Shenzhen: City of Suspended Possibility

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Abstract

This essay on Shenzhen, China, presents three vignettes addressing the question of home in a city of migrants. The first section explores the ubiquitous narratives of success forming the city’s foundational myth. The second follows this myth into the world of a Shenzhen filmmaker and his characters, as they navigate the tension between the idea of home and the urge to start anew, resulting in the suspended possibility of the title. The last section looks at young architects who hope to preserve the city’s heterotopic sites of migrants and original villagers through architectural innovations. The cases show how an economy of desire supplements the political economy of this export-driven city. The city appears as an urban desiring machine that produces itself as an object of desire for the migrants of all classes who flock to its factories, ‘urban villages’, white-collar jobs, luxury villas and underground economy. The essay is an encounter with the mythology of success and failure, the intertwining of home as an end and home as the beginning, and with the manipulation of space that allows residents to control their own subjectivity.

As Deng Xiaoping prepared to board ship on departing from Shenzhen in January 1992, a city official shouted the following advice: ‘carry out construction at a faster speed!’ (Zhao, 1993). And so the city did, sustaining an astounding 27% annual growth rate for its first 26 years, resulting in the transmogrification of a muddy swamp comprising villages and small market towns into the urban instantiation of Deng’s infamous invocation: ‘To get rich is glorious’. Today, 30 years after its creation as a Special Economic Zone, the city has over 14 million inhabitants and still sings the Chinese version of the New York theme-tune: ‘If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere’. As the urban explosion has rippled out from Shenzhen across the country, its unique role in China as a capitalist enclave has ebbed, but what still makes it distinct from other Chinese cities is its large population of immigrants.

Ninety-five percent of Shenzhen’s population was born elsewhere. With an average age of 28, this is an artificially young city. In 2009, only 2.2 million of its residents had Shenzhen city registration (hukou), while 6.4 million residents were legal migrants, to say nothing of the other 5 million or more illegal migrants (China Daily, 2009). Everyone is from somewhere else, and relatively few people are buried in Shenzhen — they return home to die. It is a city of disproportionately small cemeteries. When asked where they are from, children often adopt their parents’ hometown identity. Yet a significant part of what gives Shenzhen its sense of freedom is the shared sense of being away from home, of living in a city without an entrenched elite, of not having your family history engraved upon your neighbor’s psyche.

Addressing the question of home in a city of migrants, this essay presents three vignettes from fieldwork conducted over the last 3 years in Shenzhen. The narratives that emerge supplement Shenzhen’s alluring lure with the lure of new beginnings and the
melancholy of alienation. Through these episodes, we gain a sense of the city as an urban desiring machine: Shenzhen bloomed through the production of objects of desire for others (via export), and it also produces itself as an object of desire for the migrants of all classes who have flocked to its factories, urban villages, white-collar jobs, luxury villas and underground economy.¹ The first section explores the ubiquitous narratives of success that form the foundational myth of the city. The second follows this myth into the world of a Shenzhen filmmaker and his characters, as they navigate the tension between the idea of home and the urge to start anew, resulting in the suspended possibility of the title. The last section looks at young architects who hope to preserve the city’s heterotopic sites of migrants and original villagers through architectural innovations.

‘Civilized Shenzhen, warm homestead’²

Shenzhen swarms with stories of opportunity, its stock-in-trade of casual conversation, like discussing real estate in New York. These tales are reiterated so often and in so many ways by so many different types of people that they form an underlying weave upon which the city rests. In the 1980s and 1990s, Shenzhen represented experimentation and enrichment. ‘People in Shenzhen identify with opportunity and freedom’, one city official explained to me earnestly, trying to convey what the city represents. Today, residents are not shy about voicing criticism of the city, with its increasing pollution, lack of affordable housing and catalogue of big-city problems, but ask those who came to Shenzhen in its first two decades as young workers or children and you hear statements (as I so often have) like ‘my first impression was beautiful flowers, coconut trees and a small population — I could get a seat on the bus!’, or ‘I said to my mom “let’s stay here!”’ There were skyscrapers, amusement parks, green, clouds and blue sky, better than anywhere else in China’.

