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# Moving to keep still: dynamic stillness in the digital and physical geographies of Beijing

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of migration and mobilities through an examination of how translocal migrants engage in a variety of mobilities in order to practice long-term stillness in Beijing, China. To achieve this the paper proposes the concept of dynamic stillness, a stillness at one scale achieved through mobility at other scales. Dynamic stillness builds on other forms of (im)mobility, including turbulent stillness, waiting, suspension, immobility and emplacement. The concept returns agency to the non-mobile individual, agency that is lacking in other terms used to describe various (im)mobilities. This paper also conceptualizes mobility and stillness as taking place in both physical and digital sites, and it explores the role that digital sites, such as instant messaging groups, play in projects of stillness. Empirically, the paper explores unsuccessful attempts to displace translocal migrants engaged in food work in Beijing. While seemingly successful at first, when the analysis moves beyond simplistic snapshots of displacement and takes into account a variety of sites, scales and temporalities, the paper shows how dynamic stillness can be practiced at the scale of the sub-district by being mobile at other scales, including streets, neighbourhoods, across the nation state and to digital sites.

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## Introduction

One morning, in the fall of 2017, I walked towards Liangshan Road<sup>1</sup> and was greeted by over twenty protest banners. Hanging from the roofs of buildings, the banners included statements such as:

"We are not troublemakers (*diaomin*), we just want a fair ruling"

"Firmly and resolutely resist forced demolitions, protect the interests (*liying*) of common people"

"Fully licensed (*zhengzhao qiquan*), legal business operations, give me my legitimate rights (*hefa quanyin*)"

"We need to live in a harmonious society managed by the Party"

The banners were in response to the recently announced demolition of numerous buildings housing Liangshan Road's foodscape. The demolished area was one small part of a larger informal food economy that could be demolished across the Liangshan neighbourhood and Tiantongyuan, the large sub-district which the Liangshan neighbourhood was in. Throughout 2017, Beijing's District and Street governments were selectively demolishing buildings, resulting in displacements citywide. From my position on the street, it felt that no two displacements were too close to one another, spatially or temporally, and that this hindered any small chance of wide-spread civil disobedience or

demonstration in opposition to the demolitions. Soon the banners lay in the rubble of demolished buildings and no neighbouring businesses rose in solidarity with those displaced. The demolished structures of Liangshan Road housed over 50 businesses, including over twenty-five food businesses. The structures, I was told, lacked licenses even though the land was owned by a state-owned enterprise. Of the food businesses displaced through demolition, I only found traces of one still in the Liangshan neighbourhood afterwards.

On the day of the demolition I was sitting less than 100 metres away, behind the relatively immobile stall of Liu Laolao (Liu),<sup>2</sup> a street vendor selling *Shandong jianbing*.<sup>3</sup> We were just over an invisible-to-the-eye administrative boundary, with the demolitions occurring on the same road but in another governmental district. Sitting behind the stall, we discussed whether the demolitions would effect Liu's business, and within 24 hours we had an answer. The next day attempts to displace food businesses spread across the border. Liu and her neighbours were now regularly accosted – often daily – by the local government's Urban Administration and Law Enforcement Bureau (*cheng-guan*), the bureau tasked with the confiscation of equipment belonging to unregistered businesses and a group involved in the demolition of illegal structures (Hanser 2016). Over the next few months, Liu would have moments of hypermobility and periods of relative calm; her business would evolve into one making use of Beijing's digital geographies. Despite attempts to force her from Beijing – in line with national and municipal population goals<sup>4</sup> – she managed to stay in the city and sub-district she desired to be in.

With these events in mind, this article examines how being mobile helps to keep one still: dynamic stillness. In particular, this article is concerned with how one manages to stay still (practice stillness) at one scale by being mobile at, or between, different places and scales. In this conceptualization, actions resembling mobility – fleeing from state officials, temporarily leaving a city – may in fact be parts of broader projects of stillness. In conceptualizing dynamic stillness, I also focus on the relationship between stillness in physical and digital sites. I highlight how the negative effects of coerced mobility from physical sites can be offset by a stillness in digital sites. Furthermore, by moving business and social activity to instant messaging groups, I show that physical spatial precarity – the everyday use of spaces that can easily be demolished or erased against the will of the space users – can be offset by digital spatial fixedness. Through these actions, a dynamic stillness can be practiced at the site and scale one desires to be in, in this case, Beijing's Tiantongyuan sub-district. This is a multi-scalar stillness achieved through mobility where the still individual has agency over their (im)mobility.

In the remainder of this article, I first engage with literature on (im)mobility, waiting and stillness, finding space for the concept of dynamic stillness. I then examine literature on digital working practices and activism, noting that both spectacular and mundane acts of (im)mobility in physical sites sometimes rely on stillness in digital sites. Through this, I argue that spatial precarity and displacement can be contested through the use of digital sites. After reflecting on methods and context, I show how, through a range of physical and digital practices, an informal food stall operator (Liu) practices dynamic stillness in Beijing. This is a dynamic stillness that ends with Liu leaving Liangshan Road but staying both in her home and in the sub-district of Tiantongyuan. The article concludes with reflections on multi-scalar migrant strategies, the role of digital sites in mobilities research and how decentring the migrant and mobility and instead focusing on dynamic stillness and a multiplicity of (im)mobilities may ease tensions between migration and mobilities studies (Hui 2016).

