

Fragmented Spaces and Spatial Production: Negotiating Urban Village Public Spaces in Ganjia, Xi'an

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ABSTRACT

Urban villages in China illustrate the complexities of spatial fragmentation, where formal urban planning intersects with informal grassroots adaptations. Engaging with Benjamin's notion of fragments and Lefebvre's theory of spatial production, the study extends urban fragmentation discourse beyond Western contexts to the Chinese context. Examining public space transformations in an urban village (Ganjia Village, Xi'an), it argues that fragmentation is not a transitional phase but an enduring urban condition. Rather than resolving spatial contradictions, redevelopment generates new layers of division and contestation, producing 'fragments within fragments'. The findings challenge binary distinctions between urban-rural dual structure, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of fragmented spaces as dynamic arenas of power and negotiation. By recognizing spatial fragmentation as a persistent and adaptive process, this study calls for planning frameworks that embrace rather than attempt to eliminate informal spatial practices.

CONTRIBUTOR

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CRYNODEB

Mae pentrefi mewn ardaloedd trefol yn Tsieina yn enghraifft o gymhlethdodau darnio gofodol, lle mae cynllunio trefol ffurfiol yn croestorri ag addasiadau anffurfiol a wnaed ar lawr gwlad. Gan ystyried cysyniad dernynnau Benjamin (fragments), a damcaniaeth cynhyrchu gofodol Lefebvre, mae'r astudiaeth yn mynd â'r drafodaeth ar ddarnio trefol y tu hwnt i gyd-destunau Gorllewinol ac yn ei chymhwyso i'r cyd-destun Tsieineaidd. Gan archwilio trawsnewidiadau gofod cyhoeddus mewn pentref trefol (Pentref Ganjia, Xi'an), mae'n dadlau nad cyfnod trosiannol yw darnio ond cyflwr trefol parhaol. Yn hytrach na datrys anghysondebau gofodol, mae ailddatblygu'n creu haenau newydd o ymrannu a dadleuon, sy'n creu 'dernynnau o fewn dernynnau'. Mae'r canfyddiadau'n herio'r gwahaniaethau deuaidd rhwng y strwythur deul rhwng gwlad a thref, gan ddadlau dros gael dealltwriaeth fwy cynnil o ofodau darniog fel lleoedd bywiog lle ceir grym a negodi. Drwy gydnabod bod darnio gofodol yn broses barhaus ac addasol, mae'r astudiaeth hon yn galw am sefydlu fframweithiau cynllunio sy'n cofleidio arferion gofodol anffurfiol yn hytrach na cheisio eu dileu.

KEYWORDS

Fragments, urban village, public space, street vending, informality

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INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is often conceptualized as a process of spatial integration and modernization, where expanding cities absorb surrounding rural areas into a cohesive urban framework. However, this trajectory is rarely seamless. Instead, urbanization frequently produces spatial discontinuities, governance contradictions, and socio-economic tensions that manifest in fragmented urban landscapes (Blackmar and Harvey 1985; Lefebvre 1991; Harvey 2001). The phenomenon of urban fragmentation, characterized by uneven spatial development, contested land use, and the coexistence of formal and informal structures, has become a defining feature of contemporary cities, particularly in rapidly transforming urban environments.

In China, urban villages—villages surrounded by urban districts—exemplify some of the most pronounced manifestations of spatial fragmentation. These villages, often remnants of former rural settlements, persist as enclaves within expanding cities, maintaining distinct governance structures, land tenure systems, and socio-economic functions. Despite years of efforts to eliminate urban villages through demolition, resettlement, and integration into the formal urban fabric, these spaces persist as fragmented enclaves within the city. This raises a critical question: can such approaches truly eliminate urban fragmentation, or do they instead generate new spatial ruptures and socio-economic tensions? While redevelopment projects seek to impose order and integrate these spaces into the broader urban landscape, their effects on spatial organization, governance, and everyday practices remain uncertain. Understanding how fragmentation evolves in response to urban transformation and how different actors navigate and contest these changes is essential for reassessing the role of urban villages in contemporary urbanization.

This study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on urban fragmentation in the Chinese context by examining the transformation of public spaces in relocated urban villages. Specifically, it investigates how the interplay between top-down urban planning and grassroots adaptations shapes the spatial production and governance of public spaces in urban villages. By analysing the evolving socio-spatial dynamics, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how fragmented spaces are negotiated, utilized, and contested in the process of urbanization.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues three key objectives. First, it aims to refine the concept of urban villages as fragmented spaces by integrating perspectives from urban fragmentation, spatial production, and informality, with reference to Benjamin and Lefebvre. Second, it aims to analyse the power dynamics between key stakeholders in urban village—government, village committees, homeowners, and vendors—examining how their interactions shape and contest public spaces. Third, it aims to explore the socio-economic consequences of spatial fragmentation, particularly for marginalized groups such as street vendors.

The study draws on theoretical perspectives of urban fragmentation, incorporating Benjamin's (1999) notion of fragments and Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space. Benjamin's concept of fragments helps elucidate how past spatial practices persist within new urban configurations, shaping contemporary uses of public space. Lefebvre's framework, which conceptualizes urban space as a product of continuous social contestation, highlights the interactions between formal policies, informal economies,

and grassroots adaptations in producing fragmented spatial orders. Applying these theories in the Chinese context extends their applicability beyond Western capitalist urban contexts, demonstrating that fragmentation in urban villages is shaped by power dynamics from both urban and rural structures.

By analysing Ganjia Village as a case study, this research demonstrates that fragmentation is not a transient or pathological condition, but rather an enduring and adaptive process that structures urban transformation. The study also challenges dominant planning paradigms that seek to eliminate fragmentation through rigid formalization, arguing instead for more flexible and inclusive governance models that recognize the lived realities of urban villagers. Rather than attempting to impose a singular spatial order, urban planning must acknowledge fragmentation as an intrinsic characteristic of urban transformation and develop approaches that engage with the diverse spatial practices of those who inhabit and shape these spaces.

The structure of this study is designed to build a comprehensive understanding of urban fragmentation in Ganjia Village. Following this introduction, the literature review situates the study within broader academic debates on urban fragmentation, spatial production, and the evolving conceptualization of rurality in urban contexts. The methodology section outlines the qualitative research approach adopted in this study, including case selection, data collection, and analytical methods. The research context chapter provides an overview of urban villages in China, with a specific focus on Ganjia Village as an illustrative case. The empirical analysis examines the spatial contestation and governance dynamics shaping public spaces in Ganjia, highlighting how different actors engage in negotiations, adaptations, and conflicts over space. The findings and discussion section critically engages with the empirical data, linking the study's findings to the theoretical framework and broader debates on urban fragmentation. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the study's contributions, discusses its implications for urban governance, and identifies potential directions for future research.

