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The Opinion

Exploring inclusive Chineseness: neighbourhoods

In *Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming,* Biehl and Locke describe life in post-war Sarajevo. According to the authors, the diagnosis of collective trauma overlooks the discontentment about political and economic processes that cause (neo-liberal) deterritorialization of social life. Their approach is inspiring if one considers the consequences of rapid urbanisation in China: the deterritorialization of social and cultural life in entire neighbourhoods is often considered a necessary price for progress, whilst opposite views are judged conservative and unrealistic. Inspired by Deleuze for an 'anthropology of becoming', Biehl and Locke see agency in nostalgia, and give a voice to the memory of a less individualistic society.[1]

Wim Haagdorens

Deterritorialization, nostalgia and inclusiveness
At the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government launched the 'harmonious society' as a project to balance economic growth and social well-being. In this paper I recount the restructuring of neighbourhoods in Beijing and refer to similar dynamics in Chongqing, Chengdu, Dalian, Shanghai and Lijiang. Bourdieu's concept of class *habitus* explains how trends can stir an entire society. He also insisted on the way spatial organization governs practices, with the house as privileged locus for the earliest learning processes. I will describe one urban assemblage in Xi'an that I experienced as a harmonious community, and the deterritorialization that disrupted this. I suggest that the very structures and practices that are sacrificed for real estate projects form precious social and cultural capital that can enhance individual well-being and equally, in Putnam's words, can "improve the efficiency of society."[2] Thus, I mirror the deterritorialization of neighbourhoods with the project for a harmonious society. Today, Beijing promotes itself with four keywords: "patriotism, innovation, inclusiveness and moral strength". By sketching a personal interpretation of inclusive Chineseness, I suggest an answer to a perceived loss of Chinese culture and identity.

Progress and loss – Beijing 北京
The network of *hutongs* in the centre of Beijing contain thousands of quadrangles, where several families live in low houses and share their courtyards. The alleys provide space for markets and restaurants that serve as meeting points. Trees and greenery abound, and due to a chessboard pattern, main roads with subway entrances are at a walking distance and allow for rapid transportation throughout the city, keeping the main road traffic out. These are the green, walkable neighbourhoods, with abundant safe public space for children, which metropolises worldwide long for. Compared to guarded compounds with tower blocks, *hutongs* are assemblages rich in social connectivity and form a unique cultural heritage. But the internal migration towards the cities following economic transformation pushed the prices of real estate to unseen heights. In addition to gentrification, those *siheyuan* that were considered not valuable enough for restoration were replaced by apartment blocks. Ever since my first visit to the *hutongs* in 1999, I have seen the *chai*-character (拆 'demolish') painted on inhabited houses all over Beijing.

In August 2006, I parked my bicycle at a shop in a *hutong* east of Wangfujing Street. I bought a drink, and struck up a conversation. The aged owner explained his situation: "My house will have to make way for an apartment block. As I own just a few square metres, the financial compensation will never allow me to buy an apartment in this neighbourhood again. The new apartments are much bigger than my original property." I asked him where he would live then. "I must go to a neighbourhood in the suburbs, where housing is still affordable." Then he exclaimed: "I am a veteran of the Korean War, and I've always been a patriot. How can they do this, force me out of my house, at the end of my life?" His story exemplified the negation of symbolic capital; as a veteran on a modest pension, this was all he had in his defence. After a passerby offered to show me around, it struck me that this was the first time I had heard people emphatically deploring the cultural loss, apart from financial worries.

In August 2009, I visited the redesigned Qing-style Qianmen Street. East of Qianmen Street, a section of *hutongs* was walled-off. Once a neighbourhood with *hutongs* brimming with life, albeit with a number of dilapidated houses too, it now felt like a war zone. I entered a surreal world of crumbled houses, where plants were still kept alive by those inhabitants who hadn't left (yet). The first person to whom I spoke, a street sweeper stoically performing his job, said that preserving the houses was "too hard", but didn't give any further comment. His companions coughed and smiled in response to my questions. After a second attempt, a lady told me she didn't think anything would be restored. At some point, everybody would have to leave. Apartments at more than 4000 euro per square meter would be impossible to afford. To my question as to where they would go and live, she answered, "here and there, anywhere".

