IDENTITY & TRANSFORMATION IN REGIONAL BURNING MAN COMMUNITIES:
Contextualixing the Chinese Case

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CONTEXTUALISING THE CHINESE BM DIASPORA

Intro: Burning China

Research Map & Methods

IDENTITY – TRANSFORMATION - LOCALITY

A unique Chinese Burning Man (BM) diaspora?

„Misreadings“?

INTRO

WHEN YOU TELL YOUR FRIENDS ABOUT A BURNER EVENT IN CHINA…

WHAAAAAT? There is a Burning Man event in China? Do they allow this there?

Ah, really? Are drugs/naked people/festivals allowed in China?

Wow, I imagine it must be like going to one of the early burns. Sounds like a blast.

BURNING CHINA

Scholars have always been bewildered by China. (…) How does one describe, interpret, and understand China, that awesome, other space that has never ceased to both fascinate and infuriate? (Ang, 2000)

→ Immensely complex yet ongologically stable object of study

→ Being Chinese or a Burner varies in context

→ Burns molded by local circumstances

RESARCH MAP & METHODS

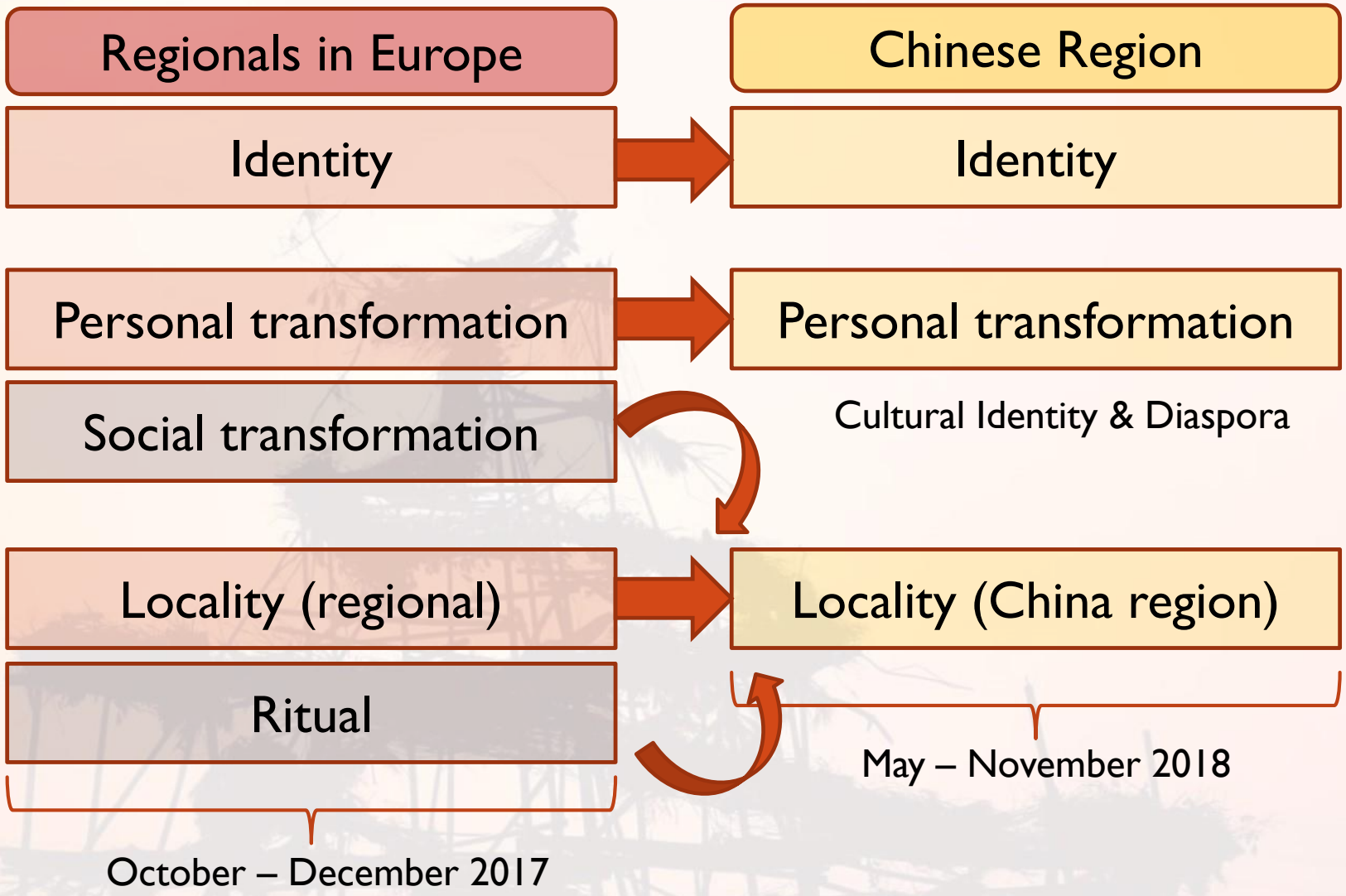
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- 20 Interviews: 9 Europe, 9 China (+1 Taiwan, 1 follow-up)
- Community leads of regional events
- Auto(n)ethnographic elements (multi-year long spatial and virtual participation, 2012-2018)
- Phenomenologically informed

