

Divergent and Convergent Paths in the Governance and Development of China's Urban Villages (2016–2026)—A Case Study of Baishizhou in Shenzhen and Tiantongyuan in Beijing

Tailai Cao*

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100032, China

**Corresponding author*

Abstract: *As China's urbanization enters a phase characterized by the optimization of existing urban space, the governance pathways and socioeconomic consequences of urban villages and similar communities have attracted increasing scholarly attention. This article takes Baishizhou in Shenzhen and Tiantongyuan in Beijing as comparative cases and, drawing on existing literature and fieldwork research, examines the governance models and developmental outcomes of urban villages and urban village-like communities under different institutional contexts between 2016 and 2026. The study finds that although both communities have long served as important residential spaces for accommodating migrant populations, differences in their institutional formation mechanisms and property rights structures have led to divergent trajectories. Baishizhou has gradually followed a redevelopment path characterized by spatial restructuring, whereas Tiantongyuan has achieved incremental improvements primarily through enhanced public services and optimized governance. This article argues that the divergence in governance pathways reflects the significant influence of institutional conditions on urban spatial transformation. These cases contribute to a better understanding of the diversity of urban governance models in China and provide insights for the future regeneration of urban villages.*

Keywords: *Urban Villages, High-density Communities, Urban Regeneration, Community Governance*

1. Introduction

Urban villages constitute a distinctive socio-spatial formation that emerged during China's rapid urban expansion following the reform and opening-up period since the late 1970s. As cities expanded into surrounding rural areas, formerly independent villages became enveloped by urban space, while land institutions and the urban–rural dual structure did not undergo corresponding transformation. This process produced transitional communities that simultaneously exhibit both urban and rural characteristics. Urban villages are typically characterized by high population mobility, complex land tenure arrangements, high building density, and relatively underdeveloped infrastructure. At the same time, because they involve multiple interrelated factors, including collective land rights, local fiscal interests, and social stability, their redevelopment and governance often face complex institutional and interest coordination challenges. Consequently, how to balance urban development with social equity has become one of the central issues in contemporary urban governance in China.

Although the concept of the "urban village" is rooted in China's specific institutional context, similar urban spatial formations and governance challenges are not unique to China. Historically, Singapore experienced the emergence of high-density "kampong communities" formed by migrants from Malaysia and elsewhere.[1-5] In Chinese Hong Kong, "bedspace apartments" and "tong lau" have led to serious losses of life and property, as well as public safety and social problems, due to overcrowding, inadequate planning, and weak community governance. [6-8] In many major cities in the United States, some low-income and immigrant neighborhoods have long struggled with crime and drug-related issues associated with socio-economic and ethnic segregation and insufficient public services. [9-13] Although these cases differ from China's urban villages in terms of land institutions and formation mechanisms, they share common features, including uneven development, inadequate infrastructure, and governance difficulties. This suggests that the governance of the so-called urban villages is not a country-specific phenomenon but rather represents a broader governance challenge associated with global urbanization. Examining governance practices of urban villages within specific

Chinese urban contexts, therefore, helps us better understand the localized manifestations of this global issue.

This article selects Baishizhou in Shenzhen and Tiantongyuan in Beijing as comparative cases to examine the governance pathways and development models of different types of urban villages and "urban village-like communities" in China over the past decade, from 2016 to 2026. Baishizhou represents a typical traditional urban village formed through the urbanization of collectively owned rural land, whereas Tiantongyuan is a mega-scale affordable housing community established in the context of housing system reforms. Although the two cases differ in their institutional nature and historical trajectories, they remain highly comparable in terms of their formation background and social functions. To avoid conceptual ambiguity, this article defines Baishizhou as a typical "traditional urban village," characterized by the continuity of collective property rights and village-based institutional organization. In contrast, Tiantongyuan is defined as an "urban village-like community." While it did not originate from the legacy of collective land institutions, it has similarly long fulfilled key social functions, including providing low-cost housing, accommodating large migrant populations, forming a high-density and highly mobile population structure, urbanizing the rural suburb, and concentrating governance pressures related to transportation and public service provision. Therefore, the primary focus of this comparison is not whether Tiantongyuan formally qualifies as an urban village, but rather how different institutional origins have shaped divergent governance pathways and socioeconomic outcomes under similar functional pressures.

Baishizhou in Shenzhen is a typical centrally located urban village that became surrounded by high-rise buildings during the process of urban expansion. As a frontier city of China's reform and opening-up, Shenzhen's urbanization was built upon the gradual integration of formerly rural land into the urban spatial system. Numerous villages that originally belonged to Bao'an County were incorporated into the expanding urban structure, forming a distinctive landscape in which modern high-rise buildings coexist with densely packed self-built housing. According to the Shenzhen Urban Village Comprehensive Governance Action Plan (2018–2020), Shenzhen contains 1,547 urban villages, ranking among the highest in China. [14] Baishizhou, located in the core area of Nanshan District, developed from former fishing villages and villagers' self-built housing in the Shahe Area. It covers approximately 46 hectares and has a permanent population of around 150,000. Due to its central location and relatively affordable rents, Baishizhou has long attracted migrant workers, entrepreneurs, and students. However, rapid development has also resulted in problems such as disorderly planning and widespread unauthorized construction.

