Manager of the recycling company B in Changping |
| Yard recyclers | Ms. Zhang | Anhui | Yard recycler in Xicheng, recycling paper |
| | Mr. Zhang | Anhui | Yard recycler in Xicheng, recycling paper |
| | Ms. Chen | Henan | Yard recycler in Changping, recycling metals |
| | Mr. Wang | Henan | Yard recycler in Xicheng, recycling metals |
| | Gao, Lou, and Yang | Henan | Yard recycler in Changping, recycling metals |
| | Ms. Dong | Jilin | Yard recycler in Changping, recycling plastics |
| Mobile recyclers | Mr. Luo | Henan | Mobile recycler in Xicheng |
| | Mr. Fang | Anhui | Mobile recycler in Chaoyang |
| | Mr. Yang | Henan | Mobile recycler in Xicheng |

Over three months in 2023, I conducted two cycles of in-depth interviews with 9 migrant waste recyclers who run small businesses or are employed in waste markets (Table 1). Conversations with them involved their migration process and their experiences in recycling in Beijing, especially transformations during the regulation. A large proportion of my participants are from Gushi County in Henan Province and Lixin County in Anhui Province; others are from various regions such as Jilin in North-eastern China. Established studies often categorises various recyclers as *formal* or *informal*, but I sought to avoid the potential for disrespecting my interviewees by categorising them on a spatial basis: *mobile recyclers*, who collected waste with tricycles in a particular area, such as communities or allies; and *yard recyclers*, who rented sites from registered companies and often ran their business with family members. With such a range of respondents, I seek to capture multiple practices and subjective experiences of different types of waste workers in Beijing's waste economy.

Moreover, I interviewed other stakeholders in Beijing's waste economy, including managers of two private-owned registered recycling companies. The names

of these companies and their managers are withheld throughout this dissertation to maintain their anonymity and privacy. Among these two companies, Company A contracted waste disposal services for the local government and therefore governed the recycling stations in Xicheng. Company B was authorised by the National Bureau of Commerce to operate independent businesses for preliminary sorting work in Changping. My queries to these managers focused on the relationship between recyclers and the station or market, between companies and the local government, and the spatial distribution of the market. Although I do not aim to compare different management systems, conversations with them examined the institutional contexts of migrant waste workers' everyday experiences. With this developing understanding, I could grasp a better understanding of migrants' narratives in further interview cycles.

## 4.3 Ethical Considerations

As my interviews were conducted with both waste pickers, traders and recycling companies, considering the methodological and ethical implications of scheduling research like this is crucial. One of my main methodological concerns was that either the managers or waste workers may not or would not be able to provide an accurate representation of waste trader's views or experiences, leading to biased or incomplete data. To address this, I cross-examined narratives shared among different actors before taking one-sided words as a fact. I also carried out in-person interviews with managers separately, promising I would not divulge information obtained from other groups in the interviews. Moreover, I anticipated that my research could touch upon experiences associated with the hardships and frustrations of living in a distant city. I adjusted my expressions and paused when my interlocutors felt uncomfortable, and assured them that they were not required to share any information they felt reluctant to share. All my interlocutors listed in Table 1 have been anonymised to guarantee their confidentiality and privacy.

## 4.4 Positionality and Researcher Development

From the perspective of my development as an independent researcher, it is also

valuable to learn from the trust-building process, reasons for refusing interview requests, and how I adjusted my relational position with my subjects. When I first entered the field in 2021, I stood out with my backpack and my notebook in hand. My foreignness to Beijing (northern China) was further marked when I opened my mouth and started communicating in Mandarin with a Southern accent. Recyclers often speculated whether I was a journalist or an official conducting secret inspections, and such misconceptions about my identity led to initial refusals for my interview requests. Once I clarified that I was a graduate student conducting fieldwork for my dissertation, some refused by saying, 'Don't interview me; I am not educated' (literally: *I have no 'culture'*)', while some asked if my paper could be seen by Beijing's officials and bring them subsidies. I admit that, in practice, the eventual trust-building was reliant on the experienced social savvy of my mother, who travelled with me during my second visit. As a first-generation migrant from rural Anhui, she introduced me to an Anhuinese migrant, Feng, who is a manager in a registered recycling company in Beijing, which positioned me as someone's daughter secured in a web of migrant relations. This more nuanced positionality enabled my subjects to perceive me to be on familiar cultural terrain, thus mitigating the initially jarring and awkward aspects of my foreignness.

The inevitable indeterminacies during my fieldwork revealed the political and spatial contexts that shaped the turbulent experiences of migrant recyclers. My respondents, especially yard recyclers and managers, constantly rescheduled meetings to cope with unexpected situations. For instance, my observations in Xicheng were frequently interrupted by visits of administrative officials from other provinces, and my interviews in Changping market were often suspended due to formal inspections. Furthermore, my field sites constantly experienced demolitions and relocations. Upon revisiting a waste market in Chaoyang I surveyed in 2021, I arrived only to find that the former wasteland had been transformed into under-construction middle-class residential buildings next to a newly built park. Thanks to my interviewees, who moved to a new waste market in Changping at the end of 2021, I was able to complete my fieldwork and analyse my findings in this dissertation. These uncertainties have added to the difficulty in conducting my fieldwork, but they have also highlighted

increasingly strict regulations and migrants' precarious spatiality. Tracking migrant recyclers and related actors' trajectories offered me a valuable, embodied experience: like my research subjects, I was also situated in an unstable and elusive sense of space and time within the shifting urban landscape of Beijing.



**Photograph 2.** A new park at the demolished site of a suburban waste market

# 5 Desire for 'Freedom'

Existing studies have provided valuable insights into the disadvantaged conditions faced by migrant waste workers, but this perspective has yet to fully capture their embodied experiences and agency in cities. How do waste workers perceive themselves? Why do they maintain engaging in the waste economy, despite hardships and discrimination? To explore these inquires, this section aims to unpack the migrant waste workers' subjectivity making. Based on interview data that I collected from migrant waste pickers and traders in Beijing, I show how they incorporate a pursuit of *freedom* into continual attempts to reaffirm their status as 'a *becoming* subject' (O'Shea, 2002). For my participants, engaging in scavenging, transporting, and trading waste not only implies enduring hardships but, more importantly, embodies a profound sense of self-pride. *Freedom*, in this respect, is different from the neoliberal sense of autonomous individuals, but instead an nuanced expression of their embodied desires.

