

## Chapter 61

# Retreat from a Totalitarian Society: China's Urbanism in the Making

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### An Earth-Bounded Society

Fei Xiaotong, a renowned Chinese sociologist, described the foundations of Chinese society as “earth-bounded” (Fei 1992). He further elaborated that in such an earth-bounded society the social structure is characterized by the order of so-called *chaxugeju* (the differential model of association), which is the basic organization principle of rural China. Different from clearly defined social boundaries in western society, the Chinese traditional society is “just like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it. Everyone stands at the centre of the circles produced by his or her own” (Fei 1992: 62). The rural society is essentially a society of acquaintance, in which one is “differentially associated” with the inner circle of family members, then the outer circle of extended family members, and further the ring of villagers. These differential associations integrate individuals into a society with social networks. Because of close but varying association, the rural villages are governed by social norms rather than laws or regulations.

In the imperial period, China was predominantly rural (Esherick 2000). The city was mainly an administrative center; but the feudal system primarily relied on rural villages' self-containment and self-governance (the mechanism is the *baojia* system, see discussion later). As the seats of administration and local political power, the cities had the most salient spatial element: the government buildings (*yamen*) served as the nerve center of a city (Ma 2009). Apart from this administrative role, other activities such as commerce were suppressed, and the Confucian elites all preferred to pursue their career in the government rather than becoming merchants (Ma 2009). While in the Song dynasty (960–1279) China saw an embryonic urban

culture brought about by booming commerce, the city as a civil society was absent in a modern sense.

As an administrative center, the Chinese city was in contrast with what Max Weber called the Occidental City in sixteenth-century Europe; Weber believes “in Europe citizens participated in the local administration, in China urban dwellers belonged to their families and native villages, while in India urban dwellers were members of different castes.” In other words, the development of city in the west represents the advancement of modernism. The implication of modernization on everyday life is the so-called “bureaucratization of social relationships.” Such an urbanized life inside the city wall became the “breeding ground for the new mode of production – capitalism – and Occidental modernity” (Haussermann and Haila 2005: 51).

### Socialist Totalitarianism

The features of rural society have been continued and even strengthened by so-called “communist neo-traditionalism” (Walder 1986). In the planned economy, the state organized collective consumption through state work-units. These work-units are more than production units; they are “total social entities” carrying out service provision, housing development and distribution, and social management (Whyte and Parish 1984). Chinese sociologist Sun Liping argues that Chinese society was a totalitarian society because social relations were totalized. He describes such a totalitarian society as a society with “under-differentiated social structure,” in which “the state controls the economy and monopolizes all social resources. Further, politics, society and ideology are highly overlapped with each other” (2004: 31). Such a totalitarian society was effective in terms of social mobilization.

The totalitarian society was strengthened by state housing provision. The work-unit compound is a unique built form of state-led industrialization (Wu 1996) and thus a territory of governance combined with hierarchical state control and residential management (Bray 2005). In other words, the work-unit compound is a combination of workplace and living-place, resulting in a relatively under-differentiated socio-spatial pattern in urban China, which has been mainly based on occupational types (Yeh *et al.* 1995) rather than socioeconomic or class division. With the decline of the *danwei* system, however, a new pattern of spatial differentiation based on housing tenure began to emerge (Li and Wu 2008). In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on the social implications of this new residential pattern.

### Absence of Urbanism

The state plays a dominant role in production as well as reproduction. The redistributive state (Nee 1991) is mainly achieved through omnipotent and self-contained work-units. An important feature of this totalitarian society is that individual members of the work-unit form a comprehensive relation, rather than a partial relation such as an employer–employee relation.

Because investment in consumption was believed wasteful and unproductive, the state constrained consumption and emphasized the production role of the city. In addition, through the household registration system (*hukou*), rural to urban migra-

tion was controlled, and the spontaneous inflow into cities was prohibited (Chan 1994). Up to economic reform in 1978, the level of urbanization, i.e., the proportion of urban population, was suppressed below 18 percent (Zhou and Ma 2003). In contrast to the “hyper-urbanization” in developing countries, the ratio of urban population to total population lagged behind the respective level of industrialization in China. In other words, the socialist city was “under-urbanized” (Szelenyi 1996). China achieved “industrialization without urbanization.”

