



universität  
wien

# MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

Probing into the Life in a Maze of Dominoes: A Case Study of the  
Livability of Shipai Urban Village in Guangzhou, China

verfasst von / submitted by

Zhu Bijin

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science (MSc)

Wien, 2024 / Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /  
degree programme code as it appears on  
the student record sheet:

UA 066 664

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /  
degree programme as it appears on  
the student record sheet:

Masterstudium DDP Urban Studies

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Joshua Grigsby, MSc.

**Probing into the Life in a Maze of Dominoes:  
A Case Study of the Livability of Shipai Urban Village in Guangzhou, China**

朱碧瑾  
Zhu Bijin



*Erasmus Mundus Master in Urban Studies*

*Supervisor: Joshua Grigsby, MSc.*

*Date of Submission: September 1, 2024*

## **Abstract**

Urban village is a unique urban phenomenon in China. Narrowly defined, an urban village refers to a rural settlement that, during the process of urbanization, loses or nearly loses its agricultural land within the urbanized area, yet still maintains village-level self-governance and collective land ownership. More broadly, urban villages are residential areas that lag behind modern urban development, exist outside the scope of modern urban management, and exhibit low living standards within rapidly expanding cities. Since the launch of China's reform and opening-up policy in 1979, urban villages have proliferated in major cities, giving rise to numerous urban challenges, among which the livability of urban villages has emerged as one of the most pressing issues. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in cities within the Pearl River Delta, such as Guangzhou. These challenges began to draw the attention of researchers around the year 2000, prompting government efforts to propose solutions for improving the conditions in urban villages. Guangzhou was among the first cities to initiate urban village redevelopment. Despite four phases of redevelopment, Guangzhou still has over 100 urban villages, housing approximately 5 million people, and the overall livability of these areas has not seen significant improvement.

Against this backdrop, this study poses the research question: Why have the livability issues in Guangzhou's urban villages not been resolved after 20 years of redevelopment? To answer this question, the study employs case study methodology, literature review, and interviews. Using Shipai Village in Guangzhou as a case study, the research examines the current state of Guangzhou's urban villages, the city's livability policies, the history of Shipai Village's transformation into an urban village, and collects perspectives from various stakeholders, regarding the livability of Shipai Village. The study then applies thick description analysis to investigate the reasons behind the persistent lack of improvement in the livability of Shipai Village.

The findings reveal that the formation of Shipai Village was primarily driven by the confusion over land ownership caused by China's land policies and the substantial demand for rental housing triggered by Guangzhou's rapid urbanization. The low livability resulting from this process is largely attributed to the villagers' pursuit of profit following the loss of their agricultural land. Over the subsequent decades, the failure to improve livability can be attributed to limitations imposed by land policies and municipal finances, poor decision-making by the municipal government, the villagers' continued pursuit of profit, and the disempowerment of tenants. The most fundamental cause, however, is the outdated nature of China's land policies, which have not evolved to meet contemporary needs.

Finally, the study discusses strategies for improving the livability of Guangzhou's urban villages within the current context and proposes fundamental solutions to urban issues, including livability, in urban villages. The paper argues that while the problems associated with urban villages are examined, the villages themselves are not the root problem; rather, the challenges faced by the residents of these villages are the issues that deserve attention and resolution.

**Keywords:** *Urban Villages, Livability, Urban Renewal, Urban Transformation*

## **Abstrakt**

Das städtische Dorf ist ein einzigartiges urbanes Phänomen in China. Im engeren Sinne bezeichnet ein städtisches Dorf eine ländliche Siedlung, die im Zuge der Verstädterung ihre landwirtschaftlichen Flächen innerhalb des urbanisierten Gebiets verliert oder fast verliert, aber dennoch die dörfliche Selbstverwaltung und den kollektiven Landbesitz beibehält. Im weiteren Sinne sind städtische Dörfer Wohngebiete, die hinter der modernen Stadtentwicklung zurückbleiben, außerhalb des Geltungsbereichs der modernen Stadtverwaltung liegen und einen niedrigen Lebensstandard in den schnell wachsenden Städten aufweisen. Seit dem Beginn der chinesischen Reform- und Öffnungspolitik im Jahr 1979 haben sich die städtischen Dörfer in den Großstädten stark ausgebreitet, was zu zahlreichen städtischen Herausforderungen geführt hat, unter denen die Lebensqualität in den städtischen Dörfern zu einem der dringenden Probleme geworden ist. Besonders ausgeprägt ist dieses Phänomen in den Städten des Perlflossdeltas, wie z. B. Guangzhou. Um das Jahr 2000 begannen diese Herausforderungen die Aufmerksamkeit der Forscher auf sich zu ziehen, was die Regierung dazu veranlasste, Lösungen zur Verbesserung der Bedingungen in den städtischen Dörfern vorzuschlagen. Guangzhou war eine der ersten Städte, die mit der Sanierung von städtischen Dörfern begann. Trotz vier Sanierungsphasen gibt es in Guangzhou immer noch über 100 städtische Dörfer, in denen etwa 5 Millionen Menschen leben, und die Lebensqualität in diesen Gebieten hat sich insgesamt nicht wesentlich verbessert.

Vor diesem Hintergrund wird in dieser Studie die Forschungsfrage gestellt: Warum sind die Probleme der Lebensqualität in den städtischen Dörfern von Guangzhou nach 20 Jahren der Sanierung noch nicht gelöst? Zur Beantwortung dieser Frage bedient sich die Studie der Methodik der Fallstudie, der Literaturrecherche und der Interviews. Anhand der Fallstudie Shipai Village in Guangzhou werden der aktuelle Zustand der städtischen Dörfer in Guangzhou, die Maßnahmen der Stadt zur Verbesserung der Lebensqualität, die Geschichte der Umwandlung von Shipai Village in ein städtisches Dorf und die Perspektiven verschiedener Interessengruppen in Bezug auf die Lebensqualität von Shipai Village untersucht. Die Studie wendet dann eine dichte Beschreibungsanalyse an, um die Gründe für die anhaltende mangelnde Verbesserung der Lebensqualität des Dorfes Shipai zu untersuchen.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Entstehung des Dorfes Shipai in erster Linie auf die durch die chinesische Bodenpolitik verursachte Verwirrung über Landbesitz und die durch die rasche Urbanisierung Guangzhous ausgelöste große Nachfrage nach Mietwohnungen zurückzuführen ist. Die geringe Lebensqualität, die sich aus diesem Prozess ergab, wird größtenteils auf das Gewinnstreben der Dorfbewohner nach dem Verlust ihrer landwirtschaftlichen Flächen zurückgeführt. Dass es in den folgenden Jahrzehnten nicht gelungen ist, die Lebensqualität zu verbessern, ist auf Beschränkungen durch die Bodenpolitik und die städtischen Finanzen, schlechte Entscheidungen der Stadtverwaltung, das anhaltende Gewinnstreben der Dorfbewohner und die Entmachtung der Mieter zurückzuführen. Die grundlegendste Ursache ist jedoch die veraltete Landpolitik Chinas, die sich nicht an die heutigen Bedürfnisse angepasst hat.

Schließlich werden in der Studie Strategien zur Verbesserung der Lebensqualität in den städtischen Dörfern von Guangzhou im aktuellen Kontext erörtert und grundlegende Lösungen für städtische Probleme, einschließlich der Lebensqualität, in städtischen Dörfern vorgeschlagen. In der Studie wird argumentiert, dass zwar die mit den städtischen Dörfern verbundenen Probleme untersucht werden, die Dörfer selbst aber nicht das eigentliche Problem darstellen; vielmehr sind es die Herausforderungen, mit denen die Bewohner dieser Dörfer konfrontiert sind, die Aufmerksamkeit und eine Lösung verdienen.

***Schlüsselwörter: Städtische Dörfer, Lebensqualität, Stadterneuerung, Stadtumbau***

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank:

My supervisor Josh, for his insightful guidance and patient explanation that helped shape this thesis.

The interviewees who took time to talk with me in their busy days and shared the important information with me.

My friends, classmates and family who supported me in this extra year.

Every author and photographer that shared their works and inspired this thesis.

# Contents

|                                                                                         |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 1. Introduction.....                                                                    | 4  |
| 1.1 Research background.....                                                            | 4  |
| 1.2 Research gap and research questions: .....                                          | 6  |
| 2. Literature Review .....                                                              | 8  |
| 2.1 Urban Villages .....                                                                | 8  |
| 2.1.1 Research on urban villages in China.....                                          | 8  |
| 2.1.2 Examples of typical urban villages in China .....                                 | 10 |
| 2.1.3 Comparable concepts in other districts .....                                      | 13 |
| 2.1.4 The nature of urban villages .....                                                | 18 |
| 2.2 Livable city and livability .....                                                   | 18 |
| 2.2.1 Development and conceptualization of livable cities and livability.....           | 18 |
| 2.2.2 Development and conceptualization of livable cities and livability in China ..... | 21 |
| 2.3. Urban renewal.....                                                                 | 23 |
| 2.3.1 Development of Urban Renewal Research .....                                       | 23 |
| 2.3.2 Urban Renewal in China.....                                                       | 25 |
| 3. Methodology.....                                                                     | 27 |
| 3.1 case study.....                                                                     | 27 |
| 3.2 Document research .....                                                             | 28 |
| 3.3 interviewing.....                                                                   | 30 |
| 3.4 Thick description.....                                                              | 30 |
| 4. Urban Villages in Guangzhou.....                                                     | 32 |
| 4.1 Overview of Guangzhou Urban Villages.....                                           | 32 |
| 4.1.1 Formation of Guangzhou Urban Villages .....                                       | 34 |
| 4.2 Livability of Urban Villages in Guangzhou.....                                      | 39 |
| 4.2.1 Living environment.....                                                           | 39 |
| 4.2.2 Public facilities .....                                                           | 39 |
| 4.2.3 Public Security .....                                                             | 40 |
| 5. Guangzhou and Livability .....                                                       | 41 |
| 5.1 livability policies in Guangzhou.....                                               | 41 |
| 5.2 The livability of Guangzhou.....                                                    | 42 |
| 6. Shipai Village .....                                                                 | 45 |
| 6.1 History of Shipai village.....                                                      | 45 |
| 6.1.1 Overview of Shipai village.....                                                   | 45 |
| 6.1.2 Geographic Boundaries of Shipai Village .....                                     | 46 |
| 6.1.3 The land use history of Shipai village .....                                      | 48 |
| 6.1.4 The population development in Shipai.....                                         | 51 |
| 6.1.5 The urbanization of Shipai area .....                                             | 52 |
| 6.1.6 The economy of Shipai village.....                                                | 53 |
| 6.2 The livability of Shipai village.....                                               | 55 |
| 6.2.1 Residential environment.....                                                      | 55 |
| 6.2.2 Infrastructure .....                                                              | 57 |
| 6.2.3 Public Security .....                                                             | 58 |

|                                                                                                                      |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 6.2.4 Summary .....                                                                                                  | 58 |
| 7. Results .....                                                                                                     | 60 |
| 7.1 The municipal government that's "not working hard enough" .....                                                  | 60 |
| 7.1.1 The lack of action .....                                                                                       | 60 |
| 7.1.2 A difficult plan .....                                                                                         | 62 |
| 7.2 Villagers who "protect their interests" .....                                                                    | 64 |
| 7.2.1 The power of land-use rights .....                                                                             | 64 |
| 7.2.2 The inability to leave the village .....                                                                       | 65 |
| 7.3 "Helpless" tenants .....                                                                                         | 66 |
| 7.3.1 The dilemma of lease .....                                                                                     | 66 |
| 7.3.2 The dilemma of rights .....                                                                                    | 67 |
| 7.3.3 The dilemma of ability .....                                                                                   | 68 |
| 7.3.4 Tenants' needs .....                                                                                           | 68 |
| 7.4 The third parties "struggling to make progress" .....                                                            | 68 |
| 7.4.1 Disappearing media reports .....                                                                               | 68 |
| 7.4.2 Difficult independent investigation .....                                                                      | 69 |
| 7.4.3 Government officials who can't accept interviews freely .....                                                  | 69 |
| 7.4.4 Village collectives that refuse to be interviewed .....                                                        | 70 |
| 7.5 Why has the livability of urban villages in Guangzhou still not improved after 20 years of transformation? ..... | 70 |
| 8. Discussion .....                                                                                                  | 73 |
| References .....                                                                                                     | 78 |
| List of Figures .....                                                                                                | 82 |
| List of Tables .....                                                                                                 | 83 |
| Appendices: Content of interviews .....                                                                              | 84 |

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research background

“Urban village” is a unique urban phenomenon in China known as "village-within-city" in Chinese. They refer to villages that were originally located on the outskirts of the city or in rural areas, but are surrounded by urbanized areas as the city expands. Urban villages are often an inevitable product of urbanization in China, retaining certain characteristics of rural areas while integrating some functions of cities (Li, 1998). These areas are usually collective land, with dense buildings and relatively backward infrastructure. The rents are usually lower than other residential buildings around, making them becoming temporary homes of many low-income groups, including domestic migrant workers and small vendors.

The formation of urban villages can be attributed to several factors. First, with the acceleration of urbanization in China in the early 1980s, rural areas on the outskirts of cities had been incorporated into urban planning. However, some land had not been completely requisitioned or planned by the government, leading to the emergence of transitional zones between rural and urban areas. Second, a significant rural population have been migrating to cities in search of job opportunities and necessitating affordable housing. Urban villages have become their primary residence due to low rental costs. Third, the rapid pace of urban development has outpaced the policy making and administration of municipal governments, also contributing to the emergence of urban villages. “Urban village” as a new thing that has become one of the biggest urban problems in some major cities in a brief space of time, most local governments couldn’t even locate the radical mechanism of the formation of it, let alone implement long-term planning strategies to address the challenges posed by urban villages, resulting in their prolonged existence within cities.

The land within urban villages is predominantly collectively owned, and the lack of coordinated planning during the construction process has led to complex land ownership issues and difficulties in standardized management. Additionally, the infrastructure in these areas is often underdeveloped, with incomplete public services such as water supply, electricity, and sewage systems in early years, contributing to poor living conditions. Furthermore, due to the low cost of living, urban villages have attracted a large number of domestic migrants, resulting in high population density and overcrowded living environments. Security concerns are also more pronounced in urban villages than other parts of a city, with higher incidences of crime including theft and robbery. Additionally, there is a notable deficiency in public services such as education and healthcare in these areas (Yan et al., 2004).

In response to the challenges posed by urban villages, municipal governments across China have implemented various transformation strategies, each with different approaches. The first model involves the complete demolition and reconstruction of urban villages, transforming them into modern residential or commercial areas. While this approach can significantly alter the appearance and functionality of urban villages,

it demands substantial financial investment and time. The second model is segmented transformation, where urban villages are gradually transformed in phases to mitigate the social issues and economic strain associated with large-scale demolition. This approach also helps preserve the interests of indigenous residents to some extent. The third model focuses on community renovation and upgrading, which involves improving the infrastructure of urban villages by enhancing public service facilities such as water supply, electricity, and sewage systems to improve the overall living environment. Although this method requires less financial investment, its transformation effects may be limited. The final model is multi-party cooperation, where the government, enterprises, and communities collaborate in the transformation and development of urban villages. By incorporating social capital, this approach seeks to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the transformation process (Ye, 2015). However, despite some successful experience in urban village transformation, many challenges remain. First, resident resettlement poses a significant issue. During the demolition and renovation process, finding equitable ways to resettle original residents and protect their interests is a major challenge. Second, funding is a critical concern, as large-scale renovation demands significant financial resources. Identifying how to raise and allocate these funds effectively is a key issue in the transformation process. Lastly, the success of these projects heavily depends on careful planning and execution. Achieving scientifically sound planning and ensuring proper implementation are crucial to the overall success or failure of urban village transformation.

As a major city in southern China and a leading force in the country's reform and opening-up policies, Guangzhou faces a particularly prominent issue with urban villages amid its urban development. Due to its unique historical background and the rapid pace of urbanization, Guangzhou's urban villages have become a significant case study for examining China's broader urbanization challenges. Several factors have influenced the formation of these urban villages.

Firstly, the rapid economic development and urban expansion around Guangzhou have led to the rapid incorporation of rural areas into urban planning. However, issues such as land acquisition and demolition compensation have hindered the timely urbanization of certain areas. Secondly, as a key economic hub and a major destination for domestic migrants, Guangzhou has attracted a large number of migrant workers and low-income groups who require affordable housing. Urban villages have become the primary gathering places for these groups due to their low rental costs (Li, 2005). Additionally, lagging policies and ineffective management have contributed to the long-term existence of urban villages. The pace of urbanization has often outstripped the planning and management capabilities of local authorities, resulting in the persistence of urban villages that are disconnected from the development of other parts of the city. This disconnection has led to numerous unresolved urban problems within these villages.

One of the most significant issues in Guangzhou's urban villages is low livability. Housing conditions are generally poor, with most dwellings being self-built and many lacking official planning or approval, leading to widespread illegal construction. These self-built houses often suffer from limited space, inadequate ventilation and lighting, and a highly crowded living environment. In the past, infrastructure such as water

supply, power supply, and drainage systems in urban villages was often incomplete, resulting in frequent issues like water shortages, power outages, and poor drainage. In some urban villages, sewage systems are aging or entirely absent, leading to the indiscriminate discharge of domestic sewage, which causes environmental pollution and hygiene problems (Liu et al., 2017). The road infrastructure in these villages is also underdeveloped, with narrow roads and chaotic traffic making passage difficult for both pedestrians and vehicles.

Environmental quality issues are particularly severe in urban villages. Narrow streets and alleys create hygiene blind spots, complicating garbage collection and cleanliness efforts. Most urban villages have low green coverage and lack public leisure spaces, creating a harsh living environment for residents. Some areas also suffer from industrial pollution and poor air quality, posing direct health risks to residents.

Social security concerns are another critical issue. Residents of urban villages, especially migrant workers, often face insufficient security due to gaps in the registered residence system and the social security system. Many migrant workers cannot access the same social security benefits as local residents, leading to low coverage of medical insurance, pension insurance, and other essential services. This lack of coverage leaves them vulnerable in times of illness and old age. In earlier years, security issues in urban villages were also prominent, with high rates of criminal activities such as theft and robbery, leaving residents' property and personal safety inadequately protected. Community services are relatively weak, with a lack of public amenities such as cultural and entertainment facilities and community activities. This results in a monotonous social life for residents and weak community cohesion.

## **1.2 Research gap and research questions:**

Despite extensive research on urban villages in both Chinese and English academia - ranging from early explorations of this emerging phenomenon to discussions on the livability issues, and finally to suggestions for urban village redevelopment – there is a fact that has been largely overlooked over the past 20 years: the fundamental livability of urban villages, particularly in Guangzhou, has not seen significant improvement. Urban villages have consistently been one of the most pressing urban issues in Chinese cities, especially in the Pearl River Delta region. The Guangzhou municipal government has repeatedly proposed various solutions at different stages to address the urban village problem, employing methods including, but not limited to, comprehensive redevelopment, partial renovation, and micro-renewal. However, as of today, Guangzhou still has over 50 urban villages, with more than 5 million people living in these areas, and most urban villages continue to suffer from issues such as inadequate lighting, poor ventilation, unsanitary conditions, and significant fire hazards. Therefore, this study poses the research question: ***Why have the livability issues in Guangzhou's urban villages remained unresolved after 20 years of redevelopment?***

This primary question will be addressed through the following sub-questions: 1. What are the specific livability issues present in Guangzhou's urban villages? 2. What kinds of transformation have Guangzhou's urban villages undergone over the past 20 years?

3. How can the livability issues in Guangzhou's urban villages be effectively resolved?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Urban Villages

#### 2.1.1 Research on urban villages in China

Research on urban villages in China began in the 1980s, paralleling the emergence of this phenomenon in Chinese cities. Initially, studies were predominantly framed within anthropological and sociological perspectives, exploring the social and cultural dynamics within these communities. However, as urbanization advanced and the complexity of urban environments increased, architects and urban planners also began to address this topic, concentrating on the spatial challenges and implications of urban villages within the broader urban context.

Initially, much of the research on urban villages adopted a negative perspective, emphasizing the challenges and disruptions these areas posed to urban development (Jiang & Wang, 2002). However, as urbanization advanced and research became more comprehensive, perspectives on urban villages evolved. Researchers began to recognize the diverse forms, structures, and unique social and cultural features of these spaces. This shift in focus reflects a more nuanced understanding of urban villages, acknowledging their role and significance within the urban landscape. Following the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in 1979, China's economy experienced rapid growth, leading to accelerated urbanization. Many rural villages adjacent to cities were annexed by expanding urban areas. However, not all villages were fully integrated into the urban fabric, some remained rural, encircled by urban development due to factors such as land use policies, prevailing urban planning principles, and the attitudes of village residents. By the late 1980s, Chinese researchers began to take notice of this phenomenon, referring to the rural communities encircled by urban areas as “a village in the city”, a phrase derived from the title of the 1982 film *A Village in the City*. Early studies primarily focused on how urbanization and the cultural differences between villages and cities impacted the daily lives of the villagers (Liu et al., 2017). Notably, only one article from this period examined the phenomenon from the perspective of urban planning and architecture. This study highlighted that the disorganized management and transformation of these villages within cities could lead to significant challenges for urban areas and disrupt public order in both the village and the city (Ren & Cheng, 1989).

In the 1990s, increasing numbers of researchers began studying the villages surrounded by urban areas, and the term “urban village” (village-within-city) gradually became the standard academic term for this phenomenon. Most researchers at the time viewed urban villages as potential threats to well-organized urban life and effective urban management. For instance, Li and Xie (1995) analyzed the causes, possible effects, and

solutions related to urban villages, arguing that these areas could slow down urbanization, negatively impact suburban economic growth, harm the image of cities, and lead to significant waste during urban transformation processes. Urban villages were widely regarded as obstacles to urbanization that needed to be eliminated. Reflecting this perspective, Zheng (1997) and Fang et al. (1999) explicitly referred to urban villages as "problems" in the titles of their papers, while Yang (1996) called for measures to prevent and control their spread. Similarly, Ma (1999) bluntly described urban villages as blights on the urban environment. During this period, researchers focused on identifying the causes of urban village formation and the challenges these areas posed.

The number of studies on urban villages in China grew significantly between 2000 and 2010, reaching a peak in 2010. After the initial identification of the phenomenon in the 1980s and the establishment of the term "urban village" in academic discourse during the 1990s, researchers from diverse fields - including sociology, economics, urban planning, and architecture - began to conduct in-depth investigations into urban villages within the Chinese context. For instance, Li (2002) explored the factors influencing the development of urban villages, focusing on the land management practices of municipalities. Tan and Peng (2003) examined how the "Rural Land Contract Law" contributed to the formation of urban villages. Zhang and Gu (2006) introduced the concept of "passive urbanization" to explain the phenomenon and proposed optimizing urbanization strategies. Wang et al. (2009) studied the development mechanisms of urban villages, emphasizing the importance of recognizing these areas as legitimate urban spaces.

Around the same time, a different interpretation of the term "urban village" emerged in Europe, particularly in Britain, where the concept gained traction around 2000. In this context, an "urban village" was defined as an "urban area with a country-like, graceful environment", and this idea was widely explored in the early 2000s (Franklin & Tait, 2002). As Chinese researchers continued to delve into the study of urban villages from various perspectives, they also began to compare the Chinese interpretation of urban villages with international conceptions. This comparative approach aimed to address the primary concerns related to urban villages in China by examining different definitions of "urban village" and the associated urban and village cultures, as well as contrasting urbanization processes in China with those in other countries, particularly in Europe. The comparisons also considered related concepts such as slums, ghettos, and squatter settlements. To inform the development of urban villages, Shi (2006) investigated slums in several European and North American countries, summarizing experiences in managing and transforming these areas. Similarly, Zhou (2007) explored the similarities and differences between urban villages in China and slums in the West from a century ago, offering suggestions for transforming urban villages into integrated urban communities.

Between 2000 and 2010, research on urban villages in China primarily concentrated on the conceptualization of these areas and the development of strategies for their transformation. However, in 2011, there was a significant decline in studies concerning urban villages, which may be attributed to the 2010 Asian Games held in Guangzhou -

a city recognized as the second most prominent in China for urban village research. Prior to the Asian Games, the transformation of Guangzhou's urban villages was a central topic in discussions about the city's image. Following the Games, the urgency for such transformations seemed to diminish. Despite this shift, scholarly output remained substantial, with approximately 800-900 Chinese publications annually addressing urban villages. During this period, researchers began to focus more on the challenges faced by urban villagers and on delineating the concept of “urban village” into more specific examples and practices.

International researchers also began to take notice of China's urban village phenomenon, leading to the publication of books and articles that introduced and analyzed the relationship between urban and rural areas in this context. For example, Bach (2010) explored the relationship between cities and the villages within them, using Shenzhen - the city most closely associated with urban village studies - as a case study. Smith (2014) examined the social-spatial dimensions of urban village transformation, emphasizing the need for integrating diverse resources within planning institutions. These international scholars incorporated the study of urban villages into broader discussions of urbanization and urbanism, thereby expanding the understanding of the phenomenon beyond the Chinese context and situating it within global urban studies. After two decades of studying urban villages from various perspectives and engaging in transformation practices, researchers have developed a more nuanced understanding in the 2020s. Zhang and Ye (2021) conducted a survey on urban villagers' attitudes towards the renewal of urban villages in Guangzhou, while Liu et al. (2022) examined the impact of micro-renewal on urban informality, using the collective property of an urban village in Guangzhou as a case study. Additionally, Ran (2023) analyzed what Chinese urban villages could learn from slum tourism projects in Brazil and India. The idea that transformation is the only or best solution for urban villages has increasingly been questioned. More researchers are now applying the theory of urban renewal to envision the future of urban villages, considering not only the city's image but also the living conditions of urban villagers and the potential value of these spaces. This shift reflects a broader and more integrated approach to understanding and managing urban villages, recognizing their complexity and the need for more holistic solutions.

### **2.1.2 Examples of typical urban villages in China**

There are thousands of urban villages across the major cities in China, most of them settle in places close to public transports, which leads to more job opportunities for the newcomers and job seekers of the cities. Here are several examples of famous urban villages in some major Chinese cities:

#### *1. Baishizhou Village, Shenzhen*

Baishizhou Village is the largest urban village in Shenzhen, covering a total area of 7.4 square kilometers. It is located in the Nanshan district of Shenzhen, approximately 8 kilometers from the city center. Surrounding of Baishizhou are high-tech development zones such as Shenzhen Software Park and Shenzhen Bay Super Headquarters Base, along with luxury residential areas like Xiangshanli, Chunshui'an, and Swan Castle,

where property prices exceed 100,000 yuan<sup>1</sup> per square meter. Additionally, there are several large entertainment venues, parks, and golf clubs nearby. However, within Baishizhou Village, the environment is typical of urban villages in the Pearl River Delta region, characterized by dense buildings, narrow streets, and limited sunlight. The majority of the residents are part of the floating population, with only 1,878 local households remaining, most of whom have already relocated. Despite this, the population of Baishizhou can peak at 150,000, with the majority being migrant workers who have come to Shenzhen for employment (He, 2020).



