

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLLECTIVIZATION POLICY AND SPATIAL PATTERNS IN URBAN CHINA BETWEEN 1949 AND THE PRESENT

---

Author:

Katherine Nosker

Faculty Sponsor:

Rebecca Li,

*Department of Sociology and*

*Anthropology*

---

### ABSTRACT

Throughout China's history, collectivization has been a hallmark of its peoples' way of life. Their living arrangements, family settlement patterns, and household roles have had a collectivist emphasis for centuries, but this trend became more than just familial when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over the country in 1949. At this time the collectivization of urban life in China increased dramatically as the CCP implemented strict policies promoting collectivization in all aspects of the Chinese peoples' lives, with particular emphasis on urban spatial patterns. The CCP firmly enforced these policies until the mid-1970s; after this time, particularly after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, collectivization began to decrease steadily.

This paper focuses on the link between collectivization policy and urban spatial patterns in China from 1949 until the present. It begins with background information on historical spatial patterns in Chinese cities, and then addresses the Maoist era (from 1949 until 1976) with special focus on collectivization policies, the emergence of the danwei system and its implications for urban Chinese citizens, and the Post-Mao era, with discussion of changes in collectivization policy after Mao's death, the evolution of the danwei, and new spatial and social organization patterns in the Post-Mao period.

### BACKGROUND ON SPATIAL PATTERNS IN CHINA

For centuries, the Chinese people have used spatial patterns as a mechanism for implementing policies and facilitating social control. For instance, during the Zhou dynasty (1066-771 BCE), groups of 25 households formed the fundamental residential unit of Chinese cities (Bray 2005:24 and Kiser; Cai 2003:512). The Chinese government chose to organize cities in this way to facilitate the enforcement of mandatory service in the country's army, collect taxes from them efficiently, and maintain safety and social order (Bray 2005:24). This trend of organizing spatial patterns to facilitate policy implementation has continued since then, and is the foundation upon which the Chinese Communist Party builds its policies and structures their spatial organization.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Bank of China in Shanghai took this idea of group living one step further, by building a residential compound for its workers, thus marking the first time in China when housing was specifically tied to the workplace (Bray 2005:45). Within the walls of this compound, workers were provided housing in accordance with their status; so, for instance, a manager would receive better housing than assistant managers or clerks (Bray 2005:45). This residential compound helped reinforce the hierarchies of the bank's management structure, while also serving to cater to most of the daily needs of its residents by providing classrooms, meeting halls, sports facilities, and gardens (Bray 2005:45). According to Bray, the Bank of China model soon was adopted by many other commercial institutions, thereby facilitating the transition to the danwei system that dominated China's development after the Chinese Communist Party took over (Bray 2005:45).

### CHINA'S COLECTIVIZATION DURING THE MAOIST ERA

Upon taking control of China in 1949, the CCP introduced new policies, a new ideology, and a new emphasis on the importance of collectivization. Given Communism's roots in Marx's theory and

works, this emphasis on collectivization is not surprising, but the Chinese have developed their own particular version of Communism. For the CCP, collectivization meant that all people must work selflessly and diligently for the betterment of the nation as a whole, and that all things (land, businesses, homes, stores, roads, etc.) were owned by the state and not by the individual (Meisner 1968:101-102). Early in the CCP's rule, and particularly during Mao's reign (1949-1976), collectivization became a way of life for urban Chinese. At that time, urban Chinese lived with the same people with which they worked; they showered, ate, and went to classes with their neighbors, and worked towards the same goal of bettering the country as a whole with their fellow citizens (Bray 2005: 3-5).

### **EMERGENCE OF THE DANWEI SYSTEM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR URBANITES**

The CCP's primary instrument for transmitting collectivist policies was the danwei system. The term danwei denotes "the Chinese socialist workplace and the specific range of practices that it embodies" (Bray 2005:3). In other words, danwei is a physical structure that contains all of the amenities people need to survive (heavily subsidized rental housing, a workplace, classrooms, sports facilities, dining facilities, bathing houses, childcare centers, and kindergartens) while also providing a social welfare system, all of which is organized and overseen by the CCP (Bray 2005:3-4; Whyte 2004:695).

