Artistic and spatial mobility in China's urban villages

Contemporary art, socially engaged art, Guangdong, urban villages, migrants, countryside, urbanization

Dr Federica Mirra
Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow
Centre for Chinese Visual Arts (CCVA), School of Art, Birmingham City University, UK
Federica.mirra@bcu.ac.uk

Dr Federica is a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at the Centre for Chinese Visual Arts at Birmingham City University (BCU), UK where she is undertaking her three-year postdoctoral research, *The City as Art: Living Aesthetics in Twenty-First Century China*. She obtained her PhD at BCU in 2022, funded by the AHRC-Midlands3Cities Doctoral Training Partnership. Previously, Dr Mirra worked as Research Fellow at the Chair of Chinese Culture and Society, University of St Gallen, Switzerland, as Visiting Lecturer at BCU and Research Assistant and Curatorial Assistant in HE and the art sector.

Abstract:

This chapter investigates the socio-spatial mobility between city and countryside in China, specifically concentrating on urban villages (城中村 *chengzhong cun*), through the lens of contemporary artistic practices. As the results of China's transformations since 1978, urban villages are informal settlements widely looked down by central and local governments due to their irregularity and transience. Building upon the literature in the fields of social, urban, and geography studies, the author deploy visual arts as the framework to examine the mobility inherent within China's urban villages. Through the qualitative, empirical, visual analysis of contemporary artistic practices by Weng Fen, Cao Fei, Zhu Fadong, Jiu Society, Handshake 302 and Xisan Film Studio, as well as interviews and online exchanges with selected artists, the author argues that the representations of mobility in Chinese urban villages are ambivalent: VICs and villagers are simultaneously depicted as invisible, and still, whilst being creative, and resourceful. Overall, this chapters asserts the significance of visual arts and, specifically, participatory and collaborative practices, which can widen the array of representations of urban villages and rethink the dynamics between city centres and urban villages.

A Japanese legend narrates that if you fold one thousand origami cranes, they will take flight and realise your dreams. Whereas children may let their imagination fly along with paper cranes, for grownups this story is more of a romanticised fantasy. Nevertheless, architect Wan Yan found inspiration from this traditional Japanese tale in 2014 and installed one thousand origami cranes in the art space of Handshake 302 (握手 302) in Baishizhou village, Shenzhen (Fig.1) (O'Donnell 2014). Baishizhou is an urbanised village in Shenzhen that provides cheap housing, services and working opportunities to a varied group of individuals, including rural migrants, foreigners, graduate students, and white-collars. Wan's installation, *Paper Crane Tea* (2014), wanted to represent and encourage the discussion of the individual dreams and ambitions of the visitors of Handshake 302 and the local villagers in Baishizhou.[1] Individually folded through repetitious and delicate movements, the fragile paper turns into a three-dimensional sculpture which reflects the villagers' aspirations and resilience to improve their socio-spatial condition. As this artwork suggests, this chapter sheds light on the socio-spatial mobility between city and countryside, specifically concentrating on urban villages (城中村, *chengzhong cun*).

< Insert Fig.1 >

Urban villages, or villages in the city (VICs), are the results of China's top-down socio-spatial policies and transformations over the last four decades. They are informal settlements which have ultimately boosted China's unprecedented urban and economic transformations. Widely looked down, differentiated, and concealed by central and local governments, these ambiguous areas have been often portrayed by official media and news as urban diseases and cancers (Siu 2007, 330). However, they have emerged as urgent topics of discussion in relation to the socio-spatial inequalities associated with China's extraordinary urbanization

[1] Wan's work is reminiscent of Yoko Ono's series *Wish Trees*, which started in 1996. In the 2010s, British expert on social policy, Gerard Lemos, erected a similar wish tree with the support of Chongqing's local authorities after viewing the work by a Korean artist, who installed a similar tree in front of Shenzhen Art Museum and asked passers-by to hang their wishes on the tree (2012, 61–63).

(Logan 2001; C. Fan 2008; Chung 2013; Lin 2013; De Meulder, Lin, and Shannon 2014; Al 2014; Parke 2018; Ma and Wu 2005b; Xiang and Tan 2005). This chapter builds upon the abundant literature in the fields of social, urban, and geography studies to discuss the mobility inherent within China's urban villages through the less deployed lens of visual arts.[2]

Mobility, as the interconnection among 'movement, representation and practice' bears a number of different and often contradictory meanings (Cresswell 2010, 19). On the one hand, it has been associated with 'progress, freedom, opportunity and modernity'; on the other, it has stood for dysfunctionality, 'shiftlessness, deviance, and resistance' (Cresswell 2006, 2). I align with Tim Cresswell in maintaining that the underexamined representations of mobility, and in my case, visual arts can untangle complex socio-spatial dynamics and identify some of the meanings associated with urban villages and villagers. Whereas Chinese authorities bring forth what Cresswell calls a 'sedentarist metaphysics' (2006, 26-42), where migrants and their locales constitute a threat to the city and need to be controlled, I argue that visual arts suggest a more nuanced understanding. The visual analysis of selected contemporary works reveals that the representations of mobility in Chinese urban villages are ambivalent: they simultaneously depict VICs and villagers as transient, invisible, and still, whilst being lively, creative, and resourceful.

In the first section, I will weave the socio-historical background of China's complex land and social reforms with a focus on Guangdong province, and mention the works by artists Weng Fen (翁奋, b. 1961), Cao Fei (曹斐, b. 1978), and Zhu Fadong (朱发东, b. 1960). In the second section, I will explore Shenzhen, as a city of economic success and social struggles (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017, 2), and analyse the installation by art collective, Jiu Society ((啾小组). The artworks reinforce the vision of mobility as 'a resource that is differently accessed' and intrinsically political (Cresswell 2010, 22). Last, I will focus on the collaborative

[2] Among the literature in visual arts, see M. Wang (2015b, 2015a, 2019b), Parke (2018), Tomkova (2018), W. Hu (2014, 406), Eschenburg (2017), and Gaetano (2009), among others.

practices by Handshake 302 in Shenzhen and Xisan Film Studio (西三电影制片厂) in Guangzhou to advance that urban villages can be socially, spatially, and artistically active and creative, even if this might not always be wholly successful or inclusive. By exploring the urban-rural mobility through selected artistic practices, this chapter brings to the fore the often-unrecognised representations, exchanges and interdependence between city and villages, urban and rural population. Moreover, I advance that collaborative and site-specific art practices have the potential to develop new ties and infrastructures across villages over time.

An urban revolution

The extraordinary rise of China into one of today's superpowers started in 1978 as Deng Xiaoping announced the Reform and Open Door Policy, namely, a series of economic reforms to enter the international market and develop into a modern nation. To distance themselves from the ten-year-disaster of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese leadership embraced a more outward approach to acquire knowledge and attract investment from the west through tax incentives and world trade regulations (Jacques 2009, 186–87; C. Fan 2008, 3–4; Huan 1986; Howell 1991). As the state integrated neoliberal policies and a capitalist system with the stark presence of the one-party-rule, China shifted from an agricultural country into what is considered in the west a 'modern' nation and service-based economy. Skyscrapers mushroomed in the urban centres, infrastructure interlinked the country internationally and domestically, and cities encroached the countryside. Over a short period of time cities became the economic engines for China's extraordinary modernisation (F. Wu 2007; Campanella 2008; Marinelli 2015; Greenspan 2012) earning the epithet of 'urban revolution'.[3]

[3] China's exceptional urban development has been widely examined from different disciplines and approaches, including economics, policy making, history, China studies and politics, among others (F. Wu 2006; X. Ren 2011; Campanella 2008; F. Wu 2007; Ma and Wu 2005b; Marinelli 2015; Greenspan 2012; Ong and Roy 2011). On the one hand, Campanella argues that it is the simultaneity of speed, scale, spectacle, sprawl, segregation and sustainability to make China's case unique (2008: 281). On the other, Wu Fulong identifies the revolutionary element in the contradictory coexistence of neoliberal policies and the authoritarian communist party (2007, 6). Though the word 'revolution' does not imply, nor exclude violence (Lefebvre 2003: 5), China's urban revolution evokes both the trauma and enthusiasm inherent within the incessant urban changes.

Blinded by the mission to create competitive cities, central and local governments overlooked and intensified the existing differences between cities and countryside, and the richer southern coasts and the poorer central regions of China (Lim and Horesh 2017; Long 1999; Hui 2006). This can be explained by the Chinese administration system, which develops through a pyramidic structure organised around provinces, the four municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing, and autonomous regions, cities, counties, county-level cities, towns, and villages (Ma and Wu 2005b). On the one hand, this administrative hierarchy allows local governments to be more independent; on the other, it establishes a 'system of reciprocal accountability' which escalates inter-regional competition (Lim and Horesh 2017, 380). 'Inter-regional socioeconomic variations' have become especially evident as Deng Xiaoping encouraged the already wealthy coastal areas to accelerate their growth and, hence, boost the broader national development (Lim and Horesh 2017, 380). In other words, the urban strategy of the 1980s – 1990s privileged the nation's GDP at the expense of the increasing regional disparities.