PARTICIPANT OBSERV-PARTICIP-ATION

Dragon Burn 2017, 2018 (Anji)
Nanjing Decompression 2018 (Nanjing)
Burner fundraising events 2018 (Shanghai)

RESEARCH ROADMAP



IDENTITY

CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE DIASPORA

- 2 ways of thinking about cultural identity:
  1. Cultural identity in terms of one shared culture (essentialist)
  2. Cultural identity as a matter of becoming & being: "It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture." (Hall, 1994)

DIASPORIC TURN

- What does diaspora imply? (Zhang 2000)
  - ✓ Scattering of seeds
  - ✓ Double relationship between „two“ different cultural homes
- Diasporic turn: De-centering of the cultural authority
- BURNERS/REGIONALS: escape from Silicon Valley millionaires / Instagram weekend visitors? :-)

BURNERS AS DIASPORIC SUBJECTS OF STUDY

Diasporic subjects as distinct versions of transnational, intercultural experience.

Why? Condition of diaspora produces subjects for whom notions of identity and belonging are radically unsettled. (Ang 2000)

As such, they are good subjects for the study of hybrid subjectivities that are favoured by postmodern and poststructuralist theory. (Zhang 2000)

COMMUNITY IDENTITY (CI)

- *Our surveys used a very loose definition of "EuroBurner". It may have been worthwhile to ask respondents to define it.* (EuroBurner Survey, 2017)
- Community identity is constructed and maintained through discourse (Colombo & Senatore, 2005: Kehoe, 2011) and beyond – to lend meaning to experience

→ Depict discursive components of community identity

Open Letter to the

European Burners' Community

(Nowhere/Euroburners FB group, 21.3.2018)

*The Ego is the only one who needs a costume to cover its emptiness (…), the only one that has NO IDENTITY OF ITS OWN, and thus needs to choose from a set of pre-drawn cards. (…) We have the most wonderfully assorted set of personalities you can dream! What do you want to be? Just say it and we'll make it so! A sparkly unicorn? An alien scientist? An indoctrinated whateverist? Please, feel free to choose! So long as you don't choose to identify as yourself. (…) I look at the Burners community, and I see no innocence-saving soul-redeeming unicorns, I only see a whole flock of Kelpies.**

IDENTITY DISCOURSE

I think it's a choice where you place yourself (…) I think you can make a lot of Burner jokes…. (…) Burning to me is a celebration of whom we are, it's an opportunity to create whom we are, without these societal boundaries.
We plan, and we put a lot into it, to create the best.
To honour that we are this beauty, this place. This is what we're accepting. Whom we are. By choosing our experience. Whom will you be? (01)

