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# Shenzhen's Urban Villages: Dialogic cultural landscapes and resilient rituals

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SHENZHEN'S URBAN VILLAGES

Dialogic cultural landscapes and resilient rituals

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#### ABSTRACT

Rapid urbanisation is drastically reshaping our environment, destabilising traditional connections to place and notions of community, and with these the relationship between place and identity. In this context, how do we make sense of such change and how do we orient ourselves when prior notions of place and identity are disrupted or lost? To address such questions this paper will draw upon Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, and through themes of mutuality, simultaneity, malleability and mobility examine concepts of cultural landscape, nature and ritual.

To pursue our study of this condition we have sited ourselves in the dramatically and rapidly transformed landscape of urban Shenzhen. The scale and speed of economic shifts and morphological transformations of the landscape have resulted in the contemporary phenomenon of the urban village, a trace of the past that remains within the present day city. These urban villages will be a focal point for our discussion, advanced through the use of narrative inquiry examining the viewpoints of those inhabiting Shenzhen, and reinforced through a review of discourse on cultural landscape. Through this, insights are revealed into the dialogical nature of the relationship people have with landscape.

Exploring further, we find that landscape both as a physical construct and as a concept is malleable, both shifting in response to and representing social aspirations and needs. This suggests that the way people orientate themselves or identify themselves can often be understood by the performances they pursue in engaging with landscape.

**Keywords:** cultural landscape, dialogical, malleability, mobility, mutuality, ritual, simultaneity

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ZOE LATHAM – ROBERT BROWN

## SHENZHEN'S URBAN VILLAGES

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### Dialogic cultural landscapes and resilient rituals

*'All things are in one way similar, and in another way different.'*

*(Chuang-tzu,<sup>2</sup> cited in Kao-Mei 1978: 286)*

#### INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the contemporary phenomenon of China's urban villages, using Shenzhen as a point of reference. Shenzhen and the wider Pearl River Delta has undergone dramatic changes evidenced in shifts in economic activity and its marked presence on the landscape, magnified by the massive scale and rapid speed of these transformations. This condition has made more visible and accentuated the meaning these urban villages have, seen in how their inhabitants maintain an inherited cultural landscape amidst profound transformation of place. Previous studies of Shenzhen's urban villages investigated the role urban villages play in the city's economic transformation by providing informal and affordable migrant workers' housing. This paper introduces a different perspective through exploring representations of socio-cultural identity. More specifically, this paper asks how once rural communities, now embedded within *uber*-urban Shenzhen, make sense of the changing, intensely urban landscape. This paper will examine the urban villagers' (re)defining of their cultural landscape through the cognitive and ritualized acts they perform to orient themselves within their changed environment.

Two key elements frame this discussion. The first is a setting out of key themes drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, which are then used as a frame of reference to examine key concepts of cultural landscape, nature and ritual. Second is a narrative inquiry which explores inhabitation within the urban villages and the wider Shenzhen urban fabric. Situating these concepts within a dialogical framework recognises the criticality of the relationship between things, and how the concepts of cultural landscape, nature and ritual all reflect a dialogic mutuality, simultaneity and potential for change.

This inquiry illustrates the dialogical nature of the relationship people have with their changed, and still changing, urban landscape. This is reflected in inhabitants' and communities' ability to adapt and make sense of a changing environment / cultural landscape through a pre-existing relation to place and intrinsic ritualized behaviours. This inquiry equally makes an argument for a more dialogical understanding of cultural landscape.

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<sup>2</sup> Chuang Tzu was an influential 4th Century B.C. Chinese philosopher.

## METHODOLOGY OF THE PROJECT

There were three key actions pursued in a body of work which underpins this text: initial, informal work; a review of key concepts revealed by this work through an adopted lens of dialogism; and a narrative inquiry and narrative analysis as a framework to examine our case study of Shenzhen's urban villages. These are outlined briefly in the paragraphs below.

### Initial, Informal Work and Observations

Shenzhen and the wider Pearl River Delta is a context both authors have engaged with through architectural practice, education and volunteerism. Urbanisation of this region is rapidly transforming the landscape from rural to urban and is a particularly destabilising condition for communities. The phenomenon of the urban village is a unique product of China's urbanisation, built by and for rural communities in the city. Our initial work within various projects revealed key recurring themes: mutuality, simultaneity, and change in the form of both malleability and mobility. Concurrently, what also emerged in our early engagement was the significance of three key concepts: cultural landscape, nature and ritual.

### Literature Review Through a Lens of Dialogism

The themes of mutuality, simultaneity, malleability and mobility echoed for us our previous readings of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. We understand Bakhtin's dialogism as concerned with 'consummation, or how parts are shaped into wholes (Holquist 1990: x),' positioning as key the relationship between things and their potential for making wholes. Drawing upon previous work (Brown 2015a, Brown 2015b), dialogism was instrumental as a cognitive lens to better comprehend emergent Chinese conceptions of cultural landscape and nature, which differ from historic Western<sup>3</sup> conceptions of the same. Dialogism was also useful in delineating ritual as a cultivating praxis.

