Heritage, Homemaking, and Identity Formation in Migrant Workers

An Ethnographic Study of Yi Migrants in Shenzhen

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From August 2018 to December 2019, I worked as a primary school teacher in Weishan, a small county in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. The full name of Weishan is Weishan Yi and Hui Autonomous County. Approximately 80 per cent of my students were Yi people. That was the first time I paid attention to and interacted with this ethnic group.

A significant number of my students at Weishan were 'left-behind children.' Their parents had left rural villages to work in urban cities, among which Shenzhen was one of the most popular destinations. Sometimes the children would chat with me about the city life they heard from their parents and asked for my confirmation. The most common one as well as their favourite one is: 'Is everyone in Shenzhen rich?' When I gave them a negative answer, they often showed an expression of doubt or surprise. In their worldview, Shenzhen is a symbol of wealth, and the reason why their parents have not become affluent enough even though they are working in Shenzhen right now is that their parents are not real 'Shenzheners.'

This project explores the role of cultural heritage in the Yi migrants' ongoing search for identity and a sense of home in a metropolitan city. It focuses on their cultural practices at the grassroots level and probes into the interplay between heritage and homemaking for a marginalised migrant group. How are the Yi migrant workers faring in the city of Shenzhen? What does the notion of home and heritage mean to them in their everyday life? What external and internal factors affect their depiction of the city as home or nonhome? How do they deploy their cultural heritage as homemaking tools to achieve a sense of belonging and negotiate their positions in society? What are their identity-building strategies and how are these strategies contingent upon specific circumstances?

The aims of this research are twofold. With regard to the specific case study, it will advance the understanding of the Yi migrant workers and the city of Shenzhen: the struggles and efforts of the former and the role of their culture in their daily practices; the latter as not merely a physical space but also an embodied and sensorial experience. In a broader sense, this study provides new insights into the nature of home in a migration context. The pursuit

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of home has taken on greater significance in an age of globalisation and de-globalisation, of increasing migration, displacement, and replacement.

I argue that Yi people are able to utilise ethnic heritage as a means to attain a sense of belonging and attachment in migratory processes. The efficacy of this approach relies on various factors, including broader socioeconomic structures and personal attributes. Throughout this process, the concept of home emerges as a comprehensive entity that connects the past, present, and future. Nevertheless, home may not always be a comfortable locus, as tensions, conflicts, and burdens may arise within its realm. The interaction between heritage and homemaking is dynamic and continuous, presenting migrant workers with both challenges and possibilities. The Yi migrants employ different homemaking strategies depending on the nature of the specific space (i.e., the level of privacy or publicity). Ultimately, the findings of this study shed light on the diverse perceptions and practices of homemaking among migrant populations and highlight the intricate relationships between cultural heritage and the sense of belonging for individuals on the move.

The city of Shenzhen

Shenzhen is a coastal city in southern China, located within the Pearl River Delta and adjacent to Hong Kong. Covering an area of nearly 2,000 square kilometres, the city now has nine administrative districts and one new district: Futian, Luohu, Yantian, Nanshan, Bao'an, Longgang, Longhua, Pingshan, Guangming, and Dapeng New District (Figure 0.1).[1] It has a subtropical maritime climate and abundant precipitation, with an annual average temperature of around 22°C.[2] The city trees are lychee and mangrove, and the city flower is the bougainvillea.

The area of Shenzhen has seen human activities for more than 6,000 years since the mid-Neolithic period.[3] Shenzhen as part of a historic county—the Bao'an County—was first established in 331 AD in the Eastern Jin Dynasty.[4] The county seat was situated at Nantou, one of the major historical and cultural sites protected at the prefectural level nowadays. The Hakka and Cantonese people are among the earliest inhabitants of this region. The place name 'Shenzhen' can be traced back to 1410 AD in the Ming Dynasty. '*Shen'* means deep and '*zhen'* is the local name for drains in the field. 'Shenzhen' literally refers to a deep drain in the field. As indicated in the toponym, this geographical region is densely covered with waters. Currently, there are more than 300 rivers and over 170 reservoirs in the city.[5]

As Richard Hu puts it in *The Shenzhen phenomenon: From fishing village to global knowledge city*, 'migration is the DNA of Shenzhen' (2021, 95). Among all the places in China, Shenzhen alone earns the distinction of being a true migrant city. There are many migrant cities around the globe such as New York, Sydney, London, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Vancouver, which exhibit high levels of cosmopolitanism as a key indicator of their competitiveness (R. Hu, Blakely, and Zhou 2013). In comparison, Shenzhen holds a distinctive

