The Massive Death of China's Urban Villages

Stefan Al

Only a few "nail houses" remain on the site that was previously Dachong Village, one of the largest urban villages in South China, 2011 (cc) dcmaster/Flickr

As expanding Chinese cities engulfed their hinterlands, chengzhoncun*—villages within the city—became an affordable residential choice for migrants seeking jobs in burgeoning commercial and industrial centers, especially in the southeast of the country. Dense, chaotic and crowded, they are well-located and well-priced entry points for the workers at the heart of China's astounding growth. Now they are being torn down. Stefan Al argues that this leaves most of their former residents with a bleak set of options*.

In 2011, bulldozers tore down nearly the entire village of Dachong, destroying over 10 million square feet of village housing and evicting more than 70,000 residents, many of them migrants. In what was called one of the key urban "upgrades" of the decade, a vibrant community had been turned into a rubble-ridden demolition site. Only a few old trees, historic temples, and ancient wells were preserved, further accentuating the bleak new hole that formed amid the skyscrapers of Shenzhen.

Located inside the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, Dachong Village had become a prime real-estate location when it was engulfed by the explosive development of the surrounding city. Developers and government officials saw the village's adjacency to a new high-tech industrial zone as both a major nuisance and a business opportunity. Following the familiar *tabula rasa* approach to planning, the village would be subsumed into the anonymity of the surrounding city only after it was razed. Billboards with images of corporate office towers, a five-star hotel, and a colossal mall already provided an illustration of the future of the village on the demolition site. It was to be the largest redevelopment project of its kind in the Pearl River Delta, aspiring to become a national model for upgrading older urban areas.

A few families had refused to transfer their property rights, but after the district government approved the use of eminent domain (i.e. compulsory purchase), the remaining homes were razed as well. Those who had agreed to transfer their land rights were given more than RMB 100 million in compensation to sell their properties, propelling the former farmers into the *nouveau riche*: some of the villagers even made it to the ranks of RMB millionaires. But the thousands of evicted migrants had little or no housing alternatives, excluded from the social-housing system and priced out of the market.

China's Urban Villages

Dachong Village is just one of countless villages hemmed in on all sides by new urban areas, and is now being eliminated. But what the local people call a "village" is in reality an urbanized version of a village: an "urban village." Literally "villages within the city," or *chengzhongcun*, these are former agricultural villages that have been engulfed by the city.

In parallel to the surrounding urbanization, these villages have too become "urban," but in their own way. They no longer consist of the picturesque farms of rural China, but of high-rises so close to one another that they create dark claustrophobic alleys—jammed with dripping air-conditioning units, hanging clothes, caged balconies and bundles of buzzing electrical wires—crowned with a small strip of daylight, which locals call "thin line sky." At times, buildings stand so close to another they are dubbed "kissing buildings" or "handshake houses"—you can literally reach out from one building and shake hands with your neighbor.

Although it is easy to see these villages as slums, a closer look reveals that they provide an important, affordable, and well-located entry point for migrants into the city (Song *et al.* 2008). Yet most of these villages are on the brink of destruction, affecting the homes of millions of people and threatening the eradication of a unique urban fabric. For instance, a 2000 plan for Guangzhou mandated the destruction of all 138 urban villages in the city's central districts alone (Crawford and Wu 2014). It is the largest urban demolition in the world's history, but has so far been given little attention outside China.

Alternatives to Demolition

Total demolition is problematic in terms of its lack of proper substitutes. Not only does it erase the unique historical and cultural traces of the villages, but expensive redevelopment can also put pressure on the surrounding infrastructure. In addition, demolition eventually forces residents to resettle into suburban areas that have potential for trouble. China's 12th Five-Year Plan announced the building of 36 million affordable housing units by 2015, but most of them are located on the outskirts of the city. These are inferior alternatives to the urban villages, as they are a long commute from places of work, while their isolation from the city and their lack of social diversity suggests the gloomy prospect of them turning into ghettos, much like the *banlieues* in Paris.

Moreover, although many urban villages have dilapidated buildings, the people living in these homes are not the urban poor (Wu *et al.* 2010); they are productive, if politically disadvantaged,

citizens with jobs. The emergence of urban villages in China fits in with a worldwide trend of "urban informality" (AlSayyad and Roy 2004). Much of the world's urbanization occurs in the informal sector, outside institutional structures such as building regulations, zoning laws, or land tenure. Hundreds of millions of people around the world are excluded from formal housing, explaining the existence of the *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, the *barrios* in Mexico City, and shantytowns in India. Urban villages are anything but marginal; they are integral to an economy that relies on low value-added labor, created by the state's inability to provide adequate housing to millions of blue-collar workers, who play an important part in the economic development of China.

Finally, the poor condition of individual buildings in the urban village does not justify the eradication of the entire village area. Instead of demolition, China's urban villages could be treated like the older historical villages that some Western cities have had the foresight to incorporate into their greater urban fabric—places like Gràcia in Barcelona, or the West Village in New York City. Their irregular and small-grain urban fabric brings some welcome variety to the surrounding homogeneous city grid, while the small lots in these areas provide opportunities for smaller businesses. As in any city, buildings come and go, but streets, open spaces, and everything else that gives long-term identity to a place can be sustained and even integrated into the future of the city.

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