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Drifting through the Capital: “Floating” Migrants and Masculinity in Xu Zechen’s Fiction

Pamela Hunt

University of Oxford

Abstract

The figure of the traveller has long been used to explore material and spiritual changes in China. Xu Zechen, an increasingly well-known writer and editor in Beijing, writes of migrants moving from the countryside to the capital city, referred to as his jingpiao (“Drifting through the capital”) series.

In these short stories Xu has built up an extensive, complex network of the meanings behind travel and the figure of the traveller. Travel is linked to the image of floating, and is associated with a combination of subversion, marginality, moral agency and the creation of new networks. In this way, Xu’s works continue to explore a series of themes that have preoccupied writers in post-reform China.

This article demonstrates this through the close reading of two short stories: “Running through Zhongguancun” and “Xi Xia”. It also shows that, for all of the attempts at subversion, Xu’s male protagonists comply with surprisingly conservative ideals of masculinity. The result of this is that women remain voiceless victims of the city, unable to participate in any of the agency that travel might bring.

This article provides the first English-language analysis and close reading of Xu Zechen’s work. It argues that, as we begin to parse out the ways in which travel and travellers feature in contemporary Chinese fiction, we must also take masculinity and its representations into account. More broadly, it stands as an argument for considering constructions and performances of masculinity within any explorations of transgression and agency in Chinese literature, something that has been surprisingly overlooked.

Key words: *Postsocialist fiction; migrant literature; urban literature; mobility; the traveller; agency; morality; masculinity; floating.*

Renewed opportunities for movement must stand as one of the most momentous changes that have taken place in mainland China since economic reforms took off. The effects of these changes—vast waves of migration, a new “floating” population—have become one of the most visible symptoms of postsocialist modernity, a major topic of study and a theme that runs through much of Chinese cultural production, becoming a trope which contributes to an overarching sense of a “Restless China” (Link et al. 2001).

Just as with so much else in postsocialist China, this new development might spell more freedoms, but it also creates precarious new situations; uncertainty and danger arrive alongside liberty and adventure.¹ Meanwhile, long before reform and opening-up provided China’s citizens with the opportunity to move again, representations of various forms of travel have been a means for authors to survey the trajectory of the nation, a way of exploring the link between the individual and society and a discussion of the development of the self, and an exploration of the possibility of agency (Lee, 1985; Cai, 2004: 127-154). Thus, as Rong Cai has put it, the figure of the traveller “is deeply embedded in the historical imagination of both modern and contemporary China.” (Cai, 2004: 128). Travel in literature and film, then, is a familiar trope which allows authors to explore material and spiritual changes.

Xu Zechen is one such author who shows a preoccupation with new modes of travel in China, and the ways in which this reflects vast changes in the country over recent decades. Born in 1978, he personally experienced the journey from countryside to city as he moved from his hometown in Jiangsu to Beijing to study at Peking University. He is now editor of *People’s Literature* magazine (*Renmin wenxue*), and is an acclaimed author; his work is often praised as providing honest depictions of the instability of contemporary China, and compassionate explorations of the inner lives of China’s more vulnerable citizens (Shao, 2007; Ma & Suo, 2008; Jiang, 2009). While he is increasingly well-known within China, however, there are no existing studies of his writing within English-language academia.² Xu is best known for a series of short

¹ For a discussion of the definition(s) of postsocialism, and the anxieties and opportunities that this new condition has wrought, see Lu, 2007; McGrath, 2010; Hockx, 2015:12–18.

² Xu’s growing acclaim is evidenced by the number of literary prizes he has been awarded. Most recently he was awarded the Lao She Literary Prize in August 2014 for his novel

stories that critics have given the title *jingpiao*, a term that could be translated as ‘drifting through the capital’, and which are tales of migrant workers who move from the countryside to Beijing. His characters are almost invariably flushed with a kind of travel fever. As he has put it:

[My characters] always want to go, to leave, to drift. To use a popular and rather clichéd expression, they are always “on the road”... They never want to stay within their prescribed limits, always wanting to “go” (Huang, 2009: 111).

As this quotation might suggest, and as this article will discuss, Xu’s interest in migrant workers is not solely an attempt to document a social phenomenon. Rather, the rhetoric of leaving and drifting in Xu’s works appears to stand as a means of exploring broader, vital, questions that run through contemporary China: about freedom and agency, social responsibility, and ways of existing in a fast-moving, and ever-globalizing world. In going, they move beyond their ‘prescribed limits’, and as such, travel implies an act of agency, especially oppositional agency.³ By extension, writing about travel becomes a way of exploring the nature and possibility of transgression.

In this article I will trace the way in which the idea of leaving, drifting, and pushing beyond prescribed limits is explored through Xu’s stories of travellers, and in the process will demonstrate the inherent complexity of such topics in contemporary China. Xu’s stories reveal the manifold, and often contradictory, ways in which topics such as movement, agency and transgression can be delineated in fiction, as they criss-cross with other pressing concerns: urbanisation and the market economy, the breakdown of old networks and construction of new ones, and troubled gender relations.

It is this last element that I will particularly consider in this article. It is especially striking that Xu’s stories of migrants focus almost entirely on a male protagonist and tend to equate movement only with men. Many studies have

Jerusalem (Yelusaleng) and, in the same year, the Lu Xun Short Story Prize for his story “If We are Snowed In” (“Ruguo daxue fengmen”).

³ I employ the word ‘agency’ here as meaning ‘acting on the world...in a way that furthers one’s values and purposes’ (Knight, 2006:15).

pointed to the way that mobility is invariably gendered, while a longstanding discursive tradition within China equates travel with masculinity (Mann, 2000; Huang, 2007; Mahler & Pessar, 2003, 2006; Cresswell & Uteng, 2012). Equally, this article will demonstrate how even as Xu Zechen's tales focus on the image of the traveller to explore the effects of postsocialist modernity, they also demonstrate the ways in which gender cuts insistently into all of this, colouring any exploration of agency or transgression that might appear in his works. There has been a notable dearth of studies of Chinese masculinity in post-1989 literature.⁴ This article argues that, as we begin to parse out the ways in which travel and travellers feature in contemporary Chinese fiction, we must also take masculinity and its representations into account. More broadly, it stands as an argument for considering constructions and performances of masculinity within any explorations of transgression and agency in Chinese literature.

I will first lay out ways in which migration and travel might be approached within the context of postsocialist China. I will then discuss an essay by Xu as a starting point for his approach to the figure of the traveller, since the scene that he depicts in this essay acts as a template, introducing the major themes that appear in his short stories: mobility, transgression, morality and masculinity. After this, I will provide a close reading of two short stories as case studies: "Running through Zhongguancun" ("Paobu chuanguo Zhongguancun") and "Xi Xia".⁵ By focusing closely on just two stories, we can consider the full richness of his texts, and their complexities—the ambivalences, the paradoxes—that appear as the author tackles the subject of mobility and migrants in the postsocialist city, as well as the ways in which the question of masculinity cuts across it. I ask: what is the meaning of mobility for Xu Zechen's travellers? What does the traveller reveal to us about the relationship between self and society, and individual agency in a postsocialist world? How do constructions of masculinity cut into the narratives of mobility?

