China’s restless urban landscapes 1: new challenges for theoretical reconstruction

The restless (re)formation of urban landscapes in Europe and North America since the mid-1970s has been the subject of extensive documentation and competing interpretations (Harvey, 1985; 1989a; Knox, 1993; Scott, 1988; 2001; Soja, 2000). By comparison, relatively little is understood about the dynamics of urban transformation on the other side of the Asia-Pacific where, despite its ‘distant’ location in ‘the Far East’, the restlessness of urban changes has been no less pronounced than its American and European counterpart. In terms of either the rapidity of changes or the scale of involvement, the formation, reformation, and transformation of urban landscapes in contemporary China really have little parallel elsewhere in the world, as the papers in this and the next theme issue will reveal. Such enormous urban changes in the most populous and yet poorly understood nation of the world pose great theoretical challenges to those of us trying to negotiate geographic knowledge in the era of intellectual globalization (Cartier, 2001).

For China specialists working in the field of urban geography, there is no shortage of documentation on the Chinese experience of urban development and urbanization. In addition to a widely scattered corpus of literature generated by individual scholars within and outside China (Fan et al, 2002; Lin, 1994; Pannell, 1990; Tang, 1997; Wei, 1995; Yan, 1995), there have been occasions when major collective efforts were made to document and explain the unique features of China’s urban development (Guldin, 1992; Kwok et al, 1990; Logan, 2002; Ma and Hanten, 1981; Ma and Noble, 1986; Sit, 1985; Yeung and Hu, 1992). Although these commendable efforts have shed important light on the dynamics of urban growth in China, the bulk of the extant literature has been, until recently, generated along the path of area studies in which the emphasis is placed on sorting out correctly the facts about a mysterious nation behind the ‘bamboo curtain’. If there is any gap between mainstream theoretical geography on one hand and the empirically rich branch of area studies on the other, such a gap is clearly noticeable in studies of urban China.

Against the above intellectual backdrop, this and the next theme issue on urban China are organized for two objectives. First, we aim to provide a platform for a team of experienced urban China specialists to share with a wide audience their up-to-date accounts and interpretations of the different facets of China’s urban transformation. To distinguish this and the next theme issue from what has been written, we have placed the emphasis on both collective expertise and timely contributions to the understanding of the complex and rapidly changing processes of urban transformation. The ten papers included in these two issues have been selected after rigorous anonymous reviews from those (altogether twenty-three papers) presented in the sessions titled “China’s Cities and Regions in Transition: Essays in Honor of Laurence J C Ma” which took place at the 97th Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in New York City 27 February to 3 March 2001. Each paper examines one of the most important and, in many cases new, components of China’s urban development. Although we allowed for and indeed encouraged a great variety of different viewpoints about different facets of urban China, contributors to the two theme issues are all professional geographers so that methodological consistency and integrity are well preserved.
Second, the two theme issues are intended as a bridge to link more directly and effectively China area studies with theoretical debates in mainstream human geography. For years, studies of China's urbanization and urban development have been largely empirical in nature and rarely sought to relate themselves directly and effectively with theoretical enquiries in human geography and other social sciences for ideological and methodological reasons (McGee, 1991; Slater, 1999; Yeung, 2001). We believe that, whereas the separation of area studies from mainstream theoretical enquiry has severely weakened the theoretical foundation of China studies, it has also rendered the mainstream theories less potent because they are rarely tested in the world's most populous nation which is fundamentally restructuring its economic system towards a market system with dramatic results. All contributors have been asked to interrogate analytically the theoretical issues currently debated in the discipline beyond China area studies. Our hope is that the publication of a collection of works that are theoretically informed and empirically solid in a top mainstream journal like this one will help China geography move one step closer to mainstream scholarship in human geography.

In this brief introduction, we will not attempt to reiterate what the contributors to these two theme issues have said in their papers or review what has been written in the urban China literature. Our intention is instead to identify a number of key theoretical issues that have emerged from this collective project and which, we believe, will be particularly important not only to our understanding of a rapidly changing urban China but also to fruitful engagements with theoretical enquiry in mainstream human geography as well as China studies. In doing so, we try to place the works of our contributors in a broader perspective, making references both to the changing intellectual environment in mainstream human geography and to the rapidly changing reality in China. The central argument we make here is that recent developments in both the intellectual environment (that is, renewed interests in place, region, differences, and regional studies) and the Chinese economy (China’s opening up and rearticulation with the Western world) have presented unprecedented and challenging opportunities to geographers for fruitful theoretical reconstruction.

