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Special Slums: Chengzhongcuns in China

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence and socio-economic dynamics of chengzhongcuns (城中村, “urban villages”) as a manifestation of social disorder within China’s rapid urbanization, driven by neoliberal reforms. It examines how chengzhongcuns developed as rural areas engulfed by expanding cities; the hukou (户口, “household registration”) system and land ownership policies from the Mao era continue to shape these spaces. Chengzhongcuns are not fully integrated into formal urban planning due to the unique land ownership system, where rural land remains collectively owned by villagers, unlike urban land, which is state-owned. This paper highlights the key differences between chengzhongcuns and slums in other developing countries, particularly how chengzhongcuns are legally distinct and intentionally maintained within the current land and governance framework rather than being a product of government failure. The socio-economic challenges faced by migrant workers in these spaces, especially the rise of the Sanhe dashen (三和大神, “Sanhe gurus”) subculture, further illustrate the marginalization and inequality within China’s urban economy. By situating chengzhongcuns in both local and global contexts of informal urbanization, this paper offers insights into China’s unique approach to urban development, emphasizing how the persistence of chengzhongcuns reflects broader patterns of social inequality in rapidly urbanizing countries.

Keywords: *neoliberalism, urbanization, hukou, chengzhongcun, Sanhe dashen*

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Special Slums: Chengzhongcuns in China

China's rapid urbanization, driven by neoliberal economic reforms, has led to the emergence of *chengzhongcuns* (城中村, "urban villages"), which exemplify the social disorder resulting from uneven urban development (Buckingham and Chan 2018). This paper explores how chengzhongcuns represent a critical intersection of neoliberal policies, urban disorder, and social inequality within China's political and economic context.

Researching chengzhongcuns, like many other urbanization issues in China, poses unique challenges due to the country's distinct development trajectory. Scholars, particularly those outside China, face several gaps in understanding this phenomenon. First, understanding chengzhongcuns requires a deep exploration of the historical, political, economic, and social backgrounds that contributed to their emergence. Second, this review will explore universal theories that help explain the dynamics of chengzhongcuns within the broader framework of urbanization and neoliberalism. Third, comparative analysis is used to identify similar urban phenomena globally, helping scholars from diverse contexts relate chengzhongcuns to other forms of informal urbanization.

This paper takes a scoping review approach to understand the existing literature on chengzhongcuns, focusing on their historical, socio-economic, and cultural aspects. The relevant literature for this review includes peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and influential books by established scholars. By organizing the selected literature thematically, this review creates a deeper understanding of how various historical, economic, and social factors have shaped the development of chengzhongcuns. This approach provides a comprehensive overview that offers a nuanced perspective on the socio-political dynamics influencing these chengzhongcuns.

Horizontally, this review uses a thematic and chronological analysis to highlight China's responses to Western influence, particularly through the adoption of neoliberal economic policies during Deng Xiaoping's leadership. Western neoliberalism inspired China to pursue market-oriented reforms to modernize and integrate the economy into the global market. These reforms triggered rapid urbanization, widened socio-economic gaps, and contributed to the distinct cultural identity of chengzhongcuns. Vertically, a comparative analysis highlights the differences in slum characteristics across developing countries and applies the 'twilight areas' concept from British cities to better understand Chinese chengzhongcuns.

This review aims to offer scholars, particularly those unfamiliar with China's unique urbanization processes, insights into the ongoing urban disorder within chengzhongcuns. Furthermore, by drawing parallels to global urbanization challenges, the paper provides valuable lessons for urban planners and policymakers seeking to improve conditions for marginalized urban groups, promote socio-economic integration, and develop more inclusive urban strategies.

A HEAVY LEGACY: ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AND URBANIZATION IN THE POST-MAO ERA

On September 9, 1976, Mao Zedong passed away, marking a pivotal moment in China's history. Domestically, Mao is regarded as the founder of the People's Republic of China and a leader who advanced industrialization (Kueh 1989; Robinson 1988). However, his policies, including the hukou system and various political campaigns, caused immense suffering and millions of deaths (Meng, Qian, and Yared 2015; Pye 1986; Wu and Treiman 2004).

Internationally, Mao's late-era diplomacy played a key role in China's future reforms. Following the 1969 Sino-Soviet conflict, Mao sought to ease diplomatic isolation, particularly by improving relations with the United States. This effort began with easing trade restrictions in 1969 and culminated in President Nixon's 1972 visit to China, resulting in the Shanghai Communiqué (Cowen and Sutter 1998; Radchenko 2009). In 1978, China signed a *Treaty of Peace and Friendship* with Japan. In 1979, the United States, under President Carter, established formal diplomatic ties with China, providing a strong geopolitical foundation for future reforms (Lee 1979).

Economically, China was entering a global environment increasingly shaped by neoliberalism and globalization. The 1970 "Nixon Shock," which ended the Bretton Woods system, marked the decline of Keynesianism and paved the way for free-market policies (Billa 1979; Bordo 2020; Zeiler 2013). In the 1980s, leaders like Reagan and Thatcher promoted neoliberalism, which helped China integrate into global markets (Harvey 2007). China's domestic reforms, including creating special economic zones in cities like Shenzhen and Zhuhai, further accelerated urbanization and economic growth (Chaolin, Liya, and Cook 2012).

