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WHAT KIND OF PUBLIC SPACE IS THE CITY OF SHENZHEN?

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North Americans have been slow to acknowledge our intimacies with Shenzhen. If you received a Cabbage Patch Kid during the early 1980s, a small piece of your childhood was fabricated in Shenzhen. If you blasted LL Cool J on a boombox in the 1990s or began personal computing in the early 2000s, some portion of your identity was assembled in Shenzhen. If you've listened to music on a Sony Walkman or watched movies on a tablet, your taste was miniaturized in Shenzhen. And, although the production chains that link Shenzhen to North American holidays, hip hop, and hacking as well as to fast fashion, cloning, animation and commercial drones have been significantly transformed since the city initiated top-down deindustrialization in 2005, nevertheless there's every chance that if you have resided in North America for the past thirty years, then many—if not all—of your cell phones have been produced in Shenzhen. Yet most North Americans have only become aware of Shenzhen since the 2010s, when the city emerged as the “Silicon Valley of hardware,” attracting young, mostly male hackers to Huaqiangbei via Rotterdam, Berlin and San Francisco (Lindtner et al. 2015).

At first glance, the story of why North Americans missed Shenzhen's industrial revolution is straight-forwardly Marxian—commodity fetishism. In Marx's reading, industrial capitalism disappears the human cost of producing objects. The separation between spheres of production and consumption enable our collective misrecognition of the interconnection between how things are produced and how they are consumed because we take for granted that the economy is organized into places of production and consumption, where “[t]hat which was created in one sphere is used—ultimately used up, destroyed—in the other” (Graeber 2011: 492).

This chapter tracks the Cold War roots of Shenzhen, focusing on how the city has become a model of successful urbanization both within China and outside. In this model of development, the entire city is considered an effect of ‘public policy,’ while ‘the public’ is defined as a population that is formed (or potentially formed) through government actions with explicit (and usually measurable) outcomes. In this model, a city is the vehicle through which public goods are delivered via urban organization which is increasingly regulated to meet policy goals. This categorization of the city as ‘public’ resonates with its use in expressions such as ‘public welfare,’ ‘public education,’ ‘public building’ and ‘public health.’ At stake in this use of ‘public’ are the presumed responsibilities of a government and the spatial means by which

these responsibilities are fulfilled. Of course, the catch to this (well-intentioned?) master planning is that not all goods are delivered equally, everywhere and at the same time. What's more, the place of a city in a global value chain has visceral effects on urban form.

Nets-to-Riches: Even Boat Dwellers Have Access to Public Goods in Shenzhen

In 1979, China followed the East Asian blueprint of using activist public policies to jumpstart modernization in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen Special Economic Zones (SEZ; Phillips and Yeh 1983). In Shenzhen, for example, China deployed the corps of engineers to implement the Five Connections One Leveling (五通一平) policy, which provisioned water, electricity, roads, telecommunications and sewage, in addition to flattening the land to facilitate industrial urbanization. The epicenter of this first round of state investment was Luohu and its immediate neighbor, Shangbu Management Area. Luohu was the location of the historical Shenzhen Market, which became the name of both the new city and its special economic zone. Shangbu was the location of its adjacent 'new town' and location of its restructured government. The national government relocated Third Front enterprises to the Shangbu and Bagualing Industrial Parks, which were located in Shangbu Management Area, bringing some of the country's top engineers to Shenzhen as well as trained workforces. In 1994, the World Bank published a policy working paper titled *China's Economic Reforms: Pointers for Other Economies in Transition?* which argued the country's experience might provide "pointers for other capital scarce economies in transition from strategies geared to heavy industry to a more balanced profile of development" even as it overlooked the extent to which only socialist states had 'readymade' manufacturing complexes that could be relocated to accommodate the needs of global logistics. The key point here is the level of state involvement and national restructuring that has predicated post-Japanese modernization.

