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Spatial Agency for Migrant Workers:
Rethinking the Dynamics of Urban Villages in China

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ABSTRACT

“Throughout history, expanding cities have always run over villages, hamlets, estates, gardens, and soft elements that constitute the countryside, the domain that hosts agriculture and nature.” Urban Villages, essentially a composite of these “soft” elements, remained as one of the hardest anchors among the residual or by-product in China’s urban development.

Until 1985, the Pearl River Delta region had been mainly dominated by farms and small rural villages. The onset of economic reform and the open-door policy brought an influx of foreign investment which fueled the unstoppable train of urbanization. Rapid urbanization let to the formation of Urban Villages, a contested space between urban and rural land. Conflicts between different constituents of these spaces start to emerge.

In the view of city government, urban villages are illegal constructions rather than a part of the city’s fabric. They are often considered an urban pathology that is incompatible to the city’s modernity. Thus, the complex power structure within the debate of urban villages is often misconstrued and misunderstood as the dichotomy between city government and indigenous villagers. However, the migrant workers, the most vulnerable group who relies heavily on urban villages’ informal housing are often neglected and ignored by planners and architects. Therefore, there is an opportunity to dissect the urban landscape from an alternative point of view: finding spatial agencies for migrant workers.

The project focuses on researching urban villages within the Pearl River Delta region of China. The research strives to identify and understand the constituents at play and their respective spatial agencies and find possible interventions in both conventional and non-conventional design method that would start generating spatial agencies for migrant workers.
BACKGROUND

Pearl River Delta:

The focus of this research is on the Pearl River Delta region of the People’s Republic of China, one of the most economically dynamic regions of the country since the launch of China’s economic reform in 1979.

Over the past 30 years, the PRD has become a megalopolis consist of metropolises such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Dongguan. According to the World Bank Group, the PRD has become the largest urban area in the world in both size and population.¹

Behind the staggering economic achievement is the world’s factory that manufactures products such as electronic devices, textiles, garments, and a wide range of other goods.

Until 1985, the PRD had been mainly dominated by farms and small rural villages. The onset of economic reform and the open door policy brought an influx of foreign investment which fueled the unstoppable train of urbanization. Rapid urbanization led to the formation of Urban Villages, a contested space between urban and rural land. Conflicts between different constituents of these spaces start to emerge. Among them, the most pressing concern is the absence of viable, affordable housing solutions in most major cities. If cities continue on the course of force land expropriation and village gentrification, soon millions of migrant workers and city newcomers face the imminent threat of being homeless.

WHAT IS A URBAN VILLAGE?

- Urban villages are the unusual products of rapid urbanization through land expropriation.

Different from the western planning concept of the “urban village”, which refers to a village style neighborhood in the urban context of western countries. These villages are developed from rural settlements and become transitional neighborhoods under rapid urbanization. The urban village is called “chongzhongcun” in Chinese, literally “village encircled by the city”. The rapid expansion of Chinese cities has been encroaching into surrounding villages since the 1990s.

CONSTITUENTS

Many observers had regarded the urban villages as the only cosmopolitan spaces in Guangzhou. Immigrants from other parts of the country sell local products and open regional restaurants in urban villages, adding a layer of cultural diversity over the predominant Cantonese culture in the city.

Among this urban hotchpotch, there are three major social groups: landless farmers whose farmland was forcibly expropriated by the city government; rural migrants who provide cheap labor to the city while suffering from institutional discrimination; and employees of small street-run businesses.

Citizens with an urban household register, usually do white-collar work in the city, but can't afford city rent.

Indigenous villagers with rural household register; landlords of urban village housing or shopowners of small business in the village

Migrant workers with a temporary residence permit; does various work in the city.
Urban Village Evolution

Stage 1
Traditional Village Settlement
Within these settlements, the land is divided into farmland and housing plots. Both kinds of property belong to the village as a collective, but individual households are entitled to claim a portion of them.

Stage 2
Expropriation of Agricultural Land
When urban expansion encroaches into rural land, the city government needs to acquire land rights from the rural collective to convert rural land into urban land. In many cases, to avoid the costly compensation to relocate villagers, the city government only expropriates the farmland of the village, and the housing land remains in the hands of the collective.

Stage 3
Beginning of Illegal Developments
Because the villagers' rights are not alienable to a third party outside of the collective, they cannot capitalize their assets through land or housing sale, so they redevelop their housing into leasing units to gain profits.

Stage 4
Gradual Expansion of Village Housing
Village housing, typically low quality and high-density with many closely packed apartment blocks of 2-8 floors, is rented out to migrant workers and also some urban residents.

