Invisible migrant enclaves in Chinese cities: Underground living in Beijing, China

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Abstract
China is experiencing an urban revolution, powered in part by hundreds of millions of migrant workers. Faced with institutionalised discrimination in the housing system and the lack of housing affordability, migrants have turned to virtually uninhabitable spaces such as basements and civil air defence shelters for housing. With hundreds of thousands of people living in crowded and dark basements, an invisible migrant enclave exists underneath the modern city of Beijing. We argue that in Chinese cities, housing has been adopted as an institution to exclude and marginalise migrants, through: (a) defining migrants as an inferior social class through the Hukou system and denying their rights to entitlements including housing; (b) abnormalising migrants through various derogatory naming and categorisations to legitimise exclusion; and (c) purifying and controlling migrant spaces to achieve exclusion and marginalisation. The forced popularity of basement renting reflects the reality that housing has become an institution of exclusion and marginalisation. It embodies vertical spatial marginalisation, with exacerbated contrasts between basement tenants and urban residents, heightened fear of the ‘other’, even more derogatory naming, and the government’s more aggressive clean-up of their spaces. We call for reforms and policy changes to ensure decent and affordable housing for basement tenants and migrants in general.

Keywords
affordable housing, basement renting, basements, China, low-income housing, migrant enclave, migrants

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Introduction
On the evening of 21 July 2012, Beijing experienced the heaviest rain and flooding in six decades, claiming 79 lives. While some of those who died were migrants living in
basements, the heavy rain forced thousands of basement tenants to temporarily live on the street (Xinhua Net, 2012). Overnight, a huge underground population was revealed – a city under the city. Basement tenants are popularly called the ‘mouse tribe’ (or ‘rat tribe’, shu zu) in the media, living in an over-crowded warren of underground tunnels and cellars lacking windows and proper ventilation, all underneath the modern city of Beijing and invisible to the world.

China is in the midst of an urban revolution fed in particular by large-scale rural to urban migration. As the national capital, Beijing has grown rapidly in recent decades. During 2000–2010, the number of long-term migrants increased from 2.68 million to 7.04 million (19.4% to 35.9% of the city’s population) (BSB, 2011; SSB, 2001). Accommodating the large population in general, and the influx of migrants in particular, has become an unprecedented challenge. Meanwhile, housing privatisation and marketisation in the last three decades has driven up housing prices, more so in Beijing than elsewhere. The average sale price for private ‘commodity housing’ (shang pin fang) in Beijing increased 240% from 5062 yuan/m² in 2001 to 17,151 yuan/m² in 2010, while per capita disposable income increased 150% from 11,578 yuan to 29,073 yuan (SSB, 2011). The price–income ratio in Beijing was 13.3 in 2009 (Dai, 2012), much higher than the conventional affordable level of 4–5. Not surprisingly, rental levels are high as well. According to Homelink Real Estate, the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Beijing was about 3250 yuan in August of 2011 (Xinhua Agency, 2011). With skyrocketing housing prices, housing affordability and housing poverty are acute problems, especially among low- and middle-income households. According to UN-Habitat (2003), over 30% of the urban population in China lived in slum conditions in 2001, which refers to a wide range of low-income settlements and poor human living conditions that are characterised by insecure residential/tenure status, inadequate access to safe water, inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure, poor structural quality of housing, and overcrowding.

Crowding is a more serious problem among migrants in Beijing with per capita living space among migrants at only 5.6 m² compared to 19.6 m² for native residents (Zhai et al., 2007). Furthermore, migrants had been officially excluded from the subsidised housing system until 2011 when qualified migrants were allowed to access ‘public rental housing’ (gonggong zulin fang) (BCOHURD, 2011). Yet the entry criteria are so stringent that few migrants can actually benefit from it. According to the twelfth Five-Year Plan for Affordable Housing in Beijing, only about 10% of all planned subsidised housing units are for migrants – mostly skilled migrants. Thus most migrants are forced to access housing on the open market. With limited financial resources and extremely high housing prices, migrants have to live in overcrowded, poorly constructed housing, such as substandard housing built by urban villagers forming so-called ‘migrant enclaves’ or ‘ant tribes’ (yi zu), and basement dormitories. In 2006, about two thirds of migrants lived in housing built by villagers and 5.6% lived in underground spaces (Zhai et al., 2007).

The majority of existing research on migrant housing has focused on urban villages, or ‘migrant enclaves’ at the urban fringe (Wang et al., 2010; Wu, 2002; Zheng et al., 2009). The appalling housing conditions, dehumanisation, and potential health and safety problems associated with living underground have recently drawn considerable media attention and public debates to the plight of the ‘mouse tribes’. Although the Beijing Municipal Government (BMG) has
tried many times to clean up basements, they remain a common residential choice among migrants, despite their obvious problems. Yet, robust research on the ‘underground city’ has been rare. This paper focuses on the subterranean housing in Beijing. In addition to understanding how and why this underground residential space has arisen, this paper aims to provide a conceptual framework to understand the poor housing conditions among migrants in general.

In this paper we call basement renting an ‘invisible migrant enclave’. As we will show later, basement tenants are predominantly migrants. However, compared to conventional ‘migrant enclaves’ – urban villages at the urban fringe – basement rentals are ‘invisible’ both physically and socio-politically. Physically, basement rentals are underground and scattered across the city, often invisible to urban residents and policy makers, let alone to visitors and outsiders. With their relatively large scales and continuous settlement, conventional migrant enclaves demonstrate visible poor housing conditions and human misery, in sharp contrast to clean, orderly, and aesthetic private housing in suburban neighbourhoods. In comparison, basement rentals hide extreme poor housing conditions and poverty; their very invisibility does not threaten the image of a prosperous city. Socio-politically, basement tenants (and migrants in China in general) have been ‘invisible’ as they generally are not qualified for subsidies and entitlements by the government. Virtually all social policies and programmes exclude migrants. As China embarks on its pursuit for the ‘Chinese Dream’ promoting homeownership, renters in China have been largely ignored in the socio-political agenda. In particular, migrant renters are the most invisible and powerless group as they are often the poorest group and they are not eligible for compensation or resettlement in the face of eviction and redevelopment. The term ‘invisible renters’ (Davis, 2006: 42–45) is appropriate here. Thus we use the term ‘invisible migrant enclaves’ to refer to basement renting in Chinese cities because of its invisibility both physically and socio-politically.

In terms of methodology, we conducted archival research on government policies and existing studies, and fieldwork in seven basement rentals in Beijing in the summer of 2012 (see Figure 1). In addition to surveying the physical condition of basements, during our fieldwork we conducted in-depth interviews with the owners and managers of basements, basement tenants, and homeowners above ground. Because of the difficulties in randomly sampling basement rental sites and basement tenants, we supplement our empirical analyses with analyses of the 2006 0.1% Migrant Survey in Beijing. This survey is a large scale (4200 migrants and 800 landlords) multi-stage cluster random sampling data set conducted in 2006 by the Population and Development Research Center at Renmin University. The 2006 survey can provide an overall picture of migrants living in basements compared to all migrants and migrants in urban villages, helping to triangulate our fieldwork.