Danwei embodies more than just physical space; it provides its members with a complete social welfare system through the provision of government-subsidized housing, medical care, food, and social services (Bray 2005:3-4). Specifically, the danwei system educates people through the provision of free schooling, which also enables the CCP to control what children are taught (Bray 2005:5). It provides security to its residents through a government-provided police force (Bray 2005:5). It regulates the people by strategically placing party cadres, or officials, in each danwei to oversee the activities of its inhabitants (Bray 2005:119). According to Whyte, CCP cadres organized political study groups, approved marriages and divorces, and supervised leisure activities (2004:698). The CCP also made sure that other aspects of urbanites lives came under the control of mass associations like the Women's Federation, trade unions, businessmen's associations, the Communist Youth League, and the Writer's Union (Whyte 2004: 698). So in this way, the danwei became the basis of urban life in China.

Further to solidify the Communist version of order, in 1955 the CCP instituted the hukou system, or "national population register" (Bray 2005:114). Under this system, the central government provided rations of necessities, such as cotton, grain, and cooking oil to those urban residents based on their hukou registration (Bray 2005:115). The danweis were in charge of managing the hukou system, which strengthened the role of the danwei in peoples' everyday lives (Bray 2005:115). Initially, this system also controlled access to urban centers, because if a person did not have a hukou registration, then he or she would not be eligible for CCP-provided necessities. As a result, people did not move around very often because they could be registered at only one danwei, and without the danwei-provided necessities it would be very difficult to survive. People therefore got to know their neighbors and co-workers very well, as they now shared all aspects of life with them.

During the Maoist period, strict design standards were practiced, particularly in the area of danwei rental housing (Bray 2005:134). Traditional single-story residences in urban China no longer seemed appropriate, so the Communists began building three- and four-storey housing blocks that were grouped around the industries which were proliferating at a tremendous rate and in which people worked (Bray 2005:134). The CCP created two main housing forms: dormitory style and apartment style (Bray 2005:134). Dormitory-style housing consisted of individual rooms branching off a single main corridor with shared, washing, cooking and bathing facilities (Bray 2005:134). This type usually housed at least one person per room, and sometimes up to twelve students in a room in a college, university, or high-school setting (Bray 2005:134). Apartment style, by contrast, was best suited to families and consisted of at least two rooms which formed an independent home (Bray 2005:134). This type was further partitioned into units which consisted of a group of apartments that shared an entrance and a stairwell (Bray 2005:134). Both of these housing options were available at

significantly subsidized rates, often at five percent or less of one's income, making housing easily affordable to all urban residents (Whyte 2005:695).

Standardization and collectivizing urban forms had many implications for the Chinese. In particular, standardized spatial patterns held great political significance because they conveyed the importance of unity in the CCP's overarching ideological stance. The new standards also demonstrated the CCP's commitment to the concept of social collectivization by making sure that people lived, worked, and played with people devoted to the same greater good (Bray 2005:139). The danwei compound, too, was infused with ideological symbolism. The central building of the danwei usually contained the main administrative offices of the compound, including offices for senior danwei officials and for the party branch committee (Bray 2005:150). Its position at the center of the danwei conveyed an important symbolic message to its inhabitants: the CCP was at the heart of everyday life for urban Chinese (Bray 2005:150).

People experienced collectivization in many ways. For instance, in apartment-style units every three to five families shared a kitchen and toilet facilities (Bray 2005:151). In addition, every two or three buildings shared common spaces including laundry rooms, recreational areas, and bicycle sheds (Bray 2005:151). Furthermore, on the danwei level, the residents shared a number of larger facilities such as schools, meeting halls, clinics, bathhouses, and dining halls (Bray 2005:151).

