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Heritage, ritual space, and contested urbanization in Southern China

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Introduction

One could walk the narrow, twisting lanes of Shenzhen's Baishizhou (白石洲) neighborhood for hours and never find the Wang Bo Gong (王伯公) shrine. But it's there, hidden away under a scraggly and dusty old *fengshui* tree, which has somehow survived its entombment within the web of clotheslines and bootleg wiring that stretches between the dense "handshake" buildings (see Figure 7.1).¹ A murky light filters down between the buildings from the "thin-line sky" above; the shrine sits in a perpetual twilight. According to one account, Wang Bo Gong marks a spot where healing water once bubbled up in the village of Shangbaishi (上白石); villagers would bring sick relatives and visitors to drink from the spring. There's a Cantonese expression, "water sources bring prosperity", that reminds us of why people originally settled in Shangbaishi generations ago.² Now the water is all paved over, but some villagers still recognize the healing properties of the site. In recent years, the shrine started collecting *Tianhou* (天后) statues; the first ones were brought by someone when a small *Tianhou* temple nearby was demolished. Then people started showing up to worship the *Tianhou* statues.³

Wang Bo Gong is not a heritage site. At least not yet. There's no memorial plaque explaining its history, and few of Baishizhou's residents know anything about it. While some do come to burn incense in hopes of high test scores or a good job placement, most do not know the history of the shrine or anything about the village and its oyster fishing and rice farming residents who lived here before the birth of China's "city without history". That is because Baishizhou's residents are almost entirely from other places in China. For them, Baishizhou is not a place of history or heritage, but of transition and incubation. Baishizhou, like Shenzhen's other "urban villages", is a social condenser and collector of disparate migrants who have come to make a new life in this most modern, most ephemeral of Chinese cities.⁴ As such, it is hardly a place where one might expect to find heritage. Indeed, the way Baishizhou is regarded as a transitional space, awaiting its inevitable demolition as the municipal government pursues a more "normal" looking and

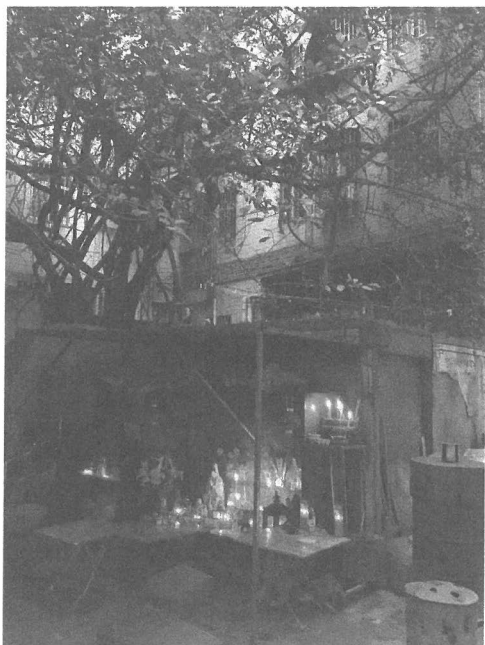


Figure 7.1 Wang Bo Gong, in Baishizhou

“true” (真正的) form of urbanization, puts “heritage” and “urban village” at seemingly opposite ends of a continuum of attitudes toward history.

And yet, just a few stops away on the Shenzhen Metro, in the urban village of Xiasha (下沙), one is confronted by a surprisingly heritagized landscape that, in its gleaming newness, seems the antithesis of the musty and forgotten Wang Bo Gong. Here, in contrast to the maze of tight lanes and “thin-line sky” that typifies most urban villages in Southern China, there is now a vast bright plaza where the Huang ancestral hall and Houwang Temple occupy pride of place (see Figure 7.2). There’s also a Buddha statue in the Southeast Asian Mahayana style, a koi pond, a reclining Buddha, and statues of the noble peasant ancestors of today’s prosperous villagers. At the entrance to the plaza is a large gate and a fountain, with statues of native villagers Huang Shi, from the Southern Song (13th century) – the first Jinshi degree holder from the Shenzhen region – and Huang Yating (1872–1916), a hero from the Republican revolution. Eight “coins” are embedded in the walkway between the ancestral shrine and the temple, leading into the main square. During the Lantern Festival (元宵), the village stages a “big dish feast” ritual (大盤菜) with hundreds of tables and thousands of people eating together in the square. In the Huang ancestral hall is a certificate from China’s version of the “Guinness Book of World



Figure 7.2 Xiasha: culture square and ancestral hall

Records” recognizing Xiasha’s *dapancai* as China’s largest (on 23 February 2002, 40,000 people participated).

It’s hard to see Xiasha as part of a “city without history”, as Shenzhen is fond of calling itself. The village has made a deliberate effort to turn itself into a landscape of Southern Chinese Confucian heritage. Financed by the village shareholding corporation, with its significant real estate investments, the heritagised landscape of Xiasha’s “culture square” (文化廣場) marks the urban village as a distinct space of territorial and lineage-based identity within a city that has, at times, considered such villages a drag on its progress toward “civilized modernity” and has actively sought to erase them from the urban landscape. The plaza might thus be considered a landscape of defiance, and an effort on the part of the village to define the landscape of civilized modernity on its own terms. Rather than await the wrecking ball, Xiasha redeveloped itself. As the anthropologist Mary Ann O’Donnell notes, “Xiasha is being presented as a viable form of upgraded urban village that explicitly references tradition, rather than Communist history and the establishment of New China. Significantly, renovation at Xiasha not only marks the convergence of Community and Enterprise interests, but also reveals the ideological form of this convergence as an upscale urban village”.⁵ This message is driven home in the village museum, which chronicles Xiasha’s

path toward prosperity. Amid dioramas of the village's oyster-fishing past, its "big dish feast" tradition, and photos of village head and CEO Huang Yingchao shaking hands with US President Bill Clinton, the museum offers an unambiguous assessment of Xiasha's transformation. Tellingly, the phrase 城市化好 ("urbanization is good") is translated in the museum as "correct civilization".

