The “New” Gated Housing Communities in China: Implications for Urban Identity

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ABSTRACT: Housing typologies in China have changed dramatically over the past hundred years. Economic liberalization is accelerating these changes, shifting the understanding of housing in ways that cannot be explained through Western housing theory. Most of China is moving towards housing in “sealed residential quarters” (gated communities), yet these communities have a role and significance very different from those in the West.

Historical analysis of housing types in China brings out the ingrained role of enclosing walls in housing, a cultural value that is centuries old yet being given new meaning through the introduction of Western-style, developer-driven housing estates. This is contrasted by a Western understanding of urban systems as consisting of interlocking spaces and flows, where social interchanges may be initiated or sustained. To explore this interplay, we examine two communities in the industrial city of Shenyang, analyzing the role that their outdoor spaces play for the residents and their urban context. We find that the population readily accepts China’s new, gated communities, even as they call into question the city beyond. This paper discusses several implications, both at the micro and the macro level.

KEYWORDS: China, Housing, Gated Communities, Urban Design, Open Space

GATED COMMUNITIES IN CHINA

For Western eyes, the transformation of China’s economy and the ensuing privatization of the housing stock has led to a housing form that seems all too familiar: the gated community. In the United States, gated housing communities, which began to appear as luxurious enclaves in the nineteenth century (Wright 1983, Hayden 2003), 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, yet the story here is more complex. Modern-day China’s “sealed residential quarters” (*fengbi xiaoqu*), have deep historical roots, and gated communities remain a housing form 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.

What remains indisputable is that China’s privatization of housing has resulted in a proliferation of a new type of status-laden complex whose scale threatens to overwhelm the sense of urban unity **(**Miao 2003, Song and Zhu 2009, Pow 2009**).** With demand for such housing on the rise, this raises the question of how policymakers, planners and architects should proceed in defining the future of Chinese urban morphologies. While we clearly cannot answer this question fully, we do point to concerns that we feel are overlooked in the current building frenzy.

A second question that this article examines is how residents use the open spaces offered in the new, gated communities. This question, we feel, is intricately linked to the need for other types of urban spaces in Chinese cities, and also to the question of spatial theory in general. Urban recreational, cultural and commercial spaces (which in the gated community become part of a pseudo-public system) have been extensively theorized in the western context (Lynch 1960, 1984; Jacobs 1961, Whyte 1980, Gehl 1987, Sennett 1990, Jacobs 1993, among others). Despite this, few authors have considered the role of the gated community’s neo-urban space in the Chinese context. We hope that this text will encourage further theoretical exploration of such spaces in China’s fast-changing society.

1.0 SOCIAL CAPITAL AND "SEALED RESIDENTIAL QUARTERS"

Depending on which texts one reads, gated communities in China are either defined as a 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, one characterized by crowded housing, a minimum of 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: first the *siheyuan,* a traditional courtyard house of the extended family, then the socialist work-unit housing, and now, under a commoditized housing system, the "sealed residential quarter". New in this last system is that residents choose to buy into it, as opposed to being assigned.

The role of housing in China is going through large changes. Zhu, Breitung and Li (2012) have theorized that housing has shifted from being people-centered to commodity-centered, or from providing a "social arena" to providing "privatized living environments". Neighborhood cohesion, they argue, does not imply cohesion of the society beyond the neighborhood. Miao (2003) concurs, arguing that the street, a traditional public forum in China, has been adversely marginalized in the process. The newly privatized community allows for both feelings of security (Miao 2003) and self-determination and escape from government control (Pow 2007b**).** Privacy, and the spaces required to sustain it, are an evolving concept in Chinese society, which helps explain some of the differing views on spatial seclusion and exclusion.

The question of privacy is also one of class. Residents of wealthy communities rely less on local social networks – neighbors helping neighbors – as services can now be bought, or obtained through the estate management (a form of deferred purchase). Thus, social connections for "utility value" have diminished in importance (Zhu, Breitung and Li 2012). We argue that exactly this point can be seen as a criticism of China's new gated communities – they fulfill the needs of a limited segment of the population, yet do not necessarily serve the needs of poorer classes, women, the elderly, children, or others who traditionally rely on local social networks.

