

Constructing Home at the Margins: Social Resilience and the Geography of Belonging in Beijing's Pi Village

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Abstract. This study uses critical geography, urban studies, and migration research to explore the social resilience of Pi Village, a peripheral urban village in Beijing, China. It shows how this place characterized by well-established informality persists and generates social resilience over time facing the rising formalization of urban governance. The paper finds a key long-lasting paradox: formal authorities see Pi Village as "illegible" and ignore it, yet residents build a strong sense of home belonging and create strong social infrastructure as a migrant enclave. This happens through bottom-up and collective interactions between state ambivalence, migrant initiative, and grassroots social action. This reveals "home" as a negotiated social and political achievement, not just a physical space. Using mixed methods, the study identifies three key sources of place-based social resilience in Pi Village, namely, economic, governance, and infrastructure. These show how migrant urban villages leverage collective power to formality and the subsequent demolition by developing unique cultural production, economic cooperation, and community governance from the bottom. The conclusion connects these local practices to wider debates on sub-urban spread and citizenship. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how such migrant enclaves, despite exclusion, can become sites of social innovation and long-run resilience – a pathway towards the legitimization of home.

Keywords: social resilience, geography of home, urban informality, migrant enclaves, place attachment

1. Introduction

1.1. The geography of home in flux

Pi Village is located in the intersection of Chaoyang and Tongzhou District of Beijing, which has significantly lower costs of living compared to central areas while enabling quick access to either the Central Business District or suburbs that have sufficient opportunities of employment. Pi Village, defined as an enclave, which often refers to areas where a particular group of people, often migrants, reside and form a distinct community [1], is also a home to migrant workers who distantly move to Beijing from all parts of China. Therefore, "The Geography of Home," becomes the core concept of delving into the construction of homes in Pi Village. The geography of home, as defined, includes not only the material and physical features of a home but also the cultural, social, and emotional

elements that influence people's and communities' sense of identity and belonging [2]. The "geography of home," however, becomes dynamic and contested during the migration process, particularly when migrants encounter obstacles like socioeconomic marginalization, discrimination, and displacement. The idea of the "geography of home" becomes very complicated in urban-rural boundaries like Pi Village because of the socio-political ambiguities and spatial differentiations it produces.

An existing fact is that there is critique on how urban villages induce mobility, their immigration populations, and place-making, highlighting researching and political implementation gaps in understanding and enhancing marginalized space, like urban villages, to foster resilience despite structurally implicit or explicit exclusion acts. Therefore, the research gap is the role of spatial liminality, such as legal ambiguities, weak governance, and urban expansion, in enabling informal "home-building" and social resilience among transient populations.

1.2. Pi Village as a case study

By introducing Pi Village as a case study, this paper aims to address the aforementioned research gap, it would be necessary to investigate how the migrant community creates a sense of place in the context of an urban village. Pi Village is a peripheral settlement in Beijing historically reliant on migrant workers (truck drivers, low-wage workers) excluded from urban citizenship, which is the Hukou system, a household registration system in China that restricts internal migration and access to public services based on place of origin [3], in the case of Pi Village. Based on the reality of Pi Village, where immigration emerges while socio-political restrictions remain, there is a paradox of "how a space deemed 'illegible', in the sense of illegibility of housing and migrant status, becomes a site of grassroots social infrastructure and connective belonging".

Pi Village, as an urban enclave thriving through decades resiliently, nurturing migrant workers amongst the power of state actors and the civil society, which respectively refer to entities that represent the formal government and its institutions at various levels (e.g., national, regional, local) and are involved in urban planning, policy-making, and governance [4] and the realm of organized, voluntary associations and groups that operate independently of the state and the market, and that engage in public life to promote their interests, values, or goals within the urban environment [5]. As a result, from an urban village surviving in the cracks to a node — a focal point in the network of social interaction that facilitates flows of people, goods, information, and resources within the city [3], thesis explored in this paper is that "Pi Village exemplifies how social resilience emerges through iterative interactions between migrants, state actors, and civil society, transforming a transient node into a 'home' with layered socio-political legitimacy".

