

The Status and Development of Informal Housing in Guangzhou Urban Villages

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Abstract. Amid rapid urbanization, the housing market must be more robust to provide housing for vulnerable groups. In China, informal housing, represented by urban villages, provides a large amount of living space and alleviates the emergence of urban poverty and slums. However, due to the social and environmental problems of urban villages, there are certain contradictions with the sustainable development of cities. This paper takes Guangzhou as an example, looking at the trajectory and underlying mechanisms of informal housing growth in urban villages utilizing field surveys and questionnaire interviews. The study extracts the current housing conditions and development concerns in urban villages and tries to unearth the economic and social issues behind urbanization. In addition, this study discusses the inclusive development strategy of informal housing in urban villages from three aspects: the improvement of affordable housing, the protection of migrant populations' rights and interests, and the renovation and renewal of urban, which offer insight into managing informal housing and supporting sustainable development in developing countries.

Keywords: Informal housing; Urban village; Affordable housing; Guangzhou

1. Introduction

The housing issue extends beyond economic factors and encompasses fundamental human rights and social fairness. Consequently, the matter of housing remains a subject of interest for the academic community on a global scale[1-3]. With the rapid growth of urbanization, there is a growing need for housing. However, the housing supply has not kept up with the increasing demand, resulting in a consistent increase in housing prices. For marginalized populations, the exorbitant expense of housing and unstable living conditions can detrimentally affect their prospects in all aspects of life, including safety, education, health, and jobs[4-7].

This tendency is highly conspicuous in China. China's housing market reforms have led to the rapid growth of real estate and an increase in urban housing levels. However, this has had a negative impact on housing affordability and the quality of housing for vulnerable groups. As a result, the housing market needs to be improved to provide housing for socially and economically disadvantaged individuals[8, 9]. The data from the seventh national census reveals that China's floating population reached 376 million by the end of 2020. While this influx of new residents contributes to the growth of the urban economy, it also intensifies the demand for housing, leading to a shortage of affordable housing options for the floating population[10]. Consequently, this housing issue has resulted in the emergence of informal housing as a response to the significant disparity between the supply and demand for urban housing[11, 12]. This helps alleviate urban poverty and, to some extent, prevents the formation of slums[13, 14]. Nevertheless, due to the social and environmental issues associated with urban villages and the conflicts between sustainable and high-quality urban development, it is important to focus on the future of urban villages and their informal housing.

The prevalence of informal housing in urban villages is particularly pronounced in coastal regions experiencing rapid urbanization. Guangzhou, one of the cities with the most prominent urban village problems in China, is located in the economically developed Pearl River Delta region, attracting many mobile populations. With its inclusiveness and convenience, it has become a destination for many migrant workers and college graduates[15-17]. Nevertheless, urban villages in Guangzhou have seen notable and dynamic development in recent years[18]. In the process of

urban modernization, what are the prospective consequences of urban villages having informal housing functions?

The rise of informal housing is intricately linked to the challenges posed by migrant populations and the disparity between income and expenses in urban areas. It reflects the absence of affordable housing and the imbalance in the housing market. The study of informal housing can provide deeper insights into the economic and social issues that arise during urbanization. Delving deeply into the distribution patterns of informal housing can provide valuable insights for urban planning, particularly in guaranteeing affordable housing and optimizing structural planning. Doing so can improve the overall quality of urban life, protect residents' rights and interests, and promote the sustainable growth of cities.

This paper explores the feasibility of people-centered and practical strategies for informal housing development in urban villages of Guangzhou. The survey tries to examine the process and mechanism of this development, pinpoint the issues linked to urban village housing, and provide guidance for regulating and developing informal housing in urban villages. Section two provides a literature review, while section three outlines the methodology, including survey information. Section four of the analysis focuses on the progression of informal housing development and its underlying factors. Then, a comprehensive examination of the current state and progress of informal housing in urban villages in Guangzhou will be conducted, followed by a thorough discussion and conclusion in section six.

