

Danwei, Family Ties, and Residential Mobility of Urban Elderly in Beijing from a Life History Perspective

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Abstract

Despite the growing concern over the aging trend in major Chinese cities, housing scholars and policy makers have not paid enough attention to residential mobility of elderly people and their need for accessible housing. On the other hand, market transition has brought profound transformation to Chinese cities. Most notably, the work unit (danwei) system, which had dominated in Chinese urban society have been dismantled gradually. Whereas many urban studies have tried to understand the implications of marketization for residential mobility and housing status in Chinese cities, little has been studied on housing status and residential mobility of the urban elderly. This paper examines residential mobility of the urban elderly in Beijing from a life history perspective. We argue that, the elderly generations - mostly born in the 1920s and 1930s and entering into the workforce in the 1950s - have lived through tremendous social and institutional changes taking place in China over the past five decades. The rise of market economy and the dismantling of the danwei system are expected to bring most significant impacts on urban elderly as opposed to younger generations. The life history perspective provides a useful framework for analyzing and understanding individual life experience in relation to social and institutional transformation. Specifically, we seek for an in-depth interpretation of danwei institutions and family ties in affecting housing status and decision of the elderly in the context of market transition, emphasizing the inter-locking of individual life events and societal contexts. We base our analysis on qualitative case studies on life-history records of 30 residents aging 65-85, representing the cohorts of the 1920s and 1930s. Major conclusions are as follows. First, despite the assumption that marketization grants more housing choices for residents, the residential mobility of urban elderly is largely constrained by institutional factors such as the work unit system and family ties. Second, our analysis shows that, for urban elderly in Beijing, danwei now represents less as an formal institution of welfare provision than a form of social networks and supports valued by elderly people. "Living in danwei" provides a sense of community and attachment for the elderly, thus leading to a high tendency to stay and low residential mobility. Second, while residential moves do happen, the decision process is often constrained by family ties, with the elderly moving to take care of grandchildren or themselves seeking care from adult children.