Invisible tenants in urban village redevelopment: Case studies from Shenzhen Megacity, China

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Abstract

China's urban development is undergoing a critical transition from expansion to redevelopment. Justice is an important issue during urban redevelopment, particularly for millions of tenants in informal settlements megacities. Using critical political ecology we investigated tenants' "rights to the city" through fieldwork, interviews, and observation in two urban village renewal projects in Shenzhen. The tenant's rights to the city has some consideration, but a "government-developer-land owner (villager)" growth coalition was more dominant during the redevelopment of urban villages. The redevelopment process caused injustices and reduced the resilience of urban village communities. The tenants lost access to affordable accommodation, small businesses, job opportunities, and public goods and facilities, while the minority growth coalition captured the economic, political, and environmental benefits of the urban village revival projects. It is critical to protect tenants' rights in the revival of informal settlements, to insure a more inclusive and fair redevelopment process.

Keywords: Political ecology, justice, urban village revival, tenants, Shenzhen

Résumé

Le développement urbain de la Chine connaît une transition critique entre l'expansion et le redéveloppement. La justice est une question importante lors du redéveloppement urbain, en particulier pour les millions de locataires des mégapoles à habitat informel. En utilisant l'écologie politique urbaine, nous avons étudié les « droits à la ville » des locataires par le biais d'un travail de terrain, d'entretiens et d'observations dans deux projets de rénovation de villages urbains à Shenzhen. Les droits des locataires à la ville ont été pris en compte, mais une coalition de croissance « gouvernement-promoteur-propriétaire foncier (villageois) » a été plus dominante au cours du réaménagement des villages urbains. Le processus de redéveloppement a causé des injustices et a réduit la résilience des communautés des villages urbains. Les locataires ont perdu l'accès à des logements abordables, à des petites entreprises, à des possibilités d'emploi et à des biens et équipements publics, tandis

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que la coalition de croissance des minorités s'est emparée des avantages économiques, politiques et environnementaux des projets de revitalisation des villages urbains. Il est essentiel de protéger les droits des locataires dans le cadre de la revitalisation des quartiers informels, afin de garantir un processus de redéveloppement plus inclusif et plus équitable.

Mots-clés: Écologie politique, justice, revitalisation des villages urbains, locataires, Shenzhen

摘要

中国城市发展正从空间扩张向存量更新转型，在超大城市更新进程中居住在城中村数百万租户的权益保障成为社会公平的重要议题。本研究基于批判政治生态理论视角，以深圳市两个典型城中村改造项目为案例，通过深度访谈与参与式观察，系统解析城市更新过程中租户"城市权"的实践困境。研究发现：在政府-开发商-村集体形成的增长联盟主导下，城中村改造决策场域呈现"租户权益菜单化"与"增长联盟餐桌化"的双重悖论，这种结构性失衡不仅加剧空间正义缺失，更削弱城市发展韧性。具体表现为：租户群体失去廉价租房、小微商业空间挤压、就业机会缩减、公共产品供给断层等多维权益受损，而少数增长联盟则通过土地增值收益再分配、政商关系网络重构、生态空间资本化等方式独占更新红利。研究强调，构建更具包容性与公平性的城市更新方案，亟需将城中村租户权益保障纳入制度设计的核心维度，通过多元主体协同治理破解增长联盟的权力垄断，实现空间正义与城市韧性的双重提升。

关键词: 政治生态学, 公正, 城中村更新, 租客, 深圳

1. Introduction

Urban redevelopment is a global concern, because among other processes, it can involve the destruction of informal settlements (Rodenbiker, 2022; Wang, 2023). Chinese urban villages, home of millions of migration workers and younger people, have frequently been targeted for redevelopment in the country's mega-cities, aiming to enhance high quality urban development (Gan *et al*., 2019). Urban villages are a particular urban form in China that have collective land ownership and private ownership of homes and other structures, dating back to the incorporation of rural areas into cities that grew around them. They play important roles in China's urban development, but they are very different to high-tech industrial and residential developments that increasingly replace them or surround them (Cheng *et al*., 2014). The image of urban villages that springs to mind for many people in China is of uncivilized, dirty, chaotic, crowded, cheap, and unhealthy areas, or even "urban tumors" (Chen *et al*., 2023), while high-tech zones are civilized, modern, affluent urban pearls. Local governments and some scholars argue that urban villages are unproductive, uncomfortable, unsafe and definitely not 'green' (Li *et al*., 2014). A national urban village redevelopment (UVR) project has been justified for its improvements to environmental quality, living conditions, and also for its enhancement of a modernizing city image, with greater benefits to all (Liu, 2020, p. 408). The guiding hand of modernization and UVR is the Chinese developmental state, which has some of the trappings of a neoliberal regime (Wong *et al*., 2021b; Jiang *et al*., 2020; Wang & Li, 2017).

The interest in UVR is shared by local governments, private developers, and some urban villagers or an alliance of "government-developer-villager." Tenants in urban villages and small business owners are generally not part of such allliances (Jiang *et al*., 2020; Chen *et al*., 2023). Urban villages offer lessees cheap rent and job opportunities (Hao *et al*., 2012; Gan *et al*., 2019) so displacement or redevelopment without consideration of these needs is unjust (Rodenbiker, 2022). The role of tenants and their contribution to urban villages and more generally to sustainable urban development is undervalued (Myers, 2013; Chen *et al*., 2023).

