



# China's Slum : Urban Village Overview

## What is the“Urban Village”

Urban Village, in its literal meaning, refers to a village located in the center of a city. Due to its stark contrast in appearance and land value with the surrounding cityscape, it is often referred to as the "Slums" of China or the parasite of the city. From a national perspective, it serves as a spatial microcosm of China's globalization, industrialization, urbanization interacting in one space. From the city's perspective, it is often portrayed as being chaotic and unregulated, a tumor that impedes the full utilization of land values. However, what is the perspective of the people living within it? Is the urban village really as unpleasant as it seems?

This essay provides a holistic exploration into the presence, formation, criticisms, and benefits of urban villages. It also presents the often-overlooked importance of urban villages to the city and compares them to "slums" - informal settlements in the West - to reveal the structural injustice and systematic ostracization of marginalized populations in urban areas.

## What characterizes an urban village?

### Exterior

Stereotypically, urban villages are characterized by high density, unregulated buildings arranged in a jagged pattern, concentrated within specific, well-defined boundaries.

Urban villages located near the city center, such as KL, SP, and TX, tend to have refurbished exteriors, while the interior blocks may have more varied appearances, mostly consisting of uni-colored or mosaic ceramic tiles. The buildings have a uniform cuboid shape without sloped roofs. The number of floors varies depending on their location. Those closer to the city center have a systematic increase in height while maintaining consistency with the original appearance. Urban villages that are moderately close to the city center have temporary container-like heightening, while those far from the city have no additional heightening.

The roads leading into urban villages diverge into small paths that barely allow two people to pass each other. This is often referred to as "shaking hands buildings." Walking inside these villages can be depressing as most views are blocked by external air conditioners and the shadows of anti-theft webs, creating a valley-like effect. Ventilation is a serious problem in these areas. This is reflected in housing prices, where rooms on higher floors are generally more expensive due to receiving more sunlight, wind, and insulation from wet ground.

## **Interior**

The size of the buildings varied accordingly. In terms of homestead, they are roughly the same and have a regular rectangle shape. However, the height varies depending on their location. In general, for SP village located downtown, buildings have seven floors with 10 rooms per floor. Most rooms are en-suite and typically consist of a bed, a wardrobe, a toilet, a shower, and a sink. Kitchen facilities are rare, and some rooms do not have windows. The rooms that were originally living rooms often have shared bathrooms and toilets.

Some original villagers, who are landlords, rent their land to second landlords for longer periods. These second landlords systematically carry out refurbishments and charge higher prices accordingly. Rent varies depending on the location of the urban village, the level of facilities, the proximity to the village gate, the floor level, and the length of the rental period. In SP, an en-suite room with air conditioning and windows on the 4th floor would charge 1500 Yuan per month. Although the price has doubled compared to the 2012 price level, it is still nearly 5000 Yuan cheaper than a similar-sized loft outside.

## **Public Spaces**

Public spaces for social interaction are limited in this area. While the main road and gates are frequently accessed, these spaces are only laminal, with people not staying for long. Since the entire buildings have been renovated to consist only of individual rooms, even the living room and dining room, which were previously reserved for interaction among original villagers, have been divided into separate rooms for renting as well. Although there are some restaurants within the urban village, most of them offer only take-away options and do not provide dining tables and chairs.

## **Ancestral Hall**

Typical rural villages in China are equipped with ancestral halls, especially in southern China where family and clan relationships still hold influence. Most festivals and important social activities, such as childbirth (particularly for male babies) or marriages, take place in ancestral halls to seek blessings. Similarly, there are ancestral halls in urban villages, often hidden amidst towering buildings. Although the original villagers do not typically reside in urban villages, they use collective funds to cover renovation and maintenance costs. Tenants do not visit ancestral halls. In redeveloped villages like LD, the original village layout is lost as people move into high-rise buildings, but the ancestral hall remains unchanged in its original location.

## **Business**

In SP, a residential urban village, business located at roads and intersections, and are typically living-based. Chain stores are limited. There are three chain stores opened and they are all bubble tea shop MXBC, with average beverage 8 Yuan, much lower than other firms in the same industry. There are one retail stores at the fork of the road, a place with highest human traffic in the region, and other convenience stores scattered on the entrances. Goods sold are complete and mostly authentic, although mostly are cheaper substitutes.

