

Intersecting Dynamics: Migration, State Control and Urban Expansion in Shenzhen's Urban Villages

Qingzheng Wang*

School of Social and Political Science, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 3010, Australia

*Email: Qingzhengw@student.unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the dynamic interplay between migration, state control, and urban expansion in Shenzhen's urban villages. With Shenzhen's designation as a special economic zone in 1978, the city experienced unprecedented economic and demographic growth, primarily driven by rural-to-urban migration and facilitated by the government's reform policies. This influx has led to the proliferation of urban villages, which are informal housing areas that have developed due to rapid urbanization and the state's uneven regulatory oversight. These urban villages have become focal points of social and economic activity, housing diverse populations including migrant workers and local entrepreneurs. The essay argues that migration and state control are crucial in shaping the urban landscape of Shenzhen, influencing the development and characteristics of urban villages. Through a detailed examination of these areas, the essay highlights the complexities of urban expansion in the context of China's broader socio-economic transformations.

KEYWORDS

Urban Villages; Shenzhen; State Control; Migration; Urbanization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Like many other emerging nations, China has witnessed a tremendous inflow of people into its cities along with urban growth (Hao et al., 2011). Specifically, China's reform and opening up in 1978 made Shenzhen a special economic zone, and its GDP rose from 200 million yuan in 1978 to 2.24 trillion in 2017 (Wang, 2023). Additionally, urban migratory populations are growing, especially in urban peripheral areas and urban villages close to city centers, and this has been supported by economic growth (Wang, 2023). The rise of urban villages in China is commonly attributed to rapid urbanization and rural-urban migration, however there are also various other political, social, and economic factors at play (Wang et al., 2009, p. 965; Wang, 2023; Zhang, 2023). The absence of state regulation or the state's inefficiency has also resulted in the widespread growth of urban villages (Zhang, 2023).

This essay argues that migration and state control have contributed to Shenzhen's demographic and economic landscape, especially the development of urban villages (informal houses). These elements have driven Shenzhen's rapid expansion and transformation. The rest of this essay has three major parts. The first part is the literature review, which will introduce and explain the relevant scholar's opinions about informality, migration, state control, and urban development, providing a solid theoretical background. The second part will explain the development of urban villages in Shenzhen and describe their background, driving factors, and functions. The last part is the conclusion, which is responsible for reiterating the argument with the key points that exist in the essay while pointing to future relevant research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban villages are informal housing, which is very common in China's urbanization process, and among informal housing in the world, Shenzhen's urban villages are unique. Informality is pivotal in global dialogues concerning urbanization, disparities, and irregular progress (Garmany & Almeida, 2023, p. 276). Urban villages are common informal communities in Chinese cities where urban-built environments progressively encircle rural villages throughout urbanization (Pan & Du, 2021). Urban villages' shortcomings include overcrowding, traffic jams, filthy living quarters, lack of property ownership, and various environmental and public health hazards to the land brought on by the "illegal" habitation of slum residents (Ghertner, 2010, p. 204). Informal neighbourhoods in Latin America are distinguished by a "lack of formal urban planning, substandard construction, illegal or semilegal land-tenure arrangements, a preponderance of poor and nonwhite residents, and restricted access to public goods and services" (Fischer, 2014, pp. 11-12). Additionally, Shenzhen urban villages exhibit numerous similarities to shanty towns in other developing nations, such as overcrowding, high population density, substandard housing, inadequate infrastructure, social and environmental issues, and elevated crime rates (Wang et al., 2009, p. 970). However, there is no occurrence of a military invasion on land in Shenzhen's urban villages, and the shelters given are of higher quality compared to those found in slums or shanty towns (Wang et al., 2009, p. 970). Moreover, currently, most urban village residents are not impoverished and come from different regions of China with distinct socio-cultural backgrounds, including indigenous villagers, migrant tenants, newly graduated youths, and some international business operators live there (Pan & Du, 2021).