Stage 5
Complete Eradication of Urban Villages
When the help from the guidelines of government policy, the Guangzhou Urban Redevelopment Office has set ambitious goals to eliminate nine, eventually all, urban villages in Guangzhou, following the redevelopment paradigm of the "Liede model."
THE BATTLE OF URBAN VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

The Players:

Who’s the Winner and Who’s the Loser?
- THE FOUNDING OF PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA
- After winning the civil war against the Nationalist party, the communists took control of the larger territories of China on October 1. The Chinese Republic is established and new taxes are imposed to finance the revolution.

- THE FIRST LAND REFORM
- From feudal landlords to peasants
- The Chinese Communist Party initiates a land reform program to redistribute land from landlords to peasants. This is an important step in the process of abolishing feudalism and establishing a more equitable distribution of land.

- THE THREE GREAT TRANSFORMATIONS
- Price Pawns to Collectives
- The economy is transformed from a market-oriented system to a collective system, where the government plays a significant role in directing the production and distribution of goods.

- THE OUTBURST OF REVOLUTION
- Leading to large-scale resistance against the CCP, this period is marked by a series of political and social upheavals. The government implements strict controls on the media and cultural life.

- THE HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITY SYSTEM
- Focus Commune for Semi-Populate
- The household responsibility system is introduced, allowing families to manage their own resources and production.

- LAND ALLOCATION
- 1970 - 1975
- The government allocates land to families based on the size of the household, aiming to increase agricultural productivity.

- THE INITIAL STAGES OF THE HOUSING REFORM
- Since the 1980s, the government has been promoting a more market-oriented housing system, allowing private ownership of homes.

- THE INITIAL & SECOND STAGES OF THE HOUSING REFORM
- This period, the city government initiates reforms to improve living standards, focusing on affordable housing solutions and public housing projects.
ROUND 10: 2017

THE EVICTION OF "LOW-LEVEL POPULATION"

City Government
- Tens of thousands of migrant workers are being forced out of their homes in Beijing under a citywide clean-up campaign in the aftermath of a fire that killed over a dozen people.
- The campaign aims to demolish illegal dwellings on short notice, effectively leaving thousands of people living in Beijing’s outskirts homeless overnight.

Low-Level Population

Developer
- Following the model of the financial successful redevelopment of Liada Village, developers and city government joined forces to expedite the eradication of urban villages.

Villagers

FINAL ROUND: 2020

Developer

City Government

I made a lot of money.

I made the city a better place!

Villagers

I became a millionaire overnight.

IT'S A TRIPLE WIN!

Migrant Workers 1985-2020

R.I.P.
THE THREE VILLAGES
Shipai Village

- Total Population: 270,000
- Area: 99 acres
- Area per Person: 61 sqft
- Building Height: 7-9 stories

Stefan Al, Villages in the City: A Guide to South China’s Informal Settlements (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.P, 2014), 127.
Shipai Village: Digital Industry
Sanyuanli Village

- Total Population: 85,000
- Area: 17 acres
- Area per Person: 86 sqft
- Building Height: 4-6 stories

Stefan Al, Villages in the City: A Guide to South China's Informal Settlements (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.P., 2014), 147.
Sanyuanli Village: Clothing Industry
Dafen Village

- Total Population: 10,200
- Area: 23 acres
- Area per Person: 99 sqft
- Building Height: 3-10 stories

Stefan Al, Villages in the City: A Guide to South China’s Informal Settlements (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.P., 2014), 81.
Dafen Village: Art Industry

Primary Retail

Secondary Retail
Migrant Workers in Cities

Primary Industry 0.5%
Secondary Industry 51.5%
Manufacturing 29.9%
Architecture 18.9%
Tertiary Industry 48%
Wholesale & Retail 12.3%
Transportation & Storage & Postal Service 6.6%
Hotel & Catering 6.2%
Residential Service & Repair 11.3%
Other 11.6%

Source: Chinese National Bureau of Statistics; 2017 Migrant Workers Survey Report
Source: COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY, 2016 Hope and Opportunity Report
OWNERSHIP TYPES

State/City Ownership
The property is owned by the country. It refers to property interests that are vested in the state or a public body representing a community as opposed to an individual or private party. State ownership may refer to ownership and control of any asset, industry, or enterprise at any level (national, regional, local or municipal); or to non-governmental public ownership. The process of bringing an asset into state ownership is called nationalization or municipalization. State ownership is one of the three major forms of property ownership, differentiated from private, cooperative and common ownership.

