

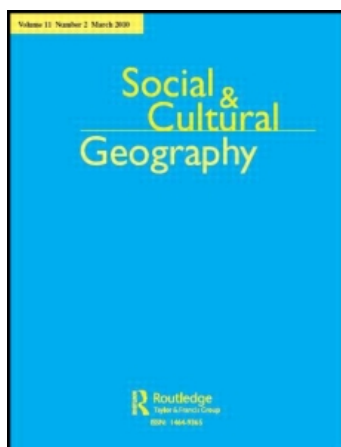
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Publisher Routledge

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Social & Cultural Geography

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713708888>

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Online publication date: 13 February 2011

To cite this Article Zhu, Hong , Qian, Junxi and Feng, Lei(2011) 'Negotiating place and identity after change of administrative division', Social & Cultural Geography, 12: 2, 143 – 158

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2011.545140

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.545140>

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Negotiating place and identity after change of administrative division

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Place identity is a fluid construction that is in a constant dynamics of re-imagination. Changes in economic, social, cultural and political conditions lead individual and groups to re-imagine and rebuild their place-based identity. One major force that causes people's interruption in place identity is the rationalizing spatial process that reduces place into abstract space that is open to reorganization. In this paper, we investigate the interruption, reconfirmation and renegotiation of the place-based identity of local residents of the former municipal district of Dongshan, Guangzhou, China, after the official administrative establishment of Dongshan was cancelled by the Guangzhou municipal authority in 2005. Thirty-six in-depth interviews were conducted, and it is found that local Dongshan residents' place identity had generally been enhanced, rather than vitiated, after the 2005 change of administrative division, while discourses about interruptions in their place identity fill up their narratives. Although sensing obvious interruption in place-based identity, local Dongshan residents re-imagined the meanings of the place of Dongshan to build up culturally delimited borders that were conditioned by the name Dongshan, and this re-imagined place-based identity results from the local residents' renegotiation about what the place of Dongshan is and how their identities are connected to the place.

Key words: place, identity, re-imagination, administrative division.

Introduction

The dynamics of place identity

Identity refers to a self-defined sense of 'who I am' and 'who others think I am'. It is a self-positioning derived from belongingness to 'home' (Blunt et al. 2003). As Heidegger (1969: 26) wrote, 'everywhere, wherever and

however we are related to beings of every kind, identity makes its claim upon us'. Identity is a socially and culturally constructed process which usually comes into being in specific settings, tightly contingent on time and space (Blunt et al. 2003; Stevenson 2007). Place-based identity develops as a result when people's sense of themselves becomes equated with a particular locale through process,

project and performance (Pratt 1998). It means that people are defined by a persistent sameness and unity of place which differentiate us from others (Relph 1976). In this sense, place is always a socially and culturally defined construct through which people struggle to achieve their goals and understand their existence (Harner 2001). Through this socialization with place, place and identity develop a dialectical relationship (Soja 1989), where symbolic meanings are written into physical settings. Thus, individual self-identity is recorded in places (Brace, Bailey and Harvey 2006), and to discover place is to discover the human self (Casey 2001; Heidegger 1962).

However, place-based identity is never a fixed status—it is an evolving process that is highly fluid and unstable. The sense of belonging is always in a process of reconstruction (Butler 1990, 1992), and the meanings of identity are in a constant dynamics of transformation. As Said (1994) points out, identity means a recursive process of imaging and re-imagining the land: it is neither fixed nor exhaustive, neither stable nor singular. In this sense, to recognize identities is beyond appreciating the ‘unsullied essence’ of a place (Said 1994). Instead, it is the recreation of a past that can be re-imagined and reproduced by individuals and groups under time–space-specific contexts—to belong is to become (Mackenzie 2004). As Massey (1994) argues, if places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interaction which they tie together, then these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time. Mackenzie (2004) suggested a possibility of repositioning of people *vis-à-vis* place. Through her elaboration on the ‘counter-geography’ of the Harris Tapestry, Mackenzie discussed on the islanders’ search for culturally authentic symbols to achieve a renewed place-based identity. The rationalizing forces headed from

top-down made the islanders re-imagine who they were and how they were related to their place. This repackaged identity supported the islanders’ campaign of place-based resistance. Similarly, Schnell (2003) gave a line of narratives with regard to residents’ re-imagined place and identity in the township of ‘Little Sweden’ in the USA. He argued that local residents’ place identity evolved from regionalism to romantic nationalism according to non-local forces that conditioned socio-cultural outset of the town. The townees’ notion about who they were and how they were defined through their space was renewed to justify their tradition, culture and ethnicity under the present context. Thus we can see that place identity is neither an essentialized notion about the meanings of a place, nor a static, sedimented idea of what the place is—it is always ‘on going’ (Mackenzie 2004), and to investigate place-based identity requires fine-grained understandings about the specific social and cultural discourses that conditioned the shaping of individuals’ and groups’ self-positioning oriented towards places.

