

The Misunderstanding to Informal Housing Concept

Research On Informal Housing in Tianjin, China

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Introduction

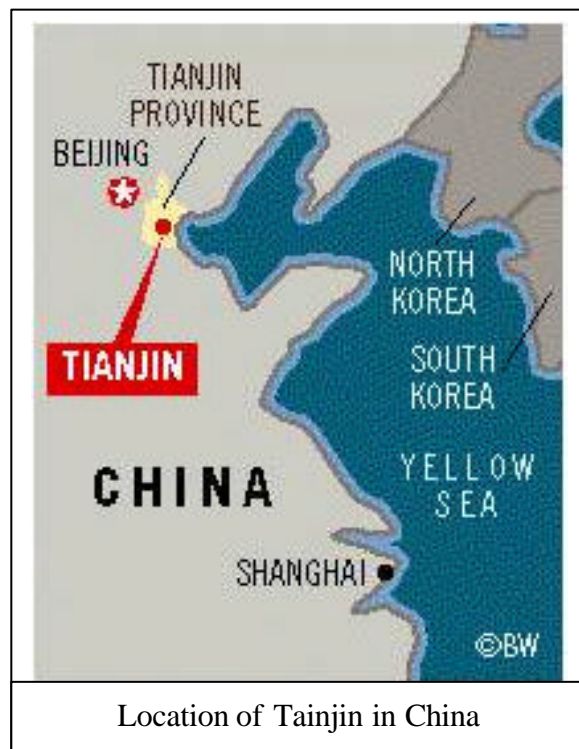
The resource of this paper is the discussion on the *Housing and building in developing Countries* course. During the discussion, I found there were some misunderstandings to informal housing concept. To make them clear, I go further to write this paper in order to analyze the concept of informal housing and to show the existing informal housing problems in China. Here I am glad to introduce Prof. Han Verschure's words as my preface.

*The built environment in developing countries is characterized inter alias by rapid growth of towns and cities, restructuring of traditional modes of dwelling and inhabitation, new ways of planning and organizing the built environment, and new processes and production in the building sector.*¹

-Han Verschure

General Background of Tianjin

My hometown-Tianjin, China, lies besides the Bohai Sea to the west of Pacific Ocean. It's 137km to Beijing. It occupies a total area of 11,305 square kilometers and has a population of 9,000,000. It is one of the three municipalities directly under the Central Government. Tianjin was found in 1404, and has a history of 590 years. According to the Tianjin City Master Plan, Tianjin is to become the economic center of the Bohai Sea Rim; the fully opened modernized international port metropolis, and an important economical center. Living quarters and service facilities will be constructed to improve the housing condition and provide better services to the people.²



Misunderstanding One: The connotation of informal housing

¹ *Housing and building in developing Countries*, Han Verschure

² *Tianjin City Master Plan, 1995*, Tianjin Land Programming Bureau

Due to informal housing is the shortcoming of the country; it is quite difficult to research on it without financial and political support of the authority. Informal housing is not registered in official statistics; any measure to invest of informal settlements remains limited. Information may be obtained from specific research studies, but it is difficult to obtain and may be of variable quality. Then the concept is not clear for Chinese researchers. Normally, it is misunderstood as slum, illegal housing or squatter settlements. Actually, informal housing, as a part of community, has certain meaning, which is different under its circumstances. That means under different society, economics, culture background, the meaning of informal housing will be different. Informal housing can be looked on as a social problem along the human being development. But actually, it is an interdisciplinary problem, which is linked with sociality, economics and urban research. Because of this, it is very important to make the connotation of informal housing clear.

Community:³ A group of people living in one place, district or country considered as a whole; or a group of people of the same religion, race, occupation, etc, with shared interests, for example, the 'British Community in Paris'. It also refers to a group of the same order living together. A community includes conditions of sharing, having things in common and to some extent being alike in some way of sharing the same attitude, interests.

Formal adj:⁴ Pertaining to the form of a work; not to be confused with "ceremonial" or "stately," *since formal elements can be quite informal in character.*

Formality:⁵ refers to the formal requirements in terms of prescribed standards and regulations, including procedures demanded by formal institutions related to shelter provision, the legal way to build. 'Informality' refers to the informal housing activities and the related socio-economic, and cultural aspects, which characterize the established, and expansion of informal housing.

