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Important note
To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

New York - Livable Cities

AMPS Proceedings Series 34.3

AMPS PROCEEDINGS SERIES 34.3

City Tech - New York City College of Technology & AMPS.   14-16 June, 2023

Livable Cities: A Conference on Issues Affecting Life in Cities

ARCHITECTURE_MEDIA_POLITICS_SOCIETY

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URBAN VILLAGES IN SHENZHEN: THE MEANING OF BEING NEGLECTED

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INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANT OF THE "EMPTY"

Chinese urbanization has been taking place at an unprecedented pace and scale. In the last four decades, the urban landscape in China has been drastically reshaped, with most land being taken, fully developed, or redeveloped. What left are those unoccupied spaces as the exception of state which provide a different scenario, potential and deserve more attention.

Borrowing Barthes' theory of semiology and notion of "empty space",[1] Bach claimed that Shenzhen's villages are "empty" in that the local power can't be adequately signified due to legal status but they remain central to the city's existence.[2] Villages used to be the center of Chinese society in the past, and now they continue to be the center around which a city is organized.

However, outsiders rarely paid attention to villages per se but rather to a few consumption nodes that sustained their daily urban life. "Passing by" is a common experience for society outside villages. In the case of Pingshan village, where this research dived into, broad boulevards, fancy shopping malls and hotels, high-rise middle-class apartments, and university campus and institutions intersected with frown-upon neighborhoods that clustered with low-income or middle-income and lowly educated people. Every working day, thousands of white-collar workers (*shangbanzu*) came out of the subway station University Town early in the morning and walked through the village along a main street before crossing a traffic road to their offices in innovation parks (formerly industrial zones) or universities. While passing by the village, they stop for breakfast and greet their acquaintances. I was also an outsider. With intensive observations at the site and encounters with residents of the villages, I tried to read the village as an comprehensive story.

Scholars have conducted an abundance of studies to understand urban villages and other migrant enclaves. In general, the spatial dimension and the social-economic dimension are two main focuses. Spatial structures, access densities, and open spaces were well studied.[3] And informality and rural migrants' lives were also well explored in ethnographic studies.[4] Some of them have attempted to integrate social and spatial characteristics. Still, more study is needed to advance our understanding of social-spatial interactions. Furthermore, as almost all studies have recognized the dichotomy of rural and urban, it is necessary to give further attention to rural cultural background as a tradition and how it still persists and influences cities today.

Based on my fieldwork from March to May 2023 and insights from existing literature, this paper explores how the urban village has been neglected and meaning of it. Further, it discusses a hybrid scenario as a possible future. Field observation was used as one main method to understand spatial characteristics and interactions among people and space. Fieldnotes were taken. Unstructured

interviews were conducted in a casual and narrative way with 18 residents covering local villagers, middle-aged migrants, and young migrants. Drawings are also used for analysis, to stimulate my encounters with residents and also to aid in the analysis of everyday practices at specific locations.

BEING NEGLECTED: NEITHER URBAN NOR RURAL SPACES

Pingshan Village, now located in the middle of the populated megacity of Shenzhen, was once in a suburban area of district Nanshan at the edge of the 1979 Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. It used to be surrounded by paddy fields, orchard trees, and mountains. Since 2001, "University Town" has become the landmark of the area, and a designated subway stop was constructed right next to the gate of the village.

Like other urban villages, Pingshan village is an example of "ignored urban space" within postreform cities.[5] In contrast to the new urban space as expansion of urban areas into suburban areas and renewed space as a result of gentrification, the ignored urban space is concentrated with low-income people, rural-to-urban migrants, and old manufacturing factories.[6] Such left-over space is often regarded as "backwards" or "behind" the progress and vision of modernization, and several reasons contributed to this neglect.

