

Empty Houses: The Practical Implications of Emotional and Economic Investment in the PRC's Real Estate Market

“So many high-rise houses and yet there’s still so many people without a place to live! Who are these houses for? Who is going to be allowed to live in them?”¹

Like many of Mary’s most memorable comments, this one was made offhand and over her shoulder to me as she drove us to dinner on her electric bike. It was April 2014, and though I cannot remember where we were exactly, I remember what she was reacting to: Yet another new residential high-rise project bursting out of the ground. These construction sites were a common sight when I conducted my fieldwork in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan, one of the poorest provinces in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). I remember that I laughed because of how true it was and told her to slow down so I could type the questions out on my phone.

During my time in Zhengzhou, Mary and I often discussed the city’s housing market. As a migrant from a village just an hour and a half north of the city, Mary was invested in the city’s rental market in a way that many people from the city were not. Technically, both of us were outsiders—she was a *waidiren* or outside person and I was a *waiguoren* or foreigner. Like me, she and her friends from outside the city had to search for apartments to rent. Like me, she kept obsessive tabs on going rental prices and was surprised to see that they only increased as time went on. Like me, she was puzzled by the challenge Zhengzhou’s market posed to rational theories of economics. Everyone could see that the supply of houses was only going up; how, then, could it be true that it was only growing more and more difficult for people to find houses to rent? If not to satisfy the demands of renters who needed a place to live, then what were these high-rise houses being built for? Who was going to be allowed to live in them?

¹“那么高的房子还有那么多人没有地方住。这些房子是给谁住的?”

The answer to this last question may be no one. In this paper, I examine the figure of the empty house in Zhengzhou to demonstrate why the intuition that these houses should be occupied may misinterpret the significance of houses to the people buying them. With the exception of *chaiqianfang* (empty houses in soon-to-be demolished urban villages or houses built as compensation for demolished urban villages), empty houses in Zhengzhou tend to align themselves with specific types of future outcomes, such as profits through investment (*touzifang*) or the marriage of children (*hunfang*). Buying a house and keeping it empty is not just a way of investing economically and emotionally in the future but also a way of investing in one's own limited ability to shape concretely future outcomes. Although I'd like to resist making a functionalist argument, I do think the proliferation of empty houses is connected to the PRC's recent history of property redistribution and sudden policy changes. On a psychological level, empty houses can become symbol of one's own ability to exert control within a capricious, quickly changing system where outcomes are often unpredictable to ordinary homeowners. On a practical level, however, what empty houses *do* is exclude lower-income migrants like Mary from the housing market and even from the city itself.

Constant Crisis: Occupying the empty house from the outside

Empty houses also have implications on the market or economic level. In fact, empty cities, empty value, and emptiness in general have been the most prominent indicators of market health—and bodily health is, tellingly, the metaphor at play here—for analysts of the PRC's housing market. In 2013, the CBS television show *60 Minutes* used Zhengzhou to illustrate the PRC's property bubble by showing scenes of the city's then-empty newly developed East

District and proclaiming it be a “ghost city.”² Within months, the report became a joke among English-speaking Chinese people and long-term expats. The district had filled with decidedly un-ghostly people, cars, and businesses by the time I arrived in Zhengzhou for fieldwork in July 2014—just a little more than a year after the clip aired. More recently, on April 18 of this year, the *Economist* revisited the city and admitted that while “the success of Zhengzhou’s development belies some of the worst fears about China’s overinvestment,” the economic outlook is still bleak:

The city’s GDP growth fell to 9.3% last year from an average of more than 13% over the preceding decade. The downward trend will continue. As the capital of Henan, one of the country’s poorest provinces, Zhengzhou had anchored the country’s last, large, fast-growth frontier. Its maturation signals that the slowing of China’s economy is not a cyclical blip but a structural downshift.³

The *Economist* isn’t alone in its pessimistic prognosis. This past April, the visual anthropologist David Borenstein introduced his Op-Doc on the PRC’s “Rent-A-Foreigner” industry in *The New York Times* by hinting ominously that even though hiring foreigners to perform for real estate openings seems to work, “as property prices continue to decline in China, whether it works enough is another story.”⁴ A closer look at the website for his documentary project *Chinese Dreamland* reveals that the collapse—or at least the cooling—of a Chinese real estate market plagued by empty houses is already built into the larger story he’s going to tell. His subjects

organize deceptive spectacles to help Chinese developers and government officials sell overpriced property. For a few hours, their scheme turns remote ghost towns into surreal globalised cities with fake foreign celebrities, diplomats, athletes, and businessmen... The

² Leslie Stahl, “China’s Real Estate Bubble,” *60 Minutes* video, March 3, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-real-estate-bubble-lesley-stahl-60-minutes/>.