⁴ For examples of studies of masculinity in modern Chinese literature before 1989 see Zhong, 2000; Lu, 1995; Louie 2002.

⁵ These short stories were first published in the following publications: "Paobu chuanguo Zhongguancun" in 2007 in *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 1 and "Xi Xia" in 2005 in *Shan hua* 5. They were then collected into a book published by Chongqing daxue chubanshe in 2008. The following references will come from this later collection (Xu, 2008b).

I will argue that the narrative of these travellers—and the rhetoric of floating in particular—is in fact a multifaceted, occasionally paradoxical study. Xu’s depiction of the traveller is tied to themes of marginality, transgressive agency, morality and the creation of new networks. However, he also explores these themes in a way that emphasises traditional roles of masculinity. The result is a surprisingly conservative exploration of the “floating” migrant, which reserves agency for men alone.

Mobility and China

As I have suggested, Xu’s *jingpiao* stories go beyond an intention to document migration or life in the city, and are written within a broader tradition of journeys and the traveller in Chinese literature. For this reason, it is useful to consider his stories within a comprehensive framework of mobility, and under the general theme not just of migration but of travel, the corporeal movement of people “for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration and escape” (Urry, 2002: 28). I follow Cresswell’s understanding of mobility—rather than movement—as “socially produced motion...imbued with meaning and power” (Cresswell, 2006: 3–4). As Cresswell and Uteng note, these meanings “given to mobility through narrative, discourse and representation have...been clearly differentiated by gender” and, equally, “narratives of mobility and immobility play a central role in the constitution of gender as a social and cultural construct.” (Cresswell & Uteng, 2012: 2). Gender thus both constitutes and is constituted by mobility, a vital thread in narratives of journeys.

The trope of travel in Xu’s work is constructed against the backdrop of the momentous changes that have taken place in terms of population movement in China. Migration and rural-urban relations, most commentators agree, have been one of the most pressing social issues in the PRC since the opening-up reforms commenced, and there has been a vast amount of scholarship on this topic (Williams, 2010: 41; Iredale & Guo, 2015; Yan, 2008).⁶ It is not the purpose of this article to provide a detailed analysis of the situation, nor do I intend to chart whether Xu’s literary representations are a fully accurate

⁶ According to the 2010 census, the size of the floating population has swelled to over 261 million (Zhu et al., 2015: 48)

representation of the Chinese migrant/traveller experience. Nevertheless, the debates that surround the issue of migration surely inform Xu's depictions, and will inevitably affect how we as readers react to his work. It is thus necessary briefly to consider rural-urban migration, the floating population and general travel in contemporary Chinese discourse, before considering Xu's own literature.

In his survey of mobility in modern Western societies, Cresswell observes that rhetoric surrounding mobility is ambiguous: an act that is presented as positive and threatening at the same time (Cresswell, 2006: 1–2). Equally, discourse surrounding the migrant traveller in contemporary China is highly contradictory. On the one hand, the migrant is often presented in public rhetoric as the “hero” and role model of the modern Chinese world, as he or she forms part of the “labour army” vital for economic development (Lin, 2013: 2). At the same time, however, migrant workers are also widely considered a “major problem” in China's cities, presented as foreign, subaltern or marginalised beings at best, and “dirty, uncivilised and backwards” at worst (Lin, 2013: 2, 30–32; Dutton, 1998: 8–10, 78–80). When it comes to describing the migrants, it is striking that public rhetoric tends to employ phrases that connote drifting or floating, using in particular the word *liu* (*liulang*, *mangliu*, *piaoliu*, *liumang*), or *piaobo*. These phrases are used by commentators and the migrants themselves, frequently in a pejorative sense (Dutton, 1998: 78; Link et al., 2001: 279).⁷ As is evident in his comment quoted above, and as I will explore further later on, Xu also engages with this discourse of floating.⁸ However, the images of drifting or floating in his work are not simply pejorative, but take on a more nuanced tone: words that connote rootlessness are employed to capture the exhilaration and adventure combined with the loss and instability that migrants face. The sensation of floating not only reflects the material uncertainties, but also conjures up more broadly the

⁷ However, as Dutton has observed, the terms are rather inaccurate: *mangliu*, or “to drift blindly”, for example, belies the fact that “there is nothing blind in the travels of these people”, who come to the city with the very specific purpose of finding work and earning a wage (Dutton, 1998: 8).

⁸ Besides the short stories analysed here, floating appears in a number of his other works, including “We Met in Beijing” (“Women zai Beijing xiangyu”) (2009) “Ah, Beijing” (“A, Beijing”) (2008) and “I've Been on the Road these Past Few Years” (“Zhe xie nian wo yizhi zai lu shang”) (2009). See also Jiang, 2009 and Shao, 2007.

psychological effects of travel and life in the city. In this way, Xu's imagery brings to mind Marshall Berman's oft-cited depiction of the maelstrom of modernity, characterized by the promise of adventure and joy as well as the threat of disintegration, in which "all that is solid melts into air" (Berman, 1983).⁹

Therefore, Xu writes within the context of the phenomenon of the floating population, highlighting the particular difficulties that rural-to-urban migrant workers face, adopting (and adapting) much of the common terminology associated with them. We might also set Xu's narratives against the more general upsurge in movement in post-reform China—whether it be migration, emigration, business travel or tourism—which is woven into the very fabric of post-reform China, closely linked to the discourse of modernization (Sun, 2002; Notar, 2006; Nyíri, 2010). As Nyíri (2010) has put it, mobility prompts Chinese subjects to "negotiate their position as a modern subject" (163). As already noted above, journeys have long been of "representational interest" in modern Chinese literature as well (Cai, 2004: 130). Leo Ou-Fan Lee (1985) has traced the figure of the solitary traveller from the late Qing period to the Maoist era, from the scholarly, late Qing traveller to the May Fourth sojourner whose ideological and cultural alienation is reflected in his anxious journey, to the revolutionary traveller, happily taking the "pilgrimage along the road to socialism" (305). All of these examples reveal the tendency to equate traveling with an exploration of the self and of the link between individual and society, and as a response to the upheavals—internal and external—of modern life. Continuing this research, Cai has shown how post-Mao literary representations of the lonely traveller also appeared as a response to new discursive systems, combined with new modes of travel and socioeconomic upheaval. For Cai, as with Lee, literary representations of journeys are a symbolic act of progression which mirrors the "national journey of China" and is also representative of the "individual's vertiginous experience" (Cai, 2004: 130). Cai goes on to consider how the figure of the traveller and authorial representation of the self tie into the issue of agency. With reference to the 1980s fiction of Yu Hua and Zhaxi Dawa, Cai argues that journeying, in fact, "testifies to the inability of the self to exercise its active agency" (133). As will

⁹ I am indebted to Sabina Knight for this observation.

become clear, I argue the opposite when it comes to Xu Zechen's narratives, which demonstrate how a journey from countryside to city, whilst perilous and lonely at times, leads to an assertion of various forms of agency.