By positioning urban fragmentation as an ongoing and contested process, this study seeks to move beyond conventional understandings of Chinese urbanization, offering new insights into the governance, contestation, and socio-economic impacts of fragmented urban spaces. Through an analysis of the interactions between planning authorities, local governance structures, and informal spatial practices, this research sheds light on the multiple layers of fragmentation that characterize urban villages, highlighting their significance as dynamic and evolving spaces within the broader urban landscape.

FRAGMENTATION AND RURALITY IN URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

The concept of 'fragment'

Benjamin's unfinished magnum opus *The Arcades Project* (1999) offers a seminal investigation into the fragmented character of modern life. By examining 19th-century Parisian arcades—once vibrant centres of commerce now abandoned and decayed—Benjamin uses these spaces as metaphors for the ruptures and discontinuities that underpin capitalist societies. In his view, these urban remnants, fragments of a lost world, are

not mere vestiges of a bygone era; they actively encapsulate the shattered promises of modernity.

Benjamin's argument addresses the idea that history itself is composed of fragments. He contends that history is not a continuous narrative, but rather a collection of fragments: disjointed pieces of the past that resist linear interpretation. These fragments, often overlooked or discarded, possess the latent capacity to reveal deeper truths about the socio-economic and cultural practices of their time. In this sense, fragments serve as active agents in shaping present-day meaning and identity.

The concept of 'fragments' has emerged as a critical lens in geographical, spatial, and socio-cultural studies, particularly within analyses of modern urban development. As urbanization accelerates globally, scholars have increasingly employed the framework of fragmentation to understand the discontinuities and uneven developments inherent in urban spaces, social structures, and cultural heritage. This review synthesizes current research on fragmentation, highlights key gaps in the literature, and outlines how the present study seeks to address these gaps.

A foundational contribution to this discourse is Henri Lefebvre's work in *The Production of Space* (1991). Lefebvre argues that space is not a passive backdrop, but is continuously produced and reproduced through social relations, power dynamics, and capitalist operations. His analysis demonstrates how capitalist urbanization leads to an uneven spatial development, resulting in fragmented urban landscapes that mirror underlying socio-economic inequalities. Scholars such as Soja (1996) have built on Lefebvre's insights, introducing the concept of 'third-space' to capture the multiplicity and hybridity of urban environments, while Smith (1996) examines how gentrification further intensifies spatial fragmentation.

Extending these perspectives, Harvey (2001) critiques neoliberal urbanism by emphasizing capital accumulation as a primary driver of spatial fragmentation. Harvey contends that urban spaces are increasingly restructured to serve capital's interests, a process that marginalizes vulnerable communities. Massey (2005) further develops this argument by exploring how power geometries contribute to the uneven development of urban areas. Building on these insights, spatial fragmentation is commonly reflected in the coexistence of formal and informal land uses, irregular and disjointed spatial layouts, and uneven access to infrastructure, services, and public spaces within urban environments.

While the concept of fragmentation has been extensively explored in Western urban studies, particularly through the works of Benjamin (1999), Lefebvre (1991), and Harvey (2001), studies applying this lens to the Chinese urban context remain limited. China's urban villages, as fragments within rapidly modernizing cities, embody complex socio-spatial dynamics that challenge conventional understandings of fragmentation and spatial production. Yet, existing research has largely focused on informal urbanism (Wu et al. 2013; Liu and Wong 2018), land-use transformations (Liu et al. 2010), and governance structures (Hao et al. 2013; Wu and Wang 2017), rather than conceptualizing urban villages explicitly as fragmented spaces produced through socio-political and economic processes. What is more, despite scholars like Wu (2009) and Ma (2002) examining broader dynamics within China's urban villages, there is a noticeable lack of micro-level analyses that delve into the specific mechanisms of fragmentation.

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by integrating theories of urban fragmentation and spatial production to analyse the transformation of public spaces in urban villages. By doing so, it provides a new perspective on how urban fragmentation unfolds in contexts outside of the West and contributes to a broader theoretical understanding of fragmentation beyond Euro-American paradigms.

The erasure of the rural?

Building on the concept of fragmentation, rurality presents another crucial dimension of spatial transformation, particularly in urban villages where rural traditions intersect with urban development pressures.

A dominant strand of literature argues that rurality is becoming an increasingly unstable and contested category under the pressures of capitalist urbanization. Scholars such as van Bavel and Thoen (2013) and Woods (2007) emphasize that rural spaces are undergoing processes of urbanization that significantly alter their socio-economic structures, often making them closely resemble urban areas. Lyson (2006) contends that the expansion of capitalism has integrated rural economies into an urban-centric logic, thereby transforming many traditional rural lifestyles. These perspectives suggest that rurality, as a distinct socio-spatial category, has been substantially—though not entirely—reconfigured in the wake of global capitalist expansion.

However, these claims have been increasingly challenged by scholars who argue that rurality is not simply disappearing but is instead being reinvented in new forms. Halfacree (2012), for example, critiques the idea that rurality has been entirely effaced by capitalism. Instead, he posits that rurality persists not only in traditional villages but also within urban contexts, where elements of rural life continue to shape socio-spatial dynamics. Rather than being eradicated, rurality is reinterpreted through representational, practical, and embodied dimensions.

Halfacree's (2012) perspective is particularly relevant to China's urban villages, where rural governance traditions and spatial practices persist despite rapid urbanization. His framework allows us to see how rurality is not merely a relic of the past, but an active force in shaping urban transformation, where rural governance, social networks, and land-use practices continue to structure everyday life. Rather than viewing rural villages as simply being absorbed by the city, they can be understood as hybrid spaces where rural and urban elements co-exist and co-evolve.

Postcolonial studies have also enriched the discussion on fragments. Chakrabarty (2000) in *Provincializing Europe* introduces the concept of fragmented histories, arguing that the narratives of non-Western societies are often rendered incomplete when viewed through the lens of Western modernity. Complementing this view, Bhabha (1994) discusses cultural hybridity and the 'third space', highlighting how fragmented identities intersect to generate new forms of cultural expression and meaning.

While existing research challenges the notion that rurality is entirely erased by capitalist urbanization, it remains unclear how residents of villages, particularly those on the urban periphery, negotiate, resist, and adapt to the forces of rapid urbanization. Scholars like Halfacree (2012) have argued that rurality persists within urban contexts, yet the mechanisms through which villages contest urban encroachment, assert spatial claims, and engage in negotiations with urban governance structures require further exploration.

Moreover, the interaction between villages and urban government is not merely a static coexistence but an ongoing process of contestation, adaptation, and transformation, shaped by a complex interplay of state policies, economic pressures, and local agency. In this context, what socio-economic consequences emerge from these struggles, remains an open question.

