Urban restructuring processes in Guangzhou/China –
the significance of emotion-focussed coping

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Since the 1980s enormous changes in Chinese cities have been brought about by dynamic transformation processes resulting from reform and open door policy and rapid economic growth. High rates of in-migration, rapid urban expansion, spatial restructuring of land use patterns and the implementation of flagship-projects particularly characterise the dynamic urbanisation of megacities in China. This paper explores and reflects upon the main transformation processes of a traditional village in the megacity Guangzhou, South China, processes that are linked to the nearby construction of the South Railway Station. Our investigation addresses the issue of how the inhabitants of this village cope emotionally with the restructuring of their living environment, which is anything but straightforward.

The primary aim of this article is to enrich the discourse on emotional geographies by discussing the concept of emotion-focussed coping. Consideration of emotions facilitates understanding of multifaceted and complex man-environment transactions – emotions both connect and disconnect people from their living environment and help to explain coping in relationships that seem neither amenable to modification nor controllable by action. In-depth interviews with the inhabitants of the village in Guangzhou and auto-photography reveal that emotion-focussed coping is widely applied to regulate emotional responses to stressful encounters through vigilance, avoidance or by changing the meaning of the man-environment transaction without changing it objectively.
1 Introduction

Since the reforms of the 1980s, an open door policy and rapid economic growth have encouraged Chinese cities to become fast-growing, highly dynamic and complex urban areas. China’s rapid urbanisation, characterised by the radical expansion of urban built-up areas, land expropriation and large-scale rural-urban migration, has produced far-reaching transformation processes of great socioeconomic, environmental and spatial significance (cf. Kilian et al. 2010, Wehrhahn et al. 2008, Wu et al. 2007). In particular, Chinese megacities have become subject to both innovations and international connectivity, as well as to rising socioeconomic and ecological vulnerability (cf. Friedmann 2005, Kraas 2007, Wu et al. 2007).

Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province and the largest city in southern China with approximately 10 million inhabitants, is an illustrative example that allows the analysis of processes and structures linked to multifaceted and fast-paced urbanisation. In the light of globalisation and increasing intercity competition from nearby cities the Guangzhou government has since the late 1990s adopted various pro-growth strategies intended to improve its leading role as the regional centre in southern China. The focus has been on large projects (e.g. the Convention and Exhibition Centre, opened in 2002; the New Baiyun International Airport, opened in 2004) and mega-events (e.g. the 16th Asian Games in 2010) that promote economic development and create new and dynamic city images (Wu 2007, Wu/Zhang 2007, Xu/Yeh 2005).

However, as emphasised by Wu et al. (2007, 225) with respect to Guangzhou’s city planning measures, “large projects often divert scarce public-sector resources away from ‘basic’ services that the city’s disadvantaged groups are particularly dependent upon.” This is exemplified by the “expensive and hasty” (ibid.) construction of the Guangzhou Opera House intended to stress the cultural importance of the city. Instead of rebuilding inadequate and run-down neighbourhood schools in the inner city (Wu et al. 2007, 225), the government prefers to implement large-scale and representative prestige projects that visibly underline Guangzhou’s competitiveness and that are meant “to impress others” (Xu/Yeh 2005, 289). According to Xu and Yeh (2005, 289), for key local planners “urban development is less about functionality than it is about prestige”. In addition to the one-sided orientation of government spending, urban expansion accompanied by massive land requisition and relocation of inhabitants is characteristic of the process of rapid urbanisation. For instance, more than 10 000 farmers were displaced due to the development of the Guangzhou University Town at the beginning of 2000 (see Wu et al. 2007 for further details).

Such complex man-environment relationships produce and re-produce emotions that indicate that there are goals at stake, that something has become meaningful. People care about, fear, hate, are afraid of or hope, are happy, are relieved. Emotions are essential to coping behaviour, they stimulate, motivate, guide or suppress certain behaviour. This paper aims to emphasise the significance emotions can have in the context of urban restructuring processes. How do people cope with uncontrollable or ambiguous events that are appraised as not being amenable to modification or controllable by action? Before pursuing this core question and discussing the paradigm of emotional geographies and the concepts of appraisal, coping and emotion-focused coping, this discussion first gives an overview of a flag-ship project that has had a profound effect on Guangzhou’s city development. The location of the project’s implementation additionally serves as the case study presented in this paper.

2 The South Railway Station – a flagship-project in the megacity Guangzhou

A key project of particular significance has been the construction of the South Railway Station in Shibi Village, 17 km south of Guangzhou’s business district, which started in 2004. The first part of the railway station was opened in January 2007.
ary 2010 and the whole station is scheduled to open before October 2010, just in time for the Asian Games (Guangzhou Municipality 2010). The government’s objective is to increase passenger handling capacity and thus to strengthen Guangzhou’s position as a regional hub city that can compete with Beijing, Shanghai and Wuhan (Zhang/Xu 2007). As the three existing railway stations in Guangzhou (North Railway Station, East Railway Station, Guangzhou Station) are overstretched and unable to meet the growing demands of the city, the decision to construct a fourth railway station in the suburban area of Panyu district (due to the absence of vacant land in central Guangzhou) was made by the provincial government of Guangdong at the beginning of 2000 (Guangzhou Municipality 2010; Railway Technology 2010).