## Stillness, mobility and dynamism

The mobilities turn resulted in greater enquiry into mobility as an 'ontological absolute' (Adey 2006, 76). This approach was in direct opposition to 'sedentarist metaphysics' (Malkki 1992, 31), or the 'world as organized through fixity' (Cresswell 2006, 738). But, as mobility is relational, it is just as important to reflect on the moments where people and things do not move and how they enter

motion or stop moving: (im)mobility (Vannini 2011). Research on (im)mobility may examine how the (im)mobility of the seated passenger in an aircraft differs to the seated dynamism of someone attending a spinning class. Spinning (cycling frantically on an exercise bike) contrasts to the bikes fixity, drawing attention to scale and vibrant materiality (Bennett 2009; Tolia-Kelly 2013). Fixity may also be produced relationally, for instance, through the mobility of hospitality workers in producing fixity for guests (McMorran 2015). Stillness is one way in which these differential experiences of (im)mobility have been expressed, with (Bissell and Fuller 2011, 2) describing the stillness of a Chongqing nail house as an 'an instance of wilful unmoving'. The relational qualities of stillness shine through particularly strongly in Martin's (2011) conceptualisation of 'turbulent stillness'. Practiced by undocumented migrants in shipping containers, turbulent stillness is an active attempt not to move the body in order to move across borders. Turbulence describes the violence of this stillness, a stillness where small bodily movements may end the desired mobility of the body. Here, turbulent stillness is a complex, multi-scalar practice involving different stages of (im) mobility.

Building on Martin's work, I use the term dynamic stillness as it suggests agency<sup>5</sup> in the act of not moving. Stillness is a form of immobility which is chosen by the individual and not enforced. It is dynamic in that it is achieved through many actions, including mobility. Individual agency differentiates stillness from other conceptualisations of non-moving, such as waiting (Hage 2009), immobility (Jeffrey 2010; Jaffe 2012), fixity (McMorran 2015), stuckedness (Birtchnell and Büscher 2011), stasis (Schiller and Salazar 2013) and suspension (Xiang 2017). These terms suggest that the subject is non-moving due to a more powerful other, not out of one's desire to be still; (im)mobility as 'submission' (Bourdieu 2000, 228) and the reproduction of 'subordination' (Auyero 2012, 2).

Stillness as a form of (im)mobility is visible in practices of resistance, including non-violent resistance, sit-ins and occupations (Lakha 2009; Ngai 2005; Scott 1985). Stillness is also used in religious, spiritual and contemplative practices (Aerthayil 2003; Sellers-Young 2013). In yoga and *taiqi* stillness is difficult to perfect, and in Taoism stillness is cultivated (Wong 1992). This is not to say that other forms of (im)mobility lack agency, with Dwyer (2009) describing 'active situational waiting' and Bissell (Bissell 2007, 284) noting that 'bodies in waiting' help one rethink and 'reconfigure what is implied by activity, agency and engagement'. But, even when productive, waiting is *for* others and built on 'prosaic, quotidian corporeal suspensions' (ibid.: 282). In comparison, stillness can be dynamic, multi-scalar and practiced because one wishes to be still. Dynamic stillness need not be analytically confined to the body, and it can be achieved across scales, including the body, the home, the neighbourhood and the city.

Recent literature in migration policy studies has paid attention to the scalar dimensions of migration, showing that migration is a multi-scalar event through which cities and national governments can clash (C. Zhang 2018; Walker and Leitner 2011). But, as many 'migration events involve movement across multiple scales that are interconnected' (Chacko and Price 2020, 6), it is important to focus not just on policy but to examine the multi-scalar place-making practices of migrants (McIlwaine 2010). Çaglar and Schiller (2018) have used the city as a scale to engage in multi-scalar analysis, highlighting the city's role in migrant 'emplacement'. Focusing on the neighbourhood, Zhang (2001) shows that a variety of scales play a role in projects of stillness, with displaced translocal migrants in Beijing desiring the neighbourhood displaced from, not just a site within Beijing's municipal boundaries, a site which may be tens of kilometres away. The home is another scale where stillness is dynamically achieved, and this is particularly visible through practices of commuting, where leaving the home and crossing local and national boundaries becomes one way to (re)produce the home (Bissell, Vannini, and Jensen 2017; Telve 2019; Renkow and Hoover 2000). Examining mobility in relation to stillness – be it during displacement, emplacement, commuting or tourism – means an awareness that mobility may be part of broader projects of dynamic stillness. When examining dynamic stillness, the temporal or spatial flattening of mobility into unidirectional moments must be avoided, and researchers must endeavour to see past what Elliott-Cooper et al. (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020: 501) describe as 'one-time snapshots of change'. By fixating

on moments of mobility, such as the moment of displacement, one may inadvertently erase evidence of multi-scalar stillness.