Figure 1 Baishuzhou village, Shenzhen. Photo by ZhihuuserJly3RH.

## 2. *Huashiyang, Beijing*

Huashiyang is located in the Chaoyang District of Beijing, near the Central Business District (CBD). It is surrounded by high-end office buildings such as Chaowai SOHO, Beijing Fortune Plaza, and Jingguang Center. The area is highly accessible, and due to its poor living conditions and low rent, it initially attracted many migrant workers seeking employment in Beijing. Currently, many migrant workers, who deliver food and parcels to white-collar workers in the CBD, reside in Huashiyang, with their warehouses also located here, making Huashiyang the logistical base for the CBD (TianYu, 2024).

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2024, 1 Euro  $\approx$  7.3 Yuan, 100.000 Yuan  $\approx$  12766 Euro



Figure 2 Huashiying, Beijing. Photo by Sina.

### 3. *Luojiazhuang Village, Hangzhou*

Luojiazhuang is located in the Xihu District of Hangzhou, covering an area of approximately 0.7 square kilometers. The village has a resident population of over 2,700 and a floating population of over 20,000. Most of the residents are migrants working in Hangzhou, with 78% of tenants born after 1990, and many renting in Hangzhou for the first time, earning it the nickname "the first stop in Hangzhou." A survey revealed that around 40% of tenants work in the internet industry, and 73% hold a college degree or higher. The two main reasons they choose to live here are the convenient transportation and affordable rent (ChengShi Interaction, 2023).



Figure 3 Luojiazhuang village, Hnagzhou. Photo by Chengshi Interaction.

#### 4. *Shajing Village, Xi'an*

Shajing Village is located in the Yanta District of Xi'an, near several well-known universities and commercial centers. Covering an area between 0.3 and 0.4 square kilometers, it is one of the most famous urban villages in Xi'an. Although the village has a total population of over 3,000, the building density on this small piece of land reaches 65%, leading to poor ventilation and lighting conditions. According to a 2012 survey, around 60% of the residents work in the catering industry, and 70% earn less than 1,000 yuan per month (He et al., 2012).



Figure 4 Shajing village, Xi'an. Photo by Times Figure.

### 2.1.3 Comparable concepts in other districts

The concept of the "urban village" (or "village-within-city") represents a distinctive phenomenon within the context of China's urbanization process. Although the term "urban village" is largely specific to China, other countries and regions have also witnessed the emergence of urban spaces with comparable characteristics. These include slums and other forms of informal settlements that bear similarities to the Chinese concept of urban villages.

#### 2.1.3.1 Slums

- Concepts of slums

The concept of slums varies significantly across different countries, shaped by socio-economic conditions and cultural contexts. Researchers have offered diverse definitions of slums. Clinard (1966) characterized slums as areas marked by inadequate housing and deficient facilities. Turkstra and Raithelhuber (2004) described them as residential areas with substandard living conditions. According to an expert group organized by UN-Habitat (2003), slums are defined by a combination of factors including inadequate

access to safe water, insufficient sanitation and infrastructure, poor housing quality, overcrowding, and insecure tenure. Although slums and urban villages differ substantially in their origins, histories, and characteristics, they share common traits such as high population density and poor living conditions. Consequently, slums in European and American cities are frequently used as comparative examples for understanding urban villages in China.

- Famous examples of slums around the world

1. *Kosice, Slovakia: Lunik IX*

Lunik IX is an autonomous district located in Kosice, Slovakia. As of 2013, approximately 6,200 people resided in this area, the majority of whom were Roma and mostly unemployed. This 1.07 square kilometer area comprises several residential buildings and a landfill. Due to the inability of most residents to afford rent and utility bills, the community lacks basic services such as water, electricity, and gas (Filčák & Ficeri, 2021).



Figure 5 Lunik ix, Kosice, Slovakia. Photo by Reuters.

2. *Bucharest, Romania: Ferentari*

Ferentari, located in Bucharest, Romania's capital, is a typical slum characterized by compact and densely packed buildings. Originally a residential area for workers, it was later illegally occupied by rural migrants and young homeless families after the workers left. Today, the majority of its residents are Roma with low or no income, and most of them consider the housing quality in the area to be very poor (Botonogu, 2011).



Figure 6 Ferentari, Bucharest, Romania. Photo by Wikidata.

### 3. *Mumbai, India: Dharavi*

Dharavi is situated on a 525-hectare plot of land in Mumbai, located between the Central Business District in South Mumbai and the emerging financial district. With a population of 600,000 to 1,000,000 people, it is a highly congested and densely populated area. Dharavi is not only a residential district but also a hub for distribution, wholesale, and artisanal production. It is home to 15,000 single-room factories employing approximately 250,000 people (Baweja, 2015).

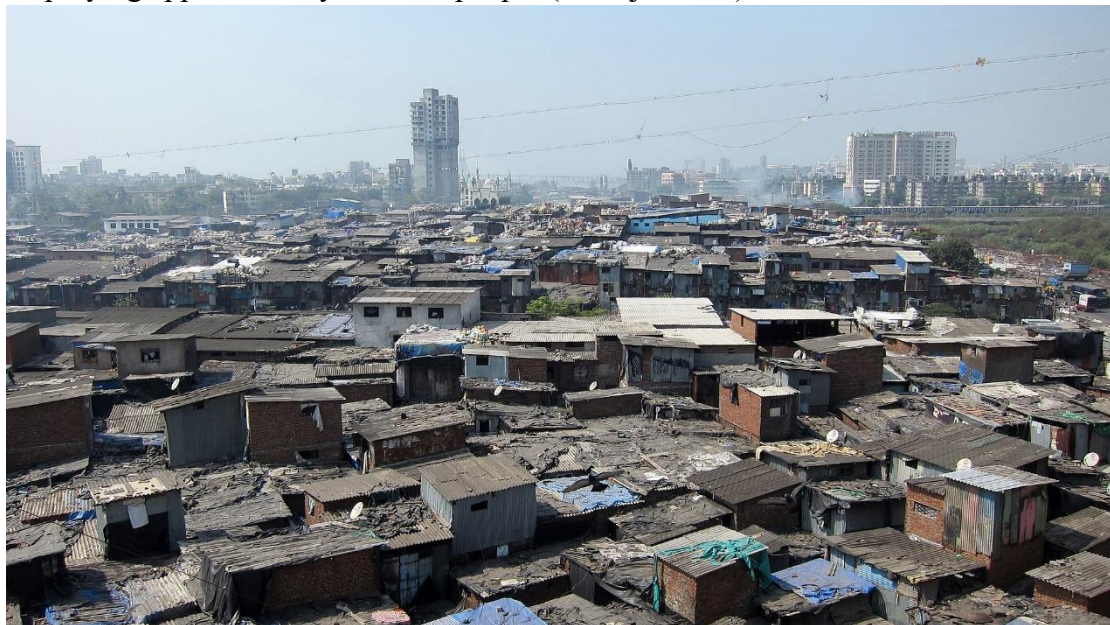


Figure 7 Dharavi, Mumbai, India. Photo by YGLvoices.

### 4. *Seoul, South Korea: Guryong Village*

Guryong Village is located in Gangnam District, one of the most prosperous areas in Seoul, South Korea, separated from upscale residential neighborhoods by only one street. Established in the late 1980s, it currently houses approximately 2,500 to 4,000 residents. Most of the inhabitants do not have stable employment and rely primarily on

government subsidies. Due to the majority of the houses being constructed with materials such as plywood, polypropylene, and plastic foam, coupled with the dense building layout, narrow roads, and inadequate public facilities, fires frequently occur in this area (Hong, 2024).



Figure 8 Guryong village, Seoul, South Korea. Photo by Naver.

#### *5. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Rocinha*

Rocinha is situated in the southern part of Rio de Janeiro. Initially, its residents were farmers migrating from rural areas to the city in search of employment opportunities. Today, this 355-hectare area is home to around 200,000 residents. Located between the coast and the hillside, Rocinha has now developed into a tourist destination, attracting 200 to 600 visitors daily (Kyritsi, 2017).

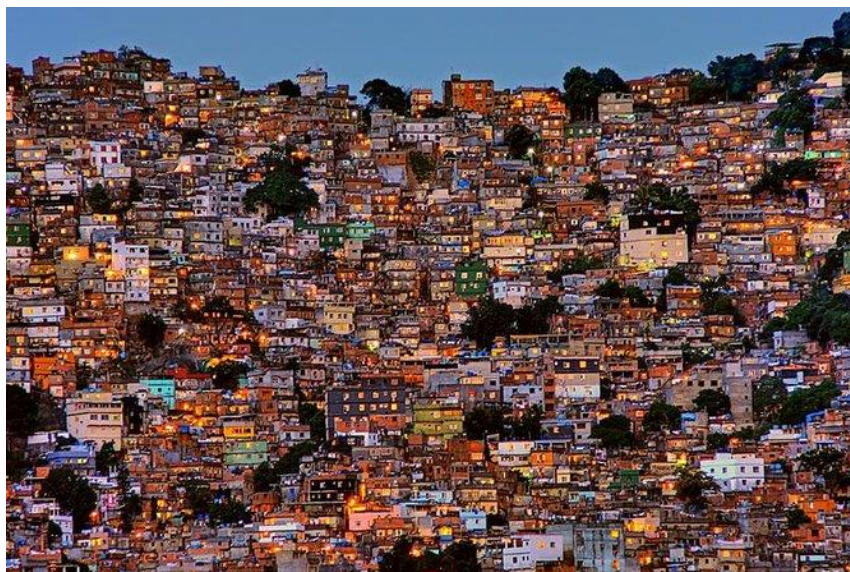


Figure 9 Rocinho, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photo by Viator.

#### 6. *Nairobi, Kenya: Kibera*

Kibera is reputed to be the largest and poorest slum in Africa, adjacent to Nairobi's wealthiest and industrial districts. Covering an area of 2.38 square kilometers, Kibera is home to between 400,000 and 700,000 people, approximately half of whom are minors under the age of 18. About 45% of residents are self-employed or engaged in casual work, with the majority living below the poverty line. The area contains approximately 17,045 buildings, most of which are single-story structures made from corrugated iron sheets, tree trunks, and mud (Desgroppes & Taupin, 2011).



Figure 10 Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya. Photo by Schreibkraft.

#### 7. *Lagos, Nigeria: Makoko*

Makoko is located in southeastern Lagos, on the Lagos Lagoon. Most of the structures are stilt houses built with wooden planks over the lagoon, accommodating approximately 100,000 residents. The inhabitants are primarily from the coastal communities of the Niger Delta, including people from Benin, Togo, and Ghana, and their main economic activities include trading and fishing (Simon et al., 2013).



Figure 11 Makoko, Lagos, Nigeria. Photo by Xinhua.

### **2.1.4 The nature of urban villages**

There has always been an academic debate in China that if urban villages are slums. Some researchers believed that urban villages are the Chinese version of slums, because according to the concept of a slum, it refers to residential areas where poor people live in, and the residents of urban villages are usually the poorer end of a city, thus urban villages can be considered as a type of slums (Lan, 2007; Qin, 2012). However, the researchers who are against this opinion argued that people living in urban villages are not in extreme poverty (Zhou, 2007).

Based on the classic definition of slums, characterized by overcrowding, poverty, informal housing, lack of safe drinking water and sanitation, and job insecurity (Davis, 2007), this study considers that urban villages in China represent a unique type of slum. While urban villages generally meet only the housing-related criteria of this definition, as most have functional water supply and drainage systems, and their residents typically have stable long-term employment, these villages nonetheless serve as concentrated areas for the poorer segments of the urban population in China. Definitions of slums vary, often encompassing descriptions of densely populated areas inhabited by impoverished populations in different contexts. Therefore, despite the distinct characteristics of urban villages compared to slums in many other countries, their essence remains the same: they are densely populated areas predominantly occupied by low-income individuals.

## **2.2 Livable city and livability**

### **2.2.1 Development and conceptualization of livable cities and livability**

#### **2.2.1.1 Relative research and practices**

In 1976, the United Nations officially adopted the term “human settlements” during Habitat I, held in Vancouver. This event also led to the establishment of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) in Nairobi and initiated a major campaign to advance the development and study of human settlements. Subsequently, many countries began responding to Agenda 21, which was adopted at the Rio de Janeiro Conference in 1992, with China publishing its own version, China's Agenda 21. The focus on human settlements continued to intensify with the convening of Habitat II in Istanbul in 1996, which placed increased emphasis on addressing issues related to human settlements.

Building on this foundation, the international community has increasingly focused on the concepts of “livable cities” and “best places to live”. The International Making Cities Livable Conference, founded in 1985 by Henry L. Lennard, has been held biannually in Europe and the United States. This conference gathers local government officials, architects, planners, developers, community leaders, behavioral scientists, artists, and other stakeholders committed to enhancing urban livability. Lennard (1997),

in *Principles for the Livable City*, outlined fundamental principles for creating livable urban environments. Paley (2000) defined a livable city as one that preserves essential urban characteristics and fosters a sense of community among its residents, as discussed in *Architecture for, by and with Children: a Way to Teach a Livable City*. Peter Smithson, as quoted by Timmer and Seymoar (2006), emphasized that a livable city highlights the "relationships between streets and buildings, and buildings amongst themselves, and trees, and seasons of the year, and ornamentation, and events and other people." P. Evans (2002) identified two dimensions of urban livability: the quality of life within the city and adherence to ecological sustainability standards. Since the 1970s, Vancouver has been recognized as one of the most livable cities globally, with livability being a central goal in its urban development, as outlined in *The Long-term Plan for Greater Vancouver* (2003).

In addition to academic research, practical surveys on the "best places to live" are also conducted in society. For instance, Money Magazine has engaged Sperling Research to provide online consulting services to determine "the best place to live". Similarly, Cityrating.com ranks American cities based on various metrics, including public employment, social stability, economic development, housing, and environmental factors.

Since 2002, The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has developed an evaluation system to offer a comprehensive assessment of urban livability. As cities have grown more complex, the indicators used in this evaluation have evolved accordingly. In the 2004 EIU livability evaluation system, 12 indicators were categorized into three groups: health and security, culture and environment, and infrastructure. By 2005, the EIU expanded its indicators to five categories: social stability, health, culture and environment, quality of education, and infrastructure. In the United States, the Annual Awards for Best Places to Live are held annually. These awards are based on surveys of urban residents, with evaluation indicators primarily reflecting respondents' subjective opinions about their cities (Evans, 2002).

In addition to national and regional assessments, international organizations have also established systems to evaluate livability. In 1995, the United Nations launched the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to encourage the advancement of living standards. This initiative is part of a broader global network known as the Best Practice and Local Leadership Program (BLP), which supports the identification and promotion of successful sustainable development programs worldwide. BLP's innovative programs focus on various areas, including housing construction, urban development and governance, integrated environmental management, social integration, economic development, crime prevention, poverty alleviation, gender and youth issues, infrastructure development, and public facility construction. The Dubai International Award for Best Practices is conferred biennially, recognizing exceptional projects from around the globe. Established in 1995 and named after Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, the award includes a "Best Practices Award" database that catalogs all qualified initiatives. Lessons learned from these best practices are disseminated globally through case studies and mentoring programs (Evans, 2002).

### **2.2.1.2 Conceptualization**

According to *A Sustainable Urban System: The Long-term Plan for Greater Vancouver* (2003), a livable urban system is one that meets the physical, social, and psychological needs of its residents while fostering their personal growth. A desirable city addresses and responds to the high cultural and spiritual needs of its inhabitants. To achieve these objectives, the principles of social justice, human dignity, equitable access to public facilities, a peaceful urban environment, public engagement, and effective management must be upheld.

Hahlweg (1997) posited that a livable city allows its residents to enjoy a healthy lifestyle and easily access various destinations, whether by car, public transportation, walking, or cycling. Such a city is characterized by its inclusivity, serving as a shared living space for all inhabitants. Additionally, livable cities should be memorable and attractive, ensuring safety and accessibility for seniors, children, and commuters. Accessible, open green spaces are especially crucial for children and elderly residents, providing areas for socializing, meeting, and relaxation. Ultimately, a livable city is one that caters to the needs of everyone.

According to Salzano (1997), livable cities serve as centers that bridge the past and the future. In such cities, historical sites are revered and preserved, including both existing landmarks and those yet to be fully appreciated. A livable city is characterized by the conservation of historical markers, such as buildings, monuments, and significant locations. In developing a livable city, it is essential to resist the wasteful use of natural resources and strive to preserve land for future generations. Thus, a sustainable city is inherently one that is livable. It should meet the needs of current residents while ensuring that the potential for future generations to thrive is not compromised. The social elements and urban architectural components of a livable city should be designed to support the community's needs and individuals' personal development and self-fulfillment. Public spaces are central to social activities and community life in livable cities. Additionally, a livable city should function as a cohesive network that links the city center with surrounding neighborhoods, with bicycle and pedestrian trails facilitating seamless connections between areas that enhance the city's quality of life.

According to Evans (2002), the concept of "livability" in a city encompasses two dimensions: habitability and sustainability. These dimensions are intricately linked not only to job opportunities but also to the quality of life for residents. Ideally, individuals should live in close proximity to their workplaces, housing costs should align with their earnings, and access to public services should be equitable. If urban planning and management policies prioritize employment and housing development at the expense of the urban environment, it will lead to ongoing environmental degradation and fail to address the fundamental issues of urban livability. As Evans (2002) highlighted, achieving true livability requires a balanced approach that integrates habitability with sustainability to ensure a high quality of life and a healthy urban environment.

### **2.2.2 Development and conceptualization of livable cities and livability in China**

The concept of constructing “landscape cities” (originally termed “shan-shui city”, meaning “city of mountain and water”, with “shan-shui” referring to natural scenery in Chinese) was first proposed by Chinese physicist Qian Xuesen in a letter to architect and urban planner Wu Liangyong in 1990. Qian's article, “Socialist China Should Construct Landscape Cities”, was subsequently presented at the “Landscape City” conference in February 1993. Since then, Ekistics has become a significant focus of urban studies in China (Liu, 1998). Wu Liangyong, an academicien of both the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Engineering, is a prominent architect known for his contributions to the study of Ekistics in China. In his book *General Architecture*, Wu discussed the concept of Ekistics within the Chinese context. In 1993, he formally proposed the establishment of an “Ekistics” research field at a conference held by the Department of Technical Sciences at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Subsequently, Tsinghua University established the “Ekistics Research Center” in November 1995, began publishing the “Ekistics Series” books in 1998, and introduced the “Introduction to Ekistics” course in 1999. This period marked a growing focus on creating human-centered habitat environments in urban planning and construction.

Fang Ke (1999) suggested in his article “Ecologization, Livability and Cultural Characteristics: Creating the Habitat Environment of Zhongguan Village in the 21st Century” that the planning and development of Zhongguan Village should prioritize “people’s environment construction” and aim for ecologization, livability, and openness. Tian Yinsheng and Tao Wei (2000) explored the concept of livability in urban environments, proposing material aspects and assessment criteria for evaluating urban livability. In his study of urban construction in the Three Gorges Reservoir Area, Shu Congquan (2000) introduced the notion of an “amenity city”, detailing its features and measurement standards (comfort level), which closely align with the later concept of a “livable city”. From a practical perspective, Zhou Zhitian (2004) defined the livability evaluation system for Chinese cities in terms of economic development, potential, safety, ecological environment, residents' quality of life, and convenience. These early studies provided a foundational framework for the subsequent theoretical development of urban livability research in China.

In 2004, the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission introduced the concept of a “livable city” as one of the four major goals for Beijing's future urban development. Chen Gang, the director of the Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, emphasized that Beijing should offer ample employment opportunities and a comfortable living environment to establish a people-oriented, sustainable “model city”. This concept has since garnered significant attention in Chinese society. Ren Zhiyuan (2005) examined the livability assessment system and defined livability as encompassing “easy living, comfortable living, healthy living, and safe living”. He Yong (2005) described a

“livable city” as one that is conducive to quality living, incorporating both the natural environment and the social and cultural milieu. Yuan Rui (2005) identified 6 essential criteria for livable cities: economic development, social harmony, cultural richness, living quality, landscape, and public safety. Zhang Wenzhong (2007) explored the connotations and evaluation criteria of livable cities, providing fundamental theories that guide the assessment of livability. He proposed objective evaluation criteria, including safety, health, convenience, accessibility, and comfort, as well as subjective criteria based on residents' satisfaction with safety, environment, facilities, transportation, and comfort. Zhang further developed a livability evaluation system based on these criteria, assessing urban living environments through a set of indices related to safety, environmental health, ease of living, travel convenience, and living comfort, utilizing data collected from questionnaires.

In addition to scholarly discussions, several cities have prioritized the development of livable urban environments. Starting in 2005, Business Week and Horizon Research Consultancy Group conducted a multi-stage exploratory research survey on the “Livability Index of Chinese Cities”. The initial phase involved surveying 3,212 individuals aged 18 to 60 from ten cities - Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, Shenyang, Xi'an, Jinan, Dalian, and Xiamen - to identify the primary variables they consider when assessing a city's livability. Based on this large-scale survey, the “Livability Index of Chinese Cities” evaluation system and corresponding weighting system were developed using a rigorous three-round Delphi Method. This method involved input from experts and scholars across various fields, including urban planning, real estate research, architectural design, and ecological research. The evaluation system comprised three primary indicators, twenty secondary indicators, and fifty-six tertiary indicators. The “2005 Annual Report of Livability Index of Chinese Cities” was compiled using a random sampling method, which included in-person interviews with 3,434 individuals aged 18 to 65 from 31 representative provincial capitals and cities of varying sizes and economic development levels. Additionally, 1,604 investors from 15 cities were interviewed by phone, providing ratings based on the established indicators and their personal experiences. Since then, an annual report and ranking of livable cities have been published each year.

Around the same time, researchers began to define “livable city” and “livability” within the Chinese context. According to Yuan Rui (2005), a livable city is one that achieves a harmonious balance in the development of its economy, society, culture, and environment. It is characterized by a high standard of living, the ability to meet both material and spiritual needs, and suitability as a place for people to live, work, and thrive. Ren Zhiyuan (2005) described livable cities as those that provide an environment characterized by “easy living, comfortable living, healthy living, and safe living”. “Easy living” is defined as the ability of residents to afford and access adequate housing and living space. The city should ensure that housing resources are equitably distributed, providing all residents, including disadvantaged groups, with access to living spaces and the opportunity to enjoy desired lifestyles without discrimination. “Comfortable living” means that residents not only have access to housing but also benefit from favorable living conditions that enhance comfort and convenience. This includes

adequate living space and amenities that contribute to a higher standard of living. “Healthy living” encompasses the availability of essential resources such as sunlight, clean water, and fresh air, as well as environments that support physical and mental well-being. A livable city should integrate natural elements, historical heritage, and cultural attributes, allowing residents to live in harmony with the natural world and feel a sense of contentment. “Safe living” ensures that residents can live without fear, due to a peaceful, stable, and civilized society. It includes robust public safety measures, well-established disaster prevention facilities, and emergency protocols. A livable city should foster social stability and prosperity, providing a secure and peaceful environment for its residents.

## **2.3. Urban renewal**

### **2.3.1 Development of Urban Renewal Research**

The term “urban renewal” first emerged in the United States Housing Act of 1954, specifically referring to the renovation of residential areas within urban settings. In August 1958, the concept of urban renewal was further elaborated at the inaugural urban renewal seminar. This seminar defined urban renewal as the process of enhancing the urban environment by improving land use and geographical areas, including the removal and redevelopment of streets, parks, green spaces, and deteriorated residential areas. The goal was to create a more comfortable living environment and a visually appealing urban landscape (Fang Ke & Zhang Yan, 1998). According to the Encyclopedia of China (1986), urban renewal involves the renovation, upgrading, and modernization of outdated buildings and infrastructure to enhance their quality, functionality, and competitiveness. The primary aim of urban renewal is to improve the living conditions of urban residents while fostering economic and social development within the city.

Due to variations in developmental contexts, challenges, and driving forces across different periods, the goals, content, methods, policies, and measures of urban renewal have evolved accordingly. Consequently, urban renewal internationally exhibits distinct stages, each characterized by specific practical approaches and guiding theories. These stages include urban reconstruction, urban revitalization, urban redevelopment, urban regeneration, and urban protection.

- **Phase one: The era of morphological determinism**

The earliest instances of urban renewal were influenced by the concept of “morphological determinism”. This phase of urban renewal evolved into the “City Beautiful Movement”, beginning with Haussmann's renovation of Paris (1852-1870). From the 1950s to the period surrounding World War II, this form-based approach to urban planning dominated urban development in Western countries. “Morphological determinism” sought to address complex urban issues through simplistic, form-driven planning. For example, Haussmann's transformation of Paris emphasized symmetrical design in the overall city layout, distinctly separating residential, work, leisure, and

transportation zones, ensuring minimal interaction between them.

Under this theoretical framework, many deteriorating areas were replaced with so-called “modernist” planning schemes, often involving extensive demolition of historic buildings in pursuit of symmetry. This large-scale reconstruction destroyed urban diversity and inflicted secondary damage on cities. Practical experience has demonstrated that urban problems cannot be resolved solely through demolition and reconstruction. Cities are complex, organic entities, and urban renewal based on “morphological determinism” not only disrupted the urban fabric but also caused significant damage to historical architecture. This approach failed to address the deeper issues underlying urban decline.

- Phase two: The human-centered approach

From the late 19th century to the 1960s, countries in the Western world, characterized by high levels of industrialization, exhibited a fervor for constructing high-rise buildings. Government-led urban redevelopment during this period was marked by “bulldozer” tactics, involving the widespread clearance and demolition of deteriorated areas, often neglecting human needs and disregarding the neighborhood environment. This approach became the hallmark of urban renewal during this phase.

In response to these practices, many scholars began to critically reflect on the consequences. Notable works include Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Colin Rowe's *Collage City* (1978), Peter Hall's *Urban and Regional Planning* (1975), and Jonathan Barnett's advocacy for “designing cities rather than designing buildings”. These works explored the concept of “humanistic” urban development, which emphasizes considering both the material and spiritual needs of people. This perspective underscores the importance of a human-centered approach, advocating for the respect of people's physiological and psychological well-being. It calls for urban renewal and planning to foster a sense of community belonging, harmonious neighborhood environments, rational traffic organization, and appropriately scaled urban areas.

These thinkers challenged the notion of an ideal, orderly urban structure, asserting that “diversity is the nature of cities”. Through their observations of urban development worldwide, they concluded that vibrant streets and residential areas are characterized by rich diversity, whereas failed urban districts often suffer from a stark lack of it. In 1961, Lewis Mumford, addressing the state of urban planning in Western countries, proposed the theory of “human-centered” urban planning. He opposed the form-centric approach to urban planning and argued that city design should be grounded in the diverse needs of people, emphasizing the importance of human scale in urban planning (Atkinson & Moon, 1994).

In summary, the human-centered phase of urban renewal represents a critical reflection on the large-scale demolition of urban structures. Urban renewal should not focus solely on the material aspects of redevelopment but also consider the impact of non-material factors, placing greater emphasis on the material and spiritual needs of individuals. Urban renewal should not be a purely mandatory directive; rather, it should embody profound humanistic values.

