Reinventing Identities in The Changing Metropolis: Shenzhen in Writer Wu Jun’s Fiction

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Abstract
This paper aims at examining the representation of Shenzhen, a fast urbanizing metropolis situated in southern Guangdong province, in Chinese writer Wu Jun’s literary production, by focusing on characters’ issues of identity and unfulfilled desire, their relationship with the urban space, and interaction dynamics among different social categories. Wu Jun, herself a witness of Shenzhen’s development, sets most of her fiction in this city, showing a deep sensibility in portraying the contradictions caused by industrialization and economic growth and how these aspects affect its dwellers’ lives, with an emphasis on the psychological dimension. Nowadays one of China’s most bustling metropolises, Shenzhen has developed very fast since it has become the first Special Economic Zone in 1980, therefore revealing more intensely than elsewhere the outcomes of China’s modernization. In her fiction, often included by critics in ‘subaltern literature’, Wu Jun frequently describes Shenzhen from the peculiar perspective of migrants, who move from rural areas in pursuit of a wealthier future, but she occasionally also depicts middle class characters. After introducing Shenzhen’s social context at the turn of the century and the influence it exerts on urban writing, with reference to Wu Jun’s literature, I will analyse six of her short stories, mainly belonging to the collection From the second to the six district, relevant to understand her ability in seizing the inner feelings of city dwellers and the psychological consequences they cope with, in the atmosphere of radical urban transformations.

Keywords: Chinese urban literature, Wu Jun, Shenzhen writers, subaltern literature, Chinese metropolis, new urban novel, Shenzhen fiction
Introduction

The personal experience of woman writer Wu Jun, born in 1969 in Hebei province, but moved to Shenzhen when she was very young, is deeply rooted in the unique atmosphere of this 21st century metropolis, situated in Southern China, Guangdong province, that constitutes her main source of inspiration.1 Wu Jun’s depicts, in a realist and at times brutal style, the way Shenzhen dwellers dial with the city, in a restless process of modernization.2 Through the description of the urban environment and the relationships characters establish with it, crucial in defining their identities, Wu Jun unveils a psychological dimension of undisclosed anxieties and desires and provides an overview of the urban fabric’s transformations in time of globalization. By embracing the subjective perspective of individuals whose daily experience takes place within the city of Shenzhen, her stories encompass contemporary urbanites’ collective condition, thus acquiring a universal value. Regardless of whether characters are migrants from the countryside, factory workers or dissatisfied middle class women, Wu Jun is engaged in portraying their psychological reactions to Shenzhen’s amazingly swift urbanization process in the context of China’s dramatic shift towards capitalism. Interviewed about her interest for lower social strata, Wu Jun has claimed: “I’m not just interested in workers at the assembly line. Teachers, hotel managers, office employees, karaoke singers are all among my protagonists” (Li, 2011). During the same conversation, she added: “I don’t think that only those who have not enough to eat belong to subaltern classes. In my opinion, whoever is not respected, is neglected, is oppressed is even more subaltern” (Li, 2011).3

Her plots unravel through a succession of inner feelings’ narrations and images of the cityscape. In addressing subaltern characters, Wu Jun’s peculiar ability is taking an objective stance, by criticizing their attitude and revealing their weaknesses and not simply standing by their side (Meng, 2013, 115). Characters often live in Shenzhen’s outskirts and are torn between the effort to conquer an urban identity, in the case of migrants, or a more meaningful life, if they belong to the middle class, and the harsh reality, which at some point of the story abruptly awakens them, by disenchanting any idealistic hope. Concerns of identity and belonging, connected to the development of the global metropolis, do not spare any of the protagonists of the six stories examined in this paper.

