Place attachment in gated neighbourhoods in China: Evidence from Wenzhou

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ABSTRACT

China's new residential developments have widely taken the form of privately governed gated communities since the socialist work-unit housing system was terminated towards the end of the 1990s. Although many studies have recognised these emerging gated neighbourhoods as having improved physical conditions, there has also been a decline in neighbouring and thus they have profoundly changed the traditional collectivist regime of living in China. However, there is a lack of research into whether gated neighbourhoods cultivate a positive relationship with residents and how such relationships are shaped. Based on a questionnaire survey of 1034 households conducted in a variety of gated neighbourhoods in Wenzhou, China, this paper intends to fill the gap by using neighbourhood attachment as an indicator, and by examining the impacts of private governance. The results of regression modelling suggest that residents have considerably high place attachment in gated neighbourhoods and that private governance enhances neighbourhood attachment by emphasising market provisions. Through knowing their neighbours, being involved in neighbourhood public events, and being provided with a good neighbourhood image as well as privatised services, residents develop an attachment to the neighbourhood socially, symbolically and functionally. More importantly, by comparing market-led, mixed and state-led neighbourhoods, this research identifies the attachment in gated neighbourhoods as underlining the demand for private governance rather than for safety. Such a new form of neighbourhood governance, as illustrated in urban China, is consumption-oriented and results from the privatisation of public goods and services provision at the neighbourhood level.

1. Introduction

China has been developing new forms of neighbourhoods as over 75 per cent of urban households have become privately owned over the last decade (Huang and Li, 2014). The common perception of a traditional neighbourhood is that these neighbourhoods have strong social ties which used to be closely-knitted through intense interaction due to the state's strong control over neighbourhood activities (Jankoviak, 1993). After 1998, China terminated the state welfare housing system to both privatise housing provision and decentralise neighbourhood governance (He and Wu, 2007). Since then, the collectivist living under centralised governance has ended, dissolving the previous workplace-based social networks (Huang and Clark, 2002; Li, 2003). Meanwhile, new neighbourhoods have begun to involve the private sector in their development and governance. The sprawling new neighbourhoods have been identified as predominantly taking the form of gated communities, particularly during the suburbanisation process (Shen and Wu, 2012; Wu and Phelps, 2011). Many scholars have stressed how gated

neighbourhoods act as 'private paradises' through the promotion of privileges and privacy in neighbourhood living (Breitung, 2012; Huang, 2006; Pow, 2009; Zhang, 2010); however, it remains unclear whether a meaningful link is established between residents and gated neighbourhoods and how such links vary. Little attention has been paid to the impacts of the emerging private governance.

Recently, place attachment has become a key planning consideration and policy orientation in China. Since 2013, central government has stressed the preservation and enhancement of place attachment in new rounds of urban development. At the neighbourhood level, prior studies have concentrated on how migrants develop low attachment to urban villages and traditional communities (Liu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016), while acknowledging a comparatively higher attachment in commodity housing (Li et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2012). Despite these findings, the mechanisms of attachment in gated neighbourhoods are not entirely understood. They warrant examination, from which to bring forward discussions about the privatisation of housing and neighbourhood governance. This paper does not aim to present a

systematic study of neighbourhood attachment; instead, it endeavours to contribute to the literature on gated communities in China by revealing the potential mechanisms and determinants of neighbourhood attachment and shedding light on the emerging private governance. This research conducts quantitative analyses based on a large-scale questionnaire survey of 1034 households conducted in the city of Wenzhou from March to May in 2013. It aims to answer two research questions: (1) how residents' socio-economic attributes and their social, functional and symbolic dimension of experiences impact attachment in gated neighbourhoods, and (2) how gated neighbourhoods with market-led, mixed and state-led governance shape neighbourhood attachment differently.

The following section will review the existing literature on neighbourhood attachment and private governance, with a specific focus on China. After presenting the research methods, the results of the data analyses will be reported. Regression models are employed to identify the determinants of neighbourhood attachment, as well as to distinguish residential experiences in different gated neighbourhoods. Finally, findings and implications will be discussed.

2. Neighbourhood attachment and private governance

Place attachment is identified as a core indicator for interpreting the complex phenomenon expressed as 'people tend to maintain closeness to a place', where they feel safe, satisfied and settled (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001: 274). Neighbourhood attachment, i.e. place attachment at the neighbourhood level, represents residents' positive relations with the neighbourhood (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Low and Altman, 1992; Manzo and Perkins, 2006). The importance of neighbourhood attachment lies in improving neighbourhood stability for betterment. Drawing on past research, the expectation is that neighbourhood attachment is affected by various individual-level variables and contextual factors. For example, elderly residents are likely to spend time on their community and consequently generate attachment (Mesch and Manor, 1998). Longer years of residence (Brown et al., 2003) and owning property (Rohe and Steward, 1996) also increase attachment because of the economic investment in the community.

