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**Transnational Landscape:  
The Symbolic Expression of Urban Parks in Shenzhen  
during the Early Period of its Establishment**

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**ABSTRACT**

Urban parks emerged in large numbers in Shenzhen's ultra-high-speed construction process, but the academic discussion concerning the historical process of their construction is limited. Based on a transnational standpoint, this research regards urban parks as an active social construction, and examines their construction history from the dual perspectives of nation-state and global-local relations. The close relationship between Shenzhen's urban parks construction in the 1980s and the special zone's attraction of foreign investment is revealed in detailed analysis. In addition, the timing national form adopted in the construction of the park is just at the same time of when special zone is planned as an important part of national rejuvenation. This thesis tries to expound the construction of Shenzhen's urban parks in a specific context at the beginning of reform and opening up in the light of a thorough historical explanation.

**Keywords:** Shenzhen, urban park, greening, social imagination, reform and opening up

## Introduction

In the discussion of contemporary Chinese urban issues, urban parks are usually regarded as technical ecological infrastructure or outdoor activity spaces, while intellectual discussions are often neglected in the raging construction. As a cultural form of space, urban park——like street, residential area, and public building——is a representation of urban social life; as a cultural form of nature, urban park like rivers, farmlands, and traditional gardens, is a cultural landscape with a specific meaning superimposed. Research in the social sciences reminds historical researchers that both the production of space and nature are closely related to the order of power, and they are the dialogue between social practice and the order of power in a particular period<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, in the intellectual discussion of urban parks, it is necessary to go deep into the systems, policies and concepts in the process of the production of space and nature<sup>2,3</sup>.

In the 1970s, the neoliberal turn in the political and economic practice of developed countries produced an international division of labor, and South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other East Asian countries or regions also started their economic take-offs, which brought new opportunities and enlightenments to China at a turning point by the end of 1970s. Under such an international pattern and geographical conditions, Shenzhen, which was established as a city in 1979, has become an experimental field for Guangdong province to go "one step ahead" in the country's reform and opening up<sup>4</sup>. Before 1979, Shenzhen had only two parks, but by 2019, Shenzhen has more than 1,090 parks of various scales. Their construction is a remould of space and nature in a specific context, and this context can find a reference frame in the global-local relationship since the 1970s, which makes these urban parks a socially constructed space and nature. Since, the basic models describing nature and space are provided by social relations<sup>5,6</sup>, this article regards the urban parks built in the 1980s in Shenzhen as a socialized space and socialized nature, and on this basis this paper provides some explanatory views on its history.

## Spatial Distribution of Urban Parks

In the early 1980s, Shenzhen restricted by its the weak industrial

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, N. (1991). *Uneven development : Nature, capital, and the production of space* (3rd ed.). Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press.

<sup>2</sup>Loughran, K. (2020). Urban parks and urban problems: An historical perspective on green space development as a cultural fix. *Urban Studies* (Edinburgh, Scotland), 57(11), 2321-2338.

<sup>3</sup>Gabriel, N. (2011). The work that parks do: Towards an urban environmentality. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12(2), 123-141.