2. Literature Review

"Informality" was originally coined in the field of urban planning to describe the types of housing found in developing countries that are not planned, regulated, authorized, or in compliance with governmental procedures and rules. Informal housing includes shanty towns, slums, and urban villages[19, 20]. Studies have shown that informal housing is primarily formed spontaneously in the absence of planning, with low-income earners as the main occupants[21]. Informal housing is known for its unsustainable physical characteristics. It is a clear reflection of urban poverty and often serves as a breeding ground for criminal activities and the spread of diseases[17]. Many experts claim that informal housing in developing countries is a temporary refuge for numerous impoverished urban residents due to urbanization. Conversely, other academics have said that informal housing, linked to urbanization in developing countries, offers homes for countless underprivileged city residents and serves as vital for economic advancement and social equilibrium[22, 23].

Urban village housing is the predominant kind of informal housing in China[18, 24]. Many scholars have defined urban villages as "transformed rural settlements within the urban development area" and "rural communities on the urban fringe under the urban-rural dichotomy"[25]. So, urban village housing is a form of urban housing constructed and managed by villagers amidst rapid urbanization; in addition to providing villagers with a place to live, a considerable part of it is not under the control of the government and provides affordable housing or transitional communities for the floating population[13]. Leasing house serves as an important means for villagers to make a living as landlords[26]. Urban village housing's informality is characterized by low quality, disorder and instability[13, 14, 20, 27], mainly for young people, low-income urban residents, and the migrant population[14, 28]. Scholars primarily concentrate on the geographical arrangement of urban villages within cities, the characteristics of rural communities, and the processes that give rise to them[13, 14, 21, 26, 29]. Urban village housing is mostly examined through the lens of informal housing[21, 30-32], with researchers like Chen Yulin emphasizing the formal regulation of informal housing in urban villages[32]. Moreover, scholars may analyze rental housing and urban village rehabilitation by considering residents' interest[33], employing participatory methods[34], and conducting creative research on the theoretical framework and mechanism of urban village restoration[35].

Current research is mainly focused on policy and theoretical research on urban village renewal[36-38], civilization[39, 40], urbanization[41, 42], and other related topics. The research on housing in urban villages is fragmented and lacks a cohesive and rigorous research logic and theoretical framework. More empirical research must be conducted on the residents' groups. As a result, the emotional and practical housing process in urban villages remains unclear. The future trajectory of informal housing remains uncertain, with various urban village housing rehabilitation and indemnificatory housing projects still being implemented. Urban villages, which are a kind of informal housing, pose a significant obstacle to the advancement of modernization and high-quality development in rapidly emerging countries such as China. As a result, there is ample scope for further research in this domain.

3. Overview of the study area and research methodology

3.1 Overview of the study area

This study examines Guangzhou, a city in China with the largest density of urban villages and the most prominent prevalence of informal housing within these villages. Guangzhou is also home to a substantial number of migrants. Following the implementation of economic reforms and the opening up of China, the progress of informal housing in urban villages in Guangzhou has undergone various phases. Recently, the government has been aggressively promoting the revitalization of urban villages and enacting many policies to facilitate the conversion of old villages and provide homes for migrant workers in Guangzhou. Nevertheless, these endeavors have also generated a degree of ambiguity concerning the prospects of informal dwelling in urban settlements.

