



Nightlife and public spaces in urban villages: A case study of the Pearl River Delta in China



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ABSTRACT

While it is widely acknowledged that urban villages in China are associated with poor housing construction, severe infrastructure deficiencies, serious social disorder and unsanitary living environment, there has not been adequate research on the provision of public spaces for nighttime activities within urban villages. Our study focuses on the characteristics of nightlife in urban villages, and attempts to identify the factors that influence the use of public spaces at nighttime. Firstly, through observations of public spaces and nighttime activities in public spaces in three urban villages in the Pearl River Delta (PRD), we discover seven types of public spaces in urban villages. They are fragmented and with blurred boundaries. There is a severe lack of public facilities and they are not managed in a standardized manner. However, low-end commercial facilities are well-equipped. Residents' nighttime activities are mostly necessary activities and low-expense activities. Secondly, ArcGIS is used to establish the temporal and spatial distribution patterns of public space users' nighttime activities. Thirdly, the analysis of the relationship between the distribution patterns and environment attributes reveals that the factors that influence the temporal and spatial distribution of nighttime activities are commercial facilities, recreational facilities, lighting and the availability and accessibility of public spaces. The interviews with 3 sides of stakeholders reveals the determining role played by local villagers and governments in the provision and use of public spaces at nighttime. Fourthly, according to the importance-performance analysis of residents' perception of 14 environment attributes, activity needs strongly affect the satisfaction of nighttime experience of public space users and indicate a high priority in intervention for improvement. Consequently, this paper proposes four design strategies for improving the everyday public spaces in urban villages at nighttime.

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1. Introduction

Urban villages¹ (*chengzhongcun* in Chinese, literally “villages in cities”), a unique product of China's rapid urbanization and massive rural-to-urban migration, are a universal phenomenon in many Chinese cities with strong economic growth (Chung, 2010; Hao,

Hooimeijer, Sliuzas, & Geertman, 2013). Serving as informal immigrant settlements, urban villages are associated with illegal housing construction, overcrowding and squalor (unsanitary living environment) and serious social disorder, making governments and planning authorities desperately wish to demolish them (Friedman, 2005; Liu, He, Wu, & Webster, 2010).

Urban villages have also attracted a lot of scholarly attention. The broader context for the definition, formation, management, living conditions and redevelopment of urban villages have been widely discussed (Liu et al., 2010; Hao, Sliuzas, & Geertman, 2011; Wu, 2016; Lin & De Meulder, 2012; Zheng, Long, Fan, & Gu, 2009). In recent years, most scholars have acknowledged the importance of urban villages in China's urbanization, thus advocating the comprehensive management and progressive enhancement of urban villages rather than massive demolition and reconstruction (Song, Zenou, & Ding, 2008; Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2009; Wu, Zhang,

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¹ Urban villages are defined as villages that are spatially encompassed by urban development areas. Their traditional agricultural economy dies but extra dwellings are constructed and rented to rural migrants, who are excluded from formal urban housing by economic and institutional barriers. As immigration and city expansion continue, new urban villages are created and increasing housing demand drives the growth of both old and new urban villages.

& Webster, 2013). However, in terms of renovation, their focal point of research lies merely in the interests of villagers, governments and developers. They tend to take the governments' perspective, proposing renovation strategies, featuring rationality and profit maximization, for the planning, design and management of urban villages. However, amidst their proposals, they have overlooked the everyday life of low-income migrant workers (transients), the main habitants in urban villages (Li & Wu, 2013; Tong & Feng, 2009; Wu & Wu, 2002). Some sociologists and environment behavior researchers argue that the use of everyday spaces must take into account the value of use of the spaces from the perspective of their users (Davies & Herbert, 1993; Lefebvre, 1984; Siu, 2007; Whyte, 1988). As home to migrant workers, urban villages serve as an important carrier of their everyday life. Through the research on the renovation of urban villages, new insights, regarding the workers' everyday life and their response to their living environment, should be offered to planners, designers and other professionals.

It is acknowledged that public spaces play an important role in residents' everyday life. The quality of everyday public spaces is correlated with the health of their residents, including physical health and mental health (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008; Francis et al., 2012a, b; Koohsari et al., 2015). Public spaces also provide opportunities for social interactions that contribute to creating sense of community and neighborhood social ties (Kázmierczak, 2013; Francis et al., 2012a, b). However, without planning and development control, stimulated by rental income, houses are built and expanded at the expense of public spaces in urban villages, inducing concrete jungles with high density and a lack of public spaces (Li, 2002; Liu et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the remaining public spaces carry multiple functions, e.g. commerce, business, transportation, entertainment, recreation and social communication, enable multiple activities, offer residents relief from the stress of work and serve as the most important activity venue; thus the quality of their environments directly affects the quality of life² of these residents (Hao, Geertman, Hooimeijer, & Sliuzas, 2012; Zhao, Altrock, & Schoon, 2011).

