

Continuity and Change in the Urban Villages of Shenzhen

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Abstract

The urban village, or *chengzhongcun*, is a unique urban communal formation in China and Shenzhen is one of the places that the urban villages first emerged. The creation of urban villages in Shenzhen is a simultaneous process with the creation of the new Shenzhen city. The original agricultural villages within the Shenzhen area were surrounded by rapidly urbanizing landscape. To make a living and adjust to economic competition in the new city of Shenzhen, the urban villagers transformed themselves into builders of self-constructed buildings utilizing their personal lots. They also became the major landlords of their self-constructed housings. Over the last three decades, the Shenzhen city has grown at an astonishing rate from a population around 300,000 to twelve million. The urban villages have become essential places for rural-to-urban migrants to survive in the city because of its low rent and flexible enforcement of the *hukou* household registration system. In a different arena, the urban villagers are forming new economic collectives – the village companies which since the early 1990s have generated great wealth for the urban villages and the original villagers. In this paper, we shall give an overview of some of the key aspects of the urban villages in Shenzhen through historical and social lens.

Keywords: *urban village, Shenzhen, informal buildings, urbanization, urban renewal, demolition and relocation, rural migrants, special economic zone*

JEL classification: *O15, J15, J61, Z13*

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of urbanization and economic power of Shenzhen, which has been transformed from a handful of sleepy villages into a large modern metropolis, has dazzled both Chinese and foreign visitors. However, people

often overlook the *chengzhongcun* 城中村, or urban villages, that have already blended into the surrounding urban landscapes. These are the original villages that have been surrounded and absorbed by the rapidly expanding city. The urban villages are now a nationwide phenomenon in China (see Li Lingling's paper in this collection on the urban villages of Guangzhou). Shenzhen's urban villages are amongst the first of their kinds in contemporary China and therefore well worth serious study and analysis. They represent a special space of contestation and negotiation in urban China. The urban villages are Shenzhen's bridges to its past and could help in the understanding of the process and effects of rapid urbanization of China in the last 30 years.

In this paper, I shall introduce the urban villages in Shenzhen in terms of their culture, history, and population. I shall present specific examples of Shenzhen's urban villages. I shall argue that despite their many apparent flaws and perceived chaos, the urban villages have performed with essential unity and provided direction for the original villagers as they weather the rapid urban changes and subsequent socioeconomic pressures all around from the 1980s up to the present.

2. Literature Review

Technically the name "urban village" in Chinese is called *chengzhongcun* or simply village in the city or village amidst city. Chung Him, a scholar from Hong Kong, is correct in pointing out that there are major deficiencies in literatures across China and the West defining urban village or village-in-the-city. According to Chung, "urban village" is a borrowed term. Chung argued that the Western form of urban village as seen in Britain and the Chinese "urban village" or village-in-the-city are very different concepts. Hence Chung insisted on using the term "*chengzhongcun*" or its direct word-for-word English translation "village-in-the-city" to describe the urban village phenomenon in China (Chung, 2010). As noted by Chung, the urban village as modern urban planning concept first emerged in England in the 1990s as a part of the revival of the traditional urbanism (Chung, 2010). England was one of the first places where the modern urban village concept was materialized with the aim of developing "village-style neighbourhood in an urban context" (Murray 2004). However for name sake, sometimes, the English urban village are also referred to as "village in the city" as seen in Nicholas Taylor's *The Village in the City* (Taylor, 1973). In other scholarly works, many authors have simply referred to the *chengzhongcun* or village-in-the-city as urban village (Song *et al.*, 2008; Wang *et al.*, 2009). While acknowledging their differences, for this paper I shall continue to use the term "urban village" simply for the ease of it instead of the Chinese word *chengzhongcun* or "village-in-the-city".

The studies of migrant enclaves and low-income urban neighbourhoods have been popular subjects in China seen from Xiang Biao's (2005) portrait of the Zhejiang village in Beijing. Or more recently, Lian Si's (2009) study of *yizu cun* 蚁族村 (ant tribe village), a form of college graduate congregate enclaves in the city. Although some of these Zhejiang villages or ant tribe villages are urban villages, most are simply low-income neighbourhoods frequented by migrant tenants. Urban villages as those in Shenzhen have the very important dynamic of having original villagers-based communal self-government. There are also the interesting aspects of economic collectives, such as the urban village companies. In addition, although the scholarly research on urban villages at the national level across various regions are popular in China with particular focuses on Guangzhou and Beijing, the research on Shenzhen's urban village is limited, particularly on the internal mechanism of original villagers and their collective organization and identities.