These initial impressions are usually accompanied by tales of success, either one’s own, or more usually stories of others. There was, a friend buoyantly recounted to me over tea, the man from Chaohou who came on a bicycle to Shenzhen, so poor he was wearing only slippers. He noticed that there were no schools inside the bonded-warehouse free trade area in Futian. Through making connections to city education and commerce officials, he got the permit to open a school, though he himself could barely sign his name. Now he runs 20 schools and is worth RMB 200 million (over US $30 million). Or a similar story: the woman from Sichuan who migrated to Zhuhai but, unable to find work, then came to Shekou (part of Shenzhen). The first thing she saw was the five-star Nanshan Hotel with foreigners playing tennis — ‘the promised land!’ She wanted to call back home to Sichuan, but she had never seen a touch-tone phone and did not know whether to lift the receiver or press the buttons first. Today she is married to the vice-president of a major free trade zone, drives a Volvo, lives in a luxury apartment in ‘Overseas Chinese Town’ district, owns several apartments that she rents out, and is mother to a son.

Note how these narratives all contain the same tropes of poor folk making good, of cleverness trumping education, of opportunity awaiting those who act, and the validation of the self through large amounts of money, trappings of status like luxury apartments and brands and (notably) a son as an only child. These narratives function as what Barthes (1974: 100) calls cultural codes, whose ‘utterances’ are ‘implicit proverbs’ that insert the dominant discourse into personal and collective stories, dreams, advertisements and fantasies, all of which serve to perpetuate the meta-fantasy of self-improvement through getting rich. These fantasies are even more plausible because of the real-life opportunities that drew workers. As a journalist put it, Shenzhen in the late 1980s and 1990s was ‘like a fever’.


² This slogan, part of a municipal advertising campaign promoting the city, was emblazoned in English and Chinese on bus stops and billboards across Shenzhen in 2009-10.
Narratives of success are strewn around like jewels. Understandably, failure is less openly acknowledged and when it is, it usually follows the same narrative of rags to riches but with a moralistic ending. An unnamed local without money met a rich woman, according to one friend, and subsequently opened a small factory outside the ‘second line’ (on the outskirts of the city). Intoxicated by his increasing wealth and mobility, he fell prey to the evils of gambling (a constant moral trope in China), and lost RMB 4 million (US $500,000), which happened to be the value of his factory. When the creditors found this out they forced him to sell the factory and, overcome by shame, he disappeared, never to be seen again. This apocryphal story shares with its success-story companions a focus on individual accountability.

As if inspiring a confessional moment, the telling of this story around a dinner table in 2008 brought out personal admissions of stock market losses: one young professional had lost 80% of her savings in the previous year and now pays out five-sixths of her income in rent, and her friends were quick to inform me that most of their acquaintances have lost 50% of their wealth in stocks. This scene repeated itself with other groups of young professionals, with one telling me with a shrug how she had lost RMB 3 million (about US $440,000), and her more chagrined friend chiming in that she had lost all her savings. Even the wife of a village leader cheerfully explained over a sumptuous dim sum meal that ‘stir-frying stocks’ (speculating on the stock market) is a ‘sure way of losing money’.

(Just like) Starting over

The fables of opportunities and failure congeal in unconventional form in the person of Liu Gaoming, a Shenzhen underground filmmaker and graphic designer. Trained as an artist, Liu literally jumped over the wall of a provincial school where he had a dead-end teaching job to seek his fortune by migrating to Shenzhen. Working as a designer, he saw the power of combining art and commerce, and he has become a highly successful entrepreneur, yet is constantly preoccupied by questions of memory and migrants.

These themes are the focus of Liu’s gritty black-and-white movies, contrasting starkly with his sophisticated graphic artwork and designs for boutiques. My first introduction to him came through a chance meeting in 2007 when I tagged along with the anthropologist Mary Ann O’Donnell, who has written about Liu on her blog (see O’Donnell, 2008) and was meeting him to discuss translating subtitles for his 2005 film ‘Rib’ (Paigu), about a pirate DVD movie seller. One thing happened, and then the next: eating Häagen Dazs at City Walk Mall, an impromptu spicy crab dinner courtesy of Liu in the urban village behind it, the purr of his luxury Toyota . . . with classical music playing on the sound system, we head to the back streets of the bustling, hustling Huangxiangbei commercial area, then walk up steep steps and along hallways (doors open behind metal bars with men staring out like prisoners) to reach the cramped room (no larger than a capacious closet) of the pirate DVD seller ‘Rib’ (Paigu) himself. The walls are a montage of David Lynch, Marilyn Monroe, Czech Wave and other movie posters. Kate Hudson peers out from behind a large box atop a TV monitor, hiding an M-9 semi-automatic combat pistol inside. One black-and-white poster shows the silhouette of a man — Paigu himself — in the eponymous film by Liu Gaoming. Tall and thin as his nickname implies, Paigu shows me his shoulder bag, a typical canvas bag with a profile of Mao wearing a cap and the standard slogan ‘Serve the People’ inscribed below — except that Paigu has added a character (bi) so that it now reads ‘Serve Money’.