This raises the question of how to build a just and inclusive, resilient and egalitarian city which embraces the poor, the less powerful, and the newly arrived, while protecting their rights. The question is important in China, where urban redevelopment is now beginning to outpace urban expansion onto greenfield sites. Urban villages are the home of millions of tenants, immigrants from rural areas, young graduates from universities, and low-income workers.

Shenzhen, next to Hong Kong（see Figure 1), is one of the most rapidly urbanizing cities in China, with around 17 million people now, developing from a rural county with abundant farmland to a megacity in half

century. It has become a pioneer of "urban renewal." Its urban villages comprise old farm buildings remaining from its agricultural past, collective dormitories from earlier state planning phases, and privately developed housing, shops and markets. Urban villages accounted for 48% of the city's total housing in at the end of 2014 and held the majority, 70%, of the population without Shenzhen household registration (Hukou)[2] (Gan *et al*., 2019). Urban villages in Shenzhen stand out as different, and less planned, compared to the modernist apartment complexes and high tech developments enclosing them. Redevelopment of urban villages is usually proposed for 'rational' reasons including land shortage, to increase economic productivity and the tax base, and to support China's global aspirations and image. As a result, more and more urban villages have been replaced by modern residential, commercial, cultural, or high-tech buildings and compounds (Wu, *et al*., 2013; Wang and Li, 2017). While Chinese urban redevelopment has been studied fairly extensively, there is a need for more investigation of the role of urban villages, especially in terms of their relationships with the surrounding areas, including high-tech developments (Wong *et al.* 2021b).

Figure 1: Location of Shenzhen.

Using an urban political ecology perspective, we aim to understand the urban renewal process and explicate the role of tenants and other marginalized groups in urban villages, such as small vendors and breakfast shops, analyzing the interaction between tenants and their contribution to the city's development, particularly in serving the high-tech parks. Tenant's "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1996), is about how citizens use and interact with urban space, beyond its market value (King, 2019). We argue their voices, interests, and livelihoods should be taken into consideration in UVR projects to attain a more just, inclusive, and better megacity.

[2] The *hukou* (户口) system, or Household Registration System, is a system of residence permits, giving exclusive access to the Social security system such as to housing, education, and employment provided by the local authority.

2. Methods

Since 1992, the Shenzhen municipal government has promoted the urbanization of the remaining rural areas, and all villagers altered their household registration from agricultural to urban residents. All agricultural productive land was redeployed for urban construction, 90% of which was expropriated by Shenzhen with proper compensation to land users. Tenure reverted to state ownership. The other 10% of the land was permitted to be commercially developed by village collectives or shareholding companies (after 1996), owned by the original villagers. Here, therefore, there is collective land ownership but dwellings are privately owned. Usually, the original residents have moved out, and their housing been continuously upgraded and renovated to obtain higher rental income. These are today's urban villages.

Urban villages have featured quite prominently in the Shenzhen megacity landscape. Around 2020 there were 300 urban villages offering 36.3% of the total residential housing stock, the majority in apartments, with a population of 10 million and housing approximately 87% of the total migrants in Shenzhen (Tong, 2023). The majority of them are without official residence status. In 2025, Shenzhen's household registered population is about 6 million, while those living in Shenzhen long-term but without Shenzhen Household Registration or *Hukou* is as high as 12 million. We took two cases for this study: Baishizhou and Dachong urban villages. Both are near the Shenzhen High-Tech Park (SHIP) and downtown from Nanshan, which is one of the most prosperous districts of the city containing businesses and tourist facilities. Baishizhou is the largest urban village in Shenzhen, and a UVR project is underway. In 0.74 km^2, there are over 2,500 buildings constructed by 1,878 households on their original residential land (*Zhaijidi*), housing over 150,000 migrants before the UVR began. Baishizhou is well known for being the first point of entry for many rural migrant workers to the city since the 1990s, and around 3 million people have rented properties in Baishizhou. Over 460,000 m^2 of floorspace is being demolished as part of the on-going Baishizhou UVR project.

Dachong was another urban village, 1.5 km from Baishizhou. It held about 1,500 farm buildings owned by around 1,000 households, and was home to 70,000 tenants. Dachong has been completely demolished and rebuilt, which provides us with a comparative case of the erasure and replacement of an urban village.

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in Shenzhen between March 2017 and December 2019. The research team visited Baishizhou and Dachong several times to collect first-hand information by observing and interviewing residents. In addition, the team interviewed experts, urban renewal policymakers, developers, managers in the SHIP, local government officials, landlords in urban villages, and NGO representatives. The team members have lived in an urban village for couple of years near Baishizhou and Dachong and they gained information from tenants who lived there. Although our research team members were not directly involved in the Baishizhou and Dachong projects, we had the opportunity to participate in several other urban village renewal projects in Shenzhen, gaining valuable inside information about the decision-making process and power structures related to urban village renewal. Due to Baishizhou being the largest urban village in Shenzhen, and Dachong's prestige location, these two urban villages were widely reported by various media, and researched by many scholars, and this provided rich secondary data.