Similar to other socialist cities in central and eastern Europe, the state workplace played a dominant role in everyday life (Stenning 2005). Production, consumption, and reproduction were intertwined at the local scale of workplace community. Szelenyi (1996) argued that the socialist city typically lacked “urbanism”; the trait of diversity, heterogeneity, and anonymity of the modern metropolis was absent. The landscape was monotone, with standard multi-story walk-ups for industrial workers. Except for monuments and public buildings, there was no skyscraper to break up the skyline. The crime rate was low; beggars and homeless were absent. There was no urban vice typically associated with urbanism. Uniformity and collectivity were the basic features of Chinese urbanism in state socialism.

## Market Reform and Emerging Residential Diversity

Market-oriented reform has brought about new freedom to middle-class consumers. Coincident with the disillusion of socialist utopia after the failure of the “Great Proletarian Revolution,” a “dystopia” has been developed; the residents escape the public realm and search for a new good life of their own. Instead of seeking social mix, they tend to choose gated suburbia as a new fantasy. As a result, these gated communities have auspicious names such as Orange County, Yosemite, Beverly Hills, Fontainebleau, and Thames Town (Wu 2005). Some of these new residences are decorated ostentatiously with neo-classical building styles (Figure 61.1).

The development of the commodity economy transformed urban spaces (Davis *et al.* 1995; Ma and Wu 2005), leading to greater diversity and autonomy. The consumer revolution unleashed the process of individualization, in which individual residents can choose their place of living according to their preferences rather than being allocated designated state-owned flats. Residential mobility increases (Li and Wu 2004), with millions of people relocated to the suburbs, leading to rapid urban expansion and suburbanization (Feng *et al.* 2008).

Rather than following the preset technical design norms of the socialist period, the design standards become more differentiated to suit different consumer groups (Wang and Murie 2000). Developers boast that their products are now tailor-made or purpose-built (*du sheng da zao*, a term used in Chinese real estate which literally means “measuring your body to make it just for you”) and therefore distinguish themselves from the products of mass consumption. In contrast to social and spatial proximity in traditional neighborhoods, these new places are built into more individualistic forms (Doulet 2008: 7), sometimes with luxury amenities such as golf courses and club houses (Giroir 2007). Changing residential styles are not a trivial matter. It will have profound social implications, as real-estate developers put forward a slogan: “living transforms China” (*juzhu gaibian zhongguo*).



**Figure 61.1** An up-market villa compound in a premium location between the Summer Place and the hill of Yuquanshan where the leaders of Chinese government reside; the figure shows the club house, served by professional domestic servants in a noble style. Author's photo.

## Uprooted Communities

### *Urban villages*

With the influx of migrants, villages near the city became migrant settlements. Under state socialism the rural population was not entitled to public housing. Rural migrants are therefore not eligible for public housing allocation. When public housing of state work-units was privatized, sitting tenants became property-owners. But they usually do not have spare property to rent. When migrants came to the city in the post-reform period, they could not find sufficient private rentals in work-unit compounds. Rather, they had to find accommodation at the periphery of the city, usually farmers' housing or self-developed housing by local farmers for migrant workers.

In Chinese, villages encircled by the city are called "urban villages" (*chengzhongcun*). But they are significantly different from defensive village space in the UK (Biddulph 2000) or ethnic enclaves described by Gans (1962) in the US. Urban villages in China are literally migrant settlements, providing low-cost housing to migrant workers (Zhang *et al.* 2003). But the quality of housing is poor. Many migrants and their families have to share apartments and even subdivided rooms.

In urban villages, the migrant population well exceeds that of local farmers. For example, in the Anlian village of Shenzhen, the population size in the household registration system is 4,042, while migrant population reaches 93,000; the ratio of migrant population to the local reaches 23:1.