Emerging theoretical issues on urban China

Until recently, the development of scholarship on urban China had been hindered by a shortage of detailed and reliable data, the lack of opportunities for field survey, and isolation of Western scholars from their Chinese counterpart (Ma and Noble, 1986; Pannell, 1990). An additional and crucial difficulty was a mainstream intellectual environment that was much less interested in and friendly toward area studies than today. The special nature of China’s planned economy and its tight central control of society rendered it extremely difficult for China geographers either to join the bandwagon of the scientific/positivist paradigm or to participate in theoretical debates in the blossoming critical social theory. China’s isolation, the paucity of statistical data, and the lack of interaction with Chinese scholars led to “superficial, or even erroneous, analyses” (Ma and Noble, 1986, page 280). Meanwhile, the lack of interaction between China geographers and mainstream scholars was at least partially responsible for the poor theoretical interpretations in studies on the geography of China. This situation was further compounded by the small number of China geographers who were actively engaged in research.

The situation today differs profoundly from that prior to the early 1980s. China geography has played an indispensable part in the resurgence of regional studies. Whereas the previous scholarly preference was the construction of spatial theories based upon such assumptions as isotropic plains, Economic Man, and perfect information, and the immediate goal was the building of models that were value free and
universally applicable, the emphasis now is to engage in plural and contextually sensitive discourses that give due recognition to place, region, local conditions, geographical particularities, discursive practices, and cultural, institutional, or relational embeddedness (Barnes, 1996; 2001; Yeung, 2003). At the same time, the political economy in China has also undergone profound transformations, moving away from plan to market, from centralized to decentralized local control, and from isolation to active participation in global capital accumulation. With technical assistance from the World Bank, the United Nations, and many other international organizations, the Chinese statistical authorities have since the early 1980s released a growing amount of important statistical information to enable empirical research. There are also great opportunities for fieldwork in the country and renewed bilateral scholarly exchanges between China and other countries. In addition, the number of China geographers actively pursuing research has increased greatly as a large number of Chinese students are being trained in the West. These young scholars have contributed significantly to the quantity as well as quality of research, as the papers in these two theme issues testify. These encouraging new developments in both academia and the target study area have opened up unprecedented opportunities for insightful understanding and meaningful theorization of what has been taking place in China. Indeed, an open China and its restless landscapes have provided fertile ground for mining new knowledge and reconstructing theoretical discourses. There are pressing needs for China geographers to give timely responses to the encouraging new developments outlined above. In this respect, the ten papers presented in these two theme issues represent an important collective initiative to meet the challenges. These papers are bounded and threaded by a set of interrelated theoretical issues they have raised.

Urban (demographic) transition and (societal) transformation

In the grand urban research enterprise, there is a well-established body of theoretical literature that deals with the logics of urban growth in the context of either advanced capitalist economies or the developing world (for the former see Harvey, 1985; 1989a; Knox, 1993; Scott, 1988; 2001; Soja, 2000; for the latter see Berry, 1973; Friedmann and Wulff, 1975; Ginsburg, 1990; Lin, 1994; 2001; McGee, 1971; Timberlake, 1985). Until recently, urban specialists working on China had tended to see the Chinese experience of urban growth as peculiar, 'unique', and incomparable with other countries in the world and therefore irrelevant to what has been postulated in the extant theoretical literature. Although numerous empirical studies have been conducted to deconstruct the conventional theory of urban transition (that is, to prove that China does not fit the conventional wisdom of urban transition), a few significant attempts have been made to construct a special theory tailor-made for a 'unique' China (Chan, 1994; Chen and Parish, 1996; Kirkby, 1985; Ma, 1976).

In recent years, however, there is a growing recognition that, as China moves along the path of market reforms and globalization, some of the theoretical and conceptual concerns in the mainstream literature on cities under capitalism may be relevant to the transformation of urban China in view of the profound processes underway in an open and globalizing nation. Will China follow the footsteps of urban transition experienced by most advanced economies some decades ago? To what extent is the conventional theory of urban transition applicable to what has been taking place in China? If a wholesale application of the existing theory of urban transition is not desirable, then are there any conceptual and theoretical approaches that could be used for either theoretical deconstruction or reconstruction? Should China’s urban geography continue to borrow concepts and theories originally developed for other socialist economies, as Kirkby (1985) and Chan (1994) have aptly demonstrated in their
application of Ofer’s (1977) theory of economizing urbanization under socialism, or should China geographers construct theories of their own in a manner similar to what has been done so well by their sociological counterparts notably Victor Nee and Andrew Walder (for a critique see Guthrie, 2000)? These are some of the important questions that demand serious and immediate reconsiderations. To this end, Larry Ma and Clifton Pannell have taken the lead and contributed new insights on how we should go from here. The two papers they have contributed here show not only the need for theorization on the basis of an enormous information accumulated over the past two decades but also the ways in which theoretical reconstruction can be effectively pursued.

The institutional (re)turn: “bringing the state back in!”

The continuing enquiry for knowledge in social sciences in recent years has been characterized by a strong and perhaps overwhelming resurgence of an institutionally or relationally oriented intellectual trend. Geography is no exception and the trend toward what is known as ‘institutionalism’ or ‘institutional turns’ has been particularly noticeable in recent theoretical reconstructions in economic geography (Amin, 2001; Jessop, 2001; Peck, 2001; Peck and Tickell, 1994). In urban studies, major theoretical attempts to explain the growth of cities in Europe and North America have also been focused on the institutional ensembles and regulatory mechanism of urban politics, the formation and interplay of urban growth coalitions, and, above all, the new urban politics (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Stone, 1989). China has been and remains under the control of a distinct political regime whose changing functioning and reconfiguration are pivotal to the transformation of the economy, society, and landscape. The importance of the Chinese party-state as an invisible yet powerful hand responsible for the formation and reformation of China’s restless landscapes has been recognized by almost all China geographers (Chan, 1994; Fan, 1999; Lin, 1999; 2000; Lo, 1987; Ma, 1976; Ma and Wei, 1997; Pannell, 1990; Wei, 2000). Interestingly enough, there was very little interaction and dialogue between the discourse of institutionalism in the mainstream of either economic geography or urban studies on the one hand and studies of the role played by the Chinese party-state in urban transformation on the other.

Although it is now generally agreed that the socialist ideology of egalitarianism and the strategy of economizing urbanization, both adopted by the Chinese state, were the two most powerful forces shaping the peculiar pattern of slow urbanization despite industrialization, many of those conceptual and theoretical questions that have already been dealt with in the mainstream institutionalism discourse remain puzzling to China’s urban geographers. What is the nature of the Chinese party-state? Is the Chinese party-state really a unitary, self-sustained, and coherent entity with what Kornai (1992, page 361) described as “undivided power” capable of transforming the space–economy at all levels? Is the party-state a fix apparatus infused with the everlasting spirits of communism, or is it changeable all the time depending upon varying historical circumstances? To what extent and in what manner has the rescaling or reconfiguration of the Chinese party-state recontoured China’s urban landscapes? If there is such an ‘institutional fix’ as neoliberalism to cope with the crisis of capitalism in the West, is there any ‘institutional fix’ in the Chinese way? If the formation of formal and informal coalitions between municipal governments and the business sectors explains a great deal the ups and downs of the restless urban landscapes in Europe and North America, what then is the internal mechanism of urban governance in the Chinese context? The papers contributed by Fulong Wu, Ge Lin, and Christopher Smith provide interesting answers to some of these questions.
Globalization and transnationalism

Despite the ambiguity and controversy associated with the concept of globalization, the functional integration of economic activities at the global scale has been generally identified as one of the most powerful forces reshaping urban landscapes at all levels. Initially, studies of the impacts of globalization on urban changes have been focused on the ‘global shifts’ of capital and industry as a ‘flexible strategy of accumulation’ (Dicken, 1998; Harvey, 1989b). Much effort has been devoted toward understanding the interrelationship between the operation of global market forces on the one hand and the emergence of ‘world cities’, ‘global cities’, and ‘global city-regions’ on the other (Friedmann, 1995; Sassen, 1991, Scott, 2001). The growing popularity of an ethno-graphic approach in urban geography has recently ushered in a new body of literature in which the emphasis has changed from the global shift of capital toward the increased mobility of transnationalists and the global networks they have built (Ma and Cartier, 2002; Ong and Nonini, 1997; Yeung, 1998).