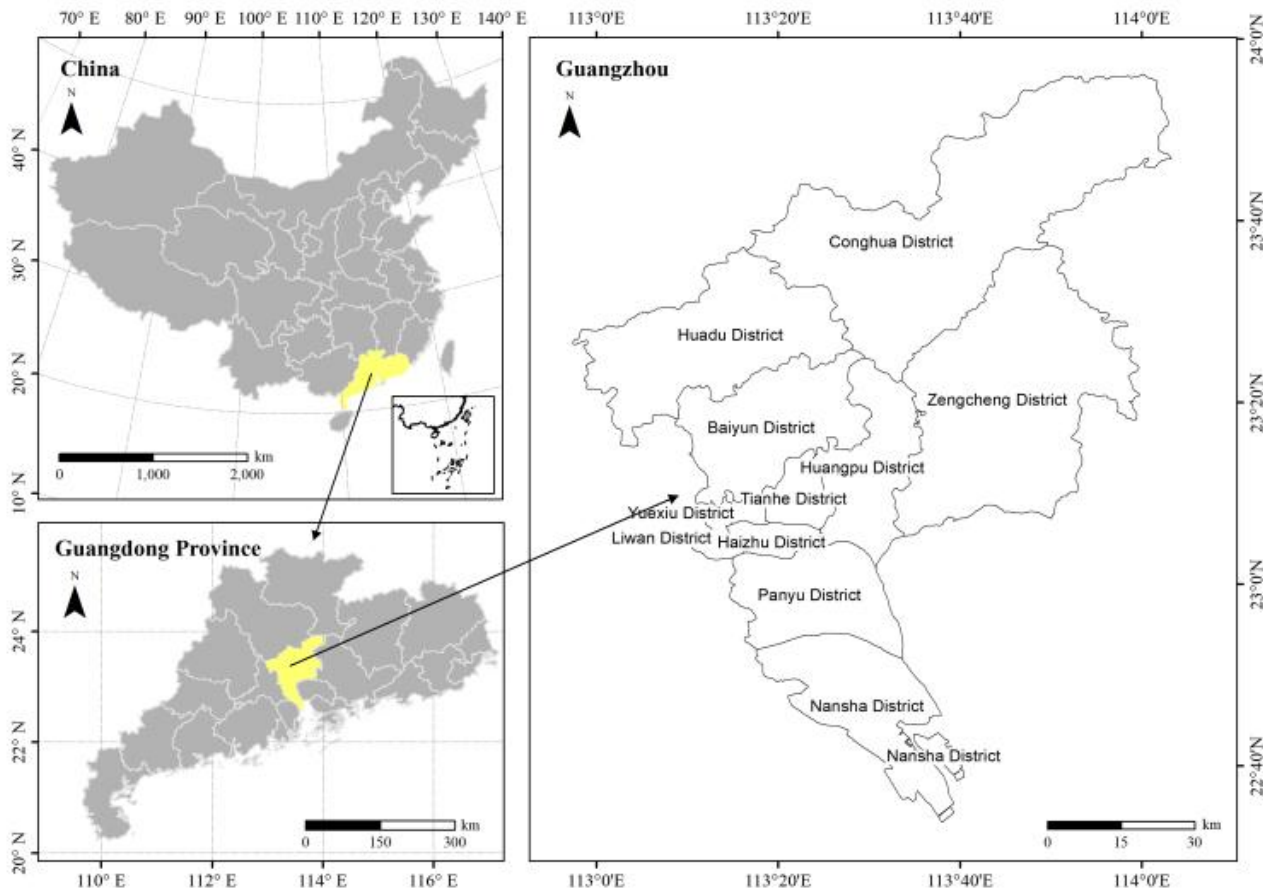


Fig.1 Geographic location of the case study area.

3.2 Research methods

This study utilizes a combination of data retrieval, field research, and questionnaire interviews to gather information from various sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the urban village population in Guangzhou. The questionnaire survey includes respondents from different age groups and occupations, ensuring a broad and representative sample. The questionnaire primarily addresses three key areas: housing, urban village living experience, and urban village development orientation. An analysis is conducted on the historical evolution of informal housing in urban villages in Guangzhou. The current state of informal housing in Guangzhou includes its operational mechanism, living conditions, and residents' perceptions.