Urban nightlife is currently regarded as an integral part of modern living (Liempt, Aalst, & Schwanen, 2015; Song & Siu, 2011). Nightlife is different from life in the daytime in terms of visibility (Saraiji, Younis, Madi, & Gibbons, 2015), psychological and emotional factors (Ryder, Maltby, Rai, Jones, & Flowe, 2016; Yuill, 2004) as well as environmental factors (lighting, security, etc.) (Edensor, 2015; Ingold, 2000; Morris, 2011). However, existing public design research mainly focuses on daytime use, and gives little concern for the experience of urban nightlife for the public. For residents in urban villages, the quality of public spaces in urban villages at nighttime needs to draw more concern. Reasons for this is manifold. First, migrant workers are busy at work and lacking in time for recreation at daytime (Liu, Xie, & Zhang, 2013); besides, due to their relatively low income, they are reluctant to pay extra money for their recreational activities. As a consequence, the nighttime activities of most residents are confined to cramped rented accommodation and the public spaces in urban villages. (Lan & Feng, 2012). As the vehicle of the everyday nighttime activities of considerable tenants, public spaces in urban villages are of extremely high frequency of use and high density of use and thus there is an inextricable link between public spaces and the experience of residents' nightlife in urban villages.

As Lynch (1984, p. 49) states, a good city space should be fit (a close match of form and behavior that is stable, malleable, and resilient); the acts and thoughts of human beings are the final ground for judging (settlement) quality. Consequently, we need to deepen our understanding of ways how public spaces are used by residents at nighttime as well as the relationship between public spaces and everyday nightlife in the course of rapid urbanization and social transformations at the margins of the Chinese society, and to convey information about them to policymakers and designers. This study focuses on the characteristics of nightlife in urban villages, and attempts to identify the factors that influence the use of public spaces at nighttime. A case study is conducted on three urban villages in the PRD, one of the most densely urbanized regions in the world and one of the main hubs of China's economic growth. This paper first describes the features of different types of public spaces in urban villages. The paper then takes Baishizhou Village as an example to establish the temporal and spatial distribution patterns of public space users at nighttime in urban villages. Thirdly, the paper explores the factors that influence the use of public spaces at nighttime, including environment attributes and underlying causes. Fourthly, this study pioneers the application of importance-performance analysis (IPA) to evaluate the residents' perception of different environment attributes and to identify the priorities in the improvement of public space in urban villages at nighttime. Finally, design methods for improved user experience in these public spaces are discussed.

2. Research methods

2.1. Case studies

A case study approach is adopted in this research. As Yin (2014) points out, "case study can investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially if the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.13). Moreover, a case study is effective for investigating phenomena in ambiguous urban spaces (Siu, 2007). The use of a case study approach is hence an appropriate strategy, since this study aims to explore users' everyday practices in public spaces at nighttime.

The area of this study is the PRD (i.e. Pearl River Delta Economic Zone), covering nine prefecture-level cities of Guangdong Province: Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Huizhou, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen and Zhaoqing. A report published by the World Bank in January 2015 indicates that the PRD has overtaken Tokyo to become the world's largest urbanized area, with a combined urban population of 48.4841 million (Urban Agglomeration in the Pearl River Delta Editorial Committee, 2015). The PRD witnessed the earliest urban villages in China (Lin & De Meulder, 2012). Enjoying preferential policies induced by China's economic reform (usually referred to as the "Reform & Opening Up") and geographic adjacency to Hong Kong and Macau and coinciding with the transformation of industrial structures in Hong Kong, since 1980, the PRD has managed to attract considerable foreign investment, swiftly becoming a base for global processing and manufacturing industries (Li & Li, 2005). Meanwhile, considerable employment opportunities have been created and considerable migrant workers have been attracted to the area. In the process of rapid urban expansion over the last three decades, a great number of villages have been transformed into urban villages. The floating population of the PRD is still growing constantly – in 1982, the population of transients (non-local residents without local household registration, or *hukou*, in the PRD) stood at 80 thousand; in 2014, transients in the PRD amounted to 25.55 million (Urban Agglomeration in the Pearl River Delta Editorial Committee, 2015). On the contrary, the insufficient regulated public housing fails to satisfy the housing

² Quality of life (QOL) is the general well-being of individuals and societies, outlining negative and positive features of life. It observes life satisfaction, including everything from physical health, family, education, employment, wealth, religious beliefs, finance and the environment.

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