

A Shenzhenist Paradox

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The modern history of Shenzhen, a Chinese coastal city contiguous to Hong Kong was always inaugurated with a song called *A Story of Spring*: “In 1979, when it was a spring, an old man drew a circle near the South Sea of China...” (Dong 1994). The “old man” mentioned in the lyrics was referring to Deng Xiaoping, who enjoys high reputation among the globe for his bold decision on introducing a free-market into the socialist superstructure (Du 2020, 9). This small city that used to be a fishing village was chosen to bear the first wave of “China’s openness policy” and, from that time on, has consistently “been the trailblazer and proving ground” for capitalist economic development while, at the same time, implementing “Chinese strategy” (Portyakov 2011, 37-38).

To fully understand this Shenzhenist paradox of enduring ideological forging but insisting its citizen’s own identity, we would have to, first put it back into a bigger picture, by which I am suggesting that we should take a look at China’s southeast coast region and its background before any further investigation directly targeting at this renewed village.

As Connery demonstrated, elementality of land and sea is very much linked with how we perceive the space (Connery 2001, 176). However, according to the Chinese version of genesis, there are two myths standing out: *Pangu Opening the Heaven and Earth* and *Nyuwa Creating Human*, neither of which made reference to ocean as an important element in regards to Chinese culture (Ni 2009, 10). On the other hand, during the era of the ancient China, ocean gradually turned to be considered not only as a symbol of imperial sovereignty but also as an object of strategic control (Connery 2001, 181), in retrospect. This Sino-objectification toward oceanic area could be further traced back to a compilation of mythology categorized by geography, *Classics of Mountains and*

Seas, anonymously written during 700-200 BC. The book was mainly divided, as its title implies, into *Classics of Mountains* and *Classics of Seas*, and the latter depicted the southeast region of the ancient China, more specifically the Yangtze River Basin and its limit: the southeast coast (Ni 2009, 10). Dating back to that period of time, the coastal territory was reckoned to be underdeveloped, uncivilized or primitive (Li 2012).

From another perspective, which urges us to reflect on the anonymity of this compilation, there were always speculations that the author was a traveler who was born in the north and educated to be one of the intellectuals. It is highly possible that he wrote *Classics of Seas* based on what he had heard during his visits to the littoral areas (Ni 2009, 15). In this sense, *Classics of Mountains and Seas*, representing a southern ideology, reflects a land and sea perception, which forms a sharp contrast to the continent centered northern sight. The oceanic people underwent a past that had been watched and depicted by the northerners as if these had been voyeurs or colonists (Said 1979): oceanic true life was broken down into spectacles (Kellner 2003) and adapted for supernatural stories, while population of the ocean did not have written language of their own to record their authentic life and to form a coherent history (Ni 2009, 15). As a result, dwellers of the southeast coast tended to share an identity with more inclusion and flexibility.

Entering pre-modern epoch, many of the coastal cities such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Guangzhou were forced to turn treaty ports (Yu 1991, 122) while Shenzhen, although tightly adjacent to Hong Kong, dodged a bullet. After the People's Republic of China being founded, it had been acting as a quiet neighbor of Hong Kong until what was sung in *A Story of Spring* happened. The lyrics depicts the scene where Deng Xiaoping drew on the map a circle at which Shenzhen was situated, meaning that he picked Shenzhen to be one of the four Special Economic Zones in 1979. Shenzhen carried the hope of absorbing funds from abroad while learning "advanced technologies and management practices", in order to become a "bridge for China to enter the world market" (Portyakov 2011, 39). Yet, in a pre-industrial society like China was in the 80s, most of the foreign capital was attracted "to manufacture products for export in simple forms such as compensation deals [and] assembly lines" (41). Big factories came into

existence quite “naturally” in the same way that Fordism was implanted in America: Shenzhen, too, did not enjoy abundant historical and cultural heritage, because of which, its lack of parasitic bourgeoisie promised a prosperous future in which this offshore village was predicted to be able to keep the development on industry as well as the growth on commerce fluent and stable (Gramsci 1971, 281-287).