The latest edition of the book *Chen Village* (Unger, Madsen and Chen, 2009) partially touches on the topic of urban village. Unger, Madsen and Chen used the pseudonym "Chen Village" to describe their subject village in the north of Shenzhen. In the previous editions of this book, much of the emphasis was on the political and social history of the village. The latest expanded edition focused more on urbanization and the social and economic transformations in the village which are very similar to those of Shenzhen's urban villages, yet the concept of urban village was never mentioned or explored. From a different angle, Gregory Guldin's *What's a Peasant to Do? Village Becoming Town in Southern China* (2001) tried to present an overall review of the urban village phenomenon in many different sites across the Pearl River Delta and China's southeastern coast. Guldin put a heavy emphasis on "townization", that is, the transformation of a village into a small town. Guldin called them "townized villages" but many of the villages mentioned by Guldin in Shenzhen and neighbouring Dongguan are indeed urban villages. Guldin provided an essential overview of the social and political changes within the local villages due to urbanization in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

There are limited Anglophone publications by Chinese scholars on the subject of urban village in China and specifically on those of Shenzhen. Yaping Wang, Yanglin Wang and Jiangsheng Wu's (2009) article "Urbanization and Informal Development in China: Urban Villages in Shenzhen" is likely the most updated research on urban villages of Shenzhen. These Chinese researchers have cited extensive Chinese government decrees and documents to provide a crucial historical overview on the village-city government relationship with regard to informal housing construction on village land (Wang, Wang and Wu, 2009). There are also a few other scholarly works by Chinese scholars on the urban villages with interests ranging from

land markets to the housing of rural migrants (Tian 2008; Zhang, Zhao and Tian, 2003). Within China many domestic scholars and government-affiliated researchers have done extensive studies in Chinese on the urban villages in the Pearl River Delta region with the aim of helping the government's move to "regulate" (*zhili* 治理) the villages. In one of the latest general publications on urban villages, while acknowledging the unique ability of urban villages in sheltering migrant labours, Liu Mengqin (2010) of the Guangdong Social Science Academy presented the urban village as a major problem and obstacle to normal urbanization in China in her book *The End of the Village: A Study of the Urban Village and Its Reform* (*Cunzhuang Zhongjie: Chengzhongcun ji Qi Gaizao Yanjiu* 村庄终结: 城中村及其改造研究). The themes of unruly villages are repeated in various Chinese scholarly publications and popular among the local media outlets of China (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*, 2011).

However, not all domestic Chinese scholars carry the same negative view of urban villages. One of the most notable works published by mainland scholars on the issue of urban villages is Li Peilin's (2004) *The End of the Village: Stories of Yangcheng Village*. Li's work on Guangzhou's urban villages, which is very similar to those in Shenzhen, is a classic in the study of urban villages. Li's book presented some of the positive qualities of the urban villages in terms of social diversity, convenience, and upward social mobility. Recently, there are also many Shenzhen scholars publishing news and magazine articles in support of the urban village as a necessary place for low-income migrant labourers (see Li, 2007; Chen, 2009). They argue that the urban village is not a shame of Shenzhen. On the contrary, the urban villages are Shenzhen's precious sites of local cultural heritage and have helped alleviate much housing pressure on the city overall.

In summary, the topic of the urban village in Shenzhen and in China more generally tends to bring out extreme opposing views from mainland Chinese academia. The kind of negative views generated from various sectors of society and the city government towards urban villages are, nonetheless, dominant. There is an unspoken consensus in the media, academia and government that the urban villages are problematic. That is, they constitute a problem that needs to be reformed and restructured. I hope to present in this paper a balanced evaluation of the urban village phenomenon in Shenzhen to show that the urban village is a necessary step in contemporary Chinese urban development.

3. The History and Cultural Heritage of Shenzhen's Villages

Thirty years ago, most of Shenzhen was made up of villages. Zhang Yibing, a popular local archeologist, once estimated that Shenzhen had over 1,300 historical "natural villages" (*zirancun* 自然村) (Fu, 2006). These natural

villages are the common ancestor of today's urban villages. Often, a single current urban village is the coalition of several historical natural villages. The villages, depending on location, engaged in either agricultural or fishing activities. The villages are very similar in terms of their social hierarchical structures. Each village was built around a dominant clan of a particular surname lineage that reserves the right to build an ancestral hall (*citing* 祠堂) in the centre of the village to demonstrate their dominance and importance.

The main distinctions among the villages are the cultural, linguistic, and religious affiliations. In both the northern and eastern sections of Shenzhen, large numbers of villages are Hakka, which is a distinctive cultural and linguistic Han sub-ethnic group in contrast to the Cantonese-speaking Han population majority in the province of Guangdong. In addition, there are also scatterings of small villages that speak forms of Chaozhou dialect from the

Figure 1 Folk Religion Worship in a Village of Shenzhen
(photo by author, 2009)



northeastern part of Guangdong Province. In terms of belief systems, among the villages there are a combination of Buddhist, Taoist, and various forms of indigenous folk religions. One interesting example of Shenzhen's religious scene is the practice of Mazu worship in several villages. Historically, the largest religious site in Shenzhen is *Tianhougong* 天后宮 which is dedicated to the worship of Mazu, the protector of sailors and fishermen. The worship of Mazu has its origins in the neighbouring coastal Fujian province and is often associated with fishing villages.

