

Dalang Fever 3: Data to Control or to Empower?

Linda Vlassenrood

Het Nieuwe Instituut and the International New Town Institute (INTI) joined forces for the participatory research project *Dalang Fever 3. How Data Can Empower a Migrant Society*. The project aims to understand the desires and needs of the migrant workers of Dalang, a rapidly transforming area on the outskirts of Shenzhen. *Dalang Fever 3* combined the extensive working experience of INTI in Dalang with knowledge on data and the smart society from the [DATAstudio](#) programme of Het Nieuwe Instituut. *Dalang Fever 3* consisted of research, an exhibition at the 2019 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture and a workshop curated by Linda Vlassenrood. Here she describes the outcomes and sensitivities of the project.

Eyes of the City

The impact of datafication on society and the human environment is all-pervasive. Many cities worldwide want to become “smart cities” and seek to harness data to make themselves cleaner, safer, more efficient places. To this end, digital tools are implemented – mainly by commercial companies on behalf of local governments – that process data, but also, to an increasing degree, generate it. Both city officials and companies collect and analyse this data in their search for solutions to a variety of problems, social and otherwise. However, some administrations also use big data to control or even oppress residents, while many tech firms make lots of money by selling their data to others. Yet the opportunities and threats that this presents for urban life are still not being sufficiently recognised by design disciplines including architecture and urban planning.

The 2019 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture, with the theme [Urban Interactions](#), explored the evolving relationship between urban space and technological innovation from different perspectives. *Dalang Fever 3* was part of the exhibition [Eyes of the City](#) that opened on 21 December, in which the curators questioned how digital technologies impact urban life. What does it mean for urban planners, architects, citizens and policymakers when a growing number of sensors, facial recognition cameras, artificial intelligence and deep learning are enabling architecture to “see”?

Dalang Fever 3 is a response to the fifth research question of the open call of the curatorial team of *Eyes of the City*: how can designers and citizens harness the power of real-time data in novel ways, especially to foster architecture’s ability to respond to people’s needs? However, people’s needs are rarely placed at the centre of global data collection. *Dalang Fever 3* therefore adds an even more important question to the discourse: how can data collection take citizens’ needs and

wants as a starting point? Perhaps by doing a much better job of collecting and understanding the needs and wants that are relevant to that society.¹ British architect Cedric Price once rightly said: “Technology is the answer, but what was the question?” Technology should indeed not be an end in itself, but should be used to solve specific, locally grounded problems in society.

China’s central government is working hard on establishing and promoting Shenzhen as its most important technology and innovation hub. Indeed, the city has a large number of globally successful start-ups like Tencent, a famous “maker” scene, and a culture of developing hardware. Shenzhen is a city that has been raising eyebrows for years because of its fast development and exceptional position in the Chinese economy. However, everyday reality in Shenzhen can be unruly. In the last 40 years, the number of inhabitants has grown from about 300,000 – within the current boundaries of Shenzhen – to an unofficial estimate of between 15 and 20 million people. According to the 2017 Shenzhen Statistical Yearbook, 11.9 million people lived permanently in the city at the start of 2017. Of these, only 3.8 million people were permanent, registered residents with a Shenzhen hukou², and over eight million people were permanent, non-registered residents.³ In reality, the number of this “floating population” is much higher. It is clear that the majority of these migrant workers are not living the “smart city life” of efficiency and accessibility: most live under the radar in extremely dense urban villages, with little access to on- and offline networks. The current Covid-19 pandemic has made the situation of this vulnerable group even more challenging.⁴

The research of *Dalang Fever 3* focused on the Dalang neighbourhood to understand the societal needs within this local community and propose next steps to improve people’s living conditions and urban environment. We wanted to question the use of data in order to incorporate migrant workers’ needs into the continuous transformation of the area. What are their problems,

¹ This was one of the main conclusions drawn from the DATAstudio program (2015–2017). The program was initiated by Het Nieuwe Instituut and the City of Eindhoven and curated by Linda Vlassenrood. It addressed the question of how we can build a smart society rather than just a smart city. In other words, how can we use data and technology to benefit citizens and neighbourhoods? The DATAstudio organized a range of activities, including workshops, lectures, school programs and the *Embassy of Data*, always with the aim of understanding or supplementing collected data. We asked aloud how we should handle data and the associated technological possibilities. And we looked at how we might use them to build better neighbourhoods together. See also: <https://destaatvaneindhoven.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en>.

² China introduced the hukou household registration in the 1950s. It divides and demarcates the population into urban and rural residents. People who are registered in the countryside, but live and work in the city, do not enjoy the same welfare and medical benefits, or free schooling for their children, as people who are officially registered as urban residents.

³ See: <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-hukou-system-benefits-and-application-process-in-shenzhen/>, retrieved on 29 July 2020.

⁴ See: <https://www.piie.com/blogs/china-economic-watch/chinas-migrant-workers-need-help-economic-downturn>, retrieved on 29 July 2020.

ambitions and wishes? How should we collect this data and make it accessible? What spatial, organisational and digital transitions should be instigated?