Upon completion at the end of 2010, the South Railway Station will be the largest and most modern railway station in Asia with an estimated passenger capacity of over 112 million travellers per year (Guangzhou Municipality 2010). The station will consist of 15 terminals and 28 railway tracks with express rail links to Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Macao and connections to Zhuhai (Guangdong Province), Wuhan (Hubei Province), Nanning (Guangxi Province) as well as to Guiyang (Guizhou Province). Parks and open spaces, shopping, commercial and residential areas, hotel accommodations and station related infrastructures are supposed to shape the surroundings of the station (Pan et al. 2006). According to Zhang Guangning, the Guangzhou Mayor, the area around the railway station will be integrated into southern Guangdong’s centre for commerce, trade and tourism and will “become the most important functional extension of the city’s central district” (Guangzhou Municipality 2010). The development area of the whole project spans 35 km² (Zhang/Xu 2007, 37), part of which was still used as farmland until 2009, and belongs to Shibi, a village that in 2008 was inhabited by about 10 000 permanent residents (villagers) and about 10 000 migrants.

How do people who are exposed to the impacts of such a large project perceive and appraise the changing conditions of their living environment? How do they cope with the far-reaching transformation processes in their close proximity? Coping is a complex, multidimensional process that is sensitive both to the environment, its demands and resources, and to personality dispositions, assets and internal demands. To investigate these research questions and to analyse such complex man-environment relationships within the frame of urban restructuring, Shibi Village has been selected as a case study.

3 Case study, research foci and methods

Rapid urban expansion and land marketisation since 1979 have intensified the loss of farmland in China’s urban periphery (Zhou/Logan 2008). In keeping with the reform and open door policy, several factories (esp. garment manufacture) have been established in Shibi, a low-cost production site, by investors mainly from Hong Kong. In consequence, Shibi has experienced transformations of socioeconomic and environmental significance. Farmland has been converted into industrial land and appropriate infrastructure (e.g. roads, storage areas) has been constructed. Rural laborers from other provinces have been migrating to Shibi to find work in the secondary sector or, since 2004, on the railway construction site.

However, despite this development, Shibi largely maintained its rural character until 2008/2009. In comparison to the “urban villages” or “villages-in-the-city” (chengzhongcun in Chinese) in Guangzhou’s city centre (for further information, see Liu et al. 2010, Wei/Yan 2005), Shibi was characterised until recently by traditional architecture and an agrarian landscape. Single-story brick houses and old temples were scattered throughout the village, a dense network of alleys and squares shaped most of the residential area, collectively owned farmland surrounded the village and historic wells served as a drinking water resource or an area for laundry and place to meet. From the...
end of the 1990s the demand for housing grew with the increase of in-migration and some villagers started to build new four to five storey houses for rental purposes. The income of most of the villagers derived from renting rooms to migrant workers, agricultural land use including fishery, small-scale business (e.g. running a kiosk, mobile phone shop or building company) and compensation for the sale of land to factory developers from Hong Kong.

It is only since 2004, when the construction of the railway station began, that Shibi has had to face tremendous and far-reaching restructuring processes with impacts on its present and future spatial and socioeconomic structures and living conditions. The development of the village from 2004 to date shows that Shibi has rapidly been changing from a traditional Chinese village characterised by a rural way of life to an urbanized village with predominantly urban land use structures. The majority of farmland was sold by Shibi’s village committees to the government in 2008. Villagers thus lost their basic source of income from farming but have not yet received enough compensation payments from the village committees. They fear resettlement, are unable to anticipate concrete future events and have difficulty in readjusting to the changes, particularly due to missing financial pay-offs from the committees. The four village committees in Shibi have not provided any information on the extent to which the residential area might be affected by the railway construction site (interviews, 2009). The first houses, those located directly beside the station, were demolished as early as 2008. However, further planning activities concerning infrastructure such as motorway access roads (particularly in the northeast of the village) suggest that more of the residential areas will be converted to urbanised land use patterns in the near future.

The top-down decision to construct the Guangzhou South Railway Station in Shibi Village was made by the government of Guangdong Province; Shibi’s inhabitants had no voice in the choice of the project’s location. In China, land has been under national jurisdiction and central planning since 1949. While land in urban areas is basically state owned, rural land, which comprises agricultural land and built-up rural land such as settlements for the villagers, is owned and managed by the village collective (Liu et al. 2010, 138). Compensation fees, regardless of their amount, are accordingly paid to the village committee, the representative body, and not to individuals. However, villagers are entitled to receive compensation payments from the committee. Under China’s Constitution (amended in March 2004), the state has the right to expropriate collective land in the public interest (Wu et al. 2007, 41). As the new railway station meets the demands of increasing traffic and thus the common concern of providing sufficient transportation facilities, Shibi’s four village committees had no choice but to sell their farmland to the government.

