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Contested Urban Spaces

Editorial

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Editorial

BETTINA GRANSOW

The restructuring of Chinese cities has produced new spatial forms such as glittering and globally-oriented Central Business Districts, iconic architecture, forests of skyscrapers, development zones, shopping malls, suburban villas, university cities, and cultural clusters. Many Chinese cities have launched comprehensive entrepreneurial strategies to boost their role in intense intercity competition. While promoting entrepreneurial discourses, cities are also presenting themselves not only as economic and metropolitan centres but also as “world-class cities”; they have recently begun to discover their local cultural heritage as an asset in pursuing this strategy. Images of “world-class” cities were promoted in particular during special events such as the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, the World Expo in Shanghai, and the Asian Games in Guangzhou in 2010. According to Ananya Roy, such strategies of “worlding” the cities of the Global South, or more broadly, the twenty-first-century metropolises, go beyond conceptualisations of Third World Urbanism that place the mega-city and its slums at the centre of the creation of urban futures. ⁽¹⁾

Critical reflections on the production of contemporary urban space in the Global South centre around neoliberalism and right to the city (*chengshi-quan* 城市权). Originating from Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s, the slogan “right to the city” stands for creating rights by means of political and social action. Lefebvre articulated a demand for redistribution and recognition, a claim challenging the rich and powerful, and a claim founded on fundamental principles of justice and ethics as opposed to a legal claim enforceable via judicial processes. ⁽²⁾ The slogan was taken up again worldwide during the global financial crisis in 2009 and has been interpreted by various NGOs, advocacy groups, and international organisations in different ways. As it was scaled up from more revolutionary interpretations by grass-roots organisations to global political arenas and institutions, a process of depoliticisation could be observed. Today the interpretations of “right to the city” extend from its original revolutionary and transformative understanding to more watered-down definitions as legal rights for specific vulnerable groups. Unlike Lefebvre’s concept, such institutionalised sets of rights boil down to claims for inclusion into existing systems with an eye to good urban governance, including toolkits for participatory decision-making and transparency on local levels, but without aiming at a transformation of existing systems. ⁽³⁾

Three general trends of the city in the Global South have been identified: ⁽⁴⁾ increasing social polarisation and spatial division within the city; the refashioning of certain urban quarters of the divided city into cosmopolitan landscapes and the integration of unevenly developed spaces into an unstable and conflict-prone “whole”; and competing claims and oppositional forms of governance that “give rise to distinctive political struggles seeking to exert influence across city spaces and to remake, defend, or control those spaces.” ⁽⁵⁾ Far from exhibiting a process of convergence, these struggles take various forms and are producing new spatial configurations in different national, transnational, and local settings. This observation fits in well with the “right to the city” discourse.

Regarding China, while there is broad debate about urbanisation and urban issues (such as the *hukou* system, land-use rights and land markets, urban villages and the marginalisation of migrants in the city, redevelopment and displacement of residents, nail houses, and collective action), a more explicit discourse on “right to the city” is still in its early stages. One argument is that the right to the Chinese city has become part of the broader project of entrepreneurial city building and emphasises eligibility in form of “entry” qualifications rather than granting migrants in the city the same entitlements that permanent urban *hukou* holders can enjoy. ⁽⁶⁾ Others assert the right to urban life as inextricable from a social project of altering dominant power structures. They suggest that the rights of three social groups, namely socialist workers in work units, rural migrants, and urban redevelopment displacees, to the modern Chinese city is situated within the uneven distribution of social power and corresponding infrastructures of social control, which contribute to these social groups’ structural marginality in the process of urban social formation. ⁽⁷⁾ A critical revisiting of existing debates on property rights activism refers to the “right to the city” perspective to examine whose rights count in China’s urban development and proposes a cross-class alliance engaging both migrants and local citizens. Such an alliance, it has been argued, has the potential to overcome the limited level of rights awareness that rests primarily on distributive justice in China. ⁽⁸⁾ This view is contested by the findings of some of the contributions to this special feature, suggesting that different social actors may distance themselves from each other in the context of collective action.

