

## Chapter 2

# Public Housing in Mainland China: History, Ongoing Trends, and Future Perspectives

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**Abstract** China has a unique experience of public housing development. Before 1998, public ownership dominated the housing provision in urban China. Nonetheless, the employer-based welfare housing program was formally abolished in 1998, and the overwhelming majority of the public housing stock was quickly privatized. However, the Chinese government again committed to developing public housing in 2007, and a large-scale public housing construction program has been implemented since 2009. This chapter aims to first provide a summary of pre-reform and post-reform public housing development in China and then discuss why the Chinese government has again turned to public housing as a solution after about 30 years of housing reform and privatization. It shows that the recent push for public housing in China should not be seen as a step backward or as the restoration of the pre-reform welfare housing system. Instead, it represents the central authority's increasing recognition of the complexity of urban housing systems in a modern market economy.

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The recent emphasis on public housing for the poor (in China) is a good example of how government resources can be used to address a pressing social need (World Bank 2012: 47).

## 2.1 Introduction

China has a unique experience of public housing development. Before 1978, the provision of housing in China rested on strong socialist ideologies: housing was not regarded as a commodity with an exchange value but instead as a basic need, as a right, to be allocated outside of the marketplace (Angel 2000). Since 1978, old-style public housing has been privatized and the socialist welfare housing system phased out. The housing conditions of urban residents have greatly improved since the market-oriented housing reform: the floor area per capita increased from 6.7 square meters in 1978 to 32.7 square meters in 2011, and the home ownership rate reached 89.3 % in 2011 (NBSC 2011). However, the supply of affordable housing has not kept pace with the full-fledged marketization. In recent years, the rapidly rising housing prices and lack of affordable housing for low- and middle-income urban households, particularly in big cities, have triggered widespread complaints from many would-be home buyers (Chen et al. 2010; Logan et al. 2010), thus also threatening the socioeconomic and political stability (Naughton 2010).

Correspondingly, over the last few years, the Chinese central government has shifted the emphasis of housing policies from commercial housing to public housing, and China's public housing program has been expanding at a dazzling speed.<sup>1</sup> Official data suggest that China started constructing 16.3 million units of public housing and finished 11 million units during its "11th Five-Year Plan" period (2006–2010) (MOHURD 2011). In the beginning of 2011, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao announced that the Chinese government is committed to building 36 million units of public housing during the "12th Five-Year Plan" period (2011–2015).

However, this chapter shows that the recent massive public housing program is very different from the old-style socialist welfare housing of the pre-reform period. New public housing is not developed and controlled by employers or work units but by the local government in partnership with commercial property developers. Public housing, even when constructed at a very large scale at certain times, is still seen as a supplementary housing sector to support the housing market rather than an equal partner of the market. Therefore, the recent push for public housing in China should not be seen as a step backward or as the restoration of the pre-reform

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese authorities commonly label such housing as "(social) security housing" (Bao Zhang Fang) (Qi 2009).

welfare housing system. Rather, it represents the central authority's increasing recognition of the complexity of urban housing systems in a modern market economy.

This chapter also shows that the Chinese public housing model has been reshaped under the overall transformation of the development ideology from "productivist welfare" to "developmental welfare" in recent years. It has been widely observed that the Chinese government's overriding development priority given to economic growth has been partly shifted to social development in recent years. In 2006, President Hu Jintao proposed the idea of a "harmonious society." This strategy gives priority to promoting common people's welfare and social harmony ahead of pursuing pure economic growth. According to this new ideology of a "harmonious society", social policy is no longer subordinated to economic policy but is an integral part of economic policy. This chapter provides some preliminary evidence that the change in the Chinese public housing policy could be seen as a strong signal of a shift in ideology from "productivist welfare" to "developmental welfare," where the latter assumes that "social expenditures in the form of social investment do not detract from, but contribute positively to, economic development" (Midgley and Tang 2001).

## 2.2 Pre-reform Public Housing in China

The current public housing system in China is a direct legacy of that in the pre-reform era. On one hand, the pre-reform public housing stock still accounts for a bulk fraction of urban China's housing stock. On the other hand, the dominance of public housing in the urban housing stock is a key difference between formerly planned economies and market economies (Szelenyi 1987). Therefore, knowledge of pre-reform public housing and housing reform is necessary to understand the current Chinese public housing policy.

### 2.2.1 *Public Housing in the Pre-reform Era: 1949–1978*

When the Chinese Communist Party took control of power in 1949, the housing stock in urban China was predominantly owned by private persons (cf. Table 2.1). However, this situation was in conflict with the socialist ideology, where housing was not considered as a commodity but as a type of social welfare to be freely provided by the state (Wang and Murie 1999). The state provision of housing with low or almost free rent such that individuals are responsible for their own housing has long been proclaimed as an essential demonstration of the superiority of socialism over capitalism (Lim and Lee 1990). Nonetheless, due to various political and economic reasons, the dominance of private ownership in urban China's housing stock continued until the mid-1950s.

**Table 2.1** Distribution of property rights to housing stock in major cities, 1955

	Publicly owned (%)	Privately owned (%)	Foreign-owned (%)
Beijing	44.35	53.85	1.8
Tianjin	43.41	53.99	2.6
Shanghai	25.8	66	7.6
Jinan	22	78	
Qingdao	57.9	37.9	4.16
Shenyang	64	36	
Harbin	55.31	40.2	4.46
Nanjing	37.75	61.3	0.95
Wuxi	19.75	80.25	
Suzhou	14	86	

Source: Report on “The Current Basic Conditions and Opinions of Socialist Transformation of Private Housing in Urban Areas” from the Office of the Second Secretary of the CCP (October 1955)

In late 1950s, the Chinese communist government carried out a massive nationalization of the ownership of land and private housing in all urban areas (Wu 1996). About one billion square meters of private housing were nationalized within a few years (Hou et al. 1999). Meanwhile, the government established public ownership over all new housing stock. By the end of the 1970s, private-sector housing had declined to about 20 % of the total urban housing stock and public housing had become the predominant form, accounting for 74.8 % (Hou et al. 1999).

