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The Emotional Life of Privileged Spaces: Security and Exclusion in Chinese Gated Communities

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Abstract

Gated residential living in cities around the world has been closely linked to social fear and the search for exclusivity. However, despite objectively low rates of violent crime in contemporary Chinese cities, the demand for fortified gated living continues to surge. Residents of elite gated communities in contemporary Chinese cities parallel, with some important differences, many social practices of withdrawal and disengagement found in the West. Through extensive qualitative investigation, we see how a nascent urban upper-middle class folds together issues of social status, predictability and security. Enclosed urban spaces appear to assist in consolidating the class position and power of the privileged, but simultaneously generate an illusion of security that exacerbates internal psychological vulnerabilities. These spaces mark social standing and differentiation from those outside their controllable residential space. Despite their social, emotional and physical ambitions, resident accounts are filled with fear and uncertainty about potentially risky social groups within these security bubbles due to the lack of informal social control. Our evidence shows how physical space is utilized to shore up class positions while managing social fears. Uncovering the emotional landscapes around spaces of elite urbanity helps reconsider future questions of creating more open and just cities.

Keywords

Gated communities, social status, fear of crime, social control, public space

Introduction

Since the rapid worldwide development of gated communities, particularly since the 1990s, scholars have been interested in learning about the social drivers of housing developments that raise physical and exclusionary boundaries (Blakely & Snyder, 1997; Low, 2001; Glasze et al., 2004). The drivers of the spread of gated communities varies according to their geographical, historical and social contexts. However, fear and social status are strongly entwined in their growing prevalence (Atkinson & Blandy, 2005; Li et al., 2012). In diverse global settings, the intense demand for protected spaces is frequently driven by profound safety anxieties and a desire to retreat from public spaces that are perceived to be disorderly (Kostenwein, 2021; Iqbal et al., 2024). In China, with the commodification of housing provision which started in the 1990s (He & Wu, 2005), private commodity gated communities have become the dominant form of new-built housing development (Wu et al., 2006). While scholars have stressed the important role of central and local governments in generating privileged residential spaces (He, 2013; Cai & He, 2022), the social motives, especially the emotional vocabularies of elite buyers in the context of objectively low urban crime rates, have been less thoroughly investigated. Thus, this article aims to contribute to the current literature by exploring the emotional landscapes of affluent residents and their distinct discourse of fear within these security bubbles. It seeks to expand theories of urban exclusion by illustrating how spatial fortification serves as a mechanism for class reproduction and the management of "uncivilized" others in the Chinese context.

Although fear of crime may not be the most prominent demand-side driver for gated living globally, it is taking on complex new meanings in Chinese cities. The rapid proliferation of elite gated housing estates in post-reform China has contributed to the creation of a hierarchical residential landscape based on residents' income levels, thereby leading to the appearance of more fragmented urban and social spaces (He, 2013). Crucially, the discourse of fear among gated community residents in China is largely decoupled from actual crime rates, which remain comparatively low. It reflects deeper anxieties regarding social mixing, the discourse of *suzhi* (human quality) (Kong, 2024), and the erosion of informal social control.

The Chinese central government is now making policies calling for the opening of existing gated communities to resolve urban issues like traffic congestion (Normile, 2016). Recent empirical studies reveal that top-down 'ungating' initiatives face formidable resistance from residents, primarily due to concerns over perceived community safety and loss of proprietary boundaries (Wu et al., 2021). Whether these political ambitions clash with urban residents' demand-side requirements needs

further investigation. Against this backdrop, the primary contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it re-conceptualizes "residential fear" in the context of post-socialist China as being not merely a reaction to crime, but primarily as a strategy for class consolidation that is built from the process of spatially filtering "uncivilized" others from local space. Second, it reveals that the very spatial strategies employed by the urban elite to mitigate these social anxieties ultimately reproduce their vulnerability by destroying the informal nature of social life in the neighbourhood.

This article begins by introducing the literature on Chinese gated communities and the discourse of fear. In the literature and theoretical illustration, we conceptualize "residential anxiety" by shifting the analytical focus from physical gating to emotional landscapes, examining the Chinese paradox of security and the erosion of informal social control in elite enclaves. The research involved gathering empirical data via 52 in-depth qualitative interviews and extensive ethnographic work in two elite gated neighbourhoods to test and expand these theoretical perspectives. Following a description of our methodological approach, we set out our key findings on how wealthy residents negotiate urban fear and social vulnerability. Here we consider the desire to create controllable spaces for their children before discussing how these households work to exclude undesirable and 'dangerous' social groups based on perceived social differences. The final section explores how various forms of social control are directed at achieving a sense of security, ultimately revealing how the lack of reciprocal trust among privileged neighbours exacerbates their feelings of vulnerability, even when behind the gates. We conclude by reflecting on the new urban policy of opening gated communities in China.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

The Discourse of Fear and the Paradox of Security in Urban China

The proliferation of gated residential estates in post-reform China is often framed through the lens of heightened urban insecurity and the fragmentation of socio-spatial landscapes (Huang & Low, 2008; Xie & Zhou, 2014). In many Western and South African contexts, residential fortification serves as a direct survival mechanism against severe violent crime (Bagaeen & Uduku, 2010; Breetzke et al., 2014). In contrast, the Chinese urban context maintains one of the lowest violent crime rates globally. With the evolution of surveillance technology and strict law enforcement, the overall crime rate in China has dropped dramatically since the early 2000s (Zhang, 2012). For instance, the homicide rate in China was only 0.6 (per 100,000 people) in 2017, compared to 4.9 in the US and 1.2 in the UK (World Population Review, 2021). Despite this remarkably safe macro-environment, the demand for gated housing enclaves—equipped with walls, controlled entrances, 24-hour patrols, and biometric monitoring systems—has continued to surge among the urban affluent. This demand was further amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the perceived "security zone" function of gated communities was heavily relied upon to mitigate unpredictable

social risks (Li et al., 2021). This coexistence of low violent crime and pervasive residential anxiety suggests that the "fear of crime" discourse in urban China operates as a proxy for deeper socio-cultural anxieties.