Moreover, while discussions of spatial and cultural fragmentation abound, the socio-economic impacts of these fragmented spaces on everyday life—especially for marginalized groups such as street vendors—have not been adequately addressed. Although studies by Roy (2005) on informality and Ong (2006) on flexible citizenship offer important insights, they often overlook how fragmented spaces are actively negotiated by diverse social actors, as well as the consequent effects on local economic activities and social relations.

This study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on urban fragmentation in the Chinese context by examining how fragmented spaces emerge through the interplay between top-down planning and grassroots spatial practices, as well as the socio-economic consequences that arise from these processes. It further intends to deepen the understanding of the socio-spatial dynamics of fragmentation, demonstrating that fragmented spaces are not merely byproducts of urbanization but active sites of negotiation, adaptation, and contestation in the ongoing production of urban space.

METHOD

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research approach and utilizes a case study method to explore spatial and social fragmentation in rapidly urbanizing environments. Specifically, it focuses on China's urban villages, which emerge as fragmented remnants of traditional rural settlements within the context of rapid urban expansion. These urban villages serve as critical sites where the interplay of old and new spatial forms manifests, providing unique insights into the processes of fragmentation that accompany urbanization.

By adopting a qualitative research strategy, the study can delve deeply into the lived experiences and micro-level dynamics within these fragmented spaces. The case study method further enables a comprehensive examination of the unique socio-spatial configurations and the transformative forces at work. This approach is particularly effective in capturing the complex, context-dependent interactions between different stakeholders, thereby elucidating how traditional spatial elements are reconfigured amid modern urban pressures.

Case selection

This study concentrates on the phenomenon of urban villages, which have emerged in China as fragmented remnants of rural settlements amid rapid urbanization. Xi'an is one of the cities with the largest number of urban villages under its administration. The rapid urbanization of Xi'an has led to the absorption of surrounding rural areas, leaving behind a significant number of urban villages. In 2014, there were approximately 417 urban villages in Xi'an. Despite the municipal government's efforts over the past decade to demolish and redevelop urban villages, their number in Xi'an remains remarkably high. These urban villages represent fragments of rural life that have become embedded within the modern urban fabric, creating

unique socio-spatial dynamics distinct from both traditional rural and contemporary urban environments. The selection of Xi'an is further justified by the researcher's extensive familiarity with the area, having resided there for five years, which provides a nuanced contextual understanding of its socio-spatial environment.

Within Xi'an, Ganjia Village was chosen as the focal case due to several compelling characteristics. As one of the eight major urban villages in Xi'an, it is the most densely populated and hosts the most vibrant informal economic activity, particularly street vending. The concentration of pedestrian flow and the prominence of informal livelihoods make it an ideal site for examining the dynamics of spatial contestation and adaptation. Its central location in Xi'an, shown as Figure 1, combined with a dense population comprising both residents and street vendors, creates a dynamic setting in which public spaces are actively contested and reconfigured. Furthermore, Ganjia Village has undergone multiple cycles of demolition, unauthorized extensions, and subsequent re-demolition, making it one of the most representative cases of the ongoing struggles between formal planning interventions and informal spatial adaptations. This continual process of urban transformation, where state-led redevelopment efforts are met with grassroots modifications and resistance, provides a rich context for investigating how spatial production unfolds in an environment marked by persistent negotiations between regulatory frameworks and everyday urban practices. These attributes make Ganjia Village an ideal case for investigating

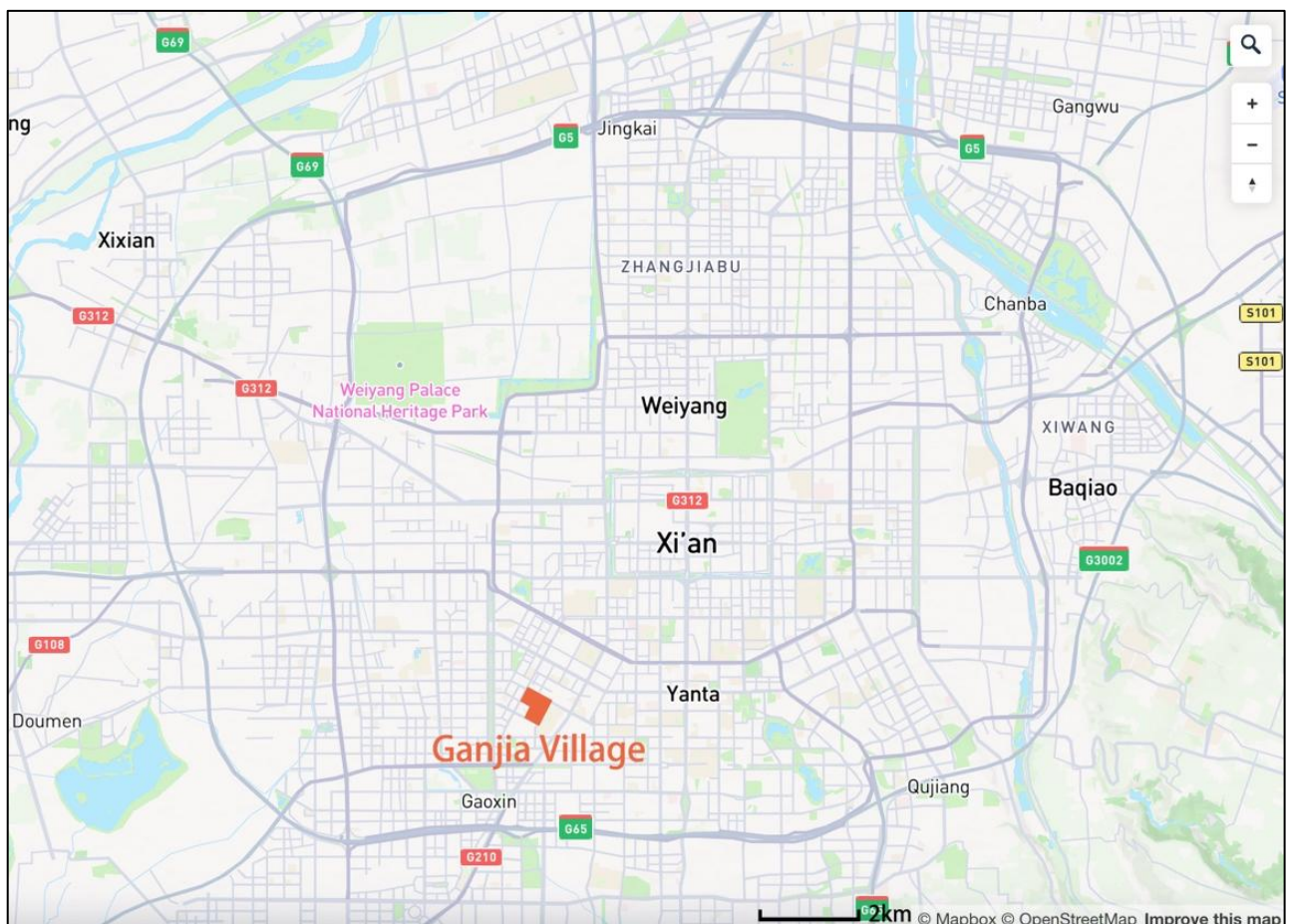


Figure 1: The location of Ganjia Village in Xi'an (Source: Mapbox, 2025)

the processes of spatial production and the resulting fragmentation, thereby offering valuable insights into the interplay between traditional spatial forms and contemporary urban development.