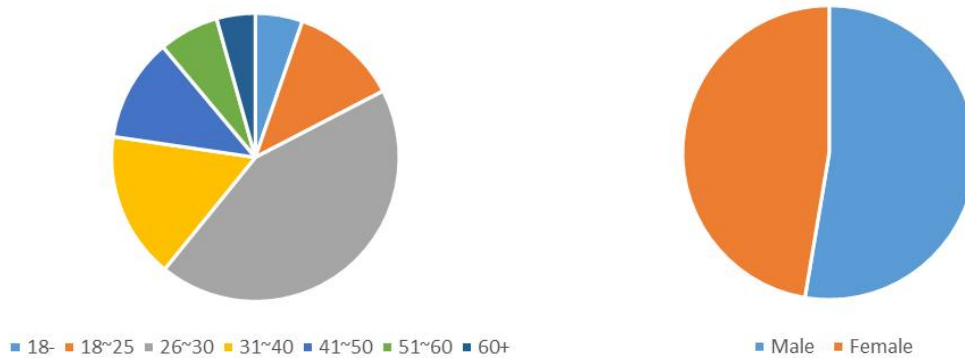


Fig. 2 Gender and age composition of survey respondents

4. The Development evolution and mechanism of informal housing in urban villages of Guangzhou

The development and evolution of housing in urban villages in Guangzhou can be divided into four stages.

The first stage is the preliminary formation stage that occurs before the implementation of reforms and the opening up of the economy. The increasing rate of urbanization led to the progressive encroachment upon arable land. Due to the expenses associated with construction, demolition, relocation, and other factors, rural villages inside the city's developed region were not swiftly constructed and gradually surrounded by built-up land[13, 26]. Consequently, informal housing in urban villages has not yet reached a significant size and is dispersed around the city, primarily used for personal habitation. The construction density is sparse, and there is less rush to build.

The second stage is characterized by a period of fast growth, spanning from the reform and opening up to the 1990s. The initial influx of migrant workers surged into the region, resulting in a rise in the migrant population, a heightened need for accommodation, and the consequent rapid expansion of informal housing. Due to the absence of a housing strategy in urban villages, villagers resort to spontaneous and unregulated land expansion, resulting in a rise in building density, and rent out some houses while living independently[20, 43]. The unique combination of urban and rural features in urban villages has culminated in a lack of national housing regulations and has allowed market forces to operate freely. Given these areas' low management efficiency, the government has permitted high-density construction in urban villages to optimize efficiency and save regulatory expenses and public utility provision duties. This is accomplished by acknowledging the property rights of villagers and collective interests, relinquishing income such as land transfer fees and leasing taxes[13].

The third stage witnessed the culmination of urban village housing from the early 1990s to 2005. As a result of the employment system, welfare, and household registration system reforms, a considerable number of rural laborers relocated to urban regions in search of better employment

opportunities. In light of exorbitant housing costs and inadequate remuneration, informal housing, exemplified by urban villages, has emerged as an important way of accommodating the housing requirements of the mobile population[44]. Impoverished rural workers, lacking education and skills, have adopted a short-term survival tactic of informal rental housing in urban villages[13], which is made possible by the property rights of their homesteads and the housing needs of the floating population. This strategy is essential in alleviating low-income individuals' housing challenges in rapidly urbanizing areas. Without proper planning and development control, villagers are eager to expand construction and maximize benefits by constructing higher. This disregard for aesthetics, comfort, and safety has led to the prevalent landscape characteristics of urban villages today, known as "handshake buildings" and "A line of sky". By utilizing informal rental housing to trade the right to occupy houses in urban villages, local villagers exploit the absence of regulation and amass enormous profits. The housing-related parties in urban villages engage in economic rational behavior to maximize their interests. This has led to the rapid expansion of informal housing, which consists primarily of self-built and additional houses, while infrastructure and public services lag behind.

From 2006 to 2014, Guangzhou entered the slow growth stage, also known as the fourth stage. In 2006, Guangzhou implemented the "middle transfer" plan to acquire development resources from the central city. To standardize the construction of urban villages and the housing rental market, Guangzhou has begun to prioritize land control for village construction in response to the savage expansion of informal housing in urban villages in the central urban area. A portion of the administration has been devoted to informal housing, and a few urban villages have undergone demolition and renovation projects. The State Council issued a notice in January 2008 regarding promoting land conservation and intensive use. By enforcing strict limits on the expansion and the extent of urban land use, this approach encourages the efficient use of existing construction land and other available space for growth. In December 2009, Guangzhou released the "Opinions on Accelerating the Renovation of "Three Olds". The local administration devised projects to redevelop or revitalize the villages in the city with the aim of enhancing the land's worth and attaining political success. The Guangzhou Municipal Government, which previously prohibited developers from participating in the redevelopment of urban villages, has lifted the ban. Market forces, the Asian Games, and bonus policies have driven this decision. As a result, the transformation of the three old areas (old houses, factories, and villages) is now in full swing. Some of the housing in urban villages, which were previously informal, have been transformed into real estate development projects with enormous economic benefits[20, 29]. During the comprehensive management and methodical development of urban villages, there has been an increasing focus on housing safety, living quality, and the human environment.