2. Literature review

2.1. Urban margins and mobility

The theoretical frameworks will be based on Turner's Liminal Spaces, Saunders' "Arrival City," and the Politics of Informality by Roy.

The concept of Liminal spaces is drawn from Victor Turner's study of rituals and rites of passage, refers to the in-between phase where individuals or groups are in the transitional state [6,7]. During liminality, the established social structures are dislocated, and the subjects are "betwixt and between" the positions assigned by law, custom, and convention [6,7]. This can be a period of ambiguity and uncertainty but also one of potential creativity and transformation [6,8]. Turner

viewed liminality as a space where societal norms can be broken, allowing for new perspectives and growth[8]. In Pi Village, liminality demonstrates the blurred legal status of housing and residents, caught between rural administration and urban expansion. Migrant workers in Pi Village exist in a state of liminality because they are neither fully integrated into the urban fabric of Beijing the metropolis nor fully detached from their rural origins [3]. Therefore, Turner's liminality enables the comprehension of Pi Village as a geographical and metaphorical 'in-between' space where conventional social structures are suspended, producing chances for novel social formations and resilience.

Doug Saunders' "Arrival City"[9,10] presents the phenomenon of mass migration from rural areas to cities and the formation of communities on the fringes of traditional urban centers [9]. These "arrival cities" are the places where newcomers establish new lives and attempt to integrate socially and economically [9]. Saunders stresses that the success or failure of these communities has a significant impact on local, national, and international development [10]. He highlights that arrival cities serve as launchpads for migrants, providing opportunities for social mobility and integration into the broader urban landscape [9]. The theory directly connects Pi Village due to its role in accommodating rural migrants to Beijing by providing affordable housing and a sense of belonging to newcomers, thus supporting them to navigate the complexities of urban life and transform from marginalized migrants into integrated urban residents or pursue job positions they desire — Pi Village operates as a distinct zone where rural migrants arrive and adapt to the urban life in Beijing.

Ananya Roy's work on the "Politics of Informality" challenges conventional interpretation of informality as marginal or outside the formal systems of governance and economy [11,12]. Alternatively, Roy argues that informality is integral to the production and regulation of urban space and is deeply intertwined with state power and capital accumulation [13]. She regards that informality is not an exception to formal planning but a mode of urbanization itself, particularly in the developing world [11]. Roy's perspective helps to reveal the underlying patterns of social power that shape urban development, from individual behaviours to national and international dynamics [14]. In the case of Pi Village, an urban village in the developing world of China, informality is eminent in the ambiguous legal status of housing and residents and the interplay of urban power dynamics. This ambiguous status often allows residents to break formal regulations, leading to creative strategies for survival and governance, and it helps us understand how Pi Village operates within the complex dynamics of Beijing's urban environment.

In conclusion, Turner's Liminal Spaces, Saunders' "Arrival City," and the Politics of Informality by Roy together construct a robust conceptual framework for the study of Pi Village by providing complementary insights into the village's nature as a space of transition, a gateway for migrant integration, and a product of informal urbanization processes, respectively.

2.2. Place attachment and social resilience

According to the thesis, Pi Village is an enclave of the coexistence of place attachment and social resilience [15]. Place attachment refers to the emotional bond that individuals or groups form with specific places, encompassing a sense of belonging, identity, and well-being derived from those connections. Social resilience refers to a community's ability to overcome social adversities and challenges through the collective effort of members. The agency, or the presenting form of actions, of place attachment is through place-making as resistance, which involves the social practice, meanings, and activities that create and recreate urban places, in general [16]. There are multiple ways of resistance of to make place: Pi Villagers, mostly those who migrate from rural areas, make places for residential and commercial use by reclaiming, negotiating, being aided by local NGOs,

and transforming public spaces to fulfil a variety of needs [17], including financial aids, cultural recognition, and the curing of nostalgia.