Given that there are other, preferable possibilities, the government showed little interest in areas like the villages of Shenzhen. The costs associated with relocation, compensation, and redevelopment were too high to attract developers to realize the vision of a "modern global city". In contrast, purchasing agricultural and bare land was way more affordable and hence favored, especially at the early urbanization stage.[7] Additionally, the lengthy process of negotiating the exchange of land values appeared to have been a barrier for a city that was eager to grow.

Second, the state's approach to villages is ambiguous. On the one hand, the state recognizes that urban villages played an important role in advancing urbanization: they housed millions of migrants on whom the city depends and for whom the city cannot secure citizenship.[8] On the other hand, the obvious visible disparity and shantylike physical environment compelled the state to transform these areas. As a result, many tactics have been used in the past decades, ranging from tolerating and eliminating to formalizing.[9] Villages have been tolerated to allow renting to accommodate migrating populations and are now facing issues of being formalized and regulated through physical renovation and supplementing rural, low-income people with urban citizens.

By labeling "urban village" or "*chengzhongcun*", the state and planners successfully alienated the space from its history, not to mention its particularity. It also manifested itself as an informal space, and such labeling becomes a governance tool for interventions and regulations. The 500 years of history since it was founded as a traditional village in south China that built upon family and kinship became remote and obscure. As a result, villages turned into leftover spaces in cities that is indifferent or empty to society outside.

THE PERSISTENCE OF VILLAGE TRADITIONS

Compared to classical European space, the Chinese space emphasizes "depth, enclosure and containment of the discourse".[10] This is in accordance with Lu's summary of traditional Chinese cities as "walled, intensive and compact" that has persisted in modern China despite of changes.[11] Inside village (Chinse: *cunli*), that residents often used to distinguish the village from the society outside, remained these spatial features.

The village's urbanizing process has formed layers in both space and time dimensions. From an aerial view, it contains the very dense village, which the locals refer to as the old village, and the extended village, which the locals refer to as the new village. Along history, there are layers of the past and present, which means tradition and modernity. For understanding the space quality and daily life of

the inside village, four points were selected, representing diverse interactions among different groups of people (e.g. local villager, old generation of migrant, young generation of migrant) and spaces (Figure 1).

1. Inside core of the village
2. Edge of the inside core
3. Extended area in rigid pattern
4. Extended area in loose pattern

Figure 1. Selection of four points that represent different spatial structures.

Moving inside the village core

"It's like a maze, easy to get lost". This is my initial impression, as it is for anybody who enters the village's inside core for the first time. Hundreds of possible routes can be taken.[12] It brings meaning of moving in the village, and by that strong social interactions are created and enhanced. The inside core remained the original village's residential size (1.2 hectare), containing about 200 houses. Buildings are compacted and densely arranged. The ancient southwest-northeast paths (following the topography) were interrupted and blurred during the process of house demolishing and rebuilding: informal and incremental expansion of housing footprint claimed the common pedestrian spaces. Alleys today are indeed spaces in-between the built, some of which are narrow for one person to pass while others are wide and/or semi- enclosed.

These in-between spaces are where people of different backgrounds encounter. Uncle Zhang,[13] in his early 50s, lives with his wife and daughter in a one-story old house made of bricks and covered in a decaying lime plaster. His job is to collect garbage every early morning between 3 and 6 am and every evening between 6 and 11pm. At his spare time, he enjoys strolling around the village, visiting neighbor's homes, the only little park in front of ancestor halls etc. One of his favorite spots is a corner just 10 meters from his house, where he can gossip about what's going on in the villagewith his neighbor who is a Anhui laoxiang (people of the same micro geographic origin) (Figure 2).

