Housing in China: Breaking the Bounds of Contemporary Urban Theory

One of the largest economic drivers in current-day Asia is China, a country that has experienced double-digit GDP growth for most of the past decade (World Bank 2014). With a centralized government still able to move mountains through policy, China's cities have grown tremendously, both in terms of physical development and population. Although high-profile prestige projects, such as the buildings developed for the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008 are the ones readily shown as the face of China's new architectural allure, it is the country's housing, an ubiquitous cultural need, that has most changed the face of the nation.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will begin by surveying the major typologies of housing in China, with a focus on their enclosures, before turning to the literature on the now ubiquitous "sealed residential quarter" (*fengbi xiaoqu*), often called a "gated community." Disagreement on how gated communities are affecting the Chinese city is strong, with some authors even making comparisons to gated communities in the United States. I examine whether existing urban theories – most of which are Western based, as the urban state and its production remains under-theorized in the Chinese literature (Tang 2000, Wei 2005) – can contribute to understanding the rapidly changing phenomenon of housing in China today.

GATED COMMUNITIES IN CHINA

Chinese housing has changed as the country's political systems have changed, which has led to areas with a fascinating juxtaposition of very different housing types. It is the economic reforms beginning in 1978, however, that have most dramatically transformed land use and housing typologies in Chinese cities. The most prevalent form of housing today is the "sealed residential quarter" (*fengbi xiaoqu*), which exists in several different forms. In some cases, these gated communities are retrofitted compounds from an earlier era, in others they are high-rise compounds with extensive infrastructure, decorative architectural or landscape features, and elaborate security systems that are designed to attract a newer, upmarket clientele.

Most of the literature on Chinese gated communities is based in the areas of urban planning or geography – both fields with broad disciplinary approaches – and uses largely quantitative methods of study, while qualitative studies, such as

those using a phenomenological approach or based on grounded research, are rare. The few such studies that exist suggest that broadening our approach to assessing urban planning and design in China will provide a much richer understanding of how urban space in China might serve its society today.

THE WALL IN CHINESE ARCHITECTURE

In China, walls have traditionally been used to express community, defined here as having both geographical and social aspects. Housing may be split into four chronological types: traditional Chinese residences (before 1840), colonial residences (1840–1948), Chinese residences during the Maoist era (1949–1978), and residences built after China adopted the Reform and Opening-up Policy (1979–present). Within these categories are found regional variations due to climate and history (see Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001; Wu and Gaubatz 2013).

Traditional Chinese houses, or *siheyuan*, consisted of a square courtyard surrounded by one-story structures along three or four sides of the perimeter, with entrances facing the courtyard. The outer walls of this complex were closed, with porches inside the yard connecting the entrances of the individual houses. This complex expressed the community of the large family of three or more generations that in Chinese culture of the time was so admired.

After the Opium Wars broke out in 1840, the Chinese government opened several commercial ports to the outside world, and foreign residential houses and construction developments were introduced to China (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 32). During the period from 1840 to 1949, new construction methods and amenities gradually emerged to house the now prevalent smaller family unit (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 27-8). With this, Chinese housing modernized and the single-story house around a central courtyard evolved into low-rise, concentrated row houses and individual apartments, differentiated by residents' economic and social standing (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 38-40).

State socialism brought a new organization of urban housing. Athough China looked to the Soviet Union as a model for housing design after 1949 (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 106), the urban organization of housing in the two countries was quite different. Soviet housing after the 1920s was simply municipally-provided apartments located in hierarchically organized neighborhoods and housing was not tied to one's employer. By contrast, much of Chinese housing was employer provided: land was owned either by the municipality or, in rural areas, by a collective, with the state providing housing for workers close to their place of work. The ensuing compounds were socially quite homogenous, reinforced by their cellular structure of neighborhoods (Wu and Gaubatz 2013, 153), with enclosing walls to more clearly delineate their territory often being added later (Xu and Yang 2009). Models ranged from double-loaded, dormitory-style buildings with shared kitchens and baths to the more typical *hanglieshi* (lined up in rows) residential area consisting of low-rise apartment blocks with a north-south orientation placed in parallel rows (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 121-2). Later this evolved into a perimeter-block system based on axial symmetry, with public buildings in the center, a model that was imported from the Soviet Union (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 128). Houses were organized into "neighborhood units" that shared supplemental facilities, similar to the Soviet system (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 124). Housing distribution was based on rank: senior government officials and employees of large state enterprises had more generous housing than low-level officials or workers in small state enterprises. (Wu and Gaubatz 2013, 198). Larger work units could provide infrastructure for their workers, whereas employees of smaller

