

Negotiating the Historical Narratives for the Redevelopment of Nantou

Xiaofan Liang

Minerva Schools at KGI

Walking into the Nantou urban village in Shenzhen, you will feel anachronistic: surrounded by skyscrapers and located at the heart of the city, Nantou miraculously preserves a small-town texture of life in the old days, manifested in the bustling street markets, sporadic ancestral halls, divine shrines, and historical heritages (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). This dislocation of time is a result of the double identity of Nantou as a special site: on the one hand, it is the Nantou old town, a capital city in the south since Dong Jin Dynasty 1600 years ago, while on the other hand, it is an “urban slum” for 30,000 people, most of whom are migrant workers in Shenzhen. However, very recently Nantou has to face an “identity crisis”: both the local government and the public have been debating about two tracks of its redevelopment. One of the options is to prioritize protecting historical heritages and thus remove all of the current population and completely reconstruct the Nantou old town area. The other option is to restrict the protection area to as minimal as possible and instead revitalize the existing community.

As a strong advocate for large-scale reconstruction, Nanshan district Sports and Tourism Bureau argues that most of the buildings within the Nantou old town areas were built illegally (Li and Wang 2014). These “handshake buildings”, a metaphor referring to how close these buildings are, have largely impacted the tourist experience and impeded efficient regulation and renovation. With only 30 years history of urban development, Nantou old town, with its 1600 years of history, can be the most significant source of culture for this rising international city. More importantly, Nantou old town was established to administer areas that cover Hong Kong and Shenzhen today and constructing a narrative around this history can greatly promote the integration of cultural identities among the two places. As a contrast, the Shenzhen Urban Planning Department proposed the revitalization option to the central government. They not only

believe that the cost to move the current population is huge but also insist that the exact reconstruction to attract tourism also take away the soul of this site that is grounded in everyday life (Li and Wang 2014).

The contention of the redevelopment debate is at the very end, a debate of the historical position and values of Nantou, which can be reduced into two inquiries. Firstly, what history should we preserve? The history of an old town heritage or the living memories of migrant workers? Secondly, who should have the power to construct such public history of Nantou and what function should it serves? Is it in the hand of governments to heightened nationalism and cultural integrations or the hand of people to create a new interpretation of history that is associated with their own identities?¹

My answer is both. Not just that both histories of Nantou worth preserving, but I argue that this process of negotiating seemingly contradictory narratives is exactly what makes Nantou historically intriguing². The very struggle that we have been through to disentangle the two opposing narratives about Nantou is also the soil to nurture and challenge our historical consciousness. Nantou old town and Nantou urban village exemplify the contrast of public transcript and hidden transcript of local history. Nantou old town museum centers the discourse of Nantou old town on why the “capital” was established and how its boundaries and functions have changed over time, accompanied by precise figures (Zhou 2007). Its history is presented as planned, linear, and objective. On the contrary, the history of the urban village is more organic,

¹ #historyandpower: identify how the tourism department wants to construct historical narrative that promotes nationalism and value the cultural past of the powerful, while the public and urban planners want to value the past of migrant workers. Reveal the power dynamics behind both sides of arguments.

² #historicalarguments: Construct historical argument that the process of negotiation makes a place more historically interesting by comparing and contrasting the values of both sides. This is backed by evidences from Nantou old town museums, history of urban villages, popularity of the exhibition and the failure of Phoenix Ancient town.

entangled, and personal. In 1951, the Chinese government started to separate urban and rural citizenship based on home locations, with the fear that massive population influx to the city would form slums and cause social disorders (Long, 2014). People who were granted rural citizenship were incentivized to stay at villages through the right to own land. Villagers have populated the Nantou old town ever since its administrative function was moved elsewhere in 1953. ("新安县志 (Ethnography Document For Nantou Old Town)", n.d.). When the urbanization frontier sprawled to Nantou village, most of the villagers abandoned farming and competed for building on their tracts of land beyond legal limits. Due to the low development cost, these buildings become popular in the rental market, providing cheap housing for the spiking increase of migrants in Shenzhen in the past decades. The entanglement of interests and the presence of historical sites within Nantou village shielded it from lucrative real estate redevelopment. Even today, the census data in Nantou urban village is notoriously hard to track because most who live there are temporary tenants.

The paring of two sites prevents us from over-romanticizing the past that is alienated from our everyday life and shows how history can grow into each other. More than that, with some revitalization efforts, we can effectively change people's conventional stigma of "urban slums". To many, the physical and social memories of living in urban villages were crystallized in the narrow and crowded spaces, the tastes of the street food, and the bustling markets, which makes Nantou urban village an live emblem of their past. Yan Meng's urban village exhibition is a successful example at recognizing these memories and makes them available again to be woven into a contemporary Shenzhen identity³. Over 550,000 people have come to the exhibition

³ #historicalmemories: This is one of the many pieces in the essay that hinges on the discussion of whose past and whose memories should be preserved, how people's memories were crystallized through both physical space and

lasting for three months, including many of those that do not often engage with cultural activities (see Figure 3) (Meng, Lin and Rao 2018). Different from traditional exhibition where the audience has little power to engage with the content, Nantou exhibition not only curates a thematic display of works from all kinds of professions but also hosts numerous workshops and art collections that were co-created by designers, urban planners, government officials, as well as local residents (Fenghuang Wenhua 2015)⁴. As a contrast, the redevelopment of Phoenix Ancient Town in Hunan, which had focused on only the protection of the physical site, had failed to even attract tourists. It was rated 2 out of 5 on TripAdvisor as many complain that the site is too commercial and artificial. The price of housing and food skyrocketed and gradually tainted the primitive lifestyle. Residents are also concerned about the younger generation growing up in such an environment will be alienated from their cultural and ethnic identity ("Phoenix Ancient Town Tourists Drop 15%" 2015)⁵.

Maybe instead of constructing a history around Nantou Old Town for 1600 years, we can establish a museum to compare and contrast the history from both sites, especially when Nantou urban village is still the best living proof for people to experience when the past and presence converge. In the end, a public history that is crafted and designed top-down may be delicate, but

social dynamics and how revitalization may change people's contemporary memories and perception of urban villages (urban slums).

⁴ #historyandidentity: illustrate why contrasting both Nantou urban village and old town heritage can provide a better framework for people, together with the exact process of debate, to construct their identity with the city as they can be personally associated with the public history and had actively participated in its construction.

⁵ #historicalgenres: compare the success of Meng's exhibition and his narrative strategy to engage with the local audiences into co-creation with the failure of Phoenix Ancient town redevelopment in which government takes the control and creates unbalance between protection of historical past and the people maintaining the past.

⁶ #audience: my audience targets Chinese people, so I did not go very in-depth with explaining the term urban village (because people have common sense of what it means) and also uses examples in China that people have more resonance with. Also sources I cited and found are also mostly in Chinese.

it is exactly those disorders and struggles that people experience through the process of negotiation that allows fractals of identities to intertwine and grow.⁷



Figure 1: Bird-eye view of Nantou Urban Village (URBANUS都市实践, 2018)

⁷ #publichistory: this entire essay analyzes Nantou as a physical site of public history, what is the contention embedded and, and how to resolve it.



Figure 2: The historical front gate of Nantou old town as well as Nantou urban village (Li and Wang 2014).



Figure 3: A poster from Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture exhibition (the Urban Village Exhibition) showing how local kids in the urban village interacting with it (Fenghuang Wenhua 2015).

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