Like other former socialist countries, the welfare housing system constituted an important pillar of the welfare system in socialist China (Wu 1996). Municipal housing authorities and employers (work units or *danwei*) were the two major providers of public housing. Nonetheless, different from the Soviet Union and East European socialist countries, public housing units were mainly allocated and administrated by work units rather than state agencies (Wu 1996). The dominance of work units in allocating social services is arguably related to the Chinese traditional clan culture (Zhao and Bourassa 2003). The integration of work and living has the purpose of facilitating the reproduction of labor, building workers’ loyalty to the enterprise, promoting high productivity, and ensuring social stability (Wu 1996; Zhao and Bourassa 2003). In addition to ideological and cultural factors, the predominance of public housing was also related to economic reasons, for example, the low capacity of the construction sector, the urgent need to accommodate the increasing number of urban residents at low cost, the need to ensure State Owned Enterprise (SOE) workers’ health and productivity, and households’ low capability to consume adequate housing due to both income insufficiency and the lack of financial instruments for private consumption (Huang 2004; Zhang 2000; Rosen and Ross 2000).

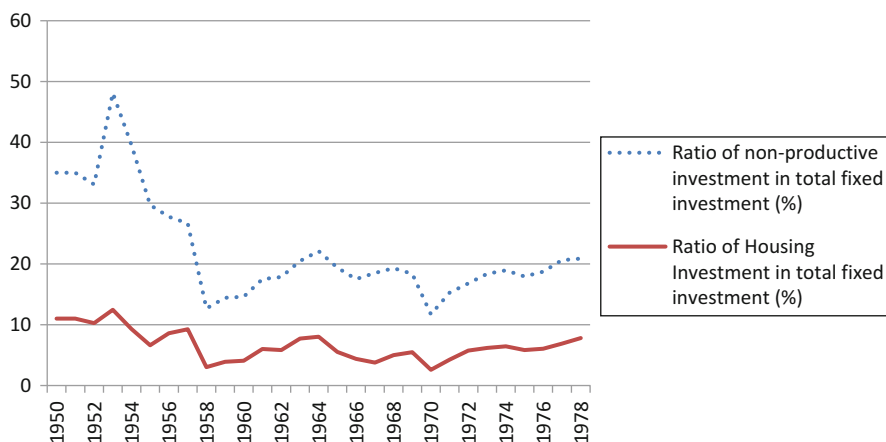
The work unit-based welfare public housing program achieved some success in accommodating the fast-expanding public sector and SOE employees in urban China during the 1950s–1960s. However, the public housing system in China existed only in urban areas. After the *Hukou* system was introduced in 1958, rural

populations were restricted from working and living in cities. Public housing was accessible only to registered urban residents (about 12–18 % of the national population from the 1950s to the 1970s). Even among registered urban households, however, the inequality of housing provision was apparent (Zhou and Logan 1996). For municipal housing that owned by the public housing agency, the level of funding depended in part on the bargaining ability of regional leaders with the central planning and housing ministries (Zhao and Bourassa 2003). The distribution of public funds for work-unit housing was also not egalitarian; “key” work units—for example, advanced enterprises in favored industries or high-ranked government institutes—usually received more public funds and additional resources (such as additional land use rights) (Wu 1996). As a consequence, the better houses were allocated disproportionately to the elites among party leaders, government officials, and managers of state-owned enterprises. The provision for workers or other underclass members was far behind schedule in almost all Chinese cities. Also, the quality of public housing significantly varied according to the work status of the tenants (Zhou and Logan 1996).

For municipal housing projects, the cost of housing development and maintenance came directly from state funds (Hou et al. 1999). The cost of work-unit housing development also came from public funds, but employers usually had the autonomy to decide on how to use those funds. In both systems, public funds paid for almost all the costs of the process of land acquisition, housing construction, and maintenance after completion (Wu 1996). The tenants had to pay only a nominal rent.

However, although the public housing provision in Chinese cities was on a limited scale, public finance could not support a sufficient supply to meet the housing demand. Because virtually all public housing was solely financed by the state through budgetary funding and allocated freely to end users, the funding for housing investment was consistently short of the growing need. Further, similar to other governments in the early stage of development (Wells 1985), the Chinese government viewed housing as a nonproductive social expenditure and a drag on the economy and hence strongly discouraged investments in housing (Hou et al. 1999). For these reasons, the investment on housing was constantly low in China before 1978: the ratio of housing investment in the total fixed investment was on average around 6.7 % during 1950–1978 (cf. Fig. 2.1), far smaller than the world average of 20–30 % over the same period (World Bank 1993).

As a result of long-term insufficient investment, the housing shortage in urban China became extremely acute in the 1970s (Wang and Murie 1999). In 1978, the mean living floor space per capita in urban China was 3.6 square meters (the living construction space per capita was 6.7 square meters), even smaller than that in 1950 (4.5 square meters); meanwhile, 41.5 % of urban households were living in poor housing conditions (Hou et al. 1999). Further, the welfare housing system became a vital impediment to economic growth (Wang and Murie 1999).



**Fig. 2.1** Housing investment in urban China, 1950–1978 (Source: China Statistics Yearbook 1981)

### 2.2.2 Housing Reform in China: 1978–1998

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Chinese government launched market-oriented housing reform as an indispensable component of China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy. Basically, the Chinese housing reform involved six key components: the commoditization of housing goods, the monetization of housing consumption, the marketization of housing allocation, the commercialization of housing provision, the privatization of public housing stock, and the socialization of housing management (Wang and Murie 1999; Zhao and Bourassa 2003).

