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# WHEN AGEING MEETS NEIGHBOURHOOD DEMOLITION: NEGOTIATING TIME, SPACE, AND KINSHIP IN STATE-LED URBAN REDEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

XIN LI<sup>\*,\*\*</sup>, MAARTEN VAN HAM<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, REINOUT KLEINHANS<sup>\*\*\*</sup>,  
BINGJIE ZHANG<sup>\*</sup> & YU GAO<sup>\*\*</sup> 

<sup>\*</sup> College of Public Administration, Nanjing Agricultural University, Weigang Street No. 1, Nanjing, 210095, China.

<sup>\*\*</sup> School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Nanjing University, No. 22 Hankou Road, Nanjing, 210093, China. E-mail: [gaoyu@nju.edu.cn](mailto:gaoyu@nju.edu.cn) (Corresponding author).

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, PO Box 5043, 2600 GA, Delft, the Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how senior residents navigate the overlapping logics of dispossession and re-possession within urban redevelopment, situating this dialectic within the broader framework of spatial commodification and lived spatiotemporal experiences. While urban redevelopment offers compensation and improved housing, it also generates deep emotional, functional, and temporal disruptions – particularly for older adults. Spatially, redevelopment projects prioritise abstract commodified space, often disregarding seniors' affective and symbolic attachments to their neighbourhoods. Importantly, seniors' attachments to place are not uniformly positive. Many express frustrations with deteriorating environments and social fragmentation, viewing redevelopment as an opportunity to improve living conditions or family wealth accumulation. The tension between loss and gain – between being dispossessed and being re-possessioned – shapes their complex responses to displacement. These dynamics are further complicated by the temporal mismatch between institutional redevelopment timelines and seniors' embodied rhythms, such as ageing-related limitations, care responsibilities, and uncertainty about future arrangements. Meanwhile, shifting intergenerational dynamics within the family domain reveal that even with financial compensation and increased family wealth, conflicts often emerge around caregiving and benefits distribution. By centring these tensions, this study moves beyond binary accounts of victimhood or compliance and highlights the ambivalence and contingency in seniors' engagement with redevelopment. It calls for more nuanced policy responses that align material compensation with emotional and temporal needs, particularly in contexts where family-based ageing care remains central.

**Key words:** Urban redevelopment; displacement; ageing; sense of time; sense of place; family dynamics

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## INTRODUCTION

Urban redevelopment projects are pivotal strategies employed by many cities to address local socio-economic issues, enhance urban aesthetics, and bolster city competitiveness (Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Kearns *et al.* 2019; He & Qian 2023; Meth *et al.* 2023). Through spatial reproduction interventions, such as the demolition of 'problematic' neighbourhoods and the creation of aesthetically appealing built environments, these projects introduce new socio-economic activities that are pro-growth and attractive to the middle class (Ren 2017; He *et al.* 2020; Burte & Kamath 2023). However, critics argue that such interventions often parallel processes of gentrification and displacement (Lees 2008; Slater 2009). While urban elites or the middle class can enjoy increased benefits, the poor, seniors, and minorities face ongoing and varied forms of displacement (Davidson 2009; Slater 2009; Day 2013; Roast *et al.* 2022; Burte & Kamath 2023). Understanding the structural forces displacing marginalised groups in urban redevelopment is a central concern in urban research, especially within critical geographical studies (Lees 2008; Roast *et al.* 2022; Burte & Kamath 2023; Kundu & Satija 2023). Existing research dichotomously categorises these forces, highlighting contestations between the pro-growth coalition – developers, local governments, elites – and marginalised groups (Burte & Kamath 2023; Kundu & Satija 2023). It further critically associates the displacement of marginalised groups with outcomes that serve capital accumulation. This narrative of 'accumulation by dispossession' reveals how individuals' right to the city is endangered, exposing imbalanced power dynamics and underlying politics between these structural forces (Harvey 2005; Ren 2017; Burte & Kamath 2023; He & Qian 2023). Moreover, this phenomenon is underpinned by assumptions about underdeveloped civic societies and institutional systems favouring growth and elites (Roast *et al.* 2022; Kundu & Satija 2023).

While displacement and dispossession have long served as dominant analytical frameworks in understanding urban redevelopment, they may also fail to capture the ambivalence of affected residents and the nonlinear trajectories of their

engagement (Doff & Kleinhans 2010; Kearns & Mason 2013; Kleinhans & Kearns 2013; Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Li *et al.* 2019a; Wang 2020; Leitner *et al.* 2022; Jin 2024). Residents – particularly property owners – frequently oscillate between opposition, passive resistance, and strategic cooperation as redevelopment unfolds (Qin & Shen 2019; Meth *et al.* 2023; Jin 2024). Recent scholarship has highlighted that in the context of land-based urban transformations, resident experiences often lie along a continuum – not limited to accumulation by dispossession, but also encompassing accumulation without or beyond dispossession (Zhan 2017; Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Kan & Sun, 2024). These studies call for a more context-sensitive, phased, and differentiated analysis that considers residents' ownership status, age, and capacity in shaping the social effects of urban transformation (Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Kan & Sun 2024). Empirical evidence from China, Ethiopia, South Africa, Western Europe, and the United States reveals that displaced residents are not universally marginalised or subjected to survival crises (Kleinhans 2003; Goetz 2013; Posthumus & Kleinhans 2014; Li *et al.* 2019b; Leitner *et al.* 2022; Jin 2024). Some achieve re-possession through redistributive mechanisms, including improved housing conditions, enhanced property ownership, or increased household wealth (Kleinhans 2003; Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Qin & Shen 2019; Meth *et al.* 2023; Jin 2024). This complicates linear narratives of uniform dispossession and suggests that some residents employ diverse strategies to maximise their benefits during urban transformation processes. At the same time, some studies have shown that while re-possession may improve residents' material circumstances and even lead many to welcome urban redevelopment, it does not necessarily reduce the levels of disruption and suffering experienced (Qin & Shen 2019; Li *et al.* 2019a; Leitner *et al.* 2022). In certain contexts, the interwoven processes of dispossession and re-possession give rise to new forms of politics, conflict, and negotiation that extend beyond structured contestations in public arenas (Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Kan 2020; Kan & Sun 2024). These tensions increasingly manifest within the private domain – particularly in familial relationships and residents' embodied interactions with place.

