The Myth of the Codes
Exploring Self-Built Rules in Peri-Urban Villages, Southern China

Jiong (Abingo) Wu
Syracuse University

Abstract

This paper challenges the prevailing belief that informal settlements lack effective zoning and building regulations by presenting an ethnographic study on self-built practices in multiple peri-urban villages in the Guangzhou metropolis, Southern China, from 2012 to 2019. Under China's urban-rural divided system, not only do formal urban zoning codes and building regulations not apply to these locales, but the emerging village regulatory frameworks are also often sites of contestation between the local state and residents. The research highlights how three distinct social groups within these villages have formulated their own informal self-built rules, akin to zoning and building codes. Local villagers have negotiated with their neighbours to establish rules on setbacks and patio arrangements to reduce overcrowding, enhance ventilation and natural lighting, and be competitive in the rental market. Peasant-workers, who fulfil dual roles as both builders and tenants, have improved housing standards by making on-site ad hoc adjustments to building elements like windows, balconies, patios, entrances, and staircases. Small businesspeople have established bottom-up guidelines to preserve and renovate traditional houses that are excluded from official preservation lists. This paper argues that these self-help settlements are not devoid of zoning and building regulations; rather, these communities develop their own sets of rules, albeit informally. Despite facing various limitations, these informal rules are crucial for grassroots empowerment. They use these rules to enhance their living conditions, establish collective actions, and leverage their economic and social interests. By revealing the rationales, mechanisms, and outcomes of these self-initiated rules, this study calls for a deeper reflection on how zoning and building codes could be made more effective and just in informal settlements.

Keywords

How to cite

INTRODUCTION

The study of informal and self-help and settlements has long been characterized by the assumption that these areas lack effective zoning and building regulations, which often lead to perceptions of chaos and disorder. Scholars such as Davis[1] and Neuwirth[2] have described informal settlements as spaces marked by a lack of planning rules, building codes, and substandard living conditions. However, recent research has begun to challenge this view, suggesting that informal settlements possess their own systems of order and regulation. For example, Al-Sayyad argues that informal settlements should be understood as dynamic spaces where residents actively engage in self- regulation and community governance.[3] Similarly, Roy contends that informal settlements are not merely spaces of deprivation but are also sites of innovation and resilience.[4] These perspectives highlight the agency of informal settlement residents in shaping their environments through informal practices.

The ethnographic study (2012-2019) of multiple peri-urban villages in the Guangzhou metropolis presented in this paper builds on these insights. It provides a detailed account of how self-built practices emerge and function in contrast to formal zoning codes and building regulations under China's unique Urban-Rural Division. This research aligns with the findings of Sanyal and Mukhija, who highlight the adaptive strategies of informal settlement residents in response to regulatory voids.[5] It also resonates with the work of Holston, who examines how residents of informal settlements negotiate and establish their own rules to improve living conditions and achieve a degree of stability.[6] The case of Guangzhou adds to this body of literature by illustrating the specific mechanisms through which different social groups within peri-urban villages create and enforce informal self-built rules. The study shows that local villagers, peasant-workers, small businesspeople each contribute to the development of these rules, reflecting their distinct needs and priorities. They demonstrate that diverse and overlapping self-initiated regulatory practices are critical to understanding the self-improving mechanisms in self- built settlements.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the broader discourse on urban informality by revealing the interactive relations between formal and informal regulation. As De Soto[7] and Yiftachel[8] suggest, the informal sector can offer valuable lessons for formal urban planning. By documenting the informal zoning and building codes created by residents in Guangzhou peri-urban villages, this study underscores the importance of recognizing and integrating these grassroots practices into formal governance frameworks.

DUAL-TRACK BUILDING REGULATION UNDER CHINA'S RURAL-URBAN DIVISION

To better understand the self-initiated building regulations in Guangzhou's peri-urban villages, it is crucial to outline the divided regulatory framework under China's unique urban-rural division. In urban settings, building codes and planning rules are formalized, comprehensive,

and strictly enforced by municipal authorities. These regulations encompass zoning laws, construction standards, safety protocols, and environmental guidelines, equivalent to international building codes operating under well-defined urban planning frameworks dictating land use, building heights, densities, and architectural aesthetics. Conversely, in rural and peri-urban villages, such formal regulations are minimal. Village governance is often more flexible and localized, allowing residents to adopt informal practices to meet their specific needs.

