

# From Excluded Ghettos to Exclusionary Enclaves: A Private Sector Initiative in Guangzhou, China

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## ABSTRACT

Massive migration is underway in rapidly urbanizing Guangzhou, the south gate of P. R. China. Over half the migrants choose to rent in “villages-in-the-city” in the downtown area because of the low-cost and prime location. The overpopulation and resulting poor environment and high crime-rate turn villages-in-the-city into *de facto* ghettos. As a result, these ghettos are undergoing a manner of demolition-development, leaving migrants’ housing needs unmet. A private-sector initiative—the Tulou Commune—intends to address this considerable market potential. Targeting low-income groups, the Tulou Commune creates a socio-spatially exclusionary enclave. This paper analyzes the Tulou Commune and the implications if more low-income migrants shifting from village-in-the-city (excluded ghetto) to Tulou Commune (exclusionary enclave). This study argues that the intervention of the private sector causes the demographic, social, and spatial similarities and differences of the two living arrangements. Socioeconomic and institutional factors also affect the initiative. This study also provides more empirical evidence in the field of low-cost housing and socio-spatial development in transitional Chinese cities. As the first project of its kind, the analysis of the case can suggest how to improve strategies for accommodating migrants in the future.

**Key words:** Migration, Villages-in-the-city, Guangzhou, Private Sector Initiative, Commune

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## 1. Introduction

In China, masses of migrants continue to flood urban areas at an unprecedented rate (Logan, 2002; Tang, 1997). These migrants are ineligible for government-subsidized housing because they are not registered as local residents (Huang, 2003; Wang & Murie, 2000). Their best option, then, is renting from the private sector—usually informally (Wu, 2004). Guangzhou offers an illustration.

As the capital of Guangdong province and the southern gateway of China, Guangzhou attracts an influx of migrants (Jenkins et al., 2007). Housing the migrants presents a challenge. Under the urban-rural dual land system in the transitional period, villages-in-the-city (*chengzhongcun*, literally, “villages encircled by an urban area”) become the main source of cheap accommodation because of local peasants’ free access to rural residential land (Chan et al., 2003; Huang, 2003; Wu, 2004). The prime location and low price attract many migrants to rent in villages-in-the-city, where low-rise buildings have burgeoned (Tang & Chung, 2002; Xue et al., 2006). The supply-demand

mechanism works well, and the informal housing market flourished until overpopulation, excessive construction, and poor management led to “severe infrastructure deficiencies, intensified social disorder and deterioration of the urban environment” (Zhang et al., 2003: 912). This justified government intervention. Unfortunately, the government undertook “demolition-development,” especially in the inner city where villages-in-the-city most damaged the city’s image (Zhang et al., 2003). Several projects have already begun. One can only hope that this destruction is under scrutiny and may change in the future (Wei & Yan, 2005). Current policy, however, will eradicate these inner city villages. The government might find it challenging to house the massive number of immigrants, but the private sector can seize the opportunity of the newly created and substantial demand for housing.

The private sector produced the Tulou Commune (see Fig. 1; hereafter, the Commune) to try to meet the potential demand. It completed its exploratory project in June 2008 and began operations in July 2008. The Commune offers a particularly interesting case: a private-sector initiative, a new low-cost

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Fig. 1. A New Private Sector Housing Initiative for Migrants in Guangzhou – Tulou\* Commune

Note: \**Tulou* literally means “dirt building”. It is a typical Hakka house where relatives live together.

Source: The first is from VANKE’s internal records; the others were taken by authors at an on-site visit.

housing model, and proximity to a high-profile commodity housing estate. This innovative model has attracted much attention from the government. The Department of Construction of Guangdong Province (DCGP) (2008) named it an honorable demonstration project though no direct subsidy was granted upon this recognition. Furthermore, mayors of other cities have invited China Vanke Co., Ltd (the largest professional housing developer in China; VANKE, hereafter) to build similar projects in their cities (Wang, 2007). It is imperative to study the Commune’s early stages before it proliferates in other cities.

The paper aims to provide policy implications on how to improve strategies to encourage private sector to further involved in low-cost housing delivery. It begins with a brief literature review, setting out the context of the research, and then introduces the methodologies. It follows with a descriptive

analysis of the Commune as a new concept in low-cost housing by private sector. The comparative study is unfolding with a systematic account of the Commune based on first-hand evidence and the villages-in-the-city from secondary data in the literature. Three perspectives structure the comparison of the Commune and villages-in-the-city: demographic composition, social interaction, and spatial embeddedness. The final part explores the mechanisms of these similarities and differences and recapitulates the main arguments of this paper. It concludes that the Commune has its own merits and that private sector intervention, for the most part, has caused the shift from excluded ghettos to exclusionary enclaves. The study contributes new evidence to the existing literature on low-cost housing by market agents and on socio-spatial development in Chinese cities. As the first project of its kind, the analysis of the case can give some advices on how to improve strategies for housing migrants in the future.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Perspective

In the current stage of globalization, urban space is being reshaped and restructured locally (Newman & Thornley, 2004). As more people move to cities, residential patterns become increasingly significant in influencing urban structure (Burdett & Sudjic, 2007). With respect to housing, cities nowadays seem to share a common tendency toward differentiation and fragmentation (Hamnett, 2001; Li & Wu, 2006; Marcuse & Van Kempen, 2000, 2002; Walks, 2001; Wessel, 2000). Residential disparities—the unequal distribution of housing resources among different socioeconomic groups— cause this fragmentation, in which different groups end up occupying different areas (Coy, 2006; Knox & Pinch, 2000).