However, the market-oriented housing reform proceeded with strong resistance in the 1980s. Until the early 1990s, the Chinese urban housing sector was seen as the last bastion of paternalist housing (Angel 2000). According to a World Bank survey, more than 90 % of urban residents in China were living in public housing in 1990, the largest ratio in the world at that time (World Bank 1991).

In a drastic move, partly as a component of the stimulus package to counter the economic and fiscal pressures of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the Chinese State Council issued in June 1998 the milestone policy document on housing reform (SC[1998]No.23) and formally abolished the work unit-based public housing system. Within one-and-a-half years, more than 60 % of urban public housing was sold to individuals.<sup>2</sup> The public housing stock privatized in 1998–1999 was estimated at 2.5 million square meter, with an implicit market value of approximately 2.5 trillion RMB, roughly equivalent to 32 % of China's 1998 GDP (Adams 2009). Given the

<sup>2</sup>People's Daily Online, (11 July 2000), available at: [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/english/200007/11/eng20000711\\_45187.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/english/200007/11/eng20000711_45187.html)

vast literature describing the Chinese housing reform in the 1980s and 1990s, this chapter does not provide further detailed discussions on the topic.

Nevertheless, we wish to point out that the massive-scale privatization of the public housing sector turned out to be a crucial step in China's market-oriented socioeconomic reform (Gibson 2009; Adams 2009). The breaking of the link that tied workers to cheap public housing through work units is an important element of the Chinese government's drive to reform SOEs and banks (Rosen and Ross 2000). In addition, the liberalization of housing markets is also a critical step in promoting the labor mobility implied by economic reform. Particularly, it helped greatly to increase job opportunities of migrants who did not have access to work unit housing (Fleisher et al. 1997). Further, once the "unit-based society" has been dissolved under the market economy, the development of the private owner-occupied housing market becomes not only a means to boost the economy but also a central pillar in building an assets-based welfare system (Stephens 2010). Finally, the market provision of housing greatly enhances personal choice and freedom in daily life (Rosen and Ross 2000).

## 2.3 Post-reform Public Housing in China

After the watershed termination of welfare housing provision in 1998, the public housing sector was scaled down dramatically in urban China, and the market came to the central stage of housing provision. Although successful in expanding the urban housing stock, the predominance of the market in housing provision triggered a house price boom, making housing affordability one of most acute social issues in China and causing social instability (Chen et al. 2010). Under such social and political pressures, the Chinese government concluded in August 2007 that public housing is a necessary vehicle to meet the basic housing needs of low-income and "house-poor" urban households (SC[2007]No.24). Public housing is also considered as a key instrument in promoting urbanization, which are considered to be crucial for China's long-term development strategy (Li 2011).

### 2.3.1 *Housing Development in Post-reform Urban China*

The 1998 housing reform paved the way for the development of a market-oriented housing sector in urban China. Since then, the Chinese housing sector has experienced a building boom that has lasted until the present time. Over the period 1998–2011, 9.3 billion square meters of housing were completed in urban areas in China, roughly twice the current total housing stock in the United Kingdom or as large as that in Japan (EIU 2011). The vast increase in housing supply leads to substantial additions to the housing stock and significant improvements in housing conditions for average households in urban China. For example, the living space per

**Table 2.2** Housing conditions and population in urban China (selected years)

Year	Living floor space per person (square meter)	Housing stock (million square meter)	Completion of housing (million square meter)	Urban population (million)	Urbanization (%)
1978	6.7		38.00	172.45	17.92
1982	8.2	/	138.31	214.80	21.13
1987	12.7	/	193.13	276.74	25.32
1992	14.8	/	231.40	321.75	27.46
1997	17.8	3,622	405.50	394.49	31.91
2002	22.8	8,185	597.94	502.12	39.09
2007	27.5	11,289	688.21	606.33	45.89
2011	32.7	/	1,025.13	690.79	51.27

Source: China Statistics Yearbook (various years)

**Table 2.3** Official statistics on tenure distribution of housing in urban China, 2011

Tenure type	Description	Share (%)
<b>Owner-occupied</b>		<b>89.3</b>
<i>Owned private housing</i>	Self-built after 1949 or old private housing built before 1949	11.2
<i>Owned market housing</i>	Bought through the market and built by developers	38.0
<i>Privatized public housing</i>	Bought during the 1980–2000 housing reform	40.1
<b>Rental-lease</b>	Including both private and public rental housing	<b>10.7</b>

Note: NBSC (2011)

capita in urban China has increased by 1 square meter annually on average since 1998 (cf. Table 2.2). By the end of 2011, the average living floor space per capita in urban China had reached 32.7 square meters, more than 4 times that in 1978.

Meanwhile, largely thanks to the massive privatization of the public housing stock in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Adams 2009), China was quickly transformed from having one of the highest levels of public ownership of housing in the world to being one of the highest homeowner nations. According to a report of the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC) (cf. Table 2.3), the homeownership ratio in urban China reached 89.3 % in 2011, and nearly half of owner occupied-homes had been converted from public housing (NBSC 2011).

