

## THE POLITICS OF PLACE MAKING IN SHENZHEN, CHINA

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*This paper examines the politics of place making in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, part of an emerging network of production centers in South China. Rapidly developed from a border town to a major city through transnational linkages of capital and kinship, the zone is a desired destination for migrant youth from all over China searching for work and experiences in the city. Temporary workers make up 66 percent of the Shenzhen population, yet many lack the proper skills and cultural "capital" to compete in the transitional economy. Authorities' attempts to forge a collective sense of place among its diverse immigrant groups have been largely unsuccessful, as Shenzhen is not one but many places shaped by differences of class, native place, and household registration status.*

"These people don't fit the requirements of a modern, international city" (Public Security Bureau official).

Spread throughout the Pearl River Delta Region in Guangdong Province, a network of production centers has emerged based on transnational connections of capital, technology, and kinship. The economic and spatial transformation of the region, accomplished primarily through overseas Chinese investment, is borne out in the villages and townships that have become manufacturing sites, and in the new cities that develop seemingly overnight (Lin 1997). Guangdong's capital investment, swift development, and sizeable job creation have drawn immigrants from all over China in search of a piece of the economic 'miracle' occurring in south China.

The Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which is part of the Pearl River Delta complex, is one such new frontier city. Located adjacent to Hong Kong, the SEZ has mushroomed from a border town of 70,000 in 1980 to a sprawling city of almost four million immigrants in 1997.<sup>1</sup> A link in an extensive spatial economy called the South China Metropolis (Castells 1996:409), Shenzhen's development process has been integrally bound up with that of Hong Kong's recent restructuring and global positioning.

This article examines social and political processes of place making in Shenzhen, interpreted here as “embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistances” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:6). Narratives of pioneer settlers, local farmers, temporary workers, state authorities, and the foreign press are juxtaposed to portray contrasting perceptions of place in this immigrant city. Issues of identity and belonging have sharpened as Shenzhen’s temporary workers now outnumber the permanent population. Constituted by difference — in native place, gender, education, and household registration status — this article shows that Shenzhen is not one, but many places.

Place making is a disputed process and raises questions of “Whose place? What kind of place?” These political questions have guided recent public discussions about an emergent Shenzhen identity. This article argues that Shenzhen authorities’ efforts to forge a collective sense of place have been foiled by social cleavages such as regionalism, class, and rural-urban differences.

### The Concept of Place

In her reconsideration of the meaning and use of the term “place” in geography, Massey suggests that places be imagined as “constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations,” rather than as bounded, static entities (1994:154). Thinking about the concept in this way allows, first, for a more dynamic sense of place that links with both wide-ranging and local networks of social relations. Second, as individuals are differently positioned, and are more or less advantaged, in the current reorganization of global capital, so are places (Massey 1993). China’s deepening engagement with the global economy, Shenzhen’s location next to Hong Kong, a major entrepot and gateway to the world, and an eager and inexpensive labor force have combined to make the Shenzhen SEZ an attractive site for mobile capital searching for a landing pad. The differential position of individuals within social and economic structures of power in Shenzhen, and their continuing relations with their hometown have a strong bearing on their experiences of place. This article is concerned with the concept of “place” in the following ways: 1) as a porous network of social relations stretching across local, regional, and national boundaries; 2) and the differing practices through which the myriad social groups experience a sense of place in Shenzhen.

Massey's revaluation is useful in discussing the development of Shenzhen. Local, regional, and global dynamics have shaped the zone from its establishment in 1979, yet these build on the region's history of transnational engagement. We cannot understand Shenzhen without conceptualizing it as part of a broader network connecting Guangdong Province, Hong Kong, and parts of Southeast Asia, linked through flows of capital, kinship, information, and labor. This is not to de-emphasize much wider associations, as Shenzhen is fully integrated into global cultural and economic circuits. A "global sense of place" (Massey 1994) may be experienced through watching television, shopping at Wal-Mart, or reading Japanese comic books.

To characterize regional interrelations, the term "Greater China" came into use in the mid- to late-1980s and originally referred to the three-way economic integration of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the mainland (Harding 1993:663). Today scholars use the term in both its original meaning and more broadly to include Chinese-based economies or "overseas Chinese capitalist zones" encompassing countries such as Singapore and Malaysia (Wang 1993:927; Ong 1997:173). Yet regional ties extend back centuries when immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong provinces settled in Indonesia, Malaysia (then Malaya), the Philippines, and Singapore (Pan 1994). Many families sent their sons back to China for study after the Republic was founded in 1911 (Hsu 1996). More recently, with China's open-door policy and investment recruitment, wealthy overseas Chinese businessmen have returned to their ancestral villages in southern China, often donating to village projects such as construction of schools, roads, and bridges (Sit 1991:165) and establishing or buying local enterprises. An unusual case is that of a Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneur who purchased 41 of 42 antiquated state-owned enterprises in his ancestral town of Quanzhou, Fujian Province, to the objections of many townspeople (Sunday Morning Post 11/29/92).