In China, a dual-sector model similar to that proposed by William Arthur Lewis has emerged (Chan and Wei 2021). It comprises two sectors: a low-productivity, labor-intensive subsistence sector involving essential agriculture and services and a more advanced capitalist sector with higher productivity and wages, such as mining and construction (Gollin 2014).

However, the *hukou* (户口, “household registration”) system continues to regulate the labor movement from traditional to modern sectors, a structural legacy from the Mao era. Instituted in 1958, the State designed the hukou system to stabilize urban centers by categorizing the population as either rural or urban, effectively restricting rural-to-urban migration (Liu 2005). In tandem with China's planned economy, this classification system entrenched the rural-urban divide by tying rural residents to agricultural production through state-enforced quotas (Liu 2005; Zhang & Song 2003). While the hukou system once played a crucial role in maintaining social and economic order during the initial stages of industrialization, it now represents a significant impediment to labor mobility and economic reform, particularly in integrating rural migrants into urban labor markets and social services (Chan 2009).

Deng Xiaoping's ascent to power significantly shifted China's labor mobility and economic development approach. Post-reform, China opened its doors to foreign investment attracting Western industries, particularly in low-end manufacturing, to urban areas (Harvey 2007:135). This industrial shift necessitated an increased labor force prompting China to ease restrictions on rural-to-urban migration (Song 2014). In the early 1980s, the administration of the hukou system began to be decentralized, granting local governments more autonomy in setting hukou admission criteria and quotas within their jurisdictions (Song 2014).

In China, 12 of the 31 provinces (primarily in the eastern region) have removed the distinction between agricultural and non-agricultural hukou. Smaller cities have also simplified the process for wealthy investors, homebuyers, and formally employed individuals to acquire local urban hukou (Chan 2012). However, these reforms have had minimal impact on low-skilled and less-educated inter-provincial migrants from underdeveloped central and western regions. These migrants often face significant challenges in obtaining local hukou through investment or skilled migration routes at their destinations (Chan 2012). As a result, they represent a sizable portion of China's internal migration but remain primarily excluded from the benefits of the current hukou reforms.

At the same time, Deng Xiaoping promoted rural reforms, advocating for the household contract responsibility system, which the State officially implemented in 1982. This system, first adopted in agriculture in 1979, made households responsible for the profits and losses of their contracted land (Lin 1988). Since then, the State has characterized the land ownership system by the following: farmers act as a relatively independent economic entity, contracting collective land and other large production resources, and producing and operating independently according to their contracts. Except for a small portion of their operating income, which is paid to

the collective and state taxes according to the contract, all other income goes to the farmers (Krusekopf 2002). This reform transformed the previous collective farming model into a system where individual households manage their farming operations. Land use rights are allocated to each household through contracts, allowing farmers to manage production and distribution independently. However, the land remains collectively owned by all the villagers, preserving the communal ownership structure (Lin 1988).

Since the 1980s, China's urban redevelopment, particularly in older city areas, has resulted in extensive gentrification. This process typically relocates inner-city residents, often from Soviet-style Khrushchyovka[2] (Хрущёвка), to new housing on city outskirts, while transforming their original neighborhoods into commercial and high-end residential areas, often auctioned to developers (Cheng 2012; He et al. 2023; Zhang, Schoonjans, and Gantois 2023). This urban transformation, termed "state-centered triangular embedment" by He (2018), reflects a balance struck by an authoritarian regime influenced by neoliberal economics, amidst pressures from the state, market, and society.

Moreover, in addition to state-led urbanization, there is also informal urbanization. Like other developing countries, as the agricultural sector shrinks and rural off-farm economic activity declines, a large portion of the rural population leaves their homes and migrates to cities for work (Lanjouw and Lanjouw 2001; Zhang and Diao 2020). This migration stems from the spontaneous efforts of local villagers and migrant workers; a result of housing development and service provision that the State does not control or regulate. However, because of the hukou system, many of them, although able to move to urban areas, are, in fact, unable to acquire full urban residency status. (Chan 2012; Wang 2000; Wu 2006).

Overall, the historical background illustrates the evolution of China's policies from the Mao era to the period of economic reforms, including the establishment of the hukou system, and reforms, and the push for greater openness. These policy changes promoted economic growth and urbanization and created a significant urban-rural divide, profoundly affecting the position of rural migrants in urban areas. These historical factors are crucial for understanding the unique trajectory of China's urban development. These urbanization and gentrification processes eventually led to special gray areas in Chinese cities with characteristics similar to "twilight areas," a concept from British cities. These gray areas are characterized by a mix of old

[2] A Khrushchyovka is a type of economical apartment building, typically three to five stories high and constructed with concrete panels or bricks. These buildings were developed in the Soviet Union during the early 1960s under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev.

buildings, unauthorized new constructions, and the intermingling of industries and workshops (Medhurst and Lewis 1969). The demographics are heterogeneous and fluid, including young people from all over the country and older adults who remain in the area (Mellor 1973). Although not defined as slums in other parts of the world, they often function as slums in China. They can be viewed as China's "twilight areas."