³ “China’s Economy: Coming Down to Earth,” *The Economist*, April 18, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21648567-chinese-growth-losing-altitude-will-it-be-soft-or-hard-landing-coming-down-earth>.

⁴ David Borenstein, “Rent-a-Foreigner in China,” *The New York Times Op-Docs*, April 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/28/opinion/rent-a-foreigner-in-china.html>.

consequences of their actions may fracture their dreams, the social fabric of Chinese society – and the world economy.⁵

Borenstein’s project works through analogy: like the foreigners who are hired to impersonate important people but are not *really* valuable, so the houses are merely impersonating valuable assets and have no *real* value.

In my dissertation, I argue that the distinction between real and fake—a word I use deliberately—is less important to people living in the PRC than outside analysts make it out to be. Here, though, I don’t want to imply that Borenstein, the *Economist*, or *60 Minutes* aren’t on to something when they point to the emptiness of apartments in the PRC; I’m just not sure that these are actually indicators of imminent economic decline. If I am skeptical of these prognoses it is less because I want to deny that Chinese housing prices have gone down and more because I think analysts working for these kinds of organizations are not encouraged to imagine a PRC housing market in which something is not about to go wrong. For instance, in a *Foreign Policy* article called “The Shanghai Bubble,” Joshua Cooper Ramo describes Shanghai’s real estate construction boom as a symptom of “Sinosclerosis”—a term he attributes to the World Bank.⁶ Besides being blatantly Orientalist, Sinosclerosis as an idea is interesting because it introduces a metaphor of the health of the body into a discussion of the PRC’s real estate market. Ramo wants us to think of the PRC’s real estate market, with its rapidly rising high-rises, “more than 70 million square meters of vacant housing,” and “empty Shanghai offices as chest pain, an early symptom of Sinosclerosis...and perhaps the locus of a crippling future heart attack.”⁷ This is, in some sense, more of what we’ve heard before from *60 Minutes*, Borenstein, and the *Economist*: things seem like they’re going well now but just you wait—disaster is just around the corner!

⁵ “Chinese Dreamland,” House of Real, accessed May 4, 2015, <http://houseofreal.dk/housework/chinese-dreamland/>.

⁶ Joshua Cooper Ramo, “The Shanghai Bubble,” *Foreign Policy* 111, Summer, 1998, 71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

Here's the interesting thing: Unlike the other examples I've given, Ramo's article was published not in the past three years but in 1998—seventeen years ago. Analysts have been using empty houses and vacancies as an indicator to argue for the imminent collapse of the PRC's property market for more than 15 years now. To paraphrase that favorite misquotation of Mark Twain, reports of the PRC's housing market's demise have been greatly exaggerated, repeatedly, and for some time now. In a way, the *Times*, the *Economist*, *60 Minutes*, and even *Foreign Policy* are easy targets—they're international publications with broad circulations and pressure to produce easy to follow narratives. I'd be remiss if I implied that they're the only ones guilty of speculating that the PRC's housing market is a bubble that could collapse at any second. Economists, urban planners, and other so-called “experts” have been arguing about whether and how to tell if the PRC's housing market is a bubble since the Asian financial crisis in 1997.⁸ In one particularly ironic article from 2004, Yulay Xiu and Hongyu Liu invoke American price-rent ratios as a standard of a healthy market to argue that the PRC's housing market was *not* a bubble.⁹ The American housing market, which would collapse a little more than two years after the publication of the article, is used here as the sign and standard of economic stability.

