

Fragments from Shiqi

# BIOGRAPHY

從石岐市來的分段  
傳記 陳家寶



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Steffi Garbo Chan

In collaboration with Yves Pedrazzini  
Dieter Dietz  
Raffael Baur

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FRAGMENTS FROM SHIQI

記  
傳

biography  
Garbo Chan

*Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.  
“But which is the stone that supports the bridge?” Kublai  
Khan asks.  
“The bridge is not supported by one stone or another,”  
Marco answers, “but by the line of the arch that they form.”  
Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds;  
“Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch  
that matters to me.”  
Polo answers: “Without stones there is no arch.”*

From Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, 2013.

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## PREFACE

Shiqi exists within a frame of a larger picture - a picture in which things have changed very quickly. During the last 50 years, the People's Republic of China has grown, developed and changed on many radical levels. Zhongshan, the city that Shiqi has now become, has gone from a village in a world in war, to a county under strong communism, to a strong economic fort for the capitalist growth of today's China. From an illegal ownership, even of your own house and agricultural land, China has exploded with new interests in privatisation through big real estate projects and the stimulation of an

economic system for a pure purpose of further economic benefit. A chronologically told story of biographical pieces about Shiqi has of interest to underline some remaining fragments of the city – as metaphors of lost ideologies of a once unified community, or as shadows left from past eras. With an urban metamorphosis as Shiqi is; what consequences does this bring to the space experienced? What influences have led to its present state of segregation and could it, or is there a need to construct differently?

The stories collected in this biography describe the development of still existent spaces of the central Shiqi sub-district that show a city in disruption. The neighbourhood of Shiqi (石岐, also the name of the indigenous inhabitants of the city), as Zhongshan, is a part of the Pearl River Delta in the south of China. Although it is the main historic centre of the city, the Shiqi district is not treated differently than any other fragment of historical trace. In a city having grown 20 times its size within the last 50 years<sup>1</sup>, the image of a future has for Zhongshan exploded outwards, continuously crossing its containing borders, resembling a hyper-reality of the modernist urban vision of a continuous, infinite tissue of mechanic growth. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Huiyu Liu: Based on interview with the associate Dean of the Urban Planning and Design Institute of Zhongshan

shadow of its neighbouring skyscrapers, the ancient centre of Shiqi, today a sub-district of the city, is caught between a neoliberalist problem of insufficient space for economic benefit, and the social dilemma of dysfunctional spaces for a modern lifestyle. What was once the key street network for a society has been transfigured into an isolated, malfunctioning enclave with only outdated values in the centre of a city that is no longer the same.

The main aim here is first to work against past trends of development whilst searching for concepts or means of identity enabling a clearer necessity of the area for all Zhongshan's local inhabitants. Ideas and concepts gathered and analysed are mainly based on two types of information: firstly, interviews and conversations with locals of different backgrounds of the city of Zhongshan, and secondly contemporary articles discussing the theme of rapid development within China from a broader current perspective. Sharing the vision of Henri Lefebvre, space is seen "*at once as result and cause, product and producer*". Space is hence a "*non-neutral container playing an important role in shaping the social processes*", in terms of the space described, the space observed and the space experienced <sup>2</sup>. It is hence of high

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<sup>2</sup> Hal Foster: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Bay Press, 1983). pp. 269-270

interest to take a step back from notions of “classical urbanism”, as Kenneth Frampton describes it “*a field that since the last quarter of a century has seen the so-called field of urban design degenerate into a theoretical subject whose discourse bears little relation to the processual realities of modern development*”<sup>3</sup>. The journey – my fieldtrip as well as the stories told – searches to identify the more discreet, intricate or fragile normalities and habits within the daily public space, This in itself, is believed to reveal or clarify an already existing essence of the Shiqi neighbourhood. Similarly to Georges Perec’s work in *L’infra-ordinaire*, the space will find its character through the same notions of “*banality, of the ordinary, through the spaces lived without being thought of*”<sup>4</sup>.

The biography of Shiqi is based on the major backbone space of the old Shiqi district. Strolling through and around four streets with different destinies, the gradual developments of the city and its surroundings tries to tell a surreal history similar to that of the present inhabitants of Zhongshan and the Shiqi neighbourhood. The stories told are therefore NOT TRUE. They are based on important historic events and noteworthy

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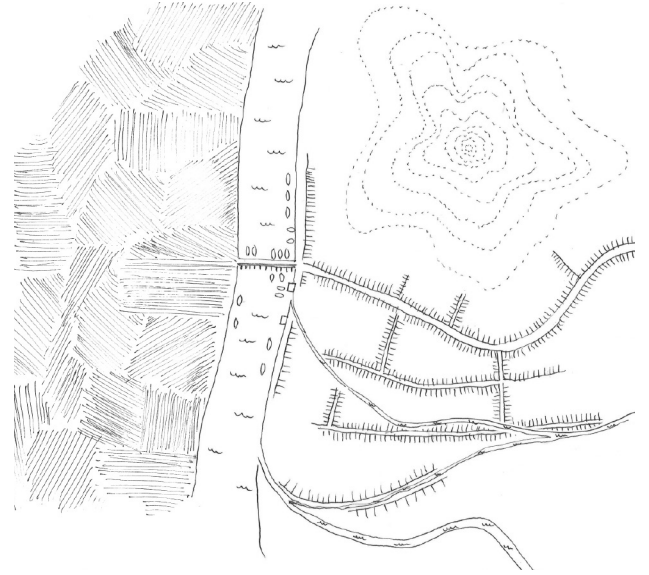
<sup>3</sup> K. Frampton: ‘Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance’, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* ed. by Hal Foster (New York: New Press), pp. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Perec: *L’infra-ordinaire* La librairie du XXe siècle (Paris: Seuil, 2011), pp. 11.

personally gathered information from different local sources from the fieldtrip. It is a simplification and an exaggeration of the real context for some clarification within its complexity. Along the chronologically arranged narrative, histories are decomposed to allow re-composition, interpretation and reinterpretation. The story is FRAGMENTED; it liberates the imagination into what is sometimes described as facts but could be read differently. It is a tool for concentrating the work on certain problematics rather than going for the impossible mission of solving everything. Thereafter, the purpose is not necessarily to get down to one clear architectonic answer; it is the questioning and opening for reinterpretation of the existing space, that may also lead to different suggestions of spatial solutions.

## CHAPTER I.

1912 - 1939



September 13, Renzi, year of Rat

(22<sup>nd</sup> of October, 1912)

Taian passageway

Shiqi

*Street*

As the sun rises, a man walks down the Taian passageway, whistling part of a familiar melody. He wears bright blue working trousers and a long sleeved shirt. This is clearly one of the workers on the many

constructions sites that have started on the street.

As he strolls down, he passes the partly finished housing structures in grey brick with their white mortar shining clean in the morning light. Piles of wooden beams and ceramic or stone tiles stand in ordered piles, ready to form a neat sloping roof. Once in a while, a stonemason has left his started work of elegant stone ornaments on the ground. He can hear sounds of the family house next to his construction site slowly waking up, and a small fire being lit for the daily water kettle for tea.

On the opposite side of the street, a woman opens the wooden blinds of their single-storey house. The man nods good morning with a smile. In front of the house runs a small stream; he sinks his hands into the fresh water and runs the water over his face, wiping it with a shirt sleeve. He looks up onto the still empty construction site where he is supposed to start his work, decides that it is still early, and continues down the street for a walk towards the big river. Following the man as he walks away, his figure slowly disappears toward the green field in the west.

Shiqi is growing.



February 12, Guichou, year of Ox  
(19<sup>th</sup> of March, 1913)

Taian passageway

Shiqi

*Public room and Neighbours*

You can hear the gentle breeze in the trees behind the houses. A moment of calm after the rush-hour of kids running from house to house for their share of food. It's like a game of eating or sharing. It gives a nice excuse for talking with the neighbours on the street.<sup>5</sup>

The woman living in the new household at house no 13 has found a comfortable place of retreat in the shadow of the house's ornamented roof. She has brought her wooden stool. She had brought the tea tray outside today, to have tea together with the workers of the house next doors, belonging to her husband's brother. Drinking tea on the street seems almost nicer than in the house. Almost like a passive morning walk to the market – everyone stops for a chat. Taian passageway is the neighbours second living room, better than the common space in the shops or in the house. Here, everyone is welcome. There is something different in sharing of a space with many people. Maybe it becomes like this just when you start to know all your neighbours. It is somehow reassuring.

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<sup>5</sup> Xiangyang Xiao. Based on interview with Property developer, 2017.

