

# Chapter 7

## China's New Suburban Reality: An Attempt to Systematically Define the Chinese Suburb



**Pengfei Li**

**Abstract** The Chinese urban landscape has changed remarkably in the last two decades. Inner city redevelopment or renovation projects have resulted in massive demolition and displacement in many cities, while large-scale residential development projects in suburban areas have taken over land formerly utilized exclusively for farming or industry. These suburban projects have led to the loss of farmland, the relocation of former villagers, and massive housing consumption by middle-class Chinese. The two parallel processes of urban redevelopment and suburban development have totally transformed China's urban landscape. Two main types of urban fringe have been produced or shaped in the last two decades: (i) the "rural–urban conjunction area," "rural–urban fringe zone," or "chengxiang jiehebu," and (ii) the "suburb." Important parts of China's new urban reality, these two types of suburb provide two radically different ways of life. This chapter focuses on these two urban fringe areas, analyzes how China's new suburban reality has been produced and shaped, discusses how local people "speak" about the urban fringe, and depicts how suburbanites actually live in the newly built environment. Only by situating China's new suburban reality in historical context can we understand the radical difference between suburbia in China and that in the West. China's suburbia is an integrated part of China's urban system, which does not (and probably will never) support an independent suburban way of life.

**Keywords** China · Suburb · Suburbanization · Suburban way of life  
Regionalism · Rural–urban fringe zone

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P. Li (✉)

Department of Urban Studies, Queens College, City University of New York, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Queens, NY 11367-1597, USA

e-mail: pengfei.li@qc.cuny.edu

## 7.1 Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a remarkable change in the Chinese urban landscape. Inner city redevelopment or renovation projects in many cities have resulted in massive demolition and displacement (Fang 2000; Zhang 2006, 2010). At the same time, large-scale residential development projects in suburban areas previously devoted to farming or industry (with residential complexes inside factories) have led to the loss of farmland, the relocation of villagers, and massive housing consumption by middle-class Chinese (Fang 2000; Feng et al. 2008). The two parallel processes of urban redevelopment and suburban development are closely connected. On the one hand, most of the displaced people resulting from city redevelopment projects have been accommodated by suburban development projects (Zhou and Ma 2000; Zhang and Fang 2004). On the other hand, suburban development projects, especially commercial housing projects, enable well-off migrant workers and hard-working university graduates (with family support) to buy a home and settle down in a city where they may not yet have a household registration (or *hukou*). These new housing developments are also home to local middle-class people (Feng et al. 2008; Fleischer 2010).

Researchers have studied China's urban redevelopment projects (Fang 2000; Zhang and Fang 2004; Zhang 2006), the consequent displacement/relocation processes (Wu 2004; Fang 2006; He and Wu 2007; Li and Song 2009), and suburban development projects (Zhou and Ma 2000; Feng et al. 2008; Wu 2010). These scholars are fully aware that most displaced people have been dispersed into the suburbs (Zhang and Fang 2004; Fang 2006; Zhang 2006; He and Wu 2007; Feng et al. 2008; Li and Song 2009) and some have pointed out the recent increase in voluntary moves to the suburbs (Feng et al. 2008; Zhou and Logan 2008; Wu 2010). Zhang (2010) even claims that some well-designed suburban gated communities have become the "paradise" of well-off Chinese, who are mainly interested in their own safety and personal lives. Most research, however, has focused on the origin and socioeconomic process of China's suburbanization, instead of how suburbanites actually "speak" about, perceive, and live in the suburbs. Moreover, previous studies fail to explicitly point out how China's suburbia radically differs from suburbia in the West.

This chapter attempts to provide a systematic definition of the Chinese suburb. It emphasizes how people perceive the suburban reality, depicts their everyday suburban life, and discusses how Chinese suburbs were produced in the first place. China's suburbanization differs radically from the process in the West, especially in the United States. Not only has the state consistently played a leading role in suburban development, but China's suburbs also lack the independence—both economically and politically—that most suburbs enjoy in the West. As a result, suburbanism is not (and probably will never be) a way of life in China, where suburbia does not offer a way of life independent from the city.

The chapter is divided into four main parts. Section 7.2 offers a preliminary definition of the Chinese suburb and clarifies two types of Chinese suburb: the suburb itself and the rural–urban fringe zone. Section 7.3 discusses the suburban

developments and how these two types of suburb have been produced by first Socialist and then contemporary China, situating these two periods into the historical Chinese metropolitan pattern. Section 7.4 details people's perceptions of China's suburbs and their suburban everyday life, based on fieldwork in Beijing and other major Chinese cities. The chapter concludes with Sect. 7.5, which emphasizes the historical status of China's suburbs and points out how contemporary Chinese suburbanites' perceptions of their living environment and China's new suburban reality are deeply related in its historical regionalism. This chapter is mainly analytical, utilizing historical, statistical, and ethnographic data. It also discusses residents' daily lives and their views of their urban fringe. All data about human subjects were collected and analyzed in accordance with guidelines from the Graduate Center, City University of New York and agreement from my interviewees,<sup>1</sup> although space limitations preclude a methodological discussion about data collection and data analysis.

## 7.2 Two Types of Chinese Suburbs

At the beginning of housing reform in the late 1980s, China's newly built suburban communities were intended only for the relocated urban poor (Zhou and Ma 2000). Researchers call this early suburbanization "government-led passive suburbanization" (Feng et al. 2008; Zhou and Logan 2008). Commodity housing built in major Chinese cities' suburban areas from the mid-1990s has targeted middle- and upper-class buyers, who are mostly successful businesspeople, well-off migrant workers, and hardworking university graduates without a local household registration or *hukou* in those major cities. Feng et al. (2008) and Zhou and Logan (2008) call this new trend "market-oriented active suburbanization."

It is this type of suburb to which most urban scholars outside China pay attention. This suburb, the product of China's process of suburbanization, can be defined as *the place or district outside a city center which is mainly residential and accommodates a large number of previous urban residents and well-off migrants who work in that city and newly own a suburban home in that city*. It is formal, and it is large scale.

