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Surviving Between Market and State: Street Vending in China's Socialist Market Economy – The Case of Xi'an

Abstract

Street vending, as a vital component of China's urban economy, is generally framed as marginal and informal activity subject to uniform state control. This paper challenges that view through a comparative case study of Xi'an—Liyuan (an urban district) and Ganjia (an urban village)—to examine how vendors navigate spatial constraints, supply chains, and regulatory regimes shaped by the interplay between market forces and differentiated state control. The findings reconceptualise street vending as an integral part of China's evolving urban economy, revealing that vendors are not passive survivors but active economic agents who engage in structured supply chains, adopt digital technologies, and leverage kinship networks. The paper further uncovers how urban-village dual structure of state control produces uneven conditions for vending livelihoods and shape different possibilities for economic agency.

Key words: street vending, socialist market economy, market-oriented mechanism, state control, urban village

1. Introduction

Street vending contributes to the vibrancy of Chinese cities, offering a diverse range of goods, from festive delicacies to electronic accessories. While street vending is found worldwide, its operation is shaped by local economic and political structures. In China, street vending is embedded within the broader framework of the socialist market economy, where market-oriented mechanisms create opportunities for vendors while state control regulates and constrains their activities. The interplay between these forces—market adaptability and regulatory oversight—defines how vendors navigate economic opportunities and negotiate spatial and legal constraints.

Studies on the socialist market economy in urban China are extensive (Bekkevold et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2020; Saratchand, 2022; Sigley, 2006; Wu, 2002), and research on street vending in China is also substantial, but the intersection is underexplored. Most research on street vending in China focuses on regulatory constraints in urban districts (Bell & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Brown, 2017; Caron, 2013; Hanser, 2016; Swider, 2015; Wong et al., 2007; Xue & Huang, 2015), emphasising state control and centralised policy enforcement by *chengguan* (*Chengshi Guanli Xingzheng Zhifa Ju*, the Municipal Administration Law Enforcement Bureau). However, less attention has been paid to the role of market mechanisms and the dynamics of decentralised state control in urban villages. Urban villages are rural settlements enclosed within urban areas, characterised by rural collective-owned land and property rights which contrast with urban state-owned land property rights. As residents of urban villages convert their properties into rental housing and commercial spaces, these villages emerge as dense hubs for informal vending (G. Huang et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2013). Some research has examined street vending within broader value chains (Lyons et al., 2008, 2013), but this perspective in China remains underexplored, and the state control regimes over street vending in urban villages remain insufficiently understood.

The paper thus has two objectives. The first is to explore the **characteristics of street vending in urban China within China's socialist market economy**, which integrates socialism and extended state control with market mechanisms. The second is to explore how the characteristics of China's urban **street vending under the divergent urban governance regimes of urban villages and ordinary urban districts**. The paper finds that street vendors actively engage in opportunities created by the socialist market economy, but also illustrates the stark contrast for vendors' security and agency in urban villages and urban districts. The paper is based on comparative study of two areas in Xi'an: Liyuan, an urban district characterised by fluid and informal vending practices, and Ganjia, an urban village with a structured, rental-based vending system.

The paper contributes to the general literature on street vending, illustrating the distinct characteristics of Chinese informal workers and how they navigate economic opportunities and institutional barriers, and to Chinese literature by offering insights into governance within hybrid economic systems, where informality is both regulated and sustained.

2. Street Vending: From global debates to Chinese Socialist Market Economy

2.1 International perspectives on street vending

Street vending has long been recognised as a crucial livelihood strategy for the urban poor and socially marginalised groups in developing nations. As part of the informal economy, vendors are often characterised by low and unstable incomes, lack of access to social protection, and the absence of formal employment contracts (Roever, 2014; Recchi, 2020). Many operate as own-account workers, often for decades, selling low-value or perishable goods in precarious public spaces. Yet, some research challenges the view of vendors as the lowest tier of the labour force. In China, some vendors hold

higher educational qualifications and earn relatively stable incomes (Huang et al., 2018), while Wongtada (2014) observes a general rise in vendors' educational attainment across contexts.

Much of the existing literature on street vending focuses on how state actors seek to exclude vendors in public spaces, and how vendors—or their organisations—respond through negotiation, contestation, or informal adaptation. Studies highlight the dynamic and uneven power relations between state institutions and street vendors, examining how governance is shaped through everyday interactions in contested urban spaces across Africa, Asia and Latin America (Brown, 2006; Falla & Valencia, 2019; Lindell et al., 2019; Recio, 2021; Tafti, 2019). *The Bellagio International Declaration of Street Vendors* summarises six recurring challenges vendors face globally: lack of legal status, insecure access to space, restrictive licensing, high regulatory costs, harassment and evictions, and lack of political voice (Mitullah, 2003)

Researchers have observed that within modernist visions of urban order street vendors are often viewed as symbols of disorder, resulting in their marginalisation or removal in cities such as Los Angeles, Accra, Bangkok, and Beijing through repeated eviction campaigns (Boonjubun, 2017; Etzold, 2015; Hanser, 2016). In response, other scholars propose rethinking the spatial logics of urban governance by treating vendor-occupied spaces as common-pool resources that support informal livelihoods (Brown et al., 2015; Recio, 2021). These contributions call for greater empirical attention to alternative regimes of spatial management that move beyond exclusion and enable more inclusive and negotiated forms of urban coexistence.

While existing research has significantly advanced understandings of state-vendor relations and vendors' claim to public space, relatively little attention has been paid to the heterogeneity of public space regimes and to the roles vendors play within the Chinese socialist market economy. Much of the literature has focused on developing or postcolonial contexts (Malefakis, 2015; Ndawana, 2022; Tonda & Kepe, 2016; Varley, 2013), where street vending is shaped by informal governance (Addi et al., 2024),

fragmented regulatory enforcement (Falla & Valencia, 2019), and electoral patronage (Roever, 2007). This study builds on those insights but turns to the Chinese context, where vendors operate within a socialist institutional framework, to explore how varied property regimes, regulatory instruments, and political-economic configurations shape vendors' opportunities and constraints. In doing so, the study contributes to a broader understanding of street vendors' differentiated economic and political roles in contemporary urban governance.