The Dalang area

Dalang is a rapidly transforming area on the outskirts of Shenzhen with various social issues and little urban planning. The Dalang area has been part of INTI's international research programme since 2012. In 2013 and 2015, INTI contributed to the Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture with the event *Da Lang Fever* and the exhibition *Da Lang Fever 2.0*. *Da Lang Fever* stands for the potential of a self-organising migrant society in Dalang; both event and exhibition showcased the empowering nature of bottom-up activities for migrant workers and have been developed in close collaboration with the Dalang government.⁵



Music and roller-skating performances by migrant workers from Dalang at the *Da Lang Fever* event in The Value Factory on 14 December 2013. Photos: UABB.



Overview of the *Da Lang Fever 2.0* exhibition and group photo of the participants (migrant workers, NGOs, governmental people, designers) taking part in the Play Da Lang game session on 7 December 2015. Photos: Lard Buurman.

⁵ See: <http://www.newtowninstitute.org/spip.php?article1074>.

Dalang lacks a systematic and integrated planning approach to meet its social and urban development challenges. Primarily a dense collection of urban villages and factory compounds, it is hard to reach, with few public facilities and limited green and public spaces. Dalang is home to approximately 574,375 people, of whom 39,563 are locally registered having a Shenzhen hukou.⁶ 534,812 citizens belong to the so-called floating population, with 336,615 people living there for longer than six months. Urban villages like Dalang in Shenzhen have always operated as arrival cities and incubators to empower citizens, even though both population and economic reality are continuously changing. Young migrant workers come from all over the country and are full of ambition, but they also face problems in adjusting to city life and workplace pressure. Hardly any data is available about the residents and activities in this remote and often overlooked part of town except from inaccessible user data from mobile phones and social media platforms like WeChat or Sina Weibo. It means accurate data is lacking about the number of people living and working in the area, the duration and reason of their stay, age, gender, income, level of education, origin, commercial activities or jobs. Furthermore, detailed qualitative data about their course in life, social issues, living conditions, problems or needs is absent, let alone subjective information about their ambitions, wishes or ideas for a better life and future.



Public space in Shi'ao Village, Dalang. Photo: Lard Buurman.

⁶ Statistics from Dalang Neighbourhood government, 14 October 2019.

Data collection

Het Nieuwe Instituut and INTI collaborated with social enterprise [Shanzhai City](#) from Hong Kong to independently gather quantitative and qualitative data. The research team collected structural and semi-structural data from people living and working in the research area of Dalang that comprised the communities of Xinshi, Dalang, Langkou and Tongsheng, totalling approximately 400,424 people, of whom 13,774 are registered. The study took place between September and November 2019 and focused on different layers of information. The researchers first interviewed 15 residents about their sense of belonging, identity and social needs, and the environment, transportation, living costs and public space of Dalang. Based on their stories, an online questionnaire was compiled. Shanzhai City then sent out four agents who approached 350 respondents. *Dalang Fever 3* was clearly a test case and not about using the latest technologies. After all, the primary goal was to engage – in the best possible way – the communities living in urban villages that have no public voice. In short, residents in Dalang were invited to anonymously share in-depth personal stories; share their findings about their neighbourhood through photographs and short statements; include their gender, age, place of origin, level of education, marital status, duration of stay, income, commercial activities and jobs; and describe their sense of belonging and general well-being in Dalang.

The long interviews, not surprisingly, mostly highlighted urgent social and urban issues. It appears that many people are struggling financially due to continuous and random rent rises, plus schooling and everyday costs. Another striking concern is put forward by female workers who are in their forties and worry about life after retirement at 50 years of age. Life in Dalang is expensive and they have no, or little, pension because migrant workers are not generally covered by the urban pension system.⁷ They wonder if it is possible for them to learn new skills and find another job so they can stay in Dalang and don't have to return to the countryside. Moreover, all parents seem to worry about the rising costs of schooling. They don't want to send their children back to their hometown as they will be separated from their kids. Finally, a lack of public space, parking and places to shelter, poor water quality and public transport, and continuous road construction works were often addressed as problematic issues of the current urban environment.

⁷ Rural migrant workers in urban areas can take part in the urban pension system, but it is not compulsory. It appears that both employers and rural migrant workers are reluctant to join because of higher labour costs for employers and migrant workers are more interested in immediate wages than in pensions. In addition, migrant workers move frequently from one place and employer to another, which makes it harder for them to join. See also: <https://www.pensionfundsonline.co.uk/content/country-profiles/china/105>, retrieved on 2 October 2020.

“外来工反感的还有‘二手房东’。

涨房租随意涨这好
多人不接受, 包括
我自己也不接受。

你每过一个月、半个月, 或者三个月涨一次, 再过三个月再涨一次, 那你涨到什么时候呢? 最起码你要透明, 为什么你要涨房租。

”

女性, 46岁, 1995年来大浪

“A thing loathed by migrant workers is the 'second-hand landlord'.

Many people can't
keep up with the
random rent increases,
including me.

Sometimes it's every 15 days, a month, or three months, and they'd increase the rent again after another three months. When will it end? At least it should be transparent why you have to raise the rent.

”

Female, 46 years old – in Dalang since 1995

Graphic design: Koehorst in 't Veld



Photograph taken by one of the respondents to illustrate the continuous road construction works.

