

# Understanding the Unique Spatial Relations and Power Dynamics of China's Urban Villages

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**ABSTRACT:** China's recent history as a Communist stronghold-turned-economic-powerhouse has garnered widespread scholarly and popular attention, as its government seeks to marry economic liberalization with one-party rule, propping up the private sector while retaining the preeminence of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). As its economy continues to grow at astounding rates and the state begins to take a more forward position on the world stage, many have deemed it an impending threat to Western hegemony. Yet focusing on China's outward positioning obscures the many peculiarities bubbling within it. On the ground, the landscape of the country has been fundamentally transformed within a relatively short time frame. The geography produced by the quick one-eighty from state-sponsored communism to state-sponsored capitalism is fascinating, providing us with an insightful counterpoint to processes more familiar to us in the West. The rapid urbanization that has accompanied the onset of market reforms has led to urban forms and characteristics hitherto unseen.

## I. Introduction

China's recent history as a Communist stronghold-turned-economic-powerhouse has garnered widespread scholarly and popular attention, as its government seeks to marry economic liberalization with one-party rule, propping up the private sector while retaining the preeminence of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). As its economy continues to grow at astounding rates and the state begins to take a more forward position on the world stage, many have deemed it an impending threat to Western hegemony. Yet focusing on China's outward positioning obscures the many peculiarities bubbling within it. On the ground, the landscape of the country has been fundamentally transformed within a relatively short time frame. The geography produced by the quick one-eighty from state-sponsored communism to state-sponsored capitalism is fascinating, providing us with an insightful counterpoint to processes more familiar to us in the West. The rapid urbanization that has accompanied the onset of market reforms has led to urban forms and characteristics hitherto unseen.

This paper will focus on one specific peculiarity: the prevalence of urban villages within many of China's megacities. This is a phenomenon that has not yet reached the public consciousness in the West but that provides a remarkable contrast to our notions of the urban-rural divide and class tensions ubiquitous in large cities. As urban sprawl collides with rural collectivized land, urban villages develop. They subvert traditional understandings of what makes a city and what makes a village and cause us to reconsider our preestablished notions of urban space, how it is produced, and who produces it. Classical theories of spatial production may not

be appropriate for explaining the dynamics within urban villages, and conversely. urban villages may shed light on aspects of the urban experience that these same theories overlook.

In this paper, I will explore these processes in relation to Henri Lefebvre's framework of spatial production and Harvey's theory of the "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1974; Harvey, 2008). I argue that urban villages are atypical in that the interactions between the forces fighting for control over the production of space in these environments differ from the conventional relationships described in Lefebvre's and Harvey's works. Instead of a classic Marxist struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, urban villages present a tripartite relationship in which one actor, the village collective, acts as both dominator and dominated. They are simultaneously a victim of capitalist exploitation and a perpetrator of it, and through this role they subvert many of our critical understandings of urban socioeconomic positionality. Additionally, they do this while still under a system of collectivized ownership, further casting doubt on the proposed socialist solution advanced by both Lefebvre and Harvey.

In making my argument, I am not attempting to delegitimize these theories – rather, I intend to build on them by revealing their blind spots and what they fail to account for. I will construct my argument by first providing some historical context on urban villages and how they came to be. I will then describe what they look like now amidst the processes presently ongoing. Next, I will introduce the three main actors central to my analysis – the government, the villagers, and the migrants – all of whom have a different stake in urban villages and play a role in shaping the space. Then, I will dive a little deeper into the theoretical background of this paper by describing the arguments put forth by Lefebvre and Harvey. After all of this necessary contextualization, I will begin my analysis, examining how the dynamics present within urban villages contradict Lefebvre's and Harvey's theories, which are often used liberally and universally to apply to most contexts. I will explain how there are many elements of urban villages that are in line with what Lefebvre and Harvey have argued, but there are also many processes that either run counter to or complicate what the theorists predicted. Finally, I will describe the wider implications of my analysis on conventional spatial theories of urbanization and capitalism and their limitations.