### Narrative Inquiry and Thematic Analysis

The concepts present in our text grew out of previous work in the field, generating a notional space of inquiry; these were further articulated in a mutually informing process through the narrative inquiry. Clandinin writes of the relational dimension of narrative inquiry:

*'Narrative inquirers cannot bracket themselves out of the inquiry but rather need to find ways to inquire into participants' experiences, their own experiences as well as the co-constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process. This makes clear that, as narrative inquirers, inquirers, too, are part of the metaphoric parade (Clandinin–Connelly, 1998).' 'They too live on the landscape and are complicit in the world they study (Clandinin 2006).'*

Collated narratives, with further reference to relevant literature, were interrogated through the lens of the dialogical themes of mutuality, simultaneity, malleability and mobility; these interrogations are summarised below.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'Western' is introduced here with caution; such terminology has historically been utilized as a cultural point of self-reference to distinguish the other. Any un-critical use overlooks how such terms have been manipulated by both East and West to serve cultural, economic and political ideologies; it equally fails to acknowledge the intrinsic nature of culture not as fixed entities but rather as transient, shifting and fluctuating. See for example: Brown 2011, Brown 2015, and Brown–Maudlin 2012.

## DIALOGICAL READING OF CULTURAL LANDSCAPE, NATURE AND RITUAL

To clarify our reliance upon Bakhtin's dialogism, we will draw upon discourse that introduces and delineates key aspects of it. Dialogism has been suggested as the global concept of Bakhtin's thinking (Renfrew 2015); distinguishing and underpinning his thinking was an 'extraordinary sensitivity to the immense plurality of experience (Holquist 1981: xx).' Bakhtin guides us away from a monological, totalizing and thus immutable perspective of any one thing. Rather, he emphasises the reciprocity of one thing in relation to another (Holquist 1990). At the same time, 'Bakhtin was not sympathetic to the ultimate fusion or erasing of differences (Emerson 1984: xxxii),' nor a reduction into dualisms; of value was the co-presence of disparate things *and* their interaction (Emerson 1984). Intrinsic to this relationship is its unfinalizability, and remaining open to new discourses (Holquist 1986). These three aspects of reciprocity, co-presence, and unfinalizability are explored further below, under the themes of mutuality, simultaneity, and malleability and mobility, and frame later discussion in our text.

### Dialogism as Mutuality

Underpinning *dialogism* is a recognition that entities are primarily defined by their relations to others, even between differences. Dialogism proposes that one entity cannot be complete in and of itself without an other. 'For Bakhtin "the whole" is not a finished entity; it is always in a relationship (Emerson 1984: xxxix).' Entities are defined dialogically; i.e., they are primarily defined by their relationship to other entities. By way of example, our identity as individuals is not generated only autogenically; who we are is equally defined through our relationship with parents, siblings, partners, friends, colleagues, and even acquaintances. Similarly, others are defined through their relationship with us. Ames extends such thinking, highlighting that all entities require others as a necessary condition for being what they are. 'Each particular is a consequence of every other, such that there is no contradiction in saying that each particular is both self-determinate and determined by every other particular' (Ames 1989: 120).

Bakhtin expands upon this mutually defining relationship noting that 'our practical everyday speech is full of other people's words' (Bakhtin 1984: 195), which remain present in an expanded and mutually informing discourse. Yet rather than a passive re-transmission, 'someone else's words introduced into our own speech inevitably assume a new (our own) interpretation and become subject to our evaluation of them (*ibid*).' Any discourse is directed both from our own reference *and* with reference towards another's speech. Bakhtin refers to this phenomenon as being *double-voiced* (*ibid*). Through this we understand any one thing not unto itself, but in its relationship with another thing, even where one thing can even be read as another thing.

### Dialogism as Simultaneity

Intrinsic to the above is the possibility for disparate even conflicting things to be simultaneously present. Crucial here is that the multiple elements' relationship is neither dialectic nor dualistic. Regarding the former, Bakhtin was openly critical of Hegel's construct of the positioning of a thesis and its antithesis together, from which would emerge either one or the other, or some form of unified hybrid, i.e., a synthesis (Bakhtin 1984).

Regarding the latter, Ames (1989) has challenged dualism's tendency towards one of the pair having supremacy over the other.

Echoing the construct of inclusive disjunction, what is posited is a condition in which two alternative, even conflicting truths may both be true. Yet their common presence is not merely an accommodation of another. As Bakhtin (1984: 189) suggests, *'two embodied meanings cannot lie side by side like two objects – they must come into inner contact; that is they must enter into a semantic bond.'* Through this one entity can obtain significance because of this adjacency, so that even brief moments or physical fragments become more pronounced in relation to some simultaneous other. Helpful to our understanding of simultaneity is de Certeau's (1984) proposition that one individual may hold more than one perception, even at the same time. The individual can shift between different meanings depending on the situation, including between an internal, imagined perception and an external reality (Bakhtin 1990).

### Dialogism as Malleability and Mobility

Bakhtin's dialogism also recognises the potentiality of change. A *dialogic* view opens us up to the potential of a thing's *'unfinishedness and the inexhaustibility of our further dialogic interaction with it... We can take it into new contexts, attach it to new material, put it into a new situation in order to wrest new answers from it, new insights into its meaning'* (Bakhtin 1981: 346–347). Here any one concept is malleable, open to change, or in Bakhtin's words *unfinalized*. Rather than being finalized from within, all things change through their interrelation with others (Bakhtin 1984). Equally, concepts are mobile and can be relocated from one context to another.

Critical to note is that not only are ideas open to change, but concurrently any one person can him/herself be open to change, even defining a sense of self in dialogue within overarching narratives (Bakhtin 1981). Moving away from discourse which would delimit the individual to abstractions within general and reductive constructions (Benhabib 1992), what is posited is a dialogical condition in which individuals are framed both by shared discourses *and* through authoring their own ongoing and evolving narrative (Brown 2015).

These themes frame our dialogical (re)reading of inherited concepts of cultural landscape, nature and ritual which follow. Our intention is not to redefine these concepts; rather, it is to emphasise their dialogical qualities.

