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CHINESE SUBURBAN CONSTELLATIONS: THE GROWTH MACHINE, URBANIZATION, AND MIDDLE-CLASS DREAMS

Fulong Wu

Suburban expansion, Shanghai.
The view from Pudong (2006)
Source: Roger Keil

The "suburb" in Chinese language is *jiaoqu*, or literally, sub-district; it refers to the places near the city, in a geographical sense and does not imply a distinctive type of settlement or a category of residence.

The meaning of "suburbia" has been absent in the Chinese context. The image of Chinese suburbia is different from the American stereotype of a single-family, middle-class residence amidst urban sprawl. In fact, the divide in Chinese society is not urban-versus-suburban but rather an urban-rural dualism. The urban and rural systems are distinctively different, characterized by two profoundly different types of citizenship and administrative mechanisms. The urban is a state-led industrial society built upon cellular organizations known as *danwei* (work units), while the rural has been left largely as a self-contained under-developed society. This dualism has been under transformation since China opened its doors to the world and began to build itself into the "world's factory."

The suburbs are where this reconstruction is happening, at the intersections between the urban and rural areas: millions of rural migrants move to the city but instead of landing in the central areas, they find rental accommodation in the suburbs. The suburbs thus witness dramatic spatial constellation in the process of Chinese urbanization. To review this process, we should trace the changes back through the era of state-planned economy.

Until the early 1980s, the suburbs of Chinese cities were largely countryside. Among the vast hinterland of large metropolises were scattered a few state industrial districts or industrial satellite towns usually based on key state projects. The suburbs were under-developed and remained rural areas to which residents were reluctant to be relocated. Spontaneous residential moves were rare, often associated with job and housing allocation to these industrial sites. Because of the under-developed facilities and lower quality of schools, the suburbs were not attractive places. Some were developed purposely through city plans as "anti-magnetic" poles to decentralize population, but in reality these projects were largely unsuccessful. This is very different from the American connotation of suburbs as the place for a more desirable single-family life.

Before the economic reform that began in 1979, Chinese cities were quite compact. The dominant commuting modes were cycling and walking, and due to the close association between workplace and housing (provided as occupational welfare), the differentiation of residence and workplace was not significant. Public resources and facilities were concentrated in congested central areas with very high densities. The establishment of housing markets changed the preference for a central location by introducing a price factor. A suburban location was cheaper and more spacious. For the first time, Chinese urban residents began to see suburban estates as alternative places to live.

Along with rising income, there was a strong desire to improve housing conditions. Since then, large estates built through "commodity housing development" have been developed in the Chinese suburbs, targeting different consumer groups. For most of the urban population, residential relocation is an effective way to find larger housing space and

improve living conditions. Residential relocation is also driven by the redevelopment of central cities, where old neighborhoods are demolished to make space for office and commercial buildings and high-end housing. Many residents may be relocated through urban redevelopment projects rather than their own choosing.

No matter whether relocating to the suburbs is due to one's own preference or influenced by redevelopment, the suburb is no longer a subsidiary category but becoming a mainstream residential location. In short, the Chinese suburb now becomes the new frontier of China's urban development.

In terms of built form, it is characterized by high-rise apartments built in master-planned estates rather than terraced and detached houses and villas. The density is comparably much higher than what is seen in the sprawling suburbs of North America. The appearance of Chinese suburbs is similar to those housing estates in Hong Kong and new towns in Singapore. Gated communities are the norm rather than exception. In the upper-market gated compounds, villas and detached houses are usually for the new rich.

Many buy these properties as an investment and use them as the second or third home. Some gated residences deliberately adopt an alien/Western landscape and brand them with foreign place names to satisfy the imagination of their owners for an elite and ostentatious style of consumption. For example, the Thames Town of Shanghai tries to mimic the style of English market town,[1] while the estates like Napa Valley and Orange County in Beijing boast their "authentic" California design.[2]

Compared with traditional neighborhoods, these new estates place greater emphasis on privacy and security features. This aims to suit the residents' desire to reduce all-inclusive and close social relations in danwei communities and live in a more private environment. In the gated communities, services are purchased from and managed by property management companies rather than from workplaces or departments of the local government. Homeowners' associations play an important role in the appointment of the property management company and the management of community affairs. In contrast to orderly planned commodity housing areas, urban informality is another outstanding feature in new suburbs.[3]

In the periurban areas, former villages were engulfed by rapid urban expansion. To save on the cost of land acquisition, the sites of villages were deliberately left out while the farmland nearby was turned into industrial and urban uses. These rural villages thus became "urban villages" or "villages in the city" (*chengzhongcun*). Because the land is assigned to individual households, under the condition of relatively lax rural land management, rural farmers began to extend their houses and become landlords of rental housing for migrants who tried hard to find accommodation in the city. The urban villages thus become the habitat for rural migrants in urban China.[4] Despite their under-developed facilities, urban villages represent a more human living environment for rural migrants than factory-managed dormitory housing, because over 60 percent of migrants in the villages bring in their families and have

a normal family life rather than sharing rooms in dormitories. The habitat of urban villages is threatened by the bulldozers of redevelopment programs and is transient and short-lived, giving way soon to more formal master-planned estates. However, the constellation of formality and informality does not disappear — more informal settlements soon appear upon the influx of rural migrants and the relocation of existing migrant population from the demolished settlements to other rural villages.