I am also well aware that urban villages are not homogenous. Keeping in mind the high levels of variation amongst China's urban villages, I will only be examining urban villages in Guangdong province – though I acknowledge that even within this province there is still a significant (though lesser) degree of variation.

## II. Historical Background

To understand the development of urban villages, it is first necessary to understand the history of land ownership and land reform in China through the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1950s, Maoism was the dominant ideology in China, and as such the concept of land ownership was heavily shaped by Communist principles. Land was designated as urban land or rural land, each implying its own type of ownership. Urban land was nationalized and legally owned by municipal governments, and rural land was collectivized and jointly owned by the village (Wang & Wang, 2014). Collective ownership meant that the land was not owned by households or individuals, but instead by the commune itself, overseen by "a community body that is seen as the legitimate entity representing the interests of all its constituents." (Yep, 2015, p. 535). In other words, at the village-level, a council had to be designated to serve as representatives of the community. They were charged with managing and coordinating the resources within the community, a responsibility that included allocating land and labor and setting redistribution rules, among other things. The resultant redistribution held these collectives together. Any goods

produced or revenue earned would go not to those who produced or earned it, but rather to these representative councils (termed 'production brigades'), who would decide how much of the surplus should be distributed to each household. This gave everyone a shared stake in both production and the profits of production. This system, however, put a great deal of power in the hands of the brigades, creating a hierarchical relationship between themselves and other members of the village collective (Kan, 2016).

This system continued until the 1980s, when it was dismantled as the state pivoted to open up to the free market, bringing with it a policy of decollectivization. Production brigades were abolished, and individual households were allocated plots of land to produce on and profit from. Yet, despite these processes, the ownership of the land still remained in the hands of the village collective – it did not become individually owned, even as other types of private property began to accumulate. Brigades were replaced by 'administrative villages', localized units of rural administration which essentially came to serve the same function as the brigades. Thus, the notion of 'collective property' remained, and the rural land stayed in the hands of the village collective (Kan, 2016, p. 591).

In the same sense, post-economic liberalization, urban land also remained under the ownership of the state. Thus, the government had jurisdiction over how land use rights were transferred or leased to users (companies, individuals, other municipal governments) in exchange for payment (Song, 2007). The government was able to establish a market for private property via this process of leasing out blocks of land, which was crucial to the regime's objective of bolstering the nation's economy. This initiative went hand-in-hand with the state's desire to grow its urban areas, jumpstarting a process of urbanization that quickly took off. Cities began rapidly expanding, stimulated by the government buying up the land surrounding metropolitan areas to construct new development after new development and accelerate urban growth (Geng et al, 2020). Economic activity became increasingly concentrated in these cities, fueling waves of migration that subsequently increased the demand for new developments, creating a positive feedback loop that encouraged the buying up of more and more of the adjacent land.

However, the state ran into a problem when it began infringing on land owned by the village collective. To continue their expansion, cities had to expropriate this land, buying it up from collectives to then lease and develop on the private market. But oftentimes collectives were unwilling to sell their land or wanted to negotiate higher sums. Due to the complex and poorly understood processes of land reform that accompanied decollectivization, it was unclear exactly what the land was valued at, and therefore compensation payment offers were arbitrary and unstandardized (Wang & Wang, 2014). As a result, governments would often requisition farmland (as this was generally cheaper to expropriate) and leave existing residential areas under the ownership of the collectives (Lin et al, 2011). This left small chunks of collective-owned land amidst large plots bought up by the state. For example, in Liede, a village in Guangzhou, the village retained only 50 hectares of reserved residential land after expropriation. As compensation, the village (collectively) received 450 million yuan for lost land and 380 million yuan for lost crops (Kan, 2016).