Among the concentrations of socioeconomic groups, those occupied by migrants have long been a focus both in academia and the public sector (Light, 2004). The sheer quantity of migrants makes their “visible feet” (Kearney, 1986) exert substantial impact on urban structure. The issue of social justice also commands attention since housing is a basic need (Regional Institute of Higher Education [RIHED], 1982). In some cities, migrants concentrate in run-down central urban districts, forming the de facto ghettos. The terms *excluded ghettos* and *exclusionary enclaves* have been identified as new spatial developments in cities in the post-Fordist period (Marcuse, 1997). These two concepts first gained currency in North America and later in other parts of the world (Douglass et al., 2012). An excluded ghetto is “a spatially concentrated area where residents’ activities are excluded from the economic life of the surrounding society” and “the confinement of their residents to the ghetto is desired by the dominant interests out of fear that their activities, not controlled, may endanger the dominant social peace” (Marcuse, 1997: 314). An exclusionary enclave is an area where “residents, intermediate and insecure in their economic, political, and social relationships to the outside community, wish to ‘protect’ themselves from a

perceived danger from below” (*ibid*). The conceptualization of excluded ghettos and exclusionary enclaves has stimulated heated discussion (Varady, 2005). The main difference between the two is whether the residents voluntarily congregate or not. In an excluded ghetto, residents do not voluntarily cut off relations with mainstream society, while an exclusionary enclave self-segregates. Moreover, the physical environment of these two differs in quality, with exclusionary enclaves generally superior to excluded ghettos. The ghetto-enclave differences can be observed from the keywords that relate to them respectively. “Excluded ghetto” is usually negative, enforced, threatening and segregated whereas “exclusionary enclave” is generally positive, voluntary, desirable and embedded (Peach, 2005). The foregoing features of strong contrast can be paired and summed up into themes that define their distinction. The themes include public image (physical environs and public security), demographic composition (profile of tenants), social interaction (internal communication and external integration), and spatial pattern. In light of this summary, the following analysis can be structured systematically to analyze the Commune.

Given that the focus of this study is the Commune, the starting point of the paper accepts the assumption that villages-in-the-city could be regarded as excluded ghettos in Chinese context drawing on the well-established literature on the characteristics of villages-in-the-city (see, e.g. Chan et al., 2003; Zhang et al., 2003). Firstly, physical deterioration and poor security make the impression on villages-in-the-city negative. Secondly, tenants are mostly migrants with limited education and low income. Thirdly, residents in villages-in-the-city are prone to encounter group prejudice. Fourthly, villages-in-the-city form spatial segmentation of areas and they are seen as inferior by the majority of people in the surrounding area. While the cases for villages-in-the-city resembling excluded ghettos are relatively clear, the new initiative – the Commune that is exclusive for migrants–remains unknown. How is different from the previous major housing arrangement for migrants? Is it excluded ghetto or exclusionary enclave? Judged by the physical environment, the Commune is better than villages-in-the-city. Meanwhile, the Commune possesses some degree of exclusivity. It is explicitly only for non-native people. In addition, the defensive building form suggests that they may want to be left alone. To better interpret the Commune, the aforementioned concepts and themes are instrumental as the theoretical lens and the two main questions of this paper are:

- Q1: What is the nature of the Commune and what is its organization? (i.e. explain why the Commune is exclusionary enclave but excluded ghettos)
- Q2: What are the similarities and differences between villages-in-the-city and the Commune, and between their underlying mechanisms?

To answer the first question, there is a descriptive analysis of the Commune. The rationale of the project will be unraveled and the management and organization will be delineated to see how the exclusionary enclave is formed. As for the second question, a comparative analysis serves to compare the Commune with villages-in-the-city in terms of residents’ composition, social integration and spatial embeddedness.

### 3. Methodology

This research employed case study and comparative study. In the case study, first-hand evidence, primarily qualitative, was collected in three steps. First, e-research served as a pretest (sample size = 5% of total residents). Second, perceptual information was gathered on a field trip. Third, in-depth interviews provided deeper insights. After the case study, the empirical analysis combined with secondary data from previous literature compared the Commune and villages-in-the-city.

Internet-based research methods have been increasingly popular (see, e.g. Schmidt, 1997; Stanton, 1998). Most of Commune residents use an electronic bulletin board service (BBS). Therefore, BBS offered a general impression of their daily interactions, useful in designing the later stage of research. Other than web-based observations about their daily concerns, the most active members were sent the e-mail survey (5% of total residents). The response rate was 100% because these residents are active in their community.

A visual panorama of the Commune site was obtained through the field study. The visit was scheduled according to time constraints and the advice of on-site managers. The Commune is a kind of dormitory town. Most the residents leave early and stay out late. Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted on weekends, and supplementary information was gathered on weekdays.

High mobility in the Commune justified the use of in-depth interviews. In the first visit, conversation with some residents and VANKE staff indicated that tenants in the Commune are quite mobile (up till 2012, the average annual move-out rate is 45%), and so it would be unrealistic to ask all the residents to fill in a questionnaire. Instead it was best to talk with some of the 100 tenants who have been in the Commune since it began. Ten tenants were randomly selected at a fixed interval of one per 10 registered tenants. For example, interviews were conducted with the fifth tenant, the 15th, 25th, 35th and so on, with slight adjustments to balance gender and other characteristics such as occupation and education level. The interviews of tenants contained two parts: the first consisted of open-ended questions, and the second asked questions regarding demographic characteristics.

During the field study, two managerial members of staff from VANKE were also interviewed using open-ended questions to elicit as much detail as possible. The managerial staff could have been classified as a type of resident because of the Commune’s self-management requirement. However, such classification

could have introduced bias since the managers have dedicated so much effort to the project and they might try to increase support for it by describing it as a success. The results of these interviews were thus interpreted cautiously. One additional in-depth interview was conducted after the field study with an official from the housing management bureau in Guangzhou. This representative of the government provided additional insight.

The comparative study combined the field study and secondary research. While primary source material was collected in every possible way, comprehensive bibliographical research located suitable datasets on villages-in-the-city to compare with the Commune. Literature on villages-in-the-city in Guangzhou is abundant, including several survey datasets. The most representative ones (Chan et al., 2003; Zhang et al., 2003) were chosen to provide the socioeconomic, political, and cultural comparisons. The similarities and differences between the Commune and villages-in-the-city are presented from three perspectives—demographic composition, social interaction, and spatial embeddedness.

#### 4. Descriptive Analysis of the Commune

Located on the border of western Guangzhou and adjacent city Foshan (specific location refers to Fig. 2), the Commune belongs to Foshan administrative area though it belongs to a Guangzhou investment company. Most of the tenants work in Guangzhou. It occupies 9,000 m<sup>2</sup> with a plot ratio of 1.3; the 6-storey building contains 278 flats, 8 youth-hostel rooms, and 11 booths for commercial use (e.g., store, canteen, and barbershop), and can accommodate approximately 1,800 people.