Literary representations of the metropolis: the case of Shenzhen

Before observing Wu Jun’s literary texts, it’s worthwhile to shortly introduce the singular history of Shenzhen, called the “city of dreams” (Bach, 2010, 421; Kho, 2017, 164) for the countless economic and cultural opportunities it offers and the appeal it exerts on migrants. Because of their peculiar features, contemporary Chinese cities are not properly studied by the perspective of Western urban theories (Wu

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1 Wu Jun writes: “Shenzhen’s uniqueness can hardly be compared to any other city. Shenzhen is the ideal land for many people, in a certain sense similar to what once were Yan’an, Peking, Paris or New York” (Wu Jun, 2012e).
2 Besides the six short stories described here, most of Wu Jun’s literary production is set in Shenzhen. See: Tan, 2014; Wu Jun, 2012e; Lu, 2012.
3 Wu Jun’s works share many features of ‘subaltern literature’; due to lack of space this trend will not be discussed here. For further readings: Shao, 2016, 103-146; Li, 2014.
Fulong, 2016); this is particularly true for Shenzhen, where many urban novels are set, and whose fast progress has fostered local writers’ ponderings over China’s urbanization.

In 1980 Shenzhen has been promoted from a fishers’ village and market town, founded around the end of Ming dynasty, to the status of city and chosen as China’s first Special Economic Zone, following the Reform and Opening Up policy launched in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping. As a SEZ, Shenzhen attracted foreign investments and benefited from a rapid development, thus becoming in a few decades one of the most modern, industrialized and wealthiest metropolises of China, with a massive population increase, that has now reached more than ten million. Attracted by higher living standards, the large amount of floating population based in Shenzhen, makes it a hub of cultural diversity, since each resident brings a peculiar regional heritage (Clark, 1998: 109), the presence of foreign residents is high, young people move from elsewhere in pursuit of fulfilment in work and adventure (Clark, 1998, 112-113).

A feature of the city useful to understand Wu Jun’s characters’ mindset, is its centre-margins dichotomy, until 2010, when the whole of Shenzhen has acquired the status of SEZ, its territory was divided in an ‘inner city’ (Guannei), corresponding to the area where the SEZ was originally established and its actual city centre, and an ‘outer city’ (Guanwai), situated outside the borders of the SEZ, mainly destined to factories and home to most migrants. In spite of the demolition of the border structures, Shenzhen citizens still distinguish the two areas.

Often residing in Guanwai, Wu Jun’s characters’ impressions of the surroundings convey a feeling of estrangement. In Er qu dao liu qu (From the second to the six district) the protagonist says: “People from every corner of the province live in Guanwai, and there are also people coming from the rest of China, like me and other pretentious students […]. Because of the frontier, this place is called Guanwai. Seven centimetres, the width of a barbed wire. Because of it many people, including myself, don’t have any chance to see Shennan Lane […]” (Wu Jun, 2012c, 58). And a little later: “In this place that is not really Shenzhen, but yet it’s not outside Shenzhen, I’ve often thought that people are like ants in a frying pan. Until today I haven’t found any good aspect” (Wu Jun, 2012c, 59). In Qin’ai de Shenzhen (Dear Shenzhen), the narrator states: “The place where he lives is Shenzhen’s Guanwai, a place separated from the actual SEZ by a barbed wire, but close to the airport. Unfortunately, Li Shuiku has never been inside the SEZ” (Wu Jun, 2008, 222).

It’s not easy to outline what an urban identity is, considering that experiences of the space can be very varied and there can be aspects of the city with which a person is

