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**RE-DEFINING PLACE  
IN SOUTHERN  
FUJIAN:  
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MANSIONS AND  
ANCESTRAL HALLS  
RE-APPROPRIATE  
THE LOCAL FROM THE  
STATE**

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## **Re-defining Place in Southern Fujian:**

### **how overseas mansions and ancestral halls re-appropriate the local from the state**

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#### **Abstract**

In post-Mao China, as in many postsocialist countries, the withdrawal of the state from the control of production, the revival of markets and new international investments in rural areas have undermined older moral economies and collectivities based on collective property relations, allowing property rights to become “fuzzy”. This paper proposes that processes of place-making play an important part in struggles over social and normative orders, including property rights, which have ensued. Place-making is defined as the symbolic appropriation of the lived-in-environment by a collective, e.g. through the erection of focal markers. This not only *reflects* a given social and normative order but also *creates* the environment that makes a certain order more compelling than others. In post-Mao China, the reconstruction of ancestral halls and temples is a pervasive phenomenon in particular in the more developed coastal regions of the Southeast. The paper argues that what we find in these villages is a slow process, in which the “traditional place”, defined as the spatial setting of a community of kinship and worship and its institutions are re-appropriating power to define normative and social orders and notions of collectivity from the institutions of the local state. This has also involved the building of a new collective person out of collective property, whereby private property and socialist collective property are being transformed into lineage and temple property. This process is not independent of the state and local cadres but the cumulative outcome of the actions of villagers and state agents alike. I therefore propose the term colonisation (also because of its spatial overtones), rather than resistance, to characterise this increasing encroachment by local institutions on geographical, social and normative space formally controlled by state institutions.

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## Introduction

This paper proceeds from the assumption that an analysis of processes of place-making makes sense in the analysis of changing property relations and moralities, that is, the general analytical focus of our department. One of the fundamental problems of postsocialist “transition” has shown to be the popular acceptance of the new social, moral and normative order (and of the set of institutions in which it is embedded) introduced “from above”. Central to this systemic transformation after the collapse of state socialism has been the break-up and privatisation of socialist collective property. As Katherine Verdery writes, the top-down privatisation of socialist property had far more than just economic aims; it was the centrepiece of a project of “cultural engineering whose aim was to re-signify fundamental ideas about entitlements, accountability and responsibility in society” (Verdery 1999: 54). But, contrary to what many policy makers might have expected, many people in Eastern Europe and in the countries of the former Soviet Union did not happily endorse the return of private ownership. Rather, efforts to break up the cooperatives and privatise land failed to win local support and met with apparent returns to the past, e.g. in the form of voting members of the old nomenklatura back into power. Local struggles focussed not simply on economic aspects but more generally on the negative social effects of privatisation, such as a on the loss of social entitlements and the undermining of an existing moral economy (see, e.g. Burawoy and Verdery 1999).

Conventional anthropological usage defines property not as a “thing” but as a social relation. This definition directs attention to the interrelationship between property relations and a society’s social and normative order and between the distribution of property rights and political power. Property also plays an important part in state-society relations, since it is legal and political institutions that ultimately govern property rights. But, as Hann (1998: 5) argues, the conventional anthropological definition of property as a social relationship *versus* a “thing” might be too narrow, as relations of human beings *to* things often play a decisive role in the formation of social and collective identities. Changes of property rights in land are probably most crucial in social transformation as they relate to virtually all of these “socially effective” dimensions of property: land is a source of livelihood and means of production, it is “home”, state territory and lived-in environment, and, as the latter, not only a place governed by socio-spatial institutions but also a place that is imbued with a certain history, meaning and identity.

The following paper will focus on struggles over entitlements, social and normative order in rural post-Mao China as part of state-society processes. Changing property relations play a

central role here. But I will furthermore argue that *which* normative and social order appears as the more salient one, and *which* set of institutions is considered more legitimate, is also influenced by the setting, that is, by processes of place-making. Place-making can be defined as the symbolic appropriation of the lived-in-environment by a collective. This often includes the erection of focal markers or territorial rituals that inscribe boundaries and establish a sense of inside and outside (Feuchtwang 1998, 2000a). It is important to underline that place-making does not simply reflect the dominance of an existing order; suffusing a lived-in environment with a particular sense of history, meaning and identity creates a setting that renders a certain order more compelling than others. As Daniel Kertzer argues for political rituals in general: “What is important about the effects of ritual on cognition is as much what the rites lead us to ignore as what they lead us to see. Political rituals erase as much history from our memory as they inscribe on them. Far from simply projecting the political order onto the symbolic plane, ritual propagates a particular view of the political order” (Kertzer 1988: 87).

The relevance of these processes is especially evident in ethnic conflicts. Examples of (violent) efforts to “cleanse” places from a rivalling identity and sense of history, and thus to delegitimize another social, political and normative order, are, for example, the destruction of mosques in India by Hindu nationalists and in Bosnia by Serbs, the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban in Afghanistan and the annual parades of the Protestant Orange Order through catholic residential areas in Northern Ireland. But also nation-state building has always involved processes that redefine conceptions of place and that establish new boundaries both socially and geographically. Place-making here has served to override older forms of localism and socio-spatial orders and to create primary allegiance which the country, its political system and institutions. In all cases, processes of place-making aim at the relationship between centres and peripheries, the nature of power and the parameters of social existence and bonding in society (Wang 1995).

