Too complex to be managed? New trends in peri-urbanisation and its planning in Beijing

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Abstract

Taking Beijing as a case study, this paper analyses new trends in peri-urbanisation and the city’s planning responses after 2000 in China. The results of the analysis show that the percentage of temporary migrant residents continues to grow in the peri-urban region and the social inequalities in relation to quality of life between local people and migrants have increased there. In particular, there is a concentration of thousands of young and well-educated migrants in the peri-urban region, resulting in a new kind of urban slum. Sprawling development still dominates Beijing’s fringe. New planning policies related to an urban–rural integration strategy have played a positive role in improving living conditions in rural areas and reducing the social and economic gaps between urban and rural areas in the peri-urban region. However, planning in the peri-urban region is still facing new challenges due to vertically and horizontally fragmented management, growing market forces, and social discrimination caused by the remnants of the hukou mechanism. This suggests that it will not be easy to achieve the planning goal of urban–rural integration and harmony society unless further actions are taken to enhance political capacity of planning system.

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Introduction

It has been forecast that the size of the world’s urban population will soon reach 6.29 billion, 69% of the total world population in 2030 (United Nations, 2010). A large part of this urban population lives in peri-urban regions and thus the question of how to manage peri-urbanisation has become one of the key issues in spatial planning and sustainable urban development in the 21st century (Watson, 2009). In developing countries in particular, the issue of peri-urbanisation is growing in importance due to continuous and rapid urbanisation in these countries (Cohen, 2006; United Nations, 2001).

There is much literature on peri-urbanisation and planning approaches to this in developing countries in Africa (Briggs & Mwangi, 2000; Mbuga & Huchzermeyer, 2002), South America (Aguilar, 2008; Diaz-Chavez, 2006) and Asia (Dayaratne & Samarawickrama, 2003; Dupont, 2007; Hudalah, Winarto, & Woltjer, 2008; Webster, 2002), as well as in China (Lin, 2006; Webster & Muller, 2004; Zhao, Lu, & Woltjer, 2009; Zhou & Logan, 2008). However, there is no agreement on the solutions or approaches needed to promote sustainable peri-urbanisation. One of the major reasons for this is that peri-urbanisation is a complex urban process affected by various factors and exhibiting different features in different countries (McGranahan, Satterthwaite, & Tacoli, 2004; Quayle & van der Lieck, 1997).

China has experienced rapid urbanisation since the 1980s. During a 26 year period from 1980 to 2006, the urban population level increased on average by 0.9% per annum (CSB (China Statistical Bureau), various years), an increase of almost ten million people annually, with most of these being migrants from rural areas. Peri-urbanisation has emerged in this context and has become a major force driving urban expansion in China’s cities in the 1990s. Peri-urbanisation is related to many environmental and social problems, which have been confirmed in Chinese cities. Some of these include encroachment of arable farmland and appearance of urban villages. The latter are rural villages located in peri-urban regions which were also called ‘villages in city’ (cheng zhong cun) because their landscapes were still dominated by village housing, insufficient urban facilities and a low quality of life (Wang, 2004; Zheng, Long, Fan, & Gu, 2009). Most migrants resided in the urban villages. In the 1990s, planning for peri-urbanisation was focused on the preservation of green space and farmland in peri-urban regions, but was also utilised as an important tool to promote local economic growth.

Since 2000, China’s transformation from a centrally planned system to a market system has continued, with further decentralisation and marketisation. There are some new trends in peri-urbanisation, reflected by many new words and phrases in the...
media, such as ‘pseudo-urbanisation’ (wei cheng zhen hua), ‘Ant-group village’ (yi zhu cun) and ‘incomplete ownership housing’ (xiao chan fang). These new phenomena reveal the new features of peri-urbanisation in China from different perspectives and also imply that planners are now facing new challenges. Since 2000, many new policies have been implemented in response to the national urban–rural integration strategy, which calls for the promotion of a better quality of life in rural regions and the efficient balancing of development between cities and rural areas and between urban and rural areas within a city. Peri-urban regions are key in relation to this strategy. Many new planning approaches have been implemented in the regions, for example the development of new socialist villages and communitilised village management. Many efforts have also been made to enhance the institutional capacity of planning. In 2007 a new law, the Urban and Rural Planning Act, was introduced by the state to replace the Urban Planning Act which had been the most important regulation in relation to planning and urban development in China since it was enacted in 1986.