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4 Concerning the inadequacy of Western urban theories to describe “multiple forms of metropolitan modernities”, see Roy, 2007.
5 For example, Northern Girls (Sheng, 2012).
7 In Special Economic Zones foreign investments are facilitated through market oriented policies and business incentives. Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen were the first four. Following them, SEZ have been established all over China.
9 On the outcomes of this dichotomy: Kho, 2017.
10 Except Metro Line 5, available in English translation (Wu Jun, 2017), I’ve translated the passages quoted in this paper from the Chinese edition.
not familiar (Haapala, 2003, 15-16). Nevertheless the metropolis defines its inhabitants’ identities and, at the same time, is shaped by them, in a process of steady and dynamic interaction. Residents’ perception of it is fragmentary and partial, since the city is enjoyed by millions of people who differ for class, personality and many other aspects (Lynch, 1960). Constituted by myriad of cultures, that in time of globalization also originate from its interconnectedness with foreign societies, contemporary conurbations affect identity formation in a multifaceted way, determining the coexistence of various lifestyles and individualities. All over the world, the emphasis upon individualism and neo-liberalism in the last decades of 20th century has determined the genesis of multiple identities within the metropolis (Thorn, 2002, 98); in China, the acceleration of market reforms in the 90s caused widespread phenomena of consumerism and individualism, especially in the metropolises.

The configuration of the urban landscape is a crucial element in shaping people’s identity and desires (Thorn, 2002, 99): with urbanization and the increase of inner migration, Chinese cities’ spatial distribution has been radically modified. Since a city is naturally divided into neighbourhoods with different functions and architectural styles, which may also differ in the kind of activities that can be enjoyed and in the categories of people that live them, “the concept of undivided city is a myth and a utopia at the same time” (Van Kempen, 2007, 15).

Rural-to-urban borders and inner city/outer city borders, considered as a virtual divide between two worlds, acquire a high symbolic value for Wu Jun’s characters at a multidimensional level, meaning that they affect their lives from a psychological, existential and practical perspective. In his study on the borders within the city, choosing Canton as a case study, Breitung (2011) argues that in most Chinese cities neighbourhoods are separated from each other and people live in bounded spaces which represent their mental map. He looks at the meaning of virtual boundaries through an array of categories, among which the psychological one, quite meaningful for the purpose of this paper, is based on the idea that an invisible aspect of borders has to do with the ‘spacialization’ of identity (Breitung, 2011: 57-58): physical and psychological boundaries prevent migrants from actually experiencing the benefits of urban life. Wu Jun is concerned with the psychological impact of migration: upon their setting in Shenzhen, characters show a dual identity, trying to get rid of their background, but yet experiencing alienation in the urban context. Even craving for a urban status, they look at the glamorous aspects of the metropolis from behind a curtain, yet unwilling to return to their birthplaces.

Sociological studies show that migrant workers, especially women, once moved to the city, refuse their rural origins and consciously adopt a modernized lifestyle, visible in their outer appearance, that help them take the distance from their fellow villagers, with whom they do not want to identify anymore (Zhang, 2014, 5-6).

For Wu Jun’s characters, the rural-urban gap is at the same time a tangible and a psychological reality: it implies a redefinition of identity, but also a geographical relocation.
Between rural and urban identity

Identity issues related to migration are the core theme of the three stories proposed in this paragraph, that can be read as tales of disillusionment and awakening to reality. In their attempt to resettle in Shenzhen, these characters seem to be more interested in finding an answer to the question ‘who am I?’ than simply pursue an economic improvement. The three characters delineated in Er qu dao liu qu (From the second to the sixth district; 2012c) embody the condition of frustrated but stubborn desire to become city dwellers that characterizes migrants: the I-narrator, after studying to become an actress, moves to Shenzhen to fulfil her dream of performing on a stage, but inevitably fails; Guo Xiaogai, her childhood friend, and her boyfriend Xu Senlin go to Shenzhen to visit her, with the unspoken goal to stay longer, but the unfeasibility of urban life transforms their wish in a defeat. Despite difficulties and discriminations from residents, who despise northern migrants, the protagonist devotes every effort to make things work, never losing hope, endowed as she is with dignity and prepared to endure loneliness:

[...] I still do unskilled work: I receive or send documents, help actors to put on make-up, I even watch people’s bags while they are singing on the stage, but they should know I studied to become an actress. And then there are those lonely and misunderstood nights. For example, I have never been to Shekou [...] ; nonetheless, not much time ago, somebody said they had seen me in Shekou while doing ‘that’ business, they described plenty of details, said I was bargaining the price beneath a tree and suggested that I should have been fired (Wu Jun, 2012c, 60).