By 1957, more than 90% of the urban population belonged to a danwei of some sort (Bray 2005:94). This means that in the eight years since the CCP had won control of the country, the danwei system had become the dominant organizational, economic, spatial, and social unit of urban China (Bray 2005:94-95). The danwei emerged as China's solution to the problem of transmitting Communist ideology to people who were unfamiliar with it. The CCP accomplished this by placing party cadres in each of the danweis in every Chinese city (Bray 2005:119). This allowed the CCP to have direct contact with nearly every individual living in a city. Interestingly, although the danwei was allowed some degree of autonomy, it still functioned as a cohesive unit of the Central CCP and aided in implementing central policy in areas such as culture, politics, and education (Bray 2005:58). Thus, the danwei functioned as a spatial tool for conveying Communist ideology and central government policy.

### **COLLECTIVIZATION POLICY AND SPATIAL PATTERNS, 1949-1976**

---

In attempting this urban transformation, the Chinese Communists sought to transform their cities into organized, production-oriented, and economically secure places with low levels of unemployment, crime, corruption, and other urban maladies (Whyte 2004:684). The CCP was initially very successful in meeting its goals as many people experienced a boost in living standard and an increase in wages, which, along with improved food distribution, allowed them to purchase better quality foods (Whyte 2004:694). The socialist system also began to deliver on its promised fringe benefits including disability pay, medical insurance, paid maternity leave, and pensions (Whyte 2004:695). Indeed, the Central CCP was quite successful in implementing its social welfare-related policies.

The new government also worked to standardize and regularize urban life in China. The CCP instituted a much higher degree of control over the population than previous governments had, and was significantly more involved in the everyday lives of its citizens (Whyte 2004:697). For example, in the 1950s, the CCP eliminated or reorganized religious organizations, extended family groups, and professional trade associations (Whyte 2004:698). The new organizations that arose, like the aforementioned trade unions, businessmen's associations, and the Writer's Union, were entirely under the CCP's control (Whyte 2004:698). Urban life now revolved around the party, and individuals were compelled to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of the Party (Whyte 2004:698; Meisner 1968:101-102).

The CCP also bureaucratized and standardized commercial development, eliminating private businesses, with their color, diversity, and variety (Whyte 2004:698). Since the state had assumed all responsibility for providing services and products to the urban population, there was no longer any need for shops to work to attract customers "with colorful signs and distinctive whistles or cries" (Whyte 2004:698).

Because of budget constraints, initial urban development focused on reusing existing space until the First Five-Year Plan (FFYP) was launched in the mid 1950s (Bray 2005:125-126). The FFYP called for the construction of hundreds of new industrial factories, most of which were built in the country's major cities (Bray 2005:126). Once this shift to "full-scale economic construction" had begun, the urban environment's character and cityscape changed dramatically. Between 1949 and 1957, the percentage of the population living in urban areas grew from 10.64 to 15.39, marking a substantial change in both policy and life for urbanites (Zhang 2004:32).

Many of the second wave of urban plans, implemented in the mid-1950s, did not fare well because of the limited availability of funds and the "intervention of radical political campaigns" (Bray 2005:130). In 1954, Premier Zhou Enlai was the first publicly to criticize the construction industry for "wasting the limited resources of the state" (Bray 2005:130). This marked the beginning of the Anti-Waste Campaign, which was heightened when the Anti-Rightist Campaign<sup>1</sup> began in 1957; these two movements combined to ensure that many of the people who had pioneered urban transformation of the early 1950s were demoted or removed from positions of power (Bray 2005:130). This campaign against waste had dramatic effects on the physical landscape of urban China. Its supporters made sure that funds were diverted from urban planning initiatives such as infrastructure development and redirected towards the needs of rising industrial enterprises (Bray 2005:130). As a result, the danwei became almost entirely responsible for financing and providing social services for its urban residents, thereby connecting the production level of the danwei-provided workplace with the quality of social services its residents received (Bray 2005:130). Not until the early 1960s were efforts made to reinstitute urban planning programs and offices (Bray 2005:130).

