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Migrants, landlords and their uneven experiences of the Beijing Olympic Games

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Migrants, Landlords and their Uneven Experiences of the Beijing Olympic Games

Hyun Bang Shin and Bingqin Li

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Editorial Note

Hyun Bang Shin is a lecturer in the Department of Geography and Environment, LSE and Bingqin Li is a lecturer in the Department of Social Policy, LSE. Both are CASE Associates.

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Abstract

Hosting of mega-events such as the Olympic Games tends to be accompanied by voluminous media coverage on the negative social impact of the Games, and the people in the affected areas are often considered to be one victim group sharing similar experiences. The research in this paper tries to unpack the heterogeneous groups in a particular sector of the housing market, and gain a better understanding of how the Olympic Games affects different resident groups. We take the example of the Beijing Summer Olympic Games and resort to empirical findings in an attempt to critically examine the experience of migrant tenants and Beijing citizens (landlords in particular) in ‘villages-in-the-city’ (known as *cheongzhongcun*) by delivering their own first-hand accounts of city-wide preparation for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympiad and the pervasive demolition threats to their neighbourhoods. The paper argues that the Beijing Summer Olympiad produced uneven, often exclusionary, Games experiences for a certain segment of urban population.

JEL classification: I31, D63, O18

Keywords: Beijing, Olympic Games, housing, marginality, patriotism, exclusion

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Introduction

In urban China, migrants only have limited housing choices and experience insecurity of housing tenure, the conditions of which are framed by the imposition of temporary status through the continued exercise of household registration system. Also known as *hukou* in Chinese, the household registration system has been inherited from the planned economy era, and regulates the urban social welfare provision (including public housing), limiting access on the basis of local household registration. This places unskilled migrants without abundant financial resources in greater disadvantage when they move to cities. As for migrants' housing, higher-income migrants would have access to urban private homeownership and the rental sector in urban housing markets that have seen price spikes in most major cities in recent decades. For all other migrants, unless their accommodation is provided by their employers (Li and Duda, 2010), the major form of tenure would be private rental tenure (Wu, 2008). Low-income migrants often end up settling down in more accessible residential space in urban fringes and abandoned sub-urban industrial sites or in dilapidated inner-city areas where local Beijing residents exercise landlordism to rent out extra spaces for private rental income. Houses in these areas usually have poor physical conditions and are often deficient of basic services (Huang and Jiang, 2009). However, they provide the most accessible and affordable solution for migrants' need to stay closer to their jobs under severe financial constraints (Li et al, 2009).

When Beijing was preparing for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, the municipality made a strong emphasis on carrying out environmental improvement projects (aka demolition and displacement) in what are known as *chengzhongcun* or villages-in-the-city (hereafter VICs), where migrant tenants far outnumber local Beijing permanent residents. These VICs are loci of informal building practices that evade municipal building codes, providing low-quality shelters predominantly for migrant tenants who cannot find affordable dwellings in central districts (Wang et al, 2009). In Beijing, these are dilapidated residential areas often located in urban fringes or former industrial sites, classified by some academics in China as being part of 'urban corners' to indicate their marginal position (Zhu, 2005). While these VICs are found in large scale in major cities across mainland China, their origin and its development patterns show variations.¹ One important shared feature is the informal building practices by former farmers who densify their own dwellings to add extra space for private lease to migrants in order to gain rental income. The degree of building density tends to be very high in the Pearl River Delta region, while Beijing sees relatively lower density. Therefore, VICs may not be 'informal settlements' in its original formation, but informal in nature through evolution, given its prevalent informal building practices. It was reported from a

1 In general, VICs have developed due to the rapid urban expansion engulfing former rural villages, resulting in the conversion of collectively owned 'land for cultivation' (and sometimes 'land for housing' known as *zhaijidi*) into urban construction land. In cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the expropriation of farmland into urban construction land tends to occur with the village families retaining their *zhaijidi*, while urban governments allow village collectives to exercise collective ownership of a small share of former farmland in order for them to carry out economic activities (see Tian, 2008). In Beijing, however, all lands including farmland for cultivation and *zhaijidi* for residential use tend to be expropriated (ibid), while the affected farmers retain the ownership of their dwellings and become urban citizens with jobs provided in the state sector.

government survey that about 332 VICs were present in the central and near sub-urban districts as of the early 2000s (Li and Zhang, 2006). In September 2004, the Beijing municipal government decided to carry out environmental improvement projects in 231 VICs accommodating 33,935 households, and specifically aimed at completing these projects in 171 VICs before the 2008 Olympic Games (Shin, 2009). These were overseen by a municipal organisation called the ‘2008 Environmental Construction Head Office’ (set up in December 2005), working together with other district governments. It was estimated that the demolition of 171 VICs might lead to the eviction of about 74,100 permanent village residents and about 296,400 migrants (ibid).

The demolition of VICs might have incurred heavy costs to both migrant tenants who rely heavily on VICs for private rental dwellings, and also local village landlords whose livelihood depends largely on rental revenues. While some studies have made reference to the issue of mass displacement through urban renewal (Shin, 2009; Smith and Himmelfarb, 2007) and the use of the Games as a means to draw public attention away from exacerbating inequalities (Broudehoux, 2007), they tend to draw on secondary sources and personal observations for discussions. This paper presents post-Games empirical findings in an attempt to critically examine the experience of migrant tenants and Beijing citizens including village landlords by delivering their own first-hand accounts of (a) how their life were disrupted by the city-wide preparation for the Olympic Games and (b) how they experienced the Games. The specific questions this paper asks are as follows. To what extent did the demolition of VICs during the Olympic Games preparation period fulfil its original goal? What did the demolition mean to local village landlords and tenants? How did tenants react? Did tenants lose access to affordable dwellings in Beijing? What were the actual experiences of the Olympic Games for those migrants who stayed in Beijing during the Games period? Through these questions, the research in this paper tries to unpack the heterogeneous groups (in terms of tenure and residency status) in a particular sector of the housing market, and gain a better understanding of how the Olympic Games affects different resident groups.

