

Stress and the ecology of urban experience: Migrant mental lives in central Shanghai

Ash Amin¹  | Lisa Richaud² 

¹Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

²Laboratoire d'Anthropologie des Mondes Contemporains, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

Correspondence

Ash Amin

Email: ash.amin@geog.cam.ac.uk

Funding information

Economic and Social Research Council, Grant/Award Number: ES/N010892/1; Natural Science Foundation of China, Grant/Award Number: 71561137001

Responding to claims in urban studies and epidemiology that modern urban living negatively affects the mental health of the poor and newcomers to the city, this paper offers a different account based on an ethnography of a neighbourhood in central Shanghai, where precarious rural migrant lives unfold. Drawing on the concept of “ecologies of experience” to recognise the making of everyday sensibilities and affective tensions in urban dwelling, it focuses on subjectivity formed in habits of negotiating the urban environment, in coping with troubled thoughts and feelings posed by precariousness. The paper considers ecologies of experience arising in distinct prosaic locations – a public library, a large bookstore, and a café – found to be important in the everyday spatial practices of migrants, grounding to different degrees of success hopes for their present and future in the city. In such dwelling, the stresses to mental health – consistently described by migrants as “pressure” (*yali*) – seem to be moderated through varied forms of respite, slowing-down, and “moments of being,” though always in ambivalent ways. In recognising the everyday materiality of urban living, the paper looks beyond the tendency in studies of China's internal migration to read off migrant mental health outcomes from structural disadvantages related to work, welfare, and living conditions. Conceptually, it opens new ground in thinking by acknowledging the role of the felt qualities of lived experience in managing mental states, building on work in geography, sociology, and anthropology attentive to the affective resonances of place and to practices of urban negotiation.

KEYWORDS

ecologies of experience, ethnography, internal migration, mental health, urban China, urban public space

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the history of writing on the effects of modern metropolitan life on mental health, an influential line of thought with roots in urban sociology argues that the stresses and strains faced by vulnerable populations such as the urban poor, combined with challenging urban conditions such as overcrowding, and sensory overstimulation, make for mental disorders such as anxiety, stress, depression, and schizophrenia (see Fitzgerald, Rose, & Singh, 2016a, 2016b; Ramsden & Smith, 2018). Simmel (1964/1919), for example, argued that urban hyperaesthesia threatens mental health, if not kept at

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The information, practices and views in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

© 2020 The Authors. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers)

bay by city dwellers, learning to adopt postures of inurement and indifference. Later, Milgram's (1970) work in social psychology identified the importance of strategies of psychic delegation (see Brighenti & Pavoni, 2019 for a historiography). Another important contribution is Faris and Dunham's (1939) development of the Chicago School's work in poor immigrant neighbourhoods, which correlated psychiatric disease with the local ecology of social, biological, and environmental interactions. In this tradition, urbanity and mental disorder are found to be threaded together, though opinion diverges on the capacity for social adjustment and adaptation.

Research in epidemiology and psychiatry, seeing a resurgence of interest in the city, seems less equivocal about the adverse impact of the urban environment on mental health, especially on that of the more vulnerable social groups (Adli et al., 2017). It discovers strong correlations in large-scale surveys between urban indicators such as population density or congestion and frequencies of mild or severe mental disorders in migrant, poor, or disadvantaged communities, and identifies city living as a stressor causing or exacerbating disorders such as anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia (Gruebner et al., 2017). Such claims have begun to attract public attention in claiming distinctive neural responses to stress (Lederbogen et al., 2011) and etchings of the urban environment on brain structure and function (Galea et al., 2011).

The role of the city for those living with mental illness has long interested geographers (Duff, 2012; Parr, 1997, 1999), generally skeptical of any reduction of urban stressors to one or two general proxies of urbanicity (Winz, 2018; see also Söderström et al., 2016). An interest in the finer grain of connection between diverse mental health states and city environments is beginning to emerge in ethnographic work within geography and cognate disciplines on precarity, stress, and affliction in particular places (Bieler & Newhöner, 2018; Pettit, 2018, 2019; Philo et al., 2019; Söderström et al., 2016; Straughan et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2019a). This work, which addresses both recognised mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia and other afflictions such as exhaustion, weariness, melancholy, and uncertainty, reveals how the precisions of place and subjective experience centrally mediate the impact of urban life on human wellbeing. It begins to provide better understanding of "the ways in which the politics of urban space is rendered corporeal" (Fitzgerald et al., 2016a, p. 150) and how susceptibility or resistance to various forms of mental illness unfolds in the play between the "dynamics of the 'environment'" and the "lived experience of urbanicity" (p. 152). Taking situated and embodied experience as the ground on which mental states are formed, this approach makes for greater open-endedness, with the city viewed as "a heterogeneous, non-deterministic and enabling milieu, rather than as an undifferentiated factor of psychic stress" (Söderström et al., 2016, p. 105).

In this paper we further develop this line of thinking by locating mental states in grounded practices of urban dwelling by interrogating how these practices intervene in the negotiation of troubled thoughts and feelings posed by precarity and stress. While this kind of approach is evident in geographical writing on the lived experience of psychosis (Duff, 2012, 2016; Parr, 1997, 1999; Söderström et al., 2016; Winz, 2018), here we ask if there is something about the lived city that prevents the states of mind of its most precarious subjects from being pushed to their limits, despite the acknowledged "pressures" of urban existence. Echoing recent geographical work on the emotional experiences of urban precarity in the West (Anderson et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2019a, 2019b) and beyond (Fast & Moyer, 2018; Pettit, 2019), we draw on fieldwork conducted as part of a broader research project on migrant lives and mental health in Shanghai, to focus on how lived experience in distinct spaces mediates everyday pressures. We look at how embodied encounters within the urban environment intervene in the making of anxious thoughts and troubled feelings, but also their endurance, complicating depictions of the affective and psychological tonalities of modern city living as choices between "stress," "comfort," or "animosity" (Brighenti & Pavoni, 2019). We suggest there is more at work than straightforward bodily reflexes of capitulation or adjustment to "cognitive overload in the urban everyday" (Berlant, 2011, p. 9), as urban subjects find themselves "being enveloped by, imbibing, internalizing and acting on the basis of local atmospheres of anxiety, uncertainty and unmoored-ness" (Philo et al., 2019, p. 10). We see this bodily grammar tilting towards gradations and oscillations of mental states and affects in confronting the stresses of urban living in the way of Anderson et al. (2019) on the mixes of anxiety, relief, and hope experienced by people dependent on payday loans, and Pettit & Ruijtenberg (2019) on how the experiences of young migrant workers in global Cairo oscillate between hope and depression.

2 | STRESS, MENTAL STATES, AND ECOLOGIES OF URBAN DWELLING

Research on the everyday endurance of stress in geography and anthropology offers valuable premises to grasp this affective complexity of moment-to-moment bodily engagements with the environment. An illustrative example is David Bissel's (2014) research on practices of commuting in Sydney, which moves away from ideas of stress as a (predictable) reflex by pre-formed subjects to strained circumstances. While acknowledging the hardship induced by an arduous daily commute, Bissel foregrounds the contingent nature of stress, along with its entanglement with other affects, including pleasurable

ones. The details of spatialised experience that emerge from the study render interpretation in terms of attrition incomplete, by including scenic moments during the commute offering “momentary reprieve” and “joyful transformations” amid the lingering exhaustions of lengthy daily travel (Bissel, 2014, p. 199). Importantly, the analysis shows how “affective tensions” and “ambivalence” (2014, p. 199), irreducible to either pleasure or pain, arise in the very environment in which commuters find themselves.

But in joining such effort to challenge the idea of the “generic stressed body” (2014, p. 192), in this paper we look beyond narrated experience and emotional talk as a window on subjective vulnerability, echoing Burbank’s (2011) ethnography of reported feelings of stress in aboriginal Australia, and Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar’s (2019b) account of everyday weariness among young people in housing need. We trace the dwelling practices – the ways in which habitat and subjectivity are entangled – through which the pressures of urban living come to be encountered in specific urban environments, following a tradition of work in health geography attentive to the significant affective and curative resonances of the micro-spaces in which people with mental health difficulties find themselves (Brewster, 2014; Parr, 1997, 2008; Duff, 2012, 2016; Winz, 2018; Söderström et al., 2017; see also Wolch & Philo, 2000).