Understanding the urban geography of exclusion and marginalisation in Chinese cities

While there is a significant body of literature on urban villages and migrant enclaves in China, there has been very limited research on basement rentals/underground housing, despite much of the media attention and public debate in China. Existing studies mostly describe basement tenant profiles and basement rental condition. Chen and Wu (2007) classify basement rental in Beijing into two kinds: (a) basement hotels, mostly located underneath residential buildings along main streets in nodal locations; and (b) basement dormitories fully equipped with...
living facilities such as shared kitchens and bathrooms. Charging by the night, basement hotels cater mainly to low-income male business people who are peripatetic between Beijing and other places, while basement dormitories offer monthly leases mostly to migrant workers with relatively stable employment (Chen and Wu, 2007). This is consistent with Wang’s (2010) findings that migrants are the main tenants of basements along with a small number of displaced native urban residents and patients who come to Beijing seeking healthcare.

Problems such as extreme crowding, poor physical environment, enclosure of the space, dampness, and the lack of sunlight, security and public space are widespread among basements (Chen and Wu, 2007; Wang, 2010). Tenants often lack a sense of belonging in the city and have a strong sojourner’s mentality (Huo, 1999; Lin and Zhu, 2008). Yet, compared to migrant enclaves in suburbs, basement renting usually offers migrants more centralised locations with better accessibility and neighbourhood facilities, closer contact with urban local residents, and a strong desire to be assimilated into the urban life (Chen and Wu, 2007). It has been argued that basement living is a result of many factors such as the gap between urbanisation and economic development, low-income of manual labour workers, and the divided urban–rural economic structure (Yang, 2011). While existing studies have shed some important lights on basement renting, it is still unclear how and why this unconventional residential space has formed in Beijing.

There are generally three kinds of basements in Chinese cities: (1) Civil Air Defense Shelters (CADS, ren fang gong cheng), which are designated shelters for use during wars and disasters, and managed by municipal Bureau of Civil Air Defense; (2) regular basements that do not meet the criteria for CADS which were originally designated for storage, parking and commercial activities; and (3) half-basements with windows above the ground which were designated for residential use. The first two are not designed for residential use, yet many of them have been converted to this purpose in recent
years. In addition to CADS built during the socialist era for war-time security, CADS have been required for all newly constructed civic buildings since the 1980s (President’s Command, 1997). With the prevalence of peace, CADS have mostly been vacant and have lacked proper maintenance leading to their deterioration over time. In order to improve the condition and management of CADS, most municipal governments encouraged work units, organisations and individuals to invest in CADS, allowing them to manage and profit from CADS during peace-time (President’s Command, 1997). Thus while CADS are owned by the state, municipal governments, work units and developers are the de facto owners, whose rent-seeking behaviour has encouraged the conversion of CADS into basement rental properties in recent decades.

Meanwhile, regular basements have often been built underneath new buildings, creating massive underground spaces for storage, parking and other commercial purposes. Yet, the property rights of regular basements, especially those under residential housing, are very vague and complex. In recent decades, China has experienced unprecedented housing privatisation, with previously public rental housing sold to sitting tenants (‘reform housing’), and new commodity housing developed by developers, managed by Property Management Companies (PMCs), and sold to individuals. While property rights for apartments are clear, they are often not for basements underneath. According to a survey by Beijing Real Estate Association in 2009, only a very small proportion of regular basements are owned by homeowners with clear property rights. Basements under reform housing are owned by the Municipal Housing Bureau or work units who used to own the housing; those underneath commodity housing are mostly owned by developers or their subsidiary PMCs and some are shared property of homeowners, but are still controlled by developers or PMCs. These complex property rights encourage the illegal conversion of regular basements into residential rental properties.

With the influx of migrants, the demolition of many urban villages, and rapidly rising housing prices in Beijing, there is a huge unmet demand for affordable housing among migrants. Not surprisingly, work units, developers, PMCs and investors are all interested in converting the massive underground spaces into profitable residential rental property. Usually, de facto owners of CADS and regular basements would make the initial investment into CADS and basements; yet few of them would directly engage in the basement rental business. Instead they often contract basements out to third party managers who then remodel the underground space into liveable residential properties and lease out to tenants, often illegally – that is, without the approval of the local government (BREA, 2009). For example, a manager would divide the underground space into many small rooms, rearrange the water, electricity, gas, add public bathrooms, and set up the phone/internet system and even the security and monitoring system, often investing hundreds of thousands to millions of yuan into the redevelopment. Despite low rents, managers can often recover their investment in 3–5 years. Thus, basement rental property has become a lucrative business that has attracted many developers, PMCs and investors, some of whom even take loans to engage in it, while others would profit from transferring their contracts to other managers with a handsome transfer fee (Zhang, 2011). Consequently, basement rental property has expanded rapidly especially in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century.

It is difficult to determine the actual scale of basement renting in Beijing. On the one hand, information about CADS is
confidential; on the other hand, regular basements can be controlled by local governments or central government agencies and the military. In Beijing there are a large number of regular basements under the control of central government agencies and military that are not accessible to outsiders. In addition, the scale has changed significantly over time, with rapid expansion before 2010 followed by a decline in recent years due to the government’s aggressive clean-up campaigns. Yet, we can still gauge the large scale of basement rental housing in Beijing based on various statistics and estimates. According to an official estimate, there are 5283 units of CADS being utilised, about 30% of which have been converted into basement rental properties (Zhang, 2011). For regular basements, an early estimation was more than 17,000 units (Zhang, 2011). Excluding those under central government agencies, there were 13,190 units (21.7 million m² floor space) of utilised regular basements in 2009, of which 21% of units (15% of floor space) were for residential use (Beijing Real Estate Association, 2009) (Table 1). In 2011, overall there were 20,101 regular basements with more than 36 million m² floor space in Beijing, including those under central government agencies and military organisations. In 2012, there were 16,347 units of regular basements in total, of which 13,843 units (25.8 million m²) are under the control of local governments, and 2504 units (3.3 million m³) are under the control of central government agencies and military. Thus the utilised basements are massive in size, with some legally for residential use and others illegally converted to residential use. While the exact number of tenants in basements is unknown and has changed dramatically over time, in 2011 there were 179,040 registered tenants in regular basements, with more than half of them living in basement rental properties, one third in employee dormitories and another 11% in basement hotels (Table 1). Obviously, the actual number of basement tenants in Beijing is much larger as most basement tenants do not register with government agencies, and there are many people living in CADS who are not counted in this statistic. According to the official estimation, there were at maximum about 1 million people living underground, a figure with which many scholars agree, although the estimation by a basement manager was as high as a maximum of 2 million (Zhang, 2011). Despite the aggressive clean-up campaign since 2010 and the goal of ending basement rental housing, there is still a sizable population living in basements. According to an official estimate, in 2013 there were ‘only’ 280,000 people living in basements in Beijing (Xinhua Net, 2014). Basement rental living continues to deserve scrutiny for a better understanding.

In the following sections, we will first provide a conceptual framework on how housing has served as an institution for exclusion and marginalisation in Chinese cities. Then we will use basement rental housing in Beijing as a case to study how this ‘invisible migrant enclave’ is formed, and how housing as an institution for exclusion and marginalisation is exercised through basement living. Finally, we will examine why basement rental properties persist despite the government’s constant effort to destroy and demolish them, followed by the discussion and conclusion.