- Phase three: The sustainable development stage

By the mid-to-late 20th century, the challenges of resource depletion, environmental pollution, and degradation caused by urban development had rendered the traditional methods of urban renewal - focused on material reconstruction and aesthetic form - insufficient to meet the needs of contemporary cities. In this context, the Low-Cost Housing Research Center at McGill University in Canada proposed the concepts of "self-development" and "sustainable development" as part of their guidance for housing construction in impoverished areas. The 1977 *Charter of Machu Picchu* emphasized the importance of respecting and protecting historical sites during urban development, insisting that all valuable cultural heritage representing social and national characteristics must be preserved.

In 1990, the European Commission published the *Green Paper on the Urban Environment*, which further emphasized that compact cities represent the most sustainable urban form. Characterized by dense construction and diverse functionality, this model has been widely embraced by European countries, the United States, Australia, and supported by scholars. By the end of the 20th century, the United Nations' Habitat Conference held in Istanbul identified "sustainable development of human settlements in the urbanization process" as a central theme for the 21st century, and "sustainable development" was established as one of the key guiding principles for urban renewal (Zhang, 2004).

In summary, the sustainable development stage marks a critical phase in the evolution of urban renewal theory. The focus of urban renewal has expanded from merely improving living environments to include the protection and preservation of historical culture, ecological environments, and traditional architecture. The scope of renewal has gradually broadened, and its significance has deepened, making sustainable development the central guiding principle of contemporary urban renewal.

### **2.3.2 Urban Renewal in China**

The study of urban renewal theory in China began relatively late. In the realm of theoretical research, Chen Zhanxiang was the first to introduce the concept of urban renewal in 1980. He emphasized the essence of urban development and highlighted the importance of economic factors in the process of urban renewal. Chen also proposed a series of renewal measures, including reconstruction, preservation, and maintenance, with the aim of achieving sustainable urban development. In 1994, Wu Liangyong summarized the theory of organic renewal through the theoretical and practical study of the renovation of Ju'er Hutong<sup>2</sup> in Beijing. The core principle of this theory is that urban organic renewal should be people-centered, meeting the needs of social development while preserving regional historical culture. In 2000, Zhang Jianqiang and Wang Haifeng conducted an in-depth exploration of the integration and planning of Hangzhou's waterfront spaces. They elaborated on the urban renewal elements involved, as well as the spatial organization frameworks and the application of spatial elements, aiming to provide effective references for urban development. In 2004, Zhang

---

<sup>2</sup> Hutong: 胡同. Alleyways in the City of Beijing

Pingyu introduced the concept of urban regeneration, stressing that in order to achieve urban regeneration, it is essential to fundamentally address existing problems and adopt effective policy measures to tackle the various challenges that arise during urban development. In 2007, Yu Jin put forth the concept of urban renewal, emphasizing its necessity. He argued that through demolition, renovation, investment, and construction, declining urban areas could be revitalized. Moreover, he expanded the scope of urban renewal to include not only physical entities but also ecological, cultural, and recreational aspects.

Chen Ming (2019) categorized the stages of China's urban renewal process into four phases: The first phase, from 2009 to 2010, involved studying the urban renewal experiences and regulatory frameworks of developed Western countries and analyzing these in the context of China's unique conditions. The second phase, from 2011 to 2012, the urban renewal planning began to focus on the protection and restoration of historical and aging buildings. The third phase, spanning 2013 to 2018, marked a multidimensional development of urban renewal in China, exemplified by the cooperation between the Ministry of Land and Resources and Guangdong Province, which initiated the “Three ‘Old’s Renovations” project - targeting old towns, old factories, and old villages - as a national model for urban renewal. During this period, the real estate development model in major cities began shifting from expansion (“increment”) to optimization (“stock”), with increasing localized renovations of city streets and aging residential communities. The fourth phase, from 2019 to the present, has seen heightened attention to the formulation of urban renewal regulations and related institutional frameworks, with the concept of “organic renewal” gaining academic recognition. Urban renewal is now viewed as a collective effort aimed at enhancing social benefits, economic quality, and residents’ living environments.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 case study

- Why case study?

1. Urban villages are not just a phenomenon but also tangible entities with distinct boundaries and characteristics within specific geographical areas. Therefore, when conducting research on urban villages, it is both necessary and practical to identify a real-life urban village and carry out on-site investigations. Case studies provide valuable insights into the true conditions of urban villages, making them an essential method for understanding these unique urban environments.

2. Urban villages are a spontaneous phenomenon prevalent across China, with large cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Hangzhou hosting numerous examples. The forms and population characteristics of urban villages vary across different regions and cities, and the policies implemented by city governments to address these phenomena differ accordingly. When studying the livability of urban villages, it is crucial to consider the specific circumstances of each city to ensure consistent and accurate evaluation criteria. Therefore, employing case analysis methods is essential for providing a solid foundation for more in-depth analysis.

3. The urbanization and transformation surrounding urban villages in China have created a complex system, necessitating a thorough investigation into their livability. This requires delving into several key aspects: understanding the origins of livability status, which involves examining factors such as land ownership, urbanization processes, urban planning, and the roles of villagers, developers, and government authorities; assessing the attitudes of residents towards livability to gauge their experiences and perceptions; and reviewing the regulations and requirements set by national, provincial, and municipal authorities concerning urban livability. Due to the diverse geographical locations, industrial functions, and village decision-making processes, the livability of different urban villages is influenced by varying factors. Therefore, conducting specific, detailed, and in-depth investigations through case analysis is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of research and gaining a comprehensive understanding of urban village livability.

4. Both internationally and in China, the term “urban village” exists, but it carries different connotations. Internationally, an “urban village” generally refers to areas within urban settings that retain some characteristics of traditional villages, often enjoying partial benefits such as community cohesion and localized services. In contrast, in China, an “urban village” describes natural villages that, despite being within urban areas, have not undergone urbanization in parallel with their surroundings. While both definitions imply areas within urban settings with village-like attributes, the practical differences are substantial. The “urban villages” in the international context tend to have higher livability, benefiting from their blend of urban and village elements. Conversely, Chinese urban villages often face challenges such as inadequate

infrastructure and lower living standards. Case studies are crucial in highlighting these distinctions more clearly and directly, allowing for a better understanding of the varying livability and characteristics of urban villages in different contexts.

- Why Guangzhou Shipai?

1. Guangzhou, a representative large city in southern China, is one of the earliest to encounter the phenomenon of urban villages. With a history spanning over 2000 years, the city has evolved from ancient settlements into a major commercial port and urban hub. Following China's reform and opening-up policies, Guangzhou underwent rapid urbanization, with its urbanization rate jumping from 45.5% in 1980 to 81.8% by 2005. This expansion led to the emergence of “urban villages”, where old natural rural villages remained amid the expanding urban landscape. The city's high population density, substantial floating population, and limited land resources have made urban villages in Guangzhou particularly prominent and noteworthy. This prominence is reflected in academic discussions, with Guangzhou frequently cited alongside Shenzhen in research on urban villages, indicating its significance and providing a rich source of literature for further study.

2. Guangzhou's urban villages are characterized by extremely high population and building density, largely due to the city's dense and large floating population, combined with limited land resources before urban expansion. Shipai village is a prime example of this phenomenon. Situated in the heart of Guangzhou, Shipai Village covers an area of 4.08 square kilometers. By the end of 2020, it had a population of 177,781 permanent residents, which represented 7.93% of Tianhe district's total permanent population. A 2006 report highlighted that the construction density of rental housing in Shipai village exceeded 70%, with some areas reaching 90%. This intense density and the village's living conditions make Shipai village a representative and relevant case study for understanding urban villages in Guangzhou.

## 3.2 Document research

- Why literature research?

1. Urban villages represent a long-standing historical issue intertwined with urbanization, land development, and a host of related factors such as China's urban-rural dual management system, land ownership, and urban planning schemes. An in-depth study of these issues necessitates a robust foundation of literature. Since the 1990s, the phenomenon of urban villages in China has been a significant focus of academic inquiry across various disciplines including sociology, urban planning, architecture, and economics. Numerous academic articles have been published on this topic, reflecting the evolving understanding of urban villages within the academic community. Additionally, the rapid urban development in China over the past three decades has led to continuous changes in the characteristics of urban villages and associated academic discussions. Thus, reviewing literature from different periods is essential to grasp the dynamic nature of urban villages and gain a comprehensive understanding of their development and implications.

As one of the largest urban villages in Guangzhou, Shipai village has garnered

significant attention from the academic community. Numerous scholarly articles and theses on urban villages in Guangzhou use Shipai village as a case study, resulting in a substantial body of academic literature. Additionally, historical materials such as village chronicles provide valuable resources that can facilitate a deeper understanding of the development history of Shipai village, making it an efficient and insightful case for analysis.

- How to use literature research

1. Historical data. The study of Shipai village in Guangzhou, particularly through official historical records like the Shipai village Chronicle, provides critical insights into the village's evolution from its origins to the present day. These records offer a detailed account of the reforms and decisions that Shipai village made in response to rapid urbanization following China's reform and opening up. This transformation from a natural village to an urban village involved significant changes in the living environment, which are crucial for understanding both the historical context and the current conditions within the village. Analyzing these developments helps to shed light on how the village has navigated the challenges of urbanization and how its living environment has evolved as a result.

2. Academic materials. To understand the development history of urban villages, it is essential to engage with relevant books and academic papers that provide comprehensive insights into the origins, evolution, and current state of these unique urban phenomena. Through these sources, one can define and evaluate livability standards, which are crucial for assessing the quality of life in urban villages. Specifically, obtaining data and information on various aspects of Shipai village, such as its living environment, will allow for a more detailed and nuanced analysis of its development trajectory and the factors that influence its livability.

3. Government documents. To thoroughly understand urban village management methods and the requirements for urban livability, it is crucial to examine the relevant policies, systems, and management practices issued by both state and municipal authorities. This includes analyzing regulations and policies that address urban development, infrastructure, and livability standards specific to different cities. Additionally, understanding the regulations related to land ownership and use rights through relevant laws provides insight into the foundational factors contributing to the formation and characteristics of urban villages. This comprehensive approach will help elucidate the complexities of urban village management and the regulatory framework shaping their development.

4. Media coverage. To gain a comprehensive understanding of urban villages and Shipai village from a public perspective, it is essential to examine media coverage and attitudes over time. Analyzing how the media has portrayed urban villages and Shipai village in different years can provide insights into public perceptions, societal attitudes, and the evolving discourse surrounding these phenomena. This includes investigating how media narratives have shifted in response to changes in urban policy, development, and social issues. By reviewing various media sources, including news articles, reports, and feature stories, one can assess how the public's understanding and concerns about urban villages have developed, and how these perceptions have influenced or reflected

broader trends in urban development and livability.

### **3.3 interviewing**

- Why interviewing?

1. Although extensive literature exists on urban villages and their living environments, research specifically focusing on Shipai village in Guangzhou through case analysis is limited. The existing academic data on the livability of Shipai village is insufficient. Livability, being a crucial indicator, heavily relies on the perceptions and feedback of local residents. To address this gap, this article employs interviews as a research method to gather first-hand data and insights from those directly experiencing the living conditions in Shipai village. This approach aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the village's livability and enrich the existing body of knowledge with empirical evidence.

2. Given the complexity of topics covered in this article - including the development history of livability in Shipai village, the renovation history of the village, and residents' attitudes and expectations towards livability. Therefore, a semi-structured interview method is employed. This approach allows for detailed discussions and in-depth analysis, providing a richer understanding of residents' views and the various factors influencing livability in Shipai village.

- How to use the interviewing methodology?

This article will conduct interviews with various stakeholders who possess valuable insights into the livability of Shipai Village, including residents, local villagers, social workers, and merchants. Using a semi-structured interview approach, questions will be prepared for each type of interviewee to elicit their perspectives on the livability of Shipai village. This method will allow for a comprehensive exploration of differing viewpoints and experiences, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the factors affecting livability in the village.

### **3.4 Thick description**

- Why thick description?

The data collection method employed in this article is the interview method. Consequently, a descriptive approach will be used to summarize and interpret the information gathered from the interviews. Given the complexity of urban villages and the multifaceted nature of livability, it is essential to utilize descriptive methods to integrate and analyze various types of information from multiple perspectives. This approach will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the research questions addressed in this article.

- How to use thick description?

This article will extract and analyze information and data derived from the interviews to address the research problems. It will explore why the livability of urban villages in Guangzhou was historically perceived as problematic and continues to be an issue. The

analysis will focus on various aspects, including land use, urban planning, urban renewal, urban transformation, and urban inequality, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to these challenges.

## 4. Urban Villages in Guangzhou

### 4.1 Overview of Guangzhou Urban Villages

Since ancient times, Guangzhou has been the political, economic, and cultural center of the Lingnan<sup>3</sup> region in China. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Guangzhou began its transformation into an industrial city. During the 1980s and 1990s, as economic development became the focal point of urbanization in Guangzhou, many suburban villages found themselves encircled by expanding urban areas, leading to the emergence of “urban villages”. Currently, there are 138 registered urban villages in Guangzhou that are slated for renovation, spread across seven districts: 2 in Yuexiu District, 18 in Liwan district, 20 in Haizhu district, 45 in Baiyun district, 25 in Tianhe district, 12 in Luogang district, and 16 in Huangpu district. Among these, 52 urban villages have been identified for comprehensive renovation, as outlined in the 2009 “Implementation Opinions on Promoting the Renovation and Renovation of ‘Urban Villages’ (Old Villages)” issued by the municipal government, which aims to complete these renovation tasks within 3-5 years.



Figure 12 Sanyuanli village, Baiyun district, Guangzhou. Photo by author.

Urban villages in Guangzhou are strategically located near commercial, industrial, and

---

<sup>3</sup> Lingnan: Lingnan is a general term for the area south of the Five Ridges in southern China, separated from the interior by the Five Ridges. Historically, it roughly encompassed parts of Guangdong (including Hainan, Hong Kong, and Macau), Guangxi and eastern Yunnan provinces, and southwestern Fujian province.

educational zones, making them integral to the city's land use and development patterns. In Yuexiu District, urban villages are often adjacent to commercial areas, while in Huangpu District, they are predominantly near industrial zones. This proximity is a significant advantage for urban villages, as it makes them attractive for investment, particularly in the development of inexpensive village collective land. This, in turn, draws enterprises that offer job opportunities, attracting a large influx of migrant workers who choose to live in nearby urban villages. The economic benefits for villagers are substantial, as they gain from both the development of their land and the rental income from migrant tenants, which also funds the construction of public facilities within the village.

As a city with a developed economy and rapid industrialization, Guangzhou has witnessed the growing prevalence of urban villages due to its accelerated urbanization. In 2000, Guangzhou's urbanization level stood at only 57.3%, but by 2014, it had surged to 85.43% (Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook, 2023). Throughout this period, many villages originally situated on the city's outskirts were absorbed into the expanding urban area. However, due to complications such as land ownership disputes and the preferences of villagers, these areas were not fully integrated into the urban fabric, resulting in the formation of "urban villages". Huang Lijun (2017) classified Guangzhou's urban villages into three categories. The first category consists of villages located within urban planning and construction zones, situated in bustling and prosperous areas with little to no remaining agricultural land, such as Shipai village and Yangji village. These villages primarily engage in economic activities like property rental, and some even form joint-stock companies to invest collective assets. The second category includes villages that retain some agricultural land but are located within urban planning zones, typically on the city's outskirts, such as Xilang village. Due to their proximity to urban areas, these villages often host numerous factories. The third category encompasses "suburban urban villages" situated far from the urban center and outside the scope of urban planning and construction, like Luogang village.

Table 1 Types of urban villages in Guangzhou

| Type              | Urban villages located in the city center       | Urban villages located in the periphery                                            | Suburban urban villages                                                            |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Location          | City center                                     | Urban-rural fringe                                                                 | Distant from city center                                                           |
| Villages          | Liede village, Shipai village                   | Xilang village, Zhu village                                                        | Luogang village                                                                    |
| Economic Activity | Property rental and other investments           | Factory rental, other investments                                                  | Factory rental, other investments                                                  |
| Industry Type     | Predominantly secondary and tertiary industries | Predominantly secondary and tertiary industries, with some agricultural activities | Predominantly secondary and tertiary industries, with some agricultural activities |

## 4.1.1 Formation of Guangzhou Urban Villages

### 4.1.1.1 Development of urbanization in Guangzhou



Figure 13 Guangzhou in 1980s. Photo by Julian Humphery

Guangzhou, situated in the economically advanced Pearl River Delta region, is one of China's earliest cities to undergo urbanization, boasting a development history spanning over 2,000 years. Located in Guangdong Province at the southernmost tip of Mainland China, Guangzhou lies at the estuary of the Pearl River, the largest waterway flowing into the South China Sea. This strategic location has historically positioned Guangzhou as a crucial port for China's maritime interactions with other countries. In 1757, amid the Qing Dynasty's isolationist policies, Guangzhou was designated as the only port in China open to foreign trade, which significantly bolstered its economic growth. This historical advantage established Guangzhou as a key economic center in China, a status that was further solidified following the implementation of the reform and opening up policy in 1979. The rapid development of secondary and tertiary industries attracted a substantial influx of people from surrounding regions, accelerating the city's urbanization process. By 1980, Guangzhou's urbanization level was 45.5%, and it surged to 81.8% by 2005 (Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook, 2023).

Table 2 Urbanization rate of Guangzhou

| Year | Total Population | Urban Population | Urbanization Rate |
|------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1980 | 5,018,638        | 2,285,178        | 45.5%             |
| 1985 | 5,449,820        | 2,569,547        | 47.1%             |
| 1990 | 5,942,534        | 2,914,281        | 49.0%             |
| 1995 | 6,467,115        | 3,166,714        | 50.0%             |

|      |            |            |        |
|------|------------|------------|--------|
| 2000 | 7,006,896  | 4,013,986  | 57.3%  |
| 2005 | 7,505,322  | 6,140,648  | 81.8%  |
| 2023 | 18,827,000 | 16,096,724 | 86.19% |

#### 4.1.1.2 Evolution of Urban Villages in Guangzhou

For decades, the urban built-up area of Guangzhou has been expanding rapidly, growing more than tenfold between 1954 and 1998. In China, this rapid urban expansion has been driven by the continuous requisition of land, often at the expense of natural villages where agriculture was the primary industry. As a result, many of these villages have transformed into urban villages. The farmers who once depended on their farmland for survival were forced to transition into working in the secondary and tertiary industries, fundamentally altering their livelihoods and the socio-economic fabric of these communities.



Figure 14 Tianhe district, Guangzhou in 1990s. Photo by Pengpai.

Before the 1980s, many urban villages in Guangzhou were still natural villages primarily focused on agricultural production. However, with the advent of the reform and opening up in the 1980s, Guangzhou's urban area began to expand rapidly. A significant milestone in this transformation was in 1985 when the State Council approved the construction of Tianhe district, where Shipai village is located, marking it as the main city center of Guangzhou. The 6th National Games, held in Guangzhou in 1987, further accelerated the development of Tianhe district. The Games prompted the requisition of large areas of farmland in Tianhe for the construction of sports venues, laying the groundwork for what is now one of Guangzhou's busiest commercial areas, symbolized by the "Tiyu West Road" metro station.

In the 1990s, the pace of urban development quickened, leading to the further requisitioning of farmland, and villages like Shipai and Tangxia in Tianhe gradually evolved into typical urban villages. This phenomenon was not limited to Tianhe district. For example, Tongdewei, located in Baiyun district, was a rural area with five natural villages - Tianxin, Ezhangtan, Yuexi, Shangbu, and Hengjiao - situated near a tributary

of the Pearl River. This area, rich in waterways and farmland, was densely populated. In 1990, the Guangzhou Municipal Government designated Tongdewei as a large-scale housing relief area, transforming it into a relocation and resettlement zone for those displaced by urban development. By 1994, Tongde street was officially incorporated into the urban management system. The demolition of old Xiguan in 1996 led to Tongdewei becoming a resettlement site for displaced households, and by 1998, additional residential areas and various facilities, including freight yards and warehouses, were developed. Post-2000, Tongdewei saw the construction of a significant amount of affordable housing, alongside the expansion of wholesale markets and freight yards, resulting in an influx of people. While Tongdewei became increasingly urbanized, parts of the area remained rural, unable to fully integrate into the broader urbanization process, thus becoming urban villages.

In response to the proliferation of urban villages in Guangzhou, the municipal government devised plans to renovate them. Of the 138 identified urban villages in the city, 52 were deemed in need of comprehensive renovation. However, due to the high costs associated with renovation and the challenges of resettling the urban village population, this plan has largely remained unimplemented. As of 2024, only Liede Village has completed a comprehensive renovation, and the broader plan for urban village renovation has been put on hold.

#### **4.1.1.3 The problems in urban villages**

According to a 1999 public opinion survey, residents of Guangzhou expressed dissatisfaction with the city in several key areas: management of the migrant population, social security, environmental protection, cleanliness, and transportation. These issues were particularly pronounced in the urban-rural fringe areas, where many of the city's 1.5 million domestic migrants reside in approximately 85,000 rental houses (Yan et al., 2004). During a recent public security crackdown, these fringe areas accounted for a quarter of the city's criminal cases. The problems of dirt and disorder were also most evident in these regions.

The rapid urbanization in Guangdong has compounded these challenges. Policies originally designed for an agricultural society have not been updated to reflect the needs of a rapidly urbanizing environment, impacting the quality of urbanization. As urbanization became an irreversible trend in China, many villages transformed into urban areas. However, policy mismatches resulted in significant differences between urban and rural "identities". Rural household registration, with its advantages created a disincentive for villagers to fully embrace urbanization. Villages often found themselves with no farmland and outdated agricultural household registrations.

Since the 1980s, farmers in these urban villages have leveraged land acquisition compensation to develop collective economies and self-built housing. Economic incentives have driven many to engage in illegal construction activities. The lack of timely government planning and inadequate environmental oversight has led to severe social and ecological issues in these urban villages (Fang Qingfang, Ma Xiangming, Song Jinsong, 1999; Tan Jinzhao, Yao Yimin, 2001).

In the early 20th century, despite extensive planning, the Pearl River New Town, envisioned as the new urban center for Tianhe, struggled to realize its potential. Its central business district failed to develop a distinct commercial, business and residential identity. The presence of “urban villages” such as Shipai and Yangji undermined the effectiveness of the central business district, resulting in unclear urban spatial organization (Zhao Chunrong, 2001). These “urban villages” were viewed as stark contrasts to Guangzhou’s image as a modern metropolis and were even labeled as “monsters” within the city.

The primary issues identified include: 1. High building density and chaotic spatial layout. Urban villages like Shipai village, Yangji village, Xian village, and Linhe village in Tianhe district exhibit building densities reaching 70% to 90%, leading to unique but problematic architectural features such as “one-line sky”, “handshake building”, “veneer building” and “kissing building”. 2. Narrow roads and poor living conditions. The roads in these villages are narrow, winding, and lack systematic planning, while the housing areas, despite their size, suffer from poor lighting, ventilation, and a lack of public green spaces, resulting in significant environmental pollution. 3. Lagging planning and management, with severe social security issues. Urban villages face problems such as inadequate regulatory systems, poor law enforcement, and mismanagement, particularly in the construction and management of homesteads. These issues have led to serious safety concerns and social security risks, rendering these areas as “scars” and “tumors” on the city’s landscape. The issues of overcrowding, high building density, and insufficient green space have consequently become central concerns in urban village renovation efforts (Tan Jinzhao, Yao Yimin, 2001).

Renowned Chinese sociologist Li Peilin described the urban villages in Guangzhou with vivid imagery, noting their stark contrast to the city's high-rise developments. He remarked, “In the bustling city center area, amidst the rows of high-rise buildings, each ‘urban village’ stands like a man-made ‘cement giant’, with structures towering over 20 meters in height, illustrating the vast scale of these urban villages at that time” (Li Peilin, 2002). At that point, areas like Liede village and Xian village in the Pearl River New City had not yet undergone renovation. The eastern side of the central business district was densely populated with these villages. In these areas, the streets, only about 1.5 to 2 meters wide, were defined by the spacing between original homesteads. Above the second floor, to maximize residential space, buildings on either side of these narrow streets extended outward, nearly closing off the sky above, a phenomenon locally dubbed “veneer buildings”, “kissing buildings” and “one-line sky”. These conditions led to a situation where most residential buildings relied on electric lighting even during the day, and the streets resembled “tunnels”, reflecting the severe spatial and environmental constraints faced by the inhabitants (Li Peilin, 2002).

On September 6, 2000, Guangzhou convened an “Urban Construction Management Work Conference”, where it was resolved to expedite urban-rural integration and establish a coordinated metropolitan urban system over the next five years. A key component of this plan was to complete the restructuring and transformation of “urban villages” in the central urban area within five years and to advance the construction of

farmer apartments in designated urban planning areas. The initiative aimed to convert lands traditionally held by farmers, whose primary occupation was no longer agriculture, into urban residential zones, thereby implementing comprehensive urban management. Despite this ambitious plan, the mayor of Guangzhou expressed notable caution. In an interview with reporters, he indicated that the renovation of “urban villages” was expected to be a protracted process, potentially spanning one or even two generations, and would not be achievable within the shorter timeframes of three, five, or ten years.

His caution is indeed grounded in practical realities. The persistent challenges in the renovation of “urban villages” are largely attributed to inadequate government planning and insufficient environmental supervision. Illegal construction is widespread, with numerous instances of hasty and unregulated building activities. The phenomenon of “three feet” competition - where adjacent buildings are constructed in close proximity - results in chaotic layouts, with high building density and poorly designed urban spaces. This has led to narrow, obstructed streets, inconvenient transportation, and a lack of public facilities and sanitation (Yang Yiming, 2002). Moreover, significant gaps in infrastructure exacerbate these issues. As of recent reports, there are still 1,278 unpaved roads in urban villages, representing about 11% of the total; more than 131 kilometers of drainage ditches remain unconnected, accounting for approximately 26% of the network; and the per capita green area is a mere 2.14 square meters, with a green coverage rate of only 7.89%. The sanitation workload is heavily burdensome, with 16 sanitation workers in Chayao village, Fangcun district, each responsible for cleaning an average of 50,000 square meters. Many urban villages lack adequate drainage and sewage systems, and outdated fire protection facilities further compromise safety - fire trucks may struggle to access these densely built areas during emergencies (Liu Shexin, 2002).

To prepare for the 2010 Asian Games, Guangzhou implemented a series of urban improvements, including the renovation of urban villages. However, as noted by the mayor, this renovation is a lengthy process, with short-term improvements proving minimal. Fire safety remains a pressing issue; statistics from the Guangzhou Fire Department reveal that between 2009 and 2014, urban villages were the site of 4,132 fires, making up approximately 67.44% of all city fires. These incidents resulted in 61 deaths, representing around 70% of the city’s total fire fatalities. Between June 2014 and March 2015 alone, urban villages experienced 527 fires, averaging more than two per day (Huang Lijun, 2017).

Several unresolved issues persist, particularly concerning the condition of streets in urban villages. Many roads are in disrepair, plagued by problems such as cracking, subsidence, and inadequate width. The expansion of residential areas by villagers has led to street congestion and mixed traffic flow, exacerbating these issues. Additionally, environmental hygiene remains problematic due to poor drainage, frequent water accumulation, and garbage buildup, influenced by both infrastructural deficiencies and local living habits.

