Gendering Grassrootscapes: The Sociospatial Relations of Lower Working-Class Women Dwelling in the Socialist Workers' New Villages in Post-Reform Shanghai

Women of the lower working-class in Shanghai are seemingly invisible in Chinese urban scholarship. Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2021 in Shanghai, this article sheds light on the social lives of lower working-class women dwelling in the Workers' New Villages in the wake of rapid urbanization. Mounting a threefold conceptual exploration of grassroots urbanism, genderscapes, and *guanxi* (social connectivity), the article develops and coins the term "grassrootscapes" to explicate grassroots women's sociospatial relations with housing units, the community, and the city. Probing these multi-layered horizons to trace women's life trajectories and gendered experiences, the article discerns how sociospatial dynamics of "grassrootscapes" are produced under a socialist system, in which women's day-to-day suffering is a by-product of market reforms. Socialist workers' housing is employed as a case study to show how the conceptualization of "grassrootscapes" can be a useful tool to examine the social transformation brought about by the drastic changes in urban policies in globalizing cities.

Keywords: China, gender, urbanization

Introduction[1]

During one of our field trips in Shanghai, a government official expressed to us that "Shanghai has no poverty" referring to the belief that China's poverty issues are in the heart of rural China. In past years, the PRC government reported that 832 rural counties of China endured extreme poverty, while the Shanghai Municipal People's Government collaborated with the central government to provide aid to support other counties in alleviating destitution (Pi, 2022; Xiang, 2022). Today, all 832 of those rural counties and their combined population of 99 million people have reported being lifted out of poverty due to an incremental increase in individual annual income, the provision of food, and sufficient healthcare and educational resources (Di, 2021). Further, as a report released

by the World Bank in 2022 stated, "Over the past 40 years, the number of people in China with incomes below 1.90 US$ per day – the International Poverty Line as defined by the World Bank to track global extreme poverty – has fallen by close to 800 million." China's Vice Minister of Finance, Weiping Yu, thus announced that China has achieved the goal of extreme poverty elimination (World Bank, 2022). What concerns us about such a national agenda is that the populations that continue to endure destitution, or experience other life challenges, may receive less care and welfare (see, for instance, Wan et al. 2021). As such, central to this article are the urban experiences of grassroots women (*jiceng funü*) living in the midst of a drastic economic transition in urban China, with a focus on the Workers' New Villages (*Gongren Xincun*).

Overshadowed by rural migration studies (Fan & Chen, 2020; Ip, 2017; Solinger, 1999; Yan, 2008), the lives of lower working-class women in Shanghai are seemingly invisible in Chinese urban scholarship. Current scholarly attention is attuned to professional women in Shanghai and their new urban middle-class experiences, putting middle-class single women at the forefront of feminist scholarship (Chow, 2019; Ji, 2015; Kam, 2020; Martin, 2022). The grassroots population (*jiceng renkou*) of Shanghai is thus underexplored. Ip and her colleagues (2021) argue that urban grassroots women's experiences can reflect the exploitative nature of capitalism, the problematics of traditional Chinese patriarchal culture, and the impacts of shifting national policies in the areas of urban planning, housing welfare, and gender-related policies. This study was undertaken in the hopes of repositioning women in global urban theory by engaging "more fully with the everyday struggles of living and working that animate urban dwellers and the complex scaffolding upon which the vast majority of the world's women living in cities, the working poor, pin their hopes and dreams" (Peake, 2015, p. 225).

The article probes the impacts of urbanization, specifically the ramifications of

housing marketization, to explore the ways these women pin their hopes on their children's education or on demolition and relocation compensation, and to uncover how they find ways to live a better life despite enduring hardships. The article traces China's economic transition, particularly from state housing provision to the marketization of housing, to further probe the ways market reforms have transformed the production of urban space, turning houses into commodities and (re)shaping the everyday lives of residents. Conceived as an urban feminist exploration, the article illuminates how grassroots women are coping with these transformations to the urban fabric, unpacking the immediate and long-term ramifications of China's economic reforms. We coin the concept "grassrootscapes," to refer to grassroots women's sociospatial relations with their housing unit, the community, and the city.[2] We begin by introducing the research methods we employed and then expound on our conceptualization of "grassrootscapes."

Methods

Drawing on six fieldwork trips to Shanghai between 2017 and 2021, the article employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews to study the lived experiences of women residing in the Workers' New Villages located in Community X (see Figure 1).[3] In 2017, we met with government representatives to legally obtain access to the village residents. They referred us to 10 neighborhood committees (*juweihui*), the units of neighborhood governance composed of village residents. The committees introduced us to the women inhabitants, identified by the government as "destitute and disadvantaged women" (*pinkun funü*) who needed both financial and social aid. In 2018, we started fieldwork, completing semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 women residents; we then conducted a further 13 life history interviews with 11 women who had previously participated in the in-depth interviews and with two additional women who were

daughters of the participants (see Table 1). Most interviews were conducted in the women's homes, allowing us to observe their living spaces (n=19). Furthermore, we had informal conversations with the women's husbands during our in-home visits between 2018 and 2021, which helped us better interpret their life stories.

[insert Figure 1]

The women interviewed were born between 1941 and 2002 and were between 21 and 82 years old. Most women (n=18) had experienced firsthand the state-planned economy between 1949 and 1978, while four of the women, daughters of the older women in the study, were born after the 1980s. All of the women had experienced or were currently enduring life challenges that included: severe illness (*dabing*) (n=17), such as gynecological cancer and/or breast cancer; poverty (*pin*) requiring financial aid (n=6); and other deleterious family issues, such as domestic violence (*jiabao*) (n=1), the death of the only child (*shidu*) (n=2), or the death of their spouse (n=3).[4] Moreover, women who owned their home (n=13) were introduced to the research team by the neighborhood committees because of other life challenges such as cancer or issues related to their children, such as the death of their single child, children who had endured cancer, or children who had physical and/or mental challenges (see Table 1). Thus, they belonged to the *disadvantaged* group of "destitute and disadvantaged" women, a social problem identified by the local government. This article invites researchers to rethink the multiplicity of destitution therefore we propose that studies on poverty among Chinese women should link to three major types of poverty: income poverty, time poverty, and property poverty (Lin, 2005). Amongst these three kinds of poverty, property poverty influences one's health, education level, economic resources, and social networks (Lin,

2005). In this study, we focus on the close link between women's health conditions and property poverty, as some women are cash poor even though they have assets.