To explore (im)mobility beyond snapshots, it is important to shift the analytical gaze away from the sites and moments where displacement events (as attempts at forced mobility) are most publicly and spectacularly practiced. Scholarship in feminist geography critiques how 'phenomena and events that are commonly viewed as public, political, global and spectacular continue to have wider appeal as subjects of study than the private and apparently mundane' (Pain 2014, 532). In the context of everyday mobility and stillness, I contend that mobility and the moment of displacement are often more spectacular than long-term stillness. This is particularly true of forced, public and violent acts of displacement (Brickell, Arrigoitia, and Vasudevan 2017; Duru 2019; Weizman 2012). In contrast, staying in the city post-displacement, being forced away from one site but not the entire neighbourhood or city, seems relatively mundane. Yet, the neighbourhood or city may be where individuals desire stillness.

With this approach, it is important not to discount the violence of forced mobility or displacement. Instead, one should query the role of forced mobility in projects of stillness. Migrants, and other city dwellers, may be aware of the potential for displacement and plan for it. In this manner, displacement is one of many spatial-temporal events in the lives of migrants. By focusing on dynamic stillness, this framework returns narrative agency to so-called *victims* of displacement, understanding them instead as *survivors* of displacement or as *practicing stillness*. Examining dynamic stillness shows that life often continues after displacement, potentially in the same city, neighbourhood or street one was 'displaced' from (Crossa 2009).

### Stillness and digital sites

This article is also concerned with extending (im)mobility to cover actions in both physical and digital sites. Existing scholarship on remote working shows that digital working practices can enable both a desired stillness and a sense of being trapped (Hardill and Green 2003; Manzo, Katia, and Minello 2020). Remote working also enables mobility and forms of digital nomadism (Green 2020), though such nomadism can contribute to displacement and dispossession (McElroy 2020). Remote working may also manifest in forms of exploitative hypermobility, where bodies are constantly engaged in algorithmically guided mobilities as part of the so-called gig economy (Chen 2018; Chen and Qiu 2019; P. Sun 2019). In this gig economy, although the body is engaged in potentially dangerous physical (im)mobilities, these (im)mobilities are made possible through fixedness in digital sites (Richardson 2020; Van Doorn and Badger 2020). Through constant connectivity one remains present in the digital workplace, regardless of physical location, leading to exploitative work practices in ride-hailing applications, virtual office spaces and food delivery applications. But what effect does constant connectivity and fixity in digital sites have on victims of forced mobility and displacement from physical sites?

In recent scholarship on food worker and vendor displacement, the role of digital technologies and digital sites has been under examined. Returning to Pain's (2014) critique of the spectacular, this may be because digital interactions are often seen to be unspectacular. What Leszczynski (2017: 2) describes as the 'small size of mobile interfaces, the deeply intimate essence of personal devices, and the highly individualized nature of mobile media practices' may make mobility and stillness in digital sites difficult to observe, and perhaps easy to overlook. Digital practices may seem mundane, but, when one takes the instant messaging group or hashtag as a field site, it is possible to observe a multitude of (im)mobilities, including mobility between hashtags or physical mobility guided by the digital site or device (Lim 2018). These (im)mobilities may be intended by the designers of digital sites and technologies, or the result of glitches and bugs (Leszczynski 2019a; Shaw 2020; Moradi et al. 2009), errors in design which users may build on to enable alternative ways of being.

Recent research on digitally enabled activism suggests that fixed digital sites of protest and organization – sites in which protestors can be digitally still – play a role in supporting physical

stillness and aiding the reconsolidation of protest following political displacement (Halvorsen 2015; Juris 2012). For instance, research on the various #Occupy movements around the world highlights how the physical sites of occupation were supported materially, socially and politically through various hashtags. During #Occupy, political organisation was carried out in digital sites, making the hashtag a persistent site of organization and solidarity and a scale at which protest was occurring (Juris 2012). In Hong Kong, in both 2014 and 2019/20, physical protest sites were supported through digital action (Cai 2016; F. Lee 2020). In both periods of protest in Hong Kong, there was large-scale use of instant messaging spaces as sites where protest was organized and information shared, while human, material and symbolic resources were also provided through digital sites (A. Y. L. Lee and Ting 2015; F. L. F. Lee and Chan 2018).

During the 2019/20 Hong Kong protests, the protest methodology of 'be water' emerged as a guiding principle (Hale 2019). Rather than attempting to practice stillness in a single area, as in 2014, protestors attempted to 'be water' and to 'blossom everywhere' across the city. Being water meant withdrawing from street level protest and continuing protest at different time-spaces; blossoming everywhere. In these multi-scalar protests, the street (airport, mall, etc.) could be a site of protest, but the city was the scale at which political contestation occurred. This was achieved through stillness and connectivity to a number of digital sites, including Telegram instant messaging groups and the forum, LIHKG (Yeo 2019). Being water and blossoming everywhere was contingent on a consistent presence in digital sites of protest and organisation. These sites guided people and advised on tactics (Ting 2020). During the most effective moments of protest, physical bodies were mobile and digital bodies were relatively static, moving between a few specific digital sites.

