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Research on the Transformation Path of Old Residential Communities in Xi'an from the Perspective of Complete Community

Qingbo Meng

School of Tourism, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710128, China

ABSTRACT

China's urban development has entered a stage dominated by stock renewal, and the renovation of old residential communities has become an important starting point for high-quality urban development. The concept of complete community and the 15-minute living circle planning provide key guidance for the renewal of old communities. Based on the perspective of human geography, this paper takes old communities in Xi'an as the research object, constructs a three-dimensional analysis framework of "spatial facilities – service system – governance mechanism", and systematically analyzes the practical dilemmas and explorations in the renovation of old communities. The study finds that the renovation of old communities in Xi'an is confronted with the coexistence of aging infrastructure and spatial resource constraints, mismatched supply and demand of public services and prominent shortcomings in full-age services, immature multi-stakeholder co-governance mechanism and lack of long-term management. Although distinctive experience has been formed in Party-building leading grassroots governance, there are still multiple tensions between patchwork renovation and systematic renewal demand, administrative leadership and resident participation. On this basis, it puts forward the optimization path of complete community construction from three dimensions: spatial reshaping, service embedding and governance restructuring, emphasizing solving spatial constraints through systematic renewal, filling service shortcomings through experience orientation, and building a long-term mechanism through multi-stakeholder co-governance. The study points out that the ultimate goal of old community renovation is to realize the leap from "living container" to "complete living community". The construction of complete community is not only a realistic path for urban renewal in Xi'an, but also a livelihood practice to improve residents' sense of happiness. It also reveals the internal connection between spatial and social dimensions in the renovation of old communities, providing a reference for the renewal of old communities in similar cities.

KEYWORDS

Complete Community; Renovation of Old Communities; Xi'an; Living Circle Renewal.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

At present, China's urban development has entered a new stage dominated by stock renewal. As an important part of urban renewal, the renovation of old residential communities is not only related to the improvement of residents' quality of life, but also bears the multiple missions of optimizing urban structure, improving living environment and enhancing social governance capacity. According to statistics, there are about 170,000 old residential communities built before 2000 across the country, involving hundreds of millions of residents. These communities generally suffer from aging facilities,

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inadequate supporting facilities and lack of management, becoming a short board urgently needing to be filled for high-quality urban development. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that "the community is the 'last mile' for the Party and the government to connect with and serve the people", and stressed that "we should build communities well and achieve the goals of ensuring access to childcare, education, employment, medical services, elderly care, housing and support for the vulnerable". He also noted that "more resources, services and management should be placed in communities to provide targeted and refined services for community residents". In the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, he further pointed out that we should "carry out urban renewal actions, strengthen urban infrastructure construction, and build livable, resilient and smart cities", and constantly "improve grassroots governance platforms supported by grid-based management, refined services and information technology, and improve the urban and rural community governance system". The spirit of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China further emphasizes that comprehensively deepening reform should take promoting social fairness and justice and enhancing people's well-being as the starting point and goal. Undoubtedly, promoting urban renewal and comprehensively improving community governance quality with old residential communities as the starting point is a key way to enhance people's well-being and happiness. Therefore, renewing the living circle of old communities is an important measure to improve the ecology, space, environment and living functions of old urban areas and systematically enhance the quality of living environment.

By the end of 2024, China's permanent urbanization rate reached 67%, and China's urbanization has shifted from large-scale incremental construction to a stage of both quality improvement and incremental structural adjustment [1]. China's urban community planning has gradually abandoned the traditional extensive development model and turned to a progressive transformation path guided by refined renewal. In December 2021, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development issued the Guidelines for the Construction of Complete Communities, clarifying the basic connotation, basic requirements, construction guidelines and typical cases of complete communities, and guiding the construction of complete communities from the aspects of basic public service facilities, convenient commercial service facilities, municipal supporting facilities, public activity spaces, property and community management. In July 2023, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and other seven departments jointly issued the Notice on Issuing the List of Pilot Projects for Complete Community Construction, deciding to carry out pilot projects for complete community construction in 106 communities. It can be seen that the concept of complete community has been embedded in the renewal and transformation of old communities, and the 15-minute living circle is an essential part of complete community planning. As early as 2018, the Code for Urban Residential Area Planning and Design proposed the concept of living circle as an important measure to balance resource allocation and safeguard spatial fairness and quality of life, triggering a research boom among domestic scholars. The living circle characterizes the relationship between residents' needs and spatial resource allocation based on residents' living scope, meeting residents' actual travel characteristics and needs. It divides residential areas into 15-minute, 10-minute, 5-minute living circles and residential block living circles according to residents' travel time, which also changes the traditional planning model of allocating resources for residential space as a closed urban system.