Under state socialism, suburban development was for a long time driven by state industrial projects and was a burden to the local government. The mechanism has changed along with the development of state entrepreneurialism[5] and the changing business model of local government. Rather than becoming a financial burden, suburbs opened up a new space for land development, generating revenue for the local government. Through economic devolution, local governments have been given more responsibilities for social expenditures. The tax sharing system between the central and local governments, however, concentrates the tax revenue with the central government. As a result, there is a significant gap in revenue and expenditure and most local governments run on a fiscal deficit. However, the system also allows the local government to retain the profit from land sales. To make up the fiscal gap, local governments have begun to use their power in compulsory land purchases to acquire the land from farmers, develop it into serviced land, and then release it to investors.

Local governments are willing to sell the land at a lower or heavily subsidized price to the manufacturing sector in the hopes of boosting the local economy. The local government can then sell the land nearby at a much higher price to property developers, which eventually brings in a profit through suburban land development.

In response to the changing business model of local government, the mode of suburban governance has shifted from a managerial style to the "entrepreneurial local state." Development zones and new towns are established and managed by business-oriented committees. Some have been created by breaking existing jurisdictional units and reassembling part of them into new, cross-boundary development zones. The initial management is streamlined, focusing on attracting investment and infrastructure provision. This is less a layer of government and more like a development corporation. However, with the increase in population size and complex functions, the demand for social services increases.

For example, one important challenge facing many industrial zones is the provision of affordable housing to key workers. The imbalance of work and residential uses constrains the operation of these industrial zones. The housing for their workers is largely left to the informal market to provide rentals. The development zone corporation often has to negotiate with nearby local governments for providing necessary services. When the suburban industrial zone is growing into a new town, its corporate style of governance has to evolve into a full local government. And indeed in places such as the Beijing Economic and Technological Development Zone, this is happening. For example the new town of Yizhuang is formed as one major new city in-between Beijing and Tianjin metropolises. When this happens, the

suburb grows out of its monotonic residential or industrial function and becomes part of the city — in a sense this is becoming "post-suburbia."[6]

In less than two decades, the Chinese city has been turned inside out; the suburb has become the fast-growing area. But this spatial reconfiguration is not a Los Angeles style of post-Fordist edge growth, though it is possible to find out some elements such as LA-inspired gated communities in the Chinese suburbs.

Chinese suburban development is more about constellations of urbanization and suburbanization, and it is heterogeneous in terms of population composition. Growth has been driven by the relocation of local farmers, rural-urban migration and the out-movement of urban residents from central districts. The process is quite different from the "white flight" and the formation of relatively homogenous affluent middle-class residential areas in the US[7] and there are different motivations.

For the new rich, changing consumption behavior is certainly behind their pursuit of a suburban dream, while a less affluent working population is either pushed out by inflated house prices or relocated through urban redevelopment. For rural migrants, the inner suburbs provide access to jobs while minimizing living costs. While the development of suburban land-based "growth machine" is part of explanation for rapid land requisition and conversion, the consumption-side explanation is becoming more and more responsible for the differentiation between white-collar and migrant suburbs and differentiation between apartments and villas.[8] For example, high-density apartments are less associated with the distinct suburban life and more with the provision of affordable housing along mass transit to access the central core, while villa compounds are chosen for their exclusive services, quality amenities, and enchanting living environments.

Migrant workers come from the countryside or other small towns to work in the suburbs of large Chinese cities. At the same time, the local governments promote industrial development and development zones in these places. Now, we begin to see a result of "urbanization of suburbs" in addition to the residential-driven suburban development built to suit middle-class dreams.

Endnotes

1 Shen, J./ Wu, F. "The Development of Master-Planned Communities in Chinese Suburbs: A Case Study of Shanghai's Thames Town. *Urban Geography.* 33(2). 2012. p. 183–203.

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3 Wu, F./ Zhang, F./Webster, C. "Informality and the Development and Demolition of Urban Villages in the Chinese Periurban Area. In: *Urban Studies.* 2013, forthcoming.

4 Wu, F./ Zhang, F./Webster, C . *Rural Migrants in Urban China: Enclaves and Transient Urbanism.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. 2013.

5 Wu, F./ Phelps, N. 2011. "(Post)Suburban Development and State Entrepreneurialism in Beijing's Outer Suburbs." In: *Environment and Planning A.* 43(2). 2011. p. 410–430.

6 Ibid.

7 Beauregard, R. *When America Became Suburban.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2006.

8 Shen, J./ Wu, F. Moving to the Suburbs: Demand-Side Driving Forces of Suburban Growth in China. In: *Environment and Planning A.* 2013, forthcoming.