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The Influence of Moral Knowledge on Urban Villages in Shenzhen, China

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THE INFLUENCE OF MORAL KNOWLEDGE ON URBAN VILLAGES IN SHENZHEN, CHINA

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1. Introduction

Chinese moral knowledge, immensely informed by the primitive cosmology and the ethical philosophy of Confucianism, had deeply affected people's attitudes and way of life. It had been practiced throughout history by framing and ordering social practice on the land, becoming a part of the path of Chinese beauty (Li 1988). However, when China has gone into its fast urban development that is much influenced by the global economy and political movements, these traditional practices face extensive challenges from the dominant western paradigms. The understanding of the traditional knowledge as cultural forces shaping the distinct characteristics of Chinese spaces and urban life (Li 2004) is urgently needed.

Chinese urban village is one of the areas where the local traditions confront modernisation. It is a particular phenomenon where the traditional rural villages are gradually surrounded by built-up urban areas in the process of rapid urbanisation (Wang et al., 2009; Pan and Du, 2021). Shenzhen, a metropolitan city in southern China, has more than 1000 urban villages (Du, 2020). The urban village has its essential roles in cities: it offers social opportunities to migrants, including the facilitation of temporary practices that meet their aspirations and needs; it fits into the landscape and generates inclusive social interactions beyond the lineage origins; it also embraces the notion of urban heritage that recognises its existing cultures and accumulated experiences as related to diversity and identity (UNESCO 2019). As the city's land resources are quickly consumed driven by the market benefits, urban villages as such have become the main target for urban redevelopment. Huaide Village is no exception, and the process is demolished-oriented. Existing studies started to acknowledge the importance of urban villages, but they mainly focused on affordable housing, typologies, and other physical elements. What are the core values of urban villages that make the distinct characteristics of Chinese spaces? How should the values of urban villages be recognised in the transitional time towards sustainable development? This paper explores the concept of moral knowledge and analyses how it influenced the spatial configuration that bears the socio-ecological values in Huaide Village in Shenzhen. The lessons and insights from the tradition provide alternative ways for future urban renewal strategies that engender better citizen engagement.

2. Methods

2.1. The study site

Huaide Village is a 700 years old village in Bao'an district of Shenzhen, China (Figure 1). Located on the eastern bank of the Pearl River Estuary, the village has a hilly landscape which used to be characterised by crisscrossed rivers and streams. With the southern subtropical monsoon climate, Shenzhen has long summers with a seasonal average temperature of 32°C and frequent heavy rains (Shenzhen Meteorological Bureau, 2022). The city is among the most vulnerable cities to tropical

cyclones on the Guangdong coast, with an average of 3 to 5 events each year (Chen et al., 2018; Shenzhen Meteorological Bureau, 2021). And the threats from rainstorms and floods were predicted to increase from 2020 to 2100 (Shao et al., 2021).

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The study applied a mixed-method approach to unravel the social-ecological qualities of the space. Interpretive mapping was used in analysing the layered spatial patterns in the past and today, focusing on the landscape structure, settlement pattern, topography, and, more importantly, the relationships among them. The mapping was supplemented by non-participant observations of study social actions in context and real-time activities and interactions. The observations were documented through fieldwork photographs, qualitative descriptions and architectural ethnographic drawings, to present the social and ecological qualities of space.



Figure 1. Huaide Village in Fuyong Subdistrict, Shenzhen. Source: D.Tan based on google earth, November 2021.

3. Moral knowledge and relational space

The social-cultural forces are considered primary in shaping houses and settlements, and others like climate, materials and technology, and economics are secondary or modifying (Rapoport, 1969). In China, moral knowledge serves as the cultural forces; it is bound to the primitive cosmic view of the world and classic thoughts, especially Confucianism. The former gives a reference for the ideal city or village; the latter stresses the order of society. They together set up a general framework for the configuration of settlements (Wu, 2015; Zhang, 2015). Within this framework, *Fengshui* was used as a geomancy rule (taking into account the site context) to modify the final settlement pattern which embeds both social and ecological qualities.