As a central city in the western region, Xi'an has a wide distribution and diverse types of old residential communities in its old urban areas. Taking Beilin District as an example, 78.6% of the communities in the district were built before 2000, with weak infrastructure, inadequate property services, many mass conflicts and disputes, and severe challenges in community governance. In recent years, Xi'an has made many explorations in the renovation of old residential communities and innovation in community governance, such as the promotion of the "Community Neighborhood Service Station" model in Beilin District, accumulating valuable practical experience. However, from the construction standards of complete communities, the practice in Xi'an is still in the exploratory stage, facing many deep-seated problems urgently needing to be solved.

1.2. Research Significance

The choice of renewal and transformation strategies for the living circle of old communities in Xi'an depends on the value orientation of renewal. After entering the stage of high-quality development, we have changed the traditional large-scale demolition and construction model led by market value and turned to a people-centered high-quality development model, which requires an ideological concept to guide the urban renewal movement. Therefore, it is necessary to learn from the concept of complete community and explore the renewal elements to improve the integrity of the living circle of old communities. By introducing the concept of complete community, we can better understand and meet residents' needs in community governance system, community culture, infrastructure, public space, public services and other aspects, so as to realize the comprehensive upgrading and transformation of old communities, promote the harmonious and stable development of old communities, and enhance residents' sense of gain, happiness and security. In addition, the concept of complete community not only refers to housing, but also includes services such as public security, education and culture. As the cell of the city and the basic unit of the country, the renewal of old communities under the guidance of complete community concept can further stimulate community vitality, optimize structure and promote urban transformation and development [2].

Through the systematic research on the existing problems of the living circle of old communities in Xi'an and revealing the deep-seated reasons for the difficulties in renewing the living circle of old communities, we will find that the challenges encountered in the renewal process are not only the objective facts such as many remaining problems and aging infrastructure, but also caused by many factors. On the basis of clarifying the problems and their underlying causes, we can put forward practical renewal strategies and implementation paths for the renewal of old communities under the requirements of the new era.

1.3. Research Review

The research progress of complete community construction and governance shows significant differences at home and abroad. Although the concept of "complete community" was formally proposed by China, its core connotation is common with relevant community construction concepts abroad. The formation of the concept of complete community can be traced back to the transformation of urban planning research perspectives in the 20th century: the research focus shifted from the macro perspective focusing on the development of big cities and regions to the micro perspective taking communities as the basic unit and focusing on small-scale spatial development. During World War II, foreign scholars began to pay attention to the convenience of community life. Town and Country Planning by British urban planner Patrick Abercrombie is regarded as the first regional planning achievement of urban areas in the history of Western planning, in which "convenience of life" is used to describe a better urban life [3]. Sociologist Dennis further expanded the connotation of convenience of life, arguing that it should not be limited to the material aspects such as housing, transportation and working environment, but also include spiritual experience to comprehensively measure the quality of life [4]. The post-war urban reconstruction process further promoted academic thinking on improving the quality of life through small-scale spatial optimization. Foreign construction practices similar to complete communities have also undergone multi-stage exploration and improvement. For example, the construction of complete communities in Singapore and Austin, USA, has gradually optimized community functions and spatial layout through the initial, embryonic and mature stages [5] [6].

Inspired by the book The City Is People, Chinese scholar Wu Liangyong formally put forward the concept of "complete community" combined with China's urban planning practice. He emphasized that people are the core of the city, and communities are the basic living space for residents; communities should not only meet the basic living function, but also take into account diverse needs

such as public security, education, entertainment and spiritual culture, which is a complex system composed of material "hardware" and service "software".