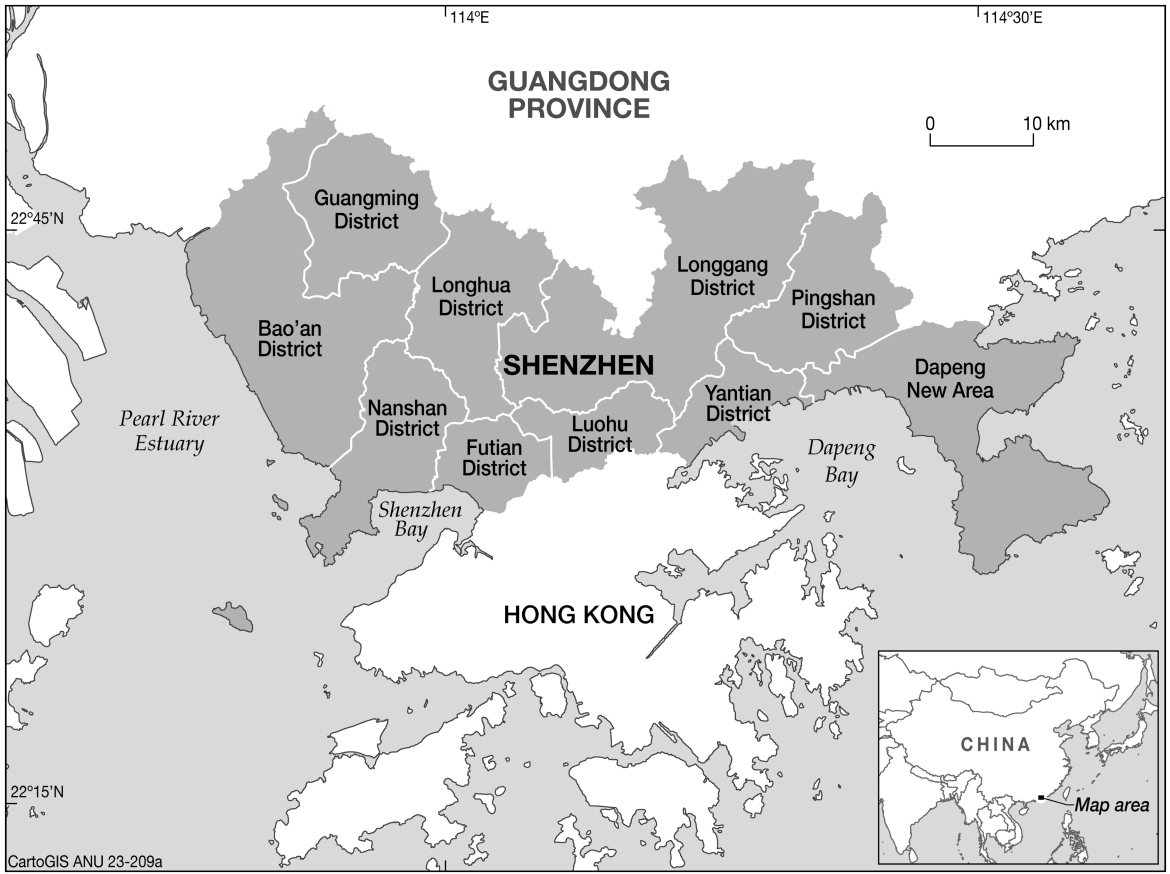

Figure 0.1 Map of Shenzhen. Map provided by CartoGIS Services, Scholarly Information Services, The Australian National University.

nature in that it is a national, not international, migrant city, achieving its megacity status through intranational migration (R. Hu 2021, 97).

Hu analyses the city's nature of migration from three aspects. Demographically, the permanent non-registered population (*changzhu fei huji renkou*) has consistently exceeded the registered population (*changzhu huji renkou*) since 1989 (Figure 0.2). As of 2021, Shenzhen has a permanent population of 17.68 million, ranked number seven among all the Chinese cities. The permanent registered population is 5.56 million, constituting 31.5 per cent of the permanent population. The permanent non-registered population is 12.12 million, more than twice the size of the former, and constitutes 68.5 per cent of the total population. According to the Seventh National Population Census of the People's Republic of China (2020), the average age of Shenzhen residents is 32.5 years old and only 3.22 per cent of the population is aged over 65 years old, making it the youngest city in China.[6]

Economically, migration has been the catalyst for the city's rapid population expansion and has facilitated the procurement of workforce for its economic growth and development. The narratives of Shenzhen's history usually start from 1979, when it officially became a prefecture-level city under the administration of Guangdong province. In 1980, it was designated as one of the first Special economic zones (SEZ; the other three are Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen) as part of China's 'reform and opening-up' policies. Shenzhen's gross domestic product (GDP) was 0.27 billion yuan in 1980.[7] By 2021, Shenzhen's GDP had exceeded three trillion yuan (USD 444 billion), with an average of over 40 per cent increase per year.[8] The GDP of the three sectors of industry accounts for 0.1 per cent (primary), 37.0 per cent (secondary), and 62.9 per cent (tertiary) of the regional GDP respectively. It has surpassed not only its neighbour Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, but also Asia's leading economies of Hong Kong and Singapore. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the city's economic foundation was labour-intensive manufacturing and the majority of migrants consisted of rural workers. As the city evolved from a manufacturing centre to a hub of knowledge and innovation in the 21st century, an increasing number of knowledge workers and entrepreneurs have joined the migrant population from other cities within the country (R. Hu 2021, 95).

Culturally, the official slogan of the city reads, 'Once you come, you are a Shenzhener' (*Laile jiushi Shenzhen ren*), denoting a distinctively welcoming and inclusive attitude toward migrants. It has been criticised for downplaying the institutional barriers, differentiation, and even discrimination that migrants encounter (Gravemeyer, Gries, and Xue 2011). Nevertheless, this slogan and its rhetorical nature still capture 'a sort of shared mentality among Shenzhen's mostly migrant residents' and encapsulate the 'positive local culture around migrants' (R. Hu 2021, 97). Together with the dissemination of the popular slogans is the construction of a hegemonic 'Shenzhen Spirit,' referring to a set of official values concretised by the municipal government. It was formulated in the 1980s and has been reconstructed several times:

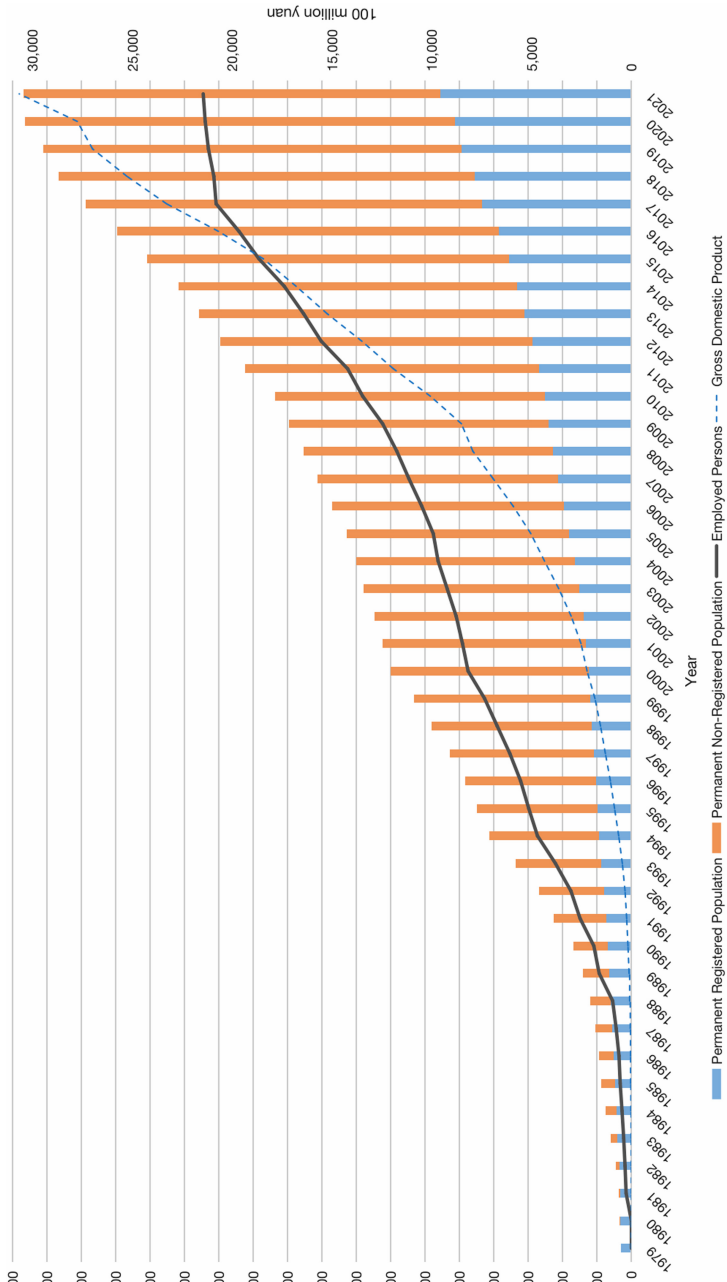

Figure 0.2 Permanent registered and non-registered population, employed persons, and GDP in Shenzhen, 1979–2021. Source: Shenzhen Statistical Bureau (SSB 2022, 4–5).

