

# Spaces of Suspension: Construction, Demolition, and Extension in a Beijing Migrant Neighbourhood

Tzu-Chi Ou

## ABSTRACT

Communities with large concentrations of migrants, who often live in makeshift and illegal housing, have been common on the margins of large cities in China since the 1980s. Why do so-called “urban villages” persist and even flourish despite repeated government crackdowns? By addressing this question, this article sheds light on a subtle dynamic of city making that has not been fully appreciated by scholarly literature and media reports that have focused on large-scale demolition and eviction in China’s rapid urbanization. Drawing from my two years of field research in Hua village, a community on Beijing’s fringes in line for land expropriation, I explore how multilateral negotiations between local residents (villagers), migrant tenants, the village committee, and municipal government led to a cyclical movement of temporary housing construction, demolition, and extension. The dynamics of recurring demolishment and reconstruction engendered spaces of suspension, which enabled migrants to enter the urban economy at a low cost. Such spaces, however, offered no formal protection or basis for developing lasting social relations, and always faced the prospect of being demolished, but nevertheless were constantly available and even expanding.

**Keywords:** migration, urban village, demolition, urban informality, city making

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## Introduction

On a sweltering summer morning in August 2013, I was trying to immerse myself in the everyday routines of my fieldwork site, Hua village, a suburban Beijing neighbourhood with a large concentration of migrant workers. Soon after turning onto a bustling main thoroughfare, I ran into a crowd of *chengguan*, widely despised municipal officers who enforce order on the streets—all in loose-fitting grey uniforms, black pants, with deep-blue caps and red badges on their left upper arms. They were in the middle of removing a makeshift fruit stand. I was nervous about witnessing a violent conflict between street vendors and city regulators, a recurring theme in media reports and scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup> The scene, however, was placid. Bystanders whispered to each other. The two impassive vendors sheltered watermelons from the sun, while a dozen officers clumsily moved the plastic roof cover and wooden pillars of the fruit stand onto a truck. The next day, the stand reappeared as if nothing had happened.

In my two years of fieldwork, ad hoc but frequent inspections like this occurred in the so-called “urban village,” a peri-urban area where residents earn a living by building and renting out low-cost housing to thousands of migrants. The inspections happened almost every month, and the vendors always returned afterward. Even after a large-scale cleansing campaign in early 2017 that demolished several large compounds and apartment buildings, residents erected new housing blocks barely a year later.<sup>2</sup> This begs the question: Why does the urban village persist and even flourish despite repeated crackdowns by the government?

This article sheds light on a subtle dynamic of city making in urban villages: over the past few decades, a cycle of recurring demolition and reconstruction turned into a hidden routine. I argue that these dynamics created “spaces of suspension,” which enabled migrant tenants to enter the urban economy quickly at low cost but, ultimately, offered no stability. In such spaces, all actors—residents, migrants, local government cadres, and inspection officers—maximized their immediate interests as they were unable to think of the near future. Residents who lost farmland relied on building houses and renting them out to migrants as their main source of income. The local administration tacitly allowed this as a means of boosting the economy but periodically demolished the construction and evicted migrants

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<sup>1</sup> Several studies focus on violent clashes between street vendors and *chengguan*. Sarah Swider, “Reshaping China’s Urban Citizenship: Street Vendors, Chengguan and Struggles over the Right to the City,” *Critical Sociology* 41, nos. 4–5 (2015): 701–716, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514529676>; Amy Hanser, “Street Politics: Street Vendors and Urban Governance in China,” *The China Quarterly* 226 (June 2016): 363–382, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000278>.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to routine rule enforcement, the governments periodically launched inspections to keep illegal construction at bay. Between 2015 and 2019, Hua village residents experienced at least three crackdowns on illegal housing.

when pressure from higher levels became acute. Once the demolition campaign subsided, local residents built more houses to accommodate more migrants, who, in turn, extended their living and business spaces. They all did so in a hurry, worrying that this could be the last chance to do so. Migrant workers lived with dynamic and fluid relations but remained hopeful about an elusive future.

Spaces of suspension grew fast, precisely because they were “suspended”—that is, everything was temporary. Shops were extended ever closer to the road, courtyards were turned into kitchens, and gaps between buildings became storage spaces for tools. Such flexibly extendable space made it easy for migrants to start small businesses. But spaces of suspension could also vanish suddenly through periodic demolition. Migrants constantly lost space for accommodations and business, and were thus forced to be hypermobile. In the urban village, the informal economy and the migrants’ lives were vibrant and precarious, at the same time.

