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Forms of Hybridity

Tradition and Modernity in Shenzhen's Urban Fringe

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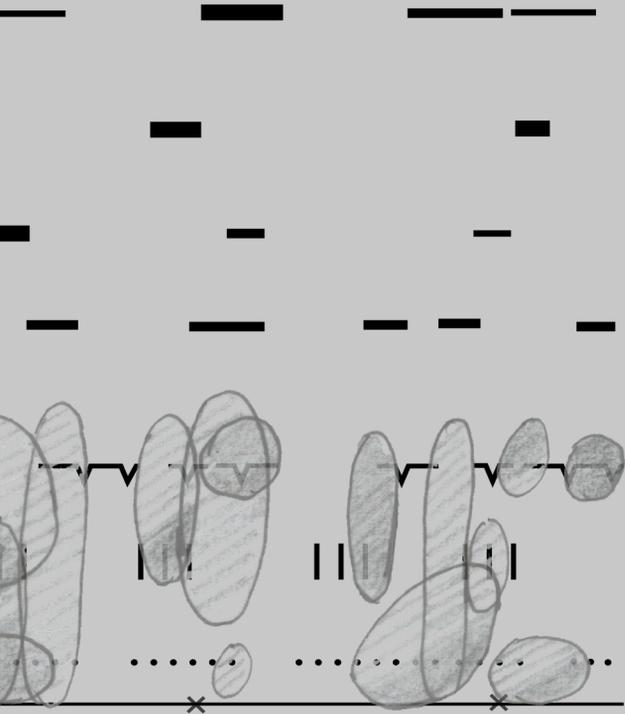
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Shenzhen's Urban Fringe

Diwen Tan



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Forms of Hybridity

Tradition and Modernity in Shenzhen's Urban Fringe

Dissertation

for the purpose of obtaining the degree of doctor
at Delft University of Technology
by the authority of the Rector Magnificus, prof.dr.ir. T.H.J.J. van der Hagen
chair of the Board for Doctorates
to be defended publicly on
Monday, 8 December 2025 at 12:30 o'clock

by

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SUMMARY

This research explores the possibilities of future inclusive urbanism by investigating how tradition and modernity—particularly in socio-spatial and ecological practices—interact in Chinese urban contexts and what implicit values they carry in post-growth cities. The Chinese territory has undergone radical and dramatic transformations under the state ideology of accelerated modernisation, accompanied by a quantitative, rational urban planning system. The consequences include the creating of a spatially homogenised ‘generic city’, which often neglects its history and obscures issues of imbalanced regional development and social divisions. However, the persistence of thousands of centuries-old villages—and associated sacred and productive landscapes—in a city like Shenzhen reveals a more layered urban reality: the city remains haunted by its deep-rooted rural past and lingering historical traces. In other words, these places, now known as ‘urban villages,’ offer a glimpse of traditions amidst modernity and formal urban planning. As China enters an economic and demographic slowdown phase in the 2020s after four decades of rapid growth and development, redevelopment policies and strategies are shifting from a brutal, one-size-fits-all approach to an in situ and integrated approach, highlighting heritage values and promoting ecological civilisation. This has led to an increasing demand for an inclusive approach to urban planning and design, making it necessary to document both the traditions and modernities, as well as the values of the past and present, for the future.

Expanding upon Corboz’s (1983) concept of ‘the land as palimpsest’, this research launches a nuanced and comprehensive reading and understanding of a place which is essential before acting on and planning. A city or a place can be conceptualised as a palimpsest: a layered, overwritten surface with traces of earlier content. Inscriptions of different actors collectively shape and modify the place, giving rise to its multiple, overlaid, and contested meanings. The palimpsest analogy—characterised by the simultaneous coexistence of all inscriptions and a nonlinear stratification process—enables us to methodologically unravel historical and cultural layers from the past in the present readings. The ‘everyday’ serves as a site for the present readings from which to enrich the understanding of traditions as being handed down within modernising practices.

Part II of this thesis rethinks modernity through Chinese interpretations as reflected in South China’s urban landscapes since the 1980s. Conceptualising the city as a palimpsest suggests that new layers may fully or partially replace the old ones or leave ‘holes’ as a result of brutal destruction. Thus, when new urban forms emerge, the old ones persist, collectively shaping and structuring landscapes. The review of 50 empirical studies on evolving urban form in South

China in the post-reform era reveals that Chinese urban modernity in planning and design is characterized by processes of disappearance and reappearance of water, production of multiple-scale functional zones, and sanitisation of nonplaces and sacred spaces. This gives a glimpse into the enduring traditions that coexist with modernity, whether through resistance, adaptation, or disguise.

Part III takes Pingshan village in Shenzhen as a case study for an in-depth empirical inquiry through architectural ethnographic mapping, illustrating the various interactions between traditions and modern influences that create hybrid spaces. Pingshan village, an ordinary 500-year-old, settlement situated on the urban fringe adjacent to mountains, contains deep descriptive layers, encompassing both traditional myths and modern ideas. Its urban complexity and multiple meanings are unfolded through narrative stories on 1) the lived urban spaces of the village and its transformed industrial park; 2) the surviving agricultural landscape with mountainside lychee orchards; and 3) the omnipresent sacred spaces. The first two focus on human interactions with the built and natural environment, while the latter extends to the more-than-human by exploring reciprocal interrelations between the body and the immaterial soul, and reimagining the relevant enchantment of the modern world.

Fieldwork is integral to the research, employing interdisciplinary methods that include observation, architectural ethnography, photography, and narrative interviews, along with repeated casual talks with residents. Architectural ethnographic drawings, combined with photography, facilitate the visual mapping of observed spatial characteristics and interactions among individuals and their surroundings, thereby aiding in the analysis of everyday practices. The act of drawing on-site requires the art of gazing in a slower mode and invites encounters naturally. Thus, architectural ethnography serves as a fundamental tool for translating abstract information into tangible visual forms, illuminating the underlying, implicit values of the site.

Reflecting on the empirical case of Pingshan as a disappearing village, the research concludes with possibilities of hybridisation in building future inclusiveness in architecture and urbanism in China. Chinese cities are entangled with future-oriented state ideologies and everyday practices of individuals and collectives who live in and carry memories and habits from the past. Hybrid spaces and forms are produced in the process of continuous interactions, negotiations, and mirroring among multiple forces. The research offers a new theoretical and methodological framework for mapping and interpreting cities and places, connecting the past to the present, and proposes guiding principles for urban planning and design that promote diversity and inclusiveness.

SAMENVATTING

Dit onderzoek verkent de mogelijkheden van toekomstgerichte inclusief urbanisme door te onderzoeken hoe traditie en moderniteit—met name in sociaal-ruimtelijke en ecologische praktijken—op elkaar inwerken in Chinese stedelijke contexten en welke impliciete waarden zij dragen in postgroeisteden. Het Chinese grondgebied heeft radicale en dramatische transformaties ondergaan onder de staatsideologie van versnelde modernisering, gepaard gaand met een kwantitatief, rationeel stedenbouwkundig systeem. De gevolgen hiervan zijn onder meer het ontstaan van een ruimtelijk gehomogeniseerde ‘generieke stad’, die vaak haar geschiedenis negeert en problemen van ongelijke regionale ontwikkeling en sociale ongelijkheid verhuult. De aanhoudende aanwezigheid van duizenden eeuwenoude dorpen—met hun heilige en productieve landschappen—in een stad als Shenzhen onthult echter een gelaagder stedelijke realiteit: de stad wordt nog steeds achtervolgd door haar diepgewortelde rurale verleden en blijvende historische sporen. Deze zogeheten ‘stedelijke dorpen’ bieden met andere woorden een glimp van tradities binnen de moderniteit en formele stedelijke planning. Nu China in de jaren 2020 een economische vertraging doormaakt na vier decennia van snelle groei, verschuiven herontwikkelingsstrategieën van een brute ‘one-size-fits-all’ aanpak naar een in situ en geïntegreerde benadering, waarin erfgoedwaarden en ecologische beschaving centraal staan. Dit leidt tot een groeiende vraag naar een inclusieve benadering van stedelijke planning en ontwerp, en maakt het noodzakelijk om zowel de tradities als de moderniteiten, en de waarden van verleden en heden voor de toekomst te documenteren.

Voortbouwend op Corboz’ (1983) concept van ‘het land als palimpsest’, presenteert dit onderzoek een genuanceerde en uitgebreide lezing van de plek—een essentiële stap voordat men handelt of plant. Een stad of plek kan worden opgevat als een palimpsest: een gelaagd, overschreven oppervlak met sporen van vroegere inhoud. Inscripties van verschillende actoren vormen en wijzigen gezamenlijk de plek, wat leidt tot meervoudige, overlappende en vaak betwiste betekenissen. De palimpsest-analogie—gekenmerkt door de gelijktijdige aanwezigheid van alle inscripties en een niet-lineair stratificatieproces—stelt ons methodologisch in staat om historische en culturele lagen uit het verleden te ontrafelen in hedendaagse waarnemingen. Het ‘allegaagse’ fungeert hierbij als uitgangspunt om deze waarnemingen te verrijken en om tradities te begrijpen als iets wat binnen praktijken van moderniteit wordt doorgegeven.

Deel II van dit proefschrift heroverweegt de moderniteit aan de hand van Chinese interpretaties, zoals weerspiegeld in de stedelijke landschappen van Zuid-China sinds de 1980s. Het conceptualiseren van een stad als palimpsest impliceert dat nieuwe lagen de oude volledig of gedeeltelijk kunnen vervangen, of ‘gaten’ kunnen achterlaten door brute vernietiging.

Wanneer nieuwe stedelijke vormen ontstaan, blijven oude bestaan en vormen gezamenlijk het landschap. Een analyse van 50 empirische studies over stedelijke vormen in Zuid-China in het posthervormingstijdperk laat zien dat Chinese stedelijke moderniteit in planning en ontwerp wordt gekenmerkt door het verdwijnen en terugkeren van water, het creëren van functionele zones op meerdere schalen, en het saneren van ‘non-places’ en heilige ruimten. Dit geeft een blik op de blijvende tradities die naast elkaar bestaan en verweven zijn met de moderniteit, hetzij door verzet, aanpassing of vermomming.

Deel III gebruikt het dorp Pingshan in Shenzhen als casestudy voor diepgaand empirisch onderzoek via architectonisch etnografische cartografie, en illustreert de verschillende interacties tussen tradities en moderne invloeden die hybride ruimten voortbrengen. Pingshan, een gewoon 500 jaar oud dorp aan de stedelijke rand en nabij bergen, bevat rijke beschrijvende lagen waarin zowel traditionele mythen als moderne ideeën verweven zijn. De stedelijke complexiteit en meervoudige betekenissen worden ontvouwd aan de hand van verhalen over: 1) de geleefde stedelijke ruimten van het dorp en zijn getransformeerde industriepark; 2) het overlevende agrarische landschap met lycheegaarden op de berghellingen; en 3) de alomtegenwoordige heilige ruimten. De eerste twee focussen op menselijke interacties met de gebouwde en natuurlijke omgeving, terwijl het derde zich uitbreidt naar het meer-dan-menselijke domein door wederkerige relaties tussen lichaam en immateriële ziel te verkennen, en zo een hernieuwde betovering van de moderne wereld te verbeelden.

Veldwerk vormt een integraal onderdeel van het onderzoek en combineert interdisciplinaire methoden zoals observatie, architectonische etnografie, fotografie en narratieve interviews met herhaalde informele gesprekken. Architectonisch etnografisch tekenen, in combinatie met fotografie, ondersteunt de visuele kaartvorming van waargenomen ruimtelijke kenmerken en interacties tussen individuen en hun omgeving, en draagt zo bij aan de analyse van alledaagse praktijken. Het tekenen op locatie vereist een langzamere blik en nodigt op natuurlijke wijze uit tot ontmoetingen. Architectonische etnografie fungeert daarom als een fundamenteel instrument voor het vertalen van abstracte informatie naar tastbare visuele vormen en het zichtbaar maken van impliciete, onderliggende waarden van de plek.

Reflecterend op de empirische studie van het verdwijnende dorp Pingshan concludeert het onderzoek met mogelijkheden voor hybridisatie als strategie voor toekomstige inclusiviteit in architectuur en stedenbouw. Chinese steden zijn verstrengeld met toekomstgerichte staatsideologieën en alledaagse praktijken van individuen en collectieven die herinneringen en gewoonten uit het verleden meedragen. Hybride ruimten en vormen ontstaan uit voortdurende interacties, onderhandelingen en wederzijdse beïnvloeding tussen diverse krachten. Dit onderzoek biedt een nieuw theoretisch en methodologisch kader voor het in kaart brengen en interpreteren van steden en plekken, verbindt het verleden met het heden, en stelt leidende principes voor die diversiteit en inclusiviteit bevorderen in stedelijke planning en ontwerp.



View from Shenzhen Bay. Photo by Diwen Tan, 2023

1 Introduction

魂兮归来！去君之恒干，何为四方些？舍君之乐处，而离彼不祥些！

屈原《楚辞招魂》

O soul, come back! Why have you left your old abode and sped to the earth's far corners,
Deserting the place of your delight to meet all those things of evil omen?

Qu Yuan (c. 340 BC – 278 BC), *Summoning of the Soul*. In *Songs of the South*, translated by David Hawkes, 1959

1.1. Motivation: city without history?

When a body runs so fast, its associated souls might struggle to catch up with the pace. Similarly, while undergoing rapid growth and urbanising living spaces, a Chinese city as a body appears to have lost its soul. Then what kinds of souls have we lost? And how to call those souls back? This loss can be understood as a result of creating a spatially homogenised ‘generic city’—a city without history, as described by Koolhaas (1995). Through this doctoral research, I try to search for souls of the city as things embedded in (latent) traditions. This research investigates the persistence of tradition and its relationship with modernity in Chinese urban contexts and their implicit values to promote future inclusive urbanism. The non-linear conception of history that connects past, present, and future is brought into focus to aid a more comprehensive reading and understanding of a place, space, or landscape.

China's urbanisation since the economic reforms of the 1980s has been unprecedentedly rapid. This process, however, is not exceptional to China, but rather a generic process that unfolded at a considerably faster pace in that country. It reveals a ‘time-space compression’: what took place in Western countries for one hundred years has taken place in Chinese spaces for one or a few decades (He, 2024). Shenzhen, a model city for testing Deng Xiaoping's market socialism, is the most representative of this process.

This rapid development and urbanisation are closely linked to the state's ideology of accelerated modernisation and a quantitative urban planning system. As an integral part of global modernity, Chinese urban society showcases its own trajectories, discourses, social institutions, and references (Lu, 2012). This modernity encompasses revolutionary changes and reforms in technology, knowledge, economics, and society within a socialist context (Buzan & Lawson, 2020), driven by a vision of creating a new world (Lu, 2006). These changes include a reform of the old urban planning system in the 1990s (inherited from the former Soviet Union in 1949) with an expansion to include regional planning (Hu, 2016; Wu, 2015). The vision of creating a new world promoted by the planning reforms enacted by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin also means building a city on a *tabula rasa*, replacing the old urban forms with new ones. The new urban planning system has been used as an efficient tool for growth, applying the quantitative land-use or hyper-functional approach. Different government departments delineated and managed different functional zones (e.g., ecological, residential, and industrial),

in their independent systems (Curien, 2014; Liu & Zhou, 2021). Such planning methods and system, however, have contributed to many problems, including excessive land development, imbalanced regional development, and social divisions with the emergence of new urban poverty (Liu & Zhou, 2021; Madrazo & van Kempen, 2012; Zhang, 2007; Zhang et al., 2023).

In the 2020s, China’s urban growth has entered a slowdown phase, both economically and demographically (Feingold, 2024). Many cities have been in transition from an economy focused on labour-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing to attracting high-tech manufacturing, information-intensive services, technological innovation, and design-oriented industries (Bontje, 2016). A growing proportion of graduates are becoming the new generation of migrants. Planning strategies and policies have been reoriented to attract and retain talent workers. Shenzhen, for example, has experienced a rapid growth in (registered) migrants¹ from the late 1980s, with the population peaking in 2020, followed by a sudden decrease in 2021 and a successive fall of 0.3% per year (Statistics Bureau of Shenzhen Municipality, 2025) (Figure 1.1). This trend, albeit affected by the COVID-19 crisis, corresponds to the national population’s downturn since 2022 and the rising aging population (Feingold, 2024; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023).

Consequently, brutal eradication and redevelopment policies targeting ‘non-places’² —spaces that have been left behind state-led modernisation and fallen outside the zoning regime, such as urban villages—are facing obstacles in such post-growth cities. Instead, there is a shift to in situ development and redevelopment, which directly or indirectly highlights the value of heritage and promotes the construction of ecological civilisation (Wu et al., 2021). This has led to an increasing demand for inclusive development, making it necessary to reread the land in a more comprehensive manner and thoroughly document both traditions and modernity, and values of past and present for the future.

In this context, the thesis is motivated to launch a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of a space, place, or landscape of the contemporary Chinese city, considering the depth of history. This reading sets an essential basis before acting and planning on the land. It builds upon Corboz’s (1983) concept of ‘land as palimpsest’. By reading a place as a layered, overwritten

¹Official data is only available for the registered migrants who stay for more than six months. Migrants are individuals whose hukou is registered in a location different from where they currently live and work. Hukou is a household registration system in which individuals register with local authorities to obtain residency; it is often inherited from one’s parents. The system was enforced in 1958 with the intention of limiting urban costs induced by rural-urban migration, but from the 1980s onwards, restrictions on rural-urban population movement were relaxed (Jin & Zhang, 2023).

²The term ‘non-places’ used in this research is derived from Kochan (2025) to reflect the prevalent perception of left-behind spaces as disconnected from the formation of official cultural identity, as well as their attributes as ‘somewhere else’ within the city where migrants have arrived and the urban poor have settled. It diverges from its original use by French anthropologist Marc Augé (1995), which refers to generic places such as bus depots, train stations, and airports.

earth surface, the palimpsest analogy emphasizes that the traces of earlier contexts remain visible in the present. In such a way, history is perceived as non-linear: the past resides in the present, together shaping the future. This approach entails recognising cities’ deep-rooted rural histories, analysing the interactions between tradition and modernity, and exploring the potential to fuse them (as hybridisation) to address various problems in urban planning and design.

Therefore, this research investigates how Chinese traditional socio-spatial and ecological practices can offer implicit values for inclusive urbanism in post-growth cities. Using the Shenzhen metropolitan area as a focus, the research adopts a palimpsestic reading of the urban landscape and conducts in-depth fieldwork in a village located at its urban fringe. Through conceptual analysis and empirical inquiry, the research reveals its layered histories that are being unevenly obscured and obliterated by the dominant narrative of the ‘generic city’.

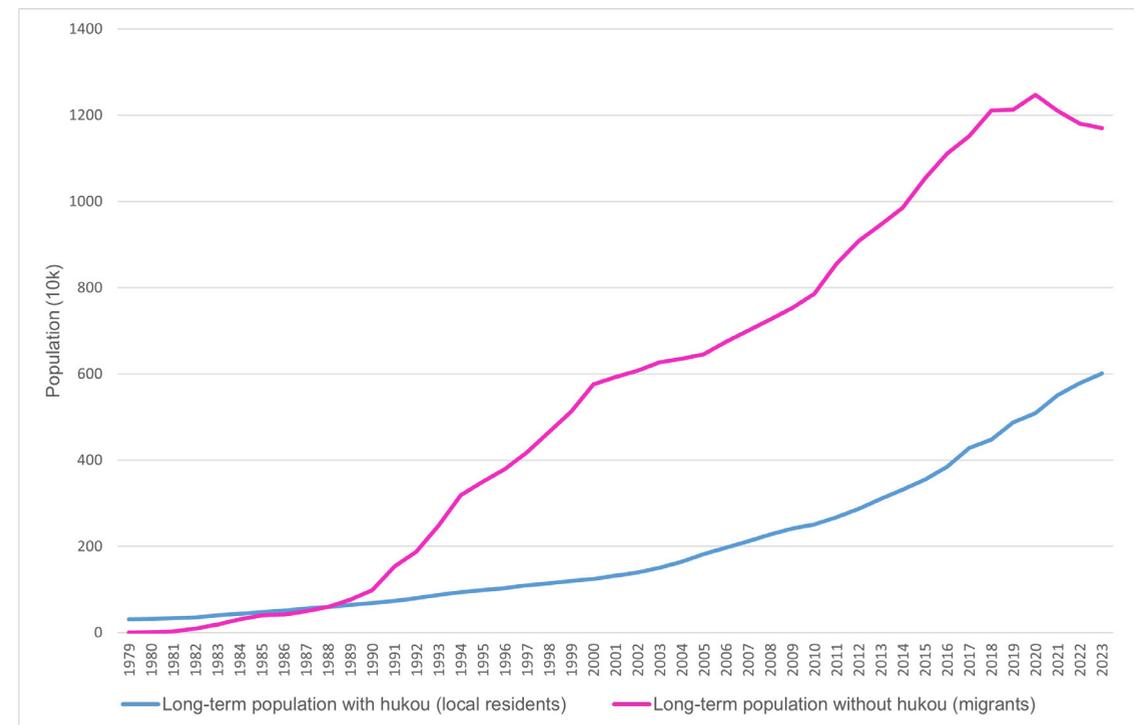


Figure 1.1. Population growth of Shenzhen. Long-term here refers to a duration exceeding six months, as defined by the National Bureau of Statistics. Source: drawn by Diwen Tan based on Shenzhen Statistics Yearbooks.

1.2. Concepts: tradition, modernity, and hybridity

Tradition (in general), in this research, stands as a conceptual term that permeates every aspect of contemporary life through its particular forms and spatial and cultural representations. Taking from Bourdier and AlSayyad's (1989) work, along with other contributors, a tradition (in particular) is a thing being handed down or the result of a process of transmission, and it has cultural origins involving common people. Such tradition could be culturally high or low, encompassing Chinese classic thoughts, popular beliefs, or practices such as *fengshui*. It goes beyond heritage classification and utilitarian logic. This research deals with tradition strongly related to place, including materiality, spatial configuration, spatial practices, and affect.

Modernity (in general), in this research, is a conceptual term that represents both an (unfinished) project and a transitory stage. The former derives from Habermas' connotations that emphasise progress and emancipation, whereas the latter, radically illustrated by Baudrillard, emphasises the autonomous mechanism of change (Baudrillard, 1987; Habermas, 1997; See also Heynen, 2000). Despite differing definitions, they collectively indicate the 'passage of time' as noted by Latour (1993), valuing the present (new) and viewing it as a rupture or break with the past (old). A binary thinking was imposed on the relationship between modernity and tradition; while modernity is dynamic and transitory, the tradition seems static and archaic.

This research focuses on the idea of multiplicity of modernity or the **pluralisation** of modernity. This does not deny the genealogy of modernity within the European-Christian civilisation, but rather challenges its dominant position in the world and brings in plural interpretations of modernity, incorporating those overlooked origins within the specific cultural and geopolitical context. In my case, that would be non-Western Chinese metropolitan contexts, where Chinese ancient civilisation, global influence, resistance to colonialism, and nationalism have been entangled in shaping modernity (Lu, 2012; Wang, 2011). Moreover, different plural modernities (in particular) are acknowledged within the same local areas or institutional framework (Delanty, 2004).

Drawing on Heynen's (2000) elucidation of modernity, I define modernity as encompassing both socio-economic transformations referred to as modernisation and the lived experience of everyday contemporary life. The latter is a 'mode of vital experience', as described by Berman (1988, p. 15), that is contextualised in space and time, within subjective relations, and being part of the world. Thus, the terms modernisation and modernity are sometimes used interchangeably in this thesis. Particularly, this research deals with modernity in relation to urban planning and design approaches.

It is worth noting that modernity is not equal to linear development. Modernity is paradox and characterised by contradictions (Beck et al., 1994). It takes into account tradition as a

substratum of modernity, while bearing temporal ruptures and spatial differentiations. In other words, reflexive modernity does not have a fixed stage, as modernity is continuously rethought or critiqued within specific contexts, through its interaction with tradition, especially the popular culture (Mitchell, 1997). In Chinese contexts, nationalism has played an important role since the Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1860) and traditional beliefs and practices continue to shape contemporary life (Goldstein, 2006). The pluralistic connotations such as 'entangled modernity', 'alternative modernity', or 'hybrid modernity' can be understood in this reflexive attitude.

Interactions between tradition and modernity give rise to **hybridity**, a process that generates creativity beyond established categories. In colonial and postcolonial studies, the term hybridity is often used to describe a mixture of social (e.g. ethnic) identity or culture. I use it for interpreting cities, particularly the spatial practices in specific geographic and historic contexts. As introduced by AlSayyad (2001) and numerous others in the field of urbanism, hybridity is a process that does not simply combine incompatible elements but instead insert a possibility connecting those elements. This possibility and the existence of hybrid forms then serve as resistance to the dominant majority or hegemonic narratives, such as land use classifications, thereby facilitating a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design.

Therefore, this research examines modernity reflexively as a distinctly local phenomenon in which tradition is transformed through its engagement with modernity, and modernity is indigenised through tradition within the Shenzhen metropolitan area. Hybridity is investigated as process of interaction through which traditions are transmitted while being modified or reshaped, resulting in new plural forms of modernities. Urban landscapes, everyday life, and popular culture serve as the site of hybridisation.

1.3. Shenzhen: a model city for modernisation or a palimpsest to move beyond

Shenzhen has always been a laboratory for piloting and testing modernisation strategies and interventions that were then applied to other cities across China. Constant destruction and construction, akin to erasure and new writing in the palimpsest analogy, led by the state as well as residents, transformed the territory, both physically and culturally. Despite its historical heritage, as evidenced by its changing names over time, Shenzhen is often perceived to be a new city or a city on a *tabula rasa* due to the well-known literature about its progressive development over the past decades (Lei et al., 2021; Sun & Xue, 2020; Wang & Liu, 2015).

Few studies have recognised Shenzhen's past and lingering historical traces (O'Donnell, 2017), nor investigated its traditions and how they coexist with Chinese modernity. Nevertheless, if we look at Shenzhen as a whole, its history is still evident via the persistence of its hundred-year-old villages – now called 'urban villages' – and their sacred and productive landscapes. These villages are bound by certain daily practices (e.g., agricultural cultivation, worship) that are closely tied to their geographical conditions (e.g., being close to mountains, springs, and ponds). Such places offer a glimpse of traditions and also reveal the resistance of traditions to the imposition of modernity, rural urbanisation, and formal urban planning. Additionally, these villages have developed their own paths in construction, produced informal economies, and formed 'flexible spaces that operate within existing urban regimes' (Kochan, 2015, p. 928), with the government's tolerance (Zhang, 2023). Rather than being seen as a model city for modernisation, Shenzhen should be interpreted as a palimpsest where tradition and modernity intersect. Urban planning practices must find a way to balance and fuse them before these villages and their remaining traditions vanish.

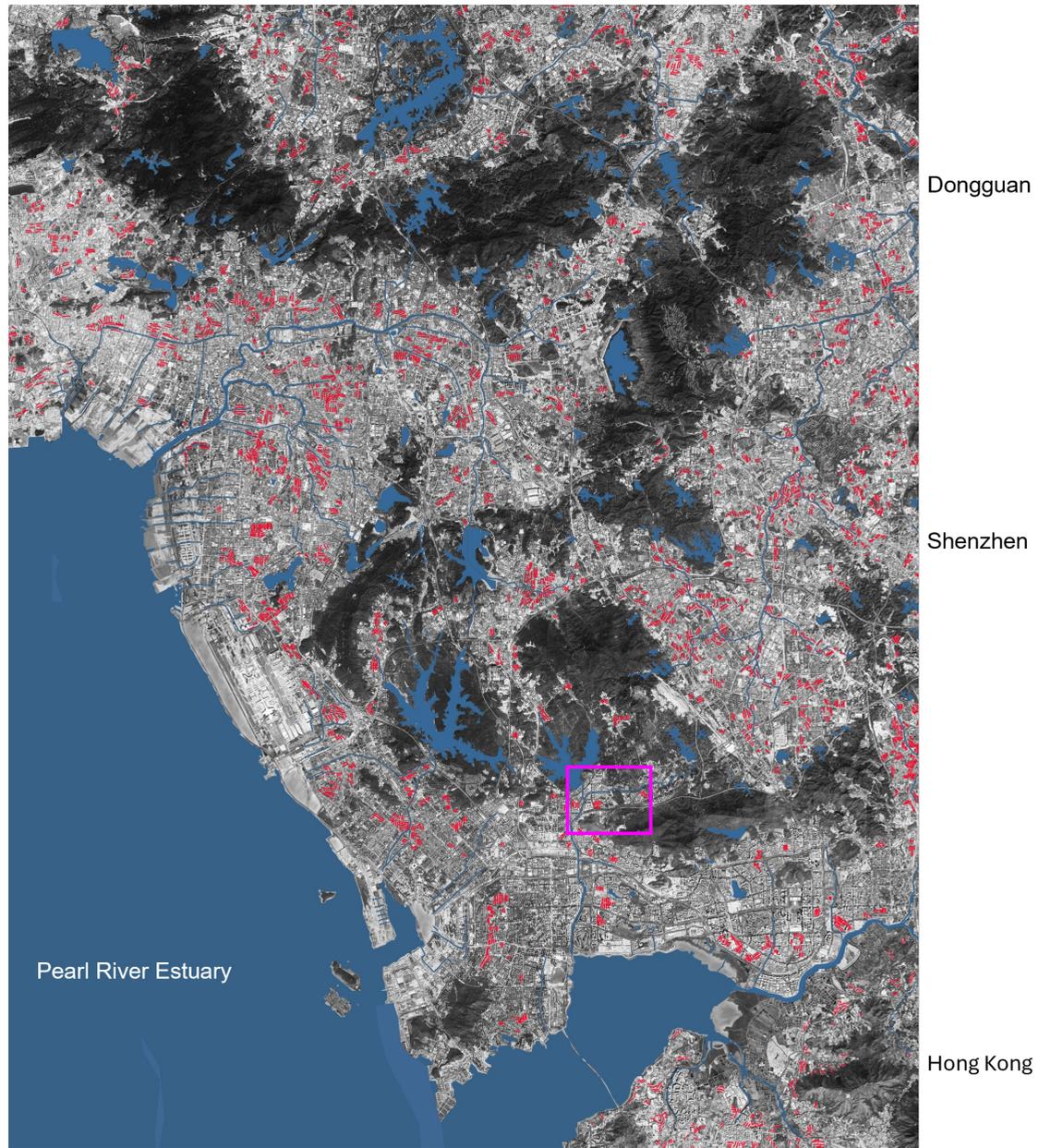
Shenzhen's territory is characterised by its mountainous topography, rivers and streams, and extensive coastline. This distinct landscape and cultural factors influenced early settlements (Rapoport, 1969). In a typical clan-based agrarian society, early communities primarily settled near the mountains or along the coast, with some villages dispersed between these areas along rivers and streams. Coastal settlers practised fishing, oyster farming, and salt production, and mountain communities used riverplains and slopes for agriculture, cultivating crops such as rice, sugarcane, and lychees. Temples, religious and ancestral, were omnipresent across the landscape. The established landscapes can be read in three interwoven types: settlement, productive landscape, and sacred landscape, based on the way of settling and how cities and villages are shaped (Kostof, 1991; Mumford, 1961). As Shenzhen transformed into a metropolitan area, these three landscape types have continued, though in different urban forms.

While urban expansion and the urbanisation process have engulfed the flat coast and riverplains, mountain ranges create a natural barrier, partially due to their unsuitability for conventional constructions. In such a way, urban fringe emerged in Shenzhen as a place where urban and rural

converge, largely shaped and defined by terrain instead of administrative boundaries. Thus, the urban fringe is not necessarily at the edge of metropolitan area; it could be tightly associated with mountain ranges, as illustrated in Figure 1.2. These areas are where villages were retained and survived the first rounds of redevelopment movements in the 2000s. These villages have accumulated deep layers of history and meanings during their 'autonomous' urbanisation process (Bach, 2010). They exhibit more mixed or entangled landscapes and diverse urban lives than urban cores.

The research takes Pingshan village as a case study (Figure 1.3), which is attached to mountains and Sha River, one of the important rivers that feed the city. The research investigates the lived spaces and daily practices of its residents, including original villagers and arrived migrants (including both rural-urban migrants, recent graduates, and young professionals), within the context of their real lives (Yin, 2017, p. 18). This village was chosen primarily for its survival from redevelopment and ordinariness among hundreds or thousands of villages in Shenzhen; established around 500 years ago, this clan-based village has no significant historical records to be officially listed as heritage and serves as a temporary (yet often long-term) home for migrants. It especially represents the medium-sized, densely populated, rapidly industrialised, and rapidly sprawled villages in Shenzhen, situated at a certain distance from the city centre yet linked by public transport, as per the type analysis conducted by Tong et al. (2010).

Before the 1980s, the village was dedicated to rice farming, pond fishing, and livestock raising. Since then—particularly after 2001, when 'University Town' became a new landmark in the area—broad boulevards, fancy shopping malls and hotels, high-rise middle-class apartments, and university campuses and institutions have intersected with stigmatised neighbourhoods predominantly populated by lower- and middle-income populations with lower educational attainment. At present, this village has a population of about 17,000 residents, more than 90% of whom are migrants from Guangdong and other Chinese provinces. The spatial layers of the old village (a dense core), new village (the extended area), and surrounding new urban spaces epitomise how Shenzhen's rural origins have been encompassed by a larger city (O'Donnell, 2017).



■ villages retained
 study site
 ■ water bodies

Figure 1.2. Pingshan village, the study site, located on the urban fringe of the Shenzhen metropolitan area. The urban fringe is defined by terrain rather than administrative boundaries. Source: Diwen Tan, based on Google Earth 2022.

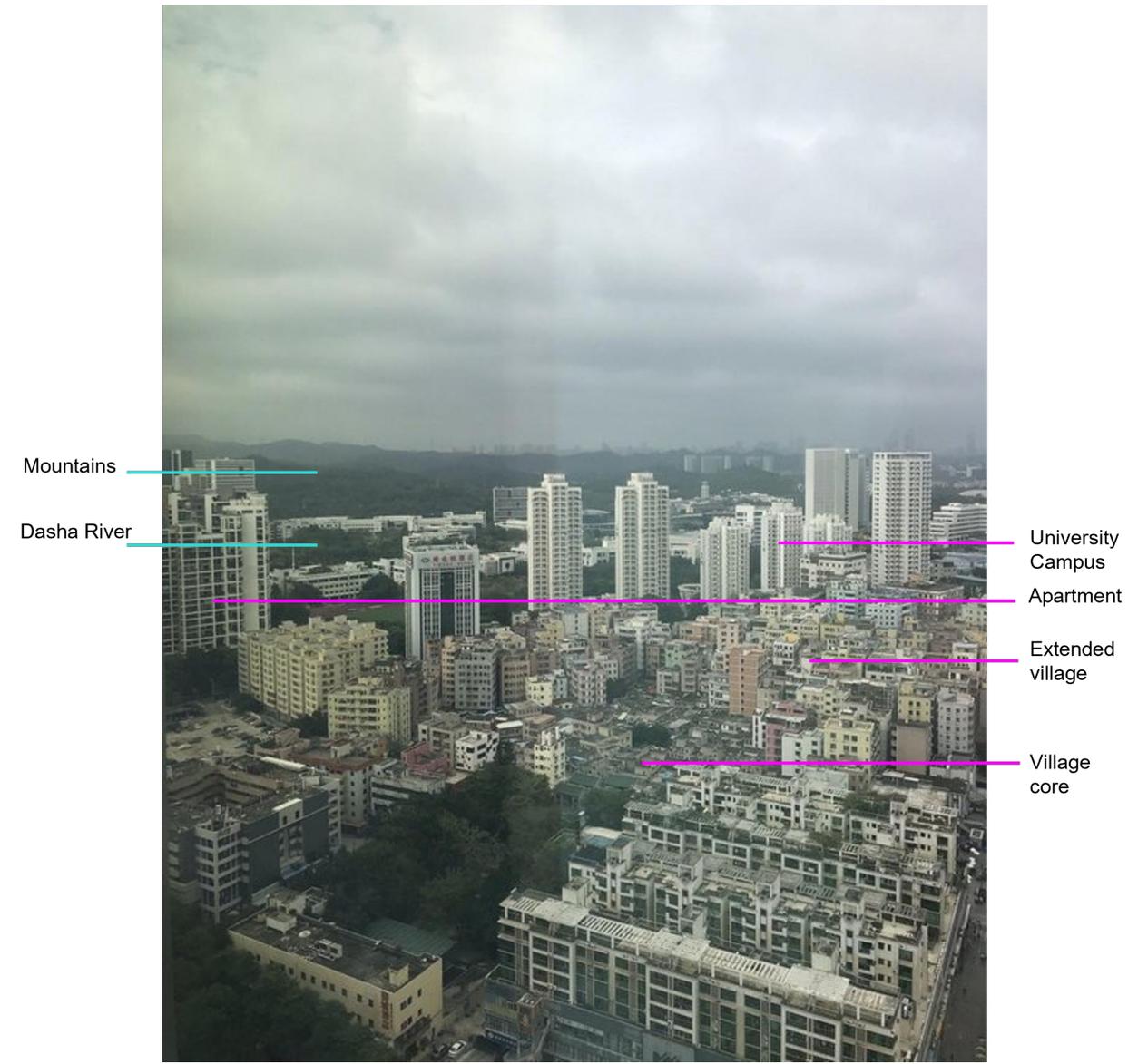


Figure 1.3. Aerial view of spatially layered Pingshan Village. Photo by Diwen Tan, 2023.