### Dialogical Reading of Cultural Landscape

Inherited conceptions of landscape in Western discourse have characterised it, through the originating influence of 16<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch painting of idealised landscapes, as an objectified scene (Corner 1999, Jackson 1986). Yet as Roe (2014: 241) recognises, *'landscape is no longer seen simply as a view or a scene, a static background.'* More recent writing posits understandings of landscape as defined not only by the visual, nor romanticized representations, but equally by what people do there (Corner 1999). Humans are participants within that landscape, acting upon it and actively engaging with it. This conceptual (re)transformation has carried through to a more complex understanding of landscape as an inclusive "field" of connective tissue that undergoes sequences of socio-cultural processes and events (Wall 1999).

Landscape becomes meaningful via interaction with it (Roe–Taylor 2014), through what Wylie (2007) describes as practices of landscape, including those grounded in the everyday such as walking. Roe (2014: 251) adds that *“landscape can be seen as a cultural process; something more than a topographical material entity, and more than something external to the individual to be perceived as ‘a view.’”* Thinking on cultural landscape has however extended beyond discussion of actions enacted within it and the meaning such actions emplace on landscape. This is reflected in UNESCO’s category of associative cultural landscape, which gives value to *‘the powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element rather than material cultural evidence, which may be insignificant or even absent’* (UNESCO, *Cultural Landscapes*). This concept is further delineated by Roe (2014: 245) who comments on ‘imaginary or representative cultural landscapes’ in which *‘the landscapes have become symbolic,’* where the *‘relationship with the physical place is often minimal; the conception of such landscapes may in fact bear little relationship with the actuality of the place.’* As Roe (2014: 247) adds, the identity of a landscape *‘may be an illusory construct over time rather than something based on a physical relationship with landscape.’* This conception evokes a quality of mutuality; that landscape, or even fragmentary elements of it, can be understood in relation to another, not present, landscape.

Evolved definitions of cultural landscape reflect a nuanced understanding of it not as a given condition, but as something intrinsically dynamic. Just as humans act on the landscape, transforming its physicality, so too through their actions and conceptualisations they can transform their emotional, mental and/or spiritual sense of the cultural landscape. This suggests that the way people orientate themselves towards the landscape is not fixed, but rather we are ourselves are malleable in how we interact with it physically and non-physically. As Speak (2014) suggests, our conception of a cultural landscape can be carried with us, projected from within as a framework with which we view any new landscape.

Extending our dialogical emphasis, we observe a shift from a view of landscape as totalized object to a more subjective view that recognises landscape as involving active, multiple relationships. Concurrently, we recognise the greater awareness afforded the category of associative cultural landscape. Indeed, Roe (2014: 264) posits that recent discourse suggests *“that perhaps it is most useful to talk about ‘relationships’ with landscape rather than ‘interactions,’ where ‘interaction indicates some kind of activity, while relationship indicates a connection.”* She adds that *‘landscape is often described as ‘perceived by people’ and is thus inherently a cultural construct of the mind or emotions (CoE 2000, Fairclough 2012).’* Wylie (2007) suggests a similar emphasis, noting landscape is seen and experienced as a projection of cultural meaning.

What is ostensibly being posed here is a valuing of connections fostered by the intangible as much if not more than a tangible materiality and a physical interaction with it. While we value this discussion (evidenced by our discussion of mutuality), we want to problematize momentarily the possibility of giving primacy to associational connections. Underlying our concern is a wariness of any compartmentalization implied by UNESCO’s categorisation of cultural landscapes, and equally a wariness of prioritizing any one categorical reading. This concern acknowledges a Western intellectual predisposition towards categorization and a seeming need to decipher and normalize definitive meanings, manifested in the drawing up of boundaries and territories (Barthes 1982). While useful to navigate conditions and negotiate meaning, categorization can also put in place narrow,

fixed definitions that do not accommodate ambiguities (Brown–Maudlin 2012). We need to be wary of the reductive nature of categories, and consider the possibility of multivalence in any one condition, and relations across multiple conditions.

We advocate a more dialogical understanding, recognising the multivalent nature of landscape. To consider a particular location and talk of one landscape representing one category may be limiting. In opposition, we argue for a need to think of the possibility of any one place as presencing multiple landscapes simultaneously. While internalised (and communicated) mental associations are critical, equally critical in our understanding of place is the physicality of the landscape and what we do in it, including through everyday performances of and experiencing through the body (which we will explore shortly in discussion of ritual). In a more dialogical reading it is about the potential for two or even three things to operate simultaneously and inform each other.

Such thinking is echoed in how Chinese culture has historically conceptualised cultural landscape. *'For the Chinese, it is taken for granted that all landscapes are cultural as they are humanly conceived images of nature and deeply involve cultural and social constructions. In practice, it is also hard for the Chinese to accept World Heritage cultural landscapes only as cultural properties because this threatens the inextricable connection of nature with landscape and cosmological beliefs'* (Heng 2012).

While a defining aspect of a cultural landscape is the meaning placed upon it through human inhabitation, simultaneously a reciprocal meaning is emplaced by the landscape on those who choose to inhabit that place (Lovell 1998). This thinking echoes various writers who have observed that while we define places, our places equally define us, and subsequently becoming part of our identity. Lovell writes of this simultaneity when stating *'we enter a landscape and turn it into a place which we are no longer able to abstract from ourselves'* (Lovell 1998: 8).