The most common business here is restaurants. On the roads there are food prepared for tenants, self-picked stir-fry food and “Mala Tang” (simplified hotpot, where the ingredients one chose are boiled together). There are extensive restaurants specialize only take away scattered WITHIN the urban village. There are hardly any seats nor is menu provided. In locating here, the restaurant can save up storefront cost but can benefit from the location of urban village itself. On delivery app, they typically show their site at margin of urban village while they actually they are hidden inside. Food deliveries are familiar with their location so locating within does not hugely affect the delivery speed

In KL, a production base urban village, due to its proximity to ZD fabric market, beside stores and restaurants, there are extensive craft stores within. Workers redevelop the houses with the first floor as shop front, second and stage floor as production, and upper floors as accommodation for workers or tenants. Locating the production within urban villages enable the small business to benefit from external economies of scale.

## **2 Types of Urban Villages**

Urban Villages in Guangzhou, represented by Shipai, formed due to rapid urbanization engulfing village into the heart of urban area, with a more distinct boundary with surrounding high-rise buildings.

Urban Villages in Dongguan, represented by DL Urban Village:

These villages are more extensively spread, well incorporated with surrounding cityscape that demonstrate less intense land utilization comparing to Shipai. The main disparity lies in the pace of urbanization, the distinguishment with surrounding cityscape.

## Formation

As the name suggests, "urban villages" refer to villages within the city. In fact, it is the remains of residential area in the past rural settlement with the complementary farmland being nationalized by government. Understanding this fact, we can recognize that urban village is a non-governmental urban space provided by the collective or villagers of the village.

The urban land is supplied by either state-owned land or land within urban village. China's Land Administration Law stipulates: "The People's Republic of China implements the socialist public ownership of land, that is, the ownership of the whole people and the collective ownership of the laboring masses." The ownership of the land by the whole people means that the land is owned by the state, and the collective ownership of the laboring masses means that the land is owned by the village collective. The "state" is represented by various levels of government, while the village collective is a rural political organization with a large number of members below the township level. To be more specific, the land in urban areas belongs to the state. The land in rural and suburban areas of cities, except for those specified by law as belonging to the state, belongs to the collective ownership of farmers; homesteads, self-cultivated land, and self-cultivated mountains belong to the collective ownership of farmers.

As the city expands, it increasingly needs suburban land to provide space for production and residents. To fully plan and utilize the land values, various levels of government representing the state will need to transform nearby village collective land into state-owned land through methods such as expropriation.

Since the Reform and Opening up in 1980s, China's participation in globalization has driven industrialization and urbanization rapidly. Taking Guangzhou as an example, from 1980 to 2021, the urban built-up area of Guangzhou expanded from 136 square kilometers to 1366.02 square kilometers in 40 years, expanding tenfold. As the city expands, it increasingly needs suburban land to provide space. The demand for land resources for the expansion of urban space grows rapidly as a consequence, swallowing up many villages on suburban areas.

Since socialism is only incompatible with private ownership of means of production, while living materials can be privately owned and protected by the state in terms of ideology, the government often bypasses the expropriation of homestead land during the expropriation

process of villages, only taking away cultivated land. This results in the urban construction of state-owned land surrounding the original rural settlements, while urban villages are essentially the private property of farmers rapidly enveloped by urbanization. It is worth noting that this land is collectively owned, and collective land cannot participate in market bidding (unless it is nationalized first). The externalities of land economy have led to the fact that although urban villages have backward construction and weak internal facilities, relying on the spillover of external public services, it becomes a space that can enjoy urban facilities but at low cost. This has led to two consequences: farmers have massively added housing to provide rental income for outsiders; and a large number of outsiders have poured into urban villages. All of these have greatly increased the residential density within urban villages. In addition, since it is non-state-owned land, the restrictions on urban planning such as road width and building height often do not apply in urban villages, forming a remarkable disparity with the surrounding Le-Corbusier cityscape.

## **Opportunities provided by Urban Village - The things we ignore**

### **The MOST suitable accommodation offered to the low income migrants**

According to the surveys of urban villages in Guangzhou in 2009 and 2010, there are approximately 128 urban villages in Guangzhou, which account for about 20% of the city's housing, 70% of the housing for migrant populations, and 40% of the city's total population. In Guangzhou, the average rent in urban villages is about 16 yuan/month/square meter, while the city's average rent is 32 yuan.