However, this definition needs to be clarified in two ways. First, "suburb" here may refer to a large suburban district or all suburban districts within a huge Chinese metropolis or municipality (Zhou and Ma 2000). For example, a suburb in Beijing can be any place located outside Beijing's city center but within Beijing's municipality territory. A municipality in China's standardized and hierarchical geopolitical system can be a huge area. Beijing has an area of 16,800 km<sup>2</sup> (6486.5 square miles), hosting 21.2 million people (Beijing Statistics Bureau 2013). A person who lives in suburban Beijing may live anywhere outside Beijing's city center but within the 16,800 km<sup>2</sup> municipality. I discuss China's metropolitan structure and its regionalism in more detail in the following sections.

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<sup>1</sup>Because this paper has to deal with translating traditional Chinese words into modern terms and translating Chinese into English, the author uses pinyin to translate terms that do not have direct modern Chinese and English correspondence.

The second meaning of this formal type of suburb is a specific suburban community. So the same person saying that they live in suburban Beijing may be referring to a particular suburban gated community instead of a huge suburban district. The suburb, to them, is their own suburban community. Thus, *the suburb can also be one of the specific gated communities outside a city center which is purely residential and accommodates a large number of previous urban residents and well-off migrants who work in that city and newly own a suburban home in that city.*

When urban scholars (Zhou and Ma 2000; Zhang 2006, 2010; Feng et al. 2008; Wu 2010) discuss China's suburbs, they can be referring to either one of these two dramatically different realities: (i) a huge district or entire suburban area, or (ii) a particular suburban community. Both of these two interpretations require further clarification.

Rather than focusing on the formal suburban setting, urban scholars (Zhou and Gao 2001; Fu and Chen 2010) within China who publish mainly in Chinese are more interested in informal suburban settings. It is clearly nonurban. Neither is it rural. Rather, these areas are called "rural–urban fringe zones." *The rural-urban fringe zone, out of the process of China's urbanization, is a mixed-use area which is physically adjacent to a city center and accommodates a large number of local nonurban residents and low-income migrant workers who rent the locals' usually informal houses and work either in the area or in other parts of the city.* The housing in the rural–urban fringe zone is the least formal of all housing sectors in China. It is even more chaotic and informal than rural residents' self-constructed houses. Various scholars (Zhang 2001; He 2013) have analyzed this special Chinese living environment under the theme "urban village." Urban villages in China, however, are clearly not urban. They are located in urban fringes and historically they were the genuine suburbs, as suburban markets or towns outside the walled cities. In contemporary Chinese municipalities, the political and economic status of these areas has become more vague. The urban villages analyzed by He (2013) have well-constructed (low-quality) high-rise apartments managed and owned by local nonurban residents who were peasants or fishers. Beijing's urban villages, from Zhang's (2001) study, are strongly regulated by the state. Local nonresidents cannot build high-rise apartments to make more rental income. Instead, they secretly build additional housing units in their yards or adjacent to their legal houses.

These types of informal setting have no formal name. Scholars call them the "rural–urban fringe" or "urban village," whereas residents label them by location (south fourth ring road, west fourth ring road, etc.), housing pattern (bungalow area), or function (wholesale area). Clearly, in this informal setting, residents' perceptions of their living environment is not as fixed as scholars' categorization.

### 7.3 The Production of China's Suburbs

The two types of Chinese suburb discussed above have been produced, shaped, and reshaped by rapid urban and suburban development in the last 20 years. This section

provides an account of China's historical metropolitan pattern and the pre-reform socialist urban reality, and then discusses these more recent developments.

### ***7.3.1 The Metropolitan Patterns in Feudal and Imperial China***

Suburban settlements have existed in China for at least 2500 years. In ancient China, as early as the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC), “suburb” (*jiao*) as a concept of place appeared in several classical books such as *The Book of Change*, *The Book of Rites*, and *The Classic Book of Poetry*. In *The Book of Rites* and its various commentaries (Liji Wangzhi, n.d.), the suburb was officially defined as “the place within a 100 *li* [equal to 25.8 miles] radius of the city.”

In the Zhou Dynasty, the king (or the prince, duke, etc., assigned by the king), his ruling noblemen, and some of his tribe members lived in the city, while slaves lived in the suburb that produced food and other items for the city. Since the Zhou Dynasty was a slave society, the king's tribe members had a higher status than the suppressed tribe members. Thus, *The Rites of Zhou* further distinguished the suburb from the wild place, *ye*. Some of the king's tribe members lived in the suburb. The suppressed tribes, in contrast, all lived in the wild *ye*, except for slaves who worked in the suburb. As well-established terms, “suburb,” “west suburb,” “east suburb,” “four suburbs” were frequently used to describe the locales of events in books of the Zhou Dynasty.