Informal:⁶adj.

1. Not formal or ceremonious; casual:
2. Not being in accord with prescribed regulations or forms; unofficial:
3. Suited for everyday wear or use:
4. Being more appropriate for use in the spoken language than in the written language.

Informal housing refers to⁷:

1. Residential areas where a group of housing units has been constructed on land to which the occupant have no legal claim, or which they occupy illegally; In China, before 1949, land belongs to the private. The residents possess of their land. Informal housing refers to construct on land without the permission of legal

³ *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

⁴ *ArtLex Lexicon of Visual Art Terminology -includes definition (English), illustration, phonic pronunciation*, Michael Delahunt

⁵ *Potentials of community based organizations for sustainable informal housing upgrading in Tanzania: the case study of Hanna Nassif: pilot project in Dar Es salaam city*, Lupala, John Modestus

⁶ *American Tradition Dictionary*

⁷ *United Nations Division for Sustainable Development 19/03/1999, United Nation Sustainable Development Report*

residence. After 1949, due to the land belongs to the public; the residence only has the land-use lease. Informal housing refers to set up housing on land without the permission of government.

2. Unplanned settlements are areas where housing is not in compliance with current planning and building regulations (unauthorized housing). Formal settlements refer to land zoned residential in city master plans or occupied by formal housing.

There maybe some alternative definitions: Many concepts intended to measure marginality of human settlements have been formulated: unplanned, squatter, marginal settlements, unconventional, non permanent structures, housing in compliance, inadequate housing, slums, etc. **'Unconventional dwellings'** is one of the most common measures, defined by the number of housing units occupied by households, but considered inappropriate to human habitation. These concepts give informal housing concept additional meanings.

Squatter Settlements:⁸ The UN Centers for Human Settlements (habit) define Squatter Settlements as uncontrolled residential areas with ambiguous legal status regarding and land occupation, built to a large extent with people's own means and poorly equipped with public utilities and community services. The usual image of squatter settlements is that they are poor, under serviced, over-crowded, dilapidated and consists of makeshift improvised housing areas. Squatter settlements are also variously termed as spontaneous settlements, unplanned developments, informal housing areas plus a host of other local names.

Illegal (vs. legal)⁹

-- Prohibited by law or by official or accepted rules.

--Unacceptable to or not performable by a computer.

Illegal housing maybe can be concluded as the housing that is prohibited by law or by official or accepted rules. So it can be looked on as part of informal housing.

Slum, slum area¹⁰-- A district of a city marked by poverty and inferior living conditions. A heavily populated urban area characterized by substandard housing and squalor. Often used in the plural.

From the analysis of the connotation, we can get to know the reasons why it is quite difficult to make the concept clear. It is especially difficult to Chinese. First, it is the 'dirty part' of the country's history, so the authority tries to deceive their people. Second, it is quite special because its position is between the homeless and home. The residents have such kind of home at least, although it is informal, which means that it is originally constructed, created through structural alterations, or occupied outside of formal market regulation. For the developing countries, especially China, the government has not enough money or energy (Maybe it is.) to deal with it, because homeless problem is quite more important than informal housing problem. In the government view, less is better than nothing at least. Third, the informal housing is not only a policy problem, but also a social,

⁸ *Potentials of community based organizations for sustainable informal housing upgrading in Tanzania: the case study of Hanna Nassif: pilot project in Dar Es salaam city*, Lupala, John Modestus

⁹ *American Tradition Dictionary*

¹⁰ *American Tradition Dictionary*

economical, and even cultural problem. Maybe some kinds of informal housings are legal housings structured by the formal way, and they are informal living environment to human beings. It may be one reason why some informal housing cannot be controlled by the government policies and law.

Misunderstanding Two: There is no informal housing in China.

With clear definition, we can go further to analyze the detail problems about informal housing in China. For the time being, some Chinese, especially who come from the metropolitan cities, thought there is no informal housing in China. That is totally untrue. Informal housing is there, no matter that you like it or not. Now the complex of China developing is embedded in changes of societies, cultures, nations, regions, and communities operating on various scale levels from dwellings to entire city and even the entire state. It experiences restructuring of traditional modes of dwelling and inhabitation, new ways of planning and organizing the built environment, and new processes and production in the building sector. On one hand, the developing situation brings more jobs opportunities, improves life level, brings democratic concept. On the other hand, the development is a little bit out of control. It brings different problems, such as new style informal housing.

