



POLITECNICO
DI TORINO

Honors thesis

ARCHITECTURE CONSTRUCTION AND CITY

Abstract

**Urban villages: A morphological narration of the rural-
urban negotiation in the city of Guangzhou**

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July 2017

An extensively researched phenomenon in recent years, the Chinese urban village, found only in coastal China, constitutes a unique form of socio-spatial configuration that materializes in the conflict between current urbanization processes and forms of development, against former languishing institutions in China.

In China's modernization, characterized by the radical expansion of cities led by the state's will towards integration with the global market economy, the term urban village refers to a peculiar form of urban development in which rural villages are being engulfed by the sprawling cities. The villages' rural identity as collective institutions in China's dual administrative system has permitted them to develop a certain inertia to redevelopment processes, resisting demolition, ensuring the survival of some who, now under the form of urban villages, spatially co-exist next to other forms of urban development, constituting new socio-spatial realities for the Chinese megalopolises. As distinct institutions, promoting different lifestyles and their substandard urban qualities, they are never fully incorporated by their host city and their relationship with surrounding urban spaces is not a harmonious one, leading them to exist in isolation from other urban spaces. Urban villages are notorious as migrant enclaves, due to their informal character they are able to provide rural migrant workers with a fertile ground on which to realize their livelihoods and their only choice for affordable housing once in the city. Under constant threat for demolition and redevelopment, it is widely considered that the unprecedented development of Chinese cities would have been impossible if not for urban villages.

Their denomination, self-contradictory in the still persisting view of the city as the opposition of country (Wachsmuth, 2013), cannot clarify whether this peculiar form of development belongs to the urban realm or to that of the rural, rather this geography can be better positioned in the interface between the two realms and can be viewed as the physical expression of a complex hybridization between urban and rural functions (McGee, 1991 cited in Roy, 2005). In the study of the urban village phenomenon, this rural/urban interface becomes dislocated, losing its former geographical identification in space (i.e. the outskirts of the city, the area where the city meets the countryside) (Roy, 2005), it can now be traced in the internal spatial structure of the city. In fact urban villages of southern China are equally distributed across the Chinese megalopolis, inside it or at its edges, making the city appear as a puzzle-like structure and the resulting collage of placing together fragments of different forms together (Secchi, 2000). This fragmentation is then further supported by the unique administrative character of such geographies, as institutions that exist beyond the regulatory power of the Chinese state.

This thesis will discuss the complex interaction established between the Chinese urban villages of Guangzhou and its host urban environment through the morphological narration of the urban village geography and the study of its formal adaptation to its current surrounding reality.

I consider urban villages as important sites for research due to their configuration as autonomous forms of socio-spatial organization, lying outside of the state's jurisdiction, giving its inhabitants the freedom to freely articulate their strategies and practices that might, eventually, ensure the village's survival and, possibly, even its future prosperity. As a grassroots administrative geography, I expect the urban village's morphology to present a certain grade of flexibility and adaptability, in stark contrast to the new urban realities of the Chinese city, formed under rigid top-down approaches and the strict regulatory control

of the Chinese state, the grade of which will be discussed in the morphological study of its space.

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