Tiantongyuan in Beijing emerged in the late 1990s as a mega-scale affordable housing project designed to alleviate population pressures in the capital city. Located in Changping District, which was then relatively peripheral, it occupied a liminal position between urban and rural areas in the city's spatial structure. Because of its relatively low rents and diverse housing options, Tiantongyuan attracted large numbers of migrant workers seeking opportunities in Beijing and became a common entry point for newcomers to the city, where shared rental arrangements were once widespread. As the population continued to grow, issues such as public transportation congestion and strained public resources became increasingly apparent. By 2025, Tiantongyuan's permanent population had reached approximately 500,000 to 700,000, accounting for nearly one-quarter of Changping District's total population, making it one of the largest residential compounds in China.

This study adopts two primary research methods. First, it critically draws on relevant scholarly literature and media reports on Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan over the past fifteen years, examining the evolution of governance policies and processes of spatial transformation. Second, it employs ethnographic field investigation to examine the historical development, current conditions, and residents' lived experiences in both communities over the past decade. In February 2026, the author conducted one week of field visits in both Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan, as well as one week of field visits to similar urban village-type communities in Guangzhou and Chinese Hong Kong. Through informal interviews with residents and officials, spatial observation, and documentation of everyday life, the study gained in-depth insight into community transformation and residents' daily experiences. Based on this combination of critical literature review and field research, this article seeks to answer the following core question: Under similar demographic structures and housing functions, why have Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan exhibited markedly different governance pathways and developmental outcomes over the past decade? The governance of urban villages is not only a matter of spatial restructuring and improving living conditions but also involves broader issues of social integration and public resource allocation. The experiences and lessons derived from these cases hold important implications for community governance in China within the broader context of global urbanization.

Through this comparative analysis, this article aims to reveal how different institutional environments and policy choices shape the redevelopment trajectories of urban villages and similar communities and to explore more sustainable governance approaches.

2. Differences and Commonalities in Historical Origins and Institutional Formation Mechanisms

From the perspective of historical formation, although Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan differ significantly in their institutional attributes, both emerged in close relation to China's rapid urban expansion and constitute important residential spatial forms developed to accommodate large-scale population inflows. The formation of urban villages in Shenzhen, like Baishizhou, is closely linked to the urban-rural dual land system and the incomplete institutional transformation accompanying land expropriation during urban expansion. As Zhou Xinhong argues, urban villages are essentially the product of multi-player interest bargaining under conditions of institutional imbalance between urban and rural governance systems; their formation reflects dynamic negotiations between local governments and village collectives over the distribution of land revenues. [15] Within this institutional context, land originally owned collectively by rural villages became enveloped by expanding urban space but was not fully converted into state-owned land. Village collectives maximized land revenue through the construction of rental housing, gradually forming high-density rental communities. Ma Hang and Wang Yaowu describe this process as a continuous evolution of social, economic, and morphological spaces, [16] while Li Peilin further notes that the "end of the village" is not simply a process of de-agriculturalization but rather one of property rights restructuring and the reconfiguration of social networks. [17]

Baishizhou represents a typical manifestation of this institutional evolution. Although spatially it has become highly urbanized, institutionally it retains collective property rights and a village shareholding company structure, thereby forming a transitional space embedded within both urban and rural institutional frameworks. The persistence of this property regime has enabled Baishizhou to maintain a rental-dominated residential function over the long term, while simultaneously providing the institutional foundation for subsequent demolition and redevelopment projects oriented toward land capitalization.

By contrast, although Tiantongyuan was likewise developed on formerly rural land, its institutional logic of formation did not derive from the continuation of collective land institutions. Rather, it emerged as a government-led mega-scale compound development project under the broader context of national housing reform. In the late 1990s, the Changping District Government reorganized the administrative divisions of the Dongxiaokou Area, establishing multiple subdistrict offices and concentrating the development of affordable housing communities on former farmland and village land, gradually shaping the spatial configuration of present-day Tiantongyuan. Gong Wei characterizes Tiantongyuan as a typical "large-block, enclosed" development, whose spatial organization extends the planning logic of the closed residential compounds of the state-planned economy era. [18] Building on this analysis, Liu Liang further argues that Tiantongyuan, as a core component of the "Huilongguan-Tiantongyuan Area," emerged from the combined forces of housing marketization reform and rapid urbanization. [19] Initially intended to alleviate urban housing shortages, it has gradually encountered issues such as traffic congestion, insufficient public services, and increasing complexity in community governance as its population continued to expand. Thus, the governance challenges of Tiantongyuan do not stem from uncertainty in land institutions but from structural tensions between public resource provision and social management in the context of a rapidly expanding mega-community (see Figure 1).