These events raise questions on the relationship between mobility in physical sites and stillness in digital sites, particularly if digital spatial fixedness can be used to contest attempts to force bodies into mobility. Scholarship on the displacement of vendors and marketers shows a number of ways in which displacement can be contested through multi-spatial and sociolegal strategies (Crossa 2009; 2013), while scholarship on residential displacement highlights how contestation may be successful but not in the ways or temporalities originally planned (Lees and Ferreri 2016; Lees, Annunziata, and Rivas-Alonso 2018). What matters are the scalar desires of those being displaced from commercial or residential sites; success for some may be failure in the eyes of others. For someone displaced from their childhood home, the scale of the home matters intensely, while for a migrant struggling to stay in a city or country there are different scalar priorities (Shao 2013). Xiang (2013) recommends employing a multi-scalar ethnographic strategy to follow complex migration and mobility events, thus enabling one to understand migration projects that transcend the rigid territorial boundaries produced by the nation state, including the boundaries of local governmental jurisdictions. This article builds on multi-scalar mobilities and migration scholarship, extending the scales examined to include digital sites as scales at which mobility and stillness are practiced. By conceptualising digital sites as scales at which stillness and mobility are practiced, I look to move beyond spectacular moments of displacement to consider how dynamic stillness is achieved across both physical and digital geographies.

## Research context

The long-term ethnographic research referenced in this article was conducted in the physical and digital territory of China (Fang 2018). I consulted the scholarship of Xiang (2005) and L. Zhang (2001), on the Beijing migrant community of Zhejiang Village, to understand better how to conduct research with translocal migrants in Beijing. To plan an effective ethnographic strategy which included both digital and physical sites, I studied the ethnographic practice of Madianou and Miller (2011), Miller et al. (2016) and Wang (2016). Central to my ethnographic digital fieldwork were Pink et al.'s (2015) principles: 'multiplicity', as 'there is more than one way to engage with the digital' (ibid.: 8); 'non-digital-centric-ness', because the digital should be 'de-centred in digital ethnography' (ibid.: 9); and, 'openness', as digital ethnography is 'an open event' (ibid.: 10). I made an active effort to explore



both physical and digital field sites playfully, to find the hidden structures and limits of the field, in order to adapt 'to the constraints of things' (Steinmüller 2019). I also took to heart the words of Abidin and De Seta (2020) that this form of ethnography is messy and not easy. These methods were practiced with an overt awareness of the mundane (Leszczynski 2019b; Pain 2014), an attention to deeply intimate relationships within a vibrant material landscape (Bennett 2009; Hall 2020; Leszczynski 2017), and a scepticism of the spectacular. Unfortunately, spectacular acts of violence and destruction became mundane and difficult to avoid.

This project took place across multiple field sites. These included the Beijing sub-district of Tiantongyuan – in peri-urban Changping District (Zhao 2020) – and the Liangshan neighbourhood nested within it. I often viewed the Liangshan neighbourhood, and Liangshan Road, as a 'foodscape' (Morgan and Sonnino 2010). Ethnographically, I explored the sensorial landscape and the role that food workers, artisans, customers, the state and material objects had in the social reproduction of the Liangshan neighbourhood and its relationship to other sites. In doing this, I examine the foodscape through the experiences of stall owner, Liu, a translocal migrant to Beijing who desired to continue her life in Tiantongyuan but who had a daughter living in a village over 600 kilometres away. The Liangshan foodscape included many structures that, while technically illegal (Hsing 2010), existed in what Yiftachel (2009) describes as the 'gray space' of urban informality, where actually existing spatial relations are neither legal nor illegal but may be used in top-down governance by the state (Roy 2009). To become a legal, or formal, structure would require a building license, a seemingly difficult-to-obtain document used in the regulation of informal structures and businesses. Research was also conducted in Weixin,<sup>6</sup> China's most popular instant messaging service and social media space, as well as a key node in contemporary urban infrastructure (Plantin and De Seta 2019). Within Weixin, research primarily took place in a Weixin instant messaging created for customers by Liu.

### **Spectacular displacement: Sitting like a state on Liangshan Road**

Liu's most spatially precarious period of 2017 began with the aforementioned demolition of a major part of the Liangshan foodscape. A key factor in her increased precarity were the *chengguan*. The historically unpopular *chengguan*, famed for their violent interactions with street vendors and informal businesses (Caron 2013), are part of a broader ecosystem of state repression (Ong 2018). *Chengguan* regularly 'enforce order in neighbourhoods, employ thuggish contract workers to manage street vendors and migrant workers' (ibid.: 99) and facilitate the outsourcing of violence by local authorities while taking 'illegal actions [and] implementing unpopular policies' (ibid.: 99). During the six months leading up to the demolition, the *chengguan* were peaceful and seemed interested in maintaining stability, a key metric in gaining a governmental promotion (Benney 2016). When *chengguan* did come to Liangshan Road they would arrive slowly, on foot, strolling at a leisurely pace. This gave businesses time to pack up street-side seating, cover stalls with tarpaulins and close doors. This presented to the *chengguan* a vision of orderliness that they did not question.

