HOUSING CHOICE WHEN FORCED. INQUIRING SUBJECTIVE WAYS OF HOUSING TEMPORALITY IN TRANSFORMING URBAN VILLAGES. CHINA.

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Introduction

In Xian Cun, an urban village in Guangzhou, a massive inflow of migrants could be interpreted to alter the entire village and the modes of life for both local villagers and migrant residents in regard to physical fabric and socio-spatial patterns, but reasons for change are equally inflicted by responses to a general urbanization and pressure from the overall city related to modernization and new economic conditions. Subjective ways of coping with transformation and change in spatial practice of home and belonging with a majority of the population being temporary migrant residents, and ways of negotiating spatial positioning within a village in forced decline is exemplified in this text.

I will build on a long term research done in relation with my PhD where I visited, registered and did interviews in Xian Cun annually since 2007. The work with the PhD ended in 2011 but I visited the village again in 2012 and 2013. I have interviewed local villagers, authorities on various levels and migrant residents during all states of growth and decline and focused on documenting responses to change of ambience.

Socio-spatial transformation in the urban village

Xian Cun was an ancient rural village with a built up housing area of about 430 times 450 meters. After the expropriation process where fields turned to new development areas this housed area constitutes one big block within the urban grid of the new central business district in the city of Guangzhou. In 1990 the village had a population of 2240 persons; nearly all of them local villagers. This was the end of an era population wise, both in this specific village and in the entire Pearl River Delta where the Special Economic Zones and Open Coastal Cities attracted labour intensive production.

There is a Chinese saying that the urban villagers stopped growing crops and started growing houses. Through this shift the main income for many local residents became the rent out to migrant residents in their houses[1]. During the 90-ies and first decade of 2000's the population in the village increased heavily with an influx of rural-urban migrants. In 2003 the village had 33 890 residents[2] and in 2005 the village had 51 868 registered residents[3]. One can speculate how the actual number is higher both due to illegal rented spaces resulting in unregistered dwellers and the many quick handovers not accounted for in the statistics. The increased population counted rural-urban migrants coming from nearly all provinces of China to work in the service industries and building sites. They brought with them different languages and customs to a neighbourhood of massive change.
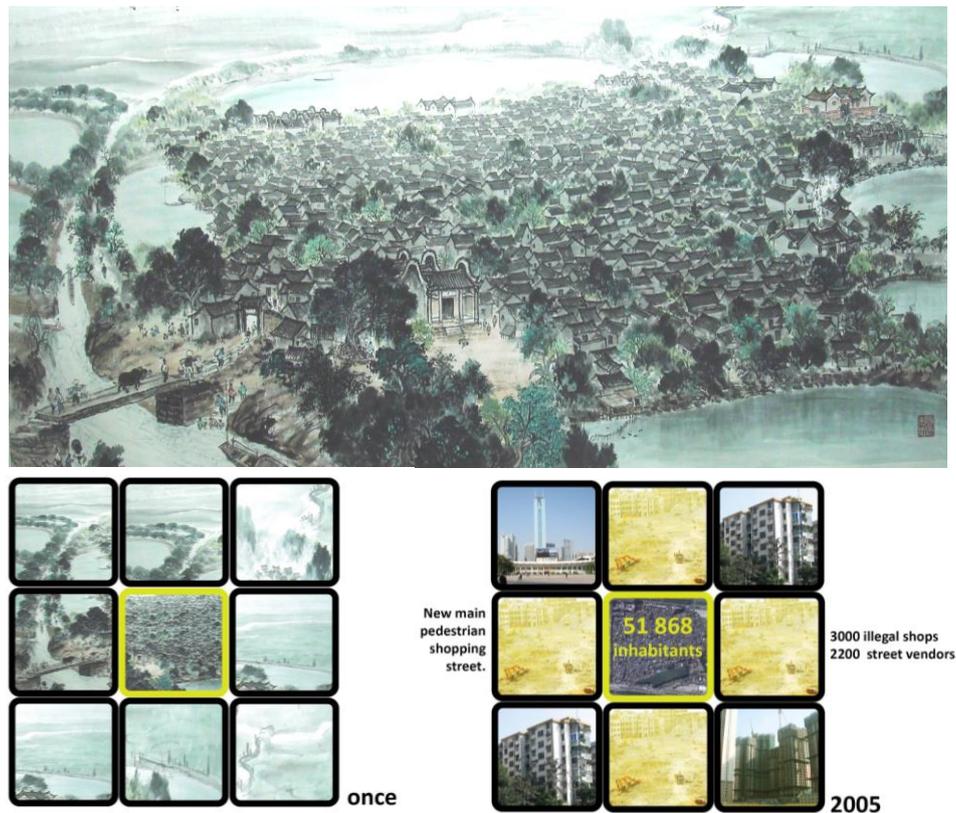
Figure 1.Ancient painting of Xian Cun. Illustration of Xian Cun transformation by author.

