

UNFINISHED DREAMS: DWELLING IN CHINA'S LANWEILOU HOUSING PROJECTS

MASTER THESIS BY YAJIE GAO

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Unfinished Dreams: Dwelling in China's 烂尾楼 Housing Projects

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Abstract

This thesis examines the phenomenon of urban abandonment in China through the lens of “lanweilou” (unfinished housing), inspired by the documentary *我住在烂尾楼* ("Dwelling in the Unfinished Buildings"). The documentary captures the plight of over 300 homeowners and approximately 1000 individuals dwelling in incomplete urban housing and prolonged uncertainty. By examining the systemic failures that led to the abandonment of residential constructions, this study delves into the everyday resistance and coping strategies of those residing in the incomplete urban residence, seeking to uncover the circumstances leading to their occupancy, the reasons behind the abandonment of residential constructions, and the broader implications for Chinese urbanism.

This research aims to contribute to the discourse on Chinese urbanism by drawing from southern urbanism theories on understanding urban abandonment in China and the various forms of everyday resistance employed by residents in response to their precarious living conditions. By developing a lanwei housing spectrum, offering critical insights into the multifaceted implications of incomplete urbanization. The narratives presented in the documentary serve as a starting point for a profound exploration of the everydayness within the grand narrative of China’s urbanization. In the aftermath of COVID-induced economic stagnation and the housing bubble burst in China, the severity of this crisis deepens, raising critical questions about the sustainability of current urban development practices and the future of urbanization in

China. Through this exploration, the thesis seeks to shed light on the complexities of urban abandonment and the social, economic, and political dynamics that shape the urban landscape in contemporary China.

Key words: urban abandonment, everyday resistance, squatting, lanweilou, unfinished housing spectrum, Chinese urbanism.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, China has experienced an unprecedented process of urbanization. Driven by state-led economic policies and speculative urban expansion (Chen 2014), China has transformed its cities into engines of economic growth. However, alongside the erection of new residential complexes and gleaming skyscrapers, a troubling reality has emerged: the phenomenon of lanweilou “烂尾楼”, or unfinished buildings and stalled housing projects. The unfinished status of these buildings can be attributed to a convergence of factors, including financial constraints, regulatory impediments introduced during the pandemic, and the collapse of housing developers. These factors represent the unanticipated consequences of speculative real estate practices and the inherent vulnerability of China’s urban model.

While there has been considerable academic discourse surrounding the ambitious scale and rapid pace of China’s urbanization, this is a notable research gap in understanding the lived experience of those residing in the urban abandoned housing and the grassroots movements that have emerged in response (Qian 2022). The existing literature on the matter tends to concentrate on macroeconomic factors driving urban growth, the policy underpinning it, and the structural challenges within China’s housing market (Z. Wang and Wu 2019; Shin 2013). Moreover, studies on grassroots urbanism in China remain relatively scarce. Research has tended to focus on formal and state-sanctioned forms of urban development, leaving a significant

research gap in understanding informal, everyday resistance and alternative forms of urbanism that emerge from grassroots initiatives (L. Zhang 2004; Shin 2013).

Nevertheless, there has been a marked absence of scholarly attention devoted to the micro-level dynamics of urban abandonment in China. I adopt fruitful southern urbanism theories and apply them to the discussion of Chinese urban informality, arguing that an investigation of Chinese urbanism can contribute to the broader southern urbanism discourse. By situating the concepts of everyday resistance (Bayat 2013; Scott 1985; Simone 2004), squatting, and insurgency (Miraftab 2009) within the context of the everyday realities of residents inhabiting lanweilou, and the grassroots mobilization of urbanism that has emerged in response to this plight, my thesis aims to address this gap in knowledge by scrutinizing how lanweilou residents navigate their precarious living conditions and how grassroots resistance is reshaping urban spaces in China.

This thesis employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing digital ethnography and netnography to explore the experiences of lanweilou residents. Digital ethnography enables an in-depth study of online environments, viewing the internet as a field (HINE 2016), where individuals engage in interaction, and shared experiences, construct communities, and form a sense of belonging. Netnography (Kozinets 2015), a specific form of digital ethnography, used to analyze digital traces left by users on media platforms, is particularly suited to the study of online cultures and activities of lanweilou residents.

The research entails online observation and analysis of online content

related to lanweilou, including social media platforms such as Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), on which residents document their daily lives and struggles.

Through these platforms, residents have been able to share their experiences, mobilize support, and draw attention to this topic. By analyzing their posts, comments, and interactions, hope to gain insight into how residents use digital space to navigate their precarious living conditions and engage in grassroots resistance.

The structure of my thesis is organized to systematically explore the phenomenon of lanweilou and broader implications for urban everyday resistance in contemporary China. The thesis is divided into five chapters, Chapter 1 presents a literature review, establishing the theoretical framework of the study. It begins by defining the field of urban abandonment and ruined urbanization. Subsequently, the concept of everyday resistance is examined in the context of Southern urbanism. Finally, the study occupies the niche of studying squatting in contemporary urban China, with a particular focus on how such practices manifest in Chinese contexts.

Chapter 2 provides the contextual background necessary for understanding the emergence of lanweilou in China. The chapter opens with an overview of China's urban model and socio-economic conditions that have resulted in a proliferation of real estate bankruptcies and construction stagnation. Followed by unpacking the complex dynamics of China's real estate market, to elucidate the roles of developers, homebuyers, banks, and local governments. Finally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on China's housing market is discussed.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach of the study, emphasizing

the use of digital ethnography and netnography to examine online resources and digital spaces where lanweilou residents share their experiences and engage in collective actions. The researcher's positionality and the limitations are carefully considered and addressed.

The primary content of this work is presented in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 is dedicated to an in-depth examination of the lived experience of Lanweilou resident of Yihefang, Xi'an, retelling the stories of their struggles and resilience in the face of adversity. The chapter includes personal accounts that illustrate the stark reality of inhabiting incomplete structures and the diverse tactics employed by residents to cope with challenges and uncertainties.

Chapter 5 examines the ways in which lanweilou residents utilized their agency to reassert their rights within the city. Building on the concept of Charlton (2018) and her housing spectrum, this chapter introduces a new "Lanwei housing spectrum" which details the various stages of resistance and adaptation that residents go through, from initial endurance to grassroots organizing and self-reliance on social media.

The thesis concludes with a reflection on the lanwei housing spectrum and the distinctive characteristics of Chinese activism. It considers the broader implications of this study for understanding urban resistance and grassroots movements in China, situating the findings within the global South's context of urbanization and social justice.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

My thesis draws inspiration from southern urban theories, aiming to adapt these frameworks to the context of urbanization in China. Specifically, it focuses on urban ruins and urban abandonment, exploring their impact on reshaping urban landscapes and their relationship with the everyday practices of the residents. Existing research on Chinese urbanization has extensively covered themes such as rapid urban growth, the role of state-led development, migration patterns, and socio-economic transformations. However, there remains a significant research gap, as Qian (2022) also identified: the lack of focus on the everydayness of urban life. My research addresses this gap by examining the multi-layered urban landscape of ruins in China, particularly through the lens of everyday life. I aim to explore how individuals' urban experiences both align and clash with the overarching urban development regime at various levels. This includes uncovering the transformative journey that leads individuals from being homeowners to "house slaves." Additionally, my study seeks to reveal the underlying complexities hidden beneath the glamorous surface of China's rapid urbanization.

Urban Abandonment and Ruined Urbanization

This subchapter draws from existing literature on urban ruins to advocate examining buildings through the lens of ruin and ruination, proposing this perspective as a means to highlight the productivity and

innovation that can emerge from urban decay. Dale and Burrell (2011) and Anita De Franco (2021) challenge traditional understandings of abandonment, offering a nuanced view that recognizes the potential and dynamism within ruined spaces. By borrowing the term "ruined urbanization" (Simone 2004), this section contests the prevailing narratives of urban development and progress, suggesting that ruins can offer valuable insights into the urban experience. The subchapter concludes by exploring the relationship between urban imaginaries and urban ruins (Fraser 2018), emphasizing how these decaying spaces shape and are shaped by the collective dreams and fears of urban inhabitants.

Dale and Burrell (2011) examine the intricate relationship between buildings and ruins. They employ a 'disturbing' perspective to illustrate the nuances of this interplay, challenging the antithesis of organization versus disorganization. They highlight that the inherent ambivalence of ruins is not just about waste and destruction but also subject to re-ordering processes, which constantly undergo a cycle of ruination and rebuilding, showcasing an interplay of temporality and spatiality. Ruins carry historical and cultural significance, serving as tangible reminders of the past, and can also symbolize the decay of power structures and the potential for new forms of organization to emerge. By examining buildings through the lens of ruin and ruination, organizational studies can challenge the traditional assumptions about stability and permanence, reevaluating the role of

memory, heritage, and collective narratives in shaping power dynamics, identities, and practices.

Anita De Franco's (2021) article explores the concept of abandonment within urban contexts and its implications for urban studies. The main argument of her work is that abandonment is not merely a symptom of urban decay but rather a complex phenomenon with broader social, political, and economic implications. De Franco challenges traditional understandings of abandonment as solely physical neglect or dereliction of urban spaces, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced approach that considers the interconnectedness of various forms of abandonment, including social, economic, and cultural aspects. Her work contributes to urban studies by highlighting the multifaceted nature of abandonment and calling for interdisciplinary research that addresses its root causes and consequences. It also underscores the importance of adopting critical perspectives that challenge dominant narratives about urban decline and offer alternative frameworks for understanding and addressing abandonment as a systemic issue within urban environments.

Overall, adopting a 'disturbing' approach of reading ruin and ruination (Dale and Burrell 2011) promotes a reevaluation of assumptions about stability, change, and interplay between organizational structure and process, which can enrich our understanding of organizational dynamics, resilience, and adaptation in constantly changing environments. It

encourages a critical reflection on the nuanced relationships between decay, memory, and re-ordering processes within the built environment.

Simone (2004) marked out the ruining of African cities by urbanization, the term “ruined urbanization” (2004, 407) refers to cities like Johannesburg, marked by decay, neglect, and breakdown of traditional urban infrastructure and systems. This notion challenges the prevailing narrative of urban development and progress by highlighting the complexity and contradiction inherent in rapidly changing urban landscapes. Simone suggests that within these ruins lies a hidden social infrastructure that is often overlooked or underestimated. He sheds light on the vital role people play as infrastructure in shaping and reconfiguring urban landscapes flexibly. In other words, people are seen as integral components of the social fabric, capable of driving meaningful interactions and collaborations that contribute to the overall cohesion of the community.

He expands on the traditional notions of infrastructure, from merely material structures like roads and utilities to people’s everyday activities and interactions in the city, aiming to compass the social dynamics and economic collaborations among residents, especially the marginalized urban life. Take ruins as “highly urbanized social infrastructure (2004, 407)” serves as a lens for examining the intersecting fragments of urban life, where the ruins themselves become sites of possibilities and transformation.

The “social infrastructure” speaks to the concept of “biopower” developed by Michel Foucault (2008), Selmeczi (2012) framed it as “biopolitics of dispersal”, as “an art of governing superfluous freedom of superfluous people” (2012, 86), she argues that “modern forms of abandonment originate precisely in the life-fostering objective of biopower.” Implying that individuals or groups are left out, neglected, or marginalized by society, stems from the mechanisms of biopower. Biopower refers to the way in which the state power is exercised over populations, especially in terms of regulating and managing life processes, such as birth, death, health, and reproduction. In this context, “life-fostering objective” refers to the aim of biopower to enhance and promote the productivity and well-being of population, can result in abandonment and neglect of marginalized and stigmatized groups in reverse, perhaps due to their lack of social worth or productiveness according to the standard societal norms. Therefore, while biopower aims to foster lives, paradoxically can lead to forms of abandonment or exclusion.

She elaborates on the "biopolitics of dispersal" by highlighting how abandonment is enacted through strategies of spatial dispersal and demarcation. These strategies involve the deliberate distancing and delaying of certain populations, particularly those deemed surplus or undesirable, from the central spaces of the city. By spatializing and codifying these dynamics, the governance of the city reinforces a consensus

regime that perpetuates social inequalities and maintains power structures.

Therefore, the biopolitical aspect of governance extends beyond mere control over bodies to include the regulation and organization of urban spaces in ways that serve the interests of those in power.

Overall, Simone's contribution lies in disrupting simplistic narratives of urban decline and instead invites a deeper exploration of the resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness of people living in cities marked by decay. His work offers a new perspective of people as infrastructure on urbanization and social dynamics, by emphasizing the agency and creativity of residents, which counteracts the embedded "biopolitics of dispersal", disrupting the official urban planned imaginaries.

Fraser (2018) examines the complex interplay between urban imaginaries and the ruins of Detroit, shedding light on urban struggles decay, development, and precarity. Over the past decades, Detroit has been defined by an urban ruin imaginary, reflecting the cycles of capital flow between excess and absence, mass production, and mass decay. Vulnerable communities grapple with ruin and the threat of destructive regeneration and gentrification, as Detroit's urban regeneration model prioritizes global capital circulation while intensifying conditions of the precarity of existing communities. The official urban imaginary of demolition of development naturalizes the politics of foreclosure and forced acquisition, erasing real histories and impending residents' agency in shaping their future. Through

the lens of “unbecoming”, the ruins of Detroit are portrayed as affective sites of shattered fantasies and precarity, highlighting the fractured social relations and precarious lives among ruins, erasure, and reconstruction.

