**Peasant-dominated Urbanization: Urbanization of Rural Migrants and the Making of Urban Villages in Contemporary China**

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**1. Introduction**

*Beisicun* is the name given to a cluster of four rural villages which, due to recent population increase and construction boom, have appeared meshed together. It is located in the northern suburb of Beijing, where the urban sprawl of broad boulevards, fancy malls, and expensive resorts intersects with frowned-upon neighborhoods, often disparaged as "dirty, chaotic, and substandard" (*zang luan cha*), three adjectives associated with the social-called *chengxiang jiehebu*, or rural-urban intersections around China’s major metropolises. Five minutes’ walk from the village center stands a newly opened *A*EON Mall, financed and operated by a group of retail and financial services companies based in Chiba, Japan. Sporting a huge parking lot, six-story parking building compounds, designer's clothing of high-end brands, underground supermarkets, expensive restaurants and even pet beauty shops, *A*EON mall symbolizes and materializes upper-middle class lifestyle in contemporary China. Right next to *A*EON mall, several other high-rise buildings are under construction during my stay in 2014, most of which are crucial components of the state-led “Life Science Park” developmental program that has launched in 2000. Since then, areas around *beisicun* have been drawn into this frenzy real estate development. Dozens of high-rise buildings were erected. More and more pharmaceutical companies and research agencies were introduced. A new subway stations was built. By far, Life Science Park has become one of the urbanizing landmarks in the northern suburb of Beijing. In a few years, this place is expected to grow into the center of modern biotechnology in the capital of China.

Nevertheless, *beisicun*, despite lying right in the heart of the Life Science Park zone, remains an enclave that appears to have little to do with neither luxury lifestyle nor high-end technology. In contracts to its surroundings, it is brimming with crowded apartments, dusty construction sites, narrow and garbage-strewn streets, cheap and dingy restaurants, small shop fronts, peddlers’ rickshaws, and most important of all, a swarming migrant population.

Statistical reports indicate that in a short period of five years, from 2009 to 2014, the number of the migrant population living in *beisicun* has doubled, reaching over 90,000. As the migrants have outnumbered the local villagers fifteen to one, *beisicun* has become one of the largest migrant settlements in contemporary Beijing. About half of the migrants in *beisicun* are from neighboring provinces such as Hebei, Shandong, and Henan. Others are from further flung parts of China, including Sichuan, Jiangxi, Hunan, Anhui, and Yunan provinces. For many of the migrants, *beisicun* functions as a temporary shelter where they can stay for years until they are forced to leave or secure better jobs and housing elsewhere.

Places like *beisicun* are commonly called *chengzhongcun* in Chinese, translated as urban villages[[1]](#footnote-1). The term itself reflects the contradictory nature of such places. On the one hand, these places are urban because they have already moved away from agricultural production and become ubiquitous parts of the cities. On the other hand, these places are rural because the majority of the residents in urban villages are still "rural personnel" according to the Chinese official *hukou* system. More importantly, they are administratively recognized as "rural" by the state. Such recognition has profound consequences: The land of urban villages is legally recognized as rural collective land, meaning the buildings on the land cannot be traded freely on the market unless the land itself is requisitioned by the state first. In addition, rural villages have relatively autonomous power from the government, in term of its decision over land use and development; public services offered by the city government do not cover urban villages.

In last two decades, thousands of urban villages have appeared and proliferated in Chinese major cities. For example, in Guangzhou, one of the first cities that has undergone market reform and been open to rural migrants, over one million rural migrants are living in over two hundred urban villages (Zhang *et al*. 2003). In contemporary Beijing, the capital of China and the most important city in the densely populated Beijing-Tianjin Corridor, there are over one hundred urban villages in and around the city, hosting roughly four million rural migrants[[2]](#footnote-2). Likewise, in other Chinese major cities, for example, Shanghai, Wuhan and Shenzhen, urban villages also function as one of the primary living quarters for rural migrants (Song et al. 2008).