As cities continued to expand and more and more of the surrounding villages were swallowed up by this process, these still-collectively owned residential areas ended up at the centers of cities. Skyscrapers, gated communities, and commercial centers sprang up around them in areas that the state had privately developed, while these village enclaves – called *cheng zhong cun*, literally "village in a city" in Mandarin Chinese – followed their own independent development trajectory (Geng et al, 2020, p. 182). The resulting geography presents sets of dense,

*Kaitlyn Zhao*

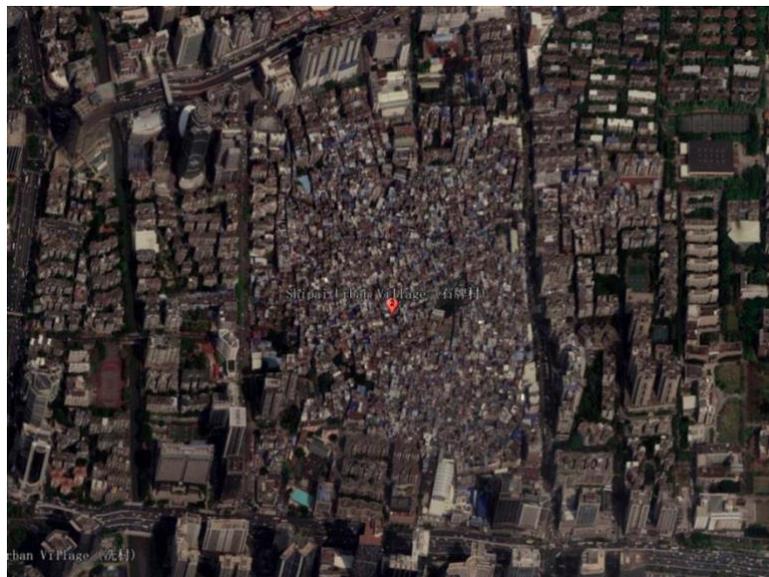
poorly maintained, run-down neighborhoods of tightly packed apartments, surrounded by seas of glimmery high-rises and shiny new developments.

This process began several decades ago and continues to this day, as China's major cities – now termed megacities – continue to grow. Guangdong province has achieved an urbanization level of 63%, a result of flourishing economic activity in its two megacities Guangzhou and Shenzhen (Wang & Wang, 2014). Consequently, these two cities also have a high concentration of urban villages – in 2018, Guangzhou was reported to host 272 urban villages, while Shenzhen in 2000 reported 241. The villages in Shenzhen are said to accommodate approximately 2.15 million people (Geng et al, 2020).



(Weng, 2016)

*Figure 1: Aerial view of Xiancun Village, in Guangzhou, China.*



(Geng et al, 2020)

*Figure 2: Google Earth photo of Shipai Village, in Guangzhou, China.*

Urban villages are primarily composed of migrants and local villagers. The former will typically only spend a few years living in the village, while the latter are usually permanently settled. As a result, villagers are far more entrenched and able to participate in the village collectives that give them access to land ownership and use rights. Taking advantage of the popularity of their neighborhoods, they have learned to develop their houses (often illegally) and rent them out to incoming migrants needing homes. For these migrants, urban villages are often their first home upon moving to a city. Their central locations and relatively cheap prices make them appear enticing to migrants who prioritize accessibility and proximity to employment opportunities (Chung, 2017).

As more and more migrants settled in these urban villages, they developed a community network, thereby attracting more migrants and so on and so forth (Chung, 2017). Now, though local villagers possess vastly more social and financial capital, the number of migrants greatly outnumber their local counterparts. This relationship will be further elaborated on in later sections, but first I will provide a closer look into what urban villages look like on the ground.

Let us consider the case of Xiaocun village, an urban village in Guangzhou. Over the last twenty years, Xiaocun has seen its population swell from two thousand to over fifty thousand (Geng et al, 2020). Migrants account for 90% of the total population and are squeezed into only 390 houses total, spread over an area of 49,600 square meters (Chung, 2017). In some areas, the population density can reach up to 2400 persons per hectare (Lin et al, 2011). Other urban villages have similar stories.



(Zhou, 2014)

Figure 3: Baishizhou Village, in Shenzhen, China.

Thus, these urban villages are incredibly overcrowded and congested. This, combined with poor maintenance and a lack of official oversight, means that residences are deteriorating with little upkeep, infrastructure (such as roads and sewers) is outdated, and public security issues run rampant (Yamaguchi & Shinya, n.d.). Facilities inside the residences are even worse. Examining the housing conditions inside urban villages in Shenzhen, Wang et al. notes:

37 per cent of migrants do not have exclusive use of a toilet, bathroom or kitchen; 35 per cent do not have exclusive use of a water tap; over 40 per cent do not have showers.