A final element of this context worth considering now is the historical link between masculinity and mobility in China. Susan Mann (2000) and Martin Huang (2007) have both detailed how, for centuries, extensive travel was generally restricted to men while women—elite or commoner—remained in the home. Sojourning also relied on male networks; it was a male occupation which served to further reinforce the importance of homosocial bonds. Thus male friendship and male travel has a long cultural history in China.¹⁰ Indeed, literary representations of decisively male travellers abound; take, for example, the figure of the *youxia* (knight-errant), or the figure of the *haohan* (“good fellow”), both immortalised in such classics as *Water Margin* and both long-standing cultural ideals of masculinity. Such figures would typically roam on the margins of society, far from the reach of the authorities, relying on their own personal codes of morality and honour.¹¹ As we will see, echoes of these archetypes appear in Xu's fiction.

This all stands as the broader context to Xu's stories; in considering Xu's depiction of migrants in Beijing, we might approach their mobility as socially produced motion constituted by, and constituting, gender. We might also take into account the experience of rising migration—and travel in general—in the PRC, which not only ushers in immense socioeconomic change but also becomes a means of negotiating the postsocialist condition, and one's position within it. Combined with this, we must also consider the literary tradition, which utilises the narrative of mobility to explore national change, the development of the self and the possibility of agency, alongside discursive traditions which associate certain archetypal masculinities with mobility.

¹⁰ Of course, this is not to say that female travellers do not exist in China, only that there is a strong tradition of equating travel with masculinity and male bonds; for a study of the female migrant experience, see Pun, 2005 and Yan, 2008.

¹¹ For studies of the *haohan* and the *youxia*, and their continuing relevance today, see Liu, 1967; Jenner, 1998; Louie, 2002: 78–97; Song & Hird, 2013: 46,47,197.

“Going Out Into the World”: Xu Zechen’s Travellers

I will now take as an example a discussion of travel and the traveller from one of Xu’s essays, first published in 2011 in a collection titled *Going Out into the World*. The essay stands as a useful illustration of his specific approach to this topic, and an introduction to the major themes of his literature, which will be unpacked in more detail in the final section of this article. In his essay, Xu describes to the reader a scene that, he says, has played on his mind for years. It is of a young man, standing on the edge of a small town at dusk, watching a train that pulls into the station and then leaves again, racing off into the distance (Xu, 2011b: 1). The young man desperately wants to go with it, “far, further, further still”, but he knows he cannot. It is a scene seeped in the longing to travel and to move beyond his normal bounded life, an impulse that Xu calls “the secret desire to go out into the world.” (Xu, 2011b: 1). Just as this image has haunted Xu Zechen, the emotion behind it pervades virtually all of his writing.¹² Desiring to go out into the world, moreover, is inherently tied up with rebellion; journeying away from home, Xu writes elsewhere, can symbolize an unfettered way of thinking, an exploration of “limitless possibilities”. More than this, it prompts a “reaction against and subversion of life as we know it today” (Xu, 2012). Xu has stated that his migrants’ travels are a form of rebellion against the pressures of society, in particular against the expectations that people face in terms of social responsibility, education, and work in today’s China (Xu, 2013).

The image of a young boy standing on the outer edge of a small town also hints at another preoccupation of Xu’s fiction—the experiences and the desires of those on the margins of society. Xu is known for writing stories about *bianyuan ren*, a term that I shall translate here as “marginal people”, and that, following Xu’s own understanding of the word, incorporates not only economically and socially disadvantaged groups, but also those who feel a certain opposition to what are perceived to be mainstream values and rules (Xu, 2013). Xu’s *jingpiao* protagonists live on the margins in all of these senses. They come from the countryside – as in the case of his young boy on the rural platform, on the edge of a rural town—and even as they move to the city, they

¹² Besides the *jingpiao* stories, other words by Xu that centre around the longing to travel include *Night Train* (*Ye huo che*) (2009) and *Jerusalem* (*Yelusaling*) (2014).

continue to live on its fringes, holding a rural *hukou* that also leaves them in a socioeconomically marginalised position. All of Xu's protagonists live on the so-called "lower rungs" of society: they are prostitutes, pirated DVD sellers, unlicensed taxi drivers and so on. Working illegally in the capital, they are accustomed to having to circumvent rules. Life on the margins, then, prompts the same kind of adventure and subversion that travel implies. Yet, for all his romantic yearning for mobility, travel to and life in Beijing is by no means a wholly positive experience in Xu Zechen's *jingpiao* stories; the excitement and freedom brought by travel to the city are accompanied by rootlessness, loneliness, and loss. This is why the imagery of floating is so apt for Xu's fiction, a reflection of the doubled-edged sword that is greater mobility in contemporary China.

Some of the elements that Xu appears to associate with the act of "going out into the world" in this scene do not match with what a reader encounters in his fiction. One clear paradox lies in the emphasis on the idea of the individual. The boy staring at the train is alone, and he dreams, we are led to believe, of solitary travel.¹³ If we remember that Xu has argued that the impetus to leave is to escape social responsibilities and expectations, then it is perhaps not surprising that his characters seek a solitary, unburdened lifestyle. We might also see this emphasis on solitude as a reflection on the breakdown of social ties in China. Postsocialist reforms, as many commentators have observed, have severed networks that had existed in earlier times (Kleinman et al., 2011: 19–20; Visser, 2010: 259–260; Knight, 2006). Institutional and ideological changes have spelled the end of the collectivist structure, and with it the end of the collective network, with a new emphasis on the individual in society over familial or state ties, a condition that the new mobility reinforces (Kleinman et al., 2011: 2). As Xu Zechen says of the friends who have inspired his characters, "they are entirely alone", with neither family nor friends in the city before they arrive there themselves. (Xu, 2011: 16). However, this picture does not, in fact, fit with the stories that emerge from Xu's *jingpiao* works. Journeys might be undertaken alone, but they lead invariably to new

¹³ This is in keeping with traditional dealings with travel in Chinese literature; see Lee (1985). Although, strikingly, this contrasts with what sociologists have observed of the realities of rural-urban migration, where there is much emphasis placed on continuing ties to the former village and to fellow villagers within the city (Wu et al, 2013: 100–120; Dutton, 1998: 79).

connections. One of the main narratives of these stories is that of the development of responsibility for others, and the creation of new relationships between two individuals, normally between two drifters.¹⁴ They are relationships based on the precarious new lives that these people lead, on the loneliness they are prone to feel, and on a personal sense of morality.

As such, the agency that characters find and express in Xu's *jingpiao* stories is not simply one bound up with a transgressive desire to travel. It is also a moral agency that is exercised when a person realizes his ability, and desire, to help other people. Sabina Knight (2006) shows how ethical dilemmas and moral agency have dominated Chinese fiction for at least the last century. She demonstrates how this preoccupation has taken on a new hue since China's economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, with some fiction revealing a "troubled yet enduring relationship to Confucian or Enlightenment ideals of social responsibility and progress toward justice and human dignity" (Knight, 2006: 223). These ideals, which Knight describes variously as compassion, loyalty, and "human-heartedness", work to "contest the determinism of free market capitalist fundamentalism" (223). Robin Visser (2010) also notes that literature in the 1990s began to explore the ethical quandaries that citizens of China were placed in as the opening-up reforms gathered pace. Market reforms had created a situation where "altruism, or the aspiration to a 'higher' ideal than pure self interest, is considered irrational behaviour"(259). These are values that clash with the "shadows" of socialist and Confucian ethics, which advocated the sacrifice of the self for the benefit of society. Thus authors began to write works that were, "permeated with questions of individual morality and 'ultimate concerns'" (263).

