

# 10

## PRESERVATION BY DEMOLITION: TOXIC HERITAGE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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Heritage preservation is usually understood as an act of preserving a human legacy for the benefit of future generations. Yet what this really means has seldom been examined (Harrison et al. 2020, 3). A deep dive into questions such as what should be preserved, why, and for whom has the potential to open up the notion of heritage as not only a tangible material legacy originated *from the past*, but also something that is intangible, processual, and discursive *for the future* (Harrison et al. 2020, 5). In this chapter, I explore how residents in a Chinese neighbourhood engaged in this future-making process by bargaining with their “toxic heritage.” Here, toxic heritage is defined as the tangible and intangible legacies of living next to a toxic facility. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between the spring and autumn of 2018, I show how the villagers of Samtilwei, a periurban neighbourhood adjacent to a petrochemical plant in southern China, tried to maximise their financial gains through the double act of destroying and remaking their toxic heritage. Such an attempt was made possible because the intangible heritage that the villagers wish to preserve, notably their land ownership and their peasant landlord status, would only be kept after the tangible forms of their toxic heritage are demolished. This tangible heritage includes not only the villagers’ own farms and homes, but also several nineteenth-century buildings that are officially listed by the government as a cultural and historical heritage in the district. On the one hand, this deliberated reconceptualisation of heritage exemplifies the villagers’ opportunism and the local government’s development-above-all mentality. On the other hand, it highlights the significance of negotiation in contemporary heritage practice (Suntikul and Jachna 2013; Kidd and Cardiff 2017; Witte 2019). In exploring how villagers tactically mobilised “preservation” to retain their intangible connections to the villages while justifying the demolition of their tangible estates, this chapter

expounds the peculiar phenomenon of “preservation by demolition” in China and discusses its implications for heritage studies.

### Resistance to relocation

Situated within 800 metres of the petrochemical zone, Samtilwei is an industrial neighbourhood consisting of three natural villages (New Village, Old Village, Happy Valley) that existed long before the government acquired their land to build the petrochemicals facilities in 1973. Although there has been no history of major accidents in this area, the local government has set out plans to demolish these three villages and relocate their residents in 2015. This is in response to the central government’s call for strengthening the health and safety standards of petrochemical production in the aftermath of the Tianjin explosions<sup>1</sup> (He et al. 2018, 825) (Figure 10.1). After nearly two years of preparation, the relocation process officially began in March 2017. A year later, 80% of the villagers were said to have signed the Relocation and Resettlement Agreement. Those who remained in the villages, I was told, were either waiting for the keys to their new apartments or fighting against the relocation order until the last minute. At the time of my fieldwork in



**FIGURE 10.1** A typical Chinese socialist banner in yellow font and red background. The banner reads: “Sign the resettlement contract and choose your apartment as soon as possible. Move away from health and safety hazards. Enjoy peace and happiness.”

early 2018, there were about 300 households and 1000 people living in these three villages, with a mix of local villagers and migrant workers.

Nostalgia for an industrial past is a well-researched subject across disciplines (Strangleman 2001; Mah 2009; Stephenson and Wray 2005; Mah 2012; Sherren et al. 2016; Emery 2020; Rhodes II, Walker, and Price 2020; Garrow 2021; Audin 2021). In her pioneering research on Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the UK and Highland, Niagara Falls, in the USA., Alice Mah observed that “despite socioeconomic deprivation and material devastation in areas of industrial decline, houses and neighbourhood spaces can become invested with notions of family and community unity, nostalgia for a shared industrial past, and stability amidst socioeconomic change” (Mah 2009, 287). In Santilwei, similar kinds of sentiments were also palpable among villagers who refused to leave their homes. Although the village houses looked dilapidated and the communal areas were inundated with filth and rats (Figure 10.2), the remainers defended the livability of the villages and insisted that their homes were far better than Ruidong Court, the urban apartment blocks that were designated for their resettlement. As Li Popo scorned, “Ruidong Court is low-cost housing for poor people! Our village houses are larger and are made of solid materials. How can the government force us to swap our detached houses with these tiny apartments in the city? It’s not fair!”

