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Social Exclusion of Chengzhongcun Villagers in an Ecological District: A Case Study of Reconstructed Xianghuwan Village

(生態圏型都市開発における城中村と社会的疎外：香湖湾の再開発を事例に)

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1. Background

China is experiencing a rapid expansion of urban areas. Since the 1990s, local governments have started to convert farmland around the city, leaving only rural residential areas and small parts of collective land to the remaining villages. These villages have been gradually surrounded by urban built-up areas, known as a Chengzhongcun village. Since the 2000s, a new type of urban development zone has emerged, called Ecological District. This district aims to achieve multiple goals such as ecosystem restoration, public services improvement and cultural tourism branding. One example, Xi'an Chanba Ecological District (CBE in short), was established under this background, and it is the First development zone to obtain the title of national-class ecological district (XUPB, 1994). During its construction, a large number of Chengzhongcun villages inside that district were demolished, providing more space for green amenity construction or redevelopment. Although, in term of 'reconstruction at original site' policy, Chengzhongcun villagers could move into the reconstructed community that was built by the local government after a 3-8 years transition period. However, they are not the intended group to enjoy most localized benefits brought by this ecological district.

What is more, the reconstruction process has made them even more vulnerable to social exclusion than before, having become the subject of social exclusion inside the district.

Gentrification as a concept is found worldwide in diverse geographic and socio-cultural contexts, seen as renovating deteriorated urban neighborhoods through an influx of more affluent residents (Lees et al, 2008). In this case, CBE is experiencing the gentrification process, through a green approach. As Gould and Lewis (2012) point out, green gentrification highlights the fact that new or restored environmental goods tend to be accompanied by rising property values, which in turn attracts wealthier groups. An affect of this is the creation of a greater gap with poorer neighborhoods, which results in displacement.

The gentrification occurring in CBE is not equivalent to a classical context because the reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers were not forced out of the physical displacement caused by exorbitant house prices or rent gap. Instead, they maintain their own residences. However, as recent gentrification research has demonstrated, the displacements caused by gentrification go far beyond physical displacement from a neighborhood (Winifred

Curran, 2018). Much of the experience of displacement from gentrification is non-physical, like the loss of culture (de Oliver, 2015), social networks (Shaw and Hagemans, 2015), and job opportunities (Curran, 2007).

A similar gentrification process has been taking place in CBE. The localized benefits that green amenity construction and new zone development brought are not enjoyed by every group inside CBE and even force the certain low-income group experience a set of non-physical displacements. Moreover, the houses they own do not have the “House Property Ownership Certification”. They cannot sell the house and move to other neighborhoods, hence they do not have the option to leave the neighborhood. The potential pressure caused by the lack of choice and non-physical displacement influences every aspect of reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers’ well-being and development.

2. Research objectives

This study addresses the non-physical displacement from the perspective of social exclusion, aims to explain how gentrification has happened in CBE, and how it influenced reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers. I aim to exam the results of green gentrification with a comprehensive perspective rather than a single aspect, which extend the boundary of green gentrification by providing the empirical evidence.

- a. To explore and explain the aspects of social exclusion towards reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers associated with gentrification in CBE development.
- b. To dig further into the dynamics that generate the social exclusion in terms of the process of gentrification and how it

influenced the inequitable distribution of localized benefits.

- c. To conclude whether the ecological district development policies are likely to engender gentrification.

3. Methodology

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data were collected during field study in September 2017, August 2018 and November 2018. The quantitative method refers to the questionnaire survey held in November 2018. Key informant interviews (KIIs) and participant observation were the main qualitative data collection methods. Local websites and governmental official documents are also included in the data.

4. Study site

This study focuses on the residents of Xianghuwan reconstructed community, locates in CBE. Xianghuwan reconstructed community is located in the center area of the CBE. The former Xianghuwan village was demolished in order to build Xi’an EXPO Park. Following the principle of ‘reconstruction at original site’, now the reconstructed Xianghuwan community is located near the Xi’an EXPO Park.