August 7, Guichou, year of Ox  
(7<sup>th</sup> of September, 1913)

Taian passageway

Shiqi

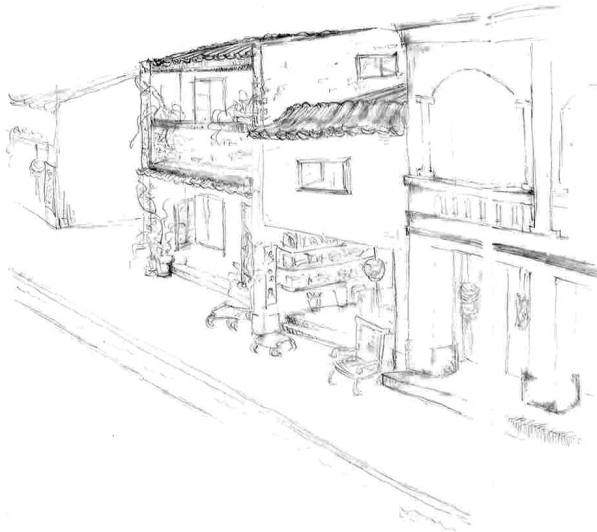
*Home*

Plants have been replanted on the balcony of house no 13. The green fits nicely between the painted ornaments of the wooden interior and the white and grey of the brickwork.

The frontal main façade of the house, facing the street, is richly ornamented. The entrance is an important element. It is the face communicating with the street and the neighbours. A local stone, shaped as symbols of air or win, holds the horizontal planes of the first floor and the roof of the house. The front façade is an important element. This was of clear importance according to the foreign merchants. It is the window of your character.

An architecture friend helps to finish the design. It is an interesting character, the architect. From time to time he tells stories from his long journeys in Europe, in particular about a city he calls Venice. It was a fascinating place, a kind of compact extreme of Shiqi, he said, a river city. A river city with its houses on wooden poles, with stone columns and floating capitals holding the floors. Balconies face towards the courtyards with magnificent paintings on their wooden interiors. We will build a

house like this for your father, he said proudly, almost as if the impressions he had brought from his adventures were ideas of his own.



Inside, everything is held by wooden logs and boards, as in most of the houses of its type in the neighbourhood. The entrance door is also in wood. Its outer pair of doors are ornamented on the upper level, as a peephole from the inside, and a screen from the outside. On the inner side there is a grid of horizontal sticks, all painted in red, as a second screen of transparency.

On the ground floor there is also a well, for drinking water.

August 5, Dingsi, year of Snake  
(20<sup>th</sup> of September, 1917)

Sunwen road

Shiqi

*Street life*

During evenings in such a perfect temperature like this, everyone goes to Sunwen road. We call it our “Little Hong Kong”, because if there is anything you need, you will find it here. There is the town hall, the post office, a bank, food markets during the day, and all kinds of shops possible. The houses resemble more those in Guangzhou rather than those of Xiangshan – or Zhongshan, as the city has started to be called; they are slightly higher, slightly larger, slightly more luxurious. The street is also slightly wider.

Many come here just for the crowd, to eat or drink together with friends or just for a walk. Many pass by with their bicycles, with or without a wagon full of products from the fields. Some bicycles are parked between the massive stone pillars, where no one has filled the space with green plantations. For the pedestrians, the arcades in front of the shops serve as shade or extra table space for the restaurants. The shop openings on the ground floor all the way down the street seem to pour their interiors out on the exterior, as if the façade line of their little shops never existed except for during closing hours. There is trade, there is bargaining, spontaneous

loud discussions with the neighbours, people passing in all directions <sup>6</sup>. Sunwen road lives like a miniature city in the countryside village.

April 25, Wuwu, year of Horse

(3<sup>rd</sup> of June, 1918)

Shiqi riverbank

Xiangshan county

*Foreign influences*

Sound of pouring water. Sometimes the humming of a bird, before it passes to a field too far away to be heard. The atmosphere at the riverbank defines the calmness of the hot summer day. A boat passes by from time to time. They are neatly completed figures of elegantly slim bodies, all in wood. Most of them are driven by oars, thrown over the sides on the bigger boats, and fitted in the back for the smaller ones. Some also soar past with their feather-like sails in a pale red or white, as if they could tell the wind where they wanted to go. In the whole region, there is only one bridge for crossing the river. It is called the Qijiang bridge and is completely made out of wood. The bridge has just the right height for the boats to pass under it.

Xiangshan, the river city. If there hadn't been the

Pearl river, there would probably not have been any Xiangshan. The Shiqi river is our world connector; it takes you anywhere you want to go. To Shun-de, to Guangzhou, to Macau, even to Hong Kong. Xiangshan is lucky to live in the calmness of the outskirts of the wars and complicated world relations. Here, everything is well enough with a simple life of working in the fields, having food on the table every evening, and an afternoon siesta on this stone wall is very well enough.



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<sup>6</sup> General Office of Zhongshan Municipal Government 'Historical and Cultural Districts' <[http://www.zs.gov.cn/english/topics\\_e/2-1-4.htm](http://www.zs.gov.cn/english/topics_e/2-1-4.htm)> [accessed 27 December 2017].



September 4, Yichou, year of Ox  
(21st October, 1925)

Xiangshan/Zhongshan county

*Politics*

Xiangshan [香山], literally meaning the perfumed hill, will from now on be called differently. With its pagoda on the very top, as a protector of the village below. Its intense red colour and ornamented wood details shines majestically all the way down to the village in the afternoon sun. Today, almost everyone has stayed at home instead of going to work in their fields on the other side of the river. They say there is something in the air, something fresh, as a breeze of hope. Something to attend, to celebrate.

The rumour goes that the Qing emperor is finally defeated and that Xiangshan will go back to its good times of harmony. I don't know how to imagine what that means. The emperors of Qing have ruled in China for over 300 years. They say a new leader will come to the frontline, a man having travelled in the Western countries, in America and in Europe. His name is Sun Zhongshan.

From now on, this hometown will be called Zhongshan. As if politicians were more important than the surrounding environment.

July 29, Bingyin, year of Tiger

(5<sup>th</sup> of September, 1926)

Shiqi riverbank

Zhongshan countryside

*Foreign influences and Economy*

Most of the people around the riverbank that are not working in the fields nearby are merchants. It is funny to listen to them, because they speak so many dialects. Sometimes it is impossible to distinguish what they are talking about. Sometimes they speak foreign languages – English, Portuguese, or French. Most of them are men, in tidy navy blue costumes with golden buttons. The women are very elegant too, in their pale, shortcut hair. Not many foreigners pass by Zhongshan though, and even fewer by the Shiqi centre. They usually just continue directly up north to Guangzhou. But trading relations with the West are growing quickly, and rumours say that soon there will be at least one foreign ship passing by the harbour a day.

It is just past noon. The fishermen have now started to return to their little wooden houses at the bank, to prepare the catch of the day for the afternoon market. Some often sell their fresh delicacies directly from their boats, parked towards the recently built Qijiang bridge, in level with the beginning of the Sunwen road. They say this is a trend from the fishing villages in Hong Kong. It makes quite a scene, people yelling out what

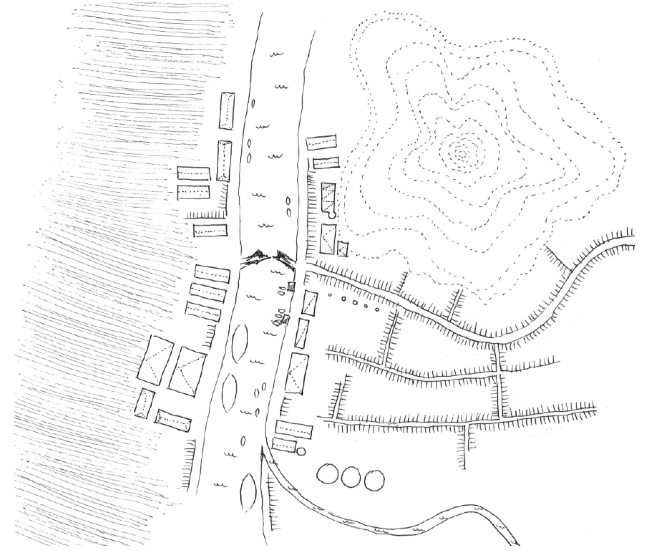
they want, all pointing in different directions. The buyers hang against the railing of the wooden bridge, whilst the boats gently rock up and down, to and fro against the poles holding up the horizontal structure. Along the riverside, just behind the small cottages of the fishermen there are also rows of open shops, a lower version due to their single heights, in comparison to Sunwen road or Taian street. There is a distinct smell of fresh seafood and sea water mixed with the smell of earth in the air. Here, many of the bigger fishermen and farming families once started to build themselves simple single-floored brickwork structures to sell their fresh catch or harvest of the day, and today the bank is filled up with different shops selling seafood, vegetables and grains from local waters and fields. Even though most of the basic brick structures are the same, there are many different families keeping the shops, making each shop different from one another.

