

Re-presentation of the Subjectivity of Chinese Urban Migrants: The Case of Shenzhen Urban Villages

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Abstract: Shenzhen, a city that has seen rapid growth since being designated as a special economic zone in 1978, differs from other first-tier cities in that it has a distinctive population structure made up of numerous migrants. How the subjectivities of these migrants—including their occupations, social relationships, and family structures—change in the process of adapting to urban life is a question worth exploring. The paper pays particular attention to Shenzhen's urban villages, which are crucial but temporary spaces for the city's large migrant population. Additionally, the article offers creative viewpoints on the complexity of rural-urban migration through the use of artistic case studies. It seeks to encourage increased awareness of these pertinent issues, inspiring stakeholders to re-envision urban development policies to foster a more inclusive approach towards this oft overlooked yet fundamentally essential segment of the population.

Keywords: urban migration; Shenzhen; subjectivity; urban-rural migration; artistic case studies

1. Foreword

Since China's reform and opening in 1978, Shenzhen has been established as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). In terms of population size, spatial development, and growth in various economic parameters, the experiment conducted by Shenzhen as a special zone has been successful in various respects (Zhang, 2003)[1]; for instance, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Shenzhen Special Zone increased from 200 million yuan in 1978 to 2.24 trillion yuan in 2017. Economic growth has fueled the influx of migrant workers and the expansion of urban space, with an increasing urban migrant population, particularly in urban peripheral regions and urban villages near city centers. These groups are known as "urban migrants", which refers to individuals who migrate from rural regions to cities seeking easier access to employment and better living circumstances. According to the data, there were 11.9804 million permanent residents in Shenzhen in 2016, with households making up just 33.99% of the total resident population. This demonstrates that non-households make up the majority of the population in Shenzhen. The majority of urban non-residents are "migrant workers", described as "temporary migrants". This paper aims to investigate how the subjectivity of the migrant population is produced and transformed through an in-depth study of urban villages in Shenzhen.

2. The subjectivity issue of urban immigrants in Shenzhen

Shenzhen has the largest percentage of migrants when compared to the other three first-tier Chinese cities (Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou), with Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing accounting for 40.51%, 38.01%, and 37.3% of all migrants, respectively. This indicates that Shenzhen's population structure is still seriously inverted, and that the city has the most prominent migrant population problem. Because of this, the problems and dilemmas of urban migration faced by Shenzhen may be more comprehensive and visible, and the subjectivity of urban migrants in Shenzhen is also more prominent.

For the majority of the migratory population, urban villages serve as "footholds" into the metropolis. As shown in Figure 1, it is the Baishizhou Urban Village in Shenzhen. Although this urban community is still in operation, the government has placed it on the demolition plan, so it will be destroyed within the next 7-8 years. There is a great deal of literature on urban migration in the context of urban villages, and numerous academics, including 'Huiming Du', 'Siming Li', 'Mary Ann', 'Hao Jingban', 'Hao Pu', and 'Yuan Yan', [10] have offered particular perspectives on Shenzhen's urban villages from a variety of fields, including geography, anthropology, urban landscape design, etc. Their study includes changes in family and gender relations during urban-rural migration in China, issues of community emotions inside urban villages, and farmers' everyday practices in China's urban villages. Few researchers, however, have

studied how migrant workers migrate after villages are demolished. The few studies that have been conducted suggest that some migrant workers may relocate to other urban villages after demolition, while others are compelled to leave the city and return to their rural villages (hometowns)[11]. The process of passive transfer and relocation from urban villages reflects the disregard for the subjectivity of urban migrant workers, while forced evacuation suggests that they do not have their subjectivity in the migration process.

Additionally, there is no further literature tracking this group to support the aforementioned conclusions, nor is there any more documentation analyzing the migration process and the significance behind that migration [12]. Therefore, Shenzhen, as a typical representative of China's rapid urbanization, as well as the urban villages that have been formed in this process, would be a good example of exploring how the subjectivity of the migrant population is constantly being reshaped.