IDENTITY DISCOURSE

- Anti-essentialist view (Hall 1994)
  Does not proceed from an origin
- Identity discourse built on personal investment and celebration of the self (here & now)
- Identification rooted in the moment of a place
  (not historically loaded - actualization)
- De-centering from the cultural authority

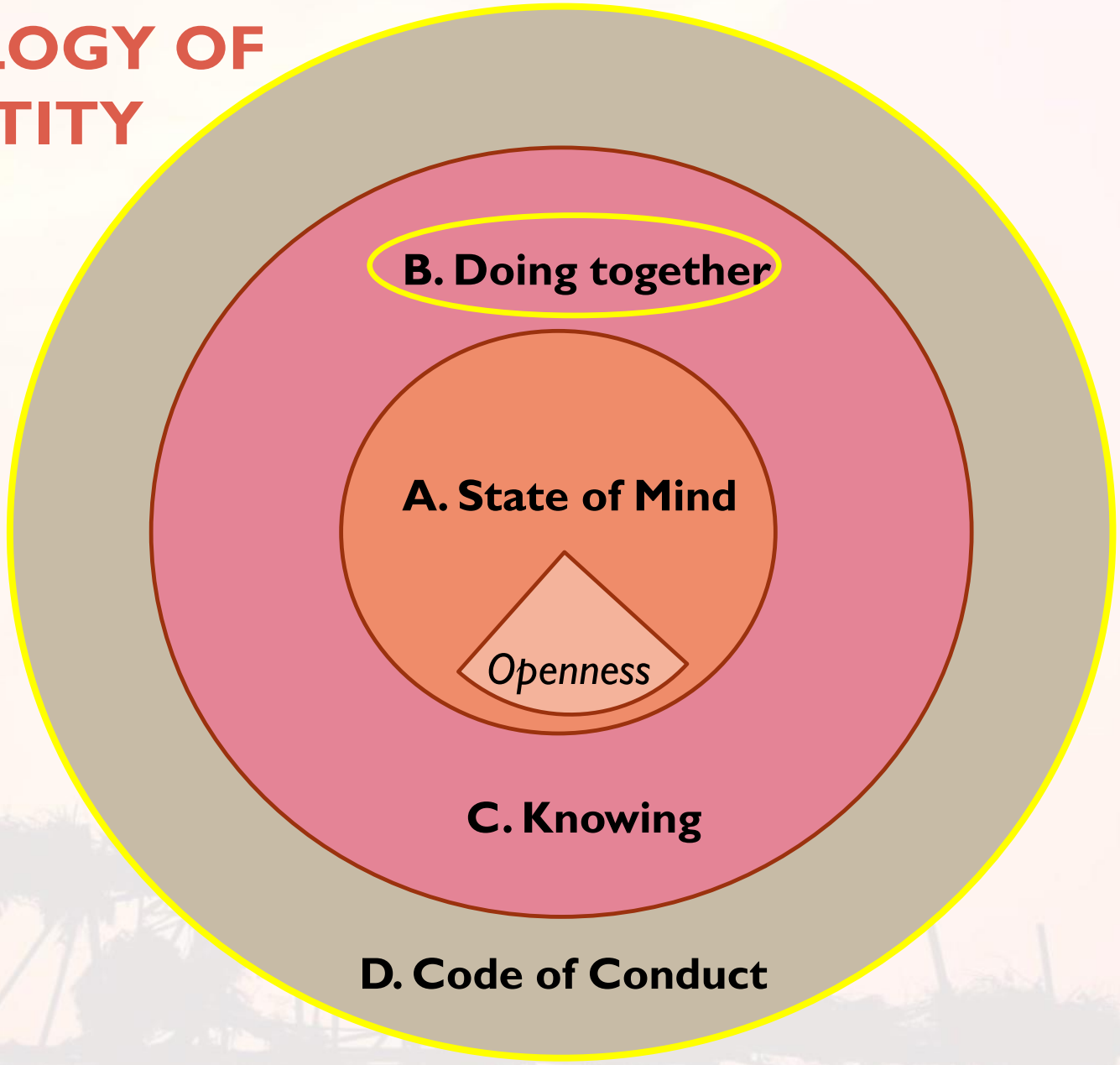
DISCOURSIVE COMPONENTS OF CI

- Identity marked by multiple points of similarities and differences. Contrasts?
  - ✓ Character traits, inclusivity & doing emphasized
  - ✓ Celebration of the self (Europe) vs. personal investment (China)?