Rationalizing spaces, interrupted places

Place is always under threat. One of the risks that place and place-based identity confront from time to time is the rationalizing forces in the form of lifeless spaces enforced by state powers. This space–place tension, to borrow Taylor’s (1999) term, represents state’s hegemonic, unifying and homogenizing actions enforced on the delicate social and cultural structures of places. During this process, the fine-grained social and cultural fabric of place is reduced at large to the object of spatial processes of modernization and rational reorganization (Oakes 1997). The totalizing

forces of modernity results in the loss of place subjectivity and interruptions in place meanings, threatening human freedom enabled by the modernizing forces themselves—a dilemma called by Oakes (1997) ‘the paradox of modernity’. Although social relations are always situated in the socio-cultural textile of places (Taylor 1999), it can be easily neglected when place is defined as the ‘traditional community’ which is in contrast to the values of modernity (Agnew 1987). This rationale of space–place dichotomy results in the fundamental devaluation of place in modern societies (Taylor 1999). It has also triggered a ‘maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and continuation, of ambiguity and anguish’ (Berman 1982: 15). Space, therefore, becomes the modern metaphor of top-down political processes (Taylor 1999), while place turns out to be the victim of modernity (Oakes 1997). One of the most extreme cases of place victimization was realized when the Renaissance rationalism dominated the planning philosophy of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European cities. Lively and organic places were transformed into coordinates of a geometric grid that was designed to ‘trace out the limits by straight lines’, to use Benveniste’s (1973) words. The new delimited quadratic spaces were the products of a ruthless crusade which with a common denominator reduced places into neutralized commodities (Olwig 2006).

The destruction of place and place-based meanings is in every way associated with the interruption of place-based identities. The local politics of resistance, therefore, is often set under the discourses of protecting territorial identities (Clark 1993; Johnston 1991a, 1991b; Rose 1994). Although the local politics of place-based identity is not always related to violent or radical mobilizations, a process of re-imagining and renegotiating place and

identity is inseparable from such a cultural politics which involves people, place and power relations.

In this paper, the authors present a qualitative research focusing on how local residents from the former Dongshan District of Guangzhou, China renegotiated and re-imagined their place-based identity after the administrative establishment of Dongshan District was officially cancelled during Guangzhou’s 2005 change of the Municipal Spatial Administrative Division. The authors try to unpack the disruptive impacts of the change of administrative division on place-based identity through qualitative data collected from 36 in-depth interviews with local Dongshan residents and other efforts, with the belief that the administratively defined territorial borders are also the product of culture, politics and sociality. In particular, we are interested in how these local residents re-imagined the place of Dongshan, and how they redefined their place identity in an ambiguous betweenness of Dongshan and Yuexiu.

Background

The integration of Dongshan into Yuexiu

The change of spatial administrative division is undoubtedly a powerful weapon possessed by top-down state powers to reorganize existing places in a rational and economical manner. Early in France after the *Grande Révolution*, the entire territory of the *République* was redesigned into a matrix of arbitrarily delimited hexagons called by the state authority the *départments*. Similarly, the 2005 change of Municipal Spatial Administrative Division in Guangzhou was based on the same philosophy of rational/economical spatial rearrangement

of territorial borders. It happened in May 2005 when several actions were taken by the municipal authority: the administrative establishment of Dongshan District was cancelled and its land was integrated into Yuexiu District; the establishment of Fangcun District was cancelled and the land was integrated into Liwan District (see Figure 1); and the Municipal Districts of Nansha and Luogang were newly established. Just like reorganizing practices around other Chinese cities, the cancelation of Dongshan and Fangcun was also situated in a grand narrative of urban spatial development and modernization. Justified in the name of economic prosperity and

regional modernization, this philosophy means that the past hints of the city need to be overcome and new and better spatial order should be constructed on the ruins of the past (Zhang 2006).¹

The former Dongshan District of Guangzhou

The former Dongshan District was located at the east of central Guangzhou, China. It covered a total area of 17 km², and housed a population of 600,000 residents. Dongshan was one of the four oldest districts in Guangzhou.



Figure 1 The four downtown districts of Guangzhou (Yuexiu, Dongshan, Liwan and Fangcun) before 2005.

Modern development of Dongshan started during Guangzhou's semi-colonial era in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when western missionaries arrived at the relatively untouched land to build churches, schools and charities. Agreeable living environment in Dongshan soon attracted lots of imperial officials, warlords and overseas people of Chinese descent to settle in Dongshan, transforming it into a prosperous urban region. The modern Guangzhou municipal administration was established in 1921, and Dongshan was listed as one of the first municipal districts. After the communist take-over of power in 1949, Dongshan had been an administrative district ever since.