### 2.3.2 Public Housing Development Since 1998

Since 1998, the public housing provision structure has evolved gradually along with the economic and social development (cf. Tables 2.4 and 2.7). A two-tier public housing system consisting of Cheap Rental Housing (CRH) and Economic Comfortable Housing (ECH) was introduced in 1998 (CRH and ECH are defined in the next section). ECH was even designed as the predominant form of post-reform housing



**Table 2.4** Milestone documents on housing policy in post-reform China

Date	Issuing authority and policy document	Objectives and implications
July 1998	State Council: Notification on deepening the urban housing reform and accelerating housing construction (SC [1998]No. 23)	The welfare-based public housing system was to be completely abolished; ECH was designed to dominate the whole housing system
August 2003	State Council: Notification on continuing accelerating healthy and sustainable development of real estate market (SC [2003]No.18)	Market solutions dominate the housing sector; ECH and other public housing programs were downgraded to marginal sectors
August 2007	State Council: Opinions on tackling housing difficulties of low-income families in urban areas (SC[2007] No.24)	Government would again intervene in the housing sector through public housing; CRH chosen as the premier public housing scheme; ECH scheme significantly modified
December 2008	State Council General Office: Opinions on promoting steady and healthy development of real estate market (SCGO[2008]No.131)	Strive to solve the housing difficulties of 7.47 million low-income “house-poor” urban families by 2011
June 2009	MOHURD: Notification on the 2009–2011 development plan of CRH (MOHURD[2009]No.91)	Detailed annual plan to solve the housing difficulties of 7.47 million low-income “house-poor” urban families by 2011, with a target set for each province
January 2010	State Council General Office: Notification on steady and healthy development of real estate market (SCGO [2010]No.4)	Strive to meet the housing needs of 15.4 million low-to-middle income “house-poor” urban families by 2012
September 2011	State Council General Office: Guidelines on the construction and management of public housing (SCGO[2011] No.45)	Public housing planned to host 20 % of urban households by 2015; growing attention shifted to PRH
May 2012	MOHURD: Regulations on Public Rental Housing (MOHURD[2006]No.11)	Regulation details set on the construction and operation of public rental housing

Source: Author’s summary based on official documents

provision (SC[1998]No.23). However, against the pressure of boosting GDP growth through a real estate boom (Rosen and Ross 2000), the actual importance of public housing rapidly waned after 1998 (cf. Table 2.4). In 2003, the State Council formally gave up the idea of establishing ECH as the main form of post-reform housing (SC [2003]No.18). Public housing has since been substantially downgraded to playing a supportive role in the whole housing system (cf. Table 2.5).

However, the successful expansion of the urban housing stock through the market has been accompanied by a rapid increase in house prices, making home purchase increasingly unaffordable for low- and middle-income households and, in particular, for migrants and young office workers (Chen et al. 2010; Yang and Shen 2008). The housing market is also polarizing property wealth between different tenures and different socioeconomic and demographic cohorts (Logan et al. 2010; Man 2011).

**Table 2.5** Housing units built in urban China, 1999–2010

Year	All commodity housing units built (in thousands)	Government-supported ECH built	
		Units (in thousands)	% share in all commodity housing
1999	1,946.4	485.0	24.9
2000	2,139.7	603.6	28.2
2001	2,414.4	604.8	25.0
2002	2,629.6	538.5	20.5
2003	3,021.1	447.7	14.8
2004	4,042.2	497.5	12.3
2005	3,682.5	287.3	7.8
2006	4,005.3	338.0	8.4
2007	4,401.2	159.4	8.1
2008	4,939.2	144.6	7.2
2009	5,548.9	143.6	7.2
2010	6,019.8	163.2	6.6
2011	7,219.2	/	/

Source: China Statistics Yearbook (various years)

Notes:

1. Even after the 1998 reform, not all urban housing units in China were commodity housing. Throughout 1998–2011, around 9 billion square meter of housing (roughly 100–110 million units) were constructed in urban China, but only 59 % were commodity housing; the rest were either self-help housing or enterprise-built housing
2. Commodity housing here refers to all housing built by real estate developers. Because ECH, CPH, and RSH are built for sale and provided by developers, they are considered as commodity housing in China's official statistics. However, nationwide data on the completion of CPH and RSH were not available

There is evidence that the Chinese central government has over time reached a consensus that the imbalance between the housing sector and socioeconomic development is largely attributed to the insufficiency and inefficiency of the state provision of housing (Qi 2009; MOHURD 2011; Li 2011). In August 2007 the central government again committed to meet the basic housing needs of low-income “house-poor” urban households by developing public housing (SC[2007]No.24). This milestone document signaled the turning point of the Chinese post-reform housing history and essentially reversed the downside trend of public housing since 1998 (cf. Table 2.5).

Over the last few years, the construction of public housing has experienced another “Great Leap Forward.” Both the development target and mode have been frequently revised. For example, in December 2008 the central government pledged to provide decent housing for 7.47 million low-income ‘house-poor’ urban households by 2011, mainly through CRH and RSH (SCGO[2008]No.131). This plan was released as a key part of the famous 4 trillion RMB economic stimulus package to counteract the negative shocks of the 2008 global financial crisis (Qi 2009). A half year later, in July 2009, the MOHURD (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development) published a detailed provincial level annual development plan for CRH for the period 2009–2011 (MOHURD[2009]No.91), and the central

**Table 2.6** The Chinese public housing scheme in the “12th Five-Year Plan” period

	Newly started (million units)	Newly started (billion square meter)	Completed (million units)	Completed (billion square meter)	Investment (billion RMB)
2011	10.43	73	4.32	30	37
2012E	7.00	49	5.00	35	25
2013E	7.00	49	4.00	28	25
2014E	6.00	42	3.00	21	21
2015E	6.00	42	3.00	21	21

Source: The 2011 data represent actual numbers, whereas the 2012E data are based on the plan announced in official documents; the rest of the data are based on the author’s own estimates, assuming that the average size of a public housing unit is 70 square meter and the average cost per unit is 350,000 RMB

government doubled the housing target with the aim of meeting the housing needs of 15.4 million low-to-middle-income “house-poor” urban households by 2012 (SCGO[2010]No.4) (cf. Table 2.4). As a result, in 2010 alone, China started constructing 5.9 million units and completed 3.3 million units of public housing. Although this achievement probably set a world record in public housing construction, it was only a prelude to a much larger public housing construction program. In January 2011, Premier Wen Jiabao announced a 5-year plan to construct 36 million units of public housing from 2011 to 2015, which aims to accommodate a fifth of the Chinese urban population by 2015 (cf. Table 2.6).