Moral beliefs require a relational pattern of configuration (Zou, 2004) that can show the order of society. In primitive and ancient times, people took the celestial world as a model and tried to establish their own ideal city or village. The four cardinal directions that were taken from the circumpolar constellations - the first to the north of pole-start, the second to the south, and the other two east and west are where sun rises and sun sets - were considered the first and foremost to identify the center of the territory (Xu and Chang, 2014), as early recorded in the classic book *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli*, 周礼). The centre where the emperor dwelled symbolises the supreme power of governing the territory. Also, the parallel of left (east) and right (west) was widely used, not only to differentiate things but more importantly to construct the moral order (Peng, 1997). The practice of *Zuozuyoushe* (左祖右社), that is, placing an ancestral shrine which keeps the late king's or family leader's spirit tablet in the left (左) while the *Sheji* altar for the god of land and grains in the right (右), showed the order of yin-yang (Peng, 1997). The worship towards the heavenly world through communication with ancestors was privileged in the left (east) direction, representing yang.

These normative rules and patterns applied strictly to the founding of the state, and also to the villages on a small scale, especially after the Song dynasty (960–1279) in the prevalence of Confucianism. In Huaide Village, sacred places are placed in the morally important locations. The ancestral hall of Pan (or the clan house of Pan) with a front square - first built in Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) - is oriented north-south, facing south to the main gate of the village. With the subtle topography (that is higher in the north and lower in the south), the orientation facilitates the ritual actions of looking upon ancestors or sages. During the worship or festivals like weddings, the clan house becomes a stage for the performance of rites and music: the ritual ceremonies are organized in the main hall; music and dancing acts are at the front square. For worshipping, only limited senior people have the right to enter the main hall (Guangdong Cultural Centre, 2018). The construction of family houses also applies the time and direction reference from the celestial world. They are also in general north-south oriented, but there is a slight difference in the individual family house. The exact orientation is defined depending on the year of construction and date of birth of the owner, as related to five phases (*wuxing*, 五行) in Chinese cosmology (Lu, 2008). As a result, an aligned but heterogeneous pattern has formed.

Fengshui (literally wind-and-water) supports above moral aesthetics of relational pattern and at the same time function as a tool for the site and climate modification. Using geomancy rules, Fengshui works closely with the site (topography, ecological assets, etc.) to identify the 'right' orientation (Feng and Wang, 1992). While the rightness means the well placing of houses for the living and graves for the dead in a mystical environment, to gather the optimal 'qi' for the good fortune of the living descendants (Needham, 1956; Bruun, 1996), the living comfort (Rapoport, 1969) is also realised by favourable microclimate modified and accessible resources. Such a good place is evident from Huaide Village's relational position in the landscape (Figure 2). The houses were clustered and situated in a relatively higher place, at the foothills of *Wangniuting*, facing the south. This helped to prevent floods during the rainy season in this lowland area on the eastern bank of the Pearl River Delta. The main mountain in the north and small hills on the other sides embraced the village; water flowed from the hills and filled in the ponds constructed in the southwest. In this way, with the prevailing southerly wind in the summer, the 'qi' settled in the village. The wind flew through villages and north-south houses also contributes to a comfortable microclimate. Tree planting was compulsory along with the village, especially in the north and also next to the sacred places like ancestral hall was a way for defence and territory demarcation. This can help reduce erosion in heavy rains and cool down the temperature, which further provides an ambient environment for ritual activities and ordinary life.