In the modern history of China, there are different kinds of informal housings under different circumstances.

- ❖ Pre-1949 : Due to the World War Two and the civil war between two parties, more than 40% Chinese lost their residency and roamed about the major cities. In the cities, they tried to build some houses by local materials. At that time, the informal housing is normally a kind of slums, or scatterments.
- ❖ During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Mao Zedong's socialism reshaped the city. New development was structured around large walled work-unit compounds, where people lived as small communities centered on the workplace. The decays of the war were demolished, and the system extremely controlled the city development. Some slums and scatterments were pulled down, and new work-unit compounds were set up. Meanwhile, in the period of the three year Great Leap and Cultural Revolution, due to the government wrong direction under extreme left wing socialist and the natural drought, Chinese had to wander around to the city to make a living. And because of the government extreme control, there were few informal housing, but only homeless, which is even worse than informal housing.
- ❖ In 1976, there happened a great disaster, earthquake, in the northeast of China. ¹¹ Tens of thousand of Chinese were dead and more than that number of Chinese lost their houses. They had to live in the informal temporary housings without water, energy, and electricity. The main informal housing was the tents at that time.

¹¹ It is said the 7.8 Tangshan (39.6 N, 118.2 E) earthquake on July 28, 1976. It is the most devastating one in China during the past 400 years. It destroyed almost 60% of the Tianjin city, and in the center of the earthquake, Tangshan city, the earthquake killed 242,000 and injured 164,000. The direct economic loss was up to 9.6 billion RMB. According to *Tangshan: The Deadliest Earthquake*, Chen Yong

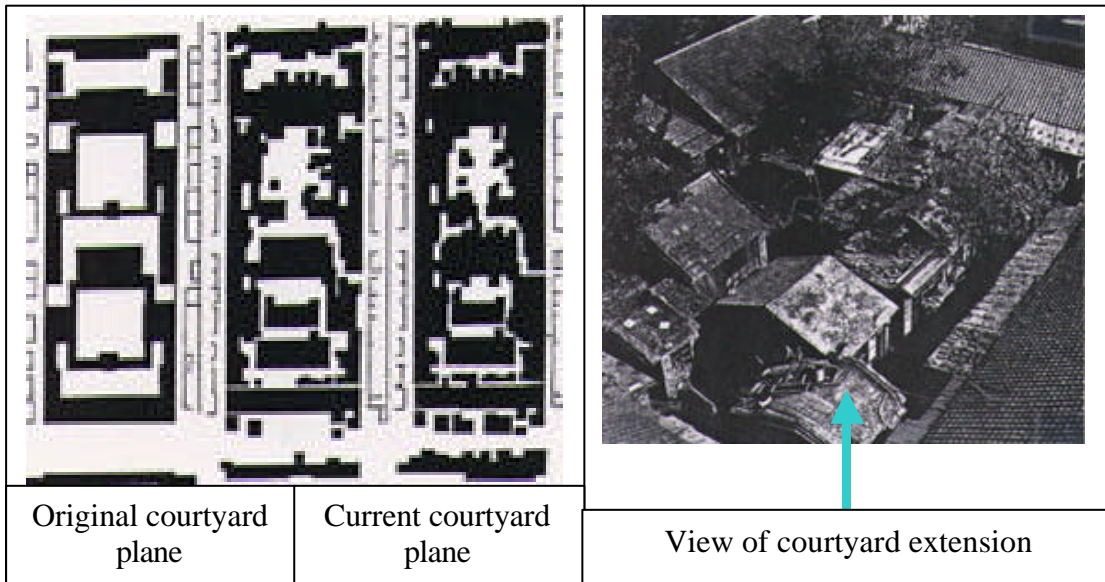


Informal housing after earthquake



Transitional market after earthquake

- ❖ Post-1979 : Because of open-door policy, occidental theories come to China and change China deeply. China has developed at staggered speed. Urban development has followed a strategy of spatial and functional specialization. Now, the definition of formal-informal, considering the informal sector as a 'temporary dysfunction caused by rapid growth and imbalances in the distribution of resources and income'¹². Current problem of informal housing, just as Geoffrey Payne's words, "The informal or popular housing activities in the uncontrolled and squatter settlements are a response to the failure of the public and private formal sectors to supply enough housing at affordable prices to meet the need of the low-income households." Due to the urbanization and population rapid growth, there are several kinds of informal housings in China.



