Making the Gigantic Suburban Residential Complex in Beijing: Political Economy Processes and Everyday Life in the 2010s

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MAKING THE GIGANTIC SUBURBAN RESIDENTIAL COMPLEX IN BEIJING:
POLITICAL ECONOMY PROCESSES AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE 2010S

by

PENGFEI LI

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by

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

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by

Pengfei Li

Advisor: Setha Low

Suburbanization is an ongoing development process in China. Hundreds of thousands of construction projects are being undertaken in outskirts of most Chinese cities, despite the increasing domestic and international concerns over China’s housing oversupply (Xu, 2010; Gough, 2015; Li, 2015). The suburbanization of China, however, is fundamentally different from the suburbanization of most Western countries, especially the United States, whose massive post-war suburbanization took place as a continuation of its pre-war industrialization and urbanization movements. In the Chinese context, suburbanization is the process of urbanization as well—urbanization and suburbanization have been promoted simultaneously since the 1990s. It is an urban expansion movement copying the existing urban form—the revised Le Corbusier’s Towers-in-the-Park model with a socialist legacy—rather than a suburban leapfrog development following a new urban format, such as the low-density single-family house form in the American suburb. As China evolves from its imperial past to the socialist period and then to the current state-led integration into the global economy and the international community, its urbanization approach embraces practices from multiple eras and even multiple cultural traditions. Moreover,
China’s suburbanization is part of its modernization process which is heavily tailored by the state and overly marketized as well—hypermarketized state capitalism with a pre-modern authoritarian mind-set.

In addition to these historical and political economy themes, my 14-month fieldwork in a suburban community in Beijing also indicates that Chinese suburbanites’ move to the suburb is mainly a socio-economic movement without an independent cultural and political invocation or inspiration. Nonetheless, this acultural and apolitical suburban movement has profound psychological impacts on the suburbanites and results in severe spatial segregation and social stratification, although these outcomes are not the Chinese suburbanites’ original motivation.
Acknowledgements

I owe thanks to so many people. Without their institutional and personal assistance, this dissertation project cannot be completed. First, I need to thank my advisor and mentor, Prof. Setha Low, who helped me throughout my field-work in Beijing via emails and skype talks and throughout my dissertation-writing journey via numerous office visits. The nick name of my field site, “Beverly Hills Towers,” was coined by Setha as well. It is a name that truly reveals the nature of my field site and smartly covers the identity of the site as well. I also appreciate Prof. David Chapin’s help throughout my graduate training in the Graduate Center, CUNY. It is David Chapin who encouraged me to use more visual figures, rather than merely words, to express my abstract thoughts in the dissertation. Prof. Michael Blim, I truly appreciate your comments during our series of discussion in your office. It is you who made me sharpen my political economy argument and statements in the dissertation.

Special thanks to my architect and urban planner friends in Beijing, including Bin Wang, Youcong Wu, Xu Xiao, and Xun Zhang. Without your help, many of my interviews in Beijing could not be scheduled and conducted. Especially Mr. Bin Wang, your introduction to Beijing City University not only enriched my academic career but also let me know many brilliant and hard-working urban planning students in Beijing. In addition to these academic supports, I also thank many of my close friends in Beijing, including Bicheng Wang, Ting Xia, Yan Xing, and Bo Zhu. You made my 14-month field-work and life in Beijing less miserable and more home-like.

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List of Acronyms and Chinese Terms in Pinyin

**BUCG:** Beijing Urban Construction Group

**CBD:** Central Business District

**CPC:** Communist Party of China

**Gaoduan:** High-end

**HC:** Homeowners’ Committee

**HPF:** Housing Provident Fund

**Hukou:** Household Registration

**Laoshi:** Fellow-townsman or villagehood

**NGO:** Non-government Organization

**RC:** Residents’ Committee

**SES:** Socio-economic status

**SOE:** State-owned enterprise

**TVE:** Village and township owned enterprise

**VC:** Villagers’ Committee

**Xiaoxian:** Residential community
Chapter 1

Introduction—Beijing’s Suburbanization in the Background of the Chinese Urbanization Process
The convergence of authoritarian administration, haphazard taste cultures, cheap labor, piles of cash, and a civil society that oscillates between the Wild West, imperial refinement, curiosity, cruelty, corruption, canniness and crazy consumption is a rich stew indeed. (Michael Sorkin, “Bull in China’s Shop” in The Nation, February, 2014)

Suburbanization is an ongoing development process in China. Hundreds of thousands of construction projects are being undertaken in outskirts of most Chinese cities, despite the increasing domestic and international concerns over China’s housing oversupply (Xu, 2010; Gough, 2015; Li, 2015). The suburbanization of China, however, is fundamentally different from the suburbanization of most Western countries, especially the United States, whose massive post-war suburbanization took place as a continuation of its pre-war industrialization and urbanization movements. In the Chinese context, suburbanization is the process of urbanization as well—urbanization and suburbanization have been proceeded simultaneously since the 1990s. It is an urban expansion movement copying the existing urban form—the revised Le Corbusier’s Towers-in-the-Park model with a socialist legacy (Figure 1.3)—rather than a suburban leapfrog development following a new urban format, such as the low-density single-family house form in the American suburb. Moreover, a regional government—the municipal government—governs both suburban districts and urban districts, and this pattern of centralism and regionalism has dominated China’s urban format for thousands of years.

From a broader historical perspective, China’s suburbanization has been tightly connected with China’s reform and opening up and its integration into the global economy since 1978, especially the housing reform of 1994 and 1998. As China evolves from its imperial past to the socialist period and then to the current state-led integration into the global economy and the international community, its urbanization approach embraces practices from multiple eras
and even multiple cultural traditions. Moreover, China’s suburbanization is part of its modernization process which is heavily tailored by the state and overly marketized as well—hypermarketized state capitalism with a pre-modern authoritarian mind-set, as I will further articulate in the following sections.

After the 1994 State Council No. 43 document “The plan to deepen the housing reform in cities and towns,” China has started to privatize public housing and state-owned-enterprises’ (SOE) housing. Four years later, after the 1998 State Council No. 43 document “The notice to further deepen housing reform in cities and towns and to quicken housing construction,”1 China has completely terminated welfare housing and embraced the real estate industry as one of the pillar industries in the nation. It is also from the mid-1990s that China’s living environment has been dramatically altered and re-shaped, together with the land and housing ownership structure (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1. Land and property ownership structure in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Imperial China</th>
<th>Nationalist China</th>
<th>Communist China</th>
<th>The 1982 constitution</th>
<th>The 2007 Property Law</th>
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<tr>
<td>Urban land</td>
<td>Privately and state owned</td>
<td>Privately and state owned</td>
<td>State owned and state units owned</td>
<td>State owned and state units owned</td>
<td>State owned and state units owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural land</td>
<td>Privately and state owned</td>
<td>Privately and state owned</td>
<td>State owned and people’s communes</td>
<td>State owned and VC owned</td>
<td>State owned and VC owned</td>
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Within this broader historical, political and economic context, China’s urbanization and suburbanization have been promoted hand by hand. Inner city redevelopment or renovation projects have been initiated in many cities, which result in massive demolition and displacement (Fang, 2000; Zhang, 2006; Zhang, 2010). At the same time, there are large scale residential development projects in suburban areas where there used to be farmland or industrial land (with residential complexes inside factories), and these projects lead to the loss of farmland, the relocation of previous industry, the relocation of people who work in that industry, and massive housing consumption by middle-class Chinese (Fang, 2000; Feng et al., 2008). The two parallel processes mentioned are closely connected with each other because the displaced people resulting from city redevelopment projects have been mostly accommodated by suburban development projects (Zhang and Fang, 2004; Zhou and Ma, 2000). On the other hand, the
suburban development projects, especially the commercial housing projects, make it possible that well-off migrant workers and university graduates who work hard and save heavily, and oftentimes with their family support, can buy a home and settle down in a city where they may not yet have a household registration or hukou,\(^2\) in addition to the housing consumption of local middle-class people (Feng et al., 2008; Fleischer, 2010).

Researchers have studied China’s urban redevelopment projects (Fang, 2000; Zhang, 2006; Zhang and Fang, 2004), the consequent displacement/relocation processes (Fang, 2006; He and Wu, 2007; Li and Song, 2009; Wu, 2004), and suburban development projects (Feng et al., 2008; Zhou and Ma, 2000; Wu, 2010) from multiple social science disciplines such as anthropology, geography, sociology, and urban planning. These scholars are all fully aware that most displaced people have been dispersed into the suburbs (Fang, 2006; Feng et al., 2008; He and Wu, 2007; Li and Song, 2009; Zhang, 2006; Zhang and Fang, 2004) and some have pointed out the recent increase in voluntary moves to the suburbs (Feng et al., 2008; Wu, 2010; Zhou and Logan, 2008). Zhang (2010) even claims that some well-designed suburban gated communities have become the paradise of well-off Chinese who are mainly interested in their own safety and personal interests. However, most of the academic studies on China’s suburbanization focus on the origin and socio-economic process of suburbanization instead of how people actually “speak” about, perceive, and live in the suburb. In reality, my research indicates that China’s suburbanites are not flying away from the city to purchase their suburban dream or way of life, as their

\(^2\) The current hukou system in China was officially promulgated in 1958. It is a powerful registration system to regulate Chinese citizens’ residence and a variety of social welfare programs (Chan, 1996). Living in a Chinese city (renting or owning a house) does not automatically provide a person or family the hukou of that city. Since 2001, the hukou reform has loosened its standards for people who work and live in a city different from their birthplace to change their hukou. Nonetheless, mega-cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen still have the strictest hukou policy. Powerful state employers such as the central government owned enterprises, universities, and hospitals can give non-local residents local hukou based on an annual quota. The non-local employees are introduced to the hukou system as special talents. Individuals who work in private companies, no matter how high their salary is and how powerful their companies are, cannot secure a local hukou, unless they can found an enterprise in the city and hire a certain amount of employees with local hukou.
American counterparts did from the 1950s to the 1970s (Gans, 1982; Jackson, 1985); nor are they seeking a secure and defended space in an increasingly “unsecure” contemporary world, as their American counterparts has been doing since the 1980s (Low, 2003; Judd & Swanstrom, 2010). Their move to the suburb is an overly marketized and monetized endeavor heavily tailored by the state, without an independent cultural and political invocation. Nonetheless, this acultural and apolitical suburban movement results in severe spatial segregation and social stratification, although these outcomes are not the Chinese suburbanites’ original motivation.

The themes mentioned above are the results of my 14-month fieldwork in a suburban community in Beijing and my broader study of China’s urban living space in the past seven years. I studied a single gated community in suburban Beijing in great detail from an interdisciplinary perspective. How did a suburban gated community get constructed in Beijing—the political background, the economic and financial processes, and the residents’ roles? How did residents perceive and “speak” about their suburban living environment and the processes through which they settle down in suburban Beijing? What was their daily life like in the suburban community? It is a political economy study, an anthropological investigation, and an environmental psychology project at the same time. Analyzing the production of space from the lens of political economy is part of my research, but that is not the full story. The processes of place making are influenced by multiple factors—class, political regime, cultural norms, family histories, and personal preferences. Some of them may not be framed into the orthodox logic of class relations at all. Moreover, portraying how residents perceive their suburban living environment and their daily life in suburban Beijing will give us a more complete picture of China’s suburbanization in the last two decades. After all, “whose suburb?” and “what is the Chinese suburb for?” are questions with more practical significance.
A historical framework: Whose history?

Place and space can be studied from a variety of approaches, which may view the same issue from different angles. How can China’s suburbanization be theorized? A historical analysis may be a good starting point.

Historians can analyze the general history of the development of world cities, point out different patterns and stages, and even predict the future direction, as Mumford’s classic 1961 book *The City in History* reveals the general evolution of Western cities in which five distinctive stages—the Greek and Roman period, the medieval stage, the capitalist city and the baroque city, the industrial chaos, and finally the contemporary suburban/metropolitan expansion—evolve sequentially. Franklin (2010), in his well-written book *City Life*, provides a historical overview of Western cities from the medieval town to industrial cities to two different types of modern cities (the Paris model that emphasizes city life and the British and American model that focuses on family life) and finally to the post-modern green city or ecological city. Franklin’s analysis echoes with the main theme of Mumford’s 1961 classic work, although he is more optimistic about the contemporary city form manifested by the post-modern ecological city movement from the 1980s onwards.

China’s suburbanization, however, can hardly be put into the “Western” framework of urban evolution mentioned above. It is clearly *not a suburban exodus* in the Western context, and it is *by no means a post-modern ecological movement* either. But why shall China’s urban development be viewed from the Western historical framework? Why shouldn’t scholars study China’s urban evolution from the Chinese context *per se*? As a Chinese national, I am not embarrassed or irritated to study China’s urban evolution from Western frameworks. It is not a
Chinese issue, but an issue faced by all third-world countries whose modern and contemporary history is defined, shaped, and re-shaped by Western epistemological frameworks and more importantly their interactions with the West. In this regard, scholars who study the evolution of Chinese cities simply cannot avoid using Western concepts and frameworks.

In multiple sections of Zhu’s (2009) systematic and historical analysis of China’s modern architecture and built environment from 1729 to 2009, Western forms and even Western practices—believed and conducted either by Chinese who adopted Western forms or by Westerners who lived in or “colonized” China—are inevitably implanted in the Chinese situation. From pre-1949 practices to socialist modernism to China’s post-modern architecture boom, “post-criticality criticality” coined by Zhu (2009), China has been actively, and sometimes passively and even forcibly, adopting several Western formats, from the Greek and Roman monumental styles in the colonial era (pre-1911 and pre-1949) to the revised Towers-in-the-Park modernism in the socialist period (1949 to 1989) to the post-socialist era when nearly all styles from all countries and historical periods can be found and oftentimes dramatically remodeled by Chinese (Bosker, 2013). Therefore, China’s modern and contemporary built environments simply cannot be understood from the Chinese perspective per se.

What makes things complicated is the over 2,500 years of urban evolution in the West has been compressed to the last 175 years (from 1840), especially the last three decades (from the 1998 housing reform), in the Chinese context (see Table 1.2). In this sense, it is not surprising at all that Michael Sorkin (2014) argues that contemporary Chinese cities are a stew, which has imperial legacies, Western colonial legacies, Mao’s Socialist forms modified from the Soviet Union paradigm, modern functional architectures (Le Corbusier’s Towers-in-the-park),
and “post-modern” or fancy (or high-end\(^3\) as middle-class Chinese call it) concrete and glass towers simultaneously. Except the Soviet form, contemporary Chinese developers and architects mix the other three styles \textit{at the same time and even in the same place/community}. Thus, even a well-trained urban and architecture historian or theorist is not able to read contemporary China’s cities and suburbs in a logical way chronologically (see Table 1.2).

\begin{table}
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Period} & \textbf{West} & \textbf{China} & \textbf{West} & \textbf{China} & \textbf{West} & \textbf{China} \\
\hline
\textbf{900BC to 6th Century} & The Greek and Roman style & Walled city in Qin and Han styles & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style \\
\hline
\textbf{6th to 16th Century} & The Medieval town & Walled city in Tang, Song and Ming styles & Streets in European colonial styles from various colonial powers from 1840s onwards & Streets in European colonial styles from various colonial powers from 1840s onwards & Streets in European colonial styles from various colonial powers from 1840s onwards & Streets in European colonial styles from various colonial powers from 1840s onwards \\
\hline
\textbf{13th to 19th Century} & The capitalist city and the baroque city & Walled city in Ming and Qing styles and the imported Greek style in monument design & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style \\
\hline
\textbf{18th Century to 20th Century} & The industrial city & Streets in European colonial styles from various colonial powers from 1840s onwards & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style \\
\hline
\textbf{1890s to 1970s} & The suburban expansion, modern city & Streets and buildings in colonial styles and the Soviet modernist mode from 1949 & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style \\
\hline
\textbf{1970s to now} & The post-modern green city & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style & Various Western styles, revised modernist style, post-modern style \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Historical evolution of cities, China and the West}
\end{table}

\textit{Note.} Summarized and reproduced from Mumford (1961), Zhu (2009), and Franklin (2010).

\(^3\)“High-end” is a frequently used phrase in the following chapters of this dissertation. That is one of the key “terms” how Beijing’s suburbanites categorized their built environment.
Hypermarketized state capitalism: China’s neo-liberal shift

Historical analysis is oftentimes theoretical reconstruction by itself. The seemingly clear evolution of cities in the West certainly deserves deeper socio-economic analysis that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nonetheless, the nature of contemporary Western cities, especially metropolises in North American, is rather clear. They are in the post-modern stage dominated by more entrepreneurial capitalistic production (Harvey, 1989) and fragmented political structure (Judd & Swanstrom, 2010), and they are striving to be greener and more sustainable (Franklin, 2010). The nature of China’s contemporary cities, as well as China’s ongoing suburbanization movement, in contrast, is harder to be categorized, so is the future direction of Chinese cities.

Figure 1.1. A sanguine picture of China’s urban evolution. Summarized and reproduced from Zhu (2009).
In Zhu’s (2009) analysis of China’s contemporary architecture practices and future direction, he provides an extremely sanguine picture (Figure 1.1). “Post-criticality criticality,” according to Zhu, refers to an approach that transcends both modernism and neo-liberalism. On the one hand, China no longer builds modernist architectures that over-emphasize function but under-evaluate form. On the other hand, China’s post-modern architectural practices emphasize creativity and negate the domination of capital at the same time. In this regard, post-criticality criticality, a term advocated by Zhu (2009), overcomes two evils—ignoring form/aesthetics and pursuing capital gain—at the same time, which is an extremely ambitious position. Although Zhu (2009) does not elaborate his approach explicitly at the end, it seems that he attempts to integrate China’s current architecture practices into the world history of urban development. To him, China’s architecture practices lead to an alternative route and/or a future orientation that goes beyond modernism, post-modernism, and neo-liberalism— all together—a sanguine seventh stage beyond Table 1.2, as Figure 1.2 portrays.

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4 In my following discussion, I will elaborate these loaded terms about socio-economic explanations of urban development.
However, Zhu’s position is based on his selective analysis of several architecture projects in China, such as the “Bird Nest” for the 2008 Olympic Games, the avant-garde CCTV building, various giant airports, top developers’ signature housing projects, etc. These buildings only constitute a tiny part in China’s massive urbanization and suburbanization movement. China’s urbanization movement, as a whole, can be anything but a “post-criticality criticality.” In reality, it is closer to the neo-liberal approach that lacks criticality and is heavily criticized by critical geography and critical social sciences in general.

The neo-liberal approach or neo-liberalism is an extremely loaded term. More and more scholars (Jessop, 2013) have started to challenge the concept of neoliberalism after the 2010s, largely because the popularity of this term in social sciences gradually makes it an “uncritical myth.” Instead of arguing for a universal shift to the neoliberal regime in the late 1970s, Jessop (2013) puts forward that there were four different types of neo-liberal shifts. China’s neoliberal shift in the late 1970s, as Jessop (2013) argues, was a transformation from state socialism that should be located in its own time and place. In what way was the Chinese shift neo-liberal? Is there a better term to categorize the transformation?

Since 1988, China has initiated a series of housing reforms. Old housing stocks have been privatized while new housing has been built mainly for commodity consumption and speculation. After somewhat painful experiences of housing privatization (painful to the socialist minds who lamented the collapse of welfare housing and the victimized and marginalized who got unfair redistribution during the privatization process), China’s urban housing as a form of public welfare for local residents was gone. Since the mid-1990s, especially the housing reform of 1998,
housing prices have skyrocketed and a pro-commerce discourse\(^5\) has further fostered commodity housing production, consumption and speculation. Individual households, more accurately, individual household heads who are normally working males, are now competing with each other to get a private housing unit or more units. The pro-commodity housing practice, by obeying market mechanisms, results in severe housing stratification and marginalizes the groups who cannot afford commodity housing. Not surprisingly, the increasing housing disparities let Chinese policy makers rethink the housing policy in the late 2000s.\(^6\) However, the old socialist urban housing structure in which welfare housing was the mainstream has already been substituted by the commoditized urban housing structure in which social housing becomes a residual sector accommodating the marginalized groups who are by no means admired by the general public and even experience the pain of self-stigma.

As the real estate industry becomes one of the pillar industries in China, a large proportion of investment keeps going into the housing sector, with a ratio that is unprecedented in human history and world history of urban development—20% to 25% of all industrial investment and over 14% of national GDP in 2013.\(^7\) Moreover, China still does not impose a property tax on individual households. As the rich do not yet have a better way to store and increase their wealth inside China, building up the housing stock becomes their primary investment strategy. Overconsumption and over-speculation, in turn, further stimulate housing production and exaggerate the repressed housing demands of the poor and even the middle-class. These economic practices at various levels—the state, different market subjects, individual

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\(^5\) The pro-commerce discourse is part the more pervasive discourse of modernization, which stresses that a modernized China needs modern science, modern industry, modern culture, modern built environment, etc. More generally speaking, modernization discourse turns into a very important way in which Chinese Communist Party legitimizes its regime (Guo, 2006).

\(^6\) Several municipalities have started to construct subsidized affordable housing since the late 2000s, but these practices remain local and marginalized.

\(^7\) Every Chinese can feel the importance of real estate industry on a daily basis. Many scholars believe that China’s economy has been kidnapped by the real estate industry. Retrieved from [http://gz.house.163.com/special/gz_bangjia/](http://gz.house.163.com/special/gz_bangjia/)
consumers—explicitly indicate that China’s housing development and urbanization movement at large are market-oriented. And they are neo-liberal as well—market plays the game and the state regulates and works for market.  

Firstly, the preparation of spaces for urban and suburban development has been neo-liberal. Take Beijing as an example, urban/suburban districts or the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that are entitled to rent out land have to lease developers their land in the first place. They are willing to rent out land to developers who want to pay the highest rent. Seeking the highest rent is the first step for a former socialist city to neo-liberalize its land. This activity of earning biggest profit is an essential characteristic of the neo-liberal economy or liberal economies in general. Here, the Chinese neo-liberal regime has its special feature that the state is taking the commanding height as the only legal landowner, while developers in the market, either private or SOE developers, can only lease land from the state ranging from 20 to 70 years (Table 1.1).

Secondly, the actual development of the rented land is neo-liberal. Developers in a neo-liberalized Beijing are no longer socialist engineers who are committed to building a modern Beijing for all working people. On the contrary, they aim to build commodities for those who can afford to consume and make money by selling the use values of these commodities. Besides, the labor regiment is no longer a great proletariat team. Instead, they are de-unionized laborers—normally migrant workers who hold agricultural household registration (hukou) coming from rural places all over China—who can be easily hired and thereafter fired. By openly exploiting the construction workers, developers can make biggest money out of smallest investment. This

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8 The existing literature on China’s state-market relationship offers other perspectives, for instance, Chinese style federalism (Montinola et al, 1995), local state corporatism (Oi, 1995), predatory and corrupted state (Ngo, 2008). Nevertheless, a neo-liberalism perspective has the strong explanatory power regarding China’s urban and suburban development.
process of de-unionization and de-regulation makes China’s urban and suburban development more neo-liberal rather than simply being economically liberal, because the Chinese State has the commanding height and even the moral legitimacy to de-unionize and de-regulate, via a mighty rhetoric that de-unionization and de-regulation work the best for the nation as well as for the de-unionized, disadvantaged workers themselves at the current stage of China’s development. No one—economists, activists, scholars, and even the de-unionized, disadvantaged workers—can substantially challenge this state rhetoric and its corresponding socio-economic practices in the Authoritarian China.

Thirdly, the final exchange process is also neo-liberal. Inner city residents are encouraged and subsidized to buy the redeveloped housing units in the urban center. In Beijing, urban districts mostly use the one-time rent and taxes paid by developers to subsidize local home buyers. If local residents cannot afford an apartment in the urban center, they will be forced to move to suburbs where they can buy a housing unit with less money. Since China’s authoritarian state forcibly promotes urban redevelopment and suburban expansion via home ownership, residents are forced to become consumers (or “happy homeowners,” as the state narrative phrases it) rather than any kind of protesters or civil dissidents. Thus, cultural and historical relationship between urban poor and their century old neighborhoods and between farmers and their century old villages are completely ignored by neo-liberal market mechanisms. Plainly stated, in this final stage, consumption is highly appreciated, whether it is about inner city housing units or about suburban housing properties. Although forced displacement and relocation may cause serious social problems, market and exchange values triumph over culture and history to the neo-liberal Chinese State. More intriguingly, urban Chinese are avidly and even insanely participating in home-buying. It seems that the privatized and owner-occupied
apartment unit—not families, not communities, not neighborhoods, not work-units, let alone the nation as an imagined community—is the most secure institution in the increasingly modernized, neo-liberal, and Authoritarian China.

The three points discussed above clearly indicate a Chinese neo-liberal shift. Instead of using the loaded term of neo-liberalism, I prefer to term the Chinese model in the last three decades as “hypermarketized state capitalism.” The Chinese state not only deregulates the market and de-unionizes the workforce but also actively engages in market activities such as setting land price, subsidizing home buyers, and managing its state-owned enterprises (SOEs)—the cornerstone of China’s economy. Although the Chinese State fits the criteria of being a neo-liberal state categorized by Harvey (2005), China’s political economists, such as Justin Yifu Lin (2008), are more willingly to consider China as a developmental state that uses its heavy hand to intervene in economic activities and tries to modernize, catch up, and even transcend developed economies as a latecomer in modernity. Lin’s perspective stresses the Chinese state’s powerful role in China’s economic practices, echoing my terminology of the Chinese model as hypermarketized state capitalism, which I will discuss in great detail in the following chapters.

China is promoting the urbanization and suburbanization process in its own historical context and with its own characteristics. It is not practicing a smooth continuation of the Western urban development track, as Figure 1.2 attempts to portray; it is not purely worshipping the market and letting the market be the decisive force in urban development; it is not giving up the authoritarian state and letting civil society and ordinary citizens play a larger role in choosing what kind of living environment they intend to design and live in. It is a “rich stew,” it is chaotic, and it is heavily marketized and highly state-controlled at the same time. It may sound like a contradiction. Nonetheless, it is the paradoxical reality in contemporary China.
Modern or pre-modern

The political economy analysis in the last section explains why China has been implementing its urbanization and suburbanization so frenetically since the 1990s. However, it cannot explain why China chose the revised Le Corbusier’s “Towers-in-the-park” as its urban and suburban model. If constructing “towers-in-the-park” in urban centers is due to the economic consideration of land limitation, why are “towers-in-the-park” also erected in suburbs and even in small towns all over China? Why not follow a variety of community models that can meet different housing needs and inspirations? Narrowing down the questions to my research, why do nearly all suburban projects in Beijing follow the “towers-in-the-park” model?

The “towers-in-the-park,” invented and advocated by Le Corbusier, is a modernist urban model that has been implemented more in third-world countries rather in the West where it was originated. It is ironic. And the reason behind is even more ironic. Before we discuss this specific modernist urban format, we need to analyze modernism from a more theoretical perspective in the first place.

Modernism, or modernity at large, evolved in the West with its own historical struggling. It took place in every aspect of economic and social life, and it was reflected in art and philosophy as well. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to define the exact beginning of the modern world or modernity. Nonetheless, numerous theorists have put their own efforts on distinguishing the modern world from the pre-modern world. In the 1840s, Marx (1844/1959) gives a political understanding of modernity. The bourgeois society separates the private life from the public life through the abstraction of the individual and the state. The real process of the abstraction of the individual is the capitalist mode of production—the working people become
the individuals who produce for the bourgeoisie without possessing the means of production and their existence as species beings has been objectified to what they produce. In this sense, the great number of people in modern society have been alienated. The state, on the other hand, has been organized by the bourgeoisie to maintain this mode of production.

Lefebvre (1962/1995), in his classic book on modernity, identifies Marx’s understanding of the modern society as a political position, which Lefebvre himself also emphasizes. Apart from that, Lefebvre (1962/1995) discusses Baudelaire’s account of modernity. Baudelaire focuses on the living experience of the modern society. To be modern is to live in a constantly changing situation. The ephemeral is the real, eternal feature of the modern society. To be modern, an individual should follow the fleeting movements of the society—fashion, trend, taste, urban streets, etc. According to Lefebvre (1962/1995), Baudelaire perfectly captures the aesthetic part of modernity. Apart from this point, Lefebvre (1962/1995) digs another important position out of Baudelaire’s writings—the fetishism of language. To be modern, in the aesthetic position, is to create something from language, in the form of poetry or art by disregarding the dirt and constraint of nature. In this new “world,” poets can enjoy themselves by dwelling in language per se and totally disregarding the real world and the social praxis. Lefebvre (1962/1995) identifies this fetishism of language as a triumphant modernity. It is triumphant and enthusiastic, being worked out through art, media, state propaganda and so on without paying attention on actual daily life or real social praxis.

Although these two positions are not the only accounts on modernity, they mainly define later theorists’ discussions—either in a more structural way or in a more phenomenal way. In Franklin’s (2010) historical analysis of urban development in the West that I have discussed in one previous section, he also distinguishes the modern cities and towns in Britain from their
medieval predecessors. To him, modernity is a process that “all manifestations of the traditional order could then be eliminated, fragmented, dispersed, or in its own terms, freed from older responsibilities, rules and obligations, indeed social bonds, in whatever form they might have taken” (Franklin, 2010, p.43).

If modernity attempts to define what the modern society is, then modernism tries to lay out the principles followed in a modern society. However, a society consists of many different aspects, and thus different sectors in a modern society may interpret modernism in distinctive ways. In philosophy, modernism emphasizes reason, rationality, and societal progress; in art and literature, however, modernism focuses more on throwing aside traditions and engaging in experimentation of the new times. In architecture and urban planning, modernism is about abandoning the old, over-crowded, and oftentimes chaotic urban format and establishing a new, scientifically planned, and orderly urban format at the same time. Since modernist architecture emphasizes function and functionality more than form and aesthetic decoration, traditions and status showing are no longer the major concerns in architectural practices.

In the Western context, because modernist architecture was originated from the industrialization and modernization process indigenously, it revolutionized previous urban formats and also worked with them. Although Le Corbusier’s writings and drafts are revolutionary, the urban format of most European cities did not undertake a sea change because of Le Corbusier and his students’ enthusiastic advocacy of modernism. Instead, various “pre-modern” and classic buildings and communities tried to modernize themselves by adopting modern technologies and retrofitting their interior spaces. The resilience of traditional formats (the Greek style, the Roman style, the gothic style, the Renaissance style, the Tudor style, etc.) and their active adoption of modern technologies reduced the power and influence of modernist
architecture in the West, although modernism dominated the field conceptually and intellectually. In this regard, the sequence of evolution of cities in the West listed in Table 1.2 should not be considered as the new model erases the old model but as the new model defeats the old model as the newest mainstream and trend.

The indigenousness of modernist architecture in the West explain its “discounted” victory on the Western soil. It also explains why Le Corbusier’s “towers-in-the-park” model and even the later revised post-war internationalist architecture have never been massively erected in the West. Moreover, in the few places where Le Corbusier’s “towers-in-the-park” did get constructed, such as numerous public housing projects in the post-war United States, more criticisms rather than praises followed. It can be said that the more revolutionary version of modernist architecture, especially Le Corbusier’s “towers-in-the-park,” did not work out in the West, although architecture modernism as a school has significantly transformed previous architecture doctrines and architectural practices in the West in general. In other words, architectural practices in the West have generally accepted modernism as their dominant principle and guidance, despite their rejection of implementing certain specific modernist forms.

In many third world countries, ironically, architectural practices accept a certain specific modernist form, while they may completely ignore or misunderstand modernism intellectually and its rich co-existence with traditional urban and architectural forms. This irony, to me, is largely due to the single fact that third world countries were forced to enter into the modern world led and defined by the West, and they are more likely to endorse a latecomer’s revenge mentality because they were humiliated by the West through its modern technologies. Modernity and modernism was exogenous to third world countries’ chronological and incremental development, and they were not originated from those countries’ self-criticism of their own
traditions. As an exogenous form, modernity was even more powerful as a destructive force in third world countries as in the developed West. In this regard, the sequence of evolution of cities in China listed in Table 1.2 should be considered as the new model attempts to erase the old model rather than the new model transforms the old model.

What is more, the various tangible forms of modernity, such as “towers-in-the-park” in architecture, science and technology in economy, advanced weapons in military, etc, have been more avidly learned by third world countries, rather than the intangible philosophy and thoughts behind these modern forms. Third world countries, especially China, are eager to embrace and install modern technologies wholeheartedly, as the way to catch up and even transcend the West, although they may still endorse a pre-modern mind-set that I will discuss in detail in the following chapters.
Figure 1.3. Two gated communities in suburban Beijing. The left community was built in the late 1990s for employees of a powerful SOE, while the right community was built in the early 2000s for commodity home-buyers. Both of these two “towers-in-the-park” communities have clear socialist residential compound legacy, and they were considered “old” by local residents. (Photo Pengfei Li)

As a result, many cities in third world countries tend to look more modern than their Western counterparts, especially in countries that conscientiously attempt to catch up and even transcend the West. Le Corbusier’s “towers-in-the-park” model turns out to be the perfect candidate to suit China’s ambition—it is upward-looking and forward-looking, it is scientifically planned, it looks fancy and futuristic, and more importantly, it is easy to duplicate. In reality, China’s “towers-in-the-park” is not the exact modernist model advocated by Le Corbusier. Accurately speaking, it is inclined more to the modernist planning ideas behind the “towers-in-the-park” model—rational and scientific planning, single-function land use, automobile and modern transportation oriented rather than pedestrian friendly, ample green space between buildings for abstract technical considerations instead of social interaction concerns—instead of the modernist architectural style. The towers in the Chinese model can be combined with any decoration styles—the Greek revival, the Roman revival, the Renaissance, the Gothic revival, the Tutor style, the internationalist style, the avant-garde post-modern glass style, and even the traditional Chinese style with roof curved upward (Figure 1.4 shows a towers-in-the-park community who has a post-modern glass-town style). After all, the exact decoration style does not matter. What matters is to be tall, to look modern, and to sell well.

As Bosker (2013) argues in her analysis of China’s contemporary architectural practices, China’s copies of Western styles are “original” and meant to serve China’s own ambition that
China can compete and even transcend Western advanced countries. Is this a superficial and distorted mentality as a latecomer in modernity? The answer cannot be a simple yes or no. Nonetheless, modernity, specifically China’s somewhat distorted view of modernity, does play an important role in China’s ongoing suburbanization and/or urban expansion movement.

Figure 1.4. A gated community that was built in the 2010s in a north Beijing suburb. The 2010s “towers-in-the-park” are taller and fancier than the 1990s and 2000s counterparts (Figure 1.3). And they are emptier as well. Contemporary China is duplicating this kind of “towers-in-the-park” everywhere, even in small counties and towns, in order to look modern and sell well. (Photo Pengfei Li)
Back to my original question, how should China’s suburbanization be theorized? It seems that we cannot use a single theoretical framework to answer this complex social issue. Problems and issues in urban studies are generally interdisciplinary, and they deserve an interdisciplinary approach for comprehensive understanding. We cannot fit China’s ongoing suburbanization process in clear-cutting historical stages, we are not able to purely use political economy, or neo-liberalism particularly, to explain China’s suburban expansion and the specific format it chooses, and we should not merely use the grand-theory or grand-narrative of modernity to theorize China’s suburbanization. These perspectives and theoretical positions all contribute to our understanding of China’s ongoing suburbanization, from their distinctive viewpoint.

Sorkin (2014) in his concise article about China’s urbanization, describes the frenetic urbanization process as “a rich stew” that is made of five elements—the authoritarian state, architecture/aesthetic cultures, cheap rural labor, surplus cash, and a problematic civil society. Each of these five elements has its own cultural and socio-economic context, being subtly shaped by local and global factors. The Chinese State—both the central government and local governments—is definitely the most important player in China’s urbanization process from the late 1990s. Thus, an in-depth analysis of the state from the perspective of political economy is unavoidable and should also be the starting point. However, other aspects such as aesthetic cultures and a problematic civil society need more careful analysis from other social science disciplines. In sum, the five elements summarized by Sorkin (2014) can and should be viewed and studied from different theoretical lens—anthropology, geography, political economy, psychology, and urban planning.
To me, it is theoretically insightful to categorize China’s ongoing suburbanization process as a rich hodgepodge, similar to “a rich stew” categorized by Sorkin (2014). It is a hodgepodge that has a variety of pressing problems—the authoritarian and sometimes destructive state, the over-emphasis on economic growth from the supply side and the investment side rather than from the demand side or the consumer side, the lack of cultural and historical sensitivity, the neglect of basic rights of ordinary citizens especially the rural migrant workers, the lack of long-term considerations, the neglect of sustainable development, and the neglect of growing economic and social stratification. And this list can go longer and become more pessimistic. Nonetheless, this hodgepodge is also open for alternatives. Although the Chinese state seems to be certain about “China’s bright future,” it is vague on what kind of living environment that the Chinese people prefer and what kind of community the country should keep constructing. After all, the post-modern condition—our way of life and even our future become more ephemeral and uncertain (Harvey, 1989)—is faced by all nations and people in the 21st century. People who live in China’s suburban “towers-in-the-park” face the similar post-modern condition as their Western counterparts who live their suburban single-family houses feel, although the Chinese state is still promoting a modernist agenda advocating an ever prosperous and ever progressive future and the Chinese urbanites are avidly participating in the home-buying process in an utterly acultural and apolitical way.