Scholars have emphasised that neighbourhood attachment is multidimensional, with social, functional and symbolic dimensions (Kyle et al., 2005) determined by both the social and the physical environments of the neighbourhood (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Moore and Graefe, 1994; Scannell and Gifford, 2010). The social environment reflects that residents in a neighbourhood are socially bonded. A classic research focus is social ties and social participation (Austin and Baba, 1990). Many scholars have acknowledged the vital contribution of strong local networks and frequent neighbourhood participation to attachment (Brown et al., 2003; Woolever, 1992). Meanwhile, the physical environment of a neighbourhood makes residents functionally and symbolically attached through impacting their place-dependency and place-identity respectively (Riger and Lavrakas, 1981; Taylor et al., 1985; Van der Graaf, 2009; Williams et al., 1992). There is an increasing body of research concerning the physical environment, particularly during the process of urban gentrification (Stedman, 2003). First, the aesthetic physical environment – i.e., the neighbourhood image – has symbolic meanings that foster a shared identity. Satisfaction with neighbourhood image may lead to the development of greater attachment (Bonaiuto et al., 1999). Conversely, dissatisfaction with physical disorder or insufficient green areas is likely to reduce neighbourhood attachment (McGuire, 1997). Second, the physical environment is closely related to neighbourhood functionality as neighbourhoods with new facilities and services can quickly establish high attachment by fulfilling residents' demands (McCool and Martin, 1994). Riger and Lavrakas (1981) have associated the use of neighbourhood services with different patterns of attachment, underlining the provision of services for facilitating neighbourhood cohesion. For physically deteriorated neighbourhoods, residents are retained and encouraged to

react to the loss of neighbourhood function by place attachment (Brown et al., 2003; Hunter, 1975). Third, neighbourhood organisation is an important contextual character that affects the attachment of residents, who, according to Kasarda and Janowitz (1974: 329), depend on 'variant bureaucratic or associational institutions' in mass society. Through the membership of neighbourhood organisations, residents become directly interested in and attached to the neighbourhood (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974: 329).

Gated communities are defined as privately governed neighbourhoods and emerged during suburbanisation processes in America in the early 1980s (Blakely and Snyder, 1997). This form of neighbourhood develops distinct social and physical environments that influence the level of attachment among the residents. Essentially, gated communities highlight safety and security by adopting special means of control, i.e. walls, fences and controlled entrances. The aim is to keep the uncertainties of rapid urban change at bay, and thus to ensure neighbourhood stability. The aesthetic physical environment has been considered as an added value that contributes to attachment in gated communities. In 1999, Talen (1999) assessed the social doctrine of the community form, suggesting that satisfying physical environments foster a sense of community. The importance of neighbourhood image is reaffirmed by Rosenblatt et al. (2009) through their research on gated communities in suburban Sydney, while Low's (2003) study of gated communities demonstrates that community spirit is closely related to residents' motivation to protect the values of the neighbourhood's built environment from intrusion.

In contrast, in empirical studies from across the world, gated communities have been recognised as having 'universally negative' social effects (Pow, 2015: 465). Criticisms concentrate on the decreases in neighbourliness as a result of privatism and privacy concerns among homeowners (McGuirk and Dowling, 2009). Scholars have argued that the low social interaction leads to the breakdown of internal integration and a decline in community spirit (Guest and Wierzbicki, 1999; Putnam, 1995; Roitman, 2005; Wilson-Doenges, 2000). As Mesch and Manor (1998) suggest, in advantaged neighbourhoods, residents' networks tend to be nonlocal; thus, they develop little attachment. Dominated by such dystopian and pessimistic thinking, existing studies have rarely considered gated communities as places capable of providing meaningful social environments for residents (Low, 2003).

The existing literature has acknowledged private governance as one of the key features of gated communities (Kirby, 2008; McKenzie, 2005), apart from safety (Coy, 2002; Davis, 1990; Landman, 2006), identity and prestige (McGuirk and Dowling, 2011). Private governance is defined as providing 'an array of traditional public services through private, commonly held organisations governed by their residents' (Gordon, 2004: iii). It ensures property rights and daily usage of public goods in the community for residents (Charmes, 2009; Le Goix and Webster, 2008; Webster, 2002). On the one hand, residents elect homeowners' associations and establish their own covenants and rules; on the other hand, private firms are contracted to deliver professional management of the community. The effectiveness of private governance thus contributes to neighbourhood functionality, overcoming government failures in the allocation of public goods (Cséfalvay and Webster, 2012).

However, limited evidence has suggested that private governance influences neighbourhood attachment, with few exceptions. McKenzie (2005) reveals that private governance empowers residents, leading to neighbourhood betterment. Furthermore, Kirby's (2008) research into gated housing enclaves in Phoenix attributes neighbourhood satisfaction to the establishment of homeowners' associations, while Walks (2008) examines residents' perception of their neighbourhoods in Toronto and stresses a causal relation between sense of community and support for private governance in everyday life.

Few studies have covered neighbourhood attachment in China's gated residential developments. During comparisons of attachment in gated neighbourhoods, traditional neighbourhoods, work-unit housing