Xu's work continues this preoccupation with the problem of social responsibility in a new world, as I will discuss in more detail in the case studies below. The moral agency that I identify in Xu's work is born out of this new mobility. Presented as it is as emerging from the margins and in opposition to the demands of the market, it ties into Xu's interest in transgression and marginality in contemporary Chinese society. As such, I concur with Knight's assertion that an exploration of moral agency has "important philosophical

¹⁴ These themes of morality, responsibility and spiritual connection have also been identified by Chinese readers of Xu's fiction. See for example Ma & Suo, 2008; Jiang, 2009; Zhang, 2008.

implications and even political significance” (Knight, 2006: 19). I suggest, as Knight has also hinted, that a deliberate exercising of moral agency in the face of the hegemony of consumer capitalism can work as an act of resistance (222–223). As we shall see, Xu’s characters not only question the “logic” of the free market, but also, by opening themselves up to close human connections within the vast and lonely city of Beijing, seek to resist the logical outcome of urbanization in China today.

Let us return now to the scene from Xu’s essay, and consider a final element: the person watching the trains is male. The gender of Xu’s travellers might appear at first rather inconsequential—and it is indeed a detail that critics and readers have thus far failed to comment upon—yet, as we consider the discursive links between Chinese masculinity and mobility, then it is apparent that the gender of Xu’s travellers is a detail worth exploring further. This becomes all the more evident when we see that Xu’s *jingpiao* stories focus particularly on the male traveller. From the young boy in the small town to the young men who drift through Beijing, men dominate Xu’s fictional journeys; it is the men who want to move, to adventure, to subvert. The overwhelming majority of women in Xu’s fiction either remain at home or are in Beijing but are still associated with domesticity. Additionally, it is clear that the stories reveal a consistent, and perhaps at first rather surprising, return to conservative male images, even as their characters are in a self-consciously marginal position and even as they seem to seek adventure and engage in a free-floating subversion.

In this way Xu’s male characters recall the figure of the marginalised man, first formulated by Connell in his framework of Hegemonic Masculinity, and which can help us conceptualise this seemingly odd position (Connell, 1993, 1998, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Understanding masculinity as plural, fluid, hierarchically arranged and in large part defined by interactions between men, Connell determined the presence of four loose groupings—or, as later reformulations put it, discursive strategies—of men within a specific culture: hegemonic, marginalised, subordinate, and complicit (Connell, 2005; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). While hegemonic masculinity was the currently “most honoured way of being a man” within a given culture and period, marginalised masculinity referred to those who, due to class or race, cannot

live up to the most ideal modes of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 836).¹⁵ However, crucially, this marginalised position inspires feelings of anxiety and powerlessness; this in turn prompts men to engage in behaviours that are associated with men in more dominant positions, or with pre-existing cultural archetypes which ostensibly signify the ideal man. That is to say, socioeconomically marginalised men often engage in behaviour that overtly complies with some hegemonic norms of masculinity, ultimately benefitting from, and contributing to, what Connell refers to as the “patriarchal dividend”, which is “the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (Connell, 2005: 79).

Xu’s characters exhibit the same paradoxical condition of marginality combined with an eventual claim to the patriarchal dividend. As well as being marginalised in a socioeconomic sense, they mirror the figure of the marginalised man in their initial anxiety about gender roles. Xu’s protagonists are markedly anxious in their masculine performances; there are constant debates, with themselves, with others, about whether they are behaving as a man ought. In this we can perhaps discern echoes of a wider cultural phenomenon, of a so-called “crisis of masculinity” in contemporary China (Zhong, 2000: 15-17, 46-51; Yang, 2010; Song & Hird, 2013: 9,11,126-127).¹⁶ Yet, amidst their uncertainties, their self-consciously marginalised identity and even their deliberate attempts at moving beyond prescribed boundaries, Xu’s protagonists repeatedly return to pre-existing ideals of archetypal masculinity within the Chinese context, emphasising, for example, the sanctity of male friendship, the masculine imperative of striking out on one’s own, and, paradoxically, their role as provider for, and saviour of, women.¹⁷ The result of

¹⁵ Although Connell refers here to a singular “way”, reformulations of this theory point to multiple coexisting models of ideal masculinity within a given time and culture (Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Chen, 1999; Beasley, 2008).

¹⁶ Changing state policy, economic reforms, interaction with the wider world and the growth of a variety of “competing discourses” of masculinity have prompted a widespread sense of Chinese men as either broken, lost or confused (Yang, 2010; Song & Hird, 2013: 10). The “crisis”, as many of the above cited studies have noted, is more perceived than actual.

¹⁷ In this way, Xu’s male characters continue a trend identified by Zhong Xueping in her seminal study of the “besieged” male writer of the 1980s, reeling in the face of immense change, anxiously seeking membership of the modern world, and concerned about perceived national and cultural weaknesses. This, combined with a sense of male “crisis”, prompted

this, as I will argue in the following readings, is that women remain objects that need to be protected or saved, victims of migration, rather than agents grasping their own destiny in their own hands.

Travel and the figure of the traveller in Xu's short stories therefore hold within them a great network of different themes and discourses, to be tested and realised as his travellers move: adventure and transgression; freedom and rootlessness; self-sufficiency and social responsibility. These themes stand against the backdrop not just of increased travel but also on-going, anxious explorations of moral agency and "ultimate concerns" in a postsocialist China. There are a wealth of studies that have considered how these themes have appeared in post-1990s Chinese literature (Cai 2004; McGrath 2010; Knight 2006; Visser 2010). None of them, however, has considered in detail how the representation of male characters cuts across these topics. The following readings will suggest that masculinity, mobility and agency are themes that are closely linked together, and that Xu's stories of travel must also be considered against the backdrop of marginalised men, a perceived "crisis" of masculinity, and the continuing resonance of historic cultural ideals of manhood. I will now turn to two of Xu's short stories to explore in greater detail how these many themes interact within the figure of the traveller, and what this might mean for the questions I asked at the beginning of this article: what is the meaning of mobility for Xu's travellers; what does the traveller reveal to us about the relationship between the self and society, and individual agency in a postsocialist world; how do constructions of masculinity cut into narratives of mobility?

male writers to express a strong sense of marginalization; yet this was in turn marked by a strong desire to "return to the centre" and to search for a "real male identity" (Zhong, 2000:22).