Paigu sells art-house films — David Lynch, Italian neorealism, Japanese avant-garde, Woody Allen and F.W. Murnau, along with the odd commercial hit. He tells me the same thing he explains in the film: he doesn’t understand the films he sells, but they are cheaper to buy wholesale than the blockbusters, and his buyers are a more
select group. All he wants is to make enough money to find a girlfriend, a wife. Liu Gaoming’s film has been shown outside China, but Paigu is not a celebrity, certainly not in Shenzhen. The 2005 film is almost excruciatingly *cinema verité* (106 minutes long and most of it without dialogue): Paigu at his apartment with roommates, Paigu selling DVDs in his store, Paigu forced out of his store, selling DVDs from an overpass. Paigu lamenting his lack of education, his lack of romance, how he likes the TV series *Ma Dashuai* (which follows rural migrants like him in the big city with a focus on simple, ordinary events), how he likes the song ‘Two Butterflies’ with its line ‘living every day in a happy dream’.

Originally from Jiangxi province, Paigu appears and disappears, unstable and unmoored, known but never quite known. His story, like that of Liu Gaoming’s next film, *Ah Song*, is what O’Donnell *(ibid.*) calls ‘the anti-Shenzhen dream’. *Ah Song* (the name of a person) begins with the filmmaker’s statement that: ‘The story is so banal it can’t even be called a story; it’s just memories from 1996, when I first came to Shenzhen’. One thing happens, and then the next, but we know that Liu left the urban village (where he first shared an apartment with Ah Song) to become a model of success; Ah Song failed to find a real job and vanished into the mist. Liu’s film is a film of his memory of Ah Song, a memory both raw yet sentimental. It is an unembellished portrayal of life in all its rainy-season tedium: buying a pack of cigarettes, pulling on an errant guitar string sticking out of the case, walking and smoking, riding a bicycle in circles, watching TV (rising vegetable prices, typhoon forecast), watching Forrest Gump on DVD, getting his hair washed. But it is sentimental in its portrayal of Ah Song’s unrequited love for a drug-addicted woman who he spies on in the neighboring building. They connect briefly but she disappears, and later so does he. Only years later does Liu find that Ah Song is back in his village in Anhui province, seemingly at peace with his decision to turn his back on Shenzhen and go home. But even here the film leaves one in doubt as to whether the final scene, shot in color, is real or Liu’s fantasy of Ah Song’s return.

In these films, O’Donnell *(ibid.*) sees the act of: ‘going home the last, unrealizable Shenzhen dream’. The desire for home, as Rey Chow (2007: 54–5) points out, is inextricable from the desire to start over again; she reminds us how Freud long ago drew our attention to the various substitutes we humans seek for the home to which we can never return *(ibid.: 55)*. As an immigrant city, a free-market city, a border city, a city of ‘opportunity and freedom’ (as the aforementioned city official put it), Shenzhen is a city for starting over. But because starting over is also a search for home, Shenzhen becomes a system for producing existential homelessness. This is what makes ‘going home the last, unrealizable Shenzhen dream’. Perhaps this, as much as anything else, fuels the hyperkinetic focus on substitutes, found all over the new China, but especially so in Shenzhen: new restaurants springing up all the time, very expensive cars, interior decoration embraced as an obsession. These substitutes are not incidentally tied to a romanticized public visibility: precisely because of the intensified freedom that comes with alienation in big cities, there is a desire to be visible, to pronounce ‘I consume, therefore I am, I endure’, an anxiety not to disappear without a trace like Paigu and Ah Song. Ah Song’s unrequited love is for the city as much as for the evanescent girl. His escape from and return to home portray the way in which Shenzhen functions as a space of suspended possibility.