However, given that as much as half of the cities’ revenues come from land sales and property taxes, it is reasonable to expect local governments to resist the promotion of public housing development. There is also widespread concern that once land is allocated for public housing, property prices in their surrounding neighborhoods could take a hit. Further, considering that the local government debt in 2011 was estimated at over 14 trillion RMB, local governments openly contend that they lack the necessary funding for public housing projects.

Nonetheless, given the political importance of the public housing program, any major adjustment to the target of 36 million units over 2011–2015 can be regarded as unlikely. However, what constitutes “public housing” is still unclear.

### 2.3.3 Public Housing Programs in Post-reform China

Currently, housing in urban China is supplied through a diversified multilevel provision system. While CRH, ECH, and RSH have existed as public housing schemes since 1998, CPH and PRH were introduced only recently. CPH first appeared in a State Council policy document in January 2010 (SCGO[2010]No.4) and is expected to meet the homeownership needs of low-to-middle-income “house-poor” households.

PRH, which is modeled after public housing in Hong Kong, appeared in some southern cities of China around 2009 and was soon elevated to a national scheme.

**Table 2.7** Types of public housing in post-reform urban China

Type	Description	
<b>Old Public Housing</b>	Housing built by the state between 1949 and 1998	
Privatized	Sold to sitting tenants at heavily discounted prices	
Non-privatized	Remain under the control of local housing authorities	
<b>New Public Housing</b>	Housing built or subsidized by the state after 1998	
	<b>Target group</b>	<b>Eligibility requirement</b>
For sale		
Economic Comfortable Housing (ECH)	Low-income “house-poor” urban households	residence permit ( <i>Houkou</i> ), income and asset threshold, living space per person threshold
Capped-Price Housing (CPH)	Low-to-middle-income and middle-income urban households	residence permit ( <i>Houkou</i> ), income threshold, without owned-home
Shantytown Renovation Housing (SRH)	Households relocated due to urban revitalization and major construction projects	owners of expropriated homes
For renting		
Cheap Rental Housing (CRH)	Lowest-income “house poor” urban households	residence permit ( <i>Houkou</i> ), income and asset threshold, living space per person threshold
Public Rental Housing (PRH)	Wide range of urban population, including new migrants	no residence permit required, loose or no income threshold

According to China’s 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2015) of public housing development (cf. Table 2.7), PRH will gradually replace ECH and become the leading form of Chinese public housing. The development of PRH is expected to benefit low- and middle-income families that are neither qualified to apply for CRH/ECH nor rich enough to buy commercial apartments.

As their names suggest, CRH and PRH are only for renting, whereas ECH, SRH, and CPH are sold at below-market prices to households eligible for each program, respectively. For example, SRH is reserved for households relocated due to urban renovation projects,<sup>3</sup> ECH is designed to promote homeownership among low-income households, and CPH is targeted at middle-income households (SCGO[2010]No.4). For the ECH scheme, land is freely allotted to developers, and the sale price is restricted to covering the construction cost, with a small profit (normally at 3 %).

<sup>3</sup> There are several debates in China on whether SRH should be regarded as “public housing” (security housing) considering that the buyers of SRH are not restricted to low-income households. Meanwhile, as relocated households are compensated by a lump-sum fund equivalent to the market value of their old housing, their affordability usually is not a problem. However, according to our definition of public housing, i.e. housing allocated by the government rather than the market, SRH qualifies as public housing in the Chinese context.

**Table 2.8** Newly started public housing by type, 2009–2011 (in thousand units)

Year	Cheap rental housing	Public rental housing	Economic comfortable housing	Capped-price housing	Shantytown renovation housing	Total
<b>2009</b>	1,710 (51.8 %)	/	590 (17.9 %)	/	800 (24.2 %)	3,300
<b>2010</b>	1,800 (30.5 %)	/	1,300 (22.0 %)	/	2,800 (47.5 %)	5,900
<b>2011</b>	1,650 (15.8 %)	2,270 (21.8 %)	1,100 (10.6 %)	830 (8.0 %)	4,150 (40.0 %)	10,430

Data source: Chinese Statistics Yearbook (various years), MOHURD (2011), and the MOHUED website. The respective ratios of each public housing type in the total number of newly started public housing units are shown within parentheses

Note: The numbers in italics are the author's own rough estimates based on the available raw data on space measurements, assuming that the average size of an ECH unit is 85 square meter over the period 2009–2010

For the CPH scheme, land is obtained through competitive bidding, and the sale price is set at around 70–75 % of the comparable free market housing level. For both the ECH and CPH schemes, buyers are subject to certain years of resale restriction period before they can trade their housing in the market.

CRH and PRH also differ. Whereas CRH is targeted at a small number of the poorest local households at nominal rent, PRH is targeted at both low-income and middle-income households that either do not want to become homeowners or cannot afford the market price. Further, PRH is so far the only public housing program that is accessible to migrants; the rest are restricted to local permanent residents in the city (who have a local *Hukou* registration).

As shown in Table 2.8, among all newly started public housing units in 2011, SRH represents the largest segment (40 %), followed by PRH (21.8 %) and CRH (15.8 %); ECH is downgraded to the fourth position (10.6 %). This is consistent with the guidelines in the 12th Five-Year Plan, which instruct local governments to shift the priority of public housing development from ECH to PRH.