Pow claims that public discourse in China has depoliticized questions of social exclusion through framing them as "questions of differing civilised lifestyle and morality" (Pow, 2007a, 1539). Other researchers highlight the relationship between social status and expectations of privacy. (Pow 2007b, 2009; Naftali 2010). Developers stress the importance of buying into a setting where larger and more luxurious apartments offer settings for family privacy, while walls and gates allow middle or upper-class residents to remove themselves from the surveillance of those who cannot buy into their physical setting. These "others", at least in Shanghai and other coastal cities, are often rural migrant workers, perceived by wealthier urbanites as a threat to both physical security (Miao 2003) and, emotional comfort (Pow 2007b). Nevertheless, the privacy bought by living in a guarded community means that state policing, sometimes veiled as social services, has been replaced by privately bought surveillance services, such as estate guards (Pow 2007b).

The prestige of upscale environments continues to be one of the main marketing points used by developers, who emphasize the many amenities and unique physical properties of the complexes. Advertisements for gated estates stress convenient access to commercial areas, offices, or good schools, or deceptively show estates swathed in lush greenery, with wooded forests surrounding them. In the latter case, the idea presented is one of a secluded and tranquil world away from urban bustle, a wholly unrealistic image considering the density and the growing car ownership that has beset Chinese cities.

Due to urban densities, much of the new developer housing is in the form of high-rise towers or slabs. With ever more gated communities juxtaposed within the urban fabric, the city has in many areas become a series of large walled spaces, around which the visitor must navigate. (Miao 2003) The new communities, in offering better physical environments and less social

obligations, may express the direction of a China in the process of social reorganization, with physical and social fragmentation a consequence of this process.

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 "gated communities" 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).

Taking this view one step further, Huang (2006) has theorized that gating is a new expression of a longstanding collectivist culture in China, offering both community and social control. China's traditional neighborhoods, defined here as the pre-Maoist and Maoist-era housing forms, may have stronger social cohesion than the new gated communities, yet members of the latter have been found to feel no less attached to their communities, and seemingly welcome the lack of social control through local government agencies (Zhu, Breitung and Li 2012, Yip 2012).

The extent of social control may be a matter of perception. The government, which allowed commodity housing through legislative changes in the first place, interestingly enough reacted to their creation by launching a new program of "community building" in 2000, 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 often attempt to evade – the government has kept its hand in social organizing, with individual communities augmenting or replacing these offers by private security and service offerings, as well as technological innovations, such as card-activated entry systems. As such, a system of surveillance, policing, or otherwise controlling and "keeping order", continues to exist, albeit with different rules for different social groups.

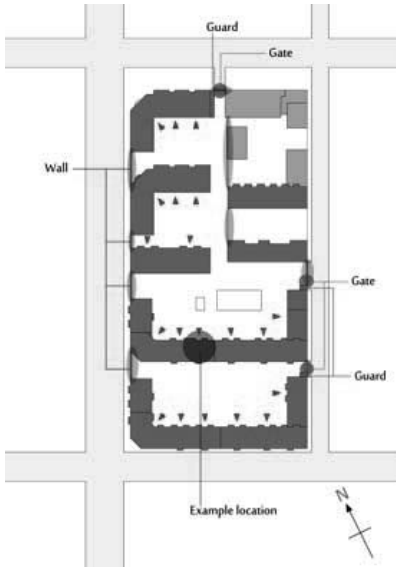
Most qualitative studies on "sealed residential quarters" have used surveys or interviews to assess residents' attitudes towards their neighborhood or its physical environment. Many of these studies examine why people are choosing "sealed residential quarters" as their housing form, and to what extent those gated communities may be compared to gated communities in the West. In the next section, we go another route, examining two communities and analyzing how residents use their common space. In doing so, we find that residents of the Chinese communities act in ways consistent with Western theory about the use of public space, and that Chinese residents seem to prefer spatial qualities that can be predicted according to such theories. This would call for a re-examination of the role of public urban space in Chinese cities, as well as re-stating the question if the new gated communities can offer a sustainable replacement for such urban space, especially as China continues to open her doors to an international community.

2.0 COMMUNAL SPACES IN TWO "SEALED RESIDENTIAL QUARTERS" IN SHENYANG

Chinese society has always been organized into discrete living groups: first the extended family living in their *siheyuan*, then the work community living in factory-provided housing, and now large estates individual families can buy into. The estates are defined as communities, yet are they communal in the sense of residents' interactions with their surroundings? In order to answer this question we observed two Shenyang housing estates to analyze how residents used the common spaces: Zhongxingli Community, built in 1992 and Fuyunxindu Community, built in 2005.