Following demolitions things changed. The official reason for the demolitions and closures was that the buildings were illegal constructions. But Liangshan Road was within a short walk of local government headquarters, so the illegality of demolished structures was clearly not new information. These actions may be better understood as attempts to displace people and reduce the population of Beijing, in line with national and municipal policy. Following the demolitions a new rhythm emerged; *chengguan* were no longer irregular day walkers; they became 24/7 urban management enforcers wishing to confiscate equipment. Alongside this change in *chengguan* behaviour came an order from key Liangshan Road landlords to close down for a month. To appease the local government, Liu's landlord ordered all stalls and restaurant spaces closed. To enforce this closure and to end street vending, *chengguan* used technologies of rapid mobility, arriving on Liangshan Road in vans. They appeared suddenly to confiscate equipment and within days Liu's stall was taken.

This made foodscape workers aware that their status had changed, and that in the eyes of the state, their informal activities were now illegal. Within two weeks of the demolitions, Liangshan Road was almost deserted with one end rubble, the other forced into closure. During this attempt to close Liangshan Road, (im)mobility was not a weapon of the weak, rather, automotive mobility became a technology of repression. Assisted by their vehicles, *chengguan* could rapidly enter areas, confiscate large amounts of equipment, and force vendors to flee. *Chengguan* would sometimes sit on Liangshan Road in their air-conditioned vans for hours, playing games, watching videos and chatting on Weixin, all via their smart phones, often with a cigarette in hand. In these moments, not only their mobility was repressive, so too was their immobility; a stillness that affected the entire foodscape. Their immobility was not waiting, as no vendors would return while they sat, highly visible in their vans. They were a sitting threat, possessing a nonchalant stillness that only those with state power could practice.

### Dynamic stillness: Resisting *chengguan* displacement

After Liu's stall was confiscated she temporarily left Beijing. One neighbour, selling barbecue, changed its opening hours, becoming a late-night restaurant. The *chengguan* came for them at 1am, confiscated their equipment and they left Beijing. Noodle maker, Shi'En, left Beijing expecting to return in early October, but Shi'En would never open this restaurant again. Two months later he had a new site, in a county just south of the Beijing border, Gu'An in Hebei province. Wishing to stay in Beijing for reasons of climate and family, he was as close to Beijing as it was possible to be, in a county firmly within Beijing's sphere of influence. This mobility out of Beijing to Gu'An, aided by a now easy-to-gain business license, fulfilled the municipal and central government's planning goals.

Liu returned to Tiantongyuan and Liangshan Road at the end of October. Upon her return Liu engaged in insurgent food vending. Liu and her husband converted the three-wheel cycle cart used for transportation into a pedal powered food stall. The new stall enabled mobility, and Liu could jump on the saddle and flee if *chengguan* were spotted. A game of cat and mouse began. The *chengguan* would use their vehicular assisted mobility to enter quickly, stragglers would lose their equipment, the speedy would live to vend another day. The now insurgent Liu practiced a mobile and multi-scalar strategy of vending. After evading capture and leaving her spot, she continued vending in less visible and populous sites away from *chengguan*. To return to Liangshan Road, Liu was now waiting, for *chengguan* to leave. But in her flight, she found opportunities at other sites. Liu may move one street away, or inside neighbouring residential communities, spaces *chengguan* did not bother with. This strategy seemed successful because of the territorial priorities and imagination of the *chengguan*, who were interested in policing around bureaucratic boundaries. They policed specific sites (Liangshan Road) at specific scales (the street), but did not act at the scale of the neighbourhood. The *chengguan*'s lack of mobility across scale and to other places presented Liu with the opportunity to be mobile around the Liangshan neighbourhood, keeping her business open and enabling a stillness in the neighbourhood.

The insurgent vending followed a period of post-demolition inter-provincial mobility. Specifically, after the Liangshan foodscape demolitions, Liu engaged in mobility to specific places elsewhere, specifically her hometown, where her parents and daughter lived. This mobility meant Liu did not stay in Beijing when she could not be economically productive there. Instead, Liu temporarily moved to an area where she could be productive in other ways; as a mother to her daughter, as a daughter to her parents, as a sister to her younger brother and as a friend. This mobility away from Beijing did not mean she was permanently fleeing Beijing, although a short-term analysis built on a snapshot of the Liangshan Road demolitions and displacements may suggest this. Rather, when seen in the long-term, this mobility and the productive actions that followed it prolonged her stillness in Beijing. This inter-provincial mobility became another element of a dynamic stillness in Tiantongyuan, with mobility at other scales securing long-term stillness at the scale of the sub-district.



Liu was not bound to Liangshan Road or Tiantongyuan, she could go anywhere in Beijing, becoming the mythical rational economic actor. When I asked Liu why she stayed in the now violent Liangshan foodscape, I was told: *'We know this place, we know people here, we've been here for a long time. It is better to be in a place with people you know. So, I'll keep trying to stay here.'* But why this street? *'This is a good spot, we know the area, we have lots of old customers here and people we're close with, including you! Haha.'* Attached to the neighbourhood and sub-district in a number of ways, Liu and her husband desired the familiarity of Tiantongyuan and Liangshan Road, with customers, suppliers, peers, a home, friends and one particularly close friend from her home county. If she moved this would be lost. While Liu and her husband were mobile, economic migrants to Beijing, making money for their family to enable *their* stillness in the hometown, they were not blindly following paths of optimal profit. They were more than just migrants engaged in profit making mobilities, they were members of a foodscape (which was being demolished around them), skilled workers, local residents and part of a community. Liu was moving beyond 'migrant exceptionalism' (Hui 2016), she was fighting for stillness in Tiantongyuan and the Liangshan neighbourhood.

