

NORTH

Volume 2

Featuring

Abigail Moss-Coomes p.17 Becca Wood p.20
Charles Stanton p.24 David Lester p.26
Jason Rose p.30 Kirsty Burston p.32 Ryan Wagstaff p.34
Seing Ta p.36 Tom Rees p.38
Andrea Carroll p.44 Nicola Brophy p.46

With...

Jonathan Purcell p.04 Lauren Jo Kelly p.53
John van Aitken p.58
□ Kevin Crooks p.64

John van Aitken

Visit: xiancun urBan
Village in guangzhou

With the rapid pace of urbanization in China since the early 1990's, the boundaries of large cities have expanded to encompass 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 are persuaded to sell their agricultural lands, now prime real estate, to the municipal authorities for development projects. In return they receive compensation, are allowed to remain in urbanized enclaves and may be given permission to build or allocated new housing. The 800-year-old Xian village or Xiancun, which sits on the edge of Guangzhou's Tianhe district- an exclusive business zone and hub of the 2010 Asian Games- is typical of this situation. Many of the now landless Xiancun farmers took advantage of compensation schemes, built new houses or added levels to existing properties and started to earn a living by renting to migrant workers, in search of cheap accommodation. Xiancun has been at the centre of a dispute between villagers and corrupt officials who sold village lands illegally, a deal which was violently enforced by the police.

Yan arrives late, having been to the wrong underground exit. We are waiting at the top of exit C, having missed breakfast. The journalist is a little over 30, appears younger. He is pleasant, if slightly wary. This tour for foreign guests is performed out of duty and gratitude to Professor Zhang. Later when we have warmed more to each other, he jokes: "Professor Zhang owes me a meal for this!"

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. 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. The wall is all that remains of the security cordon around the village but the identity checks and the violence, ended with the conviction for corruption of village officials who struck up deals to sell the village land to developers, against the wishes

of the residents. Xiancun, whose origins go back 800 years, is in many ways typical of urban villages across China, at odds or in direct conflict with rapid urbanisation. Yan is old enough to remember the countryside that has now been consumed by the business district of Tianhe and metamorphosed into a forest of towers.

Yan 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, 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. 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 a lake that reflects only concrete; a child with the world's weight in her eyes. And so on. These tropes.

Before we reach the monk and the lake we pass shops and stalls, sacks of rice, a sewing machine awaiting a seamstress, a man stripping the plastic outer layer from electrical cord. The passageways between buildings contract, reduced to narrow channels of grey silt etched by a trickle of effluent, impassable on foot, trapping rubbish. The houses get closer to each other, they are called 'holding hands' houses, Dr Zhang tells us later, otherwise they are 'kissing houses'. We take a slight detour through the market. Once the villagers would have grown vegetables, kept livestock and fished in the Pearl River and all this produce would have been sold on the market. Now it has to be brought in from further afield, but still the market is busy. There are tables fringed with the kai lan or Chinese kale that we eat as often as we can get it, which is practically every mealtime. One table is covered with twists of dusty, greying organic matter set out to dry. None of us know what this is.

Now we are going further into the area of the village where the demolitions have taken place. I tell Yan I keep thinking

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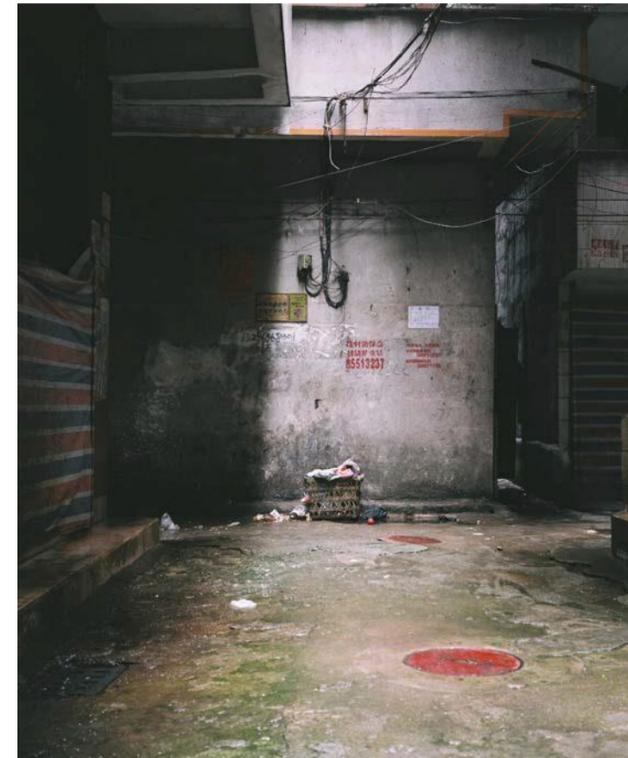