#### 5. The Rationale Behind the Commune

The board chairman of VANKE China – Mr. Wang Shi – proposed the rudiment of the Commune model (Wang, 2007). As early as 2005, VANKE began looking for a feasible way to build low-cost housing for migrants. An investigation into the low-cost housing for workers in the UK – “Sunshine City Garden” in Glasgow – triggered the idea. Subsequently the project was initiated. VANKE claims it builds houses for lower-income groups as part of its commitment to social responsibility. Public image building aside, the project’s economic incentive can be analyzed using the classic framework of supply and demand.

Migrant housing in Guangzhou is mainly supplied by villages-in-the-city. This housing perpetuates a tendency of exclusion due to the institutional constraint. According to the household registration system, migrants fall outside the urban social security system. In other words, the local government is free from the challenge of providing social housing for non-native people. Meanwhile, migrants are usually limited in what formal sector housing they can afford. Xue et al. (2006) summarize the main forms of accommodation currently available to urban Chinese migrants: rental housing in the private sector (mainly informal), worker dormitories, and self-built shacks without permission. Renting in the private sector is the most common (in Guangzhou and Dongguan, half of the migrants live in rental houses provided by the private sector [Xue et al., 2006]). Social scientists have explained the rationale for villages-in-the-city as low-cost rental housing (Chan et al., 2003; Tang & Chung, 2002; Wang & Murie, 1999). Free access to *zhaijidi* (residential land owned collectively

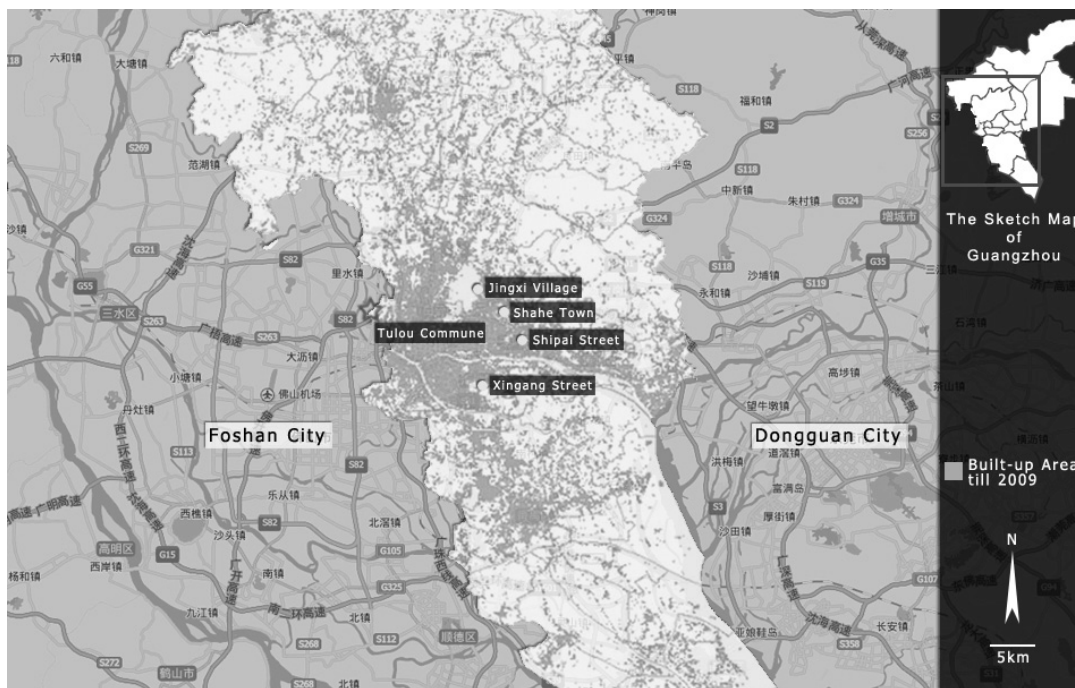


Fig. 2. The Location of the Commune

Source: base map - google map and courtesy of Guangzhou Urban Planning and Design Survey Research Institute; charted by authors

in rural areas) enables self-financing for the peasants in villages-in-the-city (Zhao et al., 2003). The peasants in urban areas no longer own any arable land for livelihood due to urban expansion (Zhou, 1997). They notice the vast inflow of migrants and the demand for low-cost housing (Zhao et al., 2003). Thus, they start to construct houses on their own *zhaijidi* for rent (Tang & Chung, 2002). At first, the government was pleased that the migrants' accommodation needs were absorbed without any public cost, so long as these villages were still at the fringe of urban areas (Zhao et al., 2003). However, rapid urbanization soon turned the situation the other way round. The expansion of urban areas places some of the villages-in-the-city in the central business district. The disadvantages now seem to exceed the advantages (Tang & Chung, 2002; Zhao et al., 2003). Although villages-in-the-city are in urban areas geographically, they are still rural areas administratively. Therefore, urban planning and municipal management regulations do not apply to these areas. In a laissez-faire environment, construction never conforms to planning and building regulations (Tang & Chung, 2002). The land use patterns in villages-in-the-city are chaotic. Rural-style low-rise buildings are placed closely side by side, in stark contrast to the circumjacent orderly urban landscape. In addition the sanitation and security in villages-in-the-city are notoriously bad. The incidence of delinquency is high. Local people usually avoid visiting these areas. Villages-in-the-city have become a thorn in the flesh of both the government and the local people.

In 2000 Guangzhou started to address the problem. Redevelopment of villages-in-the-city commenced in 2003 (Wei & Yan, 2005). It threatened the limited housing options of the migrants. Lack of bargaining power worsened the migrants' situation because the government employed a demolition-reconstruction strategy with no compensation for the tenants living in villages-in-the-city. The government never considers this group of people because they are not registered residents and no property-right issue is relevant to them. The problem of migrants' accommodation recurs. Their housing supply is reduced by the reconstruction of villages-in-the-city (Wei & Yan, 2005; Zhao et al., 2003).