The contrast between the reconstructed and heritagized landscape of Xiasha and the transitional, chaotic, and accidental space that remains of Baishizhou offers a launching point for this chapter on heritage, ritual space, and contested urbanization in Shenzhen. While Xiasha may appear as a highly manufactured space of heritage in which the village puts its "civilized" credentials on display for municipal leaders, tourists, and residents alike to see, it remains a ritual space of lineage-based territorial identity. Clearly, Xiasha is not the same ritual space that it was before Shenzhen's designation as China's first special economic zone in 1980. But it remains a space of ritual practice in which religious and ancestral communities are called into being. Like many other urban villages in Shenzhen, Xiasha owes its seemingly improbable resilience as a ritual space not to any ability to somehow remain *separate* from the massive city that has grown up around it, but rather from the integral urbanizing role that it has itself played in making that city possible in the first place. The contrast between Xiasha's culture square and Baishizhou's Wang Bo Gong might be reconsidered thus: instead of looking for traditional ritual spaces hidden away in the leftover lanes of the village-in-the-city, where the vestiges of a seemingly more authentic and rural landscape of vernacular shrines persists, we might instead consider the shiny new heritage landscapes of reconstructed urban villages as a new kind of ritual space.

This of course flies in the face of Shenzhen's official status as a "city without villages", where the rural – marked as backward, traditional, "low-quality" – has been legally expunged from the special economic zone. In contrast, then, to what we might view as the ideological rendering of Shenzhen as a pure space of secular urbanity and unprecedented newness, where a surfeit of migrants starting anew has encouraged an identity unhampered by the oppressive weight of history, this chapter will consider how Shenzhen remains a *city of villages* and how an increasingly visible landscape of heritage in these villages reinforces their ongoing presence as ritual spaces. Heritage has become, in other words, the principle medium for the display of what Herrmann-Pillath et al. (2020) have called a "ritual economy" that continues to govern Shenzhen in significant ways. The heritagized landscape of many of Shenzhen's urban villages remains a space of active ritual practice. It is a landscape that in fact blurs the ideological divide of rural and urban; it also blurs the realms of the secular and the religious. The urban village, then, can be understood as part of a broader landscape of popular religious revival masked as cultural heritage, in which practices of tourism and leisure are blended with those of religion and ritual.

The village is dead! Long live the village!

The phenomenon of urban villages reinventing themselves as consumable sites of heritage was anticipated by Shaanxi writer Jia Pingwa in his 1996 novel *Earth Gate* (土門). Jia's story is set on the edges of a vast city as it bulges out beyond its ancient walls, gobbling up countryside and villages, forcing farmers off their ancestral lands, and conscripting them as unskilled laborers into the city's construction and service industries. The city for Jia is a morally bankrupt and soulless place; it promotes a Western "garden city" ideal manifest in a grassy lawn where once agricultural fields thrived. The lawn, "a feature borrowed from the West as an indicator of 'modernity,'" hasn't been properly cared for. Instead, "the lawn looks like a diseased skin with a mixture of green and yellow patches around bare patches of brown soil where nothing grows" (Wang 2006, 149).

Like Xiasha, the villagers of *Earth Gate* decide to take matters into their own hands rather than await their otherwise inevitable devouring by the urban behemoth.⁶ They do so with a Faustian bargain, meeting the city on its own terms: their village, Renhoucun, will become a heritage attraction! A Ming Dynasty Drum Clan cultural tradition is contrived for the village. Farm houses are renovated to create a "typical village landscape", seducing nostalgic city dwellers and convincing urban planners to preserve the village as a tourist attraction.

Jia's ironic and ambivalent resolution to China's "rural problem" echoes a broader intellectual concern in China with "new heritage". For Feng Jicai (2012), invented heritage such as the massive late-Qing era reconstruction of Qianmen Street in Beijing, part of a broader trend of so-called "Xintiandification" that has spread throughout urban China, has become a contributing factor in the oppressive sameness of China's cities, "a thousand cities with one face" (千城一面).⁷ In much of urban China, "heritage" (遺產) has become synonymous with "demolition and relocation" (拆遷). That was certainly the case in Datong under Mayor Geng Yanbo's efforts to transform his city into a Ming Dynasty heritage landscape (Cui 2018).⁸ For Feng Jicai, there's no such thing as "new heritage" and urbanization has become China's cultural tragedy.