At stakes for the protagonist is not only the acquisition of an urban status: her aspirations entail complicated matters of identity. When her friends arrive in Guanwai, she’s proud to show them local habits and food tastes, as if she actually were a Shenzhener. Notwithstanding her nostalgia for the hometown, regret of countryside’s lost harmony, lets her cheerfully accommodate them, her behaviour must be interpreted as an aspect of her urban self. The identity issues of the three are also due to concrete problems, such as the lack of a residence permit:

I ran to the dormitory in building six, where Guo Xiaogai and Xu Senlin, who were there to fulfil their dreams, lived. I wanted to tell them they had to change programs, look for a new job as soon as possible, since if they didn’t find any, there would have been big problems. After all, they didn’t even have a temporary residence permit [... ] (Wu Jun, 2012c, 67).

There’s a discrepancy between who the characters think they are and urban dwellers’ image of them. The protagonist is aware that her boss, as much as everybody else in Shenzhen, has an awful opinion of migrants: “He had already told me the only profession suitable for northern girls is that of prostitute” (Wu Jun, 2012c, 68). Walking alone in the night, it occurs that men ask her the price for her services: “I clearly heard a voice coming from beneath the tree, saying in Cantonese: Miss, do you want to make business? I knew it was the fish seller because he emanated a smell of sea water” (Wu Jun, 2012c, 70).

Her friend’s arrival awakens further identity conflicts, worsening her situation. Xu Senlin’s initial enthusiasm towards Shenzhen wavers when the protagonist’s

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11 About the discriminations endured by migrant girls, see: Pun, 1999, 11-13.
employer, Lao He, doesn’t accept to hire Xiaogai and they go out of money. The situation rapidly collapses: Xiaogai loses the baby she was waiting for, after being beaten by local residents; Xu Senlin turns into an alcoholic and drags all of them into the final tragedy, when he tries to sell Lao He’s motorcycle and is captured by the police. The three gradually realize there’s no place for them in Shenzhen: their story represents the disillusionment of China’s working class in front of the promises of capitalism. The protagonist, after being fired, cannot but do the job everyone in Shenzhen thinks she’s suitable for: “[…] she hoped I could help her to get out of prison; she didn’t know that after losing my job I was already doing that old profession […]” (Wu Jun, 2012c, 75).

Loneliness, estrangement and stubbornness are also the features of Chen Housheng dadao (Chen Housheng Lane; 2012a), whose male protagonist, a factory worker, fantasizes to give one day his name to a small street situated not far from his workplace. While this alley embodies freedom and imagination, the factory represent his real life. The dormitory where he lives is described as a narrow and stifling space, where eight men share one room, each just having their bunk-bed behind the mosquito net to store personal belongings. Smothered by the utter lack of privacy, he finds in the virtual world a safe haven where he can be himself and relieve his anguish. The beloved street, though, is described as a very ordinary place, whose most advantageous aspect is anonymity. He spends there most of his free time, chatting with virtual friends in an internet bar. He has even written a poem for it, attracting praises and critics from netizens:

[…] differently from the feelings he had towards his native place, he loved this city. Any place in Shenzhen was a good place for him and he particularly hated those who praised the countryside on the web or expressed nostalgia towards rural life. He was completely different from those pedantic people, he liked the city, he liked that small street. The title of the poem he wrote for his beloved street was ‘Chen Housheng Lane’ (Wu Jun, 2012a, 10).

In spite of the difficulties, Chen Housheng loves Shenzhen; even if he hasn’t married much before moving there, he’s not planning to go back anytime soon. The metropolis allows him to emancipate from an ordinary an meaningless life. Chen Housheng is afflicted by a complicated identity issue: he feels different from his coworkers, who seem to have no other interest than playing with their mobile phones:

Nobody in this dormitory can understand him, from the morning until the night they only talk about things concerning the factory or home. There’s not even one person similar to him, who loves reading books, who likes to think, he is lonely. As soon as he started working in this factory he understood he was not an ordinary person (Wu Jun, 2012a, 12).