2.2 Street vending – within a socialist market economy

The political economy of urban street vending in China is integrally connected both to the economic transformation of the country within a socialist political system, and to the dominance of state control which pervades many aspects of urban life, albeit with differences between urban districts and urban villages. While there is an emerging literature on street vending in China, it is useful to interrogate this from an economic and political perspective to explore the unique characteristics of street vending in urban China. This section first explores the historical development of street vending in China, then analyses the role of market-oriented mechanisms and finally examines the role of state control in shaping street vending from the early stages of the Reform and Opening-up period to the current socialist market economy.

Street vending from a planned economy to a socialist market economy

During China's planned economy era (1953-1978), street vending and other private economic activities were strictly prohibited and socially stigmatised. From 1950, the state gradually abolished private ownership, centralised control over key sectors, and managed resource distribution (Solinger, 1987). Street vending, labelled the 'tail of capitalism,' was heavily suppressed, with vendors facing severe penalties for clandestine trading, leading to its near elimination (Hanser, 2016, p. 366).

After the Reform and Opening-up policy instigated in 1978, private economic activities, including street vending, gradually re-emerged. The policy was formally introduced by Deng Xiaoping at the 12th Party Congress in 1982 and was officially described as ‘a more sustainable and socially just way of making a market economy work for national development and the improvement of living standards’ (Hansen et al., 2020, p. 3). The approach promoted a unique economic model integrating socialism with market mechanisms, which has since been adjusted and reaffirmed by President Xi Jinping.

Some scholars interpret the shift from a planned to a socialist market economy as the triumph of market capitalism and the retreat of the state (Fukuyama, 1989), while others emphasise the hybrid and evolving nature of the system (Hansen et al., 2020; Saratchand, 2022). Within the literature on state-market relations in post-socialist transitions, Zhang (2001), challenges the notion of state retreat by conceptualising Chinese state control as multilayered regulatory regime that continuously reshapes social spaces, identities, and everyday lives, despite marketisation. Ding (2009) also argues that China’s market economy is a tool for achieving socialist objectives with state control as its foundation, and when market mechanisms fail the state intervenes with macroeconomic regulation surpassing that of capitalist social-democracies.

Market-oriented mechanisms and street vending

One of the most significant market-oriented reforms influencing street vending has been the transformation of the *hukou* system of household registration, which has directly shaped labour mobility and the informal economy (Butchko, 2024). Prior to the 1980s, rural-to-urban migration was strictly controlled, preventing rural residents with rural *hukou* from accessing urban jobs and services (Solinger, 1993). The gradual relaxation of *hukou* policies during the 1990s allowed rural migrants to seek employment in cities, leading to a significant increase in non-state employment in small-scale private enterprises and street vending (Wu, 2002).

However, the *hukou* reforms have also reinforced the segmentation between formal and informal economic activities. Rural migrants, often excluded from formal urban employment and social security benefits, increasingly rely on flexible own-account ventures such as street vending (Wu, 2002), and although frequently depicted as a survival strategy with minimum investment (Zhong & Di, 2017), informal employment such as street vending is deeply embedded in China's evolving economic framework. While many studies emphasise the *hukou* system as an unjust constraint on rural migrants (Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Hung, 2022), its impact on street vendors may be more complex in facilitating trading networks. Thus, street vending livelihoods and operations, must be understood within the broader framework of the socialist market economy to explore how vendors are integrated into broader commercial networks, and navigate state controls.

The socialist market economy has three primary components: the public sector, the private corporate sector, and the private small enterprises sector (Saratchand, 2022). While the public sector and private corporate sector have been extensively examined within China's market-oriented framework (Blanchard, 2008; Liang et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2017), the private small enterprise sector—within which street vending plays a significant role—has received less academic attention.

Despite the emerging body of research on street vending in China (Caron, 2013; Hong & Pavlou, 2013; G. Huang et al., 2020; L. Li & Zhang, 2020; X. Li et al., 2020; Xue & Huang, 2015), including studies which have highlighted the restrictions imposed on Chinese rural-urban migrants and marginalised groups in the private small enterprise sectors (Huang et al., 2014, 2018; Solinger, 1993, 2013), there is a notable lack of research exploring how street vendors and their supply chains are interconnected to the wider Chinese economy. While some scholars have examined the integration of street vendors into broader supply chains in the African context (Lyons et al., 2008, 2013), such research remains limited in Chinese debates.

State control over street vending

State control over street vendors has undergone significant changes over the past four decades, as regulation and enforcement has evolved in response to economic growth and urbanisation. In the 1980s, state control over street vendors was relatively supportive. The restructuring of SOEs (State-Owned Enterprises) into private companies led to mass layoffs, leaving many urban workers unemployed, and rural migrants, constrained by the *hukou* system, had limited access to formal employment in cities. The state viewed street vending as a functional economic activity that addressed gaps in the planned economy, and local governments tolerated informal vending, recognising its role in absorbing surplus labour and stimulating grassroots economic activity (Solinger, 1993). At the time, land use rights were not yet tradable, and urban land was valued primarily for its functional use rather than for its exchange value.

However, during the 1990s, the state's attitude towards street vendors began to shift, alongside the growing commercialisation of urban land. The 1988 constitutional amendment first allowed the paid transfer of land-use rights, marking the legal foundation of a land market (Ho & Lin, 2004; NPC, 1988). In 1990, Shenzhen held China's first public auction of land-use rights, and Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour accelerated land commodification nationwide. As cities embraced land-based development strategies, street vendors were increasingly seen as occupying low-value, rent-free spaces incompatible with visions of modern urban growth.

This shift was reinforced by the 1994 tax-sharing reform, which left local governments with limited tax revenue but high expenditure (Zhu, 2004). In response, local authorities turned to land leasing to generate income, creating what became known as *land finance* (D. Huang & Chan, 2018). Selling land-use rights funded infrastructure and boosted a city's GDP—one of the key indicators in cadre performance evaluations of local government. Officials were incentivised to prioritise high-yield development, while informal street vending, contributing little to revenue or image, was seen as a

hindrance to growth. As a result, tolerance gave way to exclusion, and state control over street vendors tightened through both spatial and administrative means.