However, because the NBSC classifies built-for-sale public housing (ECH, CPH, and sometimes, SRH) as a type of commodity housing in its statistical system of housing sector, it is difficult to get an accurate estimate of the current share of public housing in the Chinese urban housing stock. However, according to a large household survey conducted by National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC) in 265 prefecture-level cities, on average 7.8 % urban households were accommodated by new public housing units in 2010 (cf. Table 2.9). However, the proportion of households living in new public housing varies greatly across cities. In 115 cities (43.4 % of total cities), the proportion of public housing units was lower than 5 %; only 6 cities had a proportion higher than 30 % (cf. Table 2.9). Nonetheless, a MOHURD news release published in August 2012 announced that, as of the end of 2011, about 26.5 million low-to-medium urban households had been assisted through various forms of public housing, accounting for 11 % of total urban households.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2012-08/03/c\\_112611112.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2012-08/03/c_112611112.htm)

**Table 2.9** Proportion of public housing in 265 prefecture-level cities in 2010

Property Type	Median	Mean	Maximum	Minimum	SD
ECH	1.6 %	3.4 %	48.5 %	0 %	5.3 %
CRH	2.8 %	4.3 %	55.7 %	0 %	5.3 %
Total	5.6 %	7.8 %	58.3 %	0.2 %	7.4 %
The distribution of cities by proportion of public housing					
Below 5.0 %	5.0–9.9 %	10.0–19.9 %	20.0 – 29.9 %	Above 30 %	
115 (43.4 %)	81 (30.6 %)	57 (21.5 %)	6 (2.3 %)	6 (2.3 %)	

Source: The Large-Sample Urban Households Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC) in 2010, which covered all 265 prefecture-level cities

## 2.4 Understanding the Recent Expansion of Public Housing in China

Why does the Chinese government see public housing as a solution after almost 30 years of housing reform and privatization? What are the major driving forces behind this drastic switch? This section aims to provide some answers to these two questions.

However, it is very challenging to determine what exactly drives the dynamics of housing policy because housing policies are often championed in pursuit of nonhousing needs (Kemeny 1992). It has long been recognized that housing policy should not be limited to housing needs and that public intervention in the housing sector often occurs in response to a wide array of social and economic needs (Angel 2000: 111). Whitehead (2003) suggested that in the rationale of public economics, state intervention in housing markets has three goals: the allocation, redistribution, and stabilization of needs. This is largely because housing is typically thought of as a complex good with significant social and urban externalities (Oxley 2000; Sullivan and Gibb 2003). However, the embedding nature of housing policy makes it extremely difficult to understand what constitutes its most essential driving force.

Because China's public housing sector and housing policy are still evolving, it is premature to either assess its performance or examine its overall impacts. We can, however, highlight how new housing policies take shape in response to the economic, demographic, and societal dynamics in a fast-growing transitional economy. Particularly, in this chapter we attempt to show that there is a tendency for the Chinese public housing model to be reshaped under the overall transformation of the development ideology from "productivist welfare" to "developmental welfare" (Holliday 2000; Midgley and Tang 2001).

### 2.4.1 *Economic Concerns*

Based on our observations, the primary justification for public housing in China is based on economic growth needs. It has long been argued that the East Asian region

as a whole is embarking on the so-called “productivist welfare capitalism,” where social policy is subordinated to economic policy, there is basically no concept of “social right,” and the state provision of social welfare is premised on the needs of the overriding growth objectives (Holliday 2000). As one of the most reputed examples of “productivist welfare capitalism,” China has a long tradition of formulating social policies according to the needs of the overriding growth objectives. Some literature locates the Chinese housing policy within Asian models of a “developmental state” (Stephens 2010). Within this sociopolitical culture, it becomes natural that “(in China) state housing provision is seen as important economic drivers rather than socially necessary” (Wang and Murie 2011).

For example, Chinese housing policy makers expect that various forms of public housing could, by reconciling the contradiction between the profitability requirement of developers and the housing affordability of workers, promote urbanization and retain skilled or semiskilled workers in large cities (SCGO[2011]No.45). It should be noted that there is no evidence that Chinese policy makers are seeking to shrink the importance of the construction and real estate sector in the economy. On the contrary, it appears that they are interested in maintaining the economy-stimulating effects of housing investment in size through expanding the public housing sector (SCGO [2010]No.4). For example, the first wave of post-reform public housing expansion was launched as a key component of the 4 trillion RMB economic stimulus package in late 2008, explicitly aimed at reducing the negative impacts from the recent global economic slowdown (Qi 2009). This is the major reason why brick-and-mortar subsidies rather than individual-level subsidies have been favored by the central authority, as the former can be more helpful in generating GDP and jobs (Chen et al. 2011).

Further, in Chinese leaders’ minds, more affordable housing in the urban area will also free up household income for consumer spending (Li 2011). Because stimulating domestic consumption is considered as the most important means to adjust the economic imbalance and promote economic transformation in the next decade, the central government has high expectations of public housing.

### **2.4.2 Stabilization Concerns**

While some observers have sneered at the 36-million-unit program and belittled it as a new Great Leap Forward launched by the Chinese government, many analysts believe that the Chinese government launched its public housing program with the aim of killing two birds with one stone: to make housing affordable to those at the bottom of society and at the same time stimulate demand and cushion any slow-down after decades of breakneck growth. In many public situations, public housing is emphasized by the government authority as a means to smooth the excessive real estate cycles and stabilize the growing housing price volatility (SCGO[2008] No.131; SCGO[2010]No.4). This is obviously a lesson learned from the underlying

global economic downturn triggered by the US subprime bubble burst in 2007 (Yao et al. 2010).

### **2.4.3 Urban Development Concerns**

For local governments, the major interest in supplying public housing is driven by the urgent need to smooth relocation costs, which have soared due to the rapid increases in market housing prices. There are reasons to believe that the dominance of Shantytown Renovation Housing (SRH) in recent public housing development (cf. Table 2.8) is directly tied to the local governments' goal to promote urban renewal by providing low-cost housing to relocated residents. The local governments simply cannot afford for compensation to grow at the same rates as the soaring prices of market housing.