While the original village is a rural society integrated by family ties, the arrival of migrant population breaks up the traditional structure. Within these urban villages, the division between the rural and urban areas has been transformed into new duality between the renter and proprietor classes. Whereas for original villagers their membership of the village gives them entitlement to the village sharehold company, most migrants are excluded from any decision-making, leading to fragmentation of social space in *chengzhongcun*. While migrants may stay in the city for years, they are still sojourners in these villages because they do not belong to the community.

Migrants are extremely mobile in terms of their residential location, constantly adjusting their residences according to their job location. The informal rental market plus informal employment render tenancy unstable, although migrants from the same native place tend to cluster in the same area, creating places nicknamed by the place of origin such as Zhejiang village (Zhang 2001), Henan village, Xinjiang village. But these villages are significantly different from an established rural society.

### *Traditional neighborhoods*

Rapid urban redevelopment, especially with the property-led approach, creates profound impacts on traditional neighborhoods in China. In fact, before they were demolished, traditional neighborhoods had been less incorporated into the state system than their counterparts in work-unit residential areas. In terms of housing tenure, a large proportion was public housing converted from pre-1949 private housing but under the management of municipal housing bureaux. This is a relatively inferior type of public housing (Wu 1996).

In terms of governance, traditional neighborhoods were less bureaucratized because the organization was more or less organized by the street offices and their subsidiary mass organization called residents' committees (*juming weiyuanhui*) rather than state workplaces and their formal government (Wu 2002). Because residents stay in these communities for a long time, they develop an intimate relationship and are familiar with each other. Courtyard housing (*hutong*) in Beijing and lane houses or alleyway houses (*longtang*) in Shanghai all present a picture of close neighboring and intense social interaction.

Increasingly these traditional neighborhoods see a changing social composition. When wealthier residents moved out to suburban commodity housing, they sold out their street-front housing to retail premises or rented them to migrant workers. The building density of inner-city housing increased, especially when residents self-built extensions in the communal area. The courtyard therefore is turned into a "jumble yard." Surprisingly, even with many families living close together in the same courtyard, the traditional neighborhood ties declined because of high mobility and changing in tenancy.

Now many traditional neighborhoods are "razed to make way for garish high-rise office buildings, in town luxury apartments, Hong Kong-style malls, and

five-star hotels that might be anywhere and nowhere” (Friedmann 2007: 271). In fact, even before large-scale real-estate development, state-organized urban renewal in the early years of reform in the 1980s with high-rise residential buildings, and large residential districts had already reduced neighborhood interaction (Wu and He 2005). From the design perspective, the modern style of building could be blamed for reducing physical interaction between neighbors, but the new design is a response to the increasing demand for privacy by residents themselves. Property-led redevelopment accelerates the process of residential relocation, and replaces inner-city residents with commodity housing buyers of higher socioeconomic status (He and Wu 2007). Many traditional communities have vanished, and the Chinese city witnesses a dynamic process of the “erasure and rebuilding of place-based communities” (Friedmann 2007: 275).

### Property-Based Interests and the Private Sphere

When inner-city residents were uprooted from their territorial communities, they began to form new social relations in gated communities. These new communities have been there for a very limited time and are not “memorable places” (Tomba 2005: 939), thus lacking complex social networks of social interaction. Mostly these estates are developed from scratch by real-estate developers, providing new appealing lifestyle models but at the same time sorting social strata in the post-*danwei* era (p. 939). Nevertheless, residents in these gated communities are all home-owners. Home-ownership provides a new foundation for them to form “communities of consumers.” Home-owners’ associations have been set up, initially encouraged by the government because they help to mediate between residents, developers, and service providers such as property management companies and thus enhance social stability without incurring a cost to the government.

The emergence of home-owners’ associations adds to the complexity of neighborhood governance because traditionally neighborhoods are governed by the street offices and residents’ committees (Read 2003). To defend their common property-based interests, residents use home-owners’ associations as a space of their own – a relatively autonomous space. In this space, the role of traditional neighborhood organizations is waning. Recently there have been increasing disputes over land uses in gated communities such as preservation of green space and problems of noise and pollution. With identity based on property ownership, residents in gated communities are associated through property rights rather than entitlement and membership of the work-unit.

