

# A Glimpse Over the Wall

Living in the Last Urban Village in Wuxi, China



Jia Cheng Li is separated from the modern city outside by the government using parapets with slogans on. The slogans focus on the idea that demolition will beautify the city and make personal life better. The one in the photo states that "the principle of fairness, justice, and openness shall be firmly observed, and the right of people whose houses are expropriated shall be earnestly safeguarded."

Photo by Richard Zhang

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August 2018

Surrounded by concrete barriers with dense bushes, the ramshackle pile of buildings is the remnant part of the last urban village in Wuxi, a city 40 minutes away from Shanghai. Those residents staying, some in their nineties, have preserved their daily routines upon the ruins through the ten-year expropriation since 2009.

The name Jia Cheng Li, which literally means “caught up in the city,” turned out to be a prophecy: it is now located in one of the fastest growing regions of Wuxi and abuts the most developed local central business district. A Hang Lung Plaza and a Nikko Hotel are all less than one kilometer away, and yet this village is an enclosure marked by poor sanitation and little public order at night, lacking any security or network surveillance. In daytime, this area seems invisible to the passerby, blocking occasional curiosity outside the wall, along with its economic development.

Renovation of shanty towns was officially put on the agenda of Chinese government in 2009, a year after which the expo in Shanghai was held, and its slogan was popularized: better city, better life.

This idea was further interpreted, as a guideline, or conviction, by the government and most of the urban dwellers as “fewer shanties, better city.” From 2013 to 2018, over 26 million households were expropriated nationwide, leading to removals of more than 100 million residents. Premier Li Keqiang more than once expressed his concern over this renovation – “Shanty towns are debts of history and scars of cities.” He later added, “To renovate means more than to rebuild, but also to create a new life.”

The expropriation in Jia Cheng Li began amid such outlook. In the vacancy of national ordinance on compensations for land, Wuxi had to exercise under the guidelines set by Jiangsu Province, which, in the section of determining the compensation, stated that “land value shall be decided by the evaluation of the market.”

But the potential of land through the scope of remaining households, since the very

beginning, had diverged from that in the perspective of real estate agents. Negotiations confronted encumbrance, leading to a ten-year stalemate between the remaining 337 families and the expropriation program.

“This part of land belongs to me. If more people come to live, we could simply build up another floor, like we did. There’s no way to afford apartments for so many people with the compensation.” Said Lee Qingmin, whose mother is in her nineties and has lived here for over sixty years.

Later he described himself the lowest class of society, “Those who are affluent had left, leaving only the poor and the elder.”

Whenever a moving truck leaves, a demolition team comes. Ten years of destruction have painted this land with ruins, ashes and half-intact buildings. “Sometimes thieves would hide in one of them during the day,” one lady pointed across a pile of garbage, “In the evening they knock on our doors to check whether there are people inside, and if no, they break in.”

Under such circumstances, besides the dissatisfaction with compensation, the residents, unsurprisingly, have other reasons to stay.

As one of the typical old neighborhoods, most of its residents retained a relationship with other members of the community: after each dinner, they each bring a chair to the main road next to their houses, leaving just enough space for, in some rare cases, a car to pass. Borrowing the light from a lamp and their home, residents created an austere public sphere in a dialect only the local would understand – none of the seniors speak Mandarin.

A hundred meters away is the food market in Jia Cheng Li, a place, though shabby and messy, bustling with activities. It is surrounded by pieces of sack fabrics with different patterns and covered by blue iron plate. While the shops on the left side sell meat, and those

one the right sell chickens, ducks, and fish, there are vegetables shops scattered along several narrow walkways in the middle.

“The good value of the local food market is convenience. It's easy for the people who lives around to buy food, you know.” An uncle says while cutting off a layer of fat on the pork, “and we never weigh wrongly, always fair and reasonable.”

He pointed to a little room with eight Chinese characters on the window, saying “welcome to check the weight again, always be honest.”