This analysis resonates with the phenomenon of *lanweilou* in China, where stalled and abandoned construction sites reflect the precariousness of urban life under speculative development. The Chinese state’s often neglectful response parallels the politics of erasure seen in Detroit, where redevelopment narratives overshadow the lived experiences of those affected. In both contexts, the focus on capital accumulation overlooks the needs of communities, leaving residents to contend with the consequences of unsustainable urban policies. Fraser's (2018) critique thus offers a valuable lens for understanding the social and spatial injustices inherent in *lanwei* housing, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to urban development in China

Everyday Urban Resistance of Southern Urbanism

In this subchapter, I draw from some key concepts of everyday urban resistance from the practice of southern cities. Such as “waithood”(Honwana 2014), “quiet encroachment” and “insurgent planning”(Bayat 2013; Ballard 2015; Scott 1985; Miraftab 2009) to highlight how marginalized communities and individuals engage in subtle forms of resistance against dominant urban planning and development

paradigms. This section emphasizes the importance of everyday practices and local knowledge in shaping urban life, challenging top-down approaches to urbanization.

Honwana (2014) conceptualized the notion of “waithood”, meaning ‘waiting for adulthood’, referring to this period of suspension between childhood and adulthood. Youth in this context is not defined only by the chronological age, but rather by social capabilities and expectations. She argues that the waithood of youth does not result from a failed transition themselves, but rather rooted in a breakdown of the social contract between the state and its citizen. I take this term by expanding the subjects not only to the youth but also to a broader social group that is stuck in achieving financial capabilities. These social-economic conditions and their daily struggles perpetuate the dualism of freedom from want and freedom from fear. Building upon the previous notion of waithood, however, instead of taking it as a passive sense of “waiting”, she argues that waithood contains dynamic youth interactions and creativities of accessing their agency.

James Scott’s book explores the strategies and tactics employed by subjugated peasants in Southeast Asia to resist the domination of ruling elites. He highlighted two characteristics of peasants as either the rural poor working in agriculture or the ones with subordinate positions in a hierarchal economic and political order. He argues that while the peasants may appear submissive and compliant on the surface, they engage in subtle forms of

resistance in their everyday lives. These forms of “everyday resistance”, as Scott elucidates, are often mundane and subtle, often relying on informal networks, requiring little coordination or planning, serving as a means of individual self-help, and deliberately avoiding direct confrontation with authority (Scott 1985). Scott’s analysis sheds light on the resilience and resourcefulness of marginalized populations, offering a nuanced understanding of the ordinary’s everyday resistance to shaking oppressive power structures.

Bayat (2013) delves into the agency and resistance of ordinary people, particularly marginalized groups such as the urban dispossessed, Muslim women, and other urban grassroots, in shaping social and political change within authoritarian states and neoliberal economies. He came up with the term “quiet encroachment” (2013, 56), representing a form of social nonmovement of the urban dispossessed, exemplifies the discreet and prolonged ways in which the poor struggle to survive and to better their lives by quietly challenging established power structures and asserting their presence in urban governance. More specifically he was referring to the collective movements of the mass ordinaries, who embodied the shared experience and social dilemmas, the practices are often not guided by any ideology or organizations, aim to fight for better living opportunities and right to the city.

Ballard (2015) emphasizes the urban insurgent citizens, drawing from

rich literature to unpack how everyday individuals are empowered to assert their authority through self-help practices like dodging, resisting, defying, commandeering, diverting, building homes, earning incomes, and endeavoring in various mundane and remarkable methods to enhance their circumstances. And how do power and agency reconfigure throughout the process of grassroots activism and the assertion of their right to the city? And the contours of urban life are constantly being reshaped and redressed. Building upon the concept of “insurgent citizenship” by Holston (1995, 2008), Miraftab (2009) articulates further with the notion of insurgency and counter-hegemonic planning, he argues the “squatter movements” (2009, 35) in the global south reveals the contradictions rooted in informal settlements, as the embodiment of citizen’s insurgency but also stabilize the biased system. Informal settlements take over the weight from the shoulders of the state to supply sufficient affordable housing to the urban poor, on the other hand, squatters must give in to the political manipulation and restrictions in exchange for accessing needed daily services. Yet, they served as the “hotbed” to breed counter-hegemonic and insurgent practices that mobilized beyond the state control to reclaim their right to the city.

Squatting in Contemporary China

In contrast to the conventional understanding of “squatters” as individuals who unlawfully occupy public or private spaces, in the case of

烂尾楼 in China, they became the “squatters of their own home”. This is despite the fact that they obtain legal ownership of the property.

Nevertheless, an unfinished building usually fails to meet the requisite standards for habitation and remains illegal to reside in. Along with the phenomenon of unfinished buildings emerging all over the country, a legal gray space was born, the ambiguity of their identities and rights to occupy was constantly renegotiated by the citizens and the state.

Zhang (2015) introduced the terminology of “bulldozer urbanism” in the context of China’s urbanization, which refers to the enduring dominance of a predatory approach to urban development, which embodied a dual strategy employed by the state to advance its development agenda, quell opposition, and ensure social stability amid rapid urbanization and economic growth (2015, 141–42). According to Zhang, squatting serves as a straightforward, effective, and potentially radical grassroots strategy to address displacement and hardship, empowering individuals to assert agency and control of the violent urban accumulation, challenging the hegemonic discourse of private homeownership that drives the rapid transformation of Shanghai’s urban landscape.

Studying squatting in urban China, holds significant importance due to its distinct characteristics and implications within the country’s social, political, and cultural landscape. Unlike squatting movements seen in European cities or informal settlements in the Global South, squatting in

China is portrayed as a more individualistic and desperate response to displacement and injustice, often occupying newly built apartments symbolizing homeownership in late socialist China. The agenda of squatting in China is described as political but modest and practical, “the Chinese right’s awareness largely rests on subsistence and economic security, instead of claiming rights against the state (Shin 2013, 1168)”, focusing on resistance against repressive land-centered accumulation rather than creating alternative spaces for autonomous urban life.

Moreover, squatting in China occurs within an authoritarian context, presenting both political limits and opportunities for resistance against oppressive urban development practices and hegemonic ideologies of private property (Shin 2013). Understanding these dynamics of squatting in urban China, offers insights into the complex interplay between individual agency, political activism, and state power in the context of China’s rapid urban development.

Chapter 2. Contextualizing the Socio-Economic Roots of 烂尾楼

1. China’s Urban Model

Urbanization in China has been profoundly shaped by the central role of the state in steering, regulating, and facilitating urban growth. Since the economic reforms initiated in 1978 (H. Li 2006), the Chinese government has pursued a

deliberate urbanization strategy aimed at modernizing the economy, alleviating rural poverty, and fostering socio-economic development. This strategy has been underpinned by a comprehensive system of state planning, governance, and intervention across various facets of urban development (Chen 2014).

The state-centric model is marked by a hierarchical political structure, allowing for efficient control and strategic planning. Infrastructure and transportation development, coupled with the rising of the middle class, have been key drivers of China's urban growth (B. Wang and Just 2021). The Chinese pattern of urbanization since 1978 is characterized by “dual-track urbanization”, involving both “state-sponsored” and “spontaneous urbanization processes” (Shen, Wong, and Feng 2002, 690). In the reform process, the centrally planned economy gradually gave way to an emerging market economy emphasizing and reconfiguring the role of state-sponsored urbanization.

Land-centric urbanization has been a miracle cure for China's economic growth, exemplified by the scaling up of land fees. This emphasis on land has facilitated the convergence of urban and rural sectors, underlining the importance of integrated development strategies that bridge the gap between urban and rural areas (Liang et al. 2016). Moreover, the legacy of the planned economy in China's historical development has played a significant role in steering the urbanization process by providing upfront financing and physical infrastructure.

In the earlier stages, China benefited from a demographic dividend, which has fueled economic growth. However, as globalization and the information and

knowledge economy emerged, these factors reshaped the urban landscape. “The visible hand” (Chen 2014) has contained global impact and secured local monopolies, thereby creating a formidable force in the global economy. Overall, this synthesis of land-centric policies, integrated development strategies, planned economy principles, demographic dividends, and the impact of globalization underscores the multifaceted nature of China's urbanization trajectory.

However, despite its strengths, the Chinese urbanization model faces significant challenges. According to Chen (2014), Rapid urbanization has led to a shortage of essential resources, such as land, water, and energy, contributing to environmental degradation. The energy-intensive manufacturing sector and substantial garbage production have further strained resources (2014, 166). Additionally, the dominance of real estate development as a driving force behind the urban expansion in China has contributed to “shallow urbanization” (2014, 164). Local governments often rely on land sales and property development as major sources of revenue, incentivizing the rapid conversion of rural land into urbanized areas and the construction of residential and commercial properties. However, this focus on real estate speculation and construction often neglects broader considerations of urban livability, sustainability, and social welfare.

Furthermore, the model's dependence on favorable conditions, including global demand and initial low development, has left it more vulnerable to fluctuations in the global economy. Local debt crises and spatial inequality, exacerbated by the household registration system, present additional hurdles. Chen (2014) asserts that

China's urban growth has inherently contained elements of "planned" inequality. The principle of "先富带动后富," or enriching the early arrivers first to drive enrichment for the latecomers, has resulted in uneven development along coastal and inland areas.

Understanding the evolving dynamics of the Chinses urbanization model requires an appreciation of dialectics. While the model's success has, in part, contributed to its challenges, issues of "over-globalization" and the growing inability to redistribute wealth and manage global economic fluctuations have become current weaknesses. The concept of "shallow urbanization (Chen 2014)" highlights the disconnect between physical urban expansion and meaningful socio-economic development. The double negatives for migrant workers have resulted in material hardships and discrimination. The denial of urban citizenship and social integration challenges the sustainability of this developmental trajectory.

On the other hand, spontaneous urbanization contributes to the overall urbanization from below, it refers to the rural migration in designated urban areas without direct state sponsorship, it represents a bottom-up approach where urban growth occurs organically as a result of individual decisions and market dynamics, offering a counterpoint to the top-down planning characteristics of much of China's urbanization (Shen, Wong, and Feng 2002).

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for examining the broader socio-economic implications and the human dimension of the unfinished building phenomenon (烂尾楼) in China.

2. 烂尾楼: The Nationwide real estate bankruptcy and construction stagnation

Unfinished buildings, commonly referred to as "烂尾楼" (lànwěilóu)¹, or "rotting tail buildings," are commercial and residential complexes that remain incomplete and thus uninhabitable. These sites can be found across various urban and suburban Chinese landscapes. The phenomenon highlights the significant scale of financial instability within the real estate sector, as numerous projects are left incomplete, contributing to the sprawling presence of these unfinished structures nationwide. This section provides context and background on the extent and nature of 烂尾楼, outlining the widespread occurrence and the factors contributing to this prevalent issue.

While accurate data on the number and locations of 烂尾楼 within China is scarce, a GitHub² project titled "WeNeedHome" provides some insights. As of July 2024, this project reports a total of 351 properties in 119 cities nationwide where mortgage payments have been suspended (see Figure 1). These properties involve 135 real estate companies, including major developers such as Evergrande (恒大) and Sunac (融创). Mortgage suspensions often occur when buildings are left unfinished and housing deliveries are delayed, making this map an indirect indicator of the scale of 烂尾楼 across the country.

¹ "烂尾" (làn wěi), literal translation as "rotten tail", in Chinese refers to a project or endeavor that is left unfinished or abandoned midway

² 全国各省市停贷通知汇总地图 <https://github.com/WeNeedHome/SummaryOfLoanSuspension>

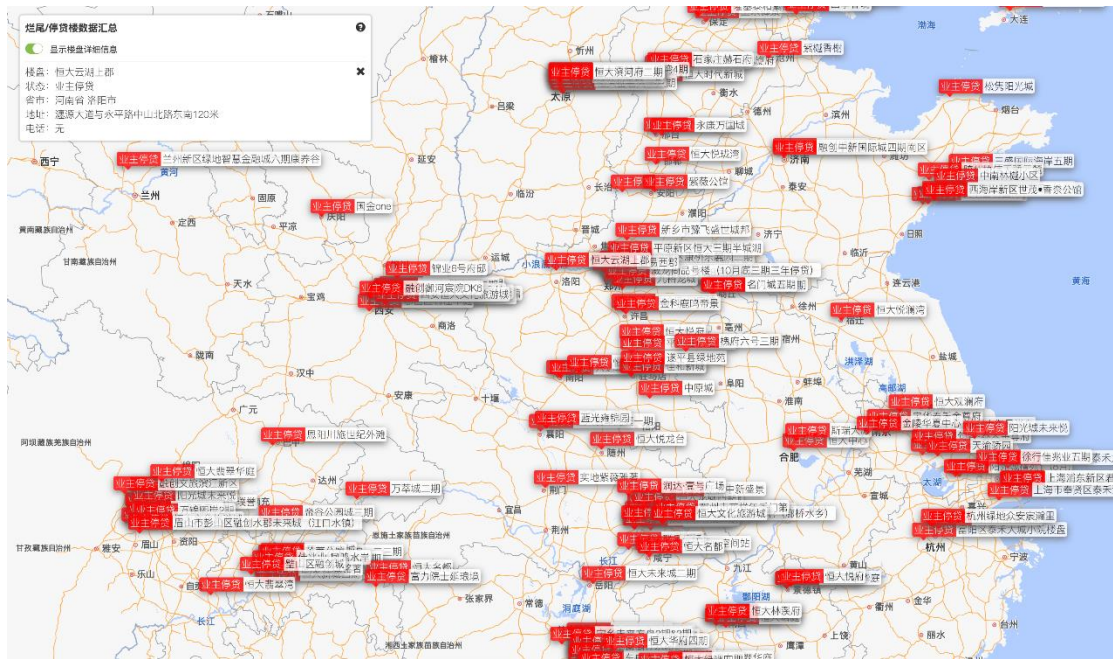


Figure 1. 全国烂尾/停贷数据汇总 National unfinished building projects & loan suspension map from Github/WeNeedHome

In this study, I will closely examine three specific cases: 易合坊 (Yihefang) in Xi'an, 别样幸福城 ("Different Kind of Happy City") in Kunming, and the Champs-Élysées project (青岛香榭丽舍) in Qingdao. By following their digital traces, I will scrutinize the everyday coping strategies employed by those affected, providing a deeper understanding of the human dimension behind these abandoned developments.

