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**Artistic Stratification: Rural Land  
Transformation of Creative Clusters by the  
Neoliberal-Authoritarian State in  
Songzhuang, China**

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## Abstract

This research investigates the role of state behind urbanization process of rural creative cluster in China. Creative city research usually discussed the neoliberal logic of intercity competition, or how the state limited the artistic autonomy, but the role of the state in space reconfiguration are ignored. The state-led artistic urbanization process involves complex state logic beyond purely neoliberal. To highlight the role of the state, this paper proposed a new concept of 'statification' to explain the economic, political and social dimensions of state-led rural land transformation. Songzhuang Art Village, the biggest artists' enclave in Beijing China, is used as a case study in this research. Several qualitative methods are used to collect empirical data, including interviews, focus groups, observation, online news reports, and policy analysis. The findings are (1) informality is the key neighborhood feature to attract statification process; (2) crafting urban discourse of illegal construction, establishing state-authorized developing enterprises, and fluidly definition of illegal construction are major state economic strategies to produce space for the affluent and to benefit from rural land transformation; (3) urban planning are used as state instruments to govern rural areas; (4) sharing state resources with artists elites and artistic censorship are significant state strategies to co-opt the artists' community. By analyzing the empirical data, I conclude that the state logic behind statification can also be discussed in three dimensions: economically the state grab land benefits from informal land users in rural land transformation, and politically planning is used as a strategy to encompass place into state's hegemonic power space, and socially the state-society relationship are actively reshaped by the state to permeate its ideology into individual life.

**Keywords:** creative city, informality, neoliberalism and authoritarianism, statification, rural land transformation, Songzhuang, China

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

Creative city strategies are employed by city governments worldwide as a low-cost instrument for local economic development and gentrification, which upgrades the urban landscape and replaces lower-income residents with higher socio-economic status middle class (Clark, 2005; Florida et al., 2008; Florida, 2005). Scholars have investigated the neoliberal logic behind state-led creative cities, and they criticized the outcomes of neoliberal creative policies as gentrification and commercialization, from the lens of social inequality and organic culture development (Chou, 2012; Peck, 2005). When turning to the creative city policy in Asia, especially discussing the state with authoritarianism features in which the state permeates individual and society by embedding norms and beliefs into social lives (Kirscht & Dillehay, 2014), such as in China and Singapore, the facilitative role of the state in gentrification and branding global cities, and the repressive role of the state in restricting artistic autonomy are highlighted by scholars (Chang, 2019; Currier, 2008; Luger, 2019; McCarthy & Wang, 2016; Ren & Sun, 2012; Wang, 2019; Zhang, 2014).

Discussions on the link between authoritarianism and creative city strategies mainly focus on the urban locale, as urban industrial factories are a common type of incubator for creative clusters. However, such partial focus ignores the particularity of creative clusters in rural areas and thus cannot fully reflect the Chinese context, in which a much more complex development process is involved due to the limitation on rural land marketing. China's special land system—the urban-rural dual land system—sets strict restrictions on rural land trading to protect agriculture sustainability and farmers' land ownership (Wang & Tan, 2020). However, informal land trade in rural areas is fairly common due to the cheap land price (Liu & Greene, 2022). As a result, developing rural land is much more complex for the state because such informality must be deconstructed to justify its action first.

The entanglement of informality and neoliberal-authoritarian governance in rural creative clusters involves a broader political economy process. This thesis argues that the traditional definition of gentrification cannot fully explain the process of state-led promotion of creative clusters in the Chinese context, and I aim to propose a new concept of 'statification' that provides a more fitting analytical framework to explain the development of rural creative clusters in China.

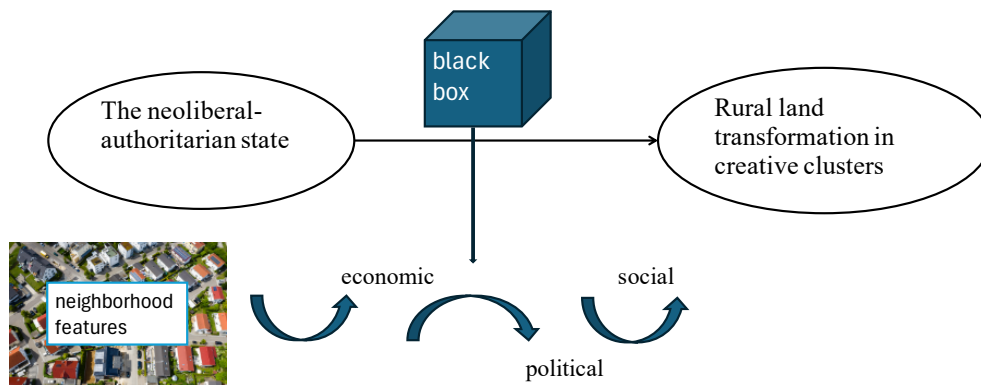


Figure 1-1 Research questions

I propose ‘statification’ as the new vocabulary to describe the rural land transformation in China. Statification refers to the neighborhood changes brought by the intrusion of the state and combines the words ‘state’ as the root and ‘-fication’ as the suffix. It is derived from the word "gentrification," which denotes the neighborhood changes brought about by the intrusion of gentlemen such as middle-class residents, and uses the suffix "-fication" to denote the changes brought by them.

The role of the state is under the spotlight when using ‘statification’. Compared with gentrification, which generally focuses on the economic process such as displacement of low-income households (Cocola-Gant, 2019), statification not only analyzes the economic dimension but also the political and social process, in which re-territorialization and state-society relationship will be examined (Figure 1-1).

The main research question is: *How does statification explain the black box process in which the neoliberal-authoritarian state achieves rural land transformation in art villages in China?* The sub-questions are: (1) What features put rural neighborhoods under the spotlight of statification? (2) What strategies does the state employ to achieve its economic goals? (3) What are the economic consequences of rural land transformation? (4) What strategies does the state use to achieve its political and social goals? And (5) what are the consequences?

This paper chooses Songzhuang art enclave in China as the case study to explain the process and consequences of statification. Songzhuang art enclave, the biggest rural creative cluster in China, is undergoing a dramatic neighborhood change as the state intervenes. Previously in Songzhuang, artists as tenants and villagers as landowners enjoyed a relatively high autonomy on informal land use, and this rural society is to some extent isolated from the state machine. However, as Songzhuang art enclave becomes famous and attracts more and more artists and visitors, the state steps in and generates dramatic

neighborhood changes politically, socially, and economically.

Several qualitative methods were used for the data collection, including observation, policy analysis, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. By talking with locals and learning about state policies from governments, a panoramic analysis of the statification process and consequences in Songzhuang art village is displayed. The key research findings are discussed from economic, political, and social aspects: the economic process of statification is producing space for the affluent. The political process encompasses the informal but profitable place into the state's hegemonic power space, and the social process tightens the loose society-state ties and re-controls the society ideologically.

Statification as a new concept is significant for two reasons. First, using statification highlights the urge to fully understand the role of the state in space reconfiguration. Such an analytical framework fits well with strong states that can powerfully reorganize space into its own interests. Second, statification can be applied to not only rural creative clusters in China but also to any other informal space under neoliberal-authoritarian regime. The informal space is usually under the highest and best land use, and has a relatively loose tie with the state, while the neoliberal-authoritarian state has natural motives to promote economic development and permeate its influence into social life. Thus, the concept of statification can be widely applied in both Eastern and Western contexts.

To understand the statification of art enclaves, it is necessary to review the literature on creative city strategy. Chapter 2 reviewed the urban policy of creative cities and critically reflected on its dangerous outcomes under neoliberalism and authoritarianism; the dual land system in China is also reviewed. Chapter 3 proposed the theoretical framework of statification, the key concept in this thesis. Chapter 4 introduced the methodology of this research. Chapter 5 answered the first sub-question about features that put certain neighborhood under the spotlight of statification. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 answered the second and third sub-questions about economic dimension, while Chapter 8 answered the last two sub-questions about political and social dimension of statification. Chapter 9 gave the conclusion and reflection of the whole research.

## **Chapter 2 Artistic Gentrification of Creative Cities and Urbanizing Rural Land**

### **2.1 Creative Cities and Critiques**

The extraordinary role of Cultural Creative Industries (CCIs) and creativity in their economic performance in regenerating urban area has attracted academic attention. Florida (2008; 2005) and Landry (2012) proposed creative class theory and creative cities theory, positively arguing the function of creativity as driving force of urban economic growth and providing guidelines on how urban government can attract the creative class. Florida's '3-Ts theory' including talent, tolerance and technology believes that talent is the fundamental element for economic growth and tolerance is the magnet to talent (Florida et al., 2008). Thus, Florida developed a creative index to measure a city's 'quality of place' and its performance in attracting talents, with metrics such as cultural amenities, authentic historic buildings, walkable streets, low threshold for accessing social resources, gentrified and mixed-use residential areas.

Art enclaves such as SOHO in New York successfully acted as a driving force for urban regeneration (Scott, 2006). Creativity is soon regarded as panacea by city governments worldwide including Amsterdam, London, Singapore, Memphis to stimulate local development (Peck, 2005). However, Florida's creative theory has been subjected to broad academic challenges. Researchers have contended that Florida has confounded statistical correlation with causal association, thereby casting doubt on his claim that creativity fosters economic success (Glaeser, 2005; Krätke, 2012; Malanga, 2004).

The instrumental understanding of creativity was questioned by other Florida critics as neoliberalism, where scholars are critical about how creativity led to gentrification and commodification of art space through the lens of social inequality (He, 2019; Peck, 2005; Scott, 2006). For example, Peck (2005) contended that Florida's creative class guideline was quite neoliberal as it commodifies art as competitive assets based on its economic value, and it also fits into the neoliberal agenda of gentrification, place marketing, interurban competition, and middle-class consumption. He (2019) criticized the nature of creative policies as contributing value to the economy rather than encouraging cultural creativity itself. The following section will further discuss why creative cities under neoliberalism can be dangerous.

### **2.2 Dangerous Neoliberal Creative Cities: Artistic Gentrification and Commercialization**



Neoliberalism holds that everything can be freely traded in markets by reducing it to a single, monetary value (Radin, 2001). Such a worldview is retorted upon by Polanyi, who rejected the assumption of the free market and advocated for attention to social and political influence on the market. Not everything can be seen as commodities, such as land or labor, since they are neither necessarily for sale nor produced artificially (Polanyi, 1944). Zhang (2017) argued that art was definitely not a pure commodity, and treating art fully under the logic of market will jeopardize art's sustainable production (Zhang, 2017). Now the process of art commercialization and gentrification is confirming such danger.

### ***Commercialization of art and space***

Commodifying art and art space has become an economic promotion tool for city governments (Peck, 2005). However, the logic of commodification is toxic to sustainable art development. On the one hand, over-commodification may curb art production and dilute the art orientation of art space. As McCarthy and Wang (2016) argued, the excessive commercialization of Beijing 798 Art Zone caused damage to its cultural capital and further pushed away artists and tourists who like authenticity. Over-commercialization under neoliberalism commodifies art and artistic space just for economic gain, rather than caring for art growth itself (He, 2019; Peck, 2005).

On the other hand, evaluating art solely based on its economic value will marginalize low-commercialized artists. Only artworks that are created by famous artists will be valued as financial instruments by investors. As a result, the art market is concentrated on a few celebrities, whose artworks are labeled with exorbitant price tags, driving up the prices of artworks while crowding out the market space for the remaining majority of grassroots artists (Zhang, 2017).

The 'income pyramid' in the artists' community exacerbates inequality and impoverishes grassroots artists. Renowned artists occupied the top stratum of the pyramid, while the majority of artists struggled to make ends meet. Such logic of commodification of art transforms the art market into a 'rich man's market' (ibid).

### ***Artistic gentrification***

Gentrification is a process of replacing marginal working-class areas with middle-class residential use, of investing capital into declining urban city centers (Cocola-Gant, 2019; Glass, 1964; Zukin, 2021). Clark (2005) thus proposed a new definition to generalize the broader process of gentrification: two changes are involved in gentrification no matter when and where, land users transition to higher socio-economic status users and the built environment transforming to upgrading landscape through reinvestment.

Gentrification is embedded in leveraging land value and it aims to narrow the rent gap. The rent gap theory is created by Neil Smith to explain why some neighborhoods are profitable to gentrify while others are not: uneven

geographical development devalorizes some neighborhoods under its potential highest land value, so it is profitable to reinvest in devalorized neighborhoods to achieve its highest and best land price and narrow the rent gap (Smith, 1987). Drawing on Harvey (1981)'s 'spatial-temporal fix' theory, which regards constructing and deconstructing urban built environment as a tool for capital accumulation by reaching potential highest and best land use through land market, He (2019) coined 'creative spatial-temporal fix' to reveal how creative policies resulted in artistic gentrification featured with narrowing rent gap and escalating property value.