Constructing Shenzhen's built environment makes salient the tension between the city as a spatial means for allocating public goods and the city as being composed of public spaces. The city's early infrastructure, for example, was provided by the corps of engineers for the use of all companies and residents in the SEZ. However, in practice, the distribution of these resources was sequential and geographic, resulting in some companies, people and urban spaces receiving first access. Luohu-Shangbu companies and residents had access to municipal water and electrical lines, roads, sewage and telecommunications before companies and residents in other parts of the city. Local Luohu and Shangbu villagers had immediate access to these new urban goods because of where they were born, while Third Front enterprises received them through their status within the state apparatus. Migrants obtained access to public goods by leaving their homes and moving to Luohu-Shangbu. Indeed, the concentration of public infrastructure and opportunities to use public goods to create private wealth in Luohu-Shangbu meant that for the first two decades, residents of the SEZ and its suburbs referred to Luohu-Shangbu as 'Shenzhen' or 'downtown.'

Early Chinese descriptions of Shenzhen emphasized the construction of an urban built environment that would (eventually) enable all Chinese people to enjoy modern infrastructure—the city as an instrument of public policy. As narrated in *The Secret of the Shenzhen Sphinx*, for example, Deng Xiaoping arrived in Shenzhen on 24 January 1984 to tour the nascent SEZ. "On the road, Deng Xiaoping opened the curtain several times to look at the busy construction sites and rising towers" (Chen et al. 1991: 95). The implied contrast was with the

rice polders, fishponds and lychee orchards that still dominated the local landscape. On the second day of his trip, Deng visited a fishing collective which had built each of its thirty-two families a two-and-one-half-story house on land reclaimed from the Shenzhen River.

The village that Deng visited was called Fishing Village (渔民村), a reference to the historic livelihood of villagers who, before they were given land on which to build homes, had lived on boats and fished for a living. Sometimes called ‘boat people,’ ‘boat dwellers,’ or the pejorative Tanka (蛋家), southern Chinese fishing families historically organized in small groups of families that lived on their boats, trading with land-based villages (Ward 1985; Anderson 1972). In the early 1950s as part of a larger land reform initiative, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) forced coastal villages in Bao’an County to provide small fishing groups with homestead land. The village that Deng Xiaoping visited, for example, had been established on land that historically belonged to Caiwuwei Village. Consequently, throughout Shenzhen, there are two kinds of fishing villages: land-based villages that operated fishing boats and fishing villages that were formally created in the early 1950s. These second types of villages, like Fishing Village in Luohu, include the character “to fish” (渔) in their name. Historically, boat dwellers were denied access to land settlements, making them some of the poorest communities along the Guangdong coast. Consequently, when the head of Luohu’s Fishing Village proudly showed off sofas and chairs, a television and refrigerator, shelves filled with alcohol and cigarettes and a clean kitchen and bathroom to Deng, the images showed the realization of the city as successfully providing public goods to some of the poorest people in the country.

Images of Deng’s visit to Fishing Village uncannily reproduced the visual rhetoric of *Life* magazine photo-essays from forty years earlier, which had presented consumption and home ownership as important elements of the American way of life (Webb 2012). As in the *Life* scenarios from the 1930s and 40s, photographs of Fishing Village were simultaneously nationalistic and aspirational, linking active consumption to nation-building, class status and gendered standards of success. Moreover, like the *Life* consumption scenarios, the visualization of Fishing Village occurred during a time of social upheaval, “bridging the gap between the demands of a Calvinistic (socialist) producer ethic with its emphasis on hard work, self-denial, and the new, increasing demands of a hedonistic consumer ethic: spend, enjoy, use up” (Susman 2003: 123). In the case of Fishing Village, the images showed how reforming the planned economy was a better strategy for delivering public goods to all Chinese people. Under the national plan, the State appropriated productive surpluses, which it then allocated to meet development goals. Under this regime, any kind of personal consumption was considered selfish at best and often illegal. Where the American images had framed citizenship and nation-building as the result of individual efforts (Webb 2012), the Chinese images functioned within a project to secure CCP hegemony in the immediate post-Mao era and before reforms were generalized more broadly in 1984 (O’Donnell 2017a). More generally, where the *Life* pictures presented the American way of life as an alternative to communism, the pictures of Fishing Village presented this way of life as the result of correct policy decisions made by an interventionist state.