The women all had a Shanghai household registration (*hukou*), with most having received the urban *hukou* by birth (n=18), and the rest obtaining it by marrying a man from Shanghai. Members of the latter group were labelled as migrant wives (*wailai xifu*) by the society, as they were of rural origin (n=4). As the population of China has been divided between rural and urban through the household registration (*hukou*) system, and urban citizens attain better health care, education, and other social resources (Fan & Chen, 2020). Under the economic reforms, the rural *hukou* population was allowed to work in Shanghai but not to live there on a permanent basis (Ip, 2017). Regarding the various ways that money came into the house, some women received pensions ranging between 2,300 CNY and 4,000 CNY (approximately 335 US$ and 580 US$) per month (n=11), while six of the husbands had pensions ranging between 3,600 CNY and 4,000 CNY (approximately 520 US$ and 580 US$) per month. This group of retirees had endured cancer and thus had become cash poor due to their medical costs. Four women in the study relied on their husband's source of income, including a pension (n=1) and monthly wages between 2,590 CNY and 4,000 CNY (approximately 376 US$ and 580 US$) (n=3). Two women earned a basic income of 2,590 CNY per month (approximately 376 US$) (n=2), and one woman's source of income was the minimum living allowance (*dibao*), a type of social allowance provided by the local government for unemployed people (n=1). To capture expert advice and perspectives related to rapid urbanization in Shanghai, we also conducted in-depth interviews with 17 "policy shapers" working as governmental officials, urban planners, journalists, and scholars.

We developed coding through "the inductive process of searching for concepts, ideas, themes, and categories that help the researcher to organize and interpret data"

(Benaquisto, 2008, p. 2).[5] The codebook was developed together with other research teams under the feminist transnational project, "Urbanization, Gender and the Global South: A Transformative Knowledge Network" (GenUrb). Drawing on the coding process, our analysis is organized into three sections focused upon (i) the housing unit, (ii) the community, and (iii) the city. In each section, we examine the women's changing ways of living, gendered experiences, and social relations through the conceptual lenses of grassroots urbanism, genderscapes, and *guanxi* (social connectivity). Putting grassroots urbanism and genderscapes together with *guanxi*, we coin the term "grassrootscapes" to define the multi-layered sociospatial relations of grassroots women situated in the socialist Workers' New Villages in Shanghai because their ways of life, standards of living, and social relationships are constituted by their restrained circumstances.

Why Workers' New Villages? Why Now?

This section provides an historical background of the Workers' New Villages to elucidate why this specific housing typology is worthy of scrutiny. Extensive scholarly work on housing in the Workers' New Villages has focused on analyzing its housing typology as it relates to architecture and urban planning, positioning these villages as a symbol of the "Socialist Legacy" (Liang, 2016; Luo, 2013; Wang et al., 2015; Yang, 2019). The Workers' New Villages were central to the housing program constructed between 1949 and 1995 to accommodate Shanghai's workers employed in nearby state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Wang et al., 2015). In the 1940s, after World War II, resources were extremely limited, leading the newly established PRC government to prioritize industrialization to resolve the economic crisis (Zhu, 2015). By 1953, there were 6.2 million people living in Shanghai, with 3 million living in slums (Wang, 1999; Yang,

2019). To resolve the problem, the government embarked upon the large-scale housing program known as the Workers' New Villages. Between 1951 and 1965, 214 Workers' New Villages were built, and a further 228 villages were built between 1967 and 1995 in Shanghai (Cui, 1998). The housing typology of Workers' New Villages was not intended to be a sustainable project but was considered a temporary solution to solve the housing problem, and the housing units' size was kept to a minimum (Cui, 1998). Residents shared a kitchen and washroom with other families, a collective lifestyle promoted in the Mao era and an efficient way to conserve the budget. Although residents had to share facilities, being able to dwell in these villages was perceived as an honor for the socialist workers. This was because people were not only assigned work by their work-units (*danwei*), but were also allocated housing (*danwei fenfang*), and in the early construction period, only "model workers" (*laodong mofan*) could live in these housing units (Wang, 2013).

As housing unit facilities are no longer shared, the homeowners can sell their property at a high price given the central location of many of these villages. Some of the women studied expected to receive demolition and resettlement compensation (*chaiqianfei*) (in cash or in kind) if their housing was demolished. In the past few decades, gentrification (*shenshihua*) in Shanghai has been largely explored by urban scholars linking it to vanishing cultural heritage (Arkaraprasertkul, 2018), intensified social disparity (He, 2007), and violence imposed by gentrification (Ling, 2021). Considering the historical imperative of housing for socialist workers, the Workers' New Villages are germane to explorations of the changing urban fabric and social relations of the grassroots population in Shanghai today.