In sum, from the perspective of institutional formation mechanisms, Baishizhou represents a typical case of village-endogenous urbanization, with its spatial form built upon the continuity of collective property rights. Tiantongyuan, by contrast, exemplifies a model of government-planned community development, whose spatial formation resulted from national housing reform and urban expansion policies. Although the two cases originated from different institutional starting points, both have played an important role in providing low-cost housing for lower- and middle-income migrant populations during the course of urban development. However, it is precisely this divergence in institutional formation that has directly shaped their subsequent governance trajectories. Governance in Baishizhou has centered on spatial restructuring through land redevelopment, with property rights reconfiguration and the redistribution of land revenues at its core. In contrast, Tiantongyuan has primarily sought to enhance community functioning through the improvement of public service provision and the strengthening of community governance systems. In other words, institutional formation mechanisms not only constitute the foundation of these communities' historical development but also profoundly

influence their subsequent spatial transformation and governance models.



Figure 1: High-rise Residential Buildings in Tiantongyuan (Photograph by the Author, February 2026).

3. Population Scale and Social Structure: Similarities and Differences in Mobility and Social Stratification

In terms of population scale and social structure, both Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan exhibit the typical characteristics of "high density" and "high mobility." This similarity constitutes an important social basis for comparison and renders the divergence in their governance pathways more analytically meaningful. Existing studies indicate that Baishizhou accommodates approximately 150,000 residents within an area of less than 0.65 square kilometers, making it an extremely high-density residential space. [20,21] Its population is composed primarily of migrant workers and tenants, while the proportion of local original villagers is relatively small. Ma Hang and Wang Yaowu note that Shenzhen's urban villages generally display a dual social structure of "original villagers–tenants," in which original villagers obtain stable income through property rental, whereas tenants constitute the principal residential population of the community. [16] He Xueni further argues that during urban village redevelopment, migrant groups such as tenants and small business operators are often the most affected, as their social networks and employment opportunities are more likely to be disrupted during spatial restructuring. [22] Using mobile signaling data, Gong Ziyin finds that following the demolition of Baishizhou, approximately 20 percent of former residents left Shenzhen altogether, while those who remained in the city relocated to more distant peripheral areas, significantly increasing their commuting costs. [23] These studies suggest that Baishizhou is not merely a residential space but also a critical social arena through which migrant populations integrate into the city; its patterns of population mobility are closely intertwined with processes of spatial transformation.

Tiantongyuan in Beijing similarly exhibits the coexistence of high density and high mobility. As one of the largest residential communities in China, its permanent population ranges from approximately 500,000 to 700,000. Huang Yi, Wang Xiaoran, and Wang Zilin observe that Tiantongyuan residents rely heavily on the urban rail transit system, with daily commuting patterns characterized by pronounced "tidal flows," reflecting its structural position as a large-scale residential area spatially separated from major employment centers. [24] In terms of social composition, although housing in Tiantongyuan primarily consists of commodity housing and affordable housing with relatively clear property rights arrangements, its residents are likewise predominantly domestic migrants—particularly young working populations often referred to as the "Beijing drifters" (beipiao). The community as a whole thus demonstrates a pronounced stage-based residential pattern. At the same time, fieldwork observations indicate that as some younger residents relocate due to high commuting costs and limited local employment opportunities, Tiantongyuan has gradually developed a relatively higher proportion of elderly residents. The community's demographic structure, therefore, reflects increasing diversity and a degree of generational differentiation.

Despite their significant similarities in population mobility, important differences remain in their

patterns of social stratification. Baishizhou's social structure is deeply shaped by the collective property rights regime, producing a relatively clear "villagers–tenants" dual structure in which the property-owning subjects are distinct from the actual resident population. This arrangement means that urban village redevelopment not only entails changes in spatial form but also directly involves the redistribution of interests among different social groups. In practice, large numbers of low-income tenants have been compelled to relocate to the urban periphery during demolition processes, increasing their living costs and exacerbating social differentiation. By contrast, social stratification within Tiantongyuan is more closely associated with differences in income level, occupational type, and housing conditions rather than with fundamental divisions in property rights. Governance tensions in Tiantongyuan are therefore concentrated less on property conflicts and more on whether public service provision, transportation capacity, and community management systems can adequately respond to the operational demands of a mega-scale population.

Overall, both Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan have played a crucial role in absorbing migrant populations into the urban system. Their high-density and high-mobility demographic characteristics have positioned them as significant nodes within broader urban operations. However, differences in their mechanisms of social stratification have led them to confront distinct core governance challenges. In Baishizhou, governance efforts have centered more directly on property relations and the spatial redistribution of populations. In Tiantongyuan, governance challenges primarily arise from the allocation of public resources and demographic changes within the context of a super-large community. This comparison demonstrates that while similarities in population scale and mobility provide a shared structural foundation, differences in social structure further shape divergent governance trajectories and developmental directions.

