

Claiming village commons by “militarizing the ancestors” in urbanizing Fuzhou, China

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Abstract: The funeral reforms in China condemn widespread burial practices considered “backward” and “uncivilized” while contradicting core grassroots values. Examining collective tomb land expropriation in a former rural township of Fuzhou hosting important military infrastructures, this article highlights issues of accessibility to ancestral land in the context of rapid urbanization and the resulting transition from village commons to state provisioned public goods. How do the original inhabitants of new urban communities make claims on their ancestors’ tomb land? What tactics are deployed to comply with state policies as well as to safeguard a certain sense of collective identity? This article shows how former villagers’ publicizing strategies of militarizing their ancestors allow for some concessions to be made, despite little room for negotiations left by sweeping urbanization.

Keywords: China, commons, funeral reforms, Fuzhou, public goods, tomb land, urbanization

As part of their larger efforts to “modernize and civilize” the country, Chinese authorities have introduced a set of new regulations aimed at reforming funerary practices considered “backward” and “uncivilized.” This funerary reform dates back to the Mao era but has accelerated since the 1990s in the context of China’s sweeping urbanization. Hundreds of thousands of villages have undergone a process of legal urbanization, which consists in turning them into “urban communities” (*shequ*) (Chung 2010; Tang 2015; Trémon 2015; Wang et al. 2009; Wu et al. 2013). Rural villages have been reorganized into urban communities in a process of “agricultural conversion” whereby dwellers of

those new administrative entities—previously classified as “peasants” (*nongmin*)—become urban citizens.

Consequently, rural lands that villagers previously owned collectively are being taken over by the state to make room for new development projects. Indeed, municipal authorities often manage to buy land at low prices before selling use rights at higher rates to real estate companies (Po 2012; Trémon 2015, 2019; Zhao 2009). The mechanisms through which these transactions occur can be tricky to investigate at the grassroots level, where the distinction between the “state” and “civil society” is often murky.¹ To simplify, China scholars usually distinguish



between the central state and the local state (including the province and urban municipalities). In this configuration, urban communities (*shequ*)²—some of which have emerged from the urbanization of former rural areas and villages—represent the lowest level of governance in contemporary urban China. Placed under the authority of the street-level office, the administrative bodies of those community centers (often derived from pre-existing village structures, such as the former village committees, *cunweihui*) are not, however, part of the official state apparatus as such (Trémon forthcoming). Instead, *shequ*’s management falls back on a few local agencies, such as police substations (*pai-chusuo*), homeowners’ associations (*yeweihui*), or newly formed residents’ committees (*juweihui*) (Pieke 2014; Tomba 2014; Zhang 2010). My research suggests that in such particular urban settings, local leaders (such as a party secretary of a new urban community) can play an instrumental, though limited role in negotiating the transition from specific village commons (in this case, ancestral tomb land used as a common-pool resource) to urban public goods (i.e., public cemeteries or cultural relics). During 16 months of fieldwork in the city of Fuzhou (the capital of Fujian Province) between 2018 and 2019, I moved into one of these urbanized communities located on the north bank of the Min River, in a former township called Hongshan. There, I investigated the urbanization processes that former villages located on the city’s outskirts and their dwellers had known over the past decades. One of these processes was converting collective tomb land, used to bury and worship the villagers’ ancestors, into a space for state-run facilities dedicated to leisure or military activities.

The urbanization process amounts to a shift from largely self-provisioning former village committees (*cunweihui*) to the state-led provisioning of public goods. Rural land that originally belonged by law to village collectives is redeveloped and repurposed for urban use, with former villagers losing their collective land use rights to the local state in the process. With

urbanization, tomb land that belonged to the villages-in-the-city becomes exponentially more valuable every day because of its rather central location and proximity to business districts. In this transition, which favors urban over rural interests, village commons (communal burial lands) are being replaced by new public goods (state-run cemeteries) (Kipnis 2019, 2021; Trémon 2015, 2019). New public cemeteries are usually established in remote locations, contradicting local practices of burying one’s relative in native soil. Furthermore, worshipping the ancestors is considered not only a moral obligation toward the dead but also a way to ensure good fortune for the living. Indeed, an auspicious location and good geomancy are the basis for burying a dead relative because it will canalize the vital energies (*qi*) concretized in the bones and bring vitality as well as fertility to the descendants (Bruun 2003; Feuchtwang 1974; Paton 2007). In that sense, funerary practices are very much embedded in the present for the descendants, family, and lineage members who take this matter very seriously. Hence, funeral reforms are seen as a direct threat to the conditions of success and social relations of those who remain and strive to care for the deceased.