## 5.1 Free from the Factory Regime

It was midnight in cool, early April. A truck, loaded with recyclable paper that had been compressed, stacked, and bundled, silently departed from the recycling station and entered Beijing's 2nd Ring Road. Mr. Zhang, a 48-year-old waste trader was at the wheel. He had migrated from rural Anhui in the late 1990s with his wife and operates a recycling stall. During the previous day, the couple had bought wastepaper from pickers, sorted and packed it, then loaded the truck. At midnight, Zhang returned to the stall, and transported the waste 40 kilometres to a suburban waste market. Sitting in the front seat next to Zhang, I noticed we were traveling at a speed of 20 km/h. The main reason for our low speed was overloading: the truck had a weight limit of 4 tonnes, but when fully loaded, as it was that day, it weighed 10 tonnes. As Zhang's heavy truck was only allowed on urban main roads after 11:30PM, my fieldwork took place at night. The dark sky, our slow and safe speed, and the truck's legitimate time frame combined to make Zhang's overloaded truck invisible in the eyes of traffic police.

Despite facing weight inspections and other restrictions faced in conducting his work, Zhang immediately described his motivation for being a waste trader as, 'For freedom.' Like many internal migrants in China, Zhang had been a factory worker for nearly three years before engaging in Beijing's urban waste economy.. His early experience in the capitalist factory informed his conceptualisation of 'freedom':

> *I followed my cousin to Dongguan (a manufacturing city known as the "world's factory") in my early twenties. After arrival, I got a job in the toy factory where my cousin worked. It was owned by a Taiwanese boss. I lived in the factory dormitory. The factory had strict rules for everything - when to work, when to eat, when to sleep. I felt like a small gear, repeating the same thing every day.*

> *Although a bit harder, I now feel more 'free' (　, ziyou). If I don't want to transport these waste today, I can do it tomorrow, right? The waste won't fly away ... When I worked in the factory, I didn't want to work overtime for an extra minute as my efforts ended up in the boss's pocket. It's different now; I can earn as much as I put in. I have control over my own affairs — Mr. Zhang (April 2023).*

Often translated as 'freedom' in English, the Chinese word 　 (*ziyou*) is better understood as autonomy and flexibility regarding the nature of everyday actions of waste recyclers. Zhang's narrative of 'freedom' involves a spirit of pursuing entrepreneurship: despite uncertain traffic regulations, he considered his work challenging and full of opportunism. Before we set off, he made a phone call to an 'informant,' in this case a colleague who departed earlier, to confirm the live traffic conditions. While driving, he was always prepared to adjust the route. In Zhang's words, police officers could only monitor within their own jurisdiction: '*as long as we take another road, they will turn a blind eye.*' In this way, waste traders and state officials on the streets reached a tacit agreement. Upon arriving at the market, Zhang sold several types of paper to buyers who offered the best prices, skilfully negotiating each deal. The sense of freedom that Zhang spoke of is therefore composed of mobility, opportunity, and pride. In addition to more flexibility in terms of arranging his schedule, the waste trade afford rural migrants like Zhang a sense of autonomy in urban spaces.

Pursuing autonomy is one of the crucial motivations for rural migrants to participate in the waste economy. This is evidenced by studies of urban waste labourers in the Global South. Millar (2014, p. 35), for example, describes a 'relational autonomy' in the post-Fordist context of Latin America, where *catadores* in Rio readjusted their work rhythms by moving between urban dumps. Similarly, Gidwani (2015, p. 4) shows that waste work in Indian cities offered a 'space of autonomy' for young migrants to live relatively unrestricted lives, free from the kinds of social expectations and obligations more common in rural societies. My interlocutor's reflections corroborate these findings: Eve if freedom' does not translate to a full-fledged citizenship status, by aspiring for and striving towards both temporal and spatial flexibility and autonomy, migrant recyclers such as Zhang exhibit agency to adjust their positions and subjecthoods within diverse social interactions.

To gain a deeper understanding of Zhang's interpretation of 'freedom,' it is crucial to contextualize it within the experiences of internal migrants in post-socialist Chinese cities. The early 1990s marked a period of rapid economic integration for China, with an influx of overseas capital into the eastern coastal cities, leading to a significant increase in the number of rural migrants who became an essential source of cheap labour. Scholarly investigations into the factory regime during this time has lent credence to Zhang's personal account of his previous work life. Migrant workers were subjected to a dormitory labour regime (Pun, 1999; Pun and Smith, 2007), which alienated them from the vibrant urban world and families elsewhere. It instead directed all their time to the skills and products of manufacturing factories. Replicating Zhang's vivid metaphor of his embodied experience, these regimes likened migrant workers to 'small gears,' keeping a giant machine running day and night. In this respect, the pursuit of 'freedom' among rural migrants in Beijing's waste economy reveals a 'politics of detachment' (Berlant, 2011) free from the capitalist factory regime.

## 5.2 Doing Motherhood in Waste Dumps

For married women in the urban waste economy, their understanding of

'freedom' is entangled with gendered obligations. I interviewed Ms. Zhang at her recycling stall in Xicheng District before setting off to the waste market with her husband. While we talked, she deftly noted down the transactions in a notebook and explained the meaning of different numbers: 'once they (mobile waste pickers) arrive, I first measure the gross weight, and then the net weight (i.e., the weight of the empty vehicle).' She expertly entered the figures into a calculator and showed the result to the picker, who emptied his tricycle and left some paper boxes onto the ground — another deal. Like her husband, Ms. Zhang had also sought a factory job. When she failed, she followed another path.