Guangdong province is one of those regions that highly benefitted from China's rapid urban and economic transformations. Already advantaged by its vicinity to Hong Kong and foreign investments, in 1980, this southern province counted three of the first four Special Economic Zones (SEZs).[4] The coastal cities of Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Shantou in Guangdong and Xiamen in Fujian were strategically chosen by the central government to stimulate the national economy through free trade, tax incentives, subsidies, and high level of autonomy. Since then, Guangdong's extraordinary rise has given its name to a developmental model with specific characteristics: market-oriented economic regulations, interests in foreign capital, growing emphasis on the rule of law and explicit commitment to enhancing social wellbeing (Lim and Horesh 2017, 374). At the same time, an astonishing rural-urban migration into Guangdong cities and towns was registered during the 1980s due to increasing economic opportunities and land reforms (Ma and Lin 1993, 590). Zai argues that in 1995, the province recorded the highest number of temporary migrants (2001, 503). Whereas Siu asserts

[4] SEZs are representative of the central government's understanding of cities as national economic engines, aimed at attracting investments and exponentially increasing the urban and national GDP. Today, China Briefing counts fifteen types of Economic Development Zones (EDZs) in China, including SEZs (Z. Zhang 2020).

that thirty-five percent of migrants were directed to Guangdong province (Siu 2007). Accounting for almost a third of the national total GDP since 2001, Guangdong and the Pearl River Delta have welcomed the largest flow of migration in the decade of 2000-2010 (Lim and Horesh 2017, 373) and the fastest urbanization in history (Liauw 2014, 50).[5]

The edited volume by Laurence Ma and Wu Fulong provides extensive insights into the unprecedented migratory flows into Guangdong cities, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou. They attribute the massive migration to simultaneous factors happening outside and inside of China: on the one hand, they list globalisation, advanced technologies, and the rise of neoliberalism in the west (Ma and Wu 2005b, 2–4); on the other, they acknowledge how the rapid urban industrialisation, the household registration system (*hukou*), and the constantly reviewed land reforms can explain China's changes and rural-urban migration across the 20th – 21st centuries. Due to the inconsistent spatial reforms, and the irregularity of low-skilled urban workers, it has been difficult to track and examine the scale of these urban migrations. Li (2005, 219) and Fan and Taubmann (2001, 184) are among those scholars lamenting the lack of systematic information and national surveys on China's population and migration. Over the last twenty years, a growing number of studies has contributed to the discourse on urban-rural gap and migrants as an urgent social concern and today, there is an extensive literature which aims to clarify China's socio-spatial mobility in the post-reform era (Al 2014; Gu and Shen 2003; Lai and Zhang 2016; Siu 2007; Chung 2013; De Meulder, Lin, and Wang 2011; J. Fan and Taubmann 2001; Y. Liu et al. 2018; Kam Wing Chan 2010; C. Fan 2008; Gaetano 2009; Giroir 2006).

Specifically, since 1979 the central government started leasing its land use rights to make profits. In other words, whereas urban and rural land had consistently belonged to the party-state before 1979, after that year, whilst local and central authorities maintained the ownership over urban land, rural territories started

[5] The Pearl River Delta is an area of over seven-thousand-kilometre square in southern Guangdong province which has experienced one of the most extraordinary urban and economic growths.

being administrated by the collective village (Crawford and Wu 2014, 19–20; L. Zhang 2005, 221–23; Ma and Wu 2005a, 20–30; Siu 2007, 330–31; Smart and Tang 2005, 77–79).[6] These changes coincided with the industrialisation of the 1970s and the need to expand cities alongside the tertiary sector.[7] Thus, many rural villages and croplands were converted into urban enclaves and rural peasants were offered the status of urban citizens (Gu and Shen 2003). However, more often than not, the expropriation of rural land by the government seemed incomplete (Huang and Li 2014, 22). On the one hand, rural land was always converted into urban areas and sold for profit; on the other, villagers' change of status to urban citizens was not so consistent (Huang and Li 2014, 22). Whereas villagers and migrants were economically included in the city to provide agricultural products and cheap labour, legally they were anchored to their rural hometowns and treated as outsiders (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017, 5).[8]

The spatial conversion from rural to urban is inextricably interwoven with the household registration system. Established in 1958 by the central government, the *hukou* (户口) system has worked as a census and migration tool since its inception (Kim Wing Chan 2010, 357–58; De Meulder, Lin, and Wang 2011, 3586).[9] Siu defines it as an 'institution and metaphor to differentiate and discriminate' (2007, 330), which conveniently established who could access the city and its services (i.e., education, medical care, jobs, and housing, among others). After 1978, the migration policies were eased to allow migrant workers to provide

[6] Yan et al. argues that 'the 1980s rural reform freed labour from the formed commune system for the urban labour market, particularly newly established Special Economic Zones' (2021, 856); however, it led to the decline in agricultural production.

[7] Since the 1980s, some rural villages turned into Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs), which were collectively-owned rural enterprises that played a big role in China's industrial and economic development in the 20th century. According to Harvey, 'they became centres of entrepreneurialism, flexible labour practices and open market competition' (2005, 126). In the 1990s in Guangdong, the government encouraged villages to transform into shareholding companies and many villagers became stakeholders and CEO (Crawford and Wu 2014, 20-1; O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017, 8).

[8] This is not unprecedented or exclusive to China. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that 'States have always had [problems] with journeymen's associations, or *compagnonnages*, the nomadic or itinerant bodies of the type formed by masons, carpenters, smiths, etc' (2010, 26). However, in China, the scale has of this phenomenon and consequences have been worth examining.

[9] Ma and Wu retrace the origins of the *hukou* to the previous *baojia* system (household administration), which was used during the Song dynasty (960 – 1279) 'to maintain local control and mutual surveillance' (2005, 28). This earlier strategy aimed to organise the Chinese territory and society and was abandoned with the establishment of the PRC and the introduction of the *hukou* system.

cheap labour and fulfil unwanted jobs in the expanding cities (Siu 2007, 330; Huang and Li 2014, 23; Kam Wing Chan 2010, 359–60). At the same time, those peasant villagers who became urban citizens during the rural-urban land conversion had to abandon agriculture (De Meulder, Lin, and Wang 2011, 3586). Catapulted in the city and its rhythms, many villagers became landlords to make a living: in exchange of their rural land, they were given monetary compensation and housing land, where they started building multiple-storey buildings to rent out to rural migrants coming into the city (L. Zhang 2005, 223; Chung 2013, 2462; Al 2014, 20).[10] However, not everyone was offered an urban status and, hence, access the city's welfare. Overall, the *hukou* and land reforms have worked as invisible barriers and produced value by regulating movement (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017, 4).

In the 2000s, the spatial and social dichotomy between rural and urban became so evident that it infiltrated the artistic scene and inspired the internationally acclaimed works by Cao Fei and Weng Fen. Both living in the south of China, respectively Guangzhou and Hainan, they attest to the constantly shifting rural-urban borders. On the one hand, Weng's photographic series, *Sitting On the Wall* (2002 – 5), depicts young girls in school uniform looking at distant urban centres from bricked, concrete, and green walls, which demarcate the invisible border between urban and rural.[11] On the other, in Cao's photograph, *A Mirage*, vibrant green fields, a deer, and two anime characters stand bright against the grey, blurred skyline in the background. In both works, composition and colour highlight the socio-spatial divide and materialise the view that 'borders, which once marked the edge of clearly defined territories are now popping up everywhere' (Cresswell 2010, 26). In their works, the cityscape turns into a backdrop, whereas the urban edges are represented as vibrant and vital areas. Although these two artworks are not the focus of my chapter, they illustrate how urban-rural spaces are understood and represented as divided and contested terrains.[12]

[10] There is a stark difference between the native villagers who were integrated in the city and rural migrants who temporarily reside in the city. Whereas some villagers have made a fortune by negotiating their urban land, migrants are still excluded from compensation and decision- and space-making (Liu et al. 2018, 29; Chung 2013, 2462-63).
[11] Author's exchange with the artist on WeChat, 20 May 2022.
[12] For more information on Cao Fei's works, see Obrist (2006), Berry (2018), H. Wu (2014), ArtBasel (2020), Hatfield, (2020), Larson (2020), Lau (2019), and Neira (2017), among others. For more information on Weng Fen's work, see M. Wang (2011, 2015c) and H. Wu (2014).