With all the flaws and problems of the current suburban living environment resulting from rampant housing development and irrational speculation, a radical breakdown of the current “towers-in-the-park” model is not impossible. The Chinese suburbanites may get tired of their current suburban “towers-in-the-park” sooner or later. They may tear down the walls and gates that enclose their communities from the larger city environment and city life, they may retrofit
their purely residential communities and make them multi-functional and supportive of different activities and events, or more radically, they may endorse a more diverse living environment—low-rise townhouse communities or middle-rise apartment communities or mix-used communities that combine multiple building types and urban functions at the same time.

Ethnography and being a foreign-trained Chinese

This dissertation study resulted from my research interest in the relationship between the built environment and human behavior since 2009. Ever since I entered the Environmental Psychology Ph.D. program in the CUNY Graduate Center from the Fall of 2009, I have been always asking a series of related questions—“Why does China keep constructing high-rise gated communities?” “Why does China promote suburban expansion in its various mega-cities?” “Why do even small counties and towns in China construct high-rise gated ‘towers’?” “What do people who actually live in these new high-rise towers think of their own living environment?” “How does the new living environment change and define people’s way of life?” As a Chinese millennial who grew up in the era when China opened itself to the global economy, I had witnessed and am still observing and thinking about the rapid change of China’s built environment.

The generational distinction or gap is highly pertinent in the Chinese context. People who grew up in China in the 1960s and the 1970s, the generation of the Cultural Revolution, tended to appreciate and even openly praise the sea change of China’s living environment. Their shanty

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9 My interests in the relationship between the built environment and human behavior can be traced back even into my adolescent reflection about my rapidly changing hometown in the late 1990s and early 2000s and my philosophical training in Wuhan University’s Philosophy Department, one of the top five philosophy schools in China.

10 The concept of the generation of the Cultural Revolution will be defined and articulated shortly in this section.
work-unit dorms or self-built townhouses in the 1960s and 70s were badly constructed and overly packed, when the socialist state was focusing on mega-projects that were important for the nation’s growth rather than individual living environment for personal well-being. When the generation of the Cultural Revolution got their new work-unit assigned apartments in the 1980s and bought their own commodity housing from the market in the 1990s and 2000s, they could feel the radical change and most of them appreciated the improvement of the living environment. However, to the Chinese millennials who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, they have lived in an already improved living environment. Consequentially, they lack the sense of appreciation that the generation of the Cultural Revolution had. In this regard, the Chinese millennials are more eager to figure out what the previous living environment looked like, why the housing in the 1980s (and the 1990s) all looked like the same—the five to six stories, modified soviet-style walk-up apartments in gated work-unit compounds (Figure 1.3), and why the housing from the late 1990s and 2000s onwards all looks like the same—high-rise towers in private gated communities with interior garden design (Figure 1.4). The Cultural Revolution almost completely eradicated the urban markers and urban networks of pre-socialist China, while the rampant urban and suburban development in the last two decades are erasing away urban markers of the socialist China.\footnote{To the new generation born after the 2000s, they already live in a “towers-in-the-park” China. Their questionings could be trickier. “What kind of housing inspiration do they have?” is a research question that needs to be studied.}

So, why does China keep replicating the “towers-in-the-park” model in its various mega-cities? Why not an alternative format? What is the daily life of people like in the high-rise suburban gated community? In order to answer these broad questions that cater to my questionings about the environment-behavior relationships I chose to conduct an in-depth ethnographic study about a single suburban gated community in Beijing. The study evolved from
my two related studies about Beijing’s suburban living environment in 2010 and in 2013. The former was a study of two suburban communities in Beijing, that compared how people who were forced to move to the suburb and people who voluntarily bought housing units in the suburb think of their suburban living environment. The latter was an in-depth ethnographic study about a relocation suburban community that hosted former farmers whose village and land were sold and transformed for suburban housing projects. The two studies predate this dissertation project, which studied a suburban middle-class gated community that is more representative of China’s ongoing suburban expansion—its political economy processes and its everyday life.

From May 2014 to August 2015, I stayed in a newly constructed and occupied suburban community. It can be said that I witnessed the formation and growth of that middle-class community since the beginning. The prolonged stay in the community offered me multiple angles to experience and study the community and its residents. However, it was not easy to be a resident and an investigator at the same time, especially as a foreign-trained researcher conducting a sensitive, if not censored, study of his native land.

The identity of a researcher can influence how she/he gains access into the site and achieves rapport with the informants. Here again, the generational distinction or gap is significant and plays a crucial role, which can be easily felt by everybody in China on a daily basis. Scholars (Farquhar, 2010; Genovese & Li, 2015) who study China’s public space have

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12 Scholars (Tomba, 2004; Zhang, 2010) are still debating how to define middle-class in the Chinese context. Tomba (2004) argues that the Chinese middle-class is a result of intentional social engineering initiated by the Chinese State. Zhang (2010), in contrast, emphasizes Chinese middle-class are more self-made and admire more privacy. In this dissertation, I simply define Chinese middle-class as people who have stable jobs and own at least one urban housing unit. I will discuss middle-class mentality and way of life in greater detail in Chapter Five and Chapter Six.

13 Although the 1982 Chinese Constitution grants citizens’ freedom of speech in China, speech has always been censored in China. In President Xi’s term, China’s intellectual freedom has been further tightened. Not only is foreign media strictly censored in China, but also are scholarly websites. 21ccom.net (The Consensus), a top Chinese intellectual website that published four of my articles, was forced to close in late 2016. The New York Times was closed in 2012. My article (Li, 2016) published in Sino-Foreign Management discusses covertly why China fences off the World Wide Web. Also see notes 29 and 51.
identified people over 50 as the dominant users of China’s urban public space. Yang, in his 2016 book *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China*, categorizes Chinese who were born in the 50s and early 60s as the Red Guard generation who activated participated in the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976) during their youth, echoing my term “the generation of the Cultural Revolution.” Throughout my field work in Beijing, the generation of the Cultural Revolution, perhaps due to their prolonged experience in collective movements, was more likely to be approached and even closely or intimately connected. They were more open to discuss politics and political issues with strangers, and they might engage in intensive debates with each other. As to my field work in my site, I had more casual conversations (over one hundred) and formal interviews with residents who were born in the 1950s and 60s than with the actual homeowners in the community who were born in the late 1970s and early 80s. Older residents were more likely to invite me to visit their apartment and even dine together than young homeowners. To the middle-class homeowners, ironically, once I told them I studied and taught in a university in New York, they became more interested in my study and me as a decent human being. Otherwise, they would just treat my approach to them as an unpleasant waste of time. Sometimes, I was extremely frustrated and even irritated by the Chinese millennials’ indifference to public affairs and strangers in general.

In addition to a person’s generation, the socio-economic status (SES) is another important factor that determines whether a meaningful conversation can take place. In general, people in lower socio-economic strata are more willingly to be approached by strangers and more friendly to offer help, while middle-class Chinese and people in the higher socio-economic strata tend to avoid unplanned social interactions with strangers all together. In the case of my

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14 Place of birth, hukou, occupation, and housing ownership status are the most crucial indicators of a person’s SES in contemporary China.
field site, it was easy for me to start a casual conversation with cleansers, doormen, gardeners, delivery men, and occasionally visiting real estate brokers. I never failed to start a conversation with these people, and I felt more comfortable chatting with these people about the community and even their personal stories in Beijing. However, I had to be well-prepared and extremely conscious about my tone and gesture in order to successfully start a conversation with the homeowners, and failures still occurred more than occasionally.

Having said this, one can rank the friendliness or approachableness of Chinese from people in lower social strata regardless of their age to the generation of the Cultural Revolution regardless of their socio-economic strata to the millennials in middle and higher socio-economic strata. This rank, although it seems to be a sweeping statement, is not contradictory with another general statement that Chinese become increasingly unfriendly and unapproachable by strangers. People in general become more cautious when they are approached by strangers, as the Chinese society becomes wealthier but also more unequal and morally deteriorating.15 So, in order to make any meaningful conversation take place, a rapport or a shared identity has to be established. I would never be able to get any casual conversations or formal interviews done if I just spoke and behaved like a typical millennial, because a typical millennial enjoys being himself or herself and does not care for others. Thus, I had to convince my informants that “we are the same, and I am part of you group, at least, I am not so different from you.” This is a subtle cultural skill which was not learned through my academic studies in the West but via my personal experience of growing up in a family that was in a lower social stratum in contemporary China.

15 Sun Liping, one of the leading sociologists in contemporary China who was also the PHD adviser of the Chinese President Xi Jinping, is famous for his Segmentation Trilogy—*Cleavage, Imbalance*, and *Negotiation*. These three books analyze the transformation of Chinese social structure after the 1990s and different strata in contemporary China in great detail. Retrieved from http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/Socen/2759/2010/20101224015358415255634/20101224015358415255634_.html
To people in lower social strata regardless of their age, I had to convince them that “I am a person who comes from poor family as well;” to the generation of the Cultural Revolution regardless of their socio-economic strata, I used my tone and gestures to show them that “I am a hard-working son who works as hard as and even harder than their children, and I am obedient;” to the millennials in middle and higher socio-economic strata, I had to try my best to non-obtrusively point out that “I am a young man who keeps fighting and already lives in a better country where people do not need to worry about hukou, poisoned baby formula, air pollution, bad-housing quality, and so on.” In all these situations, I had to balance being too polite/submissive and too obtrusive/pridefulness. But once a rapport was established, it was not difficult to develop a closer friendship. However, I purposefully chose to be not too close with my casual informants, because that would harm my intensive participant observations in the community.

Although this cultural embeddedness was crucial for me to start my fieldwork in China, my study could not be properly and rigorously conducted without my social science training in the United States. Among various methodological skills, being critical and meticulous to the research is the primary one that I have to give credit to. Social science studies in China are subject to the dual pressure from the state and researchers themselves. On the one hand, the state discourages and even forbids studies that are at odds with state ideology and state-endorsed practices. On the other hand, researchers are too eager to pursue practical and even technical applications of their studies and provide policy suggestions, even before conducting a thorough and reliable study in the first place. Being critical and meticulous helped me proceed in my

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16 For researchers who read Chinese social science literature, they cannot neglect the fact that most social science articles’ last section is about “applications and policy suggestions” rather than “discussions and suggestions for future research.” Culturally speaking, Chinese social scientists are too eager to apply their studies to practices.
field work thoroughly step by step, without jeopardizing my data collection and jumping too quickly to applications and policy suggestions.

Besides this ethical skill, specific social science and environmental psychology methods such as participant observation, semi-structural and open-ended interviewing, transect walks, behavior mapping (Bakos, 1980), and observing physical traces (Ziesel, 1981) were also used in my study. Having conducted over two hundred days of participant observations, behavioral mapping, and observation of physical traces in the gated community, two weeks of staying, living with, chatting with and interviewing rural migrant workers on a construction site, hundreds of casual and informal conversations with homeowners, maintenance staff, and temporary visitors of the community, over thirty formal interviews with middle-class homeowners and property management company staff in the community, dozens of casual conversations and formal meetings and interviews with architects, planners, and community leaders (the Residents’ Committee director and the Homeowners’ Committee director) in Beijing, I am able to provide an in-depth ethnographic study of a single suburban community. It is qualitative and does not pretend to be representative of a larger sample. Nonetheless, it is an integrated and rigorous study pursued with determination and enthusiasm. Hopefully, it can draw principles and enrich researchers and concerned citizens’ understanding of China’s ongoing suburbanization process.

Since some of my formal interviewees requested that I not reveal the identity of their community, I nicknamed the middle-class gated community “the Beverly Hills Towers.”17 This name itself is an oxymoron, which conjures a low-rise low-density California community

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17 Politically speaking, Chinese social scientists are, perhaps unconsciously, keen to offer policy suggestions, which is crucial to get funding in China, as all good universities are state-owned (the central government owned) institutions. The name was actually coined by my advisor and mentor, Prof. Setha Low at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, when we discussed how to identify my site without revealing its identity and location and also presenting its key character.
combined with a high-rise high-density Beijing suburban compound. Although I did not think revealing the name and location of the “Beverly Hills Towers” would harm the community or residents in any sense, some millennial homeowners worried that the future publication of my work might increase media coverage of their community and perhaps rough, critical academic comments thereafter. What is more, some architects who worked for the SEOs and all Residents’ Committee directors that participated in my interviews requested that I not reveal the identity and location of my site, in addition to covering their real name and title. They worried that if my work were translated into Chinese later, media coverage might lead to state censorship, thereby harming their careers and my standing in China as well. Thus, I nicknamed most of my informants in this study, except in a few cases when the informants insisted on using their real name because they would like to know and see that their name appeared in published academic works. All data about human subjects have been collected and protected properly, with the IRB approval from the Graduate Center, City University of New York and agreement from my interviewees. Because this research has to deal with transcribing and translating Chinese into English, I use pinyin to translate terms that do not have accurate and direct English correspondents.

As to the structure of my work, the following dissertation consists of five distinctive and yet connected chapters and a concluding section. In Chapter Two, I discuss the planning and design process of my field site, analyzing how the middle-class gated community could be constructed from a former rural village. In Chapter Three, I discuss the construction process of another suburban housing project to better understand how a suburban gated community can be built step by step. Chapter Two and Chapter Three are about the political economy of the place-making process of a single suburban community, and they stress the supply side and the labor
side, respectively. These two sides provide radically different views on the place-making process of a Beijing suburb. In Chapter Four, Fix and Six, I emphasize the demand side, which is beyond the framework of political economy. Chapter Four portrays what made the homeowners move to their suburban home and their home-buying experience. Chapter Five depicts how the residents (homeowners) perceive and think of their suburban community and their suburban home in particular, while Chapter Six presents the daily life and conflicts in the community. Chapter Five and Chapter Six are anthropological and environmental psychological by nature, which expose the environment-behavior relationships in great detail. Not only did the various environmental features in the community shape the suburban homeowners’ perceptions and daily behaviors, but the suburban homeowners’ mind-set and behaviors also modified and re-shaped the community.

In the end, I am able to offer a comprehensive picture of the place-making process of a suburban community in Beijing—from the supply side (the state and the market), the labor side, and the demand or residents’ side all together. It provides an understanding of why China or Beijing keeps constructing “towers-in-the-park” communities and how residents perceive, “speak about,” and actually live in one of those giant “towers-in-the-park” communities.
Chapter 2

The design and development of a Chinese suburban community—“Beverly Hills Towers”
All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his, real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848)

The erection of a residential community in China proceeds in three stages (Figure 2.1). In stage one, under the guidance of an established master plan of a county-level city or a city district, a developer obtains a lot from the county/district-level government via an auction. The character or land use of a lot—being commercial or residential—has already been designated in the master plan, and a developer cannot “openly” change the designated character of the obtained lot. In stage two, a developer hires an urban planning and design firm to provide a conceptual design of the lot and sometimes an engineering/construction design of the lot as well. Then, a developer has to submit the conceptual design and engineering design to the district/county-level Urban Planning Department and Housing and Construction Department respectively, in order to obtain a construction permit. In the third stage, a developer finds a construction company to complete the construction work. A construction company in contemporary China oftentimes sub-contracts projects to different sub-contractors who hire migrant workers informally.
Figure 2.1. The three stages of erecting a residential community in contemporary China.
Adapted from The Urban Real Estate Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China.
The law was first stipulated in 1994, and it was revised in 2007.
http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=6353&CGid=#menu1

In each of these three stages, there are covert rules. In stage one, the State is not only a regulator or a mediator, it is also a player in the land and real estate market. The State leases land and selects favored buyers via various means, such as it disqualifies certain developers to buy land at auction or it pre-designates a plot to a specific developer and holds an auction just for show or legal procedure. Moreover, many big developers are state-owned companies or conglomerates. For instance, China State Construction Engineering Company, is a giant conglomerate whose 2014 annual revenue was 800 billion yuan\textsuperscript{18} (around 126 billion USD), second only to Sinopec Group and China National Petroleum. It is a developer, a design and research institute, and a construction company at the same time. As a vibrant pro-market economy, China is certainly a capitalist society. Yet, as a MIT management scholar Yasheng Huang (2008) argues, the state and the private sector have a complicated subtle relationship which functions beyond a formal institutional framework, because there is no fine line between the state as the public regulator and the state as the landowner and market agents. In other words, the various agents mentioned in the three stages do not necessarily follow liquid market rules and there is not yet a consistent legal framework to ossify market rules. Furthermore, giant state companies, who belong to both the state and the market sector, are adept in creating and following covert rules. In Wank’s (1999) ethnographic work about China’s market transition, he

\textsuperscript{18} The company’s official website does not provide data about revenue, although it is a publicly traded company. Retrieved from http://www.fortunechina.com/fortune500/c/2015-07/08/content_242835.htm
even argues that the Chinese State’s deep involvement in the economic sector saves transaction costs and contributes to China’s unprecedented economic growth.

If stage one is more like a political game as sophisticated as the episodes shown in *The House of Cards*, stage two is more about technical applications. In stage two, developers have absolute power over architects in the design process. It is not only that big developers have their own subordinate architecture firms, but also that architects in China, as a professional group, do not command status and respect. In state-owned architecture and design firms, architects and designers are subordinate to their bosses at different levels, forming a semi-socialist, semi-Confucian hierarchy. The bosses, either as trained architects/engineers or as politicians, are mostly Communist Party of China (CPC) members. Once they become bosses or leaders, as generally referred by their subordinates, they mainly engage in administrative or political tasks. Some leaders still function like a Confucian king and try to behave as benevolently as possible—caring for their subordinates’ well-being and even persistently attempting to introduce a boyfriend or a girlfriend to their single subordinates. These “Communist Confucian” leaders, however, are not just benevolent and caring, but also authoritarian. Subordinate architects and designers have to obey the order of their leaders, and their creative designs and works can be encouraged only when their leaders accept and approve their work. Besides supervising their subordinate architects and designers, leaders in China’s state-owned architecture firms are also dealing with state-owned developers (their direct leaders) and officials in Urban Planning and Construction departments who have similar or higher ranks. In this regard, there are other hierarchical and semi-socialist relations that structure the situation.

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In private architecture and design firms, the semi-socialist and semi-Confucian structure is a rarity. Rarely do top architects or managers in private architecture firms engage in their subordinates’ personal lives. They are more interested in making their design team work efficiently and smoothly, so they can move on to other new projects. Subordinate architects and designers do not have much say in their companies, although they do most of the work.

The third stage is about the actual construction of a project. Once a design blueprint or an engineering blueprint is completed, the developer then moves on to select his/her construction company. The registered construction companies then further sublet the project to smaller construction teams, which mainly consist of private contract bosses and recruited migrant workers. In the end, people only see the omnipresent migrant construction workers come in and out of thousands of construction sites in contemporary Chinese cities and the posters of various developers that are used to wall and enclose their construction sites as well as to boost the sales of their projects. In other words, ordinary urban residents who do not work in the construction and real estate sector only see stage three in their daily life and do not understand how their urban high-rise communities were constructed, because the three stages are facilitated by different players who rarely overlap with each other.

All intermediate players in the three stages discussed above—architects, designers, engineers, actual construction companies, and private contract bosses—engage in the construction process in an opaque way and follow covert rules that lack a formal institutional framework. They do not connect the high-end (the state and the developer) with the low-end (migrant workers). That is not their job or responsibility. Instead, they just try their best to do their technical work.
In the following sections, I will discuss how a specific construction project—in a suburban district in Beijing—has come into being. It is indeed a radical transformation, from a rural village, to a hectic construction site, and finally to a so-called high-end community from late 2013. The transformation of this site is not unusual in contemporary China. As Hsing (2010) discusses in his book *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*, China’s urbanization since mid-2000s has entered into a new era, in which “urbanism largely took over industrialism as the basis for political legitimacy and policy discourse” (Hsing, 2010, p.18).

What Hsing (2010) stresses is the actual transformation of China’s macro economy *per se*. In other words, the transformation of China’s urban space from the mid-2000s is the transformation of China’s economy, and vice versa. If urbanization in the late 1990s and early 2000s was meant to serve the Chinese urbanites’ growing housing demands that had been suppressed for decades, urbanization and city-making movements from the mid-2000s have been more tightly controlled by the state to boost China’s economic growth and even to stabilize China’s authoritarian regime. This urbanization process is an “urbanization mania” for the sake of urbanization itself, as well as political considerations. I called it “jobless urbanization” or “urbanization without industrialization,” because this new wave of urbanization in China from the mid-2000s has negated China’s previous industrialization efforts and only provided temporary construction jobs that are disconnected with local economy and local residents’ daily life.
Modernity and the X Village

Nothing changes suddenly. The village that existed on the site of the now “Beverly Hills Towers” was not a close-knit, kinship pre-modern village and a total antithesis to the loosely-knit, modern urban community. The dichotomy of close-knit pre-modern communities versus loosely-knit modern communities may only exist in some anthropologists’ mind. In reality, China has never been modern. As I have discussed in introduction, China is eagerly embracing and installing modern technologies, but it still has a dominantly pre-modern mind-set. Even the most advanced modern cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are not modern (at least, they are not operating by modern principles), although they have a hyper modern appearance. The reason is totally different from Latour’s (1993) analysis of modernity. According to Latour (1993), the Enlightenment Movement’s claim that science, as the modern principle, can objectively understand all human and natural problems has ultimately failed, and therefore we have never been modern. In China, there has never been an Enlightenment Movement. The socio-economic rules underneath China’s economy booming are pre-modern, imperial China, or even Confucian doctrines mixed with pseudo communist lip service, as mentioned in the introduction part of this chapter. Contemporary China is more like a hodgepodge, with a keen nationalist attempt and a latecomer’s revenge mentality. Nonetheless, with pre-modern doctrines and principles, China, and my site particularly, is rapidly modernizing itself from the material viewpoint.

Since the summer of 2009, I have been visiting hundreds of villages inside Beijing’s constructed urban areas and in its peripheries. Although each village has its own history and characteristics, there are roughly two kinds of villages. Due to China’s rapid urbanization since the mid-2000s, some villages are completely surrounded by newer, denser urban buildings and
have become “urban villages.” These villages may be partially transformed, with new middle or high-rise commercial or residential buildings being constructed either by villagers themselves or by outside developers. Some remain in their original low-rise format, with new low-rise units being disproportionately added to accommodate more migrant workers. Scholars (Zhang, 2001) who study China’s floating population mostly focus on these settings. The villages located on city peripheries or even in rural areas are also influenced by China’s rapid urbanization and soaring housing price. Since these villages are in a more remote environment and less strictly controlled by the municipal government, they are relatively easier to be transformed/demolished. My site, was one of these villages outside of Beijing’s urban constructed areas (outside of the Fifth-Ring road in Figure 2.2).

Before discussing my site, a brief introduction of Beijing’s metropolitan or municipal structure is necessary. Beijing has two core districts, four inner suburban districts (they were not walled-cities historically and were mostly rural before 1949), and ten remote districts/counties in a territory with a total land area of 16,800 square kilometers (6,486.5 square miles), hosting 22.5 million people (Beijing Statistics Bureau, 2015). Traditionally, Beijing’s metropolitan pattern was not unlike other Chinese cities. The two core districts formed the old city, while the remote counties were far from the city and functioned as smaller walled cities. The incremental development after 1949, however, connected the core districts with their four nearby districts. The so-called market-led suburbanization (Feng et al., 2008) even bypasses the four adjacent districts and moves to the remote districts/counties.
Figure 2.2. The spatial layout of the Municipality of Beijing excluding its four northern suburban districts/counties. There are two inner city districts (1 and 2), four inner suburban districts, and six outer suburban districts surround the inner suburban districts. The two diamonds represent
two districts which were *zhou* (prefectural-level government in the contemporary situation) in the Ming Dynasty. The two circles refer to two counties (county-level government in the contemporary situation) that were also walled cities at least from the Ming Dynasty.

From the perspective of urban planning, Beijing is a giant urban hub. Built up areas within the 5th Ring Road (the dotted black line in Figure 2.2) have an area more than 900 square kilometers, bigger than the total land area of New York City including all of its five boroughs (304.6 sq mi/790 sq km) (Figure 2.3). Yet, Beijing’s built environment is still growing; most areas between the 5th Ring Road and the 6th Ring Road (Figure 2.2 between the pink line and the most outer line) are under construction currently, with an area over 1,800 square kilometers, almost 2.5 times the size of New York City but only one tenth of the area of the Core New York Metropolitan Area and one twentieth of the Combined Statistical Area.²⁰ My site is located in this vast and rapidly urbanizing belt between the 5th Ring Road and the 6th Ring Road of Beijing.²¹

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²⁰ Here, a brief comparison of Beijing Municipality and the New York Metropolitan Area can be extremely insightful. The Core New York Metropolitan Area, including 22 counties from three states, covers 6,720 sq mi (17,405 km²) and accommodates about 20.2 million people. Both the size and the population match the Municipality of Beijing (6,486.5 sq mi and 21.5 million people). However, except the urban hub of New York City (8.5 million people), residents are evenly distributed in the rest counties. In contrast, over 12 million residents live in the urban center within the 5th Ring-road of Beijing (about the same size of New York City) and over 17 million residents live within the 6th Ring-road). More importantly, Beijing Municipality is a fixed region with a unique government, while New York Metropolitan Area is still a debatable area with fragmented regional, state, and local governments.

²¹ I will define this belt as the Chinese suburb in the following sections and chapters.
Figure 2.3. The map of New York City, with a smaller picture of Combined Statistical Area highlighting New York City in the upper left corner. Adapted from New York City Department of Planning and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_metropolitan_area#Metropolitan_Statistical_Area

Three waves of urbanization of the X Village

Even though the village is already gone, bus and subway stations on the former X village territory are still called by the village name. However, it is quite confusing to newcomers to this
area and new generations who do not know the history of this area. As a fascinating modern or even post-modern neighborhood, why is it still called an X Village? Residents who own an apartment in the several gated residential communities in this neighborhood never use X Village to address their location. Instead, they name the place by referring to their own gated community. One day, I used a taxi-hailing software to request a ride to a gated community in the former X Village proper. As the car driver Mr. Xiao asked me where I am heading to, I told him the former name of X Village. Mr. Xiao, who is a self-employed “black” (i.e., unregistered) car driver, was surprised that I knew the former name of the Village. Certainly, he knew that my non-local-Beijing accent indicates that I am not a local. However, local or non-local, no longer makes much sense in this already transformed area, because local space, together with the previous rural way of life, has already been completely eradicated. As I quote in the beginning of this chapter, “All that is solid melts into air.” (Marx & Engels, 1848)

It made sense to be a local in the last few decades and even past centuries, if you lived in this ordinary Chinese village during the various former dynasties. The ancient history and memories of the X Village have been long forgotten due to generational and social-economic changes. The X Village was not a prestigious historic site, no emperors once lived or stayed there and no important figures or officials were born or lived there. Nonetheless, it was a traditional rural village that had close-knit kinship relationships and self-sustainable economy. As China’s urban environment undertook a sea change after China opened itself to the world, the X village’s transformations in the last 35 years echoed the general trends of Beijing’s development.
Table 2.1. Housing policies and laws in the past three decades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Housing policy or law</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>“Constitution” Article 10, urban land belongs to the State.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>“The No.1 Document” issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), rural land is owned by Villagers’ Committee collectively but managed by the individual household. This document established the household-responsibility system in rural China thereafter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>“Amendment of Constitution” Article 10 Section 4: The right to the use of land is transferrable according to provision of law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>State Council No. 11, “The proposal to enforce housing reform in cities and towns in the nation by stages and in groups.” Beginning of land using rights and commercial housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>State Council No. 43, “The plan to deepen the housing reform in cities and towns”. Sale of public housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>“Administrative Law of Real Estate.” The right to the use of land developed by real estate companies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>State Council No. 43, “The notice to further deepen housing reform in cities and towns and to quicken housing construction.” Stop distribution in kind in the second half of the year, and install distribution of cash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>State Council No. 379, “Property Management Policy.” Article 10: The homeowner association should be formed under the guide of the district or county government where the homeowners’ property belongs to. Article 12: The decision of changing the covenants and rules, of hiring or firing a management company should be passed by more than 2/3 votes of all the homeowners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development No. 258, “Economic and amenable housing management policy.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the 1980s, when China launched its reform policy (Table 2.1), the village was first transformed into a farming community that emphasized household labor rather than collective village labor, since the 1982 “No.1 Document” broke down the People’s communes in rural China and established the household responsibility system (Table 2.1). However, since the village was quite populous, one household (two adults and two children in general) had less than
1 acre (5 Chinese acres Mu) of farm land. With this small lot of farm land, a household could only maintain a basic living and lacked the means to become richer and prosperous. Due to the fact that the village was within Beijing’s municipal area and it was connected to the city center via local roads, some villagers started to do small business and commercial chicken and/or duck farming since the late 1980s.

Since the 1990s, more commercial duck farms/factories were erected in the village proper. Mr. Cui, one of my key informants on the site, told me that he was the manager of a duck farm/factory in the village, which was owned by the town government. This was the first sign of urban transformation, because farming was no longer the leading economic activity in the X village. According to China’s Constitution, a township does not own the rural and farm land within its territory. Instead, villagers collectively own the land—the so-called village collective. However, since villages are subordinate to their township government, the township government can designate villages’ farm land for other uses or purposes. In the early 90s, this kind of change of land use was easy and oftentimes did not require formal paperwork. Moreover, villagers in the 1990s welcomed the transformation of farm land to factories, because they could increase their income. This first wave of urbanization was healthy and incremental, and it was totally different from the jobless urbanization after the mid-2000s.

However, unlike the township and village enterprises (TVEs) in South China, most TVEs failed in North China. Moreover, most TVEs in North China were run by migrants from South China, who rented land and constructed small factories in villages in Beijing’s peripheries. The reasons of this situation are beyond the scope of my research.22 Yet, they are somehow related to

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22 In the 1980s to the early 1990s, TVEs flourished in South China. Kung & Lin (2007) wrote a well-cited article arguing that village and township owned enterprises (TVEs) played a leading role in the early period of China’s economic reform. As time went on, they became less competitive and public ownership became a barrier rather than an advantage.
the future of my site (it has been the reality already, at this moment). Some scholars argue that south Chinese have more entrepreneurial mentality, while north Chinese are more likely to rely on the regime. Zhang (2001) in her pioneering work about a village in Beijing’s south suburb in the 1990s, pointed out that most clothes and leather factories in the village were run by migrants from Fujian Province, a coastal province in Southeast China. One obvious reason for this situation is Fujian Province’s closeness to Taiwan, culturally, economically, and socially. In the 1980s and 1990s, most foreign direct investments in China were from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The capital and labor-intensive equipment from Hong Kong were mainly introduced from businessmen in Guangdong Province, while the capital and labor-intensive equipment from Taiwan were mainly introduced from businessmen in Fujian Province. Moreover, people in Guangdong and Fujian are the most mobile Chinese who have been conducting oversea businesses for centuries since the South Song Dynasty (1127-1279AD).

In the 1990s, on the one hand, the TVEs flourished in South China and impacted the fragile TVEs in North China. On the other hand, Beijing kept growing because the central government had more revenue due to China’s booming economy and tax reforms that further centralized China’s taxation system (Loo & Chow, 2006). At my site, Mr. Cui’s duck factory finally closed in 1999 and he witnessed the bankruptcy of his factory.

“I was traveling intensively in the 1990s, mostly to South China, Hubei, Hunan, Fujian, Jiangxi, etc. Certainly, you South Chinese are smarter than we North folks. What do we have? We only have bigger body and stomach. But South Chinese know how to do business…After the 1995, I mostly ordered ducks from Hubei and Hunan and we no longer raised ducks in our factories. It had more profit by just ordering ducks and duck eggs from South China.”
Mr. Cui was not sad about the bankruptcy of his factory. Neither were his fellow villagers saddened by their failed TVEs if they worked in the TVEs or by their farming life if they still worked on their small plots. As the entire central government and its governmental bodies had become richer since the 1990s, their employees needed better housing, better schools, and even better home services. Consequentially, more migrant workers came to Beijing, working in Beijing’s booming construction and service industries. Totally different from Shanghai’s rise caused by its booming financial and service sectors in the 1990s, Beijing’s rise from the late 1990s has been mainly resulted from the political significance of the city and 1994 tax-sharing reforms that gave the central government more shares in tax revenues (Loo & Chow, 2006). The city becomes richer mainly because the central government becomes more economically and financially competent.

My site encountered its second transformation during the late 1990s. Mr. Cui would make more money by just renting his factory to some “South Chinese.” And most villagers merely added more housing units to their houses and rented their rooms to migrant workers. By just collecting rent, villagers’ income increased several times. It made no sense for them to continue working on their small farming lot or working in the failing TVEs. So, roughly in the decade from 1996 to 2006, most villagers in my site became the “parasite class,” which collected rent from migrant workers who had no household registration in Beijing but were Beijing’s main laborers. Again, in this aspect, the rapidly modernizing and urbanizing city with a pre-modern mind-set never seriously questions the fairness of this housing and registration issue, not even until it becomes a serious social justice issue after the 2000s. This second wave of urbanization already made China’s urban construction fall into a problematic loop, leading to the third wave—the jobless urbanization or urbanization for the sake of urbanization.
The decade from 1996 to 2006 also witnessed Beijing’s real estate boom and soaring housing price. Several commercial buildings and residential buildings were constructed around the X Village in the 2000s, the so-called market-led suburbanization coined by some scholars (Feng et al., 2008). As the surrounding areas became completely urbanized, villagers knew that their village will be urbanized sooner or later. Different from the first two waves of transformation—setting up their own TVEs and renting out their space, the third wave was an ultimate transformation and *a game changer*. It completely transformed the rural setting of my site, and it was irreversible (but not inevitable). If the first two waves were voluntary and endogenous, the third wave was totally exogenous. It was not just shaped by the changes of the village, the town, and the entire city, it was strongly transplanted from a biased but convenient national model—architecture or residential modernity as “towers in the park.”

“Towers in the park,” a distinctive modernist blueprint proposed and propagated by Le Corbusier, was never intensively practiced and actualized in the West. Yet, to some latecomers of modernity, “towers in the park” is believed as *the way of modernity* in city planning and construction.

However, under a hectic development mode since the late 1990s, Beijing, and the entire China actually, did not seriously engage in considering or debating which kind of modernity it aimed at, at least not in the architecture and urban planning field. It was absolutely certain that the city aimed at becoming richer and more modern. But it chose a model that can be easily duplicated without serious discussions, let alone serious challenges. As I have discussed in introduction, “towers-in-the-park” turned out to be the most convenient community model for a rapidly growing China with “piles of cash” and “cheap labor” (Sorkin, 2014) to modernize its built environment, accidentally and ironically. Whose modernity? What modernity? These
questions were and are still disturbing to an authoritarian regime that emphasizes consensus and social harmony.  

The former X Village had no bargaining power to ask questions such as “Whose modernity?” and “What modernity?” It is as if these grand theoretical questions did not exist at all. Villagers were actively safeguarding and maximizing their existing interests rather than protesting the soon-to-be reality of “towers in the park.” Since 2006, the Villagers’ Committee, together with the township’s demolition and relocation office, began to measure the villagers’ household information and housing information. In 2007, before the demolition of the village started, all villagers’ household registration (hukou) shifted from Agriculture Household to Non-Agriculture Household, and the Villagers’ Committee transformed into the Residents’ Committee. The villagers were no longer farmers or peasants. Instead, they became Beijing’s newly transformed urban citizens. In reality, villagers in the X Village were not peasants since the 1990s or even earlier. It was until 2007 that their “Agriculture Household” title was finally removed.