Recognition – hope?
In Chongqing, Chengdu, Dalian, Shanghai, there are similar stories. Lijiang is particularly telling: "UNESCO placed old Lijiang on its World Heritage List, but a recent inspection mission attacked over-commercialization and loss of traditional community values."[3] Discontentment is not only voiced by direct stakeholders and outsiders; it is also expressed at the highest official levels. Xinhuanet reported on an anti-corruption meeting on 5 April 2011, with the former prime minister: "Wen Jiabao stated (...) that some social contradictions have become relatively prominent. In addition to corruption, these problems could threaten the country's development and stability if not properly handled (...). Unlawful, forced land expropriations and house demolitions are strictly banned, he said, adding that the administrative system needs to be reformed to dilute the power of some government departments."[4]

Leaders like Wen Jiabao can generate the necessary soft power to mobilize society. Further experiments with grassroots democracy could tap the 'wisdom of crowds' by giving a voice to social networks that are rich in social and cultural capital, and thus create a bottom-up dynamic in response to the project for a harmonious society.
If there's agency in nostalgia, it is worth looking at those neighbourhoods that feel, or felt, like harmonious places. There's a tremendous wealth of practices that can inspire the imaging of harmonious communities.

Object of nostalgia – inclusive Chineseness in Qinglong Xiaoqu 青龙小区
I lived in Xi'an from August 1999 until July 2001, as a student of Chinese and a teacher of English. At some point, I moved to a ground floor apartment next to the market in Qinglong Xiaoqu, together with two fellow students, historian Filippo Marsili and sociologist Antje Schöne. We gradually came to understand the mode of life that was both traditional and open to novelties. We experienced an inclusive Chineseness in a relatively harmonious community.

Above: July 2005. A weekly moment of togetherness at the opera house.

The neighbourhood was named after the Qinglong Temple 青龙寺, situated on a southern hill overlooking the city. During the Tang-dynasty, the influential Japanese monk Kukai had stayed here for two years. Recently, the temple had been restored with support from Japan. Filippo was told by a neighbour that the hill itself had been erected, on the order of the first emperor, to block the winds – the place was steeped in history. But this area was not only a place for Buddhist practice or the admiration of cherry blossoms. The meadows around the temple provided space for ever recurring rituals. One day, we went out for a run at 6 a.m., and discovered the world fully awake. Along the paths between the wheat, we passed *taiji* (Tai Chi) practitioners, people walking their dogs, and, in the early sunlight, couples waltzing to the tunes from a portable radio. Most locals started the day early. In the afternoon, some elderly men would sit on foldable chairs and observe their kites, colourful dots in the sky. Couples would come for a stroll, watch the sunset, or listen to the *erhu* player. Apart from the walled temple, there were no boundaries here.

Bonita Ely compares Deleuze's concept of 'rhizome' to Tao. "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The movement of Tao is to return, the way of Tao is to yield. Though formless and intangible, it gives rise to form. Though vague and illusive, it gives rise to shapes. Though dark and obscure, it is the spirit, the essence, the life-breath of all things."[5] Like *taiji,* life in Qinglong Xiaoqu seemed to breathe the Chinese time-space view, which is typically circular rather than linear.

The market was located in the alley that led from the northern opera house to the southern fields. Every morning there was a supply of food, traditional medicine, clothes, and occasionally there would be a bookstall. The restaurants and stalls provided affordable food. The stalls had no physical separation between cooking space, dinner space, and public space. We usually ate at a noodle stall, where we gradually integrated into the local community. We would often complete our meal with a portion of *kaorou* (grilled meat) from an adjacent stall, which was also the place to have a drink for the locals. And as Monday mornings would start south of the market, in the fields, the sound of the opera in the north called for a final gathering on Sunday evenings.

