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# Urbanisation, the State, and Community Activism in the Pearl River Delta

The case of a land dispute in Dongguan

IAM-CHONG IP

**ABSTRACT:** While the “state-led urbanisation” argument highlights the dominance of state power in China’s urban process, the notion of “local state/village corporatism” pays attention to the significant stake of local governments and their rural collectivities in economic development and urban growth, especially in the region of Guangdong’s Pearl River Delta. Yet, these two arguments overlook the multiple forms of collectivities, including the communal land system, local clanship, and territories of folk religion, and their participation in the urban process. This article adopts a more structural approach by seeing the “urban process” as the socio-spatial reorganisation of and struggle over “the collective” in the capitalist socio-spatial relations of production. With the ethnographic study of Village Z in Dongguan, I argue that proletarianisation is not simply an integral part of the urban process but also the background against which communal imagination and the cellular form of activism take their shapes. Local collectivities do not necessarily share the interests and values of the developmental states but counteract the local states at all levels, thereby perpetuating contestation over urban spaces.

**KEYWORDS:** activism, collectivities, proletarianisation, urbanisation, urban space.

Scholars of Chinese cities agree on the centrality of the local state in the urban process over the past few decades.<sup>(1)</sup> Given the continuity of the state-socialist legacy in the land system and political governance, local states take the lead in land expropriation, clean-sweep re-development, eviction, and even resettlement of residents. While the “state-led urbanisation” argument correctly draws attention to state power, the active role of society needs to be taken into account.<sup>(2)</sup> Others highlight localities, including local state and rural communities, as an institutional arrangement providing incentives and support to industrial and urban growth.<sup>(3)</sup> Although it is very likely that local state corporatism may foster economic growth and urbanisation, it is not clear that the converse is true. The conflict and separation between local state power and local society are noteworthy.<sup>(4)</sup> The objective of this article is to provide a politico-economic account of the multiple forms of collectivities, including the communal land system, local clanship, and territories of folk religion, and their contribution to urbanisation in the Pearl River Delta (PRD).

In this article, “urbanisation,” rather than a simple aggregation of population and economic activities or conversion of an administrative village into a residential community (*cungajiu*), is an “urban process” in the political economic sense. This study, following yet modifying the critical approaches of urban sociology, sees the “urban process” of the Pearl River Delta region as the social reorganisation of and contestation over “the collective” in the capitalist socio-spatial relations of production.<sup>(5)</sup> Peri-urbanisation at the

village level is seen less as a functional outcome of capital logic than as an emergent and relationally “over-determined geography of dispossession and possibility.”<sup>(6)</sup> In other words, while local states undergo urbanisation by ac-

The author would like to thank Professor Bettina Gransow-van Treeck and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions to improve the article.

1. Kam Wing Chan, *Cities and Invisible Walls: Reinterpreting Urbanisation in Post-1949 China*, London, Oxford UP, 1994; Jianfa Shen, Kwan-yiu Wong, and Zhiqiang Feng, “State-Sponsored and Spontaneous Urbanisation in the Pearl River Delta of South China, 1980-1998,” *Urban Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 7, 2002, pp. 674-694; Ying Xu, Bo-sin Tang, and Edwin H.W. Chan, “State-led Land Requisition and Transformation of Rural Villages in Transitional China,” *Habitat International*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2011, pp. 57-65.
2. You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 15.
3. Jean C. Oi, “Fiscal Reform and the Economic Foundations of Local State Corporatism in China,” *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 1992, pp. 99-126; Him Chung and Jonathan Unger, “The Guangdong Model of Urbanisation: Collective Village Land and the Making of a New Middle Class,” *China Perspectives*, No. 2013/3, pp. 33-41.
4. Minxin Pei and Xueliang Ding have long noticed that Chinese “gradualist” economic reform and localisation of economic power, without formal democracy and a system of checks-and-balances, often result in “decentralised predatory states” that engage in embezzlement of public properties and resources. Minxin Pei, *China’s Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006. Xueliang Ding, “The Illicit Asset Stripping of Chinese State Firms,” *The China Journal*, No. 43, 2000, pp. 1-28.
5. Manuel Castells, “Theory and Ideology in Urban Sociology,” in C. Pickvance (ed), *Urban Sociology: Critical Essays*, London, Methuen, 1976, pp. 60-84.
6. Neil Brenner, David J. Madden, and David Wachsmuth, “Assemblage Urbanism and the Challenges of Critical Urban Theory,” *City*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2011, pp. 225-240; Ananya Roy, “The 21st-Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory,” *Regional Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 6, 2009, pp. 819-830.

tively mobilising their resources to re-define, expand, and consolidate their urban territory and economic functions, other social actors also consciously engage in struggles over physical and imagined territories.<sup>(7)</sup> These state and non-state agents interact with one another in constituting the socio-spatial dynamic, i.e., the "over-determined geography." This not only results in capital accumulation in a new urban setting by dispossession of peasant's collective property, but also constitutes the new conditions for new communal imaginary and practice. In this study of the fringe of the metropolitan region of the PRD, I argue that the dynamic between class restructuring, communal imagination, and the cellular form of activism is an integral part of the state-led urban process in Guangdong. This process is not simply a conflict of interests between the predatory state and the populace. Indeed, both find their own agency, albeit in opposite directions, in the capitalist urban process. Village cadres, in collaboration with township and city governments, play the roles of landlord, broker, planner, and builder, alienating themselves from village life and exerting their power over the community from afar. Most villagers, with a heightened awareness that mastery of their individual as well as community lives is almost impossible, are besieged by state-sponsored urbanisation and capitalist development. Their resistance against proletarianisation runs parallel to reclaiming entitlement to their home territory.

