

Informal Migrant Communities and Social Change in Chinese Megacities

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Summary

China seeks and claims to be pursuing a process of urbanization that does not enable slums to arise. This could present a significant alternative to the depressing idea of a worldwide formation of ‘mega-slums’, or a ‘planet of slums’ as projected in Mike Davis’ book of that name. In her paper, Gransow examines whether strategies for the cities of the future can be discerned in Chinese megacities of today. After a brief description of the characteristics of urbanization and the rise of megacities in China, she analyzes the development, types and structures of migrant communities that have often taken the form of urban villages in many of the country’s large cities since the 1990s as a visible expression of massive rural-urban migration. The focus is on the informal dynamics of these migrant enclaves.

This paper demonstrates that nearly all areas of migrants’ life and work in Chinese cities are marked by informality, from their residence status and their frequent non-contractual employment to their and their children’s healthcare, improvised schooling, and uncertain living conditions. In the employment, housing, healthcare and education sectors, one can observe how informalization processes have increased over the years, yet at the same time are triggering the creation of new rules and laws which in the long run might help to overcome the existing rural-urban divide. The Chinese registration system (*hukou*) which differentiates between rural and urban residency is without doubt at the root of the numerous dual types of development that migrant workers have to bridge. It would be simplistic, however, to expect that the myriad of problems that have arisen from accelerated urbanization and from the conflicts between rapidly expanding mobility of large parts of the Chinese population and locally anchored forms (and reforms) of social infrastructure can be solved solely by eliminating the *hukou* system. Rather, far-reaching structural reforms are needed here as well as in other areas of China’s development.

The urban housing problems faced by rural migrants in China’s megacities show once again the two-sided character of these informal migrant communities. On the one hand, the informal sector creates innovative spaces for economic and social change and opens perspectives and paths out of rural contexts that offer few opportunities for change, thus supporting developments that the formal sector cannot assume. On the other hand, however, migrants are confronted with precarious housing situations and living conditions which exist in a legal limbo and only function on the basis of improvisation and short-term arrangements. Gransow argues that precisely these extemporaneous situations have to be viewed as the starting point

for social and urban planning policies that seek to secure stable and legally recognized housing and living conditions. This objective cannot be achieved by an approach to urban development that endeavors primarily to get rid of informal migrant settlements by administrative means (which today is often the case) without accounting for how these settlements are enmeshed with other aspects of migrants' livelihoods. In fact, this type of approach would ultimately only transpose the existing urban-rural divide onto the cities and reproduce it there in the form of intra-urban social polarization, a scenario that points to the specter of a "planet of slums".

An interim conclusion to the question of what can be learnt from migrant communities in Chinese megacities to benefit the future of megacity development in general is drawn by highlighting two alternatives, namely whether informality and migrant enclaves in China should be viewed primarily as a problem, i.e. as forerunners of extensive slum formation, or primarily as a solution, i.e. as transitional stages and precursors to subsequent integration. Gransow concludes that urban planners and political leaders in China have recognized the need for active integration policy for several years now and have also implemented such public policy – at least in part – but that the processes of social change currently underway at the micro-level in Chinese megacities (such as changing expectations by a new generation of migrants that – in contrast to the first generation – no longer has ties to agriculture and is looking for a future as urban citizens) point more toward urban-rural polarization being shifted into the cities. This tendency would be diametrically opposed to the development of a broad middle class which is sought in the vision of a 'harmonious society'. In addition to the need for structural adjustments, Gransow highlights the potential role that local and international civil society might play in mediating between migrants' individual/household livelihood strategies and public policy at the meso-level. The exceptional dimensions and pace of urbanization in China have already brought learning processes that show there can be no alternative to sustainable megacity development and participatory planning processes, in whatever concrete forms these take in the various regions of the country. The 'experimental informality' that can be observed in migrant settlements and megacity development all over China offers numerous points of intersection that are of interest not only for developments in China itself but also worldwide.