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# Chéngzhōngcūn (China)

From Global Informality Project

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Chéngzhōngcūn 🇨🇳



**Location:** China

**Definition:** Rural villages encircled by rapidly expanding urban settlements

**Keywords:** China – East Asia – Urban – Land – Migration – Poverty – Informal settlement

**Clusters:** Informal dwelling – Market

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The Chinese term *chéngzhōngcūn* (城中村), literally ‘village within the city,’ also translated as ‘village in the city,’ ‘village amid the city’ or, more commonly, as ‘urban village’ (Tian 2008; Zheng et al. 2009; Song and Zenou 2012; Wu et al. 2014), refers to rural villages that have, as a result of the dramatically fast urbanization process of the last four decades, been encircled by expanding urban settlements. Turned into rural-urban hybrid settlements without the direct involvement of the state, urban villages have mushroomed around most large cities across China, becoming the preferential settlements for low-income internal migrants and the urban poor.

Although official information about the amounts and spatial distribution of *chéngzhōngcūns* is rare and often not publicly available, a substantial literature has documented the emergence and evolution of many urban villages in large Chinese cities since the launching of the opening up reform (1978). Official data exist for Guangzhou and Beijing metropolitan areas, which respectively counted 138 and 876 *chéngzhōngcūns* as of 2008 (figures cited by Zhou 2017; Zheng et al. 2009; Wu 2016). In other provincial capitals such as Wuhan and Kunming, 147 and 288 urban villages have been identified (Liu and He 2010). In Shenzhen, the total number of *chéngzhōngcūns* was estimated as 241 in 2005 (Song and Zenou 2012; Wang et al. 2009), while in Zhuhai my research has identified 177 urban villages, mostly located outside the city proper.

Within Chinese extended metropolitan regions (McGee and Greenberg 1992), three types of urban villages can be distinguished according to their location (Wang et al. 2009):

- those located in the central built-up areas (城中村, *chéngzhōngcūn*);
- those lying on the fringe of Chinese big cities (城边村, *chéngbiāncūn*); and
- those situated in suburban areas or industrialized towns (城外村, *chéngwàicūn*).

The distance from the city core of each of these three types of urban village has determined the pace and time of their urbanization and development path: those closest to the central built-up area of the fastest developing cities have been swallowed up earlier and have been upgraded faster than those located at the rural-urban interface and in suburban areas.

Although they share many features with shantytowns, favelas and *desakotas* (McGee 1991), *chéngzhōngcūns* are a specific phenomenon of modern urban China. Their emergence is an outcome not only of rapid urbanization but also of the



A thread of light between two 'kissing' buildings in an urban village in Guangzhou, Guangdong province. December 2016 Source: AUTHOR. © Cinzia Losavio.

Maoist legacy of a rural-urban dual society. Following its foundation in 1949, the People's Republic of China established a dual system of production and a dual institutional structure, differentiating the urban and rural populations by means of the *hùkǒu* (户口), the household registration system, and separating urban and rural areas. This superimposed dual structure determined the land property system: rural land became collectively owned by villagers while urban land was left in the hands of the state. Starting in 1978, China entered a new era of market-oriented economic reforms; even so, its rural-urban dual structure remained intact. Conversely, the shift from a planned to a market-oriented economy triggered rural-to-urban mobility and transformed the country's land into a tradable commodity.

As cities expanded, municipal authorities became interested in accumulating land resources by expropriating rural land at a low cost and selling it to developers at a high margin (Yeh and Li 1999; Hsing 2010). The rural land

requisition process differed from city to city (Tian 2008). In megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai, local governments mostly used a top-down approach, which consisted in seizing all *chéngzhōngcūn* rural land (farmland and construction land), and proceeding to the complete demolition and reconstruction of urban villages. In the Pearl River Delta (PRD) and in Special Economic Zones (SEZ) such as Shenzhen and Zhuhai, where villagers' collectives have greater power, local governments engaged in large-scale annexation of farmland only, thereby making land available for development while minimizing compensation for expropriated



villagers. Therefore, rural collectives managed to keep their rural residential land (宅基地, *zháijīdì*) and, in some cases, the village's spare land (留用地, *liúyòngdì*) that could be used for collective purposes, public facilities and industrial and commercial uses (Wang 2017). While keeping their juridical status of rural villages, these rural knots have gradually been sewn into the urban fabric, being converted into 'villages within the city.' In other words, although they have been geographically integrated into sprawling metropolises and surrounded by modern districts and skyscrapers, *chéngzhōngcūns* retain the collective ownership of rural land as well as their original management model, being administered



An urban village in Guangzhou city core being swallowed up by urban encroachment. A group of migrant tenants was still living in what was left of the village before being expelled. Guangdong province. December 2016. Source: AUTHOR. © Cinzia Losavio.

independently of the city governments.

Since the 1980s, the soaring internal mobility of the rural labour force towards the coastal cities and the freshly established SEZ sharply increased the demand for affordable housing in urban areas. However, migrants' housing needs could not be satisfied either by the state, whose subsidized housing is made available only to local urban citizens, or by the formal urban housing markets, where commodity prices have been rapidly increasing. *Chéngzhōngcūns* soon became an available settlement option. Deprived of their farmland and precluded by their low education level from finding new job opportunities in the urban labour market, most indigenous villagers in *chéngzhōngcūns* decided to turn their attention to property-related business. Even though villagers' housing is for personal use only, they still decided to enlarge them, by adding floors and extra rooms with the

purpose of renting them to low-income migrants. Ever since, the villagers' agricultural income has been replaced mainly by property rental revenue and urban villages have turned into affordable shelters for rural-to-urban migrants, helping to relieve pressure on the municipalities by providing them with urban accommodation.

Meanwhile, non-residential buildings such as factories and commercial facilities have also been developed in *chéngzhōngcūns* – especially those located in the PRD region – attracting foreign investment that has helped to create suitable industrial areas. Some of the so-called world factories (that is, labour-intensive manufacturing industries producing goods mostly for the world market) are actually located in *chéngzhōngcūns* (Lin 2006; Wang et al. 2009; Hao et al. 2012). Therefore, many migrants have found in urban villages not only a cheap place in which to settle but also a convenient place to work and live.



Walking through an urban village's alleyways in Zhuhai, Guangdong province. March 2017. Source: AUTHOR. © Cinzia Losavio.

Since *chéngzhōngcūns*' economic and infrastructural development as well as local management and public services are independent of the urban planning framework, most urban villages are characterized by low-quality, chaotic living environments, high population density and spatial congestion. *Chéngzhōngcūns*' public facilities are generally inadequate and poorly maintained, their narrow alleyways do not meet basic fire and transport regulations, and their public roadways are crisscrossed by haphazardly intertwined electricity and telecommunication wires, as well as by substandard water, gas and sewerage pipelines. Furthermore, the design and construction of buildings in urban villages do not meet the same development procedures, regulations and building



standards imposed by the urban planning system (Hao, *et al.* 2011; Hao *et al.* 2012; Chen 2019). As a result, unauthorized floors and other constructions are built neglecting height safety codes and security distances at such high densities as to be designated ‘handshake’ (握手楼, *wòshǒulóu*) or ‘kissing’ buildings (接吻楼, *jiēwǔnlóu*) (Zou and Jie 1996; Bach 2010). Because of the poor living environments and unhygienic conditions of urban villages, as well as their relatively high crime and prostitution rates (Dong and Cheng 2017; Z. Liu and Lo 2019), municipal governments see *chéngzhōngcūn* as a source of major problems for the development of modern cities. They would rather take control of these messy areas in order to ‘regenerate’ them and especially to recapture their incremental – though yet nominal and for now restricted to villages’ collectives – land value (Tian 2008; Liu *et al.* 2012; Lin *et al.* 2015). Hence, local authorities have repeatedly tried to introduce and reinforce regulations in order to put an end to illicit activities and the rising informal housing market (小产权, *xiǎochǎnquán*) set up in *chéngzhōngcūns*. However, the more the government tries to assert discipline in urban villages, the more indigenous villagers, who have rapidly learned entrepreneurial skills, find new tricks to circumvent the new regulations, to hold onto their land, and to maximize their profits. The result has been a more vigorous intervention by municipalities which have launched urban village renewal policies. In the last two decades, hundreds of *chéngzhōngcūns* across China have been the object of complete or partial redevelopment projects, provoking on-going negotiations over compensation between urban authorities, real-estate developers and indigenous villagers (Li and Li 2011; Lin *et al.* 2015; Zhou 2017; Wu *et al.* 2013; Wu *et al.* 2018).

Even though many researchers have highlighted the importance of *chéngzhōngcūns* in providing low-income migrants with affordable rental housing (Song *et al.* 2008; Hao *et al.* 2013; Wang *et al.* 2010) and helping them to gradually adapt to urban life (Wang *et al.* 2009; Liu and He 2010), migrant tenants – whose numbers are far greater than those of local residents – are being completely excluded from the redevelopment process of urban villages and pushed away from the urban core. The *chéngzhōngcūns*’ regeneration is not only exacerbating migrants’ problems in finding affordable housing in urban areas, it is producing a wave of gentrification that reinforces the social exclusion of low-income migrants from the cities that they helped to build.

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