When seen at a single scale, at the site of Liangshan Road, Liu is displaced and somewhat powerless, particularly when compared to the *chengguan*. By taking a step back and looking at her multi-scalar and multi-sited practices of mobility, Liu is able to maintain stillness in Tiantongyuan, even if it is a somewhat turbulent stillness (Martin 2011). While *chengguan* temporarily secured the street, they failed to stop Liu's mobility away from the street. The informal economic geography of Liangshan Road was temporarily controlled, but not Liu's mobility. Her mobility enabled numerous stillnesses, for her husband and herself in Beijing, Tiantongyuan and the Liangshan neighbourhood, as well as for her parents and daughter in the family home, through the money remitted.

### Dynamic stillness: Moving to Weixin

As fall ended, I was invited into a new Weixin group, the *Western China Jianbing Customer Group*. Upon entering, Liu used the @All announcement function to say: '@All In this group we can discuss all sorts of delicious food and snacks, it is forbidden to send illegal content.' The then 44 members started chatting:

Keqing: [Liu], I'm reporting in

Wan: Me too, new member here

Liu: Haha, feel free to add more people to the group.

Keqing: Oh, it seems everyone lives around the area. Anyone from the same residential community? I'm in the Glorious Dawn community

Xiangling: Oh, that's super close!

Liu: There are some older people who I haven't added into the group though. Everyone here is young.

Xiren: [Liu], just tell us in advance which days you're out with the stall, I need to prepare my body for the experience.

Xiangling: It seems to be all of big sisters' regulars.

Liu: Yes, many people requested that I make a group, so I finally did it.

This group supported Liu's stillness during her most spatially precarious period of 2017, when she lacked a persistent physical site for her stall. The creation of this group, a persistent digital site, also acted as Liu's homecoming announcement; it made customers aware that she was back and where they could find her.

The group made her visible – or 'searchable' (boyd 2011) – in Weixin, including to customers who may not have seen her return due their own changing patterns of mobility. The demolition of

numerous structures and the construction of several walls rerouted pedestrians from Liangshan Road, creating friction along certain paths that were previously well trodden (Cresswell 2014), and changing the rhythms of the neighbourhood (Edensor 2010; Lefebvre 2004). Liangshan Road had been a bustling thoroughfare, a site of reproductive labour and consumption, which connected numerous residential communities to a metro station. Now, other than the residential communities directly along the road, Liangshan Road was home to ruins that people were avoiding (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). But, while *chengguan* attempted to make Liu invisible to potential customers in Beijing's physical geography, she now made use of Beijing's digital geography. In Weixin, where the *chengguan* were powerless and the Cyber Administration of China ruled, she could still operate.

Her stillness within Tiantongyuan was in part due to actions within Weixin, and these actions should not be thought undynamic. Liu used a variety of practices, including textual, visual and locative practices to make her dynamic stillness effective. If she operated from an adjacent street or neighbouring residential community – vending away from the *chengguan's* visibility – she notified customers through Weixin's affordances. This included making herself visible to customers in other ways: posting in the group; a textual explanation of her position; a photo of what she could see; a video of what was around her; and, a GPS location. Whatever physical location she was in, she was constantly within the Weixin group. As Leszczynski (2017) has discussed, the way in which mobile interfaces are used can make it difficult to observe the dynamism of mobile practices. But this dynamism should not be ignored because it is not easily observed or visually spectacular (Pain 2014), and, when positioned within the Weixin group Liu's dynamism became visible. Most importantly, her continued presence in Liangshan Road after so many others had left was testament to her doing *something*. It is exactly through Liu's seemingly unremarkable stillness in the Liangshan neighbourhood that one finds evidence of her dynamic digital practices. If she were not practicing stillness – if she were not doing something – she would not still be there.

### Dynamic stillness: Stillness within Tiantongyuan

Not only did customers continue to support Liu through sales they helped her in other ways as well. One Weixin group exchange had a customer asking Liu if she was vending, with another customer replying on Liu's behalf:

Xiangling: Hey @Liu are you out today? I haven't seen you

Rong: Big sister is out today, I just finished my bowl, hahaha @Xiangling

Xiangling: Ohhh, I found her, thanks @Rong. She's really well hidden today! Hahahaha

In another instance, customers warned Liu of an impending *chengguan* raid:

Keqing: Big sister, it seems that chengguan are coming

Keqing: They're walking in your direction from the hospital, but I don't know their plans

Liu: We've packed up now. Thanks darling.