3. Understanding UVR from a political ecology perspective

Reshaping urban landscape through UVR

Baishizhou's growth has been closely related to the expansion of the nearby SHIP. Many tenants and migrant workers are employed there, and this invents and reshapes the dynamics of Baishizhou. Over the past two decades, Baishizhou's landlords have illegally added more and larger/higher buildings to meet the growing demand for housing among tenants. This expansion of urban villages has been in accordance with the fast development of the companies in the zones of employment. Initially, the landlords provided dormitory-style housing to migrant workers at the labor-intensive companies nearby. Later, with white-collar staff working in SHIP, the landlords renovated their apartments according to the demands and tastes of these tenants. Today, young workers prefer the format of a single room with its own bathroom and kitchen. Rooms in Baishizhou are highly popular among workers because of the village's cheap rent, dynamic food and entertainment options, and short distance from work areas.

Due to the low cost of living, particularly the low rents, many migrant tenants have moved their families from rural areas to Baishizhou. It is usually the father who works to support the family, and the mother stays home to take care of their young children. Even though the living conditions are not that friendly, the possibility for whole families to migrate and live together is attractive. Most interviewees expressed their satisfaction with this aspect of urban life. When the tenants received eviction notices, they often sought nearby apartments, but these were not affordable. The developers compensated the property owners with 20 RMB/m^2 (US$ 2.73/m^2) for rented apartments and 30 RMB/m^2 (US$ 4.09/m^2) for shops per month if they were vacated, which was a big incentive for owners to end tenant leases. Tenants in Baishizhou voiced their concerns where they were forced to move to more affordable suburbs where their children had commute a much longer distance to school.

One migrant worker who sells noodles in Baishizhou described it as a "dream place" where the population and dynamics allowed him to sell "tons of noodles" in one day. Yet, he voiced concerns that the new, planned Baishizhou—with skyscrapers, high profile residential compounds, expensive office buildings, and a luxury commercial center—would be no place for small enterprises like his. Before the demolition started, our team visited Baishizhou (Figure 2). Some shops were already for sale as the date of forced removal was approaching. It seemed that the formal, official authority in the Baishizhou urban village had retreated first, and the building responsibility cards which usually show information regarding various public services, e.g., firefighting and police services, were already empty. At the same time, the area was still vibrant and busy with urban village life, even in areas where some buildings had already been demolished on April 19, 2019. Many tenants seemed prepared to stay right up until the last day possible.

Figure 2: Baishizhou. The buildings got demolished, and the tenants moved out. The scene does not exist now. Source: Photo taken by the authors on April 19, 2019.

Compared with the high cost of living outside the urban village, it is not difficult to understand why so many tenants remained in Baishizhou, while the necessary public services were disappearing after UVR project initiated. For a month, renting a single room costs about 800 RMB (US$112) in Baishizhou, while the same space in a nearby commercial residential apartment costs over 2,000 RMB (US$280). Some early tenants

enjoyed a relatively slow rent increase because of their long-term relationship with the landlords. A wide variety of daily commodities and foods were cheaper too. There was a main street containing all (relatively affordable) commercial services, and everything was accessible by foot. By comparison in a gated and formal community, there are fewer stores for daily shopping and these are more expensive because of higher rents, limiting the number of small and everyday businesses.

Tenants in Baishizhou took breakfast from small restaurants before conveniently walking across the street to work in SHIP, where many of China's biggest companies are located, including TCL, ZTE, Lenovo, Tencent, and others. They typically work late into the evening and then return to the urban village where there are beverage and food services. In justifying the demolition of urban villages, governments and developers often argue that the low-quality services provided there cannot possibly meet the needs of the people working in SHIP. Clearly, if the past success and vibrancy of Baishizhou is any indication, this claim is not true.

By comparison, in 2002, Dachong Urban Village was listed as an experimental project for urban renewal, but the project stagnated due to the levels of compensation being too low for urban villagers. After a market-oriented approach was introduced in 2009, however, the project was resumed and progressed with great momentum. The UVR project was led by China Resources (*Huarun*), a large state-owned company headquartered in Shenzhen. Now this urban village has been completely demolished, offering a potential glimpse into the future of Baishizhou. The only remaining pieces of the old Dachong urban village are the two ancestral temples preserved between the sharply contrasting office towers and the luxury shopping center (Figure 3).