The emerging discourses of globalization and transnationalism have yet to find a way to influence studies of Chinese cities, however. Although significant attempts have been made to link the location of foreign capital investment with the restructuring of Chinese cities (Shen, 2002; Wu, 1999; Yeung and Hu, 1992), the actual operating mechanism of local–global interaction and its spatial ramifications remain poorly understood. How have the forces of globalization interacted with the Chinese state and local conditions? To what extent and in what manner have the forces of globalization been embedded in place-specific local conditions? If transnationalism has given rise to distinct ‘ethnoscapes’ and ‘ethnoburbs’ in Europe and North America (Appadurai, 1991; Li, 1998; Zhou, 1998), what then has been the case in coastal and southern China where most of the Chinese diaspora originated? What has been the impact of globalization and transnationalism on labor mobility across the country? These are some of the questions addressed by Dennis Wei, Werner Breitung, and Zhongdong Ma in their papers that will appear in the next theme issue.

The economy and urbanization

It has been generally believed that human geography in general and urban geography in particular have in recent years witnessed a growing plurality of discourses as well as a methodological shift that has been characterized by some as ‘the cultural turn’, ‘institutional turn’, or ‘relational turn’ (Ley, 1996; Mitchell, 1999; Thrift, 2000; Wheeler, 1998). The ‘cultural turn’ or ‘institutional turn’ has not, however, wiped out economic imperatives as one of the fundamental explanatory variables for urban changes, although such turns may have helped ‘refigure’ the economic variables (Thrift and Olds, 1996). There is a well-established body of literature on economic restructuring, particularly the growth of services, as one of the most powerful forces transforming urban landscapes in Europe and North America (Daniels, 1991; Marshall and Wood, 1992; Soja, 2000).

By comparison, the cause–effect relationship between economic restructuring and urban development in postreform China remains elusive, vague, and definitely inconclusive possibly, because of the evolving nature of the subject and the rapidity of changes that has made it extremely difficult for any meaningful theoretical catch-up. What has been the nature of economic restructuring in China since the reforms? Does China follow a linear progression of economic restructuring moving away from a preindustrial toward an industrial economy as envisaged by Daniel Bell and many others? If China is now experiencing rapid industrialization as a result of market reforms and globalization, then what is the new relationship between industrialization and urbanization, which has been a topic central to the studies in the geography of
production in the West and interpretations of Chinese urbanization under Mao? The Chinese statistical authorities have in recent years released a large amount of information to suggest that there has been a substantial increase in the service sector of the economy in terms of both output value and employment. Is there really a process of tertiarization underway in China? What is the exact nature of the growth of ‘services’ in the Chinese context? How has the growth of both manufacturing and services facilitated the growth of cities and the transformation of the urban landscapes? The paper by Shuguang Wang and Ken Jones sheds significant light on some of the issues raised above, particularly on the relationship between economic restructuring and urban transformation.

Urban society, culture, and the environment

Over the past several decades, geographers’ interests in urban studies have experienced significant changes; moving from the notion of the city as the center of economic growth in the 1950s to the structuring of the systems of cities in the 1960s and 1970s and the processes of social construction of cities in the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas the city was seen as a ‘natural’ and ‘objective’ spatial entity ‘out there’ for scientific measurement, correlation, and modeling, the new intellectual trend is to see the city as an actual and discursive place that is socially produced and culturally constituted. The emphasis has been shifted toward analyzing how the city is constituted out of spatialized social relations, how such relations contribute to the (re)formation and representation of human identities, and how these relations and identities in turn reshape the urban landscapes. Cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, or Shenzhen have been home to some but a place of exclusion or a battlefield for survival to many others (Fan, 2002; Smart and Smart, 2001). If the city is an artifact socially constructed and built by people for people, then it is the interaction of the people of different cultures, their negotiation for identities, and their own narratives that explain the fundamental logics of urban changes. Despite the growing call for humanizing and subjectifying urban transformation, much of what has been written on urban China has remained under the shadow of scientism. It is not our intention to suggest a complete abandonment of scientism in favor of social theory. We do observe, however, that the actual processes of social construction and human narratives in Chinese cities past and present have ironically received much less scholarly attention than they deserve, despite the importance of cultural and social relations in a nation with one of the earliest established civilizations on earth. We also believe that an incorporation of sociological and ethnographic approaches into urban studies will do no harm to our disciplinary integrity if our mandate is to understand the operating mechanism of urban spatial transformation. Several papers included in this theme issue, particularly those by Smith, Wei, L Ma, Z Ma, and Ge Lin, have made significant attempts to move along this direction.