This legislative division roots back to the Maoist urban-hukou division in 1958. In the 1950s, China's Ministry of Construction Engineering compiled the "General Principles of Civil Building Design". It began formulating various building design codes, marking the initial efforts to establish standardized building regulations in the country.[9] However, building codes and planning rules were centrally controlled and only applied to urban areas, excluding rural areas from the formal urban planning system. Rural construction was governed by basic, often local guidelines focused on communal living and agricultural productivity. The division allowed the country to sustain food and resources extraction from rural areas while maintaining minimal administrative effort in the name of promoting rural self-reliance and self-governance.[10] This approach led to disparities in infrastructure and living standards between cities and villages.

After the 1978 Open and Reform, the urban-rural divided system persisted. In 1984, the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection established the Civil Building Design Standards Review Committee to organize and manage the compilation of civil building design standards. This review primarily focused on urban construction activities, largely bypassing the self-built housing in rural areas under the rural self- governance framework. [11] It was not until 1991 that the State Council required rural households to apply for and obtain permission from village collective committees and local governments. The central state aimed to formalize housing and land management in villages, bringing these activities under its supervision.

In the mid-1990s, the regulatory framework in Guangzhou's urban and peri-urban villages became a site of contestation between local officials and village residents. A fundamental driver of this shift was the land- centered fiscal mode that originated in Guangzhou during the early 1980s.[12] This mode relies on commodifying land use rights. The formula is simple: the municipal government appropriates cheap rural land from villagers, converts it into urban land, then sells the land use rights to developers at high prices, accumulating revenue through the land price gaps. This model was adopted nationwide and became the dominant fiscal mode for local governments after the central government's tax reform in 1994. In the new tax system, the central government standardized the tax rate for all provinces and divided taxes into three categories: central, local, and shared. The central government took stable revenue from industrial and commercial entrepreneurs directly, but to avoid fierce resistance from local states, it returned part of the revenue according to local development needs.

Crucially, it allowed local governments sole control over land use right transfer payments.[13] To generate more local revenue, local governments pushed the real estate industry to gain more land use right transfer fees.[14]

In 1994, the Guangzhou municipal government implemented the "Guangzhou Land Management Regulation," the first detail regulation specifying local rules for rural housing land use. According to these regulations, rural housing land was only eligible for villagers with local rural hukou (residence), and new housing land could not occupy farmland. Households could not apply for new housing land after selling, leasing, or giving away their existing rural housing land.[15] In 1995, the municipal government introduced the "Guangzhou Rural Residents Self-Built Housing Land Temporary Regulation." It is the first building regulation applying to self-built housing, setting limits for housing lot sizes based on per capita farmland size. For areas with less than 0.5 mu of farmland per capita, households with four or fewer people could apply for a maximum 40 m² housing lot, while larger households could apply for slightly larger lots. The regulations also stipulated that self-built houses less than 3.5 stories high could omit the formal construction report and review process by municipal departments. Complying with these regulations, district governments further restricted new rural housing land for villages on the urban fringe, granting each villager a 20 m² rural housing land quota for future population growth.[16] The purpose of these local regulations was to safeguard the local government's ability to sell land to urban real estate developers. As they enhance their control over rural housing land, they can reduce the productivity of village housing, and keep rural housing- especially the ones in and close the city- out of urban markets. Thereby, the local government can ensure that their revenue streams remained unaffected.