CHENGZHONGCUN: THE TWILIGHT AREA IN CHINA

The emergence of slums is a pervasive phenomenon resulting from urbanization and neoliberal policy shifts in developing countries (Davis 2011; 2013; Marx, Stoker, and Suri 2013; Roy et al. 2014). Slums typically form when urban growth exceeds the capacity of formal housing and infrastructure, particularly in cities unable to manage unplanned development (Marx, Stoker, and Suri 2013). As rural populations migrate to cities for economic opportunities, poor governance and inadequate public services contribute to the rise of informal settlements, often in marginal areas where residents lack legal ownership (Davis 2006: 26).

In contrast, many studies have noted that the phenomenon of slums is not prevalent in most cities and towns in China despite the rapid urbanization that China has been experiencing. Some scholars, therefore, argue that slums do not exist in Chinese cities. They believe that this is the embodiment of China's "institutional superiority" and put forward "Chinese exceptionalism" based on the concept of "American exceptionalism" proposed by Tocqueville (Zhang 2013). For example, Zhang (2021) compares the slums in China and India from the perspective of comparative sociology; slums do not exist in China because the Chinese government has more protection for rural resources and assets, providing farmers with certain resource rights that contribute to realized self-development. Meanwhile, Zhang (2021) also points out the existing problem of "quasi-slums," which have the potential to degenerate into slums. Liu and Zhang (2020) and Chan (2007) make it clear that the reason there are no slums in China is not complicated: China’s poor do not live in officially defined cities but in *chengzhongcuns* (城中村, “urban village”).

With the implementation of China’s economic reform in the more than 30 years since the beginning of reform and opening-up in 1978, the geographical boundary between city and country began to break down. On the one hand, the rapid development of urbanization has gained increasing geographical space, which has put pressure on the cultivated land in the surrounding rural areas; on the other hand, the development of cities requires a large amount of labor (Guan et al. 2018). Some of these so-called chengzhongcuns are located in built-up areas of cities, while others are close to cities, but the extension of urban space eventually engulfs

them. As a result, some rural areas were surrounded or annexed by newly advancing urban territories, forming a distinct entity – chengzhongcuns, which means the “village-in-the city” in Chinese (Peng and Baek 2014).

Chengzhongcuns exhibit landscapes analogous to "twilight areas," a concept introduced by Medhurst and Lewis (1969). In examining the urban decline in British industrial cities, Medhurst and Lewis defined twilight areas as neighborhoods experiencing social and physical decline, where marginalized populations resided in spaces overlooked by formal urban planning. Mellor (1973) further elaborated on this concept, defining twilight areas as zones situated between slums and suburban districts characterized by social and economic obsolescence. These areas, though not physically degraded like slums, face serious issues such as overcrowding, stagnation, and inadequate infrastructure. They house marginalized populations, including low-income workers, immigrants, and the unemployed, who have limited housing options.

Mellor (1973) categorizes twilight areas into three distinct types: (1) zones in transition, where businesses encroach upon residential neighborhoods, leading to rising land values and displacement of the original population; (2) gray areas, which are densely populated areas that are not slums, yet suffer from poor living conditions; and (3) areas of special need, where a diverse, transient population struggles with inadequate housing management and a lack of social cohesion. The social fragmentation in twilight areas poses significant challenges for urban planning, as Mellor notes. These areas lack cohesive communities, with distinct groups competing for space and resources, making coordinated improvements difficult. Beyond physical decay, there are broader issues of poverty and inequality that redevelopment alone cannot resolve.

Roy (2005) further proposes the concept of "urban informality," arguing that such twilight areas are not merely challenges for urban planning but represent a core mechanism of urbanization. Rather than anomalies or peripheral zones, twilight areas exemplify a "state of exception" deliberately created and sustained by state planning to enable flexible governance (Roy 2005). Urban informality, as Roy contends, reflects a system in which legal and illegal, formal and informal, intertwine, allowing the state to enforce policies and allocate resources selectively. Neoliberal practices shape this selective governance. States, pursuing austerity measures, legitimize privatization and promote self-help models, thereby reducing direct state support and intervention (Jessop 2002; Roy 2005).