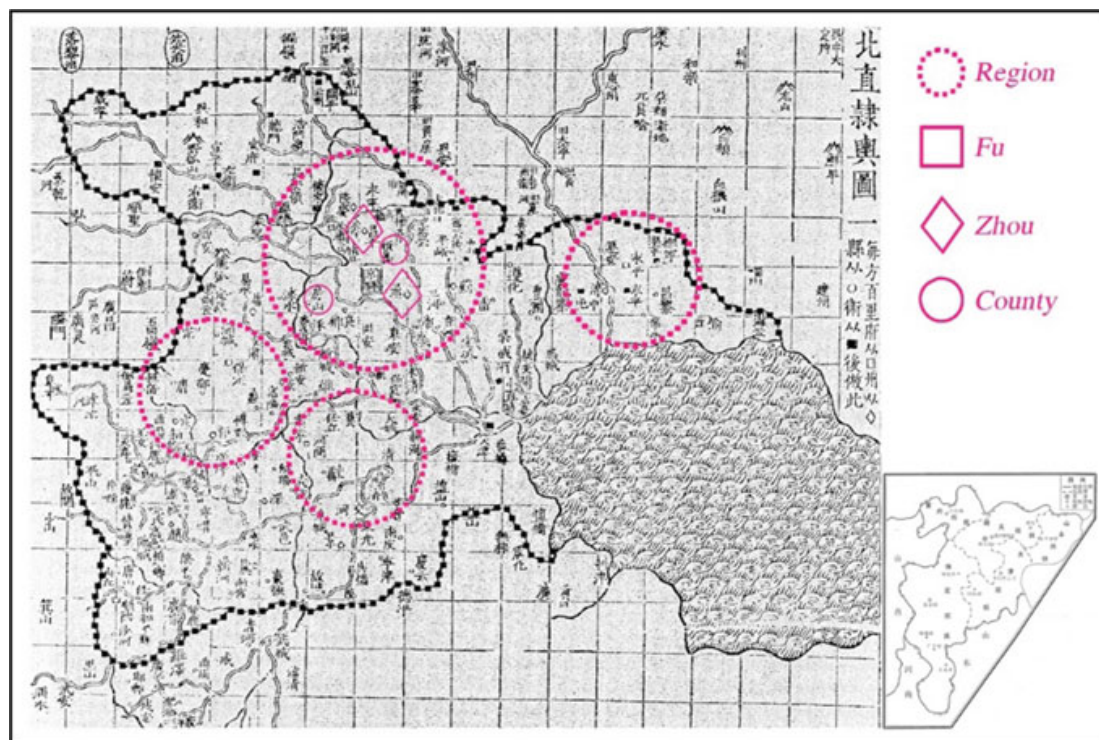
In later dynasties, China's walled cities became larger and multifunctional, especially in the capital cities and regional centers. Tang's (618–907 AD) Chang'an and Yangzhou, for instance, were large walled cities that had different districts for various handcrafted industries and commercial activities, all inside the city wall. The suburbs, then, became less important because many production activities, such as alcohol making and weaving that used to take place in the suburbs, had been moved inside the city. The sole production outside the city in Imperial China was farming (and family-scale weaving). This dual system of city and countryside has persisted until now. The suburb was purely a geographic concept which did not have any sociopolitical functions, except being the seat of the emperor's summer palace and the place of large religious sites such as Buddhist and Taoist temples. These functions in the suburb were ad hoc because whatever took place in the suburb was surrounded by agricultural activities. Even monks and Taoist priests engaged in farm work outside their temples.

The key characteristic of China's historical metropolitan pattern was that China had maintained the tradition of centralism or a centralized regime. For the most part in its imperial history, there were three levels of local government—the provincial government (*xingsheng*, *dao*, or *xunfu*), the prefecture government (the prefectural seat, called *zhifu*, featuring governors of prefectures), and the county government (the governor of a county was officially called *zhixian*). Figure 7.1 shows a map

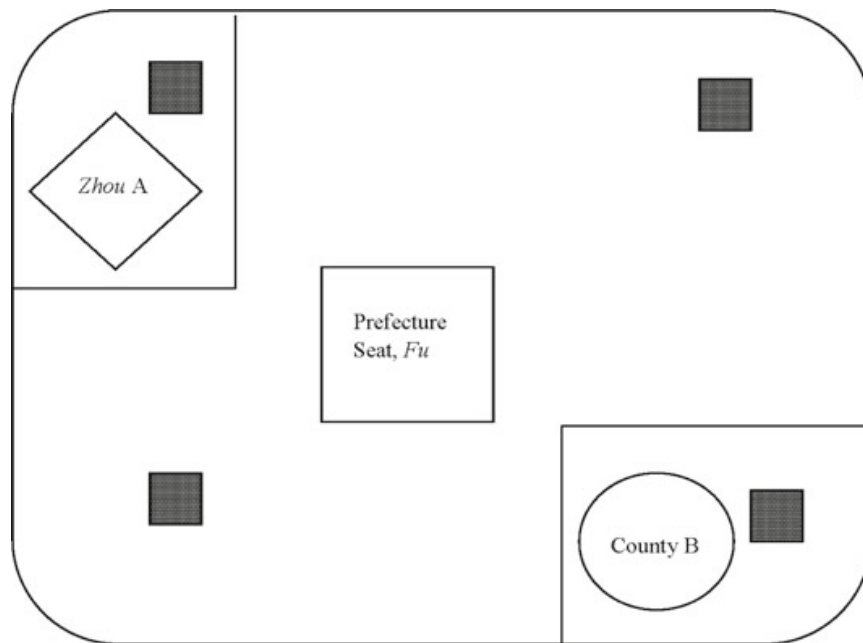
drawn in the Ming Dynasty (1541). It was part of *Beizhili* (one of the two provinces that were directly administered by Beijing). This part of *Beizhili* contained four prefectures (approximately the four red dots marked by the author): Beijing (*Shuntian fu*), Yongping, Baoding, and Hejian. Each of these four *fu* had their own prefecture seat (marked by a square □), subordinate *zhou* (marked by a diamond ◇), and subordinate counties (marked by a circle ○). Taking Beijing as an example, Changping and Tong, the so-called suburban districts of contemporary Beijing, were not suburbs at all, historically speaking. They were walled cities themselves, as *zhou* (◇), although they were politically subordinate to Beijing *Shuntian fu* (□) (Guo and Jin 2007).

Three implications can be drawn from this historical map. First, China's cities were historically governed as regions. A *fu* (□) was a large political territory which normally took charge of several *zhou* (◇) and counties; governments of *zhou* and county were at the same level, except if a large *zhou* (◇) was directly governed by the province. Second, although the cities (prefecture seats, *zhou*, and counties) in ancient China were compact, as walled clusters, they administered the vast agriculture land surrounding them by collecting taxes from the countryside and conscripting peasants for national events such as wars and large infrastructure projects.

Third, suburbs had little political power. Figure 7.2 depicts the pattern of the prefecture (municipality) in Imperial China before 1949. The prefecture seat, officially called *zhifu*, was the largest walled city in the whole region. There were several smaller cities in the prefecture (A and B in Fig. 7.1), whose governors were called *zhizhou* or *zhixian*. In order to match this figure with the historical map, a square



**Fig. 7.1** A map of Beizhili, the north province, in the Ming Dynasty, 1541. *Source* Adapted and edited from Guo and Jin (2007)