“Running through Zhongguancun”

“Running through Zhongguancun” follows the experience of Dunhuang, a man in his twenties from the countryside, who has moved to Beijing.¹⁸ It is worth first outlining the plot, which is rather convoluted yet captures well the way in which travel leads both to a sense of instability and the creation of new connections in the city. At the start of the story, Dunhuang has just been released from prison after serving time for selling fake certificates. Heading straight back to Beijing, he meets and moves in with Xia Xiaorong, a woman who sells pirated DVDs for a living but who longs to return home to the countryside. Dunhuang takes up the same trade as her, hoping to raise enough money to get his friend Bao Ding out of jail. In the meantime, he also searches for, and finds, Bao Ding’s girlfriend Qi Bao, having promised Bao Ding he would look after her. Dunhuang and Qi Bao eventually become an item, until it is revealed that Qi Bao, unbeknownst to Dunhuang, has been working as a prostitute. The story concludes with a group of policemen chasing Xiaorong’s boyfriend for selling pornographic DVDs. Dunhuang, not wanting the now pregnant Xiaorong to be left alone, takes the blame. As he is arrested, Qi Bao calls to reveal that she is pregnant too. The story presents, on the face of things, a picture of agency curtailed. However, I argue that a muted optimism is threaded through the tale; “Running through Zhongguancun” might be read as a miniature coming-of-age story, as Dunhuang’s journey to the capital shows an emotional maturation and a developing sense of morality.¹⁹

The story opens with a sandstorm, a visual manifestation of Xu’s favoured motif of drifting. Sandstorms punctuate the rest of the narrative, alongside a series of other images of floating: steam rising in a crowded hotpot restaurant; Beijing dust which pervades every inch of the city, sometimes hanging suspended in mid-air; or a recurring dream Dunhuang has of a friend fluttering away off a bridge (192,196). Dunhuang starts off as a carefree young man, as

¹⁸ The story was recently translated into English by Eric Braahamsen under the title “Running through Beijing” (Xu, 2014).

¹⁹ This matches Hua Li’s description of a Chinese Bildungsroman (*chengzhang xiaoshuo*) as a narrative which includes “setting out on a journey...ordeal by love, and the search for a vocation and a philosophy of life. Its aspect of inward reflection deals mostly with individual subjectivity along with emotional and cognitive maturation.” (Li, 2007: 31).

wild and as uninhibited as the sand and dust that blow about him. “I’m out”, he exclaims in the opening lines, and then leaps on to the next passing truck, saying, “Take me anywhere, as long as you get me into Beijing” (Xu, 2008c: 120). Much of the first part of the story sees him rambling aimlessly through the city; but while he is perfectly content at first, the freedom that this brings morphs into a profound sense of not belonging, as he feels “on the outermost edge of the world”, clinging on like a “hateful tumour” (150).²⁰ When he finds himself homeless for a couple of evenings, Beijing’s sandstorms, which had earlier reflected his free-spiritedness, have now become a force he cannot reckon with:

He walked through wind, stopping and starting, his mouth filling with grains of sand...He felt as if his body was getting lighter and lighter...If it wasn’t for the three bags he was shouldering he felt like he might be carried up into the air (Xu, 2008b: 152).

It is a scene that underlines the fine line between a joyous freedom and an alarming lack of control over one’s life. Mistaken for a beggar the next morning, Dunhuang experiences a momentary loss of identity:

On the corner he passed a convex traffic mirror. He looked into it and saw a self he did not recognise. His whole face and head was covered in dust. Tracks ran down his face from where he had cried. It looked as if he was wearing some kind of face paint. His hair had turned completely grey...if he wasn’t a vagrant then what was he? If he wasn’t a beggar then what was he? (154).

Mobility, here, appears to bring about an almost entire negation of the self. However, as the tale progresses, Dunhuang is able to establish a far more confident identity, and to assert his own agency within the city. He begins to

²⁰ While this serves to emphasize the outsider stance that migrant workers often inhabit within the city, the metaphor of the tumour has also served in Chinese literature to highlight a general sense of alienation amidst urbanites and a “postsocialist subjective experience”. See, for example, McGrath’s analysis of Zhu Wen’s 1990s fiction (McGrath, 2010: 88–91).

rely on himself in a more mature way, and starts to take responsibility for the fate of others. This responsibility is framed through the role of either male-as-provider or the loyal male friend.

Dunhuang's changing attitude towards Xia Xiaorong is a case in point: his first encounters with her reveal him to be a feckless young man, unsure of his own position at first and repeatedly wrong-footed by her attempts to strike up a more personal connection with him when all of his interactions with people in the city up to this point have been "transactions conducted for the sake of money" (124). He quickly realises, though, that she can be a source of food, drink, cash and shelter (124). Even as this setup appears to subvert usual gender roles, it is striking that Xiaorong emphasises immediately, and repeatedly through the narrative, that she longs to return to her own hometown, get married, and have children. Thus the longstanding equation of woman as domestic and man as traveller is a starting point for their friendship.²¹

It is not too long, however, before Dunhuang starts to establish a form of self-sufficiency, selling his own DVDs separately from Xiaorong, and bringing back food for her because "he did not want to become her responsibility" (147). This is the beginning of Dunhuang's life as an agent. He is not only "free", but focused, no longer the feckless drifter we saw at the beginning of the story:

He felt refreshed and revitalized, as if he had just come out of the bath...The most important thing was that he had started again as an entrepreneur, which meant that he had started a new life in Beijing. He was doing this for himself. He repeated those words to himself incessantly, hoping to instil himself with confidence (144).

This connection between entrepreneurship, freedom and power runs through much of the discourse surrounding postsocialist Chinese society (McMillan, 2009: 16). As we will see, Xu Zechen problematizes the idea that

²¹ This is a pattern repeated in a number of Xu's works. See, for example, "Ah Beijing" ("A, Beijing"), in which the male character Bian Hongqi is drawn to the capital city while his long-suffering wife waits for him to return to their rural home (Xu, 2008a).

entrepreneurial activity is a source of untrammelled freedom, but Dunhuang's plans are presented as at least promising some kind of agency. It is also worth noting that entrepreneurship in postsocialist China is particularly associated with new forms of masculinity.²² In "Running through Zhongguancun", Xiaorong highlights this very point, when, hearing that Dunhuang wants to sell his own DVDs, she complains, "men are all the same. You all want to go your own way, work alone, and cast the women aside" (143).

However, it is not true that Dunhuang's actions are conducted entirely for himself, nor is Xiaorong's accusation that he is "casting her aside" completely fair. Dunhuang's self-sufficiency very soon develops into a desire to help and protect others, including Xiaorong. By the end of the story, he is so concerned for her welfare that he risks returning to prison for her and her unborn baby (221). He also shows concern for one of his DVD clients, a woman he barely knows, running over to her apartment when he has not heard from her for a while (193).²³ It is significant that neither of these acts hides a sexual motive; Dunhuang has become a man who acts purely out of a sense of concern for another human being, it would seem. However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that his successful transformation still remains complicit with traditional gender roles. He acts as the provider in order to protect women, in line with a widely received wisdom of post-reform China that it is always the man's responsibility to take care of economic burdens within a social unit (McMillan, 2009: 15–16; Evans, 2002; Song & Hird, 2013: 135–7).

This relationship between moral agency, friendship, and traditional gender roles can be further explored in the relationship between Dunhuang, his incarcerated friend Bao Ding, and his girlfriend Qi Bao. Recalling *haohan* ideals which present male bonds as sacrosanct, held in higher esteem than government law, Dunhuang's friend Bao Ding had willingly taken the blame when they were arrested for certificate fraud. Bao Ding is therefore still in prison; as a result, Dunhuang feels an immense debt to Bao Ding, deciding

²² See, for example, the words of an entrepreneur in E.L. Zhang's study, who stated that, "When I worked for a state-run business in the past, I acted like a *taijin* (eunuch)! Only since I started my own business have I gained my own independent personality." (Zhang, 2001: 235).

