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Spatial Justice and Residential Differentiation in Inner-City Xi'an: A Comparative Study of Resettlement Housing, Urban Villages and Public Rental Housing

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Abstract: This study develops the original field report on urban problems in Xi'an into an English academic paper on residential differentiation and spatial justice. Taking East Bali Village resettlement housing, West Bali Village urban village housing and the Mingdemen public rental housing area as comparative cases, the paper examines how three housing spaces located close to the Xiaozhai central business district serve different social groups through differentiated rents, environments, tenancy relations and redevelopment expectations. The field evidence shows that Mingdemen public rental housing provides the most stable and comfortable environment at a low monthly rent of about 400 yuan, mainly supporting elderly people, disabled residents and other vulnerable groups. East Bali resettlement housing has better formal housing conditions than the urban village but relatively higher rents and a lower occupancy rate, reflecting the tension between physical upgrading and livelihood continuity after demolition and resettlement. West Bali Village offers the lowest threshold for migrants, delivery workers, security guards and small vendors, but its dense buildings, shared facilities, poor lighting and safety risks make it a typical low-cost yet environmentally deprived housing space. By linking the field findings with recent Chinese and international literature on urban renewal, affordable housing, migrant settlement and urban village governance, the paper argues that low-rent informal or semi-formal housing should not be understood only as an object of clearance. It also performs a compensatory function in the urban housing system. Inclusive renewal in Xi'an should therefore combine environmental improvement, rent affordability, tenant protection, livelihood support and participatory governance.

Keywords: Spatial Justice; Urban Village; Public Rental Housing; Resettlement Housing; Urban Renewal; Xi'an.

1. Introduction

China's large cities have entered a stage in which urban growth is no longer defined only by outward expansion, but increasingly by the renovation, reuse and governance of built-up inner-city spaces. Recent research describes this transition as a shift from incremental land development to stock-space optimization, where urban renewal must balance efficiency, publicness, environmental quality and social equity [1-5]. In this context, the question is not simply whether an old neighborhood should be renewed, but whose housing security, income strategy and everyday life are protected or weakened during renewal.

Urban villages, resettlement communities and public rental housing are three important spatial forms through which Chinese cities absorb different social groups. Urban villages are often criticized for dense buildings, weak infrastructure and safety problems, yet they also provide a low-cost entry point for migrants and low-income workers [6-10]. Public rental housing, by contrast, is a formal welfare-oriented housing arrangement that may improve stability, security and residential satisfaction [18-23]. Resettlement housing lies between these forms: it improves physical living conditions after demolition, but it may also reshape villagers' livelihood base, rental income and relation to urban space [14-17].

The field report on Xi'an provides a useful micro-case for examining these issues. East Bali Village, West Bali Village and Mingdemen are all located in the core area of Yanta District and near dense transport, education, medical and commercial resources. However, they represent different housing systems: East Bali has already been demolished and resettled; West Bali remains an urban village; Mingdemen includes public rental housing, affordable housing and commodity housing. Their spatial proximity and institutional difference make them suitable for a comparative urban sociological analysis.

2. Research Design and Case Background

This paper is based on a three-hour field investigation conducted on 14 November 2025, supplemented by a literature-based extension of the original course paper. The fieldwork used semi-structured interviews and direct observation. Interviewees included shop owners, original villagers, landlords, tenants and community security staff. The study focuses on six dimensions: community environment, resident composition, rent level, housing condition, occupancy rate and attitudes toward demolition or renewal.

East Bali Village has been transformed into a resettlement community. The fieldwork focused on Buildings 1 to 4, where the first and second floors include shops and the upper floors are residential units. A light meal shop owner reported that a 35 m2 shop rented for about 4,000 yuan per month, while a 75 m2 two-bedroom apartment rented for about 2,000 yuan per month. Another villager with multiple rental units described East Bali as more convenient and safer than West Bali, but the area also faced vacancy pressure because nearby university relocation and economic slowdown had reduced rental demand.