1.4. Research gap and questions

While abundant literature has focused on achievements in urban development and dramatic spatial transformations over the past four decades, little research has examined the traditions in the rapid Chinese modernisation process, let alone its interaction with modernity. The problems caused by the current technocratic urban planning system and the *tabula rasa* perspective of city making necessitates a re-reading of place or landscape as a collective cultural construct. Furthermore, when approaching non-places like urban villages, scholars mainly focused on physical characteristics, including density, morphology, and accessibility to public spaces and livelihoods, overlooking their thick layers of history. The **objective** of this research is to explore the possibilities of future inclusive urbanism by investigating how tradition and modernity—particularly in socio-spatial and ecological practices—coexist in Chinese urban contexts and what implicit values they carry in post-growth cities.

Research Question:

How can Chinese traditional socio-spatial and ecological practices offer implicit values for inclusive urbanism in post-growth cities?

The study uses Pingshan village in Shenzhen as a case study for an in-depth investigation. It serves as a cosmos that illustrates the urbanisation process of the city and how traditions endure amidst modernity. As the village evolves with the city, its clan-based agrarian landscapes have transformed into an alleged urban village characterised by densified housing, fragmented agricultural lands and omnipresent but hidden sacred spaces. The sustained practices, including ways of settling, food cultivating, and worshipping, as well as the associated production of space, can direct my inquiry into the intersection of tradition and modernity as well as the potential hybridisation. The sub-questions are thus arranged as follows:

Q1. What are the Chinese interpretations of modernity as reflected in South China’s urban landscapes since the 1980s? and in what ways do traditional practices persist within these modern forms?

Q2. How can Shenzhen be conceptualised as a palimpsest? and what are the interactions of traditions and modernity in Shenzhen through the analysis of an urban village?

Q3. How does traditional agriculture sustain and evolve in contemporary Shenzhen?

Q4. How do sacred spaces persist in contemporary Shenzhen? and what values do they contribute to inclusive urbanism?

1.5. Methodology: Learning in the field

What are possible methods to explore the complex relationships between the traditional and the modern in Chinese urban contexts? While Chinese cities have undergone rapid and dramatic spatial-social transformation guided by a technocratic way of planning, what people experience in their daily lives and routines demonstrates a thick description of history, an entangled world, and contested landscapes. For this thesis, empirical studies combined with theoretical reflections were then put into focus. I adopted an explorative approach named ‘learning in the field’, highlighting the necessity to ‘experience’ the field—based on Okely’s (2012) anthropological practices—to understand the local reality of space, territories, and landscapes, each of which is a cultural construct consisting of contested layers and embedded in a wider context.

This ‘learning in the field’ approach can be defined with three keywords: *palimpsest*, *literature analysis*, and *architectural ethnographic drawing*. As shown in Figure 1.4, the palimpsest analogy regards a city or a place as a multilayered, complex system that accounts for the spatial coexistence of inscriptions by all actors and the non-linear accumulation of history. It provides an analytical framework for the whole research. Literature analysis extracts the qualitative content from the existing empirical cases on various evolving urban forms since the 1980s. It particularly addresses the research question Q1. Architectural ethnographic drawing visualises what are observed, including materiality, spatial configuration, and spatial practices. It draws on urban studies (architectural perspective) and anthropology and employs mixed methods of observation, (narrative) interviews, photography, and drawing.

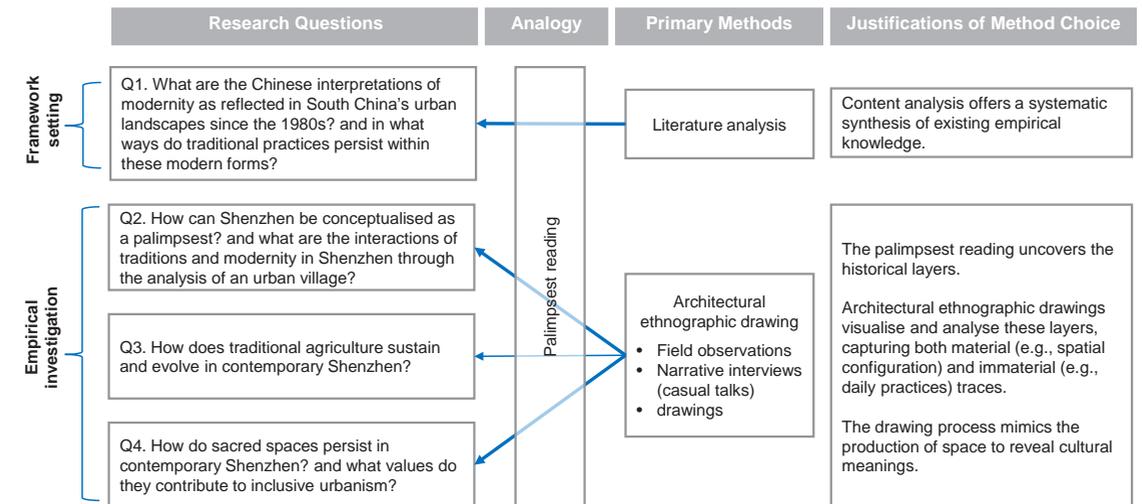


Figure 1.4. Research methodology. Diwen Tan, 2025.

1.5.1 Palimpsest

The notion of ‘land as palimpsest’ by Corboz (1983) challenges the prevalent and static perception of a city as a new city or city on *tabula rasa*. In a well-known literature that focuses on progressive development and urbanisation in China, history is largely relegated to the background as a setting scene to move from. The erasure resulting from constant destruction and construction is rarely complete and often leaves traces. The palimpsest analogy engages with these traces of earlier content and enables unravelling historical and cultural layers from the past in the present readings. This is pertinent to the reading and understanding of Chinese non-historical cities that are frequently unarchived (S. Li, 2014), with a state ideology that prioritises the new over the old.

Shenzhen can be conceptualised as a palimpsest of palimpsests, illustrating its uneven stratification process in which surviving villages contain deep description layers, encompassing both traditional myths and futuristic modern ideas. Within a village, each particular location conveys its own composition of past and present. These villages’ transformation trajectories bear the imprints of all inscription layers, from early settling with clan-based communities to the imposition of industry and infrastructure, campuses, and redevelopment projects. A contested landscape is often observed; a crowded stigmatised neighbourhood intersects with surrounding new urban forms, including broad boulevards, shopping malls and hotels, high-rise middle-class apartments, university campuses and institutions. The village itself has also gone through processes of urbanisation and modernisation, while being classified as informal, as evidenced by its layered spatial layout. Thus, the enduring villages in Shenzhen evoke the city’s history and collectively connect the city’s past, present, and possible future.

The urban palimpsest allows a thick description of a place, encompassing both spatial and temporal dimensions. It considers the coexistence of all inscriptions by different actors, from planning authorities to local inhabitants. Also, it treats history as a non-linear accumulation, characterised by a slow stratification in a *longue durée*³. Moving beyond the palimpsest, such nuanced reading and understanding by unpacking the layers can be extended to envision hybrid potentials as a process and result of the intersection and interaction between tradition and modernity.

1.5.2 Literature analysis

In parallel to the empirical investigation carried out through fieldwork in Shenzhen, a literature review of existing empirical cases on urban forms in South China since the 1980s was conducted.

³The term ‘*longue durée*’ was coined in Fernand Braudel’s (1958) article in the historical journal *Annales*.

The palimpsest analogy effectively depicts the typical cities of South China as complexes of overlapped, contested layers, providing a general understanding of their evolving landscapes and urban forms. The historically established landscapes are provisionally characterised into three interwoven types: settlement, productive landscape, and sacred landscape. Throughout spatial transformation processes, these landscapes maintain the same types from which various urban forms, both new and old, are generated. These urban forms served as keywords for the selection of empirical literature, with additional criteria that underscore spatial content for screening purposes.

In total, 50 works were selected for qualitative analysis. Synthesis and analysis occurred in the process of reading through the text while extracting modern interventions and practices for themes construction (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It was a hermeneutic loop, concentrating on the meanings behind the texts and photographs rather than the mere presence of words (Mayring, 2014).

1.5.3 Architectural ethnographic drawing

The palimpsest reading and understanding of a city or landscape is visually articulated through architectural ethnographic drawing. This method itself is interdisciplinary, spanning fields of urban studies, architecture, and anthropology. I was no architect, urban planner, or anthropologist. Nevertheless, the analysis and design studio on urban fabrics and urban studies course taught me how to observe and analyse the morphology at different scales. Landscape courses taught me the methods of interpretation and reinterpretation of landscapes. Urban anthropology lectures taught me methods such as doing fieldwork, observation, and interviews (in a narrative and casual way).

In the field, architectural ethnography as the main method is supplemented by interviews and photographs. It requires observation and ‘drawing of, for, among, and around architecture’ according to Kaijima et al. (2018). My fieldwork started in March 2023 and contains two trips with each lasting for three months. A general observation began with daily walks for an initial comprehensive understanding of the site before gradually moving to a ‘dive-in’ status. Meticulous observation was then applied. Spatial configuration, demography, rhythms of activities (what, when, and where people do), as well as self-experience, were elements considered as what constitute a field.

The experiments of architectural ethnography in China and other Asian countries, as exemplified by *Made in Tokyo* (Kaijima et al., 2001) and *A Little Bit of Beijing* (Han & Yan, 2018), seems to be reaction to rapid urbanisation and changes wrought by globalisation. Great attention has been given to the actors’ activities, as well as materials and environment to reflect the society. They were attuned to the sense of modernity—an ethnography of modernity that document contrasts

and ruptures while being grounded in historically conscious culture constituted by practices of daily life. And in a rapid changing urban environment where activities are ephemeral, a more careful observation in long time seems necessary.

In this research, ethnographic drawings were used to visually map the observed spatial characteristics and interactions among individuals and their surroundings in an analytical way. Rather than focusing solely on form and composition, the drawing process allowed me to mimic the production process of space and reexamine architectural typology from a spatial practice point of view. Sketches were made on site, which were then redrawn in a finer manner along with the reflections on all materials collected (i.e., fieldnotes, photographs).

The act of drawing requires keeping looking for a relatively long time, thus giving a slow pace. The drawing exercises trained me how to observe things with patience to be able to dig under the surface. Such observation can be termed ‘attentive observation’ (Gandy, 2024) or the act of gazing (Giesen, 2012). What I had overlooked became visible, such as Mao’s portrait painted on the door lintel of a private house, which was used to replace the previous trace of religious beliefs, though being faded and partially obstructed by exposed electrical wires. This indeed demonstrates how history is layered, and tradition seems lost but has left traces. The drawing process and observations are not limited to literally ‘seeing’, but open to the whole human sensorium. That means listening, smells, and tactile interactions with materials are all taken into account.

Creating sketches and drawings on site also encouraged ‘encounters’ naturally with a diverse population. Interviews were conducted with diverse population, covering villagers and migrants from various representative occupations and age groups. Listening was the basic principle for interviews to probe a deeper understanding of spatial practices, everyday lived experiences, and their expectations. These casual talks were repeated to increase the reliability of the oral narratives.

The result of what you ‘notice’ (which includes all sensual information) could transcend time and space. By combining different movements in time within one drawing, I articulated simultaneity, revealing multiple meanings of a location. I also illustrated the interior environment as semi-public spaces for the research. It was not about how many maps or drawings to create but about delivering an analytical message and highlighting values of the site.

The process of storytelling moves forward and backward between writing, including theoretical studies, and ethnographic mapping using hand drawings to better illustrate the complexity of a place or a landscape. My particular way of drawing, cultivated throughout my doctoral journey, corresponds to the Chinese art of painting and map-making, which typically combines drawing and text, such as poems (Figure 1.5). It values the Chinese aesthetics embedded and shared in

Chinese characters (*Hanzi*, most of which are pictographs or ideographic), calligraphy, and painting⁴ (Casey, 2002; Wang & Stanley-Baker, 2014). The merging of painting and poetry has emerged organically since the Northern Song period (960-1127): painters either express their poetic ideas in their compositions with a given poem, or artists articulate their sentiments or (re)interpretations of a painting with their own poems or a few lines (Rubinstein, 1999). As such, the drawing and text are complementary, and their combination constitutes an integral of more than representations, in other words, (non)representations (Thrift, 2007). In my drawings, notations resemble these poetic texts to further elaborate the narrative of spatial activities observed (Figure 1.6).

My fieldwork was purposive but also flexible enough to facilitate an explorative process driven by my curiosity and plural perspectives of ‘encounters’. As fieldwork furthered, I moved beyond the threshold of acceptance towards the understanding of what I was seeking, exactly as what Rabinow (2007) reflected. There was time to question myself and the topic as to the state of data. Particular inquiries were reformulated alongside the fieldwork, the walking, the listening, the gazing, and the drawing. ‘Learning in the field’ serves as an important approach for reformulating problems, reframing themes and concepts, and drawing upon what you ‘see’ and what you experience with encounters in time and space within the interconnected social, economic, and environmental contexts. Each chapter in Part II and Part III entails detailed methods that are used for particular narrative investigations.

⁴The most essential of painting is *qiyun shengdong* (animation through spirit resonance), which is well explained in Wang C.C.’s reflections on painting during his talks with Stanley-Baker (2013) and the book on landscapes by Casey (2002). The highest level of a good painting or art piece is being alive without a necessary depiction of the movements (*qi* energy).



Figure 1.5. Text and painting in a combination to represent poetics of a site, exemplified by Ni Zan's (倪瓚, 1306–1374) work *Enjoying the Wilderness in an Autumn Grove* (秋林野兴图) in 1339. Source: The Met. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45635>

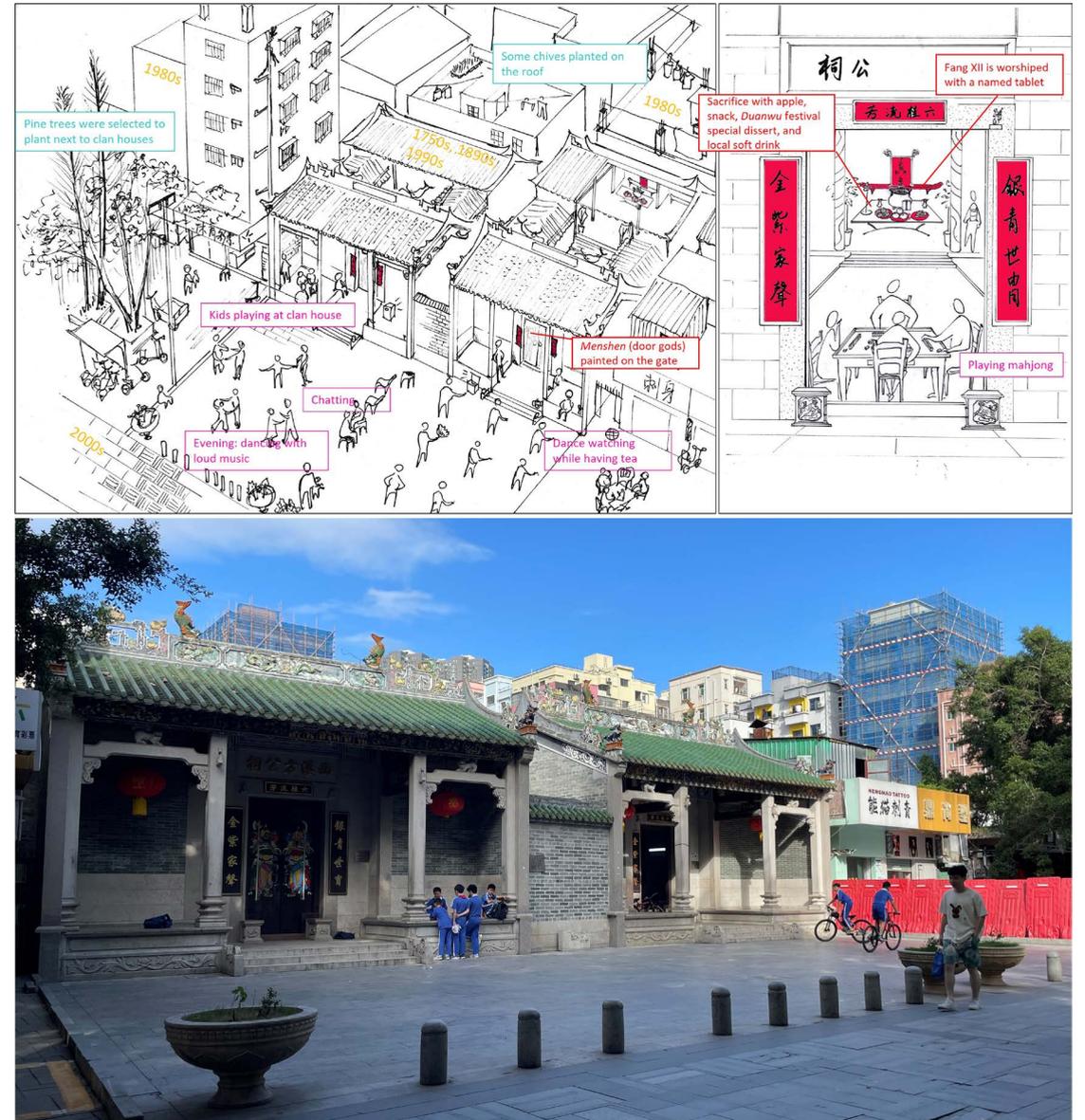


Figure 1.6. Architectural ethnographic drawings used to interpret and analyse how various actions and movements shape and are shaped by space throughout time. Source: Diwen Tan.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organised in four parts. Part I (chapter 1) outlines the scope of the research, the main concept of palimpsest, and the methodology used to explore inclusive urbanism by understanding the relationship between tradition and modernity in the Chinese urban context.

The main body—Parts II and III—comprises four peer-reviewed published (or submitted) papers. Part II (chapter 2) provides an overview of Chinese modernisation and the trajectories of modernity that assists rethinking modernity in its multiplicity along with tradition within three types of landscape: settlement, productive, and sacred. Part III (chapters 3, 4, and 5) offers an in-depth investigation of the dynamic interactions between traditional practices and modern interventions in Pingshan village. While providing site-specific context, the Pingshan case also represents the everyday reality of many ordinary villages in Shenzhen. The urban complexity and multiple meanings are unfolded through narrative accounts focused on: 1) dwelling spaces within the village; 2) the surviving agricultural landscape; and 3) the omnipresent sacred spaces. This narrative follows my exploratory journey in the field and reflexive thinking, aiming to uncover implicit values by moving from the less visible (sensible) to the least visible (sensible)—those embedded in the deeper layers of the palimpsestic accumulation—and extending from human spatial interactions to the more-than-human dimension.

Part IV (chapter 6) concludes with possibilities of hybridisation in building future inclusiveness in architecture and urbanism, grounded on the empirical findings of Pingshan as a disappearing village.

Chapters 2-5 address specific research questions and present the corresponding findings.

Chapter 2 investigates Chinese interpretations of modernity as reflected in South China's urban landscapes since the 1980s and how traditional practices persist within these modern forms (Q1). It contributes to the debates of plural modernities and invites critical thinking of urban planning and design in China. Through a systematic review of 50 empirical studies, it analyses evolving urban forms in relation to the state ideologies and modernization strategies. The findings identify three main processes that characterise Chinese urban modernity: the disappearance and reappearance of water, the production of monofunctional zones at multiple scales, and the sanitation of non-places and sacred spaces. These processes also reveal the persistence of traditional practices in various ways. The chapter adopts a landscape perspective to set a framework for palimpsest reading of place.

Chapter 3 investigates how Shenzhen can be conceptualised as a palimpsest and what interactions of traditions and modernity are in Shenzhen through the analysis of an urban village (Q2). By conceptualising Shenzhen as a palimpsest, the chapter validates this approach as an

analytical lens for understanding spatial and temporal layers, which is an essential basis before intervening. The empirical study of Pingshan village is centred on its lived urban spaces and transformed industrial parks. It gives a glimpse of the traditions that are handed down and can be seen embedded in names, artefacts, buildings, and daily practices. The everyday lens enables critical investigation of how traditional and modern layers intersect, resulting in hybrid spatial forms and practices.

Chapter 4 investigates how traditional agriculture sustain and evolve within Shenzhen's urban villages (Q3). Centring on the mountainside lychee orchards maintained by migrants, the chapter explores how cultivation practices survive amid urbanisation. The empirical investigation illustrates that agriculture has become an informal economic activity, juxtaposed with formal occupation and hillside orchard forests, in the shadows of high-rise apartment towers and disguised as parkland designated by state-led planning.

Chapter 5 investigates how sacred spaces persist in contemporary Shenzhen and what values they contribute to inclusive urbanism (Q4). It is centred on the role of sacred spaces within Pingshan village in reimagining the enchantment of the modern world and fostering inclusivity. The chapter considers Chinese popular culture and beliefs in immaterial souls. Through a close examination of shrines, village temples, and a hillside cemetery within Pingshan village, the field study demonstrates that sacred landscapes remain omnipresent and are closely intertwined with secular daily lives. As spatial structures, these sacred landscapes actively interact with modern interventions and urban regulations, evoking an enchanted dimension within contemporary life.

When compiling this thesis using papers, some parts of the introduction in each chapter are reiterated or rephrased in the overall thesis introduction. When reading this thesis, you might proceed directly to the chapters that interest you. Each chapter also contributes to specific theoretical debates and provides a more detailed explanation of methods employed.

**Rethinking Chinese
Modernity with Tradition**

2

Glimpses of tradition in modernity

A survey of South China's urban landscapes since the 1980s

This chapter contributes to discussions on plural modernities and inclusive urban planning in Chinese urban and peri-urban contexts. It employs urban landscapes as a medium for discourse on authorised modern planning and design strategies, as well as actions of ordinary people, thereby elucidating social-spatial transformation and modernity. As revealed by a review of 50 empirical studies on evolving urban forms in South China since the 1980s, three processes characterise Chinese urban modernity: the disappearance and reappearance of water, the production of monofunctional zones at multiple scales, and the sanitisation of non-places and sacred spaces. A few empirical cases also illustrate how traditional practices, including cultivation (*gengdi*), *fengshui*, and ancestor worship (*jizu*), continue to shape social and spatial dynamics amidst the state-driven modernisation. These findings suggest that Chinese modernity is an evolving process entangled with traditions and historical layers. The chapter concludes by advocating for future research that foregrounds everyday life experiences, explores urban fringes as contested spaces, and embraces a palimpsest reading of place. Such an approach offers a critical lens for rethinking urban planning and design in China, promoting more culturally sensitive and inclusive urban futures.

Manuscript submitted: D. Tan, R. Rocco, & G. Bracken. Glimpses of tradition in modernity: A survey of South China urban landscapes since the 1980s. Submitted to the *Journal Landscape Research*. In review.

2.1 Modernity beyond Eurocentrism

This systematic review of empirical studies on urban forms in Chinese urban and peri-urban contexts analyses expressions of modernity in urban planning and design approaches in the post-reform era and the possible presence and persistence of traditions. It draws inspiration from the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of modernities, which moves beyond a limited Eurocentric understanding of the world where definitions of modernity oppose both the 'past' and 'others' (Bhambra, 2007).

Modernity, referred to as typical features and cultural experiences of contemporary life by the individual and collective (Heynen, 2000; Robinson, 2006), differs according to cultural and geopolitical contexts (Nyilas, 2018). In this sense, there is no singular model of modernity; rather, modernisation and spatial transformation trajectories in non-Western countries demonstrate diverse forms and ways of being modern. Many of these modernities imply the persistence of long-standing traditions: while modernity bears temporal ruptures that distinguish itself from the past, it also coexists and interacts with tradition to generate new forms and futures, as theorised in 'entangled modernity' and 'hybrid modernity' (Delanty, 2004; Lu, 2012).

However, the acknowledgement and investigation of plural forms of modernity remain limited. Countries such as China, described as latecomer to modernisation, frequently associate their radical changes with forceful foreign encounters and the dominant influence of Western experiences; in contrast, endogenous factors (including self-reflections and rebellions) that contribute to modernity are largely overlooked (Chakrabarty, 2000; Cohen, 1984). This viewpoint partially elucidates why numerous research accounts of Chinese modernity focus on the late 19th century, when the port treaty cities were established and encounters with imperial powers were strengthened, and less on urban modernity after the Maoist era, despite rich records of dramatic spatial and cultural transformations and achievements in urban development (Liang, 2010; Lincoln, 2021; Wang, 2011).

Consequently, we examine the forms of Chinese modernity through a collection of empirical

cases of cities in South China, considering the cultural dynamics and possible persistence of traditions. To situate discussions within spatial thinking, we apply a landscape perspective to set a temporal and spatial framework for selecting and locating urban forms. Landscape, metaphorically read as ‘text’ (Barnes & Duncan, 1992) and as ‘palimpsest’ (Corboz, 1983), allows for an interpretation of land as both a dynamic result of and a process of being inscribed and reinscribed by numerous actors. It can then serve as a medium through which to discuss intertwined and divergent representations of both the authorised planning and design interventions and the everyday actions of ordinary people (Kong & Law, 2002).

We first provide an overview of Chinese modernisation and modernity trajectories and propose the landscape as an analytical framework. We then provide a systematic review through the lens of evolving urban forms, elaborating on expressions of Chinese modernity in the post-reform era and possible glimpses of traditions in modernity. We conclude with implications for a future research agenda to establish a more nuanced understanding of urban modernity in a non-Western context.

2.2 Modernity and the landscape

2.2.1 China’s modernisation and modernity

The Chinese pursuit of modernisation and modernity is commonly traced back to the semi-colonial period of the late Qing dynasty, the mid-19th century (Liang, 2010; Lincoln, 2021). This ongoing and dynamic process has involved a series of reforms across all aspects of life, including the military, language, land management, and the development of modern science. Initially driven by resistance to colonialism and a critique of capitalism (Wang, 2011), this trajectory later became intertwined with the utopia of building a socialist society based on equality during the Mao era (Bracken, 2019; Fisher, 1962), and subsequently influenced by global trade and the infusion of foreign capital (Ma, 2002).

In the late Qing dynasty and Republican era, Western influences in spatial transformation and the spread of urban modernity through industrialisation and railway infrastructure were undeniable. A few cosmopolitan cities appeared in South China, especially coastal treaty ports influenced primarily by British, French, German, or Japanese planners (Lincoln, 2021). Foreign factories, residential industrial compounds, and hybrid architecture—such as *shikumen* alleyways in Shanghai (Bracken, 2013)—emerged, attracting peasants when the vast majority of China remained rural (J. Li, 2014). To prioritise industrialisation and transportation under the Nationalist government (1925–1948), many city plans were drafted in the late 1920s, introducing US planning principles associated with functional cities and land use zoning (Cody, 1996).

The Maoist era (1949–1978) diverged from the plans of the Republican era, focusing instead

on the construction of new collective spaces in both urban and rural areas. Largely driven by industrialisation, urban planning was subordinate to national economic planning, guided by five-year plans (Xie & Costa, 1993). A new urban form called *danwei* (work unit), which blended the Soviet socialist land system and Chinese built form, emerged as a social institution to reorganise the city. This unit was used to integrate workplaces, housing, and social facilities, such as nurseries, canteens, and schools, for a collective lifestyle (Lu, 2006).

The reform and post-reform era (1978 onwards) welcomed a new interplay of neoliberalism with the experiments of economic and land reforms. The early rural land reform (1979), urban land reform (1984), and land use transfer system (1988) opened the opportunities for the development of new towns with booming industries, overseas investment, and real estate development while also producing surplus labour and deepening uneven development and social divisions (Tian et al., 2017; Wu & Gaubatz, 2021; Xi & Mei, 2022; Zhang, 2008; Zhou & Shi, 2022). At the turn of the 21st century, the urban planning system expanded to a multi-scale and multi-plan approach that covers five levels of planning hierarchically from the country to the town level and focuses on functional zones, regional planning, land use master planning, urban and rural planning, and environmental protection planning (Hu et al., 2023). A new round of reforms in spatial planning was made to shift the territorial division to integration with a set of binding index systems (Zhang et al., 2023).

Building ‘civilised’ citizens, synonymous with modernity, has long been a nationwide strategy that goes hand-in-hand with economic progress and urban transformations (Cartier, 2002). Since 2003, the ‘civilised and sanitary city’ competition has been held every three years to maintain the visual cleanliness of the physical urban environment and to regulate urban residents’ behaviours (Shi et al., 2022). With increasing ecological concerns, the term ‘ecological civilisation’ was first proposed in 2005 and officially adopted as a green policy paradigm in 2012 (Glaros et al., 2022); it gave rise to new brandings of city-making – from global city to eco-city, liveable city, and innovative city. Traditional Chinese culture, including heritage values and classic views of nature, was also reintroduced as part of the construction of ecological civilisation.

Chinese political modernity by no means intimates a conception of modernity inherited from the European context. Like Chakrabarty (2000) stated, it ‘has a contradictory relationship to European social and political thought’. The Chinese desire for reforms and movements is closely tied to their strong nationalism—the care for the country and society’s future amid the struggles of ruling classes and continuous invasions by imperial powers. The modernisation process, though sometimes characterised as ‘Westernisation’, was never a received lesson but rather an active adaptive use for self-sufficiency (*zhiqiang*) and defence: to become modern, scholars and revolutionaries also drew on the past (Lu, 2012; Wang, 2011).

Given that Chinese modernity has its own representations and has shaped contemporary Chinese

society through radical spatial transformation and social reorganisation, it is crucial to reflect on the understanding of modernity and ask the following questions: What are the expressions of modernity in Chinese cities? Is it possible to glimpse traditions within modernity? What are the relationships between tradition and modernity when constituting urban landscapes?

2.2.2 Landscape as an analytical framework

The inscriptions of interventions and projects collectively shape and modify the earth's surface, producing and reproducing varied and peculiar landscapes that serve communities and social groups. Land or landscape is considered a process, as a 'text' (Barnes & Duncan, 1992) or 'palimpsest' (Corboz, 1983), representing the non-linear accumulation and stratification of all layers of inscriptions, both old and new. These landscapes, with their evolving forms, correspondingly mirror various political and religious forces and their embedded ideologies and worldviews (Kong & Law, 2002; Mitchell, 2002; Wang, 2018). In other words, landscapes are meeting points between culture and nature (Naveh, 1995). Thus, in metropolitan areas, the change of urban forms that are present, maintained, and enhanced can serve as a lens to investigate the (prevailing) modern forces they signify and the signifying process on top of the existing landscape layers.

A typical metropolis in South China, which transformed from numerous villages and seats (*zhisuo*)⁵ of imperial power, can be conceptualised as a palimpsest—an amalgamation of overlapping and contested layers. In South China, a hydraulic traditional agricultural society was long developed with three fundamental landscapes (Figure 2.1). They are sacred landscapes, villages and fortified towns, and agriculture-based productive landscapes. Sacred landscapes are places where forefathers were situated, including tombs, shrines, and temples. This land of the deceased probably 'antedates the city of the living' (Mumford, 1961, p. 7), and particular sacred places are usually carefully located to facilitate the spatial arrangement of villages and walled citadels that were perceived as vital to ensure the community's fate (Feng & Wang, 1992). Villages and fortified towns (hereafter referred to as settlements) are places where people settled and built permanent homes. The sites are often family-based, clustered, and carefully selected in accordance with the natural environment, specifically responding to the climatic and topographical specificities of the site. Both sacred landscapes and settlements in China in the past adopted the practice of *fengshui*, Chinese geomancy, to apply the state rites and rules in a local context (Feng & Wang, 1992). Productive landscapes are either within or adjacent to the settlements (Kostof, 1991); in South China, these include farmlands, productive forests, salt yards, and other non-food industrial areas (Wu & Gaubatz, 2021). These landscapes, each possessing distinct features, intermingle spatially and socially.

⁵*Zhisuo* 治所, is the general name for the seats of imperial power, typically represented by fortified towns and cities. Administratively, there are prefecture seats (*zhouzhi*, *fuzhi*) and county seats (*xianzhi*).

The land has been substantially rewritten since the late 19th century, when China was labelled as 'not yet' modern from a Eurocentric historical viewpoint, promoting universal science and technology to forge a new society. Land is primarily understood in categories of land use within the quantitative planning system (Curien, 2014). Modern interventions and projects (as layers 4–7 show in Figure 2.1), including financing and building industries, infrastructure (Wu, 2015; Wu & Gaubatz, 2021), new housing projects (Liang, 2014), enlarged and new campuses, and redevelopment projects (Ren, 2018), are based on existing landscapes and contribute to new urban forms like industrial parks, high-rise buildings, and university towns. These interventions and projects often result in destructive impacts on the earth to varying degrees, such as soil degradation and water depletion. Also, the layers interact through total replacement, when the new is superimposed on the old (Bailey, 2007); partial replacement, when the new is written on top of the old without full erasure; or leaving a 'hole' when too brutal (Corboz, 1983). Thus, the three fundamental landscapes are continuously reconfigured and redefined based on the collective imagination of a society.

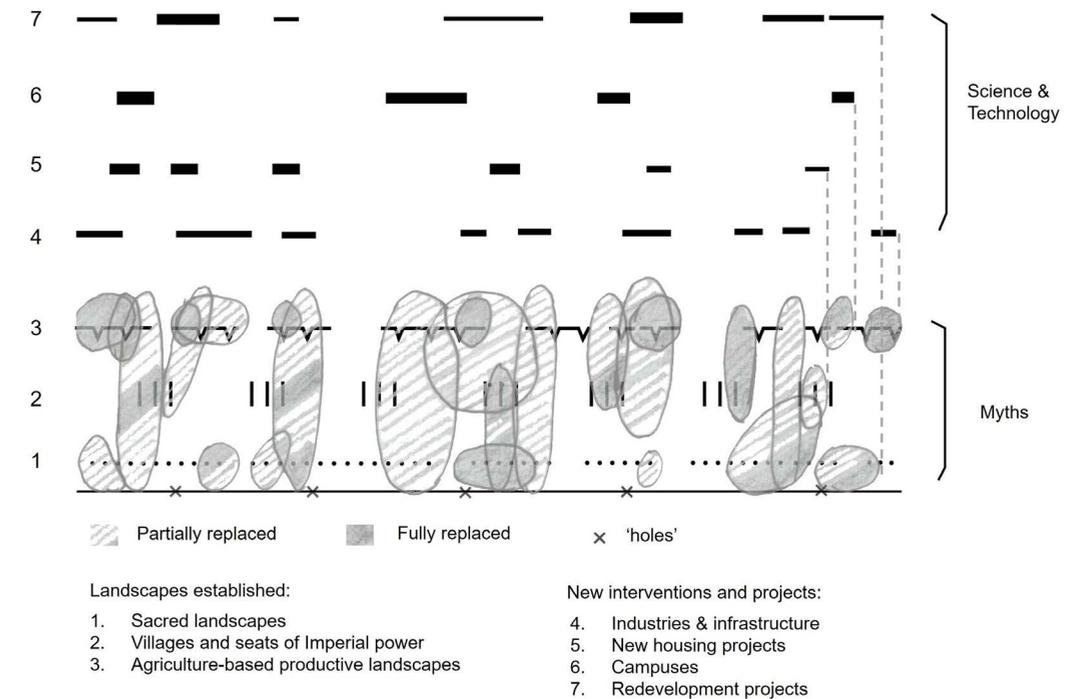


Figure 2.1. Conceptual illustration of a typical metropolis in South China as a composition of interwoven contested layers. The thickness of layers 4–7 indicates the extent of land impacts, such as physical destruction and changes in urban morphology. The shaded pattern represents the landscapes each intervention may cover and how interventions overlay. Source: Diwen Tan

2.3 Methodology

We zoom in on the Chinese landscapes with urban forms in the period after the Maoist era in South China. The period can be divided into three provisional phases: a paradigm shift towards marketisation (1980–1989), the era of land marketisation and the civilised city (1990–2009), and the advancement of ecological civilisation (2010–2022). This loose division is based on impactful events or updates of the state ideologies concerning urban transformation, as illustrated in Figure 2.2. From the 2010s onwards, increasing social and ecological concerns have driven a notable transition from a model of urban development primarily focused on economic growth to one that emphasises environmentally sustainable modernisation.

Each phase then illustrates the trend of new urban forms and associated movements of social groups. These new urban forms never replaced the old ones. As seen in Table 2.1, as new forms arose, old forms continued to exist and serve as important spaces for various social groups, shaping and structuring the landscapes. Their persistence does not imply a fixed position; instead, they incorporate new spatial characteristics and are used by diverse social groups in different ways. The coexistence of the new and old necessarily contributes to the multiplicity of urban landscapes in South China.

We conducted a systematic review of empirical studies utilising a literature search strategy that follows the PRISMA guidelines (Figure 2.3) (Moher et al., 2009). The literature search was guided by the urban forms (Table 2.1) as keyword and citation searches using the database Web of Science (Scopus), which included peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. This search is supplemented by suggestions by colleagues. The initial search yielded 658 studies.