Dongshan was believed to be unique in its political history, living environment and public education resources. It witnessed several important historic events that happened in Guangzhou since the 1911 Republican Revolution: the locale of the 3rd National Conference of the Communist Party of China and Mao Tse-Tung's Peasant Movement Institute were located here. Since 1949, many political institutions placed their office buildings and staffs' housings in Dongshan, making the district a political center of Guangzhou. Besides, Dongshan had been known for its high-status residential communities since almost a century ago—it had always been reputed as the dreamland of the urban wealthy class and high governmental officials. The district was also renowned for its concentration of highly-qualified educational/cultural resources. It possessed the largest number of good public schools, public libraries and museums in Guangzhou.

Dongshan stood out also for its history and cultures. The concept of '*Dongshan Gentlemen*' is regarded as an important cultural symbol of Guangzhou.² Due to its geographical proximity to Guangzhou's

trading port, it had always been prosperous in commerce and business, and featured a highly diversified urban lifestyle including foods, handicrafts, leisure activities and festival celebrations. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dongshan was particularly characterized by its liberal, harmonious and humanist cultural atmosphere led by a population of trader and merchant residents. In Guangzhou locals' eyes, Dongshan was a place to live in a serene environment, to appreciate the elegant urban lifestyles, and to savor the post-colonial nostalgia triggered by the red-brick European-style architectures.

However, it is essential to distinguish the name 'Dongshan' from Dongshan District, if we are to fully understand local Dongshan residents' reconstruction of place identity. Apparently, the characteristics of Dongshan that were mentioned above were not evenly distributed across the entire District. The high-quality schools, hospitals and museums, and the appreciated urban cultural diversity, were mainly concentrated around the traditionally referred Dongshan area, today's *Dongshan-Kou* area. Dongshan District, on the other hand, is an administratively unified region that sprawled out from Dongshan-Kou, which was an easily recognizable core. But in local Dongshan residents' discourses, the concepts of Dongshan and Dongshan District are usually interchangeable—the name Dongshan can refer to either the traditional core area, or the municipal district as a whole. In fact, the concept of Dongshan was more often associated with the entire administrative Dongshan District than the core area of Dongshan-Kou. This semantic ambivalence is an important background against which local residents of Dongshan District built their Dongshan-based place

identities after the change of administrative division, as we will discuss later.

Methods

Data in support of our arguments in this research were collected from various sources. At first, the authors reviewed the Guangzhou City Record, an encyclopedic documentation whose contents span over centuries of Guangzhou's history. The authors also referred to relevant government documents and media reportage. Then from March to May 2008, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirty-six local residents (nineteen men and seventeen women) of former Dongshan District.³ The first interviewees were among the acquaintances of the authors, while the rest were accessed with the snowball sampling technique. All interviewees had lived in the former Dongshan District for over twenty years when the change of administrative division took place, and their length of residence in Dongshan provided them with a good basis for a place-based identity. The interviewees covered a wide spectrum of job occupations, and their age ranged from 20 to over 80. Some interviewees spent their entire life in Dongshan, while others moved into this area at various stages of the life cycle.⁴ Geographical locations of their residences were randomly distributed across the district. Interviews were conducted in the interviewees' residences, or in public spaces like parks and restaurants. Each interview was conducted by two of the authors—who were both native Chinese speakers—and lasted from one and a half hours to two hours. Other than the thirty-six in-depth interviews, the authors also conducted short-term online or telephone interviews with a number of other informants. Since the short-term interviews were more

open-structured, respondents of these interviews are not counted when the authors make any statistics below.

Between Dongshan and Yuexiu: interrupted identities, ambiguous identities

What had been changed?

When we try to identify the substantial changes that the administrative division reorganization brings to the local residents, it is interesting to find that there had in fact been very limited 'real impacts' to their lifestyles. The most visible change took place in the political sector when the district government of Dongshan was revoked and this area lost its autonomy in decision-making. In line with this change, the income of a number of government-supported professionals had slightly decreased. Some interviewees complained that they had to go a longer way to the government quarters now when they had to deal with the district authority. But for most respondents, this impact was rather minor. Young interviewees showed a strong concern for the Dongshan locals' recession from dominating the high-quality public school resource in Dongshan since now the residents from Yuexiu also had access to those schools. But for them, it was less a problem because the Dongshan locals still possessed priority in accessing those resources. Other than those mentioned, few substantial changes could yet be detected—the appearance of the streets and neighborhoods were hardly changed, the social relations remained, and the social welfare system was hardly affected. Instead, the interviewed residents were much more concerned about the loss of the name 'Dongshan', as well as the Dongshan-based social and cultural borders that were so vital to

their self-identity. In the empirical research below, the authors will try to unpack the interrupted and renegotiated local-based place identity of the Dongshan local residents, and show how the symbolic meanings of the name of Dongshan triggered a reproduction of place-based identity, partially in relation to more material aspects of changes that were mentioned above.