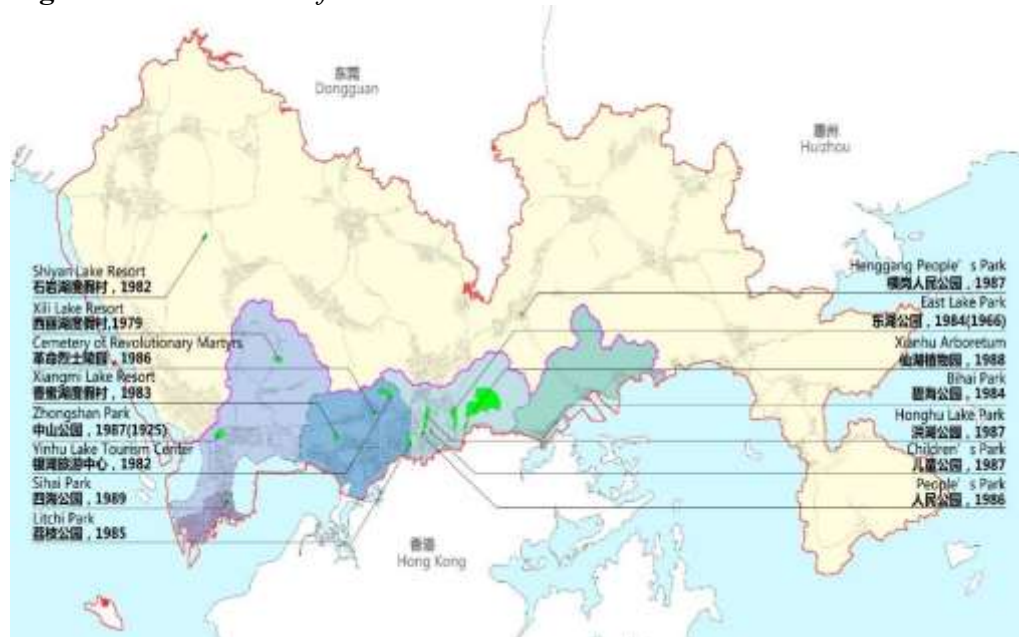
<sup>4</sup>Vogel, E. (1989). *One step ahead in China: Guangdong under reform*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: pp 125.

<sup>5</sup>Conan, M. (1999). *Perspectives on garden histories*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

<sup>6</sup>Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford; Cambridge, Mass.: B. Blackwell.

foundation was trapping in simple labor-intensive industries, and formed a "shop-factory" industrial division of labor with Hong Kong. Such a division of labor is highly dependent on convenient freight transportation with Hong Kong. Therefore, the earliest urban construction of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was carried out in the three areas (Shangbu-Luohu, Shekou-Nantou, Shatoujiao) closest to Hong Kong in terms of traffic. The incipient urban parks basically was constructed correspond with these three areas and they are : Shangbu-Luohu Litchi Park (1985), Honghu Park (1987), Children's Park (1987), People's Park (1986), Donghu Park (1966, 1984), Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery (1987) and Xianhu Botanical Garden (1988); Sihai Park in Shekou (1989); Bihai Park in Shatoujiao (1984). From the perspective of spatial distribution, the construction of urban parks in the 1980s basically kept pace with urban construction. They were mainly located in the second-tier custompass. Except for Henggang People's Park (1987), there were almost no parks outside the second-tier custompass. In terms of site selection, with the exception of Donghu Park which was built around Shigen Mountain, other parks like Sihai Park, Litchi Park, People's Park, Children's Park and other sites are mostly relatively flat farmland with little undulation.

**Figure 1.** *Distribution of Urban Parks in 1980s*



Source: Drawn by the Author.

## Urbanized Nature and its Symbolic Meaning

In the early 1970s, the economic crisis of the capitalist countries made it possible for China to integrate into the world market and thereby boost the domestic economy. However, the lack of foreign exchange reserve in China severely hampered this possibility. In August 1979, the State Council issued the

"Regulations on Several Issues Concerning Vigorously Develop Foreign Trade and Increase Foreign Exchange Income (關於大力發展對外貿易增加外匯收入若干問題的規定)", which clearly stated that "it is necessary to set up a special export zone on a trial basis, and Shenzhen and Zhuhai can conduct a trial run first"<sup>7</sup>. This was the first time the term "special zone" appeared in official policy documents in the 1970s. Obviously, the original intention of establishing the special zone is closely related to "increase foreign exchange earnings".