In the context of Pi Village, place-making can be seen as a form of resistance against the social and spatial marginalization that are experienced by migrant workers [18]. The tent theatre and Migrant Workers Home in Pi Village, which represent a collective effort to reenchant urban space and provide a sense of hope and belonging for migrant workers [19], organize cultural events, festivals, and regular writing seminars. By engaging in such cultural self-management, the migrant community creates a significant uniqueness in Beijing. Therefore, through the place-making process of creating a built environment of shared cultural desire, emotional connection, and social needs, place attachment is formed, which is a dynamic process shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors and is influenced by the meanings, experiences, and memories associated with a particular place, leading to the external definition of Pi Village as a social resilient community. Migrant workers in Pi Village form strong place attachments, establishing a sense of belonging and stability in an otherwise precarious urban environment. It is evident that the experience of social disparity, alienation, and anomie in the city is undoubtedly a very relevant part of migrant-worker literature, and therefore a path worthy of further exploration [3].

MacKinnon and Derickson brought up the concept of “resourcefulness” as an alternative approach for community groups to foster, which differs from the common conservative ecological concept of resilience that is defined externally by state agencies and expert knowledge [20]. They argue that resilience is often misapplied spatially, as it primarily operates at the scale of capitalist social relations. They regard “resourcefulness” as community groups’ internal ability to overcome adversity with an innovative solution. In the context of Pi Village, “resourcefulness” can be witnessed in how migrant communities negotiate legal ambiguities and spatial instability to construct a sense of “home” with social and institutional change [21]. This is evident in Pi Village’s transformation from a transport hub to a resilient enclave, where residents creatively utilize informal and abnormal strategies for survival, governance, reclaiming, negotiation, and transforming spaces for residential and commercial use with more social-economic resilience on the ground [22]. These actions are presented by residents’ seeking of aid from NGOs, apartments’ adaptation to satisfying nostalgic feelings, and transforming public spaces into commerce, emotional well-being, and assistance for the next generation’s development.

As a result, place attachment and resilience are bonded together, which are not merely about emotional bonds formed to struggle for survival but more likely a creative process of collective action and belonging. Several research questions are brought up to guide the investigation of the study into the interplay between place attachment and social resilience, regarding how place attachment promotes social resilience within marginalized communities and how social resilience contributes to the maintenance and strengthening of place attachment bonds in the context of urban villages, such as Pi Village.

- How do migrant communities negotiate legal ambiguities and spatial precarity to construct “home”?
- What role do grassroots organizations and informal social infrastructures play in fostering social resilience?
- How does the state’s shifting tolerance shape the socio-political legitimacy of liminal spaces?

3. Methodology & case contexts

3.1. Case selection

The selection of Pi Village as a research case is anchored in its unique trajectory from a transport hub located in the intersecting point of Beijing's main districts to a contested yet resilient migrant enclave. Pi Village is the epitome of the archetype to investigate place attachment and social resilience in the context of urbanization. The journey it has gone through marks it as a place where the dreams and struggles of rural migrants are intertwined, especially when migrants encounter social-economic disparity, alienation, and anomie in the city.

Pi Village's historical evolution includes its initial role as a drop-off location for rural migrants, a transformation into a contested yet resilient migrant enclave, and its eventual redevelopment, making it an ideal case for understanding the resilience of marginalized communities, where the concept of "home" is verified through daily interactions and place-making activities [23,24].

3.2. Mixed-methods approach

The research employs a mixed-methods approach including ethnographic fieldwork, archival analysis, and spatial mapping.

The mixed-methods approach offers a comprehensive view of Pi Village, addressing complex research questions through methodological triangulation that combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to enhance validity. In-depth ethnographic fieldwork is done through the year 2024 to 2025 by volunteering, cooperating with the head and workers of the NGO, interacting with children of all ages in Pi Village, and interviewing with residents. The ethnographic fieldwork captures micro-level practices and narratives of belonging by immersing in the daily life of Pi Village, which aligns with the study's acknowledgement of the concept "home" created and reinforced through everyday activities and interactions by understanding how people create a sense of belonging in a new environment [25].