The data presented here are drawn mainly from intensive fieldwork and ethnography conducted from 2005 to 2007 in Village Z of Dongguan, an industrial region of the PRD known as "the factory of the world," with some follow-up work continuing into 2013. Apart from in-depth interviews with 20 villagers, including ordinary villagers, entrepreneurs, and cadres, and countless casual chats, I participated in villagers' festive celebrations, wedding banquets, lion dance competitions, and an election day assembly.<sup>(8)</sup>

In this article, I firstly outline the urban context and path of Village Z. I then move on to analyse the restructuring process of class relations with a focus on proletarianisation and the rise of power elites over the past three decades. Against this background, communal imagination and practices have become prolific, especially in local resistance against state-led projects of urbanisation and in electoral struggles. The conclusion discusses its implications for understanding contested urban spaces in contemporary China.

## Urbanising the Pearl River Delta

Dongguan, the southern tip of Guangdong Province and the south-eastern portion of the PRD, was known as the home town of emigrants to Hong Kong as early as the Mao era. Its rapid industrialisation since the early 1980s was first perpetuated by the return of overseas Chinese running factories for contract manufacturing in Hong Kong as well as Taiwan. In the late 1990s, the export volume of its joint ventures and foreign companies was already the second largest in the PRD, and it was called one of the "Four Tigers of Guangdong" (Dongguan, Nanhai, Shunde, and Panyu).<sup>(9)</sup>

Over the past three decades, despite a huge influx of capital and labour, population growth in Dongguan has been so moderate that the local community has been shrinking in the demographic sense. According to official statistics, the number of migrant labourers in Dongguan has outnumbered the local population since the late 1990s, reaching 3.95 million in 2011 compared with 1.85 million local residents.<sup>(10)</sup> Another dramatic change occurring in local society is the rapid reduction of arable land, from 1.18 million acres in 1978 to 0.58 million acres in 2010.<sup>(11)</sup> Collective ownership and agricultural use of land has quickly given way to urban and industrial land use under state ownership over the past three decades.

Yet, the schematic model of modernisation fails to capture the social complexity of this rapid process. While I agree with some scholars on the relative popularity of the corporatist model of Guangdong's urbanisation, in which rural collectivities have a significant stake in urban and economic development,<sup>(12)</sup> I doubt that it is the general rule even within the PRD region. My case study offers a different story, featuring class polarisation, social conflict, and moral tension, and reveals dimensions of the urban process neglected by previous research. While some villagers had accumulated wealth and were happy with their new urban way of life, most shared an ambiguous feeling of loss as well as a strong sense of deprivation in the process of proletarianisation. This is also the first impression I gained from my fieldwork in 2005, when the land dispute was still going on in Village Z, an administrative village community with an area of 3.2 square kilometres in Township S, on the northern fringe of Dongguan City.<sup>(13)</sup> Although the administration categorises the village as "rural," its urban nature dates back to the late 1980s, when industrialisation, land expropriation, and proletarianisation were firstly triggered. Its path of socio-spatial development has long been a part as well as an example of the great urban transformation of the PRD region.

## Village Z: New industrial society

Village Z was an administrative village (*xingzhengcun*), equivalent to a production brigade in the Mao era, comprising 11 village groups (*cunmin xiaozu*) or production teams (*shengchandu*). Its population composition remained simple until export-led manufacturing brought in a large number of rural migrant workers from other provinces in the late 1980s. From 1999 to 2011, the local population of Village Z grew by only 13% to 2,308, while the temporary migrant population reached 3,585 at a growth rate of 74%. According to local villagers and cadres, official censuses seriously underestimated the number of migrant workers. On the one hand, the demographic change eventually resulted in a growing sense of threat and loss among villagers. On the other hand, locals maintained a strong status distinction from migrant workers in terms of household registration, occupation, customs, and way of life, as demonstrated by patterns of land use and neighbourhood segregation. After economic reform, villagers gradually moved out of their old villages to build new homes in a new residential area on either side of a highway. The old pre-Deng era buildings were largely rented out to migrant workers. To the northeast and the southwest of the local neighbourhood, i.e., the old village and new residential area, was the massive construction of factories and worker dormitories, along with large pieces of empty land expropriated by local cadres for future development. Local people retreated from most of their former territories to their turf located right at the centre of the village (see Map 1).

7. You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation*, op. cit., pp. 7-15.

8. I have to admit that gender bias is the major weakness of my fieldwork. The stories are told largely from the viewpoints of male informants because most women felt too shy to chat with me in private or remained mostly silent in the presence of husbands and fathers.

