



Planning for social inclusion: The impact of socioeconomic inequities on the informal development of farmland in suburban Beijing



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ABSTRACT

Informal development on farmland is not only a major problem facing thousands of people, but also a major challenge to land use planning. In the rapidly growing literature on informal land development in China, most authors claim that ambiguous property rights and the dual land tenure system are the primary factors involved. As a result, existing state-led land use planning responses to informal development are solely focused on strengthening the legal regulation of land development. This paper challenges this approach, on the basis of the theory of urban informality. By examining many illegal gated communities in suburban Beijing, the paper argues that the informal development of farmland on the urban fringe is the result of local grassroots groups spontaneously responding to socioeconomic inequities in the context of transition to a market economy. These inequities mainly concern distributive inequity, procedural inequity and contextual inequity in relation to land use. It appears that the ongoing market-oriented initiatives of the state government could worsen informal land development unless these socioeconomic inequalities at the local level are tackled. The growing civil society is another change to the state's control of informal land development in China's cities. A new land use planning system which has more concern for social inclusion rather than focusing on centralized control is imperative in China.

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1. Introduction

State-led urban land use planning plays a key role in distributing land resources and promoting the efficient use of land. However, urban land use planning is often criticized in developing countries because of its weak capacity to control informal settlements. 'Informal housing' usually refers to dwellings developed on squatted land, or houses that have insecure land tenure, do not comply with building regulations, or have inappropriate infrastructure (Jimenez, 1985). Informal housing development takes different forms, including self-help housing, land invasion, informal subdivisions and unregulated land use. Of the world's one billion urban dwellers, 32% live in squatter settlements (UN-Habitat, 2009). In developing countries particularly, informal housing represents a large portion of the housing stock (The United Nations, 2004; UN-Habitat, 2003). Moreover, informal housing and related informal development of farmland on the urban fringe have become one of the key challenges to land use planning in developing countries (Brueckner and Selod, 2009; Roy and Alsayyad, 2004; Smith and Scarpaci, 2010; Wu et al., 2013).

There are two types of informal land development in China's cities. Firstly, there is informal housing on farmers' own housing sites in urban villages (in Chinese: *chengzhongcun*). These homes are built by individual villagers on their own housing lot without building approval from the government. This conventional type of informal use of land has been widely studied (Wang et al., 2009; Wu, 2002; Wu et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2003), and is actually a Chinese version of an 'urban slum', which is characterized by the poor quality of the buildings, lack of other infrastructure, a crowded living environment and a concentration of low-income earners (Zhang et al., 2003).

Secondly, since the 2000s, a new type of informal land development has emerged on the urban fringe in China. This takes the form of illegal gated community development, which has been rarely studied. The housing in these gated communities is not legally recognized by property rights legislation (in Chinese: *xiaochan-quanfang*). However, the housing provides a quality of living that is as good as legal housing, with, for example, high-quality buildings, spacious houses, community greening, car parks, etc. Usually, the community covers a large land area and includes more than several hundred households. For example, in Beijing, one informal community, Taiyuyuan, has a land area of 133 ha, with space for 30,000 residents.

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This new type of informal land development is controlled by village committees rather than by individual villagers, who are responsible for conventional informal housing in urban villages. These village committees – the most basic administrative unit in rural China – develop the illegal gated communities by themselves or in collaboration with private developers. The informal development of these illegal communities is usually permitted by the township but prohibited by the municipal government. The emergence of village-led illegal community development implies that the conflict between state control and local land development is becoming worse, finally coming out from under the table.

This new type of informal land development began to thrive in China's large cities particularly after the 2000s. For example, housing in illegal gated communities accounted for 42% of all housing in Shenzhen, 30% in Chengdu and 25% in Xi'an in 2013. In Harbin, the amount of floor area for this new type of informal housing was 1.5 million m², which is equivalent to over 10% of the total residential floor area. In Beijing, where strict controls over informal housing have been introduced, a total floor area of 4 million m² of this new type of informal housing was developed during the period 2006–2010. The informal development of land for illegal gated communities accounted for one fifth of the total newly developed residential land in 2010.