Zhongxingli Community was built as company-provided housing, but has since been privatized. A high fence surrounds the community, with three gates with guardhouses providing access. Housing is of the perimeter-block type, with seven-story buildings surrounding a series

of four courtyards (Figure 1). Zhongxingli is an example of a permeable gated community: guards prevent outside vehicles from entering the complex, although pedestrians are usually allowed to enter freely. The buildings, too, remain accessible, as entrances have no security features. The units are tiny by Western standards, providing a vestibule that doubles as a dining area, a bedroom of approximately seven square meters, a small bath and a simple kitchen for a family typically consisting of two parents and a child (Figure 2).



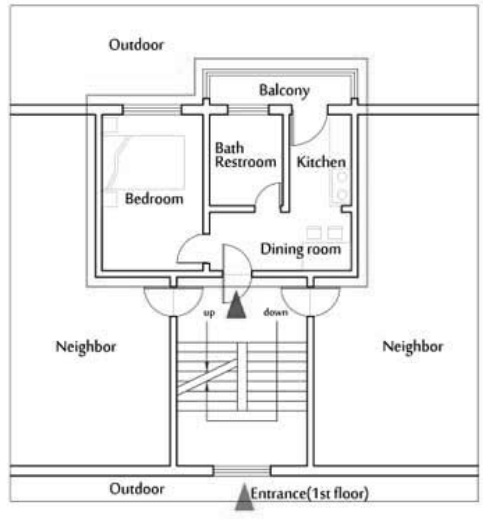


Figure 1 (left): Zhongxingli Community (no scale). The complex has four courtyards and three controlled entrance points.

Figure 2 (right): A typical apartment unit in Zhongxingli Community (no scale). The tiny kitchen and dining area double as a living area.

Fuyunxindu Community is in the Tiexi District of Shenyang. A much larger complex built as private housing from the outset, it has been broken into two complexes separated by a thoroughfare (Figure 3). Similar to Zhongxingli Community, the complex is surrounded by buildings placed on the perimeter and by a high fence, with gates controlling access. Strangers and outside vehicles are not permitted to enter, and residents are required to display a parking permit when driving into the community. Parking is mostly on street and, as there are more cars than parking spots, residents have taken to parking on the lawns. Each building has three to four stairwells, with an intercom door providing security at each entrance.

This study has concentrated on the eastern half of the community, a collection of slab high-rises that create a loose series of courtyards, most of which are open at two ends. A shift in the grid of buildings has created a central open space with communal amenities such as a wading pool, a playground, and decorative features such as outdoor sculptures. Individual units are much larger in this complex than in Zhongxingli Community, and they are arranged in a typical Western floor plan, with a living room, bedrooms, and a larger kitchen and more luxurious bath (Figure 4).

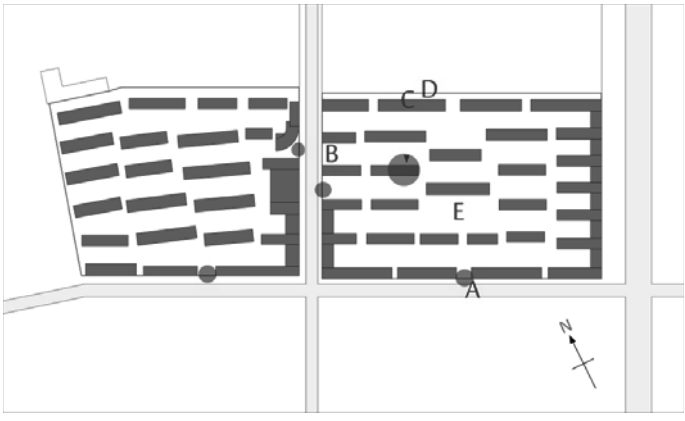


Figure 3 (left): Fuyunxindu Community (no scale). This large estate has only four entry points. The eastern portion contains two central courtyards with community amenities.

Figure 4 (right): A typical apartment unit in Fuyunxindu Community (no scale). Units are much larger than the ones in Zhongxingli Community, and rooms are functionally specialized.

Residents were observed over a period of several days in the open spaces of both communities. In addition, we noted where residents had made changes in these communal spaces to express territoriality or adapt them to their specific needs. Through these observations, we were able to discern which spaces had the most appeal for residents, and to what extent residents exhibited “ownership” of the spaces by using and adapting them.