On one level, then, the manufactured heritage of Renhoucun (or Xiasha) might represent the final colonization of "the village" by the inauthentic placelessness of urban modernity. And "placelessness" is central to the idea of the "generic city" which Dutch architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas (1995) popularized in reference to the urban conurbation of the Pearl River Delta (PRD), where urbanism has been little more than the "discarded product of Western civilization". Here, Koolhaas claimed that people live in cities without history, built tabula rasa from generic designs that could have been sketched on the back of a napkin (see also Hessler 2007). Free of the weight of history that oppresses European cities, the urban conurbation of the PRD

was also liberated from the “straightjacket of identity” and the colonialism of authenticity (Koolhaas 1995, 1249–1,257). “All Generic Cities”, he argued, “issue from the tabula rasa; if there was nothing, now they are there; if there was something, they have replaced it. They must, otherwise they would be historic” (p. 1,253).

Shenzhen, more than any other city in China, epitomizes this idea of a city that has escaped the oppressions of history, built almost instantly with “Shenzhen Speed”.⁹ Shenzhen is the urban equivalent of “just in time” post-Fordist manufacturing. The city exists as a future project, “continuously forward looking”, the model of China’s desired future (O’Donnell 2016). The story of Shenzhen, one of inevitable modernity, is also a “story of the elimination of the villages” (Bach 2010, 426). Indeed, in 2004, Shenzhen legally became a city without villages. Urban villages were, after all, reminders of history expunged from the record, an anachronistic drag on the city’s futuristic sensibilities. They were reminders of the fact – conveniently forgotten by Koolhaas’ breathless rhetoric – that the PRD is an urbanism born of the countryside. Much as it might want to think otherwise, Shenzhen is fundamentally a city of villages. Indeed, this lingering landscape of what has been called “perverse” urbanization serves as what Bach (2010, 447) has called the “lump in China’s urban throat”.

The “archipelago urbanism” (Roggeveen and Arnold 2017) of Shenzhen emerged as a cluster of exceptional zones, built up around dispersed nodes of manufacturing. These nodes were themselves village-based, the spatial outcome of a bargain between villagers and zone leaders who, in exchange for the expropriation of agricultural land, allowed villagers to retain sizable parcels of development land upon which to build export processing plants, often in partnership with Hong Kong investors, many of whom were themselves natives of these very villages. In this pattern, villages were the “starting point of urbanization, and a key element in the process of urban change that is markedly different from the dominant Western model” (Cenzatti 2014, 9). Urbanization of the PRD “originated in the industrialization and densification of villages and towns, rather than from the expansion of the central city” (ibid.).

The pattern remains clearly visible in Shenzhen’s neighbor Dongguan. “Actually, Dongguan doesn’t exist”, a city planner told me in 2017, meaning it doesn’t exist as a coherent urban identity, *as a city*. A collection of 28 townships, each relatively autonomous, each with its own industrial zones and specializations, Dongguan is a chaotic assemblage of grassroots and informal urbanisms. Municipal leadership, clearly unnerved by Shenzhen’s more recent meteoric rise to spectacular “World City” status despite its similarly vernacular history, has launched an aggressive program of centering and branding, building a central business district (CBD) of iconic skyscrapers and vast plazas. The city being imposed onto Dongguan’s urban village assemblage has been conceived at an almost inhuman, unlivable, and certainly

unwalkable scale. The central area is designed with a compelling geometry, but on such a vast scale that it is nearly impossible to see or understand on the ground. Dongguan’s center offers a layout that can only be appreciated in model form, viewed from above, in the controlled viewing environment of the city’s fabulous new Urban Planning Exhibition Hall. There, in addition to the obligatory city model, photographs from the air give people a view of what the city was planned out to look like. One could never get this sense from just living in the city and carrying on with everyday life on the ground.

There’s also a hierarchy of scale that contributes to the gargantuan size of Dongguan’s municipal plaza: it must be larger than all the town plazas, which in turn must be larger than all the village plazas. These grassroots plazas – nearly every administrative village and township in the city has one – have become a necessary display of village identity, civility, and pride. They are a spatial testament to the assemblage landscape from which Dongguan emerged and which continues to structure the everyday lives of the city’s 8 million inhabitants. As urban planners have sought to pull these villages together into an integrated and coherent future-oriented city, they have built boulevards and highways which have tended to produce the opposite effect, creating islands of village settlement separated by un-crossable six lane roads full of automobile traffic. The human scale of everyday life is not found on these roads, but behind them, hiding away in the tight narrow lanes of the urban villages.

Urban villages have persisted, therefore, not simply as remnants of a vernacular form of rural urbanization from which the PRD urban conurbation has emerged, but as some of the only livable spaces within this conurbation. They have persisted *as villages*, as assertions of a prerevolutionary social identity that has not simply survived but has indeed *been strengthened by* the reform-era ambiguities of China’s administration of rural land.¹⁰ Despite this, most municipal administrators have adopted a long-held paternalistic attitude toward the village as a space always in need of official redemption (see Oakes 2013); villages need to be rescued from themselves, renewed, and rebuilt as cities. This is how villages have been conceptualized, for example, in the New Socialist Countryside campaign (Looney 2015), which made villages the smallest unit of Chinese urban planning for the first time. Extending this perspective, urban villages are seen as disconnected from their historical roots as farming villages and thus bereft of any cultural or historical identity. They become, in this sense, non-places (Kochan 2015). And viewing them as such turns them into blank spaces awaiting demolition; they’re already tabula rasa. As summarized by Crawford and Wu (2014, 24), for municipal governments in Dongguan and Shenzhen, “...the long term goal is to eliminate existing villages and resettle villagers in high rise towers on a portion of their village land”. As a result, “with each village renewal project, another piece of the city’s identity is swept clean, and the abstract, monotonous space of ‘real urbanization’ spreads” (Smith 2014, 39).