**Housing as an institution for exclusion and marginalisation**

According to Lefebvre (1991: 26), ‘(Social) space is a (social) product’. Space is socially constructed, thus our understanding of space has to focus on the generative process of space. In order to understand why there are
Table 1. The scale and utilisation of regular basements (excluding CADS) in Beijing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>Number of basement</th>
<th>% of total units</th>
<th>Basement floor space (1000 m²)</th>
<th>% of total floor space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parking, storage</td>
<td>4523</td>
<td>34.29</td>
<td>8813</td>
<td>40.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential use</td>
<td>2768</td>
<td>20.99</td>
<td>3220</td>
<td>14.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office, education</td>
<td>1468</td>
<td>11.13</td>
<td>2074</td>
<td>9.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>9.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>733</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2960</td>
<td>22.44</td>
<td>4313</td>
<td>19.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total utilised basements</td>
<td>13,190</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>21,766</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total basements</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B</th>
<th>2011 (including those under central government agencies, military)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of registered residents</td>
<td>% of total registered residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>20,305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee dorms</td>
<td>53,393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>104,342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total basements</td>
<td>201,011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C</th>
<th>2012 (including those under central government agencies, military)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total basements</td>
<td>17,805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Central government</td>
<td>2504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Local government</td>
<td>15,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilised among (2)</td>
<td>13,843</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Basements are controlled by central government agencies and military.
(2) Basements are controlled by the municipal government.
such unique residential spaces, such as migrant enclaves and basement rentals in Chinese cities, we have to examine the actual formative process of these spaces, which is often shaped by institutional, economic and social forces. The space thus produced is not a mere passive container of people and activities, but rather is ‘… a tool of thought and of action […] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 26). We argue that in Chinese cities, housing has served as an institution to exclude and marginalise certain social groups, such as migrants. Through housing, special residential space is produced (or destroyed) to control migrants and maintain their inferior and marginalised status in cities. In this section we will provide a conceptual framework on how exclusion and marginalisation are exercised through housing.

In Geographies of Exclusion, Sibley (1995) argues that exclusion is based on difference and by fear of difference between the dominant and minority groups. Extending the object relation theory from the infant–mother relationship, Sibley (1995) argues that ‘self’ and ‘other’ are socially constructed. The dominant group (or ‘self’) often considers the minority groups as ‘other’ with unfavourable features, which are often associated with colour, disease, animals, sexuality, and nature. Thinking about differences leads to anxiety and fear of the ‘other’ and their places, upon which ‘self’ would act socially. To maintain their dominance and to prevent minority groups from polluting and threatening their space, the dominant group often excludes minority groups through purifying and controlling their spaces.

Using this conceptualisation, we argue that the process of exclusion and marginalisation of migrants in Chinese cities is a deliberate process that includes the following steps: (a) defining differences to delineate migrants as ‘other’ and denying their rights and entitlements; (b) ‘abnormalising’ migrants through various naming and categorisation to legitimate exclusion; and (c) purifying and controlling migrants’ space to achieve the exclusion and marginalisation of migrants.

Defining differences, creating fears and denying rights

With Chinese predominantly being Han Chinese, physical features such as colour and ethnicity have not been used as the main symbols to define differences between the dominant ‘self’ and inferior ‘other’. Rather, the main differences in China are institutionally produced. It has been well documented that the Household Registration (Hukou) System in China, enacted in 1958, has created an ‘invisible wall’ between the urban and rural population for decades (Chan, 1994; Cheng and Selden, 1994). By assigning rural population a different ‘birth-scribed’ (Potter, 1983) agricultural registration (vs. non-agricultural registration for urban population), the Chinese government not only virtually froze rural population in the countryside for decades, but also declared them as an inferior class who were not entitled to state welfare benefits and entitlements. Thus, despite the lack of physical differences, rural residents were institutionally categorised as the inferior, undeserving ‘other’, in contrast to the privileged urban residents. In recent decades, with the relaxation of the Hukou system, there has been an influx of migrants in Chinese cities. In other words, migrants have been able to cross the physical urban–rural boundary; yet, they still cannot cross the institutional barriers defined by the Hukou system as rural migrants have to
maintain their agricultural registration, and they are still excluded from accessing welfare benefits in cities. A two-class urban society with inferior migrants and privileged urban residents has been created (Chan, 2009).

One of the key welfare benefits in Chinese cities is subsidised housing provided by the government. Because migrants are excluded from subsidised housing due to their agricultural Hukou, they have to seek affordable housing on the market, and they mostly live in temporary housing such as factory dormitories and poor quality private rental housing provided by individual households in urban villages (Ma and Xiang, 1998; Wang et al., 2010; Wu, 2002, 2004). In particular, with the influx of migrants in Chinese cities, self-built housing in urban villages has grown rapidly to cater to the massive needs. The high concentration of migrants in these urban villages has rendered the term ‘migrant enclaves’. Yet, with the threat of being demolished by the local government, suburban villagers often expand their housing floor space by building many simple boxy rooms in densely arranged multi-story buildings to maximise rental income, but they are unwilling to invest heavily to improve the quality of housing and infrastructure. Extreme crowding, unsafe housing conditions, and the lack of infrastructure are common in urban villages. Even though there are some ‘reformed’ urban villages with better housing conditions, such as those in Shenzhen, there is generally a distinctive physical boundary between ‘migrant enclaves’ and the surrounding urban development that often features high-end private housing development. This physical contrast reinforces the institutional boundary between rural and urban, and between migrants and urban residents. Local governments have regularly used terms such as ‘dirty, chaotic, inferior’ (zang, ruan, cha) to describe migrant enclaves. Thus for municipal governments, ‘migrant enclaves’ impose a threat to the image of the modern city under construction.

With these institutional and spatial boundaries, a public discourse on privileged urban residents (‘self’) vs. inferior migrants (‘other’) has emerged in Chinese cities. For example, urban residents consider themselves as being clean, civilised, modern, sophisticated and law abiding, in contrast to migrants being dirty, uneducated, uncivilised, unsophisticated, poor, greedy, low quality (suzhi di), and law-breaking (Solinger, 1999; Zhang, 2001). Urban residents are often disgusted by the ‘improper’ behaviour of rural migrants such as spitting and talking loud in the public, and blame them for problems emerging during rapid social transformation such as higher crime rate, overburdened public services, and declining access to social services (Solinger, 1999; Zhang, 2001). Thus fear of migrants is fostered at both the individual and city level, upon which both urban residents and municipal governments will act to keep migrants marginalised and under control.

‘Abnormalising’ migrants through naming and categorising

Naming and categorising social groups is inseparable from social power, and categories do not simply describe, or represent social order, but also shape and reshape power relations among different groups (Borneman, 1992; Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1980). Historically, migrants in China were not considered a distinct group of subjects who needed special state control, and they had been called by neutral terms (Zhang, 2001). In recent decades with the massive influx of migrants, the government officially used the term ‘floating population’ (liu dong ren kou) to refer to migrants, a socially constructed, derogatory term that implies not only high mobility, but also the image of migrants being aimless, ignorant, powerless,
low quality, and destructive (Zhang, 2001). This portrait of an inferior and dangerous ‘other’ is juxtaposed with sophisticated, modern, orderly urban residents. Thus the former imposes a social problem, which demands stringent state control and regulation. As a result, the government has focused on ‘managing’ (guan li) and ‘controlling’ (kong zhi) migrants.