The online questionnaire made it possible to upscale the amount of collected qualitative and quantitative data, but also to verify assumptions from previous research on Dalang. These include the relative youth of migrant workers: 206 out of 350 respondents were aged 18 to 35. In addition, these young respondents were higher educated, on average, than the 122 respondents who were aged between 36 and 55. The younger group usually earned more, except when the jobs were related to senior positions that required more experience. It also became clear that 250 respondents were educated up to only senior high school level. Most respondents worked as lower-ranking employees, followed by researchers, technicians, contract workers, or department managers in the electronics, service, automobile and consumer goods industries. 266 respondents earned between 3,000 and 8,000 yuan which is the equivalent of around €364 and €973 per month.

Astonishingly, only 58 respondents had lived in Dalang for longer than 10 years, while 270 respondents didn't have plans to stay longer than five years or didn't know how long they would stay. The top five reasons for leaving Dalang were related to job changes, high costs of living and financial pressure, schooling for children, no access to affordable housing and no retirement security. The five things respondents were most worried about in their personal lives were income increases, improving living conditions, career development, learning more skills, and their children's education. The five things respondents were most worried about related to Dalang were education, the lack of affordable housing, poor urban environment, inconvenient transportation, and healthcare.

Fundamental questions

When combining the different data sources, more in-depth conclusions could be drawn that led to six fundamental questions that were part of the exhibition and the workshop that followed.

1. The lives of most blue-collar migrant workers in Dalang are determined by financial insecurity. It is a daily struggle to balance income with the relentless rent rises, plus schooling and everyday costs. How to keep vibrant migrant neighbourhoods like Dalang open and inclusive – primarily economically, but also socially, culturally and spatially – for all, now and in the future?
2. Volunteer organisations have, in the broadest sense, become a powerful movement that can no longer be ignored when aiming for sustainable Chinese cities. Dalang is no exception. This social support system has proved a strong mechanism in empowering migrants. People who do voluntary work in Dalang seem to have a greater sense of belonging. What other spatial, organisational and digital interventions would boost a similar sense of belonging?
3. Dalang has an open and dynamic culture due to its diverse, youthful, and continually changing mix of people. It has been a magnet for the floating population since the early 1990s. How can it

become a place of reciprocity for all generations – including retired people who would like to stay – to grow old in?

4. Dalang clearly lacks accessible public spaces, parks and leisure places for people to meet. In order to achieve a more sustainable society, it is necessary to rethink its scattered urban context. How can parameters like temporality and flexibility of place – a common feature in urban villages – aid the further, more formal urban development of migrant neighbourhoods like Dalang?
5. It is clear that the demands and opportunities of second-generation migrants (born after 1980) are markedly different from those of previous generations. All of them face problems in adjusting to city life and workplace pressure. However, it seems as if younger generations have more chances to develop themselves, improve their communication skills and extend their limited social networks, while lower-educated migrant workers born in the 1970s struggle to survive financially. How to increase the possibilities of older people?
6. It seems as if all respondents suffer from the continuous disruption of road construction, without having an influence on it. Most migrant workers are tenants and non-stakeholders without a voice. What new organisational model can be considered to increase communication and transparency within migrant society, and between migrant society and local government?



Installation *Dalang Fever 3. How data can empower a migrant society* at the *Eyes of the City* exhibition of the 2019 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture. Photo: Toon Koehorst.

Workshop

A summary of the research was shown in an installation in the *Eyes of City* exhibition that had to close early due to the outbreak of Covid-19. A multidisciplinary science and design team from both the Netherlands and China came together during a four-day online workshop in June 2020 to review the research method, analyse the collected data and propose improvements for Dalang.⁸ The goal was to find out how to incorporate people's needs into the continuous transformation of the area. What spatial, organisational and digital transitions should then be instigated?



Photo: Marit Geluk.

The Chinese and Dutch participants looked at the main concerns raised by migrant workers themselves and understood that they generally struggle to find a sense of belonging, find it hard to adapt to urban life and workplace pressures, struggle to survive financially and cannot accumulate a track record of their achievements, while the dynamics of the city call for agility – both personally and

⁸ The Dutch and Chinese participants: Marthijn Pool (architect and co-founder Space&Matter), Harm van Beek (industrial designer and co-founder The Incredible Machine), Sabine Niederer (professor of Visual Methodologies at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences), Ester van de Wiel (designer, researcher and curator public space), Linda Vlassenrood (curator *Dalang Fever 3*), Tat Lam (architect and founder Shanzhai City), Yijing Xu (community curator, architect and founder Sans Practice), Alvin Yip (designer, curator, social entrepreneur and founder Circus Tram), Wendy Wu (urban researcher, curator at architecture firm Urbanus), Tim Lin (designer, social entrepreneur at Shanzhai City) and Chris Gee (digital solution architect at Shanzhai City).

professionally – to secure a future. Simultaneously, urban villages have always operated as arrival cities and incubators to empower citizens. The Dutch participants wondered if it would be possible to also “instigate” a sense of belonging in these migrant neighbourhoods. A sense of belonging that is more broadly defined than by merely having a property and/or a local hukou as most respondents would indicate. Could a sense of belonging also evolve through meaningful relationships with others and the living environment? It could ultimately manifest itself in a greater sense of responsibility, the ability to act, and ownership in a broad sense. The whole team wanted to imagine physical and digital interventions that could work for all urban villages, but especially for people of all ages whose income causes pressure to financially survive in the city.