Artistic gentrification generally results in spatial reconfiguration and upgrading urban land value (Ren & Sun, 2012; Zukin, 2021). Creative urban images such as artistic streets with boutiques and coffee shops have attracted gentrified consumption patterns, bringing new economic dynamics to devalued urban areas. However, previous tenants —mainly artists who produced such artistic space— are not capable of affording the rising rents and choose to move out while middle-class gentlemen move in (Currier, 2008). Neoliberalism interprets the rising land prices as a price signal of regional attractiveness, but Peck (2005) sharply criticized neoliberal creative policies as motivated by strong economic desire in essence.

While considerable focus is directed toward the influence of capital within art enclaves, it is crucial not to disregard the role of the state in shaping spatial reconfigurations. The next section will discuss how the neoliberal-authoritarian state facilitates creative city strategies.

## **2.3 Creative Cities in China: The Role of the Neoliberal-Authoritarian State**

Creative Cultural Industrials (CCIs) have become a popular vocabulary in public policy in Asian cities, and creativity has been used as place branding tools to improve city images and economic competition since the twenty-first-century (Cartier, 2012; He & Wang, 2019; Luger, 2019; Oakes, 2019; Ooi, 2010, 2009).

The art market in China has undergone a huge transition from being fully controlled by the state towards embracing market mechanisms (Gao, 2011; Zhang, 2017). The economic value and cultural signifying role of creative industries is gradually acknowledged by the Chinese government. Creative city policy is used as a state-building instrument to improve city images. The tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005) issued by China's national state first mentioned the concept of 'China's Characteristic Cultural Industries', which revealed the central government's ambition to improve China's 'soft power' (Keane, 2009, 2013; Zhang, 2014). The eleventh Five-Year Plan issued in 2006 announced the

first bunch of officially named creative clusters and key creative projects with national special funds. Songzhuang Art Cluster, the case of this thesis, was included (Chou, 2012). Local governments also applied creative city policy to strategically relocate themselves on the domestic and global consumption pattern, including M50, Red Town, and Tianzifang in Shanghai(He, 2019; Ning & Chang, 2022; J. Wang, 2009)

However, the motivation of state participation in creative cities in China is questioned by scholars. Researchers revealed the economic intention of state participation (He, 2019; Wang, 2009). Ren and Sun (2022) regarded politicizing art clusters as spatial strategy to profit from land development. Keane (2013) argued that in China creative city strategy has been employed by the government to justify real estate speculation. On the other hand, scholars also noticed the state's intention in controlling art production not crossing the political 'red line' and limiting artistic autonomy (Chang, 2019; Ren & Sun, 2012; Zhang, 2014).

Zhang (2017) interpreted such motivation of state participation as neoliberalism and authoritarianism. Neoliberalism on art results in 'art for money's sake' (ibid, p15). Authoritarian states are defined as trying to subordinate all or many aspects of society to the authority of government (Edelman, 1995). Authoritarianism indicates the relationship between individual, society and the state, which is a restriction on individuals' social lives by influencing their belief through exposure to social structure and norms that embodied authoritarian beliefs(Kirscht & Dillehay, 2014).

This thesis employs the term 'neoliberal-authoritarian state' to generalize the governance model that combines neoliberalism and authoritarianism, arguing that this concept aptly captures the process and outcome of state participation in art clusters in China. The neoliberal practices concentrate on how the state leverage land value on art space. Besides, the authoritarianism is reflected in how the state controls art production and shapes society-state relationships in art communities that are previously drifting away from the state governance.

The toxic results of neoliberalism and authoritarianism on creative clusters are indicated by scholars. From the lens of cultural growth, scholars contend that art does not gain real growth through neoliberal-authoritarian state participation (Chang, 2019; Chou, 2012; He & Wang, 2019; Liang & Wang, 2020; O'Connor & Xin, 2006; Wang, 2019). As Chou (2012) found, state participation with economic intentions was not to support grassroots artistic networks, which he referred to as "organic development of creative culture" (p198), but to construct a state-sponsored development route in art cluster. Besides, the authoritarian state will not cease censoring art production(Chang, 2019; Zhang, 2017; Zhang, 2014).

From the lens of social inequality, the involvement of the state accelerates commercialization and gentrification in creative cities. The state's interest and

political concern are usually over organic creative culture development and the local community (Fung & Erni, 2013). Liu and Greene (2022) summarized the process of gentrifying art clusters in China: artists' bottom-up regeneration activities improve the place's amenities and attractiveness, and make it possible to increase rent level and land value. Then governmental involvement in politicizing art space finally results in gentrification where developers and land owners cooperate in benefiting from land value, and in displacement where low-income artists have to move out.

In conclusion, although gentrification and commercialization are ubiquitous results for art clusters, state logic in China is more powerful than market logic to push forward such outcomes. The state's neoliberal motivation in leveraging land value tangled with power led to a more unstoppable and faster process of gentrification and commercialization. In addition, authoritarian norms can reshape the society-state relationship between the art community and state governance.

## **2.4 Urbanizing Rural Land in China: Rural Land**

### **Transformation under Dual Land System**

#### ***The dual land system and informal rural land market***

The dual land system in China has long been controversial due to the inefficiency of land marketization and the inequality of income between urban residents and rural villagers (Wang & Tan, 2020). This system divides the land into dual-market tracks: urban land is owned by the urban state, and land property rights are divided into ownership and land use rights. This separation allows land use rights to be transacted between the state and land users. Meanwhile, rural land is owned collectively by villagers, but it can neither be used for nonagricultural use to generate revenue, nor be traded between collective and non-collective members (ibid). In conclusion, the dual land system put strict legal limitations on villagers' rights to marketize their land.

However, this institutional constraint on rural land trading became inefficient in the 1980s, when the fast-paced urbanization process started, the rural population declined, the amount of unused rural land increased, and the need for affordable urban space rose. Unused rural land had great economic value in renting to migrant workers. Nonetheless, due to regulatory restrictions on rural land transfers, there is a significant land value variation when compared to urban land.

This, however, has given birth to informal rural land markets, where villagers illegally transacted rural land with urban land users. Such informal rural land markets were common in urban frontier of developed regions in China, such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Beijing. Around 10%-40% of rural homesteads in

Beijing were illegally transferred (Wu et al., 2018). The spontaneous informal land market was widespread.

***The relaxation of rural land regulation: from land grabbing to land transformation***

To accommodate the demand for more affordable urban space, the China state progressively relaxed its land policy by two phases: Phase I, land grabbing in 2004; and Phase II, land transformation in 2013.

Land grabbing started in 2004. The central government issued an Article that allowed city governments to expropriate rural land for public interests (Wang & Tan, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Since then, the sole formal channel to develop rural land was expropriation by city governments, and thus the local state monopolized rural land business. However, this monopoly caused inequality because the local state can urbanize rural land at a low price by setting a low compensation standard for land-losing villagers, and then sell land at a higher price to urban land users (ibid).

In response to the inequality caused by monopoly, rural land transformation was introduced in 2013. The Chinese national government introduced a new land policy that allowed the marketization of rural collectively owned land to be traded directly between villagers and urban land users in some pilot areas. This 'direct transfer' mode allowed villagers to negotiate land prices with urban land users and protected their rights in incrementally gaining from rural land revenues because rural land remained a collectively owned status rather than state-owned.

Rural land transformation turned villagers into rentier groups and created a new benefit-sharing pattern among the state, capital, and villagers. This renders it different from land grabbing because the local state and capital are not seen as invaders and local residents are not victims, all of whom can benefit from urbanizing rural land. However, the state will have a natural motive to encompass profitable land and employ strategies to benefit as much as possible from rural land transformation. These strategies may demise villagers' interests in land transformation as a zero-sum game. This issue brings up the research questions of how the state urbanizes rural land and what the effects of state action are on the economy, politics, and social spheres.

## **2.5 Rural Area as New Incubator Space for Creative**

### **Activities**

The significant role of the urban frontier in reconfiguring urban processes in the Global South has been recognized by scholars as a 'peripheral turn' (Zhao, 2022). This perspective brings up the rationale for combining creative city strategies and rural land transformation. Zhao (2022) labels it as 'urbanizing land question' and highlights the need to analyze the political economy of land

in (re-)terrorization and reconfiguration of the state, rather than merely seeing land as object and commodity.

In fact, rural areas near developed regions in China have already become incubator space for creative activities (Liu & Greene, 2022; Liu et al., 2013). Differing from the Western context where creative workers occupy abandoned factories in urban areas, art enclaves in China are forming in rural areas featuring looser jurisdictional regulation from the urban state (Ren & Sun, 2012). For example, Liu et al (2013) identified over ten art villages located in urban fringe of Beijing, including Songzhuang Art Village, Heiqiao Art Zone, 008 International Art Zone, and so on.

Why do rural areas become incubators for creative activities? Liu and Greene (2022) argued that the informality feature of rural areas played a significant role in attracting creative talents. The low rent and easy accessibility of rural villages are friendly to non-standardized production mode, such as creative practitioners. The flexibility and autonomy over land use brought by informality are also valued by creative workers. As for the worry about the illegal status of the property, Sun and Ho (2020) found that migrant land users may feel perfectly safe even without formal rights.

The perspectives of 'peripheral turn' and 'urbanizing land question', combined with the fact that rural areas become incubator spaces for creative activities in China, have urged the need to analyze creative city strategies under the rural land transformation regime in China. This calls back the task of the main research question, which is analyzing the black box process in which the state transforms the art village in conducting creative city strategies. Besides, the informality feature of the urban fringe facilitates creative activities; on the other hand, how the state deals with informality in state-led urbanizing rural land is also a concern.

## **2.6 Reflection on Existing Literature**

Although gentrification has been widely used in creative city studies, the combination of rural land transformation and creative city strategies in the Chinese context involves a broader political economy process. This process includes re-terrorization, land transformation, and reshaping state-society relationships. Thus, gentrification lacks explanatory power in decoding the economic, political, and social spheres of creative city strategies, and also not emphasizes the role of the state in spatial reconfiguration.

The role of the state should be emphasized in analyzing rural creative clusters in China. Gentrification is embedded in a market-led neoliberal perspective. It is believed that gentrification is initiated by private developers, who are motivated by the need of wealthier residents' need for urban lifestyles and thus reinvest and upgrade the built environment (Cocola-Gant, 2019; Hackworth,

2002). However, the role of the state and the local political-economic forces, which are crucial in the global south context, are under-conceptualized in gentrification studies (Lees et al., 2022; Valle, 2021). The state is not a passive role subordinating to capital force but is a complex social relation and has autonomy (Jessop, 1990). Thus, gentrification lacks explanatory power for authoritarian motivations and ignores the autonomous role of the state behind neighborhood change.

Besides, gentrification cannot fully explain the process of rural neighborhood change in China, which is stimulated by the urbanization of rural land. The basic step of rural land transformation involves a complex local process, including power dynamics, shift in crucial stakeholders, and social effects, and thus is beyond the standard gentrification trajectory.

The informality is another element that distinguishes rural art enclaves from merely gentrification analysis because gentrification often assumes formal procedures among developers, property owners, and the state. Existing literature partially explains why informality is attractive to creative activities but does not explain how informality is unfolded into state-led urbanizing rural land. It is crucial to investigate the folding of informality and state-led rural transformation.

Since gentrification focuses more on the role of private sectors and market forces, I want to emphasize the role of the state in reconfiguring rural communities into urban processes and its consequent economic, political, and social effects, so I use 'statification' to highlight how state intervene and execute its influence over neighborhoods. The next section will discuss the theoretical framework of statification.

## Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework of Statification: State-led Rual Land Transformation in China

### 3.1 Justification for New Vocabulary in China Context

Although planetary gentrification indicates that gentrification has become a global strategy of rent extraction with myriad forms (Lees et al., 2016, 2022), many scholars remain critical of the over-use of gentrification. For example, Uitermark et al (2007) argued in the Dutch context no rent extraction motives were found when the state invested in the most remote and disadvantaged neighborhoods. The real intention of state-led gentrification, they found, was to civilize and control the disadvantaged neighborhoods where nuisances appeared.

New vocabulary for urban study is necessary. The dominant concepts in urban study largely originated from the Western context such as gentrification, suburbanization, and informal urbanization, but postcolonial urban scholars rejected uncritical use, and they believed every city should be treated as an 'ordinary city' as the source of urban theory rather than unimportant cases that differ from the Western context (Robinson, 2013; Roy, 2009a; Schmid et al., 2018).

Schmid et al (2018) advocated for new vocabulary depicting the urbanization process. They noticed that few vocabularies for urban theory are based on the urbanization process, most of which explain urban forms or urban territories with the assumption that the urbanization process happened in stable and fixed containers like urban territories. However, the dynamics of the urbanization process were crucial in a way it changed urban forms and urban territories. On the other hand, concepts that try to be universal have lost their precision and ignored heterogeneity between local experiences. Thus, nuanced theories and new vocabulary are needed for future urban study.