Infrastructure issues are concentrated in four main areas: 1. Sanitation facilities: Public toilets, sewage pipelines, garbage bins, and designated garbage collection stations are

either missing or in poor condition. 2. Circuit facilities: Network cables, transmission lines, and private wiring are often disorganized and poorly maintained. 3. Entertainment facilities: There is a notable absence of urban amenities such as cultural activity stations, public squares, and basic fitness facilities. 4. Safety and traffic management facilities: The lack of intelligent roadblocks, street lighting, fire extinguishers, and small fire cabinets at village entrances impacts both safety and traffic management. The deficiencies in these areas significantly detract from the quality of life in urban villages, highlighting the need for ongoing and comprehensive efforts to address these challenges.

## **4.2 Livability of Urban Villages in Guangzhou**

### **4.2.1 Living environment**

In Guangzhou, the space between residential houses in urban villages is typically very narrow, leading to high plot ratios and density. This configuration often results in challenging management and maintenance issues, with some alleys being completely inaccessible to pedestrians and lacking natural light during the day. The living conditions in these areas are notably harsh. Many urban villages feature “handshake buildings”, characterized by irregular orientations and minimal open spaces. The public interfaces in these areas are generally passive, with a lack of greenery and recreational spaces. The narrow roads and close building distances, coupled with exposed pipelines, contribute to significant fire hazards.

In addition to the spatial and infrastructural challenges, some urban villages in Guangzhou face significant environmental pollution issues. For example, in Hongwei village in Haizhu district, numerous garment factories contribute to pollution by discarding fabrics indiscriminately. This practice results in large amounts of uncollected garbage, which not only degrades the sanitary conditions but also creates breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Similarly, Yagang village in Baiyun district, once renowned for its pleasant riverside environment, has experienced a decline in quality due to the construction of processing plants nearby. These factories produce strong odors that disrupt the villagers’ recreational activities and contaminate the surrounding rivers, negatively impacting both the local environment and residents’ quality of life.

### **4.2.2 Public facilities**

The rapid expansion of self-built houses on homesteads in urban villages in Guangzhou, driven by a large floating population, has placed significant strain on the existing infrastructure. This overburdening has led to frequent issues such as severe water and electricity shortages. Particularly in the urban-rural fringe areas, power outages are common during the summer months. Additionally, public facilities in these urban villages often lag behind the standards found in surrounding urban areas. Common urban amenities such as sidewalks, street lights, parks, squares, and public toilets are

notably deficient. The infrastructure in many of these villages falls short of urban benchmarks, exhibiting inadequate flood control and waterlogging prevention measures, and frequently resulting in “flooding streets” during rainstorms due to an imperfect drainage system.

The chaotic road system within Guangzhou's urban villages exacerbates transportation issues, particularly as urbanization accelerates. The original road traffic and networks, which were designed for less dense and less developed areas, are now inadequate for the current demands. The rise of industries such as factories and logistics warehousing has intensified traffic congestion, significantly impacting the residents. In the Tongdewei area of Baiyun district, for instance, a survey conducted as part of the renovation planning revealed that transportation issues were the most pressing concern for residents, accounting for 43.1% of the feedback. The primary exit road, Xicha road, faces severe congestion due to a combination of factors: limited external connecting roads, heavy truck traffic, and high volumes of passing vehicles. Insufficient pedestrian facilities and high rental demand from migrant workers have further complicated the situation, contributing to serious traffic jams during peak hours (Hu & Su, 2014). Similar transportation problems are prevalent in other urban villages. The lack of well-planned and equipped transportation infrastructure in these areas leads to frequent traffic disruptions, making it challenging for residents to travel and affecting their daily lives.

### **4.2.3 Public Security**

The high concentration of floating populations in Guangzhou's urban villages, driven by low rents, significantly strains the city's ability to manage and secure these areas. The transient nature and diverse backgrounds of these populations complicate management efforts, and the lack of proper monitoring facilities and security personnel exacerbate these challenges. For example, the Sanyuanli Police Station, responsible for the Sanyuanli village area in Baiyun district, faces a significant disparity between its resources and the demands placed upon it. With only 54 officers to cover a population of 200,000 across 4 square kilometers, each officer is responsible for approximately 3,700 people. This imbalance highlights the difficulties in maintaining public order and safety in such densely populated and complex environments (Tan, 2012). The insufficient security forces contribute to a higher crime rate in urban villages compared to other areas of the city. This situation not only disrupts daily life for residents but also leads to a negative perception of urban villages, reinforcing their stigmatization as problematic areas.

## **5. Guangzhou and Livability**

### **5.1 livability policies in Guangzhou**

In January 2005, the State Council of China approved the “Beijing Urban Master Plan (2004-2020)”, which for the first time introduced the concept of a “livable city” as one of the four major goals for urban development in China. This marked a significant shift in central government policy, recognizing the importance of livability in urban planning. Existing research in China has generally focused on relatively objective measures of livable conditions. For example, Zhou Zhitian and his colleagues (2004) developed an evaluation system encompassing six dimensions: the level of economic development, economic potential, social security conditions, ecological environment quality, quality of life, and citizen convenience. Similarly, Gu Wenxuan and Luo Yameng (2007) proposed a set of criteria for evaluating livability, which included social civilization, economic prosperity, environmental aesthetics, resource carrying capacity, affordability, and public safety. In terms of policy initiatives, central government agencies such as the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and the National Development and Reform Commission have consistently issued documents and plans aimed at enhancing urban livability. The “14th Five-Year Plan” for the Implementation of New Urbanization, released in 2022, emphasized the commitment to creating people-centered cities. This plan advocates for accelerating the transformation of development modes to build cities that are livable, resilient, innovative, smart, green, and imbued with a humanistic approach.

Guangzhou was among the first cities in China to advocate the concept of livable cities. In the mid-1990s, the Guangzhou Municipal Government introduced the idea of a “two suitable” city, emphasizing it as the “most suitable for entrepreneurship and most suitable for living” (Dong & Yang, 2008). By 2000, the “Guangzhou Urban Development Strategy Concept Plan” outlined the urban development strategy with goals of establishing a “prosperous, efficient, and civilized international regional center city”, characterized by its suitability for both entrepreneurial activities and residential life. The Guangzhou Urban Master Plan (2001-2010) further affirmed this vision, stating that the city should be developed into an international regional center that excels in fostering entrepreneurship and residential comfort. Compared to nationwide livability standards, Guangzhou’s definition of a livable city emphasizes ecological considerations. The “Urban Development Strategy for Guangzhou in 2049” advocates for the creation of Lingnan-style community service areas, utilizing a 15-minute walking distance as a unit for urban planning. This plan envisions transforming residential areas into public gardens with green spaces both in front of and behind houses, and converting unused corners into pocket parks accessible to all. The strategy also incorporates the unique residential needs of the Lingnan region by adding localized features to adapt to its climate. This includes creating cool and comfortable community environments with traditional elements such as cold alleys, arcades, and inner

courtyards, as well as urban furniture like awnings and wind and rain corridors. The goal is to continuously enhance road greening and tree-lined road management. The “Guangzhou Land Space Ecological Restoration Plan (2021-2035)”, issued in 2023, outlines a strategy for integrated protection and ecological restoration across various landscapes, including mountains, rivers, forests, fields, lakes, grasslands, and sands. This plan aims to modernize the ecosystem governance system and enhance governance capacity, establishing a “people-oriented” model for land space ecological restoration in mega cities. The strategy seeks to lay a solid ecological foundation for building a beautiful and livable city, characterized by harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

The path to developing a livable city in Guangzhou predominantly emphasizes the ecological construction of urban public spaces. This focus is likely influenced by the environmental degradation Guangzhou has experienced over years as a light industry hub, coupled with the need to uphold its image as a major city and key center for foreign exchange in China. In contrast, the private living conditions of residents have not been a central concern in Guangzhou's past and current livable city policies. This discrepancy may partly explain the persistent presence of urban villages in Guangzhou and the severe livability issues they face.

## **5.2 The livability of Guangzhou**

As the famous “Flower City” and a food destination famous for its culinary delights, Guangzhou has consistently attracted tourists and immigrants from across the country with its vibrant urban landscape, rich cultural activities, and dynamic job market. Travel brochures and promotional advertisements often depict Guangzhou as a city brimming with vitality and liveliness, reflecting the convenience and energy of daily life. However, the quality of life in Guangzhou has also faced criticism. Historically, critics have described the city as “dirty, chaotic, and poor”, citing issues such as a mix of people, disorder, noise, severe traffic congestion, and inadequate social security. Guangzhou has even been characterized as the largest parking lot in China, with a reputation for being both rural and urban, or as a city akin to a peasant settlement. For instance, Xu Xueqiang and Li Lixun (2007) observed that although Starbucks had many branches in Guangzhou since 2003, they resembled crowded marketplaces rather than typical coffee shops. These negative perceptions primarily stemmed from the city’s hygiene, public security, and overall ambiance. Before the 2010s, Guangzhou’s hygiene and security issues were particularly prominent compared to other Chinese cities. Data from 2000 to 2004 indicated that the number of criminal cases in Guangzhou was 200% higher than in other investigated cities (Liu et al., 2006). It was not until 2008 that survey data showed a majority of Guangzhou citizens were satisfied with urban safety (Liu, 2008). Similarly, urban hygiene was a major concern during this period, with poor conditions in villages, markets, and suburbs, and serious issues such as dirty and disorderly rivers. Problems like littering in streets, bus stations, and other areas, along with the indiscriminate posting of advertisements, were notably severe (Tang et al., 2007).



Figure 15 "Flower city" Guangzhou. Photo by KingHo

According to the “China Urban Livable Index Report” published by Zero Point Survey Company since 2004, Guangzhou's ranking in livability assessments has shown considerable fluctuation. In 2004, the city achieved a notable fourth place, trailing only behind Shanghai, Dalian, and Beijing. However, by 2005, Guangzhou's ranking had dropped to 16th and has since struggled to re-enter the top ten. In recent years, the city has frequently ranked near the bottom among major cities, often alongside Beijing. Specifically, in 2021 and 2022, Guangzhou was ranked 38th out of 40 major cities in terms of livability. Despite this, Guangzhou achieved a more favorable position in 2022, ranking 17th among China’s popular livable cities according to the “Dwelling in a City - New Demand Insight Report on Young People’s Choice of Cities”. Moreover, in the 2023 China Urban Livable Index Analysis Report, the city improved its position to 5th place among the most livable cities in China. These variations in livability rankings reflect differing evaluations based on various criteria. The Chinese Academy of Sciences’ livable city evaluation system, which includes comprehensive and elemental assessments, showed Guangzhou excelling in public service facilities and social-cultural environment comfort. However, the city lags in other areas such as safety, natural environment quality, and transportation convenience, resulting in a lower overall ranking of 38th out of 40 cities. According to the same year's “Dwelling in a City” publication, respondents highlighted concerns such as housing prices, transportation, medical care, and overall convenience as key factors influencing livability. The discrepancies in Guangzhou’s livability ratings underscore the complex nature of urban living conditions, where the city’s economic dynamism, open cultural environment, and robust infrastructure contrast with challenges related to urban safety and environmental complexity.



Figure 16 Polluted river in Guangzhou. Photo by Awei Observation.



Figure 17 A woman sold fake tickets in Guangzhou railway station in 1994. Photo by Donovan Wylie.

## 6. Shipai Village

### 6.1 History of Shipai village<sup>4</sup>

#### 6.1.1 Overview of Shipai village



Figure 18 Shipai village, Guangzhou. Photo by Souhu.

Shipai village, located in Tianhe district, Guangzhou, has a history of over 720 years. Since the Ming Dynasty, Shipai village was under the jurisdiction of Lubu division in Panyu county, until it was incorporated into Guangzhou city in 1937 (the 26th year of the Republic of China). Since the Southern Song Dynasty, scattered settlements such as Dong village, Xiejiao bay, and Xiankeqiang gradually merged to form Shipai village. By the early Qing Dynasty, Shipai had become one of the larger and more populous natural villages in the eastern suburbs of Guangzhou.

The natural conditions of Shipai village are highly favorable, with flat terrain and fertile land. To the north, there were ponds such as Jilonggang pond and Chengjiang pond, and to the south, there was the Liede stream, a tributary of the Pearl River, making the area suitable for growing vegetables and rice. Thus, before urbanization, Shipai village's economy was predominantly agricultural, with its produce not only supplying Guangzhou but also being exported to Hong Kong and Macau. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, Shipai became a vegetable production base for Guangzhou, with an annual vegetable planting area reaching up to 1.5 million square meters. However, as

---

<sup>4</sup> Most of the content of this part is from the official history records of Shipai village.

Guangzhou transitioned into a period of urbanization, Shipai village began to develop its tertiary industry. By 1988, the total income from Shipai village's collective economy had reached over 26 million Yuan, a twelvefold increase from 1979. In 1997, the original village committee of Shipai was dissolved, and in its place, the Sanjun Joint-stock Limited Company was established to manage the collective assets of the villagers. 3 years after its establishment, Shipai Village's collective economic income reached 204.65 million Yuan, a 6.9-fold increase from 1988.

The primary source of income for Shipai village's collective economy comes from real estate rental. Following the economic reforms of 1979, China transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy, and as the market developed, major cities began rapid urbanization. Originally located on the outskirts of old Guangzhou, the area of Shipai village was designated as the new city center in the updated urban plan, which significantly increased the value of its land.

## **6.1.2 Geographic Boundaries of Shipai Village**

### **6.1.2.1 ROC period**

In 1912, Shipai Village had 4,800 mu<sup>5</sup> of arable land, along with various hills, ponds, water bodies, wastelands, and residential areas, covering a total area of 14 square kilometers. The village was bordered to the east by Yanzhi pond, Laohu Mountain, and Niufo temple, adjoining the Tangxia village; to the northeast by Cencun pit, adjoining Cen village; to the southeast by Wulong Mountain, Hannatuicang, Baima Mountain, and Yuancun head, adjoining Yuan village; to the south by Datan bay, Yangmei stream, and Changwei pit, adjoining Xian village; to the west by Qing highland, Gangwani pond, and the west side of Xibian stream, adjoining Xian village, and to the east side of Mao mountain, adjoining Linhe village; to the northwest by Angang highland, adjoining Yindingtang village; and to the north by Sajiang pond and Niu highland, adjoining Changban village.

### **6.1.2.2 Early Years of the PRC**

In the early years after the founding of the PRC, apart from the northern areas like Dacao pond, Song mountain, and Da mountain where the People's Liberation Army was stationed, the government established several institutions within Shipai village, including South China University (now South China Normal University), Jinan University, Guangdong Education Administration College (now The Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-sen University), Guangzhou Overseas Chinese Students' School, Guangdong Mechanical School, Nanhua Machinery Factory, and Guangdong Province Installation Company. Consequently, the area of Shipai Village was reduced to around 6 square kilometers.

---

<sup>5</sup> Mu: 亩. Traditional Chinese unit of measurement. 1 mu equals approximately 666.67 square metres.

### 6.1.2.3 Post-Reform and Opening-Up Period

Following the reform and opening-up policies up until 1996, all of Shipai village's farmland had been expropriated (Table 3), leaving only the residential areas and a small amount of reserved land. By 2000, the main boundaries of Shipai village were: adjoining Jinan University to the east; extending to Shipai west road to the west; from Tianhe road and Zhongshan avenue to the north; and reaching to the southern edge of Xinqing village to the south, covering an area of approximately 1 square kilometer.

Table 3 The expropriating entities of the land of Shipai

| Year      | Expropriating Entity                                  | Area (mu) | Year | Expropriating Entity                                       | Area (mu) |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1959      | Jinan University                                      | 250.0     | 1992 | Guangzhou High-Tech Development Zone                       | 263.2     |
| 1959      | Guangdong Administrative College                      | 12.0      | 1992 | Guangzhou Racecourse                                       | 452.4     |
| 1959      | Guangdong Agricultural Machinery Research Institute   | 150.0     | 1992 | Tianhe District Urban Construction and Development Company | 56.9      |
| 1976      | Guangzhou No. 113 Middle School                       | 20.0      | 1992 | Guangdong Provincial Fire Brigade                          | 36.8      |
| 1982      | Guangdong Mechanical School                           | 18.0      | 1992 | Guangdong Provincial Archives and 11 other units           | 135.8     |
| 1984      | Guangzhou Telecommunication Bureau                    | 8.2       | 1993 | Xintian Community in Tianhe District                       | 167.4     |
| 1985-1987 | Guangzhou Urban Development Corporation               | 8.0       | 1993 | Sun Yat-sen Foundation                                     | 23.5      |
| 1985-1988 | South China Normal University                         | 131.1     | 1993 | Sifang Company                                             | 125.4     |
| 1985      | Guangzhou Customs                                     | 106.1     | 1993 | Guangdong Provincial Government Office                     | 23.3      |
| 1985      | Tianhe District Development Corporation               | 65.2      | 1993 | Xinhua News Agency and 16 other units                      | 128.3     |
| 1985-1986 | South China Institute of Technology                   | 46.7      | 1994 | Zhujiang New Town                                          | 914.3     |
| 1985      | Guangzhou Armed Police Corps                          | 90.6      | 1994 | Guangzhou Municipal Government                             | 81.0      |
| 1986      | Guangdong Water Conservancy and Electric Power School | 9.9       | 1994 | Guangzhou No. 113 Middle School                            | 15.4      |
| 1987      | Guangzhou Construction No. 1 Company                  | 5.7       | 1994 | Guangzhou Port Affairs Office                              | 22.7      |
| 1988      | Guangdong Reserve Division                            | 25.1      | 1994 | Information Department of Tianhe District                  | 23.7      |

|           |                                                          |       |           |                                                               |       |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
|           |                                                          |       |           | Economic Commission                                           |       |
| 1988      | Guangzhou Relief Office                                  | 30.8  | 1994      | Guangzhou Land Development Center and 10 other units          | 60.4  |
| 1988      | Songgang Air Force Logistics Department                  | 10.4  | 1995      | Defense Building                                              | 26.6  |
| 1986-1988 | Guangzhou Youth School and 6 other units                 | 20.3  | 1996      | Huangpu Avenue                                                | 44.5  |
| 1989      | Pearl River Water Resources Commission                   | 55.7  | 1997      | South China Expressway                                        | 47.9  |
| 1990      | Guangdong Mechanical School                              | 34.9  | 1999      | Yuancun First Cross Road                                      | 29.1  |
| 1991      | Guangdong Provincial Public Security Department          | 38.0  | 1995-1999 | Tianhe District Construction Bureau and 20 other units        | 42.0  |
| 1991-1992 | Jinan University                                         | 166.2 | 1979-1999 | Shipai Village Reserved Land (including land for new housing) | 458.2 |
| 1989      | Tianhe Environmental Protection Office and 6 other units | 46.4  |           |                                                               |       |

From Table 3, it can be seen that most of the land expropriated from Shipai village over the years has been used for the construction of schools, government institutions, and roads - key public infrastructure. The presence of these facilities highlights the strategic geographic location of Shipai village and has contributed to the transformation of the original Shipai area into one of Guangzhou's educational, political, and commercial hubs, thereby continuously increasing the land value of Shipai village.

### 6.1.3 The land use history of Shipai village

Due to its advantageous geographic location, the municipal government has repeatedly expropriated land from Shipai village since the ROC era. Simultaneously, the villagers of Shipai have leveraged this advantage to develop a collective economy primarily based on the tertiary sector.

In 1925, the Guangdong University (later Sun Yat-sen University) established its second farm on 2,700 mu of arable land and hills in the northern part of Shipai. In 1930, the Guangzhou municipal government constructed a racetrack on 190,000 square meters of land in the northeastern part of Shipai, at Lingfeng mountain and Dadaotou (now located within South China Normal University). In 1931, Sun Yat-sen University planned a new campus in the Wushan area of Shipai, expropriating large tracts of land, including fields, ponds, and hills, totaling approximately 35,000 square meters. An agreement was signed between the university and Shipai village, which stipulated that the water in the ponds would be used for irrigating agricultural land and would remain

under the control of Shipai village. Additionally, three admission spots were reserved annually for children of Shipai villagers. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Shipai area was briefly designated as a district of Guangzhou, with the establishment of the People's Government of Shipai District. In December of the following year, the Shipai town in Shipai district initiated a land reform movement, redistributing land to farmers. In 1951, the Shipai Town Supply and Marketing Cooperative was established, later renamed the Shahe Supply and Marketing Cooperative. Rural supply and marketing cooperatives were a form of socialist cooperative economic organization implemented during the early years of planned economy in China, aimed at uniting farmers who contracted land on a household basis to engage in agricultural production and operations. This economic model became the prototype for the future development of the collective economy in Shipai village. In 1982, the collective enterprise Gangding hotel, operated by the Shipai team (the term "team" refers to "production team," a form of organization in China's socialist agricultural economy, derived from rural collective economic organizations established during the agricultural collectivization process, and can be understood as dividing members of the supply and marketing cooperative into several small groups), was completed and opened. In 1985, the State Council approved the establishment of Tianhe district in Guangzhou, which now includes Shipai village. Previously, this area was part of the suburbs of Guangzhou. In the same year, the Shipai town invested 600,000 Yuan to build the Shipai agricultural market, which was completed and opened. In 1986, the former Dong and Chi family cemeteries at Shanjieming in Shipai Village were converted into public facilities such as Shouxing rest park, a kindergarten, a nursing home, and the Shipai town office building.

In 1987, the Shipai subdistrict office was established, and the Shipai Town Government was renamed the Shipai Village Committee. The original village committees of Shipai town's five sections were renamed Shipai village's five joint teams, which were administratively under the leadership of the Shipai village committee, with no change in the economic management system. This illustrates the confusion in Guangzhou's and even China's urban management systems. A subdistrict office is a branch of the municipal government, and its establishment indicates that this area belongs to the urban district. In contrast, a village committee is a grassroots self-governing organization in rural areas, indicating that the area is rural, which conflicts with the presence of a subdistrict office. Particularly in China's dual household registration system, it should be clear whether an area is urban or rural, but due to unclear land ownership, Shipai village's administrative identity remains uncertain. This uncertainty laid the foundation for the emergence of urban villages in the future. In 1988, the Shipai village Cooperative Economic Shareholder Representatives Conference was held, and the "Shipai Village Cooperative Economic Shareholding Constitution" was passed. In 1990, Shipai village was recognized as an advanced unit in the creation of a sanitary city in Guangzhou. In September 1991, the nine-story Shipai hotel was completed and opened, and in October of the same year, the Shipai village Joint-stock Limited Company was established, with the village's 27 production teams reorganized into shareholding cooperative economic societies. In May 1992, the Guangzhou municipal

government began planning a large racetrack in the southeastern part of Shipai village (Shipai village held a 15% stake in the racetrack entertainment company), covering an area of 450 mu. In 1993, the Pacific computer city in the northern part of Shipai was completed and put into use. In 1994, the Shipai Economic Association restructured its shareholding system, dividing shares into four types: population shares, welfare shares, seniority shares, and resettlement shares, with each person holding a maximum of 40 shares. Shares could be inherited, and no new shares would be allocated in the future. That same year, the Kezhong industrial & trade building, covering 13,000 square meters, was built on Laohu mountain in Shipai. In 1996, the Nanyuan hotel (Building B) was constructed on Shipai east road, covering an area of 13,241 square meters. In May 1997, the original Shipai village committee was disbanded, and Shipai Sanjun joint-stock limited company was established on the basis of the committee.



Figure 19 Taipingyang computer city. Shipai village lies behind. Photo by Biaduwiki.

From the history of land use in Shipai village from the ROC period to 2000, it is evident that Shipai village is a typical near-suburban village in China that experienced chaotic land ownership and land management during rapid urbanization. Currently, land in China cannot be privately owned, it either belongs to the state or to a collective. Agricultural land belongs to the local village collective, while urban land is state-owned. In other words, once land is urbanized and no longer agricultural, it no longer belongs to the village collective. This land classification system can lead to confusion over land ownership in areas undergoing urbanization. Therefore, Shipai village ended up with both a subdistrict office and a village committee. The combination of rapid urbanization and a chaotic land management system created the conditions for the emergence of

urban villages.

## **6.1.4 The population development in Shipai**

### **6.1.4.1 Total population**

In 1953, during China's first national census, Shipai village had a population of 5,452 people across 1,120 households. By the time of the second census in 1964, the population had increased to 6,789 people and 1,996 households. In the fourth national census conducted in 1990, the population had risen to 8,855 people in 3,120 households. By 1999, the total population of the village was recorded at 9,317 people in 2,994 households, with a floating population of approximately 42,000. 20 years later, in 2019, the permanent population of the village reached 15,383 people across 2,453 households, while the floating population had surged to 94,000 (Ye, 2021). Over these two decades, the permanent population grew by about 60%, while the floating population more than doubled. This significant increase in both permanent and floating populations reflects the broader trend of urbanization and the transformation of Shipai village into a densely populated urban village.

### **6.1.4.2 External population**

Shipai Village is located outside the old city of Guangzhou. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, it was a rural and desolate area with a sparse population, and the first settlers in this area were from other regions. During the Ming dynasty, several waves of external migrants moved into Shipai Village. After this period and up until the early ROC era, there was little additional migration into the village. In the early 1920s, just before the Japanese invasion and the occupation of Guangzhou, particularly during the administration of Chen Jitang<sup>6</sup> in Guangdong Province from 1928 to 1936, roads, Tianhe Airport, a racetrack, Sun Yat-sen University, Shipai Park (now Tianhe park), and an observatory were constructed around Shipai. The surrounding area began to urbanize, leading to an influx of workers and small business operators into Shipai, which increased the external population.

From 1938 to 1945, during the Japanese occupation of Guangzhou, factories in the surrounding areas were forced to close, and some workers moved to Shipai, which had tea houses, tobacco shops, and gambling establishments etc. Additionally, some external migrants came as temporary workers during the busy farming season. After the Japanese occupied Hong Kong in 1941, many Hong Kong residents returned to the mainland, with some staying in Shipai. During the Chinese Civil War from 1945 to 1949, troops stationed locally, nearby water residents, and temporary workers during busy farming seasons also became residents of Shipai.

---

<sup>6</sup> Chen Jitang: 陈济棠. Commander of the Fourth Army of the National Revolutionary Army and Commander-in-Chief of the Eighth Group Army of the National Revolutionary Army under ROC government.

After the establishment of the PRC, several higher education institutions were established around Shipai, and a thriving commercial district developed, attracting another wave of external migrants. This wave of migration temporarily halted after the agricultural collectivization in China in 1956. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s, when the gap between urban and rural living standards widened, that many women from the village married men with urban household registrations, contributing to a new influx of residents into Shipai.

After the reform and opening up, the city center of Guangzhou shifted eastward. High-rise buildings began to rise around Shipai Village in the eastern suburbs, with increasing commercial shops and higher levels of urbanization. New developments such as commercial streets, computer cities, and office buildings created numerous job opportunities, leading to a further influx of external migrants into Shipai. Villagers responded by extensively renovating old houses on their plots, constructing multi-story buildings, and renting them out to the large number of incoming external migrants. The mid-1990s marked a peak in the renovation of old houses in Shipai Village, with over 1,000 external construction workers living on construction sites. According to the 2000 Fifth National Population Census of China, Shipai Village had around 42,000 external temporary residents, including office clerks, information industry owners and employees, service workers, small vendors, and sanitation workers.