The hundreds of routes are not only connectors between destinations but also collectors. As a sign to slow down passengers and welcome their stop-by, furniture like plastic stools and wood chairs (probably recycled from restaurants or others) were placed alongside their private belongings like a shoes shelf, broom, bikes and hanging cloths. In a morning around 10am, Uncle Zhang just grabbed a kid stool and sat in a shadow, complaining with his neighbor Brother Du and another Laoxiang. Other neighbors occasionally join the talk. During the day, many activities were stimulated in this limited but diverse settings, including active socializing such as meeting neighbors and friends, passive listening while doing their own things, and parenting.
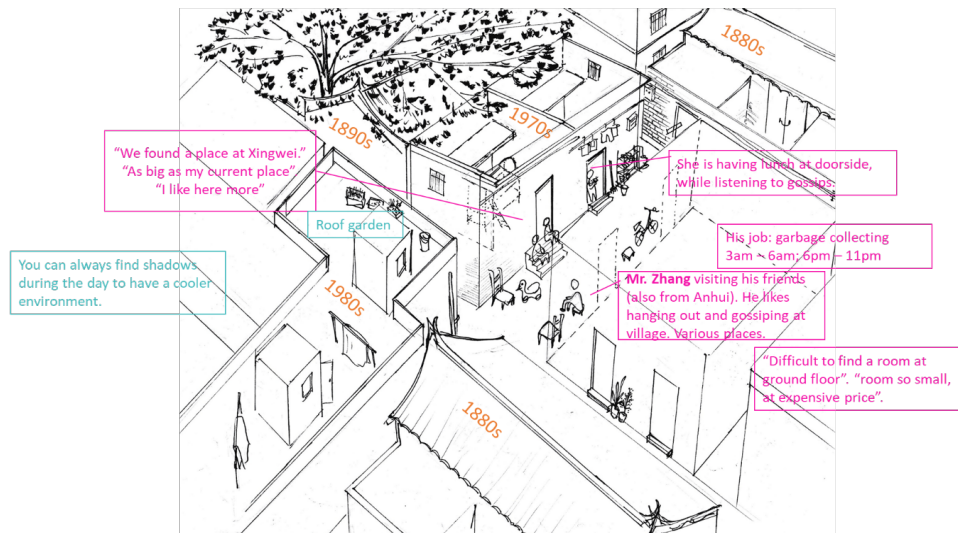
Figure 2. Point 1: favorite corner of Uncle Zhang inside the village core

Reclaiming the edge of inside core

Since late 1990s, the edge of the village core (between the inside core and extended area) has been defined as a wide standard pavement. The only exception is the square in front of the two ancestral halls (*gongci* [14]). These ancestral halls, which had been demolished and rebuilt several times at the same location, marked the front boundary of the old village.

"Bright moonlight, shining on the ground (*ditang*).

Little baby, be good and go to bed.

Tomorrow morning Mum must hurry for rice transplanting.

Grandfather goes up the hill for cow watching…"

As in this popular Cantonese lullaby *Moonlight* (*Yueguangguang*), the pavement was indeed an open ground called *ditang* in front of the ancestral halls and houses. It was basically a flattened earth ground that was used for drying grains in the sun at harvest season, and also for leisure activities in the evening when moonlight illuminated the ground. It also hosted ritual events like weddings and national holiday events.