2.1 Charting spatial use in Zhongxingli Community

In Zhongxingli Community, the courtyards that provided the best overview of activities in them tended to be the most popular (Figures 5 and 6). Thus, courtyards one and two (at the top of the plan), where residents could see into the yard and easily initiate contact with others, tended to be more popular than yard three, which despite being much larger had views blocked by two buildings located within the yard. Courtyard two was the most popular: it afforded good views of people passing on the main path at its eastern edge and provided views into the neighboring yards. We found that more people gathered here, and that they stayed longer than in the other yards.

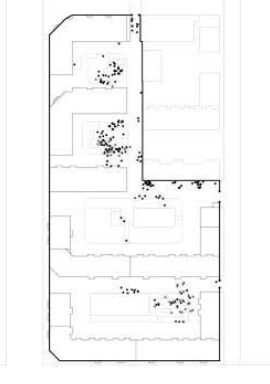


Figure 5 (left): Activity levels in the courtyards of Zhongxingli Community (yards are numbered one through four from top to bottom). Although all four yards had amenities, yards one and two were more popular as they afforded a better overview of the space and views into adjoining spaces.

Figure 6 (right): Yard one (at top in plan). Note the seating areas at the edges of the space.

Residents of Zhongxingli Community often stayed in areas we call “transitional “or “edge” spaces: in this case by the gates to the community (transition between inside and outside), in close proximity to the boundary curb of yard two, or along the edges of the community walls, especially when there was an opportunity to view into an open space. Transitional spaces by building entrances were also popular, and many people would collect there and interact with others.

Interestingly, residents in both Zhongxingli Community and Fuyunxindu Community exhibited territorial behaviors towards what was designed to be communal property. In Zhongxingli Community, residents of an adjacent housing block that was, in fact, under different management, created doorways from the ground-floor apartments to yard three, and took over a strip of garden area located next to their building’s outer wall, treating it as a private garden. Families used this “acquired” area for storage, planting vegetables, and for outdoor recreation such as barbecues.

Aside from this example, most spaces in Zhongxingli Community remained communally used. The outdoor spaces were too small and too intensely used to allow for privatization, with stairwell entrances leading directly onto the communal spaces and not onto a transitional strip of grass. While three families who lived in ground floor apartments had turned windows of their apartments into doors to create direct access to the courtyard space, they did not further privatize the outdoor space.

2.2 Charting spatial use in Fuyunxindu Community

The eastern half of Fuyunxindu Community has twenty yards. Two are clearly meant to be the focal point of the community, as they are larger and offer central amenities. One yard offers a playground, while the other has a large shallow pool surrounded by wide paths, a pavilion, benches, and landscape features. As the pool in this yard is almost entirely devoid of water, older children have taken to riding their bikes here, while younger children and their parents or grandparents are concentrated in the yard with the playground. Many of the other yards are defined as spaces only through being bordered by two of the slab housing blocks, with the other two sides being relatively open. Even these “secondary yards” are not equal, however, as those offering better views of activities in neighboring yards, especially the two main yards, tended to attract more people (Figures 7 and 8).

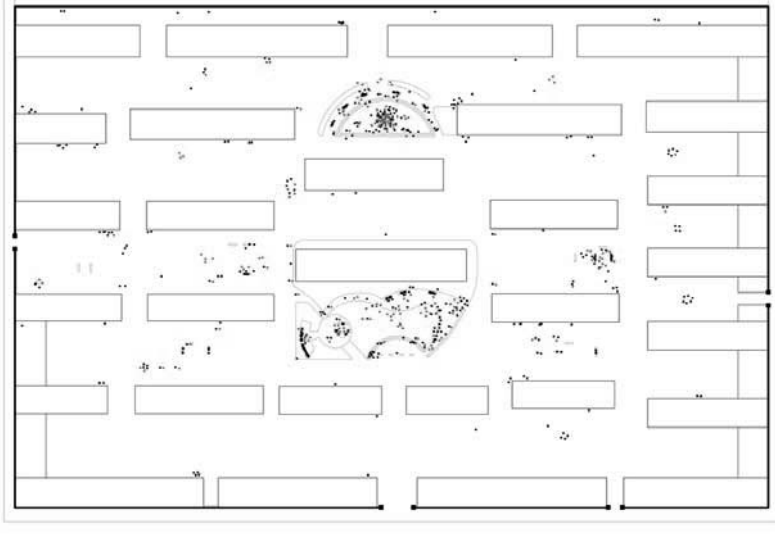


Figure 7: Activity levels in the courtyards of Fuyunxindu Community (eastern half). The central yards, offering community amenities, are the most popular, yet adjacent yards also have high activity levels.