### **Property, Place and Moral Economies in Post-Mao China**

In many ways, and especially in comparison with other postsocialist states, post-Mao China appears an odd place. Decollectivisation started a decade earlier than elsewhere (already in the early 1980s) but the Communist Party remains in power. The Party has transformed itself, on the grounds of (in plain figures) highly successful economic reforms, from a Party representing national renewal through socialism to a Party representing national renewal through nationalism, economic performance and authoritarian leadership. The coastal regions

have witnessed the emergence of one of the fastest-growing market-driven economies in the world, yet, for two decades, the government has spurned to implement large-scale privatisation programmes, especially with regard to land. Furthermore, it is just in these most “modernised” regions of China where we find a revival of apparently traditional institutions and forms of identification, of temple communities and corporate kinship groups, which have in recent years amassed an enormous wealth and whose collective rituals and festivals involve huge numbers of people. As in other postsocialist states, also in China property forms have become “fuzzy”, with different social actors holding overlapping claims or different bundles of rights and the status of property itself is ambiguous and ill defined (Verdery 1999). Property in rural China is also fuzzy in the sense of a local legal pluralism, with different notions of property rights co-existing in the same field. The institutions that embody these different notions are those of the state and local institutions that represent the traditional place and collective (see below), the temple and lineages. Historically as well as today, Chinese temples and localised kinship groups were inherently territorial or territorialising institutions that linked social organisation and collective identity to a particular place. Likewise, long-term relatedness with the temple community or kinship group was produced in collective or “inclusive” property relations, the most important part of which were rights to land and natural resources.

An important inspiration for this paper was a recent article by Stephan Feuchtwang (1998), in which he argues that settlements, “places with a territorial definition of belonging”, have often not one but different meanings or senses attached to them. The “sentience” of a place, i.e. the feelings and meanings associated with a place, can vary both in time (in a historical succession of different meanings) and in social and geographical space (referring to different boundaries, origins, institutions and socio-spatial hierarchies of inclusion). A village can therefore be “a different thing in different localities and a different thing according to different residents and purposes in any one locality” (1998: 46-47). To Feuchtwang, the most important dichotomy in present-day rural China is that between the traditional and modern place and their institutions, a dichotomy that was largely a product of the “republican revolution”. “Modern”, as he says,

“refers to relatively recent institutions with a secular and positive political and governmental history and its attendant forms of administration, discourse, property and ideology, which are part of the formation of nation-states. They distinguish themselves from older institutions reflexively. The very designation ‘traditional’ [...] is one of the effects of this separation. It is a separation of institutions which are predicated upon objectives in a secular history, breaking from institutions of kinship, property and worship which had formally also been politically and juridical. [...] Now they [the latter, *S.B.*] are ‘revived’ under another kind of state and its politics, separated from it by another kind of historical project.” (1998: 49)

In the People's Republic of China, the making of a socialist state meant not only that the Communist Party had to secure its military and political grip over a vast territory, but also that the state had to mark out places as state territory and make them part of its socio-spatial and normative order. This involved both eradicating and appropriating the symbolic and material resources of the traditional place and its collective. During the Mao era, the focal markers of an older localism, the temples and ancestral halls, were either destroyed or turned into socialist secular buildings, old community rituals were prohibited and replaced by "socialist rituals" such as Mao loyalty dances or the cult of Mao, the images of gods and ancestors were replaced by images of revolutionary heroes and local costumes were replaced by the ubiquitous blue Mao suits (see also Feuchtwang 2000b: 163-166, Jing 1996: 51-52, 69-83). With the emergence of the socialist state and socialist collectives, the rivalling senses of place and identity embodied in older local institutions were eclipsed or subjugated as smaller places were integrated into state's socio-spatial hierarchy and depended for their symbolic resources on the centre. The creation of new forms of identification that were indivisible from the state was a productive process that "hailed" state subjects and state collectives into being and that inscribed a new political and normative order onto the social and geographical landscape.<sup>2</sup>

As much as this transformation created the setting for a new political, social and normative order, what ultimately gave "weight" to the new socialist place and its collective was the introduction of the collective ownership of land, derived from an overall fundamental principle of public, i.e. state ownership of land. Chinese socialism abolished the private ownership of land and older forms of collective ownership held by temples and localised kinship groups and introduced the notion of socialist collective property based on the collective labour of a co-residential community. From the 1960s until the economic reforms in the early 1980s, this collective was the production team, the lowest tier of the commune system. Intertwined with the collective ownership of land was a whole range of social entitlements that structured the relationship between the individual, the local community and the state. Indeed, one can say that in contrast to Western "capitalist" welfare states, citizenship rights and the moral economy of the socialist state in rural China were place-linked, that is, defined by membership in a territorial collective and shares to its collective properties. As brigades and teams were obliged to deliver resources to the commune and received benefits in

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<sup>2</sup> In Late Imperial China, with much of the rural society beyond the direct reach of the state, temples devoted to canonised officials represented and "taught" peasants even in remote areas about the principles underlying the imperial bureaucracy (Ahern 1981). Moreover, the state invented spatial institutions as a means for governing society and for organising diverse localities into a centralised order. But these spatial orders were again and again integrated into local festivals and rituals, which altered official spatial conceptions in terms of their functioning and meaning (Wang 1995). This capacity of localities to appropriate and re-interpret spatial orders introduced from above was severely curtailed under socialism.

return, the household contributed labour to the collective and was in turn entitled to be maintained by the collective's property, not only in terms of income but also in terms of education, health and welfare. Access to land was guaranteed for and limited to members of the collective. An individual's affiliation with a territorial collective was in principle permanent, formalised by the household register and not to be changed at will.

