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Urban Studies

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From an emerging market to a multifaceted urban society: Urban China studies

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Abstract

China is undergoing an urban revolution. In 2011 more than half of the total population resided in cities and towns for the first time in history. Over the last two decades urban China scholars have actively engaged in dialogues with urbanists from different disciplines and different urban contexts. In consequence, urban China studies have embarked on a trail of rapid diversification and proliferation, moving beyond the topics of urbanisation and urban expansion to address a variety of issues echoing the latest developments in the Chinese city. Overall, urban China studies are witnessing a transition from a focus on economic development and spatial changes, to diverse social groups and the multifaceted experiences of living in rapidly changing cities. This virtual special issue (VSI) summarises the progress of urban China studies since the Economic Reform was launched in the 1970s. On the one hand, it delineates a broad picture of intellectual advancement and knowledge production in the field of urban China research. On the other hand, it identifies some emerging new themes that have not been well represented but are of potentially great significance in the comprehension and theorisation of Chinese urbanism. A total of 24 articles published in *Urban Studies* have been selected to represent, albeit in necessarily circumscribed form, the scope of urban China studies in this journal. They are distributed across four well-established themes: (1) globalisation and the making of global cities; (2) land and housing development; (3) urban poverty and socio-spatial inequality; (4) rural migrants and their urban experiences. We also highlight three emerging frontiers: (1) urban fragmentation, enclaves and public space; (2) consumption, middle class aestheticisation and urban culture; (3) the right to the city and urban activism. The editorial concludes by identifying some key gaps in the extant literature and some potentially productive future directions.

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Introduction: Framing the academic debate on urban China

Traditionally an agrarian nation, China was a latecomer to advanced urbanisation. 2011 marked the point when, for the first time in history, more than half of the total population of China resided in cities and towns. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, urbanisation began to emerge as a widely debated academic issue in China and, since its initial emergence, urbanisation as a theme has tended to dominate the field of urban China studies. Over the last two decades, however, scholars working on urban China have increasingly engaged in dialogues with urbanists from different disciplines and locales. They have embarked on a process of rapid subject-matter diversification and proliferation, moving beyond urbanisation and urban development per se to address an expansive range of issues that reflect both the latest developments in the Chinese city, and theoretical and conceptual advancements in the wider field of urban studies. Newer trends and orientations are now becoming increasingly evident. In particular: (1) studies of urban China have shifted from macroscopic analyses of market transition and institutional innovation to more micro-scale investigations, including contested local governance, and the physical and cultural construction of urban spaces; (2) urban transition in China is now being examined as a process in which the relative homogeneity and equality of the Maoist era is quickly being dismantled and replaced by various forms of social polarisation and differentiation; (3) urban China study is also transitioning from a focus on economic development and associated spatial changes, to the examination of diverse social groups and the multifaceted experiences of living in rapidly changing cities; (4) urban China scholars have begun to move beyond simple recording and analysis of spatial structures and relations, rethinking and problematising some of the fundamental concepts that structure social theories, such as state, civil society, property, power, etc.

Existing research can be usefully categorised into three broad corpuses of literature concerned with: (1) measuring the velocity and magnitude of Chinese urban transformation; (2) examining political, institutional and social metamorphosis in the post-reform era; (3) making sense of the multiplex matrix of socio-cultural transformations at multiple scales (He and Qian, forthcoming). Initially, a large proportion of this work, especially relating to the first category, involved empirical analysis and econometric modelling. This scholarship was dominated by a positivist epistemology that tended to lack analytical nuance and theoretical reflection. Urban China studies have since evolved through a critical examination of the emerging market towards a deeper investigation of the multifaceted nature of urban society and of the unsettled interface between state, capital and society (He and Lin, 2015; He et al., forthcoming; Lin, 2007a). Documenting every aspect of this journey is clearly beyond the scope of a short editorial. Instead, we focus on some of the most significant advancements in the field, mainly involving works published over the last two decades. This encompasses both established topics that have retained popularity and topicality, and emerging research frontiers subjected to increasing attention in recent years. In the process, this editorial documents the growing sophistication of scholarship in the field, highlighting influential, highly cited, and theoretically stimulating articles published in the journal and situating them in a broader picture of intellectual advancement and knowledge production. It also identifies some emerging new themes, not yet well represented in the journal or elsewhere, but of potentially great significance in the further comprehension and

theorisation of Chinese urbanism. In total, a collection of 24 articles published previously in *Urban Studies* has been selected for this VSI, covering key developments in four established themes of research and three newly emerging frontiers.