'Interrupted, harmed, but stronger'

Almost all interviewees believed that their place-based identity was largely interrupted by the 2005 change of administrative division. They lamented on a 'lost' home, and a lost place-based identity. The interviewees expressed that they felt sad for the disappearance of the name 'Dongshan' from Guangzhou's municipal map, because the name was not only the symbolic inscription of territorial borders, but also the discursive representation of an aggregate of local specificities and memories. They told the authors about their worry that the next generation of Guangzhou would never know about a Dongshan District that had existed as a 'bounded and independent realm' for the local residents. 'It is a pity that the name of Dongshan is lost', the authors could hear this narrative repeatedly during the interviews, 'the name Dongshan was the symbol of a past memory, and when the name is gone, the *place* will be gone forever'. The interviewees were particularly concerned about the ambiguous situation of Dongshan and its cultures: 'Where are Guangzhou's well-known Dongshan Gentlemen now? I am not clear', 'the east part of Yuexiu seems not an exact introduction for Dongshan'. Many interviewees felt that the name 'Dongshan' had been overshadowed by 'Yuexiu', and 'Dongshan Gentlemen' would soon be consigned to oblivion. However, the

interviewees confirmed that their memories about Dongshan would continue to condition their lifestyles, and to shape their perceptual world about the city. This persistence of Dongshan-based cultural awareness can be well observed from local Dongshan residents' resistance against the government-proposed closure of Dongshan's Spring Festival Flower Market.⁵ In 2005, the district authority of the newly expanded Yuexiu District decided to close the annual Spring Festival Flower Market of the former Dongshan District. The local residents of Dongshan were antagonized, and they opposed adamantly against this proposal. Finally, the Yuexiu District authority made a compromise: Dongshan's Spring Festival Flower Market was retained, but was renamed 'Yuexiu Donghu'. The Dongshan local residents believed that at least they had partially won this battle, since they have preserved a spatial symbolization of their past memory, culture and identity.

In spite of this interruption in place identity, the interviewees were strongly affirmed with their belongingness to Dongshan. Among all the thirty-six respondents of the in-depth interviews, twenty-nine still identified themselves to Dongshan, and among them many interviewees were so strongly asserted with this identity and they used adjectives like 'absolute' or '100 per cent' to describe their emotional attachment. The interviewees believed that the symbolic meanings of the place name Dongshan were central to their self-defined identity, since the name also denoted a kaleidoscope of local practices, social relations and representations that constituted self-uniqueness and lifestyle. Many respondents believed that their identity as a Dongshan local has been actually enhanced rather than vitiated after Dongshan was integrated into Yuexiu. 'Only after the name *Dongshan* was erased from Guangzhou's map did I realize that I truly belonged to

Dongshan', said one interviewee to the authors, 'when something is lost, you know how it is precious to you'. In particular, evidence from the interviews cast light on the salient role that the name of Dongshan played in the reconstruction and reconfirmation of this Dongshan-based identity.

Firstly, twenty-four of the thirty-six interviewees told the authors that they insisted on introducing themselves as a Dongshan local; five claimed that they would introduce themselves as a Dongshan local but would still explain that Dongshan was now part of Yuexiu. Only seven would say that they were local Yuexiu residents, saving them from the trouble of further explanation. Most interviewees felt it natural to position their place-based identity in Dongshan, since the name of Dongshan also embodied the meanings of locality in relation to who they were: 'we are labeled as Dongshan residents, and it can hardly be changed', 'our official identity as a Yuexiu resident causes confusion: today's Yuexiu is a large area, but we are actually from the former Dongshan area—it is now a part of Yuexiu indeed, but it is in fact very different'.

Secondly, it is found that local Dongshan residents would deliberately preserve some items marked with the name *Dongshan*. Media reportage told the stories that a large number of Dongshan local residents went to the local governmental departments to get a citizen ID card or Marriage Certificate with the name Dongshan written on it.⁶ One of the interviewees told the authors that before the change was set into practice, he lied to the local authority that his citizen ID card had been lost so that the Dongshan District Civil Affairs Department issued him a new card. In this case, when his ID card must be changed into a Yuexiu-registered one, he would be able to keep a hidden ID card forever marked with

the name of Dongshan. 'This process was a little bit complex', he told us, 'but it was worthwhile—the name of Dongshan will remind me of who I was, and who I will always be'.

Thirdly, a burgeoning number of real-estate developments that were named after Dongshan appeared in Guangzhou's housing market shortly after the change of administrative division. Until 2008, there had been totally fifteen such housing development projects within the former Dongshan District. The interviewees unanimously agreed that such a housing project could be especially attractive to the local residents of former Dongshan District. 'In person I will think it good to buy an estate in such a housing development', said one interviewee, when she was happy to list to the authors the names of those housing developments, 'it makes me feel *back in Dongshan* again'.

This disruption of place identity was also partially connected with the material aspects of the change, while those impacts could not be exaggerated. To a certain degree, an officially acknowledged name of *Dongshan* at the same time meant a series of locally-based resource accessibility, governmental support and financial autonomy. Interviewees, especially the young, expressed their concern that the high-quality education resources in Dongshan would be shared by Yuexiu, thus limiting Dongshan locals' access; the mid-aged interviewees, instead, were more concerned about the government financial support, which was largely connected to local residents' social welfare.