The process of reconfiguration of Chinese cities, which is embedded in while at the same time shaping broader currents of urbanisation in the developing world, includes not only a physical restructuring of urban spaces but also a challenge to established configurations of land ownership and control, space-based consumption, and entitlements on the part of urban citizens. Thus Chinese cities, and the spaces that constitute them, have become arenas of heightened contestation, from both within and without the city itself. But who exactly is involved in negotiating/contesting the organ-

1. Ananya Roy, “The Twenty-First-Century Metropolis: The Making of Urban Futures,” in Wilhelm Krull (ed), *Research and Responsibility: Reflections on Our Common Future*, Leipzig, CEP Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2011, p. 135; Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong (eds), *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
2. Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la Ville*, Paris, Anthropos 1968; Margit Mayer, “The ‘right to the city’ in the Context of Shifting Mottos of Urban Social Movements,” *City*, Vol. 13, No. 2-3, 2009, pp. 367 ff.
3. Margit Mayer, “The ‘right to the city’ in the Context of Shifting Mottos of Urban Social Movements,” *art.cit.*, p. 369.
4. Tony Roshan Samara, Shenjing He, and Guo Chen, “Introduction: Locating Right to the City in the Global South,” in Tony Roshan Samara, Shenjing He, and Guo Chen (eds), *Locating Right to the City in the Global South*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 2.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
6. Li Zhang, “The Right to the Entrepreneurial City in Reform-Era China,” *China Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2010, pp. 129-155.
7. Junxi Qian and Shenjing He, “Rethinking Social Power and the Right to the City amidst China’s Emerging Urbanism,” *Environment and Planning A*, Vol. 44, No. 12, 2012, pp. 2801-2816.
8. Hyun Bang Shin, “The Right to the City and Critical Reflections on China’s Property Rights Activism,” *Antipode*, Vol. 45, No. 5, 2013.

isation of new urban spaces in China, and how? How do various urban actors imagine the Chinese city of the future, and what are their strategies for creating their own urban spaces? What are the perspectives of rapid urbanisation in China – can a broad middle class emerge in the near future as imagined within the concept of the harmonious society? Or will the rural-urban divide give rise to increasingly polarised urban societies? How does agency by rural migrants impact urban spaces?

This special feature will not be able to shed light on all of the many questions arising from the contestation of urban spaces. For example, it contains no papers on spaces of production and workers' strike actions, on gender specific dimensions of urban contestation or – 25 years after the crackdown on the Tiananmen protest movement and in light of political demonstrations on Tahrir, Taksim, and Maidan – the iconic role of public squares. What is presented here is first-hand research on three different dimensions of contestation and the urban spaces thereby formed, including: 1) contestation from within the city, focussing on permanent urban citizens turned homeowners, on homeowner activism and on urban neighbourhoods under the threat of urban redevelopment; 2) contestation from the margins of urban society, focussing on an influx of rural migrants, the relation of urban villages and the city, and negotiations over public spaces between beggars and security personnel; and 3) contestation at the fringes of the city focussing on the placement of infrastructure facilities and environmental activism, and on the decay and reimagination of rural village communities under urbanisation.