*Kaitlyn Zhao*

Moreover, even though a gas supply has become the norm in Shenzhen, many migrants still use coal as their main source of fuel. Some migrants put coal-fired stoves or gas cookers inside their bedrooms, which could be a fire hazard and an uncomfortable source of heat in the very hot summer. (Wang et al, 2010, p. 89)

In this sense, the material conditions of these urban villages are dismal, and this is especially apparent when juxtaposed with the glitzy new developments rising up around them. This fact also provides ample ammunition for local governments to attack these villages, citing health and safety hazards as the justification for requisitioning the land and developing it formally (Geng et al, 2020). This rhetoric is becoming more and more prevalent as the state begins to use terms like ‘urban renewal’ and ‘urban clean-up’ to legitimize their initiatives to commandeer, demolish, and rebuild urban villages. For the purposes of this paper, I will not delve too deeply into these proceedings (beyond discussing the general nature of negotiations currently taking place between collectives and municipal officials). Each local government’s treatment of each urban village is so inconsistent that attempting to identify overall trends would paint an erroneous picture of where and what redevelopment is actually occurring. I will instead stick to understanding urban villages as they are right now and leave the question of what is to happen to them going forward to other work.

### **III. The Three Actors**

Next, it is necessary to elucidate the three main actors whose interactions compose the narrative I am constructing about spatial production in urban villages. These actors are the government, the villagers, and the migrants. The government’s actions and incentives are relatively straightforward. They function similarly to the state and/or the elite in many other cities, in that their primary incentive is to maximize the profitability of the land itself. When expropriating land, their objective is to pay as little as they can in compensation, and eventually resell the land to whichever private company is most likely to increase its value the most. They do not prioritize the lives or well-being of either the local villagers or the migrants, and only seek to acquire more land for redevelopment. They view urban villages as “unsightly and congested settlements that occupy premium land in the city.” (Kan, 2016, p. 596). In their eyes, urban villages are problem areas for two reasons. First of all, they occupy highly-desirable space and “waste” it, and second of all, their unseemliness may drive down the demand for surrounding developments. In this sense, the government, like the capitalists in conventional urbanization and gentrification literature, seeks to take advantage of the realization of the ‘rent gap’ underutilized under the current land use regime (Stein 2019; Kan 2016, 596).

This aspiration is, however, complicated by the unwillingness of village collectives to give up their land, and negotiations between these two actors add a layer of complexity to the dynamics within urban villages. The village collective coalition possesses a unique set of actions and incentives and represents the second actor central to our analysis. While these coalitions are made up of several different groups, they share the common trait that they are all indigenous to the village and have likely been for several generations. The land, therefore, has been passed down through families for decades, and it is likely that the relatives of present villagers were the peasants that originally participated in the village communes during the Mao era (Chung, 2017). Hence, most come from farming, working-class backgrounds, with their main asset being that they have a claim to the land they reside on. As the city expanded around them, most villagers stayed on these lands, even as the state began to push to buy it up. Many villagers resisted these efforts,

unhappy with the value of compensation payments or simply unwilling to leave their ancestral homes. Yet, seeing how high demand was for land they already owned, many also realized the lucrative financial opportunity that had presented itself (Kan, 2016).