The "urban informality" mechanism became central to China's approach to managing these "twilight areas" following China's urbanization policies. Unlike in the Western world, China's unique political and economic system has made urban expansion without necessarily integrating rural settlements and populations into urban organizational structures (Chung 2009). In China, this mechanism of urban informality operates through the legacies of land ownership and the hukou system from the Mao era, which maintain a flexible and ambiguous governance framework. China's unique land ownership and land use rights are one of the major obstacles to urban annexation of the countryside. China practices "socialist public ownership" of land--ownership by the whole people and collective ownership by the working people. The country's land is divided explicitly into "urban land," which belongs to the state, and "rural land," which belongs to peasant collectives, except for land legally owned by the state (Lin and Ho 2005). From the perspective of land use rights, urban land use rights can belong to both the state and private. In theory, village owners collectively possess the right to use rural land, but in practice, the land is divided among each household (Ho 2001; Tang and Chung 2002). Once rural residents are converted into urban residents and their land is expropriated, they give up their ownership and right to use most of the land. Second, there are structural disparities in education and social insurance between rural and non-rural hukou residents. Rural hukou holders who want to attend urban schools have a higher threshold and may have to pay a fee to attend, as well as meet a series of conditions such as having an urban residence permit, paying social security for a certain number of years, and owning an urban property (Montgomery 2012; Zhou and Cheung 2017).

Much like the liminal nature of twilight areas (Mellor 1973), chengzhongcuns exist in a transitional state between rural and urban systems. The transformation of rural residents into urban residents creates a financial burden for cities, leading them to evaluate costs and revenues before annexation and often exclude areas considered less valuable (Guo 2001). Therefore, in the process of urban annexation of rural areas, there is a complex transfer of land ownership, right of land use, and hukou system. The land ownership status of chengzhongcuns in China can be roughly divided into three categories:

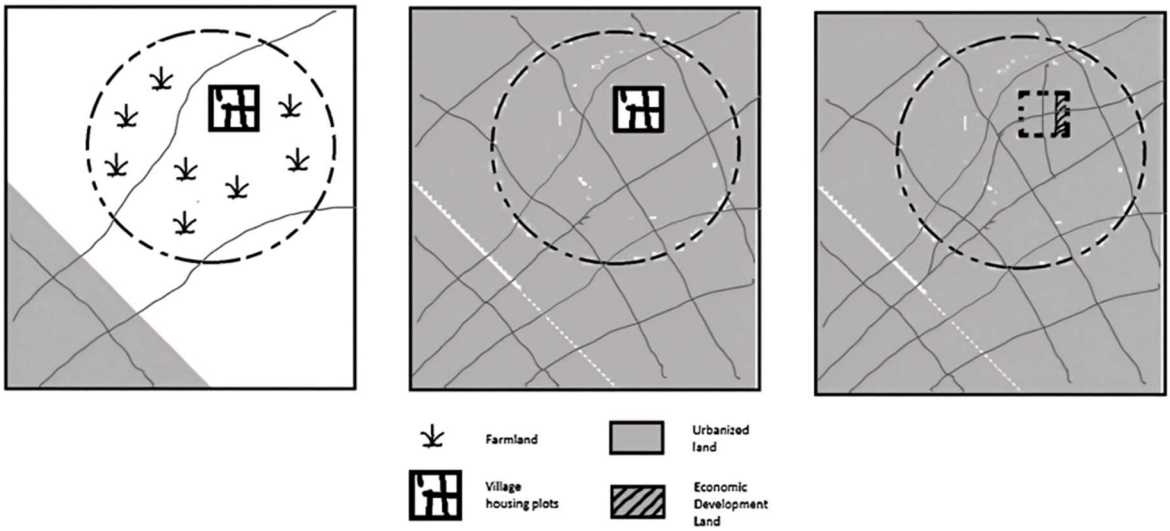
1. State-Expropriated Land. The state has expropriated land, eliminating collective land ownership among farmers. The city completely engulfs the villages, and original farmers are transformed into urban residents, though they retain traditional rural living habits. Experts broadly refer to this land as chengzhongcuns. These areas have been integrated into the city and are no longer targeted for chengzhongcuns transformation by the

government (Lai et al. 2014; Lai and Tang 2016; Wang, Wang, and Wu 2009).

2. Partially Requisitioned Land. Most of the land has been requisitioned in these cases, with ownership shared between the state and collectives. However, the original farmers have not transitioned to urban resident status (Lai et al. 2014; Tian 2008; Wang et al. 2009)
3. Collectively Owned within Urban Framework. These areas are included in the urban framework, but all land remains collectively owned (Tian 2008; Wang et al. 2009).

The situation of the latter two types of chengzhongcuns is commonly what the Chinese government intends to transform (Lai et al. 2014). Additionally, although chengzhongcuns are rural enclaves within the city (geographically), chengzhongcuns have become part of the city in structure. Often, these areas no longer have the character of agricultural land. People who used to live in the first type of chengzhongcuns received substantial compensation for demolition in other parts of the city (including ownership of multiple homes in other parts of the city), and the unemployed among them will also receive unemployment benefits (Wang, Wang, and Wu 2009). For the original residents of the latter two types of chengzhongcuns, after the government has requisitioned the farmland, the villagers still own the land for the homestead (collective construction land for building houses and their ancillary facilities) (Wang, Wang, and Wu 2009). Farmers are allowed to conduct non-agricultural activities on these lands and capitalize on them (Buckingham and Chan 2018; Sun and Ho 2018). Most will become wealthy landowners (Peng and Baek 2014). Figure 1 shows the transition from a village to a Chengzhongcun.