Like most analysts, Xiu and Liu were wrong about America (but strikingly right about the PRC). In her book *Anti-crisis*, Janet Roitman examines narratives of crisis surrounding the American market's collapse in 2007. She is less concerned with why it wasn't predicted and more with how the idea of “crisis” constrains the type of conversations one can have about it. Roitman's larger argument is complicated, but simply put she maintains that crisis is a second-order observation rather than a first-order experience and a type of judgment that has to be made

⁸ Footnote with **REVIEW** of all the IJHMA articles

⁹ Yuelay Xiu and Hongyu Liu, “Price-rent ratio in China's housing market: proper interval, measurement and an empirical study,” *International Journal of Strategic Property Management* 8:2, 2004.

after the fact. Crisis “or the disclosure of epistemological limits, occasions critique” by beginning all narratives with a judgment that is “necessarily a post hoc interrogation: what went wrong?”¹⁰ And yet, in the case of the PRC’s putative housing bubble, the question is not post hoc but ad hoc or maybe even a priori: what’s going wrong? Or maybe: What will be going wrong?

Again, the subject of this paper is not the housing market itself. I am not an economist, I am thankfully not charged with making predictions, and I do not want to deny that property prices in the PRC are declining. That said, even if they are, shouldn’t this decline in prices—and thus in speculation and “bubbling”—be seen as a good thing for the Chinese economy? After all, Sinosclerosis was supposed to be “a period of policy paralysis triggered by stalled growth”¹¹ and ghost cities a sign of a runaway construction bubble. If people are paying reasonable prices for houses and fewer of them are being built as a result of smart policies,¹² then why are analysts still looking for what’s going wrong?

My guess is that the fixation of commenters writing in English on the PRC’s imminent housing bubble is not about determining the best type of econometrics; it is about dealing with the threat posed by economic otherness. In the same way that crisis became the “blind-spot” that was never observed but from which Roitman’s commenters narrated,¹³ so a Cold-War-esque conception of the PRC’s economy as fundamentally different than an American—or, as my interlocutors in the PRC might say, Western—economic system underlies these narratives. In Ramo’s case, “The Shanghai Bubble” is lumped in with the fallen Southeast Asian economies after the 1997 Asian financial crisis; with a decidedly pre-2007 smugness, he even quotes a

¹⁰ Janet Roitman, *Anti-crisis*, (Durham: Duke, 2014), 8, 10.

¹¹ Ramo, *ibid.*, 71, 65.

¹² For a summary of the housing policies the PRC’s government has implemented over the past 30 years and their practical effects on current housing trends, see Shujie Yao, Dan Luo, and Jianling Wang, “Housing Development and Urbanisation in China,” *The World Economy* (2014).

¹³ Roitman, *ibid.*, 13.

“stunned” Malaysian prime minister as saying, “What you see are very solid buildings, roads, harbors, airports. It cannot be a mirage.”¹⁴ Yet, in the other, post-2007 reports, the argument is that this boom, these blossoming cities, and this success *has* to be a mirage, *must* be a bubble, and *is* about to go terribly wrong. As they walk in front what I now recognize as one of Zhengzhou’s wealthiest (and busiest) apartment complex, Lesley Stahl, the host of the *60 Minutes* report, asks supposed-expert Gillem Tulloch if the people buying these properties believe their values will always go up. “Yeah,” Tulloch replies gamely, “Just like they believed in the U.S.”¹⁵ Here the empty house becomes legible to American viewers: a charmingly local manifestation of a problem they understand too well.

In another, even more revealing clip that didn’t make it into the final, 13-minute report, Stahl interviews Zhang Xin, identified as a “real estate mogul.” Zhang is trying to explain the logic behind people’s willingness to purchase houses when Stahl interrupts her.¹⁶ “But we lived through it in the United States,” Stahl insists, “People in the United States hear the word ‘bubble’ and we shudder.”

“But before it bursts,” Zhang insists brightly, “People didn’t think, right? Everyone was chasing after it, right?”

Stahl seems skeptical as Zhang explains the government policies that attempted to stop rampant speculation leading up to 2011.¹⁷ Zhang is critical of the policies not because she doesn’t think they’re effective in containing the market but because they impinge on people’s right to own property. “I wonder if how China deals with the bubble, the real bubble *here*,” Stahl

¹⁴ Ramo, *ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵ Stahl, *ibid.*.

¹⁶ Lesley Stahl, “Containing China’s Real Estate Bubble,” *60 Minutes*, March 3, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/containing-chinas-real-estate-bubble/>.