Although the housing shortage remains severe, still millions are migrating to Guangzhou. In 1990 there were 990,000 migrants; in 2000, 2.08 million (State Statistical Bureau, 2001). In early 2009, the migrant population reportedly reached 6.16 million (*Guangzhou Daily*, 2009). The number is predicted to increase. Why? These migrants perceive the monetary gain as outweighing other factors. Arduous living in rural areas for years makes migrants tolerant of the plight of working in cities. The living situation does not bother those who only want to work in cities and collect enough money to return home. Those who strive to settle down hope for a less impoverished situation in the future. Furthermore, the relaxation of rural-to-urban migration since the 1990s has facilitated the influx to some degree (Li et al., 2009). Thus the demand for housing is enormous and growing, even

though only half the migrants will rent houses.

Given the current institutional constraints and market status during the transitional period, there is a substantial shortage of housing for migrants in Guangzhou. The market potential then justifies the investment. The notion that building houses for low-income groups is profitable may be commercially meaningful despite low rate of return. VANKE itself described "the Commune as an attempt to devise a feasible, sustainable, and replicable model for housing low-income people using resources from the private rather than public sector" (Interview with Mr. Deng, the manager on site, 19 July 2009).

In addition, a new document issued by the central and local governments has accelerated private sector's decision-making process. As mentioned, Guangzhou began urban village reconstruction in 2003. Not long after, the government realized the unintended consequence—migrants who used to live in villages-in-the-city still had to be accommodated. The government must resolve this problem in order to sustain abundant low-cost labor, a fundamental element of economic growth (Li et al., 2009). In 2008, Guangzhou explicitly requested proposals from the private sector to build supplemental affordable rental housing under the guidance of the central government's "multi-channel expansion of low-rent housing availability" (DCGP, 2008). Under such a framework, it is anticipated that government will offer some incentives (e.g. rebates on land taxes and fees) in the future. Promising prospect therefore further supports proceeding with the initiative. As expected, the project was recognized by the provincial government soon after its completion. However, the award is only in name. Since the guideline in 2008 is board and no further detail policies follow, the Commune's application for subsidies has not yet been approved by the government.

## 6. The Daily Functioning of the Commune

Rental eligibility in the Commune depends on three factors: no car or home ownership, income below 30,000 RMB (about 4500 USD) per annum, and non-native residency. Checking eligibility presents a major problem. Unlike government, the VANKE staff has no right to give every potential tenant a means test. This could prove to be a loophole in the model. At present, qualification depends on daily observation and judgment. That is one of the reasons for on-site staff to be quasi-residential. They work in three shifts covering 24 hours every day, and they know each tenant very well. According to their descriptions, they usually gather with tenants in the common area, drink beer, and chat. If someone is living there who does not meet the requirements, managerial staff can tell within six months through daily communication. When the contract expires, managerial staff will refuse to renew it and persuade the tenant to vacate the room for someone more in need.

The Commune must achieve self-management so as to save the tenants management costs that are usually charged in commodity

housing estates. The managerial staff said Commune management is simpler than other commodity housing estates mainly because of its small scale. At the time of the field study in 2009, the population of the Commune was about 500 and maintain more or less at this level through these years. Despite the capacity of 1,800 the leasing rate stays over 95% because some migrants are willing to pay more to retain privacy, so some shared rooms are occupied by one registered tenant. It is also possible that a registered tenant is subletting to another person, although that is forbidden. Furthermore, the lives of low-income people are quite simple in the sense that they get up early to go to work and return to the residence late at night. Managerial staff plays the role of village coordinator to encourage contribution to the community. The managerial staff has gradually learned how to mix with the tenants. As a result, the number of managerial staff has been reduced from the initial 11 to 5. This can reduce operational costs as well.

VANKE continues to explore feasible means of lowering operation costs. For example a point-collecting system rewards contribution to maintaining the environment. The tenant with the most points gets a discount on rent. As VANKE positions the Commune, it explores the practical lessons in providing low-cost rental housing for migrants.

## 7. Economic Feasibility and Sustainability

In the past, the reason few real estate developers invested in low-income housing was the limited profitability or even non-profitability. Such investment would contradict commercial tenants. According to VANKE's project appraisal, the total construction cost of the project was nearly 46 million RMB

(about 6.8 million USD, lump-sum capital from the VANKE Corporate Citizenship Fund and revenue of the Guangzhou Branch Company). It is expected to take 25 years to reach the break-even point.

VANKE set a target to make the Commune achieve financial self-sustainability at the end of 2008. Maintenance, water, electricity, and all other public space expenditures are free of charge. According to VANKE's prediction, the annual income is at best 800,000 RMB (about 120,000 USD, more details refer to Table 1). However, the reality does not measure up to the prediction. For example, laundry service was stopped because tenants seldom used it. Snooker, table tennis, and other leisure activities are free because no one will use them if there is a charge. What is more, the dorm and hostel occupancies are not as high as predicted.

For a private sector company, such an income-expenditure balance seems unsustainable in the long run. The standard rent is rather low, at an average of 20 RMB per square meter monthly. In fact, it might not be competitive with the rental market in Guangzhou (See Fig. 3; the rent is the reference rent provided by the government based on location). Some central urban districts have lower prices than the Commune. Although staff from VANKE is quite confident that the atmosphere in the Commune is an unbeatable advantage in attracting and retaining tenants, economic motivation will be decisive in the long run.

Without the guarantee of continuous high occupancy, the economic sustainability of the project is further undermined. It is reasonable to argue that actors in the private sector shirk their social responsibility unless the project is in their own interests and entrepreneurial resources abound to support it. Consequently, in time the enterprise might opt to serve those with middle

Table 1. 2009–2010 The Commune Project Revenue and Expenditure Estimates

(Unit: RMB)

	Monthly	Annually	Notes
Revenue	131,211	1,457,040	100% occupancy
1. Rental Revenue			
Flats	121,420		
Shops	0	0	Free of charge to attract operators
Dorm	5,400	64,800	95% occupancy
Hostel	4,200	50,400	100% occupancy
2. Laundry	91	1,092	Assume the number of uses per month: 50
3. Other*	100	1,200	
Expenditure	63,762	765,142	
1. Salaries	47,300		8 staff working on the site
2. Other**	16,462		
Summary (Profit)	67,449	809,390	

Notes: \*other revenue includes snookers, computer bar, etc.