< Insert Fig.2 >

Alongside the spatial separation, artists have increasingly attempted to voice their concerns over the individuals caught in between this divide, who are also the new extreme of China's social ladder: rural migrants. Sigg Senior Curator at M+ museum in Hong Kong, Pi Li, interprets artists' interest as a consequence of their physical vicinity to migrants.[13] As artists find cheap and spacious studios in city villages and the peripheries, they move to the only areas that migrant workers can afford, leading to an interesting, yet problematic dynamic. Cresswell identifies 'a major distinction' 'between being compelled to move or choosing to move' and, consequently, a different social hierarchy inherent within mobility (2010, 22). Indeed, though artists and migrants reside in similar areas, they have very different living conditions and socio-spatial rights. For instance, 'migrant' artists can obtain an urban *hukou* quite easily by entering the international art market or by gaining international recognition compared to migrants working in factories. Despite their higher status, many artists with first-hand insights into the limited mobility of China's cheap labour often decide not to openly denounce socio-spatial inequalities due to fear of attracting authorities' attention.

Among the exceptions, *The Person for Sale* (1994), by artist Zhu Fadong is one of the earliest works exposing migrant's condition. In the performance, the artist wore a blue uniform with red characters on the back reading 'this person is for sale, negotiate price on the spot' (Berghuis 2006, 111-3; Visser 2010, 169).[14] Later, in his longer term project, *Identity Cards* (1998 – 2015), Zhu forged his own ID cards to shed light on the

[13] Author's in-person interview with Pi Li at M+, Hong Kong, 19 April 2019.

[14] A very similar performance is *Luo Zidan – Half White – collar/half peasant* (1996) by Luo Zidan (罗子丹, b. 1971), where the artist simultaneously wears a blue uniform and white shirt and tie. The work reflects on a significant contradiction: on the one hand, rural workers and white collars have very different living conditions and social status; on the other, the former has been invaluable for the social upgrade of the latter.

unfairness of the *hukou* system and the frustration against the central government's top-down policies.[15] Though artworks might not offer clarity over China's everchanging socio-spatial regulations, they demonstrate how urban-rural mobility is experienced by migrants and represented by ordinary urban dwellers. By operating in and bringing forth the rural-urban interstices, artistic practices can invite alternative interpretations and suggest more complex and subtle dynamics to the official, simplified narrative.

Urban-rural migration

Developing at a striking speed and absorbing thousands of migrants flowing into Guangdong province, Shenzhen is home to a diverse population, ranging from graduate students and entrepreneurs to low-skilled workers. It is the emblem of China's achievement of economic liberalisation in a record time. From a fishing and agricultural village in the 1970s, Shenzhen has increasingly relied on industrialisation and became a tertiary based economy in the 2000s (Liauw 2014, 50). Its fate was determined by the top-down appointment as first Special Economic Zone in 1980, and the subsequent extraordinary economic, and urban transformations. O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach define Shenzhen as a 'city of contrast' (2017, 2). The metropolis has become associated with tales of modernisation and social uplifting, where peasants have enriched overnight, and young creatives developed ground-breaking start-ups. However, the city's success remains inevitably interlinked with stories of exploitation, socio-spatial immobility and suffering (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017, 2–3).

[15] See Tomkova (2018) for a more in-depth discussion of Zhu Fadong's work. Although the artistic instances above have been selected to illustrate how the representations of migrant workers have replicated the strategy of erasure, the list is not exhaustive. Among other performances and installation that either deployed or interacted with underrepresented social groups in their work, there are the photographic work *100%* by Wang Jin (王晉, b. 1962), *Together with Migrants* (2003) by Song Dong (宋冬, b. 1966) and *Offspring* (2005) by Zhang Dali (张大力, b. 1963), to name a few. Despite raising awareness towards an increasingly urgent social concern, Eschenburg stresses that their works seem to exploit migrant workers' bodies and identities by reinstating an unequal power-relation between artists and migrants (2017). For a critical analysis of those works, see H. Wu (2014, 406) and Eschenburg (2017). Moreover, see Mirra (2022) for a discussion of artistic practices engaging with migrant workers and urban villages in the 21st century.

Shenzhen's urbanization has mostly focussed on the modernisation and aestheticization of its centres often at the expense of peripheral areas and low-income population (Ma and Wu 2005b, 5–6). Due to the relaxation of the *hukou* system and the promise of socio-economic improvements in 1978, thousands of rural migrants left the countryside and arrived in Shenzhen. However, the city was unprepared to the huge human flow as job offers, housing, and services did not correspond to the number of incoming people (O'Donnell 2017, 118). To overcome this problem, rural villages encroached by the expanding city transformed themselves into informal spaces providing cheap rental options, 24/7 restaurants, shops, and temporary jobs to welcome outsiders. Likewise, those rural villagers, who became urban citizens overnight, exploited the ineffective governmental control and ambiguity over land use rights to make their fortune by adding floors to their flats and renting them out (Smart and Tang 2005, 72; Bach 2017, 148). Offering temporary and informal solutions to several problems, today urban villages have emerged in major Chinese cities as a symbol of the simultaneous urbanization and increasing socio-spatial inequality.

According to Bach, 'Shenzhen, like most of China, has been shaped by the opposition of urban and rural and by the expression of this opposition through the terms city and village' (2017, 139). Urban villages firstly emerged in the Pearl River Delta in the post-reform era. Scholars agree that they are neither entirely rural, nor entirely urban. They 'have become urban in their own way. They consist of high-rise buildings so close to each other that they create dark claustrophobic alleys, jammed with dripping air conditioning units, hanging clothes and caged balconies and bundles of buzzing electrical wires' (Al 2014, 1).[16] Their chaotic and noisy features emerge from the governments' lack of inclusive urban regulations and planning, which did not account for migrants' presence and needs. However, these settlements have an underlying structure that reflects villagers' resourcefulness and innovation. Indeed, they often have an entrance gate and their own police force (Al 2014, 1–6). Moreover, they tend to specialise into one industrial or manufacturing sector and host workers who share geographical origin, professional vocation, and dialect (Al 2014, 1–6). Engulfed by urban expansion, these urban villages constantly and creatively re-organise themselves and their network

[16] These buildings are the so-called handshake buildings.

across city and countryside to absorb and facilitate the unwanted human flow and sustain urban growth alongside their survival (De Meulder, Lin, and Wang 2011; Al 2014; O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017; Siu 2007; L. Zhang 2005; De Meulder, Lin, and Shannon 2014).

The multimedia work, *Shenzhen Grand Hotel*, produced by Jiu Society in 2016 (Fig.3) reflects the post-1978 economic and urban transformations in and of Shenzhen.[17] Jiu Society is formed by three young Shenzheners, namely Fang Di, Ji Hao, and Jin Haofan. Unlike their parents who came to the city to make a fortune, they belong to Shenzhen's second generation and 'are the experimental products of the "Reform and Opening" era' (Jiu Society 2021). Named after the Chinese onomatopoeic word for the chirping of birds or children's wailing (*jiu*), Jiu Society makes indistinct noises to make their way into this young, creative city. *Shenzhen Grand Hotel* is an immersive installation resembling a hotel room and hinting at the emergence of Shenzhen as an 'immigrant city', a place 'full of temptations and opportunities' (Jiu Society 2021). Like a temporary hotel where people arrive and leave, Shenzhen cyclically welcomes a diverse group of visitors, ranging from Hong Kong-Shenzhen smugglers to young graduate students, who flow into the city to then depart.

< Insert Fig.3 >

Comprising video works, photos, and other props, *Shenzhen Grand Hotel* reflects the transience and yet infinite possibilities of Shenzhen (Fig.3). Indeed, the hotel itself is a place of 'intermittent movement' which produces mobilities and enhances 'meetingness' (Sheller and Urry 2006, 213, 219). Robert Davidson views it as a 'ready-made conduit for transculturation', where public and private space blur and different kinds of contact emerge thanks to a spatial and temporal detachment from the fast-paced, outer reality (2018, 3, 2006). He maintains that 'whereas home is governed by family rules, traditions and cultural convention, hotel

[17] Author's exchanges with Fang Di on WeChat, 27 April – 21 May 2022.

occupancy' is different and simpler (2018, 4). In other words, it provides an opportunity for decompression. In the artists' work, the bright neon sign on the red walls reading *Shenzhen Grand Hotel since 1979*, alongside a set of white slippers, towel, and bathrobe suggest the extravagance and comforts associated with the time spent away from home. The hotel as a 'point of decompression' (Davidson 2018, 4) stands in stark contrast to the hyped urban rhythms of Shenzhen, which are embodied by the neon lights, hula hoops, as well as money and advertising cards scattered on the floor of the artists' installation.