Focusing on collective tomb land requisition in Hongshan, a former rural township in Fuzhou City, this article shows how funeral reform has been implemented somewhat unevenly, with a few ancestral tombs remaining on collectively owned lands of former villages now turned into military infrastructure. This article explores how this situation has left some room for negotiation between state and local actors, allowing for both commoning and publicizing strategies (see Introduction). Most of the former tombs, however, have been displaced, and the burial land turned into a public park. By describing how such reforms affect the daily lives and core values of those who inhabit former rural communities, this article explores the rapid urbanization processes that have brought original villagers to stand for a sense of belonging and to safeguard a collective identity. The first section attempts to situate the notions of “claims”

and “belonging” in the Chinese context, as well as the variegated ways of negotiating change among different categories of residents (“new-comers,” urban dwellers and original villagers). The second section retraces the historical background and recent development of Fujian Province and shows how the specific geostrategic position of Fuzhou influences its urbanization path. The third section provides an overview of funeral reforms in Fuzhou City and their consequences at the local level. The fourth section sheds light on the negotiation tactics original villagers deploy to retain and secure access to former communal cemetery land: a “militarization of ancestors.”

“Claims” and “belonging”: Local responses to urban (re-)development

The notions of “claims” and “belonging” have been subjects of numerous anthropological studies in China, some of which have highlighted “the continuing importance of lineage, village, ethnicity and neighborhood in structuring a range of activities from environmental protests to tax riots, ethnic protests and demands for recognition of land rights” (Perry and Selden 2010: 21). Some authors have described how those dynamics of making claims function among specific fringes of the population, such as Ching Kwan Lee’s analysis of migrant workers’ community and their insurgency against “socialist legality” (Lee 2002). Meanwhile, others have underlined the specific issues of rural-to-urban transition in Chinese cities, where “most people are pushed to the distant suburbs where adequate facilities such as schools and hospitals may take years to develop” (Shao 2013: 25), which brings the local population to make claims on certain public goods they believe the state is failing to provide.

This phenomenon is clearly visible in former villages-in-the-city turned into *shequs*, where the transition from common to public goods is far from happening smoothly and the resulting shortcomings can lead to protests and expres-

sions of discontent among the local population. In Hongshan, urban residents—of which a majority are migrant workers of the so-called floating population (*liudong renkou*)—gathered on a public square to protest the lack of public lighting that was promised in their neighborhoods by the private developer in charge of building the community’s housing complexes. Consequently, these blocks were soon nicknamed the “dark neighborhood,” which is ironic because this portion of Hongshan was officially rebranded as “national light” upon its urbanization. According to a local informant whose co-workers took part in these events, dwellers took to the streets and “shouted communist slogans while waving national flags, which is the usual way of protesting in China . . . because people can’t argue with you if you comply with the propaganda.” Indeed, as historian Shao Qin pointed out, the red flag grants a certain legitimacy and a “higher moral ground,” which prevents people who are waving it from being labeled as “anti-revolutionary,” at least in the eyes of other fellow residents or witnesses. Given that “the presence of the red flag, still prominent at major political and ceremonial occasions, has become obsolete in the daily life of the Chinese people,” it functions as “a legitimate but also distant, contested emblem to support their struggle and to get attention” (Shao 2013: 165–166).

By contrast, some original villagers, who had not been relocated and chose to remain in the area despite the agricultural conversion, took a different stance to make their voices heard while also “rallying around policy slogans promulgated by the central government in their struggles” (Lee 2002: 219). Indeed, they generated tenuous, yet symbolically powerful claims on what they consider “their homes” by marking tree trunks with the characters *si shu* (private tree) in red paint, then signed it with a local family’s name. According to passersby, including staff of the community’s residents’ committee, this act was a way of contesting the construction of a new road there, which would have required cutting existing trees, hence contradicting the municipality’s own policy of a

“green city” and its tree-planting projects. Aside from providing another example of protest relying on “mirroring” state rhetoric and policies (a strategy already visible during the reform period, Lee 2002: 216–217), this case also illustrates a particular type of “claim”: unlike the mobilization calling for public lighting, marking trees as “private” denotes a sense of belonging to a certain place, one native villagers feel particularly entitled to, both as previous collective land owners, but also because of the sentimental value they attach to it. In this light, claims made by the original villagers (such as the one described above) can be viewed as an attempt to resist what some have called “domicide” (Bruckermann 2019; Shao 2013), the “destruction of home,” brought upon the local population by the new administrative status assigned to the area and the phenomena of dispossession and dislocation it results in.

It should be noted however that such protests are not limited to newly urbanized areas but can in some circumstances take place in the urban center itself, as was the case in Fuzhou in response to urban redevelopment projects targeting some of the oldest parts of the city. The well-documented events I am referring to occurred in the historic neighborhood of Three Lanes and Seven Alleys (or *Sanfang qixiang*) in 2010 and display the somewhat more confrontational turn that issues of “making claims” can take in a historically and politically charged context. Indeed, residents of this area fought eviction notices in a more antagonistic manner by throwing bricks and makeshift projectiles at “any state agent” daring to cross a “demarcation line” they had drawn to defend their homes against what Julie Y. Chu (2014) described as “infrastructural attacks.” Nevertheless, as I witnessed during my fieldwork, these protests have had little effect on redevelopment projects of former homes in what is now Fuzhou City’s main tourist attraction and central shopping area.