- The extension of the existing housing, especially the traditional court yard. In current Tianjin, most of the residences living in traditional court yard are low-income groups. Due to the growth of the familymembers, the existing housing is not enough. Meanwhile, the residents have not enough money to buy new apartments for their offspring. The residents expand their housing to solve the

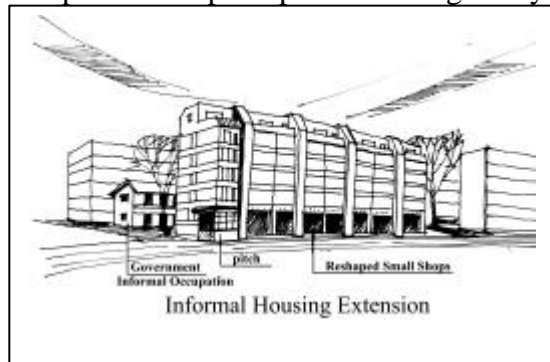
¹² Gilbert and Ward 1982, 81 *Informal Housing Markets: a Review*

problem. For the new apartment residents living in the ground floor, they need more indoor space as private function or commercial function. Then they misappropriate the outdoor space next to their windows and use it as small private yards or shops.



- Misappropriate greenland to build informal housing by government. In order to earn extra money, the committee of residence always builds and rents some housings in- between of the housing neiborhoods. The informal neighborhoods invade and occupy the formerly green space and open space. Although they are

designed and set up in due form, and the buildings are formal housings with water, heating system, electricity, they are still informal housing because they occupy the important space that is of necessity to the formal apartment residents according to the Architecture Code.



- Housing in Free market

The waves of internal migration pulsing through China over the past decade represents one crucial form of the human dimensions of the nation's change from plan to market. Those involved in the movement are members of a new urban grouping, the floating population, chiefly peasants no longer domiciled where they were initially registered to live and estimated in the range of 50 million to 70 million persons. Those floating population brings both developing hope and social, political and housing problems to the city. Most of them are unmechanized, casual, informal, unskilled labors in the cities to provide a special niche for the transients.¹³ Much of such work- in construction, and in the textile, chemical, building material, sanitation, packaging and hauling, and repair trades- is harsh, filthy, and exhausting. It has been disdained by urban young people eligible for more prestigious jobs in the foreign trade sector.¹⁴ Access to housing is 'crucial to

¹³ John J. DiIulio, *There but for fortune: The homeless, Who They Are, How to Help Them*

¹⁴ Dorothy J. Solinger, *The Floating Population In The Cities.*

any social improvement.’¹⁵ Given the extraordinary crowding and cramping that even regular city residents suffer in China, one must despair for the fate of the outsiders. With limited real housing market, mainly urban dwellings being state allocated and enterprise-owned, newcomers to the city who lack means are forced to live in a wide range of informal housing. According to one study,¹⁶ about 40 percent city residents live in residents’ homes. Another 20 percent are in collective shelters. A further 20 percent stay in hotels (including the many private inns and ‘underground hotels’ that have cropped up everywhere in China cities today, many of which make ideal residences for peddlers and others in town for relatively brief commercial sojourns) hostels or hospitals. The remaining 20 percent are in ‘various other places’. According to one research,¹⁷ these ‘other’ places include a wide array of miserable hovels, such as squatter settlements, train stations, on the streets, under the eaves, under the bridges, in free markets (a common practice for vegetable and egg peddlers is to lie on a plank under plastic sheeting inside the marketplace or in their market tent.), on boats or wharves, in bathhouses, in public toilet stalls, in garbage dumps, on dormitory stairs, or along the river banks in the summer. According to this, 80 percent of the migrants do have a roof over their heads. But except those residing with family, none of them is situated over their heads. But except those residing with family, none of them is situated to become a part of regular city life. Presumably those in the residual category, as well as members of construction teams, are frequently on the move. Even if their housing were more normal, the geographical mobility dictated by looking for work would limit integration. Here the following will be focused on informal housing in free market.