In Jiu Society's words, the work is a neon-like-memory in the form of a postcard (Jiu Society 2021). It presents the city as a shiny and consumable object. Postcards, as souvenirs, can recall a specific experience and validate the past by capturing an entire city into one single image (Stewart 1993, 139).[18] Moreover, they become a 'means to identify and possess the totality of the city' (Prochaska and Mendelson 2010, 2). The dominant red and yellow colours of the installation are reminiscent of both the Chinese flag and the fast-food brand, McDonald's, which also appears in the video work, *Jiu Bao* (2015). Together, I argue that they symbolise the hybrid assemblage of capitalist and communist values, which sustain the current ideology of the China Dream and socialism with Chinese characteristics.[19] Though the neon sign in *Shenzhen Grand Hotel* seems to display the success of this ideology by perpetuating a state-sanctioned narrative of economic liberalisation and urban growth, one needs to remember that the flashing lights of the sign, like a postcard, reinforce an attractive but incomplete vision.

[18] A variety of studies examines postcards from different perspectives, such as tourism and visual culture, highlighting their association with individual memories, the emerging middle class and archives. For more material on postcards, see McNeil (2017), Rogan (2005), Schor (1992), and Woody (1998).

[19] The China Dream is President Xi Jinping's ideological propaganda, which combines previous political agendas with a careful selection of west-centric discourses to promote the economic development of China. As per socialism with Chinese characteristics, during the 19th CCP National Congress, Xi defined it as 'a continuation and development of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents, and the Scientific Outlook on Development', which should led to the rejuvenation of the nation (Xinhua 2017). Both concepts embrace contradictory strategies, such as socialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism to advance China's economic and global role, whilst maintaining its cultural specificity. For more literature on both, see: Callahan (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017).

Another element in this immersive installation is the three-minute video, *360° Without Dead Ends* (Fig.4), where artists film several people hula hoop along the streets of Shenzhen. From a bright supermarket to a colourful game arcade and night streets, the camera captures the bodies hula hooping from different perspectives and point of views. Contrary to the rapidly spinning urban views, the bodies and hula hoops are filmed almost in slow motion and dominate the scene. The narration is accompanied by music, which starts as a playful, bubbly, and steady soundtrack that is reminiscent of an electronic game until it becomes more incipient, celebratory, and louder. After reaching an apex, the music slows down again, and the heavy tone is replaced by a lighter modulation which transports the viewer to an alien-like realm. As the video documents the everchanging character of Shenzhen, the young people in the video are not portrayed as passive victims of urban transformations; on the contrary, they seem to be enjoying this sprawling city full of contradictions. Whereas the official narrative depicts villages and migrants as fixed, undesired, and backward elements corrupting the city, existing scholarly literature (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017; O'Donnell and Bach 2021; De Meulder, Lin, and Shannon 2014; Chung 2013; C. Fan 2008; Smart and Tang 2005; L. Zhang 2005; Ma and Wu 2005b) and artistic practices offer a more nuanced and complex dynamic.

Indeed, the work captures the 'quickening of liquidity within some realms, but also the concomitant patterns of concentration that create zones of connectivity, centrality, and empowerment in some cases, and of disconnection, social exclusion and inaudibility in other cases' (Sheller and Urry 2006, 210). Whereas the world outside spins fast and grows increasingly interconnected, those who can access hotels, arcades, and planes, for instance, can temporarily detach from the high-paced urban rhythms and decide the speed of their experiences to their own liking. The portrayal of the people hula hooping in *360° Without Dead Ends* seems to embody this post-structuralist, post-humanist, and processual approach to mobility. The oscillating speed and rhythm of the visual narration and sound in the video support Merriman's argument that 'movement is ubiquitous, though not uniform' (2012a, 7). Moreover, it invites to think that the possibility to access places, technologies, move freely and slow down is not granted to everyone (Cresswell 2010; Merriman 2012, 11). Rather, it is 'performed at different scales and being underpinned by very different

political, physical and aesthetic processes' (Merriman 2012a, 6). Contrary to fast-lane people (Sheller and Urry 2006, 211), the only speedy thing that factory workers are associated with is their alienating working rhythm. Their speed and mobility, instead, tends to be slower and more complicated. Nevertheless 'as places are dynamic' and 'about proximities' and 'bodily copresence of people who happen to be in that place at that time, doing activities together' (Sheller and Urry 2006, 214), hotels and, more widely, Shenzhen can allow for exchanges that would otherwise not take place.

< Insert Fig.4 >

Together with Jiu Society's installation, the artwork opening the chapter, *Paper Crane Tea* (2014), demonstrates that urban villagers are not immobile entities forced to float between cities and countryside. Even though there is an obvious 'degree of necessity' in their movements (Cresswell 2010, 22), villagers also have dreams and ambitions that bring them into urban areas. *Paper Crane Tea* was exhibited in the art space of Handshake 302 in Baishizhou, which was the biggest and one of the most diverse urban villages in the centre of Shenzhen in 2015 (O'Donnell 2021, 13–14). The repetitive folding of paper cranes stands for the resilience and aspirations of those diverse workers who reside in urban villages and strive to realise their goals despite life hardships. Though paper is a thin and fragile medium, the repetitious folds invite a reflection on the rhythms of migrants and turn the dull paper into beautiful and more resistant origami. Moreover, if Merriman views space as constructed through the 'incessant folding, enfolding, refolding, unfolding' (2012b, 39), then one could even argue that the collective actions performed during *Paper Crane Tea* create spaces. Indeed, once installed one next to the other, the individually folded paper cranes form a three-dimensional installation that is reminiscent of the cramped yet lively community in urban villages, such as Baishizhou.

Handshake 302 was founded in 2013 by Mary Ann O'Donnell, Zhang Kaiqin, Wu Dan, Liu He, and Lei Sheng. It was located in Baishizhou for very practical reasons: the rent was cheap, it was centrally located and it was

a lively and diverse village which consisted of young creatives, start-ups, business entrepreneurs, temporary low-income workers, as well as working class families who had lived in the area for years (O'Donnell 2017, 118–19). Since its inception, the goal of Handshake 302 has been enhancing collective practices and empowering villagers to actively re-imagine their spaces by developing conversations, establishing relationships, and creating site-specific and collaborative work.[20] For instance, *Baishizhou Superhero* (2013) (Fig.5) was a low-tech and cheap installation at Handshake 302. It comprised life-size cardboard figures of cartoon-like superheroes which were developed site-specifically to reflect the unique superpowers of urban villagers. They included a village security guard, a grandma, and a bar waitress. The intention was to shed light on the daily lives of villagers and their underrated skills: 'the superpower of an unpaid grandmother, for example, is to create value by providing unpaid childcare so that both fathers and mothers can join the gendered labour force' (O'Donnell 2018). According to the curatorial statement, 'the superpower of all Baishizhou migrants is, in fact, the power to sell their labour on an unregulated market for as long as their bodies hold out' (O'Donnell 2013).

Overall, the artistic practices analysed so far recognise that villagers and migrants are 'not trapped without hope', but 'generally positive in outlook, willing to work hard and free to return to their villages' (Ma and Wu 2005a, 6). In other words, rather than stuck in the city, they migrate to the city as it is 'an attractive and profitable alternative to agriculture' (C. Fan 2008, 123–24).[21] Informal residents have quickly understood that their seclusion and ambiguity can eventually lead to a socio-economic improvement (Bach 2017, 145). Moreover, urban villages are so fluid and porous that de Meulder, Lin and Shannon argue that 'they produce vitality and differentiation' and, hence, are 'the true cities' (2014, 15). Not surprisingly, Fan and Taubmann reveal that local officials have often closed an eye on the irregularity of handshake buildings and the lack of permits of rural migrants to avoid conflicts and economic repercussions (J. Fan and Taubmann 2001, 185–

[20] Author's interview with anonymous interviewee on Zoom, 21 August 2021.

[21] However, the condition of migrant workers is very different from that of the local villagers', who often become landlords, shareholders, and entrepreneurs and 'are able to make use of their "local" resources and opportunities' (Chung 2013, 2463). Chung also maintains that there are two levels of social injustice in urban villages: urban-rural and local-outsider (2013, 2463).

87). By operating between legal and illegal, urban and rural, in other words, amidst the cracks of China's dual land system, rural villagers, migrant workers and villages in the city fluidly float across them. More than that, maintaining Merriman's theories, as villagers move across time and space, they 'actively' shape or produce 'multiple, dynamic spaces and times' (2012a, 1).

