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Villages in Development

Abstract

Villages are ubiquitous in China. As agricultural producers and fundamental units of spatial and social organization, over the past 50 years dramatic changes in government policies have transformed them. Many factors, including traditions, migration patterns, local resources, family, and governance structures have resulted in a broad range of village types. In spite of this variety and complexity, most urban planners and city officials in rapidly urbanizing areas approach them in a highly reductive fashion. For them, villages are either invisible or obsolete. Recent directives from the central government have now turned planners' attentions to villages. This is particularly urgent in the Pearl River Delta, a site of intensive industrialization and urbanization. In our fieldwork in Nansha, on the west bank of the Pearl River Delta (PRD) and since 2000 part of Guangzhou, we have observed major changes in planners' scenarios for local villages. Now intent on modernization, they incorporate villages into urban models that negate their economic flexibility, social potential and local culture. This maintains existing inequities, creates new ones, and contributes to the generic and inhospitable qualities displayed by many new urban environments.

We propose to investigate this phenomenon through a four-year joint seminar and studio sequence, collaborating with landscape and planning students and faculty at the South China University of Technology. Using physical and ethnographic documentation we will identify and analyze how a range of different Guangzhou villages might contribute to and be integrated into local urban and economic development. The project will alternate between research seminars and planning studios. The seminars will develop detailed village case studies, which the studios will use as the basis for creating scenarios, strategies, plans and policies for these villages. This will expose American students to a radically different environment and set of issues and offer Chinese students new perspectives on their own environment. The goals of the project are to contribute to the body of empirical research about PRD villages as they confront industrial and urban development, to propose alternative planning methods and tools for villages and to explore new pedagogies for multi-disciplinary and collaborative research and planning.

The research will focus on "planning from the bottom up," analyzing urbanization at the micro level with detailed studies of specific cases. We will employ multi-disciplinary methods, drawing on anthropology and sociology to emphasize the human dimensions of urban development.

Anthropologists from the South China Research Center (part of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou and Harvard University will assist us in training students and evaluating the research. Our own approach to planning builds on existing conditions, particularly local economics, histories and cultures as a springboard for planning proposals. Rather than imposing generalized solutions or normative "best practices" from outside we emphasize the potential already present in a specific place. This method seems particularly relevant to China, where planning is centralized, standardized and bureaucratic.