Domestic research on complete communities can be sorted out from two aspects: theoretical exploration and construction practice. At the level of theoretical construction, Wang Guimei believes that complete community construction is highly consistent with the renovation of old residential communities in goals, significance, content and paths, essentially achieving incremental improvement in stock space and further releasing land value [7]. Chen Qiu et al. proposed that a complete community should take into account both functional integrity and resident participation integrity, among which resident participation integrity is reflected in the integrity of population coverage, practice process and space utilization [8]. In terms of index system and evaluation research, Kong Yijing, Xiao Dawei et al. took old residential communities in the historical urban area of Guangzhou as the object, constructed a transformation index system from two dimensions of material space, community governance and services, and put forward strategies [9]. Zhang Lemin, Zhang Ruoxi et al. combined the concept of complete community with the international urban physical examination framework to construct a community-level urban physical examination evaluation system to guide community construction and renewal [10].

In terms of practical reference and path research, Kuang Xiaoming et al. analyzed the concept, connotation and experience of complete communities in North America, sorted out their working framework, implementation mechanism and public participation mode, and proposed that China should improve the working framework and standard system based on national conditions and local conditions [11]. Wu Zhiqiang, Li Xun et al. pointed out that complete communities take communities as the main body, and the current governance shortcomings mostly stem from the inconsistent interests of the "three carriages" of communities or the "loss of management" and "abandonment of management" of old communities. Therefore, it is necessary to build a sound infrastructure system, social service system, governance system and common spiritual culture [12]. In addition, some scholars have systematically carried out research on the construction of complete residential communities from the perspectives of policy guarantee, standard construction, management mechanism and multi-stakeholder co-construction [13].

2. DEFINITION OF RELEVANT CONCEPTS

2.1. Urban Renewal

The connotation of urban renewal has been evolving with the development of the times and cities, and related concepts such as urban reconstruction, urban redevelopment, urban regeneration and urban revitalization have emerged. In this process, the definition of urban renewal shows the transformation of renewal objects and goals: first, from the one-dimensional material form to the multi-dimensional comprehensive improvement of economic, social, cultural and material renewal; second, the goal of urban renewal has shifted from improving the urban environmental image under benefit orientation to people-centered sharing of urban rights [14].

2.2. Complete Community

The concept of "complete community" was first put forward by Academician Wu Liangyong at the Summit Forum of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. He believed that future urban planning would be carried out from a "bottom-up" perspective based on communities, advocating that "people are the core of the city, and communities are the most basic living places for people". It can be seen that the starting point of community planning and construction is people, so a complete community is a residential community that "includes not only housing issues, but also services, public security, health, education, internal and external transportation, entertainment, cultural parks and other factors, including both hardware and software", which is a systematic social project [15].

2.3. Old Community

The concept of "community" can be traced back to Village Communities in the East and West published by British historian H.S. Maine in 1871 and The English Village Community published by British economic historian F.A. Seebohm in 1883 [16]. In both works, scholars regarded villages as communities. In the process of community research, the most well-known is Community and Society written by German social philosopher F.J. Tönnies in 1887, which proposed that a community is a group formed based on geographical, blood, emotional and habitual factors, regarded as a traditional social life community. The expression of the concept of "community" was introduced into China in the 1930s. Fei Xiaotong translated "community" into "community", referring to a community operating collective life in a certain region. In 1984, in Introduction to Sociology compiled under his guidance, a community was defined as a large collective formed by several social groups (families, clans) or social organizations (institutions, groups) gathering in a certain region and interrelated in life. In the Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Promoting the Construction of Urban Communities Nationwide in 2008, it was proposed that "a community refers to a social life community formed by people living within a certain geographical area". In the process of transformation from a planned economy to a market economy, the living space of Chinese urban residents has shown a change from "unit community space" to "stratified community space". In Chinese, "old" refers to a period of time, and "old" refers to changes after a period of time. "Old residential area" and "old residential area" are a pair of relative concepts, which often appear together, so they are called "old community" [17]. The most significant characteristics of old communities are periodicity, relativity and development, which are specifically reflected in the fact that new communities will gradually evolve into old communities over time, namely old communities.