West Bali Village is an old urban village on Chang'an South Road. It has a long settlement history, a compact built environment and a complex population structure. The original report notes that the community had 502 converted non-

agricultural households, 1,117 registered residents and more than 15,000 temporary residents, with daily flows exceeding 25,000 person-times. Interviews showed that rooms in small inns or private rental buildings could rent for 200 to 500 yuan per month, while shop rents varied greatly according to location and business type. A landlord owning a seven-story building of about 700 m2 reported 60 to 70 rooms, with more than 50 already rented.

Mingdemen is a more formal residential area with public rental housing, economically affordable housing and commercial housing. The fieldwork focused on the public rental housing community. Interviewees emphasized convenience, comfort and low rent. One female tenant paid slightly more than 400 yuan per month and expressed a strong sense of residential satisfaction. Security staff indicated that many residents were elderly or disabled people. However, the broader Mingdemen area also showed governance problems such as narrow roads, informal vendors occupying parking or pedestrian space and noise conflicts near the city-wall park.

3. Residential Differentiation in Three Inner-City Housing Spaces

The first dimension is environmental quality. Mingdemen public rental housing has the best physical environment among the three cases: low-rise buildings, wider spacing, small public gardens and relatively good management. East Bali's resettlement buildings have formal apartment layouts but limited green space, close building spacing and visible electric-bike congestion. West Bali has the weakest environment: narrow lanes, dense high-rise self-built houses, poor lighting, mixed electrical wiring, dust and shared facilities. This contrast confirms recent studies that housing quality is strongly tied to health, subjective well-being and neighborhood satisfaction, especially among migrants and low-income residents [24-27].

The second dimension is resident composition. Mingdemen mainly supports elderly people, disabled residents and low-income households who meet public rental housing criteria. East Bali accommodates original villagers, shop operators, nearby students and workers in surrounding commercial areas. West Bali mainly serves delivery workers, security guards, retail vendors, service workers, students and other mobile or low-income groups. The three spaces therefore form a small inner-city housing ladder. Different groups choose or are assigned to different positions according to eligibility, income, social networks, household size and tolerance for environmental risk [28-31].

The third dimension is rent and affordability. Mingdemen public rental housing and West Bali both provide low-rent options, but through very different mechanisms. Mingdemen's affordability is produced by government supply, eligibility review and welfare allocation. West Bali's affordability is produced by informal private rental supply, dense space use and weak facility standards. East Bali is more expensive: whole apartments are usually around 2,000 yuan per month, while subdivided rooms may range from 500 to 1,000 yuan. The comparison shows that the city's low-rent housing function cannot be evaluated only by physical quality; it must also consider access threshold, payment flexibility and the everyday income structure of tenants [18, 21-23].

The fourth dimension is occupancy and market resilience. Mingdemen public rental housing has strong demand and can reach full occupancy because it combines low rent, formal quality and good location. West Bali also has high occupancy, reported above 85 percent in the fieldwork, because its rents are extremely low and payment terms are flexible. East Bali has more vacancy pressure, with one interview suggesting that the vacancy rate in the surveyed buildings could be around 50 percent. This pattern helps explain why demolition and resettlement do not automatically produce economic security for original villagers: formal housing may increase quality but reduce the competitiveness of low-cost rental supply.

4. Spatial Justice, Housing Security and the Function of Low-Rent Urban Space

Spatial justice requires attention to both distribution and access. The three case areas are close to central urban resources, but the way residents access those resources differs sharply. Public rental housing residents access centrality through welfare eligibility; resettled villagers access it through compensation and replacement housing; urban village tenants access it through low rent, informal networks and flexible tenancy. If spatial justice is measured only by building quality, West Bali appears merely backward. If it is measured by access to central urban opportunities, West Bali also performs an inclusionary function for groups excluded from formal housing markets [11-13].

