In contemporary China, cities are growing fast and, as buying a house is becoming an important symbol of success, the real estate industry is flourishing. For rural-urban migrants, a group that contributes greatly to cities’ growing populations, buying an urban house is seen as a great accomplishment that marks the completion of a transition from rural roots and affirm their urban identities, the need to purchase real estate in a context of continuous migration and mobility.

**Rural-urban migration and house ownership in China**

The promotion of rural-urban migration is an important goal for the Chinese state. The ‘National New-Type Urbanisation Plan (2014–2020)’, released by the central committee of the China Communist Party (CCP) on 16 March 2014, stated that the percentage of the Chinese population living in cities should grow from 53.7 percent in 2010 to 60 percent in 2020. Indeed, many Chinese cities are rapidly expanding.

When Willy Sier conducted fieldwork in China’s Hubei province (2015–2016) for her dissertation on rural-urban disparities in China, and the desires of university-educated youths from rural regions to overcome the rural-urban divide, she noticed that the topic of ‘buying a house’ came up frequently in conversation with rural families. Everybody seemed to be in dire need of a house, preferably a house in the city. It struck Willy that in many cases houses were purchased to subsequently move to a city outskirts with few labour opportunities. Therefore, many are unable to stay long-term in their newly acquired houses, and instead furnish and store them for the future.

One of the bedrooms of Wendy’s apartment (filmstill Empty Home).
and so they let their two daughters, Wendy and her older sister, take care of most of the decorating. The girls furnished the apartment with love and attention for detail, putting Wendy’s own drawings as well as a soft-coloured ‘Love Home’ IKEA painting on the wall. They now consider this apartment as their ‘family home’.

Wendy took the presence of a camera as an opportunity to present herself and her family in ways that she herself chose. Her self-presentation took the form of a tour through the house, during which she opened cupboards, pointed at objects, and explained for each object how it had been brought to the house “by our own hands”. Objects that stood out as important were the house slippers and blankets made from cotton produced in their village of origin.

Willy and Wendy discussed questions of residence. Sitting on the couch of the ‘empty’ apartment, Wendy explained how she lives in her shop and visits the family apartment only occasionally, whilst her sister and mother moved in with her husband, and her parents live on the factory grounds in Guangzhou. Wendy hopes that her parents will live in the apartment in the future, maybe after retirement.

Wendy’s family lives dispersed throughout the country — her parents and sister in Guangzhou, some family members in Wuhan, and one uncle remains in the old family house in rural Hubei province. Only once did they all gather in the new apartment for a New Year’s gathering in the new apartment for the family plot in the husband’s village, rural families today are expected to provide the couple with a costly privately-owned apartment, preferably in an urban environment. This provision of a new house for the newlywed couple is partly driven by competition for a relatively small number of brides — due to China’s current imbalanced gender ratio. The promotion of the city and urban living as the desired form of modernity is also reflected by government campaigns that call for speedy construction of the urban environment (see, for example, the billboard promoting the creation of our nation’s cities”). How might we understand and further interrogate these profound shifts in attitudes towards house ownership in China, from collective to privately owned houses, and from rural to urban housing? From an economic perspective, the price of Chinese real estate has increased rapidly in past decades. Wendy believes that the price of houses in China “can only go up”, and so, the purchase might be a smart investment. However, the way Wendy speaks about the purchase of real estate has become inescapable for bachelors looking to marry. It is true that with the country’s history of patrilocal living, provision of a ‘marriage house’ by the husbands’ family has long been part of Chinese wedding traditions. But, whereas previous generations could suffice with redecorating a room or building a structure on the family plot in the husband’s village, rural families today are expected to provide the couple with a costly privately-owned apartment, preferably in an urban environment.

Notes

1 https://vimeo.com/209590747

The film Empty Home had its premiere at the VU Ethnographic Film Festival in Amsterdam and has been screened as part of bachelor courses and events at the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University, and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). Previously, she was a lecturer in visual anthropology at the University of Amsterdam.

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The Study

https://vimeo.com/209590747

A video tour through the apartment (forstills Empty Home)They are handmade.

A billboard from a government campaign (filmstill Empty Home).

A video tour through the apartment (filmstills Empty Home).

These shoes are handmade by my grandpa, from the cotton we grow at home.

Speed up the construction of our nation’s cities

A billboard from a government campaign (filmstill Empty Home).

The Study

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A video tour through the apartment (filmstills Empty Home).