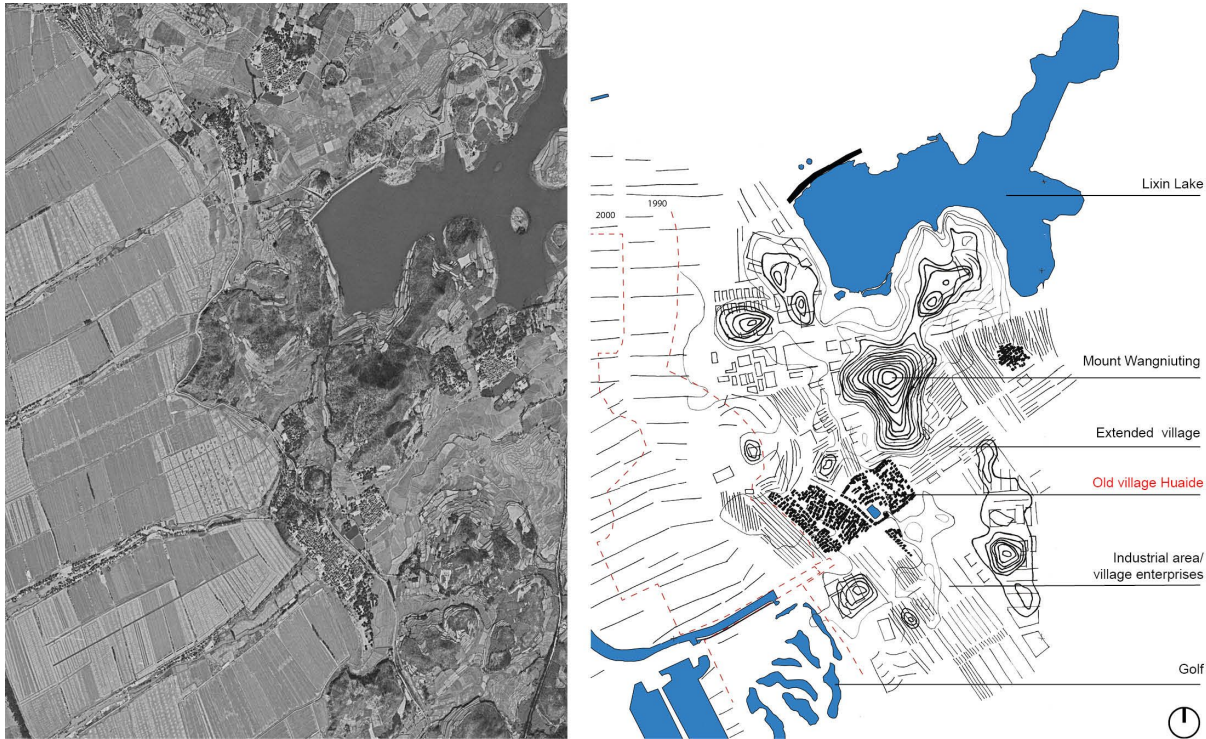


Figure 2. settlement patterns of Huaide village of 1975 (left) and 2021 (right) . Source: Earth Explorer (Left); D. Tan based on google earth 2021 (right).

In 700 years, the village and its surroundings have experienced dramatic changes. Nevertheless, it retains the traditional settlement pattern (Figures 2 and 3). While the farmlands, terraces, and even small hills around the village were reclaimed for extended communities and (collective owned) industries, the main mountain in the north is preserved to safeguard the village's territory. The layout of houses remains being aligned almost north-south, slightly towards the southeast. Though residents have replaced almost all traditional family houses with the modern dwelling of the early 20th century, they still carefully considered the orientation following the normative rules and *Fengshui* principle. In between houses lies three hierarchies of streets: 6-meter wide main streets stretching from the south gate and east gates, secondary 3-meter wide alleys, and thirdly 1.5-meter wide alleys. The first two dimensions allow for car access while maintaining a pedestrian or even socialising environment by being covered by trees or shaded by 2-4 floor buildings. The narrowest alleys are for pedestrian access. These alleys are mainly oriented north-south to receive natural daylight. Due to the compact layout between houses, most low-rise houses (2 floors) have a courtyard in the front and a balcony to obtain sufficient sunlight. This also promotes the connection with people outside of the wall. The previous natural defence wall of trees and water ponds are replaced by the mid-rise buildings (3-4 floors) with ground-floor shops opening along passageways. The sacred structures like the clan house of Pan were preserved, sitting in the privileged spaces, to maintain the prestige of value of locality. On the right side of the clan house of Pan, with a distance, now lies the Huaide property management company, which oversees the maintenance of the constructions, with an implication to claim the villager's right on the communal land of their lineage.