‘Free market’ used in this paper is far from ‘free trade’ in the field of economics, it



Housing here is only a plank under plastic sheeting.

has a special meaning in China. It refers to designated outdoor areas in the residential areas of cities and towns where the farmers are allowed to sell their produce directly to urban consumers.¹⁸ Meanwhile free market is a kind of home market because the room is used for two functions, one is business, and the other is residence. By 1979, China's government controlled agricultural sector was in serious trouble and the government

finally recognized that something had to be done to revitalize it. So in 1985, the government took a bold step -- it withdrew entirely from trying to control

¹⁵ Hohenberg and Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe*.

¹⁶ Rutkowski, ‘China’s Floating Population’

¹⁷ Dorothy J.Solinger *The floating population in the cities*

¹⁸ Yin Hao, *Market Reforms Begin in Chinese Housing*

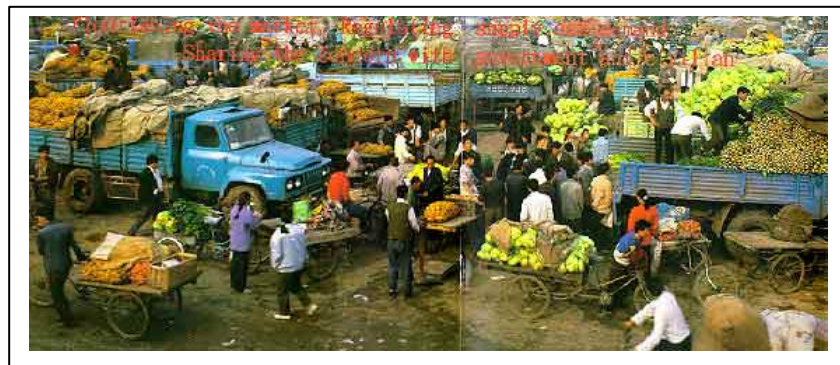
production and distribution of non-staple crops, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, and it dissolved the People's Communes, allowing farmers to decide what to grow and allowing the market to set prices. From then on, farmers took their products to the cities and sold them directly to the city life. Some of them lived in the market and sold their villagers products. On one hand, free market system provides fresh, plenty foods for the cities, on the other hand, it brings great number of informal temporary residents. In Tianjin, there were about 120,000 immigrations in 1999.¹⁹ Most of them worked in free market. And now free market housing is the major informal housing phenomenon in Tianjin. These markets continue as a popular



and lively aspect of the urban landscape, increasing numbers of farmers who are moving from rural to the cities. The free market housings are being constructed throughout the city along street fronts and, in many cases, filling in space between the housing apartments. A fleeting but nonetheless interesting feature of the retail landscape is the small booths that are routinely erected between sidewalks. Free market housing takes big problem to the city. Current free market is characterized as wasting vast amount of



resource and carrying out extensive management, leads to low-benefit, and dangerous pollution. The results are not only to debase the environment level and damage the people's health, but also to harm the state's economic continuous development. First, it has no sanitation facilities. That means it is bad to public



¹⁹ According to *Tianjin Daily*, Feb. 2000

health. Second, it is the result of extensive management. It is because there is no intensive management that farmers and resellers can get informal or even illegal materials such as water, energy and land. It is quite difficult to function of the existing government management network. Under such circumstances, environment pollution in the free market becomes the crucial important problem. Even the farmers ask themselves, “ Is it my residence in the city? Is it our dreamland?” They dislike the free market housing because there is short of water supplement, water drainage, toilet and other public facilities, and because there is dirty environment, trash with the fertilizer and pesticide residue here and there, and because everyday there is high noise to drive person crazy. These residents do not have access to water, sanitation services and refuse removal, and they are dependent on neighbors for amenities.²⁰ Approximately 16% of Tianjin city population lives in informal settlements in 1999, and most of them are the farmers from countryside.²¹ What is good for their health? Up to now such part of farmers, maybe we can call the resellers, can't get a better housing even though they have a certain amount of money and they would like to pay a part of it for the good housing in the city. And in the meanwhile, there are quite big housing backlogs in the city real state market. According to the Tianjin Bureau of Real State Report,²² the total backlog of housing in the whole urban region of Tianjin in 1999 amounted to approximately 13400 dwelling units. The current systems lack flexibility to address the differing needs of the poor communities.