The group member showed a lack of regard for Liu's now impossible-to-ignore illegality, aiding her to evade agents of the state and the Weixin group became a 'community of complicity' and solidarity (Steinmüller 2013). The persistent digital side to her business also problematized notions of the migrant as being backwards, temporary and constantly on the move – the imagined hyper-mobile, floating, rural population (Qian 2018; W. Sun 2014). Through the Weixin group, Liu demonstrated that rural migrants could skilfully navigate digital environments (Lin, Xie, and Lv 2016; Wang 2016). Liu's dynamic and turbulent stillness was evidence to those within the group that Liu was not transient, not floating; she wanted stillness and fixity. It was the state that was displacing her.

I was concerned that spam would stop Liu's group functioning as a space where 'sociabilities of emplacement' (Schiller and Çağlar 2013, 21) could be produced and dynamic stillness practiced.

Many large Weixin groups I was in had degenerated into sites of advertising and spam. Surprisingly to me, Liu was OK with spam in the group, and she would regularly interact with spam to engage with customers. One day in late November, a spam coupon for a food delivery service was posted. These coupons would give a small discount to anybody who clicked them, but one clicker (for instance, the 8<sup>th</sup> clicker) would get a bigger discount. After clicking, your number would be displayed, and it was common for clickers to share what number they received, aiding others to get the big prize. After one such coupon, an exchange between Liu and the coupon sender, estate agent Fan, began:

[Coupon]

Fan: I'm number one [out of 11]

Liu: Oh, @Fan are you still working in Tiantongyuan?

Liu: We wanna move. Saw this place, but the sign is a number for the estate agents, we wanna speak to the landlord directly. Can you help?

Fan: Let me speak to some colleagues

[...]

Fan: So, this place is a bit risky for business. Do you still wanna consider it?

Liu: I know we can't get a business license. But, it all seems to be one landlord. All we can do is try

Fan: OK, just call him Big Brother Strong, here's the number ...

Aided by this encounter, Liu ended up moving to a new commercial site, several kilometres away, in another area of Tiantongyuan. This involved a move across a local governmental boundary, meaning she was no longer a problem for the *chengguan* who patrolled Liangshan Road. Aided by her stalls digital site, Liu successfully moved from one part of Tiantongyuan to another, starting up a *jianbing* kiosk through a window in a formal building. The new business was started with a pre-existing customer base, those who she kept updated through the Weixin group. The previous mobility to Weixin persisted, and the Weixin group was still used in her new *jianbing* kiosk. Weixin became a site where an informal food delivery service began, with customers delivering from the new site to other customers closer to the old site. Liu also offered a pre-ordering service through Weixin, and she implemented menu suggestions from the Weixin group. She quickly became friends with her new neighbours, and neighbouring businesses and customers entered the group; it became a space of sharing centred around her new kiosk. Aided by the Weixin group, Liu continued her dynamic stillness in Tiantongyuan away from Liangshan Road. With this move, the Weixin group became her longest surviving site of business.

Liu had been displaced from Liangshan Road, but she was still in Tiantongyuan, the sub-district she wished to be in. For Liu, not much had changed, she was no further from home than before, although it took time for business to return to profit due to a higher rent in a new location. Arguably, her displacement from Liangshan Road led to a better quality of life as she was no longer regularly accosted by *chengguan*, she was inside during winter not outside, she spent more time with her husband, and when her daughter came to visit she could sit inside with her to chat. The spectacular displacement from Liangshan Road was not the end of Liu's story, it was just one chapter. From the local state's perspective this was a victory: one migrant business removed from the administrative area. But, as an attempt to reduce the population of Beijing – the goal of municipal and central governments – this was a failure. The attempt to force mobility was successful, but its scale was limited. Unlike in the case of Zhejiang Village twenty years earlier (L. Zhang 2001), the municipal government had failed to flatten Beijing, so, displacement from Liangshan Road did not mean displacement from Beijing. By operating between scales, Liu practiced dynamic stillness within

Tiantongyuan, Changping District, a Weixin instant messaging group, Beijing Municipality and also her home.

Not everyone was as successful as Liu in producing stillness. Many of her Liangshan Road neighbours left Beijing, and the aforementioned Shi'En, who moved across the Beijing border into Gu'An, told me: *'the regulations and policies [in Beijing] are too strict, in one moment everything changes, it's just too hard to do business in this environment.'* Liu practiced dynamic stillness through stubbornness and an alternative geographic imagination, but this was not possible for everyone.

## Conclusion

Throughout this article, and by following the actions of Liu, I have examined how people engage in mobility to practice stillness. Examples from Liangshan Road highlight how mobility between specific places within a neighbourhood, sub-district, city and country can be a part of dynamic strategies that enable people, including translocal migrants, to practice stillness at desired places and scales. This is true even as local state actors and powerbrokers make concerted efforts to force people into mobility. These findings also contribute to how displacement events – or attempts to displace – are understood. Not every act that looks like displacement – fleeing from state agents – is a successful, long-term displacement. Examining Liu's mobilities over longer periods of time and at different geographic scales highlights how seemingly displaced persons have in fact achieved stillness. Therefore, it is not enough to focus on temporal or spatial snapshots of mobility, or to assume every attempt at displacement is successful. Such an understanding of displacement removes (narrative) agency from the assumed-to-be displaced person.