These dynamics raise a key question: How do the coexisting logics of dispossession and re-possession structure residents' experiences? More specifically, can re-possession offset the negative effects of dispossession, or does it introduce new challenges? What underlies these contradictions? To address these questions, we situate the interaction of dispossession and re-possession within the broader project of spatial commodification of capitalised modernity and its friction with the spatiotemporal rhythms of everyday life (Lefebvre 2004; Davidson 2009; Zhang 2017, 2022). We argue that the dominant logics of efficiency and commodification in contemporary urban space reproduction stand in tension with the multicentric (e.g. affective) dimensions of residents' spatial and temporal experiences (Lefebvre 2004; Davidson 2009; Leitner & Sheppard 2018). These frictions are not only evident in structural contestations but are also deeply inscribed in the embodied and emotional registers of urban life (Davidson 2009; Zhang 2017; Li *et al.* 2019a). By foregrounding these microlevel dynamics, we move beyond the binary antagonisms of pro-growth coalitions (state and market) and residents, and instead centre the micropolitics of lived space (Hillier 2007; Davidson 2009; Leitner & Sheppard 2018). Furthermore, building upon Kan's (2020) emphasis on the mediating role of informal institutions, we further highlight the significance of familial or kinship-based social relations in shaping the trajectories of (dis)re-possession. These relationships, often embedded in private and domestic spheres, complicate prevailing analytical models that emphasise formal coercion or market rationality alone. Moreover, existing studies on the social consequences of urban redevelopment have largely overlooked the lived experiences of older adults (Buffel & Phillipson 2019). As many urban neighbourhoods experience simultaneous ageing of their built environments and populations, this group has become a central focus of redevelopment strategies. Yet, their distinct spatial needs and temporal urgency – rooted in age-related physical decline – directly conflict with the commodified, decontextualised logic of urban regeneration. Despite being particularly vulnerable and long-term

inhabitants, this group remains systematically excluded from policy-making processes (Buffel *et al.* 2012). Centring their perspectives is therefore crucial to understanding how redevelopment intensifies existential challenges and to formulating responsive, inclusive interventions.

To elaborate on how urban redevelopments impact the seniors and shape their coping strategies, this study illustrates their experiences. The structure of the paper is as follows. Section “Urban Redevelopment and the Displacement of Senior Residents” reviews urban redevelopment and displacement of the seniors. Section “Research Area, Data, and Methods” provides detailed information on the research area, data collection, and methodology. Section “Neighbourhood Demolition, Displacement and the Experiences of Seniors” presents the results of the transcript analysis, followed by the final section that discusses the findings and draws conclusions.

## URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF SENIOR RESIDENTS

**Urban redevelopment, displacement and dis(re)possession** – Displacement is defined as the state which ‘occurs when any household is forced to move from its residence by conditions that affect the dwelling or its immediate surroundings, and that: (1) are beyond the household’s reasonable ability to control or prevent; (2) occur despite the household’s having met all previously imposed conditions of occupancy; and (3) make continued occupancy by that household impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable’ (Grier & Grier 1978, 8; Marcuse 1985). The first implication of this definition lies in the disruption of the relationship between people and their places (Roast *et al.* 2022). In urban redevelopment, forced relocation often constitutes displacement, as powerful external actors compel households to move, disputing critical neighbourhood-based support systems essential for personal and social well-being (Fried 1963; Goetz 2016; Kearns *et al.* 2019; Burte & Kamath 2023). From macroeconomic and governance perspectives, ur-

ban redevelopment is positioned as a spatial strategy for economic revitalisation, pursued through aesthetic upgrades, rising property values, the attraction of capital, and job creation. However, critics argue that from the perspective of the displaced, these processes are often embedded in the broader political economy of capitalist accumulation – functioning through a logic of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ that systematically marginalises vulnerable groups (Lees 2008; Davidson 2009; Slater 2009; Kundu & Satija 2023).

Recent scholarship has begun to unpack the more nuanced dynamics of urban redevelopment, moving beyond dichotomous interpretations of dispossession to explore its interplay with processes of re-possession (Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Kan & Sun 2024). Empirical studies demonstrate that residents’ experiences vary considerably depending on factors such as property right status, relocation willingness, recognition of rights, and the distribution of redevelopment benefits – highlighting the simultaneous operation of both dispossession and re-possession (Goetz 2013; Li *et al.* 2019a; Kan 2020; Leitner *et al.* 2022; Jin 2024). In the context of urban redevelopment, dispossession occurs when pro-growth coalitions disregard residents’ ‘right to the city’ – including the right to remain, place attachments, and participate in the distribution of post-redevelopment value (Ren 2017; Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Roast *et al.* 2022; Burte & Kamath 2023). Re-possession refers to the formal or informal recognition of these rights, often manifested through compensation provided by local governments or developers – via monetary payments (e.g. cash), in-kind benefits (e.g. housing), or social entitlements (e.g. citizenship or social security packages) (Kleinhans 2003; Goetz 2013; Posthumus *et al.* 2013; Li *et al.* 2019b; Meth *et al.* 2023). Such arrangements essentially commodify individual appropriation and use of land or housing through quasi-market mechanisms, converting use values into exchange values (Leitner & Sheppard 2018; Li *et al.* 2019b; Jin 2024; Kan & Sun 2024). These processes reveal that power struggles over land and space among residents, the state, and market actors are shaped not only by the nature and degree of coercion embedded

in urban redevelopment but also by fundamentally divergent logics of spatial valuation and place-making (Li *et al.* 2019a; Jin 2024; Kan & Sun 2024). To better understand how the coexisting logics of dispossession and re-possession structure resident experiences, it is necessary to move beyond conventional analytical models regarding class displacement and spatial succession. A more nuanced approach must interrogate how residents’ embodied and lived experiences interact with, resist, or adapt to the formal valuation logics embedded within urban redevelopment processes.