Situating Chinese urban villages in the global context, it seems that the proliferation of such spatial form represents just one of many similar cases in the global South. As Mike Davis (2006: 17-19) has pointed out, since the 1970s, slum growth everywhere in the South has outpaced urbanization *per se*. In other places in Latin America, Asian, and Africa, we have observed similar spatial formation and settlement patterns just like Chinese urban villages. In fact, the rapid expansion of slums and slum-like places all over the globe has challenged the assumption that these places are just transitional and will eventually be transformed into urban proper (Simon 2008). As a result, since the 1980s, many studies have gone beyond rural-urban dichotomy and taken peri-urban fringes in the forms of squatter communities, slums and shantytowns on their own terms (Parnwell and Wongsuphasawat 1997; Wang 1997; Kelly 1998; Brook and Brook 2000).

Many scholars, including Mike Davis, have agreed that the proliferation of urban fringes in global South can be seen as a result of fast urbanization and neoliberalization across the globe in the past four decades (Davis 2006; Simon 2008). Nevertheless, I find Davis (and many others)' argument unsatisfying in two senses: First, it takes neoliberalism as a pure economic doctrine as if the term itself is self-explanatory. In fact, as anthropologist James Ferguson (2010) has pointed, besides the meaning of being a doctrine, neoliberalism also refers to the practice of such doctrine in the contemporary world. Just as Brenner and Theodore (2002) have argued, "the actual existing neoliberalism" is always "path dependent" and is embedded regional, national and local contexts. In other words, in order to understand Chinese urban villages, scholars have to investigate how such places are produced with regard to local policy regimes, regulatory practices, and institutional frameworks.

Moreover, Mike Davis implies that the slum growth and urbanization are two separate processes. By so doing, he is at the risk of reifying a hierarchical spatial order that place subaltern subjects at the bottom of the spectrum of development. However, in reality, the boundaries of urban proper and slums are often blurred. Inspired by Roy's notion of "subaltern urbanism" (Roy 2011), I argue the social and spatial processes in urban villages can be and should be understood as an urban process too. I use the term "peasant-dominated urbanization" to refer to such unique spatial and social process in contemporary China. In Chinese urban villages, peasants, which are commonly assumed to be the antithesis of modernization and urbanization, are actors in urbanizing the places where they live.

This study is based on a fifteen-month fieldwork in urban villages in Beijing from 2013 to 2014. The goal of this paper is two folded. First, I aim to elaborate on how the neoliberalization of urban space have made possible by concrete policy regimes and institutional arrangements in China. To be more specific, I give particular attention to the roles of lingering socialist legacies including *hukou* system and collective ownership of rural land in the making of urban villages in contemporary China. I also investigate on how contemporary local policies of gentrification have shaped urban villages in contemporary Beijing. Secondly, I explore how peasants, or rural personnel, have actively participated in the housing market, labor market and service market in urban villages. For them, urban villages are the places where they can experiment and live in the gray area of state power.

To better fulfill the proposed task, I will break this paper into four sections. The first section tells the stories of Lao Dong, a local peasant, and Bai Jie, a rural migrant. I will take a closer look of the encounter of two groups of peasants (rural migrants and local peasants) and their social positions in urban villages. The second section focuses on how local peasants mobilize their entitlements to land and run rental business strategically. The third section discusses how legacies of socialist governance, specifically collective ownership of rural land and rural autonomous system, have exempt urban villages from state regulation and have made urban villages cheaper and affordable places for rural migrants. The fourth sections explores how the need for cheap labor on one hand and attempts to take away living space of rural migrants on the other, have generated a highly dynamic process where urban villages are repressed and then constantly produced .

**2. The Encounter of Two Groups of Peasants in the City**

When heading for big cities to search for “fate changing” (*gaibian mingyun*) opportunities, Chinese rural migrants have left behind their social benefits and entitlements to housing and land. Without access to housing in the cities, many of the migrants have no option but to seek temporary shelters under the roof of local peasants, as the latter can provide the cheapest housing in the cities. This is the story when the two groups of peasants encounter.