Data collection

Data collection for this study employed several complementary methods to capture the complex socio-spatial dynamics at work in Ganjia Village. The research incorporated a thorough document review and secondary data analysis, drawing on government documents, policy reports, and urban planning blueprints to elucidate the formal objectives underpinning the village's redevelopment. These materials provided essential background on governmental intentions and actions, which were used to contextualize the field data. Direct observation was conducted to examine the daily utilization of public spaces in Ganjia Village, with particular attention to the interactions among residents, vendors, and the built environment. Observations were carried out at various times of day to capture temporal fluctuations in space usage and to provide a comprehensive understanding of the spatial evolution.

Semi-structured interviews formed a core component of the data collection process. A total of 24 participants from Ganjia Village were interviewed, ensuring balanced gender representation with an equal number of male and female respondents. To capture the diverse practices within the vendor community, participants were grouped according to their vending schedules into four distinct categories: morning market vendors; night market vendors; mobile vendors; and 24-hour vendors. Each category consisted of three male and three female participants, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how different temporal vending strategies influence and are influenced by the transformation of public spaces.

In addition to vendor interviews, key informant interviews were conducted to gain critical insights into the broader institutional and policy frameworks. Two key informants were interviewed, each providing a unique perspective on the dynamics of Ganjia Village. The first key informant (KI1) was a long-term resident with household registration (*hukou*) in Ganjia Village. She owns a rental property in the village and has lived there for many years. She provided valuable insights into the preferential treatment received by local villagers, highlighting the privileges afforded to those with *hukou* in contrast to non-local tenants and vendors. The second key informant (KI2) was one of the first-generation vendors in Ganjia Village. Having operated in the village for over a decade, she has directly witnessed the transformation of its public spaces. She shared first-hand accounts of the evolving contestations between street vendors and villagers, shedding light on the struggles vendors faced in securing their place in the village and the informal negotiations that shaped the use of public space. These perspectives contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the spatial governance and everyday contestations that define Ganjia Village.

Data analysis

The qualitative data collected through interviews, observations, and document reviews were analysed using a rigorous coding and thematic analysis approach. NVivo software was employed to systematically organize, code, and categorize the data, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and themes. The analysis proceeded in several iterative stages, during which the data were first segmented into discrete units of meaning

and subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories. Key themes emerged around spatial fragmentation, stakeholder conflicts, and informal spatial practices. This structured approach not only facilitated the examination of how different actors interact with and shape public spaces but also enabled the extraction of nuanced insights regarding the evolving spatial configurations within Ganjia Village. The methodical analysis provided a solid foundation for drawing well-supported conclusions about the interplay between traditional spatial forms and contemporary urban development.

RESEARCH CONTEXT: GANJIA AS A FRAGMENT IN XI'AN

Urban villages in China are manifestations of the fragmented and uneven nature of urbanization. Urban villages are former rural settlements located on collectively owned land within or around Chinese cities. With urban expansion, parts of village land are expropriated by the state, while other areas remain under the control of village collectives (Lin et al. 2011). It also known as a 'village in the city', or *chengzhongcun* in Chinese (Tian 2008). However, this process of urban encroachment did not entail a straightforward assimilation of rural lands into the urban economy and infrastructure. Instead, the persistence of rural land rights within these urbanized zones has created a unique spatial and socio-economic phenomenon that resists full integration into the urban framework (Liu et al. 2010).

The genesis of urban villages is deeply intertwined with China's dual land ownership structure, wherein urban land is state-owned, and rural land is collectively owned by village communities. As cities expanded, rural lands on the peripheries were requisitioned, but the residential plots of original villagers often remained under collective ownership. Due to the high compensation costs associated with requisitioning villagers' residential properties, developers frequently bypassed these areas. This dynamic led to urban development surging around these rural enclaves, while villagers retained control over their residential land and capitalized on it by constructing high-density, informal housing to accommodate the influx of rural-to-urban migrants (Wu et al. 2013).

These urban villages epitomize the fragmented nature of Chinese urbanization. They are spaces where rural and urban elements coexist in a state of tension, both physically and institutionally. The incrementally built housing that characterizes these areas, often developed with minimal regulatory oversight, starkly contrasts with the planned urban development that surrounds them. This juxtaposition creates a patchwork urban landscape where formal and informal sectors intersect, and where infrastructure and services frequently lag behind the population's needs (Wang et al. 2009).

Economic activities in urban villages are often shaped by the informal economy. Street vending, for example, is one of the most visible manifestations. The lack of formal economic structures and services, which can be attributed in part to the fact that the land is collectively owned rather than state owned and thus falls outside many formal regulatory and service provision frameworks, combined with the dense concentration of rural migrants, turns public spaces into crucial hubs for sustaining livelihoods. In this context, street vendors not only depend on these spaces for economic activities but also actively contribute to the spatial production and

transformation of their communities through everyday practices and interactions.

Within the urban landscape of Xi'an, the contrasting developmental trajectories of two adjacent urban villages—Shajing and Ganjia—provide an insightful lens for examining the transformation of traditional village forms. Ganjia Village serves as a quintessential example of urban village redevelopment. Originally spanning approximately 2,700 acres of farmland and home to over 950 families (about 3,700 people), a portion of Ganjia's collective land was requisitioned by the High-Tech Zone, a state-level industrial and technological development area in Xi'an, in 1992, marking the start of its transformation. From 2000 onward, the village underwent gradual demolition, and by 2012, residents were resettled into newly constructed housing on a portion of the original village site. Today, Ganjia Village occupies roughly 790 acres, with all 940 original households relocated into a new community characterized by a grid-like road network and uniform three-story terraced buildings, each measuring approximately 360 square meters (see Figure 2).

Despite its formal redevelopment, Ganjia Village retains many inherent characteristics of urban villages. Its overall spatial organization is more orderly than that of Shajing. However, the internal public spaces still mirror typical urban village features, marked by limited open areas that are crucial for informal social interactions. This persistence of rural socio-spatial



Figure 2: The overview of Ganjia Village and Shajing Village (Source: Google Earth, Satellite image, 2025)

dynamics underscores the complex interplay between formal planning interventions and the enduring, traditional fabric of urban village life.