\*\*other expenditures include maintenance, public water, electricity, etc.

Source: VANKE Co. Ltd.

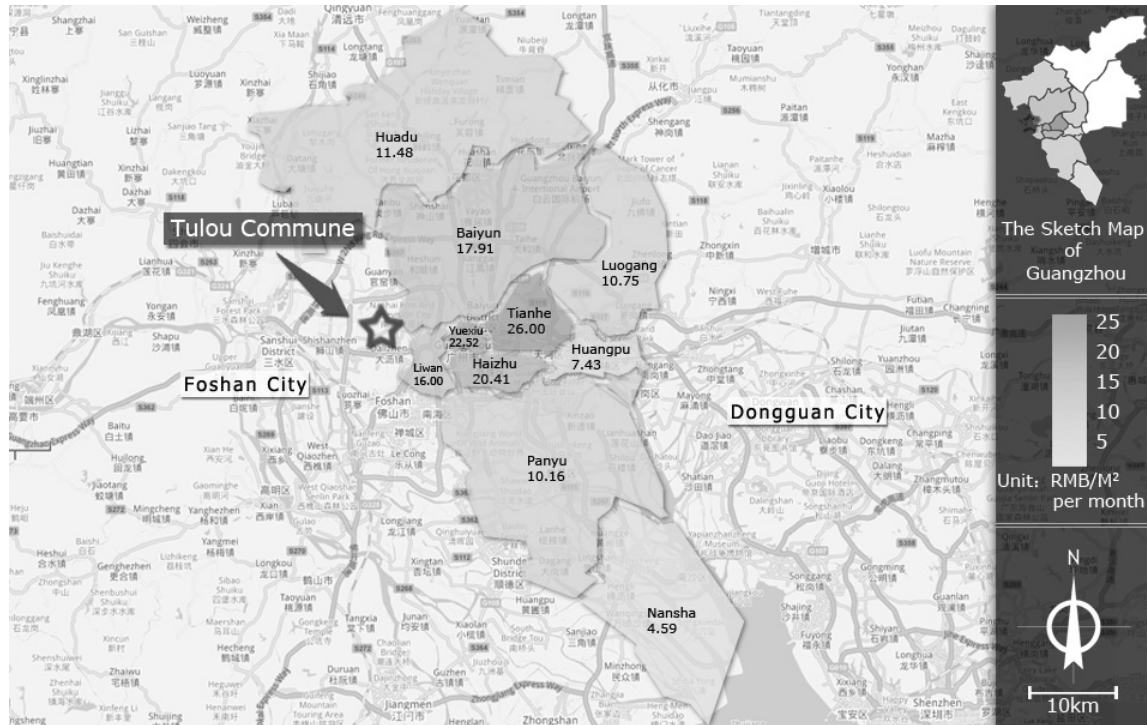


Fig. 3. Reference Rent in Guangzhou

Note: No data available of two county-level cities (Zengcheng & Conghua) but the housing market in these two cities are self-contained.  
 Source: data on reference rent is from Guangzhou Land Resources and Housing management Bureau in August 2009; charted by authors

incomes rather than the low-income groups in need, in accordance with commercial principles.

In contrast, villages-in-the-city are economically more sustainable than the Commune. The rental housing market in villages-in-the-city over the years has been prosperous. Because the government rarely intervenes, villages-in-the-city are properly and promptly tuned to market demand. Peasants in villages-in-the-city are allowed to deal with the land as they wish. They usually build housing incrementally and choose housing types according to the needs of migrants. The top priority is to build more units to rent. The informality of villages-in-the-city keeps the operational costs extremely low.

To improve the economic sustainability of the Commune, the government must offer incentives to attract investment in these projects if it intends to popularize the Commune model. At present, the Commune receives little reduction in taxes and charges even though they were entitled by the government as a pilot project of Guangzhou province.

## 8. Comparison of Villages-in-the-City and the Commune

VANKE designed the Commune as a prototype to overcome the problems posed by villages-in-the-city. It considered social mix, environmental sustainability, and spatial replicability to colonize the urban area and absorb the demand left by demolished

villages-in-the-city. This model has a sound foundation in theory. Nonetheless its feasibility must be scrutinized for new problems as it solves the old ones. This part of the study will assess the project by comparing the Commune with villages-in-the-city.

### 8.1 Demographic Composition

The basic data on demographic characteristics of tenants in the Commune and urban village vary. The possible explanation for the difference is explored and then the impact of the change is assessed.

The tenants in the Commune and villages-in-the-city have different characteristics. As shown in Table 2, the average age of tenants in the Commune is 26.4 years, and the mean income per annum is 23,000 RMB. Most of the tenants have a reasonable education, with 70% of tenants educated at the level of junior college or beyond.

Results of the questionnaire also revealed that, on average, Commune residents spent one and a half hours commuting even though slightly more than 10% of tenants work in the neighborhood commercial housing estates (as shop-assistants, hairdressers, or babysitters, for instance). A third of the tenants recently graduated from university. They chose the Commune for security and cultural atmosphere, perhaps as an extension of their student lifestyle. The enterprise also contributed to the type of resident found in the Commune. From the beginning, it purposely neglected some potential tenants because of Internet advertising

Table 2. Basic Statistics of Tenants in the Commune and Villages-in-the-city

	The Commune	Villages-in-the-City*
Number of interviewees	222 persons	189 persons
Average age	26.4	27.6
Average annual income	23,000 RMB	9,975** RMB
Level of education	Majority beyond college (68%)	Majority middle school or below (90%)

Notes: \* The data of villages-in-the-city were adopted from Chan et al. (2003). The survey dates back to the end of 1999 and early 2000, sampling four representative villages-in-the-city in Guangzhou (the location of the four representative villages-in-the-city refer to Figure 3).

\*\* 9,975 RMB at that time is approximately equivalent to 11,894 RMB now. The conversion formula is  $(I: \text{inflation rate}, P_0: \text{base period price level}, P_1: \text{current price level})$ .