To the extent that migrants may have been living in the same city for years and even decades, the term ‘floating population’ seems to be no longer justifiable. In recent years, the Chinese government started to use ‘peasant workers’ (nong min gong), ‘workers from outside’ (wailei wugong renyuan), and ‘long-term residents from outside’ (changzhu wailei renkou) to refer to migrants in official documents (MOHURD, 2007; State Council, 2006, 2011). Yet, these are still prejudiced labels for migrants as an abnormal group, different from locally registered urban residents. For example, the term ‘peasant workers’ continues to affix migrants with rurality and peasantry, and thus being uncivilised, unsophisticated and inferior, while the terms ‘workers from outside’ and ‘long-term residents from outside’ metaphorically positions migrants outside of the urban normality. These terms imply that migrants come to cities to provide labour instead of joining the urban society as citizens, and they are categorically different from local urban residents. Thus despite attempts to refer to migrants in more neutral terms, the government continues to treat migrants as an abnormal group politically and socially.

Since migrants are considered different, it is only to be expected that the treatment of them will differ from urban residents. Their naming and categorisation legitimises exclusionary policies and programmes such as denying migrants access to welfare benefits and public services in cities. In the last two decades, urban residents have enjoyed spectacular improvement in housing conditions due to housing reform, while migrants have not really enjoyed any improvement (Yi and Huang, 2012). Yet, it is legitimate for the government to ignore migrants’ poor housing conditions and continue to deny their access to subsidised housing. Migrants were never even mentioned in housing policy documents, until in 2006 the State Council (2006) for the first time recognised the need to improve migrants’ housing conditions. In 2007, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Rural Development (MOHURD, 2007) issued a document specifically concerned with that issue. Yet, the central government called on employers (work units) to provide housing to their migrant employees, and continued to deny migrants’ access to subsidised housing by the government. As both the central and local governments set up ambitious goals for low-income housing and invest aggressively into low-income housing development in Chinese cities (Huang, 2012), it is again legitimate to exclude migrants from accessing newly built low-income housing. Thus, through the above discussed process of defining differences and naming practices, migrants are denied housing rights in cities, and they are excluded from access to subsidised housing. Together with the rapidly rising housing prices on the private housing market in recent decades, this housing exclusion has forced migrants to turn to unconventional, informal housing at marginalised locations. Urban villages in suburbs, basement rental properties, group renting (‘qun zu’), rooftop rentals, and ‘container cities’ are some of the most common housing choices and residential spaces for migrants resulting from this exclusion.9

Excluding and marginalising migrants through purification and control

With the influx of migrants and rapid urban population growth, most large cities have adopted various approaches to control migrants. In addition to denying migrants
urban household registration and certain employment opportunities, housing has been recently adopted as a tool to control migrants – ‘managing migrants with housing’ (yi fang guan ren) (Duan and Zhu, 2009; Song and He, 2008). For example, in 1995 the Beijing government clearly specified the need to control the stock of rental housing, and that migrants living in rental housing should not exceed a certain proportion of the registered population (BCOHURD, 1995). In 2007, Beijing specifically established a Migrant and Rental Housing Management Committee, further combining migrant management with rental housing management. Knowing most migrants live in crowded rental housing in urban villages, BCOHURD (2011, 2012) clearly specified that there should be no more than two persons in one room and per capita living space should not be less than 5 m² in rental housing. While these regulations seem to grow out of concerns for migrants’ poor housing conditions, in reality they destroy affordable housing and increase housing cost for migrants, as there have been no concrete policies and programmes to provide alternative, decent affordable housing for migrants.

By denying migrants access to formal subsidised housing and other welfare benefits, the government has forced migrants to congregate in informal housing at marginalised locations such as urban villages to create their own space out of the state control (Zhang, 2001). Yet, once migrants form their own residential spaces, often at already marginalised locations, municipal governments consider them as a problem and a threat to urban order and image. Thus municipal governments are often keen to purify and destroy migrants’ existing residential spaces by reforming and demolishing them, and often deporting migrants or forcing migrants to move to even more marginalised locations. Spatially, this marginalisation process can take two forms: ‘horizontal spatial marginalisation’– forcing migrants to move further and further away from city centres; and ‘vertical spatial marginalisation’– forcing migrants to live at less desirable elevations (higher or lower elevations) such as basements, hillsides and rooftops. For example, with the rapid urban expansion in Chinese cities, many urban villages (or ‘migrant enclaves’) have been engulfed by urban development and have become prime urban locations with valuable land. With their ‘rural’ landscape and the image of being ‘dirty, chaotic, inferior’, ‘migrant enclaves’ are problems to many municipal governments, who hope to purify and control their urban space by destroying migrant enclaves on the one hand, and convert collectively owned land in urban villages into urban land to reap massive land-related revenues on the other. Thus many migrant enclaves with relatively good locations have been demolished. For example, in Beijing, urban villages within the fourth ring road were all demolished before the 2008 Olympic Games (104 villages in total), and those within the fifth ring road were to be demolished by 2010 (Chen and Wu, 2007). Thus, by demolishing urban villages in prime locations, municipal governments have forced migrants out of the city to live in peripherally located suburbs with primitive housing and infrastructures and fewer employment opportunities. ‘Horizontal spatial marginalisation’ is thus achieved.

In sum, housing has served as an institution for exclusion and marginalisation of migrants in Chinese cities. Through the Hukou system, rural population is defined as an inferior ‘other’ in contrast to the privileged urban population, and they are denied access to subsidised housing by the government. The official naming practices further abnormalise migrants, and thus legitimise their exclusion from formal subsidised housing, while destroying private affordable housing and existing migrants’ residential
space allowing the government in turn to purify and control urban space and ultimately achieve the exclusion and marginalisation of migrants.

**Basement renting as an invisible migrant enclave**

We argue that basement renting is a unique migrant enclave that, like urban villages, is formed as a result of urban housing being utilised as an institution for exclusion and marginalisation. It embodies ‘vertical spatial marginalisation’ of housing. In this section, we will adopt the above conceptualisation, and examine how the three aspects of exclusion and marginalisation are exercised to form basement rentals and how it is different from conventional migrant enclaves.

First of all, basement renting is a migrant enclave, sharing similar tenant profiles and housing condition as urban villages. Both our fieldwork at seven basement sites in 2012 and the 2006 0.1% Migrant Survey show that basement tenants in Beijing are mostly young, single males, who have a relatively low level of education (high school or less) (Table 2). They mostly have agricultural Hukou, and come from rural areas in nearby provinces such as Henan Province and Hebei Province. Most basement tenants work in the service sector, such as hotels/restaurants, foot spas, beauty salons, bars, supermarkets and clothing stores, and have low incomes (e.g. 1000–2000 yuan ($164–$327)). This is consistent with the overall profile of migrants in Chinese cities. Compared to migrant tenants in urban villages, basement tenants are even younger and more likely to be single, and they are even more likely to engage in services, less likely to be self-employed, and have even lower incomes. Thus basement tenants have very low housing affordability and are very vulnerable on the housing market yet their jobs require them to live close to their work or at relatively central/accessible locations due to the long hours and night shifts common to working in the service sector. Thus basement tenants are a unique subgroup of migrants who need affordable housing with a good location and accessibility.