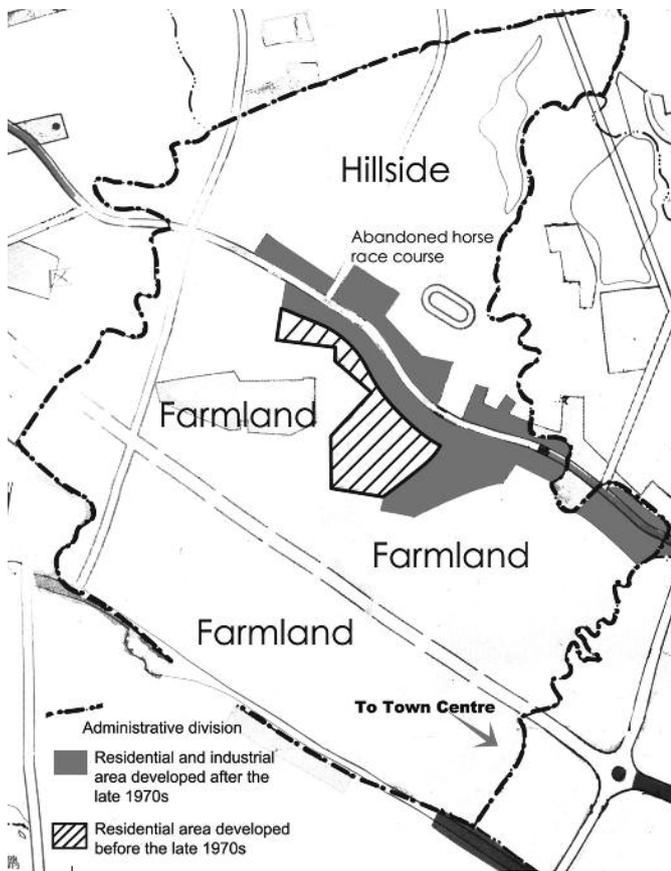
9. Dongguan Bureau of Statistics, *Dongguan Statistical Yearbook 2000*, Beijing, China Statistics Press, 2000, pp. 454-455.

10. Dongguan Bureau of Statistics, *Dongguan Statistical Yearbook 2012*, Beijing, China Statistics Press, 2012, p. 58, p. 96.

11. Dongguan Bureau of Statistics, *Dongguan Statistical Yearbook 2012*, p. 58. No statistics available after 2010.

12. Him Chung and Jonathan Unger, "The Guangdong Model of Urbanisation," *art. cit.*, No. 2013/3, pp. 33-41.

13. To ensure anonymity, all names of places and persons have been changed.



**Map 1 – Map of Village Z.**  
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In recent years, very few residents have been proud of their village's economic development. At first sight, this is a grievance over economic well-being. It is true that compared to the highly industrialised districts of Dongguan, such as the villages of Changan Town and Humen Town, Township S and Village Z failed to build up a solid economic base. Yet villagers' inferiority complex was not the major source of their frustration. As some residents observed, only factory owners, developers, and local cadres were able to take advantage of economic opportunities and their land to accumulate wealth. Villagers gradually realised that what market reform gave ordinary residents was a false hope or an impossible dream of achieving individual success in a money economy. Instead of jumping on the bandwagon of state-sponsored capitalism, they had the fate of proletarianisation thrust upon them, losing the land that was their means of subsistence and production. This is also the politico-economic background against which villagers looked for and revisited their collective identities.

### **The village as a class society**

The socio-economic effects of China's market reforms in the 1980s have been a hot topic among researchers of socialist countries. Victor Nee's argument that direct producers rather than cadres benefited from market transition was challenged by those who emphasised the factors of lingering institutional mediation and paths of market penetration.<sup>(14)</sup> These factors, as Ivan Szelenyi and Eric Kostello pointed out in their scrutiny of various socialist and post-socialist countries,<sup>(15)</sup> have become more crucial in determining the allocation of resources in the latter phase of economic reform

and in particular economic sectors such as land transactions and the privatisation of state-owned property. In the case of China's economic reform, the wealth-equalising effect caused by the rise of local markets for agricultural products in the late 1970s and early 1980s has been gradually neutralised by industrialisation and urbanisation since the 1990s. There followed a thriving literature that specified the sectoral mechanisms of market creation out of state and collective property rights, and their implications for social stratification.<sup>(16)</sup> In this light, this paper focuses on the impact of this dramatic shift in market reform on the class experience, social relations, and communal politics of Village Z.

### **Lost in market transition**

Some villagers aged over 50 still vividly remembered the golden years of agricultural reform when they firstly enjoyed good harvests and freedom in production and market exchange. Huang Xiong, aged 60, felt very proud of the economic achievements of the early 80s:

The early 1980s was the first time for me to have so much grain at home. Villagers' homes were not big enough to store it all. Everyone worked very hard. We harvested 600-800 catties per *mu* while the average in the past was merely 500 catties. The system of work points and restrictions on grain distribution were cancelled. We ate as much as we wanted. Indeed, the harvest was much more than our subsistence needs. The market price for grain was good, too. Our cash revenue increased a lot. The land of our village was almost the best in Dongguan. That was another reason for our good harvests.