Three main arguments are put forward. First, the loss of VICs due to the preparation for the Olympic Games did not heighten constraints on migrants’ access to affordable housing owing largely to migrants’ mobility and the continued presence of other VICs. Second, the landlords in VICs had been also harmed, as they faced loss of rental dwellings as major sources of household income. Third, there was a clear division between the two groups (migrants and Beijing citizens) in terms of participating in neighbourhood activities associated with the celebration of the Olympic Games, reinforcing migrants’ presence in Beijing as outsiders.

Mega-events and urban marginal population

While host cities and countries find mega-event hosting as “an opportunity for a massive physical and image make-over” (Short, 2008, p.339), mega-events are criticised for their role in making cities for visitors, neglecting the needs of local residents and producing uneven distribution of material costs and benefits (Eisinger, 2000; Gratton et al., 2006; Whitson and Macintosh, 1996). Demolition of affordable dwellings incurring residents’

displacement has often been cited as one of major negative social impacts of hosting mega-events such as the Olympic Games (ACHR, 1989; Lenskyj, 2002; Olds, 1998; Porter, 2009; Shin, 2009). Various reports suggest that such displacement is larger in scale and more brutal in nature in developing countries (Smith and Himmelfarb, 2007; Greene, 2003; Dupont, 2008). A report by the Centre on Housing Rights and Eviction indicates that the number of Beijing residents displaced due to Olympics-related urban (re)development projects between 2000 and 2008 was estimated to reach about 1.5 million (about 14 per cent of Beijing's permanent residents) (COHRE, 2007). As the COHRE speculates, these numbers are unlikely to include migrants, as government reports usually refer to only those permanent local residents who are eligible for compensation.

Critics further argue that it is the powerless in the society who disproportionately bear the burden of cities being constructed to cater for the needs of visitors rather than local inhabitants (Eitzen, 1996). Those poorer segments of the society and those socially marginalised tend to go through an experience that is detached from the rest of the city's festive mood (Lenskyj, 2002; Greene, 2003). For instance, in Athens, Romani population was the main victim of eviction during the period of the city's preparation for the 2004 Summer Olympic Games, an attempt by the authorities to keep them away from the Games venues (COHRE, 2007). In Seoul, at the time of preparing for the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, one of the most brutally oppressed groups by the government was the low-income communities whose sites were near the Olympic torch path, as the government did not want them to be exposed to the media (ACHR, 1989). Delhi as the host city of the 2010 Commonwealth Games also saw the intensifying "aestheticization of city space" (Bhan, 2009, p.140), removing slums in central city areas in order to transform the city image in line with the 'world class city' vision that Delhi promoted.

The negative social impact of hosting mega-events is often overshadowed by the politics of the events. In developing countries in particular, hosting mega-events such as the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup has been frequently associated with the national politics such as the nation-building in formerly divided countries (Steenveld and Strelitz, 1998); the promotion of multicultural national identity (Van der Westhuizen, 2004); signalling the re-entry of the host country into the global community (Hiller, 2000); changes to political institutions (Black and Bezanson, 2004). Host nations engage with symbolic politics, mobilising societal support to achieve particular visions of the state (Black, 2007). Such associations of mega-events with the national politics suggest that any opposition to mega-event hosting itself may easily be interpreted as challenging the ruling regime, thus facing oppression. Furthermore, as John Short notes, mega-events ironically "reinforces nationalism" rather than transcending it (Short, 2008, p.325). The national prestige associated with mega-events such as the Olympiad, and the use of patriotic sentiment boosted by the national government produce unfavourable political environment for those expressing dissent or objecting to government policies. Social outcasts such as homeless people or persistent protesters against government policies are often criminalised and kept away from the public (COHRE, 2007).

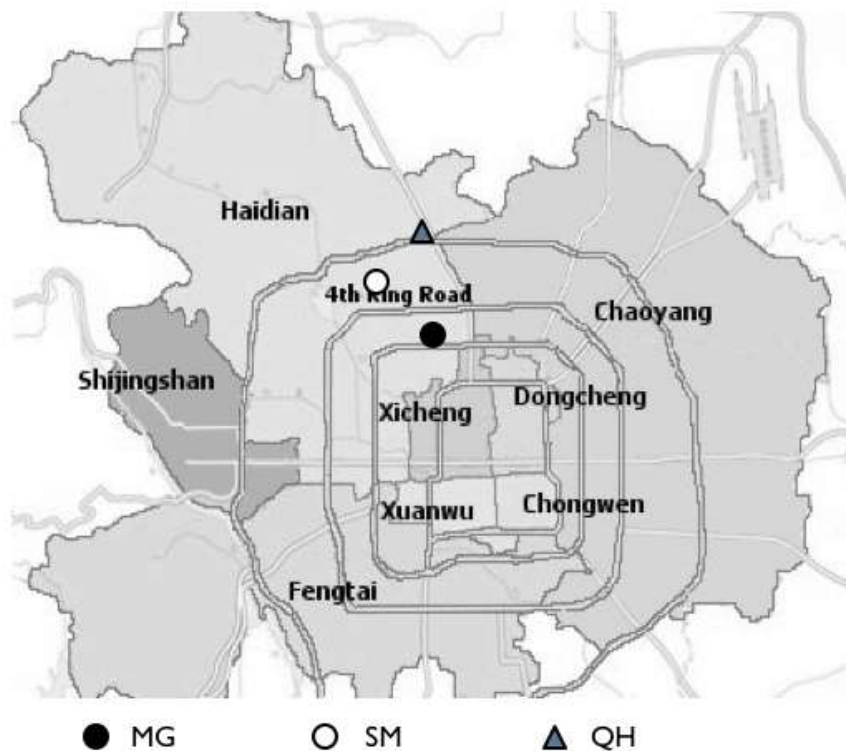
These studies suggest that when we examine the experience of the marginalised groups in an Olympic project, we need to examine both the physical and subjective experiences of the affected, shaped within the political economic constraints of the host nation. It would also