### Dialogical Reading of Nature

This dialogical emphasis is equally reflected in our considerations of nature and ritual (the latter is briefly considered in the next section). Historically Western conceptualisations situated landscape, and the nature within it, as distinct from places of human settlement. Nature was something wild and untamed, beautiful yet threatening (Roe–Taylor 2014). Such a perspective rendered nature as something to be kept at a distance and looked upon, and to be manipulated and controlled. At best it was something to be cared for and maintained in an act of stewardship (Brecher 2000); in this sense it remained detached from the human self. Such conceptions echo views dating back to the West's Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman legacy of a dualistic separation of humans and nature, with man placed over nature (Callicott–Ames 1989).

Our understanding of nature has moved on; echoing landscape, there is now greater recognition of nature as something not to be challenged, but rather to be worked *with*. More significant has been the (re) emergence in a philosophical sense of ourselves as part of nature (Callicott 1989). Head (2012) takes this further, noting that we need more relational perspectives, and not simplistic dualisms of human/non-human or culture/nature.



This shift echoes Chinese conceptions, which do not see nature as something separate from us, but rather that the self is internalised in nature, just as nature is internalised in the self – i.e., they are mutually present, independent and at same time informing each other. The environment is understood ‘as an immediate dimension of ourselves’ (Ames 1989: 142). Our discussion of mutuality further resonates here, with delineation of the Chinese worldview as open, dynamic and transformational, in which nature is characterized by *‘concord rather than discord and convergence rather than divergence’* (Tu 1989: 71). An *‘aesthetic appreciation of nature is neither an appropriation of the object by the subject nor an imposition of the subject on the object, but the merging of the self into an expanded reality through transformation and participation’* (Tu 1989: 77).

Before going too far in our praise we need to acknowledge that Chinese culture’s relationship with nature has also been marked by its impact on the landscape, and also acknowledge critiques of any over-romanticisation of Chinese attitudes towards nature. Tuan has challenged Western humanists’ ‘bias in favour of that country’s Taoist and Buddhist traditions’ (Tuan, cited in Hargrove 1989: xvli). Tuan (ibid) further notes that *‘the ordinary Chinese through their long history [have] engage[d] in gigantic transformations of the environment.’* Thus it is no surprise to read of current Chinese government policy of building a sea wall along its entire coastline, with over 50% of it now completed with devastating impacts on agriculture (e.g., fishing) and wildlife (Stallard 2014).

In light of the above, we find it prudent not to rely on a romanticised account of historic Chinese attitudes of nature. While referencing it here as a means of placing our discourse into context, drawing on dialogism we find it more useful to position humans and nature as simultaneously present, each independent but concurrently interactive and mutually defining each other.

### Dialogical Reading of Ritual

UNESCO (Intangible Cultural Heritage) identifies rituals as key ‘habitual activities that structure the lives of communities and groups,’ and which ‘remind a community of its worldview and history.’ Expanding on this, we see ritual as a tool for understanding cultures, and as a malleable “tool” by which all ‘people make and remake their worlds’ (Bell 1992). Useful here is identification of rituals as practices that cultivate who we are (Parkes 1995), and as reaffirming the meaningfulness of life by reaffirming one’s understanding of life (Plutschow 1999).

Ritual practice encultures a distinct sensibility towards the world, and to people, places and things within it. This recognises that a sensibility towards the world may be generated both through the body as well as through conscious thought, a possibility which has only recently gained currency in the West, which has traditionally valued the mind over the body. In Asian philosophy, such thinking extends back to Confucius, who believed that one could cultivate the whole self through engagement of the body in ritual practices (Parkes 1995). Equally relevant is the generation of a sense of place through ritual practice, through which meaning is emplaced upon space (Brown 2013).

Adopting Bakhtin’s thinking on the interrelationship of things, a dialogical use of ritual understands it as having relevance beyond the ritual itself. Additionally, it is a cultural agent of action which can equally give

an insight into how cultures interact with their landscapes, and normalise action within the landscape. Ritual is valuable; it reveals both how people structure an understanding of the world, and how they want to understand the world. By engaging with ritual we can understand how others see and experience the world. It also recognises that what is done at the personal scale has meaning on a wider scale. Through ritualization we come to understand and remember a place as the site of the ritual act (Kawano 2005). Through identifying the ritual act with a place, we conceptually re-schematize that place (Bell 1992). Inherent within this is a (re)structuring (or production) of space. Through ritual, we emplace (or project) on to that place our way of seeing and interpreting the world (framed by our beliefs, prior experiences and values embedded within the ritual); such emplacement enables us to both situate and orient ourselves within that place (Leach 2005). This emplacement of meaning onto place, and a simultaneous affording of possibility by the place to us, reflects Catherine Bell's (1992) construct of critical circularity. These are not two separate, monological discourses; rather they form a dialogue, in which each informs the other.

Equally intrinsic to rituals is the potential for malleability and mobility. 'Rituals...not only produce landscapes by imbuing space with moral values, ideas and perceptions, but are also capable of changing them (Probst 2002: 179). The possibility that place can shape our physical and cognitive engagement with it, and that we can concurrently through our acts and thinking re-schematize that place, evidences that neither is fixed nor immutable, but rather that both ritual and place are malleable. The relation of ritual to place evidences the capacity for change of both ritual and place. Ritual is equally transmutable. Kawano (2005: 8) suggests that in helping structure our daily lives, ritual also enables people to 'fashion a strategic context for interaction and appropriation' (Kawano 2005: 8), and that the meaning generated through ritualized acts within a distinct place can actually extend beyond their site of enactment (Kawano 2005).