< Insert Fig.5 >

Today, scholars recognise the invaluable key role played by urban villages and migrant workers in the daily functions of the city. Despite the official narrative reinforcing the urban-rural dichotomy and hierarchy, Cenzatti and Smith suggest a variation in the label 'villages in the city', which should become 'city in the village'. As promoted by the collaborative practices by Handshake 302, the village turns into a launchpad for an alternative urbanism (Cenzatti 2014, 16; Smith 2014) where everything is fluid and in constant becoming. Rather than a centre-based urban process where the countryside is gradually engulfed by the city like in the west, the proliferation and mobility of urban villages in China hints at a different urban model that is akin to the ancient Greek *synoikism* (Cenzatti 2014, 10–13) or the Indonesian *desakota* (O'Donnell 2021, 10). This proposed urbanism discards the urban-rural binary and develops via horizontal and multilateral flows, exchanges, and renegotiations (Cenzatti 2014, 17), giving more prominence to village residents and the web of networks which they weave across city and countryside.

Art mobility

Despite the growing number of scholarly debates, the historical view of mobility 'as a threat, a disorder in the system, a thing to control' (Cresswell 2006, 26) is still predominant and urban villages with their intrinsic informality unsurprisingly remain the repository of numerous problems according to the official narrative. They have been represented as places where crime and diseases proliferate (Siu 2007, 330). Therefore, to overcome the problematic stigmatisation of villages, the decline of agricultural production and the 1997

Asian financial crisis, the central government has launched a series of policies to revive the countryside since early 2000s. In 2005, Hu Jintao announced the project of a 'socialist new countryside' (Watts 2006; Looney 2015, 909–10). The campaign aimed to improve the 'production, livelihood, communal atmosphere, village outlook, and governance' in rural areas (H. Yan, Bun, and Xu 2021, 858). Likewise, since 2017, Xi Jinping has repurposed this reform under the term 'rural revitalisation' and aimed to enhance the material conditions of villagers (H. Wang and Zhuo 2018, 97). However, according to Yan, Bun, and Xu, rural revitalisation is concerned with economic revenue driven by national development rather than restoring the perception of the countryside and providing socio-economic uplifting to the villagers (2021, 859, 868).

As part of these efforts, since the 1990s the central and local governments have started incorporating rural villages within the city to improve the international opinion on Chinese urban planning and profit from villages' land-value and established infrastructure. Situated in the urban centre and often adjacent to financial or commercial districts, the land of villages is a moneymaking revenue for local officials: once converted into new urban villages, the narrative of innovative and profitable enclaves changes to 'dirty, chaotic and backward' (Siu 2007, 335), justifying forced demolition and renewal. After years of cleansing campaigns to relieve cities from illegal activities, buildings, and individuals, in 2004, the local government declared Shenzhen as the first city without urban villages (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017, 10).[22] Since then, the governments have increasingly attempted to include urban villagers within the city's welfare, allowing their access to urban education, services, and health (O'Donnell 2021, 17).

Despite the official efforts aimed at exploiting these enclaves and eliminating their informality, villages and their residents have kept developing 'complex sociotechnical machineries to regulate, evade, evoke and provoke movement across its bordered spaces' (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017, 4). Lai and Zhang notice

[22] O'Donnell identifies several stages of the integration of rural villages within the city under the goal of 'rural urbanization': the first campaign ranges from 1992 to 1996. By 1996 the villages in the inner districts were included within the city and by 2004 even the rural urbanization of the outer district was achieved (2017, 9-10; 2021, 10).

that whereas the urban renewal of the 2004-2009 was mostly unilaterally directed by the state, in 2009-10, there was an increasing number of agreements between state and villagers justified by economic benefits (Lai and Zhang 2016, 72; O'Donnell 2021, 11–13). Moreover, Crawford and Jiong argue that urban villagers have refined their strategies as they became increasingly conscious that public exposure and protests can increase their negotiating power (2014, 21).[23] Despite the ongoing exclusion of factory and low-income workers from space-making in the city, years of mediation and recurring strategies have facilitated their interplay with rural villagers and local authorities.

At the same time, an increasing number of socially engaged art projects has emerged to attest to and encourage a new kind of practices within urban villages. Pablo Helguera defines socially engaged art as the variety of engagements whose existence is dependent 'on social intercourse' (2011, 2). Operating between traditional art forms, sociology, politics, and other disciplines, socially engaged art is characterised by an uncomfortable, yet productive tension which cannot be resolved as it is intrinsic to this practice (Helguera 2011, 4–5; Bishop 2006, 183). In the west, the origins of these collaborative, collective, and public exercises can be traced back to the avantgarde and social movements of the 1960s (Helguera 2011, 2). Whereas in China, Wang Meiqin acknowledges the social role of art in the Modern Woodcut Movement and later in the experimental art of the 1980s-90s (Wang 2019a, 4). Today, socially engaged art has gained renewed significance, especially in China, where this upsurge has been associated with a growing civil society and public sphere (M. Wang 2019a, 3).[24] Furthermore, by drawing from Cresswell's understanding of mobility as practice and 'being in the world' (2006, 3–4), these artistic strategies acting upon space and society can perhaps help foster new embodied experiences for migrants.

[23] Today, an increasing literature documenting the more or less successful redevelopment projects is emerging (Smith 2014, 33–39; Jiang 2014, 42–46; Liauw 2014, 54–58; Crawford and Wu 2014, 20–26; Huang and Li 2014, 22–27; Y. Liu et al. 2018, 27–29; Andersson 2014, 38–40).

[24] Wang explains the upsurge in socially engaged art as the consequence of the current uncertainties and increasing cultural, political and economic clashes (2019a, 2). Whereas in the wider context, Bishop maintains that 'participatory practices rehumanises – or at least de-alienates – a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism' (2006, 179-80).

Amongst significant socially engaged art practices in the urban villages in Guangdong province, there are Handshake 302 in Baishizhou, Shenzhen, and Xisan Film Studio in Xisan village, Guangzhou.[25] Both art collectives operate within urban villages' established infrastructure. They collaborate with an existing community and share the educational mission to raise villagers' awareness towards space and 'rights to the city' (Harvey 2012). I argue that both art collectives 'provide an ideal framework for process-based and collaborative conceptual practices' (Helguera 2011, xi) which include workshops, site-specific works, walks and conversations. Claire Bishop criticises these activities because they tap into the same 'predictable formulas' and, hence lose their originality and site-specificity (2006, 180). However, I align with M. Wang in arguing that in an authoritarian regime like China, artists and art collectives have to recur to established strategies and less confrontational approaches than in the west to survive (M. Wang 2019a, 5). Hence, the significance of socially engaged art in China, as practised by Handshake 302 and Xisan Film Studio, cannot be merely measured against its aesthetic and oppositional potential but lies in its ability to coexist with and negotiate the everchanging socio-spatial dynamics imposed by the state.

Already mentioned in the previous section, Handshake 302 was established by several individuals with different backgrounds in anthropology, art education, and design. The differences and overlaps between their expertise have allowed the development of a diverse programme, ranging from artists' residencies to institutional collaborations and educational programmes.[26] With regards to education, Handshake 302 has developed three main sub-projects: Handshake Academy, where they work with young children, often

[25] The two cases analysed in this chapter are not exhaustive of the numerous socially engaged, public, participatory, and collaborative practices in rural and urban villages. For instance, the Bishan Commune in Bishan village, Anhui province, was initiated by artist, curator, and activist, Ou Ning (Corlin 2020). It launched a book shop, organised an art festival and coordinated other public activities for the community. However, in 2016, the project was shut down by the central government. Secondly, since 2007, artist Weng Fen has developed a programme of socially engaged practices to retrace the concept of home and land in light of the relocation and renewal on Hainan Island (N.a. 2021; P. (刘鹏飞) Liu 2022; Z. Yan 2020, 390–92). Thirdly, the Yangdeng Art Collective is formed by a group of artists from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute and operates in Yangdeng, a small township in rural Guizhou (H. Ren 2019; Z. Yan 2020, 393).

[26] For instance, site-specific works, such as *Dalang Graffiti Festival* (2015), *Evolution* (2014) and *Urban Fetish: Baishizhou* (2013), invite the local community to re-gain and reshape the imagined future of Baishizhou through art.

focussing on low-impact art; Handshake on campus, where they engage with college students and teach them how to research; and last, Handshake 302 as the art collective interested in working with the local community to create site-specific works.[27] Part of this latter project is the two-year programme *Handshake 302's Art Sprouts* (2016 – 2018), which brought migrant children together to find beauty in the everyday and create artistic responses to their surroundings. Unfortunately, in 2016, forced evictions and demolitions started in Baishizhou and in 2020 the area was mostly emptied of its residents and activities (O'Donnell and Bach 2021, 74; O'Donnell 2021, 15). In 2022, Handshake 302 has moved online (Fig. 6); however, the fate of Baishizhou and its people is still uncertain and dependent on top-down spatial policies.

