



Land speculation by villagers: Territorialities of accumulation and exclusion in peri-urban China

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Land speculation
Territorialization
Exclusion
Speculative urbanism
Peri-urban
China

ABSTRACT

Speculation in land and real estate has become a chief means of revenue generation in cities across the world. The literature on speculative urbanism has discussed how the advent of land markets transformed government strategies and created new partnerships between state and capital for rent extraction. Far less attention, however, has been paid to grassroots practices of speculation among residents of peri-urban and rural areas, whose neighbourhoods are often dramatically transformed by the rapid appreciation in land prices brought about by urbanization. Based on fieldwork in a Chinese urban village, this paper demonstrates how land commodification gave rise to competitive territorialization and forms of "intimate exclusion" within the community. The boom in property prices amplified inequalities between villagers, as those with greater access to capital, authority and social networks were better positioned to reap gains from the market while those without land rights were excluded. The desire to capitalize on market gains furthermore sharpened intra-community conflicts, creating tensions between neighbours and family members over issues of ownership and distribution. By focusing on everyday practices of territorialization at the neighbourhood level, this paper sheds light on how land speculation and rentiership could contribute to deepened differentiation at the urban frontier.

1. Introduction

The accumulation of land rent has emerged as a powerful driver that underlies the transformation of rural and peri-urban landscapes across the developing world today. Buoyed by the rapid surge in land values, city authorities have devised new strategies to tap into real estate markets and realize financial gains through the monetization of land (Shatkin, 2016). Partnering with corporate capital, land speculation has become a highly remunerative means for governments to generate wealth. This has given rise to new political rationalities and technologies of rule, where the power of eminent domain is frequently mobilized to facilitate expropriation and the assembly of land into massive land banks (Goldman, 2011).

While the existing literature has emphasized the role of state actors and capital investors in land speculation, far less attention has been given to the grassroots dynamics of speculative urbanism. Ordinary residents – including farmers, villagers, and migrants living in peri-urban areas – are also exposed to the opportunities and challenges brought by the dramatic escalation of land prices, but their agency has remained under-explored. Conventional studies often draw attention to

how speculative urbanization and land expropriation dispossess residents, and frame their anti-dispossession struggles as rightful resistance against the state. While these representations capture the dominant reality of state-sanctioned land takings, they overlook how villagers themselves participate in land speculation, and how such grassroots processes of accumulation could engender dynamics of differentiation, competition and exclusion from below that are no less impactful than those wrought by large-scale land grabs.

Going beyond framings of top-down extraction and bottom-up resistance, this paper focuses its analysis on the neighbourhood level to reveal the social dynamics of land speculation in Zhuhai, one of the four Special Economic Zones designated by the Chinese government in the 1980s. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews conducted between 2016 and 2020, we demonstrate how land commodification gave rise to competitive practices of territorialization in a peri-urban community where residents laid claims on land and speculated on future gains in property value. Rather than producing uniform class trajectories, where all residents became members of an emergent rentier class, incorporation into the land rent regime was uneven and punctuated by internal difference. We argue that land commodification has reified inequalities

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103394>

Received 6 August 2020; Received in revised form 30 June 2021; Accepted 22 July 2021

Available online 17 August 2021

0264-2751/© 2021 The Authors.

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in the village, as those with access to capital and political power were better positioned to reap gains from the property market while others were excluded. The desire to maximize accumulation has furthermore created new fractures in the community and gave rise to conflicts between neighbours, and within families, over issues of property ownership and rent distribution. By shedding light on these endogenous mechanisms, our paper advances understandings of how everyday practices of speculative territorialization could transform social relations and contribute to deepened class differentiation at the urban frontier.

Researchers of Global South urbanism have called for a “recalibration of the geographies of authoritative knowledge” by turning to experiences of rural-urban transitions outside western realities (Roy, 2009: 820). Studies of peri-urban processes in Global South cities have revealed distinct spatial logics in the making of peripheral landscapes, where residents play a primary role in producing heterogeneous spaces that simultaneously embody progress and precarity (Caldeira, 2017; Holston, 2009). This paper probes the intra-village social structures and territorial processes that underlie such unevenness to reveal how residents’ livelihoods and relations can be transformed by forces from within rather than without. Our findings thus lend support for the need to pay further attention to “powers of exclusion” and intimate forms of land and value grabbing at the community level (Hall et al., 2011; Kan, 2019b; Xu, 2018), or what can be called the “social politics of dispossession” (Kan, 2020). Although of a smaller scale, grassroots practices of land-based accumulation can have a profound impact on community relationships, enriching some while excluding others in ways that entrench inequalities in the village social structure. In our case study, the advent of land markets and property speculation acted as a process that was both reproductive of extant inequalities and productive of new class differences.

The rest of the paper is divided into six sections. Section 2 reviews the literature on land financialization and territorial processes at the peri-urban interface, arguing that a grassroots perspective that focuses on intra-village relations is urgently needed. Section 3 discusses the data and methodology used. Sections 4 to 6 present empirical findings from the case study, while the implications and concluding reflections are discussed in Section 7.

2. Literature review

2.1. Land financialization and speculation at the urban frontier

Land has been described, together with the worker, as the “original sources of all wealth”, constitutive of a “reservoir” of use values provided by nature (Marx, 1977). In agrarian economies land primarily serves as a productive asset; a means or instrument of production that is tilled and worked upon to generate value. With de-agrarianization and the advent of global capitalism, land has increasingly been incorporated into global circuits of capital. Aside from its productive function, a speculative dimension has emerged where land is treated as a “financial asset” that is “bought and sold according to the rent it yields” (Harvey, 1982: 347). This has introduced a new motive of investment – in contrast to the motive of use – to land ownership and control. As Haila (1990: 289) points out, land is being “purchased, developed, rented, and sold with an eye to the future expected revenue”. Expected rents, rather than economic rents derived from real use, now play a greater role in dictating and coordinating land use.

The financialization of land has paralleled important shifts in the political economy. Across much of the developing world, national governments are turning to land-generated wealth as a means to extend state power, whether by using extracted rents to bolster state coffers and finance state institutions, or by distributing profits as patronage to powerful clients of the state (Shatkin, 2016). The turn to land as a source of finance and investment has followed a particularly dramatic trajectory in regions like Asia and Africa. On the demand side, the dynamics of

“capital-switching” – the tendency of over-accumulated capital to find profitable investment outlets in other circuits – has given rise to an influx of speculative financial capital in cities of the Global South (Goodfellow, 2017; Harvey, 2014). On the supply side, historical and institutional legacies such as communist rule and the prevalence of state ownership meant that levels of land rent have long been suppressed in many emerging economies. This has contributed to “the buildup of significant rent gaps”, which state and corporate actors are keen to exploit through deregulation and commodification (Shatkin, 2016: 143).

The turn to land speculation as “the main business of government” has profoundly shaped territorial dynamics of urbanization on the ground (Goldman, 2011: 555). Revisiting the notion of the urban frontier (Smith, 1996), Lund (2019) characterized contemporary urbanization as a frontier process whereby new forms of control over land are being imposed through the dissolution of existing property systems and the suspension of rights. Settlements deemed “lawless” and “disorderly” have been subject to eviction and radical remaking, as purportedly “non-state” spaces are appropriated and transformed in a frontier process that is productive of state power (McGregor & Chatiza, 2019). Frontier dynamics also open up landscapes and resources to novel forms of state-sanctioned accumulation and exploitation (Peluso & Lund, 2011; Woodworth, 2017).

While studies of speculative and frontier urbanism have shed light on the nature of contemporary urban change, most analyses focus on the motivations and behavior of state and corporate actors. Agency from below is primarily examined through frameworks of dispossession or resistance, which cast residents either as victims or as resisters of state-led urban change. The literature on redevelopment often reflects such a perspective. The regularization of informal settlements through demolition and redevelopment has been a key feature of speculative urbanization in developing countries. Earlier accounts have portrayed residents as victims of state-led campaigns and as “politically passive members of a ‘culture of poverty’ (Lewis, 1967)” (Banks et al., 2020: 229). In later studies they have been cast in a more proactive light, as entrepreneurial agents and “rightful resisters” that strategize and defend their “quiet encroachment” into formal spaces (Bayat, 2000; O’Brien & Li, 2006).

Binary distinctions that either victimize or valorize residents may conceal more than they reveal, however. Understanding residents’ actions only in relation or in opposition to the state risks ignoring inter- and intra-neighbourhood dynamics that have equally significant implications for urban change and outcomes. As Banks et al. (2020: 224) pointed out, urbanization “offers different strategies for accumulation or survival to different groups, depending on their terms of integration into formal and informal sectors, systems, and processes”. Rather than being homogenous groups, the communities affected by land commodification are marked by internal difference, from levels of political and economic capital to social status and gender relations. These disparities imply that residents are often affected by urbanization in different ways, and are differentially positioned in their capacity to adapt to, capitalize on, or resist against such change.

This paper examines the social dynamics of land speculation in peri-urban China to reveal these nuances. Under market reform, China has emerged as a new frontier of speculative urbanism (Li et al., 2014; Shin, 2014). With the creation of land markets, land-sale revenues have seen exponential increase since the 1980s, a trend that has continued under China’s “new urbanization plan” despite the recent economic slowdown (Chu, 2020). The territorial transformation wrought by land-based accumulation is most visible at the peri-urban regions of Chinese cities, where formerly agrarian landscapes are being converted to industrial or urban use (Abramson, 2016; Kan, 2016). There is a burgeoning scholarship on urban village redevelopment in China, most of which adopts the state-centric perspective of formalization of informal settlements (e.g. Liu & Wong, 2018; Liu & Zhang, 2020; Zhao, 2013). These studies have emphasized how urbanization contributes to land

dispossession and widespread disenfranchisement among Chinese villagers. While more attention has been given to grassroots practices of “house planting” and rent extraction by urban villagers (e.g. Hsing, 2010; Ip, 2015), these are often framed as acts of resistance against the state. For example, the extralegal building of informal housing has been described as a “sort of contention of urban space between villagers and local states” and “a spatial strategy for villagers to avoid being left behind by local states” (Wang et al., 2019: 227). While such perspectives capture residents’ agency in challenging marginalization, they overly prioritize the power dynamic between state and society and thus pay insufficient attention to forces of accumulation and exclusion that operate at the community level.

Some recent studies have moved beyond state-centric accounts of land politics to shed light on the uneven impact of rural-urban transformation for residents. Comparing conservation zoning in peri-urban regions across three cities in Southwest China, Rodenbiker (2019) observed how uneven incorporation created diverse experiences for dislocated villagers. Rather than a singular narrative of victimization and violence, he found “a variety of outcomes that span enrichment and upward social mobility [...], to land and housing dispossession with little to no compensation that spur downward class trajectories” (Rodenbiker, 2019: 236). Aside from inter-neighbourhood variations that are shaped by spatial and temporal factors, structural forces also contribute to differentiation. In her study of a labour-exporting community in Sichuan province, Chuang (2015) demonstrated how land dispossession produced a new structure of class stratification as residents adopted differential strategies to weather land loss. While some survived by transitioning to informal sector activities or relocation, others without the means had to take on debt while continuing in precarious employment. The differentiated impact of land takings has also been observed in peri-urban villages, where incorporation into the land rent regime was differentiated not just by socioeconomic positions but by factors such as gender, seniority, and kinship loyalty (Kan, 2019b). The diversification in class trajectories reveals how experiences of expropriation can vary across groups of villagers within the same community.

Building on these studies, this paper advances the analysis by demonstrating how internal inequalities have been refracted and reproduced through the differential ability of villagers to participate in speculative rentiership. We argue that urbanization can be a class-making process whereby some peri-urban villagers are incorporated into landlordism while others are marginalized or excluded from the benefits of land-based accumulation. We focus on the territorial aspect of how this process played out to theorize the competitive practices of accumulation carried out by villagers.

2.2. Territorialization and exclusion from “without” and “within”

Territorialization is about attempts, carried out by individuals or groups, to assert control over a geographic area (Sack, 1986). It involves the inclusion or exclusion of others from a piece of land marked by some recognizable boundaries, and the control of what they can do within the designated area (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995). Peluso (2005: 2) defined territorialization as “the creation and maintenance of spatialized zones within which certain practices are permitted based on the explicit and implicit allocation of rights, controls and authority”. While the state is a principal territorializing agent, it is not the only actor with the capability to establish control over territory. As Rasmussen and Lund (2018: 393) pointed out, “different non-statutory polities of a more or less embryonic nature make territorial claims in rural and urban settings alike”. Territorialization is thus a dynamic process that involves both state and social actors.

The territorialization literature offers a useful analytical perspective for examining grassroots mechanisms of land-based accumulation and exclusion. While large-scale land grabs carried out by national governments and transnational capital have occupied media headlines and

received much scholarly attention (e.g. Borras & Franco, 2013; Sassen, 2013), territorialization by grassroots actors deserves more serious research for several reasons. Firstly, although appropriations of land by residents, villagers and smallholders may be localized and of smaller scale, they are far more numerous and prevalent than cases of transnational land grabbing. According to Cotula (2012), the combined area of land involved in small-scale land dispossession could be larger in size than that involved in large-scale commercial land deals. Secondly, the community impact of intra-village land takings could be particularly detrimental to social relations because they are intricately woven into local social and family structures (Kan, 2020). Kandel (2015) argued that the deep embeddedness of small-scale land acquisitions within local political economies makes them more difficult to resolve. While large-scale land deals may dispossess an entire community – providing a rallying cause for multiple households and other civil society entities to organize collective action – land takings by one’s spouse, parent, sibling, neighbour, or fellow kin member could be harder to resolve or resist. They thus have the potential to tear communities apart “from within”, not by exogenous force but through the cumulative impact of endogenous developments (Kandel, 2015).

This paper proposes examining grassroots practices of territorialization in conjunction with the notion of exclusion, a terminology widely employed in studies of land access. As Hall et al. (2011) observed, all types of land use and access involves exclusion of some kind. As a process, exclusion refers to the ways by which individuals or groups are prevented from accessing land and benefiting from it (Hall et al., 2011). “Access” can be understood to be the opposite of exclusion. In their work on a theory of access, Ribot and Peluso (2003) pointed out that access is not just about having the “right” to benefit from things, but also the “ability” to do so. Going beyond the conceptualization of property as a “bundle of rights”, they proposed approaching resource use from a “bundle of powers” perspective, which gives consideration to the broader range of means, relations and processes that enable or constrain different actors in deriving benefits from land use. In this light, exclusion concerns more than the absence of rights but also the “broader array of powers that prevent people from benefiting from land” (Hall et al., 2011: 8).

We spotlight two mechanisms of exclusion in this paper. First, we highlight how certain groups within the village are prevented from benefiting from the advent of land markets due to the lack of rights and means. The Chinese village community is structured by power relations, with certain members (such as husbands, fathers, elder sons, and leaders of stronger clans) being privileged property owners over others (including women and migrants). This privilege often manifests itself in differentiation in ownership and use rights in land. Exclusion can also result from a lack of means. A person “might have rights to benefit from land but may be unable to do so without access to labour or capital”; in other words, having property rights but lacking access (Ribot & Peluso, 2003: 160). Deriving benefits from land requires working it, building on it, or having the means and connections to sell it to external buyers. The degree to which residents can capitalize on land is thus mediated and differentiated by a variety of “access qualifications”, such as access to technology, capital, markets, knowledge, authority, social identities and relationships (Ribot & Peluso, 2003).

The other dimension of exclusion examined in this paper involves territorializing actions that directly prevent others from accessing land. Here the connection between territorialization and exclusion is explicit. Exclusion can take place via direct appropriation, where a piece of land is acquired and occupied by one to the exclusion of others. This can occur, for example, through the encroachment of private interests into common resources, such as where public village land is appropriated for private use. Another example is where neighbouring households compete for space and encroach on one another’s land. Exclusion can also take place via less immediate forms of land takings. The use of territorial devices such as fences and barriers creates boundaries and restricts access for others.

In the rest of this paper, we employ the concepts of territorialization and exclusion to examine the contested politics of land speculation in peri-urban China.

3. Case and methods

We focus on an urban village in Zhuhai city, Guangdong province, as a case study. The qualitative case study method is used because it enables a rich and detailed study of a particular issue where the phenomenon and context are closely interrelated (Yin, 2009; Stake, 2013). Zhuhai is selected for two reasons. First, the city experienced important rural-urban restructuring since the 1980s, following a pattern that can be commonly found in China's coastal cities. Located at the south-western bank of the Pearl River estuary, Zhuhai is part of the fast-growing Pearl River Delta region and is one of four Special Economic Zones set up by the central government in 1980. As a result of industrialization, the city experienced rapid spatial change in recent decades. Between 1995 and 2015, the area of cultivated land decreased from over 66,800 ha to around 40,500 ha (Li & Dong, 2019). It is estimated that 17,000 ha of farmland has been converted to construction land (Wu et al., 2009). Zhuhai's territorial transformation thus offers a fitting context for examining how extensive land conversion has affected peri-urban communities.

Secondly, following a period of rural industrialization, the city also saw dramatic growth in its land and property markets as it moved towards commercial and residential developments. In 2008, the National Development and Reform Commission designated Zhuhai as a centre in its national urban development strategy for the period 2008 to 2020 (Sheng & Tang, 2013). The city has since been incorporated into the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, a megalopolis comprising nine cities and two special administrative regions. Bay area cities experienced a property boom in 2016 and 2017, with prices going up by an annual rate of 40% (Zheng, 2019). Zhuhai in particular experienced an influx of external investments, with experts noting an increase in speculative sentiments (Zheng, 2019). The emerging landscape of property investment provides a suitable setting for examining grass-roots practices of land speculation and territorialization carried out by

peri-urban residents.

We conducted in-depth fieldwork in an urban village located in the western part of Zhuhai (Fig. 1). We chose Redwood as it typifies the spatial change that peri-urban areas have experienced: extensive loss of farmland in the 1980s and 1990s due to state-led expropriation, followed by conversion of village land into informal housing and industrial use, and possible demolition and redevelopment of the entire village. How residents capitalized on these changes to different degrees, and the dynamics of competition and exclusion these changes engendered, make up the focus of our analysis.

Data were collected between 2016 and 2020 through field observations and interviews. For this paper we draw on 31 semi-structured interviews, conducted with a range of informants including township and village officials, local villagers, and residents of Redwood who are not members of the village collective. Informants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. Their basic information can be found in Table 1. Empirical observations at the field site played an important part in identifying territorial practices and spatial devices such as fences and gates. We also made use of archival data. This included documents stored in the villagers' committee building, such as land requisition agreements, reports on shareholding and dividend distribution, and documents on the allocation and use of land plots. Archival materials available at the Zhuhai municipal library were also consulted (e.g. Zhuhai Municipal Gazette Committee, 2001).

Table 1
Profile of interviewees.

Interview	Interviewees
1	Deputy leader of Redwood village
2	Member of villagers' committee
3	Member of villagers' committee and village Party branch
4	Former township Party secretary, 1990s
5	Former leader of Redwood village, early 1980s
6	Former leader of Redwood village, mid 1980s to mid 1990s
7	Former village Party secretary, 2010s
8–21	Villagers of Redwood
22–31	Non-local residents living in Redwood



Fig. 1. Location of Redwood village, Zhuhai, China.

4. Background: turning land into capital in Redwood village

Villagers at Redwood still recalled the time when land was divided out to households as individual farm plots. “In 1982, the land that belonged to production teams was divided into plots and assigned numbers. We drew lots to determine which plots each household would get. I started farming my own land in 1983”, Mr. Wang, a former village leader, recalled (Interview 6, June 2017). Under Mao, the system of collective ownership was introduced in rural China where means of production such as land and farming equipment were owned by rural collective organizations, namely production brigades and teams. In the early 1980s, de-collectivization saw the dividing out of communal land to individual families. The implementation of the household responsibility system gave villagers contracted rights to farm their own plots, while land ownership rights were retained by the village. Aside from farmland, villagers were also allocated housing land or homestead plots (*zhaijidi*) on which they could build apartments for their own accommodation.

In the early years of reform, land was not viewed by villagers as an instrument of revenue generation. Villagers welcomed government expropriation as it freed them from agricultural labour. According to documents retained by the villagers’ committee, the Redwood leadership signed a pre-requisition agreement with the government in 1993 where the village received an annual compensatory fee in return for surrendering its farmland. Villagers supported the arrangement: Farming was considered strenuous work, and many were eager to receive monetary compensation as they left agriculture to join the industrial workforce.

It was in the 2000s that valuations of land began to change. Like other special economic zones, Zhuhai was once a top destination for industrial investments specializing in labour-intensive manufacturing. Confronted with growing competition from other cities, the municipal government abandoned the low-end manufacturing industries and began investing in the hi-tech sector to maintain its competitive edge (Sheng & Tang, 2013). In 2004 it announced a “westward expansion” strategy, where land was set aside in western Zhuhai for the building of hi-tech industrial development zones. Preferential rates for land use were offered to attract new investors. As a result, urban villages like Redwood became the locus of investments from companies specializing in pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and computer software, which needed land to build factories and plants.

The government’s decision to develop western Zhuhai created competitive dynamics among the subordinate townships. In Redwood, the township authorities decided to lease land at a price even lower than that set by the city to attract investors. Mr. Wen, the former township Party secretary, recalled: “We offered our land to companies at half the municipal rent level. That’s how the investments started coming in” (Interview 4, August 2017). Leasing out its land to pharmaceutical and electronics companies, Redwood village began receiving annual revenues of two to three million yuan from rent. Archival documents on village shareholding show that land-derived income was re-invested into the collective economy and distributed to about 500 eligible residents via a shareholding system, where they were given stocks and received yearly dividend payouts (“*Jiti fenhong zhengce de xiangguan ziliao*” (Information on collective shareholding policies), 2006).

As land gained new value as an instrument of rent extraction, the Redwood leadership launched extensive reclamation plans in 2005 to expand the geographical area available for construction. Abandoned land, hilly areas and ponds were filled with rocks and clay to create new land suitable for building. The reclamation did not receive approval from municipal authorities but proceeded in spite of it. Part of the reclaimed land was leased out to external investors, while the rest was distributed to villagers as housing plots.

Aside from bringing in rental revenues for the collective economy, the influx of investments also presented Redwood villagers with the opportunity to gain additional household income through renting out

their homes. The development of hi-tech industrial parks brought thousands of migrant workers to Redwood who needed a place to live. The demand for low-cost accommodation gave rise to a lucrative informal housing market, where villagers’ apartments were converted into rental flats and leased to migrants. Although rural housing land is supposedly reserved for villagers’ self-use, such informal leases are extremely common in Chinese urban villages and furnish villagers with an important source of income (Liu & Zhang, 2020; Sun & Ho, 2020; Tian et al., 2018). Villagers in Redwood increasingly viewed land as an important asset for capital accumulation rather than as a means of production. The next section examines how the changing conceptions of land translated into material practices of territorialization and gave rise to an uneven geography.

5. The uneven territorialities of land-based accumulation and speculation

In her work on “peripheral urbanization”, Caldeira (2017) highlighted a distinctive mode of urban spatial production that operates with a specific form of agency and temporality. She observed how, across cities of the Global South, “homes and neighborhoods grow little-by-little, in long-term processes of incompleteness and continuous improvement led by their own residents” (Caldeira, 2017: 5). Rather than buildings developed by others and consumed as finished products, peripheral landscapes are always in the making, built step-by-step according to the resources available to residents at each moment in time. This process of “autoconstruction” is marked by improvisation and remodeling, producing a heterogeneous landscape that is reflective of uneven progress.

In this section we advance the analysis of peripheral urbanization by examining how this differentiated geography in fact belies the differences in residents’ political, economic and social capital. We argue that such differences are further reproduced and amplified through the accumulation of rent in the informal housing market.

5.1. Differential accumulation via rentiership

A walk through Redwood reveals a landscape clearly demarcated into plots of land of more or less uniform sizes, with apartments of varying height and quality built on top. This is the material embodiment of the village’s homestead policy: each household – defined as a family unit with a maximum of four persons – is allocated a housing plot of 90 square meters (“*Zhaijidi fenpei he juti fenpei qingkuang wenjian*” (Document on housing plot allocation), 2009). The characteristics of the apartments built on these plots offer a glimpse into the differential levels of household wealth among villagers. While some are one- or two-storey houses built with stones, others are five- to six-storey concrete apartments equipped with terraces and balconies.

Building houses in Redwood usually requires two factors of input: capital and approval from the government. Prior to the 2010s, government regulation over construction on rural land was relatively lax. The shortage in formal housing supply for the vast population of migrant workers meant that authorities were often willing to turn a blind eye to building violations. The main differentiating factor in the ability to build thus lies in the amount of capital to which different households had access, which was closely tied to political power in the case of Redwood.

Following decollectivization in the 1980s, most villagers gave up farming and sought employment in the industrial sector. The demise of collective agriculture meant that non-farm employment became a key factor of differentiation among peri-urban residents. In Redwood, villagers who successfully transitioned to wage employment were better able to renovate and upgrade their apartment. Aside from variation in individual abilities, differential access to political power played a significant role. The best-quality houses in Redwood are owned by former or current leaders of the village, members of the villagers’ committee, and their kin and relatives. Access to political office provides not only

remuneration, but also social connections that might afford opportunities for rent-seeking. Village leaders in China play a direct role in managing collective resources and negotiating land contracts with external investors. In exchange for access to village land, developers and investors might offer monetary and non-monetary favors to village leaders and their families to establish goodwill, allowing the latter to accrue personal wealth via their position (Kan, 2019a; Kan, 2020).

Access to political office is itself shaped by historical context and socialist legacy. Those who assumed top positions in the reform era were often cadres or leaders during the collectivization period, or their direct descendants or allies. Mr. Wang, who was village head for over a decade during the 1980s and 1990s, was a production brigade leader under socialist collectivization. His close associate and deputy, Mr. Lin, was also a team leader and has since remained in office for over forty years. Others secured leadership roles through land-generated wealth. Two brothers, also surnamed Wang, were elected leaders of Redwood in the 2000s and 2010s. Their family acquired many land parcels during the socialist period, which later provided capital for the brothers to start their own company. Their business brought them close ties with upper-level authorities, which in turn facilitated their assumption of political office. All the leaders saw significant improvement in their housing conditions with the advent of land markets.

Having connections to those in positions of authority affects access to employment and capital. Villagers' lack of non-farm skills meant that transitioning to industrial jobs could be challenging. The village collective is an important employer providing jobs in management, security, and other areas. The distribution of these limited opportunities is determined by village leaders, who usually give them to close friends and relations.

Even with a job, however, house building still involves significant capital investments. In the 1980s, it cost around 20,000 to 40,000 yuan to build an apartment, when villagers' monthly wages averaged 100 to 400 yuan. Building costs have since seen exponential growth. As of the 2010s, it cost around 300,000 to 500,000 yuan to build a multi-storey apartment, while monthly wages averaged 4000 to 10,000 yuan. The high building costs gave rise to informal arrangements where villagers sought capital contribution from outsiders, whom locals refer to as "foreign bosses" (*waidi laoban*). Collaboration between the two is based on villagers' possession of the land title and investors' injection of capital. The two parties would sign a contract which allocated property rights over the constructed building between the villagers and the investors. External investors were usually granted rights over three stories of the building, which they could lease out for rental income. Villagers received the remaining two stories, one of which they would use for self-accommodation while the other is put up for rent. "The benefits are obvious," said one informant. "Villagers don't have to spend a cent and get to live in a decent building. It is an immediate improvement in living circumstances, and villagers can gain rental income too by leasing out the extra flats" (Interview 7, November 2019).

The ability to access capital through external collaboration again reflects uneven access to social relations and political power. Villagers who were privileged often gained connections to the non-local investors through their workplace, or received referrals through the village leaders, which enabled them to enter into such joint building arrangements. Given their direct role in rural land management, village leaders enjoyed privileged access to information and had close connections with external investors. Interested outsiders would often seek out the leaders for opportunities to invest in village land. The leaders thus played a crucial intermediary role in connecting villagers with investors, and would often award opportunities to their own supporters and family members. For example, a recently completed apartment built in 2017 was the result of collaboration between an external investor and a relative of the village leader. The external investor, who developed close ties with the village head through property development, comes from Chongqing and operates a construction business in Zhuhai. Through the village head's introduction, the investor contributed capital for house

building on land owned by the village head's relative.

The informal housing market proved extremely lucrative for villagers and external investors due to high demand. Whether a village household had the economic or social capital to build hence evolved into a dynamic of accumulation that was self-reinforcing. Wealthier and better-connected families could build taller and better-quality apartments, which in turn allowed them to extract higher levels of rent. The macro condition of housing shortage kept rent levels high, and further magnified the income difference between those with means to build and those without.

The territorialization practices of villagers with rights to land but without resources to build stand in stark contrast to those with means. Laying the building foundation without putting up the superstructure is one such practice. A walk around Redwood shows that excavation works have been completed for some housing plots, but the top structures have yet to be built. Interviews with the residents revealed that they did not have the financial resources to put up an apartment block, but by completing the foundations and footings they sought to indicate possession of the land. "We have built the foundations for two of our housing plots. It cost us around 30,000 yuan each," said one villager. "Laying the foundation shows others that we intend to build houses here in the future, although we can't do so now" (Interview 14, September 2019). Other residents converted their idle housing land into small farm plots and gardens (Fig. 2). Redwood lost all of its farmland to state expropriation in the early 2000s, and many local villagers gave up farming as an occupation in the 1980s and 1990s. The use of housing plots as small farms provides those without the means to build a way to productively dispose of their land. By asserting ownership through usage, these present attempts to territorialize are also anticipatory in nature and pave the way for realizing future gains in land value.

5.2. Redevelopment and uneven gains from speculation

If the growing interest from industrial capital and housing investors transformed Redwood residents' perspective of their land from a means of production to an instrument of rent extraction, the proposal to redevelop the village further added a speculative dimension to land ownership and use. In the mid-2010s, two real estate companies approached the Redwood leadership with plans for wholesale redevelopment of the entire village. They proposed to renovate around 85,000 square meters of village land for residential real estate. The redevelopment plan had to go through the villagers' assembly and receive a majority vote before it could proceed. The proposal divided the community and became a subject of huge controversy. Villagers living in poorer housing conditions supported redevelopment, while those with recently



Fig. 2. Farming on housing plots by villagers, July 2019.

renovated apartments opposed it. Villagers living in the congested core believed that redevelopment could improve rental income by widening roads and providing more public space, while those living at the outskirts were less enthused as they were already taking advantage of the convenient location of their property. The proposal also pitted elder villagers against the young: the latter preferred to live in modern high-rises while the former found rural low-rises more accessible. As a result of ongoing disagreements, the redevelopment plan has thus far remained under negotiation.

Despite uncertainties surrounding the project, the possibility of wholesale redevelopment gave impetus to a furor of construction activities in Redwood. While the earlier wave of house building was about rent appropriation in the short term, the construction boom in the late 2010s was anticipatory in nature. Villagers expected that their land would be expropriated, and speculated on future increases in land and property value. One practice adopted by villagers was to extend the height of their apartments, anticipating that this would enable them to receive a larger amount of compensation in the future. Villagers remarked that property was viewed as a “bargaining chip”: the more they built, the more power they would have in future negotiations of compensation.

Instead of renting rooms out to migrant workers like before, the prospect of redevelopment caused a change in calculations and prompted more villagers to sell their renovated apartments to outsiders. Informants indicated that this was because villagers wanted to obtain capital, which they could then use to invest in surrounding property. Based on field data collated, multi-storey apartments built on homestead plots in Redwood – so-called “minor property rights housing” (*xiao chanquan fang*) – could fetch up to 200,000 to 300,000 yuan for a plot size of 80 square meters. This would give villagers a substantial amount of capital to invest in the property market, as many anticipated that prices in the area would go up in the future. Because the sale of rural housing is not formally authorized, the villager’s name actually remained on the title deed upon the sale of the house. It is common practice for the villager and outside buyer to agree that, should expropriation and housing demolition take place in the future, the villager would pay the buyer back the amount of purchase price in part or even in full. Villagers believed that they stand to benefit even with this clause. For example, a villager may sell her apartment now for 100,000 yuan, anticipating that she, as the legitimate owner, will be paid 300,000 yuan in compensation in the future when expropriation takes place. She could then pay the buyer back the full amount of the purchase price while pocketing the remaining 200,000 yuan. In the meantime, the 100,000 yuan in hand would enable her to make immediate investment in the housing market.

The building boom caught the attention of the government and brought tightened regulations. According to villagers interviewed, authorities stepped up efforts to crack down on illegal construction through daily security patrols. They also made it more difficult for villagers to build by requiring them to apply for construction permits and introducing additional layers of administrative approval. In the early 2000s when the regulatory environment was more relaxed, many villagers exceeded the legally recognized building height, which was five stories plus a rooftop structure. At the time onsite research was conducted, not only were villagers forbidden from going above legal limits, they also had to go through an extended application process before they could undertake any type of construction. In order to build, villagers must first obtain approval documents from village and township authorities, submit their application to the land and resources bureau, and then obtain a permit from the planning bureau.

Rather than curbing all construction, the strengthening of regulatory control further accentuated the importance of having access to political power and amplified the difference between those with connections and those without. As Ribot and Peluso (2003: 170) observed, “privileged access to the individuals or institutions with the authority to make and implement laws can strongly influence who benefits from the resource in

question”. Prior to the policy tightening, any villager with capital could build, with those having more capital being able to build higher and better. With strengthened state regulation, however, the possession of economic capital in and of itself no longer suffices. Those hoping to build must also secure government approval, and this is often facilitated by having connections with decision-makers – what villagers described as *guanxi*, personal relationships, ties and social networks.