Source: compiled by authors

and networks of relations that could not reach people who did not have access to such communication. When asked if VANKE had a bias toward this group because they are more likely to keep the residence in sanitary and secure condition, the managerial staff rephrased the situation: “migrants at age 20-40 are the target consumers no matter what education level they attain and the outcome only indicates that the Commune meets the needs of the group you described more precisely.” (Interview with Mr. Li, a manager on site, 18 July, 2009)

In the early stages of the project, VANKE discussed how to establish criteria to allocate low-cost housing to the neediest. Some migrants have their employers solve the accommodation. The rest of the migrants can be roughly divided into two groups. One group consists of people who are willing and able to settle down but have to live in villages-in-the-city temporarily to meet their goal. The other group is unable or unwilling to stay, so the problem of accommodation does not concern them. Migrants in the first group are the potential tenants of the Commune—those who desire decent housing but may not be able to afford it. Not surprisingly, recent graduates constitute a portion of this group. Thus the Commune makes sense for these housing consumers. There is the added benefit that these tenants are easier to organize and more likely to be good tenants. These migrants only rent low-cost housing at the beginning of their career. One day they will buy commodity houses—VANKE’s primary product—in keeping with traditional Chinese value of ownership. Their potential purchasing power might be the target of the enterprise in the future, and the Commune can serve as brand-marketing behavior in a sense.

Observations from the managerial staff augmented the demographic information. The tenants on a whole were described as public spirited, open minded, and willing to make friends. They commonly communicate through Internet-based media. The average age and level of education explains the situation to some extent. Communication among tenants fosters the sense of belonging in the residence, so people contribute to the maintenance of the residence. A volunteer team has been set up to self-manage the community.

In sum, the characteristics demonstrated in the Commune shed

light on the fundamental difference between this predesigned, low-cost rental housing and those homes in villages-in-the-city formed according to the open market mechanism. In villages-in-the-city, all sorts of migrants can be satisfied because incremental construction can be undertaken informally and swiftly in response to the needs of migrants. However, the Commune is subject to regulation, and its nature was defined before it was built, with no allowance for incremental construction. It thus became a niche product.

## 8.2 Social Interaction

The social environment of the Commune promotes a sense of community among tenants. Most of the residents agreed that the Commune is more than a means of accommodation and that the neighbors are friendly. In contrast, villages-in-the-city hardly qualify as communities. The reasons are two-fold.

First, the chaotically structured environment of villages-in-the-city causes it to be negatively perceived (Liu, 2009). Physical design interacts with the mental perception of a space (Jeffery, 1971). Villages-in-the-city are devoid of public space for people to hold social activities. The constant “hand-in-hand” or “kissing” buildings create a dreary and depressed atmosphere that reinforces the notion of insecurity (Liu, 2009). Individuals develop defensive mechanisms and avoid interactions (Liu, 2009). The lack of social opportunity in turn makes the environment worse because people are not willing to invest in improvement (Grand et al., 2008). A vicious circle ensues. On the other hand, the Commune adopts a traditional Chinese building form, the *hakka*, which literally means “migrants tribe.” In ancient times, migrants’ homes evolved into the form of Tulou. The key merit of Tulou is the strong sense of centrality. The inner open space facilitates social activities among residents. According to the designer from Urbanus (Liu & Yan, 2007), VANKE introduced Tulou based on the commonly accepted notion that communication and social life among low-income migrants is critical because it not only provides emotional support, but also information about opportunities. Residents repeatedly mentioned that open space in the Commune encouraged daily social activities.

Second, the social mixture of the Commune is much better than



villages-in-the-city, a total environment, while the Commune is relatively mono-functional. The villages-in-the-city not only provide living space, but also informal businesses. This increases the heterogeneity of the place. People living in the villages-in-the-city seldom think of these places as home. Tenants regard the Commune as a home instead of a means of accommodation. They can make friends there, and the mutual help among neighbors contributes to the feeling of community. The composition and characteristics of tenants reinforces this tendency. The average age of tenants is around 26. These young people are active. At the initial stage, the managerial staff organized various activities to create chances for everyone to get to know each other. A community library and public computer room were also set up to add more public space for residents. Tenants get along quite well. Some of them even organize activities themselves.

As for social engagement with “outsiders,” the two models are both exclusive, but to different degrees. Outsiders tend to avoid entering villages-in-the-city because of worries about security (Zhao et al., 2003). The worsening environment in villages-in-the-city tends to make people leave as soon as the economic situation permits. In other words, migrants—usually in “3D” jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demanding) with low income—are left alone by the surrounding society (Guo & Zhang, 2006). The Commune reduces exclusivity to some extent. In part its design aims to promote interactions among different socioeconomic groups. Thus, the Commune is in proximity to a commodity housing

estate (see Fig. 4 regarding the design)—VANKE Wonderland Garden (hereafter, the Garden). It is a housing estate where most of the residents have higher incomes. The purpose is to experiment with a way of promoting interaction among different socioeconomic groups.

The experiment ran into difficulty immediately when some housing estate residents objected to such a project being constructed nearby. Part of the commodity housing estate was built and has been in operation since 2003; the Commune was built in 2007. The most strained relationship appeared at the end of 2008 when residents from the commodity housing estate demanded a gate be constructed around the community. The managerial staff in the Commune organized some games to gather the key actors from both sides to encourage communication. It relieved tension between the two sides. The situation gradually improved because, as the residents got to know the composition of the Commune tenants, they no longer worried about security. Also, some of the tenants worked in neighborhood shops, and misunderstanding dissipates with more frequent communication. Some of the house owners were once at the same stage, which helped them better understand the tenants. The managerial staff said some house owners even recommend the Commune to relatives who wanted to work in Guangzhou. The hope is that, with increasing communication, the interaction between migrants and residents will continue to improve.