In the interests of further policy and research, this paper raises two important questions and addresses them by using Beijing as a case study: What socioeconomic and institutional factors are involved in the new trends in peri-urbanisation since 2000? How well do the new planning approaches cope with the new trends? A number of scholars have undertaken an empirical analysis of China’s peri-urbanisation since 2000; for example, Webster and his colleagues have studied Hangzhou (Webster, Cai, Muller, & Luo, 2003) and Chengdu (Webster, Cai, Muller, & Luo, 2004). Few studies have discussed peri-urbanisation and planning responses to it together (for example, Wu, 2008). As the research questions suggest, the major research aim of this study is to investigate new trends in peri-urbanisation in China since 2000 and to discuss the performance of planning policies designed to address these new trends.

The following section will present a detailed empirical analysis of new trends in peri-urbanisation in Beijing. In Section 3, planning responses to the new trends in peri-urbanisation in Beijing will be discussed and Section 4 will present the conclusions.

New trends in peri-urbanisation in Beijing

Since the 1980s, land use in Chinese cities has changed fundamentally, due to demographic changes, economic growth, inner city redevelopment and changes in land use policies and regulations, against the background of social and economic shifts and political transformation (Gaubatz, 1999; Gu & Shen, 2003; Leaf, 1995; Lin, 2001; Ma, 2004; Wei, Leung, & Luo, 2006; Wu, 2001; Zhao, Lu, & de Roo, 2010). Peri-urbanisation entails a major change in land use as a consequence of the development of housing and industry in the peri-urban regions.

Webster and Muller (2004) summarised the characteristics of China’s peri-urbanisation as follows: (1) changing economic structure, from an agricultural base to a manufacturing-dominated economy in peri-urban areas, (2) changing employment structure, with the shift from agriculture to manufacturing, (3) rapid urban growth in peri-urban regions and (4) land use and pattern changes, from agricultural land to industrial and residential use. These characteristics were common to China’s cities in the 1980s and the 1990s. However, many new trends have occurred since then. The following text will discuss these new trends in peri-urbanisation in Beijing.

Dynamics of peri-urban regions in Beijing

The city of Beijing is the capital of China, with a land area of 16,410 square kilometres and a population of 16.95 million in 2008 (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), various years). The municipality of Beijing has 18 sub-governments which include 16 districts and 2 counties. The Beijing Urban Master Plan (2004–2020) shows that the entire city is divided into four zones: a central urban area, an inter-suburban area, an outer suburban area and an ecological conservation area (Fig. 1). The outer suburban area includes some rural areas associated with Beijing. Most of these rural areas are located in the ecological conservation area. Since the 1980s, Beijing has been undergoing obvious peri-urbanisation. The population and employment in the peri-urban region has grown, while the central urban area has experienced a significant decline in both population and employment (Zhao, Lu, & de Roo, 2011). Peri-urbanisation has greatly expanded Beijing’s urban space. After the 1990s especially, in addition to the ten peripheral constellations, new high-tech industry zones and new housing estates appeared in the peri-urban region and started to shape Beijing into a polycentric urban form (Ma, 2004).

In this study, the peri-urban region of Beijing between 1980 and 2008 is defined using an integrated approach in which both the features and functions of the peri-urban region and the administrative boundary are considered. The range of the peri-urban region is defined in terms of its inner and outer boundaries. The former is located within the inter-suburban area and defined by the boundaries of the basic administrative units consisting of built-up areas in proximity to the central urban area. The outer boundary of the peri-urban region is composed of basic administrative units dominated by rural landscape, although mixed with urban features. In this study, the degree to which an administrative unit is dominated by rural landscape can be measured by the percentage of non-built-up area in this unit: if the non-built-up area accounts for 70–80% of the total unit area, the sub-district is seen to be dominated by rural landscape, with some urban features. On this basis, the city of Beijing can be re-zoned into three regions: the major urban region, the peri-urban region and the rural region (Fig. 2). In this study, the period from 2000 to 2008 is emphasised to focus the discussion on new trends in peri-urbanisation after 2000.