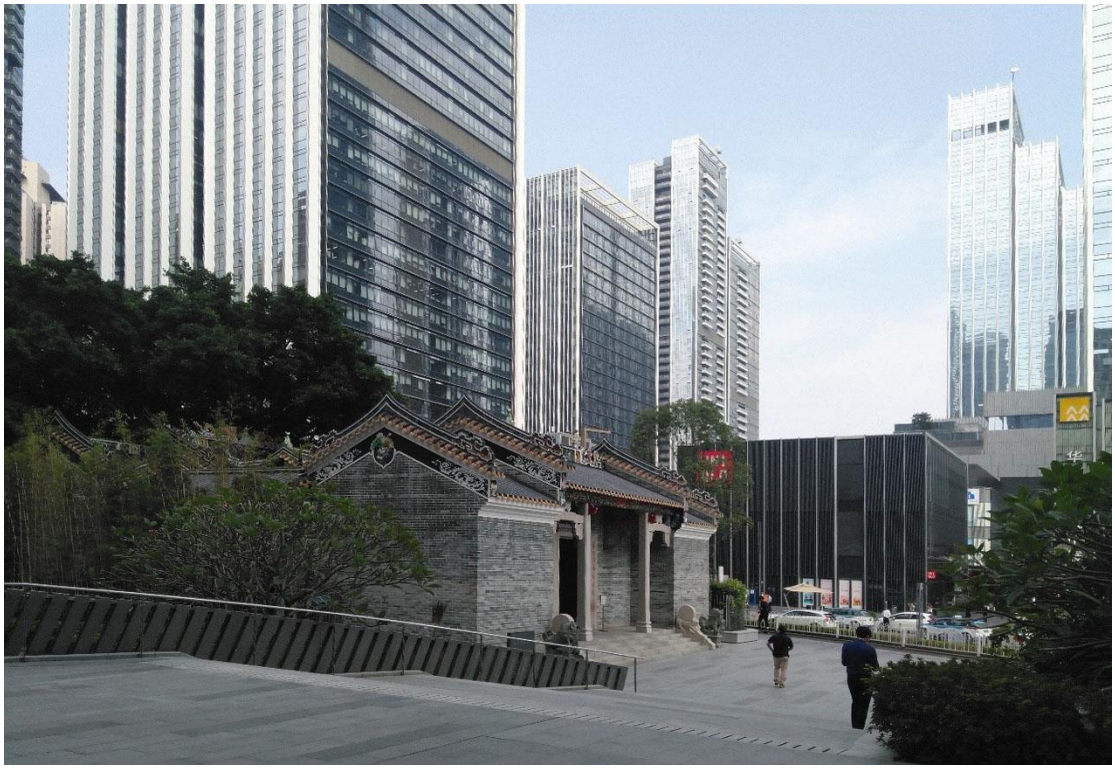

Figure 3: Dachong. Source: Photo taken by the authors on November 6, 2019.

Today, life in Dachong is similar to other new urban areas, characterized by luxury shopping with world-famous brands and upscale restaurants. Most of the remaining space is devoted to gated luxury residential and business blocks, leaving little public space to be explored or enjoyed by lay people. As an outsider, you can see the leaves of the trees in the hanging gardens in these commercial and residential places. The area is not a

friendly zone for the many low-income migrant workers: wide streets are filled with cars, fancy shops, modern apartments, and luxury brands. It is hard to imagine any kind of social inclusion and mixing occurring here. Compared with the numerous small stores distributed in the street network of an urban village, the shopping mall at the heart of this renewal project is monotonous and segregated, with limited diversity or possibilities for social mixing, and no consideration of low-income workers' needs.

In 2019, according to online real estate agency *Beike*, the average housing price in Dachong was 122,112 RMB/M^2 (US$16,827), and the monthly rent is about 5,000 RMB (US$689) for a single room, 10,000-12,500 RMB (US$1,378-1,722.5) for a two-room apartment, or 14,500 RMB ((US$1,998) for a three-room apartment. Considering that the average income in Shenzhen was 9,309 RMB (US$1,282.8) per month, these prices are prohibitive for many individuals, including university students and the vast number of migrant workers. As one migrant worker who had worked for a logistics company for more than eight years in Shenzhen told us,

> Nowadays, it is not hard to get a Shenzhen *Hukou*, but the living costs and housing prices have been the real barrier to becoming Shenzhenese. It is not as the slogan says — 'You come and you are a Shenzhenese' (*Laile jiushi shenzhenren*). It is more accurate to say that when you own an apartment, you become a Shenzhenese.

Undoubtedly, the high housing prices in Dachong have blocked many people's right to the city.

Property rights or rights of the tenants to the city

A number of Chinese scholars have shown how key state actors, usually local governments, gained the ownership of land and collective villages that lost their legal land ownership in the process of urban expansion. Generally, state-dominated formalization of informal property ownership occurred (Wong, *et. al,* 2021a). However, villages or villagers' cooperatives have their own agency to undertake bottom-up initiatives to shape the grassroots urban landscape, including its economy and governance (Wong, *et. al*., 2021c). Alternatively, the local state can actually strengthen the ability of urban village enterprises to provide welfare services to the tenants who largely depend on these urban rental properties (Tang, 2015). It seems that conflicts between collectives and the state have been relatively well resolved over the past twenty years of urbanization and ongoing negotiations about land use changes and redevelopment. The collective villages are certainly not weak players in UVR projects (Wong, 2015). They have been organized by village committees or shareholding companies that have relatively strong bargaining power during the process of urbanization, since they begin with access to land and property as the cities have grown around them. At the same time, conflicts between the state and local collectives have definitely emerged under the current property regimes and institutions.

