

Temporary Couples? A Chinese Migrant's Dream Narrative

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Summary

This piece presents a narration of a dream by a rural migrant, Yang Cui, who works in the city of Shantou in China. It reveals her inner struggles to end an affair with another migrant worker, Lao Bo. This piece is written as a part of an ethnographic book project on rural–urban migration in China, in which I experiment with different genres of writing in an attempt to address migrants' bewildering existential multiplicity of interior experience, among which some are presented more analytically, some more subjectively, and some more imaginatively. Understanding the human condition in terms of the limits of knowing others and ourselves requires anthropologists to seek creative forms of ethnographic narrative to give shape and voice to existential struggles, ambivalence, and uncertainty of everyday life. This piece attempts to use Yang Cui's narration of her dream as an evocative form of describing her inner struggles being with Lao Bo as a so-called *linsbi fuqi* (“temporary couple”), through which her self-knowledge unfolds, reflection takes place, and consciousness finds expression.

KEYWORDS

China, dream narrative, interiority, migrants, temporary couples

It is early in the morning. Yang Cui is keen to visit a fortune-teller. She and I are crouching while queuing outside a fortune-telling lodge (Figure 1) next to a farm field. Yang Cui is talking and absent-mindedly pulling weeds from the ground around her.

I had a dream last night. It tells me about the real me, the one that is actually struggling internally all the time in every minute, every second, even at night after I fall asleep. See, even in my dream.

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FIGURE 1 The fortune-telling hut with visitors waiting outside. Photograph by the author.

Yang Cui, in her mid-thirties, is a migrant worker doing assembly jobs at a toy factory where I conduct my ethnographic fieldwork in China. She moved to the southeast coastal city of Shantou after leaving her rural home approximately 2,500 kilometers away in inland China in Sichuan province. After working and living together in the toy factory in Shantou for over a year, Yang Cui, being my key interlocutor, gradually opens her inner world to me and makes her experiences available for my study of how life is lived and future is crafted for rural migrants in urban China.

I represent Yang Cui's speech that seemed self-directed in italics, to differentiate it from when she seemed to speaking to me.

[Her voice becoming remorseful, mixed with poignancy as if she starts to speak to herself and to act as her own talking partner while my presence falls into the background] *How can I keep failing again and again? Each time I promised myself that it would be the last time. I want him, but I love my daughter more. I feel happy being together [with him] but also stressfully unhappy. I know we don't have a future. I know! That's why I need to end it now! Now! Now!*

I heard my inner voices in the dream. I think I will end it for this time. I need to.

Yang Cui is talking about Lao Bo's extramarital affair with her. It has been more than a month since Yang Cui decided to leave him once again. In the past few years, she has made the same decision many times, but they end up together again every time. Lao Bo, in his late thirties, is a migrant worker; he has a wife and two children back home in rural Sichuan. Yang Cui also has a daughter left-behind in her rural home. Yet, Yang Cui avoids any mention of her husband.

Yang Cui and Lao Bo's relationship is not an isolated case among rural migrant workers in urban China. On the contrary, it is a common, hidden phenomenon: they are known as *linshi fuqi* (a temporary couple) who live like husband and wife in cities despite having spouses and children back home in the rural areas (Wu 2014). As a social designation, "temporary couple" indicates the *ethical suspension* that essentialized norms are detached from daily practices (Xiang 2021), unraveling the moral anxieties that migrants experience with their temporary intimacies, especially among female migrants (Yang 2021).

The dream couldn't be more real if it happened in reality.

[Sentimentally] *His face is so clear in the dream, his voice is so much his, his love to me and his helplessness on his face when he saw me. [...] Everything! Everything is so real. In the dream, I thought that I was in reality, although the setting in the dream was a strange place that I was not familiar with.*¹

[The dream] took place in the evening after work. I was alone in a very spacious canteen. Without thinking, I made a call to him after one long month. Without thinking, I told him that I was in the canteen, alone there, about to eat dinner. As soon as I hung up the call, I immediately regretted it. I knew that he would come to see me soon. I hated myself for failing [to leave Lao Bo] again.

I then finished my food. I locked the door of the canteen and stepped out onto the street. I knew he must have been somewhere around already. I looked around, expecting him to appear, standing somewhere not far away. I didn't see him. I put my head down and momentarily felt relaxed but also disappointed. Right at that moment, I saw him inside a new white car, waiting for me with his smile that I am so familiar with.

[Talking to herself] *Oh, maybe he got a car that month?*

I reassured myself, as he had told me before that we would have a car in the future. But suddenly, I felt I wanted to escape from his sight simply because I was not dressed well.

[Becoming agitated] *My face must have been so pale due to this whole month's sleeplessness; my hair must have smelled so bad because I had not washed it for a few days; and how could I see him in this top, my last choice of what I would wear to see him.*

[Anxiously while becoming woeful] *I didn't want him to see me like that, although I missed him so much ... so much ... so much.*

Yang Cui starts sobbing. I offer her a facial tissue. She stops for a few seconds, cleaning her running nose, then continues:

I ran away as fast as I could, and my hands were holding a pillow and a duvet; strange, isn't it? I had been holding them since I left the canteen. They made my running difficult. The streetlights were rather dim. I needed to hold them either on the left or on the right side, not in the middle, to see the path in front of me. I wanted so much to throw them away so that I could run faster. But in the dream, they seemed very important to me, and I could not do that. Simultaneously, I also did not want him to see me holding that stuff. I needed to be perfect in front of him, not like that.