### Professionalization of Social Services and Community Governance

In response to rising social mobility and an emerging sphere outside the state sphere, the state reinvented community governance and started an agenda of “professionalization of social services.” In the imperial period, China was governed by a neighborhood watch system, known as the *baojia* system; it is essentially a system of community-based law enforcement and civic control, invented by Wang Anshi of the Song dynasty (960–1279). One *jia* consisted of 100 households, and 10 *jias*

formed one *bao*. The leaders of *baojia* took responsibility for social order, while the households within the same *baojia* shared community duties. This system was replaced by the *danwei* (work-unit) system in the socialist period. In the post-reform period, however, the state began to recognize the importance of community organizations, and to consolidate smaller residents' committees into larger *shequ* (community) committees. The budget of these committees is allocated by the street office, though it is relatively modest. *Shequ* committees often operate community services as a sideline business to subsidize operational costs, but more recently the state requires these businesses to be stripped off from the community organization, changing the latter into more or less a pure government agency.

The changing population composition challenges neighborhood management. Rapid neighborhood changes create difficulties of maintaining social cohesion in these places. New residents in gentrified areas belong to a higher social stratum. They are in full employment and are very busy. They are reluctant to participate in neighborhood activities. This is in sharp contrast with the close relationship among original residents. For original residents, the residents' committee, often served by retired people and housewives similar to themselves, is a more amiable association to exchange information and seek help. In upper-market housing areas, many properties are vacant, because they were bought for the purpose of investment, and many buyers do not actually live there.

Although some inner-city residents are relocated to suburbs, they still manage to retain their household registration status in the old neighborhoods. Because the services such as schooling are better in the central area than in suburbs, the residents want to access the services based on the catchment area. They strive to maintain their registration location in the central area. In Shanghai, for example, along the route of elevated ring roads built in the 1980s, thousands of residents are still registered in these sub-districts. This creates a unique phenomenon in Chinese cities: the separation between *hukou* registration place and actual living place (*renhu fenli*), which creates a problem for neighborhood management.

## Heterogeneity, Anonymity, and Diversity

The socialist city was socially engaged. The private realm was reduced by state-organized collective consumption. In the work-unit compound, residents were familiar with each other because they were affiliated to the same workplace. In traditional neighborhoods, former single family houses were converted into multiple tenements. The privacy of courtyard living was eroded because of increasing living density and multiple occupancies. Residents often had to share facilities and communal spaces. In a sense, the socialist city was a totalitarian society, because everyday life was totalized into a public sphere.

The development of commodity housing provides a chance for the new middle class to escape from the totalitarian society. The aspiration of the new middle class for social engagement in the neighborhood is low. Rather than seeking a community life, they desire a good environment with higher privacy. For them these gated communities maintain certain anonymity. Thus, relocating into these places gives them a sense of freedom, escaping from intense social engagement, control, and monitoring in traditional neighborhoods. Although the property management company

sometimes promotes neighborhood activities, residents are generally willing to keep a comfortable distance from each other. Professional services can be provided by property management companies rather than neighbor assistance. Their places thus are purified living space, without too much uncertain interaction between neighbors or nuisance uses.

When Chinese city streets were lit up by electricity in the late imperial period, the available public facilities symbolized the arrival of modernism. But after an ephemeral period of prosperous urban culture in the 1920s and 1930s (Lee 1999), which in many ways resembled a lively urbanism, city life was interrupted by Japanese invasion and World War II. It was not until the late 1970s when China started economic reform that the neon lights began to glow again. With frontloading the market in everyday life, the new private sphere has begun to emerge. With the development of commodity housing, a home of one's own is becoming possible. The accumulation of wealth and increasing income has revived urban commerce. Commercial streets become prosperous; and some streets are converted into pedestrian streets and street malls. Shopping places are more differentiated nowadays, with franchised and luxury outlets comparable to the most expensive ones in global cities such as London, New York, Tokyo, and Hong Kong.