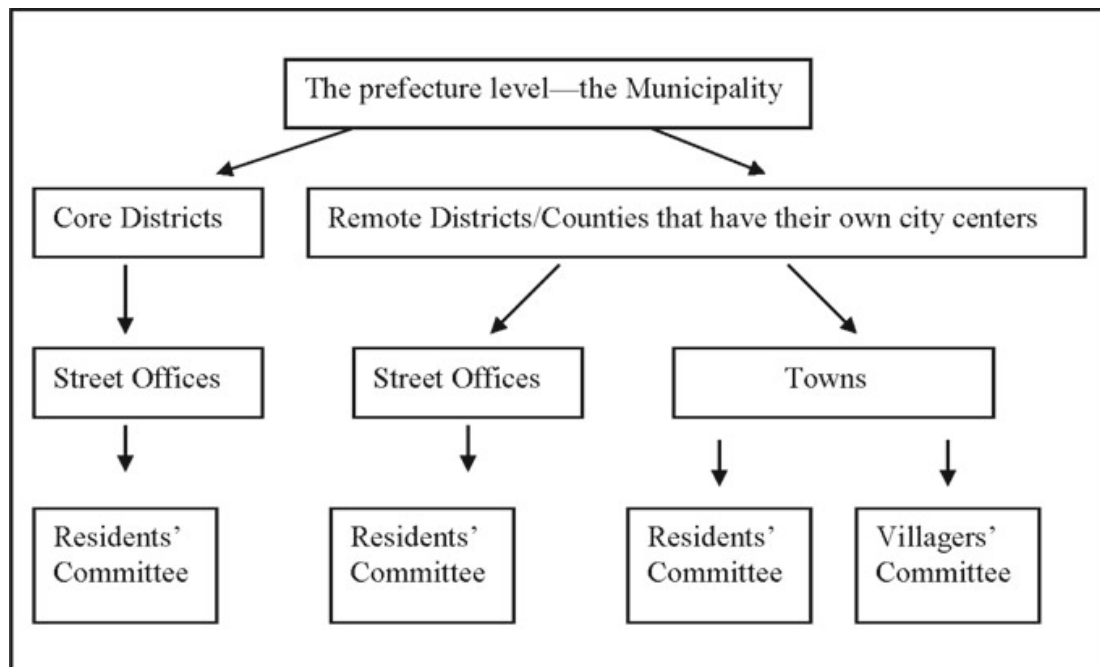
**Fig. 7.2** The prefecture pattern in Imperial China. *Source* Redrawn by the author based on Fig. 7.1

represents *fu* (□), a diamond refers to *zhou* (◇), a circle stands for county (○), while dark squares (■) represent small towns or suburban market towns outside the walled city (*fu*, *zhou*, or county). The blank areas represent the agricultural land or other natural lots that were not arable. Both prefecture and county had their own farmland surrounding their urban centers. *Zhifu*, as the highest official in the region (the highest governor and the highest judge), took charge of the entire region.

### 7.3.2 *Suburban Reality in Socialist China*

After 1949, Socialist China kept the tradition of centralism, buoyed on by nationalist enthusiasm and new technologies that facilitated controlling a vast region. China's geopolitical landscape became even more hierarchical—the central government, the provincial government, the prefecture government (relabelled the municipality), the county government, the town government, and the village committee, all forming an integrated, standardized system. This six-level structure was initiated in the early 1950s but not finalized until after the 1980s (Hsing 2010). Figure 7.3 illustrates the governmental structure from the prefecture level (the municipality) to its subordinate units. Because the geopolitical boundary of the local government was assigned and legitimized by the central government on the basis of historical legacies, the prefectures (□)—now municipalities—retained their imperial pattern geopolitically. Although the prefecture seat in a region might switch from one city to another, the prefecture level was well preserved as the real local power in Socialist China.

The municipal government supervises the core districts, the remote districts, and the counties. Since a district is large (approximately 50–500 km<sup>2</sup>/20–200 square



**Fig. 7.3** The governmental structure of the municipality in Socialist China and after. *Source* Adapted from Hsing (2010)

miles), only the very large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, etc., have core districts that are completely urbanized. The district/county is often large enough to contain agricultural land and an agricultural population. Towns and street offices are governments at the same level supervised by the district government. Towns normally have rural farmlands while street offices are purely urban.

Where did suburban development occur in Mao's China? China's formal geopolitical maps portrayed in Figs. 7.1 and 7.2 contained no suburban governmental entities. However, suburban development did take place in city peripheries, outside either a large prefecture seat or a county proper. Many factories were constructed outside the former city proper. Residential compounds were also built; before the Economic Reform, they were located inside a factory or work-unit, as the essential part of the Socialist work-unit culture. This type of suburban development should be categorized as incremental urban expansion instead of "suburbanization." Since both the prefecture seats and the small counties controlled their surrounding agricultural or other natural areas, the newly developed suburban environments were integrated into the city and the whole region.

### ***7.3.3 Metropolitan Reality in Contemporary China***

Suburban development has escalated sharply since the late 1980s. Many commodity condominiums have been constructed in the suburbs—outside the old city proper but within the city district in most Chinese cities. However, no district or county in



most Chinese municipalities has been completely urbanized (i.e., where all farming lands are urbanized and all peasants with agricultural *hukou* are transformed into urban residents), let alone the entire region or municipality. First, the district or county is very large, approximately 50–500 km<sup>2</sup> (20–200 square miles). The municipalities are even larger, approximately 2000–20,000 km<sup>2</sup> (770–7700 square miles). The average municipality area for Hubei's 13 prefectural cities/municipalities, for instance, is 13,515 km<sup>2</sup> (5218.2 square miles). A municipality is a huge integrated region under a powerful municipal government. Second, the agricultural population in the district and the municipality still outnumbers its urban population, except in some megacities like Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, etc. (NBSC 2011). Although the urban population in China already exceeds the rural population, the rural population within the municipality will not be completely transformed into urban dwellers even in Beijing and Shanghai.

Keeping the historical analysis in mind, the question “What is the Chinese suburb?” can be reexamined. Zhou and Ma (2000) define the Chinese suburb as corresponding to the political boundary—inner suburbs are inner suburban districts—while outer suburbs are outer suburban districts. Feng et al. (2008) also equate suburbs to district-level territories. However, after situating the Chinese suburb in its historical pattern (Fig. 7.2) and contemporary political structure (Fig. 7.3), it is clear that suburbs cannot be equated to district-level geopolitical territories. In other words, the first meaning of suburb offered in Sect. 7.2 is inaccurate in contemporary China. It only makes sense geographically, or directionally, because it equates suburb to any place and/or district outside the city center. From the functional perspective, it is too broad. It also refers to places/districts which are not suburbs at all.

