

Empty Home. House ownership in rapidly urbanising China

Willy Sier and Sanderien Verstappen

Why do people buy houses in which they cannot live? How might we understand the fast expansion of China's urban peripheries, full of newly constructed flats but devoid of people, shops, and labour opportunities? In this article, we look through the windows of one such apartment in the outskirts of Wuhan, the provincial capital of China's Hubei province, based on insights acquired during the making and screening of our film *Empty Home* (2016).¹



One of the bedrooms of Wendy's apartment (filmstill *Empty Home*).

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 pasts to urban futures. Yet, the houses these migrants are able to afford are often located in 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.

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 remain uninhabited. These houses were located on the uttermost outskirts of the city, seemingly desolate places, with plentiful newly constructed flats but devoid of people. It is in these far-flung urban peripheries that house ownership is affordable. However, being so far removed from facilities, industry, and labour markets, owners are forced to reside elsewhere to make a living.

These field observations were turned into a short documentary film, *Empty Home*, in cooperation with visual anthropologist Sanderien Verstappen. *Empty Home* engages with the question of house ownership in China from the perspective of Wendy, a young rural-urban migrant in Wuhan. It is a film

about rapid urbanisation, the desire to buy a house in the city, and the inability to live there. The film has an open format that invites the viewer to think about the desire 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 2014 to 60 percent in 2020. Indeed, many Chinese cities are rapidly expanding.

In Wuhan, the number of the city's inhabitants increased from 2 million in 1970 to more than 10 million in 2018.

China's *hukou* system is a family registration system that connects families to one certain location and assigns them either rural or urban status, which subsequently influences their access to social programs and state benefits (such as access to education and health care) in differential ways. The number of rural *hukou* holders living in Chinese cities is estimated at approximately 280 million. These citizens living outside their area of registration are often referred to as 'being afloat', for their lack of a stable home and local registration in the cities.

However, in an effort to put down new roots and affirm their urban identities, the rural-urban migrants Willy met in the field were often interested in investing in urban real estate. Their investments follow a national

upward trend in private homeownership. Since the beginning of the post-reform era, China has changed from a predominantly public housing regime to a country with one of the highest rates of private home ownership in the world. The number of square meters sold on the real estate market has increased from 27 million in 1991 to 157 million in 2016. Willy's research suggests that it is not only the wealthier urbanites who buy real estate, but that rural buyers also have a share in driving this real estate market.

Explorations of an 'empty home'

Making the film *Empty Home* generated new insights into these issues of mobility and house ownership. Willy had conducted almost one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Wuhan before the film was made and had seen several empty houses during this period. While we therefore had initially not expected much difficulty in finding a house in which we could film, this turned out differently when Willy approached the owners of houses that she

had seen or heard about. The large distance between house and house owner created a problem: opening the house for the film crew required huge time and capital investments by the owner. Some owners offered to lend us the keys to their house, so we could enter their apartment by ourselves; however, to make the film we needed not only the images of the house, but also the interpretations and stories of its owners. This situation created a practical problem, yet it also highlighted the frequent occurrence of absentee house owners.

Then, there was Wendy. Wendy's parents own an apartment on the outskirts of Hankou district in Wuhan. The distance between Wendy and this apartment is 'only' a few hours by public transport, which enabled her to come to the house and show us around. Wendy is a recent graduate from a university in Wuhan. After graduation, she continued to live in the campus area near her college, where she opened a small fashion store together with her friend Lucky. When Wendy's parents decided to buy the apartment in 2012, investing their savings from several decades of factory and restaurant work, they were away in China's Southern megacity Guangzhou,



View from the window (filmstill *Empty Home*).



These shoes are handmade by my grandma, from the cotton we grow at 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 married and 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 celebration. In recent years, the family chose to return to the home village for this week of festivities, to be surrounded by old neighbours, friends and family members. Wendy herself does not have a strong connection to this village, having grown up mainly with her grandparents in another village—when her parents were away as labour migrants—and in the school system where she was a boarding student from age 10.

In the film, Wendy shows her current two 'homes', one being the new apartment, where she shows us around the living room and two bedrooms, the other her shop, where she sleeps every night on a fold-out couch, together with her friend Lucky. Wendy likes



They are handmade.

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

to think that travel in between these two sites is easy, "very convenient", optimistically estimating the travel time at approximately 1 hour in the film, whereas in reality the journey requires 4 hours of travel on several buses and metro trains. In a city that now covers 8494 square kilometres—compared to, for example, the 790 square kilometres of New York City—it is no surprise that a daily commute from the apartment to the shop is simply not an option. With all other relatives residing even further away, the apartment remains unoccupied most of the year. Yet, Wendy tells us repeatedly in the film, this apartment is her 'home'.

Settling in the city

The story of Wendy's family is the story of many rural families in Hubei province, and other parts of China. There has clearly been a shift in attitude towards housing and private property since the Mao-era, when most urban citizens lived in apartments provided by their work units and rural citizens were organised in collective farms. During that time, owning private property put citizens in the dangerous category of the landlord class, a classification that could lead to persecution under the political campaigns that called for the eradication of property-based class divisions. Nowadays, however, statistics show that house ownership is very popular in China.

The number of apartments bought has become an important marker of a person's

status; moreover, 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. 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 featured in the film that says "speed up the construction 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

house, and the effort that has been put into its decoration, shows that its meaning goes beyond economic strategy. The symbolic value of purchasing a home in the city seems to be its power to solidify rural migrants' urban status and sense of belonging to the urban community, and its physical representation of the family unit.

For rural families with long and complex histories of mobility, the purchase of an urban apartment is often seen as the completion of a process of rural-urban transition. It seems that many of those families have practiced rural-urban migration since the 1980s, when fast economic development in cities and coastal areas created labour opportunities for rural workers and restrictions on mobility were lifted. They are now making their connection to the city more permanent by buying urban property, despite the continued restrictions of the Chinese *hukou* system.

Ever since Wendy has been born, she and her family members have been separated and on the move. For Wendy, the shoe cabinet in the new apartment (made especially for the storage of her sister's shoes) and the pictures on the wall (put there by her father) make her feel at home in Wuhan and closer to her absent family members. Within a context of intense mobility and fast societal transformation, might the meaning of this empty apartment then lie in its ability to provide physical evidence of the existence of this family, and its connection to the city?

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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. It was also published on the *Guardian* website on 24 March 2017 as part of their 'The Other China' series.

Notes

1 <https://vimeo.com/209590747>



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