The immediate backdrop for Deng’s visit to Fishing Village was the Central State’s promulgation of *On Rural Work* in 1984, which emphasized that “on the basis of stabilizing and perfecting the household responsibility system, [the goal is to] improve production, smooth distribution, and develop commodities” (CCP Central Committee 1984). The household responsibility system had been promulgated in 1979 and made local cadres responsible for the profits and losses of their respective communes and brigades. Under the household responsibility system, farmers could produce surplus crops and sell their goods at market. In just three years from

1979 to 1982, for example, the thirty-two families of Fishing Village had reached the 10,000 *yuan* annual income milestone by selling fish in both Shenzhen and neighboring Hong Kong. At the time, professionals in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai were earning less than 100 *yuan* a month; Fishing Village villagers not only had access to consumer goods but also could afford to purchase them. Thus, when the village head brought Deng (and by extension the millions of readers of *People's Daily*) into his home, he was not simply displaying his prowess as a local leader but was instead showing how new policies were in fact benefiting ordinary people. The polemic of the images was clear: if Reform and Opening policies could transform a marginalized village into a new neighborhood where the standard of living rivaled that of Beijing, then they would clearly benefit the rest of the country. In fact, Chinese news reports downplayed the local status of Fishing Village and the unruly fact that fishing villages had been set up in all of Bao'an County's coastal communes. Instead, Fishing Village came to stand for the generalized position of farmers in the Chinese state system, such that "fishing village" functioned as a rhetorical placeholder for rural lack in particular and the country's poverty in general.

In 1993, World Bank researchers argued that "activist public policy" rather than culture or geographic location explained how East Asian countries effectively transformed their economies through industrial urbanization by "getting the basics right"—managing private domestic investment and growing human capital to create wealth (World Bank 1993: 5). Roughly twenty-five years later, UN-Habitat made Shenzhen an exemplar of urbanization, publishing *The Story of Shenzhen* (UN-Habitat 2019) in Nairobi and offering the city as a model for equitable development in Africa. Both the World Bank and UN-Habitat have focused on Shenzhen's ability to provide infrastructure, housing and jobs to its residents; public policy has made the city a primary vehicle for sharing material resources.

Shenzhen's "nets-to-riches" tale frames the public good in terms of access to modern infrastructure, which is provided via governmental action—activist public policy. Chinese news reports used *Life*-like scenarios to demonstrate the effectiveness of these policies. Indeed, throughout the Cold War (roughly 1945–1990), American public policy deployed family consumption as an important element of its Cold War ideology, "vivid proof that the American way of life was superior to that of Soviet Communism" (Samuel 2014: 17). During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States not only promoted middle-class consumption as the most democratic form of modern living, it also invested heavily in Western Europe and East Asia in order to create middle-class homes where public goods could be privately consumed. By the time China initiated its reform and opening up policy at the end of 1978, this lifestyle had already become the presumed goal of modernization worldwide. Indeed, a few snapshots of middle-class fishing villagers were enough to help sell the idea of extending reforms to other Chinese cities as well as to convince foreign governments that China was serious about market reforms. The subtext of the images was: if private spaces of modern consumption exist, then the complementary spaces of production and public infrastructure that are necessary to sustain this lifestyle also exist.

Shekou: The Need for Critical Public Spaces

In contrast to Fishing Village, the establishment of the Shekou Industrial Zone illuminates how the spatial distribution of public infrastructure as well as state control over this infrastructure creates the necessity for watchdog institutions to ensure that public policies reach all residents rather than a selected few. To this end, UN-Habitat (2012) made public space central to its recommendations for improving cities. Public space, it argues, can be harnessed

“to enhance safety and security, create economic opportunity, improve public health, create diverse public environments, and build democracy.” In this reading, public spaces are spatial means for promoting the equitable distribution of public goods that cannot be simply distributed through the city as such (an end result which is assumed through aggressive public policies). Thus, a tension between the idea of the city’s built environment being public as such and the city’s built environment as requiring alternative public spaces vex World Bank and UN-Habitat reports. On the one hand, the city’s built environment is tasked with delivering public goods—education, safety, sanitation and so forth—to large populations. This means that the city is implicitly understood as being a shared—and hence public—space. On the other hand, the lack of equitable access to urban resources worldwide requires the designation of critical public spaces, where social goods can be more equitably redistributed.

