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# Infrastructures of Permanence and Deserted Architecture in China

Tim Oakes

"What was this place?" I ask my friend Li Jie.[1] We pull over to the side of the highway, curious about a collection of new buildings that has caught our eye as we drive by. Li squints through the car windshield. "Just some shopping street," he says. "Hard to tell. It's never been opened." Two rows of buildings – recently constructed in a vaguely traditional style – guard a brick-paved pedestrian street. Shops stand empty behind dusty glass. Weeds push up between the bricks. Piles of rubble lay scattered about. The place is deserted. "Another ghost mall," Li snorts. "They pop up practically overnight." He guides his sedan back onto the highway, the abandoned mall disappearing behind us. "And die just as quickly."

Li Jie and I are driving around the sprawling grid of empty roads in Gui'an New Area (贵安新区), a state-level economic, technical, and ecological development zone in southwest China's Guizhou province. It is a hot summer day in 2019. Our route takes us along the 33 kilometer length of Qianzhong Avenue (黔中大道), one of the first major roads to be opened in the New Area. Gui'an claims a vast swath of land – hills, valleys, and plains – just to the west of the provincial capital of Guiyang, an area more than twice the size of Hong Kong. Most of Gui'an is still fields, forests, and villages. But a

neat and tidy lattice of broad, straight new roads has been laid down in the core area. They promise opportunity, and wealth to come. But the flurry of state investment that paid for the roads has since subsided, leaving it up to local investors to conjure up the wealth. Responding to the government's hurry-and-build-it approach, entrepreneurs have lined Qianzhong Avenue with ghost developments: empty resorts, theme parks, hotels, and shopping malls. Many of these buildings seem to have become dilapidated even before Qianzhong Avenue was completed. Their abandonment is all the more striking when viewed from the meticulously landscaped road. Unlike the fallow farm fields and failed entrepreneurial ventures beyond the guard rails, the road itself is lovingly cared for and its verges kept in a permanent state of floral splendor.

***Straight, flat and wide: the infrastructure of promise.***
Photo: Tim Oakes, 2018.

A few more kilometers along Qianzhong Avenue we come upon an empty Swiss Town, slowly falling into ruin. Visitors, like Li Jie and me, still come to take pictures and kick at the weeds. Villagers from nearby park their barbecue carts along the roadside, ready to feed us, since none of the restaurants in Swiss Town have ever opened. Across the road is a scenic resort and ecological park with a lake and a baroque French-style chateau available for event rental. Farther along, an entire village has been converted into a virtual reality theme park. There are a few visitors, but most of the attractions are shut down, waiting in suspension until the promised masses of tourists arrive. Near an expansive resort hotel, we stumble upon what first looks like a vast temple complex. All the new buildings are padlocked. Manufactured plum and cherry trees, permanently in bloom with their plastic flowers, frame an empty plaza. The complex is anchored by a folk culture museum, also padlocked. A few workers joke around

***Roadside vendors, Swiss Town***
Photo: Tim Oakes, 2019.

***Abandoned pedestrian shopping street.***
Photo: Tim Oakes, 2019.

paid to do nothing but watch the dust gather. “When will this place open?” I ask one of them. “It is open!” she replies. “Not so many visitors today,” she adds with a shrug.

Rem Koolhaas once claimed that Chinese cities are full of buildings designed on table-top. “Not only is there an incredible speed of design and construction,” he wrote, “but almost every building will change its program before construction is finished” (Koolhaas 2000: 332). Buildings come and go. What remains is the grid of new roads and highways that makes them possible. Sometimes it seems that the only thing that matters in Gui’an is the roads. One map fancifully imagines the New Area as nothing more than a tangled knot of roads. For Koolhaas, the grid was not built in response to an existing need; rather, it was aspirational and predictive. “If you take one of the off-ramps, you won’t necessarily arrive anywhere.” Instead, the road is meant to trigger a “future urban situation” (ibid.). Maybe this is why such roads convey a kind of permanence in comparison to precarious and whimsical developments they spawn. This permanence is conveyed in both spatial and temporal ways.