In 2008, the year when Beijing was hosting the 29th Summer Olympic Games, the X Village was demolished. Not so different from the city’s epic event, my site was “a harmonious echo” of the city’s grand escalation to modernity, at least to the city’s ruling bloc. Beijing became more modern and prosperous, so did the former X Village. However, the demolition process did not occur without conflicts. Villagers fought to get more housing units in the soon-to-be erected towers as compensation. And some villagers delayed signing the contract to

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23 In the preface of the Chinese translation of Franklin’s City Life (2010), the translator, Professor Zhang Huiyan at Nanking University, states that China once had a heated academic discussion regarding the to-be selected pattern of China’s urban community in the 1980s and eventually chose the middle-rise/high-rise high-density version rather than the low-rise high-density or the low-rise low-density pattern. However, Professor Zhang did not cite any sources of the “heated debate.” And I strongly doubted whether such a debate ever happened in China. Even if there was such a debate, it would not make any impact in the 1980s because China was dealing with larger political and social stability issues.
demolish their existing houses. Nonetheless, the demolition process in the X Village was relatively smooth—no collective protests and no open letters and visits to Beijing’s higher-level authorities. Since I did not visit the site in 2008, I do not know what the villagers—the newly urbanized citizens from 2007—really thought of and did from 2007 to 2010. But from the former villagers’ comments during my fieldwork in the site from 2013 to 2015, it seemed that no major conflicts occurred in the demolition process.

The reasons for no conflict are not controversial. Firstly, all former villagers got lucrative compensation, if they registered in the village as a villager and had a house or farm land there. Most former villagers (as a household) who talked with me have two to three apartments in the newly relocated community, and some villagers even get more than ten apartments. These allocated apartments were owned by the relocated households and open for market rate transaction. Each apartment in the newly relocated community had a market value around 2 million yuan (around $300,000) in 2015. That was a lot of money for former peasants who still did not have stable jobs in Beijing. Some of them simply stopped working after the relocation and had a rather luxurious way of life—purchasing fancy cars after selling one of their relocated apartments. Secondly, all former villagers had other ongoing benefits from their collectively owned community proper. Since the relocation community is a giant gated community\(^{24}\) that has over 20 high-rise buildings and more than 2,000 housing units, there are over 300 extra units after villagers got their relocated apartments. These extra units are collective properties of the community and managed by a property management company hired by the Residents’ Committee (transformed from the former Villagers’ Committee in 2007). Only the registered former villagers who still live in the relocated community gain an annual dividend from these

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\(^{24}\) In the Chinese context, gated communities cannot be read as “defended space.” Cities, residential sub-clusters, and work-units have been walled, enclosed, or gated for centuries.
collectively owned housing units. Thirdly, protesting was useless and risky. As one of my research participants told me, “Why bother to protest? Demolition is inevitable. If a family or few families protested, they might end up getting no compensation at all.” To these issues involved with both individual and collective interests, China’s grassroots governments are good at engaging in the so-called “individual targeting strategy,” which avoids any kind of collective solution of a collective issue.

From the perspective of China’s modernization process, there is a deeper reason for the failure of a rural village to protest against demolition and relocation. China’s modernization after 1949 was focused on urban space and industrialization. Although Mao and his communist party did try to use machines to modernize China’s agricultural production, mechanized agriculture only took place in several large, newly chartered farms in Northeast China. The rural living environment was in an extremely pre-modern situation—no paved roads, no well-planned and constructed sewer system, no central heating existed in the X Village before the demolition. Although the X village did have electricity and tap water, not every household had a flush toilet or a shower in their home. In this regard, when pro-demolition village officials persuaded the fellow villagers to participate in the relocation process, no one was empowered to challenge the demolition even culturally, as there was simply no highly valued way of life to defend!

The X Village was gone in 2008. Not only did the village demolish all its low-rise housing, but it sold all its residual farming or semi-farming lands as four commercial plots. Thanks to the high housing and land prices in Beijing, the land deal provided sufficient funds to construct the relocation community for the former villagers. Here, as hundreds of thousands of demolition and relocation cases in Beijing, we do not know how much the X Village sold its lands for and we do not know for certain how much it paid for the construction of its new
community. The “transparent” Chinese government is never as transparent as it claimed or promised. Hyper-efficiently, some time around 2011, a new giant gated community with over 20 residential towers and over 2,000 housing units was erected. Two years later, a commodity residential community was developed from one of the four commercial plots sold by the former X Village, and this new commodity community is my field site.

**The developer and the plot for the projected “Beverly Hills Towers”**

The developer of the “Beverly Hills Towers” did not buy the land directly from the X Village, but from the township government under the authorization of the district government. More importantly, the revenue from its land-sale belonged to the district government. Since the mid-2000s, land revenue has become the most important revenue for local (district/county-level) governments in China. In 2014, China’s land sales hit 4.31 trillion yuan,25 over 50% of China’s total local government revenue. Beijing’s land sales, in particular, hit 191.1 billion yuan,26 accounting for 49.4% of Beijing’s total local revenue27 and 9.3% of Beijing’s total GDP. In this regard, “land finance” is not even an open secret in contemporary China but the exact reality of China’s urban governance (Research Team on China’s Local Debt and Local Debt Management, 2011).

Although Beijing is clearly an advanced area in China, its economy and government revenue are biased toward land sales, rather than based on corporation tax or consumption tax. Here, the point mentioned in the introduction part of this chapter has been further echoed. The Chinese state, particularly its local governments, is the most significant player in China’s

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economy; it actively participates and intervenes in China’s largest market—the housing market, and it uses its lucrative land-sale revenue (and other land and housing related taxes) to further influence various sectors of China’s economy.

As for my site, its destiny was determined as early as in 2004. The *Beijing Urban Master Plan (2004-2020)*, the “so-called” best designed urban plan in China, was issued and became effective in 2004. This plan, not surprisingly, was a political product. Its creation was urged by the Ninth Beijing Communist Party of China (CPC) Congress in May 2002, and the municipal Planning Department completed the design of the new plan in less than two years. *The Plan* puts forward a new urban spatial pattern of Beijing, i.e., the spatial pattern of “two axes—two belts—multi-centers,” which plans to construct 11 new towns outside of Beijing’s current urban built areas (roughly inside the Fifth Ring Road—the pink line in Figure 2.2). All of these new towns are based on the traditional urban centers of Beijing’s 10 outer suburban districts, except Yizhuang New Town (a newly designated and constructed national-level Economic Development Zone in Southeast Beijing). In essence, this so-called best urban master plan in China does not propose any new planning ideas, because it just reinforces Beijing’s current administrative divisions.

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28 It is the “so called” best plan because the municipality even opened Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall right next to the Tiananmen Square after the 2014 plan. However, the plan was never seriously followed by districts in the municipality. District governments and developers had various means to bypass the Master Plan and constructed buildings and communities for their interests.
Figure 2.4. The main planning map of *Beijing Urban Master Plan (2004-2020)*. All of the 11 planned new towns are outside of the city center and outside of the green belt that surrounds the city center. However, most of the areas in the green belt have been constructed in the last 10 years. The *Beijing Urban Master Plan (2004-2020)* is supposed to be a law to guide Beijing’s construction, but it is certainly not effective and not enforced. Copyright 2004 Beijing Urban Planning Department.
As located in one of the 11 planned new towns, my site has been designated as urban construction land since 2004. Former villagers in the X Village might not know this urban plan text *per se*, but this is the official document that determines the destiny of their former village. However, not all designated new towns have been constructed as new towns. Since Beijing’s suburban districts have different characteristics and their top CPC leaders have been promoting their district’s urbanization in various degrees, the 11 new towns’ urbanization processes are extremely uneven. For instance, one new town in North Beijing still lacks paved roads even 11 years after the issue of *Beijing Urban Master Plan (2004-2020)*, although scattered residential communities have been erected already.

Since urbanization is guided and practiced on the basis of pre-modern rules and district-level officials’ determination and will rather than any fixed, written laws or institutional mechanisms, a neighborhood and district’s fate is also determined by its district-level CPC leaders’ commitment and determination as well. Certainly, there are laws and regulations to “guide” various economic activities in China. But because the state is the lawmaker and a game player at the same time, any successful business in China rely on dealing with various governmental bodies effectively. In the housing market, this is exactly the case. A developer would not know when and where a land-sale auction takes place if he/she is not well connected with the District-level Land and Resources Department and even the District-level mayor or CPC Secretary (the CPC Secretary in a district/county normally does not directly get involved with economic affairs, yet some CPC secretaries are extremely active in economic activities, especially when they aim at being promoted into a higher rank).
Figure 2.5. Internal mechanism between developers and district officials. Sons of top
government officials are probably the most crucial players in China’s land deals and housing
development. They may even found a real estate development company by themselves. However,
matchmakers’ main job is to help developers get their desirable land. The most well-known and
publicized matchmakers include Zhao Jin—the son of former governor of Jiangsu Province
(China’s second richest province) and Zhou Bin—the son of Zhou Yongkang (who was a
member of the 17th Politburo Standing Committee of CPC). 29 Adapted from
http://money.163.com/15/0912/08/B3A4LKF00254U80.html.

The developer of my site, Beijing Urban Construction Group, 30 is a giant conglomerate,
one tenth of the size of China State Construction Engineering Company 31—the second largest

29 The two pairs of father and son are both in prison right now. Land development is definitely the most corrupted
area in contemporary China. Since it is politically sensitive, any serious academic debates about land deal and land
development will be silenced and censored. This is another reason why China lacks a sincere debate on
modernization and “Whose Modernity?” See note 23 for more details.
30 See more company information at http://www.bucg.com/gsj/
company in China. It is a developer, an architecture and design firm, and a construction company at the same time, and its 2014 annual revenue was 926 billion yuan (around 146 billion USD in the 2004 exchange rate). As a state-owned enterprise (SOE) owned by the Beijing Municipal government, Beijing Urban Construction Group has a natural advantage when purchasing lands and developing lands in Beijing. In 2008, when the X Village was demolished, Beijing Urban Construction Group bought one of the commercial plots cleared from the former X Village. Not surprisingly, neither the company’s website nor the district government’s website publicized how much Beijing Urban Construction Group paid for the plot. In the heyday of Beijing’s housing development, this transaction was just a small amount of the total land sales in the municipality (in 2008, the total land sales in Beijing hit 50.37 billion yuan,\textsuperscript{32} about one quarter of the amount in 2014 and 2015). Based on the land area and the average land price in the district, my estimate is that Beijing Urban Construction Group paid around 1 billion yuan for the former X Village plot in 2008.

In 2008, the year when the sub-prime crisis hit the United States, China’s housing market, especially Beijing’s housing market, was still rapidly rising. When the international financial crisis reduced the West’s orders from China, Beijing used a strong stimulus package (a four trillion yuan stimulus) to keep China’s economy growing.\textsuperscript{33} Most of the money came from land sales and then reinvested into infrastructure and housing sectors. From this bigger, and a global, perspective, Beijing Urban Construction Group’s activity in a suburban district in Beijing was merely a small transaction. Yet, this transaction completely destroyed (or transformed) a semi-

\textsuperscript{31} See more company information at http://www.cscec.com.cn
\textsuperscript{33} Retrieved from http://finance.ifeng.com/news/opinion/wylx/20081121/219334.shtml. Economists and mainstream media become more skeptical about the impact of “the Four Trillion Yuan Stimulus Package,” and they argue that it makes Chinese economy rely on fix-capital investment from the government and fail to sustain by itself.
rural community and erected a hyper-modern residential community, which in total influenced more than 3,000 households’ daily life.

In the next section in this chapter, I discuss which kind of community Beijing Urban Construction Group designed for its newly purchased land and how it designed a large-scale residential community—the “Beverly Hills Towers.”

**Architects’ pen controlled by the developer**

In Wu’s (2010) article on China’s suburbia, he attempts to analyze an interesting phenomenon about China’s suburban housing development—naming and branding. Wu argues that naming the newly constructed gated communities with foreign names is a branding strategy which boosts housing sales, since naming itself escalates the taste and status of a gated community. Bosker’s (2013) book *Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China* analyzes a related phenomenon. According to Bosker, Chinese developers prefer to copy architectural forms from the West, but they do not really care whether their copied forms are authentic because these copied communities just need to look “authentically Western” to Chinese. But why foreign names? It is really a delicate issue. A foreign name may not echo a foreign reality at all, but it is related to the ironic latecomer’s revenge mentality as I have discussed in introduction—a mentality of showing that China can catch up and even transcend the West.

Naming newly constructed residential communities with foreign terms (places/eras) not only reflects developers and ordinary Chinese people’s aspirations and preference in this contemporary era, but also reinforces Chinese people’s (biased) assumptions and perceptions about the West (and the world). Beijing Urban Construction Group names its newly designed
community as “Beverly Hills Towers”\textsuperscript{34} to fit its (and the homeowners’) aspirations about the assumed California lifestyle. But still, why “Beverly Hills Towers” for this specific gated community? What made Beijing Urban Construction Group name the community this way? What kind of lifestyle did Beijing Urban Construction Group and its architects attempt to create/project for this large-scale community?

Figure 2.6 shows another giant suburban gated community. Similar to the “Beverly Hills Towers,” it clearly intends to create a foreign sense and a status symbol. But why this kind of status symbol?

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.6.png}
\caption{An example of a giant suburban gated community.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{34} I do not use the real name of this community in order to protect the privacy of my site. Similarly, I do not use the real name of the demolished former village and I do not point out the specific district of my research project.
Figure 2.6. Another gated community with a foreign name “The Lincoln Park,” but the developer uses “The Linkpark Life” to translate from the Chinese.

Existing residential communities near the projected “Beverly Hills Towers” were constructed in late 1990s and early 2000s. Their stories are slightly different from the “Beverly Hills Towers” in terms of land purchase, community design, and naming. In the 1990s, the Chinese state even gave free lands to developers so that they would be willing to develop lands for more modern commercial and residential uses. In general, residential communities constructed in the 1990s were *mediocrely designed and modestly named*. The “Beverly Hills Towers” aims at being an outstanding residential community and alluring better-off middle-class Chinese to settle down in this suburban district. Appearance and naming are the two most impressive and straightforward ways to attract affluent home buyers in the first place.
Although I was not able to interview the architects of the “Beverly Hills Towers” who work for Beijing Urban Construction Group, I interviewed one architect who worked in Beijing Urban Construction Group previously and moved to a private architecture firm. Moreover, I formally interviewed five architects who all focus on designing commercial and residential towers and informally talked with more than 20 architects, urban designers, and architecture students and interns, during my one-year stay in China. Among these five architects whom I formally interviewed, one is a chief architect in China’s largest developer—China Vanke, which focuses on property development with a market value over 600 billion yuan.

As I have argued in the beginning of this chapter, China’s architects are largely controlled by their supervisors, either in state-owned companies like China State Construction Engineering Company, Beijing Urban Construction Group, etc., or in private companies like Vanke, Wanda, and others. Back to the naming and design of the “Beverly Hills Towers,” Mr. Zhang, who worked in Beijing Urban Construction Group previously, told me that “architectural design is a compromise between ideal and reality” and he started to feel better after he fully accepted this compromised way of working. As one of my key informants and also a good friend of mine during my stay in Beijing, Mr. Zhang toured me around the architecture firm where he currently works a couple of times. It is a middle-size architecture design firm that has more than 50 employees. Their office occupies a whole floor of a commercial tower in Beijing’s city center.

In a smoggy afternoon in late August 2014, Mr. Zhang arranged a group meeting for me in his firm. He hoped that I can introduce some architecture-related environmental psychology principles and theories to his colleagues to help them design better buildings. The conference room was a room with a big meeting table in the center and two circles of chairs—one surrounds the table and one along the four walls of the room. Although the room’s setting is not

35 See more company information at http://vanke.com/en/
hierarchical *per se*, our seating that afternoon was hierarchical and made me a bit uneasy. Mr. Zhang and I sat on one side of the table, and Mr. Xia and his team members (about 15 young architects and interns) sat in the other side of the room. I asked those who sat along the wall to move to chairs around the table, but no one moved to sit on the chairs near the table. Neither Mr. Zhang nor Mr. Xia invited their colleagues to move to the table. After all, they are senior architects and supervisors of the younger architects (in their 20s) in this room.

I did introduce some concepts such as affordance, behavioral settings, some environmental psychology studies on mental hospitals and parks, and Alexander’s pattern language. However, my main interest was knowing “how Chinese architects think and act when they design residential towers.” Mr. Xia was the only speaker from the other side of our meeting table, while his colleagues just nodded their head and smiled. We had intensive discussions and debates regarding “design ideas and design ideal.” Mr. Xia, a senior registered architect who is in his early 40s and graduated from a prestigious architecture school in Beijing, obviously had a more radical view than Mr. Zhang, my architect friend in Beijing.

“Your ideas and these environmental psychology concepts are beautiful. But they are useless. Don’t talk about architectural ideas with me. We focus on technology in China, not ideas. No place to articulate ideas. In practice, no time to design excellent work. The residential community construction is very lucrative, but there is no place to design better products… Hope is just a wishful thinking.”

Mr. Xia did not hesitate to express his ideas honestly because I promised him that I would not reveal the real name of his company or the real name of any person in our meeting room on that day. Mr. Xia’s colleagues, the younger architects and interns who sat next to him
and behind him along the wall, all nodded and smiled when Mr. Xia expressed the above thoughts. When I asked them how they thought about their design work, no one was willing to participate in our discussion. I looked at the young woman who sat right in front of me on the other side of the table and asked her what she thought about her work. She just returned me a friendly smile and then kept writing on her notebook. Each of the young employees had a notebook and they occasionally wrote on their notebook during the talk.

“Don’t ask them. They just listen to me and do whatever I ask them to do. Architects are not a creative group in China. Look at how I am called by my colleagues, my boss, and others. They call me “Xia Gong” (or Xia Craftsman, gong means craftsman or craft in Chinese. In Confucian tradition, gong is not important and it is just a tool; while shi or scholar is important because it is the essence). They call Mr. Zhang “Zhang Gong.” (All younger architects laughed when Mr. Xia spoke this.) The younger architects are even not qualified to be called a Gong, and they just work for me. As a Gong, I just do a craftsman’s technical work. Yes, I studied theories about public space and social interactions in college. But the Chinese reality doesn’t need these grand ideas. If your studies can change national policies, they may be beneficial to our architects. But now, you are useless. So, you need to publish faster. (All younger architects laughed again.)”

Mr. Xia or Xia Gong definitely had a more satirical view about his work in the firm and in the architecture field in general. It may be highly related to his rank in the firm. He is the chief architect in the firm who designs the project obtained by Mr. Zhang and his boss, a senior architect, engineer, and CEO of the firm. As a middle-size firm, they work for larger architecture firms and medium and small developers in China, mostly in the Beijing metropolitan areas. So,
their main job is designing communities that can maximize developers’ profits. Or in Mr. Xia’s terms, “using architectural techniques to maximize apartment units and floor areas of the building and the community.” As a chief architect, Mr. Xia is always busy at closely working with his team members for specific drawings, while Mr. Zhang and his boss deliver the clients’ (mostly medium and small developers) requirements to Mr. Xia and sign off the designs.

However, many contemporary residential communities in China look elegant, especially those constructed since the 2000s. My site, the “Beverly Hills Towers,” is one of these elegantly designed communities. When I reminded this fact of elegant design to Mr. Xia and his colleagues and asked them how they think of the design ideas of these communities in the brochures (including Figure 2.6 and Figure 2.7) I passed to them, they provided a plain explanation. “These brochures are for commercial uses. They are not really architectural design work. Why do you read so much about the styles from these pictures? That is over-reading. We sub-contract this kind of work to graphic design companies to beautify our projects. There are a lot of graphic design companies in Beijing.” If Mr. Xia is right, then most residential communities in contemporary China do not have “design ideas or styles.” The impressive appearance of residential communities merely intends to maximize developers’ profits.
Figure 2.7. The appearance of a hyper-modern residential community designed by China’s largest developer—Vanke. As of 2014, the site was still in its hectic construction, but all apartment units in this community had been sold out already via pre-sales.

It seems odd that Chinese architects do not care about the appearance and pattern of their architecture products. But it is a valid and justifiable position. When I asked Ms. Wang, a senior registered architect in Vanke and who graduated from one of China’s top universities, what design stands for as shown in Figure 2.7, her explanation was not really about architecture *per se*.

“Vanke is actively promoting a *way of life*. We are not merely designing buildings. We are designing a *way of life*—well-designed public space inside our communities, convenient facilities near our communities, and excellent property management services.
Vanke is the best in China because it has its own property management team and Vanke’s homeowners believe in the brand of Vanke.”

Ms. Wang’s explanations are not about the design of Vanke’s residential towers. Her comments further echo Mr. Xia’s position, the brochures are made by other digital graphic design companies to boost sales, and what home buyers really care about are Vanke’s brand, its quality, and its price.

It is premature to conclude that China’s residential community designs are styleless and tasteless. Yet, from my interviews with residents in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” residents actually do not care about the architectural style of their community. What they care about more are their community’s price, location, and way of life. I will discuss residents’ perceptions and views in greater details in Chapter Four and Chapter Five.

Although the “Beverly Hills Towers” looks impressive, its architects did not design this community for the sake of any architectural style. They designed this community for maximizing apartment units and floor areas of the buildings in the community, which ultimately maximized Beijing Urban Construction Group’s profits. Together with its naming, an “imagined” California habitat, the “Beverly Hills Towers” stands out and attracts its buyers via the “projected” lifestyle—an enclosed, protected, and high-end middle-class community. Similar to “Lincoln Park” (shown in Figure 2.6) and “Vitality” (shown in Figure 2.7), the community is designed for better-off middle-class who can afford a home in Beijing, the hottest housing market in China despite its pollution and notorious smog. Echoing the larger theme that I discussed in introduction, the “Beverly Hills Towers,” as a “towers-in-the-park” community did look modern and sell well. Because it sold well, the model was replicated in contemporary China, even though
many similar communities *could not sell at all*. In the next chapter, I will discuss how this
“assumed California” habitat was actually constructed by Beijing Urban Construction Group, its
sub-contracted construction teams, and their nameless migrant workers.
Chapter 3

The construction of a residential community—the hierarchical pyramid and sweat labor
Flexible accumulation, as I shall tentatively call it, is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism…the more flexible motion of capital emphasizes the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism. To the degree that collective action was thereby made more difficult—and it was indeed a central aim of the drive for enhanced labour control to render it thus—so rampant individualism fits into places as a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation.

(Harvey, D, The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change, 1989, pp. 147, 171)

If Harvey’s 1989 book on postmodernity argues that the world, especially the Western world, moved from modern, fixed-investment capitalism towards post-modern, flexible-investment capitalism in the late 1970s, China’s neo-liberal shift since the 1980s has been able to engage in larger fixed-capital investment. However, it is a more brutal capitalism which has completely betrayed the working class. In the construction and housing sector, the entire labor force is de-unionized and deregulated, and the construction process is an open exploitation of rural migrant workers who are from poor villages all over China. In this chapter, I will discuss in detail the construction practice of a suburban residential community.

Initially, I planned to interview construction workers on a construction site right next to the community where I lived in Beijing, but the guards did not allow me to enter the construction site and interview the workers. Similar to most construction sites in Beijing (in China actually), that site used fancy advertisement boards to enclose and wall itself, for two obvious reasons. First, it is a way to broadcast the soon-to-be completed residential community and stimulate pre-
sales. Second, it is an effective method to hide construction workers’ daily life out of the perception and judgment from the general public. The first reason highlights the space for the sake of capital accumulation, while the second reason downgrades real social practices in the Chinese context. In other words, social practice of construction in contemporary China does not emphasize the actual construction process conducted by thousands of millions of migrant workers, but focuses on capital accumulation monopolized by the state and several big developers. And the consumer success is thereafter on “the wall” exclusively.

Using the website and phone number on the elegantly designed boards/walls, I tried to find the project manager of the site or anyone who could give me an access to the site. However, the phone number led me to the sale center of the developer, while the website only offered brief and overly “beautified” information about the soon-to-be completed high-rise residential community. From June 2014 to January 2015, I tried several times to enter into the site by telling the guards about my research interests, but these attempts failed. Only one time, on a sunny and hot September afternoon, I partially entered into the site from the side door rather than the main door via talking to a worker who was smoking outside of the door. Most workers were taking a nap in the steel-board dormitory (Figure 3.1) that is ubiquitous on China’s construction sites, while Mr. Tu was relaxing outside of the construction site, with his upper body naked.

“You are not taking a nap?” I asked Mr. Tu acting like a nosy neighbor. “No, not busy today.” Mr. Tu replied in a friendly manner and was not vigilant at all. It is a matter of fact that construction workers or ordinary Chinese in general are vigilant to strangers who approach them. However, if you have a real situational icebreaker to open a conversation, that protectiveness

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36 Pre-sale is a strategy for Chinese developers to sell housing units before the completion of the construction. It is an obvious method for developers to cash out and obtain their financial investment of the projects. I will discuss more about pre-sale in Chapter Four.
37 Is China’s housing sector a real success or is it just a fantasy and bubble? China’s continuous high-speed economic growth is certainly sustained by its housing glut, but China’s housing sector is not healthy at all (Li, 2016).
can be reduced or dissolved.\textsuperscript{38} Moreover, as I have discussed in the introduction part, a shared identity—by convincing the informants that “\textit{we are the same, and I am part of you group, at least, I am not so different from you}”—has to be established in the first place in order to gain any meaningful conversation.

While talking with Mr. Tu near the side door of the construction site, I naturally put my head into the door.

“\textit{You are constructing so quickly. It is just over a year, but the community is almost finished.}” I talked to Mr. Tu.

“\textit{Well, yes, the developer aims to complete this site at the end of next year. My job is almost done here.}”

“What do you do here?”

“I drive a cement mixer truck. It is my own truck. After I finish the work here, I will go back to my hometown and look for new work.”

Mr. Tu was not a typical construction worker in the site. He worked and functioned as a small contractor, under the supervision of a sub-contractor of the site. Immediately, I noticed that Mr. Tu was much whiter than typical construction workers, because he was never exposed under the sun directly.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{38} I always used situational icebreakers to start conversations for my fieldworks in Beijing, although not all of them worked. Nonetheless, some of my key informants were brought into this study via my situational icebreakers. For instance, I met and befriended with Mr. Cui, who was a resident in the previous X Village, via my situational icebreaker “you are doing exercise in such a smoggy morning?” on a very hazy morning in July, 2013.

\textsuperscript{39} China’s racial problem is different from many countries in the world. Skin color is not a clear indicator of race or ethnicity, because most minority ethnic groups (except Tibetans and Uyghurs from west China) in China have similar skin color and facial features as the Han Chinese. It is difficult to distinguish a Mongolian or Korean Chinese from a Han Chinese purely by skin color and facial features, for instance. However, \textit{skin color is a clear indicator of class} in China, and one reason that rural migrant workers are discriminated in contemporary China is due to their darker skin color based on years of hard labor work.
The small talk with Mr. Tu did not let me enter into the site officially, nor did I have more meaningful conversations with other construction workers on that site in the following four months when I consistently tried to gain an access into it. Yet, my various attempts and failures made me find other ways to gain access to a construction site, which somehow offered me more insights into China’s construction practices.

Securing a construction site access

Once again, I turned to Mr. Zhang for help initially, since he is an architect and the project manager in his firm. It was also through him that I gained a more structural knowledge about the construction practice in contemporary China. A developer needs to obtain five permits in order to legally sell housing units in a residential community. Namely, “State-Owned Land Use Permit,” “Construction Land Use Planning Permit,” “Building Construction Planning Permit,” “Building Construction Permit,” and “Housing Sales (Pre-Sales) Permit.” The practices that I have discussed in Chapter Two are meant to get the first three permits, while the practices discussed in this chapter are based on the “Building Construction Permit” gained by a construction company hired by the developer. Mr. Zhang’s job, as a chief architect and the project manager in his firm, is to help developers who hire his firm design their projects, and more importantly, gain the two technical permits—“Construction Land Use Planning Permit” and “Building Construction Planning Permit.”

Although Mr. Zhang promised me that he will help me find a site for living there for a while and interviewing construction workers, that promise was never actualized. In the meanwhile, I had to use all my personal connections to help me find an appropriate site.
Teaching in an architecture and planning department in Beijing broadened my network in the architectural field in Beijing, but that identity only helped me get formal interviews with architects and planners. From Mr. Zhang’s rain check, I realized that a request to live on a construction site and interview construction workers was perhaps too sensitive, and it might jeopardize Mr. Zhang’s business and personal life. That is because any negative reports and writings about construction workers’ lives are strongly censored in contemporary China, a self-proclaimed socialist country for the well-being of proletariat.

On a chilly day in early January 2015, I visited a close friend’s office in Beijing’s CBD—Guomao area (the International Trade area)—just for personal reasons. A short conversation with my friend’s colleague gave me a great hope to secure access to a construction site in Beijing. Ms. Lu, a well-dressed young mother in her mid-30s, told me that she would love to help me find a construction site in Beijing since her husband works as a successful sub-constructor, after she knew that I am a researcher from New York conducting fieldwork in Beijing. Ms. Lu invited my friend and me to have dinner with she and her husband sometime soon. I was excited about this new connection for weeks, because I did not know any developers, engineers, or sub-contractors personally in Beijing. However, a guaranteed promise turned out to be another rain check. Ms. Lu’s promise to secure a construction site for me never came true, neither did our dinner plan. My friends felt sorry for this impasse and asked me to wait until the end of the Chinese New Year in early March, with the reason from Ms. Lu “my husband’s sites are barely operating now, because most migrant workers have gone back to their hometown for the Chinese New Year.” That was definitely an excuse. Yes, most construction sites in Beijing were slowing down in 2014 due to the cooling down of the capital city’s real estate market, but many sites still

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40 My friend was highly positive about her colleague’s promise, because Ms. Lu indeed married a very successful business man and she talked about her husband in their office constantly.
operated at their full scale, no matter how cold and how smoggy the weather was in Beijing (or in the entire North China Plain).

As January moved on, I became increasingly stressed and even irritated about my failure to secure access to a construction site. To me, to study construction workers’ daily life in the construction process was a legitimate project. Moreover, it was morally and socially significant. However, no site was willing to offer me an access, either officially or personally. Was this because social practices of construction in contemporary China are too secretive to be examined and studied? Or was it because a young scholar who has been trained in the United States in the last 7 years is not doing research within the Chinese academic tradition and institutional framework (or protection)? No matter what the actual reason was, I failed to convince Mr. Zhang and Ms. Lu or they did not believe that “we are the same, and I am part of you group, at least, I am not so different from you.” The pending Chinese New Year of sheep/goat\textsuperscript{41} accelerated my anxiety and self-criticism. My ethnographic research, not different from numerous other ethnographic studies, turned into an autobiography and self-interrogation for a while.

I was even asking my family members and childhood friends in south China to help me find a construction site in Beijing, since almost everyone was personally involved in the real estate sector in a rapidly urbanizing China. Eventually, in the end of January, another architect friend introduced me to a construction site managed by his close friend (both of them graduated from the same top architecture school in China and maintained intimate personal connections since then), with strict conditions such as I should not write any journalist articles or reports.

\textsuperscript{41} China’s calendar follows both the Western calendar and its traditional lunar-calendar. Most important holidays in China—the Spring Festival, the Tomb-Sweeping day, the Moon-cake day or Mid-autumn Day—are based on the lunar calendar that was important for a rural society. Modern China is still struggling with how to reconcile the lunar calendar and the Western calendar. Again, like China’s broader attitude to modernity, serious discussions and challenges are not welcomed, as I have discussed in the introduction part and Chapter Two.
about the construction site and I should not identify the name of the construction company or any of its sub-contractors.

On February 2, 2015, I arrived at the construction site. But I did not live in the construction site on that first night, since I thought it was better to treat Mr. Xu to a nice dinner and ask him some basic questions about the construction site first. That turned out to be a wonderful dinner. We talked about everything, from architecture to China’s politics and to American society. Mr. Xu was definitely an insider in the practice of place-making. He worked for a big stated-owned developer and he was a communist party member—a necessary identity for anyone who wanted to be promoted in a SOE or a government unit. And the site he introduced me to where I stayed over for nearly two weeks was in a remote suburb of Beijing’s metropolitan region.

As an architect who worked for the developer of the site, Mr. Xu had no interested in the construction process per se. To him, those workers at the bottom “were merely doing the physical labor assigned by the management personnel on the construction site.” He was still a little bit confused regarding why I insisted on living on the construction site and interviewing construction workers for two weeks, since he thought “life on the construction site is easy to understand—it is bitter; and the construction workers are simple—poor, uneducated, rural peasants who need to make money for their family.” So, to him, there was nothing worth serious study and I just wanted to experience the Chinese bitterness as a foreign-trained scholar. I did not reject his interpretation of my behaviors and research intentions, since I was indeed

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42 Mr. Xu, a friend of my architect friend, gradually became an even closer friend of mine during my stay in Beijing. Although we never met before, we established a mutual trust that I really appreciated. Perhaps it was because we were both born in a south province in China, perhaps because we were both single, perhaps because we were both critical about contemporary China. Actually, many (or the majority of) Chinese are critical about contemporary China in various ways. It is indeed a country that has many aspects to be criticized. Another architect friend mentioned before, Mr. Zhang, was critical about China’s architectural practice, so was his colleague Mr. Xia.
“experiencing bitterness in that two weeks”—no shower, frozen water for hand washing and teeth brushing, using squat toilets, sleeping on a bunk bed, etc. But I knew that I was not really experiencing and could not live the life that most construction workers went through. Nonetheless, my temporary experience of the bitterness on the site with rural migrant workers could definitely enrich my ethnographic study of the second stage of China’s place-making process.

The next morning, Mr. Xu drove me to the living quarters of the construction site and introduced me to Mr. Bao, the project manager of the site who worked in a state-owned construction company hired by Mr. Xu’s company. This was the first and only time that I met Mr. Bao, who gave me a key to a room in the dormitory area and asked me to feel at home while staying on the construction site.

“I don’t think you can live with our real workers, so I let you live with three crane drivers and two water-proof material technicians. I was going to give you a single room where our architects and engineers live, but Mr. Xu said you need to live with workers.” Mr. Bao told me without asking my opinion.

“That is ok. We are living in the same kind of dormitory, right?”

“Yes, you are in the same building and on the same floor (with real workers). Your room has fewer people. Believe me, you can’t live with our real workers.”

Mr. Bao did not explain why I cannot live with their real workers. He emphasized real when he made that claim. It was not hard to figure out the reason when I finally lived on the site.

My eventual access to a construction site was a smooth experience, done via three handshakes: my handshake with Mr. Xu, Mr. Xu’s handshake with Mr. Bao, and my handshake
with Mr. Bao. *Nothing was formal and official here, and nothing could be done formally and officially.* Only through this personal and unofficial way, my research could be conducted. So, what differentiates my secretive way of gaining an access to live on a construction site from my friend from a developer’s secretive way of gaining an access to develop a site from the government? They play the same rules of personal networking that dominate contemporary China and previously imperial China. Eventually, my own efforts endorsed *pre-modern* social and cultural rules as well, and a clear framework of the modern rule of law and professionalism was not only unnecessary but also unwelcomed.

**The basic living condition of a construction dormitory**

The basic living conditions of rural migrant workers on the construction site were nothing but harsh and miserable. From the history of industrialization in the West, the harsh conditions should take place in the early stage of the industrial revolution—from the late 18th century to mid 19th century, and ordinary workers’ living conditions got better as the industrial countries became wealthier. However, China’s development track in terms of labor conditions, not so different from China’s architecture evolution, negates the Western logic once again. One can argue that China’s rapid industrialization has taken place when western advanced economies had already become post-industrial societies. So, China actually embraces two evils—the harsh treatment and alienation of workers *in the original stage of capital accumulation* criticized by Marx (1848) and the unsecure, ephemeral, and overly individualistic conditions faced by workers *in the post-modern stage of flexible accumulation* criticized by Harvey (1989)—at the same time. Rural migrant workers’ living conditions in contemporary China cannot be viewed merely from
the general world history of capitalism, because a cultural tradition plays an important role in the
post-modern labor conditions in the Chinese context.