City districts, inner suburban districts, and outer suburban districts/counties are political territories at the same level supervised by the municipal government located in the city core. Historically, the prefecture had only one *zhifu*, who directly took charge of the prefecture seat and indirectly supervised the remote counties. In contemporary China, a district-level government that directly takes charges of the former prefecture seat is separate from the municipal government. For most municipalities in China (except megacities having a population of more than 8 million), there is only one core district which is the seat of the municipality, a result of the tradition of centralism. The core is big enough to encompass its suburban development. The suburbs developed on the core district's agricultural land are located outside the city proper but within the core district's political territory. They have not penetrated, and probably will not invade, into the remote counties. Remote counties, on the other hand, are not suburbs of the core district. They have their own history and economic base (A and B in Fig. 7.2), and they even have their own suburban communities (dark squares in Fig. 7.2). In this regard, Fig. 7.2, which represents China's historical metropolitan pattern, perfectly portrays the metropolitan pattern of most contemporary Chinese municipalities. All 12 municipalities in Hubei, a typical provincial in central and east China, can be analyzed by Fig. 7.2 except the province capital, Wuhan (it has seven core districts and six remote districts/counties accommodating 10 million people). In this sense, China's suburb is a subdistrict concept. In most municipalities, except megacities, talking about the municipality

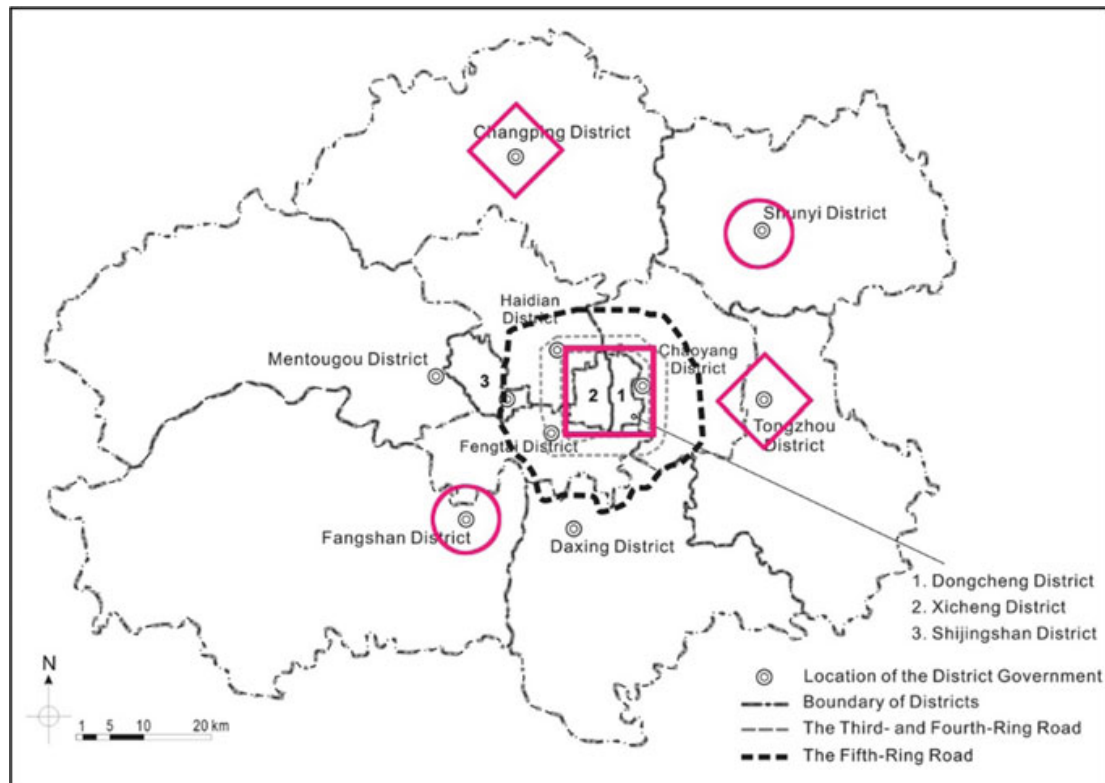
geographically is too large in scale. We have to lower the scale to the district/county level. Only at this scale can we achieve an appropriate definition of the Chinese suburb. *The suburb*, in most contemporary Chinese cities except megacities, is *the subdistrict-level neighborhood outside a city/district/county center which is mainly residential and accommodates a large number of previous urban residents and well-off migrants who work in that city/district/county and newly own a suburban home in that city/district/county*. In most non-megacity Chinese cities, there are more locals than migrant workers. Furthermore, most migrant workers are from the villages within that district/county.

### 7.3.4 *Metropolitan Reality in Contemporary China's Megacities*

As mentioned directly above, *the suburb in China*, generally, can be defined as *a place that is outside the city/district/county center but is well integrated into and governed by the city/district/county*. It can be an area, a neighborhood, or a gated community. The pattern established so far, however, does not fit the megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Wuhan, and so on.

For big municipalities, the metropolitan pattern is more complex. For example, Beijing has two core districts, four inner suburban districts, and ten remote districts/counties in 16,800 km<sup>2</sup> (6486.5 square miles), hosting 21.2 million people (Beijing Statistics Bureau 2013). Traditionally, Beijing's metropolitan pattern was not unlike other Chinese cities. The two core districts formed the old city while the remote counties were far from the city. The incremental development after 1949, however, connected the core districts with their four nearby districts. The so-called market-led suburbanization further bypasses the four adjacent districts and moves to the remote districts/counties. As shown in Fig. 7.4, Beijing comprises two inner city districts (1 and 2) and four inner suburban districts, with six outer suburban districts surrounding the inner suburban districts. The two diamonds represent two districts that were *zhou* in the Ming Dynasty. The two circles refer to two counties that were walled cities at least from the Ming Dynasty.

For Beijing, the so-called inner suburban districts are not “suburbs,” neither historically nor currently. Historically, they were the countryside of the capital city. For instance, in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 AD), the northwestern part had some summer palaces and parks for the emperor. After 60 years of continuous development since 1949, the inner suburban districts are now high-density areas, characterized by mixed uses—commercial areas, office towers, residential middle—and high-rise buildings, and light or heavy industrial factories, which are all intertwined. Although large inner suburban districts like Haidian and Chaoyang still have peripheral farmlands and green belts far away from the city center, the areas adjacent to the core districts have been completely urbanized. Thus, the difference between the inner city (the core districts) and the inner suburbs makes sense only in a geopolitical map.