Approach

The Dutch participants redefined the research method used for *Dalang Fever 3* and outlined three important steps: firstly, obtain a deep understanding of the area, secondly, map existing networks of people, NGOs and other institutions, and finally, design meaningful (micro-)interventions. A deep understanding is acquired by compiling “thick data” that consists of official⁹, online¹⁰, and participatory and social research data¹¹ on the area and how that area is experienced. To double check the latter, it is important to visualise, discuss, and annotate the data with inhabitants and other local stakeholders to verify the findings. Interesting tools are “talking back to the map” wherein local stakeholders interpret and annotate maps¹², visual community-based participatory research methods such as photovoice (participants are invited to photograph scenes or places that represent their concerns) or “soft mapping” depicting subjective information on a map.

Step two includes identifying local hubs, connectors, pioneers, events, digital tools, media and communication channels in the existing networks. Again, this information should be double-checked and modified with inhabitants and other local stakeholders. Step two should ultimately lead to the formulation of actionable insights to inform the design process.

The final step includes the design of meaningful (micro-)interventions on-site and online through existing and, if necessary, new channels.

⁹ Including demographic composition, aerial views and official maps.

¹⁰ Including search engine results, social media analysis and media monitoring.

¹¹ Including media and tech consumption research, interviews, surveys, observations, data walks and photovoice.

¹² In the project Naturpradi Paris by Médialab Science Po, local stakeholders annotated the social media research on green spaces and 'revegetation' in the city of Paris, see:

<https://medialab.sciencespo.fr/en/activities/naturpradi/>, retrieved on 21 August 2020.