1987: 'Opening up, Innovation, Devotion.'
1990: 'Opening up, Innovation, Unity, Dedication.'
2002: 'Opening up and innovation, Honesty and law-abidance, Practicality and efficiency, Unity and dedication.'
2020: 'Dare to break through and try, Openness and inclusiveness, Practicality and reverence for law, Pursuit of excellence.'[9]

As a regional articulation of the state discourse, the Shenzhen Spirit serves as 'a rhetorical vehicle' for 'the simultaneous construction of material and spiritual civilisation' (Florence 2017, 87). Consequently, a model has been set for migrant workers, encouraging them to align their behaviours with the core values of the city (Florence 2017).

The development of Shenzhen has been built on China's intensive internal migration since the 1980s, with the country's migration policies serving as the critical institutional structure in which migrant workers negotiate their socioeconomic positions. While migration studies nowadays tend to focus more on international migration, internal migration is arguably more important in quantitative if not qualitative terms, especially for China (King and Skeldon 2010). From 1991 to 2001 alone, an estimated transfer of 100 million people took place between interior and coastal regions, signaling the scale of this ongoing phenomenon (Deshingkar and Grimm 2005, 10). According to a 2022 governmental report entitled *The Population Scale Continues to Expand and the Employment Situation Remains Stable*, the rapid increase in population mobility has become one of the most important characteristics of Chinese society, injecting powerful impetus into socioeconomic development.[10] As of 2020, the migrant or floating population in China reached 375.82 million, accounting for 26.6 per cent of the total population.

The household registration system, or the *hukou* system, plays a crucial role in regulating internal migration by linking social welfare benefits to a person's registered residence (K. W. Chan 2013). The system was introduced in the 1950s as a way to control population movement and allocate resources based on planned economic goals (Fan 1996; Liang, Por Chen, and Gu 2002). Each family is issued a household register containing identifying information of each family member, such as age, native place, marital status, and address. The *hukou* system has two main categories: rural and urban. Rural *hukou* holders are restricted from living in urban areas and accessing social welfare benefits. Urban *hukou* holders, on the other hand, enjoy privileged access to social welfare benefits and better job opportunities.

The system has had a profound impact on Chinese society and created a two-tiered society, with significant disparities in education, healthcare, and social welfare between rural and urban areas (Davin 1999; Liang and White 1996; Ye et al. 2013). Rural-to-urban migrants often face significant challenges in accessing social benefits and services in urban areas. For instance, their children are not eligible to attend public schools in urban areas, and they

often struggle to obtain healthcare services due to the high cost of medical care (Chen 2011; X. Hu, Cook, and Salazar 2008; H. Zhang 2017). Despite these challenges, internal migration has continued to play a vital role in China's economic development (P. Huang and Zhan 2005; Shen 2013). Migrants have contributed significantly to urbanisation and economic growth, particularly in the manufacturing and construction industries.

The Chinese government has recognised the importance of internal migration in driving economic development and has taken steps to reform the *hukou* system (Wang, Milner, and Scheffel 2021; Wu 2013; J. Zhang, Wang, and Lu 2019). Since the 2000s, the government has relaxed restrictions on migration and introduced policies to provide social welfare benefits to migrants, aimed at reducing the institutional barriers faced by migrants (K. W. Chan 2014; Zhao, Liu, and Zhang 2018). One of the most significant reforms was introduced in 2014, which allowed rural migrants to convert their *hukou* status to urban *hukou* status if they met certain requirements, such as having stable employment and housing in the city.[11] In the present time, the *hukou* system does not function as a mechanism to control the movement of people anymore, as individuals have the liberty to relocate from one area to another.

Nevertheless, the *hukou* system remains a significant obstacle to the full integration of migrants into urban society (K. W. Chan and Buckingham 2008). The system perpetuates social and economic sectors and limits social mobility for rural-to-urban migrants (X. Huang et al. 2017; Y. Zhu 2007). Migrants who do not meet the requirements to convert their *hukou* status must continue to rely on temporary residency permits, which do not provide access to comprehensive social welfare benefits. Additionally, the reform has been implemented at a slow pace, with some urban areas imposing additional requirements for *hukou* conversion.

It should be noted that the *hukou* system poses a major obstacle for migrant workers only if they intend to settle down permanently in urban areas and require access to formal education for their children or ownership of housing in major cities (Xinrong Ma 2019, 57). However, most migrant workers who come to cities for temporary employment and later return to their home villages are typically unaffected by the challenges posed by the *hukou* system. They do not express significant concern regarding the inequality that arises due to *hukou* restrictions, as their primary objective is to secure employment and improve their economic circumstances (K. W. Chan and Zhang 1999; Wu 2013; Y. Zhu 2007). This is particularly true for those who are engaged in low-skilled and manual labour, who constitute the majority of migrant workers in China (C. K.-C. Chan, Ngai, and Chan 2010; J. Zhang, Wang, and Lu 2019). These labourers, due to their inadequate comprehension of the potential consequences of the *hukou* system, generally have limited access to vital social services, making them susceptible to exploitation and mistreatment by employers who could easily take advantage of their precarious status as non-permanent residents.

Shenzhen's unprecedentedly rapid growth from a small village to a megacity has made it a legend and a miracle. The so-called 'Shenzhen phenomenon' symbolises the exceptional success of China's socioeconomic reforms in the past 40 years (R. Hu 2021). It has been considered a model city whose economic development mode is replicated and promoted both within China and around the globe (Engman, Onodera, and Pinali 2007; Baissac 2011; Bräutigam and Xiaoyang 2011; X. Zhou 2012; Dannenberg, Yejoo, and Schiller 2013). In terms of the reason for its remarkable achievements, Juan Du (2020, 2) points out in her book *The Shenzhen Experiment: The Story of China's Instant City* that, 'Shenzhen's achievements are often attributed to the power of the centralised state and its modern planning, while the city's reputed lack of history or local characteristics is optimistically theorised as a secret to success, enabling possibilities and the pursuit of the new without an obligation to consider the past.'

