The End of the Chinese Villages
——A Study of the Villages Located in Southern Urban China[*]

Li Peilin

Abstracts: This paper notes and makes an analysis of the end process of villages in Guangzhou, the quickly developed urban hub of South China. Using case studies the author finds that the end of the villages is very difficult, not only because of the mode of life, the occupational changes of the peasants and Chinese registration system, but also because of the changes in the property rights and social network. The author employs a model to understand the general transformation of the villages in the end process, and to simulate theoretically the complete process of the industrialization and urbanization of villages since the reform in China.

When I translated *The End Process of Peasants*, written by Henri Mendras, a French expert in rural sociology, into Chinese about 10 years ago, the topic seemed to have nothing to do with China, a large agricultural country at that time. However, recent years see China's inland regions accelerating their pace of modernization, thus gradually forming an unbalanced development system characterized by "core," "half fringe" and "fringe." It seems that, to the China's mainland as a whole, the end of village may need a rather long period. But, what needs mentioning is that speed of the changing process is seen picking up in some developed areas. It used to be a common sense that the end of village and end of peasants share the same process featuring the non-agricultural process, industrialization and the change of household registration system. But in reality, the end of village, a living system and social relation network, is far more difficult and needs longer time than that of peasant. Not merely a process going hand in hand with industrialization, urbanization has turned out to be a process taking a special developing course of its own.

1. Creation of Question and Explanation of the Studying Method and Hypothesis

The villages located in large cities, or "rural villages" as called, have mushroomed in the Pearl River delta region in recent years. Countless stories are told about them and opinions vary over the phenomenon. The recent 20 years have seen the process of industrialization and urbanization in the Pearl River delta growing at a dazzling speed. It is thus believed that the high-speed expansion of city may be a factor directly resulting in creation of the "urban villages." Nevertheless, it may be wrong to rush to the conclusion, since the phenomenon of "urban village" has never come up in other countries in their process of urbanization.

We assumed before leaving for conducting the investigation into the "urban

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villages" that the so-called urban villages might be some villages verging on the rim of cities, in which the villagers have changed job to do business and manufacturing. It was thus concluded that these places could be merely regarded as the expanding sections of cities. However, the opposite is true in reality when we were finally on the spot seeing with our eyes. Even though we read enough reference materials about the "urban villages" before leaving, we were really knocked out in front of the villages sitting within Guangzhou, economic, political and cultural center of South China.

Sitting right in the city proper and between the groups of skyscrapers are some "cement monsters" each standing averagely 20 meters high and occupying an areas of several sq kms. What's amazing is that the "cement monsters" were not built by a company as a construction project. They were, instead, built one by one by individual household. They were clearly constructed to seek quicker fortune because the price of land use and house rent are soaring in Guangzhou. No aesthetic and harmonious factors were considered in the architectural design. Between the buildings, some seven stories and some eight stories, are lanes 1.5-2 meters wide. But the upper section of the buildings above their third floor stretch out from both sides of the lane to nearly join each other. Therefore, the lanes are nearly covered and the buildings almost joining each other in the upper part are jokingly called "kissing buildings." This makes the light in the building rooms so dim that every household has to turn on light even in the daytime. Despite the poor living environment, business in the villages is brisk. Flanking the narrow and dark lanes are shops and grocery stores standing closely side by side. Residents of the villages are not only local villagers but also hundreds of thousands migrant workers coming to work in Guangzhou from other regions.

Generally speaking, urbanization is the only way out for transforming redundant rural labor force, improving farmers' income and reforming rural communities. We used to share the knowledge that along with the process of urbanization should be happiness, celebration and cheerful dreams of farmers. However, question is raised in front of us about how difficult the end process of village is.

In the recent 20 years since China introduced the new policy of reform and opening to the outside world, there have been loads of sociological studies by individuals in the urbanization process of villages. These include the study by Zhou Daming on Nanjing Village located in the cities in Guangdong Province, the study by Wang Chunguang, Xiang Biao, Wang Hansheng and others on Beijing's Zhejiang Village, a gathering place of migrant workers and rural-grown businessmen, the study by Zhe Xiaoye on Wanfeng Village, a super village in high-industrialized southeast regions, the study by Lu Xueyi and others on Xingren Village in China's developing north, the study by Wang Mingming on Meifa Village and Tangdong Village in agriculturally developed southern Fujian Province, the study by Huang Ping and others on eight villages in four provinces from which the great number of migrant workers come. (Zhou Daming, 2001; Wang Chunguang, 1995; Xiang Biao, 1998; Wang Hansheng and others, 1997; Zhe Xiaoye, 1997; Lu Xueyi, ed., 2001; Huang Ping, ed., 1997.) These studies act as different links of a researching chain nearly

covering the whole process of village's urbanization in China.