The Great Leap Forward (1958-60), which roughly coincided with the Anti-Waste Campaign, was the CCP's attempt to modernize China (Song and Zhang 2004:139). The leaders tried to do this by building factories to increase production, hoping to catapult the country into the ranks of developed nations (Whyte 2004:706-09). Unfortunately, many people starved during the "three bitter years" (1959-61), because of food shortages and a slump in the economy (Whyte 2004:709). During this depression, many plants were forced to close and large numbers of people laid off (Whyte 2004:709-10). The economy did not begin to rebound until 1962 (Whyte 2004:712).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-77), all development came to an abrupt stop (Song and Zhang 2004:139; Bray 2005:130). The Cultural Revolution, the intent of which was to eliminate all traces of tradition and things deemed reactionary, resulted in a great deal of destruction instead of construction (Whyte 2004:718). In particular, temples were defaced and Christian churches shut down, and those who wanted to continue religious ceremonies were forced to do so secretly in their own homes (Whyte 2004:726). This halt in development lasted from late 1966 until Lin Biao fell in 1971, after which urban planning institutions were reinstated and staff returned to their previous positions (Bray 2005:130-31). However, since the "Cultural Revolution leftists" still controlled the central government's policies in 1971, urban planning was considered "tainted by bourgeois ideology" and therefore did not receive much funding (Bray 2005:131). Urban planning agencies did not regain the support of the central government until after Mao's death in 1976 (Bray 2005:131).

#### **CHANGES IN COLLECTIVIZATION POLICY IN THE POST-MAO PERIOD**

---

China's policies in general, and collectivization in particular, took a drastic turn after Mao Zedong's death. The CCP's policies and practices began to change with reforms enacted in 1978 (Zhang 2004:33-34). Mao's death was a watershed in China's history, as the country has since taken many measures to add elements of privatization to the formerly collectivist lifestyle of the Chinese. More specifically, Mao's death marks the beginning of an ongoing transition from an entirely Communist way of life to a hybrid of Communist and Capitalist systems.

Beginning in 1978, the Chinese government loosened controls on many aspects of life, gradually allowing market forces to come into play, and placing a new emphasis on intellectuals. Most significantly, the private sector reemerged after the 1978 reforms, and according to official Chinese statistics, the number of urbanites engaged in private business increased from 150,000 in 1978 to about 8 million in 1992 and 24 million in 1999 (Bray 2005:167). There was also a new push to

construct more housing in urban areas to alleviate the housing crunch and cramped living conditions (Whyte 2004:729). Along with the reinstatement of market forces, these changes helped revive private businesses, which added color and variety to the formerly dreary urban cityscape (Whyte 2004:730).

Many of China's other policies also encouraged privatization and decreased emphasis on collectivization. This change in policy reflected opinion that the "iron rice bowl"<sup>2</sup> should be smashed (Bray 2005:160). Those, such as Xue, who believed this, did so because they were convinced that this system fostered lazy, inefficient workers and kept China from reaching its potential (Bray 2005:160). One of the first measures implemented to improve the economy and increase productivity was a bonus system (Bray 2005:160). In 1979, the silk industry adopted a "position-wage system" in which each worker's salary was tied to the position the worker occupied in the factory (Bray 2005:161). This may seem like an obvious policy to those familiar with Western workplaces, but for the Chinese it represented a dramatic change from the time when *every* worker had an "iron rice bowl." Chinese workers now had to shift their mentality away from working for the collective good, to begin working to improve their own life chances. Not surprisingly, these changes did not take place overnight and represent a gradual shift from strict Communism to a hybrid of Communism and Capitalism.

These policies and the reintroduction of private market forces have resulted in an increase in economic and social inequality. Piper Rae Gaubatz notes that "better work units tend to provide better housing and this housing tends to be located in districts where better schools are located" (1995:38). She specifically notes that the largest and most powerful work-units can take advantage of the best and newest housing developments, such as the Fangzhuang residential area in Beijing, which is not accessible to smaller businesses (Gaubatz 1995:38-39). The CCP recognized that inequality was rising, and their policies reflect their attempt to deal with the situation. In the preamble to the 1995 State Council document *Decision on Deepening Reform of the Urban Housing*, the CCP explains that it is changing

the system of investment in housing construction from one where the state and the *danwei* are solely responsible to one where the state, the *danwei*, and the individual each take a reasonable part of the burden ... to establish an economically appropriate, social-security style housing supply system for low- to middle-income earners and a commercial housing supply system for high-income earners" (Bray 2005:173).