Against this overall background, the investigations discussed in this paper focus on environmental change, stress appraisal and coping behaviour among Shibi’s inhabitants. As problem-related coping directed at managing or altering the problem causing a troubled man-environment relationship has been widely discussed in literature (cf. e.g. Bohle 2001, Wisner et al. 2007), the following research results primarily address the issue of emotion-focussed coping in the context of structures and processes that cannot be easily influenced (for further details on problem-focussed coping within this study see Bercht/Wehrhahn 2010). How do the inhabitants of the village cope with the agonising uncertainty about whether they will be resettled? What role do emotions play in the whole process of coping and how might they reduce or increase the experience of stress? In this respect, an additional aim is to reflect on potential adaptive coping approaches.

Extensive site-inspections, 51 in-depth interviews with Shibi’s inhabitants, averaging 60-90 minutes in length, and three semi-structured interviews with urban planners from the South China University of Technology and the Sun-yat sen University in Guangzhou were carried out from 2007 to 2009. Additionally, the method of
auto-photography was applied in Shibi in order to better capture people’s emotional states and personal appraisals of their living conditions. Five interviewees were given single-use cameras to photograph anything in Shibi that they related to the transformation processes and associated with positive or negative outcomes or feelings. The pictures were discussed afterwards in detail.

4 Theoretical and conceptual background

4.1 Emotional geographies

“It is just these emotionally mediated senses and relations that compose the fabric of our existence, that make our lives meaningful, or, in their absence, hopeless. Emotions are vital (living) aspects of who we are and of our situational engagement within the world; they compose, decompose, and recompose the geographies of our lives.” (Smith et al. 2009a, 10). On the basis of this assumption, Smith et al. (2009a) argue in their recent anthology “Emotion, Place and Culture” (2009b) for the integration of emotions into the field of geography: “Emotions are […] intimately and inescapably caught up in the current re-writing of the earth, the production of new, transformed, geographies, and New World Orders, that affect us all […] [T]he question of how we might feel as well as think about these transformations is seldom addressed and this is (only one reason) why […] geography needs to take emotions seriously.” (ibid. 2009a, 3, emphasis in original). Why, asks Thrift (2004, 271) with similar intention, is there such a neglect of emotions in the current urban literature, “even in the case of issues such as identity and belonging which quiver with affective energy?”. Falter and Hasse (2002) and Weichhart (1986) emphasise as well that emotional aspects should be taken into account in the context of appraisal and action-related processes (cf. also Hasse 1999).

The registration and analysis of emotions in terms of their communicative, adaptive function and as an influential factor affecting motivation, appraisal, action and goal-setting in geographical research contexts has been insufficient. “There is something crucial missing in geography”, conclude Davidson and Smith (2009, 441, cf. also Anderson/Smith 2001, Bondi et al. 2007). Sympathies, antipathies or emotional states such as mistrust, envy, fear or curiosity, trust, hope and enthusiasm can have a sustainable impact on the nature of political decisions, economic transactions and productivity at work – “what happens at work may depend on the most personal, private and emotionally-present intricacies of a worker’s complex life” (Anderson/Smith 2001, 8). In Moisi’s opinion (2009, 137), the fear of a new war between Germany and France after 1945 was a considerable factor in the founding of the European Union. However, political power interests (cf. Sparke 2007, Thrift 2004), institutionalized rules and standards (cf. Amin 2006), war and terrorist actions (cf. Pain 2010; see also Pain 2009 on the issue of globalization fear) or processes of globalisation, migration and shaping identity (cf. Conradson/Mckay 2007, Ho 2008, Moisi 2009) are also often easier to interpret and understand if emotional (steering) mechanisms are additionally considered. Drawing on this background, Smith et al. (2009a) state that emotions connect human beings to places; the world is perceived and produced through emotionally laden activities.