And yet, the “city without villages” only exists on paper. Just as Jia’s Renhoucun villagers persist in the city, urban villages in Dongguan and Shenzhen persist as distinct spaces of territorial identity, an identity ritualized in the contrivance of a drum clan, or a newly built “culture square”. The villages persist for two broad reasons. First, they provide an informal infrastructure that subsidizes the formal urban aspirations of the cities within which they’re located. And second, they provide a form of cultural governance for the city.

A significant component explaining this persistence, particularly in terms of the former issue of villages subsidizing the city, is the transformation of the former rural collective into a village shareholding company that functions, in many of these villages, as a corporate extension of the lineage association. Chung (2014, 602–03) has argued that despite the transformation of the rural collective into a new, urbanized format, the relationship between the rural collective and its members has remained unchanged. In this sense, the institutional change, which aimed to put an end to traditional Chinese rurality, has “retrofitted” the former rural collective unit, redefined the collective membership, and revived village identity rather than eliminating all three. The shareholding company has replaced the former production brigade and thus maintained and strengthened the socialist legacy of the collective system and self-reliance.

Po (2012, 2,843) has identified something similar, noting that in Shenzhen,

...of the 208 newly established urban residents’ committees, the municipality has been able to provide public financing to only six of them; the rest still must be financially self-sustaining. In Longgang, a relatively “rural” district of Shenzhen in which rural villagers have officially been designated as urban residents, urbanized villages still had to spend 800 million yuan, fully one fourth of their collective income, to finance public services in 2008. In short, then, it is the collective economy at the village level, and not urban governments, that have been financing urban expansion in the PRD region.

By virtue of their very density, their walkability, and affordability as transitional spaces for millions of migrant workers, the PRD’s urban villages have provided, almost by accident, a sustainable urban fabric for the cities that grew out of them. The situation is similar to that described by Simone (2004), who argued that when the inner-city slums of Johannesburg had been “let go” by the state, a remarkable heterogeneity of residents had formed their own informal infrastructures of security and provision that produced maximal outcomes with minimal inputs. This is something that is now being recognized in Shenzhen. As Kochan (2015, 928) observed, “...in recent years, even proponents of the redevelopment-by-demolition model have begun to recognize the positive social and economic roles of urban villages within China’s rapid urbanization process. Urban villages are increasingly seen as informal,

transitional and flexible...” Al (2014, 3) calls the villages a “fine-grain urban fabric” providing “more intimate and human-scaled urban spaces” that are surprisingly cosmopolitan.

But it is heritage that has provided the rhetorical cover for urban planners and officials to safely promote preservation without seeming to abandon the city’s utopian dreams of shiny newness. The Shenzhen Urban Planning Commission’s 13th Five Year Plan, published in 2016, provided, for example, guidelines for the protection of some remaining urban village landscapes: “In principle, comprehensive improvement will repair ancestral halls, temples and other buildings of cultural historical value, emphasizing the heritage and continuity of historical context, under the protection of the premise, the development of cultural industry and tourism industry” (Miao 2016). Meanwhile, the plan makes clear that “outer district” urban villages will continue to be demolished. Still, the plan recognizes urban villages as a kind of “urban wetland” – capable of absorbing floods of migrants sustainably.

In Dongguan, in sharp contrast to the municipal government’s addiction to demolition, the state-of-the-art Urban Planning Exhibition Hall displays an unexpected narrative of learning from the past and incorporating it into the contemporary urban fabric, instead of simply bulldozing it and starting fresh. According to the figures in the Hall, 80 km² of the city is designated historic protected area, including several historic cultural towns and villages, and 6 historic cultural streets containing 274 historic buildings, 183 of which are “top grade”, and 91 are “secondary grade”. It’s an exhibition that aspires to convey a role for heritage in the modern city. There are collections of photographs of old buildings that were demolished or otherwise “disappeared” in the face of progress, many of them from the socialist era. “Like many cities throughout China”, reads one display, “Dongguan took up the task of historical preservation relatively late; the preservation mentality has only recently developed here...”

At the same time, though, the Hall projects an upper-middle-class, gentrified version of mixed urban street life that the city also aspires to, with Western-style cafes, sidewalk al fresco dining, and people riding bike-share bikes. A street sign says “Soho”. Similarly, the Shenzhen Museum depicts a future high-tech and middle-class citizenry, without a migrant worker in sight. In the future Shenzhen, the heroic migrant construction teams who built Shenzhen Speed have all moved on.

A disconnect thus remains in these displays, between the heritage recognition of discrete buildings and streets on the one hand and the working-class street life sustained within the “chaos” and unruliness of the urban villages on the other. These vernacular urban fabrics – based loosely on the village settlement patterns that preceded them – remain unimaginable as heritage landscapes capable of sustaining a livable city for a broad range of classes and livelihoods. The Exhibition Hall’s imagined street life is one which the vast majority of Dongguan’s residents would never be able to afford. At the same time, while urban villages have emerged as a default form of affordable

housing and social condensation, their survival has, like Renhoucun's, become a game of outdoing the city at its own game, implementing a touristic, spectacular version of heritage that appeals to the *nouveau riche* sensibilities of the now-wealthy original inhabitants.