We seek to give due recognition to field evidence on how distinct “ecologies of experience” (Simpson, 2013) morph out of routinised engagements with the city. Attending to how states of mind are “embodied in the social, material and affective occupation urban spaces” (Duff, 2017, p. 516) opens the possibility of seeing everyday stress, understood as a visceral manifestation of demanding existential circumstances, as impacting mental health through the “topography of the everyday sensibilities ... consequential to living through things” (Stewart, 2011, p. 445).

This “topography”, however, is not a mere setting into which lives simply unfold. Rather, it emerges as the product of active engagements and affinities with the built environment, rendered habitable through modes of dwelling that Bister et al. (2016) refer to as “niching”. In their ethnographic accounts of the everyday life of people living with a diagnosis in Berlin, “urban assemblages” are made habitable through movements along a “network of places” – a mental health care facility, a café, a store, and other “little spots of social contact” (Bister et al., 2016, pp. 193–194).¹ Like similar work cited above on the spatial experiences of those with mental ill health, this example signals that subjectivities – including mental states – are formed in dwelling and doing (Sennett, 2018), in the continuum of emotions, bodies, sociality, matter, and space, in attunement with the felt qualities of experience as it unfolds through particular places and situations (Bieler & Newhöner, 2018; Richaud & Amin, 2020; Simpson, 2017).

Despite resemblances with Cameron Duff’s work on the role of “enabling places” (2012) and “atmospheres of recovery” (2016) in the lives of people living with mental illness, our approach departs from its characterisation of practices of inhabitation. The dynamics of place, dwelling, and subjectivity described by Duff (for people self-identifying as being in recovery) are orientated towards a “lived, affective practice of becoming well” (2016, p. 68), participating in a “daily ‘project’” of recovery (2012, p. 1393). By contrast, our ethnography of rural migrants in Shanghai leads us to examine emplaced forms of managed subjectivity (Richaud & Amin, 2020) that largely evade a self-conscious *telos*, and remain irreducible to “a line of becoming well” (Duff, 2016: p. 59). Though, like Duff, we remain attentive to how concrete places work themselves into, and modulate, affective and bodily experiences, we find the openness inherent in Paul Simpson’s (2013) concept of “ecologies of experience” more adequate to capture the moment-to-moment, multifarious ways in which subjectivity, including mental states, is formed in the continuous and co-constitutive relationships between the self and its environment. Here, “inner life processes and affective states” (Biehl et al., 2007, p. 6) take shape “in the playing out of embodied experiences” (Simpson, 2013, p. 181), in the relations “between a variety of constitutive elements: human bodies, nonhuman bodies, animate entities, inanimate objects, ambient atmospheres, sounds, discursive formations, social norms ...” (p. 193). Here, the subject does not emerge as self-present but through the living of the city across particular ecologies of experience altering or reinforcing the mood states of a longer mental biography. Susceptibility and vulnerability are threaded into the relations of in-living (Harrison, 2007, 2008).

Such are the relations of mind and emplaced experience we seek to capture in this paper, focusing on rural Chinese migrants facing the many stresses of precarious work, welfare, and residence, and alienation and loneliness in fast-paced central Shanghai. Theirs is a mental life that does not fit with the language typical of the recent “psycho-boom” in China, marked by the rapid growth of off-line and on-line psychotherapeutic, psychological, and vernacular forms of therapy in response to mental illnesses of varying severity experienced by highly stressed students, employees, and professionals at a time of rapid socioeconomic transformation (Yang, 2017).

Our subjects (see below) remain far removed from this discourse, yet not from one of being burdened by manifold everyday existential stresses, described as specifically Chinese by one young man because of the constant “struggle” (*fen-dou*) to “earn money,” while foreigners “live freer and happier lives than the Chinese”. Regardless of gender, age, or educational background, our subjects speak of the “pressures” or “stress” (*yali*) of urban living posed by a host of challenges

ranging from the uncertainties of work, housing, and income to the disappointments of failed expectations. While *yali* talk is known to be common to all urban social groups (Kleinman et al., 2011; Yang, 2017), migrants such as our informants facing particular life challenges describe a general order of things in the metropolis that has to be actively negotiated. If in English “stress” indicates a “visceral complaint” (Stewart, 2007, p. 43), a bodily “state of arousal” (Aneshensel, 1992; Au, 2017), or a condition of mild mental disorder, “*yali*” indicates the onus of facing the challenge of the metropolis (e.g., the fast pace of life or the pressure to succeed).

If *yali* does not necessarily convey the intimately felt impact of city living, other vernacular terms do so, notably that of “heart” (*xin*), the entanglements of body and mind.² Despite his oft-reasserted “love for big cities,” one informant, for example, sighs about how “the city tires one’s heart out” (*lei xin*). Again, as used by our informants, this vernacular notion of the “heart” is far removed from official discourses placing the “heart” at the centre of psychotherapeutic interventions, aiming at revitalising a Chinese cultural tradition of inner strength to address mental stress (Yang, 2017). *Xin* signals permeability of the self to external pressures, but also a certain enduring capacity, illustrated by another young man emphasising how being “large-hearted” (*xin hen da*) enabled him to accept unreasonable demands from his boss and unpaid working hours. In general though, “states of heart” (*xintai*) are not reducible to inner practices of self-management, but have the mark of ways in which the city is experienced. If there is a vernacular of the metropolis “exhausting the heart”, there is also one of the possibility to feel otherwise: “heart” as movement-inducing. In one young man’s own words, “because of being troubled at heart” (*xin fan*), he sits in a bookstore and consults self-help books.

Our informants thus confirmed that much was to be learned by directing our gaze to how mental stress manifests in different ways, also waxing and waning in the course of urban dwelling.

Hence the framing of this paper in the terms set out above, motivated by the desire to recognise the agency of subject–environment relations in shaping the balances of mental illness and wellbeing. This is not to deny the force of individual brain–body histories and personal experiences, nor of the webs of community and care that are available, but instead to acknowledge the additions of actual spatial experience, the susceptibilities of immersive subjectivity. In a Chinese context, such an approach begins to fill a gap in research on the experiences of rural migrants, echoing recent calls for further geographical investigations of the ways in which “people in Chinese cities ... overcome the stresses of urban living, or seek to momentarily ‘escape’ tiredness” (Jayne & Leung, 2014, p. 265).

3 | DISCOURSES OF MIGRANT MENTAL HEALTH IN URBAN CHINA

Urban China is very much in the foreground of current debate on the negative impact of the city on the mental health of vulnerable subjects such as migrants (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). China’s fast-paced urbanisation and marketisation in the aftermath of the Reform and opening up policy (1978) have resulted in metropolises such as Shanghai, Shenzhen, Beijing, or Guangzhou attracting large populations from the rural areas in search of employment opportunities in factories, construction work, and increasingly, the service economy. Often referred to as *nongmingong* (“peasant workers”) or *waidiren* (“outsiders”), more than two generations of rural-to-urban migrants have established a durable presence in the city, both in the urban villages of suburban areas (Zhan, 2017; Zhang, 2001) and in the central neighbourhoods where restaurants, cafés, malls, small retail shops, beauty parlours, real estate agencies, and the like provide especially younger migrants with precarious employment. Portraits of migrant lives recurrently feature the long and sometimes unpaid working hours, the cramped and overcrowded dormitories, the frequent experiences of prejudice, and other predicaments (e.g., Chan, 2002). In China, institutional constraints add to these hardships of urban life and labour. National policies since the 1950s have sought to limit the growth of the rural population in cities by legally tying individuals to their birthplace, which prevents migrants from benefiting from the social rights attached to urban citizenship (Johnson, 2017; Zhang, 2002a). The household registration system, or *hukou*, restricts access to health care and education for the children of migrant workers and leaves migrant residents vulnerable in a context where evictions in the name of urban redevelopment campaigns are common. These institutional restrictions, paired with stigma and trying working and living conditions, have given rise to concerns over the effects of disadvantage on the mental health and wellbeing of rural migrants. Chen Yingfang, for example, writes of the “life pressures and psychological crisis” (2012, p. 189) experienced by those trying to build new lives in the city, while a growing number of epidemiological and sociological studies set out to measure this impact (Chen, 2016; He & Wang, 2016; Lei, 2017; Li et al., 2006; Yang et al., 2012; Yi & Liang, 2017; for a detailed review, see Li & Rose, 2017).