In addition, emotions hold people together in social groups. They help to determine priorities within relationships and signal to other people the motivational and emotional state of the person experiencing the emotion. Importantly, emotions motivate adaptive action and are thus fundamental to human social action (cf. Goller 2009). The analysis of emotions enriches geographer’s work because it facilitates understanding that different people may react in different ways to the “same” conditions. In general, action theories disregard the issue of emotional influences on human action. “Geography has tended to deny, avoid, suppress or downplay its emotional entanglements” (Bondi et al. 2007, 1) – but why this apparent absence of geographical attention to emotion? Smith et al. (2009a) und Thrift (2004) trace this neglect
back to Cartesian dualism. Descartes’ famous *cogito ergo sum* (“I am thinking, therefore I am”) proclaims a divide between mind or soul (*res cogitans*) and matter (*res extensa*). According to Descartes, thinking, or the ability to rationally reflect, is the essence and the only thing that cannot be doubted. In comparison, perception and emotions are unreliable. From this perspective, “affect is a kind of frivolous or distracting background” (Thrift 2004, 57) that cannot be a part of the human’s knowledge of the world (a more detailed overview of Descartes’ philosophy is given by Landweer and Renz 2008, Newmark 2008). The debate on rationalism inevitably raises the question of the conception of man. Are reason and emotion mutually exclusive? Is action influenced by emotions considered to be irrational? In Lazarus (2006, 87) opinion, “emotions are the product of reason in that they flow from how we appraise what is happening in our lives” and are thus conjoined with reason. He therefore argues that rational decision-making and emotionally-influenced action can be entirely compatible. This has also been confirmed by neuroscientific studies (cf. Damasio 2004). Those parts of the brain concerned with processing emotions, including the limbic system, are integral to the structure of rationality necessary to make decisions on action.

Nonetheless, emotions are, due to their complexity and diverse character, difficult to capture and operationalise, as also stressed by Bondi et al. (2007, 1): “Emotions are never simply surface phenomena, they are never easy to define or demarcate, and they [sic!] not easily observed or mapped although they inform every aspect of our lives” (cf. also Smith et al. 2009a, 3). Emotions in geography have been implicitly or explicitly ignored as “obstacle épistémologique” (Lossau 2005, 59), as a barrier to scientific research. However, the fact that emotions are not easily specified or measured should not be allowed to detract from their significant importance to human geographies and lives (Smith et al. 2009a, 3).

According to Davidson and Smith (2009, 442), certain subject areas of critical geography, namely, feminist (cf. Koskela/Pain 2000, Rose 1993), psychoanalytic (cf. Philo/Parr 2003), and non-representational (cf. McCormack 2003, Thrift 2007), have been most closely associated with the emergence of emotional geographies. These approaches have recognized that a world without passion or spaces solely ordered by emotionless principles and demarcated in keeping with political, economic or technical logics represents a “barren terrain” (Bondi et al. 2007, 1). They criticise a “world-view that accepts the centrality of an essentially rational, unchanging, autonomous, and emotion-free or emotionally controlled human subject”, as emphasised by Davidson and Smith (2009, 442), and attribute the genesis of the contemporary “emotional turn” and the formation of the paradigm of emotional geographies to the approaches of critical geography (cf. also Smith et al. 2009a, Bondi 2005).

Following Pile (2010, 6), the prevailing opinion has been that Anderson and Smith’s (2001) editorial paper “Emotional geographies” marks the turning point in geography’s recent appreciation of the importance of the emotional concept – “we want to argue for a fuller programme of work, recognizing the emotions as ways of knowing, being and doing in the broadest sense”, declare Anderson and Smith (2001, 8). As Pile (2010, 5) further points out, there has been, particularly since 2003, a considerable increase in (Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American) geographical research activities and publications focussing on the topic of emotions (see Pile 2010 for a detailed overview).

Emotional geographies – a new perspective that intensifies the pluralism of competitive paradigms in human geography? Not at all – “The term ‘emotional geographies’ should not be understood narrowly since emotions slip through and between disciplinary borders. This is not a new sub-discipline of an already established field”, argue Bondi et al. (2007, 2f., cf. also Thien 2005). Emotional geographies stand for the extension of geography’s self-identity, for revealing that something is lacking. In Bondi et al.’s opinion (2007, 3), it is the overall aim to understand emotion – experientially and...
conceptually – in relation to its “socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states”. Similarly, Smith et al. (2009a, 2) regard emotions as events that take place in, and reverberate through, the world and beings.

Although, due to its broad and elusive nature, no consensual definition of emotions exists – neither in geography (some scholars even distinguish between emotions and affect, see Thien 2005) nor in psychology (cf. Frijda/Scherer 2009, Stemmler 2009) – there is widespread fundamental agreement in emotional science regarding the significance of emotions for analysing and understanding complex man-environment relationships (cf. Davidson et al. 2007, Lazarus 1991, Pile 2010, Smith et al. 2009b).

Before going into more detail and discussing how emotional relations shape these relationships, it is worth noting that up to now the issue of emotions has not been intensively discussed within the German community of geographers. It can be assumed that the personal networking of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American scholars (Liz Bondi, Joyce Davidson, Steve Pile, Mick Smith, Nigel Thrift etc.) – e.g. via joint publications, the organisation of the interdisciplinary “Conferences on Emotional Geographies” since 2002, the cooperative editorship of the journal “Emotion, Space and Society” since 2008 – has strengthened the topic of emotions particularly among British and North American geographers.

Against this background, this paper aims to make evident the benefit geography can gain from becoming more familiar with emotional research, and to tear down existing barriers – “to neglect the emotions is to exclude a key set of relations through which lives are lived and societies are made” (Anderson/Smith 2001, 7).