Rather than merely defending against physical violence, the gating of residential space in contemporary China functions as a spatial strategy for the rising (upper) middle class to manage social complexity, selectively disconnect from the unpredictable urban public, and consolidate their nascent social status (Pow, 2009; Liu & Atkinson, 2025). Recent studies reveal that the demand for an exclusive "security zone" in China was profoundly amplified during recent public health crises, where gates were repurposed as rigid barriers to exclude external health risks and unfamiliar populations (Li et al., 2021). The transition from a centrally planned to a market-driven economy has dismantled the traditional, state-managed social fabrics, creating less governable and highly unequal urban spaces (Bray, 2005; Wu et al., 2006). In this context, gated communities operate as what Wu (2005) describes as "consumer clubs," fulfilling the affluent class's demands for exclusive neighbourhood environments and high-quality services that the state no longer universally provides. More importantly, the fear articulated by these privileged urbanites is fundamentally tied to the Chinese discourse of *suzhi* (human quality). The demand for enclosure is driven by an underlying anxiety about social mixing with "uncivilized" others—such as rural migrants or lower-income groups—and a desire to construct a purified, predictable environment for class reproduction and family upbringing (Zhang, 2012).

This robust, market-driven demand for socio-spatial exclusivity explains the profound resistance to recent housing policies. In 2016, the Chinese central government issued a guideline attempting to halt the construction of new gated communities and gradually open up existing ones (Normile, 2016). Yet, this policy has encountered significant push-back and remains largely unimplemented. The middle-class residents defend the private production of their exclusive civic goods against "ungating" policies (Chiu-Shee et al., 2023). Therefore, to truly understand the resilience of gated communities in China, we must look beyond objective crime rates and physical urban planning, and critically examine the complex emotional landscapes and class-based anxieties that compel the privileged to retreat behind the gates.

Conceptualizing Residential Anxiety: From Physical Gating to Emotional Landscapes

In the Western literature, fear of crime is among the most prominent drivers of gated living (Low, 2003; Atkinson and Blandy, 2005; Davis, 2006). Mike Davis was among those commentators who firstly began to consider the emotional landscape of urban life, and the way that emotions were contained within, or projected onto, particular geographies within the city, what he called an ecology of fear (Davis, 1998). He suggests that, with inadequate public investment in dealing with social inequalities

and conflicts, urban residents, especially those with the resources to do so, actively separated themselves from the urban poor and implemented more advanced security measures such as gates, walls, and private security forces (Davis, 1998). However, Davis's image of an 'ecology of fear' is largely rooted in residential anxieties regarding urban decay, extensive social control efforts, aligning broadly with traditional theories about urban social disorder (Hunter, 1978; Moore & Shepherd, 2007). While this framework effectively explains the motivations of residents in high-crime contexts, it struggles to fully capture the psychological dynamics of the urban elites residing in heavily guarded, pristine environments in Chinese cities.

The lack of social capital and social control may lead to the fear of crime regardless of the influence of actual crime rate. For instance, Low (2003) has argued that the fear of crime, or actually fear of 'perceived crime', is an important social effect of gating which highlights the way that enclosure generates embattled and worried mindsets. She suggests that gates and walls help to solidify existing social boundaries and to create impressions of social divisions that are constructed around 'good' insiders and 'bad' or risky outsiders. Building upon this, we argue that understanding contemporary urban exclusion requires an 'affective turn.' We conceptualize the 'emotional landscape' of gated living not merely as a psychological reaction to immediate physical threats, but as a spatialized manifestation of systemic class anxiety and the precariousness of newly acquired social status.

The theory of social vulnerability typically suggests that the poor or disadvantaged social groups are more likely to endure high levels of fear as they cannot easily prevent or recover from the crime damage (Bissler, 2003). However, based on the Western contexts, Atkinson and Blandy (2018) have indicated that "fear of crime particularly operates for those affluent residents who are least at risk of crime and whose social prestige speaks of such anxiety in the form of gates and boundaries" (p. 87). Despite not being socially vulnerable, these affluent groups are now similarly suffering from the fear of crime, a phenomenon also reflected in recent Chinese urban literature. In

the context of China's rapid urban restructuring, this feeling of fear is profoundly affective; it is connected with their concerns about increasing social difference (Wu, 2005) and maintaining their new middle-class social status.

Recent scholarship on the emotional geographies of the Chinese elite class reveals that the pursuit of enclosed living is a deeply contradictory project (Sun & Webster, 2019). As affluent residents utilize physical space to shore up their class positions, they inadvertently internalize the very social fears they seek to escape (Liu & Atkinson, 2025). The fortification process cultivates a hyper-vigilant affective atmosphere, where the pervasive presence of security apparatuses constantly reminds residents of potential outside threats, thereby reproducing vulnerability from within (Drozdewski & Webster, 2021). By shifting our analytical focus, from physical gating to these emotional landscapes, we can better understand how the pursuit of absolute physical security may paradoxically erode psychological well-being.

The Illusion of Security: The Erosion of Informal Social Control in Elite Enclaves

Additionally, the lack of weak ties and community engagement, also known as informal social control, may also lead to inadequate collective action towards crime (Putnam, 2000). The concept of informal social control here is connected to ideas of social capital and the existence of collective norms that may help the possibility of controlling local problems (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). However, in the highly commercialized and privatized spaces of Chinese elite enclaves, these informal mechanisms are increasingly supplanted by formal, commodified property management. This substitution creates a profound illusion of security. While physical walls and technological surveillance systems might effectively deter opportunistic external crimes like burglary (Wang et al., 2021), they fundamentally undermine forms of reciprocal trust among neighbours.