**Figure 61.2** Xintiandi in Shanghai, an up-market and trendy shopping and entertainment district adaptively built in preserved housing of stone-portal gate style. Author's photo.

Among the premium consumption locations are Shanghai's Xintiandi (literally "New Heaven and Earth") (Figure 61.2). This project was a joint venture between Hong Kong property developer, Shui On, and Luwan district, using an approach of property-led redevelopment (He and Wu 2005). The terrace housing in colonial Shanghai was adaptively converted into boutiques, bars, and restaurants. The building style, known as *shikumen*, or stone-portal gate, is preserved, while the place is becoming a trendy consumption and entertainment quarter of Shanghai. Places like Xintiandi are not an "ordinary space" of shopping or eateries – they want to assume new identities for particular places. Xintiandi is engineered and grafted into Shanghai's "upper corner" from the colonial era (Pan 2005). Together with the calendar with pop stars and the café, the terraced housing style forms "Shanghai nostalgia" which romanticizes colonial days. Most importantly, the products in these trendy places represent a new taste, distinguishing themselves from standard goods of mass consumption.

### **Conclusion: Urbanism in the Making, but a New Social Mentality?**

Market-oriented reform has brought about profound social changes in China. Before the communist revolution, China had been largely an earth-bounded rural society; state-led industrialization has been initiated since 1949, but through work-unit social organization and the "totalization" of state–society relations, China achieved "industrialization without urbanization." Urbanism was absent, and some traits of the traditional society remained. This stable social order has been broken by the introduction of the market. Post-reform urban development has been driven by the political economy of marketization on the one hand, and rising consumer revolution (Davis 2000) and individualism on the other.

Large-scale rural to urban migration has significantly increased the size of the de facto urban population. The social bonding of migrant workers begins to loosen out, and they become sojourners; more than that, through rapid urban redevelopment and demolition of traditional neighborhoods, the whole urban population is uprooted and become literally a "floating population," customarily in China only referring to migrants. The rootless situation is physically due to rising residential mobility and metaphorically because of the relaxed relation with place-based communities. Meanwhile, responding to new aspirations of privacy and the private life, gated communities are built and widely spread. Urban China is thus becoming more diversified and heterogeneous. In a sense, the making of urbanism in China is a result of the retreat from a totalitarian society that has existed in Chinese history for many dynasties.

In response to increasing social complexity, the state strives to maintain a governable society by downloading administrative tasks to the community (Wu 2002), hoping to impose a new spatial order through rebuilding place-based communities, under the name of "community construction" (Friedmann 2007). But this is not equivalent to re-establishing a totalitarian society. First and foremost, commodification has profoundly changed social relations. Community services are commodified and provided through so-called "property management companies." The management of neighborhoods is also "professionalized," because the retirees and

housewives of residents' committees are replaced by professional social workers. The organization of the street office evolves into a level of government, with officials on the payroll of civil servants. At the community level, property owners form home-owners' associations, but their relationships are based on property interests, and thus are more rational and partial than the more comprehensive relations in a totalizing work-unit environment. Over time, newly built neighborhoods may mature and social relations may be strengthened. But it is unlikely that urban China will return to its totalitarian past.

In short, urban China under market reform presents an unprecedented level of diversity and heterogeneity, in terms of both spaces and social classes. Treating market development as the driver for social progress, the state has necessarily to manage newly acquired social complexity, division, and mobility. This increasingly forces the state itself to be separated from society, becoming the state apparatus in its modernist sense. The consequence is professionalization of social management; and recent increases in social expenditure can be read from this trend of the modern state. What we will see in urban China is modernization of society as well as the state, much in line with bureaucratization of social life, predicted by Max Weber. The state thus can no longer be embedded within society, as it was in a totalitarian society. The state has to stand on the opposite side of society and mediate various social contentions and conflicts, rather than acting as a direct resource allocator. Thus, returning to the classic concern of urbanism and mental life (Simmel 1903), an intriguing question would be, to what extent is this newly made urbanism shaping a different social mentality and a new personality?

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