4.2 Stress appraisal and the concepts of coping and emotion-focussed coping

At a time when behaviourists dominated explanations for human behaviour, the American psychologist Richard S. Lazarus instead stressed the study of cognition and extended it into fields such as stress, emotion and coping (cf. Lazarus/Folkman 1984, Lazarus 1991, 2006). He indicated the importance of cognitive mediation in the context of analysing man-environment relationships: “The essence of my theory of stress […] is the process of appraisal, which has to do with the way diverse persons construe the significance for their well-being of what is happening and what might be done about it, which refers to the coping process.” (Lazarus 2006, 9, emphasis in original). Lazarus’s conceptual schematization of stress, emotion and coping has served as a scientific basis for a great number of contemporary psychological studies (e.g. Aldwin 2007, Eppel 2007, Kleinke 2007) and is still state of the art in psychology (see Bercht/Wehrhahn 2010 for further details). His frame of reference is an epistemological and theoretical approach that emphasizes individual differences, the cognitive-relational concepts of appraisal and coping, and a process-oriented outlook. The following describes some core principles of his schematizations.

A fundamental proposition of Lazarus’ stress conception is the personal meaning of man-environment relationships that, in turn, depends on the appraisal process by means of which that meaning is constructed. According to Lazarus (2006, 55), this meaning is the crucial cause of stress, emotion and varying coping modes. If a person appraises his or her relationship to a certain event in a particular way, a specific emotion, which is tied to the appraisal, will usually follow unless the appraisal is changed by cognitive coping processes.

From this perspective, Lazarus and Folkman (1984, 21) define psychological stress as a “relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being”. An emotional reaction (e.g. fear, anger, shame etc.) thus indicates that an important commitment or goal has been engaged and demonstrates how the person interprets the encounter (Lazarus 2006, 87). Based on this assumption, a person is under stress only if events
negate or endanger important personal goals and commitments. This implies that not all potential stressors actually cause stress. What is appraised as being stressful by one person may not be so appraised by another. “Because of different goals and beliefs, because there is often too much to attend to, and because the stimulus array is often ambiguous, people are selective both in what they pay attention to and in what their appraisals take into account” (Lazarus 1993, 7). To emphasize that stress is neither in the environmental input nor in the person per se, but reflects the conjunction of both, and to underline that person and environment dialectically influence each other, Lazarus (2006, 12ff.) uses the term “transaction”. He prefers the term transaction to the term interaction because, in his opinion, the latter portrays person and environment as separate entities while transaction, however, implies that the variables reciprocally influence each other and thus modify their characteristics compared to the initial situation. For example, a person alters the physical environment when building a hotel on former agricultural land and vice versa, the person benefits from this land use change in terms of financial profit and positively toned emotions like happiness or delight. The two basic subsystems, person and environment, are thus conjoined and considered at a new level of analysis which means that in the relationship their independent identities are lost in favour of a new condition or state (Lazarus/Folkman 1984, 294). Moreover, transaction implies process. The experience of emotions is not static but is constantly changing as a result of the continual interplay between the person and the environment (cf. Lazarus 2006).

In addition to the stakes a person has in an encounter, evaluations are required about whether anything can be done to manage or improve the troubled person-environment relationship and, if so, which coping options might work. This involves a complex process that considers both modes of coping and the likelihood that a given coping option will accomplish what it is supposed to. In this sense, stress and stress-related emotions are particularly powerful when the individual must cope with demands that cannot easily be met. For instance, the emotions of anxiety or fear are more likely to occur and will be stronger when a person believes his or her capacity to deal effectively with a demanding man-environment transaction to be poor (Lazarus 2006, 60). Lazarus (2006, 78) points out, however, that decisions about coping actions vary in accordance to changing conditions and available resources. Based on reappraisals which refer to a modified appraisal due to new information or feedback from the environment, new coping options might be considered.

Taking this issue into account, Lazarus and Folkman (1984, 141) define coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person”. Their definition contains a process-oriented approach and implies a distinction between coping and automated adaptive behaviour by limiting coping to demands that a person considers as taxing or exceeding his or her resources (Lazarus/Folkman 1984, 141f.). By using the word “manage”, though, Lazarus and Folkman (1984, 141) emphasize that coping does not necessarily mean mastering. “Managing can include minimizing, avoiding, tolerating, and accepting the stressful conditions as well as to master the environment.” (Lazarus/Folkman 1984, 142). From Lazarus’ research standpoint, coping is thereby regarded as independent of the outcome. This permits coping to include anything the person does or thinks, regardless of how successful or adaptive it is.