The regulation of street vending was delegated to *chengguan*, an agency first piloted in Beijing in 1997 and expanded nationwide in the early 2000s. The *chengguan* were responsible for urban management and hygiene, and usually operated under municipal authorities. Although enforcement practices varied by region, *chengguan* units became the primary mechanism for controlling urban vendors. Under the Administrative Penalty Law, *chengguan* officers were authorised to issue warnings, fines, and confiscations (Caron, 2013), leading to frequent confrontations with vendors, widely criticised for their excessive harshness and arbitrary implementation (Wang et al., 2006). International observers documented cases of power abuse and disproportionately severe penalties (Flock and Breitung 2016). Hanser (2016, p. 370) describes these conflicts as a 'guerrilla war,' in which vendors, facing constant evictions, were forced to adopt evasive strategies to sustain their livelihoods.

Since the launch the National Civilised City campaign in the early 2000s, state control over street vending has become increasingly exclusionary. The campaign's evaluation metrics gave vendors a negative score, associating them with disorder, congestion, and a poor urban image (Hanser, 2016). Local authorities then intensified enforcement, treating vendors as obstacles to the *civilised city* ideal and removing them from visible public spaces (Huang & Xue, 2011).

During this period, conflicts between *chengguan* and street vendors escalated, prompting legal reforms aimed at mitigating violent enforcement. In a high-profile incident in 2009, Xia Junfeng, a street vendor, fatally stabbed two *chengguan* officers, triggering widespread public debate. Some sociologists and criminologists argued that Xia's actions reflected the desperation of individuals subjected to systemic repression (Xu & Jiang, 2019). This case led to the introduction of the Administrative Enforcement Law in 2011, which aimed to formalise urban law enforcement and reduce excessive coercion (Caron, 2013).

Nevertheless, enforcement remained inconsistent, and conflicts between vendors and municipal authorities persisted. Local government response oscillated between flexible and rigid enforcement strategies. *Chengguan* enforcement patterns became increasingly unpredictable, with vendors facing sporadic evictions and selective tolerance (Hanser, 2016a). Ferchen (2008, p. 175) describes this phenomenon as ‘cyclical disregard and enforcement,’ in which large-scale events, international exhibitions, and high-profile government visits triggered crackdowns on street vending, leaving vendors in a precarious position with no institutionalised rights, and constantly navigating shifting regulatory landscapes (Swider 2015).

A turning point occurred in the early 2020s when China’s strict control over street vendors was temporarily relaxed in response to economic challenges exacerbated by Covid-19. Premier Li Keqiang publicly endorsed street vending as a means to stabilise employment. In 2020, the National Civilised City evaluation metrics were revised and no longer gave vending markets a negative score. The updated criteria explicitly encouraged the development of vendor markets in designated areas, provided they were well-managed and did not obstruct traffic or affect sanitation (Zhang & Shao, 2024). This adjustment sent a clear signal from central government, prompting local authorities to soften enforcement, and many cities across the country began to respond.

However, a key gap remains in understanding how response and state control of vending areas in China now operates, and existing research has largely overlooked how regulatory mechanisms differ between urban districts and urban villages. In urban districts, while the post-Covid shift towards more inclusive policies on street vending has been researched (Song, 2020; X. Zhang & Shao, 2024), it remains unclear how *chengguan* enforcement has changed as policies evolve. Particularly in urban villages, the mechanisms of state control of street vendors remain unclear, operating within a decentralised rural administrative structure that differs significantly from other urban districts.

3. Methods

The city of Xi'an, with its vibrant street vending culture and many urban villages, was the location of this research. The research compared two case study sites: a vending market in the urban district of Liyuan Road, and Ganjia Village. Ganjia is one of the larger urban villages in Xi'an with a high concentration of vending and, as an urban village, is 'rural land' under collective ownership controlled by the Ganjia Village Committee¹.

The challenge was then to find a comparable market for the research in an urban district. Liyuan Road was selected from a shortlist of eight other markets as the best comparison as informal vending occurs throughout the day and evening. Liyuan Road marks the boundary between two administrative districts in Xi'an: Weiyang and Lianhu. While the road itself is state-owned urban land, its northern and southern sides fall under the separate district jurisdictions, each governed by a different *chengguan* team with different modes of operation.

The qualitative research strategy was based on observation, document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and key informant interviews. Building trust was essential to enable interviews with street vendors. In Ganjia, the first interviewee played a crucial role as gatekeeper in enabling interviews with other vendors. To gain his confidence and a better understanding of his challenges in managing his stall, the lead researcher assisted him by selling goods at the stall while he focused on cooking. This support also encouraged the gatekeeper to introduce other vendors as interviewees, including his neighbours, relatives, and friends. Although reliance on a gatekeeper may have limited participant diversity, the close networks in Ganjia mean that the views collected are likely to be representative.

¹ The village committee is a grassroots self-governing body in rural areas of China, responsible for managing collective assets and representing the interests of the village community. Its members are exclusively individuals whose *hukou* is registered in the village.

Building trust in Liyuan was more challenging due to vendors' insecurity about their lack of fixed vending spaces. There, the lead researcher built trust through a *chengguan* official who also operated an informal lottery stall. Using the boot of his car as a stall, he parked on the sidewalk, set up tables and chairs nearby, and cleverly issued himself a parking ticket to 'legitimise' his occupation of the space. The *chengguan* official then facilitated introductions to other vendors.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 48 street vendors across both sites, including 24 participants from Ganjia Village and 18 from Liyuan Road, and equal numbers of male and female respondents. Interviews were undertaken with morning market vendors, night market vendors, mobile vendors, and 24-hour vendors (the latter only in Ganjia). The two key informant interviews were with *chengguan* officials, the enforcement officer (who sold lottery tickets in Liyuan) and a team leader (*chengguan* supervisor).