Theoretical Framework: Grassrootscapes

The article coins the term "grassrootscapes" by mobilizing the three conceptual lenses of

grassroots urbanism, genderscapes, and *guanxi*. Predominantly, urbanism has been explored in association with the capitalist integration of urban spaces and lives (Hourani, 2014; Razavi et al., 2022; Vivant, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Previous studies have substantiated the ways governments shape urban living, reflecting how urbanism is a way of life that is, to varying degrees, being shaped by urban planning authorities (Ip & Buckley, 2022; Razavi et al., 2022; Wirth, 1938) and the capitalist absorption of spaces (Gonzales, 2017). Grassroots urbanism is explored not only as a way of life but also as a way of implementing bottom-up strategies—a means for the urban poor to reclaim their rights to the city (Hespanhol & Tomitsch, 2019). In China, urbanism has mainly been explored as encompassing shifting ways of life and ideologies, linking them with rapid urbanization (Ren, 2017; Wang et al., 2016; Wang & Li, 2018). Wang and their colleagues have discerned that urbanism reflects how urbanities possess weaker social ties than rural populations (Wang et al., 2021). While most studies have stressed the spatiality of urbanism in post-reform China (Ren, 2017), Wang and Li (2018) have focused on the affective dimensions of China's urban cultural workers to argue that the Chinese state governs its people through coercive force and the construction of moral value-laden environments to forge ambient power. Bottom-up movements against urban development have also been explored by Ling (2021), who coined the term "bulldozer urbanism" to describe the violence involved in demolishing old neighborhoods, whereby lower working-class populations and rural migrants had no other option but to accept their fate when the authorities use bulldozers to destroy their homes. Thus, we propose that grassroots urbanism can also be read as a form of resistance on the part of the urban poor.

In its engagement with grassroots urbanism scholarship, this article links grassroots urbanism to the concept of genderscapes. In 1990, Arjun Appadurai addressed the rapidity of the globalization process, arguing that the emerging global cultural

economy had now to be understood through new spatial models of cultural-scapes – ethnoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, and ideoscapes – to capture the multi-centered dynamics of global cultural flows. Stemming from overlapping and disjunctive spatial and cultural entanglements in ethnography, finance, media, technology, and ideology, Appadurai (1990) developed these landscapes based on Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined community," which he then expanded into the concept of "imagined worlds" (1990, p. 296). For Appadurai (1990), these imagined worlds are a social construct, reflecting the ways a person and a group are situated in society. Inspired by Appadurai's work, feminist researchers have further probed the gendered dynamics and new circulations of cultural flows related to gender, using the terminology "genderscapes" (Bose, 1997; Datta, 2016; Käng, 2014). According to Anindita Datta (2016), the term genderscapes describes how gender seeps into different layers of space. By linking the notions of cultural-scapes and genderscapes to grassroots urbanism, this article develops and coins the term "grassrootscapes," to provide a nuanced interrogation of grassroots women's sociospatial relations with their housing unit, the community, and the city—in other words, it examines urban poor women's multi-layered sociospatial horizons.

The final conceptual lens that allows us to capture the grassroots population's urban experiences is *guanxi*. Positioning *guanxi* as a form of Chinese social connectivity, "*guanxi*" is understood as a socio-cultural specific idiom connotating social networks (Gold et al., 2002). Much has been written related to the unique Chineseness of *guanxi* and its role as a specific and defining element of Chinese culture (Bian, 2019; Kipnis, 2002; Yang, 2002). In the late 1990s, after China opened its doors to foreign investment, some claimed that *guanxi* could help in understanding how Chinese business relationships operate (Yang, 2002). While some researchers read *guanxi* as social capital in Chinese

society (Gold et al., 2002), others assert that there is no word in English with which to fully translate *guanxi*, and they advise leaving the word untranslated (Kipnis, 2002). We view *guanxi* in a broader sense—not simply as social connectivity between people, but as underpinning social relations between individuals and their social worlds. In the following analysis, we unpack the women's sociospatial relations employing the concepts of grassroots urbanism, genderscapes, and *guanxi* in each sociospatial horizon.

Horizon 1: The Housing Unit

This section will illustrate how residents' ways of life are reshaped because of housing reform. Based on the interview data, some women resided in small housing units ranging between 14 and 17 square meters (n=9), while others lived in medium-sized units between 24 and 36 square meters (n=7) or in large-sized units between 40 and 60 square meters (n=6). In what follows, we explore the women's social fabrics of their families with a focus on the housing units and homeownership.

Grassroots urbanism: Changing housing structures, changing ways of life

Stemming from the marketization of housing, new ways of living are being experienced by urban grassroots populations, and the collective lifestyle that has characterized Chinese grassroots urbanism has come to an end. Beginning in the 1990s, residents of the Workers' New Villages were given the chance to purchase their assigned housing units, designated as homes with property rights (*chanquanfang*). The workers' housing units were opened to the market so that those workers who are financially capable could purchase them. However, not all units could be sold on the market, as stated by our research participants C Mama and W Ayi (Ayi means "auntie" in Chinese) that their families could not purchase their assigned housing units because of its shared structure.

In the early phase of the reforms, the government had to deal with the complicated structure of the housing units with shared facilities restricting the commodification process. Constructed based on the socialist ideal, there are two main types of housing units in the Workers' New Villages: those that share a kitchen and washroom with one or more households, and those with their own kitchen and washroom (see Figure 2). In legal terms, the housing units with shared facilities cannot be commercialized as homes with property rights and they have remained as rental housing (*zulinfang*), meaning that the registered occupants have the right to live there and pay a low rental fee, while their family members can register their *hukou* using that unit. To resolve this complexity, the government initiated a reconstruction program in 1992, branded as *Meiwei Duyong* ("the exclusive use of the stove and washroom"), so that more families can have their own facilities and can purchase their unit (Shanghai Government, 2012) (see Figures 3–4).

[insert Figure 2]

[insert Figure 3]

[insert Figure 4]

As C Mama explained, "After the remodeling, it [the shared bathroom and kitchen] was separated. We now have one bathroom and one kitchen." Subsequently, the reconstruction allowed her family to purchase their unit when it was renovated in the early 2000s; however, she failed to convince her husband to purchase it, and so she kept blaming him over the past two decades. Previous studies have explored how the laid-off workers who purchased their housing units when they were initially allowed to do so have become the new urban middle-class, while the urban poor consists of those who found the purchase of their own home to be a concept too new to embrace and those who could

not afford to purchase their homes (He, 2007). As He (2007) commented, those who have failed to adapt to the market economy enjoy the least benefits from the reforms. We propose that the remodeling program has turned the housing units into commodities and terminated collective ways of living. More importantly, it has generated new forms of social disparity and discontent.

