







CROWDS TAKE OVER AIHUA ROAD.  
Devices in various conditions re-entering circulation through the ghost market.

# THE GHOSTS OF SHENZHEN

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In the dead of night, I set out to investigate rumors of something best described as paranormal activity. Around midnight I arrive at the presumed site—the Aihua Residential Quarters. As I wander around, midnight slowly turns into dawn. Not much out of the ordinary is going on. Suddenly, around 3 am, they start to arrive — the ghosts of Shenzhen. Under the watchful eyes of local police, they carry their stock in makeshift bags.<sup>1</sup> The mood is tense as everyone seems to be waiting for something. Then, as if orchestrated by a higher power, the ghosts reveal their wares. In a choreography of bedsheets unfolding into market stalls, the *ghost market* begins.

Just around the corner on Aihua Road, there are several malls. One specializes in recycling cell phones. The other is the largest second-hand phone market in Shenzhen. Here, at night, the residue of these formal marketplaces finds its way to the street and into the backpacks of the many eager customers. To navigate under the veil of darkness requires at least a torch, but to inspect the quality of the piles of phones and logic boards available from the street vendors requires more specific tooling. Amidst the hot and noisy<sup>2</sup> crowds, numerous customers carry devices closely resembling something wielded by ghost hunters, taking readings of electromagnetic fields.

To understand what is happening here, we need to wander further into the often-ignored district of Huaqiangnan. By taking us along the flows and corners of this neighborhood, this chapter will attempt to “make sense of Shenzhen”. It is, in its own right, a bricolage of chance encounters, opportunism, fallacy, off the record interviews and numerous meanderings, accompanied by complementary academic references and illustrated by the author’s photography.<sup>3</sup> But first, we need to identify this esoteric device.

## A PORTABLE CHARGING TEST POWER SUPPLY

This tool, or “*portable charging test power supply*” (随身充电测试电源 *suishen chongdian ceshi dianyuan*) in the words of a trader interviewed in 2018, is a bricolage of consumer electronics held together by hot-melt glue or electrical tape. It is made of a USB power bank, an adaptor for the plethora of USB

1 *Makeshift bags* (*linshi xingli*, 临时行李) are often made from bedsheets—see *Floating Population* Stijns, 2013

2 In Chinese, *renao* (热闹), literally meaning “hot and noisy,” is used to positively describe the lively atmosphere of a crowded and busy place.

