

Representations of Space and Practice in Shenzhen OCT Theme Parks, China

LI Xiaomei

Abstract

China's economic development and "market reforms" since the late 1970s has brought tremendous changes to its society. Starting with the special economic zones in southeastern coastal area, new urban space has emerged all over the country. Shenzhen Municipality, the first Special Economic Zone, was established in 1979 as an experimental space of "market reforms" and a showcase of the Open Door Policy. In the production of this new urban space of Shenzhen lies multilayered relationship between the global markets, the national reform policies and the China – Hong Kong relationships. Since the mid 1980s, the Chinese government started to promote tourism development. In 1984, the top cadres of Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council gave the development rights of "Overseas Chinese Town" (OCT) to a Chinese government funded travel agency in Hong Kong (i.e. Hong Kong China Travel Service). This paper aims to analyze the socio-spatial relations and socio-economic dynamisms behind the production and representations of OCT's urban space through a lens of multilayered relationships, by focusing on the first three theme parks opened in OCT, which are the "Splendid China" (opened in 1989), the "Shenzhen China Folk Culture Villages" (opened in 1991) and the "Window of The World" (opened in 1994).

Conceptually adopting human geographical perspectives on space and place, particularly the theories on the production of space by Henri Lefebvre, this paper analyzes the process and the historical-geographical condition of the production of OCT's urban space and explores the roles that the theme park space of OCT plays, as a tourist sight and a desired urban consuming center as well as a place lived by the minority performers. Splendid China, the first theme park opened in China, represents a Chinese nation with a continuous traditional past and a splendid landscape that can be imagined and celebrated as a coherent whole, by not only the mainlanders but also the overseas Chinese. At the Shenzhen China Folk Culture Villages, which was built to complete the image of "splendid china", ethnic culture in the form of objects and performing bodies are commercialized and gazed upon as cultural Others. However in the meanwhile, ethnic performers, by allowing the objectivizing gaze of the state-sponsored media, establish their identity and right to a voice in their own affairs, appropriating and turning, whenever possible, these objectivizing moves to their own benefit. The maintenance and assertion of minority "culture", no matter how exoticized or contrived, the negotiation and conduct over a better life in the city, no matter how trivial or hopeless, may be

seen as a form of resistance.

The theme park space of OCT is not only a conceptualized space designed and built by OCT's leaders and urban planners but also a representational space experienced and lived by tourist and ethnic performers. The process of the production of OCT and its theme park space is a process of spatial practice evolving both "representations of space" and "representational spaces" simultaneously. These two facets of the process are neither contradictory nor binary against one another. For instance, the manipulation of "representational spaces" such as the national heritage and landscape in the representations of "Splendid China" was motivated by the imagination of a new type of leisure space in Shenzhen Municipality, at the time when industrial development was still the mainstream. The theme park space of OCT, particularly the Window of the World became "representational spaces" of modernity and urbanization for the later developers in China. Hence Shenzhen might itself be considered one big theme park that holds "globalization" and "economic development" as its theme, representing a splendid success of the Chinese reforms.

The urban space of OCT, including the theme park space in Shenzhen and the urban places developed by OCT in other cities, is a social space produced in the context of the socialist Chinese government opening up to join the global markets and to seek a national identity. It is still an ongoing process. Just as the ethnic performers at the Folk Culture Villages appropriating and turning the tourists' objectivizing gaze to their own benefit by creating or changing their performances in favor with the tourists' needs, they also participate in the process of OCT's spatial practice as social agency. The perspectives of "representations of space" and "representational spaces" are neither of binary relations nor fixed. In the process of spatial practice, the two are rather interpenetrating and overlapping.

Key words: space, place, representation, ethnic minority performers, Overseas Chinese Town, Shenzhen Municipality, fieldwork, positionality