Dongshan or Yuexiu: ambiguous identities

Although most interviewees confirmed that their Dongshan-based identity had indeed

been enhanced after the change of administrative division, this was not universal among all the local residents of Dongshan. In fact, eight interviewees believed that they found it confusing about whether to identify their belongingness to Dongshan or Yuexiu. They told that they did not know how to explain where they came from. They admitted that emotionally they were still identified to Dongshan, but they had also developed a clear awareness that Dongshan no longer existed as a region with acknowledged boundaries and identities—since the name of Dongshan was no longer acknowledged, there seemed to be a need to reorient local Dongshan residents' place identity. 'Dongshan will pass away from people's memory gradually. It feels uncomfortable and there is a conflict between a Dongshan identity and a Yuexiu identity', one interviewee described the 'dilemma of identity' he was facing in a frank manner, 'I will say that I am from Dongshan, but adding that it is at present part of Yuexiu—it seems to be the only way to reach a balance between the imagination and the reality'.

The subjective and constructive nature of place is essential in the interviewees' negotiating their place identity. They were beginning to regard Dongshan as a symbolic entity of meanings, values, histories and memories, while not seeing it as an administrative region that should be acknowledged by hegemonic discourses of the state. For them, the name of *Dongshan* now denoted no longer an officially claimed territory, but rather a locality with specific cultural heritages and sociality. 'I will not insist on the concept of a *Dongshan District*', one interviewee told the authors, 'I would rather take it as a distinct place, and people know where this name refers. If people are merely concerned about which municipal district I live in, I will just tell Yuexiu'.

Concerned with this reproducing of meanings of place, we find it is relevant to ask whether the interviewees had developed a place-bounded nostalgia as criticized by Harvey (Harvey 1989; May 1996). So far in our discussion, it appears that the imagined identity shared by the respondents embodies an anti-integrationist paranoia that is reactionary and regressive by nature. Such a critique, however, is unfair and not in line with other observations from the interviews. In fact, most interviewees showed an open, rather than provincial or bounded attitude towards a Yuexiu identity. They did not deny the possibilities that the combined Yuexiu and Dongshan could produce new place meanings and identities. However, a progressive sense of place (Massey 1993), as we may expect from this open attitude, was yet unseen. A place is beyond a physical entity that allows for interaction and integration. A place is home, and it is the very people and relations that constitute the meanings of a place that are the most vulnerable to any interruption in place as an ontological existence. A progressive construction of identity is not easy, and it requires delicate techniques that carefully address people's 'betweenness of place' (Entrikin 1991). This process, therefore, should by no means resemble what took place in Guangzhou—no public consultation at all, but only patriarchal government actions. During the research, many interviewees expressed their depression about 'knowing nothing about what, and knowing nothing about why'. They could develop few strategies to adapt themselves to a new place identity, when they had little access to the economic, social and political processes that were impacting upon them, thus the only thing they could do is to re-imagine the place meanings and re-territorialize the place-based identity. In this sense, the re-imagined place identity of the interviewees

does not support a judgment of an anti-integrationist paranoia. On the contrary, it can be regarded as the externalization of a psychological renegotiation that is triggered by a dictatorship of space.

Repacking place symbols, re-imagining place identity

The renegotiation of place-based identity always involves a process of re-imagining the place. As local Dongshan residents reshaped their place-based identity, some characteristics of the place were deliberately extracted to represent the place as an 'imagined land' with the distinctiveness and unity that any place must bear (Relph 1976). Among the thirty-six respondents of in-depth interviews, twenty-six believed that Dongshan was the 'best place in Guangzhou to live in'. Although not all of these respondents had a good knowledge about the historical and cultural significances of Dongshan, this generalized idea about a 'good Dongshan' was circulated among the interviewees as a collective memory. A sense of pride is at the center of the interviewees' narratives about 'what Dongshan is like'. The image of Dongshan was constructed into a place with the best living environment and the best supply of public service facilities in most of the interviewees' discourses. As one interviewee told, 'the environment in Dongshan is so comfortable—there are few factories, but a lot of office buildings. There is no air pollution here, and we have a great number of greens and parks'. Other narratives focused on a serene, clean and spacious living environment, lower building density and a good supply of infrastructures and public service facilities. In fact, high-quality public service facilities to which Dongshan residents have access are repeated themes in the interviewees' narratives, especially in terms of education.

In a similar way, most interviewees regarded Dongshan as Guangzhou's hegemonic center of political power. People living in Dongshan were portrayed into 'people of power' by the interviewees. A retired government official described Dongshan in a rather vivid way:

In previous times if you told someone you were from Dongshan, he would respect you because he thought you must be an important figure with power. I think this makes Dongshan really different from other parts of Guangzhou—you know what it means in China if power can trickle down from one center to periphery areas.