3. Unpacking Real Estate Dynamics in China

3.1 Mapping the Chain of Interests in China's Housing Market

In order to comprehend the phenomenon of 烂尾楼 in China, it is essential to map out the chain of interested parties involved in the housing market, detailing the roles and responsibilities of each significant entity involved. By scrutinizing their exchanges and interactions, we could better grasp the embedded systematic factors that have led to unprecedented urban abandonment.

When ordinary people want to purchase a property, besides the direct transaction relationship between the buyer and the developer, who else is involved in this chain of interest? One crucial entity in this chain that must be mentioned is the bank, which plays a pivotal role in maintaining the flow of funds. Home buyers typically obtain "*housing mortgage loans*" (房屋按揭贷款) from banks to finance their purchases, repaying the loans in installments (Figure 2).

A key feature of housing mortgage loans is the "*entrusted payments*" (受托支付) system. This means the money borrowed by the homebuyer from the bank does not pass through the borrower's hands but is paid directly to the developer by the bank. This system is designed to prevent homebuyers from misusing this loan. Since the bank pays the developer directly on behalf of the buyer, it also assumes the responsibility to supervise the developer, ensuring that the funds are not misappropriated, and the housing project is completed on schedule and meets quality standards.



Figure 2. Schematic Diagram of Entrusted Payment Process for Housing Mortgage Loans³

³ Image by 柳行长's YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9V-YrQ-1A8>

In China, the “pre-sale housing” (期房) policy allows developers to sell properties before construction is complete, often under the promise of “lower housing prices” to attract buyers. Developers also often need to borrow “development loans” (开发贷) from banks to finance the construction. Banks, therefore, have a dual responsibility: they must assess the qualifications of developers and oversee the fulfillment of their obligations. For banks, housing mortgage loans are generally low risk, while development loans carry higher risks. To mitigate these risks, banks urge strict repayment schedules for homebuyers, ensuring a steady flow of funds to repay developers. This approach not only secures the repayment of low-risk housing loans but supports the recovery of high-risk development loans (柳行长 2022).

It becomes evident that the issue of unfinished buildings is directly related to inadequate financial oversight by banks over developers. When developers receive payments, these funds are supposed to be allocated to the ongoing housing complex’s construction. However, if the developers misappropriate these funds, redirecting them towards new projects or other investments, it results in a financial shortfall for the original developments. A notable example of such mismanagement is China Evergrande Group, whose financial troubles and subsequent default on debt obligations have left numerous projects unfinished and homebuyers stranded (W. Wang 2023). This

mismanagement of funds leads to a cascade of financial troubles, culminating in halted construction, bankruptcy, and ultimately, the collapse of projects and corporations (S. Zhang and Tsai 2024).

3.2 The Role of Local Governments in the Real Estate Interest Chain

At this point, one might naturally ask: if the pre-sale housing policy poses such significant risks to the timely completion of housing projects, why does the government allow such extensive land development and construction? The question brings us to the often hidden yet fundamental role of local governments in this interesting chain.

Local governments play a crucial role in the real estate market, driven by their vested interests in land sales and urban development (Zheng 2022). This situation has its roots in the 1994 fiscal reforms in China. Prior to these reforms, the central government's budget revenue constituted a low proportion of the total revenue, with over 75% of the income being controlled by local governments (Lam and Badia 2023). The context of the economic liberalization during the reform and opening-up period exacerbated this issue, leading to an increase in wealthy local governments and the central government sometimes having to borrow money from them, significantly undermining the central government's macroeconomic control and diminishing its authority.

To address this imbalance, the *"tax-sharing system reform"* (分税制改

草)⁴ was implemented in 1994. Post-reform, local governments were required to remit over 75% of their tax revenue to the central government, almost the reverse of the pre-reform situation (Chen 2014). Consequently, local governments faced a pressing need for new sources of fiscal revenue, leading to the rise of the so-called "*land finance*" (土地财政).

“Land finance”, also known as land-centered urbanization by which local governments have expanded their cities by building on relatively cheap land but using the huge amount of fees they have levied on real estate developers for the long-term use of the land (Lin and Yi 2013; Chen 2014, 162; Huang 2023). With the system of state-owned land, “selling land” became a new strategy for local governments to boost their income. The revenue generated from land sales became a major source of income for local governments, they may prioritize short-term financial gains over long-term project viability, incentivizing them to promote rapid real estate development. As property prices continue to rise, the value of assets increases, driving up consumption expectations and overall economic activity.

Moreover, the governments rely on land as a high-quality collateral to secure large loans from banks, which are primarily used for urban infrastructural development. Thus, "housing prices are linked to land prices, land prices are linked to fiscal revenue and fiscal revenue is linked to infrastructure investment

⁴ The reform was a large-scale adjustment of the tax distribution system and tax structure between the central and local governments. In order to make ends meet, governments started to let lands (also known as land finance) which eventually pushed up the land and housing price. (“Tax-Sharing Reform of China in 1994” 2023)

(兰小欢 2022)."⁵ This creates a complex relationship where the prosperity of the economy, local government finances, banks, and the real estate market are closely intertwined: if one prospers, all prosper; if one suffers, all suffer (城市研究所 2024).

3.3 From Tradition to Investment: Unpacking China's Property Obsession

China's fascination with property ownership is deeply rooted in both historical and cultural contexts, evolving over centuries from a traditional emphasis on family stability and status to a modern-day investment strategy. This phenomenon is driven by various factors, including historical practices, social expectations, and economic policies, shaping the relentless pursuit of property ownership.

- Historical and Cultural Roots

The Chinese people's pursuit of housing is rooted in their "nature" rather than acquired education. This pursuit is a comprehensive manifestation of the three primitive needs of "territory", "sense of security" and "sense of comfort" (世界华人周刊 2018). Historically, as a traditional agricultural society with relatively low urbanization, owning property was a symbol of stability and respect.

With rapid urbanization, many rural residents have moved and settled in big cities but lack stable employment or consistent monthly income.

⁵ Originally quote ““房价连着地价，地价连着财政，财政连着基础设施投资” by 兰小欢, 2022, 置身事内：中国政府与经济发展 (Chinese Edition).

Homeownership represents more than just property ownership, it also secures a sense of security and social respect. The belief that "having a house means having a home" remains deeply entrenched, reflecting a long-standing cultural emphasis on the significance of property as a symbol of stability and confidence (Tomba 2004).

In contemporary China, owning property has evolved into a powerful indicator of personal success and social status. The concept of "六个钱包买房" (six wallets buying a house), which signifies that one property would drain all the savings from the couple and both sides of their parents, exemplifies the extraordinary societal obsession with real estate investment. This relentless pursuit is fueled by a culture of comparison, where having a better house than others ignites anxiety and drives property acquisition. Houses have transcended their traditional role as mere shelters, evolving into benchmarks of societal achievement (世界华人周刊 2018). In the quest for property, people are willing to endure substantial financial burdens, such as long-term mortgages and significant debt, taking initiatives to devote "affective labor" (Acht nich 2021) to cash out their future to avoid the social stigma associated with not owning a home. This societal pressure drives individuals to invest heavily in real estate, often pooling resources from multiple family members to secure a property, leading to substantial financial burdens, such as long-term mortgages and significant debt (S. Zhang and Tsai 2024).

- Homeownership and Marriage in Modern China

In modern Chinese society, the notion of purchasing a home in conjunction with marriage has not diminished; rather, it has become increasingly emphasized. The term "房奴" (housing slave)⁶ emerged early in the public consciousness, vividly expressing the significant pressure young people face regarding housing consumption and resonating deeply with many young homebuyers burdened with mortgages. A house is not only a place for personal stability and livelihood; it also provides individuals with emotional belonging (林蒙丹 and 林晓珊 2020).

Modern young women have raised their expectations for potential partners, with homeownership being a critical criterion. This has resulted in considerable pressure on men to pursue potential spouses. In reality, this societal pressure drives men to secure stable housing to meet these expectations, profoundly impacting marriage decisions and the cultural narratives surrounding relationships.

- Housing and Hukou: The Key to Essential Services

In addition, China's household registration system "户口" (hukou system) is closely linked to the real estate market, and plays a significant role in recent urban changes in China (Shen, Wong, and Feng 2002, 691). In China, a house is not merely a place of residence; it embodies the rights and benefits tied

⁶ 吴银涛, 胡珍, 陈敏.城市青年房奴现象的产生及生存发展状况研究[J].中国青年研究, 2012(2):70-74.

to urban household registration, encompassing a comprehensive range of entitlements and qualifications related to birth registration, residency status, education, healthcare, retirement, employment, and even marriage (Yihong and Schläger 2014, 65). The hukou system is divided into agricultural and non-agricultural (urban) hukou, by dividing the urban and rural residents, institutionalizing housing discrimination in policy-making, which further marginalizes migrants' everyday lives in the city in household arrangements, education, and mental health (Qian 2022). In many cities, purchasing property is a crucial means of obtaining an urban hukou, directly affecting children's eligibility for school enrollment and giving rise to the phenomenon of "school district housing" (学区房) (陈友华, 施旖旎, and 季春梅 2017).

As social competition intensifies, parents are willing to spend substantial amounts of money to purchase properties within the catchment areas of high-quality schools to ensure a good educational starting point for their children, further driving up the prices of school district housing. This dynamic allows local government to generate revenue from land and real estate, while also creating opportunities for corruption and rent-seeking behaviors (Y. Li and Yu 2015).

• Chaos in the Rental Market: A Lack of Security and Stability

Despite economic and social development, the rental housing market in China faces numerous issues. According to a report by People's Daily⁷ in 2013,

⁷ People's Daily (人民日报) is the largest and most influential newspaper in China, serving as the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

problems such as brokers not adhering to contractual commitments, frequent disputes between landlords and tenants, and difficulties in seeking legal recourse have severely hindered the healthy development of the rental housing market (邢斯馨 2013). Issues like subleasing and shared rental arrangements are prevalent, leading to significant losses and undermining trust in the rental market.

The chaotic and disorganized state of the rental market, coupled with soaring rental prices and the difficulty in safeguarding tenants' rights, has led to widespread skepticism and negative perceptions about renting. The prevalent issues of security and stability have fostered a general mistrust in the rental system, driving the public to view homeownership as a more reliable and stable alternative (Shin 2013). This shift in societal attitudes has further reinforced the steady expansion of the real estate market, strengthening the preference for purchasing over renting, strengthening the rental market expansion while the rental market continues to struggle with credibility and regulation.

In summary, the property obsession in China is a complex interplay of historical values, social expectations, and economic incentives. The cultural emphasis on homeownership as a marker of stability, status, and success, coupled with economic policies like the hukou system and school district housing, drives the relentless pursuit of property ownership. The chaotic rental market further propels this obsession, making homeownership a top priority for many Chinese citizens.

4. China's Housing Market Fever: A Post-COVID Cool Down

The COVID-19 pandemic, originating in Wuhan, China in late 2019, has had profound and lasting effects on the lives of Chinese people. In response to the rapid spread of the virus, the Chinese government implemented a series of strict measures under the zero-epidemic policy until December 7, 2022⁸.

Aiming to control and ultimately eliminate the virus within the borders.

Imposed with a series of strict measures including widespread testing, digital health QR code, quarantine, and forced lockdown.⁹

Contrary to expectations, the anticipated economic recovery in the post-COVID era has only shown a brief resurgence followed by a sluggish consumption pattern. The once bustling scenes of crowded marketplaces have been gradually replaced by shuttered stores and empty shopping malls. The stringent policy control and economic stagnation during the pandemic resulted in a significant increase in the unemployment rate. A large number of foreign-invested companies withdrew from China, and more than 460,000 small and medium-sized private enterprises closed.

National data indicates that since 2018, the surveyed urban unemployment rate has increased, from below 5% to as high as 6.2%. Especially for the youth workforce, it has shown a clear upward trend from around 10% to as high as 20% in 2022 (Figure 3) (D. H. L. Li Xiangyuan

⁸ "China Eases 'Zero Covid' Restrictions in Victory for Protesters". The New York Times. 7 December 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/world/asia/china-zero-covid-protests.html>

⁹ "China's 'Zero Covid' Policy Changes, Explained". The New York Times. 7 December 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/world/asia/china-zero-covid-changes.html>

2023).

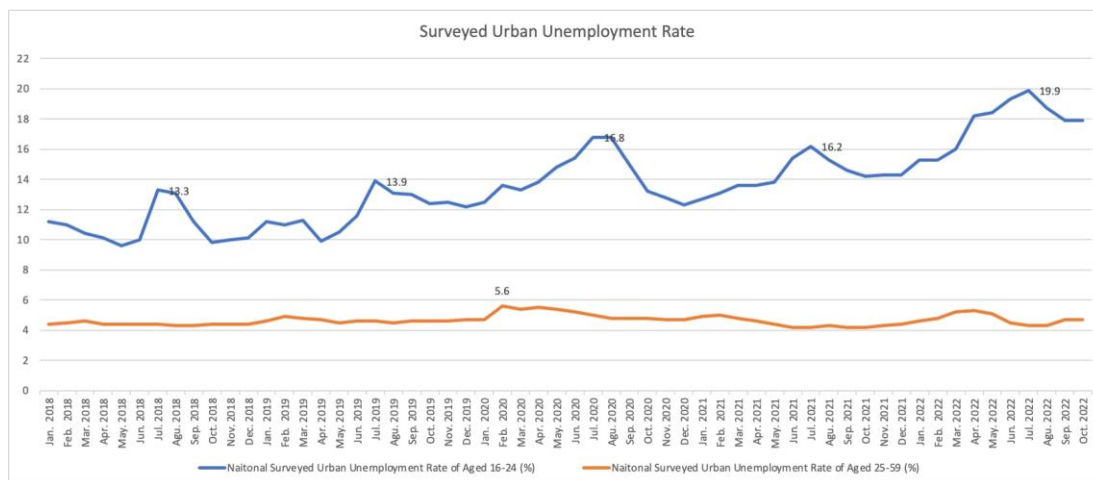


Figure 3. Surveyed urban unemployment rates

The three-year epidemic brought about significant changes in the lives of Chinese people. How have the zero-epidemic policy and strict epidemic prevention control played an indelible role in curbing the spread of the new coronavirus to the greatest extent possible? However, these measures also had significant impacts on the livelihoods of citizens and social and economic development. One sector profoundly affected was the real estate industry. Investing offers insights into the broader implications of these challenges.