In the early 1980s, China's economic situation was still worrying. The vigorous construction of the special zone did not mean that the country's resources should be allocated to the construction of this new city. On the contrary, the builders of the special zone needed to "do it by themselves and cut a bloody path"<sup>8</sup>. At this time, under the difficult economic situation, the first batch of urban parks built by the decision-makers of the special zone can of course provide the general public with space for leisure and social functions. However, historical research also needs to focus on other deeper causes in the context of the changing institutional frameworks. The urban construction in the early stage of the establishment of the special zone is very focused on the investment results. The special zone construction and development company (特區建設開發公司) established in Shenzhen in 1980 is mainly responsible for this. Once the development funds cannot be recovered, it will bear the corresponding economic responsibility<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, at least from standpoint of policymakers, if the construction of urban parks is only to serve the citizens without combining the original intention of establishing a special zone, it is obviously not easy to gain approval at various administrative levels.

The exploration of this deep-seated reason can be explained from the study object of the special zone during this period—Singapore, which is also located in East Asia, because one of the key contents of the study at that time was urban construction and urban greening<sup>10</sup>. Before the new millennium, Shenzhen sent three large-scale official delegations to Singapore, two of which were closely related to greening and the construction of an international garden city. After being forced to be independent in 1965, the resource-poor Singapore relied heavily on investment from European and American countries for the development of this city-state, and greening policies such as "Garden City" are

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<sup>7</sup>State Council of the PRC issued 'Regulations on Foreign Trade and the Increase of Foreign Exchange Earnings', 13<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1979, In Wang Z.C. [Ed.], *Comments on the Master Planning of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone* [pp. 662-663]. Press of Chinese Democratic Legal System.

<sup>8</sup>Party Literature Research Center of the CPC Central Committee. (2004). *Deng Xiaoping's chronology (1975-1997)*, Beijing: Central Party Literature Press: pp. 510.

<sup>9</sup>Land and Resources Commission of Shenzhen Municipality. (2010). *Fifteen years of urban planning practice in Shenzhen since the reform and opening up (1980-1995)*. Haitian Press, pp 24.

<sup>10</sup>Luo C.R. (1985). *Methods and Experiences in the Construction of Infrastructure in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone*, In *Infrastructure Construction Office of the People's Government of Shenzhen Municipality* [Ed.], *Experience in the Infrastructure Construction of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone* [pp. 7-11]. Guangzhou: Xinhua Bookstore, Guangdong Province.

the Lee Kuan Yew government's important means to obtain foreign investment for Singapore<sup>11</sup>. During a visit to Singapore in the summer of 1983, the main leaders of Shenzhen strongly recognized their experience in urban greening. Since then, Shenzhen has vigorously promoted relevant experience, set aside 30 meters of Shenzhen's main road as a green belt, set aside an 800-meter green belt from the Shanghai Hotel to Huangmugang, and vigorously built the first batch of urban parks in Shenzhen, etc. These projects are closely related to the visits to Singapore<sup>12</sup>.

In the 1980s, for emerging cities in East Asia such as Shenzhen or Singapore, the quality of the space environment, like other infrastructure, affected the investment confidence and strength of external investors. In this regard, the strategies from Lee Kuan Yew and Vice Mayor Luo Changyan who was in charge of urban construction, are quite coincident. They both took attracting foreign businessmen and meeting their investment needs as the primary orientation of urban construction. Undoubtedly, urban parks do provide citizens with leisure, social, health and other functions. However, when returning to the specific context of East Asia, more important reasons may be overlooked by the general discussion. That is, in the East Asian region in the 1970s and 1980s, at least in Shenzhen and Singapore, creating a good "city impression" and attracting investment from developed countries and regions is more relevant. Urban greening and park construction were also here playing a corresponding political role. As the first "five-year plan" since the establishment of the city, Shenzhen's "Sixth Five-Year Plan" has clarified that the source of funds for the construction of the entire special zone is "mainly relying on the introduction of foreign capital". In Luo Changren's view, "In terms of urban construction... those who mainly supply and serve foreign businessmen... should adopt international standards for construction to meet their needs"<sup>13</sup>; while in Lee Kuan Yew's view, one of his strategies is also to make businessmen and tourists from developed countries use this place as a base for business and tourism in their own region. He believed that in all his plans, greening projects were most cost-effective<sup>14</sup>.

