

The Endogeneity of Urban Villages: An Attitudinal Survey on Elderly Care in G Village

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Abstract

As a typical urban village, G Village is at the forefront of urbanization, exemplifying the transformation and endogenous development of modern village communities. The study finds that despite challenges such as land reduction and population mobility brought by urbanization, G Village retains its unique community structure and cultural atmosphere through collective village construction and renovation. This is evident in the elderly residents' concepts of living arrangements, neighborly interactions, and shop operations. Utilizing participatory observation and in-depth interviews, this research depicts the transmission of life concepts and actions of elderly residents under the influence of urban mobility, examining their construction of daily life and emotional values in the present context. The study adds a micro-perspective to the sociological research theme of "human urbanization."

Keywords

Urbanization, urban village, elderly care, community structure.

1. Introduction

The concept of community was first introduced by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in his 1887 book "Community and Society." He argued that a community is a close-knit, mutually supportive social group composed of a homogeneous population with common customs and values.

Historically, Tönnies' views on community were theoretical abstractions of various empirical facts during Europe's transition from traditional to modern society. His views carried a certain idealism and romanticism, reflecting a sense of melancholy and anxiety about the "loss of community" amid industrialization and urbanization. Villages and neighborhoods merely became symbols of a homeland, rather than precise definitions of specific social phenomena.

Contrary to Tönnies' "disappearance of community" theory, representatives of the Chicago School rediscovered new urban communities in burgeoning cities, emphasizing the role of spatial areas and organizational systems within communities. Chinese community studies have been greatly influenced by the Chicago School. Since the early 1930s, after representatives like Robert E. Park lectured in China, Chinese scholars such as Wu Wenzao and Fei Xiaotong have emphasized the social relationship implications of communities and the actual daily lives of local people. They believed that every community has its own social structure and ways in which various systems cooperate, laying the foundation for community studies in China.

In contemporary Chinese society, even traditional rural communities known for their warmth and cultural integration are far from the homogeneous communities described in Tönnies' context. Under the impact of modernization and the expansion of urbanization, villages are influenced by urban economic radiation, permeated by urban culture, and experience an influx

of unfamiliar outsiders. They also benefit from the spillover of urban public services and infrastructure. Among all villages, urban villages are the focal points of these complex changes, most intensely reflecting the transformation of modern village communities. Based on this, this paper follows the path of Chinese community research, focusing on a "village within the city" in Beijing, aiming to understand the typical features of village transformation by examining the lives and interpersonal interactions of villagers within this community space.

2. Field Site Introduction

The field site of this study is G Village, located in the eastern part of Beijing. The village is situated on the southern side of the East Chang'an Street extension line, only 8 kilometers from the city center. It borders the Tonghui River, extends to the East Fifth Ring Road in the east, to Guangqu Road in the south, and to the Jingtong Expressway in the north, covering a total area of 2.7 square kilometers. It is a typical urban village. Presently, the village exhibits a "population inversion" characteristic, with a permanent population of 11,363 and a registered population of 6,487.

Due to its location in the urban fringe, the village originally had little arable land, and this was further reduced by national key projects during urbanization. The construction of the Beijing-Shenyang Railway, the Jingtong Expressway, the Huaneng Power Plant, the Beijing G Sewage Treatment Plant, and high-voltage power lines have reduced G's original 2,300 acres of farmland to only 80 acres of industrial land, turning it into a "three-non" village: "no agriculture in the countryside, no farmland for farmers, and no jobs after converting from farmers to urban residents." As urban development progressed, G Village once faced the prospect of village extinction due to its awkward position as an urban village. However, through village collective construction and renovation, G Village leveraged its unique characteristics to develop into a distinctive new socialist countryside.

G Village has a large influx of non-local population, making it different from traditional familiar societies. However, the shared geographical culture, beliefs, values, customs, consumption habits, basic living facilities, and socio-economic life form a unique cultural field and folk environment in G Village, constructing its unique community folklore.