This socialist moral economy based on collective property rights has come under increasing pressure since the 1980s, when the economic reforms returned production responsibility to private households, private markets were revived and China opened its economy to international investment. All over China, and particularly in the more developed areas of the Southeast, the legal ambiguity concerning land rights and land ownership<sup>3</sup> and missing institutional checks on local corruption, left room for increasing predation on collective resources by governments at various levels. While higher-order units, such as township governments, accumulated increasing power over the allocation of land in villages, village cadres often privatised village resources by using their remaining power to enrich themselves and their families and to forge advantageous alliances with new economic elites. Moreover, rights to village lands, formally tied to registered membership in the administrative place, were increasingly sold to outsiders of the socialist collective, foreign investors or overseas Chinese.

This hollowing out of collective entitlements has been accompanied by new forms of top-down place-making that threatens to destroy the "sentience" (Feuchtwang) of smaller places altogether, both socialist and pre-socialist. In the name of modernisation and in conjunction with market forces, the state has been tearing down, ripping apart and rebuilding existing settlements and relocating families and communities. I could observe the results of these policies in the city and hinterlands of Xiamen, a Special Economic Zone and boomtown in southern Fujian. In only a couple of years, the city had been completely transformed physically; old residential neighbourhoods had been destroyed *en masse* and new ones with modern high-rise apartment blocs have sprung up. The massive expansion of the city has also swallowed up neighbouring villages. Village homes have been torn down and agricultural fields have given way to new urban housing developments and former villagers now live in apartments they have obtained from the state. In other places, new six lane motorways cut

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<sup>3</sup> What is meant exactly by the term collective, for example, has never been defined in law. This institutional indeterminacy, as Peter Ho argues, is deliberate since it has given the state more leeway to react to developments at the grassroot level, has avoided large scale social conflict and has thus allowed the land system to function despite continuing reforms. But, as Ho also points out, this legal ambiguity can be used by local authorities to appropriate collective ownership rights in order to facilitate land planning and urban construction especially in the more developed coastal regions. There is thus the danger "that the collective ownership rights of villages may be trampled" (Ho 2001: 401-402).

settlements into halves, agricultural fields and family homes have given way to golf courses and amusement parks and village ancestors had been reburied at new sites. Against this, we find a countermovement of building of temples and ancestral halls, which redefine local collectives and moralities, “repossess” collective memories and which re-inscribe continuity and permanence in place (Jing 1996, 1999, Flower and Leonard 1998). Based on data compiled in different locations in China, Stephan Feuchtwang has noted varying degrees of collective identification with the village as a traditional or a modern administrative place, and he argues that this identification is correlated with the presence or absence of collectively owned enterprises and their management (1998: 70). My point here is that collective property relations are not only the force that gives “weight” to different senses of place or collectives but that place-making itself, through the erection of new focal markers and territorial rituals, plays a central role in competitions over the meaning of property relations and for the legitimacy of the legal, social and political institutions in which property relations are embedded.

**The Ethnographic Case:  
Nanjiang, an overseas Chinese home community in southern Fujian**

My ethnographic example is from Nanjiang village, a coastal mixed farming and fishing village in Jinjiang City, southern Fujian. Jinjiang City or Jinjiang *Shi* is itself made up of 14 rural townships. Situated within the so-called Minnan Golden Triangle (made up of Xiamen, Quanzhou and Zhangzhou prefectures), it is widely known for its rapid development of privately founded rural industries and the high-income levels among the rural population. Much of this development is owed to Jinjiang’s extensive ties to overseas Chinese communities, mostly in the Philippines and Hong Kong (Chen 1999).<sup>4</sup>

Nanjiang village itself is known as a *qiaoxiang*, a home community of overseas Chinese. The village has only 2,800 residents, but over 12,000 relatives live in Manila and 4,000 in Hong Kong. Of its 788 households, 320 have relatives in Manila and 350 in Hong Kong. The largest part of overseas migration to Manila took place between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1940s, while emigration to Hong Kong occurred predominantly in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hong Kong, of course, is not formally “overseas” but scholars studying transnational relations generally integrate it into the “overseas” category.

<sup>5</sup> According to the villagers, a particularly large number of people from Nanjiang went to Hong Kong at a certain point in the 1970s, when the British colonial government granted citizenship to many illegal residents.