Shenzhen and the whole of Guangdong are best situated within this context of supranational connections of kin and capital. Castells locates Shenzhen within a newly emerging "megacity" encompassing Hong Kong, Macau, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and the Pearl River Delta proper (1996:404). Megacities are so named for their ability to incorporate huge segments of a population into the global economy and integrate their surrounding areas and regions into a functional economic network. But the defining feature, which Castells suggests make megacities a "new urban form," is the capacity to "connect

externally with the global economy while being disconnected with segments of the local population," who do not possess the necessary skills, or whose skills are irrelevant in the new high-technology information economy (*ibid.*). As we will see, large sectors of Shenzhen's population are semi-skilled, lack professional training, and do not "fit" the economic plan and civic image local authorities wish for the city. Thus, Shenzhen is not one, but a multitude of economic, social, and linguistic spaces constituted by various parts of the population.

### The Creation of Shenzhen

The most striking feature about Shenzhen is that it did not exist as a metropolis two decades ago. Shenzhen originally was a small market center surrounded by rice fields, founded around the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). With the opening of the (Shenzhen) Luohu-Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou railway in 1910, the marketplace gradually developed into a small border town, and foreign trade increased rapidly (Wu et al., 1985). At the time of Liberation in 1949, Shenzhen had roughly 10,000 inhabitants, with a few thousand more scattered in seven or eight villages to the west of the town (*ibid.*). Historically this area of south China had received little industrial investment from the central state (Lin 1997:6). Yet for the first half of the twentieth century the region was linked to Hong Kong through trade. After Liberation in 1949, 70,000 refugees from Guangdong province fled into Hong Kong, bringing capital and entrepreneurial talent (Endacott 1958, cited in Lee 1994). Ties between Guangdong Province and Hong Kong endured in spite of the sealing of the border in 1950, through illegal immigration and occasional loosening of border controls by mainland Chinese authorities (*ibid.*).<sup>2</sup> As Hong Kong capital and entrepreneurial skills have been instrumental in the development of Shenzhen and Guangdong Province, likewise a substantial part of Hong Kong as a locality has been produced out of the social, political, and economic turmoil on the mainland.

Before the establishment of the SEZ in 1980, the overall area of Shenzhen was less than three square kilometers, composed of one-story houses and businesses. As there was no bus service, overseas Chinese and Hong Kong people visiting relatives had to walk or rent a bicycle to get into town from the train station (Wu et al. 1985:3).

In 1979, with the decision by the central state to establish special economic zones which would be allowed to "carry out

special economic policies and flexible measures," (ibid.) Shenzhen began its remarkable transformation.

In the four original zones, foreign investors supplied capital, technology, and goods to be processed, in return for inexpensive land and labor, and a finished product (Chan and Kwok 1991). The zones were seen as a way to increase exports, earn foreign exchange, and accelerate local development (Crane 1990). Preferential policies to attract investors included tariff exemptions on funds and goods brought into the zone as investments; a 15 percent tax on investments inside the zone; and significant exemptions for local enterprises (Crane 1990; Chao 1994).

As one of China's key sites of market experimentation, the Shenzhen SEZ was modeled after export processing zones in Korea and Taiwan (Vogel 1989). However, Shenzhen was also to be a global city attracting foreign tourism and business and a model of economic reform. With Asian "tigers" such as Singapore as development models, Shenzhen became an experimental center for capitalist economic and management practices, modern urban planning, and other system reforms (ibid.). Shenzhen's many parks, wide swaths of green in residential districts, and abundance of flowers and trees lining the streets are reminiscent of Singapore's landscape.

Although there has been a modicum of investment from the U.S., Europe, Taiwan, and Japan, the majority came from Hong Kong capitalists (Vogel 1989:145; Lee 1994). According to Lee, since the late 1970s Hong Kong manufacturers had been faced with a contracting labor market, production cost increases and regional competition (1994:145). By the early 1990s, Hong Kong manufacturers had transferred a significant portion of their economic base to Guangdong Province (Goodman and Chongyi 1994: 177). Correspondingly, the manufacturing workforce in Hong Kong declined from 837,000 in 1988 to 484,00 in 1993, with a rise in employment in the trading and business sectors, from 937,000 to 1.3 million (Castells 1996:408).