Regarding the second reason mentioned above, Herrmann-Pillath et al. (2020) claim that in Shenzhen, the municipal government has politically co-opted the economic role of lineages for local cultural governance. If we view "cultural governance" as the mobilization of political authority through the established cultural patterns and practices of a given population (see Oakes 2019), then there is clearly something to be said for the role that village-based lineage associations and institutionalized ritual practices have played in maintaining social order in the rapidly urbanizing landscape of the PRD. Herrmann-Pillath et al. (2020) argue that a form of hybrid government between municipal authorities and village-based actors has emerged and that, spatially, this hybrid is in part defined by the ritual spaces of, and ritual practices in, the urban villages.

In addition, village shareholding companies have become essential components of the municipal government structure, most obviously in their ability to fund local infrastructure development. Guo and Herrmann-Pillath (2020, 7) note that,

in the contested field of controlling urban land use the lineages activate their social capital of extended kinship in safeguarding and even enhancing their economic position; they reassert their identity and social status in architectural designs, such as vast "cultural squares" that centre on an ancestral hall, often with associated temple. This open manifestation of lineage identity is accommodated by the government because substantial infrastructure investment is funded by the villages outside the formal municipal budget...

Village-based lineages might thus be viewed as the original power brokers of urban development in Shenzhen, and serve as an interest group that counterbalances the overriding power of the municipal government. While a dominant narrative of urban modernity assumed that traditional lineages would wither away with the transformation of Shenzhen from a collection of villages to an urban metropolis, this assumption neglected the fact that traditional lineages had always been a mix of rural and urban. The role of lineages in the hybrid cultural governance of Shenzhen, then, suggests not only a village-municipality hybrid but a more fundamental mixing of the rural and urban in contemporary China.

Heritage-ritual spaces in Shenzhen's urban villages

There are several ways in which villages in China can be understood as ritual spaces. As outlined by Herrmann-Pillath (2018), villages can be territorial

spaces of kinship (represented materially in the form of the ancestral hall (祠堂)); they can be social spaces of shared religious ritual (often marked by a village temple devoted to a local or regionally respected deity such as Tianhou); they may have a spatial arrangement governed by principles of *fengshui* (風水); and/or they may provide a space for the internment and ongoing worship of the deceased. While this final attribute has become difficult to maintain in urbanized environments, the others remain highly relevant in Shenzhen's urban villages today.

Like Xiasha, a number of urban villages in Shenzhen have built open plazas or "culture squares". In a nod to the mimetic role that such plazas tend to play throughout China, as spatial referents to the centrality of the state, many of these appear as miniature versions – though still laid out beyond the scale of everyday life – of Shenzhen's hyper-spectacular Tiananmen-dwarfing Citizen's Square (市民廣場). As was noted above in the context of Dongguan, a clear hierarchy of scale seems to be at work in explaining the growing size of these plazas as one moves up the urban administrative ladder. In Shenzhen's outlying districts, as in Dongguan, impressive plazas have been built by district (former township) governments as a visual display of prestige and power. Walking through one of these plazas, a city planner exclaimed to me, "These districts are really strong! They can do whatever they want, no matter what we tell them or what kind of plan we impose. They're very formidable! (很厲害)".

The plaza could thus be viewed as a landscape of power that is available to all levels of China's urban administrative hierarchy. That urban villages should appropriate this spatial format as a means of placing themselves within this hierarchy, and thus claiming a legitimate place within the urban administration, makes sense. Of course, one could argue that urban villages, like the district and city governments above them, are simply complying with residents' demands for new spaces of leisure. Given the broader context of China's leisure turn (see Rolandsen 2011), this explanation also makes sense. But these spaces are also highly symbolic as the "face" of the village, and they provide a concentrated arena where the territorial identity of the village may be ritually enacted through festival gatherings (such as the "Big Dish Feast") and through worship at the temples. Of course, the space is also used for leisure activities such as dancing. Indeed, the village as heritage-ritual space is now blended with both commercial and leisure functions, both of which may be seen as reinforcing, rather than detracting from, the ritual function of the space. An example of this is found in the urban village of Fenghuang, where the Wen temple is now a leisure park built by the village shareholding company. The park includes a Buddhist temple, where the village employs a resident monk, an Earth God shrine, and several monuments.

In what follows, I focus on two neighboring urban villages in Shenzhen's Futian district in order to convey the blended nature of these heritage-ritual spaces. In both cases we see the reproduction of the village as a ritual space via the creation of new heritage and leisure spaces.