To engage with these tensions, it is necessary to transcend conventional preoccupations with abstract space and instead attend to the multiplicity of spatial dimensions and their intrinsic temporalities (Lefebvre 2004; Hillier 2007; Davidson 2009). Under capitalist modernity, space and time are increasingly governed by efficiency, subjecting lived spaces and organic rhythms to rational calculation and segmentation (Lefebvre 2004; Davidson 2009; Leitner & Sheppard 2018). This dominant spatial-temporal regime leads to the abstraction and standardisation of space and time into measurable, exchangeable units, often stripped of contextual meaning and reduced to ‘empty containers’ for circulation (Lefebvre 2004; Hillier 2007). This imposed homogenisation conflicts with the heterogeneity and polycentrism that define lived space-time, producing sociospatial frictions that frequently manifest as conflict or resistance (Lefebvre 2004; Hillier 2007; Davidson 2009; Zhang 2017; Leitner & Sheppard 2018). Spatially, commodification privileges certain place-based qualities – such as location, function, and physical character – by transforming them into exchangeable commodities and abstracting their value into monetary terms, thereby incorporating them into circuits of capital (Davidson 2009; Li *et al.* 2019b). This process routinely ignores or devalues the emotional, symbolic, and functional meanings embedded in place-based relationships; it also alienates residents from the use values of their environments (Fried 1963; Ekström 1994; Manzo *et al.* 2008; Davidson 2009; Gilroy 2012; Leitner *et al.* 2022). Temporally, urban redevelopment

proceeds through accelerated cycles of spatial reproduction – eviction, demolition, and rebuilding – aimed at maximising returns (Zhang 2017; Li *et al.* 2019b). These imposed rhythms often conflict with residents' lived temporalities, generating temporal dissonance (Lefebvre 2004). In particular, bureaucratic governance technics, driven by goals of efficiency, completion, and risk avoidance, frequently adopt standardised, one-size-fits-all approaches (Zhang 2022). Such governance tends to overlook temporal and social diversity, leading to rigid policies and uniform procedures that favour expedience over contextual sensitivity. These frictions are especially evident in: (1) mismatches between institutional timelines and social rhythms; (2) disregard for the temporal needs of vulnerable groups, particularly the elderly; and (3) neglect of the extended durations needed to form or dissolve place attachments. As a result, urban redevelopment remains in fundamental tension with the polytemporalities of everyday life.

Second, urban redevelopment's spatial-temporal valuation requires moving beyond the conventional state-market-individual triad and recognising the family as a key mediating institution. Families have long been functioning both as sites of social reproduction and as economic units of consumption and informal production. As Kan (2020) shows, kinship structures reshape property relations and influence how redevelopment benefits are distributed, positioning households as strategic yet often overlooked actors in urban restructuring. Families collectively navigate spatiotemporal changes, developing adaptive strategies to maximise benefits and mitigate displacement risks (Goetz 2013; Severinsen *et al.* 2016). These strategies, however, are neither uniform nor conflict-free. Intra-familial tensions – especially along generational or gender lines – can spark disputes over resource allocation and rights claims (Qin & Shen 2019). The family thus functions as an institution, mediating between structural forces and household needs while shaping how spatial and temporal values are contested (Smith & Ferryman 2006; Barrett 2013; Zhang 2017). Recognising the family as an institutional actor enables a

deeper understanding of the social dynamics of urban change by connecting macrolevel pressures with everyday life.

Building on this, we propose an analytical framework to reorient the study of urban redevelopment – especially where dispossession and re-possession intersect. Moving beyond traditional narratives that oppose abstract systems to individual subjects, our framework emphasises two dimensions: (1) a multidimensional spatiotemporal lens that highlights the interaction between formal governance regimes and lived experiences; and (2) the family as a third mediating force – alongside state and market – that interprets, negotiates, and reshapes (dis)possession. By bridging macro-political processes with the intimate domains of relational, affective, and temporal life, this framework offers a more grounded understanding of how urban change is lived and managed during urban redevelopment projects.

**Urban redevelopment and its influences on seniors** – Existing research has frequently identified vulnerability through indicators such as income and ethnicity to capture populations disproportionately affected by redevelopment (Day & Cervero 2010; Barrett 2013; Keene & Ruel 2013). Yet, the specific vulnerability of older adults – arising from physical decline and a heightened reliance on localised resources – warrants greater scholarly and institutional attention (Ekström 1994; Barrett 2013; Kleinhans *et al.* 2018; Kearns *et al.* 2019). Spatially, older adults depend on built and social environments designed to accommodate the conditions of ageing; temporally, their health status, long-term residence, and intensive daily engagement within the community cultivate deeply rooted attachments and distinctive perceptions of time. In many sociocultural contexts, later-life mobility further necessitates a renegotiation of intergenerational care responsibilities, giving rise to complex – and at times conflictual – family dynamics. These intersecting vulnerabilities mean that older adults often encounter urban redevelopment as a disruptive force that unsettles care infrastructures, destabilises established

people–place relations, and disregards the rhythms of ageing. Consequently, their lived experiences diverge from both the instrumental logics driving redevelopment initiatives and the more adaptive responses available to younger populations. This study foregrounds the experiences of older adults by situating them within the context of urban redevelopment and displacement, examining their responses across spatial (people–place interactions), temporal (governance processes), and relational (family dynamics) dimensions. Particular attention is given to how these dynamics unfold across both public and private domains, with a specific focus on the Chinese context.

*People–place interactions and seniors' response* – Seniors are particularly reluctant to move due to functional and psychological ties to their surroundings (Lawton 1983; Logan *et al.* 1998; Oswald & Rowles 2006; Gilroy 2008; Buffel *et al.* 2012). Compared with other age groups, they tend to exhibit a stronger attachment to their neighbourhood environments (Fried 1963; Oswald & Rowles 2006). Emotionally, their neighbourhoods often carry affective meaning, family history, and personal memories, making relocation psychologically difficult (Hillcoat-Nalletamby & Ogg 2014; Severinsen *et al.* 2016). Functionally, long-term residency allows them to accumulate substantial local knowledge, social capital, and social credits, aiding in combating personal competence declines and achieving successful ageing in place (Fried 1963; Oswald & Rowles 2006; Buffel *et al.* 2012). For older adults, these people–place relationships – expressed through constructs such as place attachment or Rowles's (1983) concept of autobiographical insideness – are vital to maintaining place-based identity and a sense of personal continuity. When disrupted by forced or voluntary relocation, these connections may be fractured, undermining both psychological stability and self-perception. In such contexts, constructing mobile forms of autobiographical insideness becomes essential to preserving self-coherence amidst environmental change.