These ingrained beliefs—that Shenzhen is a rootless city, a white paper without any background colour, a place free from the burden of the past—have formed Shenzhen's 'founding myth' (Du 2020, 4). This myth is a powerful and effective tool to establish an influential image of the authoritative state and legitimise ordinary people's 'Shenzhen dream' as well. As a result, the miraculous city has attracted a myriad of immigrants from every part of the country and become the second city after Beijing to include within its population all the 56 ethnic groups in China.[12]

However, as Du (2020) has insightfully argued, such a founding myth (and its rhetorical vehicle) emphasises the top-down policies of the central government at the expense of the dynamic bottom-up negotiations and practices from local governments, communities, and individuals. She contends that there are four major misconceptions about the city's developmental history. First, the purpose of designating Shenzhen as an SEZ is not as ambitious as to increase China's role in the global economy. Instead, SEZ is an experiment to alleviate poverty nationwide, a more urgent and modest goal that provides greater agency to its citizens. Second, the year 1979 is not the beginning of the Shenzhen story. Pre-1979 history (e.g., immigration, administrative systems, maritime traditions, and social networks), though generally unrecognised, has a significant influence on the city's evolution. Third, a considerable number of regional communities and individuals, such as residents in numerous urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) remain unsung in the grand narratives of the city and its cultural landscape (Oakes 2020). Fourth, the popular propaganda that Shenzhen has been transformed from a small fishing village into a metropolitan area neglects the city's 'placeness,' which is closely related to the aforementioned pre-1979 history and local people. Therefore, Du (2020, 16) contends that 'a faithful account of the city's social and material landscape *must* zoom in to the level of the local artefacts, natural features, infrastructures, buildings, animals, and humans that define it' (emphasis in original).

Recent years have seen some efforts to remedy the misconceptions of Shenzhen's founding myth and acknowledge the grassroots initiatives within the larger history. For example, the Shenzhen Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and Shenzhen Evening News jointly sponsored a project called 'Shenzhen's oral history.' Presenting the memories of 100 people from all walks of life, it seeks to 'remember a history, appreciate a time, continue a feeling, and spread a spirit.'[13] Nevertheless, the selected individuals are mostly experts and elites with notable achievements in their fields of work.

Ethnic minority groups are relegated to those who are 'unacknowledged in standard accounts of Shenzhen's population explosion' (Du 2020, 14). As of 2021, the total population of ethnic minorities in Shenzhen is 1.24 million,[14] but no detailed statistics are available in terms of the population of each minority group. The only official data that can be found on Yi people in Shenzhen is that the Yi population exceeded 10,000 in 2013.[15] The lack of data denotes the marginalisation of the group in society.

The year 2020 celebrates the 40th anniversary of Shenzhen's designation as a Special Economic Zone. Nevertheless, as Ezra Vogel points out, 'Shenzhen has not received the scholarly attention it deserves' (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017, xiv), especially in Western literature. One of the aims of this research is to address this gap by zooming in on the interplay between the Yi migrant workers and this miracle city. By focusing on an under-represented group in an under-researched global city, this study aims to move a step forward and address the Shenzhen phenomenon from a different perspective.

Yi people: society, culture, and mobility

Since the 20th century, China has been using the word *minzu*—either coined by late Qing literati or imported from Japan (Y. Zhou 2019, 69)—to refer to the diverse groups living in the territory. The Chinese word *minzu* was originally translated as nationality and has been redefined as ethnicity or ethnic groups since the 1990s (Bulag 2010, 284). The correspondence between the Chinese word and its English translation remains problematic. Some scholars consider it untranslatable (e.g., Harrell 1990) whereas others attempt to distinguish between similar words such as *zuqun* or *guozu* (e.g., Bulag 2010; R. Ma 2010a).

Yun Zhou (2019) traces different definitions of ethnicity in the Chinese context. The official definition of *minzu* in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* is 'a stable community with common language, territory, economic life, as well as common psychological quality expressed in common culture.'[16] Under the influence of Marxism (R. Ma 2010b; Yang 2008), the four criteria in this definition clearly follow the Soviet model of a 'nation,' which is 'a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.'[17] In 2012, an official document defines *minzu* as 'a

stable community of people formed in a certain historical development stage. Generally speaking, *minzu* has common characteristics in historical origin, mode of production, language, culture, customs, and psychological identity. Religion plays an important role in the formation and development of some *minzu*.'[18] As Zhou (2019, 70) points out, this latest definition omits the territorial requirement in the Stalinist framework, whereas the role of religion is highlighted for certain groups.

China now has 56 ethnic groups, including the dominant Han (around 91.11 per cent) and 55 minority groups (around 8.89 per cent).[19] Each individual belongs to one and only one ethnic group, although there is still a very small portion of unidentified groups (around 0.06 per cent). The finalisation of the 56 ethnic groups is a result of the state-led 'ethnic classification project' that took place from the 1950s to the 1980s (Zhou 2019, 76–77). The classification has two main principles, i.e., the four Stalinist criteria and the intention of an individual group (Zhou 2019, 79–80). However, 'the state has a privileged position' in the actual process of classification, meaning that the identification is 'a collective decision, rather than a sum of individual decisions' (Harrell 1990, 517–518). When the collective decision is at odds with the individual ones, disputes may arise (Harrell 2001b; e.g., Bulag 2010).

The official classification has a significant impact on the distribution of political, economic, and cultural resources. There have been a series of favourable policies for minority groups since the 1980s, such as the representation of minorities in political institutions, financial input to minority areas, support programmes for minority students, etc. The state currently regards equality, unity, mutual assistance, and harmony as the essential characteristics of China's ethnic relations and develops eight main ethnic policies.[20]

One of the fundamental political systems aimed at protecting ethnic minorities' rights and providing them benefits is the Regional Ethnic Autonomy System. Based on the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People's Republic of China* (1984), regional autonomy is practised in areas where ethnic minorities live in concentrated communities.[21] Accordingly, China has designated autonomous administrative divisions at different levels: five autonomous regions (province-level), 30 autonomous prefectures (prefecture-level), 117 autonomous counties (county-level), and three autonomous banners (county-level). In these autonomous areas, autonomous agencies are established to function as local agencies of state power at their respective levels.[22] The power of autonomy of the self-government organs includes enacting self-governing regulations, organising local public security forces, independently arranging for and administering local economic development, etc.

Yi people are an ethnic group with a long history and distinct culture. Although there have been debates on the origin of Yi people, one of the most accepted theories is that 6,000–7,000 years ago, a group of ancient Qiang people migrated south and merged with indigenous tribes in the north and south of the Jinsha River (Wuqie et al. 2009, 11). They gradually evolved into

various local branches and expanded their territories into neighbouring areas such as Liangshan and the Red River. Each branch formed its own customs and dialect, with different autonyms including Nuosu, Nasu, Nisu, Axi, Sani, etc. Although these branches were categorised into a single ethnic group by the state in the last century, Yi people are diverse linguistically and culturally. However, heterogeneous as they may be, the 'Yi peoples are all related to each other historically, and that they retain greater or lesser amounts of cultural similarities in the present day' (Harrell 2001a, 8).