Compared to villages-in-the-city, the Commune has better

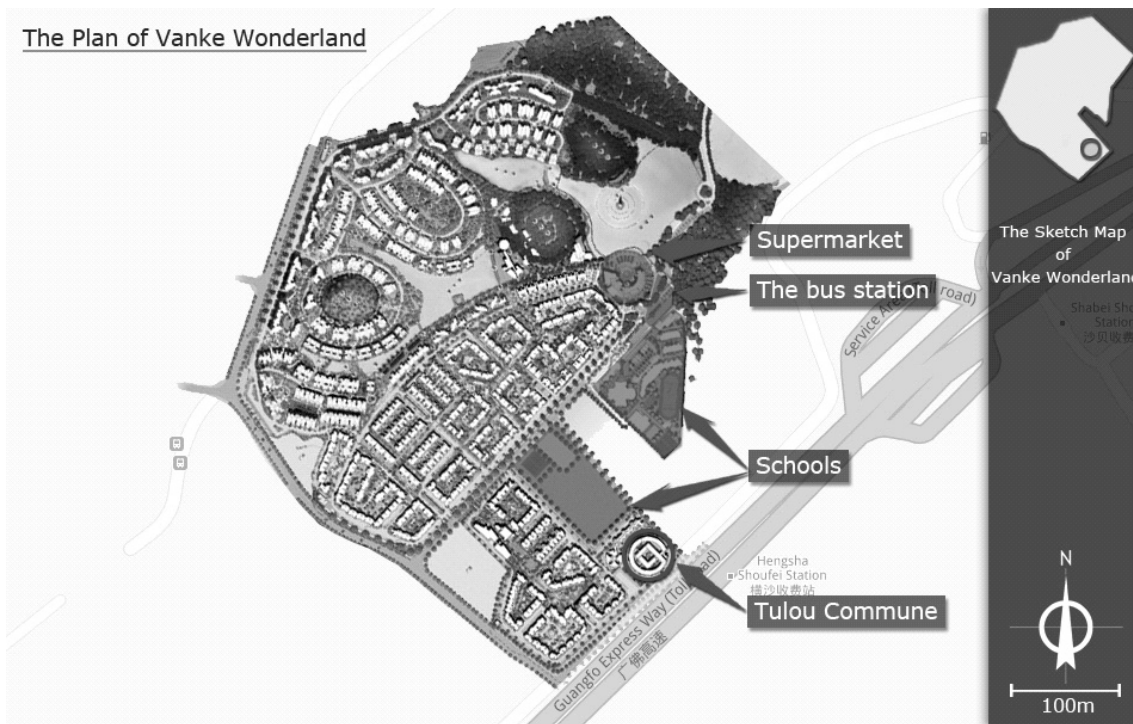


Fig. 4. The Commune and Its Neighborhood—The Garden  
Source: VANKE internal record

social interaction internally and externally, both in terms of quality and quantity. The building's special form promotes community harmony, but excludes itself from the vicinity. The original Hakka Tulou model defends against outside threats, but some point out the architecture excludes itself from the surrounding area. The special design appears to label the low-cost migrants (Interview with residents in the neighborhoods nearby, 22-24, July, 2009). Whether the influence of the design is beneficial or not has yet to be determined. But one thing is certain—the unusual appearance raises the interest of the public, and it might help to change the conventional impression of migrants' agglomeration.

### 8.3 Spatial Embeddedness

One of the principles for designing the Commune was “to fill the urban void” (Liu & Yan, 2007). The spatial flexibility of the building could embed itself in the urban fabric. The advantage of villages-in-the-city is their central location, but they are not compatible with the surrounding urban landscape. Does the Commune have such a geographical advantage, and does it improve on it? The designers believe that the model's compact design and flexible scale enable it to “colonize” an urban area, which means the possibility of locating near the central district (Liu & Yan, 2007). The designers also promote the Commune as a substitute for the old low-space-ratio buildings in villages-in-the-city (Liu & Yan, 2007). It could be a win-win strategy. For one thing, villages-in-the-city would become an attractive option. For another, the higher density building requires less land to accommodate the same number of tenants. This model could house migrants in a prime location while avoiding displacement. This scenario, however, might fail to take into account social and political resistance.

It is worth explaining why the Commune is located at the border of Guangzhou and Foshan. According to the designers at Urbanus, they were first assigned “to study the possibility of using a similar prototype to accommodate low income housing in Shenzhen” (Liu & Yan, 2007: 4) because VANKE planned to build it next to a high-profile gated community (Liu & Yan, 2007: 6). Residents in that community “were strongly against it” with “demonstration after demonstration” (Liu & Yan, 2007: 6), so VANKE worried the value of their asset would decline and the prestige of the community would be undermined. As a result, VANKE had to find another location, “somewhere remote” from the city center (Liu & Yan, 2007: 6). The current location was then selected, and fortunately residents of the Garden seemed much more tolerant of the project. This outcome in fact saved VANKE money on the experiment. Because the current location is at the fringe of an urban area, the land price was much lower than the original prime location in Shenzhen. The whole story vividly illustrates that the promotion of the model depends not just on its feasibility, but social factors as well.

As for political power, the government might not be happy to

support locating the Commune in the central business district where the price of space is very high. Since the premium on land leases constitutes a considerable portion of local government's total revenue, it is doubtful that the government will be willing to allow the Commune to occupy the prime location (Yeh & Wu, 1998: 220). After all, the rationale for reconstructing villages-in-the-city in the inner city is precisely to release the value of land in the central area. Besides, it remains a question whether the Commune can mix with business under the regime of “city for profit” (adapted from Brenner et al., 2009), influenced by economic globalization.

The current arrangement of the Commune still has much to recommend it. It partly reduces long commuting in that tenants can work in the commodity housing estates. There are shops, hair salons, and restaurants in the Garden, so 10% of the tenants work in the neighborhood. Not only does it avoid the job-housing mismatch and accordingly long-distance commuting, it also fosters mutual understanding between these tenants and customers in the neighborhood. In this sense, the model demonstrates that it can be embedded and replicated in the urban fabric.

### 8.4 The Hidden Mechanism

The comparison of the Commune and villages-in-the-city can be summarized as follows:

- a) The demographic composition of the Commune is only a small fraction of the migrant population. Compared to villages-in-the-city, tenants in the Commune are relatively homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status. This might have resulted from the voluntary gathering of this subgroup whose needs are met by the Commune. An implicit filtration mechanism controlled by the company is also possible.
- b) Socially, internal interaction is better in the Commune than in villages-in-the-city. This is partly due to the homogeneity of the tenants. The staff also deserves credit for their role as social catalysts. Initially, external relations with the high-income community around the Commune were not very good. But after one year, the tense relationship began to relax. It is still too early to judge the success or failure of this social experiment.
- c) Spatially, the model unexpectedly solves the working-living mismatch to some extent by housing migrants close to different socioeconomic groups. However, whether it can be embedded in the city center, like villages-in-the-city, is doubtful because of sociopolitical resistance and the high land premium.