If one compares the 21st century Chinese construction migrant workers’ living conditions with the 19th century British industrial workers’ living conditions, one will find sharp
differences between the somewhat equally miserable lives. The new proletariat, who worked in
newly founded industrial cities or districts in the UK, permanently left their rural Scotland or
Ireland and became “new residents” of the numerous growingly polluted “Coketowns”
(Mumford, 1961). Their homes were packed, dirty, unhealthy, lacking private bathrooms,
lacking drains, and lacking a water supply. In contrast, the new migrant workers, who worked in
newly urbanized cities or districts in China, temporarily left their rural villages and became
urban nomads moving project to project in thousands of thousands of rapidly urbanizing
construction sites. Their temporary but collective dorms (not homes) were packed, dirty,
unhealthy, lacking private bathroom, lacking drains, and lacking water supply as well.
Figure 3.1. My room with five other workers on the construction site. It is relatively more decent than other rooms in the same building, because it is less packed. I had a few casual conversations with Mr. Little Hou who slept below me on a bunk bed and formally interviewed two roommates living there—Mr. Gardener and Ms. Little Rich. (Photo Pengfei Li)

The 19th century British industrial workers’ living situation can be well explained by capitalism that endorsed free market and free labor. How about the 21st century Chinese construction migrant workers’ living situation? Is the army of thousands of thousands of migrant construction workers a result of neo-liberalism? David Harvey’s (1991) Marxist approach seems to be a powerful framework to capture the macro-level production process of newly urbanized Chinese cities and suburbs—the state retreats from providing welfare housing to urban residents
and social wares to (local urban) construction workers, housing markets gain momentum to
supply more commercial housing units, the state uses variegated means to foster and stimulate
housing markets, and eventually “free” migrant workers without any social welfare are hired to
work on construction sites nationwide. The retreat of the state and the dominance of the market
are the two most important features of neo-liberalism. However, China is clearly not a Western-
style neo-liberal state. It was never a liberal capitalist state in the first place. How can it
transform from a socialist state to a neo-liberal state? As I have argued in Chapter One and
Chapter Two, the Chinese State is not only a regulator of its economy, but also a game player. Its
penetration into the market covers every aspect of China’s economy and it influences people’s
daily life in a profound way. So, is it a socialist authoritarian state that denies social welfare to its
workers or a socialist economy that endorses “free” labor? It seems contradictory but that is how
the Chinese State functions on a daily basis.

The construction workers on the site where I had lived for two weeks were not free
laborers who pursued their individual survival or well-being. Institutionally speaking, they were
still tied to their rural farm land and rural house via their household registration (hukou). They
lived in the city to which they did not belong institutionally and worked in a collective but
purposefully isolated way. This collectivism was based on these migrant workers’ shared
hometowns rather than their collective proletariat identity. This shared mentality of fellow-
townsman (laoxiang) or villagehood culturally defies a neo-liberal interpretation of construction
workers’ living situation, while the hidden state control challenges a neo-liberal reading of
construction worker’s living situation socio-economically. In this sense, China’s construction
workers are not “free” laborers, while China’s state is not a de-regulatory state.
The construction pyramid

There were five two-story steel-board dorm buildings on the site, with 12 rooms in each building and eight bunk beds in each room. If fully occupied, the site could accommodate 800 workers. However, only three of these five buildings were open and workers were unevenly distributed in around 30 rooms in the three buildings. Besides these five main buildings, there were six one-story steel-plate buildings. One of these buildings was the kitchen in the further west of the living quarters, which was the most important place for the construction workers in addition to their dorm. A building on the further east was an *ad hoc* convenience store—an interesting existence on China’s construction sites in general. It took a few days for me to fully understand the spatial layout and function of the living quarters.
In Hillier and Hanson’s (1984) discussion of space syntax, depth distance is a key concept to understand the hierarchical nature of space. The deeper the location is in a given space, the more significant that location is. For example, in a skyscraper headquarters, the higher the floor is, the more important the office is; and on one specific floor, the deeper the location (from the entry point or elevator) is, the more significant the person who occupies that location is. The physical layout of space represents the social hierarchy of space. In other words, our physical and built space is never purely physical but has a profound social logic and implications. This space syntax makes a lot of sense in a safe and well-established environment and society. This spatial logic or syntax does not fit the spatial layout of my construction site, however.

My construction site follows a clear social logic by its own, which can only be interpreted in the context of contemporary China. Among the six one-story buildings mentioned in the beginning of this section, four were located in the south end of the living quarters. Although they (Dorm A to Dorm C in Figure 3.2) were closer to the only gate of this walled site, their single-room units were occupied by on-site architects, engineers, and subcontractors, who had higher status than workers in Dorms 2, 3, and 4 (Dorm 1 and Dorm 5 were closed). Both the kitchen and the convenience store were closer to the workers’ area than to the management/office personnel’s area because only workers patronized these two places. Moreover, they were supposed to locate in areas closer to the gate for economic considerations. However, on my construction site, political considerations triumphed over economic considerations. The kitchen and the convenience store were more likely to become eyesores when district or city-level
officials came to inspect the site for safety and propaganda concerns.\textsuperscript{43} As I have argued earlier, in a safe and well-established environment, Hillier and Hanson’s space syntax makes sense. But my site, similar to other construction sites in China, is a temporary jobsite that is meant to disappear after the construction is complete. Moreover, it is not safe. Space syntax works almost in a reverse way there. Instead of following the spatial logic of “the deeper, the more important,” my site follows a spatial logic of “the closer to the gate, the more important.” That is because these higher-rank on-site personnel are the ones who need more freedom to get in and out of the living quarters and they also need to run out of the living quarters with their car as fast as they can once an accident occurs.\textsuperscript{44}

The management personnel and sub-contractors (around 15) who lived on the south side of the site had more privacy in their single rooms. They could stay with their partner, if their partner worked on the site or came to visit them on the site. Besides, they shared a smaller and cleaner restroom. The workers, about 200 in total on the site, used a bigger and dirtier semi-outdoor restroom in the back of the dorm area. Although I lived with the workers in Dorm 2 closer to the back of site, I always used the smaller and cleaner restroom in the front area near the gate. No signs clarified that the back restroom was for the workers and the front restroom was for the management staff and sub-contractors only, but these two groups of people separated themselves tacitly by going to the different restrooms.

I was the only one who switched between these two restrooms, as far as I had noticed.

The guard of the dorm area, a man in his 50s who lived in the room adjacent to the front

\textsuperscript{43} Although the state (the central government or a city government) no longer officially and substantially protects the construction workers, it still runs image shows regarding its cares and concerns about construction workers frequently, especially in important holidays such as International Workers’ Day (May 1st) and Chinese New Year. It is not unusual that a city official (normally the Party Secretary) visits a construction site and brings gifts such as new quilts and jackets to construction workers, with state media. Which group can fit the image of proletariat better than construction workers?

\textsuperscript{44} Fire and building collapse are common accidents for the temporary living quarters on construction sites.
restroom, asked me once what I was doing on the site when I was going to use the front restroom. I did not tell him my real identity and just replied that I need to use the restroom. He did not stop me from using the restroom. So, there were no clearly written rules regarding the hierarchy of the dorm area, although the hierarchy was obvious. The front area was obtrusively more decent than the back area, with cars/mini-vans parking in front of some dorm rooms in the front area.

The hierarchy of the space itself perfectly echoes the hierarchy of the construction practice. On the top of the pyramid is the developer and his supervision team that inspects the safety and protocol issues on the site, then the construction company and its core employees (the project manager Mr. Bao and some on-site architects and engineers), then the subcontractors, and finally the construction workers clustered and hired by different subcontractors on the bottom of the pyramid. In contemporary China, construction companies cannot be called real construction companies because they do not have any real workers. They outsource all physical work to informal sub-contractors for efficiency considerations.

People in different strata put on different helmets as well—developer’s employees, the supervision team, and the construction company’s core employees wore white helmets with their unique logo, while construction workers wore yellow helmets with or without logo (see Figure 3.1, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5).

Among the first three groups, the developer and the firm’s core employees did not live on the site, although they could if they insisted on this issue. Its on-site engineers worked in the temporary office area—the same kind of steel-plate building as in the living quarters—on the north end of the construction site. The developer’s staff had the absolute power to inspect the site, because it was the one who ultimately funded all work on the site, including the construction quarters and the living quarters. That was why my friend Mr. Xu could easily find me a bed on
the construction site. To make my life easier on the site, he gave me his helmet as well. Wearing a white helmet that represented the developer’s side, I had the right to enter into every corner on the construction site rather than just the living quarters.

The supervision team and the construction company’s core employees worked and lived on the site, but they had much more freedom on the site. They never dined in the canteen in the dorm area and never patronized the convenience store. Many of them just occasionally slept on the site, based on my observations. In this sense, a third criterion of the hierarchy of my construction site was whether employees dined in the on-site canteen and patronized the convenience store and how often they slept in the dorm, in addition to the physical layout of the site and the helmet type.

This third criterion is the most interesting one, which deserves more elaboration. The construction workers did not have to dine in the canteen, neither did they have to shop in the convenience store. However, construction workers had all their three meals in the canteen for obvious economic and socio-cultural reasons. These on-site meals, together with on-site accommodation, were part of the unwritten contract that lured the construction workers to this site in the first place. The reason why millions of millions Chinese migrant workers were willing to work in construction sites or export-oriented factories in China’s coastal cities was the fact or tradition that “the job covers meals and accommodation,” so that migrant workers could keep the majority of their salary as savings. The on-site convenience store, then, supported the construction workers’ other necessary consumptions. Although the on-site convenience store sold a variety of goods from beverage, bread, and instant noodles to toothpaste, used boots and second-hand quilts, the most frequently purchased items were cigarettes. The majority of migrant workers were smokers (according to a World Health Organization report, there are more than
300 million smokers in China⁴⁵) and they smoked one pack of cigarettes every day. Although they smoked only cheap cigarettes (5 yuan a pack or 10 yuan a pack), it was their largest monthly consumption during their temporary stay in the city.

The socio-cultural reason was subtler and more controversial. Institutionally speaking, the construction workers were not residents in Beijing, although they had worked on the site for over half a year already (and would stay on the site for the entire year of 2015). Swider (2015) in her ethnographic studies about several construction sites in Beijing, argues that the isolated situation of China’s construction sites is for social control, so that the migrant workers could be trapped and “safeguarded” in their on-site islands—a metaphor used by Swider (2015)—and avoid being distracted by the modern city to which they did not belong. This perspective is an over-interpretation. Making the construction workers live in a walled and enclosed temporary community obviously has the social control effect. However, this living situation is not purposefully designed as a social control device in which thousands of thousands of construction workers could be watched, by the state or by the construction companies. This way of organizing migrant workers into isolated and walled compounds has been formed gradually in China’s transition from a strictly planned economy to a highly regulated market economy in the last 30 years. It is more accurate to categorize this living situation an outcome of the combination of the collectivist living tradition (of the townsmen and villagers), the socialist past, and the authoritarian regime, rather than a singular paradigm of social control.

⁴⁵ Retrieved from http://www.wpro.who.int/china/mediacentre/factsheets/tobacco/en/
Migrant workers’ morning routines

Having discussed the hierarchical nature of the construction site in the last section, I will focus on the daily life of the construction workers in the construction camp in the following two sections.

The construction workers’ on-site life was completely work-oriented. Although there were no written contracts clarifying working hours and holiday schedules, the work was conducted in a highly organized way—breakfast from 6am to 6:30am, morning work from 6:30am to 11:30am, lunch break from 11:30am to 1pm, afternoon work from 1pm to 6 pm, dinner from 6pm to 7pm, beer drinking and card playing in the dorm from 7pm to 9pm, sleeping around 9:30pm, and a new circle starts all over again.
Construction workers’ life was almost evenly distributed between work and rest. Everyday around 5:30am in early February 2015, I was wakened up by people’s conversations and other morning routine noises—teething brushing, bun eating, and soup drinking—from the two rooms next to the room where I stayed in Dorm Building 2 (see Figure 3.2). My five roommates were not “real” construction workers, as Mr. Bao, the project manager of the site, categorized on the first day. Three of them were crane drivers and the other two were formal employees of a waterproof material company.

As not-so-real workers, my roommates had a wake-up “privilege” on the site—they could get up at 7am rather than at 5:30am. Moreover, since Mr. Gardener and Miss Little Rich (Xiaofu), a young couple in their late 20s, both worked on the site as crane drivers, they had an extra “privilege” to put two bunk beds together and make the bottom parts of the two bunk beds their “king-size” bed (see Figure 3.1). Miss Little Rich was not embarrassed by living with five men in a dorm, because her boyfriend was constantly staying with her in the dorm when they were off. Clearly, Mr. Gardener and Miss Little Rich were still workers and they were not entitled to live in a better environment. Otherwise Mr. Bao could put them in a more decent single-room dorm that was designed for on-site professionals and sub-contractors.

Most workers got their free breakfast in the canteen. Breakfast was always the same, plain buns (no meat or vegetable inside) with porridge or soup and several pickled side dishes such as radish, cabbage, and cowpea. Perhaps by this single measurement, Mr. Xu’s statement

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46 The two characters of Mr. Gardener’s girlfriend, xiao fu, literally means little rich in English. It coincidentally indicates Miss Little Rich’s family background—her peasant parents simply hoped her to be rich a little bit.
became invalid—I just could not *experience the bitterness* on the construction site. However, these steamed plain buns could make the construction workers more stuffed than other types of more delicious buns (with meat or vegetable inside). And they were cheaper and easier to make. Mr. Gardener always took three steamed buns with pickled vegetables and porridge back to our dorm around 7:15am, ate two of them, and left one bun to his girlfriend Miss Little Rich.

However, not everyone had the breakfast in the canteen. As shown in Figure 3.3, some workers choose to buy the pancake sold right outside the gate of the living quarters every morning around 6am. It was a popular pancake for breakfast in northern China, and it was easy to make and could come with different flavors (spicy, spicy and sweet, salty and sweet, etc.). Chatting with the street vendor on one morning around 7am when most construction workers already went to work on the site revealed an unexpected new world to understand China’s construction site and the *ad hoc* opportunities and entrepreneurship resulted from the construction practice. The vendor, Mr. Wang, was a man in his late 40s. Having been living in Beijing for years, Mr. Wang represented another type of migrant workers—the migrant entrepreneur. Mr. Wang told me that he could not work on a construction site or in a factory, although he might make more money as a typical migrant worker. He enjoyed the freedom to make pancakes and had sold pancakes outside various construction sites in the last few years. Mr. Wang sold one piece of pancake for 5 yuan to 10 yuan, depending on whether his client asked for an extra egg or egg with ham or sausage. If lucky, Mr. Wang could sell 50 pancakes on one site and did not need to move to a second spot, which could make him 200 yuan (around 30 US dollars) net profit.

Unlicensed, unregistered, and untaxed, Mr. Wang lived in a more temporary situation. His business was not stable and his right to sell was not guaranteed. However, Mr. Wang found
his way to survive and even thrive to a certain degree in Beijing, a place where most migrant workers were unwelcomed but crucial for the functions of the city.

“You know, it is better for me to sell crispy pancakes in front of a construction site so early in the morning. The construction workers are not picky, and the urban management officials can’t get up so early to take my vending cart away. A large construction site normally operates for a year or longer, so it is safer (and relatively stable) for me to make money in this way.”

Was Mr. Wang doing a parasitic business at the expense of poor construction workers? Was he helping construction workers or taking advantages of construction workers? These are controversial questions that cannot be definitely answered. Essentially, his business was not radically different from the convenience store inside the construction site. Both of them were unlicensed and untaxed and both of them depended on construction workers’ genuine needs—the urge for tobacco and the urge to avoid the free but plain buns in the canteen occasionally. Furthermore, both of them lacked a modern legal framework and professionalism to supervise the operations and relied on the vendor’s conscience to provide unfiltered and safe items. That was because they both lived in the gray area of contemporary China in which the institutional framework was simply absent. Here, once again, Swider’s (2015) theory of social control becomes less relevant. Instead of helping the state control migrant workers on the jobsite or the isolated island categorized by Swider, the convenience store and Mr. Wang’s vending cart were

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47 From the 2010s, the Chinese State stopped policing and arresting unlicensed vendors on the streets. One can argue that repeated media reports made China’s city policemen and enforcement personnel more civilized. The real reason is China’s economy is big enough that it can ignore the informal sector and migrant workers who work in the informal sector. It costs more to police them, compared to the possible tax that might be collected from them.
the result of the absence of the state. In return, they might have the effect of containing workers, but they were not designed for that.

**Being safe and saving money**

From the macroeconomic perspective, the army of construction workers was the direct result of China’s housing boom. So, if the housing market keeps rising, the construction workers will benefit because they will have more job opportunities and bargaining power. Is this the case at my construction site? What do construction workers think of their job? How do they perceive and think of their daily life on the construction site?

From mid-2014, the housing sector was already in a transitional phase. Construction projects were slowing down and the housing investment was cooling down. This macro-level situation had impact on my site as well. As I mentioned in section 3 of this chapter, the living quarters were not fully occupied and two dorm buildings were unused. That was because the construction site was not operating in its full capacity. Nonetheless, this macro-level situation had little influence on the construction workers’ daily life in 2014 and 2015. Among the nearly 200 construction workers, the majority were in their 30s to 50s and most workers were from cities adjacent to Beijing, such as Tangshan, Baoding, Cangzhou, and Xingtai. These workers were even not interested in their job or their identity as construction workers per se, let alone the nature of the construction practice and the macroeconomic situation.

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48 The construction workforce is structurally different from the work force supporting China’s export machine. Young migrants normally work in large factories in Southern cities such as Wenzhou, Guangzhou, Dongguan, and Xiamen, etc. Older migrants work in construction sites and restaurants all over China. Both of these two major labor forces in contemporary China are de-unionized, and both of these two groups save heavily from their monthly salary. They belong to the bottom stratum of contemporary Chinese society, and they are the most likely threats to the Chinese state and the authoritarian regime, not the rising middle-class theorized by Western scholars.
Several key cultural and institutional factors contributed to contemporary Chinese construction workers having little knowledge or curiosity about their job. What kept them on the construction site was the relative stable salary and the sentiment of villagehood or fellow townsman they shared with each other. As I mentioned earlier, the construction industry was extremely hierarchical. Workers on my construction site were organized by their sub-contractors or bosses (*baogongtou*) and disciplined by their bosses as well. Most of them even had no knowledge about the name of the construction company that hired their bosses, let alone the developer who hired the construction company. This was an institutional factor as well as a cultural factor. Institutionally speaking, the construction company did not have any formal relationship with the construction workers, because it only directly dealt with its sub-contractors (the water-proof material sub-contractor, the tower crane sub-contractor, the steel-laying sub-contractor, the concrete sub-contractor, etc.). Culturally speaking, most sub-contractors were informally organized, and these bosses hired the migrant workers from their own town or village. Moreover, many sub-contractors had quite close relation with their workers, and they could easily abuse this relationship by delaying their workers’ salary or promising a future payment. Here again, the regulator purposefully “ignored” the payment conflicts between sub-contractors and their employees. Only when migrant workers engaged in collective protest to demand their payment would local government officials start to intervene.\(^49\) Lawsuits practically did not exist in the lowest stratum of Chinese society, let alone this kind of class lawsuits.

In this regard, although the construction workers were institutionally unwelcome in Beijing and lived on an enclosed and walled jobsite, they were still culturally and emotionally

\(^{49}\) “Demanding payment” is a common phenomenon in contemporary China, especially during the Chinese New Year, because most salary payments of migrant construction workers are scheduled before the Chinese New Year. It is culturally shocking that the poorest group in China gets paid annually, since it is the richest stratum in the West that gets paid annually. It is more shocking that the Chinese state and the state media oftentimes play the role of the savior for migrant workers who fail to get their salaries.
bound by their fellow villagers’ companionship. This dual cultural and institutional factor, together with the economic situation of failing to find a better job, shaped them into a highly coherent and disciplined group, or more accurately, several highly coherent and disciplined sub-groups. They still had a communal life far away from their rural community. In reality, their collective socio-economic condition made their life on the construction site more communal than their life back in their rural community. After all, it was on this urban but temporary jobsite where migrant workers dined together, worked together, slept together, and entertained themselves together.

I would not say that these construction workers were pessimistic about their jobs and future. They got used to their identity as poor migrant construction workers and they did not think they would be rich or better-off in the future. However, they exchanged laughter at work and in their dorm. Every day from 7pm to 9pm was the most enjoyable moment to the construction workers. They brought foods—stir-fried vegetables, a few pieces of pork or chicken, plain buns or rice—from the canteen to their dorm, some bought a bottle of beer from the convenience store, some drank a small cup of strong Chinese liquor (baijiu) brought from their home, and they chatted and laughed about their wives at home, told funny stories they had heard, or talked about a fellow villager who made a fortune. Food sharing was not uncommon if someone bought a roast duck from an outside restaurant or received some preserved foods from home. By living with those construction workers and chatting with them, I could feel that their laughter was genuine. However, this happiness on the site had nothing to do with their job per se but was the result of their companionship with their fellow villagers or townsmen.

Mr. Lu, a steel-laying worker from a rural village in Tangshan (a city northeast to Beijing), lived with his 11 co-workers and fellow villagers right next to my dorm. As a father of
two boys in his late 30s, Mr. Lu’s justification of taking this job 200 kilometers away from his home village was “making money for his two sons’ education and helping them buy an apartment in their county when they grow up.” Mr. Lu clearly had an urban aspiration, though it was not buying an apartment in Beijing or becoming a resident in Beijing. Instead, he wanted to save enough money to buy two apartments for his two sons in their home county. Although he was born in a village and his wife was still doing some basic agricultural work in their village, Mr. Lu preferred to become an urban resident and move to the county center with his family in the not so remote future (and register as a non-agricultural household). By making 150 yuan per day (around $23) and saving heavily, Mr. Lu could save about 40,000 yuan (around $6,100) a year. After his wife and two sons spent half of his savings, he could still save 20,000 yuan (around $3,050) a year. With this saving rate, Mr. Lu would be able to buy a small apartment in his home county in ten years, if there were no accident or illness for him or his family.

Mr. Lu, similar to most other construction workers, was willing to eat the bitterness for his dream, and his only extra consumption on the site was smoking a pack of cigarette (5 yuan) per day. It was the remote dream or responsibility outside of the construction site that motivated the construction workers to eat the bitterness, while it was the onsite sentiment of villagehood that sustained the construction workers’ daily activities.
Working on the construction site was not only eating the bitterness, but also facing life-threatening dangers without any institutional protection. As a result, construction workers in a subgroup had to closely look after each other to avoid any possible accident. Mr. Zhang, a steel-laying worker who worked for a Cangzhou sub-contractor, was a leader of a team of six members. Being paid 50 yuan more per day (he could make 200 yuan—around $30—a day), his job included watching his team members in addition to getting his own job done.
“The construction site cannot afford any accident. It is bad for everyone. It is bad for us, bad for our boss, and bad for the developer as well. We (construction workers) have no insurance, so we can only look after ourselves and rely on ourselves to be safe.”

“Relying on ourselves” and “looking after fellow villagers or townsmen,” quite shockingly, was another factor or reason that made contemporary Chinese workers highly disciplined. Those workers were not trained to be construction workers. However, by practicing construction work with licenses obtained and secured by their sub-contractors or bosses (most of them did not take the exam by themselves to get their licenses), these non-unionized, temporary rural migrant workers turned into “the extremely organized” army of workers who actualized the Chinese dream of becoming a modern nation—at least in its built environment.

In sum, being safe and saving money were the only two things that concerned the construction workers on my site. None of my interviewees ever imagined improving their living standard in Beijing or gaining more bargaining power regarding their insurance and social security benefits. To them, these demands were not aspirations, since they simply did not exist. The only demand they had was “the canteen should make meals more delicious and offer more meat.” But this trivial, non-institutional requirement was still hard to be satisfied, because the construction company preferred to save expenses. Thus, migrant construction workers were socially and self-consciously projected as the ones who were meant to eat the bitterness in the city where they did not belong to.
A younger generation’s more ambitious aspirations

But not every worker on the site merely aimed at being safe and saving money. Some workers, particularly the younger generation and the ones who did more technical jobs on the site, were more ambitious about their life and their role in the construction practice.

Mr. Gardener, a young man in his late 20s, was proud of the communities that he helped to build as a tower crane driver. According to him, “every brick, every steel bar is moved by my tower crane. Without me, the project can’t be done.” Different from the construction workers who did not have aspirations regarding their job per se, Gardener was a positive young man who was proud of his role on the site and confident about his future. He told me that he entered into the career of being a crane driver by physically visiting a construction site in his hometown six years ago. He persuaded a crane driver to take him as his apprentice. In his words, there were many ways to become a crane driver. One could get trained to be a crane driver by studying in a vocational school. But attending a school was not necessary, if you knew someone who could give you a license for practicing crane driving.
As a crane driver, Gardener made 6,000 yuan a month. That was a decent and even admirable salary in China. Together with his girlfriend, they made 11,000 yuan a month and could save around 100,000 yuan a year (around $15,000 US dollars). Even a middle-class household in the United States could not easily save 15,000 dollars a year. However, being uninsured and unaffiliated with any institution, Gardener and his girlfriend Miss Little Rich had to have a frugal way of life and save to plan their own future—one of their dreams was buying an apartment in Miss Little Rich’s home county in three years so that Miss Little Rich’s parents
would allow Gardener to marry their daughter. Gardener was positive about buying a new apartment in three years with cash. To him, this was not his dream but a feasible plan that could be realized. In early February 2015, I was positive about Gardener’s apartment-buying plan as well. However, as 2015 passed by and China’s housing market further cooled down, I was not sure whether Gardener and Miss Rich would secure another crane driving job on another construction site somewhere in China so that they could save another 100,000 yuan (roughly $15,000) in the coming year of 2016.

Gardener’s real ambition was not just buying a home for Miss Little Rich and him. He dreamed of something bigger. He was totally aware that the crane driving job was not secure, because the job term was based on a given construction project. Once a project was over, their job term was over. So, a smart crane driver had to know how to find a new job before the end of one’s current term. In the last six years, Gardener had always successfully found a new jobsite after one project was over. And it was through looking for a new crane driving job that Gardener met his girlfriend Miss Little Rich two years ago. Here, in this practice of job finding, Gardener revealed his bigger dream to me.

“If I can rent some tower cranes, I will rent some. If I can’t rent by myself, I will work for the rental company. Or, if there are other jobs, I can rent some or do some as well.”

“What other jobs?”

“Anything related to construction work. I have people (laborers). If I know a site is looking for some workers, I can go there to talk with the manager and rent the jobs to others.”

“You ask someone else to do the job? You become a sub-contractor?”
“Yes, like that, hehe (giggling).”

*Becoming a sub-contractor,* Gardener was indeed aiming at doing something bigger and more lucrative. If he succeeded, he would become a boss for his own workers. He might become rich by abusing China’s informal housing industry, i.e., through organizing and exploiting poorer migrant workers, or he might end up losing all his savings if the project he subcontracted went bankrupt.

By formally interviewing Gardener and living with him for nearly two weeks, I could feel his ambition. However, being young and occupying a relatively technical position did not necessarily make a construction worker ambitious. Little Hou, another tower crane driver in his mid-20s who shared the lower level of a bunk bed with me, had no idea regarding his future. Although he was born in a rural area in Chongqing (a metropolis with over 10 million people in southwest China), he never did any real agricultural work and he became a migrant worker right after he graduated from his middle-school. Before working on construction sites, he worked in factories in Shenzhen and restaurants in Chongqing for a few years. Confused, distant, and quiet, Little Hou never actively talked with anyone in our dorm or on the site. The only friends he had were in his cellphone, and it was from watching him playing with his cellphone that I could detect genuine human interactions and laughter from Little Hou.

Life on the construction site was more *alienating* to Little Hou than to Gardener, Miss Little Rich, and other construction workers. Gardener and Miss Little Rich had a pending plan to buy an apartment in three years and a more ambitious dream to become a sub-contractor that supported their stay on the construction site over 1,000 kilometers away from their hometown. Other construction workers had their family responsibilities and fellow villagers or townsmen’s
companionship that eased their bitterness on the construction site. For Little Hou, it was total alienation—no ownership to his means of production and no interests in his crane driving job per se, far away from his hometown (over 2,000 kilometers), and not have a single friend on the jobsite. Would the salary of 5,000 yuan a month sufficiently sustain his stay on the jobsite in 2015? It was a question that lacked a definite answer even from Little Hou himself.

The deeper one delves into the nature of China’s contemporary construction practice, the more problems one discovers. These problems cannot be explained by a single theoretical framework—not the neo-liberal state, not the social control via the household registration (hukou), not the collectivistic tradition, and not the pre-modern cultural mind-set. However, all these factors play their role in shaping China’s contemporary construction practice and construction workers’ daily life.

Workers remain extremely powerless, institutionally, socio-economically, and culturally. They are institutionally cordoned off from China’s rapidly urbanizing cities, because they have no access to resources and benefits of the city in which they work. They are socio-economically disadvantaged, since they have no insurance, no union, and no social security benefits of any kind. They are culturally belittled, ignored, and even discriminated against by contemporary Chinese society. Their sentiment of fellow villagers or townsmen’s companionship exists as a remedy for their bitterness on the jobsite temporarily rather than as a thing by itself. As a cultural being, the sentiment of fellow villagers or townsmen’s companionship can hardly be seen in other places in contemporary Chinese society. Despite their powerless and underclass status, a

50 Little Hou came to Beijing with one of his hometown friends in 2013. But his friend left Beijing to work on another construction site. As I have pointed out in note 45, young migrant workers are more likely to work in large factories in South China. Comparing China’s younger generation of migrant workers (late teenagers to early 30s) with older generation of migrant workers (late 30s to 60s) will be an intriguing research topic by itself.
rapid urbanizing China has been built by these migrant workers to whom the whole society gives little credit.
Chapter 4

Moving into the community—economic considerations versus the way of life
It has often been observed that the Chinese are a pragmatic people who don’t waste much time on speculative notions but turn their mind to solving the problems set before them… Success is measured not by good intentions but by results. It has also been said that the present reformist regime is less ideological than its predecessor, that it displays pragmatic management skills and flexibility, and that it has a realistic assessment of the limits of its still considerable powers. (John Friedmann, China’s Urban Transition, 2005, pp. 119-120)

Using pragmatism to categorize the Chinese and the Chinese regime is certainly cogent. As I have argued in the last chapter, the construction workers tried to make the best out of their structurally disadvantaged situation pragmatically, rather than engaging in any collective and ideological confrontation. The fact is, they could have chosen a more confrontational strategy, because both the Chinese Constitution and the Chinese state’s propaganda apparatus claim that China is a socialist country centered on the proletariat. Yet, China is not a country ruled by its Constitution. It has become more authoritarian since the 1989 incident, which is still a national taboo till now.

Instead of being closely connected, the design process and the construction process of suburbanization in contemporary China are separated from each other, as I have discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. On the one hand, architects and urban designers who design the contemporary Chinese space rarely know anything about actual construction workers who build the buildings, and they do not pay attention to workers as well. On the other hand, actual

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51 The June Fourth Tiananmen Incident in 1989 is a taboo that is still actively censored by the central government. The official account argues that students were misled by some leaders and the Western evil forces who intended to overthrow the Socialist Regime, and Deng saved the regime by acting strongly. However, the official account never publicized how many student protesters were killed on June 4th. A few leading scholars (Wang, 2009) in China argue that the entire academia and intellectual elites become collectively silent after the June Fourth incident, and the legitimacy of the CPC regime relies solely on its economic success thereafter.
construction workers are trapped at the bottom of the construction hierarchy without any institutional protection or benefits. Although these two groups live and work in the same space—the same jobsite and living quarters, they are socio-economically and functionally distance from each other.

This seemingly obvious dichotomy between the representation of space and the construction of space is not the most dominant relationship in China’s rapidly urbanizing cities. Both of these two practices are subordinated to a more powerful abstract space, the space for the sake of capital accumulation which is controlled by the developer, and ultimately the state. The decisive power of the developer and the state in the place-making process of a residential community not only exists in the developing and construction stages, but also in the housing-sale period and even after the community is completed.

However, since my research project focuses more on how residents perceive and think of their living environment—the walled and gated suburban community which is omnipresent in contemporary China, I will emphasize the residents’ role in the place-making process. Three major questions will be answered in the following three chapters. What motivated residents to move into the “Beverly Hills Towers”? How do residents perceive and think of the “Beverly Hills Towers” as their home and a living environment in suburban Beijing? And finally, what does their daily life look like in Beverly Hills Towers?

“Oversupply” in a highly controlled market

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the developer of one of the sites that belonged to the X village gained the plot and started to develop it in 2008. Although many places in the world suffered
from the global financial crisis back in that time, China’s housing market and construction were still on the rise, largely due to the controversial four trillion yuan (US$ 586 billion) stimulus package.\(^{32}\) Most of the stimulus money went to infrastructure investment and the real estate sector, which stimulated China’s domestic consumption from the supply side rather than from the demand side.

Based on the data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China,\(^{53}\) from 2005 to 2015, China’s national housing consumption increased from 554.9 million square meters to 1,285 million square meters, while its unsold housing stock increased from 146.8 million square meters to 718.5 million square meters. The unsold housing stock increased five times in the last ten years. In general, an apartment in China has a floor area of 100 square meters (about 1,000 square feet), which means that there were at least 7.185 million unsold housing units in China in 2015.

Beijing, one of China’s most heated housing markets, witnessed a steady increase in housing construction, investment and housing prices but with a more volatile amount of housing consumption. It is not easy to make sense of the macro-level data of Beijing’s housing market. How can the housing prices keep up with increasing supply but decreasing demand, if price is the outcome of the balanced relationship between supply and demand? Economically speaking, a shifting relationship between supply and demand will result in a fluctuating price. However, from Table 4.1, we do not see any volatility in the price indicator. It seems that Beijing home-buyers’ actual demands have nothing to do with the frantic state of the housing market. As long as housing prices are still on the rise, developers feel keep constructing and keep investing in the real estate sector, even though they cannot sell their products (Table 4.1 and Figure 4.1).

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\(^{32}\) See note 33 in Chapter Three for China’s stimulus package.

### Table 4.1. Beijing’s housing market from 2007 to 2015

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<td>97.19</td>
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<td>14.39</td>
<td>19.43</td>
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<td>15.547</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13799</td>
<td>17782</td>
<td>16852</td>
<td>17022</td>
<td>18553</td>
<td>18833</td>
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*Note. Adapted from National Bureau of Statistics of China, “Beijing’s Real Estate Sector,”


A crucial factor to understanding China’s housing glut is the concept of *potential demand*. The housing market, and the state, assumes that China’s urbanization rate will increase and millions of migrant workers will move to and settle in the city, even though the state has not provided any substantial measures or policies to support migrant workers settling in the city. Keeping in mind the harsh conditions discussed in the last chapter, how could those non-
unionized, badly paid rural migrant workers be able to afford a housing unit that they constructed? The current measures endorsed by the state are merely investing in the supply side and making sure developers can get loans from the major banks controlled by the state. Thus, in general and nation-wide, China suffers from a housing glut. But this picture does not exactly match the situation of China’s mega cities (national in-migration cities) such as Beijing.

Figure 4.1. Beijing’s housing market from 2007 to 2015. Adapted from Table 4.1.

In China’s mega cities, one institutional barrier that is related to the potential housing demand distorts the actual demand of housing market. It is the household registration system, or
the *hukou* system. In Beijing, a metropolitan hub that has over 22 million people in 2015, only half of these permanent residents have the Beijing *hukou*. Many permanent residents in Beijing would like to buy a home. However, their *hukou* restraints them from owning a home, if they do not have a Beijing *hukou* or they have not paid income tax in Beijing for 5 consecutive years. In this regard, millions of non-*hukou* holders, many of them well-educated and working in the service sector, have to repress their housing demand, save heavily, and rush to “grab” a home once they meet the home-purchasing conditions—paying income tax and social security in Beijing for 5 consecutive years and having a residence permit.\(^{54}\) This is the most crucial factor to explain why housing prices in Beijing match housing investment and these two continuous rising lines (gray line and blue line) have nothing to do with actual housing consumption (brown line) from 2007 to 2015 in Figure 4.1.

If the institutional barrier represses and thereafter *potentially reinforces* millions of non-*hukou* holders’ housing demand, a cultural factor further stimulates the potential housing demand. In China, “owning an apartment” or “financially being capable to own an apartment in the near future” is a pre-condition for Chinese men to get a wife or even a date (Jacobs, 2011). Since the heterosexual family is still a strong institution in contemporary China socio-culturally, parents or a parent will not let a daughter get married if the future son-in-law does not own a home or is not capable of buying a home in the near future. Although it sounds like a bizarre cultural rule in a modern society, the Chinese state actually uses concrete institutional policies to crystalize this cultural tradition. The state makes it hard for people who do not own a home to obtain essential permits from giving birth to a child to registering a child in a public school to even getting a driver’s license or a passport in the city where they live. These crucial daily life practices, especially these practices related to reproduction, show how capable the Chinese state is in

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\(^{54}\) See note 2 for details regarding who is qualified to change one’s *hukou*. 
controlling the society and consequentially in steering the housing market to the direction it prefers.