Urbanization factors like migration and government neglect, particularly in Shenzhen, have led to the growth of informal settlements. Several socio-economic factors are currently linked to favelas, including poverty, inadequate sanitation, lack of education, rural-to-urban migration, and government neglect (Garmany & Almeida, 2023, p. 282). Moreover, the asymmetrical trade with rural areas, haphazardly developed settlements (fragmentation) disregarded by the government, and a growing informal sector all contribute to the economic expansion but also result in a city that is spatially divided and disjointed (Murphy & Carmody, 2019, p. 148). Additionally, according to De Soto (as cited in Garmany & Almeida, 2023, p. 287), informality resulted from excessive regulation and bureaucratic management. However, the development of urban villages in Shenzhen is due to governmental initial ignorance and later ineffective government supervision (Wang et al., 2009). In Italy, as labour shortages hit the wealthy industrial regions of northern Italy, demand for "flexible" services and low wages surged, attracting more migrant workers from the south and boosting informal housing (Merrill, 2011). Urban areas with high population densities and frequent influxes of commuters and tourists often experience a proliferation of tiny, inexpensive enterprises, which leads to a situation where workers are paid low salaries and the labour is demanding and intense (Sassen, 2011, pp. 88-89). Traditional, informal urban marketplaces and housing arrangements primarily support the subsistence of poorer people (Murphy & Carmody, 2019, p. 143). Urban villages are crucial in the context of rapid urbanization since they provide vital sources of affordable housing and employment prospects for individuals with low incomes (Wang et al., 2009, p. 957). Migrant workers who immigrated to Shenzhen from other places in China to participate in the construction and development of Shenzhen have a significant impact on the development of Shenzhen, including the development of urban villages (Wang et al., 2009).

State control over the city was uneven, often neglecting poorer communities, and Shenzhen did not formally address its complex land management until 1992, and corruption among village cadres also existed. It has long been assumed that the state establishes a more significant presence in affluent neighbourhoods (where levels of capital accumulation are higher) than in poorer ones because the impact of the state machinery tends to vary throughout space (Garmany, 2009). Additionally, planning in the Global South also equates to a dishonest transaction when authorities trade contracts or an exemption from existing rules on new construction for a share of the profits made by development (McFarlane, 2012). Like the favelas of Rio and other Brazilian cities, Pirambu's

material existence—that is, its hospitals, schools, streetlights, public parks, municipal and federal buildings, security and emergency response personnel, etc.—is noticeably less than that of wealthier areas (Garmany, 2009). Before 1992, The municipality used rural hukou status to restrict village people from urban services, while residential solid land use rights stopped developers and the local government from taking over residential land for development (Wang et al., 2009). In Shenzhen, it was not until 1992 that the municipal government granted urban resident status to all locally registered rural people to take over collectively owned land (Gan et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2009, p. 959). Usually, village cadres and their families often lead illegal housing construction, and there is frequently a profit-sharing relationship between village cadres and developers, which could be called corruption (Wang et al., 2009; Shi et al., 2018).

3. CASE STUDY

Geographically, in the process of Shenzhen's urban expansion, roads and other infrastructure improvements also avoided village residences, while the new municipal center and other critical public buildings were constructed on recently purchased farmland (Wang et al., 2009; Hao et al., 2011) to avoid costly and time-consuming plans and the demand of compensation and relocation of Indigenous residents (Hao et al., 2011). This urban expansion method preserves the original land of the villagers in the urban villages and provides a foundation for the construction of urban villages (Wang et al., 2009; Hao et al., 2011). Additionally, after the reform of China's household registration system, rural immigrants obtained the right to reside in Shenzhen temporarily, and a large number of rural immigrants entered Shenzhen to work, stimulating the local rental market (Wang et al., 2009). Moreover, the government ignored the growing urban village housing market and illegal development because it could partially help solve both the livelihood of indigenous villagers and the housing problem of migrants (Wang et al., 2009; Hao et al., 2011). However, when the government wants to limit the development of urban villages, the lack of effective supervision causes urban village development again (Wang et al., 2009; Hao et al., 2011). Two primary aspects promote the development of urban villages in Shenzhen, including the vast immigration and the absence and ineffectiveness of state control. Anyway, the advantageous positioning of urban villages in rapidly expanding cities, coupled with the substantial rise in land prices, have presented village communities with favourable economic and commercial prospects, facilitating their transition from agricultural to urban lifestyles (Wang et al., 2009, pp. 966-967).