²³ The woman is housebound, offering us another image of a mobile man contrasted with a static, domestic, woman.

early on in the narrative to save up all of his money to get him out of jail. Therefore Dunhuang chooses to sell pornographic DVDs, which can be sold for a higher price but would earn him a far greater fine or sentence if raided by the police. This reveals an intriguing, slightly subversive take on the values that a neoliberal market is supposed to instil in someone. He might be economically and socially marginalised, but Dunhuang in “Running through Zhongguancun” must still negotiate the neoliberal market, and its influence on human relationships. As Knight notes, “Risk-taking, gambling, outsmarting others, and hardnosed ‘pragmatism’ all connote hallowed capitalist values”, while the free market system assumes that all human beings are fundamentally “self-seeking” (Knight, 2006: 224). What is interesting about Dunhuang’s engagement with the new economic system is that he is indeed complying with these values, but not for his own personal gain. Whilst utilizing the options—fraudulent and highly risky—available to him in a postsocialist China, Dunhuang upends them by doing so to help a friend.

As he chooses to engage with the economy in this way, Dunhuang’s actions appear as a form of moral agency; at the same time, this morality is in defiance of the values that a capitalist economy is supposed to instil in one. As such, these acts also establish an attitude towards the market economy which is ambivalent, or even subversive. Another significant facet of Dunhuang’s actions lies in the fact that he does this specifically to help his “brother” out of prison; it is, therefore, an agency that emphasizes again the importance of *haohan*-inflected homosocial bonds. In a revealing scene, Dunhuang responds to a girlfriend’s complaint that he is wasting his time attempting to save money for Bao Ding. He responds, simply, “Women will never understand men’s business” (Xu, 2008b: 204). Recalling Connell’s marginalised masculinities, Dunhuang seeks to rise above his socioeconomic subordinate position and reassert his own masculine authority, through recourse to a set of expected behaviours – as breadwinner and loyal friend.

As well as earning and saving money for his friend, Dunhuang takes on another task. This is to find Bao Ding’s girlfriend for him, a young, lively, woman called Qi Bao. Dunhuang is unsure at first at how to find her, as he has only ever seen the back of her clearly; then he realises that he remembers her “pretty nice behind”, and he could probably tell Qi Bao’s behind from anyone

else's (133, 172). Deciding to look for her, Dunhuang begins a long period of staring at women who pass him on the street. It is a neat picture of the kind of social connection that exists in Xu Zechen's Beijing: tangential, or heavily reliant on chance, and on first impressions rather fragile. It also creates a situation whereby women are reduced to just one part of their bodies:

For the next few days he looked at countless bottoms. Big ones, small ones, fat ones and thin. Round ones, flat ones, developed ones and undeveloped ones, shapely ones and unshapely ones. He looked until his vision blurred, until, when he closed his eyes, he thought he could still see two fleshy objects undulating in front of him (172).

Ma Ji and Suo Luo have argued that Dunhuang's willingness to look for Qi Bao, all for his friend in prison, is an indication of the morality at the heart of Xu Zechen's work (Ma & Suo, 2008:172). It is indeed possible to read this as a positive affirmation of the importance, and continued possibility, of a strong and lasting male friendship. It is also apparent that this positive exploration of *haohan* camaraderie results in a denial of agency to women in the story. In this formulation, the two humans that connect are two men. Qi Bao is objectified on a number of counts: she becomes an object to be protected while her man is imprisoned; she is an object to be gazed upon, and she is reduced to a fragmentation of body parts. As a character, Qi Bao is feisty, strong and rebellious, yet even this cannot detract from the fact that her role in the plot is essentially to be a means of demonstrating the strong bonds between Dunhuang and Bao Ding. Dunhuang and Qi Bao eventually become a couple, which might at first appear to complicate the claim that this storyline indicates a celebration of loyal friendship. However, in a scene which recalls Sedgwick's (1985) notion of the homosocial desire, the love triangle culminates in the two men affirming their friendship for one another, while Dunhuang casts Qi Bao in the mould of the femme fatale, cursing to himself that she must be, 'the child of a fox spirit' (207).

The culmination of Dunhuang's emotional and spiritual growth comes when he decides to take responsibility for another person's crimes. This takes the narrative full circle, as he was initially released because of Bao Ding's sacrifice.

However, we are left with a final ironic twist: Dunhuang's decision to give himself up for the sake of Xiaorong and her boyfriend's unborn child might be an act of moral agency and great sacrifice, but it backfires in the final lines, when Qi Bao calls him, furious, to tell him she is carrying his baby (222). What are we to make of this last revelation? As Dunhuang is arrested, he is forced back into stasis; any attempt at going out into the world has failed, his attempt at social responsibility fails as well as he has now left his own child fatherless. However, the crucial fact is that he attempts this agency—we are reminded of the tight strictures within which Xu's marginalised men live, but we can see at least that they can, and do, act. "Running through Zhongguancun", for all its negative portrayals of travel, the city, and agency, still affirms the possibility of human connection and the possibility of emotional and spiritual growth. This echoes the observation that Sabina Knight makes of Weihui's *Shanghai Baby*, in which the protagonist "seeks to transcend the insignificance of isolated selfhood through testifying to the importance of others" (Knight, 2006: 257). Equally, Dunhuang's actions refer back to the Confucian notion that "feelings of unique worth grow through responsibilities for others" (254).

Yet, while Dunhuang engages in all of the elements of travel that Xu highlights in his fiction—pushing against strictures, seeking independence, but also constructing new connections—this narrative ultimately reaffirms the role of men as protector and provider. Women are either, like Xiaorong, desperate to raise a family back in their hometown, or, like Qi Bao, are simply "damned fox spirits", still returned to the traditional female sphere of motherhood by the end of the story. To focus on the curtailed agency of Dunhuang, therefore, would be to miss the point that the agency that is attempted is centred around conservative gender roles. The women in "Running through Zhongguancun" are satellites of the male characters—objects to be gazed upon, saved, protected. The agency that I identify in this story—moral agency, and oppositional agency—is therefore the preserve of male travellers.

“Xi Xia”

Conservative gender roles are revealed still more clearly in the next story I discuss here, “Xi Xia”.²⁴ Compared with other *jingpiao* stories, its ending is notably happier, revealing a cautious optimism in the possibility of a long-standing, loving relationship between drifters (Xu, 2008e: iii). “Xi Xia” is narrated by Wang Yiding, a single man in his twenties from outside Beijing, who now owns a small bookstore in the city. One day a woman appears, with two striking qualities: she is very beautiful, and she is entirely mute. She is ‘delivered’ to him, bearing a note that simply asks for Wang to look after her well and informing him of her name—Xi Xia. Wary of this stranger who has no capacity to explain where she has come from, Wang attempts repeatedly to get rid of Xi Xia, but she refuses to leave, devoting herself to looking after Wang as if she were his wife. An understated narrative highlights Wang Yiding’s emotionally closed life; it is only when Xi Xia appears, and remains, that Wang slowly becomes able to express his emotions. Moved by her kind-heartedness and her beauty, Wang eventually falls for Xi Xia, despite several warnings from friends and neighbours. The turning point of the story comes when Wang begins slowly to embrace the idea of love and connection to another human being. Just as we saw with Dunhuang in “Running through Zhongguancun”, Wang is eventually able to accept the role that Xi Xia expects of him, and which everyone else has warned him about – this is not only the role of a lover, but also of a provider. The story ends with the news that Xi Xia’s muteness might be cured. Wang hesitates for a moment, fearing that any change in their relationship might cause him to lose Xi Xia. In the final sentence, however, he accepts a call from a doctor who might be able to help.