In contrast to neighbouring areas, Nanjiang has seen no important development of rural industries in the past two decades, which villagers attribute to the “unhelpful” attitude of the village government.<sup>6</sup> The large majority of villagers also no longer earn a living as farmers or fishermen, that is, they do not depend on local resources. Rather, they earn an income by sending children to work in more developed urban areas, by running small shops, and by relying on the remittances of overseas relatives. Twenty-four households own fishing boats but they generally employ immigrant workers as fishermen. Most of the village households also do not hold land contracts. After teams had initially distributed land to their member households according to the number of household members, in 1990, after much land had been left lying fallow, the village government recollected the land, handing out new contracts only to those who were willing to farm it long-term. Today one third of all of Nanjiang’s agricultural land (300 *mu*<sup>7</sup>) is farmed by five private farms (*gerenchang*), which employ wage labour and which mainly grow Longyan fruits and watermelons. The village government holds most of the remainder. Villagers are allowed to grow peanuts or sweet potatoes for their own consumption, without, as I was told, having to pay agricultural tax (*nongye shui*) but also without having formally contracted the land (*chengbao*). This means that the government can decide to sell the land use rights to a new farm or for housing at any time. Those who have farmed the land then receive only a minimum compensation for the lost harvest (*qingmiaoqian*). Nearly one half of all village land is officially designated or already used for buildings and streets (see table 1).

Land Use	Mu (1/15 ha)
Farm Land	900
Houses	460
Temples	8
Ancestral Halls	10
Public Facilities (School, Kindergarten Cultural Centre, Government Buildings, Old People’s Centre, etc)	10
Other (Streets, etc)	112
In reserve for housing development	90
Total	1590

*Table 1: Land use in Nanjiang*

<sup>6</sup> Especially with regard to checks on village industries by higher-level inspection teams. As a former township cadre himself told me, in an economically more developed neighbouring village, village cadres would do everything they can to keep township inspectors from cracking down on enterprises which break official guidelines and regulations. In Nanjiang, village cadres would not protect local enterprises in a similar fashion and that was why there were no rural industries in Nanjiang.

<sup>7</sup> One mu is equivalent to 1/15 hectare.

Although Nanjiang has no rural industries, the village is considered rich by its neighbours, due mainly to the heavy investments by members of Nanjiang's two native place associations (*tongxianghui*) in Hong Kong and Manila in the village infrastructure. Foreign remittances (*qiaohui*) have for a long time been the major financial source for public services and local infrastructure in Jinjiang. Under the Nationalist government in 1935, for example, only 6% of all expenditures on education came from the state and the rest from overseas endowments (Chen 1999: 63). Though remittances also continued under Mao, they were much reduced due to political repression and limited interactions between locals and their relatives abroad (especially during the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution). Since the reforms, with local governments actively reaching out to overseas communities to attract investments and the easing of contacts to home villages, return remittances have soared. In Nanjiang, overseas relatives have since the reforms financed the building of the new primary school and its computer equipment, the kindergarten, the cultural centre and the village library. Money from overseas is paying most of the teacher's wages, supplies the village with electricity and running water and has built most of the village streets. Overseas Chinese also have financed public buildings for different organisations of the administrative village. They built a new house for the old people's association (*laorenhui*) and the construction of a new office building for the local government (*cunweihui*) is underway.

### **Village Mansions and the Overseas Chinese Claim to Village Membership and Leadership**

Villagers regard these investments as sign of the overseas Chinese strong attachment to and care for their home village, a village, which many of them have never lived in or left as young people. The village is spotted with stone *stellae* commemorating those who have given money to the community, with inscriptions ranging from a simple "This street was built by XY" to long tractates that praise an investor's patriotism and love of home community and tell of his fortunes overseas. In the new school and kindergarten, images of overseas Chinese who have invested into village education are hung side by side, or have replaced, images of revolutionary heroes or founding fathers of the People's Republic.

The attachment of overseas Chinese to their home community also resulted in a building boom in Nanjiang, which makes the village appear far larger than its actual population. Nearly a fourth of all village houses (165 out of 747) are owned by people residing in Hong Kong and Manila, many of them huge mansions built on much more than the officially allowed 150m<sup>2</sup>. This housing development is not only eating up much of the land formerly

used for agriculture, it is also continuously driving prices for housing plots up. As a result, those living in the village can hardly afford the necessary expenditure anymore.<sup>8</sup>

Although the waste of land and money caused by these practices was sometimes criticised, and especially the massive rise in land prices that ensued, the reactions of villagers were surprisingly subdued. To most villagers, overseas relatives were not foreigners or outsiders, but a special category of locals (*bendiren*) who had to be looked after (*zhaogu*). Their status was not one of having moved away or left the village for good but one of “having not yet returned” (*hai mei huilai*). This was obviously related to the long history of return investments into the village. It was this local status that gave overseas relatives, in the eyes of villagers, a right to village lands, in clear contrast to, for example, immigrant workers, many of whom had lived and worked in the village for more than ten years. All those immigrants rented houses from villagers, but, as they were considered outsiders (*waidiren*), I was told that they would not dare to use village land to build their own house. By defining overseas Chinese as locals, on the other hand, villagers also made them responsible for the well-being of their home village, to which they were supposed to reciprocate.