This literature is marked by the treatment of the urban environment and subjectivity as discrete entities, leaving unexplored their dynamic imbrications. Sociological and epidemiological research on China’s rural-to-urban migration tends to describe the urban experience of migrants and their mental health as *sui generis*, resulting from the structural organisation and constraints of city life (He & Wang, 2016; Lei, 2017). Typically, He and Wang write that “the understanding of new

generation migrants' urban experience and wellbeing should be situated in the ternary interactive framework of the state, market and society" (2016, p. 70). In this approach the city appears as a cold vector, underexplored and automatically assumed to be damaging to mental health.

Similarly, while anthropological research reveals the "emotional and mental worlds" of migrants (Zhang, 2002b, p. 275) by recording worries and distress expressed in narratives of everyday experience (Chan, 2002; Sun, 2014; Zhang, 2002b), it reveals little of how such mental states and negative feelings are borne and negotiated on a moment-to-moment basis, through embodied encounters with the urban environment. Again, the urban remains a neglected dimension, despite being assumed to contribute to mental ill-being. There are one or two exceptions, however. In her work on the cultural practices of migrant factory workers in the Pearl River Delta, Wanning Sun (2014, pp. 207–208) writes of the importance of Internet cafés where migrants usually confined to the city's industrial zones spend their spare time. Sun notes how computer games, along with the oft silent company of familiar strangers, help migrants to "de-stress" (p. 208). In a similar vein, Yang Shen's (2019) ethnography of the everyday experiences of restaurant workers in central Shanghai shows the importance for these young migrants of the "short respite" (p. 146) and "temporary shelter" (p. 149) afforded by group outings to karaoke bars. Like the ethnographies cited earlier in this paper, this example speaks to the value of a fine-grained understanding of how the living of space affects mental states.

4 | FIELD SITES AND METHODS

The research informing this paper follows this approach, focusing on rural migrants in Shanghai – a metropolis that is both a privileged destination for workers from neighbouring and remote provinces and "one of the most unequal cities in China" when one considers differences in the socio-economic statuses of local-born and migrant populations (Shen, 2019, p. 17). Our project, however, crucially differed from previous work in its conceptual premises and methods, inspired by the theorisation of urbanicity, lived experience, and mental health referred to earlier (e.g., Fitzgerald, Rose, & Singh, 2016a, 2016b). The project did not take for granted the likeliness of migrants to experience mental disorders, and it remained unconvinced that urban challenges affects mental health in singular and undifferentiated ways. To borrow the words of Kathleen Stewart, "the point of analysis was not to track the predetermined *effects* of abstractable logics and structures but, rather, to compose a register of the lived *affects* of the things that took place in a social-aesthetic-material-political worlding" (2017, pp. 192–193; emphasis original). We did so through a 15-month period of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2017–2018 in two contrasting environments: a suburban area of early blue-collar migration now experiencing factory demolitions (cf. Richaud & Amin, 2020) and a vibrant neighbourhood in the city centre, which provides the case evidence for this paper.

Our study area is a 1-km square space situated in the middle of the inner-city Huangpu District, in proximity to some of the city's most famous tourist attractions, such as the Bund or Nanjing Road. It consists of two large blocks of old low-rise buildings and narrow alleys in the heart of Shanghai's high-rise commercial district, with its upscale malls and office buildings. The area consists of small shops on the ground floor of buildings, with housing above, and narrow alleyways in between packed with small homes belonging to old Shanghai residents or rooms rented out to rural migrants. Much of the retail employee base is migrant, both old established workers and young newcomers from across China. Despite images of migrants forming native place-based "communities" (Zhang, 2001) relying on strong ties and mutual support, this was not the case in the neighbourhood we studied. As we will see, however, fleeting friendships and light-touch sociality compensated the anonymity and forms of isolation that characterised social life in the area. In the Chinese context where rural migrant bodies are often marked as different, the anonymity and solitude which our vignettes will illustrate should nonetheless not be reduced to yet another predicament, but as an ambivalent ground for the formation of an "ethics of indifference" that "affords certain protections and allow certain freedoms" (Tonkiss, 2003, p. 299).

Given our interest in dwelling practices, we followed a place-based approach, through repeated visits to workplaces (cafés, restaurants, shops) and places of rest (bookstores and libraries), without presupposing their contrasting effects in terms of the co-constitutive, dynamic relationships between inner selves and the city in negotiating urban stress. Attentive to the lived experiences of place, one aspect of our method consisted of producing in situ descriptions of live situations. Besides non-intrusive observation, access to the lifeworlds of migrants was gained through repeated engagements with singular individuals – both men and women – of different backgrounds, ages (ranging between 18 and middle age), and places of origin. With the exception of a few Shanghai-born people living or working in the neighbourhood with whom we became acquainted during fieldwork, all informants came from rural areas (or occasionally small towns) and did not possess Shanghai *hukou*. While a few of them had vocational college degrees, most had not reached or finished secondary education. Duration of stay in Shanghai varied from several months to several years. While some of them lived with their family, those informants introduced over the following sections were either single or stayed in Shanghai alone.

During fieldwork, being a foreigner proved helpful, as it often entailed being perceived as an “open person” (Goffman, 1963, p. 126) with whom verbal interactions in public spaces are deemed legitimate. Some of our informants, particularly those attracted to the cosmopolitan aura of the city, enjoyed interacting with foreigners, which they perceived as an opportunity inherent to working in Shanghai's city centre. While disclosing the purpose of our visits to the neighbourhood, the second author simultaneously became perceived as a “regular” in cafés, restaurants, shops, and bookstores. In these settings, the workers' availability and affective labour when dealing with us as regulars afforded possibilities for convivial interactions and sustained relationships over time. Establishing such relationships proved more difficult in the library, not only because of its rules, but also, as will become clear, interactions between regulars were minimal. Rather than disrupting these modes of sociality, we relied on fewer opportunities for interpersonal engagements.

As is often the case in ethnographic work, it remains difficult to provide an exact number of informants. It would be safe to claim that we observed and interacted with over 100 people, while gaining more in-depth knowledge of trajectories, future plans, life events, and emotional experience of 19 informants (seven women and 12 men) through on-the-spot informal talk, semi-structured interviews, joint activities outside of the workplace or discussions through WeChat – a hugely popular social media app. Relationships with these key informants ranged from acquaintances to friendships sustained through shared meals, outings, and exchanges about private matters. Of particular interest was to find out that some informants working in shops or cafés made use of other fieldsites, such as the bookstores or the library.

More fleeting contacts also proved instructive about both the uses of specific places and, in certain cases, the states of “heart” that brought one there. A single chance encounter sometimes led to the sharing of introspective and intimate thoughts, but the contingencies of these informants' lives prevented extending of these relationships in time.

In addition to fieldwork, a questionnaire survey was conducted by one research team member with 135 migrants in the two neighbourhoods that comprised our study (Li et al., 2019). The results showed that about half of the respondents perceived their lives as stressful, yet “colourful”, and three-quarters had moderate stress, while half of those surveyed experienced moderate mental distress. Two respondents showed high perceived stress and three cases potentially experienced severe mental illness (2019, p. S18).

The analysis of lived situations presented below aims to demonstrate the balance between fragility and stability made in the dwelling of familiar spaces in the neighbourhood. While our ethnography does not make for comparability or generalisation about migrant mental health and its negotiation in urban China, it does offer up the living of specific situations and spaces as an important dimension of mental life in the city.

In the following vignettes of time spent in a public library, a bookshop, a bijou café, and familiar neighbourhood, we show how seemingly ordinary rituals such as lingering, browsing, and workplace banter – all three aided by the material aesthetics of the space – are involved in helping migrants to temper the stresses of city life by providing them momentary mental relief with lingering effects. In veering towards the “positives” of spatial occupancy, our intention is not to propose the city as antidote to mental disorder, nor to play down the considerable and continued mental stress faced by the migrants we encountered, but instead to reveal the agency – which could well be negative – of situated dwelling in shaping the body–mind relationship.