Genderscapes: The end of the gender-friendly housing policy

The genderscapes of the Workers' New Villages, which were built in the 1950s, were clearly influenced and shaped by the social order imposed by the government under the "male-female equality" policy (*nannü pingdeng zhengce*) at that time, a state term developed in the Mao era (Li, 2016). The allocation of houses to women workers through the work-units is one of the most prominent male-female equality policies of the pre-reform period (Li, 2016; Wang, 1999). Among our participants, four women lived in the village because they were socialist workers and assigned to live there by their work-unit. These women had gained the right to work outside the family home during the socialist period, and some had gained access to housing—a move considered part of the liberation of women (Wang, 1999): the socialist housing benefits for workers, based on the policy of male-female equality, helped to raise the social status of women (Davis, 2002).

Of our participants, the 13 women who owned their unit comprised the largest group, compared to those who remained there under a rental contract (n=3), or those whose relatives either owned or were registered tenants of the unit and allowed them to live there (n=2). There were four mother-daughter pairs; two mothers, one widow and one divorcee, owned their unit, one woman co-owned her unit with her husband, and one woman's mother-in-law owned the unit; all daughters lived with their parent(s) (n=4) (see Table 1). Lung (1999) has revealed how Shanghai men perform chores, reflecting one of

the key social impacts of socialist policy and a cultural phenomenon that persists in Shanghai. As Ji (2015) comments, women in Shanghai enjoy relatively high status in China. However, Fincher (2014) has discerned that women continue to face intense social and legal injustices in relation to the new policy of homeownership in Shanghai. Thus, Fran Martin (2022) argues, China's economic shift has reproduced gender inequality.

We observed that women who were homeowners had more social power within their families, as they were the major decision-makers. When asked about gender equality within the household, H Ayi shared that she had an equal relationship with her husband, and that she found it to be important to have gender equality at home because the family was then harmonious (*hexie*). Other women such as Y Mama, who had owned her house with her late husband, shared that her husband had been the one who cooked, and so after he died, she had to learn to cook. As she explained, in Shanghai, men are responsible for grocery shopping, tidying up the house, and cooking (termed, in Shanghainese, *madasao*). Tellingly, the socialist workers' housing allocation for both male and female workers was a way to empowerment for women; the end of housing allocation; however, has shut down the most direct path to empowering women through homeownership. As Berlant has stated, "precarious[ness] describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else's hands" (2011, p. 192). In the case of our participants, the lives of the women who lived in a housing unit owned by their relatives and of those who continued to rent their housing unit were in more unstable and insecure situations. Nevertheless, some women (n=13) in the study were homeowners, and thus they might have experienced a more secure situation than other research participants, although they may have been cash poor.

Guanxi: Homeownership and family conflicts

Next, we break down the reasons why and how the research participants owned, or did not own, their housing units to explore their *guanxi* within the neighborhood community. Three of the women owned their unit because of their status as socialist workers and had received their housing allocation directly (n=3), while others lived in the village because of their husband's housing allocation through their work-units (n=3). Most women, however, lived in the village because of family members (n=10), including parents (n=2), parents-in-law (n=5), grandmother (n=1), uncle (n=1), or brother-in-law (n=1), who were originally assigned to live there by their work-units. Despite their heterogeneous backgrounds, those who lived in the village because of their parents or relatives commonly shared a broken form of *guanxi*, and they confided that the break had occurred when housing inheritance had created family conflict.

In exploring the reasons behind this observation, it became apparent that family conflicts were stimulated by housing inheritance, and family disputes had become the new urban norm in these villages. C Ayi, who was born and raised in Shanghai, shared: "We went to court earlier to fight for the house ownership with his [her husband's] brother and sister. We won. That's why we can live here." C Ayi lived in a housing unit with her husband that had originally been the rental house lived in by her father-in-law. By paying 10,000 CNY (approximately 1,450 US$), her family would have been able to own the housing unit. Nevertheless, her father-in-law could not afford this amount, so she lent him the money. In 2003, the unit was renovated. C Ayi thought that she and her family would be able to live there, but her father-in-law decided to give full ownership to his younger son. C Ayi's familial conflict was settled after they paid her husband's younger brother 60,000 CNY (approximately 8,700 US$) as compensation for giving up his registration for the housing unit, as proposed by the court. Having won the court case, C Ayi's family became the homeowner, but in the meantime her husband had cut all ties

with his father and brothers. To become the homeowners, C Ayi and her husband thus paid a high price in terms of losing these family relationships. Her experience unveils two larger issues: first, although the government allowed residents to buy their housing unit at a fair price, not all workers could afford it because Shanghai citizens' income in the pre-reform period was relatively low due to the socialist wage rank system (Huang, 2006). Second, while some residents were able to secure their unit, they gave up their *guanxi* with their family members, considered a crucial social relationship in Chinese society (Song & Ji, 2020).

In addition to Shanghai women's experiences with family conflict, migrant wives (*wailai xifu*) of Shanghai can also endure hostile experiences in the face of family conflict. To give an example, at the time of our study, H Jiejie (meaning, elder sister), born in 1968 in a rural region, had remarried 15 years ago, to a low-income Shanghai man who grew up in Community X. She had a 12-year-old daughter from her current marriage and a mentally disabled 31-year-old daughter from her previous marriage. After remarrying, by law, H Jiejie could not immediately apply for a Shanghai *hukou*, and her elder daughter could not apply for healthcare benefits in Shanghai. To take care of her elder daughter, H Jiejie stayed in her hometown after her second marriage. Her younger daughter, born in Community X, did have a Shanghai *hukou*, and so she was able to stay in Shanghai and receive a high-quality education. After 10 years of marriage, H Jiejie was eligible to officially apply for the Shanghai *hukou*, but only by registering under the address of a housing unit that was owned instead of a rental unit. Since her husband rented a studio in the outskirts of Shanghai, the only option was to register H Jiejie's *hukou* under her mother-in-law's housing unit in Community X.

