

AIS General Research Fund (GRF) and Early Career Scheme (ECS) Success Round 2017-18

Project Title: Old Neighbourhoods, New Spaces: Urban Reconstruction and Governance in China's Urbanization

Brief Abstract:

China has experienced an intense process of urbanization in the past two decades. Cities expanded territorially and demographically at an unprecedented speed, and all over the country, unstoppable waves of development have supplanted the historic urban fabric. Existing literature tends to approach this urban revolution primarily as a by-product of the post-socialist governing order and the changes it made possible. This project draws on social science studies on infrastructure, power and spatial politics to develop a more nuanced, historically informed, framework of analysis.

The project will focus on three different case studies of old neighborhood reconstruction in Guangzhou, South China. Combining archival research with ethnographic investigation, the project will concentrate on three different critical moments of the process of urbanization in this southern metropolis first, street construction during the Republican era; second, the socialist housing transformation in the 1950s and 1960s; and, third, a reconstruction project in the new city center in the contemporary. With different analytical emphases, these three case studies of old neighborhood reconstruction will exemplify a nuanced analysis of urbanization that takes into account historically distinctive combinations of and evolving relations between actors, political rationalities, government capacity, material constraints, expertise and economic practices. This approach adds significant historical complexity to conventional accounts of post-Mao processes of urbanization, while challenging master narratives of urban transformation that give too much agency to state actors. Outside the China field, the project will make an important contribution to recent debates on infrastructure, power, and governance in the fields of urban studies, anthropology, post-colonial studies, and STS, adding a much-needed non-Western perspective into what remains a largely Western-centric research agenda.

Investigator: Dr ZHANG Jun

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. She is currently finishing her first book manuscript entitled "Driving toward Modernity," which examines the mutual rises of the middle class and the automotive regime in contemporary urban China. Meanwhile, she is writing on two other projects. One explores the emerging philanthropic practices in the context of rising inequality. The other project takes the spatial metamorphosis of Canton/Guangzhou as a way to understand the socio-economic and political transformations in China in the Republican era and in the contemporary.