As of 2021, Yi people are the sixth-largest ethnic minority group in China. They have a population of over 9.8 million and constitute 0.3 per cent of China's total population. Yi people are mainly located in rural areas in southwest China, including the mountainous regions of Yunnan (5.07 million), Sichuan (3.19 million), and Guizhou (0.96 million).[23] Together, the three provinces cover 94 per cent of the Yi population. Additionally, there are Yi people in other Southeast Asian countries such as Burma, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province is home to the single largest Yi community. Among its 4.87 million permanent population, around 55 per cent (2.94 million) are Yi people.[24] Liangshan is a mountainous region with harsh natural conditions. An embodiment of the harshness is the famous Atuleer Village, known as the Cliff Village, in Liangshan. The village is located on the top of a 1,600-metre-tall peak and the only way to the outside world was unsecured vine ladders. It received nationwide media coverage and attention in 2016, making the dramatic scenes of children climbing up the vine ladders on a sheer cliff face a symbol of hardship and backwardness in remote areas of China.[25] Currently, there are a total of three Yi autonomous prefectures and 19 Yi autonomous counties, all located in the southwest region of China (Figure 0.3).

Traditional Yi societies have two major characteristics: clan and class. Scholars have different views on the nature of the Yi clans (*jiazhi* in Mandarin) and their relationship with the Han lineages (Fang 1984; Q. Hu 1985; Lin 1995; Yi 2007; Xueliang Ma 1989). Generally speaking, a clan is based on patrilineality and the son-father patronymic naming system (D. Liu 2016, 30). Clan members worship common ancestors and practice exogamy. Every clan has its own surname, and every Yi individual belongs to a clan. As a traditional Yi saying goes, 'Monkeys depend on forests; Yi people depend on clans.' The clan is the most basic unit of social action and public participation in Yi societies: it is the root of Yi people. It 'once functioned as a military organisation to protect its members from outside attacks and provided a mechanism to solve internal disputes' (Xinrong Ma 2019, 43). Before China's democratic political reform in the 20th century (Womack 1984), Yi societies had a long-established hierarchical social system based on slavery. There were two socially distinctive classes: the Black Yi and the White Yi, the former being the ruling class and the latter being the subordinated class. The proportion of the White Yi was around 90 per cent and no intermarriage between the two classes was allowed (D. Liu 2016, 29). Though the Yi societies have undergone dramatic

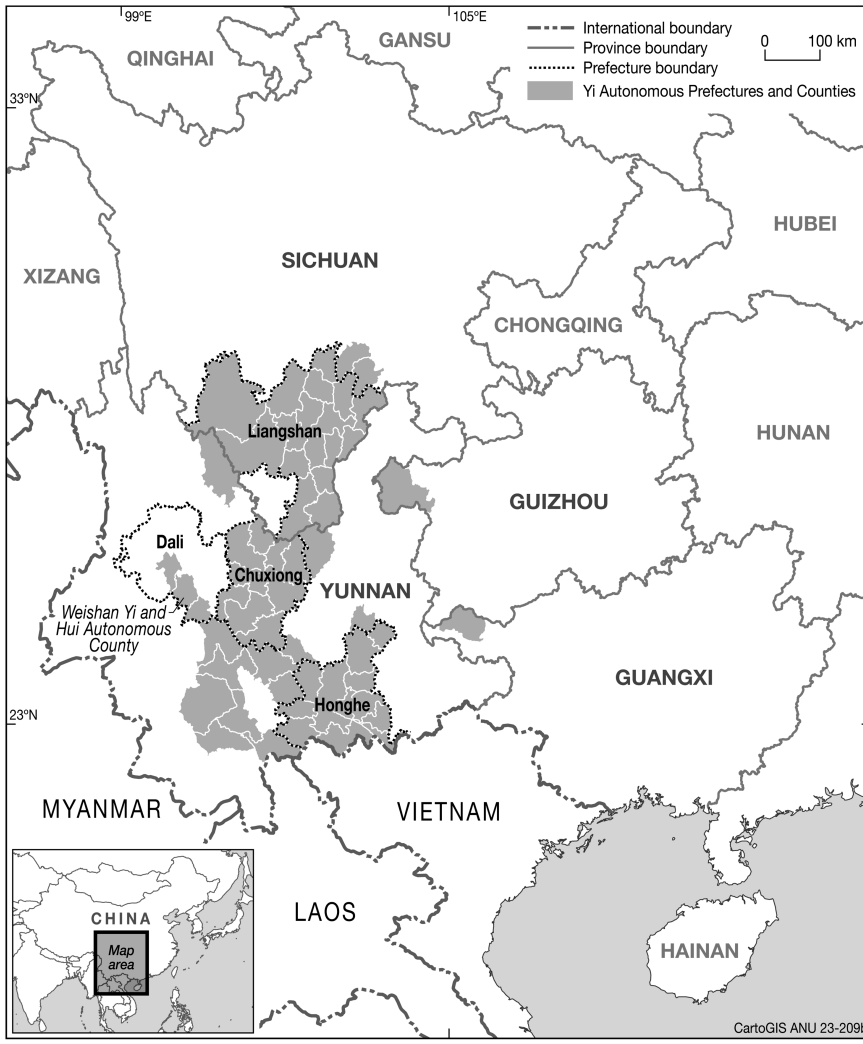

Figure 0.3 Map of the Yi autonomous areas in China. Map provided by CartoGIS Services, Scholarly Information Services, The Australian National University.

changes since the 1950s and social stratification does not officially exist anymore, the traditional social structure based on clan and class still exerts an important influence on Yi people in the modern era.

Besides social systems, religion also plays a pivotal role in Yi people's daily life. Animism and ancestral worship are ubiquitous in their everyday practices (Wuqie et al. 2009, 321). In Liangshan, for instance, *bimo* and *suni* are the two types of spiritual practitioners. A *bimo* is a male specialist in the Yi language, scriptures, and rituals. *Bimo* serve as shaman priests and enjoy a high

status in traditional societies (Kraef 2014). *Suni* are of lower social position and can be either male or female. Unlike *bimo* who learn the knowledge, suni usually acquire their power after a sudden disease or 'being possessed by the spirit of suni' (Wuqie et al. 2009, 321). *Bimo* and *suni* perform divinations for all kinds of social events, including weddings, funerals, hunting, disputes, etc. (Lin 1995, 91–101). Some Yi people, especially in Yunnan, are also converted to Christianity or Buddhism as a result of the cultural exchange with other ethnic groups (Wuqie et al. 2009, 325–26).