Catching the importance of language and translation in the global dialogue of urban experience, Zhao (2020) questioned the uncritical stretching use of 'suburban' in heterogeneous urban contexts with the reason of 'frozen mental habits' of hegemonic use of English narratives and valued vernacular terms representing for urban frontier, for example, the Chinese vocabulary *Jiehebu* showed the need to retain local vocabulary as this word highlighted the fluidity feature of the urban frontier in China. Finally, Zhao proposed the 'creative interpretation' approach which allowed distance between different languages to pursue more productive global dialogues.

Responding to the call for new vocabulary in urban studies and more productive global dialogues, I try to fulfill the task of coining new vocabulary that better



catches the Chinese context. Although some ‘universal’ theories still have explanatory power, local specificity will always reveal the asymmetric relation between a place and a broader totality of urban theory. Scholars must resist the temptation to reduce singular urban experiences to universal theories and ignore the local context (Oakes, 2019).

### 3.2 Statification: Economic, Political, and Social Process of Neighborhood Change

The vocabulary statification is drawn from gentrification. Applying the suffix ‘-ification’, ‘statification’ refers to the neighborhood change brought by the invasion of the state. The type of neighborhood, the stakeholders involved, the motives, the process, and the outcomes of statification will all be included in the theoretical framework of statification. To better understand the relationship between gentrification and statification, a table is provided to compare the two concepts (Table 3-1).

Table 3-1 Comparison between gentrification and statification

	<b>Gentrification</b>	<b>Statification</b>
<b>Neighborhoods type</b>	Profitable neighborhoods with wide rent gap	Profitable neighborhoods with rent gap, informality, low degree of congruence between topographical and topological state space
<b>Actors and stakeholders</b>	Private sector as leading role, government, locals	Local state, quasi-state enterprises, landowners, informal tenants, and limited participation of private developers.
<b>Motivations</b>	Neoliberalism	Neoliberalism and authoritarianism
<b>Process and outcome</b>	Economic	Economic, political and social

#### ***The type of neighborhood: the degree of congruence between topographical and topological state space, and popular urbanism***

This section answers the first sub-question about what features can put neighborhood under statification. The first feature is ‘territory effects’, which reveal the tension between hegemony and plurality of each territory (Brighenti, 2010: 53; Harvey, 2012). Such neighborhoods enjoy autonomy in informal land use which may be against the legal arrangement of the state, and the societal relationship embedded in the space is isolated from the state.

Inspired by Lefebvre’s spatial triad, Brighenti’s territory effects, and Galster’s ‘the degree of the presence of the neighborhood’, all of which challenged the take-for-granted state space (Brighenti, 2010; Galster, 2001; Lefebvre, 1991), I use the degree of congruence between topographical and topological state space

to identify neighborhoods with territory effects.

Conventional topographical description of power believes that power is located in the given territory, and the state space is a fixed, ordered hierarchy with clear mapping. In contrast, topological thinking of state space recognizes territorial complexity and argues territory is not pre-given but is produced by political construction, and can be manipulated and modified (Brenner & Elden, 2009). Topological space is about the power of reach and fluid relations (Ghertner, 2017; Harvey, 2012). To put it simply, the topographical space is legally under state sovereignty but practically could conflict with it, while the topological space is practically under the state power of reach. When the degree of congruence between topographical and topological state space is low, the neighborhood is experiencing tension between state hegemony and territorial plurality, or with territory effects.

Another feature is popular urbanism. Popular urbanism is a process in which without the state offering affordable housing, communities spontaneously produce informal housing that does not have tenure security, good infrastructure, and amenities (Schmid et al., 2018). Popular urbanism's informality foretells that these neighborhoods are under the threats of formal forces, and statification is the process of conducting such threats.

I argue that rural society in China is the typical neighborhood with territory effects where the degree of congruence between topographical and topological state space is low. Rural villages in China legally self-govern themselves and villagers own rural land, thus villages are isolated from mainstream urban governance and enjoy limited autonomy in land use. Meanwhile, the popular urbanism process in Chinese rural villages produces informal spaces. When villagers spontaneously rent cheap housing to urban workers and construct urban infrastructure to support urban lifestyles, popular urbanism starts in rural communities, and informal space is produced.

#### ***The actors and motives of statification***

The main initiators of statification are the state and quasi-state enterprises. Although neighborhoods with informality are widespread in China, not all of them are going through statification. The state's motives in launching statification in neighborhoods are closely linked to its neoliberal-authoritarian nature. Usually, the state tends to intervene in profitable spaces, or spaces that are regarded as political threats. Formalizing the informality is a basic step for statification. In general, the motives for statification are the state's sustained will to extend its power to profitable space and encompass urban differences into its hegemonic power space (Wu & Zhang, 2022; Zhao, 2020a).

#### ***The economic, political, and societal process of statification***

The process of statification has economic, political, and societal aspects. First, the economic process usually upgrades the urban landscape and produces space

for the affluent, accompanied by narrowing rent gap and expanding tax base. The major beneficiary are private developers and the government.

Second, the political process involves reterritorialization, which is a state strategy to encompass plural territory into the power of reach (Allen, 2011). Informal spaces that may conflict with state sovereignty will be reterritorialized into topological state space and increase the degree of congruence between topographical and topological state space. Informality will be deconstructed and formalized by the state, for example, the state may use demolition and construction of infrastructure to acquire and extend hegemonic power space.

Last, the societal aspect of the stratification involves reshaping the society-state relationship in an authoritarian way. The social relationship in neighborhoods that used to be isolated from the hegemonic power space of the state will be reshaped by embedding state apparatus into micro everyday practice. With authoritarian motives, the state conducts topology power, which generates influence at a distance (Allen, 2011), and this process will result in a society governed by the state.

***The outcomes of stratification: economic, political, and social***

The outcomes of stratification can also be examined from economic, political, and social aspects. First, economic outcomes overlap with gentrification, including displacement, a better tax base for local governments, and profits for investors. The state produces neighborhoods catering to the affluent, and the landscape will experience a transformation from informal housing to high-end but homogeneous commercial and residential buildings. The change in landscape and infrastructure is the result of broader political and social network effects (Lieto, 2017).

Second, the political results involve a shift in governance mode. Wu and Zhang (2022) argued the smallest geographical unit in China is neighborhood governance, then urban governance, which features the state's monopoly control of land and extra-economic goals like maintaining social stability. The highest level is regional governance, acting as a tool for state rescaling to fix the vicious competition between individual cities. When a neighborhood is under stratification, its governance mode will change from neighborhood governance—which is characterized by autonomy and dispersed land control—to urban or even regional governance, where the state logic supersedes the local communities.

Thirdly, the social consequences are about evolving everyday life. Under stratification, localized daily life and informal social networks will be altered fundamentally because the neighborhoods are encompassed into state logic, and then homogenized under commodification. Residents experience more stringent state control in daily lives, and the informal social networks they were dependent on will give way to a more formal, bureaucratic structure.

## **Chapter 4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Questions and Approach**

With the popular phenomenon that rural villages act as incubators for creative clusters, statification is proposed as a new concept to explain the rural urbanization process in China. The main research question is: How does statification explain the black box process in which the neoliberal-authoritarian state achieves rural land transformation in art villages in China? The sub-questions are: (1) What features put rural neighborhoods under the spotlight of statification? (2) What strategies does the state employ to achieve its economic goals? (3) What are the economic consequences of rural land transformation? (4) What strategies does the state use to achieve its political and social goals? And (5) what are the consequences?

To answer the research questions, I adopt the qualitative approach and case study to understand the strategies and consequences of state intervention in rural urbanization. Songzhuang Art Village in Beijing, the biggest artists' enclave in China, is used as the case study for this research. Three small cases of land projects are used to demonstrate the economic consequences. I took a meandering route in data collection, and participants' perspectives and actions are considered as the starting points of analysis in this study. My role is to translate and reorganize the data and their perspectives into an academic form of work. The conceptual model of statification below will be applied as a consistent perspective in analyzing the Songzhuang case study.

### **4.2 Conceptual Model: Statification**

To solve the research question, this study proposes statification to explain the black box process of how the neoliberal-authoritarian state achieves rural land transformation in creative clusters. Statification focuses on threefold economic, political, and social dimensions to unveil this process and its consequences, and I develop the conceptual model of statification (Figure 4-1).

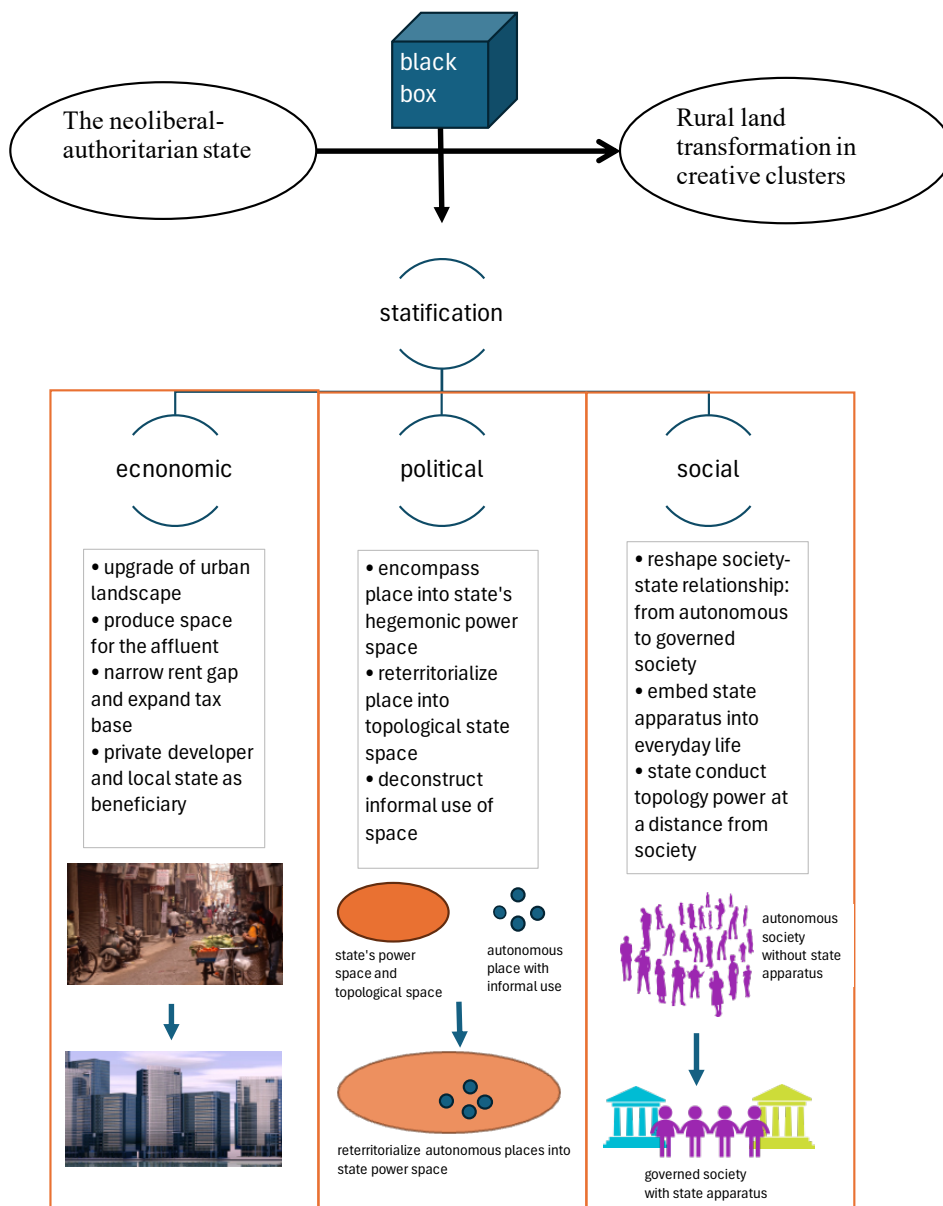


Figure 4-1 Conceptual Model of Statification

The economic process involves landscape upgrading and is accompanied by narrowing the rent gap and expanding the tax base, thus private developers and local states are typical beneficiaries in this process. Second, the political process involves how the state encompasses places with autonomy into its own hegemonic power space, and this process is usually accompanied by the deconstruction of the informal use of space in these places. Lastly, the social process is about the state actively reshaping the society-state relationship following authoritarian governance logic, which has natural motives to permeate state influence into individual social life and realize governmentality by ‘conduct the conduct’ (Foucault, 2007). What the conceptual model does not

unveil is the exact state strategies. The strategies may vary from case to case, but it is meaningful to analyze these strategies to understand modern state's governmentality. The following chapters will reveal the specific state strategies for achieving statification. To explain the conceptual model, methods of data collection and analysis is discussed below.

### **4.3 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

Data is collected through fieldwork, including interviews, observation, focus groups with developers, and governmental meetings; and through second-hand data, including policy documents, news reports, documentaries, online forums.

Interviews and observations were conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of five times one-day visits to Songzhuang Artists Village, on the 29<sup>th</sup> March, the 13<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 23<sup>rd</sup> April in 2023. I visited the galleries, art museums, artists' studios, and the Art Plaza Square to find interviewees and do the observation. The interviewees were chosen randomly including artists, local villagers, and business owners. Each interview lasted for 20 to 60 minutes.