There are many reasons for the emergence of this new type of informal land development. Most previous studies believe that ambiguous property rights legislation and the existing dual land tenure system are the major reasons (Deng and Huang, 2004; Ho, 2005; Wang et al., 2009; Zhao, 2013a,b; Zhu, 2004). Accordingly, policy responses to informal land development in China thus far mainly focus on repairing the existing institutional drawbacks of the dual land tenure system. On the one hand, state-led land use planning is being enhanced through the issuing of new regulations or the revision of existing regulations, with more direct, stricter land development controls to be applied. Recently, the central government initiated new reforms to property rights, which aim to convert villages' collective assets into a new form of shareholding cooperative. A new board of directors elected from the villagers is now in charge of collective property, including land. The board is supervised by the party administration. As a result, this new shareholding cooperative organization tends to enhance the jurisdiction of the party at the village level. At the same time, market-oriented approaches have been introduced in order to overcome the disadvantages of the conventional planned system (Wu, 2002). In 2013, the central government introduced the National New Urbanization Strategy, according to which the government will apply more market-oriented approaches to the management of village land. The position of the market as the 'emperor' of both land development and management is thus being reinforced in China (Haila, 2007).

However, our existing understanding of the new type of informal gated community may not accurately reflect the reality. If so, the existing policy solutions to informal land development may need to be rethought. In China, the existing dual land tenure system has been in place since the 1960s. As such, why have informal gated communities grown so rapidly only in recent years? This fact suggests that the existing dual land tenure system may be a precondition rather than a direct factor, or at least not the only factor, in the emergence of informal gated communities. Are there other major factors influencing the emergence of this new type of informal housing?

According to urban informality theory, socioeconomic inequality is a key factor behind informal development (De Soto, 1989). It is regarded as a direct factor in informal development, while the land management system is considered a contextual factor. Therefore, land use planning with more concern for social inclusion might be able to tackle informal development in a more effective and equi-

table way. Similarly, in China, increasing socioeconomic inequality could be a vital factor behind the growth of illegal gated communities. For this reason, land use planning should pay more attention to improving social inclusion rather than only strengthening government controls.

This paper aims to investigate the effects of socioeconomic inequality on informal land development in China. Three types of socioeconomic inequality related to land use planning will be discussed: distributive inequality, procedural inequality and contextual inequality (Fig. 1). Distributive inequality refers to the unfair distribution of incremental value from farmland development between farmers and government, and inequality in housing affordability between the rich and the poor. Procedural inequality refers to the fact that grassroots groups, such as farmers and the urban poor, are often excluded from the policymaking process. Contextual inequality refers to discrimination against disadvantaged groups in institutional and political arrangements, for example, long-term development management inequality between urban and rural areas, and conventional governance inequality between the central and local governments in land development management. The findings in the paper will add to our existing knowledge of informal land development in China, contributing a new framework: land use planning for social inclusion in a transition context.

2. Literature review: informal land development and socioeconomic inequalities

2.1. Existing studies on informal land development in China

As introduced above, the existing land tenure system is widely believed to be the main factor behind informal housing and land development (Deng and Huang, 2004; Ho, 2005; Wang et al., 2009; Zhao, 2013a,b; Zhu, 2004). The land tenure system in China is conventionally characterized by dual land tenure in which land ownership is separate from land use rights. Land ownership is divided into two categories: state-owned land and collectively owned land. State-owned land is owned by the state and its agencies (councils, governments, state-owned enterprises, etc.), while collectively owned land is owned by a collective economic organization (CEO). In rural areas, villages are CEOs, and they are the predominant type of economic organization. While there are some CEOs in the urban context, which developed from villages or local communities, nearly all of the land in urban areas is state-owned, and nearly all land in rural areas is collectively owned. In rural areas, the CEO distributes land to the villagers only for cultivation or residential purposes, according to the existing land laws. If collectively owned land in the rural areas is used for non-cultivation functions, for example, for industrial development or real estate development, land ownership must first be transferred to state ownership. How much land can be transferred and what kind of development the land can be used for are regulated by land use planning.

In the centrally planned system in the pre-reform era, housing and development land were allocated through administrative orders that were determined according to the economic plan. Land was not considered a commodity and had no 'value' (or market price) (Ding, 2003). There were no opportunities for local governments, developers or other agencies to obtain illegal benefits in the land development process. Since the 1980s, when urban land reform was implemented, market rules mediated by price mechanisms have emerged in the allocation of land use rights (Ma, 2004; Wang et al., 2005). As a result, land markets and housing markets have now emerged in China (Chen, 1998; Dowall, 1993). In the urban land-market reform process, land use rights have been separated from state-owned land. Land use rights can now be transferred according to a determined monetary value (Walker and Li,

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