The Qinqiang 秦腔 opera house, just across the Second Ring Road, was easily accessible by foot. Every Sunday evening at eight o'clock, local musicians played there, if possible outside. Attendance was free. At our first visit we were given low stools in the front row of the square, and were invited to take pictures at will. Musicians would come and go, light each others' cigarettes, and an occasional toddler would crawl amongst the musicians. A late player would first quietly walk his bike across the stage to park it inside the house, and then take up his instrument to join the others. The setting was modest, but the singers performed with conviction. Among the audience, all generations were present. An architecture student told me he didn't always understand the songs in Shaanxi dialect, but he liked listening to them. They were older than Beijing opera. Humorous, with strong female characters, Qinqiang provided entertainment with tongue-in-cheek morality, a reminder of aesthetic and linguistic bonds. The audience wasn't always equally attentive, but there were drinks and warm snacks, so the place was packed until well after ten o'clock. This Sunday evening ritual was like a confirmation of local identity and togetherness. Adults and kids could meet each other there one last time before the start of the new week. But visitors were welcomed too, as we noticed the first time in the winter of 1999, and ever since.

Inclusive Chineseness and conflict management

At several instances I experienced an openness towards alternative worldviews, whether it was the *baozi* seller on American fast food, or the retired railway engineer who found me a copy of *Shanghai Baby,* or the many unexpected invitations for a drink and a talk. We had become friendly with the *kaorou*-stall owner too, whom we called *shifu* (master). His waiter was a few years younger than us, and he was like a brother to the younger niece of the *shifu*. One afternoon, they joined Filippo and myself for lunch. The niece asked us what we were doing in Xi'an, and I said jokingly: "we are part time teaching, part time *laowai*" (the term substituted the expected 'student'). *Laowai* is the term with which foreigners are commonly addressed, often with a chuckle. She replied with unexpected seriousness: "To us, you are not *laowai*. We don't call you that anymore. To us, you are two friends."

One evening, Filippo and I were again sitting at the *kaorou*-stall, enjoying dinner. The joyful atmosphere suddenly turned awkward, when some customers, six bullies of the kind that are for hire, started trouble. After verbal insult and complaints about the bill, they became physical, violently pushing around the waiter. He was in no way a match for these big men, but refused to give in. It was hard to tell who the men really wanted to challenge: we were aware that it might be us, the two *laowai*. We were trying to determine the margin of the tolerable, and wondered what to do if it were crossed. A number of bystanders observed the scene, waiting to intervene as well. Suddenly, the *shifu* stood up from behind his barbecue set, reprimanded his waiter, slapped him (gently) in the face, and told him to take care of the barbecue. Then, he sat down at the bullies' table, shared a couple of laughs and invited them for another drink.

What to an outsider could look like a sheepish reaction, was to us an impressive act of self-control. We regretted not having found a way to intervene ourselves, but the *shifu's* reaction had likely been the best way to protect his waiter and his customers. He had positioned himself as the host, the waiter in a serving position, and the bullies back into their position of guests. Because of their uncle-cousin relationship, rather than boss-waiter, there were no hard feelings. The waiter kept on working there; he hadn't lost face, nor had the owner. But the bullies never came back. Framing this scene by Confucian tradition ties in with Bourdieu's concordance of *habitus*. But as a reaction to drunken misbehaviour, serenely canalizing this bad energy away instead of confronting it, also reminds us of the application of Taoist principles.

Destructuring a harmonious community

June 2001, the fields west of the temple are lit up all night. Within weeks, part of the hill is cut away by bulldozers.

July 2007, increased traffic makes direct access from Qinglong Xiaoqu to the opera house impossible. Further down the road, there is a new pedestrian bridge. While dozens of neighbourhoods are levelled, friends point to the Ming-dynasty roofs that are obligatory constructed on all buildings within the city wall to stress the historic importance of Xi'an.