This does not mean that poor environments should be romanticized. West Bali's shared bathrooms, crowded corridors, insufficient daylight and safety risks represent clear spatial deprivation. However, recent studies of urban village regeneration warn that clearance-led renewal can displace tenants, increase rental costs and weaken migrants' capacity to remain near jobs [15-17, 32]. The field evidence therefore supports a dual judgment: West Bali needs environmental improvement, but its low-rent function should be retained through affordable rental supply, phased renovation and tenant protection.

Mingdemen shows the positive side of formal housing security. A stable public rental unit gives vulnerable residents privacy, safety and predictable cost. Empirical studies from Beijing, Chongqing and national migrant surveys similarly show that public rental or security housing can improve satisfaction, long-term settlement intention, local identity and social integration [18-23]. Yet formal public rental housing has limited supply and strict access criteria. It cannot fully replace the large-scale low-rent capacity that urban villages provide to mobile workers.

East Bali reveals the ambiguity of resettlement. Demolition and replacement housing can improve sanitation, management and dwelling independence, but original villagers may lose land-based income and find that their formal units are less competitive in a segmented rental market. The interviewees' mixed attitudes toward demolition correspond to recent literature on redevelopment conflict, institutional arrangements and stakeholder bargaining [14-17, 33]. A just renewal strategy should therefore evaluate not only compensation area or building quality, but also post-resettlement livelihoods and rental income continuity.

5. Urban Renewal Dilemmas and Governance Implications

The comparison suggests three governance dilemmas. The

first is the quality-affordability dilemma. Improving housing quality often raises costs, while maintaining very low rents often depends on dense, weakly regulated and environmentally poor buildings. Recent studies of master leasing and micro-renovation in Shenzhen show that upgrading can create more livable housing for young and newly arrived citizens, but it may also transform the social composition of urban villages and reduce the lowest-cost supply if affordability is not protected [6-8].

The second is the efficiency-participation dilemma. Top-down renewal may move quickly, but it can intensify conflicts when villagers, tenants and small businesses are treated mainly as objects of management. Research on urban village redevelopment finds that institutional arrangements, stakeholder negotiation and bottom-up participation affect conflict levels and project outcomes [14, 16, 17, 33]. Xi'an's policy design should therefore include tenants and small operators in information disclosure, relocation planning and benefit evaluation, not only village collectives and developers.

The third is the welfare-market dilemma. Mingdemen depends on government allocation and cannot expand without fiscal and land support. West Bali depends on market-like private rental relations and cannot guarantee minimum environmental standards by itself. East Bali depends on resettlement compensation and rental income, but is vulnerable to local market downturns. An inclusive housing system should combine public rental housing, affordable rental housing, regulated urban village rental rooms and improved resettlement communities rather than relying on a single model [1-5, 18-23].

Based on the fieldwork, four practical suggestions can be proposed. First, West Bali should adopt phased micro-renovation, focusing on fire safety, wiring, sanitation, ventilation, waste management and lane order before large-scale demolition. Second, Mingdemen should strengthen support for elderly and disabled tenants through community services, barrier-free facilities and income assistance. Third, East Bali should improve rental management, public space maintenance and support for resettled villagers whose income declined after demolition. Fourth, the Mingdemen area's vendor and parking conflicts should be handled through fixed vending spaces, pedestrian priority and community negotiation rather than simple removal.

6. Conclusion

The comparative study of East Bali, West Bali and Mingdemen shows that inner-city residential differentiation in Xi'an is not a simple hierarchy from old to new or from informal to formal. Each space performs a different social function. Mingdemen offers welfare-based stability for vulnerable groups. East Bali provides formal resettlement housing but also reveals post-demolition livelihood pressure. West Bali offers the lowest rental threshold for mobile workers while concentrating clear environmental risks.

The core finding is that spatial justice depends on the simultaneous protection of affordability, dignity, safety and access to central urban opportunities. Urban renewal in Xi'an should not erase low-rent space in the name of beautification, nor should it tolerate unsafe and unhealthy living conditions in the name of affordability. A more inclusive path is to improve the material environment while preserving the social function of low-cost rental housing, strengthening public rental housing, protecting tenants and supporting resettled villagers' livelihoods.

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