The electronics sector initially dominated Shenzhen's economy, composed mainly of labor-intensive and low-technology industries, usually branch plants from Hong Kong (Chan and Kwok 1991:187). Other major sectors included toys, textiles and footwear (Sit 1991). Castells notes that by 1994 Hong Kong capitalists had set up 10,000 joint ventures and 20,000 processing plants in the Delta Region, employing as many as six million people (1996:408). Ten years after its

establishment as an economic and social experiment, Shenzhen and environs had become Hong Kong's industrial hinterland, as Hong Kong was itself transformed into a global city specializing in finance and services.

An unusual characteristic of Shenzhen is that two-thirds of the residents are defined as part of the "floating population." These residents, whose household registration is elsewhere in China, have resided in Shenzhen less than five years (Shenzhen SEZ Economic Yearbook 1995).<sup>3</sup> The remaining one-third is composed of permanent residents who hold the Shenzhen household registration permit. A second characteristic is the gender imbalance, the 3:1 female-male ratio reflecting an economy originally based on low-level manufacturing and services. A third unique aspect of Shenzhen is the youthfulness of its population. 73.5 percent of the "floating population" in Shenzhen are between the ages of 15 and 29 (Yeung and Chu 1994). Of these features which have shaped the physical contours, social structure, and gender relations of the zone, an individual's household registration status most significantly influences his or her life choices.

### The Household Registration System

What may most differentiate Shenzhen and China from other Asian countries is the household registration system (*hukou*). This system, established in the late 1950s by the Communist Party to control population movement into urban centers, assembled Chinese citizens into a spatial ranking of privilege. The inherited status of "agricultural" or "non-agricultural," passed through the matrilineal line, meant that a person born into an agricultural family, for example, had no opportunity to convert to non-agricultural status, thus being denied perquisites given to those in the urban state-supported sector (Potter 1983).<sup>4</sup> These perquisites included employment, subsidized housing, medical services, and grain rations. China's urban policy since the 1950s has heavily favored state-sector urbanites at the expense of farmers (Potter 1983; Zhou 1996).<sup>5</sup> In developing countries, rural migration has been a major cause of urban growth (Guldin 1992). China's household registration system stemmed movement toward urban areas, although this was periodically ruptured. For example, during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) farmers were brought in by local urban enterprises to accelerate industrialization (Chan 1994:38). The mobility strictures also meant that China's cities did not

experience until recently the large-scale migrant settlements which ring urban perimeters and often strain centers of major metropolises in other Southeast Asian countries (Guldin 1992:226).

Although the household registration system is somewhat relaxed in China today, it continues to affect people's decision-making and life choices: for example, marriage, housing, and schooling for children. Although many Chinese people now have freedom of movement, the great difficulty in shifting from rural to urban residence status has set up a two-tiered system of privilege in China's cities (Solinger 1995). Only two people out of forty interviewed in the research for this article held a Shenzhen residence permit, the remainder possessing renewable border passes (tongxing zheng).<sup>6</sup>

This difference in residence status figures significantly in shaping individuals' experiences of place. Access to subsidized housing is granted only to permanent residents; in a family both spouses must hold the Shenzhen residence permit in order to qualify for such housing. Young women and men both rank the Shenzhen residence permit as one of their most important "demands" (yaoqiu) in their search for marriage partners. However, the two-tiered system of privilege discussed by Solinger must be further differentiated, by categories of gender, generation, and rural or urban origins, discussed further in this article.

### **Narratives of Settlement**

In this section I draw out narratives of settlement by officials, pioneers, temporary workers, and farmers and fisherpeople whose villages dotted the region at the time of Shenzhen's ground breaking. A general distinguishing element of cities historically has been "their diversity in relation to spatial and economic divisions of labor and in terms of ethnicities" (Westwood and Williams 1997:1). This is certainly the case in Shenzhen. Most Shenzhen residents are from elsewhere in China, bringing with them regional dialects, cuisine, beliefs, and practices. Many immigrants from China's poorest provinces such as Sichuan inhabit the bottom rungs of the socio-spatial hierarchy as street peddlers, sidewalk tailors, and beggars. Young women from rural regions toil in the factories and sweatshops. Who are these sojourners who have filled Shenzhen's store fronts, factories, and offices, and what were their motives in settling in Shenzhen?

In China's recent past the state has periodically relocated citizens to remote corners of the country to participate in industrialization programs and to secure ethnic regions with settlement by Han Chinese (Ma and Hanten 1981; Day and Ma 1994). The discourse of nation building attached to such movement has continued in the settlement of Guangdong's frontier regions, now infused with that of global engagement.