They found that they could invest in their properties and develop them as rental units, renting them out to migrants flooding the cities and making large profits off of the rental income. Though the land was managed by the 'administrative villages', each household (through long-term local residency) already had a predetermined stake in it through the structure of collectivized ownership. Thus, this structure turned former peasants into quasi-shareholders, with the administrative village serving as central management. Shareholding worked as a distributive mechanism which pooled the rental revenue generated by each unit and converted it into shares. These shares were then distributed out to individuals and households in the form of dividend payments (Kan, 2016). These dividends cultivated a sense of mutual support and trust in the collective, as each shared a financial stake in its continued success. For some villagers, dividends from rent became their primary source of income, especially as many were undereducated and unable to obtain employment in the urban economy (Kan, 2016). In an effort to bolster the amount of rental income obtained, villagers began to further develop their properties, soon becoming quite a stable fixture in the residential real estate market. However, these developments often bordered on – or were blatantly – illegal, as they violated health and safety codes or construction regulations. In the hopes of raising rental income by stuffing more and more people into limited spaces, villagers extended frames of old homes or constructed entirely new buildings on-site. As long as there was more demand for housing (which, as these cities continued growing, there always was), villagers would keep building (Geng et al, 2020). Yet this enthusiasm for development did not extend to a willingness to maintain these residencies, leading directly to the overcrowded but shoddy conditions described earlier.

This process only reinforced the frustration of the state, which acknowledged that the continued financial success experienced by villagers as landlords would make them even less likely to sell their land, but also had a heightened incentive to acquire the land as settlements became more crowded and unsightly. They have, as a result, redoubled their efforts to expropriate urban village land, though the success of these efforts varies case-by-case (Crawford & Wu, 2014).

The third set of actors crucial to the spatial production of urban villages are the migrants, who make up the bulk of renters in these neighborhoods. It is difficult, of course, to make generalizations covering such a large group of people, as there is undoubtedly significant variation in the backgrounds, preferences, and motivations of those who fall under this category. That being said, previous literature has found that the majority of migrants move to a new city in pursuit of economic opportunities, often coming from rural areas in the central and western regions of the country and migrating to urban areas in the coastal regions (Goodkind & West 2002). They are often referred to as the "floating" population, or *liudong renkou*, due to high rates of residential and employment mobility and short settlement durations (Zhu, 2007, p. 65).

Much of migrant life is the product of household registration. The household registration system, or *hukou*, is another legacy of China's socialist era, historically acting as a form of migration control to disincentivize individuals from permanently moving their place of residence. Essentially, the system provides individuals with a form of local citizenship: it registers one's residence in one, and only one, region. Citizens are usually registered at their place of birth and must give up their registration if they are to move permanently outside of that locale and reregister elsewhere. However, an official reregistration and change of *hukou* is exceedingly difficult to

obtain. In addition, local permanent registration is necessary for obtaining many social benefits – without it, migrants are unable to access social services like public schools, state sector jobs, or welfare programs (Wu, 2004). Hence, though migration itself is legal, the barriers to social living conferred by the *hukou* system disadvantage migrants in whatever region they migrate to and isolate them from the native population.

Household registration is also the primary reason why so many migrants choose to live in urban villages despite poor conditions. Without *hukou*, migrants are barred from accessing low-cost public housing built and subsidized by the state. Additionally, lacking *hukou* creates barriers to finding decently-paid permanent employment, meaning that migrants cannot afford to find better housing on the formal commercial market either (Lin et al, 2011). Both of these factors, in combination with urban villages' convenient locations, mean that urban villages are usually the most cost-effective – if not the only – option for the majority of migrants. In that sense, migrants are essentially forced to put up with the crowded, subpar living conditions put upon them by hostile and profiteering villagers, who see migrants as an entirely different class of people. Villagers are known for treating migrants poorly, looking down on them and excluding them from local social networks. Migrants have described the feeling of 'otherness' that permeates their life in urban villages, as indigenous residents barely acknowledge or make contact with them beyond standard landlord-tenant interactions (Chung, 2017, p. 2255). Many migrants cope with this by forming connections and communities amongst themselves, especially with others who have migrated from similar regions (Chung, 2017).

Thus, these three actors – the state, the villagers, and the migrants – constitute the forces working to shape urban villages. Their positionality in relation to one another is a direct result of the evolution of China's social and economic policies over the last few decades, and their interactions shape the process of spatial production, as well as the product of that process. I will now dive into a theoretical analysis of these relationships.

#### **IV. Theoretical Background**

As we will be analyzing the case of Guangdong's urban villages through the lens of Lefebvre's and Harvey's theories of spatial production, I will now address exactly what these theories consist of. We can understand Harvey's theory of "the right to the city" as an extension of Lefebvre's seminal work on understanding the production of space, and so I will present them as separate but connected concepts.