¹⁷ Yao et al, *ibid.*.

says, either not understanding or not caring for Zhang’s argument, “versus how *we* dealt with it is going to be a test of whether—which system of capitalism can best deal with a situation like this.”

Zhang has murmured assent through the assertion, but now she pauses. “You’re talking about the U.S. system where it just lets the market take its course, right?” she asks, “Versus China—”

Stahl interrupts looking down, almost impatiently, over her nose. “I’m talking about controlled capitalism here—state controlled—to see whether it can *control* a bubble versus our inability when we had our housing crisis.”¹⁸ Zhang tries to hedge with an “I don’t know” but Stahl plows on: “Is it a test?”

“It’s a test—” Zhang stops. “I don’t really know in the end whether Chinese policy on containing the bubble will work or not,” she says finally, “Right now it seems to be working, but it’s not a long-term solution.”

The clip fades to black. We never get to see it, but I’d guess that Zhang used the next 30 seconds to reiterate her point that the policy can’t last forever not because it doesn’t *work* but rather because it doesn’t give people the *freedom* to do what they want. This is a much more interesting insight (and one that American viewers might even relate to), but it doesn’t interest Stahl and the *60 Minutes* producers who are after something I might call the comfort of commensurability. If people in Zhengzhou know something people in the U.S. don’t about how capitalism works, then this poses, as Stahl put it, a “test” or maybe even a threat to the U.S. system; if, however, they too believe that prices will go up *just like they believed in the U.S.*, then the threat vanishes. The Zhengzhou homeowner is not *less* credulous than the pre-Recession

¹⁸ I should note that I find both these characterizations of the PRC’s and the USA’s economic systems oversimplified and dubious at best.

American homeowner; instead, the Zhengzhou homeowner's credulity is commensurable or maybe even more extreme. The effect of the Borenstein piece on renting foreigners is to belittle the threat of economic otherness even further by emphasizing Chinese credulity. It's not just that people in the PRC *believe* in their bubble; it's also that what they believe in is so surreal, so obviously false, and so divorced from the "real value" upon which modern capitalist economies should be based that they're barely rational. As it's represented by these various commenters, the gullibility of PRC home buyers redeems American homeowners' experience of being duped and, through comparison, universalizes it: It could have happened anywhere, to anyone, and is still happening to these even more naïve people in the PRC.

Still, none of this answers the question I opened with, which is why empty houses? For this, we can also take comfort by assuming commensurability and turn back to Roitman's work.

Narratives explaining the American housing bubble, she explains,

...all attempt to document a differential between the "real economy," on the one hand, and a "fictive" or "overvalued" state of affairs, which is seemingly immaterial, on the other... What is needed, or hoped for, is a return to what might be deemed real value—to true prices, to the underlying fundamentals, to material production. In the prevailing, generic crisis narrative, this "real economy" is represented by houses.¹⁹

English-language narrations the PRC's putative housing bubble also use houses to represent the "real economy." Journalists, analysts, and other commenters writing in English about the PRC's housing market do not fixate on empty houses, vacancy rates, and price-rent ratios because they want to determine the best indicators. They fixate these things because the empty house *appears* to be signifying crisis by revealing a discrepancy between "real" and "fictive"—or, as I would say, fake—value. From the perspective of the *Times*, the *Economist*, and even Ramo, the house, which in the American case represented the material and the real, should not be empty. To these commenters, occupation of the house makes its value *real*; thus the focus on price-rent ratios.

¹⁹ Roitman, *ibid.*, 43.

People's willingness to *pay* to occupy the house is concrete evidence of its *worth*. If the house is not occupied, the logic seems to go, then how can it be worth anything? And if it is worth something, what is it worth? To whom?

The flaw in this logic is that the occupation of houses in the PRC has apparently, since the 1990s, had very little to do with whether people were willing to *pay* to live in them and more with whether people were *willing* to let people pay to living in them. In his 1998 piece, Ramo observes, "Workers trying to move to Shanghai could not find anywhere to live." He continues: "According to some estimates, 7 million of the 9 million square meters of unsold property is residential, while local officials speak of a critical housing shortage."²⁰ I'm struck by how his observation anticipates my friend Mary's by over a decade: How can there be so many high-rise houses and yet still so many people without a place to live? Who are these houses for? Who is going to be allowed to live in them? Having already attempted to address the etic or outside view, for the rest of this paper, I'm going to attempt to focus strictly on these questions and their implications for people living inside the PRC. The question for me is what all these empty houses mean right now to people like Mary and to the people who are choosing to keep them empty; we should expect that the answer may be different than what they mean to the world economy in a speculative present invented and imagined by journalists at CBS or the *Economist*.