### **6.1.5 The urbanization of Shipai area**

Before the early ROC era, the land within Shipai Village (including residential land, farmland, hills, and ponds) covered approximately 140 square kilometers, equivalent to one-tenth of the current area of Tianhe district. From the late 1920s to the late 1990s, over a span of more than 70 years, this land underwent three stages of urbanization, transforming Shipai from a rural area with limited access to transportation into a well-connected and economically vibrant new center of Guangzhou.

In August 1925, after the Nationalist Government constructed Zhongshan road (now Tianhe road and Zhongshan avenue) to the north of Shipai village, the Shipai area acquired its first road. In 1929, the Guangzhou Municipal Government built the Shipai Racecourse in the areas of Lingfen Mountain and Danaotou. In 1933, the racecourse was converted into the Shipai Airport, and that same year, the new campus of Sun Yat-sen University was established in Shipai's Wushan area. By 1935, the new campus of Sun Yat-sen University was completed, and its schools of literature, science, law, engineering, and agriculture moved from the city center on Wende Road to the new campus. In the same year, the Guangzhou Meteorological Station was established on the southern side of Shipai's Laohu Mountain. At that time, China's overall urbanization rate was only about 10%, indicating that Shipai was among the regions in China that entered the urbanization development phase relatively early.

At the end of 1949, the Second Field Army of the Chinese People's Liberation Army established a military and political university at the former Shipai Racecourse. In January 1950, the military and political university was renamed Southern University. At the end of 1952, Southern University was closed, and South China Normal

University was established at its former site. South China Normal University also built a new campus at Gangding in Shipai. In 1953, the Guangzhou Returned Overseas Chinese Students Remedial School was founded on Taipo Mountain to the east of Shipai village (now in the northwest of Jinan University). In 1956, Huangpu avenue to the south of Shipai village was opened. From that year until 1959, several higher education institutions were established in the Shipai area. The concentration of schools brought about increased population and high mobility, and also spurred local commercial development.

Starting in the 1980s, the focus of Guangzhou's urban construction shifted eastward, with Shipai village located approximately 3 kilometers east of the old city center. In July 1984, the Tianhe Sports Center was inaugurated to the west of Shipai village. In May 1985, Tianhe district of Guangzhou was established. In the same year, Guangzhou Customs requisitioned 106 mu of land from Shipai Village to build a "container inspection site", and subsequently, new government agencies, commercial enterprises, and residential complexes were established in the Shipai area. Between 1985 and 1994, the state requisitioned 3,809.4 mu of land in Shipai, accounting for 79.2% of Shipai village's arable land. Over the decade, most of the land in Shipai Village was requisitioned, and the Shipai area had largely completed general urbanization. However, in the Chinese context, there remained a fundamental difference between Shipai and other urban areas: Shipai village's residents had not yet transitioned from rural to urban household registration. The Chinese household registration system divides registrations into agricultural and non-agricultural categories, with agricultural registration referring to rural residents and non-agricultural registration to urban residents. Only agricultural registrations confer land use rights. Consequently, if villagers abandoned agricultural registration, they would also have to give up their collective land ownership rights. At that time, due to increased job opportunities and influx of external populations in the Shipai area, the rental housing market was in high demand. Many villagers began renting out their homes as a primary source of family income and were reluctant to give up their agricultural land use rights. As a result, Shipai Village was never fully integrated into the urban management system and evolved into a prominent urban village in Guangzhou.

### **6.1.6 The economy of Shipai village**

Before 1949, Shipai Village had favorable geographical and natural conditions, with a strong agricultural base and convenient transportation, making it an important production base for grains and vegetables in Guangzhou. In 1948, Shipai village had 4,800 mu of arable land, including 3,840 mu of rice paddies, which supplied over 500,000 kilograms of rice annually to Guangzhou; 960 mu of vegetable cultivation, providing over 3,000,000 kilograms of vegetables annually; and approximately 200 mu of patchouli cultivation, yielding around 20,000 kilograms of dried patchouli each year, which was also exported to Hong Kong, Macau, and Southeast Asia. The income of Shipai villagers primarily came from agricultural production.

After 1949, the economy of Shipai village underwent several stages of development due to the influence of political conditions. From 1950 to 1958, land reform was implemented in China, and villagers were allocated land, leading to rapid development in agriculture and a yearly increase in crop yields. In 1948, the annual yield of rice per mu in Shipai village was approximately 220 kilograms, and vegetables yielded 3,000 kilograms. After land reform, the annual yield of rice per mu reached a peak of about 380 kilograms, and vegetables yielded 4,000 kilograms. From 1954 to 1955, the annual income of village laborers was 70-80 Yuan, increasing to 90-100 Yuan by 1956-1957. During the period from 1959 to 1965, various communes were established across China, and movements such as the "Great Leap Forward"<sup>7</sup> and "The Great Steelmaking"<sup>8</sup> were launched. Initially, the agricultural management system transitioned from advanced agricultural cooperatives to the "combined political and economic" system and the semi-supply, semi-wage system of communes, which promoted a money-free approach to food consumption and led to significant waste of food and living materials. The unrealistic and rushed approach to agricultural production and the promotion of absolute equality in distribution decreased villagers' production enthusiasm, compounded by natural disasters, resulting in widespread hardship. Between 1959 and 1961, the annual yield of rice per mu fell to 260 kilograms, a 34% decrease from 1957, and the annual yield of vegetables fell to 3,000 kilograms, a 25% decrease from 1957. Villagers' monthly wages were set at seven levels: 4 Yuan, 6 Yuan, 8 Yuan, 10 Yuan, 12 Yuan, 14 Yuan, and 16 Yuan, with the average annual income of laborers in the production team being around 100 Yuan. It was not until 1962-1963, when the commune management system was reformed, that agricultural production began to recover, with the annual yield of rice per mu reaching 450 kilograms and vegetables 4,000 kilograms. The income of Shipai team members also increased, with an average annual income of around 160 yuan. From 1964 to 1977, the "Cultural Revolution" caused varying degrees of damage to agricultural production in the Shipai team. At the beginning of the "Cultural Revolution," various agricultural production responsibility systems were abolished, and political scoring systems were adopted, neglecting scientific farming methods and leading to a regression in agricultural production levels. Normal agricultural production only resumed after the end of the "Cultural Revolution." By 1977, the average annual distribution for laborers in the Shipai team was 365 Yuan. From 1978 to 1988, the agricultural planned economy in Shipai village gradually transitioned to a market economy. Besides traditional agricultural industries, Shipai village also began developing the tertiary sector. In 1987, the total income from the tertiary sector was 10.4232 million Yuan, and in 1988, the total income of Shipai village was 26.0371 million Yuan, a tenfold increase from the 2.2395 million Yuan in 1977 before the reform and opening up. After 1989, with the continuous eastward expansion of Guangzhou's urban area, all of Shipai village's arable land was requisitioned, and the

---

<sup>7</sup> The "Great Leap Forward" campaign refers to the mass movement in economic construction carried out throughout the country from 1958 to 1960, which was characterised by the achievement of high targets for industrial and agricultural production.

<sup>8</sup> "The Great Steelmaking" Campaign from September to December 1958 was a large-scale mass movement that blindly pursued the high-speed development of iron and steel production in the "Great Leap Forward".

tertiary sector completely replaced agriculture. The primary industries in Shipai village's tertiary sector are real estate and property management. In the mid-1980s, the village committee took out a loan of 1.8 million Yuan from the bank to build enterprises such as Gangding restaurant, a comprehensive market, and simple warehouses. Subsequently, using land compensation funds, a series of diversified properties, including a computer city and office buildings, were established, transforming Shipai east road into a bustling commercial street. By 2000, the property area in the village reached 250,000 square meters, and the total income from the tertiary sector reached 149.53 million Yuan. Following the experiences of other villages, Shipai village began experimenting with a cooperative economic shareholding system from 1989, transforming the 27 production teams into 27 cooperative economic societies. In 1997, the Shipai village committee was abolished, however, this only removed the form of the village committee. On the basis of the original village committee, Shipai village established the Shipai Sanjun Joint-stock Limited Company, transitioning from a political organization managing village land to an economic organization. Currently, each Shipai villager receives an annual dividend of 50,000-60,000 Yuan.

## 6.2 The livability of Shipai village

### 6.2.1 Residential environment



Figure 20 Shipai village. Photo by author.

In Shipai village, most buildings are between seven and nine stories high. According to a data collected in 2017, there are 3,384 rental buildings in the village, providing a total of 11,492 rental units. This high density results in very narrow distances between buildings, often insufficient for a single person to pass through. The close-packed structures obstruct natural light, leaving many alleys in darkness (Ye, 2021). As a result, middle and low-rise buildings receive little to no sunlight throughout the year and require artificial lighting even during the day. The dense construction also leads to high utility costs, as many rental properties utilize commercial electricity and water services, which are more expensive. Ventilation conditions are poor due to the crowded layout, exacerbating the already damp indoor environment caused by Guangzhou's frequent rainfall. This dampness makes it difficult to dry clothes indoors. Additionally, the summer heat in Guangzhou, combined with inadequate ventilation, contributes to uncomfortably high indoor temperatures.

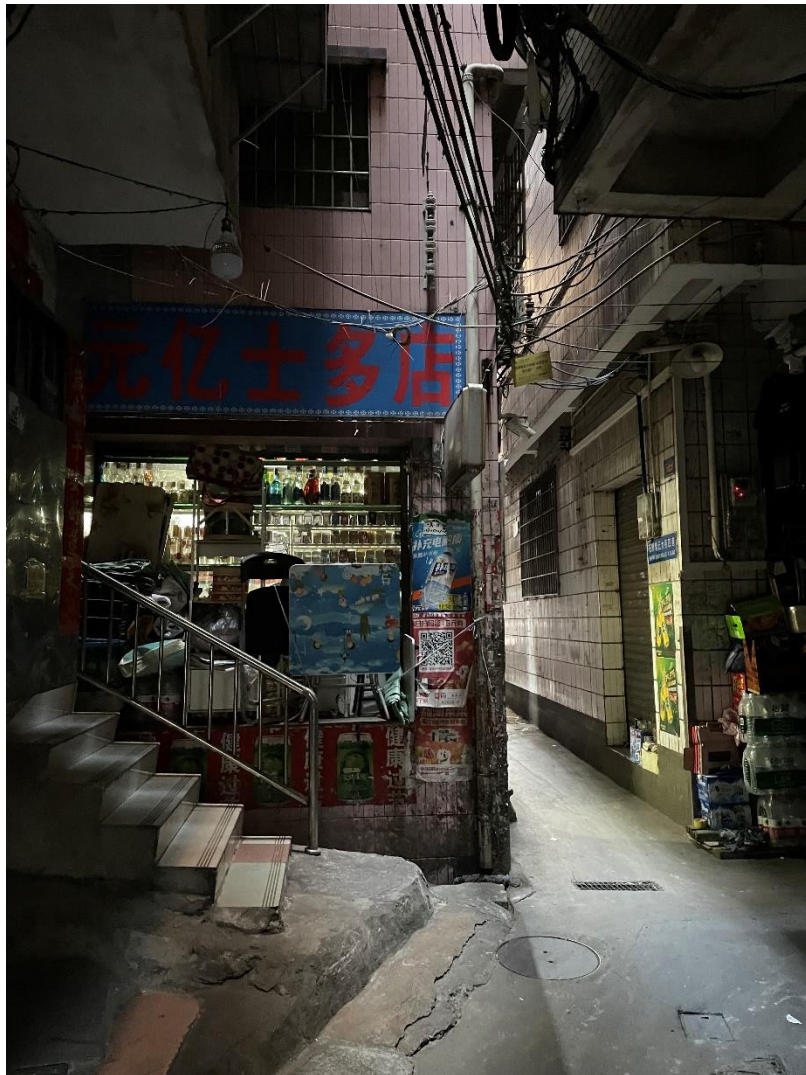


Figure 21 Sunshine is limited in Shipai village. Photo by author;

Shipai Village also grapples with significant noise issues. The presence of numerous warehouses within the village, combined with the high volume of cars parked on surrounding roads and the constant movement of goods carts, exacerbates the problem. Daily disruptions occur as early as 3 to 4 o'clock in the morning, when trucks arrive to

unload goods on the roads and then transport them into the village using hand carts. This frequent activity causes considerable inconvenience to residents, disrupting their sleep and leading to numerous conflicts (Lai Weihua, 2013).

## 6.2.2 Infrastructure



Figure 22 Wires and tunnels between buildings in Shipai village. Photo by author.

As an urban village situated in the city center, Shipai village features relatively well-maintained main roads, primarily paved with cement. However, many of its alleys remain narrow and deteriorated, which hampers effective drainage. The village contains over 170 streets and alleys, with the main streets averaging 7-8 meters in width, secondary streets 5-6 meters, and branch roads ranging from 1-2 meters. Specifically, roads wider than 2 metres account for only 27% of the total, those between 1.5 and 2 meters constitute 40%, those between 1 and 1.5 meters make up 20%, and those narrower than 1 meter represent 13%. The majority of these streets are too narrow to accommodate fire trucks, thereby presenting notable fire hazards (Huang, 2017).

Shipai village possesses a relatively comprehensive range of public facilities, including primary schools, kindergartens, sports fields, elderly activity centers, and public toilets. It is also in proximity to markets, hospitals, bus stops, and subways. However, these facilities are not without their shortcomings. Although the village includes primary education institutions, these schools suffer from limited educational resources, small

campus areas, and inadequate facilities. Furthermore, while there are ancestral halls and temples, there is a notable shortage of venues for cultural and entertainment activities. The village also lacks sufficient public spaces such as squares and parks. The scarcity of available land has led to a minimal presence of greenery, a stark contrast to Guangzhou's reputation as the "Flower City."

### **6.2.3 Public Security**

In the early years, Shipai village faced significant security challenges, including frequent criminal activities, fires, and economic disputes. Issues such as theft, counterfeit production, illegal pornography, drug use, and gambling were prevalent. In response, the village restructuring company, along with residents, undertook extensive security measures by installing a large number of surveillance cameras. Approximately 30,000 cameras were deployed across the village, sparking some controversy. According to Dong Zhijun, Secretary of the Party Committee of Sanjun Company, the village collectively invested nearly 5 million yuan to install 164 cameras, including 38 on rooftops and the rest at major intersections. Additionally, villagers funded cameras for individual properties, covering 80% of the village area. Dong Zhijun noted that prior to the installation of these cameras, Shipai village experienced frequent burglaries, with up to 50 criminal cases reported in a single month. After the cameras were installed, the security situation improved significantly, reducing the number of monthly criminal cases to about four. Despite these improvements, the local police station emphasized that the cameras' design, installation, management, and maintenance were independent of police oversight. The police use the recorded footage only when necessary for investigations, in accordance with the Guangdong Province Public Safety Video Image Information System Management Measures and the Guangzhou Public Safety Video System Management Regulations. Furthermore, Sanjun Company established a security team and set up security booths at each major intersection leading out of Shipai village, staffed by 1-2 security personnel. While the overall public security has seen improvements, some thefts still occur. The security team is tasked with investigating thefts and locating lost items, contributing to a generally satisfactory security environment, according to local residents.

### **6.2.4 Summary**

After years of adjustments, Shipai village has seen significant improvements in public security and some upgrades in public services. However, the overall living environment remains largely unchanged, and infrastructure deficiencies persist. Shipai village falls short of Guangzhou's standards for ecological and livable city construction, particularly in terms of green space and proximity to major parks and squares. An extensive evaluation of urban livability, which considers factors such as urban safety, public service facilities, environmental friendliness, and social harmony, reveals that Shipai village still faces serious challenges in these areas (Zhang Wenzhong, 2016).

Consequently, there is a pressing need for further enhancements to improve livability in the village.

## **7. Results**

### **7.1 The municipal government that's “not working hard enough”**

#### **7.1.1 The lack of action**

Although urban villages have long been recognized as a critical issue in Guangzhou's development, meaningful progress in addressing these problems has been limited. Over the past 30 years, only 10-15 years have seen substantial focus and action from the municipal government on urban village issues. For most of the time, the municipal government did not actively engage with or resolve the various problems facing urban villages. Interviewees consistently reported a lack of municipal government-led renovation projects in Shipai village, with some residents having lived there for as long as 37 years without witnessing any government-led renovations.<sup>9</sup> The director of the Party Committee of Shipai Street Office also confirmed that there are currently no planned renovation projects for Shipai village.

Despite the existence of goals for urban village renovation in official government documents, such as the “Urban Village Renewal Plan” and the “Three ‘Old’s Renovation Plan”, not all urban villages have received equivalent attention and investment. For instance, Liede village is the only urban village in Guangzhou that has completed a comprehensive renovation. The Guangzhou municipal government began planning for urban village renovations in the late 1990s, but these plans were not implemented until 2008, when the renovation of Liede village was successfully completed in 2010. Following this, Guangzhou ambitiously aimed to renovate 52 urban villages within the next three to five years under the “Three ‘Old’s” renovation plan. However, by 2012, the approval of new renovation plans effectively ceased, resulting in a halt in urban village renovations. As noted by Guo Youliang (2017), this stagnation in renovation efforts highlights a disparity in the implementation of urban renewal projects across different villages.

#### **7.1.1.1 Insufficient financial support**

The peak period of urban village renovation in Guangzhou spanned from 2000 to 2010, driven significantly by the desire to enhance the city's urban image in anticipation of the Asian Games. This emphasis on improving Guangzhou's urban brand was not solely motivated by a need to enhance the living environment and livability of urban villages, but also by the broader goal of showcasing the city as an appealing destination. During

---

<sup>9</sup> See Appendices #2, #3, #6, #8 and #10.

this period, the Guangzhou Municipal Government secured substantial financial funding to support renovation efforts, with Liede village being the first to benefit from this initiative. In 2007, the renovation of Liede village was achieved through a combination of investment solicitation and compensation mechanisms. The government facilitated the renovation by inviting investments to construct resettlement housing and offering compensation to villagers. At that time, the average housing price in Guangzhou was 8,735 Yuan per square meter. The compensation scheme provided villagers with 1,000 Yuan per square meter for material costs, with the promise of “demolishing one square meter, compensating one square meter”. Given Liede village's strategic location near Guangzhou's CBD and its proximity to the iconic Guangzhou Tower, the newly built resettlement housing quickly became a sought-after high-end residence. As a result, villagers profited significantly from the demolition and redevelopment process.

The situation in Shipai village contrasts markedly with that of Liede village. The demolition plan proposed by the government has not received unanimous support from the villagers<sup>10</sup>, and as a result, Shipai village has yet to undergo large-scale renovation. Currently, the average housing price in Guangzhou stands at approximately 33,000 yuan per square meter, with prices in Tianhe district, where Shipai village is located, soaring to 97,000 Yuan per square meter. Given these high market values, villagers expect compensation to exceed the previous rate of 1,000 Yuan per square meter for material costs. Compensating villagers at current market rates would impose substantial financial burdens, as Shipai village has a building density of up to 70% and a total building area of approximately 1 million square meters. This would require financial expenditures running into hundreds of billions of yuan. Without significant incentives, such as those associated with high-profile events like the Asian Games, it has been challenging for the Guangzhou municipal government to secure adequate funding from higher authorities for large-scale demolition and redevelopment.

Several interviewees have indicated that improving the environment in Shipai village while preserving its existing structures is a challenging task<sup>11</sup>. They suggested that only through comprehensive demolition can significant improvements to the living conditions be achieved. However, the substantial costs associated with such demolition have prevented the municipal government from initiating these projects in the short term. This financial constraint has, in turn, hindered any substantial progress in enhancing the livability of Shipai village.

#### **7.1.1.2 Rationality of promotion**

Despite the financial constraints limiting the comprehensive demolition of Shipai village, alternative solutions do exist. However, respondents indicated that there had been no renovation activities focused on improving livability in Shipai Village for

---

<sup>10</sup> See Appendices #10.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendices #2, #3, #4, #6, #7, #9 and #10

decades.<sup>12</sup> Currently, the only confirmed renovation efforts include road surface improvements on the outskirts of the village, funded by the village collective rather than the municipal government. This suggests that since Shipai village's current urban pattern was established, the municipal government has not implemented effective measures to enhance its living environment and overall livability.

This decision is closely linked to the phased development goals of the municipal government. The 16th Asian Games, held in Guangzhou in 2010, introduced a distinct political incentive for urban authorities to advance the transformation of urban villages. The Games served as both an opportunity for Guangzhou to present its urban image to Asia and the world and as a justification for the city's unconventional development strategies. This event held significant implications for urban development and the political interests of government officials. To ensure the success of the Asian Games and enhance the city's image, the then-mayor of Guangzhou explicitly proposed the transformation of “urban villages” as a key performance indicator for evaluating district-level government leadership (Guo, 2017). However, once the Asian Games concluded, the improvement of Guangzhou’s urban image ceased to be a major criterion for political performance evaluation. Consequently, the urgency for transforming urban villages diminished among government officials, as such initiatives no longer contributed to their career advancement within the official selection system. Furthermore, the advantageous location of Shipai village complicates its renovation, involving numerous stakeholders, with the village collective holding significant leverage due to land ownership. Negotiating with these collectives presents a formidable challenge for the government. Past negotiations have often failed, leaving officials who invested substantial time and effort with little to show for their efforts, thus impeding their career progression. As a result, the renovation of Shipai village has become a low-priority issue, and the improvement of its livability remains a distant goal.

## **7.1.2 A difficult plan**

### **7.1.2.1 An impossible mission**

Urban village renovation movements in Guangzhou have spanned approximately 20 years. On September 6, 2000, Guangzhou convened an “Urban Construction Management Work Conference” which outlined a plan to accelerate urban-rural integration and establish a coordinated metropolitan urban system over the following five years. A key objective was to complete the restructuring and transformation of “urban villages” in the central urban area within this timeframe and to advance the development of farmer apartments in designated urban planning areas. The aim was to convert land from non-agricultural farmers into urban residential areas, thereby implementing urbanization management (Li, 2002). This period also leveraged the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games and the national initiative for creating livable cities,

---

<sup>12</sup> See Appendices #2, #10

prompting the Guangzhou Provincial Government and the Guangzhou Municipal Government to issue various agendas, which outlined goals and plans for urban village transformation. Despite these ambitious plans, as of now, only Liede village has been fully renovated out of the 53 urban villages initially slated for comprehensive redevelopment.

Following the Asian Games, the Guangzhou Municipal Government revised its approach to the transformation of the city's "urban villages". After May 2012, the government halted the approval process for new "urban village" renovation projects. In June 2012, it issued the "Supplementary Opinions on Accelerating the Promotion of the Three Olds Renovation Work", signaling a shift in policy regarding urban village redevelopment. The rapid pace of the original renovation plan, coupled with concerns about impacts on land and financial revenue, led the municipal government to abandon its earlier goal of completing comprehensive renovations of 52 urban villages, including Shipai village, within a 3-5 year timeframe. Instead, the revised approach required the participation of village collectives, residents, and developers, with renovations to be carried out according to an annual implementation plan set by the government. However, this revised plan has not been notably successful, and substantial progress has yet to be achieved in Shipai village.

When the initial renovation plan for Guangzhou's urban villages was proposed, there were already concerns about its feasibility. The mayor of Guangzhou, in an interview with reporters, expressed a cautious view, suggesting that the renovation of urban villages would be a protracted process, potentially spanning one or two generations rather than being completed in 3, 5, or 10 years (Li, 2002). As anticipated, two decades later, only one of the originally planned 53 urban villages has been fully renovated. This situation highlights the shortcomings of the initial plan, which appeared more as a political agenda for the Asian Games than a practical, data-driven strategy. The plan lacked the necessary on-site investigation and professional analysis, rendering it impractical and ultimately undermining its potential for successful implementation.

Following 2012, the Guangzhou Municipal Government, District Government, and Urban Planning Department issued various plans and recommendations for urban village renovation. Some urban villages, such as Xian village and Chebei village in Tianhe district, have ongoing renovation projects. For instance, the collective property reconstruction project in Chebei village has been registered, which will involve demolishing some existing buildings to develop commercial property with a total construction area of approximately 300,000 square meters. However, long-term tenants and residents of Shipai village report that they have not witnessed any government-led renovation projects in their area. The recent "Guangzhou Urban Renewal Special Plan (2021-2035)" released in 2024 once again addressed the renovation of urban villages situated in the central city area. Several urban villages in Tianhe district were included in the list of planned renovation projects, but Shipai village was notably absent. This absence indicates a lack of effective negotiation between Shipai village and the municipal government concerning urban village renovation.

### **7.1.2.2 An impossible negotiation**

The absence of renovation plans for Shipai village by the municipal and district governments over the years is not due to a lack of intention to address urban village issues. Rather, new plans addressing urban village renovation, including those focused on comprehensive redevelopment and livability improvements, are frequently introduced. However, the core issue lies in the implementation of these plans, which often fails to materialize.

Mr. Chi, a long-time resident of Shipai Village, shared that while the government has proposed specific renovation plans, these have been met with resistance from the villagers<sup>13</sup>. The consensus among residents and tenants is that improving the living environment in Shipai village necessitates demolition. The village's high building density - up to 70% - and the total building area, which covers 1 million square meters on a land area of 600,000 square kilometers, make it clear that significant demolition is required to address issues like lighting and ventilation. Many buildings are spaced less than 1 meter apart, and any attempt to renovate the existing structures would inevitably disrupt the entire area. The villagers argue that meaningful improvements can only be achieved through large-scale demolition rather than merely upgrading existing buildings. However, such a process would inevitably impact the interests of land and property owners. The villagers believe that successful renovation of Shipai village depends on the government presenting a compensation plan that satisfies the village collective. Given the immense financial and performance pressures associated with this task, the municipal government faces significant challenges in meeting these demands. Consequently, despite various renovation plans being proposed by the municipal and district governments, progress on Shipai village's renovation remains stalled unless successful negotiations with the villagers are achieved.

## **7.2 Villagers who “protect their interests”**

### **7.2.1 The power of land-use rights**

China's land ownership system is characterized by socialist principles, with state ownership of urban land and collective ownership of rural land. According to Article 10 of the Constitution adopted in 1982, “Land in rural and suburban areas, except for those designated by law as belonging to the state, belongs to collective ownership; homestead land, self-owned land, and self-owned mountains also belong to collective ownership”. This means that rural land is owned collectively by the villages where it is located, and village collectives have the authority to manage land through methods such as subcontracting, renting, exchanging, transferring, and stock cooperation. However, they are prohibited from selling the land to individuals. In the context of Shipai village,

---

<sup>13</sup> See Appendices #10

this means that the land is owned collectively by the villagers registered in Shipai. Any changes involving the land and the buildings on it require the approval of the village collective. The government does not have the authority to interfere directly in these decisions. This system significantly influences the renovation and redevelopment processes, as the government's ability to implement changes is contingent upon securing the consent of the village collective.