3. DILEMMAS IN THE RENOVATION OF OLD COMMUNITIES IN XI'AN

3.1. Spatial Facility Dimension: Basic Shortcomings and Spatial Constraints

From the perspective of spatial facilities, old residential communities in Xi'an generally face the dual constraints of aging infrastructure and tight spatial resources.

On the one hand, the problem of aging infrastructure is prominent. Taking Longqingfang Community in Beilin District as an example, built in 1988, the community has overall peeling exterior walls, aging wires, and cast iron downpipes. After nearly 40 years of use, the pipes are often blocked, seeped and leaked, and the water pressure on high floors is insufficient. Some buildings of Hanyuan Road Community in Xincheng District were built in 1956, with seriously aging public facilities and rotten tap water pipes that burst from time to time. Behind these problems are the historical debts of insufficient investment and lack of maintenance in old communities for a long time.

On the other hand, tight spatial resources restrict the improvement of facilities. Old communities were built earlier with low design standards, generally suffering from narrow public space, insufficient green space and lack of parking spaces. With the rapid growth of private cars and electric bicycles, the parking contradiction has become increasingly acute. Yirun Garden Community did not plan an electric bicycle parking area during construction. With the surge in the number of electric bicycles, unit doorways and fire passages are occupied by a large number of vehicles, highlighting potential safety hazards. No. 138 Courtyard in Changlefang has complex property rights and no management, with garbage and sundries piled up, vehicles parked randomly, and cables in disorder. The solution to these problems is faced with the rigid constraints of the existing spatial pattern, which is difficult to be resolved through simple "plugging" transformation.

3.2. Service System Dimension: Mismatched Supply and Demand and Full-Age Shortcomings

From the perspective of service system, old residential communities in Xi'an have obvious mismatched supply and demand and full-age service shortcomings in the allocation of public services and convenient commercial facilities.

The needs of the "elderly and children" groups are particularly prominent. The old urban area of Xi'an has a high aging rate, but the supply of aging-friendly facilities and services is seriously insufficient. Most old communities lack barrier-free facilities, elderly activity places, community elderly care service stations, etc. Many elderly people in Hanyuan Road Community reported that it is very inconvenient to travel due to the lack of elevators and potholed roads. At the same time, childcare services are also in short supply. Young families are facing the dilemma of "difficult childcare", and community-embedded childcare facilities are almost blank. In terms of convenient commercial services, although some old communities have relatively mature commercial supporting facilities around them, the network of daily life service outlets such as "small repairs" is shrinking. Residents' demand for vegetable stores, maintenance, housekeeping and other convenient services is difficult to be effectively met. Compared with the ideal picture of "within walking distance and everything available" in a complete community, the real service system presents obvious fragmented and low-quality characteristics. It is worth noting that Xi'an has made initial explorations in revitalizing idle community space and embedding service functions. Focusing on old communities, Beilin District has revitalized "golden corners and silver edges" such as community gatehouses and property rooms, built 119 community neighborhood service stations, and embedded service functions such as elderly care, childcare, leisure and entertainment, and housekeeping and maintenance according to local conditions. This "embedded" service model provides a useful idea for solving the contradiction between tight spatial resources and lack of service functions in old communities.

3.3. Governance Mechanism Dimension: Multi-dimensional Exploration and Practical Dilemmas

From the perspective of governance mechanism, Xi'an has formed distinctive experience in community governance innovation, but still faces the practical dilemma that the multi-stakeholder co-governance mechanism is not yet mature.

Grassroots governance innovation led by Party building is a prominent highlight of Xi'an. Beilin District has innovatively created the "Community Neighborhood Service Station" model. Centering on the community Party branch, it has set up a "three chiefs" team with the secretary of the community Party branch as the station master, Party members and the masses as building chiefs, and government Party members and community workers as service chiefs, effectively making up for the shortage of governance power in old communities. This model extends the tentacles of grassroots governance to residents' doorsteps by sinking service forces and promoting neighborhood co-governance, realizing the transformation from "no one cares" to "someone manages". Through neighborhood service stations, Jiannan Community has promoted residents to spontaneously participate in governance, built new electric bicycle sheds and installed charging piles, greatly improving the environment.