Thematic coding in NVivo explored vendors' products, daily turnover, income and expenditure patterns, access to raw materials, social networks and relationships with suppliers, customers, and local authorities, to examine how street vending livelihoods are shaped by value chains and state control. Interview data was also organised into the two case nodes of Liyuan Road and Ganjia Village, and further categorised by gender, age, type of vending, education level, and *hukou* status, allowing for comparative analysis of how social attributes shaped vendors' experiences, strategies, and claims within the different governance regimes.

4. Context—Liyuan and Ganjia

This section introduces the two case study sites in Xi'an, Liyuan and Ganjia, examining their spatial, locational, and economic characteristics, alongside market opportunities available to vendors. It then explores the dual urban-village control structure through key policies and enforcement over street vending.

4.1 Spatial and economic context: market characteristics

Liyuan and Ganjia illustrate how market forces in different urban spaces interact with localised conditions to influence street vending activities. While both areas support vibrant vending economies, their spatial structures, market conditions, and economic opportunities differ significantly.

Observation shows that Liyuan Road has a highly mobile and flexible street vending economy, shaped by its spatial configuration and economic conditions. The area's proximity to Xi'an's Second Ring Expressway enhances connectivity, facilitating the transport of goods and vendor mobility. The surrounding urban fabric consists of relocated housing communities and the urban village of Gelaomen, both of which offer low-cost rental housing. These affordable areas have attracted a diverse population, including migrant workers, self-employed vendors and small-scale traders. Vendors along Liyuan Road are highly mobile and respond to shifting demand, frequently adjusting their locations and operating hours.

Ganjia, a redeveloped urban village with a grid street layout in Xi'an's high-tech district, has evolved into a dense commercial hub with a well-established vending network. Benefiting from high pedestrian flows, particularly during the evening peak (6–9pm), Ganjia has developed a concentrated vending economy with stalls operating along its busiest thoroughfares. Ganjia has a more spatially clustered vending pattern than Liyuan, shaped by its rural land ownership structure. Residential properties are allocated to villagers, but the land remains under collective ownership, encouraging rental housing and commercial leasing. This has also resulted in a dense concentration of vendor-operated rental units. The central vending area of Ganjia is strategically located along its widest and most accessible route, near a school, residential communities, and a university, making it a key location for food vending, particularly fresh and cooked food.

4.2 Evolving state control dichotomy in urban-village structure

State control over street vending in Xi'an is different in urban districts and urban villages. A regulatory review and the interviews suggest that in Liyuan, regulation has shifted from strict enforcement to conditional relaxation, while in Ganjia, governance has become fragmented, with multiple actors negotiating control over vending spaces.

Like most urban districts in China, Liyuan has historically been subject to strict government vending regulations. In 2005, the government criminalised street vending in public space, through the *Shaanxi Provincial Urban Appearance and Environmental Sanitation Regulations* (SPG, 2005), resulting in fines and confiscations and reinforcing a zero-tolerance approach to informality. Subsequent policies, including the *Opinions on Food Safety Supervision Responsibilities* (SPG, 2011) and the *Regulations on Small Food Vendors* (SPG, 2016), further strengthened enforcement mechanisms.

However, the economic impact of Covid-19 led to a temporary policy relaxation. The *Measures to Promote Market Consumption* (SPG, 2020) introduced designated vending zones and permitted controlled vending activities, expanding vending opportunities while keeping them under state regulation. Then, *the Key Points of Urban Management* (SPG, 2023) reaffirmed a controlled flexibility, allowing vendors to operate in predefined areas while maintaining strict oversight.

However, these policies applied only to designated areas, and there was no clear guidance on enforcement for informal vendors operating in Liyuan. This ambiguity created discretionary space for law enforcement, allowing local authorities significant autonomy in determining the extent to which informal vending activities were regulated.

In contrast, the state control in Ganjia shows structural fragmentation.

After the state-led redevelopment of Ganjia, the governance of vending markets was initially centralised under the Ganjia Village Committee. As the primary authority, the

village committee planned the vending market, allocated stalls, managed vendor contracts and collected fees. However, this exclusive control soon met resistance from adjacent villagers, who opposed their exclusion from market benefits. In response, some began informally expanding vending spaces by constructing unauthorised structures, integrating vending activities into their properties. By 2017, these modifications significantly altered the planned spatial order, prompting government intervention.

In 2018, the government launched large-scale demolitions to remove illegal extensions and restore urban order. Yet, rather than consolidating control, this intervention further fragmented governance. Since 2019, a multi-layered system has taken shape, where governance over vending spaces is distributed among different actors with competing interests. The government maintains overarching supervision but does not engage in daily operations. The village committee no longer holds vendors' contracts. Its role is limited to collecting management fees and maintaining market infrastructure, including sanitation, waste disposal, electricity and gas safety. Instead, lease-holding vendors now negotiate directly with adjacent villagers through informal verbal agreements to secure vending spaces.

Further fragmentation of vending space also takes place. Lease-holding vendors rent stalls entirely from adjacent villagers to operate their own businesses, but many sublet portions of their stalls or rent out specific time slots to offset cost. Lease-holding vendors thus exercise authority over subletting vendors. Subletting vendors, despite being the majority in Ganjia, have less security, relying entirely on informal agreements with lease-holding vendors—who themselves hold only verbal and informal contracts with adjacent villagers. Moreover, government intervention, whether through stricter enforcement or market restructuring, poses a constant risk of disrupting or dismantling the existing vending market, further exacerbating its instability.

5. Enmeshed livelihoods

From the interviews it is clear that informal street vending in Xi'an is shaped by two interwoven forces. First, vendors must navigate market opportunities, forming dynamic supply chains and adapting to shifting economic conditions. Second, they operate within a regulatory landscape, shaped by the urban-village dual system that defines the limits of informality. The findings from this paper contrast street vending in the 'urban' context of Liyuan to the 'village' management of Ganjia. The findings suggests that informal street vending in Xi'an is an evolving practice shaped by the tensions between market-driven adaptability and state-imposed constraints.