On 20 July 1979, China Merchants fired the ‘first shot’ of China’s reform and opening up by detonating a section of Sixth Bay and enlarging the natural harbor to begin construction of the Shekou Industrial Zone. Shekou was selected because it was located near the Port of Hong Kong as well as China Merchants’ Hong Kong offices. The Industrial Zone’s earliest industries were related to shipping and ship repair and included light industry, catering and tourism services, as well as manufacturing for export. As the Shenzhen government did in Luohu-Shangbu, the Shekou Industrial Zone also studied the experience of foreign free trade and export processing zones, making infrastructure construction and employee recruitment top policy priorities. This level of coordination meant that the Industrial Zone’s Management Committee operated as a *de facto* government of Shekou independent of Shenzhen. Consequently, Shekou’s experience has come to represent an alternative origin for Shenzhen. In 1981, for example, at the entrance to the Shekou Ferry Terminal where the ‘first shot’ had been fired, the Shekou Industrial Zone erected a billboard that read, “Time is money, efficiency is life” (时间是金钱, 效率是生命). The slogan was immediately controversial because it not only celebrated earning money but also framed earning money as a moral virtue, begging the question: When Shekou’s charismatic leader, Yuan Geng, erected the sign was he ‘selling out’ the Chinese Revolution? Or was something else at stake?

The circulation of news creates an alternative ‘public’ by linking markets, ports, salons and offices via newspapers that report on information of use to ordinary people rather than the government; the ‘public’ that reads newspapers is not exactly the same ‘public’ that is the object of state policies. Habermas (1991) has identified the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere with the rise of the traffic in news that supported the traffic in commodities as the modern world system grew. In this reading, ‘public opinion’ is an organized attempt to understand the spatial (and spatializing) consequences of global value chains from a non-governmental perspective. Sometimes this perspective can be identified with a specific geographic entity (like a city, for example), but more often than not, it is identified with a particular set of users, whose interests necessarily cross geographic boundaries. The creation of a local public sphere is a critical effort to locate a city within and against other places on co-created value chains. And here, suddenly, abruptly, the slogan ‘time is money’ blurs the distance between Philadelphia 1748 (at the start of the second industrial revolution) and Shekou 1981 (when late developers such as China began mass modernization). Under Benjamin Franklin’s editorship, *The Pennsylvania Gazette* became the most popular newspaper in the American colonies, while under Yuan’s leadership, Shekou’s small, local newspaper, the *Shekou Bulletin* (蛇口通讯报), cultivated a national subscription with stories that revealed the

ways in which factories, leaders and other institutions abused public trust (Xu and Pan 2012). Both newspapers were 'watchdogs,' monitoring how well public institutions served the public.

Of course, the appeal of Fishing Village's nets-to-riches story is its simplicity: if we build a city according to certain standards, it will create a desirable lifestyle for all residents within a proscribed territory. The appeal of Shekou's story of watchdog institutions is in allowing a space for critical reflection on how well a city serves its resident population (i.e. public). The historical distance between Philadelphia and Shekou reminds us, however, to pay attention to how urbanization increasingly relies on centralized state action. Early developers, such as England and the United States; middle developers, such as Germany and France; late developers, such as the original East Asian tigers; and late, late developers such as China, have all required different levels of social organization in order to urbanize. Each successive generation of developers has not only required greater inputs of capital, investment goals, training programs and engineering but also access to larger hinterlands and markets in order to urbanize. Late developers have also required stronger government organizations to manage this social transition, including unequal access to the benefits of these policies, which have tended to be concentrated in national capitols and designated cities. The East Asian Tigers first grew their national hinterlands and then expanded via foreign policy into neighboring countries. In contrast, circa 1979 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) first used manufacturing for export to develop Shenzhen, the Chinese state controlled the third-largest national territory on the planet, providing it with both a vast hinterland and potential markets. What's more, the resources of this territory had already been organized within the Chinese state, facilitating the spatial reorganization from Third Front development of the hinterland to the development of coastal ports, begging the question of just how portable the Shenzhen model actually is.