5 | SILENT LOITERING

11:30 a.m. On the 7th floor in the District Library, behind the glazed door of the “electronic reading room” sit several men, whose faces have become familiar due to repeated visits: sitting in front of a computer screen, with his personal belongings displayed on his desk – a small towel, a backpack, a flask, food – a man vigorously scratches his swollen legs; his computer on, a one-armed man is sleeping on his desk. Others arrive: a young man, carrying plastic bags. Outside the glazed door, in the main reading room sits a short, stocky man, with his flask on the table; he's busy reading newspapers, occasionally raising his eyes. He reads with his head resting on his hands folded in front of him, half-lying on the table. About half an hour later, he grabs his flask and returns to his desk in the computer room. He immediately curls up on the desk, his head laying on his folded arms. Many others are sleeping. ... A middle-aged man in a khaki jacket arrives in the room and takes a seat. His headphones on, he spends a while making himself some tea out of small tea-leaf bags he keeps in a plastic bag. He watches the surroundings, stretches his arms noisily, or taps his finger against the table. Eventually, he walks into the computer room where, with a playful expression on his face, he stands behind another man half-lying on his desk, enlacing him. The other man stands up, and they pretend to bully each

other, laughing and talking for a few seconds, although only reasonably loudly. “Let’s go,” says one of them. They both walk towards the toilets, though at different paces – the man in khaki takes a detour by the elevator. Throat-clearing noises become more frequent. As they come out of the toilet after about five minutes, each returns to his seat. ... Click, click, click. The man in khaki uses a nail-clipper, along with a foldable nail file. ... At twelve thirty, the stocky man gets up to refill his flask at the water fountain made available to the public, in the main reading room. He then goes back into the computer room. There, he approaches two other men with whom he laughs and chats for a few seconds, then walks slowly towards his desk ... (Edited field-notes, October 2017)

Men aged between 30 and 50 regularly occupy one of the floors of the district’s library. While some of the men sometimes borrow magazines or newspapers or use computers in a leisurely way, they also spend a certain amount of time sleeping. This use of public space is also to be found elsewhere in the area, such as its bookstores. In general, it is men and not women making such use of public space. While a librarian and other regulars referred to them as “unemployed”, those we talked to mentioned casual work as their occupation. One middle-aged man from Zhejiang Province explained he occasionally engaged in “light” manual work, refusing to engage in “heavy” labour.⁴ While many are indeed migrants, others are Shanghai-born retirees or people who have been impaired in some way, including suffering a physical disability.

The terminology the men used to refer to their own spatial practices connotes aimlessness. Time spent in the library everyday was a way to “muddle along” (*hun*) or “rove” (*you dang*) for “homeless” (*mei you jia*) individuals. Regarded as a practice of dwelling rather than a directionless move, *hun* echoes a form of “loitering”, an emerging concept in the literature on waiting and inactivity that Wafer defines as:

An embodied practice; one which emerges from conditions characterized by waiting and temporal uncertainty, but which acknowledges the human endeavour that is directed towards durability. More specifically, loitering implies a durational occupation of public space – a street corner, a pavement, a park bench – in such a way that appears (and is performed as) disinterested and idle, but which is always watchful and always present. Loitering is about the endurance of the body in the present, the ability to remain present for an unknown duration in the hope of an uncertain and precarious future. (2017, p. 407–408)

Despite certain similarities, the loitering we observed is of a different nature. The rhythms of idleness are neither watchful nor aspirational. They are there in order to kill boredom, find solace in a quiet place, while simultaneously taking advantage of the facilities on offer – ironically not library resources for learning, but tables to sleep on, login for free to surf the net, and bathrooms to groom yourself. This is not a space for watchfulness in the hope that an opportunity will present itself. Indeed, it is noticeable that the men hardly talk to each other. The gathering should not be mistaken for a group. “I come here alone,” one man in his thirties from Anhui Province insisted, as one of us asked him about his relations to others. There is minimal contact between the men, only a mere repeated co-presence that at times allows for sporadic, dyadic verbal and non-verbal exchanges. The atmosphere is mostly silent, if one admits that silence is always noise; noise most often deemed irrelevant unless one learns to pay attention (Cage, 1961): a laugh, a quick verbal exchange, a throat cleared. The sociality is one of “being alone together” or of “social solitude” (Coleman, 2009). “We might know others, but we don’t sustain relationships” (*bu lai wang*), said the aforementioned man from Zhejiang. There is no gain to be made from the sociality beyond itself. Being in a library is an everyday reproductive routine that is not future looking nor aspirational.

Here, there is a subtle interplay between temporalities of aimlessness and purposefulness. It is as though the space affords this play. There are distinct rhythms of intention: arrival, lunchtime, refilling one’s water cup, regular use of the bathroom to wash (including clothes), nap times, and departure. The stay is structured, and as such a means of organising the day in meaningful ways, keeping at bay the demons of uncertainty and inactivity that could darken the mood. In this organising, personal objects play their part. Out come the combs, cups, lotions, mobile phones, portable batteries, and other personal belongings, partly to mark territory, but also in preparation for restorative rituals to come. The orderliness and spatial morphology of the library – also important as a mooring – is lightly adjusted to give the anchoring a more personal touch. In between this structuring, there are also seemingly aimless, directionless wanderings, gestures, and utterings. In the interplay between purposeful activity and aimlessness, the room for anxiety is kept to a minimum.

Being-in-the-library is undoubtedly restorative, and one conversation confirmed our sense that the men do seem “damaged” in some way and in need of comfort. After months spent exchanging non-verbal signs of mutual recognition, one of

the men eventually struck a conversation with the second author outside of the library. Getting more animated as he talked, he spoke of illicit activities he engaged in years ago, leading his wife to divorce him. No longer could he see his child. In fear of retaliation, he has been “hiding” in the anonymous metropolis. He confessed having thought about taking his own life in the past, but it “no longer mattering” (*wusuowei*). In the calm mood of the library where he has come for two years, stress is somehow held in abeyance (Berlant, 2011), contained temporarily against the commotions of the inner self, and until it has to be confronted out in the street where, the man explained, one’s “face” (*lianmian*) or sense of pride sometimes prevents him from turning to friends for help.

In alluding to the affordances of the space, we must include its regulatory aspects. Generally, the literature on loitering emphasises how these forms of presence of marginal individuals in public space are perceived as a threat, an object of discipline and control. Policing is inherent to the regulatory responses, adding to anxiety of the individuals now labelled deviant. In contrast, in the library, such control is absent. The men we describe seem free to treat the public space as a temporary home. Hardly ever are they cautioned, and when so, it is with a measure of parsimony and without any intention to offend. Indeed, there exists a form of recognition on the part of the library staff. Two episodes illustrate this point. On one occasion, a woman librarian greeted two men as they were about to leave, playfully asking why they were leaving “work” (i.e., their stay in the library) so early. There followed a short exchange of jokes and banter, an obvious sign of mutual recognition. On another occasion, a security guard appeared at the front desk, possibly to make his presence felt, yet during most of his time on the 7th floor, his surveillance was not directed at restricting the activity of the loitering men. The regulation of the space is light touch and non-intrusive, in the heart of the city centre, where regimes of visibility are typically described as impediments to people and acts deemed out of place.

In the moment-to-moment management of wellbeing in this urban space – and we have little evidence of the degrees of success – quite a few things are at work as the elements of “atmospheric attunements” (Stewart, 2011). These disrupted lives find themselves anchored in a comfortable public place made familiar by their own bodily rhythms and the affordances of the library itself, including its layout, quietness (a large poster on the wall calls for “tranquillity”), “light-touch” sociality (Thrift, 2005, p. 146), and an atmosphere of permissibility and reliability (as a place of return, safekeeping, and legitimate presence), as the men often come and go, leaving their belongings behind. In contrast to a dangerous past life and hazardous outside, at least for the aforementioned man, the library is not a space of betrayal or deception, nor one of animosity and control, but one that provides temporary respite and escape, as a habitus of self-abeyance in which repair is always fleeting.