Ordinary urban residents, embedded in these cultural and institutional practices, consider owning a home as the pre-condition to have a basic (not decent) life. In a country where a formal rental market does not exist and renters are highly discriminated against and badly treated, urban residents are pressured into buying a home whenever they are capable, even though owning an apartment and paying a monthly mortgage reduces their quality of life in the short term. In Beijing, permanent residents without hukou are even more desperate to own an apartment, especially married couples. Although they are not institutionally recognized as Beijingers, their real estate property provides them a solid standing in Beijing, offers them various essential rights related to reproduction mentioned in the last paragraph, and even generates numerous psychological benefits such as self/family-esteem and self/family-appreciation.

When I asked Ms. Ou, a young mom, a college graduate from China’s Harvard (Peking University), and an experienced social worker in a well-funded NGO (funded by the Ford Foundation), why she decided to buy an apartment and move to the Beverly Hills Towers, she answered me passionately. She even doubted why I asked her such an obvious question, and her tone sounded like I knew nothing about China and the meaning of owning a home in Beijing.

“I am not just buying a house (apartment). I am buying my life in Beijing…Graduated from a (top) university in Beijing in 2006, I had been a renter in central Beijing for 6 years before I bought a house (apartment) in the suburb. Yes, I need to commute more than one and a half hours to work per route every weekday and the

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55 Ms. Ou was one of my key informants and interviewees who lived in Beverly Hills Towers. She still did not have a Beijing hukou by 2015, although she already owned a home and had a stable family in Beijing. Similar to other working Chinese millennials, Ms. Ou’s parents were taking care of the two-year old daughter in her Beijing suburban home.
subway is always packed like hell. Owning an apartment makes me have a basic life in Beijing so that I can have a baby, register her in a school here in the future, invite my friends and my parents to my home, and feel like I have a home in Beijing…”

Indeed, my understanding of home-buyers and potential home-buyers in Beijing grows as time goes on. In my various pre-dissertation field trips in Beijing from 2009 to 2013, I did not live on my field sites long enough to fully understand people’s daily life and demands. All I had observed were huge housing oversupply, soaring housing price, frantic home-buyers, and limited civil interactions in Beijing’s gated communities. I had no idea why people rushed to “grab” apartments when the housing stock kept piling up and “oversupply” was obvious. Did people rush to “grab” apartments in Beijing because the price kept rising? Among those people who rushed to grab a home, some had a home or many homes already, so why did they still rush? I had a naïve thought, which was logical and made sense economically. Namely, if residents in Beijing do not fight to “grab” apartments, the already “irrational” housing price will decline due to the oversupply and reduced demands, thereafter more people can afford to buy a home.

Only after I talked to Ms. Ou and other young home-buyers like Ms. Ou in Beijing and “rushed” to dozens of apartment hunting events pretending to be a real homebuyer, did I finally understand that the housing mania in Beijing was not a story of oversupply at all and my naïve thought (about supply and demand) does not make much sense in reality. China’s housing market in general is suffering from oversupply, on the basis of over 7 million unsold housing units claimed by the Bureau of Statistics of China and over 60 million empty homes speculated online (Jacobs, 2011). However, in Beijing, a highly controlled and distorted housing market where the rich own multiple (even hundreds of) housing units without paying annual property tax...
at all while the poor and the restrained own nothing, the housing demand of millions of residents is *institutionally* repressed and then incubated. “Hoarding supply,” as an open secret, is rampant in China’s megacities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, and the state once again “ignores” individual and institutional investors’ hoarding activities. Several rounds of academic and media debate about imposing property taxes did not result in any concrete policy changes. Consequently, the repressed individuals and households—most of them are highly-educated, working hard, and saving heavily—will grab the opportunity to buy an apartment whenever they meet the conditions, in order to secure their basic life standing in Beijing. They are using a highly individual way to solve an institutional flaw, although the state might not have intentionally created this flaw. Since millions of individual housing demands can only be satisfied after meeting certain conditions or criteria, the situation indicates an “undersupply” rather than an “oversupply.” The state has no intention or effective ways to change this situation institutionally, thus the “undersupply” and “home-buying mania” will continue to be the reality in Beijing, at least for the near future.

**Apartment hunting and fancy pre-sale buildings**

Although the oversupply turns into an “undersupply” situation sounds dubious to foreigners and even economic theorists, it is the living background for millions of millennials and migrant workers in Beijing. Total housing units in Beijing can definitely accommodate its over 22

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56 Retrieved from [http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper81/11970/1077358.html](http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper81/11970/1077358.html). Two groups are the hoarders of China’s apartments in megacities—business blocs from South China such as “Wenzhou housing speculation group” and local and national party leaders. For both groups, there were only sporadic media reports. Especially for the latter group, media reports only revealed “apartment hoarding” after the officials were prosecuted and put into prison. Not surprisingly, there are no systematical studies regarding “apartment hoarding,” because this kind of study has a very gesture of attempting to overthrow the state. Retrieved from [http://special.caixin.com/2012-12-12/100471738.html](http://special.caixin.com/2012-12-12/100471738.html) Also see notes 13, 29, and 51.
million residents by absolute measures, but the uneven distribution of housing stock—and uneven distribution of resources across Chinese cities—still incubates huge housing demands. Moreover, Beijing’s housing market cannot be examined by the housing sector itself. The concentration of high-quality schools, hospitals and jobs in Beijing continuously attracts immigration, which further fosters potential housing demands in the already distorted housing market.

As long as millions of non-hukou holders in Beijing decide to stay in Beijing and use their life’s savings to own an apartment there, thanks to the state’s social control policy via hukou, developers will always have the power to steer consumers’ demands. This unbalanced relationship between developers and consumers explains the lack of design or the impotence of architecture design in contemporary China from a socio-economic perspective. There is no economic stimulus to create a built environment that satisfies consumers’ nuanced needs. Most home-buyers are just desperate to grab an apartment to support a solid standing in Beijing, rather than expecting any higher-level benefits—aesthetic, psychological, socio-political, etc. In this regard, China’s suburban movement is a pure economic process without any political and cultural invocation, and it cannot be frame in the theory of “defended space” (Low 2003; Judd & Swanstrom 2010) either. Mr. Xia, a senior architect who has been working in the field over 15 years, already hinted this point in Chapter Two.

“People just want an apartment in Beijing, and those who have a home already want to own more because of the investment value. You can ask my fellow architects in this room, ‘how many of them do not have a home in Beijing?’ and ‘how many of them want to buy a home in Beijing?’ We architects in China are not architects in Western
countries. In Italy, an architect can design for a very small house. Here, even a giant residential building requires no (genuine) design at all.”

The actual undersupply in Beijing and the lack of housing design constitute the status quo of the built environment. They have a huge impact on people’s housing expectations, psychological pressure to secure a home, and their actual house-buying behaviors. People’s expectations and house-buying behaviors, on the other hand, reinforce the status quo of the residential built environment in Beijing. This interactive model of human-environment relationship (Wicker, 1979) will be further discussed in the following chapters.

However, the status quo should not be exaggerated. It cannot be claimed that architects in Beijing do not provide genuine housing design at all. Nor can it be claimed that home-buyers have no higher-level housing expectations. There are wealthy people in Beijing who have more nuanced demands of their home, and there are well-designed communities for the wealthier social stratum. These communities in general are outside of the vision and access of ordinary and middle-class people in Beijing and form another example of spatial injustice (Huang & Low, 2008) in contemporary Beijing.

Most housing design and housing consumption are nothing but footnotes in the developers’ capital accumulation process, i.e., the process to produce the abstract space. Not surprisingly, capital hides its brutal process of accumulation in a culturally disguised way. In the various kinds of advertisement brochures that present the soon-to-be completed gated communities, developers attempt to cater to the growing demands of China’s middle class. They make the gated community look fancy and luxurious (such as the Lincoln Park project discussed in Chapter Two), in order to allure families who are interested in buying the status symbol of
such a community. They can also create a cozy and vibrant image of the gated community (such as the Vanke Vitality project discussed in Chapter Two), in order to attract young buyers who are more inclined to convenience and comfortableness. Are middle-class home-buyers\textsuperscript{57} attracted by the image or theme controlled and manipulated by developers? To answer this question, a crucial practice in China’s place-making process has to be examined in greater details—the pre-sale exhibition center.

One reason of China’s hectic housing development is due to the pre-sale system\textsuperscript{58}. It is a policy that allows developers to sell housing units before the completion of a building or a gated community, which accelerates capital turnover for developers to a large degree. This system was introduced to China in the 1990s when the housing supply was scarce but the housing demand was huge—a relatively richer China tried to build newer housing for its workers, mostly SOE employees. Gradually, as the supply went up, developers had to use various marketing tactics to allure potential customers to participate in the pre-sale system and pay for the housing unit before they moved in. Erecting a lavish pre-sale exhibition center on the construction site before the completion of the community became a common practice and even a standard procedure. If there is housing competition among developers in China, the pre-sale exhibition center would be one of the key places where competition occurs.

\textsuperscript{57} See notes 12 and 48 for more details regarding discussion of China’s middle class.

\textsuperscript{58} Retrieved from http://www.bjreview.com.cn/forum/txt/2010-04/17/content_264228_2.htm
Figure 4.2. A lavish pre-sale exhibition center in south Beijing. It offers free coffee and drinks to visitors who show their interests in buying a housing unit there. (Photo Pengfei Li)

The pre-sale exhibition center is the showplace of the attractiveness of the soon-to-be finished gated community. Most pre-sale exhibition centers are well designed to make people feel what the real community will look like in completion. Oftentimes, the pre-sale center projects a soon-to-be finished community that is more beautiful and pleasing than the ultimate reality, because it only highlights that specific gated community and ignores the surrounding environment that is usually not attractive at all. In this regard, visitors, as potential home-buyers, have to constantly compare the beautiful miniature projected in the pre-sale center and the actual “reality” projected or imagined in their mind. Here, an interesting theme of postmodernism is
echoed over and over again—all are signs and symbols while the reality or things themselves do not exist (Baudrillard, 1995). The image of the gated community in the potential homebuyers’ mind will not be a whole picture that matches the reality of the gated community objectively either. Lynch’s (1960) idea that city residents have a more or less similar image of the city in which they live is not the case of Beijing’s gated communities. In Beijing, although the sandbox simulation or miniature in the pre-sale center does indeed project an image of the gated community, developers never use the objective image to promote their sales. They merely use the image to please their potential buyers, and the potential buyers know that the sign represented by the miniature is anything but real. Moreover, potential buyers are more interested in individual housing units than the whole picture of the community, since sincere home-buyers always insist on visiting the model housing unit that has been decorated by the developer rather than just staying in the main exhibition hall.

No matter how fancy and pleasing Beijing’s numerous pre-sale centers look like, they play more tangible and realistic rules. The pre-sale center functions as a market place and even a market incubator, which collects visitors’ information such as name, occupation, and cellphone number. Once a visitor shows sincere interests in buying a housing unit, a sale representative in the pre-sale center will talk to the visitor and persuade the visitor to sign for a housing unit. The sale representatives, not surprisingly, emphasize more about the housing unit’s property value and investment value, rather than its architecture style or theme. And most home-buyers look for the use value and economic value of the housing unit, rather than its aesthetic and social value. In the regard, the owned apartment, as a “necessary” entity for the Haves, refers to different things to the two groups—the sale representatives and the potential home-buyers.
In the past 5 years, as Beijing’s housing market has become more heated, developers have begun to transform a housing pre-sale into a grand social event. With media coverage and large number of potential homebuyers’ participation on a single day, the image of a hot housing market is reinforced over and over again and potential homebuyers’ housing demands are further reinforced psychologically. During my fieldwork in Beijing, I had been asked multiple times to pay a registration fee (normally 10,000 to 30,000 yuan, around 1,500 to 4,500 US dollars) so that I could participate in the house hunting event on the final sale day. I would never pay such a registration fee even if I were a sincere home-buyer, because I am not qualified to buy a housing unit in Beijing in the first place as a non-hukou holder who never paid the income tax and social security fee in Beijing.59

On the final sale day, the ones (visitors turn into actual homebuyers) who have paid the registration fee and signed a contract to participate in the sale event rush to the pre-sale center to select a housing unit they are willing to buy, by telling the sale representative their confirmed housing unit on the large screen or by physically placing a flag on the specific housing unit in the miniature sandbox. Through inviting certain mainstream media to broadcast the house selling event, developers not only sell their current soon-to-be erected gated communities, but also promote sales and housing demands for their future projects. They often exaggerate the number of homebuyers who have paid the registration fee, and they are always “proud” to announce that not all buyers who have paid the registration fee can actually buy a housing unit and all the housing units have been sold out on a single sale day. However, savvy homebuyers will not fail to notice that most pre-sale centers are still open after the big house-hunting day and they still have housing units to sell in the not yet completed community.

59 Some sale representatives were desperate to sell. They even suggested me that I could marry someone in Beijing who was qualified to buy a housing unit.
Buying an apartment, you have to buy one!

Although I did not participate in the pre-sale event of the “Beverly Hills Towers” in 2011, I participated in several sale and pre-sale events from 2013 to 2015. Some were more frenetic than others, if the locations were good and the developers were well-known. It is methodologically problematic to discuss the sale conditions of the “Beverly Hills Towers” based on these other sale events. However, their similarity and Beijing’s housing supply in general definitely influence the mindset of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents regarding their motivations for moving into the community. To a certain degree, similar house sale events occurred elsewhere, once broadcast by some mainstream media and received by the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents, can further reconstruct their memory of their own home-buying process. After all, people’s memories are shaped by the past events as much as by the ongoing events and even future expectations. Mr. Tang, a millennial in his early 30s who took my interview due to his father’s persuasion, told me that “I still go to the pre-sale events occasionally, because I am looking for a second home. However, the prices are less affordable now and the communities are in further areas now.”

From the house-sale day in 2011 to the day when homeowners started to move to the “Beverly Hills Towers” in 2013, most “Beverly Hills Towers” residents had waited two years to move into their housing unit, thanks to the pre-sale system. A two-year delay is the normal waiting time in China’s pre-sale system. For some unlucky home-buyers, they might wait an uncertain amount of time if the developer went bankrupt or the funding was insufficient (it happened occasionally in some smaller cities in China), although they have already bought their housing unit and/or have been paying their monthly mortgage since they participated in the pre-
sale system. In the case of “Beverly Hills Towers,” another interesting phenomenon deserves further discussion. Since this gated community is in one of China’s most frenetic housing markets, the property value increased over 25% even before the community became habitable. Some home-buyers of “Beverly Hills Towers” never moved into the community and some housing units in the community had undertaken multiple transactions before their real “owner” finally moved in. Here, the capitalistic feature of housing as a commodity reaches its perfect state—not only as a product for consumption but also as an object for speculation. The state, or more precisely the lack of the state, facilitates the practice of this kind of capitalistic consumption and speculation.

The reason that I place so much emphasis on the socio-economic context of the pre-sale system and Beijing residents’ house-hunting activities is because its enduring importance. Residents of the “Beverly Hills Towers” bought a housing unit and moved to this gated community were more inspired by owning a property and a home in the gated community rather than the style and features of the physical environment itself. As mentioned earlier, no matter how real the miniature sandbox presented in the pre-sale exhibition center is, the salespersons use the convenience of the community and the investment value of the housing unit to attract potential buyers. In the entire housing selling process, it is again the socio-economic feature rather than the aesthetic and socio-cultural features that has been emphasized. As shown in Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4, most suburban homes for sale are in a vast vacant land; if home-buyers use the physical environment itself to guide their home-buying activities, they have to bet on a lot of uncertain environmental issues—how the surrounding area will look like in the future, whether the streets will be well-paved, whether the community will look the same as in the sandbox, etc. However, these questions and concerns seem to be inessential to current home-
buyers, at least in the frantic Beijing housing market. Getting a home, buying a home before it becomes more expensive, sorely justifies most Beijing residents’ home-buying behavior. Is it a rational motivation? Is having a home a rational motivation? In Beijing’s case, having a home means buying and owning a home.

Figure 4.3. Home-buyers have to be patient to wait for their gated community to become habitable. To some, the surrounding of their community can be an urban desert for years. Still, the housing price rises continuously even in the empty area—a suburban residential area in southwest Beijing—shown in this photo. (Photo Pengfei Li)
Home is an emotionally loaded concept. Perhaps this is the only non-economic issue besides all those economic and institutional reasons discussed in this chapter that allures Beijing residents to buy a housing unit (I will discuss more on this topic in the following chapter). Although it is not difficult to conceptually separate one’s longing for home and one’s desire to buy and own a home, social practices in the past 20 years of housing reform in China have successfully planted a belief that families have to own their own home. Given that over 93.5% Chinese households own a home and over 18.6% households own two homes, according to a study conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, owning a home is no longer an economic choice but a social and ideological necessity.

Here, this number of 93.5% needs a careful cultural and institutional reading. As shown in Table 1.1 in the introduction part and the series of discussion of hukou by now, China’s rural land and rural housing are completely disregarded. About half of China’s citizens still lived in rural areas by 2016, and more than half of China’s citizens still had the “Agricultural hukou” by 2016. However, all rural people are considered homeowners in China, because statistics assumes that all rural people have a home in their rural villages, no matter how dilapidated and pre-modern their home is. In this sense, poor migrant workers in Beijing’s hundreds of construction sites discussed in Chapter Three and migrant workers in large factories in South China are all considered homeowners in their hometown. As to Beijing’s over 22.5 million residents, half of them are considered migrants and non-locals because they do not have a Beijing hukou. As long as they do not plan to settle in Beijing and purchase an apartment in Beijing, they are not considered as “Have Nots” and their housing demands will be completely ignored, such as Mr. Lu and his fellow construction workers discussed in Chapter Three.

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60 Retrieved from [http://sh.house.163.com/13/1225/19/9GVDJ2IL00073SDJ.html](http://sh.house.163.com/13/1225/19/9GVDJ2IL00073SDJ.html)
Most of my interviewees in “Beverly Hills Towers” laughed my question “why do you have to buy a home?” Some of them even questioned me back, “have you ever lived in China?” This interrogative question made me feel uneasy. They totally internalized the requirement to buy a home and rendered this deed a necessary pre-condition for a happy life. Why is “owning a home” a must? Why does a married couple have to buy an apartment? To me, they just made an ontological error\(^1\) that confuses a contingent condition with a necessary condition, or in other words, they confuse a choice with a must. People do not have to buy a home. There are other ways to dwell in a secure home and have a happy life, or at least there should be other ways to secure a home and have a happy life. However, contemporary Chinese have been culturally and ideologically manipulated in a way that most people cannot think otherwise or refuse to think the alternatives. As my quote from Friedmann in the beginning of this chapter, “the Chinese are a pragmatic people who don’t waste much time on speculative notions but turn their mind to solving the problems set before them” (p.119). However, this problem set before them—owning a home—definitely needs serious debate and even actual challenges. However, most Chinese choose to put more burdens on themselves and their family to solve this problem, rather than seeking a broader societal answer.

**Representation of space**

A housing unit in contemporary Beijing, including the over 1,500 housing units in “Beverly Hills Towers,” is socially produced and sensed as an economic necessity. People’s social practices in

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\(^1\) Ontological certainty is a philosophical concept originated from Rene Descartes (1596 and 1650AD). People are desperate for certainty—they want their body to be a real entity and their mind to be a real entity as well. Treating a non-entity (a unicorn) as an entity (an existing animal) is an ontological error. Confusing a contingent condition with a necessary condition is also an ontological error.
the construction process and the exchange process of a gated community crystalize a housing unit—and a home—as an essentially economic entity, as discussed in Chapter Three and the first three sections in this chapter. This material space reinforces people’s conception of housing as an economic necessity, indicating the validity of the \textit{abstract space} in contemporary China. In addition, \textit{the representation of space} (Lefebvre, 1991) in contemporary China is nothing but the economic function of a housing unit and a gated community, without any cultural and political invocation. Although the status symbol is certainly a crucial by-product of the home consumption and many homeowners do like the status symbol as a homeowner, it is a socio-economic symbol than a cultural and political symbol. It is necessary to own an apartment and a home for a decent socio-economic standing, but not as a cultural and political aspiration.

Space has been conceived in this way not only by architects, urban planners, real estate developers and politicians as discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, but also by residents who use space on a daily basis. The economic and investment value of space triumphs over the aesthetic meaning and use value of space to an extreme degree, in which some architects and residents have to lament the lack of aesthetic meaning and use value of space even though they are longing for them desperately.
Figure 4.4. A young man is taking photo of an idle construction site, which is surrounded by several suburban residential gated communities. (Photo Pengfei Li)

When I asked residents in “Beverly Hills Towers” the exact reason that made them buy a housing unit and move into this gated community, most residents emphasized the economic rationale of their decision making process two or three years ago unsurprisingly. Mr. Sun, a young father in his 30s who worked in a well-known IT company in Beijing, told me that “his wife and he had to buy a new housing unit for their upcoming son in the year of 2011 and the housing price in this community matched their budget very well.” Mr. Zhang, a young single man in his early 30s who worked in a powerful state-own enterprise (SOE), provided a rationale that was so true to most young bachelors in contemporary China.
“I had been actively looking for a suburban apartment since 2010 after I got my master degree from New York University (NYU) and secured a good job in Beijing. Although I was not born in Beijing, my graduate degree from NYU and my SOE job rendered a Beijing hukou to me. So, I am ‘officially’ a Beijinger…With the help of the Housing Provident Fund (Figure 4.5), the housing price in ‘Beverly Hills Towers’ was a very good deal to me and I bought a housing unit immediately.”

Figure 4.5. Internal mechanism of the Housing Provident Fund (HPF). Adapted from The official website of Beijing Housing Provident Fund Center. http://www.bjgjj.gov.cn

A very good deal was Mr. Zhang’s rationale to buy a housing unit and move to “Beverly Hills Towers.” Mr. Zhang was a smart young man, and he became one of my close friends in
“Beverly Hills Towers” because of our similar experience in New York. As a single young man, his housing unit—a two-bedroom apartment—was even larger than many married couples with children in “Beverly Hills Towers.” Thanks to his SOE job and a good mortgage plan from the Chinese Housing Provident Fund (HPF). Mr. Zhang, as a typical HPF beneficiary, only paid a small portion of his mortgage monthly because his HPF paid the bigger portion. In this regard, he could enjoy a larger apartment while many married couples had to stay in a one-bedroom apartment due to their lack of the HPF mortgage support. A big goal for him, a more pressing expectation for his parents back in his hometown, was to find a good wife. And he was not so anxious about this mission because he already owned the pre-condition that thousands of thousands of bachelors in Beijing were dreaming of and working for.

The representation of space as an owned property—even without much aesthetic meaning and use value—is so ingrained in contemporary Chinese homeowners’ mind to such a degree that people rarely pay attention to other possible representations of space. Even to a well-designed gated community like “Beverly Hills Towers” which developers did attempt to impress

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62 The HPF is a capital pool contributed by enterprises and individuals together on a monthly basis for home-buyers to purchase a home. Although all employers and individuals are required to participate in the HPF, only SOEs participate in the HPF consistently and therefore the system benefits SOE employees mostly. In Beijing, the two most important conditions for HPF application are having a legal living permit in Beijing and participating in the HPF continuously for at least 12 consecutive months. For non-hukou holders, the precondition to legally buy an apartment in Beijing is paying taxes and social security for at least five consecutive years (see the first section of this chapter for more details). So, people who work in informal sectors are completely excluded from the HPF system, and people who work in the private sectors and private companies are more likely to be excluded from the HPF system, due to the less security and stability of private employment. Moreover, because all registered and formal companies are required by law to pay their shares and deduce their employees’ shares from the monthly salary, most Chinese cities end up having more HPF revenues than expenses, because a large number of people simply do not qualify for the HPF application. For instance, Beijing’s HPF input in 2015 was 446.85 million yuan, while its out was 444 million yuan, with a surplus of 2.85 million yuan. Retrieved from http://www.bjgjj.gov.cn/xwdt/201608/W020160825365937879207.pdf

The HPF system is definitely another institutional tool for the Chinese state to control housing consumption and even social stability. The SOEs employees—including government officials, state-owned companies’ employees, and the entire educational workforces and health care workforces—are so well protected by the system and they even do their best to abuse the system. In this regard, they lack the logical and moral stance to criticize the government and the regime. That is also why I have argued that China’s middle-class are not the threats to the state at all, and they even do not try to change the status quo and help migrant workers. See notes 12 and 48 for more details regarding discussion of China’s middle-class.
the potential home-buyers and residents via the appearance of the towers and the landscape design inside the community, it was the economic merit that had been emphasized over and over again. In a frantic housing market like Beijing’s, although people with financial capacity did have the freedom to choose their own home and community, the economic and investment concern was still the primary concern when they decided to buy and move into a gated community. “Is it a good deal?” and “Will the property value increase in the future?” were the two primary concerns during the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ home-buying process, rather than “Is it a good home?” and “Is the community good for me and my family?”

Scholars in the field of environmental psychology argue that people have clear psychological demands about their living environment and their home. People always manipulate and modify their space to “create a setting of psychological comfort” even in their childhood period, according to Cooper Marcus (1992). This capacity to mold and revise space is important for the formation of self-identity. In the case of “Beverly Hills Towers,” home-owners’ perception of their space as one’s owned property is certainly a psychological demand as well. Although residents in Beijing generally lack the opportunity to genuinely choose and modify their living environment because the numerous newly designed and constructed suburban communities do not differ substantially from each other, they (the relatively affluent residents) do have the choice to own a space. Own a space, or have to own a space, becomes the only genuine and tangible psychological demand in the buying and moving process. This psychological demand is crucial for the formation of residents’ self-identity, which indicates how economic status has been emphasized to an extreme and bizarre extent that the Have Nots63 “forever” live with shame.

63 They are not the 6.5% considered by statistics, but the over 50% non-hukou holders in Beijing, including decent white collar workers and college graduates.
The findings in this chapter are preliminary due to the qualitative and ethnographic nature of my study. I cannot use my interviews of a few residents in “Beverly Hills Towers” to represent all residents in the community; neither can I generalize the findings to other suburban communities in Beijing. Nonetheless, I analyze the general housing situation in the first section of this chapter and the general practices of home-hunting in section two and three, and these more general discussions echo the general mind-set of home-buyers in Beijing. The absolute housing over-supply in China does not negate the relative housing under-supply or over-demand in China’s mega-cities such as Beijing in my study, thanks to the state’s controversial hukou policy and other related social welfare policies. Over the past three decades, China’s economy has evolved into an extremely uneven state, in which coastal provinces and mega-cities have been receiving huge amounts of population and capital in-flows while villages and even smaller cities in inland provinces have been hollowed out.

Although China’s housing investment, consumption and price started to cool down from early 2014 to mid 2015 due to the obvious nation-wide oversupply, Beijing’s (similar to the three other mega-cities Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen) housing prices are still rising. That is because the housing demands of millions of non-hukou holders in Beijing who have been taught to have to buy a home are persistent. Moreover, “apartment hoarding” is frantic in Beijing, because people with wealth—“house uncle” and “house aunt” in China—are actively seeking places to “park” their capital and the Chinese State has no intention to regulate this predatory class, at least not at this moment. As a result, own a home becomes the most significant rationale for Beijing’s middle-class residents to choose a community and buy a housing unit there. However, once residents move into a new gated community, other aspects of the environment will definitely influence their daily life in the community although they emphasize the economic
aspect most. I will discuss more about the *lived space* and the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ daily life in the following chapter.
Chapter 5

The community where we live in—“high-end” community and decent residents
The skyscraper if considered as independent achievement in itself may be justifiable: a prideful thing! A tall building may be very beautiful, economical and desirable in itself—provided always that it is in no way interference with what lives below, but looking further ahead than the end of the landlord’s ruse—by inhabiting a small green park. That park is humane now. The skyscraper is no longer sane unless in free green space. (Frank Lloyd Wright, The Living City, 1958, p.52)

In Frank Lloyd Wright’s classic and passionate writings about city skyscrapers—Manhattan in his mind, he condemns skyscraping in an overcrowded city as rugged “individualism” of capitalism and “a moral, economic, aesthetic, ethical monstrosity” (Wright, 1958, p.55). His extreme negative attitude toward the overcrowded industrial city was not exceptional in the 1950s, when white flight was the dominant trend in a transforming America in the mid-20th century. Interestingly, Wright is one of the few urban theorists who admires and endorses Le Corbusier’s “towers-in-the-park” model, as he argues that high-rise buildings in free open space are beautiful and prideful (Wright, 1958, p.52).

Wright polarizes skyscrapers into two groups—high-rises in an overcrowded city as negative structures and high-rises in a free open space as positive structures. He seems to oversimplify the issue since he does not offer any social science studies to support his statements. Moreover, it is hard to prove that a specific urban environment—high-rises in an overcrowded city—has certain fixed impacts on people, because people are subject to multiple environments (social, cultural, economic, and other physical environments) simultaneously. Nonetheless, Wright’s account about skyscrapers in a free open space is relevant to China’s suburban reality, even though he personally advocated medium to low-density living. In Beijing, thousands of
residential communities are following the gated “towers-in-the-park” model, including the “Beverly Hills Towers.” Are the “Beverly Hills Towers” beautiful and prideful and influencing the residents positively? Did the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents move to their gated community due to the aesthetic value of their community?

People rarely make their location choices just based on their evaluation of the physical environment. Wright probably would not refuse to visit and even settle down in New York City solely because he thought New York City is a horrible urban environment. What is more, physical environment is inevitably linked with social and cultural practices. Aesthetic consideration is certainly a major factor motivating Americans to move to the suburb, as urban historian Dolores Hayden (2002) argues that the hut model—detached single-family house—is the most favored and the most constructed housing model in the United States. However, the hut is not just a physical entity with a positive aesthetic value. The hut is also a cultural symbol and it offers certain social goods such as education in the school district where the hut belongs to. The social function of the hut in the suburb, the so-called suburban way of life, is actually the most important factor motivating Americans to move to the suburb, according to some classic suburbia studies in the United States (Gans, 1982; Wood, 1958).

In the Chinese context, neither the aesthetic factor nor the social factor plays a big role in homeowners’ location choices. As I have argued in the last chapter, Beijing’s home-buyers are pressured to secure a housing unit, and their biggest concern is “whether they can get a good deal.” At least to my informants in Beijing, especially the first-time homeowners, the top reason to move to the suburb was the affordability of a housing unit in the suburb. They simply could not afford a housing unit in the city center and the city center rarely had new housing for sale. American suburbanites may still get confused about their Chinese counterparts’ specific location
choices, “Why the ‘Beverly Hills Towers’? Why not another suburban gated community?” These are totally legitimate questions in the American context, but they lack the ecological validity in the Chinese situation. Again, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the housing pre-sale system greatly confines Chinese homeowners’ perception of their future home. Aesthetical features and social features simply do not exist when most homeowners buy their housing unit—those features are on the various beautified brochures offered by the developer, while economic and financial characters are the only tangible factor that can be rationalized and seriously relied on when Chinese suburbanites make their location choices.

Thus, it is safe to conclude that the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners did not and could not perceive the prideful, high-end status of the community back in 2011. They were persuaded to believe that concept and the projected reality but they actually bought a housing unit in the community based on their economic considerations, rather than on any specific cultural and political aspiration. However, once they moved into the “Beverly Hills Towers,” did they perceive their community as a beautiful and prideful place as Wright praises the excellence of skyscrapers in a free open space?

The “Beverly Hills Towers” in the neighbors’ eyes

In the summer of 2013, the “Beverly Hills Towers” was in the final landscape construction stage. The manic apartment-buying days were long gone, as pre-sale had taken place two years before. However, the peaceful and unoccupied orange “California” community could not hide its sanguine, “high-end” status, even in the stage when no one had moved in yet. As a built environment, it started to influence people on a daily basis even before it was occupied and
utilized. The first residents who were consistently influenced by the community were residents of the relocated and urbanized former X villagers—the former landlord of the “Beverly Hills Towers.”

Although my study emphasizes how the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents perceive and think of the “Beverly Hills Towers” as their home and a living environment in suburban Beijing, a brief discussion of the neighbors’ perception reveals the community from a special perspective. Residents of the former X village, especially the elders who spent a lot of time in public space inside their relocation community or on adjacent streets outside of their community, were closely watching the entire construction process. When the community was finally constructed in the summer of 2013, the contrast with the neighboring relocation community was sharp. On one side of a residential street, it was a new but poorly constructed gated relocation community for former peasants. On the other side, it was a new and elegantly constructed gated commodity for well-off middle-class and high-end homeowners—mostly SOEs employees (including government officials, state-owned companies’ employees, and the entire educational workforces and health care workforces) and high-income professionals in the finance and IT sectors in Beijing.64 Moreover, the facades of the commodity community even attempted to show off an exotic “California” aesthetic.

My interviews with several former X villagers indicated their ambivalent attitudes toward their neighbor—not “their neighbors” as people but “their neighbor” as a different community. On the one hand, they admired the better construction quality of the “Beverly Hills Towers” and the better landscape design offering a more pleasant semi-public space inside the community. On the other hand, they still claimed that “the land of the ‘Beverly Hills Towers’ was theirs and they

64 See notes 12, 48, and 62 for more details regarding discussion of China’s middle class. In each of the three footnotes, I define the Chinese middle class and its influence on the Chinese society.
were cynical about the sharp price gap between their gated community and the “Beverly Hills Towers.” Some former residents even lamented the deal of selling the land years ago.

“I prefer the previous village environment where I had my own court-yard house and I had over ten rooms for rent. Every month, I had stable income around 5,000 yuan. Now, I had no income source except the annual dividends from our collectively owned and managed properties (of the former village). Plus, the housing quality here is very bad, and some interior wall coatings fell off already.\(^6\) Yes, I have two two-bedroom apartments in this relocation community, but the other one is for my son when he is ready to get married. By selling an apartment in this community, you cannot buy any housing property in this area. You cannot buy an apartment in the ‘Beverly Hills Towers’ at all. We should not have sold the land (to the ‘Beverly Hills Towers’) years ago.”

Mr. Huang, a man in his mid-50s, was interviewed by me on a public bench outside of his relocation community on a lightly polluted morning in June 2013. He was a little bit angry about the fact that “the ‘Beverly Hills Towers’ land was no longer theirs and he could not afford a housing unit in that community.” He constantly pointed to the “Beverly Hills Towers” when he talked about the living conditions in his own relocation community. Mr. Huang’s opinions on the “Beverly Hills Towers” were echoed by my other interviews with several former X villagers. They clearly felt the sharp contrast between their own relocation gated community and their luxurious neighboring community, which had subtle psychological influences on them. Although

\(^6\) http://news.sohu.com/20160509/n448486872.shtml is a news report regarding the falling off of exterior walls of several buildings in a Beijing suburban residential community. Bad housing quality is a rampant issue in China. The peeling and cracking of interior wall coatings are extremely common. Although the falling off of exterior walls is rare, housing in China generally do not last more than 30 years. Soviet-style residential compounds constructed in the 1980s are considered extremely old in China. That is also why I argue that these apartments do not have much use value—it is another open secret among architects and engineers.
the impact of the “Beverly Hills Towers” on non-residents is not my research topic, it is a serious issue that deserves further in-depth studies.

If neighbors of the “Beverly Hills Towers” had clear jealous and cynical attitudes toward the “exotic” gated community, how did its own residents perceive and think of the community as their home and living environment? The previous three chapters negate the significance of design on place-making process of the “Beverly Hills Towers.” Neither did architects and designers’ design theme—an exotic-looking high-rise community—matter in the design and construction stage *per se*, nor did it matter in the homeowners’ house-buying process. If not design and location choices, what is the environmental feature that matters most to the residents once they have lived in the gated community?

The home-making process of the “Beverly Hills Towers”

From the end of 2013, the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners started to move into the community. The moving-in process itself was another place-making endeavor—the actual home-making process to many Chinese households, mainly due to the lack of control over larger environment.
Figure 5.1. One typical Chinese residential apartment with concrete walls and floor, water and gas pipes without attached fixtures, and advertising posters of informal remodeling companies/teams on the walls. (Photo Pengfei Li, not in the community of the “Beverly Hills Towers”)

Chinese developers, in general, construct residential buildings without decorating the interior space, even in the minimal sense. The housing unit that a homeowner gets years after
participating in the pre-sale is a raw unit with unpainted concrete walls and floor, unfurnished kitchen and bathroom, and fixtureless electricity, gas, internet, and water lines, as shown in Figure 5.1. The household needs to hire a remodeling company to do all the decoration jobs, from installing wires and sinks to painting walls. Different from the housing construction industry, the housing decoration industry is less formal and loosely regulated and controlled by the state. Although the main labor army in this industry consists of migrant workers as well, the group that I have discussed in Chapter Three, migrant workers in the interior remodeling industry are more likely to work in small teams or be self-employed. What is more, they decorate and remodel millions of new, raw Chinese homes with oral agreements rather than signed formal contracts in an unbelievable speed—ranging from 20 days to 3 months.

