

Wu, F. (2005). Rediscovering the 'Gate' Under Market Transition: From Work-unit Compounds to Commodity Housing Enclaves. *Housing Studies*, 20: 235–354.



Chapter 6

MAKING MODERN SOCIETIES

In Chapter 6, we look at how contemporary Western societies came to look how they do and how many of the elements of social life that we take for granted came about through the process of industrialization. One of the elements we focus on in this chapter is the city – we look at how modern cities developed during the industrial revolution, how they were understood to be bad for our health, and how sociologists have made sense of the city as a social space. Sociologists are still interested in exploring cities as social spaces because cities draw together diverse people from a range of backgrounds and are ‘shaped by structural power that affect all aspects of human life’ (C. Wu 2016: 2013).

One particular aspect of contemporary cities that sociologists have been interested in is gated communities. Gated communities are residential developments which restrict free public access through walls, fences, gates and other perimeters (Atkinson and Blandy 2006). While it's tempting to think of gated communities as a modern Western (particularly North American) phenomenon, Fulong Wu (2005) uses secondary data (data which other researchers have collected) to trace the history of gated communities in China, disrupting the idea that gated communities are a Western invention and that they are a modern development.

Instead, he argues that modern gated communities in urban China are the latest version of a much older tradition of creating urban enclaves which can be traced as far back as walled cities (building walls around the entire perimeter of a city to control trade and as a defensive tactic to keep invaders out). In fact, Judd (1995: 160) suggests that ‘new gated communities are remarkably like the walled cities of the medieval world’.

Wu does not go that far back in history! Instead, he takes us through the story of Chinese urban gated communities in the twentieth century. He draws particular attention to key moments in this story which shaped how gated communities looked and worked – the 1949 Communist Revolution which introduced ‘work-units’ and ‘workers’ villages’ where employees would live alongside their colleagues in close proximity to their industrial workplace; the commodification of workers’ housing through the 1980s ‘wherein the workplaces purchased commodity housing and then sold houses to staff at a discount price’ (page 240); and finally the development of ‘a new type of residence: pure commodity housing estates’ (page 241) which we would recognise as contemporary gated communities – ‘spatial enclosures with

secured gates, walls and fences, security personnel, and contracts with property management companies' (page 243). Wu looks also at the symbolic meaning that *gates themselves* had throughout these periods. He suggests that "gating" cannot be understood only through the physical form' but, instead, it is important to understand the gates of gated communities as having a social and cultural role (page 243).

Wu uses secondary data to trace the changing demographics of people living in Chinese gated communities and to make arguments about the changing importance of gates themselves. For example, drawing on Li's (2003) data about education levels of people living in a gated community in Shanghai, Wu shows that as the community became commodified (and so housing became more expensive), the educational level of residents increased; while around 7% of the original residents were 'semi/illiterate', all the residents living in that community in the early 2000s were able to read. He also uses data produced by Wang (2001) which shows that the annual income of residents in a fairly modest Shanghai gated community was around 3.5 times higher than the average for a Shanghai resident. These data are important for showing the ways that gated communities become 'enclaves of those with similar socio-economic status' (page 241) and can be 'consumer clubs' (page 247) where very wealthy people are able to demonstrate their riches through living in the community and engaging with the social and leisure activities which it offers.

As Wu's article shows, secondary data can be a very useful method in sociological research but is relatively under-used (Gorard 2002). In fact, even forty years ago Martin Bulmer (1980) asked why sociologists don't use official statistics more in their research given how useful they can be. One of the first benefits that's often given for secondary data analysis is that it's quick and cheap – the data already exists so researchers don't have to spend huge amounts of time in the field collecting primary data themselves. As Barney Glaser (1963: 11) commented, secondary data is very useful for researchers with 'micro-resources'. But there are many other benefits beyond these practical considerations. In her review of secondary data methods, Emma Smith (2008) suggests three specific 'promises' of this research approach – social benefits, theoretical benefits, and political benefits. The social and theoretical benefits of secondary data analysis are that researchers do not need to intrude on people's privacy through collecting data from them; that already available data are more 'democratic' in being low-cost; and that they allow new theoretical insights to be developed. Moreover, secondary data are useful for exploring historical shifts and changes as Wu's article does.

Aside from this and perhaps most pertinently for Wu's focus, secondary data analysis also has the benefit of feeding into what Smith (2008: 43) calls 'political arithmetic'. The political arithmetic tradition in social sciences is centred on using statistics to draw policymakers' and politicians' attention to issues of inequality and injustice. While Wu doesn't link his research to a political arithmetic tradition, his use of statistics to show that contemporary gated communities function to exclude certain population groups certainly draws attention to inequality represented by, and reproduced through, gated communities.

But using data that other people have gathered is a risk in sociological research. In particular, data collected for one project and purpose may not be useful or appropriate for an entirely different piece of work. As we argued in Chapter 4,

methods of data collection should line up with the core research questions which are driving a particular project. The challenge of using secondary data is that we don't always know what those original research questions were. While we might know what specific questions were asked of participants, or what specific data was dug out of an archive, we don't always know about the wider project, its direction, or its values. Moreover, Garcia and Mayorga (2017) argue that the wider social context in which quantitative research is designed is important in shaping what that research will look like, and so what data it will produce.

That's not to say that we should mistrust all secondary data. Some secondary data have very clear sources. For example, the motivations and methods behind whole-population censuses are transparent and even research data which is stored in repositories such as the UK's [Data Service](#) has a clear pathway to follow back to the original project it came from. The task for sociologists thinking about using secondary data is to ask whether the aims and objectives of the original project (the one that the data was actually collected for) have led to data which aligns well with our new project. This isn't only a question for our research, but also how we report that research so that other sociologists who read our work can assess its reliability.

In Wu's article, many of the secondary data sources cited are from unpublished research. The data that he uses on educational levels (Li 2003), and annual income of gated community residents (Wang 2001) are both from unpublished sources. This puts us, as readers of Wu's work, in a trick situation. How are we to know that Li and Wang's data is appropriate, reliable, and useful if we can't trace back to the original research it came from? On the other hand though, Li and Wang's data may well be the *only* statistical information available on the changing demographics of urban Chinese gated communities owing to the particular political landscape of China and the rather niche research focus. Without this data (albeit from a potentially questionable source), Wu's argument would be much weaker and his important work may not have gotten published without it.

QUESTIONS:

1. Wu used some potentially dubious unpublished data in his article, but this might have been the only data available on this topic. How should Wu have dealt with this issue in his article? For example, should he have reported that his data was secondary unpublished data?
2. 'Secondary datasets are not neutral or objective tools' (Garcia and Mayorga 2017: 249). How far do you agree with this statement? How might the wider social landscape shape quantitative data (e.g. what questions are asked, how variables are constructed)?
3. Wu argues that 'gating' (closing gates around an estate or community) has several functions, what might these be?

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