4. The Evolution of Governance Mechanisms: Divergent Paths between Spontaneous Order and Government-Led Transformation

In terms of governance mechanisms, Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan exhibit markedly different trajectories of evolution, differences that are deeply rooted in their distinct institutional foundations and spatial attributes. Broadly speaking, Baishizhou's governance logic has shifted from one characterized by "spontaneous order" to one dominated by government- and capital-led spatial restructuring. In contrast, Tiantongyuan's governance trajectory has largely reflected a process of government-led "incremental optimization" within the existing built environment. Chronologically, around 2016, the accumulated challenges associated with high-density residential communities—such as traffic congestion, inadequate public services, fire safety risks, and spatial disorder—became increasingly prominent on the urban governance agenda in both cities. Between 2018 and 2020, Shenzhen introduced the Shenzhen Urban Village Comprehensive Governance Action Plan (2018–2020), while Beijing launched the "Huilongguan–Tiantongyuan Coordinated Governance Action Plan" (commonly known as the "Huitian Action Plan") in 2018. By approximately 2024–2026, as these governance pathways continued to unfold, more clearly differentiated spatial and social consequences had begun to emerge, providing the empirical basis for the comparative analysis presented here, informed by field observations conducted in 2026.

Baishizhou long operated under a condition of "semi-formal governance." Although administratively incorporated into the urban system, the internal spatial order and everyday management of the community were, for a considerable period, primarily maintained by the village shareholding company and village committee. This governance model, grounded in collective property rights, enabled urban villages to develop a highly self-organized spatial order during the process of urban expansion. However, as urban land values continued to rise, Baishizhou was gradually incorporated into the formal urban renewal system. Feng Xuetao notes that the redevelopment process in Baishizhou gave rise to a tripartite bargaining structure among government, market actors, and the public, with governance shifting from early single-actor promotion to multi-actor interaction. [25] In this process, governments and developers often prioritized land capitalization and the enhancement of spatial value, while relatively neglecting the social networks and everyday needs of existing residents. [22] Gan Lu further demonstrates that demolition-and-reconstruction models of renewal typically increase floor-area ratios and intensify land development in order to reintegrate central urban functions. [26]

These developments suggest that Baishizhou's governance logic has gradually shifted from earlier "tolerant governance," which allowed the continued existence of urban village spaces, toward a form of "capitalized governance" oriented around land redevelopment. The core objective is no longer solely

the improvement of living conditions but the comprehensive enhancement of urban functionality and land value through spatial restructuring. During this transition, large numbers of former tenants were compelled to relocate, social network structures were reorganized, and the spatial function of the community shifted from a low-cost residential enclave to a more capital-intensive urban functional space.

By contrast, Tiantongyuan's governance model has primarily taken the form of gradual optimization under sustained government leadership rather than spatial substitution through demolition and reconstruction. As a planned large-scale commodity and affordable housing community with clearly defined property rights and a relatively stable spatial structure, its governance priorities have centered on enhancing operational efficiency and residential quality within the existing community framework. Gong Wei observes that Tiantongyuan has, in recent years, introduced the concept of the "open community," gradually dismantling enclosed spatial configurations and improving the connectivity of public space. [18] Huang Yi, Wang Xiaoran, and Wang Zilin propose, from the perspectives of public health and street-space optimization, that improvements in street environments and the restructuring of public spaces can enhance community vitality. [24] Liu Liang, adopting a systems-management perspective, argues that governance in Tiantongyuan has exhibited a clearly phased evolution: in the initial stage, the primary objective was to satisfy housing supply demands; as the population expanded, governance priorities gradually shifted toward alleviating traffic congestion, improving public service provision, and strengthening community governance capacity. [19]

The 2018 launch of the "Huilongguan–Tiantongyuan Coordinated Governance Action Plan" (the "Huitian Action Plan") by the Beijing municipal government provided a crucial institutional foundation for this governance transformation. Through phased improvements in infrastructure, supplementation of public services, and regional industrial upgrading, the plan significantly enhanced community governance and operational conditions. Under sustained governmental investment, Tiantongyuan successively constructed metro lines, schools, hospitals, and public green spaces, effectively mitigating the pressures associated with operating a mega-scale residential community. As one community governance official noted in an interview, "Without the high-level attention and strong support of the Beijing municipal government under the Huitian Action Plan, Tiantongyuan would not be as well-developed as it is today." In addition, Tiantongyuan has gradually developed a multi-level, multi-actor governance system composed of subdistrict offices, residents' committees, homeowners' associations, and resident representatives. Through a "five-party coordination" mechanism, the community has implemented more refined forms of management. This indicates that Tiantongyuan's governance pathway has not relied on spatial replacement to achieve functional upgrading but has instead depended on sustained governmental investment and the optimization of governance structures to enhance functionality and operational stability within the existing community progressively.

It is worth noting that, despite the significant divergence in governance pathways between Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan, the renewal processes in both cases have been directly driven by governmental planning. For instance, the Shenzhen Urban Village Comprehensive Governance Action Plan (2018–2020) designated Baishizhou as a key redevelopment target, with the government facilitating demolition and reconstruction by introducing developers and coordinating the interests of multiple stakeholders. Similarly, the "Huilongguan–Tiantongyuan Coordinated Governance Action Plan" ("Huitian Action Plan") promoted incremental governance optimization in Tiantongyuan through sustained fiscal support and systematic planning. This suggests that in China's megacities, the governance of high-density communities continues to rely heavily on the institutional guidance and resource allocation capacity of the state.

