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Social Cohesion under Diverse Housing Environments in Songjiang New Town, China

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ABSTRACT

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SOCIAL COHESION UNDER DIVERSE HOUSING ENVIRONMENTS IN SONGJIANG NEW TOWN, CHINA

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Abstract

Social cohesion is a pertinent issue especially in China where the restructuring of the urban landscape has influenced the social make-up of urban communities. This study investigated neighborly interaction as a form of social cohesion in Songjiang New Town, Shanghai, and used the negative binomial regression to analyze which factors influence neighborly interaction. The results confirmed previous literature regarding a number of individual determinants but more importantly revealed that while hukou was significant in establishing weak social ties, it was not influential in maintaining strong social relations. Nevertheless, the study argued that the institutional limitations arising from hukou status might be an imposed condition of low social contact among non-Shanghai hukou holders. Furthermore, the study revealed that relocation and commodity mixed developments were a factor of low social cohesion, contending for improved planning and design measures which mitigate for the dislocation experienced by relocates.

Keywords: urban diversity, social cohesion, social network, migrants, relocation housing

1. Introduction & Literature Review

Urban diversity is an inherent quality of neighborhoods today in China since the complete urban re-structuring of the post-economic reform era. As existing neighborhoods transformed and new neighborhoods formed overnight with intense changes in migration flows, especially in large receiving cities such as Shanghai, new social groups emerged and social cohesion of urban neighborhoods correspondingly changed. This has inspired a wave of research in regards to migrant settlements, urban villages, the problems of relocation, and the diversification of housing supply.

Insofar, there have been extensive studies on the social cohesion between the indigenous population and migrants in urban villages in China. However, more recent studies have revealed the diverse socioeconomic status of migrants [1, 10], the assimilated lifestyles of second and third generation migrants in their urban destinations [8, 10], and the wide-ranging

housing choices and aspirations of migrants [6] which are backdrops to the differing level of social cohesion in urban communities. Therefore, the understanding of social cohesion should not be limited to urban villages or a stereotyped socioeconomic profile of the migrant group, but rather extend to investigating wider geographical and socioeconomic contexts.

In this respect, New Town developments provide a useful test bed for broadening the understanding of social cohesion under dynamic urban changes, as New Town developments are known to be driven by internal migration and the provision of housing [11]. Against this background, this study empirically investigated social cohesion under various neighborhood contexts by focusing on four different areas in Songjiang New Town, Shanghai, China. More specifically, this study examined neighborly interaction as an important social cohesion indicator in three respects – the total number of neighbors,

regularly met neighbors, and neighbors within the housing estate – and inquired what individual and housing factors contributed to the differing levels of neighborly interaction.

2. Research Methods

Study Area

For this study, four neighborhoods were selected in three of the *jiedaos* in Songjiang: *Yueyang*, *Yongfeng*, and *Fangsong*. Area A is located in the old and established *Yueyang jiedao* which forms part of the original Songjiang district. Area B belongs to the *Yongfeng jiedao*, where residential development precipitated after the mid-2000s with a mix of high-end commodity housing and relocation housing estates. Area C and D both are part of the master-planned *Fangsong jiedao* which are the comprehensive large-scale developments constructed since the 2000s. Commodity housings are concentrated in these areas with wide-ranging building types such as high-rise, mixed-developments, and villa compounds. In total, 53 housing estates were surveyed.

Data collection

To collect data, a resident survey was conducted through the intercept survey method from December 24 until 31, 2015. With the assistance of undergraduate students from Tongji University, two sessions of three-hour long street surveys were conducted each day along two main street intersections for each site. The questionnaires were read out and filled in by the assistants themselves in order to minimize confusion and reduce mistakes. In total, 370 residents were surveyed.

Method

In order to analyze what factors may influence neighborly interaction, the research used the negative binomial regression, which is usually employed to model over-dispersed count data¹.

As mentioned earlier, the dependent variables were determined in three respects which investigated both the breadth and intensity of social relations: the total number of neighbors a resident knows (model 1); the number of neighbors that are in regular contact with the resident (model 2); and the number of neighbors a resident knows within their housing estate (model 3).

The independent variables were divided into two categories: individual determinants and housing environment determinants. The individual factors include both demographic and socioeconomic variables, as well as tenure years, as these are important determinants of social distance, which have been used in previous studies [2, 3, 5, 7, 10]. The housing environment determinants include building age, housing type in terms of economic classification, and physical building type. These variables test whether the differences in age of an area, building density or income disparities influence the formation of social relations.

3. Analysis & Results

The following table shows the negative binomial regression results using backward elimination (Table 1).

Table 1 Regression results using backward elimination

Dependent variable	Significant variables	Regression coefficients	P-value
Neighbors _Total	Gender	0.237	0.042
	Tenure years	0.075	0.000
	Hukou_Agriculture	-0.379	0.083
	BldType_high-rise	-0.263	0.055
	MS_widowed	-0.787	0.058
	MS_others	-2.033	0.000
	HousType_comm+relocatn	-0.468	0.005
	Inc_3-5	-0.400	0.012
	Inc_5-10	-0.436	0.001
	Hukou_OtherUrban	-0.368	0.002
Neighbors _Regular	MS_others	-1.033	0.000

¹ UCLA Institute for Digital Research and Education ([https://stats.idre.ucla.edu/stata/seminars/regression-models-](https://stats.idre.ucla.edu/stata/seminars/regression-models-with-count-data/)

[with-count-data/](https://stats.idre.ucla.edu/stata/dae/negative-binomial-regression/), <https://stats.idre.ucla.edu/stata/dae/negative-binomial-regression/>)

