



Is social capital eroded by the state-led urbanization in China? A case study on indigenous villagers in the urban fringe of Beijing



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ABSTRACT

In the rapid urbanization process, indigenous villagers' social capital might be affected by the flooding-in of rural migrants and more importantly by the government's urbanization policies. Based on survey data collected from fifteen Beijing villages in 2011 and 2012, we study the relationship between social capital and urbanization for indigenous villagers in the urban fringe of Beijing. We find that the bottom-up urbanization measured by migrant-local ratio weakened social networks and social trust. However, the top-down urbanization measured by designating policy zone promoted social networks and social trust.

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1. Introduction

A recent survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in seven Chinese cities reveals that trust among people in China dipped to a record low with less than half of the respondents feeling that “most people can be trusted” while only about 30% trusted strangers (China Daily, 2013). It seems that China is experiencing a trust crisis. The media attributes this breakdown in social relations to China's rapid and “inevitable” urbanization. Because social capital is recognized as a necessary condition of social integration, economic efficiency, and democratic stability (Arrow, 1972; James Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995; Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2000), it is important to investigate whether urbanization is to blame for the degraded state of social capital in urban China.

We studied social capital change for *indigenous villagers*, a special group of people living in the urban fringe. Indigenous villagers have two distinctive features that call special attention to their social behavior and welfare. One is that their land is engulfed by rapid urban expansion. The other is that incrementally more indigenous villagers give up agricultural production and choose to work in the manufacturing and service sectors during the urbanization process. Moreover, these two features do not independently develop but in fact reinforce each other and they are particularly amplified when migrants flood into cities along with urbanization. For example, those indigenous villagers giving up agricultural production often rebuild or expand their houses on their residential plots (*zhaijidi*) and rent them to rural migrants. As a result, their residential settlements are

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converted into mixed and semi-urbanized communities, or in some extreme cases, *chengzhongcun* (urban villages) (Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2009)¹. The increasing mixture of local residents and migrants may cause changes in lifestyle and social contact.

In addition to this *bottom-up urbanization* developed from unofficially constructed houses mentioned above, municipal governments execute *top-down urbanization* in some areas by demolishing villagers' houses and moving them into newly built residential compounds (Tan, Li, Xie, & Lu, 2005). After the redevelopment, these indigenous villagers receive either monetary compensation or new housing units with floor areas contingent on factors such as family size, size of land plot and floor area before development. This top-down urbanization is believed to be superior to the informal bottom-up urbanization for solving the problems caused by bottom-up urbanization such as chaotic land use, low-quality housing, infrastructure deficiency and social disorder (Zhang, 2005). However, it is still unclear to both academia and policy makers how indigenous villagers' social capital will be affected by these two types of urbanization.

Learning how social capital changes in the urbanization process will shed light on the general transformation of social structure, and at the same time will help us to better understand the complex and controversial relationship between social capital and urbanization in China. In particular, since indigenous villagers are forced to be integrated into a wide range of conflicts, such as informal building, land expropriation, and sharing of village collective property, without a comprehensive social integration of indigenous villagers, China's urbanization can hardly form a harmonized and healthy society. In this paper, we investigate whether indigenous villagers' social networks and social trust have been destroyed by aggressive top-down urbanization². Using the 2011 and 2012 survey data from randomly selected indigenous villagers in fifteen villages in Beijing, we found that top-down urbanization does not damage indigenous villagers' social capital. Rather, it significantly strengthens it. However, this positive impact of top-down urbanization is partially offset by the bottom-up urbanization caused by rural–urban migration. Indigenous villagers living in communities with more migrants experience less increase in social capital caused by top-down urbanization than those in communities with fewer migrants.

In the next section, we briefly review the literature on the relationship between social capital and urbanization, followed by introducing China's top-down urbanization and related socio-spatial patterns of indigenous villagers. In Section 3, we propose the methodology and describe the data. We then investigate the relationship between urbanization and the change in social capital of indigenous villagers from multiple perspectives in Section 4. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Indigenous villagers' social capital and urbanization

There is no agreed upon definition for social capital. Perhaps, the most cited one is given by James Coleman (1988): social capital is anything that facilitates individual or collective action, generated by networks of relationships, reciprocity, trust, and social norms (Portes, 1998). According to the World Bank, there are six sometimes overlapping dimensions of social capital: (i) networks, (ii) trust and solidarity, (iii) collective action and cooperation, (iv) information and communication, (v) social cohesion and inclusion, and (vi) empowerment and political action (Dudwick, Kuehnast, Jones, & Woolcock, 2006). Among them, networks and trust are the core, as they are the producers of social capital – beneficial outcomes are produced through norms and trust in the network-based process (Durlauf & Fafchamps, 2006).

A network is a kind of structural social capital which enables people to access resources and collaborate to achieve shared goals. Informal networks are manifested in spontaneous, informal, and unregulated exchanges of information and resources within communities, as well as efforts at cooperation, coordination, and mutual assistance that help maximize the utilization of available resources. Trust, on the other hand, is a kind of cognitive social capital which refers to people feeling that they can rely on relatives, neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, key service providers, and even strangers, either to assist them or do them no harm. According to Etzioni (1988, 1996), communities with high levels of social capital are characterized by high levels of trust, a sense of reciprocity and mutual support, which leads to strong social networks. In contrast, conflicts in a community can result in social capital loss in the form of a lack of trust and weak social networks.

2.1. Urbanization and social capital

Though clearly important, the relationship between social capital and urbanization is still complex and elusive. For example, sociologists have long been emphasizing that urbanization destroys social capital (Park, 1917; Wirth, 1938; Wissink & Hazelzet, 2011). Early urban sociologists argued that traditional villages and small towns promoted close relationships among residents, while urbanization induced substitution of secondary for primary contacts, weakened bonds of kinship, destructed existing neighborhoods, and undermined the traditional basis of social solidarity, which ultimately reduced intimate ties and trusting relationships (Park, 1917; Wirth, 1938). Modernization, along with urbanization, standardizes the values, norms and behaviors of urbanites, and weakens the importance of close social relations in a community (Stein, 1960). Moreover, postmodern scholars in urban studies created the term 'enclave urbanism', according to which cities have become more heterogeneous and 'fragmented', 'splintered' or 'partitioned', and new boundaries have strengthened the isolation, exclusion, selection, and inequality among individuals, groups and neighborhoods (Graham & Marvin, 2001). As a result, the social cohesion of traditional villages will fade in the city.

¹ However, because municipal governments prohibit indigenous villagers from rebuilding and expanding their houses, the property rights of additional buildings, unregulated and often in poor quality, are not protected by law (Liu, He, Wu, & Webster, 2010).

² Social networks and social trust are the two most important measures of social capital, as they are the producers of social capital (Durlauf & Fafchamps, 2006).

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