In the remainder of this article, I focus on another such case of “making claims” aimed at retaining a sense of “belonging” linked to former (collective) ownership as well as values of

local kinship, both threatened by the radical changes brought about by urbanization policies.³ Indeed, the attempt to maintain value and memory by reviving village public goods in urban renovation, albeit unsuccessful at times, can contribute to the sense of belonging and the identity of community. This case, as we shall see, again mobilizes similar “mirroring” practices but this time through innovative tactics of promoting certain village commons to public goods. It is also particularly telling in relation to Fuzhou’s urbanization context, insofar as it brings into play an additional and significant dimension linked to the strong militarization of the area (which will be further discussed in the next section).

Urbanizing Fuzhou amid regional tensions

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power marked China’s turn to “opening-up policies” aimed at implementing a series of economic reforms across the territory. After a decade of Cultural Revolution characterized by economic stagnation and strong unrest, a new development strategy was indeed crucially needed (Y. Ma 2019: 33). In effect, many cities experienced an unprecedented boom under market-oriented policies aimed at promoting China’s access to the global market and closing the gap with the West. The country then began its transition from a politics of class struggle to a focus on economic development under a “Chinese market economy,” or in official terms: “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This nationwide program consisted of “four modernizations,” targeting the sectors of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense. Meanwhile, urbanization soon became a priority in the race for economic growth and social development in China. By making large-scale investments in developing designated zones, Chinese authorities opted for what some have described as a “trial and error” approach, which consisted in gradually introducing new economic regulations

in targeted zones or cities before reproducing models in other cities that proved effective or generated the most benefits (Xie et al. 2018: 3). This impulse of reforms led to establishing new special economic zones (SEZ) in five coastal areas strategically located near Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao for boosting exports to and from these regions. Creating these special economic zones enabled cities such as Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, Xiamen as well as the island of Hainan to emerge as new poles of attraction for foreign investment and businesses, thus helping to shape the image of China as the “world’s production factory.” Besides, introducing lean fiscal policies—for instance, reducing tax rates on profits—within this first “sample” of special economic zones made it easier for foreign capital and companies to set up in mainland China.

With rapid economic development, these designated areas also experienced tremendous growth in urban infrastructures (Xie et al. 2018: 3). However, the Fujian Province started with an important economic disadvantage and in fact was already lagging behind in this race for nationwide urbanization. Indeed, several cities, including Fuzhou (the provincial capital), did not immediately reach the same pace of economic growth, due to pre-existing economic deficits inherited from the pre-reforms era. During the 1950s to 1970s, urban development in China was carried out centrally, following a process of urbanization “from above” (L. J. C. Ma and Lin 1993; Shen and Lin 2017). In this development model, constructing new towns (as well as expanding existing urban centers) thus depended almost exclusively on large-scale investments from the central state. Considered a poor province of China, Fujian has been somewhat neglected by this approach to urbanization, with the central government favoring larger and more economically competitive urban centers. Several factors can explain this lack of dynamism in Fujian. First, the region’s mountainous topography, its humid climate, and its lands being prone to floods largely contributed to Fujian’s geographic isolation, which was cut off from the major urban centers

of the neighboring provinces, and by extension from the corresponding infrastructure network. More importantly, Fujian Province’s slower pace of economic development can be attributed to a regional context under high tension, which shaped the long-lasting reputation of the province as a renegade. Indeed, on numerous occasions in history, Chinese authorities have considered coastal Fujian a rebellious area.

During the reign of the first Ming dynasty ruler, fortifications were erected in Fuzhou City following an irregular pattern in comparison to other typical square or rectangular shapes of city walls in China during this era. Indeed, Fuzhou City’s walls’ “truly irregular shapes” were “designed to capitalize on the defensive potential of particular natural features” (Chang 1977: 90). Later, in the seventeenth century, Qing imperial officials, whose authority was suffering constant undermining from Ming loyalists—mainly the famous pirate-warlord Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga in its *hokkien* pronunciation)—launched a fierce campaign to eliminate resistance and conquer Taiwan where Koxinga had retreated. In the late nineteenth century, part of the Fujian Province was once again turned into a battlefield during the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864). This reputation of an outlaws’ lair and home of conspirators held strong until 1949, with the defeat of nationalist troops led by general Chiang Kai-Shek, which then prompted their retreat to Taiwan. In the following decades, the risk of an armed conflict and the general climate of instability reigning around the Taiwan Strait resulting from the civil war provided few incentives for the central government to encourage economic and urban development in this region, considered to be problematic from a security standpoint (Shen and Lin 2017). This resulted in very little investment from the Chinese central government. Indeed, as the first area to be possibly invaded and taken over by the Republic of China in Taiwan, “Fujian suffered from wholesale isolation and marginalization under state socialism, receiving a mere 1.5 percent of China’s total capital investment between 1949 and 1978, the fourth lowest amount among all the

provinces” (Chu 2010: 25). However, with the start of the “reform and opening” (*gaige kaifang*) from the late 1970s onward, China’s central government started to devote more attention to this region because of its proximity with emerging economies overseas (including Taiwan), which “quickly turned into its major selling point for leading the way in state experiments with economic liberalization” (Chu 2010: 25). Xiamen, another Fujianese city, was declared one of China’s first special economic zones in 1980. A few years later, in 1984, the provincial capital, Fuzhou City, was also designated an open coastal city (Pieke et al. 2004: 42).