about a film I have seen of a group of volunteers looking for survivors in a devastated section of Gaza. Yan, wordless, takes in what I have said. The devastation in Xiancun, however, is wreaked by the slow violence of bulldozers not the violence of bombs. Under our feet is grey clay-demolition dust mixed with water. The ubiquitous stripey polypropylene tarpaulins line the passageway and shield from view some of the rubble-keeping the light out too. The sound of a scooter approaches us with incremental volume and clarity, ominous with the potential for collision. Liquid drips on metal, out of sight, somewhere above our heads. Ping, pang. Pang, pong. Pang, pong. The scooter passes, followed by a man carrying a sack over his shoulder. They both turn right. My camera follows them along the increasingly narrow path, just too late. a shaft of light falls between the buildings, illuminating grey tones of wall and floor.

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. 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. 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. 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 resident's memorial to a former life? or maybe a still life constructed by a previous photographer?

The height of the rubble, over 10 metres maybe, means that we are on the same level as 2nd or 3rd floor windows. Some of the window apertures are filled with precarious and attractive arrangements of stacked bricks, others are open, the window glass is long gone. Yan climbs into one of the flats, to see if we can access the higher floors. he returns, shaking his head. There is no staircase.





The most tangible evidence of the remaining population in the urban village is the washing hanging out to dry. how to dry the washing appears to be the perennial problem of everyday life in Guangzhou and the urban village is no exception. Since very few people have tumble driers here and most live in apartments they have to negotiate the problem of how to dry the washing. Balconies are festooned with clothes hanging from racks, 4 or 5 rows deep. high levels of humidity and lack of air flow in the balconies, building recesses, hallways and lobbies where washing hangs, means that the task of drying is endless and dominates the domestic landscape. In the urban village demolition has created new opportunities for drying clothes. Lines have been strung between empty flats across the mounds of rubble. Clothes hang along fences and in window cavities where sometimes a shirt hanging out to dry can be mistaken for a figure. The lines of coloured washing add personality to the endless grey-white of the concrete rubble and the remaining holding hands houses that replaced the traditional village homes.

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 man with the cropped hair sits by the lake, we are about to photograph an abandoned settee. at this moment a woman arrives, places straw beach mats over the settee and precedes 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.

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 future nail houses. he



says that some of them are trying to get the most money they can and not everyone has sympathy for that. 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.

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 around which the towers of offices, hotel and board rooms peek. Through the brown film of pollution, which covers the Google earth image, Xiancun is almost a perfect square edged by tree-lined roads. The flat roofs of the village look like an industrial zone. To the west of Xiancun is a pendant shaped area of parkland rimmed with towers, this is the "diamond necklace" of Landmark Plaza's, which culminates in the jewel of haixinsha Island, decked out for the 2010 asian Games. The somewhat more prosaic regus tower, which has offices to rent per day, leans towards the urban village, casting in its wake a shadow in the form of a lozenge. The Google earth satellite image, taken in 2015, clearly shows the demolition at the interior of the village. From the air the rubble mounds we scaled earlier look like a single rough-hewn track, carelessly scooped out from the dense housing. Viewed from the air the small lake fringed with washing lines is like a mouth open, aghast.

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