This encounter of two groups of peasants seems to be “magic”. It appears to be a win-win situation: for rural migrants, they have found affordable living spaces in the city; for local peasants, they have found a profitable rental business to run. However, what behind this seemingly win-win situation is new forms of social inequalities and hierarchies. In urban villages, both groups stop being peasants and start to reinvent themselves in the markets. Rural migrants have mostly transformed into non-agricultural workers, many of which depend on selling their labor power. While local peasants have turned into landlords that mainly rely on their entitlement to land and operate rental market of informal housing.

The encounter of two groups of peasants can be better illustrated with the stories of Lao Dong and Bai Jie, both of whom are peasants according to the *hukou* system, and both are now living in *beisicun*.

***Lao Dong: “It feels like I have been ‘growing houses’ all my life.”***

Lao Dong is a peasant in his sixties. As a native member of a suburban village of Beijing, he is now a landlord of over 100 tenants, all of whom are rural migrants from other parts of China. When we first met in February 2014, Lao Dong was standing in front of piles of used bricks that were leftover from his old tile-roofed house just torn down, monitoring the demolition team that he hired two days ago. His plan was to replace his old house with an “apartment style” building with forty individual rooms.

“We no longer grow crops. We grow houses (*zhong fangzi*) instead. And it feels like I have been growing houses for all my life”, said Lao Dong with a smile on his face.

However long it may seem to him, Lao Dong's "life-long" business of "growing houses" only started twelve years ago when the number of rural migrants began to grow in the village. Before that, he participated in labor markets himself by taking all sorts of jobs. In the early 1990s, Lao Dong quit agricultural chores for the first time. He worked as a middle-level staff at a township enterprise in his rural county. When the company was put out of business in the mid-1990s, Lao Dong chose not to go back to his village and started to seek jobs in the city centers of Beijing. Thanks to his status of being a Beijing resident, he was able to work as a taxi driver for years until the early 2000s when he realized his status as a peasant in Beijing and his entitlement to his housing land could potentially give him more advantages in the market.

Since the early 2000s, Lao Dong started to rent out his spare rooms to migrants. Back then, his two extra rooms made him 100 *yuan* per month. He soon realized that the whole family could depend on this rental business if he owns more rooms. In 2006, he borrowed money from his friends and relatives and started to build a two-story apartment with his yard. There were roughly 20 separate rooms at first, and the number doubled with continuous investment and construction. These rooms are designed for rental purposes. Each room is about ten to twelve square meters and the rent costs from 180 *yuan* to 200 *yuan* depending on their qualities and sizes. In urban villages in Beijing, these rooms are typically called "single rooms" (*danjian*). With no independent bathroom, no separate kitchen and no running water, these rooms are already "outdated" and relatively cheap on the market.

When I met Lao Dong in 2014, he was demolishing his tile-roofed house that his whole family has lived in since the 1980s. What he was about to build is a three-story building with forty more rooms. These standard rooms are called *gongyu*, meaning apartment. Every *gongyu* is equipped with individual electricity meters, running water, water sewage, separate kitchen, and indoor bathrooms. The rent usually cost three times more than *danjian,* from 600 *yuan* to 750 *yuan*.

During my stay in *beisicun*, I walked by Lao Dong’s construction site almost every day. The construction project went fast and smoothly: By the end of March 2014, the main part of building made of bricks was already erected. In mid-April, the exterior decoration is done. In mid-May, even before the interior decoration was complete, Lao Dong had already posted an advertisement on the walls of his new apartment building, soliciting new tenants to rent his rooms.

For Lao Dong and his family, this new three-story apartment building is the biggest investment they have made so far. It may bring a big leap upward to their income. With a one-time investment of about 300,000 *yuan*, they now add one more building and forty more rooms. Their old two-story building will continue bring them the income of 4,8000 annually. And this new one will allow their annual income of 280,000 *yuan* (about 56,000 USD).

***Bai Jie and Her Family: “It almost feels like a town here.”***

Bai Jie was born in a village in Henan, a place 661 miles from Beijing. Before heading to Beijing with her husband in the mid-1990s, she had worked in a toy factory in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province for three years. Being pregnant with her first child in 1995 forced her to leave her work and come to Beijing with her husband.