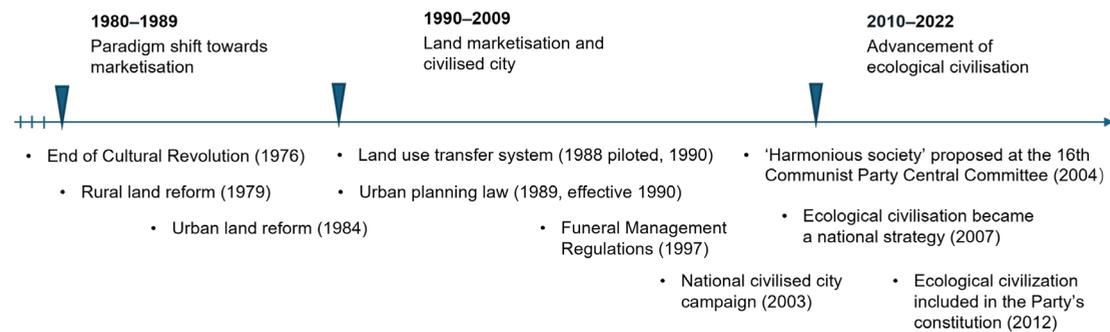


Figure 2.2. Timeline reflecting the major national ideological and policy changes. Source: Diwen Tan based on existing policies and programmes.

Table 2.1. Urban forms in urban and peri-urban areas of South China sorted in a temporal and landscape-based spatial frame.

Time periods	1980-1989 Paradigm shift towards marketisation	1990-2009 Land marketisation and civilised city	2010-2022 Advancement of ecological civilisation
Three types of landscape			
Sacred landscapes	'sacred place' 'temples'	'urban cemetery' 'sacred place' 'temples'	'urban cemetery' 'sacred place' 'temples'
Settlements	'work-unit' 'informal settlement' 'urban village' 'enclaves and migrants'	'new (urban) district' 'gated community' 'informal settlement' 'urban village' 'enclaves and migrants'	'sustainable neighbourhood' 'new (urban) district' 'gated community' 'informal settlement' 'urban village' 'enclaves and migrants'
Productive landscapes	'industries or factories' 'rural-urban migrants' 'agricultural production'	'urban agriculture' 'industrial parks' 'university town' 'industries or factories' 'rural-urban migrants'	'makerspace' 'creative space' 'high-tech industries' 'urban agriculture' 'industrial parks' 'university town' 'rural-urban migrants'

Note: This collection was based on works by Curien (2014), (Ren, 2018), Wang (2022), Wu and Gaubatz (2021), Xi and Mei (2022), and Zhang (2008). It is not exhaustive and the terms were refined through a circuitous path alongside the literature search and screening. For illustrative images, please refer to Figure A in the supplementary material.

We employed clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to create boundaries for our search within an enormous body of related work. For an empirical study to be included in our data set, it must include all of the following: 1) spatial changes in urban and urban fringe areas during the process of urban and rural transformations to allow a discussion on the contested tradition and modernity; 2) spatial characteristics at the architectural and neighbourhood scale positioned in a wider urban context. The studies to be excluded are: 1) those that 'only' consider the spatial distributions of certain urban landscapes; 2) those that 'only' focus on buildings themselves, including materials, aesthetics, and interior layout, while ignoring the wider urban system; 3) those that 'only' consider their analysis at municipality level or above.

A cultural and geographical boundary was also set, emphasising the Han population's settlement areas in the humid subtropical region of South China. That means the study areas cover the

Yangtze River Basin, Pearl River Basin, and Southeast River Basin (Varis et al., 2014); however, the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, though geographically part of South China, is excluded due to its distinct cultures and diverse ethnic groups.

Two rounds of screening, adhering to systematic review protocols, were undertaken. At the first screening stage, titles and abstracts are screened against the aforementioned criteria. Many studies that address technology, productivity, housing satisfaction, and migrants' livelihoods without spatial references or qualitative content were excluded. 111 studies reached the second screening stage. Then, the full text of all these studies was reviewed to determine if they fit the criteria. Overlapping works were removed if they shared the same empirical contexts and study periods overlapped, yielding 50 works. The full list of works is available in Supplemental Table A of the technical appendix.

These 50 works were subjected to a qualitative content analysis. Coding and analysing happened interchangeably by reading through the text while constructing themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The process was a hermeneutic loop, consistently re-contextualising, reinterpreting, and redefining the research questions. The analysis focused on the meanings behind texts rather than the mere presence of words (Mayring, 2014).

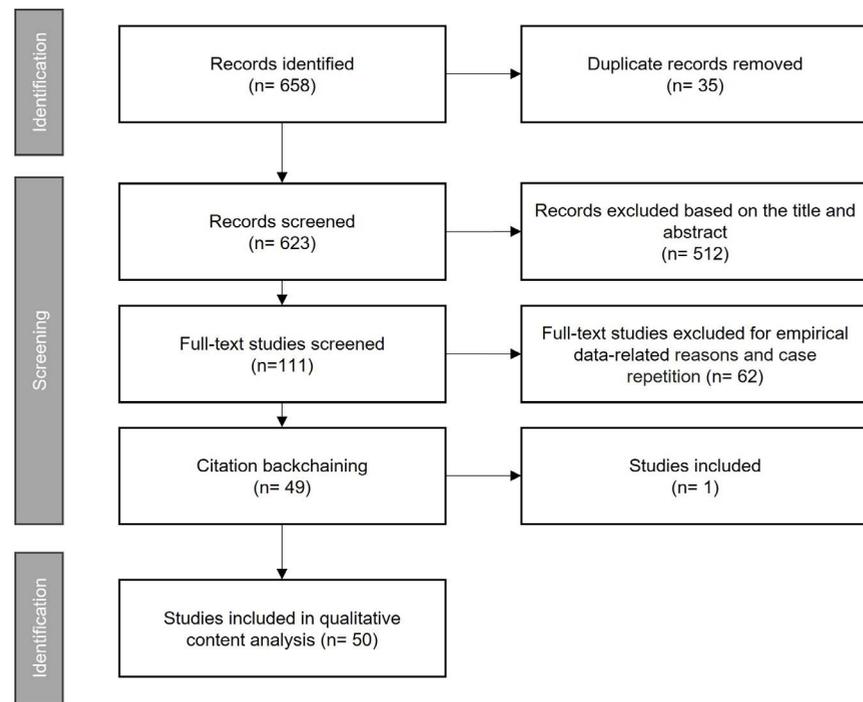


Figure 2.3. Process of systematic literature review

2.4 Expressions of modernity

The reviewed studies cover 17 cities in South China, concentrating on coastal cities in delta regions or megacities along the Yangtze River⁶. Drawing primarily on these empirical cases within Chinese cultural contexts and reflecting on a wider social-spatial transformation process, we identified three intertwined themes: the absence and presence of water, monofunctional zones at multiple scales, and sanitising non-places and sacred spaces. The alterations of water bodies represent the most significant and observable phenomenon of territorial change, directly reflecting emerging lifestyles that move away from the long-standing hydraulic society. The monofunctional zones executed by the Chinese state-led planning imply rational principles and national needs for efficient urbanisation and development. Sanitising, then, facilitates the modernisation process by regulating land uses and behaviours of citizens, including migrants.

2.4.1 The absence and presence of water

Water has always been a political and social battlefield due to its scarcity, uneven distribution, and, more recently, because of climate change. Before the 1980s' reforms, a typical hydraulic society was present with complex networks of diverted rivers, canals, ponds alongside settlements to control floods and irrigate farmlands. Water visually disappeared dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s as agriculture-based livelihoods diminished. A wide phenomenon across all reviewed cases was the requisition and acquisition of rural farmland for urban and industrial development and other non-agricultural construction, which served as the main driving force. Cultivated lands thus became fragmented, turning into islands within the ocean of the sprawling urban built-up area (Ho & Lin, 2004). Direct lake, river, and coastline encroachment for urban development also diminished the size of water bodies (Chen & Zong, 1999; Ho & Lin, 2004). Water pollution became an issue due to the discharge of untreated urban wastewater into rivers and run-off from agricultural fields (Huang et al., 2006), especially in areas where farmers or corporations pursued high productivity by shifting from rice cultivation to high-value vegetable production (Huang et al., 2006; Zhang, 1995).

Water then became an absent presence in modern urban areas. Water bodies were largely trapped, enclosed, and disconnected from other urban amenities. They were embodied in the form of reservoirs and pipes for pumping, water supply and transport, or sewage, and often situated underground and concealed beneath concrete pavements and roads (He & Chang, 2020; Kochan, 2015; Svensson, 2022). Ironically, in some places, water has become hazardous due to recurrent waterlogging and rising sea levels (Chen & Zong, 1999).

⁶These cities are Changzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Kunshan, Nanjing, Quanzhou, Shanghai, Shantou, Shenzhen, Shunde, Suzhou, Wenzhou, Wuhan, Wuxi, Xiamen, and Zhuhai.

Beginning in the 21st century, water has gradually reappeared following increasing awareness of the ecological and cultural meanings of water and farmlands. Small-scale urban agriculture emerged in the early 2000s throughout the urban core with a rising concern for food security. Water recycling was a common practice of collecting rainwater and storing it in boxes, bottles, or tanks for regular irrigation (Ding et al., 2022; Horowitz & Liu, 2017; Talamini et al., 2022). Organic farms, a new trend, started to appear in the ecological zones or drinking water source protection zones (Ding et al., 2018; Hietala et al., 2021), signifying their important role in contributing to ecological civilisation.

Simultaneously, water became actively engaged in urban design and redevelopment projects. The redevelopment of Liede (2007-2010), a village in Guangzhou, incorporated a retained village stream and pond (associated with one of the village's ancestral halls) as a medium for historical and cultural heritage conservation (Li et al., 2014). The water bodies were cleaned up and beautified to hold festival activities, including the revived dragon boat competition, and the open spaces adjacent to the water were turned into a culture square and village park. The same design strategy was applied to the reinvention of Huangpu Ancient Village and Port (Lin et al., 2022). Rivers, ponds, and historical piers were marked as 'characteristic scenic spots' to strengthen the city's cultural identity. In addition to historical and cultural values, water also generated natural sightseeing, enriching the eco-tourism experience based on nostalgia and imagined rural authenticity (Lang et al., 2016; Zacharias & Lei, 2016). At Pu'an village, located in a peri-urban area of Changzhou, wet farmland with bulrush and wild grasses gave urban citizens a sense of rural landscape (Li et al., 2021). Furthermore, the waterscape could carry spiritual meaning and form a pleasant environment for religious site reconstruction, exemplified by the reconstruction of the Chongyuan Buddhist temple along Yangcheng Lake in Suzhou (Li & Zhu, 2008).

Urban development practices during and after the reform era treated water as merely a technical element, overlooking the intrinsic and multifaceted logics of the relationships between cities and water. However, in the past decade, nostalgia and ecological and spiritual concerns have catapulted water back onto the scene, seeking to reinvent waterscape urbanism.

2.4.2 Monofunctional zones at multiple scales

The hyper-functional and productive urban planning model characterises Chinese cities with myriad zones at multiple scales. Herewith, the term 'zone' not only refers to the well-known special zones or spaces of exception as a reform policy in the 1980s but also a general term for territorial delimitation of a place designated with singular land use and specific functions. As collectively observed in the reviewed cases, the scale of the zone varies from regional and municipal levels to neighbourhood and building levels; all bear a similar matrix logic that follows the land allocation, which is calculated based on the quantitative data of plot area, plot

ratio, and population density.

During the land requisition and conversion process, a standard homestead plot area per household and a maximum plot area for villages to establish industries and businesses were often given as compensation in the 1980s and 1990s (Kan & Chen, 2021; Wang et al., 2009). Industrial zones were widespread, characterised by a homogenous landscape of rectangular factory buildings and dormitories on a flat terrain next to villages' residential areas. Later, more complex industrial zones were built in the form of industrial or high-tech parks that comprise multiple functions—industrial, residential, commercial, and recreational, with the potential to be converted into a new town, as exemplified by Suzhou Industrial Park (He & Chang, 2020) and the Shenzhen Silicon Software Ecological Park (Fang & Xie, 2008). Industrial and residential areas were spatially separated by a road network and connected by public transport. The industrial area within the park can be further divided into a research and development area, a software-hatching area, and a training area. The boom of university towns in peri-urban areas in the 2000s followed the same construction and expansion logic as exemplified by Ye et al. (2014)'s study in Nanjing. The industrial revitalisation of the 2010s, corresponding to the economic transition from labour-intensive manufacturing to research-oriented or service-oriented occupations, further complicated such zoning division by diversifying the functions of refurbished buildings (Choi et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021; Pan & Song, 2017).

To enforce the clarity of zones, borders were constructed, and access was controlled. Thus, demarcating and maintaining a zone reflects the underlying idea of differentiation (and stratification). Not only factory complexes but also gated communities, as the dominant housing, set a physical boundary with high walls and gates, surveillance equipment, and security guards (Breitung, 2011; Pow, 2007). Such an enclosed neighbourhood features high-end modern dwellings with an orderly living environment; various amenities like parking lots, green spaces, and playgrounds were provided and clearly marked for residents and visitors. This demarcation creates a social difference and barrier between the 'civilised' insiders, urban citizens or young engineers or scientists associated with campus expansion (Boland & Zhu, 2012; MacLachlan & Gong, 2023), and 'uncivilised' outsiders, rural migrants and sometimes poor peasants (Pow, 2007).

Areas that fell outside the zoning regime became 'non-places' (Kochan 2015), partially attributable to the (temporary) vacuum of planning and regulation as well as the persistence of local practices (Liu et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2009; Zhu, 2004). Those spaces include the urban village (or village-in-the-city) and urban agriculture. Urban villages tended to extend houses horizontally and vertically beyond their perceived limit in all 16 cases since the earliest record by Leaf (2002) and develop informal businesses by allowing functional changes from residential to industrial or mixed (Liu et al., 2014). Thus, they were inevitably perceived by the state, planners, scholars, and urban citizens as overcrowded, unruly, disorderly, and backwards.

However, they also mimicked state planning's rigid grid pattern when designing extended areas (van Oostrum, 2021). Urban agriculture, outside the 'basic farmland' category, was also deemed informal or illegal as it typically involved reclaiming 'vacant land'—an opportunity brought by a lag in construction after land conversion (Roast, 2022; Xing et al., 2022) or by appropriating protected zones such as riverbanks (Horowitz & Liu, 2017).

In summary, while monofunctional zones facilitate efficiency of urbanisation through the homogenous replication of new urban forms such as industrial parks and gated communities, they also lead to consequences. The delineation of well-defined functional zones fosters enclosure, social stratification, and spatial segregation. Consequently, certain spaces become left behind, perceived not as integral to the city, but as problems to be fixed or corrected.

2.4.3 Sanitising non-places and sacred spaces

Creating a harmonious city goes hand-in-hand with modernisation, maintaining spaces that are 'clean', 'secure', 'hygienic', and 'orderly'. If the zoning model above has contributed to such harmony with homogenous order, sanitisation then facilitated the hygiene urbanism by addressing the 'dirt', 'disorder', and 'danger' of spaces by removing and rectifying what has been left behind by modern progress. These spaces include 'non-places' and sacred spaces.

The quickest way to transform old villages was demolishing dilapidated buildings and illegal shacks, rebuilding with new standardised layouts, and relocating residents, as seen in all cases during the early phase of brutal regeneration. The resettlement could be either in a grid-pattern and height-controlled residential area or a gated community (Wu & Zhang, 2022; Zhao & Zou, 2017). It changed in the late 2000s and 2010s when the local party and urban planners began to recognise heritage and cultural values and favour micro-regeneration. To mitigate the persisting issue of congestion and lack of green spaces and open spaces identified by planners or developers (Liu & Wu, 2006; Zhu, 2004), a standard design approach was used to add urban infrastructure and amenities (e.g. road widening) and create squares or plazas. Conserving historical buildings or streets was also incorporated into the redevelopment to create a new image and identity for the place and city, for example, 'old street' (Luo et al., 2022) and 'historical old town' (Lin et al., 2022).

Similarly, informal agriculture in urban areas was replaced by ornamental landscaping. Agrotourism, such as U-picks and high-tech demonstration parks, is limited to peri-urban areas (Veeck et al., 2020), with food production and processing moved to rural hinterlands (Horowitz & Liu, 2017). This adjustment is not only due to the land issue mentioned above but also sanitary challenges, including odours and untidiness, which contradict the efforts to 'beautify' urban areas, as commented by local officials or property management of residential community (xiaoqu wuye) (Glaros et al., 2022). Flowering plants were preferred to vegetables, particularly

during 'green community' campaigns (Boland & Zhu, 2012). The recent growth of small urban organic farms appeared to change the situation with a benign acceptance of agriculture as a legitimate use of urban space, though still more popular in the peri-urban area, serving as a combined productive and educational site.

Sacred spaces, including temples and cemeteries, have different trajectories. From the early 1980s, many temples started to reopen and be rebuilt. A few have registered under the constitutionally protected religions, namely Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Protestant Christianity (Abramson, 2011), serving as both cultural tourism sites and religious associations (Li & Zhu, 2008). In contrast, the majority of village temples dedicated to ancestral lineages or deities that likely encompass different religions or possess distinct local names and legends are not included in the land use (Abramson, 2011; Gao et al., 2019; Murray, 2018; Weller, 2021). They were referred to as 'folk religions', and consequently, their revival heavily relied on local attitudes and decisions.

In southern coastal cities, financial and political support from the diaspora significantly influenced local planners to accommodate the revival of folk religious spaces, such as the Mazu temple in Quanzhou, despite the official rhetoric that discourages folk-ritual practices as feudal (Abramson, 2011; Murray, 2018). Since the 1990s, those folk temples have gradually been incorporated into urban redevelopment and some tourism development to showcase heritage preservation. Creating a cultural square or plaza in front of ancestral halls has become a common practice, adjacent to wide roads and commercial buildings (Chen & Tao, 2017; Guo & Herrmann-Pillath, 2023b; Song et al., 2016).

Cemeteries or graves, as spaces of the dead, adhered to the 1997 'funeral management regulation' issued and updated by the state (Decree No. 628); the market-oriented urban cemeteries have transformed due to new forms of burial, those labelled 'land-saving eco-burials' including tree burial and columbaria. However, only two studies addressed such spaces. Deng and Li (2023) illustrated the clearance of graves for urban expansion and construction of urban cemeteries in Nanjing. The cemeteries were continuously pushed outwards to the outer suburbs along the updated 'fringe belt'—the historical city wall and mountain belt (1990s), the ring road (2000s), and then the expressway (2010s). Guo and Herrmann-Pillath (2023a) examined a modern cemetery on a hillside in Shenzhen. It features a highly dense layout, holding 36,000 burial plots with each smaller than one square metre. More space was allocated to the open spaces, including alleys and greenways, to fit the 'garden' style.

The sanitation of spaces left outside of the official zoning system exemplifies the Chinese mentality of 'prudence' (S. Li, 2014) characterised by a fear of 'danger' and 'disorder'. This approach has evolved from brutal demolition to more nuanced forms of formalisation, increasingly taking into account heritage and environmental values—especially when these

values are significant for a city's image making. Peri-urban areas, among all reviewed cases, seem to serve as reserves that allow such non-places to survive.

2.5 A glimpse of tradition in modernity

Amid the emphasis on innovation and modern ways of living, we captured a few traditions from the fragments of those empirical stories. Frequently, the reviewed studies allude to tradition as a site backgrounds for modern changes and developments, except in rare cases that acknowledge it as cultural heritage or lifestyle (Chen & Tao, 2017; Chen & Zong, 1999; Fang & Xie, 2008; Gao et al., 2019; Li & Zhu, 2008; Lin et al., 2022; Weller, 2021; Zhao & Zou, 2017). Three traditional themes were: cultivation (*gengdi*), *fengshui*, and ancestor worship (*jizu*).

While *fengshui* principles guided people in selecting appropriate locations for the living and the dead, ensuring survival and prosperity at a place through the aggregation of energy – *qi* – informed by the topography and other environmental features, cultivation, as a practice with intricate knowledge, allowed people to change and modify the land for production and reproduction, and ancestor worshipping, which was immanent in the lineage bond, helped govern social relationships individually and collectively.

These traditions observed in the empirical cases reviewed have persisted in various forms (Table 2.2). They never remain static and instead transform themselves while intersecting with modernities. The most notable means of persistence is through active revival by locals, usually combined with a necessary reinvention or reimagination, as resistance to state-led modernity. This process is exemplified by the reinforcement of the sacredness of a village's ancestral hall in Guangzhou to reclaim ownership instead of politicising the space during the state-led urban village redevelopment; farming and gardening on their allocated housing plots by land-less villagers in peri-urban Zhuhai, asserting their land ownership; and relocated residents' 'ungating' the gated community in peri-urban Nanjing to reclaim a rural lifestyle.

More often, the persistence of tradition is in a disguise of modern forms, as seen in the cases of urban cemeteries, monument parks, cultural squares, and organic urban farming. The spacious ground in front of ancestral halls or temples was indeed an integral part of the whole for various activities, from ritual ones to social gatherings and leisure events of the village collective. Such uses continued, and spaces were retained as concretised 'cultural squares' or 'plazas'. Some temples were rebuilt or reopened as attractive landmarks or mountain parks for tourism purposes. Visiting ancestral sites on important dates, including the *Qingming* festival⁷, has been continuously practised by the public at cemeteries, though adapted to environmental norms.

⁷*Qingming* (Tomb Sweeping Festival) is a traditional festival of the dead. On the 15th day following the spring equinox, tombs would be visited and tidied by descendants.

In line with the above, some traditions were accepted and acknowledged by the state and/or local party, so persistence is defined as adaptation. For example, the *Qingming* festival has been listed as a national festival dedicated to praying for respect from the ancestors through tomb sweeping and worshipping. The *Qiqiao* festival, recovered from a legendary story, was reinvented as a regional intangible heritage for the city's brand-making and creative tourism development, to cater to a consumerist society. Specific spaces were accordingly created, such as a theme park and exhibition centre.

However, some traditions became too fragmented and were reduced to mere symbolic uses. Two examples are *fengshui* and agriculture-related water networks (used to characterise a hydraulic society). *Fengshui*, despite its commutability to the ecological approach to urban design and planning, has seen a reduction in use, though some designers have selected elements and incorporated them into modern tools like GIS to quantitatively design a high-tech park or historic site. The mountain, river, and *qi* are more symbolic elements than the actual meaning of the cosmos.

The persistence of traditions, whether in opposition to or in alignment with modern interventions, allows certain forms, often seen as non-places (e.g. urban villages), to continue and impart depth to new modern forms through varied (and frequently alternative) use values. It therefore serves as a force to hinder the hegemony of urban planning and has a potential to guide a more inclusive approach to planning and governing landscapes.

2.6 Conclusion

The expressions of Chinese modernity illustrated by the reviewed empirical cases in South China cities align with the arguments for plural forms of modernity that draw on cultural and geopolitical contexts (Nyilas, 2018). In the process of constituting urban landscapes since the 1980s, water has played varying roles (technical, nostalgic, ecological, and spiritual) while zoning with designated singular functions at multiple scales has served as a modern instrument for proliferation in quantity, and sanitisation has facilitated eliminating perceived 'danger' or 'disorder' associated with non-places.

The glimpses of enduring traditions suggest that modernity reveals multi-dimensional ambivalence (Delanty, 2004). Chinese urban modernity in urban planning attempts to delineate land into distinct fragments with mono-functions and to maintain orderly land uses, whereas traditions, through their persistence as resistance, adaptation, disguise, or reduction, attempt to forge the multiplicity of cities by interrupting and intertwining these distinct fragments. Apparently, there are interplays between urban modernity and tradition, and modern planning and design practices respond to these traditions and adjust accordingly.

Table 2.2. Identified traditions in the selected empirical cases and their uses in the modern society of South China.

Tradition	Use before the 1980s	Use since the 1980s
Cultivation (Gengdi)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hydraulic society with cultural landscapes composing water networks with the purposes of irrigation and flood control - Settlements structuring and naming - Land claiming and food growing as productive (and reproductive) practices - In natural rhythms through crop rotation, material cycles, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Water networks survived and were reduced to a supporting role in irrigation - Widely recognised as a legacy of tradition or agricultural heritage - Persisted as farming activities in new forms, e.g. organic farming, small-scale rooftop gardening - Survive and reinvented as an agricultural landscape for sightseeing and tourism
Fengshui	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As principles for locating things (for both the dead and the living) according to the natural environment (movement of wind, flow of water, sun direction, mountain forms, etc.) - Developed from the cosmological <i>yin-yang</i> philosophy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduced to symbolic selective elements for incorporation with modern tools in urban design and planning - Persisted silently as the mentality of the public
Ancestor Worshipping (Jizu)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lineage building and maintaining relationships among families - Communal spaces and private spaces, e.g. tombs, temples, village ancestral halls, and home altars - Festivals <i>Qingming</i> (tomb weeping) and <i>Chongyang*</i> (<i>double ninth</i>) as per lunar calendar; deities' birthdays - Associated cults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Persisted in new forms, e.g., commercial cemeteries and monumental parks - Revived as resistance to state reclamation - Accepted and adapted as a national, provincial, and municipal traditional festival, i.e. <i>Qingming</i> - Revived as folk festivals, e.g. <i>Chongyang</i>, deities' birthdays - Survived and reinvented as spaces for cultural tourism

**Chongyang* in autumn, similar to *Qingming* in spring, is a festival for the dead. The date of *Qingming* relates to the solar calendar, while the date of *Chongyang* is on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month.

In other words, traditions are embedded within modernity, functioning as a force for reflexivity by fostering both self-critique and critical engagement with dominant paradigms, thereby contributing to reflexive modernity as a means of pluralisation, as proposed by Beck et al. (1994). These intersections offer a valuable analytical framework for examining key elements of city heterogeneity—such as specificity, continuity, and identity (Pan, 2021)—beyond the ‘high’ ideological shackles, thereby informing more inclusive and adaptable approaches to urban planning and design.

Consequently, diverse interplays of tradition and modernity should be the focus of further research in order to contribute to the debates and critiques of urban modernity, as well as provide valuable insights to modern urban planning and design in China. It is necessary to start with an understanding of urban modernity as a non-linear historical process to which urban planning processes are attached. This approach invites re-reading a place following the view that its past resides in the present (or contextualising a place within history). Current studies on the reform and post-reform eras often neglect the historical importance of events before the 1980s, and thus retain a dichotomous perspective of pre-modern and modern. This view carries a European idea of modernism and the mentality of a superior now and an inferior past as criticised. The ‘land as palimpsest’ conception can help bridge the binary of past and present, and help develop a more comprehensive understanding of a place, a space, or a landscape, by giving it thickness.

Closely related to the first, the second important aspect is to give more attention to the everyday life where both tradition and modernity are experienced. The modernity shown in reviewed cases can be considered as political modernity, characterised by state-dominated planning and design ideas. This aligns with Wang’s (2018) nationwide study of the land use change and urbanisation process in China. However, there were dialectic negotiations between state and local practices, forming a ‘space of relative autonomy’ as termed by Scott (1990). While the government tries to set disciplines and borrow rules from Western planning, the local Chinese villages and neighbourhoods try to give meaning to land based on daily and traditional practices such as cultivation and ancestor worshipping. Thus, further work could be conducted on the evidence drawn from everyday life, including tactics like resistance or adaptation, as well as the strenuous effort of dominant groups to regulate sites. To facilitate an empirical investigation, mixed methods should be encouraged to balance spatial and socio-cultural analyses. For example, ethnography or photography could be incorporated into the prevalent approach of questionnaires and interviews.

The third aspect is the need to expand study areas into hinterlands and give more attention to urban fringes. These areas, with lax state supervision, exhibit more contested landscapes and diverse urban lives than urban cores, where the resistance manifested by long-term villagers, rural-urban migrants, and other residents is a primary form of enduring traditions. Given its

complexity and deep-rooted rurality, more in-depth investigations on the potential new spatial forms as a result of interplays of tradition and modernity could take place there to facilitate a comprehensive understanding, which would inform more sensitive and responsible planning and design interventions, rather than adhering to generic, population-based approaches.

This review work has limitations. Current studies that were selected and reviewed concentrate on coastal cities or megacities along the Yangtze River. These cities, typically treaty ports during the semi-colonial period, soon became pilot cities for special economic zones and other opening policies. Including studies in Chinese language can mitigate the overlook of inner territories of river basins. Nevertheless, this indicates a geographic bias among international researchers.

This chapter demonstrates that Chinese urban modernity is not a Westernised imposition but rather an evolving, entangled process where traditions persist, adapt, and hybridise within the fabric of modern urban landscapes. Through practices like cultivation, *fengshui*, and ancestor worship, traditions continue to shape spatial and social dynamics, amid state-driven modernisation and technocratic planning. At the same time, these enduring traditions act as a force for reflexive modernity, challenging the current dominant paradigms of functional zoning, sanitisation, and urban homogeneity. The chapter asserts that recognising and engaging with these tradition-modernity intersections is essential for developing more culturally grounded, inclusive, and adaptable urban planning approaches. Rather than being perceived as impediments to progress, they should be understood as dynamic processes that enrich urban heterogeneity and offer critical alternatives to top-down, homogenising urban design. This perspective invites a rethinking of urban planning as a historically and culturally embedded practice, where the past is not erased but continuously reshaped in the making of more just and diverse urban futures.

Supplementary material

Table A: A full list of reviewed empirical works

Code	Publication	Period covered by data		Urban forms	Empirical sites	Methods
Sc1	Li and Zhu (2008)		2005-2006	Buddhist temple at an industrial park	Suzhou, peri-urban	Design review
Sc2**	Abramson (2011)		1990s-2005	communal temples	Quanzhou, urban	Fieldwork (Observation, photography)
Sc3	Gao et al., (2018)		2012-13	village's ancestral temple	Guangzhou W-village, urban or suburban	Ethnographic fieldwork (observation and interviews)
Sc4	Svensson (2022)		2012, 2014, 2015	Ancestral halls	Wenzhou, peri-urban	Fieldwork with 3 visits in 2 years (observation, interviews, photography)
Sc5	Murray (2018)		2015-17	City God temple	Xiamen, urban	Fieldwork (observation)
Sc6	Weller (2021)		till 2016	Sacred sites at industrial park	Suzhou, peri-urban	Anthropological fieldwork (interviews)
Sc7	Guo and Herrmann-Pillath (2023b)		2016-19	village's ancestral hall and temple	Shenzhen, urban (Xiasha) and sub-urban (Fenghuang)	Participatory fieldwork (observation, interviews, and archives)
Sc8	Guo and Herrmann-Pillath (2023a)		2019	urban cemeteries	Shenzhen, sub-urban	Questionnaire survey (n=200), archives (i.e., government documents, news, and web content)
Sc9	Deng and Li (2023)	1949	till 2020	urban cemeteries	Nanjing, urban and peri-urban	Planning review
S1	Leaf (2002)		mid-1990s	urbanised village	Quanzhou, peri-urban	N/A
S2	Zhu (2004)	1980s	1990s	urban village	Shantou, Shenzhen urban	Observation and archives (government planning documents)
S3	Liu and Wu (2006)		2004	old neighbourhood, migrants' enclave, workers' village	Nanjing, urban and peri-urban	Spatial survey, in-depth interviews (n-35)
S4	Pow (2007)		2004-05	gated community (middle and high income)	Shanghai, urban and peri-urban	Fieldwork (participant observation, interviews)

S5	Wang et al. (2009)	1990s 2000s	urban village	Shenzhen, urban and peri-urban	Fieldwork (interviews, policy archives, household survey)
S6	Liu et al. (2010)	2006-07	urban village	Guangzhou, Kunming, Nanjing, Wuhan, Xian, Harbin, urban and peri-urban	Household survey with questionnaires (n=75 each village)
S7	Breitung (2011)	1980s 1990s 2000s	work unit, gated community	Guangzhou	Survey (n=662)
S8	Boland and Zhu (2012)	2000s	green community	Shanghai, urban and peri-urban	Participant observation, archives (programme document and reports)
S9	Li et al (2014)	till 2012	urban village	Liede, Guangzhou, urban	Archives (plans, maps) and photography
S10	Liu et al. (2014)	2010	urban village	Xiaohubei, Guangzhou, urban	Ethnographic study
S11	Kochan (2015)	2000s	urban village	Shenzhen and Beijing, urban	Observation, photography
S12	Zacharias and lei (2016)	2010, 2013, 2014	urban fringe, art village	Guangzhou Xiaozhou, peri-urban	Spatial mapping, questionnaire, observation
S13	Lang et al. (2016)	2014-15	urban fringe village	Xiamen, peri-urban, Shenzhen peri-urban	Observation, documents
S14	Zhao and Zou (2017)	2014-16	urban village, gated community, university town	Nanjing, peri-urban	Observation, in-depth interviews (n=27)
S15	Song et al. (2016)	2016	urban village	Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Zhuhai, urban	Observation, structured interviews (n=40), questionnaire survey (n=463)
S16	Chen and Tao (2017)	till 2016	urban village	Guangzhou Zhucun, urban	Participant observation, in-depth interviews (n=23), archives
S17	He and Chang (2020)	2012-18	Industrial and residential enclaves	Suzhou SIP, peri-urban	Questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews (n=30), non-participant observation

S18	Oostrum (2021)	2019	urban village	Guangzhou, urban and peri-urban	Spatial mapping (morphology), photography
S19	Maclachlan and Gong (2023)	2019	gated community (talent workers, high-rise)	Shenzhen, urban	Participant observation, semi-structured interviews (n=64)
S20	Kan and Chen (2021)	2016-20	urban village	Zhuhai, peri-urban	Fieldwork with observation and semi-structured interviews (n=31)
S21	Wu and Zhang (2022)	2020	urban villages	Hangzhou, urban and peri-urban	Spatial mapping, semi-structured interviews (n=12), quantitative questionnaires (n=199)
S22	Luo et al. (2022)	2020-21	historical neighbourhood	Shanghai, urban	Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews (n=36)
S23	Lin et al. (2022)	2019-22	village in the city/ancient village	Guangzhou Huangpu, urban	Semi-structured interviews (n=20), participant observation, document analysis
PA1	Zhang (1995)	1950s -1992	lowland agriculture	Shunde, urban and peri-urban	N/A
PA2	Chen and Zong (1999)	1980s 1990s	lowland agriculture	Shanghai, peri-urban	Aerial photographs and bathymetric data, agricultural reports
PA3	Huang et al. (2006)	till 2002	small farmland	Nanjing and Wuxi, peri-urban	Workshops, structured interviews (n=102), water sampling
PA4	Horowitz and Liu (2017)	2013	urban agriculture	Wuhan, urban and peri-urban	Survey of activities, semi-structured interviews (n=60)
PA5	Ding et al. (2018)	2010s	small organic urban farms	Shanghai, urban and peri-urban	Survey of locations, archives, interviews (n=57)
PA6	Li et al. (2021)	2016	creative space/industry, urban village	Pu'an Village, Changzhou, peri-urban	GIS land use mapping, semi-structured focus-group interviews
PA7	Glaros et al. (2022)	2017	urban agriculture	Nanjing	Questionnaire (n=56), structured interviews (n=22)

PA8*	Roast (2022)		2017	urban agriculture	Chongqing, peri-urban	Observation, qualitative interviews (n=130)
PA9	Veeck et al. (2020)		2017-18	urban agriculture	Nanjing, peri-urban	Archived statistical data, GIS, interviews
PA10	Hietala et al. (2021)		2018	small-scale eco farms	Shanghai Qingpu district, urban fringe	Qualitative in-depth interviews
PA11	Talamini et al. (2022)		2017-19	urban agriculture	Shenzhen, urban	Policy study, spatial mapping, semi-structured interviews (n=47)
PA12	Ding et al. (2022)		2018-20	community garden	National wide	Spatial mapping, questionnaire (n=1569), in-depth interviews (n=171)
PA13*	Xing et al. (2022)		2019-22	urban agriculture	Chongqing, suburban	Questionnaire (n=465), spatial analysis, photography
PI1	Ho and Lin (2004)	1987-96		settlements, industrial land	Wuxi, urban and peri-urban	Land use statistics survey, land use mapping
PI2	Fang and Xie (2008)		2005-08	hi-tech park	Shenzhen, peri-urban	Planning and design review
PI3	Ye et al. (2014)		1990s-2012	university town	Nanjing, peri-urban	Land use cover change mapping
PI4	Pan and Song (2017)		2015-16	Industrial zone, innovative park	Shenzhen, urban	participant observation, qualitative interviews, reports
PI5	Choi et al. (2022)		2010s	makerspace	Shanghai, urban	Qualitative unstructured in-depth interviews (n=37), observation

PA: Productive landscape (agricultural-related)

PI: Productive landscape (industrial-related)

Sc: Sacred landscape

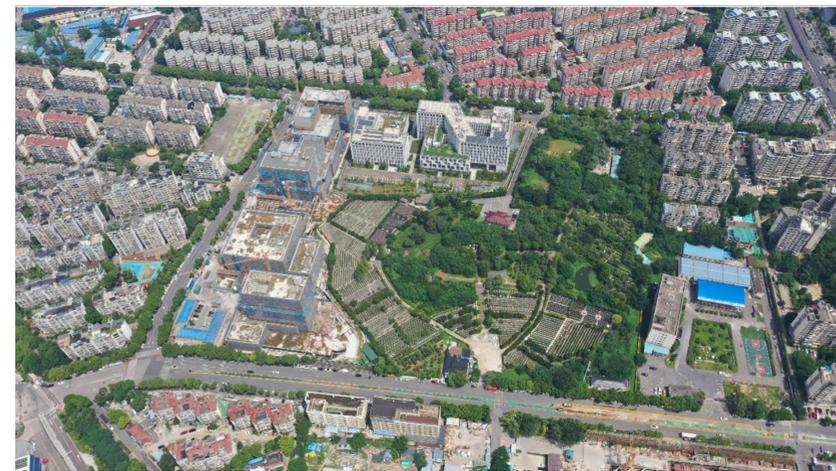
S: Settlement



Communal temples, Quanzhou, 2000s
Source: Abramson 2011



Ancestral hall and the cultural square in the front, Shenzhen, 2010s
Source: Guo & Hermann-Pillath, 2023b