What explains this craving to build houses in Nanjiang? Most of the overseas Chinese return to the village, if at all, no more than once a year for *qingmingjie*, the day of “sweeping the graves”; on other ritual occasions, relatives in the village are paid to worship their lineal ancestors. First generation migrants who left Nanjiang in younger years generally retained a strong emotional attachment and often considered the village as the place they would return to after retirement. However, as with migrants everywhere, most of them never do.<sup>9</sup> There are no cases I know of where second or third generation migrants returned to Nanjiang; attachment to the village in their case is thus even more symbolic, i.e. a source of individual and collective identity abroad. The famous native place associations (*tongxianghui*) are organised on the basis of joint descent from an ancestral village in China. To build a house in Nanjiang thus confirms full membership status within two communities at the same time, within the village and the non-localised diaspora community. As a powerful place marker of the “absent presence” of migrants within village space, the house itself bridges the geographical distance and re-integrates those who have left into the village community. Moreover, for both migrants and villagers alike, a large and beautifully built village house represents the fortunes of its owner, accumulates symbolic capital and establishes a claim to community leadership.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2001 the price for a plot of 150 m<sup>2</sup> was 40,000 RMB, which was nearly twice the price of two years earlier.

<sup>9</sup> Sometimes migrants were buried in the village they had left as young people. The grave of one emigrant, who had left Nanjiang in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and made a fortune in Manila, is still the largest grave in Nanjiang. The funeral ceremonies, as I was told, lasted two weeks.

Similar to the stone *stellae*, it is the “public face” of a family or person that remains in place, even if its owner is absent.

Rights to land are the most important signs of local status and define the boundary between insiders and outsiders. But, importantly, the attachment to land and collective rights to it do not refer to land as a means of production, the basis of the socialist collective. There is little nostalgia in Nanjiang for lands that once were farmed collectively and are now private housing plots, nor do ordinary people seem to value land much as a source of income or subsistence. Instead, land is valued as a lived-in environment and a common place of origin and settlement rights, rather than the rights to live off village lands, distinguishes insiders from outsiders. These rights are the collective basis of what Stephan Feuchtwang has called the traditional place the village as a ritual and historical unit whose members claim descent from an original settlement (Feuchtwang 1998: 54).

But the “revival” of the traditional place and its collective is not independent of the village as an administrative place and state collective. It is the local state, the village and township government, that controls the allocation of land in the village and thereby *de facto* confers the rights of settlement. Though state regulations have already since 1955 encouraged overseas Chinese to build houses in their “home villages”, overseas Chinese cannot be full members of the socialist collective that makes state subjects and defines rights towards the state. In this logic, they should have no rights to the collective resources of the village, including, most importantly, collective village lands. However, as in other overseas home communities, there is a long-standing practice of Nanjiang’s local government to trade access to land for investments into public services and the village infrastructure. While strained relations between the state and the overseas community during the Mao era put a ceiling on this practice, since the reforms all constraints have been lifted. The village government today directly approaches members of Nanjiang’s native place associations for funding and it has sold huge amounts of former farmland to them. The incomes from the sale of collective lands for private use, rather than agricultural taxes or taxes from rural enterprises, constitute the major income source of the village government today. As an elderly villager told me, overseas Chinese can really build houses where and of whatever size they want in the village, since “how could the *cunwei* [i.e., the village government] say no to money?” Village residents, on the other hand, cannot simply buy more, even if they wanted to, and have to stick to the official 150m<sup>2</sup>.

Taken together, the practices of both overseas Chinese and of the local state serve to subvert the village as socialist collective, while they reinforce or revive the sense of the village as a traditional place and a collective defined by descent from an original settlement. But the

revival of the traditional place and its collective depends first and foremost on the reconstruction of its focal markers, the temples and ancestral halls, and on the revival of kinship or religious festivals and processions that create community and mark out socio-spatial orders (Feuchtwang 1998, 2000a). Overseas Chinese money also fuels this revival in Nanjiang.

**Re-building the Traditional Place:  
how ancestral halls give birth to a new village collective**

In Nanjiang, ancestral halls are the most powerful symbols of the traditional place and the traditional collective. The first ancestral hall in Nanjiang was rebuilt in 1985 (it also seems to have been the first in the whole region). This was the ancestral hall of the Shangzong Chen, the most numerous lineage in the village and the “elder brother lineage” of the Xiazong Chen, the second of three localised Chen lineages in Nanjiang. The third localised lineage, the Xiwei Chen, is not closely related to the other two, and its members were far later immigrants to Nanjiang. The Shangzong Chen were the first to rebuild their hall due to their superior status within the traditional collective and their superior relationship to the local state. With regard to the former, the Shangzong Chen were superior because of their majority in numbers, the lineage’s elder brother status, and its seniority in terms of settlement history. In terms of government relations, it “helped” that the three most wealthy and “famous” overseas Chinese in Nanjiang were members of the Shangzong Chen. As I was told, it was their intervention that assured that no problems were to be expected from the local state when the hall was rebuilt in 1985.

The rebuilding of this hall was the signal not only for the reconstruction of other ancestral halls in Nanjiang but also in neighbouring villages, from which representatives were sent to the Shangzong Chen to inquire, as they said, “how we managed it”. The building of the ancestral halls was then the signal for the reconstruction of a hierarchy of places, i.e. of a socio-spatial order that integrated different territorial collectives into a spatial hierarchy of inclusion. Upwards in scale, Nanjiang’s Chen lineages contributed, together with Chen lineages throughout Jinjiang City, to the building of a massive clan hall at their common historical place of origin; downwards in scale, the restoration of the halls was followed by the restoration of focal houses of worship or *gongting* of the localised lineages’ different branches (also named *gongting* in Nanjiang). Place-making through the reconstruction of focal buildings preceded a revival of lineage rituals and lineage committees, the managing body of a lineage. Lineage rituals create community both in place and in time, and mark out a

common lived-in-environment as lineage space. In the major lineage ritual *jizu*, all males of a lineage feast together in the ancestral hall at the time of the winter solstice to commemorate and honour the ancestors. After the rebuilding of a *gongting*, a three-day festival is held for member households, who are joined both by other lineages' representatives and by married-out daughters and their families residing in neighbouring villages. In addition, the *gongting* group marks its extension in space by attaching red flags to the houses of its member families. On a higher level, the Chen lineages of ten villages within the township revived in 1986 a joint annual festival, which is hosted in rotation by one village at a time. Each year, processions to and from this village mark out relationships in space, creating a common territory over a cycle of ten years.