During the twenty years of life as a rural migrant, Bai Jie and her husband tried many ways to make a living and raising their three children. During the first two years, she sells small toys in the streets outside a park in Beijing. After accumulating some money, she and her husband were talked into the business of shoe cleaning. As the business failed, their 30,000 yuan saving was gone. This setback did not crush their will, and they kept trying to set up their own business. A better chance came for her when her friends introduced her and her husband to the business of manufacturing doors. In 2002, Bai Jie and her husband were both in this business. At first, they worked as workers and apprentices. Several years later, they started their own business.

During these ups and downs, Bai Jie and her family has always lived in urban villages. In twelve years’ time, there were three or four times that they are forced to move because the developmental programs by both the state and real estate companies had led to the demolition of those villages they lived in. But over the whole time, they had never lived in places other than an urban village. She is somehow satisfied with her living arrangements in urban villages. When asked what is her experience in these villages, Bai Jie replied:

“You cannot compare this place with inner city. But we have everything we need here. Ten years ago, these places had no light at night. But look how this place looks like now. People call this place a village, but it is not. It almost feels like a town here. What else could people like us ask?”

Without a doubt, Rural migrant's remarks on urban villages have to do with their meager income and the fact that urban villages are the "urban price gap" in the cities. However, even for those migrants who can afford to live in a better place, they still choose to live in urban villages. The reason goes beyond cheap living price itself.

Urban villages respond to the needs of people like Bai Jie at different stages and under different situation. During the rough days, the cheap prices in urban villages allow them to make ends meet. When the situation gets better, they may save money for the future by living on the cheap in urban villages. When they decided to start a small company, they used the saving as the startup capital. In a word, urban villages are the crucial sites through which rural migrants negotiate their social identities.

Moreover, compared to the dormitory, urban villages give people like Bai Jie a sense of freedom. She could stay with her husband and take care of her three children. In addition, rural migrants find it is easier and more comfortable to establish a relationship with their landlords because of their shared status and knowledge as "peasants". Many of these new landlords have also had experience of being migrant workers before returning to rental business in home villages. A good proportion of rural migrants also have land benefits back in the hometown and also have a chance to take advantage of their relationship with the land just like their landlords do in Beijing. They can develop mutual understanding very fast.

Furthermore, as studies have shown, the migration pattern in China usually comes with strong social ties from their native places (Ma and Xiang 1998). Even though, such spatial bonds are weakened after years of gentrification campaigns, many of the urban villages are still showing a pattern of spatial bonding of native villages. As a result, living in urban villages sometimes provides them a sense of social belonging. In the urban village where Bai Jie lives, over forty percent of the migrants are from Henan, making the village itself a lot more comfortable and emotionally close. For rural migrants, urban villages are places for bonding with people with same roots and similar taste.

**3. “Growing House”: The Tactics of Cashing in Entitlements**

Lao Dong's story demonstrates that the entitlement to land has given local peasants significant advantages in developing and managing rental housing in urban villages. According to the Chinese Constitution, rural land is collectively owned by rural communities. All members of the community are entitled to partake of an equal share of the collectively-owned land, acting as de facto land owners (Zhang et al. 2003:918). In other words, the access to rural land, especially the entitlements over housing land, is primarily associated with Chinese *hukou* system and village membership (*cunji*). Such land policies have excluded non-local actors from accessing the right over land. Even though local peasants consist only a very small proportion of residents in urban villages, they usually are the ones' who control the housing market.

Local peasants, exemplified by Lao Dong, started to host them without being fully aware of the future development of their rental business when rural migrants first poured into the cities. At first, they rent out their spare rooms to the outsiders in return for a small sum of rent money (Ma and Xiang 1998; Zhang 2001). As more and more rural migrants came and stayed in the villages, local peasants gradually realize that there could be a highly profitable business for their households. They turned themselves into small real estate developers, constructing (and demolishing), renting and managing properties on their housing lot. This section explores the concrete strategies that local peasants apply to cash in their entitlements in urban villages.