The notion of spaces of suspension wishes to nuance our understanding about rapid urbanization in China, which is arguably one of the most dramatic social transformations of global significance in our times. China’s “urban speed machine”—an assemblage of state power, urban planning, and land finance entities—has been widely documented.<sup>3</sup> Between 2005 and 2011, about 27,200 square kilometres of rural land was expropriated and converted into state-owned urban land.<sup>4</sup> The demolishing process, which encroached on farmland and replaced it with high-rise buildings, boutique malls, wide roads, and brand-new metros, recalls the epic story of urbanization in developing countries.<sup>5</sup>

However, this speed machine is not without cracks. In contrast to the image of a bulldozer tearing down village houses, Chu documents a “passive-aggressive” form of demolition.<sup>6</sup> Against the backdrop of a series of legal reforms in the 2000s, local governments opted for less confrontational approaches when evicting and relocating residents. But residents’ experiences varied greatly. Rodenbiker highlights the heterogeneous and uneven ways the villagers were incorporated into urban areas.<sup>7</sup> While some villagers moved into wealth due to land expropriation as documented by Rodenbiker, Chuang

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<sup>3</sup> Shih-shen Chien and Max D. Woodworth, “China’s Urban Speed Machine: The Politics of Speed and Time in a Period of Rapid Urban Growth,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 4 (2018): 723–737, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12610>.

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank, *Urban China: Toward Efficient, Inclusive, and Sustainable Urbanization* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2014), 27, <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0206-5>.

<sup>5</sup> Fleischer recorded ethnographically how suburban Wangjing was transformed through massive construction into a middle-class residential area in Beijing. Friederike Fleischer, *Suburban Beijing: Housing and Consumption in Contemporary China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Julie Y. Chu, “When Infrastructures Attack: The Workings of Disrepair in China,” *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 2 (2014): 351–367, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12080>.

<sup>7</sup> Jesse Rodenbiker, “Uneven Incorporation: Volumetric Transitions in Peri-Urban China’s Conservation Zones,” *Geoforum* 104 (2019): 234–243, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.05.002>.

registers the tragic deaths of impoverished villagers as a consequence of dispossession.<sup>8</sup> These differentiated experiences manifest a mode of “recombinant urbanization.”<sup>9</sup>

This article joins this literature by illustrating a particular mode of “urban informality”<sup>10</sup> on the ground that is an integral part of the “urban speed machine,” yet with its distinct logic of being cyclical and dynamic.<sup>11</sup> In what follows I will first position the urban village as a site of uncertainties and mobility in the grand movement of urbanization in Beijing. I will then explain why residents in Hua village rushed to build and rebuild illegal rental housing, and why they were tacitly allowed to do so. This is followed by a discussion about how migrants made use of such space, and at what cost. I will then explore the socio-political implications by examining migrants’ reactions to the fact that they lived in a state of suspension. The conclusion recaps how the spaces of suspension were sustained by delicate and dynamic negotiations between residents, migrants, grassroots authorities, and government agencies, which reflected the condition of “complexed development” in contemporary China.<sup>12</sup> This study is based on my ethnographic research from 2013 to 2014 in Hua village in northern Beijing. Its 2,000 villagers no longer ploughed the land; instead, they provided rental housing for about 30,000 rural migrant workers, rural *hukou* holders from nearby provinces.<sup>13</sup> Middle-aged migrants tended to work as domestic workers, janitors, construction workers, home renovators, drivers, and retailers, while younger migrants often worked in the service sector as salesclerks, IT programmers, accountants, real-estate brokers, and couriers. During my research, I worked with a grassroots NGO serving migrants in the village, and its routine activities and social programs allowed me to establish relationships with 70 local villagers and migrant workers. Among them, I conducted 35 in-depth interviews.

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<sup>8</sup> Julia Chuang, “Urbanization through Dispossession: Survival and Stratification in China’s New Townships,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, no. 2 (2015): 275–294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.990446>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew B. Kipnis, *From Village to City: Social Transformation in a Chinese County Seat* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 2 (2005): 147–158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360508976689>.