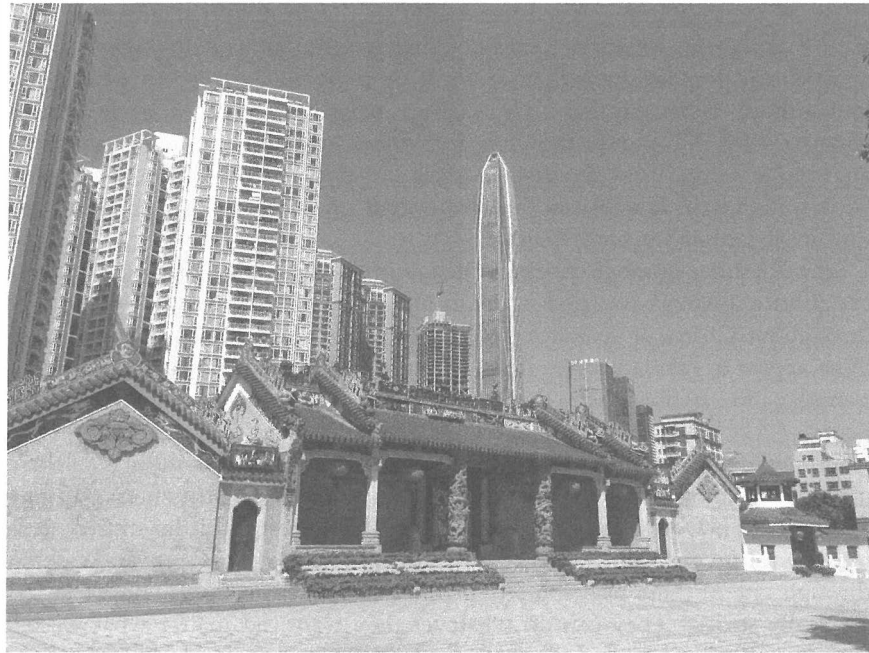


Figure 7.3 Huanggang ancestral hall

Shuiwei and Huanggang

Originally a single village, Shuiwei (水圍) and Huanggang (皇崗) share the Zhuang ancestral family name. Both villages have turned themselves into significant heritage landscapes focusing on their ancestral stature, their cultural sophistication, and their civility. Most significantly, the heritage landscapes of the villages blend the symmetry and abstraction of contemporary urban design in China, with heritage structures, bas-relief murals, and other reminders of the rural origins and distinct identity of the villages. This distinct identity is then ritually practiced in these spaces in cyclical events such as the “Big Dish Feast” and in everyday events of worship at the temple and ancestral hall. It is also practiced in more mundane ways, as people engage these spaces through leisure and recreation.

The larger of the two villages is Huanggang, which has rebuilt its village center as a vast cultural plaza (see Figure 7.3). The rebuilt Zhuang ancestral hall faces the plaza (“Guangdong’s second largest ancestral hall”, I was told by a caretaker), as does a massive stage and a small temple. Next to the ancestral hall is a preserved collection of original village dwellings (see Figure 7.4), and next to these is a lovely classical Suzhou-style garden. Opposite the ancestral hall is a pedestrian corridor with a long fountain, at the end of which is a bell tower looking something like St. Mark’s Campanile in Venice. Beyond



Figure 7.4 Preserved Republican-era dwellings, Huanggang

this is the formal gateway to the village, facing Jintian Road, which forms Huanggang’s eastern boundary.

This layout of village gate – bell tower – fountain corridor – plaza – ancestral hall – garden forms the east-west axis around which Huanggang was traditionally arranged. The village’s decision to emphasize this axis in its reconstruction amounts to a statement of defiance, since the entire village sits right in the middle of the north-south axis that has been formed by Shenzhen’s new Futian CBD. This municipal axis runs from Lianhuashan Park in the north, to the soaring new Citizen’s Center, Citizen’s Square, and the Convention and Exhibition Center on Binhe Road. There the axis stops, for on the other side of Binhe Road is Huanggang and its defiant east-west village axis. Huanggang’s central axis is, in this way, a landscape of power that mimics, but also defies, the larger power grid of Shenzhen. In mock-ups of a future Huanggang on display just to the north at the Shenzhen Urban Planning Museum in the Citizen’s Center, the east-west orientation of the village has been completely erased by the north-south layout of the Futian CBD, effectively disappearing Huanggang as a distinct space and fully incorporating it into the city. Yet, Huanggang’s plaza and park convey an unmistakable message of power and wealth, a kind of village-scale monumentalism that is almost as alienating as the huge Citizen’s Square itself.

And while Shenzhen's official planning hall illustrates one vision of the village's future (in which it is erased), one can find a different vision within the ancestral hall, where the Huanggang Museum features a scale model depicting the village's future development, with the east-west axis very much intact, surrounded by shiny skyscrapers. As Smith (2014, 38) has commented, "Glorifying the ancestors is now just as much a matter of turning Huanggang into a sparkling icon of urban modernity as it is about offering sacrifices to the dead". Huanggang's heritage landscape, Smith argues (*ibid.*), is one that actively positions the village between the future city and its rural past. "By invoking what it sees as the best of both the urban (spectacle, centrality, commerce) and the rural (filiality, consanguinity, memory), Huanggang seeks to fashion a new identity that transcends the two". Part of that identity is one that seeks to explicitly out-civilize the city. Huanggang's culture plaza is "a space of spectacle and aspiration – the yearning to be recognized as a 'truly' urban place is palpable" (*ibid.*, 36).

Shuiwei's heritagization has been somewhat less monumental than Huanggang's, though no less aspiring to blend urban modernity with rural tradition via the reproduction of ritual space. Partly by virtue of the smaller size of Shuiwei itself, the village center is laid out on a much more intimate scale. While still centered on a culture plaza and stage, Shuiwei heritage is not anchored by an ancestral hall. Indeed, the original ancestral hall for both Shuiwei and Huanggang still sits crumbling and forgotten on the side of Fumin Road, which separates the two villages. Nor does Shuiwei's village museum focus on the status of the village lineage (Shuiwei and Huanggang claim that the village's founder, Zhuang Sen, was born into the 48th generation of Zhuangzi's descendants). Instead, the museum features a curious collection of "scholar rocks" (貢石), a subtle claim to the refined sensibilities of the villagers which stands at odds with the more typical museum-as-corporate-branding-project one finds, for example, in Xiasha.