Shiqi is a continuous patchwork of different living moments.



## CHAPTER II.

1949 - 1976



1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1949

(August 10, Jichou, year of Ox)

Zhongshan

*Politics*

An announcement has finally been made in the daily news today. The CPC, Communist Party of China is taking over the governance of the new People's Republic of China. We are to await a society of equality, where all men have the equal rights to all things. We will live in

a country where no man is higher paid than any other, where we all work together for the big collective, for the better good of the whole of the social community<sup>7</sup>.



### **The people's communes are good**

*A poster for schools shows the ideal people's commune, with a rich harvest, backyard furnaces, communal facilities for eating and washing, a centre for the elderly and the people's militia<sup>8</sup>.*

<sup>7</sup> 'Rui Guangting - The People's Communes Are Good' <<https://chineseposters.net/gallery/g1-959.php>> [accessed 27 December 2017].

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*.

15<sup>th</sup> of April, 1954  
(March 13, Jiawu, year of Horse)

Riverbank  
Zhongshan county  
*Politics*

Since a few weeks back, the inhabitants of the Zhongshan county have gotten up even earlier than before to get to their work in the fields. Ever since the announcement of the new land reform, the government has taken in all agricultural fields.

The people work like horses.

The changes happened so quickly. A disagreement with the daily soldiers passing by, and blood traces on the ground for at least a week afterwards. The message was very simple: Never disagree with the governing Communist party and the Liberation Army.

So many of them were never seen again afterwards.

The expansion of the fields is so vast that it is no longer possible to see the other end of them. When the CPC took over the governance, they were also very quick in making everyone understand that the soil on which they ploughed, on which they walked and slept, could not properly belong to any of them without

belonging to them all.

The land of China  
is the ownership by the community.

Community for all of us, is a space to share.

The Communist party is sharing.

And the labouring never ends. Day and night, there are people working. Thereafter, the harvest never stays in Zhongshan; everything leaves from here on trucks or by boat towards bigger cities, or even other countries even further away. The selling taxes rise for each month. *The work to justice among all men needs some sacrifice*, one of the soldiers once said curtly. It could be asked what justice he meant, if it was a true or imagined one. <sup>9</sup>

20<sup>th</sup> of January, 1958  
(December 1, Dingyou, year of Rooster)  
Sunwen road  
Zhongshan county  
*Utopia*

A five-year-plan has been established as a new major development project under leader Mao. They call it

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<sup>9</sup> F. Dikotter 'Mao Zedong and the Chinese Countryside' in *Homecoming* (Riga: Gestalten, 2013)

大跃进 (dayuejin), the Great Leap Forward. As if literally, we are preparing for running past the enemy. More modern, more efficient, more powerful.



8<sup>th</sup> of July, 1958  
(May 22, Wuxu, year of Dog)  
Riverbank  
Zhongshan county  
*Economy*

Black. The smog from the metal fires rise high in the air.

The central Shiqi neighbourhood's outspreading city figure is about to be filled up with slim cylindrical elements of red brick. Once they are raised, they never stop puffing out the dense smoke colouring the sky. There is a steel obsession rising in the entire city. It is becoming hard to tell if it an obsession due to the

people or to the pressure from above. Everywhere along the riverbank factories stand puffing their black smoke into the foggy sky. In the inhabitant's backyards there are furnaces burning even more of the wood torn down for the steel production <sup>10</sup>.

Even if we do, the factories never sleep. Once the production starts, it never stops. It is the beauty and the horror of the machinery; it never stops.

They must be the chimneys of the recent industries where many of the inhabitants have started to work lately. The industries have started to pop up in a regular pattern outside the centre. They are big boxy objects with high windows, too high up to peak in on the inside.

It has been months since anyone last saw a clear blue sky.

Things are changing.

7<sup>th</sup> of May, 1959  
(March 30, Jihai, year of Pig)  
Taian street  
Zhongshan county  
*Street life*

Today is market day. One ration of food is given out for each household, to share for the following five

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*.

days until the next market day. There is a collection of ration tickets in advance, and always the same nervous cautiousness for not losing those tiny pink paper stripes. All the more satisfactory to give those pink tickets away for the little bags of rice or vegetables, and sometimes a chicken.

Colourful tents, farmers shouting, order in the line; the market is able to change the street into a completely different atmosphere. its chaotic noise and the battling crowd in the narrow space, becomes an attraction, an awakener, with its multiple colours and chaotic, yelling crowd. It is an occasion letting the streets live again <sup>11</sup>.



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<sup>11</sup> *Xiao*.

20<sup>th</sup> of September, 1959  
(August 18, Jihai, year of Pig)  
Sunwen road  
Shiqi centre  
*Street life*

Sunwen road bears the appearance of a ghost town. The shop openings on the ground floors have all been replaced by facades with openings. Some, the older ones, are rather properly closed off with brick tiles and painted, even though their doors are of the most primitive designs. Some are simply covered with planks with improvised door structures of different kinds, from wooden boards to curtains to old clothes pinned to the wall.

A group of old men sit in the protection of one of the porticos and play Chinese chess. The atmosphere is silent, pensive. This is a rare scene these days, in the never-ending routines of continuous labour in the industries, on the fields, in the households or on the street. The only thing able to break its sleepwalk is to enter the collective canteen. At noon, it is always crowded, and the food is not expensive.

Everyone sits in one long space crossing through the entire building. It fits exactly two narrow tables in width, and they squeak as much as the chairs under the moving crowd. The kids run around, filling their bowls

little by little when passing the tables of the canteen.



公社食堂强 饭菜做得香 吃着心如意  
生产志气扬

*The commune's canteen is powerful, the dishes are deliciously made. You eat like you wish, production ambitions are rising*<sup>12</sup>.

The conversations are screamed across the long tables. Those are cheerful moments, allowing to find peace in

<sup>12</sup> Whenfa Zhao, 'Zhao Wenfa - The Commune's Canteen Is Powerful ...', 1959 <<https://chineseposters.net/gallery/e16-204.php>> [accessed 4 January 2018].

the simplest of things; a meal, friends, reassurance under a protecting roof.

These are the winding pillars on which Zhongshan is still standing<sup>13</sup>.

19<sup>th</sup> of February, 1960  
(January 23, Gengzi, year of Rat)  
Taian passageway  
Zhongshan county  
*Home*

A letter arrived from Hong Kong today. Grandmother read it out loud in the shared room. The children sat down on their shared bed to listen. It seems as if mother and father are doing well. They stay in a single room, rather similar to the space of their little apartment at house no 13, with shared kitchen and toilets. As a kind of Taian passageway, but bigger, and vertical.

Grandmother says that it might even be possible to go visit them one day. Father promised in the letter that he would come home to visit soon, without specifying a date. There was a strange smile on grandmother's face when she read the sentence, as if there were many feelings at the same time. A sort of melancholy, maybe. I cannot be easy to not know when is the next time you will see your son again.

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<sup>13</sup> Xiao.

The room is separated from the five other apartments of the house by thin wooden walls painted in white. The clothes hanging on the balcony have come to have a double functioning as a curtain, always replaced by a new heap of clean laundry to dry. Within the approximate 15 square meters shared between the grandparents and their remaining grandchildren, there are three beds, a small table and two chairs. The door to the balcony has a glazed upper part, and a staircase on the other end of the room leads down to the main entrance. The shared toilets for the neighbourhood are found further down the street, with a common water tap<sup>14</sup>.

It is a space of community for all of us,  
it is a space to share.

5<sup>th</sup> of May, 1972  
(March 22, Renzi, year of Rat)  
Riverbank  
Zhongshan  
*Reconstruction*

The rebuilding of the Qijiang bridge is coming to its end. It has been 5 months of heavy work, without a single day of rest. Most of the metal in the bridge has been locally production in Zhongshan itself. It is really

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<sup>14</sup> Peiqing Fong: Based on conversations with local having grown up on <sup>13</sup> Taian passageway, Zhongshan.