3 Unless stated otherwise.

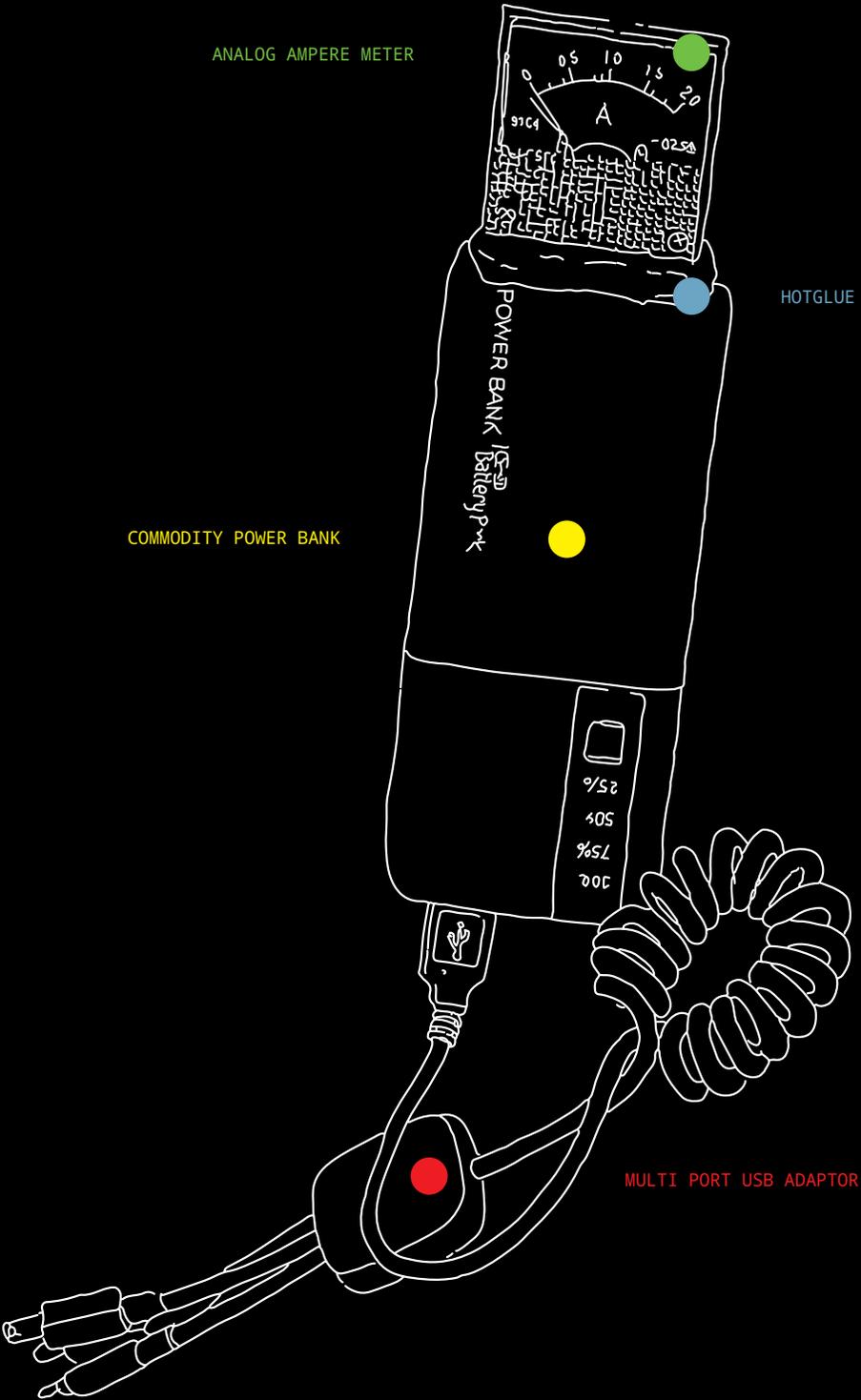


DIAGRAM OF A PORTABLE CHARGING TEST POWER SUPPLY.

variants and an analog ampere meter to measure electrical currents drawn from the bank. Sometimes it's outfitted with an extra USB LED torch for specific use at night, or alligator clips for more general testing purposes.

This tool allows the user to measure logic boards or phones for current draw. The amount of current the device draws under testing informs the buyer of the state of the device and determines the object's complex life trajectory. For example, if a device draws a current it might be in working condition, even though the screen does not light up because it is broken. When the device in question is a common model, it might be worth replacing the screen in order to sell or refurbish the unit. A high or infinite current might indicate a short circuit, while no current at all might indicate a broken phone or logic board. Depending on the model, these can be scrapped for components, raw materials or for use in improvised phones reconstructed from a multitude of scrapped parts,<sup>4</sup> commonly referred to as an “*explosive mobile device*” (炸弹机 *zhadan ji*). Eventually the phones or parts might flow towards the informal ghost market again, to start a new journey.

The tool itself is based on mobile accessories, making both the tool and the user mobile. The handheld device thus offers a certain leverage over renting an expensive desk in one of the malls and equipping it with tools. It can be defined as an *ex-commodity*, a “thing retrieved, either temporarily or permanently, from the commodity state and placed in some other state” (Maquet 1972, in Appadurai 1986)—*commodity* being used here in its widest acceptance. The commodity becomes a tool, or a part of a tool, used to assess the quality of other *ex-commodities* on sale, with the primary goal of establishing their resale value.