Materials supporting this essay are derived from a survey made in October 2001, which covered seven "urban villages" located in Guangzhou. They are Shibei Village, Tangxia Village, Yaotai Village, Sanyuanli Village, Tongde Village, Xiancun Village, Yangqi Village, Linhe Village and Liede Village. Statistics show that the "urban villages" in Guangzhou, which totally number 139, may fall into three categories. The first kind are those located in downtown areas, and there are completely no farmland; the second kind are those located on city rim with less farmland; and third kind are those located in the suburb of city in which large stretch of farmland remain. The villages our investigation targeted are those of the first kind. Accounting for one third of the total "urban villages" in Guangzhou, these villages feature typical character of the end process of villages. Therefore, the term "urban villages" used in this essay refers specially to the villages of this kind.

2. Emergence of "Urban Villages"

Despite situating in the city proper, the "urban villages" keep many characteristics of their rural origin, which clearly depicts the institutional discrepancy of urban and rural areas. These characteristics mainly fall into three categories.

The first difference can be seen in land use system. According to law, all the land in cities is owned by the state, while those in rural areas are collectively owned. During the process of urbanization, the state may take over the use of farmland, but it cannot take over the land on which farmers built their houses to live in. As a result, despite that the "rural villages" are now located in cities, the land for residence is still collectively owned. We will take a look into its impact in the following sections of the paper.

The second discrepancy is in the system of social management. According to law, "neighborhood committees" are the grassroot government of the urban communities, and government supports their budget. But in rural areas, the villagers' committee, a self-government organization, is the managing body. Management of the villagers' committees is financially supported by villagers themselves.

The third discrepancy is in residential registration system, which is related to the land-use system and social management system. It is a common sense that the old residential registration system is a stumbling block hindering the process of urbanization and that farmers' change of profession can be realized by the change of their residential registration from rural areas to cities. However, what is interesting is that even though "villagers" in the "urban villages" have already acquired urban residential registration ever since their farmland were taken over, they remain the status as "villagers." For them, the status of "villager" is far more important than urban residential registration. This is because that the status of "villager" enables them to be shareholders of the immense collective economy based on villages, which separates them in terms of economic power from ordinary city dwellers and the immigrant workers who rent house to live in the "urban villages." That may be the reason why these former farmers now prefer being "villagers" to being urban citizens.

Studying from the angle of reasonable choice of individuals, one may find that

the emergence of the special groups of building and the new form of village system is an outcome of farmers seeking maximum income from land use and house renting, given the situation that the price in rent of land and house is soaring. Nevertheless, it remains a topic questioned by many scholars that whether or not farmers have on earth the economic reason of seeking maximum income. According to most of the substantialists among scholars in sociology and anthropology, who pay more attention to "small tradition" and "regional knowledge," small farmers lack the modern economic reason and they usually entangle in unreasonable "deep games." Even if we should not make a subjective assertion that these small farmers are unreasonable, the so-called "reason" of small farmers is "alternative reason" totally different from "utilitarianism." As for most of the rich farmers, the common attitude is to maintain "self-sufficiency and a comfortable life" when there is no stimulation from the outside to seek accumulation and proliferation of capital. But as for those farmers who lead a difficult life, the explanation for them preferring to be "villagers" may come from their "survival reason" (Geertz, 1973, Chayanov, [1925] 1986, Scott [1976] 2001) to avoid living crisis. Contrary to the explanation of "alternative reason," a number of economists and historians have proved the "universality" of explaining small farmers' economic behavior with "economic reason." They pointed out that farmers share the same potential with land speculators, and that given the new economic stimulation from the outside, farmers can also break away from the "survival logic" manipulating them so as to seek the maximum interests (Schultz, 1964, Popkin, 1979, Huang , 2000 [1990]). Actually, studying from the angle of process analysis, one may find that the two points of view are not basically contradictory. The key point is that whether or not we can assume the "vicissitude" of farmers' life from "survival reason" to "economic reason." In reality, the "vicissitude" has already taken place in the "urban villages" which are facing the end of villages.