On the other hand, the cultural specificities of place are also vital for the interviewees' re-imagination about a Dongshan-based identity. First, most of the interviewees believed that residents in Dongshan were more educated than people from other parts of Guangzhou—they seemed to prefer reading and learning, and to be more qualified and more knowledgeable. 'There is no dirty word that ever comes from the lips of a Dongshan local', told one elder interviewee, with a look of pride, 'even in a teahouse, we behave more cultivated and you can see the teahouses in Dongshan are much less noisy than in Yuexiu'.

Another important cultural symbol cherished by the interviewees is the European-styled Dongshan villa, mostly built during the former semi-colonial era of the city (see Figure 2). These villas were initially constructed to accommodate overseas Chinese traders, businessmen and missionaries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nowadays, most of these villas are public properties and used by the local Housing Authority as public housing rentals. Usually, one villa is divided into several apartments and occupied by a number of households at a time. Due to the intensive use



Figure 2 The front façade of a Dongshan villa. Source: online photograph www.sunlb.com.

over the long term, most of the villas are now in continuous decline, and some are being torn down. Before the change of administrative division in 2005, public voices for preserving and protecting these villas remained basically silent. But during the interviews, most respondents felt that there was an urge to protect these villas. They believed that these villas are historical recorders of a past memory of Dongshan, and they felt assaulted by the fact that some villas were now being demolished. One college student told the authors:

These villas are so delicate in both architecture and decoration. They are a precious heritage for us. But I am afraid that the government pays little attention to this issue—they don't care about these villas, just as they don't care about the culture of Dongshan. I hope the local authorities of Yuexiu and Guangzhou would pay more attention to the issue of protecting these villas.

The third cultural symbol that frequents the interviewees' narratives is the concept of

'Dongshan Gentlemen'. We have mentioned this term several times in this paper, and obviously there seemed to be no end to the interviewees' passion about this concept. The *flâneur*-like nature of the Dongshan Gentlemen was representative of Guangzhou's new urban lifestyles during the semi-colonial and Republican periods. Certainly, the era of the Dongshan Gentlemen came to an end after the communist take-over of power in 1949, but during the interviews, this concept was used frequently by the interviewees to refer to the liberal and elegant cultural atmosphere of Dongshan. Some young male respondents would like to call themselves 'Dongshan Gentlemen'. 'People often call young men who were born in Dongshan "Dongshan Gentlemen"', said one of the young male interviewees, 'and we are all proud of this name—we are all proud sons of Dongshan'.

To be sure, many of the place symbols whose knowledge was circulated through local Dongshan residents' re-imagination and

reproduction of their place identity are neither place-specific nor authentic features of Dongshan: as a downtown district, the 'fresh air' of Dongshan is by no means immune to the air pollution caused by the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Guangzhou; the building density in Dongshan is in fact quite high; western-styled buildings and villas are actually widely distributed across the entire inner city of Guangzhou, due to its status as a former semi-colonial city; even more government office buildings were located in Yuexiu before the change of administrative division (from the city map presented in Figure 1, the headquarter of Guangzhou Municipal Government was based in Yuexiu before 2005); and whether residents are cultivated or not is not necessarily associated with which district they live in. Even some of the interviewees admitted that those place symbolizations were to some extent 'too simple generalizations' about what Dongshan was and is now. On the other hand, we should still be informed that Dongshan was a place with considerable internal differentiation, as we discussed above. Concentrations of public facilities and cultures were by no means even phenomenon across the entire district. Some interviewees told the authors frankly that living in different parts of Dongshan certainly meant quite distinct place experiences. But in spite of all the 'ungrounded-ness', the local residents needed those symbols to legitimize their place-based pride, and they had to re-imagine the internally heterogeneous Dongshan into a unified entity with detectable cultural boundaries to justify their Dongshan-based place identity. This re-imagined place was a direct response to the loss of place name, and knowledge about a reconstructed cultural boundary circulated among local Dongshan residents as a form of collective place memory. This memory supports their place-specific

identity *vis-à-vis* the rationalizing and dissolving forces from the state authority.

Conclusions

Identity is a highly fluid process (Mackenzie 2004; Massey 1994), and it is always a dynamic construct that is open to change when previous socio-economic conditions are altered and understandings about what a place is are disrupted or even destroyed (Kneafsey 2000; Pratt 1998). Individuals and groups re-imagine the meanings of place to legitimize or criticize their present (Schnell 2003). In this paper, we see how the local residents of the annulled Dongshan District re-imagined the place of Dongshan to legitimize a contested/disrupted place identity, and to respond to a state act that reduced place into a lifeless space that was open to rationalist reorganization. To a large extent, the re-imagined place of Dongshan in the local residents' narratives is divergent from observed realities, and the local residents developed several strategies to make their imagined place identity grounded and reasonable: first, through a homogenizing imagination, the historical and cultural features of the core area of Dongshan-Kou were recoded to delimit a conceptualized place image of the entire Dongshan District; then, with a multifaceted and multileveled comparing process between Dongshan and other parts of Guangzhou, several place symbols were extracted to justify Dongshan's uniqueness and distinctiveness which support the locals' place identity. Both processes were carried out to re-justify and reconfirm the name of *Dongshan* that had been erased from dominant discourses. Thus we argue that identity is always a socially and culturally defined construction that requires amendable and modifiable understandings. In many cases,

the drives behind this dynamics of identity are non-local forces that disrupt the existing social and cultural conditions of a conventional place.