His memory of the early phase of economic reform contrasts with his experience as a peasant in the Mao era of collectivisation. His personal story is a small part of the whole picture of China's rural economy featuring decollectivisation and price reform from 1979 to 1984. The annual growth rate of agricultural product value reached 7.7%.<sup>(17)</sup>

Yet after the mid-1980s, the dramatic growth of the rural economy gave way to sluggish development with the shrinking effect of decollectivisation and price reform. The village committee and Party branch secretary of Village Z began taking over management of the land and encouraged villagers to quit agricultural production, intending to develop the land for industrial and commercial purposes in the future. In return, each villager was entitled to an annual payment of 500-1,000 *yuan*. Most villagers admitted that they did not have much objection to it at that time because they had placed high expectations in other businesses. Huang Qiang is an example. In 1990, Qiang, a young man of 27, was happy to lay down the burden of

14. Victor Nee, "A Theory of Market Transition: From Redistribution to Markets in State Socialism," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 54, No. 5, 1989, pp. 663-681; Andrew Walder, "Property Rights and Stratification in Socialist Redistributive Economies," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 1992, pp. 524-539; Jean Oi, "Fiscal Reform and the Economic Foundations of Local State Corporatism in China," *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 1992, pp. 99-126.
15. Ivan Szelenyi and Eric Kostello, "The Market Transition Debate: Toward a Synthesis?," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 101, No. 4, 1996, pp. 1082-1096.
16. Yanjie Bian and Zhanxin Zhang, "Marketisation and Income Distribution in Urban China, 1988-1995," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, No. 19, 2002, pp. 377-415; Andrew G. Walder, "Political Office and Household Wealth: Rural China in the Deng Era," *The China Quarterly*, No. 186, 2006, pp. 357-376; Andrew G. Walder, Tianjue Luo, and Dan Wang, "Social Stratification in Transitional Economies: Property Rights and the Structure of Markets," *Theory & Society*, Vol. 42, No. 6, 2013, pp. 561-588.
17. Yifu Justin Lin, "Rural Reforms and Agricultural Growth in China," *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 82, No. 1, 1992, pp. 34-51.

agriculture and joined the rising industry of sand mining triggered by massive construction projects in the PRD. However, his business could not survive cut-throat competition from many other villagers like him. A few years later he returned to the village to work as a security guard and tractor driver.

In the 1990s, we could drive a tractor to deliver goods to customers. At that time, many people were building houses, and demand for transportation of construction materials such as brick, rock, and sand was huge. I earned 10,000-30,000 *yuan* per year. During 1994-1995, the township government suddenly revoked our licenses. Two years later, tractors were banned from the main roads. Violations were subject to heavy fines. We could only drive within the village, and deliveries were almost impossible.

Since then, Qiang has made a living from fishery and pig farming. Yet, in 2005, when I paid a visit to his home, he looked rather grim and nervous. He was worried about his livelihood again because the township government was launching a "Four Clean-ups" campaign (*siqingli*) to end all kinds of farming. At the age of 42, Huang Qiang had no option other than to look for a job as a security guard for a factory or on the security team of the village committee.

Instead of generating income from their land, some villagers were lucky enough to make a living, rather than gain much wealth, from renting out their surplus apartments to migrant workers. But the property market of Village Z was not as strong as that of the more prosperous regions of the PRD. Since the mid-1990s, some villagers have worked as self-employed cargo drivers who provide services for small factories and workshops. Huang Zhi, aged 36, was better-off than Qiang, earning a monthly income of 2,000-3,000 *yuan* with his cargo van. To sustain a successful business and cover the rising cost of gasoline, license fees, and tolls, especially during the years when Dongguan's manufacturing sector was shrinking, Zhi worked very hard and barely had time for his family.

The shift of market penetration has had an enormous impact on villagers' livelihood. Although the local market of crops and other sideline products in the early 1980s enabled most peasants to enjoy economic well-being, it failed to continue providing sufficient incentives for the growth of the rural economy after the mid-1980s. The capitalist path of development since the early 1990s, characteristic of industrialisation and urbanisation, deprived villagers of land use and gradually eliminated space for husbandry, fisheries, and informal economy. This process resulted in higher economic inequality, to the detriment of most ordinary villagers, particularly small traders and self-employed workers who had no strong ties with local cadres.

### **The rise of local power elites**

The dramatic shift of market penetration from local and agricultural market to industrial capital and land development since the 1990s has meant something radically different to a handful of village elites. Since the early 1980s, a large number of foreign capitalists, usually overseas Chinese, began to make use of cheap village land to establish and expand their production sites. And until the late 1990s, the village committee and Party secretary held enormous power to dispose of collective land without accountability to those below or much restriction from above. It is an open secret that vil-

lage cadres pocketed compensation for land transactions and development.

Huang Xingfeng, born in Village Z, emigrated to Hong Kong in the 1950s and then opened a small rattan manufacturing plant in the 1970s. In 1984, he moved its production to his home village and was granted a large piece of land in the north by the village secretary, but without signing any written contract. This was probably the beginning of the collusion of local power elites with foreign capital in developing the village's collective land for industrial and commercial use. Transactions and even speculation in land in the PRD were spurred by Deng Xiaoping's southern tour and his strong endorsement of economic reform in 1992. In the case of Village Z, the whole area in the north was eventually taken over by enterprise owners, real-estate developers, and speculators without any substantial compensation to the village committee. Since then, intense concern over land revenue, development, and use and misuse of government power has been endemic among villagers.

A ring of local state-party elites, including village Party secretary Huang Ganzhi and his associates, held positions in the village committee since the early 1970s under the patronage of township Party secretary Tang Binghua, thereby gaining wealth out of various under-the-table dealings. During the influx of overseas capital, land development, and speculation, they accumulated initial capital so quickly that they have been expanding their business networks in other parts of Dongguan since the mid-1990s. They not only built rows of luxury villas in a corner of the village, but eventually moved out of the village, and some even emigrated abroad, although they exercised power to their own absolute discretion in land-related affairs for more than 20 years. Despite patron-client relationships in the village and wealth trickling down to some villagers, these power elites have gradually lost their mass support since the late 1990s.