Although very different in their form, basement properties are characterised by similarly poor housing conditions to urban villages. Basements vary in size, ranging from 20 to hundreds of rooms. In some basements, there are multiple stories underground. Problems such as crowding and the lack of infrastructure are prevalent. Per capita living space in basement rentals is 5.9 m², even less than that for migrant tenants in urban villages (7.2 m²) and migrants as a whole (7.9 m²). Rooms are usually very small, ranging from 4 to 12 m² in size, yet some rooms can be as large as 30–40 m² but are often shared by several households. Rooms in regular basements are often divided by thin walls, with poor soundproofing and insulation. Interestingly, rooms in CADS are in somewhat better condition, with wide hallways, high ceilings, thick concrete dividing walls and security doors that meet the requirement for civil air defense. Most basements are equipped with few services and infrastructure. There are only shared bathrooms (also serving as showers) and washing areas with multiple faucets, often located in the middle of a long hallway, which can serve hundreds of people and obviously are often not adequate for tenants (Figure 2). Since cooking is prohibited in basements, there are no formal kitchens, yet individual electric cookers/stoves are often used by tenants, causing incidents of fire. In some better basements, dehumidifiers may be placed in the hallway to keep the air dry (Fieldwork). A property management service is extremely rare, with the exception of a couple of large basement rentals that are frequently inspected by officials. For example, basements under Xin Long Metropolitan
Garden were converted from CADS, which is one of the showcases for basement rental properties in Beijing with frequent official visits. In addition to the physical conditions, which are better than are common in other basements, with thick concrete walls, wide hallways, and security doors, this basement rental housing has a Property Management Company (PMC) which also serves the apartment complex above ground. Yet the basement manager complains that the property services he receives are not as good as those above the ground. With the poor housing conditions, not surprisingly, basement tenants pay lower rents; yet interestingly, they are more likely to have written leases (41% vs. 8% in urban villages and 15% for all migrants). To a certain degree, this shows that the leasing of basement rentals between basement managers and tenants is relatively formalised.

Secondly, compared to conventional migrant enclaves, basement rentals are often centrally located, with good accessibility.
While conventional migrant enclaves are mostly located in villages at the urban fringe, our fieldwork shows that most basement rentals in Beijing are found in relatively central locations, mainly inside the fourth ring road (Fieldwork). They tend to be close to major commercial and employment centres and have convenient access to the public transit system and services (see Figure 1, Table 3). Above two of the surveyed basements are hotels/restaurants, and the rest are all private commodity housing developments, with housing price in the high 30,000 yuan/m². This is more than twice of the average housing price in Beijing (15,518 yuan/m² in 2011) (SSB, 2012). An apartment of 90 m² in these communities would cost more than 3.3 million yuan ($550K), which is about 44 times the average household income in Beijing (75,248 yuan in 2011) (SSB, 2012), and obviously prohibitive to migrants. In these neighbourhoods, rental levels are very high too. The average rent in Dongchen District and Xicheng District (two districts in the core urban areas) in Beijing ranged between 45 and 75 yuan/m² in the fourth quarter of 2011 (BCOHURD, 2011). Thus, the rent for a modest one-bedroom apartment of 60 m² in these two districts ranged from 2700 to 4500 yuan/month. In comparison, rents for basement dormitories of 8 m² in these communities are about 400–800 yuan/month ($78–$163/month), and basement hotels cost less than 100 yuan/night (often 60 yuan/night), much cheaper than apartments and hotels on the ground in the same area (Fieldwork). It is clear that the central, convenient locations

![Figure 2. The hallway, bathroom, wash area, and a typical room in a basement, and apartments above the ground. Source: Photos by the author.](image)
Table 3. Characteristics of seven sampled basements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Housing type</th>
<th>Housing price (yuan/m²)</th>
<th>Infrastructure</th>
<th>Size of the complex</th>
<th>Basement type</th>
<th>Room size (m²)</th>
<th>Number of rooms</th>
<th>Rent (yuan/m²/month)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jin Yu Mei He Yuan Xiaoqu</td>
<td>Outside of the north fifth ring road</td>
<td>Commodity housing, price-controlled commodity housing, 6–9 story buildings</td>
<td>29,000 for commodity housing; 6600 for controlled price housing</td>
<td>Close to bus/subway stations, have kindergarten, convenience stores in the complex, hospital and supermarket nearby</td>
<td>Land: 70,000 m²; total housing floorspace 150,000 m²</td>
<td>Regular basement designed for garage, some half basement</td>
<td>4–9</td>
<td>About 100 rooms</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ji Qing Li Xiaoqu</td>
<td>Between the second and third ring road</td>
<td>Regular commodity housing, 9, 18, 22 story buildings</td>
<td>37,000</td>
<td>Close to transit, supermarket, hospital school nearby</td>
<td>Land: 12,000 m²; total housing floorspace 240,000 m²; 1725 households</td>
<td>Regular basement, CADS</td>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>About 30 rooms</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhu Gan Hutong</td>
<td>Inside the east second ring road</td>
<td>6–16 story buildings</td>
<td>38,000</td>
<td>Central location, close to several subway lines, convenient</td>
<td>Land: 360,000 m²; housing: 600,000 m²; 1038 households</td>
<td>Regular basement designed for parking</td>
<td>10–15</td>
<td>About 100 rooms</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian Heng Hotel</td>
<td>Inside the east second ring road</td>
<td>A five-star chain hotel/restaurant Resettlement housing, 6–7 story buildings</td>
<td>1000–2300 yuan/room</td>
<td>Close to subway stations</td>
<td>With about 500 employees</td>
<td>Three-story basement CADS</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xin Long Metropolitan Garden</td>
<td>Inside the second ring road</td>
<td>Resettlement housing, 6–7 story buildings</td>
<td>37,000</td>
<td>Close to multiple bus, subway stations, convenient services</td>
<td>Land: 110,000 m²; Housing: 300,000 m³</td>
<td>Regular basement CADS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>About 40 rooms</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing Shangshe Xiaoqu</td>
<td>Inside the east second ring road</td>
<td>Commodity housing, 12–14 story buildings</td>
<td>38,000</td>
<td>Close to transit, convenient services</td>
<td>Land: 12,000 m²; housing: 57,000 m²</td>
<td>Regular basement</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jing Fang Hotel</td>
<td>Inside the second ring road</td>
<td>2-star hotel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Close to transit</td>
<td></td>
<td>Regular basement</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
<td>60 yuan/room/night</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of basement renting, their good accessibility to services and employment on the one hand, and cheap rents on the other hand, have made them especially attractive to young and low-income migrants who work in the service sector and who prioritise affordability and accessibility more than good housing conditions.

Third, basement rental properties exacerbate differences between basement tenants and urban residents and heighten the fear of the ‘other’. As discussed above, basement tenants are mostly migrants. Thus the above discussed defining differences between migrants and urban residents through the Hukou system applies as well. In addition, due to basement rentals’ centralised locations and close proximity to mainstream urban neighbourhoods, the differences between migrants and urban residents are even starker. Even though basement tenants live in the ‘same’ neighbourhood as urban residents; socially, economically and psychologically they are in two worlds. The former live underground in small dark rooms and can be evicted at any time, while the latter live in expensive apartments above the ground, enjoying their homeownership (see Figure 2, Table 3); the former often work in the informal sector, with low income, and usually have to work at nights and weekends, while the latter have stable jobs in the formal sector, enjoy reasonable incomes, and work the normal 8–5 hours; the former are excluded from any welfare benefit while the latter enjoys all kinds of entitlements as legal citizens of the city; the former endure the disadvantage of leaving their families to struggle in the city, while the latter enjoy their families and the economic gains of the reform. This socioeconomic contrast is spatially manifested through their vertical living arrangement: basement tenants are inferior and lower on the social ladder than urban homeowners.