Chen Housheng frequently thought that the computer was like his wife or even much better. If he hadn’t got that place, the internet, how could he have expressed his feelings towards this metropolis? This was a way to communicate with the world around him, it was the only way he had to let his heart fly […] (Wu Jun, 2012a, 12)

His coworkers sometimes bring women to the dormitory, bothering him even more. When his wife goes to visit him, he’s embarrassed to let her sleep in his bed, doesn’t want to ask them to leave the room for one hour, plans to go to a hotel or to the lawn where he goes to think. Due to the discomforting situation, he understands he shares the same destiny of the other factory workers. Unexpectedly he’ll overcome his feeling of oppression by acknowledging the redeeming power of human relationships.
His wife Liu Caiying, a genuine girl who symbolizes the simplicity and moral values of the countryside, not in conflict with herself, helps him in this process, showing him the importance of people. Anyway, he secretly considers her unsuitable for urban life, he’d like her to share his interests: she doesn’t read a Shen Congwen’s novel he borrowed her, doesn’t like the web. He’ll gradually accept he’s not so special, but this awareness is not without melancholy.

Qin’ai de Shenzhen (Dear Shenzhen; 2008) is paradigmatic of migrants’ identity issues: it retraces the inner evolutions of three migrant workers from northern China, employed in the same skyscraper, who establish utterly different relationships with Shenzhen. Zhang Mangli is a successful manager who strives to hide her rural origins, pretending to have forgotten her previous habits, even when Li Shuiku will find out the truth by opening a letter destined to her. Li Shuiku hopes to bring back home his wife Chen Xiaogui, who works as a cleaners’ team leader, in order to make a family with her. While, even after starting to work as a security guard, he never feels comfortable with the coldness of urban atmospheres, he soon finds out that Chen Xiaogui is only interested in becoming a true urban dweller: trying to behave as a local, she envies elegant and fashionable Shenzhen women, that instead look down on her. For her Li Shuiku is a burden which could prevent her from obtaining an urban status: “In front of Shuiku, she always spoke as if she was a white collar. He knew she was just pretending” (Wu Jun, 2008, 230).

Chen Xiaogui’s background haunts her through her man, urging her even more to look like a citizen. The white collar Zhang Manli consciously rejects her past, displaying contempt towards any attitude that could be misinterpreted as ‘northern’. Li Shuiku is, instead, clearly inclined towards the countryside, considering the city an unnatural environment. His sexual desire is frustrated by Chen Xiaogui’s refusals, that seem to be an aspect of her urban self, while to him she looks more beautiful than ever, as much as those unattainable women walking in the fancy streets. Shenzhen bewilders him. His impression upon his arrival in Bao’an district, Guanwai, clashes with his idea of the metropolis: “This place has recently been transformed in a city district, it still has something of the old town. There are tall and short buildings, beneath the skyscrapers there are old houses, the market is chaotic, clothes and food shops are one next to the other […]” (Wu Jun, 2008, 220). But in the next page, he glimpses the metropolis he imagined: “There were gleaming tall buildings everywhere, he could see a lot of men he envied and women that left a man out of breath. Li Shuiku went mad each time he saw one of them” (Wu Jun, 2008, 221). The impersonal office building has different meaning for the three of them. For Chen Xiaogui it’s the place where she can try to conquer her urban identity. Her husband feels dazzled by it. For Zhang Manli it’s the place where she can express her new self.

