

# CHINA'S URBAN RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY IN THE COURSE OF TRANSFER OF SOCIAL PATTERN

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**ABSTRACT:** Even though the study of urban sociology in China is just a beginning, it doesn't mean that urban social problems in China are new or simple. As a very sensitive field, urban residential community has not been deeply analysed before owing to various reasons. This article tries to start with the background of China's social development and analyse the pattern, essence and evolution direction of China's urban residential community which is in the course of transfer of social pattern. This article first analyzes the functional mechanism of seven main elements affecting Chinese urban residential community in the course of transfer of social pattern. Some of the elements come into being under the social economic background, with Chinese characteristics, and have a profound influence on urban residential community. Based on that, the author then respectively infers the evolution of four main patterns of urban residential communities in China now. Finally, it puts forward the basic principles of urban community development in the current transfer period in China, and with a development eyesight, it makes a summary of the general characteristics of the Chinese urban residential community in the future.

**KEY WORDS:** Urban residential community, functional elements

In China, cities have finally stepped into the prosperous road since the early 1980s after experiencing a quite long period of stagnation or abnormal development. Owing to the deep effect of traditional planning economic system, the managing personnel (administrative officials) of most cities, planners (almost architects) as well as the common people still see that the urban development is a space change of physical form and structure, and view urban planning as the simple expression of drawings. They deeply experience the tremendous course of administrative orders over urban growth. They haven't been conscious that urban space is virtually a so-

cial network, urban development in essence is a social process.

The study of the real urban sociology traced back to the late 1980s. The reform and opening to the outside world brought great changes to the social political and economic systems of China. As the urban social space, content and people's value concept that were established in the 30-year planning system are facing the complete attack, social problems of cities are gradually revealing, especially for such a country with large population as China, residential problems are the fundamental ones that affect the overall situation. Therefore, more attention has been paid to the urban sociology including the urban residential community problems. It's basically significant to overall reorganize the social structure in the course of transfer of social pattern and better solve the problems in residential community.

In accordance with some community systems and community relationships, the general concept views residential community as living community with the same population characteristics, which is organized in a certain district. In China, there was only one concept of "residential district" before, which avoids and abandons the social problems possibly caused by the concept of "community". Up till now, the theory of neighborhood unit put forward by C. A. Per in the 1920s has occupied a leading position in China's planning, which basically puts focus on exploring the relationship between architectural space and people's living activities, and simply makes the summary based on quantitative architectural standard or norm of well-completed facilities. However, people have sociality, and residential district in essence is a kind of community, the social background, social relationship and social mutual movement are still the basic elements that compose China's urban residential community.

## **I. ANALYSIS FOR MAIN FACTORS IN RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY IN CHINA'S CITIES**

China is a country with a long history of feudal residence. The influence of traditional feudal groups and household system (mainly the areal relationship and blood relationship) up till now has deep vestiges. The function of community is being strengthened, and the traditional residential structure is disintegrating gradually. On one hand, urban residential community affected by the main factor (society) tries to cast off the traditional yoke, satisfy the needs of social life, contact and development of the times, on the other hand seek the cordial neighborhood relationship that won't be felt regrettable at parting from until the passing. It implements the redivision, delimitation of physical space as well as the reorganization, location of social network and role.

China and western countries have different history background, realistic cir-

cumstances and futures. The interference of the socialist planning system fundamentally affects urban residential community. Compared with western countries, the same main factors have different functional connotation and dynamics.

## 1. State Policy

Most western countries adopt the land private ownership<sup>[1]</sup>. Generally, urban residential community forms spontaneously while the main responsibility of the government is to retain the stability between communities. But in China, the state policy may directly lead to space move ment of residential community and its reorganization. For example, for the time being, with the large scale suburbanization of residential community of China's urban renewal (not the suburbanization of western cities), residential community confronts the big change and re-construction of physical space and human space. The traditional residential community atmosphere has been broken while the new human circumstances and cultural atmosphere are hard to be set up in short time. Therefore, the following imbalance of cultural psychology and the fragile, broken social network relationship generally exist.