**Fig. 7.4** The spatial layout of the Municipality of Beijing excluding its four northern suburban districts/counties. *Source* Adapted and edited from Beijing Statistics Bureau (2013)

No one who walks or drives in Beijing from the core districts to Haidian or Chaoyang can be aware that they are passing from the city to “the suburb.” They are still in the city! The inner suburban districts in Beijing (similar to Jersey City in New York City metropolitan region) are too urban and too mixed-use to be suburbs.

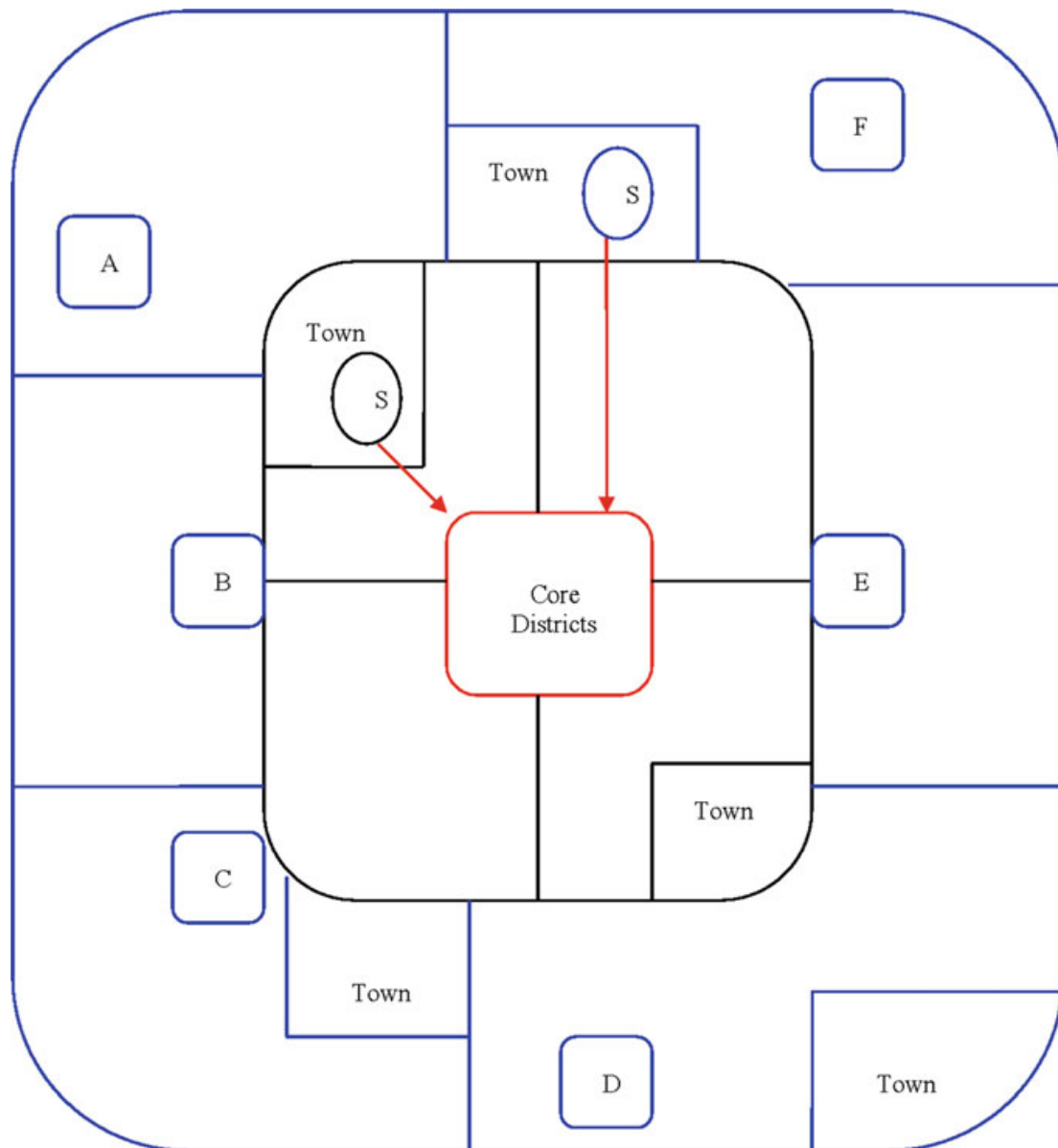
Are the so-called outer suburban districts suburbs? Historically, they were walled cities that had their own suburbs and countryside. In Fig. 7.1, Changping and Tongzhou were two *zhou* (◇), while Fangshan and Shunyi were two counties (○). In contemporary Beijing, the outer suburban districts still have their independent urban centers, although researchers of China’s “suburbanization” often underestimate this fact. The outer suburban districts have lower densities than the city center and the inner suburban districts. If a person drives from Haidian to an outer suburban district Changping, they can easily perceive the difference because the periphery of Haidian and Changping is farm and forest land. But they will be puzzled again as soon as they enter another city, a smaller city with a high-density district center which has its own history and crowded streets. In this regard, an outer suburban district in Beijing as a political and geographic territory contains many different land uses—the district/county core, its own small towns, and rural lands. It is another city that has its own suburbs instead of the core district’s suburb.

The complex realities of the district-level governments and the existence of the powerful municipal government justify the Beijing Municipal Commission of Urban Planning’s (BMCUP) avoidance of the term “suburb.” The BMCUP (2005) uses

fancier terms to define Beijing's districts: Core Districts of Capital Function (equal to Zhou and Ma's Core), Urban Function Extended Districts (equal to Zhou and Ma's inner suburbs), New Districts of Urban Development, and Ecological Preservation Development Districts (equal to Zhou and Ma's outer suburbs). Suburbs have no places in this hierarchical system. Instead, they are described as new cities, new satellite cities, and new towns. The rationale of BMCUP's newest master plan (2005) is to overcome the conflicts between the city core and other areas while providing the municipal government with the greatest power to integrate the whole region.