In all cases, the precondition for reviving these festivals has been the building of the focal building. Also, only lineages that had renovated their hall had selected lineage committees (*lishihui*). These committees were responsible for maintaining the hall, administering lineage funds, organising major lineage rituals and managing lineage affairs in general. The latter included regular contacts to overseas members, sending delegations to the respective clan organisations, and inviting and conferring with other lineage representatives. Dependent on the strength of the new collective, lineage representatives also increasingly managed affairs within their group, both interfering and mediating in problems between member households and representing the group to the "outside".

This revival of the village as a traditional place competes with the definition of the village as administrative place because their respective boundaries and internal spatial orders are largely congruent. Nanjiang has five named settlements (*dian*), which were originally space "owned" by a dominant lineage, as is still obvious in the case of one settlement which carries the name of the lineage itself (*xiazong*). Below that were a number of named neighbourhoods or "corners" (*jiaoluo*), which no longer appear on the official village map but which villagers still use for orientation. *Jiaoluo* roughly coincided with the former settlement area of a *gongting*; indeed, when I asked what a *jiaoluo* was, the simple answer was that it meant a *gongting*. After collectivisation, *dian* were cut into halves by production teams but teams generally did not cut across them. Today, *dian* are equivalent to the "villager's small groups" (*cunminxiao zu*), the successor organisation of production teams. Each *dian* elects representatives who, again, vote in the election of the village government. As I was told, these representatives are often chosen so as to represent the different *gongting* within a *dian*. According to an elderly villager, this was not an explicit policy but rather a scheme that "exists in people's heads".

The return of ancestral halls, which had been used as storehouses and offices by the brigade or the production teams in Nanjiang, into lineage ownership and their elaborate reconstruction symbolises the retreat of the state's control over the meaning of place, social existence and identities and the re-appropriation of localities by the traditional collective. The most striking example for this reverse process of place-making is the construction of an entirely new ancestral hall by Nanjiang's third Chen lineage, the Xiwei Chen. As late immigrants to the village, the lineage had no ancestral hall in Nanjiang before the Revolution and returned to a neighbouring village for all major rituals. Consequently, there was no land or building that could be returned to them and, as a lineage, they could not purchase land designated for private housing from the local state. Instead, with the passive consent of the village government, they simply used the land on which "their" production team had built a storehouse and a sports field. The ancestral hall was erected on the site of the sports field, and they built their own branch building of the old people's association on the site of the storehouse. A lineage representative found nothing unusual in this, as he said, the place was collective property before and afterwards (*jitide*). But, obviously, the new place and its collective stands in an entirely different relationship to the state. Moreover, membership in it is held on the basis of different criteria: The revived "traditional" collective includes overseas relatives with houses in Nanjiang as full members but it discriminates against smaller name groups living in the same area, which were formerly part of the same team. As the lineage leader told me in a lowered voice, "these people are not really locals (*bendiren*)" – they were late immigrants, but all households held formal village residency.

### **A New Collective and Its Property**

The strength of the "revived" or reconstructed traditional collective and its institutions and the sentience of the traditional place are built on collective property. Lineages and their subunits collect property from two sources: from private donations, whereby private property is turned into collective lineage property, and from the transformation of socialist collective property into lineage property. Again, there is a striking parallel to the making of socialist places and socialist collectives in the past, which also involved the transformation of private and older types of collective property into a new form of collective property. But today, the distinguishing factor of *this* form of collective property is that it is *not* part of the state's collective property regime. And, as the law knows only socialist collectives and socialist collective property (which are part of the state and its property regime respectively), the lineage's collective property (like the collective person built out of it) is not legally

recognised by the state. That is, kinship groups in Nanjiang could neither register the ancestral hall as collective lineage property nor received formal title for the land on which it is built from the township government. The same was the case with the *gongting* houses or the land on which they were built; registration here remained in the land of original owners, even if it had been transferred from private into collective property (see below). But (and this underlines the regulatory strength of the institutions of the traditional place and the legal pluralism with regard to property rights) a lineage leader told me that it didn't matter whether ownership was registered or not, since "everyone knows anyway that it is collective (*jiti*) property". The collective he meant was of course the lineage.

The reversion of socialist collective property into lineage property obviously included the return of ancestral halls and to the land they were built on; tellingly, it did not include agricultural lands formerly under lineage ownership (of which few existed in Nanjiang anyway).<sup>10</sup> But it included other types of productive properties. When the Shangzong Chen rebuilt their hall in 1985, they also retrieved a row of houses at the local market, which the lineage had rented out to private shop owners before the Revolution. At the time, the buildings still housed the village's collective "embroidery factory" (*xiuhuachang*), which then moved to another place before it closed down in 1987. The lineage now again rents these houses to private shop-owners and uses space on the upper floors as a meeting room and lineage office. The rents go into the lineage fund.