### Inverting city and village

This suspended possibility manifests itself in built form through the work of Urbanus, a firm of young, socially engaged, Western-trained architects with faith in modern architecture’s ‘progressive’ potential. They work out of a sleek office in OCT (Overseas Chinese Town) Loft, an artistic zone modeled on Vancouver’s Gastown and Granville
Island areas, with added hints of the archetypal ‘Soho’ combination of factory lofts, artists and style. As everywhere, the Shenzhen dream of money and new beginnings lies at the origin: a founding partner of the firm migrated to Shenzhen from Beijing in the 1980s. In Beijing he was earning a basic salary of RMB 200 (US $30) per month (rising to perhaps RMB 300 after bonuses). In Shenzhen he was able to earn RMB 2,000 (US $300) per month, making nearly his yearly wage in a couple of months or less with a big bonus. ‘The draw’, he said quietly, ‘was strong’. But Shenzhen allowed more than money, it allowed for reinvention and experimentation.

Today, Urbanus’ office entrance in its old factory building is blinding in its simplicity: white walls and a long white desk with the company name spelled out in white relief letters, two white phones, all contrasted by a single black keyboard and flat screen above which rises a red national flag and behind it a secretary in a black chair, her shirt the same red as the flag and her hair the same black as the computer. An adjoining room, however, spills over with models in all sizes and colors, a dream factory of urban imagination. Shenzhen is stabilizing now, explains Yan Meng, one of the firm’s founders, but Koolhaas (2002) got it right in describing the urban condition of the region as the ‘City of Exacerbated Difference’. Meng and his colleagues sought to counter the ‘black-and-white’ mentality in urban planning by concentrating on the ‘gray areas’. To this end, among the clash of competing projects, Urbanus has focused on the ‘seemingly unsolvable problem’ of what is known as the urban village, or literally ‘village in the city’.

Formerly collective farms surrounded by lychee orchards and vegetable fields, these villages became one of the most conspicuous by-products of Shenzhen’s urban explosion. Benefiting for years from special status, the villages arrogated a surprisingly high level of autonomy, allowing the former farmers to build illegal housing and expand village enterprises into joint stockholding companies. As they cultivated rents from migrants, the farmers became wealthy and their 15% of the city’s land came to house over 50% of the population. The city government has sought to control the villages and, through cooptation, coercion and conversion, are well on their way to demolishing the villages in the central districts that appear as urban blight on a fantasy landscape of designer skyscrapers, malls, luxury hotels and high rises (Wang et al., 2009; Bach, 2010).

Urbanus sought a way to square the circle, to preserve the village as a form and remove its stigma as backward rural vestige holding out against the inexorable civilization of the orderly modern city. They developed four plans for inverting the term ‘village in the city’. Instead, they sought to create the ‘city in the village’, by which they acknowledge the village as the city, as an integral part of its social, cultural and political value, as well as its architectural signature style (Urbanus, 2006).

The proposals, one of which has been realized, all incorporate the odd shimmering beauty of glowing models with rhizomatic forms. Juxtapositions of bold color and black-and-white photographs veer from pop-art immediacy to Heartfield-like photomontages and 3D images with science-fiction sinuosity. The designs are at once whimsical, visionary, romantic and pragmatic. In the cramped village of Gangsha, in a block where 400,000m2 of housing is built on less than a third of a square mile of land, Urbanus proposed selective demolition to create clearances, stitch the existing houses together townhouse style and connect all of it by rooftop corridors interspersed with gardens. Community life would be focused in courtyards and rooftops. From above, the model is a zigzag of colored streets in the sky, running and looping around each other as they trace the contours of the blocks. In compact Fuxin Village, density is maintained but literally hollowed out — the buildings are linked by ‘rings’ that create connections in the manner of intersecting subway lines, one for commerce, art, children, entertainment, gardens, etc., complete with ‘transfer stations’. A sense of ‘mystery and surprise’ is a key design goal. Unlike these adaptations, a giant mixed-use möbius-strip building rises from inside Xinzhou Village. The towering slants and uneven surfaces reflect the overhangs and sharp angles of the handshake.
buildings\(^3\) at its feet, and echo the incongruous half-ruins of the original sentry towers, walls and wells that intersperse the village.