The remainers were not the only people who had expressed nostalgia for village life. Those who had already left also felt homesick. Dan Dan and Yu-fang became



**FIGURE 10.2** A villager enjoying his bamboo smoking pipe while watching TV.

friends when they married in the Old Village in their early 20s. Their husbands accepted the government's compensation offers and moved to Ruidong Court as soon as they were given the keys to the apartments. However, neither Dan Dan nor Yu-fang wanted to cut their ties with the villages. They came back to visit their friends and neighbours whenever they had time. "We miss living here," Dan Dan said, "people are closer to each other in the villages."

Villagers had also complained about the cramped condition of urban living. For example, it was particularly difficult for 91-year-old Chan Gongong to imagine living in the same block with hundreds of other residents. In his mind, a building block is a standard three-level detached home in which Santilwei villagers lived (Figure 10.3). Normally, each block is occupied by no more than one or two households, often from the same kin. By contrast, Ruidong Court is made up of five 24-level blocks of apartments occupied by unrelated people of various origins. As such, Chan Gongong was convinced that Ruidong Court is inferior to the village houses. Being in a wheelchair, he was also apprehensive about living in a high-rise building. He said, "I don't trust the lifts. Lifts in China go out of order all the time!"

Although Ruidong Court was dismissed by these villagers as cheap, small, and cramped, this apartment complex is actually selected by the local government as a demonstration community to promote smart and intelligent property management in China. Not only is the gated community (*xiaoqu*) equipped with high technologies



**FIGURE 10.3** A standard three-level village house undergoing demolition.

like real-time air pollution monitoring and 5G wireless intelligent light poles, Ruidong Court is located within walking distance to many local amenities, including undergrounds, hospitals, schools, nurseries, and supermarkets. These benefits, however, did not seem to make a difference to the villagers' opinions.

However, what distinguishes the place attachment in Samtilwei from the place attachment observed in cases of deindustrialization (Strangleman 2001; Stephenson and Wray 2005; Emery 2020; Rhodes II, Walker, and Price 2020; Garrow 2021) and cases of environmental justice (Allen 2003; Davies and Mah 2020) is that toxic contamination has never been the driving force for changes and actions in Samtilwei. For one, people in China tend to downplay the health impact of toxic pollution (Tilt 2006; Lora-Wainwright 2009; Mah and Wang 2017; Lou 2022). Whenever I asked the villagers what they think about petrochemical pollution, they would brush it off as something minor and tolerable (Lou 2022). "There is no need to make a big deal of it! The pollution is not as bad as people said" Uncle Qin stated. Instead, villagers liked to brag about the sweet lychee they grew and the plump fish they kept in the pond. The rationale is that if humans can survive petrochemical pollution, the plants will certainly be alright. Another factor to keep in mind is that in view of the recurrent food-safety incidents, many farmers in China would rather rely on their homegrown food for subsistence than buy food from the market (Lora-Wainwright 2014, 661) as they perceived pesticides as far more dangerous than petrochemical contamination (Lou 2022).

As I have discussed in another article, petrochemical communities in China are adept to using what I coined "the art of unnoticing" (Lou 2022) to ignore the threat of pollution and chemical explosion in order to continue living there. This coping mechanism is not uncommon in (post-)industrial communities (Mah 2009; Jovanović 2016). Frequently, people in these affected communities would attribute their health problems to stress (Lora-Wainwright 2009) and ageing (Mah 2009, 303–304). Other times, they used longevity as evidence that pollution was overstated (Lou 2022). As Granny Ma of the New Village claimed, "I've lived next to the petrochemical plant for three decades already. What's the point of worrying now? Many people in our village live 'til their nineties. My mother-in-law died at age eighty-nine. My father-in-law died at ninety-two. There is even a nursing home nearby called the Village of Longevity!"

In short, these narratives not only reinforce people's confidence that Samtilwei was a liveable place. More importantly, they cast doubt on the necessity of the forced relocation. Although the local government insisted that the move was purely driven by health and safety concerns, nobody in the village really believed that. In fact, everyone knew that the ulterior motive behind the land grabs was to enable the local government to "secure lucrative land deals with outside investors" (Lora-Wainwright 2012, 8), from which the profits were not fairly distributed among people at the grassroots (Lora-Wainwright 2014). It is this perceived unfairness in compensation rather than toxic pollution that motivated some of the villagers to bargain with their toxic heritage.



