



Border at the Centre of Myth

Fishing Village, Caiwuwei, Shenzhen

Photo montage of Caiwuwei Village.
PC: Caiwuwei research team for the 2013 Hong Kong Biennale, Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism / Architecture, Curator Na FU.

Na FU

Walking alongside the Shenzhen River, overlooking the distinct difference between the two sides of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, one enters a space formed and captured by photography, maps, and monuments: Fishing Village (渔民村) in Caiwuwei, Luohu district. In fact, this is the famous ‘fishing village’ that Deng Xiaoping visited during his 1984 inspection tour of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which became the material basis for the city’s founding myth. However, in contrast to the fixed certainties

of the Fishing Village myth, nothing could be livelier than listening to the stories told by the villagers who have experienced the changes wrought by the border. Here, their families were torn apart, their land restructured, and their community reformed by newcomers. The story of Shenzhen’s success is only part of the villagers’ memories, because their natural bonds were originally aligned through kinship networks with other villages on both sides of the Shenzhen River, where connections were made through marriage, market exchanges,

local language, and farming. The border has changed the social and economic dynamics on both sides of the river, and imposed a political ideology that has transformed the space and its people. This is the story of Fishing Village's successes as it became a 'model' for inclusive growth. This is also a story about how villagers became millionaires through land development, while also taking on urban citizenship. More importantly, this is the myth about the Shenzhen miracle, where urban development has informed new identities.

Any villager can tell you how they formally and informally navigate the border, even as the meaning and political interests of the border have also transformed across time and space. They have lived on the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border by crossing and reimagining implicit and explicit boundaries between the two cities, as well as those between the village and the city proper. These borders are simultaneously material and imaginary, where different regimes of order are represented through degrees of visibility—the China–Hong Kong border, for example, is an actual fence with barbed wire, while the demarcation between the village and the city can only be discerned through local knowledge about architectural styles and familiarity.

In this essay, I examine representations of the physical border in relation to social interactions with the border itself to generate discussion about the formation of identity and its instabilities. As a material border, a 'thick' wall separates Fishing Village from the Frontier Closed Area of the Hong Kong New Territories. Yet as an imaginary border, a 'thinner' invisible border divides village and city structures, distinguishing those within Fishing Village and those without. This essay recounts three stories from the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, illustrating how differently situated bodies navigate the physical border, this iconic urban village, and the urban spaces between and beyond. I tell my story as an ethnographer peeking through the fence at the border of Fishing Village; the story of Mr Cheng, a shoe repairman, who works on the

invisible red line moving in and around the urban village and city proper; and the story of Mrs Wang, a Hong Kong aunty, who lives in Caiwuwei and crosses the border at Luohu every day. This allows me to track the visible, invisible, and often overlooked boundaries that structure everyday life between the cities.

The Border

Fishing Village is located on the northern banks of the Shenzhen River, where the villagers used to be fishermen on both the river and the tidal sea. It is a recent settlement and part of Caiwuwei Village—a large village comprising several hamlets—which became home to resettled fishing families in the early 1950s (see Du's essay in this forum). Today, Fishing and Caiwuwei villages are both considered 'urban villages' (城中村).

The location of Fishing Village was specifically chosen to connect with the Shenzhen River, the land on the other side of the river, and Shenzhen Bay, into which the river discharges before entering the Pearl River. Interestingly, there are hardly any walls on either bank, with the Shenzhen River serving as a natural border, which extends over vast untouched green space on the Hong Kong side. As such, the landscape itself manifests the separation of the cities. From the Hong Kong side, one has views of Shenzhen's high-rise cityscape, while from the Shenzhen side, the green fields and rolling hills of the Hong Kong Frontier Closed Area are breathtaking. This separation is recent and not absolute. Historically, Luohu and Futian districts in Shenzhen and the Hong Kong New Territories had a unified cultural geography. And even though the Sino-British border was drawn in 1898, it was not until the Cold War that different forms of segregation began to shape the physical border, separating Bao'an County (China) and the Hong Kong New Territories (United Kingdom). Locals, however, still remember serial flights across the border between the 1950s and the 1970s

(Ku 2004; Warner et al. 2005), when villagers swam across the Shenzhen River from Bao'an to Hong Kong in search of an escape from communism and relative poverty, dreaming of economic opportunities in the Crown Colony—a situation that came to be known as the 'Great Escape' (大逃港), with the Shenzhen River taking on a form of symbolism akin to a 'Chinese Berlin Wall'.

In terms of the geography of the period of Reform and Opening Up, Fishing Village is located near the historical Shenzhen Market and just behind the Bao'an County seat of government. During the early 1980s, as business and cross-border trade developed in Luohu and manufacturing developed in Nanshan, the banks of the Shenzhen River became a key connection between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, with export checkpoints set up at Wenjindu and Huanggang. Located on the banks of the Shenzhen River, villagers in Fishing Village suddenly had new opportunities. They smuggled in umbrellas, televisions, and even cars from Hong Kong to sell in the SEZ's booming markets, quickly accumulating capital that could be invested in the construction of a new village. In 1984, Deng Xiaoping visited New Fishing Village (渔民新村), which comprised 32 independent 'rural' homes in the middle of downtown Shenzhen. In addition to their houses, villagers showed off consumer luxury items that were not available even to ranking cadres in Beijing. Fishing Village was not only rich, but also its built environment and modern amenities made it an aspirational model for the rest of the country. This visit was publicised throughout China, making Fishing Village famous as the origin of Shenzhen's miraculous modernisation story.

On entering Fishing Village, it is possible to walk along a section of the physical barrier that separates Shenzhen and Hong Kong. This wall is short—only a couple of hundred metres long—and features a bas-relief series of images that recount the village's history. The storyboard provides a full account of Deng's 1984 inspection tour, when the village became a national economic model for successful

rural development. There are small openings between the bas-reliefs with steel bars; rather than acting as barriers, these spaces seemingly invite you to view what is on the other side.