Official narratives of Shenzhen interpret modernization as a project of socialist construction. In an essay reflecting on the creation of the Shenzhen SEZ, Vice Mayor Lin Zuji vividly described the hardships of Shenzhen's pioneers who opened up the land:

In the beginning, the Special Zone's pioneers came here just for their ideals and dedicated spirit. The small frontier town, the desolate beach and wild mountains, the scorching sun, the small house with iron sheeting, no benefit to seek, no gold to wash. They paid with their sweat and wisdom. People have only one goal: explore the way for building socialism, win honor for the country. Shenzhen would not be prosperous without the lofty ideals and ambition of the first group of Shenzhen people (Shenzhen Commercial Daily 11/26/94).

In a later interview, the Vice-Mayor stressed the "Shenzhen spirit" of hard work and belief in collective goals which distinguished pioneers from later settlers who came to "pan for gold" and make a quick buck. The Vice-Mayor's rhetoric of collectivism, central to Chinese socialist ideology and which informed much of state discourse and citizens' life experiences in the 1950s and 1960s, belied other motives in unofficial accounts of migration.

Several residents who had moved to Shenzhen in the early 1980s gave quite different reasons for their relocation. As an "old" Shenzhen (pioneer) recalled his move, his reasons bore none of the socialist construction of Vice-Mayor Lin's story:

My supervisor asked me to come here. When we got here there was only the village of Shenzhen near the train station and another village near the Shenzhen river. There were small mountains all around and we built huts to live in while the soldiers built the dormitories and factories. I came to this place because it was closer to my native hometown, and to buy better food and clothing. We could buy fruits and vegetables from the nearby villagers. My friends came because they wanted to escape to Hong Kong. We

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could also watch Hong Kong TV (interview, May 1994).

Other long-term residents mentioned the attraction of an urban registration permit, better and more plentiful job opportunities, and a sense of freedom as reasons for migration. A local social science researcher explained to me that in the early 1980s, most people were weary of the political campaigns which had governed daily activity during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976), and many believed they could rebuild their lives more privately in Shenzhen. Settlers such as the engineering and construction crews fared well, as many were able to transfer their household registration from their hometowns to Shenzhen (interview with PLA soldier, Shenzhen 1996).

Yet disjunctures between an ideology of socialist construction and actual practices are multiple. Along with Beijing and Shandong Province, Shenzhen has been labeled a "disaster zone" for excessive corruption at high levels (South China Morning Post, 6/21/95). The 1995 national anti-corruption campaign lasted longer in Shenzhen than in other cities such as Beijing and Shenyang (South China Morning Post, 5/5/95). Senior Shenzhen cadres have been implicated in cases of fraud and graft, in some cases involving bribes of over one million U.S. dollars (South China Morning Post, 8/26/96). Although this attack may have been motivated by other underlying goals (attempts by anti-zone factions to persuade the state to remove Shenzhen's "special" economic status), blatant practices of official dipping into public coffers have been a continuing source of outrage and frustration by Shenzhen's urbanites. Long criticized by the central government for doing little to maintain a clean civil service, in 1996 the mayor of Shenzhen announced a system of regular job rotations for cadres, especially those in influential areas of personnel, finance, and materials (South China Morning Post 4/10/96). Today, Shenzhen officials are hard pressed to uphold the claim that Shenzhen "marks the hope of the nation's future" (Anagnost 1995:590) and plays the role of national exemplar of economic reform.

### **Representations of Shenzhen**

The Hong Kong and foreign press ride the train from downtown Hong Kong to the border in ninety minutes and alight at Shenzhen's Luohu Station set to see the city and record their impressions. Many journalists describe Shenzhen as a "Wild

East" (Sunday Morning Post), as "lacking soul" (Newsweek), as "Hong Kong's little brother" (Hong Kong Magazine). Orville Schell, a well-known China scholar, commented on Shenzhen:

The SEZ was a charmless upstart. Having had no real history, it had no "old" section, much less a heart, like Tiananmen Square, that focused everything toward a single central point. Its identity was equally as elusive. It was a bastard, a no-man's land that was in its weird way a perfect expression of its ambidextrous role as interface between a People's Republic and a British Crown colony (1994:333).

In sum, Shenzhen is portrayed as a bastard, soulless, without history. As journalists point out, Shenzhen possesses all the features of a frontier boomtown undergoing rapid growth: gleaming skyscrapers jostling ramshackle workers' dormitories; sordid beauty parlors offering sexual services; children, infants draped across their laps, begging; air that is hazardous to one's health. This is one story of Shenzhen's development. Local authorities have others. Visions of Shenzhen upheld by many authorities sketch a view of a global center with foreign-funded high-technology office parks and highly skilled employees, serving as a financial and services hub for southern China. One part of that picture is emerging, as high-tech office parks become established on the western edges of the city, where the new downtown area is being constructed (*China Daily*, 6/13/95).