Jinling Overseas Chinese Cemetery
Nanjing, 2020s
Source: Deng & Li, 2023

Figure A: Images of urban forms from the selected empirical works



Urban village,
Shenzhen, 2000s
Source: Kochan, 2015



Old neighbourhood
Nanjing, 2000s
Source: Liu & Wu, 2006



Workers' village
Nanjing, 2000s
Source: Liu & Wu, 2006



Gated community
Shanghai, 2000s
Source: Pow, 2007



Regenerated historical
neighbourhoods
Shanghai, 2020s
Source: Lou et al., 2022



Suzhou Industrial Park,
Suzhou, 2010s
Source: He & Chang 2020



From the industrial park to
the innovative park with
office buildings (right),
Shenzhen, 2010s
Source: Pan & Song 2017



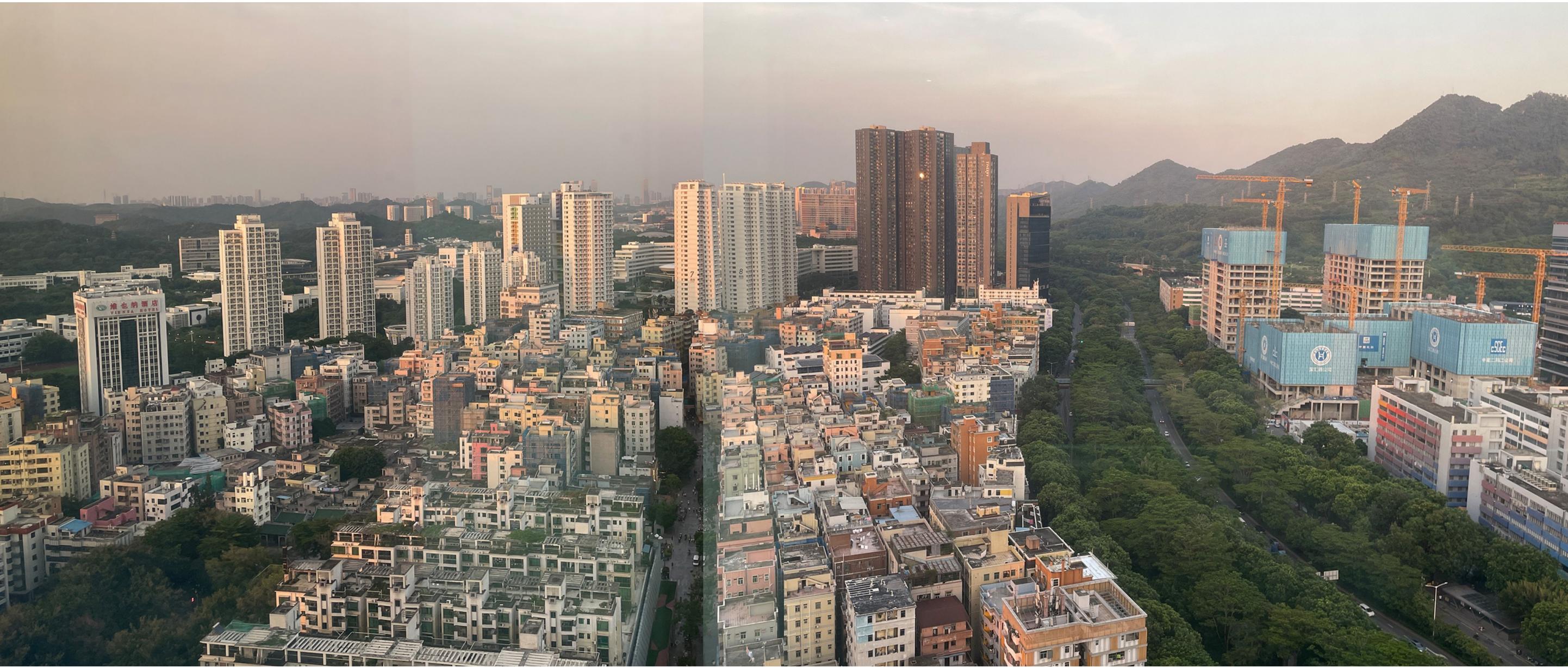
Makerspace,
Shanghai, 2010s
Source: Pan & Song 2017



Urban agriculture in a vacant
land (left)
Chongqing, 2017
Source: Roast, 2022

Organic agriculture (right two)
Shanghai, 2010s
Source: Hietala et al., 2019

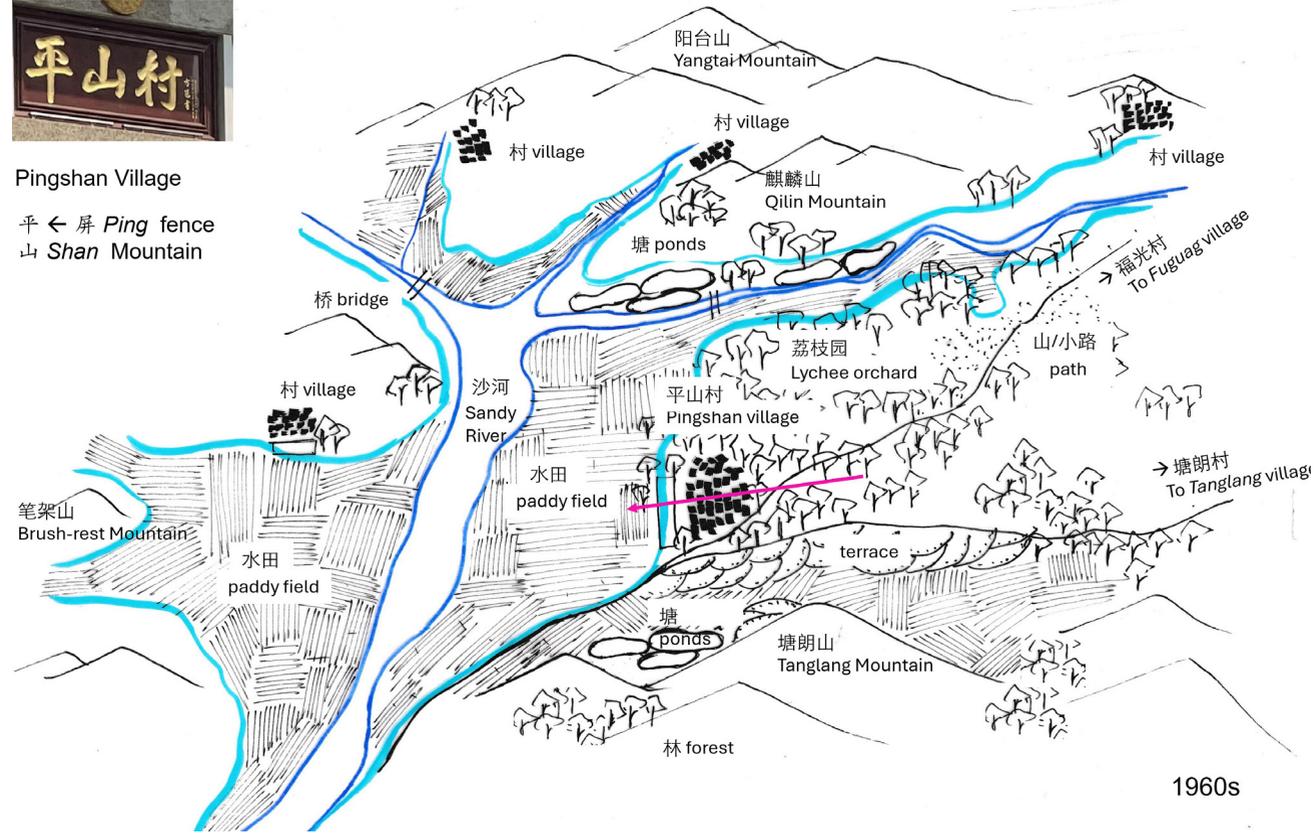
Rediscovering Pingshan village



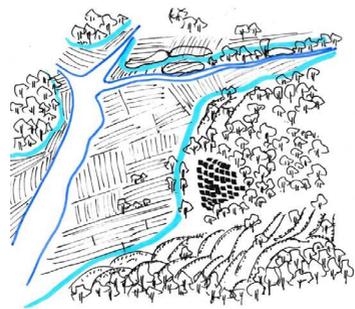
Aerial view of Pingshan village. Photo by Diwen Tan, 2024



Pingshan Village
平 ← 屏 Ping fence
山 Shan Mountain

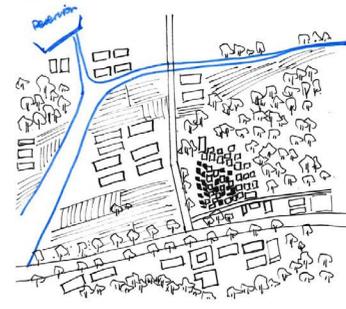


1960s



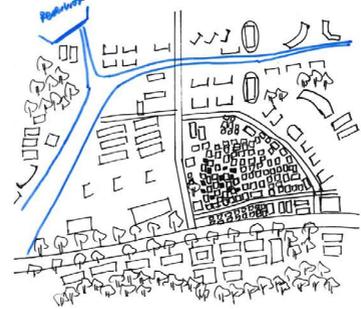
1960s

Villagers moved out, along Taogang (fleeing to Hong Kong) wave in 1950s-70s.



1980s

Migrant workers moved in when the hukou system relaxed in the early 1980s, and overseas factories set up in the Special Economic Zones.



21st century

Migrant population increased until the end 2010s when urban renewal started in Pingshan.



Village Paifang gate. Photo by Diwen Tan, 2023

3

Pingshan village

Neither rural nor urban

This chapter uses the palimpsest analogy to explore the interactions between tradition and modernity in Chinese urban contexts. Chinese megacities including Shenzhen have undergone continually radical and dramatic transformations. The palimpsest notion, a layered, overwritten surface with traces of earlier content, enables us to unravel historical and cultural layers from the past in the present readings. Shenzhen is then conceptualised as a palimpsest, illustrating its uneven stratification process in which urban villages contain deep descriptive layers, encompassing both traditional myths and futuristic modern ideas. The case study of Pingshan village, through a close examination of specific locations via ethnographic mapping, demonstrates that each particular space is an accumulation of various ways of palimpsest. This gives a glimpse of the traditions that are being handed down and how they intersect with modern influences to produce hybrid spaces. These traditions are the forms of practice embedded in the everyday lives of residents, including long-term villagers and arrived migrants. This chapter concludes by proposing a framework for creating the potential of hybridisation to inform a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design.

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Minor adjustments were made to align with the thesis.

3.1 Neglect of the city's past

As a multi-layered, complex system, a city may be seen as a palimpsest: a layered, overwritten surface with traces of earlier content (Corboz, 1983; Liu et al., 2020). The palimpsest analogy has been employed in urban studies to investigate urban forms and the multiple historical layers of meaning that cities have accumulated, from their origins to the present (Crang, 1996; Khirfan, 2010; Turgut, 2021). This chapter extends the application of the palimpsest analogy to a Chinese urban context to inform a more inclusive approach to understanding cities before acting on or planning. This approach entails recognising cities' deep-rooted rural histories, analysing the interactions between tradition (past) and modernity (present), and exploring the potential to fuse them to address various problems in urban planning, such as social-spatial segregation.

The unprecedented and rapid development and urbanisation China has experienced since the economic reforms of the 1980s are closely linked to the state's ideology of accelerated modernisation and a quantitative urban planning system. Chinese urban modernity encompasses revolutionary changes and reforms in technology, knowledge, economics, and society within a socialist context (Buzan & Lawson, 2020), driven by a vision of creating a new world (Lu, 2006). As illustrated in Chapter 2, particularly Section 2.2, these changes include a reform of the old urban planning system (inherited from the former Soviet Union in 1949) in the 1990s with an expansion to include regional planning (Hu, 2016; Wu, 2015). The new urban planning system has been used as a tool for growth, incorporating ecological environment protection and transportation development. Applying the quantitative land-use or hyper-functional approach, different government departments delineated and managed different functional zones (e.g., ecological, residential, industrial, public lands), in their independent systems (Curien, 2014; Liu & Zhou, 2021). The absence of a unified spatial planning system has caused many problems, including overlapping social conflicts, excessive land development, and imbalanced regional development (Liu & Zhou, 2021). Such planning methods also contributed to social divisions with the emergence of new urban poverty (Madrazo & van Kempen, 2012; Zhang, 2007; Zhang et al., 2023).

These urban problems are observable in Shenzhen, a city as a laboratory to test modernisation strategies and interventions that were then disseminated across China. Constant destruction and construction, akin to erasure and new writing in the palimpsest analogy, led by the state as well as residents, transformed the territory, both physically and culturally. Despite its historical heritage, as evidenced by its changing names over time, Shenzhen is often perceived to be a new city or a city on a *tabula rasa* due to the well-known literature about its progressive development over the past decade (Lei et al., 2021; Sun & Xue, 2020; Wang & Liu, 2015). Rem Koolhaas, for example, described it as a ‘generic city’, meaning a city without history (Koolhaas, 1995, pp. 1239-1264; Sala, 2016). Few studies have recognised Shenzhen’s past and lingering historical traces (O’Donnell, 2017), nor investigated its traditions and how they coexist with Chinese modernity.

The palimpsest analogy allows a nuanced reading and understanding of a place, which is essential before planning (Corboz, 1983). This chapter extends this notion and hypothesises that reading Shenzhen as a palimpsest can help inform a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design. It will address the three questions: 1) How can Shenzhen be conceptualised as comprising different layers? 2) What are the interactions between tradition and modernity in Shenzhen, as observed through the analysis of an urban village? 3) After reading Shenzhen’s landscapes, is it possible to envision hybrid potentials that go beyond the palimpsest?

We take an urban village—a space that has accumulated deep layers of history and meanings during its ‘autonomous’ urbanisation process (Bach, 2010)—as a case study. Using a combined methodology of observations, interviews, and ethnographic mapping, we closely examine spatial configurations and the lifestyles of residents, including original villagers and arrived migrants, in three areas of focus: the village core, the extended village, and the village’s industrial park. Reflecting on the empirical case, we present an alternative approach to the redevelopment of the urban village, proposing a future hybridisation scenario that blends tradition with the new inscriptions made by modern science and technology.

3.2 Urban palimpsest and beyond

The palimpsest analogy has been widely used for reading cities and places in a more comprehensive manner. Corboz (1983) introduced the concept of ‘the land as palimpsest’, acknowledging the scarcity of land and the necessity of reusing and rewriting it. This reuse requires soil scraping, involving destruction and construction to allow for the ‘inscriptions of new ideas and ideals of new, emerging worlds’ (Johannessen, 2013, p. xvi), as was observed globally in the era of rapid industrial growth. Embracing the idea of ‘longue durée’, land is considered to result from ‘lengthy and slow stratification’ processes with new inscriptions constantly added by inhabitants, planners, and natural factors (Cavalieri & Cogato Lanza, 2020; Corboz, 1983, p. 32). This echoes geographer Sauer’s view of landscapes and places as being

‘in [a] continuous process of development or of dissolution and replacement’ (Sauer, 1963, p. 333).

Examination of the process of layering and contestation in cities has found that the traceable past is not static; rather, it is actively engaging with the present, even as the new meaning becomes dominant or ‘superscribed’ upon it (Colwell, 2022; Duara, 1988; Turgut, 2021). The inscriptions from various historical eras coexist, alongside others being erased and ones yet to be written, producing multiple interwoven meanings in a place. The past may symbolise an enduring spirit amidst the constant changes and restructuring of urban forms (Khairfan, 2010).

The simultaneous coexistence of all inscriptions and the non-linear accumulation that connects the past to the present contribute to recognising various traditions within modern practices in Chinese urban contexts. As some scholars have observed, Chinese contemporary life was engulfed in thick layers of accumulated history (Huang & van Weesep, 2019; Ji, 2015; Lu, 2012) while being guided by future-oriented state ideologies in an era of high modernity (Scott, 1998). Some scholars of everyday urbanism have shown that people exhibit diverse attitudes towards introduced modern technologies, planning projects, or institutions, including acceptance, resistance, or adaptation (Goldstein, 2006; Heynen, 2000); their attitudes are often associated with traditional beliefs and habits. A new form can also emerge from the hybridisation of the old and new, as exemplified by the urban form *danwei*, which blends influences from both Soviet modernity and traditional Chinese spaces (Lu, 2006). The everyday then serve as a platform for critical investigations of modernity and how it has been experienced in particular contexts.

Moving beyond the palimpsest as simply a concept to describe and read the land over time, this paper aspires to interpret the interaction of tradition and modernity, the values of the past and present, to inform a hybridization scenario. Although there are numerous efforts to this end in specific architectural projects led by architects or research collaboratives utilising local materials and vernacular knowledge in experimental designs (Bolchover & Lin, 2013; Wang, 2013), few attempts have been made in urban planning. Even in those architectural experiments, the architect’s visions of rural and possible modern life often overlooked the local lives that are actually shaping spaces (Qian & Lu, 2022). Planners and designers are also trying to revive or remake traditions to develop urban cultural tourism. The common practice is creating ancient villages by introducing festival shows and markets, renovating houses, and opening museums (Lang et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2022). However, without understanding the past (and contested) layers, traditional elements are reduced to general forms that are added to the existing landscape and serve as tools for tourism.

3.3 Shenzhen as a palimpsest

Shenzhen, often viewed as a model city for testing Deng Xiaoping's market socialism in China, has been at the forefront of experimenting with new foreign ideas, interventions, and transformation strategies. Since 1979, when Bao'an County was elevated to a city and renamed Shenzhen, the land has undergone continual, radical and dramatic transformations. A series of new urban layers have been superimposed on previous ones, bringing with them the spirit of modern science and technology. Its histories, its rural origin and roots, are being unevenly obscured and obliterated.

By revisiting its development trajectories, Shenzhen can be conceptualised as a palimpsest composed of overlapping, contested layers that represent both physical and cultural aspects. The territory is characterised by its mountainous topography, rivers and streams, and an extensive coastline (Figure 3.1). Three layers (layers 1-3), namely the village, sacred landscape, and productive landscape, were established in the past within the framework of myths backed by traditional and religious beliefs and practices (Li, 2018). Greatly influenced by the landscape and cultural factors (Rapoport, 1969), early clan-based communities established settlements primarily near the mountains or along the coast; some villages were dispersed between the two, along rivers and streams. While adhering to the existing landscapes, they also actively altered them to create new ones including sacred and productive landscapes. Sacred landscapes are omnipresent: there are religious temples in the mountains and small communal temples and ancestral halls in villages. Productive landscapes are strongly associated with settlements: while coastal settlers (mainly Cantonese and Danga) practised fishing, oyster farming, and salt production, the mountain settlers (Cantonese and Hakka) used riverplains and slopes for agriculture, including the cultivation of rice, sugarcane, and lychees.

Layers 4-7, namely industries and infrastructure, campuses, housing projects, and redevelopment projects, were driven by a utopian imagination backed by modern technology and science. This separates the new era, especially of reforms of the 1980s' onward, from the past (Figure 3.2). Shenzhen's rapid industrialisation and migration-related urbanisation propelled the expansion of industrial parks, infrastructure, new residential apartments, and other high-rise buildings. At this early stage, land conversion, land expropriation, and privatisation were common practices. Much of Bao'an's topography and agricultural fields, especially along its coastline, were flattened and filled in to implement the urban Special Economic Zone (SEZ) (Ma & Blackwell, 2017). Some villages also underwent demolition-led redevelopment and were partially or totally replaced by different zones. The remaining agricultural villages were reclassified as urban villages (*chengzhongcun*), as an efficient 'spatial fix' for under-urbanisation (Song et al., 2008). To accelerate educational modernisation, universities from across China began to establish campuses in Shenzhen in the early 2000s. With the construction of the University Town of Shenzhen, the former recreational area of Xili Lake (a reservoir built in 1960) and the

surrounding mountainous landscape became a haven for scholars and students. Football fields, stadiums, libraries, and other residential buildings replaced the original villages, along with their orchards and sacred sites such as cemeteries. The 2010s saw an ideological shift towards creating an ecological, innovative, and liveable city. There has been a boom of creative centres, innovation parks, and makerspaces that are remaking former industrial facilities (Fu et al., 2022), serving as incubators to foster diverse types of businesses and attract talent workers. A new redevelopment initiative aimed at comprehensively improving urban villages was launched in 2018, with the goal of rehabilitating housing to improve residents' quality of life and preserve cultural identity.

Clearly, the modernisation process occurs in three simultaneous and interconnected ways: 1) The first involves total replacement as the new is superimposed on the old in such a way as to remove most evidence of the past (Bailey, 2007); 2) The second involves partial replacement, in which new layers are written on top of each other, thus creating a space where the overlap, contrast, or concealment of multiple layers can be perceived; 3) The third involves 'holes' left by brutal erasure (Corboz, 1983, p. 33), where the past is absent. Among the most conspicuous examples of this last process in Shenzhen are hundreds of reservoirs that were created by removing forests, excavating, demolishing villages, and relocating residents, as well as very limited historical archives or documents from before the 1980s that have survived.

These surviving villages and their lands that have experienced the transformation process bear the imprints of all layers, 1-6. They emerge as ideal sites to read as palimpsests and discuss how the intersection of traditional and modern layers creates a potential hybridity. On the one hand, they are connected to the rapid and large-scale changes that occurred locally and globally, and on the other hand, they retain a deeply layered description of the site. These villages collectively connect the city's past, present, and possible future, reflecting both traditional myths and futurist modern ideas. The villages' urbanisation process and enduring ancestral halls—located between new shopping malls and high-rise apartments—serve as a reminder of the many historical layers that have accumulated over time. The villages' names, always rooted in the local topography, like mountains and rivers, or carrying blessings from the first settlers, convey a depth of cultural thickness that is often overlooked. The label 'urban village', or '*chengzhongcun*', despite its negative connotations with outdated stereotypes and social discrimination and its implication of being 'backwards' or 'behind' on progress and modernisation, encapsulates a mixed or ambiguous identity that is neither urban nor rural.

3.4 Methods and materials collection

Pingshan village is an ordinary clan-based village, which is attached to mountains and Sha River, one of the important rivers that feed the city. Since 2001, when 'University Town' became a new landmark in the area, broad boulevards, fancy shopping malls and hotels, high-rise middle-

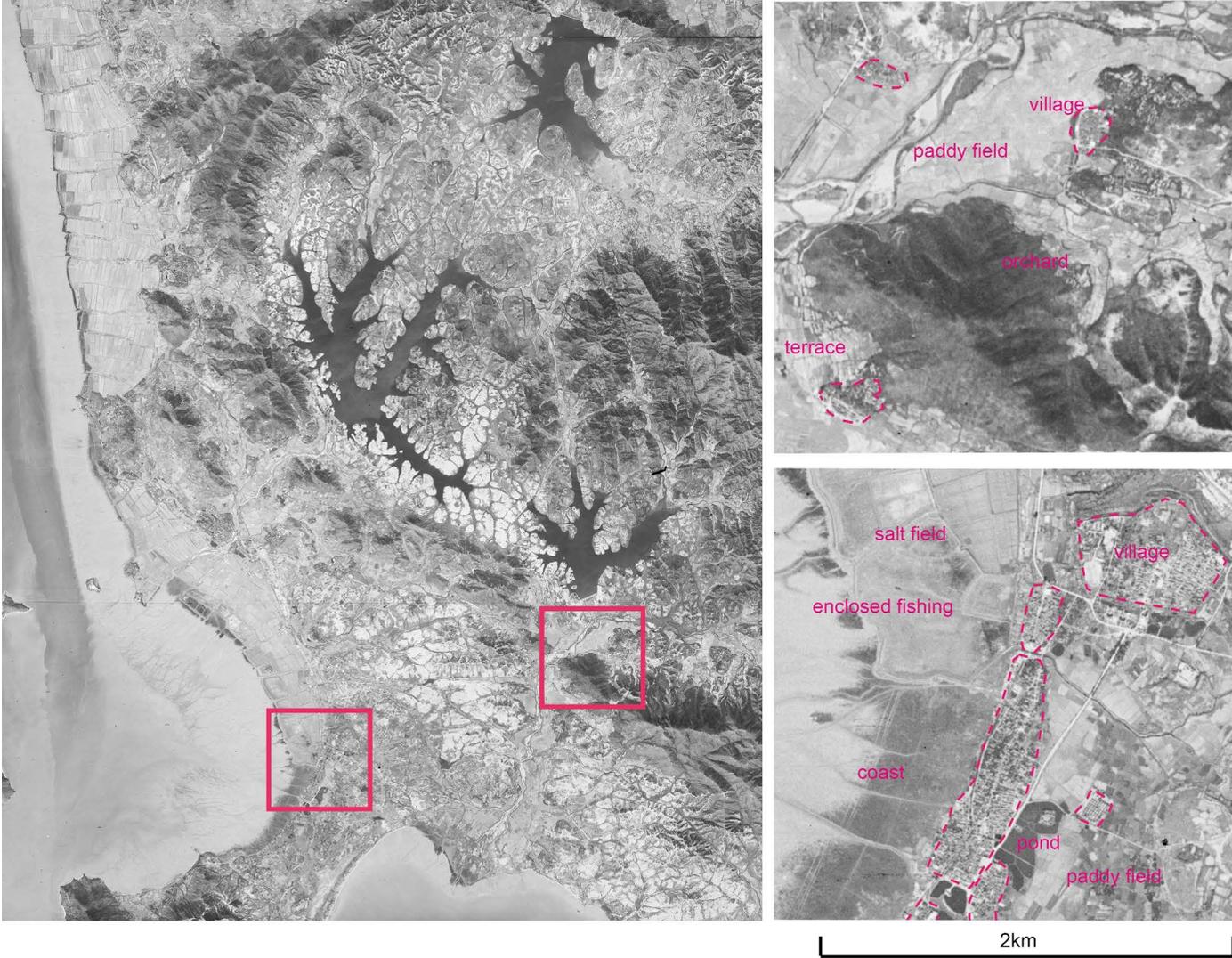


Figure 3.1. Traditional villages and agricultural activities before the 1980s were concentrated along the coast and near the mountains. Source: USGS dataset DS1014-2101DF147 (1964), modified by Diwen Tan with notation of productive landscapes.



Figure 3.2. Since the 1980s, the coast has been radically filled by urbanisation, yet the big mountains have resisted. Source: Google Earth 2023.

A series of interviews were conducted with different groups. In the first phase numerous visits were made to the community work office to delve into the village's history including its lineage, demographics, and the ongoing 'Talent Town' redevelopment project. The majority of the research time was then spent speaking with residents to probe a deeper understanding of the everyday lived experiences of local villagers and migrants. Narrative interviews (Ayres, 2008; Squire, 2013) were conducted with a total of 48 individuals, of which 16 engaged in extensive dialogues lasting several hours each. They are intercepted during observations at random, though intention was given to cover a diverse population, consisting of elderly and middle-aged villagers and migrants of various occupations and ages. Also, a planning official and construction workers were met and the site tours they provided allowed me to learn about the ongoing redevelopment plan and its motivations, and to understand residents' diverse expectations.

The preliminary sketches made on site were subsequently refined into ethnographic drawings during and after the fieldwork. Ethnographic drawings, as described by Kaijima et al. (2018) were used to visually map the observed spatial characteristics and interactions among individuals and their surroundings, as well as aid in the analysis of everyday practices at specific locations. These drawings were a fundamental tool for translating abstract information into tangible visual forms encompassing spatial elements such as buildings, paths, and yards. Creating these drawings on site helped facilitate encounters with residents, from which interviews followed naturally. To address privacy and ethical considerations, all personal characteristics are anonymised in the drawings, and pseudonyms are used in place of actual names.

3.5 Past and present of Pingshan: neither urban nor rural

3.5.1 The village core: paths as collectors

Within the village core, the urban tissues are highly compact and dense, typically comprising built structures ranging from one to three stories and non-built spaces, including a mess of paths. For first-time observers entering the village core, it often feels like a maze, an impression they repeatedly shared. There are hundreds of possible routes to take, each with a multitude of activities occurring along the way. However, for a teenager who has grown up here as a second-generation, rural-urban migrant, 'every route leads to another; any route is good to take'. This compact urban morphology and the zigzagging paths infuse meaning into living and moving in and through the village, contributing to the creation and enhancement of social interactions. The teenager prefers not to take the most direct route home after her apprenticeship at a copy shop within the village's extended area, but rather to detour to visit her old school friends.

The myriad routes were not originally used for only passing; rather, they represent the interstitial spaces between built structures. In the past, three ancient southwest-northeast paths traversed

this area, following the topography and connecting the village's front and back. However, they were disrupted by the urbanisation process marked by house demolitions and reconstructions that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s. The informal and gradual expansion of housing encroached on common and pedestrian spaces, including ditches that ran along the paths for water drainage. This formed the current, maze-like alleys, some of which are so narrow that only one person can pass, while others are wide and semi-enclosed (Figure 3.4).

Each route that people take serves not only to connect destinations but is also a collection of distinct points or featured spaces. Consider, for example, an ancient path that starts from the ancestral hall of Fang family XI and extends to the village's rear (Figure 3.4). As individuals journey along this path, they can encounter different writings or traces from various historical periods. For instance, there is an old house from the late Qing dynasty that has a sloped wooden roof, a high wall made of blue and black bricks (*qingzhuan*), and a humble gate (*qiangmen*)⁸ framed by 38 cm-thick stone. There is an image of Mao that was painted on the house in the 1950s to replace the previous trace of religious beliefs; although faded and partially obstructed by exposed electrical wires, it nevertheless reminds villagers and careful observers of the history. Adjacent to this house there may be one that was rebuilt in the 1980s using the exterior tiles, such as stylish glass mosaic, that were prevalent and fashionable at that time. All new houses have flat roofs, which shifted their traditional courtyard from the ground to the rooftop. If in the past these paths primarily served for transit and draining water, then today they function as collectors. People traverse through these points as in-between spaces, and each point serves as a stage for social interactions and everyday activities: chatting, washing and drying clothes, eating, card playing, garbage sorting, and so on.

The village core is mainly home to the first generation of rural-urban migrants, and those in-between spaces serve as points of encounter for people from different backgrounds. Uncle Zhang, in his early 50s, lives with his wife and daughter in a one-story, brick-built old house with deteriorating lime plaster. He recalls that in the early 1980s 'I used to go to the mountains to cut wood for villagers or harvest vegetables like large white radishes'. He now works as a waste collector and cleaner in the village as a result of the disappearance of extensive agricultural areas and the introduction of sanitation services. He works every morning from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. and every evening from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m., which gives him considerable free time during the day. He often strolls around the village, visits neighbours' homes, or rests while watching people play cards at the small park in front of the collective ancestral temples. One of his favourite spots is a corner just 10 metres from his house, where his fellow villager from the same province (*laoxiang*) Du's family lives (Figure 3.5). The corner is furnished like other in-between spaces, designed to invite passers-by to slow down or stop by. The furniture typically includes plastic

⁸The *qiangmen* gate style in the imperial time was popular for the families who have a certain wealth but nobody serve as officials.

stools, wooden chairs and foldable tables, which are possibly repurposed from restaurants or elsewhere. One morning around 10 a.m., Uncle Zhang grabbed a children's stool and sat in the shade complaining with Du. Other neighbours occasionally joined the chat. Throughout the day, this limited but diverse setting fostered various activities of urban life, including active socialising such as meetings between neighbours and friends, passive listening while individuals went about their own tasks, and parenting. If cities are often viewed as 'encounters, as spatial formations resulting from dense networks of interaction and as places of meeting with 'the stranger' and with his or her 'difference' (Simonsen, 2008, p. 145), the village core here serves a similar purpose.

3.5.2 The edge of the inside core: the persistence of *ditang*

In the late 1990s, the front edge of the village core underwent significant changes. It was transformed into a broad, paved, two-way vehicular road in the late 1990s. This occurred over phases during which natural soil was changed to concrete and rivers channelled, as part of the state's preference for a more sanitary urban environment. The paved surface, originally called *ditang*, was levelled and compacted earth ground located in front of ancestral halls and houses. As a part of Cantonese culture, *ditang* was used for many purposes, including drying grains in the sun during harvest season and leisure activities in the evening, especially when the moonlight illuminated the ground. It also served as a space for ritual events such as weddings and weekly private markets. There were no fixed functions assigned to *ditang*.

Today, the paved surface is patterned and cleaned every day by rural migrants, most of whom are in their 50s and employed by the village through a sanitation company. However, for Granny Zhan, the pavement in front of her single-storey house continues to serve the same purpose as the *ditang* (Figure 3.6). In the 1980s, she renovated the 40-square-metre house with an updated façade in the fashion of that era. She also added two six-floor housing blocks connected to the old one, which was a common practice, and therefore expanded the house to the edge of the village core. By partially enclosing the front space with recycled portable fences, she reclaimed the front area for her continued daily use. As part of her routine, every morning Granny Zhan offers incense to divine beings. After that, she sits outside facing away from the house, soaking up the sun while waiting for her neighbours (a single, middle-aged woman and other elderly villagers) to join her for brief chats. During the Tomb Festival (*Qingming*)⁹, which is dedicated for honouring the dead, she set off fireworks and burns incense in front of her house.

During the nationwide 'civilised and sanitary city' movement—as an evaluation mechanism that was launched in 2003 and runs every three years (Shi et al., 2022), outdoor spaces were monitored and inspected to maintain social control and order. In April 2023, conflicts emerged

⁹See footnote 5.

regarding the use of pavement. Activities such as dining at tables, drinking tea, and disordered parking were seen by the state as interrupting the standard use of paved roads and thus the city's image. Instead of openly expressing their frustration and anger towards the state's regulations, the residents here displayed patience. They would sneak out during the late evening and prepare to continue using the space in the same way after restrictions were eased.

From Granny Zhan's vantage point facing the southwest, the riverplain and large-scale agriculture that had been written on the land prior to the 1980s are barely visible. In their place stand imposing urban structures and forms: a mixed-use building with a shopping mall on the plinth and a five-star, 32-storey hotel on top; a middle- and upper-class housing community; a wide vehicular road; a square park; and a few self-built houses. The long, rectangular *fengshui* pond has shrunk in size but remains along the axis of ancestral halls and has become part of a village square park, now equipped with a concrete surface, newly planted plants, and fitness facilities, that was established in 1998. While Granny Zhan appreciates the restored riverbank and the tea restaurant at the shopping mall, she often misses the earlier, quieter environment that was free of traffic noise and housing construction noises.

3.5.3 Extended area: reusing the yard

The new village is an extended residential area of the core. To the northeast of the old village is a steep area where self-built houses are relatively sparsely distributed. The area was once covered with forests and orchards that served as a natural defensive barrier and a source of wood resources. The primary ancestor temple, consisting of three halls, is also located there, facing west. The housing units built in the new village in the 1980s and 1990s were initially for families. The distances between them vary, influenced both by the topography and traditional family-based settlement patterns. Villagers maintained the tradition of having yards: each building has its own yard, terrace, or balcony of a different size and shape. Some yards are fully enclosed, while others are partially enclosed and intersected by pathways.

Sister Hua resides on the ground floor of a four-storey house constructed on a slope (Figure 3.7) in a spacious room with an open yard. Sister Hua, who was born in Hunan Province in the mid-1980s, moved to Pingshan village about eight years ago for her children's education. She is both a housewife and an entrepreneur. Every day, she drives her two children to and from school, preparing meals and caring for them. Unlike other young couples who often receive grandparental assistance (Croll, 2006), she is raising her children herself as she is determined to apply modern ideas instead of her rural parents' outdated beliefs. As an entrepreneur, she operates her own self-service flower shop.

The building has only four households, each of which occupies one floor. While other households use the access from the basement, Sister Hua has privatised and claimed ownership of the

semi-open yard and external stairway. This area has now become a playground for children, an experimental plot for growing vegetables and plants, and the setting for her flower business. Various plants and colourful bouquets that are arranged along the stairway that connects the alley to the outside village attract passers-by, especially university students from the adjacent campus. During the pandemic, especially during the lockdown period in 2022, planting helped her improve her mood after a business failure. 'Though I know it's not my own house, it feels like home. Living here is comfortable, similar to my hometown in the countryside,' she remarked.

3.5.4 Extended area: 'on and off'

To the southeast side of the old village, there are apartment blocks arranged in a rigid layout that were developed by villagers as a collective community and provide cheap rental housing for rural migrants and other renters such as recent college graduates (Figure 3.8). These buildings, known as handshake buildings, were built with seven to eight floors each and were separated by a standard distance of about 2.5 metres. However, the informal extension of balconies and windows to maximise indoor space has significantly reduced the distance between buildings, creating a crowded atmosphere. Each floor consists of four households, accommodating a diverse mix of renters. There are two types of units available. The first is a 20-square-metre studio with a kitchen and bathroom that is ideal for the younger generation of migrants, many of whom work in nearby offices. The second type is a 40-square-metre unit with one living room, one bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom, which is suitable for migrant families.