Lefebvre's theory of spatial production is grounded in a Marxist conception of capitalism and class relations. He interprets space as serving three purposes: acting as a means of production, in that particular spatial organizations can increase productive forces; serving as an object of consumption, in that space itself is consumed for production; and functioning as a political instrument, in that it can be used by the state to control hierarchy and homogeneity (Lefebvre, 1979). In that sense, he sees space as not only supported by social relations, but also as both producing and being produced by social relations (Lefebvre, 1979). He posits that capitalism specifically has appropriated this process by creating an abstract space of domination wherein capitalism is and can be the only producer of space. This space is oppressive, conforming all within it to its own conceptualization of space as a tool to extract surplus value (Lefebvre, 1979). At the same time, the space produced by capitalism is contradictory and chaotic, necessarily giving rise to those that question the capitalist exploitation of space (Lefebvre, 1979).

Lefebvre uses this as a background to advance what he sees as a solution – a shift towards a socialist production of space. To him, socialist space implies the end of private property and the

state's domination of space, and the reprioritization of use value of space over exchange value (Lefebvre, 1979). This socialist space must be managed by a collective, democratic base, and must abolish the system of private ownership of land and resources while still maintaining an individual's right to space (Lefebvre, 1979). To get there, a fundamental transformation of our understanding of space is necessary. While difficult, this reorientation is crucial to eliminating the deleterious and exploitative effects of capitalist space.

This theorization of space as both a sociopolitical tool and product is given a more concrete application in Harvey's piece, "The Right to the City". He bases his argument on Lefebvre's conception of space but ties it explicitly to processes of urbanization under capitalism. In his view, urbanization is a social and spatial process that is accelerated by capitalism, as both require the production and reproduction of surplus value to sustain themselves. Urbanization occurs as that surplus is mobilized, a process that can only be driven by capital's determination to expand and coopt more resources in a zero-sum system of exchange (Harvey, 2008). To do this, capital has to gain command of the entire urban process, thus giving it the "right to the city". At its most fundamental level, the right to the city "is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization." (Harvey, 2008, p. 23). Capital, however, has made it such that the right to the city is stolen from all citizens, leaving capitalist forces the sole controllers of that collective power, and ergo the sole producers of urban space, able to shape it into whatever they desire. Within this process lies a system of 'accumulation by dispossession', wherein capitalists' preferred form of urban development involves the systematic displacement of low-income populations by the state or the economic elite in order to extract value from their land (Harvey, 2008, p. 34). Thus, capital's domination over urban space almost always involves a class dimension that privileges the elite over the poor, underprivileged, and marginalized.

Given this, he suggests a solution similar to the conclusion Lefebvre had come to. He advocates for the democratization of the right to the city; or, in other words, broad collective control over the production and utilization of the urban surplus that has heretofore only been controlled by the capitalist elite. He believes that once the worker and the common folk have reclaimed the right to the city, they will have the ability to redefine the city as they see fit, therefore breaking up the monopolistic power of capital (Harvey, 2008). In this world, urbanization can take on new forms and dimensions, and the dispossessed can reassert agency over their place in the city – something that they have long been denied.

## **V. Analysis**

Understanding urban villages through the lens of Lefebvre's and Harvey's theories of spatial production will necessarily involve quite a bit of nuance. I will start by describing the features of urban villages that do fit into the conventional interpretations of space. Firstly, the character and impact of capital are consistent, in that capital prospers by coopting more and more space for itself. Urban villages exist due to capital's continuous consumption of space, as the onset of capitalism catalyzed urban growth and caused cities to engulf more and more of the surrounding countryside. In "The Right to the City", Harvey describes this process exactly, citing how capitalist production requires the attainment of more and more profitable terrains to absorb and appropriate for surplus production (Harvey, 2008). We see this process manifest in China as it does in many regions around the world, with urban sprawl continuing to infringe upon the lives of previously agrarian peoples.