Dissonance between desired civic representations and grounded experiences of place has created frustration among some officials, expressed succinctly by a member of the Public Security Bureau: "The people here don't fit the requirements of a modern, international city." His remark was aimed not only at semi-skilled rural migrants from elsewhere in China, people considered of poor "quality" (*suzhi*) for Shenzhen's high-technology and financial development, but also native farmers grown wealthy but who lack urban 'culture' and 'civilization'. The municipal government's 'civilizing' practices, which included awarding plaques to hygienic households and selfless model citizens, and holding culture contests, are part of the politics of producing a Shenzhen citizenry able to engage with the global economy (Anagnost 1995; Brownell 1995).<sup>7</sup>

For China's twenty-something generation who came of age imagining Shenzhen as a symbol of all that is possible in new China, Shenzhen holds other meanings: an immigrant space harboring myriad possibilities of fulfillment in work, adventure,

and love: a space, kinship-free and anonymous for those who desire, in which to try and get rich, in which individuals can remake themselves. As television became widespread in China, people everywhere could tune in to the spectacle of development occurring in south China and envision themselves as participants. Television programs, newspaper accounts, and returning migrants' stories helped to fire individual imaginations about potential lives elsewhere, and were important in prompting some to leave home and seek a new life in factories in the south.

### Farmer Landlords

How did local farmers fare in Shenzhen's development? Scattered through the Shenzhen region were Hakka farming villages that had been organized into communes during the Maoist era. Many of the villages had been settled centuries ago by villagers' forbears from northern China (interview, Shenzhen 1996). Today, some have been enveloped by concrete. A view from the bridges over downtown Shenzhen's thoroughfares gives an indication of where parts of villages still stand. Single-story, gray-tiled village rooftops seem miniature and faded huddled next to shining twenty-story office buildings and shopping centers. A popular outdoor shopping area known for inexpensive Hong Kong-style knockoffs has now surrounded East Gate, one of the original villages. "Old Street," part of the site of former Shenzhen town, also had been remade into a shopping district.

Rural economic reform occurred through decollectivization and the establishment of the household responsibility system, under which control over labor was returned to the individual household. Households rather than collectivized production units began to assume responsibility for agricultural production (Johnson 1992:199). As a result, labor efficiency increased and the number of rural workers needed decreased (Li 1997:115).<sup>8</sup> Transfers of land-use rights and land accumulation became possible under the new rural reforms (Li 1997:195).<sup>9</sup>

Unlike other frontier regions of China, Shenzhen's development has produced much wealth for many villages through leasing land to Hong Kong capitalists. Many former farmers have invested their capital in restaurants and apartment buildings in Shenzhen (interview, Shenzhen 1996). In one village I visited, the village committee received rents from a Hong Kong manufacturer, which were distributed annually to each family. Villagers with family in Hong Kong supplemented

their share with remittances from them and built large new houses, renting out their old one-story homes to outside migrant laborers hired to work in the factory. The new homes were of the type similar to those one sees from the train passing through Hong Kong's New Territories on the way to the Hong Kong-China border: white-washed, three and four-story buildings with tile roofs and wrought iron railings, front courtyards, and gated entrances. Many villagers had relatives in Hong Kong and had attempted themselves to flee over the border. The capitalist worlds of Hong Kong and beyond, physically sealed off to villagers by a border fence, had long been incorporated into villager's cognitive maps of their landscape. Villagers perceive themselves as part of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) connected through Hong Kong and global television, attempted border crossings, returning immigrants' stories, and remittances earned through relatives.

Through Shenzhen's development, the village has been transformed. Movement into new gated homes has altered the spatial arrangement of the village, such that now people see each other less often. Formerly living side by side in single-level dwellings, villagers interacted daily through planting, cultivating, and harvesting rice fields. Migrants now outnumber locals, doing factory work that most village people shun. Ambivalent as villagers are towards the migrants, they have grown accustomed to them as an integral, necessary part of village life. As my young informant Xiao Lan remarked, local people especially miss migrants at Spring Festival when they return to their native hometowns, the village eerily quiet in their absence.