Chapter 3. Digital Ethnography as a Method

In this chapter, I outline the research methods employed to investigate the phenomenon of 烂尾楼 and the everyday coping strategies of affected individuals. This study utilizes digital ethnography and netnography as its primary methodologies,

leveraging the internet as a field of research. By immersing in online platforms such as websites, blogs, and social media, these methods allow for the exploration of virtual communities, capturing the nuanced narratives and shared identities that flourish within these spaces. This approach is particularly valuable for studying sensitive topics, such as 烂尾楼, in the context of China's socio-political environment.

Digital ethnography emphasizes the interconnectedness of online and offline experiences. Researchers such as Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz (2013) and Murthy (2008) highlight the importance of integrating digital technologies into social research to capture the intricate dynamics of online spaces. This methodology involves online participant observation and interviews, examining digital traces to understand the emotional and affective dimensions of online interactions (Møller and Robards 2019).

Netnography, as redefined by Kozinets (2015), in particular, integrates archival and online communications work, participation, and observation with new forms of digital and network data collection, analysis, and research representation. Inspired by Hannam's (2017) study of China's online hiking communities, this research adopts a similar approach to understanding the dynamics of online communities affected by 烂尾楼. These online spaces enable individuals to navigate state control and engage in collective actions, fostering new expressions of urban individualism and social connectivity (N. Zhang 2014).

This study employs a multi-platform digital ethnographic approach to investigate the phenomenon of unfinished buildings (烂尾楼) in China. By examining

specific cases across the national geographies such as 易合坊 (Yihefang) in Xi'an, 别样幸福城 ("Different Kind of Happy City") in Kunming, and the Champs-Élysées project (青岛香榭丽舍) in Qingdao, I aim to understand the everyday coping strategies of those affected by urban abandonment.

For the Yihefang case, I analyzed videos posted by the video blogger “环华十年” (Ten Years Around China) on Bilibili¹⁰. The vlogger, “环华十年”, has uploaded a series of eight videos about the unfinished Yihefang building project in Xi'an¹¹. Each video features interpersonal conversations, capturing the vlogger's immersive first-person experience as he enters the unfinished buildings and interviews the residents who occupied the 烂尾楼. These videos offer an intimate glimpse into the residents' living environments, with the vlogger establishing connections through emotionally engaging conversations and their daily activities. Many participants, for example, burst into tears during the interviews. This engagement serves as a rich tapestry of empirical data, capturing the nuanced realities of life in *Yihefang*. I have transcribed and translated the narratives from his interviews, providing a detailed account of the residents' experiences. Similarly, for 别样幸福城 ("Different Kind of Happy City"), I examine a mini-documentary produced by 冬呱视频 (Donggua Video) in 2020¹², which echoes the themes found in the Yihefang case.

For the Champs-Élysées project, I follow the digital traces of a Chinese TikToker named “Xiang Xiang Ge” (即墨香香哥 (记录烂尾楼生活)) on

¹⁰ 环华十年's channel page on bilibili https://space.bilibili.com/165360675?spm_id_from=333.788.0.0

¹¹ <https://space.bilibili.com/165360675/channel/collectiondetail?sid=297168>

¹² 冬呱视频. “【冬呱视频】别样幸福? 50 多户业主住进没水没电烂尾楼, 每月还要还 4 千多房贷 说好的幸福都去哪儿了 透明时代,” September 21, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsfcNtopRDQ>.

Douyin¹³, who documents life in the abandoned building. Additionally, I utilize other media platforms such as 豆瓣 (Douban), where I discovered a popular Chinese social forum with a group named "Working Class Homebuyers" (社畜买房共进会)¹⁴. This forum provides further insights into the collective experiences and challenges faced by individuals dealing with unfinished buildings.

By mobilizing through various online sites, I aim to piece together a comprehensive picture of the 烂尾楼 phenomenon in China. This study will scrutinize the everyday coping strategies employed by those affected, offering a deeper understanding of the human dimension behind these abandoned developments. This comprehensive approach ensures a thorough exploration of the complexities surrounding unfinished buildings and their impact on individuals and communities.

Research Process, Positionality, and Research Limitations

In conducting this research, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of the researcher's body and the inherent limitations of the study. The researcher's positionality, including cultural background, access to digital platforms, and subjective interpretations, inevitably influences the data collection and analysis processes. Additionally, limitations such as restricted access to certain online communities, potential biases in digital trace data, and ethical considerations related to participant privacy and anonymity must be addressed. This section will discuss

¹³ Xiang Xiang Ge's Douyin homepage: https://www.douyin.com/user/MS4wLjABAAAASc-Imll8yfTfpvPnfdtG9PAOdDH_selMS4dfMU6QS50

¹⁴ Douban homepage <https://www.douban.com/group/677158/>

these factors in detail, highlighting how they shape the research findings and the steps taken to mitigate their impact, ensuring a robust and ethical approach to studying the phenomenon of 烂尾楼.

As a researcher born and raised in China and educated in urban studies, I am deeply connected to my cultural background and am committed to critically examining urban development and people's everyday well-being in China. This study was inspired by an online news article about 烂尾楼 I've encountered- a mini-documentary depicting modern-day citizens dwelling in their unfinished concrete "homes". These interviews provide a profound lens into the lives of residents of Yihefang, who have occupied 烂尾 "làn wěi" (unfinished) buildings, demonstrating resilience and ingenuity as they navigate the urban margins. This struck me and motivated me to research further into the urban dynamics underlying this issue. Over the past decades, China's unprecedented speed of economic growth and urbanization have been celebrated globally. However, I couldn't help but wonder about the setbacks accompanying this rapid progress.

This study adopts a netnographic approach, leveraging these online interview videos as my primary data resources, a methodological adaptation of ethnography for internet-mediated communications and digital interactions. *Netnography*, as outlined by Kozinets (2015), allows researchers to immerse themselves in the online environments where social interactions occur, closely examined in mediated settings, such as blogs, social media posts, and comments, providing insights into the lived experiences of individuals. As Hannam and Witte (2017) argue, *netnography* offers a

faster, simpler, and less expensive way to enter the field digitally, enabling researchers to gather substantial data without a physical presence in the field. This digital approach not only facilitates access to a broader range of narratives but also mitigates the risks associated with traditional ethnographic fieldwork, such as accessibility, physical danger, and financial constraints. Furthermore, it allows for a more flexible and adaptive research process, accommodating the dynamic and evolving nature of online environments. Given the sensitive nature of their life stories and the strict control and censorship of the online realm in China. It is crucial to anonymize their identities and present their experiences in a manner that safeguards their privacy and dignity.

In this research, I utilized some major social media channels and video-sharing platforms in China, such as Douyin (“抖音”, Chinese TikTok), Chinese Bilibili (Chinese “Youtube”), and Douban (豆瓣, a Chinese social networking forum). I began by conducting keyword searches and upon finding adequate video narratives, I collected, transcribed, and translated them (from Chinese to English). To ensure accuracy, I used AI tools like ChatGPT to double-check my transcriptions. Additionally, I supplemented my findings with Chinese newspaper articles and other national and international media posts.

I also attempted to direct message some video uploaders on Bilibili and sent applications to join some private online communities on Douban. However, due to the users’ strong sense of self-protection and concealment, not many individual, first-hand narratives have been accessible to me. This led to a fundamental limitation of my

research: all the data I collected online were pre-edited and scripted by original content creators. My role involved online unobtrusive observation, keyword research, data collection, juxtaposition, and analysis.

My proficiency in both Mandarin and English helped me navigate through the “Chinese firewall”¹⁵ smoothly. I collected video data, which I then translated into detailed transcription in both languages. I sought to also grasp minor details revealed in the video participant’s narratives, by problematizing transcription during embodied analysis, focusing on listening to intertwined layers of bodies, and identifying and tracing the movement of non-verbal voices in stories and transcript texts enables us to grapple with the multiple layers of complexity and contradiction within individual narratives(Chadwick 2017, 64), using them as threads to dig further for more information from other relevant internet users. In this study, I took on a reserved observer’s role, choosing not to physically immerse my body in the field to avoid risking the safety and exposure of vulnerable urban populations. Instead, I aimed to be sensitive and critical of the online content I discovered, reflecting on my subjectivity and being aware of the bias of the original content creator and interview subjects.

By closely examining the everyday realities of urban living in 烂尾楼, I aim to reflect on the broader socio-economic implications and urban structures at play. This approach aligns with the ability to think in a transversal logic (Caldeira 2017), zooming in and out to connect micro-level observations with macro-level political-

¹⁵ Wikipedia refer to it as the “Great Firewall”: The **Great Firewall** (*GFW*) is the combination of legislative actions and technologies enforced by the People's Republic of China to regulate the [internet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet) domestically. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Firewall#cite_note-1

economic phenomena.

My position as a researcher and a Chinese citizen necessitates reflectivity and self-awareness. Due to the strict state control and surveillance, considerations for both the protection of vulnerable urban margins and my personal safety are paramount. By consciously adopting a detached observational stance and combining the ethical principles and methodological strengths of netnography, this research strives to give voice to the abandoned citizens and honor the lived experiences of Yihefang residents while contributing valuable insights to the fields of urban studies and digital ethnography. This balanced approach ensures that the research remains both ethically sound and methodologically robust, ultimately enhancing the validity of the study while upholding the dignity and agency of the individuals involved.

Chapter 4. Loss of Hope: Squatters of their homes

In this chapter I delve into the narrative research of residents of *Yihefang* (易合坊), Xi'an (see the map in Figure 4) , exploring major themes like home-making, insurgent planning, urban citizenship, and affective labor. The primary data sources of this chapter were derived from interview videos produced by a video blogger named “环华十年” (Ten Years Around China)¹⁶, which were uploaded on the Chinese video-sharing platform Bilibili¹⁷ in 2022. Despite the lack of basic amenities and poor living

¹⁶ 环华十年's channel page on bilibili https://space.bilibili.com/165360675?spm_id_from=333.788.0.0

¹⁷ Bilibili, nicknamed B Site, is a [video-sharing](#) website based in [Shanghai](#) where users can submit, view, and add overlaid commentary on videos. Definition from Wikipedia.

conditions, numerous residents of *Yihefang* have chosen to inhabit these unfinished concrete structures, rebuilding their homes in the ruins, and seeking to thrive for survival in the cracks of the society.

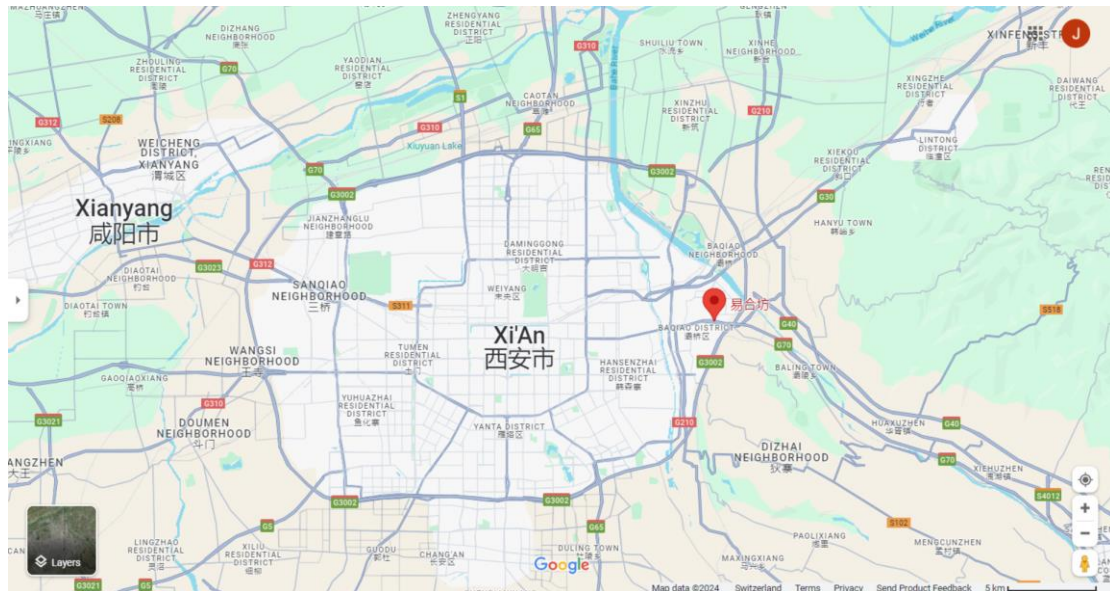


Figure 4. Location of Yihefang, Baqiao District, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, China

Let us embark on a journey following “环华十年” into the abandoned buildings of *Yihefang*, Xi'an. Through the debris and ruins of a once-promising future, ascending the dark and seemingly endless staircases, we encounter a series of doors, each one representing the home of a squatter in the abandoned spaces, we gain access to these individuals and listen to their compelling stories, which they have longed to share, yet lack the means to do so. These stories reveal the indomitable spirit and tenacity of these people in the face of adversity.

In examining the narrative accounts of *Yihefang* residents, this chapter aims to contribute to the broader discourse on urban informality, resilience, and subaltern community-driven development. By illuminating how individuals navigate and

negotiate their existence within the socio-economic and political confines of contemporary urban China, we seek to shed light on the lived experiences and resilience of these marginalized communities.