5.1 Street vending characteristics and market-oriented adoptions

Street vending in Liyuan and Ganjia operates within distinct land property rights regimes, which shape vendors' spatial and economic strategies. In urban Liyuan, where vending spaces are informal and enforcement is unpredictable, vendors are often mobile, enabling them to evade regulation and access better market opportunities. In contrast, the urban village of Ganjia provides a more structured vending environment, where the village committee regulates market access through rental fees and informal agreements.

Empirical data suggest that vendors in both Liyuan and Ganjia require significant financial, social, and human capital to establish their businesses. Among the 42 interviewees, 11 held a college or bachelor's degree (7 in Ganjia, 4 in Liyuan), and many transitioned from formal employment to vending. Vendors' motivations ranged from career dissatisfaction to entrepreneurial aspirations. One female, night-market vendor in Ganjia explained, 'I used to be a teacher, but I never liked my job. The work environment felt too enclosed, so I resigned and started street vending'. Another male, mobile vendor in Liyuan reflected, 'I worked in aerospace quality control for five years. Office life was repetitive and dull, so I left to pursue vending'.

The urban-village dual structure also influences vendors' business investment and operational strategies. In the more stable operating environment of Ganjia, vendors can invest in fixed stalls with access to water, electricity, and cooking appliances (Figure 1). In Liyuan, where vending spaces are informal and enforcement remains unpredictable, vendors must be mobile, investing in pushcarts, electric tricycles, and small trucks (Figure 2). Both groups use smartphones for procurement, financial transactions, and customer engagement, illustrating the adaptation of informal businesses to market-oriented mechanisms.

Income levels among vendors vary significantly. In Ganjia, where vending spaces operate on collectively owned village land with fixed stalls, and a reduced risk of eviction, vendors report monthly earnings between RMB3,000–20,000 (USD420–2,800). However, the need to pay rent means that only vendors who can generate enough income can afford to operate there. Lower-income vendors and part-time traders are effectively excluded.

In urban Liyuan, where vendors operate without rent on state-owned land, monthly incomes are generally lower, ranging from RMB400–8,000 (USD56–1,120 USD). Without the need to pay rent, vendors with lower capital investment, other part-time jobs or family responsibilities can engage in vending. The flexibility of entry fosters a more inclusive market, albeit with lower earnings due to market instability and frequent enforcement actions.

The *hukou* system also shapes vendors' market access and economic security. Among the 42 respondents, 36 hold rural *hukou*—17 out of 18 respondents in Liyuan and 19 out of 24 respondents in Ganjia, indicating that street vending remains an occupation accessible to rural-to-urban migrants. Although *hukou* reforms are loosening restrictions, barriers to urban employment persist, particularly regarding education, social security, and business formalisation. As a male, night-market vendor in Ganjia said, 'I was denied access to high school in Xi'an because my family couldn't afford the social security payments needed for non-local students'. A female vendor in Liyuan

explained, ‘When we reach 60, our pension is only RMB100 (USD14) per month, unlike retired state employees, who receive significant pensions’.

Nevertheless, rural *hukou* provides advantages in access to supply networks, skills transfer, and community support, especially for new entrants into street vending. Many vendors source products from their hometowns at lower costs and rely on family-based production. A female morning-market vendor in Liyuan said, ‘I learned how to make *Shandong* pancakes from my family and have been running my stall in Xi’an for six years’. Vendors who are adjacent villagers with ‘rural’ *hukou* in Ganjia enjoy reduced rental fees and priority access to vending spaces.

The practice of taking on apprentices (*shoutu*) represents a market-oriented adaptation that is distinctive to the street vending economy in China. It constitutes a particular pathway through which newcomers gain entry into the sector. In addition to the kinship and friendship networks commonly observed in other national contexts, and beyond the rural *hukou* ties unique to China, *shoutu* is widespread, enabling aspiring vendors to pay experienced practitioners to help them access practical knowledge, business techniques and supply channels. These apprenticeship arrangements vary widely in form and scale. Sometimes, the exchange is highly personalised: experienced vendors transfer skills, recipes, and logistical know-how on an informal and negotiable fee basis. In other cases, apprenticeship has become fully commercialised, with new entrants paying standard fees to specialized companies that offer vendor training, sell equipment and proprietary recipes, and provide standardized instruction. In this latter model, vendor networks may extend across cities and even provinces, and the franchising companies often continue to serve as fixed supply sources for ingredients or products. This apprenticeship was explained by two male respondents in Ganjia:

“Pretty much everyone’s taking on apprentices now—even the apprentices are turning around and training others. The market is really crowded. This year especially, so many people started vending, and all kinds of training businesses

popped up. But most of them just want the sign-up fees—they don't really care if people succeed or not".

"I've taken on two apprentices before. I taught them how to make spicy strips—both the recipe and the technique. I charged each of them 5,800 yuan for the training."

In China, large-scale training operations offer standardized packages that include skills instruction, equipment, and access to supply chains. Many vendors continue to source goods from these providers, indicating not only a mature franchising model but also a developed and integrated supply infrastructure within the informal economy.

5.2 Supply chains and market integration

The supply chains of street vendors in Liyuan and Ganjia exhibit a complex structure, reflecting formal and informal market mechanisms.

The **upstream supply chains** of street vending are highly diverse in both Liyuan and Ganjia, and vendors buy from wholesale markets, farms, online platforms, and small-scale manufacturers. In both areas, wholesale markets play a crucial role in supplying goods to vendors (Figure 3). Xinqiao Market is more accessible for vendors in Liyuan, while Zhuque Market is closer to Ganjia.

A noteworthy finding is that in both areas, many vendors buy goods online, often from e-commerce platforms such as Taobao, Meituan, and 1688 for general purchases, or specialised platforms like Kuailv² and Shibangda³, catering specifically to small businesses, offering bulk orders and fast delivery for food and other perishables. Vendors clearly had access to internet-enabled mobile phones, robust digital payment

² A wholesale platform for restaurant and food service providers, offering fresh and frozen food with efficient logistics.

³ Shibangda: A specialised e-commerce platform catering to small vendors and restaurants, providing bulk food supplies and delivery services.

systems, and stable delivery addresses, again suggesting their businesses were relatively well resourced.