Figure 1. From a village to a Chengzhongcun



Source: Buckingham, Will and Kam Wing Chan. 2018. "One City, Two Systems: Chengzhongcun in China's Urban System." *Journal of Contemporary China* 27(112):584-595.

How did chengzhongcuns become China's special type of slum? Three primary factors contribute to the chengzhongcuns becoming de facto slums. As with twilight areas, chengzhongcuns face exclusion from formal urban planning processes, leaving them disconnected from the surrounding urban governance systems (Mellor 1973). First, although chengzhongcuns are spatially within urban boundaries, administratively, they are excluded from urban development planning and urban governance systems. Since some chengzhongcuns are not under the municipal government's authority, the city cannot directly manage and plan them. These chengzhongcuns became de facto independent kingdoms and were separated from urban planning and infrastructure development policies. However, due to the loss of arable land, the villagers rent out their old houses to migrant workers, while they often move to better new houses in other areas.

Much like the urban informality of twilight areas (Mellor 1973; Roy 2005), chengzhongcuns also operate outside formal governance as a deliberate state strategy. The local administrative system regards some chengzhongcuns as administrative villages; therefore, villagers' committees manage them.[3] Tang (2015) pointed out that the role of the newly formed neighborhood committees is mainly symbolic. The "villagers' committee" in chengzhongcuns

[3] Administrative villages are the smallest grassroots autonomous units in China's local administrative system. Their management organs are villagers' committees. See Guo and Thomas (2004).

has become the “landlords’ committee” -- their urban planning often involves the illegal construction of more houses, such as “small property rights housing,” which are not subject to government control or planning supervision, thus forming an informal housing market in chengzhongcuns (Liu, Yi, and Zheng 2018; Sun and Ho 2018). These chengzhongcuns often have harsh environments and poor sanitation. Illegal buildings are often too dense, and most of them do not meet the requirements of government building safety and fire protection (Liu et al. 2010; Tian 2008).

As seen in twilight areas (Mellor 1973), the marginalization of low-income residents also characterizes chengzhongcuns, where rural migrants face significant exclusion from formal urban systems. Liu and Zhang (2020) refer to the second factor in China's urbanization process as informal urbanization, which involves interprovincial immigration that has brought large numbers of people, primarily rural migrants, to cities in search of employment opportunities. Low-skilled people who come to work tend to opt for convenient and cheap accommodation (Tian 2008). Workers in manufacturing and construction often live in employer-provided dormitories or construction sites, while workers in low-paid informal jobs are provided accommodation in private rental housing (Tian 2008). Indigenous villagers, seeking financial gain from the increasing number of migrant workers in need of affordable housing, are inclined to capitalize on this opportunity by constructing and renting out houses in chengzhongcuns. However, the transfer of ownership to non-village residents is prohibited (Tian 2008). Chengzhongcuns’ low rent and location advantages have become their first choice for staying. Therefore, they have created an active but unregulated housing rental market that accommodates relatively low rents. Large numbers of low-income migrants live in illegally built housing, otherwise known as informal sectors (Zhang 2011).

The third factor is the gentrification process in China (He 2018). The process of outright urban annexation of rural areas involves compensation and resettlement of original rural residents, which makes urban governments want to develop these lands more quickly to reduce costs (Shin 2015). Additionally, the rapid increase in housing prices during urbanization has led city governments to favor constructing high-end residential and commercial buildings for greater economic benefits, a process in which they align firmly with real estate developers to amass substantial wealth (Kan 2021). As village houses and farmland are demolished to make way for upscale apartments and commercial buildings, the city’s new boundary extends to the edge of rural areas, continuing its expansion until new chengzhongcuns are formed, and the cycle

