

Informal Housing in Shanghai

A Brief Introduction to its History

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Abstract: Informal housing has in recent years been a topic in the research field of sociology in China. In the context of many negative and “stigmatizing” (Wu 2014: 67) reviews, informal settlements in Shanghai have been gradually torn down since the 1990s as part of urban development projects and redevelopment projects of old urban areas. The city administration tries to create a new, tidy and clearly structured cityscape and promotes the construction of modern, similar skyscrapers. Compared to these new housing estates, the chaotic texture, the self-developed structure and the enormously high-density space belong to the most distinctive characteristics of the informal settlement in Shanghai. These self-developed structures, the minimalist interior space, and the relationship with the environment are now rare and particularly interesting in the context of today’s architecture in Shanghai.

Keywords: informal housing, Shanghai, Chinese Communist Revolution.

Definition of informal housing in Shanghai

The meaning of “informality” is a fundamental issue when we confirm the definition of informal housing. In terms of architecture or urban planning, “informality” means that informal dwellings do not comply with the law or the regulatory framework in the city. (see UN-HABITAT 2003: 104) UN-HABITAT has also defined the following situations as informal: «being built on land intended for another use; not conforming to all of the standards laid down for that part of the city; not being subject to planning permission or building inspection; being built on land not owned by the occupier and without permission of the owner» (UN-HABITAT 2003: 104) In most cases, “informality” usually takes place during the construction process or before the construction works,

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however, the label of “informality” or “illegality” cannot fully reflect the diversity of informal living. “*vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous, rural*” (Rudofsky 1965: 3), described Rudofsky the self-built buildings in *Architecture without Architects* and at the same time largely enlarge the meaning of the informal housing.

The informal Settlement in Chinese is called PenghuQu (棚户区), or Penghu Settlement. The meaning is synonymous with barracks quarters, or shanty towns. However, there is a clear difference between a Penghu settlement and slums (贫民窟) in China, because in the informal settlements in China, there are enough technical infrastructure, public services, and the inhabitants, in contrast to the slums, have formal identities.

The history and the 4th generations of informal housing

The informal settlements have provided financially affordable accommodation for the poor, refugees, rural-urban migrants and newcomers for more than a century and a half. The history of informal housing in Shanghai can be traced back to the first half of the 19th century, shortly after the forced opening of Shanghai in the Qing Dynasty. It's hard to figure out when the first “houseboats” came to Shanghai. At the beginning of the 20th century, many refugees arrived in Shanghai by boat or sampans because of the civil war and the destruction of their villages. These groups were ultimately aware that it is difficult to find low-priced and affordable accommodation and kept staying on the boats. Living on sampan boats was the first generation of informal housing in Shanghai.

Sampans (舢板) were quite popular with farmers because of their low cost in the villages, where the river network was very dense. For the residents who lived on sampan boats, all the belongings of the families were on the boats. The living area was initially limited to the inside of the boat and life on the boats was very difficult. Such sampans were usually only two meters long and one meter wide, and in extreme cases even three families lived separately in the front, middle and rear hulls. (see Editorial Group 1971: 40) Even though living on sampan boats was the last choice for the poor, water supply and sanitation was never a problem. The high heat capacity of water and the high width of the river made life in summer never unbearable.

A few years later, more and more refugees came after the Xinhai revolution and the lasting civil war. Many rivers, especially the small creeks, were overflowing with sampans. Some sampans were therefore unable to move in the crowd, others were damaged. Many residents left the broken boats stranded on the bank or even pulled them ashore. The living space was gradually changed by the dwellers as well. They extended the living area from the boats to the riverbank. On the other hand, after spending several years living in Shanghai, some poor migrants already had some savings. With the savings, they built new makeshift huts on the bank (see Wu 2015: 49) to get a higher quality of living. The building material probably just came from the former boats or garbage. These represent the second type.

This form of the second type was various, because here the transition from living on water to living on the bank took place. A few “houseboats” leaked after a long stay in the water, some “land boats” dilapidated gradually. At the same time, the new arrivals could find no more space on the full river and could also only settle on the bank. Some people simply raised the boats in the air to avoid the flooding and pest infestation, some built a new hut with felt, straw, bamboo poles, and other accessible materials, some remained on the boats and rebuilt them. Most of the existing forms of housing between the 1930s and 40s were only in a temporary situation and later the dwellers moved continuously from bank to land. The quality of housing did not yet change fundamentally during this period, but the living area was considerably expanded.

In between, rapid industrial growth had increased Shanghai’s fascination to all rural-urban migrants, and many new factories were built in Shanghai, especially inside the International Settlement, as a result, many people flooded into Shanghai. In 1900, there were only 345, 276 Chinese residents in the International Settlement. In 1932 this number was already over 1,000,000.² The city administration could, however, not offer enough affordable housing and the poor could then only build huts themselves “*on the roadside, on the bank, near the train station and port, in the waste land or on the ruins*” (Wang 1947). These are the third type of informal living in Shanghai.