Huaqiangbei, Chimerica: Hacking Global Value Chains?

Perhaps the most widely circulated example of North American 'first contact' with Shenzhen was written by Canadian author and illustrator Guy Delisle. Published in 2000, Delisle's *Shenzhen* sarcastically chronicled the narrator's encounters with "the smells, the noise, the crowds, the dirt everywhere" of the city, circa 1997 (Delisle 2006 [2000]: 7). Delisle went to Shenzhen to supervise animation, production layout and edge smoothing work for a French studio. His job embodied contemporary hierarchies of global cultural production, with 'creative work' located in Europe and North America and 'non-creative work' first located in Korea and Taiwan and then in the PRC. Readers imagined Delisle as experiencing

the usual maladies of the long-term boarder: cultural and linguistic alienation, boredom, and cravings for Western food and real coffee [in] the hideously expanding 'Special Economic Zone of Guangdong Province,' a tariff-free city north of Hong Kong where the employers are foreign and the Cantonese locals are hungry

(Rall 2004: 72)

Delisle's charcoal sketches evoke the stereotypical grime—material and spiritual—that English speakers have associated with industrial urbanization since Dickens and other Victorian reformers (Flanders 2012): cramped and repetitive work, unidentifiable and derivative spaces and an environment that is relentlessly, oppressively instrumental—one works until exhaustion for money that is insufficient to purchase objects of individualized desire. *Shenzhen* also took gendered hierarchies at face value, with young Chinese women translating for and otherwise facilitating

the work of a hapless white male manager. Emphasizing the existential anxieties of living in capitalism's grim frontier, *Shenzhen's* cover shows a solitary white man in a mass of Chinese figures.

English-language media, including *The Guardian*, *Time*, and the *New York Times* wrote positive reviews of *Shenzhen*, and the popular book review website *Goodreads* gave it 4.5 stars. Readers have raved about the quality of the book's illustrations while praising the text precisely because Delisle refused any meaningful engagement with Shenzhen, its residents and its national aspirations in order to better gripe about how horrible it is for a Westerner to live at "the grim frontiers of free trade" (Rall 2004: 72). One reviewer even asserted, "Delisle's keen awareness of how and why he can't connect to the city makes for a rarity: a thoroughly engaging memoir of being bored to distraction" (Wolk 2006). None questioned the book's description of Shenzhen's urban environment nor showed even passing interest in the inequalities of globalization which were so naturalized as to be invisible to its beneficiaries. In these reviews, Shenzhen didn't suffer from a lack of public spaces but rather from a lack of spaces for dedicated consumption; the Fishing Village model of urbanization was the assumed standard, with gendered translation service and access to recognizable commodities as expected as public infrastructure and noticeable only in their absence. At this moment of entitled blindness, we see precisely how commodity fetishism conflates with Shenzhen's nets-to-riches myth, where the city exists in and through consumption that is organized through the urban built environment.

It is notable that Delisle's French account of Shenzhen as capitalism's grim frontier was published in 2000, several years after companies located in the Shangbu Industrial Park had begun transitioning to produce mobile phones for China's domestic market, including *shanzhai* brands (Yang 2016), and the English account was published in 2006, when Shenzhen was de-industrializing its urban core by moving manufacturing to its outer districts and repurposing industrial parks for creative industries, including graphic design, architecture and tech innovation. The point, of course, is that Shenzhen's early factories produced consumer goods rather than intermediate products (such as turbines) that would be used by other industries. Consequently, much of the environmental pollution that Delisle experienced while in Shenzhen could have been attributed to urban construction rather than to heavy industry discharge and runoff, highlighting just how thoroughly Delisle and his readers conflated consumption and urban lifestyles and ignored (or didn't recognize) varieties of industrial manufacturing.