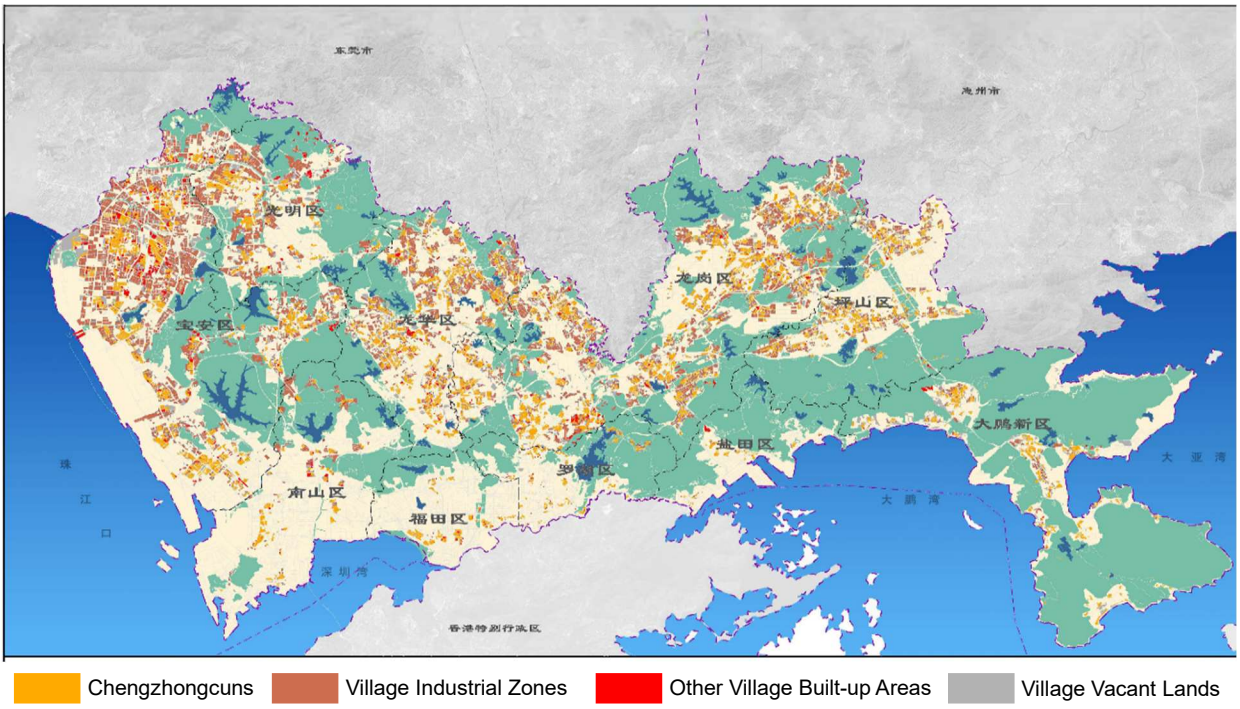
repeats. The migrants living in the original chengzhongcuns are forced to move to the new chengzhongcuns further away from the city (Buckingham and Chan 2018).

These factors lead chengzhongcuns to mimic the universal characteristics of slums. Neoliberalization policies in China have created around 100 million disenfranchised, displaced, and exploited rural migrants (Davis 2004:60). Shrinking public sector employment has led to the expansion of the informal sector, often a last resort for poor residents (Kombe 2001). In the slums, in order to protect its meager interests from other competing informal sectors, and due to the lack of forced labor rights, the informal sector often becomes a semi-feudal realm riddled with kickbacks, bribes, and other fraudulent activity (Davis 2004:185).

The chengzhongcun is home to lower-socioeconomic workers from all over the country and has become the natural soil for the development of the informal sector due to its unregulated characteristics and related social disorder (Zhang 2023). Most people in chengzhongcuns are low-income groups, and the restriction of spending power makes the internal economy of chengzhongcuns different from the outside cities (Li and Xiong 2020). In chengzhongcuns, small vendors can sell products that do not meet quality inspection standards at low prices, restaurants serve food without operating licenses, and many illegal hotels and internet cafes provide cramped but cheap accommodations (Bach 2010; Chung 2010; Kochan 2015).

There is both competition and cooperation among the informal sectors. The handling of these relationships is often rife with criminality (Lui and Chan 2022; He and Wang 2015). Violence, prostitution, drug abuse, and other incidents make chengzhongcuns into the “urban sores” of the city. (Zhang 2011; Zhong 2013). For example, the Shenzhen Municipal Government has identified chengzhongcuns in planning documents (see Figures 2 and 3) as unwelcome landscapes and hotbeds of social ills that hinder foreign investment and urban development (Hao 2015). Aiming for substantial economic benefits, underworld organizations in some chengzhongcuns have long controlled grassroots political power and interfered in reconstruction. These organizations rig elections through intimidation, violence, and vote-buying while also recruiting corrupt state officials as "protective umbrellas" to illegally dominate these areas (Cheng 2019; Tian 2008). People living in chengzhongcuns are generally affected by crime (e.g., economic vulnerability, violence, and sexually transmitted diseases), which can lead to legal charges and convictions for its inhabitants, potentially depriving them of the possibility of obtaining employment in the formal sector (Cheng 2019; Tian 2008).

Figure 2. Chengzhongcuns in Shenzhen



Source: SUPB. 2019. “Shenzhen Urban Village (old village) Master Plan (2019-2025).” Shenzhen, China: Shenzhen Urban Planning and Natural Resources Bureau.

Figure 3. Chengzhongcun Gangxia Village in Shenzhen

Source: https://kknews.cc/zh-sg/news/nrnkkvq.html

In addition, institutional constraints also play a role in the informal sector in chengzhongcuns. According to Amaral and Quintin (2006), in developing countries, the informal sector emphasizes low-skilled jobs because informal managers receive less external funding and choose to replace physical capital with low-skilled labor. Even if the labor market is perfectly competitive, there are systematic differences in the characteristics of formal and informal workers. In order to compete with the formal sector, the informal sector can only reduce costs to a minimum by lowering wages and avoiding additional expenses. Research by Jiang, Qian, and Wen (2017) shows that employers in the informal sector (especially those with rural or out-of-town hukou) are more likely to “opt out of social insurance” because of the cost. Informal employees in chengzhongcuns often hesitate to join social insurance schemes, as they perceive the protection offered to be inadequate and the additional financial burden of paying for social insurance to be too high (He and Wang 2015). Despite policy support, the informal sector is extremely difficult to convert into the formal sector, and low-skilled employees who refuse to join

the social security system make it virtually impossible to enter the formal sector (Reutersward 2005).