The 3.5-story limit was widely rejected by urban and peri-urban villagers. For them, self-built housing represents both the most important asset for village households and a major income source from rental units. However, different building norms and living environments emerged between the two. Urban villagers universally built "handshake buildings," where residents in adjacent buildings can shake hands through their windows due to the proximity, resembling tenement buildings in early 20th-century New York City. In contrast, peri-urban villages adopted setback buildings, patio principles, shifting windows, improving living norms, and informal preservation codes. Through the practices, they have created more diverse housing forms and less spatial congestion. The informal regulatory frameworks in peri-urban villages were not the efforts of "progressive reformers" or planning professionals as seen in the West at the turn of the 20th century. Rather, they are the diverse, often overlapping building and settlement rules formed by local villagers, peasant-workers, and small businesspeople.

VILLAGE LANDLORDS' SELF-INITIATED HOUSING CODES

Scholars often attribute the substandard living environments in urban villages to "greedy landlords." As long as their properties yield significant rentals, they see no reason to improve conditions.[17] So, what drives peri-urban village landlords to create informal housing codes and improve living conditions? Their motivation is closely related to two distinct features of peri-urban villages that contrast with urban villages.

THE SUPPLY-OVER-DEMAND RENTAL HOUSING MARKET

The primary difference between urban villages and peri-urban villages lies in the rental market's supply-demand configuration. Because of their central locations, urban villages enjoy high market demand, resulting in low vacancy rates. In contrast, rental housing in peri-urban villages often faces a supply-over-demand situation. This is due to the sheer number of peri-urban villages; while there are only tens of urban villages, there are thousands of peri-urban villages. Additionally, each peri-urban village typically has hundreds of rental buildings.

Since the mid-1990s, residents of peri-urban villages have been keen on building rental apartments to secure stable incomes amidst economic turbulence. The massive supply of rental apartments in these areas has created a highly competitive market for village landlords. Unlike earlier days when migrants had to "beg" villagers to rent apartments, now villagers must cater to the tenants. Rental housing advertisements are ubiquitous in peri-urban villages. While existing housing awaits occupancy, new apartments continue to be constructed, further flooding the rental market. In many peri-urban village, the rental housing vacancy rate was between 30-40% as the village leader estimated in 2014, much higher than the American housing vacancy rate of 10% during the 2010 foreclosure crisis. Therefore, improving the housing condition allow peri-urban village landlords to appear competitive in such rental market.

HOME FOR BOTH: LANDLORD-TENANT CO-HABITATION

Another significant difference is the villager-migrant co-habitation mode in peri-urban villages. In urban villages, few villagers live in their rental apartments. With good rental incomes, most villagers buy real estate properties and live in urban residential communities (xiaoqu). Some outsource their village buildings to rental agents for professional management, detaching themselves from tenant interactions and concerns about living conditions. If the high-demand market guarantees good incomes, they are not motivated to make changes. In contrast, many villagers in peri-urban areas live with their tenants.

Drawing from my ethnographic fieldwork, several reasons account for this co-habitation dynamic. First, families with limited economic capacity and only one housing lot have no choice but to live with their tenants. Second, even families with two or more housing lots often build co-habituated apartments first due to financial constraints. Building a three-story apartment costs around 200k to 300k yuan, which takes many years to accumulate. For villagers who can afford to build a separate building, it is usually still within the village, as soaring urban housing prices make urban apartments unaffordable. This co-habitation makes landlords and tenants "staying in the same boat," compelling peri-urban villagers to consider building better housing conditions.

SETBACK APARTMENTS

Building setbacks are a regulatory measure that originated in New York City at the turn of 20th century. It has since been adopted by many high-density mega cities. Peri-urban villages have

developed their own versions. For those with housing lots near the main street, they divide their lots into two parts: the ground floor for commercial use and upper floors set back a few meters for residential purposes, allowing for better sunlight and ventilation (Figure1). To compensate for the lost floor area, they often build up to four or five floors in the back part, despite municipal height restrictions of 3.5 stories. Though this violates local regulations, it is generally accepted among neighbours as it improves living conditions for both inhabitants and the community.

For those with lots not near the main street, they create a front patio, arranging the building layout in an "L" shape to form an air-well for ventilation and sunlight. In cases of larger lots, the apartment building only occupies two- thirds of the lot, leaving more space adjacent to the street (Figure2). Building setback rules are a common strategy used by peri-urban villagers to improve the living environment. Because they create better sunlight, ventilation conditons, and less visual interference between buildings on all floors.