They stand alone or with our community. Engage in the principles while catering to their needs and upholding attitudes of love, blessing, joy, acceptance, and gratitude. But really they just do what the fuck they want to do. (01)

Everyone can be a burner as everyone should burn their passion to join in this big event. (19)

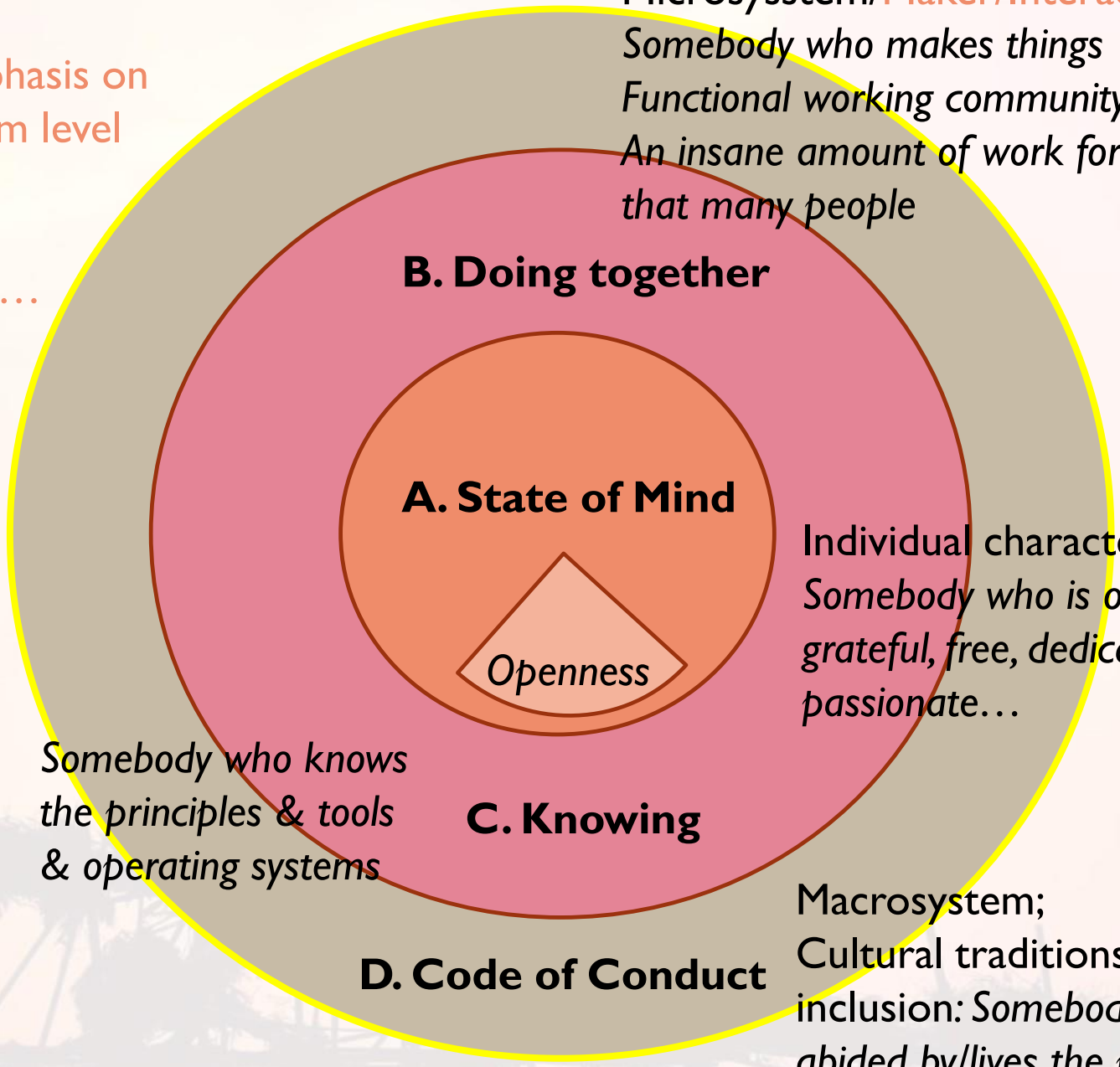
ECOLOGY OF IDENTITY



Less emphasis on exosystem level

- Media
- Status
- Rights…

Microsysstem/Maker/Interaction:
Somebody who makes things
Functional working community
An insane amount of work for not that many people



Individual characteristics:
Somebody who is open, creative, grateful, free, dedicated, passionate…

Somebody who knows the principles & tools & operating systems

Macrosystem;
Cultural traditions, values and inclusion: *Somebody who abided by/lives the principles*

TRANSFORMATION

TRANSFORMATIONAL DISCOURSE: DE-CENTERING & COMMUNITY

- Priviledging of the periphery, emphasis of the local: de-centering from the cultural authority that would be the BM motherland
- Anti-gigantism: Synergy of time and space but embedded in the safety of a smaller community
- Community as a strong enabler of transformational experience on the local level

TRANSFORMATIONAL POTENTIAL

- Diaspora opens up new spaces for cross-cultural articulation, but also radical disruption.
- Diaspora are those who are constantly reproducing themselves a new – through transformation and differences (Hall 1994)
- „Double potential“ of transformation? – diaspora condition meets Chineseness (Ang, 2000) and its rapid transformation

TRANSFORMATION IN THE DIASPORA CONDITION