*Kaitlyn Zhao*

As in many other regions, this process also often leads to large-scale displacement. Village lands bought off by the government are usually developed to house China's *nouveau-riche*, a category that previous residents – peasants and migrants – seldom fall into. As a result, the selling of such lands leads to a diaspora where households are forced to find new housing, often away from communities they have been a part of for years. This process is even more difficult for migrants, who, due to their registration status, have a hard time finding alternative housing outside urban villages. They are forced to relocate farther away from their employment and may even have to move to another city due to the limited options available (Geng et al, 2020). This perfectly exemplifies Harvey's idea of "accumulation by dispossession", as valuable land is forcefully captured from lower-income populations who have long occupied the space. In his piece, Harvey even uses the PRC as an example of this process, describing how, "it is often populations on the rural margins who are displaced, illustrating the significance of Lefebvre's argument...that the clear distinction which once existed between the urban and the rural is gradually fading into a set of porous spaces of uneven geographical development, under the hegemonic command of capital and the state." (Harvey, 2008, p. 36). This quote accurately encapsulates how capitalism has corroded the stability of those living at the intersection of urban and rural.

What Harvey fails to include in this narrative, however, are the complex dynamics occurring under the surface. He describes how some of those displaced by the state are sent on their way with small compensation payments, while others are forcefully removed by brutal repression (Harvey, 2008). Yet he does not mention those who successfully lobby to stay – and end up becoming instruments and beneficiaries of capitalism themselves. This tension is the primary way in which urban villages diverge from Lefebvre's and Harvey's theories. Though the nature of capitalism is the same, the agents of capital are different. Lefebvre primarily framed the conflict over the control of urban spatial production as a Marxist class struggle, wherein the political and economic elite are positioned against the general public or the working class (Lefebvre, 1974). He draws a strong connection between the state and capitalism, in that the state has been a major player in "the maintenance and management of capitalist growth at all spatial scales." (Brenner & Elden, 2009, p. 369). Harvey reinforces this idea, citing that the political and economic elite exert complete control over urban production at the expense of the public (Harvey, 2008). In other words, capitalist growth depends on state support, and simultaneously the state uses capitalism as an instrument of growth.

Yet, in the urban village case, while the state is in fact the main arbiter of capitalism, these efforts are emulated not only by the private sector developers with whom they contract (the 'economic elite') but by the working class itself. The village collectives, acting as landlords, dominate the vulnerable migrant population, essentially reproducing the same spatial dynamics propagated by the state on a smaller scale. Instead of seeing their urban village space as occupied by residents, the village collectives see it as a means of production in that it can produce surplus value for them to extract, and an object of consumption in that it can be consumed for that production. In that sense, they treat the space almost identically to how the state does. In fact, the very reason that many villagers refuse to sell their land is that they believe renting it out will be more profitable in the long term than a one-time compensation payment (Wang & Wang, 2014). These villagers are rent-seeking and acting capitalistically in every sense of the word, yet, as former peasants, they cannot be mistaken for a new 'urban bourgeoisie'. As most are undereducated and unskilled, they share a majority of traits with the working class. They also occupy a unique position in that they are both exploited and exploiter; they are, on the one hand, being pushed off their own land by the state and private developers, but they also act abusively to

migrants and achieve power through this relationship. This dual dynamic is not even mentioned in Harvey's piece, but it highlights the complexity of urban social and spatial relations. In occupying multiple positions at once, village collectives contradict the standard upper-class capitalist against lower-class worker framework put forward by the theories.

Additionally, the central solution advanced by Lefebvre and Harvey to counter the ills of capitalism is actualized in urban villages, yet still fails to achieve the objectives they outline. In their pieces, both authors argue for a shift towards a socialist urban space, wherein a democratic base owns control over the urban surplus and private ownership is abolished (Lefebvre, 1979; Harvey, 2008). This ideal of collectivized ownership is realized in urban villages, as all land is owned and managed by a collective made up of various shareholders. All households have a stake in the land, but none have sole ownership over any of it. Yet what we witness is not a harmonious society in which all receive an equal slice of the pie, but rather a system where even this collective ownership has been weaponized against those excluded from the collective. The power amassed by the 'democratic base' is leveraged to exploit those on the outside – the base has acquired "the right to the city" and has consciously chosen to recreate exactly what the state did before it. In that sense, many of the harmful effects of capitalism are not ameliorated by the presence of collective ownership.