These setback rules usually follow the principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit among neighbouring lots. The extent of the building setback and the height of the buildings are often determined through discussions and negotiations between adjacent lot owners. This is why clusters of village apartments may follow one type of setback while others follow different patterns, and some may appear as fully occupied structures similar to urban village buildings. As the rental market becomes increasingly competitive, more villagers are adopting the setback mode to create better living conditions to attract tenants, especially "white-collar" workers who prefer decent living.

Fig. 1.   Setback apartment with ground floor commercials. (Image by author, 2014)

Fig. 2.   Setback apartments with front door patio. (Photo by author, 2015)

PATIO APARTMENTS

The "Patio Apartment" strategy, though less common, profoundly improves housing conditions. Families or relatives with adjacent housing lots combine two or more lots to collectively develop their new apartments. This collaboration offers greater flexibility in designing floor plans and building layouts. Often, households use a patio as a central feature to organize the buildings. They work together, along with their neighbours, to position the structures in a way that maximizes sunlight and ventilation. The patio creates a shared space for landlords and tenants, benefiting the public street by increasing sunlight and providing visual openness.

In the following case, Auntie Chen and her relatives co-built a patio apartment complex on three consecutive, narrow, west-facing lots. West-facing houses are undesirable in Guangzhou due to excessive heat and poor ventilation. Rather than constructing three narrow buildings with poor orientation, they reoriented the buildings to the south, enhancing natural ventilation and reducing heat. They arranged the buildings around a patio, creating communal areas for bike parking, stroller storage, children's play, and socializing. To address neighbors' concerns about spatial standards, they lowered the street-facing building to two stories, improving sunlight and ventilation for the street and surrounding buildings (Figure3 and Figure 4). This layout improved the physical condition of each unit, making the rental units popular and resulting in a tenant waiting list.

Patio apartments are remarkably effective for alleviating congestion in larger areas compared to setback buildings. Such designs benefit owners, tenants, and neighbors by providing stable rental incomes, better housing conditions, and enhanced communal environments. However, because it requires collaboration among adjacent lot owners, it is less commonly adopted than setback rules.

Fig. 3.   The street view of Chen's patio apartments. (Photo by author, 2015.)

Fig. 4.   The patio view of Chen' patio apartments. (Photo by author, 2015.)

PEASANT-WORKERS' INFORMAL BUILDING CODES

Peasant-workers,[18] the primary tenants in low-rent, sub-standard housing units in urban villages, have little legal protection against poor living conditions. However, as both major tenants and core constructors of peri-urban village housing, they leverage their construction skills and tenant status to influence landlords and housing practices, advocating for informal building codes. Through these efforts, they seek to improve their living conditions and assert their housing rights.

ADVISING LANDLORDS

Many peasant-workers have extensive experience working on various construction sites, both in the city and in villages. Familiar with urban building codes through empirical knowledge, they understand what types of village units rent well. Some often serve as informal consultants, advising village landlords on building new rental apartments with higher living standards. This advocacy has led to the establishment of new norms, such as larger windows, higher ceilings, and better amenities. For instance, they often recommend design features that enhance ventilation and natural light, improving the overall livability of the apartments.

OPTIMIZING ARCHITECTURAL LAYOUTS

Peasant-workers optimize architectural layouts and spatial arrangements through onsite ad hoc design. Unlike urban construction, codified architectural drawings are uncommon in village building processes. Instead, villagers use abstract diagrams to illustrate building layouts, leaving room for builders to improvise. Builders adjust window locations to maximize sunlight and privacy, alter building areas to accommodate existing trees, and make other decisions through onsite discussions with owners and neighbors. This flexibility allows for practical and context- specific improvements.

USING SHORT-TERM LEASES

Peasant-workers leverage short-term leases to pressure landlords into upgrading apartment conditions. To avoid taxes, few landlords sign formal rental contracts, leading to oral month-by-month or short-term leases. This arrangement allows peasant-workers to move flexibly between different low-cost rentals, seeking better deals and conditions. By exchanging rental information among themselves, they can promptly relocate from dated, low- standard units to newer, improved rentals.