“Although It’s a Bare House, At Least It Can Shelter Us from The Wind and Rain”

In March 2022, the blogger “环华十年” documented his visit to the unfinished housing project *Yihelang* (易合坊) in Xi’an, Shaanxi province. The video he uploaded on the 28th March 2022, titled “买了期房 10 年交不了, 实拍西安 300 多户居民住进烂尾楼” (*Purchased Pre-sale Property Unable to be Delivered for 10 Years: A Real-life Glimpse of Over 300 Households Living in an Unfinished Building in Xi'an*), as of now, this video has gained over 3.7 million views, more than 237,000 likes, and over 73,000 shares (环华十年 2022). At the beginning of the video, the camera pans over the debris piled at the entrance of the building. The house possesses basic external wall structures but lacks installed doors and windows. Residents have independently constructed wooden planks and ladders to access the stairway. Inside the building, construction materials and garbage are scattered everywhere, and the walls are bare concrete. A man in a black leather jacket walks in front to lead the way (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. Entrance of an unfinished building in Yihefang, showing makeshift ladders and debris, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1nP4y1M7dN/>

Following several residents' steps as they ascend the stairs, everybody has the flashlight of their phones on to illuminate the dark stairwell, the blogger asks one man walking in front, with a smartphone in his right hand, to use for lighting, and daily necessities such as brooms and dustpans in his left hand, which floor he lives on, he responds, "26th floor." Climbing up and down such a high building without electricity and no elevators has become their daily routine.

Grandma Li, a 67-year-old resident living on the 13th floor, has been facing significant physical challenges. Following a severe accident, she underwent major surgery on her leg and back, resulting in a lack of sensation in her right lower leg and a stiff back that hinders her movement. She recounts her daily struggles in the face of her poor health:

"I've gone up and down four or five times today. One trip to fetch water, another to watch people dancing in the square, and so on. I climb up and

down four or five times a day, running back and forth... To fetch things, go to the toilet, or get water, you have to go down. Look, there's no water, no electricity, it's so difficult. If we had water, electricity, and an elevator, people wouldn't be so tired, and wouldn't need to fetch water or climb stairs. Just carrying things is so hard; I can't get up, I'm out of breath. Oh, empty-handed, I can barely manage, but carrying things, I can't make it up without resting several times..."

The camera pans across a corridor, littered with blankets, plastic bottles, construction debris like cement and lime, and wooden boards. With a sigh of relief, they stopped at a floor, where one apartment door was open, and then entered the room, the cement floor was covered with green dust sheets, and some people gathered chatting inside. The camera turns to a woman in a pink jacket, sitting in the corner and making dumplings, she tells him that she also lived on the 13th floor and had been living there for about half a month when he noticed several buckets of water sitting next to the window and pose the question of how she managed to get them up, she replies in Shaanxi dialect while continuing to wrap dumplings in her hand: "Oh, just slowly, day by day, for the sake of living... In three years, the epidemic has left people with no income. Although it's a bare house, at least it can shelter from the wind and rain, right? We've been renting a place outside for more than ten years, but we can't afford the rent anymore. We still owe the landlord tens of thousands of yuan in rent, so we have to make do."

She told the blogger when she bought the apartment, by contract the mortgage loan would be paid in fifteen years, originally the *Yihefang* complex was scheduled for completion in 2014, however, has been delayed indefinitely due to the bankruptcy of the housing developer.¹⁸ When asked if she still pays back the loan, she answers,

“Yes, what else can we do? If we don't pay, what about the bank... We rural folks have worked hard for half a lifetime, a whole lifetime's worth of sweat and blood has come to this... And I bought it when my child was one year old. My son is 13 now. I bought it early, bought it when my son was one year old. I borrowed money from relatives to buy this house...”

As previously stated, a house in the city is closely tied to Chinese people's educational opportunities, access to healthcare, and receipt of other social welfare benefits. The *Hukou* (户口) household registration system represents a significant barrier to urban integration (Qian 2022)¹⁹. For instance, although this lady and her two children have been living and working in the city, their rural hukou restricts her children from attending school there. Buying an apartment in the city serves as a pass for her son to access better educational opportunities. Therefore, houses are endowed with educational attributes, which directly determine the geographical location and teaching quality of children's schooling. The concept of “学区房” (*School district*

¹⁸ From the video description of the documentary 住在烂尾楼的日子, uploaded by 一名野客, on Bilibili https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1LM4y1D7Ft/?spm_id_from=333.337.searchcard.all.click&vd_source=a06cea341eafc049826c03c08049871f

¹⁹ Established in its modern form in 1958, the hukou system determines where residents can access credit, government jobs, education, subsidised housing, welfare and other social services.

housing)²⁰, as a byproduct of the household registration system, further drives the steady rise of urban housing prices.

17 Stairs, 32 Floors, 544 Steps

On the 4th of April, “环华十年” uploaded another video, which gained as well more than 400,000 views on *Bilibili*. This time, the focus was on an individual merchant from Xinyang, Henan, who is running a small barbecue restaurant. He told the blogger that he’s been living in Xi’an for over 30 years, and both his son and grandson were born there. “I bought this house (in *Yihefang*) when my son was 18. He’s 25 this year,” with a laugh. His shop used to be on the other side of the city, but due to an increase in rent imposed by the landlord, he had to relocate to a more affordable area.

“Business is much worse now compared to last year. Before, around this time, we could still have a few tables of customers...This year has been tough, but we worked harder, setting up stalls both in the mornings and evenings, selling breakfast in the morning, and barbecuing at night. This way we can earn at least a little bit, mainly because there are more people at night.”

As night falls, the camera follows his motorcycle back to *Yihefang*, stopping at the deserted and dark construction site. He gets off and walks into the dimly lit, dusty hallway marked with chalk. His steps are agile, taking two at a time, "Taking one step at a time is more tiring," he remarks, turning around to point at the chalk

²⁰ 学区房 (xuéqūfāng) translated as “housing in a quality school district.”
https://eyeshenzhen.com/content/2021-08/05/content_24457025.htm

markings on the door above indicating the floor numbers, "I marked each floor one by one." The blogger pants heavily, he comments on how his legs feel numb as they reach the 15th floor of their goal of 32. The merchant, aged 52, chuckled at the blogger and encouraged him to keep going, it was 1:15 a.m.

Upon reaching his place on the 32nd floor, he barely takes any break and rushes to go down to fill the water buckets. "Today was rushed, so I have to save this water. Water is more expensive than oil, haha... still have to fetch water," with a lighter tone, "Going downstairs is easier!" As they go down, the blogger calculates, "17 stairs, so 32 floors are 544, 544 steps..." The merchant repeats, "544 steps," and the blogger responds with a laugh, "My legs are really weak now, I'm not joking." The merchant then turns around and replies, "We can endure hardship. When we were young, we worked on construction sites and in mines. For your generation, just climbing stairs is difficult. If there's water and electricity upstairs, even if there's no elevator, we'll still come to live here."

As they exit the building and walk towards the water station to fetch some water, the blogger suddenly asks, "Last night, an old lady slept on this board, you know?" The merchant was taken back to admit he had no idea. The blogger continues, "Right here, by the ping-pong table, the old lady lives on the 23rd floor. She said her knees hurt, she couldn't go up, so she slept on this ping-pong table for one night." The camera then focuses on the ping-pong table in a dark corner, fenced off. With a heavy sigh, they continue walking.

"We always come here to fetch water," the merchant explains, pointing to a

temporarily built structure with prefabricated panels at the construction site, with an open sink. It seems like houses built for the workers, with temporary water supply for the construction site." The blogger then proceeds to enter the room behind the sink. "There used to be a water heater here, but now it's not in use anymore", he notes. Meanwhile, the merchant placed the buckets under the tap, washed them first, then filled them with water.



Figure 6. The merchant was carrying two buckets of water at 1:39 a.m.

At 1:39 in the morning, the merchant was carrying two buckets of water up to the 32nd floor once again (Figure 6). Water spills out occasionally as he climbs. This time, their conversation was mostly replaced by the sound of heavy footsteps and panting. They take a break on the 20th floor, and the flashlight scans over the elevators. The merchant informs the blogger, "Look, these elevators haven't been finished. We came here in March, I forgot which day, March 1st or 2nd. When we came, they were still operational, we took the elevator up," The blogger replies, "Right, and now they've stopped them? So, they're technically connected to electricity,

but not in use." The merchant murmurs in agreement, "Yeah, fixing this will solve everything..."

“Even The Bad Water, They Won’t Let You Have It”

Another episode was uploaded on April 10, 2024²¹. The video begins by following a 67-year-old grandma who lives on the 13th floor. She had an accident several years ago, and it took a lot of effort to save her leg, she now has dozens of screws in her waist and back. She carries buckets up and down the 13th floor multiple times every day, and each trip takes half an hour. The scene switches to outdoors, where the camera focuses on a handful of wild vegetables in her hand. She was hunching over in the weeds on the construction site, looking for eatable wild vegetables.

She invites the blogger to come up with her as she is about to go home to cook. The blogger mentions some news he heard about “the barrier”, and the grandma replies, "Yes, around midnight. They told us to go for a COVID test at midnight. When we came back, they had blocked the entrance. They took the chance while everyone was out to block the door (Figure 7)."

The motivations behind this eviction remain unclear and are the subject of much speculation. Some believe that the developer hired personnel to block the building, while others think that government forces might also be involved in

²¹ “西安烂尾 10 年的楼盘后续，她们连烂尾楼都快住不上了！”，by 环华十年, 10th April, 2022. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1DT4y1Y7dT/?spm_id_from=333.788&vd_source=a06cea341eafc049826c03c08049871f

preventing illegal squatting. However, the undeniable fact is that, even as homeowners and property rights holders, their right to housing remains unprotected as long as the construction of their homes remains incomplete.



Figure 7. The security guards blocked the entrance to Yihefang, on April 10, 2022.

In the kitchen, the grandma is cooking while discussing the challenges of accessing clean water: "We can't get good water, we drink the tap water which other people only use for laundry, because the other water is too far to fetch. We use the water from the tap at the construction site, boil it, and let it settle before using it." She switches on the gas stove to boil water and cuts a tomato to cook with the wild vegetables. She heats oil in a pot, sauté some green onions, adds the chopped tomato and continues to stir-fry. She adds a little salt, then quickly stirs in the wild vegetables, pours in hot water, and covers the pot to simmer. When it is almost ready, she cracks an egg into the pot, stirs it, and the fragrant wild vegetable soup is done. After serving the soup, she adds more water to the pot. While waiting for the water to

boil, she goes to the window and shouts to someone outside, "Hongmei, come up for lunch! The soup is ready, come up quickly! Tell your dad to come up and eat!"

The camera then turns to a younger woman wearing a mask, presumably 'Hongmei', introduced as the grandma's daughter-in-law. This is a household of a young couple with two children and two elderly people, the grandma, the mother of Hongmei's husband, and the father of Hongmei. The blogger asks, "Are they going to remove the temporary water pipe?" The grandma adds, "Maybe they think we're using too much water?" Hongmei looks at her and nods, "I heard them say they might remove it tonight." The grandma replies, "If they remove it, you (*we*) won't have any water to drink," and the blogger agrees, "If they remove the temporary water pipe, you won't have any water, you can't live here." The grandma repeats, "You (*we*) can't live here," and Hongmei mutters, "They're practically driving people to their deaths." The grandma continues, "Even the bad water, they won't let you (*us*) use. Look at how bad these people are."

There is a pattern evident in the grandma's narrative where she often shifts pronouns, replacing "*I/we*" with "*you*" as she is telling her story to the blogger. When the grandma discusses her struggles, she uses "*you*" instead of the first-person pronoun, as if seeking empathy from the blogger. The narrative technique leverages the blogger and the camera as mediums to elicit broader societal empathy and sympathy toward an individual's plight. By adopting this pronoun shift, she effectively invites the listener to put themselves in her shoes, thus deepening the

emotional resonance of her story.

As lunch is about to be ready, Hongmei grabs a basin to sprinkle water on the ground, saying “The dust is unbearable. In a few days, we'll cover the floor with something. We might buy something online to cover the floor, the dust is too much...” A family of three sits around a small table having lunch. The noodles they are eating are just cooked by the grandma, who is squatting on a very small low stool. She hasn't eaten a single bite yet, continuously making sure Hongmei and her father have enough to eat. At this moment, the daughter-in-law, Hongmei, suddenly couldn't hold back her emotions. She stands up, waves her hand towards the camera, and says, "Don't film, stop filming..." Before she finishes speaking, she turns her head and starts to cry, facing a bare concrete wall and wiping her tears away. The camera then returns to the small table in the dining room, showing a full bowl of noodles that the mother-in-law had served Hongmei, which she hasn't even touched.

"We came here in our 20s. It means that since we were about eighteen or nineteen, we've been in Xi'an. Both of our children were born and raised here. Now, look, we have a house but can't live in it. It's such a failure, just feels hopeless. Today, they blocked the door, making it impossible for people to go up or down. We're all ordinary people, especially the elderly. We came back in the evening and can't even get inside...After so many years, really, the tears just come out uncontrollably... I can't talk about it, nowhere to talk about it."

Hongmei lived on the 13th floor

This chapter delves into the lived experiences of individuals, out of desperation, financial burden, and scarcity of resources to take up residence in the lanweilou, or abandoned buildings of Yihefang, Xi'an. This chapter presents personal narratives that grapple with the lack of basic amenities, unsafe living conditions, and a pervasive sense of abandonment by both developers and the government. It highlights the everyday reality of the socio-economic setbacks resulting from the burst of the housing bubble and the bankruptcy of housing developers. Furthermore, it also sheds light on people's resilience and agency in spite of their harsh circumstances. The subsequent chapter will continue to examine their efforts to secure their right to live and seek justice. Ultimately, this chapter underscores the profound loss of hope and the sense of betrayal experienced by homeowners of 烂尾楼, providing a crucial lens through which to understand the human impact of China's housing crisis.