Consolidating change

During the period of densification the village transformed into an urban block with paved streets and a closed sewage system. Buildings grew from 1-2 stories up to 7-9 stories with cantilevers stretching over the streets from both sides. The physical changes became indications of optimism towards growth, renewal and urbanization in an ambience where the village was seen by its residents to bridge the urban gap. Still, some local villagers were growing vegetables in their backyards while the tallest building in the world was being erected two blocks away[4].

Village corporate culture

When a Chinese urban village get their fields expropriated for urban development the village as a corporate get economical compensation and the right to develop part of their former fields into industrial areas or new urban quarters. All villagers are shareholders in this company and are granted interests to replace their former salary as farmers. Some village corporates run very well, while others hardly have interests to share[5].

Double biased spatial positioning

One can think of the tenure system in Chinese urban villages as a dual spatial practice both in regard to the difference in interests by the village corporate and the singular local shareholders and in regard to the spatial interests of the local villagers versus the migrant residents[6]. The houses within the village are juridical more difficult to expropriate than the fields, and for the houses the compensation goes directly to the family and not to the villagers as a whole. In Xian Cun the village committee and the village corporate management supported a demolition process that was to result in the entire village to be replaced by new high-rises. The singular villagers had a more differentiated idea of pain and gain and were afraid of losing the income generated when leasing out rooms and apartments in their

houses. For many the compensation they would get could not make up for a new flat and an income to sustain a life in the city[7].

During the densification process when the majority of the population were migrant residents in Xian Cun the migrants faced restrictions in the way they were allowed to use the common spaces of the village as this was amenities catered for and by the local villagers. Parks and ancestor temples, the school, kindergarten and the streetscape were all made for the local villagers and only in limited degree welcomed migrant residents. These biased conditions created very different ways of grounding spatial positioning in the village, and spatial negotiations and ideas of spatial belonging manifested in very different spatial practice among the local villagers and migrant residents[8].

In 2003 3920 illegal shops were reported, as stated in the yearbook[9], in 2005 they counted 2200 street vendors[10]. All of them had to negotiate the use of the streets with the risk of being caught by the patrols that could throw them away or confiscate the goods. Balancing risk and gain was therefore essential in their practice of street use. Streets were narrow and an empty spot was almost immediately replaced by other street vendors. While nobody were allowed to territorialize a streetscape on a permanent basis, one could say that the street vendors in general as a group did a continuous occupation of common space within the village through temporary and subjective positioning, when settling for a few minutes or hours in a place before heading to a new place and leaving the site for the next vendor[11].

Temporality and belonging

The average length of a stay for a migrant resident in Xian Cun before the eviction was about 6 months according to the village authorities. For many migrants the village provided work, networks, a social scene and everyday services within the city. 50 % of the clients to food markets, clothes shops and restaurants within the village were living outside the village. The village made up a dense migrant settlement with influx and out-fluxes on a large scale on a daily basis, creating a neighbourhood where local residents became alienated and migrant residents were surrounded by strangers having to face rapid change and continuous transformation all through the period described.

In the interviews I did the migrant residents would often emphasize the temporality in their presence and an urban aspiration reaching beyond the village where they resided. They would emphasize an attachment to the city rather than a belonging to a specific urban village[12].

Even in their definition of home the role of temporality was embedded. While the word for home in Chinese; *dja*, literally means both *house*, *home* and *family* many of my informants had come to redefine this as family bonds across borders rather than a place to call home. With this mental change, they handle the uncertainty and instability of life in the city by abolishing the traditional conception of 'home'[13]. Perceived as a multi-scalar belonging[14] that capture broader both regarding time and space, this mean in some situations they can relate to a more dynamic and flexible structure of 'home' while for other situations this creates a new type of vulnerability as a more 'subjective home' makes more individual demands without providing the security of the a hometown. The urban village does not replace the role of the hometown in this respect.

The fence

As part of the preparations to the Asian Games in 2010 the village got beatified with unison pale yellow painting, plantings and a tall fence encircling the village. The fence was lined with big posters urging people to behave civilized and depicting idealized images of the modern city. This treatment happened with villages visible from major streets all over the city. The makeover was not a process of improving the living conditions or facilities for the residents of the villages, but rather a way to hide off the unwanted image of an urban category needed to build the glossy image of the central business district, in Xian Cun's case being in the vicinity of the opening ceremony held in the new Central Business district. The urban village did not fit into the narrative of prosperity and progress while the large population facilitating this shift depended on the village and not the urban neighbourhood for

their presence in the city. This first fencing was the visible start of an eradication process and a halt in the process of assimilating the village to the surrounding urban development.

The fenced village is both an example of a site and a population within being "put in place" and being "out of place" within the urban realm as described by Tamara Jacka[15] in her notion of emplacement through social control, where she emphasize how people get placed in particular relationships with other people and with their physical environment. When renting an apartment inside a confined urban village, they find themselves in neglected migrant enclaves, not representing the wanted image of the modern Chinese city. If the village is visible from the outside, it is a thorn in the eye of the wanted 'harmonious image' of the city. If the village is hidden behind fences depicting the idealized city, it is an image that shows a modernization that does not include villages in the city.