The heritage landscape of Shuiwei is anchored by a large bas-relief mural, narrating the historic transformation of the rural village into an urban scene (see Figure 7.5). These murals are a seemingly obligatory feature of nearly all the urban villages throughout Shenzhen and Dongguan. They tend to depict, in various ways, the citizen-ization of the villagers, and thus can be read as a material representation of the village's role as incubators of citizenship for the migrants who now make up most of their inhabitants (Bach 2010). Shuiwei's mural depicts village history from the time of the classical sages, the Warring States, to the establishment of a prosperous village (symbolized by the village well) with healthy children, and a large banyan tree. Then there are depictions of resistance against the British, followed by the revolution and the Mao era. Here the village is depicted with agricultural labor, plowing the fields with

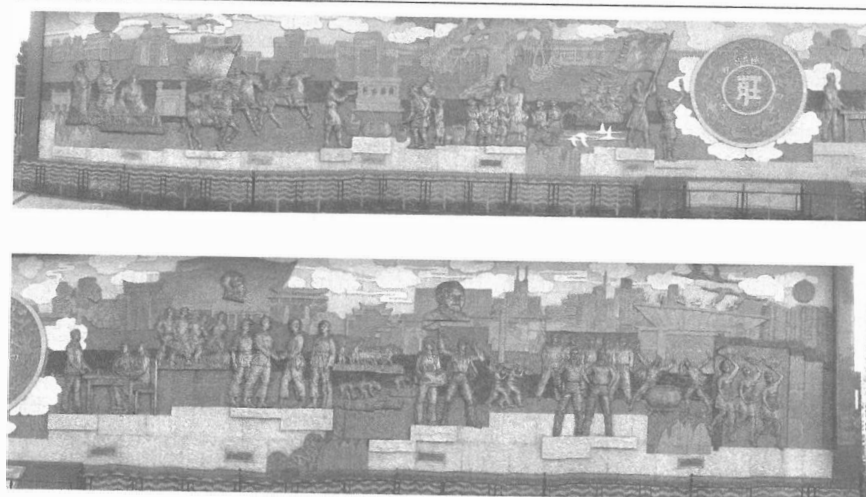


Figure 7.5 Shuiwei bas-relief mural

water buffalo, harvesting the rice. Then the Deng Xiaoping era, and the Shenzhen skyline appears, full of tower cranes. The villagers become construction workers, and engineers with plans and walkie-talkies. We see them dressed "business casual", looking like Shenzhen bosses. But the final scenes of the mural are particularly revealing in that they return us to a cultural depiction. No longer agriculture or industry or urbanization, but shirtless men beating on a drum and women in traditional clothing dancing with fans.

The plaque below the mural (dedicated 8 August 2008) reads, in part: "Culture is the soul of a city, and similarly culture is the soul of a village. That is because culture is the most valuable and eternal spiritual wealth shared by man, and also the spiritual support and moral base on which to construct and promote human's qualities. The ultimate goal of social development is to secure cultural prosperity". Other heritage features in the village include a bronze reproduction of the ancient well, depicting the collecting of water, and the washing of clothes and vegetables. Across the street and next to the culture square is a classical garden. These features contribute to the integration of Shuiwei's public spaces into the urban (and tourist) map of Shenzhen (Kochan 2015, 942). They reinforce Shuiwei's distinct territorial identity as a village, and reclaim the village as a ritual space. Kochan (*ibid.*) comments: "...these spatial arrangements strengthen the urban village's neighborhood characteristics, creating public spaces for everyday activities that are instrumental in bringing together a social mix that blurs the sociospatial boundaries between the urban village and the city".

Conclusion: the village is everywhere

The slightly incongruous nature of village-based heritage sites deep in the heart of Shenzhen, with village plazas where rituals that reinforce village identity still take place surrounded by the glass towers of urban modernity provides an opportunity to reconsider the standard narrative of urbanization in contemporary China. That standard narrative is one in which the urban village is an anachronistic hold-out, a non-place of anonymous migrants, waiting for demolition. In this narrative, the urban village ceased to be a ritual space long before the wrecking ball erases it as any kind of space at all.

Yet an alternative narrative seems to suggest itself when one is confronted with the lineage-based heritage-ritual spaces of villages like Xiasha, Huanggang, and Shuiwei. This alternative narrative views the urban as an outcome of the village which continues to persist through the ongoing enactment of ritual. This alternative narrative can be found in a recent study by Gao (2018) of village territorialization through ritual practice in the Pearl River Delta. Arguing against the conventional view that the village is “out of place” in urban space, Gao finds that the territorializing process of reproducing the village as a ritual space actively ties the village to a whole range of broader urban and state processes. Her project effectively upends our conventional ways of thinking about cities in China, replacing the overwhelming sense that the city is everywhere with the counterintuitive but inescapable fact that “the village is everywhere” or that, as she puts it, there is no outside of villages. Her focus is on the village not as a fixed or a given territory that can be categorized along some sort of continuum between “the rural” and “the urban”, but rather on territorialization as a socio-spatial and dialectical process. This process is not driven by policy, or by elite actions, but by territorial rituals embedded in everyday life. Village territory therefore cannot be viewed as a “thing” that gets acted-upon by processes, for example, of urbanisation (or collectivization, or marketisation, or whatever political-economic development holds sway at any given historical moment). Rather, territory is the dynamic product of villagers engaging these processes through an ongoing repertoire of cyclical (or rhythmic) ritual practices.