Situating this phenomenon within a broader comparative perspective reveals that governance models for high-density communities vary significantly across institutional contexts. Field research conducted by the author in older districts of Kowloon, Chinese Hong Kong, indicates that high-density, low-income communities such as Tong Lau face similar challenges of overcrowding and community aging (see Figure 2). However, due to their regime of permanent private property rights, government intervention remains relatively limited, and community renewal relies more heavily on market mechanisms and the autonomous decisions of property owners. This suggests that governance of high-density communities does not inherently depend on demolition and reconstruction or strong state intervention; rather, governance models are profoundly shaped by property regimes and local legal frameworks. Similarly, redevelopment practices in Liede Village and Dongjiao Village in Guangzhou have adopted a "government-led, collectively self-developed" model, achieving a relative balance between collective land capitalization and the protection of villagers' interests. This approach enabled spatial renewal while preserving social stability within the original community. These cases

demonstrate the diversity of governance models for urban villages, of which the government-led spatial restructuring commonly observed in Chinese mainland cities represents only one pathway shaped by a particular institutional environment.

In summary, the divergence in governance mechanisms between Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan fundamentally reflects two distinct logics of urban renewal. Baishizhou's governance pathway centers on land redevelopment, achieving spatial functional restructuring through demolition and reconstruction—a typical form of "substitutive governance." By contrast, Tiantongyuan has pursued the gradual enhancement of community functions through sustained public investment and the optimization of governance structures, representing a model of "improvement-oriented governance." This divergence not only reflects differences in the institutional foundations of the two types of communities but also profoundly shapes their modes of spatial transformation and the life trajectories of their residents. As such, it provides an important analytical entry point for understanding the differentiation of community governance models in China's megacities.

5. Current Development Conditions and Residents' Lived Experiences

From the perspective of current development conditions, although both Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan have undergone prolonged governance interventions and spatial adjustments, their developmental trajectories and residents' lived experiences display significant divergence. Broadly speaking, Baishizhou has entered a phase of spatial transformation dominated by demolition and reconstruction and is gradually exhibiting a trend toward gentrification. [27,28] In contrast, Tiantongyuan has achieved functional improvement and enhanced living quality largely within its existing spatial framework through sustained public investment and incremental governance optimization.

Existing research indicates that following the demolition of Baishizhou, nearly 50 percent of former residents experienced improved housing conditions; however, their commuting distances increased significantly, and the original balance between residence and employment was disrupted. [23] This suggests that improvements in material space are often accompanied by social and economic costs. From the perspective of urban spatial restructuring, as low-density rental housing in urban villages is gradually replaced by high-density commercial housing and commercial developments, migrant populations who once relied on affordable rents are increasingly displaced from the area. In their place, future residents are more likely to belong to middle- and higher-income groups with stronger economic capacity. This process reflects a typical pattern of gentrification, whereby spatial renewal facilitates the reconfiguration of population structure and social stratification, transforming residential spaces originally serving low-income migrant populations into urban functional spaces oriented toward higher-income groups.

The "gentrification trend" discussed in this article is primarily grounded in the following field-based observations: the continuous weakening of low-cost rental functions, the outward relocation and social network reorganization of low-income tenant groups, and the post-renewal orientation of space toward residents and businesses with greater purchasing power. It should be emphasized, however, that Baishizhou remains in a stage of ongoing redevelopment and spatial transition. The trends identified here do not represent a completed outcome but rather an unfolding structural shift and an anticipated set of social consequences.

Fieldwork conducted by the author in Baishizhou in February 2026 further confirms that this transformation remains in progress. At present, Baishizhou displays a pronounced condition of spatial transition. The community's perimeter is now surrounded by newly constructed high-rise residential buildings, construction barriers, and major urban thoroughfares, making it difficult to observe its internal spatial structure from the outside. Within the community, traditional small-scale commercial establishments—such as convenience stores and local restaurants—remain along the main streets, yet overall pedestrian traffic has declined noticeably compared to previous years. The interior still retains the characteristic "handshake building" morphology typical of urban villages, with narrow building gaps, tangled electrical wiring, and poorly maintained alleyways, reflecting the spatial features historically associated with such settlements (see Figure 2).