For Granny Zhan,[15] a local villager who married into this village in the late 1950s, the pavement remained the open ground in front of her cottage (Figure 3). She reclaimed it by partially enclosing the front space with recycled portable temporary fences and continued to use it for her leisure. Almost every day, after offering incense to divine beings in the early morning, she sits outside facing outwards, soaking up some sun while waiting for her neighbours (a middle-aged single lady and other old villagers) to join her and have small chats.
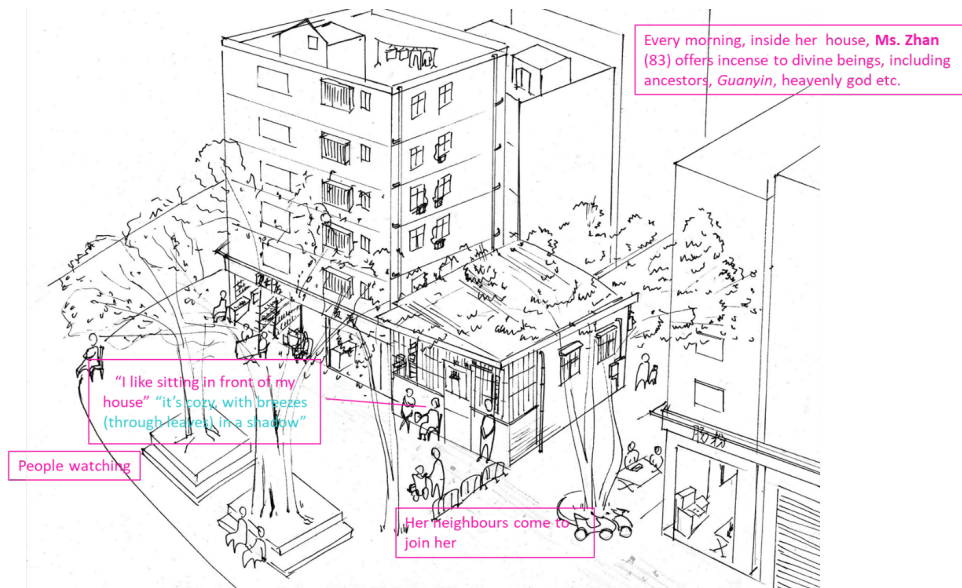
Figure 3. Point 2: Granny Zhan's house and its front space

Extended area: on and off

The new village is the extended residential area of the core. To the southeast side of the old village is a handshake building model (literally shaking hands from within their rooms) with a rigid layout (Figure 4). The informal extension of balconies and windows reduced the distance between buildings significantly. It is a standard design by the village collective: buildings are 7-8 floors (some with one extra floor added), and each floor contains 4 households in two types (one is a studio with kitchen and toilet of about 20 square meters, and the other has one living room, one bedroom, kitchen, and toilet for 40 square meters).

Apart from being known for the handshaking narrowness, it is more about the dynamic of on and off,[16] which opens and closes people's connections to other buildings and village environment. Xiao Mo,[17] who was born in Guangxi province in the early 1990s, lived in a studio on the 3rd floor, benefiting from its proximity to her office. When she opened her windows and curtains, she would be immediately engulfed in an oily, noisy, smoky, and dirty environment. With "on", all private rooms become one space. When she closed her windows and curtains, she could enter another world created by herself, private and clean.
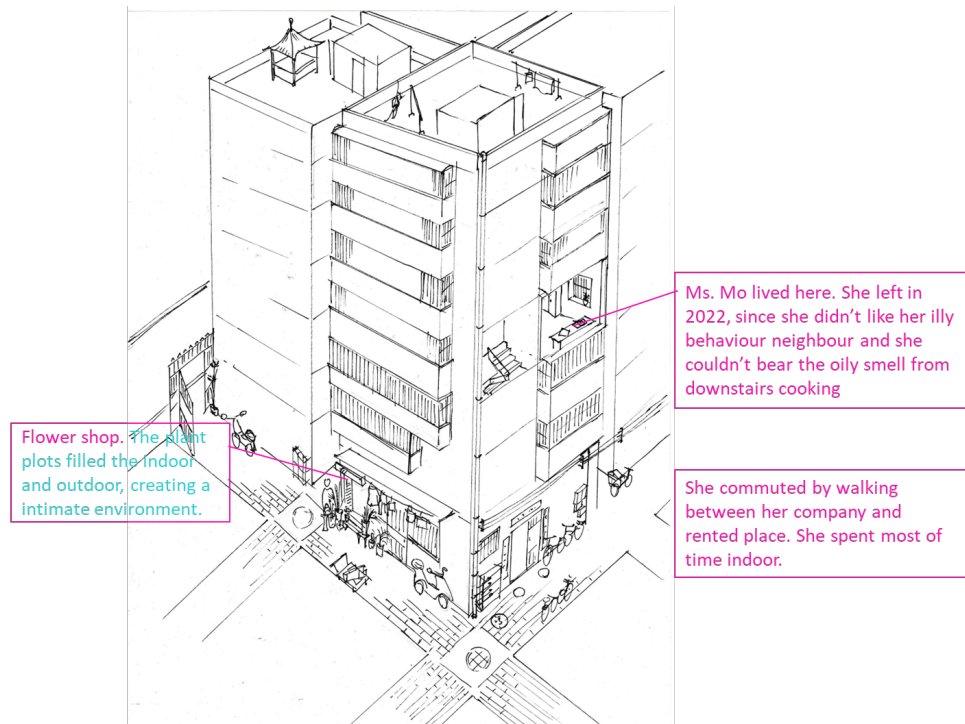
Ms. Mo lived here. She left in 2022, since she didn't like her illy behaviour neighbour and she couldn't bear the oily smell from downstairs cooking