An urban park is not a neutral urban installation, it is an institution that realizes a specific urban ideal<sup>15</sup>. The international division of labor endows developed countries and regions with some kind of dominant power, while developing countries and regions need to take care of the international elites' perception of the environment and space, and the symbolic expression of urban space becomes means and methods. As the urbanized nature, greening, parks

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<sup>11</sup>Yuen, B. (1996). Creating the Garden City: The Singapore Experience. *Urban Studies*, 33(6), 955–970.

<sup>12</sup>Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Research Institute. (2010). *Topics of Reform and Open in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone*, Shenzhen: Haitian Press: pp.279.

<sup>13</sup>Luo C.R. (1987). Do better in Shenzhen's planning work, In Haitian Press [Ed.], *Comments on the Master Planning of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone* [pp. 31-35]. Haitian Press.

<sup>14</sup>National Archives of Singapore. (2015). *Lee Kuan Yew's Governing Strategy*. Beijing: People's Publishing House: pp 101-107.

<sup>15</sup>Yozaburo Shirahata (1995), *A Study of Modern Urban Park History: The Genealogy of Europeanization*, Shibunkaku.

and resorts are all incorporated into the urban process under the corresponding context, making "nature" fit in with its cultural form. They certainly have general practical functions such as civic leisure, socialization, health, etc., but at a more structural level, their symbolic meaning transcends pragmatical functions<sup>16</sup>.

### **Formal Style and its National Expression**

In the early 1980s, for the decision makers of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, they had to take a "cautious" attitude when dealing with the style of those iconic buildings<sup>17</sup>. They intended to design these buildings with both a "sense of the modern" and "national characteristics". During this period, newly built museums, libraries, and even tourist buildings were more or less influenced by "national characteristics" in terms of form and style. Under such a guiding principle, the three most important parks at that time, Donghu Park, Litchi Park and Xianhu Botanical Garden (1988), were designed according to the three traditional Chinese garden styles ——Jiangnan Garden, Lingnan Garden and Northern Garden respectively<sup>18</sup>.

In the 1980s, teachers and students from Beijing Forestry University were mainly responsible for the planning and design of Shenzhen's urban parks. Beijing Forestry University was the only university in the country that offered a major in landscape design. Its history of running the major can be traced back to the "Gardening Group (造園組)" co-organized by the Department of Construction of Tsinghua University (清華大學營建系) and Beijing Agricultural University in the early 1950s. The syllabus they used at that time came from the Leningrad Forest Academy, and this cooperation was approved and suggested by architectural experts from Soviet Union, and it was Liang Sicheng who was working in the Beijing Urban Planning Commission (北京都市規劃委員會) who proposed and promoted the cooperation between the two universities. Liang Sicheng also shouldered another more influential task, which was to integrate the "national form, socialist content" from Soviet architectural theory with traditional Chinese architectural forms. His relevant views were embodied in a series of speeches and articles from 1950-1954, and had a nation-wide impact. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that there is an intellectual connection between the Soviet architectural theory introduced in the context of the "Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship (中蘇友好同盟互助條

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<sup>16</sup>Angelo H. (2020). *How Green Became Good: urbanized nature and the making of cities and citizens*. The University of Chicago Press, pp 28-32.

<sup>17</sup>Zhou D. (1987). *A Review for the Urban Planning and Construction of Shenzhen* In Haitian Press [Ed.], *Comments on the Master Planning of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone* [pp. 12-24]. Haitian Press.

<sup>18</sup>Fang H. (2010). *Shenzhen Landscape Architecture: From the Inheritance of Landscape Architecture Mechanism of China to the Creation of Regional Style: For the Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Founding of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone*. *Landscape Architecture Journal*, (05):70-72.

約)” in the 1950s and the construction of urban parks in the special zone in the 1980s.