Shenzhen's urban villages varied in number and size over time especially after the commencement of economic reform and the founding of Shenzhen as a city in 1979. Wang Ruyuan (2004) counted only 71 urban villages within the then Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1999. The total urban village area in Shenzhen was about ten square kilometres. The size of the villages varies greatly from year to year due to land sale and government acquisition of land. There have been many cases of large villages dividing into smaller villages from the early 1980s onwards. For example, Huanggang Village, which I have visited extensively, was divided into the current Huanggang Village and Shuiwei Village in the year 1980. Another of my research villages, Buxin Village, was divided into the current Buxin Village and two other villages in the late 1970s.

Despite varying in location and geography, most of Shenzhen's villages share a similar history. The county of Xin'an, which included both the current Shenzhen and Hong Kong regions, was established in the 16th Century in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE). Because of the historical connection, many villages in Shenzhen and Hong Kong share the same lineages. Since the Opium War (1839-1842 CE), the Hong Kong region became separated from Xin'an County when it became a British concession. The remaining areas of Xin'an County was later renamed Baoan County which remains as name of the local region until the founding of Shenzhen in 1979.

Prior to 1978, Shenzhen's villages, like most Chinese villages, had gone through the great political turmoil in the first three decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since its founding in 1949. The Great Leap Forward (1957), the Four Clean Up Campaigns (1963-1966 CE), and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976 CE), all greatly affected the villages of Shenzhen. It might be surprising to people how deep the penetration of political campaigns was back then. The highest command of "Chairman Mao" could spread from the centre of Beijing to the furthest corners of what we know call Shenzhen. During my fieldwork I was always amazed by the fact that the villagers of this locality, who at the time could barely speak or understand Mandarin, could nonetheless memorize the songs of the Cultural Revolution and the three political essays (*laosanpian* 老三篇) of the Chairman.¹ I was told by one villager that during those days, when the newest teaching was issued by

Chairman Mao through telegraph, the entire village would gather around to study it even when it was late in the night.

Overlapping the great political chaos, there was the significant historical phenomenon of “*taogang* 逃港” in Shenzhen. *Taogang* literally means fleeing to Hong Kong. By some estimation, counting only those from Guangdong province alone, 565,000 people attempted to flee from Shenzhen to Hong Kong. Among those, at least 140,000 were successful (Lu, 2008). This is only the official version of the figure which is likely to be a great underestimation. During those years of turmoil, tens of thousands of people from elsewhere and large numbers of local villagers fled on foot from Shenzhen to Hong Kong. Sometimes, they walked across the mangrove swamp bordering Hong Kong. Sometimes they just swam across the Shenzhen Bay. As a consequence, in the urban villages, many if not most of the original villagers have relatives who fled to Hong Kong. The reason of their fleeing could vary greatly. Some were sincerely fleeing political persecution and food shortages while others simply wanted better wages and opportunities. The *taogang* event shook the villages of Shenzhen to their cores. Many villages reported losing half of the able-body male population to *taogang* during the 1960s and 1970s. It should be noted that the *taogang* event was never successfully curbed by the border guards who were often local villagers themselves. They faced the dilemma of stopping their friends and relatives from fleeing or neglecting their duty. The phenomenon of *taogang* was only greatly reduced after the economic take-off of Shenzhen in the 1980s.

In March 1979, the city of Shenzhen was founded in the Baoan County areas with the approval of the Chinese State Council. In May 1980, it was officially declared the first Special Economic Zone of China. With the proclamation, Shenzhen was rapidly urbanized in the 1980s. In the following decades, the villagers proved themselves to be amazingly flexible and adaptable to the new urban environment that was gradually surrounding them. Initially, they leased village land for small factories by Hong Kong or Taiwan investors. Later, they began to set up small factories of their own with particular specializations. For example, Huanggang Village in southern Futian District had a sand transport business that was entirely village-owned in the 1980s. The villagers dug up sand from nearby land and transported it by truck to the various construction sites. Later on, they set up a rubbish collection and recycling business by importing waste from Hong Kong. For a while, their specialty was importing used tires from Hong Kong to recycle on village-owned sites. In Buxin Village, the villagers set up a small fish bait factory that supplies the Hong Kong consumer market. The local villagers simply called it the “red worm factory”. These factories were all set up in the mid-1980s. It was the “first bucket of gold”² for the villages. However, the real business opportunity came later when Shenzhen expanded

Figure 2 Shenzhen in Early 1980s (courtesy of Shenzhen Huanggang Holding Company Ltd, 2010)



in population. The villagers were able to start large-scale accommodation leasing operations.