Moreover, compared to other formalized urban communities, Ganjia Village exhibits significant deficiencies in aesthetic appeal and functionality. The absence of green spaces, landscaped areas, and recreational facilities—elements essential for liveability and environmental quality—exacerbates the challenges faced by residents. In addition, the community's internal infrastructure is markedly substandard, failing to meet basic needs and further marginalizing its inhabitants within the broader urban context (see Figure 3). For instance, the scarcity of designated parking spaces has forced residents to use public streets for parking, thereby intensifying spatial constraints and highlighting broader issues of inadequate urban planning in informal settlements.

Collectively, these differing responses to similar urban pressures illuminate how traditional, open village spaces can be radically reconfigured and overwritten by modern urban development, contributing to a multifaceted and fragmented urban landscape.

FRAGMENTED PUBLIC SPACES IN GANJIA VILLAGE: STATE PLANNING VS. GRASSROOTS MODIFICATIONS

The evolution of public spaces in Ganjia Village can be understood through the lens of spatial fragmentation, manifested in the coexistence of formal and informal structures, irregular spatial layouts, inconsistent land uses, and uneven access to infrastructure and services. This reflects the ongoing tension between government-led urban planning and grassroots spatial production by villagers. The transformation of Ganjia Village's public spaces can be conceptualized in three distinct phases, each characterized by different forms of spatial production and varying degrees of fragmentation. The current configuration of public space in Ganjia has been shaped by the negotiation and conflict among four key forces: the government, the village committee, the villagers, and the street vendors. The government acts as the principal planner and designer, having initially determined the village layout and continuing to oversee its development. The village committee serves as the manager and enforcer of public space order. Meanwhile, villagers,



Figure 3: Building structures and streets inside Ganjia Village (Photos: Mengyuan Wang, May 2023)

defined as those with household registration (*hukou*) in Ganjia who were compensated and resettled after demolition, and street vendors, mostly rural migrants seeking livelihood opportunities, interact in complex ways that further complicate spatial governance. This interplay of forces produces a dynamic urban fragment, classified by the coexistence of competing interests, overlapping claims, and inconsistent spatial practices, that is continuously redefined through layered interventions and adaptations.

2000–2013: State-led redevelopment and the formation of standardized space

The first phase of transformation in Ganjia Village, as discussed in research context, involved a state-led redevelopment process that replaced the original village with a newly constructed resettlement community. During this process, the government imposed a homogenizing vision on the spatial landscape, effectively erasing the organic diversity of the former village. The resulting standardized space, marked by uniformity and order, was intended to ensure the seamless integration of Ganjia into the broader urban framework. Notably, villagers had minimal participation in the planning and decision-making processes, a lack of agency that would later contribute to emerging spatial conflicts within the community.

2014–2018: Informal spatial production and the rise of contestation

The second phase marks a period of intense spatial conflict and the emergence of grassroots-driven spatial production. Following the completion of the resettlement in 2013, villagers—now the primary users of public spaces—began to engage in spatial practices that reflected their daily needs and economic aspirations. Ganjia Village's favourable location and low cost of living attracted a significant influx of low-income residents. In response, around 2017, villagers started to informally expand their properties by adding additional floors to the original three-story buildings, sometimes raising them to seven or eight stories. Public spaces were also repurposed, with temporary structures erected to serve as commercial shops for rent. These bottom-up adaptations disrupted the previously imposed order, leading to a fragmented and heterogeneous spatial condition that reflected the villagers' attempt to reclaim and redefine their environment.

The government responded to these unregulated expansions by initiating a series of demolitions in August 2018, aiming to remove illegal extra storeys and restore the original urban layout. This intervention intensified conflicts between the government and the villagers, as both parties struggled to assert control over the space. The lack of effective communication mechanisms during this period exacerbated tensions and underscored the fragmented nature of spatial governance in the area. Following these demolitions, illegally constructed additional floors were removed, reverting buildings to their original three-story configuration, and temporary prefabricated structures in public spaces were dismantled.

2019–Present: Adaptation and the fragmentation of public space

Since 2019, public space in Ganjia has continued to evolve through a combination of formal regulation and informal adaptation. The village committee designated one of the main roads for vehicular traffic, while repurposing the adjacent road as a street vendor market. According to the initial plan, vendor stalls were established along both sides of this road—areas that were originally used for parking. Each stall was numbered, and contracts

were signed between the committee and each vendor, with the village committee taking responsibility for managing the space and collecting fees. As the public space did not belong to individual villagers, the committee explicitly prohibited local residents from imposing additional charges on vendors.

This formal arrangement initially altered the nature of the public space by taking over areas formerly used for villagers' daily activities and parking. In return, the committee compensated the villagers by distributing a portion of the rental income as dividends at the end of the year, but only to those with household registration in Ganjia, thereby favouring property owners over tenants. Over time, however, the enforcement of these contractual agreements weakened as the leadership of the village committee changed. Local residents began pressuring vendors to pay additional rent—particularly homeowners whose properties were adjacent to vendor stalls—by employing tactics ranging from non-cooperation and provocation to outright violence. As a result, many vendors, despite holding formal contracts with the village committee, found themselves compelled to comply with additional rent demands from nearby homeowners. One veteran street vendor recounted her experiences:

‘As one of the early vendors in Ganjia, I remember how things were initially managed. At that time, the village was under a unified management system, and I even had a formal contract for my stall. The village committee regulated the public spaces: only they were authorized to collect fees, such as sanitation charges, while homeowners were explicitly prohibited from charging rent. The space outside the houses, including the green areas, was considered communal property, belonging to the village and not to individual homeowners. Homeowners only had rights to the space within the walls of their homes.

‘Over time, as village leadership changed, assertive homeowners began demanding rent from vendors. Those of us who refused to pay faced various forms of retaliation. For example, homeowners would park their cars in front of our stalls to block access, or they would pile objects in front of the stall, making it difficult to do business. The village committee, made up of locals, found it difficult to stand up to the homeowners, as they didn’t want to create conflict within the community. Eventually, many vendors had no choice but to start paying extra charges.

‘At the same time, the village’s green spaces, which were initially preserved as communal areas, were gradually taken over by vendors as the demand for stall space grew. Vendors removed the greenery to expand our stalls, and over time, the green areas were completely converted into vendor spaces. The village committee, unable to enforce the original layout, allowed this to happen.’ (KI2, female street vendor).