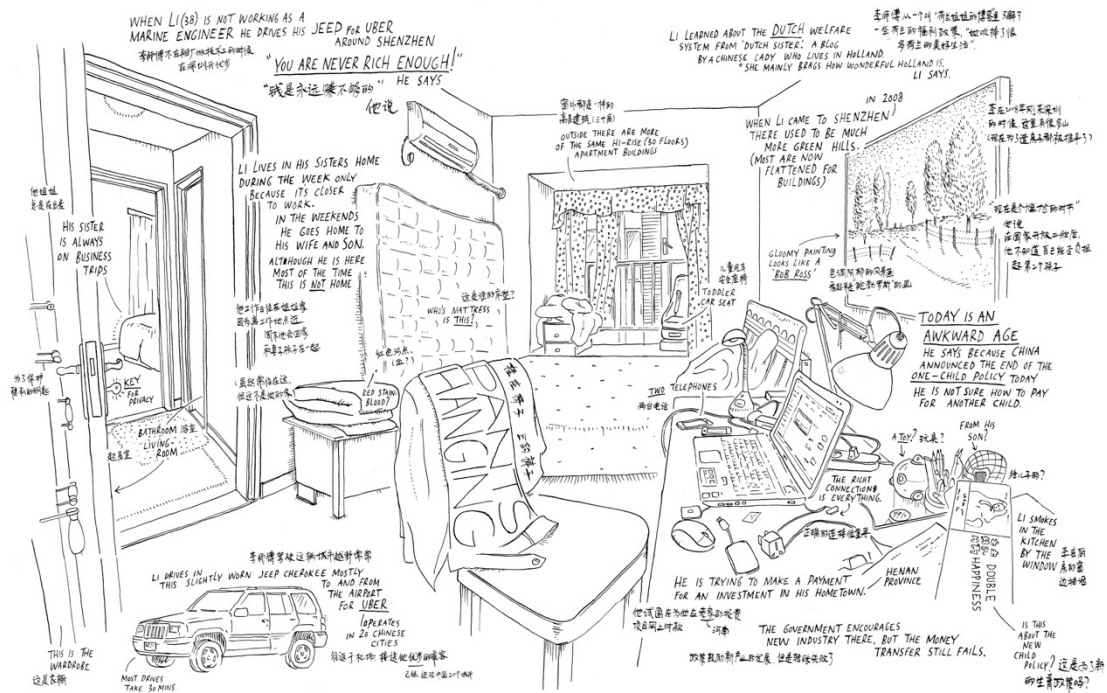


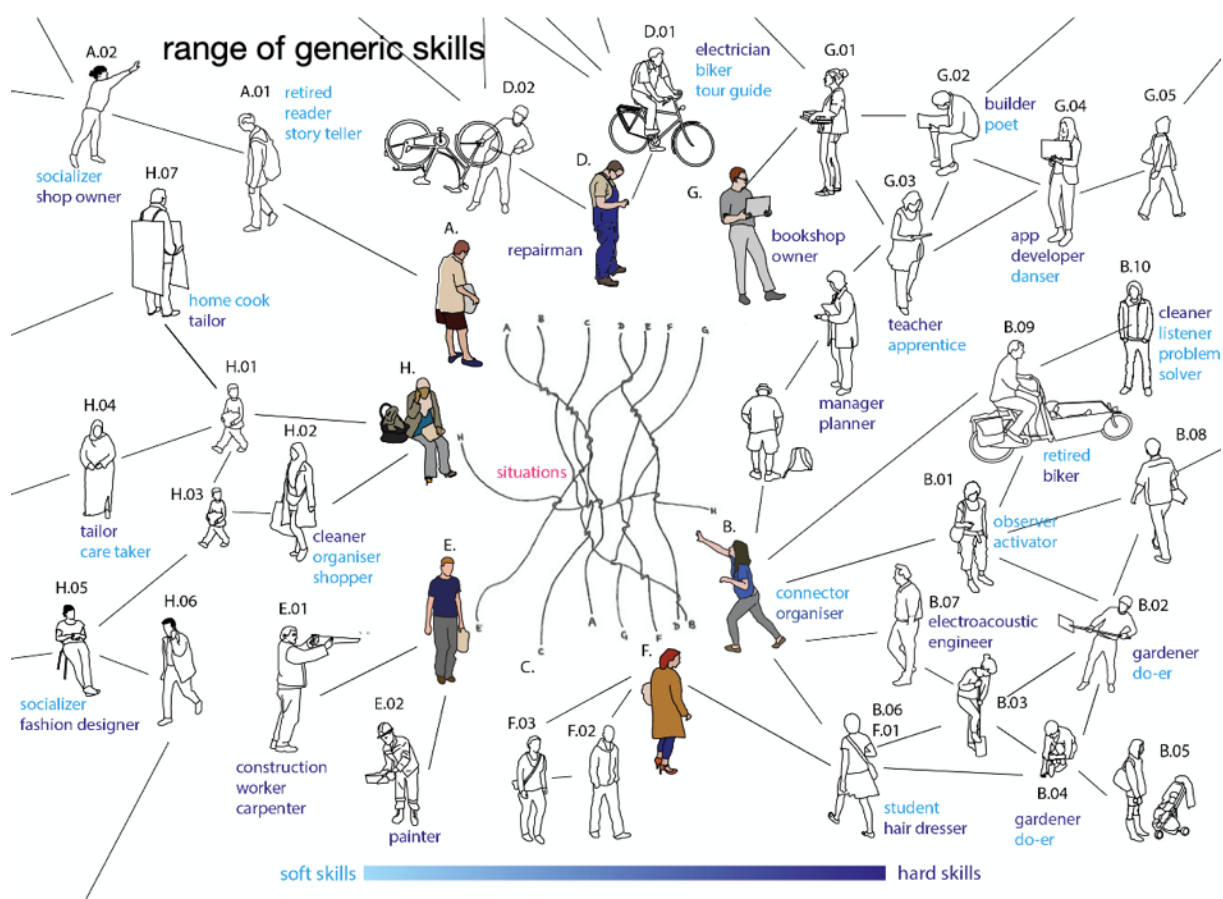
Image: Drawing made in 2015 by artist Jan Rothuizen describing the home, life and desires of Uber taxi driver Peng Li (38) living in Dalang for the exhibition *Social City of DROOG* at the 2015 Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture.

Dalang School of Life

We wanted to turn our understanding of the people and the context of urban villages into meaningful digital and physical interventions that could promote belonging. Even though step two – mapping of existing networks – was missing in the research of *Dalang Fever 3*, the concept of setting up a School of Life (not to be confused with [The School of Life](#) founded by British philosopher and writer Alain de Botton) was quickly born. The Dalang School of Life is intended to be an informal on- and offline community-driven learning network in the urban villages that empowers people through skill sharing and knowledge exchange. The urban village is the campus of the Dalang School of Life and its inhabitants are the students, teachers and agents. Inhabitants come to the city to make money, but also to develop themselves by learning new skills. The Dalang School of Life enables migrant workers to build up an alternative curriculum vitae, but also to meet new people, extend their limited social networks, broaden their work opportunities, improve their communication skills, gain self-confidence, improve their surroundings, and have fun. It is supposed to be an add-on to all other formal systems of empowerment – including local NGOs – that are supported by the government, since the Dalang School of Life is created and shaped by migrant workers themselves.

How would it work? When newcomers arrive in Dalang with all their ambitions, dreams, different cultural backgrounds and skills, it is hard for them to know what to expect from the local community. There is no guidebook on how to become part of it. However, everybody possesses time, knowledge, skills and ideas that are of great value to the community once residents are connected to the on- and offline learning network. In short, everybody joins the Dalang School of Life upon arrival and is challenged to give and take knowledge and skills.

To visualise and shape the possibilities of the network, inspiration was found in two of British anthropologist Tim Ingold's diagrams showing a mesh of entangled lines and a network of connected points.¹³ We projected these onto the community and envisioned possible encounters. We listed a large variety of soft and hard skills, but also roles to play in the exchange of skills and knowledge. A tailor who is an excellent home cook, for example, while a cleaner might also be a good problem solver.