Recent urban sociological studies highlight that the commodification of neighbourhood governance in China deeply alienates residents, dissolving the

traditional "eyes on the street" and leaving individuals emotionally isolated within their private domains (Zhang et al., 2020; Wu & Zhang, 2022). The over-reliance on professional security guards and technological barriers creates a internal vacuum of trust. Recent empirical analyses demonstrate that communities with higher degrees of physical closure often exhibit higher actual insecurity, as the walls actively destroy natural street surveillance and informal neighbourly relations (Wu & Tan, 2023). As residents withdraw from collective neighbourhood life, their suspicion toward both unfamiliar "outsiders" and unvetted "insiders" (including service staff and anonymous, wealthy neighbours) intensifies. Recent quantitative evidence further confirms that spatial enclosure directly diminishes residents' willingness to participate in community affairs and manage neighbourhood commons, continuously weakening the foundation of informal social control (Shen et al., 2023).

Consequently, as Sun and Webster (2019) observed, many urban residents of gated communities in China still install security grills on their apartments due to deep-seated feelings of insecurity. The hyper-individualization of defense—fortifying one's own apartment within an already heavily guarded estate—suggests that physical gates fail to generate genuine emotional comfort. Recent international research shows that, while enclosed spaces attempt to monopolize safety for the privileged, they actively degrade democratic access, vitality, and actual security of the public streets outside the gates, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of urban fear (Kostenwein & Ruiz Carvajal, 2025).

Extensive criminological research surveys reveals that gated communities fail to deter property crimes, such as burglary, when compared to their non-gated counterparts, rendering the physical boundary highly porous (Addington & Rennison, 2015). Furthermore, comparative housing studies demonstrate that the mere presence of physical barriers does not automatically alleviate residents' psychological fear of crime; instead, it often heightens their sensitivity to internal disorder (Vilalta, 2011). These studies highlight the reality of gains in certain areas of physical security while arguably

leaving a more complex and ambivalent set of emotions attached to contemporary urban, social life in Chinese cities where state, residential-spatial and class boundaries are being redrawn over time. In this context, the emotional landscapes of the privileged are fraught with contradictions: the very spatial strategies employed to mitigate fear ultimately reproduce it by destroying informal social networks. We seek to contribute to the discussion of how social class, physical urban space, and the erosion of informal social control come together to produce the kinds of gated lifestyles that are such a marked feature of the new urban landscape, which will provide new insights regarding current urban policies and future urban forms.

Data and Methods

The work presented here was conducted in Zhanjiang, a middle-tier Chinese city with a population of around 7 million, 45 per cent of which live in urban areas (Zhanjiang Yearbook 2021). The rationale for this selection was driven by the fact that most research on Chinese gated communities has heavily focused on first-tier mega-cities, such as Guangzhou and Shanghai, leaving the country's 'ordinary' cities under-researched. Zhanjiang, ranking 9th in GDP (\$530bn US in 2022) within the prosperous Guangdong province, shares many similarities with other rapidly developing middle-tier cities in China. In these spaces, despite a generally slower rhythm of urban life, we can witness the fast expansion of elite gated communities driven by cheaper land prices and aggressive real estate investments. Investigating these middle-tier cities reflects a more common and geographically widespread urban experience, making it crucial to unveil affluent residents' requirements for upscale gated communities outside the primary metropolises.

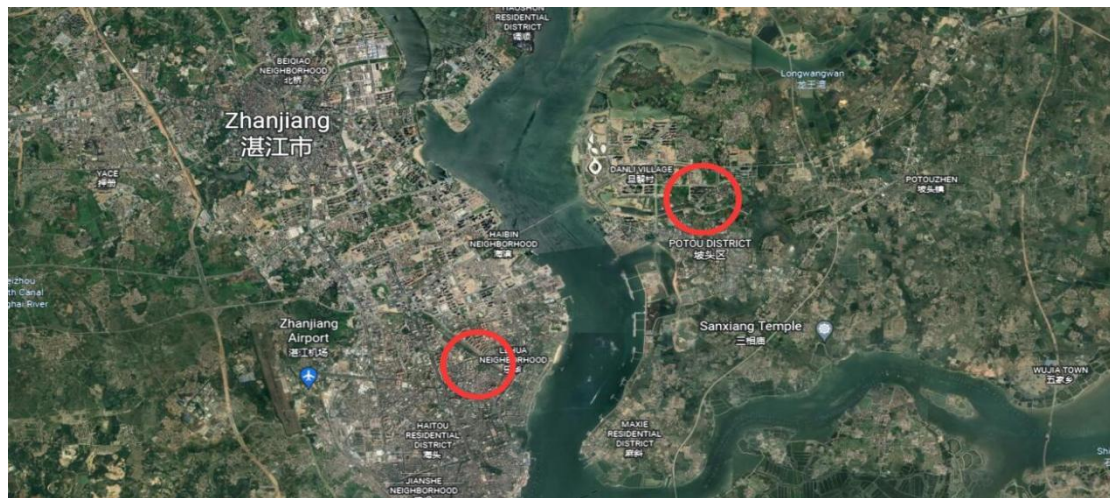
The primary research data comes in the form of 52 in-depth, qualitative interviews with the affluent residents and management staff of two elite gated communities in Zhanjiang (See details in Table 1). The participants included residents living inside and outside the GCs, staff from the housing management company, neighbourhood security panels, local police, and security officials from the local governments. Our approach prioritizes depth of engagement with key actors to assist with analytical generalization and theory-building (Yin, 2018). The substantial number of in-depth interviews, coupled with 6 months of rigorous participant and non-participant observation, allows us to develop substantive insights from this body of work (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, rather than seeking statistical generalization, this extensive qualitative dataset helps us to generate theoretical inferences regarding the

emotional landscapes of the Chinese urban elite that can begin to be applied in other, similar urban contexts.