Family drama had ensued as her four brothers-in-law disagreed with this decision. As H Jiejie expressed, "they hid the certificate of the housing unit. It is the certificate that

we needed for changing the *hukou*." Thus, H Jiejie and her husband went to the police station, where they were told that H Jiejie's brothers-in-law had reported their objection and added their names to the certificate, becoming registered persons for the unit. The police told H Jiejie and her husband that verbal consent could serve as legal consent for household registration. H Jiejie's husband then went home to video-record his mother's approval in allowing H Jiejie to register under the housing unit. Eventually, while H Jiejie managed to stay in the unit, her husband cut the *guanxi* with his siblings. As he expressed, they would "grow old and die without contacting each other again" (*laosi buxiang wanglai*). H Jiejie confided that her family could remain living in the housing unit, but that she was afraid that her husband's brothers would "kick them out" one day.

Under the One-Child Policy in China (1980–2015), the *guanxi* of each individual household was modified because of the changing core family size, which was limited to a man, a wife and one child in each household, influencing succeeding generations. Most women in our study were born before 1980 (n=18), the year the One-Child policy was implemented; this generation usually grew up with siblings and thus shared a wider kinship-formed *guanxi*. As K Ayi's daughter, a 31-year-old cancer patient, commented: "The biggest problem here [the village] is about the property of one's parents, right? If you have more than one child, how do you divide up your property?" When housing property passes from one generation to the next through inheritance, siblings must negotiate who will inherit the property, and family conflicts inevitably arise.

To conclude, we propose that the concept of "grassrootscapes" epitomizes the social reality configured by the economic transition—the urban poor are in conflict with each other over housing inheritance as the government no longer offers free housing. Today in Shanghai, people may work around the clock but still are unable to make a down payment, making homeownership impossible. Cutting ties with one's siblings to secure a

place to live makes sense, considering that the housing unit of the Workers' New Villages has endued with enormous economic value. Seen in this light, China's market reforms have not only contributed to wealth inequality but have also configured family conflicts over homeownership and is eroding the political attempt to empower women through housing allocation. In a sense, these "grassrootscapes" capture the ways in which the *guanxi* amongst the grassroots population is constantly reshaped by wider politics.

Horizon 2: The Community

Under the socialist social order, place-making (*diqu yingzao*) and community-building (*shequ jianshe*) in the Workers' New Villages were managed by the government through the implementation of the community's cultural centers and neighborhood committees. The villages played a crucial role in the 1950s' policy changes, which aimed at transforming Shanghai's westernized demeanor constructed under the previous semi-colonial period (Yang, 2019). Constructed under the socialist agenda to promote a collective lifestyle, the villages were designed as self-sufficient communities, incorporating a police station, a rudimentary medical clinic, and a cultural center to provide public facilities (Yang, 2019). As Appadurai states (1990), global cultural flows are not a single-way process, but instead mark an intricate development where local resistance is possible. Here, we explore how these socialist living ideals persist in the Workers' New Villages, creating different ways of life in the face of global capitalism.

Grassroots urbanism: Social activities and cultural lives

We asked the women living in the villages if they had accessed any of the social activities arranged at the Community X Cultural Center. They responded:

> We go to the Cultural Center for dancing. We go there once a week. We perform dancing sometimes. I dance in the neighborhood with 15 people. The song we performed last time was "I Love You China." (Y Ayi)

> There is entertainment at the Cultural Center, so I go to watch all the performances. But we only join in the free activities. I feel sorry about that. (Xiao H Ayi)

Most of our research participants shared that they enjoyed the free activities provided in the Cultural Center such as film screenings and Chinese operas, but some, like Xiao H Ayi, felt guilty for not joining in any paid events. Besides the free activities, visiting the public library in Community X was one of the most popular cultural activities. The Community X Library offers free events for cultural enrichment, including a Reading Festival, Art Festival, and a mobile library named "The Book Caravan."

C Mama lived with her husband, daughter, and mother-in-law in a small housing unit in the Workers' New Village. Along with a bunk bed for her daughter and mother-in-law and a double bed for her and her husband, their small living space could only accommodate a tiny foldable dining table and four foldable chairs. C Mama felt that her home was too small for her daughter to study in, and she expressed the hope that her family could pursue upward social mobility lay in her daughter's education (see Figure 5). C Mama stated:

> She [her daughter] has a lot of homework and she studies in the library. She does not stay at home when she has [a] holiday because the environment [at home] is very bad. So, she goes to the library. (C Mama)

Important moments of the women's social lives were reflected in their participation in such free activities in terms of how they used and made use of village facilities.

[insert Figure 5]

Genderscapes: Female residents and socialist volunteerism

One prominent aspect of genderscapes within the New Workers Village community was volunteerism among the women, an attribute inherited from socialist ideals. During the Tenth Five-Year Plan of China (2001–2005), the neighborhood committees were assigned new roles by the government, such as allocating social benefits and subsidies and providing reemployment training. These activities were mainly carried out by women residents—a tradition passed down from the socialist gender equality-related ideal of liberating women through recruiting female residents to join in community volunteer work. As W Ayi shared, under the umbrella of the neighborhood committees, she became a volunteer to take care of the older adult residents living alone (*duju laoren*). W Ayi spent time visiting the elderly and taking them to the hospital for regular check-ups. In her words, she found the volunteer work to be meaningful, especially as she had received so much help from the neighborhood committee as they stepped in to help her (when her husband had attempted to murder her).