Rather than being characterised by the narrowness that gave rise to the handshake name, these buildings and their spaces in-between are better defined by the dynamic of 'on and off' (Kaijima et al., 2001), which regulates people's connections to the neighbourhood and village environment. The ground floor, which is filled with a variety of businesses such as barber shops, flower shops, massage parlours, and restaurants, is often 'on', blurring the boundary between private and public. The entire ground floor can be viewed as a single area connected by narrow alleys. The ground floor, which has high ceilings similar to those of older houses in the village core, often functions as space for both working and sleeping, often featuring a mezzanine level. This is exemplified by a family-run barbershop where the loft is used for washing hair in the morning and turns into a bedroom for the family in the evening. In comparison, the rest of the floors are often kept 'off' to maintain private spaces. According to Xiao Mo, a recent graduate in her mid-twenties from Guangxi, 'When I open my windows and curtains, I am immediately engulfed in an oily, noisy, smoky, and dirty environment. But when I close them, I can have my own world created by myself, private and clean.'

3.5.5 Youth apartment at the industrial park

In 2015, the village-owned industrial park characterised by squat 3- to 4-storey factory buildings became a makerspace called the University Town Maker Town (*Chuangke xiaozhen*) with the aim of fostering the burgeoning trend of mass entrepreneurship (Figure 3.9). Not too long before this, in the 1990s, large muddy paddy fields with fishponds were cultivated in this area adjacent to the village, taking advantage of the floodplain of one of the few main rivers in Shenzhen. At the turn of the 21st century, this level land was occupied and several industrial parks for product processing and manufacturing were built on it, mainly with the support of investors from Hong Kong who were buoyed by the Three Import and Compensation Trade (*sanlaiyibu*) policy. Along the foot of the mountain, three industrial parks, each spanning more than 300,000 square metres, were established in the late 1990s. These facilities were broad and spaced apart to facilitate transport; at the same time, a 12-lane east-west boulevard was constructed to run parallel to those parks. However, only a decade later, there arose a need to revitalise and transform these factories.

The gated makerspace covers an area of 50,000 square metres and is now a shared office space. After the exterior of the industrial park was renovated, the interior painted, and roads paved, the industrial park was transformed into coworking space. It now accommodates various offices, including a coffee workshop, logistics firms, and apartments for rent. In comparison with the global model of makerspaces, Chinese innovation spaces are more shaped by 'traditional institutional forces, aiming at providing young creative talent (especially college students) a home for potential entrepreneurial practices' (Fu et al., 2022, p. 5).

The residential buildings inside the makerspace are limited to youth apartments. U Plus is one of the companies that targets young tenants, from new graduates to young professionals with moderate but stable incomes. Seven out of the twenty long-term renters that were spoken with were either entrepreneurs or actively searching for opportunities to establish start-ups. They are actively socialising and networking to connect with like-minded people or peers with whom they can establish business collaborations and mutual support mechanisms. This aligns well with the initial concept of the youth apartment, which was to create a homelike atmosphere for each tenant. The diversity among the tenants in terms of backgrounds and interests contributes to an exchange of ideas.

To maximise the number of renters and their opportunities to exchange ideas, the residential areas include a variety of large common spaces designed for shared activities, including a hall with an open kitchen on the ground floor, a first-floor balcony, and a rooftop, while individual rooms are limited to 12 square metres. Activities, ranging from cooking, watching films, and playing games to cultivating vegetables, fruits, and flowers, bring people together, promote friendships, and create a sense of home, in addition to facilitating networking for entrepreneurship.

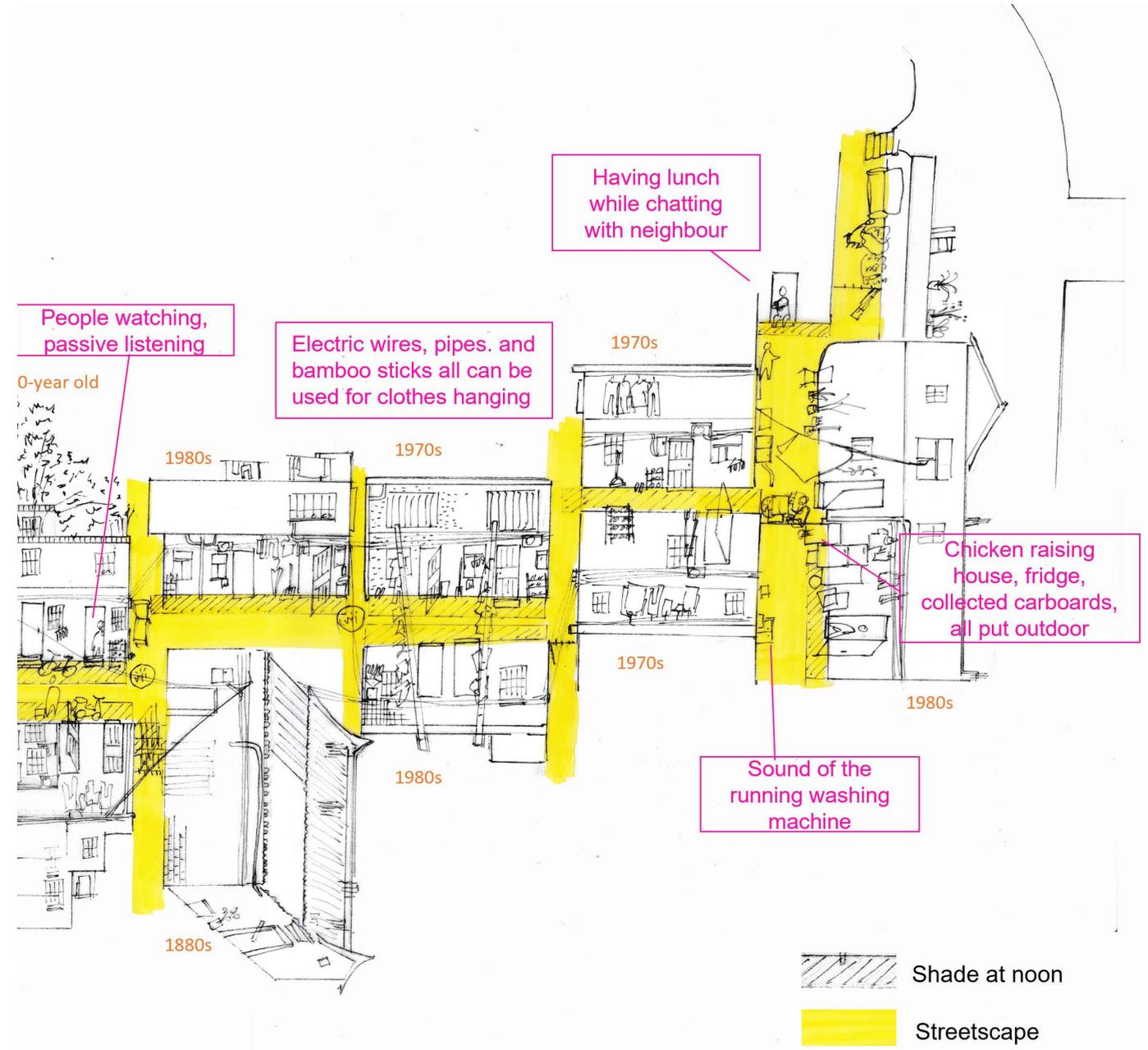
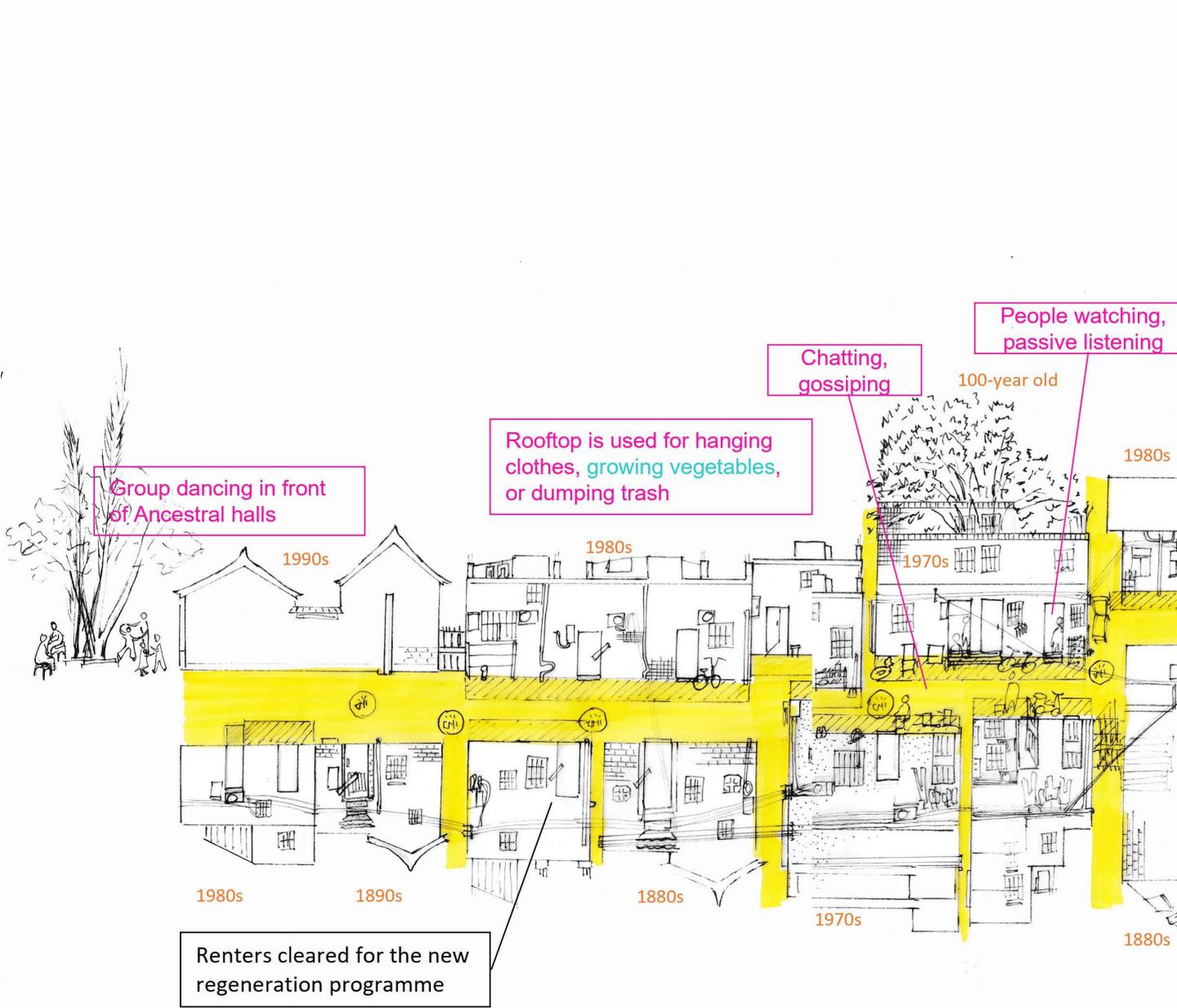


Figure 3.4. An ancient path works as a collector of various spaces in between the built structures. Source: Diwen Tan, 2023

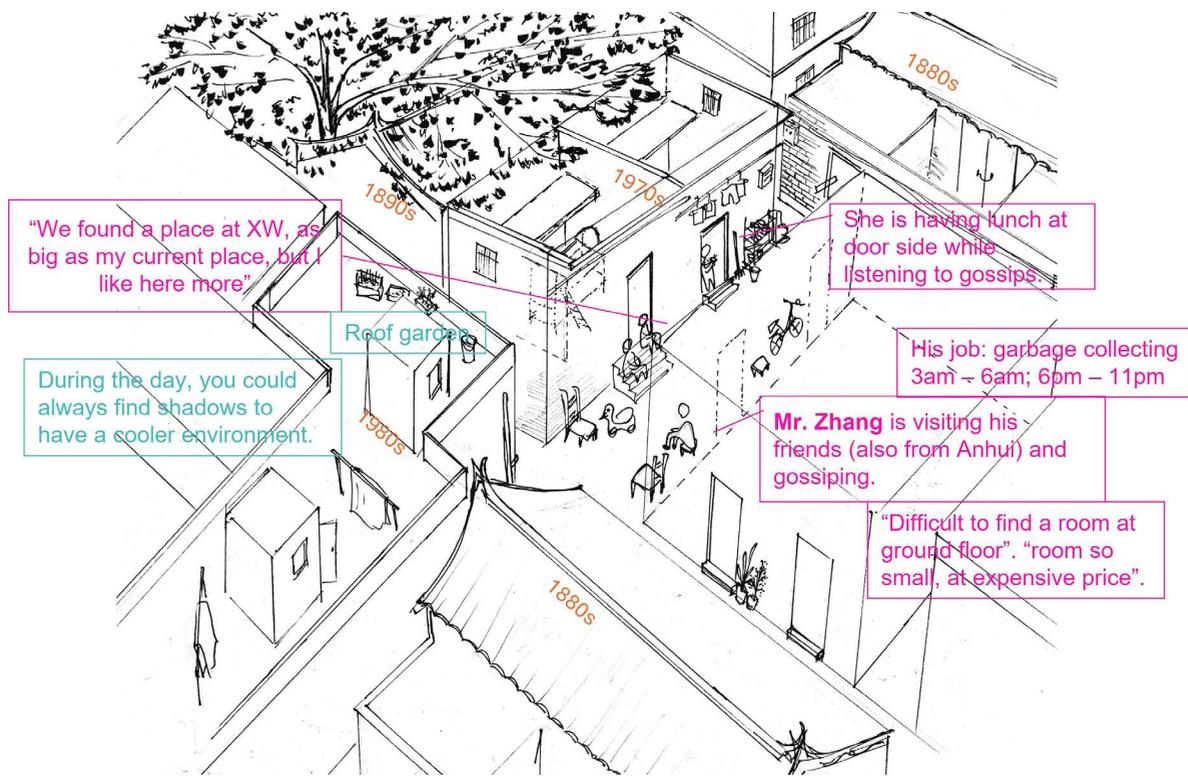


Figure 3.5. Point 1: Uncle Zhang, a rural-urban migrant in his 50s, seated in his favourite corner inside the village core, chatting with fellow villagers (*laoxiang*) and neighbours who are also migrants. Source: Diwen Tan, 2023.



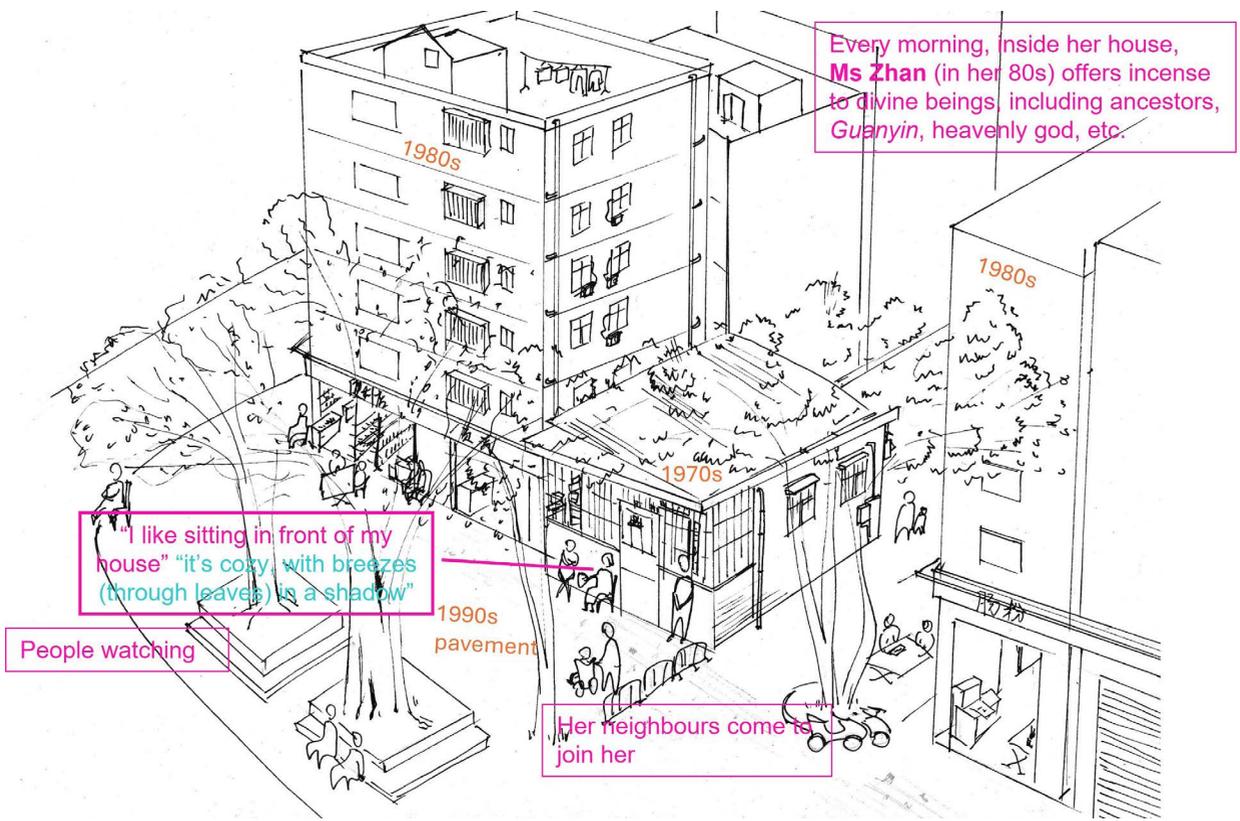


Figure 3.6. Point 2: Elderly villager Granny Zhan's house and its front space. Source: Diwen Tan, 2023.



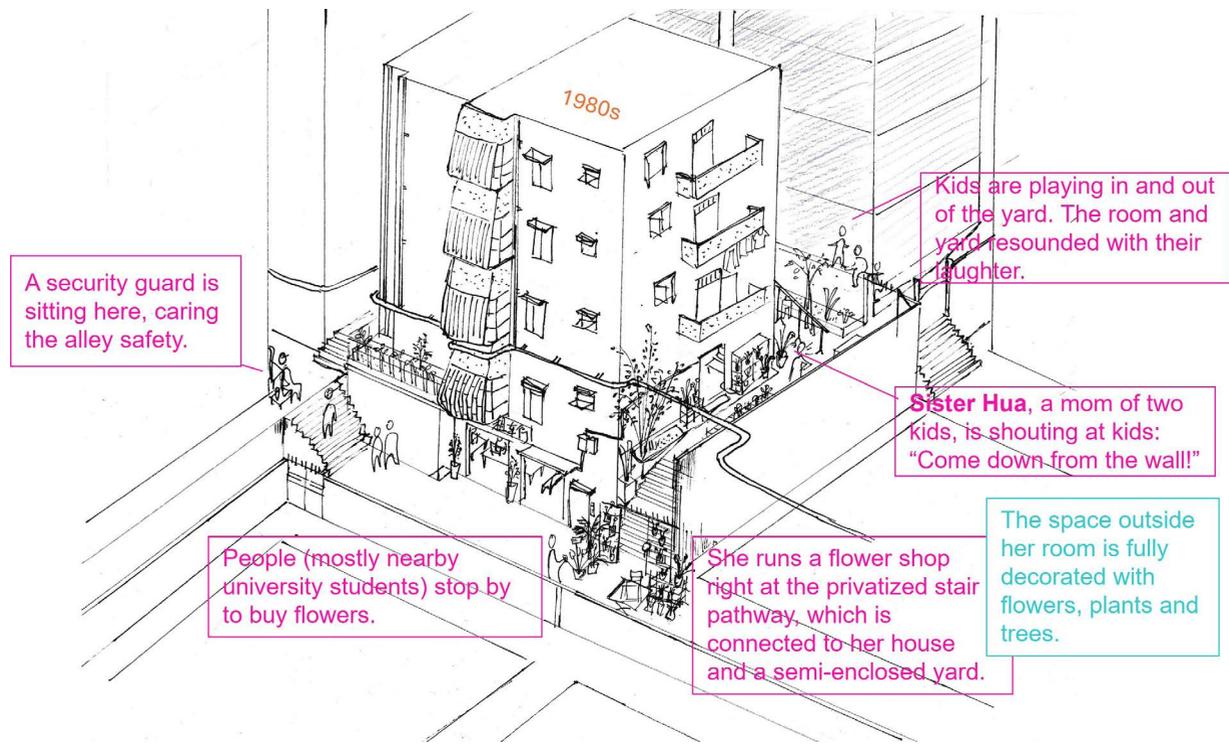


Figure 3.7. Point 3: Sister Hua's privatised yard and stair pathway. In her 30s, she represents the younger generation of migrants who predominantly reside in the extended area. Source: Diwen Tan, 2023



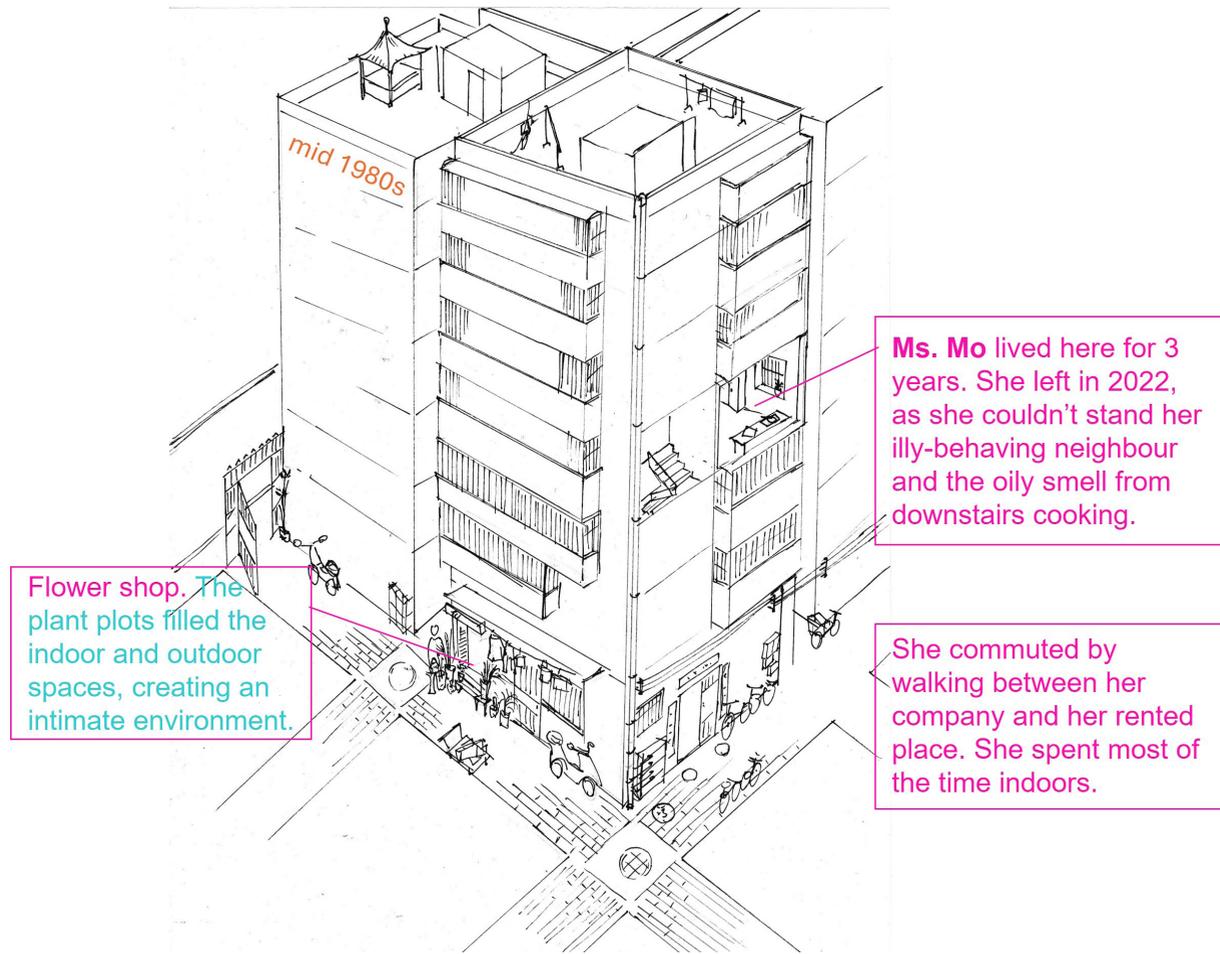


Figure 3.8. Point 4: Xiao Mo's apartment at the extended area, shared with another recent college graduate. Source: Diwen Tan, 2023.



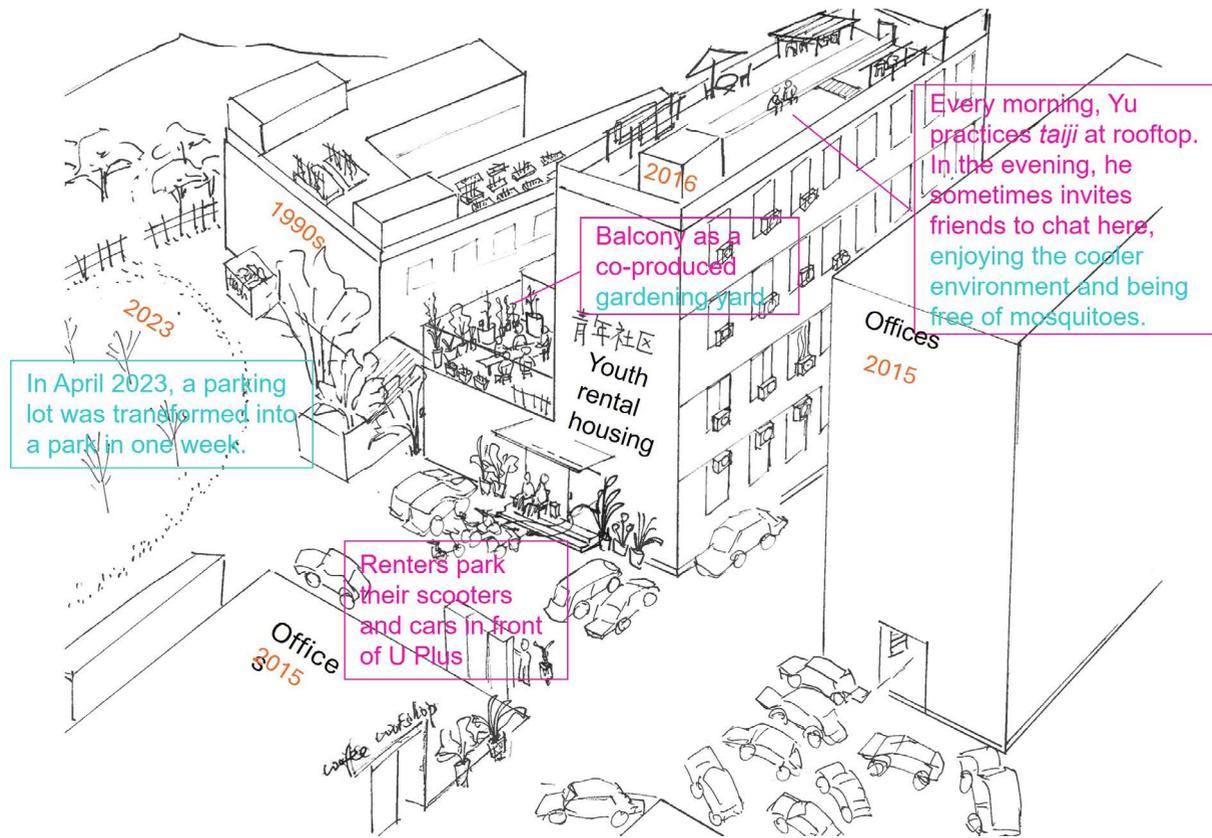


Figure 3.9. Point 5: Youth apartment U Plus and activities at the industrial park. Source: Diwen Tan, 2023.



3.6 Discussion

3.6.1 The handed-down traditions

All of these locations serve as palimpsests that contain history and convey certain facets of it. From the village core to the extended area and the village-owned industrial park, the physical landscape has experienced continuous transformation. The modern land-use categories imposed on the land have had the most significant impact on the current spatial arrangement: a left-behind urban village surrounded by single-use zones, including university campuses, high-rise housing, shopping malls, industrial parks, and green spaces. These areas are separated by a hierarchical road system. Muddy roads flanked by trees were widened, straightened and paved as standard traffic and pedestrian lanes, integrated into the extensive urban road system. Waterways are absent from the village, being covered by concrete. Streets are maintained ‘clean’ so that all objects and activities that deviate from the defined function of providing passage are kept out of sight. This monofunctional zoning is supported by ‘civilised and sanitary city’ campaigns, which focus on visual cleanliness as well as citizens ‘*suzhi*’ (similar to the English word quality) that links to behaviours.

At the same time, villagers also held the mentality of pursuing the appearance of progress and modernisation, with a focus on materiality. They modernised their old built environment: traditional brick houses with courtyards were rebuilt into modern 2- to 3-storey concrete houses, which in turn have been transformed into mid-rise apartment buildings. And the extension of housing onto previous agricultural land also mimics the official, rigid planning pattern: they adhered to the minimal standard building interval but with some deviations to maximise living and working spaces. In response to the state’s ideology of ‘cleanliness’, just 20 years after they were constructed, some apartments, especially those along the main street, underwent renovations (by developers in cooperation with villagers and the local government) to enhance their aesthetic appeal. At the same time, the village collective hired a private security team to provide 24-hour security and a sanitary team of about 30 people to maintain daily cleanliness.

Nevertheless, the process of de-layering reveals glimpses of traditions that are embedded in names, artefacts, buildings, and most notably, daily practices. The village name *Pingshan*¹⁰ (screen mountain, which means using mountains for protection and defence) itself reflects the historical practice of settling in relation to the mountains. The old village’s densely clustered layout that conforms to the topography and its southwestern orientation suggests the *fengshui* principles that influenced. A few old houses retain their decayed façades and traditional forms of *tianjing* (celestial wells). Ancestral halls once marked the front edge of the village and the

¹⁰For a detailed explanation, please refer to Lexicon (Table 6.1).

large earth ground in front of it was necessary for processing agricultural products; it was also a space for leisure activities, ritual events, and private markets.

All these elements recall an agricultural civilisation in which a clan-based village was established near productive landscapes within a framework of myths. Villagers used to grow rice, tend orchards, and raise animals to sustain themselves and generate income. They made ditches, fishponds (including a *fengshui* pond), and water storage areas, creating a typical rural farming landscape. With collective beliefs in family values and ritual practices especially ancestor worship, villagers worshipped deities such as the goddess Guanyin and family ancestors in communal places like temples as well as in their own domestic private spaces. The reverent attitude associated with these worship practices mattered, serving as a way to communicate human emotional needs, often related to family’s health and wealth (Li, 2018).

Traditions, defined as that being handed down or transmitted (Shils, 1981), persist in the present. Traditions interact with modernities through the rhythms of daily life, producing various hybrid spatial forms and practices. The first aspect of hybridity identified in this case relates to economic production and labour. As villagers entered the market economy, their practice of cultivation, inherited from an agrarian society, continued, though it changed from ‘growing grains’ to ‘growing houses’, which provides both residences for rural migrants and economic commodities (Liu et al., 2010; Zhan, 2018). Today, villagers continue ‘growing’ buildings in renovated forms under the governmental-designated labels of ‘talent town’ and ‘maker town’. In such a way, the productive landscape continues to evolve: the village shifted from producing food in an agrarian society to producing diversified businesses, products, and services, as well as young entrepreneurs. At the same time, the cultivation of food persists and has resurged among the younger generation for more diversified purposes, including physical and mental health, and in new forms such as rooftop gardens.

The second aspect relates to the continuous production of ambiguous mixed-use spaces with evolving functions determined by residents’ activities. This is largely due to the villagers’ self-design of the spaces, which is shaped by their usage patterns; for example, while they have clearly defined the plots of land for houses, they have left other spaces, such as semi-open yards and pathways, loosely defined or ambiguous. Alleys serve more as spaces in between buildings than mere passages; they function as dynamic stages for interactions and exchanges or as extended living spaces (for dining, etc.) (Kochan, 2015). Naturally and as part of their daily routines, the space in front of each house is frequently appropriated for private leisure or communal gatherings by both long-term villagers and migrants. The historical concept of *ditang* remains to be relevant today, albeit through a modern planning form characterised by pavement. The ground floor features the high ceilings that were common in older buildings and remains part of the modern building structure, allowing for the space to accommodate both work and rest functions. The ambiguousness or flexibility of spaces (combining living and working) is

often observed in urban villages as an essential living strategy (Chung, 2010; Chung, 2017; Liu et al., 2014).

The last aspect is ancestor worship, as collective culture has endured through generations and formed public spaces. Pingshan village's ancestral halls and *Guanyin* temple remain despite having been destroyed several times, by natural disasters and human events such as cultural revolutions; they were rebuilt with improved construction materials and techniques. These spaces continue to represent the village's roots and serve as venues for rituals and community events like elections and group dances. While the planning regime may have redesignated this space as a park, overwriting its religious significance, many people, both long-term villagers and migrants, visit the Guanyin temple to pray to the goddess and make wishes for the well-being of the living. During the Tomb Sweeping Festival¹¹, the smell of incense and the sound of firecrackers are omnipresent in the modernised village.

As observed and described above, traditions have endured as practices that shape people's experiences of modernities, thus allowing for the possibility of moving towards a hybrid scenario. Such practices, such as the ways in which spaces are utilised, encompass 'production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). In the Chinese context, modernisation is about infrastructure (e.g., roads) and regulations (e.g., those regarding distances). However, the ways in which villagers and migrants inhabit and use the village spaces are infused with rural logic. This logic may be described as 'feudal' traditions and is often associated with what authorities and occasionally urban residents criticise as being of low '*suzhi*' (Zhang, 2014). A potential hybrid here then suggests that the status of being a mixture becomes more inclusive, challenging the mindset of being 'corseted into false oppositions such as high or popular, urban or rural, modern or traditional' (Canclini et al., 2005, p. xxiv; Franco, 1992). This hybridisation process stresses achieving originality through coordination between traditional and modern elements (de Souza e Silva, 2006; Guo et al., 2022; Haseeb et al., 2023), rather than simply incorporating contradictory aspects of both origins, as represented by the re-making of ancient towns for modern culture-based tourism (Lang et al., 2016).

3.6.2 Beyond the palimpsest: hybrid traditions and modernity

The call for hybridisation has arisen in response to rapid changes in space and society generated by technological advances and a mentality that values adapting the old (Haseeb et al., 2023). As the mechanised urban growth of the past created issues such as new urban poverty, social-spatial segregation, and conflicts between local residents and top-down planning (Liu & Zhou, 2021), scholars and practitioners began to explore alternative planning and design approaches aimed

at promoting social and ecological inclusiveness. 'Integration' has become a central national strategy in China to address the complex dichotomies between rural and urban, tradition and modernity, and informal and formal. In practice, in-situ development and redevelopment have been advocated for as ways to incorporate traditional heritages and enhance local identity (Wu et al., 2021). Shenzhen's current 'comprehensive improvement' regeneration programme also aims to integrate leftover elements into the surrounding urban standard fabric through micro or organic revitalisation measures, avoiding the brutal erasure of physical traces of the past, seen in previous demolition and redevelopment phases. However, the idea of integration is different from hybridisation. Integration can easily become the assimilation or formalisation of informalities, weakening differences (Zhang, 2023); hybridisation, on the other hand, is a dynamic process of interactions between the spatial-functional features of an urban space, as well as social, and increasingly, digital aspects (Cho et al., 2016; Di Marino et al., 2023). Urban designers and planners must proactively take measures and implement changes to meet the demand for a hybrid urban environment.

Urban villages, characterised by high-dense housing and proximity to urban facilities, often as 'non-places', have become focal points for making a city's new image. A new phase of rehabilitation and formalisation took place in the studied village, which has transformed it into a 'Talent Town' in order to attract and accommodate newly arriving young professionals and college graduates. Key terms such as 'youth', 'single', 'socialising', and 'youth community' are bolded on publicity boards. Talent workers are highly valued and essential for Shenzhen to transition from an economy focused on labour-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing to attracting high-tech manufacturing, information-intensive services, technological innovation, and design-oriented industries (Bontje, 2016). Therefore, affordable housing becomes an important factor for attracting and retaining talent workers (MacLachlan & Gong, 2022).

This 'Talent Town' project followed the dominant top-down approach to land-use categories. There are four designated zones in the village: 1) a housing zone (extended village area) for low-cost rental housing; 2) a venture capital zone (old village) aimed at promoting or remaking the generalised *lingnan* courtyard culture;¹² 3) Alumni Street, providing public spaces for socialising; and 4) an innovation park (industrial park) that serves as an entrepreneurship incubator. The existing housing function is cleared and renovation has been approved to highlight its architectural heritage. Visible communal spaces, such as the local market, village park, and grocery, have been identified and categorised as public spaces and relabelled to better align with the context of a youth community. The housing zone is categorised into three groups: family apartments, people-benefit housing, and youth apartments, which are the majority.

¹²Lingnan is a geographic area in the south of the Nanling Mountains, covering the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Hongkong and Macau. As a regional culture, Lingnan culture converged with the central Chinese cultures of the Central Plains since the Qin (221BCE-206 BCE) dynasty but maintained its unique features.

¹¹Ibid.

Within the latter group, all units are classified as one of two types: units for a single person and units for a couple. Both are smaller than 20 square metres, rendering them unsuitable for families—the majority of the current residents. In addition to standardising individual rental units, other common features adopted include adding passages between buildings, designing pocket gardens, and adding shared youth facilities (e.g., gyms). This physical standardisation imposes spatial separation, hindering the continuous and adaptable spatial practices that have allowed handed-down traditions to remain active in the present. This contrasts with the current village's emphasis on movement and spaces defined by residents' habits.