In Shipai village, the transition from agricultural to urban land began in the 1920s, with the government expropriating agricultural land. Today, Shipai village is classified as an urban village, with its land now considered homestead land. Homestead land, designated for the construction of residential and ancillary facilities, is collectively owned and managed by the village. This type of land, unlike expropriated agricultural land, presents unique challenges for redevelopment due to its residential nature. The primary difficulty in expropriating homestead land stems from the fact that it is the primary residence for many villagers. Unlike agricultural land, which can be expropriated with relative ease, homestead land is integral to the villagers' living conditions. Given the rapid increase in housing prices and rents in Guangzhou, many villagers have become reliant on the rental income from their properties, making them even less inclined to relinquish their land without substantial compensation. A 2016 study revealed that the majority of Shipai villagers held negative views towards land acquisition. Of the 30 villagers surveyed, 36% felt that compensation standards were too low, while 23% were concerned about the implementation of compensation measures and social security. Additionally, 20% feared a decrease in income post-acquisition, 13% worried about the potential impact on their livelihood security, and 7% felt their rights might be violated during the acquisition process. Only 1% of the villagers supported the urban village renovation plan and were willing to cooperate with land acquisition efforts (Yan, 2016). According to Chinese land management laws, villagers have significant control over land use decisions. Therefore, no renovation project in Shipai village can proceed without the collective consent of the village, complicating efforts to implement redevelopment plans.

In addition to the complexities associated with land ownership, the financial burden of maintaining and improving Shipai village falls upon the village collective. The costs associated with sanitation and maintenance are managed by Shipai village's restructuring company, which oversees the cleaning personnel and security team. Given the company's focus on its own financial interests, there is a limited incentive to invest significantly in the comprehensive improvement of the village's livability. This financial constraint often results in minimal expenditure on enhancements, as the company prioritizes its economic benefits over substantial upgrades to the living conditions within Shipai village.

### **7.2.2 The inability to leave the village**

Most residents of Shipai village derive significant financial benefits from land transactions, primarily through two mechanisms. The first mechanism involves income from renting out properties. Property owners in Shipai village, including those who may

no longer be residents or have converted to urban household registration, continue to benefit from rental income. Even after their migration to urban areas, these property owners retain ownership of their homes built on the village's homestead land. Buildings in Shipai village, typically 5-7 stories high, can generate substantial rental income. With 2-3 rooms available for rent per floor, each building can yield a monthly income ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 Yuan. The second mechanism concerns dividends from the village's collective land management. Village collectives in Shipai village have transitioned into business entities, such as the Sanjun Company, which operates as a restructuring company managing the land through real estate ventures. The collective ownership structure means that the beneficiaries of this income are the current Shipai villagers who hold agricultural household registration. According to the Director of the Party Committee of Shipai Street, the village collective no longer functions as a traditional committee but as a corporate entity. The shareholders, who are the villagers, receive 50% of the company's annual profits as dividends. Presently, Sanjun Company generates an annual income of approximately 400 million yuan, with each villager receiving an average annual dividend of around 30,000 Yuan.

Due to the nationalization of agricultural land in Shipai village, the villagers have lost their primary means of livelihood through agriculture. With a majority of the population having only completed primary school education and lacking systematic vocational training, they possess limited skills and qualifications for alternative employment. In Guangzhou, where the average per capita income is approximately 10,000 Yuan per month, finding alternative job opportunities that can match this income is challenging without relying on rental income from their properties. Consequently, the villagers are highly resistant to the idea of demolition, as it threatens to deprive them of their primary source of income and exacerbate their economic insecurity.

## **7.3 “Helpless” tenants**

### **7.3.1 The dilemma of lease**

Due to various factors, including the challenging living conditions in Shipai village, the majority of the original villagers have moved away. Currently, out of the village's population of over 60,000, fewer than 1,000 are original Shipai villagers. The remaining residents are tenants who do not own property or land and therefore lack decision-making power regarding issues such as narrow building spacing and poor ventilation. Although these tenants experience livability problems directly, they are unable to address them, as the decision-making power rests with those who are not directly affected by these issues. This situation creates a disconnect between those who live in the area and those who have the authority to address and improve the living conditions, resulting in a persistent divide between the means of living and the individuals who inhabit them.

The rental period of tenants in Shipai village is usually relatively short. Among the interviewed tenants, the longest rental period is 6 years, and the shortest is 1 year,

mostly around 1-3 years. Ms. Yang, who works as a nurse in a private hospital, said that she chose to live in Shipai Village due to work reasons<sup>14</sup>. Her current plan is to stay until she resigns. If she leaves Shipai Village, the most likely reason is to change jobs. Besides Ms. Yang, all other interviewed tenants stated that they came to Shipai village to live due to work reasons<sup>15</sup>. Due to the low-quality living environment, Shipai village's competitiveness in the rental market lies in its geographical location and relatively low rent, attracting mostly migrant workers working in the surrounding areas. The work of this group is usually unstable, and most of them come from other places, which is the "floating population" in the Chinese population concept. They usually do not live in Shipai village for a long time, so they do not pay additional costs such as time, energy, and money to improve the living environment.

### **7.3.2 The dilemma of rights**

Shipai village's appeal in the rental market is primarily due to its advantageous location and relatively low rents, which attract migrant workers employed in the surrounding areas. These tenants, whose average income is generally below the per capita income of Guangzhou, occupy a relatively disadvantaged position both economically and socially. In contrast, the village collectives, which control land ownership, benefit from substantial rental income. Additionally, real estate companies involved in the village's redevelopment handle all land and industry-related issues professionally, providing substantial economic and social resources. Currently, China's legal framework lacks sufficient protections for tenant rights, and Guangzhou has not implemented comprehensive regulations to improve the rental housing environment. As a result, tenants living in suboptimal conditions find it challenging to allocate financial and material resources to compel village collectives to address these issues.

According to the 2023 report from the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau, the city's permanent population is 18.827 million, while the total population, including temporary residents, is 22.9818 million. Of this total, the registered permanent population constitutes 46.05%, while the registered floating population makes up 53.03%. This indicates that the floating population in Guangzhou is substantial, representing over half of the city's permanent residents. In Shipai village, this proportion is even higher, exceeding 90%. This high percentage means that most tenants in Shipai village are from outside the area, lacking local relatives or long-term acquaintances. Consequently, they have limited social resources and few connections to build trust and form strong community alliances. As a result, these tenants face difficulties in organizing effectively to advocate for their rights and address issues related to their living conditions.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Appendices #4.

<sup>15</sup> See Appendices #2, #3, #5, #6, #7.

### **7.3.3 The dilemma of ability**

In addition to facing economic and social resource disadvantages, tenants in Shipai Village also experience significant educational disadvantages, which further hampers their ability to protect their rights or seek improvements in their living conditions. The educational level of residents in Shipai village is below the average education level in Guangzhou (Liu, 2020). This indicates that a substantial portion of tenants in Shipai Village have not pursued higher education and consequently lack access to important legal and social rights information. This educational gap restricts their understanding of how to effectively advocate for their rights and raise awareness about their living conditions. As a result, tenants may struggle to express their concerns or mobilize support to address issues affecting the livability of Shipai village.

### **7.3.4 Tenants' needs**

Ms. Yang, a tenant of Shipai village, highlighted the importance of urban villages like Shipai in meeting the needs of tenants.<sup>16</sup> She pointed out that Shipai village's prime location in central Guangzhou offers proximity to numerous job opportunities and convenient transportation. In contrast, the high housing prices and rents in nearby areas - ranging from 50,000-120,000 Yuan per square meter and 5,000-11,000 yuan per month, respectively - make Shipai village's significantly lower rents, between 1,000 and 3,000 Yuan per month, an attractive option. Despite the transportation challenges in Guangzhou, such as heavy traffic and frequent delays, tenants often find the convenience of living close to work outweighs these issues. For low-income groups who work nearby, the trade-off between a less favorable living environment and reduced commuting time is considered worthwhile. As noted by all interviewed tenants, the decision to reside in Shipai village primarily stems from economic considerations related to affordable rent and job proximity. Therefore, even though the livability of Shipai village is not highly rated by tenants, its economic advantages make it a preferred choice. Consequently, tenants prioritize cost-efficiency over improvements in living conditions.

## **7.4 The third parties “struggling to make progress”**

### **7.4.1 Disappearing media reports**

Following the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, the momentum for urban village renovation projects in Guangzhou significantly waned, resulting in a marked decrease in media coverage. Analysis of newspaper articles on urban villages in Guangzhou

---

<sup>16</sup> See Appendices #4.

available on Zhiwang<sup>17</sup> since 2000 reveals that only 43% were published after 2010, with a mere 22% specifically addressing Shipai village during this period. The decline in media focus reflects the shift in government priorities, as urban village renovation was no longer deemed a crucial aspect of government work. Consequently, while the livability of urban villages, previously a media focal point, remained stagnant, media interest diminished. Post-2010 coverage by major Chinese newspapers and magazines increasingly centered on updates regarding government policies rather than in-depth investigations into the current living conditions within urban villages. The inherently insular nature of urban villages and the lack of advocacy or social confidence among tenants exacerbate the challenge of obtaining accurate, on-the-ground information. Additionally, although new policies for urban village transformation have been periodically introduced, and there have been plans to survey Shipai village, these initiatives often fail to advance beyond the proposal stage and are rarely reported or monitored by the media. This lack of follow-up and public oversight results in a deficiency of societal scrutiny and accountability concerning the transformation and livability of urban villages.

#### **7.4.2 Difficult independent investigation**

The absence of media coverage poses significant challenges for researching and investigating Shipai village. Like many relatively closed communities, Shipai village exhibits a high degree of internal censorship, which complicates efforts to conduct thorough investigations. This phenomenon is not only prevalent among the residents of Shipai village but also affects neighboring areas and institutions such as government departments and service agencies. This censorship culture may explain the scarcity of interview-based studies in Chinese academic research on urban villages, including Shipai village. The lack of media attention and the closed nature of these communities collectively contribute to the difficulties faced by researchers trying to gain an accurate understanding of these areas.

#### **7.4.3 Government officials who can't accept interviews freely**

The director of the Party Committee of Shipai Street has provided some information regarding the renovation of Shipai village but has indicated that in-depth interviews require an internal review by the street office. Similarly, staff from the Green River Community Neighborhood Committee have stated that interviews with them necessitate the consent of their director. These staff members are affiliated with the Tianhe district Government in Guangzhou, highlighting that government officials are not entirely free to accept interviews or share information for academic research. This restriction on key data presents a significant challenge for independent researchers attempting to gather comprehensive and accurate information on Shipai village and its

---

<sup>17</sup> Zhiwang: the biggest academic website in China.

renovation efforts.

#### **7.4.4 Village collectives that refuse to be interviewed**

This study sought to interview members of the Shipai Village Governance and Protection Team, affiliated with the village restructuring company Sanjun Company and comprising Shipai village residents. However, all 7 members from the 4 booths declined to participate in interviews. Some members cited the need for permission, claiming regulations from superiors prohibited interviews. Others stated personal reasons for their refusal, such as being part of the village collective and not wishing to be interviewed. The director of the Party Committee of Shipai Street clarified that no formal permission is required for academic research interviews. According to the director, the reasons provided by the governance and protection team members were pretexts to avoid participating in the interviews.

In addition to the security team members, villagers in Shipai village have also frequently refused interviews. Two elderly male villagers declined to participate, suspecting that the interviewer was associated with a particular company and were therefore hesitant to provide accurate information. For example, when asked about when they moved to Shipai village, they would respond with vague or incorrect answers, such as "yesterday". Social workers at the Shipai Street Social Work Station also expressed concerns about being deceived, citing their experience with numerous individuals and their general wariness of potential dishonesty.<sup>18</sup>

Due to various factors, the villagers of Shipai village exhibit a cautious attitude toward external interviews and show significant resistance to sharing personal information with outsiders. This reticence complicates the process of obtaining accurate and detailed first-hand data from the villagers. As a result, independent researchers face considerable challenges in accessing internal information, which hampers the ability to conduct investigations based on robust factual evidence and to reach definitive conclusions. In survey research, the inability to draw effective conclusions undermines the value of the study. Consequently, the difficulty in conducting interviews in Shipai village has led to a dearth of relevant research and limited external understanding of the village's living environment. This situation results in a lack of social oversight regarding the living conditions and overall livability within Shipai village.

### **7.5 Why has the livability of urban villages in Guangzhou still not improved after 20 years of transformation?**

- **Insufficient Government Effort.**

1. The Constitution of China stipulates that rural land is not publicly owned but is collectively owned by village collectives, meaning that municipal and district

---

<sup>18</sup> See Appendices #8.

governments do not have direct authority to manage the living conditions in urban villages.

2. Although the issues of livability in urban villages are well-recognized, neither the municipal nor the national government has introduced sufficiently comprehensive regulations for the management of rental housing to standardize the living conditions.

3. Many urban villages in Guangzhou are remnants of historical issues, with illegal buildings that have existed for decades, creating a situation where changes in one area affect the entire system. Without large-scale demolition, it is difficult to improve living conditions. Demolition requires the consent of the village collective, and the compensation demanded by the village collective represents a disproportionately large expenditure for the municipal government.

4. Due to practical constraints, the task of demolishing and renovating urban villages to improve their livability becomes a challenging endeavor. Investing effort and time in this task is detrimental to career advancement, so such plans are often indefinitely postponed.

- Residents' Reluctance to Cooperate.

1. Most urban villages are located in the center of Guangzhou, and their advantageous geographic position makes them highly sought-after in the rental market, generating significant profits for property owners. To maximize profits, residents often undertake illegal building modifications on limited land, neglecting the living conditions and thereby greatly reducing the livability.

2. The village collective owns the land in urban villages, and residents with properties also hold ownership over the buildings. Village affairs are decided by the village collective and the residents themselves. Since many residents no longer live in Shipai village and only rent out their properties, their concern for property maintenance and living conditions is primarily profit-driven. Improving livability would incur costs, so few are motivated to take proactive measures.

3. Residents of urban villages originally depended on agriculture for their livelihood. After their farmland was requisitioned by the state, they lost their primary means of subsistence. With low levels of education and limited skills, rental income became their main source of revenue. Large-scale demolition to improve livability in Shipai village would inevitably harm their interests, leading many residents to resist cooperation with demolition efforts.

- Multiple challenges faced by tenants

1. Housing prices and rental costs in Guangzhou are high. Most tenants in urban villages are low-income workers who rely on these areas as affordable housing options within the city, despite their lower livability standards.

2. The majority of tenants in urban villages are migrant workers from other regions, who generally have lower incomes and educational levels. They often lack the economic resources, social networks, and knowledge needed to advocate for better living conditions. Additionally, there is limited media coverage of the living environments in urban villages, which contributes to the lack of social attention to their livability issues.

3. Some tenants own homes in more remote areas of Guangzhou or in surrounding

regions but choose to live in urban villages closer to the city center due to better job opportunities, despite the challenges posed by long commutes and poor public transportation experiences.

In summary, after two decades of urban village redevelopment projects, the livability of urban villages in Guangzhou has not improved, primarily due to the three interconnected reasons discussed above:

1. The chaotic land ownership, urban planning oversights, and inadequate government regulation of land use during Guangzhou's rapid urbanization, caused by China's land management laws, led to the emergence of urban villages.
2. The lower livability of urban villages results in relatively affordable rents, making them a viable option for migrant workers seeking housing in the city.
3. The influx of migrant workers renting properties in urban villages generates substantial profits for the original villagers, making rental income their primary source of livelihood. As a result, villagers are reluctant to agree to demolition and redevelopment unless the government offers sufficient compensation.
4. The government lacks the necessary funds to initiate large-scale urban village renovation projects, making negotiations with villagers difficult to resolve. Since unsuccessful actions do not yield benefits such as political achievements or promotions for the relevant government departments and officials, redevelopment projects are indefinitely postponed, and the livability of urban villages remains unimproved.

## 8. Discussion

### **Does the livability of urban villages need to be improved? Is there a high possibility of improvement?**

Mr. Zhou, a second-hand landlord who was interviewed, remarked, “This is not a place for people to live”, reflecting a sentiment shared by several other tenants who also expressed dissatisfaction with the livability of urban villages<sup>19</sup>. Numerous studies and reports have corroborated these concerns, highlighting deficiencies in various aspects of the living environment in urban villages, including inadequate lighting, poor ventilation, and safety hazards. Clearly, the livability of urban villages requires significant improvements.

Most respondents contend that the high density of buildings in urban villages results in exorbitant costs for any attempts at rectification, making it nearly impossible to enhance living conditions in Shipai village before a thorough demolition takes place<sup>20</sup>. Social worker from the Shipai Street Social Work Station concur, noting that it is unfeasible to find affordable housing with satisfactory living conditions within Guangzhou's urban area. She argued that any improvements in living conditions would inevitably lead to increased rents.<sup>21</sup> Thus, within the current housing rental market of Guangzhou, characterized by a profit-driven supply side and a demand side prioritizing low rent and convenient transportation, the likelihood of improving the livability of urban villages in the short term remains minimal without substantial third-party intervention.

### **How can urban villages be transformed?**

Although comprehensive renovation of urban villages in Guangzhou is challenging without government involvement, some studies suggest that micro-renovations, which involve limited demolition, could still enhance residents' living conditions. For instance, measures such as installing bamboo ladders to improve fire safety and increasing greenery and recreational facilities in public spaces have been proposed. While significant improvements in livability may be difficult to achieve, there remains potential for incremental enhancements. So, how can we truly increase the possibility of improving the livability of urban villages, and how can we enhance livability to a certain extent under existing conditions?

### **What can tenants do?**

#### ● Tenant's actions

In the absence of economic and social resources, tenants often find it challenging to take independent action. However, it remains their legitimate right to advocate for improved living conditions. Under the current circumstances, tenants might consider two main approaches. First, they could establish a residents' committee, akin to the owners' committees found in standard residential areas. This committee would collaborate with other dissatisfied tenants to engage with grassroots government

---

<sup>19</sup> See Appendices #3.

<sup>20</sup> See Appendices #2, #3, #4, #6.

<sup>21</sup> See Appendices #8.

organizations, such as neighborhood committees and street offices, to report issues and press for solutions. Second, tenants could reach out to the media, actively providing information about the conditions in urban villages to generate social attention and oversight.

- **Loss of tenants**

Second-hand landlords and villagers in Shipai village have observed that tenants are currently at a disadvantage<sup>22</sup>. One landlord noted that the poor living conditions in the village have diminished its appeal, particularly among younger people. Similarly, a villager indicated that his property is more difficult to rent due to its central location within Shipai village, where the environment is notably inferior compared to surrounding areas. This shift suggests that while livability has not been a primary concern for tenants in recent years, there is a growing awareness of the importance of living conditions. Should more tenants choose to leave or avoid renting in urban villages due to these conditions, it could shift the market dynamics, compelling urban village owners to improve livability in order to attract and retain tenants.

**What can owners do?**

In response to tenant loss, homeowners can attract new tenants by enhancing living conditions. While fundamental improvements may be challenging with only small-scale renovations, certain aspects can still be addressed. For instance, addressing tenants' concerns about fire safety by equipping rental properties with fire extinguishers can be effective. Additionally, maintaining open communication with tenants to understand their specific issues and needs is crucial for making targeted improvements and fostering better living conditions.

**What can the village committee do?**

Today, most village committees in urban villages have transformed into village restructuring companies operating as enterprises. Property management within these villages is typically handled by management companies hired by these restructuring entities. Although the buildings themselves may not be entirely owned by these companies, they are responsible for managing the public areas within the village. These companies can engage with residents to understand their needs regarding greenery, public spaces, and street lighting. Additionally, it is crucial for these companies to ensure that homeowners adhere to housing safety regulations and rectify any properties that do not meet legal standards.

**What can the municipal government do?**

Firstly, the living environment in urban villages remains a significant urban issue, characterized by inadequate lighting and ventilation, poor hygiene conditions, narrow streets, and safety hazards. These problems necessitate formal intervention by the municipal government. The initial step in addressing these issues is for the municipal government to conduct a thorough investigation and evaluation of the livability conditions in urban villages.

Although land use rights in urban villages are controlled by village collectives, the government can still play a regulatory role by establishing regulations related to

---

<sup>22</sup> See Appendices #3, #6.

housing rental, such as minimum per capita area and fire safety standards. These regulations can be adapted to local conditions. For instance, in Guangzhou, which is a relatively dry city, issues of dampness and inadequate ventilation have been reported by tenants. The government could mandate that rental properties with average humidity levels exceeding a specified threshold during non-rainy seasons must be equipped with dehumidification devices. However, it is crucial that such regulations are implemented in a way that does not exacerbate the challenges faced by tenants in securing rental housing.

Currently, urban villages are experiencing tenant attrition, which presents an opportunity for the government to engage with villagers and propose renovation plans aimed at improving their living conditions. With 67 undergraduate universities in Guangzhou and a substantial pool of research talent, the government can leverage this academic expertise to address urban village challenges. By encouraging researchers from educational and research institutions to contribute to urban village renovation efforts, the government can benefit from innovative solutions and informed recommendations to enhance living environments in these areas.

### **Is it only urban villages that need to be renovated?**

The phenomenon of urban villages has long been recognized as one of Guangzhou's most pressing urban issues. Researchers and media have criticized these areas for contributing to problems related to urban aesthetics, living conditions, and crime rates. But are these problems really arising from the urban villages themselves? Will these problems be easily solved after the disappearance of urban villages? Urban villages are not the root cause of urban issues but rather a manifestation of broader urban challenges. These villages are essentially pre-existing rural areas within a city that have not undergone simultaneous urbanization. Their forms can vary widely, from fully preserved ancient villages to more modern rural structures, and are not necessarily characterized by the dense and crowded "handshake buildings" that lead to safety and hygiene problems. In Guangzhou, the prevalence of "handshake buildings" in urban villages is attributed primarily to two factors:

1. Villagers' pursuit of income through illegal construction practices.
2. The municipal government's inability to fully enforce building regulations.

This inability stems from difficulties in negotiating with village collectives for land acquisition and the complex nature of land ownership rights as stipulated by national laws, which often leads to unclear ownership of land with varying attributes. Literature reviews and interviews with residents and villagers of Shipai village revealed that many issues related to lighting, ventilation, hygiene, and fire safety in urban villages arise from the close proximity and high density of buildings. According to the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China and national standards set by the Ministry of Construction, the recommended distance between multi-storey buildings is 6 meters, between multi-storey and high-rise buildings is 9 meters, and between high-rise buildings is 13 meters. These standards are designed to ensure adequate living conditions, including sufficient lighting, ventilation, and privacy. However, the buildings in urban villages often have distances of only 1 meter or less between them. This issue is partly due to the fact that although the General Principles of Civil Law,

established in 1987, stipulated that building spacing should consider the lighting and ventilation rights of adjacent structures, specific numerical design standards were only introduced in 2018. Consequently, there were no specific legal provisions for buildings constructed prior to this date. Furthermore, despite earlier laws prohibiting self-built houses in urban villages from exceeding five floors, illegal construction continued unchecked. The municipal government not only failed to enforce these regulations but also modified the law to increase the maximum allowable height from five to seven floors. Had the district and city governments acted promptly against illegal constructions, the current situation in Shipai village, characterized by problematic “handshake buildings”, might have been avoided.

Villagers in urban villages engage in illegal construction largely due to the financial incentives associated with renting out properties. The primary source of income for these villagers has shifted to rental revenue since their land was expropriated by the state. Additionally, the high demand for affordable housing in Guangzhou, driven by a significant influx of migrant workers, exacerbates this issue. These workers, facing high rents and limited housing options, are forced to seek accommodations in urban villages despite their poor living conditions. These dynamics highlight a fundamental oversight in municipal urban planning. The municipal government has failed to adequately address both the livelihood needs of the original residents and the housing demands of newcomers. This neglect has perpetuated the survival of urban villages. The transformation of urban villages cannot be addressed in isolation; it requires a comprehensive rethinking of urban spatial distribution. The issues seen in urban villages are not inherent to the concept of urban villages themselves. For example, in Europe and North America, urban villages often represent a more desirable living environment. The problems observed in Guangzhou's urban villages—such as poor livability—reflect broader urban issues, including inadequate spatial planning, insufficient affordable housing, and inconvenient transportation. As the residents of urban villages are among the most vulnerable urban groups, their experiences often encapsulate broader urban problems. Studying these neighborhoods provides valuable insights into the broader issues facing cities, offering researchers the opportunity to uncover systemic urban challenges through the lens of these disadvantaged communities.

Referring to urban villages as “urban disease” or “urban stain” is misguided. The true issues lie in the policies, systems, and planning failures that create and perpetuate such living conditions. Residents who find themselves in urban villages are not the problem but rather the victims of these systemic failures.

### **Limitation**

I did not anticipate the difficulty of conducting interviews in Shipai village. It proved challenging to approach unfamiliar tenants and residents for interviews. On the first day alone, I faced 15 rejections and could not find any local villagers willing to participate. This lack of preparation significantly slowed my progress. Additionally, since all interviewees had work to do, I could not take up too much of their time. Because our conversations were limited, it was difficult to establish deeper trust, preventing me from gaining more insight into their family situations and thoughts on urban planning and

policies. Most interviewees did not fully engage with the interview process, likely due to various factors such as their caution towards outsiders or disillusionment with the municipal government, and this study could not delve into these issues. For similar reasons, the study also lacks perspectives from within the village restructuring company and from other researchers.

# References

- Atkinson, R.D., & Moon, G. (1994). *Urban Policy in Britain: The City, the State and the Market*.
- Bach, J. (2010). "They Come in Peasants and Leave Citizens": Urban Villages and the Making of Shenzhen, China. *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(3), 421-458.
- Baweja, V. A. N. D. A. N. A. (2015). *Dharavi Redevelopment Plan: Contested Architecture and Urbanism. The Expanding Periphery and the Migrating Center*, 381-387.
- Botonogu, F. (2011). *Hidden Communities: Ferentari*. Editura Expert.
- Business Week. (2006). *2005 Annual Report of Livability Index of Chinese Cities*. Business Week.
- ChengShi Interaction. (2023, March 30). LuoJiaZhuang, The First Stop of Young People Coming to Hnagzhou. BaiJiaHao. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1761768448931038959&wfr=spider&for=pc>
- Cities PLUS. (2003). "A Sustainable Urban System": The Long-term Plan for Greater Vancouver. Vancouver, Canada: cities PLUS
- Clinard, M. B. (1966). *Slums and Community Development : Experiments in Self-help*. New York, NY: Free Pr.
- Davis, Mike, 1946-2022. (2007). *Planet of slums*. London ; New York :Verso
- Desgroppes, A., & Taupin, S. (2011). Kibera: The biggest slum in Africa?. *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est/The East African Review*, (44), 23-33.
- Evans, P. (2002). *Livable Cities? Urban Struggles for Livelihood and Sustainability*. University of California Press.
- Fang, K. (1999). Ecologization, livability and Cultural Characteristics: Creating the Habitat Environment of Zhongguan Village in the 21st Century. *Urban Problems* (6), 2.
- Fang, Q. F., Ma, X. M., Song, J. S. (1999). Urban Villages: Policy Problems Encountered in China's Urbanization Process. *Urban Development Studies* (04), 21-23.
- Filčák, R., & Ficeri, O. (2021). Making the ghetto at Luník IX in Slovakia: People, landfill, and the myth of the urban green space. *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, 57(3), 293-313.
- Franklin, B., & Tait, M. (2002). Constructing an Image: The Urban Village Concept in the UK. *Planning Theory*, 1(3), 250-272.
- Hahlweg, D. (1997). "The City as a Family" In Lennard, S. H., S von Ungern-Sternberg, H. L. Lennard, eds. *Making Cities Livable. International Making Cities Livable Conferences*. California, USA: Gondolier Press.
- He, J. X., Xiao, Y., Bu, J. T. & Zhao, G. (2012). A preliminary study on the transformation strategy of 'urban villages' in the context of the construction of guaranteed housing: the example of Shajing Village in Xi'an. *Cities*(02), 28-32
- He, X. N. (2020). *Social Impact Assessment of Urban Renewal of Urban Villages in Shenzhen* (Master's Thesis, Shenzhen University). Master's Degree.