### **Why the rent in urban village is low?**

Because the land in urban village is not authorized as state-owned urban land, it lacks the public services that should be provided by the government, resulting in much lower value than their counterparts. For migrants, this is a space with very low acquisition costs, especially since urban villages often do not require too much legal proof, providing a large gray space and flexibility. The low cost here includes not only land prices, but also internal prices, public services, housing supply, and its own good location and convenient commuting. Since human living and production cannot be separated from space, the cost of space provided by formal government land is too high, so people, particularly low-income immigrants, will move and live in urban villages, resulting in where the ratio of external and local populations can be as much as 10:1.

## **Benefits**

For the city: Urban villages greatly alleviates the pressure on the government and the city itself to provide housing and public services.

For tenants: Low cost, convenient location, high tolerance for user identity can enable new immigrants to settle and gradually establish themselves in the city. It forms an adaptive space and plays an important role in connecting rural or migrant populations in urban integration.

According to "The Triumph of the City," poverty in urban areas is actually an advantage rather than a disadvantage, as poor areas actually provide a way out of poverty for the poor. In China, based on unique geographic advantages, urban villages have lower living costs and convenient transportation compared to surrounding areas. In addition, due to the overwhelming demand for integration of large numbers of migrant populations into the city, local governments are unable to provide housing and other public services for all. Thus, urban villages have replaced the government role in helping city to absorb a large number of marginalized populations who have yet to integrate within the city.

## **A prosperous informal economy - A case study of Kangle Urban Village, HaiZhu, Guangzhou**

Kangle urban village is located next to China's largest fabric market, benefiting from its external economies of scale and had shifted its role from purely providing accommodation to textile production. Within one square kilometer area, Kangle Village includes more than 5,200 family workshops, textile factories, and warehousing companies, and has gathered 300,000 practitioners in the garment industry. The architectural structure has also adjusted in accordance to production needs, forming a structure with storefronts on the first floor, production on the second and third floors, and dormitories on the fourth and fifth floors. Establishing factories in Kangle Village have extremely favorable market conditions due to a developed industry chain with nearby Zhongda Fabric Market, cheap land rent, relaxed regulatory environment and flexible, mobile migrant workers.

### **Economy knitted into surrounding urban area**

In the textile industry circle in Kangle, a batch of clothes can be produced and shipped within three days. On the first day, the customer takes the sample and looks for fabrics in Zhongda fabric market International Light Textile City. In the evening, they go to the factory in Kangle Village to get the pattern and cut the fabric. On the second day, the factory begins to produce the goods, and on the third day morning, the goods can arrive at the warehouse for delivery. The Chinese textile industry relies on this mature industrial chain every day. The matchment between each components becomes the primary consideration. In December 2022, when the

Guangzhou government planned to transfer the manufacturing industry of the textile and clothing business district of Zhongda to the Guangqing Economic Special Cooperation Zone, 80%-90% of the bosses were unwilling to relocate their factories and businesses. The main reasons were: the new market was not open, there were no fixed orders and workers, the source of goods was unstable, and there was no cooperation and efficiency like Kangle Village now.

## **Chain migration**

Chain migration is a term used to describe a situation in which migrants from a particular place follow other migrants to a particular destination. Stable social trust and support are the main characteristics of familiar rural communities. Rural migrant workers who move from the countryside to the city for work maintain this inertia to some extent. Taking Tangxia urban village in Tianhe, Guangzhou as an example, taxi drivers from Henan province have established a stable network of relationships here, providing each other with information, job opportunities, and life experiences, among other things. In Kangle urban village in Haizhu, Guangzhou, workers who have been here for a long time will introduce the situation to their relatives or fellow villagers, attracting them to come spontaneously or directly recommending them to employers in Kangle Village. They may work together in the same factory, or their relatives become factory owners and bring them into their own factories to work.

## **Liveliness and placeness**

Sometimes, urban villages are more lively than communities built on surrounding state-owned land. The residents here are not limited to agricultural workers and other groups. Many white-collar workers also rent houses in urban villages because the level of parking facilities and commercial shops in urban villages attracts people from all levels of society in a city. In terms of the relationships between residents, urban villages retain the strong sense of community and neighborly belonging that is found in traditional rural communities.