Bell (1992) carries this thinking forward, noting that once internalized, ritualized practices can be strategically manipulated in response to new spatial-temporal conditions. Key here is that ritualized acts can literally generate a world view that frames how we approach our relationships with other spaces, people, events and ideas beyond the site of ritual, and as Bourdieu (1977) suggests, with changing conditions in the future. Rituals are thus better understood not as static practice, but more as transformable, creative and generative (Bell 1992: 92).

## CASE STUDY – BACKGROUND, METHODOLOGY, RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Background

A range of experiences by this paper's authors situates the above discussion in the context of Southern China. Zoe Latham spent two years living, working and volunteering in Shenzhen, China, while Robert Brown has spent time leading student investigations of both traditional housing and urban environments for the past three years in Southern China. Throughout this time both informal dialogues with colleagues and the local community in these locations, and more focused investigations together with students have been pursued. This work revealed the presence and significance of concepts of cultural landscape, nature's place as intrinsic to this landscape, and the role rituals play in generating and reinforcing the community's cultural landscape;

equally exposed was a dialogical quality within these concepts. The unique phenomenon of Shenzhen's urban villages presences these concepts, both through the physical landscape and the intangible essence of everyday living within this changing context.

### Contextualising Shenzhen's Urban Villages

Shenzhen was once a cluster of small, rural villages orientated around a network of rivers and paddy fields in which lychees, oysters and vegetables were cultivated. The name Shenzhen is itself agrarian, derived from the marking of the land by farmers with deep—"shen" furrows—"zhen" ( 深圳 ) (Wu 2014). Since the 1980's, indeed within the lifetime of one generation, the massive and rapid growth of Shenzhen and with it the wider Pearl River Delta has completely urbanised the landscape, negating the original inhabitants' previous connections with their agrarian setting. The city has engulfed these traditional villages, forming an extreme and unique urban reality (Smith 2014).

At first glance the old farming villages of Shenzhen have disappeared – yet in reality their physical presence has persisted in a new form of urban agglomeration called an urban village (Liau 2014). Due to the loss of agricultural land, the villagers abandoned farming. The retention of the villagers' housing plots was an opportunity for farmers to continue to make a living off their land – albeit in a non-agricultural sense. Villagers extruded their housing plots vertically, adding stories to their houses to provide affordable housing for migrant populations, low rent commercial space and employment opportunities, educational facilities and medical care for villagers (Hao 2012). The villages thus have remained a distinct feature of Shenzhen's urban landscape.

In morphological terms, the self-built urban villages have physical and social characteristics common to everyday patterns of collective living in China, while providing a degree of continuity with the rural heritage of inhabitants. The multi-functionality of traditional courtyards 'provide a space in which neighbours maintain contact with each other,' a place where 'friendship and cooperation naturally bloom (Wang 2000: 4).' The inside/ outside nature of spaces formed by a traditional courtyard house continues to be marked by everyday practices of using these communal spaces. While pertinent to the discussion, the perpetuation and transformation of the courtyard house is not so significant, as the pre-existing rituals remain more-or-less intact. What is more significant to this study is how the community has maintained a sense of conceptual continuity with their past despite the transformation of the physical presence of their prior wider landscape.

In the context of the above, it's easy to assume the villagers' connection to their previous cultural landscape would be lost, given the negation of the physical landscape and physical actions within it. The land was once worked by hand, weather and seasons defined workdays and crops directly fed inhabitants, but this is no longer the case; yet a sense of connection remains. It is argued the transformation of the surrounding physical landscape has actually strengthened the villagers' cultural identity by reinforcing a notable difference from urban Shenzhen's cultural and phenomenological norms (O'Donnell 2008).

Even though there are very few physical remains of agrarian life, the shift from rural to urban has not diminished all village-based cultural identities. The tightly packed enclaves of the urban village are full of street life, pockets of public spaces, and lively pedestrian activities – a vibrant urbanity that is rarely found outside



Figure 1. Da Fen Urban Village Street Life – market stalls, trading, historic traces, community gathering and playground.

Photos by Zoe Latham, 2014



of these enclaves in Shenzhen. Many of the rural people and ways of life remain, making urban villages one of the rare places in the city that indigenous socio-cultural actions/rituals remain. Rural traditions or cultural dispositions continue to inform property ownership and businesses, often revolving around family and neighbour relations, retaining a very local socio-cultural essence to the urban village. Yet what remains- most significantly for discussion here- is a way of conceptualising landscape.

Building off the prior informal discussions noted above was an explicit investigation carried out in the form of a narrative inquiry with inhabitants of Shenzhen's Urban Villages. While the former revealed the overarching narrative of the inhabitants' cultural landscape, understanding of nature and the role of ritual, the latter provided deeper insight into the nuances of the meaning of each as situated in Shenzhen's urban villages.

### Narrative Inquiry and Thematic Analysis

A phenomenological discussion was shaped through a dialogical meaning-making process between the inhabitants of these places as participants and the authors as researchers/observers over time. Bakhtinian conceptions of dialogism (1981) influenced a "narrative turn" that saw the study of narrative increasingly permeate disciplines. Stories have always been a way people create meaning in their lives and narrative inquiry embraces the fact human beings live and tell stories about their living (Clandinin 2006). The narratological process is increasingly recognised as a useful tool for the interrogation and understanding of human action (Reissman 1993). This narrative approach has been a way of understanding the collective experience of a place as well as a group's cultural milieu (Clandinin–Connelly 2000).