Vendors also sourced goods from formal and informal small-scale workshops. Formal workshops are regulated with business licenses and registered addresses, while informal workshops, often located in urban villages, lacked food safety certifications and business licenses. Food produced in informal workshops, was mainly ready-to-eat items such as pancakes or steamed buns, or semi-processed food, including rice noodles, wheat noodles, and wonton wrappers, which could be bought in bulk. One interviewee reported that food from informal workshops could not be sold in supermarkets and was mainly distributed through street vendors.

Some vendors procured supplies directly from farms, mainly fruit and vegetables, bypassing wholesalers and intermediary markups. Produce came from suburban farms in Chang'an District and counties further from Xi'an (Figure 4). Often these vendors had been in business for many years and owned small trucks, enabling them to transport goods directly. As a fruit vendor from Liyuan Road, explained, he had links with many farm owners who would contact him during the harvest season to arrange bulk purchases. Direct procurement was easier from Liyuan due to its proximity to the city ring expressway. Vendors in Ganjia nearer the city centre, were less likely to travel to farms, but relied more on informal networks, as the area's relatively stable vending environment and concentration of vendors now supports several small-scale processing factories catering specifically to their needs.

Vendors used three main methods of **transport**: self-pickup, free delivery, and third-party transport services. Vendors with shorter operating hours and smaller-scale businesses tended to prefer self-pickup, using e-bikes or e-tricycles to collect wholesale goods. In contrast, vendors with larger-scale operations and extended working hours often benefited from free delivery by suppliers or third-party transport services such as Lalamove⁴, allowing them to optimise supply chain efficiency. Vendors

⁴ Lalamove is a mobile app-based logistics platform that connects users with delivery drivers. It provides

in Liyuan were more likely to pick up goods themselves, whereas vendors in Ganjia relied more on delivery services.

The **downstream** customer base of vending markets in Ganjia and Liyuan reflects the dynamic nature of their supply chains. Street vendors in both locations catered to a diverse but stable clientele, including young people, the elderly, students, working professionals, full-time carers, and retirees. In Ganjia, vendors served local village residents, people from nearby residential communities, office workers and commuters, while the Liyuan market mainly catered to transient trade from passing pedestrians and local residents.

Payment methods also shaped supply chain dynamics. All vendors interviewed accepted digital payments such as WeChat⁵ Pay and Alipay, reflecting the increasing integration of mobile payment systems into the informal economy. Additionally, some had direct communications with individual customers and groups through WeChat, enabling them to accept pre-orders, allowing vendors to adjust their inventory and procurement strategies accordingly.

In Ganjia, several street vendors employed casual **hourly-paid workers** to support their operations, suggesting well-established businesses, due to high pedestrian peak-hour flows, the vibrant market atmosphere and relatively stable working environment. casual workers often helped prepare ingredients, cook food, and with post-operation cleanup. Wages for casual workers in Ganjia were standardised, RMB15 (USD2) per hour. Vendors' role in local employment creation reflects a dual contribution: enhancing economic stability for themselves while fostering informal labour opportunities.

on-demand transportation services for goods, calculating fees based on the distance and the weight or size of the items being transported.

⁵ WeChat is a multi-purpose messaging, social media, and mobile payment app widely used in China, enabling users to communicate, share content, and conduct transactions seamlessly within a single platform.

Street vendors' **networks** played a crucial role in their supply chains, through ties of kinship, trust, and shared resources. Experienced vendors often bring relatives and friends into the trade, fostering skill dissemination and collective business expansion. Such relationships also influence procurement strategies, shaping where and how vendors source their goods. One example was the cooperative network of vendors reported by a male night-market vendor in Ganjia.

'I am from Huaining County, Anqing City, Anhui Province, and have been running a street vending business in Xi'an with my wife for 13 years.... We sell snacks like steamed buns, wontons, and rice noodles, which are specialties of our hometown, known as the 'hometown of pastries.' Many steamed bun vendors nationwide are from our city, as it's common for relatives to teach others pastry-making ... many of my friends and relatives now run similar stalls in Xi'an. We all source products like rice noodles and wonton wrappers from the same supplier, who is also from our hometown. He delivers supplies daily, and we settle payments monthly, relying on mutual trust...Over time, we've transitioned from carrying goods on shoulder poles to using tricycles and handcarts.'

This trust-based network is essential for maintaining a stable and efficient supply chain. These long-term supplier relationships, ensure flexible payment arrangements, minimise financial pressure and reinforce mutual support and collective resilience.

5.3 How urban-village dual state control shaped street vending

These distinct administrative arrangements in urban Liyuan and the village of Ganjia define the extent of state intervention in different spaces, and shape how vendors engage with regulatory authorities and negotiate their position within the informal economy.

In urban districts such as Liyuan, state control over street vending operates through broader regulatory frameworks that define where vending is permitted. Vending is strictly prohibited on Class I roads (main thoroughfares) and Class II roads (secondary streets). On Class III roads (local roads) such as Liyuan Road, vending is tacitly permitted under conditions of safety and orderliness. The balance between enforcement and accommodation reflects a regulatory system that is neither fully prohibitive nor entirely permissive.

The regulations are implemented by municipal governments, with enforcement primarily carried out by *chengguan* departments. The *chengguan* are responsible for monitoring vending activities, enforcing urban policies, and maintaining public order, but their organisational structure varies. *Chengguan* in some districts operate under the centralised Urban Comprehensive Law Enforcement Bureau (UCLEB), but in other areas enforcement authority is delegated to subdistrict offices, leading to inconsistencies in enforcement practices. In Liyuan, the south side of Liyuan Road is managed by Lianhu District where the *chengguan* operate under the sub-district office, while the north side falls under Weiyang District, where the *chengguan* are directly managed by the UCLEB.