> "I do think the rent should go up that fast. I used to live in a place that charged 600 yuan/month. It was too expensive. I could not afford it. Well, it was not really that I could not afford it. I just thought it was not necessary. A laoxiang (hometown fellow) lives in a similar place. It only takes 400 yuan/month. She even has two windows in her place. I talked to my landlord; she was not willing to lower the rent. Then I moved out. The place I live now is 400 yuan/month, including water."

> Master Hong, an experienced builder from Guangxi.[19]

These informal building codes and strategies have led to significant improvements in living conditions for peasant-workers. The advice and adjustments made during construction result in better-ventilated, well-lit, and more comfortable living spaces. Short-term leases and the flexibility to move allow peasant-workers to continuously seek better housing options, fostering a dynamic rental market where landlords must respond to tenant demands.

SMALL BUSINESSPEOPLE'S ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

Small businesspeople are the main advocates for historical building preservation in peri-urban villages. Unlike urban villages, peri-urban villages have a significant number of traditional houses. However, these houses are largely excluded from government-funded architectural preservation programs. Small businesspeople, who are often passionate about these buildings, rent them from villagers and self-initiated preservation. They run various businesses such as tea houses, small inns, galleries, studios, classrooms, cafés, and boutique shops.

> *"My competitor is not the people who run businesses in the traditional houses, but those who want to demolish them. In fact, the more people run their businesses in these traditional houses, the better. This is why we organize ourselves. In our WeChat group, you can see how people are helping each other.*
>
> *We try to preserve this village. One day, when all these traditional houses are gone, this place will become another urban village, giving the government a reason to demolish it, and we will need to leave too."*
>
> *Ted, a design studio runner in the village.*[20]

As cities continue to expand, many peri-urban villages face the threat of demolition to make room for urban renewal projects. In response, as Ted mentioned, small businesspeople have begun coordinating their preservation efforts collectively. These efforts involve organizing both online and onsite, spreading preservation methods and guidelines as broadly as possible. By expanding the preservation area, they can assert the village's historical and cultural significance and gain public support against demolition. They organize themselves through a "decentralized loose network," with no leader, formal name, explicit rules, or regular meeting times. Communication occurs via WeChat groups, phone calls, and ad hoc meetings, which helps avoid the risk of state intervention.

Rather than following a "discussion-action" route, preservation efforts operate through an "action-redirection" route. Small businesspeople engage in spontaneous preservation and renovation, then visit each other to learn effective methods, formulate preservation guidelines, and circulate them around. This loose network extends beyond small businesspeople to include village cadres and landlords. Some small businesspeople build trust with village cadres, who are also landlords of vacant traditional houses, facilitating access to resources and contacts for preservation efforts. These connections allow them to disseminate information to more interested parties.

"What's Mine Will Be Yours" – Guidelines for Recycling

> *"Every time there is a house deconstruction, we inform each other. Someone's trash is another's treasure. Some villagers think their old furniture is worthless, but we see it as priceless. We use them for our projects."*

> *Xia Li, an active traditional house preservationist.*[21]

Recycling materials from deconstructed traditional houses plays a significant role in preservation efforts because it keeps renovation costs low. Recycled materials range from architectural components and building materials to furniture and decorations (Figure 5). Social connections within the village facilitate the sharing of tools and workshop spaces, enabling small businesspeople to repair and repurpose discarded items. This collaborative approach not only preserves the historical integrity of the buildings but also fosters a sense of community and

shared responsibility for maintaining the village's cultural legacy. Moreover, as most of the materials come from deconstructed houses, they retain the aesthetics of traditional building culture, including material characteristics, colour tones, and traces of time. Therefore, the recycling rules act as spontaneous preservation guidelines, embodying the material culture of the village's heritage.