Archival research involves collecting existing documents, academic journals, and news articles, policy documents, and online forums to analyse media representation, policy changes, and evolving public perceptions of Pi Village to help provide a macro-level understanding of the historical. However, due to the inadequacy of policy-related materials available, this study is mostly based on existing academic journals and news articles related to Pi Village and primary research done daily through interactions with the NGO, children, workers, writers, parents, and residents of various demographics. Archival research complements the ethnographic fieldwork by connecting local experiences to broader social, economic, and political, also helping the comprehension of social contexts.

The spatial mapping is employed to visualize the growth of informal infrastructure and demographic shifts, which provides a spatial dimension to the analysis [26]. Participant observation and informal interviews from architectural and anthropological fieldwork can give a deeper understanding of people's interaction with their built environment [27]. The spatial mapping will be conducted by the tool of QGIS. By visualizing the qualitative aspect, the mapping complements the archival analysis and ethnographic fieldwork by grounding the analysis in the material reality of Pi Village to offer a nuanced understanding of place attachment and social resilience. Furthermore, the study can examine people's interaction with their built environment [28].

4. Empirical findings and analysis

4.1. Economics geographies and spatial arbitrage

Pi Village demonstrates how economic geography and the concept of spatial arbitrage, which refers to the act of capitalizing on geographical disparities in prices, wages, or other economic factors to improve one's economic condition, influence migration patterns. The transformation that occurred in Pi Village's case is rooted in the economic opportunities available in Beijing combined with the lower costs of living in the village [3].

It is unignorable that the cost-of-living difference between central Beijing and Pi Village is huge. By living in Pi Village, rural migrants could enjoy normal goods at a lower price, which is accessing Beijing's labour market with top-tier wage while paying less for housing and other necessities [29], which is a primary reason why Pi Village stays especially attractive to migrant workers who have lower budget of living and seek greater savings. Although migrants have to give up the access to resources such as healthcare, education and higher-paying job options, their cost-benefit analysis tells them that living in Pi Village and making efforts to survive is more likely for them to accumulate wealth than living in their hometowns. Pi Village's location is very strategic, connecting the suburb with the centre of Beijing. Its geographic proximity to jobs and transportation hubs of expressways and metro minimizes commuting time, which is shortened within an hour for most cases, and costs, making it an attractive residential option for those working in both the city and more peripheral districts of Beijing and outcompeting other residing options [3]. Additionally, due to the nature of an enclave, Pi Village fosters an informal economy that allows residents to creatively adapt spaces for commercial, artistic, and educational use, which provide additional economic opportunities for migrants and contributing to the village's economic resilience, despite the substandard living conditions [30]. Lastly, the utilization of informal strategies for survival and transforming spaces for residential purposes demonstrates "resourcefulness" by navigating legal ambiguities.

Although having advantages economically and geographically, migrant workers often face discrimination in the urban labour market and are more likely to be employed in informal or low-wage sectors [31]. Besides, due to the Hukou system, which is a regulation of household registration in China, exacerbates the challenges faced by migrants, limiting their access to public services, social welfare, and children's education [3]. By interviewing Pei, a mother of two sons, who was raised and married in Pi Village due to the advantage of spatial arbitrage. She immigrated to Beijing and stayed at Pi Village at the age of 12 with her parents who are earlier rural-urban labour migrants, reveals that even after more than decades of staying here, Pei has to send her kids back to her hometown for the last year of high school and Gaokao (the entrance exam to universities) because her family is not eligible for the quota of Gaokao due to not having a local-Beijing Hukou, which forces her family of three generations rooted in Beijing to passively separate again for education purposes, bringing her family great inconvenience. When talking about the extremely competitive educational atmosphere in Beijing, she stated that she would never compare her sons to "other children" since the resources children access are not comparable to those who are native to Beijing and have the financial support and privileges to enter top-tier schools. Through Pei's case, a rural migrant-worker family of six, even after 20 years of dedication in urban development, still lives in the periphery of Beijing's resource and social structures. Although she admitted several policies in social welfare has evolved, policy reforms aimed at integrating migrant populations, these reforms have not fully addressed the systemic inequalities embedded in the Hukou system [32].