The “Beverly Hills Towers,” similar to other new gated communities in Beijing, took around a year to fully become a community of decorated homes—that is, homes that could actually be occupied. From the first group of residents moved in at the end of 2013, the community remained the status as a “remodeling site” until October 2014 and the constant background “melody” in the community was the remodeling noise—tile cutting, wood sharpening, wall piercing, etc.—from the private high-rise havens, sometimes simultaneously. Depending on their budget and decoration materials, individual households’ homes look more diverse and idiosyncratic, despite the community only has four different unit layouts—one to four bedroom apartment (Figure 5.4 shows a two bedroom apartment in the community).
Figure 5.2. The ideal kitchen of the model home exhibited in a pre-sale center in Beijing. This lavishly decorated kitchen differs sharply from the unfurnished room in Figure 5.1. (Photo Pengfei Li, not in the community of the “Beverly Hills Towers”)

Theoretically speaking, individual households’ decoration choices should genuinely reflect the high-end status of the “Beverly Hills Towers”, because a private home is the actual place residents can show off their personal wealth and tastes, in addition to the designated high-end status to the “Beverly Hills Towers” as a community. Thus, the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ home should look like the model home shown in Figure 5.2. However, the concept of high-end itself needs to be further interpreted before engaging in further discussions.
Figure 5.3. The governmental structure of the municipality in Socialist China and after. The municipal government supervises the core districts, the remote districts and counties. Since a district is large (from approximately 50 square kilometers to 500 square kilometers/20 square miles to 200 square miles), only the super big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Wuhan, etc. have core districts that are completely urbanized. Oftentimes, the district/county is large enough to contain agricultural land and an agricultural population. Towns and Street Offices are governments at the same level supervised by the district government. Towns normally have rural farm lands while street offices are purely urban.

Contemporary Chinese society is a highly conformist society that emphasizes uniformity and “face.” 66 From the perspective of urban structure and urban politics, Mainland China is made

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66 “Face loving” is not even an open secret in China. It is deeply embedded in Chinese culture, as Lin Yutang’s classic 1935 book, My Country and My People, depicts. It is by far the most well-written and understandable book about Chinese culture and Chinese people in English. The closest English term for “face loving” is perhaps “status conscious.” In numerous The New York Times reports and comments about China, “the status conscious Chinese” is
of four directly-controlled municipalities and 27 provinces. The 27 provinces can be further divided into 333 municipalities, and each province has about 11 to 21 municipalities. All these 333 municipalities and the four directly-controlled municipalities have the same political structure shown in Figure 5.3. And it is an extremely centralized and hierarchical system, with municipality mayors named and approved by province governors and province governors named and approved by the Central Committee of the CPC. Different from the fragmented urban political structure, as Wood (1961) describe in this classic book *1400 Governments*, and the “Balkanization” of America’s metropolitan landscape (Wood, 1968), the Chinese system is a centralized bureaucratic system. And its officials are recruited by merits (province-level exams) and personal networks, rather than by democratic votes. Take the municipality of Beijing as an example (Figure 2.2 in Chapter Two), it is even larger than the Core New York Metropolitan Region, with a land area of 6,720 sq mi (17,405 km2). Instead of having over 1400 governments like the New York counterpart, it has only one regional government that takes charge of 16 district governments in a well-organized and hierarchical way. This same structure can be applied to the rest three directly-controlled municipalities and 333 regional municipalities. Although different municipalities do have their own special economic and socio-cultural features, political uniformity is the foundation of China’s daily operations. The entire Chinese territory, in this sense, is run by its 337 urban machines. From the perspective of social life itself, as the state uses economic achievement to justify its political legitimacy, people rely on individual economic achievement to justify their

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Note 62 about the HPF system and the discussion of China’s homeownership rate also demonstrates that China’s rural system and its rural residents are subordinate to China’s urban political machines and urban policies.
personal values and self-esteem in the society. Different from many western societies in which mass culture is the dominant culture and middle-class values are the dominant values, contemporary Chinese society openly praises and even worships the “high-class” and the elites.

“Although it is difficult to compare its (a small county with a population around half a million in an inland province—Hunan) wealth with coastal cities in Eastern and Southern China, but the BMW-like luxury cars have been very common in the Liuyang County. The concentration of luxury cars has become a concrete and sufficient representation of the wealth symbol in the small county.

This concrete representation is sustained partially by the stable industrial and commercial tax sources and partially by the confident, centripetal mainstream society centered by the civil servants (party and city officials) and employees of public institutions (the educational workforces and health care workforces).”

In Shi’s (2013) well-written and widely circulated blog article about a small county’s civil life during his Chinese New Year revisit of his hometown, a contemporary Chinese urban way of life worshipping luxury and “high-end” products is vividly depicted. Urban life in Beijing is an exaggerated version of that of the Liuyang county, with more international luxury brands and status symbols. Here, high-class triumphs over middle-class and high-class values and inspirations triumph over middle-class values and inspirations. Chinese society is probably not yet a middle-class society in terms of per capita GDP, but in terms of mind-set, people are craving for a luxury way of life and endorsing the rarely seriously defined high-class values.

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70 It has been re-published by one of China’s leading liberal-wing newspapers—Southern Weekly, and it has been viewed over 0.1 billion times. Shi cites terms such as “peasant life” and “rural China” from Fei’s 1939 classic anthropological study about rural China, while he uses poetic language to lament the radical but superficial transformation of China’s contemporary urban space.
That is also why Chinese developers like to use the lavishly decorated “high-end” home to allure the potential home-buyers, as shown in Figure 5.2. In contrast, the middle-class home which emphasizes domesticity with modest and frugal decoration in the West (Rybczynski, 1986/2014) cannot cater to the demands of China’s middle-class.

High-end products, high-end services, high-end restaurants, high-end communities, etc. are terms that are widely used in media and people’s daily life. No one seriously discusses what “high-end” refers to, but in order to make something desirable a high-end status must be attached; at least, it has to look high-end, even though it may be fake.71 From her fieldwork in wealthy gated communities in China, Bosker (2013) argues that even the young doorman in a gated villa community in Beijing really believes that he may be rich one day as the wealthy residents whom he guards for, and she considers this young doorman’s inspiration as the dominant mind-set in contemporary China. I do not believe that many Chinese believe or even dream that they will be super rich one day, so Bosker’s doorman cannot represent thousands of thousands of doormen in China’s gated communities. However, Chinese do endorse and worship “high-end” values, although they know they may not have or get any high-end things.

In this context, the “Beverly Hills Towers” is designated as a high-end community because it looks high-end, thanks to the exotic but fake California atmosphere of the community. From the socio-economic perspective, the “Beverly Hills Towers” is not an exclusive wealthy enclave. It is not the so-called villa community that accommodates China’s new rich and elites. Some homeowners in the “Beverly Hills Towers” are certainly wealthy, but most homeowners are young married couples in their 30s and 40s who are first-time homeowners and commute to

71 In taobao.com, Alibaba’s online shopping website, people can buy a lot of fake luxury brands, from Chanel to Rolex. Fake sport car keys turn out to be a popular item, because many men use fake Porsche car keys to pretend to be the super rich. Chinese media have reported a lot of stories related to people’s mind-set of craving for high-end products. Retrieved from http://fj.people.com.cn/n/2015/0102/c181466-23416315.html
the city center for work, ranging from 30 minutes to 90 minutes by subway ride with a distance ranging from 10 miles to 30 miles.72

Figure 5.4. The design graph of a two-bedroom apartment in the “Beverly Hills Towers.”

Redrawn from photos of apartments in “Beverly Hills Towers.”

72 Beijing has four main CBDs and various high-education hubs scattering in different directions with the Fifth Ring Road, an area larger the entire land area of New York City (Figure 2.2 in Chapter Two).
During my one year stay in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” I visited over ten apartments in the community. None of these homes was as lavishly decorated as the ideal home in Figure 5.2. Middle-class “Beverly Hills Towers” did not make their homes “high-end,” although they were clearly allured by the “high-end” ideal home in their home-buying process. They also admired “high end” values, but they lacked the financial power to concretize their high end demands. Both Mr Zhang’s (an interviewee cited in Chapter Four) and my apartment in the “Beverly Hills Towers” had the same design layout (Figure 5.4), the interior space was designed for essential everyday functions rather than showing off luxury way of life. Among my formal interviewees, only Mr. Zuo’s home was the closest model to the ideal “high end” home (with two more bedrooms added on the right side of Figure 5.4), with top-brand appliances, furniture, well painted and relief walls, and elegantly paved floor. As a chief editor in a media company in Beijing, Mr. Zuo (he had gradually become one of my key informants and close friends in the community since late June, 2014) showed off his wealth more through his brand name clothes and luxury cars—with one BMW and one Buick, rather than from his decorated home where only relatives and close friends would visit.

The “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ perception and attitude of their community

Since most “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners did not and could not afford to lavishly decorate their homes to the high-end ideal, they clearly did not consider their homes as high-end homes. They were middle-class who admired high-end values without having the so-called “high-end” lifestyle. If they did not think of their homes as “high-end” homes, how did they think of their gated community as a larger living environment?
Although I explained the psychological nature of my study to my interviewees before our formal interviews, most of my interviewees were confused about my question “how do you perceive your own community?” And they were equally confused about my question “how do you perceive the high-rise building in this community?” I had anticipated this kind of cognitive confusion before my field work, since people (not just Chinese) are not trained or educated to perceive their living environment in any explicit way. People sense and experience their living environment on a daily basis, have personal feelings and even emotional reactions to their living environment, and discuss their feelings and thoughts about their environment with their family members and friends. However, they are not trained or educated to “perceive” their environment in any theoretical way, and they usually do not use the words “perceive” or “perception” in everyday life situations. Nonetheless, I always asked my interviewees these perception questions first and then re-phrased my questions based on their response. The response I got, not surprisingly, was “I don’t understand your question.” Only Mr. Tu, a graphic designer in an IT tour company and a father of a one-year-old boy, responded “I am not an architect. I do not know how to perceive the building in any aesthetic way.”

Once I re-phrased the question to “how do you think of your own community?”, I received more informative answers. All of my interviewees had positive feelings about the overall living environment of the community. They answered the question in a more or less similar way, “the environment of this community (xiaqu)\textsuperscript{73} is pretty good, and the greenery is good.” My interviewees’ emphasis on the greenery was something I did not expect. I always feel uneasy about the western environmental psychology literature on nature. To me, nature is not automatically or naturally restorative, indicating that nature does not necessarily make people

\textsuperscript{73} Xiuqu is the prevalent living quarter in contemporary China. Via the format of gated community, xiaqu becomes the only residential form.
relaxed. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) argue that nature reduces people’s stress from a well-established psychological mechanism, i.e., saving people from the directed attention process so that people will not feel mentally fatigued. They further explain this psychological mechanism by clarifying four concepts or four components of the restorative environment—being away, the extent, fascination, and compatibility. Because of these four components, people are either exempt from the directed attention process or engaging in involuntary attention when they are exposed to nature, both of which make people fatigue free.

It is hard to defend Kaplan and Kaplan’s attention restoration theory (Steg et al., 2013) as a cross-cultural psychological mechanism. Moreover, the attention restoration is implausible even within one culture or society. People’s attitude to nature is highly related to their education and even their career. While most westerners’ positive attitude to nature may be due to the romanticization of nature, ordinary Chinese people’s attitude to nature is dually shaped by mainstream education in Socialist China after the 1950s—March 12 as the National Tree-planting Day when party leaders from the central to local governments all plant trees and broadcast their deeds publically via local and national TV programs—and the Imperial China’s garden principles—harmony with nature with well-groomed plants and elegantly constructed architecture such as pavilions and bridges. Due to this cultural distinction, a Chinese person may feel alienation rather than fatigue free by exposure to the untamed or slightly tamed nature in the West.

74 Several scholars have argued that during the era of Romanticism in the 18th and 19th century, the untamed nature was no longer a scary or unwelcoming place. Instead, natural beauty has been glorified either from a naturalistic position or from a modified religious position.
The “Beverly Hills Towers” has well-designed gardens inside the walled community. It may look or feel awkward to design classic Chinese gardens in an apparently “California” themed residential community, so the gardens use modern pavilions and wood boards to decorate the natural settings. As shown in Figure 5.3, another “Western-style” community also has plenty of greenery with modern-themed man-made resting areas. Although none of my interviewees commented on the design and maintenance of the gardens inside of the community before I asked them about these specific aspects, the design-enhanced elements definitely contributed to
the interviewees’ positive attitude of the landscape. That is because the greenery in the community was not merely about the coverage of green space from the technical perspective but also about the layout, design, and maintenance of the green space. My interviewees in their 50s and 60s\textsuperscript{75} were the ones who gave the most positive comments on the green space inside the community. As a Tai Chi practicing lady who was in her late 50s from Heilongjiang province told me, “I like the green space and gardens inside the community very much, and I even don’t want to go to a nearby park to do exercise and walk my grandson because of this.” The senior residents used the gardens intensively, despite the heavy air pollution.

As to the high-rise buildings themselves, my interviewees’ attitudes range from “can’t complain” to “no other choice.” Wright (1958) might be disappointed that the well-designed “Beverly Hills Towers” as skyscrapers in a free green space—the green space was well praised by the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents as discussed earlier—failed to generate pride and pleasure among their dwellers. Although they did think that their towers are more aesthetically pleasing than the nearby residential towers, this comparative opinion merely indicated that the nearby residential towers are not aesthetically pleasing or even utterly displeasing. As discussed in the previous section, several former X villagers were jealous about the “Beverly Hills Towers,” which was mainly caused by the lack of design and maintenance of their own relocation towers and community and the seemingly high-end look of the “Beverly Hills Towers.”

\textsuperscript{75} These senior residents in the “Beverly Hills Towers” are not the homeowners but the parents of the homeowners, whose main job was taking care of their young grandchildren. They used the public space inside the community on the daily basis. As a result, the most prevalent and observable phenomenon in the community was grandparents with baby cart or little children using the community gardens. I will discuss more about this issue in the following chapter.
Doormen, cleansers, and property management personnel as our servants

It is interesting that most homeowners did not perceive either their home or their community as high end. Moreover, they did not feel that they were having a high end lifestyle. Given the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ socio-economic status as middle-class wage earners, they would not be paranoid to feel that they live in a luxury home or community in reality, even though they did admire and demand the so-called high-end lifestyle. In other words, they admired a high-end community but they did not genuinely perceive their community as high-end.

Ironically, middle-class “Beverly Hills Towers” residents actually demanded high-end services in their community. Whenever the on-site property management company’s services did not match the homeowners’ expectations, they would use the “high-end” rationale to accuse the company—“how come you provide such bad services in this high-end community?” Perhaps this is the only negative consequence that the developer, Beijing Urban Construction Group, did not expect when it advertised the “Beverly Hills Towers” as a high-end community. The “Beverly Hills Towers” persistently demanded the property management personnel in the community—cleansers, doormen, gardeners, internet maintenance staff, etc.—to provide quality services to match the status or title of the community as a high-end community. This was also the focus of most conflicts in the community.

In China’s already privatized housing sector, the physical landscape is dominated by middle and high-rise gated communities, while the governance structure is filled with on-site, for-profit property management companies. In theory and by law, homeowners have the right to choose their own property management company to provide services to their gated community.

However, in practice, the developer always designates and even creates a new property management company for its gated community. On the one hand, it makes the developer an important, perhaps the most important, stakeholder in the already occupied residential community. On the other hand, its affiliated or designated property management company can make a profit continuously in the gated community.

During my one-year stay in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” residents’ complaints and accusations about the property management company ranged from personal issues such as “why my internet connection is off?” to communal issues such as “the communal area is not clean,” “the dancing ladies in the garden are making too much noise,” “someone’s car blocks the road in the community,” etc. Many of these complains were not about the property management company per se. But by reporting these issues to the company and demanding proper solutions, homeowners always used the “high-end” rationale to justify their complaints once the company could not satisfy their demands.

In one of my formal interviews, Mr. Tu, a man in his early 30s who worked in the powerful National Grid, complained the Internet connection as a big problem in his community.

“We only have one internet service provider in this community. The monthly fee is two times higher than other Internet service providers available in nearby communities. With this price, the service is not good at all. I always lost connection in my apartment. Is this a high-end service?”

Mr. Tu was not the only man who complained about the Internet connection, and he was not the only man who always called the property management company to solve the connection

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77 Stated-own energy companies, telecommunication companies, and National Grid companies are the most powerful and lucrative state-owned enterprises (SOE) in China. In many smaller cities, these national SOEs still construct their own housing, although China has abandoned welfare housing since 1998.
problem either. As a non-homeowner resident in the community, I called the property management company several times regarding my Internet and electricity problems. The maintenance staff from the property management company always tried to get to my apartment immediately after they received my call. The service, to me, was decent and prompt. The electricians and the Internet maintenance boys, in their late adolescence and early 20s, used extremely polite language to serve residents in the community. They always addressed the resident as “nin (thou)” rather than “ni (you),” and they always prepared their own footwear wraps when they entered into the resident’s home.

As a non-homeowner resident and an outsider of the community, I felt the property management company did too much to try to provide seemingly high-end services. Every morning around 9am, the property management personnel—doormen in white uniforms, cleaners in gray uniforms, gardeners in green uniforms, electricians and Internet maintenance staff in blue uniforms, and office workers in formal black suits—converged near the east gate of the community in two straight lines. Under the manager’s instructions, the staff would do some body stretching exercises first, stand up straight to listen to the manager’s address, and then clap their hands loudly when the manager finished his address. This daily routine performance took 15 to 20 minutes every morning and some senior residents always stared at the property management personnel’s gathering from a safe distance afar—far enough to not disrupt their activities.

78 Normally, “nin” is used only when a younger person addresses an older person. However, in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” “nin” was used when the property management staff served the homeowners. When a 40-year-old electrician came to my unit to fix my household circuit and address me “nin,” I felt extremely uncomfortable. Here, class status triumphed over age as the indicator of how much respect a person should receive.

79 Although the roads in the “Beverly Hills Towers” were well paved, they were still dirtier than most homeowners’ homes that had tile or wood flooring. Hosts normally prepared slippers or plastic footwear wraps for visitors. However, when the property management staff served the homeowners, they always used their own footwear wraps, because the property management company intended that the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners should feel more respect.
All homeowners with whom I had conversations considered this morning gathering as a normal management activity practiced by a for-profit property management company. Although none of them openly praised this way of training the staff, none of them condemned this practice either. However, I felt extremely uneasy when I watched the morning routine of the property management personnel. Those staff, some were still teenagers and some were in their 50s and even early 60s, all came from rural China to make their living in Beijing, and they had to sacrifice a lot to keep their work there. But did their non-local status justify this kind of open performance inside of a so-called “high end” community? Did converging in a disciplined way really improve the personnel’s service skills? Some personnel in the two lines showed clear unwillingness on their face when they were instructed by the manager. Their facial expressions indicated that this morning routine was highly controversial.

By training and disciplining the employees in this “humiliating” way, a sharp division between the service providers and the homeowners had been created. The “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners as “masters” of the community stayed on the one side, while the management and maintenance personnel as “servants” stayed on the other side. Both groups were the residents of this “high end” gated community and used the built environment on a daily basis. However, “masters” lived in their decorated homes, while “servants” lived in free underground apartments provided by the property management company. Living in the windowless, badly-ventilated underground dormitory far away from their hometown and family, which kind of “high end” services could those migrant workers provide? Were the “masters” really paranoid in demanding “high end” services?

Not surprisingly, most homeowners did not know where their community “servants” lived or what their actual living conditions were. Their servants’ constant presence in the
community did not stimulate their curiosity about the servants’ whereabouts, thanks to the modern division of labor that makes people so close to each other physically but so distanced from each other socio-economically. Thanks also to the property management company’s business strategy. By offering various uniforms to its five distinctive types of employees, a delusionary image was successfully created—the decent, well-dressed “servants” were meant to provide high-quality services in the high-end “Beverly Hills Towers.”

**Forming a Homeowners’ Committee**

The previous two sections further demonstrate the point that the built environment is rarely perceived by its users through the physical features only. Although the skyscrapers in the “Beverly Hills Towers” community indeed look aesthetically pleasing due to their modernist design and cheerful color, the homeowners did not perceive their buildings as “prideful” things. Nor did they perceive the “high end” status of the community based on the physical environment itself. However, middle class homeowners in the “Beverly Hills Towers” did admire and demand a “high-end” status of their community, and they constantly pressured the property management company if the services did not match their expectations of a “high-end” residential community.

However, in terms of another key indicator in addition to the socio-economic status of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents, property management fee per square meter per month, the “Beverly Hills Towers” is indeed not a high-end community. The average property management fee per square meter in Beijing in 2015 was 2.4 yuan, while the property management fee in the “Beverly Hills Towers” was 2.6 yuan. In contrast, the property management fee of a high-end villa community can be as high as 10 yuan per square meter. Since the “Beverly Hills Towers”

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had nearly 1,600 apartments occupied already with an average size of 100 square meters, the annual property management fee collected by the property management company was around 4.6 million yuan (709,000 US dollars). Is 4.6 million yuan enough to provide “high-end” services to a huge gated community with over 5,000 residents? In other words, from the user’s end, can 920 yuan ($142) buy high-end services—garbage collection, electricity and Internet maintenance, gate-keeping, etc.—for a “Beverly Hills Towers” resident for a whole year?

The answer is “unlikely.” Yet, property management is still a lucrative business in contemporary China and many developers are not willing to let homeowners choose or hire their own property management company. The business environment in China embraces flexibility and informality in general (Huang, 2008). The so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics or capitalism with Chinese characteristics is an institution that operates largely through personal network and informal transactions (Huang, 2008). Business entities, and individuals as well, are highly adept at obtaining gray incomes. In the case of the “Beverly Hills Towers,” there were multiple gray channels where the property management company could get extra revenues in addition to the property management fee. The elevators in the “Beverly Hills Towers” all installed fancy advertisement boards, which posted commercials targeting young middle-class “Beverly Hills Towers” residents specifically, from automobile-sale to peer to peer (P2P) lending. In addition, the property management company organized community events regularly, from artwork auctions to temporary exhibition and sales. Although some events seemed to be completely civic and not for profit, such as exhibition of nearby childcare centers, after school programs, and gyms, invited institutes were believed to gain the access to the community by paying the property management company a certain amount of fee. Although none of these

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81 By March 2015, 18 months after the first group of households moved into the community, the “Beverly Hills Towers” had nearly 1,600 thousand apartments occupied, with an occupancy rate of 97.5%. I got this number from a signed and stamped notice posted by the property management company on the community bulletin board.
outside institutes/entities were willing to tell me how much they paid the property management to get into the “Beverly Hills Towers,” they all insisted that “we have gained the permit from the property management company already.”

With multiple sources to gain gray incomes, the on-site property management company was able to maintain the seemingly high-end status of the community. More importantly and controversially, the property management company used a political framework to safeguard their uncanny deals in the community—the Homeowners’ Committee.

The Homeowners’ Committee (HC) is a new institutional entity as a result of China’s neo-liberal housing reform since 1998, and it gained its legal status on the basis of the 2007 Property Rights Law of the People’s Republic of China. In Read’s (2012) anthropological study on China’s grassroots governance structure, he distinguishes the Homeowners’ Committee from the Residents’ Committee, the more traditional grassroots governance entity. It seems straightforward to Read (2012) that these two entities represent two different institutions and embody two radically different mind-sets—the former embodies the growing demands of privacy and even democracy among China’s new urban middle-class, while the latter embodies the socialist state’s control and surveillance over its lowest level of administrative unit.

However, this seemingly evident insight lacks ecological validity in the Chinese context. It makes perfect sense from a liberal and even a critical perspective endorsed by Read. However, a liberal view itself is a problem and even a demon in contemporary China. It is overly condemned by the state and its various propaganda bodies, enthusiastically advocated by some right-wing scholars and public intellectuals, and vaguely received and discussed by the general

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82 The Residents’ Committee is a government body that is supposed to be operated independently by local residents as a Non-governmental organization (NGO). However, in practice, the Residents’ Committee is organized by the local government and its staff are hired and paid by the local government as well, as the de facto lowest level of administrative unit in China. I will discuss more about the Residents’ Committee that takes charge of the “Beverly Hills Towers” in the following chapter when I analyze the daily life of the newly occupied community.
public. Generally speaking, being liberal is a more moderate position that differs from a more radical, left-wing position or a more conservative, right-wing position in the West, while being liberal is endorsing a far right-wing position in China even though the Chinese government does not follow a left-wing position at all. The Chinese State is a contradiction—it is economically right-wing (pro-market and de-regulation) and politically authoritarian (and paying lip-services to democracy and equality). In this regard, interpreting China’s new HC as a liberal institution and the homeowners’ right movements as liberal movements is highly problematic, which simply implant a western concept of “liberal” in the Chinese context.

The HC in the “Beverly Hills Towers” aimed at short-term, pragmatic gains. Even so, homeowners still skated away from the political functions of the Homeowners’ Committee. In some cities where pro-market forces are strong, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, some Homeowners’ Committees had organized collective events to fight against the developer’s uncanny deals and even the local government’s industrial project near their home. Even these events targeted at obviously violated economic interests rather than political gains, however.

In theory, a Homeowners’ Committee should be organized by homeowners themselves, under the guidance of the Residents’ Committee which the gated community is subordinate to. In practice, oftentimes, the formation of a Residents’ Committee occurs when homeowners in a gated community try to protect their collective interests. In the “Beverly Hills Towers,” however, the formation of a HC was a smooth, unenthusiastic process. It was entirely facilitated and arranged by the property management company with low rate of homeowner participation.

83 Liberal views, and even a moderate request of the freedom of speech, have always been censored in China. See notes 13 and 51 for more details.
84 These organized events include protesting against constructing a city road cross the gated community, operating a power plant near the gated community, operating a garbage treatment center near the gated community, etc. In general, media skate away from reporting these events as well. Southern Metropolis Daily, a liberal newspaper in China, is one of the few media channels that had intensive reports about these protests organized by Homeowners’ Committees. Retrieved from http://gd.nandu.com/html/201406/15/1029026.html
In July 2014, when the “Beverly Hills Towers” was about 70% occupied, the property management posted a notice on the community bulletin board encouraging homeowners to sign up and participate in the homeowners’ first general meeting. The notice was short—two sentences on an A4 paper with a letterhead from the property management company and a stamp from the Residents’ Committee, a governmental body pre-designated by the local district government even before the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents moved into the community.

“As discussed with some concerned homeowners and encouraged by the Residents’ Committee, the ‘Beverly Hills Towers’ community is ready to hold its first general meeting in order to form its own Homeowners’ Committee. Please call the property management company or visit our on-site office for more information, all homeowners are welcomed.”

The joint notice from the property management company and the Residents’ Committee itself indicated low civic engagement and activism of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents. Unsurprisingly, a month later, an exact same notice was posted on the community bulletin board with an updated date. This repeated notice further indicated that residents remained uninvolved in civic events in the newly occupied community, although a Homeowners’ Committee would be the most (and perhaps the only) beneficial institution that genuinely safeguards the residents’ interests.

I was not sure when and how many residents participated in the first general meeting. I did try to call the property management company to ask the date and location of the first general meeting, but the company refused to tell me the information because I was not a homeowner.

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85 The actual occupancy rate of the “Beverly Hills Towers” was much higher than most suburban gated communities’ occupancy rate. In many suburban gated communities, fewer than 50% apartments are lighted on a regular evening; in some remote gated communities, the occupancy rate is even lower than 10%.
From my casual conversations with the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents, most homeowners were aware of the call for the general meeting, but they were not interested in the event and did not participate in the event (either in person or by phone). Nonetheless, in mid September, the property management company posted another notice on the bulletin board asking homeowners to vote for the director and associate director of the Homeowners’ Committee. The brief bio of five candidates was posted on the bulletin as well, on a standardized form including the candidates’ various vows to serve the community once they were elected.

In a newly occupied community where the 1,200 households (by the summer of 2014) barely knew each other and did not have a formal public meeting space, the formation process of the Homeowners’ Committee was a mystery. Near its east gate, the community had a well-designed community center that was used as the exhibition house to show off the model apartment during the pre-sale stage, but this community center had been closed by the developer ever since the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents moved into the community. The only formal space that could be used to foster a sense of community remained unavailable, indicating the developer’s lack of interests in promoting the community spirit and the residents’ willingness to focus on their individual household life rather than the communal affairs.

A month later, in mid-October, the newly formed Homeowners’ Committee posted its first notice. “Under the guidance of the Residents’ Committee, the representatives of the ‘Beverly Hills Towers’ residents have elected its first Homeowners’ Committee members. Mr. Jin has been elected as the director of the Homeowners’ Committee…” The new formed Homeowners’ Committee had its stamp already and was ready to execute its due duties. Mr. Jin, a retired military official, was elected as the director of the committee, and he vowed to serve the
community based on his work experience and his abundant time commitment to this newly
occupied community.

Although I could not participate into the homeowners’ meetings in person, Mr. Zuo was my key informant for the updates of the Homeowners’ Committee. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mr. Zuo, a successful chief journal editor, was heavily involved in both the state and the private sectors. He was also one of the five candidates that run for the director of the Homeowners’ Committee. However, he did not get the position because he “was not as well connected with the property management company and the Residents’ Committee as Mr. Jin and did not have the same time commitment as Mr. Jin,” using Mr. Zuo’s own words. He also gave me his sincere and insightful comments about the whole formation process of the Homeowners’ Committee of the “Beverly Hills Towers.”

“You cannot expect Beijing’s homeowners to be as active and enthusiastic as homeowners in Shanghai and Guangzhou. In this political center, ordinary people are the least political because of sensitivity of politics. No one even wants to participate into the democratic formation process of the Homeowners’ Committee. Democracy is not rosy here at all.”

“Not rosy democracy” is a fantastic remark. Certainly young middle-class professionals in the “Beverly Hills Towers” would not feel the rosy character of democracy. They were so overwhelmed by their individual economic concerns and their decent standing in Beijing, rather than the local politics of their own gated community. They would not gain anything substantially by participating in their community affairs, because their non-political living needs were well managed by the property management company in a “high-end” way while their political needs
(hukou status, medical welfare issues, children’s education issues, etc.) could not be solved in the community level at all, at least most people thought so. The “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ lack of interest in community affairs also led to several communal conflicts that I will discuss in detail in the following chapter.
Chapter 6

Daily life and conflicts in the community—childrearing, dog walking, community management, and family life
All manifestations of the traditional order could then be eliminated, fragmented, *dispersed*, or in its own terms, *freed* from older responsibilities, rules and obligations, indeed *social bonds*, in whatever form they might have taken. Because the ultimate design brief, the number one principle, was liberation from older shackles and ties… The thing is, unlike most traditional city spaces it was built to be beautiful, but more than that, it was built to be lived in and, specifically, enjoyed. (Franklin, *City Life*, 2010, pp.43-44)

In Adrian Franklin’s well-written book *City Life*, a brief history of the city in the West is provided—from ancient Greek and Roman cities to medieval cities to industrial cities to modern cities and finally to post-industrial, post-modern cities. Corresponding to these five city prototypes, Franklin also describes five different kinds of lifestyle. A modern city, according to Franklin, is associated with the modern welfare state and offers a space to be lived in and enjoyed by individuals without *social bonds*. Modern people, no matter whether they live in Paris or in an American suburb, live in a *dispersed* space where they are more likely to be independent (or even isolated) “Mr. or Ms. Consumers” rather than fixed members of a medieval church or some specific guilds.

In the Chinese context, the “Beverly Hills Towers” was built to be lived in and enjoyed without *social bonds* as well. As a large community hosting nearly 1,600 families by March 2015, it could be a self-sufficient town providing its own schools and jobs. However, urban planning in China in the past 20 years preferred and only authorized single-function design of urban districts rather than multi-function, mixed-use design. As a result, the “Beverly Hills Towers” was pre-designated as a pure residential community without any other urban functions such as work, education, and entertainment. Consequently, *social bonds* with co-workers,
street front shop-owners and employees, and neighbors and strangers on the street were all gone from the neighborhood street. If Jane Jacobs (1969) were right—namely, urban space is enjoyable and lovely because of informal social contact and interactions on the street and in various street front stores, how could the gated “Beverly Hills Towers” eliminating urban streets and street front stores be enjoyable and lovely? How is daily life in the “Beverly Hills Towers” like? How do the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents utilize and enjoy their enclosed space?

**Renting an apartment in the “Beverly Hills Towers”**

Having been studying Beijing’s suburbanization since 2009, I knew which kind of suburban community I was looking for in my in-depth study. My study attempted to find out how a specific type of built environment—a suburban gated community in Beijing in my case—has been designed by architects, constructed by migrant workers, and perceived and finally lived by its residents. More importantly, I was interested in a suburban community that can somehow indicate China’s ongoing construction boom in the 2010s—an outcome of what is called “market-oriented active suburbanization” by some scholars (Feng et al., 2008; Zhou and Logan, 2008).

As I have argued in Chapter Two, the former X village was a typical suburban site for housing development. It was just one of the many former rural villages in Beijing that were under urban transformation from the 2000s. When I was finalizing my residential site in June 2014, I could choose a newly constructed and occupied gated community in every direction outside of Beijing’s city core—86—in the north or northwest in Haidian or Changping district, in

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86 Beijing’s city core is still expanding. So far, all areas within the 4th ring road are urbanized. The area between the 4th and the 5th ring road has been designated as green belt and public parks (see Figure 2.2, Chapter Two), but it has
the west in Shijingshan district, in the southwest in Fangshan district, in the south in Daxing district, in the east in Tongzhou district, or in the northeast in Shunyi district. These so-called “suburban districts” in Beijing all have their own histories, and some of them—Changping, Shunyi, and Tongzhou—were walled-cities since the Ming dynasty (Figure 2.2 in Chapter Two). However, in the contemporary context, a suburban gated community in Beijing is more likely to be a purely residential community for nuclear families where the older shackles and ties of the historical walled-cities are irrelevant. Thus, the “Beverly Hills Towers” as a community was similar to other gated communities in other outer districts of Beijing, in terms of urban function and socio-economic status (Figure 6.1). As shown in Figure 6.1, many suburban gated communities in the outer district (A to F) are homogeneous.

been gradually urbanized as well. In reality, it is harder to develop the area between the 4th and 5th ring road than the area outside of the 5th ring road, because many dense urban villages are located in the designated green belt.
Figure 6.1. The metropolitan pattern of China’s megacities/mega-municipalities. The three concentric rings have several local/district governments at the same level. The first ring captures the city districts (core districts). The second ring includes four inner suburban districts which have towns on their peripheries. The third ring includes six outer suburban districts which have
their own district core (A to F) in the center and towns on their peripheries. Gated communities (S) in these towns are more like Beijing’s suburbs than local residential areas.

I moved into the community on June 5th, 2014. Compared to finding a construction site to live on, it was much easier to find a gated community to live in. In the beginning, I was going to find a room in the “Beverly Hills Towers” via some popular rental websites such as ganji.com and 58.com. Most renters in China prefer to find a place to live from the homeowner directly so that they can save the commission charged by a broker. This is partially due to the highly informal nature of the rental housing market and partially due to the stigma of a rental home being the second option.

In my research planning stage, I did hope that I could find a young couple renting out one of their rooms in their two- or three-bedroom apartment. In this case, they could get someone to help them pay the housing mortgage and I could live with a household in the community in an intimate way. However, this turned out to be wishful thinking. Renting a single room cannot help the homeowner’s mortgage payment in any substantial way, because rent in Beijing is disproportionately low compared to the high housing price. The average price for an apartment in the “Beverly Hills Towers” in 2015 was around 3 million yuan ($470,000), while the rent for a room ranges from 1,000 to 2,000 yuan per month ($160 to $320). Renting a single room out means nothing financially to a newly married young couple. On the contrary, it would lead to many unnecessary inconveniences and even daily conflicts to the middle-class homeowners who admire a “high-end” way of life.