Actually, a balanced price based on market exists in the income rate of urban land. Sometimes, the phenomenon of the income rate decreasing or house rent disappearing may be seen because of government's mandatory factor. But this can be compensated in other forms or indicated as the government's cost. Given the situation that land price is soaring and eight-story building is the highest building according to government regulation, "villagers," in order to seek maximum income from the land they own, try to take the best use of the village's space. That is the reason why the "urban villages" have become architectural monster with so many crowded-built buildings.

Despite the fact that the "villagers" in the "urban villages" have no farmland and the majority of them do not work in the "village," they remain to be villagers closely attaching to the "villages" to keep the life style which they are accustomed to and the social network they rely on. There are two factors contributing to persistence of the village system　– social relations based on the old village management and dividends drawing from the collective-owned property. It is said that an "urban village" is like an isolated island in the sea. The sea around it is a strange world and the island is a small community in which everybody knows each other well.

Previously, the collective income of the "urban villages" came from some

collective-run mills, stills, paper-making factories, brickyards, tea-making workshops, stone manufacturing factories and garment-making factories. But the situation changes in recent years as a result of the rise of price in labor force and land use and decline of the labor-intensive industries in cities. Nowadays, major income of an "urban village" comes from the collective-owned real estate. The managing body of the collective economy is "economic association," under which are several "economic unions" with their independent accounting units. Even though the people's commune has fallen into history, the institutional heritage of it can be found today in the "urban villages" which inherits the old system of "three-level management based on production team." This has provided an organizational structure for newly-rising shareholding system the "urban villages" adopt. Under the system, villagers are shareholders of both the "economic association" and "economic union."

3. New Structure of Social Stratification of "Urban Villages"

Four factories contribute to the structure of social stratification in the "urban villages," which include: 1) identity and real estate, 2) managing power, 3) capital 4) knowledge and skills.

The first one is the stratification based on identity, which divides people into two groups – local villager and non-villager. The persons who are not local villagers usually live on business or labor work, while the local villagers live mainly on three sources – dividends, house renting and business. Since the income from dividends and house renting is far higher than that from small business and labor work, the "villagers" are often richer than "non-villagers" and even ordinary urban citizens. Therefore, many "villagers" do not work and lead a comfortable life by relying on dividends and house renting, becoming the new rich. Some "villagers" own a small shop but they do not run it themselves, leasing it out to "non-villagers" to run. The "villagers" regard themselves as the upper class in the "urban villages." Actually, a number of the wealthy "villagers" have moved to live in elegant communities, saying that living in the village with immigrant workers cannot provide a good environment for their children to grow up.

The second one is stratification within the "villagers" group, which is based managing power. Though a small society, an "urban village" has several management levels. For example, an "economic association" consists of financial department, real estate management department, wage and human resources department, administrative office and the office of legal consultants. An "economic union" also has several departments. Besides, there are some other managing bodies in the village separately devoted to social security, health and sanitation, market management, family planning, education and taking care of senior citizens. All the posts are taken by "villagers," which enable them to be persons with power. Apart from the high wages they earn from taking the posts, which is as high as 100,000 yuan a year for a village-level official, there are invisible powers derived from the posts. For example, the people in power often make higher income from the real estate they own, and they may change their bank savings into "living capital."

The third stratification is based on the possession of capital, which divides the

"non-villagers," mainly immigrants from other provinces, into two groups – people with capital and people without capital. The people with capital refer to those who own a small business while the people without capital are those who work to earn wage for a living. What needs mentioning, however, is that there is no large income gap between the people with capital and those without. This is because that the firms and shops that the people with capital own are usually so small that the income from it, after rent and tax, can only guarantee them a from-hand-to-mouth living.

The final stratification is made among those who work for a living, which divides them into so-called white collar and blue collar. The white collars living in the "urban villages" are often technicians, sales persons, teachers, doctors, taxi drivers, journalists and clerks, while those blue collars are usually working in manufacturing industry, construction industry, transportation and catering.

