



## What authenticity does: On fake spaces and real emotions

Francesca Piazzoni, 15 December 2020

Thames Town, a British-themed village on the outskirts of Shanghai, attracts residents and tourists with its gothic-like church, red phone boxes, and statues of Winston Churchill and Princess Diana. What is “real” in a quintessentially “fake” place like Thames Town? Does thinking through these categories even make sense? Who gets to live and visit Thames Town, and who does not? Judgements of what is “real” versus what is “fake” are elusive, to say the least. But the values people associate with these judgements carry concrete social, economic, and political implications.

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Were we to be asked whether we prefer something – anything – to be “real” or “fake,” most of us would pick the former with little hesitation. We all like the prospect of engaging with authentic people, places, and things. But what it means to be authentic is ambiguous. Scholars have tried to pin down an answer for years. Throughout the 20th century, debates evolved from understanding authenticity as a fixed material property, an originality that objects either have or do not have, to a context-dependent quality that essentially relies upon the eyes of the beholder.

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Thinking of authenticity as a relationship among people, meanings, and places helps reveal its spatial implications. It helps understand how ideas of “the authentic” affect the production of landscapes, enabling geographies of exclusion and insurgency.



The spatial politics of authenticity writ large in a place like Thames Town. Built within the “1 city 9 towns” Shanghai’s city plan (2000–2005), this British-themed village is far from an isolated case. It resonates with many other residential environments themed after Western regions that mushroomed in China from the mid-1990s, when urbanisation fuelled the country’s transition to a market economy, and owning one, if not multiple houses became a must for many. While the government prompted developers to stop producing imitative urbanisations in May 2020, “simulacra-scapes” and “copycat architectures,” as scholars have called them, continue to attract residents and visitors.

The fabricated authenticity of Thames Town serves as a rhetorical as well as a physical means of segregation. Around the open-access themed core, gated residential clusters include condos, townhouses, and villas packaged with names like “Windsor Island” and “Kensington Gardens.” Guards in scarlet-coloured uniforms stand in front of the black-and-gold wrought-iron gates of each compound. From the village streets, views on the much denser residential districts that surround Thames Town make the picturesque village stand out. Many residents I interviewed referred to this striking distinction as a mark of their own prestige: their ability to live in a British town distinguishes them from those who can only hope to visit. Inside homes, residents construct their own authentic Britishness. Some furnish rooms to convey idealised Western atmospheres; others decorate their homes in sharp contrast to the British theme, for example, by crafting quintessentially “Chinese” interiors.

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Tourists swarm from Songjiang and Shanghai just to visit Britain for a day. Cafes and restaurants cater to their expectations by offering “English breakfasts” and “pancake menus.” A Disney-esque trolley bus ferries visitors across the village. But the wedding-photo business is what drives most visitors (and profits) to the town. Future brides and grooms crowd streets and squares to have their portraits taken a few months before their wedding ceremonies. Professional photographers depict them against different backgrounds, according to which landscape best suits the couple’s matching, eclectic outfits (from fairy tale prince and princess and Mao’s Red Guards to American newlyweds). And if some regret not being able to afford travelling to the “real” Europe, others see Thames Town’s artificiality as a diversion that adds to—rather than detracts from—their wedding experience.



But Thames Town does not leave room for those who cannot afford to consume it. Like many other residential districts throughout China, the British village counts about a half of its properties vacant (with most homes owned, but not necessarily occupied). Construction work is carried out by migrant workers who remain in town for a few months, living in the units they work on. Affluent, “formal” residents tend to ignore – if not despise – their “informal”, itinerant co-villagers. Some, for example, ask guards to prevent migrant workers from hanging out in front of buildings within their residential compounds. And guards remove them from the public spaces of the themed core, where workers are regarded as a visual disturbance to the photo industry.

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The British theme quite literally pushes migrant workers outside of the themed core, to the margins of the wealthy compounds. At the same time, however, the crafted authenticity of Thames Town enables other dynamics that disrupt dominant expectations of who is entitled to be in the village. Brides and grooms who cannot afford to pay an established wedding salon, for example, hire small-budget photographers and use streets as rehearsal rooms. Sidewalks serve as places to change clothes, eat, and often sleep between photo-shoots. These do-it-yourself couples move constantly, so as not to get caught by guards who push them away from front-shops and crowded streets (only to let them move a few metres away).

In spite of the residents' efforts, migrant workers too enplace their own geographies by asserting a right to use and produce a city, no matter how crafted. Provisional kitchens appear at the entrances of buildings where migrant workers informally reside. During the evenings, areas in front of the gates become markets where migrant workers, guards and taxi drivers exchange fresh produce. Some migrants purposely flout the unwritten rules of Thames Town. While most official residents avoid the impropriety of hanging their washing out of the window (a habit they consider not British), some workers consciously break this doxa to remind affluent inhabitants that they live in the town too.

What Thames Town demonstrates is not simply that authenticity is a complex and opaque category, but also that it facilitates exclusion as well as unanticipated geographies. These geographies disrupt dominant ideas of what – and who – is appropriate, making visible other, insurgent urbanisms.



*Yragaäl* by Philippe Druillet, 1971

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The production of authentic landscapes continues to exclude marginalised groups. From “historic” downtowns and “original” gentrifying neighbourhoods, to “ethnic” enclaves themed after an essentialised, “exotic other,” hegemonic constructions of the authentic continue to oppress those who do not look authentic enough. Making space for these groups to emplace their needs and emotions can help empower them to break crafted landscapes of power and assert their right to the city.

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## About the author

Francesca Piazzoni is a Lecturer at the University of Liverpool, School of Architecture. Her research explores the politics of public space with a focus on design justice, insurgent urbanisms, and critical heritage. A licensed architect, Francesca started interrogating authenticity by practicing preservation in Italy, Lithuania, and China, where she designed several “fake” towns herself. These experiences translated into a book titled *The Real Fake: Authenticity and the Production of Space* (Fordham University Press, 2018).