Figure 3. Existing spatial pattern of Huaide Village. Source: D. Tan based on Google Earth 2021

Moral knowledge in ancient times showed a far-reaching effect on the spatial pattern that goes hand in hand with the order of society. It offers an abstract and relational structure that frames the village or city through orderly arranging of essential nodes like the central space and scared figures. In other words, spaces have their social meaning and are *relational constituted* (Fuller and low, 2017). At the same time, the site context modifies such structure with the given climate, topography, wind, rainfall, and other natural conditions. In the end, with the conjunction of moral rules and geomancy, the village itself bares a glue of social and ecological values evident from reading the morphology and the moral practices.

4. Urban redevelopment and socio-ecological values

Early in 2004, the local government of Bao'an District launched the old village redevelopment programme in Huaide Village; later on, in 2010, it became part of the Shenzhen urban renewal programme (Urban Renewal and Land Preparation Bureau of Bao'an District of Shenzhen, 2020). A completely new 'urban look' was proposed (Figure 4) on top of the traditional settlement pattern to modernise the entire old village. Spatial control and regularisation - among the popular ways of resolutions to modernisation (Pan and Du, 2021) - were used. In this control plan, the entire old village is boldly divided into blocks: a public green park in the middle as an axis, large residential blocks on two sides, and one commercial block on the east-south corner. The important scared figures are to be isolated and framed into the park axis. In residential blocks, about more than half of the land is reserved for green spaces; a high floor area ratio (of 6.6) is required. The average footprint of a high-rise building is about 6 times of a current house. Moral rules seem to be constrained in the few heritage architectures decorated by the green parks, between the divided blocks. The renewal plan creates rather an illusion for

the valuable land property which can draw great attention from the developers and future investors. The demolishing process of the Huaide Village goes relatively slow, compared to the industrial area in its south which was cleared to give away for the new subway station. Houses are being torn down one by one depending on the individual negotiation, and then the areas were temporarily marked as parking plots, to demarcate the land as the domain of the state.

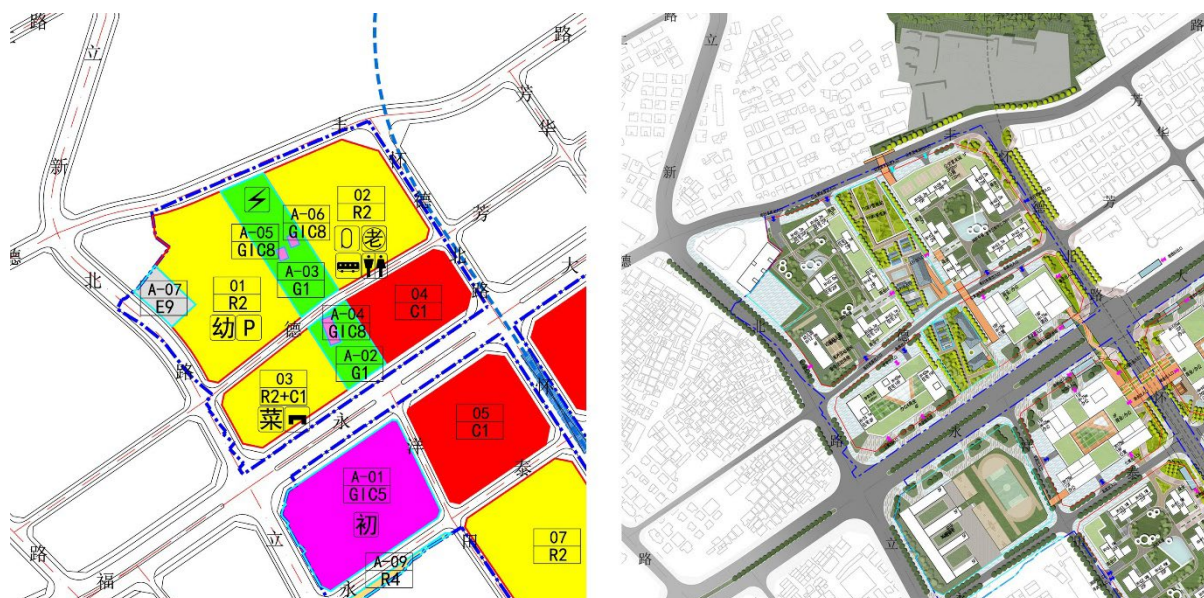


Figure 4. Block division and index control map (left) and schematic diagram (right). Source: Urban Renewal and Land Preparation Bureau of Bao'an District of Shenzhen, 2020