It is also reasonable to conclude that this re-imagining and reproducing process of Dongshan local residents' place identity should be seen under wider social and economic geographies of the local power structure of Guangzhou (Massey and Jess 1995), where people's relations with place were fragile when being subjected to state forces that dissolved conventional cultural borders of the locality which was highly conditioned by the place name assigned with cultural meanings. Under the context of China's contemporary campaigns of modernization and development, existing places are very often threatened when the state intends to reorganize spaces for achieving modernity. In a civilization like China where state power is dominant, the local residents of Dongshan felt neither motivated nor capable of protecting their identity in any activist manner. Instead, they had to reposition themselves back in place through internalizing several place symbols to draw a conceptually tangible borderline of the place whose memory and past they decided to stay loyal to. Therefore, in spite of the lack of narratives of resistance among the local residents, their re-imagined place identity reconnected them to a 'lost place' that belonged to them and to which they belonged.⁷

Interestingly, this research found that the interviewees' struggle for identity was less concerned with material aspects of life than the symbolic representation of culture and sociality. They were much more concerned about the place name that conditioned their place-based identity. However, this does not mean that the interviewees' interruption of identity is simply a place-bounded fiction.

de Certeau (1984) recognized how the Concept-City ideal of Renaissance reduced land into neutral entities that could be simply arranged on a map or plan. Instead of such a neutralized space, de Certeau preferred a pedestrian lifestyle that was not prescribed and was full of experiences. This notion corresponds partly to Heidegger's conceptualization of dwelling or being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962), a process through which people infuse meanings to places as existential insiders (Relph 1976). Thus we argue that the primary reason behind local Dongshan residents' place interruption is the very fact that Dongshan and Yuexiu are two fundamentally different places, and the annihilation of the place name was presupposed on a homogenization between Yuexiu and Dongshan, as well as the invisibility of place-specific cultures and sociality. Rationalizing state power ignores the textual patterns of places that are saturated with personal and social history (de Certeau 1984). As we can see in this paper, when the two districts were merged into a unified one and one district lost its name and visibility, conflicts of identities were inevitable among the local residents of Dongshan. Rather than being weakened or neutralized by new identities, the Dongshan-based place identity of the local residents gave rise to a more clearly defined notion about 'who they are' and 'how they are connected to Dongshan'. Thus we argue that place-based identity is in fact an aggregate of ideas about a place whose boundaries are drawn by subjective individuals who are conditioned by a trajectory of place meanings, memories and imaginations. It is influenced, but not exclusively defined by the material sphere of people's life. Place identity is under threat of rationalizing spatial forces, but spatial forces can by no means destroy people's awareness about a place—they can only trigger a new round of re-imagination and reconstruction of

both place and place-based identity. In this sense, implications that can be derived from this research for a politics of identity can be more appropriately stated in a policy-oriented way—place should be respected, and the state authorities should be aware of the cultural, social and psychological consequences when the name of place is annihilated and the perceived cultural borders are obscured. If such a reorganizing action is indeed necessary, then a much more fine-grained process of the re-adaption of psychological identification and the reproduction of place meanings should be present, with the participation of both the state and the people who can be easily subjected to such state forces.

Acknowledgements

Funding for this research comes from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (grant No. 40771067, 40701041), and the Natural Science Foundation of Guangdong Province (grant No. 10251063101000007).

Notes

1. Guangzhou's 2005 change of administrative division was typically representative of the subsuming power of the hegemonic discourse of urban development. In search for more space for urban expansion and industrial development, Guangzhou launched a plan to establish two new municipal districts, i.e. Luogang and Nansha, at the more peripheral area of the city. However, the State Council of China prescribed that the total number of Guangzhou's municipal districts could not be increased. As a concession to the central state, Guangzhou Municipal Government decided that the administrative establishments of Dongshan and Fangcun would be cancelled, in order that the number of districts would stay unchanged.
2. Dongshan Gentlemen (Chinese Pingyin: *Dongshan Shaoye*) referred initially to the liberal-minded, well-educated young Chinese men that resided around the area of Dongshan-Kou during the former Republican

Era. These gentlemen owned properties and settled in Dongshan, but their families—which were usually wealthy enough to support their *flâneur* lifestyle and social networks in Guangzhou—were usually based overseas. Those gentlemen were usually receivers of western education and behaved elegantly, and were largely adored by the Guangzhou locals. Gradually, the concept of *Dongshan Shaoye* became an important cultural symbol of Dongshan District.