Collective Ownership
The property is owned by community or village. The property is owned and controlled through some representative mechanism that allows a community to influence their operation or use and to enjoy the benefits arising. Benefits of community ownership in infrastructure projects such as dams and irrigation are claimed to include increased responsiveness to needs of that community and the community valuing the projects more highly.

Private Ownership
The property is owned by individual, single family or several individuals. Private ownership is a legal designation for the ownership of property by non-governmental legal entities. Private property is distinguishable from public property, which is owned by a state entity; and from collective (or cooperative) property, which is owned by a group of non-governmental entities. Private property is further distinguished from personal property, which refers to property for personal use and consumption. Private property is a legal concept defined and enforced by a country’s political system.
PARTICIPANTS’ CLASSIFICATIONS

State Government
A state government or provincial government is the government of a country subdivision in a federal form of government, which shares political power with the federal or national government. A state government may have some level of political autonomy, or be subject to the direct control of the federal government. This relationship may be defined by a constitution.

Village Community
The local government that manage the land and govern the residents inside the village.

Single Stake Holder
An individual homeowner from the village community.

Multiple Stake Holders
A corporation consists of multiple homeowners from the village community.

Migrant Workers
Rural migrants who provide cheap labor to the city while suffering from institutional discrimination and employees of small street-run businesses.

Developer
Real estate developers are the people and companies who coordinate renovation and re-leasing, converting ideas from paper to real property. Real estate development is different from construction, although many developers also manage the construction process.

Architects
An architect is someone who plans, designs, and reviews the construction of buildings. To practice architecture means to provide services in connection with the design of buildings and the space within the site surrounding the buildings, that have as their principal purpose human occupancy or use.
Lie De Village Redevelopment

- **2000**
  - Since 2000, the Guangzhou municipal party committee and the Guangzhou municipal government have been planning the redevelopment of Lie De village.

- **2002**
  - In 2002, Tianhe district government agreed to cancel the villagers’ committee of Lie De village and establish a company to realize the redevelopment.

- **2005**
  - Early planning and schematic design for the Lie De village consisted a rolling-development mode.

- **2007**
  - In May 2007, Lie De village announced the start of its redevelopment, which made Lie De the first urban village in Guangzhou to undergo holistic reconstruction.

- **2010**
  - Early planning and schematic design for the Lie De village consisted a rolling-development mode.

Triple Win

- “**Triple Win**”
  - “Villagers: It costs nothing to live in a mansion with riverfront views.”
  - “Village collective: Own a five-star hotel that will generate up to 100m annual income.”
  - “Government: Promoted the renovation of 138 urban villages.”

“For both the government and residents of Guangzhou, the greatest benefit is to use the momentum of the successful redevelopment of Liede village to promote reconstruction of 138 ‘urban villages’ in Guangzhou and completely rectify the chronic illness of having ‘urban villages.’ By doing so, we will ultimately promote the development of the whole city and benefit all citizens.”

In all of China, there is perhaps no village that has resisted for this long.” - Lu Yongquan

In 2009, the government launched the Xian village redevelopment project, promising villagers apartments in the new high-rise towers upon completion, but a lack of trust and transparency has hampered the project. For the most part, the villagers support the redevelopment of their ancestral land, which was settled almost 800 years ago by the first Xians and Lus and Liangs—the village’s major family clans—so long as they control the process.

Soon thereafter, on Aug. 19, 2009, the first protests erupted on the steps of the Xian Village Committee’s office building. They gave speeches and chanted slogans: “Open the village accounts.” “Disclose village official’s salaries and assets.” “No more corruption.”

Ten-Thousand Villages Campaign

The "Ten-Thousand Villages Campaign" was a integrated renovation on urban villages in the Shenzhen that Vanke started.

They aimed to renovate urban village housing into long-term rental apartments (at affordable price), within a neighborhood of community commercial, community education and industry work. The rent for the renovated apartments would remain in the same range as the original housing units, with a slight increase, in exchange for a more secure and comfortable living environment with basic home appliances.

However, despite the relatively "low" increase in rent that Vanke believed to be reasonable, many tenants still complain about it, and many of them are forced to leave. This is mainly due to the fact many migrant workers have very high price elasticity to their rent; a 10% increase in rent may cause them to go from just getting by to unable to sustain their life.

Shipai Village
Figure 5: All ground-level shops, restaurants, warehouses, and community services.

Figure 6: The heights of all buildings with average height at 5.06 storeys and total house footprint area at 281,607 m².
INTERVENTIONS
INTERVENTIONS
SCENARIO 1: LIBRARY & MUSEUM
SCENARIO 2: SPORTS CENTER
SCENARIO 3: THEATER & ENTERTAINMENT
SCENARIO 4: RESTAURANTS & SHOPS
Bibliography:


