

FROM DIVISION TO FUSION

A TRANSFORMING MODEL OF CHINESE URBAN-RURAL INHABITATION

JIEQIONG WANG

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A great shift of human population from rural environments into cities has caused worldwide political and security issues. This movement has engaged, and will continue to affect, as much as one third of the world's population. One of the most striking results is the creation of a distinct urban space – the village in the city. Unlike squatter settlements in most developing countries, the housing of migrant workers in China is exclusively restricted to informal rentals in Villages-in-the-City (ViCs), which causes them to continually change locations. This dynamic relationship between migrant workers and their living place is based on three factors: the physical environment, interpersonal relationships, and a high-mobility lifestyle. Understanding scales of place can then serve as alternative guidance for architectural intervention in order to rethink the form of ViCs.

In Doug Saunders's recent book, *Arrival City* (2010), he claims that we will end this century as a wholly urban species. So far we have seen a great shift of the human population out of rural areas and into cities, and this has already caused worldwide political and security issues. This movement has engaged and will continue to affect an unprecedented number of people, perhaps up to one-third of the world's population (Saunders, 2010). In this context, the unique Chinese rural-urban migration phenomena have also raised international concerns, but from a different perspective. While this movement has caused severe affordability problems for housing authorities, it has stimulated the formation of a distinct urban space in Chinese metropolises – Villages-in-the-City (ViCs).

Unlike squatter settlements in most developing countries, these ViCs are “owned” by ex-peasants who lost their farmland during rapid urbanization. These ViCs also accommodate the rural-to-urban migrant workers, who now outnumber the indigenous ex-peasants. However, compared to these indigenous ex-peasants, new migrant workers lack power and do not have the legal rights to own self-help housing due to the Hukou registration system. Under the restrictions put in place by this system, housing for migrant workers in China is restricted to informal rentals in ViCs, which therefore forces migrant workers to continually change locations. As a result of these factors, migrant workers are forced into a high-mobility lifestyle, which has earned them the name “floating population” (Wu, Zhang et al., 2014). Experiencing extreme overcrowding and having long been considered blemishes on the face of the Chinese metropolis, the ViCs that accommodate this “floating population”

are at a crossroads of redevelopment. While developers and authorities are attempting to rapidly demolish them, urban designers and architects are proposing various architectural interventions to save these informal enclaves. However, many of these approaches would conceal the villages (thereby segregating migrants) or replace them (thereby gentrifying the urban spaces).

These differing approaches bring up other questions about the future of the villages. For example, how should the large number of displaced workers be rehoused during the redevelopment, and how can a redesign of the villages positively impact the workers' futures? Furthermore, what voice do these workers have in the future of their adopted city?

The Hukou registration system was implemented in the 1950s, to restrict the number of residents in urban area. Only those born with local Hukou can have access to social resources, which directly affects one's living opportunities.

Historically, decisions regarding the management of ViCs have been driven by social and economic advancement priorities. However, given the importance of place attachment to these spaces, city managers should instead consider the management of ViCs from an architectural point of view. Although the concept of place attachment has been discussed in North America and Europe for decades, place attachment is largely context-based. For instance, in North America,

place attachment has been primarily discussed in the context of neighborhoods and a sense of community. New Urbanists attempted to design pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods in order to foster social interaction and create a greater sense of neighborhood attachment. Joongsub Kim and Rachel Kaplan have conducted research that found place attachment is highly dependent on the aesthetics of a community. Therefore, the urban designers' and architects' perspectives on reenvisioning ViCs becomes highly important for the reinforcement of this place attachment (Kim & Kaplan, 2004).

Alternatively, place attachment discussions in Europe have been focused on a broader and more dynamic urban context, which better addresses the relationship between high-mobility lifestyles and place attachment. For instance, in Robert Feldman's (1990) work, he finds that in a society, attachment to a type of settlement remains strong, even in high-mobility settings. In the same vein, Gabriel Moser (1990) has conducted empirical research in Paris based on Feldman's study, finding that residential attachment is associated with satisfaction with the physical environment, establishment of local interpersonal relationships, and the ability to periodically escape from everyday life or the social relationship system. In the case of Chinese ViCs, the mobility of migrant workers lies on two levels: their everyday commute from ViCs to the city, and their frequent change of rented houses and locations. In this respect, Maria Lewicka's work on how mobility leads to different forms of place attachment offers a more pertinent reference. Her categorization of the alienated people who are alienated from both residential and social surroundings (Lewicka, 2013) is particularly representative of migrant workers in Chinese ViCs.

This essay will explore the dynamic relationships between migrant workers and ViCs based on these theories of place attachment. Moreover, it aims to look at what scales of place within a ViC are appropriate for the floating population's community attachment so that it can serve as an alternative guidance for proper architectural intervention. Such interventions can thereby reshape the existing form of ViCs, and thus create a better future for the floating population.

PHYSICAL DIVISION

Since China's Economic Reform in the 1980s, which caused a system shift from a planned economy to a market economy, rapid urbanization has driven a great tide of migrant workers from rural areas to metropolitan areas in Southeast China. These rural migrant workers came to seek a better life, but due to the high rental prices in the city and the restrictions of the Hukou Registration system, they were displaced to the periphery of cities instead of settling closer to the urban core (Zhang, 2001; Wu, Zhang et al., 2014). This situation stimulated the emergence and prosperity of the informal urban enclaves, or ViCs, which are the remnants of previously agriculturally based villages that were surrounded, but not redeveloped, as cities expanded. As local housing authorities lack enough money to relocate these indigenous ex-peasants after they have expropriated the farmland, such ViCs have become temporary enclave settlements, facing the risk of being demolished as soon as funding for removal is secured by authorities.

At the same time, to maintain the city image, ViCs have been concealed and walled off from the city, with only discreet entrances for people



FIGURE 1
ANDONG LU | THREE DISCREET ENTRANCES FROM THE CITY TO THE VILLAGE

to engage with the city (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). Through this physical segregation, visitors and even urban residents hardly notice the existence of ViCs. For people living in the ViCs, indigenous ex-peasants are able to retain their productive rural lifestyle that relies little on a connection to the city, but the migrant workers who work in the city have to commute through the invisible entrances every day. In this sense, it is the migrant workers that are experiencing

this spatial segregation between city and village each day.

Moreover, this spatial division also exists within the ViCs. The collective land system in villages gives the indigenous ex-peasants ambiguous rights to build their houses on the land that was allocated to them (Hao, 2014). By taking advantage of this ambiguity, indigenous ex-peasants have seized on a



FIGURE 2
ANDONG LU | THE INTENSIFIED LIVING SPACE IN A ViC

prosperous opportunity to occupy the vacant land surrounding their houses, driven by the great demand of renting rooms from migrant workers. During this phase, the indigenous ex-peasants have extended the space of their houses by occupying public spaces. Gradually they began to fence around the occupied public space to claim their ownership. This practice transformed the original scattered and flowing spatial form of villages into a highly covered and enclosed form.

Further driven by this great tide of displaced migrant workers, indigenous ex-peasants began to either cooperate with developers speculating on "their land," or self-reconstruct their houses into remarkably high-density rooms for renting (Figure 6). In this sense, ex-peasants have become quasi-developers and landlords. In this phase they started to speculate on land values by adding additional stories to their houses. Concurrently, with the intensification of living spaces and the worsening of living conditions, ex-peasants started to move out of their own houses. Their houses became complete

commercial products for renting. Usually a house can be shared by several migrant families, with each family renting a room. As scholar Pu Hao pointed out, ViCs have gone through three spatial development phases during this process: total area coverage, densification, and intensification (Hao, 2014). The transformation of spatial forms also reveals the physical segregation between local indigenous ex-peasants and migrant workers. First, indigenous ex-peasants have occupied the original public spaces to build additional substandard rental housing, which means migrant workers are mostly accommodated in houses that are physically separated within the original structure. Second, through densifying their houses and increasing the number of rooms available to migrant workers, the indigenous ex-peasants have earned enough capital to move out of one neighborhood in the ViC and relocate to a less crowded one.

In sum, the divisions within these cities occur on three scales: separation of ViCs and the city, separation within neighborhoods, and separation within dwellings. The physical division separates migrant workers from both urban residents and indigenous villagers. The separation of migrants from urban residents is primarily due to the lack of affordable housing, while the separation of urban residents and indigenous villagers is due to the lack of a "legal" right to build their own houses, forcing the villagers to rent. This also leads to the migrants' worsening living conditions, because their high-mobility lifestyle furthers overcrowding and discourages infrastructure investment.

However, when the ultimate goal of an architectural intervention is to foster place



FIGURE 3
ANDONG LU | THE BUILDING "WALL." STREET VIEW FROM OUTSIDE THE VIC



FIGURE 4
ANDONG LU | THE WALL. VIEW FROM INSIDE THE VIC

attachment, under these circumstances how do migrant workers obtain an identity in such a separated host city? In Breakwell's (1996) model, he identified continuity, place-congruence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness as five principles for an individual to gain identity in a place. Drawing on this model, continuity and place-congruence are based on the comparison between their host city and their hometown. In this sense, the physical segregation in ViCs may hinder migrant workers' development of identity in the host city as compared to their hometown.

Furthermore, Lewicka's (2010) research in Poland finds that scale of place also influences the strength of place attachment depending on three main variables: the physical environment, social factors, and demographics. More specifically, physical variables accounted most

for attachment to building and to neighborhood, while effects of social factors (neighborhood ties and sense of security in a district and neighborhood) accounted for attachment to buildings, neighborhoods, and city districts. The effects of demographic variables were less consistently related to scale of place.

Lewicka's findings have been partly verified by Cecilie Andersson's (2012) work on Chinese ViCs. Based on her in-depth observation and interviews, Andersson concludes that migrant workers' attachment to a dwelling and to a ViC neighborhood is temporal and transitional, which is far from the image of a secure home. Her findings also have raised another crucial aspect that influences migrant workers' place attachment – their social relations in the host city.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

In many cases, migrant workers who have been physically segregated due to housing policy are also excluded from formal social resources. Many migrant workers primarily rely on people from their same hometown when they first arrive in a host city. However, because of their similar backgrounds and simple ways of gathering information, they are generally constrained to take jobs which are dangerous, low-paid, and less prestigious. Despite their indispensable role in urban development, migrant workers have always been isolated within the urban sphere because of their lack of formal education and rural behaviors. As in Britain in the 19th century, urban residents rarely have personal encounters with these migrants (Friedmann, 2005). As a result they rarely develop interpersonal relationships with urban residents.

Concurrently, migrant workers are seen as “outsiders” and are socially marginalized by indigenous ex-peasants, though these indigenous ex-peasants used to have similar rural behaviors as the migrants (Wu, Zhang et al., 2014). This disconnection is primarily due to the highly mobile lifestyle of migrant workers. First, it is difficult for migrant workers to develop stable and normal relationships with their landlords when they frequently change living locations. Second, their high mobility also undermines migrants’ reputation as credible renters. In some cases, they are even considered potential criminals. Third, frequent changes in employment force frequent moves between villages, breaking social supports that were formed within the village between migrant workers from the same hometowns, and preventing a strong place attachment between migrant workers and their newly adopted ViCs. Thus, migrant workers in Chinese ViCs are isolated by local residents from both the cities where they work and the ViCs where they live due to a lack of stable social networks. Moreover, without local Hukou (a “legal” identity) these migrant workers are in many cases outside the social security system. This impacts their basic working rights in two senses. First, they are not protected by laws when discharged by employers, which makes their work conditions unstable. Furthermore, this abuse of rights puts migrants’ lives at risk, especially when they are facing dangerous jobs and disastrous workplace accidents (Wu, Zhang et al., 2014). In this regard, they are not only suffering from social isolation, but also from employment instability and insecurity.

As a result of social isolation, these migrant workers gradually change their old behaviors and activities to adapt themselves to the isolated and unstable ViC lifestyle. For instance,

instead of spending time with friends or families at home after work, they choose to stay in an internet café. Instead of engaging in various informal local activities, they choose to have cheap foot massages, and instead of fighting for their rights, they choose to walk away when facing conflicts (Yi Liu & Wan Xiang, 2014). For these migrant workers, the concept of “home” or “neighborhood” has changed greatly from their rural hometowns. In this respect they can hardly obtain a feeling of worth, and they struggle to meet situational demands within ViCs. This inhibits them from developing self-esteem and self-efficacy as described in Breakwell’s model of identity.

Thus, it is obvious that migrant workers can hardly develop their attachment to ViCs because of both physical divisions and social isolation. However, for these migrant workers ViCs are merely a transitional living place where they are displaced for a period of time. Workers still have their initial ambitions to be embraced by the city (Andersson, 2012), and by living transitionally in ViCs they are preparing for that next step in their settlement. In this respect ViCs are actually arrival cities for these floating populations, and therefore function as a social mobility path for them. It is understandable that neither this scale of dwelling nor this scale of neighborhood is the right place for migrant workers to develop spatial attachment.

EXAMINING IMPACTS OF POPULATION GROWTH AMID INSECURITY

For decades migrant workers have struggled to fit in between ViCs and the city, though they have gradually accumulated wealth and social



FIGURE 5
ANDONG LU | RESIDENTS EATING AT SNACK STANDS IN THE CORNER



FIGURE 6
ANDONG LU | RESIDENTS READING AT A "BOOK BAR" IN THE MARKET

networks. Some migrant workers become very wealthy and are able to import other workers from their hometowns in order to grow their own wealth within the village. However, even the great wealth these migrant workers have accumulated does not provide an exit from the substandard living conditions or social isolation within the ViCs. Moreover, they are still trapped in what is seen as an embarrassing identity: an outsider. In a survey of 60 ViCs, Zhigang Li and Fulong Wu (2014) found that this increase of social status did not bring power or "legal" identity to migrant workers because of the Hukou system. This indicates that the Hukou registration system plays a determinant role in impeding both migrant workers and indigenous

ex-peasants from gaining their identity and social integration within ViCs. In this sense, the question remains: what can urban designers do in addition to calling for policy revision?

It is worth noting that although migrant workers are displaced in ViCs, their initial ambition was to seek a better life in cities. In this regard, ViCs are the transitional place that provides a platform for accumulating wealth and social connections. However, fully integrating with the urban environment is the ultimate goal for migrant workers. Thus, considering the three different scales of physical segregation, the separation between ViCs and the city plays the most significant role in hindering workers' effective social relations.

In an attempt to overcome this segregation, migrant workers build constant linkages between the two spaces, and through their everyday commuting act as the primary agents connecting the city and ViCs (Andersson, 2012). More importantly it is through this distinct way of relating themselves to both the city and village that they regain their social value and self-esteem, drawing on Breakwell's model of identity (1996). Furthermore, although they tend to avoid informal activities at the scale of their neighborhood, they become more active in the "business street" (a place filled with small and informal businesses) and the "flower-bird market" (an informal market primarily selling various plants and pets). Both places are located on the fringes of ViCs and serve both the village and the city (Figures 7, 8, 9, and 10). Through these informal activities in shared spaces migrant workers develop interpersonal relationships with people from different locations, and their social networks are expanded further into the city, unrestricted by their ViC or workplace. This interaction

helps foster a transitional moment when migrant workers can escape from the Hukou registration system. Thus, this interaction with the surrounding environment provides the potential for obtaining higher self-efficacy. Hillier and Hanson (1988) believe that "...space can reassemble what society divides," and spatial arrangements can promote social integration and encourage encounters between individuals from different social categories. For migrants, shared spaces help social networks diffuse across the boundaries of ViCs. In this respect, these types of transitional and shared spaces between the ViC and city are where migrant workers can develop attachment, and provide a platform for urban inclusion and social integration.

Thus, these transitional spaces shared by the village and the city should become the target for architectural interventions. However, most of the temporary architectural proposals which attempt to redevelop ViCs have failed to consider migrant workers, providing well-intentioned interventions that neither serve the migrant workers' needs nor bolster their place attachment. For example, one intervention focused on developing a museum for workers, but left the problem of workers' housing quality and security unaddressed (Meulder, Lin et al., 2014).

Past architectural interventions have also struggled because workers have varying attachment to different scales of place. For instance, within ViCs, the improvement of workers' living conditions relies heavily on the adjustment of the Hukou registration system. This system impedes physical fusion, making interventions less effective at the neighborhood scale. In this sense, when public facilities such

as museums, schools, and community centers are adopted as architectural interventions to encourage spontaneous development of ViCs, location and method of the interventions become significant considerations.

CONCLUSION

ViCs have come to a crossroads in recent years. They face redevelopment concerning various issues, such as how to balance the interests of three parties: the indigenous villagers, the local government, and the private developers (Meulder, Lin et al., 2014). They also face the question of how to change the fragile physical environment while maintaining vital economic activities. However, few redevelopment proposals are targeted at the relocation of migrants, though they have gradually become the primary occupants of the ViCs. In this sense it seems an appropriate time to bring the migrant workers' marginalized living situation to public attention – especially to those who are deciding the future of the ViCs.

Integration of migrant workers into the city, which was their original intent when relocating from their agricultural villages, is reliant on place attachment. Development of this attachment cannot occur through the current spatial configuration of ViCs and the city. Workers' high-mobility lifestyles, combined with the physical separation between the ViC and the city, within neighborhoods in the ViCs, and even within individual residences, exacerbate their social isolation, which then further impedes place attachment.

Thus, the success of redeveloping ViCs relies heavily on their physical and social

connections to the surrounding urban sphere. As a transitional place for migrant workers, the nature of the ViC is dynamic and heterogeneous, which means an attempt to redevelop them with static interventions may fail. As this shift in urban development continues to occur in China, intentionally

considering spatial fusions as a new model for Chinese urban-rural emplacement can generate better social inclusion for migrant populations. These interventions will be the hinges that save the ViCs while maintaining the heterogeneity of the city. ■

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