2. Statistics from Chronicle of Foreign Settlements in Shanghai.

The third generation, namely makeshift huts, were usually built of straw and wood. Despite the threat of flooding and fire, the poor people had at least a shelter. During the development of the huts, the settlement as well as the social network in the settlement developed. A few associations were also established during this period in order not to let the huts be demolished by the government. The low supply of affordable housing forced the workers in Shanghai to build themselves small straw huts near factories. This gradually developed into settlements. For example, the beginning of Yaoshui Long (药水弄), a well-known informal settlement which was demolished after the Chinese Communist Revolution, can be ranged back to the early 1920s.

The situation worsened after Shanghai incident in 1932. The war between China and Japan caused large numbers of refugees to Shanghai. Five years later, the invasion of the Japanese brought even greater flow of refugees. By 1942, the number of residents in Shanghai International Settlements and French Concession increased by approximately 780,000.³ Most of them were Chinese refugees. The refugees and the homeless began building makeshift huts all over the city or even right on the bombed-out ruins. In combination with the refugee flows came more and more “houseboats”. This trend continued until the end of the civil war. Shortly before 1949, almost all rivers and creeks in Shanghai were overcrowded with this kind of boats. The boats on the river, especially these on the Suzhou Creek, together formed a new form of community, the Settlement on the river.

In 1926, the city administration made an investigation about the informal housing. The International Settlement were finally aware that informal housing at that time is an unpleasant problem and tried several times to remove the shanties. However, only 10% of the huts were demolished in the following years.⁴ The nationalist government of Shanghai also tried to change the situation, for example by building new affordable settlements in the suburbs. Before 1937, the city administration continued different efforts without success. During the Sino-Japanese War and the following second Chinese Civil War, there was an explosive increase of the number of informal housing without the control of government.

After the Chinese Communist revolution in 1949, the new city

3. Statistics from Chronicle of Foreign Settlements in Shanghai

4. Statistics from the document on Penghu-problem from the management of the International Settlement.

administration in Shanghai was unable either to restrict continuous migration or provide enough affordable housing. Some of the hut-dwellers were forced in the following years to return to their homeland. Some had the opportunity to rebuild their hut with wood, brick or glass, which was provided by the city government according to the archives. In 1959, the number of informal housing reached its peak; this year, there were 5.46 million square meters of informal housing in all, accounting for 15.8% of all residential space in the city center of Shanghai. It was home to 1.39 million people, 24% of Shanghai's population.⁵ The statistics show that there were 4.84 million square meters of informal housing in Shanghai in 1964, and the per capita living space in the informal settlements was less than 4 square meters.⁶ The refurbishment of the makeshift huts was mostly done in the 1970s and 1980s when most of the temporary building materials were unable to support the houses. These houses of the fourth type, namely Penghu-buildings then had at least a stable form.

The fourth generation of informal housing in Shanghai, which until now existed sporadically in the city center of Shanghai, are the so-called Penghu-buildings or the building in the Penghu-settlement. The complex private refurbishment of third generation makeshift huts in the settlement was carried out in the 1970s and '80s because of the collapse of the huts, the improvement of the financial situation or the increase in family members.

The new Penghu-buildings have been stabilized by bricks and cement and another story has been built without permission of the city administration.

Some years after the Chinese Communist Revolution there was still no noticeable decrease in the number of informal housing. The government also participated in the renovation of the settlements and the construction of the infrastructures. Some urbanizing measures, including the building of water supply points, sewers and public toilets, as well as road-asphalting made the informal settlements a well-integrated urban area. Attempts to improve the own living situation in

5. Statistics from summary of improvement and repair work for Penghu in winter 1959, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

6. Statistics from statement on improvement of Penghu buildings in Shanghai.

informal settlements and the generally stagnant situation of informal housing in Shanghai continued until the end of the 20th century, when the real estate market was finally opened, and urban renewal was initiated by the city administration. Then, the city administration launched several large plans of urban redevelopment and demolition of old urban areas, including most informal settlements from 1990 to 2010. After that, informal housing was no longer one of the main living cultures in Shanghai.

The 4 types of informal housing in Shanghai had obvious temporal characteristics and each type embodied had a big change to the earlier ones, so they can be defined as the 4 generations of informal housing in Shanghai. The four generations showed the conditional popular urbanization of informal settlements. The “evolutionary path” of this is also the way for the dweller in these settlements, to improve the quality of housing and to integrate themselves into the city.

