

Residential Mobility and Urban Change in China: What have we learnt so far?

Si-ming Li

Abstract

The past few years witnessed growing interests in the study of residential mobility and housing decisions in Chinese cities. Various attempts have been made to estimate the mobility rate, analysing how it varies over time and places, and to examine how residential mobility is related to housing tenure change and to the nature of residential differentiation and the process of suburbanization in urban China. In this paper I seek to take stock of knowledge on this topic. Evidence to date suggests that despite the massiveness of housing construction programs over the past two decades, residential mobility has not increased in some cities. Also, despite the efforts at privatization and marketization, work units have continued to dominate the housing provision scene and play a pivotal role in China's suburbanization. High-status workers such as cadres and professionals are the ones that benefit most from the housing reform; they are also the first to suburbanize. But there are also tendencies for proprietors of private business and other urban new rich to move to more centrally-located sites. At the end of the twentieth century, the Chinese government decided to end welfare allocation of housing and grant full property rights to former buyers of work unit housing. This will set in train a new wave of moves. In the last part of this paper I try to analyse how this may bring about new dimensions of residential differentiation. In particular, I hypothesize that again it is the high-status groups that will lead the way in the new round of spatial reshuffling. However, instead of showing a predominately outward trend, in a more fully-marketized environment, it is likely that large proportions of the high-status groups will undertake more inward moves.