However, in the high-end “Beverly Hills Towers,” there were rental units available, although many homeowners were not aware of this fact or did not pay attention to this fact,
thanks again to Beijing’s housing boom and institutional barrier (the *hukou* system). Some apartments in the “Beverly Hills Towers” were investment assets in the beginning. They were refurnished by the homeowners in a basic way and listed in the housing market for sale. These for-sale properties might never enter into the rental market or they might be available for rent temporarily. In order to make rental profitable, the remote homeowners\(^{87}\) had to retrofit a one-bedroom apartment into a two- to three-bedroom apartment and a two-bedroom apartment into a three- to five-bedroom apartment. Only by retrofitting an apartment into an undesirable and packed manner, can a 3 million yuan apartment generate a 50,000 yuan (around $7,800) or higher annual income.

Most renters, because they had been living in a culture which considers a rental home as a stigma, did not mind living in an undesirable and packed apartment. Reducing cost was their biggest concern and they would not make any real investment (decorations, furnishing, remodeling, etc.) on their rental home because that was not their “home.” This forms a vicious circle—the homes for rent neglect the interior environment for their renters and the renters do not care about the interior environment of their rental homes. All the homes I could find from ganji.com or 58.com had been drastically retrofitted. In the worst case, a three-bedroom apartment was remodeled into a six-bedroom apartment (with two master bedrooms having their private toilet and shower) in which the living room was gone completely and the kitchen looked like a garbage dump ground. I had visited five retrofitted apartments in the “Beverly Hills Towers” in late May and early June of 2014 and I was deeply shocked by this contradiction—

\(^{87}\) The homeowner of an investment housing asset could be local or someone from a city that is thousands of miles away from one’s property. In the context of Beijing’s housing market, many brokers and real estate firms buy properties where rental is profitable. In all these cases, the homeowners never get involved with the community issues actively.
how a hyper-modern, California-themed, high-end gated community could have these hidden undesirable rental units.

Although I got the list information from the websites showing the properties were rented out by the homeowner directly, four of the five apartments were shown by the same real estate broker. The websites listed information from about fifteen “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners directly, and these “homeowners” all had different surnames and cellphone numbers. However, when I called these numbers and made appointments for room visits, it was always the same guy—Mr. Chen, a young man in his early 20s with strong Gansu\textsuperscript{88} accent—who met me and took me to see these available rooms. After showing my interests in living in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” I asked Mr. Chen why it was always he who took me to visit the rooms in the newly occupied community.

“My company has about 20 properties in this new community. They are either owned by us or managed by us for the sake of the actual homeowners. You are really renting the room from us as the homeowner because we do not charge you any broker fee…And this new community is a very popular community because its environment is good and it is close to the subway station.”

Mr. Chen’s reply explained why the four apartments I had visited with him all had the same kind of doors, locks, and even retrofitting style. The company was really renting these properties for predatory profit—retrofitting the apartments to generate maximum bedrooms and investing little on shared space such as bathroom and kitchen. I did not see any of my “possible” prospective roommates when I visited the four apartments on two different afternoons in late May and early June of 2014, but I could sense that the other rooms were occupied. It seemed that

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\textsuperscript{88} Gansu is a province in west China, bordering Xinjiang. It has a large Muslim population.
the renters did not live in an apartment with shared space but in their isolated and locked rooms—a probable strategy to reduce the stigma of being a renter. I was wondering what kind of life I would have in the high-end “Beverly Hills Towers” and what kind of study I would conduct if I were renting one of the rooms offered by Mr. Chen for a year. I would certainly live in a micro-environment that was radically different from the majority households’ micro-living-environment. My daily experiences, and even my personality, would be shaped by the micro-environment gradually if I had chosen to live in the retrofitted, packed apartment.

For the sake of my study and for the sake of my living experience in Beijing, I had to find a more “normal” apartment in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” Renting a single room was not only an undesirable plan but also a harmful option for my study. Thus, I had to burden myself financially to rent a whole apartment in order to secure my study and my living. Seeking the help from a professional real estate broker seemed to be the only reliable and effective method. As I pointed out earlier, the housing rental market was highly informal and stigmatized. As a result, real estate brokers were mainly doing second-hand house sale business, because rarely did costumers ask their help for rentals. Yet, there were homeowners who listed their properties for rental in the formal rental market, especially when they were screening their “potential” renters who could use their properties in a more responsible way. Three real estate brokers—they all had chain stores in Beijing—had physical offices within the neighborhood of the “Beverly Hills Towers,” and they were doing business right next to each other. I asked the two larger and more renowned brokers to help me find a one-bedroom or two-bedroom apartment in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” This turned into a new adventure.
Homelink and 5i5j were the two largest real estate brokers in China, and both of them had thousands of chain stores in major Chinese cities. By dressing their agents in professional outfits and providing a formal three-party contract, Homelink and 5i5j charged a one-month rent as their broker fee. I was not surprised that both Homelink and 5i5j told me that there were less than ten rental apartments available in the “Beverly Hills Towers” and there were more second-hand apartments for sale in the brand-new gated community. By insisting on renting a good and reliable apartment in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” I persuaded the real estate agents of two brokers to schedule multiple apartment visits for me as soon as possible. In return, they kept reminding me that I had to pay a full one-month rent as the broker fee if I signed a contract via their service.

They were effective brokers. In less than three hours, each of the two brokers had an agent call me—Mr. Wu from Homelink and Miss Li from 5i5j. Mr. Wu had three apartments to show on June 3rd, 2014, while Miss Li had two apartments to show on the same afternoon. When Miss Li told me the apartment numbers of the two upcoming visits, I realized that they were the same apartments scheduled by Mr. Wu. In order to avoid the awkward situation of visiting the same apartments with two competing brokers, I told Miss Li my interests in these two apartments and asked her to schedule more visits for the next morning.

I met Mr. Wu near the east entrance of the “Beverly Hills Towers.” As an employee of the leading real estate broker in China, Mr. Wu tried to work in a professional way—more professional than many aggressive or even harassing real estate agents in Beijing. He was totally different from the “aggressive” Mr. Chen who attempted to persuade me to rent one of the rooms managed by his real estate company. As a young man in his late 20s, he behaved in a mature and

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89 The official website of Homelink is lianjia.com. The official website of 5i5j is 5i5j.com. 5i5j is the abbreviation of the Chinese term WoAiWoJia, which means “I love my home” literally in English.
reliable manner—assured but not aggressive. He handed me his business card and shook my hand before we walked into the “Beverly Hills Towers.” Mr. Wu was adept at using the electronic key to enter into the entrance, indicating that he was quite familiar with the newly occupied community.

We visited three apartments in two high-rise buildings in the afternoon—a one-bedroom unit on the 13th floor and a two-bedroom unit on the 22th floor in the building Six and a two-bedroom unit on the 2nd floor in the building Three. I expressed my interests in the one-bedroom unit on the 13th floor and a two-bedroom unit on the 2nd floor, because both of them offered views to the community garden inside the gated compound. Mr. Wu told me that they were owned by reliable homeowners, and the rent for the one-bedroom was 3,200 yuan (around $500) per month and the rent for the two-bedroom was 4,000 yuan ($630) per month.

“Which one do you prefer?” Mr. Wu asked me.

“If the one-bedroom can be cheaper (less than 3,000 yuan), I will rent it. However, since the second one is just 800 yuan more expensive, I think it is a better deal to rent the two-bedroom. Can you negotiate the rent for me?”

“For the one-bedroom, the homeowner cannot rent it out for less than 3,200. The homeowner wants to find a reliable renter to live there before selling the property. For the two-bedroom one, I can call the homeowner and ask the opinion.”

This conversation happened when we were in the two-bedroom apartment on the 2nd floor of the building Three. All the three apartments that I visited were never lived in by anyone before. The homeowners remodeled the raw apartments months ago, but no one had ever lived in these apartments because everything—floor, kitchen closet, toilet in the bathroom, etc—was
brand-new with a thin layer of dust on the top it. I could sense that it was not easy to rent a whole apartment in suburban Beijing, especially when there were abundant unoccupied apartments in Beijing’s suburban community. Renting a whole apartment for $7,500 a year was not an acceptable option at all for most renters in Beijing, given the fact that per capita income in China was around $7,500 in 2014.90

An interesting thing happened when Mr. Wu and I entered the two-bedroom apartment on the 2nd floor of Building Three. Two young ladies wearing white shirt with the logo of the third real estate broker in the neighborhood were about to leave the unit with a client, when Mr. Wu used the key to open the door. Mr. Wu and I had eye contact with the two young ladies, but neither of us said anything. This somehow awkward coincidence further indicated the housing oversupply in Beijing, which made real estate brokers and agents compete with each other intensively and even aggressively. And I took advantage of the system based on my knowledge of hungry homeowners and real estate agents in the beginning.

The real estate agents were certainly fighting for their clients. When I said goodbye to Mr. Wu and asked him to call the homeowner for me, the two young agents stopped me outside of the building Three after Mr. Wu left.

“Hi, brother, what kind of apartment are you looking at?” One young lady asked me with a clear Northeast accent.

“I am looking for a one-bedroom or a two-bedroom apartment in this community.”

“How do you think of the one you just visited? Have you made your decision?”

“Not yet, it is a little bit pricy for me.”

“We can negotiate the price for you right now. And we can give you a discount regarding the broker fee.”

“Really?”

“Yes, we can visit the apartment with you again so you can make your decision.”

These two young agents were definitely more “passionate” than the professional Mr. Wu. Because I was also interested in visiting the apartment again, I followed the two young ladies to the unit. The two-bedroom was frugally remodeled, with white tiled floor and basic kitchen and bathroom equipment (a sink, a stand-alone stove top connected with gas pipeline, and an old refrigerator in the kitchen, a sink, a toilet, and an electric water heater for the shower in the bathroom). In order to make the unit more desirable for renters, the homeowner put two old bedframes with mattresses and two old closets in the two bedrooms as well. The two agents told me that this property had been listed in the rental market for two months, and the homeowner wanted a decent and responsible tenant to rent the whole unit.

I really liked the open balcony in the unit. In all buildings in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” only the second and third floor units have projected balcony, forming the lower facades of the building in order to enhance the aesthetic value. I was more impressed by the balcony’s practical usage than its aesthetic value. With an open balcony, I could sit there to observe the entire community garden. The two young agents realized that I was interested in the unit, especially the balcony, and they told me that “this is the only unit with balcony for rent in the entire community” and they would like to negotiate the price for me.

If I asked the third broker to find an apartment for me in the beginning, I would probably dislike its agents’ aggressive working style. However, they intercepted me when I was about to
find my ideal place to live in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” With a 50% discount on the broker fee and a negotiated 3,800 yuan (around $600) monthly rent, I signed a one-year lease with the homeowner with the help of the two agents the next morning. The homeowner also allowed me to move in from June 5th, although the lease was from June 15th, 2014 to June 15th, 2015, and I further extended the lease to July 31, 2015 in the following year. It was another sign that renting a whole unit out in a formal way in suburban Beijing was not an easy job to both rental unit seekers and apartment owners.

**Absent young homeowners and omnipresent grandparents-children groups**

The “Beverly Hills Towers” took more than a year to become a fully occupied community—a rate that is rare in suburban Beijing. By renting a whole apartment, I became one of the first residents in the community. As I have pointed out in Chapter Four, during my first few months in the community, the remodeling noise from multiple buildings was the constant melody of the new community, and the remodeling noise also became the most pressing conflict among new neighbors.

“Building become taller and taller, but people’s hearts become narrower and narrower.” An old lady in her 70s offered me this metaphorical moment on a lightly polluted weekday morning in July, 2014. Ms. Liu, a retired working-class lady from Sichuan province, was one of the earliest residents in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” I only had sketchy conversations with Ms. Liu, when she was at her morning exercise recess and shared a stone table with me inside the gated “Beverly Hills Towers.” In this brand-new community where *social-bonds* had been eliminated (Franklin, 2010), Ms. Liu was over 1,500 kilometers away from her old friends back in her hometown in southwest China. She might have felt proud in the first few days when she
moved to Beijing to live with her married son and daughter-in-law, which was the only bond she had in Beijing. But after moving to the community to take care of her pregnant daughter-in-law and after listening to her constant complaints about the remodeling noise for a few months as a widow, Ms. Liu lived more in sorrow than in happiness or pride.

“What do you think of living in a high-rise building in this community?”

“It is a cage to me. The buildings become taller and taller, but people’s hearts become narrower and narrower.”

“Why do you think that way?”

“People can’t talk with each other but curse each other. And households are locked in their own unit. I always want to go out if I can, although I don’t know anyone else in Beijing.”

Ms. Liu played a bamboo flute right next to me after our several rounds of small talk. I could feel her sorrow from her music. It was like a metaphorical protest against the high-rise living environment, against her daughter-in-law’s constant complaints at home, and against the lack of neighborly interactions in this hyper-modern community. I never talked with Ms. Liu again in the community, although I did meet her a few more times inside our shared space. Like her own words, people’s hearts become narrower and narrower, they lived in their own locked units (Figure 5.4 and Figure 6.2) and rarely had chances to talk with their neighbors and form meaningful new bonds in this gated community, although many residents might want to form social bonds or at least communications in their new community.

If I had lived in the “Beverly Hills Towers” for only one or two months, I would consider the community as an enclosed compound of isolated families on the basis of my occasional
conversations with upset residents like Ms. Liu. However, the community did offer communal space for social interactions, especially to the grandparents who took care of their newly born or pre-school grandchildren. They were the most dominant users in the public space inside the “Beverly Hills Towers.” This phenomenon of “absent young homeowners and omnipresent grandparents-children groups” is the most observable feature of gated residential communities in contemporary China (Figure 6.1), and the “Beverly Hills Towers” gradually turned into this kind of typical child-rearing gated community.
Figure 6.2. The vertical structure of a “Beverly Hills” tower. There is no public space in the main body of the building except the two elevators. Property management staff lived in the basement of the tower.

By September 2014, around 70% of the community had been occupied. As I have discussed in the last chapter, it was also the period when the Homeowners’ Committee (HC) in the community had been formed. In order to make the HC formation procedure look legal and professional, the property management company inside the community updated the occupancy rate on a monthly basis. Apart from reading the notices and documents posted by the property management company,91 “Beverly Hills Towers” residents could feel that their community became more populous on a daily basis. The summer remodeling period was gone and the remodeling noise was sporadic after September 2014, indicating more units were ready to be occupied. Moreover, the newly renovated private kindergarten affiliated with the community started to operate from September 1, 2014, and “Beverly Hills Towers” children from three to six-years old were escorted by their grandparents (occasionally by their young parents) to and from the kindergarten every morning around 7:50am and every afternoon around 4:30pm—a natural setting for social interactions among adults with pre-school children.92

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91 Residents in the community rarely read the notices or documents posted on the bulletin board. It seemed that these documents posted by the property management company and the Residents’ Committee in the communal space inside the community had nothing to do with residents’ daily life. Oftentimes, young homeowners passed by the bulletin board without even having a look at the board. Moreover, many young homeowners drove and parked their car in front of their own building, so they did not have chance or interests to pay attention to the bulletin board.

92 The private kindergarten affiliated with the “Beverly Hills Towers” was extremely unaffordable. Its annual tuition was around 10 times of a public kindergarten in the area—a tuition that was even higher than most colleges in China. However, if the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents did not have a Beijing hukou, it was likely that they had to send their pre-school children to the “high-end” private kindergarten. Although homeowners could get a discount when they sent their children to the kindergarten, it was still several times more expensive than a public kindergarten.
Figure 6.3. Grandparents-children groups in a gated “European-style” suburban community. It is more common that one grandparent takes care of one grandchild (the other grandparent can go grocery shopping, cook, or engage in other daily chores). Sometimes, both grandparents or two grandmothers take care of one grandchild. This phenomenon is also partially caused by China’s one child policy in the last 30 years. China’s millennials (the generations born after the 1980s), once they are married, oftentimes have four grandparents to take care of their newly born child. (Photo Pengfei Li, not in the community of the “Beverly Hills Towers”)

Most of my participant observations and casual conversations in the community were about or with the grandparents in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” The “Beverly Hills Towers” grandparents, as a cohort of retired pensioners who were born in the 50s and 60s, were the
generation of the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976). This was a cohort that had very frugal and disciplined way of life. Although the “Beverly Hills Towers” grandparents were not the homeowners in the community, most of the married couples in the “Beverly Hills Towers” could never afford to buy a housing unit in Beijing without the heavy financial support of the generation of the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, many married young couples in the “Beverly Hills Towers” exhausted the wealth of three families—the newly formed couple, the husband’s parents, and the wife’s parents—to secure their housing unit in the community.

Because of the hefty financial nature of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ standing in the community (as I have discussed in Chapter Three), they did not hesitate to talk about the financial details of their apartment and even their own life. Oftentimes, exposing the financial details of the apartment was the very way how strange neighbors in the community got to know each other. My casual informants, once they had interests in knowing me more, always asked the same question, “you have bought an apartment in the community?” These hundreds of casual conversations depicted a valid picture of the most significant element of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ daily life.

“Morning, I have seen you a few times in the community. Are you here to take care of your grandchild?”

“Yes, like many old people here.”

“How long have you been in the community?”

“Over 6 months.”

“You are living with your son? Or daughter?”

“With my son.”

“He must be very excellent to buy a unit in this community.”
“Hehe (giggling), every non-local who can buy a housing unit in Beijing is excellent. He just bought a small one-bedroom apartment here back in 2011. It cost 1.3 Million yuan (around $205,000). For sure, we supported him, for obvious economic reasons.”

Ms. Tu, a very easy-going and talkative lady in her early 60s, was a pensioner from Harbin—the capital of a Northeast province in China. Once she knew that I just rented a whole two-bedroom unit in the community by myself, she encouraged me to seek my parents’ help to buy an apartment in the community or anywhere in Beijing. “You are an excellent young man. Don’t waste your money on rent. Your rent is even more expensive than my son’s monthly mortgage. Ask your parents to help you buy an apartment, as soon as possible.” A casual morning exercise talk ended up into a financial or life lesson, and this was just one of the numerous times that kind “Beverly Hills Towers” grandparents encouraged me to buy an apartment in Beijing. Some not so “kind” grandparents, once they knew that I was not a homeowner, gradually changed our topic or found a reason to end the casual conversations.

“How much did you pay for the unit? How much is your monthly mortgage? How much does your son make every month?” are the repeated topics the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents talk with each other once they wanted to know each other more. During my hundreds of days of participant observations in the community, I constantly heard people compare floor area, price, and mortgage conditions of their apartment. The economic aspect not only led the similar millennial couples to move into the “Beverly Hills Towers,” but also defined the daily topics of the generation of the Cultural Revolution who were in the community to take care of the millennial couples’ children (and probably the hard-working millennial couples as well).
Public space users and child-rearing in the community

As I pointed out in the last section, the “Beverly Hills Towers” was not a community in which individual households locked themselves in their high-rise apartments. On the contrary, the grandparents used the public space—two open community gardens, open spaces between buildings, pavilions and curvy galleries—inside the community intensively with their grandchildren, despite the heavily polluted air that was unhealthy for outdoor activities (Figure 6.4 and Figure 6.5).

It was not a surprise to me that the Cultural Revolution generation justified the bad air quality and they did not mind engaging in outdoor activities in the bad air. They could use the exact narrative propagated by the central government over the last 30 years to justify the air pollution sincerely—our nation is under rapid industrialization and development so that pollution cannot be avoided. As to their own health risk, they would justify their outdoor behaviors by claiming that they had a good health, because they had eaten more “bitterness” in their earlier years. In other words, they did not think bad air quality in Beijing in the 2010s is as bad as the hard days they experienced during their youth in the 1960s, 1970s and even early 1980s. However, I still could not understand why they took their infant or toddler grandchildren outside when the PM 2.5 level was over 150.
Figure 6.4. Terrible air pollution in Beijing during my 14 months’ stay from June 2014 to August 2015. Reproduced from http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/12/18/world/asia/air-pollution-widespread-china-beijing-red-alert-maps-charts.html Copyright 2015 by The New York Times

Figure 6.5. Beijing’s PM 2.5 level based on my field notes.93

93 The graph made by The New York Times may not look horrifying, because the red curve represents the weekly median PM 2.5 value. The Figure 6.4 made out of my field notes represents a scarier image, which indicates the heavy air pollution in Beijing especially in the Winter of 2014 and the Spring of 2015. The worse two days were Oct. 25 (475) and March 28 (499). However, there were days with extremely good weather—early October (The National Day holiday week), Nov 9 to Nov 11 (The APEC took place in Beijing), Jan 1 and Jan 2 (The New Year
Since my study is not a quantitative investigation, I cannot describe the proportion of residents who engaged in outdoor activities on smog days and the nuanced attitudes between the ones who hated the smog and the ones who did not mind the smog. Given the fact that the “Beverly Hills Towers” already had over 1,000 households from September 2014, the around 100 grandparents-children groups in the public spaces in the community could be the “minority” of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents rather than the majority. Nonetheless, they were the ones who dominated the public spaces in the community on a daily basis, and they were by no means “conducting” an experiment to prove “the air is still safe for their health and their grandchildren’s health.” Engaging in outdoor activities was just their daily routine that they did not overthink about the potential health risk. On a larger scale, it is fair to claim that Beijing’s residents in general were tolerating the air pollution and economic opportunities were more important than possible health risks for people who stayed in Beijing.\(^9^4\)

On any given weekday from September 2014 to August 2015 (except the chilly winter season from December to February), the “Beverly Hills Towers” grandparents used the public spaces inside the community in a tacitly organized pattern. The space clearly defined what the residents can do and what they cannot do, as a behavior setting (Wicker, 1979) that forms an environment-behavior *synomorph* (p.10). Because of the shaping power of the built environment, the behaviors of the “Beverly Hills Towers” parents could be understood more accurately from knowing the space the grandparents were in than from knowing individual characteristics of the grandparents.

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\(^9^4\) The younger generations—the millennials—are more likely to complain the air population and even make cynical jokes via social media, and they wear masks when they engage in outdoor activities. However, they are more politically disorganized and insensitive, and they even do not have any intention to engage in collective protests that are not uncommon to the generation of the Cultural Revolution.
In the morning from 5am to 10am, the grandparents used the open space in the two community gardens to do exercises. The morning exercise routine was more like an individual effort than a group behavior. The exercisers in their 50s to 80s came to the open space in the two community gardens at different time periods. Some did Tai Chi, some did sword, and some just did stretching exercises. If there were more than three people doing exercise at the same time in the open garden, they would occupy different spots in the open garden. However, they always stayed in the central area of the open garden so that their activities would not be occasionally interrupted by other people who bypassed or circumvented the open garden—young people who went to work walked quickly to the east gate of the community by taking a short-cut through the open garden and dog walkers who were mostly young ladies walked around the open garden.

Morning exercisers chose the two community gardens for obvious environmental reasons—they were relatively isolated from the driving and pedestrian lanes in the community and they were relatively larger and more open than other public spaces inside the community. However, the size of the open gardens was not big enough for group exercises. This was perhaps the reason that no groups had been formed even though some exercisers encountered each other on a daily or weekly basis.

Each of these two community gardens had a children’s playground with a small sand pool on its periphery. As early as 7am in the morning, some grandparents took their toddler or preschooler grandchild to play in the two sand pools, while they watched the morning exercisers in the open gardens or did stretching right next to their grandchildren. It was more common for grandparents who were looking after their grandchildren to engage in conversations and social interactions with peers, especially when the children were in the sand pool or the playground and played with each other. As a large residential community (over 1,000 households since
September 2014 and over 1,500 households since March 2015), the three playgrounds (there was a third playground in front of a residential tower) were not enough for the hundreds of young children in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” As a result, the numerous outgoing grandparent-child groups tacitly shared space with each other. And it was not unlikely that any conversation between a grandmother and another grandmother was their first talk, although both of them had been living in the community for a year already.

The east gate area was another place that attracted public space users inside the community. This was also the place where the manager of the onsite property management company trained the employees every morning, as I have discussed in Chapter Five. The function of this space echoed with the movement of the clock. Between 7 am to 9 am every weekday, it was the busy corridor for young people to go to work as isolated individuals. Rarely did a couple go to work together, and even more rarely did young commuters talk to each other when they walked towards the east gate. This residential compound, different from work units’ compound that was built for workers’ solidarity, was built for isolated nuclear families who worked for different employers from the beginning. From 9 to 9:30am, it became the space for the embarrassing property management training. The timing of the training was interesting—it avoided the morning rush hour so that it would not block the way of the stressed commuters and it also avoided the space conflict with the grandparent-child groups who usually came to use the area after 10am. The training was meant to draw some attention from the homeowners to showcase their “high-end” services, but it was not intended to be the show of the community.

After 10am, the east gate area started to be busy. The rectangle water fountain in the center of the corridor cut the space into two parts. With the edge of the fountain functioning as the handrail, the area turned into a perfect space for toddlers to learn how to walk. The landscape designers of
the “Beverly Hills Towers” might never have imagined that their aesthetic design elements became functional tools for the residents. But the fountain-turned-into-toddler-handrail phenomenon demonstrated the significant shaping power of the environment, i.e., the affordance (Gibson, 1979/2014) of the fountain in this child-rearing community.

In the early afternoon, the community was always quiet. An occasional visitor of the “Beverly Hills Towers” might think the community was not so different from other ghost suburban communities in Beijing, but that would be a mistake. The households in the “Beverly Hills Towers” followed a uniform schedule, although they were isolated from each other. This pattern was once again generated by the generation of the Cultural Revolution. Everyday between 12:30 to 2:30 was the nap time, rain or shine. During this period, not even a single grandparent-child pair stayed in the public space inside the “Beverly Hills Towers.” It was not easy to clarify who needed a nap more—the grandparents or the children. By living with and being disciplined by the generation of the Cultural Revolution, the new generation somehow inherited or will inherit a more uniform way of life. However, there was a group of elderly women who were against the “nap” norm. Four to Six women in their late 60s and 70s always stayed in the semi-enclosed gallery in the north community garden to play cards from 1pm to 5pm. They even “colonized” a small space in the semi-enclosed gallery by leaving a small wooden table there, with a heavy stone on the top of the table after they finished their game around 5pm. This was the only group that met regularly and met in the same space during my 14 months’ stay in the community. Was this a significant social bond that negates Franklin’s claim that the modern community is built for isolated consumers without social bonds? The women’s card playing group was a cohort that had limited social functions. It was always the same four to six women playing cards in the semi-enclosed gallery, and no new grandmas joined that group.
Occasionally, some grandfathers and grandmothers (with or without grandchildren) bypassed the group or stayed with the group for a while, but I never saw anyone join the group and enlarge the group. Moreover, from March 2016 to August 2016, the community already had around 1,600 households, but this was the only semi-permanent group formed in the community. This abnormal existence of the grandmas’ card-playing group indicated the exact theme that the modern “Beverly Hills Towers” failed to generate social bonds and was not built for social bonds in the first place.

The afternoon child-rearing spaces were different from the morning spots. The two east gate areas were no longer popular, while the two community gardens became more populous. And the grandparent-children groups were more non-stationary in the afternoon. The majority of the grandparent-children pairs walked inside the community a round after a round. Occasionally, they stopped in the two community gardens to have a rest. It was from these afternoon child-rearing routines (and morning routines) that the “Beverly Hills Towers” grandparents and children had a chance to know each other and become friends. Interestingly but not surprisingly, it was the toddlers or pre-school children who became friends with each other first. The “Beverly Hills Towers” grandparents communicated and socialized with each other mainly because their grandchildren needed to play together.

During my months of participant observations in the community, I found an interesting phenomenon—the grandparents never called other grandparents their names. Instead, they called other grandparents “Guoguo’s grandpa or grandma” or “Xiangxiang’s grandpa or grandma” and they were called by other grandparents “Niuniu’s grandpa or grandma” as well. It seemed that the generation of the Cultural Revolution were happy to live in a state without strong subjectivity. They were happy to be identified as “Xiangxiang’s mom or dad” when they raised their own
children. As their excellent children became the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners after years’ of hard-work in Beijing, they were happy again to be identified as their grandchildren’s caregivers. From a western philosophical perspective, these “Beverly Hills Towers” grandparents may be criticized as subjects without self-identity or lacking subjectivity. However, embracing a larger perspective, one can always further question the questions “whose subjectivity?” and “whose identity?” Their identify was defined by their children and their grandchildren. This was also the reason that they were invited to live in the “Beverly Hills Towers” in the first place. More importantly, these grandparents were not passively invited to live in Beijing. They were the ones who actively and even aggressively pushed their children to get married and settle down in the “Beverly Hills Towers” as homeowners.

The grandparents no longer dominated the public spaces in the “Beverly Hills Towers” after 5pm. Young parents, as they were absent from the community in the daytime, started to use the public space with their children and engaged in conversations with other young parents. Some of them stayed outside as late as 11pm. The reason that young parents took the responsibility to look after their children in the public space from 5pm onwards was more about letting the grandparents make dinner rather than spending time with their own children as primary caregivers, based on my numerous casual talks with the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners. This further indicated the crucial role of the grandparents in the community—they were not only babysitting their grandchildren but also babysitting their own adult children. Echoing my point in the last paragraph, their subjectivity was not actualized through their individual identity but via their family network—as “Xiangxiang’s grandma” or “the mother of Xiangxiang’s father” more accurately.
In the summer time, some kindergarteners and primary school children could stay in the public space until 10pm, with their parents or grandparents watching them closely nearby. I never saw a group of children played in the public space without another group of adults watching them. The “Beverly Hills Towers” was a large gated community with an area of over 60,000 square meters (over 15 acres). If “Beverly Hills Towers” children were allowed to freely move in the community, they would have multiple settings to play their own games. However, they were never allowed to move from one side of the community to another side or even from the open space in front of one building to the open or semi-enclosed space in front of another building. Within the confined space, the “Beverly Hills Towers” children still enjoyed their time with their own peers—chasing each other, playing with water guns, scooters or balls, crying due to minor accidents such as falling on the ground, etc.

The most popular children’s playground was not the two community gardens—they were open and cleared space for morning exercisers and grandparent-infant/toddler groups. The elder children preferred more enclosed space that have multiple affordances—curvy roads, trees, bench tables and chairs, semi-enclosed gallery near the east gate area. This east gate area was different from the east gate corridor discussed before. It was right next to the east gate corridor—the busiest walkway in the community—with a well-designed semi-enclosed garden. This space should be the real community center, because a detached stone house stood in the center of the garden that was promised to be open to everyone in the community. However, the house was always locked. Neither the developer nor the property management company showed any intention of opening the house to the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents. Nonetheless, the semi-enclosed porch and gallery, together with curvy wood roads and well-trimmed trees, became the perfect playground for older children in the community. From the “Beverly Hills Towers”
children’s long-lasting laughter in the evening, an occasional visitor of the community might generate another delusionary perception—the “Beverly Hills Towers” is a lovely residential compound. In the following section, I will discuss more about the less lovely part of the community life.

The invisible walls in the “Beverly Hills Towers” and the apolitical homeowners

The “Beverly Hills Towers” was not a suffocating cage, as categorized by Ms. Liu, a widow who might be too old to take care of her pregnant daughter-in-law. But it was not a paradise for its residents either. The lovely daily life images portrayed in the last section were about those residents who liked to be in the public space inside the gated “Beverly Hills Towers,” despite the polluted air. And these images masked many social problems of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents, although they were certainly the better-off or “Haves” in contemporary China.

There were several invisible walls inside the visibly gated “Beverly Hills Towers,” which made the high-end looking enclave an enclave of multiple enclaves. First, there was an invisible wall between renters and homeowners in the community, as briefly discussed in section one of this chapter. Since renters rarely used the public spaces inside the community, they were excluded from the community life. The “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners then could legitimately feel that their community was a pure homeowners’ community. Secondly, among the public space users, there was an invisible wall between the grandparent-parent-child groups and the property management personnel, as discussed in Chapter Five. The “Beverly Hills Towers” parents or grandparents never talked to the cleaners and gardeners who cleaned and beautified their community, even when a cleaner was picking a trash piece right in front of them.
This division was highly noticeable, because the “servants” had their uniforms with standard colors. Thirdly, perhaps the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners thought that they had earned their current status—their solid, decent, and prideful standing in Beijing was a result of hard work (at least to the majority of homeowners), they were less demanding to challenge or change the invisible wall among homeowners regarding the hukou status. As I have discussed in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, owning a property in Beijing just gave a solid standing to people who worked and settled down in Beijing. Without a Beijing hukou, a homeowner still faced many challenges in the daily life.

The third invisible wall partially explained why young homeowners were totally absent from the public space inside the community on any given work day. They just did not have time to stay in the public space to take care of their children or have fun. More than two thirds of the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners were non-Beijingers, and the majority of these non-locals did not have a Beijing hukou. This statistical information came from three different sources—my interviews with a property management employee and the director of the RC, and my descriptive analysis of an unexpected notice posted on the bulletin board in every “Beverly Hills Towers” building. From Table 6.1, we can see that the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners came from all 31 provinces in mainland China except Chongqing, Guangxi, and Tibet.

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95 Powerful state employers such as the central government owned enterprises, universities, and hospitals can give non-locals Beijing hukou based on an annual quota. The non-Beijing employees are introduced to the Beijing hukou system as special talents. Individuals who work in private companies, no matter how high their salary is and how powerful their companies are, cannot secure a Beijing hukou, unless they can found an enterprise in Beijing and hire more than ten people who have Beijing hukou.

96 I will provide a detailed analysis of the parking lot dispute in the following section.

97 Four direct-controlled municipalities—Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing—are considered as provinces as well. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Direct-controlled_municipalities_of_China
Table 6.1. Number of households who participated in the lottery of buying an underground parking lot

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<th>Region</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Household #</th>
<th>Household #</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>106</td>
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<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
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Note. In March 2015, the property management company in the “Beverly Hills Towers” posted the information of the homeowners who participated in the lottery of buying an underground parking lot. The homeowners’ national ID information, which can reveal the homeowners’ birthplace, was partially disclosed as well on the post.
Different from some American scholars’ understanding of China’s new middle-class homeowners as liberal individuals who are eager to fight for their own rights (Bray, 2006; Read, 2008), the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents were apolitical. During my 14 months’ stay in this gated “high-end” community, not a single organized rally took place in the community. It was not because the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners could not be organized due to their diverse backgrounds, as shown in Table 6.1. Instead, the young “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners were putting more individual efforts to work against the institutional restriction of the hukou system, rather than engaging in collective political requests. What is more, different from the generation of the Cultural Revolution, the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners lacked the skills and consciousness to engage in collective rallies because China’s millennials have been educated to be economics-oriented and apolitical ever since China’s reform and opening up, especially since the 1989 Tiananmen square event.

The young “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners were fully aware that the school life for their children could be hard due to their lack of a Beijing hukou. Although most “Beverly Hills Towers” children were born in Beijing, they did not have a Beijing hukou because their parents did not have one. Thus, although they could go to public schools in Beijing, they have to take the National Higher Education Entrance Examination back in one of their parents’ hometowns. This double standard for children with a Beijing hukou and those without was the third invisible wall that divided the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners, as I have discussed earlier. However, the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners had no intention to challenge this third wall, although the majority of the homeowners were the victims of this invisible wall.

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98 The National Higher Education Entrance Examination is the standard national exam for all high school students. It takes place annually on June 7 and 8, across all provinces in Mainland China. It is the only exam which determines what college a student can be enrolled. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Higher_Education_Entrance_Examination
To the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners I had interviewed, the hukou problem was the one that they could not change at all. They did want their children to go to good public schools in Beijing, and they were doing their best to get their children to enroll in good public schools. But none of my interviewees intended to challenge the state and the current hukou system, even in positive and suggestive ways.

Mr. Sun, a middle-level manager in a well-known IT company in Beijing, took my interview when he walked his two-year old toddler son in the open community on a slightly polluted Sunday morning. When we talked about the major concern or problem of living the “Beverly Hills Towers” as a young parent, his answer was not so different from that of my other interviewees.

“You know, I have a hukou from Jilin (from Table 6.1, we can see that around 13.7% of homeowners in the “Beverly Hills Towers” are from Northeast China), and my wife is from Jilin as well. So far, we can let our son study in Beijing, but we have to work harder and save heavier for him, because he cannot take the National Higher Education Entrance Examination in Beijing and he will have to have a higher score to get in a good university in Beijing or elsewhere in China.”

“You start to worry about this issue since he is only two-year old?”

“Yes, it is actually an urgent issue. It is not an issue after 16 years. It is an issue when he is about to go to a kindergarten at age three, a primary school at age six, a middle-school at age 12, and a high school at age 15. In each of these stages, we are not at the same starting point as people who have a Beijing hukou.”
Ms. Ou, a young mom and an experienced social worker in a well-funded NGO (funded by the Ford Foundation), worried about her daughter’s education as well. “I should have chosen to work in a state-owned department after I graduated (so that I could get a *hukou*). Without a Beijing *hukou*, we have no bargaining power to offer quality education for my daughter.”