A thematic analysis of early informal discussions revealed overarching narratives or themes of the inhabitants' conceptions of cultural landscape. Thematic analysis has proven useful in illustrating *'how stories can have effects beyond their meanings for individual story tellers, creating possibilities for social identities, group belonging, and collective action'* (Reissman 2008: 54). These themes prompted subsequent, more explicit narratives that provided deeper insights into nuances of meaning of their cultural landscape. In this application of narrative inquiry, the data (participant's stories) was interpreted through the thematic lens of emergent dialogic theory- conceptions of cultural landscape, nature and ritual. This form of analysis does not focus on the structure of narrative, but purely the content in an effort to generate a shared or collective understanding. Participants in the narrative inquiry had resided in Shenzhen, China although many had relocated from other provinces. Participants were between 20 and 65 years old, both male and female, from rural and urban backgrounds, and most participants were professionals.

The questions posed were based around connections to nature, in particular human/cultural action or thought in response to nature within the urban context. These open-ended questions aimed to uncover potentially subtle daily rituals performed, or emotions people might feel in order to re-orientate themselves within the rapidly changing rural-urban context. Listed below are the questions put to participants as a way of initiating a narrative.



Question 1.

*In your city, how do you connect with nature?*

Question 2.

*Are there any things you do every day that connect you to nature? Or remind you of nature?*

Question 3.

*Are there any countryside traditions that are still practised in the city?*

Question 4.

*If you are from the countryside, does anything in the city remind you of the countryside?*

Question 5.

*Tell us your favourite story or experience about being in nature.*

In what follows we have selected a number of distinct comments made by participants, representative of the respondents as a whole, that illustrate our thematic analysis of mutuality, simultaneity, malleability and mobility. Their narratives illustrate the dialogical nature of the participants' conception of and relation to cultural landscape and nature, and evidence the role ritual plays in formation of each of these two concepts. These are then expanded upon in a phenomenological-based discussion with reference to wider discourse.

One aspect of the participants' narratives describes experiences that highlight ways in which inhabitants enact both selective rituals at seasonal celebrations (e.g., the making and eating of special foods, and the lighting of fireworks) and everyday rituals to reinforce and evoke their conceptualisation of their cultural landscape. While of interest, the former has been explored elsewhere (e.g., Feng–Du 2015). It is the latter, and how people orient themselves through ritual within their new environment on an everyday basis, that is the focus of our discussion below.

### Mutuality

*"Sometimes, no matter where you are, even if you are in the city, a little thing from nature could lighten you up, that is the power of nature."*

The above comment was made by one participant making reference to *little things* from nature being important and having impact on their emotion. From this comment one can assert the context of that reference is not significant and the scale or quality of that *little* reference to nature is not significant, yet it can potentially open a window to some greater, abstracted concept of nature. Roe describes this mutuality as relevance or mirroring, 'it is not always the high quality of the landscapes that determine whether landscapes are highly valued, but the relevance to and mirror of a particular culture that seems to be important (Roe 2014: 247).'

The same notion of mutuality is reflected in descriptions below between the *little things* and their (re) conceptions of *nature* into a broader sense of the meaning.

*"One evening, me and my friend were walking at the side of the road, and noticed a twinkle flash to our eyes. We had not taken much notice at the first glance, and we continued to walk a few yards more, and realized the twinkles are fireflies; they were dancing around by the small lawn which belongs to the apartment. We were getting excited, and very happy."*

*"Watching the trees, grass or sky to let myself not forget there is something beautiful over there."*

*"I have to walk to the mailbox to get the mail everyday. The mailbox is a bit away from the apartment. There are some small trees by the sidewalk. And some taller trees beside the apartments. That makes me connect to nature and reminds me of nature."*

*"If I see flowers and grass on the way or I heard bird call, nature will come to my mind, that's beautiful."*

*"When I get out of the office, I look up to the sky, to catch the beauty of sunset. In the evening, I enjoy jogging with the moon and stars."*

Participants give voice not only to conventional settings such as a rural scene or a city park but also individual fragments in which nature is immanent. *"The enduring use of wild and wilderness as concepts linked to ideas of 'pristine' nature"* (Roe 2014: 241) are less relevant here; nature in this context does not need to be bounded by our pre-conceived ideas of what constitutes nature. Even when seemingly far removed from nature, something seen from the road riding on a bicycle or even within a bus can bring relevance to some intangible meaning or cultural landscape,

*"Everyday I go to work either by bus or shared bike following the same route where there are very big trees and green grassy fields on both sides. There's also a small mountain park in my neighbourhood so the environment is very pleasing. Every day when I go to work I feel good and comfortable."*

These insights attest to the capacity of nature to be understood even as a fragmented form (such as a firefly, a tree or the moonlight). This accepts nature not as some preconceived whole, but open to varying forms of conception and associations of what landscapes mean to people (Smith–Jones 2007).

By considering the potentiality of a fragment of nature as a prompt for associations and conceptualisations, this alludes to another representation of nature, a remembered actual landscape, or an imagined landscape. This recognises the ability of things to:

*'have a dimensional character that goes beyond their materiality; on the one hand in and of itself they are icons that represent and signify something, and on the other hand they also obtain relevance in their composition and arrangement. That is to say, the monumentality is relevant by itself (as a monument), but also collectively as a combination by their association with people and by means of other characteristics of the landscape, be they other monuments, paintings or topographical features'* (Curtoni–Beron 2011, 110–111).

