Nanhai Food Stories. Edible Explorations of a Place in Transition

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Abstract

Nanhai, in Shandong Province, could be described as either a *new district* (新区) or a *ghost town* (鬼城), depending on whether the focus is on its promises or on its emptiness. Like other similar sites in China, Nanhai is a place in transition, suspended in a liminal space between its rural past and its metropolitan future. While literature on *new* or *ghost* towns in China tends to focus on their urban form (see for example Shepard, 2015), what tends to be forgotten is how people inhabit, shape, and negotiate place. Indeed, liminal places like Nanhai can hardly be described as cities, because they present themselves rather as a fluid combination of village and high-rise lives.

In Nanhai, various communities with different origins, temporalities, and reasons for being there coexist. The food that these communities produce, prepare, and eat can be seen as a marker of social and cultural identities: a way of marking differences but also building connections (Appadurai Arjun, 1981; Lupton, 1996, p. 30). We propose that tracing food patterns, histories, and mobilities can help to capture and appreciate Nanhai, beyond its mere urban form.

This paper presents a *Research through Design* (Frankel & Racine, 2010; Frayling, 1993) approach that seeks to explore and understand the identity of Nanhai through its food stories, and that experiments with ways of sharing these stories through design actions and artefacts. It will introduce a theoretical framework for the proposed approach and discuss how this contribute to debates of transition towards culturally significant sustainable and desirable lifestyles. By describing the outcomes of a recent student exhibition organised as an exploratory first research activity, the paper will present and discuss some example of food story listening and telling (Valsecchi, Pollastri, Tassi, & Chueng-Nainby, 2016). These examples include artefacts such as games and playful packaging that have been designed as a way of making food stories visible and interactive.

Finally, as the first public presentation of a novel research programme, the paper will bring some open questions to the debate on design opportunities for places in transition and will aim to generate further discussion on this topic.

Keywords
Food, urban futures, research through design, ghost cities, China

1. Pasts and Futures. Buildings and Fields

Nanhai (威海南海新区) is a new and under-development district of Weihai in the easternmost tip of the Shandong peninsula. Most of the population of Weihai city is concentrated in the county-level district of Huancui (环翠区), which hosts the local government institutions and most economic and cultural attractions, and is separated from Nanhai by several kilometres of hills, villages, and open fields. Newcomers as well as locals hardly do think of Nanhai as an integral part of Weihai city, but rather as a distinct and fairly isolated sprawl, still for the most part under construction.

As both Cox (2014) and Shepard (2015) remind us, in fact, the word "city" (市) in China has a purely administrative meaning. It identifies prefectures that include urban conurbations, densely populated centres, but also –and for the most part– large rural areas. Most cities in China predominantly rural regions, rather than densely populated metropolitan areas. This, of course, may be obvious to most Chinese readers, but this broader meaning of the word tends to mislead scholars and other readers who are not familiar with Chinese politics and land administration.

Until about a decade ago, the area where Nanhai now sits was almost entirely occupied by agricultural fields and a network of villages of farmers and fishermen. Traces of destroyed or disappearing villages can be found in Nanhai's toponyms: Wanjiazhai village, Boluodao village, Sunjiazhai village are now names of bus stops and neighbourhoods of high-rises and well-manicured parks. Since the issuing of the 2011 "Shandong Peninsula Blue Economic Zone Development Plan", in fact, the area has been subjected to intensive urbanisation, with the aim of creating a comprehensive business district, an industrial zone, and a seaside resort area for tourists coming from cities in the inland and looking for fresh air and white beaches (wendeng.gov.cn, 2017). Several of the building complexes that are being built are in fact holiday rentals or hotels. Newly constructed high-rise apartment blocks also host the relocated farmers from the villages that are being destroyed, as Weihai government plans to urbanize the 70% if its rural population by 2020 (Qilu yi dian, 2017).

Like most of Shandong, Nanhai has a long and well-respected agricultural tradition, and shares with other communities along the coast the largest production of seafood in the Country. Yet, because of the scale of the recent urbanisation projects, this heritage is almost hidden within the 'ghost city'.