An important feature of Lazarus’s conceptualization of coping is that it involves more than just problem solving. The function of problem-focused coping is to change the actual person-environment relationship by acting either on the environment and/or oneself (e.g. develop new skills). It is aimed at managing or altering the problem causing stress (Lazarus/Folkman 1984, 159). In comparison, emotion-focused coping is directed at regulating the emotional response to the problem – for instance, by avoiding thinking about the threat or reappraising it – without
changing the reality of the stressful person-environment relationship (ibid.). Although thinking rather than acting is involved in emotion-focussed coping, it is, in Lazarus’ (1991, 112) opinion, by no means a passive process, but has to do with “internal restructuring” (ibid.). Effort is needed to change the meaning of a transaction and therefore the emotional reaction. Coping is thus a powerful mediator of emotional outcomes.

However, Lazarus stresses the fact that problem- and emotion-focused coping are often displayed at the same time: “Both are essential parts of the total coping effort, and ideally facilitates the other” (ibid. 2006, 124). Against this background, the issue of problem-focused coping is not generally ignored in the following discussion of the research results (examples will be provided later in the text), but the particular interest lies in the analysis of emotion-focused coping.

5 Research results

As described in Section 3, Shibi Village and its inhabitants have experienced rapid and profound transformation processes of great spatial and socioeconomic significance. In coping with the impacts of the railway station project and accordingly with the demands of daily life, emotion-focussed coping proved to be invaluable. Exposed to the unavoidable restructuring of their living environment, Shibi’s inhabitants have to deal with various factors such as losing their rural identity (including traditional lifestyle, customs, culture) and rising unemployment and crime. With low levels of education and skills, they feel marginalised in the urban labour market. “A lot of villagers have lost their basic source of income [due to the sale of land; author’s remark]. How shall they make a living if not from farming?” (interview, 2008). Most of the interviewed villagers only attended primary school and received no further education. On the one hand, they are peasants who no longer partake in agricultural activities; they have lost that most important resource on which they have lived for generations. On the other hand, they remain villagers due to the Chinese household registration system (hukou), instituted in 1955 (Liu 2005, 135). This system fixes a person’s residence to his or her native place and divides the population into rural and urban households in order to severely restrict and control rural-to-urban migration. Friedmann (2005, 11) considers the hukou status as a “card of entitlement”. In contrast to an urban hukou, a rural registration, for example, denies rural citizens access to social welfare, healthcare and education in cities, even though they may live and work there (for a more comprehensive overview, see Liu 2005). However, only the status of a rural citizen offers every rural villager an equal right to use land for building houses and entitles receipt of compensation fees from the village committee if collectively owned farmland is sold (interviews, 2009, cf. also Liu et al. 2010, 139).

Along with the process of extensive land expropriation in Shibi Village and the general impacts of the hukou system on different entitlements, the interviewees face other tremendously stressful conditions. The empirical data shows that people have personal goals at stake and that there is thus potential for loss and vulnerability. The way interviewees define and evaluate their relationship with the environment – a process Lazarus (2006) calls “appraisal” – and the way they describe their emotional response, reveal that important commitments are endangered and that their resources are insufficient for warding off threats to those commitments. The following discussion addresses three issues that are appraised as being harmful and threatening and causing fear and anxiety by 90 % of the interviewees: (a) insufficient payment of compensation fees, (b) possible resettlement, and (c) uncertainty about the village’s future development.

As mentioned earlier, the village committees hold and manage the compensation fees on behalf of all the villagers. The interviews revealed that only Shibi’s committees have the power to decide how much and in what form the fees and funds are redistributed to the villagers. Rural
land, the basis of peasant livelihood, is therefore an important resource controlled by a limited number of officials: a “guarantee of wealth” (interview, 2008). The villagers, however, have no demonstrable say in either the management of the transfer of collective land or of the compensation fees. “We haven’t yet received enough compensation payments from the village committee. They are corrupt and keep most of the money for themselves. […] If you look around, you notice that the committee members have the largest and most modern houses of the village. One cadre even sent his son to the USA for study reasons; we all wonder how he can afford it.” (interview, 2009). According to this interviewee, open protests and even violent conflicts therefore took place in Shibi in 2008. Villagers assembled in front of the four village committees to express their dissatisfaction about the insufficient pay-offs. The protests, however, were “brutally suppressed” (interview, 2009) by the police and, according to three in-depth-interviews carried out in 2009, one resident – selected arbitrarily to frighten and intimidate the villagers and to keep them from further uprising – was sent to prison for one year without a trial.

The organisation and implementation of the protest illustrates the anger and the worries of the villagers. It was aimed to alter the problem that was causing stress and can thus be regarded as problem-focussed coping. However, since Shibi’s demonstrators were oppressed by the police, the villagers have been afraid of the consequences of further protests against corruption and no longer dare to speak out their concerns in public. According to four interviewees’ statements, the committee’s control over significant resources such as farmland enables the committee members to establish personal connections with high-ranking politicians at the Panyu district level who help them obtain personal benefits and even provide protection for corrupt activities (interviews, 2009). For this reason, it has been difficult for the villagers to change the reality of the troubled person-environment relationship – “there is nothing we can do about it but hope”, states a villager (interview, 2009).