## Bargaining with toxic heritage

At first glance, the villagers' emphasis on family and community, and their longing for continuity and stability, resembles the sentiments of "devastation but also home" in areas of industrial decline (Mah 2009). However, a closer examination reveals that family, community, and nostalgia for village life only accounted for a small part of people's resistance to relocation. As I bore witness to how villagers bargained and negotiated for a better compensation and resettlement arrangement over the course of four years (2018–2022), I realised that the situation is much more complicated. Given the infrastructural dereliction and the potential hazards of the area, why were people reluctant to move? What value did their toxic heritage bring to individuals, families, and communities?

To make sense of this seeming contradiction, it is necessary to contextualise the villagers' perspectives in light of China's rapid urbanisation in recent decades. Since the 1980s, China has set off a wave of rural land expropriation and housing demolition in response to the demand for urbanisation. Under the current Constitution, urban land is owned by the state and rural land is owned collectively by the village communities (Peng 2018; Kan 2019). By this law, if the government wants to develop rural land, it must first convert them into state-owned urban land through the process of expropriation (Kan 2019, 636), which has become a major source of social unrest in China over the years (Sargeson 2013; Yuen 2014). In many cases, the conflict is inflicted by inadequate compensation or poor resettlement of land-lost farmers and rural residents. Thus, earlier research on land expropriation tended to focus on the state's coercive measures and the peasants' struggle (Yuen 2014; Lora-Wainwright 2012). More recently, however, scholars have challenged the binary view that villagers are either activists or victims in such processes. As Wang's research demonstrates, contrary to popular imagination, the state could not "simply expel existing residents and liquidate their homes" (Wang 2022, 504). Instead, the local government has to "calculate and allocate monetary and property compensations among relocated households based on a variety of factors ranging from the size of the family to the value of the estate to be demolished" (Wang 2022, 503).

As such, "the extent to which peasants benefited or suffered from land requisition was determined by multiple factors which differed region by region, village by village, and household by household" (Chen 2019, 79). Indeed, "compensation standards in developed coastal areas differ substantially from those of western regions" (Yang and Qian 2021, 502). While villagers in the west of China usually receive only minimal compensation (Lora-Wainwright 2012; Lora-Wainwright 2014), in more developed areas and in the region where I carried out my fieldwork, rural residents have received a large lump sum of monetary compensation (Kan 2019). For these villagers, demolition and relocation projects create opportunities for them to reap direct monetary benefits (Kan 2019; Wang 2022), resulting in the advent of a new social class known as *chai erdai* in Chinese, meaning "demolition parvenus" (Yang and Qian 2021, 502; Shi et al. 2019, 11) or "new rich-through demolition" (Steffen 2022).

Although the law does provide guidelines for land requisition in China, local governments have considerable flexibility in their handling of compensation (Chen 2019, 102). Generally speaking, rural residents are entitled to a combination of all or some of the following: a one-off monetary compensation for their land, lost crops, demolished houses; resettlement allowances; employment alternatives; or an urban household registration (a.k.a. an urban *hukou*, a status that is linked to a wide range of social benefits and services) (Kan 2019, 638; Yang and Qian 2021, 501). However, as the urbanisation of rural China is increasingly achieved not through physical land grabs but “the strategic enrolment of rural communities in the commodification of land via speculative rentiership” (Kan 2019, 633), local governments “have to constantly update and negotiate protocols of calculation with property-owning villagers to solve emerging issues of commensuration” (Wang 2022, 506). For example, the villagers of Samtilwei contended that compensation should be calculated based on their land’s *future* value rather than its current value. And as I mentioned above, villagers did not believe that pollution was what motivated the government to relocate them. The real reason, they said, was that there would be a real estate boom in the area in the near future:

What pollution? There is no pollution! Health and safety hazards are not the real reason that the government wants us to move. It’s just an excuse to grab our land and turn it into something more lucrative. I tell you, this place is going to be more prosperous than the Central Business District in the future!

(Quote from an interview in 2018)

Initially, the compensation offered to the villagers of Samtilwei was either one-off cash compensation *or* resettlement housing based on the size of their original properties. Either way, as soon as the villagers signed the agreements, they would permanently lose their legal connections to Samtilwei. Evidently, the villagers’ reluctance to leave was not merely driven by the sentiment of “devastation but also home” (Mah 2009), but also the lucrative prospects of demolition, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to receive some money from the government (Lora-Wainwright 2012; Kan 2019; Wang 2022).