6 | RESPITE FOR SELF-HELP

Feifei has been sitting on the immense fourth floor of the bookshop “City of Books,” among English books and dictionaries. He has agreed to meet there after having turned down an invitation to lunch, claiming that he had no appetite. A few days earlier he had been fired for the second time in a very short period as a café waiter. Among all of our informants Feifei, aged 25, stood out as the only one who admitted to suffering from, in his own words, dread, “thinking too much,” and depression. This state is a reflection as much of his difficult childhood and his struggle to cope with the “bitterness” of city life as a solitary migrant from one of the poorest areas of China (Guizhou), as it is of his circumstances – including living far away from the city centre with a cousin he has no affinity with, losing jobs, lacking in confidence and feeling awkward amidst social interactions. Perched on the edge of a small cabinet covered with piles of textbooks, Feifei is immersed in a book about China’s famous entrepreneur Jack Ma. This is the second day he has spent in the bookstore after losing his post. Feifei is looking to the book to learn about what makes those he refers to as the “strong at heart” who they are and how they attain commercial success. He is trying to learn how to become a different and more resilient person able to “make a lot of money”. If there is a lingering interest in other kinds of profession, such as becoming an English-speaking tourist guide, this too is part of his desire to become a cosmopolitan. Feifei’s aspirations were a long way off from his current capabilities, and on occasion he realised the enormity of the gap to be crossed. A few months after this meeting, and one more in-between position in a restaurant that smelled of stale oil rather than fresh coffee, Feifei resignedly returned to his village in the mountains.

In the larger bookstores of the neighbourhood in which lingering can pass unnoticed amid the ebb and flow of buying books and drinks and food, other young men (it always seems to be men) browse the “success studies” shelves for books

that might help them learn new entrepreneurial skills (see also Sullivan & Keohe, 2019). The browsers are left alone, sometimes for several hours, without fear of admonishment, they mark the territory in small ways, for example by lying down on the floor with a book resting on their chest, and they gather as strangers who have nothing in common other than their need for respite combined – in some cases – with a quest for books that can help them improve their lot. Here the ecology of attention, marked by the vast array of books, signage, and titles that read like injunctions (e.g., *The choices you make will determine your future*, *Go beyond confusion*), gives those lingering for respite from their predicaments a certain directionality. “I read this book n times,” said Li, another browser, pointing to one of the former titles. There is learning to be done, and there are rewards to be had from the books consulted. The task of learning is made all that easier in this non-obligatory and pleasant environment – certainly more so than that arduous and possibly expensive formal training that would be the other alternative. Sometimes, the space offers up the serendipity of a chance meeting that offers new possibility: Li, after talking to one of us for several hours about his existential dilemmas and predicaments, grasped the opportunity to ask for some English lessons. Equally, the directionality does not have to be sustained, as suggested by the term *wan* (“to have fun” or “to hang around”), used by Li to refer to his visits to what he called “the library”, because “you can read the books here and there's no need to buy them” – after all, the place provides an opening and is supposedly a leisure space. The space comes with few learning expectations, and indeed, when the doubt of non-achievement arises, as it so often does, the disappointment can be endured, and with this, the existential anxieties continue to linger: “I thought it all through [*xiangtong*]; I should go back to Shenzhen, for there might be no hope for me in Shanghai”, said Li. “But,” he hastened to add, “it would be better if I could start my own business [*chuangye*], it's just that I can't find investors ...”.

The ecology of this moment is one of doubtful respite in a space offering the promise of learning and intellectual curiosity only in a fragile way. The promise is easily betrayed by self-doubt and by not being able to live up to the “strong at heart”. At the same time, the space nourishes a “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011) without which the hopeful would feel even more threatened, as Harry Pettit (2019) has shown in the case of young educated Egyptians drawing on different forms of distraction, such as self-help, religion, and consumption to endure the precarity of life in contemporary Cairo. These situations act out as a rehearsal space for impermanence and transition to an ill-defined end. The outcomes are uncertain, not only because the required learning is not done, but also because goals continually shift. In Feifei's case, shifts were from this or that profession, to another, “smaller city, where I would develop better”, or “a return home”, another room to rent, back to drudgery. The bookstore is a staging post in an uncertain journey, but as such, a meaningful one, we would argue. Immersed in an inclusive and textured (literally) public space, the browsers of self-help books can rehearse transition, possibly also a desired new identity, even knowing that the chances of fulfilment through this situation alone are slim. The rehearsing counts in its own right, as inner dialogues of doubt and ambition come to be spatialised in a public space permitting silent expression as well as endorsement – through its architecture and atmosphere of learning – of the hopes nurtured.

Thinking through the city, the practices of browsing in bookstores, at the most basic level, speak to the value of migrants having access to open public spaces shared by everybody in the heart of the metropolis. Here, hierarchies are equalised, possibilities are put on display for all. If the dynamic of the public library is one of reinforcing present routines, that of the bookstore is one of making the everyday pregnant with future possibility – an idea to borrow from Jack Ma, “becoming a tourist guide for foreigners”, in Feifei's case, or the promise of a chance encounter with a foreigner, in Li's. The browsing migrant leaves with the promise of cosmopolitan belonging endorsed – of course always tempered by the burden of uncertainty. And in turn, the promise can be rehearsed privately in public, saved for that later day when it can be remembered to aid a difficult situation. The bookstore has in the mildest way given a taste of emergent citizenship, but if not this, the opportunity to orchestrate and negotiate one's worries in a more gentle and hopeful space whose traces may linger.

7 | FAMILIARISED ASPIRATION

Around 1:30 p.m., behind the counter of this white brick-walled, neatly decorated café, Manyu, a girl in her early twenties originally from a small town in Shandong Province, is busy taking orders from an ongoing inflow of customers, sometimes providing them with recommendations. The drinks are prepared by a newly recruited waiter working behind her at a tranquil pace, and this despite the sense of agitation caused by the constant movements of other colleagues walking back and forth between the kitchen and the space behind the counter, as well as the unusually loud music, shifting from bossa nova to a jazzy version of “Eyes of the

Tiger”, adding to the background noises of the street. ... “Will your child also have some?” asks Kang, as a woman requests his suggestions. A 27-year-old man from the rural outskirts of Xi'an, manager Kang usually performs his role with dedication, rarely missing an occasion to convey a sense of concern towards the customers' needs or show recognition to old patrons: “You come here so often, but we haven't offered you a member card?!” “Hey, you must take this upstairs!” pointing at a plate of hot spaghetti served with salad, Kang exhorts his new colleague. A few minutes later, he and Manyu are fooling around behind the counter, teasing each other: “Talking about me again?! But who does this, huh? Who does this?! Every week, I'm the one who does it”, says Manyu, in a playful self-victimising tone. Their jokes and laughter suddenly end as two newly arrived customers are greeted by Kang. (Edited fieldnotes, December 2017).

Here, we pursue the theme of the future in the everyday, by considering the lived experience of a group of young migrants as they move through the spaces of the inner city to nourish their sense of “progression” (*jinbu*) and “striving” (*nuli*) as well as their quest for cosmopolitan citizenship. This newly established “bijou” café is explicitly cosmopolitan, “a locus of encounter between globalised cultural repertoires and locally mediated practices” typical of urban China's new coffee house culture (Lv & Qian, 2018, p. 52), in a way alluring also to its low-paid employees. Here too, though the subjects manage to avoid the disorientation we have described above, their spatial experience – as migrants – is not always one of just reward, but is instead tempered with many pushbacks and small injuries encountered every day owing to their assigned identity.

These young café employees conform to a large extent to portraits of new generation migrants (He & Wang, 2016), who tend to be better educated than the rural migrants of the 1980s, have looser connections with their place of origin and a strong desire to remain in the city, are more familiar with new technologies, and are prepared to negotiate the impermanence of city life, especially in the job and housing market. Their aspirational culture is a mix of hope and achievement. Kang and his colleagues are starting out, but carefully planning out and investing in their future. They tend to set goals and time frames for achieving them, especially in terms of their career ambitions in the service sectors, and opening one's own shop is considered the ultimate goal. “I have to stand by myself by the time I turn thirty” (*san shi er li*), Kang once explained, recounting how he considered his work at the café as “if it was my own business”. The “now” is almost always discursively construed as a stepping stone – prospectively or retroactively – in the process of self-making and advancement. And progression is intended to unfold in central Shanghai, even if this means commuting long distances to get to work and at the expense of sacrificing home ownership. The dream is certainly premised on achievement, but for the newcomers, it is a fragile premise. Café employees, for example, are badly paid, they work long hours (often unpaid for overtime), they have no contractual rights, they could be easily sacked (or move on to yet another form of employment), and their housing situation is precarious, balanced between living in crowded hostels and shared rented rooms and searching for new accommodation that often turns out to be too expensive or lost to another competitor.

