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How stubborn ‘nail houses’ take a stand against China’s rapid urbanisation

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Hyun Bang Shin

A single house balancing precariously in the middle of a construction site may seem like a doomed and fragile structure. But in China, these residences have become a potent symbol of resistance. Known as “dingzihu” in Chinese – which can be translated as “nail house” or “nail household” – buildings like this represent those who, like stubborn nails, defy state-ordered evictions and demolitions by refusing to vacate their properties.

Nail houses came to global attention in [spectacular images](#) published in the lead up to the 2008 Olympic games in Beijing. But the practice began earlier, when homeowners in China were granted inviolable rights to their privately-owned property following two important legal changes in [2004](#) and [2007](#).

Nail houses have come to possess a special meaning in a country that perceives urbanisation as a vital political, economic and ideological project. Local economies depend heavily on investment in infrastructure and buildings, and growing middle class consumption is [seen as the next engine](#) for China’s economic development. What’s more, urban citizens are considered to be more civilised, or have a higher level of “suzhi” (cultural attainment), and [have better access](#) to public services such as education, health care and housing.



Going up. [Ioan Sameli/Flickr](#), CC BY-SA

But building and expanding cities requires big tracts of vacant land for large-scale developments. This results in the demolition of existing homes, neighbourhoods and villages, which don’t fit the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) vision of an urban future.

Courts and compensation

Compensation for families whose homes are on the brink of demolition is always a major source of dispute. Offers are based on current valuations of properties, which is likely to be far lower than any of the residences which [replace them](#). This means that displacement is often inevitable, leading to broken communities and

psychological damage from stress and violence and compelling families to demand financial redress.

Petitions by residents face limited success in court. The heavy presence of the CPC in every sphere of social and economic life makes it extremely challenging for residents to make successful claims against the state. Court decisions are rarely made against governments, especially in areas where aspiring local governments have removed regulatory and physical barriers to development.

So instead, nail households endure power cuts, limited services and threats of forced eviction and demolition, in order to gain as much compensation from the government or developers as possible, to ensure their own survival in an increasingly unequal society. Resisting families are often stigmatised as “selfish” for trying to protect their own interests, at the expense of a greater good for their neighbours and the wider public.

Government authorities also feed this perception with posters, like this one from Guangzhou, which reads: “To protect the interest of homeowners, never surrender to nail houses.”



Rebel against the rebels! Hyun Bang Shin, Author provided

Yet this kind of impasse is not inevitable. Nail households might not go to such extreme measures if they were consulted and provided with informed choices to upgrade their homes and neighbourhoods, without demolition. Families do not become nail households overnight. Nor is a nail house the outcome of some intrinsic “selfishness” on the part of the protesters.

Rather, families often endure long-term harassment and violence, and succumb to despair when they are unable to resolve disputes. Many residents start out by conducting persistent negotiations with local governments or developers, becoming “nail house embryos”. Over time, feelings harden and residents become more determined, until they are willing to take extreme actions to keep their homes.

Under pressure

Much of this can be put down to the process. When a neighbourhood is slated for redevelopment, residents face extreme pressure to move: the local government in charge would organise various bureaus – including public security, planning and propaganda offices – to work closely with neighbourhood leaders, to enforce the timely

eviction of local residents. Various financial incentives, as well as direct threats and peer pressure, are designed to speed up the process of eviction.



A nail household in Tianjin, north-east China. Hyun Bang Shin, Author provided

In this context, nail houses symbolise the inequality and unfairness prevalent in contemporary China. Yet a greater awareness of property rights among urban citizens may empower them so that they are no longer subject to whims of the authoritarian state and single-minded for-profit businesses. Enhanced rights consciousness would also enable them to demand for greater participation in urban planning processes that often exclude the voices of citizens.

If governments, developers and other Chinese citizens can acknowledge the plight of nail households, rather than rejecting and alienating them, it could lead to a fairer system for all. Then, no longer will nail houses stand as towering tombstones for vanished communities.