	Inc_5-10	-0.308	0.078
	Inc_3-5	-0.464	0.050
	Tenure years	0.066	0.000
Neighbors _Housing Estate	Gender	0.202	0.097
	BuiltYear_2000s	-0.378	0.018
	MS_married, living together	0.379	0.038
	BuiltYear_2010s	-0.420	0.026
	MS_widowed	-0.774	0.057
	MS_others	-1.055	0.000
	Employment	-0.210	0.071
	Inc_3-5	-0.366	0.018
	Inc_5-10	-0.377	0.007
	Tenure years	0.069	0.000
	HousType_comm+relocatn	-0.381	0.008
	Hukou_OtherUrban	-0.393	0.001
	Hukou_Agriculture	-0.446	0.026

Individual determinants

In general, female residents were more likely to have higher social contact (1.27 times more in terms of the total number of neighbors, and 1.22 times more within housing estate) and those who were not employed or retired were less likely to know neighbors within the housing estate by 19.0%. Widowed or those with marital status belonging to the “others” category had significantly low neighborly interaction. Also, middle-income households knew significantly fewer neighbors for all three models which corroborate previous literature on the middle-class wanting privacy and relying on social networks outside their neighborhood [6, 10].

Tenure year was highly significant for all three models ($p < 0.01$) and increased the likelihood of neighborly interaction by 1.07 times. As argued before, length of residence in relation to social network is a positive condition where familiarity develops over time and allows the building of interpersonal relations. While this may not necessarily further support a sense of belonging or social solidarity, which are other aspects of social cohesion [4, 10], tenure year is significant because it is influential in forming both weak and strong social ties [5].

Hukou status is significant in establishing social relations as expected, but not influential in maintaining relations, as it was not a significant variable in regularly met neighbors. Agriculture hukou and other urban hukou holders knew approximately 30% fewer neighbors in terms of total number, and both hukou statuses also knew fewer neighbors within their housing estate by 36.0% and 32.5% respectively. However, it was not found to be a significant variable in terms of the number of regularly met neighbors, indicating that while hukou is important in establishing weak social ties or acquaintances, it may not have such a clear bearing in forming strong social ties.

Housing determinants

The high-rise building type decreased the total number of neighbors by 23.1%, while those living in post-2000 developments knew fewer neighbors within their housing estate by approximately 30% (year of build 2000-2009 decreased by 31.5%; year of build 2010- decreased by 34.3%). Low social contact in post-2000 developments was corroborated by the descriptive statistics where higher neighborly interaction was found in older estates. Residents living in estates built before 2000 (27.6 people) and in parallel blocks (21.5 people) – a building type usually built in older areas – knew considerably more neighbors.

In regards to housing type, those living in commodity and relocation mixed development knew 37.4% less total neighbors and 31.7% fewer neighbors within their estate. This was a particularly important variable to consider as the p -value suggested its high significance. Furthermore, the fact that commodity and affordable housing was not a significant variable indicated that lack of neighborly interaction might not necessarily be a problem of income differences. In other words, the problem of dislocation or being an ‘outsider’ may be a more pressing issue which accentuates segregation rather than income levels. Hence, the commodity and

relocation mixed housing estates require closer examination.

Within the studied sample, there were nine commodity and relocation mixed housing, all located in areas A and B. Out of the 53 residents surveyed, 34 (64.2%) lived in area B, of which 22 people were known to have Shanghai urban hukou. If then, low social contact can be posited as a problem of Shanghai urban hukou holders who have been relocated to these estates, it may be that they choose to value their connections of former neighborhoods and do not actively seek new social networks in the new estate [6]. Also, if the relocated housing situation is not an improvement of their prior condition, this might lead to higher dissatisfaction compared to the new occupants of the development [9], which could adversely affect their decision to foster social relations.

This conjecture is plausible in area B where relocates needed to adjust not only in regards to a completely new environment but also into an area where there were many locational disadvantages such as inconvenient amenities and public transport, noise pollution and low vitality. In fact, those who moved due to relocation purposes had either average or low satisfaction of their living environment, with one resident evidently complaining of the noise levels within and outside the housing estate.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

In conclusion, the study called for a more nuanced understanding of hukou status while corroborating previous literature on the significance of individual determinants such as gender, marital status, income and length of residence. Although hukou is a significant variable in establishing initial social ties, it does not influence the formation of strong social ties, indicating that non-Shanghai urban hukou does not necessarily act as a disadvantage in social cohesion.

Nevertheless, because low social contact of non-Shanghai hukou holders is closely related to short tenure years, the institutional limitations of hukou should not be overlooked. Short tenure years itself may not be viewed as a serious problem since social relations can be expected to naturally form over the course of years. However, if the issue of short tenure year is related to the high residential mobility of agriculture and other city hukou holders due to institutional limitations or precarious living conditions, this would be considered problematic since, in this case, low social contact is an imposed condition rather than a condition out of choice. In other words, the institutional limitations of hukou can act as a barrier to forming sustainable and connected urban communities, which are often-cited objectives of urban projects in China.

The study also highlighted the problems of relocation, and how inconsiderate housing environments can deter social relations especially when relocates are accommodated alongside commodity housing residents with different housing expectations and experiences. Hence, acknowledging that the issue of relocation would maintain under the on-going urbanization of China, the mixing of relocates should be approached more carefully as they may be more prone to being reclusive. Planning and design measures that mitigate for the housing environment disadvantages – such as creating small hubs of urban amenities rather than placing endless rows of unoccupied shops, providing diverse community facilities within the housing estate, and introducing smaller urban blocks with better pedestrian and vehicle connections – may be necessary in creating spaces of interaction which may facilitate social cohesion or at least improved living satisfaction which may lead to fostering social cohesion.

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