The original villagers can also be oppressors of tenants during the process of urban redevelopment (Xu *et al*., 2021). This is because the tenants themselves have no rights in the decision-making process of the UVR, despite being the people who live and work in the cities and contribute to urban development in many ways (Jiang *et al*., 2020). Their tenant status contributes to their active exclusion from urban village redevelopment (Yang, 2018), with their interests and livelihoods almost totally neglected. After buildings are all demolished, they have to relocate, usually much further away from places of work. Many migrant workers face the dilemma of choosing between adequate housing conditions and a suitable location, especially in relation to their children's opportunities and proximity to good schools (Huang *et al*., 2017; Bao *et al*., 2018; Zeng *et al*., 2019).

Depoliticized strategies are often employed by the state and its growth coalitions to lessen the conflicts and inequalities between urban and rural people during the redevelopment process (Smith, 2021, pp. 6-8). The "local residents" of urban villages are actually considered to be only the landlords, who usually possess buildings on their residential sites (*Zhaijidi*) or collective properties, such as factories or commercial buildings owned by their village shareholding companies. This narrow definition of "residents" leaves a huge social and economic gap between the "local residents" and migrant workers, despite the latter group's strong presence in urban villages.

Powerful urban growth coalition and the powerless

The alliance of "government-developer-village" is formed under the neoliberal developmental logic and holds the rights to the city (Harvey, 2008), which is to formalize the informal property rights of urban villages (Chen, *et al*., 2023). Mainstream media, usually supporting UVR projects, claim that the urban village cannot keep pace with the rapid development of high-tech parks, particularly the needs of high-income white-collar or middle-class workers (Liu & Wong, 2018). In UVR projects, the "developer" part of the alliance with market first, neo-liberal principles, is dominated by a so-called power coalition, which is formed by the urban developers and financial institutions. "Government" is primarily local state government, alongside the high-income middle class and local farmers (as the landlords of urban villages) (Kuyucu & Uensal, 2010; Harvey, 2007). UVR projects generate rapid returns for the "government-developer-village" coalition. By turning dilapidated urban villages into commodities, buildings enter the private sector and properties may be bought and sold for the first time (Wong, 2015; Shin, 2016; Chen *et al*., 2023). Local villagers as landlords benefit from the soaring commercial real estate prices in Shenzhen through changing their illegal village-like buildings with informal property rights to formal property rights. In these two cases before redevelopment, land was owned by a collective, but house owners has use rights to the land, meaning both houses and land use rights could not be sold on the market. The villagers did not get approval to expand and raise their homes for more financial benefit. After demolishment, private house owners received satisfactory compensation, and the state took over the land, sold use rights to the developers, meaning that property can now be officially recognized with formal status and traded on the market.

Local government in Shenzhen is in favor of eliminating the informal markets with its limited property rights, while the rural village owners still operate an autonomous grassroots body to manage their affairs. To some extent they replace officially registered property rights (Ren, 2014). Accordingly, the local government authority requested that the owners follow the administrative requirement and pay a service fee when they rent and sell. More and more, however, these self-built neighborhoods, which are perceived as low in productivity and less 'civilized' by the urban growth coalition, have been taken over by new high-tech, commercial, and residential spaces to generate economic growth and revenue, as explained above (Zhao & Webster, 2011; He, 2012; Shin, 2013; 2016).

This approach leaves very little (if any) space for tenants and other lower-income individuals who provide services for tenants. While most scholars acknowledge the economic powerhouse of high-tech parks in China's rapid economic growth, the role of urban villages is often described as limited to supplying cheap but poor condition housing for high-tech parks (Zeng, *et al*., 2011; Cheng *et al*., 2014), which vastly underestimates their importance in urbanization. In fact, there are many key connections between urban villages and high-tech parks. Typically, residents work in the high-tech parks but they live in the urban villages. In this way, the urban villages provide accommodation, social amenities, food, entertainment, and other services to support high-tech park development. Hence, it is a mistake to treat the achievements of high-tech parks and urban villages separately, instead of considering both together in a systematic perspective. All enjoy the economic achievements of SHIP, while urban villages play their role (Zeng *et al*., 2011; Cheng *et al*., 2014). The "growth coalition" and its elites are part of a decentralized authoritarian power system focusing on real estate development. As economic growth becomes the underlying motivation for economic and political alliances between local governments and businesses, the issue of housing for the poor and the weak is ignored or dismissed entirely. As such, the renewal of urban villages could exacerbate segregation between low-income and high-income residents.

China adopted early versions of urban renewal projects, aiming to create international cities full of modern buildings. The uniform, modernizing projects now carry the risk of reducing the diversity of urban land use and urban forms of life, create "inequality disenfranchisement," as well as "a singular monolithic" urban space (Kleinhans, 2004; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008). Shenzhen, as a pioneer city of urban renewal projects, has not yet shifted away from a solely economic focus (e.g., the prioritization of the central business district) to a more comprehensive understanding of these projects, including using social integration to resolve social problems and pursue sustainability (Musterd & Ostendorf, 2008; Chan & Lee, 2008). From the perspective of social integration, it seems that the UVR projects are creating more social exclusion. Clearly, it is vital to think beyond the economic value of UVR projects and take social sustainability into consideration.