If studies of the people and society in Chinese cities require more vigorous endeavor than before, then the same thing can be said about research on the physical environment of the city which is arguably the other side of the coin. There is mounting evidence to suggest that Chinese cities have experienced massive land development since the reforms. With few exceptions (Ho and Lin, 2003; Wong and Zhao, 1999; Yeh and Wu, 1996), existing documentation of China’s urban land development has been focused on the commercialization of the housing sector and the emergence of the urban land market (Huang and Clark, 2002; Li, 2000; Wu, 1996; 2001; Zhou and Logan, 1996; Zhu, 2002). Many theoretical and practical issues have yet to be closely scrutinized to shed light not only on the dynamics of urban environmental transformation but also on the new processes of human–environment interaction in the era of
market reforms and globalization. How clear or ambiguous is the Chinese definition of land-property rights? What are the institutional underpinnings of the evolving land-disposition regime? Is it appropriate to see land-property rights as simply ‘a bundle of rights’ as described in the classic theory of urban land economics? What is the actual procedure for the conversion of land from rural to urban and from the state sector to the commercial sector? How do we understand the pervasive illegal land transactions taking place all over the country? How do we explain the tension and frequent conflicts between the farmers who have lost fertile farm land and the municipalities who have taken it over? To what extent and in what manner has the central regulation been circumvented and manipulated by municipal and local cadres? The papers by L Ma, Wu, Wang, and Wei have dealt with some of these questions, but further research is needed to understand better the complex mechanism of land development.

**Conclusion**

We would like to close this brief introduction with our observation that studies of China’s urban geography are currently at a critical juncture. For decades China’s urban geography has been known for its empirical orientation and strong attachment to the tradition of area studies. China geographers have been commonly regarded as area specialists with good knowledge about the geographical specificities of China’s land and people. Encouraging new developments in the intellectual environment and the Chinese political economy in recent years have presented China urban geographers with both challenges and unprecedented opportunities. These new developments included the resurgence of regional studies subsequent to the return of interests in place after the globalization fever, the dramatic growth of the Chinese economy and its rearticulation with the outside world, and, last but not least, the emergence of a new generation of scholars with both first-hand field experience in China and up-to-date Western training in cutting-edge theories and methodologies. A fertile ground is already broken for fruitful theoretical reconstruction. If the restless urban landscapes in Europe and North America have amounted to a new urban geography as claimed by Knox and his colleagues, then we see no reason why the ongoing tremendous urban transformation in China cannot provoke and generate a new urban geography of China with similar theoretical significance. Such a new urban geography of China is not to break completely with past tradition so that the baby would not be thrown out with the bathwater. Instead, it has to be built upon what has been richly and substantively accumulated over past generations. If there is anything ‘new’ to the urban geography of China, then it should be the meaningful and contextually sensitive reconstruction of discourses that are theoretically informed and empirically grounded. To this end, the collection of papers in these two consecutive theme issues simply represent the seeds we have sown for future germination and eventual production of impressive fruits. There is a Chinese saying: “casting a brick to attract jade” (paozhuan yinyu), which literally means offering a few commonplace remarks by way of introduction so that others may come up with valuable opinions. If the collection of papers we present in these two theme issues could be followed by greater debates and theoretical interrogations, then the goals we have set for this project would have been very well accomplished. It is our hope that, before too long, the new urban geography of China will constitute an important part of the mainstream literature in urban studies in general and urban geography in particular.

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