units relied on municipal infrastructure services (Wu and Gaubatz 2013, 153). With China's second five-year plan, standardized building designs and industrialized building were introduced to speed up construction times and save on costs; by 1953 standardized designs accounted for 34% of all construction ("Standard design work", cited in Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 125). Throughout the socialist era housing remained in short supply, however, with urban per-capita living space less than four square meters in 1978 (Wu and Gaubatz 2013, 198). Predominant typologies included double loaded corridor buildings, double or triple loaded stairwell buildings and apartment blocks with exterior access balconies.
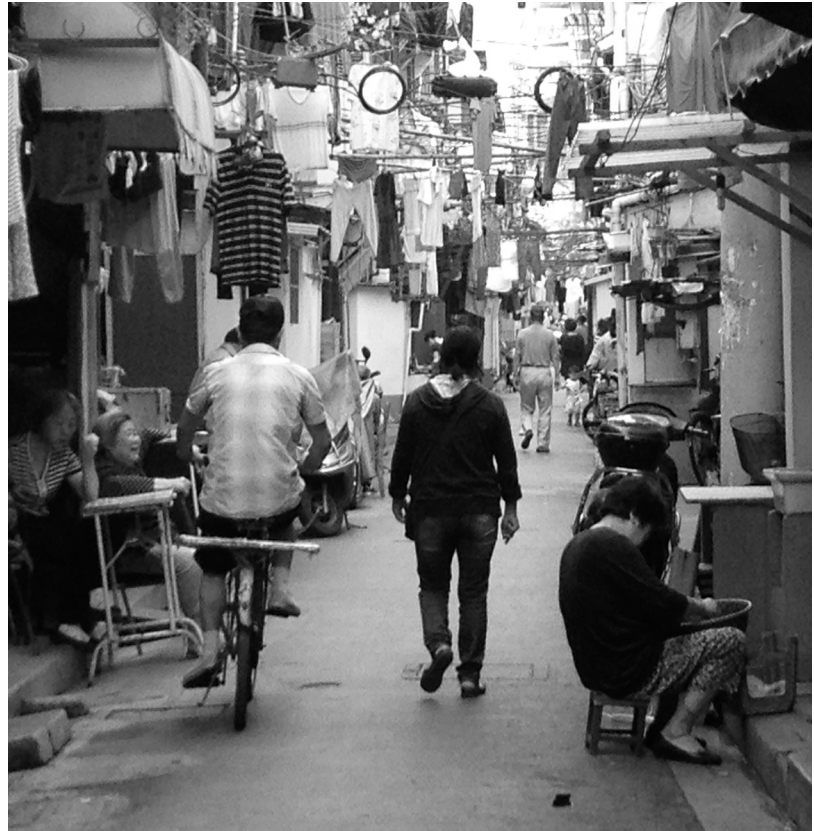
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Figure 1: Traditional street in Shanghai. Many daily activities take place in this public space, which functions as an extension of the home.

Throughout the 1950s, there was considerable discussion over ideal neighborhood layouts. The north-south oriented buildings evolved from traditional modes of living that took into account passive heating and cooling demands (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 123), while supporters of the Soviet-type perimeter block pointed out that it allowed each group of buildings to act as a small neighborhood cell that, when aggregated, would become a network of streets and small squares. The first was considered more suitable to Chinese living patterns while the second was seen as offering a more finished urban form, though at the expense of noise protection, solar orientation and cross-ventilation (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 136). Spatial and administrative organization overlapped in both systems: in Caoyangxincun, an area on the outskirts of Shanghai constructed in the 1950s, a "small group" consisted of 300-500 people, the "work area" 2000 people, a village committee was 8000-1000 people, and the neighborhood consisted of 63,4000 people (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 138).

Apartment buildings with shops on the ground floor appeared in the 1960s and were seen to both improve availability of consumer goods and enliven the

streetscape (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 160). This typology was also employed for residential areas in new satellite towns (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 167). This spatial organization was partially countered in the early 1960s when official doctrine called for erasure of the "three differences" between urban and rural areas, workers and peasants, and mental and manual labor, resulting in residential areas that now integrated industrial, agricultural, military, educational and trade functions. Daily activities such as cooking or washing became collectivized in these areas. By July 1960, there were more than 1000 such communes in Chinese cities (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 163).