Then we should ask ourselves: What shall we do for those new residents? What is the real city life? What does the presence of peasants in the cities- this new, reurbanization of China- help us to see about processes of class and community formation and potential for a shift in social structure for outsiders in the wake of the country's market reform? What is about the process of market itself in China's reform?

- Riding through the countryside today, you'll see many newly constructed, two story homes built by the farmers with profits earned from selling their produce at the "free markets".²³ That is another kind of informal housing- in the countryside- because it is occupied the land special for farming.²⁴ When



▪ Informal housing in countryside

²⁰ Liu Tianqi, *Environment Protection in China*

²¹ *Tianjin Daily*, Feb. 2000

²² *Tianjin Daily*, Feb. 2000

²³ Gao Shangquan, *The Reform and Development of China's Rural Economy*

²⁴ In China land is a urgent resource. According to China Agenda 21, it is dominated by hostile geographic terrain, and 50 percent of China's population must live on only 13.5 percent of its land. Since only 10 percent of China's land is arable, a mere 7 percent of the world's cultivated land feeds 22 percent of the world's population.

the land for farmer's housing is not enough for their demand, they will occupy the arable land for housing. According to the Chinese Land-use Law, it is announced as illegal housing. And sometimes the government alerts to demolish these housings. (Although in reality it seldom happened)

Misunderstanding Three: Informal housing is meaningless, useless and worthless.

The informal housing is not a coincidence phenomenon, but logic one. It is that people react to the changing, such as economic development, disaster, urban sprawl or growing birth rate. Since it exists, it must have its special function and meaning. In my view, free market housing is the precedence of formal low-price social housing in the future. After the farmers or resellers have enough money, they will go to the next step- low price social housing. The current free market housing is the temporary housing for their immigrating into the cities.

The informal housing is functional because it is a kind of transitional housing under certain financial or social background. It represents the country's deficiency and the people's needs. At least it is better than the homeless, which is one of the extreme symptoms of human settlements inadequacy. In fact the existence of illegal settlements may reduce the incidence of homelessness. In developed country, informal housing, especially in-law units and various forms of house sharing, have long been proposed as efficient means of housing the elderly or allowing the elderly to age in place.²⁵

The informal housing is a part of human worth. The total informal housing of the world is worth 10 billion \$.²⁶ I do believe even in Tianjin, the third biggest city of China, the informal housing is worth more than 10 million dollars. And I think the 'informal residents' can make use of their houses to earn more than that amount of money.

Misunderstanding Four: Informal housing is out of control.

Some of my friends told me that the informal housing must be out of government control just because it is informal one. But I think they misunderstood the meaning of informal housing. It has been shown in the first paragraph. In my view maybe some kinds of informal housing, for example, the housing in free market or the temporary housing after earthquake, are under the government control. Just for instance, let us see how the free market housing is controlled. 'The free markets are under the government's control. The system of the control is divided into four parts. The city government's Industry and Commerce Bureau has overall jurisdiction over the free markets. It has the authority to issue and retract the vendor license. Within the Bureau, the Neighborhood Liaison Office has direct administrative responsibility and sends a representative from this Office to *each market every day* to insure that the market runs smoothly and to collect Market

²⁵ Victor Regnier, A.I.A., Associate Professor of University of Southern California, *Design Principles and Research Issues in Housing for the Elderly*

²⁶ *Notes of Urban Sociology course*

Participation Fees from the vendors. The market administration office responses to administrate daily work such as to clean the environment, to safeguard the order, to provide fire control or even the children's enrollment in the school'.²⁷ Then the question moves to another point that is whether or not such kind of control is useful or functional. It is quite difficult to evaluate it. But here it can be announced that one of the reasons why there is informal housing is that the government control is not functional, or partly functional.

Misunderstanding Five: Informal housing is not the target of research.

Maybe informal housing is looked down on by some Chinese, although it is a quite important concept. The reason why they belittle it is because they thought informal housing is not qualified for approval. Is informal housing or illegal housing not 'qualified for approval'? Some Chinese scholars say yes. The reasons are it is:

- a) Lack of commitment at policymaking level.
- b) Inadequate provision of funds for housing development.
- c) Inappropriate and unattainable building standards.
- d) Inefficient land delivery system.
- e) Cost-consuming bureaucratic procedures in support institutions, and in project planning and implementation.