Cultural norms also shape the seniors' perception of place and their responses to displacement. For instance, in China, ageing in place, especially in long-term residences and neighbourhoods, is deeply rooted in traditional norms that caution against relocation in later life (Huang 2013; Gao *et al.* 2015; Liang & Guo 2018). Consequently, senior residents in China are often more reluctant to move and exhibit lower mobility compared with other age groups and their counterparts in other countries (Gao *et al.* 2015; Liang & Guo 2018).

However, long-term residency does not inherently enable successful ageing in place or eliminate the possibility of relocation (Li *et al.* 2019a; Li & Zhang 2021). Seniors' capacity is vital for their adaptation to changes introduced by urban intervention policies, neighbourhood environments upgrading, and the arrival of new social groups as part of redevelopment processes (Buffel & Phillipson 2019). When their health declines and environmental conditions deteriorate, the home can become a disabling space (Taylor 1999; Li & Zhang 2021). Neighbourhood degradation – often exacerbated by disinvestment or deliberate neglect – amplifies mismatches between seniors' needs and their living environments, pushing them towards relocation (Li *et al.* 2019a). High population turnover and the erosion of social cohesion may further alienate seniors from their communities (Buffel & Phillipson 2019). Consequently, in redevelopment contexts, older adults must navigate the tensions between cultural norms, emotional bonds, functional realities, and the imposed logic of displacement (Wiles *et al.* 2009; Lager *et al.* 2013).

*The imposed rhythms of urban developments and seniors' response* – The organisation and rhythms of the dispossession and re-possession process of urban redevelopment significantly shape the experiences and reactions of senior residents (Popkin *et al.* 2005; Smith & Ferryman 2006; Zhang 2022). Stability, encompassing housing, income, and supportive social ties, is crucial for successful ageing. Urban redevelopment, particularly through

forced relocation, threatens this stability, provoking stress and anxiety (Ekström 1994; Li *et al.* 2019a).

In voluntary movements, alternative housing is typically prearranged. However, in urban redevelopment contexts, rehousing presents significant challenges (Peace *et al.* 2011; Löfqvist *et al.* 2013). First, relocated housing (re-possession) that local governments provided as compensation of transitional settlements is often not prepared, requiring lengthy wait times (Popkin *et al.* 2005; Li *et al.* 2019b). In China, this waiting period can extend over many years (Zhang 2022). Second, the compensation process frequently fails to meet ageing-related needs or is beyond the affordability of the seniors (Smith & Ferryman 2006; Barrett 2013). In practice, seniors receive limited consulting assistance from local governments or developers, increasing their stress levels. Additionally, the digitalisation of urban redevelopment processes poses challenges for seniors, who often lack knowledge of ICT technology, making it difficult for them to stay informed about project progress and exacerbating their distress (Popkin *et al.* 2005; Smith & Ferryman 2006).

*Family dynamics and influences on seniors* – The dispossession and re-possession embedded in urban redevelopment present significant challenges for senior residents, necessitating assistance from family members (Goetz 2013; Keene & Ruel 2013). While such support can alleviate mental stress, it may also lead to conflicts within families (Zhang 2017). Forced movement disrupts seniors' ageing plans, particularly regarding care arrangements and living conditions (Smith & Ferryman 2006; Goetz 2013; Severinsen *et al.* 2016). In Western countries, individualism often necessitates reliance on personal or institutional assistance. In Eastern contexts, such as China, social and cultural norms about caregiving for the ageing population compound these challenges (Wang 2019; Tao *et al.* 2022). Historically, co-residence of parents and children is common under the influence of filial piety<sup>1</sup> in Confucianism (Chen & Silverstein 2000; Ikels 2006; Sereny 2011; Yan 2016; Fei 1983).

However, existing studies also reveal that the traditional parent–child power structure in China, which emphasises unconditional obedience and assistance, has shifted towards a descending familism due to marketisation and individualisation (Yan 2016; Cheung 2019). Individualism and the desire for a preferred lifestyle have gradually moved typical parent–child living arrangements away from cohabitation, alongside increasing intra- and inter-city residential mobility (Forrest Zhang 2004; Ikels 2006; Sereny and Gu 2011; Cheung 2019). More seniors choose to age independently, either passively or actively (Sereny 2011; Cheung 2019).

Currently in China, individualism and market mechanisms, based on rationality and cost-benefit equilibrium, increasingly influence familial obligations and benefits (Ikels 2006; Cheung 2019). This fact shifts the parental–children relationship from the parents' absolute authority to a collective decision based on individual preferences. Support from family is becoming increasingly conditional (Chen & Silverstein 2000; Ikels 2006; Cheung 2019). Consequently, the growing independence of parental–children interactions regarding living arrangements or caregiving in contemporary China likely increases seniors' stress and anxiety levels when involved in urban redevelopment.

## RESEARCH AREA, DATA, AND METHODS

Our case study area is in Shenyang, China, which is a typical old industrial city in north-east China. Shenyang has been called the 'Ruhr of the East', and it has been deeply affected by a planned economy. The city has a large proportion of state-owned enterprises, industrial workers, and *danwei*<sup>2</sup> communities. However, since the 1980s, Shenyang has suffered from a major economic depression because of its maladjustment to the market economy. Many enterprises have gone bankrupt, leading to many layoffs. Urban areas, especially traditional industrial areas, have fallen into decline. In residential areas, the physical condition of many old neighbourhoods, especially *danwei* communities and urban villages, has severely deteriorated due