The analysis of the development

In terms of housing culture, we can see both inheritance and evolution in the development of informal housing in Shanghai. First, the boundary between privacy and the public changed in different generations of informal housing. In the first generation, several families even had to live together on a sampan boat. The border at the beginning was not clear. In fact, the “house wall” and door made of temporary materials from the sampan boats, huts on the bank could not separate the interior and exterior. On the other hand, the refugees, poor workers, were also the so-called rural-urban migrants, who at that time had no awareness of privacy and brought the customs from the rural areas with them. That means informal housing lacked at the beginning both a physical and psychological border between privacy and public. During the refurbishment the dwellers built rooms for various uses in the house, at that time different levels of privacy were gradually formed in housing and the cognition of privacy was also built up. However, in comparison to the mainstream of living styles, the psychological border between privacy and public is relatively unclear for the dwellers in informal housing.

The dwellers’ reaction to the climate was also changed because of the different housing situation. Dwellers did not have many options

for building materials and house shapes. They still reacted relatively well to make the buildings suit the climate. Between May and July there is the one-month long period when the temperature is not so high, but the humidity is especially high in Shanghai. It was usually a big problem, to spend this period, before the air-conditioning was everywhere in Shanghai. The benefits of living on the rivers are obvious, the waterways never need expensive repairs; drains never suffers from stoppage; taking a bath is possible at any hour. In addition, the expanse of the river functions as a cooling system in the summer. (see, Rudofsky 1965: 42) The residents in Penghu settlements also had the sensitive reaction to the extreme weather. Small windows at the back side of the house, for example, are indispensable and they kept the doors open for more ventilation to spend the muggy month.

The multiple use of space and social units of the informal housing were kept in the original way.

For informal housing, the deficits of urban development, infrastructure and interior space are the frequent reasons for the deterioration of the quality of housing. Small space for living forces the dwellers to use the space innovatively. Multiple use of single space is a common phenomenon in informal housing. It was quite normal that in earlier times the dwellers in the huts had only a few bundles of straw and a thin woolen bed at home, which were used as a dining table during the day and as a bed at night. (see Editorial Group 1971: 5) The living situation was improved after the refurbishment. However, the high birth rate in the 1960s along with the return of sent-down youths (知青) led to a rapid increase in family members in the 1970s and 1980s. The scarce average living space at that time was a common phenomenon in informal housing in Shanghai. The multi-use was varied and included many different situations. A Chinese proverb, which is often used in the description of the small living space in reports, is 螺蛳壳里做道场. It means literally celebrating a complete ritual in a snail shell.

At the beginning the social units in the informal settlement were the poor workers seeking jobs in Shanghai or the refugees from the countryside near Shanghai, especially in the areas north of Yangtze. Normally they came from the extended families in these areas, which usually consisted of more than three generations, but the wars and famines uprooted them and then

disintegrated the extended families. After that, the refugees had to start new families in the informal settlements. The first generation in the settlement usually brought up several children, namely the second generation in the settlement. Only few residents in Penghu settlements are not natives. Migratory movement in and out of the settlement is quite weak.

Summary

A few years after the Chinese Communist Revolution, a considerable amount of public housing was planned and started to be built. The large supply of affordable housing dampened the rapid increase in the number of informal housing. The strict implementation of the Hujia system⁷ (户籍制度) from 1958 proved to be effective in stopping the flow of migrants into Shanghai. These two measures together finally stopped the increase of informal housing. After the Chinese economic reform, the rapid economic development led to a remarkable decrease in the area of informal housing.

Improvement of the housing situation, especially the physical living conditions in the informal settlement is clear. The development path of informal housing shows the urbanization of informal settlements. At the same time, many lifestyles of 4 generations of informal housing are maintained that nowadays look different from these of normal urban life in Shanghai. It means that living in Penghu settlement differs from the normal urban living in Shanghai. Residents in informal settlements, for example, have a weaker cognition about privacy than the normal urban residents or share the bathroom with neighbors. To some extent, we can call it the unfinished social urbanization. However, it is quite certain for everyone including the dweller in informal settlements that informal housing in Shanghai will come to an end in the near future.

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7. The Hujia system is the official control of the place of residence in China and, to some extent, restricts the free migration between the different places in China.

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Next page: Pic. 1: Living on sampan boats, the first generation of informal housing in Shanghai. © Harrison Forman, Harrison Forman Collection, UWMilwaukee; Pic. 2: living on the bank, the second generation of informal housing in Shanghai. © Harrison Forman, Harrison Forman Collection, UWMilwaukee; Pic. 3: makeshift huts, the third generation of informal housing in Shanghai. © Malcolm Rosholt, University of Bristol, Historical Photographs of China; Pic. 4: Buildings in the Penghu-settlement, the fourth generation of informal housing in Shanghai. © unknown photographer, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_548212d30102uxm9.html; Pic. 5: Informal settlements in Shanghai have been gradually torn down nowadays © own photo.