4. Rural-to-Urban Migrants and the Making of Urban Village

Since the mid-1980s, Shenzhen has become a magnet for migrants from all over China looking for work. The policy of economic reform and Shenzhen's status as a SEZ made Shenzhen the land of many firsts in China. Shenzhen was the site of many significant and new political and economic trends. First, there were the initial signs of the loosening of the system of household registration system (*hukou* 户口) which used to effectively block rural residents from living and working in the cities. The loosening of the *hukou* system in Shenzhen helped to usher in the age of the rural-to-urban migrant workers (*nongmingong* 农民工) in China where millions of rural farmers flocked to coastal and urban China to take up manufacturing jobs. In Shenzhen, there was also the beginning of the end of the "iron rice bowl" (*tiefanwan* 铁饭碗) policy toward permanent employment and equal pay systems of the "big rice pot" (*daguofan* 大锅饭). Shenzhen was the first place for flexible wages according to one's ability and effort. Shenzhen's Zhuyuan Hotel is famous for being the first workplace to fire workers in the history of the People's Republic of China.

With the myth of Shenzhen being a paradise for hard workers, flexible wages and hiring without *hukou* restrictions, large number of migrants came to Shenzhen from all over China with very different skill levels. Initially,

most of the migrant workers were housed in factory dormitories. Gradually and for various reasons, many migrants began to settle in the urban villages. Some of these migrants did not have stable employment. Many of them were self-employed or employed by small businesses. In addition, the later migrants often came with their entire family to the city and they were no longer satisfied with the dormitory as a place to live. This is often the case during my interviews with the migrants. In the late 1980s, massive numbers of migrants began to move into the urban villages attracted by the cheap rent and the loose residential registration. Subsequently, Shenzhen's population skyrocketed and it was during this time that the urban villagers began to see great changes in their life.

Today, Shenzhen has a total estimated population of 12 to 14 million plus or minus the very unstable migrant population.³ The official government census puts Shenzhen's total long-term residential population as 8.9 million and the floating population to be around 2 million (Lu, 2010). Out of the 8.9 million long-term residents, only 2.3 million have Shenzhen *hukou* and the rest have proper urban *hukou* registration⁴ from other Chinese cities (Lu, 2010). No matter what figure one uses from the lowest estimation of 12 million to the highest estimation of 14 million, Shenzhen has experienced tremendous population growth within 30 years. The original Baoan County Annals (Baoan Xianzhi Committee, 1997) stated that the county had roughly only 300,000 residents in 1978 just prior to the founding of Shenzhen.

In the 1990s, the villagers were quick to take advantage of the migrant population boom in Shenzhen and start building rental apartments. The rent that the villagers charged was always, and continues to be, the cheapest in the city. The present average rent in the villages ranges from 1,000 to 2,000 yuan⁵ per month for the most basic apartment suite. The apartment unit could be shared by a single family or by a ragtag group of migrants from the same home town. For the migrants, the urban village is an excellent place to start their new urban life in Shenzhen. For the original villagers, the migrants are great tenants who do not complain much about the cramped and chaotic conditions of the villages. The lucrative apartment rental operation would soon become a norm among the urban villages in Shenzhen. When I was interviewing one former village chief at Buxin Village, he comically suggested that after 1984, villagers no longer cared about planting crops for harvest. All the villagers cared about is "growing buildings" (*geng lou* 耕楼).

5. Relation between Villages and Government over Land

Shenzhen's urban villages are very ambiguous places in term of land rights. According to the Chinese Land Administration Law, all urban land belongs to the Chinese government. The so-called ownership of property within urban

areas by citizen or non-government organizations is actually a long-term renewable lease of up to 70 years. However, the Chinese Land Administration Law also clearly states that all agricultural land in rural areas belongs to the village collective. Thus, a grey zone of ambiguity is created surrounding the urban villages of Shenzhen and many others around China. The urban villages were historically agricultural villages that were absorbed into an urban zone or new city in the case of Shenzhen. In Shenzhen, the villages remain in control of their land even after the urbanization process. Hence, the urban villagers are urban residents with special collective property rights.

Shenzhen was constantly expanding throughout its first two decades with new roads and new buildings encroaching onto the borders of the villages. Often, the city government would have new plans for public infrastructure around or inside the villages. In this regard, one of the often unspoken conflicts of interest between the villages and the local government in Shenzhen is that of land acquisition, which is a direct assault to the villages' collective landholding permitted by the Chinese Land Administrative Law. In earlier cases of the mid-1980s, the city government purchased the land very cheaply from the villagers for their own urban design and planning. Compared to current prices at minimum over 5,000 yuan per square metre, the land sold to the city government back in the 1980s was at 4.5 to 6 yuan per square metre, roughly 3,000 to 4,000 yuan per *mu* 畝 (660 square metres).⁶ The villagers under political pressure or simple ignorance agreed to the terms of the city government.