## 2. Social Economic Status

Under the function of market economy, based on the social economic status, the class differences and conflicts in western countries inevitably show the space separation between communities and the reorganization of elements in community structure. Before 1949, this kind of multi-level community affected by the factor also existed in some developed cities in China

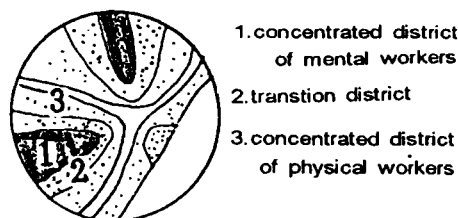
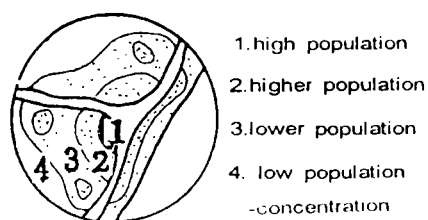


Fig.1 The functional pattern of cultural elements to the population concentration in Shanghai city

(Fig.1). With the establishment of socialist system, the space separation between communities was destroyed by the measures of equality in politics and economy. Before the mid 1980s, the social economic status basically didn't affect urban residential community in China (even among units). In recent ten years, with the adjustment of economic system, the appearing of social stratum and widening of its gap have been undeniable. And the real estate market for development of residential community has clearly showed the objective needs of different community. Previously, we have been evading this question even though it has objectively existed and continued. How should we face it?

### 3. Household Life Cycle



**Fig.2** The space functional pattern of population, culture and employment in Shanghai city

In China, owing to the limitation of economic conditions and market supply and the restriction of the traditional family concept, household life cycle and residential space shift don't have a clearly relevant relationship. With the increase of kernel families, "living apart but not becoming estranged" appears between children and the generation of their fathers, which has a blood relationship need of certain space

segregation and is affected by tradition and reality. It is different from western country and will survive for ever. (Fig.2).

### 4. Segregation of Minority Nationalities

In cities, because of the equality of politics, economy, and society status among all the nationalities guaranteed by the socialist nationality policy, the phenomenon of segregation of minority nationalities doesn't generally exist, but it strongly exists in specific urban districts in Sian city, such as the Islamic community of north compound gate in Xi'an City. But it is different from western countries. In China, even though the community segregation exists caused by the differences among nationalities, the conflict focus is generally limited in the sphere of life custom. Only if we deal with that appropriately, it won't become the crux like that in western cities.

### 5. Improvement of Traffic Conditions

It is the same as western countries that the shortening of time and space distances caused by traffic conditions will lead to the geographical move ment toward the areas outside urban residential space. But just like the above-mentioned, the obvious conformity relationship between traffic conditions and space distribution of residential community won't be obtained from the land system of Chinese characteristics, the restriction of unit and the survival of the traditional psychological bearing power.

### 6. Effect of Population Concentration

The urbanization level of China is still low and usually considered to be the

phase of concentrated urbanization. The effect of population concentration displays the centripetal characteristics of rural population towards cities and the intensely dependent, hastening-near psychology of urban citizens towards urban centres. Central districts still have some powerful and complicated residential communities, which become the tremendous obstruction power for adjusting and upgrading of land structure in urban centres.

## **7. Unit System**

The unit system with Chinese characteristics has the feature of tribe. The residential community of unit system leads to the same quality characteristics of residents to a high level. This kind of housing system is the key reason which hinders other main factors from being brought into play. But at the same time as the unit housing has the recognition of inheriting it naturally by children, the original identity of members of unit system community is alienating. Together with the deepening of housing reform, the unit housing system will move towards the complete social system, but the course will be very slow and difficult.

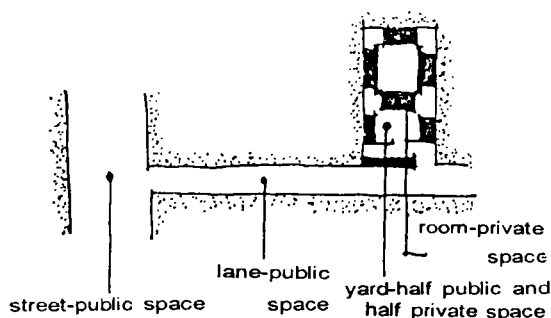
## **II. PATTERN AND ESSENCE OF CHINA'S URBAN RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY**