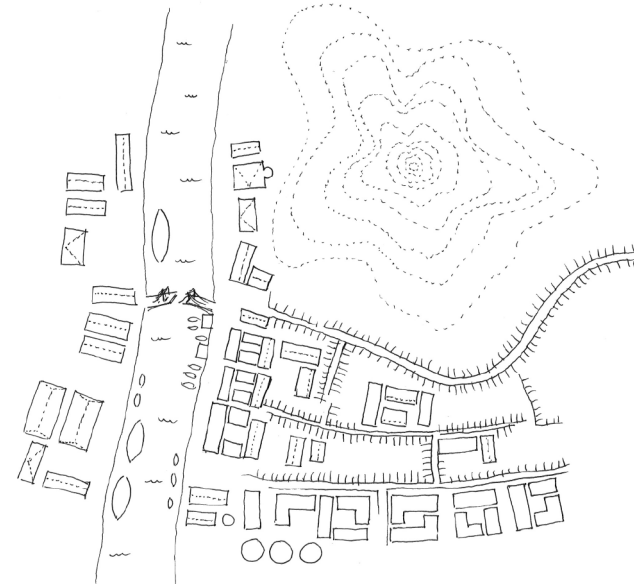


to be a pride, for Zhongshan, by Zhongshan. Its red curves fit nicely to its layered background of industry and fields. It will be an exciting moment when they will try the first opening of the bridge for an actual boat passage.

Passage into a modern age.

### CHAPTER III.

1978 - 1990



*The entire China goes through an era of modernisation. There is an obsession with keeping up with the tempo of the industrialised world. The Chinese cities face “an aggravating inner-city deterioration and congestion, some large-scale policy programmes were implemented by the municipal governments of [large cities] to facilitate the physical renewal of run-down areas”<sup>15</sup>*

<sup>15</sup> Chengguo Zhang and Xun Li: ‘Urban Redevelopment as Multi-Scalar Planning and Contestation: The Case of Enning Road Project in Guangzhou, China’, *Habitat International* 56 (2016), 158.

19<sup>th</sup> of March, 1978  
Taian passageway  
Zhongshan county  
*Demolition*

Something odd is happening at the end of Taian passageway. Unknown workers are tearing down the houses before the crossing of Taian passageway with Yuelai street. The entire street fills up with dust and the echoes of material falling to the ground. The workers are not from the region – they speak foreign dialects. A man passes by and asks what happened with the house. One of them answers, with his very strong accent, that it was already about to fall into ruins itself, and that there would be a bigger house with more space for more people there instead.

He calls it a collective house. It is like a normal courtyard house, but for many families living together, he said, before continuing his monotonous movements of tearing down brick pieces to the ground.

3<sup>rd</sup> of September, 1978  
Taian passageway  
Zhongshan county  
*Home*

The mediator of the southern Shiqi neighbourhood passes by her responsibility area with a big pile of documents under her arm. It is late afternoon. As the

sun sets over the humming industries, she knocks on the door of house no 13. She gets a warm welcome; everyone recognizes her face. She asks for the house owner, getting confused looks in return. *Owner?* A long time had passed in their country without anyone having used this particular term. A short silence, and then they all call for Mr. Fong.

*May I come in?*

*I am very glad to communicate the announcement of open applications for the back-taking of your property, Mr Fong.*<sup>16</sup>

She hands over a pile of documents. Another silence. A million possibilities, in a confused surrealist moment, flashes through the head of Mr Fong. Liberation from taxes, a considerable income, a future for the children, open renting market, renovation of the house, and maybe even a private shower<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Xiunan Tan and Yuzhen Miu. Based on conversation with ex-mediators between the government and the inhabitants of Taian passageway and other parts of Zhongshan, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Xiao.

5<sup>th</sup> of June, 1980  
Taian passageway  
Zhongshan county  
*Demolition*

Demolition. Reconstruction.

Houses are exchanged like pieces on a chessboard, not only on Taian passageway, but all over the entire neighbourhood.

Erasing all traces of the past.

31<sup>st</sup> of January, 1981  
Taian passageway  
Zhongshan city  
*Politics*

The People's Republic of China goes through a new reform.

From collective industrialisation to foreign trade and exchange with the exterior world.

Deng Xiaoping announces: "*Mao was 70% right and 30% wrong*"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Dinah Gardner in Beijing: 'The Meaning of Mao' <<http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2009/09/2009923112053530390.html>> [accessed 27 December 2017].

3<sup>rd</sup> of March, 1981  
Taian street  
Zhongshan city  
*Utopia*

The entire southern side of Taian street has transformed into one long continuous construction site. There are houses to be built, and many of them, for the new era of the People's Republic of China.

All that counts, is the new, better future.

29<sup>th</sup> of June, 1981  
Crossing of Taian street  
with Yuelai street  
Zhongshan city  
*Economy*

It is noon. There are people in the streets, cyclists with their bicycles passing in an even rhythm. From time to time a vehicle pass by, honking the horn to split the crowd for its passage. There is an impression of excitement in the air. Men and women stroll around, as if by curiosity rather than in an actual search for anything in particular – but what is not exciting with the reallocation of a commercial street in town? Many of the shop spaces are still empty, but some have been filled up with mostly objects from abroad; televisions, plastic

furniture, fabrics and thread collections, clothes... A couple passes by with a large cardboard box attached to their bicycle, a man crosses the street dragging his seemingly heavy trolley. But most of the people stroll around the crowded streets without buying anything.<sup>19</sup>

A different life is about to come back to the streets of Zhongshan.

3<sup>rd</sup> of June, 1982  
Taian street  
Zhongshan city  
*Reconstruction*

At one end of the Taian street there is an odd sight being raised above the heads of the passing crowds. A newly constructed housing complex. "For sale" can be read on big white billboards with red signs on the grey façade. The dust on the dirty windows reveal the state of the building block -

None of the apartments are inhabited.

Naturally, these houses are an initiative in relation to the new governmental reform. It expected a new life standard from the life of Zhongshan, of money, privacy

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<sup>19</sup> Zeyan Lai: Based on conversations with local inhabitant grown up in Zhongshan. 2017.

and ownership.

*"At that time, all work and resources still belonged to and came from the government. But who could buy those houses? All of us, we were all just equally poor fellows."*<sup>20</sup>

7<sup>th</sup> of November, 1984  
Taian street  
Zhongshan city  
*Home*

Passing through a narrow corridor, a small courtyard opens up toward the sky, surrounded by ornamented balcony structures ending the two floors above. Green plants stand orderly on an improvised wooden bench against the stone structure, accompanied by a pair of feet in its old slippers. One of the inhabitants is taking his siesta.

From above, conversations can be overheard. A man yells something to his neighbour across the courtyard. A group of young girls have found their spot on the ground; giggling, they are reading a book together in their corner. Each floor has its corridor facing the inner courtyard on one side, and the metallic entry doors to the 2-3-room apartments on the other.

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<sup>20</sup> Xiao.

The courtyard collective housing becomes a standardisation element in growing cities.

There is no shower, but a Turkish toilet can be found behind a wooden door at the end of each corridor, and there is running water in each one of the shared kitchens.

Adding apartments to the growing city of Zhongshan allows for all families to house their own apartment of those not staying in the Danwei complexes at the riverside <sup>21</sup>.

Least possible economic input for a maximal economic output.



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<sup>21</sup> Danwei were very common during the industrialization period of the PRC. For a higher efficiency, it housed the workers within the industry premises, allowing cheap housing for the cheap Made-in-China labour. See David Bray, *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005).

February, 1987  
Zhongshan city  
People's Republic of China  
*Politics and Economy*



### **China's Great Open Door**

*Traditional red Chinese doors open to a vista of skyscrapers, with flags of foreign countries above. A literal representation of China's 'Open Door Policy' to promote the Special Economic Zones. These Zones are to attract foreign investment with a reduction of*

*bureaucracy and taxes.* <sup>22</sup>

Most people are working for the big industries, and the industries are doing well. China has the famous rumour of cheap labour, and is not ashamed of continuing its investments of people for the sake of the economy of the country. The riverbank is full of commercial and industrial buildings in the background.

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<sup>22</sup> 'Sun Yi - Special Economic Zones - China's Great Open Door' <<https://chinese posters.net/gallery/e13-354.php>> [accessed 27 December 2017].

## CHAPTER IV.

1990 - 2005



*“The typical downtown which, up to twenty years ago, still presented a mixture of residential stock with tertiary and secondary industry has now become little more than a burolandschaft city-scape: the victory of universal civilization over locally inflected culture”<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Frampton, pp. 17.