Some of the most vivid examples of land acquisition happened in Huanggang Village. The city government used a large chunk of this village to build the Huanggang Border Terminal in the late 1980s, which is now the main border terminal between Shenzhen and Hong Kong. In the mid-1990s, another piece of land was acquired from Huanggang Village to build the Futian District Government Complex. In the year 2000, the city government again acquired a large northern section of Huanggang Village to build the Shenzhen Exhibition Center. In the more inland village of Buxin, a similar process was repeated in the 1980s and 1990s. The city government, for example, bought land cheaply from villagers to build the Jingwei Beer⁷ factory. When interviewing a retired village chief, it is estimated that Buxin has lost over two thirds of its original village land during the initial acquisition stage in the 1980s and 1990s.

Although the government had achieved success in acquiring land from the villages, the villagers had their ways of not cooperating with the city government. The villagers had started a massive building boom within the villages in the late 1980s. It was a direct challenge to the planning and zoning of the city government. The privately constructed buildings did not follow regulations on size and standard. In addition, there are indications that

the villagers' private constructions were spreading onto neighbouring land outside the villages. Hence, in 1986, the city government formally introduced policies to limit the size and height of privately constructed housing in the villages. It limited the size of each building site to 80 square metres. Each villager was allowed 40 square metres of building space (Shenzhen Municipal Government, 1986). In 1989, the city government introduced the red line policy to limit the size of the village. The policy stated that the villages and villagers could only construct buildings within the red line drawn by the government (Shenzhen Municipal Government, 1989). It was meant to define the modern borders of the villages. Furthermore, the city government issued new decrees to strengthen control over all village-owned land within the red line and put them under direct jurisdiction.

However, since the red line policy of the late 1980s and the limitation on how high the villagers could construct their buildings, the city government has achieved very little success in regulating the villagers. None of the decrees was effectively followed by the villagers. Almost all villages had violated the government's regulation on the size and height of the buildings to different degrees. The villagers had constructed blocks and blocks of buildings that were at least over five floors tall. In reality, the phenomenon of rampant construction (*luanjian* 乱建) was everywhere. Attempts to construct buildings

Figure 3 Shenzhen Urban Village Sprawl (photo by author, 2008)



beyond the government red line also continued but at a much smaller scale than before. According to Wang Yaping (2009), the government's decree in the late 1980s had an exactly opposite effect. The villages had instead sped up their *luanjian* building effort which had become an out-of-control phenomenon. Contrary to popular perception of authoritarian style of governing in China, in the case of Shenzhen, the city municipal government has been for a long time reluctant to forcefully deal with local villages. This was likely because of Shenzhen's symbolic importance of being an experimental special economic zone. The local government has been for a long time very cautious to use any sudden forceful measures against large collective entities such as the urban villages. Or simply they did not find the villages to be an overwhelming concern with so much energy devoted to building the main streets of the Shenzhen city.

The result of the villagers' rampant construction is today's infamous urban village landscape full of densely constructed apartments. So narrow is the distance between the buildings that the locals call them the "kissing buildings" (*qinwenlou* 亲吻楼) or "handshake buildings" (*woshoulou* 握手楼). The highly dense buildings of urban villages formed a unique scene of their own. Except for some of the main streets across the villages, most village streets between apartments are extremely narrow. Very often, one will encounter streets between two apartment blocks that is about the size of footpath of typical Western suburban home. The streets between the apartments can sometimes be compared to the popular Chinese expression describing a deep valley with only one line of sky, that is, *yi xian tian* 一线天 (Wang, 2004). This is not an exaggeration. Many urban village streets keep on the street lights for 24 hours because of the almost perpetual darkness between the densely constructed buildings. The humid condition of Shenzhen makes the alleys look even worse. Many scholars have raised concerns about the quality and potential for fire dangers among the urban villages' buildings (Wang, 2004).

Throughout the 1990s, some original villagers began to cooperate with the newly emerging class of Chinese real estate developers, both state-owned and private. Because of shared profit and mutual interest, the villagers are more cooperative with the real estate developers than with the city government. This new partnership phenomenon started to be repeated throughout the villages. Better quality apartment complexes started to emerge around the villages. The improvement of housing quality also attracted a new generation of migrants to the villages. These were mostly single white-collar workers and Hong Kong residents. In the early 2000s, the force of real estate developers became ever more prominent among the villages as they got involved in urban renewal projects that often have a priority for the villages. Kingkey Group, one of the largest real estate companies in Shenzhen, had its beginnings in

Figure 4 *Yi Xian Tian*, Narrow Space between Buildings (photo by author, 2009)



the urban villages. The founder of Kingkey Group, Chen Hua, was an early migrant construction labourer in the early 1980s (Zhongtou Guwen, 2008). Chen made his fortune and built a business empire by getting involved in urban renewal projects in the urban villages. The once two-way game between the villagers and the city government has become a three-way game between city government, the real estate developers, and villagers. The three sides are pursuing their own interests. However, the game has become more cooperative and less zero-sum.