This is the structure of social stratification now existing in the "urban villages." However, the structure is by no means static, and it, instead, is changing with time goes by, according to the mechanism of individuals' reasonable choice. Therefore, the "rising" and "creating" process of stratification is by no means a copy of the previous one. For example, many owners of small firms and the white collars may have a great expectation because of their spirit to take risk and their knowledge and technology. Actually, these kinds of people are rising in the new round of stratification process. On the contrary, the people with property are declining in the new era of knowledge-based economy. Not working and being accustomed with comfortable life, these people have gradually lost the spirit to start undertaking. Consequently, some of them may fall to lower class of the stratification, thus becoming a heritage of the agricultural civilization period.

4. Continuation of Village-Based Social Relations

A village's social and economic life is usually supported by a special network based on family or blood relations. Though located in cities, the "urban villages" are no exception. Efforts were made in the past long period by political and social reformers to break the old social network in villages, replacing it with modern administration and management. But all these efforts failed. Even worse, it is often a case that the modern administration and management, after being introduced to a village, were gradually, but quickly, reduced to a part of the old organizational form.

Though living in the city proper and leading a modern life, the "villagers" maintain a social network based on family and blood relations. Therefore, the "urban villages" or "village communities" are completely different from the neighborhood communities and unit-based communities in cities.

What's worth special noticing in the "urban villages" is that among the poorly constructed and crowded buildings stand three spacious and elegantly-built buildings. They are ancestral temples, primary schools and kindergartens, and the center for senior citizens. This shows a commonly accepted value among the "villagers" to pay respect to the aged and take care of children. Dominating an "urban village" are usually three-five large families. Each family has its own ancestral temple. The largest and most powerful family usually made its temple most luxuriously built. The

phenomenon of patriarchal clan remains common in southern China. This may hark back to centuries ago when many northern clans moved to the southern provinces due to war or natural disasters. By now these family clans still pay much attention to their history, or their "roots" as they always say.

Survey shows that at least 20 households in a village share consanguinity. Some villages even see 50 to 100 households to have the blood relationships. Generally speaking, the group of villagers who share consanguinity is a like company and the groups of villagers having blood relationships are its subsidiaries. The social network has laid a foundation on which these villages' economic life operates.

There is an ancient saying in Chinese history, which reads that a family cannot maintain rich for more than three generations. The explanation for the "rule" is that it is often a case that the offspring of the rich families are profligates. The opposite is true in reality when analyzing the traditional system of inheritance. Differing from either the inheritance systems in Europe or that of the Chinese royal families, which is characterized by the right of primogeniture and collecting wealth, the inheritance tradition practiced in the Chinese grassroot level is characterized by dividing wealth among brothers. Functioning as inheritance tax in modern society, the tradition seemed to be deliberately designed to avoid emergence of powerful families, which may be strong enough to threaten empire power.

History tells countless stories about how family-based companies decline right after the family head passed away and an internal war for property broke out, which incurred great losses to the family business. Being aware of the truth that dividing a family wealthy means change of property's ownership and change of social relations, large families in Chinese history tried to keep the family wealth intact to avoid business decline and external crisis.

Actually, an "urban village" is a large "family" based on a social network weaved with blood ties and consanguinity. The "family" has the genuine function in collecting wealth and capital. For example, it is regulated in the village-based shareholding system that withdrawing share is not permitted. Even though some former farmers have changed profession to do other works, they heavily reply on the village-based social relations in life, which serves as a safety umbrella preventing them from the crisis and external pressure. Therefore, persistence of the social network based on village is actually the direct result of villagers' demand to keep the big "family" intact and prosperous.

5. A Brief Conclusion.

In the past, most of sociological studies on the process of urbanization placed emphasis on farmers' change of profession. The different is true according to our investigation into the end process of the "urban villages," which shows that villages do not come to an end as a result of the end of peasants. The very fact is that the end of village still has a long way to go by going through a long process which features redefining of property ownership and reorganization of social-relation networks. Even though what is happening in the "urban villages" in Guangzhou bear some special characteristics, the social clashes and conflicts taking place there are typical of the end

process of villages. It is obvious that the non-agricultural process and industrialization cannot simply bring to an end to the village society deeply rooted in a social network weaved by blood ties, family relations, cultural traditions and shared values and rules existing for a long time.

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