After several rounds of negotiation, the villagers agreed that instead of giving up their collective land ownership in exchange for one-off cash compensation, they would retain the collective ownership *and* the property rights of any to-be-built structures on their lands. In return, the government would be given the use rights to develop this neighbourhood, and the villagers would earn rental income from these newly developed properties. This new deal enables the government to proceed with its development plans while incorporating villagers as stakeholders by converting them into “peasant landlords” (Chu 2022). Although the villagers would be physically removed from their lands and their original houses, they are able to preserve their rural household registration, known as rural *hukou* in Chinese.<sup>2</sup> This is a significant victory, as rural *hukou* is increasingly considered a valuable intangible

asset that farmers can pass on to their children, allowing them to also “participate directly in the appropriation of value from land as rentiers” (Kan 2019, 640).

The villagers gave three reasons for their rejection of the one-off cash compensation. First, the seniors in the village were worried that some less-educated villagers might end up gambling all the money away or squandering it on conspicuous consumption if they received a large lump sum. This is a social problem that has been widely reported in recent years (Bao et al. 2017). Second, although the villagers were concerned about currency depreciation, they knew very little about investing. Rental income was by far their most familiar form of investment option. Many villagers had already been renting out their spare rooms or houses to migrant workers in the area. Last but not least, the villagers of Samtilwei wish to preserve their rural *hukou* – a status that is increasingly seen as a financial asset thanks to the waves of urbanisation and land expropriation.

The negotiation process in Samtilwei reminds me of what Jovanović observed in an industrial town called Bor in Eastern Serbia because of the villagers’ seeming self-contradiction. In Bor, Jovanović found that people disliked smoke, but they also celebrated smoke. Smoke, she wrote, was “a sign that the company was working well and that the whole town and its citizens, whether they worked for the company or not, depended on its production” (Jovanović 2016, 490). From there, Jovanović concluded that “it was not that people only adapted to risks while accepting them as inevitable. The risk was also seen as something that could be calculated and bargained with in relation to hopes for stable futures” (Jovanović 2016, 496). Such a conundrum was epitomised in a meeting between citizens of Bor and representatives of the local smelting plant, where villagers abruptly shifted from demanding compensation for health damage to asking the plant to employ them for “a stable personal and communal future” (Jovanović 2016, 496).

Like the citizens of Bor, the villagers of Samtilwei had also learned to see the bright side of living next to a petrochemical plant, but their articulation of *why* it was a positive thing changed over the course of the negotiation. During the early stage of the negotiation, most remaining villagers felt defeated and powerless. After all, nearly 80% of their fellow villagers had accepted the compensation offer and relocated to Ruidong Court. Given that there was no hope in sight, all they could do was express their reluctance and nostalgia – the feeling of “devastation but also home”. Borrowing Mah’s words, at that time there was an “idealized vision of community projected onto a turbulent social and economic reality” (Mah 2009, 295). But as the negotiation reached a stalemate in subsequent years, the villagers realised that the government could not evict them without their consent, and that relocation is a “messy process” of “value calibration and translation” (Wang 2022, 515). During this phase of their negotiation, the villagers justified their stay by highlighting the liveability of their homes and downplaying the threat of pollution and chemical explosions. Finally, when the profits from demolition were in sight, villagers shifted to emphasise the necessity of relocation for the sake of health and safety. This change in emphasis not only aligned them with the government’s



official objectives, but also made them appear less greedy and morally questionable. In other words, the toxic heritage of petrochemicals was simultaneously perceived as “a source of hazard, a threat, a risk, and a source of money and prospects, an opportunity” (Jovanović 2016, 498). No one seemed to be troubled by their own inconsistency. In the face of limited economic and political alternatives, opportunism was endorsed while health and heritage were commodified.

### Preservation by demolition: Destroying and remaking toxic heritage

The story of Samtilwei not only demands us to rethink what we should preserve, why, and for whom, but it also challenges the very definition of heritage preservation. These questions became even more poignant when we take into account that all listed historical buildings in the neighbourhood were being actively ignored by the villagers and the local government during the demolition. According to government records, there are currently 22 heritage sites listed in the Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the Level of Huangpu District (*Huangpu qu dengji baohu wenwu danwei*). Of these 22 sites, three of which are located within Samtilwei. The earliest site, situated at the back hill of the New Village, is a family tomb dated back to the Yuen Dynasty (1271–1368). The other two are an ancestral hall and a front entrance (*men lou*) of a classic Chinese house (Figure 10.4) dated 1823 and 1821, respectively.