Living off factory rents and remittances, many villagers while away their time playing mahjong, and young people, who now have the means to attend university, engage in leisure activities instead of preparing themselves for higher education. Village youth are not equipped with the skills necessary to compete with educated northerners now snapping up professional jobs in Shenzhen's transitional economy. Xiao Lan, the only student of her village to attend university, explained to me:

People in my village are not competitive with outside people. They feel they are superior because they are local people (bendi ren), but they can't compete because outside people work harder. They feel proud while they are home, because they have money, but small in Shenzhen city. They tell me they are afraid to try for a college degree, so they will not get good jobs like the northerners. They know little about the outside, so they can't amount to too much.

In the new atmosphere of the market, many youth were unable or unwilling to bridge the space and time of the village, where wealth accumulation was effortless due to remittances and factory rents (Chan et al. 1992), with that of the urban, which required grit, competitiveness, talent, and speed. Even as the capitalist world of their imaginations has been brought into focus through economic reform, without the means of market success, young villagers' experience of place may become more circumscribed. The "time-space compression" (Harvey 1989) engendered by the spatial reorganization of global capital is experienced differently by social groups such as these village youth. The ability of individuals to take advantage of corporate practices of flexible accumulation, which have fostered Shenzhen's growth depends on a myriad of factors. Along with factors of class, ethnicity, and gender, which affect individual experiences of space and place, and one's location in the "new relations of time-space compression" (Massey 1994:165), this study highlights age/generation, rural-urban status, and a kind of capital based on educational, social and linguistic skills. For in spite of their nouveau riche status, providing them one source of power, many young villagers lack the cultural "capital" (Bourdieu 1984) through which they may gain access to Shenzhen's middle and professional classes, and to the urban marketplace.

The village community life that Xiao Lan recalls has weakened with the village's transformation. Her own experiences of loss and nostalgia were recuperated in visions of a different shape of hometown, designed in the style of the self-contained housing estates she saw on Hong Kong television, complete with McDonald's, Seven-Eleven, and a health club. When I asked her specifically what drew her attention to the estates, she replied that "everything is organized." On television Xiao Lan could see groupings of tall high-rises, newer ones painted in shades of lavender, light orange, and blue. She spoke of communal spaces full of human interaction: the parks and playgrounds in the center of residential areas where grandmothers watched grandchildren and teenagers gathered after school. She believed a similar spatial design in her village may restore community sentiment attenuated by prosperity. In her eyes, the newly built environment of the village was not conducive to sociality and daily rituals which help to create collective memories and a sense of "home" (interviews May 1995).

### **Native Place Networks**

Much of the social relations essential to immigrants involves native place and school networks. Native place, meaning in this context hometown, is a complex feature of identity through which Chinese people historically defined themselves and others. Goodman writes about Shanghai sojourners that "native place identity expressed both spiritual linkage to the place where their ancestors were buried and living ties to family members and community" (1995:4). A flexible construction, native place can refer to levels of village, town, and province, so that people from the same town or province would consider themselves to be "hometown" mates or co-provincials. These varying levels of relationships, simultaneously fluid and solid, provide linkages between places near and far. Bridging city and hometown, they act as pathways through which information, commodities, and financial and other resources are conveyed. Back and forth movement between province and city, and the symbolic and material presence of the hometown in Shenzhen, create a processual sense of place that Massey has argued for (1994:155).

Native place ties were crucial to new immigrants in locating work and housing, and providing support in an unfamiliar environment. New arrivals to Shenzhen were hidden in their co-provincials' factory dormitories until work and accommodations were secured. Others went to stay with relatives or hometown mates in the shed settlements scattered throughout Shenzhen, which are divided by native place groupings.

Walking with my friend Xiao Ming through the maze of small huts behind the Red Cross hospital, cobbled together from plywood scraps and corrugated iron, she introduced me to her friend who provided shelter when she first arrived in Shenzhen. We picked our way along the wooden boards placed over the rivers of mud, passing children, dogs and chickens who turned out to greet the foreigner.

Xiao Ming's friend lived in a modest one-room shed built by her husband, who worked on a construction site. Her section of the settlement was called "Sichuan Village," as all the immigrants were from Sichuan Province. She was relatively comfortable compared to others in the vicinity, as she could afford electricity and had a two-burner stove and a small black and white television. The hut settlements are illegal but ignored by the police, possibly receiving compensation from the settlers. The hospital rented out the land to the immigrants, yet if the

land were to be developed the settlement would be bulldozed with no compensation provided for the inhabitants. The shed settlement was thus a fluid community which nevertheless offered residents a temporary feeling of "home," as fellow provincials cooked Sichuan cuisine together, spoke the Sichuan dialect, and provided newcomers with accommodation, information and friendship.

After a two and a half day train ride in the hard seat class from Chongqing, Xiao Ming arrived in Shenzhen with a few dollars in her pocket. She located the shed settlement and spent several days with her hometown friends until she secured work as an assistant in a nearby hair salon, which provided room and board and a monthly salary of \$25.

