



Linking social housing provision for rural migrants with the redevelopment of ‘villages in the city’: A case study of Beijing



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ABSTRACT

The affordability of housing in China is a pressing social and economic issue, particularly for rural migrants. The provision of more social housing is a key element of current policies. Paradoxically, ‘villages in the city’ (ViCs) – which provide the majority of affordable housing for rural migrants – face the threat of, or have already undergone, demolition and redevelopment. This article explores the linkages between social housing provision for rural migrants and the redevelopment of ViCs by taking Beijing as a case study. It first looks at the marginal status of rural migrants in the system of social housing supply, and then analyses the opportunities afforded by and the problems associated with ViCs. A critical evaluation of the redevelopment of Tangjialing village highlights the problems caused by the strategy of combining the provision of public rental housing with the demolition of ViCs. Reflecting on empirical evidences and international experiences, this article suggests that it would be better to link the provision of public rental housing to the incremental upgrading of ViCs.

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Introduction

In China, state work-units once provided a large proportion of the country’s social housing (Wu, 1996). In the 1990s, a package of reforms, which included changes to the social housing scheme, were introduced in order to stimulate the domestic economy (Mak, Choy, & Ho, 2007). Work units no longer built their own housing but had to purchase ‘commodity housing’ – housing developed by real estate developers and managed by property management companies (Wang & Li, 2004). Since the late 1990s, ‘affordable housing’ (*jingji shiyong fang*) has been introduced in major cities for middle- and low-income households. Nevertheless, the supply of affordable housing has always lagged behind demand. Commitment has remained perfunctory in most locations and the policies are mainly geared towards urban residents who have secure jobs and steady incomes (Wang, 2001). An inadequate supply of affordable housing combined with such issues as rapid

economic growth, population increase and the liberalization of the housing market has resulted in a surge in commodity housing prices in major Chinese cities (Mak et al., 2007). The affordability of housing in China is a pressing social and economic issue, particularly for households that are marginal to the housing market. Most rural migrants, who are usually employed in low-paid positions, cannot afford commodity housing in metropolitan cities. Without citizenship, they are also largely excluded from the social housing scheme. Although the latest type of social housing – public rental housing (*gongzu fang*) – is accessible to rural migrants, its provision is subject to various constraints, such as financial difficulties and land shortages.

While the social housing scheme has faced many impediments to provide affordable housing for rural migrants, ‘villages in the city’ (*chengzhongcun* or ‘urban villages’) in many Chinese cities have become migrant enclaves. Villages in the city (ViCs) are a specific urban form of development in China. Due to the rapid urbanization process, villages in the suburbs of cities are swallowed by urban developments. These ViCs are characterized by dual urban–rural structures. Although the farmland of the ViCs is usually requisitioned by city governments, village settlements usually remain untouched. Within village settlements, villagers’ housing

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plots and collective industrial lands are collective land. They are managed by the villagers and their collective organizations, respectively, but cannot be sold. Constructions on these collective lands are much cheaper than those on urban lands, where there is a requirement to pay land transfer tax and other fees. Deprived of their agricultural resources, villagers reconstruct their houses to accommodate low-income migrants. Due to a lack of effective regulations, ViCs have some characteristics similar to informal settlements in other developing countries, such as overcrowding, illegal constructions, inadequate facilities and poor living environments.

Nevertheless, the positive role of ViCs has recently been recognized: they provide cheap and affordable accommodation (Zhang, Zhao, & Tian, 2003), education facilities (albeit substandard ones) and job opportunities for rural migrants, who are largely excluded from the formal urban system (Lin, de Meulder, & Wang, 2011). They are also considered communities of interest for urbanized villagers who develop anti-poverty survival strategies by reconstructing their housing to accommodate migrants (Liu, He, Wu, & Webster, 2010). Because they have a considerable amount of collective industrial land, ViCs play an important role in a city's industrial development (Choy, Lai, & Lok, 2013). Recognizing the positive role of ViCs in the urbanization process, many scholars suggest that village upgrading could be a feasible approach (Hao, Sliuzas, & Geertman, 2011; Lin & de Meulder, 2012; Zhang et al., 2003).