This statement raises the question as to whether emotion-focussed coping is at least applied to – consciously or unconsciously – regulate the emotional response (e.g. fear, anger, rage) to the problem. Hoping, for instance, is yearning for amelioration or wishing for relief, but the prospects are uncertain. The emotion of hope arises from the condition of harm, in this case related to insufficient compensation payments. According to Lazarus (1991, 285), hope is characterized by the absence of a clear action tendency. From this standpoint, Lazarus (1991, 287) treats the process of hoping as a form of emotion-focussed coping: “The capacity to retain hope in the face of despairing conditions is probably a major coping resource” (ibid.). In comparison, the inability to hope and hence the tendency to give in to despair is less helpful in coping with stressful conditions. Asked about the personal meaning of hoping, the villager quoted above answered that hoping gives him strength and energy to go on with his life and allows him to comfort his wife (interview, 2009).

Another example of emotion-focussed coping that demonstrates an appraisal of uncontrolability is the mode of distancing. Distancing describes efforts to detach oneself from the stressful encounter. Interview statements such as “[I refuse to think about it] [the corruptive behaviour of the village committees; authors’ remark] too much”, “I have too much to do to take care of it” or “It’s none of my business” indicate that the interviewees try to distance themselves from a condition that is considered not to be amenable to modification or controllable by action (interviews, 2008/2009). When nothing can currently be done to alter stressful conditions, the coping form of distancing can be beneficial in that the emotions of fear or anger are then experienced less intensively.

Based on the research investigations, the majority of the interviewed villagers want to stay in Shibi despite the construction of the railway station and corresponding infrastructure. However, they fear resettlement due to the pending demolition of some parts of the village. “So far the village committee hasn’t yet informed us
about the houses that have to give way to the railway station but they must know about the future plans. […] We don’t want to be relocated. I’m so anxious about the future” (interview, 2009). This statement illustrates the uncertainty and stress the villagers have to deal with. The uncertainty and stress in turn increases levels of vulnerability as villagers have a significant goal at stake with no guarantee that they will achieve it and no available resources with which to try.

A woman in her sixties also deeply suffers from the agonising uncertainty about whether some houses in Shibi have to be demolished. For the sake of clarity, she has sought out the village committee at least once every six months and asked for detailed information about potential relocation planning. However, “without success. I am always told that they don’t know anything either but I will keep asking them. […] I’m not afraid of moving, I just need to know what’s coming up for me in the future so I can calm down” (interview, 2008). Her coping behaviour, which can be subsumed under the category of “information seeking”, has the function of providing a basis for action intended to manage a stressful person-environment relationship and so represents problem-focussed coping. At the same time, it makes her feel better by making the transaction seem more under control, which implies emotion-focussed coping in terms of regulating her emotional response. This example illustrates that people also draw on both coping functions and that coping is a significant mediator of the emotional outcome of a stressful encounter. The emotional state at the beginning of a stressful occurrence may be changed by the time the occurrence reaches its end. As soon as the woman knows more details, her emotional state will change from anxiety to relief. Each emotion provides different information about how a person has appraised what is happening and how the person is coping with it (Lazarus 2006, 34). “In effect, each emotion has a different scenario or story about an ongoing relationship with the environment” (Lazarus 2006, 34).

A 37-year-old villager expressed his fear of resettlement within the frame of auto-photography. He took two photographs of one of the wells (Figure 1a) and its surrounding area (Figure 1b) in Shibi Village. “As a child I loved to play on the square around the well and in front of the old temple. […] I doubt that this part [of Shibi Village; authors’ remark] will remain as it is. Everything will be demolished and we will be relocated” (interview 2007). In answer to the question about his way of handling this situation, the interviewee stated that he had withdrawn from social life and was living in the past. “The fear paralyses me.” (interview 2007).

This example demonstrates the way in which the emotion of fear disconnects the villager from his living environment; probably as a kind of self-protection. To reduce or suppress the fear he thinks back to his childhood and keeps his thoughts in the past instead of looking to the future. His emotion-focussed coping is charac-

Fig. 1a, b: Traditional well and its surrounding area in Shibi Village in 2007

Source: Photograph taken by an interviewee within the auto-photography investigation in Shibi Village, 2007
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terized as escape, which describes mental (and also physical) avoidance of the condition causing stress and negative emotions. In contrast to this 37-year-old interviewee, other villagers apply anticipatory problem-focussed coping and try to prepare themselves for approaching transformations. “We [the interviewee himself and his wife; authors’ remark] save as much money as we can because we fear resettlement and don’t expect to receive sufficient financial support from the village committee. […] If we face demolition we want to have the ability to build a new house”, states a 30-year-old resident (interview 2009). He gains some control over the situation by saving money and thus also makes the feeling of fear more controllable. According to Taylor (2003, 188), scientific studies confirm that events are experienced as less stressful when people feel that they can control, predict or modify these events. As mentioned above, the relational meaning that an individual constructs from the person-environment relationship is considered to be a core element in the appraisal process. Based on the confluence of the social and physical environment and personal variables, every individual construes his or her own environment thus shaping emotional and behavioural responses. The extent to which people feel confident of their powers of mastery over the environment influences whether an encounter will produce stress appraisals (Lazarus 2006, 55, 60).