Empirically Empty: The Empty House as an Emic Category

So now that we've seen what role the figure of the empty house plays in analysts' fantasies, let's look at what they do for people in Zhengzhou. I've already introduced you to Mary, who is 31-years-old, a migrant from a rural village, and at least as savvy about the paradoxes of the PRC's housing market as a writer for *Foreign Policy*. Mary is the person who

²⁰ Ramo, *ibid.*, 69.

helped me find the apartment I rented for the last year of my fieldwork in Zhengzhou. Together, we rode our e-bikes around, stopped at apartment complexes, and called out to sleepy guards, “*You mei you kongfang?* Are there any empty houses?” At one bright, white, new-looking complex, Mary popped her head into the building management office: “Any empty houses?” The woman replied with a resolute “no” before I’d even dismounted from my bike. “Are you sure there will never be any houses?” I moaned petulantly in Mandarin, “It seems like everything here is new and empty!” The woman did a double take: Where was I from? America?! She reconsidered: Maybe there were empty houses if they were for an American. She made a phone call, and a thin man in his late 60s or early 70s slunk around the corner. “Who is renting the house? Just you or her too,” he said suspiciously, pointing at Mary.

“Just her!” Mary replied cheerfully, “I’m here to help! A friend.”

He led us up to the apartment, which was, without a doubt, the best one I’d seen in the district so far. It was huge, bright, and clean—no one had ever lived in it before. The old man, whom I’d call Mr. Zheng for the rest of my time in Zhengzhou, explained that this was just one of the few apartments he owned in the complex. While we sat in the empty apartment I’d eventually end up renting, Mr. Zheng assured me that he and his family were not provincial bumpkins; they too had money, had gone abroad to South Korea, and knew what it was like to have to rely on friends like Mary. “When you are outside (*zai waimian*), you can only rely on friends,” he said sagely, through clouds of cigarette smoke. I asked Mr. Zheng where he was from. Ashes fell onto the pristine white tiles as he jerked his hand up and down, pointing at the ground: “Here! We are from this very piece of earth. We are natives (*bendiren*).”

I thought of that moment often as time went on. The way Mary had been so quickly dismissed by the building manager disturbed me. Why had the house only appeared when I, the

obvious foreigner, poked my head into the office? Mary got her friends from church to help me move in two weeks later, and over lunch I asked them what they thought. “It’s discrimination (*qishi*), right?” I asked in Mandarin. Mary refused to admit that, but the Christian men she’d brought to carry my things were a little bit more receptive. “Probably it is a kind of prejudice (*pianjian*) against outsiders (*waidiren*),” they explained. And indeed, across the city I found landlords more willing to rent to me once they discovered I was foreign: so outside as to be outside the outsiders. Chinese migrants or outsiders (*waidiren*), these landlords maintained, were terrible tenants who would get grease stains all over the apartment whereas foreigners were believed to truly care for their things and those of others.

Even the apartment I ended up living in was rented to me with the belief that I would not change it; it was meant to be a marriage apartment (*hunfang*) for his 7-year-old grandson. Middle- and upper-class Zhengzhou people I spoke to said they preferred to provide their children apartments that were either newly remodeled or had never been lived in before, and yet this was not the first future marriage apartment I was offered during my search. Stranger even than the marriage apartments, however, were the investment houses (*touzifang*) people offered. When I asked why these apartments were vacant, the owners generally said that they hadn’t gotten around to hiring a middleman (*zhongjie*) to find a tenant and that it would be too much trouble to find a “suitable” (*heshi*) tenant on their own. In any case, these owners assured me, the property was appreciating well enough to justify the expense even without the rental income (though they’d be happy to take my money, of course). I was shown two other empty houses, both of which had at one point been occupied by the families who offered to rent them to me before they moved to better, newer apartments. In both cases, my occupancy would have had one sentimental condition: I would not be able to change the house—something they couldn’t trust a

normal Chinese tenant to do but felt that I, as a foreigner, would be more than capable of. In a statement echoed by several landlords who offered to rent me their apartments, Mr. Zheng maintained that he'd rather let the apartment be empty than rent to a person of low moral quality (*suzhi*)²¹—a person who, I speculated, he might imagine as looking like Mary.

