

Developing Frontiers: Photographies as border work in the case of Xian urban village Guangzhou

Title Slide

JA

Introduction

In this presentation we are going to use a visit to the urban village of Xian (SHEANN) in Guangzhou as way to open up a conversation about a type of contemporary border. We will use site writing from this visit and examine images made by others and ourselves.

In this we will talk not of national or recognized territorial borders as such but instead examine how urban spaces globally are being redrawn according to financial concerns, creating a new series of borders that demarcate the growing and shifting unevenness of wealth and poverty. The borders we are thinking about are something of a moving target, produced in the development process.

As sociologist Sakia Sassen comments globally there are 'sharp shifts' in land ownership being brought about by what she terms a 'savage sorting'. These shifting acquisitions amount to a systematic

transformation in the pattern of land ownership in cities. We are going to consider the work that photography does in relation to depicting such spaces, how these photographic practices might constitute a form of border practice.

With the rapid pace of urbanization in China since the late 1980's/ early 1990's, the boundaries of large cities expanded to encompass many of the ancient villages on their outskirts. The term *urban village* is used to describe these villages absorbed into Chinese cities and megacities such as Guangzhou. In the process of urban expansion villagers were often persuaded to sell their agricultural lands, now prime real estate, for development projects.

New Slide – Maps 1

Xian village (SHEANN), which sits on the edge of Guangzhou's Business district- an exclusive world-class economic zone and the hub of the 2010 Asian Games- is typical of this situation.

New Slide – building

It was one of the first of Guangzhou's 138 villages to urbanize, starting around 1985. Many of the now landless Xiancun farmers

took advantage of the compensation schemes and some remained in the now urbanized enclaves and built new houses or added levels to existing properties and started to earn a living by renting rooms to migrant workers, in search of cheap accommodation. It became a centre for migrants from more or less all over China and we hear that the village became wealthy through the sale of land to developers.

New Slide – overview

JB

A Walk in Xiancun, April 2015 – Part 1

Yan drives us from the station where we met, to a small rank of parking spaces close to the building site of the East tower, which, at 530 metres on completion, will be the tallest building in Guangzhou.

New Slide - Tree

We cross the busy road via the underpass. On the other side, bear left towards a cutting in a section of wall and we slip into the urban village before we realize it. This cutting is all that remains of a checkpoint in the security cordon around the village, which was activated during the violence of 2010. Since then the village officials who struck up deals with the developers and the deputy mayor who

attempted to sell the village to developers over the villagers heads, have been convicted of corruption.

Yan is old enough to remember the village when it was surrounded by the countryside that has now been consumed by the business district and metamorphosed into a forest of towers. He strides slightly ahead, but nevertheless making sure to accommodate our pace, slowed by equipment and curiosity. It gets better he keeps saying, when John makes to photograph anything.

New Slide – Demolished building / cars

Our guide knows what a photographer has come to find in a place like this: moments of heightened drama; places where things connect, and places where disconnection is striking, extreme-scapes in which gleaming towers of glass and steel are indifferent to the wounded crumbling hovels beneath them.

New Slide – demolished building

The photographer looks for human expressions of the drama too: people picking life through the remains of hope, hanging washing in

war zones; a monk crouched by water in which concrete is reflected; a child with the worlds weight in her eyes. And so on. These tropes.

JA

Photo 1

Photography's origins at the end of the industrial revolution meant that its growth coincided with the development of the new industrial city. It is not purely by chance then that the city has been a major subject for photographic depiction since its origins.

New Slide – Marville Image

Photographers as far back as Charles Marville in Paris of the 1850's have documented urban demolition and reconstruction. Often employed by those undertaking the demolition, these photographic practices frequently suppress certain narratives of the unbuilding process.

New Slide – Annan image

Acting as a propaganda tool they have often eliminated the impact on the lives of inhabitants or the economic realities driving the

valorization of reconstruction schemes (James 2004). In this process even reformist documentary images have also played their part in justifying large-scale urban reconstruction under the guise of enlightened change.

David Company in 2003 in his work on 'late photography' examined a new approach emergent in the medium. This trend involved a form of photographic record after the event has happened. Here the photographic image captures the stillness of the aftermath. This new type of image making practice he argued, was closer to forensics than traditional photojournalism as it utilizes the frozen moment of the image as a 'signifier of the memorable'. In this process photography, he argues, cedes its place in the contemporary 'mediasphere', to other media such as video and television to capture the live event in real time. Today photography is no longer the medium of the decisive moment, the means by which the live event is grasped.