Huang Yingbang was somewhat exceptional among the local elites. In 1979, he built up his small workshop with remittances from his brother-in-law in the United States. However, rather than from industrial production, his wealth came largely from smuggling raw materials restricted by the harsh import quota system in the 1980s. According to a local official in the township government, this was very common during the early years of economic reform, especially in Town S, located near the Dong River, the eastern tributary of the Pearl River. Despite Yingbang's involvement in illegal activities, he was very proud of not profiting from the seizure of collective land in his home village. And unlike Ganzhi and others, Yingbang lived in the village and was deeply concerned about its development.

Huang Guilin, aged 28, was the manager of Village Z's electricity station, a government position passed on to him by his father, who worked there for 40 years. Guilin, a young man born in the Deng era and growing up amidst collusion between government and business, never stopped taking advantage of his privileged position despite villagers' complaints and gossip. As soon as he took office, he opened a small shop monopolising the installation of electrical meters. He often bragged about his friendship with enterprise owners and their respect for him. For instance, Guilin enjoyed talking about his privilege of parking his vehicle in the lot of Xingfeng's plant. Enterprise owners and managers entertained him largely because of his control over power supply, which was indispensable to their business. While he tried hard to emulate the village's nouveaux riches, he despised ordinary villagers for their parochialism and poverty. As he told me bluntly, he preferred driving around Dongguan in his Honda Prelude to socialise with entrepreneurs and officials rather than hanging out with his fellow villagers.

## Resistance to proletarianisation and localisation

The stories above confirm the findings of the Chinese local state's predatory nature.<sup>(18)</sup> Indeed, the process of class restructuring and differentiation is the background against which we understand territorial politics at Village Z. In contrast to the stories of class formation of power elites, the class experience of ordinary villagers could be termed as proletarianisation, i.e., landless people being forced to join the army of wage labour. Yet, most tried hard to avoid ending up as low-end factory wage-earners, which is why there were only three factory workers among the 50 villagers I met.

Proletarianisation is never a process without active or passive resistance. During the industrial revolution of Europe, small peasants did not join the ranks of labour unless they were left with no land or other means of subsistence. Farmers and artisans fought against the factory system in the nineteenth century.<sup>(19)</sup> The peasants and indigenous people of colonies refused to join industrial work because they preferred more leisure to engage in cash income until subsistence farming was destroyed by colonisation and heavy taxes levied by colonial authorities.<sup>(20)</sup> Most local people of Village Z refused to join the migrant workers for cultural rather than economic reasons. They differentiated themselves from migrant "peasant workers" (*mingong*) to affirm their status, cultural identity, and way of life as "local people" (*bendiren*). Generally speaking, they preferred to enjoy more individual autonomy and freedom in work. Wage work, subject to high labour intensity and discipline in factories, was never regarded by locals as a promising career. And most local people, not highly educated and speaking Cantonese as well as their more localised dialect, were not accustomed to speaking the Putonghua that was the *lingua franca* among factory workers of different origins. In sum, their resistance to proletarianisation took the shape of localisation in one way or another.

When I first met Huang Xingxing, aged 25, in 2004, he had just quit his job in a tyre factory. As a key member of the village's lion dance team, he participated in training with other local young people in their new ancestral hall. He enjoyed talking about lion dancing and hanging out with his friends rather than his regular job. He showed his frustration whenever he mentioned it:

I graduated from high school in 1995. The village committee introduced me to a rattan factory. Then I moved to a tyre factory in Town F. The work was really tough and 12 hours per shift. I moved and packaged those heavy and dirty tyres every day. Then I moved to another factory to work as a driver after I got my driver's license... The boss's wife was in charge of everything. She was mean and harsh. The salary was only 800 *yuan* per month. I couldn't take a break at all. Apart from driving, I had to take care of the machines. The shop floor was really hot. I was fed up with it and finally quit. It just so happens that our lion dance team is about to go to Vietnam for a competition. So I will look for another job after that.

Instead of seeing any prospects in his work, he dreamed of working as a professional lion dance artist. However, he told me that the birth of his son called an end to his dream. He understood that he could not rely solely on his wife, a factory worker, to support family. But he admitted that he always wanted to take a temporary break from work. In the summer of 2006, the township government subsidised members of the lion dance team to par-

ticipate in a citywide competition. He immediately quit his job again for training and preparation.

While Xingxing's aversion to factory work was widely shared, his occupation is not typical among local young men. Most I met worked as security team members hired by the village committee or police officers for the local public security bureau branch. In 2006, the staff size of security and police officer reached around 100, an average of one law-enforcement officer per five households. These officers came from similar backgrounds. They were not highly educated and some had enlisted in the People's Liberation Army when they were around 20. Most veterans were recruited by the village committee as security officers. Yet the physical strength and combat skills of these young military veterans might not have been the major consideration. As Huang Bingyan, team leader of the security officers, explained, this recruitment policy was primarily intended to provide job opportunities for local people. In fact, although he always complained about the slackness of local people and preferred to hire non-locals, he was under constant pressure from local families to recruit their sons.