So, it was very purifying, in a sense. It was like turning up the speed of life. (…) it's like jumping into a washing machine too, so when you turn up the speed and everything starts to get thrown around way more, everything (…) you don't like with the life you're living gets thrown up, and you get to see it, and you can either clear it or you can live with it. (…) it was challenging but it was a lot of fun, too (…) and it was a very social time, a very explorative time. And there was lots of questioning. (17)

Most important, showing our kindness to the strangers really inspired me a lot. (…) I think being willing to open themselves to other people will be difficult to some Chinese people. (19)

GIFTS/TOOLS OF TRANSFORMATION FOR CHINA?

Burning Man culture, especially the 10 principles, is something <u>we could offer</u> to Chinese people, especially now… (11)

- Gifting a Burn (?)
- Start from a deserted condition

…for Western countries, they have already seen this, for many many years, and it's hard to create something new, from the environment. But in China we have the opposite, <u>we have zero.</u> So, we have a lot of room to improve there (laughs), on the positive side… (18)

GET FRIGHTENED TOGETHER

…in America, getting in a bunch of animal costumes might make you feel more weird, than it does in China, because you are already weird all the time… for no reason would a group of Chinese people our age just start doing this on their own. But if they have a group of other people from around the world that are willing to get frightened with them, then it can help you open up (…) I feel like radical expression is one that really goes much further here. (12)