Two luxury gated communities—Central Palms (in the city centre) and Outer Hills (in the suburban area)—were chosen as research cases to capture diverse geographical contexts within the city. Both are high-end private estates built long enough to have formed stable neighbourhood relations, boasting the city's highest real estate sales prices (around 2,500 US dollars per square meter in 2016). They feature exclusive neighbourhood services and highly fortified security systems, including electronic identification, pervasive surveillance cameras, and numerous security personnel. The presence of dense neighbourhood experiences among middle-class residents and high-status groups (e.g., well-known entrepreneurs and celebrities) in both cases provided adequate and rich participants for our qualitative research. Figure 1 shows the satellite images of the two selected gated neighbourhoods to depict their location within the city fabric.

Categories of interviewees	Number of interviewees	Means or contact with interviewees
Residents (insiders)	30 (15 for each gated communities case)	Gatekeeper, snowball sampling and quota sampling
Residents (outsiders)	10 (5 for each case)	The staff of the residential committee
The staff of the housing development company	2	Contact through my relatives
Police	1	Contact through my relatives
security officials from the local government	1	Contact through my relatives
Private guards	3 (1 for each case)	The staff of the residential committee
Staff of the Residential Committee	3 (1 for each case)	Gatekeeper sampling
Representatives of the homeowner organisation	3 (1 for each case)	Gatekeeper sampling
Manager of the housing company	1	Gatekeeper sampling
Total number of interviewees	52	

Table 1 : Key typology and data of the interviewees



*Figure 1: Satellite images and locations of the two selected gated communities
(Source: Google Earth)*

The fearful elites in the security bubbles

In this section, we begin with a series of observations around the complex motives, feelings, and strategies deployed by the affluent residents of the two gated communities. As our interviews revealed, the decision to purchase a home in these elite enclaves is undeniably multi-faceted. Residents frequently cited pragmatic and functional considerations, including location advantages, convenient commuting distances to workplaces, high-quality supporting facilities (such as schools and commercial centers), as well as a desire for internal traffic safety and a quiet physical environment. However, while these utilitarian factors establish the baseline requirements for middle-class housing, we found that the discourse of fear and the search for social predictability form the underlying emotional core of their residential choice. Beneath the surface of seeking a 'quiet environment,' there lies a profound anxiety about urban disorder. This feeling of vulnerability has become a crucial factor behind the development of a kind of 'gated mindset' associated with this lifestyle. According to most interviewees, the desire for finding safety—or more accurately, a socially filtered safe haven—was the most prominent emotional factor in terms of residential choice, and this led them to select apartments in the gated communities. They considered that the physical design of gates, walls, and various types of advanced security apparatus, such as electronic authentication systems and surveillance cameras, helped increase the difficulty of potentially 'dangerous' outsiders targeting their neighbourhood. For them, diverse security strategies helped to create more bounded, controllable, and socially purified residential spaces. Thus, living in private and clearly-defined gated neighbourhoods with increased control over these private spaces was seen as helping to ensure safety and alleviate class-based anxieties.

Due to increasing demand for security in neighbourhoods, housing developers in Zhanjiang actively promote the importance of security in gated communities in order to attract potential house buyers, often by stressing the unique security apparatus available. For instance, Mr Wang, a manager of a real estate company, illustrated their promotional strategies in this way:

We usually use different advertising strategies targeted at people of different consumption levels. For instance, in terms of the security apparatus, we will install a series of high-tech security equipment, such as fingerprint scanners, face recognition, infrared burglar alarms and one-button alarm apparatus, to attract affluent customers to our high-end gated communities. New high-tech security equipment and diversified protection measures enable us to draw in our affluent customers much more quickly. These affluent people are more concerned about their personal safety. We normally convince them to buy our housing by promising that our high-tech security equipment can safeguard them from many criminal behaviours (Mr Wang, general manager in a real estate company).

Housing developers and real estate agents appear to closely monitor and understand the desires of affluent home buyers' and their anxieties about crime. On the one hand, they leverage this demand for security to promote their gated housing estates through installing various high-tech security equipment. On the other, their marketing of these security services at the neighbourhood scale has raised residents' awareness of risks to their homes and neighbourhood, further diffusing more anxious emotional responses among prospective house buyers. We found that in their idealised image of life in the gated community this space was seen as dream space of near complete safety and security. Residents also spoke in ways that suggested a strong reliance on their neighbourhood security services to achieve some sense of release from a fear of violence or intrusion. Most interviewees, around three-quarters, stated that they could not imagine residential life without gates and walls defending them from urban risks, unveiling why many residents oppose the government's policy of opening gated communities.

We further found that nearly half of our interviewees had equipped their homes with more security devices to supplement the security personnel and design features already in place in their communities. For instance, Ms Yuan, living in Central Palms, depicted her use of more advanced technology to defend her home:

Although our community is safe for living in, I want more security for my own home, so I use some security equipment in my house. First, our front doors are two steel anti-theft doors of good quality with infrared alarms. And I have installed grills on all the windows and our balcony. I have also installed surveillance cameras in all the rooms inside my house. I can check

the videos from these cameras on my smartphone anytime and anywhere, enabling me to have total control of my home space. If thieves enter our community for valuables, they will definitely not take my house as their first target because of these types of security apparatus (Interviewee 3, Ms Yuan, accountant, Central Palms).