Although the idea and plan to maintain an integrated region via current district division is well propagated and pursued, the reality does not fit the plan very well. The "suburbs" in China's megacities have indeed been produced in the last 20 years. They are no longer informal communities or markets (dark squares in Fig. 7.2). They have become huge and now penetrate into the remote counties. The established districts cannot appropriately host the newly constructed suburban communities, although they attempt to incorporate these suburbs into the current political structure. Many huge suburban communities built in Beijing's remote counties (Changping, Shunyi, Daxing, etc.) or joint areas between an extended district and a remote district/county (Changping and Haidian, Changping and Chaoyang, etc.) are not the suburbs of any specific districts. They are the suburbs of the core districts or the extended districts, if we use BMCUP's terms, or, from the residents' perspective, they are the suburbs of Beijing. Tiantongyuan, the largest residential community politically governed by a township in Changping, accommodates more people than the traditional Changping County proper. Another residential community with the same size is under construction in Changping. And more giant gated communities are under construction in Fangshan, Daxing, and Tongzhou. Few residents in these suburban communities work in the local districts, and the majority have to commute to the city center or extended urban districts for work and entertainment. Thus, the newly built suburban communities are more Beijing's suburbs than the local counties or the towns' residential areas. *The suburb in China's megacities*, therefore, can be defined as *the super-big community that is built outside of the core district or in the remote county but accommodates the population for the entire municipality instead of the district or county in which it is located*. In China's megacities, suburbanites are mostly successful businesspeople, well-off migrant workers, and hardworking university graduates without a local household registration (or *hukou*) in those major cities. The demographic composition in megacities' suburbs is dramatically different from that in smaller Chinese cities. The metropolitan pattern of China's megacities is shown in Fig. 7.5.

The three concentric rings in Fig. 7.5 have several local/district governments at the same level. The first ring captures the city districts (core districts). The second ring includes four inner suburban districts with towns on their peripheries. The third ring includes six outer suburban districts which have their own district core (A–F) in the center and towns on their peripheries. Gated communities (S) in these towns are more like Beijing's suburbs than local residential areas.



**Fig. 7.5** The metropolitan pattern of China's megacities/mega-municipalities. *Source* Extrapolated from Fig. 7.4

## 7.4 Residents' Perceptions of China's Suburbs and Their Suburban Everyday Life

The last section discussed the geographical and topological production of China's suburbs. But the discussion focused on one type of suburb—the more formal one. What about rural–urban fringe zone? How has it been produced during China's rapid urbanization and suburbanization processes? The answer is a little surprising. Rural–urban fringe zones have not been produced; rather, they grow because they lack formal development. They become significant because they have been left alone or left behind. When major suburban development projects and urban

redevelopment projects transform China's urban and suburban landscape, rural–urban fringe zones become the gray areas. Thus, the process creates a strange reality (Fu and Chen 2010).

Consequently, people who live in China's contemporary urban fringe face two sets of realities. For suburbanites who live in formal and “high-end” suburban gated communities, their place identity is unambiguous. They state that they live in “a suburb” or “a suburban community” without conceptual confusion and hesitation. However, for suburbanites who were forced to move into their current suburban community, they conceptually agree that their neighborhood is in “a suburb” but they personally do not want to accept the fact that they are actually living in a suburb. For residents in rural–urban fringe zones, there are confusions and hesitations both conceptually and personally.

#### ***7.4.1 How Suburbanites in Formal Suburban Gated Communities Perceive Their Living Environment***

As mentioned earlier, two major groups of people live in China's formal suburbs—the previous city residents who have strong place attachment to the “city,” and well-off homeowners who were born in other parts of China or rural parts of that city. This distinction between local and nonlocal still matters in contemporary China (Chan 1996; He 2013). At least in megacities, a household registration (*hukou*) is still precious and offers many benefits—educational, social, and even psychological goods.

Former city locals who were forced to move to suburbs because of city redevelopment projects did not move to the suburb of their own free will. Most interviewees for this study who were forced to move to Beijing's suburbs are uneasy that “they are currently living in a suburb.” Conceptually, they all agree that they live in a suburb, in a suburban community in either North Beijing or South Beijing. Here, “suburb” does not refer to an entire remote district/county in the Municipality of Beijing. It is a suburban community or a suburban neighborhood outside Beijing's core districts, as defined in Sect. 7.3.4. The previous city locals who were interviewed were not willing to accept that they were suburbanites. Although they no longer have a residence in the city center, many of them still keep their *hukou* in the city, just to remind themselves psychologically and symbolically that they are still real Beijingers.

When I asked a well-dressed woman in her middle 50s how she thinks of her current living environment, her immediate reply was very dramatic:

Ai-you (Oh-ah). What a thing! What do you want to know? I don't have any good feelings about this place. I was cheated to move here. Now I can't do anything to change that.

This woman was not exaggerating her personal perception about a suburban community in South Beijing. Other former city residents showed similar uneasiness about how their current living environment influences them on a daily basis. However, they

are unable to move back to the city center, because they cannot afford a housing unit in the city center once they have been relocated to a suburban housing unit.

Some former urban residents have more than one housing unit, and they have no problem accepting their suburban home conceptually and personally. This group of former urban residents often live in more expensive suburban communities, alongside well-off suburban homeowners who were born in other parts of China. They share a local identity with the group just discussed, but their attitude toward the suburban environment is much more positive. They enjoy the green space inside their suburban community, the convenient amenities around it, the nice restaurants outside the community, and the regional supermarkets. They all have cars to drive back to the city whenever they wish. Based on all these amenities, the residents have nothing to complain about regarding the physical environment.

Another group who live in China's formal suburbs is the most active group. They are eager to express their identity as suburban property owners and willing to defend their rights when necessary (Read 2008). Their suburban home is often their only home in that city. They identify themselves as suburban homeowners who work and live in the municipality, although they may not yet (or ever) have a household registration (*hukou*) in that city. All suburban homeowners I interviewed in Beijing not only agreed that they live in suburban Beijing, but they are also proud of their status as suburban homeowners. Mr. Zhou, a chief editor of a top Chinese magazine in his late 30s, thinks his community in South Beijing is the exemplary community in the surrounding area. Figure 7.6 shows a modern high-rise apartment in a suburban gated community in Beijing. Thousands of this kind have been copied in suburbs all over China.