< Insert Fig.6 >

Similarly preoccupied by urban renewal, Xisan Film Studio emerged as a platform to enhance villagers to voice their concerns through their mobile phones and cameras.[28] Rather than an art institution, 'it is a film festival organised by artists for the village. It is a collective and temporary action' (N.a. 2017). It emerged in 2016 in the village of Xisan, in the north-west district of Panyu, Guangzhou, under the direction of several artists residing there, such as Zheng Hongbin 郑宏彬 (Xuan, Trivic, and Ho 2021, 8).[29] The overall goal is to invite the local community to join and develop artistic practices in public space. Maintaining Joseph Beuys's belief that 'every man is an artist', individuals are encouraged to capture their daily experiences through the intuitive and common medium of their smartphone camera. This object becomes a non-intrusive tool to seek creativity in the everyday. Even though these actions might not lead to an immediate change in the mobility of villagers, Xisan Film Studio argues that everyone has a specific reason to do what they are doing (Li and Wu 2017). Moreover, these practices enhanced by technology subtend a potential mobility, even though this

[27] Author's interview with anonymous interviewee on Zoom, 21 August 2021.
[28] Author's exchanges with Xisan Film Studio assistant curator on WeChat, 14 December 2021 and 16 – 25 May 2022.
[29] Zheng Hongbin had already developed socially engaged and participatory works in the Pearl River Delta (P. Zhang 2018).

might not be performed (Merriman 2012b, 7–8). Indeed, they bring to the fore invisible socio-spatial dynamics and widen biased views around urban space. Drawing on Saito, rather than aesthetic exercises per se, these everyday gestures become empowering actions which can 'affect and sometimes determine our worldview, actions, the character of a society', as well as 'the physical environment' (2007, 51).

Throughout the years, Xisan Film Studio has gradually adapted their practices to the community and filmed a variety of daily scenes, ranging from the encounter with a farmer to the aspiration of migrant workers (Fig.7). Produced through a low-tech and low-cost approach, the videos are fragments of urban daily life that address villagers' socio-spatial concerns. Since 2017, Xisan Film Studio has tackled the recurring demolition and forced relocations in the village through videos and songs. For instance, the video, *I am not a city manager* (2017), was filmed by Lin Jinchao 林进超 and captures the anxiety and anger experienced by a local resident, who initially approaches the artist to ask whether he is a city manager. After being reassured that the artist is not a local official, the villager opens up about the recent clashes among villagers and city manager due to the demolition of some irregular buildings.[30] Moreover, in 2018, Xisan Film Studio started producing and circulating songs around the village. By singing, the artists hoped to include more residents and address sensitive issues in a convivial and playful way. One of these songs, *xiyang wei renjian fadian* (夕阳为人剪发点, Sunset for the People's Haircut Point) (2018), commemorates the demolition of Liang Bo's Haircut Point. Irregularly built between 2012-2016, Liang's business became a frequented spot in the village, where people could have their hair cut, as well as gather to play chess, and sell vegetables. Despite being evicted by the local authorities due to cleansing projects, Liang's Haircut Point was a significant 'transfer point' in the village and enhanced what Sheller and Urry call 'meetingness' (2006, 219).[31]

[30] The video was published on WeChat, alongside some explanatory text and images, however, it has been removed and cannot be viewed online anymore.

[31] Indeed, even after its closure, the news of the upcoming demolition prompted the artistic mobilisation of Xisan Film Studio.

< Insert Fig. 7 >

In 2017, Xisan's engagement with urban renewal extended beyond the village, reaching Baishizhou, Shenzhen. On that occasion, around eighty Xisan villagers joined a group of artists to document the evictions imposed by the local government in Baishizhou urban village, even though it was recognised that villagers did not want to cause troubles and often needed encouragement (P. Zhang 2018).[32] Through their phones, they took images and shot videos of the signs of imminent demolition (i.e., the omnipresent Chinese character for demolition, *chai*). The end product was an hour and forty minute footage, which was shown at the 2017 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture in Shenzhen and accompanied by a meal prepared by artist Liu Sheng (Jiang 2018). The film expressed the artists' wish to make villagers more aware of their potential mobility.[33] The project allowed the participants to diversify their usual routes and experiences, as well as act upon what Cresswell calls a 'politics of mobility' – 'the social relations that involve the production and distribution of power' (2010, 21). I argue that the artistic expedition to Baishizhou by Xisan residents can demonstrate the solidarity across different villages and foster new ties amongst individuals who share similar socio-spatial conditions. Maintaining that practices critical of the spaces in which they intervene, or the dynamics through which they work, have the potential to grasp and shape the ways in which space is organised (Rendell 2006), then Handshake 302's and Xisan Film Studio's work constitutes a first step towards villagers' critical understanding of space and its inherent dynamics.

[32] Surprisingly, Handshake 302 was not aware of this initiative. Hence, there were no interactions between the art space in Shenzhen and Xisan Film Studio. This is not the only artistic instance attempting to raise awareness and resist the official redevelopment project. In 2009, Chongqing based artist, Wang Haichuan, started documenting the transformations in Tongyanju, a central district in Chongqing which was to be renewed (Xu 2021; Zheng n.d.). Since then, Wang has initiated a series of projects for the local community. For instance, in 2013, he organised a photography workshop and provided film cameras to the villagers to capture whatever caught their eyes (Zheng n.d.). The villagers' actions produced nine hundred pictures of urbanscapes, ruins, everyday objects and other blurry memories based in Tongyanju.

[33] Peter Merriman distinguishes a potential mobility from actual mobility, arguing that 'just because we have the technological and social capacity to move in a particular way, at a particular speed, it does not mean that we necessarily enact that potential, or that movement has taken on an enhanced social significance' (2012b, 7).

Concluding remarks

Overall, the artistic practices analysed in this chapter have shed light on the visual representations and meanings associated with the socio-spatial mobility in the urban villages in Guangdong province. Specifically, it emerges that urban villages are not fixed and universally defined (O'Donnell 2021, 8). On the contrary, they are the ultimate products of the physical movements and potential mobility performed by urban villagers and migrants. Thus, they are represented as everchanging and resourceful platforms which help sustain economic growth and improve the material conditions of the low-income population. For instance, the works by Weng Fen and Cao Fei demonstrate that vitality and diversity belong to the urban villages and peripheries rather than to the financial and commercial districts. Likewise, villagers are not merely viewed as backward and passive individuals. Zhu Fadong highlights the mobility, as well as resourcefulness of migrant workers by re-enacting the practice of forging IDs in his performance. The existing literature and artworks suggest that they are increasingly aware of their spatial rights and take advantage of their transience, floating across city and countryside and, eventually, becoming urban residents. 'Transient' and 'in the process of becoming', urban villages and migrants constitute an 'intrinsic part of China's post-reform modernity' (Siu 2007, 332).

Though the artistic works mentioned in the first section reinforce the reductive binary of urban/rural, the following practices offer a more complex representation of the movements and mobility of migrant workers. Indeed, Jiu Society's installation, *Shenzhen Grand Hotel,* transforms Shenzhen into a hotel to reflect on the different scales and speeds of movements in this young metropolis. Moreover, Handshake 302 and Xisan Film Studio, as socially engaged, site-specific practices, illustrate the intricate urban-rural interlinkages while also having a potential active role in future space-making. I advance that they can anticipate potential ways to shape space by ways of exchanges, collaborations, and public actions and by being critical of their surroundings. Unsurprisingly, the upsurge in socially engaged practices occurs at the same time as villagers become more aware of their spatial rights and as scholars recognise the key role of these villages. In this light, the initiatives by Handshake 302 and Xisan Film Studio, among others, should be interpreted as critical attempts to reposition villages and their community as conscious holders of spatial and artistic agency.

Though these socially engaged practices are ‘temporally contingent’ (Wilbur 2015, 97) and, hence, not always immediately successful, I argue that over time, they have the potential to develop alternative mobilities to the officially enforced ones to negotiate and even intervene in space.

Figures

Fig.1 Wan Yan, *Paper Crane Tea* (2014), installation in Handshake 302, paper. Courtesy of Handshake 302.

Fig. 2 Weng Fen, *Sitting on the Wall – Shenzhen* (I) (2002), c-print, 124 x 164.5 x 4.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 3 Jiu Society, *Shenzhen Grand Hotel* (2016), exhibition view at the Centre For Chinese Contemporary Art (CFCCA), Manchester. Courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 4 Jiu Society, *360° Without Dead Ends* (2016), video installation, 3’24’’. Courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 5 Handshake 302, *Baishizhou Superhero* (2013), installation in Jianghan Baihuo department store plaza. Courtesy of Handshake 302.

Fig. 6 Handshake 302 Academy. Courtesy of Handshake 302.