Fig. 1. Study site: Xianghuwan Reconstructed Community in CBE, Xi’an City, Shaanxi Province, China



Source: <http://www.sacu.org/provmap.html>

2. <http://ditu.ps123.net/china/2308.html>

3. <http://www.expo2011.cn/2010/0910/14509.html>

4. Google Map

5. Conclusion

The first research objective was discussed in chapter four; the objective was to dig further into the dynamics that generate the social exclusion in terms of the process of green gentrification in CBE. As a conclusion, the new or restored environmental goods tend to be accompanied by the attraction of wealthier groups, while creating a greater gap with poorer neighborhoods. Since the establishment of CBE, the municipal government of Xi'an City decided to prioritize increasing the number of wetland parks and waterfront parks through the implementation of new development zone plans. Near these main public parks, some large-scale residential projects were introduced by real estate developers, including some luxury ones. Besides the real estate development, the CBE also provides a perfect environment for business, attracting more and more high-income people to work and live here. On the other hand, the reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers have moved back to the new houses provided by the government, and live together with the wealthier group in CBE, but with different level of income. Moreover, from the very beginning of its establishment, the social resources were distributed unequally in CBE, such as the healthcare facilities and basic education facilities. Not only the physical environment has been gentrified, the non-physical factors inside CBE have also been gentrified: the reconstruction resulted in the loss of culture of Chengzhongcun villages, since the common places they owned were completely changed. Meanwhile,

reconstructed Chengzhongcun communities are not included in the prevalent culture buildings since their life style is totally different from the wealthier group's.

The second research objective was discussed in chapter five along with the presentation of the results. It is shown that reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers are facing five fundamental aspects of pressure of exclusion caused by reconstruction. (1) The economic aspect: The high unemployment rate and job instability of Chengzhongcun villagers have resulted in the inability to sustain a livelihood especially in a high-level consumption district. (2) The public service and local governance aspect: There is a big gap of medical service between Chengzhongcun village's clinic and the newly-built community clinic, from the doctors' professionalism to the equipment. Moreover, due to the insufficient functions of related government institutions, until now, the Xianghuwan Villagers' Committee has still not transitioned into the Xianghuwan Community Committee and the election of the committee has not been held neither. The reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers are excluded from the institution system and have lost their access to participation. (3) The social network aspect: The old social relations with neighbors and acquaintances were broken down after reconstruction. In addition, the public places of reconstructed community are designed based on urban communication patterns, the reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers can no longer build their new social relations through their familiar way with the completely changed surrounding layouts. (4) The cultural aspect: After reconstruction, the reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers' household registration type changed from agricultural Hukou to non-agricultural Hukou,

and they have legally become urban residents, but socially many of them have failed to build the urban resident identity; this is because the dominant culture in CBE refers to a modern, elegant and environment-friendly culture, which is totally different from the farming culture or the Chengzhongcun culture. (5) The spatial aspect: Chengzhongcun villages had already experienced the spatial aspect once since the Chengzhongcun villages were formed at the very beginning. They were surrounded by urban constructions and separated from formal urban areas. After reconstruction, the appearance of the reconstructed communities became similar with other neighborhoods in CBE. However, from the house quality, to the way the reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers are treated, the reconstructed Chengzhongcun community is still regarded differently by other residents of CBE. Now they are excluded spatially twice due to this gentrification process.

In conclusion, in agreement with recent research (de Oliver, 2016; Langegger, 2016; Shaw and Hagemans, 2015; Curran, 2007), gentrification would not only cause the physical displacement of the old neighborhood, but also produce non-physical displacement. Besides, this study revealed the non-physical displacement of an old neighborhood that has not yet been influenced by physical displacement due to the 'reconstruction at original site' policy of the local government. The lack of the option to leave and the on-going green gentrification process together result in the non-physical displacement of the reconstructed Chengzhongcun community, expressed as the social exclusion that reconstructed Chengzhongcun villagers are facing currently.

This study examined the results of green gentrification with a comprehensive perspective, which extend the boundary of green gentrification by providing empirical evidence. That is, gentrification does not necessarily lead to physical displacement of the old neighborhood inhabitants, especially when the gentrification process relates to local policies. However, non-physical displacement also negatively influences the old or inferior neighborhoods, and it is more likely to render its residents socially excluded from the gentrified area.

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