The political ecology of urban redevelopment

Urban political ecology helps us understand this urbanization process as political, economic, social, and ecological, with important justice and equity dimensions (Swyngedouw *et al*., 2003; Cornea, 2019). Critical political ecology stresses "a way of thinking about questions of access and control over resources, and how this was indispensable for understanding both the forms and geography of environmental disturbance and degradation, and the prospects for green and sustainable alternatives" (Peet & Watts, 2004, p. 6). The economic and social cost and benefits from UVR projects tend to be distributed unfairly among different political actors. Usually, weak political actors bear more negative costs and are neglected or excluded from benefit-sharing.

As we have shown, it was tenants who contributed time and energy to the urban village, and it was their demand for housing that motivated the local villagers to plan and develop farm-like buildings in the early days. The tenants' demand for various economic and social services also promoted a vibrant small businesses culture. Tenants are still considered as outsiders to the megacity, without institutional rights to have their voices heard in UVR projects. Urban villages have common shared space on their streets and in their markets, while UVR projects are often crowded by exclusionary, residentially segregated gated communities that lead to further residential segregation (Tomba, 2014, pp. 34-36). The exclusion of the tenant migrants or workers is common, while the benefits of economic transformation are largely enjoyed by the growth coalition, thus leading to wider gaps between the rich and the poor in megacities (Tomba, 2014, pp. 40-49). The process serves neo-liberal rationality through economic development, but also the urban political order. From a neoliberal or developmental perspective, there is legitimation of the progression from farmland to urban villages, and then new urban redevelopment, over a few decades.

The lack of justice felt by some actors, particularly the distribution of costs and benefits of among different stakeholders, parallels other political ecology studies of spatial and social injustices (Franklin & Osborne, 2017; Connolly, 2019). Urbanization is often uneven and unjust.

4. Who gains and who loses?

Procedural and distributional injustice

As we have illustrated, it is local government, project investors, developers, and landlords who all stand to benefit tremendously from these renewal projects, giving them incentives to downplay the strengths of urban villages and highlight (or even fabricate) possible weaknesses. Local government gains particular political and economic capital, as well as a perceived international reputation. Urban land is in state ownership while the private sector and public organizations can own the land use rights for 70 years, renewable if required. Notably, it is far easier for the government to control a gated community than an urban village with hundreds of thousands of people. Developers obtain open sites to develop profitable businesses. Local landlords can gain property compensation in cash, as well as in some cases, other property. Thus, demolishing the urban village is a win-win situation for all of these stakeholders.

In the Chinese media, the word demolition (*Chai*) is used to denote a mixture of violence, state power, and the protest of owners against local governments and developers. But in recent years, in the minds of many people, the character *Chai*, when drawn on the wall of an old and shabby building, means millions of RMB. Some owners of these old buildings are looking forward to the urban renewal projects in their community, dreaming of becoming millionaires or even billionaires after developers pay them off. There are progressively fewer protests among local villagers against developers, as we learned in interviews with academics and city planners in Shenzhen. The collective organization of the local villagers as landlords has proved successful in protecting their collective interests (Hsing, 2010). When the planned Baishizhou project created hundreds of billionaires among local landlords, it made headlines in Shenzhen (Sina, 2019).

We have shown that the tenants in urban villages, including migrant workers, small business owners, students, and office workers, hold the weakest position during the process of urban village renewal, when they are only loosely organized, unfamiliar with each other, and busy with their own livelihood struggles. Most are simply forced to move to locations far from the city center after development takes place. The tenants who lived in urban villagers suffered the most, while as we found, their landlords already live elsewhere. It is interesting

to observe that as a result of these moves, some urban villages on the city outskirts quickly become more vibrant, such as Pingshan urban village and Wangjingkeng urban village. The rights of the tenants to participate in the current urban village revival projects are denied, and their contribution to the development of urban villages and urbanization are not protected because their economic, social, and environmental interests are disregarded.

UVR projects are justified as serving the public interest, particularly in terms of economic growth and facilitating access to nearby high-tech parks. Yet the companies in these high-tech and industrial parks have not participated sufficiently in the project decision-making process either, despite being greatly influenced by the project outcomes. In order to reserve space for industries, the Shenzhen local government requires developers to generate an industrial planning report to justify their urban renewal project. One main theme is how the project would serve the area's economic growth in the future and preserve some space for industrial use, such as manufacturing and related businesses. Developers would like to work differently, maximizing residential space due to the high price of real estate in Shenzhen, and therefore they tend to replace manufacturing floorspace with office towers designed for "creative industries," which can actually be used as both offices and apartments.

From the procedural justice perspective, the majority of the tenants have no decision-making power during the urban redevelopment process. From a distributional justice perspective, the majority of tenants suffer and lose the most during the urban revival process. The low ecological footprints of urban tenants are lost. Larger footprints under the conditions of modern life take their place.

Disconnection between residents and SHIP

We argue that integration and connection of the urban village and the industrial zones are essential. Planning should consider them systematically, including the overall ecological impact of redevelopment and with attention to green space and energy profiles. In the central parts of Shenzhen, the life and death of urban villages are deeply associated with the growth of their high-tech or industrial neighbors. We argue that it is crucial to understand urban villages' role in the healthy development of the city, and particularly, the advantages and disadvantages of urban villages for the people living in them.