1.1. Ghost Towns

The term *ghost towns* (*or ghost cities*) usually described new, large developments that are occupied significantly below capacity, "drastically fewer people and businesses than there is an available space for" (Shepard, 2015). While there are many historical reason that could turn an urban area into a "ghost city", in China the formation of ghost towns (鬼城) is often due to the development of new city areas. The significant scale and pace at which these new developments are being built (but not yet occupied) is captured by Jin et al. (2017) in their analysis of emerging geographical data.

As an emerging phenomenon, ghost towns of China are still ill defined, but are being documented by Chinese as well as international scholars and media. Most descriptions of ghost towns that are available to the international audience,

however, tend to focus on their urban form and planning processes, and on their lack of people, business, culture, and activities (Shepard, 2015), rather than on the ways of living and place-making activities.

1.2. Living in Nanhai

The authors of this paper have been spending, over the past year, several months in Nanhai, teaching at the newly established International Campus of Beijing Jiaotong University. The Campus, which opened to the first cohorts of students in 2015, currently hosts about 700/1000 students (rising to up to 5000 when the campus will run at full capacity) and members of teaching and administrative staff. All of the students live on campus – as it is customary in most Chinese universities – while most of the teaching staff (including the authors) live in apartment buildings in town.

Figure 1. BJTU Campus in Weihai. The high-rise buildings on the left have been left unfinished and are currently abandoned (Image source: www.lancaster.ac.uk)

2. Edible Encounters in Nanhai

The importance of food as a medium for a deep understanding of place is evident in the way in which newcomers and local inhabit Nanhai. While ghost cities are often described for their emptiness, in this paper we argue that looking at food practices may help us capture the overlooked culinary, cultural, social, and agricultural richness and diversity of places like Nanhai.
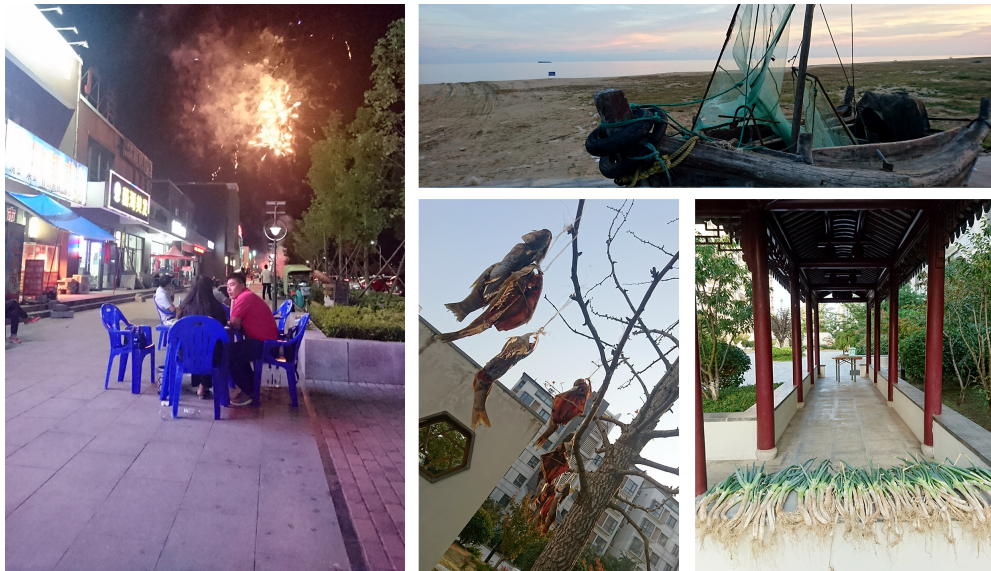

Figure 2. Encountering food in Nanhai: sitting at the outside table at a Sichuan restaurant (while fireworks are used for a local celebration); a fisherman's boat by the beach; fish and leeks being left out to sun dry in the courtyard of an apartment block.