Contestation from within the city

China's rapid urbanisation is a process whereby urban space is increasingly privatised. More than three quarters of urban households in China currently own their own living space. Beijing now has 700-800 residential communities with formally organised homeowners' associations.⁽⁹⁾ Symbols of urban modernity and social status, the new "gated communities" that have developed since the 1990s may yet become the centre of conflict between different categories of actors: homeowners' committees defending their rights, real estate developers and management companies, residents' committees and local administrations. Focussing on a collective initiative in Beijing aiming at establishing a municipal federation of homeowners' committees and creating a nation-wide network, Aurore Merle examines the ability of homeowners' movements to go beyond the gates of local communities and federate their various claims. She reaches the conclusion that the application committee requesting authorisation for a federation of homeowners' committees in Beijing (*yeshenwei* 业申委) limits the scope for intervention by the party/state on the local level and can thus help strengthen civil society. However, given the complex interconnections between homeowners' organisations and administrative organs as well as market forces, one might also come to the conclusion, as did Shen Yuan, that "the property-owning class is producing its own civil society."⁽¹⁰⁾ While discourse on the existence and scope of action of an emerging civil society in China has thus far concentrated almost exclusively on the balance of power between it and the state, on lines of conflict, or on overlaps and interdependencies with the state and its many levels, Merle's paper raises the additional question of civil society and fragmentation. The homeowners' movement powered by the new urban middle class is not only gaining autonomy vis-à-vis state bodies but is also pursuing de-

cidely individual interests. As such, it does not stand *pars pro toto* for "society" as such, but rather is contributing to the process of segregation in urban spaces and the compartmentalisation of Chinese civil society.

The introduction of commodified land, housing markets, and commercial projects often leads to large-scale demolition of housing and displacement of urban populations. Particularly in neighbourhoods with historical flair and culturally significant architecture, personal and collective memories are closely interconnected with the history of the place. Bettina Gransow examines the social impact of an ongoing redevelopment project and how citizens' activism unfolds in reaction to the impact on their everyday lives and community in an old town neighbourhood of Guangzhou. Her study is structured by a recognition-theoretical model of social conflicts (following on Nancy Fraser and her debate with Axel Honneth over redistribution and/or recognition).⁽¹¹⁾ Gransow focuses on contestation in economic (fair compensation), social (rupture of family and residential networks), cultural (authenticity of the place), and political (public participation) dimensions of recognition. While scholarly discussion of collective action and protest movements concentrates on the forms and extent of protest and its ability to challenge the party-state, the perspective afforded by conflicts of recognition sheds new light on the underlying motives and driving forces behind citizens' action. The example of a socially mixed neighbourhood impacted by a redevelopment project clearly shows not only the mechanism behind gentrification and social segregation but also the asymmetrical power relations among affected citizens trying to resist this process. Temporary alliances with supporting groups, media, and academia are helping to empower citizen activists and to design fresh and innovative conceptions of the neighbourhood as a historical place, its meaning for the local people personally, its public significance, and its potential for renewal based on the ideas of local people, but at the end of the day only very few residents may enjoy the outcomes of this endeavour.

Contestation at the margins of urban society

The movement of hundreds of millions of rural migrants during China's market reform has produced thousands of migrant enclaves in Chinese cities that – compared with massive city slums in which migrants find cheap shelter in other developing countries – are disproportionately fewer, more sporadic, and less visible in the urban landscape. Examining the pattern of migrant settlements in Shenzhen, Edmund Cheng explains how urban villages and factory dormitories have become the major forms of migrant settlements when migrants are viewed as a temporary workforce without rights to the city. He then analyses how and why the spatial contention brought by rural migrants is shaped and kept latent by the dynamics of urban planning in Shenzhen as the forerunner of other Chinese cities. While all over China there are many different forms of urban villages depending on specific circumstances and local policies, a common threat to urban vil-

9. See Zhengxu Wang, Long Sun, Liuqing Xu, and Dragan Pavlicevic, "Leadership in China's Urban Middle Class Protest: The Movement to Protect Homeowners' Rights in Beijing," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 214, 2013, pp. 412, 415.

10. Shen Yuan, "Housing Transforms China: The Homeowner Rights' Campaign in B City," in Laurence Rouleau-Berger and Li Peilin (eds), *European and Chinese Sociologies. A New Dialogue*, Leiden, Brill 2012, p. 252.

11. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, London, Verso, 2003.

lages is the aggressive redevelopment policy of municipal governments. Not only the provision of migrant housing is at stake but also urban village economies, which particularly in inner city districts may have close links with the surrounding urban economy.⁽¹²⁾

The majority of rural-to-urban migrants are workers and small business-people. But there are also migrants who are unable to work for various reasons, some of whom make a living from panhandling in public urban spaces. While defined by its relative accessibility to all members of a society, public space is not a space free of power structures or their challenges. Beggars – highly marginalised in Chinese society – depend for their very existence on the appropriation of urban public space. At the same time, local governments often deny them the needed visibility by using a regime of public order consisting of security personnel, related policies, and discourses. The paper by Ryanne Flock focuses on the dynamics of contestation over public space by beggars facing this official regime and asks: Who are the actors using which concrete mechanisms and reasons to refuse or allow beggars access to public space? How do beggars appropriate and maximise their chances of appropriating public space? Flock's paper takes the metropolis of the south, Guangzhou, as a case study and concentrates on the most dynamic places for panhandling: the environs of temples and churches as well as popular shopping streets. She finds that beggars in public space face contrasting sources of governmental legitimacy – economic progress and strength on the one hand, which their presence undermines, versus responsibility and morality on the other, which should be applied to assist them – leading to a double-bind logic of control and tolerance. This finding coincides with Vivienne Shue's insight into the contested discourse on charity in China. Looking into the potential for mutual empowerment by the state and society, she found that local governors responsible for civil affairs still see charity as the responsibility of the state and not of society, because their legitimacy depends on being perceived as "benevolent" (*ren* 仁) state officials.⁽¹³⁾

Contestation at the outskirts of the city

Rapid urbanisation requires infrastructure such as sewage plants and waste-to-energy (WTE) incinerators, which are usually built on the outskirts of cities. Homeowners who find comparatively low-priced living space or investment property in these areas use various means to resist the construction of such facilities. Many parts of China have seen protests against waste incineration plants. The article by Amy Zhang examines the logic and framing of homeowner protests against WTE incineration in Guangzhou. She argues that the concept of rational (*lixing* 理性) resistance emphasised by homeowner activists represents one way of understanding urban environmental contention in China. Urban homeowners use rational resistance to distinguish themselves from both villagers and the state. According to Zhang, their focus on rationality is a critique of the government's reliance on technology to resolve the social problem of waste management. By introducing the concept of "rational resistance," Zhang builds on the discourse of "rightful resistance" initiated by Kevin O'Brien, but sees the demands of urban environmental protesters as going beyond the arguments of village protesters and thereby highlights a phenomenon that has thus far not received sufficient attention in the literature on collective actions, namely the distancing of middle-class actors from other social groups in environmental protests.

The urbanisation of villages on the outskirts of cities is often accompanied by disputes over rural land. This in turn is associated with social upheaval

and reconfigurations of economic structures and cultural traditions. lam-chong Ip focuses on the conscious struggles of social actors to strengthen and form their own territorialities, simultaneously resisting, negotiating with, and conforming to state-led urbanisation. Using the example of Dongguan, he argues that the dynamic between class restructuring, communal imaginations, and a cellular form of activism is an integral part of state-led urbanisation in Guangdong. This process is not simply a conflict of interest between the local state and the population, but also a struggle against proletarianisation in a fast-growing capitalist and industrial environment.

Only occasionally do the case studies in this special feature refer explicitly to the "right to the city" discourse, although they definitely have the potential to make a contribution here and advance the discussion. These case studies based on careful field work allow new configurations of China's urban society to be traced, which can help to understand more recent issues at the nexus of the state, market forces, and (civil) society that transcend the results of individual studies. Such issues include the generalisation of gentrification plus the mechanisms behind the rise of a new type of urban poverty accompanying marginalisation, alienation, and a loss of identity (see the papers by Edmund Cheng, Bettina Gransow, and lam-chong Ip in this volume), as well as the tendency toward fragmentation on the part of civil society within the process of collective action (see Amy Zhang, lam-chong Ip, and Aurore Merle).