To move towards hybridisation, several principles are proposed to guide practitioners in adopting a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design. These principles aim to serve as a framework for mediating between state and local actors and between formal plans and informal practices. The prospective target audience includes municipal urban planners, urban designers, architects, community committees, real estate companies, and invited scholars as regeneration project consultants.

Step 1. Reading a place as a network and a series of interconnected points, rather than from a zoning perspective. A delayering analysis of this empirical case revealed three interwoven networks. The first comprises a maze of narrow alleys, which serve as a social nexus where interactions occur and connections are made. The second encompasses the built structure with various typologies, such as clan houses in the dense old village core and a handshake building in the extended village. The third network is the human interactions occurring on top of those physical elements. These networks establish the base for the site investigation as part of the planning and design process. Furthermore, they provide insight into how to integrate or revive the local culture within the spatial structure of the urban village.

Step 2. Recognising the existing values. In a society undergoing rapid changes, urban villages with autonomous urbanisation have produced different values as traditions have encountered modernities. The zoning of the 'Talent Town', especially zones 2 and 3, however, ignores the existing open spatial structures that are essential for diverse activities, instead confining the socialisation spaces to a designated street. By eliminating the housing function of the village core and limiting it to a finance hub, it also increases social-spatial segregation. Therefore, rather than assigning functions to specific zones, it is important to disperse functions throughout the village networks to enhance social interactions.

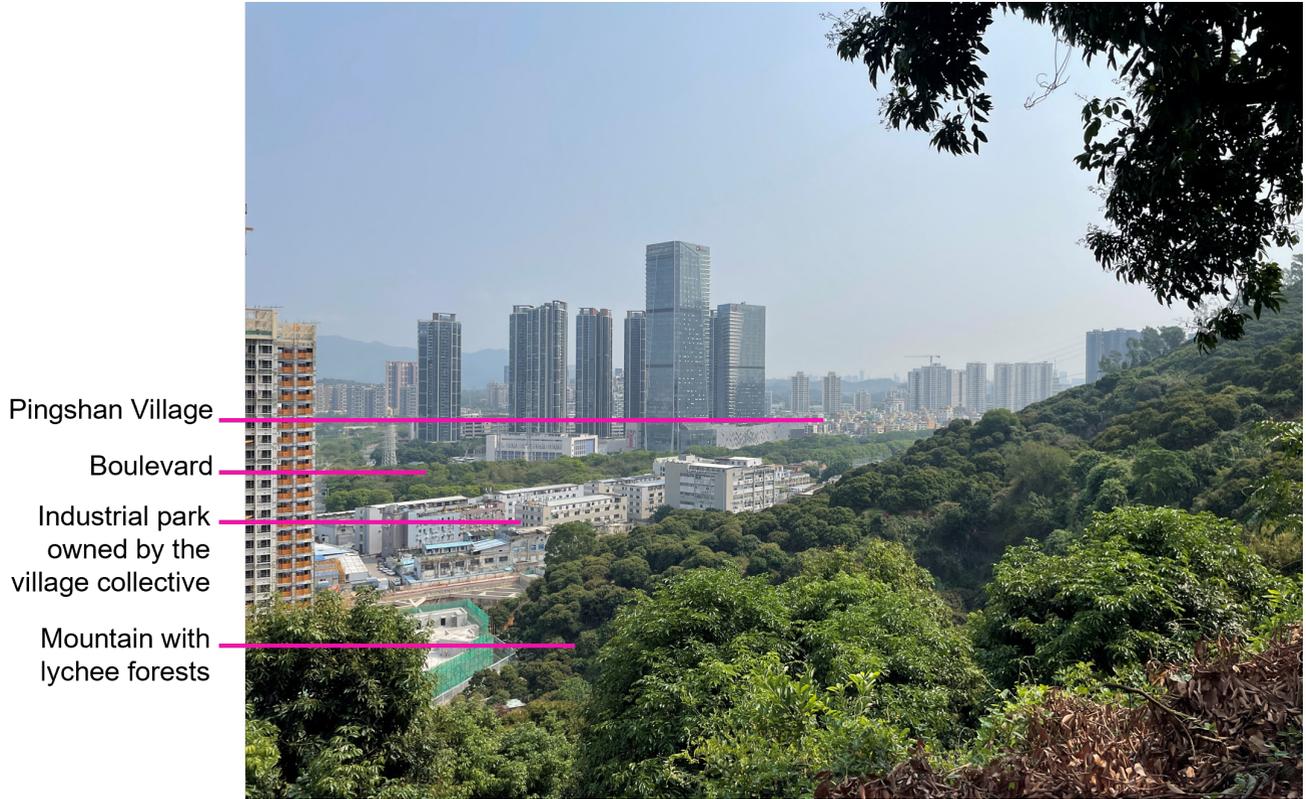
Step 3. (Strategically) embedding or designing the state's vision of programmes and functions with consideration for the networks and layers of a place. For example, the space in front of buildings is ubiquitous throughout the village, serving as a hub for social interactions and for both living and working. Instead of setting a fixed number of housing units, an inhabited area could be designated to allow for diverse uses of the space or flexibility in its use, including

for housing, working, and leisure.

3.7 Conclusion

The chapter conceptualises Shenzhen as a palimpsest. A close analysis of an urban village shows that each particular space has undergone a process of being written, erased, and rewritten, resulting in an accumulation of all types of palimpsests. The process reveals how inherited traditions overlap and interplay with modernity. The past, partially visible and partially invisible, lives within the present, fostering the prospect of a hybridisation process that leads towards a more inclusive form of urbanism.

We try to propose a framework for the hybridisation potential in urban planning and design by merging inherited traditions and modernity, and do not provide prescriptive urban redevelopment strategies. Given the well-established palimpsest nature of cities, there is a need for future studies evaluating the current regeneration and (re)development programmes. This research should examine how spatial interventions and changes can be aligned with how and why people use spaces.



Pingshan Village

Boulevard

Industrial park
owned by the
village collective

Mountain with
lychee forests

Village and City. Photo by Diwen Tan 2023



On the other side of the boulevard are renovated industrial parks (owned by the village collective) and new high-rise buildings at the foothills of the mountain, characterised by lychee forests. Photo by Diwen Tan, 2024.

4 Urban Agriculture

Opportunities from the void space *kongdi*

This chapter examines the land cultivation practices that persist in a metropolitan area, drawing on the operation of a U-pick lychee orchard located on village-owned collective land. Observation reveals the ironic juxtaposition of a DIY cottage in a sylvan setting surrounded by an intensively planned, densely populated urban environment featuring high-rise apartment towers. Field data show that informality, social networks, and petty entrepreneurialism are all manifest in urban agriculture, lychee production, labour, and land tenure. This illustrates the interstitial porosity that exists within the incorporated bounds of an urban area with informal economic activity juxtaposed with formal occupations and sylvan orchard hillsides in the shadows of state-owned enterprises and high-rise apartment towers. The persistence of lychee orchards demonstrates a form of resistance to political modernity, offering an alternative lifestyle that challenges urban-rural dualities and explores heterodox pathways to the good life.

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Minor adjustments were made, and a reflection based on my second fieldwork in 2024 was added at the end of the paper.

4.1 Lychee Vista

Based on field observation of ‘Lychee Vista,’ pseudonym for a hillside lychee orchard in urban Guangdong, and social engagement with its operators, a couple originating in Sichuan (we call them Frank and Maggie), this case study is motivated to record our observations and explore the informal character of urban orchards, as one type of urban agriculture (UA).

UA has clear health, environmental, social equity, food security, and income generation benefits (Orsini et al., 2013; Smit & Nasr, 1992). UA is an accepted part of the urban landscape in most Asian countries and especially in China (Smit et al., 2001; see also Yeung, 1987). Indeed, megacities such as Shanghai have incorporated UA into their economic development strategies (Wen, 2003) yet the status of food producing spaces in urban areas is often ambiguous. Most empirical studies on UA in Chinese cities focus on horticulture on comparatively open and level sites (Glaros et al., 2022; Wei & Jones, 2022). UA practices may occur in ‘guerrilla gardens’ on otherwise vacant spaces, or on land parcels awaiting (re)development which is especially common during rapid urbanization. The informality and insecurity of land tenure on these guerrilla gardens have been recognized in developed cities (Hardman & Larkham, 2014). Observing agricultural activity on the urban periphery of Chongqing, Asa Roast (2022, p. 391) uses *kongdi* (vacant land with connotations similar to ‘wasteland’) as a concept to indicate, not a specific geographic location, but a temporary phase ‘awaiting an imagined future of urban development.’ Reusing and reclaiming ‘empty’ space facilitates informal urban agriculture for food production and physical activities detached from the unhealthy foodways of the city (Roast, 2022).

This chapter concerns a hillside lychee orchard located on terrain too steep for traditional urban land uses. A blend of a U-pick orchard and custom harvesting for shipment to a nationwide clientele has become the foundation for a profitable business, albeit neither registered nor incorporated. How can such informal activity thrive on urban land subject to formal regulation by local authorities? The land is used with the knowledge and consent of an urban village (*chengzhongcun*, for example see Hao et al., 2013) which owns the land. The orchard is

classified as urban parkland, but its unsuitability for orthodox construction land and the cloak of invisibility provided by the trees make it seem ‘empty,’ providing opportunities for villagers and rural migrants who are entrepreneurially disposed. This highlights the nuances of informality as it is manifest in labour, markets, land tenure, and housing of urban farmers.

4.2 Informality of urban agriculture

UA in China is characterised by four types of informality:

1. Informal, often part-time, labour is embodied in self-employed or recreational horticultural activities, but those same workers may also hold formal sector employment.
2. The second aspect of informality refers to the agricultural production process. On the one hand, cultivation, production, and harvesting may be formally organized in an integrated value chain subject to codified institutional regulation. On the other hand, the various stages may be articulated informally by a looser self-employed value chain of producers, pickers, and vendors, linked by tacit knowledge, social capital formation, and trust (*guanxi*).
3. The spontaneous and unauthorised use of nearly every patch of apparently vacant and abandoned land is the most visible aspect of informality in the urban landscape. Much of the land used for urban agriculture is cultivated by people with no legitimate authority to use the land for that purpose in guerilla gardens. In the case of Lychee Vista, there is some expression of tenure, of informal authority to use the land, but such a usufructuary favour would never survive a challenge from the state.
4. Fourth, the reproduction of informal labour and oversight of urban agriculture requires housing which is often itself informal and unauthorised in areas that the state has not managed to regulate (Polese, 2021, p. 324).

This chapter is inspired and motivated to observe these informalities in a party state where labour, economic activity, land, and housing are monitored and closely regulated. In unravelling this apparent paradox, we are reminded that the opposition between formality and informality is a false binary; they are poles along a continuum and they are often interdependent (McFarlane, 2012, 2019; Roy, 2005). Our field observations remind us that such fixed formal and informal categories may have blurry boundaries and help to develop a more nuanced understanding of processes embedded in an urban ‘way of life’ (AlSayyad, 2004, p. 7; Wirth, 1938, p. 1), within a historically specific context.

4.3 Data collection procedure

This project began unintentionally during a Sunday afternoon walk along a pathway leading

from a paved parking lot to a wooded hillside. The path led to a cottage in a lychee orchard and a warm welcome from Frank and Maggie, a married couple in their mid-40s (Figure 4.1). Situated amidst a metropolis, the mountain site is a fifteen-minute walk from public transit. Formerly surrounded by fertile farmland and traditional agricultural villages, the mountain area is now considered as a ‘country park’- a landscape amenity contrasting with nearby industrial parks, urbanised villages, and commercial centres. Lychee trees have become an iconic park feature.

What began as ‘inquisitive observation’ (Zhong et al., 2019, p. 177) and impromptu socializing evolved into friendship and eventually as an exercise in qualitative data collection. Qualitative data was gathered from 12 March to 13 June 2023 over a span of weekly and biweekly meetings with two additional meetings in November. Some engagements were serious semi-structured interviews, and others were social occasions over tea and meals both indoors and outdoors.

As sociable cross-cultural conversations morphed into purposive interviews, we recognized our ethical obligation to explain our intentions. The first time we recorded a conversation we asked permission to do so, and while this was willingly given, we were concerned that our respondents did not fully grasp the significance of a digital voice recording, and that acquiescence was not truly ‘informed consent.’ Ensuing visits were not recorded, in part because of their social nature. Later, we wanted to record verbatim responses in Chinese for subsequent transcription and verbatim quotation. Thus, we sought to reiterate our ethical obligations to obtain informed consent prior to recording further interview data. We explained that we were planning to write a story about the lychee orchard for an English-language academic journal.

This caused concern and bewilderment. Maggie asked, ‘What is the use of recording this conversation? We are just ordinary people; we are just chatting normally.’ Maggie could not imagine how her folk wisdom gained through years of living on the land in urban China might be of any value. She displays a remarkable mixture of peasant modesty, allegiance to the Party, and is quick to confess her lack of formal education. She went on to express apprehension about our research and its dissemination. After reassuring her that we would be prudent in what we wrote, We concluded the preliminaries for this recording by reiterating that Maggie was under no obligation to answer any questions and she was at liberty to change the subject at any time. Her answers would be translated carefully to avoid any trouble with authorities. Photographs would not be used and pseudonyms would replace personal names and toponyms.

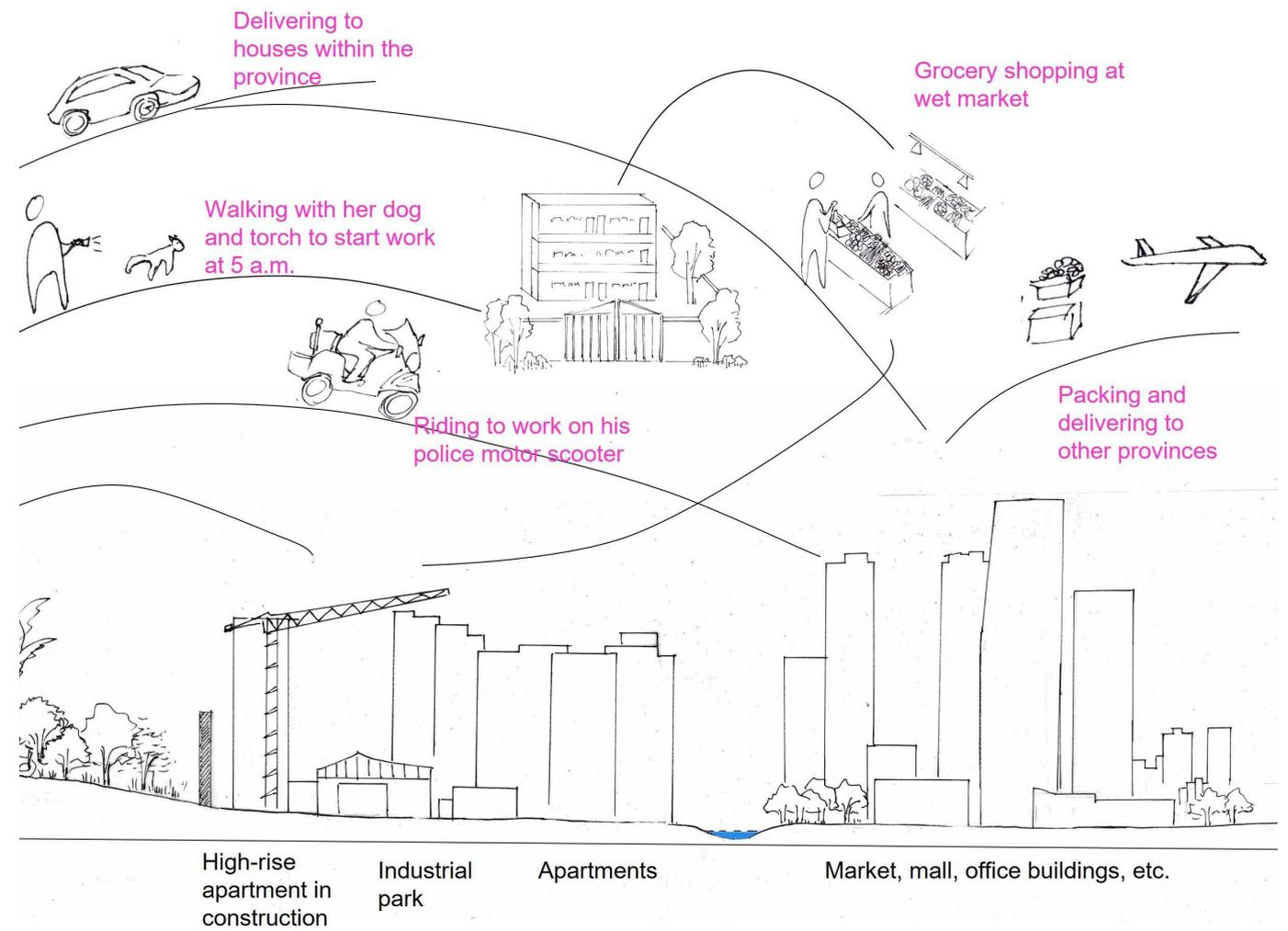
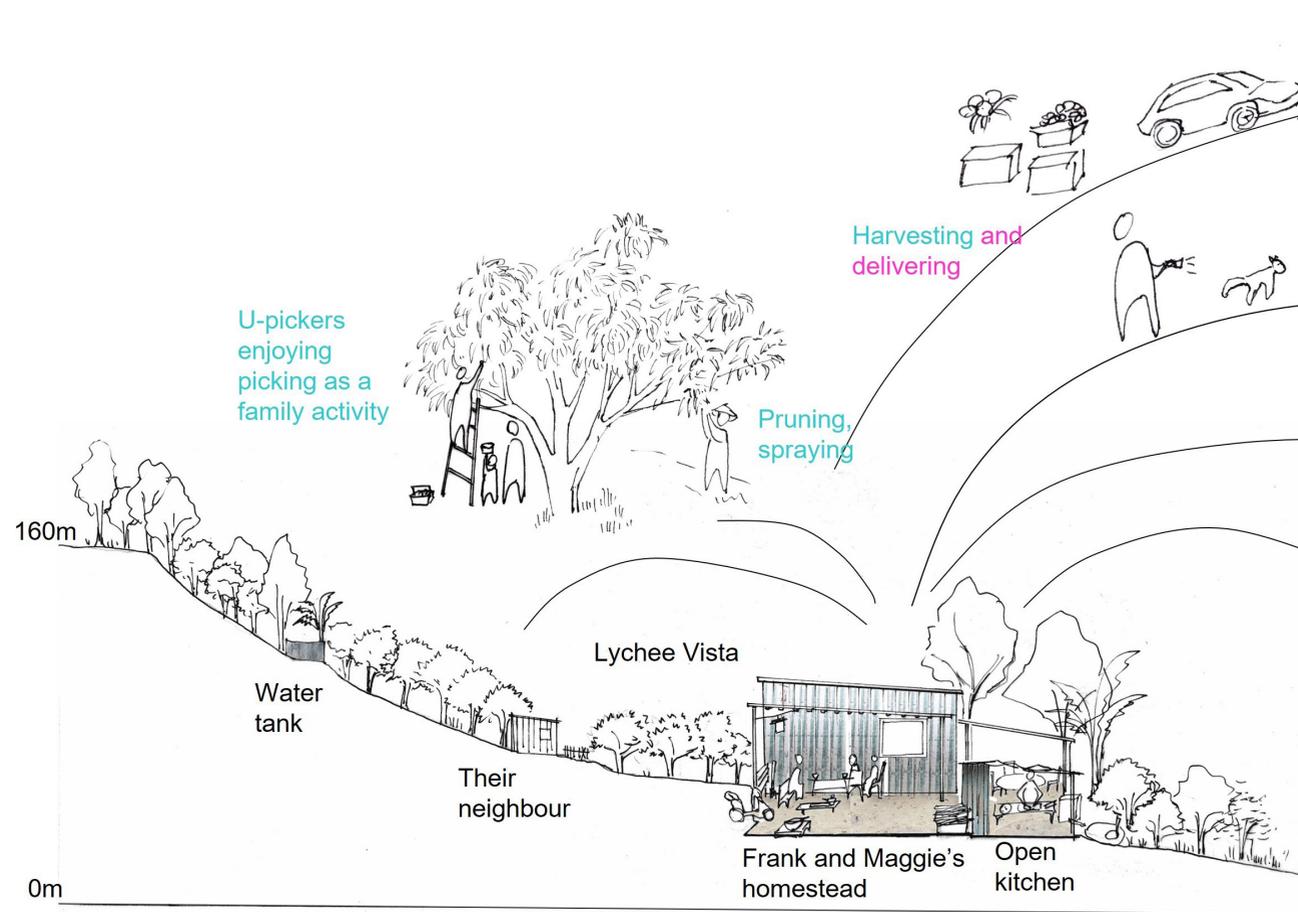


Figure 4.1. Landscape profile showing the upland orchard, lychee vista homestead, high-rise apartment buildings under construction, and the urban village in a process of reconstruction and gentrification. Source: Diwen Tan, 2023.

4.4 Informal and formal labour: on the job and in the orchard

Frank and Maggie operate an orchard producing lychee for sale and vegetables for household consumption. In these activities, they are self-employed and not subject to labour regulations, social security benefits, or income tax—their work is not recorded, protected or regulated by public authorities, hence they are informal workers according to the ILO (2002). But they are also formally employed fulltime: Frank is a police officer and Maggie works in an institutional kitchen.

While the revenues from their U-pick lychee operation can be lucrative, full-time employment is a risk management strategy. The permanent off-farm work, which is formal and sanctioned by the local government, provides employment security and social benefits in the city for Frank and Maggie. In a good-harvest year, the income from lychee production could comprise 80% of their total household income, however yield depends on weather conditions, and lychee cultivars are prone to ‘biennial bearing’ with rich and poor fruit crops in alternating years. Thus, urban farm income is neither stable nor reliable as it ‘depends on heaven for sustenance (*kaotianchifan*)’ as Maggie told us. This stands in sharp contrast to migrant families adopting a “hoe and wage” survival strategy, regarding self-employment in agriculture as vital to household security even though their formal employment typically provides a larger share of household income (Ye, 2018). The intense connection between agricultural self-employment, ancestral land tenure and rustic memories leads many rural migrants to consider farmland as a form of indemnity to sustain their livelihoods. Whether informal agricultural work is considered to be the main or most reliable source of long-term sustenance varies considerably. Maggie regards formal employment income and its associated access to the city’s medical resources and future retirement benefits, as a kind of insurance policy while the orchard is the major income source, insecure though it may sometimes be.

Frank works a forty-hour week alternating between day and night shifts, patrolling city streets as a community-based police officer (*minjing*). Maggie works about a kilometre from home, providing institutional food service. She starts work every weekday at 5:00 a.m. It takes about 15 minutes to pick her way down the mountainside in the pre-dawn dark, escorted by her dogs as canine guardians. Her formal work ends at 3:00 p.m. so that she has time for household chores and to manage the lychee orchard.

These full-time formal sector occupations allow Frank and Maggie the time and flexibility to be part-time farmers, tending their orchard through the year: pruning the trees to keep fruit-bearing branches in-reach for U-pickers, repairing storm damage, monitoring trees for blight and insect infestations, and spraying regularly to control pests. Frank and Maggie use their summer vacations to operate the orchard and their son comes home to help out, so lychee harvest season is a family affair. This year they asked the son of a fruit wholesaler to assist

with the harvest, providing a *WeChat* red envelope (*hongbao*) as an expression of thanks and informal compensation. This would also foster an informal relationship with a local wholesaler with potential benefits in marketing the fruit.

Informal lychee production, harvesting, and marketing in relatively small urban orchards compete with the commercial lychee industry. Lychee has been the iconic summer fruit in South China for thousands of years and has now become Guangdong’s largest fruit crop (Huang, 2002). Lychee production accelerated rapidly in the late 1980s when city markets grew, and the Household Responsibility System provided an incentive for U-pick orchards. Thus, the area under lychee cultivation in Guangdong tripled in just ten years, reaching 300,000 hectares in 2000 (Figure 4.2). In recent years, more investment and attention have shifted to technology innovation and culture-themed tourism in large commercial orchards (Xinhua, 2023).

Lychee Vista is a relatively small-scale tourist orchard covering an area of about 20 mu (1.3 hectares) with 200 lychee trees, some longan trees, and a patch of dragon fruit. In June and July, city people come, often as families, to pick their own lychee (U-pick or pick-your-own, *ziyou caizhai*). For many, this is a nostalgic experience and families enjoy spending an afternoon on a verdant hillside. In June of 2022, U-pick visitors were charged a flat rate of 60 RMB (about US\$10) for all the lychee they could pick and eat on-site. Customers wanting to take fruit away are charged at the market price: 30-35 RMB per *jin* (half a kilogram) for the most expensive *Nuomici* variety of lychee fruit in June 2023.

Marketing relies on Frank and Maggie’s social network, including friends, relatives, and colleagues (from their formal off-farm jobs). *WeChat*, China’s most popular social medium, is the most effective channel to invite old customers to return. U-pick customers survey the sylvan atmosphere, fresh air, open spaces, and spectacular vistas, quite different from the street density, traffic, and intensity of urban life in a megacity. Visitors enjoy the rural atmosphere and reminisce about their rural backgrounds. The mechanisms for compensating Frank and Maggie for their hospitality are often informal and deeply embedded in social relations and reciprocal obligations. Frank disseminates information about their lychee products through his social network of U-pick customers and he uses *WeChat* to attract potential buyers nationwide. He is planning to expand his business and diversify his resource base by renting another lychee orchard nearby.

4.5 Formal land use rights and informal land tenure

UA may occupy temporarily vacant land awaiting (re)development; steeply sloping parcels not suited to construction; margins of road, rail, or drainage allowances; or public land that is formally zoned as a community garden (Zhang et al., 2022). In the case of Lychee Vista, the

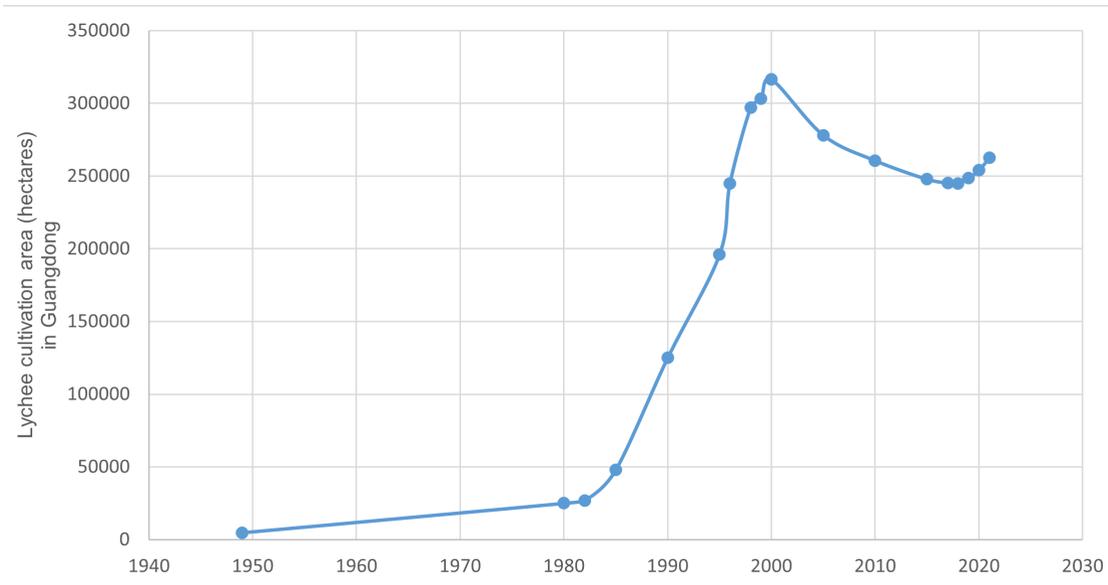


Figure 4.2. Lychee cultivation area in Guangdong province. Source: 1950-2000 is based on FAO data from Huang (2002). 2000-2022 data are from the Guangdong Statistical Yearbook (2022), Chapter 11.

tenure arrangement for the level homestead area of less than 200 square meters and the adjacent orchard on the steeply sloping hillside is informal, though it also seems quite secure.

The orchard can be traced back to the 1980s when *kaihuang* (literally ‘reclamation of wasteland or uncultivated land’) was encouraged by the central government. Traditional village farmland of Lanshancun expanded to reach the limit of field crop cultivation along the mountain’s edge. Uncle Xie, a local Lanshan villager, acquired occupancy of this rugged little hillside by planting lychee and longan trees in an environment that was unsuitable for any other crops.

In ensuing years, traditional agricultural villages such as Lanshancun were engulfed by urban growth and became so-called urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) (Hao et al., 2013), while their agrarian land has been expropriated for industrial parks, commercial centres, and housing estates. The steeply sloping hillside, reclaimed wasteland through lychee planting, was of no interest to the government because of its limited urban development potential, thus rights to this land remained with the village collective. The orchard land has been designated as part of an urban park under the municipality’s land use regulations.

In the early 2000s, villagers started to rent out their forest land to rural migrants, both to obtain rental income and to manage and protect their lychee trees. Orchard tenants could harvest and

sell the fruit however they chose and had an incentive to maximize their yield. In the case of Lychee Vista, Uncle Xie granted informal tenure to Frank rent-free, based on their close relationship and mutual trust developed over a period of years. However, Uncle Xie’s authority to grant use of the land to Frank, whether approval by the village collective was necessary, and whether such approval was actually given is not clear. There is no document, contract, or deed transferring stewardship and usufructuary rights to the land to Frank and Maggie. However, Frank seems quite confident in the long-term security of his tenure. ‘The villager [Uncle Xie] lets us use the land and manage the trees. I can stay here as long as the government does not take over the land,’ a prospect that Frank views as extremely unlikely.

Frank’s social networks and personal relationships are diverse and not at all limited to *laoxiang* i.e., people with common village origins in his native Sichuan. Uncle Xie is from Guangdong and speaks Cantonese while Frank is Sichuanese. Yet Frank has managed to overcome the cultural divide which has been fundamental to his informal land tenure and informal lychee production and marketing. Sharing lychee, longan, and dragon fruit with relatives, friends, or co-workers (in their formal workplaces) and inviting their children to help have become the means for maintaining a rich social network comprising a wide range of personal relationships (*guanxi*).

4.6 Informal housing

Frank and Maggie’s farmhouse is a single-storey cottage on a concrete pad. The walls are green metal-clad foam-core panels 3-4 centimetres thick topped off with a corrugated shed roof. It has an air-conditioned living room, three bedrooms, a detached open kitchen (considering fire safety), and a separate toilet structure that drains into a concrete septic tank. The structure is mainly self-built, but some construction workers were brought in at a critical stage to assist Frank with erecting the walls. The standard of construction is much better than the precarious self-built huts found near UA fields in Guangdong (Talamini et al., 2022, p. 109). In some respects this is a form of ‘small property rights’ housing (Lai & Lin, 2022); however: Frank and Maggie’s property rights depend on the benevolent munificence of Uncle Xie and there is no document of any kind to certify or legitimate their occupancy.

Access to water and electricity is a common challenge for informal housing and urban agriculture. Frank and Maggie collect rainwater in concrete water tanks built (and later abandoned) by villagers for the irrigation of village farmland in the 1960s and 1970s. A dendritic network of polyvinyl chloride pipes distributes irrigation water to trees downhill from the reservoirs. Potable domestic water from city supplies is tapped in from the construction site down the hill on an informal basis. Lychee Vista has an electricity meter in the industrial park down the hill, so the monthly electrical bill requires a formal transaction. However, the electrical conduit is DIY and runs informally through the woods and up to the house. There is no vehicular access

for anything larger than a motor scooter. Thus, there is no access for emergency services or parcel delivery.

Frank and Maggie own their home but not the land on which it stands. In the unlikely event that the government expropriated the lands of Lychee Vista, Frank is not sure that they would receive any compensation. He recognizes that their house was illegally built. ‘You definitely cannot sell the house... Uncle Xie (informal landlord and villager) told us to build a good-quality house. If the government were to take over the land, it might provide some compensation for the homestead.’ Maggie and Frank express a deep attachment to place: Lychee Vista is their home and an important part of their livelihood. ‘For as long as we have lived here and worked here, this land has belonged to us. I want to protect it and manage it well as a productive lychee forest. Since the uncle gave it to us, we have the responsibility to protect these lychee trees and to make good use of them.’

Despite being built on rugged terrain and deep in the bush, Frank and Maggie’s home is not completely undocumented and unregistered. They are at least under the jurisdiction of the park office, Lychee Vista’s land is registered with the village management committee, and the house is registered with the sub-district office. Yet their neighbourhood is well off the beaten track and visits from any authority are a rare occurrence. The local government adopts a *laissez-faire* approach to management, typically refraining from interfering with production activities while providing timely notifications in case of emergencies such as fires, typhoons, or disease outbreaks.

4.7 Conclusion

In operating a lychee orchard in the midst of a megacity, Frank and Maggie live a hybrid formal-informal lifestyle. They are among hundreds of households scattered through rugged forestland well within municipal boundaries. Primarily consisting of migrant families, they hold full-time off-farm formal sector occupations for social security, have mobilised land tenure with local villagers, and reside in self-built farmhouses in pursuit of their own good life. These lychee orchards exemplify urban agriculture that is classified as informal, as it falls outside the ‘basic farmland’ category. However, lychee trees, indigenous to the region, characterise the mountain, giving distinct substance to the general parkland. The persistence of lychee orchards demonstrates a form of resistance to political modernity by presenting an alternative lifestyle that straddles the artificial boundaries of urban and rural, as well as formal and informal. It challenges the normative urban behaviours anticipated under an ideology of modernisation, and the search for the ‘good life’ may lead down heterodox pathways amidst urban orthodoxy.

The *kongdi* concept has been used to indicate the temporary nature of informal agricultural practices on urban land that may be considered empty or vacant in the vernacular (Roast, 2022).

However, our case suggests rather the ambiguity of *kongdi* due to its unproductive nature, and thus an opportunity for reclamation for cultivation at the early stage. On top of that, there is another sense to ‘empty’ that emerges from the *laissez-faire* management of local government, benign neglect by property inspectors and the ambiguity of land use regulations especially when applied to land that is not (yet) built up with urban uses. As a land use designation, ‘country park’ does not convey any precise indication of the types of vegetation that are appropriate or activities that are permitted, thus the care of lychee trees and practice of lychee production for profit (which is considered agricultural and outside of urban life) is ignored as a matter of tacit disregard by the party state.

4.8 Revisit: informal housing demolished and relocated

In May and June 2024, I revisited Lychee Vista. The housing demolition occurred unexpectedly, but was unrelated to the governmental land expropriation. This incident was triggered by a torrential downpour during the *Qingming* time in early April 2024¹³. The rainstorm over consecutive days dismantled the temporary construction fencing (composed of steel tiles) for a complex of 25-story tower blocks in the lowland; accumulated trash and household waste concealed in the woodlands were carried away and deposited into the complex by the flowing water. The property developer’s report, accompanied by a complaint to the sub-district office, led to a demand for housing demolition with a short notice of three weeks.

Wall and roof panels are piled and maintained intact on-site, with some furniture and utilities left dispersed on the flattened concrete floor. The demolishing process was not as brutal as in many instances of early regeneration aimed at property rights redistribution and redevelopment into a new urban form (Hao et al., 2013; He et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2012). This rather demonstrates a mentality of out of sight, consistent with the *laissez-faire* management at the local level. With a lesson learned from other homesteaders who encountered similar circumstances, Maggie and Frank show little worry and have prepared to deal with the issue. ‘We disassembled our houses ourselves to ensure those panels remained intact for potential reuse or reconstruction [at the same site].’ For them, the space is reverted to the status of *kongdi*, which can therefore be reclaimed later after the current intensive inspection has concluded.

Maggie and Frank are moving to another part of the mountain, approximately one hour’s walk away. The new location has no difference in nature, with ancestral land belonging to another village, a lychee orchard owned by another villager, a cottage (though not yet equipped with electricity), and an informal agreement between rural migrants and a local villager. It is again through their extensive social network, characterised as personal relationships (*guanxi*), that

¹³*Qingming* here refers to one of the 24 solar terms (jieqi) in the Chinese lunisolar calendar. *Qingming* is widely recognized as rainy period in Spring, favored for seeding.

they are introduced to this new location. While taking the new lychee orchard, they continue managing Lychee Vista. It is partially because they expect to reassemble the farmhouse later at the same site, albeit in a better disguise using vegetation, and partially because they want to preserve and potentially expand their informal economy as a major income source.

This second fieldwork and observation reinforce my argument that if perceiving a space as *kongdi* allows planning authorities to expropriate land or ordinary individuals or groups to reclaim land, then the mountainous forestland itself can be conceptualised as a void space, offering alternative opportunities within a highly urbanised and classified metropolitan area. Herewith, the concept of void as articulated by the Chinese term *wu* (negation, nothingness, void) in the *Tao De Jing* goes beyond dualistic thinking and gives the usefulness of things.

Such urban agriculture is sustained not only by individuals' motivations for domestic consumption, health food, or entertainment, as observed in other residential agricultural practices, but, more importantly, by social or personal networks addressing the broader neglected social, cultural, and environmental needs of segments of the population. The orchard land tenure, lychee marketing, and the expansion of operating lychee orchards despite forced house relocation are all inextricably linked to social networks. These social networks extend beyond the conventional ties of common geographic origin, instead relying on morality, trust cultivation, and the pursuit of reciprocal benefits that urban amenities and institutions can not provide. Cultivation practices for migrants serve as a means for negotiating livelihoods and shaping their own experiences of contemporary life.