Curious about how the elderly in G Village construct their daily lives and emotional values under the influence of community folklore, the author conducted field investigations in G in October 2022 and January 2023. These visits aimed to portray the elderly's concepts of elderly care and living conditions under the influence of urban mobility.

3. The Village Space of G

G Village is located on the southern side of the East Chang'an Street extension line, only 8 kilometers from the center of Beijing. Situated along the Tonghui River, it extends to the East Fifth Ring Road in the east, to Guangqu Road in the south, and to the Jingtong Expressway in the north, making it an urban village. It has a permanent population of 11,363 and a registered population of 6,487.

In the highly mobile Chaoyang District, G Village stands out. Heading west, the large red characters of "G Village" catch the eye. The entrance arch of the village separates the unfamiliar street scene from the G Village community. Physical barriers like walls and fences delineate the village's 2.7 square kilometers within the open expanse of Beijing, but the entrance does not serve as a substantial barrier. Instead, it acts as a public open space, a crucial link that maintains community sentiment (Lu Man et al., 2022). The thoughtfully designed and impactful entrance symbolizes the village, characterized by a boundary that is "exclusive to outsiders and shared

among insiders" (Feng Minliang, 2014), fostering a sense of "we-consciousness" among community residents (Fang Yaqin et al., 2014).

Yu Dazhong pointed out, "The village environment is not only an ecological physical form but also a cultural choice and expression method for building a community, serving as a symbol reflecting meaning and symbolic functions" (Yu Dazhong, 2010). Upon entering G, the village's environment and streetscape stand out with a distinct community character compared to the outside. The ubiquitous "G" logos and slogans, along with clean streets and antique-style buildings, create a unique village space. "All social activities occur within specific spaces, and space influences people's behavior and interactions in a unique way" (Fang Yaqin et al., 2014). In G Village, the physical community boundaries and distinctive village environment facilitate the formation of social relationships and interactions among the elderly, shaping unique values, cultural concepts, and modes of action, and thus the distinctive appearance of G Village.

4. The Living World of the Elderly in G

4.1. The Houses in G Village

Scholars have suggested that the subjective experience of life stems from the experience of living spaces, observing individuals' active perception of spatial structures and their interconnections, facilitating the understanding of unique individual concepts of self and society (Huang Jie et al., 2013). Therefore, understanding the living spaces of G villagers can better elucidate the life attitudes and social participation behaviors of the elderly in G Village.

G Village covers a total area of 2.73 square kilometers, with a distinct architectural style designed in the Ming and Qing dynasties' architectural styles. Each household predominantly features a two-story courtyard style, with some sections reaching three stories. The first floor is entirely used for commercial purposes, while the second floor is used for residential or cultural reception purposes. Despite the wave of land reforms in the 1990s, G Village maintained collective ownership of the land by farmers, with the land in G belonging to the villagers' homesteads, thus the property rights of the houses belong to the villagers themselves.

"It's more comfortable to live in a house owned by myself" - For the elderly in G, the comfort of owning their own property significantly enhances their sense of community belonging in G Village. Community sense is a cognitive structure system, constructed through residents' feelings and perceptions, containing emotional factors. It is a spiritual bond built on the basis of a shared spiritual life, which is the soul of the stable existence and harmonious development of a specific community (Luo Yinghao, 2007; Kong Xiang, 2019). Scholars summarize the occurrence and development of "community sense" as the result of the influence of factors such as "physical presence," "social relationship presence," "interest presence," "participation rights presence," and "social security rights presence" (Tian Yipeng et al., 2013). The elderly in G Village, with their own houses to live in, familiarity with fellow villagers, and social insurance, are reluctant to move elsewhere.

Facing the high mobility brought by modern cities, living in urban public housing poses the risk of demolition, and renting a house comes with the possibility of being reclaimed by the landlord. Only having one's own land and house provides a true sense of ownership. "Settling down to enjoy one's work" is a traditional Chinese concept and custom. Only with one's own land and house can a collective sense of belonging be ensured, making people more willing to actively participate in village construction. The elderly in G show less inclination to relocate and are content with living on their native land, an attitude rooted in their experience of living in their own spaces.