The majority of lineage funds in Nanjiang, however, are made up of private donations, most of which came from overseas. The Wangs and the Xiazong Chen, the two wealthiest lineages, each had funds of between 250,000 and 300,000 RMB (ca. 34,000 Euro – 41,000 Euro). These were kept in a bank account, opened under the name of three lineage representatives. The donation of larger sums to the collective (*song gei gongjia*) is highly prestigious and commemorated on stone inscriptions in the ancestral halls. It is also an important basis for (formal or informal) lineage leadership. Village families are more often commemorated for leaving building space to the collective, as in the case of the Xiaozong Chen, who added a yard to their ancestral hall and built a road leading to it, for which they had to tear down village houses in the vicinity to do so. Most transformations of private into collective space and property involved the *gongting* buildings, originally old private homes with a collective

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<sup>10</sup> Formally, the ownership of all village lands, including that of buildings, remains with the collective. In the case of houses, villagers are often ignorant of this and consider also the land their house is built on as their property (Ho 2001: 397). That lineages considered the land the ancestral hall was built on as lineage property, however, was not the result of ignorance of laws but a case of legal pluralism. Moreover, the formal village ownership of land also means that housing plots should not be used otherwise, e.g. after tearing down the house. This, however, happened in Nanjiang when the Xiazong Chen acquired houses in the vicinity of their ancestral hall, tore them down and used the land for the construction of a yard or a road leading to the hall (see below). The government did not interfere.



shrine in a central room. Most *gongting* (and now I mean the lineage subunit) aspired to turn the whole house into a hall and thereby to extend collective space from the altar to the whole building. To achieve this, all private owners of different rooms in the building had to agree to leave their property to the collective. In one case, this involved more than twenty families, and the new hall was built on more than 600 m<sup>2</sup>.

But there were also cases where families refused to do so. Some of those families refusing did so for reasons of poverty, because they still lived in the room and had no house to move to. They were generally offered alternatives by *gongting* representatives and “persuaded” to accept them. In other cases, families refused because they had broken contact with the group. This often delayed the reconstruction or made impossible, leading to considerable acrimony. It amounted *de facto* to blocking the building of a (new) collective person out of collective property relations.

The villagers use the terms “collective” or “public” (*jitide or gongjiade*) for both the properties of the socialist collective and those of the lineages and temples. In each case, collective means that everyone in the group has a share (*you fen*), representing the durable relationships between members. These shares and the principle of equality that they establish between members also shape local notions of entitlement, reciprocity and accountability. But as the ancestral halls assembled collective property and the local state increasingly sold or privatised resources of the state collective, these notions have been eroded within the state collective, while they have gained strength in the traditional collective. Villagers complained that the local government did nothing for the village, that it collected taxes and money from land sales without reciprocating to the community. The collective properties of ancestral halls and temples, on the other hand, could in their view not be privatised: no member of a temple committee would dare to steal money from a “god”, and no lineage representative would be so stupid as to steal money from himself, that is, money intended to care for the deceased. Also, the transparency in temple and hall finances, where incomes and expenditures were regularly made public, stood for the villagers in contrast to the total absence of transparency in the case of local state finances.

While villagers consider the moral economy of the state to be largely defunct, that of the traditional collective “worked” in their eyes. This does not mean that inequalities are much reduced compared to earlier years, but that there is more *perceived* reciprocity, responsibility and accountability. The rich reciprocate to the community by investing in public projects and paying large sums into the ancestral trust, money that benefits all by paying for community rituals. Wealthier lineages in Nanjiang also increasingly take charge of social welfare. On one occasion, the Wangs gave 3000 RMB (ca. 400 Euro) to a poor man whose son had died and

wife run away. All lineages supported families of college and university students by giving out monetary prizes ranging from 800 to 1000 RMB (ca. 107 Euro – 134 Euro) for successful enrolment. Sometimes, local lineage leaders also helped to organise support from overseas if a family could not finance the most basic requirements for a funeral, where today the cremation alone costs 4000 RMB (ca. 540 Euro).

### **Evolving State-society Relations and Legal Pluralism**

What we find in Nanjiang and in other Chinese villages like it, is a slow process in which the “traditional” place, defined as the spatial setting of a community of kinship and worship and its institutions, the temples and lineages, are re-appropriating the power to define normative and social orders and collective identities from the “modern” place and the territorial institutions of the nation-state on the local level. The paper has suggested that the structural causes behind the revival of such an apparently traditional form of localism are found neither in the locality, the state, nor the new transnational economy alone but in the relationship between all three: between the locality and its particular moral economy, the socialist state’s place-based system of social entitlements, its rootedness in collective property relations and its erosion by the new transnational economy.