Worshipping during the Qingming festival. Photo by Diwen Tan 2023.

5

Omnipresence of The Sacred

A city shared by the living and the dead

This study analyses the persistence of everyday sacred landscapes in the Chinese megacity of Shenzhen. It is inspired by Lefebvre's notion of bodies in relation to space, material religion, and Chinese popular religion concerning reciprocal interactions of bodies and souls. Through a detailed examination of shrines, village temples, and a hillside cemetery using architectural ethnographic mapping and qualitative methods, the case study of Pingshan village demonstrates that various sacred spatial practices persist and actively intersect with modern interventions and urban regulations, woven into everyday life. The process of production and reproduction of sacred landscapes reveals their dual nature as both enduring and temporary, challenging the static notions of space. In conclusion, this study suggests that recognising the intersubjectivities among human, natural, and spiritual elements allows the sacred to function as a spatial figure of landscape infrastructure, one that possesses the structuring power to reconfigure urban settlements towards inclusivity.

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Minor adjustments were made to align with the thesis.

5.1 Enchanted modern life in China

Many studies have shown that various sacred practices and spaces persist, intermingled with the modern urban lives of people across the globe (Gómez & Van Herck, 2012; Yelle & Trein, 2020). Increasing attention is given to the geography or spatiality of religion, as these sacred practices have contributed to shaping the future of urbanism by engaging with and critiquing modernity through a deeper sense of embodiment (Kwon, 2008; Lanz, 2014; Wilford, 2010). The research covers a wide range of relevant topics, including social and spatial transformations of religion (Dora, 2018; Kiong & Kong, 2000), production of sacred spaces (Jones, 2019), and community making (Fan, 2003). However, the concept of immaterial souls or spirits has largely been excluded from these debates. Only few exceptions (Heng, 2022) acknowledge souls' active interactions with human bodies. This explicit acknowledgement is important in challenging the prevalent worldview that has focused on the bodily, physical, and human aspects of existence, with 'the divine removed to an other-worldly reality' (Sahlins, 2022, p. 11). In other words, it aids us in reimagining the enchantment of the modern world (Wilford, 2010).

Therefore, I use Lefebvre's concept of bodies in relation to space to examine the reciprocal relationships between bodies and souls and to reimagine the space becoming enchanted. It proposes that the interactions, negotiations, and borrowings between the enchanted and disenchanted worlds enable us to reconceptualise urban spaces beyond their purely physical and bodily aspects to inform a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design.

The study focuses on a Chinese metropolitan area as the site for empirical investigation, where diverse forms of soul beliefs exist and traditional culture began to resurge in the post-reform era. This landscape presents a juxtaposition to the country's pursuit of modernisation and advancement in science and technology. Following the Taylor (2007) and Caseau (1999)'s secularisation narratives, China's cities' rapid transformation was accompanied by three dynamics: desacralisation and desecration, which involved removing elements deemed 'superstitious' or 'feudal'; resacralisation in which new 'proper' forms were legitimised for environmental reasons as part of a sanitising process; and the reinvention of national traditional culture through cultural revitalisation programmes (Cartier, 2019; Ren, 2018). However, beneath this modern and orderly façade, popular beliefs in Daoism, Buddhism, *yin-yang*, and ancestral spirits endure. In other words, modern life in China seems still enchanted; the physical world and the parallel spiritual world are never fully separate, as observed in lived experiences (Fan, 2003; Gao et al., 2019).

The study takes an urban village in Shenzhen as a case study to investigate the persistence of sacred landscapes. It is a place that epitomises how rural origins are encompassed by a larger city (O'Donnell et al., 2017) and a microcosm where popular religion is entangled with urbanisation and modernisation dynamics. Using embodied methodologies, the study illustrates sacred spatial

practices in the daily lives of migrants, villagers, and the village collective, emphasising their intersection with state-led urbanisation and transformation. This analysis reveals the sensory and affective qualities of evolving but enduring sacred landscapes. Moreover, it enhances understandings of the social production of space by seeking to move away from the Cartesian framework and instead adopting embodied subjectivities from a human-decentred perspective.

5.2 Body, soul, and sacred landscape

The living body and its relationship with space have been thoroughly explored by Lefebvre (1991). He rejected Cartesian space as a container waiting to be occupied by bodies, and instead proposed the concept of a body that has the capacity to create space through the deployment of various energies governed by the laws of nature. The first core element of this concept is to oppose viewing space and bodies as objects and bring in the perspective of embodied subjects (Kinkaid, 2020). This is shared by the phenomenological work by Merleau-Ponty (1962), emphasising bodies' inherent capacities to direct behaviours. The second element is that the relationship between bodies and space is immediate, reciprocal, and intersubjective; it is through interactions and relations among multiple bodies that space is produced. As Lefebvre (1991, p. 170) asserts, 'each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space'. Bodies as subjects produce and reproduce space's meanings through social practices, and at the same time space orders bodies through social and spatial codes (Kinkaid 2020). Also, these social practices are often performed in repetition and reoccurrence, thus imparting rhythms to everyday life, as explained in Lefebvre's work on rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre, 2004; Simonsen, 2005).

This phenomenological understanding of space and time provides a foundation for scholars interpreting urban spaces as appropriated by groups of embodied differences or the city in its entirety. As illustrated by De Boeck and Plissart (2004), Kinshasa can be portrayed as a giant living body comprising many individual bodies that move, act, and interrelate, generating the city's 'inner drive and rhythms'. The body, therefore, is both physical and social, producing specific forms of social lives and imbuing various urban spaces with multiple meanings.

In the scholarship of spatiality of religion, sacred spaces are often seen as inhabited by divine forces. These spaces are artefacts with unique forms that exert structural power on a city. They can become a place of attraction, organising sequences of sanctity and assembling buildings that surround them (Kostof, 2005). They may serve, individually or collectively, as the predominant structure of a city or be embedded within the urban fabric while signifying the area, such as roadside memorials (Dickens, 2021). According to Rossi (1984), the persistence of a sacred artefact is 'a result of its capacity to constitute the city, its history and art, its being and memory' (p. 60). From material religion approach, artefacts or objects 'become icons when they have not only material force but also symbolic power' (Bartmański & Alexander, 2012). In this way of

embodiment, invisible souls, spirits, or deities are made tangibly present (Knott et al., 2016). Additionally, under the view of urban morphology, these spaces or landscapes have been studied as physical forms that exert structural power on urban tissues (Shannon & De Meulder, 2019). However, while more emphasis has been given to the human experience of material things, such as sensations, souls as subjects are less explicitly discussed. This is partially influenced by a naturalistic orientation (Descola, 2013) where the concept of souls is often supplanted by the concepts of the mind or consciousness, and Plato's theory of the immortal soul that views the soul as an autonomous thinking thing to be freed from bodily constraints (Swinburne, 2021).

Conducting this study within the Chinese cultural context of analogical thinking and divination traditions (Descola, 2013; Yang, 1961) necessitates an alternative understanding of souls. We must view souls as connected to bodies and space by incorporating aspects of the soul's active and effective influence on the body's movements (Heng, 2022). It is this network of movements that has formed the territory of sacred landscapes. Chinese souls (*hun* or *hunpo*, often seen as plural entities for each living body) are rather abstract and related to cosmic energy *qi* (or *jingqi*). This embodies the yin-yang interaction and constitutes the *wu* (beings), whether animate or inanimate (Yu, 1987). Collectively, it becomes a world of myriad things (*wanwu*), including bodies and souls, governed by the cosmic order.

This *wanwu* world permeates everyday lives of the bodily human world, through gestures of veneration, including incense worshipping, burial rites, and funeral rites. Chinese souls are ubiquitous in different forms either as deities, spirits, or ghosts (including ancestral spirits) (Gu, 1929; Yu, 2005). These animated beings invite actions and gestures, thereby instantly creating and maintaining sacred spaces. These sacred landscapes (from tablets and shrines to temples and tombs) not only serve as individual buildings for worshipping but also give cosmological spatial structure and social order as exemplified by auspicious site orientation and relational location (Needham, 1956). When controversies over modern urban planning and land rulings arise, such landscapes and beliefs in souls can also become forms of silent, nonviolent resistance. For example, some may appear under the disguised name of 'cultural square' to align with modern public space classifications, while others are expressed through revived ritual performances that reunite the community, affirming the symbolic importance of place (Gao et al., 2019; Guo & Herrmann-Pillath, 2023a).

The belief in the existence of souls in plural forms and their inextricable links with the living invites a re-examination of how urban spaces are shaped and constituted, not only through material bodies but also through immaterial souls. This approach enables decentring human dimension in viewing the world (Lane, 2001; Sahlins, 2022), by requiring the acknowledgement of ghost-gods as subjects with free wills, emotions, and differential powers, as equal as bodies. In this sense, Lefebvre's notion of bodies can be broadly interpreted to include non-human beings, such as souls. The materiality and embodied experiences inspired by the material religion can

extend to the capacities of souls or spirits.

5.3 Methodology

This study closely examines the dynamics of various sacred landscapes that are retained amidst the rapid urban transformations (Figure 1). They include: 1) the widely spread shop front sacred spaces of Chaoshanese migrants¹⁴; 2) villagers' divine family guardians enshrined in each house; 3) village-owned communal temples, including ancestral halls and a Buddhist temple, that have been collectively maintained as expression of clan identity since their ancestors settled here 500 years ago; and 4) the hillside cemetery established on the village's collective land, adjacent to the settlement area (Figure 5.1).

Using embodied methodologies, this empirical research draws on qualitative data collected during fieldwork I conducted during two separate trips in 2023 and 2024. The first fieldwork, conducted from 1 March to 30 May 2023, provided an overall understanding of the village, including its history, demography, spatial configuration, and rhythms of daily activities. Staying in the village allowed me to gradually immerse myself in the community, while daily walks within and around the village and numerous interactions with the community committee and residents also helped build trust. The discovery of omnipresent sacred spaces arose organically through my sensory experience on-site, including the smell and smoke of burning incense, the visual aesthetics of temples, and the sound of firecrackers during *Qingming* (Tomb-Sweeping Festival)¹⁵.

Building on the established relationships I developed at the village, the second fieldwork took place from 12 May to 4 August 2024. I used architectural ethnographic mapping (Kaijima et al., 2018) as a main method to visually map the observed spatial characteristics, including material representation and spatial arrangement, and gestures and social practices involved in making sacredness and sacred spaces. To capture the complexity of the production of sacred spaces, this method was complemented by photography and field note-taking, derived from interviews and my experiential engagement with people's daily lives at the site through all senses and a reflective mind.

I made sketches on-site to document shape, size, structure, activities, and environments at different moments. The act of drawing necessitates a careful and slower mode of observation,

termed 'attentive observation' by Gandy (2024). Long-term observation using this mode is also essential for capturing those ephemeral sacred rituals that are integral to daily practices. In parallel, a series of interviews through casual and extended conversations with residents who have direct experience of the sacred activities in the village. They had diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, and migration status and represented different groups that are associated with various sacred locations.

Fieldwork itself, (re)drawing, and writing constituted a long process of contemplation from a human-centred perspective, which aimed to elucidate the intersubjectivity of human, natural, and perceived spiritual elements. The final drawings, synthesised from observed data in the form of sketches, photos, and fieldnotes, were the result of contemplation. They translate abstract and spiritual concepts and elements into tangible visual forms that encompass materiality and spatiality, illustrating sacred spaces in the process of being assembled and constituted. Combined with photographs and writings, these drawings offer a narrative interpretation of bodies, souls, and everyday practices in time and space, revealing embedded cultural meanings.

Additionally, I made a three-day visit to a young migrant's hometown in the Chaoshan countryside to better understand the regional culture. Also, a guided visit to the city's commercial public cemetery allowed me to learn the modern planning strategies on death and burial. To address privacy and ethical considerations, all personal characteristics were anonymised in the drawings, and pseudonyms were used.

In the following two sections, I elaborate on how sacred spaces are produced, reproduced, and maintained in contemporary society through four narratives, each epitomising key features of a particular typology. I begin with the omnipresent sacred within the village and then turn to the landscape of practices related to death—the hillside cemetery established on the village's collective land following Granny Zhan's passing.

¹⁴Chaoshan, a region located in eastern Guangdong province, has a distinct identity characterised by its own language (Min Nan Teochew dialect) and rich cultural traditions. The region is particularly known for its vibrant rituals and mystical practices. Chaoshanese has become the dominant group among migrants in Pingshan village and the wider city.

¹⁵See footnote 5.



Shops and *Caishen* (the god of wealth)



Houses and divine family guardians



Village temples



Figure 5.1. Omnipresence of sacred spaces in Pingshan village. They are: 1) shops of Chaoshanese migrants operated with *Caishen* (the god of wealth), where the shrine either follows the village's southwest orientation or prioritises the door-facing; 2) local villagers' houses with divine family guardians *Menshen* (the door god) and/or *Tudi* (the earth god) at door sides and their ancestors' tablets and shrines at home; and 3) village's temples situated at the old village's border. Source: Shenzhen Government, statutory plan; and photo by Diwen Tan, 2024

5.4 Omnipresence of the sacred as defining parameter

5.4.1 A migrant's shop defined by Caishen

Since the late 1980s, large numbers of migrants have arrived in the village, with Chaoshanese migrants forming the predominant group. They soon established businesses with sacred spaces to sustain their livelihoods. As commonly claimed by them, the god of wealth, *Caishen*, must be honorarily invited (*qing*) when starting their businesses. Various shops along the streets and alleys feature a shrine dedicated to the worship of *Caishen*. Unlike homogenised chain shops, these businesses are very personalised and specialised, including restaurants, grocery shops, tobacco sellers, tea and liquor shops, mini markets, greengrocers, and second-hand electric appliance retailers. This practice not only necessitates the normative process but also defines the shop's spatial arrangement.

The village's only DIY shop has had a *Caishen* enshrined in the front room since 1999. The shop belongs to Uncle Liu, who came to Shenzhen around the age of 17 in the 1980s. After spending 10 years working in various industries in Nantou village, Shenzhen, Uncle Liu decided to move to Pingshan to start his own business. At the time, farmland and orchards still dominated the largely rural landscape of Pingshan village, along with industrial factories with colour steel tiles. Seeing the opportunities presented by the farmland's requisition for a university campus and the surrounding urban development, he decided to open this DIY shop. It became the first one in the village, and even in the sub-district, anticipating the high demand for building materials.

The *Caishen* statue was invited (*qing*) from a temple in his hometown that his family often visited. It came with a full set of supplies, including a wooden shrine, a ceramic incense burner, three red liquor cups, and a pair of electric lotus lamps. For Uncle Liu and his wife, the specific form of the god is less important, whether it is the legendary figure of Lord *Zhao*, *Fan Li*, or a hybrid representation, or a statue, image or simply incense ashes from the god's worship. What truly matters is the process of consecration (*kaiguang*) to imbue the material and physical form with spiritual power (*lingli*); the object is then perceived as a divine being.

It is a newly built three-story building where he established his shop, located right in front of the old village. The village collective constructed the building, in a modern concrete style, on former agricultural land, following the axis of the communal ancestral halls and fishpond (Figure 5.2). The ground floor consists of seven units. Following the traditional layout of old village houses, each unit has a spacious room in the front and a small one in the back, with a high ceiling of approximately 3.8 metres to accommodate a mezzanine. This design proved to be ideal for businesspeople, offering storage space or the flexibility to combine working and living functions. The ground floor was quickly filled with shops and restaurants.

If the building provides the locational and volumetric convenience for the business, then the design of a *Caishen* shrine defines the shop's arrangement. At Uncle Liu's DIY shop, a *Caishen* shrine is located in the back of the front room and above the door to the back room, positioned to face the shop door while aligning with the village's southwest orientation. The shelves of goods are then arranged within this structure, ensuring an unobstructed view of the god. Strictly speaking, the shrine's distance from the walls and floor should be carefully measured using a *luban* ruler and aligned with the owner's horoscope to ensure maximum luck. However, this is not always strictly observed, and flexibility is often exercised. In practice, a location that is convenient for worshipping is recommended. For example, although the height of Uncle Liu's shrine is not ideal, it is practical for him and his wife using a chair.

For over 20 years, every morning and evening, Uncle Liu (or sometimes his wife) has opened the daily business by burning incense for *Caishen*. On the 1st and 15th of every lunar month, his wife offers sacrifices, including food and drink, burns incense, and prays at the shrine before burning joss paper (*yuanbao*) in the space out front, which has patterned pavement next to the green belt. This offering is not only made for *Caishen* but for all the gods that she remembers, regardless of religion. The sacrifices are nourishment for the gods, while the act of burning is a means of communicating with and directing them. These ritual practices are simplified, Uncle Liu explained, to adapt to the local customs. Here, customs refer to modern urban practices shaped by a series of state regulations on sanitation and cleanliness under the banner of ecological civilisation. For example, it is required to use an iron basket to burn paper money outdoors. After consuming the 'shadow' of the sacrifices, the worshipped gods leave behind a residue with invisible power, *lingqi*. It then becomes an honour for offerors like Liu's wife to share this enspirited residue with family members and guests.

Inviting and devoted worship of *Caishen* is indispensable for Chaoshanese business people, but they do not rely solely on god's power (*lingli*) for success nor blame failure on it. 'To gods, *xinyi* [heart and mind] is important. To succeed in a thing, yourself must make efforts to do it well', Uncle Liu explained. Liu's philosophy is widely shared by others and observable in their business strategies. Without consciously realising it, their actions often embody a reverent attitude (*xinyi*) or sincere mind (*chengyi*) towards the gods. Liu adopted human emotions or compassion for others (*renqing*) as the fundamental reciprocal trading principle (Mauss, 2002). Offering help and convenience to others, such as allowing late payments in the early stages of his business, earned him trust and more contracts. Such *renqing*, as many business people believe, brings undetermined luck (*yunqi*) to business, which is considered an important factor alongside one's fate (*ming*).

5.4.2 Villager's house ordered by divine family guardians

As more migrants move in and occupy the ground floor for businesses, an increasing number of

villagers have relocated from the village core to the extended area or beyond, often opting for elevated housing. In response to the waves of migration and state-led urban sprawl, the village extended its residential area to the eastern side in the 1990s by replacing its rice fields with mid-rise apartment buildings of 6-7 floors, constructed in a rigid grid pattern. These buildings have since been rented to rural migrants and recent graduates, while some floors are reserved for villagers' own extended families, usually with two to three generations.

As villagers with families moved homes, their divine family guardians were also moved from a one to two-story house with a yard to a mid-rise apartment (Figure 5.3). Divine family guardians include *Tudi* (the earth god), *Menshen* (door gods that protect against evil influences while encouraging the entrance of good ones), *Tianguan* (heavenly official, often referred to as heavenly father and earthly mother), recent ancestors, and *Guanyin* (goddess of mercy). Some sacred materials and spaces were moved from outdoors to indoors, while others were elevated from the ground floor to the first floor. These changes are consistent with observations made in Singaporean Chinese society (Kiong & Kong, 2000). However, despite their elevated position, divine guardians maintained the spatial and cultural order of the house, suggesting an inside-outside and top-down hierarchy. Also, since all buildings in the extended area align with the village's orientation, the relative positioning of family gods remained the same.

Uncle Fang's house exemplifies this spatial order. He designed his apartment building with construction skills honed through practice in Hong Kong when he was young, and now lives with a family of three generations. *Tudi*, who was traditionally located at the left of the main door or front yard gate facing outside and at ground level, was relocated to the indoor living room on the first floor. *Tudi* now shares a cabinet shrine made of *Cunninghamia* wood with the greater god *Guanyin*, who is placed at the top. Recent ancestors are placed in the middle, following the hierarchy of gods. *Tianguan*, who used to be placed alongside the door facing the front yard and at a certain distance from the ground, was lifted to the first-floor balcony. The *Menshen*, in the form of two hero figures, continue to be affixed to the main door, renewed annually along with the couplet and five *menjian* (door papercuts featuring patterns of old copper coins) placed around the main door. However, the copper wall incense burner traditionally used for worshipping *Menshen* is no longer used, leaving the door façade relatively clean. This is mainly because the alley along Uncle Fang's three apartment buildings was long ago transformed into a vibrant and bustling 'cuisine variety street', known among residents and nearby students. Additionally, the building façade is subject to national campaigns of 'sanitary and civilised city' that regulate the spatial order and behaviours. In the more hidden and narrow alleys, the *Menshen* worshipping burner is still visible. During *Qingming* Festival¹⁶, the smoke rising from balconies and windows would suffuse alleys, more precisely the space in-between buildings.

¹⁶See footnote 5.

'Every family has [its own] *shenpo* [sorceress]', villagers often joked. In earlier times, the village used to have a sorceress who was believed to cure illnesses and resolve abnormal behaviours or situations, especially when kids were 'hunted', 'possessed', or 'scared' by ghosts. However, after she passed away, no person inherited the shamanic (*wu*) personality (*ge*) required to communicate with ghost-gods. Nowadays, every woman—whether the head of household or their wife—continues serving all gods with deference through daily worship and rituals on important dates. Every morning, the first task of Uncle Fang's wife is to burn incense, add lamp oil, and pray. On the first and 15th of the lunar month, she offers sacrifices and burns joss paper in an iron basket for all gods. Once this is done, she and any daughters prepare breakfast for the family and manage household chores. In such a way, she assumes the role of the family *shenpo*; communicating with family guardians has become her daily routine.

Uncle Fang, freed from such duties, serves as a respected elder and guardian of the vibrant neighbourhood. He likes to go downstairs and sit in front of the house on a small stool to spend the morning watching people, reading newspapers, and chatting with neighbours (restaurateurs who rented the ground floors from him) while smoking. Around noon, his wife or daughter calls him for lunch from the balcony or stairway window. After lunch and a brief rest, he routinely comes downstairs again for his 3 p.m. bubble tea—a habit developed during his time labouring in Hong Kong—if no family mahjong game is organised. While sitting at the same doorway (*menkou*)¹⁷ with a bubble tea and a cigarette in his hands, he anticipates various encounters and silently observes residents' lives.

To Uncle Fang and other villagers, family extends far beyond a nuclear one: it encompasses the immediate extended family to the whole kindred village. Their earliest common ancestors, enshrined at the grand ancestral temple, are believed to have the power to control the village's fate and oversee individuals' well-being, while their own recent ancestors are worshipped at home and believed to guard their families. 'When the fortune is endowed, you should be able to 'receive' it', Uncle Fang reflected. He believes that he inherited a fortune (i.e., land) from his ancestors and was able to manage it well. However, while people are 'under the protection' of benevolent ancestors, this is conditional. If offended, their anger can bring suffering and hardship, not only to individuals, but in the case of high-ranking villagers, to the entire village. That is why he challenged a village leader who supported the ongoing rehabilitation project 'Talent Town' by pointedly asking, 'Can you hold a clear conscience in front of your great ancestors?'

5.4.3 Village bordered by temples for lineage ancestors and communal gods

As mentioned above, family holds a far-reaching meaning for a lineage-based village. Artefacts

¹⁷For a detailed explanation, please refer to Lexicon (Table 6.1).

such as ancestral halls and communal temples are tied to its collective identity and shared history and memory. Being constructed in specific styles and appropriately located following fengshui principles, they spatially frame and spiritually safeguard the village. At the very front and back of the old village are ancestral halls, honoured by the community. The grand ancestral temple with three halls is located on the upper terrain and enshrines wooden memorial tablets of early ancestors. Men's full names are carved into the tablets, along with their spouses' surnames, indicating their clan. This hall is often closed and only opens for lineage-related events, such as New Year worship by the village collective.

On the village's front edge are two connected sub-family ancestral halls. These have become a social space, with the open space in front having been converted into a small, popular park. The right¹⁸ sub-family ancestral hall is used for storing equipment, including a floor speaker, cables, and chairs for the daily group dances held in the morning and evening. The left hall recently reopened following renovations of the elderly entertainment centre and is only open from noon until mid-afternoon for elderly villagers to play mahjong. Tables placed at the entrance create a makeshift 'wall' to provide a degree of privacy from the outside while generating curiosity about the interior. Inside the hall, there is a sacred and quiet atmosphere, with the background sound of mahjong. The quietness is accentuated by the high-ceilinged hall supported by marble pillars, narrative ink murals along the tops of walls, carvings of animals on the beams, and a modest altar dedicated to Ancestor XII.

The Guanyin temple, located at the east edge of the old village and aligned with the village's orientation, was originally built when the village was established in the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911) as a place to pray for fertility, peace, and prosperity. There are no records showing how many times it has been destroyed and rebuilt, but the most recent reconstruction occurred in 1998. Due to severe damage and a lack of proper maintenance, the wood structure had to be dismantled, according to the villager in charge of the reconstruction. However, the reassembly was not successful: the main beam was broken, and most pillars were too corroded to be reused. Consequently, the temple failed to be listed as a city's historical and cultural site for preservation. Today's *Guanyin* temple is a new construction (*xinmiao*, as local villagers refer to it) built with bricks and marble pillars and painted red (Figure 5.4). Residents who are not familiar with its long history call it red temple (*hongmiao*). Nevertheless, its location, size, orientation, and functions have remained unchanged. As the only Guanyin temple in the whole district, it is a source of pride for the villagers and is frequently visited.

The Guanyin temple not only enshrines the Buddhist goddess Guanyin but also various other

¹⁸When orienting a sacred space, 'left' and 'right' are used from the point of view of the enshrined god(s) and aligned with the orientation of the space, regardless of the human body's position. In classical Chinese thought, 'left' is yang and 'right' is yin.

gods serving different purposes, including the folklore god of wealth Caishen, the folklore fertility goddess *Shi'er Nainiang* (literally 'wet nurse with 12 children'), the folklore sea goddess *Tianhou* (also known as *Mazu*), and the earth god *Tudi*. A local villager in his 60s is responsible for daily maintenance, including cleaning and regularly repainting the wooden gates with preservative oil. Every 1st and 15th of the lunar month, he comes early at 8 a.m. to relight the candle tower and hang and burn large incense cones for each family offering. Around the same time, a middle-aged woman who voluntarily acts as an agent of the village comes to worship all the gods in clockwise order. She offers hundreds of burning incense sticks at once and burns a pile of joss paper for the village. Each village family contributes a yearly fee for this service. This practice is practical since most households now enshrine and worship their own Guanyin and other guardian gods at home, as seen earlier in the case of Uncle Fang. Nevertheless, the cooperative model of worshipping the communal gods demonstrates the continued social bond between individual families and the village collective. Throughout the day on these significant dates, other residents, including migrants, also visit the temple and pray for blessings, including health, wealth, family happiness, marriage, childbirth, education, and careers—encompassing all areas of life.

5.5 From the living to the dead: Cemetery embedded in lychee orchards

A cemetery—a place for the burial of the dead and for the living to pay their homage—is traditionally located near, yet apart from, the settlement area. Chinese peasants have commonly embedded cemeteries within productive landscapes, such as farmlands. Since the late 1990s, national and municipal regulations on modern urban cemeteries have been enacted; the establishment of the village's cemetery, categorised as a welfare public cemetery, was a negotiated result. Scattered, buried tombs (*fen*) in an arch shape with a tombstone (Teather, 2001) had been relocated into this collective cemetery, a hybrid product that lays on the productive landscape of hillside lychee orchards in a concrete rectangle design.

At age 90, Granny Zhan passed away at her house, located at the edge of the old village. Her funeral was a modest and quiet event held at her home, completed within 24 hours. Rather than inviting Nanm *daoshi* (Daoist priests) (Li et al., 2010) to perform dances to summon her departing souls, or hosting a banquet to publicly announce the death, her family chose to follow modern municipal funeral regulations that were issued in 2000 and revised in 2004 and 2019 (Shenzhen Municipal People's Congress, 2019). After her passing at noon, a funeral was quickly organised at her house for relatives and close friends. Early the next morning, her body was sent for cremation before being interred at the village's communal cemetery on the mountainside. By noon, the procession had returned to the house, and the ceremony had finished.

Despite the silence and frugality, some village traditions subtly persist amid the modern urban cemetery and burial regulations. To transform the living room into a funeral hall, family members

moved the furniture, including tables and chairs, outdoors against the wall beside the gate. The wooden chairs, adorned with flower carvings, served as silent markers that announced the death to the public. The body was bathed, dressed, and laid in a prepared wooden coffin covered with a piece of red cotton. The coffin was placed in the centre of the room, with an incense burner serving as a small altar in front of it. Mourning was embedded in gestures of offering incense sticks.

Family members stayed awake for Granny Zhan until the second day, when the procession began early in the morning. Scheduled at an auspicious time according to *Tung Shing* (Cantonese for the ‘all-knowing book’ or almanack), a quick but loud firecracker was set off in front of the house. After that, the procession departed. Family members stopped by the Guanyin temple with firecrackers, sacrifices, and joss papers to inform the village gods of her death and ask them to take care of her souls. Next, the procession and the body paused at the village’s main gate (*paifang*)¹⁹, where another firecracker was set off before leaving for the cremation. Remains of the burned firecrackers were almost immediately swept away by sanitation workers, leaving almost no trace.

After the cremation, the ashes were then carried to the hillside cemetery (Figure 5.5). Stairs flanked by young pine trees on both sides led people upwards to the burial site—partially concreted terraces with a rectangular frame that were converted in 2015 from the village’s lychee orchards. A red banner with a bold slogan stood out from the green, reminding people to refrain from using firecrackers and be thrifty and eco-friendly. On the terrace, between rows of lychee trees, the ashes were interred underground. The interment was accompanied by loud firecrackers and white joss paper thrown around the site. The bare soil was flattened once again and covered by a green mat to simulate vegetation as required by urban greening regulations. The families then offered sacrifices of rice, the deceased’s favourite food, and liquor, worshipped with incense, and burned piles of joss money in a pair of iron buckets.

While waiting for the procession’s return, female relatives cleaned all the rooms and prepared sacred items to ward off ‘dirt’. These included an enamel wash bowl (popular in the 1980s and 1990s) filled with water infused with pomelo leaves, along with a dozen needles threaded with a red string. Upon returning from the burial site, the procession was required to wash their hands with the fragrant pomelo water before entering the cleaned room. The *guhong* (literally attaching the red to clothing) with the prepared needle brooch was believed to bring good luck and longevity, symbolised by the metaphor of *congrou daowei* (from the beginning to the end) represented by the action of threading a needle. Once these rituals were complete, the family set up an altar with a framed photo of Granny Zhan, an incense burner, a pair of lamps, and a sacrifice for daily worship. From then on, Granny Zhan became a *xianren* (forebear). For the

¹⁹For a detailed explanation, please refer to Lexicon (Table 6.1).

first seven days, the family would visit the cemetery daily to renew the incense and add joss paper to allow the deceased’s soul to rest without lingering, while also serving as a comfort to the living.

As a recent ancestor, Granny Zhan became one of the family’s divine guardians, looking after the well-being of her family and descendants in all aspects of their lives. While her physical body is now in the mountainside cemetery, her soul has been empowered with *lingli* through these rituals, granting her the ability to appear anywhere. She can remain in the house through spiritual objects and communicate with her family in various ways, such as through dreams. Her family members also approach her through daily worship at home and periodical visits to the hillside communal cemetery.

The cemetery, which also contains lychee orchards and part of a park, fosters encounters with hikers, prayers, lychee caretakers, and forest rangers managing fire control, all in harmony with nature. Additionally, a *tulu* (literally ‘soil trail’), an unpaved, winding path created by former villagers to walk between villages, connects these spaces. Lychee caretakers (villagers and hired migrants) regularly visit to perform necessary tasks such as pruning, insect control, and occasionally maintaining trails damaged by heavy rainfall. Descendants of the village make seasonal visits to the cemetery, walking up the concrete stairs (constructed atop the soil trail) and praying on the concreted lychee terrace. Hikers explore various trails, marking newly discovered trails with red or other brightly coloured bands tied to trees. Coming across cemeteries and some ancient tombs in the mountains would not be a surprise to these hikers, as they are part of the landscape and Chinese culture.

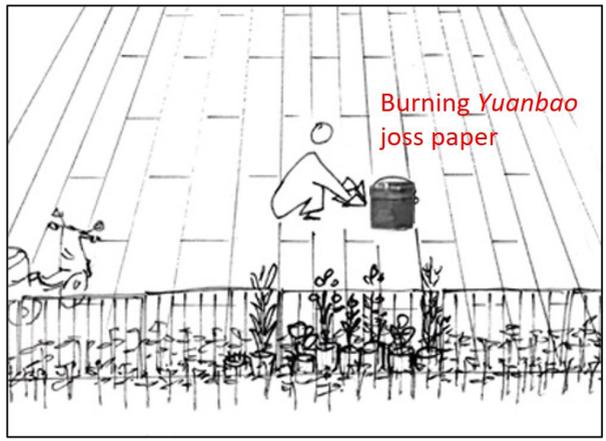
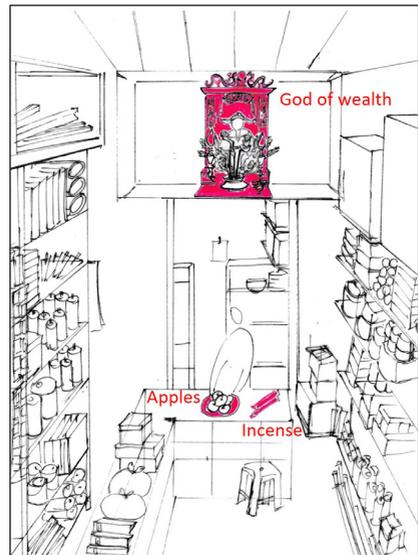
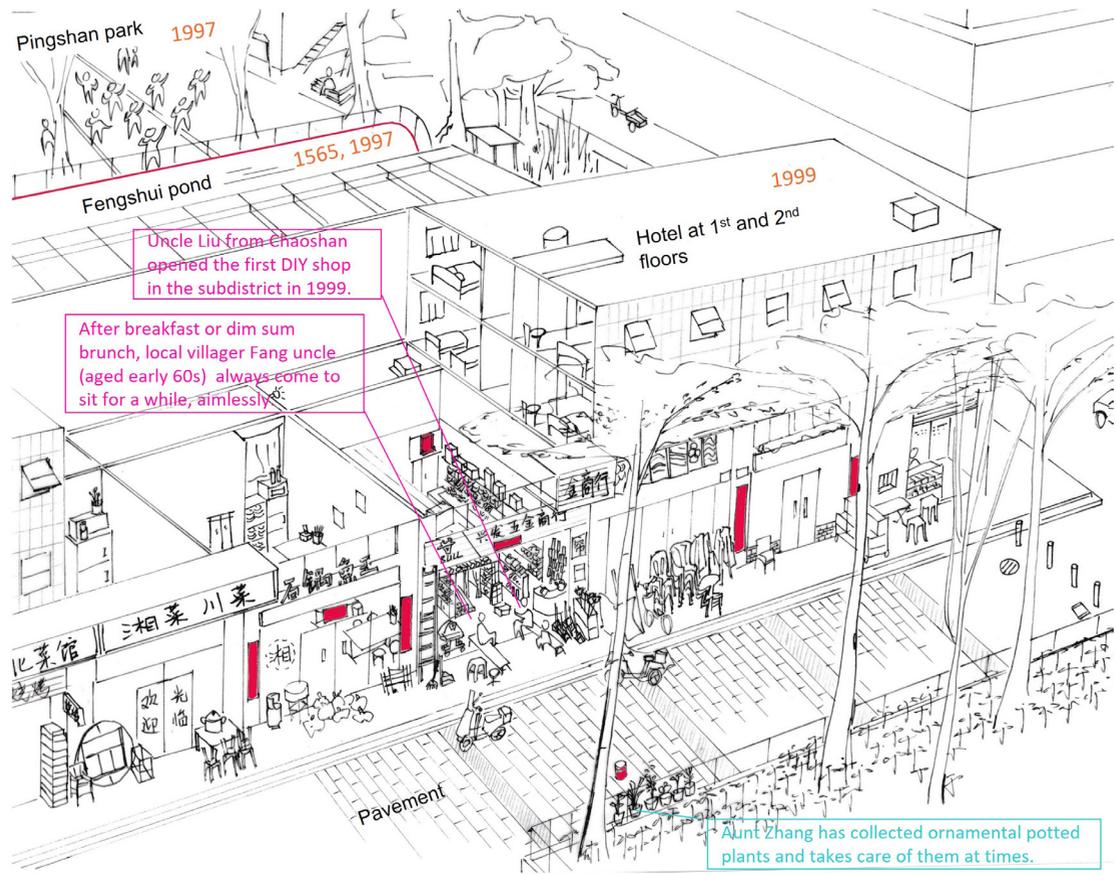


Figure 5.2. Uncle Liu's DIY shop opened with *Caishen* (the god of wealth) that is invited, enshrined, and daily worshipped. Source: Diwen Tan, 2024.