Everyday life in suburban Beijing, however, is quite problematic. Although many suburban gated communities look clean and beautiful, a very important human element is lacking—street life. Both the streets in suburban Beijing and the space inside gated communities are too limited for meaningful social interaction (Li 2017).

#### ***7.4.2 How Residents in Informal Urban Fringe Areas Perceive Their Living Environment***

The rural–urban fringe in contemporary China is a “hodgepodge.” Although scholars (Zhang 2001; Fu and Chen 2010) categorize it as “rural–urban fringe zone” or “urban village,” people who live and work there cannot give a unique name or categorization for their own living environment.

The rural–urban fringe is physically closer than the suburbs to the city center. In Beijing, for example, urban villages are located mostly between the fourth ring road and the fifth ring road, as shown in Fig. 7.4, while most giant suburban gated communities are outside the fifth ring road. My interviewees who live and work in the rural–urban fringe areas provided multiple names for their place (Fig. 7.7).



**Fig. 7.6** A modern high-rise apartment in a suburban gated community in Beijing. *Source* Photo by the author, 2015

Locals who grew up in those areas and work there think their place is still a village, since the political organizations in the areas are still Villagers' Committees. Locals' daily lives are heavily influenced by this formal political structure—school, housing, medical welfare, job finding, marriage, and so on. Nonetheless, when I asked “Do





**Fig. 7.7** An urban village between Beijing's south fourth ring road and south fifth ring road. *Source* Photo by the author, 2014

you think your place is a rural–urban fringe zone, an urban village, a suburb, or something else?" they mostly replied, "Yes, yes, it is called a 'rural–urban fringe zone'. We were taught to categorize it in that way at school."

Outsiders, however, have a more mixed perception of the place. In reality, in all rural–urban fringe areas, outsiders outnumber locals. They rent locals' homes, run retail or wholesale stores, restaurants, beauty salons, hotels, anything that can make a living. All my interviewees had been working in the various rural–urban fringe areas for more than 5 years. Yet they cannot name the place with a clear, unique geographic notion. A young man in his early 30s had been a delivery person in a wholesale rural–urban fringe zone for more than 10 years. He did not think of the whole area as a village, although its official name is a village:

It is a wholesale zone. It is not a village, absolutely not.

Interviewer: Is it a suburb? A rural–urban fringe zone? An urban village? Or something else?

I don't know. To me, it is just a wholesale zone. I live in a village nearby, however.

Another man, an unlicensed taxi driver, thinks that "his living area is just a village. It is called as a village. And it is as backward as a village." Although I kept

reminding my interviewees that there was no farmland in the area at all, some of them still claimed that their living and working place is a “village”—a special, busy, but backward village in Beijing.

A hodgepodge living environment contains a hodgepodge of lifestyles. Most residents in rural–urban fringe areas are migrant workers. Although they have been living close to the center of Beijing for several years, some of them even do not know exactly where they are in the city. They do know how to go to the railway station to go back to their hometown. Locals, although they have become the minority in the rural–urban fringe areas, are the real winners. Their living environment may become worse year after year, but they have significant rental income. And most of them have formal apartments somewhere nearby, in the city, or in the formal suburb, based on their financial power. And those migrant workers who make a good living as (for example) a wholesale boss or a hotel owner have or plan to have a formal suburban apartment in Beijing, outside the hodgepodge where they have made their own fortune in the first place. They are, or will soon be, one of the suburbanites discussed in Sect. 7.4.1.

## 7.5 Concluding Remarks

The recent urban expansion and suburban developments in China have created and reshaped two major types of urban fringe—formal suburban communities and rural–urban fringe hodgepodes. These two radically distinctive built environments are perceived differently by their residents and offer distinctive ways of life.

Regionalism is the key to understanding the Chinese suburb. Many suburban communities developed in the last 20 years are within the city/district territory, although they are outside the traditional city core that evolved from the walled city. Suburban life is an integrated part of urban life, although many suburbs are geographically far away from the city center. Suburbanism is merely a part of urbanism, because suburbia does not (and probably will never) create an independent way of life that is different from urbanism. On the one hand, the city—at the district level, not the municipal level, as a county or *zhou* governed its surrounding areas in the imperial period—still takes charge of the suburban communities culturally, economically, and politically nowadays. On the other hand, in the cases of megacities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, in which the suburbs are produced on a massive scale, the suburban developments in the remote districts/counties have produced suburbs of the municipality, rather than the district/county level city. Although the suburb produced in these cases is larger than the remote district to which it is subordinate, it is perfectly integrated into the region or municipality and can never bypass the municipal administration to form its own government. Different groups of suburbanites perceive the newly built suburban environment differently. To the former city residents who were forced to move to a suburb, the “city” is forever their home although they have no real standing in the city core anymore. Well-off groups have more positive perceptions to the suburban living environment, although China’s brand-new

suburban gated communities have or will soon have many social problems (arising from lack of social interaction and lack of mixed-use zoning).

The rural–urban fringe zone, on the other hand, has been left behind. Compared with the suburb, it is physically closer to the city. Yet socioculturally it is distanced from the city. Its existence is highly related to China's metropolitan regionalism. An urban village, no matter how large and rich it is, is still a village within a district of a municipality and is unlikely to be a voice for policy change at the municipality level. Thus, it has been developing in a more incremental and spontaneous way. The spontaneous development of China's urban village is not the beautiful spontaneity of smallness praised by Jacobs (1961). Rather, it is a chaotic hodgepodge. Without careful replanning that considers multiple stakeholders of the rural–urban fringe zone, including local governments, locals, business owners, migrant workers, and regional government bodies, the living environment of the hodgepodge will continue to worsen. Its residents, as a result, will continue to be confused by its status, or, alternatively, they will just stop pondering the identity of their living environment.

Neither of these two types of Chinese suburb echoes the suburb in the West. The Chinese suburb does not (and probably will never) have the right to be incorporated into an independent jurisdiction. By subordinating to a district or an entire municipality, China's suburbia is an integrated part of China's urban system, which does not (and probably will never) support an independent suburban way of life.

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