<sup>11</sup> In this article, I highlight how local actors as a “regime of urban informality” fostered informal settlement and spaces of suspension. HaeRan Shin and Soyung Park, “The Regime of Urban Informality in Migration: Accommodating Undocumented Chosŏnjok Migrants in their Receiving Community in Seoul, South Korea,” *Pacific Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2017): 459–480, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2017903459>.

<sup>12</sup> Biao Xiang, this issue.

<sup>13</sup> The household registration (*hukou*) system divides China’s population into agricultural and non-agricultural populations. Despite the recent *hukou* reforms, many rural *hukou* holders who migrate to large cities cannot benefit from public provisions and social services.

### **On (the) Edge: The Urban Village as a Site of Uncertainty**

Against a backdrop of rapid urbanization, urban villages are on the edge in two senses. First, urban villages are spatially on the periphery of expanding cities. A rural village is turned into an urban village after it becomes a target of expropriation for urban development. Second, urban villages are on the edge because the residents are socially “edgy”: unsettled; energetic, yet anxious; constantly engaged in construction, moving, and transactions.<sup>14</sup> Urban villages are also on the edge in terms of their administrative positioning. In Hua village, where my research took place, the village committee was supposedly a self-governed body of the residents. The committee oversaw daily activities in the community and nominally controlled the collectively owned land. The community had no autonomy in terms of its development plans, especially regarding land use.

Living on Beijing’s edge, the Hua villagers I spoke to were anxious about their destiny because they were on the frontier of urban development. The village started to lose its farmland in the late 1980s. From the perspective of Old Wang, my landlord and a local farmer in his sixties, the land was encroached by various actors. The military appropriated the land on the east part of the village. The Beijing Gardening and Greening Bureau zoned the northern part of Hua village for a park. The most recent requisition took place in 2004, when the city government seized part of the village for constructing a subway station. By 2005, Old Wang told me, there was no farmland left in the village.

While the future direction in Hua village was clear to the villagers, the process of how the village would be turned into a fully urban place was far from certain. There was no definite timetable, while piecemeal demolitions were constant and rumours were rampant as for what might happen next. The negotiations between residents, the village committee, the city government, and the developer regarding the terms of compensation and relocation were complex and could take years. In other villages nearby, the demolition of old buildings and the construction of new ones took place on a small scale, rather than the entire village being bulldozed all at once. Such demolishing processes created ample spaces of transition that could be appropriated for various uses on a temporary basis.<sup>15</sup>

Irregular inspections by authorities intensified the uncertainty. In urban villages, illegal construction fell into a regulatory grey zone. The Hua village committee’s stance on illegal buildings oscillated between turning a blind

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<sup>14</sup> Erik Harms, *Saigon’s Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Nguyen highlights the “slow construction” of urban renewal in Beijing. Victoria Nguyen, “Slow Construction,” *City* 21, no. 5 (2017): 650–662, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1375728>.

eye and cracking down. For some villagers, the committee's demolition of illegal buildings was nothing but a "show" [*zuoyangzi*] to satisfy inspectors from higher up. Right after officials left, owners immediately rebuilt the structures. But sometimes, the government enforced the law vigorously. As Old Wang was rebuilding his old house, a team of a dozen officials suddenly arrived and accused him of illegal construction.

Villagers tended to blame corruption for the arbitrariness in enforcing the rules.<sup>16</sup> This could be true, but the village committee's inconsistency also stemmed from its desire to balance economic profit and political risk. On one hand, land seizure was a major source of revenue for local governments.<sup>17</sup> City government was also fully aware that it was impossible to eradicate temporary housing, and that the informal housing might be necessary for urban life. On the other hand, governments remained responsible for maintaining civility and modernity in the city, especially by thwarting "big city diseases," including overpopulation, congestion, and housing shortages.<sup>18</sup> They carried out frequent inspections to keep illegal construction from spinning out of control. Through recurrent inspection and demolition, the sprawl of rental housing was contained within the boundary of the village.