In *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Appadurai explains how “the flow of commodities in any given situation is a shifting compromise between (socially) regulated paths and competitively inspired diversion.” The ghost market—as well as the more formal markets in the area—exemplify this diversion process of objects becoming commodities despite being originally specifically protected from it. A case in point are factory-fresh “unpopulated” Apple logic boards, as well as schematics for the latest smartphones.

Bricolage is viewed by Michel de Certeau (1986) as the art of making-do, a process that often implies cooperation as much as competition. In Aihua Road's ghost market, we can witness both. By following the trajectories of the mysterious tool, we will unpack its flows and acts of diversions, “for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. The things-in-motion illuminate their human and social context.” (Appadurai 1986)

4 For example, a working logic board is cleared of all broken chips and populated with working chips from a broken logic board. An excellent example of the fact that electronics are, per definition, modular.



THE CLOSING OF *FORMAL* WHOLESALE MARKETS IS A NATIONWIDE TREND. All but one electronics market has disappeared from Beijing, but even this final holdout is said to be closing soon. Here, an image of its ground floor (2018). Centergate Como Beijing (科贸电子大厦, *Ke mao dianz dasha*) next to the Southern Longshen Market (龙胜市场南铺) in Shenzhen (2018).

## ENTERING THE GHOST MARKET

Every night since at least 2000 (Yidianzixun 2019), the *ghosts* gather to form an informal night market on Aihua Road (爱华路).<sup>5</sup> Urban markets usually bring together actors from different cultural systems, where linguistic barriers can result in unspoken *mute-trade* and other unseen forms of barter and unwritten rules. The name “ghost market” (鬼市 *gui shi*) possibly originates from this cross-cultural silent trade, common in the Tang dynasty (Glahn 2004). Another possible explanation is the propensity for street vendors to run away from ghosts—i.e., from law enforcement as if they have seen a ghost (Leung 2011). As of today, unwritten rules still apply in such informal markets, making research inherently difficult. First, asking where the goods come from is banned. Second, asking if the goods are genuine is considered highly impolite. As in any market, it is all about mutual trust and respectful encounters, after all. Third, don’t expect any returns or receipts.

The exact origins of the night market phenomenon in China are unclear and cover a plethora of activities, from late-night entertainment in regular marketplaces during the Qin and Han dynasties (Zhang et al. 2013) to the more fluid nightly economies of the Tang dynasty (Liu 2009). An interesting aspect is how the goods for sale reflect the territory and form unwritten accounts of socio-political histories. One origin of Beijing’s night markets is sometimes associated with the decline of the Qing dynasty where royalty, stripped of their status but not their pride, could sell their riches under the cover of darkness without losing face (Zhen 2018). This veil of anonymity also offered other elements of society the chance to rid themselves of their wares, notably antiquities looted from the many ancient tombs surrounding Beijing (Murphy 1995). While varied in nature and intention, all of these ancient nighttime activities found their roots in urban settlements and arguably exemplify one of the earliest forms of “special economic zones.”

Today’s Aihua Road market is located between decaying *danwei*-style housing and impending construction sites. The area, called Huaqiangnan, stands in marked contrast to the brand-new pedestrian street of Huaqiangbei, the global center of consumer electronics a few blocks north. The future of Aihua Road’s market feels uncertain if not impossible. Formal markets, such as TTD, colloquially known as Aihua market, are closing their doors.<sup>6</sup> Resellers in the nearby Longsheng market hall explain that business has been slowing. On the other hand, informal practices in the residential quarters are thriving. In this environment, grassroots tactics offer a space for city dwellers to manifest their expertise over the rapidly closing strategies of urban planners and developers. As such, the ghost market actually enables newcomers to make an initial capital to hire a desk in one of the formal malls as well as providing retirees with a form of income.

5 Literally the “Love China Road.”

6 深圳市通天地通讯(爱华)市场, The TTD (*Tong Tandi*) market closed May 30, 2019.