Migrants as Polluters

What danger could Mary pose to these empty houses? Even though I know the facts are irrelevant to how the prejudice against her played out in reality, it's worth noting that Mary kept the house she did live in much better shape than I did and was much cleaner in practice. "Where there is dirt there is system," Mary Douglas writes in *Purity and Danger*.²² Where there is the potential for pollution, there is also purity. The identification of migrants like Mary as polluters reveals something crucial about the motivations of homeowners like Mr. Zheng. To preserve the purity of their empty houses, homeowners almost invariably end up foregoing rental income. Desirable tenants such as myself rarely entered the rental market. People who were from Zhengzhou usually either lived in the same house as their parents (who owned it) or else owned their own house. Upwardly mobile people from outside of Zhengzhou who were distinguished by their well-paying professions or jobs often opted to buy their own houses in the city after just a few years. In fact, most other foreigners had no need to rent—they worked at schools in the city and had their housing provided for them. Most of the people looking to rent houses were like Mary—migrants without enough income or stability to buy a house in the city who would end up splitting the cost by living two or even six to a room. Mary herself worked as a dorm manager for a company that brought migrant women to the city to work as skilled manual laborers.

²¹ For more on *suzhi*, consult Ann Anagnost, etc.

²² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concept of pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 44.

Mr. Zheng's neighbor owned the apartment next to the one I rented from Mr. Zheng. Mr. Zheng often spoke disparagingly of his neighbor's decision to hire a middleman (*zhongjie*) to find tenants. "If you do it that way, you could end up with anyone living in the house," he would say to me, "It's too messy (*luan*)! With us, I know you, you know me. We trust each other. You're only one person, and a foreigner. You won't have so many people crammed (*ji*) in one room doing these out of order things (*luan qi ba zao*) the outsiders (*waidiren*) do!" Mr. Zheng and I had an arrangement between individuals (*geren*), not *zhongjie*. Tenants preferred to rent from individuals because *zhongjie* raise the price of rent to extract a higher fee; landlords like Mr. Zheng preferred it because of the personal accountability it suggested. "Middlemen (*zhongjie*) don't care who rents the apartment, they just want the money!" Mr. Zheng insisted. Mr. Zheng performed a version this speech for me when I gave him my rent money in person (and in cash) every three months. Though the discriminatory logic beneath his statements is obvious, on a certain level his prejudices were borne out by reality. During the 12 months I lived there, the apartment next to me cycled through two different sets of tenants after the first set was discovered to be running either an illegal dormitory or else a brothel out of the apartment.

Just as Douglas attempts to rid her analysis of ritual efficacy of "medical materialism,"²³ so I want to table the question of whether homeowners in Zhengzhou actually do prevent damage to their apartments by refusing to rent to migrants and instead say that even if it is true, it's a by-product of the decision not an explanation. From Mr. Zheng's periodic speech, with its emphasis on the disorder and mess associated with outsiders, and his repeated insistence that I explain how I became friends with Mary, whom he referred to as my "tan friend" or "a person like that," I gathered that he viewed migrants as polluters. From a structural-functionalist perspective, this

²³ Douglas, *ibid.*, 36-37.

makes perfect sense. Like the interstitial persons Douglas describes as the second type of polluter in *Purity and Danger*, migrants to Zhengzhou

...are none of them without a proper niche in the total society. But from the perspective of one internal sub-system to which they do not belong, but in which they must operate, they are intruders...If anything goes wrong, if they feel resentment or grief, then their double loyalties and their ambiguous status in the structure where they are concerned makes them appear as a danger to those belonging fully in it.²⁴