Population growth in the peri-urban region

Rapid peri-urbanisation in Beijing is firstly characterised by the rapid growth of the population in the peri-urban region. Since the 1980s, Beijing has experienced a dramatic growth in the population, increasing from 11.03 million in 1990 to 16.95 million in 2008 (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), various years). The main urban region and the rural region also experienced a steady increase in population. However, compared to the increase in the peri-urban region, the population increase in both the main urban region and the rural region has been slower. The percentage of the total population in the peri-urban region increased from 21.5% to 36% during the period 1990 to 2008 (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), various years), while the percentage of the population in the main urban and rural regions decreased dramatically. The results reflect an obvious trend towards peri-urbanisation in Beijing.

Migrants from outside Beijing account for a major part of the incremental population growth in the peri-urban regions due to reforms of the hukou system. The hukou system is a resident registration system which is unique to China. According to hukou policy, the population of the whole nation was classified into two categories: people with urban hukou and people with rural hukou. In the pre-reform era, rural residents with rural hukou were not allowed to migrate freely to the city. Furthermore, a household’s hukou has always served as the basis for the allocation of many goods and services, such as basic foodstuffs, housing and jobs, as those with urban hukou consumed more goods and services than those with rural hukou. Since the 1980s, the hukou system has gradually been relaxed. Rural labourers are now allowed to move to the cities and
find work there, although they are often still denied many of the basic privileges enjoyed by local urban residents. The number of temporary migrants increased from 713,000 in 1990 to 7.48 million in 2008, more than a tenfold increase (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), various years). Of the temporary migrants, 51.5% lived in the peri-urban region in 2008 (Fig. 3). As a result, peri-urbanisation
in Beijing features drastic growth in the migrant population. This is different from peri-urbanisation in Europe and North America, which is dominated by residential suburbanisation, whereby existing urban residents move from the city centre (Richardson & Bae, 2004).

Villages in the peri-urban region provide main living places to migrants (Wu, 2002). This has resulted in ‘urban village’ in Beijing which is a type of informal settlement in the peri-urban region. In 2005, the existence of 231 urban villages, using 10.9 hectares of land in the peri-urban region, was confirmed in Beijing (Yang, 2004). Most of these villages have developed from pre-existing farming villages, and their residents are generally farmers who have become landlords, while the remainder are poor unemployed people or low-income migrant workers without local Beijing hukou. A recent survey of migrants in urban villages revealed that 73% have only junior middle school or a lower level of education, which is a much higher percentage than the 47% for the total population in the city (Zhang, 2009). Most of these migrants work in low-skilled jobs and their average monthly income is half the mean income of the average worker in the city (Zheng et al., 2009). Facilities and urban services in these urban villages are also inadequate, while they also contain most of the city’s factories in which employees work long hours at low wages under poor conditions. They are also centres of crime (Yang, 1996). Compared with other communities in the peri-urban region, urban villages can be considered ‘China’s slums’ (Ma, 2007), with illegal construction and unplanned development prevalent.

However, since 2000 some new trends in urban villages have become apparent. As mentioned above, the number of young and highly educated yi zu migrants has increased rapidly. As we saw, they often live together in groups in small living spaces. For example, in Tangjialing, a village located in the peri-urban region of Beijing, a yi zu migrant’s room space is less than 10 m2 on average and the average rent is only 377 yuan per month (Pan, 2010). The main reason why such new migrants choose to live in urban villages is that housing in the villages in the peri-urban region is much cheaper than the central urban area. However, there are many social and environmental problems associated with life of the new migrants in these villages; for example, the small and crowding living space, absence of healthy environment and social exclusion from the city (Fig. 4). This has presented a new challenge to planners.