In the demolishing process, however, the village shows resistance to the claiming of the land and homogenised urban spaces (Herrmann-Pillath, 2018), through the persistence of its relational pattern and naturally developed social life. The streets, sacred or public structures, collective parks (preserved from patches of trees), shop fronts, and the newly demolished squares constitute a network (Figures 5 and 6); the field of the network is essentially a space of society (Figures 6 and 7). This field accommodates all forms of social-cultural life: it welcomes not only local residents but also newcomers, including migrants. First, streets are among the most prevalent form of social space linking the different destinations. The pedestrian environment with trees and plants promotes communication. Second, the sacred or public structures are unique and form the urban spectacle. Sacred places like clan houses and old trees all become a public domain. Formal and informal activities transact around these places depending on the circumstances. They could be worshipping saints and heroes at the temple, worshipping ancestors of all households at the ancestor hall, or spontaneous and self-organised ordinary life such as playing Mahjong in the hall or dancing in the front square (Figure 7). On the one hand, such a sacred landscape maintains and strengthens the expanding kinship by reaffirming the social hierarchy; on the other hand, it is a space of society that invite social connections beyond the lineage. Third, collective parks centred on old trees (i.e. *Ficus Concinna* and *Dimocarpus Longan*) provide an ambience that gathers residents to relax in the cool, chat with friends, etc. The *Ficus* tree, usually next to the temples, bears a symbolic cultural meaning, while the *Longan* tree is a popular local species for fruits. Last, the continuity and openness of shop fronts encourage both information and financial exchanges. The paved way in front of the shop entrance is used as the extension of a privately owned shop for displaying goods or mobile stalls.



Figure 5. Spatial network that accommodate urban social life in urban village Huaide. Source: by D.Tan based on google earth map 2021

Inheriting old traditions and integrating new social interests, the village itself is a space for urban daily life that facilitates people to encounter and interact with each other. This spatial structure is ambiguous without clear division and set a framework for the social-cultural life of the population. In contrast to the oversized 'new look' under the urban redevelopment programme, the network links the essential spatial fragments from sacred trees to shop fronts and retains the social and ecological values.



a) East-west alley



b) North-south alley



c) North-south alley



d) North-south road



e) Shops along the street outside village



f) Park, sacred tree (*Ficus concinna*), and open square



g) Open front yard

Figure 6. Various spaces that host social and ecological qualities. Source: photos by D.Tan, July 2021