Flower shop. The plant plots filled the indoor and outdoor, creating a intimate environment.

She commuted by walking between her company and rented place. She spent most of time indoor.

Figure 4. Point 3: Xiao Mo's apartment at extended area

Extended area: privatizing spaces

The extended area to the northeast of the old village has a relatively loose built layout, which is partially influenced by steep slopes. The dwellings are self-built houses owned by villagers on their homestead. In comparison to point 3, these units share bigger distances in between. Each building has its own yard, terrace, or balcony with a view and differs from each other. Some yards are fully enclosed, while others are partially enclosed and interspersed with pathways.

The spacious room with an open yard let Sister Hua decide to take the ground floor of a four-story house constructed on a slope (Figure 5). Sister Hua,[18] who was born in Hunan Province in the mid-1980s, moved to Pingshan village about 8 years ago for her children's education.[19] She is both a housewife and an entrepreneur. Every day she drove her two children to and from school, making meals and caring for them. Unlike other young couples who usually receive grandparental assistance,[20] she prefers to raise children herself using modern ideas. At the same time, she operates a flower store, which she developed at covid time to improve her down mood after her hotel business failed.

The building block has only 4 households, each with one floor. While other households use the access from the basement, she privatized the semi-open yard and stair pathways and claimed ownership. This area now became a playground for children, an experimental plot for growing vegetables and plants, and the setting for her flower business. "Though I know it's not my own house, it feels like home. Living here is comfortable, similar to my hometown in the countryside", she remarked.
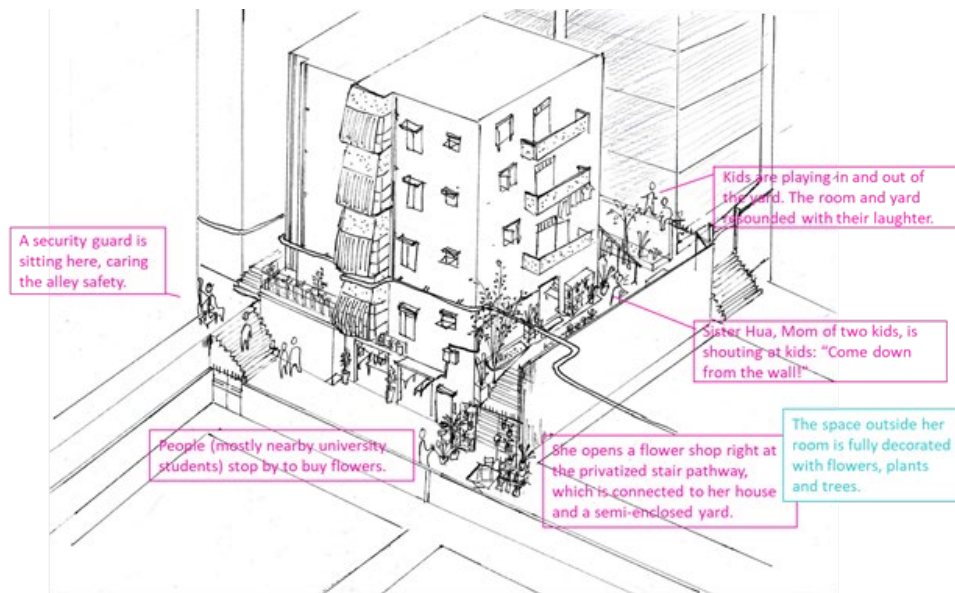
Figure 5. Points 4:Sister Hua's privatized yard and stair pathway