***Household-based Developers***

During my fieldwork time in Beijing from 2013 to 2014, many urban villages were going through a construction boom. *Beisicun* is no exception. Walking on one of the main roads of only 600 meters, I encountered several construction sites. The larger construction units covered about 400 square meters, and the smaller ones were about four times less. Out of curiosity, I counted and found out there were eight of them on both sides of that main road. The even more curious thing for me is the fact that each construction site is developed on its schedule. There seem to be no signs of collaboration or coordination among these construction sites, even for the neighboring sites. The hired construction teams are from different regions, including Hebei, Henan, and Jiangsu provinces.

In comparative studies on urban villages in China and England, Chung (2010) has pointed out that Chinese urban villages are developed without any planning scheme. Based on ethnographic materials I collected during my fieldwork in and beyond *beisicun* in Beijing, I argue that lack of planning in urban villages has to do with the fact that the basic unit of informal housing development is rural household instead of village committee or other agencies. As real estate developers with difference resources, abilities, and strategies, local households often come up with different designs and plans in terms of land use. This has resulted in a seemingly disorderly spatial layout in urban villages.

The fact that rural households functions as real estate developers has to with Chinese rural land policies. In contemporary China, Rural land by the function can be divided into two main categories: farming plot and the housing lot (*zhaijidi*). A member of the community will be allocated a lot of communally held land with unrestricted tenure and virtually free for the construction of a home when he or she is in need of housing. Each of the construction sites on the main road is operated by one of the local households.

***Bringing In Outsiders***

Even though, local households are the ones that have access to land and thus in charge of the housing markets in urban villages. Once the rental business has expanded, they need to bring in outsiders to participate in the rental economy. As the housing business is a highly profitable business in urban villages, outsiders also find ways to invest their money or themselves in the housing market.

In *beisicun*, two blocks from Lao Dong's new compound was aunt Ma's four-story building. As a divorced woman in her fifties, aunt Ma does not have the abilities to take care of her properties all by herself. She sub-leased her building to brothers Che. Brothers Che comes from Shanxi province. As sub-lease contractors, they rent the building for 200,000 RMB a year and work as genitors in the building. They both take turns to take care of the maintenance of the building and respond to the requests of tenants. The total number of rooms in this building is 40, and each can bring in a rent of 700 RMB. After deducting the rent to the local landlord, they will earn 146000 yuan each year. Apparently, a bigger portion of the profit goes to the landlord.

Fang's situation is different. His apartment building locates on the previous farmland of *beisicun*, where now many small factories and companies sit on. He rents the farmland and build apartment compound with his investment. He told me proudly that he was the "landlord" of the apartment building, whereas the most accurate description would be the “houselord”. Unlike brothers Che, Fang comes to *beisicun* with his capital. Just as Che brothers, Fang also works full time as genitor of his apartment building.

***Upgrading the Living Space***

Investing housing business in urban villages has risk. On the one hand, local peasants are eager to upgrade their properties so they can rent out their rooms for more money. On the other hand, they are hesitate to make big one time investment in their property, as they are afraid that once the urban villages are demolished by the state, their investment will be with no economic return at all. To better handle such risk, many local peasant households choose to start with a smaller investment, and then gradually put more money into the housing business. Since they upgrade their rental properties every three or five years, in urban villages in Beijing, there are at least three types of housing that can be seen in Beijing urban villages. All of them are designed specifically for rural migrants.

The first generation of housing is “individual room in the yard” (*dayuan danjian*). Many of such rooms are used to be spare rooms in local peasants’ houses. By simply putting furniture inside the room, local households have transformed themselves into landlords and started to collect rent. In most cases, the investment on such housing is less than 10,000 *yuan*. However, since each household has only enough rooms to host less than five tenants, the reward of this type of housing is low. As the tenants usually share living space and facilities with their landlords, the labor input of such rental business is relatively also low.

The second generation of housing is “single room” (*danjian*). Driven by the booming rental market, many local villagers started to construct buildings on their open yard in order to host more tenants. In *beisicun*, for example, this around of construction began around the year of 2006. The majority of these single rooms have no bathroom or kitchen. Tenants usually have to share one bathroom in the building or to use public bathrooms in the village. Single room building is much more profitable. Taking aunt Ma's apartment building, for example, she invested about 100,000 RMB in 2006. Twenty single rooms were built. With each room rented for about 200 RMB, the annual income can be 48,000 RMB. The operation of single room building requires much more work. In most cases, the seniors of the households take care of such rental business.