August 2009, the opera house has disappeared. At its previous location, high rise blocks dwarf remaining parts of the neighbourhood. A wall seals off the northern entrance of the market, the southern part has shrunk to just a few meters, while another wall separates the remaining neighbourhood from what are now construction sites. The gatekeeper of my former apartment tells me that most people are living in apartments on the Second Ring Road.

Below: January 2011. Cranes on top of the tower blocks that will provide modern living space to hundreds of families, on the location where used to be the market. Across the Second Ring Road, the opera house had to make way for more apartments and office blocks.

Walking through the remains of Qinglong Xiaoqu, I notice a billboard with ten do's and don'ts for 'civilised citizens'. Love for the motherland, respect for teacher and study, believe in science, protection of public morals, and embellishment of the environment; the don'ts are spitting, swearing, urinating, destruction of greenery and – in the remains of a once walkable neigh-bourhood – no jaywalking. I wonder whether these guidelines really form the crystallization of Qinglong Xiaoqu's potential. The extortion of the essential through the demand of the insignificant; again Bourdieu comes to mind.[6]

On my way to the temple, where meadows used to be, I see warehouses: 'Western section Restaurant Utensils City' and 'Western Section Furniture City'. Next to the temple, on the one surviving meadow, two *taiji* practitioners seem undisturbed by the trucks that roar off and on behind them. Machines are destroying the meadow and obscuring the 'desire lines'[7] that year after year had been traced by local farmers, kite-flyers, *erhu*-players, couples, kids. The gatekeeper of the temple tells me about the construction of a park. After our brief conversation, he fills my flask with hot water and says gently, with that same openness that had once embraced us: "You are very close to us. Although you live far away, your heart is very close."

At the intersection of the Second Ring Road and Xingqing Street, hundreds of people are enjoying a warm summer evening on the bicycle lane and the patches of grass next to it. Among them, I recognize a dozen men and women standing in a circle, singing: the musicians of the Qinqiang opera house. I ask them whether they still play together, and they confirm to do so when the weather allows it. I wonder whether they can still give rhythm and structure to their community, that now lives scattered along the ring road.

Restore

After the campaign by Wen Jiabao, the warning of former president Hu Jintao in January 2012 against a "strategic plot of Westernizing and dividing China" in "ideological and cultural fields", provides another opportunity for dialogue.[8] If there's a threat from abroad, there's also a strong willingness to share scholarship. China invested massively in museums and archaeological work, but perhaps underestimated the cultural robustness in seemingly insignificant places and ways of life. Research in this field can give a voice to people and highlight practices that generate valuable social and cultural capital. This can contribute to the cohesive, harmonious society, that is so much hoped for.

When I revisited the neighbourhood east of Qianmen Dajie in April 2013, surprisingly, most inhabitants were still there. It seemed that the construction craze had come to a grinding halt. The once omnipresent *chai*-character 拆 (demolish) was nowhere to be seen. When I cycled out of the neighbourhood, I did see one big character on a house: xiu 修, meaning 'restore'. There is room now for architects like Wang Shu, who uses traditional techniques and materials to address contemporary challenges in urban planning.

When in the 1980s and 1990s, Confucianism was suggested as an alternative social basis, Jenner saw this "as a symptom of the depth of the crisis"[9] and Tam characterized Confucian discourse as "psychologically and politically repressive."[10] In reaction to cultural essentialism, isn't it instead possible to prize the variety of Chinese value systems, and explore how they can strengthen social cohesion in a pluricultural society? Thick ethnographic description, with knowledge of Chinese value systems, can contribute to dialogue. Biehl and Locke asked how ethnographers can effectively bring their material to technocrats and policy makers. According to Bourdieu, "collective mobilization cannot succeed without a minimum of concordance between the *habitus* of the mobilizing agents."[11] This assumption also holds for researchers who observe social dynamics and frame the dialogue.

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Notes

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