These changes represent a dramatic shift from Maoist times, when collectivization of urban life in accordance with communist ideology was the primary goal.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF THE DANWEI IN THE POST-MAO PERIOD**

---

Since the early 1980s, there has been a tremendous boom in construction and significant changes in the urban system (Zhang 2004:33-34). Expansive tracts of land have been appropriated for new development and large portions of existing cities, rebuilt (Bray 2005:167). Furthermore, Bray notes that "the locus of urban life [is] shifting out of the *danwei* compound and onto the street" (2005:167). This transition has been facilitated by the rapid growth of small privately owned businesses that are not associated with the *danwei* and serve consumers in new ways. The proliferation of private businesses and the decrease in collectivization have resulted in a unique hybrid form of collectivized and privatized life. In China, the two now go hand in hand. Bray claims that without the social services provided by the *danwei*, many business people would not have dared to start their own business (Bray 2005:169). Indeed, many business people go to work each day knowing that they have access to the benefits of *danwei* living, such as free or heavily subsidized health care, subsidized housing, and schooling for their children (Bray 2005:169). While this is technically illegal, as those who do not work for a State Owned Enterprise (SOE) are not entitled to these benefits, many do so by living with relatives who are employed by the state, or by having one partner in a couple work for the state while the other works for the emerging private sector (Lina 2001:178; Bray 2005:169).

The housing market also has changed drastically since the 1980s, though strictly in accordance with the new housing policies. These have resulted in a new housing system with two options. The first, commodity housing, is constructed and sold at a profit on the open market to those who can afford to pay market rates (Bray 2005:174). According to Wang Lina, "since the umbilical cord

between work units and workers has not been cut, the work units are still the main buyers in the housing market" (2001:168). In other words, State-Owned Enterprises purchases the housing at market prices, and then distribute the housing units to its employees at subsidized rates (2001:168).

The second option is subsidized housing, which the danwei system still provides to most urbanites (Bray 2005:74). There is, however, one change to danwei-provided housing; danwei employees can purchase their residence at a subsidized rate and then own "only a proportion of the housing equivalent to the proportion they have paid of the full cost price" (Bray 2005:174). The Chinese government is encouraging people to buy public housing through "preferential policies, such as a low 1.5 percent depreciation rate for old housing stock, a working-age discount of 0.6-0.9 percent, and a 5 percent discount for purchase of currently occupied dwellings and for lump sum payment of the whole price" (Lina 2001:172). In this way, the CCP is encouraging people to continue living in danwei-style residences, but is offering people the option to purchase housing at market rates to increase government revenue.

### **NEW SPATIAL AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION IN THE POST-MAO PERIOD**

---

As a result of this shift away from collectivization, a new spatial order has arisen in urban China. The new planning regime has created a new spatial unit, the small district (or xiaoqu), which is remarkably similar to the old danwei (Bray 2005:176). The small district is a planned residential area where communal facilities such as restaurants, shops, sports facilities, and kindergartens are integrated with housing and under the control of a private property management company (Bray 2005:176-77). Most of these small districts are not attached to any sort of institution or workplace, thereby increasing the diversity of the people living in these areas in terms of background, income, profession, and interests (Bray 2005:177; Gaubatz 1995:35). Another big change in urban spatial patterns has been the rise of specialization and separation of districts in Chinese cities (Gaubatz 1995:34-35). According to Piper Gaubatz, district specialization, or the proliferation of land dedicated to a single use, has arisen because of a combination of factors. In some cases, the state has made certain types of development, such as commercial zoning, a priority, thereby facilitating its development in certain areas (Gaubatz 1995:45). In others, the state has left large tracts of land open for other uses, thereby allowing market forces to determine types of development (Gaubatz 1995:45). Five examples of specialized districts that have emerged include target development zones, downtown business centers, residential areas, restoration districts, and foreign quarters (Gaubatz 1995:47).