Urban planning in China fell into disregard during the early years of the 1966-78 Cultural Revolution, which also saw the first high-rise housing constructed (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 172ff). While housing standards declined overall, by the early 1970s, large cities explored prefabricated high-rise slabs, usually placed in parallel rows, with retail on the first floor, (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 180ff).

With economic reforms beginning in 1979, private developers began constructing new commercial housing on a large scale to be sold by real estate companies, with land being acquired in various ways within urban centers, or on the edge of cities as new suburban communities (Wu and Gaubatz 2013, 156). The welfare approach to housing quickly shifted to a commodity-centered one, with features and amenities now marketed to a buying public. The state encouraged this trend, as commercialization helped ease the country's chronic housing shortage (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 198). In an effort to save land, many projects from the 1970s on were designed as high rises (eight floors or more) (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 204). As early as the 1980s, the State Council was encouraging "comprehensive development", whereby whole areas would be planned and constructed and later managed by commercial real-estate developers, with profit becoming their dominant criterion (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 229). In 1999, the state work units ceased providing housing for their workers, although some provided subsidies to purchase apartments (Wu and Gaubatz 2013, 197 and 206). In the now hotly contested real estate market, buildings' appearance and amenities, as well as outdoor landscaping, became an important selling point (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 230ff). Since the communities were privately owned, walls and gates controlled access to the lush new spaces and their upscale amenities.

Although after 1978 the government remained involved in housing design through experimental programs or competitions that aimed at saving land while providing housing with better spatial organization for contemporary lifestyles (Lü, Rowe and Jie 2001, 202ff), the government seems to have largely ceded housing provision, and thus de facto also urban design and planning, to the private sector. In this, the situation is similar to what one finds in the United States, which is perhaps one reason the literature has been ripe with comparisons between the two. In the United States, gated housing communities, which began to appear as luxurious enclaves in the nineteenth century (Wright 1983, Hayden 2004), have usually been seen as offering a select community a perceived sense of physical and economic safety through class and racial segregation, as well as access to amenities such as landscaping and recreational facilities. In part, this holds true for contemporary gated communities in China as well: citizens report choosing gated communities in order to seek security from crime (Read and Chen 2008, Pow 2009a), and landscaping and recreational facilities are highlighted in marketing brochures. Yet the story of the Chinese housing form remains more complex, as some scholars are quick to point out. "Sealed residential quarters" can look back to older Chinese

typologies incorporating gates and walls, and modern-day communities with some sort of enclosure remain a housing type for a variety of social classes. The prevalence of such housing in Chinese cities may point to more than one set of reasons for their popularity (see also Pow 2009b, 1ff.).

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Figure 2: Caoyangxincun housing project, built in the early 1950s in Shanghai. The once-open parallel housing blocks have been retrofitted with walls and gates.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND "SEALED RESIDENTIAL QUARTERS"

Scholars are divided on their assessment of the modern-day gated community. Some point to the proliferation of what is perceived as a new type of gated complex, one that is often quite luxurious, and whose scale threatens to overwhelm the sense of urban unity as a whole (Miao 2003, Pow 2007a, 2007b, 2009b). Others point to the tradition of enclosures in Chinese society, arguing that the large-scale complexes with their high rises set into landscaped settings are a logical evolution of a "Chinese way of life" (Breitung 2012, Douglas, Wissink and Kempen 2012, Huang 2006, Huang and Low 2008, Xu and Yang 2009). Still other scholars, using various assessment tools, have determined that people in gated communities are quite attached to their physical communities, but not necessarily to their social environments (Li and Li 2012, Zhu, Breitung and Li 2012). These last findings beg the question of how to define "community", and what makes for successful urban spaces – spaces for consumption, for social interaction, for organized events or for spontaneous interactions? In the social realm, China has a

strong tradition of neighborhood associations that organize life at the local level, another factor that must be taken into account when considering what constitutes a community.