However, the problem that the multi-stakeholder co-governance mechanism is not yet mature is also prominent. On the one hand, the coverage rate of property management is low. A large number of old communities such as No. 138 Courtyard in Changlefang have no property or owners' committee, and only the family committee undertakes simple water and electricity fee collection, unable to handle environmental and facility problems. On the other hand, the depth of resident participation is insufficient. Most renovation projects are still government-led, resident participation is a mere formality, and the cultivation of bottom-up endogenous power is insufficient. Even in the neighborhood service station model, how to continuously stimulate residents' enthusiasm for participation and build a long-term governance mechanism is still an unsolved problem.

In addition, the long-term management mechanism after renovation has not been effectively established. After the renovation of some communities, due to the lack of sustainable funding sources and management subjects, problems such as facility damage and environmental rebound soon appear. Residents of Electric Wire Factory Community reported that the environmental hygiene is still dirty and messy after renovation, "walking into the community is like walking into a 'waste recycling station'". This reminds us that the renovation of old communities should not stop at "renovation", but also focus on "management" – the construction of a long-term governance mechanism is equally important as the repair of physical space.

4. OPTIMIZATION PATH OF COMPLETE COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION

4.1. Spatial Reshaping: From Fragmentary Patching to Systematic Renewal

Establish a pre-community physical examination mechanism. The construction of complete communities should take "physical examination first and then renovation" as the basic principle. In accordance with the construction standards of complete communities, systematically investigate the shortcomings of communities in infrastructure, public services, public space and other aspects, and form a problem list and demand list. The physical examination process itself is also a process of resident participation – through questionnaires, interviews, community walks and other ways, let residents participate in identifying community problems and expressing willingness to improve. Promote systematic renewal of overall planning at the district level. Break the "community-based" renovation idea, take the 5-10 minute living circle as a unit, and coordinate the resource integration of adjacent communities and scattered plots. For the problem of tight spatial resources, learn from the experience of Yitian in Shenzhen to efficiently use inefficient spaces such as overhead floors, corner lands and idle houses to embed community service functions. For the "courtyard within a courtyard" with complex property rights, explore the district-level overall renovation model, and realize the integration and utilization of spatial resources through government guidance, property right replacement and functional restructuring. Focus on improving the quality of public space. Public space is the "container" of community life and the "place" for residents to communicate. The construction of complete communities should pay attention to the quality improvement of public spaces such as pocket parks, community squares and slow traffic systems, creating a place environment where residents can stay, communicate and activities. Linjiangyuan Community in Luzhou transformed the "Qiyuan" which had been closed for many years into a "happy space" at residents' doorsteps, where the elderly sing and dance and children play, becoming a vivid portrayal of community vitality.

4.2. Service Embedding: From Indicator Control to Experience Orientation

Focus on filling service shortcomings for the "elderly and children". Combine the community population structure and scale to carry out aging-friendly and child-friendly performance evaluation, and rationally plan the service facility network. For aging communities, focus on configuring barrier-free facilities, elderly activity places, community elderly care service stations, senior canteens, etc.; for communities with many young families, focus on configuring childcare facilities, children's activity venues, after-school classes, etc. Taigang Community in Luzhou jointly built a community medical and elderly care center with the People's Hospital to provide telemedicine, family doctors and other services; Yitian Community in Shenzhen upgraded a single plastic venue to a "natural, full-age and fun" child-friendly park – these practices reflect the service concept of "full-age friendliness". Revitalize stock resources to embed convenient services. For the problem of tight spatial resources, adopt the "embedded" service model, revitalize "golden corners and silver edges" such as idle houses, property rooms and gatehouses in the community, and embed functions such as elderly care, childcare, housekeeping and maintenance, and express delivery services according to local conditions. The "Community Neighborhood Service Station" model in Beilin District is worthy of promotion – by

revitalizing idle spaces such as community gatehouses, the service tentacles are extended to residents' doorsteps. Build a "one-stop" comprehensive service system. Learn from the experience of the "Citizen Center" in Jiangsu Road Community in Shanghai to build a "one-stop" comprehensive service carrier integrating multiple functions such as elderly meals, parent-child interaction, cultural entertainment and transaction handling. At the same time, through the construction of an intelligent platform, realize the integration of online and offline services, allowing residents to link to required services with "one click".