Subordinate to the local development strategy, urban renewal has been extensively used by municipal governments as a “growth machine” (Wu et al. 2006). During the so-called “property-led regeneration,” old dilapidated houses in downtown areas are expropriated, original households are relocated to suburban areas, and residential communities in downtown areas are converted to shopping centers or other more profitable projects. By doing so, local governments obtain substantial revenues and funding sources to invest in the development of urban infrastructure and thus increase the city's competitiveness (Li 2011). Property-led regeneration reflects the emergence of the entrepreneurial and profit-seeking behavior of local governments in Chinese cities (Yang and Chang 2007). Thus, the main function of Shantytown Renovation Housing (SRH) is to rehouse expropriated urban and rural households at low costs and thus help to facilitate “growth-promoting” urban regeneration.

### **2.4.4 Urbanization Concerns**

Official statistics suggest that China is currently experiencing the largest-scale urbanization in human history: in 2011, for the first time in Chinese history, more than half of the population—51.27 % or 690.79 million people—was living in urban areas, representing an increase of 19.36 percentage points over the 1997 figure and a net growth of 300 million urban households over this period. Further, according to the *World Urbanization Prospect 2011* by the United Nations (United Nations 2012), the urbanization ratio in China will reach 69 % in 2030, and the urban population will increase by more than 300 million over the period 2011–2030. This implies that there will be a strong and sustained momentum for the expansion of housing demand and consumption in urban China in the next few decades. However, the land available for urban residential use in China is small compared to its fast-growing urban population. Moreover, to ensure its own food security, China has a strict quota on agricultural land development. Thus there is a



decreasing supply of suitable sites for residential development. The expansion of low-cost public housing programs, however, is expected to increase the supply of affordable housing to meet the accommodation needs of a growing number of new entrants who have little hope of purchasing commodity homes at market prices.

For urban residents, housing is more than just affordable shelter (Whitehead 2003); it can profoundly affect the well-being of families through its interconnections with the composition of communities and social services. Thus, its socioeconomic implications often go way beyond the housing sector. From this perspective, public housing has several positive potentials: it is considered to potentially have positive effects on childhood development (Newman and Harkness 2002; Currie and Yelowitz 2000), it could boost households' nonhousing consumption (Le Blanc and Laferrère 2001), and it may even improve health outcomes for families (Baker and Tually 2008). In addition, by reconciling the contradiction between the profitability requirement of land private ownership and the housing affordability of workers (Tutin 2008), public housing can attract and retain skilled or semiskilled workers in large cities and can thus have impacts on regional economic competitiveness (Ross 2008).

We thus argue that the current housing provision system in China is actually not very different from that in western countries if one considers the development stage the country is in. China is at a stage of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The social composition of the urban population not only includes the emerging middle class but also a re-emerging and ever-expanding working class (which differs from the socialist workers of the pre-reform period). However, whereas commercial housing targeted at the new middle class in cities flourished during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the working class housing problem was not properly addressed. The poor-quality private rental housing offered by urban villages provided a temporary solution in the past, but the alliance of local farmers, rural-to-urban migrants, and young educated professionals now represent a large proportion of the expanding urban population (PFPC 2012). It is this group of people that the new public housing is aimed at (MOHURD 2011; Li 2011). In many western countries, public housing was developed at a similar stage of rapid industrialization to accommodate industrial workers (Malpass and Murie 1999). From this perspective, one may conclude that governments across the world are taking "similar strategies" to address similar housing issues; the only difference is the timing.

#### **2.4.5 Redistribution Concerns**

The rapid upsurge in house prices in most major Chinese cities since 2003 has elevated the housing affordability issue to a key social concern in China (Chen et al. 2010). There is clear evidence that the Chinese housing market is increasingly polarizing property wealth between different tenures and different cohorts (Logan et al. 2010). While rising market housing prices continues to create substantial wealth for established homeowners, the residual proportion of the urban population

trapped in the private rental housing and informal housing sectors due to affordability problems is expected to face declining welfare security. In 2005, home assets accounted for 71.34 % of the total family wealth of Chinese urban households (Liang et al. 2010). With the accelerated home price inflation in recent years, the wealth gap between homeowners and renters in China is expected to expand significantly. There is growing concern that the unequal housing distribution intensifies the gap in economic and social stratification, which could widen further with the rapid increase in housing prices (Man 2011).

The change in housing policy orientation should thus be understood under the overall shift in the development strategy of China. A number of researchers have pointed out that the Chinese government's overriding development priority given to economic growth has been partly shifted to social development in recent years. In 2006, President Hu Jintao proposed the idea of a "harmonious society." In 2007, during the CCP's 17th National Congress, he put forward the "scientific concept of development" as China's development strategy in the foreseeable future. This strategy prioritizes promoting common people's welfare and social harmony ahead of pursuing pure economic growth. Thus, the switch in housing policy is an integral part of the macro transition.

#### ***2.4.6 Social and Demographic Reasons***

The high priority given to public housing also has to be seen in the context of societal changes and demographic transformation. During the rapid urbanization process, the "urban poor" face increasing hardships; many rural-to-urban migrants are excluded from the formal housing market and are concentrated in so-called "urban villages." The National Population and Family Planning Commission of China (PFPC) reported that in 2011, only 37 % of rural-to-urban migrants were accommodated by the private rental market; the rest lived in overcrowded dorms or shanty sheds at their workplace (PFPC 2012). Also of significance is the fact that the underdeveloped private rental market provides an ineffective solution for vulnerable households in these changing economic and social circumstances. Apart from rural migrants, many well-educated young professionals wish to join the ranks of the urban middle class, which increasingly demands a higher-quality of life. Nonetheless, most of these people could not initially afford market housing (Chen et al. 2010).

The explosion of housing demand in China in the last decade is also widely believed to be attributable to the rapid demographic transition during this period. Over the last decade, China has experienced sharp changes in demographic profiles in terms of both age structure and household size (Peng 2011). While the total dependency ratio was 48.1 % in 1997, it drastically dropped to only 34.4 % in 2011. It is reasonable to consider the fast-growing proportion of adults in the total population as another key reason for the surge in housing demand. Meanwhile,

the recent downsizing of the average household size in urban China (from 3.08 in 1997 to 2.88 in 2011) may also positively contribute to the housing demand.