“Apartment” (*gongyu*) is the third generation of housing. In 2014, many people were upgrading their old "single rooms" into "apartments", with restroom, kitchen and running water. The initial investment ranges from 200,000 to 1,000,000 RMB. The rent for such apartment ranges from 500 to 700 *yuan* per furnished room. Internet connection is also available in most of these properties.

**4. At the Margins of the State**

This section moves on to discuss the relative autonomy of urban villages in the context of state power. In previous studies on urban villages, scholars have pointed out that urban villages are places at the margins of the state. Xiang coins the term “nonstate place” (Xiang 2005) to refer to these subaltern places in the city. Zhang demonstrates vividly how the public power in these places is privatized without any state intervention (Zhang 2001). Bach directly uses the term “autonomous” to describe their relationship to the state (Bach 2010).

Such relative autonomy has its deep roots in socialist governance that empathized on spatial fixity and dualistic governance over the rural and the urban. Other than *hukou* system, rural collective land ownership, and self-governing system in rural villages (also known as village autonomy) are both crucial factors that are accountable for the making of relative autonomous spaces in the city. This lingering regime allows the village to require some autonomy from the state legally.

***Privatizing the Public Power***

In many cases, urban villages do appear to be more "autonomous" than other rural villages. The relative autonomy has to do with the fact that these places have been incorporated into the urban processes, creating the vibrancy and dynamics that are neither seen in rural villages nor urban centers. Due to corruption, lack of check and balances, village committees usually are not accountable to the peasant collective. Some of them are operating on collectivism inherited from Mao's era while some of them are completely transformed into agents of local clans or powerful families. In both circumstances, the "autonomous" status is created by both the old regime of governance and the logic of the market.

*Besicun*’s village committee is powerful as it controls the use of collective farm land. Beisicun was one of those villages that never implemented the “household contract responsibility system”. The land has always been “collective owned” in the village. In the mid-1990s, when local township enterprise went bankrupt, the village committee started to rent the farmland to outsiders to bring in cash. In the late 1990s, each household would receive 300 kilos of flour as compensation. Ten years after, even though the value of land has increased over ten times in the area, the compensation remains the same. Local villagers suspect that the village committee has taken commission behind their back. “It is an open secret and we all know it. But nobody would say anything about it. Look how many trips they have taken to foreign countries. Where does the money come from? We can do the math, and it is without a doubt that they have pocketed our money.” Aunt Li told me this in private.

Local people were silent about such abuse of power, as the local politics are also reinforced by violence. When I was in *Beisicun* in 2014, the head of the village have twenty “adopted sons” (*gan’erzi*). All of these “adopted sons are in their late twenties or early thirties. They are in fact gangsters who help the village committee to reinforce its governance. Such privatization of public power is common in urban villages.

***The Art of Recycling***

State regulation is nowhere to find in urban villages. The public power goes into the village committees. However, like a lot of the village committees do not have the abilities or intentions to govern the public in urban villages, the newly emerged housing market, and service market appear to be chaotic.

In contemporary urban villages, reused bricks are the most common and widely used construction materials. In the beginning, when a house is torn down, bricks are recycled for the coming up construction. After years of primitive development in urban villages, the work of picking usable bricks out of piles of construction waste also becomes a separate trade. In most cases now, local peasants decide to purchase used bricks on the market. Used bricks cost only one-third the price of new ones. They allow the local peasants to minimize their cost.

Besides used bricks, other substandard materials are widely used in the construction in urban villages. For example, as early as the 1990s, the Chinese government has banned the use of cement slates in the construction of urban civil buildings for safety reasons. Even though this policy has never been strictly reinforced by government agencies, cement slates are abandoned in the construction in major cities in China. However, in contemporary urban villages, cement slates are still widely used in the construction of apartment buildings. Many of these cement slates are even recycled from demolished buildings.