The spatial production process of the vendor market in Ganjia is depicted in Figure 5, which illustrates the multi-stage transformation: from government planning, characterized by the allocation of green space and parking spaces; to Village Committee intervention, which designated fixed vending spaces while avoiding occupying the green space; and finally, to bottom-up spatial production, where villagers and street vendors established informal kiosk and fixed vending spaces, often encroaching upon the green space. Initially, vendor spaces were standardized, with uniform stall sizes and equal rental fees as determined by the committee. However, the current landscape is



Figure 4: The current vendor market spatial arrangement in Ganjia Village (Source: Mengyuan Wang, May 2023)

markedly diverse. As illustrated in Figure 4 and Figure 5, vendor spaces now vary widely in size and type, and the pricing structure has evolved into a tiered system. For instance, kiosk vending spaces—elevated areas with fixed shelters for storing equipment—command higher rental fees due to their permanence. There are also fixed vending spaces, which are open-air but assigned to specific vendors with daily usage requirements, and mobile vending spaces, represented by yellow squares in the figure, where vendors set up in available gaps but face constant risk of displacement.

The present configuration of Ganjia's public space is the outcome of ongoing negotiations and power struggles among the government, the village committee, villagers, and street vendors. Government regulations prohibit villagers from constructing permanent buildings in public spaces, ensuring that the area comprises only temporary structures like stalls and shelters. The village committee manages the area by collecting rent and sanitation fees, and by patrolling daily to maintain order and address safety concerns. Concurrently, villagers, often in their capacity as homeowners, provide essential services such as water and electricity, sometimes charging additional fees to vendors. Street vendors, being the most vulnerable group in this dynamic, are compelled to navigate these complex arrangements to sustain their livelihoods.

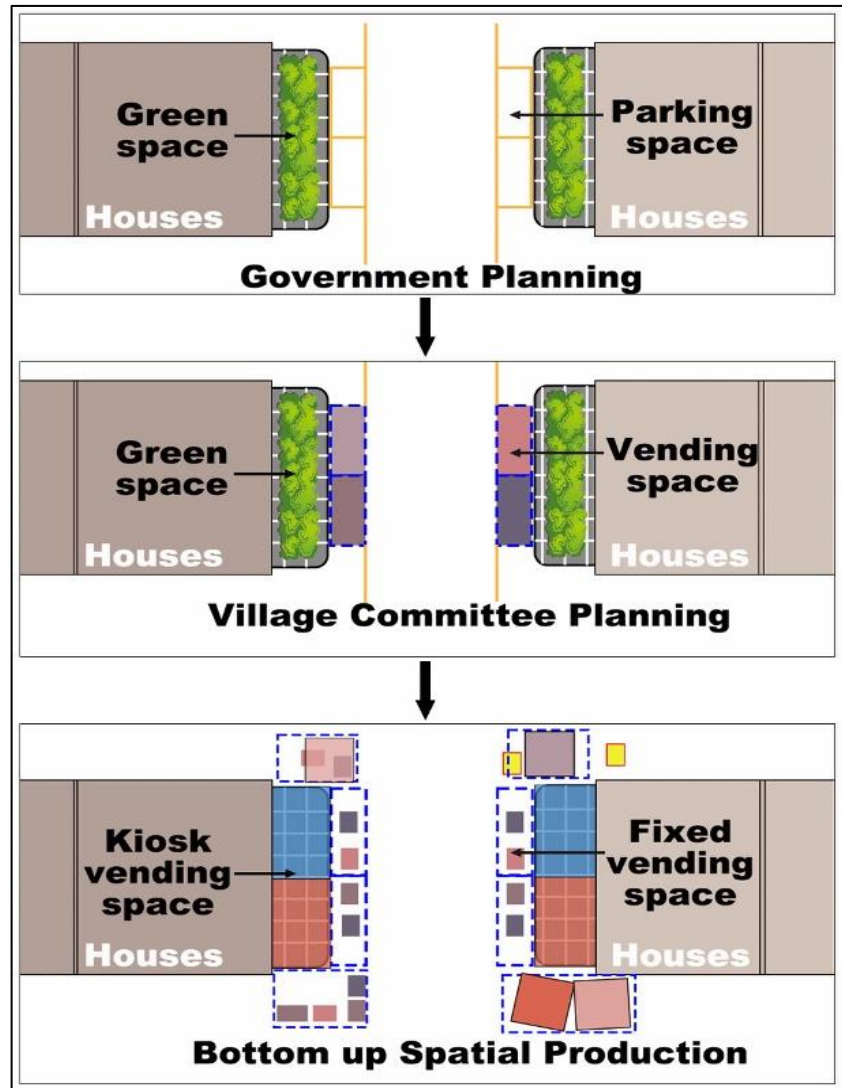


Figure 5: The spatial production process of the vending market in Ganjia (Source: Mengyuan Wang)

The current state of Ganjia's public spaces is best described as 'fragments within fragments'. Although the village represents a fragment of the modern city, its public space exhibits further internal fragmentation—an intricate patchwork produced by formal planning interventions overlaying spontaneous, grassroots adaptations. This complex, multi-scalar assemblage constitutes a representational space, wherein traditional village forms are continuously reconfigured by market forces, state intervention, and local agency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Public spaces in Ganjia Village are not static or neutral sites; rather, they are deeply contested, continuously reconfigured, and shaped by overlapping

layers of governance, informal practices, and everyday negotiations. The village's spatial transformation reveals not just a single rupture between urban and rural, formal and informal, but multiple, intersecting layers of fragmentation (Lefebvre 1991; Harvey 2001). By tracing these processes, this study unveils how spatial fragmentation manifests both externally—

positioning Ganjia as a fragmented entity within the broader urban landscape—and internally, producing fragmentation within its own public spaces.

This section presents the key findings of this study, structured to align with the research objectives and to rethink the theoretical background. The analysis is organized into four main themes: urban village as fragmented space; the power dynamics among key stakeholders; the socio-economic consequences of fragmented public spaces; and theoretical reflections.

Fragmentation of public spaces in Ganjia Village

Urban villages have long been described as spatial anomalies—fragments of the rural embedded within the urban, residual spaces resisting full incorporation into the city (Wu et al. 2013; Liu and Wong 2018). This aligns with Soja's (1996) concept of 'third space', where multiple spatial logics coexist and conflict. However, this study argues that fragmentation is not simply an external condition imposed upon urban villages; it is also internally generated and constantly reproduced. Ganjia Village, rather than functioning as a singular fragment, exhibits a layered fragmentation of its own, particularly within its public spaces.

Historically, Ganjia was restructured under state-led redevelopment, intended to standardize and formalize its spatial layout. Yet rather than resolving its marginality, this restructuring intensified spatial discontinuities, as Lefebvre (1991) theorizes in his account of uneven spatial development under capitalist urbanization. Public spaces that were initially envisioned as cohesive community assets have instead become sites of competing claims and territorial negotiations.