5<sup>th</sup> of October, 1990

Sunwen west road

Zhongshan city

*Renovation*

The western part of the Sunwen road, nowadays called Sunwen west road, is covered in bamboo scaffolding. Aluminium paint buckets with different pastel colours lay scattered on the ground, where the newly laid stone flooring shines strangely clean. The façades of the emptied apartments on the ground floors have been ripped off and replaced by big shop openings, leaving big heaps of old brick, wood and nails at the centre of the street. An old man in torn clothes with a wheelbarrow appears through one of the dark side-alleys of the street. He passes the heaps of used building material, chooses the best bricks that are left, and walks away. A worker takes his afternoon siesta at the foot of an arcade pillar giving some shade.

Behind the construction scene, the rest of the old Shiqi is left untouched.

2<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1998

Fenming road

Zhongshan city

*Demolition*

Walking up the Fenming road, on the eastern side of the Shiqi river, there are so many of the industrial

buildings being torn down, and the chaos from the construction sites blocks the streets. The people passing by have white working helmets in plastic, and worn, dusty clothes. These are all workers for big companies of Zhongshan, raising a new, modern China from the ashes of the past. The old shops and markets in the arcaded buildings along the river lie splintered on chaotic piles of old brick and plaster, unable to offer any shade for the sun. The only shade there is comes from the high figures of steel and concrete raised along the river.

Destruction of the past

for construction of the future

The new Fenming road will become among the widest of the central streets of the Shiqi district.

*“The Chinese people is big, there is so many of us. It is not like in Europe, where everything can be kept small. We are many, so our roads are wide”*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bintaο Xin. Based on conversation with the Mayor of Sham tseng, 2017.

3<sup>rd</sup> of June, 2000  
Taian passageway  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Abandon*

At dusk, a man strolls down the street of Taian passageway, smoking a cigarette. His figure is torn; so are his clothes and his face. The street breathes of silence, between the back of an old industrial building and the façades of abandoned houses, tangled up in malfunctioning electric wires. He pushes open the wooden door at house no 13; it squeaks, and flakes of worn red paint falls to the ground. There is no furniture left in the house; since the house became empty of people, unknown hands were too quick to bring all the abandoned treasures into better use. At parts of the indoor stone flooring, plants from outdoors have started to intrude in between the cracks. The wooden stairs to the second floor have foot-sized holes, and the water pipes once going to the shower on the second floor are bent and rusty.

A syringe falls onto the stone floor,

and so does its user.

17<sup>th</sup> of June, 2000  
Taian passageway  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Isolation*

Two police men of the Shiqi sub-district survey the seclusion in the facades of no 13 and 15. Red brick in the door window openings, painted in white.

The streets in the inner Shiqi bear the appearance of a ghost town. The housing entrances have almost all been blocked off with metal blinds of brick infill. Their owners have left them to their destiny, being unable to sell their property, nor having enough money or strength to reinforce it. How could it be possible anyways, in such a problematic zone?

The houses still alive have clothes hanging on the balconies and faded lucky-sayings on paper stripes at the front door. They are all in very bad condition. Most of the inhabitants are renting their habitats as migrant workers, coming in to the city to build the future China for a better price than the city citizens <sup>25</sup>. Life in a capitalist state is not equal.

At the horizon surrounding Shiqi, high green figures

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<sup>25</sup> Liu

rise in the air. Sometimes you can see them standing at the edge of a turning street. As part of a new land reform, the government has started to sell land to private property developers to solve housing questions differently than in the near past. The profit goes back to the developer for the next 70 years to come<sup>26</sup>. The neighbours that had once lived in or still own a house in Shiqi move to these city outskirts. In the high-rise housing blocks, life is more convenient, “with a place to park your car, a larger space, with better air and a safer, enclosed environment”<sup>27</sup>

*“City marketing in China is shifting from a product-centric view [since the 80s] to a consumer-centric one under the economic reform. During the process, utopic, idealistic and symbolic though, combined with pragmatic market-driven entrepreneurial visions, have transformed China’s urban historic neighbourhood’s morphological form.”*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Xiao.

<sup>27</sup> Liu.

<sup>28</sup> Zhu Qian and Hongyan Li: ‘Urban Morphology and Local Citizens in China’s Historic Neighborhoods: A Case Study of the Stele Forest Neighborhood in Xi’an’ *Cities* 71 (2017), pp. 107.

5<sup>th</sup> of January, 2005  
Fenming road  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Economy*

*“The last quarter of a century has seen the so-called field of urban design degenerate into a theoretical subject whose discourse bears little relation to the processual realities of modern development”*<sup>29</sup>

Walking up the Fenming road, at the riverbank side. Scooters, cars, people, more people, more scooters. People with big shopping bags in the shade of the high commercial blocks. The large stone façades are rhythmized with parking guards in between the blocks and big store entrances; of leather shoes from Portugal, whisky and cigars from England, or a clothing brand from Spain. Expensive foreign trademarks have become a part of the Fenming riverbank. Oddly enough, almost all, is Made in China. Even further up north the government is about to construct a Ferris wheel in relation to another finished shopping mall.

People walk in and out of the turning entrance of the golden Fuhua hotel. Everyone talks about the lovely view from the spinning panorama restaurant on the top.

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<sup>29</sup> Frampton, pp. 22.

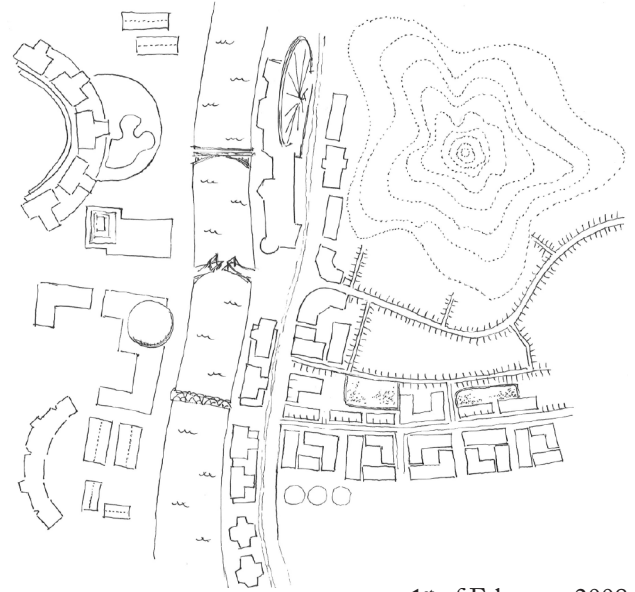
Everywhere along the riverbank, people sit, stand, walk and take photos with their colourful digital cameras.

The Shiqi riverside has become a pocket for the wealthy Zhongshan of the future – an icon of the new Chinese capitalism and economic growth.



## CHAPTER V.

2005 - 2017



1<sup>st</sup> of February, 2008

News declaration

from the Municipality Government of Zhongshan

*Politics*

In collaboration with the Urban Planning and Design Institute of Zhongshan (UPDI), the municipality of Zhongshan city has established a five-year-plan for a future protection masterplan for the Shiqi sub-district. Based on thorough investigations and mapping of existent infrastructure and historical

elements of the urban tissue, the UPDI has been able to isolate a determined central zone within which there are different levels of heritage protection for the coming future. The levels of protection established have mainly been put forth based on characteristics of so-called “cultural value”.

The most important are those of “rich history”; if someone famous has lived there, if it has the typical historical characteristics of its time, or if there are any important politically historical events related to the historical objects. Renovation funds are given out mainly by the state. These are small sums that can be applied for by the citizens for private renovations of their own property<sup>30</sup>.

*“You know, as long as there are people living in these houses, they will not fall. Old houses are like that, they have been standing for so long, how would they fall? To renovate, it’s just to make it look nice again. You see, buildings are as women growing old. You put on a new dress and some makeup for them to look new and fresh, it is a simple as that, no?”*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Liu.

<sup>31</sup> Xin.

23<sup>rd</sup> of October, 2010

News declarations  
from the Municipality Government of Zhongshan  
*Utopia*

### **Zhongshan to apply for the “Demonstration region for Modern Chinese culture”**

*In the 6th Session of the 12th Zhongshan CPC Committee held recently, Qiu Shuhong, director-general of Zhongshan Municipal Publicity Department, put forward to establish Zhongshan as “Demonstration Region for Contemporary Chinese Culture” and reported to the State Ministry of Culture. It is one of the important tasks for Zhongshan to carry out the Outline for Guangdong to Establish a Powerful Province in Culture and enforce the historical and cultural city construction.*<sup>32</sup>

### **Outlook**

*The harmony between modern times and history is the goal as well as the necessary result of city development and construction.*

*At present, at the same time Zhongshan is*

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<sup>32</sup> General Office of Zhongshan Municipal Government ‘Zhongshan Was Officially Announced National Historically and Culturally Famous City - Relevant News’ <[http://www.zs.gov.cn/english/topics\\_e/news/32.htm](http://www.zs.gov.cn/english/topics_e/news/32.htm)> [accessed 29 December 2017].