Given his long-lasting political career in various leading positions in Fuzhou City and the Fujian Province (1985–2002), China’s president Xi Jinping is particularly aware of the importance of cross-straits relations and their toll on this region’s economic development. To boost the economic development in the area, he personally green-lighted several large-scale infrastructural projects, such as constructing an international airport in Fuzhou’s newly urbanized Changle district. Later, the Binhai “smart-city” harbor and the newest Fuzhou South station were constructed, as well as railways and metro systems bridging the urban center to developing coastal areas. In Fuzhou, these flagship infrastructural projects received much publicity through official propaganda as well as financial backing from the central state. Interestingly, they are mainly located in Fuzhou’s coastal districts, which are spreading toward the shores of the Taiwan Strait, hence more remote from the city’s historic center. Yet, these coastal areas are scheduled to become increasingly interconnected with the city’s historic urban center and the inlands as part of the construction of a Greater Fuzhou area. Along this new axis spreading from the inland toward the coast, urbanization was coupled with the promotion of township and village entrepreneurship (i.e., Township Village Enterprises, TVE), which, over the past decades, triggered the creation of new zones of economic and industrial development at the local level. This increased the need

for new interconnecting development zones and hence the construction (or improvement) of infrastructures.

However, given the province’s context-sensitive location, city developers often have to deal with a “dual-use” principle (i.e., both civil and military), which is deeply embedded in the construction of public infrastructures in the area. In Fuzhou, one case in particular highlights this logic, namely the decommissioning in 1996 of the dual-use (military/civil) airport of Yixu, located in the Cangshan district, at the time of the construction of the Changle international airport in the coastal area. Since then, the military function of the Yixu airport remained, whereas the civil function was bestowed upon the newest Changle airport. Notwithstanding, expanding Fuzhou City toward the coastal areas aligns with the Chinese state’s long-term goal to reunite the continent with the Taiwanese islands. This ambition became even more evident with the December 2020 opening of the Fuzhou-Pingtang Railway, bridging the hinterland of Fuzhou (where Hongshan is located) with the inner city, all the way to the islet of Pingtan, on the edge of the Taiwan Strait. This railway converts into a 16.3 kilometer sea-crossing bridge in the coastal areas. It is China’s first and the world’s longest cross-sea road-rail bridge (six-lane highway on top and a high-speed railway on the bottom), described by state media as “play[ing] a positive role in promoting cross-strait infrastructure.”⁴ Furthermore, proposals have been considered to extend the existing structure with an underwater tunnel connecting the Pingtan island with Hsinchu City, in Taiwan. Indeed, since 1996 Fujian’s provincial government has organized multiple seminars on the idea of a cross-strait tunnel. However, this initiative stoked a great deal of concern over its feasibility and the risks involved, both technical, financial, and of course political.⁵ Once again, this highlights the context of regional tensions and its particular significance for further investigating urbanization processes, especially given Fuzhou’s strategic location in what was described recently as “the most dangerous place on Earth.”⁶

From village cemeteries to state-sponsored public cemeteries

To meet growth targets of the urban agglomeration on the western side of the Taiwan Strait, city planners are facing a real urbanistic conundrum. First, with the sea on one side, and mountains overlooking suburban areas on the other, Fuzhou's constructible land is a scarce resource from the outset. Second, the geological constraints and specific soil conditions that make Fuzhou a "sponge city," meaning flood control and stormwater management are key issues, increase challenges for urban planning. In this context, the area called Hongshan has become a primary development zone for connecting Fujian Province's hinterland to the inner city of Fuzhou, following an axis toward the new coastal districts. Squeezed between the Min River and the mountains near the historic west gate of the city, Hongshan was once a rural township (*xiang*) and home to several fisher or merchant settlements that stocked grain and provisions to feed the city. In late 1992, Hongshan officially became a town (*zhen*), and only three years later, it was upgraded to sub-district (*jiedao*) level, becoming part of one of the core urban districts of Fuzhou. From then on, all the former natural villages (*zirancun*) were reorganized and gradually converted into urban communities. Given its strategic location in terms of urban expansion and the development of mobility, linking the older city with the fast-growing Nantai Island (now Cangshan district) and the inner lands, investors soon eyed the potential of Hongshan and municipal authorities offered its villagers financial compensation in exchange for their land. In less than a decade, Hongshan has turned into a vast housing complex of high-rise buildings with access to its own public services and facilities, such as schools, sports centers, parks, and health centers. To document the history of the former villages converted into urban communities (*shequ*) in Hongshan and to meet with original villagers, my plan was to attend the *Qingming* festival—or Tomb Sweep-

ing Day—when people traditionally return to their hometowns to worship their ancestors on collective tomb land. Through a series of interviews with the local population, I managed to identify two burial sites that belonged to original villagers. The first one was located on the local mountain that delimits the south-eastern border of the new urban community. However, it did not look like ancestral tomb land at all. Instead, the whole mountain was covered by a vast leisure complex built as an elevated forest trail sinuating throughout the trees.