At the core of this fragmentation is the tension between formal governance and grassroots spatial practices, consistent with Lefebvre's (1991) notion of space as socially produced. Public spaces in Ganjia have been subdivided, repurposed, and reappropriated in ways that do not conform to original planning models. Green spaces have been encroached upon and converted into vending areas, pedestrian walkways have been transformed into informal parking lots, and designated market zones have become patchworks of formalized stalls, temporary kiosks, and mobile vending spots. These transformations are not arbitrary; rather, they reflect the interactions between regulatory constraints, economic necessity, and localized power struggles (Harvey 2001).

This study thus extends conventional discussions of urban villages as fragmented spaces by revealing how fragmentation operates at multiple scales, shaping not only the position of the village within the city but also its internal spatial order. The notion of 'fragments within fragments' challenges the prevailing assumption within urban redevelopment discourses that state-led redevelopment naturally leads to spatial cohesion (Liu and Wong 2018), showing instead that formal interventions often produce new forms of instability and fragmentation.

Stakeholder interactions and power dynamics

Public space in Ganjia Village is neither neutral nor uniformly governed. It is actively shaped by interactions among multiple stakeholders, each vying for control, access, and influence. These stakeholders—municipal authorities, the village committee, homeowners, and vendors—engage in continuous negotiation, competition, and strategic positioning, shaping the

evolving power dynamics of public space. However, their roles are highly uneven, and power is not distributed equally. Some actors wield formal authority, while others rely on informal mechanisms to assert control, reinforcing the fragmented and contested nature of public spaces in Ganjia.

Municipal authorities, though not directly involved in vendor management, play a critical role in defining the broader structural conditions of public space governance. Their interventions primarily target illegal construction and unauthorized building extensions, seeking to maintain regulatory control over urban development rather than directly managing the everyday use of public space. When they enforce demolition policies, they disrupt existing spatial arrangements, forcing homeowners to adapt and renegotiate their influence over public areas. However, these interventions are sporadic and reactive rather than part of a coherent governance strategy, leaving a regulatory vacuum that local actors fill through informal negotiations.

At the village level, the village committee is the primary governing body responsible for public space management, but its authority is fragmented and inconsistently applied. It actively regulates vendors—imposing fees, assigning vending zones, and restricting operational hours—yet struggles to exert the same level of control over homeowners. As a result, public space regulation in Ganjia is deeply imbalanced, with strict enforcement against vendors but limited intervention in how homeowners utilize or modify collective-owned public spaces.

Homeowners, leveraging their long-term residency status and social capital, exert significant influence over adjacent public spaces, often beyond the formal oversight of the village committee. While they do not hold legal ownership over public spaces, many have expanded their spatial footprint through informal appropriations—using sidewalks for storage, converting public areas into private parking, or even subletting portions of public space to vendors. Although municipal authorities occasionally enforce demolition measures, these interventions do not fully dismantle the informal spatial claims of homeowners, who frequently adapt and reassert control through alternative means. These informal claims reflect Roy's (2005: 155) argument that 'informality also indicates that the question of to whom things belong can have multiple and contested answers'.

The village committee regulates vending through designated zones, rental fees, and operational restrictions, while homeowners, leveraging their informal control over adjacent public spaces, often charge additional fees for premium vending spots or for access to storage areas. This illustrates Massey's (2005) assertion that spatial relations are produced through asymmetrical power relations and social negotiations. Unlike formalized commercial spaces, these arrangements lack legally binding contracts, leaving vendors in a weak position with little protection from sudden changes in fees or evictions. Those without strong social connections or financial resources often find themselves at a disadvantage, forced to accept unfavourable conditions or relocate frequently to avoid escalating costs.

On the other hand, operating within the urban village offers vendors a degree of stability that is not available in city-managed public spaces. Unlike vendors in municipal areas, who are frequently subject to government crackdowns and forced removals, vendors in Ganjia do not face direct interference from municipal authorities. The village committee, despite imposing financial obligations, provides a relatively stable vending environment where vendors can operate without the constant threat of external eviction. This allows vendors to develop long-term customer bases

and maintain a more predictable livelihood compared to their counterparts in other urban public spaces. However, this stability comes at the cost of vulnerability within the village's informal governance structure, where power remains concentrated in the hands of the village committee and houseowners.

Ultimately, the governance of public space in Ganjia is not defined by a single authority but is the product of continuous power struggles among multiple actors. This dynamic interplay between formal and informal control ensures that public space in Ganjia remains highly contested, fluid, and fragmented; it is an evolving landscape shaped both by top-down interventions and everyday negotiations among local actors.

Socio-economic consequences of fragmented public spaces

The fragmentation of public space in Ganjia Village has produced significant socio-economic consequences, affecting vendors, houseowners, and the broader community in distinct ways. As public spaces become increasingly segmented, economic opportunities are unequally distributed, traditional community interactions are disrupted, and social hierarchies are reinforced. Rather than serving as shared resources accessible to all, fragmented public spaces now operate as contested economic assets controlled by different groups, leading to uneven access to spatial and financial opportunities. While Harvey (2001) critiques how capitalist urbanization restructures space to serve capital accumulation and marginalizes vulnerable groups, the case of Ganjia extends this understanding by revealing how local actors, through informal negotiations and grassroots adaptations, continuously reshape and contest spatial and economic inequalities in ways that challenge top-down control.

One of the primary economic consequences of fragmentation is the unequal distribution of spatial and financial advantages among different social groups. While houseowners capitalize on their informal control over public spaces by extracting rent from vendors, vendors themselves face mounting operational costs with little security. The lack of formalized rental agreements leaves vendors vulnerable to arbitrary fee increases and sudden displacements, limiting their ability to make long-term investments in their businesses. This economic asymmetry reflects a broader pattern of marginalization of vulnerable groups under spatial restructuring, as described by Harvey (2001). Massey (2005) conceptualizes these inequalities as structured outcomes of enduring power geometries, the case of Ganjia extends this understanding by revealing how local actors actively renegotiate spatial claims and economic benefits through informal and everyday negotiations.

The commodification of public space has also altered the nature of community interactions, weakened traditional social networks, and fostered a more transactional spatial environment. In the past, Ganjia's public spaces functioned as flexible sites for both social gathering and economic exchange, allowing residents to engage in informal social interactions. However, as vending activities have intensified and public spaces have become increasingly controlled through informal economic arrangements, social interactions have become increasingly monetized. This process reflects what Lefebvre (1991) described as the transformation of urban space from use value to exchange value under capitalist urbanization. Furthermore, the informal negotiations and shifting spatial practices between houseowners and vendors illustrate Roy's (2005) argument that informality serves as a

mode of urban governance, where formal and informal actors jointly shape access to urban space.

