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Rediscovering the 'Gate' Under Market Transition: From Work-unit Compounds to Commodity Housing Enclaves

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Abstract

This paper applies two major explanations in gated community studies, namely the club realm of consumption and the discourse of fear, to examine the changing forms of urban 'gated communities', i.e. the transition from work-unit compounds to gated commodity housing enclaves, in urban China. While the gate has existed in China for a long time as a physical form, it has now been rediscovered as an instrument for the partitioning of derelict socialist landscapes produced by 'economising urbanisation' and a post-socialist imagined 'good life'. The study highlights that the function of gating is dependent upon social and economic contexts: under socialism, gating reinforces political control and collective consumption organised by the state; in the post-reform era, the gate demarcates emerging consumer clubs in response to the retreat of the state from the provision of public goods. While the discourse of fear seems less

applicable to the Chinese city, urban fragmentation is paving the way to a new urban experience of insecurity, which has begun to appear in the discourse of ‘community building’ in urban China.

Keywords:

- Gated community
- urban China
- social inequalities
- urban governance
- commodity housing

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