**Land use changes in the peri-urban region**

Previous studies have reported that land development is one main factor stimulating the peri-urbanisation of Beijing (Zhao et al., 2009). Table 1 shows that during the period 2000–2008, land use for settlements and industrial development increased by 420 km2 and land use for new transport infrastructures had a growth of 48 km2 in the peri-urban region. During the same period, there were great losses to agricultural land, including 212 km2 of arable land, 66 km2 of land used for gardens and 114 km2 of forest. These results reveal that there has been a rapid transformation of land use – from farmland and green spaces to urban land – in the process of peri-urbanisation of Beijing.

One of the major reasons for the transformation in land use is residential development in the peri-urban region. In particular, since 2001, soaring housing prices in the central urban area, combined with the ever-growing population of the city, has led to a prosperous real estate market in the peri-urban region. In Beijing during the period 2001–2008, newly developed housing for sale had a total floor area of 160.32 million m2, including 144.33 million m2 of commodity housing and 15.99 million m2 of social housing for low-income earners (BMCHURD (Beijing Municipal Commission of Housing and Urban–Rural Development), various years). Of this newly developed housing, 27.2% was located in the peri-urban region. In other words, housing equivalent to a floor area of 5.45 million m2 was added to the peri-urban region annually. From 2006, there was a new trend in housing development in the peri-urban region, with the municipality deciding to increase the land available for social housing on the basis of 2005 figures, in order to curb the growth in housing prices and enhance the affordability of housing for the poor. However, this social housing is only accessible to local residents, with migrants having no rights to rent or buy because they have no local hukou (Wu, 2004).

In the past decades, urban sprawl has occurred in the peri-urban region of Beijing and become one of the main forms of suburban land development after the 1980s (Zhao, 2010). Urban sprawl in Beijing can be characterised physically, as dispersed, low-density development, and functionally in terms of a decline in the degree of mixed land use, particularly apparent in the local jobs-housing balance. These two aspects of sprawling development are often combined at one place in a suburb. Apart from the dispersed distribution apparent in urban villages, the rapid development of housing in the peri-urban region is a major factor stimulating urban sprawl. There is much research revealing that an unsatisfiable demand for housing in the city centre and rapid suburban development have led to both legal and illegal sprawl on Beijing’s urban fringe (Deng & Huang, 2004). The development of industrial zones in the peri-urban region is another major aspect of urban sprawl. For example, of the 470 industrial development zones in Beijing in 2003, 94% were authorised by local governments (district, county or town) and were dispersed across the suburbs (Zhao et al., 2009). These local industrial zones were thus seen as ‘illegal’ industrial development zones by the central and metropolitan governments. Nearly all of these illegal industrial development zones were closed by the central government and its municipal counterparts in 2003. As a result, an area equivalent to 467 km2 that was planned to be developed in the peri-urban region has been saved (Zhao et al., 2009).

**Social inequalities in the peri-urban region**

There is a high level of diversity of social features in the peri-urban region of Beijing. The urban fringe is composed of residents who have relocated from the central urban area, migrants from outside Beijing and local rural people. The first group can be divided into two: those residents who are forced to move out of the central area due to urban redevelopment and those who move in pursuit of improved living conditions, including larger housing space as well as a better environment in the suburban community. Most of these residents are middle class. In contrast, migrants from
outside Beijing are usually concentrated in villages in the peri-urban region. They account for a large part of the urban poor in the suburbs. Since the middle-class groups tend to live in high-quality housing, dominated by villas and low-density townhouses with higher housing prices, more space and better services, it is apparent that various population groups living in the peri-urban region are segregated into different residential areas by their ability to afford housing. Such residential segregation between the rich and the poor is currently growing due to the increasing income gap between these groups.