4.2. Negotiating legitimacy: state-migrant interactions

At Pi Village, governance structures and rules are unclear, contested, and not fully enforced, which is generalized in a term called “ambiguous governance”. Pi Village’s ambiguity arises from the tension between the formal urban planning regulations and the pragmatic realities of managing rapid urban expansion and increasing migrant populations.



Figure 1. Sign of apartment renting in a narrow alley of Pi Village (author’s own)

The local government tacitly tolerates certain informal practices, such as the construction of unauthorized housing and operation of unlicensed businesses, to maintain social stability and support economic growth. This is a special case for an enclave of low cost of living and high economic vitality, though informal, due to the metropolis Beijing’s massive demand for cheaper labour force [33]. It is a series of chain reactions that links Pi Village’s vigour to the economic output/consumption of Beijing, directly influencing the city’s gross production. Despite the advantage of tolerance, there is a risk that this tolerance can shift abruptly, as demonstrated by the mass evictions of migrant workers in 2017, which was labelled as the removal of the “low-end population” [3]. This mass eviction reveals the governance’s underlying attitude toward migrant workers, which treats migrant workers as tools/instruments for maximizing production without ensuring the access to essential social resources. Nowadays, the political attitude toward Pi Village is shifted back to “tacit tolerance” after years of disputes, especially after the severe economic downturn during years of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the government’s seeking for social stability — evicting large numbers of residents from informal settlements can lead to social unrest and instability, and tacit tolerance can be a way to maintain order, even if it means overlooking regulatory compliance.

As walking through Pi Village, sole traders are a very common phenomenon. A 50-year-old woman, Li, runs a Liangpi shop on her pedicab, which is obviously an informal business without a business license. The Liangpi hand-made by her is very popular within Pi Village and its neighbouring communities. Indeed, it’s much fresher compared to those sold in the centre city, with a price that is 30% of the common market price. According to other customers, her pedicab has been there for years and she sells from 5 a.m. when people go to work to 2 a.m. when some are back from work while she prepares raw material for the new day. Due to her Beijing accent, a conversation was initiated spontaneously. She was born and raised in Shijingshan District, which is one of the 6 main districts in central Beijing, with the closest distance to Changan Street, the heart of China, showing how different she is compared to other migrant workers in Pi Village. Before the pandemic, she

worked at Club-Med in southern China, which was a stable and enjoyable job for her. The reason she moved from Shijingshan to Pi Village is due to her son's marriage and the potential risk of working outside of Beijing during the pandemic. Regarding the dramatic change of lifestyles within years of her life, she felt it was totally acceptable for her due to the zero-cost of having her own business and staying closer with her family. The story of Li manifests that the tacit tolerance in Pi Village allowed people like her to form a stronger bond with her family as well as bringing values to the community. Therefore, governance ambiguity contributes to Pi Village's place attachment and social resilience.



Figure 2. Li making Liangpi in her pedicab (author's own)

4.3. Grassroots infrastructure and collective belonging

In Pi Village, grassroots initiatives, often led by migrant workers themselves, play a crucial role in addressing local needs and fostering a sense of community [3]. Besides individuals, there is a local NGO called Tongxin rooted in Pi Village since 2015, supporting children's extracurricular education and daily activities of the Pi Village Literature Group every Saturday. Tongxin satisfies the needs of Pi Village's residents by offering free education resources to children, since most parents are unable to provide support in their children's education, and sourcing funds from Walmart China to aid food supply in the community. A food bank funded by Walmart is set up in Tongxin, which allows residents to both directly purchase food in a lower price of use coupons earned by children's excellence in extracurricular activities.

