Infrastructure of Desire

Rubble, Development, and Salvage Capitalism in Rural China

Jade diggers by the house with the ominous inscription.
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In Tengchong, at the China-Myanmar border, a new development project has led to the destruction of large parts of the old town. As construction of the new, high-rise apartments has yet to begin, groups of men and women dig through the rubble, looking for precious jade. This essay moves from this unique event to reflect on the ‘desire’ that lies at the core of China’s infrastructural development, which produced Tengchong’s rubble in the first place.

Tengchong, Yunnan province, August 2017. The sound of bulldozers. Dry, white dust is suspended in the stuffy summer air. The old town is a patchwork of ruins. A single, lone house resists amid all the destruction. By its entrance an ominous inscription, painted in black on a piece of blue tin: ‘People living inside, one dies if s/he dares to enter’ (有人住入内死).

Anthropologist Gastón Gordillo (2014) approaches the materiality of ‘rubble’ as a symbol of recurrent waves of human violence and destruction. Rubble, he argues, is not just an unembellished ruin; rather, it allows for a rethinking of critical negativity in the production of space,

narratives, and history. Rubble in Gordillo's words takes the form of 'constellations', that is, objects primarily understood in relationship to other historical objects, places, and processes. In Tengchong, visiting the rubble that bulldozers left behind, such constellations emerge rather clearly alongside the *desire* at the heart of China's infrastructural hubris. But first, let's return to the rubble.

On a small section of cleared ground, a plastic ribbon supported by four wooden sticks encloses a small vegetable garden. Lettuce and cucumbers. A single line of tomatoes. This, an old woman explains, used to be the place in which her family kept a small vegetable garden. Before the Bulldozer came. She cleared the rubble and fixed the garden again after the house was torn down and will continue to do so until construction on the new project finally starts.

Another part of the rubble is even more animated. Beside the lone house with the sinister inscription a cluster of at least three dozen men and women, armed with shovels, sticks, and water pumps are busy digging holes in the rubble. Other men, smartphones in hand, frenetically move between the holes, chatting with the diggers and looking at what is being taken out the rubble. They are after some jade, hidden in the belly of old Tengchong houses. Some dig it out of the ground, others sell it across China via WeChat and other online platforms. This is the moment when the rubble becomes unique, entangled in a web of social and historical worlds. Of stories, hearsays, and legends. The old town of Tengchong is not just any rubble—its constellation speaks to a very specific past and present, and to multiple possible futures.

A City Built on Jade

Tengchong, situated less than 100 kilometres from the Burmese border, has been a major gateway for Burmese jade and amber since ancient times. In the Ming period (1368–1644),

records show that the city had become a major carving centre for precious jade—a much prized gemstone throughout Chinese history (Kloppenborg Møller 2018). Legend has it that back then Tengchong bridges were made of jade and memorial arches were made of amber, as trade in both commodities flourished and brought wealth to the city (Rippa and Yang 2017). During my first visit to Tengchong in 2015, I heard several people saying that in those days only top-quality jade was carved, while stones containing jade of lower quality were thrown away or used as construction material for houses. As a man in his early sixties told me once: 'As kids whenever we wanted to buy some candy we would go into a field, dig a hole, find some jade and use that to pay for the candy.' I remained sceptical but kept listening to such stories with fascination. What happened next, however, made me change my mind about the veracity of such stories.

In late 2016, ground was broken on a major project for the reconstruction of Tengchong's old town. Large sections of the city were demolished, and a maze of alleys and two-storey houses gave way to tall apartment blocks and shopping streets. As work began, my WeChat feed began filling up with curious videos. Groups of Tengchong residents were seemingly leaving their houses at night to go digging in places where the bulldozers had just torn a house apart. Legends, it appeared, were driving some interesting activities. Yet it was not until a few months later, when I found myself walking through the rubble that the old town had become, that I realised the scale of the operation. Jade was indeed hidden amid the rubble. A single man, excavating with his hand and a few basic tools, could easily find 500 yuan worth of jade in just a few hours. A number of WeChat traders (微商) were making a fortune out of it, livestreaming from the rubble and selling jade pieces online to customers all over China. The old town of Tengchong had to be reduced to rubble before becoming a mine of sorts—and then, eventually, a place with a bright and modern future reflected by the towering new buildings surrounding the rubble.

Tengchong rubble.
PC: Alessandro Rippa.