Anticipating imminent expropriation amidst such uncertainties, residents (the villagers) hurried to add to their rental housing. The village committee also earned profits from the rental housing they built on collectively owned land. In the village, stacks of bricks, bags of concrete, and piles of rubble were everywhere. The village was soaked in clouds of dust and immersed in the noise of drilling. As villagers were building more and more apartments, migrants moved into urban villages for the cheap housing.<sup>19</sup> Rent in Hua village ranged from RMB300 to 1,000 per room per month.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, renting a room in an apartment in normal residential compounds adjacent

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<sup>16</sup> According to media reports, the party secretary was convicted of land-related corruption offenses in 2015. A few local villagers told me that Hua village's party secretary and his family alone controlled quite a few rental properties.

<sup>17</sup> You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>18</sup> "Beijing tongguo guanche jingjinji xietong fazhan guihua gangyao de yijian" [Beijing municipal committee's opinion on passing the 'outline of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated planning'], *Xinhua News*, 12 July 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/11/c\\_128010212.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/11/c_128010212.htm).

<sup>19</sup> In 2016, the number of permanent residents in Beijing was 21.72 million, while the population of migrants from other provinces was 8.07 million. Xiaozhuang Li, "Beijing liudong renkou jiegouxing tezhenɡ ji duice yanjiu" [The structural characteristics and countermeasures of floating population in Beijing], *Beijing shehui kexue* 11 (2017): 4–16.

<sup>20</sup> According to my fieldwork in 2013–2014, rooms in a one-storey house [*pingfang*] were below RMB500, while rooms in a *gongyu* apartment building were between RMB600 and 800. A one-bedroom apartment, an unusual layout, cost at least RMB1,000. In winter, landlords charged their renters another RMB200 per month for heating. After a series of demolitions between 2017 and 2019, housing supply fell, and rents skyrocketed. In 2019, rooms in a *gongyu* apartment building were between RMB1,000 and 1,600.

to Hua village cost two to three times more than that.<sup>21</sup> Old Wang noted that migrants carrying huge amounts of luggage flocked to the area like attending “open banquets” in the countryside.

### **Landless Landlords: The Morality of Illegal Construction**

Although villagers were categorized as rural households and still called peasants, their livelihood no longer relied on farming. Instead, they developed rural land for low-cost rental housing for migrant workers. Speaking about the sprawl of illegal construction in Hua village, Mrs. Wang, my landlord’s daughter-in-law, told me:

They [the village committee] took our land away. There is nothing here. In our neighbouring village, each of their villagers receives an RMB800 allowance per month [from the village committee]. There is no welfare provision in this village. Until last year [2013], we still received some rice, flour, and cooking oil. Now we have nothing. They don’t take care of your livelihood, so they do not care about the illegal construction.<sup>22</sup>

For Mrs. Wang, if the villagers had land, they could be self-sufficient. The village committee, however, took their land away without providing sufficient compensation. It was thus fully justifiable for them to make a living through renting out their homes. Since the village committee abdicated its responsibility, it had no standing to intervene in illegal construction.

In 2016, only a year after the Old Wang family replaced its old, single-storey farmhouse with a four-storey building, the village administration ruled the building an illegal construction and tore down its third and fourth floors because officially, only two-storey buildings were allowed. The demolition process exasperated Old Wang: “Tell me what is illegal construction? You [the officers of the village committee] even built houses on arable land. Yours are not illegal. [Why is it that] we ... peasants are not allowed to *fanshen* [turn over] and live in a higher, better building?”<sup>23</sup>

Old Wang justified his action through the notion of *fanshen*, or “turning the land into housing.” *Fanshen* is a politically charged term; it was a new word created by the Chinese socialist revolution, meaning the emancipation of peasants who “throw off the landlord yoke” and “enter a new world.”<sup>24</sup> Old Wang professed a strong nostalgia for Maoist China, when the subjects of emancipation were peasants. As Xiang argues, they “[felt] that they not

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<sup>21</sup> During my fieldwork, I met former tenants from the nearby residential compound who later moved to Hua village to save on rent.

<sup>22</sup> Author’s field notes, 4 January 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Author’s field notes, 4 November 2014.

<sup>24</sup> William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), vii.

only ‘owe[d]’ the state, but that they also ‘own[ed]’ it.”<sup>25</sup> Peasants were no longer “subjects with entitlements” embedded in a socialist country. Such an ideal society had been left behind in the era of economic reforms. Old Wang saw himself as part of the most underrepresented group in politics: deprived and ignored peasants [*nongmin*], entitled to only the worst social welfare.<sup>26</sup> He thus regarded constructing multi-storey buildings for his livelihood completely justifiable.