Moreover, female residents had maintained the practice of organizing social activities, voluntarily or with the assistance of neighborhood committees. H Ayi shared,

> I have joined a social club organized by residents, named the Community X Cancer Patients' Social Club. The leaders care about the patients. (H Ayi, retiree)

H Ayi's neighbor, S Ayi, a 63-year-old cancer patient herself, was the president of this social club. H Ayi said that their goal in setting up the club was to "spread positive energy for the residents" because she knew the pressures that working-class patients faced. Hidden in their narratives is the gendered element in their volunteer work—Although they shared very little in the official interviews, we learned in our informal conversations that most women in our study had gynecological cancer and/or breast cancer, and thus

the club offered gatherings for women to share their gendered experiences of fighting cancer. Moreover, as C Ayi and Y Ayi shared, they would join other women to dance in a shopping mall's outdoor square after dinner every night. During our fieldtrips, we observed that square dancing, drama clubs for female retirees, and choral associations were popular among the women. These social clubs reflect a gendered grassroots way of life, providing a space where women can bond with those who share similar interests.

Guanxi: Strong social ties

All women in the study expressed that they perceived their *guanxi* with their neighbors as important. W Ayi, a migrant wife, expressed, "We have a saying, 'A distant relative is not as good as a near-neighbor,' right? Sometimes neighbors can offer immediate help." W Ayi, who had suffered from both severe illness and domestic violence, shared that her neighbors came to help when her husband was beating her. Since her home was connected to those of four other families who shared the same corridor, her neighbors could hear her screaming for help. The social relations in the neighborhood, constructed both materially (through building structure) and figuratively (through socialist communal support), enabled the women to find comfort and, more importantly, support. Moreover, the women shared a close *guanxi* with the neighborhood committees, as some of them had been working as volunteers or block leaders (*louzhuzhang*) to help maintain the community's social order. These examples capture the close *guanxi* the women had with their community and help reveal how a socialist gender-friendly policy remains in these villages, as all women had participated in their community's volunteer labor force, although some could not continue due to their changing health conditions. Researchers have argued that urbanities share a weaker network (Wang et al., 2021); however, the grassroots' *guanxi* network in Shanghai's Workers' New Villages remains strong.

Horizon 3: The City

Located at the Yangtze River, Shanghai is one of the largest cities in the country and the world, with 24.76 million people as of 2022. Shanghai was a treaty port before the establishment of the PRC and was also one of the first five cities to open up to foreign trade over 150 years ago (Ji, 2015). As Ji comments, "Shanghai is the most Westernized city in mainland China" (2015, p. 1063). Geospatially, the city is divided by the Huangpu River, with the east side known as Pudong and the west side, Puxi. Many scholars have analyzed the urban fabric of Shanghai, throwing light on how Pudong is the modern, global part of Shanghai (De Kloet & Scheen, 2013; Huang, 2006; Ip & Buckley, 2022), and on the reasons why Puxi has rich urban landscapes such as *shikumen lilong* houses, an architectural design mixed with Chinese and Western attributes built in the 1860s, inserting Shanghai into China's imperial past to make sense of the city's semi-colonial history (Arkaraprasertkul, 2018). We argue that there is no single way to examine Shanghai as a city, whether referring it to as modern, globalized, westernized, or "traditional," because such singularity fails to thoroughly capture the diverse historicity of the city. Urbanism in the Shanghai's Workers' New Villages, we propose, is still imbued with socialist characteristics. Thus, we stress the imperative of shedding new light on the Workers' New Villages to scrutinize the socialist remnants of the city, which is still in place in the face of intense global cultural flows (Appadurai, 1990).

Grassroots urbanism: An ideology of gratis (Mianfei zhuyi)

The housing reforms suspended free housing and other welfare benefits for socialist workers, but the invitation of consumerism has offered different ways of living for the women in the villages. The Workers' New Villages underwent a drastic social

transformation in the post-reform period, especially before the Expo 2010 Shanghai China in Shanghai. Under the Expo's slogan, "Better City, Better Life," the Shanghai government invested 28.6 billion CNY (approximately 4.2 billion US$) to improve infrastructure in selected sites in Pudong and Puxi, including the district where Community X is located (Peng, 2010). Commercial areas were developed in Community X, resulting in hundreds of luxury plazas, hotels, business office buildings, as well as embassies and consulates. During the course of our fieldwork trips, we witnessed the expansion of Americanized fast-food chains, such as Starbucks, McDonald's, and Kentucky Fried Chicken, and the newly built Japanese and Korean shopping malls, which have turned the areas near Community X into a hip commercial zone, attracting more young people to travel there to visit and shop. These commercial activities, although not always free, can be seen as advantages offered by urbanization. As our research participants shared:

> I go to the shopping malls sometimes. Just to have a walk. (L Jiejie)

> I cannot go too far, being physically challenged. But sometimes, I go to the malls to shop for something I need. (M Ayi)

During a hot summer in 2019, some women told us that they enjoyed visiting the shopping malls because of the "free air-conditioning." As we observed during home visits, even in temperatures of over 38˚C (around 100.4˚F), the women tended not to switch on the air-conditioning as their electric bills would then be unaffordable.

While some women enjoyed essential shopping or just going to the malls for a walk, one older woman, Y Mama, shared that her 37-year-old unemployed daughter Z Jiejie was addicted to gaming:

> I cut the internet service at home because I could not afford that. She goes to the malls and libraries for free Wi-Fi now. (Y Mama)

Y Mama's daughter had spent her time in the internet cafe after school when she was a student. After completing technical secondary school, she had found a job, but she found working difficult as she did not like the interpersonal interaction. She then left her job and began receiving monthly unemployment benefits (*shiyejin*) of 1,895 CNY (approximately 275 US$). This mother-daughter experience reveals how social life is shaped by new urban facilities such as internet cafes and malls. In the Chinese cultural context, these women's social practices of using free services provided in the malls, such as air-conditioning and Wi-Fi access, are considered as "*ceng*" (literally, rubbing), an act that socially refers to how people attain free food and drinks. We propose that while consumerism (*Xiaofei zhuyi*) has penetrated millions of lives in urban China, the women in our study were striving to find and enjoy free services in commercialized spaces. An ideology of gratis (*Mianfei zhuyi*), as we have coined it, had become part of their everyday lives, countering what Appadurai called, "the fetishism of the consumer" (1999, p. 307).