Considering the above in relation to participants' narratives, the *mirroring* between physical fragments of nature such as trees or moonlight represents and signifies something beyond just what it *is* but also the collective associations with other people and aspects of an imagined or remembered landscape. For instance, moonlight is an evocative fragment, prompting notions of openness and reflection. Similarly, when thinking of a tree, what is it in relation to? The fragment itself becomes significant in its ability to connect people to wider landscapes remembered or imagined and inherently cultural.

This mirroring, or mutuality, is reflective of inherited Chinese thinking. Western philosophical tradition emphasises objectivity and a faith in underlying rationalist principles. We see this played out from Euclidean and Cartesian thought, through natural law theorists to the Structuralists. Eastern philosophy by contrast em-

braces the subjective; rather than conveying a Western analytical, positivistic theory, valued is *'a metaphorical mode of knowing, an epistemological attempt to address the multidimensional nature of reality by comparison, allusion, and suggestion'* (Tu 1989: 69). This thinking relies not on logically demonstrated truth made tangible, but instead embraces the evocative metaphor, such as the fragment with associated meanings. It promotes not the scientific, but instead the aesthetic (Callicott–Ames 1989). Through this multi-dimensional nature, *'a linkage will always be found between any given pair of things in the universe. We may have to probe deeply to find some of the linkages, but they are there to be discovered'* (Tu 1989: 70).

This way of viewing the world is reflected in traditional Chinese aesthetic sensibilities. A prime example is present in T'ang poetry, in which manifold meaning is given emphasis – i.e., metaphoric relation and allusion dominate over analytic relation (Kao and Mei 1978). This illustration is expanded upon by Yu (1981: 220), who notes that *'almost all Chinese images, therefore, function...as illustrations or embodiments – whether of their semantic category or of an intellectual or affective meaning implicit in them.'* She further adds that in Chinese philosophical thought a sense of the transcendent was not something lying beyond that which was present, but rather was *'immanent in all things'* (Yu 1981: 221), and that such analogies lie latent waiting to be discovered, and are not manufactured (Yu 1981). Heng (2012) adds to this, noting a Chinese predilection for expressing meanings not in a direct way but rather through symbolism and metaphysical rhetoric. Heng (2012) further states that *'Subjectivity is at the centre of Chinese philosophies informing Chinese landscape culture, and that...Chinese landscape painting is another testimony to such subjectivity... (as) all landscape paintings are subjectively created and mixed with all the imaginings in an artist's mind.'*

The double-voiced nature of this relationship with nature is echoed in the participants' narratives revealed through our inquiry. Though seemingly fragmentary, the glimpses of elements within the urban landscape speak of another nature; it is not simply the fragment present before them that they experience, but equally another condition present in their minds as memory or imagining.

### Simultaneity

*"I could see from far the city skylines and from near the mountain range and reservoirs... And I loved my city more at that moment."*

In this utterance two disparate things come together; the city (or human or culture) and nature. These two aspects, seemingly conflicting, are presented and brought together in a simultaneous presence and even a mutual embrace. The participant relishes the view, considering the city and nature co-joined as a favourite view. Similarly, one participant shared a mutual experience of the body moving through the city,

*"The purpose of this walk is to sense the city's space with my own body. That is always my favourite part when I can see the whole city view in a mountain."*

Neither of the participants quoted above perceives their actions as a retreat from the city into nature; both are simultaneously valuing the city and nature, experiencing the city through the nature of body. While one thing may have a presence in its own right, this is about that thing as one *element* within a composition of relational things. Something may take on enhanced meaning in composition with/presence next to/in juxtapo-



sition with man-made context; in this context 'a specific object, because of shared cultural associations or the context in which it is placed, cries out to be read as something more' (Yu 1981: 219).

The city and nature are not mutually exclusive; through conceptions of cultural landscape both can be present simultaneously as an inclusive disjunction. Several participants made mention of their ability to navigate between cultural landscape, (present day) physical urban cultural landscapes and conceptualised or (past) remembered cultural landscapes.

*"Sometimes you can hear fireworks. They are banned in the city but you can still hear them sometimes, and it reminds me of childhood when we had fireworks."*

The above quote illustrates how remembered non-urban landscapes and rituals within those can permeate into the present day experience of the city. Smith and Jones describe this simultaneity as,

*"Systems of knowledge have developed over long periods of time in a particular place and are embedded in that place. They are systems of knowledge that have enabled [its inhabitants to live in landscape with multiple meanings] and to cognitively and/or spiritually navigate between different spaces and meanings."* (Smith and Jones 2007: 62)

There is significant mention throughout the narratives of re-energising through walking or jogging in nature, signifying these activities are more than just leisure or exercise; they are opportunities for reconnection with nature (whether fragments or perceived wholes). Participants tell stories of sensing the city's space with their own body – through sight, smell, sound and feelings. Participants speak of the importance of this in their comments,

*"I had a strong feeling of being alive when seeing such a great view."*

*"The people here are very fond of nature, and often go to the mountains in their leisure time ...to feel nature, and to feel the wonders and magnificence of nature."*

Ritualized behaviours have enabled a once agrarian community to situate itself within the now highly urbanised landscape of Shenzhen. This is realized not through shutting out the present day and retreating into the past, but rather through a dialogue grounded in ritual with people's present-day landscape. They have built themselves a cultural landscape grounded in their past that allows them to orient themselves in the rapidly changing context of Shenzhen and simultaneously connect with their cultural dispositions.