### **Migrant Tenants: Makeshift Housing Helps Maximize Savings**

Whereas landlords experienced foregone entitlements as the subjects of emancipation, migrants were less concerned about the legality and morality of the construction. Migrants chose to live in Hua village to save on rent. They kept their living conditions basic. Their “spatial inscription of liminality” was vividly illustrated through tiny, packed urban village housing.<sup>27</sup> When visiting my informants, I often found myself sitting on the edge of a bed. As small as 100 square feet, a typical room was packed with possessions; spending on rent was reduced to maximize savings.<sup>28</sup> For example, Sun Yuan, an accountant for a foreign company in Beijing, rented a house for RMB500 a month in Hua village. Her humble house was in a large housing compound, where most residents made their living trading scrap. This amounted to a “dirty, chaotic, and substandard” (*zang luan cha*) living environment.<sup>29</sup>

Noticeably, the rent-to-income ratio was extremely low among migrant tenants in Hua village. The migrants that I interviewed spent roughly one-tenth of their monthly income on rent,<sup>30</sup> while the average rent in Beijing

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<sup>25</sup> Biao Xiang, “‘You’ve Got to Rely on Yourself ... and the State!’ A Structural Chasm in the Chinese Political Moral Order,” in *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China*, eds. Carlos Rojas and Ralph A. Litzinger (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 147.

<sup>26</sup> Old Wang expressed his vexation through writing. Whenever we met, he would read his poems. The poems discussed broad themes from land, housing, environmental problems, and social relationships to politics. He once wrote a song for the 2008 Olympic Games. He said that his song would not be selected because he was merely a peasant.

<sup>27</sup> Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 84–86. Due to the household registration *hukou* system, migrant workers could neither settle down in the city nor lead lives as farmers in their rural hometowns. Migrant workers belonged “neither to the rural nor to the urban society” and thus became “a people of prolonged liminality.” Zhang, *Strangers in the City*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> In 2014, 61 percent of the “floating population” who migrated to Beijing relied on renting private housing, and 67.3 percent of the same population spent less than RMB1,000 on their monthly rent. Li, “Beijing liudong renkou,” 6.

<sup>29</sup> Yang Zhan, “The Urbanisation of Rural Migrants and the Making of Urban Villages in Contemporary China,” *Urban Studies* 55, no. 7 (May 2018): 1525–1540, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017716856>.

<sup>30</sup> In 2014, most migrants I interviewed earned from RMB3,000 to 5,000 per month. At the low end, this number was slightly higher than the nation-wide average of RMB2,864 in 2014. Guojia tongji ju (NBS), *2015 nian nongmingong jiance diaocha baogao* [2015 survey report on rural migrant workers] (Beijing: National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016), accessed 5 May 2020, [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201604/t20160428\\_1349713.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201604/t20160428_1349713.html).

typically took up a quarter of a migrant's income.<sup>31</sup> Sun Yuan spent only 5 percent of her RMB10,000 monthly income on rent. "I would rather save money to buy a house than pay more rent," she told me firmly.<sup>32</sup> She did not care about the hardship or sacrifice of living in an urban village. Instead, for a long time, she focused on buying a property.<sup>33</sup> When having a house elsewhere is the most important goal, the transient nature of living in Beijing is seen as necessary.

Like Sun Yuan, most migrants minimized their rental housing costs to quickly become a homeowner somewhere else. Twelve out of the 35 migrant workers I interviewed in Hua village spent from RMB200,000 to 400,000 buying houses in their rural townships and counties.<sup>34</sup> One of them was Lan Ying, a saleswoman working in a Carrefour supermarket in Beijing, who bought a new three-bedroom apartment in her hometown in Henan Province. Not planning to return home any time soon, Lan Ying stayed in Beijing, where she had worked since 1993. "How about improving the condition of your home here?" I asked her. (I meant her house in Hua village, where she had been living with her husband and daughter for more than ten years.<sup>35</sup>) "No, I won't," she answered flatly. "To improve [the house] is to put my renminbi [money] into wasteful motions [*zheteng wode renminbi*]," she joked.<sup>36</sup> She considered it a waste of money to invest in the present, in the family home where they lived day and night.