6. The Urban Village Community

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies first introduced the concept of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to distinguish the rural and the emerging modern urban community in Germany in the early 20th Century. Interestingly, both Tönnies's terminologies of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* could be applied to the urban villages. In the urban village we find both the kind of *Gemeinschaft* rural community and *Gesellschaft* modern urban society. Thirty years ago, the urban villages of Shenzhen were *Gemeinschaft* of tightly knitted village communities, just like most villages in China. The village of Shenzhen had a well-established ancestral hall (*citing* 祠堂) lineage system which was strengthened after the economic reform. The prosperous villages have spent large sums to erect and redecorate their *citang* to strengthen their collective identity and community feeling.

After the rapid urbanization process, the *Gesellschaft* of Tönnies's started to form in Shenzhen's village. Tönnies's original definition emphasized the emergence of individualism in modern capitalist urban society where people were bound by common aspiration and codes of conduct. After the formation of Shenzhen city and the urbanization of the village areas, the individual villagers were very quick to adapt to the new urban and economic reform environment and took the opportunity to profit from their villager identity and land ownership. One particular act of individualism was the rampant building effort described above. In addition, the boom in residential population within the village also made it hard for everybody to know everybody else.

Since the mid-1980s there was a melting pot-like phenomenon of many different regional Chinese cultures from various inland provinces with the local coastal Pearl River Delta village culture (as is described in the fiction of the urban migrant writers discussed by Li Lingling in this collection). With the settling of a migrant majority in Shenzhen and in the villages, the migrants have brought their provincial cultures to Shenzhen and the villages. Today, the urban villages are filled with regional-flavour restaurants, a simple but obvious indicator of diversity. Some of them are from spice-obsessed mountainous provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. There were also the equally spicy varieties from the central Yangtze provinces of Hunan and Hubei. These restaurants are usually small with room enough for only six to eight tables. However, they are intensely loyal to their regional style and flavour. Shenzhen's urban village culinary scene is in fact as diverse as those in long-established food courts of Beijing. The original villagers are not swallowed up by the regional cultures. The Cantonese herbal tea shop is usually just around the corner. There are many famous local food chains grown out of the villages. For example, the locally famous Chao Tai Beef Restaurants were originally from the urban village of Gangxia.

Although the urban village to a degree is the melting pot of Shenzhen and China, there are also conflicts of economic and cultural elements among its various groups of residential populations. Provincial and regional prejudices are major causes of social conflict in China. In the more developed coastal urban areas of China, the sense of regional or provincial superiority is particularly strong. Although Shenzhen is often called the migrant city of China, there is still a strong undercurrent of nativism among the villagers and early Guangdong migrants who spoke Cantonese and are deeply rooted in this locality. Most of the later migrants are from poorer inland provinces. They either spoke heavily accented Mandarin or their regional dialects, and they are now the majority of the urban villages' residents. However, in terms of economic and political power, they are the weaker party compared to the collective of local villagers. The basic relation between them and the villagers were that of tenants and landlords. The local villagers, now mostly relatively prosperous and wealthy, often look down on the out-of-province migrants. The migrants because of the perceived exploitative economic relationship with the landlord villagers or their own provincial prejudices also disrespect the local villagers. Interestingly, in spite of regional differences, they have formed a consensus about the local villagers as being lazy, greedy, and useless. During my interviews with migrants, when I asked them how frequent they communicate or socialize with the original villagers, they always said that the only chance that they communicate with the original villagers was during rent collecting.

7. Negative Images of Urban Villages

In present-day Shenzhen, the urban village received many strong negative stereotypes, which to certain degrees are arguably true. The urban villages from the typical main-street Shenzhen citizens' view are basically a kind of "ghetto" for rural-to-urban migrants. The word "ghetto" here is referring to the modern American description of poor sectors of the inner city inhabited by racial minorities. The type of negative stereotype projected toward the ghetto in the United States is very similar to those projected at the urban village in Shenzhen by the average Shenzhen citizen, at least without the racial element. The stereotypes of "dirty, chaotic, and dangerous" urban villages are common in Shenzhen for those who live outside the villages. They are also prominent in the thinking of the city government.