Chengzhongcuns, initially seen by marginalized immigrants as temporary havens offering affordable housing, have increasingly become inescapable swamps for low-skilled migrants (Chen and Jim 2010). The combination of skyrocketing urban housing prices, low wages, excessive work hours, and lack of social mobility impedes these migrants' transition to urban residency, leaving most to realize that their stay in chengzhongcuns is not transient but permanent (Bach 2010; Wang, Wang and Wu 2009). Most will realize they are stuck in these swamps forever, with no viable path forward or opportunities for economic advancement. This situation exacerbates class segregation, as urban spaces, products of social constructs, foster distinct cultural identities and deepen societal divisions (Fainstein and Campbell 2011). "Although the growing wage inequality has hurt both low-skilled men and women, the problem of declining employment has been concentrated among low-skilled men" (Wilson 2011:25). In this desperate atmosphere, low-skilled male immigrants created a new subculture group within chengzhongcuns – *Sanhe dashen* (三和大神, "Sanhe gurus") (Gong 2019; Peng 2021).

TRAPPED IN SWAMPS: SANHE GURUS AND TWILIGHT LANGUAGE

The word Sanhe comes from the name of the largest human resources company in the region. Many job agencies and labor dispatch companies, mainly "Sanhe Talent Market," have settled in the chengzhongcuns of Shenzhen, gradually forming a "job street" for the recruitment of general workers (Gong 2019; Peng 2021). Some job seekers stay here for a long time, forming a unique subculture group. Workers who escape from factory assembly lines, work primarily as daily paid temporary workers, and have no fixed abode are often jokingly called "Sanhe gurus" (Dong 2022). Some individuals, having sold their resident identity cards to illegal organizations for money, find themselves unable to enter legal factories or afford the fare home due to not having their identity cards (NHK 2018; Whitworth 2022:60).

For Sanhe gurus, chengzhongcuns "had become a ceaseless conveyor belt that looped back on itself; it sustained their life at the margins of existence but at the same time confined them there, not providing opportunities to move away or to change their precarious state" (Whitworth 2022:59). They navigate an informal world where daily survival is prioritized over long-term security, reinforcing their marginalization within the urban space (Dong 2022). Their choice to work in the informal sector is not necessarily voluntary but rather a reflection of their limited opportunities due to lacking legal documentation. The hukou system continues to regulate labor mobility, often preventing migrants from accessing urban benefits such as

healthcare, housing, and stable employment (Chan 2012). This exclusion from formal employment and social services mirrors the broader struggles of low-skilled migrants in China, who navigate informal housing, labor, and social networks to survive (Wu and Treiman 2004).

Academics often translate the term *dashen* (大神) as “gods” (Gong 2018; Huang 2019); however, in this context, I have chosen to use the Sanskrit-derived term “guru,” which closely aligns with the connotation of dashen. In Chinese slang, dashen commonly refers to people who have reached an elevated level in a particular field. Similarly, a guru in pan-Indian traditions is more than a teacher. They are revered guides who shape values, impart knowledge, and foster spiritual growth (Mlecko 1982).

In addition, gurus in pan-Indian philosophical texts use a form of "twilight language," akin to the obscure languages that are difficult for outsiders to understand (Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 2013:11). In chengzhongcuns, Sanhe gurus have also developed their own form of “twilight languages.” These unique terms reflect their way of life within chengzhongcuns. These "twilight languages" were created naturally and derived from life experiences in chengzhongcuns (Whitworth 2022). For instance, adhering to a belief in only accepting same-day pay jobs, they frequently use the internet slogan "one day for work, three days for play" (Dong 2022). Table 1 lists some of their commonly used slang terms:

Table 1. Common Slang Terms Used by Sanhe Gurus

Slang Terms	Meaning
Treasure Hunt/ Opening Treasure Chests (开宝箱)	Rummaging through the trash to find food and things to sell for money.
The Big Water （大水）	A cheap and high-capacity bottled water. People think drinking this water can relieve hunger.
Hang Up/ Hang-up （挂逼）	The symbolic concept of Sanhe gurus often refers to encountering a particularly difficult situation (in big trouble), such as being penniless and sometimes dying. But most of the time, it refers to a state of being basically penniless and having nothing to do. It could also be used as an adjective to describe the cheapest food or service to help "maintain vital signs" when the body is almost overwhelmed (See Figure 4), e.g., hung-up noodles, hung-up beds.
Haixin Hotel (海信大酒楼)	"Haixin Human Resource Market," the activity center of Sanhe Gurus. Because many Sanhe gurus sleep at the door of the "Haixin Building" at night.
Car Repair （修车）	Soliciting prostitutes
The Great Communal Bed （大通铺）	A flat area on which many Sanhe gurus sleep, usually a square or park.
Black/Shady Factory (黑厂)	Factories with terrible working conditions and not paying minimum wage.

