AIS General Research Fund (GRF) and Early Career Scheme (ECS) Success Round 2019-20

Project Title:
Demolish the walls, Rebuild the city: Infrastructural Transformation and the Emergence of Urban Governance in Republican Canton, China

Brief Abstract:
This project is an inquiry on socio-political and material transformations. It does so by taking an anthropological approach toward studying the historical development of urban governance in Canton (Guangzhou) in early twentieth-century (Republican period) China. Though Imperial China had had a history of walled cities, there was no urban administration until the Republican era when municipal governments emerged amid a dramatic reconfiguration of the socio-political landscape.

This project will develop a new approach to studying this transformation. How did government officials develop technical and administrative expertise to manage the infrastructural projects? How in this process were political reasoning and capacity for such governing techniques as budgeting, taxation and planning developed, which led to the increase of infrastructural power? How did the government develop new forms of knowledge, skills and practices that shaped municipal governance? How did the reshaping of the built environment reconfigure social relations and power structure?

To answer these questions, the proposed research takes the Canton Municipal Government Gazette as the primary source of information and the primary object of scrutiny, supplemented with memoirs written by officials, local and foreign newspapers, maps, photos, interviews and field visits. By making sense of the efforts to rebuild the political system and to initiate social change through re-organizing space, this project seeks to reveal how socio-political transformation is made tangible and durable.

Investigator: Dr Jun ZHANG

Biography:
First trained as a lawyer and then an anthropologist, Dr ZHANG Jun is interested in social transformation, class politics, urban studies and politics of infrastructure, with a regional focus on China. Her book "Driving toward Modernity: The Car and the Lives of the Middle Class in Contemporary China" (Cornell University Press, 2019) examines the mutual rises of the middle class and the automotive regime in contemporary urban China. She is currently working on a book manuscript (with Dr. Gonçalo Santos) on the emerging philanthropic practices in the context of rising inequality. Zhang's next project, which is granted funding support under the ECS scheme, takes the spatial metamorphosis of Canton/Guangzhou as a way to understand the socio-economic and political transformations in China in the Republican era.

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