Social vulnerability theory suggests that poor people are more likely to suffer from fear of crime (Bissler, 2003). However, our interviews indicate that even wealthy residents are surrounded by feelings of insecurity. Thus even while technological approaches to security and control at the neighbourhood level were unable to fully reduce fear of crime, residents clearly expressed a desire for any means by which they could exert more control of their domestic space. As nascent affluent social groups in contemporary Chinese neoliberal urban environments, they are more fearful of becoming the conspicuous crime target and losing their wealthy accumulated over the past few decades under liberal economy system.

In some extreme cases, fearful interviewees even prepared various defensive tools, such as glare flashlights and tear gas in their homes in order to respond to potential threats. As one interviewee said: “I have prepared some self-defence measures in my home so that I can fight back and punish home invaders when necessary” (Interviewee 18, Mr Chen, teacher, Central Palms). As shown in Figure 2, both defensive architectural design and the presence of various security apparatus reflect these wealthy residents’ fear of risks and feelings of vulnerability while in their private homes. The use of physical, social and financial resources to secure their absolute personal and property security in their neighbourhoods and private homes spoke of an increasing sense of insecurity and concerns about their social status.

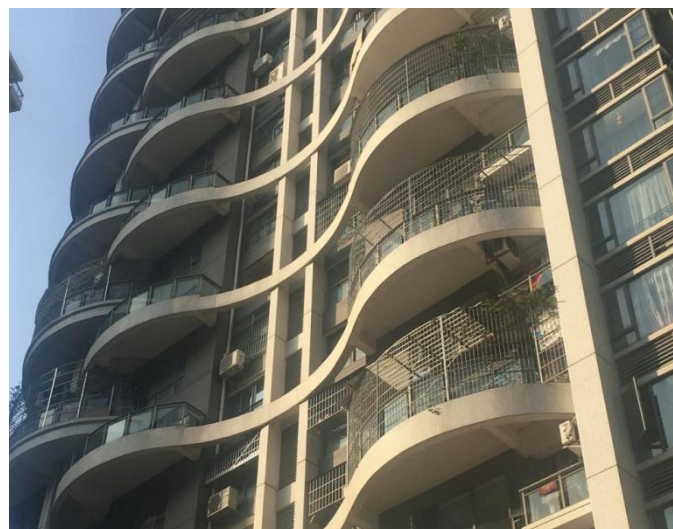


Figure 2: Installed iron cages around and over balconies and windows

Protecting our ‘precious children’ in the risky city

Seeking gated spaces was clearly linked to concerns about feelings of vulnerability in general, but it was also linked to a strong need to offer complete security for children, who were considered more vulnerable in current Chinese urban settings. It was evident that people living in the study areas expressed a strong desire to create safe, homogeneous and controllable social environments for their children in both their residential spaces and schools. For these residents, living inside gated communities reflected a desire to stay away from unwanted contact with unexpected and dangerous people and space outside their privileged world and away from any life experiences that may be disturbing, chaotic and painful. As a result of these measures their children come to grow up in relatively homogeneous social spaces in which privilege and safety become normalised features. This context indicates the possibility that children growing-up in these neighbourhoods may lack experience or knowledge of other social groups.

Many residents described how life in the gated community was an important aspect of their planned development and cultivation of their children's lives. In reality, this motivation was linked to a desire for control and the planned safety of their children - the security measures and controlled space of gated communities helped them to watch and monitor their children's activities and social interactions. In this sense, responsibility for providing a safe environment outside the domestic household space appears to be increasingly delegated to individual households who make choices to purchase in neighbourhoods seen to offer the right kind of space for development – mirroring Low's observations in the US (2003). As Ms Liu, a resident from Central Palms, stated:

I bought this house mainly for my 3-year-old child. He can enjoy a better living environment. And he will be safe living inside the gated community. I do not have to worry about his safety. The safeguards and camera surveillance help a lot. And the kindergarten in our community is of good quality with experienced teachers, my child will have a good start in his early education. This is crucial to his future development. ... I want to create a safe and sound neighbourhood environment for my child where he can play, learn and grow up in this well-organised neighbourhood. I also want my child to interact with other children from families with high social status and good family education (Interviewee 2, Ms Liu, doctor, Central Palms)

Since the strict implementation of family planning policy in China in the 1980s (Attané, 2002), most urban households have only one child per couple. This policy has increased the vulnerability of the next generation and thus made parents more concerned about their precious children's security and the environments they develop in, meaning that gated communities have been welcomed by a generation of affluent and anxious urban parents. Parents often lack confidence about the safety of city life and, therefore, choose to live in gated communities to create desirable and

controllable environments for their precious only child. In this context, upscale gated communities are identified as ideal residential choices by parents because of the good physical environment, strict neighbourhood management and high security.

Many parents in our study expressed the advantages of neighbourhoods that helped to provide homogeneous social environments for their precious children. Gates, walls and bespoke neighbourhood services were perceived as mechanisms for excluding risky or undesirable outsiders, including poorer and potentially dangerous populations and their children, from the neighbourhood (see Figure 3). This is an important point, showing how social space was strongly influenced by the physical attributes of the gated developments. The physically enclosed space of the developments made it very unlikely that children were able to interact with underprivileged social groups and their children, which eventually do harm to entire social solidarity in the future.



Figure 3: Bespoke neighbourhood services for children inside

Fearing the resentful and excluded urban 'other'

While residents inside gated developments appeared to achieve some sense of security, those living in poorer neighbourhoods, without the resources to support these security measures, were seen by insiders as suffering from higher levels of crime. For those living in gated communities this uneven exposure to risk helped to drive the choice to live in a protected neighbourhood space as a means of ensuring security as well as the effective avoidance of potentially dangerous social groups. This observation by Mr Gao, a resident from Central Palms, exemplifies such feelings:

I have lived in this community for three years, and I only remember two thefts that happened in our neighbourhood. This crime rate is relatively low. Most of our residents are high-quality people with no criminal tendencies. But, to be sure, the gates and surveillance system cannot eliminate all the chances of crime inside our community. Thus, we are careful with our personal property, such as cars and other costly property in our home, especially when I meet with people I have not met before. The gates, walls, and the 24-hour patrolling security guard make us feel

safe inside our neighbourhood (Interviewee 11, Mr Gao, programmer, Central GC).

