

Don't Underestimate the Rice Fields

Juan Du

In Shenzhen there are rice fields and then, without any intermediate condition, the metropolis.¹

In observation of the current stagnating practice of contemporary architecture and urbanism, Rem Koolhaas has lamented the lack of optimism once exhibited by Le Corbusier's grand vision of the modern city starting from scratch, *tabula rasa*. In Koolhaas's enthusiastic search for the next model of urban development, Shenzhen was heralded as the miracle city that leapt from *nothing* to a large metropolis without any intermediary steps. Certainly, he is not alone in this assumption: ask anyone who has ever heard of Shenzhen and most will tell you that it is a young city with plenty of bling and no history. Since the year 2000, Shenzhen has had higher GDP per capita and a higher rate of economic growth than Beijing or Shanghai, exceeded only by neighboring Hong Kong. Presently, Shenzhen has amassed a population of 12 million from an original number that is commonly perceived as dismissible, or by Mr. Koolhaas' account, zero. However, had it begun as a true *tabula rasa*, Shenzhen could hardly exist as we know it today. The pervasive legend of Shenzhen's development does not accurately represent the complex and unique processes of the territory's urban growth and transformation.

Shenzhen was called into existence in 1979 with the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone under the grand vision of then Premier Deng Xiao-Ping. Some 2000 km² of territory in China's Pearl River Delta region were chosen, which was occupied by several thousand agrarian villages at that time. These villages had cultivated the regional land and water for hundreds of years and each village collectively owned the land of their living settlements and farmlands. Under Deng's rousing slogan of *To Get Rich is Glorious*, Shenzhen was designated to become the Chinese government's controlled experiment of *Capitalism with Socialist Character* where the generation of wealth rules the day. The central government eventually purchased



Fig. 1: Areal view of the Shenzhen region.

all land from the villages. Payment varied depending on individual negotiations. When money was given, the land value was calculated at a rural farming land price. In most cases, each male member of the villages received a plot of land to build a private residence as compensation. The designated land parcels were clustered together, mostly on the communal grounds of the original villages. Considering the issue of the villages settled, the government went about the serious and profitable business of turning the rice fields and fishing ponds into a brand-new and super-modern city. If that was the end to the history of the original villages, Koolhaas et al. would have been mostly correct, and we would have missed an opportunity to examine the remarkable development of resilient self-organization and a powerful display of informal urbanization.

At a glance, present-day Shenzhen is a textbook example of a centrally planned modern city with large distinct districts of zoned developments linked by high-speed vehicular arteries set within manicured lush greenery. The city's fast-paced urban development is applauded and emulated as a monumental precedent of modern urban planning in Asia. However, within this planned landscape there exist hidden pockets of anomalous developments packed with illegal construction, substandard housing, and colorful nightlife. Dubbed *Villages in the City*, these are the resilient remnants of the former dismissed villages.

¹ Rem Koolhaas, et al., *Mutations* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), p. 318.