The way in which food shapes Nanhai can be experienced by taking the time to explore the more established neighbourhoods, the courtyards of newly built apartment complexes, the beaches, the markets, as well as the sprawling food deserts. As the city takes place, in fact, migrant from mostly Shaanxi, Sichuan, Gansu province establish small family restaurant. These often offer a mix of traditional regional and local cuisine, making use of the fresh fish from the region. Next to the local supermarket, the farmers' market takes place in the old villages that still survive in the shadows of the new developments, and is scheduled according to the lunar calendar. Former farmers, now living in apartment blocks, still grow or (acquire otherwise) corn, nuts, vegetables, and fruit, which are left out to dry in the sun during the summer. On the beach fishermen sell the daily catch, either in the fish market or directly from their boats.

But as the development of Nanhai proceeds in phases, miles and miles of roads, fields, and empty blocks separate the neighbourhoods, limiting the access to services and produce for those who live in newly urbanised but still mostly inhabited areas. Some of the students at the BJTU campus were astonished at the number of people and shops they encountered during their first trip to the local farmers market. Up until that moment, they said, they thought Nanhai was entirely just as empty as the neighbourhood where the University is located. The relationship between food and cities is in fact mutual. On the one hand, urban environments and infrastructures have a strong influence on food production and consumption practices (Steel, 2013). On the other hand the food produced, moved, prepared, eaten contributes to shaping the city and its identity.

Food and identity are tightly connected, particularly in places and situations where the presence of migrant communities is significant. Here food practices (cooking, eating, drinking, selling, growing and consuming) play a role in building new social ties and cultural identities, but also separate from other groups (see Bonnerjee et al. 2012). For this reason, we propose that understanding food and food-related practices can be a way of understanding the ways in which cities are formed and lived. This is particularly relevant for ghost cities, whose transient identities are much more complex and diverse than one may expect from their rows of identical empty apartment blocks.

This paper presents a first experiment in using design as a story-listening and story-telling approach (Valsecchi et al., 2016) to explore, understand, and communicate the multiple identities of Nanhai through the encounters with its food stories.

2.1. Encountering

Encounters in Nanhai, are mostly encounters of the half way, of the middle tones, of in between-ness, of transition itself. These are encounters that challenge dichotomies and singular, fixed coordinates, at various levels.

A place in between, as explained in the previous section, Nanhai is a place in transition between its rural past and its metropolitan future.

The authors of this paper live for part of the year in Nanhai, and part of the year somewhere else (Lancaster, UK or Beijing). In a sense, we are searching and researching Nanhai while ourselves in transition. The people we encounter are also in transition: adapting to and adapting the place to make it their own; either because they are also in transit (other university colleagues and students), or because they are new to Nanhai, just establishing (themselves and Nanhai) from other parts of China, or because they are locals trying to adapt (themselves and Nanhai) to the new urban shapes that are growing at fast speed, replacing their villages. Conversations and attempts at understanding are half way between language and mimicry, half way between Chinese and English.

More importantly encounters in Nanhai force pulling in other directions the polarizing political and epistemological debates and the myriad layers of realities within them (Mol 1999); of the neoliberalism of the Global North and Chinese Liberalism (David Tyfield (2017) calls it Liberalism 2.0). Both political projects are built upon systems of knowledge that are not just political but include market, values and ethical systems. Encounters at Nanhai catalyse a constant interrogation of both systems, not just at the theoretical level, but at a level that troubles the personal and what it means to know, to search, to research and to design. We are making of this transition not just a modest in-betweeness, but a transgressive critical mode of becoming with the not-yetness (Ross and Collier, 2016).

Using design to investigate *food-stories*, to focus on creative practices of the quotidian, was not a coincidental choice for study but a 'way of operating' (in the sense of de Certeau, 1998) within encounters of not-yetness at Nanhai. At the core, we aim to draft a framework that articulates the relationship that their strangeness has with familiarity, at the same time, searches for ways to access the everyday that 'holds us intimately, from the inside', the 'history at the halfway point of ourselves' (Certeau, 1998, 3 p.p), but also a way to explore designerly methods that allow for 'unveiling' (ibid.) critical transactions of not-yetness and simultaneous articulations of the spaces of 'resistances' that within the grid pattern of functionalist planners (paraphrasing again de Certeau (133 p.p), sprang up from a stubborn past. Food-stories in this sense, is an explorative framework for accessing, sharing and creating new knowledges.