These socioeconomic differences are exacerbated by proximity, constantly reminding both migrants and homeowners that they are two different groups. The previously discussed public discourse of privileged urban residents versus inferior migrants is further strengthened in the context of basement renting. As a result, the fear of the ‘other’ is heightened. Homeowners in neighbourhoods with basements are afraid that basement tenants have crossed the ‘boundaries’ between them and are thus ‘polluting’ and ‘threatening’ their neighbourhoods (Sibley, 1995). They are afraid that basement tenants are overburdening the infrastructure and public facilities in their neighbourhoods, overcrowding public spaces, bringing crime, undesirable people and disamenities to their neighbourhoods, occupying their underground spaces, damaging the image of their neighbourhoods, and causing devaluation of their properties. While these fears are similar to those for migrants in general, living in the ‘same’ neighbourhood has made these fears more personal and real, increasing social tensions, anxiety and conflicts.

The contrast between basement tenants and homeowners is so stark that migrants often internalise the stigma on themselves. Living in small, dark rooms in basements, many basement tenants have a strong sense of inferiority. Virtually all the basement tenants we interviewed realised that they are categorically different from homeowners above the ground. Some are even ashamed of their basement living such that they do not tell families and relatives back home about it, as they cannot ‘make it’ in the city in an era when housing conditions and other material wealth are symbols of social status (Zhang, 2010). This internalisation prevents them from interacting with homeowners with confidence and dignity. For example, when homeowners complain about basement tenants using the public space above
the ground to air out their comforters and dry clothes, most basement tenants will either stop doing it, or do it secretly when no homeowners are around. They do not allow us to dry clothes up there. They scold at us. So we have to stop, and hang in our room’ (Interview, 7 June 2012). Even basement tenants themselves believe that they should not use the public space above the ground, and they try their best to avoid direct conflicts with homeowners:

You know, we live in basements, so we probably should not use the garden above the ground … Some Beijing local residents are very bossy. They look down upon us. I do not want to get into a conflict with them. (Interview, 7 October 2012)

Thus, even though migrants have crossed the spatial boundary between urban and rural and now live in the same city and even in the same neighbourhood as urban residents, they are ‘out of space’ as Sibley (1995) called it, and have a sense of uneasiness in the city.

Fourthly, basement rentals embody an even more derogatory naming practice. In addition to the official naming practice for migrants discussed above, basement tenants are subject to even more humiliating naming and categorisation by the public and media, such as ‘mouse tribe’. Even though it has not been officially adopted, the popularity of the term is undeniable. A simple search of ‘mouse tribe China’ on Google.com finds 1.4 million items, ‘rat tribe China’ finds another 1.4 million items, and a search of ‘shu zu’ on Baidu.com (a popular Chinese search engine) finds 2.9 million items. While the origin of this term is unknown, it vividly captures the image of basement tenants physically living in underground tunnels and socially lying at the bottom rungs of the ladder. While the Hukou system and the above-mentioned official discourse ‘abnormalise’ migrants, this new naming further delineates migrants as ‘other’ through de-humanising them.

De-humanising minority groups is common in the racist discourse, and animals such as rats, pigs and cockroaches have been used to represent minority groups (Hoggett, 1992; Mayall, 1988; Sibley, 1995) In particular, rats live in subterranean spaces coming out to spread disease, which heightens its potency as an abject symbol. Rats have been used to refer to Jews in anti-Semitic films by Nazis, Irish and Gypsies in the 19th century (Mayall, 1988; Sibley, 1995). Even in the Pulitzer prize-winning story The Complete Maus: A Survivor’s Tale by Art Spiegelman, Jews are portrayed as mice. Even though mouse (or rat) (‘shu bei’) has long been used in China to refer to dishonourable persons and scoundrels, it has not been used to refer to a disadvantaged social group with negative connotations in China. Thus it is a new practice to name basement tenants as a ‘mouse tribe’, with stereotypes of being abnormal, poor, dirty, chaotic, dangerous and threatening. To de-humanise a minority group has long been adopted to ‘legitimate’ exploitation and exclusion from a civilised society (Sibley, 1995). Thus, while not officially adopted by the government, colloquially naming basement tenants as belonging to a ‘mouse tribe’ is a social practice that works in conjunction with the official discourse to legitimise the exclusion of migrants from accessing welfare benefits and the urban life in general.

In addition, abnormalising migrants legitimates exclusion at the micro-level by individuals and communities. For example, socialising in the neighbourhood, drying clothes and airing out comforters outdoors have been common practices among Chinese. Yet, when migrants do the same, urban homeowners consider this ‘abnormal’ and ‘inappropriate’ behaviour, and thus as reasons to exclude them from their neighbourhoods. In one neighbourhood that was
visited in the fieldwork, a pavilion was built in the garden of the housing estate for residents to rest and socialise. Yet, when basement tenants in this neighbourhood started to socialise in the pavilion, homeowners were very unhappy about the noises they made, and they demanded the PMC demolish the pavilion so that there is no place for basement tenants to hang out (Fieldwork, 16 August 2012). Similarly, when basement tenants dry their clothes outdoors above the ground, homeowners complain about them even though they themselves dry their own clothes outdoors. Similar behaviours, such as socialising in the neighbourhood and drying clothes outdoors that are prevalent among homeowners, is considered ‘inappropriate’ for basement tenants, and threatening to homeowners. As Douglas (1993: 121) has argued, ‘once they have been formally classified as abnormal, the very same behaviour is counted intolerable’.

While some basement tenants brush off and even protest the fact that they are said to belong to the ‘mouse tribe’, most tenants accept the term, although unwillingly (Fieldwork, 23 July 2012). The following reactions are common when we ask basement tenants about being called a ‘mouse tribe’.

Living in basements makes us ‘mouse tribe’?! We do not steal rice!
We are just like others, working and making money legally. It does not matter whether we live under or above ground.
Well, if they call us ‘mouse tribe’, what can we do? Nothing.
‘Mouse tribe’? Who cares? I do my work and make money.
Well, we do live in basements.

There are some signs of internalisation of this term among basement tenants. When discussing homeowners’ objection for them to dry their clothes/comforters outside, one basement tenant sighed, ‘Well, we are the mouse tribe’ (shui rang wo men shi shu zu ne). Whether publicly acknowledging it or not, virtually all basement tenants realise that they are different from homeowners above the ground, at least in affordability, and they have no choice but to live in basements and be called the ‘mouse tribe’. Some consider living in basements temporary and hope to save money and move above the ground in the future: ‘I live here to save money. Next year I hope to move up and rent a place above the ground. It is too damp down here.’ They even cited the fact that many celebrities in China who are very successful now used to live in basements when they started their career in Beijing. Yet, most basement tenants think they can never afford to buy an apartment above the ground, given the housing prices in Beijing, and thus they can never be on par with homeowners above the ground: ‘Housing price in Beijing is way too high for us. We cannot possibly buy an apartment’ (Fieldwork, 1 August 2012).