In this case, “those belonging fully” to the city are official city residents or people with *hukou* or household registrations in Zhengzhou. Douglas notes that “pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined” and the PRC—with its explicit, rigid residency regulations—has *defined* the legal line between urban and rural as clearly as possible but failed to enforce it in practice.²⁵ Other scholars have investigated the “floating population” of migrants within the PRC in greater detail,²⁶ but what I want to stress here is the way in which migrants can internalize the sense that they pollute and that as a polluting person they are “always in the wrong.”²⁷ Mary was an exception to this, but other, even poorer migrants I knew tended to speak deprecating about themselves and the dangerous displacement they knew they embodied. One migrant woman once expressed amazement after I ate a piece of bread she gave me. “You know the rest of them who live in your complex think we are very dirty (*hen zang*),” she admonished, “How can you, a rich foreigner, still dare to eat our food?” Conscious of how her own pollution made her unattractive to potential landlords, the woman had also escaped Zhengzhou’s discriminatory housing market by living with her husband, disabled older son, and younger daughter in a shed just outside my apartment complex. Instead of paying rent, she swept the stairs daily, and her husband collected the trash.

²⁴ Douglas, *ibid.*, 126-127.

²⁵ **Reference article about hukou system**

²⁶ **For example, Li Zhang (2000), etc**

²⁷ Douglas, *ibid.*, 140.

Purity and the Invaluableness of Control

Let's return, for a moment, to one of Mr. Zheng's refrains: "Middlemen don't care who rents the apartment, they just want the money!" Here Mr. Zheng is objecting to what he sees as an inherently bad practice, and yet it's a practice that appears to be perfectly rational. A middleman's job is to rent as many apartments at as high a price as possible to as many people as he or she can to make as much money in service fees as possible. Of course middlemen don't care who rents the apartment; of course they just want the money. What exactly is it about middlemen that Mr. Zheng finds so objectionable? The answer is money and brings us back to the consternation of Ramo, Stahl, and all those other analysts of the PRC's economy. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas argues that money is "an extreme and specialised type of ritual," which

...can only perform its role of intensifying economic interaction if the public has faith in it. If faith in it is shaken, the currency is useless... The test of money is whether it is acceptable or not. There is no false money except by contrast with another currency which has more total acceptability.²⁸

Underlying Mr. Zheng's statement is the presumption that the middlemen should care about something else besides money as such; in other words, there is another currency that has more total acceptability when it comes to renting houses. I argue that this "currency" is control over visions of the future.

In a different article, "The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space," Douglas thinks through "the home as an organization of space over time."²⁹ She explains the concept through the house's material architecture and capabilities:

Each kind of building has a distinctive capacity for memory or anticipation. Memory institutionalized is capable of anticipating future events... The home makes its time rhythms in response to outside pressures; it is in real time. Response to the memory of severe winters is translated into a capacity for storage, storm windows, and extra

²⁸ Douglas, *ibid.*, 86.

²⁹ Mary Douglas, "The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space," *Social Research* 58, No. 1 (SPRING 1991), 294.

blankets; holding the memory of summer droughts, the home responds by shade-giving roofs and water tanks.³⁰

The home, she offers, is used to make “a general plan for meeting future needs.”³¹ In the case of empty houses in Zhengzhou, particularly the marriage houses, these future needs may be very far in the future indeed. Not renting to migrant tenants allows homeowners in Zhengzhou to preserve their plans without fear of pollution. What homeowners like Mr. Zheng might pay in lost rental income or literal money, they get back in this currency of feeling like they have control over the future. Keeping the house empty keeps it pure; however, as Douglas points out,

when purity is not a symbol but something lived, it must be poor and barren. It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as a stone when we get it.³²

It is not for no reason that *60 Minutes* dubbed the empty high-rises in Zhengzhou’s East District “ghost cities.” The empty, pure house is sterile, uncanny, and—as the program’s website cheekily puns—spooky.³³ If money is a ritual, then Zhengzhou homeowners’ rejection of it by keeping houses empty is its own “particular set of assumptions by which experience is controlled,”³⁴ in this case, nearly to death. This ferocity suggests to me that control over the future of the apartment—whether it’s meant to be a marriage apartment, an investment property, or a sentimental space—is *invaluable* to homeowners in Zhengzhou. People’s particular visions of the future—and the means to preserve them—cannot be purchased or have a price put on them. By keeping their houses empty and paying a monetary opportunity cost, homeowners are investing in their own ability to determine otherwise uncertain outcomes.