In November 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs issued a document called the MCA's View on Promoting Urban Shequ Building throughout the Nation, in which the MCA officially endorsed the implementation of shequas (Bray 2005:182). This document defines 'shequ' as "a social collective [...] formed by people who reside within a defined and bounded district" under the control of a Residents' Committee (Bray 2005:182). The city of Shenyang, in the late 1990s, was one of the first to adopt models of shequ organization (Bray 2005:183). This city developed three types of territories that correspond to various forms of urban spatial patterns: block style, which is based on urban blocks bounded by streets; danwei-style, which is based on a danwei compound and includes residential areas; and residential compound style, which is based on a bounded residential compound, or district (Bray 2005:184). In this new system, the shequa is supposed to accomplish five basic functions: provide services for the local residents, organize cultural and educational programs, manage elements of healthcare and sanitation, coordinate between other organizations and institutions, and provide security to local residents (Bray 2005:186-87).

### **CONCLUSION**

---

Clearly, the organization of Chinese cities has changed dramatically in the past half century. With the advent of rigorously enforced collectivist policies and spatial patterns in 1949, Chinese urbanites' way of life was altered to reflect Mao's Communist values. The introduction of the danwei system was the hallmark of the period, and continues to play an important role in the lives of urban workers. The tide shifted slightly during the Anti-Waste Campaign and the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and

early 1960s, when development was refocused or stopped altogether. The country dedicated itself to industrialization, and all forms of ornamentation and decoration took a back seat to functionality. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-77), the CCP's building efforts ceased, and things not deemed "revolutionary" by the ruling party were destroyed or eliminated. This severely handicapped the country, and by 1976, when Mao died, China was ready for change.

Since 1978, the CCP has lifted restrictions on development, opened the market, and introduced private forces into the lives of Chinese citizens. This has had a tremendous effect on urban life. Communities no longer must be attached to a work place; cities have specialized and been separated into districts. Moreover, China's housing policy has been transformed into a dual system, in which both danwei-style and commodity housing, which can be purchased on the open market, are available. The fact that these changes in collectivization policy and spatial organization in urban China follow the same trajectory indicates a close link between the two.

---

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> During the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Central Communist Party actively worked to silence those who criticized the government (Whyte 2004:704).

<sup>2</sup> The term "iron rice bowl" refers to the idea that the Chinese Communist Party would provide all urban residents with equal provisions (Song and Zhang 2004:145).

---

## WORKS CITED

- Bray, David. 2005. *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gaubatz, Piper Rae. 1995. "Urban transformation in post-Mao China: impacts of the reform era on China's urban form." *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in post-Mao China*. Eds. Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth J. Perry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kiser, Edgar and Yong Cai. 2003. "War and Bureaucratization in Qin China: Exploring an Anomalous Case." *American Sociological Review*. 68: 511-539.
- Lina, Wang. 2001. "Urban Housing Welfare and Income Distribution." *China's Retreat from Economic Equality: Income Distribution and Economic Transition*. Eds. Carl Riskin, Zhao Renwei, and Li Shi. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, Inc.
- Meisner, Maurice. 1968. "Utopian Goals and Ascetic Values in Chinese Communist Ideology." *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 1:101-110.
- Song, Shunfeng and Kevin H. Zhang. 2004. "Spatial Dynamics of City-Size Distribution." *Urban Transformation in China*. Eds. Aimin Chen, Gordon G. Liu, and Kevin H. Zhang. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Whyte, Martin King. 2004. "Urban Life in the People's Republic." *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 15: The People's Republic, Part 2: Revolutions within the Chinese evolution 1966-1982*. Eds. Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhang, Kevin H. 2004. "The Evolution of China's Urban Transformation." *Urban Transformation in China*. Eds. Aimin Chen, Gordon G. Liu, and Kevin H. Zhang. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company.