Although the decrease of the overall crime rate in the city and moves into private gated communities generated a certain sense of security for the affluent, it might be naive to consider that residents live fully without a fear of crime. One crucial factor is that increased income inequality and the fragmentation of social space in cities have increased a generalised sense of risk and increased the emotional response to urban life around experiences of fear. Worse still perhaps is the sense that criminality is associated with poor neighbours and 'uncivilised' citizens in the wider city. The elite gated communities of Zhanjiang are often located near other types of neighbourhoods, such as urban villages (former rural villages surrounded by growth of urban scale) and work-unit compounds, where residents are relatively poor. Although no apparent conflict has emerged between rich and poor residents outside, many affluent residents expressed a strong concern about the morality and 'quality' of poor residents outside. For example, Ms Xie from Central Palms illustrates these feelings about the residents of these poorer spaces:

Living in our community, I can enjoy a quiet and comfortable lifestyle with residents who are similar to us. When I walk outside our community, I usually meet with residents in surrounding urban villages and migrant workers. They talk in their own language, such as 'leizhou hua' (a local language of the nearby countryside), with a loud noise, which makes me quite uncomfortable. Their behaviour is so rude, which makes them look like barbarians. I heard from my colleagues that many drug abusers live in those urban villages. That's so dangerous. So I like to stay in my own community rather than interact with those uncivil strangers." (Ms Xie, Manager, Central Palms).

In this illustrative example, the physical boundaries of the community help to instil a sense of a moral 'splitting' of 'good' people inside from those 'bad' people outside. As Low (2003) argues however, this sense of social splitting offers a crude dualism that oversimplifies and dichotomies cultural and social complexity, risking the false impression of good 'self' from bad 'other' – physical space here operates to deepen existing social cleavages and to increase social stereotypes alongside false impressions that the community space is risk-less or free from social problems. We found that, most residents of the gated communities considered their neighbours to be morally respectable and unlikely to commit crimes. However, poor residents living outside, even in adjacent ordinary gated communities, were deemed to be potentially dangerous 'drug abusers' and moral 'others' who might be likely to be a source of criminal behaviour. This dualistic thinking complements and enforces a fear of poor 'others' outside the gated communities, a view that appears to be rooted in a propertied, middle-class cultural politics bolstered by the physical divisions in operation here.

The desire for social homogeneity inside the gated communities was expressed by most of our interviewees. They were eager to live in exclusive communities with other neighbours of perceived 'high quality' and with similar socio-economic backgrounds. This made them feel relatively safe and able to enjoy life without disturbance from what they often perceived to be more dangerous, 'rough' or different kinds of people who lived outside their communities. Ms Yuan, an accountant living in Central Palms, offered the following:

The price of our house in this gated community is rather high in our city, but it is not the highest. So, some rich people from the countryside [can] still afford it, as well as some residents in urban villages. Although they are rich, their lifestyle and [life] quality are not of the same level as us. Sometimes I feel pretty uncomfortable living with them. And many community conflicts are caused by them. That's one point that I am not satisfied with within my current community. I know there is a new gated community being built in the 'Jinshawan' with a much higher price. I plan to move there with my family. I ought to get better neighbours there (Interviewee 3, Ms Yuan, accountant, Central Palms).

Among the interviewees, there was a strong desire to live with like-minded people with similar social-economic backgrounds to help maintain a sense of social homogeneity that could be socially and physically distinguished from the poor, potentially dangerous and uncivilised residents outside their neighbourhoods. In contemporary Zhanjiang, privileged residents sought to preserve the 'purity' of 'middle-class' residential space and exclude less well-off people who could afford to live there. They even search for more expensive and exclusive gated communities to exclude the possibility of living with urban poor who were considered uncivilised, dangerous and lacking middle-class cultural capital. For these residents, ideas of the 'good life' or a 'modern lifestyle' depended on the purification of social environments that might thereby ensure the kind of controllable and undisturbed lifestyle that they sought out in their pursuit of an ideal city lifestyle.

Analysis of the data appeared to indicate that residents living in Outer Hills had higher levels of fear of crime than those living in Central Palms. Consequently, they were more inclined to use the semi-public spaces and services inside gated communities and to refuse to have contact with their neighbours in nearby areas. This is because Outer Hills is mainly surrounded by poorer neighbourhoods where higher levels of crime and fear exists according to social disorder theory. As one resident from Outer Hills explained:

I seldom hear of any violent crime inside our neighbourhood. I think our neighbourhood is relatively safe for living in. However, I feel unsafe when I visit our surrounding poor and derelict neighbourhoods because many

local urban villagers and poor people live there. Most of them do not have proper jobs, and many teenage toughs always hang out, gamble and even take drugs there. Some neighbours told me that they might rob your money when you are alone. Thus, I hardly visit those neighbourhoods or have contact with those people. I usually choose to walk and play inside our neighbourhood as much as possible (Interviewee 43, Ms Zhang, retiree, Outer Hills).

The relatively poor and unstable social environment in the suburban neighborhood heightens the privileged residents' fear of and hostility toward their neighbors of different, generally lower, social status.

