

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Urban Communities in China

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This project, funded by the European Commission, 7th Framework, Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities, is one of four strands of research in a larger programme of research on the prospects for sustainable urbanisation in China. The overall project is organised by a consortium, Urbachina (with an informative website), coordinated in Paris and Rome. Two of the four strands are in the charge of the LSE. The other one at LSE is on land, law and policy, coordinated and led by Professor Athar Hussain, Asia Research Centre. This one is the only ethnographic strand.

Urban government in China is officially a task of social management and community formation. This task at the lowest, hands-on level is given to Residents' Committees that are understaffed and underpaid. Welfare beneficiaries rely on these staff, but others have little to do with what are officially 'their' committees. They form their own kinds of informal association. We ask how well are public spaces, utilities, and the fabric of the properties rented or owned (by leasehold) maintained, and how (or whether) residents can effectively bring deficiencies to their committees or to property management companies for remedy. We ask whether this limited representation or indifference to being represented or to government can be sustained.

Similarly, planning and rebuilding of cities creates spaces for residents' recreation but the question is how residents make use of these spaces. We use the idea of place-making, developed by Stephan Feuchtwang in a previous publication (2004 *Making Place: State projects, globalisation, and local responses in China*. London: UCL Press) to observe gatherings and any focal locations or buildings.

A larger question concerns the growing iniquity of provision of housing and other public goods and whether endemic deficiencies and complaints, including complaints about other residents, can be sustained. To ask and answer this question we are adapting the idea of 'housing classes' first used in a study of racial discrimination in housing in Sparkbrook, Birmingham, UK in the 1960s. In urban China discrimination is not racialised. It is instead a ranking of life-styles using the vocabulary of 'civilisation' and 'quality'.

Field research started in April 2012 and is being conducted in four cities, two mega-cities (Shanghai and Chongqing) a large-sized city (Kunming) and a medium-sized city (Huangshan) by a team of six researchers, three Chinese and three European, led and coordinated by Stephan Feuchtwang. Each researcher conducts two months' fieldwork, using a schedule of topics to be covered, in two fieldsites, each the territory in the jurisdiction of a residents' committee, one central and one peripheral, in two cities. The results will be extensive field reports from a range of residents' committees, more numerous in the largest two cities. They will be completed in 2013. The end-report, combining all these field reports will be composed by Stephan Feuchtwang in 2014. There will be interim publications. The project ends in March 2015.