HUAQIANGBEI PEDESTRIAN STREET.  
The renovated Huaqiangbei Pedestrian Street, sporting several elevated points of interest.

Although these informal practices suggest relative autonomy from the formal market economy, an unequal power relation nevertheless exists. Only through long working hours, often in addition to formal commitments, may these tactics provide some resistance to marginalization. Furthermore, becoming a *ghost* is as relevant as ever, especially in the face of the global transitioning from *creative city* towards *smart city* (Bria and Morozov 2018).

#### HUAQIANGNAN AND HUAQIANGBEI: ACROSS THE STREET

Right across the street, the homogenized slab of smooth concrete that is the recently renovated Huaqiangbei Pedestrian Street offers a glimpse into the advance of the *smart city*. In this consumer electronics heaven, easygoing muzak playing from speaker-laden lampposts guides you gently towards shiny flagship stores. Under the influence of numerous municipal and central government policies, Huaqiangbei transitioned to “China’s No. 1 Electronics Street” in 1988 (Chang 2019), “A beautiful boulevard” in 1999 (Cheng 2015), to “Huaqiangbei Pedestrian Street” in 2017—coinciding with the *Three Dimensional Economy* plan (Urbanus 2009). Most recently, the Huaqiangbei Innovation and Development Action Plan (2017–2019) calls for the creation of a “red street, a civilized street, a cultural street and a smart street” (Futian, 2017).

Behind the futuristic facades though, one can still catch a glimpse of the Huaqiangbei once tantamount to the infamous cottage industry of *shanzhai* and counterfeit electronics (Braybrooke and Jordan 2017). Parallel to the effort to curb these practices and to China’s innovation ambitions (Fan 2016), both the term *shanzhai* and the district of Huaqiangbei have been transformed from derogatory connotations of copycat industries<sup>7</sup> to symbols of a wide range of competing aesthetics and perspectives on China’s creative economy (Keane & Zhao 2013).

On the other hand, the Huaqiangnan area is still remarkably absent from these master plans as well as from research, media and maps. Although colloquially falling under the same area as Huaqiangbei, Huaqiangnan was always administratively allocated to another urban area in the master plan—namely *Binhe* (滨河). Concurrently however, it offers a valuable example of a fully functioning *three-dimensional economy* characterized by informal practices that leverage both mixed-use zoning and a street-smart approach. Meandering from the maze of interconnected electronics markets through to extemporaneous overpasses that snake through residential dwellings, the neighborhood manifests itself as a three-dimensional bricolage of opportunistic situations. While typical of Shenzhen’s urban development (O’Donnell et al. 2018), the district was shaped by an ad-hoc conglomeration of creative disobedience deeply intertwined with official policies. Its facades, both weathered and futuristic, strikingly document this history.

7 Naturally, mass production is the act of copying.



THE AIHUA RESIDENTIAL COMPLEX VIEWED FROM THE TTD MARKET.  
This *danwei*-style neighborhood exists as an assemblage of residential housing, restaurants, mom and pop stores, commercial establishments and urban farming. Notice the SEG (*Sai ge*, 赛格) building in the background.

The core of the area revolves around the Aihua Residential Quarters (爱华住宅小区 *Aihua zhuzhai xiaoqu*). Constructed in 1979 before the opening of the Special Economic Zone, this residential area provided dormitories for the Aihua factories in the region. With no precedent to rely on, most of the planning techniques in Shenzhen were originally limited to zoning. The actual decisions and construction were left to enterprises—often state-owned (SOE) like Aihua Electronics Ltd—who were moving in first. The liberal borrowing of blueprints from either Hong Kong or the socialist *danwei* housing units resulted in a prime example of “copy-paste architecture” as still demonstrated by the Aihua Residential Quarters.

What the SOEs gained in independence through cheap land lease in the SEZ, they often lost in financial support from the government. From now on they would have to generate their own income—despite still being state owned. To compensate the loss, several SOEs started to engage in labor-intensive processing and assembly work for export. Instead of being dumped, the excess production was kept and sold to the domestic market for extra income—often known as *third-shift* production (Barbosa 2009) or *excess order* (甩单 *shuaidan*) (Fan 2018).