(Dis)trust of social control within gated communities

Now we move to discuss resident perceptions of formal (private security guards and local police) and informal (neighbourhood cohesion and intervention) control of 'deviant' and criminal behaviours inside gated communities. We also reflect on how these perceptions of social control influenced their sense of security. While formal social control is often discussed in the literature of gated communities, the situations of informal social control are equally important to residents feelings of security. According to our interviews, private security guards were reported to not only control access but also to coordinate with the local police to prevent crime issues and deal with rule-breaking in the gated communities. Most interviewees appeared to see their neighbourhoods as safe spaces due to the private security guards whose general presence appeared to reassure residents. Here, Mr Li from Outer Hills, describes his feelings about the security guards:

The security guards in our neighbourhood are pretty enthusiastic about solving your problems and take their duties seriously. They usually deal with deviant behaviours, such as theft and fraud, in our neighbourhood. If you spot any uncivilised behaviours and potential criminals, you can directly call them, and they will react very quickly. Our security guards always wear neat uniforms and usually patrol our neighbourhood to keep order inside, which makes me feel safe (Interviewee 17, Mr Li, owner of car repair company, Outer Hills).

The private security guards were mostly considered trustworthy by residents, and they felt that they could ask them to intervene more generally in problems. This increased their general sense of security because they could immediately seek help from a formal security presence whenever they encountered what they saw as forms of social disorder or antisocial behaviour. The private security guards who patrolled around the clock also contributed to the sense of a safe and predictable living environment. Private security guards often wear marine blue uniforms that are like

the police uniform and Chinese military uniform. Some residents reported feeling that these uniforms made the security guards look like police officials and therefore more formal and powerful, which increased their own sense of safety.

Resident relationships with the local police and their ability to seek help from external agencies also influenced their ability to deal with crimes and fear of crime (Warner and Rountree, 1997). Mr Zhang, a government official from the Security Department in the Street Office, described how the local police force had a closer relationship with the management companies, security personnel and residents in gated communities than with poor neighbourhoods such as urban villages:

The residents in the gated communities have more trust in our ability to solve local crime issues and conflicts. Many of them call us or write letters to us to seek help for local problems. In addition, the managers of the gated communities consistently report issues and conflicts in their neighbourhoods to us, which can primarily increase our ability to deal with these problems. However, many local urban villagers tend to solve their problems through gang fights. They also like to ask the elders in their clans to solve their problems or conflicts. Some of our staff are even unwilling to be involved in the complex conflicts in urban villages (Mr Zhang, a government official in the Security Department).

This comment reflects that the social relationships between residents and local police agencies have significant influence on the local communities' ability to seek help from external agencies and to control crime. Compared with poor neighbourhoods with low trust in local police agencies, the residents and management panels of gated communities have relatively close relationships with the local police force and rely on help and control from local authorities. However, although trust in formal social control methods had partly reduced residents' fear of crime, several interviewees still presented concerns about the ability of security guards to deal with crime and violence. For example, Ms Pan from Central Palms discussed her concerns as follows:

Our security guards are zealous and hard-working, but I am suspicious about their ability to confront the criminals. Most of the security staff are relatively older adults, and they are not genuinely professional security personnel and have not got specialised training. Some of them are even very short and slight. If violence or severe crimes occur, I think they are not competent to deal with those issues. ... Some of the security guards do not strictly control the entrances and the gates, and they may let some outsiders get into our neighbourhoods. This also makes me feel unsafe (Interviewee 47, Ms Pan, retiree, Central Palms).

Although the private security guards are considered an essential mechanism for social control, residents did not fully trust their abilities to deal with crime, especially violent crimes.

Informal methods of social control also played an essential role in regulating social disorder and reducing the fear of crime in neighbourhoods. This kind of 'collective efficacy' (Sampson et al., 1997) appeared to be very low in the gated developments where formal methods of control and design were strong but the valuing of privacy and privatised lifestyles generated a relative absence of social cohesion among residents. As a result, most of them had not formed strong neighbourhood relationships and did not trust them to solve neighbourhood conflicts or deal with uncivilised behaviours. This lack of social cohesion appeared more severe in Central Palms where residential mobility was higher than in Outer Hills. The residents of Central Palms appeared unwilling to directly confront neighbourhood problems and conflicts and had low expectations of the possibility of achieving more informal forms of social control, such as with dealing with anti-social behaviour. For instance, as Ms Xie from Central Palms relates here:

I have heard of some neighbourhood conflicts and criminal cases in the past two years, but I did not directly get involved in these issues. I think the management company and the security guards are the main agencies in charge. I want to enjoy my neighbourhood life without being bothered by these distractions. So, if these issues do not influence my home and life, I tend to avoid dealing with them. ... It's quite normal. And I don't think my neighbours will come to help me get out of these troubles. We are not friends, and I do not even know their names (Interviewee 23, Ms Xie, manager, Central Palms).

It is evident that the lack of social cohesion and trust between these residents has led to an unwillingness or even resistance to actively participating in controlling crime issues or confronting conflicts. Thus, residents seemed to have, in many cases, quite low expectations of informal social control over crime and anti-social behaviours. The apparent orderliness of life in these gated neighbourhoods was not born of intimate or necessarily strong social bonds since household transiency, social fragmentation and isolation among residents seemed quite apparent (Baumgartner 1989). This isolation from, and lack of familiarity with, other residents in the gated communities appears to have increased their fear of crime and intrusion due to the lack of a possibility to exert informal modes of social control within the neighbourhood.

It became clear in the analysis phase that a lack of social cohesion in the gated communities and their only partial trust in local formal security agencies meant that some residents felt unsafe, even while inside their neighbourhoods. For example, Ms Liu from Central Palms illustrates her concerns:

There are many service workers such as the cleaner, gardener and house servant who can enter our community without the permission of the security guards, and the house servants even have the keys for several dwellings. Most of them are poor workers with low skills, and lack educational backgrounds, and some of them come from rural areas. I am really afraid that they would steal our personal belongings and threaten our children. With these low-quality servants inside, I dare not let my child play alone in the community” (Interviewee 2, Ms Liu, doctor, Central Palms).