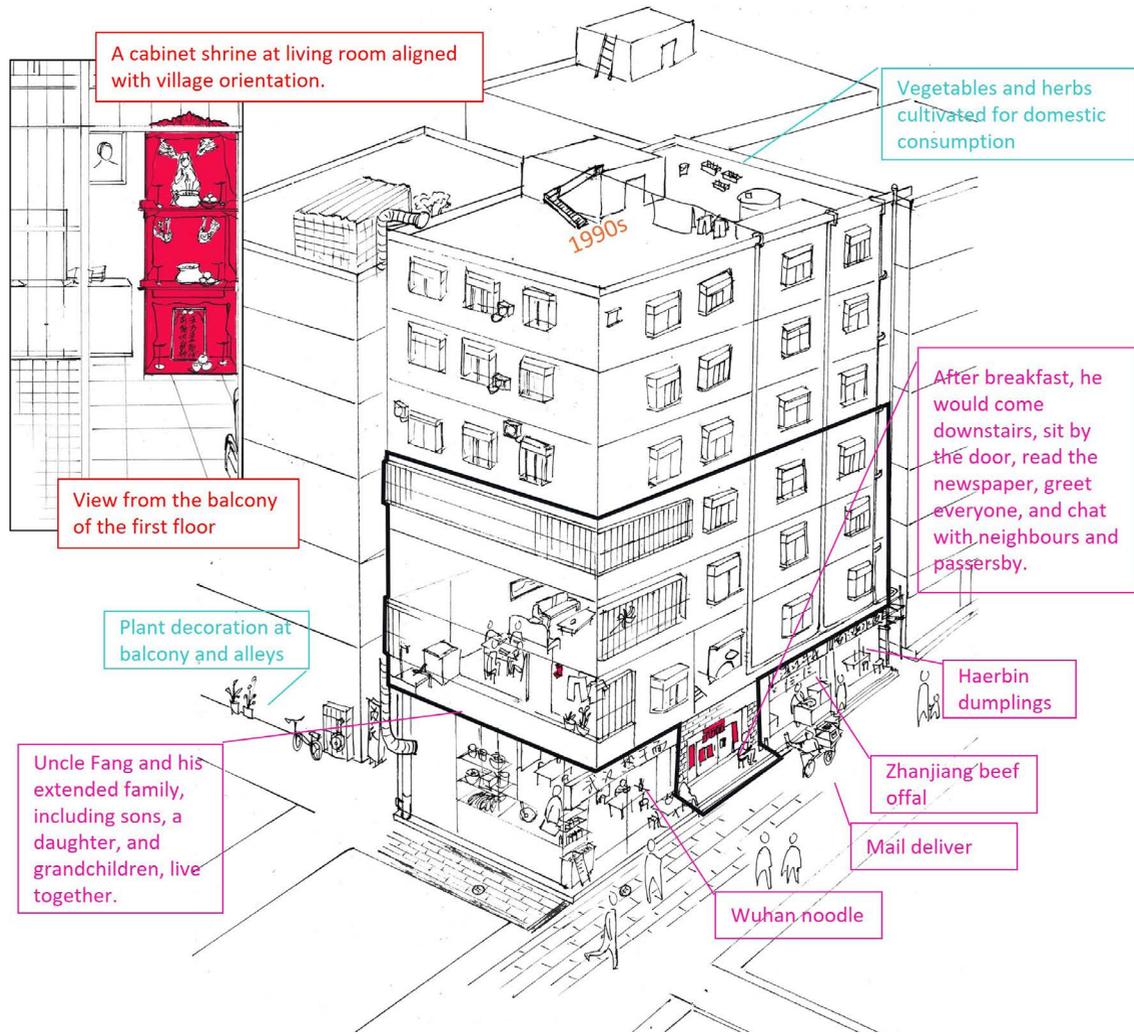


Figure 5.3. Villager Uncle Fang's home at the extended area of the village and divine family guardians.
Source: Diwen Tan, 2024



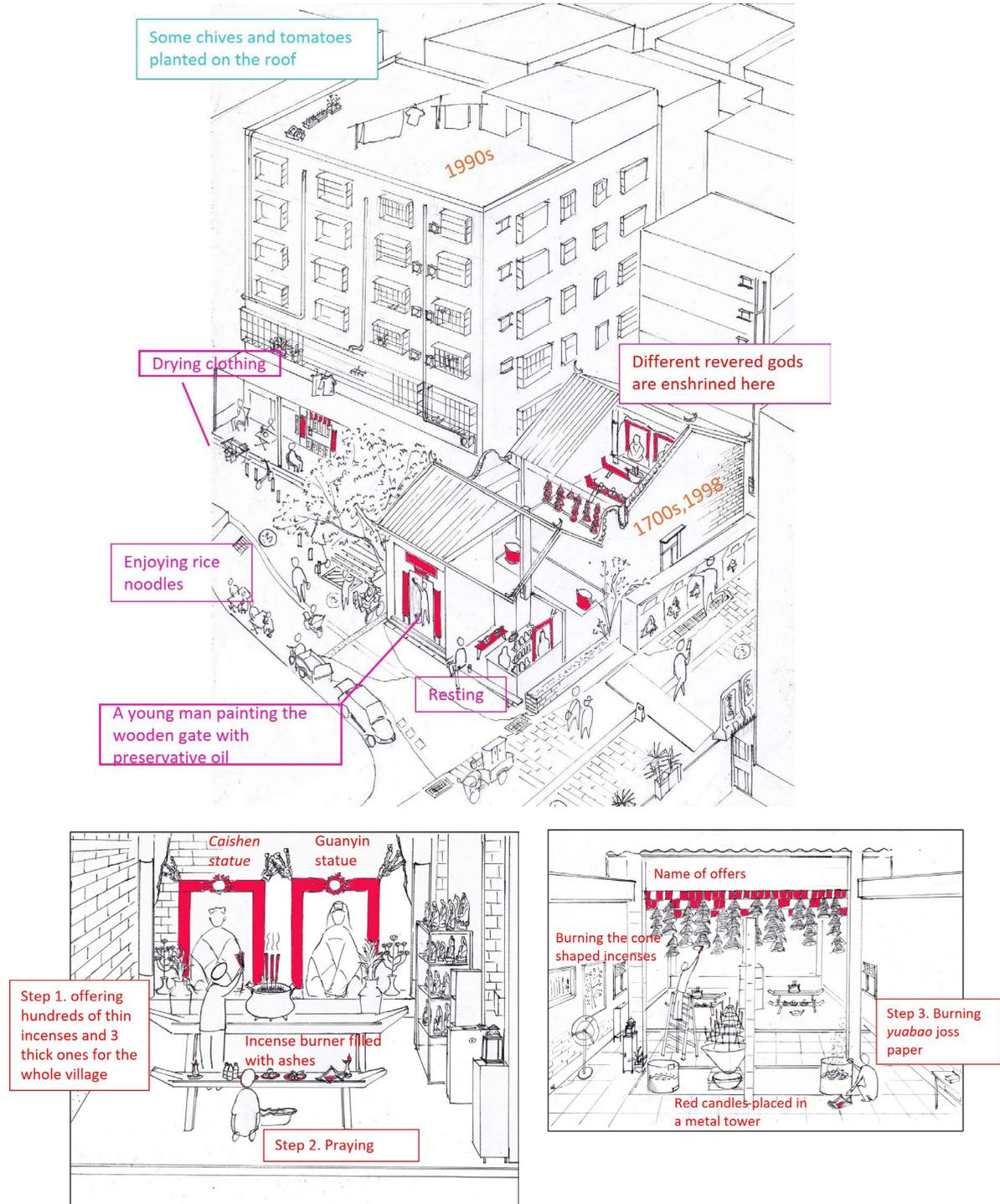


Figure 5.4. Village's Buddhist temple, known as red temple, hosts various revered gods from Daoist, Buddhist and folklore. Source: Diwen Tan, 2024.



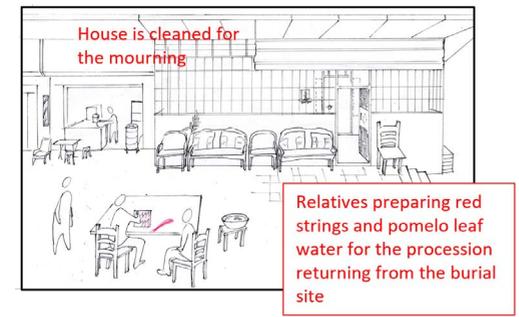
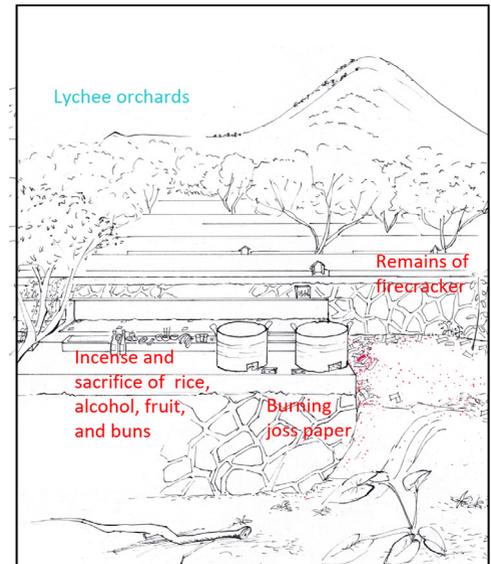
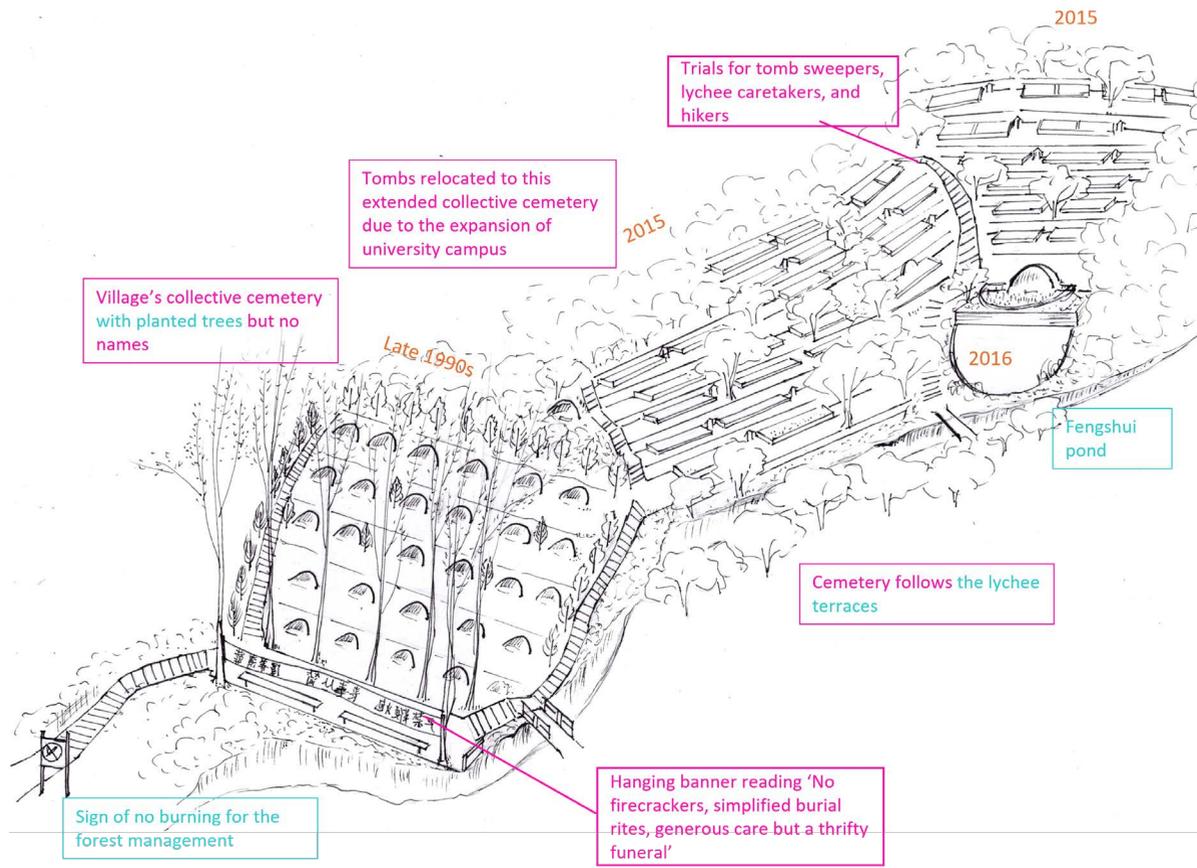


Figure 5.5. Village's communal urban cemetery built since late 1990s and extended in 2015 in a modern style at the hillside. Source: Diwen Tan, 2024.



5.6 Concluding discussion: persistence of the sacred and accompanying values

In the making and remaking of these sacred spaces, souls, represented as various ghost-gods with distinct functions, actively influence the daily gestures and practices of human bodies. They bestow material things, broadly including images, statues, shrine boxes, food, smell, and sound, with the power *lingli* to communicate with each individual and family as they desire. There is hardly any separation between bodies and souls in people's everyday life.

The presence of sacred landscapes is characterised by their dual nature as both enduring and temporary. The interdependent relationships between individual businesses and praying to *Caishen*, between villagers' homemaking and praying to divine guardians, between the village community and praying to ancestors, and between the descendants and forebearers all contribute to the formation and perpetuation of sacred spaces alongside lived social spaces. Souls and spirits are invited and enshrined within carefully designed artefacts, placed in designated locations in a storefront, home, or the lychee orchard in the mountain park. As villagers' homes were transformed into mid-rise buildings, with courtyards shifting to balconies and rooftops, divine family guardians were also elevated. Even if they are not publicly visible, they are still important. Rather than merely adapting to social spaces, these presences actively define and shape the spatial order through their orientation and distance from the floor or main door. They are prayed to or worshipped every day through simple offerings of incense burning, lighting, and bowing, which are part of daily routines.

On the other hand, sacred spaces are often created informally through rituals that reappropriate public spaces. On important dates—such as the 1st and 15th of every lunar month, deities' birthdays, or traditional festivals—villagers and migrant residents briefly claim the space in front of their homes, which is usually pavement, alleys, or stairs, for ritual practices including burning joss papers, setting up sacrificial offerings, and lighting firecrackers. On funeral and burial days, the route from the house of the deceased through the *Guanyin* temple and village *paifang* gate to the cremation and hillside cemetery is signified with intensified rites and mourning. While worshippers may use the same spaces regularly, their spatial transition is fleeting: once the rituals conclude, spaces revert to their previous state, leaving few, if any, traces of their sacred uses (Jones, 2019).

Such sacred territory evokes an enchanted world with 'infrasecular landscapes' (Dora, 2018), dynamic, multilayered palimpsests where the sacred and profane spheres intertwine, and traditional thoughts and practices continuously negotiate with modern values, regulations, and initiatives. The resulting values rest on reimagining the spatiality of spirit (Bartolini et al., 2017) and the 'plausible and relevant enchantment of the modern world' (Wilford, 2010, p. 335).

Reflecting on Lefebvre's bodies and his relevant analysis of everyday life and rhythms, sacred

practices contribute to a stable cyclical repetition that can balance with the linear repetition—the dominant temporality of modernity. The recurring acts of sacred-making create rhythms that align with natural cycles. The lunisolar calendar, used in the almanack *Tung Shing* by villagers, governs ritual practices and performances in rhythms that align with sunrise and sunset, the waxing and waning of the moon, and the seasons. At important dates, from every 1st and 15th of the lunar month to seasonal festivals such as *Qingming*²⁰ and funerals, the fluid boundary between the human world and the spiritual world dissolved, and simultaneously, emotions, affections, and symbolic representations are added to the linear time of contemporary life. In such a way, the intertwined cultural and natural meanings are produced.

Morality is produced, obeyed, and enforced by the simultaneous reflection of reverence and fear towards ghost-gods. It has led migrants to certain behaviours – keeping promises and being honest – that align with the Confucian classic Doctrine of the Mean, which have helped them build reliable personal relationships and served as essential livelihood strategies in an arrived city. The possible ambivalent results of blessings and punishments from the souls allowed the village to defend their communal temples regardless of their heritage value.

Furthermore, tension and negotiation with contemporary urban planning and design are unavoidable in the process of persistence (Guo & Herrmann-Pillath, 2023a), and the resulting sacred landscapes are indeed hybrid, complex, frequently mixed-used, and more fluid (Burchardt et al., 2023). *Caishen* shrines share storefronts with a multitude of goods, supplies, or cooking apparatus; divine family guardians occupy elevated spaces in villagers' living rooms and courtyards; and the village's communal cemetery is hidden among the municipally designated mountain park, intersecting with lychee orchards and occasionally attracting adventurous hikers. Such landscapes stand in stark contrast to the designated, monofunctional land use regime.

Drawing further on the studied sacred landscapes to inform more sensitive and inclusive planning, I propose that sacred spaces should not be understood as static land use but as a dynamic landscape form. As such, these sacred landscapes can take on a structuring role alongside existing settlements, mountains, and agricultural landscapes, helping to redefine the urban framework. They give a spatial order that resonates with human behaviours, beyond merely addressing the functional needs of different users. Behaviours here constitute interactions or intersubjective relationships among human bodies, natural elements (e.g., topography, rivers, trees, and seasons), and immaterial spiritual presences. The ephemerality of such interactions in turn necessitates a meticulous reading of space from a human-decentred perspective. Additionally, the persistence of sacred landscapes provides opportunities for ruderal spontaneous vegetation to recolonise the urban fabric. In sum, sacred landscapes with

²⁰See footnote 5.

their persistence amidst modernity can conceptually be a medium for the natural environment's recolonisation into the urban fabric. With all the activities recorded, sacred landscapes should be considered as an 'intermediate nature' (Corner & Tiberghien, 2009) that can function as landscape infrastructure that has the power to embody the bodily motions and connect both the enchanted and disenchanted worlds.



Typical steel scaffolding and green net signifying the ongoing destruction and construction work during the rehabilitation process. Layered landscapes are visible through the green net. Photo by Diwen Tan, 2023

6 Conclusion

Possibilities of hybridisation in architecture and urbanism

钱先生所追求的从来不是中国旧魂原封不动地还阳，而是旧混引生新魂。

余英时《犹记风吹水上鳞：钱穆与现代中国学术》

What Mr. Qian pursued was never the resurrection of the old Chinese soul intact, but rather the old soul giving birth to the new soul.

Yu Ying-shih, 1990. *The Wind Blowing Over the Waves: Qian Mu and Modern Chinese Academic Study*

6.1. The palimpsest as an analytical and methodological framework

This research provides a more nuanced reading that allows for a better understanding of the village in a Chinese metropolitan area through palimpsestic readings across settlement, productive landscape, and sacred landscape. By conceptualising a Chinese city as a palimpsest, its overlooked past and lingering historical traces are rediscovered and recognised. The historical analysis using ethnographic drawings at particular architectural and urban locations serves to mimic how the city has been and is being shaped by different inscriptions from all actors, including human and non-human inhabitants. By emphasising the simultaneous inscriptions and non-linear accumulation characteristic of urban palimpsest, the research develops a spatial-temporal analytical framework to support a more comprehensive understanding of space, place, or landscape.

Shenzhen is a giant palimpsest network of palimpsests, which has undergone a rapid process of being written, erased, and rewritten since the 1980s' economic reforms. Hundreds of villages have survived in this coastal and mountainous terrain. Despite being stigmatised as 'urban villages', these villages, alongside their associated productive agriculture and omnipresent sacred landscapes, serve as the core where all historical and cultural layers are condensed and sedimented. Within an urban village, as exemplified by Pingshan village in this research, different locations from the urban core and extended area to industrial land and mountainside demonstrate various ways of palimpsest. In such a way, the landscape formed is rather entangled, overlapped, and sometimes contested.

6.2 Beyond palimpsest: hybrid tradition and modernity

The palimpsest readings reveal how inherited traditions coexist and interplay with modernity. The past, partially visible and partially invisible, lives within the present, fostering the prospect of a hybridisation process that leads towards a more inclusive form of urbanism.

Chapter 2 draws on a systematic review of 50 empirical cases of urban forms in South China to reveal the multiplicity of Chinese modernity since the 1980s. It demonstrates that Chinese urban modernity in urban planning and design is a set of dynamic and reflexive processes involving the

disappearance and reappearance of water, the delineation of monofunctional zones at multiple scales, and the sanitation of non-places and sacred spaces. These three mutually enhance each other. These processes also imply the persistence of traditions, whether in opposition to or in alignment with modern interventions. Such persistence, especially through tradition-modernity intersections, allows certain forms, like urban villages, to impart depth to the new modern forms, thereby acting as a force of reflexivity that challenges the hegemony of urban planning. This finding is further elucidated by the in-depth architectural ethnographic analysis and narratives of Pingshan village in the Shenzhen metropolitan area investigated in Chapters 3-5, concentrating on the lived urban spaces, the surviving agricultural landscape, and the omnipresent sacred spaces.

Enduring traditions are those being handed down or transmitted. As shown in Chapters 3-5, they are embedded in names, artefacts, and, more importantly, daily practices. Rather than staying fixed or static, these traditions transform themselves while actively interacting with modern interventions through rhythms of daily life, producing various hybrid spatial forms and practices.

The **practice of cultivation**, inherited from an agrarian society, has continued as an important **mode of economic production and labour**. This continuation could be in a different form and with different substances. For example, the village studied has shifted from ‘growing’ grains to ‘growing’ houses for rent, and later diversified its businesses, products, and services, as well as young entrepreneurs, as depicted in Chapter 3. It could also be a continued food cultivation, practiced by villagers, rural migrants, and new migrants (including recent graduates and young professionals), but for different purposes ranging from substance needs to food security, mental health, and physical activities, detached from the unhealthy foodways of the city, as depicted in Chapters 3 and 4.

The second aspect refers to the **ambiguous mixed-use spaces**. This is embedded in the knowledge of villagers’ self-design of spaces that are shaped by their usage patterns, as depicted in Chapters 3 to 5. Often, they gave specific orientation and plot dimension to each house but left other spaces, e.g., semi-opened yards and pathways, loosely defined. These spaces are indeed ‘in-between’ spaces, serving as a stage for encounters and the unpredictable. It allows for both permanent and temporary opportunities for its maximum flexibility. And such ways of using spaces, as a habit, are often reflected in their daily linguistic terms (Table 6.1).

Third, **worshipping revered souls or spirits**, including ancestors, helped form public and semi-public spaces with depth in contemporary cities, as depicted in Chapters 3 and 5. Auspicious locations were carefully chosen to structure the settlement (e.g., village) or define the spatial-social arrangement of a shop or house. Their religious or sacred significance overlays with the spaces’ redesignated forms, such as a village park or a city parkland, giving depth, i.e., rich

meanings, carried from the past to these new land use classifications. These spaces thus can host evolving functions that are determined by residents’ social and ritual activities and become relational space.

In the hybridisation processes described above, traditional elements and daily practices are mixed and combined with modern planning and design approaches to generate new structures, artefacts, and practices. These diverse forms of hybridity then suggest that the status of being a mixture becomes more inclusive, challenging the conventional research methods that are often ‘corseted into false oppositions, such as high or popular, urban or rural, modern or traditional’ (Canclini et al., 2005, p. xxiv; Franco, 1992). In this sense, the intersection of tradition and modernity—and the resulting processes of hybridisation—enable the ‘old soul’ to give birth to the ‘new soul’.

What are the features of hybridisation?

Hybridisation is a process that acknowledges differences. Between traditional ways of using spaces and modern land use categories, there are differences. Also, within the traditional practices, different users and place makers demonstrate their different habits and use patterns. In village Pingshan, this is evidently seen in villager Granny Zhan’s use of front space as *ditang*, migrant Sister Hua’s use as flower store, and migrant Uncle Liu’s use as temporary worshiping place. Hybridisation, herewith, should not be mistaken with integration, a term used as the nation-wide redevelopment strategy for building a homogeneous society (Zhang et al., 2023), as the latter can fall into assimilation or formalisation of informalisation in practice, therefore weakening differences (Zhang, 2023).

Secondly, **hybridisation necessitates interactions** among spatial-functional features of an urban space, as well as social and increasingly digital aspects. The interaction, rather than a mere incorporation of contracting aspects of both origins, is often reciprocal to create originality as opportunities to critique the present and reimagine our places. Such interaction encourages or requires the force of resistance to imposition, compared to other forms of persistence (i.e., in disguise and passive adaptation), to create new spatial forms and practices. The labelled urban village is never a result of isolation, but rather an accumulation of interactions (such as *ditang* and pavement; buried tombs and urban cemetery) as the village urbanises alongside the city. The (re)produced lived spaces, interwoven sacred landscapes, are often in hybrid, complex, and frequently fluid forms. As explicitly shown in Chapter 5, the resistance is rooted in strong cultural beliefs or shared worldviews centred on cosmic energy *qi* and reciprocal relationships among myriad things, including bodies and souls; they act as counterpower to, while remaining interdependent with, modern secular narratives. Consequently, ‘infrasecular landscapes’ are evoked. In a broader sense, interactions are about epistemology of space.

Unavoidably, **some elements resist or fail to hybridise**. Passive adaptation represents one such situation, where the common practice of urban planning could be reinventing ancient towns for consumption-driven cultural tourism. These ancient towns, along with their selected cultural elements, are then treated as spaces to be preserved at a distance from everyday life. A lived space is thereby reduced to an absolute space comprising symbolic elements as per Lefebvre’s conception of space (Lefebvre, 1991). It is a purification process instead of hybridisation to recreate place identity or authenticity, ultimately resulting in a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994). A sense of loss emerged during my talks with long-term villagers and migrants, as one of the villagers, Granny Zhan, frequently laments, ‘there is no Pingshan’.

6.3. Chinese lexicon for rethinking modernity

The traditional Chinese linguistic terms often encompass specific meanings that are simultaneously inclusive and flexible. The English translation usually flattens the Chinese language and primarily loses meaning. A translation process is also involved in the adoption of modern Chinese terms in urban planning that are derived from internationally standardised terminology. This direct adoption can lead to and has often led to ignorance of the existing long-standing structure of how people settle and use spaces. Questions thus arise: Why do international scholars not stick to Chinese terms to convey their original meanings? Why do we not include original Chinese terms that are in active use for context-situated urban planning and design? These inquiries or suggestions can serve as a critique of urban modernity in non-Western contexts.

In Table 6.1, I summarised the Chinese lexicon that emerged from the empirical investigations of Pingshan and its wider Shenzhen metropolitan area, with an attempt to highlight the richer cultural meanings embedded in Chinese terms, especially in comparison with their translations or corresponding modern terms.

The meanings embedded in Chinese lexicons well represent the underlying territorial logic, that is, how people (individual and collective) perceive, relate to, and modify the land. It works with topography, orientation, seasons, and social relationships, attributing placeness to a specific space. Urban planners and designers can mobilise these lexicons to help rethink land use categories and delve deeper into the substance, thereby avoiding assimilation and reduction. Also, these lexicon could function as entry points for municipalities, designers, architects, and researchers to engage with residents to lay a sound urban analysis for regeneration. This nuanced perspective may disrupt the entrenched, often prejudiced, mindset that privileges modern regulations and easy solutions, invite a search for and appreciation of the soul(s) of a place, and thus facilitate better interventions with the territorial logic.

Table 6.1. Chinese lexicon of urban spaces collected during the empirical investigations.

Traditional terms	Meanings	Modern terms
平山村 Pingshan cun Pingshan village	The character 平 (<i>ping</i>) is a phonetic loan character of 屏 (<i>ping</i>), which refers to screens or shields. The village name <i>Pingshan</i> means mountains serve as a fence for protecting the village.	城中村 urban village, village-in-the-city 人才小镇 Talent Town
地堂 Ditang Grand hall	In Cantonese culture, <i>ditang</i> is a levelled and compacted earth ground, commonly located in front of ancestral halls and houses. Uses: drying grains (before the 1990s), ritual events, private markets, and leisure activities.	广场, 人行道 Square, pavement
门口 Menkou Doorway	Without a clearly defined boundary, the space can extend as much as possible, depending on other buildings. It bears the concept of in-between.	人行道, 街道 Pavement, road/street
...旁边的 (路) ...pangbiande (lu) (pathway) besides...	As an ‘in-between’ space in a dense residential area, it has no specific name.	巷子 alleyways
牌坊 Paifang Paifang gate	A gate that consists of pillars and beams, inscribed with a place or village name and clan family precepts in Chinese calligraphy, decorated with mythical (natural) patterns or figures	正门 main gate
新庙/红庙 Xin miao/Hong miao New temple/red temple	It was rebuilt in 1998 with modern materials, replacing the old wooden structures and being painted red.	观音庙 <i>Guanyin</i> temple
去[村名]的路 qu[cunming]de lu Route towards [village name]	Often without an official name, the route serves as a connection between destinations. The destination indicates a direction.	[名称]路, [名称]大道 [administrative name] road, [administrative name] Boulevard

土路 <i>tulu</i> Soil trail/path	An unpaved trail, usually winding, following the topography. It gets muddy in the rain.	郊野径 Hiking trail Or no record
荔枝林/荔枝地 <i>Lizhi lin/lizhi di</i> Lychee forest/lychee land	A piece of land where lychee is cultivated is often mixed with other fruit trees in a smaller amount, such as Longan.	郊野公园 Countryside parkland, a classification of parklands in metropolitan area as per land use regulations
荒地 <i>Huangdi</i> Uncultivated land	The land is often featured with wilderness and not used for human productive activities.	空地, 留用地 Vacant land, reserved land
坟地/墓地 <i>FendilMudi</i> Tombs/graves	Shaped as mounds, this type of grave relates to the (earthly) ground burial ceremony. <i>Fengshui</i> is followed in location and orientation. It can be clan-based graves bonded with lineage.	公墓 Public cemetery, categorised as special land use

6.4. Framework for an inclusive approach to urban planning and design

Based on the empirical evidence, hybridisation can be regarded as a way through which the village evolves with the city. Inhabitants actively act and react to the broader social-economic changes and municipal modernisation strategies, while carrying on their own habits and traditional beliefs in everyday practices. In doing so, they demonstrate their multiple experiences of modernity, creating opportunities for alternative living that go beyond the dichotomy rural / urban, which embrace and enhance both. Instinct values are thus generated through the process.

Despite the shift from brutal to more organic methods, the prevailing approaches to urban regeneration and rehabilitation for social and ecological inclusiveness continue to overlook the dynamics process involved in the production of social space. Urban designers and planners must proactively take measures and implement changes to meet the demand for a hybrid urban environment. I hereby propose several principles to guide practitioners in adopting a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design. These principles aim to serve as a framework for mediating between state and local actors and between formal plans and informal practices.

Step1: Reading a place as a network and a series of interconnected points, rather than from a zoning perspective. Delaying analysis could help reveal interwoven networks at each particular place through the following three aspects. The first network comprises in-between spaces, as exemplified by a maze of narrow alleys that serve as a social nexus for various encounters. The second network encompasses the built structure with various typologies. From

the ancestral halls in the dense old village and handshake buildings in the extended village to the wide blocks in the industrial park and self-built farmhouses (cottages) in the rugged forestland, historical narratives are unfolded across time and space. The third network is composed of the human and non-human interactions occurring on top of the physical elements, giving an in-depth understanding of the materialities. For example, it is the intersubjective interactions among human bodies, natural elements (e.g., topography, rivers, trees, and seasons), and immaterial spiritual presences that sustain the production and reproduction of sacred landscapes in hybrid, complex, and frequently fluid forms. These networks establish the base for the site investigation as part of the planning and design process.

Step 2: Recognising the existing instinct values instead of hastily sanitising otherness. The latter approach, as an expression of Chinese urban modernity, has furthered social-ecological segregation. In a society undergoing rapid transformation, urban villages with autonomous urbanisation processes have produced different values as traditions have encountered modernity. The non-places and unregistered sacred spaces often carry the features of informality in terms of labour and economic production, land tenure, and housing, and often allow spontaneous claiming and reclaiming of space and land for different uses. In such places, functions are dispersed throughout the networks, enabling social-ecological interactions.

Step 3: (Strategically) embedding or designing the state's vision of programmes and functions with consideration for the networks and layers of a place. Many spaces in Chinese terms are ubiquitous and loosely defined for evolving uses. For example, *menkou* or *ditang*, as the space in front of buildings, often serve as hubs for social interactions and for both living and working. Instead of setting a fixed number of housing units per plot, an inhabited area could be designated to allow for diverse uses of the space or flexibility in its use, including for housing, working, worshiping, and leisure.

6.5. Limitations and future research agenda

This study draws extensively on fieldwork and theoretical reflection. It has some limitations. The period spent in the field could be longer to enrich my understanding of the site. The six-month period (1 March - 30 May 2023 and 8 May- 4 August 2024) in the village was shorter than the traditional ethnographic approach (Van Maanen, 2011). This timeframe might have limited my observations of seasonal events, including ceremonies and festivals. This is partially due to the COVID-19 pandemic and budget limits. My first fieldwork was conducted after the COVID-19 waves in early 2023, which were triggered by a sudden lifting of lockdown measures in China. However, my continuous remote communication with residents between and after the two fieldwork periods helped to partially mitigate this limitation. Additionally, this research selected only one village in Shenzhen for empirical investigation. The village represents only one of many types of urban villages that are characterised by various factors such as size, density,

and location. Nonetheless, the processes of self-help urbanism and transformation observed in the case align with findings in other studies, and an in-depth analysis from three landscapes (settlement, productive, and sacred) was conducted.

The subjectivity inherent in ethnography has also limited the study's direct replicability. The documentation of my observations and encounters in the field, either through ethnographic drawings or texts, is largely influenced by my viewpoint and interpretation. I have conducted meticulous participant observation and employed repeated narrative interviews to enhance the reliability. Also, for each chapter, the methodological framework is thoroughly detailed to support its validity.

This exploratory approach is inevitably time-consuming and requires the researcher to remain sensitive to the movements and events in the field, as well as the subtle changes in the built environment. This may lead to delayed production of deliverables, especially if the fieldwork started late. My principal structuring idea of palimpsest, along with entirely reformulated research questions, was informed by my first fieldwork. However, it was already midway through my PhD journey.

Future research may build on the current findings and limitations. Given the rich articulation from the Chinese terms and their implications in how spaces have been and are being perceived and used, a lexicon in the local language could be an entry angle to interrogate the landscape as cultural and social construction in a better-situated manner. This lexicon includes toponymy but is not limited to it, as indicated by Basso's connotation of landscapes from language in his book *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Basso, 1996). Second, the hybridisation and the investigation of traditions that are being handed down and persist amid modernity in the everyday milieu may be tested in another urban context or even rural context.

This can take into account of the geographical bias, concentrating on eastern, coastal, or Yangtze River megacities as indicated in Chapter 2, by drawing attention to inland ordinary cities. Third, the research has extended from the human dimension to the non-human dimension and revealed an enchanted world as nature/culture entangled. The more-than-human perspective and potentials of enchantment of the modern world deserve more attention, which is essential to deal with pressing issues of social-ecological division and to move beyond seeing the world as merely physical, mechanic, and in dualities, but in all its multilayered complexity.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

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2011.09-2012.11	MSc. Sustainable Energy Systems University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom
2007.09-2011.07	BSc. Physics (First Class Honours) Hunan Normal University, Hunan, China

Professional Experiences

2023.12-current	Graduation Project Mentor and Design Studio Tutor, Master's Programmes in Urbanism and Landscape Architecture Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands
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2018.10-2019.08	Focal Point on Green Belt and Road Initiative UNEP-IEMP, Beijing, China
2014.12-2017.04	Associate Project Manager in Ecosystem-based Climate Change Adaptation UNEP-IEMP, Beijing, China
2013.11-2014.11	Junior Consultant & Intern under the Resource Efficiency Programme UNEP China Office, Beijing, China

Extracurricular Activities

2025.03-current Editorial Board Member
FOOTPRINT Delft Architecture Theory Journal, Delft, The Netherlands

List of Publications

Peer-reviewed Journal Articles

1. Tan, D. (2025). Persistence of everyday sacred landscapes: Shrines, village temples, and hillside cemetery in Shenzhen. *Space and Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/12063312251367253>
2. Tan, D., & Nguyen, M. Q. (2024). Beyond the palimpsest: Traditions and modernity in urban villages of Shenzhen, China. *Cities*, 151, 105093. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.105093>
3. MacLachlan, I., Tan, D., Shi, T., & Yang, Y. (2024). Urban orchard in a megacity: Formality and informality in China. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2024.2351399>
4. Mills, A. J., Tan, D., Manji, A. K., Vijitpan, T., Henriette, E., Murugaiyan, P., Pantha, R.H. et al. (2020). Ecosystem-based adaptation to climate change: lessons learned from a pioneering project spanning Mauritania, Nepal, the Seychelles, and China. *Plants, People, Planet*, ppp3.10126. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppp3.10126>

Books

5. Fu, Ch., Bai, Y., Tan, D. & Zhang, L. (2022). *Case studies on ecosystem-based approaches for resilient livelihoods in developing countries*. UNEP. <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/42924>

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6. Tan, D., Park, S. Y. (2025). "Learning in the field for responsible design". In *Manifesto Evolving Education*. TU Delft. (Forthcoming)

Book Reviews

7. Tan, D. (2025). Brown, David L. & Shucksmith, Mark. Rethinking rural studies. Edward Elgar Publishing. 2024. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-025-10178-1>
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Conference Papers

9. Tan, D., & Nguyen, M. Q. (2024). Urban villages in Shenzhen: The meaning of being neglected. 154-163. Paper presented at AMPS: Livable Cities, New York, United States. https://amps-research.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Amps_Proceedings-Series_34.3.pdf
10. Tan, D., & Rocco, R. (2022). The influence of moral knowledge on urban villages in Shenzhen, China. 441-450. Paper presented at AESOP Congress 2022, Tartu, Estonia. https://research.tudelft.nl/files/148191533/AESOP_2022_Book_of_proceedings.pdf

Forms of Hybridity

Diwen Tan

Tradition and Modernity in Shenzhen's Urban Fringe