The expansion of the security ranks occurred alongside local people's feeling of being threatened by migrant workers from outside. The fact that "temporary residents" outnumbered the local population created a persistent demand for more security forces for the local community. It also reinforced a local sense of belonging and a defence mechanism against outsiders, especially migrant workers. The economic contribution to the village economy by workers from inland provinces was never recognised by locals. Instead, local residents positioned themselves in the role of maintaining local order and security while migrant workers were always portrayed as troublemakers bringing chaos to their home territory.

## Communal imagination and practices in conflict

In sum, ordinary villagers developed a new sense of place in the midst of the breakdown of the rural economy, the rise of industrial capitalism, proletarianisation, and desperate attempts to escape from labour discipline. In other words, the collectivity and locality of this small village should be taken as a formation as well as a process in which multiple forces of territorialisation and de-territorialisation interact with one another.

In 2005, I was introduced to Village Z by a Township government cadre in charge of cultural affairs. Huang Jun, Guilin's father and the vice-director of the Zhixing Lion Dance Team, was my first local informant. He began his volunteer work there after his retirement. We met in a big three-storey building called the "Zhixing Cultural Centre" (see Photo 1), the office and training site of the team. This was the newest and largest public building in the village, occupying a piece of land with an area of 6,000 metres in the north-eastern part of the village, facing southwest. It ran parallel to the village's ancestral hall, a 300-year-old historical building. Jun explained to me that it functioned as an ancestral hall for the Huang lineage in the past, especially for the villagers of the East Wing. The name of "Zhixing" also came

18. Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy*, op. cit.; Alvin Y. So, "Peasant conflict and the local predatory state in the Chinese countryside," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3-4, 2007, pp. 560-581.

19. Stephen Marglin, "What do Bosses do?," *The Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1974, pp. 60-112; Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000.

20. Giovanni Arrighi, "Labor Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianisation of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia," *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1970, pp. 197-234.



**Photo 1** – Zhixing Cultural Centre.

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**Photo 2** – The festive parade of Jiangwang.

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from the original name of their old ancestral hall, Zhixing Hall. When I wondered why the cultural centre was even larger than the office building of the village committee, Jun smiled without explanation.

Huang Yingbang, a successful local entrepreneur, was the founder and director of the lion dance team. In the early 1990s, adult villagers were very irritated by problems of youth delinquency and school dropouts. Yingbang and some senior villagers came up with the idea of a lion dance team to recruit and organise the boys. To their surprise, the team made a success

and even won grand prize in a national competition in 1996. The villagers and even the cadres of the township government were very proud of it. In 1998, they raised some money from a rich fellow villager in Hong Kong for the construction of the cultural centre.

This project was a further development for channelling local or overseas villagers' newfound wealth from the market economy into building or restoring sites for community rituals. For Yingbang, despite his involvement in smuggling in the 1980s, the lion dance team earned him a good reputation and moral authority that eventually posed a challenge to the crumbling authority of village cadres. In fact, Yingbang had been in a feud with Ganzhi, the village Party secretary, since being kicked out of the village leadership in the late 1970s. It was clear that Yingbang's cultural centre project was an attempt to establish a domain and claim a new lineage territory parallel to the local party-state authority. The centre provided not only a training ground for the lion dance team, but also office space for village groups in the East Wing of Village Z.

In order to contain Yingbang's endeavour, Ganzhi rejected his request for a piece of land for the cultural centre. But Ganzhi finally backed down under pressure from the township government and the donor. Ganzhi responded by attempting to initiate an even larger project to construct a new village government building right in front of the cultural centre, perhaps as a physical demonstration of his power. However, due to the government's long-standing financial difficulties, he failed to raise sufficient funding for it. For various reasons, he left office in 2004 and the construction project was abandoned. This story sheds light on the process of making a locality. On the one hand, local elites can manage a new territorial space by revitalising lineage traditions, solidarity, and networks and getting around the patron-client relationship dominated by village cadres. On the other, collaboration with the upper levels of government and the overseas network of fellow villagers proves a successful strategy for maintaining their autonomy.

Many teenagers recruited by Yingbang to join the lion dance team in the late 1990s ended up working as security and police officers. In spite of his moral power and personal networks, Yingbang did not explicitly present himself as a competitor for political power in the village. Instead, socio-cultural purposes and religious functions still prevailed over politics in his circle. For example, the lion dance team represented the East Wing in the festive parade of Jiangwang, a patron god of the Huang's lineage who settled in Village Z and Village Q.

I attended the festive parade and celebration in 2006 (see Photo 2). On the second day of the tenth month of the lunar calendar, the male villagers of East Wing, West Wing, and Village Q took turns carrying the statue of Jiangwang around the region they called "Jinshan," an historic name for a territory that encompasses several of the present administrative districts. The rally not only visited sacred landmarks such as the Temple of Jiangwang, ancestral halls, and the Zhixing Cultural Centre, but also the homes and enterprises of some "big shots" who were typically donors to the celebration and to the office of the village committee. Along with spirits, deities, and ancestors, influential businessmen as well as local cadres were anchored to local places as guardians of the local ritual-political jurisdiction.

The process of ritual re-territorialisation was organised with and perpetuated by male social bonding and a communal sense of belonging rather than superstitious belief. After the rally, a big evening feast with singing and dancing performances, free to all villagers, was held in the cultural centre. The activities were shot through with communal solidarity, historical memory, and moral authority, constituting a space of *minjian* opposed to the ex-

ertion of state power.<sup>(21)</sup> By the end of the feast, Yingbang, satisfied with all the arrangements, remarked, "The show tonight is great and lively. This is what we mean by having fun with the people. What is taken from the people is used in the interests of the people. Forget about those official formalities. I don't want leaders' [*lingdao*] boring speeches at all. Having a good time with the people is the most important."