Gated communities in China are defined either as symptom of an upper class perception of social and moral superiority over lower classes, or as a continuation of a deep-rooted collectivist culture, including that culture's social control. In the first case, gating is described as a retreat from a more traditional Chinese culture characterized by crowded housing, little individual space resulting in oversight both through family and neighbors, and a socialist system of government control over nearly all aspects of one's life. In the second case, gating is described as a form of community building, one that has evolved naturally from decades of housing that has centered around defined groups, with commoditized communities allowing people to buy into those groups as opposed to being assigned.

Despite these differing interpretations of the community enclosed by the walls, very few studies have examined how residents in current-day China use the communal spaces offered them, either public spaces such as parks, or private ones such as the landscapes of the gated communities. Historical studies have emphasized the traditional importance of public spaces for recreation and point to the use of any open space as an impromptu gathering area today (Wu and Gaubnatz 2013, 244-5). Such communal recreational and commercial spaces, which in the gated community become part of a privatized system, have their parallels in Western housing and urban typologies. Such open space, urban space, or "space between buildings" has been extensively theorized in the Western context (Lynch 1960, 1984; Jacobs 1961, Whyte 1980, Gehl, 1987, Sennett 1990, Jacobs 1995). Few authors, however, have considered the role of such pseudo-public space in the social life of China's "sealed residential quarters", and fewer still have examined the implications for public space on the greater scale of the city itself. Is there a tipping point beyond which large-scale estates will have obliterated any urban life outside them?

Zhu, Breitung and Li (2012) have theorized that Chinese housing has shifted its role from being people-centered to commodity-centered, or from providing a "social arena" to providing "privatized living environments". The privatized community allows for greater feeling of self-determination and escape from

Figure 3: A modern gated community in Shanghai. Community facilities and open spaces are now contained within a privatized environment.

government control (Pow 2007b). This sense of privacy, and the spaces required to sustain it, are an evolving concept in Chinese society, having become a point of negotiation between the government and its citizens, between neighbors, and even between family members, and helps explain some of the questions asked about spatial seclusion and exclusion.

Researchers have posited that for the better off, community attractiveness is more important than social cohesion, since they rely less on local social networks. Residents of wealthy communities no longer feel they need neighbors for help with everyday matters, as services can now be bought or obtained through the estate management. Thus, social connections for "utility value" have diminished in importance (Zhu, Breitung and Li, 2012). Yet even resident groups able to purchase services can find social capital useful: both Huang (2006) and Pow (2009b, 3) cite examples of homeowners organizing when the developer does not honor agreements. In this case, the new legal situation creates ad hoc homeowner associations that communicate via meetings, phone calls, and email list serves as a common goal creates a new community of people with similar interests.

The public discourse has de-politicized questions of social exclusion through framing them as "questions of differing civilised lifestyle and morality" (Pow 2007a, 1539). For respondents in a 2004 study conducted in a Shanghai complex, privacy in the new community meant an escape from the nosiness and gossip of the overcrowded older quarters, but also from people of lower social standing (Pow 2007a). In China, as in the West, access to personal or familial privacy is a function of economic standing, with social superiors enjoying more right to privacy than their social inferiors (Pow 2007b).

While a hermetic separation of inside and outside is often assumed to be essential for a "sealed residential quarter", many communities, especially those that are not marketed to China's ultra wealthy, are simply enclosed by walls, with access remaining open. In Shanghai, over two thirds of all housing communities, and almost half of the newer commodity-built estates were found to have no access control at all (Yip 2012). This explains some of the debate over what constitutes a "gated community" in China. Many older communities have been retrofitted with "gates" by reducing the number of entrances from the street to the interior open spaces (Miao 2003). Despite gates, however, many communities remain fully accessible, evoking the feeling of security and "quality of life" without the management investing in features or personnel that would truly seclude the residents inside (Yip 2012).

Another question centers around community and social control. Huang (2006) has theorized that gating offers both collectivist culture and social control, while other studies have found that residents of the new gated communities seemingly welcome the lack of social control through local government agencies (Zhu, Breitung and Li 2012; Yip 2012). This lack may be a matter of perception. The government, which allowed commodity housing through legislative changes in the first place, has interestingly enough reacted to their creation by followed patterns of involvement dating from an earlier era. Thus, in 2000, the Chinese government launched a new program of "community building", with "Community Committees" and "Community Service Centers" providing social, welfare, health and administrative services (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2000, cited in Huang, 2006). Continuing a policy of involvement in people's lives – a policy that those choosing commodity estates cite as one of the reasons for their retreat into the new housing in the first place

– the government has kept its hand in social organizing, with individual communities augmenting these offers by private security and service offerings. As such, a system of surveillance, policing, or otherwise controlling and "keeping order", continues to exist, albeit with different rules for those of different social groups.