In Western discourses on architectural history, “style” has been subdivided into a more and more detailed genealogy by J.N.L. Durand, A. Pugin, and other 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural historians<sup>19</sup>. However, the hidden presupposition of this type of architectural history based on "style" is actually a planning of European modernity on the Nation-state system since the Enlightenment<sup>20</sup>. This modern planning and its hegemonic nature were transplanted to modern China at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Liang Qichao, Luo Zhenyu and other modern Chinese intellectuals therefore believed that a national history must be created in order to create a nation-state. In this context, Liang Sicheng, who aims to "revive the country and the nation", has carried out research on the history of Chinese architecture<sup>21,22</sup>. The cultural concepts of European countries were also formed during the construction of this nation-state system, and are actually conceptual constructions in a specific historical context<sup>23</sup>. When Stalin proposed "national form, socialist content" in 1925, the purpose was to demonstrate "Great Russianism" in an architectural way<sup>24,25</sup>. Similarly, after being introduced into China, this architectural design guiding principle actually reflects the construction of China's power system as an emerging nation-state in the 1950s. In this process, "style" was intertwined together with the Chinese architectural culture and Chinese architectural history under the paradigm of national history. Then, this "national characteristic" was historically manifested in the construction of the special zone in the early 1980s.

Therefore, we also need to respond to the relationship between the construction of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and the nation-state. Shenzhen is indeed a new city, but to excavate the conceptual structure of special zone construction in the depths of history, it needs to be put into the framework of world-China relations since the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>26</sup> ——The Shenzhen Special Economic Zone spearheaded the Chinese's ardent pursuit of modernization, which was a reaction to Western invasion. In addition, many developing countries in East Asia had a history of being more or less

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<sup>19</sup>Kostof, S. (1991). *Culture and the Built Realm, the Limits of Architectural History*. TMs. Lecture Series of College of Architecture and Urban Planning. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

<sup>20</sup>Hsia C.J. (2016). *On heterotopias : Selected essays (I)*. Taipei: Tangshan Press: pp. 182-187.

<sup>21</sup>Levenson, J. (1970). *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and the mind of modern China* (2nd rev. ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press: pp. 114-238.

<sup>22</sup>Liang S.C. & Lin Z. (2007). *The Most Beautiful Architectural Words of Liang Sicheng*. Beijing: China Youth Publishing Group: pp. 30-42.

<sup>23</sup>Wolf, E. (1982). *Europe and the people without history*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>24</sup>Ji G.H. (2007). *The Incursion of Soviet Socialist Realism and Its Influence on China's Architecture in the 1950s*. *Times+ Architecture*. (05):66-71.

<sup>25</sup>Wang Y.S. (2014). *Exploration on the Origin and Evolution of Soviet Architectural Theory "Nation in Form, Socialist in Content"*. *NEW ARCHITECTURE*. (04):91-93.

<sup>26</sup>Feng Y. *Lessons from Shenzhen: Architectural Modernity and the Historical Structure of Chinese Experience*. *Times+ Architecture*. (04):10-13.



dominated by colonizers. Many scholars, including M. Castells, believe that the foundation of their economic rise around the 1970s is a nationalist project — the state is related to many aspects, including the economy. In the context of the economic rise of East Asia, we can understand the relationship between the nation-state power system and the construction of the special zone, and more specifically its relationship with the formal style of Shenzhen's first batch of urban parks in the 1980s. After the new millennium, although the national form of architecture in Shenzhen has not completely disappeared, it has gradually declined<sup>27</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Shenzhen was an experimental field for the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the 1980s. As an important component of national rejuvenation, its urban construction is incorporated into the urban process structured by specific power relations. In this context, the abstract "nature" represented as its cultural form, making parks and greenery in cities as social constructs.

Whether it's learning from Singapore or adopting on the guiding principles from the Soviet Union in planning and design, it shows that they are by no means a romantic and beautiful place in the city far away from the mundane world. The ideas and knowledge which build them should not be understood simply as coming directly from the will of a person or institution, but rather hidden in a tightly interwoven genealogy. At the same time, the historical writing of landscape architecture professionals needs to realize that it is not only Shenzhen that has made these parks, but that these parks have also largely constructed Shenzhen as a network of multiple concepts.

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<sup>27</sup>Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.