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How does urban regeneration in China impact its working-class population?

Chinese cities are home to large numbers of its working class population, and are going through large-scale regeneration projects. What effect do these programmes have on these people?

I was inspired to examine this issue by the documentary *Tough Out* (2020, Xu). The documentary focuses on a baseball camp run by the Power Baseball Angel Foundation, which takes in children from impoverished families, providing them with food, accommodation, education via local schools, and baseball training. The documentary follows the team over the course of a few months, particularly focusing on a young boy called Ma Hu, who struggles to integrate with the team (2020, JI).

One of the passing issues which the documentary focuses on is the foundation being forced out of its facilities, in a suburb of Beijing. Whilst the reason that they are being forced out isn't explicitly mentioned, it can be inferred that Beijing's programme of urban regeneration is very likely to blame.

It is clear the camp is trying to provide a genuine opportunity to children who would otherwise have very little hope in life, therefore it was hard for me to watch that they are faced with the extra challenges of losing their facilities, putting the foundation's existence at risk.

Regeneration Programmes have moved in the 21st century from being more government-led to being led by the private sector (Ye, 2011), and aim to meet the huge demands for accommodation and infrastructure in China's huge urban areas. Regeneration has clear benefits for many people living in cities, raising standards of accommodation, and providing new infrastructure and facilities. It also creates economic growth, directly to the construction and manufacturing industries as well as creating new jobs on completion, and attracts investment from elsewhere in China and around the world.

However, for the working-class population in these cities, regeneration can have far-reaching negative effects.

Early in the documentary, the camera shows this notice on a derelict-looking building, implied to be near the foundation's facilities:



Fig. 1. Still from 'Tough Out', 10:08 (Xu, 2020)

The 'Daxing accident' referenced in the picture was a fire in a housing block in the Daxing district, in South Beijing, on 18/11/17. 19 people lost their lives in the fire. Two days after the fire, the Beijing authorities began a huge eviction programme of housing and business buildings from predominantly Beijing's poorest areas, citing safety concerns. Most people affected were given days to leave their houses, and some buildings, such as the one pictured, had their electricity and water supply cut. Whilst the authorities maintained that all the people displaced by these restrictions would receive compensation, many were forced to leave Beijing for good, as it was unaffordable to stay. (BBC News, 2017; Elmer, 2018). The events received international criticism, deeming them inhumane; the speed, scale and restriction of utilities in this case was unprecedented, however, forced evictions in China are not. (Elmer, 2018; Niewenhuis, 2017)

It is not clear if the baseball facilities were included in these cuts, or were instead affected by Beijing's wider urbanisation plans. In either case, the foundation was faced with being forced out of its facilities, characteristic of the experience of those on land required by China's urban regeneration programmes.

In Beijing and other large Chinese cities, a vast majority of the working class are internal migrants, who move to the cities from rural areas where employment opportunities are scarce, in search of work (Gries, 2023b). It is this group who collectively were hit hardest by forced evictions, as they live in the most deprived areas, and individually are the most affected. China's hukou system aims to control internal migration, by restricting areas where people live such that if they don't have hukou status for a particular area, they are not eligible to receive welfare support, education or medical care (Gries, 2023b). Internal migrants who do not have hukou status in urban areas earn significantly less compared to their counterparts who have hukou status (Gustafsson and Sai, 2023) and often have very poor living conditions; in 2005 over 60% of internal migrants in Beijing lived in less than 10m³ space per capital (Zhao, 2013). This means internal migrants living in China's cities are among its poorest citizens, and they make up the bulk of the working class.

These urban migrants are essential to China’s urban economies. They often have little choice but to take low-paying jobs such as delivery, sales and services, supporting the demand created by the middle and upper-class residents in Beijing (Gries, 2023c). Without them, costs would almost certainly rise, putting further strain on China’s already slowing economic growth.

Were the evictions after the fire necessary, or were they an excuse for the Beijing authorities to push forward with their urbanisation plan? Another factor to consider when forming a judgement is the growth of the population of China living in its urban areas.