There are many different kinds of crimes in the urban village. The most heinous and rampant are thefts and break-ins. Both the perpetrators and victims of this kind of crime are mostly migrants. The originally villagers' residence are usually heavily guarded with dogs and other surveillance measures. Aside from common theft, the urban villages are infamous for their

organized criminal activity, which branches out into various aspects of the underground economy. The organized crime in the villages could vary greatly in scale. Some are gangs and some are mafias. Originally, the organized crimes first emerged when the original villagers formed gangs among themselves to either protect themselves or to bully the migrants. Increasingly, the gangs of local villagers are replaced by much larger gangs made up of migrants with provincial allegiances. There are also countless regional gangs vying for control over sections within the urban villages. Lately, there are also the Hong Kong-based triad elements setting up bridgeheads in the villages (Quan, 2010). Most of the time the gangs are not a serious concern to average residents of the urban village. However, they are a monthly headache for small shops and restaurant owners as they collect their protection money. In addition, there was potential danger for bystanders when the gangs started fighting each other for turf control.

With the great variety of criminal organizations, there is bound to be a vibrant underground economy in Shenzhen's urban villages. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the villages were the place for “*Huang, Du, Du* 黄, 赌, 毒”, the big three in Chinese public security concern. *Huang* or yellow in the mainland Chinese context represents any immoral activities from pornography to prostitution (see Sigley, 2006). The first *Du* is gambling. The second *Du* is drug use. In the urban village, all three elements are very prominent. *Huang*, however, is likely the biggest of the three. One could find prostitutes in a wide variety of price range and locations in the urban village. Clubs, bars, massage parlours, barber shops, and even small theatres are places where the prostitutes attract their customers. As for other such activities, there is the pirated pornographic DVD sold from various small video stores. These shops also host an amazing selection of other pirated DVDs usually on sale just days after the global premier of new blockbuster movies. Gambling is probably the least prominent in the urban villages. However, there are rare cases of mini-gambling dens in the villages and small slot machines in some convenient shops. Drug use is viewed with much severity. Because of historical and legal reasons, the offense of selling drugs and using drugs are much more severe than gambling activities and prostitution. The local police (*gonganju* 公安局) and the village security team tend to take drug-related activities very seriously because it would reflect poorly on their work. However, there are always the rumours of drug use by idle village youth since the 1990s.

8. The Urban Village Success Story

Despite all the negativities about some urban villages, one could not deny the success of many villages. In terms of economic organization, the urban villages of Shenzhen are definite shining examples for similar urban

settlement or townized villages in developing nations. In 1992, the Shenzhen government passed decrees to let villages form their own village joint-stock company (*cungufengongsi* 村股份公司) (Shenzhen Municipal Government, 1992). This is a historical moment for the villages which over the era of the People's Republic have changed from natural villages to work brigades to village again and finally to companies and residential communities. Every village in Shenzhen now has a village company of its own. The companies basically act as the parallel governing structure of the villages in charge of economic affairs. As an economic collective, the village company will distribute dividends to the shareholding villagers. It also takes care of social welfare in the form of community clinics, kindergartens, and activity centres for the villagers. In many ways, the companies proved crucial in the villages' efforts to maintain some self-governing power. Soon after 1992 and the formation of the companies, the villages were brought into the city government administration network. The political unit of the village, the village committee (*cunweihui* 村委会), no longer exists. In its place, there is the first the street office (*jiedaoban* 街道办) and then the residential committee (*juweihui* 居委会). The new government organs are all controlled by the city government.

Since the formation of the companies, all villages were put on the same starting line. Over the next two decades, they strived for success and achieved different results. So far, for over two decades, no village company has gone bankrupt. Some villages have become great successes. The village companies in many ways symbolized the urban villages of Shenzhen at present. They have provided important cushions for the average villagers during the period of rapid economic change and urbanization. The companies as economic collectives have provided unity and direction for the villagers. This is especially true among the more successful villages. The collective spirit has helped them deal with powerful organizations whether it is the city government or the real estate developers. This is especially precious when considering examples of urban villages from elsewhere in China. More often than not, without any form of economic collective organization the urban villages could be completely demolished and relocated based on government or real estate developers' terms, as is now often the case in many other rapidly urbanizing Chinese cities. The very existence of so many urban villages in Shenzhen proved that the urban village collective model has worked.

Huanggang Village is one of the largest urban villages in Shenzhen. The village is one of the first villages to undergo the urbanization process. Its current total size is about half a square kilometre. It is a Zhuang surname village. The village has approximately 700 years of history. The total population of Zhuang descent in Huanggang is about 1,700 (Huanggang Zhuang Clan Association, 2010). In 1992, by decree of the Shenzhen city

government, Huanggang Village is no longer a village but a part of the city. Hence all village-related political structures were abolished and replaced with urban administrative structures of street office as mentioned above. In the same year, the Huanggang villagers formed the Huanggang Joint-Stock Company with a registered fund of 200 million yuan. Currently, by conservative estimates the company is worth more than six billion yuan. The Huanggang Village Company owns two large hotels, one large department store, and a variety of properties ranging from office buildings, restaurants

Figure 5 Huanggang Business Centre (Huanggang Shangwuzhongxin)
(courtesy of Huanggang Holding Company Ltd, 2010)



to rental properties (including apartments, factories, and shops). In June 2009, the ambitious Huanggang Company finished construction on its first skyscraper, the Huanggang Business Centre (*shangwuzhongxin* 商务中心), a 62-floor office building with the height of 268 metres in Shenzhen's CBD (central business district).