In the hair salon Xiao Ming was assigned tasks of shampooing hair, cleaning, shopping at the nearby market, and cooking. Working each day from morning until evening left little leisure time to explore the pleasures of urban life. She often spent her few hours of free time with her co-provincials in the settlement, a fifteen-minute walk from the hair salon, exchanging news from home, job possibilities, and work anecdotes. On the occasional night off she and her friends strolled along "Old Street" hunting for clothing bargains. The sites of the workplace, the produce market and the shed settlement largely defined Xiao Ming's routine of work and leisure. The television in the hair salon, constantly on, broke up the monotony of work and provided indirect experiences of Shenzhen life. Moreover, as Shenzhen television broadcast Hong Kong channels, immigrants could receive news of their home provinces not reported on Chinese state television channels (for example, sporadic attacks by farmers on tax collectors, or labor strikes). Xiao Ming had come to Shenzhen to "see the world" (kan shijie), yet she does so primarily through electronic media, which constituted much of Xiao Ming's daily lived experience. However, native place ties were a critical element through which many people like Xiao Ming apprehend the city. These social networks, part of migrants' place making practices, help order an individual's sense of the urban environment and provide a form of community, however transitory.

In considering the spatial relations of native place, several Shenzhen authorities believed such sentiment has impeded the fostering of a broader sense of urban community. The "raw materials of native place sentiment" (Goodman 1995:5), such as language and local practices and loyalties, were viewed not only

as counter to the project of social integration in a city of immigrants, but also obsolete in the kind of modern community envisioned by local officials and elite. Vice Mayor Lin writes:

Hometown fellow consciousness, schoolmate consciousness, fellow workers consciousness, these three kinds of consciousness have such a centrifugal force and destructive power that they can lead Shenzhen people to lack the sense of homeland, the sense of belonging they should have (Shenzhen Commercial Daily 11/26/94).

How to create a collective identity among people with disparate loyalties? In efforts to remake the city's waning image and inspire sentiments of belonging, local authorities proposed a new kind of identity for Shenzhen and its residents.

### A Civic Identity

The public "new citizen" debate which engaged Shenzhen officials, elites and ordinary residents for nine months in 1994 delved into politics of place, identity and belonging. In newspapers, on television, in the public sphere, in workplaces, people debated the meanings of an emergent Shenzhen subjectivity and self-image for what was considered by many as the most modern city in China. The newspaper discussion was scheduled to end after four months, yet due to reader interest was extended another five months. The "Shenzhen person" discussion was clearly an opportunity for residents to reflect on Shenzhen's culture and status and to form public opinion. It was also more of a concern to certain sectors of the population, as elite, city officials, and white collar employees were more heavily represented than Shenzhen's vast temporary service and manufacturing workforce. Temporary workers not organized into work units and not skilled in reading Chinese newspapers were underrepresented in the debate. However, a small group of workers contributed letters, which opened a controversy over the relationship between wealth and access to "civilization":

People of the working class like me are interested in the discussion of 'The Image of Shenzhen people.' But I have some viewpoints. Take politeness and values, for example. Comparing such a modern, civilized city like Shenzhen with the countryside is like heaven and hell. Looking at temporary workers like us, 7 or 8 of us share a room of about 190 square feet. Our working hours are very long. We as well would like to wear smart clothes, go to the Grand Theater and listen to music and enjoy modern civilization, but everything requires money and where would we get all

that money? We plan to work here for many years and then leave when we have earned enough. Who cares about politeness or spiritual values? Don't laugh at what we write. Now you can say we have taken part in this discussion (Shenzhen Evening News, 3/31/94, my translation).

In this man's opinion, he and his coworkers could not afford "civilization" as they understood it in the newspaper discussions, commodified in a middle and upper class lifestyle. Practices encouraged by local authorities to train the "uncivilized" in urban ways went unheeded by many workers, whose concerns focused on Shenzhen's high cost of living, cramped living conditions, and providing for family members in the hometown. These workers contested socialist notions of "spiritual values," which were to discipline workers for the market economy, as, by their accounts they had little to gain in the process. Occupying the lower tier of the two-tiered household residence system, in which they were classed as permanent "nonlocals," few options were available to them.

What emerged from the debate was less a collective Shenzhen identity hoped for by authorities, than a realization of "communities" proliferating throughout the city, marked by distinctions of class, education, native place and goals. As has been noted elsewhere, the way migrants experience urban life depends to a large degree "on the political and economic character of the gendered social relations linking the country and city" (Ferguson 1997:153). In Shenzhen, many migrants' experience of place is lived through connections with their native hometown, through letter writing, phone calls, expenditures for the natal family, gift packages, the accommodation of hometown friends, and the occasional train ride home. These practices suggest that immigrants' sense of place in Shenzhen encompassed a network of social relations which stretched far beyond its borders.