Without a Beijing *hukou*, the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners were *financially burdened and emotionally stressed*, because they had to work extremely hard and save heavily for their children’s education. Even Mr. Zuo, a successful chief-editor in a well-known magazine in Beijing who had a BMW and a Buick, told me that “he was constantly irritated because he did not have a Beijing *hukou*.” And his solution for his seven-year old son’s future is “sending him to an American college and totally avoiding the Chinese National Higher Education Entrance Exam.”

I was shocked by the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners’ coping strategies regarding their lack of a Beijing *hukou*. They all agreed that the system was unfair, but they had no intention to challenge the system collectively. Like the situation I have discussed in Chapter Four, the home-buyers agreed that the institutional policies that push them to become homeowners are unfair, but they were still desperate to grab a housing unit and become a homeowner. After all, owning a housing unit in Beijing is way superior than renting a house, although the lack of a Beijing *hukou* still poses several serious restrictions. More importantly, since the millennials had been used to the economics-oriented mind-set, they had their diverse, individualistic strategies regarding their disadvantaged situation. The budget-sensitive, individualistic coping strategies effectively preempted any organized, political solution.
When Mr. Tu—a young dad and a state-owned enterprise (SOE) employee—told me that he will buy a housing unit in the city when his one-year old son is ready to go to a middle school, I asked him the reason eagerly.

“Well, I got a Beijing *hukou* because I worked in a SOE, but my *hukou* is not in the city center. In order to let my son get a better education and then go to a good university, we need to live in a good school zone.”

“How is the education quality in this district?”

“The primary schools are ok, but all the good middle-schools and high-schools are in the city center. That is why I want to buy a housing unit in the city center when my son gets older. So, I have to work harder and harder.” Mr. Tu replied calmly.

“Wow, that must be a financial burden.”

“Yes.”

“But why don’t you and other homeowners ask the local district government to improve the middle-school and high-school education, you are a Beijinger already and you are entitled to demand this? And your son has the same advantages as other local Beijing children (i.e. their parents are local Beijingers, not just non-locals with Beijing *hukou*).” I posed this critical question to Mr. Tu, and I had no idea how he would respond at that moment because I just met him and persuaded him to be interviewed.

Mr. Tu laughed at me, in a cynical way. “Have you ever been living in China?”

“Hehe, I had lived in China for a long time. As far as I know, most westerners think Chinese are more *collectivistic*.” I tried to loose the tension a little bit.

“No way, we are not collectivistic, we listen to our leaders. If I knew a leader in the education department in the district government, I would just phone him/her and ask
him/her to put more resources into the local education system. That will be a more effective approach.” Mr. Tu still replied calmly.

I did not expect that Mr. Tu and I could have such a meaningful interview when I approached him. He looked like a bookish boy who was still taken care of by his parents (it was true that Mr. Tu’s parents were living in the community to take care of him and his family). However, under the thick but cute glasses, it was a subtle man who had been embedded in China’s public sector for a long time and he knew exactly how to survive and thrive in a powerful SOE—we listen to our leaders.

Mr. Tu’s coping strategy was different from other non-hukou holder homeowners. He was one of the minority among the non-local homeowners in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” In this regard, we can see that the third invisible wall divides the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners into three groups—local Beijingers who were born in Beijing (or true Beijingers, as they proudly called themselves in this way), non-locals who gained a Beijing hukou due to the state quota (non-locals with a Beijing hukou), and non-locals without a Beijing hukou. The three groups’ privilege dropped from the first group to the third one, although they were way more privileged than the furtive renters and the omnipresent “servants” in the community, as I have discussed earlier in this section. Thus, in this context, what defined and confined the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ daily life in this high-end, California-themed community was not the physical environment per se but the social status in which the residents were embedded. Not only was the “Beverly Hills Towers” built to be enjoyed (Franklin, 2010) but also the community was built to be enjoyed (or endured) by different social groups in different ways. Moreover, as the “Beverly Hills Towers” were designed to have no communal space inside the high-rise building, different
groups were “safely” locked in their individual units (Figure 6.2). Physical isolation, in this regard, reinforced the invisible social walls inside the community.

The “true Beijingers” who were also the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners would never move their hukou to the “Beverly Hills Towers.” That was how they could take advantages of both their hukou status (better education resources in the city center) and their homeowner status (better environment and housing in the suburb). As the most privileged group among the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners, they were also the most undisclosed residents in the community. During my 14 months’ stay in the community, I encountered only four families who were “true Beijingers”—an old couple in their early 70s who lived in the “Beverly Hills Towers” and gave their city apartment to their married son; a Muslim grandma who took care of her second son’s one-year old toddler; a young lady who married a local Beijinger and lived with their dog; and Mr. Zhang99 a widowed old man in his 80s who lived with his eldest married daughter and with whom I met and chatted in the public space on a daily basis.

Out of my hundreds of casual and formal encounters and conversations with the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents, only four of them were with the so-called “true Beijingers.” That was why I was shocked after I saw the parking lot lottery list (Table 6.1). I constantly asked myself this question “Where do local Beijingers live in the community and what is their daily life like?” Statistically, the “true Beijingers” formed the single largest group in the “Beverly Hills Towers” by place of birth. However, they definitely stayed away from the public space in the community. One the one hand, the “true Beijingers” were better-off and more socially mobile so that they

99 Mr. Zhang appeared in my field notes many times and we became good friends. Through his eyes, I saw the community from a different perspective. He even insisted on taking photos with me, and he asked me to print the photos and give them to him. When I gave the printed photos to me, he insisted on paying me money. I resisted taking his money, obviously. He is a typical retired Chinese, who barely consumes for himself (lives with his children, only buys food or gives some money to his children to buy food, and has no other bills or consumptions at all) but has deep pocket. He got 4,000 yuan—roughly 650$—every month, higher than my teaching salary in a university in Beijing.
could afford to go to more entertaining places and parks. From Mr. Zhang’s mouth, I had a sketchy mental image regarding the daily life of the “true Beijingers” in the “Beverly Hills Towers”—driving to work everyday, coming home late in the evening, having an in-house maid or an hourly maid to cook and do house chores, and driving to further suburban wild lands or “happy farmhouses” to spend the weekend. With this kind of busy schedule, the “true Beijingers” had no time and no need to use the public space inside the “Beverly Hills Towers.” The public space, consequentially, were left to the non-local homeowners who were actually proud of their status as the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners. On the other hand, the “true Beijingers” were more likely to use the “Beverly Hills Towers” as their second home. Most rental apartments in the community, like the one where I lived, were owned by “true Beijingers” who were absentee landowners.\(^\text{100}\) Due to these two aspects, it was totally reasonable that the single largest and most privileged group in the “Beverly Hills Towers” had the least presence in this high-end community.

**The remote Residents’ Committee and conflicts in the community**

The previous four sections, in general, portray a peaceful picture of the daily life in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” Although the various sub-groups—renters, servants, non-local homeowners, and local homeowners—in the “Beverly Hills Towers” were radically different from each other and even hostile to each other, they co-existed with each other by using the different spaces inside the “Beverly Hills Towers” or using the same space at different time periods.

\(^\text{100}\) Of the indicated “35.3%” “true Beijingers” shown in Table 6.1, the majority were absentee landowners. But I could not prove that hypothesis, because neither the HC nor the RC intended to give me the accurate number.
Because most communications and social interactions in the “Beverly Hills Towers” took place among residents in the same sub-group, the three invisible walls described in the last section did not end up in creating conflicts between residents but acted simply as separations. Non-local homeowners in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” the majority of the residents in the community, interacted only with other “non-Beijing” homeowners, especially with the homeowners who also came from their home province. With this kind of self-selection of social interactions, conflicts among homeowners were reduced to the minimal level. The minimal level of neighborly conflicts in the “Beverly Hills Towers” was different from moral minimalism in a New Jersey suburban community depicted by Baumgartner (1988). In the setting of that small New Jersey town where the geographic layout was flat and horizontal rather than vertical, suburban residents tried to avoid direct personal conflicts with each other. When they witnessed their neighbors’ troublesome behaviors or some strange intruders’ unlawful behaviors on their suburban streets, they never confronted the troublemakers by themselves. Instead, they walked away or called the local police to deal with the troublesome or unlawful issues.

To a certain extent, the Chinese suburb is more socially engaged than the American counterpart. To American suburban residents, if they get tired of locking themselves in their single-family house, they can engage in private or semi-private outdoor activities—family gatherings, parties, barbecue, etc.—in their own backyard. The high-density towers-in-the-park model, in stark contrast, forces residents who are tired of locking themselves in their own apartment to engage in public outdoor activities. There is no space for private or semi-private outdoor activities.

The “Beverly Hills Towers,” in particular, did not offer private yards for its residents. Only a few households who bought the first floor apartment had a small yard, which was not big
enough for private family gatherings. The yard was perhaps not suitable for this kind of event as well, because activities happened on the small first-floor yard could be seen by anyone in the public space of the community. And because of gating and guarding, intruders were unlikely to get into the community in the first place. Thus, the conflicts in the “Beverly Hills Towers” were mainly domestic conflicts inside the households and neighborly conflicts among residents. The most frequently occurring conflicts were noise complaints due to the remodeling and the use of the public space, based on my casual conversations and formal interviews.

The “Beverly Hills Towers” residents, strikingly similar to the American suburbanites, resolved their daily conflicts in a minimalistic way (Baumgartner, 1988). The “Beverly Hills Towers” never directly knocked their neighbors’ door to ask them to reduce the remodeling noise or directly approached the music/opera playing grandparents to request them to turn down the music/opera. Instead, they called the property management company and requested the company to resolve the conflicts. During my stay in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” I saw the property management personnel in black suit rushed in and out of different buildings in the community on a daily basis. The black suit personnel were not blue-collar maintenance staff but white-collar office workers who answered phone calls from the “Beverly Hills Towers” owners and solved their non-technical problems and complaints. I once called the property management company to complain about the remodeling noise from the neighboring unit on my floor. That unit was doing renovation every weekday from 9am to 6pm, even without a break at lunch time. Interestingly, one staff member told me that the company was aware of the issue because other neighbors had called them to complain too, and he promised me he would talk with the unit owner immediately and ask them to stop remodeling between 12pm and 2pm—the lunch and nap time for many elderly “Beverly Hills Towers” residents.
As for domestic conflicts, the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents were more indifferent than their American counterparts. They chose non-involvement strategies rather than minimalistic involvement strategy in regard to their neighbors’ domestic conflicts. Occasionally, some serious domestic quarrels broke the peace of the gated “Beverly Hills Towers.” If the household having a domestic quarrel did not close their windows, their quarrel could be amplified by the spatial layout of the high-rise buildings and the open community gardens. For the few quarrels that I had witnessed (heard) from my apartment or in the open space in the community, the parties (always a man argued with a woman or a woman fought with a man) engaged in the quarrel for hours and other residents could even hear what they were fighting about. These long quarrels indicated the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ non-involvement attitude towards their neighbors’ domestic fights. In a more extreme case on a smoggy January afternoon, a young woman in her late 20s or early 30s was crying in front of a building in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” while a man was yelling at her in an irritating tone. The man, in his late 20s or early 30s as well, tended to ask the woman to get out of the community but the woman refused to follow him. Their quarrel escalated and they yelled at each other in extremely loud voices. “Why are you coming to me? You should not just come like this.” The man yelled to the woman. “How can you keep ignoring me? I will go to your work-unit to report you.” The woman cried and yelled back. This hysterical quarrel lasted more than 30 minutes inside the community and on the street outside of the community. Dozens of residents witnessed this incident and stared at their quarrel, but no one tried to stop the quarrel. No one even asked the property management personnel or the community guard to stop the couple, although the event was clearly troublesome in the peaceful “Beverly Hills Towers.”
The absence of state in the daily life of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents is an interesting issue. The Chinese State, and its various bodies, has no physical presence in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” As I have already discussed in this section, when the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents had conflicts, they never sought the help from the state—the property management company was their constant mediator. It was true that the conflicts in the “Beverly Hills Towers” were never serious enough to demand the direct involvement of the state. At least during my 14 months’ stay in the community, policemen or patrol cars never entered inside the community, as far as I knew. The private guards employed by the property management company were doing an effective job making the community safe and relatively inaccessible to outsiders.

However, it was not because the “Beverly Hills Towers” was so “good” that the state was not needed. The absence of physical government bodies was not contradictory with the pervasive existence of the state in the background. In fact, the State was not only the most important player that shaped the “Beverly Hills Towers” in the first place but also the one that defined the everyday life and the future life of the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents. As I have already discussed in section 4 of this chapter, the three invisible walls of the community were directly caused by the state’s hukou system, and both Mr. Tu’s plan to buy an apartment in the city center and Mr. Zuo’s plan to send his son to study in the United States resulted from the institutional framework of hukou. But the omnipresent state resulted in a counter impulse of the Chinese millennials—the homeowners in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” The more important the state was, the more likely the millennials tried to avoid the state. They intentionally chose to distance their daily life from the direct involvement of the state. This coping strategy was totally different from that of the generation of the Cultural Revolution, who actively demanded that the state satisfy
their needs. Here, we need to clarify the state into two different aspects. On the one hand, the state refers to the Chinese institutional framework and its various policies, especially the *hukou* system. On the other hand, the state refers to the physical governmental bodies at different levels from the central government to local governments, including different state departments such as the education department, police department, social insurance department, and so on. The first aspect is omnipresent and intangible, while the second aspect is dispersed and physical. The distinctive attitude between the millennials and the generation of the Cultural Revolution to the state was in regard to the second aspect. The apolitical stance of the millennials indicated their exact political position in contemporary China—distant and detached.

As to the physical aspect of the state, the state body at the community level—the Residents’ Committee (RC)—had an ambiguous existence, both from the viewpoint of the existing Chinese institutional framework and from the Western liberal perspective of civil society. The Chinese constitution defines the RC as a self-organized, autonomous residential organization. By this designation, residents in a gated community or in an urban cluster should organize a RC by themselves. In practice, however, both staff members in a RC and residents who are registered in a RC consider the RC as a governmental body and the RC directors as state officials. In addition, the RC is directly funded by the local government and the RC staff members are state-employees. This financial structure solidifies the role of the RC as a grassroots governmental body rather than a civil society NGO. Thus, there is no way for the RC to function as a civil society NGO and the liberal activists in China have given up on the RC completely, at least in Beijing.
In the case of the “Beverly Hills Towers,” the RC was not inside the gated community.\textsuperscript{101} The absence of the RC further distanced the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents from the state body designated to be a “self-organized, self-managed organization” of the local residential community. Even to the two most collective events that took place in the “Beverly Hills Towers” during my 14 months’ stay, the residents did not invite the RC to get involved in the conflicts, which clearly indicated that the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents never considered the RC as their own organization.

The first collective conflict occurred in the spring of 2016. In March 2015, the property management company in the “Beverly Hills Towers”, on the behalf of the developer Beijing Urban Construction Group (BUCG), posted a notice to encourage the homeowners to participate in the lottery of buying an underground parking lot (the important geographic information shown in Table 6.1, section 4 of this chapter was revealed from this event). The parking lot was quite pricey—300,000 yuan (around $47,200) for one slot. In the beginning, the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners were not so interested in the issue, because the parking lot was too expensive and sounded completely unreasonable—following the current monthly parking fee of 150 yuan, the parking lot value can afford to rent a parking lot for 2,000 months (167 years). Who would pay 300,000 in cash to just get a small underground parking lot, if one could use the money for the same thing for over 167 years? In order to encourage more residents to participate in the purchasing process, the property management company listed the advantages of owning a parking lot—forever your property, no need to share with anyone, free transfer right, and free to rent the owned parking lot in the following weeks of March via the community bulletin board.

\textsuperscript{101} As China’s urban residential pattern shifted from the danwei (work-unit) system to the gated community model in the 1990s (Bray, 2005; Read, 2012), the job of the RC became more challenging. A RC no longer organizes residents in a danwei compound or several compounds from multiple work-units where residents knew each other as colleagues or co-workers. A RC in a gated community governs residents who do not know each other and who have no economic connections with each other.
and the bulletin board in each building. I was curious about the “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners’ attitude towards the parking lot issue in March 2015, but my conversations with my formal interviewees and casual informants show that only a small portion of homeowners were interested in buying a parking lot.

The property management company’s post in April was a bit surprising. As Table 6.1 in section 4 shows, 300 hundred homeowners had participated in the purchasing process and 210 lucky ones would be randomly selected and given the right to permanently owning a parking lot in the high-end “Beverly Hills Towers.” After the new post was publicized, more homeowners started to discuss the issue. Mr. Zhang and Mr. Zuo frankly called these residents who participated in the lottery “insane rich people.” But most residents in the peaceful “Beverly Hills Towers” were not bothered by the insane parking lots, because they had more urgent things to worry about in their daily life—their jobs, their children’s education, and even their dogs, etc. However, when the final list was settled, the homeowners who did not get the parking lot started to raise their voices. They called the Homeowners’ Committee (HC) to complain that they never noticed the lottery in the first place, the lottery process was not fair, and some families had bought two parking lots. They also posted complaints in multiple online forums regarding the unfair process of buying a parking lot. A handful of homeowners even encouraged to the HC to veto the lottery process and do the lottery once again. However, since the few disappointed homeowners failed to get the support from the homeowners who never participated in the lottery (because they never intended to buying a 300,000 yuan parking slot), their requests gradually faded. Neither the property management company nor the HC treated their requests seriously. The RC, the governmental body who represented the residents’ interests, was never approached by these dissatisfied homeowners as well. Thus, this parking lot issue, although it could be
political if more homeowners questioned and challenged its legitimacy in the first place, was quickly buried by other daily routines in the “Beverly Hills Towers.”

Dramatically, the permanent underground parking lots in the high-end “Beverly Hills Towers” became rentable in the market as early as May, 2015. The “lucky” homeowners who paid 300,000 yuan to buy an underground parking lot started to post ads online to rent out their newly owned parking space. And there were people leaving online replies showing interests of renting the parking lot. By renting a permanent parking lot 500 yuan (around $95) per month, the insane rich people seemed to be not so crazy financially—they could get their 300,000 yuan investment back in 50 years at this upgraded price rather than 167 years at the price charged by the property management company. In this sense, the “Beverly Hills Towers” millennials successfully transformed a potentially political issue into an economic affair. I was not sure how sustainable and stable this transformation was, but it was conflict-free.

The other collective and potentially political issue in the community was also peacefully transformed into an economic transaction. It was a conflict between some homeowners and the affiliated kindergarten in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” In May 2015, some “Beverly Hills Towers” parents who sent their children to study in the community affiliated kindergarten started to gossip that their children were physically punished in school by a teacher. As more children reported that they were punished or saw other children being punished by that teacher—standing in front of the classroom without wearing anything, a dozen of “Beverly Hills Towers” parents became extremely emotional. They posted this humiliating event on multiple online forums and sought social justice from a broader audience. The kindergarten, especially its officials, were more afraid of online rumors than physical protest in front of the kindergarten. That was because the chain kindergarten was concerned with its reputation nationwide. It quickly posted multiple
counter-posts, apologized to the children and parents who might be harmed, and promised to carefully investigate the case and punish the related staff member. The conflict was resolved in two weeks—the kindergarten reinforced its security, put more surveillance cameras outside the campus and inside each classroom, fired the teacher who physically punished the children, and waived the tuition of the three children who were punished for one year. Again, a potentially collective and political conflict was reduced into a technical and economic issue. The “Beverly Hills Towers” parents were satisfied with the efficient pin-pointed solution rather than escalating the issue into a boarder education justice demand, indicating that the Chinese millennials tried to avoid politics as best as they could.

These two collective events both ended up into individual matters, which were strikingly similar to the “Beverly Hills Towers” residents’ strategies in dealing with their more individualistic everyday challenges, as discussed in the earlier sections in this chapter. The Chinese millennials, the young “Beverly Hills Towers” homeowners such as Ms. Lu, Ms. Ou, Mr. Sun, Mr. Tu, Mr. Zhang, Mr Zuo, etc., were adept at shifting a collective or communal burden into a personal task. To them, uncertain collective and political costs would be riskier than pressuring themselves to work harder and find out personal and oftentimes financial solutions. This individualistic and economy-oriented mentality perfectly explained why the community center—the children’s heaven mentioned in section 3 of this chapter—was forever locked in the community. The “Beverly Hills Towers” parents never bothered to ask the developer BUCG to open that elegantly constructed and decorated house to the residents, although the house was clearly defined as the property collectively owned by all homeowners in the brochure that allured the homeowners into the community in the first place.
After all, the “Beverly Hills Towers” was not built to be just *enjoyed* (Franklin, 2010). Instead, it was built to be *enjoyed by individual households as their private homes in which private and household interests triumph over public and collective demands.*
Chapter 7

Concluding remarks
My departure from the “Beverly Hills Towers” was not a happy ending. On July 31, 2015, the homeowner of my unit came to community to take the unit back and return my one-month deposit, as we had scheduled a month ago. My 14 months’ stay in the “Beverly Hills Towers” was comfortable and productive. It was certainly an experience that most renters in Beijing would never have, since the stigma and actual troubles of being a renter were pervasive in Beijing. Ms. Wu and I met only three times in the 14 month period—the day I signed the contract with her, a day in November when she came to get an important document sent by the property management company to the unit, and on July 31, 2015.

The rent was paid quarterly via online bank transfer, so physical contact was unnecessary. Since I always paid Ms. Wu on time (11,400 yuan, roughly $1,800) and I informed her whenever the community had important notices for the homeowners, Ms. Wu and I never had any disputes. She did put her property on the rental market again two months before my departure, so I showed the apartment to multiple visitors in July 2015 for her. However, I did not think anyone would move to the apartment right after I left, because there were abundant rental properties in suburban Beijing and many had remained unoccupied for months.

The troubled rental market might be the fundamental reason for my unhappy ending with Ms. Wu. I did not break anything in Ms. Wu’s apartment during my stay, although all furniture—two beds, two closets, one dining table with four dining chairs, one refrigerator, an TV, one water heater, one stand-alone stove top, and one couch—in the unit were old. As a temporary renter and resident in Beijing, I did not invest anything into the apartment, except some kitchenware, an IKEA table and an IKEA couch (999 yuan, roughly $150). I gave my

102 Different from the 5i5j agent Mr. Wu, though they have the same surname.
103 My efforts to notice Ms. Wu were unnecessary, because the property management company had the contact information of all homeowners. It phoned and texted the homeowners regularly regarding events and issues of the community.
kitchenware and the IKEA table to some friends in Beijing before my departure, because they were easier to move. For the IKEA table, I planned to give it to Ms. Wu for her future tenants if she returned my deposit back without any problem. Otherwise, I planned to give it to Mr. Zuo, one of my good friends in the “Beverly Hills Towers.”

But either of these two scenarios worked out. The two times Ms. Wu and I met, she was with a man referred to as her brother. I never doubted their relationship, although they behaved more like a couple than an elder brother with a younger sister. On the morning of July 31, Ms. Wu came with this man again. This time, however, the man spoke a lot, while Ms. Wu mostly remained silent.

“How much did you pay for the internet?” The man asked me.

“I paid 1,000 yuan (around $160) to the internet service provider in the community for the whole year. I will return the equipment back to the provider if you do not want to keep it.”

The man called the property management company and the Internet provider for over 10 minutes regarding the internet and my equipment. Eventually, he let me take the equipment to the property management company so that I could get my equipment deposit back (200 yuan, roughly $30).

“Can you give me my one-month deposit back?” I talked to Ms. Wu kindly. However, she tried to avoid eye contact and looked at the man.

“What quantity do you want your deposit back?” The man asked me.
“I want my full deposit.”

“Well, that is impossible. Look at the other bedroom! We gave you a new apartment, but you damaged the ceiling.” The man increased his voice and sounded angry.

I felt unpleasant immediately. It seemed that my 14 months’ peaceful interaction with Ms. Wu collapsed in one second. I followed the man to the other room. Yes, there were two black lines on the white ceiling caused by luggage wheels, which were left by a roommate who rented the other bedroom from me and put his luggage on the top of the closet in that room. I could have wiped the ceiling to get rid of the black marks, but I had not thought this could become a problem. I explained the reason of the two black lines to him and told them that my IKEA couch was worth 1,000 yuan and I could give it to them for free.

“We don’t need your IKEA couch. We have to pay workers to re-paint the wall and clean the apartments too. And to whom did you rent the room? An unclean Indian guy? How can you rent a room to a foreigner, especially a low Indian?” (When Ms. Wu and “her brother” came to pick up some documents in November 2014, they knew that I rented the other room to a student from Pakistan who was doing his master’s study in Beijing and they were totally fine with that. However, the “angry-looking” man even called my Pakistani roommate “a low Indian” at the moment when he tried to keep my safety deposit.)

The man’s tones sounded provoking and disturbing. It seemed that he was going to get the most money out of me, a person whom he probably would never meet again in his whole life. I knew that I lacked the skills to deal with this kind of man, so I asked Mr. Zuo—one of my good
friends in the “Beverly Hills Towers” and a Homeowners’ Committee (HC) member—to come to my apartment to help me. It turned out that Mr. Zuo, a non-local homeowner, lacked the skills to deal with provoking “true Beijingers” as well. His identity as a HC member did not help at all in my case, and he had no binding authority to Ms. Wu, an off-site homeowner who never participated in any HC meetings.

“How much do you want to return me?” I asked the man.

“How much do you want?” The man asked me.

“You can give me 3,000 yuan and keep the rest 800 yuan for cleaning the apartment.” I tried to look at Ms. Wu’s eyes, but she avoided my eye contact once again.

“Don’t be ridiculous! What can 800 yuan buy? It even cannot cover the workers’ compensation.” The man sounded extremely disturbing and provoking.

“How much do you want then? 800 yuan is enough to re-paint the small area on the ceiling.” I began to lose my patience.

“Look at your attitude! You didn’t want to pay for your mistake at all. You just want to walk away from this apartment like nothing happened.” The man, in his late 50s, was really good at arguing and fighting. I could even imagine that he argued and fought frenetically on Beijing’s streets during the Cultural Revolution 40 years ago.

Mr. Zuo tried to soften the tension and asked me to pay more. However, the man was still “angry” even I was willing to pay 1,800 yuan for my “mistake.” “I can only return you 1,000 yuan. That is it.” The man eventually disclosed his “iron teeth,” and he must have known that neither Mr. Zuo nor I have the skills to negotiate or fight with him. In order to save my time to move my luggage and other belongings to a friend’s home in Beijing and not completely ruin my
last day in the “Beverly Hills Towers,” I chose to give up and not talk anymore in the apartment where I did have many good memories. I walked to Ms. Wu to get the deducted security deposit, and she counted 10 bills from an envelope that should have had 38 hundred-bills inside. I could sense the sorrow from her eyes and she could sense my bitterness and resentment as well, although she tried her best to avoid eye contact. We had only friendly and polite communications in the previous 14 months, after all. But that fragile mutual respect collapsed completely at the end. Ms. Wu had no control over the man whom she referred as her “elder brother,” although she was the sole homeowner of the apartment (only Ms. Wu’s name is on the property deed).

When Mr. Zuo and I were going to remove my IKEA couch out of the apartment, the man rushed to the couch and yelled “What? You cannot move this couch out. No way!” The couch was never in the deal in our final negotiation. The man just knew that he could be as aggressive as possible, intuitively. Yes, he was right. Mr. Zuo and I just walked out of the apartment with my luggage and other belongings, leaving 2,800 yuan and an IKEA couch behind forever. In this regard, the man actually helped Ms. Wu win a whole month’s rent for the apartment (3,800 yuan, around $600). Although it might not be a big deal to Ms. Wu financially, it could give her (perhaps the man) a psychological boost. After all, the apartment was likely to be vacant for a few months after I moved out.

Social fractures and social stratification in contemporary China

My last experience in the “Beverly Hills Towers” was not an insignificant personal case. Thousands of similar cases took place in Beijing on a daily basis. The social rupture between homeowners and renters is “the norm” in Beijing. Renters normally walk away when their rights
are violated by homeowners or real estate brokers. Even though they might intend to fight back, there is no institutional framework to safeguard their rights. Moreover, many renters do not have any kind of housing contract in the first place. They have to be tolerant of being bullied or violated and learn to be smarter for the next time. As my parents always told me, “every time you are bullied by others or the society, you will be smarter next time because you have learned how to walk away from bullying.” Chinese folk culture, in general, is shifting the burden of bullying to the victims rather than the bulliers. Thus, ordinary Chinese are cultivated to walk away from problems rather than confronting and fighting back, in general. This general cultural characteristic further reinforces the stigma of “being a renter” in China. As a renter, one has to face the fact that she or he is going to be treated as a secondary citizen and even a secondary human being, as a popular Chinese idiom “living in other’s house, how can one not bow one’s head” has claimed for over one thousand years.

The lack of an institutional framework and legal framework in contemporary Chinese society sounds like a questionable statement, because China has constructed a bureaucratic machine that is perhaps the largest and most complicated one in the world—over 88.75 million communist party members, 337 identical and well-organized city machines discussed in Chapter Five, a centralized, national examination system selecting college students and government officials once a year discussed in Chapter Six, and dozens of state agents operating from the central government all the way down to the county level government, and to the township level for some bureaus, in an extremely hierarchical way—administrative unit, police bureau, procuratorate bureau, court, people’s congress, tax bureau, industrial and commerce inspection bureau, urban planning bureau, land and resources bureau, education bureau, public

104 The number is from China’s leading state media—Xinhua news. Retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-06/30/c_1119139485.htm
health bureau, civil affairs bureau, social welfare bureau, etc. Even though all of these bureaucratic machines are regulated by various laws and ordinances, they fundamentally operate on personal networks. Civil life in China is sustained more by personal connections than by fixed institutional rules and regulations—from simple errands such as opening a bank account, making a doctor’s appointment, getting a state ID, and getting a driver’s license to more complex tasks such as gaining a business license, obtaining a construction permit, and registering a school child. A phone call, a text message, or a banquet in a restaurant if necessary, is a more effective means to get things done than any formal methods, and it has the magic power to expedite any bureaucratic procedure. I, a researcher and native Chinese conducting a legitimate study about China’s urban expansion, also had to utilize the informal strategy several times to get my research done, as discussed in Chapter Two, Three, and Six. The modernity issue is definitely an urgent problem—contemporary China is rapidly modernizing its place and space, but it is still occupied by its pre-modern traditions and mind-set.

In addition to this larger issue of modernity, the social rupture between renters and homeowners also indicates social stratification in China in a broader sense. Housing tenure is the most important factor that defines social class and wealth in contemporary China. The number of housing properties is a more accurate indicator of family wealth than income level. In a widely cited article written by Xu (2010), a professor at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, contemporary Chinese society is divided into four different classes—people who own multiple housing properties (over 10 million yuan family asset, roughly 1.5 million US dollars; income is not a matter at all), people who own only one housing property and have an extra state-owned or work-unit-owned housing unit (over 1 million yuan family asset, roughly 150,000 US dollars;...
middle-income or upper-middle income level), people who live in the state-owned or work-unit-owned housing (no asset, low and middle income), and renters (no asset and different income levels). Xu’s classification may lack ecological validity nationwide, since China’s regional disparity is severe. It certainly reveals the reality of social stratification in China’s mega cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, etc. (and more second-tier cities are joining the list increasingly).

The determinant role of housing tenure in contemporary China is largely due to the fact that a large proportion of investment (20% to 25% of all industry investment and over 12% of national GDP)\(^{106}\) is going into the housing sector and China still does not impose a property tax on individual households. I have already discussed housing construction in Chapter Three and housing oversupply in Chapter Four. Given the importance of the housing sector, both economically and socio-culturally, Chinese at all social classes are connected by this so-called pillar industry of the nation. Rich households are doing their best to hoard multiple housing properties to secure their wealth without any additional costs (tax-free). Middle-class Chinese who want to climb the social ladder to a higher level also use this convenient and tax-free way—storing multiple housing properties. Since the state has increased the down payment ratio for the second property and beyond to control rampant housing speculation, many middle-class families use an extremely controversial way to avoid the policy constraint—getting a divorce. Even The New York Times (2013) is aware that home-buyers in Beijing and Shanghai are using divorce to secure more apartments for lower down payments.

Ms. Wu, the homeowner of the “Beverly Hills Towers” apartment where I had lived for 14 months, was likely to be one of the divorced middle-class homeowners in Beijing. It was

\(^{106}\) Every Chinese can feel the importance of real estate industry on a daily basis. Many scholars believe that China’s economy has been kidnapped by the real estate industry. Retrieved from \(\text{http://gz.house.163.com/special/gz_bangjia/}\)
unlikely that Ms. Wu was single, since “being a single adult” was also a stigma in China and Ms. Wu always had an “elder brother” with her. It was also unlikely that a married Ms. Wu only put her sole name on the property deed. When I told Mr. Zuo that the property deed only had Ms. Wu’s name, Mr. Zuo reached his aha moment.

“Aha! That provoking man must be her [now divorced] husband. You know, many local Beijingers are getting a divorce so that they can secure a lower down payment for their second or third home. Everyone knows that many Beijing families have multiple apartments—the divorced man’s home and second home, the divorced woman’s home and second home, and the adult child’s home and second home. And some Beijingers have more apartments if they bought properties before the constraint policy or if they know some officials in the housing bureau. I am really pissed off by the system. I don’t have a Beijing hukou. If I am single or divorced, I am not qualified to be a homeowner in Beijing at all, not even for a single home.”

Mr. Zuo’s resentment further indicates the significance of hukou—an institutional framework—in China’s contemporary wealth distribution and social stratification. By income and employment status, Mr. Zuo was certainly in the upper-middle class level. However, the lack of a Beijing hukou disqualified him from storing his income and wealth in a more secure way and he felt more stressed as an urban middle-class person, compared to Ms. Wu who worked in a SOE as a low-level employee but owned multiple apartments in Beijing.

If Mr. Zuo, a high-income, successful media professional and a homeowner, still felt irritated and stigmatized in contemporary Beijing, how do struggling middle-class non-hukou

107 In 2011, the strictest housing constraint policy was stipulated in Beijing, which was called “the 15 restrictions on Beijing’s housing market.” Retrieved from http://finance.people.com.cn/GB/14093867.html
holders feel in Beijing? Moreover, how do migrant workers (both construction workers and community servants), whose efforts to modernize Beijing and maintain the “modern atmosphere” of Beijing, feel in the city where they do not even have a decent rental space and in a city that does not intend to consider them as its own citizens at all? By burying their heads in the sand of an increasingly authoritarian China and “smartly” circumventing the system via intensive personal networks, people in different social strata and classes all work extremely hard to get their best out of the existing system, while being blind and indifferent to each other. At this moment, neither China’s middle-class nor the overly exploited working class, dare to confront the fundamental cause of all these problems—the authoritarian and predatory state together with the hoarding and predatory ruling class.

The study of space, as many place and space studies have demonstrated, is not about the physical features per se. The built environment is more social and cultural than physical. And it is spatialized by different social and cultural groups in an extremely hierarchical way, via daily social and cultural practices. In the case of the “Beverly Hills Towers,” the different groups that I have discussed in this study—architects, urban planners, and developers in Chapter Two, migrant construction workers in Chapter Three, home-buyers in Chapter Four, home-owners, renters, and property management staff in Chapter Five and Six—were not defined by the physical environment per se but by their various social and cultural practices in the community.

Space never segregates and differentiates people naturally. On the contrary, by engaging in different activities people in different social strata unreflectively and/or unconsciously naturalized the different functions of the space. Architects designed the community pressured by the developer’s profit-oriented concerns, migrant construction workers were confined on their construction site and lived under harsh conditions, middle-class citizens rushed to grab a housing
unit to secure their decent standing in Beijing or further store their wealth, renters locked themselves in their tiny room and stayed away from the shared public space, grandparent-children groups heavily and happily used the public space in the community for exercise and social interaction, and property management staff unobtrusively maintained the community and over-politely served the homeowners while living in unnoticed underground apartments inside the community. This naturalizing process, however, is problematic. It tends to justify and defend a socio-spatial system that should be criticized and modified.

After all, the resentments and complaints were real in the “Beverly Hills Towers.” Some homeowners’ happiness in the community cannot be used to naturalize the larger system that segregated and divided the different groups in the community. That larger system, solidified by institutional policies such as hukou, the HPF mortgage, de-unionization, and no property tax, will be challenged sooner or later, as China’s social stratification and spatial segregation continue to worsen. “Towers-in-the-park” cannot just wall people in. Once social injustice becomes unbearable, the wall will be tore down eventually, from the grassroots rather than the state at that time.
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