Hereupon, with an upsurge of assembly factories’ construction, within only three decades, Shenzhen’s “population burgeoned from three hundred thousand to fourteen million”. Therefore, people inhabiting this city identified themselves as three different “classes¹ of resident”: Shenzheners that was referring to those who had been through higher education and then moved to Shenzhen for more opportunities thus consequently, those with a *hukou*²; migrants, or migrant workers³, mainly indicating those who came to Shenzhen from rural areas, a condition that was emphasized in the modern Chinese context, and in result, those without a legal or permanent *hukou*; and at last, locals, who were born and living there all along at the time (O’donnell 2020, 33). The convergence and mixture of people from different backgrounds and life experiences once again reinforced the malleable nature of Shenzhenism.

Among the migrants, a particular type of people sticks out for its sheer amount: those who did not have the chance to receive college education and came to Shenzhen only for higher wages in order to better support the rest of their family whose entire life could be bound to a small piece of farmland. Xu Lizhi, one of the countless Shenzhen migrants, was employed as an assembly line worker in a factory of Hon Hai Precision Industry, trading and better known as Foxconn Technology Group, a Taiwanese multinational electronics contract manufacturer⁴. Xu was born in 1990 in a remote village of Guangdong province and came to Shenzhen when he turned 21. After the first

¹ “Class” is a strong word but we will come to that later to find out why the author considers it to be appropriate to use, at least in the scenario of Shenzhen.

² *Hukou* can be directly translated into English as “person with residence certificate”. In the modern China, there is a huge discrepancy between people with an urban *hukou* and those with a rural one because whether one has *hukou* in the city he lives and the type of it could determine how one would be treated on certain issues regarding one’s taxes, children, retirement, housing, public welfare, etc.

³ The term “migrant worker” should be a polished translation from a less polite appellation in Chinese, *nongmin’gong*, which could be directly interpreted as “peasant worker”, meaning worker who came from rural areas and was peasant before they moved to a big city to do physical labor. In modern Chinese, *nongmin* or peasant could carry insulting implications.

⁴ See <https://www.foxconn.com/en/index.html> for more information about Foxconn.

contract with Foxconn that lasted for three years coming to an end, Xu was caught up in the unemployment for more than six months, due to which he had no choice but to sign another contract with his former employer. However, no longer being able to deal with the tedious and repetitive assembling work, Xu committed suicide only four days after the second engagement being settled. To everybody's surprise, Xu turned out to be a talented poet with remarkable works done on the internet. A couple of years after his demise, a reputable poet Qin Xiaoyu collected his compositions and compiled them into a book titled with Xu's last post online: *A New Day* (Xu 2015, 3). The author selected and translated two poems⁵ where Xu excellently narrated his experience under Fordist way of production. In *Sculpture on the Assembly Line* (19) done in 2011 he wrote:

Along with the assembly line, going straight down

I saw youth of my own

Streaming in a flow, just like blood

I never did notice

That I had been standing enough

To be an ancient sculpture

In *I Swallowed A Moon Made of Iron* (273) completed in 2013 he said:

I swallowed a moon made of iron

They call it a screw

I swallowed sewage of industry and orders of unemployment

Those youth died an early death under the lathe

I swallowed rushing and homelessness

⁵ Xu's poems were all written in simplified Chinese and in Mandarin and he did not deliberately try to rhyme or control the number of syllables of each verse. Therefore, flexible rhymes and random syllables are also adopted for the English version. The author, at the same time, retained the punctuation marks and most of the word order that the original poems used.

I swallowed pedestrian overpasses and life full of water scale
And I cannot take no more
Everything I swallowed now spouts out from my throat
Sprawling on the territory of my motherland
To be a poem of shame

As a matter of fact, Shenzhen fits perfectly in the terms with which Gramsci depicted America: it “[had been demanding] a certain proportion between age-groups for purposes of production”, in purpose of which it sucked rural population and made them its screws; once the ratio reached a “rationalized” status, as an immigrant city, the high heterogeneity as well as amalgamation of diverse cultures has contributed to the founding of this Fordism in Shenzhen’s style (Gramsci 1971, 286-295). To some extent, the outcome of this rationalization was a total success. By the time of 2009, Shenzhen “has grown to become a megalopolis and the fourth biggest generator (after Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou) of gross regional product” and “its GDP per capita reached \$13,600 against the 2009 China-wide average of around \$3,700” (Portyakov 2011, 37). The Shenzhen identity, or Shenzhenism, went through modification and reconstruction at the same speed as the city was being built: the capital was all over it.