Finally, during the transformation and upgrading phase from 2015 to the present, the Central Urban Work Conference explicitly stated that urban development had entered a new stage of development. This conference also introduced the concepts of "smart growth" and "compact city". The Urban Renewal Bureau of Guangzhou was officially established on February 28, 2015, in line with the national trend of urban renewal, which aimed to urgently improve the development of informal housing in old urban villages. In June 2017, the Guangzhou Municipal Government issued the "Implementation Opinions on Enhancing the Level of Urban Renewal and Promoting Saving and Intensive Land Use" to respond to the national policy. Relaxing restrictions on the main body of old village renovation and investment promotion time greatly promote the process of urban village renovation. However, aggressive renovation and excessive development of urban villages will cause a shortage of housing followed by an increase in housing supply, resulting in challenges in meeting housing demand. This will lead to fluctuations in both formal and informal housing markets. In recent years, the regeneration of urban villages in Guangzhou has focused on comprehensive planning, refined governance, and humane design. As the real estate market develops and urban management modernizes, informal housing in urban villages has transitioned to formalized

management. However, the future development of urban villages and the social issues they give rise to require further discussion in academic circles.

Table 1. Development and evolution stages of informal housing in urban village

Development stage	Development background	Development status
Primary stage (Before the reform and opening up)	Due to the expansion of urban construction land, rural communities in Guangzhou are not being developed promptly. They are gradually being encircled by urban construction land, resulting in the formation of urban villages.	Informal housing in urban villages is not widespread and is dispersed around the city. Housing in urban villages is mostly owned by individuals, with modest building densities and cautious acquisition practices.
rapid development phase (In the early stages of reform and opening up-1990s)	Due to the excess workforce in rural regions, the urbanization of cities, and the initial influx of float population, there has been a notable rise in the migrant population and an increased need for housing.	Given the lack of housing regulations in urban villages and the tacit approval of the government, villagers participate in the unauthorized land expansion and increasing construction density.
Climax development stage (From the early 1990s - 2005)	A substantial influx of rural laborers has migrated to urban areas in pursuit of employment prospects, while the availability of stable housing is falling behind, and the cities are burdened with exorbitant housing costs and meager incomes.	Informal housing is rapidly expanding (usually self-built, multi-story houses), while infrastructure and public services are relatively lagging behind.
Slow growth stage (2006 - 2014)	Guangzhou's urban development policy, known as "middle adjustment", focuses on land conservation and intensification. The government actively promotes the Renovation of "Three Olds" and the implementation of relevant legislation.	The focus has been on enhancing the aesthetics of the landscape and improving the environment, particularly by ensuring safety and enhancing the quality of living and the overall human environment. Additionally, efforts have been made to regulate the construction of urban villages and the housing rental market.
Transformation and upgrading stage (Since 2015)	The state advocated implementing "smart growth" and "compact cities" in urban development strategy. In order to facilitate the transition of urban villages, the first Urban Renewal Bureau was founded in Guangzhou.	Guangzhou investigated methods for renovating and improving urban villages. Nevertheless, Leapfrogging has caused oscillations in both the formal and informal housing markets, leading to an unclear future for informal housing in urban villages.

5. Characteristics of Informal Housing in Urban Villages in Guangzhou City

5.1 Low living quality

Informal housing in urban villages has problems such as small housing areas, low building safety, lack of infrastructure and public services, as well as low living environment and quality of life. According to the 2020 China Census Yearbook, the per capita living area of urban households in China is 36.52 square meters. However, more than 30% of people in Guangzhou's urban villages have less than 30 square meters. Due to spontaneous alterations, rush construction and other informal construction problems, informal housing conditions in urban villages are usually inferior

to those in planned new construction areas, lack strict building codes or regulations, and have uneven building quality, which may pose potential risks in terms of building and fire safety. Despite certain renovation regulations and policies, the management of new and additional construction in urban villages is costly and difficult to manage, and there is a lack of clarity in the main body of approvals and management, leading to the phenomenon of not daring to and not wanting to manage. In management, lower-level employees tend to be passive towards completed buildings, neglecting their responsibility and disregarding any issues that may arise.