Fifth, despite encouraging the utilisation of underground spaces, the municipal government has focused on controlling, purifying and cleaning up underground residential spaces as basement renting has grown in scale and become popular among migrants. In 2001, BMG conducted a comprehensive survey of all basements, and found a quarter of them were ‘problematic’. BMG has since issued many regulations to clean-up and rectify basement rentals and formalise their management. For example, in 2004 BMG issued the ‘Management Method for the Safe Utilization of CADS and Regular Basements’ (no. 152), which provided detailed requirements for basements, established a responsibility and accountability system, and required all utilised basements to be registered and recorded. Later, BBCAD (2006) issued very specific requirements including that per capita living space cannot be less than 4 m², bunk beds are not allowed, ceiling height should not be less...
than 2.4 m, and room size should not be less than 8 m². Before the 2008 Olympic Games, BMG shut down and fined thousands of illegal and problematic basements to protect urban order and the city’s image. In 2010, BBCAD proposed a three-year plan of evicting 134,000 households in CADS and stopping leasing CADS to new tenants in the future (Zhang, 2011). In 2011, BBCAD (2011) banned the use of illegal basements for residential use and the illegal change of non-residential basements to residential rental usage. Thus, since 2011 Beijing has further stepped up its effort to clean up basement living. In some districts, managers are required to shut down their basement rental properties within a month (Zhang, 2011). The severe flooding in 2012 further exposed problems associated with basement living. BMG has since been determined to gradually transform all basement rentals back to public space for homeowners, and eventually eliminate basement rental properties. As a result, basement rental living in Beijing has been scaled down significantly in the last couple years. Yet it has by no means disappeared. Both legal and illegal basement renting continue to exist in Beijing (BCOHURD, 2013); advertisements for basement rental properties are still widely seen on websites, and there is still a sizable population living underground (Xinhua Net, 2014).

In addition to the top-down clean-up campaign by the government, homeowners have also engaged in bottom-up purification of their neighbourhoods. Once realising there is a ‘mouse tribe’ in their neighbourhood, homeowners often try hard to find reasons to drive them out. For example, in one neighbourhood visited, homeowners demanded the PMC to stop leasing out basements despite massive financial losses to the PMC and homeowners. As a result, about 1000 basement tenants were evicted from that neighbourhood alone with the basement being converted into a parking lot.

Sixth, the invisibility of basement renting represents the extreme form of spatial marginalisation. The invisibility is both physical and institutional. Compared to urban villages where poor housing conditions are still visible despite their marginal locations, basement renting is virtually invisible to the public. Many urban residents are not even aware of migrants living in basements directly underneath them. Since the change of basement from planned function to residential use is often illegal, entrances to basement rentals are often made very difficult to detect and find. They are often located on a different side of the building from the entrance into the apartment building, separating the flow of basement tenants from homeowners. In some basements, signs such as garage and warehouse are still being displayed at the basement entrance even though they have been converted to residential use; in others there is no sign but a simple unnoticeable door, or a mobile shopping cart in front of the door disguising the entrance (Fieldwork). Migrants are thus ‘swept’ under the carpet (or ground), their poverty and misery being no longer visible to the public, and thus less threatening to the image of an orderly, prosperous, and modern city that the state has been promoting.

Institutionally, similar to migrants at large, basement tenants have largely been ‘invisible’ on the political maps of both local and central government. For decades, migrants have never been considered part of the target population for any urban policy and welfare programme, including subsidised housing. The term ‘migrants’ do not even show up in any government document and policy unless it is about the control and management of migrants. In recent years, the central government does show concerns about migrants’ poor housing conditions (MOHURD, 2007; State Council, 2006), yet there is not any specific policy and
programme to address the problem. Similarly, basement renting has been an interest of the government only for the purposes of control, management, rectification, and clean-up. Despite the poor housing conditions in basement properties, there is not a single policy or programme to improve their condition. In 2011, BCOHURD (2011) mentioned for the first time that qualified migrants may be able to access ‘public rental housing’. However, as previously mentioned, the entry criteria are so stringent that few migrants are qualified; few have benefited from the policy. Instead, BMG has launched an aggressive campaign to evict basement tenants and clean up basement rentals since 2010 (BBCAD, 2011; Zhang, 2011). Yet, there is no policy to provide alternative shelters to those evicted from basement properties. While there are signs that the government recognises the need to address the migrants’ housing issue, migrants in general and basement tenants in particular remain ‘invisible’ on the political and policy agenda.

In addition to the massive need for affordable housing, the invisibility of basement renting made it possible for it to expand rapidly before 2010, and persist in spite of the recent aggressive clean-up campaign. Its physical invisibility makes it less threatening to the government, encouraging an ambivalent attitude towards its presence. Similarly, political invisibility means it is inevitable for informal affordable basement housing to emerge. As long as migrants are denied their housing rights in the city and excluded from accessing subsidised housing, informal housing such as basement renting will continue.

In sum, basement renting is a testimony of housing as an institution of exclusion and marginalisation in Chinese cities. Because of its invisibility, the proximity between basement tenants and urban homeowners, and derogatory naming on top of the official categorisation, basement renting exacerbates the differences between migrants and urban residents, heightens the fear of the ‘other’, and results in more aggressive government control and purification.

The Beijing Municipal Government vowed to get rid of all basement rentals. Despite their often illegal conversion of underground space into residential rentals, basement managers believe that basement tenants, instead of themselves, are the target of the clean-up campaign (Zhang, 2011). The clean-up campaign is not an economic effort; rather it is a political action to ‘purify’ the urban space by excluding and marginalising the residual population such as the ‘mouse tribe’ and destroying their spaces. Discouraged by the lack of affordable housing, it has been reported in the media that some migrants including professionals leave Beijing for smaller cities or move back to their hometowns (Xinhua Agency, 2011). Our interview also shows some basement tenants are planning to leave Beijing for better living conditions elsewhere. This is probably the ultimate exclusion and marginalisation of migrants through housing.

Discussion and conclusion

Chinese cities have been experiencing unprecedented, profound social, economic and spatial transformation in recent decades. Acknowledging the fact that this great transformation is a multi-faceted process, we believe housing has become a key to understanding social and urban geography in Chinese cities. In particular, in the geography of exclusion and marginalisation in Chinese cities, housing is no longer just the outcome of other driving forces, but rather is itself the driving force for exclusion and marginalisation. We argue that housing has to be positioned at the centre of our inquiry.
to better understand exclusion and marginalisation in Chinese cities.

Access to decent housing is a basic human right. Yet millions of migrants in Chinese cities have been denied this right despite the spectacular housing development and improvement in recent decades. We argue that in Chinese cities housing has served as an institution to exclude and marginalise migrants, through the Hukou system, to define migrants as an inferior and undeserving group who are not entitled to subsidised housing, derogatory naming and categorising practices to abnormalise them, and controlling and purifying existing migrant spaces. Consequently, ‘migrant enclaves’ are pushed to marginalised locations, either horizontally away from city centres or vertically away from the ground, and are composed of informal housing with poor conditions.

Adopting this conceptualisation, we argue that the popularity of basement renting in Beijing is a result of housing being an institution of exclusion and marginalisation, and it embodies ‘vertical spatial marginalisation’. Basement rental is a migrant enclave, with its tenants predominantly migrants and extremely poor housing conditions. Compared to traditional migrant enclaves that are often located at the far suburbs, basement rentals tend to have centralised locations with good accessibility, catering to migrants working in the service sector with long hours and irregular shifts. As migrants live in the ‘same’ neighbourhood with urban residents, the differences between them are in starker contrast, which further heightens the fear of the ‘other’. In addition to the official discourse of naming migrants, the colloquial naming basement tenants as the ‘mouse tribe’ further helps to legitimise their exclusion, mirroring a common practice in the racist discourse. Despite encouragement for the utilisation of underground space, the Beijing Municipal Government has focused on controlling, managing, rectifying and cleaning up basement renting. The physical invisibility of basement renting has made its existence less threatening to the government, while its political invisibility makes it absolutely necessary to migrants. Thus despite waves of the clean-up campaign, basement renting persists, although on a much smaller scale than before.