"Seeing Old, Using New" – Guidelines for Renovation

> *"What you see can remain old, what you intensively use, should be clean and relatively new"*

> *Boss Zhao, an experienced traditional house renovator in villages-by-the-city.*[22]

Boss Zhao, an experienced traditional house renovator, shares strategies or renovation guidelines that have widely circulated among small businesspeople. These guidelines involve manipulating lighting and flooring to highlight the "old" while maintaining functional areas as "new." They include specific treatments for windows, floors, staircases, walls, and doors. Despite the absence of formal written documents, the renovated houses serve as living examples. These practices help lower renovation costs and make preservation accessible to newcomers, thereby expanding their impact.

"PRESERVATION FOR LIVING" – GUIDELINES FOR PROGRAM

In contrast to formal preservation guidelines and codes, which often rigidly define building usage, small businesspeople bring flexibility and versatility. For instance, Dong renovated a traditional house in 2011 and later expanded to multiple properties, transforming them into multi-functional spaces for various businesses. By signing long-term contracts, he ensured stable rental rates and reduced financial risks. Other occupants, like Ye and Brother Si, increased their income by introducing new uses for their spaces, such as cinemas, galleries, and shooting locations for commercials and films. This diversification not only gives traditional houses a new aesthetic while maintaining their overall tone, but also makes the preservation activity economically sustainable (Figure 6).

Fig. 5.   Example of using recycling materials for interior renovation for a traditional house. (Photo by author, 2015)
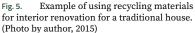
Fig. 6.   Example of new program for a traditional house. (Photo by author, 2015)

These collective efforts in preservation and adaptive reuse highlight the resilience and creativity of small businesspeople in peri-urban villages. By forming effective guidelines to preserve architectural heritage, they sustain their businesses and communities amidst rapid urbanization pressures. Two characteristics distinguish these informal guidelines from formal ones. First, they are persuasive rather than coercive. While they may not result in highly consistent aesthetics as formal guidelines do, they respect individual choices and demonstrate a more just process in forming collective consent. Second, these codes and guidelines aim to vitalize and sustain people's living environments rather than turning historical houses into static artifacts.

CONCLUSION

The study of informal and self-built settlements, traditionally characterized by perceptions of chaos and disorder due to the assumed lack of effective zoning and building regulations, has been challenged by recent research.

This paper builds on these insights by providing a detailed ethnographic study of peri-urban villages in the Guangzhou metropolis. It highlights how self-built practices emerge and function in contrast with formal zoning codes and building regulations. The findings illustrate that resident of these settlements—local villagers, peasant- workers, and small businesspeople—actively engage in creating and enforcing informal building codes and guidelines that reflect their distinct needs and priorities. Their diverse and overlapping regulatory practices demonstrate a dynamic self-improving mechanism within self-built settlements.

This research also contributes to the broader discourse on urban informality by offering new insights of the interactions between formal and informal regulation. Unlike urban areas that have already adapted international building codes, the case of Guangzhou's peri-urban villages captures the emerging moments on how bottom-up building codes and guidelines are formed. Although these guidelines and codes may fall short in terms of universality and physical strictness, they illustrate effective collective efforts to enhance housing conditions, preserve architectural heritage, and sustain community livelihoods. They also demonstrate more just processes in building regulation-making by considering grassroots' interests rather than overlooking them. By documenting these practices, this study calls for a reevaluation of how zoning and building codes can be made more inclusive and effective in self-built settlements. Recognising the agency of informal settlement residents and integrating their innovative strategies into formal planning processes can lead to more resilient and sustainable urban development.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Jiong (Abingo) Wu is an assistant professor at the School of Architecture, Syracuse University. She earned her Ph.D. in Architecture at University of California, Berkeley, an Advanced Master of Architecture at Berlage Institute, Rotterdam, Netherlands, and a Bachelor of Engineering/City Planning from South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China. Her main research area is the theory and history of 20th and 21st century global housing approaches. In recent years, her works focus on Chinese village housing and American Collaborative housing.