I kept running along a street. His car seemed to be getting closer and closer. I was more and more nervous. I kept running. I saw the sign for the public toilet and passed a few alleyways. I didn't stop, and my mind was busy too.

[Hesitantly] *Maybe I should hide in the public toilet? No, no, no. Not wise at all. He must be very close to me now. He would see me slipping into the toilet. What an indecent place to hide! I'd better turn into an alleyway and then turn again so that he will have to get out of his car to follow me, but by the time I have made some more turns into some other alleyways, eventually, he will lose me. Good heaven! It is too late to do it now. I've already passed the alleyways quite a while ago.*

Then, luckily, there was a crowd of children celebrating something in the middle of the street. I managed to pass them, but I knew that it wouldn't be easy for him driving in his car. I got a chance to slow down a little bit and breathe at the end of the street. But, I hit a T-junction.

[Tensely and apprehensively] *Oh no, no, no! Which one should I take, left or right? Both directions are new to me. I have no idea about them at all. How can I choose?*

She stops pulling the weeds for a while. I listen carefully, paying great attention to those subtle changes in her tone as if those changes are “fragment[s] of an individual's linguistic identity” that “breach the surface of the self,” through which I can hear her roaming thoughts and see her internal speech-act (Rapport 2008, 333).

On the one hand, Yang Cui believes that her future is embedded in her daughter's future while her relationship with Lao Bo “has no future,” as she told me many times and as I suppose she had told herself many more times. Even worse, Yang Cui has been constantly faced with ethical dilemmas; she even dreamed about Lao Bo's wife angrily breaking into the room she shared with Lao Bo. She told me that she did not feel morally right maintaining the extramarital relationship. On the other hand, she enjoys being spoiled “like a princess” within the relationship, even though she believes that there is no future for the relationship.

She looks at me and continues:

I just found that I might not have time to think too much. So I just turned left without any reason and kept running. The more I ran, the more I felt I needed to keep running.

[Reflectively] *I could not just give up and stop; otherwise, we would meet again, and even worse, he would see the worst ‘me’ ever.*

I kept running along the road. But the road seemed endless. It was scarily quiet and straight, and for a long time, I saw no end in front of me. What's worse, along the road on the left-hand side was a high stone-built wall; I felt its great pressure when I ran all the way along next to it. All of these—so strange, right? Last week, you told me that in the place where you study, there were pretty high stone-built walls. See? They appeared in my dream.

I kept on running. I became more and more tired, and my legs seemed heavier and heavier. I wanted to speed up, but I couldn't. I felt almost breathless. I kept running, occasionally turning my head back to look at his approaching car.

[Extremely nervously] *Oh no! His car's coming. I need to speed up! I shouldn't stop. I shouldn't give up. Where is he? He must be so close to me now. [...] Oh, how can I do it? Oh, no, he's almost reached me!*

But my mind couldn't make my legs go faster. His car was getting so close to me already. I was about to give up.

No! I shouldn't stop. I shouldn't give up. [...] But he's almost reached me! Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!

Then I woke up at that very point! I looked through the dark in my room, wondering whether, in my dream, he had caught me in the end. I had no answer but felt so so so tired.

I listen quietly, without interrupting her, as if I am watching her film—entitled “A Dream? A Runaway”—with her narration. It is self-informed and self-informing. “It tells me about the real me,” Yang Cui said.

Yang Cui is talking to me but also speaking inwardly to herself, trying to understand her mind through the dream and the talking itself. She is taking the opportunity with me to have a conversation with herself. Her narration is a version of her “interiority”—“an individual's inner consciousness, the continual conversation one has with oneself” (Rapport 2008, 330).

Yang Cui directs her own story. But it is still an open story. She has come here to the fortune-teller to ask about her fate, about the possible ending of her story. She is queuing patiently to find out about her future. The weeds surrounding Yang Cui have almost been pulled out.

It is her turn now. Unfortunately, I am not allowed to go into the fortune-telling lodge with her. After approximately fifteen minutes, she steps out of the lodge.

“So?” I ask with sincere concern.

Yang Cui looks at me and says, “I knew it must be a call! It is! *Laotian* (heaven lord)² does not allow me to be with him!”

She says nothing more. Yet, for most of the day shift assembling toys in the factory, Yang Cui seems distraught.

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NOTES

¹ I use brackets around ellipses to indicate something left out, and ellipses without brackets to indicate a pause.

² *Laotian*, or *Laotianye* (literally meaning “old man in the sky”), a term commonly used in Chinese, broadly refers to heaven as the highest “authority,” which has the magic power to control everything about the human world on the earth, to encourage virtue and punish evil. *Laotian* plays an important role as an invisible “authority” to many Chinese people, especially when one uses that authoritative voice to reassure one's self-doubt (Sangren 2012).

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