to the lack of investment from residents, local communities, and local governments. Meanwhile, the bankruptcy of many *danwei* also led to the spatial concentration of massive layoffs of workers. Against this process, the city underwent several rounds of shantytown redevelopment projects from around 2000 until now. In 2000, the Shenyang municipality initiated a large-scale shantytown redevelopment project (SRP) and emphasised redeveloping shantytowns and land at market prices. In 2013, the central state initiated the second round of SRPs. While the local authorities of Shenyang claimed that there were no shanties left, they enlarged the scope of their redevelopment into the urban periphery and neighbourhoods at undesirable housing market locations. During the most recent of SRPs (2014–2016), about 81,500 households were involved. The Ministry of Housing and Urban–Rural Development of PRC (MOHURD) has promoted the ‘Shenyang mode’ nationally due to its success on SRPs (Shenyang Daily, 2016). Shenyang is therefore a pioneer of SRPs in China and a very interesting case study for investigating the experiences of relocatees during SRPs over time. The interviews and questionnaires were collected based on the municipality’s redevelopment plans and the assistance of

acquaintances. Figure 1 maps the study areas where interview data were collected.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in multiple rounds, with intensive sessions held in March, April, September, and October of 2015. From 2018 to 2025, additional insights were gathered through a series of offline meetings and online communications with both residents and project implementers to track ongoing developments. In total, we interviewed 43 respondents whose neighbourhoods are demolished. We recruited respondents through a combination of snowball sampling and door knocking. All the respondents were homeowners and had been living and/or working in these neighbourhoods for at least 12 years. The interviews were conducted face to face using a semi-structured interview schedule. A total of 43 interviews were conducted with residents ranging in age from ~60 to 85 years, with most currently living alone. Among the interviewees, 17 are male and 26 are female. The size of their housing ranges from <20 m<sup>2</sup> to more than 100 m<sup>2</sup>, depending on the location and the type of their neighbourhoods. Their household size ranges from 2 persons to 6 persons.

During the interviews, questions were asked about the respondent’s family and moving history, moving intentions, residential satisfaction, and perceptions and experiences of

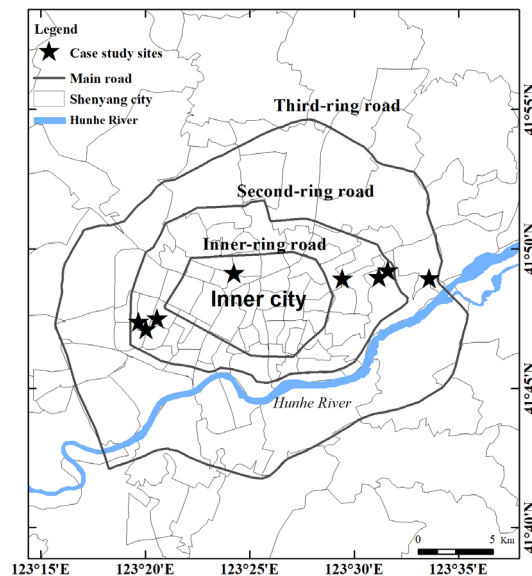


Figure 1. Locations of case study areas in Shenyang.

the impending demolition and neighbourhood changes. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, enabling content analysis of the transcriptions. The remaining four interviews were not recorded either because permission to record was not given or because the recording device failed. During the interviews, we also kept a logbook in which we noted our observations regarding emotions and nonverbal cues of respondents. When analysing the transcriptions, these notes were used to provide additional context to specific quotes, including some of those incorporated in section “[Neighbourhood Demolition, Displacement and the Experiences of Seniors](#)”. Atlas.ti was then used to code their lived experiences in these neighbourhoods, their meaning of home, dependence on their neighbourhoods in social, physical, and economic terms, their opinions on intergenerational co-residence and the function of family members, moving intentions, their coping strategies regarding neighbourhood decline, and their perceptions of the impending demolition. To guarantee the anonymity of respondents in the analysis, the quotations are accompanied by gender, age, living status, and fictitious name. The interviewing questions, the coding and analysing of related materials, and the developing of the following empirical part are based on the framework in section “[Urban Redevelopment, Displacement and Dis\(re\)possession](#)”. In addition to the in-depth interviews, between December 2015 and January 2016, 421 questionnaires were randomly distributed to residents involved in Shantytown Redevelopment Projects (SRPs) in Shenyang. Of the 416 questionnaires returned, 328 were deemed valid for analysis. Among these, 104 respondents aged 60 years or older, with the oldest respondent being 93 years old. This study examines the perceptions of these senior respondents, focusing on their stress levels regarding the organisation of the displacement, their residential satisfaction, place attachment, and intentions to leave their original neighbourhoods.

Longitudinal fieldwork since 2015 until now shows that several land parcels remain only partially acquired, with scattered residents still living among semi-demolished neighbourhoods and structures standing

amid rubble (site observation). This illustrates the extended and unpredictable timelines of urban redevelopment, which have exceeded expectations of governments, developers, and residents alike. Amid China’s real estate downturn, the acquisition–demolition–reconstruction model requires greater caution and selectivity. Without this, risks may escalate, and delays could deepen socio-economic tensions far beyond initial projections.

### NEIGHBOURHOOD DEMOLITION, DISPLACEMENT AND THE EXPERIENCES OF SENIORS

**Ambivalent people–place relationships and contradictory reactions of seniors** – Senior respondents exhibited contradictory reactions – expressing both a desire to move and a deep attachment to their declining neighbourhoods. This paradox arises from changing people–place dynamics, influencing their perceptions of relocation. On one hand, memories, family histories, and the current functional and social supports of their neighbourhoods compel them to stay. On the other hand, various forms of neighbourhood decline motivate them to move.

This duality challenges the romanticised notion that residents resist urban redevelopment solely due to place attachment. In fact, our respondents encountered various forms of neighbourhood decline that have made continued occupation detrimental to their ageing process and well-being ([Figure 2](#)). For instance, lack of investment and maintenance, along with frequent shortages of basic services like water and electricity, challenge their everyday lives. Additionally, high population turnover has led to fragmented and shrinking social networks. While residents with more resources can leave these neighbourhoods, socio-economic constraints prevent others from moving. Consequently, facing impending redevelopment, these residents may experience better living conditions after forced relocation. As our survey data show, 38 per cent of the 104 surveyed seniors affected were dissatisfied with their neighbourhood environments, and ~58 per cent of them intended to leave. These figures



Figure 2. *Deteriorating housing and neighbourhood conditions prior to urban redevelopment.* Source: Authors.

highlight the negative experiences our respondents had within their neighbourhoods that motivate them to relocate.

