

Informal Elements in Urban Growth Regulation in China – Urban Villages in Ningbo

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Summary

Massive rural-urban migration has always accompanied modern urbanisation; the volume of migration flows in contemporary China is, however, unique in history. Although cheap labour is an essential ingredient to the booming economy, the Chinese political-administrative system is ill prepared to accommodate the migrants in the rapidly growing conurbations. They are denied the status of urban residents and are forced to live in so-called urban villages which constitute enclaves of informality in an otherwise highly regulated society.

The article sets out to describe and understand the informal elements of urban growth in the light of uncoordinated and even contradicting political aims and administrative regulations on the national, provincial and municipal levels. Based on a representative survey of two urban villages in the booming city of Ningbo, the socio-economic characteristics of migrants and their position on the urban housing market are related to their precarious residential status. The changing perceptions and attitudes of local politicians and administrators are explored with reference to new directives issued by central government.

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1 Rapid urbanisation and informality – the unique Chinese case

The history of modern urbanisation illustrates that informality was and is a regular companion of rapid urban growth. Already in Europe and the United States, where the growth of cities during early industrialisation was driven by economic development, public authorities found it very difficult to allocate land for urban growth industries and housing for labourers and to provide public services timely and effectively. Early planning standards were, therefore, straightforward, enforcing only minimal requirements of fire protection and public hygiene. Still, their control and enforcement was difficult even in countries with strong public authorities.

A hundred years later, when the mechanisation of agriculture in Southern Europe set free massive rural-urban migration, the large cities could hardly cope with the influx