Cultural Centres, such as the Migrant Workers Home in Pi Village, serve as vital spaces for community building and cultural expression [34]. These centers often host literature groups, art troupes, and museums that celebrate migrant worker culture and provide a platform for their voices under the support of Tongxin [3]. The Pi Village Literature Group, for example, offers workshops and a supportive community for migrant workers to develop their writing skills and excavate their inner stories [34]. Fan Yusu, was the most successful writer ever nurtured in the group whose essay "I am Fan Yusu" went viral in 2017 and has been widely discussed in China and internationally. Fan Yusu's rise to fame highlights the potential of these grassroots initiatives to empower migrant workers and amplify their voices in the broader society [2]. Though few "workmates" actively engage in shaping the New Worker culture, Pi Village literature holds significance for those who contribute to and benefit from it, particularly its authors [2]. Fu Qiuyun, a key member of the literature group, has been composing and helping other members, such as Fan Yusu, publish poems since 2014 and notes how literature has reshaped her perception of life,

allowing her to believe that literature offers solace in suffering [34]. The literature group provides space for study and discussion to workers who are interested in literature [3]. The participation of intellectuals, writers, and editors, such as Yuan Ling, who immersed in Pi Village, regularly participate in the weekly activities of the literature group afterward, and published the book *My Pi Village Brothers and Sisters* with the aim of giving Pi Village more recognition and publicity [34], has expanded the community's dynamics, offering diverse perspectives and expertise [2].

Place attachment is cultivated through social rituals such as festivals and shared meals in Pi Village, forming the narratives of "staying despite precarity". Picun Workers' Home holds traditional cultural and festival events tailored to various hometown features to help workers create an emotional connection to an otherwise "heartless" urban space [19]. These events provide opportunities for migrants to celebrate their culture, share experiences, and build a sense of community [2,3]. The New Workers' Art Festival and the Precarious Worker's Spring Festival Gala are examples of such initiatives, which captured the attention of official news media in Beijing. Additionally, food is important for fostering a sense of community and social integration [35]. In order to preserve their cultural heritage and promote social ties, migrants can prepare and share traditional dishes from their hometowns in Tongxin's Shared Kitchen. Notwithstanding their status as outsiders, these activities turn Pi Village into a thriving cultural landscape where migrants actively influence their surroundings and create deep bonds with their community [3]. Zhao, a worker in Tongxin, was an undergraduate when she first joined. When seeking for a job after graduation, her mind wasn't about charity work at all. However, after an occasional volunteering opportunity in Tongxin, especially after a "special" child stepping out of his depression and becoming confident, she felt grateful to be needed to help those children, and chose to work there as her career after graduation. Throughout the years, she has been taking children out to worth-visiting spots in Beijing, where their parents are unlikely to bring them due to financial burden and time constraints, and actively communicating with the parents of the children who need extra support. These grassroots initiatives demonstrate the resilience and agency of migrant communities in Pi Village.

5. Conclusions & discussions

Pi Village has challenged binary notions of formality and informality through its blurred lines between official and unofficial culture [2]. Grassroots initiatives like Tongxin and the Migrant Workers' Home fill gaps in formal governance by providing essential services and cultural spaces; the agency of migrant workers and the economic hybridity of the village further complicate the dichotomy [19]. As Picerni [3] suggests, all forms of informality in Pi Village, from the informal economy and geography to grassroots culture in literature and education, Pi Village challenges the city's uniformity while struggling other policy restrictions like Hukou, offering a multi-layered perspective of urban space. The tactic tolerance in Pi Village allows people to form stronger bonds, thus contributing to the community's strong social resilience.

Therefore, "home" in Pi Village is not a static entity but rather an ongoing process. Through material practices like permitting the growth of grassroots infrastructure and symbolic claims of belonging fostered in cultural centres, residents create a layered socio-political legitimacy, which allows them to negotiate their place in the city and build a resilient community from the ground up. In conclusion, the power of cumulative acts of dwelling as a collective social agency in peripheral regions of China can shape a sense of home, and generate long-term resilience [36].

Drawn from the study of Pi Village, future research can be conducted as comparative studies of similar migrant enclaves in other Chinese cities like Guangzhou or Shenzhen [37,38], which could

reveal the diverse strategies employed by migrant communities to build resilience and negotiate urban integration in different historical and demographic contexts. A longitudinal analysis tracking Pi Village's fate amid Beijing's ongoing urban restructuring would provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of urban renewal policies on migrant communities. It can be achieved by monitoring changes in housing affordability, social networks, access to services, and even the effectiveness of participatory planning approaches [39].

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