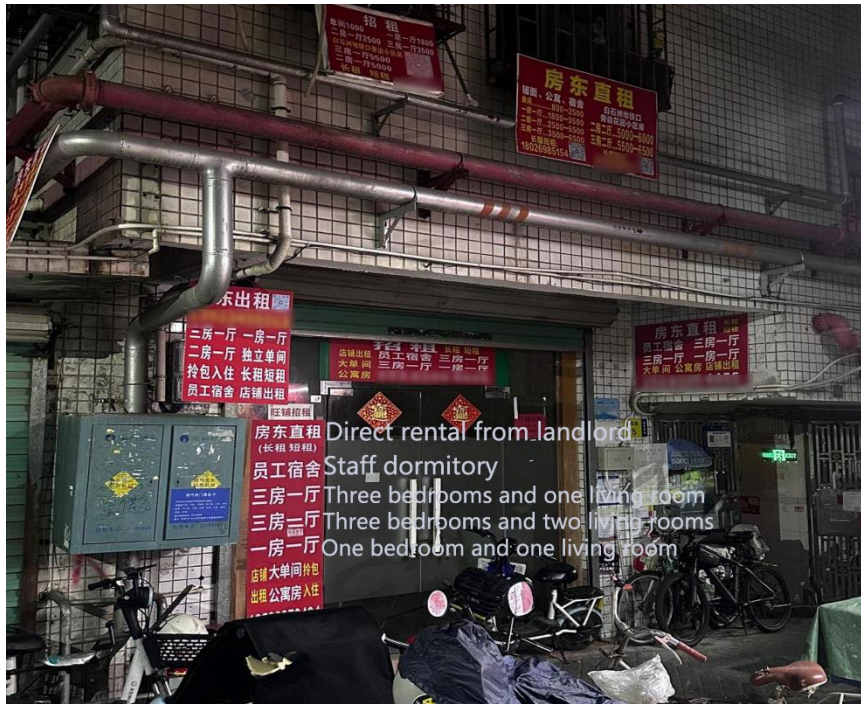


Figure 2: Rental Advertisements Commonly Seen Throughout the Baishizhou Community, Shenzhen (Photograph by the Author, February 2026).

However, in contrast to its earlier vibrancy as a densely populated residential enclave, a substantial number of housing units are now vacant. Walls are covered with rental advertisements, some buildings appear entirely abandoned, and others are partially demolished, with interiors emptied of furniture and left hollow—clearly embodying the features of a "transitional space." More importantly, the demographic composition of the community has changed significantly. During field observation, the author noted a marked decline in the once large tenant population, accompanied by a noticeable reduction in everyday social vitality. Those currently most visible in the community include short-term food delivery workers, porters, sanitation workers, small shop operators, and a limited number of middle-aged and elderly original residents. The number of long-term young tenants has clearly diminished.

This demographic shift does not simply indicate community decline but rather reflects a typical transitional stage in the process of gentrification: the gradual departure of low-income resident groups combined with the incomplete arrival of new middle- and upper-income residents, resulting in a temporary decrease in population density and social activity. In other words, Baishizhou's core function as a low-cost urban residential space is gradually eroding. Its spatial character is shifting from a "lived space" serving migrant populations toward a "development space" oriented toward future urban capital and higher-income groups.

By contrast, Tiantongyuan exhibits a markedly different developmental trajectory. Field observations conducted by the author indicate that Tiantongyuan has evolved into a mega-scale urban community with relatively complete supporting facilities and stable operations. The community contains several mature commercial centers; for example, the Hongde–Cuiwei commercial district encompasses a range of integrated retail complexes that include dining, retail, and various lifestyle services, adequately meeting residents' everyday consumption needs. In addition, with the continuous expansion of the urban rail transit system in recent years, Tiantongyuan has developed a transportation network composed of multiple metro lines and bus routes, enabling residents to commute relatively conveniently to central urban areas. [24]

In terms of governance, Tiantongyuan has established a relatively mature and institutionalized management system. The community is administered through a multi-tiered structure consisting of subdistrict offices and neighborhood committees, with clearly delineated responsibilities at each level. This arrangement allows the community to maintain a relatively stable operational order despite its extremely large population size. Public spaces are orderly and well-maintained, commercial activities remain vibrant, and everyday life demonstrates continuity and stability. This stability suggests that Tiantongyuan's development has not relied on demolition and spatial substitution but has instead

achieved functional enhancement within the existing community framework through sustained governance investment.

With regard to the current demographic composition, interviews conducted by the author indicate that current residents of Tiantongyuan consist predominantly of middle-aged families and elderly populations, while the proportion of younger residents has begun to decline. This shift reflects a stage-specific transformation in the community's development. On the one hand, as overall housing prices and living costs in Beijing have continued to rise in recent years, some younger migrant residents have gradually relocated to areas with lower living expenses. Meanwhile, early homebuyers have aged into middle and later life stages, resulting in an increasingly family-oriented and aging demographic structure. On the other hand, employment opportunities in areas surrounding Tiantongyuan remain significantly fewer than those in central Beijing, reducing the community's attractiveness to younger residents. In sum, Tiantongyuan has gradually transformed from a transitional residential space dominated by migrant populations into a more mature community characterized by long-term, stable residence.

Nevertheless, Tiantongyuan's governance still faces ongoing challenges. For instance, relatively low property management fees and insufficient maintenance funds in some residential compounds have created financial pressures for infrastructure upkeep. Shortages of parking spaces and the persistence of informal shared rental arrangements continue to increase governance complexity under conditions of high population density. However, unlike Baishizhou, where spatial functions are gradually dissolving and giving way to gentrification-driven substitution, the core objective of governance in Tiantongyuan remains the preservation of the existing community structure and the enhancement of governance capacity and residents' quality of life through sustained public investment.