The second phase was a five-day fieldwork from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> August 2023, and I moved to Songzhuang Artists Village to better conduct interviews and observations. I booked interviews in advance with artists that I knew from the first fieldwork phase and online social media. Besides, I booked interviews with a local developer to acquire more information about the planning and land projects. Also, I visited twice the office of the local village committee to grab the chance for an interview and finally finished it, but when I visited a township governmental department, I was refused. Besides, I revisited the ongoing land projects to observe their progress.

Governmental meetings and focus groups with developers were organized with the help of professors from the School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China. Five governmental meetings and focus groups were conducted on the 20<sup>th</sup> March, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> April, the 11<sup>th</sup> May, and the 1<sup>st</sup> August in 2023. Governments of various scales were involved, including the Tongzhou District Government, Songzhuang Town Government, and developers, and each meeting lasted for 60 to 90 minutes.

Second-hand data are found online and other academic work. By visiting the governmental website, searching planning documents, watching the Songzhuang documentaries and governmental official interview videos, googling news reports about land projects and art activities in Songzhuang, and visiting social media like art forums and WeChat media platform, I gathered information about the history of state policy and planning, artists' nostalgia emotion towards authentic art enclaves, and the informal housing dismantles.

Fieldwork, together with second-hand data, provides useful information for analyzing the motives, strategies, and consequences of state intervention. I

transcribed every interview into text, filed them in the order of interview time and occupation, and promised the interviewees to delete the original tape record.

Also, I wrote fieldwork diaries and took field photos to record the features of the space, such as the photos of land projects, the art paintings drawn by artists, the fancy newly built restaurants, and hotels, and the art studios of artists. Inserting photos in fieldwork diaries helped me to demonstrate my observations and feelings.

In addition, I created an Excel table to file the news report information, such as the main contents, the media publisher, the time of publishing, and the website link. Besides, I reorganized the most relative data into one document with more than 18,000 words. I listed some land projects in Songzhuang and chose three projects as small cases to demonstrate economic consequences in Chapter 5.

Lastly, by linking case information with various theories and other academic research, I realized how complex the whole urbanization process is and gradually came to an analytical framework: stratification, by using which I hope to encompass various related theories and perspectives into my analysis.

In total, I conducted 21 times interviews with artists, business owners, villagers, and previous factory workers in Songzhuang, and 6 times interviews with governmental staff and developers. The interviewee list is provided in Table 4-1 below.

Table 4-1 List of Interviewees

Interview number	Interviewees	Date of interview
G01	Anonymous G01, governmental staff	2023-03-20 2023-04-03
G02	Anonymous G02, governmental staff	2023-08-01
G03	Anonymous G03, governmental staff	2023-05-10
G04	Anonymous G04, governmental staff	2023-08-11
D01	Anonymous D01, developer	2023-04-20
D02	Anonymous D02, developer	2023-08-01
D03	Anonymous D03, tourism developer	2023-04-23
D04	Anonymous D04, rental property owner	2023-04-20
D05	Anonymous D05, developer	2023-08-10
A01	Anonymous A01, artists, media practitioner	2023-03-29
A02	Anonymous A02, artists	2023-03-29
A03	Anonymous A03, artists	2023-08-10

A04	Anonymous A04, Sculptor, artists	2023-03-29
A05	Anonymous A05, artists, Employee at Sculpture company	2023-04-15
A06	Anonymous A06, artists, oil painting, sculpture	2023-04-15
A07	Anonymous A07, artists: oil painting	2023-04-20
A08	Anonymous A08, Artist: music	2023-04-20
A09	Anonymous A09, Artist: sculpture	2023-04-20
A10	Anonymous A10, Artists: sculpture	2023-04-20
A11	Anonymous A11, Art Curator	2023-04-20
A12	Anonymous A12, Artist	2023-08-09
B01	Anonymous B01, Worker at Art Museum	2023-04-13
B02	Anonymous B02, Business owner of gallery	2023-04-13
B03	Anonymous B03, Staff at a rental property Company	2023-04-15
B04	Anonymous B04, Owner of rental property	2023-08-10
B05	Anonymous B05, Owner of restaurant	2023-04-15
B06	Anonymous B06, Porcelain dealer	2023-04-23
B07	Anonymous B07, Ceram artwork dealer	2023-08-09
B08	Anonymous B08, Calligraphic artists	2023-08-09
R01	Anonymous R01, residents, Old factory worker	2023-08-09
V01	Anonymous V01, villagers	2023-08-11

\*G=government, D=developer, A=artists, B=art-related business, R=residents, V=villagers.

## 4.4 Ethical Considerations

I acted as an outsider during data collection in Songzhuang. I don't have personal bonds in this place, and this makes it harder for me to gather data because some interviewees lack trust and only provide very general information.

To protect participants' privacy, I applied anonymous informants and disguised settings as shown in Table 4-1. In some interviews, I taped the whole discussion to transcribe it more precisely, but I promised the interviewees that I would delete the original tape record after finishing the transcription. I did delete all the tape, and sometimes I deleted the tape on the spot. Some participants strongly refused to be taped, so I made notes with paper and pencil, or on my laptop. This method is harder to record important points, so I finished the



transcription on the day to avoid blurry memory as much as possible.

The confidentiality form was not applied in this research. I did most of the artists' interviews alone and without a reference letter, so the precondition for artists to accept my interviews was that they were willing to have an informal talk with me. Confidentiality forms may undermine their willingness for informal talks and they tend to treat it as a formal, serious, official interview. As a student, the best I can do is to inform interviewees sufficiently that I am researching neighborhood change in Songzhuang, while keeping our conversation informal and in a casual tone to protect their sense of security.

## Chapter 5 Popular Urbanism and Informal Use of Space in Songzhuang

### 5.1 The Spontaneous Formation of the Art Enclave in Xiaopu Village

The famous Songzhuang art enclave was first spontaneously formed in Xiaopu Village, which is located in the east of Beijing, and its initial name was Xiaopu Artist Village (Figure 5-1). Around the 1980s, freelance artists who lived upon the free art market rather than state sponsor emerged in China. As inter-city migration control was gradually relaxed, artists flew into Yuanmingyuan in Beijing because of its cheap rent, proximity to urban areas and top universities, and liberal environment. These artists held informal exhibitions to reflect on social and political issues, which attracted media, art students, and foreign dealers. However, the Haidian District government saw Yuanmingyuan artists as a threat and forced them to leave. A group of artists, including famous Lijun Fang and Minjun Yue, moved into Xiaopu village, which is twenty-five kilometers away from Beijing's city center. By 1994, around 200 artists were gathering in Songzhuang (Zhang, 2019).

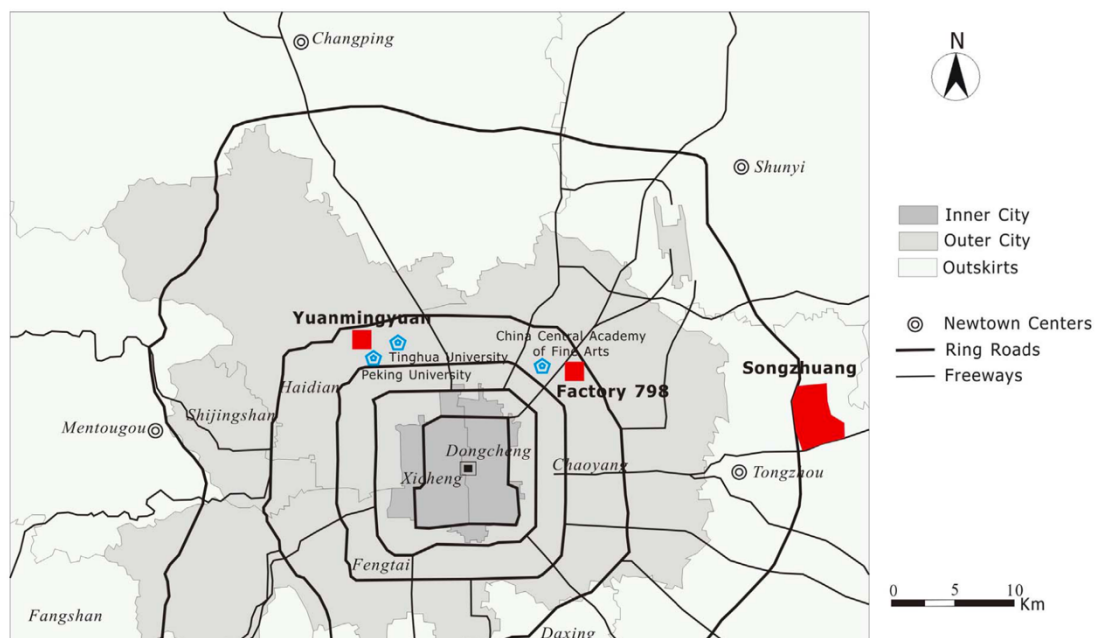


Figure 5-1 Songzhuang Art Village location in Beijing

Source: produced by Zhang with reference to Fig.1. (Zhang, 2019: 4)

For a long time, Xiaopu village was the poorest village in Songzhuang Town due to its barren land. Xiaopu villagers migrated outside for jobs and their land and

house were idle. When artists came to Xiaopu village to find housing, Dabai Cui, the Xiaopu Village Party Secretary, thought renting idle land to artists could increase villagers' income as many artists were willing to pay twice the price, so he welcomed artists and helped them find accommodation. In the 1990s, Cui applied to the higher authorities to convert farmland into construction land to support the artists' surge population (ibid). In the 2000s, Cui encouraged factories to locate in Xiaopu and rented land to factory owners.

Xiaopu Village was an ideal place for artists because of the cheap rent, proximity to Beijing's city center, and the relatively autonomous and loose political environment in rural areas. According to the law, villagers' autonomy is the basic organization form in rural areas. Xiaopu village was isolated politically from urban governance, economically from the local state's urban land development, and socially from the urban state-society relationship as the state apparatus was not invading rural areas. With the support of Cui, artists enjoyed quite a freedom in art creation and the self-construction of their art studios, although these are informal housing.

## **5.2 Why Songzhuang Art Village Attracts the Stratification**

### **Process: The Neighborhood Features**

#### ***Low degree of congruence between topological and topographical space***

Stratification is often implemented in neighborhoods with territory effects, where the degree of congruence between topographical and topological space is low. Such neighborhoods are problematic from the authoritarian perspective because they challenge the state authority and are inconsistent with mainstream governance.

Songzhuang Art Village features a low degree of congruence between topographical and topological space. Located in rural areas, the Xiaopu Village enjoys self-governance and autonomy, also has established its political organization –the Xiaopu Village Committee– to manage daily affairs.

Such political arrangements have nurtured a loose tie between rural society and the urban state. The rural villages are out of the jurisdiction sphere of urban states and thus they are relatively free from the political and social control of the urban state. The loose tie between rural society and the urban state is exactly the reason why the first bunch of artists chose to reside in Xiaopu Village: they relocated to rural areas to avoid the urban state's political control.

The majority of the original artists created contemporary works, which reflected social realities and critiqued political policies. This genre of art is deemed radical. The radical art creation, which was regarded as a political threat to the state, resulted in territory effects. Such features have catalyzed the state to

initiate the stratification process.

### ***Informality***

Songzhuang Art Village is located in the rural areas and urban frontier of Beijing City, and it was a typical rural society before artists came in, where villagers had rural land ownership but limited autonomy on land trade, and self-governance in local affairs. Xiaopu Village is the core place of Art Village.

The in-migration of artists triggered the first urbanization process for Songzhuang, but in the form of popular urbanism as there was mostly spontaneous providing of informal housing without state action. The villagers as landlords rented their idle rooms, yards, or even individual homestead land to artists to gain rental income, and artists constructed self-built houses. Besides, some rural factory owners, who rented collectively owned rural land from the Xiaopu Village Committee, also converted the factory buildings into art studios and rented them to artists. Take the north part of Xiaopu Village as an example, there are now around 300 artists' self-built studios, 40 privately-run art spaces including galleries and art museums, and 4 factory-converted art spaces, each of which can accommodate hundreds of artists (*interviewee D02*).

However, the self-built art studios and factory-converted art studios have no legal property rights according to land policy. Rural land cannot be developed for non-agricultural use if without arduous administrative procedures. Higher government levels were required to approve the development of rural land for urban use, but at that time, these authorities lacked a dedicated department to handle this kind of business, thus rural villages could only conduct informal land transactions between villagers, factory owners, and artists<sup>1</sup>. Thus, these art studios were informal housing and were labeled as 'small property rights' in China.

Aside from informal housing, Songzhuang's art market is also permeated with informality. Friends' recommendations make up 40% of the artist's sales in Songzhuang, followed by online live streaming (34%) and exhibitions (21%). Prominent painters invite private collectors to their friends so they can purchase their paintings in person (*interviewee G01*). This kind of informal art market mechanism makes tax collection difficult for the local government.