Urban identities and social stratification

In Lianshang ni de chuang (In love with your bed; 2012d), Shiqi yingli (Seventeen miles; 2012b) and Metro Line 5 (2017) Wu Jun portrays social stratification within the metropolis, as a cause of cultural misunderstandings and identity clashes, telling three stories in which dwellers belonging to different social classes are confronted. Middle class members are represented as greedy for money, lacking of human values and overflowing with material accumulation, while the working class is energetic, resilient and optimist, despite objective obstacles. These three stories illustrate the
metamorphosis of people as a consequence of wealth. For example, the Zhuang family in *Shiqi yingli*, once humble migrants from Chaozhou, who eked out a living selling chickens on a stall, after getting rich act as if they’d forgotten their previous condition, just yearning for more privileges and adopting a haughty attitude:

Twenty years passed. Mister Zhuang’s business had enormously developed, of course he didn’t sell meet anymore, but was the owner of a listed company, his name often was in the newspapers and he appeared on television, he had transformed the small market where he used to work in a business plaza, where foreign brand products were sold [...](Wu Jun, 2012b, 26).

When they were still poor Wang Jiaping, a school teacher, and his wife Jiang Lanying offered help to Zhuang’s sons, who didn’t have a place to study: although at that time their father was very grateful, in his new entrepreneur’s identity he feels superior to his benefactors, doesn’t even try to help Wang Jiaping, who’s about to lose his job. The Zhuangs have moved to Seventeen miles, “a place situated on Shenzhen’s east coast, rich people’s villas are there” (Wu Jun, 2012b, 20), they own a private beach, where Jiang Lanying imagines they can have sex whenever they want. During Wang family’s visit to the villa by the sea, Zhuang’s wife shows off extreme luxury, making them feel awkward, and treats them with arrogance and snobbery. The story involves the topic of the marginalization of culture in the consumerist society: the two teachers are overwhelmed by a world where money, not culture or humanity, define people’s value. The subway also represents a distressing symbol of modernity: “[…] strangers of any kind are swallowed or spitted out of the metro station; they make her think that the world has changed […]” (Wu Jun, 2012b, 26).

In *Lianshang ni de chuang*, an account of prejudices towards northern migrants, three women with different backgrounds cross paths. Su Weihong, a bored middle class housewife, regrets having abandoned her career as an actress. A Di, her husband’s cousin from Guangdong province, is a common girl who lives with them to help cleaning and raising children. Su Weihong hates their neighbourhood, not far from an industrial area built in the 80s, and is disturbed by the presence of factory workers in the surroundings: she hates to confront herself with their youth, even if she’s just thirtytwo.

Looking at the environment around her, Su Weihong felt angry, it was like living in a big garbage basket, she regretted that when she was young she hadn’t rather gone to Hong Kong to look for a local man to marry. Who could she blame now? (Wu Jun, 2012d, 79).

Migrant workers and Shenzhen’s outskirts are blamed as a scapegoat for personal frustration:

Her husband never answered her complaining. Migrant workers from the countryside were too many, the apartments’ prices were too high inside the city and so they had to live in a peripheral area. When they had moved there, you could hear frogs croaking and meet hens wandering around, there was a somehow romantic atmosphere. Nowadays she could only listen migrant worker girls screaming during the rush hours, she just saw trash bags or dirty food boxes flying in the air, especially after 11 pm, when the factory closed(Wu Jun, 2012d, 80).
A Di’s goal, instead, is to become one of those *dagongmei*. That’s why she’s bewitched by A Huan, her roommate when she finds employment in the factory, a maverick northern girl, with a free personality and a rebel attitude, who spends money for fun and wears showy clothes. Su Weihong looks down on her because of her uninhibited behaviour and because she’s a northern girl. When A Di brings her friend to Su Weihong’s apartment, she behaves impolitely, reinforcing the woman’s racism: taking drinks and food from the fridge without asking, using everything she finds around, included Su Weihong’s bed (the title comes from there).

At the end, A Huan is raped by two criminals in the dormitory room she shared with A Di who, in spite of their alleged friendship, doesn’t help her and doesn’t hesitate to indicate her to them. In this grim story fear, racism and preconceptions overcome friendship. When she’s informed of the facts Su Weihong just suggests to A Di to leave the factory, which is not a safe place for a girl from Guangdong.