The comparison above reveals that Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan are currently moving along two distinct trajectories of community transformation. Baishizhou has pursued spatial functional substitution through demolition and reconstruction and is gradually exhibiting characteristics of gentrification, resulting in the displacement of low-income migrant populations and the restructuring of the community's social composition. In contrast, Tiantongyuan has achieved functional improvement through incremental governance, allowing its existing community structure to persist and stabilize. This divergence demonstrates that different governance pathways not only shape distinct spatial forms but also profoundly influence residents' lived experiences and social structures, ultimately producing two contrasting urban development trajectories: one characterized by capital-led spatial redevelopment, and the other by community stabilization grounded in public governance optimization.

6. Conclusion

A comparative analysis of Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan demonstrates that, despite significant differences in their historical origins, institutional foundations, demographic composition, and governance structures, both communities have played essential roles in accommodating large-scale residential demand during China's rapid urbanization. By providing relatively affordable housing, these high-density communities facilitated labor mobility and enabled diverse populations to participate in urban economic and social life, thereby serving as important links between urban development opportunities and heterogeneous social groups.

Despite these shared functions, the two communities have followed distinct developmental trajectories. As a traditional urban village increasingly absorbed into Shenzhen's urban core, Baishizhou's redevelopment has focused on spatial restructuring and land integration, accompanied by significant adjustments in demographic composition and community functions. While the physical environment is likely to improve further through redevelopment, the community's social structure remains in a process of transformation. In contrast, Tiantongyuan, as a government-planned mega-scale residential community, has pursued gradual optimization within its existing framework through improvements in transportation infrastructure, public services, and community governance. These divergent pathways reflect the diversity of governance approaches adopted under different institutional and spatial conditions.

Comparative observations from Chinese Hong Kong's Tong Lau communities and urban village redevelopment in Guangzhou further suggest that there is no universally applicable governance model for aging high-density neighborhoods. Governance strategies are shaped by factors such as property rights arrangements, policy environments, and local developmental conditions. Consequently, urban renewal involves not only physical spatial improvement but also careful consideration of community

social structures and residents' everyday lives, requiring policymakers to balance multiple objectives simultaneously.

This article argues that as China's urbanization shifts from rapid expansion toward the optimization of existing urban space, high-density residential communities will remain central to urban development. Future renewal practices should therefore pursue spatial efficiency while preserving community continuity and social stability. Urban village redevelopment may benefit from more flexible and diversified approaches tailored to local conditions, while established large-scale residential communities can continue improving residents' quality of life through enhanced public services, transportation systems, and governance capacity. Strengthening multi-stakeholder participation mechanisms among residents, community organizations, and government authorities may further improve the adaptability and inclusiveness of governance processes.

From a broader perspective, the transformation of high-density residential spaces reflects not only physical spatial change but also ongoing adjustments in social structure and governance capacity. The experiences of Baishizhou and Tiantongyuan illustrate different forms of experimentation in managing high-density communities and provide useful insights into the evolving diversity of China's urban governance models.

This study nevertheless has certain limitations. Because the analysis focuses primarily on two representative cases, its conclusions remain shaped by specific local contexts and the constraints of short-term fieldwork. Future research could expand the comparative scope to include additional types of high-density communities under varying institutional and developmental conditions. Larger-scale surveys and longer-term ethnographic research would further deepen understanding of residents' lived experiences, social networks, and responses to urban renewal. Moreover, as digital technologies increasingly shape urban governance, future studies may also examine how smart governance systems and data-driven management practices are transforming community life and governance structures in contemporary Chinese cities.

References

- [1] Yeoh, B. S. and Huang, S. *The Conservation-Redevelopment Dilemma in Singapore*. *Cities* 1996, 13(6), 411–422. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751\(96\)00028-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751(96)00028-5).
- [2] Seng, L. K. *Conflict and Change at the Margins: Emergency Kampong Clearance and the Making of Modern Singapore*. *Asian Studies Review* 2009, 33 (2), 139–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820902923258>.
- [3] Kumar, V. *When Heritage Meets Creativity: A Tale of Two Urban Development Strategies in Kampong Glam, Singapore*. *City & Community* 2019, 19(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12427>.
- [4] Yow, S.H. *Singapore's last surviving village*. www.bbc.com. <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210525-singapores-last-surviving-village>.
- [5] Mun-Delsalle, Y-Jean. *Find out How This Development Redefines Senior Urban Living*. *Forbes*. March 20, 2025. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yjeanmundelsalle/2025/03/20/find-out-how-this-development-redefines-senior-urban-living/>.
- [6] Ng, S. L., Zhang, Y., Ng, K. H., Wong, H. and Lee, J. W. Y. *Living Environment and Quality of Life in Hong Kong*. *Asian Geographer* 2017, 35 (1), 35–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10225706.2017.1406863>.
- [7] Hui, M. and Frost, R. *Hong Kong Disasters Have Long Played Key Role in Shaping City*. *Bloomberg.com*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-11-29/hong-kong-disasters-have-long-played-key-role-in-shaping-city> (accessed 2026-02-13).
- [8] Kwan, S. *What we know about Hong Kong's deadliest fire in decades*. *Fortune*. <https://fortune.com/2025/11/28/what-we-know-about-hong-kongs-deadliest-fire-in-decades/> (accessed 2026-02-13).
- [9] Turner, M. A. and Greene, S. *Causes and Consequences of Separate and Unequal Neighborhoods*. *Urban Institute*. <https://www.urban.org/racial-equity-analytics-lab/structural-racism-explainer-collection/causes-and-consequences-separate-and-unequal-neighborhoods>.
- [10] Lens, M. C. *Zoning, Land Use, and the Reproduction of Urban Inequality*. *Annual Review of Sociology* 2022, 48 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-030420-122027>.
- [11] Fan, Z., Zhang, F., Becky P.Y.L. and Ratti, C. *Urban Visual Intelligence: Uncovering Hidden City Profiles with Street View Images*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 2023, 120 (27). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2220417120>.
- [12] Allach, A. *Redlining Maps Didn't Affect Neighborhoods the Way You Think They Did*. *Shelterforce*.