The informality as a critical neighborhood feature in Songzhuang reflects what I call 'a low degree of congruence between topological and topographical space'. The presence of the state is relatively weak, which allows room for informal use of space that may conflict with land policy. However, the state does not necessarily intervene with every neighborhood that features informality. Only

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<sup>1</sup> Shan Wu, Jia Song (2013, Dec 28) Songzhuang Demolishes Small Property Houses: Artists and Villagers Resist Demolition. *Southern Metropolis Daily*. <http://art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=77722&forumId=8>

when such informal space becomes profitable, the state have the motivation to start the statification.

As Songzhuang became famous for its ideal artistic atmosphere and potential market opportunities, more and more artists wanted to settle down here. Property prices and rent levels were rising dramatically as result: The daily rental cost per square meter was between 0.3 and 0.4 CNY in 2010; however, by 2022, the cost had quadrupled to between 1.2 and 1.5 CNY (*interviewee G01*). Besides, some profitable art industries were also located in Songzhuang, such as private art schools, which rented large-scale land to build school infrastructures, including teaching buildings, canteens, and dormitories. Many art students studied in those private art schools (*interviewee G02, D01*).

Informality and profitable space together induce the statification. Nevertheless, the manner of state intervention appears to vary over time, with earlier stages appearing more supportive in the growth of organic art and later stages being more neoliberal and authoritative. The next section will discuss the state intervention in different phases.

### 5.3 State intervention in different phases

Local governments of different scalar gradually intervened in the development of Songzhuang art enclave, including Songzhuang Town government, which is the higher authority of Xiaopu village, and Tongzhou District government, which is the higher authority of Songzhuang Town government (see Fig 5-2).

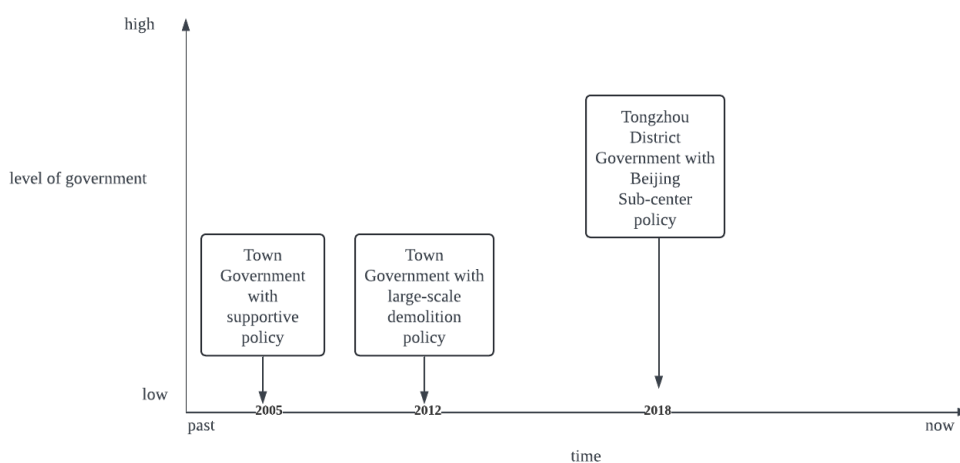


Figure 5-2 state intervention in different phases. Source: Author.

The pursuit of Village Committee, which is at the bottom level of governance, was simply to increase rental income by renting rural land to artists and factory owners. One of the staff in Xiaopu Village Committee indicated in the interview: "*For the Xiaopu Village Committee and the villagers, it didn't matter what*

*was built on the ground as long as they could benefit from land revenues."* Thus, neither the landowners (Xiaopu village collective) nor the users (artists and industries) cared about the informal and illegal status of buildings.

However, for higher level governments, the pursuit was more complex. Jiebao Hu, the leader of the Songzhuang Town government, noticed the value and potential of the Songzhuang art enclave. In 2005, Hu proposed 'Culture Creating City' as a guideline and adopted supportive policies towards art activities and rural land use. Loose regulation was implemented for the buildings on the rural land. The town government promoted organic creative culture development and the number of artists in Songzhuang increased to around 5,000 in the 2010s (*Interviewee G01*).

After Hu was out of office in 2011, the successor town leader Li overturned Hu's supportive and relaxed policies. Li wanted to introduce land projects with high tax revenues<sup>2</sup>, then large-scale demolition of illegal properties was conducted. In December 2013, Songzhuang experienced large-scale demolition of 'illegal properties' for the first time in twenty years<sup>3</sup>. Many art studios were dismantled, and artists were displaced. Forced demolition was resisted by both artists and villagers. With Li's action, rent prices soared and tax base projects came in, such as universities like Beijing Film Academy.

Besides, the famous 'Songzhuang Art Festival' which was organized spontaneously by artists for the past seven years was replaced by the government-held 'Songzhuang Cultural Industry Exhibition, China', where the artwork of Songzhuang artists had little exposure. As the famous art curator Xianting Li wrote in *Songzhuang Nightmare*: "Culture becomes an advertisement for attracting real estate projects." An anonymous artist also echoed: "Songzhuang was dead after 2012, no rebuttal." Due to displacement and incapacity to pay the rents, lots of artists left Songzhuang, and the declining number of artists was recognized as a problem by the government.

In 2018, the urban planning plan of Tongzhou District as Beijing Municipal Administrative Center (BMAC) was approved by the central government. Songzhuang was then under the spotlight of urban planning since it belonged to the administrative border of BMAC. Before BMAC, there was no real planning in Songzhuang. The BMAC planning reterritorialized rural areas near Tongzhou District into urban administrative state by embedding state apparatus into rural society, and encompassed autonomous rural politics into

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<sup>2</sup> CCTV (2013, Nov 17) A Town's Dream of Cultural Industry-CCTV.com Interviews Li, Party Secretary of Songzhuang Town, Tongzhou District, Beijing. CCTV. <https://news.cctv.com/2013/11/17/VIDE1384696440158593.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> Shan Wu, Jia Song (2013, Dec 28) Songzhuang Demolishes Small Property Houses: Artists and Villagers Resist Demolition. *Southern Metropolis Daily*. <http://art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=77722&forumId=8>

urban state's hegemonic power space, which was the reproduction of social relations and the state itself (Jessop, 1990; Schmid et al., 2018). Informal land use in rural areas would be regulated under urban governance, thus demolishing informal properties was continued by the present town government.

The state intervention in Songzhuang by different level governments saw a process in which artists were displaced by demolition, the rent gap was narrowed by the introduction of high-profit land projects, and state control over rural art community was enhanced. I will then investigate the process of artistic neighborhood change and strategies employed by the state.

## **Chapter 6 State Strategies of Economic Stratification: How the State Terminates Informal Use of Rural Space and Profits from Rural Land Transformation**

To achieve rural land transformation, the Songzhuang Town Government must finish primary land development first, which requires formalizing the informal use of rural land by demolishing existing illegal properties. However, these properties involve a large number of landowners like villagers, and tenants like artists and factory owners, which means the compensation for those groups will be enormous.

Besides, some industries using informal buildings are quite profitable and provide a large tax base for the local state. For example, the private art schools in Songzhuang have each contributed more than 4 million tax every year for Songzhuang Town Government, such as Huaqing Art Education School and Zhouda Art Education School (*Interviewee D05*). What strategies have been employed by the local government to reduce the costs of primary land development, preserve existing high-profit industries, and maximize its profits from urbanizing rural land?

### **6.1 Crafting Urban Discourse, then Problematizing**

In order to justify governmental intervention in the neighborhood, the first step of the state is crafting intelligible knowledge, and then problematizing them, so that the improvable deficiencies where the government can intervene can be identified (Ghertner, 2010).

In Songzhuang case, the intelligible knowledge is produced in the form of urban discourse, which is to define existing art studios, factory-converted studios, and art-related industry buildings as 'illegal constructions' (*Weijian* in Chinese). I argue that defining them as 'illegal constructions' is a process of creating discourse to produce social knowledge, not a process of rectifying all the legal violation.

The local state has been identifying the illegal properties since 2012, asserting that they lacked formal administrative registration. Beijing Municipal Government issued special action of 'rectifying illegal land use and construction' in 2013<sup>4</sup>. Since then, 'illegal construction' has become an official discourse that supported Songzhuang local state's deconstruction action. The discourse 'illegal

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<sup>4</sup> (2022), Beijing launched special action to control illegal land use and illegal construction in 2013. Xinhua News Agency. [http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-07/10/c\\_1128820402.html](http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-07/10/c_1128820402.html)



constructions' appeared countless times on government websites and online news, and such discourse made the state action more legitimate. On its website, Songzhuang local state even published the quantity of illegal areas that are demolished annually as a sign of completing significant administrative duties. For example, it reports: *"In 2018, a total of 3.54 million square meters of illegal construction was demolished... the quantity ranks high in all districts in Beijing."*<sup>5</sup>

By employing the 'illegal construction' discourse, the local state gains legitimacy in dismantling artists' studios and other buildings, sometimes in a very forced way. *"The local state told you one day that your house was illegal construction, and you must leave within a very limited time, like three days. If you do not leave in due, then all of your belongings will be deconstructed with your house, including your art paintings. What if you are not at home that three days? (Interviewee A05)"* The quantity of lawsuits against governmental forced demolition also saw an increase. For example, the local state demolished Liu's house in 2017, who did not leave within due days after the announcement, then Liu sued the local state. The People's Court, after hearing the case, confirmed that the forced demolition carried out by Songzhuang Town Government was unlawful. *(Interviewee A07)*

Besides, 'illegal construction' discourse dismissed the local state's responsibility to compensate artists or other informal land users. The local state only needs to compensate land-losing villagers because they are legal landowners. As an officer from Songzhuang Town Government said in the interview: *"We do not need to negotiate with artists about compensation for demolition, and we just need to inform them when we will demolish, for example, after three days we will dismantle this illegal construction, and artists who live in there should leave before the day."* *(Interviewee G01)*

Informal land users will get no compensation due to the illegal status of their properties. *"I spent more than one million CNY to decorate my art studio. But if this place is demolished, I won't get a penny of compensation."* *(Interviewee A06)*

In summary, the urban discourse of 'illegal constructions' problematizes the legal status of existing buildings and thus extends the state's power to intervene. Meanwhile, this discourse excluded informal land users from compensation, regardless of the large investment by artists.

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<sup>5</sup> (2020, 22 July), Songzhuang Town Urban Management, *Party History Office of the District Committee*. <https://www.bjtz.gov.cn/bjtz/fzx/202007/1308596.shtml>

## **6.2 Establishing Town-Owned Enterprises to Grab Land**

### **Benefits from Villages**

In the popular urbanism period of Songzhuang, the direct land beneficiaries are the Village Committee and villagers as landowners, and informal rental property developers. The Village Committee and villagers could directly benefit from rural land development by renting rural land and to artists or factory owners despite the informality and legal violation. Informal rental property developers rented studios to artists or businesses and can collect rental income.

This informal network of land business naturally excludes the state from the game. To grab land benefits from the village and informal developers, the state strategy is to establish special Town-Owned Enterprises (TOEs), which take over the management of rural land to fulfill the local state's economic pursuits over land value.

Songzhuang Town Government established three authorized companies (see Figure 6-1): Songzhuang Town Industrial and Agricultural Trade Company (STIAT), which is 100% owned by Songzhuang Town Government; Beijing Songzhuang Investment Development Co., Ltd (BSID), which receives external investment from STIAT and are responsible for solving informal land use issues, undertaking the township outsourcing such as creating urban planning, and attracting investors in Songzhuang rural land development. BSID largely upholds the will of the local government even if it plays by the laws of the market to exist.

Lastly, one rural land joint venture was established, Art Garden Joint Venture (AGJV). A basic step for rural land marketization is to establish a rural land joint venture enterprise, where all the villages invest collectively owned rural land as capital. The enterprise acts as the landowner to transact rural land with land users. Villages can develop rural land with the intermediate rural land joint venture and share dividends with the enterprise.

All the villages in Songzhuang (35 villages in total) pooled their collectively owned rural land as shares to invest in AGJV, with each village accounting for a different percentage of shares. As landowner, AGJV collaborates with other financiers to launch a new project firm that specializes in carrying out rural land projects, including residential and commercial development. AGJV and financiers split the revenue from land projects, usually at least 30% for AGJV as demanded by AGVJ.

However, Songzhuang Town Government employed BSID to break the land benefit distribution pattern and regained its monopoly power over rural land transformation. Despite having its own formal entity, AGJV is practically run by BSID. BSID thereby has the real power in deciding land development, and

AGJV represent for the interest of BSID rather than villages.

Besides, BSID also manipulates the land bidding process by acting as both the bidder and tenderer. AGJV is the token land bidder as it is controlled by BSID, and the project firm is the token tenderer as it is also under the management of BSID and financiers. By manipulating the land bidding, the cost of land transaction prices can be reduced to attract more investors and developers.

Thus, BSID is core player and executor in Songzhuang rural land development, which connects rural land ownership on the villages' side and rural land development on the governmental and financier's sides, while STIAT functions by providing governmental investment for BSID and AGJV shares the same personnel with BSID.