Rubble, Development, and Desire

The stories surrounding Tengchong's rubble echo much of Anna Tsing's work on out-of-the-way places and the margins of global capitalism (2005; 2015). The woman tending to her small vegetable garden seems to suggest a possibility for life in capitalist ruins. Jade diggers and WeChat traders, on the other hand, are an example of what Tsing calls salvage capitalism—that is, an opportunity for exploitation of value produced without capitalist control. Tsing uses the notion to conceptualise the way Southeast Asian immigrants and white Vietnam War veterans pick matsutake mushrooms in Oregon, and their relations to global markets, particularly Japan which drives much of the economy revolving around the matsutake trade

and consumption. These lives, 'simultaneously inside and outside of capitalism' (Tsing 2015, 63), are characterised by a form of freedom—from wage labour, property, and exploitative power relations.

Drawing from such discussions, Tengchong's rubble also poses a set of fundamental questions about China's development and modernisation. If the rubble is a constellation of history and violence that nevertheless produces new forms of sociability, such as the countrywide market for jade excavated in the city, what does this rubble say about the destructive power that created it? How do we approach the infrastructural desire at the heart of Tengchong's development?

In their discussion of desire, Deleuze and Guattari build a radical critique of the Freudian model—extremely influential in the social sciences—that presupposes desire as predicated

Jade diggers
amidst the rubble.
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on a lack. Here, in other words, the object of desire is placed outside of the subject—directed towards something that the subject does not have, or that remains prohibited. Desire, in this way, is ‘externally organised in relation to prohibitions that give it a constitutive relation to “lack”’ (Parr 2010, 66). The two theorists, on the other hand, intend to free desire from the yoke of lack and to transform it into a positive, productive force. As they put it: ‘Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 26). Deleuze and Guattari call this a purely immanent theory of desire. What it means is that desire is not a psychic reality, an idea—most generally understood as a lack or a wish—but an active and positive reality immanent to desire itself. Desire is thus not a negativity, it

is not defined by the lack of something, but is rather defined as productive, experimental, and ultimately ‘positive’. Importantly, for Deleuze and Guattari, the immanent drivers of desire never exist by themselves, they are always social: the product and production of interconnected machines—organic, technical, abstract, and so on. Desire does not lack, but produces. The desire-machine of Deleuze and Guattari is the site of that production, and thus encompasses both the subject and object of desire, not as two separate entities, but as one positive and inseparable force.

Similarly, Tengchong’s rubble cannot be seen as pure negativity. Jade diggers and the vegetables sprouting up from it show its potential for life and (salvage) capitalist exploitation. Rubble in Tengchong is also productive in a different sense. As a precondition for new infrastructure, Tengchong’s

rubble can be situated at the core of rural China's aspiration for modernisation and development. Rubble becomes, following Deleuze and Guattari, an immanent site of desire. Not a negativity, but a prominent constellation of production—of the future to be, made of high-rise apartments and shopping streets.

The infrastructure that is set to emerge out of Tengchong's rubble is highly paradoxical. It is paradoxical not only in that it materially points towards the destruction that necessarily lies at the heart of (infrastructure) production; but also in that rubble's 'suspended' state (Gupta 2015) seems at odds with the pace and scope of development in China. The seeming a-temporality of rubble, in other words, clashes with the future-oriented scope of infrastructure in China, where the construction of new buildings has become not just an answer to a particular need, but a more encompassing model of development (see Ren 2014; on the notion of temporality in infrastructure studies see also Grant and Zhang in this issue). Infrastructure seems a solution *per se*: it generates GDP, employs low-skilled labour, provides a lifeline for the overcapacity issues of state-owned enterprises, and fills up the pockets of local officials. The Chinese bureaucratic statecraft can be seen as a sort of infrastructure machine in itself: it functions—from the appointments and promotions of officials to the relations between local and more central organs of the state—in a way that makes infrastructure its most likely material product. The reconstruction of Tengchong's old town is but one particular outcome of this particular desire machine, its rubble a necessary moment in the development trajectory of China—the 'paradigmatic infrastructural state' (Bach 2016).

What I want to stress in this essay is that the infrastructural production—discursive and material—that China has embraced as a development model cannot be understood based on theories that place the object of desire outside of the infrastructures themselves. Rather, what Tengchong's rubble shows is

that infrastructure development is more akin to what Deleuze and Guattari define as a pure desire-machine logic. As opposed to Gordillo's rubble, in today's China there is no time to dwell on the negative. Rubble is ephemeral, fugacious, a brief moment of desolation within the productive logic of desire. The past is swallowed by the yet-to-come—by something bigger. In Tengchong, rubble needs to be put into use—excavated for jade or cultivated for vegetables—before it is not there anymore. This is an exemplification of the logic of a desire machine, in which infrastructure is productive of more infrastructure—a self-propelling force that does not need an external 'function' (a lack or a wish) in order to be perpetuated. Infrastructure, in rural China, is desire in and of itself.

In the meantime, the lone house in the middle of Tengchong's rubble has been torn down. 'For desire desires death also, because the full body of death is its motor, just as it desires life, because the organs of life are the working machine' (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 8). ■