An increase in the public provision of urban housing may help to address the housing stress of a broader range of disadvantaged groups that acutely need public support. Such an increase can also help to influence the supply structure of housing provision by adding a large number of small-size apartments, which are currently rare in the market. “Public housing supply can alleviate the imbalance between demand and supply in the housing market and the structural problems of housing stock; thus, it is a key vehicle to promote urbanization” (Li 2011).

#### ***2.4.7 Political Reasons***

Besides these economic and social justifications, the strong push for public housing also has important political implications. While housing price inflation and affordability problems appear as economic imbalances, their underlying causes are deep-rooted political problems in the society. The requirement of the working class for housing support (through public housing) has become a very important political demand that the Communist Party can no longer afford to ignore. The recent changes in the composition of the urban population, especially the large number of rural migrants and young graduates and professionals, demand significant adjustments in the ruling Party’s representation and development strategies. The provision of about 20 % of public housing in urban areas could bring a large group of new residents into the system. The development of public housing could thus be one of the most important strategies to maintain social and political stability (Naughton 2010). This point is also related to the “paternalism hypothesis,” which has a long tradition in China, and the wider view that housing is a merit good that more easily gets public support when state assistance is delivered in a direct form (Whitehead 2003; Hills 2007).

“Adequate housing for everyone” was for the first time set as a political promise of the Chinese government in the CCP’s 17th National Congress in October 2007. It was repeatedly reiterated by Premier Wen Jiabao in his annual report to the People’s Congress in 2009–2011. Of course, adequate housing for everyone does not necessarily mean private home ownership for everyone. Rather, it refers to a situation where people’s basic housing demand can be adequately met, and public housing is considered as a key policy tool to achieve this target (Qi 2009). In any case, the ruling party has taken the provision of public housing as a serious political obligation. As stated by Vice Premier Li Keqiang, “the government’s ability to deliver and distribute public housing fairly is an important test of its political credibility” (Li 2011).

### 2.4.8 Summary

To sum up, the Chinese central government appears to believe that the inadequate support for public housing at the various levels of government is a major reason for the chronic shortage in the supply of affordable housing for low- and middle-income families (Li 2011). On average, economic comfortable housing and public rental housing accounted for less than 7.8 % of the total housing stock in 265 cities in 2010. In more than 40 % of the prefecture-level cities, public housing represented less than 5 % of the total housing stock, indicating a severe shortage in subsidized housing for low- and middle-income families in urban China. Further, most migrant workers are excluded from any type of government-subsidized housing. In summary, public housing development in China has multiple functions. As stated by Vice Premier Li Keqiang, the top Chinese leader in charge of economic and social policy since 2007 and the person expected to take over as premier in spring 2013:

The new public housing program is more than a major enhancement of social welfare, a vehicle to adjust income inequality and a crucial channel to improve social stability; it is also an important pillar of economic growth for the next several years as it has many economic functions such as “a tool to dampen price increases in the private housing market.” . . . “implementing the massive public housing program is an effective approach to switch the economic growth model and improve economic structure. . . Public housing projects bridge economic growth and welfare, enable investment and promote consumption, and thus are decisive in expanding domestic demand. (Li 2011)

## 2.5 Conclusions

The recent policy attention given to the large-scale construction of public housing in China seems odd in comparison to the housing practice in most western countries, where public housing development has been kept at a minimum. Wang and Murie (2011), who examined the early stage of post-reform public housing development in China, found it difficult to locate the new phase of the Chinese housing policy ideology into any existing regimes in the typologies of comparative research on housing systems. They suggested that the Chinese approach to housing policy is distinct and hybrid. Even ECH could be seen as a residual safety net as social housing does in the liberal regime of housing system, their driving rationales are much different. While the residual status of public housing in the liberal regime is mainly underpinned by the ideology of minimizing government intervention, in China it is largely due to the needs of economic growth. Several studies attribute this difference in housing policy to the “productivist welfare” ideology prevailing in East Asia (Holliday 2000).

Interestingly, the “productivist housing policy” hypothesis can also be used to explain why the recent massive construction of public housing is widely regarded as an economic vehicle to counteract the shocks of the global economic downturn and as a regulation tool to cool down the overheating residential property markets.

Meanwhile, the shift in housing policy exemplifies many of the trends in Chinese social and economic policies that have emerged since the global financial crisis. Over the last few years, the Chinese government has apparently become more cautious of market failure and has increasingly regained more direct control of resource allocation in many economic and social sectors (Naughton 2010).

The current national prioritization of public housing in China signals a sharp change in the housing policy of previous decades so as to address negative externalities and inefficiencies in China's short-lived post-housing reform period. Although housing sector complexities can never be totally coordinated by a central authority, this massive public housing program is designed to help balance economic growth and provide stability in light of the increasingly short supply of low-cost housing, high levels of inflation, and a growing wealth gap.

Land and housing policies are among the Chinese government's most important tools for fine-tuning the economy (Chen et al. 2011). A housing policy that addresses the needs of the majority is critical for any government during in the event of an economic downturn. In the 1980s, during which China experienced massive unemployment, the country adopted a market approach to confront job creation, with debt financing as a key element to maintain employment through massive large-scale infrastructure projects. Today the government is looking at a long-term land allocation plan oriented toward economic restructuring as a tool to control economic cycles.

The current plan to rapidly increase investment and construction in public housing may result in an increased supply of affordable housing for needy families. However, we believe that the establishment of a finance system for such affordable housing is at least equally important. The Chinese government should promote the use of a variety of financing tools and instruments to attract social capital to public housing investment and lower the cost of borrowing to low- and middle-income families. A well-functioning housing finance system will contribute to the expansion of home ownership, the development of housing markets and employment, economic growth and wealth accumulation, and social and political stability.

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