Fig. 5 shows the growth in family income for different groups in the peri-urban region of Beijing between 1990 and 2008. All residents, local urban residents, local rural residents and temporary migrants have witnessed increases in their annual income due to the overall economic growth in the city. However, compared with the income of the local urban residents, the income of the local rural residents and temporary migrants exhibit lower growth. The results thus reveal that the income gap between local residents and migrants has become larger in the peri-urban region. There are many reasons why most migrants are in the low-income group (for example, their low level of education or low labour skills). However, there is an important institutional factor: the remaining hukou system. A migrant’s hukou status is often seen as one key criterion by an employer when making a decision on a job offer and/or wage. Most high-salaried jobs are not accessible to temporary migrants as they have no local urban hukou, even if they have similar skills to a local resident (Zhao & Howden-Chapman, 2010). Apart from these effects on job opportunities, the remaining hukou...
system also has an effect on migrants’ access to social welfare, for example, access to social housing, education and medical care.

Since 2000, the quality of life for the poor in the peri-urban region has improved, but there are still serious problems, with some even tending to become worse. In 2008, 37.1% of rural people and migrants in the peri-urban region still did not have access to fresh tap water and 75.3% of the villages located in the peri-urban region were short of medical services (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), various years). Waste treatment infrastructure and public transport services lagged far behind demand due to the ever-growing number of migrants in the peri-urban region.

Temporary migrants in particular face great problems related to the quality of life. For example, in 2005 in the peri-urban region, 81.6% of migrants lived in rented housing, while 78.4% of the local residents lived in their own houses (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), 2006). Of the migrant residences, 47.4% had no kitchen, 58% no bathroom and 38.8% no toilet. In terms of residential space, 60.3% of temporary migrants had less than 10 m² per capita (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), 2006). Children’s education is another serious issue with respect to the quality of life of migrants. In 2006, the number of school-aged children from migrant families reached 370,000 in Beijing. Almost a third (31%) of the children from temporary migrant families do not have access to a public school (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), 2006). Most of these children must therefore attend private schools which have been opened especially for migrant children. However, these private schools are of very low quality. A recent report by the Beijing Centre for Legal Assistance to Youth (Zhang, 2009) showed that all of the 41 private schools opened for migrant children, 21 were illegal, having not received a permit from the municipality, while 98% were located in rented houses, lacked a heating and cooling system, a playground and sporting facilities. The school cafeterias were found to be of low quality and the food was bad. The survey revealed that 73% of the pupils were not happy, 54% hoped to go to a public school, to have a large playground, to have a good school desk and to participate in more activities.

Planning responses to urban–rural integration in Beijing

Village communitilised management

Many policies have been implemented in response to the national urban–rural integration strategy since 2000 in Beijing. For example, since 2006, a new approach has been implemented in Beijing’s urban fringe in order to manage temporary migrants, reduce crime and enhance the efficiency of public services; that is, the municipality has introduced a programme for managing urban communities in rural villages. This is also called ‘village communitilised management’. According to this approach, migrants living in suburban villages must register with the village administrative organisation, which undertakes the local management of
the village. Residents receive a residence card stating their basic personal information. Like the gated urban communities, the villages are usually enclosed by a steel fence, with security at the village gates. This approach has effectively reduced crime in the urban fringe. For example, there have been no criminal activities recorded in Dashengzhuang village in the Daxing District of Beijing since the village implemented this new approach (Zhang, 2010). An interesting result of the approach is that both the local people and the migrants have a greater sense of security and belonging than previously (Zhang, 2010).

Recently, the municipality of Beijing had a meeting which specifically addressed the issue of ‘Extending Village Community Management’ and decided to implement this new approach in all of the villages located in the peri-urban region by the end of 2011. The responsibilities of local management will be further extended from population management to include urban services management, including waste management and water supply management.

Undeniably, this approach also has many problems. For example, there have been increases in local management related fees and a separation from connections with the rest of the city. The policy was even criticised in China’s Democracy and Law newspaper (in Chinese) as a ‘ridiculous action showing strong social discrimination’, as almost all of the temporary migrants who live in the villages are low-income earners (Liu, 2010).