Additionally, the water and electricity supply systems in the area are unreliable, the roads are narrow and unhygienic, and public services such as education, healthcare, and cultural facilities heavily rely on neighboring urban areas. The quality and accessibility of basic services in this region are often inadequate for those in urban areas. Hygiene concerns, noise pollution, and air quality issues also challenge the living environment. The compact construction of houses, insufficient access to natural light and ventilation, low levels of greenery, and overcrowded living circumstances all contribute to cleanliness, noise, and air quality issues.

5.2 homogeneity of housing products

Informal housing in urban villages has certain similarities. Firstly, there are fewer differences in the surroundings, and the physical environment, sanitation, and supporting facilities are more general. Because workers and students are more sensitive to housing costs and tend to choose urban villages as a more cost-effective option, informal housing in urban villages is generally close to sufficient clientele, such as educational areas, industrial zones or large factories. Urban villages near commercial centers and major transport hubs attract tenants with shorter commuting times and closer access to jobs. In addition, urban villages close to tourist attractions or cultural districts are likely to attract tourists for short-term rentals or residents interested in arts and culture. These stable sources of tenants enrich the informal housing market and drive commercial development in the neighborhood, allowing living facilities such as catering and retail to cluster in the neighborhood.

Secondly, the housing product ontology is less varied, with the housing area concentrated between 10m² -40m², and there is some consistency in the building structure and supporting facilities. Many merchants join hotel brands and operate on their own in a low-investment, high-yield approach based on the provided decoration, operation and other formula, which lowers the threshold for entering the short-term rental market. Within the broader framework of product homogenization, the variations in informal housing primarily stem from disparities in geographical circumstances, resulting in discrepancies in terms of population size and duration of residence.

5.3 The characteristics and high satisfaction of the residents

The main residents of urban villages vary depending on the location and encompass a diverse range of individuals, such as low-income families, migrant workers, retired older adults, young families, and newly employed individuals. Hence, to facilitate the formalization of informal accommodation in urban villages, consideration must be given to citizenization and the integration of this population.

While the living conditions in urban villages are less than ideal, these inhabitants hold a more favorable opinion of informal housing. Approximately 80% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with their living situation in urban villages. Half of the respondents believed that informal housing in urban villages offers affordable and convenient housing. However, only 1/5 of the respondents considered the environment to be unclean and unsafe.

The high level of satisfaction with informal housing is attributed to the consistent perception of rent and quality, as well as a rational evaluation of living conditions and needs. Most urban village residents are in the non-hedonic initial asset accumulation stage. As a result, their living conditions are characterized by reduced requirements, with a primary focus on affordability and convenience in work and daily life. When revitalizing urban villages, it is imperative to prioritize three essential

elements: inexpensive cost, accessible transportation, and convenience. These aspects take precedence over enhancing material conditions and safety.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

6.1 The issue of informal housing development in urban villages

While urban village housing offers affordable housing options for migrants looking for economical housing due to systemic discrimination, it cannot be unequivocally regarded as the optimal housing solution for low-income migrants. This is due to the deteriorated surroundings, safety hazards, diminished tax revenues, and high transience associated with urban village housing. The subsequent examples illustrate how urban villages can be utilized to provide low-cost housing[27].