Yet, the quest lingers intact, and once again, this has something to do with the ways in which the locality is inhabited and how it inhabits these aspiring individuals. Within walking distance, there are other jobs to be found, and indeed, the moves are frequent, even if usually horizontal. By frequenting local restaurants and shops, a certain familiarity is constructed, both with the morphology of the neighbourhood and what it may offer, as well as with faces who could be approached for a conversation about possibilities. There is a promise of belonging in a place considered to offer opportunity, and the recognition gained from being a familiar face – encountered as a café employee. Within the workplace too, certain rituals become a form of “apprenticeship” (*xuexi*) for “self-improvement” (*ganhua*). The café work, for example, is not simply that of doling out food and drink, but is punctuated by the conversations that are sustained with customers, by the ways in which the display board is written, and by the details of how food and drink are arranged in cups and plates. Gradually, the neighbourhood is domesticated as experimental ground and stepping stone for the future. This is not to say that such domestication is secure. On one occasion when one of us accompanied Kang to look for a new place to rent in old houses along narrow alleys, his gait and demeanour changed on encountering locals who immediately saw him as a migrant, signalling unreliability or some other negative attribute. This is just one example of the many ways in which respondents speak of their discomfort in being sensed as out-of-place migrants. They refer to their work as exhausting or poorly paid, housing being expensive and precarious, opportunities evaporating as fast as they appear, and daily routines becoming “tasteless”. The local ecology of aspiration, then, is not all positive. Yet, despite its many constraints and frustrations, a lived culture of “yearning” (Rofel, 2007) remains, sometimes even leading to interpreting the latter as part of the “city experience”. Describing her experience of daily commuting in Shanghai's overcrowded, densely packed subway, Manyu refused to reduce these routinised forms of thrown-togetherness to their alleged stressful nature, rather perceiving them as exuding a collective feeling of motivation (*dongli*).

At times, however, aspirations are also cast aside or recede into the background when these young people find themselves indulging in the routines established inside and outside the workplace: “Our job is stressless” (*mei shenme yali*), as Kang said on some occasions. For if the “now” of the urban everyday is retroactively or prospectively construed in light of the “later”, repeated encounters in the field show that often the “now”, as it unfolds in the living of the moment, is also comfortable in itself, being ascribed no meaning beyond itself, allowing our informants to temporarily withdraw from the “reflexive scanning” or “hypervigilance” (Berlant, 2011) required by the navigation of urban life and the pressures it poses. Stress can recede into the background of comfortable routines, where one can enjoy what the city has to offer – the tastes of a dinner with one’s colleagues at the end of the day, an outing, an enjoyable conversation with familiar strangers. But most interestingly, our informants tend in the end to experience the very feeling of the absence of stress as problematic, as they return to the aspirational genres of urban life, which value upward movement, not repetition.

“[Stress] can be the badge you wear that shows that you’re afloat and part of what’s happening – busy, multitasking, in the know. Or it can be a visceral complaint against being overworked, underpaid, abandoned by the medical system, or subject to constant racist undertows” (Stewart, 2007, p. 43). Our landscape of aspiration points to this ambivalent logic. Even when stress is temporarily at bay, as when the migrant subject indulges in the cosiness of routines, its very absence becomes stressful, as opposed to the entrepreneurial subjectivity to which these young people aspire (see also Rofel, 2016). Although the open-endedness of such stories should prevent us from jumping to foreclosed conclusions (Dalsgaard & Fredriksen, 2013), the stresses encountered rarely seem to mount as an inner crisis. They are endured for the present through small-scale practices of dwelling and related sociality.

8 | CONCLUSION

What these everyday vignettes of the occupancy of space reveal about mental health in the city is that subjectivity is formed and expressed in the practices of urban dwelling, and not in any cause–effect relationship between (vulnerable) subject and (stressful) environment. Spatial experience in a very detailed sense intervenes in the management of stress, sometimes helping to temper it in therapeutic ways through practices of domestication, familiarity, and respite. Ethnographic work of this kind throws up a host of urban repertoires in the mid ground of living the city that question presumptions of vulnerable subjects suffering mental disorders because of the stressful urban environment. They may or may not, depending on the recursions of urban inhabitation and their cumulative effects on subjective wellbeing. Thus expressed, it is important to stress that inhabitation should not be interpreted as the making of “comfort bubbles” – to borrow Peter Sloterdijk’s (2005) terminology, against an allegedly fearful urban “outside”. It is simply the act of domestication with all its ambivalences. For the café workers, and for some bookstall browsers, the routines do become disturbing when felt to hamper progression to cosmopolitan aspiration, a very reminder that one should be seeking the opposite of rest.

The ways in which the dwelt situation intervenes in the management of stress remain ambivalent, inasmuch as mental states are hardly reducible to a duo-tonal condition – “being alarmed” versus “being at ease” in Brighenti’s and Pavoni’s terminology, or “stress” versus “wellbeing” in the language used in some quarters of geographical literature (Schwanen & Wang, 2014; Wang & Wang, 2016). “Rest and its opposites” (Callard, Staines, & Wilkes, 2016) can converge. Respite can be doubtful, as when, in the bookstore, “the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and hypervigilance that collects the material that might help to maintain one’s sea legs” (Berlant, 2011, p. 4). Comfortable routines can become unsettling. The sleep one takes in public can be troubled. The ecology of the situated moment is experienced in its own right, but always as part of wider structures of attention that prompt self-scrutiny, unless perhaps whether one has already withdrawn from aspirational regimes, as the silent loiterers may have, yet seem to remain attached to existence beyond mere survival.

As Lauren Berlant argues, despite its inherent cruelty as an affective *structure*, as a form of *experience*, “cruel optimism might not *feel* optimistic” (2011, p. 2; emphasis original). But nor does it necessarily feel cruel or unpleasant, at least not entirely. Upholding one’s aspirations or sustaining one’s orientation towards the very reproduction of life, while undoubtedly inducing stress, is also facilitated by the comforts of the places where one finds rest, however troubled. Here, an important aspect of the relationships between everyday stress and mental health may be at stake. Perhaps the comforts we have described contribute to the blurring of the boundaries between “forced adaptation” and “pleasurable variation” (Berlant, 2011, p. 9). Perhaps they participate in the conditions undergirding one’s urban-living fantasies by reducing the sense of threat, thereby helping to keep severe mental distress at bay. Our examples show that in the living of the moment in places made familiar and domestic, the stresses of enduring precarity threatening mental disorder get temporarily suspended, as time, including the stretching out of uncertainty and stress or the fading washes of optimism in the future, fragments into the sensations and affects of the here and now.

To note this is to reveal the inadequacy of reading the stress and anxiety of migrants directly from “the huge contrast between the harsh reality and their colorful dreams” (He & Wang, 2016, p. 83). Of great importance are questions of *where* and *how* one is left alone with one's existential doubts or disgruntlement, where one feels entitled to return, and what experience these places afford. Our aim is not to fall back into some form of environmental determinism, but rather to suggest that the interplay between subjectivity and urban spaces matters in ways that have seldom been considered despite the resurgent interest in the relationships between mental health and citizenship. None of this is to distract from the assaults of precarity or the stresses of urban living on the lives and mental health of vulnerable subjects. Instead it is to bring out the salience of meaningful intermediation by the experience of subjects in highly specific ecologies of dwelling, or more accurately, ecologies that allow meaningful dwelling.