3. Nanhai Food Stories – a Design Education Experiment

As in most design courses, the curriculum of the double degree taught at the Lancaster University/ Beijing Jiaotong University includes several studio-based modules in which students are invited to apply, in group projects, the design skills and theoretical framework acquired in other parts of the degree. The purpose of each studio is generally double: to develop abductive thinking skills for creative concept development, but also to present students with complex issues, and explore with them the role(s) that design may perform.

In the Spring Semester of 2018, students and lecturers explored together in a studio environment the food stories of Nanhai through a *Research through Design* approach (Frankel & Racine, 2010; Frayling, 1993) adopted with a pedagogical aim.

3.1. The theme
"Nanhai Food Stories" was the title and theme of the 2018 Spring Semester Design Studio. At the beginning of the semester students were asked to "design a way to bring a 'food-story' to the campus".

The project was divided into two main phases, with students working in groups of five for each phase:

1. **Exploring Nanhai and its food offering.** Students were sent out in different locations to discover local food and interview people around it. After the initial fieldtrip, students were asked to select one dish or product and research it in its context. Students were suggested to start from basic desk research, but were encouraged to go back to the place where the food was first discovered, to listen to the stories and experiences of producers, cooks and consumers. At the end of this activity students were asked to identify a meaningful "food-story" to bring to campus.

2. **Telling food stories through design.** Groups designed and prototyped packaging ideas, games, and services that could bring the food stories to campus. Each group developed one short documentary about the food they chose, one prototype of their concept, and one poster describing the main features of their idea, as well as their research and design process.

These artefacts (videos, prototypes, and posters) were showcased in a week-long exhibition on campus.

The reason for choosing "food-stories" as the theme of the studio was mainly related to the importance of food in Chinese culture (as remarked in earlier sections), the disconnection between local culture and the newly built university campus, and the potential of small scale design actions to contribute (in modest but meaningful ways) in bridging cultural and physical divides (see for example Lou, Valsecchi, & Diaz, 2013). As advocates of research-led teaching, we wanted to invite our students to experience a complex design and research process in a way that could be meaningful and relevant to them and their context, but that also encouraged them to develop their own design interests and perspectives within the multiplicity of potential themes and relations that working on food stories and encounters in Nanhai could elicit.

3.2. Exploring Nanhai Food Stories through Ethnography

Figure 3. Students conducting ethnographic research at the market.

The project involved a 3-week stage of critical design ethnography in its broader

sense (Barab et al., 2004; Crabtree, Rouncefield and Tolmie, 2012). Inspired by de Certeau and Giard's (1998) study of everyday life, the field work focussed on three interrelated organising cultural practices: *orality*, *operativity* and the *quotidian*. *Orality* is considered as the medium to relate with the other and the principal space for place-making. *Operativity*, beyond the purely informational, pays attention to the social-materials gestures, strokes, manipulations, tools that operate cultural information into the more-than-human living experience. The *quotidian* or ordinary refers to system of values and functioning of particular codes of those who practice operativity; what is important and why, the role of myth and tradition, and the inherited ways of operation of the "right here and now". The search for quotidian is paradoxical, as the only way of making sense of it, is by becoming an outsider to the values, even temporarily and for the means of the search, or what Issacs (2012) called 'finding the hidden obvious'.

With the idea of capturing in images and voice, students visited the local street market and local small restaurants of Nanhai, with the double intention of finding orality, operativity and the quotidian of food practices, journeys and identities that encounter Nanhai, but also to experience and reflect on their own role as mediators of food-stories and what that would mean. Regarding the latter, we discussed together ideas and problematics of: presentation and representation as *othering* (Sontag, 1966; Fabian, 1990, Dervin, 2012), mapping multiple humans and non-humans (Galloway, 2016), empathy and distancing of the ethnographers (Galloway, 2018) and the interplay of economic and political investments, cultural imaginaries and material sites (Suchman, 2011) of food practices and their agency at shaping place.