Most migrants living in Hua village were not impoverished. They chose to live there partly to take advantage of the illegal nature of the housing, which gave them the "freedom" to extend a given structure in a way that maximized their living space. Makeshift kitchens adjacent to rental units, for example, were ubiquitous in the village. Outdoor, temporary kitchens made of shelves stood next to the one-storey farmhouses. Children sat on a low stool and did their homework on a folding table in the yard. Within multi-storey buildings, tenants set up a station of stoves in the corridor. These extensions further lowered living expenses.

Although housing in a space of suspension might charge low rents, the

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<sup>31</sup> Migrants' rent-to-income ratio in Beijing was 24.2 percent in 2011 and 25 percent in 2016. Ran Liu, Tingzhu Li, and Richard Greene, "Migration and Inequality in Rental Housing: Affordability Stress in the Chinese Cities," *Applied Geography* 115 (2020) Article 102138, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2019.102138>.

<sup>32</sup> Author's field notes, 22 March 2014.

<sup>33</sup> In 2014, Sun Yuan and her husband decided to balance their jobs and their children's education by buying an apartment in Yanjiao, a township in Hebei Province which became a bedroom community of Beijing.

<sup>34</sup> Most of the houses or apartments were in the migrant homebuyers' hometown provinces. Five migrant homeowners purchased apartments in Yanjiao. Many migrant homebuyers, however, left their houses behind and continued to stay in Beijing.

<sup>35</sup> Her married son lived with his family in another rental unit in the same housing compound.

<sup>36</sup> Author's field notes, 27 September 2014.

cost brought about by frequent demolition was high.<sup>37</sup> Due to constant demolition, migrants had to move from one urban village to another frequently. Each wave of demolition broke up networks and forced migrants to rebuild social relationships in new destinations. The cycles of demolition and relocation led to fragile social relations and undermined solidarity between tenants.<sup>38</sup>

Migrant tenants thus saw themselves as sojourners and suspended themselves from improving their lives in the urban villages, even if they were financially capable of doing so. I asked a teacher from a private school set up for migrant children in Yue village if she visited students' homes. "The parents rent the houses to make a living in the city, not for us to visit," she responded, in an aloof manner.<sup>39</sup> The teacher did not see the rental house as her students' home, but rather, a temporary dwelling to earn money.

### **The Economy of Suspension**

Against the backdrop of pending expropriation, an informal economy flourished in the urban village.<sup>40</sup> The roads were often heavily congested with unlicensed taxis, moto-taxis, motor scooters, mini-buses, and bikes. Along the central road, stretching for a mile, stood numerous stores and shops, with or without licenses, satisfying all kinds of needs, including restaurants, fruit and vegetable stands, grocery stores, hair salons, clothing stores, supermarkets, drugstores and clinics, and stores for mobile phones and domestic appliances.<sup>41</sup>

On the streets, migrant shop owners utilized every opportunity to extend the physical reach of their shops. Food sellers, for example, used the place in front of their doors or around windows to cook. They also utilized the small front yard for extra seating. Moto-taxi drivers and unlicensed taxis

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<sup>37</sup> Sociologist Matthew Desmond has called attention to the neglected relationship between private rental housing and urban poverty in the United States. The urban poor tend to spend more than two-thirds of their income on rent, and the growing scale of eviction further constrains upward social mobility for the poor. Compared to the American urban poor, the self-inflicted status of suspension, rather than rental stress, better characterizes the housing predicament of migrant workers in Beijing. Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Frequent demolition and the construction of multi-storey buildings also led to estranged relations between the landlords and tenants in the village. Tzu-Chi Ou, "Low-End Accumulation: Spatial Transformation and Social Stratification in a Beijing Urban Village," *Positions*, forthcoming.

<sup>39</sup> Author's field notes, early 2008. I initially conducted field research in Yue village in 2007.

<sup>40</sup> To gain an ethnographic understanding of the informal economy, I lived in a rental unit, shopped for groceries, cooked, bought clothing, and rode moto-taxis in the village, as did other migrant tenants. Through daily activities, I built rapport and exchanged views with merchants and store owners. These daily encounters helped me capture suspension and extension in the dynamic of city making.

<sup>41</sup> In addition to retailers and storekeepers, there were two big compounds where most households processed and traded recycled scrap. A few small factories were scattered at the edge of Hua village.

occupied the crossroads at the centre of the village. Grocery stores displayed fruit and vegetables outdoors. Towels were hung up and air-dried in front of hair salons. Colourful buckets, stools, brooms, and dustpans piled outside of hardware stores. Migrant vendors and shopkeepers made use of such extensions to expand businesses and maximize their earnings.

