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# Neighborhood Attachment, Social Participation, and Willingness to Stay in China's Low-Income Communities

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## Abstract

Neighborhood attachment is an important factor that determines political and civic participation, which further help to enhance neighborhood stability. This article explores this argument in the context of Chinese cities. Contrary to common perception, although rural migrants do not identify themselves with the places where they live and do not actively participate in community activities, they express a relatively strong willingness to stay in these places. In contrast, the unemployed or retired urban residents actively participate in community activities but prefer to leave if possible. This article argues that the relation between neighborhood attachment and neighborhood stability is not straightforward, and in this context it is largely determined by the institutional design that excludes migrants' involvement, turning them into "economic sojourners."

## Keywords

neighborhood attachment, neighborhood changes, participation, low-income neighborhoods, Chinese cities

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## Introduction

China is experiencing rapid urbanization and urban development, which has greatly transformed not only the built environment and landscapes but also social relations and urban governance (Friedmann 2005; Logan 2008). At the grassroots level, we witness new residential mobility and urban mosaics that are different from what was described three decades ago by Whyte and Parish (1984) and Walder (1986). These changes are manifested as the end of collective consumption epitomized by state housing and work-unit governance (Wu 2002; Read 2003; Bray 2005; Shieh and Friedmann 2008), increasing diversity of residential design and standards (Wang and Murie 2000; Huang 2004), greater inflow of rural migrants (Fan 2002, 2008; Li, 2006; Zhu and Chen 2010) and the development of their enclaves (Ma and Xiang 1998; Zhang 2001; Zhang, Zhao, and Tian 2003), residential segregation based on housing tenures (Li and Wu 2008; Li et al. 2010) and separation between migrants and urban households (Wu 2004), and neighborhood social changes (Wu and He 2005; Forrest and Yip 2007). To cope with increasing mobility and ungovernable urban space, the state initiated the program of “community construction” (Wu 2002; Bray 2005; Friedmann 2007) to strengthen local service provision and social management (Xu and Chow 2006). Similar to the rising “neighborhood” agenda in the United Kingdom under New Labor (Kearns and Parkinson 2001), the issue of developing territorially based community is brought to the forefront of the policy agenda. Recent policies have recognized the marginal status of migrants and attempt to “urbanize” migrants and integrate them into urban residents (Zhang and Lei 2008). These all require a better understanding of neighborhood social interactions, especially between different social groups in China.

However, “neighborliness” is a new topic in China, despite some recent research on social interaction among residents and sense of community (e.g., Xu, Perkins, and Chow 2010). There has been even less published on the relation between neighborliness and social participation. Some general observations suggest declining informal neighborhood interaction (Wu 2010), especially the new middle class seeking more exclusive and private living environments in gated communities (Pow 2009). The interaction of migrants with their urban neighborhoods is not entirely known. This article pays attention to rural migrants in the cities who have no official registration status. As such they are “undocumented immigrants” but internally within the country rather than across the national boundaries. Despite a great variety of migrants in terms of income and residential arrangements, they can be easily identified by their registration status. The topic has an implication for the urban poor, because informal and reciprocal help has been an important source for coping with difficulties (Tang,

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