From an economic perspective, urban villages provide cheap housing as well as various daily services for the workers in industrial parks. From a social-psychological perspective, they offer their residents some similar opportunities as people living in high-income residences, with the opportunity to experience a feeling of equity, fairness, and inclusiveness. According to the urban village residents our team interviewed, they are satisfied with their lives in urban villages. Some tenants reflected that the social network in the neighborhood is safe and well developed. From a socio-environmental perspective, densely populated urban villages shorten commutes and reduce the ecological footprints of the people living there. From a political perspective, the participation of the community of local farmers in the urbanization process provides some local culture and local autonomy to check the power of the state, as well as the market. But the tenants, particularly the migrant workers, have contributed their energy and talents to urban development over the years, and it is important for the city government to protect their rights during the process of urban renewal. Currently, neither the neoliberal nor the state developmental logics can offer them legitimacy.

Affordability is a key characteristic for newcomers to the urban village, including low-income groups, and migrant workers, unable to afford urban renewal housing targeted to specific (higher-income) groups. The urban village blurs the lines between income groups, while there is a clear-cut demarcation between the poor and the rich after the renewal, lacking space for the poor. The urban village is permeable and deeply integrated into the ecosystem of the city. People, goods, and information can enter and exit urban villages relatively freely, in contrast to the enclosure and segregation of gated residential compounds and industrial parks. There are small companies in the industrial parks and their employees frequently live in urban villages, which was not accounted for in the UVR model.

From a systems perspective, the urban village is a vibrant socio-economic ecosystem that combines all kinds of mixed market and public services. If the urban village can be viewed as a forest, then urban renewal projects are more like carefully cultivated trees in a garden. Villages offer a wide variety of products and services

suitable for people with different incomes, unlike the less diverse offerings in the streets and buildings of urban renewal projects.

There is, therefore, a severe lack of systematic thinking in the design of UVR projects. High-tech parks do not only employ high-income workers. They are supported by large numbers of workers on lower incomes, who provide affordable products and services. If there is no space for these low-income individuals, the life of the high-income workers may not be sustainable. The urban village provides a "sponge" for entrepreneurship, particularly in hard times. For start-ups, small and medium-sized companies, if there are financial risks, the low cost of urban villages offers them a secure place to weather difficult times. It is hard to imagine that the more luxurious urban renewal projects allow for such possibilities and flexibility. UVR projects, at present, only target the elites and neglect the bottom segment in terms of labor and income. We need to consider whether social mobility has been reduced by the UVR strategy. While the segmented structure of the UVRs may accord with the wishes of their residents, questions remain about the inclusiveness, sustainability and social justice of the model.

Community is essential for urban landscape evolution

Shenzhen's past success in urbanization saw the coevolution of the state and the market, as well as local communities, including the "informal" actions of tenants and small businesspeople. With limited power and resources on the part of the local government, as well as the industry-focused role of the state, the state put its efforts into various forms of industrial development, while the market and the local communities took on the role of developing an informal economy beyond the influence or control of the state; this has been a major source of Shenzhen's economic success in the past. There is now less and less vacant space left in Shenzhen, so the state continues to take more and more from the urban villages, and this is risky. A comprehensive urban plan must consider the needs of all the city's residents, rich and poor.

Livelihood opportunities in the urban village have played a key role in Shenzhen in providing the possibility of advancement and equality, so it is unwise to destroy such a healthy system (Hao *et al*., 2011). The risks that remain are density, fire risks, sanitation, and security, but it is important that the local government consider how to solve these problems in the landscape of UVR projects and remaining urban villages instead of wiping out the latter entirely. More imagination and diversity are needed in future developments.

All are losers

At first glance, the losers from this process of urban renewal appear to be the tenants who must find cheap accommodation, commodities, and services far away from the center and whose children may have to transfer to different schools far away. Surprisingly, it is not just this group. Some companies in SHIP had complaints when we interviewed their personnel. Although they are the target customers of the urban renewal projects, managers worried about the increasing living costs after the urban villages were demolished.

> Our company used to provide cheap accommodation in Baishizhou village for our assembly line workers in the urban village. Now there are fewer chances to find affordable dormitories for them there. We have to relocate them in Chaguang village [another urban village nearby] and organize shuttle bus services. Before we only needed two shifts of assembly line workers, but now, due to the traffic jam in the morning, we need three, which greatly increases our costs. We have heard that Chaguang will also be demolished soon, so we need to move our assembly line to yet another place. (interview with a manager of a manufacturing company in SHIP)

Ironically, with the rising cost of living in all areas near SHIP, many of the companies in the industrial zones are considering moving to other locations along with the demolition of Dachong since 2008. It is true that market competition will eliminate unprofitable businesses, while ensuring that those that can afford the operational costs remain, but this could have disastrous results. Shenzhen's municipal government has promulgated various industrial policies to keep companies and industries in Shenzhen since 2010. Local

officials and economic experts voiced concerns in 2019 that the increasing costs will force manufacturers to move out, weakening the innovation capacity of the high-tech park (interviews, November 6, 2019). Due to the fierce competition among firms and district governments in Shenzhen, Nanshan district government would prefer to keep its companies in its governing region. To this end, the government has subsidized companies and mitigated the cost increases caused by the urban village renewal projects, but these policies have failed. Among our interviewees, many managers of small and medium firms concluded that there was very little the local government could do: the subsidies could not cover their increasing costs, and companies have been moving further away in order to stay profitable (interviews, November 9, 2018). Given that it is impossible for manufacturing firms with limited profitability to stay in the SHIP, it is more realistic to consider the benefits offered by relocation (interviews, November 9, 2018 with representatives from 17 manufacturing companies). Some managers mentioned that they hoped the local government could help them to move to Vietnam or other countries instead. From the interviews, it was clear that the local district government really wanted these companies to stay given their importance for revenues and GDP, but firms said that rising costs could still drive them away.