However, this varies greatly from village to village. For example, in Kangle Village, due to its rushed production process, workers have very little offline time for socializing during production. In addition, the special labor model, which is mainly based on short-term work, makes workers highly mobile between different factories. As a result, the social circles of workers and the pre-existing acquaintances they had before entering Kangle Village overlap significantly. Furthermore, the residents of Kangle Village are mostly migrants who engage in business or work, making it almost impossible for them to establish social relationships with locals and integrate into urban life.

# Drawbacks of urban village - Under whose perspectives?

## Physical aspects

Urban Village has faced criticism for its visual pollution, which is attributed to its stark contrast with the surrounding urban landscape. The narrow alleys within the community hinder sufficient ventilation and sunlight exposure, creating a dingy and depressing atmosphere for pedestrians. In addition, unlike other gated communities, the lack of a property management department sometimes results in unregulated waste disposal practices and poor sanitation. Furthermore, the infrastructure within Urban Village is occasionally not well-maintained, which can be attributed to the tragedy of the commons.

## Land-value potential

"From the perspective of urban development, these garment factories in Kangle Lujiang belong to the low-end industry, which does not match the low-end nature of being located next to Zhongda University in the city center."

The first problem is the unmet land value. Urban villages, by definition, are villages engulfed within the city center, making them outliers in a cityscape dominated by efficiency and uniformity. The collective ownership of land means that the government has no right to plan systematically or intervene with the present construction. Additionally, the informal nature of its economy means that most of the rent and production are not included in the taxable base. As a result, the potential land value that could be realized if the land were nationalized remains unrealized, making it an outlier that would be better off being redeveloped.

## Governance Difficulty

“Us Hubei People want to Eat”

This was a genuine questioning from the migrant workers living in Kangle urban village who is prohibited from leaving the village, yet no food was being delivered within. Urban village, due to its informal nature, is hard to manage. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Guangzhou, 94% of new infections were found in Haizhu District, with the majority concentrated in Kangle, Lujiang, and Chigang urban villages. This is attributed to various

factors, such as mismatched information between tenants, landlords, and the government; the absence of an official channel to report cases; difficulties in tracing undocumented population; mistrust against the government; and discrimination against migrant workers.

The COVID pandemic has only highlighted the longstanding governance difficulties. As land is primarily owned by village collectives rather than the government, it becomes challenging for the government to exert its influence in regulating urban villages. The role of the government is often replaced by clan societies, with elected village heads taking charge, while the power of the village party secretary is diminished. As a result, certain activities, such as gambling and prostitution, are managed with less strict regulations compared to the surrounding areas.

## **My opinion**

However, I believe that some of these drawbacks are context-dependent. For example, the second drawback arises from a capitalistic perspective that prioritizes profit maximization above all else. This perspective overlooks the potential marginalization of low-income migrants and the subsequent denial of their right to the city. Furthermore, it would lead to a cityscape characterized solely by efficiency, predictability, and uniformity. In fact, even when viewed through a capitalistic lens, demolishing urban villages and the inexpensive labor they provide would increase production costs, particularly in the service sector, which hinders capital reproduction.

In addition, regarding the third aspect, the challenge in governance, I believe the main problem does not lie in the presence of urban villages themselves. It is not the urban villages that cause the residents to become suddenly "unregulated." Instead, we should recognize the vibrant individuals within these villages, appreciating them as valued citizens of our city rather than viewing them solely as temporary migrant workers or exploitable labor. Therefore, the solution lies in improving communication and negotiation, rather than imposing stricter regulations or, worse, demolishing the places where they currently reside.

Admittedly, I believe that addressing the physical aspect is something that we should tackle collectively. The tragedy of the commons refers to a situation where individuals consume a resource at the expense of society. When individuals act in their own best interests, it can lead to harmful over-consumption, which negatively affects everyone. In the case of the urban village, the land is collectively owned and divided among different villagers who then rent it out to tenants. Since the villagers typically live outside the urban village, they have limited incentives to raise funds collectively to improve the infrastructure within the village, such as better lighting, smoother roads, and increased safety measures with CCTVs. This situation calls for external regulations from the government to guide villagers in investing and actively improving the living environment. However, completely redeveloping the villages into a new

cityscape would make it impossible for tenants to afford, and it would also eliminate the previous vitality that came from the informal economy.

To effectively assess the drawbacks, it is important to consider the perspectives upon which the opinion was formed. Taking a comprehensive approach, it is advisable to focus on improvement rather than removal - with the genuine aim of promoting a better quality of life for individuals.