Since its opening to the public in 2015, this 19-kilometer, pedestrian walkway, known as the "trail of fortunes," gained popularity among local residents and visitors for being a peaceful and quiet spot to have a walk and breathe fresh air in the city, which is indeed a rare commodity in the busy streets of Fuzhou. During a walking interview on this trail with one of my informants, I got confirmation that tombs had been entirely removed from the mountain, when she declared, somewhat humorously, that "we were merely walking above the ghosts now" (*women xianzai jiu zou zai guihun de shangmian*). Indeed, funeral reforms had already been put into motion in this part of Hongshan. Following the new national policy of funeral reform (*binzang gaige*), adopted on 30 April 1997, during the twenty-eighth meeting of the Standing Committee of the Tenth National People's Congress, the governments of Fujian Province and Fuzhou City issued a series of new regulations to implement funeral rituals with cremation practices, thereby reforming burials to make room for construction, while dismantling the "old funeral customs." However, promotion of cremation and gradual abandonment of burial practices are not a new phenomenon in China, as they date back to the Republican Era. Under Mao, during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the ruling party drew a clear line between urban and rural customs (Whyte 1988). Cremation became the norm in cities, while in rural areas, burial was still allowed, although people sometimes had to remove tombs

located on arable land. In the funeral reforms of the late 1990s, guidelines for funerary practices in urban areas were extended to the industrializing and urbanizing countryside. However, these policies met with increased resistance, and therefore, “authorities [were] generally careful to legitimize their implementation by the need to make space for roads and other infrastructure” (Trémon 2015: 79–80). Moreover, authorities resorted to justification in terms of building a “socialist spiritual civilization,” with burial practices being characterized as chaotic (*luan Zhang*) as opposed to “scientific, civilized and healthy” (Trémon 2019: 242). Besides, “these prohibitions are sometimes justified as measures for fire prevention or pollution reduction” in a move to enact “civilized” (*wenming*) funerals and raise the “quality” (*suzhi*) of those who bury loved ones in the cemetery (Kipnis 2019: 267).

Traditionally, the family members or elders of the same lineage as the deceased take care of funerals in rural China, and the dead must be buried close to their relatives, usually on familial land near their homes. By contrast, urban funerals are arranged in more standardized and commodified ways by professional funeral specialists in public cemeteries, “which are distant from the family home, and which are only visited for purposes of memorialization” (Kipnis 2019: 255). By declaring familial and communal tomb land “unsuitable for funeral use,” new regulations thus criminalized villagers’ usage of the land owned by the rural collective, while adding to the negative representation of the countryside as a place where “feudal superstitions” survived (Trémon 2019: 242). However, traditional values based on the principles of geomancy (*fengshui*) and filial piety (*xiao*) emphasize the importance of locality in the act of burying ancestors. Indeed, relatives have to be buried close to and by one’s family or lineage members in order to satisfy one’s moral obligations to the dead. By doing so, one is insuring a good and prosperous afterlife for the deceased, whose spirit will then return the favor to the living. The grave sites and

remains of apical ancestors, in particular, are therefore of utmost importance, and their destruction amounts to “destroying the lineage as a whole” (Trémon 2015: 80). In Fuzhou too, the older population perceived the introduction of a new local cremation policy as a “very terrifying situation,” so much so that “people claimed that some ailing elderly persons had committed suicide . . . to beat the deadline for the launch of mandatory cremation” (Chu 2010: 163). Particularly in Fujian, these reforms also triggered a race to obtain foreign citizenship or legal status (e.g., a US green card), in order to avoid crematory funerals: “For those who missed the small window between the policy’s announcement and its enforcement, the one alternative to wholesale defiance and violation of the policy was to claim exemption as a subject under the rule and protection of a foreign state” (Chu 2010: 163).

Despite being presented under the aegis of fostering scientific and spiritual civilization, these reforms thus acted locally as another tool for the urbanization of suburban areas or places considered slums or backward “villages-in-the-city,” hence granting municipal authorities even more leverage in dealing with the conversion of rural land. In this light, the construction of new public cemeteries by municipal governments appears more as a means to achieve economies of scale rather than a sheer act of provisioning public goods. Indeed, far from engaging with local actors at the village community level in a horizontal manner, the top-down implementation of funeral reforms stipulates that local structures, companies and institutions, residential committees (*juweihui*), and social organizations have to comply and “do a good job of propaganda and education in funeral management and must guide citizens to handle funerals in a civilized and modest manner.”⁷ Nonetheless, the unequal implementation of these guidelines in Hongshan left some room for negotiation between local leaders of the urbanized communities and municipal agencies, as I later discovered.

Nowadays Hongshan is home to a vast majority of incoming migrant workers or the “floating population”—that is, a large group of temporary residents originating from other provinces or neighboring rural counties. I too was a temporary resident in this community and a foreigner on top of that. But little did I know when I first moved into one of Hongshan’s newly urbanized communities that the former county also provided housing for military personnel stationed in the area. At first, the military aspect and political sensitivity of Fuzhou’s location did not really impact my daily research activities, as I was focusing on urbanization processes at a rather micro level. However, the area’s military significance became more apparent as my presence and research on tomb land met with increased scrutiny from local authorities. Eventually, my days of snooping around were interrupted as I reached the second ancestral site I had identified: one of Hongshan’s former rural villages that was now surrounded by imposing military constructions. I was just about to reach the former village’s entrance when a soldier in uniform appeared from behind and asked me to follow him to a discreet military outpost nearby, which I had not spotted until then. There, all my personal belongings—including my phone, note pads, and camera—were seized, and I was thoroughly questioned. From then on, my access to communal land would be denied due to its proximity to highly sensitive military infrastructures.⁸

Militarizing ancestors: Negotiating access to former communal burial land

Since my search for “physical evidence” of previous villages’ structures, such as the village committee (*cunweihui*) building or the offices of a remaining peasants’ economic association (*jingji hezuo she*) was interrupted, I started asking around the urban community whether any of the original villagers (*yuancunmin*) were still living in Hongshan. Most residents, however, declared themselves *wailairen*, newcomers who

had moved to the neighborhood rather recently. After a couple months of using the snowball sampling method, I got in touch with a family of original villagers who had just opened a restaurant in the vicinity. Their premises stood out in the newly constructed neighborhood, where most of the buildings’ ground floors were used as a temporary dump or filled with debris and unfinished construction work. As a regular customer of this family business, I soon got acquainted with a few of its members. Three generations of women were actively promoting what they considered their “culinary heritage”: a dedicated daughter acting as the restaurant’s owner, her mother-in-law as chef for local Fuzhounese cuisine, closely supervised by the maternal grandmother for anything related to traditional *nyonya*⁹ delicacies. My first encounter on the paternal side was with the owner’s father, Lao’yi, who often joined me for dinner in his spare time (which he had plenty of as a “young” retiree) and rapidly became a key informant. Indeed, our conversations gave me access to precious insights on “what used to be there” prior to the urbanization of former natural villages. As a native villager, Lao’yi was particularly keen on sharing memories of his life in Hongshan and its rural past. On the issue of tomb removal, I learned from Lao’yi that there used to be two mountains, but the government decided to flatten the whole area to make room for new military constructions and ultimately tombs had to be removed.¹⁰ Lao’yi later introduced me to his younger brother, Lao’er, who he presented as “far more knowledgeable on these matters.” It turned out that Lao’yi’s brother was the acting party secretary (*shuji*) of the new urban community. Unlike his older brother, and probably given his official function, Lao’er was more reluctant to evoke life in their home village in front of a “foreigner friend.” Instead, he would systematically dismiss all my questions about the past in former rural communities and describe ongoing projects in the urban community (such as the construction of new roads or the promotion of waste sorting), which he and his colleagues had helped

set up in collaboration with the district-level government.

Although the two brothers were natives of the same original village, their attitudes toward the changes that their community had undergone over the years were quite distinct. Surely this could be attributed to their different statuses in the new urban community: one playing an active, official role in the administration’s leadership (Lao’er), the other being an “ordinary” retired resident (Lao’yi). While the former was describing the urban community’s development in rather pragmatic terms, reflecting the new administrative structure much in line with municipal urban policies, the latter kept referring to a “previous version” of Hongshan, where kinship still played a role in ritual practices and shaped the former villagers’ lives. This discrepancy became even more apparent when Lao’yi called his brother out on the way the *shequ* had managed the removal of ancestral tombs. This “sensitive issue” led to an argument between them, as the party secretary eventually admitted, though reluctantly, that the community’s leadership (which he was also part of) had to clear tomb land to make room for the military.

Further interviews with residents pointed to the fact that most of Hongshan’s former ancestral tombs had already been relocated to the neighboring county of Minhou¹¹ (more than 20 km away from Hongshan) where a new public cemetery had recently been constructed. The Fuzhou Huangtian Chinese Permanent Cemetery (*Fuzhou huangtian huaren yongjiu lingyuan*) is a legally operated cemetery approved by the Fujian Provincial Department of Civil Affairs. Interestingly, this cemetery also serves as a mausoleum for revolutionary martyrs, whose graves and monuments are displayed in a dedicated memorial park. With a total investment of about 108 million yuan, it was built in 1996 and covers a built area of 500 *mu* (a bit more than 33 hectares) and was designed by the Xiamen University Architectural Design Institute. To promote the construction of this new public cemetery, city officials ap-

pealed to its supposedly good *fengshui* location (*yi shan mian shui*) on the banks of the Minjiang River. At the same time, the cemetery’s location was praised in a promotional video for its proximity to a major highway and upcoming metro lines, as well as its convenient accessibility to and from the city center. This illustrates the paradoxical stance of state officials in enforcing market-oriented logic for transitioning formerly rural, collective commons into urban goods, as well as the ambivalence in governing funeral practices: while burial practices based on locality and geomancy are considered feudal and hence forbidden at the former village’s level, *fengshui* rhetoric is openly mobilized as a selling point for urban developers at the city level to relocate and recentralize the tombs in a public cemetery. The construction of this new public cemetery effectively prompted the takeover of Hongshan’s collective lands as well as the tombs’ removal, to make room for state-run facilities, including the military and walkway infrastructures that expanded over former ancestral land. Yet, by the time I investigated the collective tombs site in 2019, the community still counted more than five hundred actual graves on its land (according to Lao’er), where villagers’ ancestors are buried. Since the remaining burial sites are located on what is now a growing military complex, with troops stationed and training on a daily basis, people who want to worship their ancestors on remaining tomb land have to seek a special authorization from the military officials in order to access them. Then, they must undergo a thorough body search at the base’s entrance, where any personal items, such as firecrackers, paper money, candles, or incense sticks, are prohibited. This prompted Lao’yi to complain: “You can barely bring flowers! And during the *Qingming* festival, a lot of additional soldiers are sent to guard the entrance to the site!” In this regard, the remaining collective tombs located on former village’s land but inside the newly constructed military facilities fall under city regulations regarding funeral practices (article 11), which forbids the burning of paper items (paper houses, tools, or money) and other

practices considered to be feudal superstition during funeral activities.

Thanks to his older brother's outburst, I finally got to see Lao'er without his "official mask" of party secretary, as both engaged in a rather heated conversation, switching at times from Mandarin to the local dialect. To prevent any "loss of face," Lao'er concluded their argument (and subsequently, our interview) by describing how the villagers had managed to promote some of their ancestors' tombs and steles as "cultural relics" within the provincial government's policy of "cultural relics preservation" (*wenwu baohu*). One of them is Zhang Jing, a Ming Dynasty General. His tomb had initially been classified in 1961 as a "cultural protection unit" by the Fujian Provincial Bureau of Cultural Heritage.¹² Following Hongshan's urbanization however, Zhang Jing's tomb has been subject to numerous controversies linked to cases of looting and vandalism (notably of statues adorning its funeral monument), causing the new urban community's leaders to tighten access regulations to the burial site. In 2018, the tomb was finally rendered accessible to the public (thus ending the practice of obtaining prior authorization from community leaders), and Zhang Jing was officially commemorated during the *Qingming* festival. This event, which gathered representatives of the urban community as well as military officials, was made possible not only because the tomb was protected by both municipal and provincial heritage policies, but also, more importantly, because the commemoration itself was publicized as an effort to "build the Communist Party" (*dangjian*) at the new urban community level, as well as part of a propaganda campaign to "promote the National Defense."

To safeguard what they saw as part of their collective heritage ("their ancestral land," "their mountain," etc.) in the face of sweeping urbanization processes in their community, local former village-level leaders raised their influence to match the local state (at both municipal- and provincial-levels) by "militarizing" their an-

cestors. With urbanization, villages lose their (relative) political autonomy and become subordinate to the urban administration, that is, the local state. As we have seen, there is some ambiguity, because the new urban community (*shequ*) level is not fully integrated into the urban administration. The situation is paradoxical; there is loss of autonomy, but partial integration increases the possibility of talking to the higher municipal levels. Thus, some native Hongshan villagers, particularly brother Lao'er, were able to levy their official positions in the new urban administration (*shequ*) as well as their belonging to the party to promote their community's interests. Whereas ancestral burial sites used to belong exclusively to the members of the village community, access was safeguarded by orchestrating a public ceremony, in compliance with official discourse and military propaganda. In practice, only native villagers took part in this event, mainly those involved in the organization committee, as well as some representatives of the military on the new base. Worshipping rituals are now co-organized both by former villagers and military officials. This publicizing strategy (see Introduction), addressed at the state, serves as commoning, that is, maintaining and protecting the former village community members' enduring access to their ancestral tombs. However, the involvement of the military, while it is a form of public recognition of their ancestors' worth, underscores the villagers' loss of their ancestral land.

Other local historical figures were equally revered, such as prominent political figure Shen Baozhen (1820–1879) or late Qing dynasty admiral-in-chief and Minister of the Navy Sa Zhenbing (1859–1952), who conveniently pledged allegiance to the Communist Party after the civil war. The latter two had not yet resulted in similar events displaying the collaboration between *shequ* leaders and military representatives, but they did testify to the native villagers' efforts to get public recognition of their deceased. Lineage members thereby legitimized ancestor worship by emphasizing their ances-

tors’ historic heroism. As in Wenzhou, there is a “convenient conflation of honoring lineage ancestors with paying homage to patriotic heroes who resisted foreign invasions of national space” (Yang 2004: 737).

Conclusion

The shift from collective tomb lands (common-pool resource) to state-run cemeteries (public good) through the appropriation of burial land by municipal governments is probably the most culturally and politically sensitive aspect of the wider process of urbanization and transitioning to an urban public-goods regime that is currently occurring at a massive scale in China. This article has shown how native villagers managed to act through official channels at the new urban community-level in order to mitigate the effects of this top-down imposed change. As elsewhere in Chinese cities, the construction of a state-run cemetery was used to enforce cremation practices and relocate villagers’ tombs to a centralized facility, regardless of its remote location from original ancestral land. Furthermore, a large part of the ancestral tomb land was converted into state-owned land for the construction of military facilities and leisure infrastructures.

Because what used to be collective village land is now either a restricted area (the military base) or a public area open to all (the forest trail), community leaders had to find other ways to legitimize community access to ancestral tomb land. They did so by commemorating historic figures whose tombs are located on their ancestral land, based on the promotion of one of them as a “cultural relic.” In publicizing these figures, praised as national heroes, villagers actively resorted to the state’s own “rhetoric of rights and obligations” (see Trémon, Introduction to this issue), in this case both communist and military propaganda, which enabled them to hold official public events on former collective land. But “hiking above the ghosts” on the

Trail of Fortune may constitute a less formal way to commemorate the dead, by bodily investing new urban facilities, hence preserving a sense of belonging to a place.

Resistance in China can indeed take several detours and often involves the mirroring of state governance practices, for instance by replicating national propaganda to yield benefits locally. Despite the sweeping urbanization of former rural communities in the area, the case of Hongshan indicates that, however small, there is still some room left for negotiations between local leaders and state officials. In this sense, it provides a nuanced perspective on the larger context of spatial struggles in urbanizing China, where state control is strong and opposing voices are usually quickly muted. Other works have described this “dynamic and evolving” nature of the Chinese political system. For instance, Andrew Mertha’s (2008: 158) case study of local resistance movements and policy activism opposing large-scale dam projects in contemporary China highlights how “grass-roots initiatives, regardless of whether they are initiated by the local state or Party apparatus or by society, . . . contribute to a more dynamic and diverse political process.” As this article has shown, local (former village-level) leaders in Fuzhou were able to negotiate enduring access to the former communal burial land that was no longer officially theirs. Securing access to a plot of land formerly owned by the village collective but now effectively controlled by military personnel constituted a way of “generating claims of belonging” (Bruckermann 2019: 204)—belonging to a certain place and ancestral tradition.

By mobilizing military history and heroic narratives to make claims over ancestral tombs, former rural residents partially withstand state-led urban policies and cope with the loss of their past (village) common goods. However, especially in the context of growing tensions with Taiwan, there is nothing they can do to prevent the army from carrying out with its expansion in the area. Moreover, these “coping strategies”

are too limited in their application to effectively resist the loss of geographical as well as historical landmarks caused by the forced relocation or dismantling of former villages.

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Notes

1. This is especially the case with Fuzhou, which is both a provincial capital and a prefecture-level city.
2. Full name: community service centers to the Party and the masses (*shequ dangqun fuwu zhongxin*).
3. For further literature on how different kinds of policy making, including (para-)military, can affect spatial changes, see Mertha 2008.
4. Gu Liping. 2020. "Cross-sea bridge starts load tests." *China Daily*, 27 August. <http://www.ecns.cn/news/2020-08-27/detail-ifzpzpxeu2685190.shtml>.

5. Li Dapeng. 2005. "Feasibility of cross-Straits tunnel discussed." *China Daily*, 8 November. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-11/08/content_492243.htm; "Taipei says thanks but no to cross-strait plan." *Taipei Times*, 26 April 2007. <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2007/04/26/2003358257>.
6. "The most dangerous place on Earth." *The Economist*, 1 May 2021. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/01/the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth>.
7. Twenty-eighth meeting of the Standing Committee of the Tenth National People's Congress, 30 April 1997.
8. In the meantime, newly gathered information has revealed that this site, known as the "311 Base," is officially dedicated to the "Three Warfares" (namely the Public Opinion, Psychological Operations, and Legal Warfares) targeting both Taiwan and its international supporters (see Charon and Jeangène Vilmer 2021).
9. This is a reference to the eponymous ethnic group and descendants of early Chinese migrants who settled in Southeast Asia, mainly on the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian Archipelago.
10. Interviews with Lao'yi and Lao'er, 18 June 2019; 25 June 2019.
11. Minhou is also under Fuzhou City's administration.
12. Terminology around key-concepts of "cultural relic" (*wenwu*) and "cultural heritage" (*wenhua yichan*) in China's cultural heritage policy are thoroughly discussed in the literature (see, for instance, Bi et al. 2016; Fresnais 2001). Zhang Jing's ancient tomb mentioned in this article is listed on the "provincial cultural relics protection units list" (item no. 50) published by the Fujian Provincial Bureau of Cultural Heritage (*Fujian sheng wenwu ju*), 15 August 2020. http://wwwj.wlt.fujian.gov.cn/zwgk/tzgg/gztz/202008/t20200815_5540916.htm.

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