However, we could see in Xu’s poems that this Shenzhenism was constantly alienating him from his work and himself as a worker (Marx 1959), all of which drove him to his own destruction. His death was not only a romantic poet’s death, but also a classical subaltern’s one. When he was alive no one cared for his talent even though he posted every single piece of his compositions online. He reached out and spoke up as a subaltern, migrant worker in an extraordinary way; nevertheless, his “class of resident” restricted him from being heard or valued, let alone being able to escape this cage of class. We would never know exactly how Xu would identify himself regarding to Shenzhen, a strange city where he chose to end his life. Nonetheless, his poems perpetuate as a proof of survival both of himself and of his kind: the assembly line workers once were magnificently re-presented by one of their own (Spivak 2010).

While Xu’s tragedy being a typical Fordist one, his poems show rebellion of his

kindred souls and as a result, the society was finally aroused by the particular death of his. What was intentionally neglected previously in this paper was the fact that Xu's fall was only one of the many suicides that happened to Foxconn subaltern employees. As a matter of fact, the first half of 2010 itself witnessed the notorious "Foxconn serial jumping-off-building incident", in which more than ten consecutive demise occurred in Shenzhen⁶. Nevertheless, the public started to pay attention only after Xu's remarkable poems were discovered by Qin, and more specifically, after 2017 when a film based on several migrant workers and simultaneously poets (one of them being Xu) was released⁷. The Shenzheners and Shenzhen locals grasped this opportunity at last to take these strangers in as their city's creators and owners as well; in addition, the former ones embarked on caring for the migrants' rights and social recognitions⁸. The estrangement between three "classes of residents" has started to crumble not on a superstructural level but from bottom to top: it was a spontaneous blending into which Shenzhen dwellers' free will blossomed. From this point, it should be safe to reconstruct Shenzheners' meaning in the discourse of this city's inhabitants by cancelling the relevance of *hukou* as an essential condition. Under the paradoxical co-existence of capitalist market and socialist ideology, another once-irreconcilable paradox laid inside of its citizen's identity has eventually stumbled across a significant twist.

As Benveniste illustrated, in order to constellate oneself into a psychic unity, one would have to cast the magic spell of saying "I feel"; without it, one is only a mess of contradicting feelings (Benveniste 1971, 223-225). Xu's fall has caused so many I-feel's that true Subjects capable of articulating themselves (22) revived in Shenzhen although its story began almost 40 years ago. Under the contradictions between national ideology against geographical identity and economic policies, the term Shenzheners, with its gradually refreshed and hence literal implication as it should have been for a

⁶ There is no official record or statistics showing how many Foxconn employees committed suicide in Shenzhen. However, according to the author's memory and what the author could find on the internet, thirteen should be a possible answer to the former mystery.

⁷ See more about *The Verse of Us* on IMDb: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5140556/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1.

⁸ The author reached this conclusion thanks to the many comments posted on the biggest Chinese film forum online called *Douban*.

long time, is trying to include everyone who has dedicated themselves to the prosperity of this global city, and this turn in attitude will, step by step, be accomplished by its inhabitants' act on their own initiative. However, this does not mean that we should render the term "migrant" or "migrant worker" paralyzed in Shenzhen. As Butler ingeniously put it, while "[t]his converging and interarticulation... performed by identity categories is a necessary error", the categories "can become such a discursive site whose uses are not fully constrained in advance" so that they will, one day, democratize relating politics from bottom to top and at the same time, will "expose, affirm, and rework the specific historicity of the term" (Butler 2011, 175).

Therefore, the Shenzhenist paradox of people's articulation against superstructural and ideological ruling has not been and will not be a paradox at all but a coping, resisting process, during which it is projected that rebellious voices will be heard and that class difference will be obliterated. Although the poundings struck by identity discrepancy happened rather recently, their echo continues to resonate and it is reconciling one with another into a chord. Fortunate for the Shenzheners, it is getting louder and louder as we speak.

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