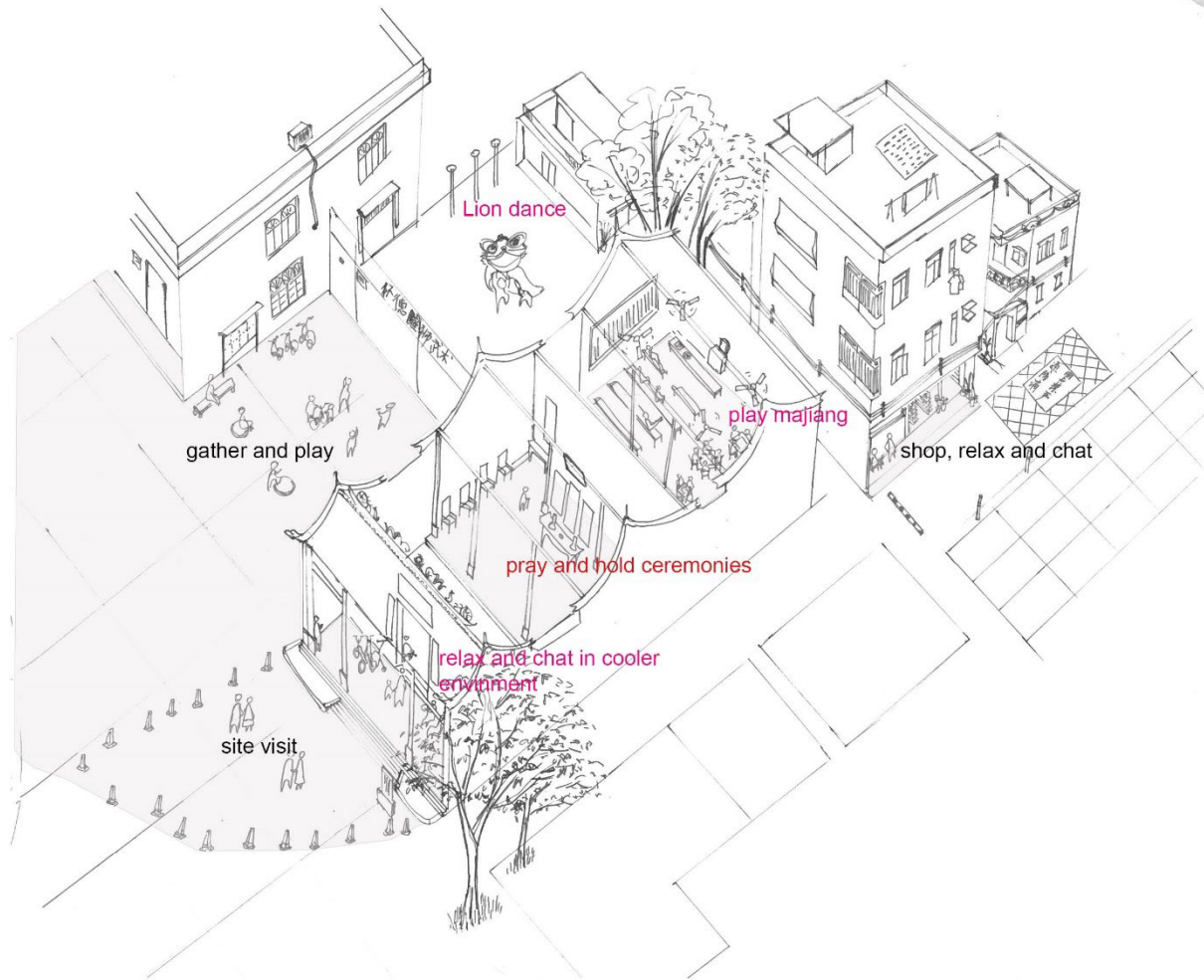


Figure 7. Diverse civic life at sacred site clan house and its surroundings. Source: by D.Tan based on fieldwork held in July 2021.

5. Conclusion

The study departs from the prevailing perspective on Chinese urban villages and instead provides an alternative way to unravel their space qualities from a cultural and ecological perspective. In Huaide Village in Shenzhen, the moral beliefs as social-cultural forces, working with the site context, have profoundly guided the way of life and settling. As a whole, the urban village landscape constitutes a relational pattern functioning as a space of society. However, the current transitional path to modernised urban life dismissed this learning.

This study highlights the need to recognise the values of urban villages themselves, to trigger a new approach to urban design and strategic planning to sustain life qualities, rather than seeing it alone as a reserved land budget. The current interests of governments and developers accrue from the rationality for renovation and profit maximisation for the planning, design and management of urban villages. When applied to all urban villages, such a way can lead to a homogenised urban environment. Indeed, the ancient wisdom shown through urban villages may provide many advantages for constituting a social-ecological balance that fits the cultural requirements and landscape. Such values are implicit, but further discourse on them can help understand the diversity of urban spaces in the Chinese context. Studying diverse social life within the urban village can also inform a better citizen engagement in future urban spatial strategies.

This study also raised questions regarding our attitude toward urban heritage. The historic urban landscape is the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values, as affirmed by UNESCO (2019). Urban renewal concerning the urban village should not be limited to conserving those individual historic buildings and certain forms. Instead, it should consider the area an urban landscape (in a broader context) that bears the local culture and daily social life. Protection of natural and cultural heritage is urgently needed.

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