Chapter 5. People as Infrastructure: Utilizing Agency to Reclaim

Rights to the City

This chapter presents a synthesis of the conceptual framework and the primary data. In order to analyze the diverse experiences of individuals residing in these problematic properties, known as “rotten tails” (烂尾楼), and their responses to the associated challenges, I have employed a spectrum inspired by Charlton (2018). This section begins with an outline of the primary obstacles faced by residents, including the lack of access to essential services, and financial burdens. And

significant psychological impacts. Subsequently, the chapter analyzes the proactive self-help strategies employed by these individuals, which reflect their capacity for agency and resilience in the face of adversity. The “housing spectrum” as conceptualized by Charlton (2018), is presented as a heuristic device to capture the distinctive urban reality of lanweilou. Finally, the chapter broadens the discussion to consider the potential future outcomes and risks associated with the ongoing phenomenon of unfished housing, offering a comprehensive view that transitions from specific individual challenges to broader system implications.

Navigating the Crisis: Key Challenges for Homeowners

In the sprawling urban landscape of modern cities in China, 烂尾楼 is a poignant reminder of economic downturns, failed investments, and unfulfilled dreams. These stalled construction projects, typically lack essential infrastructure such as water, electricity, and gas, with many even missing basic installations like doors and windows, which pose severe safety hazards, often abandoned due to financial crises, corruption, or mismanagement, leaving behind not just skeletal structures but also shattered dreams and financial ruin for countless families. Despite these adverse conditions, there has been a notable increase in the number of residents moving into lanweilou in recent years, demonstrating remarkable resilience and determination to rebuild their homes amidst the ruins.

The psychological impact of living in such conditions is equally profound. The sense of failure and abandonment by the government contributes to widespread

mental health issues and community disillusionment. For example, the residents of Yihefang display a tendency to shed tears in front of the camera. The residents experience heightened levels of frustration and despair as they confront the reality of their unfinished homes and the perceived neglect by authorities. This situation is emblematic of the concept of "affective labor" (Acht nich 2021), which refers to the emotional and social efforts invested in making the best of a challenging situation. In this context, affective labor extends beyond mere physical survival, encompassing the emotional and psychological work residents undertake to cope with their circumstances and maintain a sense of dignity and hope amidst adversity.

Developing the Lanwei Housing Spectrum: Self-Help Strategies and Resilience

Borrowing from Charlton's (2018) conceptual framework of the housing spectrum, we can similarly develop a "lanwei housing spectrum" to understand the diverse coping strategies employed by residents living in unfinished or abandoned buildings (烂尾楼). Charlton's study, which explores housing dynamics in Johannesburg, offers valuable insight into how residents interact with their living conditions and the state, emphasizing housing as an action rather than a mere object. Her analysis mapped out a spectrum of "everyday infrastructural experience" (2018, 116) that reveals the intricate relationship between local responses, state interventions, and everyday lived experiences.

Applying Charlton's framework to the context of lanwei buildings, we can identify parallel modes in the spectrum of coping strategies. Her theoretical approach

offers enlightenment on navigating the dualism of legal and illegal, private and public, passive and active, to develop a spectral understanding of residents' everyday coping strategies and also attempt to illustrate the dynamic power interplay. This spectrum ranges from basic survival tactics to more organized forms of activism and self-reliance.

Mode 1: Waiting and Enduring

The residents are facing identical crises of waiting and dwelling, marked by state marginalization and criminalization. Their identities went through radical change as the building fell into abandonment, they became non-homeowners, creditors, and illegal occupants. Their “waithood” (Honwana 2014) involves a prolonged period of uncertainty: waiting for housing developers to resume work, waiting for banks to lower the mortgage loan, and waiting for the state to step in and rescue them from being homeless. However, their voices and stories are facing constant censorship and concealment. State-controlled media suppresses any coverage of negative social incidents, which might potentially damage the political image of the state and party.

The lived experience of a resident in Yihefang exemplifies the endurance required in such dire circumstances. In an interview by 环华十年, a woman describes the financial and emotional burden she has shouldered over the years. "I spent over 600,000 or 700,000 yuan (around 80,000 CHF)," she says when asked about the cost of her property. Despite the house being unfinished for almost ten years, she continues to pay off the mortgage, explaining, "Yes, what else can we do? If we don't pay, what

about the bank... We owe the bank money, what else can we do?" Her situation is further complicated by the fact that she bought the house when her child was just one year old, borrowing money from relatives to make the purchase. Now, her child is 13, and the burden of paying for an incomplete home remains a daily struggle.

The endurance of residents is often intertwined with a sense of hope that things might eventually improve, and an unwillingness to let go of their dreams, even in the overwhelming adversity. Another female resident's narrative vividly captures this complex blend of hope and endurance. As she recalls, despite considering selling her unfinished home, she ultimately decided to hold on. She recounts a conversation she had with a young man named Changbin²², presumably a sales office staff member who had assisted her in purchasing the house. He offered to help sell the house if she was dissatisfied. Despite her doubts, his words provided a fleeting sense of security. She explains, "When they said that I thought I had looked at this place thousands of times and felt a bit reluctant to leave... At that time, I still thought, hey, let's try it again!" This fleeting reassurance, coupled with her deep emotional investment in the home, is like a form of social endeavor as Achtnich described, gambling and taking risks to trade off their current struggles for a long-term possible future (2021, 317), despite the building's prolonged state of incompleteness.

These testimonies illustrate the emotional endurance devoted to remaining in such limbo, waiting for the day when their homes will finally be completed. It underscores how the residents' decision to stay is not just a matter of financial

²² For privacy protection, all names in the interview have been phonetically transliterated.

constraint but also a deeply rooted emotional investment. This endurance, however, is not merely passive; it is an active decision to maintain hope amidst hardship, laying the groundwork for the subtle forms of resistance that will emerge in later stages.

Mode 2: Mortgage Strikes and Payment Suspensions

As the period of passive waiting and enduring dragged on, frustration and anger begin to give way to a more active and collective form of resistance. The prolonged uncertainty and worsening conditions in 烂尾楼 triggered a significant shift in their responses, marked by the rise of mortgage strikes and payment suspensions emerging in the face of economic difficulties and systematic injustice within the housing market. These movements often initiated by the homeowners of unfinished buildings and organized at a communal level, highlighting the frustration and financial distress endured by individuals translate into a collective refusal to continue the mortgage payment and a demand for government intervention to ensure fairness and justice.

As residents begin to realize that waiting would not bring any change, some turn to more assertive forms of protest. The essence of mortgage strikes lies in homeowners ceasing their monthly payments to the bank. This phenomenon, known as "断供潮" (duàn gòng cháo, or the mortgage strike wave), has gained momentum as more homeowners recognize the power of collective action. Due to stalled construction projects, homeowners have already incurred significant losses from their substantial down payments. The additional burden of monthly mortgage payments

tightens the financial noose around many economically strained homeowners, which led to the rise of collective and forceful mortgage suspension movements.

Mortgage loans have traditionally been regarded as high-quality assets on bank's balance sheets, maintaining stability even amid broader economic difficulties. This is partly due to China's stringent down-payment requirements, where authorities typically mandate a 30% down payment for first-time homebuyers, providing a significant buffer for banks against potential declines in property prices (Huang 2023, 10). However, the regulations that once protected financial institutions have become a double-edged sword for homeowners. Individual mortgages in China recourse loans, meaning that if the borrower defaults, the bank can seize not only the property but also other assets of the borrower (Fang et al. 2016). This structure has placed immense pressure on homeowners, who face the risk of losing not just their homes but their entire financial security.

The first significant collective mortgage suspension occurred on June 30, 2022, in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, at an Evergrande project. This action quickly sparked a wave of similar protests. According to research by the China Real Estate Information Corp (CRIC), as of July 13, 106 projects across more than 20 cities, including Shenzhen, Wuhan, Zhengzhou, and Changsha, had joined the mortgage strike. In Zhengzhou alone, 26 projects participated. These affected properties involve 135 developers, including major real estate giants such as Evergrande (恒大) and Sunac (融创). (郭菲菲 and 肖望 2022) (Figure 8). As compiled under the "WeNeedHome" page on the online repository GitHub, unlike the official statistics

from CRIC, these figures are supplemented by data and maps created by grassroots contributors: by 1st August 9, 2024, a total of 349 properties across 119 cities nationwide had issued mortgage suspension notices (See the map in Figure 9).

However, homeowners are well aware that by forcibly suspending mortgage payments, they face risks such as bank credit score reductions, mortgage defaults, and subsequent late fees. Guo (2024) has identified three fundamental reasons for the emergence of mortgage strikes. First, the high cost of mortgage monthly payments indirectly enslaves the homebuyers to work for the developers and banks. Second, the low-valued lanwei buildings are determined as poor collateral. Third, the long-term time cost, meaning that the labor force for the next 20-30 years will be tied to incomplete properties, added further pressure.

Property Progress



Note: Data covers 290 stalled projects in 32 cities as of the end of 2022
Source: China Real Estate Information Corp.

Caixin

Figure 8. Property Suspension Progress Chart by CRIC

To date, although there have been occasional instances of homeowners winning legal battles and receiving court rulings that absolve them from making further payments, there has been no significant political or policy-level action by the state to address the underlying issues. As some homeowners have expressed, "Stopping mortgage payments is a forced choice between bad and worse. It's not about winning anything, it's just the only option left (郭菲菲 and 肖望 2022)."

This growing trend of mortgage strikes underscores the desperation of homeowners who feel abandoned by both the market and the state. It also highlights the need for systemic reforms to address the root causes of these issues and prevent future crises. Through collective action and the refusal to continue mortgage payments, homeowners are no longer passively enduring their circumstances—they are actively resisting and demanding accountability and change.

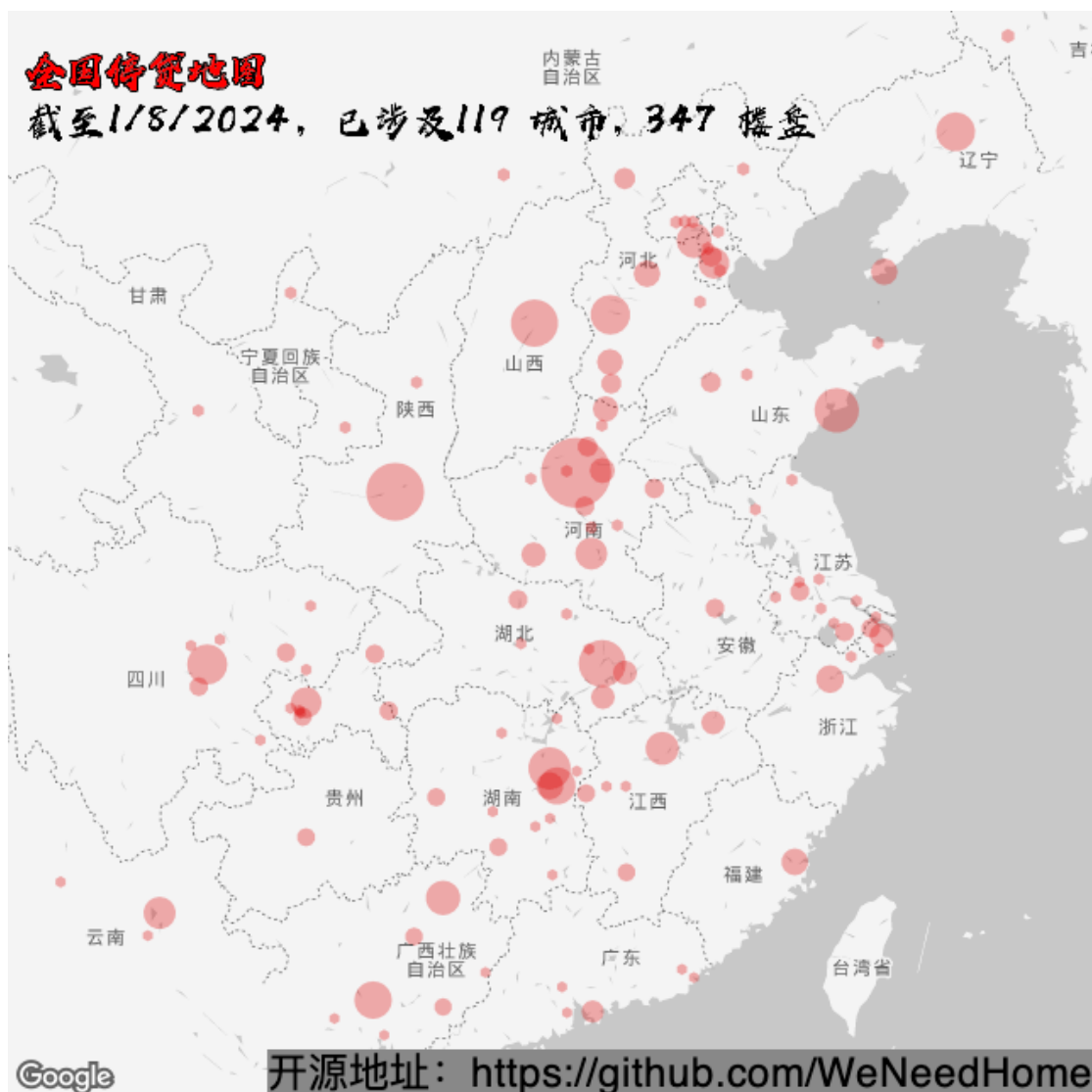


Figure 9. 全国停贷地图 National Loan Suspension Map from Github/WeNeedHome

Mode 3: Retention and Act of Everyday Resistance

In addressing the significant challenges they have encountered, homeowners have demonstrated considerable fortitude and resourcefulness. Rather than passively accepting their circumstances, they have developed various innovative strategies to address their difficulties. As residents settle into their new reality, they engage in what Bayat (2013) terms "quiet encroachment" and everyday acts of resistance. Such as “unlawful acquisition of lands and shelters, followed by such

urban amenities as electricity, running water, phone lines, paved roads, and the like (2013, 15)". In examining the logic of quiet encroachment and everyday coping strategies of the dwellers of urban abandonment in the lanweilou context. Their decision to take up residence in the partially constructed concrete building blocks in order to survive the obstacles they face, including difficulties in accessing water, electricity, gas, and functional infrastructures. This is done to prevent themselves from ending up homeless.