### **1. Traditional Neighborhood Community**

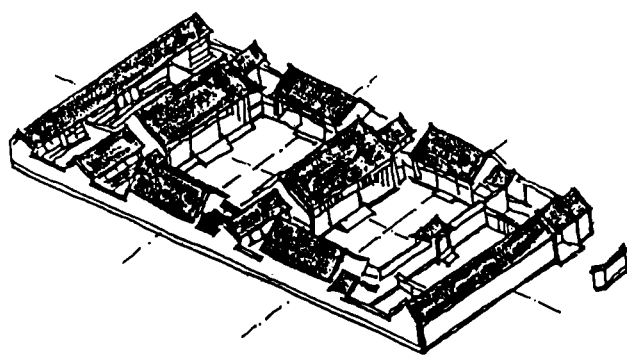
We choose the representative residential community of "Siheyuan" (a compound with houses around a courtyard) in Beijing and analyses its situation in current community life. Several Siheyuan are located one by one to form lane. Each lane or a section of it is a community (Fig. 3).

The old "Siheyuan" consists of residential units of household (Fig. 4), which reflects the "respecting the elder idea" of the feudal clan system and deals with the congregation of clan size and parting of household size in a better way. From another point of view, it corresponds with the traditional production relationship of peasant's economy. People's collaboration in the production is only limited in the household sphere while the contacts outside the yard community among people appear as the complete clan image. The contacts among people are mainly limited to community where the household is. It also causes the mutual segregation between communities in cities, which can be called "urban rural culture"<sup>[2]</sup>.

In the 1950s, Siheyuan of the clan size was replaced by the household residential form of non-clan size. At that time the social changes caused by industrialisation were not enough to shake the controlling of "urban rural culture" over the



**Fig.3** The alignment of the neighborhood community space function



**Fig.4** Siheyuan in Beijing

neighborhood relationship. On the contrary, owing to the breaking of the traditional household residential form and raising of women's position in the society, together with the stressing of the state on collectivism, the neighborhood relationship reached the high degree closeness in this period that had never existed. The combination of "urban rural culture" and collectivism successfully solved the dense residence problem created by urbanization, which, however, depended on two premises: one was that people should have a recognition of neighborhood, the other was that people could restrain the benefits of their own families. During the culture revolution period, the individuality sense that originally had healthily been developing began to expand in disorder followed by the turmoil in the society, and the friendly relationship between neighbors was torn into pieces.

In the 1980s, the neighborhood relationship entered a rational and stable period, which didn't return towards the traditional one, but symbolized the formation of a new order. People no longer viewed the neighborhood relationship as a special social relationship, but applied the ordinary method in dealing with the relationship in cities to Siheyuan. "Looking Like Siheyuan" residential design that came from

the book "Juer Lane" written by Mr. Wu Liangyong sensitively held this tendency. Under the premise of obeying the objective social law, the formation of the new intimate neighborhood was promoted and established through the successful space design and social organization.

## **2. Unit Community of Tribe Size**

The unit community of tribe size has been analysed in the above paragraphs, which has three most obvious characteristics: the high identity of population within the community; introversion of community activities; coincidence of living role and production role of individuals. The sub-culture formed based on the three characteristics in a sense may be anti-urban culture, mainly showing a kind of special whole psychology trend-fixing, custom, some collective fashion and stronger and certain "community sense", which have a conformity effect of certain strength on the individual behaviour living in it (just as rural village). But it may lead to certain behaviour of the massed or collective behaviour and affect the socialization of the next generation. The high closeness under the planned economy, the unbreakable unit housing system will gradually degenerate following the transfer of economic system and the complete socialization of urban production and life, increasingly be replaced by community of mixed pattern. But residents have strong dependence on unit housing and psychology of yearning for it because of their basic residential demands.

## **3. Comprehensive Community of Mixed Pattern**

Owing to strengthening of urban comprehensive development, since the 1970s residential communities with single function in a large scale, better residential environment and complete living facilities have been built on the separate section of cities or the urban edge (incl. high-grade residential community), which are the development tendency of urban residential community. From practice, it proves that this kind of residential community still has the following problems:

(1) As the bearing capacity of purchasing houses by people is limited, in a large comprehensive community, working units usually purchase the houses unitively and then distribute them to employees by means of gratuitousness or welfare. Community space is still divided by unit system and the whole community mutual action is hard to form. However, as the advantages of the mutual living facilities has been taken and a place for association has been supplied, the community atmosphere is likely to improve with time passing by. The living role and the production role don't coincide in a certain sphere and the residents still have some enthusiasm of participating community activities.