Historically, wars with the central dynasty, commerce, and tension between clans were the main reasons for Yi people's outmigration, but there were few large-scale migrations from the Yi areas to the central plains (D. Liu 2016, 34–35). After China's economic reforms in the 1980s, the Yi districts have experienced a significantly higher level of population mobility. Among the ethnographies on Yi people and their mobility, Shao-hua Liu's (2010) *Passage to Manhood: Youth Migration, Heroin, and AIDS in Southwest China* is one of the most influential. Regarding Yi people as a special group under the inevitable influence of modernity, Liu studied the 'passage to manhood' chosen by the group for a particular age—flowing into cities for fun and adventure and eventually becoming drug addicts, drug dealers, or thieves. The way to end this distorted ritual was either death or entering the next stage of life in different ways (e.g., working as a construction worker or returning home to be a law-abiding farmer). The Yi youth seemed to be caught in such a predicament, with no chance of rejecting, resisting, or changing the forces of modernity.

Not only do Yi people migrate to neighbouring areas in southwest China, but they also venture further to other parts of the country in response to the broader socioeconomic changes and development (Liu, 2010; D. Liu 2016). According to the 2020 Chinese Census, the Yi population in two provinces that are not traditionally inhabited by Yi people (that is, apart from Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou) has exceeded 100,000 respectively: Zhejiang (0.16 million) and Guangdong (0.14 million).[26] The Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta, two of the most developed and urbanised areas in China, have become popular destinations for Yi migrants because of their manufacturing industries and densely distributed factories. Northwest areas such as Xinjiang also attract Yi people (Luo 2021). As one of my interviewees says, half-joking and half-proud, 'Wherever there are people, there are Yi people.'[27]

Han Bo and Liu Dongxu[28] both examine the internal organisation of the Yi migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta (PRD), namely the distinct 'foreman system.'[29] In his thesis *Foreman System: The Niche and Organisation of Yi Workers in the Pearl River Delta* (2011), Han regards the emergence of the foreman system for Yi workers as a result of both the habitus of the ethnic group and economic structures in the PRD. The periodic fluctuations of overseas demand require a supply of temporary workers, who tend to be under relatively loose management and short work cycles. The niche of temporary workers happens to suit the social behaviour and expectations of Yi people:

to experience modernity and have fun in cities while living gregariously with familiar group members.

Liu's monograph *The Order of a Mobile Society: Studies on the Organisation and Group Behaviours of Yi People in the Pearl River Delta* (2016) further examines the 'invisible community' created by the foreman system for the Yi workers in the PRD. Liu argues that the foreman system, brought about by the development of the labour market in coastal cities, is in essence 'quasi-union' and 'quasi-dispatch.' It enables Yi workers to organise more effectively based on their original social bonds and helps them adapt to the instability and vicissitudes of the market. By using and reconstructing their original social relations, Yi workers enhance their social solidarity to deal with intragroup and intergroup tensions in the process of deep marketisation. In a similar vein, Xinrong Ma's dissertation *Entrapment by Consent: The Co-ethnic Brokerage System of Ethnic Yi Labour Migrants in China* (2018) delves into the 'brokerage system' (another term for the foreman system) and explores its double-sided nature: on the one hand, the brokerage system 'entraps,' exploits, and controls the Yi workers, making it difficult for them to find self-employment; on the other hand, the workers voluntarily rely on the system for protection and security when migrating to urban areas.

Nonetheless, studies on the multilayered roles of culture in Yi people's daily experience of a global city and their complex cultural strategies in the migratory processes are still insufficient. As Hong Zhu and Junxi Qian (2021) have pointed out, a significant body of research on migration in China is dedicated to the 'institutional parameters that shape the motives, processes and consequences of migration' (p. 2686) such as the *hukou* system, but only a few studies pay attention to 'migrants' agency in experimenting with the institutional turfs to advance specific purposes, their fluid identities and subjectivities, everyday experiences and practices, and their multiple, evolving relations to broader cultural and ideological systems' (p. 2687).

Yi studies have become a rising interdisciplinary field incorporating linguistics, literature, philosophy, religion, geography, sociology, anthropology, and so on. Many scholars, both in and outside China, have devoted their lives to advancing the knowledge of the Yi and made significant achievements. For example, Liu Yaohan, the first Yi professor in the People's Republic of China, edited a book series titled 'Series of Yi Culture Studies' (*Yizu wenhua yanjiu congshu*, 1985–2005), which collects over 40 books and covers various aspects of the Yi culture. Furthermore, a considerable number of websites have been developed to promote Yi studies and expand its social influence.[30] It is not my intention (and beyond my capabilities as well) to review all critical issues in Yi people's history and culture. This research mainly focuses on the present, but it is hoped that by providing a brief account of how the group of people has become the 'Yi' in contemporary China, it will add a layer of history to this picture and address the goal of connecting the past, present, and future.

Heritage and homemaking

As David Lowenthal (1998, 94) has pinpointed, 'heritage today all but defies definition.' As 'a conveniently ambiguous concept' (Harrison 2013, 14), heritage embraces a wide range of meanings for different people across the globe. Scholars have defined heritage from numerous perspectives, and there are some general agreements worth noting. First, heritage is not only about the past but also about the present and the future (Lowenthal 1985; Harrison 2013). Second, heritage is not only a thing (or noun), but also a process (or verb)—either cultural, economic, political, or social (Harvey 2001; Smith 2006). Third, as a process, heritage is not peaceful, but a contested one involving various stakeholders (e.g., Langford 1983; Samuel 1994).

This study adopts the constructionist approach to heritage and conceptualises heritage as a distinct form of social action that involves a diverse range of heritage workers, including ethnic communities, cultural practitioners, and governments at different levels. The constructionist view of heritage challenges the essentialist notion that heritage is an inherent characteristic or a static entity (see, for example, Bendix 2009; Harrison 2013; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004; Smith 2006). Heritage is not a given, but is created and recreated by human actions. As Peter Howard (2003, 7) states, 'not everything is heritage, but anything could become heritage.' This view underlines the notion of heritage as a product of constantly evolving societal perceptions and cultural narratives, which can be mobilised for diverse social and political goals. It recognises the fluid and dynamic nature of what is considered heritage and the significance of individualised experiences in shaping its meaning and value (Vomvyla 2013, 43–44).

Here, Harrison's discussion on two understandings of heritage—official heritage (the largely top-down approach by the state) and unofficial heritage (the bottom-up practices at local levels)—is useful. According to Harrison (2010, 240), official heritage refers to 'the processes of heritage identification, management and conservation that are embedded in legislation and government,' whereas unofficial heritage 'may not be recognised by governments or be listed on official heritage registers but they are considered to be significant or culturally meaningful by communities and collectives in the ways in which they constitute themselves and operate in the present, drawing on aspects of the past.'