As we have explained, many individuals left or are leaving Shenzhen for their hometowns or other cities after the demolition of urban villages, affecting labor markets and relocation decisions. For example, when Huawei moved a large part of its company out of Shenzhen to Dongguan (north of Shenzhen) in 2018, it took thousands of staff with it, as well as the many other people providing products and services to Huawei and its staff. As one taxi driver commented, the street near the Huawei Shenzhen plant was once so crowded that it took several minutes to drive through, but now it is almost empty.

The state values the high economic output of the industrial parks as an important achievement—one that is legal, formal, and under the control of the state. It did not calculate the supporting role of urban villages and the vibrant informal economy they embody, simply because they are usually outside state control. Instead, the state exaggerated the role of industrial parks and undermined that of urban villages in the process of urbanization and economic development. One great risk from this mindset is that in urban renewal projects, only limited information is taken into consideration. The demolition of informal urban space has created a disturbance to market systems, through the effects on the labor market.

Local governments want to attract talent (e.g., researchers, managers, and experts) to work in the high-tech parks, but they tend to ignore the symbiotic relationship with urban villages, which together form a larger social ecosystem comparable to a forest. As Alexander (1965) suggested, "A city is not a tree." Rather, a city is a forest, in both physical and social terms. It would be wrong to view and define a forest as only its largest few trees, as if those trees could grow there without the support of the surrounding plants. Yet that is how the governments often view cities, seeing only successful companies and high-income people while ignoring the fact that these are just one small part of the urban ecosystem. In this way, the chain effects of demolishing the urban villages in this ecosystem damage the healthy development of the high-tech parks. We understand that the renovation of dilapidated areas is necessary, but we argue that any approach to renovations must consider the entire urban social ecosystem and that the process should be smooth and gradual in order to avoid destroying the fragile ecosystem before a new and healthy one can mature.

Many argue UVR projects are required to improve the urban ecology, as little green space exists in most urban villages with their high urban density. But only the rich local residents can afford to enjoy the valuable greenery and beautiful environment of most urban renewal projects. A just urban socio-environmental perspective, therefore, always needs to consider the question of who gains and who pays, asking serious questions about the multiple power relations—and the scalar geometry of these relations—through which deeply unjust socioenvironmental conditions are produced and maintained. After completed the UVR project, the tenants and the other associated marginalized people were forced out from urban center, and as Swyngedouw *et al*. argued more generally (2003, p. 910): "…it is likely that urban areas populated by marginalized residents will bear the brunt of negative environmental change, whereas other, more affluent parts of cities will enjoy growth in, or increased quality of, environmental resources."

5. Conclusions

Informal settlements and tenant communities constitute vital yet often contested components of megacity ecosystems, wherein their right to the city emerges through collective socio-spatial practices—negotiated via everyday interactions among residents and their tactical engagements with urban space. The neoliberal paradigm of urbanization prioritizes property regimes and speculative markets, yet it systematically marginalizes the politics of inclusion and rights to the city for vulnerable populations. This article has shown that in the megacity of Shenzhen, justice is an important issue during urban village redevelopment, a particular urban form dating back to original rural land uses, particularly for millions of tenants in informal settlements. The voices and interests of the tenants living in the urban villages and other marginalized communities and groups have been ignored by elites controlling urban renewal projects. And yet this group is a majority, and important for the urban economic and social landscape. This imbalance threatens to destroy the fragile urban social ecosystem, including disconnected the integrated relationship between industry and residential space, in a deteriorating urban economy and where job opportunities are decreasing. The manufacturing workforce in Shenzhen dropped from 2.46 million in 2015 to 2.07 million in 2021 and the population of Shenzhen decreased in 2022 for the first time since 1980.[3] In the end, both the marginalized majority and development alliances are negatively impacted under the urban renewal program. The cost of living in Shenzhen is rising for everyone as segregation increases and the social inclusiveness and competitiveness of the city decreases, negatively influencing the overall welfare of the city's residents.

We need to apply an ecological, systematic approach to consider fundamental questions that are political in nature: What kinds of cities are we going to construct? Whose happiness and welfare do we value? Who can afford to stay in the cities and enjoy the right to live and shape them? The numerous tenants in urban villages should have a say in shaping their cities. A political ecology perspective is necessary to reexamine the urban redevelopment project, to consider fairly the urban village and its role in urban development, and the rights of the numerous migrant tenants. A more balanced and comprehensive path towards continuing prosperity and success, that is more inclusive and just, would recognize these issues.

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