These extensions were indispensable for running the informal economy. Several self-employed migrant workers living in Hua village told me that when they searched for houses to rent, a spare space for storing their tools, equipment, and materials was their first criterion.<sup>42</sup> Such space in formal urban residential areas would be expensive or simply unavailable. The extensions thus helped the migrant workers, vendors, and shopkeepers to provide cheap products and services. As a result, food prices in Hua village were as low as half or two-thirds of Beijing's average.<sup>43</sup>

The village committee played a crucial role in facilitating the spaces of suspension and extension. The committee profited from the buoyant economy through rent-seeking practices, such as charging stall fees and "hygiene fees." Inspections from higher levels were often reduced to a formality. The village committee usually notified vendors and shopkeepers beforehand so the latter could be prepared for the show. On the day of the inspection, all extended business locations suddenly vanished, whether they were carts with a bamboo steamer basket for buns, cooking pots and stoves for noodles, or outdoor seating and tables. The main road—which used to be busy, chaotic, and crowded by stalls, vehicles, and pedestrians—became wide and empty. A passing water truck dampened the dusty roads. No single vehicle dared to park on the street. And yet, soon after the team of inspectors left, sellers restored extensions without further ado. As usual, the smell of buns and noodles from bamboo steamers and cooking pots wafted on to the street. Moto-bikes and unlicensed taxis queued up and blocked the heart of the bustling village as if a few hours earlier no inspection had occurred. Through negotiations between the committee officers and the shopkeepers or vendors, the spaces of extension were kept in check.

The resulting uncertainty did have an obvious impact on the local economy. Businesses in the village changed hands at an extraordinarily fast rate. The signs "shop space ready for rent" were found everywhere. A hot pot restaurant on the main street, for example, changed owners three times in less than four months, between December 2013 and March 2014. Self-

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<sup>42</sup> Construction workers and home renovators extended their living spaces to the front yard or adjacent vacant lots to store cans of paint. Housebuilders, drivers, and vendors took up space around their houses to park their cars, trucks, or street food carts. The most representative examples were scrap recyclers, who made use of any spare space for processing recycled paper, wood, metal, or household appliances.

<sup>43</sup> For example, in 2014, a plate of pepper and beef over rice cost about RMB10 in Hua village, but it cost about RMB15 in a fast-food restaurant in the central city. Some migrants even complained that living expenses in their home counties were higher than in Hua village, especially clothing and daily necessities such as shampoo and cosmetic products.

employed migrant workers, street vendors, and shopkeepers, one after another, tried their luck at starting a small business in Hua village because barriers to entry were much lower than in the urban core, with its strict laws and regulations. A shop owner selling *liangpi*, Chinese cold noodles, in Hua village bluntly told me, “No license was required here. You can start a business anytime you want.”<sup>44</sup> The shop owners and vendors did not intend to run a long-lasting business in an urban village. The tenants looked to save as much as possible. Neither the vendors nor the customers appeared interested in having the roadside stalls “upgraded” into proper shops.

### **Between Resignation and Hopefulness**

In early 2014, a rumour circulated that the government planned to close the street open air markets in Hua village. I asked vendors what they would do if the government enforced the order. A vendor voiced their collective attitude: “Who knows? We just take one step at a time without knowing what comes next [*zouyibu suanyibu*].”<sup>45</sup> Almost two years after the rumour first circulated, at the end of 2015, the government finally took action. Given the unclear plans about demolition, the migrants avoided making any major decisions. Their reasoning was straightforward—if the urban village was fated to be demolished, what would be the point of differentiating rumour from truth? Instead, waiting and seeing was the most common strategy.

The mentality of “taking a step now without knowing the next” resonates with the temporality of suspension, which is characterized by an unknown length of time. Most rural-urban workers, bounded by the household registration system, migrated in the belief that they would eventually return to hometowns, like “falling leaves returning to their roots.” Unlike local villagers, ordinary migrant tenants were ineligible for compensation when their rental housing was demolished. On that account, any investment in the urban village home would “put renminbi [money] into a wasteful motion.”<sup>46</sup> Migrant tenants resigned themselves to temporary, makeshift housing in the urban village. The near future in the city then disappeared as they deferred decisions until the last minute.<sup>47</sup>

In the meantime, a vernacular developmentalism encouraged optimism about an elusive future. When I visited another urban village, where low-cost apartment buildings were ubiquitous, a seven-storey building with an elevator

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<sup>44</sup> Author’s field notes, 6 March 2014. The shop owner planned to familiarize himself with making and selling cold noodles in Hua village, and aimed to become a member of a famous *liangpi* chain store in downtown Beijing.

