



Villages at the urban fringe—the social dynamics of Xiaozhou



John Zacharias*, Yanna Lei

College of Architecture and Landscape, Peking University, Beijing, PR China

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ABSTRACT

Peri-urban villages in south China are regenerating by developing their own productive economy, in some cases with art as the driving focus. Is a new community emerging from the co-habitation of artists and villagers? This study examines community relations among villagers, artists and students in Xiaozhou, Guangzhou in the context of threats to the village's long-term survival. Structured and semi-structured questionnaires with all three groups, in-depth interviews with artists and a field survey were employed. Artists and villagers have gradually increased their interactions, with villagers participating in the artistic life of the community and artists establishing longer-term relations with their hosts. The arrival of art students has altered the economic foundation of these relationships, threatening the survival of the art community as well as much of the historic building fabric.

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1. Introduction

At the urban fringes, villages (*chengzhongcun*) are undergoing social and economic transformation in different ways than occurs in villages located within the built-up city. For example, art (Ren and Sun, 2012), ecotourism and homestay are frequent themes for local development, as well as large-scale industrial uses where they are permitted. In contrast with some centrally located villages, peri-urban villages tend to retain more of their original populations. Also unlike centrally located villages in Guangzhou that have become rented housing enclaves for a migrant population, peri-urban villages in that city are often obliged to develop a productive economy following the loss of agriculture. The new non-migrant residents of such communities may have an economic stake in the local area and remain for years in contrast to the shorter-term stay of migrants. Are we seeing the emergence of a hybridized community in this peri-urban regeneration or are immigrants simply co-habiting the original village space with villagers? The question is important as cities grapple with the development patterns of regions at the urban fringe where hundreds of former agricultural villages are repositioning themselves or staving off acquisition by authorities.

Firstly we aim to understand how the larger urban context may impact sense of community and community formation. Xiaozhou, one of hundreds of ancient villages facing serious challenges at the

leading edge of municipal expansion across China, responded in part through its own development initiatives. In this case, art and craft, art training and student housing introduced new residents and new relations with the city. Secondly, we try to understand the extent to which the emergent population composed of multiple groups constitutes community. The literature on measures of community focuses on social relations, shared values, co-habitation, and tenure. This investigation of the Xiaozhou case is divided accordingly into four sections on the social, economic, cultural and spatial relations among the three demographic groups now investing village space.

While all urban villages experience policy pressure from municipal level authorities, the villages have quite different responses depending on geographical location within the urban region. In Guangzhou, all 138 urban villages, housing more than one-third of the population (Hao et al., 2011) should be redeveloped by 2020, according to a recent planning document (*Overall Plan of Guangzhou City, 2010–2020*; Quanlin, 2010). Such a demolition and reconstruction plan has had success in Tianhe district and in Zhujiang New Town in particular, the designated Central Business District of Guangzhou, although not without controversy and violence (Sargeson, 2013). Some villages such as Shipai have successfully resisted planned demolition and reconstruction, largely through the deployment of economic levers (Zacharias et al., 2013).

The flourishing art market in China has supported the growth of artist colonies in villages (*yishu cun*). Local hosts sponsor art communities in villages near Beijing, but such communities also experience structural changes or displacement because of economic and political pressure (Liu et al., 2013). Although the art

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: zachariasjohn478@gmail.com (J. Zacharias).

colonies are the results of indigenous efforts, when their activities become established and publicized, they must interact with official agencies. Xiaozhou appears to have escaped much official oversight while attracting a wide variety of artists working mostly in visual media. They are distinct in product as well as in organization from the villages devoted to reproduction and more stylistic production, like Dafen in Shenzhen (Li et al., 2014). Although art schools are new forms of local economic organization, art colonies as a whole are distinguished by individualism and lack of formal organization. They also represent a social innovation in introducing an urban population, with urban tastes and employment, to a rural enclave at the urban periphery.

The approach to village redevelopment so far has involved extinguishing villager rights to the land in replacement for cash or property in the form of limited lease apartments. Replacement schemes have invariably resulted in a massive increase in fixed capital accompanied by a decline in economic productivity. As a result, redevelopment rarely happens without a massive transfer of public goods—for example, exceptionally high building density in Liede village in Guangzhou. A concentration of transport infrastructure and proximity to central city economic functions have delivered multiple opportunities for both internal and external investment in centrally located villages. At the urban fringe, the opportunities and constraints for development are fewer, leading to different approaches by the village.