DISCUSSIONS OVER TRADITIONS AND MODERNITY

Shenzhen's villages have been part of the city's urbanization trajectory.[21] As a whole, they connect the city's past, history, and possible future. Their "feudal" traditions, which have been criticized by authorities and urban citizens, remain and coexist with modern infrastructure and regulations. In a fast changing society, Shenzhen's villages demonstrated the tradition as "what we make and sustain everyday and everywhere through the occasionally contemptuous act of living".[22]

Undeniably, the tradition has been declining as local villagers became landlords and moved to high-rise middle-class apartments. The feeling of "being lost" was revealed by villagers[23] in terms of land loss, loss of intimate personal relationships that were bonded by kinship (Chinese: *renqing*), and loss of natural elements. Pingshan village, like many other traditional villages in south China, is a lineage-based settlement established cosmologically hundreds of years ago. Its orientation followed the topography and took the mountains and rivers as landscape context. Being interrupted by large footprint infrastructures like campus buildings, today's spatial characters are no longer visible. Even the traditional *fengshui* tactics are confined to names and memories.

Every villager recalls an ancient well and a thousand-year-old cypress in the village, where people used the water for drinking and children for bathing. Aside from these practical uses, folklore allowed people to preserve it until the 1980s when industrialization caused severe pollution. "That cypress tree is goodness from a thousand years ago. That's why the water was always crystal clear. It was said that if you are sick, drinking tree bark water can help recovering", I was told by a local villager who works at the village community.

Still, you can find cultural imprints like ornamental *paifang*, ancestral halls, *Guanyin* temple. The village name written on the *paifang* memorize the settlements' relationship with the topography and blessing at local; and the inscribe tablet and couplet on the back remembered the lineage and their ancestors. Rural migrants arrived and through their daily lives they have been reforming their habitus[24] on top of these imprints and remaking traditions.

In addition, the land, once rural, is still collectively owned by villagers, as a legacy from Mao's time. Villagers have well defined the house plot, but left other spaces such as *ditang,* semi-open yard, and pathways loosely defined or ambiguous. The spatial attributes above enabled villagers and migrants

continue to common or occupy these spaces temporarily or permanently. Thus, the village remained being infused with rural sense of living and using spaces.

CONCLUSION

Urban villages as ignored urban space tell a comprehensive story. They are neither a resistance to modernization nor subordinance to urban life. The reluctance of state, either with no investment interest or ambiguous in measurements, produced such leftover spaces.

By analyzing particular pointes based on layers (spatial and temporal), diverse daily practices that in relation and interact with space were unraveled. Travelling from inside core to the extended area, the old village to the new village, the past to present, the activities change from collective to private. The establishment of new village can be seen a protection of the old core, allowing the tradition resurrect.

The rural culture inherited from the village's past is a tradition that has been carried on through people using the space. Despite changes in forms or designated formal functions such as pavement, traditional practices remain as a habitus. Villagers and rural migrants together link the past with the present, making urban villages an entanglement of urban essence.

NOTES

[1] Roland Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," in *The City and the Sign*, ed. Mark Gottidiener and Alexander Lagopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 88–98.

[2] Jonathan Bach, ""They Come In Peasants And Leave Citizens ": Urban Villages and the Making of Shenzhen, China," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (2010): 421–58.

[3] Matthijs Van Oostrum, "Access, Density and Mix of Informal Settlement: Comparing Urban Villages in China and India," *Cities* 117 (October 1, 2021): 103334, https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CITIES.2021.103334; Xiaoli Liu and Wei Liang, "No Zhejiangcun: Social and Spatial Implications of Informal Urbanization on the Periphery of Beijing," *Cities* 14, no. 2 (1997): 95–108, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0264-2751(96)00047-9.