Also in *Metro Line Five* (Wu Jun, 2017) two metropolitan women are compared: a middle class woman, Shi Yu, who has a boring marriage, chosen just for money, and who regrets having left her job to take care of her busy husband, and a migrant girl, Zhu Xiyan, who in spite of many difficulties, appears as a more dynamic and happier person, supported by the certitude that she can improve her life through her own efforts. While the well-to-do lady is always complaining because she’s dissatisfied with her life as a housewife in the suburbs of Shenzhen, the hunanese masseuse finds there occasions to work, earn money and make new experiences:

Her husband had bought a flat in the area so as to avoid friends, acquaintances and his ex-wife. There wasn’t a single place around there to have fun. To make matters worse, the area around the flat had turned into a building site just a few days after they had moved, and the noise stopped them sleeping. Later on they were supposedly carrying out repairs on the metro and prices immediately skyrocketed (Wu Jun, 2017, 8)

Also in this story, migrants are a scapegoat for personal frustration: Shi Yu doesn’t appreciate their presence in the nearby markets. Her discontent for not being a career woman anymore is also associated with her uneasiness towards traffic and construction sites. The new metro, a symbol of modernization and future for Zhu Xiyan, is a further annoyance for Shi Yu. In the area where they both live, residents’ daily lives revolve around the construction site of the new metro line:

Things weren’t bad before the metro. Now it was a nuisance, it was damaging the environment and the original landscape. Shenzhen is a landmark in the progress of Chinese civilization as well as an essential stopping point for people of distinction. Why mess that up? (Wu Jun, 2017, 3)

[...] there were building works for the metro everywhere. Towering cranes were dotted over the roads like pins in a map that just made people lose their way. The roads there and back where jammed, so she lost time taking a detour. They hadn’t put up road signs, she went down several dead ends (Wu Jun, 2017, 3).

The two meet each other in the beauty centre where Zhu Xiyan is employed. At the beginning Shi Yu despises the young girl because of her origins and expresses disapproval towards her beauty treatments, but then she’s attracted by her optimism.

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13 The term refers to rural migrant girls. For further reading about *dagongmei*’s issues of identity, see: Pun, 1999; Zhang, 2014, 23. For literary representations of *dagongmei*, see: Jaguscik, 2011; Dooling, 2017.
and starts to trust her and feel piety for the hardships she’s endured. Zhu Xiyan helps her when she has a miscarriage, but throws away or refuses Shi Yu’s gifts, usually second hand things. Their friendship ends when Shi Yu finds out the migrant girl is having an affair with her husband. Zhu Xiyan is not interested in her husband, but is trying to exploit the situation to earn more money, in order to marry her boyfriend: she’s good in turning adversities at her advantage. Avidity also causes Shi Yu’s failures: choosing money over ambitions, materiality over happiness, she condemns herself to perpetual disgruntlement.

**Conclusion**

Through the analyses of these six short stories, set in Shenzhen in time of globalization, I have attempted to demonstrate the relevance of issues of identity and belonging in the fictional production of writer Wu Jun and to show how, by contextualizing individuals’ daily experience within precise areas or spaces of the city, she highlights the influence of the urban environment on the psychological dimension. As they’re focused on everyday reality, memory seems not to be a meaningful aspect of characters’ inner world; their contradictory identities and restlessness appear not just as an outcome of urbanization and rapid economic growth, but as result of the difficulty to define their own place in the city and of their need to find a meaning for their efforts in the context of social transformations. As an aspect of the wider phenomenon of ‘urban literature' and thanks to their realist style, Wu Jun’s stories also constitute a contribution to the understanding of China’s urban configuration in 21st century.

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14 For further readings about the broad phenomenon of contemporary Chinese urban literature, see: Visser, 2010.
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