In our three sites, each with its well-furnished space, the migrants were able to make the same claims on the city as might settled Shanghai residents. Adding nuance to recent studies of migrants in Shanghai that emphasise their marginalisation (Johnson, 2017), reinforced by limited presence in public spaces (Shen, 2019, p. 146), our informants eventually demarcated such public spaces as nurturing, almost private, environments enabling both mooring in the present and a connection with a conducive future. Dwelling these spaces reinforced a subjectivity of becoming and possibility, always of course, ambivalent and fragile. Yet, if a truth of everyday urban experience is that of harrying through impersonal, anonymous and demanding public spaces, then knowing about affective micro-geographies may be of relevance for a politics of managing urban mental health through situated environmental experience. Such a politics might want to delve into the sensorial impact on mental states of places negotiated by vulnerable subjects, into the disruptions of “the moments of passage and switching between different affective atmospheres and ambiances” (Winz, 2018, p. 9), and into the ways in which urban design and architecture may become “psychotoxic” (Golembiewski cited in Winz, 2018). It might wish to explore ongoing experience of urban atmospheres as an aid to mental wellbeing, fully aware of wash effects with always uncertain outcomes. These might be the lingering effects of accumulated experience, such as exposure to living in a disadvantaged area or access to green space manifesting much later in mental health outcomes, as Pearce et al. (2018) reveal in their longitudinal study of place and mental health in Edinburgh. But beyond the focus on certain kinds of urban environments such as green spaces and parks (Groenewegen et al., 2012; Pearce et al., 2018; Rishbeth & Rogaly, 2018), this politics might follow the lessons learned from practices in “unremarkable sites” (Duff, 2016, p. 72) such as those of our vignettes. It might foreground in its actions the premise that the relationship between subjectivity and mental health is forged in important ways in the conjoined agency of bodies and habitats in encounter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to our interlocutors in the field, without whom this research would not have been possible. We also wish to thank the editors of *Transactions*, as well as three anonymous reviewers whose careful engagement with our work helped to improve the article greatly. This study is part of a larger project entitled “Migration, Mental Health, and the Chinese Mega-City”, led by Nick Manning (principal investigator) and Nikolas Rose (co-investigator) at King's College London. The project was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant no. ES/N010892/1) and Natural Science Foundation of China (grant no. 71,561,137,001).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Ash Amin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1313-2777>

Lisa Richaud  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1988-4312>

ENDNOTES

¹ While their study concerns individuals suffering from mental health problems, the authors rightfully emphasise that “niching” as a concept applies to all kind of urban subjects.

- ² One example illustrates *yali* (“pressure”) and *xin*, the “heart” speak of different registers of experience. One young man talked about the “pressures” of life in Shanghai, by which he referred mainly to the cost of living. As he confessed his gambling habits, I asked him whether he engaged in such activities in order to “alleviate pressure” (*huanjie yali*). “Not to alleviate pressure, but because of my bad moods” (*xinqing bu hao*), he answered.
- ³ This was also confirmed by one informant employed in a nearby book store, who spent his spare time in the library and got acquainted with some of the men.

REFERENCES

- Adli, M., Berger, M., Brakemeier, E. L., Engel, L., Fingerhut, J., Gomez-Carrillo, A., ... Stollmann, J. (2017). Neurourbanism: Towards a new discipline. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, *4*(3), 183–185. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(16\)30371-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(16)30371-6)
- Anderson, B., Langley, P., Ash, J., & Gordon, R. (2019). Affective life and cultural economy: Payday loans and the everyday space-times of credit debt in the UK. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/TRAN.12355>
- Aneshensel, C. (1992). Social stress: Theory and research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *18*, 15–38. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.18.080192.000311>
- Au, A. (2017). The sociological study of stress. *European Journal of Mental Health*, *12*, 53–72.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Biehl, J., Good, B., & Kleinman, A. (2007). Introduction: Rethinking subjectivity. In J. Biehl, B. Good, & A. Kleinman (Eds.), *Subjectivity: Ethnographic investigations* (pp. 1–23). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bieler, P., Newhöner, J. et al. (2018). Universal biology, local society? Notes from anthropology. In M. Meloni, J. Cromby, & D. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of biology and society* (pp. 641–662). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bissel, D. (2014). Encountering stressed bodies: Slow creep transformation and tipping points of commuting mobilities. *Geoforum*, *51*, 191–201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.11.007>
- Bister, M., Klausner, M., & Niewhöner, J. (2016). The cosmopolitics of “niching”: Rendering the city habitable along infrastructures of mental health care. In A. Blok, & I. Farías (Eds.), *Urban cosmopolitics: Agencement, assemblies, atmospheres* (pp. 187–205). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Brewster, L. (2014). The public library as therapeutic landscape: A qualitative case study. *Health & Place*, *26*, 94–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2013.12.015>
- Brighenti, A. M., & Pavoni, A. (2019). A city of unpleasant feelings: Stress, comfort and animosity in urban life. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *20*, 137–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1355065>
- Burbank, V. (2011). *An ethnography of stress: The social determinants of health in aboriginal Australia*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cage, J. (1961). *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Callard, F., K. Staines, & J. Wilkes (Eds.) (2016). *The restless compendium: Interdisciplinary investigations of rest and its opposites*. Cham, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chan, A. (2002). The culture of survival: Lives of migrant workers through the prism of private letters. In P. Link, R. Madsen, & P. Pickowicz (Eds.), *Popular China: Unofficial culture in a globalizing society* (pp. 163–189). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Chen, J. (2016). Migration and urban mental health in China. In P. Jorgensen, N. Okkels, & C. Kristiansen (Eds.), *Mental health and illness in the city* (pp. 283–298). Singapore: Springer.
- Chen, Y. (2012). *Bian zhong zhi Tong*. Shanghai, China: Shanghai Sanlian Shudian.
- Coleman, L. (2009). Being alone together: From solidarity to solitude in urban anthropology. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *82*, 755–777. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20638659>
- Dalsgaard, A., & Frederiksen, M. D. (2013). Out of conclusion: On recurrence and open-endedness in life and analysis. *Social Analysis*, *57*, 50–63. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2013.570104>
- Duff, C. (2012). Exploring the role of “enabling places” in promoting recovery from mental illness. *Health & Place*, *18*, 1388–1395. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2012.07.003>
- Duff, C. (2016). Atmospheres of recovery: Assemblages of health. *Environment and Planning A*, *48*, 58–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X15603222>
- Duff, C. (2017). The affective right to the city. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *42*, 516–529. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12190>
- Faris, R. E. L., & Dunham, H. W. (1939). *Mental disorder in urban areas: An ecological study of schizophrenia and other psychoses*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fast, D., & Moyer, E. (2018). Becoming and coming undone on the streets of Dar es Salaam. *Africa Today*, *64*(3), 2–26. <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.64.3.01>
- Fitzgerald, D., Manning, N., Rose, N., & Fu, H. (2019). Mental health, migration and the megacity. *International Health*, *11*, S1–S6. <https://doi.org/10.1093/inthealth/ihz087>
- Fitzgerald, D., Rose, N., & Singh, I. (2016a). Revitalizing sociology: Urban life and mental illness between history and the present. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *67*, 138–160. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12188>
- Fitzgerald, D., Rose, N., & Singh, I. (2016b). Living well in the neopolis. *The Sociological Review Monographs*, *64*, 221–237. <https://doi.org/10.1002/2059-7932.12022>
- Galea, S., Uddin, M., & Koenen, K. (2011). The urban environment and mental disorders: Epigenetic links. *Epigenetics*, *6*, 400–404. <https://doi.org/10.4161/epi.6.4.14944>