Emptiness as a Fantasy of Annihilation

³⁰ Ibid., 294.

³¹ Ibid., 295.

³² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, *ibid.*, 199.

³³ Stahl, “China’s Real Estate Bubble,” *ibid.*.

³⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, *ibid.*, 158.

On my last day in the field, my friend Sophy drove me to the train station. Like Mary, Sophy was also in her early 30s and not from Zhengzhou; unlike Mary, Sophy held a prestigious job in the international education sector and was originally from a city, not a village. According to the systemic and relational logic of the city, Sophy was not a migrant in the same way that Mary was. As we wove through the snarling traffic in the south of the city, Sophy began ranting to me about Zhengzhou, which she maintained was worse than her hometown.

“Look at this!” she exclaimed in frustration, gesturing at the industrial buildings mixed with high-rise residential towers, “This makes no sense. Why is it like this? If I get rich, I want to drop a bomb on Zhengzhou so that it has a chance to start over. It’s just not right.”

Even after I reacted with horror, Sophy held her position. It would be better, she admitted, if the hypothetical bomb could be dropped without killing all the people, but the city would still be better off if it were given an empty, pure, and clean slate. As it is, however, Zhengzhou is occupied, lived in, and polluted by at least nine million people if not more. It is not as hard to buy a house in Zhengzhou as it is to buy a house in first-tier cities like Beijing or Shanghai, but because of the policies implemented to prevent a housing bubble, it’s not terribly easy, either.³⁵ More broadly, PRC’s history of property distribution, tendency toward sudden policy changes, and current laws guaranteeing the land-use rights of any particular residential building for only 70 years at the longest makes homeownership and control over houses a rare and precious occurrence. For as long as people in Zhengzhou can own houses, I think they will treat them as spaces that contain plans for the far future and do whatever they can to preserve them. Even if the GDP declines and market prices fall, people will continue to retain their houses because the idea of a future home can be *more than* its monetary worth; it’s invaluable. There are

³⁵ Yao et al., *ibid.*.

exceptions to this of course. Even though people speak about “move-in rates” and high-rise complexes are often strikingly dark and unoccupied at night, most houses in Zhengzhou are *not* empty. Not all homeowners needed to keep their houses empty; I also knew people who were enthusiastic landlords and people who worried about the collapse of the housing market and were trying to sell their properties as quickly as they could.

What’s interesting is that people in Zhengzhou are aware of the prognoses of all those outside experts who see in the dark windows of the empty houses the end of the PRC’s breakneck rise and trouble for the world economy; they just find them to be less convincing than the analyses of other experts. Although Douglas warns that “any piecemeal interpretation of the pollution rules of another culture is bound to fail,”³⁶ I still want to take a risk and connect fear of the migrant to fear of the stranger, which contrasts with the authority and the comfort of the familiar person. On a different day, I asked Sophy what she thought would happen if the housing market collapsed. Dreamily, she began to list the possible effects. All of her students’ parents’ money was tied up in investment properties, without which they wouldn’t be able to send their children abroad for college. Without going abroad, the students wouldn’t need to learn English, and so she wouldn’t have a job. Her husband’s business—an American BBQ restaurant—would also likely fold as people cut back on expenses. The buildings they lived in would deteriorate because no one would be willing to spend money on upkeep. This, she laughed grimly, would be the best quality of life she or anyone in Zhengzhou would ever have. It would ruin her whole life.

Only later when I was looking through my notes would I realize the irony of Sophy’s sober reaction to the housing market’s hypothetical collapse when compared to her playfulness in proposing that a bomb be dropped on Zhengzhou. Anyway, her horror didn’t last long, and she

³⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, *ibid.*, 51.

soon became more playful about the housing market too. “It might be kind of exciting,” she admitted, “And plus it will never happen.” She explained to me that all the officials and well-connected real estate tycoons she knew still had their money tied up in apartments. “These are the people who control the system,” she told me confidently, “They wouldn’t let it happen because they would suffer too.” I didn’t think to ask her how many apartments they’d bought, or where, or whether they were allowing anyone to live there. My guess would be that even these authorities might still keep a few properties vacant against their own monetary interest but for their own piece of mind; even the people—or especially the people—charged with determining the future of Zhengzhou might need at least one pure and empty space that they could count on controlling.