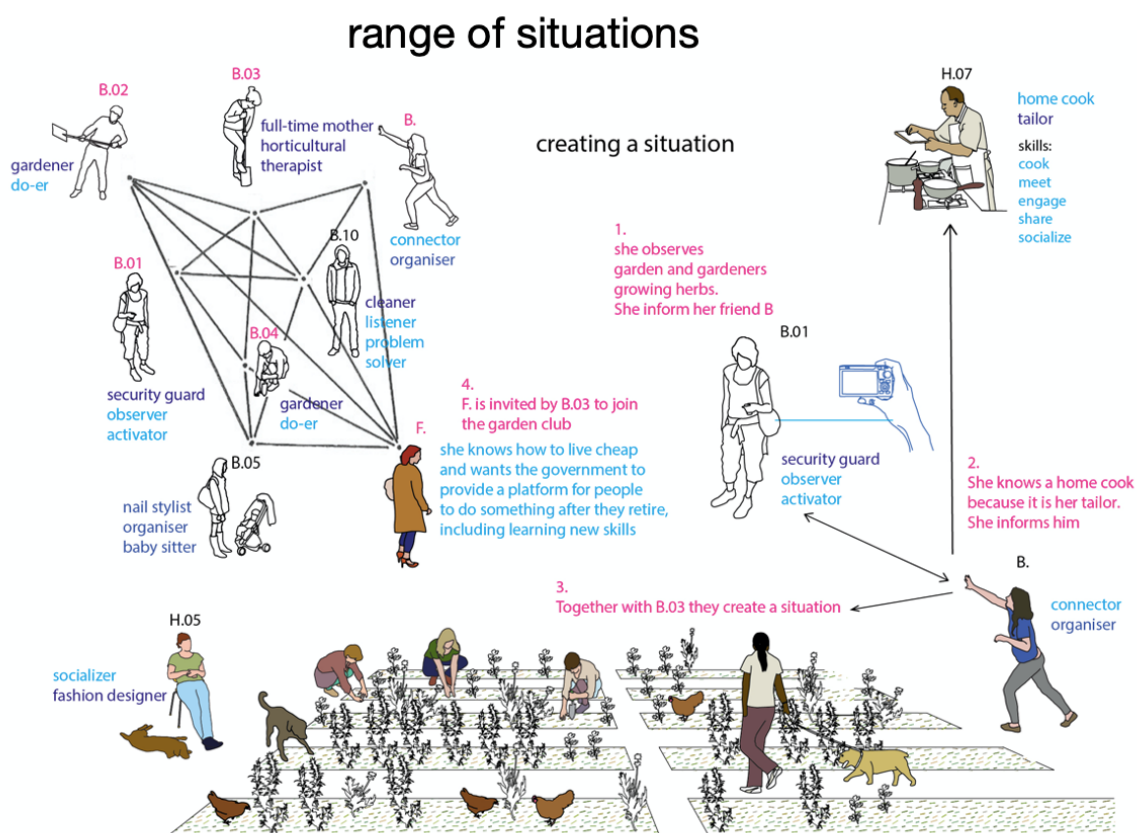


Skills and roles of community members. Image: Ester van de Wiel

¹³ Tim Ingold, *Being alive. Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2011).

Situations

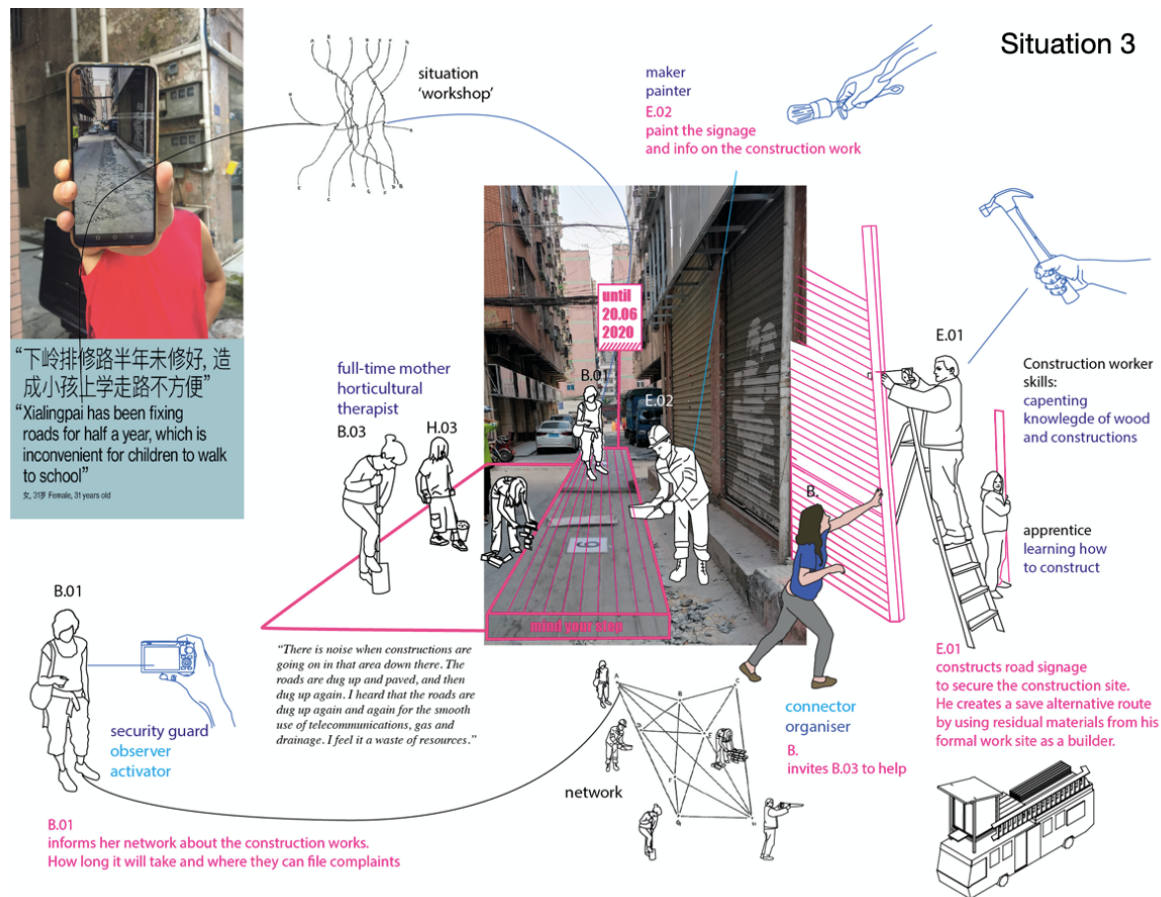
We also imagined a range of “situations” on five different scales of interaction with growing numbers of stakeholders: from peer-to-peer exchange between a few individuals to a more collective learning network and improvements of public space in collaboration with local NGOs. The smallest scale of interaction could consist of Person A. who is a security guard and observes gardeners growing vegetables. She informs person B. who is a talented organizer and connector. Person B. knows a tailor who is also a home cook. She informs him about the gardeners and sets up a garden club. She invites people to join, but also organises lunch for newcomers to the village made from the fresh produce delivered to the home cook.