The literature has revealed the transformative and destabilizing effects of rapid urbanization in urban villages (Qian et al., 2013). Whether these transformations lead loss of community or whether new forms of community emerge from a more diverse population co-habiting traditional village space is of central interest. Work on sense of community proposes local inhabitant conceptions as a guide to forming a larger portrait of community as social space. The measures proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) were followed by standardized and numerical methods, including the Sense of Community Index (SCI) (Perkins et al., 1990). Refinements in subsequent years enlarged the range of elements considered in measures of community, offering instruments such as the Multidimensional Sense of Community scale (Prezza et al., 2009). Following this literature, contemporary community may be expressed in social, economic, cultural and spatial terms. So it is important to be sensitive to manifestations of cohesion at various scales and across life domains.

Now we turn to Xiaozhou to see how these issues have played out in this case. The village lies in the midst of a designated green zone, a watery landscape of former orchards and villages, but not entirely protected from development (Fig. 1). The edge of University Town, combining the undergraduate programmes of several Guangzhou universities, begins just 1.4 km away on former agricultural lands. Access to Xiaozhou is along old roads that followed the possibilities in the local geography. Although just 6.5 km from the edge of Zhujiang New Town, the new planned central area of Guangzhou, Xiaozhou remains difficult to access by bus or private vehicle. As a result, the neighbouring land uses offer fewer opportunities for economic linkage than do centrally located villages.

A series of economic development initiatives, starting in 1999, had little real impact. The first was the South Lung Protection Plan (part of the Master Plan of Guangzhou, 2001–2010), including the Yingzhou Ecological Preservation Park (2000). Guangzhou government improved the road infrastructure and dredged waterways but failed to launch the ecological park itself on the orchard lands. The Historical Protection Plan was initiated in 2004 with a study by the Guangzhou Institute of Planning, and enacted in 2008. The Xiaozhou village committee objected to this plan, complaining that the façade decoration destroyed authentic Ming architecture and did little to support economic development. They also complained

that the sewage diversion project worsened the quality of the village waterways. Xiaozhou village initiated its own Tourism Development Plan in 2005, with the help of Beijing Union University. The plan was completed in 2008 but, much like the initiatives of the government, had little impact on livelihoods and wellbeing of villagers, according to village committee members. This background of failed plans helps explain the current self-building activity.

Xiaozhou's artistic roots extend back to the 1960s when Lingnan artists established there. Guan Shanyue (关山月—1912–2000) and Li Xiongcai (黎雄才—1913–2001) were two of the best-known artists. Their naturalistic landscapes follow a long Chinese tradition of artists seeking inspiration in natural and rural settings. The more recent migration of artists to peri-urban locations can be associated with China's urbanization and modernization. Artists sought out peri-urban locations to take advantage of low rents, spacious work environments and relative freedom from interference from authorities (Liu et al., 2013). Xiaozhou also attracted urban artists, largely because the village remained a close-by rural backwater. The introduction of art schools, capitalizing on the reputation of Xiaozhou as an art village, altered the economic outlook for villagers, who benefited individually from renting to students (Qian et al., 2013).

The art community was substantially renewed by 1995 and had as many as 250 self-declared full-time artists at the peak in 2010. The village supported the artist colony by building standard village blocks in a new development area on the west side of the village. A major exhibition centre opened under the Nansha expressway, a gift from an anonymous businessman. Several art schools opened in the village, along with galleries, cafés and craft enterprises. In spite of all these homegrown initiatives, many villagers felt disadvantaged, particularly when compared with villages closer to the centre of Guangzhou. For example, Shipai had collective income in 2004 of 140 m RMB (Lan, 2005), compared with 8 m RMB for Xiaozhou in 2008, for comparable villager populations.

Rebuilding began in earnest after the opening of the nearby university campus, to house students and increase individual family income. Many Ming dynasty buildings were lost as individual villagers rebuilt their family plots (*zhaijidi*) to several floors of rental accommodation. Students looking for cheap accommodation near the university joined the villagers and artists.

Is a new, mixed community emerging and how does ongoing urbanisation impact on community? The following sections on social, economic, cultural and spatial relations explore these questions while presenting the results of the field investigations.

2. Methods

The first field investigation was in 2010, with questionnaire instruments and observation studies in 2013 and an additional questionnaire survey in 2014. The first investigation was part of a best practices study supported by the Institute of Transport and Development Policy (ITDP). That year may have been a high point in the cultural evolution of the village, with redevelopment activity hardly begun and with many art-related activities on a regular basis. The second study was conducted by the co-author while preparing a Master thesis on the topic. The third study was intended to go deeper with the art community and included in-depth interviews with artists, held usually in their studios.

The first study consisted of a mapping of the village with its temples, administrative buildings, open spaces, art schools, artist lofts and artist accommodation. At the same time, the building fabric in its state of preservation, transformation, abandonment or reconstruction was recorded in the core, historical village. We hoped to capture the spatial dimensions of an economic

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