Meanwhile, senior respondents are also deeply attached to their neighbourhoods. They often referred to their homes as ‘ancestral home’ (老家), indicating rootedness in their neighbourhoods and the associated personal identity and cosiness. Many compared their sense of home in these neighbourhoods to potential relocation choices, emphasising the spiritual and symbolic meanings rooted in place-based personal and collective histories. In their narratives, ‘ancestral home’ reflects a deeply intertwined history between a family or individual and a place, developed over decades or generations. For many seniors, it is also envisioned as the final resting place of their lives, aligning with aspirations to age in place. The emotional and symbolic value of these environments can outweigh the appeal of modernised but unfamiliar alternatives.

It is hard to leave your homeland. Moving into a high-rise building is very difficult for old people like me. Here we live on the ground floor and use coal for heating, which is quite warm. We can buy food nearby, which is very convenient. In high-rise buildings, you have to pay for maintenance fees, and it costs a lot! Moreover, it feels like living in a jail in high-rise buildings. It is hard for us to move up and down. Here, we can talk to neighbours just by standing in

front of our doors. But in high-rise buildings, it is impossible. Nobody knows each other. This is why I want to stay here. Furthermore, people living next door are quite close, just like relatives. After relocation, you don't know your neighbours; people are quite defensive. (Guo, Male, 70s, living with his wife)

Furthermore, the comparison between seniors' current (targeted for redevelopment) and prospective (post-rehousing) neighbourhoods make evident the mismatch between their needs and what redevelopment delivers. This disparity amplifies their anxieties about post-relocation life and reinforces their dependence on their current surroundings. A key concern among respondents is the significant reduction in housing space resulting from compensation constraints imposed by local governments. Some worry that their entire family may not be adequately rehoused, potentially leading to overcrowded living conditions and intra-family conflict. Others fear being relocated to peripheral areas lacking essential infrastructure – such as hospitals, public transit, or affordable markets – thereby increasing living costs and reducing access to medical care. These concerns are particularly acute for seniors with chronic illnesses or limited income. Additionally, while their current low-rise buildings (typically one to five floors) facilitate daily mobility and social interaction, many fear being relocated



Figure 3. High-rise buildings in resettlement neighbourhoods after urban redevelopment. Source: Authors.

to high-rise buildings with 20 or more floors (Figure 3). These buildings are perceived as isolating and physically restrictive – ‘jail-like,’ as one respondent described – and the social atmosphere in new neighbourhoods is often seen as indifferent or impersonal. Although redevelopment may improve certain material aspects of living conditions, the anticipated loss of social ties and increased financial burdens remain pressing concerns for senior residents. As Guo (Male, 70s) previously emphasised, these issues compound their reluctance to relocate. Supporting this, our survey data show that 88 per cent and 81.7 per cent of surveyed seniors expressed satisfaction with their neighbourhood’s location and emotional sense of ‘home,’ highlighting the vital role of everyday functional support in sustaining their place dependence.

**Governed redevelopment timelines and chronic uncertainty for seniors** – When confronted with urban redevelopment, the organisation of the project involves the sequence of its various stages. These stages can be categorised into two main sets. The

first set pertains to governmental–residential negotiations, forced residential relocations, and neighbourhood demolitions. Local governments often aim to accelerate these processes to swiftly secure land use rights from the market, ensuring profitability from redevelopment. The second set involves establishing relocation communities, disbursing monetary/in-kind compensations, and managing the displacement period. Due to the substantial financial commitments required from local governments for compensating affected residents, these activities can be organised with more flexibility and time than the initial stages. The temporal urgency and sequence of urban redevelopment activities create a mismatch between the expectations of local governments and the experiences of affected residents, especially the seniors. This discrepancy heightens stress among seniors as the project unfolds. When projects commence, residents are given limited time to relocate, necessitating swift arrangements such as packing and moving personal belongings and finding alternative housing,

which is particularly challenging for senior residents. According to our survey of 104 senior residents, 63 per cent reported high levels of stress related to finding housing after displacement.

But during the meeting, they never mentioned anything about doing it in batches. They said it would take six months and cost over a billion yuan. After they finish the other part demolition and redevelopment of the area, then it would be our turn. We signed the agreement in June – or maybe July – and then ... nothing. After that, everything just stalled. We have no idea when it'll actually start. (Jie, 70s, female, living alone)

Ah [sign], I don't know where I will go. Where should I live? If I have another home, I won't bother to think about this. After the demolition, I can directly move into it.... (Shuang, 67, female, window, living alone)

How can't we be angry? ... The ideal situation is that we can afford an apartment in current housing market with the compensation we get. But if you (local government) only give us 100 or 200 thousand RMB, how could we afford one?! We cannot! (Qing, 70s, female, living alone)

Seniors are also required to promptly decide on compensation options within a set timeframe. Compensation represents a significant increase in family wealth, as noted by Hui (60s, female), who remarked, '*There is only one chance in our life to undergo demolition and relocation, isn't it?!*' Typically, the amount of compensation seniors receive is determined by the size of their soon-to-be-demolished dwelling and the local housing price set by an asset assessment company. They must choose between in-kind compensation (housing) or monetary compensation, each option carrying uncertainties and risks. Those opting for monetary compensation may find it insufficient to purchase comparable housing in the private market due to the relatively small size of their demolished dwelling compared with current market standards. We found that approximately 95 per cent of the 104 surveyed seniors perceived the receiving compensation as lower than the surrounding housing prices. Consequently, many face the prospect of using personal savings or seeking loans from friends and relatives, significantly increasing financial burdens on their families.

Those who opt for in-kind compensation face different, yet equally burdensome, challenges. Delays in construction and financial constraints on the part of local governments and developers often result in prolonged waiting periods. Furthermore, the number of well-situated housing units with appropriate floor levels and layouts is always limited, making it difficult for residents to secure satisfactory relocation options (*interview information with Xia, local project implementing staff*). Some of them are left unable to finalise agreements, placing them in a state of prolonged housing limbo. In some cases, residents have endured this uncertain status for nearly a decade, as their neighbourhoods deteriorate around them during ongoing demolition and redevelopment. The unpredictable duration of redevelopment projects fuels concerns related to declining health, mortality, and fluctuations in the housing market. The psychological stress is significant, with many seniors reporting emotional exhaustion.