Local peasants are not the only ones that operate in the gray areas. Rural migrants who started their own business in an urban village also ignore basic safety and health standards in order to maximize their profit gains. For example, during my stay in urban villages, people keep telling me that the food is not safe in urban villages, especially the meat of all kinds. It is commonly believed that swill-cooked dirty oil (*digouyou*) is widely used in restaurants, food stands, and breakfast bars in urban villages.

***Factories without Factory Name Tags (changpai)***

The labor market in urban villages also demonstrates the lack of state regulation. Thanks to collective ownership of rural land, village committees have the relative freedom over the use of land. In those urban villages whose farmland is not yet been requisitioned by the state, they usually rent it out to outside investors for rent money. As long as getting the rent on time in full amount, village committees and local peasant do not usually bother to check what kind of business their tenants are running. As a result, urban villages become the locales for informal economies in the city.

For Example, Pi village is a typical one among these urban villages. Nowadays, on the previous farmland or Pi villages, there are over 200 small factories with very suspicious legal status. Most of these underground factories have not registered with the Bureau of Commerce and thus do not pay tax to the state. Their products are often cheap and of low qualities. Workers in these small factories are often short time workers who seek for a temporary job.

In contemporary Pi village, these 200 factories are on different scales, ranging from a family-run factory of four people to factories with over forty workers. These factories produce varieties of products, including doors, windows, furniture, feminine hygiene products, clothes, and so on. However, there is no way an outsider can tell the kind and scale of the factory. Each factory is hidden in its won factory yard. There were no signs or name tags (*changpai*) in front of any of these factories indicating the name and specialties of these factories. At the front gate of each factory yard, a big and threatening dog seems to be the standardized setup. Whenever a stranger is approaching the factory, insiders will instantly know.

**5. Places on the Move**

Even though Chinese urban villages exist at the margins of the state and maintain relative autonomy, it does not mean they can remain intact when the state start to implement gentrification campaigns. On the contrary, because of urban villages’ autonomy, they usually become one of the primary targets of state-led developmental programs in contemporary China.

In contemporary Beijing, the policies regarding urban villages are somehow self-contradictory. On the one hand, the city needs migrant workers as cheap labor and also need urban villages to provide them with living space. On the other hand, there is the increasing need for attractive plots of land for urban development. This is why there have been several waves of gentrification campaigns against urban villages.

The combined policy outcome is the creation of “place on the move”: urban villages meet their ultimate fate of being demolished, and the land on which they stand are developed/gentrified. However, as long as migrant workers remain in the city, they will find new places to live and produce new urban villages.

***“From Inside Out”: Gentrification Campaigns in Beijing***

As unwanted parts of the urban landscape, urban villages are now one of the primary targets of urban gentrification programs in the Chinese metropolis. Before 2008, Beijing government has started a thorough investigation of Beijing urban villages. On July 16th, 2005, Beijing Academy of Social Science (BASS) released a report titled "Report on Beijing Urban edges"[[3]](#footnote-3), labeling urban villages as “urban edge” (*chengshi jiaoluo*). With a very strong political agenda of legitimizing gentrification projects targeting urban villages for 2008 Olympics, the report depicts urban villages the places irrelevant to modern city, left behind by the fast pace of development, and about to be eventually cleared through development and modernization processes (BASS 2005).

The gentrification campaigns driven by the exigency of pursuing a modern urban look in the name of “beautifying the capital” for the occasion of 2008 Beijing Olympics have significantly reduced the number of urban villages. By the end of 2010, the city government of Beijing proudly announced it has eliminated all urban villages within the third ring highway, a demarcation enclosing the most central functions of urban Beijing. Research indicates that there were 332 urban villages in Beijing by 2005. The number has dropped to a little over one hundred in the year 2014[[4]](#footnote-4).

The government’s ambition in terms of urban redevelopment goes beyond just “reducing” the number of urban villages. In a 2010 environmental development report, the Development and Innovation Committee of Beijing (*fagaiwei*) has clearly stated that the goal is to “more or less wiping out” (*jiben* *xiaomie*) Beijing’s urban villages by the end of 2015[[5]](#footnote-5).