be necessary to have a longer historical view (Davis, 2011) so that the role of demolition of low-income settlements in urban policy-making could be better understood. Therefore, in our study on the experiences of Beijing's VICs residents including both migrant tenants and their landlords, we will also focus on their physical and subjective experiences of the Games.

Research Data

In order for us to clearly understand VIC residents' actual experiences of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympiad, we intended to carry out post-Games fieldwork, involving qualitative interviews with migrant workers as well as village landlords with formerly rural origin. These interviews were carried out between December 2008 and January 2009. Beijing is known for its concentric ring-roads: the areas around and beyond the fourth ring-road are usually described as 'near sub-urban' areas (see Figure-1).

Figure 1: Location of study areas



The official statistics indicate that as of 2008, the number of migrants in Beijing reached 27.4 per cent of all permanent residents. The majority of migrant population (56 per cent) live in near sub-urban districts (Haidian, Chaoyang, Fengtai and Shijingshan) (see Table-1 below). Haidian was chosen as the main district for field research site selection, as it had the largest share of VICs when the municipal government identified 231 VICs for demolition

by 2010.² As shown in Table-1, Haidian had nearly one million migrants, constituting about one third of its total population. In Haidian, three neighbourhoods were selected based on accessibility and their locational proximity to the city centre. One neighbourhood (marked MG for confidentiality) is located just outside the northern section of the third ring-road near disused rail track north of Beijing North Station; the second neighbourhood (SM), just outside the northern section of the fourth ring-road near Tsinghua University and Yuanmingyuan; and the third neighbourhood (QH), adjacent to the intersection between the fifth ring-road and G6 Jing Zang expressway. QH consists of three sub-neighbourhoods, named QH 2-, 3- and 4-Street. As part of redevelopment, QH 2- and 3-Street were undergoing demolition, which commenced in 2005 and 2006 respectively according to QH interviewees, and remained on-going as of December 2008. Official estimates of the population size were not available, but the interviewees suggested that the number of local Beijing households in MG, SM and QH 4-Street reached 50~60, 150 and 1000 households respectively. The interviews with migrant tenants suggest that house rents declined with distance from the city centre so that people paid on average cheaper monthly rents in QH (24~35 yuan/m²) than in SM (40~50 yuan/m²) or MG (35~71 yuan/m²).

Table 1: Permanent population and density in Beijing, 2008

	Population (thousand persons)			Population Density (people per square kilometre)
		Migrants	% of migrants	
Beijing (total)	16,950	4,651	27.4%	1,033
Inner city districts	2,083	381	18.3%	22,546
Dongcheng	553	101	18.3%	21,823
Xicheng	673	112	16.6%	21,284
Chongwen	297	53	17.8%	17,978
Xuanwu	560	115	20.5%	29,614
Near suburban districts	8,356	2,601	31.1%	6,549
Haidian	2,930	906	30.9%	6,802
Chaoyang	3,083	998	32.4%	6,775
Fengtai	1,753	489	27.9%	5,733
Shijingshan	590	208	35.3%	6,997
Outer suburban districts	4,708	1,443	30.6%	748
Other districts and counties	1,803	226	12.5%	206

Source: Beijing Statistical Yearbook 2009

2 Among the 231 VICs, most were concentrated in three near-suburban districts of Haidian (70 VICs), Chaoyang (57 VICs) and Fengtai (51 VICs), as shown in the news report included in the Real Estate Industry Monitoring Report (29 October 2004) found on this link, <http://www.lgqjd.gov.cn/oa/infofiles/files/00001426.doc> (last accessed 19 May 2012).

In total, 48 qualitative interviews were conducted: 17 in MG, 10 in SM and 21 in QH. Interviewees were selected from various parts of each neighbourhood, taking into account their tenure and household registration status: 28 migrant tenants and 20 local Beijing permanent residents, the latter divided into two groups, 14 landlords and 6 non-landlords. Snowballing was applied in order to recruit migrant tenants who experienced house-move due to demolition during the pre-Games period. In the case of migrant interviewees, the average number of years of residence in Beijing turned out to be 5.9 years for those in QH, 3.5 years for SM and 6.7 years in MG.

Efficacy of government's demolition policy

According to the Haidian district mayor, 47 VICs were subject to environmental improvement by December 2006 as part of the Games preparation, involving the demolition of 2,215,000 square metres of illegal construction (Haidian District Government, 2007a, p.45). In its 2009 annual yearbook, the Haidian district government summed up its Olympic-related environmental improvement efforts, stating that 63 VICs and urban corners were subject to comprehensive improvement (Haidian District Government, 2009, p.121).