***Map depicting Gui’an as a tangled knot of roads.***
Source: Wang 2019: 65.

Spatially, the road creates a new kind of territory, one that is unambiguously of the state. Matthäus Rest and Alessandro Rippa (2019) point out that roads are central to the state's enactment of territorial integrity. Roads are how the state is imagined by its citizens. This explains the meticulousness with which Qianzhong Avenue is maintained. Every day a small army of well-paid villagers in matching bright orange vests and straw cone hats is out gardening the road: trimming shrubs, planting new flowers, pulling weeds, removing trash. Their labor sharpens the division between the road as a state space, and the fields and villages through which it passes as the leftover spaces of another era, abandoned and awaiting demolition. The ghost malls and decaying theme parks sprout up like weeds in these residual zones. They are ventures that cling to the state and its promise of development as materialized in the road. But they are not of the state, and so they are left to their own devices. Some will succeed, while most wither and die.

Yet the grid of new roads in Gui'an also territorializes the land by dividing it up into abstract and equivalent pieces, as if graph paper had been laid over the rumpled karst topography of Guizhou. Previously, rural settlements and market towns were governed through dendritic networks of connection: hierarchical systems of progressively more local roads, lanes, and pathways following streams, valleys, and low points between hills. These have been replaced by what Leonardo Ramondetti (2020: 32) calls an "equipotential" surface, where each section of land becomes equivalent as a resource for future wealth generation. That one section might be hilly while the other is flat is no longer a problem. The hills are quickly leveled. Yet the surface remains uneven. New industrial clusters – such as the one containing a Foxconn server plant where thousands of villagers now work – are nourished by the road, whereas the entrepreneurial ventures carved out of the New Area's leftover spaces are not.

One might think then that the newness of the road would be its defining temporal quality. And of course this is how most of the residents in the area do experience life along Qianzhong Avenue. It has upended their world with newness: they no longer farm, many no longer travel to labor in distant cities, instead choosing to work at Foxconn or in a precarious new venture. The road has either demolished their villages or turned them into beautified leisure resorts. But as the uncertainty and changeability of their new lives is reflected in the impermanent architectures being built up alongside the road, the road itself takes on a kind of permanence.

Guizhou is a mountainous plateau region infamous for its historical impenetrability. Roads are heroic here. An oft-repeated quote comes from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) traveler Xu Xiake, who wrote in consternation shortly after entering Guizhou early in the seventeenth century: "there are so many mountains here, if you want to build a road, the first thing you see in front of you is another mountain!" (Wang 2019: 64). For centuries, Guizhou's few roads were slow, winding, ponderous. And this fact makes today's expressways all the more monumental – their magnificent bridges and tunnels render Guizhou's formidable terrain as little more than scenery. This is also part of the road's territorializing effect as a kind of state space. The promise of Qianzhong Avenue lies precisely in its contempt for the landscape upon which it has been laid, a contempt expressed by its straightness, flatness, and the sheer waste of space in its eight-lane width.

***Rice husk Pyramids of Giza.***
Photo: Tim Oakes, 2019.

For the Guizhou writer Wang Jianping (Wang 2019), Qianzhong Avenue connects past and future in a single narrative thread, linking Xu Xiake to China's rise as a global infrastructural superpower. But its exuberant roadside attractions offer a far less coherent narrative. Not far from the empty culture museum and shopping street, Li Jie and I find ourselves strolling around a former rice paddy. It has been turned into a collection of miniature world monuments, all built from plastic strips meant to look like dried rice husks. There is a Roman Coliseum, a Sydney Opera House, the Pyramids of Giza. They are charming in their way but already falling apart: a moment of uncertain direction as villagers work out what to do with the fields they no longer farm. One villager later tells me, "that little theme park, it will be gone next year." Hannah Appel has remarked that infrastructure is futurity and deferral all at the same time: "Regularly unfinished, and often faulty, new construction is haunted by abandonment" (2018: 45). So, part of what explains these attractions is simply the urge to build as much as possible before a new "infrastructure time" inevitably sets in, a coming era of "dwindling resources, fleeing foreign capital, decommission and abandonment, of ruins" (Appel 2018: 54). In Gui'an, it seems this new time has already arrived. Qianzhong Avenue's roadside attractions are testament to the road's promise and to its simultaneous abandonment.

**Notes:**

[1] A pseudonym.

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