(2) The characteristics of different position of the residents in community is strengthening, but the formation of the new neighborhood relationship lacks the mutual community basis. Besides, the lack of various demand space or inappropriate construction have caused the weakening of resident's contacts, which is reflected in the unit apartment of multi-levels and high levels. The above-mentioned point has become the key issue of urban planning and community construction(Table 1).

(3) In the mixed residential community that lacks the real community atmosphere, the problems of the old people and children's growth have become the focus of the society. Therefore, the mixed community must create a kind of new community spirit through the cultivation of various physical and non-physical means. Only in this way can truly reflect its value and the raising of Chinese resident's residential standard.

**Table 1 Survey of contact among residents in a high-rise in Beijing**

Content	Percentage in the investigated residents( % )
Not knowing neighbour's names	72
Not knowing neighbour's working units	68
Never calling at neighbour's home	95
Often calling at neighbour's home	0
Finding out neighbour's social interests	1
Often helping one another	1
Never contacting neighbors	93

**4. The Peripheral Community of Evolution and Substitution Pattern**

This kind of community that exists in peripheral district of cities is characterized by the confusing function, the swaying employment of residents, the complicated composition and the deficient facilities<sup>[3]</sup>. In the traditional peripheral district of rural pattern, the function is in a mess; the district linkage of resident's employment is disintegrated; the control over society weakened. The urban resident's relationship of different nature hasn't been established and the urban management hasn't been made. This peripheral community of intrusion pattern is obviously different from the western subanization of diffusion pattern.

With the developing of cities and strengthening of urban management, the peripheral community of evolution and substitution pattern will gradually be replaced by the urban community of comprehensive pattern, too. On the premise of the



guarantee of basic facilities and service facilities, the adaptability of the suburban natural environment to the residence of high standard has been initially reflected in the cost of land.

### **III. THE DEVELOPMENT POLICY OF URBAN RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY IN CHINA**

China is a state with a socialist market economic system. Equality and benefit will be the basic rules of China's urban residential development policy.

#### **1. Carrying Out the Residential Socialization Policy**

In spite of the lopsided community relationship caused by the irrational housing system, the confusion of space field and the coincidence of life and work, the community relationship that has been established after experiencing a long period of time really has its value. The residential socialization is the trend of the whole social economic activities, which requires us in the residential community construction to transfer to analyse and reorganize more complete and deeper social relationship from simply deliberating of the shape of construction, and study the mutual movement between social relationship and construction space.

#### **2. Adopting a Correct Attitude Towards the Community Difference**

To a certain extent, the difference based on the social economic status must affect more strongly the differences of residential community, but the containing action of the original historical background of various kinds and social system to it is still very strong. As far as the socialist system is concerned, the ultimate goal is to reach the equal communist system and the social stratum difference by viewing the obvious community difference as a sign shouldn't be encouraged by us. Therefore, the construction of superior and other residential communities shouldn't be the developing direction and focus of China's housing policy, but the housing private system should be carried out in a community with the mixed residential one as a leading role. The demand differences of various status are reflected by means of the concrete price difference of sections.

In the organization of public service utilities and activities of other communities and the establishment of community spirit, the effect of stratum difference will be decreased, and the harmonious community relationship will ultimately be formed, which is beneficial to the stable and coordinative development of society.

## IV. LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FUTURE OF URBAN RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY IN CHINA

**1. From the View-Point of Landuse Pattern.** The residential community gradually moves from the urban centre towards the periphery, and the residential space and working space relatively separate from each other.

**2. From the View-Point of Family Relationship.** The relationship between different generations is closer than that in the western society. In addition to the slow change of land system, bearing level and social service guarantee in a long period, the obvious family cycle won't cause clear effect on the movement of residential space.

**3. Formation of Community.** The community formed by the different factors of the western social economic status and race will not be the leading, and the mixed comprehensive residential community will exist more generally. The same quality characteristics of community will significantly be reflected in the equal social contacts and the active public spirit of the social system, in which the class difference has been eliminated.

**4. Moulding of Community Spirit.** The common sense of community residents in community isn't based on the benefits of political and economic groups, which puts more emphasis on the modes demanded by ethics, traditional culture and the quality of the times. The equal, active, united and cordial community style will replace the hierarchical, enclosed, divergent, cool and abnormal neighborhood relationship.

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