The work progress was slower than planned. As early as in November 2005, the 'municipal management committee' of the Haidian district admitted in its annual progress report that while it aimed to undertake 17 VIC improvement projects involving the displacement of more than 560 households and the demolition of 57,000 square metres, only two projects were completed and another nine had just started, leading to the displacement of 157 households and the house demolition of 6,027 square metres. The district government also announced that while it aimed at implementing 29 VIC projects and displacing 2,872 households altogether in 2005 and 2006, only 5 were completed and 1542 households displaced by December 2006, resulting in the completion rate of 53.7 per cent (Haidian District Government, 2007b). These suggest that the district government might have rushed into project completion in the remaining days before the Olympic Games opening, and some projects might have remained incomplete or postponed. For instance, West Street in SM was supposed to be regenerated, but it clearly did not happen. As one landlord interviewee in his 30s living with parents said:

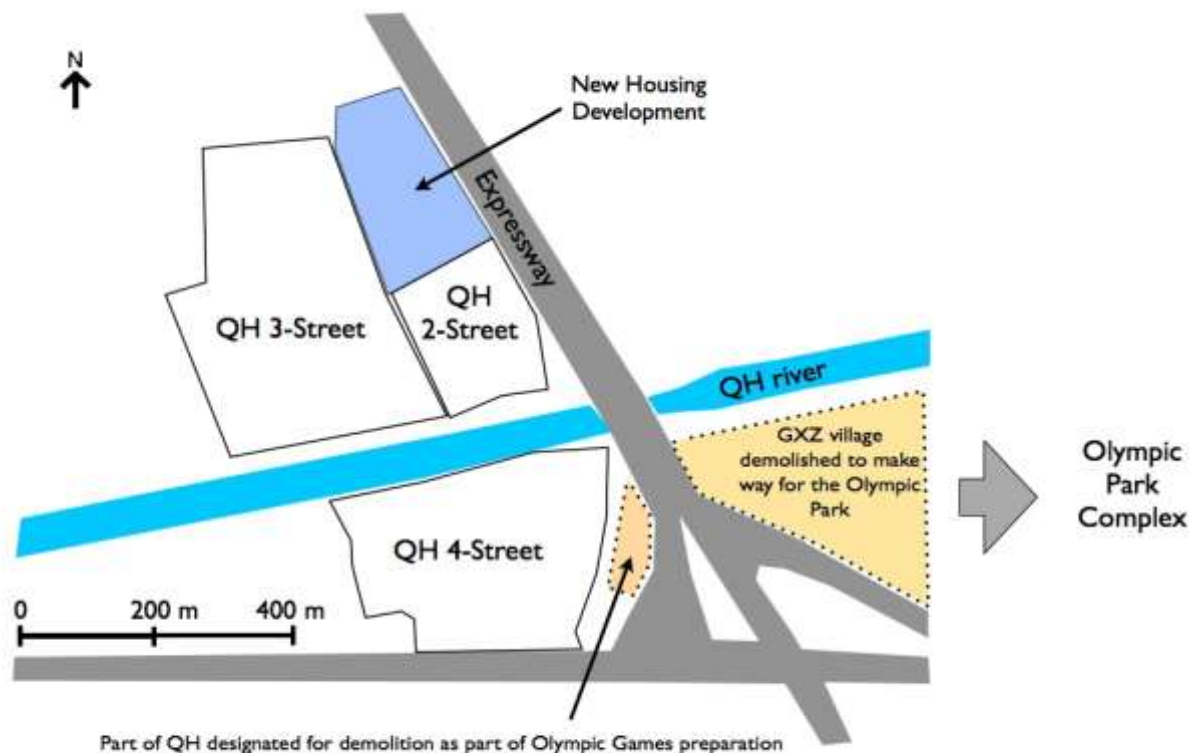
It's been said during the last ten years that this place would be demolished...Before the Olympic Games, newspapers said SM West Street would be demolished, but until now, nothing has been demolished (S3)³

Furthermore, the characteristics of those 171 VICs selected for demolition could also be questionable. While some VICs experienced wholesale demolition such as those located on what became the Olympic Park complex, some others might have been pin-pointed to maximise the output during the limited time. This was the case of QH village demolition. While QH village as a whole constitutes a large area divided by QH River, only a small section of QH 4-Street, located in the south-eastern corner where it meets the expressway,

3 In this paper, in addition to basic details of interviewees, each interviewee is identified by the classification code that represents village name and interview sequential number. Q2, Q3 and Q4 denote QH 2-, 3- and 4-Street respectively.

was designated for demolition to be turned into a green space (see Figure-2). This project was announced to be an Olympic Games related VIC improvement project in July 2006. The area to the east of the expressway used to be a large VIC, also demolished to make way for the Olympic Park complex. The case of QH-4 Street's partial demolition clearly indicates that the government attempts to demolish VICs as part of the Games preparation might have left some VICs only partly affected rather than complete eradication. As a landlady in her 50s from MG village expresses, talks about VICs demolition might have been "only a slogan" for some areas, as "the state did not have the strength" (M16).

Figure 2: QH village precinct and the location of demolition areas



Understanding the consequence of demolition projects: Views of the village landlords

To those village landlords, the news of demolition of other VICs as part of the Olympic Games clean-up provoked mixed feelings about the future of their own neighbourhoods. Among the 14 village landlord interviewees, 11 were aware of the demolition of VICs within the fourth ring-road or near major Olympic venues, but they were rather sceptical about the necessity to do so. For instance, a 53-year-old landlord in SM (S7) claimed that demolition was:

“Definitely because of the Olympic Games. If not, could the demolition be taking place so hastily? I feel like this village does not need to be demolished, as it would be difficult to relocate [villagers]”

His view was echoed by another landlady in her 60s from SM (S10) who indicated that the number of migrants in her neighbourhood increased because “*chengzhongcun* within the fourth ring-road were demolished and people had no place to live but to squeeze into outside areas”. The very survival of the study neighbourhoods, however, also suggests that the eradication of all VICs in Beijing would take much greater efforts and a longer timeframe. Talks of demolition and redevelopment have been around for many years in both SM and MG, which would have made local residents tired of years-long government inaction to address neighbourhood dilapidation. The inability to enforce the projects generated a sense of instability:

For more than 10 years, people were talking about redevelopment, but it has not taken place until now (S3).