Actually informal housing is of great importance in housing research. Researchers never stop studying on it. Agenda 21 and United Nations Sustainable Development Reports give it clear concept and indicator. According to the materials, the concept is relevant to Sustainable/Unsustainable Development:²⁸ 'urban areas promise economic efficiency and potential for development deriving from concentration of population, business and industries. However, when needs of a rapidly growing population in urban areas go beyond governments' ability to meet them, sustainability of urban development can be threatened. Needs include of a growing population range from food, housing, land, employment, and education to environmental infrastructure including water supply, sanitation, and waste collection services. Demands for more and better urban services present one of the major challenges for local and national governments. The usefulness of this indicator is increased if growth rates are available for selected urban size categories.' It has its own measurement methods: Households and population living in informal housing are generally measured in censuses. Area of informal housing can be evaluated through aerial photography or land use maps. This indicator should not cover dwelling units, which have been regularized. They are those units for which land titles, leases or occupancy permits have been granted. It should only include those units, which presently occupy land illegally, and/or housing units, which are not in compliance with current regulation. Where feasible, the interpretation and meaning of this indicator would be

²⁷ According to *Environmental Impact of the Free Market in China*, Huang Yi

²⁸ United Nations Division for Sustainable Development 19/03/1999, *United Nation Sustainable Development Report*

supported by the comparison of informal housing area and population to total urban area and population.²⁹

The methodology of research on informal housing is quite difficult, since there is no enough data especially census about it. So, the ground approach may be important.³⁰ It can be demonstrated through the enhanced understanding reasons of the extremely vulnerable and threatening conditions for informal housing settlements; its success in revealing the 'illegal' initiatives they use to house themselves, the nature of their poverty, their intimate feelings and family matters to an outsider. Then the researcher can recognize that data on the processes by which households gain access to housing resources, such as land, building materials and credit, must be gathered and understood from the respondents' perspectives. To do this, the methodology is devised to support theory-generating research with an approach known as grounded theory.

Misunderstanding Six: Informal housing must die.

As the analysis above, informal housing is a production of a certain period. That means in different periods, there will be different informal housing styles. It has its function under the certain circumstances. Although it brings us many social or environmental problems, it cannot be shut up immediately. What we should do may be sustainable development way. Housing in free market can be used as an example. On one hand, free market housing in China is the first step of farmers moving to the cities. On the other hand, current level of housing has degraded the environment heavily. Then it is not a good idea to stop at once such kind of home market phenomenon in China. If free market were shut up suddenly, then there would be millions of jobless at once. What we shall do is to improve it under the existing physical condition. That means the government should provide certain way to improve the housing environment under residence affordable ability. Here we propose sustainable development theory. It means we should improve its level step by step. It is our pleasure for the China Agenda 21 signed in 1992.³¹ We hope the government can go further more than that. We hope that the government uses the taxes from free market back to serve for the free market and the housing. We suggest our government that sustainable development should be looked on as a means of integrating economic development and the city planning. It is sustainable development which is an approach to develop that 'involved maximizing the net benefits of economic development subject to maintaining the services and quality of natural resources overtime.'³² The method is to make critical evaluations of the existing building regulations, codes and standards including the strategies and the formal procedures related, to highlight the inadequacies in the housing policies, and identify the general institutional problems and constraints, and to suggest new approaches to standard setting and guidelines.³³

²⁹ United Nations Division for Sustainable Development 19/03/1999, *United Nation Sustainable Development Report*

³⁰ World Resource Institute, *China's Health and Environment*

³¹ China Golden Health Medical Co. Ltd., *China Agenda 21*

³² Luc Hens, *Readings on Sustainable Development*

³³ China Golden Health Medical Co. Ltd., *China Agenda 21*

Conclusion:

Research on housing in developing countries has increased considerably in the last fifteen years, marking a shift in the approach "from studies of homelessness, to studies of lodging".³⁴ The consideration of informal housing has led to a better understanding of the processes by which the poor access land and shelter in the developing world. Land and housing have been studied and described in large metropolitan agglomerations, particularly in Tianjin, China. Yet, the nature of informal housing still deserves research attention.

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³⁴ Peattie 1994, 140