Figure 8: One of the central yards of Fuyunxindu Community.

Since Fuyunxindu Community provided larger areas for play than did Zhongxingli Community, children were able to pursue activities that required more space, such as biking or scooter riding. Both children and adults were outside longer in the Fuyunxindu Community yards than the Zhongxingli Community yards; in Zhongxingli Community the yards were empty by 7:00 p.m. while in Fuyunxindu Community they were still lively after 7:30 p.m.

As in Zhongxingli Community, the residents of Fuyunxindu Community tended to congregate in "transitional" and "edge" spaces, especially at the edges of the playground and the shallow wading pool that now acts as a sunken plaza. Fuyunxindu Community buildings included a private garage on the ground floor of some of the buildings, and a small private garden adjacent to the building for some of the others; these provided further "edge" spaces that residents used extensively. Residents expanded upon these private territories, however, by placing furniture on the street in front of the garages to gain an extra "room", by planting flowers or vegetables on the public lawn next to their private gardens, by decorating the common spaces with little statues, or by paving a path leading to their gardens. Some residents went so far as to erect fences around once-common spaces they had taken over. While some of these activities, such as placing ornamental statutes, were clearly designed to enhance the common spaces, others, such as taking over once-public space and excluding others from using it, were extreme forms of territorial activity.

2.3 What determines spatial use in Zhongxingli Community and Fuyunxindu Community?

In examining both communities, three spatial elements were found to influence the extent to which specific outdoor spaces were used by residents: 1) Visibility into areas and the activities taking place there, 2) Transitional and "edge spaces" that provide a link between two spaces and their activities, and 3) Threshold spaces that allow residents to assume a territorial attitude.

While both communities had such spatial elements, we determined that in Fuyunxindu Community they were far more salient. More interestingly, we found that the patterns of behavior observed align largely with those described in Western theory about the use of public space. For example, spaces that allow unhindered views of activities, such as people strolling by or children playing have been shown to be more popular than spaces that allow no views of activities (Gehl 1987). 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), while transitional

areas allow a feeling of being part of the activity (Whyte 1980). Watching activities from the edge of a space also allows what William Whyte has termed "triangulation", in which the activity provides the ice-breaker stimulus for two people observing it to initiate contact (Whyte 1980). Fuyunxindu Community is spatially more complex than Zhongxingli Community, with more spatial "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. Fuyunxindu Community also offered more diversity of spaces than Zhongxingli Community, with central features an integral part of the estate's offerings.

The greater saliency of the three spatial features in Fuyunxindu Community – visibility, transitional and "edge" spaces, and threshold spaces – corresponded to longer use times and more instances of residents' "adopting" spaces it for their own needs. We argue that this pattern of use demonstrates residents' connectedness to their community (see also Yip 2012), yet we also argue that this attachment prevents Fuyunxindu Community residents from seeking engagement beyond the walls of their complex. By contrast, the sparser and much more porous Zhongxingli Community showed less activity within its courtyards, yet a public park nearby provided an outlet for its residents and those of similar communities nearby: here children played while their elders chatted, an afternoon dance provided opportunities to socialize, and street barbers offered haircuts to passers-by.

3.0 GATING: A UNIQUE CHINESE PROBLEM?

China's "opening up" reforms have led to a society in rapid transition, and with the market economy increasing its hold, individualism, expressed in part through the ability of individuals to purchase a luxurious lifestyle, will play a greater role in everyday life. In choosing housing, larger the community and the more features it offers, the less residents will need to leave to find material amenities and social opportunities. This is seen in how the public park near Zhongxingli Community is intensely used by those living in the smaller-scale communities surrounding it, whereas Fuyunxindu Community residents spend evening hours within their enclave. In both housing estates, we found Chinese residents to be using their open space in much the same manner as Western theory would predict. We thus argue that in an urban sense, the criticisms made for Western gated communities may be assumed to also 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."

China's "sealed residential quarters" are not all comparable, and walled communities are certainly not a recent phenomenon. While the smaller communities result from an older social system, the larger, upscale communities, we argue, do not follow from a "Chinese way of life" but rather from an economic system that, as in the West, has privatized open space, in this case replacing the older familial or state regulation with an economic control that reserves use of open space to those with authorization to be there. With residents' gaze focused inward, the long-term effects of such large estates on the urban fabric are not immediately visible nor would residents necessarily see them as their concern. Yet the scale of these estates is changing cities through a process of stealth, with no end in sight.

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