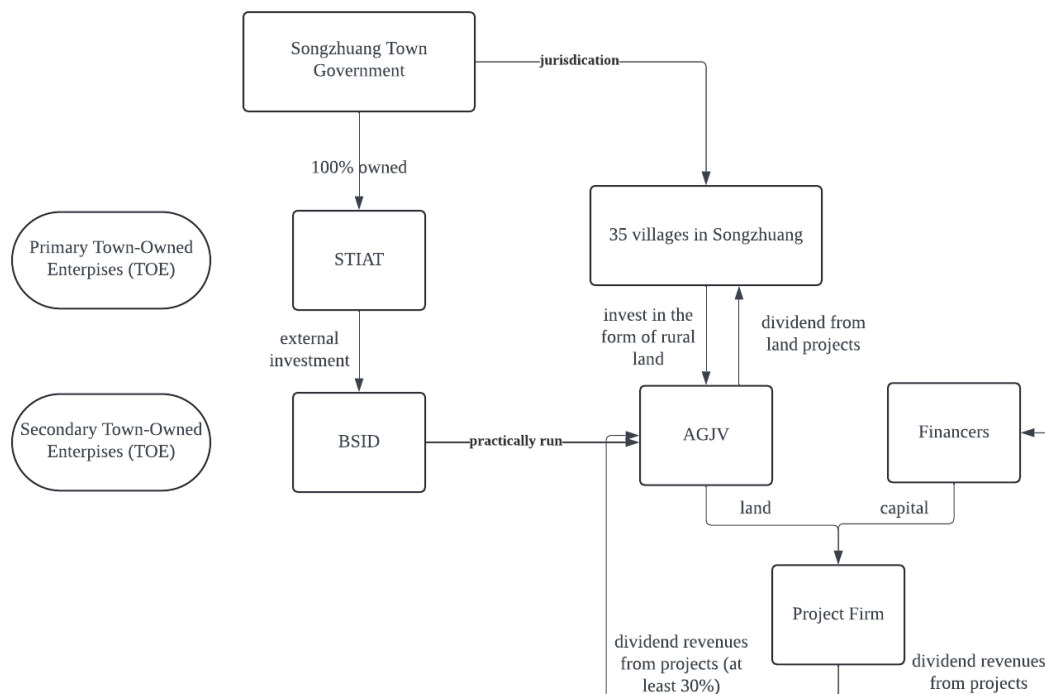


Figure 6-1 Relations between TOEs, rural land joint venture, and external financiers

Under this organizational arrangement, all the land revenues, including land lease, land bidding, and profits from land projects, go straight to BSID, while the villages only indirectly receive dividends from BSID. This supports my opinion that statification restructures the state's location in the stakeholder's patterns by squeezing out informal developers and subordinating villages.

### 6.3 Fluid definition of informality: preserving high-profit informal land uses

Despite the state-produced urban discourse of 'illegal constructions', the state ironically preserved some informal buildings and related businesses. The local state's demolition action is quite controversial, as people argue that even the governmental buildings are also fitted into the definition of 'illegal construction', as these buildings also lack enough administrative construction licenses<sup>6</sup>.

The reason the local government seeks to retain some informal properties is that some highly profitable industries also reside in informal buildings, and some properties have been home to many artists, so demolishing them would immediately result in social unrest and the eviction of artists. A developer said, "*We want to keep the art education industries despite their illegal status because these high-profit industries are the tax base for the local government.*" (Interviewee D05)

To keep these informal properties and the related businesses while also justifying the state's demolition elsewhere, these informal properties must be fluidly identified and flexibly dealt with. As the informal attributes of properties are defined by rural land leases that do not meet the requirement of administrative procedures, the informal properties can be formalized by legal land lease procedures. The strategy is to transfer the informal land leases that were contracted between the village and the informal developers, to the authorized development company, or BSID. Previous informal land leases are no longer valid with the replacement, which means the rent receiver transforms from village to BSID.

Fluid defining of informality and the state's breach of its own rules further support my claim that 'illegal constructions' is a process of discourse creation intended to produce social knowledge rather than to correct legal infractions. Many informal properties are retained and can thus continue their businesses. For example, high-profit private art schools such as Huaqing Art Education School and Moonlight Art Studios converted from old factory buildings, are permitted to continue using illegal constructions after being re-contracted with BSID, and artists are permitted to still live in factory-converted art studios and pay rent to BSID (Interviewee D05). In contrast, former informal developers who leased land from the village and collected rent from artists were excluded from the land game under the pretext of informality.

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<sup>6</sup> Shan Wu, Jia Song (2013, Dec 28) Songzhuang Demolishes Small Property Houses: Artists and Villagers Resist Demolition. *Southern Metropolis Daily*. <http://art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=77722&forumId=8>

# Chapter 7 Economic Consequences of Stratification: Who Eats the Most Cake after Rural Land Transformation?

## 7.1 Stakeholder Mapping in Rural Land Transformation

Before the state intervenes in rectifying ‘illegal constructions’, the stakeholders who benefit from informal land development are mainly Village Committee, villagers, and informal developers (Figure 7-1). Village Committee rents out collectively owned rural land to informal developers and charges land rent as collective income. Villagers can gain extra rental income by renting idle individual homesteads to artists and benefiting from dividends of collectively owned rural land renting. Informal developers such as factory owners or real estate investors who constructed art studios and office buildings can also profit from the informal rental property business. As rent rises, Village Committee, villagers, and informal developers can benefit directly from the rising land values.

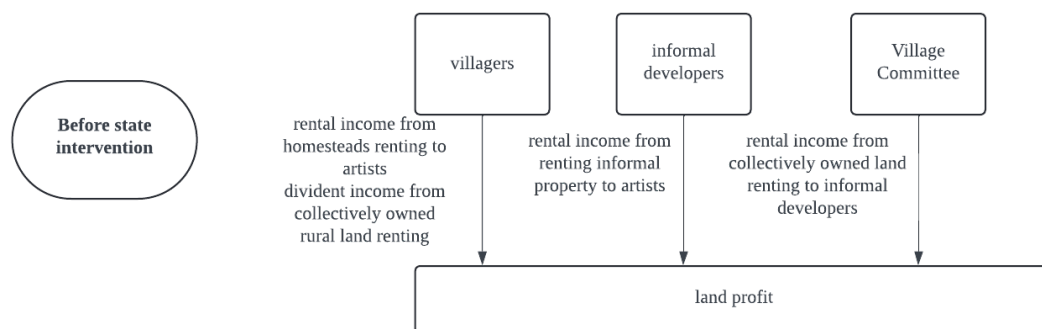


Figure 7-1 Main beneficiaries in rural land business before state intervention

When the state initiates the rural land transformation process in Songzhuang Art Village, new power dynamics are injected into the game of rural land business. The local state demolishes some informal properties and formalizes some under its management, but this action destroys the rental income basis for informal developers. On the other hand, the local state authorizes development company to participate in land development, and the company persuades villages to collaborate in such a way that villages can share the benefits from land projects by investing rural land as capital, and the company is in charge of managing all rural land and developing rural land projects alongside other capital developers.

After the local state intervenes, the stakeholders’ structure also changes. On the

one hand, the state cleans out part of the informal land business through demolition and then introduces new high-profit land projects to expand the tax base. On the other hand, the state grabs part of the land benefits from villagers by encompassing rural land into the hegemonic power of the state (Fig 7-2). The local state strategically acquires monopoly power over rural land transformation.

Besides, the higher authority can also earn a piece of the pie from rural land transformation by charging administrative fees for rural land bidding (Fig 7-2). The Tongzhou District Government intends to charge 20-50% of the rural land transaction prices as administrative fees (*interviewee GO2*), and it hopes to hold the fees in its hands rather than splitting with the Beijing Municipal Government or the villages. As the staff from Tongzhou District Government said in the interview: “*We intend to hold the administrative procedures within district level, not up to the municipal. Besides, the administrative fees could be used to support urban construction on rural land project areas, but it is not compulsory to do so.*” (*interviewee GO2*)

Consequently, the Village Committee no longer receives land rent from informal developers, but has ceded real power over rural land development to the State, and thus can only receive dividends from the State's rural land projects. For the informal developers, they are kicked out of the game due to the informality of their land business (Figure 7-2).

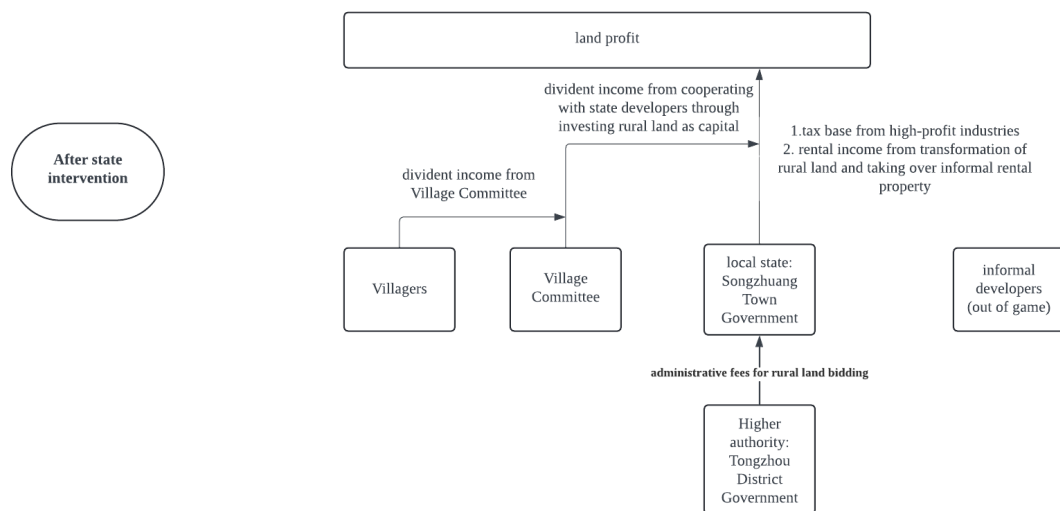


Figure 7-2 The changing structure of stakeholders in rural land business

## 7.2 Who eats the most cake? Three Cases of Rural Land Projects in Songzhuang

Statification restructured the benefit distribution of rural land development by

the state's practice of formalizing the informality. The state grabs the rural land benefits by squeezing out informal developers and subordinating the village, so that the state relocates itself as the primary beneficiary who eats the greatest amount of cake from rural land development in the distribution pattern. To further support this claim, three cases of land projects in Songzhuang are provided to analyze how the state allocates the land "cake" in a way that serves its own neoliberal interest best.

***Impression Street commercial land projects: swindling with game rules***

Impression Street Projects best illustrates how the local government subtly distributes land revenues to maximize its own profits while squeezing out profitable space for the villages (see Figure 7-3, 7-4, 7-5). The way crucial actors develop rural land reflects the nuanced strategy.



Figure 7-3 Landscape before renovation

Source: taken by the author



Figure 7-4 Landscaping renderings of Impression Streets Project (photo provided by Shoukai Group)

Source: Beijing Sub-center Newspaper (2022 Nov 02),

<https://www.bjtz.gov.cn/bjtz/fzx/202211/1621772.shtml>



Figure 7-5 landscape after renovation and development

Source: taken by the author

Under the regular rural land marketization procedure, the villages can gain dividends from the profit generated by land projects (see Figure 7-6). The rural land joint venture cooperates with the capital investor to establish a new project firm to develop rural land. The new project gain land use rights from the rural land joint venture, and the investor provides capital. The capital investor and the rural land joint venture split the profits from developing rural land at a specific ratio, and the villages are also eligible to receive dividends from the venture's income.

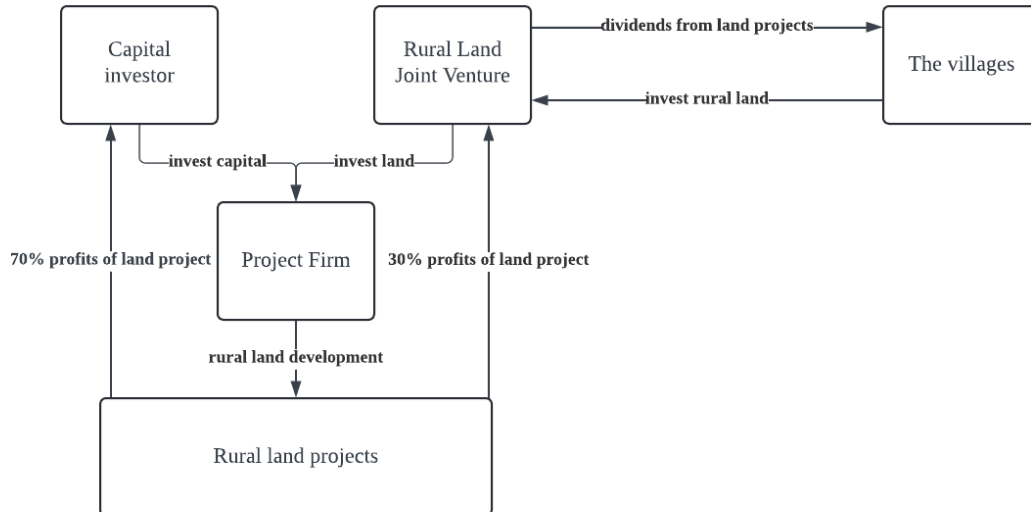


Figure 7-6 Regular procedures of rural land marketization

However, in the Impression Street Project (ISP), the collaborating mode between critical actors is very tricky (see Figure 7-7). The key actors swindle with the game rules to squeeze out the villages and maximize their profits from land projects. The Xiaopu Village borrows ¥850 million to develop the Impression Street project from the Shoukai Group, which is the PRC state-owned real estate development enterprise. The 40-year license to run the ISP



to Shoukai Group is used as repayment of borrowing by Xiaopu Village. Thus, the Xiaopu Village acts as a token developer for developing the ISP while the Shoukai Group is the real developer and operator. Due to its token developer role, the ¥850 million developing fees will not be really given to Xiaopu Village (*Interviewees G02; D02*).