Figure 2. Fenced village and stripped houses. Authors photograph, 2011

Processing a decline

In Xian Cun the fence indicated a shift into a period of enforced replacement, ending in expulsions and total demolition. Throughout this process living conditions were put on trial with purpose made hinders used with increasing force by the local authorities to provoke a rapid decline. Deliberate removal of vital public services, demolitions and a standstill in the garbage handling was means used to transform an urban block with a population of 50 000 residents into a pile of brick fragments and a few hundred stubborn local villagers.

The first functions that were demolished were the new food market built in the 2000s, the kindergarten, the school and the hospital, all from around 1990. These were all common village facilities and removing them was like officially closing down the village, management wise. The local villagers who refused to move set up shuttle busses to get their children to school, and a new informal food market was established in the reminiscent of the school yard by migrant residents. While the village was hidden behind a fence, the demolition process within the village was very visible for the residents living on the inside. Piles of brick were left to block the lanes, and the stand still in garbage collection resulted in garbage stored in emptied buildings and on the street.

Spatial resistance by the local villagers

As a response to this planned impediment informal initiatives were established, new paths were found around the gravel and the local villagers set up a system of volunteers cleaning the streets. For the local villagers it became important to unite and stage the continuous spatial engagement to the common village facilities, also when they had been physically removed. I witnessed for instance a banquet hosted inside the confines of the former Confucius school. It had for a decade been rented out by the village authorities as a bicycle shed, but was torn down in the demolition process. Through this manoeuvre the plot was seen again to be open for villager initiatives that regained the site as a common place.

Figure 3. Local villagers host a banquet in the reminiscent of a former common building, Courtesy by Malte Lech. December 2011

Drying clothes on racks hanging out of their window openings from houses partly demolished with doors and windows removed provided a sign of fresh presence within a landscape of decomposition. These practices were different spatial manifestations than the daily demonstrations that happened in front of the village hall and can be understood as a demonstration of resistance through acting everyday normality.

Another way the local villagers stated their presence and spatial positioning was by putting up red flags on all buildings where residents neglected to sign off their property rights. This constituted a counter message to the official posters stating how many villagers had signed the handover agreement for their houses.

Figure 4. Signs of habitation behind the fence. Authors photograph, 2013

Migrant temporary spatial negotiation

During spring 2011 semi-official patrols were sent in to knock on doors of migrant residents urging them to move out, but the migrant residents working in the central business district and construction sites were quickly replaced by new residents working on the demolition of the village. In the initial phase of the demolition phase gatekeeping and restrictions to enter the village without a residence permit meant the migrant share of residents sunk quickly. Still many of the migrant residents kept a relation to the village in decline. I talked to a vegetable seller who formerly had a stand at the food market and lived in the village. After the demolition of the food market they returned to their hometown but moved back to the city once the new temporary food market was established in the village. They lived in the neighbouring urban village and came walking to Xian Cun on a daily basis to sell vegetables in the former school yard.

In January 2011 a request came to shut down all shops and workshops in the village. I witnessed how many shop owners found new temporary ways of operating, behind closed gates or with activities less visible from the street and how this was responded with unpredictable electricity and water supply. This enforced a practice by the workshops being more and more off grid. They were located in the village but operating in contradiction to the expected by the authorities.

New main shopping street looking ahead

In 2003 the village authorities started to build Lan Qing, the new main pedestrian shopping street in collaboration with the city authorities, facing the new main axis of the business district. It brought together the existing row of shops from the village with a new long building housing shops, restaurants and parking. The new street was wide and with sufficient daylight unlike the old main street of the village. The facades of the new shopping street became the ideal put forward by the village authorities, with its' row of commercial signs all being equal in size and in a strict line. The street was tidy and with no street vendors or illegal activity. In the new building the village authorities hired out the commercial spaces directly. Many shops and restaurants in the street represented big Chinese brands seen all over the city. It was almost as if this part of the village had a city camouflage, it was assimilating the city, creating a new type of symbiosis between the city and the village.

In late 2008 the village authorities payed for the new shopping street to get new paving. It became the preferred street to buy formal suits and trendy clothes. In summer 2010 both the paving from 2008 and the low buildings built in 2005 were demolished and replaced by a fence and plantings. The low building was demolished leaving the street with shops on only one side. Most of the former shops

were gone and replaced by shops facilitating the needs of the demolition workers needing pickaxes, helmets and work shoes.

In 2013, after all these various urban states and rapid shifts I saw emerging informal vegetable fields in soil pockets on the brick-piles in the former street along a holey fence and buildings being emptied out. This does not need to be interpreted as a sign of a completed circle, from farming to urban growth, decline and back to farming. I will argue how this agency was just another temporary response on a spatial opportunity emerging in a transforming urban landscape and a visible manifest of how a subjective positioning by a migrant resident depending on these spatial opportunities find a space of negotiation in the midst of the central business district. This is one among many signs of urban ambitions and a challenging of the massive temporality of the urban ambience enacted through a multi-local positioning, relating to both the urban village, the city and beyond. The urban village is an arena where the residents, through their everyday practice and attitudes subvert diverse boundaries, not only that of the urban-rural divide, but equally important that of their own subjective experience of connecting to multi-scalar urban spheres, through local-local relations, within and beyond the urban village.

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