From the 1980s there were discussions about demolition in this area, but nothing has happened. Whether or not demolition takes place is a matter for the state, and has no relationship with us (M5)

As for landlords living in QH 4-Street (see Figure-2 above), the slow process of demolition in the adjacent neighbourhoods QH 2- and 3-Street provided a template against which they would draw a provisional conclusion about the future of their own neighbourhood:

“This area is definitely not going to be demolished. You know, as far as demolition is concerned, there is no fixed schedule. You say the QH 3-Street neighbourhood is undergoing demolition, but it’s been five years since the notice. Even though demolition has begun and takes place continuously, it has not finished yet. Only half way through. So, our place here, nobody knows when it’s going to be demolished” (male, landlord in his 50s, Q4-11)

Different from the general understanding, landlords and local Beijing residents were often eager to have their neighbourhood demolished and redeveloped as they considered it a means to improve their own living conditions. They were also quick to point out the need for adequate compensation. While there were regulations to provide in-kind (in the form of providing relocation housing) or cash compensation, cash compensation has become the norm since the early 2000s (Shin, 2007). Local village landlords and public sector tenants were aware of the compensation policies and during the interviews, and were expressive about the level of cash compensation they wished to receive.

What is more concerning to the landlords is the loss of future rental income. For many, rental was an important source of extra income. Among the 11 landlord interviewees who disclosed their rental status, each landlord had about 10 tenant households on average, earning approximately 39300 yuan per year. This was 57 per cent of Beijing’s average household disposable income in 2008.⁴ The highest rental income was enjoyed by an interviewee’s family in SM (S1) who rented out 17 out of 27 units (the other 10 units

4 The per capital annual disposable income for Beijing residents turned out to be 24,725 yuan, and the average household size 2.8 members in 2008 (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2009, Table 8-2).

remained vacant) at the time of the interview and earned about 112,200 yuan per year. Around 2004, the family informally added two more storeys on top of the original 120-square-metre one-storey dwelling. The second highest rental income was from a 72-year-old landlord in MG who had 10 tenant households (M12). He added a second floor in 1985 to add more living space, and then spent around 150,000 yuan to add another floor in 2003 for renting. As the level of rent in his place was between 500 and 700 yuan per unit at the time of interview, it would have taken less than three years to recover the initial investment. Nevertheless, as the earlier interviewee S1 mentions, rental income was the main, if not the only, source of family income. Migrant tenants were also aware of this situation, as a 30-year-old migrant stated: “if demolition takes place, there is not more income source. For the local [Beijing] resident, house rent is the income source” (Q4-2). Demolition, cash compensation and relocation (or re-housing on site) would improve the physical living conditions for these landlords, but would also destroy the basis of their major household income.

Views of migrant tenants: “We’d just move and find another place”

In contrast to landlords, migrant tenants were much less concerned about neighbourhood demolition. With regard to the city-wide demolition of VICs, the majority of those responded (19 migrant interviewees) indicated that they had not heard of the news or were not interested in following up the development. While private rental dwellings in VICs would provide migrant tenants with the most accessible means of residence in Beijing, the private rental tenure did not guarantee any protection for migrants upon demolition. Cash or in-kind compensations are only meant for local permanent residents in owner occupation or public rental tenure, and private tenants are supposed to negotiate individually with landlords, in which case the outcome depends largely on the relationship between landlords and their tenants. Usually, migrant tenants receive little protection, as an interviewee (Q4-2) stated: “this [compensation] has no relation to us nor to my interest...let it be their concern”.

Migrants understood that there was no compensation provision for displaced private tenants, and they did not expect it either: They tended to accept that this was part of their life. Among the 28 migrants interviewed, 17 of them moved their residence at least once during their stay in Beijing, and eleven said they had moved in the past because of demolition. Irrespective of their previous demolition experience, they held the view that, upon demolition, “we’d just move and find another place to live”, showing no strong sense of attachment to their existing residence and little expectation of tenure security. One migrant, a 24-year-old woman (Q4-4), mentioned that she did not pay attention to demolition simply “because we are migrants”. Her statement echoed other interviewees’ views that “we migrants have no rights” (M3) and “we migrants do not receive any benefits” (M9) from the government upon demolition. These claims suggested that migrants were well aware of their fundamentally insecure position in the city. The restriction on their housing choices, the institutional constraints from the exercise of household registration system and the continual efforts by the municipal government to eradicate accessible residential space such as VICs caused migrants to grant as less significance as possible to house-move upon demolition of their rental dwellings.

Given the scale of demolition in the short time span before the Olympic Games, one would wonder if the migrants were under pressure to pay higher rents. In our study, eight interviewees reported that the rent level in the surrounding areas went up, and three interviewees who had to move indeed paid higher rents, as they did not want to move further away and stayed close to their original place of residence. For instance, interviewee Q4-10 (28 year old male) worked in a supermarket, and he paid 400 yuan as compared to the previous 260 yuan. His new residence was close to his previous neighbourhood, which was near the north-eastern corner of the Olympic Park.