In the face of the various constraints on social housing provision, some Chinese cities (e.g. Beijing) are allowed to construct public rental housing on collective land. As the capital city and one of the main metropolitan areas in China, Beijing has launched pilot projects on social housing provision. A new policy has been initiated to combine the construction of public rental housing with the redevelopment of ViCs. This article explores the linkages between social housing provision and the redevelopment of ViCs by taking Beijing as a case study. It begins by briefly reviewing the literature on social housing provision and informal settlement upgrading. It then analyses the marginal status of rural migrants in the system of social housing supply, before looking at the development opportunities afforded by and the problems associated with ViCs. A critical evaluation of the redevelopment of Tangjialing village illustrates the problems associated with the development strategy that combines the provision of public rental housing with the demolition of ViCs. Reflecting on empirical evidences and international experiences, this article finally suggests that the provision of public rental housing can be combined with the incremental upgrading of ViCs.

The majority of data were collected during intensive fieldwork in Beijing in 2010–13 with the assistance of local institutions and government agencies. Firstly, the authors studied the existing social housing scheme by visiting several social housing project sites in 2012. Planning documents, such as The Planning of Housing Construction in Beijing (2006–10), were obtained from government bureaus. Second, the authors used field observations and interviews to survey the opportunities afforded by and the problems of ViCs on the urban fringes of Beijing. Third, two periods of fieldwork were conducted for the case study of Tangjialing village. In 2010, a number of interviews were conducted to ascertain the living conditions of migrants in the village before the demolition. The interviewees included recent graduates and migrant workers. In 2013, the authors interviewed officials at the Beijing Municipal Planning Bureau about issues related to the redevelopment of Tangjialing village and the provision of public rental housing. The authors also visited the Tangjialing project site and interviewed villagers about rental housing situations. Although the information collected did not allow meaningful quantitative analysis, it did enable a contextual elaboration to advance our understanding of the linkages between social housing provision and the redevelopment of ViCs.

Literature review: social housing provision and informal settlement upgrading

The provision of social housing is related to the redistributive role of government. Redistribution plays a role as a countervailing force to the inequality between households generated by the free market in the contemporary metropolis (Harvey, 1973). Redistribution is in essence a public affair organized by the state or one of its subsidiaries. In most Western countries, the slow but steady development of the welfare state from the end of the nineteenth century resulted in a massive redistribution system, in which social housing was one of the key elements. After the Second World War, squatter settlements, very much like those found today in the cities of developing countries, appeared in many European cities (Kesteloot, 2004). Large-scale social housing estates were built in an attempt to tackle these settlements. Since the economic crisis in the mid-1970s, the role of the state in welfare provision as a whole has become less dominant. Within the context of the restructuring of the welfare state, housing associations have become the main providers of social housing (Warrington, 1995). Social housing in Europe now faces such problems as segregation, ethnic enclaves and high unemployment rates (Whitehead & Scanlon, 2007). The emphasis of current policies in many Western countries is on public–private partnerships and mixed communities, and there is particular concern about segregation and the position of vulnerable households.

Unlike developed countries, which have the capacity to replace slums with social housing, most cities in developing countries do not have the resources to sustain the high costs of city center redevelopment, which usually involves the demolition of informal settlements and the construction of high quality subsidized housing for the poor (Carmona & Burgess, 2001). After almost three decades of debate on how best to deal with informal settlements, there appears to be broad agreement among a variety of different stakeholders that upgrading the settlements is the most appropriate approach (Abbott, 2002). It is seen primarily as a low-cost alternative housing policy option, the idea being that it can be more cost-effective to upgrade the substandard housing environment than to demolish such neighbourhoods and relocate their residents (Wegelin, 2004).

The main emphasis was initially on physical aspects, focusing on public actions in providing infrastructure and services, while it now includes the integration of physical, social, economic, organizational and environmental improvements undertaken cooperatively and locally by citizens, community groups, businesses and local authorities (Wekesa, Steyn, & Otieno, 2011). Following the achievements of the Kampung Improvement Program in Indonesian, the work of the British architect John F.C. Turner in Lima and other successful upgrading projects, informal settlements are now regarded as housing solutions and their upgrading is increasingly supported by governments around the world (d'Auria et al., 2010). Planners have also realized that for the poor, 'housing' comprises attributes beyond the actual shelter, namely location, transport, job opportunities and access to services. Future policies that support the livelihoods of the poor in slums should enable urban informal-sector activities to flourish and develop, link low-income housing development to income generation, ensure easy geographical access to jobs through pro-poor transport and the more appropriate location of low-income settlements (UN-Habitat, 2003). If all these attributes cannot be provided at once, the most important ones can be introduced incrementally (Wadhwa, 1988).

In sum, social housing provision and informal settlement upgrading are usually regarded as two distinct approaches. Whereas slums in the West were replaced by high-standard social housing estates, informal settlement upgrading is the main method

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