They (local government) asked me to wait for rehousing. But what if they can only provide me a dwelling and then rehouse me 20 years after the demolition? I cannot wait ... I really cannot wait for 20 years. (Gang, 60s, male, disabled and living alone)

The pressure experienced by seniors negotiating with local governments over compensation is palpable. As our survey data show that among the 104 respondents, 91 per cent seniors expressed high levels of stress. This stress is rooted in perceptions of compensation fairness and the urgency to secure adequate housing solutions without undue delay. Some seniors, feeling too old to wait, reluctantly accept government offers or delegate decision-making to their children. Others, dissatisfied with offers, opt to resist relocation efforts, reflecting the personal significance attached to their homes. For instance, Gang (60 s, male) resisted vacating his home despite his neighbours' departure, insisting on immediate relocation as his preferred compensation choice to avoid the risks associated with other options. The fear of homelessness affects the seniors even before demolition commences, causing significant distress among affected residents.

**Wealth redistribution and caregiving in the shadow of re(dis)possession** – In the face of urban redevelopment, families of affected seniors contend with two interrelated challenges. First, they must make collective decisions about compensation. Redevelopment offers a rare opportunity for wealth accumulation (see Figure 4), prompting families to engage in strategic coordination – both to negotiate more favourable compensation and to manage its internal distribution among siblings in ways that avoid intra-family conflict. Second, seniors and their families must reorganise living and caregiving arrangements, determining who will provide care and where displaced elders will live. Thus, urban redevelopment is not merely an economic event but also a site where collectivist and individualist logics intersect within evolving intergenerational relationships in urban China.

Within Chinese familial structures, collectivism typically guides decisions, particularly regarding the transfer of family wealth. Understanding each family member's needs becomes essential when navigating

compensation decisions. The concept of 'descending familism,' in which elders prioritise the welfare of younger generations (Yan 2016), frequently shapes such negotiations. Many seniors, particularly those living with adult or marriage-aged children, are more concerned with securing housing for their children than for themselves. In this context, urban redevelopment compensation becomes a critical site of intergenerational negotiation. As evidenced in Hui and Qing's case study, these seniors frequently express frustration when compensation packages fail to account for their children's housing needs – an illustration of how standardised resettlement policies often overlook complex multigenerational household realities. The structural tension between policy regulations and heterogeneous household needs creates an implementation gap where standard compensation packages (monetary or in-kind) prove incapable of resolving intergenerational survival strategies. As a result, families sometimes convert private frustrations into public claims by leveraging petition systems. These actions prompt intervention from higher levels of government, who may introduce ad hoc



Figure 4. Deteriorating community environment versus promotional messages highlighting benefits of urban redevelopments. The message includes: improving quality of life, enhancing the living environment, and increasing property-related income of households. Source: Authors.

policy solutions – such as targeted poverty relief – to resolve conflicts rooted in compensation inadequacy (Interview information with Jia, a project implementing staff; Wei, a lawyer of the project).

How will my daughter support herself for the rest of her life? She is already 36. How will she make a living?! We can help her now because we have a retirement allowance of around 6,000 RMB per month. But what happens when we die? Who will take care of her? We don't mean to be a 'nail household' that refuses to move, but in the nearby neighbourhood, some residents are refusing to relocate. (Hui, 60s, female, living with her husband and her daughter's family)

My son is over 30 years old. He and his girlfriend are not ready to get married because our family don't have a decent apartment for them. ... The ideal situation would be for the government to provide me with enough compensation for two apartments. Then my son could get married. Now, at over 60 years old, we still can't afford an apartment. Even with the compensation, about 4000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup>, it's not enough. The compensation just isn't sufficient. (Qing, 60s, female, living alone)

Beyond compensation, many respondents faced dilemmas around rehousing and caregiving. While some seniors preferred independent living due to differing habits across generations, others – particularly those with long-standing co-residential arrangements – chose to remain with their children. For example, Fang (85, female) lives with her son and daughter-in-law and intends to continue doing so, aligning with traditional patrilocal caregiving norms. Her decision is supported by her financial independence via a state pension. However, not all respondents shared this stability. Some reported conflicts over caregiving expectations and disagreements regarding the distribution of wealth from redevelopment compensation. These disputes reflect the broader tensions between traditional filial norms and contemporary challenges in family caregiving and inheritance negotiation.

My son mentioned that they now want to have us live in their current home, while they move out to rent a place. Later, once we finalize what compensation we'll receive, he and his wife are planning to claim all the compensation for

themselves in the future. However, I also have a daughter (married) who should rightfully receive a share of the compensation. We'll have to figure out how to divide it later – this is quite complicated to discuss now ... So, we're also avoiding discussing this topic altogether....

(Yuan, 72, male, living together with his wife)

Because of the redevelopment, my children asked me to give up my share of the compensation. They said if I did, they would visit me often, but if I didn't, they might not. Well, it's as if I have a tender fillet (refers to the compensation), I have to give it all to my three children. I have to give up my share! ... But my neighbours advised me to keep some money for myself. In the future, if my children refuse to take care of me, I won't be able to support myself. Then, who I can turn to for help? Nobody! (Shuang, 67, female, living alone)

The cases of our respondents exemplify how caregiving obligations and the distribution of compensation are intricately linked during urban redevelopment. Ideally, both caregiving responsibilities and compensation should be equitably distributed among children. However, various factors, such as parental preferences and children's socio-economic circumstances, influence decision-making. Children facing financial hardships may receive a larger portion of compensation or fewer caregiving duties to alleviate their burdens. Gender norms also play a role, with some seniors believing sons should receive more compensation and assume greater caregiving responsibilities.