3.1. Immigration

Shenzhen's transformation from a fishing village to a global economic hub exemplifies China's rapid urbanization and migrant integration. Remarkably, Shenzhen, a small fishing village, quickly developed into a leading special economic zone, a major global technical and economic force, and a representation of an immigrant city in just thirty years after China implemented its reform and opening-up strategy (Chen, 2023). The investment of multinational capital promoted the development of Shenzhen, and the rapid development and the creation of many job opportunities attracted immigrants from all over China (Clark, 1998). Between 1979 and 2019, 11.79 million people entered Shenzhen, consolidating its position as China's most significant population flowing into cities (Chen, 2023). Migration was crucial in facilitating the urbanization and growth of Shenzhen (Wang et al., 2009, p. 958). The need for inexpensive housing has risen dramatically along with the number of migrants, but the government's efforts to provide such a demand are not meeting it, so urban village attracts a vast number of immigrants (Wang, 2023). Additionally, identity and rights are essential for the migrants (Secor, 2003). The household registration system, which divides all people in the nation into either agricultural (rural) or non-agricultural (urban) populations and requires official approval to migrate, has tightly regulated rural-to-urban migration since 1958 (Clark, 1998; Wang et al., 2009, p. 958). According to Shen (as cited in Wang et al., 2009, pp. 958-959), rural migrants were first

permitted to register as temporary residents of cities in 1985. Since then, the primary contributing reason to China's urbanization has been rural-to-urban migration (Wang et al., 2009, p. 959). Currently, there are so many immigrants in Shenzhen that there is seldom use its local dialect in daily life, basically Mandarin, while the phrase "You are a Shenzhener once you come here" reflects the inclusivity of Shenzhen (Chen, 2023, p. 574).

Shenzhen's rapid development attracted numerous rural migrants; however, due to their low income, they prefer the urban villages, while local farmers earn income by leasing self-built rooms after losing their land. Shenzhen drew a large number of rural migrants during its explosive growth thanks to foreign investments from Hong Kong and other nations, which resulted in the construction of many industries and processing facilities (Wang et al., 2009, p. 959). Simultaneously, locals are turning to land and property-related companies as a means of earning money because new arrivals need inexpensive homes (Hao et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2009). Even though migrants made more money than in other places, they could only afford older, less desirable houses, so many migrants ended up living in shoddy, poorly situated homes in nearby towns (Wang et al., 2009, p. 959). Urban Village meets the increasing demand for immigrants because most immigrants are low-income (Hao et al., 2011). Additionally, migrant workers and urban villages are like magnets that attract each other, because urban villages are expanding and hiring migrant workers to build buildings, while migrant workers rent cheap rooms in urban villages. (Hao, 2011). Local farmers in urban villages create housing on their residential land and lease it to migrant workers, which offer essential facilities such as water, electricity, toilets, and a sewage system (Wang et al., 2009, p. 970). The loss of revenue and farmland forces the villages to find alternative means of subsistence, and most farmers have only completed elementary or junior high school, which makes it challenging to get appropriate employment in cities (Wang et al., 2009, p. 962).

3.2. State Control

Government efforts to regulate the informal development of urban villages in Shenzhen are undermined by inefficiencies and the prevalence of 'popular' illegal practices, often led by local officials with vested interests. Due to the illegal development and subsequent social problems in the village in the city, the government is increasingly unbearable to the urban villages and wants to solve urban villages (Hao et al., 2011, p. 218). However, the inefficiency of government supervision caused the prevalence of housing construction in urban villages (Wang et al., 2009, p. 962). The administrative and political agencies of the time could not effectively regulate the vast and complicated informal settlements solely through penalties and legislation (Ghertner, 2010, p. 190). When the local administration attempted to enhance regulations on village home construction, the outcome frequently entailed an increase in both the size and scope of growth (Wang et al., 2009, p. 967; Hao et al., 2011, p. 219). Because illegal methods were so standard, they were "popular"; resource management still has many different rights, conventions, and regulations today (Meehan, 2013, p. 321). Popular illegalities are, however, brittle accomplishments because different institutional and infrastructure assemblages distribute state authority unevenly (Meehan, 2013, p. 331). The government must use village cadres to implement policies and regulations (typically the highest standards) that limit village development because there is no efficient administrative structure to carry them out (Wang et al., 2009, p. 967). The central government has long criticized the Shenzhen government's lack of effort in fighting against corruption (Clark, 1988). Village leaders occasionally accept bribes from real estate developers while also possessing personal stakes in the development process, and typically, unlawful housing construction is frequently spearheaded by village officials and their families (Wang et al., 2009).