3.3. Telling stories through games and playful packaging

Towards the end of the ethnographic immersion in Nanhai, students found themselves looking for ways for not only communicating the compelling stories they discovered, but also make sense of the complexity of relationships they unveiled within the apparent stillness of the "ghost city". Students were encouraged to explore different ways in which design could help dealing with this complexity, through the use of – for example – information visualization artefacts, product-

service systems, instruction manuals, objects, etc. Interestingly, the six groups all chose to introduce distinct elements of play or playfulness in their design, and to use these as a way of enabling user to experience encounters with food in Nanhai and showing stories that cannot be told only by words.

Historically, play and games have been studied in a myriad of ways, from economists using game-like simulations to literary theorists studying the 'play' of meaning in language and literature. Within processes of research through design, game and playful artefacts can be used as methods for accessing complexity and for sharing knowledges, by allowing for representations that are loyal to the dynamism and entelechy of systems.

The three board games designed in the studio all sought to use the mechanics of the game to immerse the players in the food or produce stories, and encourage them to explore these stories from the inside rather than observe them from a distance. One game (*Adventures of Sea Worm*) told the story of a famous East Shandong delicacy, the sea worm: a type of marine worm that lives in the sands of the local beaches. The group of students designed a large-scale game, in which players moved on the board as either the sea worm (trying to survive and reproduce in a hostile environment) or the chef (who would try to get to the sea worm). Through the game, players were presented with the environmental threats brought by large urbanization to the habitat of the worm, while also being explained the characteristics of its life cycle. *Gourd* and *The Great Food Adventure* were also board games that told stories. With *Gourd,* students dealt with the multiplicity of meanings, uses, and stories of the gourd in China: a vegetable that is used as spoon, toy, music instrument, food, vessel, ornament, and much more. Through the board game, players could discover the various uses and stories of Chinese gourds, while experiencing some of these uses themselves, as the game packaging and pieces are all made of gourds and other natural materials. *The Great Food Adventure* is a less traditional game, in that it is a game that is impossible to play without a game master, who acts as a storyteller. The game focusses on the *jianbing*, a staple street food in Shandong province, and interweaves recipes, history and legends within the game. In this game facts and

myths are presented next to each other by the game master, so that playing becomes a way of spending time with stories.

Figure 3 playing "Adventures of Sea Worm" at the Nanhai Food Stories Exhibition

Figure 4 Students and visitors of Nanhai Food Stories exhibition playing **"Gourd"**

Figure 5 Playing "The Great Food Adventure" with the Game Master

Two groups chose to design a packaging for the products they chose. The box of the *Salt Sea Duck Egg*, a local recipe for preserving the eggs of seafood-eating ducks, hides a series of pop-up illustrations describing the history of the produce as well as its modes of production. In the extensive research project preliminary to design of the box, this group followed the entire line of production of the eggs, but decided to leave most of the information discovered through this process to the documentary that was produced as part of the projects. The packaging itself was instead designed as a first point of playful discovery of some of the richness of the produce and an invitation to tasting it. *Precious* is also a playful packaging that folds and unfold to reveal stories, in this case of jewelry that the students designed with oyster's shell. The box opens like a shell, but when it is open it resembles a fisherman's boat, and it reveals fables written by the students.

Figure 6 Opening a pop-up box of Salt Sea Duck Eggs

Figure 7 "Precious": oyster jewelry in a playful packaging

Finally, a group investigating the practice of making and buying steamed buns *(baozi)* in the market, decided to design a service, called *Baozi King*, for local vendors, migrant from other parts of China, and international students to meet and make baozi together, adapting the recipe to everyone's personal taste and traditions. The service, which was designed to be situated in the market, was

presented at the exhibition through a prototype that invited visitors to play with shapes, tools and ingredients for making baozi.