村民记者

Bibliography

Al, Stefan, ed. 2014. *Villages in the City: A Guide to South China's Informal Settlements*. Hong Kong and Honolulu: Hong Kong University Press and University of Hawaii Press.

Andersson, Cecilie. 2014. "Migrant's Place Attachment." In *Villages in the City*, edited by Bruno De Meulder, Yanliu Lin, and Kelly Shannon, 38–45. Zurich: Park Books.

Bach, Jonathan. 2017. ""They Come in Peasants and Leave Citizens": Urban Villages and the Making of Shenzhen." In *Learning from Shenzhen: China's Post-Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City*, edited by Mary Ann O'Donnell, Winnie Wong, and Jonathan Bach, 138–70. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berghuis, Thomas. 2006. *Performance Art in China*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited.

Fig. 7 Group photograph of Xisan villagers at the screening of *Villager Reporter* (2017). Courtesy of Xisan Film Studio.

Berry, Chris. 2018. "Cao Fei's 'Magical Metropolises.'" In *Visual Art, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interface*, edited by Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang, 209–35. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Bishop, Claire. 2006. "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents." *Artforum*, no. February: 178–86.

Callahan, William A. 2013. *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2014. "The China Dream and the American Dream." *Economic and Political Studies* 2 (1): 143–60.

———. 2015. "Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream." *Politics* 35 (3–4): 216–29.

———. 2017. "Dreaming as a Critical Discourse of National Belonging: China Dream, American Dream and World Dream." *Nations and Nationalism* 23 (2): 248–70.

Campanella, Thomas J. 2008. *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Cenzatti, Marco. 2014. "The City in between the Villages." In *Villages in the City: A Guide to South China's*

Informal Settlements, edited by Stefan Al, 8–17. Hong Kong and Honolulu: Hong Kong University Press and University of Hawaii Press.

Chan, Kam Wing. 2010. "The Household Registration System and Migrant Labour in China: Notes on a Debate." *Population and Development Review* 36 (2): 357–64.

Chan, Kim Wing. 2010. "The Household Registration System and Migrant Labour in China: Notes on a Debate." *Population and Development Review* 36 (2): 357–64.

Chung, Him. 2013. "The Spatial Dimension of Negotiated Power Relations and Social Justice in the Redevelopment of Villages-in-the-City in China." *Environment and Planning A* 45: 2459–76.

Corlin, Mai. 2020. *The Bishan Commune and the Practice of Socially Engaged Art in Rural China*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Crawford, Margaret, and Jiong Wu. 2014. "The Beginning of the End: Planning the Destruction of Guangzhou's Villages." In *Villages in the City*, edited by Stefan Al, 18–28. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press and University of Hawaii Press.

Cresswell, Tim. 2006. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World and Pete Merriman's Mobility, Space and Culture*. New York and Oxon: Routledge.

———. 2010. "Towards a Politics of Mobility." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28: 17–31.

Davidson, Robert A. 2006. "A Periphery with a View: Hotel Space and the Catalan Modern Experience." *Romance Quarterly* 53 (3): 169–83.

———. 2018. *The Hotel: Occupied Space*. Toronto: University of Toronto.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 2010. *Nomadology: The War Machine*. Edited by Brian Massumi. Seattle: Wormwood Distribution.

Eschenburg, Madeline. 2017. "Fixing Identities: The Use of Migrant Workers in Chinese Performance Art." *Yishu* 16 (3): 26–36.

Fan, Cindy. 2008. *China on the Move: Migration, the State, and the Household*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Fan, Jie, and Wolfgang Taubmann. 2001. “Migrant Enclaves in Large Chinese Cities.” In *The New Chinese City: Globalization and Market Reform*, edited by John R. Logan, 183–97. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Gaetano, Arianne. 2009. “Rural Woman and Modernity in Globalizing China: Seeing Jia Zhangke’s The World.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 25 (1): 25–39.

Giroir, Guillaume. 2006. “A Globalized Golden Ghetto in a Chinese Garden.” In *Globalisation and the Chinese City*, edited by Fulong Wu, 208–12. Abingdon: Routledge.

Greenspan, Anna. 2012. “The Power of Spectacle.” *Culture Unbound* 4: 81–95. http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se.

Gu, Chaolin, and Jianafa Shen. 2003. “Transformation of Urban Socio-Spatial Structure in Socialist Market Economies: The Case of Beijing.” *Habitat International* 27 (1): 107–22.

Harvey, David. 2005. “Neoliberalism ‘with Chinese Characteristics.’” In *A Brief History of Capitalism*, 120–51. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2012. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Right to the Urban Revolution*. *Verso*. London: Verso.

Helguera, Pablo. 2011. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books.

Huang, Quanle, and Tao Li. 2014. “In the Shadow of the Metropolis - Shipai Village.” In *Villages in the City*, edited by Bruno De Meulder, Yanliu Lin, and Kelly Shannon, 22–27. Zurich: Park Books.

Hui, Liu. 2006. “Changing Regional Rural Inequality in China 1980-200.” *Area* 38 (4): 377–89.

Jiang, Jun. 2014. “A Village by the Special Economic Zone: The Dafen Paradigm of China’s Urbanization.” In *Villages in the City: A Guide to South China’s Informal Settlements*, edited by Stefan Al, 42–46. Hong Kong and Honolulu: Hong Kong University Press and University of Hawaii Press.

Jiu Society. 2021. “Jiu Society.”

Lai, Yani, and Xiaoling Zhang. 2016. “Redevelopment of Industrial Sites in the Chinese ‘Villages in the City’: An Empirical Study of Shenzhen.” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 134: 70–77.

Lefebvre, Henri. 2003. “From the City to Urban Society.” In *The Urban Revolution*, 1–22. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Lemos, Gerard. 2012. *The End of the Chinese Dream: Why Chinese People Fear the Future*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Liauw, Laurence. 2014. “Village-in-the-City as a Sustainable Form of Social Housing Communities for China: A Tale of Four Villages in Shenzhen.” In *Villages in the City: A Guide to South China’s Informal Settlements*, edited by Stefan Al, 47–61. Hong Kong and Honolulu: Hong Kong University Press and University of Hawaii Press.

Lim, Kean Fan, and Niv Horesh. 2017. “The Chongqing vs. Guangdong Developmental ‘Models’ in Post-Mao China: Regional and Historical Perspectives on the Dynamics of Socioeconomic Change.” *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 22 (3): 372–95.

Lin, Xiaodong. 2013. *Gender, Modernity and Migrant Workers in China: Becoming a “modern” Man*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Liu, Pengfei (刘鹏飞). 2022. “从都市摄影到海岛乡村家园复兴——翁奋专访 (From Urban Photography to the Revival of the Island’s Rural Homeland – an Interview with Weng Fen).” 艺术中国 (Art China). 2022. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_2GOmTOnxRbEC-_HRsunIg.

Liu, Ying, Yanliu Lin, Na Fu, Stan Geertman, and Frank van Oort. 2018. “Towards Inclusive and Sustainable Transformation in Shenzhen: Urban Redevelopment, Displacement Patterns of Migrants and Policy Implications.” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 173: 24–38.

Logan, John R, ed. 2001. *The New Chinese City: Globalization and Market Reform*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Long, Gen Ying. 1999. “China’s Changing Regional Disparities during the Reform Period.” *Economic Geography* 75 (1): 59–70.

Looney, Kristen E. 2015. “China’s Campaign to Build a New Socialist Countryside: Village Modernization, Peasant Councils, and the Ganzhou Model of Rural Development.” *The China Quarterly* 224: 909–32.

Ma, Laurence, and Chusheng Lin. 1993. “Development of Towns in China: A Case Study of Guangdong Province.” *Population and Development Review* 19 (3): 583–606.

Ma, Laurence, and Fulong Wu. 2005a. “City-Space: Scale Relations and China’s Spatial Administrative Hierarchy.” In *Restructuring the Chinese City: Changing Society, Economy and Space*, edited by Laurence Ma and Fulong Wu, 19–33. London: Routledge.

———. , eds. 2005b. *Restructuring the Chinese City: Changing Society, Economy and Space*. London: Routledge.

Marinelli, Maurizio. 2015. “Urban Revolution and Chinese Contemporary Art in a Total Revolution of the Senses.” *China Information* 29 (2): 154–75.

McNeil, Isabelle. 2017. “Glossy Postcards and Virtual Collectibles: Consuming Cinematic Paris.” *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 4 (3): 387–405.

Merriman, Peter. 2012a. “Introduction: Mobility, Space and Culture.” In *Mobility, Space and Culture*, edited by John Urry, 1–20. New York: Routledge.

———. 2012b. *Mobility, Space and Culture*. Edited by John Urry. New York: Routledge.

Meulder, Bruno De, Yanliu Lin, and Kelly Shannon, eds. 2014. *Village in the City: Asian Variations of Urbanisms of Inclusion*. Zurich: Park Books.