How a potential situation could evolve. Image: Ester van de Wiel

Each situation is shaped by loosely connected communities in Dalang that are all part of the on- and offline learning network. Another level of interaction could relate to residents informing each other about road construction works and working with residual materials to shape alternative walking routes. Situations could ultimately lead to temporarily pop-up parks, cinemas, sun shelters, play courts and pedestrian paths, based on local needs. The Dalang School of Life would provide a

certificate – a digital system perhaps similar to LinkedIn – for people to build up a curriculum vitae with their achievements and developed skills during their stay in an urban village.



A situation wherein residents collaborate to deal with road construction works. Image: Ester van de Wiel

The Dalang School of Life is about creating value for the residents themselves. However, who should endorse such a learning network to make it trustworthy? What are the incentives for residents to join? What is the economic model supporting it? How to give shape to the credibility of residents joining the Dalang School of Life? Is it possible to stay away from the social credit system that is currently being implemented by the Chinese national government¹⁴? Should the Dalang School of Life primarily facilitate the bankability of migrant workers, or could it relate to the exchange of soft skills and knowledge only? How much of the system should be online in order to still guarantee privacy for its users? Important questions that led to different opinions amongst the Dutch and Chinese participants about how to implement the Dalang School of Life in practice.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/china-social-credit-system-explained>, retrieved on 7 September 2020.

Bankability

First of all, what is meant by the bankability of migrant workers? Many rural citizens coming to the city to work are not financially literate. Without the right documents, they must rely on employers to manage their finances, including payroll, opening a bank account, and so on. To open a bank account, only a guarantor letter from the company is needed, not a proof of address. The younger generation is more literate, so they are using electronic wallets like Alipay and WeChat Pay to link to their accounts. However, many migrant workers are still being paid in cash. A third option is that migrant workers are not getting paid and that the employer keeps their money until the end of the year or when they leave the factory. These migrant workers live in the factory compound and do not generally need to spend money. Food and living expenses are deducted from their salary book. Still, they do have a problem of liquidity in regard to unforeseen expenses. When they exchange services with each other, they do not have money. These migrant workers need more tools to help them to track the exchange of value and knowledge.

In addition, when migrant workers move from one urban village to another or to another city, there is no system that documents their achievements. It means they cannot show an official track record to their new employer and are subsequently often financially exploited. Being able to build a digital identity with a track record of their working experience and skills would be of great benefit to the majority of migrant workers. It would enable them to find better jobs, make more money and ultimately be more bankable.

Differences of opinion

The Dalang School of Life is clearly a speculative proposal, co-created in only three days. It would definitely need more local research in order to fully understand the conditions in which the proposal could be further developed either as a commercially or an academically (research) funded project. However, a fundamental divide between the Dutch and Chinese participants in regard to datafication and control became apparent in the discussions after the final presentation. Het Nieuwe Instituut, INTI and Shanzhai City were not naive in regard to China's growing desire for surveillance and control. It is clear that the national government is tightening the control and management of cyberspace since the Cybersecurity Law came into effect on 1 June 2017. It covers every form of network activity in China: internet, mobile phone, WeChat type social networks, cloud systems, domestic and international email.¹⁵ We therefore decided in August 2019 not to collaborate with the local government of Dalang, in order to have more freedom in control of the data collected, to avoid

¹⁵ See: <https://www.chinalawblog.com/2019/10/chinas-new-cybersecurity-system-there-is-no-place-to-hide.html>, retrieved on 29 July 2020.

the complication of reporting, and to safeguard the privacy of individuals who would take part in our research. At the time, independently developing the initial phase of the project seemed realistic. Shanzhai City indeed successfully gathered data anonymously with an application built on decentralised ledger technology. However, the lack of local government endorsement led to the questioning of one of its data collection agents by the local community authorities while gathering respondents. It all fizzled out, but, clearly, endorsement from the local government is essential to further develop the project in collaboration with local stakeholders including NGOs and volunteer organisations.