*constructing an economically strong city, it also positively declares for a well-known national historical and cultural city, which is not merely an important measure for the protection of historical and cultural heritages, but also the scientific road for the harmonious development of Zhongshan City. We believe Zhongshan, the birthplace of numerous celebrities who led China to openness in the modern history, will present a brand new brilliant image to the whole world.* <sup>33</sup>

1<sup>st</sup> of August, 2014  
Fenming road  
Shiqi Sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Renovation*

The Qijiang bridge is under renovation. Its future body aims to be an exact copy of its previous appearance. This is one of the city objects under the municipal heritage protection. No enlargement to resolve transport systems is allowed, neither any reinforcement of its body except for using new steel where the old iron doesn't hold any longer. And some fresh paint, as if to show its inhabitants the (false?) difference.

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<sup>33</sup> General Office of Zhongshan Municipal Government: 'Outlook' <[http://www.zs.gov.cn/english/topics\\_e/2-1-7.htm](http://www.zs.gov.cn/english/topics_e/2-1-7.htm)> [accessed 29 December 2017].



18<sup>th</sup> of October, 2017  
By car  
From Taian passageway  
to Fenming road, to outskirts  
Zhongshan city  
*Streets*

When taking the car into the Shiqi centre the most important of all personal characteristics is patience.

The streets are narrow, and there are few parking spaces in comparison to the number of cars. Sometimes it is necessary to drive down a street you just took backwards, because it happens that the U-turn in front (if there was any) is occupied by something else; a scooter, a wagon of building material, another car. The streets are still made out of concrete. In the middle there is often a trace of a second layer, as if there was a stream running along the narrow streets, but are now completely overlaid.

Turning another street, and the next street turns into a highway. The number of cars and scooters is endless. People cross the large roads as if there weren't any vehicles: noise, chaos and horns. There are two running lines in each direction. A big roundabout (or crossroad intersection, impossible to distinguish one from the other nowadays), where the hierarchy of turning in our out is not as clear as it maybe should be. The atmosphere is not stressful, but it is big. The speedometer never rises above a 50 km/h. The road becomes unrecognizable, there are so many new construction sites that it becomes impossible to recognize a place from a day to another. Perfect palm trees run along the grand boulevard; long alleys, forever-long, *where are we now, is this still part of the same city?* A right turn, a street, a stop, letting cars pass by, letting scooters pass by. Off again, and quickly, the surroundings turn from 3 to 6 to 30 (floors). The circulation corridor has enlarged from 2 cars, to 4, to 8. Or maybe 10, when you are in a hurry.

Here, you would not be able to go anywhere without a car, except for between your home or the car itself.

25th of October, 2017  
Between Sunwen west road  
and Taian passageway  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Abandon*

At night, the backside of the old city centre moves in shadows. Somewhere in the distance, fading music of traditional Chinese instruments echo from the main street. An old man wanders down the narrow housing street in his slippers (and pyjama trousers?), and disappears in the distance of the dull lamppost light. Doors and windows are closed off with metal blinds on the exterior.

No lights are seeping out from the windows of the houses.

26th of October, 2017  
Taian street  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Street*

Even though it is rather noisy, most of the crowd passing by on the Taian street has no interest to hang around. It is not made for being a place to stay. The sidewalks are so narrow that sometimes it is difficult to even pass someone without touching their shoulder, and the street is full of



stressed cars and honking scooters. As many other streets in the old Shiqi centre, it is a permanent traffic jam.

It is noon. A man has seated himself in front of his neighbour's shop, which seems closed for the time being. He has brought his own plastic stool, having the perfect height to still be able to reach his thermos of tea, that can be put on the ground in front of him. He takes a sip, and observes the street.

A man on the opposite side a bit further away sells jewellery to nobody behind his desk in Ming-style woodwork.

An old man sits behind his sewing machine, working hard on the large pile of clothes he has gathered on the tiny table space next to him.

Later in the night, passing by again, a lonely light dangles just above the same head. The tailor continues to work on his pile of clothes.





28<sup>th</sup> of October, 2017

Taian street  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Abandon*

In the middle of the Taian street, another house has fallen into ruins. There are metal scaffoldings around the site, and the piles of old brick seem to be for sale. A white cardboard sign on top of one of the piles read “10 yuan/piece”. An old man on a three-wheeled bicycle stops in front of the heaps of stone and earth, and starts to wander around the remainders. Is he looking for potential building material?

30<sup>th</sup> of October, 2017

Taian passageway  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Roots*

At the corner of Taian passageway before the little square that has become a parking lot, there is a shop full of nostalgia. It is so full of stuff that one can hardly see the colours of its walls. Every centimetre seems to be covered either by shelves with food or beverages, posters, books



cups, bowls, chopsticks and all other kinds of things that we all knew as kids. The old Coca Cola refrigerator in the outer corner is standing at the edge of the entrance step as if it is about to be pushed over by the whole interior.

Outside, tiny dogs are walking around the area without a leash; everyone knows that they belong to the shop. Inside, children have come by to play with their grandparents in the afternoon after school. The shop owner sits in front of the shop among a group of people, all chit-chatting together in loud voices. They all have a strong Shiqi accent.

Xiaoyi took over her little shop over 30 years ago. She lives together with her retired parents in the house just next doors. The shining white façade with clean roof tiles on top resemble a subtle renovation of their home into a romanticised perfection of the Song dynasty housing. For Xiaoyi, Shiqi is her oyster. She knows all the locals in the neighbourhood. She shares a nostalgic moment of memories, of all the former neighbours once living on the same street, of the landlords who kept track of rents, of houses that had suffered fire incidents, and of owners having demolished their houses to create something more modern.

*“I couldn't imagine how to be able to live otherwise. I have been proposed to move elsewhere, to places people have*



*thought more functional, practical in these modern times. But I prefer it here. Maybe it is because of the roots, this is where I come from, where I belong, to the pure simplicity of our Chinese traditions. I am not asking for much, simplicity is for me happiness”<sup>34</sup>*

永遠聯絡 - *let's keep contact for forever. It is important to keep in good contact with everyone you can*<sup>35</sup>. As the group of locals in front of the little shop go back to their conversations, the sunset reveals the indoor activity on the ground floor in the shopping mall on the opposite side of the road. Behind the big window, teenage boys all face a screen each with big headphones on their heads, clicking monotonously. For a tiny moment, it was as if no other end of the world had ever existed.

1<sup>st</sup> of November, 2017  
Junction to Taian passageway  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Renovation*

At the junction between Taian passageway and Yuelai street, someone has put up a giant metal gateway, richly ornamented with golden details. A dog barks as a warning

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<sup>34</sup> Xiao yi: Based on conversation with local inhabitant on the Taian passageway

<sup>35</sup> Lai:

from the inner yard. On the side of the high wall, a shiny blue sign is marked “no. 4 The Beverly Hills”. On the other side of the narrow street (that in itself measures about half the width of the gate itself) a row of stone balconies hang above the heads of the passers-by. More or less savage plants hang down its three stories in a vernacular pattern together with clean laundry and cleaning materials. Almost all windows are open but there is not much light coming out (nor in, probably). Sometimes you can hear the television being turned on or glimpse a steaming pot of tea. People passing by all look you in the eyes, you can see the curious expressions in their faces.

2<sup>nd</sup> of November, 2017  
Taian passageway  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city  
*Neighbours*

A yellow bicycle passes by with a young man on its saddle. He disappears into the mist of the winding narrow street, surrounded by worn grey brickwork. Further down the street, the man running a community centre for the neighbourhood's elderly comes out for chat.

He asks the stranger where she comes from. Even from the twenty meters' distance between them, he distinguished her non-local appearance. The owner seems

like a friendly character; he seems to know everyone in the neighbourhood. A few seconds of conversation before he starts another with the next person passing by on the street. As she walks away, he calls *if you want to know about the history of the area, you should talk to the old ladies next door.*

The two women are seated in the sun in a chair each. They have both passed the age of 90, but are impressively healthy and clear in their minds. *Yes, we live here together. Many of us. There is not so much space, but we are doing fine. The most important is to feel at home. This is our home.*<sup>36</sup>

The small courtyard in the centre of the house opens up toward the sky, surrounded by ornamented balcony structures ending the two floors above. Green plants stand orderly on an improvised wooden bench against the stone structure, accompanied by a pair of feet in old plastic slippers. An inhabitant seems to be taking his siesta.