Huanggang Village is a one of the bigger villages in Shenzhen for its size and population. However, the village is overall well administered. Some areas of the village are better planned and administered than anywhere in Shenzhen. Overall, the village is safe, and well monitored and governed. The restaurants are clean. The supermarkets and open-air fresh food markets are vibrant. The buildings constructed by the villagers are not as crammed and chaotic as elsewhere. They seem to have a uniform look of similar height. Since very early on, the village company had enforced their own standard of building regulations and planned the village area by themselves. On this, Huanggang stands apart from other villages in Shenzhen in their ability to control the average villagers and enforce a kind of economic collectivism.

At present, Huanggang Village has a very large public square which has a European-style watchtower at the centre. On the square, there is a platform for theatre and speeches. Behind the square there is the family temple and ancestral hall for the Zhuang family, which is one of the largest family temples among Shenzhen's villages. Behind the temple, there is a village museum, one of the first of its kind in China. There is also a private park for the Zhuang

Figure 6 Villagers Gathering during an Important Holiday at the Village Square with *Citang* in the Background (courtesy of Huanggang Holding Company Ltd, 2010)



clan near the temple. The village has another much larger park blocks away which serves as a public park for the city but bears the Huanggang name.

On 23rd August 2010, Premier Wen Jiabao visited Shenzhen to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Hu (2010) from Xinhua News Agency reported Wen's visit to Shenzhen in detail. Among his various ceremonial stops in Shenzhen, the premier visited Huanggang Village. Such a visit by a head of state is highly choreographed for its symbolic meaning. Reading it from Chinese social and political context, this visit highlighted Huanggang village's significance as a major achievement of the Shenzhen SEZ. The official story by Xinhua News Agency described the village's importance as follows:

Thirty years ago, the Huanggang villagers made less than nine *mao* (90 Chinese cents) daily on fishing and farming. Fleeing to Hong Kong had become a popular activity among villagers. At its worst, there were only 16 people left in the village. Today's Huanggang is a land of high-rises, beautiful environment and collective economic holding of more than six billion yuan. Every month, the average village has a dividend of 6,000 yuan. (Hu, 2010)

Figure 7 Premier Wen in Huanggang Village (courtesy of Huanggang Holding Company Ltd, 2010)



9. Conclusion

The urban village of Shenzhen is quite a complex phenomenon with issues ranging from history to economics, from local politics to cultural heritage, from population movement to village self-government. Many scholars and officials have emphasized greatly on the negative aspects of the urban village, that is, the high crime rate, chaotic buildings, and lack of administration. However, they failed to balance their view with the potential positive elements of the villages in term of cultural diversity, low-cost housing, and economic self-government. There are indeed great lessons to be learned from the urban villages of Shenzhen. Despite many of their flaws, the Shenzhen urban villages could be examples and models for countless urban villages in China that are facing the potential danger of being completely demolished and relocated. In many cases elsewhere, due to the lack of collective economic organization, the villages ceased to exist after the urbanization process. And the villagers were forced to face the sudden onslaught of urban lifestyle and fierce competition. In the cases of Shenzhen's urban villages, the village company has provided direction and unity for local villages. Their continuing existence throughout three decades of rapid economic changes proved their effectiveness. In addition, a well-performing village company as an economic collective could provide riches for the villagers for generations and the necessary protection to the local cultural heritage.

Notes

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1. They were "To Serve the People", "Study Norman Bethune", and "The Old Fool Moves Mountains". Bethune was a Canadian medical doctor who served with the Communist Red Army during the Civil War and died in China.
 2. The Chinese colloquial expression of primitive capital accumulation.
 3. The Shenzhen Municipal Government officials tend to use the 14 million figure as Shenzhen's population. Yet the official census tends to cite the total population figure to be no more than 12 million.
 4. These are urban migrants who migrated to Shenzhen from other Chinese cities.
 5. With the current exchange rate of 6.3 yuan : 1 dollar (USD), it is around 166 and 332 dollars (USD).
 6. The original information was 3,000 to 4,000 yuan per *mu*. During my interview at Buxin and Huanggang Villages I was informed that the city government compensated the villagers for their land acquisition at 2,000 yuan per *mu* or around 3 yuan per square metre.
 7. Shenzhen's most popular local brand for beer.

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