In the 2010s, North Americans were reintroduced to Shenzhen via Huaqiangbei, a rebranded section of the Shangbu Industrial Park. The British-produced WIRED documentary, *Shenzhen: The Silicon Valley of Hardware* (WIRED 2016), for example, used the area's narrow streets and crowded markets to illustrate a story in which creativity, hard work and free markets create new economic possibilities for individual makers who just happen to be predominantly male, English speaking and able to pursue their dreams wherever they take them. They were particularly pleased with the speed at which prototyping, production and shipping can be achieved in Huaqiangbei. After all, WIRED's *Shenzhen*, like Delisle's *Shenzhen*, presupposed a global manufacturing hierarchy in which unemployed North American and European inventors could obtain Chinese visas on the strength of their creativity and realize their dreams on Chinese assembly lines. What the documentary missed, however, is the relationship between access to public infrastructure and social organization. And this perspective—the city as a vehicle through which public goods are distributed—is precisely how Shenzhen has understood the rise of Huaqiangbei. Produced by Dushi (都市), a Shenzhen-based company, the documentary, *Decoding Shenzhen: The Huaqiangbei Backstory* (Dushi 2015) tells the story of Shenzhen's success as a story of successful public policy. The filmmakers point to Huaqiangbei as the spatial nexus where design, prototyping and manufacturing companies come together

to produce new products for the market. Indeed, the Shenzhen filmmakers use 'Huaqiangbei' to emphasize the need for nimble institutions within the state apparatus.

As a globalized public space, Huaqiangbei redistributes resources that are critical to global value chains: spaces for design, components manufacturing and prototyping as well as links to factories and logistics networks that will deliver finished goods to target markets. These resources are now considered 'public' in the sense that governments are held responsible for providing these resources to geographically bounded populations who can take advantage of them. As with the emergence of Luohu-Shangbu, the ability of the Shenzhen government to provide such a space is taken as a sign of its good public policies. However, it is also clear that this iteration and valuation of urban space—like the Fishing Village and *Shenzhen* narratives—hinges on consumption; Western makers praise Huaqiangbei because it allows them to purchase what they need to invent new gadgets, while Chinese businesses praise it for the policies that allow this kind of market to survive. What's missing from both these stories is the necessity of an alternative public *à la* Philadelphia and Shekou where once upon a time public opinion was thought to improve society through salons and a watchdog press. In this sense, it is telling that the success of Huaqiangbei has been the area's intensive support of open access goods (Lindtner et al. 2015). The success of Huaqiangbei cannot simply be attributed to its components markets or its formidable logistics network, but rather Huaqiangbei has succeeded because open access norms have constituted an alternative public.

Thus, in lieu of a conclusion, I'd like to posit that for both North Americans and Chinese people, Shenzhen's Fishing Village, repurposed factories and public infrastructure allow us to imagine our histories as cobbled together through material objects, even as we use these objects to tell stories that necessarily conjure diverse and possibly incompatible emotional experiences and intellectual understandings. In English, we might call this condition "Chimerica," a felicitous turn of phrase that not only combines China and America but also conjures the word 'chimera.' Simultaneously geopolitical and inter-cultural, innovative and oppressive, adaptable, whimsical, provisional, scary and global in its pretensions and reach, Chimerica comprises piracy, colonial expansion, international socialism, the Cold War, the rise of the East Asian Tigers and the era of Reform and Opening. Chimerica is also excruciatingly banal, suffusing everyday life and ordinary minds with a sense that suddenly, abruptly and even unexpectedly, we're all living intercultural lives but not the same intercultural lives and certainly not lives with the same values or, if with the same values, with different understandings of how to express those values in everyday life. We've been blindsided by globalization, and although Shenzhen's insertion into global manufacturing chains has been critical to what has happened in the postwar era and where we, as a planet, are headed, nevertheless we haven't reached agreement on what that means. In this sense, the Shenzhen experience not only echoes debates that have occurred and reoccurred since the Second Industrial Revolution began in the late 18th century but also shows up conflicting desires of industrial modernization. We want our cities to be truly public spaces, but we end up settling for limited public spaces and imagining that they are the solution to what remains a political problem—how do we create equitable lives for mass populations in the 21st century?

Acknowledgments

In addition to Nick Smith, who reminded me that it is always useful to return to Habermas when thinking through the tensions that vex the meanings of 'public,' I would especially like

to thank the volume's editors, Miodrag Mitrašinić and Timothy Jachna, for their helpful responses to my original manuscript; this chapter is better for their input.

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