Negotiations among family members are essential to reach consensus on caregiving roles and compensation distribution. Formalising these agreements through legal channels ensures future security in ageing care arrangements. For instance, in Fang's case, her children agreed through negotiation that their brother would exclusively receive compensation and assume caregiving duties, while the daughters would forego compensation and caregiving responsibilities. Legalising this agreement under civil affairs supervision protected Fang's interests. While Fang's family achieved consensus, other senior residents face ongoing family disputes over wealth distribution and caregiving duties, exacerbating their stress, anxiety, and feelings of insecurity.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper examines how urban redevelopment influences individuals – particularly senior residents in China – and shapes their responses. While dispossession is widely recognised as a core component of displacement and urban redevelopment (Lees 2008; He & Qian 2023; Kundu & Satija 2023), this study adds to existing literature by highlighting the role of re-possession, in which residents receive monetary or in-kind compensation from project initiators (e.g. local governments or developers). The coexistence of dispossession and re-possession can yield tangible benefits, such as increased household wealth and improved living environments. However, this dual dynamic also intensifies the complexity of resident experiences. It exacerbates tensions not only between institutions and individuals but also within families, as decisions about compensation and relocation reveal competing interests and values.

By situating the dynamic of dis(re-)possession within the interaction between individual spatiotemporal experiences and contemporary modes of spatial production, this study contributes to the literature by offering a deeper understanding of why residents – while potentially and even significantly benefiting from re-possession (financially) – may still face new challenges and exhibit seemingly contradictory responses, oscillating between resistance and cooperation. From a spatial perspective, current redevelopment practices prioritise the commodification of abstract space. Even when re-possession is offered, it has clear limitations. First, compensation often fails to account for the symbolic, emotional, and historical significance of place, deepening feelings of loss associated with the demolition of ancestral homes. Second, perceived inequities between existing communities and future relocation sites foster dissatisfaction, especially when seniors evaluate relocation in terms of daily access to health care, shopping, and social ties. Third, environmental degradation in original neighbourhoods – caused by disinvestment and structural shifts – can motivate seniors to consider relocation, challenging idealised notions of place attachment. We find

that these areas may simultaneously serve as both ‘enabling places’ and ‘disabling spaces’, which is in line with the extant literature (see e.g. Taylor 1999). Temporally, redevelopment projects – driven by economic logic, accountability metrics, and control mechanisms – often clash with residents’ sense of time, generating anxiety in the following ways. First, seniors face physical challenges related to ageing, relocation logistics, and the search for new housing. Second, low trust in project implementers amplifies uncertainty around fulfilment of relocation promises, producing hesitation or non-cooperation – even in the presence of re-possession incentives. Moreover, intergenerational differences in spatial-temporal rhythms create additional stress, as seniors must navigate divergent needs within families during the redevelopment process. The findings on disputes between senior residents and other stakeholders concerning redevelopment timelines resonate with existing literature on the social consequences of contemporary urban redevelopment practices (Davidson 2009; Zhang 2022; Kundu & Satija 2023).

This study also sheds light on the under-explored role of the family in shaping senior experiences during forced relocation. While much of the literature emphasises structural forces or individual agency (Li *et al.* 2019a; He & Qian 2023), our findings underscore the family as a collective actor in negotiating compensation and mediating institutional pressures. Families often work together to maximise compensation outcomes, with members drawing on shared needs or hardships to morally appeal to local authorities. Yet, individualism and changing parent–child interactions can endanger this collective motivation for family interests, particularly when considering obligations and benefits allocation related to family wealth and ageing care issues. The role of the family is further emphasised as it functions as a mediator for contested relationships between structural forces and affected individuals. In the context of state-led urban redevelopment projects, conflicts between local governments and affected individuals have partly transferred into disputes within families, highlighting the paradoxical nature of institutional practices in stabilising the post-relocation lives of seniors

involved in urban redevelopment. On the one hand, local governments employ legal approaches, such as legislation and jurisdiction, to help senior individuals decide which child will assume responsibility for their care and distribute family wealth gained through urban redevelopments (e.g. Fang's case). On the other hand, through this legislative process, ageing care obligations are entirely internalised into the family domain. This indicates a retreat by institutions on senior care issues for those affected by displacement. Despite family-based negotiations and official involvement, some seniors may still face uncertainty around long-term care and ageing security.

Comparably, the experiences of seniors in our research show nuanced differences regarding the kind of support individuals can get and to what extent they can depend on family, the state, and the market for combating personal crises in a society undergoing multifaceted transitions like China. The encounters of seniors in the Chinese context also display distinctions from their counterparts in other countries. The first notable difference is how family members interact concerning individual obligations and benefits in the family sphere. For instance, seniors involved in urban redevelopment projects in the Netherlands and the United States are mostly tenants from public housing sectors (Popkin *et al.* 2005; Smith & Ferryman 2006; Kleinhans *et al.* 2018). The compensation (re-possession) they receive is relatively limited and primarily aimed at assisting with a smooth transition for resettlement, rarely leading to a significant increase in family wealth, as is often the case in China. Interactions within the family mainly concern forced movement with regard to finding alternative housing, with less emphasis on obligations and benefits allocation within the family domain. The second difference lies in the relatively mature social welfare system for ageing care and the prevalence of individualism and the high value placed on independence in a Western context. This makes caregiving for seniors more of an individual affair rather than a collective family obligation (particularly children's responsibility). Unlike the path dependence on family caregiving in China, seniors in a Western context prefer to turn to institutions or markets and reduce reliance on others. Seniors in the Chinese context are likely

to face more challenges than their counterparts in Western contexts regarding care-receiving issues. To prevent seniors from becoming a 'hard-to-house' group under current one-size-fits-all compensation models (Popkin *et al.* 2005), we recommend more targeted interventions. These include shortening relocation timelines for seniors, offering economic security through pensions, facilitating access to senior care centres, and providing follow-up support after relocation.

This study has some limitations. Follow-up interviews with seniors after relocation are essential to fully assess the long-term impacts of forced displacement. Future research should also include the perspectives of family members – particularly children – to better understand intergenerational dynamics and how families make relocation decisions under redevelopment pressures.

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#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Filial Piety: Filial piety, which is embedded in Confucianism, requires children to provide their parents with various types of support (e.g. material, economic and emotional support) and to show them respect and obedience (Cheung & Kwan 2009).

<sup>2</sup>Danwei communities are affiliated with state-owned manufacturing enterprises, governmental institutions, etc., as public welfare for residing their employees during the socialist era in China.

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