

## **In what way should we do political sociology research in contemporary China? ——A book review of *Politics of Housing Right: Homeowners United Right-Protecting Action in Urban China***

Yongmei LI

University of Southampton, UK  
Email: Yongmei.Li@soton.ac.uk

A series of questions occurred in my mind when I thought about the topic of housing right, which mainly diverge in two directions regarding local democracy and China studies. It is fair to say that the core idea of these two directions is interaction. No matter the interaction between public and private sectors or the interaction between research and reality, interaction really means a lot and does make differences. This work by Xiaolin Wu can be taken as an example as a well-organized combination of those two interactions.

Democracy at local level is based upon people's awareness of rights. Apparently, housing right is one of many fundamental civil rights regarding daily life. Presumably, large amount of population and the vast territory of China are two primary catalysts. As is known to all, China is such a huge country compared with many other countries in the world, the complicated situation in China is also amplified for the huge population and large scale. Especially in the era of quick urbanization and urban regeneration, rural residents are pushed and pulled to cities, thus causing the expansion of new urban residents population. Subsequently, the basic need for house living is boosting dramatically.

What's more, it is remarkable that the idea of common people about housing can reflect the typical Chinese characteristic. Evidently, possessing one's own private property is a symbol of social status and identity. No matter in which social class, Chinese people are always willing to own a house. Additionally, because of housing policy and local government financial need, this situation has been intensified to a higher level. Examples of conflicts can be witnessed or heard everywhere which consist of various aspects of community life, such as basic facility maintenance, safety security, housing management and services, parking lot payment etc. Apart from that, the conflict between homeowners also happened frequently.

Therefore, for China Studies, the singular methodology of figuring out essence from trifles and keeping our eyes on those trifles existing in big amount is of great importance. The former is telling us small and specifics can reflect many differences as well as reasons behind them and the latter can lead researchers to some basic rules of big phenomenon. Undoubtedly, housing right in contemporary China is such a big phenomenon, which can be a driven force of many housing right conflicts. Apart from that, the amount of homeowner as well as homeowner

association are boosting so fast that any trivial problems regarding housing or property can be a big phenomenon. That's why the author select the topic of homeowner conflict and made an effort to grasp some basic rules from those trifles of huge amount.

Subsequently, another question comes out. Is housing right a contemporary concept? Frankly speaking, the fact that intellectuals have been keeping a close eye on civil right especially housing right of common people can date back to Tang Dynasty and Enlightenment Era. Clearly, *Two Treatises of Government* by John Locke and the poem of *Maowuweiqiufengsuopoge* by Dufu can be the very best evidences for this fact. However, it is weird that housing right sounds like a contemporary concept. The strong consciousness of possessing a house or property has been rooted deeply in the mind of Chinese.

Conflicts are triggered when interest groups chase after varied interests in the same area. Who took actions first? Who raised their questions first? Who responded to those interest issues? Those questions are challenging the cooperative governance of government, private company and housing right organization. Whether public engagement and involvement is a strong power reshaping local society governance? To what extent are public sectors and officers affected by that kind of power? The roles of different subjects should be examined carefully on the basis of analyzing conflicts.

The identity of homeowner is reconfirmed once the housing right activities start. No matter from the perspective of public culture-oriented consciousness or private possession consciousness, housing right has been an essential bond linking people's private life and public life. Obviously, homeowners come from diversified classes and have different occupations in the whole society, but their common identity makes them unite together and strive for some interests in common. An organization or a collective action can turn individual's fury to public engagement. That is indeed the meaning of association or alliance. The reason of crucial shift from individual action to collective action can be attributed to the existence and development of homeowner organization. By this means, homeowners can share information, discuss activity agenda, do some brainstorm and pool resources. Social network can function well and public opinion can be summarized, which will change the means of public involvement into social reform. The identity of homeowner can exert another influence on actions. The common identity means whoever wants to participate in housing governance can make a contribution and even witness every breakthrough through playing their irreplaceable roles.

So here comes out the issue that how does the causal relationship work in the housing right conflicts? And on what conditions, those kind of conflicts will be activated and the activities triggered? These puzzles are just what this book struggled to address. From the theoretical perspective of conflict resolution, the roles of three main subjects have been clarified with the accordance of causal relationship and conditions in the housing right conflicts.

Only by figuring out the mechanism of homeowner association and their collective actions can we find the way to cooperative governance between public and private sectors. Any ignorance or misunderstanding of those facts can lead to detrimental effects of policy making and implementation. The government is supposed to have a good command of skills and tool to balance the relationship between civic organization and market behavior. Once a series of interactions don't work efficiently, norms and rules will be broken. Thus, bigger conflicts can be induced in a larger scale and prompt public sectors and private sectors to notice the severe situation. The group of homeowner will probably turn to the government for their civic identity and property rights in the following stage which means the two sides involved in the conflict is likely to experience a shift, from homeowner group versus market subject to homeowner group versus both local government and market subject, thus causing the conflict status being leveled up.

So what should researchers do for or with those phenomena? How to connect their research to the reality? What kind of China study can make sense and respond to the reality in China? These problems above are just the main targets of research on China housing right in the field of Political Sociology. Meanwhile, the courage to observe, record and even participate instills a great power into contemporary China studies and Political sociology analysis. The action research is in urgent need in China especially in housing right protection research. In this way, the breakthrough of both theory innovation and property-based action can be achieved at a very fast speed. Or else, when researchers only focus on the previous study or events, they will definitely lose and miss abundant opportunities of mining fresh phenomena nearby and not to mention propelling the development and prosperity of China study. Undoubtedly, this work of *Politics of Housing Right: Homeowners United Right-Protecting Action in Urban China* is a remarkable milestone on the long way to local democracy research in China.