In Liyuan these inconsistencies were clear, as highlighted in the interview with a senior *chengguan* officer from Weiyang District. He noted that in line with official training, *chengguan* in Weiyang generally classify all vendors outside government-designated areas as informal, and that many evictions are initiated by complaints from ground-floor shop owners. He highlighted the inconsistencies of *chengguan* operation:

‘The structure of *chengguan* departments varies significantly across districts in Xi’an, leading to notable inconsistencies. Personnel include civil servants, public institution staff, contract workers, temporary staff such as auxiliary officers, and security guards. This composition is both complex and disorganised. For example, auxiliary officers and security guards, who lack formal training, are

primarily tasked with assisting formally employed officers in enforcement. Their lower qualifications and lack of training often lead to improper enforcement practices, such as verbal abuse or violent actions... *Chengguan* departments lack the resources and capacity to fully train all personnel’.

Vendors must navigate these inconsistencies in enforcement to survive. As *chengguan* patrols in Weiyang and Lianhu districts follow different schedules and are restricted to their respective jurisdictions, vendors shift between the north and south sides of the road to avoid inspections. Since *chengguan* officers do not operate beyond their designated areas, this administrative division unintentionally sustains informal vending, demonstrating how vendors adapt to fragmented governance.

Most vendors in Liyuan found the current status of limited accommodation acceptable. The relationship has shifted from a confrontational ‘cat-and-mouse’ dynamic to a more coordinated system, where vendors and *chengguan* functioned like ‘colleagues’ occupying the same space at different times. When *chengguan* conduct routine patrols, vendors pack up their stalls, ensuring that *chengguan* officers can report a clean and orderly environment. After the patrols pass, vendors promptly return, with the tacit acceptance of *chengguan*. The lead researcher witnessed a *chengguan* officer advising a vendor to move their stall slightly so the officer could take an official photo without the vendor in frame. *Chengguan* and vendors thus minimised direct conflict, demonstrating how flexible enforcement sustains informal vending while maintaining state authority over urban space.

However, some mobile vendors in Liyuan had experienced violent confiscation of their goods by *chengguan*. One male vendor in Liyuan sustained a hand injury while struggling with *chengguan* officers over his tricycle. Although he reported the incident to the police, his complaint was not upheld, and he received no compensation. Another mobile vendor in Liyuan said,

‘When *chengguan* arrive, it feels like they are hunting down criminals. They catch us as if we were thieves. This is what I hate most. They should enforce the law in a civil manner by issuing fines rather than treating us like criminals.’

Nevertheless, many vendors acknowledged the *chengguan* role in state control, seeing enforcement as a predictable constraint rather than an existential threat. For example, as one male night-market vendor in Liyuan said:

‘We are quite familiar with *chengguan*, and there’s no conflict between us. Sometimes we even chat with them. We have no grudges against each other, so why wouldn’t we talk? When *chengguan* arrive, we just leave—it’s that simple.’

Vendors also noted that since Covid-19, state control over urban public spaces had relaxed. Enforcement rarely involved physical confrontation and was limited to verbal warnings or persuasion.

Thus, in Liyuan, while formal regulations dictate where vending is allowed, enforcement on the ground is shaped by practical considerations, including local governance structures, complaints from businesses, and negotiated interactions with vendors. This governance approach reflects the highly institutionalised nature of state control in urban districts.

In contrast, the urban village of Ganjia had a decentralised and lenient mode of governance, where state control is mediated through village-level institutions rather than municipal authorities. In Ganjia, control of public spaces is delegated to the village committee, through a rental system, jointly controlled by the committee and owners of adjacent properties (adjacent villagers), who both claim some stall rentals. Vending spaces are organised into designated stalls and, according to their operating hours, they can be divided into stalls for the morning market, all-day market and night market. Vending spaces were further divided by their operating security into fixed-exclusive, fixed-shared, semi-fixed, and mobile stalls. Rental agreements also

distinguished between leased stalls and sublet stalls. The rental requirements meant that vendors' access to space in Ganjia depended on a market-based ability to pay, rather regulatory negotiations as in Liyuan. While the rental agreements offered vendors stable operating spaces, they also created conflicting authority over public space, as vendors must navigate both village institutions and owners' demands.

In both Ganjia and Liyuan, the research found no evidence of formal vendor organisations, due to the nature of state control. Vendors use WeChat groups to exchange information, but these facilitate informal communication rather than as act as platforms for collective representation, leaving vendors with no way of engaging in dialogue with state authorities.

In conclusion, in Liyuan, *chengguan* enforcement has evolved into a cooperative yet regulatory arrangement, where vendors adapt to shifting enforcement patterns while maintaining informal vending activities. In Ganjia, governance has taken a market-based approach, with the village committee controlling public space access through stall rentals, effectively commodifying vending opportunities. However, both contexts reflect the restrictive nature of state control. In many countries, street vendors' organisations have been powerful advocates for accommodation of informal workers (Brown et al., 2015), an approach which is not available to vendors in Xi'an.

5.4 Conflicts and Negotiation under dual structure control

In both Liyuan and Ganjia, conflicts and negotiations with enforcement authorities, market actors, and fellow vendors are central to the daily experiences of street vendors. Tensions in Liyuan often emerge from regulatory enforcement and spatial disputes, while conflicts in Ganjia stem from fragmented governance and competition over space. How vendors navigate these challenges—and the extent to which they can negotiate their position—reveals the structural constraints imposed by state control under the urban-village dual structure.

Conflicts and Negotiations in Liyuan

In Liyuan, despite the relative relaxation of enforcement, the *chengguan* still impose fines and confiscations, particularly during intensified regulatory campaigns such as evaluations for the National Civilised City designation. The most common penalties include confiscation of weighing scales, seizure of carts, and fines ranging from RMB200–500 (USD28–70) per incident. The enforcements create moments of tension, occasionally escalating into verbal disputes and occasionally physical altercations. Although conflicts have been less frequent since the pandemic, they persist as a reminder of the precarious relationship between vendors and enforcement authorities.

Aware of the risks of confrontation, *chengguan* officers have adjusted their enforcement strategies. The senior officer interviewed noted that some officers were reluctant to carry out strict enforcement due to fears of escalation, and all officers in his team carried body cameras to record enforcements and deter escalation. These adaptations illustrate how state control is not merely imposed but also negotiated, as both vendors and *chengguan* adjust their behaviour to avoid direct confrontation.