<https://shelterforce.org/2024/08/21/redlining-maps-didnt-affect-neighborhoods-the-way-you-think-they-did/>.

[13] McKay, L. C. *American neighborhoods are segregated by income. What does that mean for the future of income inequality, neighborhoods, and children?* Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2025/american-neighborhoods-are-segregated-by-income-what-does-that-mean-for-the-future-of-income-inequality-neighborhoods-and-children>.

[14] Shenzhen Urban Village Comprehensive Governance Action Plan (2018–2020). <http://zjj.sz.gov.cn/attachment/1/1218/1218409/10302366.docx>.

[15] Zhou, X. *The Urban Village Problem: An Analysis of Its Formation, Existence, and Transformation*. Doctoral Dissertation, Fudan University, 2007.

[16] Ma, H. and Wang, Y. *The Space Evolvement and Integration of Villages in Shenzhen*; Intellectual Property Publishing House, 2011.

[17] Li, P. L. *Tremendous Change: The End of the Village – a Study of Villages in the City*. *China Social Sciences* 2002 (1), 168–179.

[18] Gong, W. *The Renewal of Public Spaces in Old Communities Guided by the "Open Community" Approach: A Case Study of Tiantongyuan, Beijing*. *Urban Development Studies* 2019, 26(11), 66–73.

[19] Liu, L. *Urban Diseases and Governance Paths of Mega-Sized Urban Communities from the Perspective of Full-Cycle Management Theory: A Case Study of Beijing's "Huitian Area"*. *Journal of North China Electric Power University (Social Sciences Edition)* 2024, 5 (2), 63–73. <https://doi.org/10.14092/j.cnki.cn11-3956/c.2024.02.006>.

[20] Bunt, T. *Urban Renewal Study of Five Villages in Baishizhou*. URBANUS. <http://www.urbanus.com.cn/20th-anniversary/urbanus-symbiosis/urban-research/travis-bunt-baishizhou/>.

[21] Wang, Y. and Erk, G. K. *Rural-Urban Chinese Migration and an Architectural Investigation of the Urban Village in Shenzhen*. *The International Journal of Community Diversity* 2022, 22(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-0004/cgp/v22i02/1-14>.

[22] He, X. *A Study on the Social Impact Assessment of Urban Renewal of Urban Villages in Shenzhen: A Case Study of Baishizhou Village*. Master Thesis, Shenzhen University, 2020.

[23] Gong, Z. *Analysis of the Relocation Characteristics of Original Residents after the Demolition of Urban Villages Based on Mobile Phone Data: Taking Baishizhou, Shenzhen as an Example*. Master Thesis, Shenzhen University, 2020.

[24] Huang, Y., Wang, X. and Wang, Z. *Optimization Strategies for High-Density Communities Based on Residents' Travel Patterns: A Case Study of Beijing's Tiantongyuan Community*. *Towards Chinese-Style Modernization: The Value and Role of Planning – Proceedings of the 2025 China Urban Planning Annual Conference 2025*, 274–284. <https://doi.org/10.26914/c.cnkihy.2025.047369>.

[25] Feng, X. *Empirical Study and Model Exploration of Community Planning in Baishizhou, Shenzhen from the Perspective of Spatial Governance*. Master Thesis, Dalian University of Technology, 2020.

[26] Gan, L. *Exploring the Utilization of Underground Space in Demolition and Reconstruction Areas: A Case Study of the Baishizhou Key Urban Renewal Unit in Shenzhen*. *Urban and Rural Development* 2021 (11), 49–51.

[27] Zukin, S. *Gentrification: Culture and Capital in the Urban Core*. *Annual Review of Sociology* 1987, 13 (1), 129–147. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.13.080187.001021>.

[28] Shaw, K. *Gentrification: What It Is, Why It Is, and What Can Be Done about It*. *Geography Compass* 2008, 2 (5), 1697–1728. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00156.x>.