<sup>45</sup> Author’s field notes, 18 June 2014.

<sup>46</sup> I quoted from Lan Ying, a migrant worker whom we met earlier in this article. Author’s field notes, 27 September 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Jane I. Guyer, “Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 3 (2007): 409–421, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.3.409>.

impressed me. The friend who introduced and accompanied me to the village asked, “This village has progressed more than Hua village, right?”<sup>48</sup> To my friend, an elevator in an urban village indicated growth and progress. A linear time-space imagination of urban development mentally distanced the residents from their immediate surrounding in the urban village, as everything here and now was meant to vanish soon.<sup>49</sup> In making sense of their lives, the migrants either looked backward to the “undeveloped” countryside or looked forward to the “developed” urban areas.

Migrant workers were optimistic about what the demolition would bring to their lives. In the spring of 2017, about one-third of Hua village was torn down during a city-wide campaign to “disperse and release” [*shujie*] migrants from the capital. As I visited Liu Tao, a young IT programmer from Hebei Province, he was just moving out of one demolished apartment building to another in the same village. I asked him what he would do if the whole village were to be demolished. “Move outward,” he replied without thinking, meaning that he would move farther away from the city centre to the Sixth Ring Road, on the outskirts of Beijing. Then, I asked what he thought about the demolition. “This [demolition] is better,” he said. “Beijing should not have such a chaotic place. Both the traffic and public order are bad [here].”<sup>50</sup> His close friend, who was having dinner with us, echoed Liu Tao and added, “The city should look like a city. The countryside should have the look of the countryside.”<sup>51</sup> The urban village, as a non-rural and a non-urban place, has no place in these blueprints.

Migrants detached themselves from “the nearby,”<sup>52</sup> as if the demolition were unrelated to them. That allowed migrant workers to work, live, and long for a rosy future when facing another round of demolition and displacement. Rather than taking their personal pains as the starting point, migrants rationalized the demolition campaigns from the perspective of the state. Behind their hopefulness was a common reasoning that emphasized the importance of the “grand scheme” [*daju*]. Ordinary migrants stood by the state’s vision of developmentalism. The demolitions, small or big, they believed, would pave the way for progress.

## Conclusion

In this article I have examined the dynamic interactions between the Beijing landlords, the migrant tenants living in the makeshift housing, the village

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<sup>48</sup> Author’s field notes, 13 June 2014.

<sup>49</sup> As Biao Xiang noted, “‘near future’ disappears as people chase opportunities that are available at the moment.” Biao Xiang, this issue.

<sup>50</sup> Author’s field notes, 17 July 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Author’s field notes, 17 July 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Biao Xiang, this issue.

authorities, and the municipal government. The loss of government care prompted villagers to accumulate wealth through building illegal construction. Makeshift housing enabled migrant tenants to maximize their savings, and suspended them from a content urban life. Village authorities oscillated between turning a blind eye and cracking down, to balance growth and political pressure from the municipal or central government. The pendulum swung between ignoring and enforcing rules for migrant vendors, extending leeway in commercial spaces and expanding the informal economy.

The spaces of suspension were sustained—as well as constantly undermined—by multilateral relations that were highly fluid. Sometimes, landlords defied rules and discreetly constructed buildings. Sometimes, migrants seemed powerful enough to disregard regulations and utilized the grey zone to extend their territory. Sometimes, the government had the upper hand to crack down on illegal construction and the informal economy. Due to dynamic and fluid relations, the spaces of suspension offered no formal protection and hardly provided a basis for fostering lasting social relations. As the fruit stand in the article's introduction showed us, spaces of suspension can be temporarily eliminated, but then re-emerge. As such, the persistence of urban villages must be understood in both temporal and dynamic terms. Such dynamics on the margins of the city have characterized urban life in China over the past two decades.

*National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, April, 2021*