*With no education and a child to take care of, what else can you do? I've tried to get a job in factories before, and when they saw that you had a four-month-old child, they refused to hire you. In factories, everyone shares the same routine. If you go to work, who will take care of your child? If you do this (waste recycling), you have more 'freedom.' You can raise your child and work at the same time.*

*When my child was one year old and learning to walk, I was collecting scrap by the street. There was a utility pole nearby, so I tied his walker to it with a rope. If I didn't tie him up, he could have run into danger with all the cars passing by. It was so dangerous! Then we ended up renting a fixed stall in the recycling station where I buy good and noted down the transactions — Ms. Zhang (April 2023).*

Chen, now in her fifties, migrated from rural Henan in 1995. She live in a recycling market in Changping District with her husband and 3-year-old grandson. Her rented room was at the corner of the market, a wall away from layers of discarded plastic bottles. Her room was about 10 square meters, with a bed, a gas stove, and a simple sink to wash dishes and clothes on the left side. In such surroundings, she has raised her two sons and now turned to take care of the third generation. Chen told me that her life as an waste picker now is much better than a country life:

*After getting married, I raised oinks for a living in my husband's family. Every day we slept in a small shack next to the pigsty. Oh, that place, you can't imagine how run-down it was! We could bear the hardship ourselves, but we couldn't let our kids grow up in that place. Now I am doing well here. Xiao Dong (her grandson) goes to*

*kindergarten in the nearby village, and my husband works as a waste dealer in this market. Twenty years ago, when I first arrived here, I rode a tricycle with my husband to collect the waste across streets and alleys, but now I am getting old and can't do it anymore. Every morning, I take Xiao Dong to school, make a lunch, and do the laundry in the afternoon. I am very 'free.' Even though I have no income, I can still take care of my family — Chen (April 2023).*



**Photograph 3.** Female workers in suburban waste dumps:

A discarded cabinet and her grandchild's toys placed outside Chen's home, and a female recycler dismantling a lamp base at a waste sorting station

This finding challenges the perception that rural women migrate to cities to escape from gendered obligations in the original societies (Gaetano, 2015; Gidwani, 2015). Instead, waste work shaped diverse understandings of the relationship between women's self-perceptions and their maternal roles. Ms. Zhang saw freedom' in recycling as the ability to sustain income while raising her son, thereby challenging the gender norms that often places women at the margins of the household economy. Yet, she also perceived the unstable surroundings of the waste work as 'dangerous' and therefore limited her workspace in a fixed station to better fulfil her maternal role. In her alternative interpretation, Chen viewed the meaning of 'freedom' as a sense of self-value that could compensate for her inability to generate substantial income, caused by the demands of motherhood. For Chen, migration is a glorious process of seeking improved growing conditions for next generations. Both mothers worked hard to raise children alongside their waste work, carefully creating boundaries from what is seen as dirtiness, disorder, and pollution.

This section has investigated the motivations that drove rural migrants to engage in Beijing's urban waste economy, aiming to expand the existing scholarly discourse focused on the exploitation and marginalization faced by waste workers. By engaging with my participants and analysing their memories, imaginations, and everyday recycling practices, a distinct theme of self-claiming through the pursuit of 'freedom' (    , *ziyou*) emerges. Consequently, I argue that the embodiment of a fulfilling life of migrant recyclers in Beijing extends beyond material improvements; it encompasses their efforts to reposition themselves within an era characterized by profound shifts in values. It is their evolving understanding and pursuit of 'freedom' that have been reshaping their diverse mobilities across distinct social fields. In this regard, the pursuit of freedom' serves as a lens through which I can better comprehend the nuanced motivations, alongside the agency and resilience of migrant waste workers in Beijing in their quest for a more meaningful existence.

# 6 The Geography of 'Freedom'

This section aims to provide a spatial analysis of the expressions and actualisation of *freedom* claimed by migrant waste workers based on my observation and interviews in central and suburban Beijing. In the previous section, I have shown that migrants in Beijing's urban waste economy generate and reshape their desires to embrace a sense of freedom through their embodied experiences as migrant workers in various social fields. Building upon this, the purpose of this section is to understand, more deeply, migrants' spatial imaginations and practices in reshaping and actualising the sense of *freedom*. I present three ethnographic sketches, in which migrant waste workers cultivate their various spatial imaginations, movements and connections, and engaged with the transformative moments of different spaces across their rural home and urban Beijing.

## 6.1 Rural home: 'A place with no future'

Most commonly, the rural-urban ties of migrant recyclers in Beijing are articulated through kinship or their other rural networks. One participant, Mr. Feng, migrated from a village in Lixin County, Anhui Province to Beijing in 1995. After more than 20 years in Beijing, he has transformed from a waste picker to a successful entrepreneur, managing three registered recycling stations in the city centre. Feng's family used to run a restaurant in their home village. In rural communities, restaurants commonly serve as de-facto information hubs by hosting weddings, funerals, and festivals. After hearing that collecting waste in Shanghai could earn a considerable income at one such event, Feng initially headed to Shanghai along with his father and cousin. After living in a shantytown on the outskirts of Shanghai for a year, he returned to his rural home. However, less than six months later, he embarked on a similar journey, this time to Beijing. Feng recalled why he decided to leave home again:

> *The surroundings where you situate pushed you to step out. All day long people discussed these things: how much you earned today, how much I earned; where there might be job, when to do it together. Gradually, you would feel that staying at*

*home is really boring. Big cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing are where young people should go... 'You're still young,' people whispered, 'and you should go out and venture, explore the vast tapestry of life that awaits you.' So I wandered, where can I seek for more opportunities? Beijing is the capital of China! If you cannot find anything to do in Beijing, where else can you go? — Feng (May 2023)*

Feng's recollection delineates a visual representation of the spatial distribution of opportunities perceived by his rural residents (Map 2). The megacities, like Beijing and Shanghai, are commonly viewed as promising areas filled with opportunity, while the rural home is deemed a place with no future. This binary spatial imagination stemmed from the transmission of migration experiences.

Functionalist migration theory provides a mechanistic approach to examining the generation of waste workers' migration. In particular, it suggests that migrant networks have a significant influence on migration decisions by facilitating connectivity, resource transfer, and a self-feeding social structure for migration. In other words, migrant networks produced a self-feeding migration regime by impacting other social aspects. For instance, Stark (1984) showed that migrants' remittances led to an increase in the 'relative deprivation' at the community level, and therefore household decisions to migrate aim to improve their relative status. With the notion of 'cumulative causation,' Massey (1988) suggested that circulated migrants integrated the social structure of destination societies into the matrix of the sending ones. These previous findings have helpfully noted how migrant networks generated migration from longitude aspects. However, they have also reduced migration to a simplistic functional connection between a point of departure and a point of arrival.