Interviews with villagers revealed how having connections expedited the approval process. When plans for wholesale redevelopment were still being discussed and yet to be formally announced to residents via the villagers’ assembly, those close to the leadership already learnt of the news from the leaders. Their privileged access to information enabled them to take immediate action in terms of applying for permission to build, allowing them to gain approval before upper-level authorities began to rein in construction activities. The close relations between village leaders and officials in the relevant bureaus also facilitated the approval process for leaders’ relatives and associates.

The differential ability of Redwood villagers to build suggests that, while it is a “game” open for all, participation in land-based accumulation and property speculation is not a level playing field. The extent to which a household can capitalize on land price appreciation depends on a variety of factors, from historical legacies to differential access to capital, markets and political power. While each of these factors has its standalone effect, they also overlap and interact with one another in ways that amplify disparities. The examples given in this section show how access to political authority gave certain villagers enhanced access to economic capital, social relations, and information. The impact of these factors is cumulative and self-reinforcing, with households having more property and capital to start with being better positioned to accumulate further speculative gains. The advent of land markets in Redwood village has thus been a powerful force of differentiation for the community.

6. How competitive territorialization and exclusion transformed social relations

The previous section has shown how peri-urban residents are differentiated in their abilities to take advantage of the boom in land and housing prices. This section probes the ways by which some members of the community are prevented from benefiting from land markets, by examining two mechanisms of exclusion. First, we analyze how some groups are excluded due to the lack of recognized rights in land, or power relations that prevent them from exercising their rights. We further examine acts of competitive territorialization by villagers that directly block others from accessing land. It is observed that land-based exclusion has created new fractures within the community and contributed to increased conflicts.

During fieldwork in Redwood, we encountered numerous instances of property disputes which involved family members and non-local residents. These disputes often stemmed from the lack of recognition for rights held by certain social groups, which reveals the power structures that shape and underlie patterns of exclusion. The case of Ms. Lan serves as an example. Ms. Lan came to Redwood as a migrant in the 1980s. She and her late husband paid a villager a one-off sum of several thousand dollars to purchase his house, a single-storey apartment built on the villager’s housing plot. Ms. Lan and her family have since lived in the apartment, and planned to refurbish and rebuild the house as her family expands and financial conditions allow. Because the apartment is over forty years old, it is in poor condition and has serious leakage problems. However, attempts to renovate and potentially rent out rooms have been blocked by the original owner, who is disputing Ms. Lan’s rights to the property. Home purchase and property transfer in the 1980s often relied on verbal agreements or simple contracts. In Ms. Lan’s case, her written contract lacked specification over the conditions and period of purchase, which the villager is now using to challenge her ownership claim. Such disputes are commonly found between local villagers and

long-term residents of the village who are not native-born members of the community. Even though there are agreements of transfer between the two parties, the lack of clear and recognized rights means that non-local residents are often unable to validate their ownership. Not only are they prevented from participating in the rental housing market, they are also at risk of losing their property. Especially since the rise in land prices in the 2010s, these residents have found themselves increasingly marginalized in the community, as they face legal challenges from the local villagers who sold them the property.

The lack of rights recognition for non-local residents points to an important divide that prevails in many urban villages. While local, native-born residents are members of the village collective and enjoy privileged access to land and resources, non-native-born residents are seldom incorporated into rural welfare regimes regardless of the length of residency. Because rural land is owned by the village collective, native-born villagers control decision-making and this can often take place at the expense of non-locals.

Another social group that is prevented from participating in the housing market due to the absence or weakness of property rights is women. In Redwood, the advent of rural land markets has brought family disputes to the fore. Many of these conflicts revolve around the distribution of land and housing rights among family members. Because the household is the unit of homestead plot allocation, and each household is defined as consisting of four persons, who within the household holds the right of title and exercises use rights is often a flashpoint of disputes. For a household with more than four persons, which family member gets to be registered as the holder of the second piece of homestead land is also a frequent source of competition between siblings. These tensions are particularly pronounced in distribution of family estates, where siblings fight over land and property left behind by their deceased parents. Intra-family conflicts spotlight gendered patterns of exclusion and inequality that are prevalent in Chinese villages. Women in rural China are seldom given rights or prioritized as property owners; they lose access to land in their native-born village immediately upon marrying someone outside the village (Jacka, 2013; Po, 2020; Sargeson, 2012). Elder sons are privileged owners and decision makers, while younger siblings, especially daughters, have less say and are more likely to be excluded from holding property.

Even if women hold nominal titles to land, they can be prevented from exercising such rights due to gendered norms and power relations at the village level. Our fieldwork reveals that, among native-born villagers, women are less likely to take advantage of the housing market even if they are legitimate property owners. The case of Ms. Tang serves as an example. Ms. Tang is a native-born villager who married within Redwood. Her husband passed away almost three decades ago, and she has since been reluctant to renovate her apartment, a two-storey house built in the 1980s that is now in poor condition. Ms. Tang had four daughters with her late husband, and the absence of men in the household has been her main reservation: "I cannot participate in any joint house building projects with external investors. I lost my husband and I have no sons. If there are any disputes or problems in the process of collaborating with outsiders, women are at an inferior position. I would rather make less money and receive less compensation than to make trouble for myself" (Interview 14, September 2019). Without capital input from external investors, Ms. Tang does not have enough savings on her own to undertake renovation works. Despite being the rightful owner, she is constrained both by gendered relations and the lack of capital in deriving benefits from her property. The inability to effectively exercise rights thus intersects with the lack of access qualifications in this case to produce exclusion from the land market.

