Danwei system in China and its impact on the daily life of urban residents after reform

Luo Li
Danwei system in China and its impact on the daily life of urban residents after reform
Introduction

Danwei system is a very unique phenomenon in China’s urban areas. Before the Reform and opening-up in China, people called the social organizations and institutes as danwei, such as factories, shops, schools, hospitals, research institutes, cultural groups and government officials, in which they worked and served. (Lu Feng, 1989) However, under China’s danwei system, danwei is not just a working place in common sense, but an enclosed, multifunctional, and self-sufficient entity. It has been the most basic collective unit in the Chinese political and social order for decades (Lowell Dittmer & Lu Xiaobo, 1996). There is no doubt that set up after the establishment of new China, danwei exerted its social function strongly. It is not only being the tool for national integration, but easing the pressure of unemployment and providing social welfare as well. However, there were few researches on Chinese danwei system. People lived and worked in danwei and took the system as granted. With the penetration of reform, the traditional structure of danwei has been profoundly changed, so do the political and social functions, which are gradually weakening and separated form danwei (Chai Yanwei, 2000). Meanwhile, increasing number of scholars began to realize that danwei system is closely connected to the urban studies in contemporary China in terms of its evolvement on social, economic and spatial phenomenon. Researches on China’s danwei on urban studies surged during the past two decades.
Sociologists have done deeply researches on China’s danwei system, ranging from the background of the establishment of danwei system in China, the compound function of danwei and its evolvement, complex internal organizations and informal relationship in China’s danwei, as well as personal politics in the Chinese danwei under reform to the daily life of residents in danwei and their dependency on the system (Chai Yanwei & Liu Zhilin & Shenjie, 2008). At the same time, geographers in China have paid attention to the effects that the chaning danwei system had brought on Chinese urban structure and social structure. (Chai Yanwei, 2000).

In the booming researches on the danwei system and its effects on the study of urban spatial structure, they introduced a macro perspective of institution to spatial issues based on the very framework (Xu Xueqiang & Hu Huaying, 1989). Great changes have taken place in urban spatial structure after the reform of danwei. In this context, what are the influences of these changes on the daily life of urban residents living and working in the changing surrounding should be focused and further studied.

**The Establishment of Danwei System in China**

Danwei is a system innovation, which usually take place during the transition period from agricultural society to industrial society. In the industrialization process, the agricultural society is industrialized at a very fast speed. It is turning millions of rural labors into workers and trying to organize them into a large work-unit. The unit
will function as an enclosed, multifunctional and self-sufficient entity. (Li Yi, 2006). It not only exists in China, but in many countries during the correspondent periods historically.

As the basic element of China’s social structure, danwei system was set up in the period of planned economy, serving as the basic governing pattern in China. Thus, danwei has become the window for the outside world to experience the collectivism and social phenomenon in China (He Zhongda & Lv Bin, 2007). After the establishment of new China, the social institution in China has been dramatically changed. At the same time, the country was facing unprecedented economy recession and inflation, as well as serious unemployment. With massive and extensive economy recovery policies launched, the unique danwei system was established and went on stably from 1957 (Lu Xiaobo & Elizabeth J. Perry, 2001). Danwei was regarded as the product of the strategy of planned economy. It took charge of the cities on behalf of the government, which played a great role in China’s socialist development.

The Compound Function of Danwei and its Evolvement in the Reform

Before the Economic Reform, there were two characteristics in China’s danwei---permanent employment and entire social welfare. (Li Yi, 2006). Danwei is the compound of working place, living unit and social welfare. It not only provides salaries to workers, but also distributes houses, provides kids’ nurseries, schools and
medical treatments, sometimes even funeral for the elders. It may even intervene in workers’ marriage, divorce and conducting one-child policy as well. Danwei is having its own style within the walls and gates. It is more a self-sufficient entity than an organization which provides products and services to the outside world (Yang Xiaomin & Zhou Yihu, 1998).

For a long time, houses were built under national investment and redistributed by danwei rather than a commodity purchased by individuals. This led inequality in housing distribution based on official ranks and insufficiency for different housing needs of people (Zhou yu, 1999). After 1990, the welfare housing distribution system was gradually eliminated, With the privatization measure of public house, urban residents were encouraged to purchase the public house they lived from government or danwei. China has established a multi-level system for housing (Saywell & Trish, 1998).

In the period of economic shortage, the social functions of urban areas weren’t completed. It was danwei to build various social infrastructures to meet the needs of workers, such as canteens, shops, public bathrooms, kindergartens, even school. During the reform, those infrastructures were basically socialized, not only meet the basic life demands of people, but higher pursuit of lives outside danwei (Zhou yu, 1999). The original pension system which was conducted and granted by danwei has been replaced by social endowment insurance. With the reform going deeper, the control function of danwei has weakened. Urban residents have gotten attached more to their living communities rather than danwei they work in.
The Changing Danwei System and its Effects on Urban Structure

In the traditional danwei system, there was barely any flowing between people or information, which resulted in a relatively static society. While the urban geographical structure was largely determined by danwei, it also remained fixed. With the weakening of danwei system, the traditional urban structure was broken and became loose. People could choose the place they live freely and their daily life was not confined to danwei, but more extensive. Social stratification was thus becoming obvious from then. The rigid atmosphere of danwei was replaced by increasing inter-personal relationships in the living communities. The transformation of old city and suburban development further optimized the urban structure (Walder.A, 1991)

Conclusion

Although Danwei has gradually lost its dominant role since the launch of reform, it will still take a long time to withdraw. Danwei still plays as an entity to which most workers hold their sense of belonging. The housing distribution system and welfare system of danwei will continue to affect people’s life. Even in the newly-built communities, danwei is still to play a certain role to support in the long haul. After the reform, the control function of danwei is eliminated, but its effects on urban areas
didn’t vanish. It is changing and rearranging the urban structure day by day. And taking its cover in the present, we should still attach importance to the Danwei system and its impacts on the daily life of urban residents in terms of new employment policy, living communities, welfare systems, as well as their social sense of belonging.

Reference


Chai Yanwei., & Liu Zhilin., & Shenjie.(2008). Changes of the danwei system and its effects. Department of urban and economic geography, Peking University, Beijing 10087, China.


