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MASTER OF SCIENCE IN
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Abstract

**The Meaning of the Gate in Transitional Urban China
Challenges and Potentials of the Gate in
Contemporary Chinese Cities**

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Gated community is recognized as a global phenomenon but the enclosed physical forms of gated settlements are deeply embedded in the Chinese urban history, and can be traced back to the gated and walled cities of the Chinese feudalism society, including enclosed palaces for the gentry and enclosed courtyard houses for the ordinary urban residents, the walled work unit compounds or *danwei* of the Socialist period, till the contemporary gated communities which dominated the urban landscape of many Chinese cities after the housing reforms of the 1990s. The last urban guidelines elaborated during the historical meeting of China's Central Urban Work Conference on December 2015, targeted the gated communities as the source of traffic jams and congestion, and therefore the walls should be demolished and the gated communities should open-up their gates to the public. The proposal has raised a strong debate and opposition from the public as well as criticism from legal experts as the new directive is against the *Property Right Law* of 2007: *"roads and other public areas and facilities within a building zone are jointly owned by owners, with the exception of the public roads belonging to a city ownership"*.

To better understand this singular urban phenomenon, the author chooses to analyse it starting from the Chinese centralized monarchy till present days gated communities. Through this long and detailed exploration of meanings and forces behind the persistence of the walled settlements in urban China, the author seeks to pursue ideas that can help generate alternative and sustainable ways, new possibilities rather than the demolition option, to rethink the attitude of the wall in contemporary Chinese cities. The demolition of the walls and then the provision of more roads within the enclosed settlements, perhaps, will contribute to literally alleviate the problem of traffic jams for a short term, but it will not definitely solve it. The source of traffic and its related problems, is not the gate or the wall, rather the way the vital organs of the city have been arranged and organized, the problem is the lack of a strategy of 'spatial and functional order'.

In China, since the economic reforms and opening-up era, the urban form of many cities have experienced dramatic changes which transformed the traditional high-density and self-relying urban settlements into decentralized developments and urban activities. Therefore, elaborating new approaches that can promote a wholesome relationship between the diverse urban entities of the city making them more collaborative and less conflicting maybe can bring important benefits to the city as a whole. The jobs-housing balance is expected to minimize commuting trips and to reduce the negative impacts of those trips such as congestion and air pollution. The positive attributes of the *danwei*, as a self-contained urban model, integrated with the specific issues and different needs of contemporary Chinese cities and residents' style of life, can offer an attractive alternative for China in its quest to rethink its cities dominated by gated communities, in most cases 'passive cities within the city'.



View on a residential complex in Tiantongyuan South, Changping District, Beijing.
(Source: photographyofchina.com)



Gated entrance to one of the gated communities in Tiantongyuan, Beijing, 2015.
(Photo by Badiaa Hamama)

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