Figure 1: Baishizhou Urban Village (Visual China, 2019)

3. The emergence of urban villages in Shenzhen

Due to their affordability and social accessibility, migrants are forced to find residence in urban villages (Zhang et al., 2003) [1], and as a result, Shenzhen's urban villages have become the "landing place" for rural migrant workers to migrate to Shenzhen. Since 1978, Shenzhen has been experiencing rapid urban transformation, which may be the primary external cause for the formation of urban villages in Shenzhen. Additionally, since the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Administrative Region (SAR), the extent of urban land usage has expanded dramatically. Shenzhen relies on the conversion of rural land into urban land to provide sufficient space for urban development. As a consequence, villages that were once in the suburbs were incorporated into the urban land range and transformed into urban villages, which are now surrounded by high-rise structures as a result of urban growth. Since the reform and opening up in 1978, rural migrant workers have moved from the countryside to the cities on a large scale, and the huge urban-rural gap has facilitated the mobility of the labor force (Zhao, 1999)[2]. Many are settling in the cities and becoming "city dwellers", but their household registration information and a large number of social relations remain in the rural areas, and the urban social security system excludes them from the city. In fact, they have become urban migrant workers.

Compared with other Chinese metropolises such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, Shenzhen is an emerging city of rapid migration. So far, Shenzhen has experienced explosive population growth in a short period of time. The population increased from 310,000 in 1979 to 10.62 million in 2013. Immigrants are the primary driver of population expansion. In 1979, there were 150,000 immigrants, making up 50% of the whole population. By 2013, there were 7.52 million immigrants, making up 70% of the overall population. In addition to a sharp growth in population, there has also been a sharp change in the structural makeup of the population. With the increase in the migrant population, the demand for low-rent housing has also greatly increased. However, the government's effort to build affordable homes is unable to meet such a high demand. Therefore, urban villages with lower living costs bear the responsibility for low-cost housing. According to a study of temporary residential housing in Shenzhen, 48.7% of the migrant workers live in urban villages.

There are huge differences between China's urban villages and those of other developing countries.

In India (Nijman, 2010) [3] and Egypt (Harris and Wahra, 2002)[4], "urban villages" are referred to as "slums", which are formed through illegal occupation. Although there are some parallels between the two in terms of landscape characteristics (mixed and crowded), demographic characteristics (mainly migrants and the poor), and community features (segregation from neighboring communities). However, China's urban villages are more complicated because they involve China's distinctive land system and the interests of local peasants. Only individuals with a specific level of wealth or social position, or those with a higher education, had the ability to obtain an urban household registration from the 20th century to the 21st decade due to the constraints of the household registration policy (Fan, 2002)[5]. According to Fan (2002)[5], people who have access to urban household registration are referred to as "elites" and those who do not are referred to as "outsiders". The concepts of "elite" and "outsiders" effectively communicate the distinction between "permanent" and "temporary" migration.

Before the 2010s, migrant workers who migrated to cities were infrequently given the opportunity to obtain urban household registration, were frequently neglected and excluded from the urban social security system and were unable to access urban resources such as education, welfare, and housing. This is one of the main reasons why migrant workers have been referred to as 'floating populations' (Goodkind and West, 2002) [6]. The household registration system creates a very high institutional barrier for peasants to settle in cities and further defines peasants as "others," "outsiders," and "lower class" in the eyes of city dwellers.

Under the dual land system, China's cities expanded on a massive scale, occasionally choosing to circumvent villages, and gradually forming urban villages. Since development projects in urban villages are not included in the key construction plans of government agencies, local inhabitants will satisfy the current growing demand for housing through large-scale construction while at the same time satisfying their own economic interests. 'Baishizhou' is a typical example of an urban village in Shenzhen, which is the largest of its kind. Over 150,000 low-income migrant laborers from all over the country are housed in more than 2,500 farmer's homes that are used as rental accommodations on this 0.6 square-kilometer plot of land. On the other hand, locals who own houses may be entitled to more compensation based on the actual size of their houses in future demolitions. For the above reasons, large numbers of low-income urban migrant workers have congregated in urban villages, creating high-density communities with a large number of illegal buildings.