Shenzhen's land reform 1992 sparked resistance from villagers and village leaders, highlighting the limits of state control in the face of entrenched local interests. In 1992, Shenzhen's land reform recognized rural residents as urban citizens, entangling traditional land rights with modern legal and political challenges. According to Shenzhen Municipal Government (as cited in Wang et al., 2009, p.

959), the municipal authority assumed collectively held land and granted urban resident status to all locally registered rural people in 1992. Despite being state-owned in law after the land acquisition, the original villagers retained ownership and could profit from, transfer, and build private dwellings on the site (Gan et al., 2019). Beyond the above territory, the original village collective and people occupied further state-owned land (Gan et al., 2019). Urban subjects assert citizenship rights conditional to their integration into the discourses and behaviours around urban identity and belonging (Secor, 2003). Cultural politics often forms around rights and entitlement disputes, with identity as the center of political conflict (Secor, 2003). Because the expectation that farmers should relinquish their rights for compensation was contested by villagers who believed collective ownership represented their communal rights over generations (Wang et al., 2009, p. 966). However, village leaders, who were also the lowest-level government and Communist Party officials, found themselves in a difficult position, navigating between representing villagers' traditional land rights and governmental pressures (Wang et al., 2009, p. 966). However, as mentioned before, the village leaders prioritize their interests and the interests of their family above state interest, leading to instances of corruption (Wang et al., 2009).

The informal development of urban villages in China reflects the government's flexibility in planning restrictions and housing policies, as well as the adaptation to low-income migrants during urbanization. Urban villages are considered informal and unsatisfactory due to the absence of government oversight and the institutional limitations on communal land property rights (Lai et al., 2017). Although some of these villages were situated far within the city's built-up districts, the government found it challenging to exercise control over the construction of family homes within village boundaries (Wang et al., 2009, p. 967). There have traditionally been few planning and building restrictions in villages, allowing rural people to construct and utilize their houses in any way they see fit (Wang et al., 2009, p. 967). Without proper implementation in planning and building, it is reasonable and essential for local farmers to construct rental properties to ensure their survival (Hao, 2011). Additionally, in support of changing accumulation regimes, Shenzhen's policies towards urban villages have evolved, oscillating between tolerance and exclusion, with informality emerging during the social creation of spaces due to negotiations and compromises between local authorities and affected residents (Zhang, 2023). Informality is the government's deliberate strategy to create distinct spatial values and establish a regulatory mechanism that addresses issues based on experience rather than the law (Gan et al., 2019). Urban villages have become the city's primary concentration point for low-income groups and provide low-cost housing and employment for migrants, a temporary solution to the government's affordable housing shortage (Gan et al., 2019; Hao et al., 2011).

4. CONCLUSION

This essay has effectively explored how immigration and state control influence the development of Shenzhen's urban villages on the topic of global urban development. It reiterates that immigration and state control have been essential in developing Shenzhen's urban villages. They do not exist in isolation but interact complexly, shaping urban villages' characteristics and development trajectories. Immigration is due to cancellation by the central governments on the partial restrictions of household registration, which allows farmers to move to cities. In addition, without implementing reform opening-up, and loosening market regulations, foreign capital would not have been able to enter Shenzhen with such ease. Additionally, while immigrants can only afford urban villages due to their low incomes, the government deliberately ignores the early development of urban villages so that local farmers can profit from providing accommodation. Later, the Shenzhen Municipal Government decided to deal with the urban villages, but it could not control its state effectively due to corruption.