Redevelopment of urban villages

Another initiative is the redevelopment of urban villages in the peri-urban regions. This initiative will replace existing migrant and urban villages with new villages or communities in which the quality of housing and living facilities are higher. Since 2008, the municipal government has cooperated with local district governments to build two pilot urban village redevelopment projects in the peri-urban region of Beijing. One is Beiwu village in Haidian District and the other is Dawangjin village in Chaoyang District. Many new decentralised approaches were tested in these two villages. Urban redevelopment in the city centre is usually managed and financially supported by the municipality and district governments. However, according to the new decentralised approach, in the redevelopment of villages in the peri-urban region, the village committee and villagers will play a key role in management and the determination of investment.

In Beijing village, collaboration between the local village committee (the administrative organisation in Chinese villages), private developers and individual villagers was formed in relation to the redevelopment of the village. Villagers transferred their housing land use rights to the village committee which then utilised the land as a type of investment, collaborating with private real estate developers to build new housing and a new community. Villagers are provided with new houses for free with the same floor area as their old house and if a villager wants to have extra housing space, he/she only pays half of the commodity housing price on the open market in that area. Moreover, villagers on low incomes can receive up to 80% discount when buying extra housing space. All villagers are included in the same pension system as urban citizens. The village committee is going to use part of the collectively owned farmland to develop a commercial hotel and other local businesses. The farmers who lose their land will be offered jobs in the hotel or other local services.

The outcomes of these pilot developments show that the living conditions and quality of life of the villagers have improved. The local residents report that they like their new community, the new services and the new lifestyle (Zhou, 2009). After evaluating these pilot projects, Beijing municipality has decided to implement this successful policy in other villages, with 50 key villages in the peri-urban region of Beijing to be redeveloped over the coming years. These 50 villages currently have a population of 690,000 temporary migrants and 183,000 local residents, including 140,000 local rural farmers and 43,000 local urban residents (Zhang, 2010). Urban redevelopment in current urban villages will have a great effect on social and economic development in the peri-urban region. In particular, thousands of temporary migrants will be negatively affected as they have no land to exchange for a new house, a job or social insurance. In fact, the issues in relation to migrants have been overlooked by those new approaches. For example, the two pilot project developments led to hundreds of temporary migrants moving to nearby villages, from where it is difficult to turn as housing prices in the new community are much higher than the houses in the original village.

These facts suggest that the present planning policy in relation to urban–rural integration has overlooked the wellbeing of migrants. While planners and committee members cheer for the new developments and the wide roads provided to hundreds of local villagers, they have not realised that thousands of migrants will lose their living spaces and have to move from one village to another. This will not be a sustainable way to achieve overall urban–rural integration in the peri-urban region unless alternative solutions that provide housing to migrants are found. A recent survey reports that only 10% of migrants agree with the dismantling of urban villages, as they believe it will become increasingly difficult to find a cheap room in the peri-urban region (Deng, 2006). Most of them are very concerned about where they will live in the near future.

In addition, new communities developed in the villages would cause further urban sprawl in the peri-urban region. Most of the villages in Beijing are dispersed widely and while the new communities developed in these village locations will still be dispersed across the peri-urban region. Some housing in these new communities will be distributed to local villagers, while the rest of the housing will be sold on the market as commodity housing, as the private developers need to benefit from their investment in the redevelopment of the villages. This means that some urban residents will soon live in these communities and more sprawling urban settlements will appear in the peri-urban region. The problem of a sprawling distribution will not be resolved unless several new communities are relocated and developed in one location. However, it would be very difficult for the municipal government to implement such a policy as each village has its own land use rights. In addition, in the current decentralisation context, local autonomy and fiscal responsibility have made it difficult for villages to collaborate with each other when local economic benefits are involved.

