

## **Discussion of Chinese Collective Housing Design from Gender Perspective**

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the change history of the Chinese collective housing during the market-oriented transformation period from 1990 to 2010 while focusing specifically on the socio-spatial organization and gender aspects of this process. Emphasis gives to the relationship between housing design and gender equality, as well as a discussion of the work unit system, which has deeply shaped the Chinese collective housing model. The main research methods comprise analyses of literature and survey, including the author's own experiences of the collective housing and work unit.

### **Key word**

Chinese collective housing, Work unit, Gender equality, Domestic work

### **1. Introduction**

Housing design is not only an architectural topic but also a sociological topic. Discussion of housing design often relates to the ways of living, as well as how the environment is built. The housing model is affected by social and political factors. On the other hand, the dwelling environment simultaneously influences individual life and social culture. Nowadays, as a social consensus, more and more people embrace the idea of gender equality and support for women to pursue careers and political rights. However, for respect to the home, especially this year under the pandemic and the burdens of stay-at-home orders, it seems like a “disaster for feminism” since much of the increased domestic work has still fallen on women (Finley, 2020; Donner, 2020). A report from the UN recently shows that the intensified unpaid care work was mostly

performed by the women during the COVID-19 global crisis. “A pandemic amplifies and heightens all existing inequalities.”<sup>i</sup> It is important that rethinking housing design from a gender perspective, which might provide a feasible idea for the current situation and develop a gender equality environment in the future.

According to many valuable studies discussed on housing design for gender equality, collective housing is a major research field. The many United States and European architects and feminists consider collective housing as a form contributing to gender equality. Collective housing design could make both men and women involved in paid labor and unpaid labor equally (Hayden, 1980). Sharing essential space or facilities in collective housing design makes domestic work visible and does increase gender equality. The limitation of Western collective housing development might be “too few real projects” to impact social reality (Vestbro and Horelli, 2012). While a lot of real collective housing projects, as an essential part of social lifestyle, implemented in state-socialist countries last century. Most Western studies of these state-socialist models are focused on social system differences. Concerning the interaction between physical housing design and social content, it is instructive to take a glance at large-scale collective housing projects in state-socialist countries from the gender perspective. Besides, compared with former state-socialist countries’ experiences, Chinese collective housing development history is unique. Since the Chinese reform and opening-up policy has introduced private business and market incentives into a state-led economic system from the 1980s. This transformation has profoundly changed social content. It seems few studies analyze the change of the Chinese collective

housing model through a lens of gender.

The transformation of the Chinese collective housing since last century, as Chinese reform from a planned economy to a market one, can be divided into two main phases: the period to around 2000, although the work unit (danwei)<sup>ii</sup> which most of the Chinese collective housing based on were gradually dismantled (Lu, 2006; Liu and Chai, 2015), the collective housing has still physically maintained as a majority housing form for urban residents as before at that time; followed by a period, many policies implemented to the construction of a new economic model. Especially, in the housing policies field, with the rapid growth of urban residents' income and to resist the influence of the world economic crisis in 1997, the Chinese government began to encourage individuals to purchase houses on the real estate market in 1998 (Xiong, 2010). With the new real estate system established on the opening market, the old collective housing model, as the outdated work unit system, began to fade out of the market. However, the tremendous changes in economic and public policies in the market-oriented reform may not promote gender equality. Some surveys show that 61.6% of men and 54.8% of women agree with the view that "men should work outside and women should stay at home" in 2010. Compared to 2000, both sexes are more likely to agree with this statement; the percentage of men who agree has increased by 7.7 % and the percentage of women has increased by 4.4%. The same survey also shows that 48% of the women agreed with the claim that "a good marriage is better than a good job". This number has increased by 10.7 % compared to 2000.<sup>iii</sup> It seems with the development of the economy, people have become more conservative on gender issues. Scholars criticize

that some changes in economic reform has accelerated the marginalization of women in the labor market and exacerbated gender inequality (Liu, Li and Yang, 2014).

It is hard to tell the changes in the collective housing directly led to the rising gender inequality since the reform era. The purpose of this article is to analyses studies in the complex relationship between housing design and gender equality in the case of Chinese collective housing. The main concern is with how the Chinese collective housing design is formed under the work unit system, how the collective housing space affected residents' daily activity and changed over time, including how domestic work is shared. Furthermore, how these situations in turn may affect women on employment, marriage, family formation, children's care, and thus may also have affected gender equality. The analysis present in the article draws on information from English and Chinese literature, and descriptive statistics derived from nationally representative sample surveys. Including the Second and Third surveys of the Chinese Women Social Status Survey (CWSSS), the surveys are conducted jointly by the ALL-China Women's Federation and the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (CNBS). And the article also uses the long table data of the fifth census and the sixth census provided by the CNBS, carried on comparative analysis of the urban housing changes.<sup>iv</sup>

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 focuses on urban social-spatial characteristics of the work unit and the collective housing model under the work unit system. Section 3 analyzes the collective housing changed in the transformation period from 1990 to 2010. And discusses how these changes may affect the domestic work shared in gender and effects on gender equality. The last section

concludes the paper and discusses directions for further research on this topic.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, 9 April 2020,

<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en-1.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> A work unit or danwei, is a place of employment during the period when the Chinese economy was not as developed and more heavily reliant on welfare for access to long-term urban workers or when used in the context of state-owned enterprises. In general, it shows the following features: (1) a walled and gated enclosure; (2) spatial differentiation of facilities and activity areas; (3) close jobs-housing proximity ; (4) physical and social infrastructure and services, and others. (Bjorklund, 1986).

<sup>iii</sup> Surveys source: "Executive Report of the 3rd Survey on the Status of Chinese Women", by Project Group of the 3rd Survey on the Status of Chinese Women, No.6 Ser.No.108. (2011): 14.

<sup>iv</sup> Statistics Bureau of the People's Republic of China. Fifth Census

[DB/OL]. <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/5rp/index.htm>

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