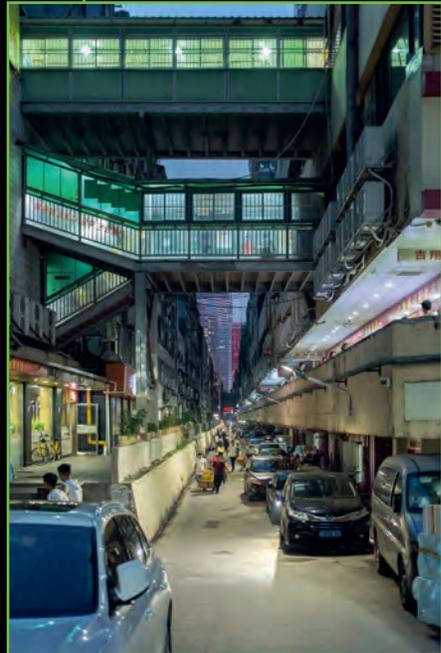
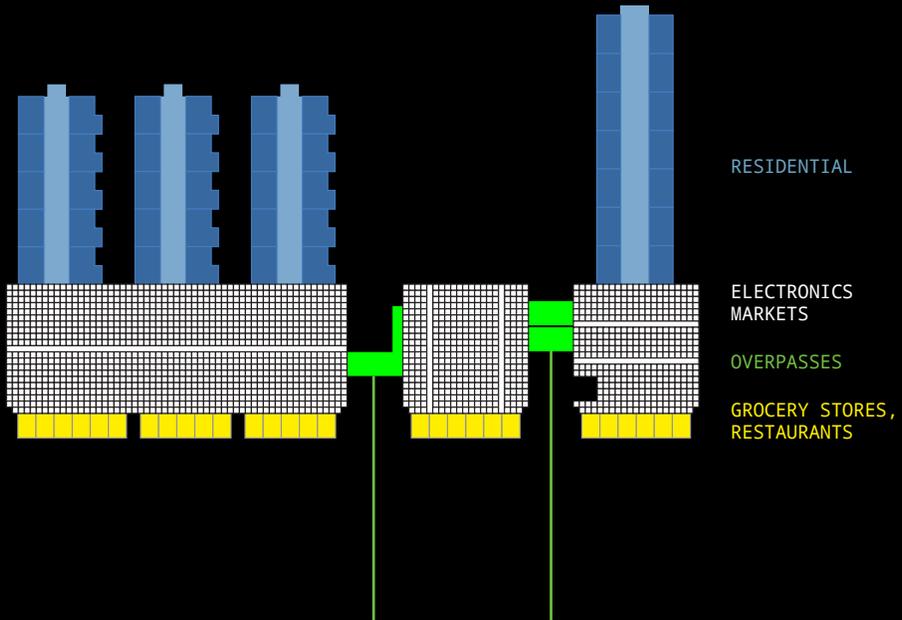
In the early 1990s, the Shenzhen government initialized a deindustrialization policy, pushing most manufacturing activities out of the Shangbu area to curb growing pollution. The SOEs were left with urban lands under an interdiction of production and complicated use rights related to zoning. They promptly decided to re-appropriate their now empty factories and the adjacent dormitories for commercial usage. The low rent of the still-industrial land attracted new tenants, allowing for a proliferation of informal structures. As an example, SOE Huaqiang informally converged three standalone factories into a huge commercial market for electronic components, forming the basis of what is now colloquially called *Huaqiangbei*. This fluid use of space became the basic condition for Huaqiangbei’s future success (Lam 2019). The spatial demands prompted the informal construction of multistorey, inter-building bridges, enhancing both horizontal and vertical flows.

