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Informal suburbanization in Beijing: An investigation of informal gated communities on the urban fringe

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ABSTRACT

Informal land development has become a key issue in relation to land use planning in many countries. A new type of informal development, the informal gate community, has emerged and has become a new form of suburbanization in China's cities. Empirical studies about this new form remain scarce, as discussions on the slum-styled urban village still dominate the existing literature about informal development in China. The paper aims to explore the facts and factors in the new type of informal development. Looking at Beijing as a case study, analysis shows that informal gated communities have a high quality of life and good services, with public facilities and public transit. The existing institutional discrimination against migrants is a major reason why people choose informal housing, although the soaring price of formal housing is an important factor. The village-owned enterprise plays the role of business manager for the village's informal development. Its collaborations with government intuitions and state-owned enterprises blur its informal development activities and give buyers more confidence in buying informal housing. Conflicting responses to the informal development from state and local governments results in ambiguous and loose controls of informal development. As a result, local governments, villages, and residents have formed a strong informal development coalition. This coalition has created an invisible institutional barrier, making it more difficult for the state to prevent informal development. In addition, the ongoing political decentralization, economic liberalization, and market-oriented reforms seem to be bringing new challenges to the control of informal land development. For future policy, a more just and inclusive governance system is imperative for managing the suburbanization process in China's cities.

1. Introduction

Urban informality refers to settlements or trade that occur outside of formal structures. It indicates “unplannable” exceptions to the order of formal urbanization (Roy, 2005; Waibel, 2016). Informal urban development has a wide range of types, including squatter settlements, self-helping housing, slums, unserved subdivisions, extralegal land development, urban development without authorization permission, entirely or partly, etc.

Informality is a key theme of urban studies and urban planning. Sir Peter Hall and Ulrich Pfeiffer stated that “the urban poor have built their own city without any reference whatsoever to the whole bureaucratic apparatus of planning and control in the formal city next door” (Hall & Pfeiffer, 2000, p. 15); cities become “informal hypergrowth” and “ungovernable,” and planners and politicians should pay particular attention to this informal development. Recently, informality

has gained increasing attention from planners and politicians because informal housing and land markets are not just the domain of the poor, but they are also important for the middle class, even the elite, of Second World and Third World cities (Roy, 2005). The United Nations (UN-Habitat, 2013) (2013) reported that around 33% of the urban population in the developing world in 2012, or about 863 million people, lived in slums. In the UNECE region (Europe and North America), more than 50 million people in over 15 countries lived in informal settlements in 2009 (UNECE, 2009). In the United States, informal activities including informal housing have become integral parts of cities (Durst & Wegmann, 2017; Wegmann & Mawhorter, 2017).

Informal development has both advantages and disadvantages. At first glance, informal housing has links with crimes, shabby houses, dirty streets, and insufficient infrastructure and services (Connolly & Wigle, 2017; Meth, 2017). The people who live in informal housing

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often face economic exploitation, political repression, social stigma, and cultural exclusion (Bayat, 2000). However, informal housing still has some benefits. Informality serves “a beneficial purpose in the development of a competitive capitalist economy, both by helping reduce imports and by supplying goods and services” (De Soto, 2000, p. 38). Informal housing provides dwelling places to the poor and also a chance for local governments to improve housing affordability (Porter, 2011). In some cases, those who live in informal housing are not marginalized people; instead, they are socially organized, culturally optimistic, economically hard working (Perlman, 1976), and fully integrated into society (Bayat, 2000). According to de Soto, informal activities, including informal urban development, are means for breaking down legal barriers and natural responses to real market forces; the informal entrepreneur is an economic “hero” who manages to survive and prosper despite the state’s continuous and strict controls (De Soto, 1989; Main, 1989). In this sense, informality is a form of urban growth (Rakowski, 1994a).

Informal development has close links with suburbanization. In Egypt, for example, agricultural land on the city periphery plays an important role as a spatial “reservoir” for informal development (Soliman, 2004). Informal development has become a dominant form of urban development in suburban areas in Mexico (Connolly & Wigle, 2017), Latin America (Inostroza, 2017), and India (Parasuraman, 2016). In Europe, informal development in periurban areas is a main driver for growth (UNECE., 2009). In the United States, informal housing in the suburbs is a major component of urban sprawl (Durst & Wegmann, 2017). Informal urban development in China has become one of the key types of suburbanization (Zhao, 2016, 2017). Therefore, some researchers have argued that informal urbanization is driving metropolitan expansion (Roy, 2005).