4.2. The Attitude of the Elderly

The elderly in G hold a complex attitude toward their senior lives. When the author explained the purpose of the interview—to investigate the daily lives of middle-aged and elderly people in the G area—the responses from the local elderly were tinged with misunderstanding and confusion. While they shed their initial hostility towards the sudden intrusion, they were puzzled about what was so interesting about their lives to investigate.

Regarding their daily lives, the elderly in G often responded with a hint of self-mockery: "Hah, nothing to do." However, the author found that this self-deprecating remark did not necessarily imply negativity. Even though they claimed to have nothing to do, the elderly in G had quite organized daily routines. "I take a half-hour walk every afternoon," one elderly person proudly shared, "Then I go back, eat, watch TV, and go to bed."

In the modern context of rising individualism and a "progress-oriented mindset," "idleness" is not an encouraged lifestyle. People of all ages are encouraged to "live and learn," and "idleness" seems to carry a negative connotation. However, the elderly in G do not feel the "shame" that comes from being unable to achieve an ideal self (Shen Yan, 2020). They believe in "doing what is appropriate for one's age," and "idleness" is precisely what is appropriate for their age.

Although the elderly often jest about their idleness, they do not feel the need to change their current situation. "At this age, what more can you want? People should be content." The elderly in G are well aware of the comfort of their lives and have no intention of self-pity. Most of them were born as farmers. In typical rural settings, many elderly people do not have a retirement age; they only stop working when they fall ill or are too weak to continue farming, relying on their children for support in their later years (Wu Yemiao, 2021). However, many elderly in G have not depended on land for income for over a decade. Instead, they utilized the advantageous geographical location of G to find work elsewhere and, following the village's collective renovation, they have enjoyed an old age supported by rental income from village-owned properties and dividends from the leasing of collectively-owned land.

As early as 1983, G Village lost its farmland to urban development, becoming a "three-no" village: no agriculture in the countryside, no land for farmers, and no jobs for those who transitioned from farmers to urban residents. Through village collective construction, the villagers achieved a life where "people do not leave the village but can move into buildings and get rich without stepping out of their homes." The elderly in G have their own houses, with the first floor rented out as shops and the second floor for their own residence. Their children either live with them, or if they have daughters, the daughters do not marry far away. One elderly woman's daughter, for example, is in her forties, and her son-in-law's family lives in the Haidian District, visiting back and forth.

In short, the elderly in G enjoy a life with physical presence, vested interests, and social relationships. The significant improvement in living conditions, combined with the traditional Chinese mindset of "contentment brings happiness," allows the elderly in G to enjoy their idleness. They live well, take care of their grandchildren, keep pets, and visit parks.

5. Social Participation of the Elderly: Interaction with Community Shops as an Example

Scholars have suggested that village communities, due to their close internal relationships, frequent interactions, and rich customs, become a living space that can satisfy not only material but also spiritual needs (Liu Tieli, 1996). In G Village, the elderly achieve material self-sufficiency through the shops in the community. "Community commerce should not merely be a single experience-based place but also a place of exchange, participation, communication, and interaction" (Zhong Xiaohua, 2008).

The two-story design of G Village buildings typically has the first floor rented out as shops, forming street-front shops and creating a mixed-use environment. These street-front shops, as part of the street's fabric, continue Beijing's tradition of close neighborhood interactions, becoming an important space for interaction between local residents and incoming merchants (Li Xiaoning, 2021). The shopkeepers meet the basic living needs of G villagers, supporting each other and building mutual trust within the neighborhood.