However, looking for affordable or cheaper places to live was a priority. Some migrants would try to find affordable places where they would pay similar rent. As a 34-year-old male migrant living in QH 3-Street states (Q3-4), “if demolition takes place, rents will go up, and it is not a good thing. At present, people who live in this kind of place are all migrants, and it is better to have cheaper rents even if living conditions are worse off”. Keeping rent level within household budget was the motive for these displacees to look for places farther out. In our interviews, a female migrant in her 40s (Q4-8) working at Beijing University No.3 Hospital, used to live near the hospital at the northern section of the third ring-road. She had to move further north to QH 4-Street, about five kilometres away from her original residence to keep the same rent level (about 300 yuan). Another 39-year-old male migrant interviewee (Q3-3) used to live with his family near the south-eastern section of the fourth ring-road, but had to move to QH 3-Street in 2006 to keep his family’s rent at 4~500 yuan. Migrants were also keeping themselves aware of alternative neighbourhoods where cheaper accommodations could be found, which would help them decide where to move if needed. For example, a 43-year-old migrant garbage collector living in QH 4-Street at the time of interviewing stated: “From here to the north, around Xi’erqi village, rent is 100 something yuan...The place also has a school, so sending my child to school would not be a problem.”

These findings suggest that the availability of alternative VICs such as QH 4-Street and Xi’erqi allowed migrant tenants to find affordable dwellings when they needed to move. Even if the demolition of 171 out of 231 VICs before the commencement of the Olympic Games was completed as the government claimed (Wang, 2008), this still left 60 VICs in their priority list for demolition by 2010. The number would increase to more than 100 VICs if we accepted the government estimation that there were 332 VICs in Beijing by early 2000s. As noted earlier in this paper, village landlords responded to the housing market by densifying their houses in order to provide more rooms for increased number of tenants, hence increasing rental revenues. In this way, the capacity of the existing VICs to accommodate migrant tenants multiplied quickly. Landlords’ intention to build more was clearly spelt out by a landlady in her 60s (S10):

“This year, our state just hosted the Olympic Games. It spent a lot of money and currently does not have the energy to renovate this place. It may stop and rest for a year or two before it begins demolition. After waiting a couple of years, if the state does not demolish this place of ours, I will build. If it does the demolition, I will not build.”

The presence of informal construction of rental dwellings by village landlords also provided tenants with an extra assurance that demolition might not happen in the short-term. As a 30-

year-old male migrant (Q4-2) said: “You look at the houses here. Many landlords built flats and rented them out, so in the short term, demolition may not happen” (Q4-2).

Whose Games? Migrants’ exclusionary experience of the Olympiad

At the time of hosting the Beijing Summer Olympiad, a number of news reports emerged, delivering scattered stories about how the Games were received among Chinese. Mainstream local Chinese media tended to report on the general public’s positive reactions to the grandeur of the Olympic Games, and the national prestige associated with the mega-event. After all, having failed earlier in 1993 in its competition with Sydney to bid for the 2000 Summer Olympiad, Beijing’s eventual winning to host the 2008 Games could be seen as an opportunity to prove to the world that China had finally integrated with the world economy, endorsed earlier in part by its accession to the World Trade Organization.

Like many other cities in the country, Beijing has benefited tremendously from migrants’ cheap labour for its wealth accumulation. When the Olympic Games were in preparation, there were reports of exclusionary experiences of the Olympic Games among migrants. Migrants as builders of the Olympic City were excluded effectively from sharing the joy of the Games, affected by many restrictions and bans imposed as part of Beijing’s environmental control. The Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (hereafter BOCOG) produced the Beijing Olympic Action Plan,⁵ and its Social Environment Development section specifically classified the management of migrants as part of government actions on ‘security, health care and sanitation’. It stated:

“Maintaining good social order – the projects of ‘safe community’ and ‘science-and-technology based security’ will be continued. Specifically, we will continue enhancing the public security structures from the grass roots and building a complete anti-criminal network among the citizens. Management of the floating population in the city shall be further improved and services will be provided.”

City-wide operation for social cleansing to make streets free of undesirables was strengthened in early 2008 (Watts, 2008), affecting beggars, street vendors and other unlicensed businesses. Construction sites and factories were to be temporarily closed during the months preceding the Games in order to improve the quality of Beijing’s polluted air, and migrant workers in these sectors were ‘persuaded’ to leave Beijing (Branigan, 2008; Fahmy, 2008). As the government security measures were tightened, ID checks for city-bound travellers were introduced to discourage migrant commuters to enter Beijing. These measures were all aimed at keeping migrants away as much as possible during the Games under the name of ‘management of the floating populations’. Several VIC landlords reported the impact of such exclusion: they had fewer tenants and lost rental income especially in QH where migrants were concentrated:

“[Our] family’s [rental] income decreased from July [2008], as many [migrant] tenants went back home” (A 46-year-old landlady from QH, Q3-1)

5 See the BOCOG web site, URL: <http://en.beijing2008.cn/07/93/article211929307.shtml> (last accessed 26 May 2012).

Various civil codes (and penalties) were also implemented to encourage ‘civilised’ behaviour. Rural-to-urban migrants were often viewed by urban local residents and policy enforcers as being ‘uncultured’, and were negatively affected more than urban citizens by the disciplinary measures. These codes also included no use of rickshaws in city centres and other Games areas. Informal and *uncivil* activities other than authorised by the municipality were to be hidden from the views of local residents and visitors during the Games period. These restrictions were relaxed only after the closing of the Games, as the symbolic image of a rickshaw driving along the main artery next to the Olympic main stadium shows in the picture below.