ENDNOTES

7. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006)
8. Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
9. Nezar AlSayyad, *Cairo: Histories of a City* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Nezar AlSayyad and Ananya Roy, eds., *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).
10. Ananya Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
11. Bishwapriya Sanyal and Vinit Mukhija, eds., *Informal City: Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001).
12. James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
13. Hernando De Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
14. Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
15. Baike, Baidu. "History of General Principles of Civil Building Design". (Accessed May 15,2024)
16. Zhang, Li. 2001. *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population* (Stanford University Press).
17. Baike, Baidu. "History of General Principles of Civil Building Design". (Accessed May 15,2024)
18. For more urban land use right commodification experiments in Guangzhou, please refer to: Quanle Huang, *Metropolis of Rurality A Spatial History of Shipai in Guangzhou from the Perspectives of Typo-Morphology (1978-2008)*(China Architecture & Building Press, 2015).
19. In 1994, the central government reformed the tax system to reclaim revenue control, as it was only receiving about 25% of reported earnings, with local governments hiding significant portions. This imbalance created a "rich local, poor central" scenario. The reform shifted the revenue distribution, with the

central government securing about 60% post-1994, leading to increased reliance of local governments on land sales for income. More on land-center development after 1994, please see book: (Hsing 2010)

20. Two decades after the new tax reform, a real estate reliant mode was developed, rooted in local governance and development. According to the Guangzhou Construction Yearbook, the revenue from land sell took up more than half of the city's total revenue since the early 2000s, with a significant growth on the real estate sector.

21. Guangzhou Municipal Government, "Guangzhou Land Management Regulation," 1994.

22. Guangzhou Municipal Government, "Guangzhou Rural Residents Self-Built Housing Land Temporary Regulation," 1995.

23. Li, Peilin. 2002. "The End of the Chinese Villages-— A Study of the Villages Located in Southern Urban China." *Chinese Social Sciences* 2.

24. In the Chinese context, "peasant-workers" (农民工, nóngmín gōng) are migrant workers from rural areas who work in urban centers. They have a rural hukou (household registration), which classifies them as peasants despite their employment in urban industries. This dual identity reflects their transitional status between rural and urban life and highlights the institutional barriers that restrict their access to urban public services and benefits. They are crucial to China's economic boom, providing labor for construction, manufacturing, and service industries, often under harsh conditions for low wages, while living in sub-standard housing with little legal protection.

25. Interview with Master Hong, an experienced builder from Guangxi, 2015.

26. Interview with Ted, a design studio runner in the village, 2015.

27. Interview with Xia Li, an active traditional house preservationist, 2014.

28. Interview with Boss Zhao, an experienced traditional house renovator in villages-by-the-city, 2015.

REFERENCES

AlSayyad, Nezar. Cairo: Histories of a City. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. AlSayyad, Nezar, and Ananya Roy, eds. Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin

America, and South Asia. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004.

Baidu Baike. "History of General Principles of Civil Building Design." Accessed May 15, 2024. Davis, Mike. Planet of Slums. New York: Verso, 2006.

De Soto, Hernando. The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Guangzhou Municipal Government. "Guangzhou Land Management Regulation," 1994.

Guangzhou Municipal Government. "Guangzhou Rural Residents Self-Built Housing Land Temporary Regulation," 1995. Holston, James. Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil. Princeton, NJ: Princeton

University Press, 2009.

Huang, Quanle. Metropolis of Rurality: A Spatial History of Shipai in Guangzhou from the Perspectives of Typo-Morphology (1978-2008). China Architecture & Building Press, 2015.

Hsing, You-tien. The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Li, Peilin. "The End of the Chinese Villages—A Study of the Villages Located in Southern Urban China." Chinese Social Sciences 2 (2002).

Neuwirth, Robert. Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Roy, Ananya. City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Sanyal, Bishwapriya, and Vinit Mukhija, eds. Informal City: Latin America. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001. Yiftachel, Oren. Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

2006.

Zhang, Li. Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

INTERVIEWS:

Interview with Boss Zhao, an experienced traditional house renovator in villages-by-the-city, 2015. Interview with Master Hong, an experienced builder from Guangxi, 2015.

Interview with Ted, a design studio runner in the village, 2015. Interview with Xia Li, an active traditional house preservationist, 2014.