It is worth questioning how diverse flows of movements play a role in altering the perception of locality of residents and thus their migration decisions. As Rouse (1992) aptly articulated, it is the entire geographic expanse traversed by a migrant community's residents, rather than one or two locations, that forged the social arena of that migrant community. Based on this understanding, it is not only the attractions of urban Beijing that drove Feng's desire to migrate. Rather, it was driven by an ongoing process of affective geography. This was not only constituted by the

resources and information transmitted by circulated migrants, but was also embedded in the embodied experience of his individual migrant navigation. Feng provided a poetic description of his different bodily sensations across different terrains:

*My village is very remote, dozens of miles from the nearest town, lying amidst the vast expanse of a plain. The boundaries of the village stretched as far as the eye could see. Standing at one end of the paddies, I could gaze across the fields and catch sight of the humble cottages on the other side. Beyond them, more paddies stretched into the distance. That was the entirety of my world. That's the everything.*

*The first time I went to Beijing, I even didn't know how to get there. As I stood in line at the ticket window, I marvelled at the multitude of faces, each brimming with anticipation and purpose, all bound for the same destination. The journey usually took at least a day and a night, but I was too excited to sleep. As the train hurtled toward its destination, I couldn't help but wonder what awaited me in the city that lay ahead. I felt like I was stepping into a new world — Feng (May 2023).*
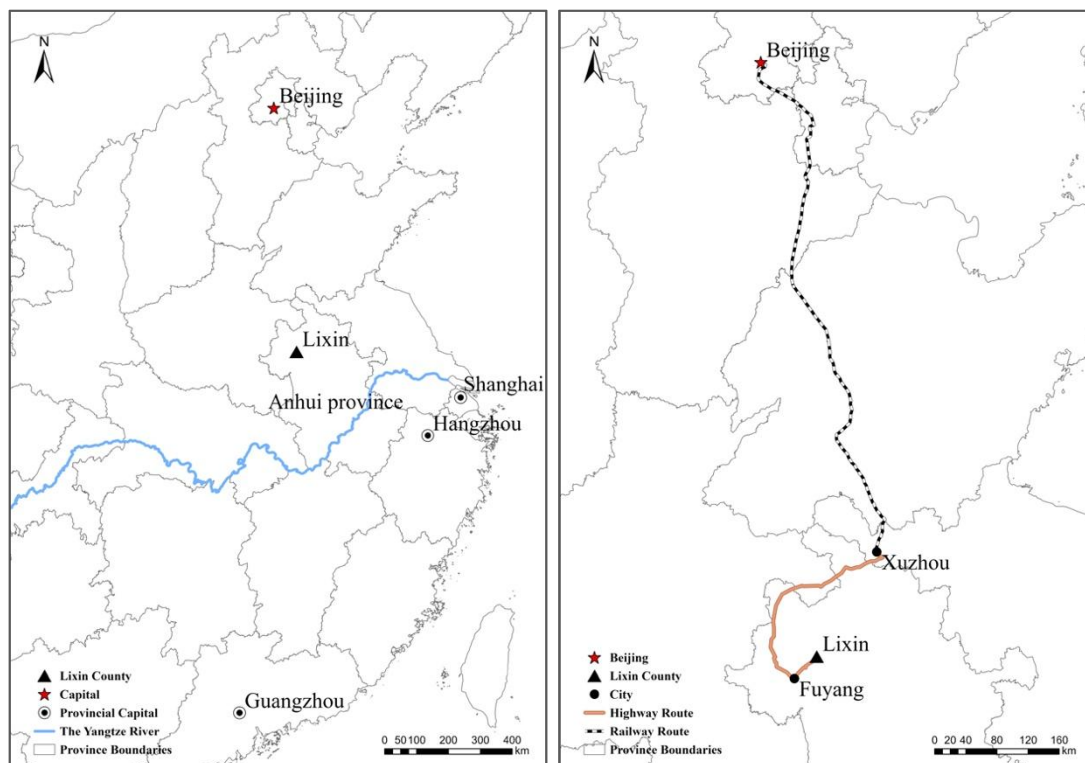
**Map 2.** The map of opportunities and Feng's first journey to Beijing in 1995

I now juxtapose Feng's spatial imagination of future opportunities with his initial journey to Beijing to illustrate how his desire for a 'free' venture was generated, expressed, and actualised by (im)mobilities across different terrains (Map 2). The migrant network within the village produced an imagined spatial distribution of a deserving future, shaping the concepts of leaving and venturing as an desirable life project of its social members. Feng's reflections embody that rural residents urged to reposition themselves as forward-looking subjects in a cosmopolitan context, otherwise they would easily be 'stuck in the most narrow confining sense of locality' (Chu, 2010, p. 38). Therefore, Feng's migration was generated by his embodied sense of what was 'stuck,' and the embodied desire to seek for future *freedom* under intense transformations in his rural home.

Feng's navigation across Shanghai, rural Anhui, and Beijing provides compelling evidence of how individuals perceive future-oriented spatial imaginations through their relational, material, and embodied experiences. My findings reveal that the intertwining of rural and urban spatial imaginaries, combined with the embodied encounters of (im)mobilities, creates a tapestry of meaning for migrants. Consequently, the vision of an expansive and unknown urban space, teeming with potential, can become ingrained in the life cycles of rural individuals. Despite the journey being fraught with uncertainties and regulations, these challenges do not diminish the power of desire. Instead, dealing with these impediments became an essential aspect of realising their desires. Feng's narrative sheds illuminates on an affective geography where the space between rural Anhui and Beijing transcended its abstract representation on a standard map, appearing as a lived landscape which he traversed across different spatialities and temporalities.

## 6.2 Central Beijing: Invisible navigation

In the post-Mao period, mobile recyclers collecting waste with a tricycle have emerged as the primary force in handling household waste in Beijing. These individuals, even contemporaneously, traverse communities and streets, collecting waste and forming a ubiquitous yet largely-unseen and ignored social group within

the urban centre. This contrasts with the societal prestige of Beijing's central area, where iconic landmarks such as Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City carry significant symbolic value as the political and cultural heart of China.