“Xi Xia” works, then, as a kind of optimistic counterpoint to other *jingpiao* stories, revealing a warmth and contentment that is not visible in his other writing. Starting with another “floating” man in Beijing, feckless, anxious and alienated, “Xi Xia” quickly places interpersonal relations at the very core of the

²⁴ It is worth noting that Shao Yanjun does not view “Xi Xia” as an example of *jingpiao* fiction, considering it instead as an example of what she calls Xu’s “enigma” (*mituan*) stories. As will be clear in the following discussion, I believe that “Xi Xia” can be considered alongside the other *jingpiao* stories quite comfortably in its depiction of migrant life on the margins of the city, and the emotional/spiritual repercussions that such a life brings (Shao, 2007: 27).

story, and demonstrates the possibility of establishing a sense of belonging, and of responsibility for another human being (Shao, 2007: 27). If Xu Zechen's *jingpiao* characters are all "on the road", the end of "Xi Xia" signals the tantalizing possibility of finding one's way home. However, as before, this new and redemptive responsibility is clearly guided by traditional gender roles.

We can see in Wang Yiding the hallmarks of Xu Zechen's other male characters. He is alone in Beijing, with no family in the city, or indeed even mentioned in the entire story. His life seems to be stale, monotonous, and with a nameless, lingering sense of loss. Although we do not see his own journey, we are constantly aware that he has travelled to, and continues to drift through, Beijing, with little expectation of returning to a more settled life in his hometown. Again, imagery of floating, rootlessness and drifting appear repeatedly throughout the narrative. Xi Xia herself is described as a person with "no roots, floating in mid-air", by Wang Yiding's disapproving (and concerned) acquaintances. (Xu, 2008c: 32). But she is by no means the only one. In one scene, Wang Yiding looks through the missing persons advertisements, giving the reader a snapshot of the many others who lead a rootless life in postsocialist China: "old people who weren't all there, mentally ill people who had gotten lost, kids who had run away from home to see the world" (22). Beijing, for Xu Zechen, is a city populated by drifter upon drifter, and they move around in an uncontrolled, almost chaotic way, lost and alone. But the main drifter in this story is Wang himself. He refers to himself as a "Beijing drifter", who had spent eight years in the city, "With no one caring for me, no one loving me, suffering and struggling, but with nothing to show for it, and no lovers" (15). Later on, in despair, he asks himself, "I have run this way and that all my life. Where has it gotten me?...I haven't even had a real conversation with anyone recently." (28)

Xi Xia's arrival in Wang's life is a shock to him and to the people around him. A stranger with a mysterious background is a threat to all. It also prompts a meditation on morality, responsibility for others, and social connections. It does not show a very positive picture at first as, in this city of drifters, everyone goes out of their way to wash their hands of Xi Xia. Even those supposed to be in a position of authority and protection are unwilling to take responsibility for a stranger: 'What does it have to do with me?', asks the

policeman who originally “delivered” Xi Xia to Wang Yiding (22). Wang’s landlady will only take her in for one night, and after she discovers Xi Xia’s history, will not put her up any more. More than this, she casts Wang as responsible for the awkward situation, by failing to get rid of her in the first place (14). Wang slowly realizes that Xi Xia has indeed become “his problem” and seeks to resolve it by getting rid of her, desperately trying to affirm his lack of responsibility to her. “You and I have no connection at all!”, he shouts, in a frustrated, bewildered bid to drive her away (15). Yet when the landlady praises him for trying to send her home, Wang feels himself feeling “more and more unsettled, my heart empty” (34).

Wang’s masculine identity undergoes a transformation in “Xi Xia” and, just as with “Running through Zhongguancun”, the protagonist shifts from drifting, marginalised loner to caring, loving man. Perhaps we could read this as reflective of new developments in gender relations in Chinese society. For example, Song Geng and Derek Hird note that a range of modes of masculinity have recently formed, mirroring the idea of a postmillennial “new man” who is emotionally expressive, caring and sensitive (Song & Hird, 2013: 214–215). A number of terms have appeared, largely in cyberspace, which celebrate the gentle male. Consider, for example, the 37°C man (37°C *nan*), so named because 37 degrees represents the comforting warmth that he exudes; a similar term that has appeared, which might be applicable to Wang, is the *nuannan*, or warm guy.²⁵ It is worth noting that, for all the positive connotations of these so-called “new men”, these particular configurations of masculinity continue to conform to hegemonic principles which assign the role of provider to the male. Equally, within “Xi Xia”, the love affair between Xi Xia and Wang Yiding reasserts, rather than redefines, traditional gender roles. This will become evident after a brief consideration of the depiction of Xi Xia.

²⁵ For some indication of the discussion that the *nuannan* has inspired, and its implications for gender politics, see Sun, 2014; Zhang, 2015; Wang, 2015. This latter term did not hold much purchase until 2014, long after “Xi Xia” was written, and I do not mean to suggest that Xu deliberately borrowed from these exact cultural typologies in his creation of Wang Yiding. However, it is worth noting that this tendency in Xu’s construction of masculinity is indicative of a much broader trend in contemporary Chinese society towards a demand for more dutiful and sensitive men (Song & Hird, 2013:108).

Unlike Wang Yiding, Xi Xia is able to make her emotions known almost immediately, despite her inability to speak and her apparent ignorance about her own origins. By necessity, her emotions are expressed largely through body language, a fact that allows Xu Zechen to describe Xi Xia's body in fragments; descriptions most frequently focus on her smooth hair, sometimes loose and seductive as she lounges in Wang Yiding's flat, sometimes tied back in a ponytail, twitching as she busily tidies the home, or as she cooks Wang a meal. From the earliest descriptions of Xi Xia, it is clear that she is someone who invites a feeling of protectiveness: she sleeps curled up "like a cat", emitting "loveable" little snores. At other times, she is referred to as a "little girl" or a "small child" (Xu, 2008d: 10, 12, 30). In some ways, she is utterly reliant on Wang Yiding, and when they walk outside she clings on to his arm in a way that emphasizes her helplessness and dependency on him. However, when they move into the domestic realm, Xi Xia is immediately comfortable, "like the hostess in a little home", instantly moving into the kitchen to cook, or happily washing Wang Yiding's clothes, an action which he finds "moving" (7, 11). When she passes Wang some food, she does it "entirely naturally, as if she were a wife serving food to her husband, or a little sister passing it to her brother" (8). It is an irony that, although Xi Xia is most obviously the "traveller" in this scenario, without roots or history, she is far happier to settle into a domestic lifestyle. Despite her status as an "angel" in this story, her feet are very firmly placed on the ground (4). It is Wang Yiding who is left bewildered and anxious about this situation, while Xi Xia is a natural homemaker.