Meulder, Bruno De, Yanliu Lin, and Shifu Wang. 2011. “Understanding the ‘Village in the City’ in Guangzhou: Economic Integration and Development Issue and Their Implications for the Urban Migrant.” *Urban Studies* 48 (16): 3583–98.

Mirra, Federica. 2022. “Urban Imaginaries: Contemporary Art and Urban Transformations in China since 2001.” Birmingham City University.

N.a. 2017. “居动|西三电影制片厂 (Action| Xisan Film Studio).” 西三电影制片厂 (Xisan Film Studio). 2017.

———. 2021. “翁奋|海岛乡村:关于家园与土地的艺术在地实践 (Weng Fen| The Rural Island: The Site-Specific Art Practice on Homeland and Land).” 海岛乡村艺术 (The Art of the Rural Island). 2021. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/2WGJp2lqODBf87at0WfPyw.

O’Donnell, Mary Ann. 2013. “Baishizhou Superhero!” Shenzhen Noted. 2013. https://shenzhennoted.com/2013/12/16/baishizhou-superhero/.

———. 2014. “Paper Cranes.” Shenzhen Noted. 2014. https://shenzhennoted.com/2014/03/28/paper-cranes/.

———. 2017. “Laying Siege to the Villages: The Vernacular Geography of Shenzhen.” In *Learning from Shenzhen: China’s Post-Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City*, edited by Mary Ann O’Donnell, Winnie Wong, and Jonathan Bach, 107–37. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 2018. “Figuring Post-Worker Shenzhen.” Made in China. 2018. https://madeinchinajournal.com/2018/05/18/figuring-post-worker-shenzhen/.

———. 2021. “The End of an Era? Two Decades of Shenzhen Urban Villages.” *Made in China*, no. 2: 8–18.

O’Donnell, Mary Ann, and Jonathan Bach. 2021. “Reclaiming the New, Remaking the Local: Shenzhen at 40.” *China Perspectives*, no. 2: 71–75.

O’Donnell, Mary Ann, Winnie Wong, and Jonathan Bach, eds. 2017. *Learning from Shenzhen: China’s Post-Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Obrist, Hans Ulrich. 2006. “Cao Fei.” *Artforum* January: 180–81.

Ong, Aihwa, and Ananya Roy, eds. 2011. *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Limited.

Parke, Elizabeth. 2018. “Out of Service: Migrant Workers and Public Space in Beijing.” In *Visual Art, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interface*, edited by Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang, 261–84. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Prochaska, David, and Jordana Mendelson. 2010. *Postcards: Ephemeral Histories of Modernity*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Ren, Hai. 2019. “Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary Art: The Yangdeng Art Collective.” In *Socially Engaged Art in Southwest China: Yangdeng Art Cooperative*, edited by Yi (郭，宜） Guo, Fan （杨，帆） Yang, and Juan （王，娟） Wang, 20–28. Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing Group.

Ren, Xuefei. 2011. “Space, Capital, and Global Cities: An Introduction.” In *Building Globalization: Transnational Architecture Production in Urban China*, 1–18. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rendell, Jane. 2006. *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*. London: I.B Tauris.

Rogan, Bjarne. 2005. “An Entangled Object: The Picture Postcard as Souvenir and Collectible, Exchange and Ritual Communication.” *Cultural Analysis* 4: 1–23.

Saito, Yuriko. 2007. *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schor, Naomi. 1992. “‘Cartes Postales’: Representing Paris 1900’.” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (2): 188–244.

Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. 2006. “The New Mobilities Paradigm.” *Environment and Planning A* 38: 207–26.

Siu, Helen F. 2007. “Grounding Displacement: Uncivil Urban Spaces in Postreform South China.” *American Ethnologist* 34 (2): 329–50.

Smart, Alan, and Wing-Shing Tang. 2005. “Irregular Trajectories: Illegal Building in Mainland China and Hong Kong.” In *Restructuring the Chinese City: Changing Society, Economy and Space*, edited by Laurence Ma and Fulong Wu, 71–82. London and New York: Routledge.

Smith, Nick R. 2014. “City-in-the-Village: Huanggang and China’s Urban Renewal.” In *Villages in the City*, edited by Stefan Al, 29–41. Hong Kong and Honolulu: Hong Kong University Press and University of

Hawaii Press.

Stewart, Susan. 1993. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Tomkova, Denisa. 2018. “Zhu Fadong: Why Art Is Powerless to Make Social Change.” *Yishu Online* 17 (1): 85–96.

Visser, Robin. 2010. *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Wang, Han, and Yi Zhuo. 2018. “The Necessary Way for the Development of China’s Rural Areas in the New Era-Rural Revitalization Strategy.” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 6 (6): 97–106.

Wang, Meiqin. 2011. “Tales of Our Time: Two Contemporary Artists From China.” Northridge, CA: California State University Northridge Art Galleries.

———. 2015a. “Disappearing Bodies.” In *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 161–206. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.

———. 2015b. “The Street at Day and Night: Wang Fenghua and Liu Xintao.” In *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 208–47. London: Routledge.

———. 2019a. “Introduction: Voices from Below: The Potential of Art Activism.” In *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China: Voices from Below*, 1–12. New York: Routledge.

———. 2019b. “Walking the City: New Approaches to Public Art.” Liverpool.

Watts, Jonathan. 2006. “China Vows to Create a ‘new Socialist Countryside’ for Millions of Farmers.” The Guardian. 2006. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/feb/22/china.jonathanwatts.

Wilbur, Sarah. 2015. “It’s about Time: Creative Placemaking and Performance Analytics.” *A Journal of the Performing Art* 20 (4): 96–103.

Woody, Howard. 1998. “International Postcards: Their History, Production, and Distribution (circa 1895 to

1915).” In *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards*, edited by Christraud M. Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb, 13–46. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Wu, Fulong, ed. 2006. *Globalization and the Chinese City*. Abingdon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203698716.

———. 2007. *China’s Emerging Cities*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Wu, Hung. 2014. *Contemporary Chinese Art*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Xiang, Biao, and Shen Tan. 2005. “Does Migration Research Matter in China? A Review of Migration Research and Its Relations to Policy since the 1980s.” 16. Centre on Migration, Policy and Society. Oxford.

Xinhua. 2017. “Full Text of Resolution on Amendment to CPC Constitution.” Xinhua. 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2017-10/24/c_136702726.htm.

Xu, Qin. 2021. “A History in Art of a Vanishing Community.” Shine. 2021. https://www.shine.cn/feature/art-culture/2106180812/.

Xuan, Xue, Zdravko Trivic, and Puay Peng Ho. 2021. “Living Theatrical Approach to Creative Placemaking: The Case of Xisan Film Studio Project in China.” *Cultural Trends*, 1–20.

Yan, Hairong, Ku Hok Bun, and Siyuan Xu. 2021. “Rural Revitalization, Scholars, and the Dynamics of the Collective Future in China.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48 (4): 853–74.

Yan, Zhou. 2020. “The Urban and the Rural: Social or Critical Realism.” In *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art: 1949 to Present*, 369–96. Singapore: Springer.

Zai, Liang. 2001. “The Age of Migration in China.” *Population and Development Review* 27 (3): 499–524.

Zhang, Li. 2005. “Migrant Enclaves and Impacts of Redevelopment Policy in Chinese Cities.” In *Restructuring the Chinese City: Changing Society, Economy and Space*, edited by Laurence Ma and Fulong Wu, 218–27. London and New York: Routledge.

Zhang, Phoebe. 2018. “Can Citizen Journalism Work in China? Villagers Give Their Verdict.” South China

Morning Post. 2018. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2170419/can-citizen-journalism-work-china-villagers-give-their-verdict.

Zhang, Zoey. 2020. “Where to Invest in China: A Primer on Its Economic Development Zones.” China Briefing. 2020. https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-economic-development-zones-types-incentives/.

Zheng, Bo. n.d. “Case Study: ‘Tongyuanju.’” Future Learn. Accessed May 12, 2022. https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/socially-engaged-art/0/steps/23888.

江, 雪 (Jiang, Xue). 2018. “西三電影製片廠：媒體失語的年代，用手機攝影為城中村村民賦權 (In the Era of Media Aphasia, Mobile Phone Photography Empowers Urban Villagers in Urban Villages).” The Initium. 2018. https://theinitium.com/article/20180108-mainland-villager-reporters/.

黎, 艳明 (Li, Yanming), and Huansong) 吴, 焕松 (Wu. 2017. “西三电影制片厂- 第一季：《菜农》《三轮车》 (Xisan Film Studio - The First Season: ‘Vegetable Farmer’ and ‘Tricycle’).” 西三电影制片厂 (Xisan Film Studio). 2017.