Within this context, Mr. Luo, works and navigates as a mobile waste picker. Map 3, below, illustrates the extent of Mr. Luo's everyday navigation. The map presents a portion of Xicheng District, one of the two central districts that constitute the city centre of Beijing. Due to his lack of urban household registration (*hukou*) and financial constraints that prevent him from affording housing in the city centre, Luo and his wife reside in a rented room of 50 square metres, sharing that space with two other migrant families. This year, Luo joined a formal recycling company and became an authorised waste picker. Every day, he departs from his home at 8:00AM, and travels to several central residential areas, where he collects recyclables from the streets. Luo then sells these items to the yard recyclers at the formal recycling station before returning to his rented room around 8:00PM. In addition to the designated streets, Luo expressed maintaining connections with hotel managers, school guards, and some residents nearby who served as valuable resources under the formal regulatory framework.

Yet with all these connections to residents' everyday lives, Luo's navigation remained invisible in the state's vision of central Beijing. Adjacent to Taoranting park and on the side of the southern 2nd Ring Road, the waste station where Luo sells recyclables was isolated from the urban surroundings with a brick wall (Photograph 4). As I observed his working area, I saw that above the piled-up scraps, there was a green net to prevent the irregular landscape from being exposed to aerial views. Indeed, such was the extent of the concealment that tourists and citizens passing through the park could barely notice the waste pickers who were hard at work performing the function of waste disposal, pushing their tricycles with hurried faces.
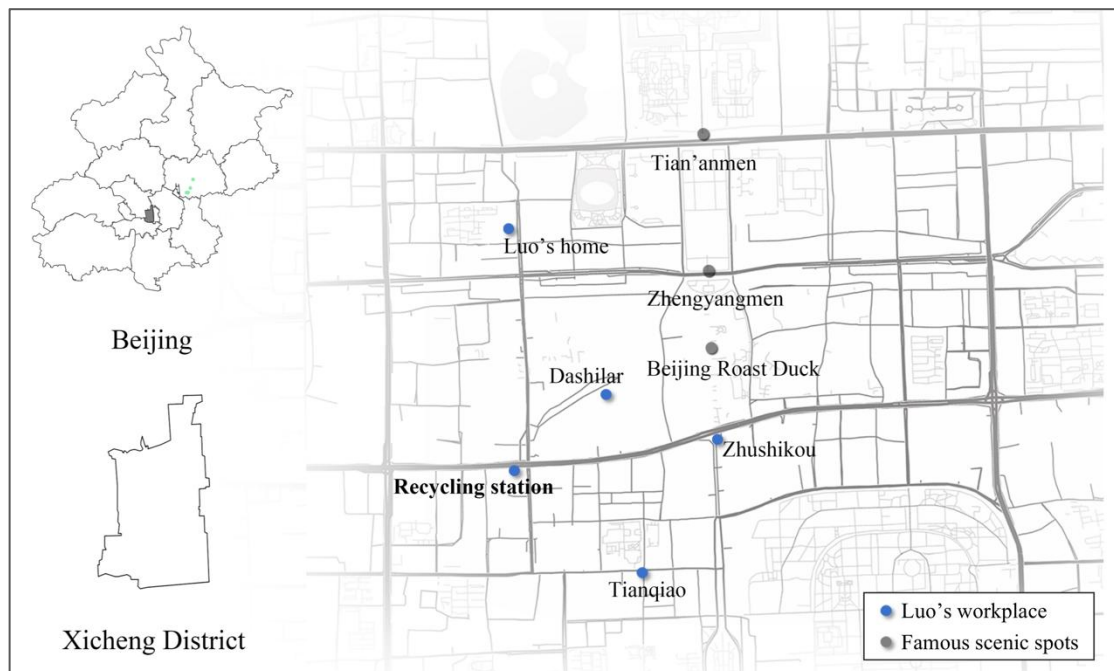
**Map 3.** Luo's everyday navigation in the centre Beijing



**Photograph 4.** A waste worker sorting recyclables in the recycling station

Despite working and living in Beijing's centre for almost thirty years, Luo claimed that he had visited the expansive Tian'anmen Square only once and had never been to other scenic spots nearby. He also engaged in minimal material consumption,

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and even the furniture in his rented room were mostly recyclables collected from residents and hotels. Despite this situation, Luo expressed content with his current lifestyle, and explained that had developed a sense of autonomy by actively connecting to local social relations. Unlike Zhang's (2001) finding that rural migrants from Wenzhou strengthened their presence in the city by lavish material consumption, Luo reported creating an alternative subjectivity by navigating the invisible facade on the fringes of everyday Beijing residents' lives.

The navigation practices employed by migrant recyclers in the centre of Beijing reveal a deliberate politics of invisibility, which encourage and enable waste pickers to cultivate an alternative spatial perception that exists beneath the dominant surface, in which Beijing is the political and cultural centre of the Chinese state. Drawing on the skills honed through their engagement in informal waste work, they strategically embrace invisibility as a means to avoid exclusionary governance and stigmatising discourses. By establishing connections within urban communities, pickers such as Luo develop a repertoire of skills that allow them to navigate the formalised regulations while maintaining access to material resources. Therefore, their invisible navigation not only demonstrates their capabilities and resilience in the face of top-down governance, but even more significantly, it materialises their internal desire for a better future and grants them a sense of autonomy within the urban space. By employing invisible mobilities and forging connections, pickers such as Luo actively participate in the everyday operation of the central Beijing.

### 6.3 Suburban Beijing: Home making in the waste market

Unlike Luo's navigated livelihood with the Beijing city centre, many other migrant recyclers would rather make their homes in suburban waste markets. These markets, serving both trading and residential functions, can be traced back to the migrant enclaves of suburban Beijing formed during the 1990s (Zhang, 2001; Xiang, 2005). As rural migrants were not guaranteed formal house ownership by the urban government (Cho, 2009; Zhan, 2015), most of their housing was built on vacant land by local villagers and then rented to them. To demarcate their own living area,

villagers would often construct walls around these migrant houses, thus creating a spatial pattern known as the 'migrant yards.' As such, rural migrants arriving on the outskirts of Beijing created new types of 'non-state space' (Xiang 2004).