In the lead up to the November 2010 Asian games, Xian villagers suffered a similar fate to others in the vicinity of world sporting events and were under extreme pressure to leave. Villagers were pressured to vacate the village and as soon as they left the developers

demolished their properties. Reflecting on Company's work we find grainy, poor quality uploads to YouTube from mobile phone movies are the medium of this hard news- not still photography.

[Brief commentary to youtube videos]

New Slide – Market Demolition

1) Demolition of the market. Xiancun (SHEANN) is a place of informal economies.

Markets are often a target for developers who need to eliminate these economies to make way for global brands.

New Slide – Demolition

2) Demolitions, these houses are on the edge of the village. Facing a 6 lane road and new developments. If you look carefully the demolition of one block is taking place whilst people are still living in the block next door. (Look for person in the window)

JB

A Walk in Xiancun, April 2015 – Part 2

Yan is proposing to take us up onto the mound of rubble that forms a high level concourse between the hollowed out buildings. It is a steep climb up several metres of loose looking rubble. Yan is encouraging or rather threatening that I will regret it, if I don't go.

New Slide – demolished building

I know this is true but it is the idea of being left behind in the grim street, noticeably foreign and burdened with equipment that finally convinces me to make the short climb. The rubble has filled in the space between 6 or 8 blocks, which stand empty. I imagine the rubble shifting, losing my footing and airlocks.

John and Yan are already ahead of me. I am finding my feet. Finding that the rubble under foot is compacted and stable. Of course the residents of Xiancun use this route everyday. One of them is walking towards me now, along the rubble track towards a washing line strung between two derelict buildings.

New Slide – Washing

He avoids my gaze and the thinness of my smile that never got going.
He adds the upholstery from a baby car seat to the line of personal belongings already hanging there.

New Slide - slippers

On my left rubble stops at the edge of a room. There is a row of pink fluffy slippers with cartoon faces, which I have to read as a poignant symbol, a clear and deliberate statement against the demolition of these homes. Deeper into the room, behind the slippers, I can see a woman's face, a reproduction of a painted portrait that has apparently come off the wall, landing askew. Apart from this still life the room is a concrete shell. This is a scene awaiting the photographer, an image stalking the lens. A media ready-made created by a village activist? A residents memorial to a former life? Or maybe a still life constructed by a previous photographer?

We are occupying a small rubble hillock with tripods and cameras. However critical we might wish it to be, the photographic process as it stands-making images to show others how things look when they look most like themselves, or alternatively most extraordinary-inevitably involves stalking moments.

On the steep mound of rubble above where the bald man crouches by the lake where he benefits from a consistent mobile phone signal, we are about to photograph an abandoned settee. At this moment a woman arrives, places straw beach mats over the settee and proceeds to lay her washing under the sun. We do not photograph her as she goes about her domestic chores in public. Not all photographs can, nor should be taken.

New Slide - lake man

JA

Today many theorists and practitioners are questioning photography's ability to make *'legible'* the key drivers of today's emergent terrains. Can photography visualize connections to the networks of power and capital that articulate the current political economy? What power does it have to unmask current realities?

New Slide Sequence-3 views between houses

Considering the issues of borders we can ask ourselves a range of questions about what do various photographic practices make visible.

What kind of border work does photography do in relation to internal borders and these development frontiers? Is it securing them? Is it masking them behind its smooth shiny surfaces, soothing them into non-existence? Is it simply documenting the prowess or the drama of fortifications? Witnessing the skirmishes, battles fought and lost? Injustices and resistance? Recording the developers territorial gains?

New Slide – Bricked up window

What kinds of borders do photographic practices actually produce? In the case of Xian village is the term frontier more appropriate? What do borders and frontiers look like? Can photographic practices or photographs themselves make distinctions between frontiers and borders?

Urbanist & Journalist blogs

Many people have visited and photographed Xian, urban academics, activists, urban explorers, looking for good shots for their portfolios.

A couple of observations from our research:

1) We see multiple iterations of the same or equivalent image/
spectacle is replicated across this work.