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<sup>36</sup> Based on conversation with old women living in the collective house at 1-3 Taian passageway, 2017.



3<sup>rd</sup> of November, 2017  
Sunwen west road  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan City  
*Reconstruction and Economy*

*“The official absence of community involvement in preserving and developing urban heritage has transformed some Chinese neighbourhoods from ones of local traditional living into historic theme parks, devoid of the local population and traditional activities in their historic centres”<sup>37</sup>*

Sunwen west road resembles an open-air disco. Crowded, loud and filled with young people dressed in fake leather jackets and plastic high-heels. With its neon signs of fake Western clothing trademarks, it is the Coney Island of Zhongshan. A young woman stands, looking completely bored, in the entrance of one of the shops, clapping with gigantic neon blue plastic hands held in her real hands. It is as if it had been transferred into a tourist trap (consciously or unconsciously?). It smells of burnt cotton candy and popcorn, and walking down the street, an endless number of modern food wagons are filled with all the sweets ever imaginable.

Behind the bright neon signs of fake Nike and Peak



<sup>37</sup> Qian and Li: pp. 99.



boutiques (Niike and Peek) shadows of blackened back alleys of the rest of the old city centre pierces through.

At the centre of the street, one of those inner streets seem to be under renovation. The glazing on the ground floor is still covered with blue plastic, and the slick, freshly painted facades hit the eyes with their bright neon colours. Turning the corner at the end of the street, it looks as if the house owner did not have enough money to paint his house in the same neon colours as its previous neighbours, or to decorate with the same huge plastic flowers. Its ground floor is not covered with blue plastic, and does not have a display window. In its rather typical shop opening, there is a restaurant, with signs in red on white background. The edges are rusty, and the paper menus on the walls are heavily faded, as if worn since forever by sunlight and humidity. A woman arrives on her light blue scooter, stops, takes off her fluffy pink gloves and joins a friend at one of the tables on the side of the street.

These people seem as if they couldn't care less about neither the hip nor the hop of the noisy theme park next doors.

6<sup>th</sup> of November, 2017  
Close to Taian passageway  
Zhongshan city  
*Gentrification*

Turning from the Taian passageway onto a side street, there is a small but intense scene of contradictions. The wild green plants are growing orderly in their clay pots, the old façades are renovated with other old bricks, the old windows have been painted and wooden indoor furniture has been placed outside creating a kind of living room in the narrow street. The door has been left ajar. Pushing gently on the ornamented metal doorknob,

*Hello?*

*Are you looking for something?*

Someone asks from behind, in mandarin.

*Oh, I'm sorry, I don't speak mandarin.*

*Ah. Well. Are you looking for someone in particular? Are you here for the art lesson?*

Gentrification. Lately, though mostly in the bigger cities of China, a trend has been spreading in many bigger cities in China. People from abroad come to install themselves in the old, often heavily rundown

neighbourhoods of the city, instead of searching for an apartment in the new functional and modern areas outside the city centre. They seem to have a different objective,

*...but I couldn't tell you exactly what I like about it. I just like old houses. This is a real home. That... it is all the same. That, it is machinery, it's not for us. We humans have a history, a complexity. Here, there is complexity.*

He offers tea, and a long conversation follows. He recounts stories of his hometown further in north of China, of his interests in art and the birth of his art studio, and how it moved into the old areas of Zhongshan.

His 8-year-old son sits playing a highly intense computer game just next to the conversation. Sometimes his 5-year-old sister comes joining him in her mini roller-skates, neither succeeding in convincing her brother that it is her turn to play, nor to convince her father to play with her.<sup>38</sup>

On the upper floor of the transformed Lingnan house, a young boy is showing his last finished artwork to his mother. He wears shiny white sneakers and black



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<sup>38</sup> Yikai Zhou. Based on interview with artist settled in the Shiqi sub-district of Zhongshan. 2017.

rimmed glasses. She holds a big Longchamp handbag in her right hand, and wears a powder blue silk shirt.

Contrasts.

8<sup>th</sup> of November, 2017

Fenming road

Shiqi sub-district

Zhongshan city

*Street and Economy*

Crossing the Fenming road toward the riverbank. Patience. It is not possible to cross the street anywhere, excluding to climb over fences and to walk through plantations in the middle of the road. There is a crossing at maybe every two-hundred meters, loosely connected to one of the bridges crossing the river.

The crowds of people walking on the streets towards the old areas are, on the opposite side of the road, mainly substituted by people on scooters. Instead of peeking into the open street shops along the street there is the discovery of the different stone materials in the facades of the high building, merely visible due to the shop openings on the other side. Some majestic stairs towards the road propose an entrance, but be quick to realise that the entrances are closed off. Further down, an entrance guardian is sleeping in his chair. Passing to the entrance of the next building – they are closed off with metal blinds. Passing to the next, the same metal blinds. Passing onto the riverside of the



building blocks, no entrances are open either. Of the many hotel buildings left along the river, only one is still in use. The turning panorama restaurant has stopped turning. Its rooms are abandoned. The restaurants around are chains as Starbucks' café or likewise from Hong Kong or Taiwan. Two men pass by on yellow renting bikes. They speak in mandarin. A man with dusty clothes (a migrant worker?) has found a spot in the shade at the riverside to take a nap directly on the ground.

Little by little comes the discovery of the riverside being as abandoned by the Zhongshan citizens as the old city centre. Except for the largeness of the spaces, there are few signs of luxury left around the skyscrapers, in themselves also about to fall into ruins. The entity of people on the streets speak mandarin. These are tourists from the surrounding villages coming in for cheap shopping. Along the river there is no shopping; only inside the few shopping malls that have still survived. Walking into the shopping malls, the only people hanging around seem to be the ones working in the shops.

As a matter of fact, there is not much of anything along the riverside. Strollers look for objects of interest through their camera objectives, but most entrances are closed, as the buildings in their entirety. Colours are faded. Neon signs are off. There is no music or cotton candy, and the once launched guided boat attraction has abandoned its



piers and its worn signs. The only true noise there is comes from the humming of the cars in the background.

The humming of the cars, that is where the local inhabitants are. They sit in their cars, becoming part of the traffic jam in the background. Continuously, and daily, they cross the island of the old city that no longer serves in their daily routines or daily needs.

And so has the city of Zhongshan come to function, in fragmented islands with its entire population scattered in the sea of in-between.

10<sup>th</sup> of November, 2017

Taian passageway

Shiqi sub-district

Zhongshan city

*Street fragmentation*

Just before dusk, a man strolls down the Taian passageway, smoking his afternoon cigarette. He is wearing a black suit, with matching black trousers. There is a certain decency to his manners, and I would have wondered what a man as such does in these otherwise mostly abandoned streets, if it hadn't been for his pink slippers. This was clearly one among the few still living in the area.

Strolling down the street, the old man passes the faded

Lingnan façades<sup>39</sup> of the old housing district. The flaking paint and blackened marks become even more visible on the grey brick walls in this light, and green branches of wild plants hang down from the upper cornice, as the last settlers in a majority of the houses. Rusty metal sheets, once serving as outdoor roofs are pierced with holes or dangerously hanging on one edge. The entrances of house number 13 and 15 are barricaded with bricks, and with the rough metal screens closing off other surrounding ground floor openings do not help for creating a friendly atmosphere.

On the opposite side of the street, the ventilation shafts in the back of a shopping mall puff thin white smoke in the air and expresses its dissatisfaction with a monotonous humming noise. Its high, pink mosaic tiling façade looks funnily out of scale next to its facing picturesque houses. Following the old man as he continues down the street, I could almost see his frontal figure in the mirroring façade of the skyscraper at the end of the street.

The patchwork tissue of Shiqi is fragmented.

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<sup>39</sup> see Annex p. 12-21.



## CHAPTER VI.

2017 - 2022

10<sup>th</sup> of January, 2018

Taian passageway

Shiqi sub-district

Zhongshan city

*Politics*

*“We have never imagined that we could bring about revolution with pockets of alternative architecture, which to make a revolutionary impact, would have to infiltrate the existing constraints. The familiar question is: If tomorrow morning we woke up to find the earth taken over by local*

*authorities, how would we change our way of planning and constructing the built environment?*<sup>40</sup>

The city is a palimpsest. It is a patchwork of fragments from different time eras, from different political eras, from different utopic visions that overlap and make a whole. It is a city looking for its form, drawing shapes according to its temporary vision of how life should be, subjective reasoning related to the contemporary philosophy; the forever fluctuating ethos. The sub-district of Shiqi has only become one of the many fragments in a much larger picture that continues to grow. Zhongshan will continue as such, in its infinity if it may. We will always look for a better way to live, to structure the city, for it to correspond to contemporary or future ideas and visions. There will always be new, better visions. There will always be new houses to build, larger streets to connect them, more efficient vehicles to bring us out in the vast territory.