There has been extensive discussion of the drivers and reasons for informal housing. There is a general belief that depoliticization, liberalization, and privatization in the context of economic transformation and globalization is promoting informality (Bayat, 2000, 2004, p. 200; Gilbert, 2004, p. 144). Informality represents redistribution, reorganization, and rearrangement of resources, goods, and services (Durst & Wegmann, 2017). The land tenure system, land development and use regulations, political and institutional constraints for the provision of public services through formal ways, increasing demands for housing and decreasing housing affordability, and social and institutional discrimination against migrants and the poor have promoted informal urban development (Amoako & Boamah, 2017; Zhao, 2016). In particular, the gaps between the poor’s demands and the services governments supply are direct reasons for informal development. Therefore, the informal economy, including informal housing, is “the people’s spontaneous and creative response to the state’s incapacity to satisfy the basic needs of the impoverished masses” (De Soto, 2000, p. 14).

Informal development in the Third World falls into different models (Ubink, Hoekema, & Assies, 2016). In Latin America, an informal political affiliation between squatter groups and the state sustains informal land development (Baker & Velasco-Guachalla, 2018). The public gains the benefits of informal development, while politicians gain election votes. In the Middle East, a depoliticization process that has reduced political and formal roles is a major factor influencing informal development (Feld & Boyd, 2016). There are informal ways of obtaining political invisibility for informal development, including bribery and corruption. In Africa, increasing housing demand and market liberalization have become major factors influencing informal development (Fox, 2014; Soliman, 2004). In South Asia, informal development has mainly occurred in the periurban area, where state controls on land use are loose (Zhu & Simarmata, 2015). A landscape of *desakota* has formed in the suburbs (McGee, 1991).

Informal development in China has had wide discussion. Studies about urban villages dominate the existing literature (Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2010, pp. 153–174; Wang et al., 2009; Wu, Zhang, & Webster,

2013). Urban villages are usually in city centers, and they have village features. There are serious problems with the quality of life in these urban villages, for example, illegal and low-standard buildings crowded with migrants and poor people, shortage of facilities, crime, etc. Therefore, the authorities see urban villages in China as urban slums (Zhao, 2013).

Since the 2000s, a new form of informal land development has appeared in suburban areas in the context of rapid suburbanization, namely informal gated communities (Zhao, 2016, 2017). The communities have spacious and low-density housing, and they have public facilities, such as transit, schools, hospitals, shops, playgrounds, and spacious green space. However, urban development in these communities has no land use permission or planning approval by the state and municipal governments, and therefore they are illegal developments. This type of informal gated community has increased quickly in the suburbs of China’s cities. For example, housing in illegal gated communities accounted for 42% of the housing in Shenzhen, 30% in Chengdu, and 25% in Xi’an in 2013. Even in Beijing, the capital of China, where the strictest controls on illegal development are in force, the informal development of land for illegal gated communities accounted for more than 20% of newly developed residential land in 2010. From 2006 to 2010, four million square meters of informal housing went up (Zhao, 2016, 2017; Zhao & Zhang, 2016). The informal gated communities are becoming a major form of suburbanization in China’s cities.

This paper addresses these gaps by looking at Beijing as a case study. It mainly answers two research questions. First, what forces make urban development of informal gated communities happen in suburban areas? Second, how are the state and other actors involved in the process of informal land development? Following the introduction, the paper presents a thorough literature review in Section 2. Section 3 analyzes a case from Beijing. Section 4 discusses informal land development in the suburbs of Beijing. Section 5 presents conclusions.

2. Literature review: informality and informal urban development

Informality is one of traditional key research themes in the field of urban studies. Cases from the Third World, such as Latin America, South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and China have dominated the literature about informality (Wu et al., 2013; Zhao, 2017). In recent years, there has also been wide discussion of informality in developed countries (Durst & Wegmann, 2017; Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2015; UNECE., 2009).

The definition of informality in urban studies originated from the concept of the informal sector, which is an illegal sector that is out of range of protection from the legislative system (Hart, 1985; Mazumdar, 1976; Ubink et al., 2016). It often involves the urban poor or self-employed people, such as petty traders and street hawkers. Informal activities usually involve ease of entry, reliance on indigenous resources, family ownership of enterprises, small-scale operations, labor-intensive and adapted technology, skills acquired outside the formal school system, and unregulated and competitive markets.

Informal urban development refers to illegal or self-developed land or housing. Informal urban development is a way of life (Alsayyad, 2004, pp. 7–30; Waibel, 2016). A leading figure in the Chicago School of Sociology, Louis Wirth, argued that urbanism is a mode of life, and that the urban mode of life no longer exists only in cities (Wirth, 1938). According to Wirth, at least four types of elements are vital to informal urban development: social action, social organization, individuals or groups, and conditions. Social actions include residents purchasing or renting informal housing, developers developing informal housing, and land owners transferring land use rights. Social organizations are formal or informal coalitions that receive benefits from informal development and tend to protect their benefits. For example, in China, an informal coalition between villages, villagers, local government, and developers forms in the process of informal development (Zhao &

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