New Slide -blog 1 - blog 2

2) There is a flattening as a result of topographical realities- this flattening brings contrasting spaces into close proximity. As they *are* in the space. No long lenses are needed to force these things together, they clash like tectonic plates in a geological cataclysm.

New Slide blog, 2, 3 end chair in window

3) Contrasts between poverty and extreme wealth between rubble and aspirational glass and steel structures are evident from within the space, as much as they must be from the higher floors of the tower blocks. The photographs reiterate the visibility of uneven life.

4) We need to consider whether these images display a form of othering or neo-orientalism, that has its parallels in the Chinese governments othering, the vilification of these undeveloped villages and their migrant populations. The aesthetics of rubble is not harmonious. We have watched the rise of a megacity form of photography that presents in equal measure the nightmare and exhilaration of gigantism against which dwarfs the domestic architecture of villages and factory housing.

New Slide hording

Hoardings

Against these image making practices we see official forms of image making about the coming developments that will replace the village on the same site. These images are printed onto hoardings that wrap around the village boundary.

The clean sleek images of new skyscrapers on the developer's hoardings help legitimize capital investment strategies and validate claims for change. They work alongside a wider repertoire of cultural forms to commodify space and sell cities (Jones 2013). Such imagery

provides a modernizing 'future gaze' that works with place marketing. It is designed to both to attract mobile investment capital (Jansson & Lagerkvist 2009) and portray the change as embedded in 'socially resonant forms' (Jessop 2004). As a strategic representation communicating these changes such imagery mediates perceptions of urban entrepreneurialism to key publics.

They 'script' the emerging area, making legible the new projected spatial and social configurations (Gregory (1999). These visual formulas foreground certain new populations while erasing existing village neighbourhood in their engineered topographical imaginings. They stabilize the perception of the contested neighbourhood area and provide a clear teleology through the creation of a new 'urban imaginary' (Parker & Long 2004). These hoardings sell the everyday corporate utopias of housing development, whilst at the same time masking building work. Bounding vision and at the same time creating a textile border, which regulates access to the space within it.

New Slide – camera jane

JB

A Walk in Xiancun, April 2015 – Part 3

Alongside the soft, everyday signifiers provided by washing on lines, we note the more trenchant symbols: the red flags flying atop of buildings. Yan tells us that the red flags indicate the dwellings of residents determined to remain. Waiting for John at the side of the road, I am talking to Yan about these villagers who stay on, the ones presiding over coming nail houses. He says that some of them are trying to get the most money they can and not everyone has sympathy for that.

New Slide school

He asks me what I think, what do I really think about the situation? I tell him that I don't think it matters so much about individual motives. What if some people are motivated by money? It doesn't change the fact that as a whole this area has been decimated because of corporate interest. This is a global problem and it is always the poor who are forced to leave their homes and sometimes this is achieved through violence. Yan seems satisfied with this response and he tells me that a few years ago he witnessed a protest against the evictions, which lasted for several days, during which time many villagers were badly beaten by the police.

New Slide yan

Yan keeps looking at his phone. He is using a fluctuating GPS to navigate through the narrow streets. I imagine us, tiny figures waving to the unseeing eye of a satellite. Before long we find ourselves at the edge of the village. Leaving as the migrant workers are returning from their work on the East tower or one of the other high-rise buildings in the business district, to have lunch in the urban village. We pass a group of them in the elegant underpass, which opens into a wide circle of sky encircled by towers of offices, hotel and board rooms.

New Slide - women

JA

In conclusion in the new economic framing of the world there is a battle being fought and its battleground has since the late 1970s been the urban frontier. Today the real-estate market has become not only the 'centrepiece of most city's productive economy', it is also a key form of accumulation within the global economy (Smith 2002: 443).

In the case of Xiancun it is a territory surrounded, embattled, the border between it and the affluent business district drawn up tight to its door. In Xiancun everyday life is lived in this war zone. Here the

border is a clear manifestation of a process of capital accumulation and its spatialization.

In this framing working class districts, areas of former industrial production and well sited marginal territories like urban villages are all lucrative frontiers that sit upon 'enormous capital accumulation potential'. Photographic practices may replicate the othering of spaces like Xiancun, creating further borders and making spectacles out of complex contested spaces. We need to consider new practices that will open up a more critical interpretation of the realities of lived unevenness and the dynamics of its production.