### **Conclusion**

Shenzhen and its environs have been built upon layers of local, regional and global relations which have downplayed national borders and have cultivated kinship, culture, language and geographical affinities for purposes of investment and capital accumulation. These social relations provide a dynamic notion of place which precludes a definition based on boundaries.

This article argues that social groups' positions within regional and global networks of capital and power are influenced by distinctions finer than those of class, gender, and ethnicity (Massey 1994). Factors of age, geographical origins, and cultural "capital" may also shape individuals' abilities to take advantage of periodic rearrangements of global capital, illustrated by the predicament of Shenzhen's village youth.

As the "rural" has moved full force into the "urban" of China, spatial boundaries created by the state are no longer salient. Yet with migration, other distinctions — of local and non-local, skilled and non-skilled, civilized and 'uncivilized' — become more salient in high growth areas like Shenzhen. Segments of the population lacking the relevant skills and cultural "capital" may lose out in Shenzhen's shift to a high-tech, information-based economy.

However much Shenzhen has symbolized China's global engagement and its national future, it is the diverse present which overwhelms municipal officials and permanent residents. Shenzhen's differences — of language, native place, class, household registration status, thinking — have been perceived as a social and political problem to be managed by authorities. Official attempts to remake the population through "civilizing" practices and to kindle a collective sense of place are complicated by the frontier nature of this newly built immigrant city and by cultural cleavages such as native place. Hometown ties and urban conditions were factors shaping immigrant groups' divergent understandings of Shenzhen as a locality, which periodically contest the desired official image. The identity making linked with place and wished for by authorities is a long-term, disjunctive process, and the emergence of a Shenzhen identity is at least a generation away.

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<sup>1</sup> Roughly several hundred thousand people fled over the China-Hong Kong border between 1950 and the late 1970s, most of the escapees are from border regions such as Shenzhen's Baoan County (Vogel 1989:164).

<sup>2</sup> Vogel gives 1980 figures for the old town of Shenzhen as slightly more than 20,000 people (1989:136). The current figure of four million came through personal communication with a researcher in Shenzhen, September 1997.

<sup>3</sup> The term "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) is used somewhat loosely by journalists. I follow Chan's definition to mean "the population staying temporarily in places different from those where the household registration is held. These include tourists, businesspeople on trips, traders, sojourners, peasant workers contracted from other places, and migrants seeking jobs in cities" (1992:53). This definition cuts across class, where often in popular writings the "floating population" is conceived of as primarily poor, rural migrants (see also Guldin 1992; Solinger 1995).

<sup>4</sup> The household registration system is actually more elaborate than I have described here, and is in the process of transformation. Chan calls it a dual system, based on household registration (the occupation of household members) and residence distinctions. The entire Chinese population is differentiated into four groups: A) urban agricultural; B) rural agricultural; C) urban non-agricultural; D) rural non-agricultural (1992:43).

<sup>5</sup>Urban residents did not receive a uniform package of fixed wages, housing, and other subsidies. During the socialist era the urban economy was composed of three sectors: 1) the state sector, with fixed wage scale and full benefits; 2) the collective sector, with a variety of wage arrangements; 3) the independent sector, where people engaged in private and putting-out work (Whyte and Parish 1984:30-31).

<sup>6</sup>The article is part of my dissertation on migration, gender relations and marriage in Shenzhen, the research for which was carried out between 1994 and 1996.

<sup>7</sup>The concept of civilization has a complexity of meanings which I cannot fully elaborate upon in this article. For my purposes here, the notion of "civilization" is used in state discourse and policy as a goal to achieve, as in the "socialist spiritual civilization construction" campaign begun in the late 1980s to differentiate socialist "values" from those of capitalism. Anagnost (1995) and Brown (1995), writing extensively on the subject, define "spiritual civilization" as a set of public morals and etiquette, and link its current use to the shaping of a disciplined Chinese workforce for the world economy.

<sup>8</sup>Decollectivization of rural communes in the late 1970s released a huge, formerly hidden supply of surplus labor (Lee 1994:135). Many of the unemployed migrated into newly developing regions in south China, yet their household registration remained in their rural native place.

<sup>9</sup>In China the state owns the land. The practice of the "transfer of land use rights," which began in the special economic zones, allows foreign and domestic investors to lease plots of land for between 40 and 70 years. Farmers have been able to lease farmland from the state for up to 50 years (Li 1997:195).

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