An analysis of the underlying mechanisms of similarities and differences begins by exploring the reasons for difference. The main cause is private sector intervention. All the differences bear the imprint of the private sector, driven by the utility maximization.

zation principle. This refers not only to maximum economic gain but also social benefit. VANKE has been recognized as a pioneer in cooperation and social responsibility, which ground the official explanation of the Commune's origins. At the same time, the fact the VANKE is a free enterprise should never be ignored. Thus, it still attempts to strike a balance between the two goals. The homogeneity of good tenants reduces risk of late payment. More important, it improves social integration, which facilitates self-management and decreases on-site staff, allowing the entrepreneur to explore spatial embedding and colonization of the city with this model. All of which achieves an economy of scale—thereby increasing the profit.

Apart from the differences, these two geographically distant arrangements present three similarities:

The concentration of migrants in both cases might be caused by the tendency of migrants to live together for mutual help, as well as the inertia of conglomerating as newcomers (Urbanus, 2008). Nonetheless, the formation processes are different in the two cases. The Commune is designed for the migrants and only for the migrants, which explicitly guides the concentration. The renting procedure is implicitly in favor of a specific group of migrants. For villages-in-the-city, the rental housing is open to all. It ends up being a migrants' ghetto. The gathering process is without intention or purpose. Outsiders passively exclude residents of villages-in-the-city, whereas tenants voluntarily gather in the Commune where the homogeneity generates a sense of community that excludes the outside.

Second, both housing arrangements integrate their residents. The Commune guides the tenants to build social capital. This improves the overall environment and atmosphere, and management cost is reduced. The Commune is integrated in completely residential terms. Villages-in-the-city, on the other hand, organize their heterogeneous insiders by totalizing the area. This means the area is self-contained—people live there, work there, and even enjoy their leisure time there (adopted from Marcuse, 1997). The different mechanisms further confirm that villages-in-the-city are excluded, while the Commune are exclusionary.

Third, the Commune achieves a living-working match by being located next to a commodity housing estate, so tenants can find job opportunities in the neighborhood. The situation in villages-in-the-city is different. A prime location enables migrants to live near where they work at a low cost and avoid commuting time and fees. As analyzed before, it is a question whether the Commune can occupy the inner city location as villages-in-the-city have.

To sum up, the intervention of the private sector is responsible for most of the differences between the Commune and villages-in-the-city. Still, there are some similarities. The different mechanisms drive the two spatially different cases toward some degree of convergence phenomenally. The similarities and differences reflect the problems the Commune resolves as well as new problems arising from this new experiment.

## 9. Conclusion

The nature of the Commune was first identified as a private initiative triggered by cooperative social responsibility and the large unmet housing demand. The project has merits in its own right. The foremost is as a valuable and decent attempt to devise a model to accommodate low-income migrants. However, it also raises the problem of economic viability and sustainability. It has been argued that such a project cannot be replicated economically. First, it needs a large lump-sum investment to get started. The high threshold might render the Commune a one-time project if no alternative financing strategy is possible. Second, the uncertainty of revenue and the unavoidable daily expenditures undermines the sustainability of the project. Third, the exit strategy is still unclear. Perhaps the government will take it over when the private sector encounters too much social resistance and the burden is too high to bear. More support from the government could improve the situation. However, it might further complicate the problem since the role of government in creating such a niche product is unclear in the Commune.

The comparison of the Commune and villages-in-the-city described the possible shift from “excluded ghetto” to “exclusionary enclave”. Demographically, the Commune only accommodates a small portion of migrants who are rather homogeneous. Overall, tenants in the Commune on average are better off relative to those in the villages-in-the-city. Socially, it successfully promotes internal socialization and a sense of community by simulating the traditional Hakka Tulou. In terms of social interaction with the surrounding high-income community, geographical proximity facilitates communication among people to some extent. Because of VANKE's managers, the tense relationship between the two groups has become more and more harmonious. Spatially, the Commune solves the mismatch of working-living space by locating it close to the general commodity houses where migrants can find some jobs. However, sociopolitical forces can affect the success of embedding the Commune model. In the final part of this section, a possible explanation of the differences and similarities was provided and summarized.

By and large, the Commune can be described as an enclave of culture, attitude, and management. To link the Commune and villages-in-the-city together, the role played by the private sector can be substantial. From villages-in-the-city to the Commune, the heterogeneity is replaced by relative homogeneity, although it still presents a concentration of migrants. The Commune mitigates the exclusivity of the villages-in-the-city, but a new form of exclusion is forming—the social interaction in the Commune is better internally than externally. From villages-in-the-city to the Commune, location moves from inner city to outer city, although the Commune is seeking a way to make housing in prime locations available to vulnerable social groups. The sociocultural context and the institutional legacy have had considerable influence on the shift. Some enabled the new model

to achieve unexpected success, while others hindered it. Therefore, this initiative is just a start and some lessons could be gained from the Commune for future improvement. First, more attention shall be paid on the physical design to better promote social cohesion among tenants. For instance, it is good practice to have expansive provision of public space to facilitate communication. Second, location shall be cautiously selected to cope with the urban spatial development. Third, public sector should reify the general guideline to ensure the implication of the enabling framework on low-cost housing provision.

Finally, the significance of the project should be recapped. This pilot project not only draws attention from private sector on the new possibility, but also offers valuable information to the public sector on how to better facilitate market agents in providing low-cost housing. While this innovative project opens up a perspective for the private sector to see low-cost housing, the case is not without limitation. The Commune is still the only case in the region due to various reasons (for example, the large amount of investment and limited support from public sector). There is still a long way to go to be a good model for low-cost housing. More meaningful improvement calls for cooperation of all related actors in the housing sector to properly accommodate migrants in rapidly urbanizing cities.

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