The Chinese culture is not nostalgic. It relates renewal with refreshment, with quality augmentation and development of the society. The symbolic aspect of a layer of the past is not the nostalgia. Nevertheless, it is the roots, but maybe more as a question of security,

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<sup>40</sup> *Reading Henri Lefebvre* in Kanishka Goonewardena et al. *Space Difference Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2008) pp. 264.

of spatial and neighbour recognition, a place where everyone could always belong, no matter the flux of the contemporaneity.

9<sup>th</sup> of May, 2022  
Taian passageway  
Shiqi sub-district  
Zhongshan city

*“It is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become modern and return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.”*<sup>41</sup>

*“Felicitous space is not merely imagined or lived but has an original, real protective value. Thus, it also corresponds to spatial practice”*<sup>42</sup> The value of the space depends on our spatial practice.

In the afternoon sun, a man walks down the Taian passageway. With his left hand, he holds his afternoon cigarette, with his right he waves to his street neighbour who is about to replant some plants on her balcony.

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<sup>41</sup> Paul Ricoeur *History and Truth* (Northwestern University Press: 1965) in Frampton: pp. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Goonewardena et al: pp. 39.



She smiles and waves back. The façades are a subtle patchwork of new and old materials. Rusty metal and faded paint meets washed grey bricks, replaced metal sheets and added wooden roof structures. Plants hang down from the pots on window panes and balconies along the street. You never know what to expect when walking down the passage, there is always something different happening. During evenings in such a perfect temperature like this, everyone passes the Taian passageway.

Taian passageway is a connector.

## AFTERWORD

The stories from Shiqi shows a city that has become a disruption of isolated fragments of short but intense time eras. The consequential fragmentation of Shiqi, as well as the city itself, is mainly due to consequences of masterplans from a sequence of politico-economic visions, generating a fascinating but brutal context full of strong contrasts. It is difficult to find the thread that links all the pieces together. Nevertheless, they are there, all equally existent and equally real.

The political top-to-bottom system of the last 50 years in China has led to little or no direct involvement of the inhabitants in the development, not only of the form for the city, but also its programmatic content and distribution. In comparison to Western urban development, the Chinese models of living conditions have hence been able to expand into extreme cases of masterplan constructions, where each rupture in time has created a new pocket of a utopian vision, without further consideration of the future of the already existing city. If the reason lies behind a rough history, a culture of non-nostalgic elimination of the past, or something else, the hypothesis remains that Zhongshan will continue to look for a new utopia of coming lifestyle ideologies, continuously spreading its territory further out towards the Pearl Delta. In its infinite search for a perfect form, the flaw of lacking bridges between the islands remain. The voids between the patches have never been resolved, if ever seriously considered. As each vision-island has become an enclave for one specific type of inhabitants (the one for which it was constructed) the porosity and circulatory fluidity through the city is getting lost. The further out the island grows, the more dependant will it become on its major form of transport (in itself a source of isolation), the car. As a result, Zhongshan has become a city of segregation, and the importance of self-identity is getting more and more lost in the separate, aging, city

fragments.

The conversations with local inhabitants of different social backgrounds has enabled the recognition of a number of characteristics or conditions that have continuously reappeared as of main of importance for them and their city. The key issues become a set of notions (see the *Notion Index*) that could help to re-establish this lost identity. The end of this biography is hence dedicated to the three sets of notions considered.

### **Basic spaces for the common**

The traditional Lingnan architecture in which the Guangdong province was firstly developed, brought the importance of the street as the main community space into the daily life of Zhongshan. Even though this has become an architecture style little or rarely considered among the contemporary iconism of later Chinese housing and commercial blocks, these streets still exist in the Shiqi neighbourhood as they have kept the traditional spirit. As much as these are places where there is a right to extend the private space – to sit down, to drink tea or to take a nap – it is also a space of contact, a term having gained main importance during the tough history of China. In other words, a space that allows good contact with your neighbours is essential. It is the second living room, the space for all common

necessities. As Zhongshan grows, the city has expanded into inhuman, car-dependent scales where privacy has resulted very literally in fences and private housing entrances, thus erased common space and common life. The second living room has been erased, or moved into the private area of each household.

### **Political and economic prevalence**

Going through the development of the growth and transformations within Shiqi throughout the last decades, it can be stated that the area has endured several ruptures due to harsh political decisions. Governing political interests have led to tendencies of being totalitarian, monotonic and of economic profit, no matter how alien the result may have been for the local citizens. This might be read as a problem of too large-scaled urban planning without enough thought of the consequences for the local inhabitants. The lack of validation of a sustainable and local urban planning, in addition to lacking necessary renovation procedures has led to the abandonment of big areas or entire buildings within Shiqi today. What is left are mainly rundown housing areas or empty skyscrapers behind a tourist-proof backdrop curtain. A majority of the residents are part of the immigrated working class, with no other choice than seeking themselves to poor

housing conditions with low rents<sup>43</sup>. A small percentage also include a group of locals, having stayed in the neighbourhood for their often nostalgic appreciation of the expressed simplicity of the traditional life.

### **Consequential spatial changes**

Concerning the trends of demolition and renovation, the five-year heritage protection plan of the central Shiqi could be a gain of hope for a government that will not continue with the strategy of tabula rasa as an answer to all questions. Nevertheless, it equally evaluates the area as a problematic zone. As the government of Zhongshan states, to highlight the cultural values within the Shiqi district is an aim to developing the economic profit for the city. A fear would be thus as the story of the Sunwen west road, where the consequences of lacking social consideration has turned the street into what Qian and Li express as *historic theme parks, devoid of the local population and traditional activities in their historic centres*<sup>44</sup>. Another auto-generated change is the example of Zhou's artist studio, where a conventional program allows the crossing of a wealthier social class with another part of the city. However, when gentrification turns into a trend, it may easily drive out the lower social classes, because these are not, and will

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<sup>43</sup> Liu

<sup>44</sup> Qian and Li

never be, protected. As understood from interviews with associate Liu Huiyu from the Urban Planning and Design Institute of Zhongshan, the Chinese protection policy searches to preserve the cultural heritage values almost as if they were objects rather than places where people live and have a daily life. If anything, these mostly poor people living in run-down houses with bad electrical and water connections, are seen as a problem. Rather than treating the old Shiqi as a problem zone, the following project step of this tale and analysis has of interest the potential reaffirmation of a necessary identity of the Shiqi neighbourhood within and for its city. It seeks to reverse the divide between the different fragments, as *a boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greek recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presence*<sup>45</sup>

The new will always leave something old behind. It is a responsibility to work with the past, existing figures as much as bringing in the new. Even more important is to bring them all together. The purpose is not to restore a past that has lost its proper value nor to work with auto-economic gentrification of old spaces. A project, imagined in the void between the pockets

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Heidegger 'Building Dwelling Thinking' in *Basic Writings* (HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 356.

of the different islands of the capitalist skyscrapers on Fenming road, the modernist courtyard houses on Taian street, and the traditional housing behind the Taian passageway, could be an opportunity for updating the use of a neighbourhood through its connection with its city. Whilst being specific in terms of context, the project could also be seen as a sample strategy for interrelating, or triggering the interaction between islands in other existent or future areas within or outside of Zhongshan. The procedure of working on the Taian passageway as a mediating space would naturally work within a blueprint completely on a local scale, but as Frampton expresses it so clearly, *"It is my contention that only an arrière-garde has the capacity to cultivate a resistant, identity-giving culture while at the same time having discreet recourse to universal technique. [...] The fundamental strategy [...] is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with the elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular space"*<sup>46</sup>. Zhongshan suffers from an obvious lack of fluidity and continuity within its growing urban tissue, and will not be able to grow and demolish in its infinity. The question to investigate in large terms asks, how to work within the existing tissue to reintegrate the global from a local scale?

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<sup>46</sup> Frampton.

## NOTION INDEX

*Each story, or date, within the biography discusses one or sometimes several of the key notions identified during conversations and interviews with local inhabitants of Zhongshan. They have further been classified in different main themes.*

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陳家寶  
Garbo Chan