The waste markets established between the 1990s to the early 2000s in Beijing align with the above definition of migrant enclaves in terms of their spatial function and distribution, and have therefore also been labelled 'waste villages' (Tong and Tao, 2016; Wu and Zhang, 2019). During the rapid expansion of Beijing's urban space and frequent urban upgrading projects, these waste markets have been repeatedly demolished and relocated to urban outskirts. Their residential functions have also gradually decreased due to stricter regulatory measures since 2017 and the Upgrading Beijing project. Contemporaneously, authorised recycling companies, with land lease contracts with village committees, take responsibility for managing the layout and operations of the market. Situated in the very corner of the market (Map 4), the temporary settlements of migrants were constructed by the companies rather than local villagers. The authorised recycling company, with land lease contracts with village committees, take responsibility for managing the layout and operations of the market.
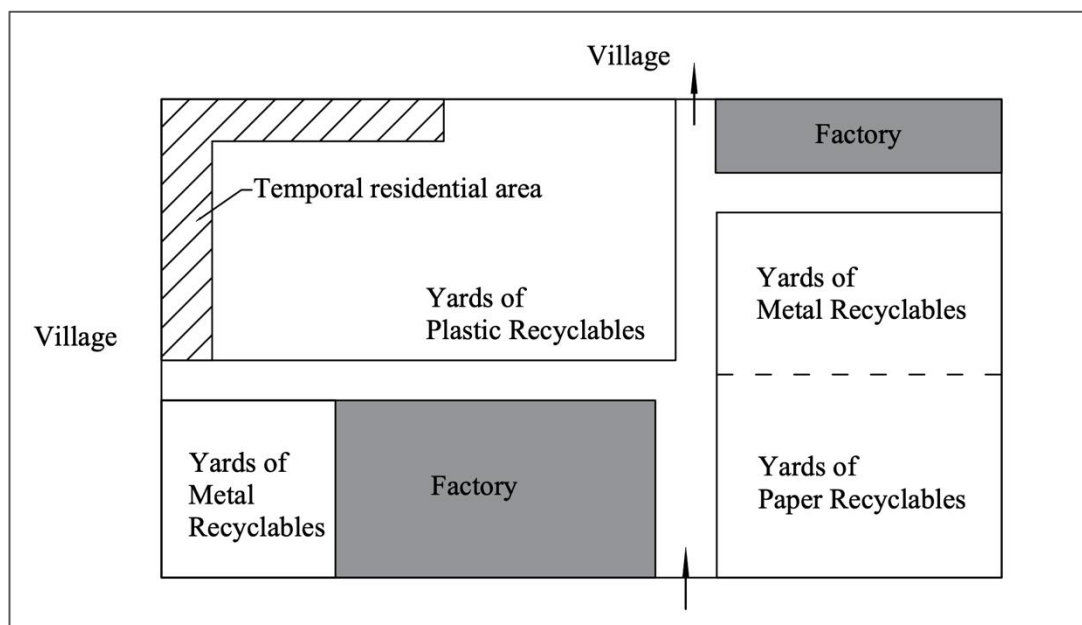


**Map 4.** The spatial distribution of the waste market in Changping, Beijing

According to Soja (1996), the relationship between space and its organisational forms is not unidirectional but rather reciprocal: both mutually influence and reinforce social relations. Beijing's migrant recyclers who established their dwellings within the market itself both shape the physical space and develop a collective identity through their homemaking practices. The routines of these recyclers revolve around the market, and their temporary dwellings, typically small brick houses, starkly contrast with the three-story self-built houses of the local villagers. This choice of building materials minimises potential losses for both the recyclers and the companies in the event of another demolition. Facilitated by the interconnected layout of their houses in a small yard, their sense of solidarity is not driven by regional or kinship ties but rather their daily encounters and mutual care. During my fieldwork, I often encountered instances of a mother caring for three children from different families in the yard, illustrating the community bonds forged among the recyclers. In this way, migrant workers embraced a sense of belonging within the evolving geography of urban peripheries.

As the gateway for migrants, the margins of metropolises have accumulated numerous informal dwellings and lower-class communities, seeing the emergence of new memberships (Islander and Landau, 2022). However, my aim is not to investigate how migrant waste workers countered their position by engaging in political conflicts. Rather, I highlight how they draw themselves into evolving urban assemblages through processes of actualising their desires, where the notion of margins become an embodied experience of uncertainties in the expanding urbanisation. One of my study's participants, Chen, who live in a waste market in Changping District, kept complaining about her demand to have a bigger wardrobe. She said: '*It never happens. Moving again is inevitable. I'm not afraid of relocation because I can always find a place to live. Yet if I move, I'll have to throw away all the things in my room, which would be such a waste! (Chen, April 2023).*' In her room, she stored several plastic woven bags atop her wardrobe. Cheng could easily pack up and quickly move these if and when another market demolition occurred. As such, a sense of uncertainty punctuates migrant workers' daily lives within their everyday home settings (Photograph 5).

**Photograph 5.** Homemaking in the suburban waste market

Migrants' homemaking within the suburban waste market, with the possibility of sudden demolition a fact of life, suggests that for migrants, living on the 'margin' does not indeed imply a state of being 'stuck' (Wu, 2010) but rather a nuanced understanding of the urban space and their positions. My participants demonstrated a seemingly contradictory spatial practice: they establish their homes with aspects of permanence and belonging within the waste markets, while simultaneously designing their surroundings in temporarily constructed formats, to prepare for the anticipated arrival of bulldozers. Despite inevitable spatial transformations, they exhibited a sense of autonomy, or in their words, 'freedom', that empower them to embrace uncertainties. They continually adapted their understanding of the urban space through dwelling in this ever-evolving frontier. In this way, migrant recyclers in the suburban waste market gained unique perspectives of Beijing through an embodied sense of temporality. Their relationship with Beijing is inherently unpredictable and multifaceted as the evolving Beijing itself.

The findings presented in this section have helpfully cast fresh light on the migratory patterns and diverse spatial arrangements adopted by migrant waste

workers across rural and urban territories. By tracing their embodied experience in their journey to Beijing, I have shown that the migration of rural Chinese peasants are best understood as a life project outlined by the spatial imagination of *a free venture* for a better future. My findings also unveil strategies that waste workers develop to reposition themselves, which emerges through their often invisible and uncertain, yet interconnected, everyday navigation. Through the process of actualising their desires in the city, waste workers create new forms of sociality and space, thereby drawing themselves into the evolving social assemblages in both their rural homes and the city they inhabited. Through these practices of imagining, navigating, and dwelling in the city, they portray an embodied geography of 'freedom.'