The official-unofficial opposition in heritage discourse is not always clear-cut, and there exists the possibility of transforming from the unofficial to the official (Gao 2014). By employing the constructionist approach and heritage-as-social-action model, this study places particular emphasis on the unofficial aspect of heritage, which can also be referred to as private heritage (Howard 2003), heritage from below (Robertson 2012), and everyday or grassroots heritage (Evans and Rowlands 2021). It delves into how individuals personalise these heritage experiences and the strategies that they use to deploy them. Furthermore, it critically reflects on the influence of official heritage on ethnic

migrant groups, as well as the ways in which individuals respond to and navigate official heritage within particular contexts such as the tourism industry and social media.

This project investigates how migrant communities utilise ethnic heritage as a means of achieving a sense of belonging within urban environments. Heritage refers to 'the interaction between people and the world, and between people themselves' (Holtorf and Fairclough 2013, 198). More specifically, heritage in this research has been narrowed down to the following five aspects: marriage and family ritual, work culture, consumption and production of food, festival and performance, and leisure and entertainment. As Smith (2006, 3) has stated, 'all heritage is intangible'—'not only because of the values we give to heritage but because of the cultural work that heritage does in any society' (Smith and Akagawa 2009, 5). This kind of cultural work that heritage does in society is the focal point of this project. For migrant communities, their ongoing work of producing locality and employing heritage as identity markers can be regarded as a concerted effort to gain recognition within society.

The relationship between heritage and home is not a novel topic in the field of heritage studies, as the traditional understanding of heritage concentrates on the ways in which 'heritage becomes signified; produced and constituted in cultural contexts; communicated in cultural mediation; consumed, further reified, and 'held onto' as a sense of belonging' (Crouch 2010, 57). Nevertheless, there appears to be a considerable gap in research on the interplay between heritage and home at the local level. Despite the widespread interest in this topic, a cursory search using the keywords 'heritage' and 'home' reveals limited results (see, for example, Wollentz 2017; Kuutma and Annist 2020; Vomvyla 2013; Lipman 2020).

What is the relationship between heritage and homemaking? Why are they useful for understanding ethnic migrants' everyday life practices in a metropolitan area? I propose a simple and straightforward framework to analyse the stories of the Yi migrant workers in Shenzhen. To summarise, heritage is used as a tool for identity and meaning-making in the migration context; in this process of deploying heritage and struggling for a sense of belonging, migrants create a multifaceted vision of the past, present, and future that is called 'home.'

This book explores the Yi migrants' cultural practices in the city of Shenzhen as a means to emphasise their agency in constantly negotiating their social positions. It argues that these cultural strategies can become an effective tool for a marginalised group and contribute to their struggles for recognition in a foreign city. The cultural practices cannot be called 'weapons of the weak' as James Scott (1987) shows in his seminal anthropological work on Malaysian peasants, because firstly, the Yi migrants are not fighting against the society or opposing any institutional systems and secondly, whether they identify themselves as 'the weak' is still debatable. Nevertheless, they do manifest grassroots attempts to achieve recognition and, in this sense, can be tentatively

considered as 'tools of the marginalised' (whether they identify themselves as 'the marginalised' will be further discussed in the stories).

Heritage is the tool for identity making is the goal of daily practices, but the stories of the Yi migrants do not end here. My further argument is that both the tool and the goal are ultimately intertwined in the migrant workers' home-making processes. Paolo Boccagni (2017) presents home as a 'search,' indicating the persistence and incompleteness of the homing process and all the involved negotiations. Both home and recognition can only be a relational, everlasting, and 'unfinished accomplishment' (Fathi 2021, 981). An ideal and desired home is nothing but a vision. It can be predicated on memories of the past, reconstruction of the present, or anticipation of the future, but it is by its nature unreachable, or at least not entirely achievable.

The argument that home is a vision does not, however, denote any attitude of pessimism or nihilism. The pursuit of home is by no means futile, nor is the identity struggle. Instead, this research aims to highlight that the whole process of practising culture, reconstructing identity, and pursuing home is exactly the meaning of life itself.

Methodology

The data drawn on in this project come from my 15-month fieldwork conducted in Shenzhen between February 2021 and April 2022, both online and on-site. Originally, my proposed topic was about the Yi communities who were relocated in the state-led poverty-alleviation project in Liangshan. However, from the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted on-site fieldwork and rendered research in Liangshan inviable. Shenzhen was chosen as a compromise to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on my research progress, but it turned out well. I am familiar with the city and could easily get help from my family and friends whenever needed. I did not experience the hardship of traditional ethnographical fieldwork, of staying at a remote and underdeveloped village for a long period and struggling to find suitable accommodation. Instead, I took the subway to my field sites in the morning and returned to my apartment after work. I could always taste my mom's signature dishes and take comfort from my cat. 'An anthropologist in Shenzhen' may even sound weird because of the privileges the city is able to offer.

As a Han Chinese student, I am an outsider to the Yi communities. I needed to learn their language and win their trust to get permission to take part in their social events. However, in many situations, I feel more at home than they do in the city, and they understand that. This insider of the field site/outsider of the research community position frequently confused and questioned my understanding of the city as well as my alleged identity of being a Shenzhener. The discovery and exploration of aspects that were previously unnoticed constantly remind me of the importance of zooming in on the city (Du 2020) and regarding it as an ongoing meaning-making process in which all of us are involved. As an attempt to bring in new perspectives on the interplay between

the researcher, field site, and research participants, self-observation and self-reflection are integrated into the narration.

Methods used in the research included participant observation at important field sites (e.g., restaurants, factories, and the Folk Culture Village), in-depth interviews with 57 research participants, and archival research on official documents and news reports. Among the 57 interviewees, 42 are Yi migrant workers in Shenzhen, three are local officials, four are scholars researching related topics, three are journalists/photographers, and five are other relevant people such as factory managers or neighbouring business owners (see Appendix). Pseudonyms are used throughout the book. Around two-thirds of the interviews were face-to-face while the others were conducted via WeChat or QQ due to the lockdown policies of the city during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, as a complement to real-life participant observation and in-person interviews, I made use of popular social media channels (e.g., WeChat, QQ, and Sina Weibo) and video-sharing mobile apps (e.g., Kuaishou and Douyin) in China to get connected with the Yi migrants and to conduct online research.

At the time of writing, the three-year-long pandemic controls have officially come to an end in China. Strict quarantine requirements for domestic and international travellers were lifted. The green health code and mandatory polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests are in the past. The number of Covid cases has disappeared from daily news reports. All the familiar routines and norms of the past now appear dreamlike as the Chinese people step into the new post-Covid era.