LOCALITY

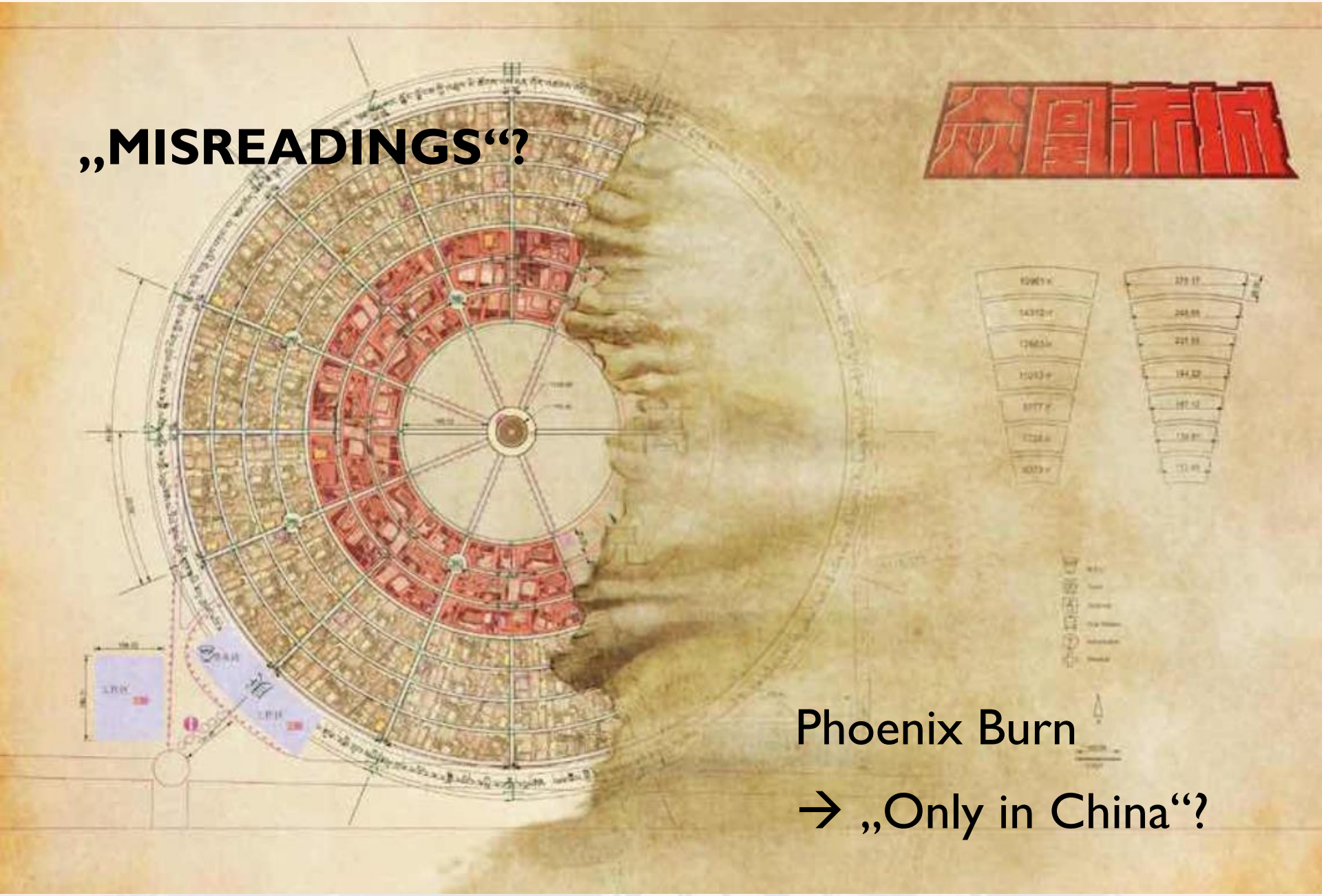
ENHANCED LOCALITY

- Accepting local authorities
- Unpredictability - enhancing the potential of temporary autonomous zones

I love regional burns, because (…) you are kinda in this empty space, in this <u>void, you are alone in this madness</u> (laughs) (01)

It means they are recognizing us as an <u>autonomous political border</u>, so we need a visa stamp, I don't know if you saw the visa stamp (…) they could put it in their passport, or put it on a piece of paper as a souvenir, but it falls within that other theory (…) where instead of waiting for the revolution you make this <u>temporary revolutionary society</u>, and then before the authorities know about it, and stop it, it disappears. (11)

„MISREADINGS“?



Phoenix Burn

→ „Only in China“?

THESES - DISTINCT FORMATION OF THE CHINESE BM DIASPORA

- Chinese BM diaspora creates distinct transformative potential, but also copy culture
- Government context and & unpredictability can enhance the potential of temporary autonomous zones and their appeal
- Radical self expression meets individualist interest
- Proximity to transnational community
- Doers ←→Chinese work ethic vs. outsourcing (counter-cultural potential)

THANK YOU!