Dafen Village, known as ‘oil painting village’, contains the only realized project from the Urbanus four, an art museum that rises from a slope like a creature slowly drawing itself upright. Dafen is an unusual village, having found a highly successful market niche as a relentless production site for reproduction oil paintings. One apocryphal story places its origin in a Walmart order for 16,000 paintings, for which the company hired an army of artists. A Super-Walmart (one of nine in Shenzhen) does indeed rise above the village like a fortress, but today the village generates its own industry, with the entire history of Western art in imitation appearing in random order lining street after street. Jacques Louis David’s ‘Napoleon Crossing the Alps’ appears numerous times, next to familiar works by Da Vinci, Manet, Warhol and Picasso.

Keenly aware of the odd juxtapositions of the village, Urbanus sought an anti-museum, one that embraced art as product and as object. A lopsided hexagon, the museum was a high-minded concept. It was supposed to express through architectural form the rhythm and values of the village, with studios for artists, exhibition halls for the global art market, theaters and cafes for the local population. Its traverses, bridges and multiple entrances were supposed to connect the ‘chaotic and disorderly’ intersection of village center, neighboring high-rise housing and shopping areas. Yet more than a year after its completion, the bridge connecting the high rises with the village had not been opened, and life courses around, rather than through, the museum. Sighing, Yan Meng lamented the internal politics of the village, which failed to share the architect’s commitment to community interaction.

Ironically, the villagers that are the subject of Urbanus’ plans and the owners of housing for legal and illegal migrants are the only ones at home (in the strict sense of living in their place of origin). The villagers are also more mobile than many Chinese, thanks to the quirks of border history that have resulted in many of them having family in Hong Kong. Shenzhen’s villagers often acquire Hong Kong residency permits, heirs to a tradition forged by the area’s 150 years of openness to foreign trade and migration. For them, the Mao era was the aberration; they spoke the language of globalization avant la lettre. In a city where home is elsewhere, Shenzhen’s villages are reminders of the awkward autonomy experienced by 95% of the city’s residents.

Conclusion

These scenes from Shenzhen tap into the economy of desire that supplements the political economy of the city. In each of these episodes, we encounter the mythology of success and failure, the intertwining of home as an end and home as the beginning, and the manipulation of space to allow residents to control their own subjectivity. Shenzhen appears as a city in suspense where everyone is always awaiting the next installment. It is a city of suspended disbelief, filled with migrants’ tacit expectations of the city’s fulfillment of their dreams, even when they can only be fulfilled vicariously. It is a city that relies for its desiring power on a discursive dynamic that Barthes called ‘proairetic’: an ongoing story with no clear sense of an ending, where the suspense of what happens next keeps everyone going. This perpetual motion of desire is what enables and, in its own way, ennobles Shenzhen as a city defined by its most famous billboard, which states ‘Time is Money, Efficiency is Life’, and in which a pirate DVD salesman with no real prospects in marriage or income carries his bag with the doctored exhortation to ‘serve money’ while singing to himself a line from his favorite song — ‘living every day in a happy dream’.

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\(^3\) Handshake buildings refer to usually illegal low-rise residences for migrant workers, built so close together that you could shake the hand of the person in the next building by leaning out the window.
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References


Résumé

Ce travail sur Shenzhen présente trois évocations sur le thème du ‘lieu d’origine’ (home) dans une ville chinoise de migrants. La première partie revient sur les récits généralisés de réussites qui sont à la base du mythe fondateur de la ville. La deuxième suit ce mythe dans l’univers d’un cinéaste de Shenzhen et de ses personnages soumis aux tensions entre la notion de lieu d’origine et l’envie de recommencement, aboutissant à la ‘possibilité en suspens’ du titre. La dernière partie porte sur de jeunes architectes dont les innovations espèrent préserver, dans la ville, des sites hétérotopiques de migrants et d’anciens villageois. Les cas étudiés montrent comment une économie du désir s’ajoute à l’économie politique de cette ville orientée à l’exportation. La ville apparaît comme une machine urbaine en désir qui s’autoproduit en objet de désir pour les migrants de toute classe qui affluent vers ses usines, ‘villages urbains’, emplois de bureau, villas de luxe et son économie souterraine. Ce texte est une rencontre avec la mythologie du succès et de l’échec, avec le lien inextricable entre le lieu d’origine comme fin et comme début, et avec la manipulation de l’espace qui permet aux habitants de maîtriser leur propre subjectivité.