Structure of the book

The following chapters explore five spaces: factories, families, restaurants, the Folk Culture Village (which is a tourist attraction), and social media. Factories, restaurants, and the Folk Culture Village are physical spaces, while families and social media are either less tangible or fully virtual. Drawing upon insights from dramaturgy, the five examined spaces can also be regarded as five different 'stages' on which the Yi migrant workers perform their varied strategies of homemaking and identity-building. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman differentiates the backstage and front stage in society. The front stage is where 'part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance' (Goffman 1959, 22), whereas the 'performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking in his lines, and step out of character' on the backstage (p. 112). Due to the 'omnipresent I the researcher' as the audience, none of the five spaces in this story is true backstage in Goffman's theory of dramaturgy, but they still witness different levels of outsider involvement and various forms of theatrical performances. It can be said that families and factories are closer to the backstage, the tourist attraction and social media

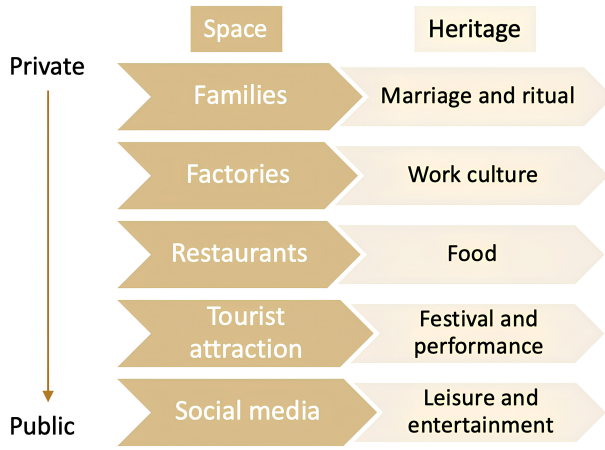

Figure 0.4 Chapter organisation.

are nearer to the front, and restaurants are situated somewhere in the middle (Figure 0.4).

Chapter 1 concentrates on family life and probes into the impacts of marriage and ritual on the Yi migrants' identity reconstruction. Based on the lived experiences of three young Yi women and two middle-class, middle-aged Yi workers, it highlights their various understandings of marriage and family rituals. The young Yi women viewed their ethnicity through the lens of child betrothal, which imposed significant emotional and financial burdens on them. Consequently, they chose to flee from their marriages and hoped to assimilate into urban life. In contrast, the middle-class Yi workers had settled in the city and established cross-ethnic families, enabling them to utilise their interethnic marriage as a form of social capital. However, they also faced challenges in navigating conflicts and making compromises within their households.

Chapter 2 delves into the work culture in factories and its impact on the Yi migrants' homemaking. Traditional values and social connections play a significant role in the Yi community, where trust and mutual help form the basis of their social ties. However, in the factory setting, these values can conflict with the efficiency and unity required in modern industrial life. The industrial dormitories and the foreman system provide a semblance of a home-like space and family-like connection, but they are not a substitute for true family or home. Furthermore, official discourse often misrepresents them, overemphasising their agency and reinforcing ethnic stereotypes in the process of urbanisation.

Chapter 3 looks at the role of ethnic restaurants in shaping the Yi migrants' sense of home and belonging through the consumption and production of food. These semi-private and semi-public spaces serve as important sites for the migrants to reaffirm their cultural identity and connections to their places of origin. The chapter examines three types of Yi-origin restaurants, each

representing the Yi culture in a different way within a foreign city. At the public level, the restaurants function as social spaces for migrants to gather and engage with others. On the private level, they provide a setting for migrants to establish intimate connections within a familiar environment.

Chapter 4 centres around the Folk Culture Villages, an ethnic theme park, and explores how cultural performances and festive celebrations in an authorised heritage setting affect the cultural identities and sense of belonging of migrant workers. It examines the implications of ethnic theme parks as embodiments of ethnic and heritage tourism. As tourism migrant workers, the Yi employees at the park hold a dual identity of host and guest. On the front stage, they showcase an official and idealised version of ethnic heritage to a wide range of audiences. On the backstage, they negotiate their self-identification through interactions with colleagues from various backgrounds, both similar and different.

Chapter 5 focuses on the impact of social media platforms on the leisure and entertainment activities of Yi migrants. It explores how these platforms influence the self-representation, cultural practices, and social connections of the Yi community in the digital space. The chapter highlights the potential of social media to empower ordinary people and promote bottom-up heritage practices, ultimately creating a hybridised pan-ethnic cyber community for migrant workers to establish a sense of attachment. However, it also recognises the existence of a digital divide, both between the Yi and non-Yi groups and within the Yi community itself. The chapter emphasises that while social media serves as an extension of the real world, it cannot fully replace physical connections.

Notes

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3 Data comes from 'Shenzhen Overview.'
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5 Data comes from 'Shenzhen's Basic Water Regime', Water Authority of Shenzhen Municipality, 24 April 2022, online at: http://swj.sz.gov.cn/xxgk/zfxxgkml/szswgk/szjbsq/, accessed 3 December 2024.
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25 In May 2016, *China Daily* released a photojournalism report titled 'Kids climb vine ladder in 'cliff village' in Sichuan', drawing attention to the perilous conditions faced by remote mountain villagers (online at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-05/25/content_25453124.htm, accessed 15 May 2023). The report received widespread coverage in both Chinese and English media. Following the exposure, the government implemented various measures to improve the living standards of the villagers. These included the construction of a steel ladder to replace the treacherous vine ladders and the establishment of a kindergarten to provide better education for the children. Four years later, in 2020, the government relocated the villagers to the county seat, while their original village was transformed into a tourist site, attesting to the immense progress made. More information and official media coverage can be found at: https://tv.cctv.com/yskd/special/xycgs/index.shtml (accessed 15 May 2023).
26 Data comes from the *China Population Census Yearbook 2020*.
27 Interestingly, a similar expression can be found in Liu Dongxu's book (2016, 36).
28 Chinese literature citations typically follow the Chinese custom of listing full Chinese names with the surname first.
29 The Pearl River Delta refers to a network of nine cities (i.e., Guangzhou, Foshan, Zhaoqing, Shenzhen, Dongguan, Huizhou, Zhuhai, Zhongshan, and Jiangmen) in Guangdong Province. As one of the wealthiest and most densely urbanised regions in China, it has been the centre of labour-intensive industries and witnessed a surge in labour demand since China's economic reform and opening up in the 1980s. With people flowing into this megalopolis from every part of the country, this area has consequently received much scholarly attention and become an ideal place for migration and urban studies.
30 See, for example, Yi Studies Website (http://www.yixueyanjiu.com), Yi People's Website (http://www.yizuren.com), Yi Website (http://www.yizu.tv), and online Yi language learning (https://omniglot.com/writing/yi.htm).

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