Many service workers were hired by management companies and homeowners in the gated developments to perform various manual tasks, such as cleaning, gardening and housework, which were considered ‘menial jobs’ by the residents (Zhang, 2012). This work is crucial to keeping the community clean and orderly, but these service workers are considered potential threats because of their low status and rural migrant biographies which are seen as denoting untrustworthiness. Ironically, the indispensable roles of service workers in gated communities have become a permanent source of fear and insecurity, mirroring work that found similar concerns in some US gated communities (Atkinson and Smith, 2012). In this sense, the apparent tranquility and safety of life in these affluent spaces was riven with emotions and feelings of anxiety as a result of the relative isolation of affluent neighbours inside, which largely reinforce existing class-neighbourhood boundaries and the estrangement between various social groups.

Conclusion

While the Chinese literature on gated communities has emphasized the role of governments and market power as the main driving forces for enclave urbanism (He, 2013; Cai & He, 2022), the demand-side motives—especially the fear of crime and the emotional reflections of those elite social groups—have been less thoroughly investigated. Beyond simply confirming Western models of urban exclusion, we have sought to explore the distinctive and contextually grounded emotional landscapes of the affluent residents interviewed in two, key elite Chinese gated neighbourhoods. This work is illuminating in highlighting the nuanced feelings they have regarding feelings of social vulnerability and fear of other groups within contemporary post-socialist Chinese cities. Our analysis supports a wider set of observations regarding the social and physical shifts emerging in the fabric of Chinese cities. Alongside the emergence of a new and expanded (upper) middle-class, and the fragmentation of space into older/newer and more/less protected areas, a landscape of fear has arisen. These emotions are a surprisingly strong and foregrounded emotional repertoire among the affluent urbanite studied here, even in places that they otherwise considered to be oases of security. However, increasing social inequalities, changing city governance, various modes of social control, and the physical forms of neighbourhoods appeared as part of complex local narratives focused on issues of decline and urban-social change. As a result, this elite class seeks a life behind gates and walls, motivated by a desire to secure both themselves and their families, but also their nascent class positions. The emotional landscape of these settings was thus one in which realizing an ideal social lifestyle was attached to a need to broadly control the physical environment, both for themselves and their children.

Although statistics show that crime rates in China have decreased dramatically in the past decade, revealing a profound disconnect in perceived security, widespread media reports of violence, coupled with moral discrimination and cultural stereotypes targeted at poorer social groups, have cultivated elite fears of 'dangerous' or 'uncivilised' others. Under these circumstances, affluent residents seek to withdraw

into gated communities in search of safe and controllable residential spaces. This observation, of course, broadly mirrors findings in the urban West. However, one noticeable distinction lies in a heightened sense of vulnerability that residents appear to feel regarding being potential targets of crime. This seems to stem from a recently achieved middle-class position and rapidly increasing personal wealth—a stark departure from the egalitarian urban lifestyle of the socialist era. A fear of crime and the search for predictability in the patchwork of unequal neighbourhood conditions have become important factors influencing the choice to live in exclusive gated communities. This speaks as much to a desire to reproduce and install ideals of a purified middle-class identity as it does to creating safe zones for families.

The interview results show that defensive architectural design, a homogeneous social environment, and formal security guards have provided residents with a baseline sense of security. However, their partial distrust of private security personnel (as agents of formal social control) and their lack of social cohesion and reciprocal trust (methods of informal social control) from their neighbours largely increase their fear and feelings of vulnerability even behind the gates. This highlights that the quest for absolute physical security erodes psychological well-being by destroying natural neighborhood trust. In this sense, the ideal of gated living is revealed to be something of an illusion. By living inside fortified homes, affluent residents have come to take for granted that extreme measures are necessary to secure themselves. These measures are supplemented by class-based identities that map onto the physical boundaries of the gated developments, sharply distinguishing between a dangerous outside and a still risky, yet more manageable, inside. This appears to reveal the significant affective and social needs of elite residents.

Our work helps us to understand why top-down policies aimed at 'ungating' are not likely to be easily implemented. To address these entrenched challenges, policymakers must recognize that ungating will require more than physical dismantling efforts. Planning measures should also prioritize efforts at instilling modes

of informal social control and alleviating class anxieties through reductions in social inequality and investment in social infrastructure and other support systems. It may be that, rather than forcing physical integration, the creation of high-quality, shared civic spaces between enclaves would help to foster more inter-class encounters and socially cohesive cities more broadly. Alongside these efforts the enhancing public safety may also help to reduce middle class reliance on privatized defense. While this study offers important insights into the emotional landscapes of the privileged in a Chinese middle-tier city, future research should explore how these affective dynamics vary across different urban scales and geographical contexts. Comparative studies examining the emotional topographies of diverse neighborhood types will further enrich our understanding of the specialization of social trust and fear in the rapidly evolving Chinese metropolis.

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Research ethics and consent

This study involved human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the research. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw, and how the data would be used. All identifiable information has been

anonymised to protect participants' confidentiality, and no participants are identifiable in the manuscript.

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Figure captions

Figure 1 Caption: Satellite images and locations of the two selected gated communities

Figure 1 Alt Text: Google satellite map marking two studied gated communities in Zhanjiang: one located in the city centre and the other in a remote suburban area.

Figure 2 Caption: Installed iron cages around and over balconies and windows

Figure 2 Alt Text: Balconies and windows enclosed by iron cages, illustrating how residents reinforce their private homes against perceived risks and vulnerabilities.

Figure 3 Caption: Bespoke neighbourhood services for children inside

Figure 3 Alt Text: Bespoke facilities for residents inside the community, illustrating how internal services support privacy, exclusivity and separation from outsiders.