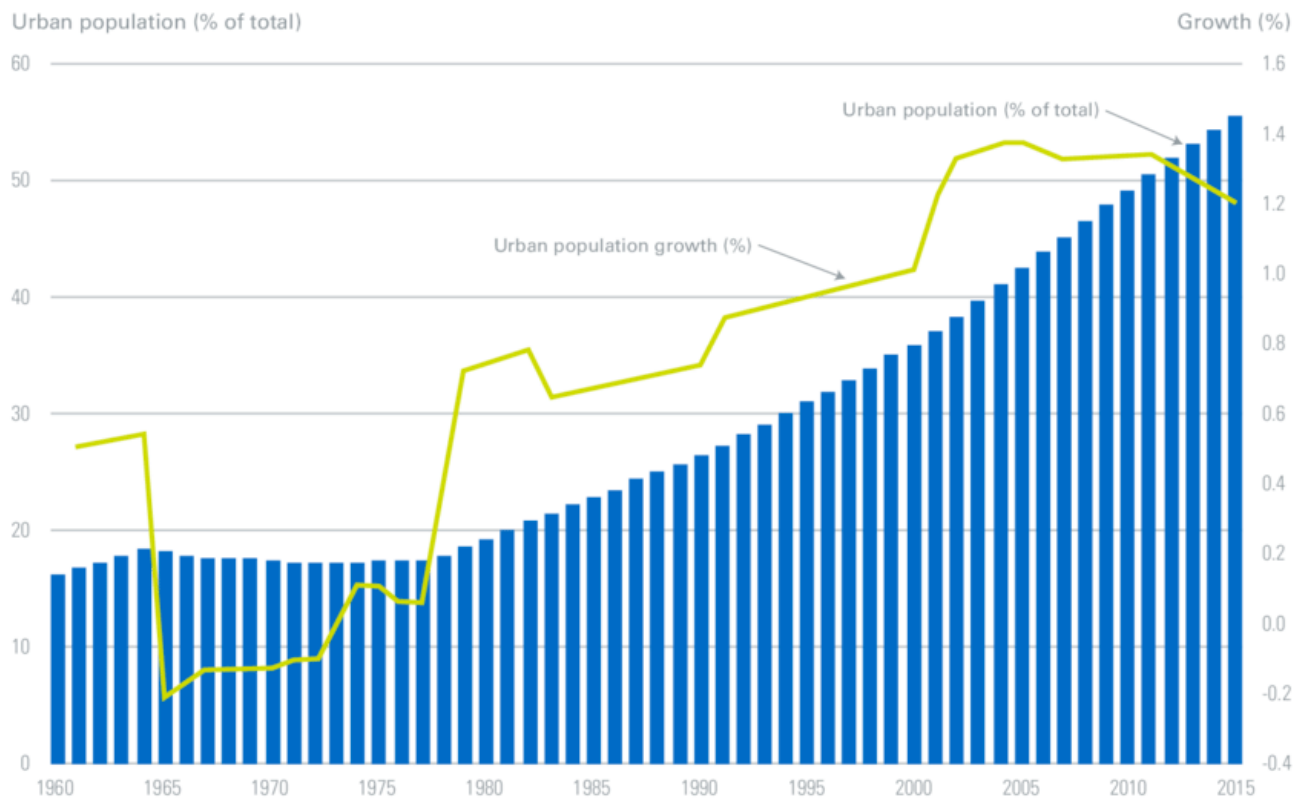


Fig. 2: Urban Population Growth in China, 1960-2015 (Wong et al., 2017)

Internal migration has caused the populations in Chinese cities to swell hugely. The blue bars show how the percentage of China’s population living in urban areas has grown consistently from around 18% in 1978, when Deng’s Reform and Opening policy was introduced, to 55% in 2015. The demand is largely driven by employment, where large numbers of people have left rural areas to cities in search of work.

The huge numbers of people have put a strain on accommodation, infrastructure and welfare systems in Chinese cities, such that many cities have taken steps to drive down their population growth. The hukou system is one aspect of this, but more radical steps have been employed. In 2018, Shanghai and Beijing put explicit caps on their populations, and critics claim that forced evictions, followed by internal migrants and low-skilled workers being priced out of new accommodation is a deliberate tactic employed by the authorities. The governments claim this is not the case. (Roxburgh, 2018)

On the other hand, Beijing has seen positive examples of how poor urban neighbourhoods have been regenerated to provide positive outcomes to both residents and investors. In Beiwu

village in the Shunyi district of Beijing, Local villagers transferred their land to the village administration, who then advertised it to developers as an investment. After the regeneration, villagers were offered the same space as they previously owned in housing, and were able to obtain more space for huge discounts. Spare land was then used for new businesses, creating jobs and helping promote the local economy (Zhao, 2013). This is a positive example of how regeneration projects can benefit both the existing residents, and investors.

This Daxing incident was one of the most newsworthy but is very far from the only case where existing urban residents, mainly of the working class, are forced out for regeneration programmes. This video is a news report from Chikan, a Chinese town in Guangdong province:



Video 1: ‘Residents of old Chinese town Chikan evicted to make way for tourists’ (*South China Morning Post*, 2017) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzessET-8bs>

The local government hoped 7 million people per year would visit the redeveloped old town of Chikan by 2020, with new shops and hotels providing employment opportunities. In hindsight in 2023, we know that due to COVID-19 pandemic meant this was not the case, however if these numbers do develop, it is clear the local economy would benefit hugely, but it is certainly unclear whether Chikan’s working class, likely to be forced to move elsewhere or not having the required education to take these new employment opportunities, would ever benefit. Many residents felt they had no choice but to sell and accept low prices for their properties, also highlighting how facilities in the city had fallen into disrepair with the authorities refusing to act. They feel they are forced to move, often putting themselves under financial strain (*South China Morning Post*, 2017). Particularly, this huge banner, displayed in the city centre, glorifies the number of residents who’ve signed compensation deals. In my view, this is an attempt by the local government to legitimise their enforcement of power, using images of collective pressure to get other residents to accept deals. This legitimacy is then used to force the remaining residents out, so the project can commence.



Fig. 3. Still from Video 1, 0:36

China's urban working class population, particularly the internal migrants who form the poorest groups, are disproportionately affected by urban regeneration projects by China, who in many cases aren't able to resettle in alternative accommodation and are forced out of the urban areas. Despite the population challenges in Chinese cities, large numbers of internal migrants being forced to leave urban areas has consequences both for individuals, with rural poverty still very high leaving the low-skilled populations forced out struggling to find work, and the cities, with their economies facing labour shortages of low paid jobs. China should look to provide resettlement schemes or model regeneration projects around the needs of the citizens already living there, such as the example of Beiwu, or for example providing residents who are forced out hukou status for the local area, as well as adequate compensation reflecting the fact that these are some of its poorest citizens, lowering the barriers to being able to remain in the cities. Particularly as China's population ages (Gries, 2023a), internal migrants will continue to play a large part in China's economy, and it is essential for the government to ensure they are protected.

Thankfully, for the Power Baseball Angels Foundation, later in the documentary they managed to secure a new facility, however, the seller highlights how they will again be forced out in the near future, due to another iteration of the regeneration programme. For many working-class people in China, they are not so lucky and face being forced out of the cities they leave for good.

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