One common adaptative measure observed among lanwei residents is the use of makeshift indoor decorations to manage the harsh living conditions. In Yihefang, many residents used an extra blanket to cover up the bed and shield it from the dust (Figure 10). One explained, "I was worried about the wind, so I put this up. Otherwise, it's all dirt when you sleep at night because the floor is also dirt." The residents of Different Kind of Happy City, face similar challenges in attempting to maintain cleanliness and comfort. Chen, used a mosquito net to cover her bed, further exemplifying the resourcefulness of lanwei residents' strong adaptabilities to their poor living environments (Cheng 2020).



Figure 10. A bed with a red blanket to cover up from the dust. (From Yihefang)²³

The residents of Yihefang have also addressed the issue of electricity by purchasing solar lamps (see Figure 11), which they would charge on the balconies during the day and use at night. They have also devised makeshift solutions for water and cooking needs, such as carrying water buckets to fetch it from the construction site's water station downstairs and using portable cassette stoves (Figure 12). One resident described her efforts to manage cooking with a small stove due to a malfunctioning gas tank, underscoring the extreme measures taken to adapt to the lack of infrastructure (环华十年 2022).

²³ Image by 环华十年's video on 06:37

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1DT4y1Y7dT/?spm_id_from=333.788&vd_source=a06cea341eafc049826c03c08049871f



Figure 11. People gathered around a tricycle selling new solar panels and lights



Figure 12. The gas tank she carried herself up to the 19th-floor

Beyond indoor modifications, residents also make use of the available outdoor spaces within the compound for subsistence. In Yihefang, for instance, the residents have turned the neglected land into a site for growing and harvesting wild vegetables. An elderly resident shared, “The wild vegetables that can be used to make cold dishes.” And recounted how such practices were part of her upbringing: “When

we didn't have money to buy food, we would dig up some wild vegetables to eat... we farmers eat whatever we can find. Just pick off the dead leaves, blanch them in hot water, add some salt and oil, and you can eat it (Figure 13)." This practice of harvesting wild vegetables not only illustrates the residents' resilience but also highlights a continuity of traditional coping mechanisms adapted to their current circumstances.



Figure 13. The elderly woman collecting wild vegetables.

The infamous abandoned building known as “别样幸福城” (“*Different Kind of Happy City*”) located in Kunming, Yunnan province (see map in Figure 14) has been abandoned for 7 years. This prolonged period of neglect serves to exemplify the enduring nature of the underlying issues. Since May 2020, more than 50 homeowners have gradually moved into the abandoned building, sparking public debate. Originally scheduled for delivery in 2015, the developer has since been involved in 657 lawsuits, leading to its extended abandonment of the project (Cheng 2020).

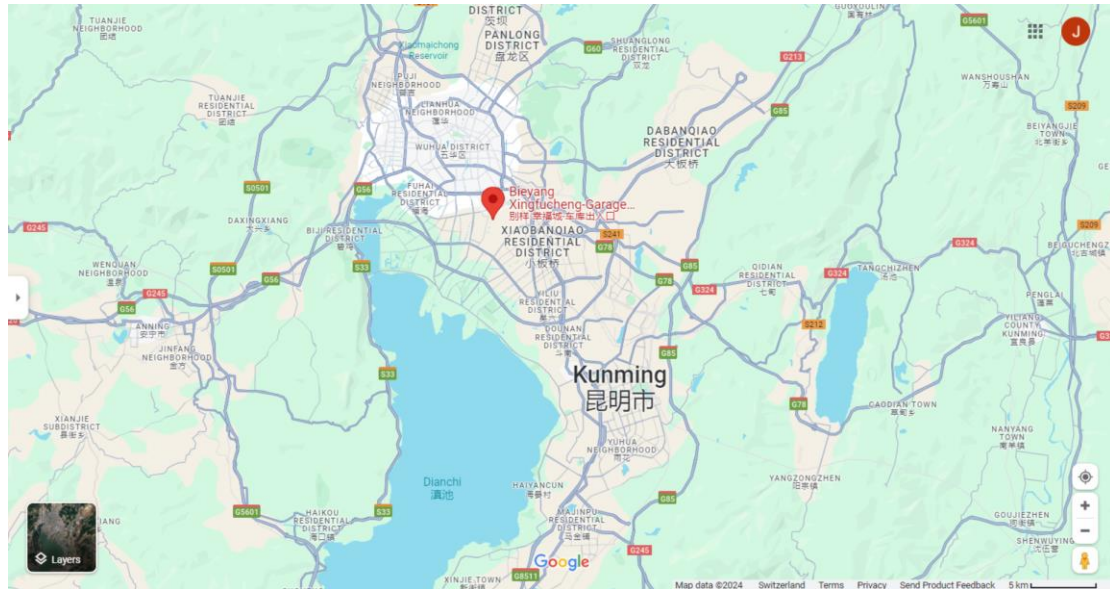


Figure 14. Location of “别样幸福城”(“Different Kind of Happy City”) in Kunming

A mini-documentary produced by Cheng (2020) provides a detailed glimpse into the residents' daily struggles and their resourcefulness.²⁴ The film captures a female resident using salvaged wood for fuel and retrieving water from a muddy pit, showcasing their adaptive strategies in an environment devoid of basic amenities (See Figures 15 & 16). This mode reflects the dualism of residents being both legitimate occupants and transgressors of the formal housing norms. Primarily in despair of self-help and desperation for a roof over their heads, instead of uprising or contesting the state power or political system.

²⁴ 冬瓜视频. “【冬瓜视频】别样幸福? | 50 多户业主住进没水没电烂尾楼, 每月还要还 4 千多房贷 说好的幸福都去哪儿了 | 透明时代,” September 21, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsfNtopRDQ>.

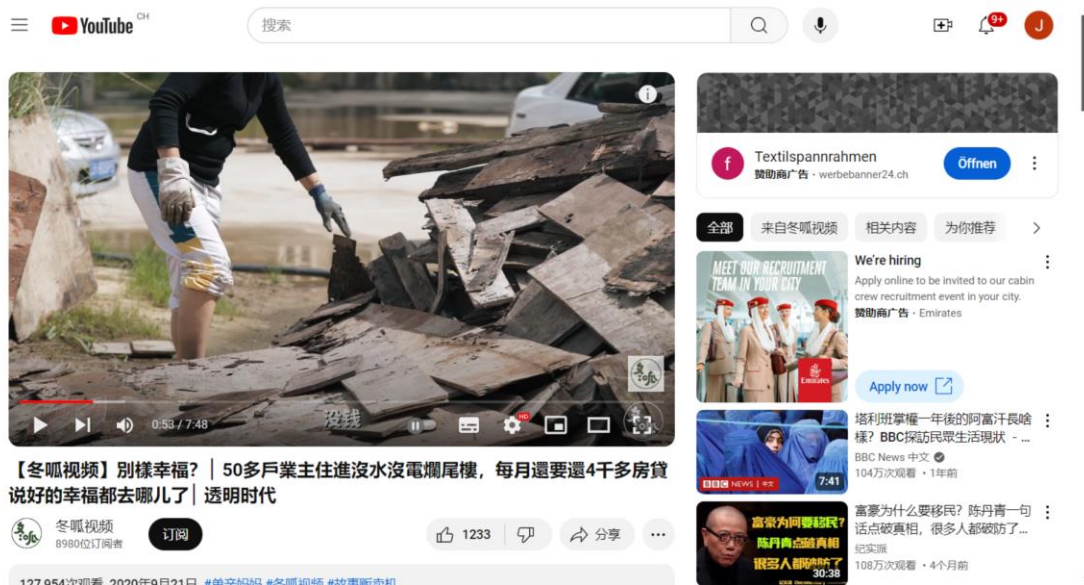


Figure 15. Chen collected the wasted wooden planks as firewood

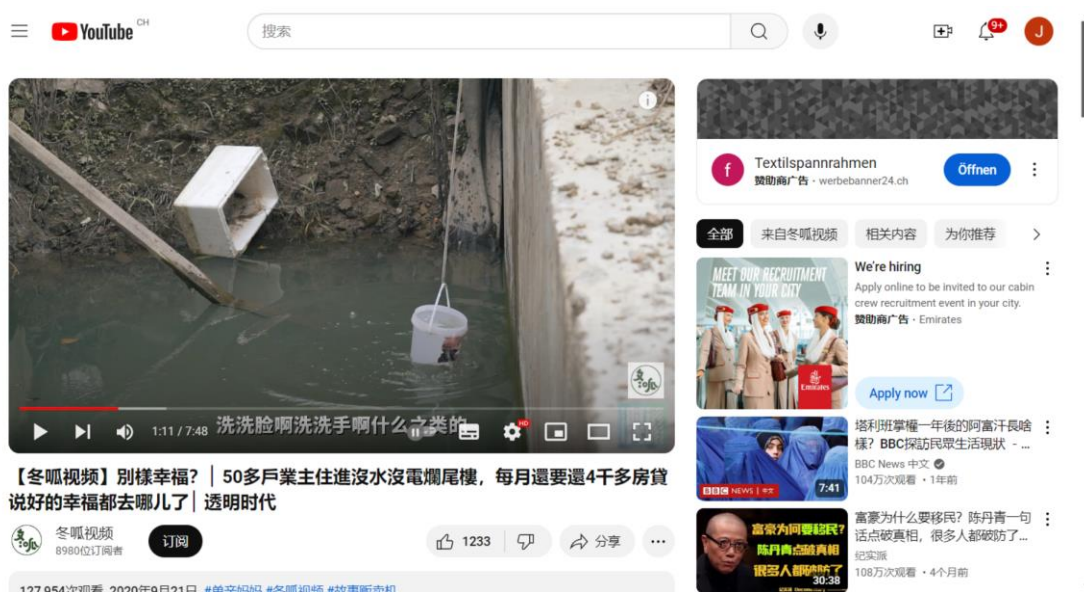


Figure 16. Chen uses a plastic bucket tied with a rope to fetch water from a muddy pit

These examples of indoor and outdoor adaptations underscore the residents' ability to navigate their challenging living conditions through practical and inventive means. The modifications and adaptations tactics reflect a broader spectrum of housing coping strategies of 烂尾楼, blending everyday resourcefulness to transform incomplete housing into functional living spaces with the necessity of marking do in

less-than-ideal situations.

Mode 4: Grassroots Mobilization and Self-Rescue Initiatives

As residents adapt to their environment, there is a shift towards social organization and community building becomes evident. The crisis of unfinished buildings, or 烂尾楼, has sparked a unique form of grassroots activism. Residents form informal networks to share resources, organize communal activities, and provide mutual support. This collective approach is crucial as affected individuals band together to seek justice, and solutions and establish a sense of community where traditional mechanisms have failed.

Communities impacted by 烂尾楼 often find themselves in a precarious situation, grappling with financial losses, disrupted lives, and the erosion of trust in traditional governance and market mechanisms. In response, residents are not passively awaiting external aid but are instead taking charge of their own destinies (Honwana 2014). A notable example is the 易合坊 (Yihefang) complex in Xi'an, according to the lanweilou video interview series conducted by “环华十年”, a middle-aged woman provided a detailed account of their community “self-rescue plan” (自救)²⁵.

In the interview, the woman explained how residents of her building, like those in adjacent buildings, participated in self-rescue efforts. She recounted, “We

²⁵ Video link on Bilibili
https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1y3411H7yL/?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0&vd_source=a06cea341eafc049826c03c08049871f

bought the glass, and then it was installed from the top floor to the 14th floor. At that time, there was no money, and we couldn't pay the workers, so it stopped. The doors, the entrance doors, were also funded by us, and even the elevators were bought with our own money for self-rescue. At that time (the end), we lacked a small amount of money and couldn't hire workers to install these things, so it stopped. We also participated; Building 2 succeeded in self-rescue, but our Building 1 failed.”

The self-rescue initiative came up with a mid-way solution after negotiations with the housing developer, Side Company (四德公司)²⁶, which owned the parking spaces. This plan required a significant contribution of 20,000 yuan (approximately CHF 2,500) from each household, with the developer mortgaging the garage as collateral, valued at 60,000 yuan (approximately CHF 7,500), shared among three households. This arrangement allowed homeowners to potentially recoup their investment by either claiming the garage or reselling it later. Despite these efforts, only about a third of the homeowners participated in the plan. The participating homeowners took substantial steps to advance the project, including purchasing and installing essential components such as glass, doors, elevators, and external wall insulation. However, the financial resources were insufficient to complete the work, and the effort was halted due to the inability to pay workers and continue the installation.

A critical issue was the divergent attitudes among homeowners. While some, driven by immediate housing needs and potential cost savings, were willing to invest

²⁶ 西安四德置业有限公司, filed for bankruptcy liquidation in 2018.

<https://pccz.court.gov.cn/pcajxxw/pczwr/zwrzh?id=7BD73A1E18E5A6608FC48B763AAA8EB6>

in self-rescue, others resisted, believing that the developer or other entities should be responsible for completing the project. This lack of unanimous support hindered further fundraising efforts and the overall success of the initiative. The limited participation, divergent attitudes, and financial capabilities among homeowners ultimately led to the failure of the self-rescue effort for Building 1.