- <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27321/d.cnki.gszdu.2020.000150doi:10.27321/d.cnki.gszdu.2020.000150>.
- Hong, MiKyung. (2024, January 20). Fire breaks out in Guryong Village... Seoul's last shantytown 'vulnerable to fire'. Point Daily. <https://www.pointdaily.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=143998>
- Hu, G. & Su, H. Y. (2014). Practice and innovation of Guangzhou's urban governance transformation: Reflections based on the 'Tongdewei model'. *Urban Issues* (03), 85-89. doi:10.13239/j.bjsshkxy.cswt.140314.
- IMCL. (2006). Conference History. <https://livablecities.org/conferences-history/>
- Johnston, R. J. et al. (eds.) (1981): *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford (Blackwell). ISBN 0-631-10721-5 (5th edition published in 2009)
- Jiang, C.Z., and Wang, T. (2002). Planning control reforms for clear property rights--An overview of the transformation of 'urban villages'. *Urban Planning* (12), 33-40.
- Kyritsi, K. (2017). *Slum Upgrading Processes in Brazil in the Late 20th Century: The Cases of Rocinha (Rio) and Project Prometropole in Recife (Pernambuco)*. University of California: Berkeley, CA, USA.
- Lan Y. Y. (2007). The Logic of Formation of China's 'Ghetto-like' - A Study on Migrant Population Settlements in Urban Villages. *Journal of Social Sciences of Jilin University* (05), 147-153.
- Li, H. W. (2002). Analyses and Reflections on Guangzhou Municipal Government's Urban Land Management Situation. *Urban Planning Forum* (03), 37-40+80.
- Li, L. H. (2005). Economic and Social Characteristics of Urban Villages--A Case Study of Typical Urban Villages in Guangzhou. *Beijing Planning and Construction* (03), 34-37.
- Li, Z. J. & Xie L. S. (1995). The Phenomenon of "Village" in the City. *Journal of Economic Work* (08), 20-21.
- Liu, H. (2020). A study on language landscape and migrant workers' identity in urban villages--Taking Shipai village in Guangzhou as an example. *Language Strategy Research* (04), 61-73. doi:10.19689/j.cnki.cn10-1361/h.20200405.
- Liu, P. L. (1998). Culture of Human Habitation: The New Topic of Ekistics. *Journal of Hengyang Normal University* (01), 12-16
- Liu, Y., Liu L. X., Yi, Z. K., Ma, H. J. (2022). Exploration and Thoughts on Micro-Renewal in Response to Urban Informality: The Case of Collective Properties in Guangzhou Urban Villages. *South Architecture* (10), 71-79.
- Liu, Y. Q., Liu, Y. & Li, Z. G. (2017). Mechanism Analysis of Residents' Sense of Belonging, Neighbourhood Interaction and Community Participation\* - An Example of Urban Village Transformation in Guangzhou City. *Urban Planning* (09), 38-47.
- Ma, X. M. (1999). Urban villages: Black Spots in the Urban Environment. *Environment* (11), 12-13.
- Palej, A. (2000). "Architecture for, by and with Children: A Way to Teach Livable City" Paper presented at the International Making Cities Livable Conference, Vienna, Austria, 2000.

- Qian, X. S. (1993). Socialist China Should Construct Landscape Cities. *Urban Problems* (03), 4-6
- Qin, H. (2012). The right to housing of the new urban poor - how to look at 'shanty towns', 'unauthorised building works', 'urban villages' and 'low-cost housing'. 'low-cost housing'. *Social Science Forum* (01), 195-219. doi:10.14185/j.cnki.issn1008-2026.2012.01.022.
- Ran, Q. C., & Wang, Q. S. (2023). Implications of Slum Tourism in Brazil and India for Tourism Development in China's Urban Villages. *Journal of Xiangtan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* (04), 94-97+123. doi:10.13715/j.cnki.jxupss.2023.04.017.
- Ren, W. H., Cheng, F. (1989). Today and Tomorrow of the "Village in the City". *Architectural Journal* (03), 5-9.
- Ren, Z. Y. (2005). Opinions about Livable Cities. *Urban Development Studies*.
- Salzano, E. (1997). "Seven Aims for the Livable City" in Lennard, S. H., S von UngernSternberg, H. L. Lennard, eds. *Making Cities Livable*. International Making Cities Livable Conferences. California, USA: Gondolier Press.
- Shi, L. Y. (2006). Master's Thesis on Slum Upgrading in Foreign Countries, Beijing Forestry University). [https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=ZJxhFRRmSIhSGbKX9zCOIH1aTviACU15mnQjI2zYqpUC9fFmHgO4Pf3Q3zN3Jmj2p0FmFCO7AbFPfGXEz\\_4jUnHxCh2zWv5WscFKgec2FHGuV06M1ReAi1DUQJoD6CsvvMva-gVD07C0tmeAdTf6CA==uniplatform=NZKPTlanguage=CHS](https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=ZJxhFRRmSIhSGbKX9zCOIH1aTviACU15mnQjI2zYqpUC9fFmHgO4Pf3Q3zN3Jmj2p0FmFCO7AbFPfGXEz_4jUnHxCh2zWv5WscFKgec2FHGuV06M1ReAi1DUQJoD6CsvvMva-gVD07C0tmeAdTf6CA==uniplatform=NZKPTlanguage=CHS)
- Shu, C. Q. (2000). About the idea of building "'amenity cities" in the Three Gorges Reservoir Area. *Journal of Chongqing Jianzhu University(Social Science Edition)* (02), 78-84.
- Simon, R. F., Adegoke, A. K., & Adewale, B. A. (2013). Slum settlements regeneration in Lagos mega-city: An overview of a waterfront Makoko community.
- Smith, N. R. (2014). Beyond top-down/bottom-up: Village Transformation on China's Urban Edge. *Cities*, 41, 209-220.
- Survey Office of the National Bureau of Statistics in Guangzhou. (2023). *Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook 2023*. China Statistics Press
- Tan, L. M. (2012). Reflections on community management of urban villages in Sanyuanli, Guangzhou. *Journal of Guangzhou City Vocational College*(04),45-48.
- Tan, S. K., & Pang, B. Z. (2003). The Rural Land Contract Law and its impact on the urban real estate sector. *China Real Estate* (02), 19-21.
- TianYu. (2024. January 2). HuaShiYing-The Last Urban Village at Beijing CBD. Personal Library. [http://www.360doc.com/content/24/0612/15/73493751\\_1126006923.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/24/0612/15/73493751_1126006923.shtml)
- Tian Y. S., & Tao W. (2000). The creation of "livability" in an urban environment. *Tsinghua Science and Technology* (S1), 5.
- Timmer, V., & Seymoar, N. K. (2006). The Livable City. *The World Urban Forum* 2006.
- Turkstra, J., & Raithelhuber, M. (2004, August). Urban Slum Monitoring. In 24th Annual ESRI International User Conference, 9th-13th August.

- UN-Habitat. (2003). The Challenge of Slums - Global Report on Human Settlement. UN-Habitat.
- Wang, L., Wang, X. C., Zeng, X. J., Xie, L. J. (2009). Evolutionary mechanism of urban village development under the concept of spatial quality of urban social life. *Modern Urban Research* (06), 78-82.
- Wu, L. Y. (1989). *General Architecture*. Tsinghua University Press.
- Wu, L. Y. (2001). Exploration of Ekistics. *Planners*, 17(6), 4.
- Yan, X. P., Wei, L. H. & Zhou. Y. B. (2004). A Study on the Coordination of Urban-Rural Relations in Rapidly Urbanizing Areas -Taking the Transformation of “Urban Villages” in Guangzhou as an Example. *Urban Planning*(03), 30-38.
- Yang, A. (1996). Prevention and Control of “Urban Villages”. *Urban and Rural Development* (08), 30-31.
- Ye, Y. M. (2015). Theoretical Architecture and Mechanism Innovation of Inclusive Urban Village Transformation in Megacities - Examination and Reflection from Beijing and Guangzhou. *Urban Planning* (08), 9-23.
- Yuan, R. (2005). Discussion on the Criteria of Evaluating Livable Cities. *Economic Science* (4), 3.
- Zhang, G. L. (2004). Towards a tripartite partnership: The evolution of Western urban renewal policies and their implications for China. *Urban Development Research* (04), 26-32.
- Zhang, G. R., & Gu, Z. L. (2006). Research on passive Urbanization in the Process of Rapid Urbanization. *Urban Planning* (05), 48-54.
- Zhang, L. Z. & Ye, Y. M. (2021). A Study on Villagers' Willingness to Renewal in Urban Villages from the Perspective of Prospect Theory: Based on a Questionnaire Survey of 25 Villages in Guangzhou. *Urban Planning* (12), 19-26.
- Zhang, W. Z. (2007) Discussion on the Connotation and Evaluation Indicator System of Livable Cities. *Urban Planning Forum* (03), 30-34.
- Zhang, W. Z. (2007). Indicator Systems and Methods for Evaluating the Environment within Cities. *Scientia Geographica Sinica*, 27(1), 7.
- Zheng, J. (1997). Problems and Countermeasures of “Urban Villages”. *Contemporary Construction*(04),20.
- Zhou, Y. G. (2007). A Comparison of Two “Urban Diseases”-Urban Villages and the Western Slums of a Century Ago. *New Architecture* (02), 27-31.

# List of Figures

- Figure 1 Baishuzhou village, Shenzhen. Photo by ZhihuuserJly3RH
- Figure 2 Huashiying, Beijing. Photo by Sina.
- Figure 3 Luojiashuang village, Hnagzhou. Photo by Chengshi Interaction.
- Figure 4 Shajing village, Xi'An. Photo by Times Figure.
- Figure 5 Lunik ix, Kosice, Slovakia. Photo by Reuters.
- Figure 6 Ferentari, Bucharest, Romania. Photo by Wikidata
- Figure 7 Dharavi, Mumbai, India. Photo by YGLvoices.
- Figure 8 Guryong village, Seoul, South Korea. Photo by Naver
- Figure 9 Rocinho, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photo by Viator.
- Figure 10 Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya. Photo by Schreibkraft.
- Figure 11 Makoko, Lago, Nigeria. Photo by Xinhua.
- Figure 12 Sanyuanli village, Baiyun district, Guangzhou. Photo by author.
- Figure 13 Guangzhou in 1980s. Photo by Julian Humphery
- Figure 14 Tianhe district, Guangzhou in 1990s. Photo by Pengpai.
- Figure 15 "Flower city" Guangzhou. Photo by KingHo
- Figure 16 Polluted river in Guangzhou. Photo by Awei Observation.
- Figure 17 A woman sold fake tickets in Guangzhou railway station in 1994. Photo by Donovan Wylie
- Figure 18 Shipai village, Guangzhou. Photo by Souhu.
- Figure 19 Taipingyang computer city. Shipai village lies behind. Photo by Biaduwiki.
- Figure 20 Shipai village. Photo by author.
- Figure 21 Sunshine is limited in Shipai village. Photo by author;
- Figure 22 Wires and tunnels between buildings in Shipai village. Photo by author.

## List of Tables

Table 1 Types of urban villages in Guangzhou

Table 2 Table 2 Urbanization rate of Guangzhou

Table 3 The expropriating entities of the land of Shipai

# Appendices: Content of interviews

## #1 Caterer/female/50 years old

Interviewee

It's very congested in the morning, those riders.

Interviewer

So you think the transportation is bad here.

Interviewee

Very congested, very congested. The traffic is not very good. Look at those roads, it's hard to walk on the platforms.

Interviewer

And then it's very congested. Have you been here all these days? It's raining these days.

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

Was here flooded?

Interviewee

No, it's just damp.

Interviewer

So the drainage system is still okay.

Interviewee

Yeah.

Interviewer

How long have you been here?

Interviewee

I have been here for 1 or 2 years.

Interviewer

Are you new to Guangzhou?

Interviewee

I have been here for many years.

Interviewer

But you just came to Shipai? what do you think is the difference between Shipai and your previous working environment?

Interviewee

This place is too congested, making me feel restless. (When) the riders picked up the meal in the morning.

Interviewer

There are a lot of them?

Interviewee

Well, it's a lot of people.

Interviewer

Do you think there is any difference between the pandemic period and now?

Interviewee

It's about the same, it gets damp whenever it rains, that's for sure.

Interviewer

Is dampness the biggest problem?

Interviewee

I haven't seen the sun here yet. Now there's sunshine outside, but there's no sunshine here.

Interviewer

Will someone take care of this?

Interviewee

Yes, they need to spray medicine to do the disinsection, and the village committee will come to inspect it.

Interviewer

Do you think they have been solving these problems that everyone has encountered here?

Interviewee

Yes, if there are bugs to kill. Their main task is to kill them.

Interviewer

Have you ever seen anyone else coming here besides the village committee?

Interviewee

Some come to check hygiene.

Interviewer

The health department?

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

Recently, Guangzhou has released a new proposal regarding urban villages, that if only two-thirds of the villagers agree to the renewal of the villages, they can proceed. If you are a villager from Shipai village and have property here, do you think you would agree?

Interviewee

I don't understand these things, I definitely need to renovate it, and I definitely agree.

Interviewer

Do you want this environment to be renovated?

Interviewee

I want to improve it 100%, why don't I agree?

Interviewer

What part do you think you want to renovate.

Interviewee

To renovate, ventilation is necessary. Look here, it's less than a few tens of meters, with one house connected to another.

Interviewer

Besides ventilation.

Interviewee

Ventilation is enough, not being damp is good enough.

Interviewer

Is it enough to make just these changes?

Interviewee

Where don't you want ventilation? It's time to see some sun. It's too humid, right?

Interviewer

Besides, for example, do you have any other views on security or other aspects?

Interviewee

Everything is fine

Interviewer

So it's safe.

Interviewee

It's all fine, it's too humid, it's just too humid. Everywhere, the clothes are all furry, just like that kind of little fur (mould), without seeing the sun.

Interviewer

Hygiene or anything like that is okay?

Interviewee

Hygiene is fine, but it's too humid.

Interviewer

Are there many bugs here?

Interviewee

There are no more bugs, after they killed them, there are no more.

Interviewer

If there is a satisfaction level of 1-10, what is your approximate level of satisfaction with this environment?

Interviewee

Satisfied? Not even 2, how possible can I get to a 10.

Interviewer

Do you usually communicate with the owners here?

Interviewee

I don't understand, we don't even know where they are.

Interviewer

If you have the right to plan Shipai Village in the future, what do you think you would like it to look like?

Interviewee

Ventilation is sufficient.

Interviewer

Ventilation, and not crowded anymore?

Interviewee

Yes, just don't be too crowded. Anyway, we come from the countryside, and seeing this place is too congested makes us feel restless.

Interviewer

Where are you from?

Interviewee

We came from Guangxi.

Interviewer

So you are okay with the high temperature here?

Interviewee

When I first arrived, I felt a bit uncomfortable, but just a little bit.

Interviewer

Okay, finally, what is your profession?

Interviewee

I make fast food.

Interviewer

And what is your age?

Interviewee

I am 50 years old.

Interviewer

Do you know how much the rent is here?

Interviewee

How much? Does it seem that they are 700 or 800 yuan here? Is more than 1000 a suite? More than 1000 or 2000. Maybe there are single rooms and houses. I have never lived in them. We can't afford to live there. It's so expensive to rent a house for 3000 or 4000 a month.

Interviewer

Do you mean rent a house for 3000 or 4000 yuan here?

Interviewee

I said that we couldn't live so well if we earn 3000 or 4000 yuan, and I didn't ask about it, but we could rent with 700 or 800 yuan.

Interviewer

It is relatively a little more expensive here?

Interviewee

Those ones that can have sunshine.

Interviewer

By the road?

Interviewee

Better things are definitely more expensive. There's no sunshine here.

Interviewer

So you are not going to move here because it is close to work?

Interviewee

I didn't know, I might need to take care of my grandson next year.

## **#2 Wang/female/former janitorial workers in the hospital next to Shipai village/60 years old**

Interviewer

What do you think is the biggest problem living here?

Interviewee

Very expensive, the rent is very expensive. Building are too close to each other.

Interviewer

The buildings are too close together.

Interviewee

The houses are separated to smaller rooms. They make “room within a room”, separate one room to two rooms.

Interviewer

How long have you been living here?

Interviewee

I have only lived here in the village for 2 or 3 years, but I have been here for decades.

Interviewer

For decades, where did you live before?

Interviewee

I used to live in the hospital.

Interviewer

Is the hospital also nearby?

Interviewee

Yes, inside Zhongshan Hospital.

Interviewer

How many years have you been here?

Interviewee

Counting back to this year, I have been staying here for about 27 or 28 years in total.

Interviewer

Is there any difference between 27 or 28 years ago and now?

Interviewee

The difference is significant

Interviewer

What is the difference?

Interviewee

In the past, Shipai was relatively chaotic, with many thieves and robberies, but it's okay now.

Interviewer

Have you ever encountered a similar event??

Interviewee

We haven't encountered it before, but we often hear that people on the street talk about it, that people shouting “robbery, robbery”.

Interviewer

It's 20 years ago?

Interviewee

10 years ago, the public security is much better now.

Interviewer

Why do you think it has improved so much?

Interviewee

Everyone's effort, social attention and increased legal regulation in this area. It's relatively good now.

Interviewer

The security team here belongs to the village company, right? Or it's the police who takes care of the village more?

Interviewee

It seems that the security were recruited by Shipai village. Not very clear. The police station also has police officers here.

Interviewer

Besides security, do you think there have been any changes in the living environment?

Interviewee

I don't think there has been much change in the environment. There are too many people living in these houses, and there is a lot of garbage, but it is still better than before.

Interviewer

What is the difference between the past and the present?

Interviewee

Before, garbage was everywhere and wasn't cleaned very often. There might have been fewer people who used to sweep the floor, but it was similar.

Interviewer

Are the people sweeping the floor now the government's sanitation workers, or are they hired by the village themselves?

Interviewee

Anyway, they are all sanitation workers, I don't know where they belong to.

Interviewer

Are there significant changes in other aspects besides hygiene and public security?

Interviewee

Of course, when we came, the east side of Shipai and the Taiguhui mall were still fields. There weren't as many houses here either, but later many were built slowly by them.

Interviewer

Were the roads so narrow when they built them?

Interviewee

Yes, it was narrow when it was built

Interviewer

Were the buildings this tall at the beginning?

Interviewee

At first the houses weren't as high as now, the height gradually increased. The houses used to be small, but they demolished old houses and built tall new ones. Gradually, the

houses became tall. They used to be only 4 or 5 floors tall, now they are 7 or 8 floors tall.

Interviewer

You have been here for over 20 years, have you heard that the government has invested in any renovation?

Interviewee

I don't know how Shipai village was renovated, I don't know.

Interviewer

So you have never seen the government come to renovate here.

Interviewee

I have heard it, but there was only thunder and no rain. The people of Shipai village did not agree to demolish their houses. In the past, there were stalls on both sides of the entrance road of Shipai village, selling fruits and things. Then they were demolished, so at least there is a road that a fire truck can pass. There were stores behind the archway, but now it was demolished. They (villagers) didn't agree to demolish their houses, so they (the government) can only change these areas.

Interviewer

A draft has recently been issued, which states that if 2/3 of the villagers agree to renovate the urban village, it can be renovated. Do you think Shipai village will be renovated?

Interviewee

If you want to touch their cake, they definitely won't agree. Not to mention 2/3 of people, there won't even be 1/3 of people. 90% of people will disagree. Think about how much income this has brought them, renting out their houses. They have contracted out many of their houses to others. The houses are much more expensive than before. Our house used to be 400 yuan/month, but now it's 700 yuan. There are so many supermarkets, so many storefronts, and those large ones, they are all a part of their income. Local people themselves rarely live here, only these old ladies who actually live here. But there aren't many young people living here. They all left and live outside. These houses are rented out. It's difficult to dismantle it, but I think it's better to do so because fire safety is the biggest risk. If the houses catch fire, the fire truck can only come here, but can't go to the center.

Interviewer

Do you think there is a possibility of improvement in the future?

Interviewee

I don't know, it's difficult. They've been talking about it for so many years, but it hasn't changed either.

Interviewer

Why do you think it can't be dismantled? Because the villagers don't agree?

Interviewee

Yeah.

Interviewer

It's the matter of interests, right?

Interviewee

Yes, most of the problems are related to this.

Interviewer

What other aspects do you think are dissatisfying?

Interviewee

We have to turn on the lights when we enter the house all year round, and in rainy days, the clothes inside the house won't dry, and there is a musty smell, with all kinds of smells. Those ones with windows facing the outside are better, those facing the inside have a bad ventilation.

Interviewer

Are there any bugs here?

Interviewee

Everything, cockroaches, bugs, and mice.

Interviewer

Are there many young people living here?

Interviewee

Not young people, but working people. Because this place has a good location and many office buildings nearby, making it very close to jobs. I bought a house in Nansha district (the southernmost district of Guangzhou), so I don't have enough time to go back. I have to rent a house to live here. It seems that there are fewer people renting houses this year because the rent is expensive.

Interviewer

If the transportation from Nansha to here is convenient, for example, it only takes about half an hour by metro.

Interviewee

I will definitely go home, and won't live here anymore.

Interviewer

How do you feel about the transportation in Guangzhou?

Interviewee

I can't say it's inconvenient, the transportation is quite convenient. I have become accustomed to living here for so long now. But this place only provides activities for older people, there is no place to play.

Interviewer

Do you usually eat and buy things here in Shipai?

Interviewee

Buying things is very convenient, there are vegetable markets everywhere, but the food in the supermarket here is a bit expensive.

### #3 Zhou/male/second-hand landlord/62

Interviewer

How many years have you been here?

Interviewee

6 years.

Interviewer

Have you been living here in Shipai village?

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

Do you think there has been any change since coming here for so long?

Interviewee

It's getting worse and worse.

Interviewer

Why?

Interviewee

People is leaving, and the environment is getting worse.

Interviewer

Why there are less people?

Interviewee

Environment. There are piles of garbage here, sometimes they don't even clean it.

Interviewer

Do you think the hygiene is not very good?

Interviewee

Yes, you go check now and there is still such a thick pile of garbage inside the garbage cans. Mice and mosquitoes. When it rains, it's damp,

Interviewer

Do you think there is anything particularly bad besides dampness?

Interviewee

Hygiene.

Interviewer

In addition to these, such as noise, ventilation, and light?

Interviewee

Where did the light come from? There is no light. The noise is okay, there is no problem with management, there is no problem with public security. It is just not suitable for human to live.

Interviewer

Are you moving in because of work or?

Interviewee

We are here to make a living. We came from Hubei to Guangdong and started doing second-hand houses here. We took over the house and renovated it, and then rented it out to someone else, earning a small price difference to support my whole family.

Interviewer

So you live here to be convenient to work.

Interviewee

It's not suitable to work here now. I may have to leave this place and leave Shipai village.

Interviewer

Do you think there have been any specific changes in recent years?

Interviewee

It can only be said to be the big environment. This condition has already been established, it's impossible. There should be a fire escape inside. You see, if there is a fire, there will be problems.

Interviewer

Why do you think it can't be transformed?

Interviewee

How much does it cost to demolish this house here? One square meter is too expensive and usually cannot be solved.

Interviewer

A new draft has been introduced in Guangzhou, which requires two-thirds of the residents and villagers to agree to renovate this village before it can be renovated. Do you think the villagers here will agree to the renovation? Will two-thirds of the villagers agree?

Interviewee

If it causes too much harm to his interests, he will not agree. If it does not cause any harm then...

Interviewer

It's also possible, isn't it? Which part do you think needs to be renovated the most now?

Interviewee

Fire exits should be established to allow access even in the event of major safety accidents, as this ensures personal safety. Nowadays, people have increasingly high requirements for the environment, and there is no ventilation or sunlight in it. How can it be suitable for living. Young people don't want to live here and feel that the conditions are not good. Nowadays, there are fewer and fewer people. We must first have fire exits and water and electricity facilities.

Interviewer

How long do you think it will take to completely solve the problem if we need to renovate it?

Interviewee

At least 10 years.

Interviewer

Have you seen any renewal projects during your 6 years of residence?

Interviewee

There are no renewal projects, just the ground outside. This is not done by the government, but by the villagers here. I don't know the details.

Interviewer

Do you usually communicate with the owners here?

Interviewee

We will rent his house. They all live in the Pearl River New Town and sit at home counting money.

Interviewer

Do you know how they make decisions related to the village?

Interviewee

They make decisions within themselves.

#### #4 Yang/female/nurse/28

Interviewer

How long have you been living here?

Interviewee

1 year and a month. Actually, I have been working here for 5 or 6 years. Yes.

Interviewer

What do you think about the living environment.

Interviewee

It's plain? It's too noisy and there are too many people.

Interviewer

Do you think the living environment has changed since you came here?

Interviewee

Hygiene is basically okay, the hygienic condition is good, and the noise is always loud, because it's on the roadside and there are takeaway bikes and so. Sometimes in the middle of the night, there are people shouting. The noise is loud, it's about 24 hours.

Interviewer

How late does it stop making noise.

Interviewee

If you fall asleep, there will be no noise. There is also noise in the early morning, because maybe they have to get the goods out or something.

Interviewer

Do you think you live here is because you work here?

Interviewee

Yes, I work nearby.

Interviewer

Do you usually talk to your landlord? What if you meet any difficulties about the apartment?

Interviewee

We don't do communication. The local landlords are more casual, you only need to pay the rent. If there is any wear and tear in the room, you buy things and repair them by yourselves, or call someone to deal with it.

Interviewer

Recently, Guangzhou has issued a draft that if there are 2/3 of the villagers agree to transform the village, it can be transformed. Do you think it is possible that 2/3 of the villagers agree to transform it?

Interviewee

I don't think so. No one will agree. Because they all make money by renting houses. And I don't think the government can spend so much money at once. If they rent the houses, they can do it for a long time, as well as their descendants, as long as the houses can continue to be repaired and the land belongs to them. They can rent it out all the time. I think the income is considerable. My landlord lives on the first floor. If you give him money, what kind of house can he buy in the center of Guangzhou? I don't think he can buy a very comfortable house. Even if they can have tens of millions for

compensatory payment, it can only afford a new three-bedroom apartment. Not as good as now.

Interviewer

What do you like about the living environment here?

Interviewee

I think the transportation here is convenient, and the metro station over there is also under construction.

Interviewer

If you move out in the future, what do you think is the reason?