Anyway, despite the longstanding controversy surrounding urban villages in China, the English-language literature on this topic is sparse (Wang et al., 2009, p. 958). Discussions by conventional

scholars and policymakers predominantly revolve around economic factors, often overlooking the concerns and requirements of the local community, particularly the significant migrant population (Wang et al., 2009, p. 958). The relatively cheap rents in Shenzhen's urban villages have attracted a large number of outsiders, including recent graduates, who come to Shenzhen to pursue their dreams (Wang et al., 2009; Pan & Du, 2021). The development and origin of urban villages in Shenzhen have been described and explained in this study. A potential direction for future research could be to explore the impacts on immigrants if urban villages in Shenzhen were to be demolished. This would provide deeper insights into the social and economic dynamics that govern urban transformations and their effects on marginalized communities.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chen, J. (2023). The impact of city immigrants: Take Shenzhen as an example. *Highlights in Business, Economics and Management*, 21, 573-577. <https://doi.org/10.54097/hbem.v21i.14692>.
- [2] Clark, C. (1998). The politics of place making in Shenzhen, China. *Berkeley Planning Journal*, 12(1), 103-125. <https://doi.org/10.5070/BP312113045>.
- [3] Fischer, B. (2014). A century in the present tense: Crisis, politics, and the intellectual history of Brazil's informal cities. In B. Fischer, B. McCann & J. Auyero (Eds.), *Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America* (pp. 9-67). Duke University Press.
- [4] Gan, X. Y., Chen, Y. L., & Bian, L. C. (2019). From redevelopment to in situ upgrading: Transforming urban village governance in Shenzhen through the lens of informality. *China City Planning Review*, 28(4), 30-41. <http://img.ccpjournal.com.cn/ueditor/upload/20201010/7331602292694609.pdf>.
- [5] Garmany, J. (2009). The embodied state: Governmentality in a Brazilian favela. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10(7), 721-739. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360903205132>.
- [6] Garmany, J., & Almeida, R. G. (2023). Urban orientalism and the informal city in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 41(2), 275-294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758231164405>.
- [7] Ghertner, D. A. (2010). Calculating without numbers: Aesthetic governmentality in Delhi's slums. *Economy and Society*, 39(2), 185-217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085141003620147>.
- [8] Hao, P., Sliuzas, R., & Geertman, S. (2011). The development and redevelopment of urban villages in Shenzhen. *Habitat International*, 35(2), 214-224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2010.09.001>.
- [9] Lai, Y., Chan, E. H. W., & Choy, L. (2017). Village-led land development under state-led institutional arrangements in urbanising China: The case of Shenzhen. *Urban Studies*, 54(7), 1736-1759. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016629325>.
- [10] McFarlane, C. (2012). Rethinking informality: Politics, crisis, and the city. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 13(1), 89-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2012.649951>.
- [11] Meehan, K. (2013). Disciplining de facto development: Water theft and hydrosocial order in Tijuana. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 31(2), 319-336. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d20610>.
- [12] Merrill, H. (2011). Migration and surplus populations: Race and deindustrialization in northern Italy. *Antipode*, 43(5), 1542-1572. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00904.x>
- [13] Murphy, J. T., & Carmody, P. R. (2019). Generative urbanization in Africa? A sociotechnical systems view of Tanzania's urban transition. *Urban Geography*, 40(1), 128-157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2018.1500249>.
- [14] Pan, W., & Du, J. (2021). Towards sustainable urban transition: A critical review of strategies and policies of urban village renewal in Shenzhen, China. *Land Use Policy*, 111, 105744. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2021.105744>.
- [15] Sassen, S. (2011). Global migrations and economic need. In R. M. Smith (Ed.), *Citizenship, borders, and human needs* (pp. 56-91). University of Pennsylvania Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fh9s7.6>.
- [16] Secor, A. J. (2003). Citizenship in the city: Identity, community, and rights among women migrants to Istanbul. *Urban Geography*, 24(2), 147-168. <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.24.2.147>.
- [17] Shi, L., Lamb, Z., Qiu, X. C., Cai, H., & Vale, L. (2018). Promises and perils of collective land tenure in promoting urban resilience: Learning from China's urban villages. *Habitat International*, 77, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2018.04.006>.
- [18] Wang, Y. (2023). Re-presentation of the Subjectivity of Chinese Urban Migrants: The Case of Shenzhen Urban Villages. *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology*, 5(12), 117-123. <https://doi.org/10.25236/IJFS.2023.051020>.

- [19] Wang, Y. P., Wang, Y., & Wu, J. (2009). Urbanization and informal development in China: Urban villages in Shenzhen. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33(4), 957-973. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2009.00891.x>.
- [20] Zhang, X. (2023). Informality and rapid urban transformation: A case study of regulating urban villages in Shenzhen. *GeoJournal*, 88(4), 4425-4439. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-023-10874-x>.