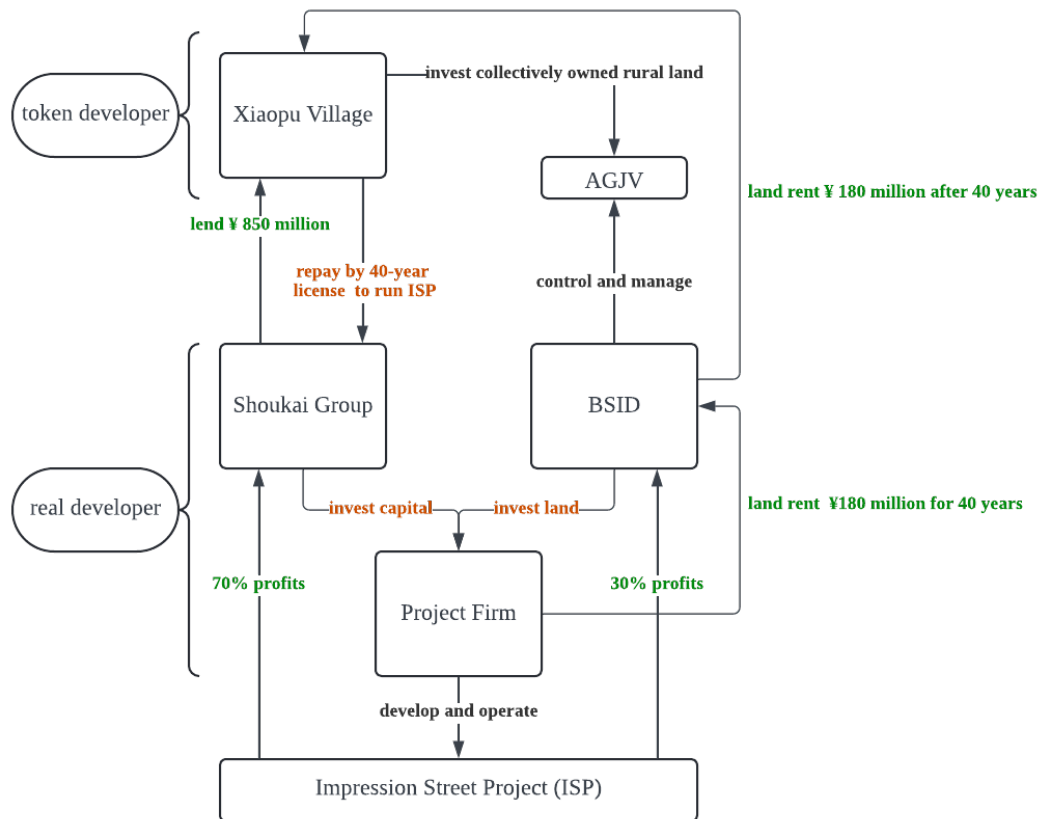


Figure 7-7 The tricky collaborating mode between key actors of Impression Street Project

As the real developer, the Shoukai Group, who provide capital, collaborates with BSID, who provide land, to establish a new project firm. Because the rural land joint venture in Songzhuang, AGJV, was practically under the management of BSID, BSID can be very flexible in land provision. The new project firm leased collectively owned rural land for 40 years from the Xiaopu Village and will pay ¥180 million as land rent after 40 years.

The profits from ISP are split between the Shoukai Group and BSID. However, due to AGJV, the rural land joint venture, does not participate directly in establishing the project firm for developing ISP, AGJV cannot share dividends from project profits. Besides, the Xiaopu Village also cannot share dividends from ISP, although it is the token developer.

Such a tricky arrangement kicked Xiaopu Village out of sharing dividends of rural land projects. Xiaopu Village could have benefited from both land rent and land project dividends if under regular procedures, but the subtle

arrangement only permitted Xiaopu Village to receive ¥180 million land rent for 40 years and the developer and BSID could enjoy all of the profits from the increase in land value in 40 years.

***Young Artists Workshop residential projects: seizing control of lucrative projects***

Statification process facilitates the local state to seize control of lucrative land projects, and the residential development projects Young Artists Workshop (YAW) is a good example. There are a large number of artists who are now living in informal housing in Songzhuang. After the demolition, artists' demand for rental housing will soar, so the developing residential projects has a good economic prospect.

BSID has led the development of the residential project, Young Artists Workshop (YAW) which specifically aims at artists tenants. YAW is sited on Xiaopu Village's collectively owned rural land and will be developed and operated by BSID. YAW project is invested by Tongtou Company, which is a district-owned real estate development enterprise, and by AGJV, the rural land joint venture of Songzhuang. A special project firm is established by Tongtou and AGJV and will receive dividends from this land projects. BSID will act as both the developer and operator of YAW project.

As the local developer and secondary Town-Owned Enterprise, BSID is easily to access to local knowledge and to governmental resources. To better fitting into artists' demand for studios, BSID issued a survey to investigate Songzhuang artists' need for special room types like floor height and lightening. BSID takes advantages of its local advantages and seizes the lucrative housing projects.

***Whole-Village Relocation: producing space for the affluent***

Statification overlaps with gentrification because they both facilitate the production of space for the affluent. This can be illustrated by the Whole-Village Relocation plan in Songzhuang.

Xiaopu Village, as the core geographical area gathering the majority of artists, are facing a Whole-Village Relocation (WVR) plan. In the past popular urbanism period, many artists rented rooms or yards from villagers sited on the individual homestead. The villager's houses were usually very bleak or poorly built, but the artists spontaneously regenerated them through their handiwork. As a Xiaopu villager said in the interview: *"We rent out the yard to artists, and they altered the yard magnificently into a very beautiful space. Next time when we rent out yard, the rent can be significantly higher thanks to artists' regeneration."* (Interviewee, V01)

However, to accommodate more artists in Xiaopu Village, the BSID issued the WVR plan. Xiaopu villagers will be relocated to another village which is 15 km away, but their homestead and house will be retained. BSID will transform all

the previous villagers' houses into rental property projects and regenerate the villagers' houses to increase the rent level. BSID acts as the developer and operator of this project.

WVR plan kicks out the local villagers to make more space for accommodating artists. This plan facilitates the production of space for the affluent. The large in-migration of artists in Xiaopu Village has resulted in the rising land value. The artists' rent and their need for urban lifestyle facilitate local economic development, but the local villagers cannot generate economic growth as they do not need to pay rent and their rural lifestyle fails to stimulate urbanization. The WVR plan reveals the neoliberal logic in maximizing the land benefits.

## Chapter 8 Political and Social Stratification: The Strategies and Consequences

### 8.1 Political Stratification: Planning as the Strategies of Reterritorialization

#### *Strategies: planning as the state tool*

For a long time, the higher authority has been absent from Xiaopu Village governance, and Songzhuang Art Village hardly belongs to the state topological space. As a grass-roots political unit, the Xiaopu Village Committee is not capable enough to conduct projects like urban planning. There has been no real 'planning' that features top-down, knows-it-all, built at all once in Xiaopu Village. For example, from 2005 to 2011, the Songzhuang Town Government only had a general guideline to encourage cultural development, and regulations or policies were flexible to accommodate artists' needs, but no comprehensive land uses were predetermined by planning documents.

Thus, the old urbanism mode is similar to the 'traditional city', which features individual-led, incremental development and organic adjustment (Cozzolino, 2020). Under this urbanism mode, the legal code for developing land is 'prohibition' that only regulates what you cannot do but does not predetermine spatial configurations (ibid).

However, the introduction of national planning has changed the situation. In response to the central government's policy of relieving non-capital functions in Beijing, which was proposed in 2014<sup>7</sup>, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) adopted the Outline of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development Plan, which demands the relocation of Beijing municipal administrative and public institutions to Tongzhou District in 2015. In 2017, the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council approved the Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016-2035), and in 2018, the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council approved the *Detailed Controlling Plan for the Sub-Centre of Beijing City (Block Level)* (2016-2035), which establishes the Sub-Center status of Tongzhou District.

With the national planning, Tongzhou District and its surrounding towns and villages are under the political control of higher authority. The national state led a series of establishment of state organizations in Tongzhou District and its surrounding towns and villages, including the Urban Planning Department.

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<sup>7</sup> 2022, 10<sup>th</sup> July, Beijing: Moving Toward a World-Class Harmonious and Livable City. *Xinhua News*. [http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-07/10/c\\_1128820402.htm](http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-07/10/c_1128820402.htm)

Since then, Songzhuang Art Village has been under the spotlight of urban governance, and real planning has also been introduced into its territorial space.

A series of official planning documents were released, such as the *Detailed Control Plan (Neighborhood Level) for Beijing Urban Sub-Center (2016-2035)*<sup>8</sup>(see Fig 8-1). These planning documents regulate prescriptive rules that demand predetermined goals of comprehensive land use and are under standard planning criteria introduced by the national government. The centrally planned decisions and the standard planning criteria have restricted villagers' and artists' autonomy in rural land use.

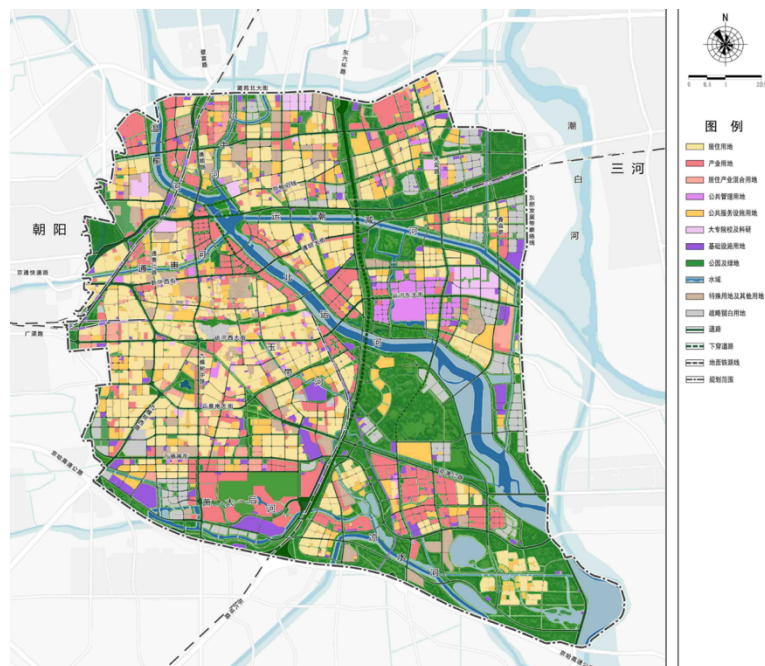


Figure 8-1 Land use planning of Tongzhou District, such as residential use, industrial use, public use, university land use, water, infrastructure, transportation, and so on.

Source: Beijing Municipal Commission of Planning and Natural Source.

Besides, maps and images are also introduced into Xiaopu neighborhood governance, such as land use planning maps and landscaping rendering images of land projects. Planning maps with various themes are produced officially, such as transportation, water and flood-proofing, function zoning, agriculture and ecological land use and so on. Take the function zoning map as an example (Fig 8-2), this map tries to ensure that future industrial development complies with the will of the state and to encourage investors or business owners for their investment. Landscaping rendering images (see Fig 7-4) try to provide attractive and inviting visual presentation of how the predictable future of land projects will look like. The use of maps and images indicates the state's will to

<sup>8</sup> (2022, 6<sup>th</sup> Jan), Detailed Control Plan (Neighborhood Level) for Beijing Urban Sub-Center (2016-2035, *Tongzhou Sub-branch of Beijing Municipal Commission of Planning and Natural Resource*. <https://www.bjtz.gov.cn/bjtz/xxfb/202201/1506725.shtml>

control society by acquiring monopoly use of force and power through planning (Scott, 1998).