Interviewee

If I don't work here anymore. If the new work is too far I definitely won't live here anymore. The traffic here is very bad in the morning rush hour.

Interviewer

Do you feel that you are not satisfied with other aspects except the noise?

Interviewee

Everything else seems to be okay, although the traffic is bad, I am close to work, and the surrounding area is quite lively, so I can go shopping and so on. I can take my baby to the supermarkets, or take she/he to the city center to have a look.

Interviewer

Do you think the business in the village can cover your needs?

Interviewee

No, but the supermarkets inside are only for buying vegetables and fruits. If you want to buy something else, or want to feel more comfortable, you need to go to the supermarkets at Gangding. For daily life here is okay, but you don't want to do shopping here. It is necessary to go to a distant place, those small supermarkets can not meet all the needs, right?

Interviewer

Have you ever heard of Shipai before you came to work?

Interviewee

I don't think I have paid attention to it.

Interviewer

How do you feel walking inside the village?

Interviewee

crowded.

Interviewer

How do you think the reason why it hasn't been transformed like Liede village?

Interviewee

I think they don't agree it. In fact, I think some urban villages are needed for people who work around. If there are only Xiaoqu (small district/gated community) here, people can't afford living here.

Interviewer

How do you think about the transportation here in Guangzhou?

Interviewee

It's not very convenient, because I always have to transfer, not that I can get there just by one bus or one metro, and line 3 and line 5 are very crowded. So it's not that convenient to walk around in the stations, so many people pushing each other to walk, it's uncomfortable. So I want to live here, I don't want to squeeze with people. And in rainy days there will be more people taking buses and taking taxis, it's impossible to catch a taxi.

Interviewer

Are you worried about the fire safety here?

Interviewee

In fact, I'm not worried about that. If there is a fire or something, it's very close to the security booths, they can find it at the first time, and offer help in time. Those security booths belong to the village, to keep orders.

Interviewer

Will you go to them if you have a problem?

Interviewee

There're not many problems. I think the security here is pretty good, because there are surveillance everywhere. I don't have money or expensive things on me.

Interviewer

Are you worried about walk at night?

Interviewee

No. I just don't like it deep inside. I'm worried that I might meet any psycho or something there if I walk at night, or something dangerous. So I live on the periphery

## #5 Employee/female/48/refused to be recorded

1. How long have you lived here?

3 years

2. Why do you come to Guangzhou?

Work

3. Has the living environment changed over the past 3 years?

No, it's not good here, the village is very narrow, bad hygiene, very messy, bicycles and electric bikes are parking around, and there are too many takeaway bikes. (Is the security messy too?) It is not messy.

4. Why do you live here?

Convenient transport, fair rent

5. How do you feel about the living environment?

Bad light, bad ventilation, too dirty

6. Whether the house is rented from a first-hand landlord or a second-hand landlord?

Second-hand landlord. (Who will you go to if you have problems with the house?)

Second-hand landlord. (Have you contacted the first-hand landlord?) No.

7. How about living in Shipai village?

Daily life is convenient, everything you need can be bought in the village, water is expensive, electricity costs 1.5 yuan a unit.

8. Now that a new draft has been introduced, if 2/3 of the villagers agree to rebuild the village, it will be rebuilt, do you think the villagers will agree to it?

Possibly, if the compensation is enough.

9. Do you want the transformation to happen? And in which dimensions?

I hope there will be a transformation, the most important thing that needs to be improved is the ventilation, I hope the houses can face the sun, and I hope the distance between the buildings will be wider if it is possible.

10. With these problems exist in Shipai village, why do you think the transformation has not been done?

I don't know.

11. Do you think the traffic in Guangzhou is convenient?

The traffic is very convenient, there are metro, buses and taxis.

12. If there is a better choice other than Shipai village, will you move out?

No, because Shipai village is close to my workplace.

13. Who do you live with?

With my partner.

## #6 Wu/male/high school teacher/around 35/refused to be recorded

### 1. Why came to Shpai village?

Child needs to go to school

### 2. How long have you come here?

5-6 years

### 3. How do you feel about the living environment?

Dense, too damp. There is no way to improve the situation, can only wait for the demolition and relocation

### 4. How do you rent the apartment?

Rent from a first-hand landlord, usually directly contact the landlord if there're any problems in the apartment. It is usually my wife that contacted the landlord, I'm not quite clear

### 5. Have there been any changes since you moved here?

No, only the outer streets have changed, the ground is renovated, the roads inside are very narrow, it's impossible to change

### 6. There's a draft in Guangzhou that only if there are 2/3 villages agree to transform the village, the villages can be transformed. Do you think there can be 2/3 villagers agree to it here?

Possible, if the government's compensation is decent enough. But it's not easy, because now the compensation money is not enough to give. The location of Shipai village is good, so you need to modify the strategy.

### 7. If you are dissatisfied with the living environment here, will you report the situation to anybody?

There won't be any changes even if someone reports, so there's no use to. There are a lot of residents here in Shipai village, if there's only one person who has an opinion, it will be meaningless. Shipai village belongs to the village collective, and the rights of them and residents are not equal, residents do not have the capital to fight against them. Now the village committee has set up a collective company, the village committee is a government organ, and a business enterprises operated by their own, the affairs of Shipai village are decided by the village committee and the villagers themselves.

### 8. Why isn't there any improvement?

Because of the interest.

### 9. Is it possible to improve in the future?

Can only wait for the demolition. The rent in the neighbourhood is very high, so they need enough compensation. Last month, a village in Baiyun district was demolished, and the villagers were only given a few thousands of money, the compensation is too little. It won't be easy.

## #7 Wang/male/supermarket owner/37

Interviewer

How long have you been here?

Interviewee

About four years.

Interviewer

Do you live here? Or just work here?

Interviewee

Yeah, I live here, too.

Interviewer

Do you think there has been any changes about the living environment since four years ago?

Interviewee

There's no any difference. There is no difference in the environment, but the amount of people is different.

Interviewer

Less people?

Interviewee

Yeah, the business is not that great.

Interviewer

Why do you think there are less people?

Interviewee

How do I know, I don't know.

Interviewer

Have you thought about it?

Interviewee

The economy is not good, so there are less consumers.

Interviewer

What improvement do you want to see here, regarding living environment?

Interviewee

Nothing to ask for nothing, I have. After all, I can change anything.

Interviewer

Anything you are dissatisfied with now?

Interviewee

Aren't you asking these questions for no use? I would like to change, I would like to have a conditioner, if I can I will live outside of here. The houses had already been built, you can't change it because you want to change it. If I want sunshine, can I just modified the houses?

Interviewer

So you think it will be better with sunshine?

Interviewee

But it's not possible.

Interviewer

So Guangzhou has issued a new draft on the transformation of urban villages, that if 2/3 of the villagers agree to transform them, it can be transformed or transformed. According to your feeling, do you think that 2/3 of the villagers here will agree to the transformation?

Interviewee

I don't know, I come from other places. It's none of my business.

Interviewer

So you don't feel anything about it?

Interviewee

I'm an outsider, there's no good or bad for me if there's a transformation.

Interviewer

Do you think it's possible?

Interviewee

I don't know.

Interviewer

If you have any problem with the apartment, who will you talk to?

Interviewee

The landlord. I usually go to her/him.

Interviewer

What do you think is the reason that you are not that satisfied with the living environment here?

Interviewee

How do you expect me to answer...

Interviewer

Whatever you think.

Interviewee

I'm just not satisfied. But there's no way to change. I don't have the conditions. If I have money I will live in a better place. But the price will be high if you want a better one, if you live in a cheaper place there won't be good sunshine.

Interviewer

What do you think is the main reason that makes you live here?

Interviewee

The main reason is that it is cheap, that is, the rent.

Interviewer

Does it have anything to do with your work?

Interviewee

How can it be related to my work.

Interviewer

If you didn't work here, would you still live here?

Interviewee

I don't know.

Interviewer

Do you think the living environment will be improved in the future?

Interviewee

I don't know.

Interviewer

Do you think it's possible?

Interviewee

I don't think so.

Interviewer

Why do you think it's not possible?

Interviewee

Why? It won't be a small project. I've heard it since a long time before that they were going to rebuild, but nothing happened in so many years. So it won't be possible in 8,9,10 years. It's impossible to acquire the land, the price is too high.

Interviewer

What do you think about the transportation in Guangzhou?

Interviewee

It's good. It's pretty convenient living here.

Interviewer

Do you think the convenience of transportation affects your choice of residence?

Interviewee

My finance affects it.

Interviewer

What about the impact of the housing price in Guangzhou?

Interviewee

If you have the money, you will definitely buy an apartment.

## #8 Social worker/female/40

Interviewer

Have you heard of Shipai village before?

Interviewee

Yes, Shipai is a very big village. It's an old and big village in Guangzhou.

Interviewer

Have you ever been to Shipai before working here?

Interviewee

No.

Interviewer

What's your impression before?

Interviewee

In my opinion, it should be a relatively old village, it is like a lot of Guangzhou's urban villages that are relatively small, the distance between house and house is relatively small, and then the local villagers of the Shipai village should be similar to other villagers in Guangzhou that they should be rich. And they won't live in the village, only a few older people, young people don't live here.

Interviewer

How do you feel about the living environment inside?

Interviewee

Maybe it's because the land use in Guangzhou is intense, the land in the village is intense too. So it's narrow between one and another house. There are a kind of "hold-hand building" in Guangzhou, that people can hold hand in adjacent buildings. The houses insides are close to each other, but the houses on the periphery are fine, there's sunshine there, and the size is big.

Interviewer

Do you know how the tenants feel about the living environment?

Interviewee

I don't know a lot of tenants here. There are some tenants who came to consult about the Hukou (registered permanent residence) or the education of children. The tenants here are mostly young people who work nearby.

Interviewer

Some of my interviewees are worried about the fire safety here, some are bothered by the dampness here. How do you think about this? Which aspects of the living environment do you think can be improved?

Interviewee

I think these 2 aspects are impossible to solve. Because the road is that wide, you can't possibly carry out an extension, the problem of firefighting is basically impossible if you have to rely on the fire engines, you can only root it out at the source, that is, each of your households provide themselves with firefighting equipment and some gas masks, so that in case of these things happening, you can save yourselves. If you are trying to wait for the firefighters to go in to the center of the village, it is basically impossible. The second problem is humidity, which is not unique to Guangdong,

regardless of the year round it is a bit humid, if this is the case, you can only condition it yourselves. In terms of the living environment, I think the main goal in the future is to improve the public areas, for example, some of the resources provided by the public places. We can build some parks in the village, transform it into some activity places, add some activity facilities, sports equipment, these can make them have a better feeling of living. But if you want to change it on a large scale in terms of the environment, it is basically impossible. If they want a better living environment, they can choose to live in a Xiaoqu, but they have a limited budget. It's hard. But actually in Shipai it's not that bad, you can go and see other villages in Tianhe district. They are the same. The villages I lived before other places are the same, as crowded as here. They are basically the same. If you have requirements on living conditions, you need to improve your budget.

Interviewer

Why do you think it's hard to change this situation?

Interviewee

It depends on the plans and resources of the government. And there might be some residents who don't want to accept the transformation. They live here, they are emotionally attached to this place. If it's changed into a Xiaoqu, the connection between older people...their neighbours might not live in the same building with them, it won't be so easy to find them. So it relates to the affection villagers have on this place, and the resource provided by the government. You can see older men and women chatting and playing cards here. The atmosphere in the village is thick.

Interviewer

Recently Guangzhou issued a new draft, only if 2/3 of the villagers agree to transform the villages, the urban villages can be transformed, do you think that there will be 2/3 of the villagers agree to transform the Shipai village?

Interviewee

Without investigation, I don't know. I don't know their attitude, so it's hard to answer the question.

Interviewer

Do you think it's possible?

Interviewee

It depends on how much the government and the estate agents would like to pay. If it's like the Liede village, it might be possible. But there's only one Liede.

Interviewer

Do you think the possibility is high?

Interviewee

It's hard to say, it depends on a lot of aspects.

Interviewer

Has your impression on Shipai changed?

Interviewee

Not much. The impression I have on the urban villages are like this.

Interviewer

Do you think the transportation in Guangzhou affect people's decisions of living in urban villages?

Interviewee

No. The difference between urban villages and xiaoqu is actually not very big, but the biggest difference between the urban village and the xiaoqu may be the rent, the urban villages are cheaper than the xiaoqu more than half, if you want to choose a one-bedroom apartment, it is a thousand or so hundreds, but in the xiaoqu this is certainly not. Here is Ganging metro, there are countless bus lines nearby, travelling is very convenient. On the contrary, if living in a remote xiaoqu, it may be inconvenient for to travel. 2000-yuan budget is enough to rent a three-bedroom in an urban village, but can only rent a tiny apartment in the suburbs. Then surely you have to make the trade-off yourself, either you sacrifice on distance or you sacrifice on money.

Interviewer

So rent is the element that affect them the most.

Interviewee

Mostly. They want both shorter commuting time and lower rent, and acceptable living conditions. After all they only go back to the apartment outside of the working time. It doesn't really matter if there's sunshine or not.

Interviewer

Do you think it's hard to be a social worker here, when it comes to communication?

Interviewee

Not very hard. We don't have a lot of contact with the tenants. I think mostly the problem is on themselves. They want to spend less money and have a better environment, but this is hard to be satisfied. There are policies in Guangzhou that they can apply for low-rent housing. If you can't apply for low-cost housing, there are still low-cost housing subsidies, rent subsidies, and so on. Guangzhou has a lot of support and help for these people who have all kinds of housing difficulties.

Interviewer

They might not know these?

Interviewee

Their understanding of the policy determines whether they can get the policy support in a timely manner, and the lack of support is mainly due to the fact that their own information is not up-to-date. A lot of requests we are dealing with here is to give them low-cost housing and low-cost housing subsidies, but they do not know. In fact, they may be rich, they just do not want to buy a house here, but they may still be very rich.

Interviewer

They don't want to spend on it?

Interviewee

Yes, I see many tenants who come to ask questions, they are actually quite wealthy. They can spend tens of thousands of money to get their own household registration and then bring their children over. Some of them even attend private primary schools, and private ones are quite expensive.

Interviewer

So it's about how they manage their own money?

Interviewee

Or they don't have a lot of requirement concerning living conditions. If their budget is limited, they will choose to live in urban villages. Who hasn't live in urban villages at a younger age?

## #9 Villager/male/30s

Interviewer

Do you still live in Shipai village?

Interviewee

Relocation housing (the housing provided to villagers who agree to move out of the village).

Interviewer

So these are all relocation housing here? Is here a part of the old Shipai village?

Interviewee

It's the new one. It can be considered to belong to Shipai. But if you are talking about the original one, it's in the north.

Interviewer

So you no longer live in the village?

Interviewee

No, most people moved here.

Interviewer

Do you know the approximate percentage of the villages who moved out and stayed there?

Interviewee

Except for some older people think it's convenient to live there, people basically moved out.

Interviewer

What is the reason do you think people choose to move out?

Interviewee

The reason...I can't speak for us..

Interviewer

So you are not very sure.

Interviewee

Because everyone has different ideas.

Interviewer

Do you have any property there?

Interviewee

Basically everyone has their own houses there.

Interviewer

Is that your homestead?

Interviewee

It's the homestead

Interviewer

Do you rent your house?

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

Do you communicate with your tenants personally or through agents?

Interviewee

Through agents, it's not easy to rent houses recently.

Interviewer

So it's only recent or it has always been like this?

Interviewee

It's mostly my house. My house is inside the village

Interviewer

In the middle?

Interviewee

Yes, the ones in the middle are difficult to rent out.

Interviewer

Do you think the village has changed since you are younger?

Interviewee

It's getting better, and life is getting rigorous.

Interviewer

How about the inside part of Shipai?

Interviewee

Compare to the previous time it's definitely getting better. No matter the transformation takes place or not, with the help of the government and the street (community), there is some sort of micro-renovation inside. Like the roads, road lights, buildings and the surrounding environment, there is an upgrading.

Interviewer

Do you think the change is significant?

Interviewee

Definitely.

Interviewer

Do you remember what the village was like when you were young?

Interviewee

This is very hard to describe, cause I was born in the 1980s. If you are talking about the 1980s...It's hard to describe. Because it's basically completely different. The old weary houses you are talking about are basically, only 1 or 2, most of the houses, even if villagers don't live there anymore, have been renovated.

Interviewer

I wonder if you know any renewal projects in the village that are supported by the government or real estate agents?

Interviewee

I don't really know about the real estate. If the Shipai village is going to be transformed, the investment might need to be a lot, so usually there won't be any (projects). Because the density in Shipai is high. So if the real estate agents are coming here, they need to invest a lot. Maybe because this reason, there hasn't been any of them. It's not like Lide village and Xian Village, they already have several series of building. Except for some nail households (residents who refuse to move out when the land their houses are at were sold)

Interviewer

Recently a draft has been published, that only if 2/3 villagers agree to rebuild the village, the transformation can be done. Do you think there could be 2/3 villagers agree to the transformation?

Interviewee

It's hard to say. There's a very realistic problem, that my house is in the middle of the village and hard to rent out, but some people's houses are on the periphery and are relatively easy to rent out, cause their houses are bigger. So it mainly depend on how the government subsidizes.

Interviewer

So it's possible but not necessarily.

Interviewee

Depends on how the compensation is.

Interviewer

Now the land of Shipai belongs to the village collective right?

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

Do you have any public decision-making?

Interviewee

Yes, definitely. Cause all of the properties and renting belong to the collective of villagers, conferences are held to do research. It's not that the village committee can decide,

Interviewer

Do you vote?

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

Everyone has the right to vote?

Interviewee

Shareholders.

Interviewer

So everyone with shares can participate in the voting and every decision is made by the villagers together?

Interviewee

Yes, definitely. Conferences are needed.

Interviewer

It's quite democratic.

Interviewee

Yes. It's not only up to what we (village committee) want, there is supervision. There are the government, street and district government. It's definitely not an one-man show.

Interviewer

I interviewed some tenants before, they said they have some dissatisfaction towards the living environment. And you talked about that your property is hard to rent out, then do

you think you will make some changes to make your property easier to rent out, or more catering to tenants' needs?

Interviewee

As I know...Cause I give it to the second-hand agents. They may not be able to renovate the exterior of the house, but the interior is already pretty fashionable, they transformed it to an apartment. They are probably, it's not because if your interior is good or not. After the pandemic, the economy is not very great, a lot of people don't want to come to such a big city, so there are less people from other places.

Interviewer

So when there were more people from other places, the situation was better.

Interviewee

Yes. It's mostly the economy, not the renovation of the houses. Even if the houses are poorly decorated, but there were a lot of people coming out to work here. But now the problem is there's no difference between working here and at home, let alone you have to pay the rent here, they definitely don't want to come back anymore.

Interviewer

I heard people talking about the renovation of the ground outside of the village, does the village collective involves in this? Or it's a project of the government?

Interviewee

Where do you mean?

Interviewer

Around the primary school.

Interviewee

That's the construction of metro.

Interviewer

So it has nothing to do with the village collectives?

Interviewee

Yes it does. Cause the property belongs to the collectives, so there need to be conferences and voting.

Interviewer

So you need to all agree with it.

Interviewee

Yes.

## #10 Chi/staff of the community/37

Interviewer

How long have you lived here?

Interviewee

Thirty years, more than thirty years. I was born here.

Interviewer

Are you a villager here? Yes.

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

Do you think there are any significant changes here from when you were a child?

Interviewee

The environment changes a lot. The security and the sanitation, a lot of aspects have been improved

Interviewer

What the village was like when you were younger? Can you describe a bit?

Interviewee

There were a lot of fields in Shipai before, these were all field here outside of the school. After the development a lot of fields were expropriated. After the expropriation they turned into stalls for rent. Then we can have dividends, those dividends belong to us.

Interviewer

Do you live here or the new village?

Interviewee

Here in the village.

Interviewer

Why didn't you move to there? There is the relocation housing right?

Interviewee

They need to have the shares. In Shipai there are 2 kinds of villagers, the peasants have the shares, we residents don't have them.

Interviewer

You are a resident here.

Interviewee

For those peasants, it's much cheaper if they use their shares to buy (apartments).

Interviewer

You are a resident, so your hukou (registered permanent permission) is...

Interviewee

My hukou is still here in Shipai, but the peasant kind and resident kind are divided. Before the peasants had welfare shares, they seem to still have them now. During festivals they will be given food, like rice or tissues, to give you.

Interviewer

What's the difference between peasants and residents? Why someone is a resident and someone else is a peasant?

Interviewee

I don't know much about this either, because when I was born, I was also a peasant, my mother was a farmer at that time. Then for a period of time, she changed her hukou to a city resident hukou. A lot of people changed into residents and they went to state-owned enterprises to work. After that I was born and entered my mom's hukou, so I'm a resident.

Interviewer

So you don't have those shares

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

If they have some decisions about the village to make, like renovating some of the infrastructures, will you participate?

Interviewee

No.

Interviewer

What about other villagers?

Interviewee

They don't either.

Interviewer

How about the people of the village company? Do they have the right to make decisions?

Interviewee

Because we have 28 production teams (the smallest unit in a village) in Shipai Village. There are production teams in every area of Shipai. The production teams and the company are divided. If a building belongs to the company, then it goes with the company, if it belongs to a production team, the money goes to the team, the company can't have the money. But we still need to pay the tax.

Interviewer

You mentioned that there are many big changes, what do you think is the reason of the changes?

Interviewee

Because the broader environment changed. Every aspect of life has been improved, so it's because of the broader environment.

Interviewer

What changes do you expect?

Interviewee

I'm not sure. We are just villagers, if there's any change, we can't intervene, so we just let it develop as it does.

Interviewer

Now a new draft was issued in Guangzhou, if only 2/3 villagers agree to the transformation of the urban villagers, then the transformation can happen. Will you agree to transform the village?

Interviewee

Now, people won't agree, most of the villagers won't agree. Because the policies changed. It's different before, the previous ones were better for us. There are so many

problems outside now, the real estate has a lot of problems, the conditions definitely won't be as good as before. If you expropriate the land, we won't get the compensation that we deserve, then there won't be any agreement. And they were talking about land expropriation in Shipai villages in my dad's time, now they still hasn't done it when I already married and had my own kid.

Interviewer

Was there any big renovation projects here?

Interviewee

No. They had a lot of plans. At the beginning, they want to divide the Shipai like a "#". And then I don't know why they paused, they just talked about it. But I guess the villagers disagreed.

Interviewer

So the villages have the right to decide, because this land belongs to the villages collectives.

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

I saw there's a Shipai xiaoqu over there, the relocation housing. Aren't there a lot of Shipai villagers? Why do you think they choose to move over there, or mover out of the Shipai village?

Interviewee

At that time the Shipai villagers have discounts (buying the apartments). And they have the shares. Those people living there, they don't need to pay by money, but with the shares. Cause we don't have the shares. They don't need to pay cause they have the shares. No matter how long they need to pay with their shares, they don't need to spend money on it. And they can rent out their houses here, so they can have an income. For those peasants is a good deal, it won't harm.

Interviewer

So for your daily life, if you want to buy groceries or eating out, do you usually do these things in the village.

Interviewee

Yes. Mostly in Shipai, there are some old restaurants there on the East Shipai Road.

Interviewer

So you recommend them.

Interviewee

Yes. They are owned by Shipai villagers.

Interviewer

I interviewed some tenants before, they think some aspects of the living environment is not very satisfying, do you think villagers will agree on some projects that improve the living environment here?

Interviewee

I don't think so, cause now the Shipai village is already saturated and can't be changed. If you are talking about the environment, those buildings on the periphery might be able to have a good environment, but inside the village it's all the same, there's not a lot of

differences. If you are talking about the light, in every village there are building that are narrow without good sunshine.

Interviewer

Do you know when Shipai village started to look like this?

Interviewee

When I was in primary school I think. Around the 1992.

Interviewer

In the 1990s.

Interviewee

Yes. Cause I was in primary school, my family also build the houses at that time, a lot of people were building houses then.

Interviewer

Do you still have your houses there?

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

Do you rent it out?

Interviewee

Yes. 90% of the houses in Shipai are for rent.

Interviewer

Do you communicate with your tenants yourselves, or do you hire the second-hand agents?

Interviewee

We rent it by ourselves.

Interviewer

So if the tenants have problems they directly come to you?

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

What are the problems that happen the most frequently

Interviewee

Basically, there is no big problem, because they usually solves small problems by themselves. If there's something broken, they solve it themselves. Unless they need some paperwork that have to be through us, that they need us to provide something, then we offer our help. Normally they can handle themselves.

Interviewer

Do you think renting out houses becomes easier or uneasier?

Interviewee

There are much less people living here now. Cause Shipai village is too old, the buildings are too old. And the metros are very convenient, now Chebei village is pretty nice, a lot of people are living there. They rather live a bit far away than living in Shipai, cause they do have a better environment.

Interviewer

If there are micro-renovation projects that can improve the living environment and attract more tenants, would you consider it?

Interviewee

I would definitely consider it if there are those things.

Interviewer

So you are willing to.

Interviewee

Yes.

Interviewer

You said Shipai became like this since the 1990s and there're not many changes, what do you think the reason is?

Interviewee

Because there's no planning when the houses were built, many people build more than they should

Interviewer

And no one came to stop that.

Interviewee

Cause not only one household, but all of the Shipai village were like that. Originally the paths of Shipai is quite broad. Now people can't even enter the paths. If there's something there you are not even able to get it out. They are too narrow, if someone drops something there you can't even help. Before people can still walk into them. If everyone's like that, it's very hard to make the environment better.

Interviewer

So do you think the problem is the people?

Interviewee

It's already inevitable now, you can't change.

Interviewer

The cost is huge.

Interviewee

You can say that. If you want to demolish them and rebuild, but people still act like that and build like that, then nothing will change. My wife's village has this plan, that you need to make sure there's enough space. Cause you need to let the cleaners go in there to clean, and keep it clean. Or there will be mosquitos and bugs, and you can't find your things back if you drop them there. Now man people use water cannons to clean the ground, clean those bottles out, cause people can't get in.

Interviewer

What do you feel about the environment, what do you satisfied or dissatisfied with?

Interviewee

I have lived here for too long, I don't have specific feelings.

Interviewer

Do you want anything to change? Or do you have anything you want it to remain the same?

Interviewee

Emm...maybe better hygiene and improvement on security

Interviewer

Which aspects of the security do you think are not perfect?

Interviewee

There are thieves every month. They are recidivists. The security team caught them before, they know who they are. Because those are all small cases, they can't register at the police office. Maybe, I don't really know, they caught them and released them in a few days anyways.

Interviewer

It's the security team who catches the thieves?

Interviewee

Inside the village it's their business.

Interviewer

So if you have some problems concerning the security, you go to them?

Interviewee

Yes. If things are stolen you go to the police.

Interviewer

The security team belongs to the village?

Interviewee

Belong to the village company.

Interviewer

They hire from the outside or they are or villagers?

Interviewee

They don't hire from the outside.

Interviewer

Ok. How do you feel about the transportation in Guangzhou?

Interviewee

Nice, the transportation is good. There are many metros now and a lot of places are approachable

Interviewer

Then how about the rent and house price here?

Interviewee

I don't know about the rent, but the house price is high.