4. Development and evolution of the subjectivity of urban immigrants in Shenzhen

The definition of subjectivity has been interpreted variously in different fields, but the interpretation of subjectivity in the study of philosophy is particularly pertinent to the primary focus of this research work. The relevant discussion on subjectivity in the field of philosophy was initially proposed by the well-known French philosopher Michel Foucault. In "Discipline and Punish", Michel Foucault argued that subjectivity interacts with micro-power, which is produced by power, and that those with micro-power can resist power structures to make differences. According to Michel Foucault, "people do not have a unique identity of 'themselves'; they are subjects created by institutions and networks of power of which they are usually unaware." (Foucault, 1977)[7], Michel Foucault focuses on subjectivity from the perspective of power relations. Whereas Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Félix Guattari proposed the concept of subjectivity transformation, Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Félix Guattari wrote that human subjectivity is not a predetermined identity but is always produced in the process of individuation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980)[8]. Both of them believe that subjectivity does not exist but is a processing process that flows through different network collections. Subjectification is the positive process of becoming subjectivity, such as "becoming a woman", "becoming an animal" and "becoming a minority". In reference to the nomadic theories of 'Gilles Deleuze' and 'Pierre-Félix Guattari', 'Rosi Braidotti' proposed the concept of "nomadic subjectivity," pointing out that the body is the location where the body, symbol, and the social overlap.

The study of subjectivity in the philosophical field aids in the analysis of the current shifts in the subjectivity of urban migrant workers. Socio-economic reforms caused peasants to relocate into cities, but because the reform of the social system lagged behind economic development, a large number of peasants entered the cities and became urban migrant laborers. These individuals no longer worked in agriculture after moving to the city, had a wider range of employment options than they had in rural regions, and were able to forge a variety of social connections that enriched and widened their social networks. Their employment options include factories or family workshops, and there are many specific career options, such as car maintenance, environmental sanitation, hairdressing, etc. In terms of social relations in the cultural dimension, the single geographical and kinship social structure has been gradually

dismantled due to the invasion of new social groups—immigrants. In terms of housing, since the income of migrant workers living in urban villages is generally low, most of them prefer mixed living choices, and there are different living spaces in each rental building, resulting in a mixed living environment in urban villages. According to Peng's field interviews with migrant workers, public kitchens, and bathrooms in rental buildings in urban villages are generally shared. In terms of family structure in urban villages, the majority of migrant workers live as family units in urban villages (Ma, 2006) [9]. This not only demonstrates the challenging living circumstances most migrant workers encounter once they arrive in Shenzhen but also brings more aftermath issues to the demolition of urban villages, which may lead to the displacement of migrant workers residing in urban villages.

5. Artist case studies

Nowadays, many non-profit social groups, including anthropologists, artists, and others, are actively involved in research activities in urban villages, attempting to explore rural-urban migration in depth by adopting novel perspectives and innovative approaches. For instance, artist 'Huang Yihong' recently conducted a three-month residency program in the urban village of 'Bai Shi Zhou' in Shenzhen, China. As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3. His works include "Si Liang Bo Qian Jin" (2019) and "Clearance" (2019). The artist explores art through eviction notices, lorries, immovable waste, and other objects related to relocation, so he organizes his creative ideas more around this theme.



Figure 2: 'Si Liang Bo Qian Jin', Yihong Huang, 2019.



Figure 3: 'Clearance', Yihong Huang, 2019.