Despite being listed as protected heritage sites, neither the villagers nor the local officials were interested in shielding them from demolition. From the villagers’ perspectives, the “real heritage” that needs to be preserved is their ownership of the rural lands and their rural household registration. Their indifference to preserving the officially listed heritage forces us to rethink not only *what* heritage is, but also *who* decides what can be considered real heritage. Although the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) (2003) has made an attempt to acknowledge non-Western manifestations and practices of heritage (Smith and Akagawa 2009, 1), in practice, it continues to “privilege colourful and exotic examples of intangible heritage; that represent nationally valued cultural events or performances, and which coincide with romanticised Western perceptions, while Indigenous works remain under-represented” (Smith and Akagawa 2009, 4). Indeed, international organisations are unlikely to classify China’s collective land ownership and household registration system as intangible heritage, even though villagers of Samtilwei clearly privileged them over the tangible heritage that manifests their lineage (family tombs and ancestral halls) and their industrial past (the petrochemical sites). Such incongruence makes apparent the need to reconsider both the theory and practice of heritage preservation in order to address the complexity of the politics of recognition (Taylor 1994; Chakrabarty 2007). In light of this, previous studies have proposed to conceptualise heritage “as a cultural practice, rather than simply a site, place or intangible performance or event” (Smith and Akagawa 2009, 6). They argue that heritage is best understood as a cultural and political process of “remembering/forgetting” (Urry 1996; Dicks 2000;



**FIGURE 10.4** A *Men lou* in the New Village dated 1821. *Men lou* is the front entrance of a classic Chinese house. It is known as the ‘face’ of a family. The more elaborate the front entrance, the wealthier the family. The black plaque on the left records that the New Village *men lou* was officially listed as a heritage site in Huangpu District in July 2009.

Graham 2002; Peckham 2003; Smith 2006; Harrison 2013), and as a “verb” rather than a “noun” (Harvey 2001).

Building on these lines of thinking, my case study in China adds two nuanced dimensions to the ongoing re-theorisation of heritage preservation. First, the peculiar phenomenon of “preservation by demolition,” whereby a heritage would only take form after it has been destroyed, may obscure the dialectics between heritage and preservation if the connections between the tangible (e.g. properties, lands, historical buildings) and intangible heritage (e.g. ownership, use rights, residential status) are not unravelled. While some scholars might attribute their seeming incongruence to the “inherent dissonant nature of heritage” (Smith and Akagawa 2009, 5), others would argue that there is no intrinsic nature in heritage, because heritage does not exist, but is made by people who imbue them with meanings, status, and values *for present purposes* (Kenny 2009, 151; Bendix 2009, 255). The case in Samtilwei proves the latter point, as land ownership and rural identity in themselves are not lucrative without the commodification of land.

Second, my ethnographic study has shown that the present wave of land expropriation in China offers rural residents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become rich not just for themselves, but also for their future generations who would inherit their peasant landlord status. This “positive” case in China echoes the growing research on the possibilities of life in grim circumstances (Tsing 2015; McTighe and Raschig 2019; Murphy 2017; Ahmann and Kenner 2020) and challenges the widespread assumptions that toxic heritage is intrinsically undesirable for people who own and inherit it. While previous research has shed light on the intersection between the legacies of toxicity and the often celebratory interpretations of labour, prosperity, and place attachment to post-industrial sites, my case study contributes to the existing literature by elucidating the toxic site’s financial promise for the current and future generations. It provides a case where the value of toxic heritage (in its material sense) derives not from the act of preservation, but from the act of demolition.

Finally, contrary to popular belief that heritage preservation is about the preservation of the past, I join other scholars to argue that heritage preservation is “deeply rooted in the present” (Kenny 2009, 151) and closely focused on the future (Harrison 2020). Heritagisation (Bendix 2009, 255) of toxicity is a process rife with calculation and contradictions in contemporary China, but for those who live the experience, it is also an opportunity to create a future in the brutality of neoliberal late-industrialism.

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## Notes

- 1 According to an official statement published by the People's Government of Guangdong Province, the decision was jointly made by the inspection teams of the State Council of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment.
- 2 According to the *hukou* system, holders of land use rights are still considered rural citizens (Chu 2022).

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