Traditional gender roles thus persist throughout this text. Xi Xia might be an entirely mysterious person to the other characters in the story, but to the reader she appears as an amalgam of every clichéd female type one can imagine finding in fiction: at times she is referred to as an angel from above; a honey-trap; a little girl; a sister; a wife (4, 8, 13, 28). Fears on the part of others that she is a femme fatale prove unfounded, and the eventual formulation that emerges is another traditional one – she is master within the home, her man is master outside of it. In sum, for all of Xu's emphasis on the non-traditional margins of Beijing life, "Xi Xia" is filled with the image of woman as homemaker, and man as economic provider – an equation that holds great currency in post-reform China, as many have observed, and as we have

already seen in the case of “Running Through Zhongguancun” (Evans, 1997: 142; Evans, 2002: 339; Jankowiak 2002: 378).

References to Xi Xia as both wife and child work to build up a power structure within which she has no opportunity, and apparently no desire, to exercise any kind of agency. In the meantime, Wang Yiding becomes the ultimate provider: of a home, of money for her (as a mute it is apparently out of the question for her to find paid employment), and, crucially, the provider of a voice. When Wang hears that a treatment exists that will help her, he panics at first, fearing he will lose her, or learn something of her history that will ruin their relationship. It is then that the full extent of Wang’s power over Xi Xia becomes clear, as the doctor calls, and Wang hangs up on him. Fortunately, he changes his mind, and decides to answer the next call, but the final image we are left with is one of male voice, and female voicelessness:

I looked at Xi Xia, leaning her body towards me, hugging my right leg. Her eyes were closed, her mouth turned up at the corners, opening and closing as if she were eating something. I held the phone with one hand, and stroked her face with the other. I started to talk (Xu, 2008d: 44).

I read “Xi Xia” as an exploration of the possibility of the creation of responsible, loving human connections in a postsocialist traveller’s world. It also asserts a moral agency that contradicts the perceived mainstream views on how to treat unfamiliar, unknowable people in a large, modern city. In other words, protagonist Wang Yiding acts according to his personal sense of right and wrong, which is in opposition to the advice his friends and neighbours give him. As such, this can be read on one level as another form of transgression, pushing against expected behaviour and ‘prescribed limits’ within the new city. Choosing to extend his love and protection to this rootless, history-less woman, Wang explores the possibility that meaningful human connection can happen even in the new, urban China. Masculinity is associated with the restless, marginalised floating sensation, just as in “Running through Zhongguancun”. The difference here is that it is presented in an even less positive light; Wang Yiding is tired of drifting, tired of floating. However, masculinity is also configured as the responsible, morally active

gender; the cure for an aimless sense of masculine rootlessness is, apparently, to stand up as provider and saviour of women. Xi Xia, though undoubtedly an “angel”, is infantilized and flattened, remaining two-dimensional. Wang Yiding, on the other hand, is a complex character who is allowed to grow and develop, all by way of acting as the provider—of home, protection, and especially of voice.

Conclusion

“Nothing could better capture the chaos and confusion emanating from China’s collective venture than the trope of travelling”, observes Rong Cai of Chinese fiction in the 1980s (Cai, 2004: 130). Travel, and narratives of travel, have long stood as a means of confronting the material and spiritual changes that modernity has brought to China, and a means of negotiating one’s position within it. Xu’s *jingpiao* stories indicate the continuing discursive resonance of the traveller, demonstrating that it is still “deeply embedded in the historical imagination” of postsocialist China (Cai, 2004: 128).

Running through Xu’s works is the markedly appropriate, and versatile, trope of floating and drifting. It reflects the perilous lives that migrant workers lead, but also extends into a metaphor for the spiritual and material upheavals of a postsocialist nation, for the ideological unmooring that comes as market reforms continue apace, and for the new networks that seem to appear in the postsocialist city—random, tenuous, and unsettling. Yet, as is evident from the two stories discussed here, for all that his protagonists do drift, they establish strong, loyal friendships, and discover their own redemptive responsibility for others. Just as 1990s writers were “left with the burden of creating new belief systems” in the face of crumbling socialist ideologies, it seems that Xu has tasked himself with creating a new network of responsibility and morality as old ties break down. (Visser, 2010: 286). Although Xu’s characters come to the city rootless and floating, they eventually find their own particular moral compass to guide them.

I asked at the beginning of this article what meanings mobility might hold in these works of fiction; I have argued that Xu constructs a vast, far-reaching

and intricate web of themes which he then ties to the overarching narrative of travel and travellers. For Xu, travelling is closely associated with marginality; with an adventurous kind of transgression and therefore with an oppositional agency; an attempt to turn one's back on mainstream society and values; and an exploration of a new, personal sense of moral agency. On this point of agency, my reading of Xu's fiction diverges from Rong Cai's analysis of the traveller in post-Mao fiction, which, as noted earlier, is depicted as a testament to 'the inability of the self to exercise its active agency for survival in the age of reforms.' (Cai, 2004: 133). The opposite situation appears here. Travel, in the adventure and transgression it allows for, is a form of agency in and of itself, allowing Xu's protagonists to go, to explore, and to act, despite the strictures that still remain; it also leads to a moral agency that appears as travellers chose to act according to their own sense of compassion, loyalty and social responsibility. It is in this way that travel allows Xu to continue the literary interest in ethical quandaries, and the "ultimate concerns" which were so evident in 1990s urban fiction.

Yet I have also argued that any observations made about agency and mobility mean very little if we do not delve into the gender relations that cut through the tales of these travellers. Masculinity holds a paradoxical place in Xu's fiction, equated with movement, adventure, and transgression, at the same time as being aligned with duty, moral agency, and security. This, as I have discussed, draws on co-existing, and often paradoxical ideals of masculinity that appear in gender discourse: the rugged, loyal *haohan* and *youxia*, the "warm man", and the traditional breadwinners. His male travellers appear to hover between these roles; mirroring the floating sensation that his men experience as they drift through Beijing, their masculine identities are at times unsteady, anxious, and in flux. However, when his characters do find secure ground it is mirrored by an affirmation of these sets of masculine performances, which ultimately are not just not transgressive, but are manifestly regressive in the gender roles they comply with. As marginalised masculinities, Xu's men still assert their power over women through a complicity with hegemonic ideals. Women, as a result, remain in the patriarchal system, not real travellers at all, but victims for whom the men must provide, allowing the latter to establish their own, rooted, identity.

Xu's tales of migrants in Beijing provide fertile ground for an analysis of literary responses to a set of topics which have for decades preoccupied students and citizens of China, including new patterns of movement, moral and ideological shifts, agency and the individual. Just as critics have failed to consider the theme of masculine performance in Xu's work, studies of literature since the 1990s have not explored configurations of masculinity in any great detail. Xu's stories therefore provide a compelling reason to carefully consider the impact of hierarchies of gender, and especially the representations of masculinity, as China's writers confront the consequences of postsocialist modernity.

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Pamela Hunt is Chiang Ching-Kuo post-doctoral fellow in Chinese literature at the University of Oxford