### Malleability and Mobility

*"There is a wetland park near where I live...the lotus pond is the most attractive in summer... there are no lights, but the stars and the frog's croaking...(I love the lotus pond). The lotus pond always reminds me of the countryside where I used to live. There was a lotus pond in front of my uncle's house. He had a boat in the pond to help catching fish and digging out lotus root for food."*

*"I was born in a small town in the south; a small town in China is actually the countryside. When I see some old man selling his own vegetables in the market or some children playing with stones on the side of the road, I am reminded of my memories of the countryside because this is an interesting game."*

The voices heard here are not simply passive in their engagement with place; through ritualization they take on an active role in the conceptualisation of cultural landscape. The experience of a prior cultural landscape and cultivated ritual practices sensitises the participant to similar fragments of that cultural landscape even if in a very different urban context. This attests to not only the role people can play, but also the mutability of both the rituals and cultural landscape. In these commentaries a number of ritualized behaviours are enacted in the respondents' everyday life, re-engaging and re-orientating them to a past life. Although the physical environment has changed, daily rituals allow the participant to make mental connections to memories (whether mental or body-based) of their natural environment. Roe expands upon these multi-landscape interactions:

*'In changing landscapes the contribution of serendipity is acknowledged in the synergies between people and nature that result in the cultural landscapes that are highly valued. These landscapes evolved because of intimate and fortuitous associations between communities, livelihoods and environments over time fulfilling what seems to be a deep-seated spiritual need to connect to the environment in ways that are meaningful (Roe 2014: 259).'*

Within the urban villages, rural activities, whether as festivals or everyday events, continue to have a presence and attest to their mobility. While present throughout the city, festivals are arguably more pronounced and more impassioned in the urban villages, marking the seasons, and thus the agricultural calendar; festivals continue to have presence and on-going relevance. As one participant notes, they provide a "country-side breath". Rural customs equally show mobility, moving from one place to another but still carrying a resonance. One participant is reminded of the countryside through the simple action of an old man selling his own vegetables in the market. For another, it is through carrying out a custom one can see in rural China of going out in the evening and meeting with neighbours, sitting under a tree or exercising.

The mobility and malleability of ritual allows people to respond to changing contexts, such as Shenzhen's rapidly urbanising landscape, through their own imaginings and memories. Ritual is posited as a malleable and mobile practice that frames how we engage with and give meaning to place, whether the site of the ritual itself or even beyond the site of the ritual. In times of change Selman emphasises 'the need for 'social reconnection' with landscape', but states '*reconnection may indeed require imaginings, the desire to create connections between the past and the future that requires valuing things such as traditional attitudes to landscape*' (Selman 2012: 142). Cultural landscapes are socially conceptualized or imagined and subsequently can be physically transformed; through ritual practice people build their own places – changing cultural landscapes over time (Tilley 1994).

This enactment is *dialogical*. In an immediate sense, they have embraced what the urban landscape has to offer them; yet concurrently they can project onto that landscape something of their past. They haven't turned away from their new urban environment, but rather have directly engaged with it. This is not about two landscapes merging into one, but rather that one worldview, or cultural landscape grounded in the agrarian, frames how they interact with and what they appropriate from another, urbanised landscape. In so doing, they (re)generate meaning of their previous life that they come to associate with their new, and different, landscape. Such rituals reaffirm their personal and cultural identity, reminding them who they were and still are.

These narratives suggest there doesn't need to be a particular physical landscape for people to enact their rituals within; connections to place (in this example nature) can be tenuous, even artificial. The important determination of a ritualized connection to nature within this cultural landscape is that ritual can be adaptive and resilient despite adverse changes to or shifts in its setting (Brown 2013), notably here a dramatic shift from a rural to an urban landscape.

## CONCLUSION

The ever-increasing and rapid urbanisation present in contemporary life has, and is, dramatically transforming our environment. It has disrupted inherited connections to place and integral to this our conceptualisation of our identity. To pursue our study of this condition we have sited ourselves in the dramatically and rapidly transformed landscape of urban Shenzhen and its urban villages, which are a trace of the past that remains within the present day city. Our study has been advanced through the use of narrative inquiry examining inhabitants' structuring of cultural landscape in the context of Shenzhen's recently urbanised landscape.

Exploring this condition, we have drawn upon Bakhtin's dialogism and definitions of landscape, cultural landscape and ritual. Analysis of a narrative inquiry through a Bakhtinian dialogic framework revealed that the concept of *mutuality* allows people within the city to use fragments of nature to relate to another, remembered cultural landscape. In addition, *simultaneity* allows people to hold multiple perceptions (past and present) of relations to cultural landscapes, both in their mind and through their lived experience. Lastly, *malleability* and more so *mobility* in the context of Shenzhen's urban villages recognises that people's perceptions and rituals can adapt and be relocated to new ritual contexts. Our analysis reveals ways people can control their cultural landscape, whether physically, conceptually, or through ritual enactment; people can also respond to change through holding multiple cultural landscapes in their mind and siting themselves within these.

Building again off dialogism, we recognise and embrace the proposition that things are defined by their relationship with others. Ritual has been used to examine our conceptualisation of cultural landscape; further revealed has been how ritual itself acts to structure how people schematize their landscape, both as individuals and as part of a shared cultural identity. We have also shown the ways in which ritualized behaviours have enabled a once agrarian community to adapt to and situate itself within the now highly urbanised landscape of Shenzhen. This is realized not through shutting out the present day and retreating into the past, but rather through a dialogue grounded in ritual with people's present-day landscape. They have built themselves a cultural landscape grounded in their past that allows them to orient themselves in the rapidly changing context of Shenzhen and simultaneously connect with their cultural dispositions. As landscapes around the world change in response to forces of increasing globalization and urbanisation, there is still much we have to learn about the dialogical and resilient potential of our conceptual and experiential relationship to place.

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