Figure 3: Olympic main stadium, Bird’s Nest and a rickshaw



These ‘Olympic’ restrictions on everyday life of migrants (as well as local Beijing citizens in many instances) were felt by migrant interviewees who stayed behind in Beijing during the Games period, enduring hardship due to constraints on their income-generating activities. A 30-year-old male interviewee (Q4-2) recollected the temporary closure of his wife’s clothing store located at Wudaokou area in Haidian district. Another 45-year-old migrant (Q4-5) was experiencing difficulties as he could not run his street stall for bicycle repair due to the government ban between 20 July and 20 September. Another family (Q4-4) had to move because their lorry for living did not have a Beijing number plate and was not allowed to park in their previous residence located near the northern section of the fourth ring-road, not too far from the main Olympic Games complex.

Migrants' uneven experiences of the Games were also evident in their exclusion from various neighbourhood-based cultural and sports activities as part of Games celebration. These activities were largely organised by grassroots organisations such as neighbourhood residents' committees or local sub-district governments. Activities such as neighbourhood patrolling by volunteers and gatherings to celebrate the hosting of the Olympic Games were attended by more than "80 per cent of local villagers" (50-years-old male interviewee in QH, Q4-11), and these activities were "100 per cent for local villagers", that is, no participation of migrants (72-years-old male interview in MG village). While local Beijing citizens were actively voicing out their experience of participating in the Olympic Games-related volunteering activities, the same experience was hardly heard of among migrants, who also considered those festive activities to be none of their businesses and mostly stayed away. This feeling of indifference would have emanated from their deep-rooted perception that migrants were mostly excluded from neighbourhood affairs, as expressed cynically by a migrant interviewee: "the neighbourhood committee ignores us and only cares about birth control" (Q4-5). One of the migrants who were interviewed expressed frustration about her experience of attempting to participate in a neighbourhood activity during the Games period, and being rejected by a local authority person who scolded at her and demanded her immediate departure:

"At the time of the Olympic Games, there was an activity organised in this place, and I went to watch it as it looked lively. A person, who looked like a person in the Street Office, saw me and said, 'where are you from, and where are you going?' So I said, 'Did I cause anything to anyone? Did I do anything that violates the law?' His eyes were looking down on people. Their vision is to discriminate against migrants...Actually, we migrants and local people [from Beijing] are two different kinds, and they are not interested in migrants" (52-years-old male interviewee, S1)

The migrants' exclusionary experience of the Olympic Games reflected the decades-long consolidation of inequalities based on household registration institutions, which severely constrained migrants' rights in their destination cities. These inequalities were accompanied by stigmatisation and marginalisation in cities of their own construction. Migrants were often looked down upon by local residents, who would use the expression such as "*suzhi tai cha*" (a female interviewee in her 50s in MG village) that could be literally translated into 'the quality is poor (or not up to standard)', possibly referring to all aspects of poor characteristics such as ill manner and low level of educational attainment. Those punitive measures against migrants reflected bias and stigmatisation frequently associated with migrants (Mallee, 2000, pp.148-151).

Patriotism and the Olympic Games

The Beijing Olympiad's official slogan "One World, One Dream" was visible from every corner of Beijing when the city hosted the 2008 Summer Olympic Games (see Figure-4 below). On the web site of the BOCOG,⁶ it is explained that the slogan:

6 See its web page on <http://en.beijing2008.cn/17/74/article212027417.shtml>

“...expresses the common wishes of people all over the world, inspired by the Olympic ideals, to strive for a bright future of Mankind. In spite of the differences in colors, languages and races, we share the charm and joy of the Olympic Games, and together we seek for the ideal of Mankind for peace. We belong to the same world and we share the same aspirations and dreams”

Contrary to the international orientation of the slogan, mega-events like the Olympic Games are often dotted with patriotic sentiment, creating great challenges for any anti-Olympic movements or protests against the government policies. During the period of the Games preparation and hosting, government policies and actions were often rebranded as being related to the Olympic Games, thus gaining a sense of urgency and exception. The Games were also thought to have been used as a way of diverting public attention away from social discontents, and “as a propaganda tool to promote national cohesion and rally an increasingly divided people around a common cause” (Broudehoux, 2007, p.392). The public support was high among Beijingers, as demonstrated by the 94.6 per cent support rate according to an independent survey conducted in February/March 2000 (The IOC EB, 2000).

Figure 4: Street fence with Olympic slogan: “One World, One Dream”



Note: On the banner, “For the glory of mother land, for the glory of the Olympic Games”

Such an exceptionally high support for the Games was sustained, and possibly strengthened, as the entire Chinese state was disseminating pro-Olympic Games messages by the central

and municipal governments. Patriotism was emphasised heavily during the Games preparation. Neighbourhoods were decorated with slogans and placards that delivered pro-Olympic, patriotic messages (as shown in Figure-5). While ‘One World, One Dream’ was its official slogan, the Beijing Olympic Games web site displayed five main spirits of Beijing Olympic Games in Chinese, giving a top priority to the patriotic spirit for the glory of the country. The 2008 Olympic Games was indeed a major moment not only for the city but for the country to promote itself and consolidate its confidence and pride both domestically and internationally.

Figure 5: Placard in a Beijing neighbourhood



Note: Words on the banners are “One World, One Dream”

This exceptional atmosphere, coordinated by the state, seemed to make migrant tenants and village landlords more tolerant of the harsh treatment and of the disruption to their livelihood due to the mounting pressure of demolition. For instance, a 28-year-old male migrant interviewee (Q4-10) stated explicitly that even if the demolition of the VICs within the fourth ring might have incurred costs to migrants:

“This is okay, as hosting the Olympic Games is a major state affair, a very rare event. We can understand these arrangements by the state. Hosting the Games raises our country’s profile. Incurring a little bit of costs to my family is not a big deal, as long as the loss is not huge.”