On the main road of the eastern part of G Village, there is a small supermarket known for its low prices and variety of services. Besides the general goods and vegetable sections, it also has a milk tea counter and a small food stall. Many imported and specialty items are casually displayed at the entrance without price tags, suggesting that one has to ask the shopkeeper for the prices and details of specific products. At the entrance, an elderly woman, referred to here as Auntie B, was anxiously sharing her child's work situation in the community with two shopkeepers. The shopkeepers, speaking with Northeastern accents, listened intently, occasionally expressing their deep concern and even pausing their business to listen. When I tried to join the conversation to ask about the milk tea offerings, the shopkeeper shook her head, saying, "Sorry, we can't make any right now," and then turned back to her conversation with the elderly woman.

Returning to the goods section, I quietly listened to their conversation, but Auntie B's voice lowered as she realized there was an outsider in the store. Suddenly, the door opened, and another elderly woman, Auntie C, entered, asking, "Are there any eggs left?" The shopkeeper enthusiastically responded, "Yes! These just arrived today..." As she fetched the eggs and greeted Auntie B, Auntie C naturally joined the ongoing conversation, making the small supermarket seem particularly lively.

G's elderly have their own criteria for evaluating these external shopkeepers. Shops that are too trendy have "nothing worth looking at," and shopkeepers who are too calculative are not welcomed. Only those who show respect and warmth can begin social interactions with the elderly in G. "Helping each other in times of need has been the way since ancient times," and "Distant relatives are not as good as close neighbors; close neighbors are not as good as the door opposite" are vivid depictions of the interactions between G's local elderly villagers and incoming shopkeepers. Only those who are willing to participate in community mutual assistance and abide by the social interaction rules and etiquette of the village can "get along with the neighbors" (Li Guojiang et al., 2021) and be accepted into the local social network by G's elderly.

6. Conclusion

This study, through an investigation of the elderly's attitudes toward retirement life in G Village, Chaoyang District, Beijing, reveals the endogenous development characteristics of urban villages under the influence of modern urban mobility. It particularly emphasizes the social relationships within the community and their changes during the modernization process. Despite challenges such as land reduction and population mobility due to urbanization, G Village has retained its unique community structure and cultural atmosphere through the construction and transformation by the village collective.

Specifically, the elderly live in their own houses, which enhances their sense of belonging and security within the community, reflecting the traditional concept of "settling down and enjoying work." They have adapted to their leisurely lives, viewing it as an appropriate state for the elderly, embodying the attitudes of "having nothing to do" and "people should be content." Supported by the village collective economy, their quality of life has significantly improved.

Additionally, the elderly achieve social participation and spiritual fulfillment through interactions with community shops. The shops in the village not only meet material needs but also serve as important venues for communication and interaction among the elderly. Incoming shopkeepers need to adhere to the social norms and etiquette of the village to be integrated into the local social network.

The relatively stable social relationships and shared values in G Village promote the community's endogenous development. Whether it is the renovation of public facilities or the coverage of social security, villagers show a high level of participation and support. This internal strength allows G Village to maintain its unique community characteristics and cultural heritage amidst modernization.

Current academic research on urban villages often uses Western modern urban development as the standard, assuming suburban villages are problematic entities that need external intervention for transformation. Consequently, past research has focused more on macro-level issues such as the disposal of collective assets, the urbanization of rural management systems, economic and industrial support, and the equalization of public services. However, it has lacked studies on the micro-level daily lives and livelihood patterns of urban village residents. This study's micro perspective clarifies that "the core of urbanization is the urbanization of people." Observations of the elderly in G reveal that "urbanization of people" is not the same as the urbanization of peasants. Despite changes in living environment and identity, the elderly in G have not been fully integrated or assimilated into the urban economic and social systems. Instead, they demonstrate an active ability to adapt to the city, reconstruct the village community, and maintain the traditional community atmosphere.

In summary, through their adaptation to the living environment and participation in community activities, the elderly in G Village have built stable social relationships and shared values, driving the continuous development of the community. This study not only enriches the understanding of the living conditions of the elderly in urban villages but also provides new perspectives and insights for modern community research.

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