3. During the interviews, we are particular interested in to which place the local Dongshan residents identify themselves (in Chinese: *Wo shi nail ren?*). Under the cultural context of China, 'being from where' is closely connected with the construction of personal or group identity. In this sense, the authors used the questions on the interviewees' self-definition of 'where I am from' or 'where I belong' as the starting points for investing the meanings of place to them, as well as their place-based identity. To be sure, this enquiry was also assisted with a number of other interview questions.
4. Among the thirty-six respondents of the in-depth interviews, twenty spent their entire life in Dongshan and never left. The rest of the sixteen respondents migrated to settle in Dongshan, but after their settlement, they never left to live in other places. Some respondents moved into Dongshan before 1949, while others came after the founding of the PRC to Dongshan for job opportunities. Among the sixteen respondents, nine had lived in Dongshan for over thirty years.
5. A Spring Festival Flower Market is an important cultural tradition in Guangzhou, bearing Guangzhou locals' good wishes for the Chinese New Year. Before the change of administrative division, Dongshan and Yuexiu had their Spring Festival Market respectively, and the market in Dongshan, with its cultural significance, was obviously a channel through which the Dongshan residents' place memory was embodied.
6. An official Citizen ID card or Marriage Certificate in China registers citizens at the municipal district level.
7. The Chinese experience we present in this paper suggests that the politics of identity process is contingent on the internal communication of local power structure. Under the cultural context of China where the state power is prevalent in the organizing of social life, and a mature civil society is fundamentally absent, the asymmetry of power contributes to a place imagination that differentiates Dongshan's place politics from the Anglo-American experiences where place-based identities often lead to direct confronta-

tions of the civil society with indifferent state power. In this sense, we can see that identity process is not a self-bounded realm of abstract representation of meanings. Rather, it is largely structured through local geometry of relative power.

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Abstract translations

La négociation de l'endroit et de l'identité après un changement de la division administrative

L'identité de l'endroit est une construction fluide qui est dans des dynamiques constantes de la ré-imagination. Des changements dans des conditions économiques, sociales, culturelles et politiques mènent l'individu et des groupes à ré-imaginer et reconstruire leurs identités basées sur l'endroit. Une force majeure qui provoque une interruption dans des identités de l'endroit des gens est le processus spatial rationalisé qui réduit l'endroit à un espace abstractionniste qui est ouvert à la réorganisation. Dans cet article, nous investiguons l'interruption, la réconfirmation et la renégociation de l'identité basée sur l'endroit des résidents locaux de l'ancien district municipal de Dongshan, Guangzhou, Chine, après l'autorité municipale de Guangzhou a annulé l'établissement officiel administratif de Dongshan en 2005. On a mené trente-six entretiens en profondeur, et on a trouvé que l'identité de l'endroit des résidents locaux de Dongshan a généralement amélioré plutôt que vicié après le changement de la division administrative de 2005, de la même façon que des discours sur des interruptions dans leurs identités de l'endroit remplissent leurs récits. Bien qu'ils ressentent une interruption évidente dans l'identité basée sur l'endroit, des résidents locaux de Dongshan ont ré-imaginé les significations de l'endroit de Dongshan afin de développer des frontières locales délimitées culturellement qui ont été conditionnées par le nom Dongshan, et cet identité basée sur l'endroit ré-imaginée est le résultat de la renégociation des résidents locaux à propos de qui

est l'endroit de Dongshan et comment sont leurs identités connectées à cet endroit.

Mots-clefs: endroit, identité, ré-imagination, division administrative

Negociando lugar y identidad después de un cambio de división administrativa

La identidad de lugar es una construcción fluja que está constantemente reinventado. Cambios económicos, culturales y políticos se causan personas y grupos reinventar y reconstruir su identidad. Un esfuerzo dominante que se interrumpe la identidad de personas es el proceso espacial de racionalidad que se reduce el lugar a un espacio abstracto que puede ser reorganizado. En este artículo, investigamos la interrupción, reconfirmación y renegociación de la identidad de residentes locales del distrito municipal de Dongshan, Guangzhou, China, cuando la municipalidad de Dongshan fue eliminado por los autoridades de Guangzhou en 2005. Treinta y seis entrevistas fueron realizados, y se encuentra que las identidades de residentes de Dongshan fueron elevados, no desmerecidos, según el cambio de división administrativa de 2005, y discursos de la interrupción de sus identidades dominan sus narrativos. Notando la interrupción en su identidad, residentes de Dongshan reinventaron los significados del lugar Dongshan para construir fronteras culturales y esta identidad reinventado se resulta de la renegociación de los residentes del significado del lugar Dongshan y como sus identidades están conectados al lugar.

Palabras claves: lugar, identidad, reinventar, división administrativa