### Lineage solidarity and electoral struggles

There has been a proliferation of scholarship on the revival of lineage organisations and traditions vis-à-vis the higher orders of state power, especially in South China.<sup>(22)</sup> Sharing this observation, this study argues that the resurgence of ritual space and communal organisations can be seen as a popular movement for villagers to re-embodiment rural space and revolt against proletarianisation. It is a retrieval of social space from the drives of the modernising state back to the bodily practices of place-making. These practices re-activate the cyclical temporality of festival as well as the imagined spatiality of lineage, local, and spiritual place, rather than an unchecked linear progression featuring capitalist imperative, homogenisation of space, and physical discipline.

Lineage solidarity is not only staged and performed in rituals but also embedded deeply in social organisations, including descent groups characteristic of their place-bounded identities. Before the Chinese Communist Party came to power, these were small kinship or descent groups, sharing the family name "Huang" and claiming common respective descent. Villagers of the same kinship groups, renamed "production teams" in the Mao era, lived in the same neighbourhood and worshipped in their own ancestral hall symbolically affiliated with the Zhixing Hall for generations. Mao's collectivisation further strengthened their social relationships despite the name of "production team." Villagers of the same descent group worked together as a production and labouring unit for almost 30 years. Since the 1980s, after villagers quit farming, they were renamed "village groups," primarily functioning as residential clusters and basic interest groups as well. Heads of village groups, elected by villagers, were in charge of collecting rent for their agricultural land, although management was in the hands of the village committee. Collective ownership was perceived by villagers as an entitlement of not only the individual but also the descent group. Hence, the heads of village groups played an important role in local disputes.

After township Party secretary Tang Binghua stepped down in 2003, Huang Zhanji, one of Ganzhi's associates, succeeded Ganzhi in the post of village Party secretary. However Zhanji resigned very soon, and the party organisation nominated Huang Zhenhe as village Party secretary in 2004. Zhenhe, a villager as well as a descent group member born in the 1970s, left the village for education in the 1980s, joined the Party while at university in the 1990s, and worked as a factory manager for more than ten years before he took office. He was regarded by villagers as an outsider and a "puppet" controlled by Ganzhi's associates. Villagers led by most descent groups took this chance to challenge party-state authority. Instead of posing physical challenges to the Party leadership, they decided to play it safe by staging a protest outside an electronics factory and accusing its owner of occupying their village land without compensation. Some even used a tractor to push down the wall, and the township government sent a team of riot police to disperse the crowd. They made their voices loud enough to be heard by upper-level cadres, but without being confrontational toward the government.

In 2005, protest leaders Yuezhen and Zhikun were supported by villagers, especially village heads, to run for election. Despite protests from villagers, the Party secretary and township government refused to put their names on the ballot in the first round. However more than 400 villagers used the space provided on the ballots for "write-ins" (*lingxuan taren*) to support them. As a result, Huang Zhiyuan and Huang Zhigang, Party members and candidates selected by the Party, failed to gain more than half of the votes, and another round of voting had to be held. In the second round, probably in fear of protests and even riots, the township government agreed to put Yuezhen and Zhikun's names on the ballot. They finally won the election with more than 700 votes and became chairperson and member of the village committee, respectively. It was believed that the extra votes they gained came from Yingbang, who encouraged villagers, especially members and supporters of his lion dance team, to write in the name of Guilin, the electricity station manager, in the first round. But Guilin announced his withdrawal from the election in the second round and his votes went to Yuezhen and Zhikun.

After the election, the land dispute continued with the conflict between the Party secretary and village descent groups. Zhenhe proposed to sell most of the remaining land to developers and to construct factory buildings for rental on the rest. However, many villagers preferred to divide the land among the village committee and village groups first and then develop the plots of land. Huang Qiu, one of village group heads, used the logic of lineage division to justify their proposal.

It doesn't make sense to put all the land together. Division is normal. It is just like a father with his grown-up sons. Division of land and property is the rule. How could they live and work together?

The village committee was portrayed as the father by villagers, who saw themselves as his offspring, obedient yet entitled to a share of the family property. The moral economy,<sup>(23)</sup> inspired by the metaphors of lineage, branch (*fenfang*), and family, prevailed over any concept of socio-economic justice and civil rights. Villagers succeeded in demanding distribution of the annual revenue derived from agricultural land according to village groups and temporarily halted the Party secretary's project. Local solidary groups, such as temple and lineage groups, provide informal institutions that hold local authorities accountable for the public good.<sup>(24)</sup> But their power, confined to the distribution of interests, proves to be a cellular form of resist-

21. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 317; Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "Spatial Struggles: Postcolonial Complex, State Disenchantment, and Popular Reappropriation of Space in Rural Southeast China," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2004, pp. 719-755.

22. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, "Spatial Struggles: Postcolonial Complex, State Disenchantment, and Popular Reappropriation of Space in Rural Southeast China," *art. cit.*; Tangbiao Xiao, "Analysis of the Impact of Lineage on the Power Distribution and Operation in Village Governance," *Journal of Beijing Administrative College*, No. 3, 2002, pp. 1-6; Tangbiao Xiao, "Clan and Village Government in Today's China," *Journal of Literature, History & Philosophy*, No. 4, 2006, pp. 156-163; Chee-Beng Tan (ed), *Southern Fujian: Reproduction of Traditions in Post-Mao China*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2006.