While the migrants and local Beijing residents went through disproportionate Olympic experiences as explained earlier, the migrant's view above was echoed by another village landlord (Q4-11) who held a Beijing *hukou*:

“The Olympic Games is the nation's major event, and is our glory. We should support it strongly. Every resident should support it. Even if there is a sacrifice to make, we should endure it.”

Concluding discussion

In their discussion about the material legacy of hosting international mega-events, Whitson and Macintosh (1996) argue that any identifiable benefits are not evenly shared among citizens, calling for the reconceptualisation of urban development and promotion to be more inclusive. Our study of the impact of Beijing Olympic Games on migrants and village landlords as well as their experience of the Games also suggests the uneven distribution of the benefits and costs of the Olympic Games. We identify that the Olympic Games have reinforced the existing socio-economic and political inequalities, and our findings testify Eitzen's argument that “the powerless bear the burden” (Eitzen, 1996). In China, the sharp distinction between migrants and local citizens' right to the city is embedded in the backbone of the society (Li, 2006; Hu et al, 2002; Shin, 2011). Critics also point out that local governments are increasingly redefining urban citizenship and associated benefit entitlements, which given preference to locally registered permanent residents irrespective of their rural or urban status (Smart and Smart, 2001; Chan and Buckingham, 2008). Village landlords, though part of Beijing citizens, were negatively affected by the demolition pressure on Beijing's VICs, which saw the selective targeting of VICs in Olympic-related strategic locations. Migrants as outsiders faced exclusionary experiences of the Olympic Games, even though their presence was the backbone of Beijing's Olympic City construction.

In this paper, we have also explored that contrary to common perception, migrants were not as severely affected as one might have thought in terms of accessing affordable housing in the city. The reasons for this may be two-fold. First, the actual demolition, while being substantial, might still have left a significant share of existing VICs intact or partly affected. As the example of QH village suggested, some VICs would have seen only part of the neighbourhood, rather than the entire area, being subject to demolition. The presence of remaining villages would have allowed migrants to ‘hop’ from one demolished village to another, thus keeping the housing costs down while experiencing inconvenience due to longer commuting time. For migrants, it appears that housing tenure security may be less of a concern upon making decisions on house-move (Wu, 2008). As Beijing has expanded in scale and its inner city areas redeveloped, low-skilled migrants with no resources to access private homeownership are pushed further out to suburban areas where affordable places such as VICs are concentrated. This has been further facilitated by the construction of extensive mass transport infrastructure, metro line expansion in particular, and the hugely subsidised passenger fares, albeit likely increase in the time taken for commuting. It is possible that the expected ‘slow death’ of VICs in relatively central districts of Beijing in its promotion as a ‘world city’ would accompany the growth of VICs in outer suburban districts, thus producing a bifurcated city with spatial segregation.

A further question to be answered is why the injustice and harsh treatment of migrants in particular were accepted. While acknowledging the intensified security measures during the Games period, we highlight the role of nationalism, promoting patriotic sentiment as much as possible in order to bring stability to the country and divert public attention away from domestic disputes. As Emily Parker describes, the Beijing Olympic Games became “an outlet for Chinese nationalist fervor” (Parker, 2008, p.273). It makes marginalised populations more tolerant of the unequal treatment during the Games preparation and hosting period. The Games brought the Chinese people behind the Beijing Olympic slogan, “One World, One Dream”, even if it was a nightmare for some individuals, as some cynical netizens put it. Migrants were pushed around not only due to the constraints in their economic activities but also because of city-wide demolition of accessible residential space. Village landlords suffered, pressured under demolition threats and to lose their only means of income sources. The problem with this situation in which mega-event hosting is combined with heightened nationalism is that vulnerability can be partially disguised. As the excitement of the Olympic Games fades away, the various social pressures suppressed before and during the Games period may resurface, which would brew new sources of social tension.

The discussions in this paper have implications for more mega-events to come in developing countries where the intensity of urban development would likely produce a similar degree of demolition and displacement in a relatively narrow time window. Most of all, it would be necessary to understand the social consequences in the broader framework of political economy of urban development and its relation to mega-event hosting such as the Olympic Games that comes with a specified, unchallengeable deadline. The latter largely acts as a catalyst to what will happen to host cities during the post-event period. The empirical in-depth analysis in this paper suggests that the complete eradication of VICs is challenging and they prove to be resilient even in times of municipal assault under the names of the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, the Beijing experience also testifies the fact that the Olympic Games has acted as a catalyst to what the municipality desires, that is the making of Beijing as a world city (China Daily, 2010). The presence of VICs may turn out to be incompatible with the municipality’s city development vision, and the Olympic Games has widely opened the door to more intense intervention in Beijing’s most marginal, dilapidated space.

Moreover, while most current studies studying the social legacy of the Olympic Games tend to examine the scale of displacement of the poor, this approach needs to change so as to address the broader exclusion of poor residents or ethnic minorities or other types of urban marginal populations whose stigmatisation and discrimination exclude them from equally sharing the new Olympic space with their urban neighbours. Sydney’s experience in the 1990s in preparation for its 2000 Summer Olympiad showed that “public money being spent in this way [Games preparation] ... seems to polarize the city population into those who consume world class entertainment and benefit in other ways from its presence and those who cannot and do not” (Wilson, 1996, p.608). Our study of the 2008 Summer Olympiad confirms this statement, and goes further to highlight that Olympic experiences in developing countries would be manifold harsher for urban marginal population who have a weak foothold due to the built-in structure of inequalities accumulated over time.

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