In relation to the appraised uncertainty about the village’s future development, research results particularly indicate that emotion-focussed modes of coping are more likely to occur than problem-focussed modes. The majority of the interviewees are threatened by not knowing what is going to happen in the near future. For instance, denial (“Shibi hasn’t changed yet and won’t change in the future”), distancing (“I’m too old to worry about any consequencess”) or wishful thinking (“All of us will become rich because Shibi is transformed to a city with many job offers”) characterize those interviewees who regard the future development as not contingent upon their actions (interviews 2008/2009). They lack access to appropriate resources such as solid information on resettlement measures and schedules or to the urban labour market. However, based on the development of contemporary urbanisation processes, it seems likely that Shibi will change completely, undergoing transformation from a rural Chinese village characterised by a traditional way of life to an urbanized village. Conclusions, though, concerning the ability of the villagers – as citizens with a rural hukou status – to readjust, to keep up with, and to adapt to the changing living conditions in the long-term, cannot yet be finally judged from the empirical data.

In summary, the cited interview examples illustrate that the function of coping involves more than just problem solving. Emotion-focussed coping does not aim to change the reality of a person-environment relationship by either acting on the environment or on oneself. It does not aim to manage or alter the problem causing stress. Emotion-focussed coping is directed at regulating emotional responses when individuals appraise that they have no means of changing a person-environment transaction. Shibi’s inhabitants face far-reaching transformation processes that are difficult to influence by action. Without the function of emotion-focussed coping, however, they would be even more vulnerable and less resilient to the restructuring of their living environment. They either change the way the stressful relationship with the environment is dealt with (as in vigilance or avoidance) or the relational meaning of what is happening (e.g. denial), in both cases mitigating the stress even though actual conditions have not changed.

6 Conclusions

This overview of emotional geographies and the presentation of its main features provide an insight into a comparatively new research field in geography. Referring to the comments of Bondi et al. (2007), Davidson and Smith (2009), Smith (2009a) or Thrift (2004) with regard to having thus far neglected emotions in research, the concept of emotion-focussed coping shows one way to enrich the debate on the integration
of emotions into the field of geography. Under comparable conditions, people differ in their sensitivity and vulnerability to certain types of events, as well as in their interpretations and reactions. “The person and environment interact, but it is the person who appraises what the situation signifies for personal well-being.” (Lazarus 2006, 12). Hence, it is necessary to take into account the cognitive processes that intervene between the person and the encounter. The way a person construes an event shapes the behavioural and emotional response. Considering solely problem-focused modes of coping is insufficient and narrows the focus to conditions that are appraised as changeable or controllable by action.

Within the scope of empirical research in the megacity Guangzhou, it became evident that people also try to cope with encounters that are appraised as not being amenable to modification. They are not able to change the reality of the person-environment transaction, but they can alter its relational meaning or the way in which the troubled relationship with the environment is addressed. First impressions from an external perspective might suggest that the villagers have not been able to develop or apply any coping mechanisms. However, considering internal processes that are only subject to self-reflection enables a more profound analysis of coping modes and thus broadens the view.

Whether coping is successful or unsuccessful, though, can only be judged by taking into account the context in which the person is operating, including existing constraints, rules, institutional conditions, resources, individual norms and expectations, and subjective standards in terms of successful coping (Lazarus/Folkman 1984, 192, 196). Indeed, there are certain stressful conditions that call for a specific solution. For instance, if a house is on fire, it is necessary to control emotions of panic and to call the fire department immediately. However, for many other stressful encounters, such as that discussed in this paper, the solution is anything but straightforward. The effectiveness of a certain mode of coping depends on the extent to which it is appropriate to the internal and/or external demands of a situation. Coping that is effective in one situation can be ineffective in another, and vice versa. The example of denial illustrates this point. If nothing can be done to alter a stressful condition, denial can be beneficial. However, if these coping modes prevent a person from trying out more productive coping behaviour in a situation that can be improved, it has negative consequences (e.g. in escape). In general, there is no such thing as universally effective or ineffective coping. Against this background, Lazarus (2000, 672) defines effective coping in terms of the quality of fit between the person and environmental demands. He considers this relationship “as constantly changing: in effect, as a process that depends on shifting work demands and settings and fluid personal outlook” (Lazarus 2000, 672).

To sum up, this paper aims to make evident the significance of emotions and, in particular, of emotion-focused coping modes in the scope of analysing complex man-environment transactions. “Our emotions matter. [...] Whether joyful, heartbreaking or numbing, emotion has the power to transform the shape of our lives” (Bondi et al. 2007, 1).

References

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