This convergence of horizontal and vertical movement not only applies to the spatial qualities. Rather, it provides a way to approach the emergence of the various overlapping realities existing today. While common narratives on Shenzhen tend to reinforce the dichotomy of grassroots, horizontal versus the top-down, the Special Economic Zone actually enabled a conglomeration of both informal practices and top-down policies more than a purely vertical *stack*. This commonality finds its expression through the excellent device of street signs. Wandering the bustling streets, it’s easy to get caught up in the overwhelming Shenzhen speed,<sup>8</sup> while dodging fast-paced crowds to the soundtrack of ripping packing tape.<sup>9</sup> The maze of intersecting over-and-underpasses seem to make street names redundant. Yet, these prosaic navigational tools point us to where the practices of bottom-up and top-down align.

8 As sublimely illustrated by the 2014 ZTE slogan *Tomorrow never waits*.

9 JT Singh, “Tape City” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZRxJhIbgkU>

MIXED USE AROUND THE AIHUA  
RESIDENTIAL QUARTERS



OVERPASSES.  
Overpasses linking Southern Longshen Market (龙胜市场南铺) to TTD market (通天地通讯市场) through residential areas.

CONCLUSION: THE TOP-DOWN GUERRILLA AND THE MOUNTAIN FORTRESS  
 Before the official designation as a Special Economic Zone, dozens of state-owned factories were corporatized and relocated to Shenzhen in 1979 (Cheng 2015). Notable examples, such as Zhenhua (translatable as “Invigorate China”), Aihua (“Love China”) and Huaqiang (“Strong China”) lent their names to their allocated lots as they moved in. Invoking a continuation of patriotic values, these joint-ventures were created through the reform of a preceding special zone, the Third Front (Bachman 2001).

The Third Front Construction directive (三线建设 *Sanxian jianshe*) of 1964 envisioned the creation of a self-sufficient industrial backbone, able to resist (nuclear) war amidst growing tensions with the US as well as the USSR (Naughton 1998). Deploying the proven revolutionary guerrilla strategy of *rural surrounding urban*<sup>10</sup> (Qiu 2009), factory towns re-appropriated natural fortresses like the mountains and caves of central China as shelter.

In the late 1970s, shifting priorities relocated state resources to the coastal areas. Several Third Front factories were merged into the aforementioned joint-ventures and settled in Shenzhen. The Third Front legacy is still visible in Shenzhen, where SOE landlords appropriated industrial buildings through a proliferation of informal structures interconnecting them. Moreover, the *shanzhai* culture—literally “*mountainous fortress*”—displays a compelling resemblance to the guerrilla tactics, resistance and patriotism of the Third Front: “buy *shanzhai* to show your love for our country” (Yang 2015). Like during the Yuan Dynasty,<sup>11</sup> the *bandit resistance* of *shanzhai* is vanquished by co-optation with the ruling power, finding its way into innovation discourse to reaffirm the *Shenzhen miracle* myth, with Huaqiangbei as its main stage.

Huaqiangnan, on the other hand, is nowhere to be found under the spotlights. Nevertheless, its actual setting still attests to the importance of low-scale guerrilla tactics in the grounding of larger governmental policy plans. As of today, the mixed-use development of Huaqiangnan continues to provide affordable housing and social settings that enable the basic conditions of Shenzhen’s success. Closing the gap between policies and life, the daily routine of the “ghosts” and their handmade tools reminds us that grand narratives of cities and technologies would not exist without the small-scale, negotiated tactics of humans.

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<sup>10</sup> *Nongcun baowei chengshi*, 农村包围城市

<sup>11</sup> The Chinese classic *Water Margin* written in the 13th century tells epic stories of outlaws in mountain villages, giving its original name and connotation to the term *shanzhai*.



STREET IN THE URBAN VILLAGE OF SHANG MEI LIN XIN CUN (上梅林新村). Like the Aihua Residential Quarters, urban villages offer a stepping stone, essential living quarters and community to the economically marginalized. As rapid urbanization threatens these urban villages with destruction, one can't help but ask the question: whose urbanization is this?

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