# 7 Becoming or Loss

In the two sections above, I have presented how rural migrants in Beijing's urban waste economy cultivate a positive self-perception by claiming themselves as desired individuals for *freedom* and engaging in associated spatial practices across rural and various urban societies. However, it is important to note that a focus on *desire* should not disregard any *disenchantments* migrants feel in the city. Indeed, as I established deeper trust with my participants, I found that they increasingly expressed a sense of *directionlessness* after a lifetime of venturing and struggling. By explaining the inner transformation of migrant waste workers in Beijing from a state of desiring to a state of feeling lost, this section aims to capture the nuanced interplay between individual desires and the post-socialist Chinese state's discursive production of a collective future prosperity.

## 7.1 Liangxin (Conscience) in Rural-Urban Reciprocities

Migrants in Beijing's urban waste economy view interactions with their rural kin and acquaintance networks as, simultaneously, a source of support and a moral burden. During my first encounter with my participant Chen in April, she proudly showcased a row of preserved meats hanging along the wall, which had been sent from her hometown Henan (Photograph 6). At that moment, the weight of her rural connections seemed a comforting anchor to her in her tumultuous urban experiences. However, a month later, when I visited her for follow-up interviews, she was sitting on the doorstep with an expression of deep sorrow on her face. She voiced her grievances about a recent conflict in her husband's extended family:

> *The scrap business is no longer as lucrative as it used to be. You see. So we decided to do something else... When it came to investing, we were all united family, but when it came to splitting the profits, it wasn't the same anymore! Back then, we pledged 'common prosperity', but now everyone just wants to get the most for themselves. I told my husband he's too honest and got taken advantage of by his own family! Can you believe it? Family members fighting over money and causing all this trouble. Is there no conscience (liangxin) anymore? — Chen (May 2023)*

With each word she spoke, I observed her emotions growing more intense. She paused, and after I reassured and comforted her several times, she unveiled the heart of the conflict. One year ago, her husband had invested the majority of their savings into a cousin's real estate construction project. However, among those who had also joined the partnership, one relative did not make his payment. Later, the project initiator unearthed a trail of discrepancies and triggered a public wave of accusations and doubts. Fearful of further financial burden, Chen's husband reluctantly revealed the identity of the debtor. The debtor soon spread the tale throughout the extended rural family, claiming that Chen's husband had broken his trust. As a result, not only did Chen's household face a financial crisis, but they had also been branded as 'traitors' to their kinship collective.



**Photograph 6.** The preserved meats in Chen's home, sent by her rural relatives

Chen's narrative valuably exposes how rural migrants employ a moral regime centred around a culture of reciprocity to evaluate their own actions and those of their rural peers. As supported by the perspective of New Economics of Labor Migration perspective developed by Stark and Levhari (1982), the first migration journeys of most waste workers rely on financial support from their rural relatives, and

consequently, they sent back remittances to assure the income of households. Nonetheless, within the context of China's rural society, this practice cultivates a moral obligation with which migrants were required to maintain their family membership by ongoing reciprocal interactions, even demonstrating necessary acts of self-sacrifice (Yan, 1996). Oxfeld (2010) aptly refers to a Chinese proverb, 'drink water, but remember the source' (          , *yinshui siyuan*) to capture the enduring influence of the rural moral bond on migrant behaviour. Oxfeld also highlights a native concept of *liangxin* (      ), translated as 'conscience,' which embodies an affect underwent dynamic reshaping within the social relations. Migrants' connection to their rural homeland as such became a dual force, both providing a sense of security and imposing moral obligations.

Not only did these concepts exist in kinship networks: the moral ties between rural and urban members also assigned migrants the role of taking on responsibilities to the entire community of the rural left-behind.' Ms. Zhang, in our third conversation, shared disappointments she had endured due to the indifference shown by her rural network. Last year, while sorting the recyclables, she fell from the top of the truck, fracturing a leg and requiring surgery. As she lacked urban household registration, she was ineligible for public health insurance available to Beijing's citizens. With a mixture of hope and trepidation, her husband posted a heartfelt message on social media seeking financial assistance for her surgery. Yet, as days passed, she was disheartened to find that not a single relative or acquaintance reached out to inquire about her well-being or offer any form of support:

> *I spent two long months lying in bed in the hospital. My husband posted updates on his social media account, hoping someone would take notice, but not a single message or call came through... I couldn't help but question myself: What am I striving for? What is 'success'? At this stage of my life, the more time passes, the more I cannot find a clear sense of direction. — Ms. Zhang (April 2023)*

These findings demonstrate that the sense of being 'lost' in Beijing, experienced by participating migrant recyclers, is likely associated with the blame, betrayal, and indifference they encountered from their rural relationships. Furthermore, rather than

emphasising materialistic losses, participants employed a discourse of affect and morality, such as invoking the concept of *liangxin* (      ), to articulate the injustices they faced. This deep disappointment, surpassed any resentment they felt toward the exclusiveness of urban governance, and engendered a deep sense of directionlessness regarding their future. These findings raise an intriguing line of inquiry into the reasons why this moral dimension held such significance for rural migrants in China: to the extent that judgments based on it could undermine their other expressions convictions regarding self-cultivation and the pursuit of an ideal future.

**7.2 Disconnected from the Collective Good**

The personal value of rural individuals in Chinese societies has been closely intertwined with their contributions to a sense of collective good, even during the dividing years of post-socialist market transition, starting in the late 1970s. Yan (1996, 2009, 2017) conducted a series of remarkable ethnographic studies that exposed the social consequences of China's market transition. In contrast to Western notions of individualism, Yan (2009: xxxii) argued that Chinese society in the 1980s and 1990s experienced a form of 'individualisation without individualism.' Yan explained that this ostensible contradiction was due to the persistence of a reciprocity culture in rural communities, where mobile individuals were obliged to fulfil various moral obligations in order to maintain emotional connections with their rural counterparts, which in turn shaped the individual's identity and reputation in the local context. As they mostly represented first-generation internal migrants arriving in the 1990s, my participants navigated a delicate balance between the pursuit of the individual and collective good in order to demonstrate their self-worth.