This points to the simplicity and misplaced idealism with which Lefebvre and Harvey conceptualize the solution to the capitalist domination of space. Capitalism is far more deeply entrenched in our societies than what may be evident, and thus even if individual capitalist desires are curbed, the overall orientation of a society towards profit cannot easily be undone. Even those eager to share spoils with neighbors and community members may still seek profit-making opportunities that occur at the expense of others. This reveals something about the human spirit, which is at its heart preferential. Individuals discriminate, and though many may be willing to quell their own selfish desires to benefit those they feel a kinship with, this generosity does not necessarily extend to all members of society. The fact that this is true even in a country like China, where the culture heavily emphasizes communitarianism over individualism and capitalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, is deeply troubling for the efficacy of the proposed socialist solution.

That being said, this does not indicate that all hope is lost. Clearly, capitalism's effect on attitudes towards profit accumulation is strong and very contagious. But this merely indicates that Lefebvre's and Harvey's solutions are oversimplified, not off base. They should be amended to account for the pervasiveness of capitalist thought and target the overall system instead of urban spaces as independent entities. The interconnectedness of spatial relations under capitalism precludes the possibility of a socialist community successfully operating outside of the capitalist system sans total isolation, and therefore social movements seeking to socialize one metropolis at a time will be unsustainable. There is also danger in regarding the 'public' as a monolith, and not accounting for the ways in which the relative positions of different groups can result in divergent behavior. Communities that thrive off of a strong affinity with each other often source loyalty from mutual characteristics that are not shared with the rest of the population, which, when combined with an unequal distribution of power, can create opportunities for 'othering' practices that may become exploitative. Thus, a reimagined socialist solution must account for all of these factors in its initial structural design, or there is a danger of it devolving into a replica of the very practices it was created to solve.

## **VI. Wider Ramifications**

*Kaitlyn Zhao*

Given all of the above, the question then turns to what this may mean for our understanding of these theories of spatial production. The evidence above does not serve to discredit the importance of these theories, but it does prompt us to rethink our broader conceptual understandings of spatial relations. The reality of spatial existence is never as simple as the elite versus the people dichotomy that is often pointed to in the literature, and it is important to understand relationships within – and also with – space as multi-faceted and multi-positional. Space is relative and constantly changing, and one’s place within it shifts depending on who they are interacting with at any given time. In that sense, we cannot simply conceive of spatial power as flowing in one direction – from the powerful to the powerless – for the dynamics on the ground are often more complicated than that.

My argument also points out several limitations in the theories themselves. Often, these theories are regarded as universally applicable and explanatory. Yet there are several crucial elements of urban villages in China that they fail to capture. To understand these omissions, we must acknowledge that these theories were developed by Westerners, crafted with mostly Western spaces in mind. But the development of capitalism and urbanization in the West is not mirrored all over the world, and thus divergent trajectories should be expected in regions where it differs. The production of space is heavily influenced by historical legacies and cultural factors, and as such in many cases alternative frameworks will be necessary to truly understand how society interacts with the spaces it inhabits. Future work should examine how theories of spatial production can be amended and expanded to take into account these nuances, instead of taking Western characteristics as given and applying them to any and all contexts.

## **VII. Conclusions**

In sum, this paper has analyzed urban villages in Guangdong, China, through the lens of Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space, and, relatedly, Harvey’s theory of the right to the city. In doing so, I have addressed several aspects of urban villages that the theories either take for granted or fail to take into account at all. This may shine a light on their limited applicability to non-Western contexts. That being said, there is still plenty of room for these theories to be adjusted to understand these non-Western realities, a process that I hope I have begun here. More work is needed, of course, to truly unpack how to marry these theories with complex realities. Crucial next steps involve identifying and analyzing urban phenomena occurring elsewhere that may present similar contradictions as China’s urban villages.

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