As shown in below figure 4. The Chinese artist 'Nut Brothers' created an art performance about the

schooling of children in urban villages. In his work 'Shenzhen Dolls' (2018), he reveals the uncertain future of migrant children who may be relocated to different schools under government reconstruction plans. Since 2013, anthropologist 'Mary Ann' has established a project called 'Handshake 302' (as in Figure 5), which is both a rentable art space and an art project in 'Baishizhou' urban village in Shenzhen. As shown in Figure 6, the exhibition 'Long March Project: Illegal Buildings III' utilizes the temporary nature of illegal architecture as a metaphor for developing multiple visual working approaches to perceive current political, social, economic, and cultural realities. It is an inspiring exhibition that stimulates individuals to consider new forms of social life.



Figure 4: 'Shenzhen Wawa', Nut Brothers, 2018.



Figure 5: 'Handshake 302', photograph, 2013.



Figure 6: 'Long March Plan: illegal construction III', 2018.

Additionally, some artists created artwork directly addressing the subjectivity of migrant workers. As shown in Figure 7. In the work 'Slow Motion' (Hao Jingban, 2018), the artist 'Hao Jingban' directly enters these real clean-up scenes, using film as a medium to express the individual's aphasia in social reality. Her personal experience of clearing out the migrant workers in Beijing causes us to reconsider the future living conditions of urban village tenants. The film "Where We Come From, Who We Are, and Where We Go 2.0" (2019), directed by 'Wang Chong' (as in Figure 8), explores the roots of immigration based on the background of global immigration. As shown in Figure 9 and Figure 10. The pieces "Acquire

Everything in You" (2014) and "Love Story" (2012) by artist 'Liu Chuang' are related to urban migrant workers and are set in factory spaces. Therefore, based on various research backgrounds and scopes, the study of the subjectivity of urban migrant workers has its own specificity and necessity.

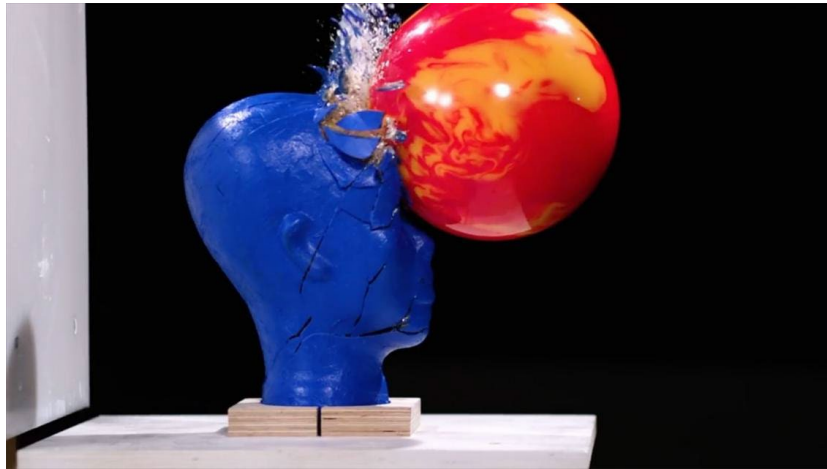


Figure 7: 'Slow Lens',Jingban Hao,2018.



Figure 8: 'Where we come from, who we are, where we go to 2.0', Chong Wang, 2019.



Figure 9: 'Acquiring all the things in you', Chuang Liu, 2014.



Figure 10: 'Love Story', Chuang Liu, 2012.

6. Conclusion

To comprehend migrant workers' general situation in Shenzhen and how their subjectivity is always evolving and changing in various socio-urban contexts. The works created by the artists reveal the ongoing concern for migrant workers and their subjectivities in transitional contexts, enabling an intuitive understanding of the issues of urban migration that previous artists have identified and raised as well as the particulars and issues they may have missed. Understanding the narratives, needs, aspirations, difficulties, and imaginations of these urban migrant workers, exploring the deeper implications of the ongoing changes in their subjectivities and their interpersonal relationships with others and the environment. Expressing concern for the vulnerable group of urban migrant workers, hopes to attract more attention from other groups and prompt more people to re-examine the social needs of urban villages and urban migrants.

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