[4] Alan Smart, "Ethnographic Perspectives on the Mediation of Informality between People and Plans in Urbanising China," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 7 (January 16, 2018): 1477–83,
https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017745440; Yang Zhan, "'My Life Is Elsewhere': Social Exclusion and Rural Migrants' Consumption of Homeownership in Contemporary China," *Dialectical Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (2015): 405–22, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43895167; Bach, ""They Come In Peasants And Leave Citizens ": Urban Villages and the Making of Shenzhen, China."

[5] Tingwei Zhang, "Urban Development Patterns in China: New, Renewed, and Ignored Urban Spaces," in *Urbanization in China: Critical Issues in an Era of Rapid Growth*, ed. Yan Song and Chengri Ding (Toronto: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2007), 3–28.

[6] Zhang, *Urban Development Patterns in China*.

[7] Yan Song, Yves Zenou, and Chnegri Ding, "The Role of China's Urbanizing Villages in Housing Rural Migrants," in *Urbanization in China: Critical Issues in an Era of Rapid Growth*, ed. Yan Song and Chengri Ding (Toronto: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2007), 145–68.

[8] Sainan Lin and Piper Gaubatz, "Socio-Spatial Segregation in China and Migrants' Everyday Life Experiences: The Case of Wenzhou," *Urban Geography* 38, no. 7 (August 9, 2016): 1019–38,
https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2016.1182287.

[9] Xukun Zhang, "Informality and Rapid Urban Transformation: A Case Study of Regulating Urban Villages in Shenzhen," *GeoJournal* 88, no. 4 (August 1, 2023): 4425–39,
https://doi.org/10.1007/S10708-023-10874-X/METRICS.

[10] Jianfei Zhu, "A Celestial Battlefield: The Forbidden City and Beijing in Late Imperial China," *AA Files*, no. 28 (1994): 48–60, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/29543922.

[11] Duanfang Lu, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form:Modernity, Scarcity and Space 1949-2005* (Oxfordshire, New York: Routledge, 2006).

[12] Matthijs Van Oostrum, "Appropriating Public Space: Transformations of Public Life and Loose Parts in Urban Villages," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 15, no. 1 (2021): 84–105, https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2021.1886973.

[13] Uncle Zhang is pseudonym for privacy. Interviews with him was taken at alleys and a consent form was signed.

[14] *Gongci* 公祠 is different from *citang* 祠堂, which is the temple built for a family branch. At the studied village, people refer to their temple of the origin or common ancestor as *da citang* (big ancestral hall).

[15] Granny Zhan is pseudonym for privacy. Interviews with her was taken at the open ground in front of her house. A consent form was signed.

[16] Momoyo Kaijima, Junzo Kurodo, and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, *Made in Tokyo* (Kajima Institute, 2001).

[17] Xiao Mo is pseudonym for privacy. Interviews with her was taken at the public hall of her current apartment. A consent form was signed.

[18] Hua is pseudonym for privacy. Interviews with her was taken at her house. A consent form was signed.

[19] Pingshan village is one of the few urban villages in Nanshan district that offer quotas for migrants' children for public schooling with low or attainable entry requirements. The middle school education was only made available two years ago as an extension of its primary education. For her case, it was a 1-year tax payment plus residency registration at local neighbourhood, whereas homeownership is necessary for most public schools.

[20] Elisabeth J. Croll, "The Intergenerational Contract in the Changing Asian Family," *Oxford Development Studies* 34, no. 4 (December 2010): 473–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600810601045833.

[21] Bach, ""They Come In Peasants And Leave Citizens ": Urban Villages and the Making of Shenzhen, China."

[22] Nezar AlSayyad, "The End of Tradition, or the Tradition of Endings?," in *The End of Tradition?* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–28.

[23] Interviews with villagers were taken in casual talks during house visits or co-working at the village community office. Consent forms were signed.

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