The challenge in thinking of Shenzhen’s urban villages in this way comes from the fact that the vast majority of their inhabitants are migrants who do not themselves engage in these ritual practices in any kind of regular way. And in some cases, the original villagers are less interested in heritage and ritual than in selling their development rights and moving somewhere else. This has been the case, for instance, in Hubei (湖貝), one of Shenzhen’s oldest but also most impoverished urban villages. Originally slated for demolition, Hubei became the focus of a preservation movement that ultimately pitted the interests of the original villagers against Shenzhen’s more recent residents who increasingly regard urban villages as worthy of preservation.

The original Zhangs of Hubei were conspicuously absent from the voices of the preservationists, who saw in the village’s 500-year-old “three vertical and eight horizontal” grid, one of the last remaining examples of ancient Cantonese settlement patterns in the Pearl River Delta. The Zhangs, for their part, advocated the preservation of the Zhang ancestral hall, the heart of the village as a ritual space. As noted by O’Donnell (2019, 481), “the debate between preserving the entire village or a single ancestral hall was over migrant versus native identity as the truly ‘local’ Shenzhen...”

And yet, Hubei is a ritual space not only for the Zhangs but also for the Chaoshan migrants who began to occupy the village after the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. With their own landscape of altars and incense burners placed at the village entrance and throughout its narrow lanes, another layer of ritual space has been added to Hubei. Heritagised or not, Hubei remains a ritual space on multiple levels. For a broader intellectual movement committed to preservation, Hubei’s lanes have unwittingly become a ritual space through which a new vision of Shenzhen’s urban identity is articulated. “As artists and intellectuals continued to explore Old Hubei, their lessons increasingly departed from the themes of ‘architectural preservation’ and ‘local tradition,’ focusing instead on the role of urban villages and informal entrepreneurialism in the ongoing reproduction of Shenzhen’s social ecosystem” (O’Donnell 2019, 490).

We might thus see how Shenzhen’s urbanization was not only born out of the villages but remains tied up in village identities. Heritage and ritual remain core components of the ongoing negotiation of these identities in relation to the broader identity of Shenzhen as China’s world city model *par excellence* (Zhang 2019). That model city status, ironically, has emerged from a context in which “the village is everywhere”, and in the village as a ritual space reproduced through reconstructed heritage along with other spectacular markers of urban modernity.

Notes

1. The term “handshake building” (握手樓) describes the dominant pattern of informal housing in many urban villages, where apartment buildings are built so close together that neighbours can “shake hands” across the space between them. See e.g. Poon 2016.
2. These details about the history of Wang Bo Gong can be found in Mary Ann O’Donnell’s report, “Handshake 302: Six months in Baishizhou”: <https://maryannodonnell.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/czc-six-months-in-baishizhou.pdf>.
3. Tianhou is one of several official titles for the Chinese sea deity Mazu.
4. I use the term “urban village” in this chapter to identify those settlements known in Chinese as 城中村. While “village-in-the-city” is a more faithful, if less graceful, translation of this term, I prefer “urban village” precisely for its ambiguity. My use of the term “urban village” should not be confused with the urban village idea that emerged in 1970s and 1980s British, and then American, urban planning movements. See, for clarification, Chung 2010.

5. Mary Ann O'Donnell, “下沙陳楊候王廟: mapping the transition of property rights in Shenzhen”, *Shenzhen Noted*, 15 July 2012: <https://shenzhennoted.com/2012/07/15/下沙陳楊候王廟-mapping-the-transition-of-property-rights-in-shenzhen/>.
 6. The reference here to the city as a behemoth is a deliberate nod to Zhao Liang's stunning 2015 film *Behemoth* (悲兮魔獸), about – among other things – the destruction wrought by China's insatiable appetite for urbanization. See the appraisal by Sorace (2016).
 7. Apologies for this horrible neologism; Xintiandi-ification (新天地化) is a reference to the rise of Shanghai's Xintiandi heritage district to model status, and its replication throughout much of urban China (see Ren 2011, 118–123; Campanella 2008, 279; Kipnis 2012).
 8. See also Zhou Hao's 2015 film *Datong* (大同, English title *The Chinese Mayor*) for a devastating account of heritage-as-demolition.
 9. “Shenzhen Speed” refers to the almost heroic speed with which Shenzhen's first skyscraper was built at a rate of one floor every three days. The term has become something of a brand for the city, reinforcing its history-less, future-looking utopian identity.
 10. China's constitution was amended in 1982 to define collective property rights without actually defining the collective, an omission that freed villages to engage in production outside the national plan. The 1986 land law neglected to define the collective as well. As noted by O'Donnell (2017, 108): “In theory, the urban work units negotiated with brigade and team leaders to transfer the administration of land from the rural to the urban sector of the state apparatus. In turn, the brigades and teams would continue to produce food for the new urban settlements. In practice, however, brigade and team leaders acted on behalf of their natal villages and co-villagers, asserting a prerevolutionary social identity rather than straight-forwardly adhering to the Communist administrative hierarchy or ‘system’ (*tizhi*), as it is glossed in the vernacular”.
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