We acknowledge that underground living is not unique to Chinese cities. Nor is the lack of decent and affordable housing for the influx of migrants unique to China; it is common in many developing countries. According to UN-Habitat (2003), 46% of the current urban population in developing countries live in slums. Yet, what is unique to China is the role of the government and public policy in the ways it contributes to the poor housing conditions experienced by migrants, and creating a massive, marginalised population such as basement tenants. With the persistence of the Hukou system, the Chinese government continues to deny migrants’ right to the city, and exclude them from accessing subsidised housing. This has forced migrants to live in poor, informal and illegal housing. Meanwhile, the government’s persistent and determined objective of controlling population growth especially in large cities encourages the government to adopt housing as another important mechanism to control the influx of migrants. For example, Beijing Municipal Government has adopted the policy of ‘managing migrants through registration, employment and housing’ (yi zheng guan ren, yi ye kong ren, yi fang guan ren), which aims to control the influx of migrants through tight control of household registration change into Beijing and limiting migrants’ employment opportunities and housing access (BCOHURD, 1995, 2011; BMG, 1985). In other words, the municipal
government intentionally makes it harder for migrants to access housing and employment to control migration and population growth. Despite these efforts, the long term migrant population in Beijing has increased rapidly during 2000–2010 to account for more than 35% of the total population (BSB, 2011). Economic opportunities and resources in China tend to be concentrated in a few first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which has made them the magnets for migrants despite local governments’ efforts to control the influx of migrants. Thus there is really no incentive for municipal governments of large cities to provide decent and affordable housing to migrants. Not surprisingly, various informal and illegal housing with poor housing conditions has emerged to cater the unmet massive housing needs, ranging from urban villages to group rental, roof top rental, and basement rental housing. For the same reason, basement rental persists in Beijing despite the government’s waves of clean-up campaigns.

Since there is a huge demand for affordable housing in central locations with good accessibility, there is a clear need for policy to formalise and improve basement renting rather than try to eradicate it. With proper construction and design, and amenities (e.g. bathroom, shower, ventilation), it is possible to provide decent affordable shelter in basements. During our fieldwork, we found one basement rental property meeting such amenities, as it has been often inspected by officials. In other words, basement owners and managers respond to the government’s requirements to stay in the business. This implies that the government needs to set strict requirements for basement owners and managers to upgrade the condition of basements, and regulate the leasing process to protect tenants’ rights. While shutting down some uninhabitable basements, the government should inspect basements constantly, and offer licences to those meeting the desired standards.

Meanwhile, the municipal government should allow qualified migrants and those would-be basement tenants to access low-income housing such as ‘public rental housing’, and develop affordable housing in more centralised locations or along public transit lines specifically for migrants, as many of them work in the service sector in the city. In addition, the government should encourage other agencies such as employers, developers and urban villages to provide alternative housing – decent, affordable and accessible – to shelter migrants, as argued by Huang and Tao (2014). Besides financial incentives and preferential land policies, profound reforms in the land system and public finance system are required to ensure the sustainable provision of affordable housing for the mass of migrants. Instead of an institution to exclude and marginalise migrants, housing should be utilised by municipal governments as a key mechanism to include and assimilate migrants into the city through proper urban planning and housing design. Only then, the ‘mouse tribe’ may see the light at the end of the tunnel, and achieve their housing dream and urban dream in Chinese cities.

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Notes

1. ‘Public rental housing’ is a new subsidised housing started in 2010 which targets new employees and migrants. According to BCOHURD (2011), no. 25, migrants have to meet the following conditions to access public rental housing: (a) continuous residence and employment in Beijing for a number of years; (b) household income less than 100,000 yuan for a family of three persons, and less than 130,000 yuan for a family of four; (c) can provide a temporary residence card, proof of having paid the housing provident fund and social insurance; and (d) migrant or family members have no housing in Beijing. The actual criteria are determined by local district or county governments based on their economic development, available resources and affordable housing.

2. There is a dual land system in China, with rural land owned by rural collectives, and urban land owned by the state. Rural households are allowed to access a plot of collectively owned land in their villages for housing construction mainly for self-occupancy. But in suburban villages, it is common that households build more housing for rents. ‘Ant tribe’ refers to a special kind of migrant enclaves where college graduates live in extremely crowded housing in suburban villages.

3. Most new apartment buildings built since the 1990s are commodity housing for sale, and residents usually own their apartments.

4. Since CADS are not accessible to the public due to their confidentiality and many regular basements, especially those under central government agencies, are not accessible either due to the sensitivity of the subject in recent years, we cannot adopt a random sampling of basement rental sites and basement tenants. But we selected seven basements in typical but different neighbourhoods, and interviewed basement tenants, managers and homeowners when they were available.

5. This survey sampled both migrants and landlords who provide housing to migrants. A multistage sampling technique was adopted. First, the sample size (4200 migrants and 800 landlords) was distributed among districts/counties based on the latest migrant distribution provided by the government. Second, in each district/county, fieldwork was conducted and 120 migrant concentrated streets/towns/townships were identified. Based on the allocated sample size in each county/district, streets/towns/townships are selected in each county/district, and within each selected street/town/township, 100 migrants and 20 landlords were to be sampled. Third, in each selected street/town/township, three specific neighbourhoods were identified for actual survey. Within each neighbourhood, systematic random sampling was adopted, based on the total number of migrants and the number of sampled migrants in each neighbourhood.

6. The transfer fee alone can be as high as one million yuan for a basement of 1000 m² within the second ring road of Beijing.

7. Basements underneath central government agencies and military organisations are predominantly used by their own employees with less than 10% leased out to others (Interview, staff of Central Government Agency Civil Air Defense Shelter Office).

8. Ethnic minorities in China are also constructed as internal ‘other’ against the national narrative of progress, development and modernity (Anagnost, 1995).

9. ‘Group renting’ refers to the phenomenon of homeowners dividing their apartments into many small spaces and leasing to different people, or having many bunker beds in rooms, thus significantly increasing the number of people living in one apartment, as well as rental income. ‘Container cities’ refers to cities in which poor residents and migrants renting vacant containers as their dwellings, forming a community similar to mobile home park. ‘Rooftop rental’ refers to space on the roof of apartment buildings that is not designated for residential use being leased out to low-income people.

10. The minimum wage in Beijing was 1260 yuan in 2012, according to Beijing

11. It is a custom in China for people to occasionally hang their comforters/quilts/blankets outdoor in the sun to get rid of the dampness and to sanitise.


13. Zuying Song, a famous singer in China, had lived in basements when she moved to Beijing in 1989, according to a popular programme, Interview by Lu Yu (Lu Yu You Yue) on Phoenix TV in Hong Kong (see http://v.ifeng.com/vblog/news/201312/4ef1cc2d-f70c-4b0a-8a2d-7b847fc05c6d.shtml).

References


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