- Goffman, E. (1963). *Behaviour in Public Places*. New York: The Free Press.
- Groenewegen, P., van den Berg, A., Maas, J., Verheij, R., & de Vries, S. (2012). Is a green residential environment better for health? If so, why? *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *102*, 996–1003. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2012.674899>
- Gruebner, P., Rapp, M., & Adli, M. (2017). Cities and mental health. *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International*, *114*, 121–127. <https://doi.org/10.3238/arztebl.2017.0121>
- Harrison, P. (2007). The space between us: Opening remarks on the concept of dwelling. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *25*(4), 625–647. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d365t>
- Harrison, P. (2008). Corporeal remains: Vulnerability, proximity, and living on after the end of the world. *Environment and Planning A*, *40*, 423–445. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a391>
- He, S., & Wang, K. (2016). China's new generation migrant workers' urban experience and well-being. In S. He, & D. Wang (Eds.), *Mobility, sociability, and well-being of urban living* (pp. 67–91). Berlin, Germany: Springer.
- Jayne, M., & Leung, H. (2014). Embodying Chinese urbanism: Towards a research agenda. *Area*, *46*, 256–267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12108>
- Johnson, L. (2017). Bordering Shanghai: China's hukou system and processes of urban bordering. *Geoforum*, *80*, 93–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.01.005>
- Kleinman, A., Yan, Y., Jun, J. et al. (2011). *Deep China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lederbogen, F., Kirsch, P., Haddad, L. et al. (2011). City living and urban upbringing affect neural social stress processing in humans. *Nature*, *474*, 498–501. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature10190>
- Lei, L. et al. (2017). Mental health status of migrant workers in China: The roles of working conditions, residential environment, and victimization. In Z. Liang, S. Messner, & Y. Huang (Eds.), *Confronting the challenges of urbanization in China: Insights from social science perspectives* (pp. 200–220). London, UK: Routledge.
- Li, J., Manning, N., & Mechelli, A. (2019). Digging deeper in Shanghai: Towards a 'mechanism-rich' epidemiology. *International Health*, *11*, S14–S23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/inthealth/ihz057>
- Li, J., & Rose, N. (2017). Urban social exclusion and mental health of China's rural-urban migrants: A review and call for research. *Health & Place*, *48*, 20–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2017.08.009>
- Li, X., Stanton, B., Fang, X. et al. (2006). Social stigma and mental health among rural-to-urban migrants in China: A conceptual framework and future research needs. *World Health & Population*, *8*, 14–31. <https://doi.org/10.12927/whp.2006.18282>
- Lv, Z., & Qian, J. (2018). A coffeehouse neotribe in the making: Exploring a fluid cultural public space in post-reform Chinese urbanism. In A. Hary, A. Bennett, & B. Robards (Eds.) *Neo-Tribes* (pp. 51–67). Cham, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Milgram, S. (1970). The experience of living in cities. *Science*, *167*, 1461–1468. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.167.3924.1461>
- Parr, H. (1997). Mental health, public space, and the city: Questions of individual and collective access. *Society and Space*, *15*, 435–454. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d150435>
- Parr, H. (1999). Delusional geographies: The experiential worlds of people during madness/illness. *Society and Space*, *17*, 673–690. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d170673>
- Parr, H. (2008). *Mental Health and Social Space: Towards Inclusionary Geographies?*. London, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Pearce, J., Cherrie, M., Shortt, N., Deary, I., & Ward Thompson, C. (2018). Life course of place: A longitudinal study of mental health and place. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *43*, 555–572. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12246>
- Pettit, H. (2018). Hopeful city: Meritocracy and affect in global Cairo. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *42*, 1048–1063. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12695>
- Pettit, H. (2019). The cruelty of hope: Emotional cultures of precarity in neoliberal Cairo. *Society and Space*, *37*, 722–739. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818825264>
- Pettit, H., & Ruijtenberg, W. (2019). Migration as hope and depression: Existential im/mobilities in and beyond Egypt. *Mobilities*, *14*, 730–744. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2019.1609193>
- Philo, C., Parr, H., & Söderström, O. (2019). “On edge?” Studies in precarious urbanisms. *Geoforum*, *101*, 150–155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.04.020>
- Ramsden, E., & Smith, M. (2018). Remembering the West End: Social science, mental health and the American urban environment, 1939–1968. *Urban History*, *45*, 128–149. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926817000025>
- Richaud, L., & Amin, A. (2020). Life amidst rubble: Migrant mental health and the management of subjectivity in urban China. *Public Culture*, *31*, 77–106. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7816305>
- Rishbeth, C., & Rogaly, B. (2018). Sitting outside: Conviviality, self-care and the design of benches in urban public space. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *43*, 284–298. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12212>
- Rofel, L. (2007). *Desiring China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rofel, L. (2016). Temporal-spatial migration: Workers in transnational supply-chain factories. In C. Rojas, & R. Litzinger (Eds.), *Ghost Protocols: Development and Displacement in Global China* (pp. 167–190). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schwanen, T., & Wang, D. (2014). Well-being, context, and everyday activities in space and time. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *104*, 833–851. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2014.912549>
- Sennett, R. (2018). *Building and dwelling: Ethics for the city*. London, UK: Allen Lane.
- Shen, Y. (2019). *Beyond tears and laughter: Gender, migration, and the service sector in China*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Simmel, G. (1964). The metropolis and mental life. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York, NY: Free Press. Originally published in 1919.

- Simpson, P. (2013). Ecologies of experience: Materiality, sociality, and the embodied experience of (street) performing. *Environment and Planning A*, 45, 180–196. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a4566>
- Simpson, P. (2017). Spacing the subject: Thinking subjectivity after non-representational theory. *Geography Compass*, 11(12), e12347. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12347>
- Sloterdijk, P. (2005). *The world interior of capitalism. For a philosophical theory of globalization*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Söderström, O., Abrahamyan Empson, L., Codeluppi, Z. et al. (2016). Unpacking “the city”: An experience-based approach to the role of urban living in psychosis. *Health & Place*, 42, 104–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2016.09.002>
- Söderström, O., Söderström, D., Codeluppi, Z., Empson, L. A., & Conus, P. (2017). Emplacing recovery: How persons diagnosed with psychosis handle stress in cities. *Psychosis*, 9, 322–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17522439.2017.1344296>
- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Stewart, K. (2011). *Atmospheric Attunements*. *Society and Space*, 29, 445–453. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d9109>
- Stewart, K. (2017). In the world that affect proposed. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32, 192–198. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.2.03>
- Straughan, E. R., Bissell, D., & Gorman-Murray, A. (2019). Exhausting rhythms: The intimate geopolitics of resource extraction. *Cultural Geographies*, 27, 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474019879108>
- Sullivan, J., & Keohe, S. (2019). Truth, good and beauty: The politics of celebrity in China. *China Quarterly*, 237, 241–256. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001285>
- Sun, W. (2014). *Subaltern China: Rural migrants, media, and cultural practices*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Thrift, N. (2005). But malice aforethought: Cities and the natural history of hatred. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30(2), 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2005.00157.x>
- Tonkiss, F. (2003). The ethics of indifference: Community and Solitude in the City. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6, 297–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779030063004>
- Wafer, A. (2017). Loitering: Reassembling time in the city-of-the-global-South. *Social Dynamics*, 43, 403–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2017.1390876>
- Wang, F., & Wang, D. (2016). Place, geographical context and subjective well-being: State of art and future directions. In S. He, & D. Wang (Eds.), *Mobility, sociability and well-being of urban living* (pp. 189–230). Berlin: Springer.
- Wilkinson, E., & Ortega-Alcázar, I. (2019a). Stranger danger? The intersectional impacts of shared housing on young people's health & well-being. *Health & Place*, 60, 102191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102191>
- Wilkinson, E., & Ortega-Alcázar, I. (2019b). The right to be weary? Endurance and exhaustion in austere times. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 44, 155–167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12266>
- Winz, M. (2018). An atmospheric approach to the city-psychosis nexus. Perspectives for researching embodied urban experiences of people diagnosed with schizophrenia. *Ambiances*, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.1163>
- Wolch, J., & Philo, C. (2000). From distributions of deviance to definitions of difference: Past and future mental health geographies. *Health & Place*, 6, 137–157. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1353-8292\(00\)00019-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1353-8292(00)00019-8)
- Yang, J. (2017). *Mental health in China: Change, tradition, and therapeutic governance*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Yang, T., Xu, X., Li, M. L., Rockett, I. R. H., Zhu, W., & Ellison-Barnes, A. (2012). Mental health status and related characteristics of Chinese male rural–urban migrant workers. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 48, 342–351. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-011-9395-8>
- Yi, Y., & Liang, Y. (2017). The effect of socioeconomic status and social inclusion on the mental health of Chinese migrants: A comparison between interprovincial and intra-provincial migrants. *Journal of Health Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105317718058>
- Zhan, Y. (2017). The urbanisation of rural migrants and the making of urban villages in contemporary China. *Urban Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017716856>
- Zhang, L. (2001). *Strangers in the city: Reconfigurations of space, power, and social networks within China's floating population*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Zhang, L. (2002a). Spatiality and urban citizenship in late socialist China. *Public Culture*, 14, 311–334. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-311>
- Zhang, L. (2002b). Urban experiences and social belonging among Chinese rural migrants. In P. Link, R. Madsen, & P. Pickowicz (Eds.), *Popular China: Unofficial culture in a globalizing society* (pp. 275–299). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

How to cite this article: Amin A, Richaud L. Stress and the ecology of urban experience: Migrant mental lives in central Shanghai. *Trans Inst Br Geogr.* 2020;00:1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12386>