The second aspect of exclusion observed in Redwood involves acts of territorialization and direct encroachment. As mentioned above, territorialization can be understood as the assertion of control over a geographic area through creating and maintaining spatialized zones (Peluso, 2005; Sack, 1986). Exclusion is part and parcel of all attempts to

territorialize: the creation and maintenance of access for one implies the prevention of access for others. In Redwood, the village landscape was relatively undifferentiated in the first decades of reform, and many land parcels were left abandoned or unattended. The rise in land prices brought forth an intensification in territorializing behavior. Devices such as walls, fences and gates began to crop up around the village, and residents made use of stones, planks and barbed wires to delineate their housing plots. These boundary-making practices became hotspots of conflicts as allegations of encroachment abounded between neighbours. Villagers' attempts to maximize their own claims over land resulted in numerous disputes. For example, one household took down the public toilet in the bid to enlarge their building area, which was met with outrage and opposition from other villagers. Another household started using land on top of the underground sewage system to build. This was discovered by fellow villagers who reported the infringement to village authorities. Yet another household expanded their apartment outwards and encroached on the alleyway, and was told to stop following complaints.

While many households engaged in acts of competitive territorialization, the consequences for their actions differed. Villagers alleged that, as with the ability to secure government approval to build, residents with connections to authorities had greater room of manoeuvre. Tensions over encroachment were thus exacerbated by the fact that village leaders were not seen by residents as impartial arbitrators. Because they felt that the leaders would be biased towards their own relations and friends in adjudicating property disputes, residents increasingly abandoned village-level mediation and instead took each other to court. While it could be seen as providing a more fair and transparent platform, the frequent use of legal channels has also resulted in marked deterioration in social relations. The cost of lawsuits also meant that those with means were better able to advance their claims.

In sum, this section shows how the advent of land markets in Redwood has transformed social relations in profound ways. It was not that these patterns of inequality were previously absent, but the financialization of land and the turn to speculative rentiership had a direct impact in turning latent forms of exclusion into open contestations for land and property rights. The appreciation in land value is thus pivotal for understanding why relations between villagers changed the way they did. On the one hand, the boom in rental prices made visible the differential ability among households to build and accumulate wealth. The increasingly evident stratification gave rise to sentiments of perceived injustice, anger and jealousy among villagers. On the other hand, the possibility of reaping windfalls also gave impetus to competitive territorialization and sharpened conflicts between neighbours and relatives. The overall result was that existing patterns of inequality were entrenched and accentuated: those with recognized rights and privileged access to capital and authority were better positioned to gain from land price increase, while those lacking rights and means were excluded from its benefits.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Across cities of the developing world, the rapid appreciation in land value has become a significant force of transformation in peri-urban areas. This paper examines how residents have capitalized on this to engage in accumulation and speculation. Rather than framing their practices as entrepreneurial resistance against an extractive state, we look into dynamics within the community to reveal internal patterns of inequality and exclusion. Far from being a level playing field, we show that the opportunities to participate in and reap gains from land-based accumulation are unevenly distributed among residents. Differential access to capital, power, information and social relations translated into uneven gains from land markets as well as differential abilities to assert claims over land through competitive territorialization. The speculative turn in local land politics thus not only reflects internal stratification but also reproduces it. Over time, these everyday acts could result in the

cumulative effect of deepened social differentiation and alienation.

Scholars of global urbanisms have reiterated the need of working with “a new repertoire of cities” to generate theoretical knowledge about the rural-urban experience (Roy 2008: 820). Researching how land commodification reshapes class and social dynamics in the context of a Chinese urban village offers insights that demonstrate the importance of theorizing urban change from the vantage point of Global South cities. This paper contributes to the literature on peripheral urbanization which emphasizes residents’ agency in the production of space. Rather than focusing on the role of the state and private actors in land speculation, analytical primacy is given to villagers’ practices of house building and territorialization, which embodies a distinct spatial and temporal logic (Caldeira, 2017). Peripheral landscapes often feature unfinished constructions and constant remodeling as residents upgrade their buildings when resources become available. In the case of Redwood, the uneven landscape is a material embodiment of villagers’ differential ability to take advantage of the property market, a difference that became amplified over time as those able to participate in rentierism re-invested their land-derived wealth into further accumulation. Rather than uniform incorporation into a new urbanity, or wholesale dispossession of the entire village, we observed a diversification in class trajectories where some were enriched while others were left behind.

Recent works on peri-urban developments in other areas of the Global South have revealed similar dynamics of uneven incorporation that challenge linear narratives of rural-urban transition. In his study of Manila’s extended metropolitan region, where urbanization has created high levels of speculation in the land market, Kelly (1999, 2003) demonstrated how everyday power relations in rural areas were directly related to the politics of land conversion. While landlords – being highly educated, of high social status and with sufficient resources – stood to benefit, farming households were subject to different levels of pressure to sell their land based on their tenancy rights and economic circumstances. Similar observations were made by Levien (2012) in the context of Rajasthan, India. There, the legacy of feudal class and caste structures became a “basis for unequal upward mobility via land prices” (Levien, 2012: 965). The ability of farmers to profit from the speculative boom was rooted in inequalities in economic and cultural capital, with some being forced to sell fast and at lower prices while others were able to hold onto their land and act as brokers for fellow villagers. Land sales in peri-urban Mali were similarly marked by unevenness, as observed by Becker (2013). His research found that only men in established lineages and founding families were able to sell land, while many others, including women, unmarried brothers, and new arrivals were excluded from market transfers.

These observations echo our findings and highlight the impact of endogenous factors in structuring relations of dominance and exclusion in the peri-urban areas of emerging cities around the world. Together they lend support for the need to pay further policy and research attention to small-scale land takings and dynamics of accumulation and dispossession within the community (Kan, 2019b; Kan, 2020). Practices of “intimate exclusion” – taking place between family members, relatives, the extended kin, and co-villagers – can affect communities in significant ways (Hall et al., 2011). As urbanization and land commodification continue to transform peri-urban areas at a rapid pace, more effort should be given to understanding and overcoming relations of extraction, exploitation and exclusion not just between state and society but those within communities as well.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Karita Kan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Xi Chen: Investigation, Resources, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the editor and reviewers for their helpful comments. The work described in this paper was fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. PolyU 25604917).

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