The fixed sellers all have worked here for more than a decade, providing a possibility of building connection with the buyers. Thus, a public sphere was formed. During the break in the noon, some aunties would play music with a speaker and start dancing.



An auntie selling vegetables and an auntie selling bean products dance in a narrow aisle following Chinese pop music and dance during the noon break everyday.

Photo by Richard Zhang

The market will disappear after the complete removal of Jia Cheng Li neighborhood. According to the Wuxi Urban Planning Bureau, the first step, started in 2009, was to demolish dilapidated buildings.

The converted land was designed as an updated residential unit which the current residents cannot afford: the average housing price has risen only faster than the compensation. According to the data provided by Anjuke, a Housing Management Cooperation, since 2012, the average housing price in that district has risen from around 8000 yuan/m<sup>2</sup> to over 14100 yuan/m<sup>2</sup>, while the compensation for buildings has only been raised from 7000 yuan/m<sup>2</sup> to 11500 yuan/m<sup>2</sup>. It seemed that the longer the residents wait, the weaker the reason they would have for leaving.

In May 2018, the government decided to finish the demolition project. An abandoned building was turned into the expropriation office overnight. Lawyers often presented there to answer legal issues. Red Banners with yellow characters were strung throughout the yard of the office as well as the whole Jia Cheng Li neighborhood. One slogan depicted the project as “breeze of spring,” which would bring “warmth and vitality” to the community as if the demolition team has the restoration power.

In the office, there is a form that tracks the progress of expropriation, listing all the proprietors of the 337 “nail houses,” many of whom have been labeled “dead.” They were the ones who first laid the groundwork, and they were the ones who now become stories told by their children.

“Houses were built in the last century with the savings of our fathers, some of whom first arrived here on boat, carrying nothing but family.” Wang Sheng told us, a bony man in his 40s.

In 2013, Wuxi Urban Planning Bureau established a new design of its CBD named “Wuxi Manhattan,” aiming to renew the downtown and to expand its tertiary sector. Eventually it was expected to function as a trade center with cultural feature spots by the canal. So far, plazas and office buildings have been erected and flourished around Jia Cheng Li, yet within the walls the paces of life remain still.

“Some of the superstitious elder had a conviction that feet leaving the soil represents death.” Lee Qingmin said to us at an evening discussion, “Even an extra pension and a better environment wouldn’t persuade them.”

“Most of my neighbors have moved away,” says Lee’s mother, “I haven’t because I could not afford. If I were to move, it’s likely that I would not know any of my neighbor.”

“We support the leadership of CCP and the city development,” Lee’s neighbor, Xu Jingfang added, “But this conflict is indeed too hard to deal.”

Among the first wave to leave Jia Cheng Li, ten years later, Huang Shumin revisited her home, which was once her dormitory when she worked at a textile mill. Her grandchild is in kindergarten, receiving advanced English training, and her family has decided to let her study aboard.

Huang said that she still had a sentiment to this neighborhood.

In June, 2018. The expropriation office issued an announcement that required the remaining dwellers to move in 6 months; otherwise a judicial practice may become necessary. The full reconstruction of Jia Cheng Li seems inevitable. Another 35 acre of lands will join the city development, those original inhabitants scattered.

In the 1950s, most residences were established in Jia Cheng Li, adding new vitality to the old buildings that were constructed before the formation of the PRC.

It was said that in the 1970s, Jia Cheng Li was considered the silk-stocking district of the city. A girl would be blessed to marry someone there.

In the 2010s, after years of obsolescence, Jia Cheng Li embraced its demolition.

On that evening when Mr. Lee shared with us his stories and thoughts on compensation, his neighbor told us to take more photos of him sitting under the lamp, “He never talks this much.”



Mr. Lee sits on a rattan chair and talks about his stories of demolition with a lit cigarette in his hand. People in Jia Cheng Li like to chat in the shared space- small area in front of their houses- during summer nights.

Photo by Richard Zhang