Through grassrootscapes, we read these women's grassroots social practices as a way to reclaim city spaces, finding strategic ways to benefit from urbanization. At times we met with the women in our study in urban settings such as cafes and restaurants. One time when the first author met with four research participants, they sat down and cautiously took out fruit and dumplings from their bags and refused to order coffees, although we had offered to pay for the bill. The women all said that the coffee, sold at the price of 29 CNY (approximately 4 US$) per cup, was unreasonably expensive. We observed that where commercial spaces provided homogenous spaces, the grassroots women maneuvered to resist consuming commodities, creating a more diverse social world—a bottom-up strategy in line with the findings of other grassroots urbanism studies

(Gonzales, 2017; Hespanhol & Tomitsch, 2019).

Genderscapes: Hope and gendered violence

In 2021, workers' housing units in Community X, despite their small sizes were worth between 1.5 million CNY to 5 million CNY each (between 217,600 US$ and 725,300 US$), depending on their size. Residents in Community X have benefited from the rapid urbanization that has given them easy access to urban facilities such as schools, metro stations, and shopping malls. All participants shared that they considered living in the villages as highly convenient. Most expressed that they did not wish to relocate to another districts in Shanghai, but in choosing to live in the villages, they could not make money by selling off their housing unit, and so they remained cash poor. However, the housing demolition and resettlement compensation (*chaiqianfei*) provided through the government's improvement program had presented an opportunity for a better life for some of these women.

The case of W Ayi sheds light on this situation. A migrant wife on her second marriage, W Ayi shared her hope that one day the government would demolish the village so that her family could receive financial compensation. At our interview in 2018, W Ayi confided that she tolerated domestic violence from her husband because they co-owned their home: she could not leave him until the village was demolished. In the interim, W Ayi was beaten by her husband again and hospitalized, and her heart condition had worsened when we visited her in 2019. Her experience demonstrates how a woman tolerates inhumane treatment from her spouse because her life choices are closely linked to her home and its value as property, and due to the desire triggered by the promise of a demolition and relocation payment. Based on successful cases in receiving high rates of compensation for property, most women in this study have pinned high hopes on

improvement and they eagerly await the compensation offered by the government. Such hopes point to a new form of urbanism that shapes people's desire for a better life (Smith, 2002), and that echoes the emerging national slogan of China, "To Live a Better Life," which is meant to persuade people to pursue an exquisite lifestyle (*jingzhi shenghuo*) through consumption (Xinhua, 2023). In coining the term "grassrootscapes," this article contributes to studies of urban improvement, offering insight into the affective dynamics of hope and desire experienced by grassroots women. However, lurking beneath the potential for a demolition and relocation compensation in exchange for their property are the uncountable acts of violence these women might have to endure.

Guanxi: Betwixt poverty and pride

The concept of grassrootscapes provides a theoretical lens through which to interrogate grassroots women's social networks within Shanghai. Local Shanghai residents are born into a higher social class than their rural counterparts, under the rural/urban divide enforced by the *hukou* system (Anagnost, 2004). During our fieldwork, we felt the hostile sentiments of local Shanghai women toward the rural migrants who lived in the villages as tenants. They shared that rural migrants were noisy and dirty, reflecting the problematics addressed in the "*suzhi*" discourse (Anagnost, 2004). As Anagnost proposed, "*suzhi*" can be read as "quality" in English and refers to a new power game related to population control policies, whereby the rural population has become known as low-quality others who since the 1990s have provided the labor for massive urbanization and infrastructure projects (2004, p. 109). Bringing the "*suzhi*" discourse into our discussion, we can fathom a deeper meaning in narratives such as the one from C Mama: as a migrant wife, she preferred going to libraries with her daughter instead of joining in social activities because she felt inferior when meeting other local Shanghai

residents due to her rural background.

In relation to migrant wives, Shanghai women have a higher social status. Due to Shanghai women's pride, their painful lived experiences are commonly treated as stories that cannot be spoken—*jiachou buke waiyang*, meaning domestic shame that should not be spread (Gamble, 2003, p. xix). Their pride in being Shanghainese had led to some of them rejecting the financial aid offered by the government; rather, they had opted for working harder to make a living. Moreover, to live up to their own standards for themselves, Shanghai women must demonstrate their "*suzhi*." In H Ayi's case, as a Shanghai woman, she shared that she dressed up every time she went out, as a way to maintain her family's face (*mianzi*). Additionally, she shared that because she was a communist party member, she had to help maintain the social order of the neighborhood. To do this, she regularly cleaned the corridors of her housing block, and even tidied up the randomly parked shared commercial bikes in Community X. In short, although the women in the study were regarded as "destitute and disadvantaged women" by the neighborhood committees, they enjoyed a higher social status in Shanghai than rural migrants. This is particularly noteworthy as it helps explain why women of the lower working-class in Shanghai are neglected in academic studies—because they seemingly enjoy a higher social hierarchy compared to rural migrants.

Conclusion

Pulling together the three conceptual lenses of grassroots urbanism, genderscapes, and *guanxi*, the article has developed and coined the term "grassrootscapes" to explore the lived experiences of grassroots women dwelling in the Workers' New Villages of Shanghai. Social transformation has been captured in the study via the women's sociospatial relations with their housing unit, the community, and the city. The state plays

a role in shaping these sociospatial relations through the implementation of housing reforms, urban planning programs, place-making schemes, and gender-friendly policies. In other words, the state has constructed and shaped everyday life, turning women's lives into part of the production of space, and their suffering into a by-product of market reforms. We argue that these market reforms have configured social conflicts between socialism and the capitalist world order. Under post-reform economic logic, residents of the villages have had to endure the long-term ramifications brought about by the commercialization of their homes, alongside new regulations under the law that have altered their social relations with their family members, especially at times when conflicts are evoked over homeownership. What is at stake is the women's ability to negotiate the complex causes of poverty and the situations within their own grassroots family. As this study has elucidated, while some women are homeowners, they have suffered from unimaginable financial burdens after being diagnosed with cancer and become cash poor. Those women who rent their housing unit or who live in a unit owned by others are both cash poor and have no assets.