One key significant finding from Chen's narrative is her adoption of the state's developmental discourse of 'common prosperity' (           , *gongtong fuyu*) to judge the conflicts within her trans-local families. In China, 'common prosperity' has been utilised as a consistent political slogan and a declared objective aimed at promoting economic equity and social equality. This resonates with established arguments that the predominant role of the Party-state in shaping individuals has remained strong and

consistent, even during and after the market transition (Murphy, 2002; Yan, 2009). By aligning their goals and behaviours with this state's political slogan, migrants rationalised their migration as a means to ensure material and social progress for their rural homes and communities. Additionally, China's party-state, in the reform era, has created a temporal framework that distinguishes the strategic position between rural and urban space, in which the city was a symbol of future modernity, while the countryside was a nostalgic entity, a subject to be developed, and a resource for urbanisation (Jacka 2014, pp. 158-161). In this approach, the Party-state portrays its goals of development and modernisation as a dominant aspect of the rural collective good, and has planted it into the life-long desires of flesh-and-bone migrant bodies.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand migration as an assemblage of various economic, social, and ethical factors within particular context. This assemblage reshapes migrants' interactions with the rural society, and weave their processes of self-cultivation into the fabric urban spaces. Upon leaving their rural homes, migrants position themselves in an ideal and distant future, and embrace convictions to confront the uncertainties in the migration journey and urban life. However, when their rural ties experience conflicts or ruptures, migrants likely perceive a loss of recognition for their contributions to the collective good, and come to doubt the entire regime of desire that constituted their meaning of self. Therefore, migrants can fall into a vacuum, a "status of in-between" (Cho, 2009, p. 52), facing 'cities that won't let us stay and villages to which we cannot return' (Zhan, 2015). While Cho and Zhan attribute this status and subsequent emotion to the structural constrains of urban membership system, my findings corroborate Rofel and Yanagisako's (2018) study that highlights an affective engagement with a prospective future that pulled them through the present. In this sense, the *desire* itself exhibits a social force.

This section has focused on a sense of directionlessness experienced by rural migrants in Beijing's waste economy and explores the underlying factors of its formation. In line with Yan's (2017), I considered desiring rural migrants as both agentive and social, embodied and reflective. My findings show that migrants' loss of faith in their future life was generated by conflicts or ruptures in their affective ties

with the rural collective. When they feel unrecognised or betrayed by these rural-urban reciprocal interactions, their subjectivity making as individuals venturing for 'freedom' appear unsettled: their sense of 'freedom' morphs into a deeper sense of directionlessness. As such, my examination of migrant waste workers' senses of directionlessness builds on Schwenkel's (2014) notion 'post-socialist affects', and Ferguson's (1999) concept of an 'anthropology of decline.' Both authors trace the ambivalence of people who find themselves disconnected and excluded from claims of progress feel toward forms of market transition and global integration, and my investigation has corroborated these findings.

# 8 Concluding remarks

The narratives and everyday practices of waste workers I present in this dissertation offer a vivid analysis of the urban livelihoods of over 250,000 rural migrants engaging in Beijing's urban waste economy. Despite enduring the hardships and discrimination inherent in waste labour, and exclusions from urban redevelopment and migrant regulations, my participants demonstrated that they cultivate a sense of subjectivity by asserting themselves as 'free' individuals venturing for future opportunities. I argue that their assertion of 'freedom' is less about the neoliberal notion of individual autonomy than an affective engagement towards desirable futures. This motivates them through the present and enables migrant waste workers to navigate their positions facing uncertainties in the urban environment. These insights arise from my extensive fieldwork: when queried about their motivations for migrating to Beijing and entering the waste economy, they seldom gave me direct answers but rather expounded upon their lifelong experiences intertwined with their expectations and struggles for the future. These intricate details prompt a reframing of their asserted 'freedom' as an embodiment of 'desires' that delineates individuals' ventures for better futures within their life projects as *becoming* subjects.

My analyses of migrant waste workers pursuing 'freedom' challenges prevailing studies that primarily regard them as merely victims of structural factors. Despite facing uncertainties, migrant waste workers in Beijing develop a dynamic understanding of their relationship with the city through their everyday navigation. Most waste workers I encountered tend to situate their future elsewhere in order to navigate their flexible position in the city. These findings join recent discussions in migration studies on migrants' subjectivity making in cities. However, they also reveal a unique 'in-between status' among internal rural migrants in China (Cho, 2009): a state of facing 'cities that won't let us stay and villages to which we cannot return' (Zhan, 2015). In this context, a meaningful inquiry should encompass not only their agency and desires but also their inner transformation from 'desiring freedom' towards a deeper sense of 'directionlessness.' As such, I see my ethnography in Beijing as viably contributing to the strand of research that James Ferguson (1999) referred to as an 'anthropology of decline'. This also reminds us that increasing

mobility flows today are as much about connections as they are about stratification and disconnection (Schwenkel, 2014).

These complex expressions and actualisation of *desire* in migrants' pursuits of a sense of freedom also reveal the potential of the concept of desire in *socialising* the often-mechanistic approach utilised in migration studies, in which scholars examine the forces that generate various (im)mobilities (Castles, 2013; Carling and Schewel, 2017; De Haas, 2021). Desire appropriately captures how migrant waste workers embarked on their ventures within a post-socialist context and constantly reflect and adjust their positions through embodied senses of (im)mobilities. Therefore, by seeing *desire* as a social force, my investigation integrates multiple temporalities and shifting social assemblages into its initial inquiry of how migrants *become* better selves. Moreover, the embodied and subjective experiences gleaned from rural migrants engaging in Beijing's waste economy advance our understanding of the social subsequence of the massive urbanisation and modernisation in contemporary China and other developing societies worldwide. The stories I present in this dissertation also illustrate that rural migrants' agency in pursuit of a better future may, in the long run, prove to be more advantageous and beneficial for the state than for these migrant workers and their families. Future research should explore this subjugation in more detail, and analyse how migrant waste workers retain a sense of social belonging within ever-diminishing social and spatial structures. As Ms. Zhang asked while reflecting on her lifelong experiences: What am I striving for? This inquiry is not only helpful for migrants involved in ongoing modernisation but also for those who craft and drive these processes.

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