INTI and Het Nieuwe Instituut are not against seeking collaboration with the local government, but full data control is in every way contradictory to the ambitions of this project: to safeguard the interest of the participants and make sure users are in control of, and empowered by, their data. Even in many countries outside China, this way of thinking is not generally shared or publicly debated. However, how to protect the public interest of data and establish data sovereignty for citizens is still part of critical discourse. A project like [DECODE](#) for instance – led by a Europe-wide consortium and funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Programme – is about providing tools to individuals to give them ownership of their personal data. It is up to them if they want to keep their personal data private or want to share it for the public good. Unfortunately, these alternative trajectories have become unimaginable in China. We found out that a new cybersecurity law known as the Cybersecurity Multi-Level Protection Scheme (MLPS 2.0) came into effect in December 2019.¹⁶ It effectively means the government has unrestricted access to *all* data within the country, whether it’s being stored on Chinese servers or transmitted through Chinese networks. A partnership would automatically lead to sharing the digital key to all gathered data, no matter what blockchain technology has been used. Even our most critical and independent local partners have accepted reduced privacy and urged the Dutch side to compromise at some point.

Another uneasy discussion was related to the principal incentive that the Dalang School of Life should be about crediting and enabling migrant workers to make more money, not about facilitating a sense of belonging. The Chinese participants questioned why that would be even necessary in a transient place where most people only stay for a short period of time. Were the Dutch participants naïve in primarily addressing the exchange of knowledge and skills? Yes and no. Urgency and incentives are indeed needed for people to join a learning network. However, life is about more than just making money, according to the Dutch team members. Establishing a successful participatory project is challenging, but a growing number of international examples and

¹⁶ See: <https://www.datacenterdynamics.com/en/opinions/chinas-new-cybersecurity-law-bad-news-data-center-security/>, retrieved on 24 August 2020.

interventions,¹⁷ and also the empowering nature of grassroots activities in Dalang, manifest other kinds of social value. Yet the Chinese participants were trying to solve a structural and fundamentally complex economic and social problem that is beyond the scope of what the Dutch could or should comprehend. It is therefore striking how one of the Chinese participants ultimately described the spectrum of both solutions: bankability of the migrant workers versus efficiency for the migrant workers. Efficiency stands here for leading a more comfortable life with shared facilities and activities.

It seems as if it will be hard to overcome the differences in order to collaborate further. We do share the objective of capacity building, but don't always speak the same language when we talk about values, trust, endorsement, social capital, crediting or even bankability. Let alone about how datafication should contribute to people's needs while the national government is increasing its control over residents. In addition, that same Chinese government perceives international exchange more and more as international "interference". We did consider some modes of collaboration that could do justice to the different opinions. An option would be to consider only an offline version of the Dalang School of Life and start with the smallest interventions thinkable. The Dalang School of Life could also be developed as an academic project in order to map the existing networks and test small interventions through research by design. In any case, the project would need to be steered by a local partner.

Epilogue

Dalang Fever 3 turned out to be a project with a steep learning curve. Even after many years of working experience in Shenzhen and a long track record of collaborations with different local governments, it became clear – initially between the lines – that INTI and Het Nieuwe Instituut were questioned as trustworthy foreign institutes by the Shenzhen Biennale Organising Committee. The reason was that we worked on a Shenzhen case without local political confirmation. We were ultimately told that we couldn't organise the workshop with Dutch and Chinese designers on biennale grounds unless we collaborated with the Dalang government. Well-informed sources made it clear that this was all part of the growing self-censorship of the Shenzhen Biennale Organising Committee. That same censorship led to the removal of several text panels from the exhibition that were supposedly sensitive. It surprisingly even included an innocent quote by a 31-year old man: "Road construction makes a loud noise here – too noisy to sleep late on weekends. The roads are dug up and repaired repeatedly. We don't know who we can report these issues to so we're just living with it. The noise problem has been around for a while. Anyway, it is what it is." The removal of

¹⁷ See: <http://socialdesigncookbook.com/>, retrieved on 24 August 2020.

information due to censorship is nothing new. For years, specific terms like Taiwan, Tibet and Tiananmen Square, or displaying maps of China, have been considered problematic and were always removed by the Shenzhen Department of Cultural Affairs, not the organisers. However, since Xi Jinping has come to power, censorship has grown exponentially. It is now the Shenzhen Biennale Organising Committee itself that removes information – before anyone else does – that is primarily related to accountability on city level. It makes it painfully clear that addressing people's needs in their most basic form is extremely sensitive, even at the – since its first edition in 2005 – progressive Shenzhen Biennale. Especially when people's needs are related to proposals for new organisational models. Indeed, this suggestion that was also removed from the exhibition because it is considered to be a political comment. We were subtly told by one of our Chinese partners to strategically downplay our future international presence, which means that years of fruitful research and exchange on the development of Shenzhen might end right here.

Het Nieuwe Instituut, the 2019 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism / Architecture, and the Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Guangzhou generously supported both the research and the exhibition. The Creative Industries Fund supported the workshop.