Source: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1778563

Figure 4. A "hanging up" *Sanhe* gurus who fainted from starvation.

Source: https://auzhu.com/game/539041.html

Another reason for adopting the term “guru” is that the values and lifestyles of Sanhe gurus resonate with more young people who are dissatisfied with reality (Kan 2013; Li and Cheng 2023). They are hailed (both seriously and playfully) by young people as exemplars in life. Under the background of the domestic economic downturn, the difficulty of class mobility caused by the fixed social class, and the harsh treatment of employees by capitalists, more young people have joined the construction of this subculture out of disappointment with the real environment (Kan 2013; Li and Zhu 2017; Ngai and Chan 2012). Young people began to pursue a new way of life: not buying a house, not falling in love, not marrying, not having children by maintaining a minimum standard of living, and refusing to be exploited by Chinese capitalists (Di 2023). With the China real estate crisis, the acceleration of the declining birthrate, and population aging, urban pessimism pervades China's young people (Bai and Lei 2019; Chiang, Hui, and Chen 2021; Gupta and Kaur 2023; Liu, Xing, and Zhang 2020).

DISCUSSION

Chengzhongcuns are a unique hybrid space in urban theory, shaped by neoliberal forces, urban informality, and the persistence of informal urbanization. These urban villages

emerged during China's rapid urbanization, driven by reforms that accelerated city development. However, chengzhongcuns occupy an in-between space—neither fully rural nor urban, neither entirely formal nor informal (Buckingham and Chan 2018). This blurred status highlights the tension between China's top-down urban expansion and the influence of rural governance and land ownership (Lin and Ho 2005).

Chengzhongcuns illustrate the impact of neoliberal reforms, which emphasize market-driven growth, leading to uneven urban development and marginalizing low-skilled migrants in informal labor and housing (Harvey 2007). The hukou system further exacerbates exclusion by limiting rural migrants' access to urban services like healthcare and housing (Chan 2012). Gentrification has also isolated chengzhongcuns, reinforcing their status as informal spaces with precarious labor and substandard living conditions (He 2018). This system is similar to Medhurst and Lewis's (1969) concept of "twilight areas," zones in transition facing social and economic decline.

Roy's (2005) concept of "urban informality" demonstrates how informal practices are integral to state strategies, allowing selective tolerance to maintain control. Roy (2005) also explains how reduced state intervention under neoliberal policies exacerbates inequality and exclusion. These theories highlight the challenges of managing urban informality under neoliberalism, where the state leverages informality for flexibility but fails to address social inequalities. The Chinese experience with semi-regulated urban informality reveals significant challenges, including persistent inequality, exclusion from formal services, and governance issues. Managing chengzhongcuns demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining social stability while keeping marginalized populations outside formal urban systems, underscoring the negative consequences of selective integration and the limitations of informal governance structures in addressing urban inequality.

The long-term existence of chengzhongcuns shows they are far from temporary. Despite reforms, rural migrants still face significant barriers to becoming full urban residents, primarily due to the hukou system (Chan 2012). While China's neoliberal economic model drives rapid growth, it also entrenches inequality. Chengzhongcuns have become a permanent feature of the urban landscape, reinforcing these disparities (Liu and Zhang 2020). For the Chinese government, maintaining chengzhongcuns is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these areas provide affordable housing and a flexible labor force; on the other, they highlight the challenge of managing semi-informal spaces outside formal urban governance. This creates

ongoing issues with infrastructure, sanitation, and crime, reflecting broader themes of social disorder that are a critical focus of this paper (Whitworth 2022; Zhang 2021).

While the primary focus of this paper is on the chengzhongcuns within China, similar phenomena of informal settlements exist worldwide, often influenced by global economic trends and domestic governance policies. For instance, the existence of informal settlements like favelas in Brazil or slums in India highlights how neoliberal reforms and rapid urbanization contribute to marginalized communities across different political and social environments (Ren 2018). Unlike chengzhongcuns, which are partly integrated into the state's governance system, informal settlements in other nations often reflect government neglect and a hands-off approach (Roy 2011).

The lesson from China's experience for other countries is the need to balance urban development with social and environmental considerations. To avoid the adverse outcomes of China's rapid urbanization, other countries should aim for a development model that integrates both urban and rural needs, emphasizing equity and sustainability. A balanced approach is crucial to prevent issues like rural decline, environmental degradation, and social inequality (Li et al. 2018). Instead of focusing solely on economic growth and urban expansion, countries should foster comprehensive urban policies that address the needs of all urban and rural residents. This means promoting inclusive urban planning that integrates informal areas into formal governance structures, improving living conditions and providing equal access to essential services (Guan et al. 2018). By learning from China's challenges, other nations can pursue sustainable urbanization that not only supports economic growth but also promotes social stability and environmental health.

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