The divergent outcome between the two buildings' initiatives highlights the variability and complexities of grassroots mobilization. It underscores the importance of cohesive community efforts, supportive policies, and innovative financial mechanisms. The experience of the residents of “易合坊” served as a valuable lesson on the importance of solidarity, the critical role of grassroots organizations, and the reclaiming of agency in the face of systemic failures. As residents adapt to their deteriorating environment, a shift toward social organization and community building becomes evident. The crisis of unfinished buildings, or 烂尾楼, has sparked unique forms of grassroots activism. Residents form informal networks to share resources, organize communal activities, and provide mutual support. This collective approach is crucial as affected individuals band together to seek justice, find solutions, and establish a sense of community where traditional mechanisms have failed.

In the broader public narrative, the residents of 烂尾楼 are often viewed with a mix of sympathy and stigma. On one hand, they are seen as victims of predatory real estate practices and systemic failures, abandoned by developers and overlooked by the authorities. On the other hand, there is a perception that these residents might bear some responsibility for their situation, having made what are now viewed as risky or

ill-advised investments. This duality in public perception adds a layer of complexity to their struggle, as they must not only cope with their material losses but also navigate the social implications of being associated with a failed housing project.

Community organizing forms the backbone of self-rescue efforts, by building networks of support, establishing transparent communication channels, and advocating for policy changes, grassroots organizations are transforming the narrative around 烂尾楼. While the general public may view these residents as victims or failures, these grassroots efforts challenge that perception, showcasing the resilience and agency of those who refuse to be passively defined by their circumstances.

Those groups employ various strategies, including assembling community collectives to ensure supply and security, engaging in dialog with authorities, and raising public awareness. In the example of "Different Kind of Happy City" in Kunming, Ms. Chen shared how residents collectively purchase drinking water and shared meals, reducing costs to just 5 yuan (approximately 0.60 CHF) per person per day (Figure 17). The high level of communal organization and solidarity, especially under tight financial conditions, demonstrates the collective ability to budget effectively. By pooling resources and sharing responsibilities, they mitigate individual burdens. Additionally, to ensure the safety of residents, they spontaneously organized patrol teams to patrol three to five times every night (see Figure 18), further exemplifying the grassroots efforts to maintain a semblance of order and security in the chaos (Cheng 2020).



Figure 17. Ordering water from outside can carry nearly one ton of water at a time.



Figure 18 To ensure the safety of residents, the owners of 烂尾楼 organized patrol teams.

Beyond offline communities' efforts, online platforms have also emerged as vital spaces for mutual assistance. On 豆瓣 (Douban)²⁷, a popular Chinese social

²⁷ A Chinese social networking service that allows users to share reviews and recommendations on books, movies, music, and various other forms of media

forum, where a group named "Working Class Homebuyers" (社畜买房共进会)²⁸ serves as a virtual assembly for individuals facing similar housing challenges. The group currently has 272,250 users and has initiated discussion threads addressing a series of issues related to home buying and mortgage loans. It provides a space for discussion, mutual support, and resource sharing among its members. The group operates under strict guidelines to maintain focus and avoid exploitation by real estate agents or developers. The rules emphasize that only individuals actively involved in home purchasing or mortgage repayment are welcome, fostering a sense of shared experience and solidarity. This virtual assembly complements their offline efforts, reinforcing the broader theme of grassroots mobilization and the importance of communal solidarity in overcoming adversity.

Mode 5: Self-Reliance on Social Media to Raise Public Attention

In contrast to the previous modes, this phase reveals resident's reliance on the rise of social media influence. Various media channels provide new avenues for oppressed voices to be heard and for injustice to be seen by the public. This mode marks a strategic shift from grassroots resistance to leveraging digital platforms for broader public awareness and engagement.

One notable example is a Chinese TikToker "Xiang Xiang Ge" (即墨香香哥 (记录烂尾楼生活)) on Douyin²⁹, who uploads short videos to document and share his daily life as a resident moved into the unfinished building project Champs-

²⁸ Forum URL <https://www.douban.com/group/677158/?ref=sidebar>

²⁹ Chinese version of TikTok. By 2023, Douyin (抖音) has more than 1 billion registered users.

Élysées project (香榭丽舍) in Qingdao (Figure 19). His content captures the tough realities of living in the lanwei building, not only showing video footage of makeshift living arrangements and strong adaptations, but he also does online streaming occasionally to update lanwei progress. As his videos gained popularity, they significantly raised public awareness and influence regarding the issue of stalled construction projects.

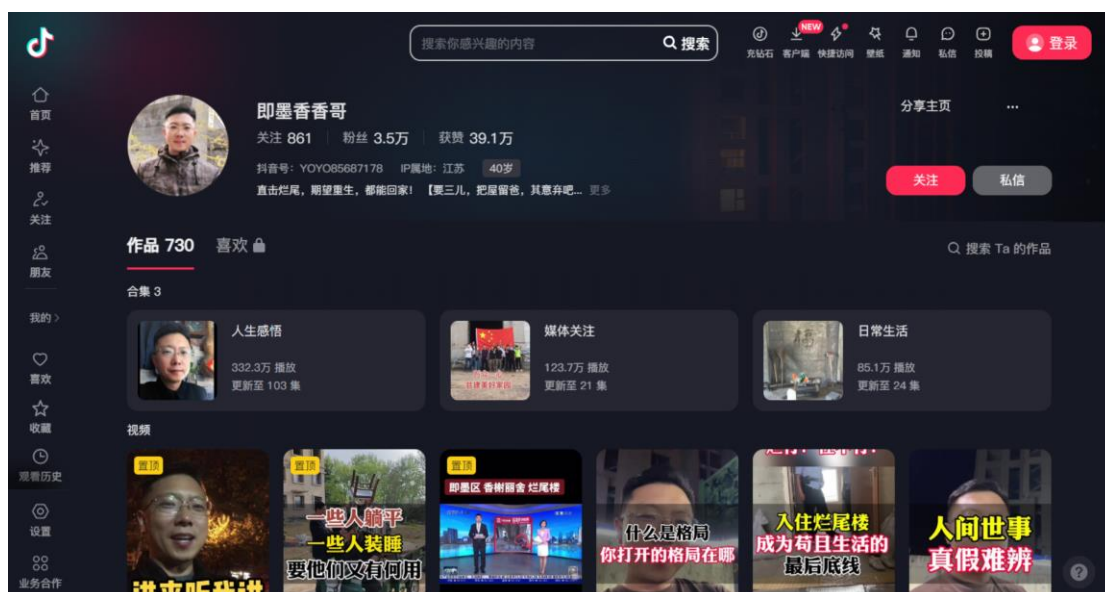


Figure 19. Douyin homepage of Xiang Xiang Ge obtained more than 390,000 likes and 35,000 followers as of July 2024

Xiang Xiang Ge's videos have resonated widely, eliciting a range of reactions from the public. In the comment sections of his posts, viewers have expressed a mix of compassion, encouragement, and frustration. Some comments show genuine empathy for the residents' plight, acknowledging the personal hardships and offering moral support. Others reflect on systemic flaws, with users critiquing the failure of developers and government authorities to address the issues surrounding unfinished buildings.

The impact of Xiang Xiang Ge's social media presence extends beyond individual interactions. His account has sparked a broader conversation about the systemic issues within China's housing market and the plight of homeowners stuck in unfinished projects. This digital visibility has galvanized similar residents to come forward, share their own stories, and form solidarity networks. As a result, his narrative has not only inspired others in similar situations to unite and advocate for change but has also drawn attention from various media outlets and news channels (Figure 20). These platforms have started to cover the issue more extensively, broadcasting the residents' realities to a wider audience and pressing for public and governmental responses.



Figure 20. Qingdao TV Station Reports on Local Unfinished Buildings

In August 2022, a photographer named Weimin Chu encountered "Xiang Xiang Ge" through a TikTok livestream. Deeply moved by the content, Chu decided to document the situation firsthand. "It was because he posted videos about the unfinished buildings that I became interested in the Qingdao Champs-Élysées project (青岛香榭丽舍)," Chu explained. "This project, located in Jimo District, Qingdao, far from the city center, was the least completed among all the sites I have photographed." Chu expressed his astonishment, "Filming these unfinished buildings was deeply impactful. I never imagined anyone would choose to live in such primitive conditions. They each have their difficulties. Even those who own higher-floor units prefer to stay in their own homes rather than empty lower-floor apartments. I had never interacted with residents of unfinished buildings before, and this experience profoundly changed many of my preconceptions."(吕萌 2023)

Through Chu's photography and Xiang Xiang Ge's videos, the stark realities faced by residents of unfinished housing projects have been brought to the forefront of public consciousness. Chu's photos, which poignantly captured these living conditions, went on to win an Honorable Mention in the 2023 Photo Contest, Asia, under the title "Faint Light in the Unfinished Building (Chu 2022) (see the cover of this thesis)." This combination of visual storytelling and social media outreach has highlighted the human aspect of the crisis, garnering empathy and support from a wider audience. The use of media channels has thus become a powerful tool in raising awareness and mobilizing public opinion, making a shift towards digital activism and media engagement as essential tools in the fight for justice and reform.

Conclusion: The Lanwei Housing Spectrum and the Uniqueness of Chinese Activism

The case of lanweilou in China serves as a case of appropriation of the urban ruins and the grassroots mobilization of contemporary Chinese cities. It also expands the scope of Southern urbanism, facilitating the study of Chinese urban phenomenon. Encouraged by scholars such as Anita De Franco (2021) and Dale (2011) to closely examine the subtle socio-economic relationships embedded in the urban ruins. This entails understanding the biopower operated through the urban regulations and space, as well as the experience of urban marginalized communities. Qian (2022, 3) also proposed to apply a lens of everyday urbanism to research urbanism in contemporary China. Furthermore, the utilization of rich southern urbanism notions of everyday resistance and subaltern living strategies, also inspired by Charlton's (2018) study on housing practices provides a heuristic device for understanding the diversity and complexity of how residents cope with the challenges and struggles of 烂尾楼.

Developing the Lanwei Housing Spectrum, which encompasses various modes from waiting and enduring, through adaptation and resistance, grassroots organizing, to leverage of social media, demonstrates the innovative strategies and collective agency of residents facing unfinished housing projects. The grassroots movements have played a pivotal role in mobilizing homeowners to collectively address the survival issues stemming from unfinished housing projects. The

community-led efforts “reconceptualized citizenship” (Holston 2009) by addressing housing, infrastructure, and services. By engaging in self-help initiatives and organizing collectively, residents assert their agency, challenge urban inequalities, and reshape their roles within the urban socio-political fabric.

The phenomenon of mortgage strikes represents significant financial pressure on real estate developers, banks, and financial institutions, adding pressure to related authorities to renegotiate terms with homeowners. The large-scale collective movements, as discussed by Simone(2004), such collective actions exemplify the concept of people as a “highly urbanized social infrastructure”, that come together, collaborate, and create networks through redistribution of agency from centralized structures to grassroots actions, to reconfigure power dynamics and influencing the future trajectory of urban development.

Furthermore, the role of social media channels in amplifying these struggles cannot be overstated. The accessibility of digital platforms allows residents to reach a broader audience and raise public awareness about their plight, which has transgressive meanings that expose the limits of the bureaucratic design of everyday life and spaces (Caldeira, 2017). Meanwhile, be aware of China’s “capital-state complex” (Qian 2022, 2), using every day as a site for studying lanwei residents’ daily survival strategies and maneuvering makeshift practices to negotiate uncertainty and alienation. As Zhang (2014) notes, “Online communities constitute a fluid imagined space”, in which multi-media platforms foster the formation of counter-hegemonic narratives and boost online activism under heavy state control in real life. This digital

engagement serves as a critical counterbalance to state control, providing residents with new avenues to voice their grievances and seek solidarity. The lanwei housing spectrum reflects a broader struggle against systemic failures and highlights the transformative potential of community-led actions and digital advocacy in addressing urban inequalities.

Building on Shin's (2013) argument regarding the characteristics of Chinese activism, particularly in the context of property rights, reveals a distinct set of dynamics shaped by the country's unique socio-political environment. In contrast to the more confrontational forms of activism seen in the Western world, Chinese activism tends to focus on specific grievances, such as land expropriation, harsh labor conditions, and eviction orders, rather than directly challenging the state or the ruling Communist Party (2013, 1184). Despite the increase in protests across China, these movements often do not aim to dismantle the underlying power structures that perpetuate exploitation and inequality. Even the lanwei housing provokes protests and mortgage strikes, but the focus of rarely on the state. This limitation means that while Chinese rights activism is significant in terms of its scale and frequency, it often falls short of addressing the root causes of urban inequality and injustice.

In conducting this research, I employed exclusively digital methods. Digital ethnography granted me the opportunity to gain some insights into this sensitive topic and concealed community in China. Despite the lanwei residents facing erasure and censorship from the state to avoid attracting too much public attention, there are still numerous grassroots media personnel and social figures striving to document the truth

and contest the state-dominant discourse. The digital field enables Chinese citizens to navigate the intricate landscape of rights, power, and resistance in a distinctive manner, offering a model of how marginalized communities can assert their right to the city in a rapidly changing urban environment.

In concluding this study, I advocate for further exploration of urban decay within the context of Chinese urbanism, taking ruins and abandonment as constructive lenses through which we can reimagine and reshape the urban future. The persistence of 烂尾楼 not only reflects the failure of mismanagement in the urbanization process but also serves as an educational tool for unpacking the broader socio-political dynamics at play. By examining urban abandonment, we can uncover the hidden narratives of those who inhabit them, offering valuable insights into the resilience and agency of the overlooked urban populations. I strongly urge more dedicated research on Chinese urban everyday life, especially through onsite fieldwork can better capture the nuanced living experiences. I believe such research would make a substantial contribution to the broader southern urbanism discourse, enriching our understanding of how marginalized grassroots communities navigate, resist, and adapt to the challenges posed by rapid urbanization.

Note on the Use of AI Tools

AI-Based Tools	Type of Use	Affected Work
Chat GPT-4	Translate (CN-EN) and grammar checking of the interview narrative transcription	Entire paper
Grammarly	Grammar checking	Entire paper
DeepL Write	Sentences polishing and rephrasing	Entire paper

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