Figure 8 Playing with food at the "Baozi King" station

4. Dealing with the complexity of the ghost city through food, design, and play.

The experience of leading the studio was, for the authors, not only a teaching experience, but also a laboratory to reflect, together with the students, on the complexities and temporalities of the ghost city. When doing so, it is easy to get caught in the paradoxes of the *'wicked problems'* (Rittel & Webber, 1973): those that we must try to understand but that cannot ultimately be 'solved'. Thus, this experience gave us plenty of time and opportunities to engage in discussions on what may our role as designers be in this both complex and complicated context. We argue that one contribution that design might bring may consist of interventions

that unveil and amplify cultural and social richness that permeate places like Nanhai. In their playful stories of food encounters, our students offered compelling examples of how one might do so through games, playing, and immersion. According to Huizinga (1944), playfulness is not limited to games. In his *Homo Ludens*, he explored elements of play as material, aesthetic and ethical organising mechanisms in society. For Huizinga, all play moves, and has its players, within a 'play ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course'; a 'consecrated spot' (9-10 p.p) The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, the medical or military operating theatre, are all giving form and informing functioning playgrounds, forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All of them are temporary worlds within the ordinary world dedicated to the performance of an act apart from it. Inside the playground an absolute and peculiar order reigns, it creates order, *is* an order. This dynamic order within an order has been called by Zimmerman and Salen (2003) 'the magic circle'.

Stripping away the genre differences and the technological complexities, all games share four defining traits: a goal, rules, a feedback system and voluntary participation. The goal is the specific outcome that players will work to achieve. It focuses their attention and continually orients participation providing a sense of purpose that activates the flow of the game mechanics. The rules place limitations on how players can achieve the goal, stablishing what is called the economy of game play. Rules unleash creativity and foster strategic thinking. The feedback system or mechanics tells players how close they are to achieving the goal. It can take the form of points, levels, a score, or a progress bar. Finally, voluntary participation requires that everyone who is playing the game knowingly and willingly accepts the goal, the rules, and the feedback. Knowingness establishes common ground for multiple people to play together. Games are ultimately dependent upon knowing participation; without this, they cease to be games at all, in a way participation and the lip of trust that it implies is the 'magic' of the magic circles. To design a playful artefact, is to design for deep interaction. In the case of multiple players, the game space and the possibility of play worlds multiply the

possibilities of interactions and affections for collaboration.

Creating games and playfulness, is designing for artefacts that catalyse
collaborative world-building: playing with a world within a world in which to
rehearse alternative presents and plausible futures (Bleecker, 2009; Coulton,
2015). The game communicates tensions, conflicts and frictions and offers the
experience of temporality, negotiating them in the economy of the playworld.
Playing worlds may result in artefacts that can appear subversive and irreverent in
nature (Coulton et al. 2016), however they can also be effective tools to instigate
conversations and creative thinking on complex issues otherwise too difficult to
approach, especially in a context of conflicting perspectives.
In the case of student projects, the task was to put research examples in motion to
create situations that offered (offline) interactions to instigate conversations,
reflections and personifications beyond the written or audio-visual document.
Playfullness in their design process helped access, capture, unpack, and share
food stories of Nanhai, and with them the encounters and continuous negotiations
that are at play in the ghost town.

4. Macro Issues and Micro Actions.

This paper presented an experience of looking at ghost cities at the *macro* as well
as at the *micro* level. 'Nanhai food-stories' project aimed, in fact, at discovering
everyday life in town and make food stories tangible and interactive at the *micro*
level, while at the same time connecting them with important *macro* scale issues of
places in transition.
Visions of future Nanhai that can be found on roadside billboards or promotional
messages focus on promises of futures that are built on blank canvases. Until
these plans are fulfilled, it is easy to look at cities like Nanhai as *ghost towns.*
In ghost towns, the spatial capacity is over-supplied, and activities are deadly
needed to meet the surplus capacity. On the other hand, there are many examples
of long standing tradition, creative solutions, and small-scale innovations
conducted by citizens themselves in everyday practices of urbanism. Discovering
food-stories through design and story-listening has been for us a way of amplifying

some of these practices. And our students taught us that play and games can have an important role in urban matters, as they can be important catalysts for engaging with complex dynamics.

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