***Da Li: “I am a Drifter in Urban Villages.”***

I encountered Da Li when I was visiting a half demolished urban village named *dongxiaokou* in the north part of Beijing. Before 2011, *dongxiaokou* hosted more than sixty thousand migrant workers, many of whom are short-term workers and scavengers. When the demolition finally came, over two third of the local peasants signed compensation contracts with the local government and left the village for good. For those local households that aimed at a higher compensation, they chose to continue to rent out their illegal housing to rural migrants, as a way of bargaining for more compensation.

When I visited *dongxiaokou* in 2014, the demolition was still not yet finished, and the village was in ruins. Without any public services, the garbage piled up for over three meters high. There were over 300 hundred people living in the half demolished village. Da Li was one of the few people who choose to stay in *dongxiaokou* even after the 2011 demolition. When asked why he chose to stay in *dongxiaokou*, he responded: "My daughter likes the school near here. The rent is cheap here. Plus, I hate moving. Each time when I was forced to leave a place, I feel terrible."

Before moving to *dongxiaokou*, Da Li spent five years in another urban village named *beiqijia* where he learned to work as a scavenger. In 2009, when beiqijia was facing demolition, Da Li and his neighbors had no choice but to move. According to Da Li, there are over 500 people moved from *beiqijia* to *dongxiaokou* by the end of 2009. However, only two years later, they are facing another round of demolition. By the time of my visit in 2014, all of Da Li's friends have moved to other urban villages.

No matter how much he hates moving, Da Li had to the fact the reality. At the end of our interview, Da Li said to me "I am a drifter in urban villages, and I will move to another urban village in no time. "

Da Li is not the only one who is struggling for stable living space. He is one of the million migrant workers that are drifting between urban villages. Gentrification campaigns and developmental projects may force them to leave their temporary home from time to time. However, as long as they are offered jobs in the cities, they will find a way to stay.

I spoke with Da Li over the phone two months after my visit to *dongxiaolou*. He told me that he had moved to an urban village where many of his friends lived.

**6. Conclusion**

In previous sections of this paper, I have discussed how the persistence of socialist legacies of rural-urban dualism has contributed to the making of Chinese urban villages in contemporary China. Even though, the emergence and proliferation of slums and slum-like places are widely seen across the globe in the context of neoliberalization. The uniqueness of Chinese urban villages should not be overlooked.

Moreover, due to the state-led gentrification campaigns against urban villages, urban village, as a spatial form, is constantly repressed and then produced. From such perspective, urban villages are not just places that can be pinned on maps, but also a particular organization of space and people. They are a social form through which a set of social, cultural, economic and political arrangements can be made and maintained. In big metropolises like Beijing, urban villages are constantly made, unmade and remade.

Ethnographic materials demonstrate that urban villages can be resistant to big capital and real estate companies. In other words, the spatial and social arrangements of urban villages provide rural migrants with protection. Ironically, the resistance to capital does not necessarily mean that urban villages and people living in them are automatically resistant to the capitalist regime. In fact, urban villages can be seen as very crucial sites for the reproduction of labor power for rural migrants and thus are the indispensable component of Chinese capitalism and global capitalism.

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1. *Chengzhongcun* has been translated as “urban village”, “villages in the city” or “urbanizing villages” in academic studies. In this paper, I use the most commonly used translation “urban village”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This number is a rough estimation that draws on the data from an unofficial report in 2014 by a Chinese NGO named Social Resource Institute. The report can be accessed online. http://www.csrglobal.cn/publications.jsp [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A full report is available online. <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/2005/Jun/891828.htm>. Accessed 2014/7/26. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The number of urban village in 2014 is based on an unofficial report on Beijing urban villages by Social Resources Institute (SRI) that was released in May 2014. The title of the report is “Beijing, City and Outsiders” (*Beijing, Chen, Wairen*) and the full report is in Chinese and can be accessed online: <http://www.csrglobal.cn/publications.jsp>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A related media report can be accessed online from a Chinese website: <http://www.guandian.cn/article/20111107/115348.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)