4.3. Governance Restructuring: From Administrative Leadership to Multi-stakeholder Co-governance

Deepen governance innovation led by Party building. The "Community Neighborhood Service Station" model in Beilin District proves that Party building leadership is an effective way to solve the governance problems of old communities. This model should be further promoted, extending organizational tentacles to communities and buildings, and giving play to the vanguard and exemplary role of Party members in community governance. At the same time, establish and improve the organizational system of "community Party branch + autonomous committee + building chief" to realize the sinking and coverage of governance power. Build a whole-process participation mechanism. The key to moving from "symbolic participation" to "substantive participation" is to embed resident participation in the whole process of demand identification, planning and design, construction supervision and later operation. Learn from experiences such as "designers entering communities" in Nantong and "children's councils" in Shenzhen, and build consultation platforms such as neighborhood councils and community bench meetings to make residents truly the main body of community renewal. Before the formation of the renovation plan, the 916 Community in Chaisang District, Jiujiang City extensively solicited opinions from units and residents. Both the theme determination and facility layout have undergone sufficient opinion collection and consultation – such "joint consultation" is the premise of "joint construction". Innovate long-term operation mechanism. Sustainable operation capacity is the lifeline of a complete community. Explore a diversified investment and financing model to attract social forces to participate in community construction and operation. Learn from the integrated "construction, operation and investment" model in Beijing to guide professional operation service enterprises to provide long-term operation services; learn from the "separation of property right and use right" model in Jiangxi to revitalize idle resources and solve funding problems. For renovated communities, explore a hybrid management model of "property + autonomy", introducing professional property services while giving play to the supplementary role of resident autonomy.

5. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECT

From the theoretical perspective of complete community, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analysis framework of "spatial facilities – service system – governance mechanism" to systematically examine the practical exploration and realistic dilemmas of old community renovation in Xi'an. The study finds that Xi'an has formed distinctive experience in grassroots governance innovation led by Party building, but on the whole, it still faces multiple tensions between "patchwork" renovation and systematic renewal demand, tight spatial resource constraints and service function expansion, administrative-led logic and resident participation logic, short-term renovation investment and long-term operation mechanism.

The concept of complete community provides important theoretical resources for old community renovation: it requires us to shift the focus of renovation from the "patching" of physical space to the "restructuring" of the whole community, from the "filling" of individual facilities to the "optimization" of service system, and from the "promotion" led by the government to the "activation" of multi-stakeholder co-governance. The ultimate goal of old community renovation is not to build a "perfect

living container", but to create a "complete living community" – where space is accessible, services are available, neighbors are familiar, life is convenient, and residents have a sense of belonging.

As a study from the perspective of geography, this paper reveals the internal connection between spatial and social dimensions in old community renovation: spatial form affects social interaction, service allocation is related to quality of life, and governance mechanism shapes community identity. Future research can further conduct a comparative analysis of different types of old communities, track the community evolution process after renovation, and explore the theoretical connection between complete community construction and issues such as social spatial differentiation and community resilience.

Urban renewal is an action related to hundreds of millions of people's lives. As Ni Hong, Minister of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, said: "Whoever seizes the opportunity to transform and develop will build good houses and provide good services for the people, and will have a market and a future." For Xi'an, an ancient capital with a thousand years of history, the construction of complete communities is not only a realistic path for urban renewal, but also a livelihood practice to improve residents' sense of happiness, gain and security. When old communities complete the leap from "living container" to "complete living community", Xi'an's urban renewal will also write a wonderful chapter in the process of Chinese-style modernization.

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