Apart from above two planning responses, there are many other planning responses to urban–rural integration in Beijing regarding environmental preservation, investments, social development, etc. These responses have been mainly focused on economic growth in the peri-urban regions and the rural areas. For example, in 2003, over 50 new policies were made to increase villagers’ income in the peri-urban regions. The share of the whole municipal investments in the rural areas including the peri-urban regions has increased from 20% in 2003 to 50.1% in 2007 (BSB (Beijing Statistic Bureau), various years). The rural areas have overtaken the main urban areas as the mainly invested region in Beijing. The investments have a wide range from roads, water infrastructures, housing and factories to schools, clinics, community centres, employment training, etc. Promotion of local economic development is one of the most important principles of spatial planning in the peri-urban regions. In the meantime, more strict management of reservation of farmlands have been implemented to protect environmental space for the city. Urban development in the peri-urban regions needs more permission from different
departments, in particular, from planning bureaus after 2007. The main reason for this is a new law, the Urban and Rural Planning Act, which was introduced by the state in 2007. Urban development management will be strengthened in Chinese cities according to the new law.

Policy implications and conclusion

In China, rapid urbanisation has greatly improved the quality of life for millions of people. This will continue at a rapid pace over the next decades. Undeniably, this rapid urbanisation process causes some problems related to social and environmental development in both urban and rural areas. These problems are typically reflected in peri-urban regions, which are transition zones, moving from a pure rural to an urban landscape, and which have a high level of complexity in their social and economic structures. The results of the analysis in this paper have revealed some new trends in peri-urbanisation in Beijing since 2000. These new trends are the result of new economic, institutional and social factors arising in the context of industrialisation, decentralisation and marketisation.

The results of the analysis show that the percentage of temporary migrant residents in the peri-urban region has continued to grow due to the further reform of the hukou system. The structure of the population of migrants in the peri-urban region, which was previously dominated by farm workers, has greatly changed, with the number of young and well-educated migrants increasing dramatically. Thousands of these young and well-educated migrants are now concentrated in urban villages, resulting in a new kind of urban slum. The results also reveal that migrants still have difficulties in gaining access to public facilities and services that are available to local residents and this is due to the remaining hukou system. All these mean that the social inequalities in relation to quality of life between local people and migrants in the peri-urban region have been increasing after the 1990s (Chan, 1996; Logan, 2008).

Sprawling development still dominates on Beijing’s fringe and improvements in the transport system have tended to cause further urban sprawl in the peri-urban region. Apart from fragmented management in urban development, the middle-class preference for suburban housing is a major cause of low-density sprawling development in the peri-urban fringe. The new landscape, composed of high-quality gated villages and communities alongside small towns like urban villages, indicates a social polarisation in the suburbs of Beijing.

New planning responses to the national urban–rural integration strategy have played a positive role in promoting rural development and reducing the social and economic gaps between urban and rural areas in the peri-urban region. The new Urban and Rural Planning Act has enhanced the institutional capacity of the planning system to cope with urban–rural separation, and new decentralised approaches designed to involve multiple stakeholders in urban development have effectively improved living conditions in rural villages. However, planning in the peri-urban region is still facing new challenges due to increasing vertically and horizontally fragmented management, growing market forces and social discrimination caused by the remnants of the hukou system. This suggests that it will not be easy to achieve the planning goal of urban–rural integration and harmony society unless further actions are taken to enhance political capacity of planning system in the future in China.

In the current process of decentralisation and marketisation, the capacity-building of planning should be facilitated if institutional innovations can be made to enforce the planning system in China now. The innovations involve arrangements of power, rights, public resources, accountability, and legitimacy in the planning system. Firstly, the management capacity of the current planning system may need to be enhanced to mitigate the negative effects of market-led development in the current transformation context. The remaining centrally planned system should be renewed to apply a centralised management to urban development. Secondly, an appropriate institutional structure and practices in planning need to be developed; the legitimacy of the planning system should be increased; and, a clear system of accountability between the different sectors needs to be established. Thirdly, the question of ‘planning for whom’ needs to be seriously considered, as the current planning system is mainly engaged in achieving economic goals made by governments. Fourthly, there is a need to enhance its administrative capacity to coordinate a variety of private, NGO, and CBO sectors. In particular, the increasing social inequalities in peri-urban regions require planning to pay more attention to community-based participatory approaches.

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