Conflicts among vendors in Liyuan arise primarily from territorial disputes due to the absence of secured stalls. Since vending spaces are informally allocated, disagreements occasionally occur over the best vending locations. However, vendors have developed informal rules to manage such conflicts—those who have worked in Liyuan longer are given priority in choosing space, and most vendors operate from regular places, reducing tensions.

Conflicts and negotiations in Ganjia

Tensions in Ganjia stem from the **fragmented control system**, where vendors must navigate the overlapping remits of the village committee and adjacent villagers. The village committee is responsible for managing vending spaces but lacks standardised enforcement practices, leading to arbitrary and inconsistent regulation. Vendors frequently reported instances of harsh and unfair treatment. For example, a vendor

recounted how her parked electric scooter was deliberately knocked over by a committee member for allegedly blocking the road. There was no compensation, but despite the injustice, she did not report the incident to the police, fearing retaliation from the village committee. The lack of accountability in enforcement highlights how state control in Ganjia is exercised through localised, informal mechanisms rather than institutionalised governance structures.

The informal vendor agreements in Ganjia also create significant vulnerabilities, as all rental arrangements are verbal, with no written contracts or legal protections. Subletting vendors are particularly precarious—the bottom of this informal hierarchy is exposed to overlapping risks from adjacent villagers, the village committee, and holding vendors. Any unilateral rent increase must be borne by them, who lack bargaining power and must comply with multiple demands to retain their stalls. These dynamics reinforce power asymmetries within this market-driven governance system.

Ganjia vendors also experience competition-driven conflicts, as many vendors sell similar products and work in close proximity, intensifying competition. Unlike Liyuan, where vendors can shift locations to avoid direct competition, Ganjia's fixed stall system limits such flexibility, further heightening tensions.

The conflicts and negotiations surrounding street vending in Liyuan and Ganjia illustrate the distinct dynamics of state control in the two areas. In Liyuan, mutual accommodation between vendors and *chengguan* reflect a pragmatic enforcement strategy aimed at reducing tensions. In Ganjia, the fixed stall system provides a degree of operational stability, but fragmented control and reliance on informal agreements heighten vendors' vulnerabilities. However, in both contexts the absence of formal negotiation channels between vendors and the state creates a structural limitation which exacerbates conflicts and prevents vendors from securing predictable and equitable conditions, reinforcing their precarious position within the state control system

6 Discussion and conclusion

A key contribution of this research lies in highlighting the specific characteristics of street vending livelihoods within China's socialist market economy, where highly commercialised market practices coexist with strong state control and limited political representation. **First**, the findings demonstrate that vendors are deeply integrated into formal and informal supply chains, and navigate state control in collaboration with officials, suggesting that vendors are not simply occupying space but are active agents in shaping flows of goods, value, and labour across urban economies. **Second**, the Ganjia case describes a distinct governance mechanism that is largely absent from existing literature. Vendors in Ganjia operate within a collectively-owned urban village, where public space is managed through localised property arrangements. This presents a regime, shaped by community-based governance rather than state regulation. **Third**, the absence of formal vendor associations in both Liyuan and Ganjia further reflects the strength of state control over informal economies. Despite the scale of vending activity, vendors lack institutionalised platforms for collective bargaining and rely instead on digital networks such as WeChat groups, which facilitate information exchange but do not support collective representation. This lack of formal organisation limits vendors' negotiating power within both regulatory and market-driven mechanisms.

While extensive research has examined state-market relations in China's economic transformation (Fukuyama, 1989; Hansen et al., 2020; Saratchand, 2022; Wu, 2002), street vending has been largely overlooked in these discussions. The paper also contributes to the growing body of research that advocates for treating public space as a common-pool resource (Brown et al., 2015), by illustrating how collective ownership can enable forms of access and stability beyond state-led regulation.

In addition, this study contributes insights on street vending supply chains in urban China and reveals its operating costs and deep integration into structured supply

chains, including wholesale markets, e-commerce platforms, direct farm procurement, and small-scale production workshops. Street vendors' adoption of digital tools for bulk purchasing, financial transactions, and customer engagement further illustrates their integration into contemporary economic infrastructures, highlighting street vending's reliance on business acumen, capital investment, and adaptive decision-making. This paper also highlights how kinship-based networks, trust-based supplier networks, and apprenticeship systems shape vendor entry and supply chains. These social arrangements function as alternatives to formal contracts or credit, enabling vendors to build stable operations and reinforcing informal institutions within China's socialist market economy. By doing so, this paper extends the market-oriented discussion of street vending by Huang and Xue (2018, 2020), and the work of Lyons and Brown (2008, 2013) on global supply chains in street vending, thus challenging the prevailing discourse that portrays street vending in China as precarious and marginal (Bell & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Caron, 2013; Hanser, 2016; Swider, 2015),

From the perspective of state control over street vending, the research reveals stark contrasts across urban districts and urban villages. In Liyuan, vendors face direct but inconsistently-applied state control, which gives rise to adaptive strategies and informal negotiation. In contrast, Ganjia's vendors operate under a localised system involving adjacent villagers and the village committee, enabling more stable operations, investment in processing, and informal employment. While prior research has focused on *chengguan* enforcement in urban areas (Caron, 2013; Xue & Huang, 2015), less attention has been paid to urban villages, where regulation is decentralized and shaped by informal, market-based arrangements. By highlighting these divergent modes of governance, the research fills a critical gap in the understanding the governance of urban villages, and shows that state control over informality is spatially differentiated, contingent, and instrumental in shaping vendor livelihoods.

Take together, these insights suggest that street vending in China is not a vestige of underdevelopment but a dynamic and embedded part of the socialist market economy.

A limitation of this research is that its focus on only two case studies may not capture the full diversity of governance practices across different urban settings. Future studies could explore how variations in property regimes, local governance structures, and modes of state intervention shape street vendors' economic potential, their use of public spaces, and their property rights and responsibilities in both urban district and urban village contexts.

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