The segregation of social space and gentrification as a mainstream phenomenon.

Widespread modernisation and large-scale urban infrastructure projects trigger processes of gentrification that lead to the destruction of inner-city neighbourhood communities. These processes are linked to residential segregation, marginalisation, loss of social networks, and isolation of the poor and elderly. Whilst urban poverty in China in the 1990s could still be ascribed in large part to the loss of employment and was also considered cushioned by the existence of the *danwei* system, large-scale modernisation projects have paved the way for gentrification as a mainstream phenomenon in Chinese urban development. In Guangdong province the "Three Olds" (*sanjiu* 三旧) policy (2009) is already accelerating the redevelopment of inner-city "old" urban villages, industrial areas, and residential districts. On a national scale a similar policy is being established for the coming years as part of the National New-Type Urbanisation Plan (2014-2020) (国家新型城镇化规划 2014-2020 年) released on 16 March 2014.⁽¹⁴⁾ At least three types of local communities will be destroyed under the maxim of economic growth: inner-city neighbourhoods, urban villages, and village communities near cities. Spatial interventions promoted jointly by local state and market forces are triggering protests, collective and individual actions that contain both defensive and proactive elements: neighbourhood preservation as well as territorial and cultural/historical re-imagination of the contested spaces. Against an overpowering alliance of local government (including its urban

12. Yanliu Lin, Bruno de Meulder, and Shifu Wang, "The Symbiotic Relationship between Urban Villages and the City: Implications for Redevelopment Strategies," in Fulong Wu, Fangzhu Zhang, and Chris Webster, *Rural Migrants in Urban China: Enclaves and Transient Urbanism*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 240-255.

13. Vivienne Shue, "The Political Economy of Compassion: China's Charity Supermarket Saga," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 72, 2011, p. 771.

14. Shouquan fabu, Guojia xinxing chengzhenhua guihua (2014-2020) (Authorised Release, State planning new urbanisation), http://news.xinhuanet.com/city/2014-03/17/c_126276532.htm (accessed on 17 March 2014).

planners), developers, and real estate companies, there is very little room for sustainable urban development strategies in social and environmental terms. A civil society kept artificially weak cannot function as a corrective – either via strong intermediary organisations or via legally anchored participatory rights – to urban development policies that can easily be expected to induce further social upheaval.

Fragmentation of civil society – How collective is collective action?

The papers in this special feature address in different ways how social actors distance themselves from each other: urban homeowners from villagers and villagers from migrants form two dominant patterns in the social transformation of Chinese society. Of special interest for our area of study is the self-distancing that takes place in the context of collective actions. In addition to the farmers who lose their land and the migrant workers who cannot live in cities on their wages, the actors of urban contestation include above all the new middle classes, with a focus on collective action by homeowners. Noteworthy here is the question of whether they are pursuing primarily private interests either as individuals

or as a social group, and in so doing whether they are helping or hindering the strengthening of civil society. In particular, Zhang's paper on "rational resistance" illustrates how homeowners protesting a WTE incinerator near their neighbourhood at the edge of the city deliberately distance themselves from what they see as an emotional and inarticulate protest on the part of local villagers. They present themselves as "citizen experts" on equal standing with government representatives, who not only comprehend the technical (and social) implications of the new urban infrastructure better than the latter but are also able to gain from distinguishing themselves from the villagers in the sense described by Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁵ The middle-class protesters thus gain in social identity and strengthen their own position, which also means a strengthening of the protest movement. At the same time, however, they contribute to the fragmentation of collective action and thus weaken the protest's effectiveness. It is therefore not only state control and intervention that limit the expansion and strengthening of civil society but also a (quasi-inevitable) fragmentation within this society's own ranks. This dual weakening of civil society means that its production of precisely those intermediary structures and urban spaces needed to achieve social sustainability can proceed at only a very slow and laborious pace.

15. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1984.