By focusing on Liu's relationship with Liangshan Road one could argue that the state successfully displaced her. But by exploring her relationship with Tiantongyuan it is possible to see that she was dynamically still in both Tiantongyuan and, for a time, in Liangshan Road. This dynamic stillness was achieved through a variety of mobilities, within the Liangshan neighbourhood, within Tiantongyuan, outside of Beijing and to digital sites. Her mobilities – actions that resemble displacement – are in fact part of a broader project of stillness which must be examined through a scalar lens. The concept of dynamic stillness helps make sense of how these numerous mobilities are connected and begins to show that they are part of a larger project of stillness. This is not a return to the 'world as organized through fixity' (Cresswell 2006, 738); instead, Liu's experience shows that mobility can be practiced to achieve many ends. In this case, it was practiced to achieve stillness in Tiantongyuan. This is, of course, not the ideal situation for individuals, such as Liu, to be in. But to characterize Liu only as displaced from Liangshan Road does a disservice to the effort she put in to remaining in Tiantongyuan.

The events discussed in this paper highlight the role digital sites play in projects of stillness, with digital sites involved in an alternative geographic imagination that was used to resist displacement and practice stillness across scales. Through mobility to Weixin, and the dynamic use of Weixin, Liu not only found a persistent site where she could be still even as the chengguan forced her into mobility, but she was able to find a space free from chengguan oppression. Even then, there remain scalar limitations to Liu's stillness. Liu's dynamic stillness was successful because the local state did not understand her or her desires, they treated her as a rational economic actor who would follow the path of least resistance. If the state had operated across scales to displace her, as with Zhejiang Village (L. Zhang 2001), then stillness in Tiantongyuan may never have emerged. The state failed in this because it seems to be highly fragmented (Mertha 2009; Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988). As highlighted by geographers of China's land tenure and planning systems (Guo 2001; Hsing 2010), parts of the state apparatus may be openly hostile to one another. In this case, there was a lack of information sharing, between local governmental districts and between those who police the internet and those who police the streets. Liu's experience suggests that, when the state is fragmented there are opportunities for mundane resistance, including projects of stillness. These

may have a greater chance of success if individuals make use of alternative geographic imaginations, including the use of digital sites.

Liu, though, was the minority; the majority of those who made up the Liangshan Road foodscape were displaced from Liangshan Road and Tiantongyuan. Many also left Beijing. Not everyone has the capacity to act as Liu did, and they may not have had the same scalar desires as Liu. Liu's dynamic stillness in Tiantongyuan is worth highlighting, but so is the success of the state's attempts to displace the Liangshan neighbourhood foodscape and the many translocal migrants who worked in it. When re-examining Liangshan Road two years from the displacement, Liu's vending spot is now a site for another form of (im)mobility: an informal car parking lot. While there exists a painful irony in this, an informal parking lot also hints at an uncomfortable change in Beijing's geography in that the space for (migrant) place-making in Beijing has been reduced. Sites that sustained hundreds of people now house dozens of cars, and Beijing has gotten a little bit smaller.

Finally, Hui (2016) argues that the relationship between mobilities and migration is a tense one, particularly around issues of migrant exceptionalism and methodological nationalism. Throughout this article I have attempted to de-centre migration studies and the migrant status of interlocutors, conceptualising dynamic stillness around numerous forms of (im)mobility; as much around displacement, commuting and *taiqi* as around migration. Such a de-centring - and I am by no means the first person to de-centre migration - is a necessary step in easing the tensions described by Hui. Decentring the nation-state through an awareness of methodological nationalism and paying attention to a multitude of scales is another step in the right direction, and the translocal approach helps in this by promoting an examination of 'multiple and hybrid histories, their politics and social constructions, their material geographies, and their connections to other scales and places' (Brickell and Datta 2011, 4).

I believe that the next step in alleviating these inter-disciplinary tensions involves the decentring of mobility, to interrogate a multiplicity of (im)mobilities in mobilities and migration studies. By paying attention to multi-scalar (im)mobilities across physical and digital geographies this article has highlighted how the same action may be simultaneously involved in urban resistance, translocal migration and informal commerce. As I have shown, digital sites play an important role in dynamic stillness as well as in everyday urban and migrant mobilities. For some, the digital place may be the place in which one has been present the longest, or the only site from which one has not been forced. That digital sites intersect with studies of (im)mobilities should not be news to many reading this, but I hope that this article encourages mobilities and migration scholars to explore a wider variety of (im)mobilities, including those taking place in or supported by digital sites.

## Notes

1. All sites below the sub-district, Tiantongyuan, have pseudonyms.
2. Liu Laolao, as well as the names of all other interlocutors in this article, are pseudonyms.
3. Shandong jianbing is a large and thin savoury pancake, folded over with wafers and condiments inside.
4. The goal to reduce the population of megacities is outlined in the National New Type Urbanisation Plan (2014–2020) (SCPRC 2014). Municipal population goals are outlined in the Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016–2035) (BMCUP 2017).
5. Described by Dwyer (2009, 23) as the 'universal human capacity to choose how and when to act'.
6. Sometimes known as WeChat. There are analytically significant differences between Weixin and WeChat which necessitate the use of one term over another (Ruan et al. 2020).

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