Beyond economic impacts, fragmentation has led to increasing social differentiation and tensions between long-term residents and vendors, as well as between different groups of vendors themselves. Some vendors, particularly those with strong local connections or financial resources, can secure better vending spots and maintain stable operations, while others remain in a cycle of displacement and instability. This has created an internal hierarchy within the vending community, where those with established relationships with homeowners or village authorities gain privileged access to space, while mobile vendors or newcomers struggle to find consistent locations to operate. Over time, this spatial stratification contributes to broader economic inequalities, reinforcing divisions between more stable vendors and those in precarious conditions.

For many vendors, this environment necessitates a shift in business strategies, as survival depends not only on access to customers but also on the ability to navigate shifting spatial dynamics. Rather than focusing on long-term business growth, vendors are often forced into short-term survival strategies, such as informal fee negotiations, frequent relocations, and reliance on social networks to secure operating space. The unpredictability of public space access also discourages investment in fixed infrastructure or business expansion, as vendors remain uncertain about their future stability within Ganjia's fragmented spatial order. These patterns closely resonate with Ong's (2006) concept of flexible citizenship, where marginalized actors develop adaptive strategies to survive under unstable and fragmented urban conditions.

In short, the fragmentation of public space has transformed what was once a shared, multifunctional urban commons into a segmented, profit-driven landscape where spatial access is increasingly determined by financial leverage and social capital. Vendors, rather than functioning as independent economic actors, must now operate within an informal and highly unstable system of negotiations with multiple power holders. Homeowners, by contrast, continue to benefit from their informal control over space, profiting from a fragmented system in which access is dictated by unofficial fees and personal networks rather than equitable governance. These socio-economic consequences not only exacerbate inequalities within Ganjia but also highlight the long-term risks of fragmented spatial governance, where public spaces cease to function as collective assets and instead become fragmented zones of contestation and economic disparity.

Theoretical reflections: Fragments, spatial production, and urban transformation

Ganjia Village's fragmented public spaces reflect broader trends of urban fragmentation in rapidly developing cities like Xi'an. As a space where rural traditions intersect with urban pressures, Ganjia embodies the complex and often contradictory dynamics of spatial production in urban villages. However, rather than viewing these fragmented spaces as passive outcomes of urban restructuring, this study argues that they are sites of continuous negotiation, contestation, and redefinition, where different groups struggle to assert control and determine the meaning of space.

Benjamin's (1999) concept of fragments as remnants of past socio-economic structures provides a lens to understand Ganjia's evolving spatial landscape. Rather than being erased through redevelopment, earlier spatial practices

persist and intersect with new urban forms, creating ‘fragments within fragments’. Informal vending zones, reappropriated alleys, and residual communal spaces which illustrate how past spatial logics continue to shape the village’s present, even within a formalized urban framework.

This study extends Benjamin’s (1999) insights by highlighting how fragmentation in Ganjia is not merely a historical residue but an active force in contemporary urban negotiations. While Benjamin’s fragments often signify loss, in Ganjia they represent ongoing spatial adaptations, where past and present spatial orders are continuously reworked through everyday practices. This suggests a need to rethink urban fragmentation not as a passive remnant of past structures but as an active and negotiated process, exemplified by the continuous redefinition of public spaces through the interactions and contestations among the government, the village committee, villagers, and street vendors.

Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the production of space helps explain why Ganjia’s redevelopment has not resolved spatial contradictions but instead produced new layers of contestation. This study builds on Lefebvre’s (1991) work by showing that fragmentation is not just a byproduct of capitalist urbanization but also shaped by localized governance, land tenure duality, and informal economic practices. The village’s public spaces are continuously renegotiated through the interactions of vendors, homeowners, and regulatory bodies, resulting in a dynamic, rather than static, spatial order.

By applying Lefebvre’s (1991) framework to the Chinese urban village context, this study challenges the assumption that state planning and informality exist as binary opposites. Instead, it reveals how urban space in Ganjia is co-produced by formal policies, informal economic arrangements, and grassroots spatial adaptations. This suggests the need to move beyond a dichotomous view of formal and informal urbanism toward a more nuanced understanding of how different spatial claims intersect, conflict, and evolve over time.

This study contributes to the literature on urban fragmentation by demonstrating that fragmentation is not simply a stage in urban transition but an enduring and adaptive condition. While much of the existing research treats urban villages as spaces in flux, Ganjia’s case shows that fragmentation itself is a long-term mode of spatial organization, continuously shaped by negotiation and contestation.

Furthermore, by incorporating Benjamin’s (1999) and Lefebvre’s (1991) insights into the study of Chinese urban villages, this research highlights the limitations of Western-centric urban theories in fully capturing the complexities of China’s spatial transformations. The intersection of state intervention, market forces, and informal practices in Ganjia suggests that urban fragmentation in Chinese cities requires a framework that accounts for both top-down planning and bottom-up spatial production.

Ultimately, the persistence of ‘fragments within fragments’ in Ganjia underscores the need for more adaptive and inclusive urban planning approaches. Rather than seeking to eliminate fragmentation, future policies should recognize and engage with the lived spatial realities of urban villages, embracing flexibility in governance and planning strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the spatial fragmentation of public spaces in Ganjia Village, demonstrating that fragmentation is not a temporary phase of urbanization but an enduring and dynamic process. While redevelopment introduces formal structures, it does not resolve spatial contradictions; rather, it reconfigures them, generating new layers of contestation and negotiation. Public spaces in Ganjia remain fragmented, as multiple actors—including municipal authorities, the village committee, homeowners, and vendors—compete for spatial control, reinforcing uneven access and regulatory inconsistencies.

These findings contribute to existing debates on urban fragmentation by applying Benjamin's (1999) notion of fragments and Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space to the context of Chinese urban villages, revealing how localized governance mechanisms and collective land rights interact with informal practices to continuously reshape urban space. While Benjamin emphasizes how fragments of past spatial practices persist and influence new urban forms, and Lefebvre highlights the continuous production of space through formal planning and informal adaptations, the case of Ganjia demonstrates that fragmentation in Chinese urban villages is shaped not only by capitalist urbanization but also by distinctive localized governance structures, such as the mediating role of village committees, and collective land tenure arrangements that enable grassroots spatial adaptations. This extends their theories by showing how urban space in China is co-produced through multi-scalar negotiations between state policies, village authorities, and informal actors, a dynamic less emphasized in existing Western-centric frameworks.

Rather than treating fragmentation as a problem to be eliminated through rigid formalization, urban planning must acknowledge it as an intrinsic characteristic of urban transformation. More adaptive and inclusive governance models are essential to accommodate the complex and evolving spatial realities of urban villages. The case of Ganjia underscores the importance of planning approaches that move beyond the formal–informal binary, engaging directly with the lived experiences and spatial agency of those who continuously shape and negotiate urban space.

Ethics and consent

This study was approved by The School of Geography and Planning Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University, under the approval reference number 2223-020. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Participants were fully informed about the research objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The study adhered to Cardiff University's Research Ethics Policy and relevant legal and institutional guidelines.

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