23. This concept, firstly developed by Edward P. Thompson and James C. Scott, refers to the moral perception and reasoning of peasants and artisans in pre-capitalist societies. According to their historical studies, communal consensus and the norm of reciprocity, rather than market-driven calculative rationality, matter in people's social action. Please see T. C. Arnold, "Rethinking Moral Economy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 1, 2001, pp. 85-95; James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, New Haven and London, Yale University; Edward P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of The English Crowd in the Eighteen Century," *Customs in Commons*, New York, The New Press, 1971, pp. 185-258.

24. Lilly L. Tsai, "Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 2, 2007, pp. 355-372.

ance, not powerful enough to challenge the developmental state and its economic project in the long run.

Without much capital and experience in any business other than farming, the village heads failed to attract capital outside the village and launch alternative development projects, especially at a time when the investment fever had passed in Dongguan. In 2006, the city and township governments collaborated in offering a deal worth 90 million *yuan* to acquire all land located in the south, the largest plot in the village. With reluctance, all village groups agreed to this offer. As Huang Qiu, a village group head, explained, while all villagers looked for economic development, the government's proposal was almost the only option. They were also afraid that if they rejected this offer, the city government would expropriate their land with meagre compensation in the name of public interest. Villagers were also happy to receive 10,000 *yuan* per household as soon as the deal was done.

The electoral struggle and land dispute came at a moment when communal control over land was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. As the procedures for land use changed and expropriation became more formalised and elaborate, and as the scale of development increased, it became less and less feasible for villagers to reclaim the right to their land. The devolution of communal control over land put the regulation of land into the hands of state cadres, who managed it in a legal yet more capitalist manner. Village elections, as scholars of Chinese grassroots democracy argue, (25) not only function as a zone in which local people seek political participation, but also as the means by which one-party rule regains its legitimacy. The case of Village Z confirms the finding that elections mitigate challenges to Party rule and demonstrates that they also help restore the legitimacy of state-led developmentalism and the urban process at the expense of strong motivation to participate in village affairs.

The collective action of villagers lacked sustaining power largely due to the lack of an adaptive leadership, a factor identified by recent research. (26) As the village dispute eventually calmed down, township cadres attempted to pacify the dissidents by absorption and buyoff. Yuezhen's chairpersonship could not bring much change to the power structure of the village presided over by the Party. When the next election came, Yuezhen decided not to run for office, probably because he was offered a position in township government. After the right to develop village land was largely handed over to the city and township governments, the controversy over several small plots of land to be developed by the village government did not cause serious conflicts anymore. Villagers lost all leverage for action, even though they were disappointed with Yuezhen's performance and the small dividend derived from ground-rental income from factories. Without much challenge, Zhiyuan, selected by the new township Party leadership again, won the seat of village committee chairperson during the elections in 2008 and 2011 respectively. Then Zhiyuan eventually replaced Zhenhe as Party branch secretary.

### Conclusion: Territorial struggle

Recent grassroots resistance in China, launched through litigation, the civic action repertoire such as rallies and protests, and grassroots elections, has drawn attention from the media and academics. (27) However, this portrayal, informed by liberalist notions, does not pay sufficient attention to the post-socialist context. The Mao era of collectivisation not only built up a Leninist state-bureaucracy penetrating into the villages, but also consolidated a network of nucleated villages with organised fields. The Cultural Revolution by

no means completely eliminated villagers' folk religion or their territorial imagination. Lineage ties in Guangdong, especially after decollectivisation, reinforce their corporate character as the basic framework of resistance in cellular form. (28) The "cellularisation of society" by state penetration, as Vivienne Shue noted in the 1980s, continues to contain the growing number and intensity of villagers' struggles. (29) The sprouting of local sites of insurgency is so fragmented that it hardly constitutes a civic domain at the local level, not to mention the national level.

The post-Mao states, central and local, harnessing the principles of capitalist development, seek to corrode these place-based identities as obstacles to capital accumulation and state-sponsored urbanisation. (30) The states divest villagers of direct power and duties immediately concerned with the production and appropriation of land, leaving them to cultural and ritual attachments to their imagined territories. This study contributes to the discussion on China's state-led urbanisation and the rise of localities by highlighting the conflictual politico-economic process, experience of class polarity, and proletarianisation. These have implications for cultural politics in the sense that communal-territorial imagination and contestation soar in the midst of proletarianisation and people's struggles against it. It is a socio-spatial struggle over "the collective" rather than a smooth market transition. In sum, the contestation over urban spaces involves the re-enchantment of communal territories and the emergence of the local state at the village, township, and city levels, with the public character of an urban growth machine.

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26. Lianjiang Li and Kevin O'Brien, "Protest Leadership in Rural China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 193, 2008, pp. 1-23; Xianwen, Kuang and Christian Göbel, "Sustaining Collective Action in Urbanising China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 216, pp. 850-871.
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29. Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politics*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988.
30. Arif Dirlik, "Place-based imagination and the politics of place," *Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1999, pp. 151-87. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, "Spatial Struggles: Postcolonial Complex, State Disenchantment, and Popular Reappropriation of Space in Rural Southeast China," *art. cit.*