This development might appear at first glance as the result of or basis for a new local “resistance” against the state. It is true that villagers complain heavily about the inequalities brought about by the reforms and the monetarisation of collective resources, practices they compare negatively to both the moral economy of the socialist past and that of the lineages and temples. But the notion of resistance, as it is understood by Scott (1990) and commonly used in anthropology, seems to give too much weight to active strategising and too little to existing interdependencies and the *unintended* consequences of the actions of, in this case, villagers and the local state agents alike. First of all, the building of ancestral halls and temples needs the consent of the local state, which often also involves a state interest in them. The state has allowed the building of ancestral halls in overseas areas, because of what it perceives as the “need” of overseas Chinese to cultivate their cultural “roots” and hometown “traditions”. This is not only a consent “bought by” return remittances. The government understands that the overseas Chinese’s attachment to and integration into the local collective, fostered by the building of ancestral halls, is itself the source of further investments from overseas. In the even more problematic case of temples (“superstition”), Flower and Leonard (1998: 279) report how the state tried to co-opt a temple in rural Sichuan for its own interests

of development by changing its meaning from an assertive local identity to state-sponsored Buddhism and the development of tourism.

To recreate a (state-controlled version of) the “traditional place” can thus *also* be in the local state’s interest. Furthermore, representatives of the local state take often part directly in the executive committees of these local institutions, not only to exert control over them and tap their social and material resources but also to regain some of the prestige cadres lost as representatives of the local state. In another Fujian village I studied, for example, the acting party secretary and the village head doubled as lineage representatives – though as ordinary committee members and not as leaders (Brandtstädter 2000). In Nanjiang this was not the case, probably because the local government had its own direct links with Nanjiang’s hometown associations overseas. Here, the local state tried to raise its standing *vis-à-vis* the lineages by organising funds for public projects, tapping both overseas and lineage resources. The Shangzong Chen, for example, told me that they had recently lent the village government 20,000 RMB (ca. 2,700 Euro) for the construction of a canal, and the local government was always part of the local management committees that oversaw the construction of new streets or public buildings financed from overseas.

But by their involvement in lineages and temples, by becoming part of their moral economy (see Brandtstädter 2000) and even by using lineage funds for the performance of state tasks, the actions of local cadres only fuel the revival of the traditional place, its collective and its normative and social order – at the expense of the state’s ability to control the forms of social existence and social bonding (including the definition of property relations) in rural China. This development is obviously not intended strategically on the part of local state agents, nor is it the straightforward result of community “resistance” to the state. The dialectics of the process and its social and normative consequences are best understood in terms of the “semi-autonomy” of existing institutions and collectives. The term is Sally Field Moore’s, who developed the concept of the semi-autonomous social field for the analysis of legal pluralism and social change. A semi-autonomous social field, according to Moore,

“can generate rules and customs and symbols internally, but [...] it is also vulnerable to rules and decisions and other forces emanating from the larger world by which it is surrounded. The semi-autonomous social field has rule making capacities, and the means to induce or coerce compliance; but it is simultaneously set in a larger social matrix which can, and does, affect and invade it, sometimes at the invitation of persons inside it, sometimes at its own instance.” And, two pages later: “The semi-autonomous social field is defined and its boundaries identified [...] by a processual characteristic [...]. Many such fields may articulate with others in such a way as to form complex chains, rather the way the social networks of individuals, when attached to each other, may be considered unending chains.” (Moore 1973: 720, 722)

It this “semi-autonomy” and the interdependent processes it gave rise to, acted out through the agency of local cadres and villagers, that seems to be the basis of a re-appropriation of the

local from the state. I therefore propose to use, instead of resistance, the term *colonisation* (also because of the term's spatial overtones), in order to characterise an increasing encroachment by local institutions on geographical, social and normative space formally controlled by state institutions.

## Conclusion

In his book “The condition of postmodernity” (1990), the social geographer David Harvey shows how the meaning and perception of space (and time) has been transformed through modernisation and the latest phase of “flexible accumulation” and how this has affected individual values and social processes of the most fundamental kind. As he says,

“[s]patial and temporal practices, in any society, abound in subtleties and complexities. Since they are so closely implicated in processes of reproduction and transformation of social relations, some way has to be found to depict them and generalise about their use. The history of social change is in part captured by the history of the conceptions of space and time, and the ideological uses to which those might be put. Furthermore, any project to transform society must grasp the complex nettle of the transformations of spatial and temporal conceptions and practices.” (Harvey 1990: 218)

Anthropologists have demonstrated how particular places or monuments can “gather and keep a people's sense of themselves” (Flower 2001), and how in China the erection of temples has asserted local interests and memories and thus has involved struggles over notions of morality and history (Flower and Leonard 1998, Flower 2001, Jing 1996, 1999, Feuchtwang 2000). To my knowledge, however, processes of place-making have not yet been systematically linked to analyses of legal pluralism, changing notions of property rights and the legitimacy of economic, political and legal institutions, which have formed the core of studies on postsocialist transformations. I have shown in this paper that concepts of place, property, collectivity and social and normative orders (‘moralities’) are intimately linked. I have furthermore shown that processes of place-making in rural China – of suffusing a locality with meaning through, e.g., the building of ancestral halls – have not only *reflected* social changes and social outcomes but have in themselves *created* the environment that made certain institutions and a certain social and normative order more compelling and more legitimate. The study of social transformations, especially in the postsocialist world, should thus also include struggles over the definition and meaning of the lived-in environment – an analysis of “who owns the land”, to quote the title of Peter Ho's recent article (2001), in a more symbolic sense.

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