USING OPEN SPACE IN THE "SEALED RESIDENTIAL QUARTERS"

Most qualitative studies have examined the configuration of the new communities, or have used interviews to assess residents' attitudes towards their neighborhood or its physical environment. Many of these studies are working towards theories as to why current-day Chinese are choosing "sealed residential quarters" as their housing form and to what extent those gated communities might play a social role similar to such communities in the West.

For planners and designers, an essential question remains how people use the spaces offered and how this affects the city as a whole. In a study conducted by researchers at Penn State University (Yu and Staub 2013, Staub and Yu, 2013), we discovered that residents of two communities in the northern city of Shenyang use outdoor space in ways consistent with Western theories, and that Chinese residents seem to prefer spatial qualities that can be predicted according to such theories.

The two housing estates, one built in 1992 and consisting of simple seven-story buildings arranged around four small courtyards, and the other built in 2005 as a series of more opulent high-rise slabs set in parallel rows within a walled and landscaped complex, showed that residents of the newer, more upscale community felt more attached to their community and used the outdoor spaces more extensively. These findings replicate those of other studies.

In both communities, however, an analysis of how residents used open spaces compared to predictions based on theories formulated by Jan Gehl (1987) or William H. Whyte (1980) showed that Western theory could quite adequately predict spatial use. For example, such theory predicts that areas that allow unhindered views of activities, such as people strolling by or children playing, will be more popular than spaces that allow no views of activities (Gehl 1987, 25ff). Edges of spaces tend to be popular because they allow both a view into a space and a sense of territoriality and control for the observer (Gehl 1987, 151), while transitional areas allow a feeling of being part of the activity (Whyte 1980, 21) Watching activities from the edge of a space also allows what Whyte has termed "triangulation", in which the activity provides the stimulus for two people observing it to initiate contact – an ice breaker, so to speak (Whyte 1980, 94ff).

In the Shenyang study, spaces that allowed visibility into areas and the activities taking place there showed a high degree of use and activity. Transitional and "edge spaces" that provided a link between two spaces and their activities, and threshold spaces that allowed residents to assume a territorial attitude were also popular and attracted people. While both communities had such spatial elements, we determined that in the newer community they were more salient, and that this community was spatially more complex than the older estate, with more spatial thresholds and layers between the community gates and the entry to the individual units, leading to residents' having more opportunities to interact with others within the complex itself. The newer community also offered more diversity of spaces than the older one, with communal amenities an integral part of the estate's offerings.

The greater saliency of the three spatial features in the newer community – visibility, transitional and "edge" spaces, and threshold spaces – corresponded to

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longer use times and more instances of residents' changing common property to adopt it for their own needs. We argue that while this pattern of use demonstrates residents' connectedness to their physical community (see also Yip 2012), it is precisely this attachment that prevents residents of the newer community from seeking engagement beyond the walls of their complex. By contrast, the sparser and much more porous older community showed less activity within its courtyards, yet a public park nearby provided a lively outlet for its residents and those of similar communities nearby. This study suggests that not just physical amenities, but also the potential for visual and social interaction, remain important in Chinese housing and urban life.

GATING: A UNIQUE CHINESE PROBLEM?

With Chinese residents in at least one study using their open space in much the same manner as Western theory would predict, the criticisms made for Western gated communities may be assumed to increasingly hold true for their Chinese counterparts, that the prevalence and scale of such communities holds power to destroy what is commonly seen as a collective urban experience. Miao (2003, 45) writes of "urban space [that] looks like a giant stage set without actors [despite the area having] nearly 10 000 residents per square kilometer."

While gated communities have been attributed to a "Chinese style of living", this explanation is not straightforward. Community bonds have been an important factor in Chinese society, with communities both socially and spatially defined. No study has convincingly made a case that public urban space is irrelevant in Chinese society. In explaining walls and enclosures as a culturally Chinese phenomenon, scholars simplify the effect of frequent policy changes that have created a plethora of housing types in the past two hundred years. In looking towards the future of Chinese housing, the question becomes which Chinese traditions to draw from, and how to create the most livable cities possible in the process.