Looking towards Hong Kong, there is an endless stretch of green. Where the openings between the walls are high, you can jump and catch a glimpse of the river. As you follow the storyboard along residential gates and factory walls, weaving between the walls, the other side seems distant and unreachable. Looking at a map of Fishing Village, it is clear that though the storyboard wall is not actually on the banks of the Shenzhen River, it is intimately connected to the border walls. Here, the feeling of segregation between the two cities is profound, and the small cracks feel not only like an invitation to look through, but also an imperative that the cities remain sundered.

Star-Crossed Borders

Aged in her late fifties, Mrs Wang always has a heart-warming smile when you see her. Since the 1980s, she has lived in Caiwuwei Village. At first, she lived in a three-storey residential building; then, after 1999, when the village demolished these small buildings and erected seven-storey tenements, she rented a two-bedroom apartment for herself. Since arriving in Shenzhen, she felt that her destiny lay with Hong Kong, where many of her friends live and, in fact, where she now holds a Hong Kong identity card. Early every morning, Mrs Wang spends an hour and half travelling to Hong Kong, where she works in a metro station. She takes the metro to the border at Luohu, passing two checkpoints and traversing a 50-metre-long indoor bridge over the Shenzhen River. On the other side of the border, she continues for another three metro stations. Every night, she returns home late to sleep. Her journey is part of her quotidian rhythm—a life composed of repetitive border crossings. How do we define her? Is she a Hong Konger, a mainlander, or a dual-citizenship holder?

Like Fishing Village, Caiwuwei has been shaped in and through the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border. When talking with Caiwuwei villagers, it becomes clear that almost half of the village’s population has already migrated to Hong Kong, either via the Great Escape before the 1970s or as social or economic migrants after Reform and Opening Up. Mrs Wang’s story provides deeper insight into the ways the border creates a life as a permanent migrant—one’s identity suspended between borders. To tell her story is not to disregard or downplay the difference between regions. Rather, it raises questions of how we understand and imagine the border, instead of an obsessive focus on what lies on either side. We have already seen that the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border simultaneously integrates and separates the two cities. On the ground, this means that the border functions to the extent that it cultivates the idea—but not the practice—of separation.

Living Off the Border

Fishing Village and Caiwuwei are two of more than 300 urban villages in Shenzhen. Like the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, the boundaries between an urban village and the city proper are imagined as absolute, but in fact they create spaces for tactical appropriation and unexpected livelihoods. Consider, for example, the story of Mr Cheng. In his home village, Mr Cheng was a bicycle repairman, gaining skills that smoothed his transition to Shenzhen, where he has worked as a shoe repairman since the 1990s. Mr Cheng does not have a store and lives in a shared dormitory-style apartment in the urban village. He sets up shop under a tree on the pedestrian street in the same spot just outside Caiwuwei Village he has occupied for more than twenty years. Both city management workers and village security guards chase him away when he is within their jurisdiction. However, Mr Cheng—like other vendors—knows that this pedestrian space is safer for unsanctioned vending because it is on the

border. City management workers and village security guards avoid each other as a matter of practice; following an unspoken rule, neither city workers nor village guards will pursue vendors outside their own jurisdiction. Hence, Mr Cheng is safe on this spot, and all his clients know where to find him. Even with an illegal and ‘temporary’ shop, he always returns to the same location. He relies on this thin margin to support himself and provide a livelihood for his family back in his home village. Mr Cheng has never considered moving. During the urban renewal of Caiwuwei Village, he worked next to the construction site because his clients knew where to find him. Like other vendors, Mr Cheng’s livelihood depends on this border. As a group, they navigate among different spaces to find the right one, on the invisible border or beyond.

In Mr Cheng’s story, we see how boundaries not only perpetuate differences, but also are strategies for governing. On the Shenzhen control map, the border between the village and the city proper is an unequivocal red line, suggesting absolute separation between two systems. On the ground, however, the boundary is not obvious. Sometimes it is located at the back wall of a factory, sometimes along a fence of a residential community, but most commonly, the boundary is a pedestrian street, which also allows people to walk around the village as if the border was not there. In fact, it was only after 2004, coinciding with a period when the government started to reimagine urban villages, that these villages appeared on Shenzhen planning maps. This meant that, for the first 25 years of Reform and Opening Up, townships and villages rebuilt and expanded independently of city government supervision. Today, villages still coordinate security, fire stations, and property management offices within a prescribed neighbourhood—informally defined as an ‘urban village’, as this is all that remains of historical villages. Like the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, the red line has turned into an absent presence that one brushes up against without noticing, becoming visible in specific contexts, but vanishing as

people cross between the village and the city proper every day without noticing they have left one administrative territory and entered another.

The Myth of Separation

Mr Cheng's shoe repair stand navigates between different qualities of space, finding its boundary in the fragile points of entry to his informal business. Similarly, Mrs Wang's transregional daily activity may not directly challenge the political border. However, her movement—like that of others who cross the border to study, shop, visit family, and work—does generate social norms that in turn transform political discussions. Border villagers remind us that they are connected with Hong Kong through shared surnames and via the local Weitou dialect, and that they are also connected to the rest of the world as a result of international migration. This means that, as political borders have been created and reinvented through time and place, they inevitably change (Lahav 2004). The border's material form can be seen in the physical manifestation of a concrete wall or in the less concrete competition between architectural styles. The point is that these borders are neither built overnight nor permanent fixtures of the landscape. Rather, even if the border exists to segregate different ideologies, religions, and political subjectivities, it is still mediated by the invisible 'wall' of identity, which is formed through situated practices (Bach 2015). ■

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