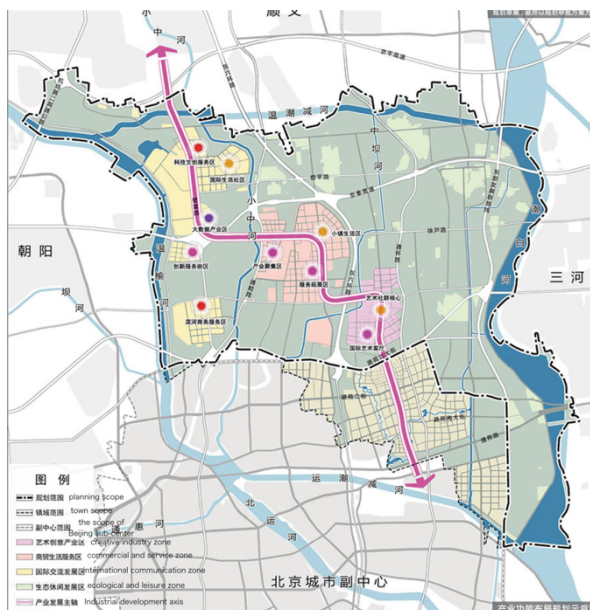


Figure 8-2 The function zoning map of Songzhuang Town

Source: Beijing Municipal Commission of Planning and Natural Source,

<https://yewu.ghzrzyw.beijing.gov.cn/zkdnmsUploadFile/gwzykfile/ueditor/20211231/1476826226705342466.pdf>

**Consequences: changing urbanism mode and reterritorialization**

There are two results of introducing planning into Songzhuang Art Village. First, the urbanization mode has been transformed from the ‘traditional city’ into the ‘modern city’ (Cozzolino, 2020). The ‘traditional city’ urbanism mode features individual-led, incremental development, and individuals can freely develop their landscaping as long as they avoid certain prohibitions codes. After the introduction of planning, the urbanism mode transformed into the ‘modern city’, which features expert-led, predetermined goal, and comprehensive land use planning (ibid). As a result, farmers no longer have as much control over rural land development because they are now under the rule of standard urban planning criteria, and artists are also limited in designing unique art space.

Second, the political statification process has also encompassed Songzhuang Art Village into the state’s own hegemonic power space, and reterritorialize the rural areas into topological state space. Urban planning is a tool used in the reterritorialization strategy, and it functions as a state instrument that advances state interests. Embedding the urban state instrument such as planning into rural society and introducing standard criteria in land development are employed as state strategies to produce topological state space by limiting the autonomy of land use. These strategies successfully result in state rescaling and increase the degree of congruence between topographical and topological space in urban frontiers, which suits the logic of authoritarian governance.

## 8.2 Social Stratification: Co-opt Artists' Community

### *Strategies: co-opt the elites, embed state instruments, and art censorship*

Artists' production activities in Songzhuang are regarded as a threat that is inconsistent with the state's ideology (Zhang, 2019). Social stratification process endeavors to re-control the society that is loosely tied to the state and to subordinate individuals' social life under authoritarian beliefs. To fulfill the aim, the state employs several strategies.

First, the state co-opts the art elites into the state track. Sharing political resources with elite artists helps subordinate elite groups under state control. In China, state-sponsored art organizations, such as Artists' Associations, have provided rich art resources for their artist members. However, artists in state track are believed to do more propaganda work for the state than real art. Lijun Fang, one of the most famous and influential artists in Songzhuang, was inaugurated as Director of the Art Center of the National Painting Academy in 2013. His inauguration was controversial because he used to be a representative of critical contemporary art, but he was finally recruited into the state track. Some art critics thought that recruiting elite artists into state track could neutralize the political threats<sup>9</sup>.

Second, the state embeds state instruments in the art system to control the distribution of art resources. For example, state-sponsored public art education colleges, art associations with administrative rank, and other state-sponsored art organizations can distribute art resources through state instruments. As an interviewee said,

*“If you are a member of a state-sponsored artists' association, you will have lots of chances to exhibit your artworks in various exhibitions. Sometimes I feel like there is always that small group of people who can participate in art museum exhibitions, and they monopolize the exhibiting opportunities. This is not good for young artists' growth, because they lack chances in such an art system.” (Interviewee A09)*

These organizations have the authority to choose whether artists are eligible to participate in national exhibitions, as well as to grant formal identification to artists so that artists can receive state funding, get access to governmental services, and other benefits like pensions. The official identification is directly related to an artist's economic-social status.

Thirdly, the city government regularly conducts artistic censorship of exhibitions in Songzhuang Art Village and has the right to withdraw artworks.

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<sup>9</sup> Yuejun Jiang, (2013 Aug), Is the future of contemporary art in limbo? *Sina News*.  
<https://collection.sina.com.cn/plfx/20130825/0815124927.shtml?from=wap>

As a staff at Songzhuang Art Museum said in the interview: “*I cannot figure out how many governmental departments will conduct artistic censorship. They visit private and public exhibitions regularly and if some paintings are not considered as ‘suitable’, they will withdraw these paintings.*” (Interviewee B01)

***Consequences: creative class that lost their radical edge***

The result of social stratification in Songzhuang Art Village is that the creative class lost their radical edge and artists tended to cooperate with the state. Drawn from Novy and Colomb (2013)’s theory of transformed urban social movements, which reveals that creative class who used to be the mainstay of social resistance has been adapted to cooperate with the state, I argue that the changing role of Songzhuang artists resonates with Novy and Colomb (2013)’s conclusion.

In the initial forming stage of Songzhuang Art Village around the 1980s, the first bunch of Songzhuang artists majored in Contemporary Art and created artworks that were ironic and sarcastic to social issues. When the first local state-led large-scale demolition was implemented at the end of 2013, the artists launched resistance against demolition. But for now, the Songzhuang artists have lost their political sarcasm. This can be supported from several perspectives.

First, the art category distribution in Songzhuang has changed dramatically. Previously, contemporary art dominated in Songzhuang, but now Chinese traditional paintings are the majority, which avoid political subjects in favor of lyrical beauty. By 2022, 1,763 artists in Songzhuang majored in Chinese traditional painting, making up 44% of the total artist population in Songzhuang Art Village, and became the largest artists group (Interviewee G01).

Second, the majority of oil painters in Songzhuang focus on creating attractive and unique IP images rather than political satire. To increase market share and sales, they are now painting more figuratively rather than abstractly. For example, a well-known artist has recently had strong sales thanks to his creative drawings of deconstructing daily, mundane objects into artistic expression, such as dragon fruits (Figure 8-3). Compared with previous Songzhuang oil painters’ artwork that subtly conveys critical attitude, the emerging popular artists are staying away from social issues.



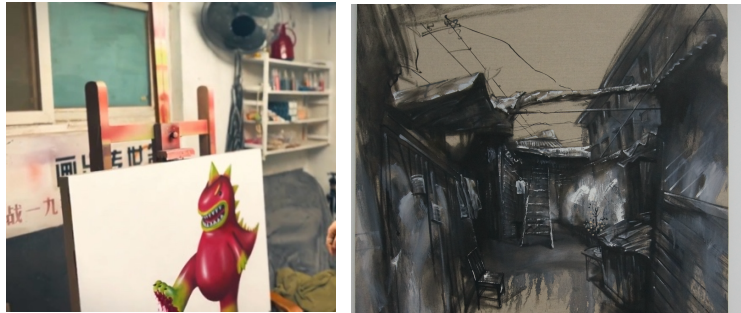


Figure 8-3 Comparison between oil painting genre in Songzhuang Art Village

Source: taken by the author

Chang (2019) defined two dimensions of artistic autonomy: one is free from market demand and the other is free from state demand. However, Songzhuang artists's creative activities are tightly bonded to the market and the state's demand. Songzhuang artists lost their radical edge and now they intend to cooperate with the state, and the number of artists reached a new peak in the 2010s when the state began to intervene (Zhao, 2021). Although an anonymous artist said, "*The real Songzhuang Art Village was dead after 2012*", more and more artists are still coming to Songzhuang, while state intervention in Songzhuang also provides precious resources for artists.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion and Reflection

In order to answer how stratification explains the black box of state-led rural land transformation in creative clusters, I use Songzhuang Art Village as a case study and analyze the empirical data of state strategies and consequences in three dimensions: economic, political, and social.

The key findings involve what kind of neighborhood will attract stratification and what state strategies and consequences are. Informality and rent gap are two critical features that put rural neighborhoods under the stratification process. Besides, stratification in Songzhuang consists of three dimensions. Economically, the state cleared informal land use to produce space for the affluent. To justify demolishing actions and minimize the costs, crafting urban discourse of 'illegal construction', fluidly defining it, and establishing authorized developing companies are employed as state strategies. Politically, urban planning was introduced into rural areas as state instruments, which encompasses rural areas into urban governance. Images and maps are widely used by the state to acquire monopoly power over future space reconfiguration. Socially, intense artistic censorship and sharing state resources with artist elites help in co-opting the artist's community.

By analyzing the key findings from empirical data, the state logic behind stratification has been concluded. The state's pursuit in stratification can also be discussed in three dimensions. Economically, with rural land development becoming profitable due to the high reputation of the art community, the state endeavors to regain the monopoly power over rural land transformation and benefit from it by stratification. However, stratification relocates rural land stakeholders by subordinating villages and excluding informal land users. Politically, neighborhoods featuring informality are out of state topological space and are not under urban governance, and the state endeavors to encompass these informal places into its own hegemonic power space to control them better. Socially, the state aims to reshape the state-society relationship in an authoritarian way that permeates its ideology into individuals' everyday lives. In conclusion, the economic stratification reflects neoliberal features, while the political and social stratification reflects authoritarian features.

Reflecting on the Songzhuang Art Village case, I am critical of the neoliberal logic of stratification and argue that the local state's strategies have run counter to the national state's original policy purposes in permitting rural land marketization. Rural land marketization as an amendment land policy in China is aimed at equalizing the rights for land development for the villages and avoiding the local state's monopoly control of land business. However, the Songzhuang case study has shown that the local state employed tricky strategies to regain its monopoly power over land business.

In addition, the neoliberal logic also leads to a reduction in diversity. Before state intervention, the Xiaopu village is diverse because factory owners, factory workers, informal business owners, artists, and indigenous villagers all lived on this place. After state intervention, only art-related industries and artists can be retained, while factories and agriculture all disappear. Under neoliberal logic, the most lucrative land use will hegemonically incorporate all land into a single land use, as illustrated by the diminishing diversity process in Songzhuang.

The validity of the results is relatively high as I provided a state perspective in analyzing rural neighborhood change in China. Abundant data is collected and analyzed, such as interviews, focus groups, policy, and online news reports. I collected information from comprehensive groups, including developers, artists, villagers, local state staff, business owners, and other residents. However, there are also weaknesses of this research. Some important information is not allowed by the interviewees to present in research because they keep it confidential or they want to protect privacy. Besides, as a student, I did most of the interviews alone and I did not have personal bonds in the case neighborhood, which means my limited access to the most inner, local knowledge about this neighborhoods. Sometimes I found it difficult to distinguish the validity of interview information, so I cleared out many data that could not be proved by factual data, such as personal stories or personal opinions. But I still benefited from the highly personalized information as they provided a more lively picture for me to understand the Songzhuang Art Village neighborhood.

This research also complements the nuanced urban theories for neighborhood change, especially gentrification. Gentrification has been widely discussed in various contexts, even if some place-specific urbanization processes are largely ignored as unimportant or exceptional cases. Statification, compared with gentrification, can depict more precisely the process of rural neighborhood change under urbanization in China, because the informality in space use, which is quite common in rural neighborhoods in China, is specifically considered, as well as the important political and social aspects. Furthermore, the discussion of state strategies is important since it studies empirical data through the lens of state power, resulting in a clearer understanding of the state's role in space reconfiguration.

The overall discussion of statification aims to reveal the role of the state in urbanization and landscape transformation. The political force, rather than purely economic reasons, could be dominant in the urbanization process. How does the state organize space? How can we explain the logic of state intervention actions? Why did rural land transformation happen in some neighborhoods but not in others? The concept of statification provides an analytical framework to answer these questions. Although we discussed statification in the Chinese context, this concept could also be used in other contexts, because the strong will of every state machine to present and sustain

itself over the power in space organization can be seen from both Western and Oriental contexts (Kong, 2012; McGuirk & MacLaran, 2001; Uitermark et al., 2007; Zhao, 2020a).

Future urban research should highlight the role of the state in space reconfiguration and be conscious of the unique contexts. To reveal the role of the state, the governmentality features of varying states are unavoidable to discuss. The urban space reconfiguration and space production activities should be different under varying governmentalities. Statification provides an analytical framework to capture the state logic in economic benefit patterns, the political presence of the state, and the society-state relationship. Thus, I believe statification provides an approach to investigating varying governmentality features of different states, both in Western and Eastern contexts. In addition, Statification in this research originally focuses on informal neighborhoods, and by studying how the state deals with informality, scholars can investigate the governmentality features of the state. Future research can expand the research subjects beyond informal neighborhoods to see how statification can also happen in other types of space.

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