The mechanisms for creating informal housing reflect the result of the coordination of market choices and social needs, as well as the puzzle of the lack of urban planning and management. The current stage of housing development in urban villages is characterized by unequal power among the various actors. The owners and villagers are the beneficiaries, while the migrant population is the victim of middle-classisation due to their lack of bargaining power. Urban village transformation under state regulation is characterized by "exclusionary" renewal[13, 35]. As the environment and management of urban villages improve, rent and consumption levels rise, making it more difficult for the float population to rent a flat[26, 30, 45]. The migrant population will continue to gather in new urban villages, thus forming a vicious circle in which housing in urban villages will exist forever. Urban housing will also form a dual structure, dividing it into mid- to high-end commercial housing and low-end informal rental housing or small property rights housing, exacerbating social class differentiation and conflicts. Therefore, the transformation guided by the existing regeneration mechanism for urban villages undermines social equity, triggers social conflicts, and is unsustainable[26]. In the past, public rental housing in Guangzhou was mainly aimed at low-income disadvantaged groups.

In contrast, various public property rights housing types were mainly provided to senior professional talents who met specific conditions. A large number of mobile populations could only flow to informal housing, and urban villages carried a large labor force in Guangzhou. As a consequence, the government should be extra cautious in pushing forward the issue of urban village regeneration[13].

6.2 Development strategies for informal housing in urban villages

The positive impact of housing development in urban villages in alleviating housing pressure should be acknowledged. Merely transforming urban villages into urban communities might challenge local villagers to assimilate into urban society and can also exacerbate housing issues for mobile populations. Research on addressing informal housing development in urban villages focuses on three main areas:

The first thing that needs to be prioritized is enhancing affordable housing. This can be achieved by combining the transformation of urban villages with the construction of affordable housing. By implementing various means for the construction of affordable housing, we can retain the "population dividend"[43, 46]. For instance, we can designate the existing floor area of urban village housing leased by outsiders as a small area for affordable housing. This allows the community to share the market to some extent[19]. Moreover, a strategy should be created to increase the availability of cheap housing by categorizing the housing in urban villages into self-occupied and surplus units that can be rented out. To achieve a supply-demand balance, modify the supply structure to align with the housing demand structure of the floating population[35].

Secondly, the rights and interests of the floating population should be protected. It is important to acknowledge the impact of the floating population on urban development and transformation. We should dismantle the obstacles the dual household registration system poses, enhance the housing

system, and safeguard their housing rights[19]. For example, public rental housing should be built in agglomeration of the floating population, and rental subsidies should be given to informally employed people who have difficulty accessing public rental housing so as to achieve a shift from "making up for the houses" to "making up for the people". Paying attention to the importance of the construction process of indemnificatory housing. It is important to focus on developing social capital and community cohesion when building affordable housing, providing public amenities, and establishing affordable small-scale housing complexes[27].

Third, urban village renewal. By adopting the concept of inclusive transformation, the focus is on serving the many needs and core interests of the floating population and promoting a progressive organic micro rejuvenation model. Attempt to investigate efficient methods and ways for revitalizing urban villages, which will result in a thorough enhancement of both spatial quality and social network[26]. Eliminate the perception and distrust of residents towards the government's pursuit of economic benefits through renovation, and maintain the original rental level for continuous operation while improving quality and ensuring safety. One such strategy is implementing cost-effective alternative housing policies to improve substandard housing conditions. In addition, efforts should be directed toward enhancing community infrastructure and services.

6.3 Conclusion

Taking Guangzhou as an example, this study combines questionnaire interviews and field research to systematically sort out the housing in urban villages from the perspective of informal housing. This study divides the development of informal housing in urban villages into five stages: primary - rapid development - climax development - slow growth - transformation and upgrading, and analyses the mechanism of the development of each stage from the perspectives of the economy and society. The current housing status in urban villages is characterized by four features: Low living quality, homogeneity of housing products, and the characteristics and high satisfaction of the residents. Lastly, focus on the progress of informal housing in urban villages and provide strategies for regulation.

This study only uses qualitative means to make a simple compendium of informal housing in Guangzhou, and the differences between different places have not been explored yet. In the future, quantitative means can be introduced to conduct in-depth analyses. It is crucial to involve diverse stakeholders to understand the requirements and investigate the management method of informal housing. Strive to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between the variables of dynamics and quality. Employ inclusive strategies in the planning, design, and management processes to promote improved cohabitation between informal and formal housing.

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