Furthermore, the term "grassrootscapes" elucidates how the women have pinned their hopes on their children's education or on future demolition and relocation payments. In a sense, urbanism is not merely *a way of life*, but also implies *a way of thinking*. Learning how urban residents experience and perceive their social lives is essential in helping urban feminist scholars scrutinize the ways urbanization seeps into the everyday lives of women. We assert that the hope shared by these women is vulnerable, and seemingly a cruel optimistic fantasy (Berlant, 2011), because what they hope for may not always be achieved, especially in the cases of demolition and relocation. Notably, the local government has opted to renovate the Workers' New Villages rather than initiate large-scale redevelopment planning in the city center. Thus, the villages in Community

X have been undergoing renovation since 2020 and will no longer be demolished by the government in a near future.

Finally, we propose that claims such as "China has eliminated poverty" or "Shanghai has no poverty" are dangerous because impoverished lives are rendered invisible by such grand narratives. Through delving into the conceptualization of "grassrootscapes," we have considered the social transformations brought about by market-oriented reforms and discerned a new form of ideology, *Mianfei zhuyi*, or the ideology of gratis, that these women have developed to counter consumerism. As such, our findings have opened an analytical window into the lived experiences of grassroots urban women living in the Workers' New Villages in post-reform Shanghai. Expanding our focus on how lower working-class women have responded to the marketization of housing sheds light on the cracks that consumerism affords for how women's lives might be transformed.

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Endnote

1 This research is part of a transnational research project, "Urbanization, Gender and the Global South: A Transformative Knowledge Network" (GenUrb) (Principal Investigator: Linda Peake), which focuses on grassroots women living in six selected cities in the Global South including Cochabamba, Delhi, Georgetown (Guyana), Ibadan, Ramallah, and Shanghai (https://genurb.apps01.yorku.ca).

2 This article purposely uses the term "housing unit" instead of apartment (*gongyu*), as an apartment is a housing type commonly known as commodity housing (*shangpinfang*) and thus is discursively attached to the new urban middle-class.

3 To protect the confidentiality of the women and their families, we decided to use pseudonyms, and the community is renamed Community X to ensure their anonymity.

4 Since the post-reform period began, people with life-threatening illnesses have also had to endure heavy medical costs due to the marketization of medical and health care, hence the common phrase, “falling into poverty due to illness” (*yinbing zhipin*).

5 The inductive coding process yielded 30 parent-codes and over 200 child-codes.

Figures

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Birth Year	Household Registration (*Hukou*)	Marital Status	Destitute and Disadvantaged Conditions	Housing Condition
1	L Ayi	1958	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient, heart disease	▪ Shared house before the government's reconstruction plan. ▪ She owned the housing unit with her husband.
2	H Ayi	1950	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient, death of the only child	▪ She owned the housing unit with her husband.
3	Y Mama	1944	Shanghai	Married (Widow)	Heart disease, death of a spouse	▪ She owned the housing unit.
4	Z Jiejie (Y Mama's daughter)	1983	Shanghai	Single	Poverty, poor physical and mental health conditions, unable to work	▪ Her mother owned the housing unit.
5	W Jiejie	1974	Shanghai	Married (Widow)	Poverty, death of a spouse	▪ Rental housing unit. ▪ Shared registration with her cousin.
6	H Jiejie	1968	Shanghai	Remarried	Poverty, elder daughter is mentally disabled and needs 24/7 care	▪ Shared facilities before the government's reconstruction plan. ▪ Rental housing unit. ▪ Shared registration by her husband and his four brothers.
7	L Jiejie	1969	Shanghai	Married	Heart disease	▪ Rental housing unit. ▪ Unknown registration status.
8	C Ayi	1957	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient	▪ She owned the housing unit with her husband.
9	Y Ayi	1960	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient	▪ She owned the housing unit with her husband after a legal case.
10	Z Ayi	1941	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient	▪ She owned the housing unit. ▪ Unknown shared home ownership status.
11	Xiao H Ayi	1970	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient	▪ She owned the housing unit with her husband. ▪ Her family had received 8 million CNY in relocation compensation from the government.
12	S Ayi	1958	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient	▪ She owned the housing unit. ▪ Unknown shared home ownership status.

13	T Ayi	1942	Shanghai	Married (Widow)	High-blood pressure, poor health condition, death of a spouse, and son is in prison	▪ She owned the housing unit with her sons.
14	M Ayi	NA	Shanghai	Married	Poverty, poor health condition, and husband suffered a stroke and needs 24/7 care	▪ Her father used to own the housing unit, but she now owned it. ▪ Unknown shared home ownership status.
15	G Ayi	1955	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient	▪ Her brother-in-law owned the housing unit.
16	J Ayi	1956	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient	▪ She owned the housing unit. ▪ Unknown shared home ownership status.
17	L Ayi	1963	Shanghai	Divorce	Poverty, and daughter diagnosed with cancer	▪ She owned the housing unit. ▪ Unknown shared home ownership status.
18	X Jiejie (L Ayi's daughter)	1987	Shanghai	Married	Cancer patient	▪ Her mother owned the housing unit.
19	C Mama	1969	Shanghai	Married	Poverty	▪ Her mother-in-law owned the housing unit.
20	C (C Mama's daughter)	2002	Shanghai	Single	Poverty	▪ Her grandmother owned the housing unit.
21	W Ayi	1956	Shanghai	Remarried	Poverty, domestic violence, heart and stomach disease	▪ She owned the housing unit with her husband. ▪ Shared home ownership with her husband's daughter from his previous marriage.
22	W (W Ayi's daughter)	1985	Shanghai	Single	Poverty, mother suffers from domestic violence	▪ Her mother, stepfather, and stepsister owned the housing unit.