This editorial is somewhat more descriptive than others in the *Urban Studies* VSI series to date – an unavoidable consequence of the breadth of the field of urban China studies. Our objective therefore is to provide a framing for an already very extensive body of scholarly endeavour, and by doing so to acknowledge significant scholarly developments while identifying notable gaps in the extant research. In this way, we intend that this VSI will encourage specific new lines of research inquiry, even greater analytical rigour and, where appropriate, more nuance in future urban China studies.

Established areas of research

Our framing begins from a consideration of the following four very well established themes in the literature: (1) globalisation and the making of global cities; (2) land and housing development; (3) urban poverty and socio-spatial inequality; (4) rural migrants and their urban experiences.

Globalisation and the making of global cities

The extant literature here collectively explores the political economy and spatial outcomes of China's rapid urbanisation. It also tracks the driving forces of globalisation and market transition that lay behind the dramatic urban changes witnessed to date.

Urbanisation *as a process* was central to early scholarly writing on urban China, and it remains so now (Lin, 2004). It has also been central to Chinese urban scholars' active interventions in debates over market transition, which have prevailed in post-socialist countries since the early 1990s. Driven by Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows, the Pearl River Delta region (PRD) in South China, the Yangtze River Delta region (YRD) in Southeast China, and the Bohai Rim Region (BRR) in North China have all emerged as significant global city-regions under this transition (Zhao and Zhang, 2007). The work of Sit and Yang (1997, this issue) was one of the earliest attempts to map out the spatial pattern and mechanism of FDI-induced urbanisation in China. The influx of foreign investment has profoundly transformed the configuration of the Chinese urban system. Interplaying with internal reforms, FDI effectuated an export-oriented industrialisation, population migration, border urbanisation and the rapid development of small cities and towns, contributing to an equilibrated yet scattered pattern of urbanisation between 1978 and 1993. From the mid-1990s onwards, rural and township-based industrialisation has shifted to city-based spatial reproduction and yielded an uneven pattern of non-agricultural land development. Gaubatz (1999, this issue) delineates the morphological changes in the three largest Chinese cities – Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Marketisation, coupled with globalising forces, she argues, brought about a series of transformations in Chinese cities: land-use specialisation, enhanced circulation, new building height regulations, development zone planning, urban renewal and privatisation of the real estate market. The lines of inquiry pursued by Gaubatz set the tone for many subsequent studies on the driving forces of urban development in China. A perhaps stereotypical example is the study of spatially delineated 'development zones' in China. The development zone is by nature an expedient and innovative means of overcoming economic and institutional constraints, but it also causes conflicts and dilemmas between different scales of

governance (Chien, 2008, this issue; Yang and Wang, 2008). It thus offers significant theoretical potential for understanding the malleability and flexibility of governance and regulatory mechanisms for the creation of zones of exception (Ong, 2006). More recently, studies have charted the global aspirations of Chinese cities, culminating in plans to build true 'global cities' as commanding centres of the global economy and finance, thus signalling the gradual transition of China from a 'recipient' to an active shaper of globalisation (Zhang, 2014, this issue).

The tumultuous crusade of market reform and urban development in China has been closely linked to transformations in the global economy. In that process, much effort has been made to measure: the development of Chinese urban systems (e.g. Chen, 1991; Song and Zhang, 2002); the rapid growth of Chinese cities of different sizes and geographical locations (e.g. Ke et al., 2009; Wang and Zhou, 1999); economic growth and industrial development (e.g. He and Pan, 2010); and the integration of Chinese cities in the world city system (e.g. Taylor et al., 2014; Yusuf and Wu, 2002). At the same time, forces from below – such as locally based, relatively small-scale developmental initiatives and the decentralisation of governance structures – and resultant processes of 'glocalisation' (Swyngedouw, 1992) cannot be neglected. After all, 'global capitalism has to seek shelter from [or better, *within*] locally specific conditions in order to take root in socialist soil' (Lin, 2001: 383). The impact of both local and global forces, and resultant urban changes, are essential to our understanding of the Chinese city and emerging Chinese urbanism.

In order to climb up the global urban hierarchy, first-tier cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, have embraced various 'worlding' strategies. To comprehend the production of 'world city'

imaginaries in China, both local and global forces, and the changing urban dynamics brought about by these forces, must be understood. In this regard, an early research focus on external forces, including FDI, has given way to more explicit and nuanced investigations of the internal dynamics of Chinese cities through the lenses of place making, flagship urban projects and mega-events (e.g. Shin, 2014). Urban states in China have turned to the explicit promotion and marketing of city images. Not only are the resultant discourses engineered to give a global identity to the city; flagship landscapes are also constructed to showcase the receptiveness of cities to global styles, cultures and tastes. The conceptual toolkit of the entrepreneurial city is often employed to explain indiscriminately diverse trajectories of worlding (Wu, 2003), although a more situated and nuanced approach might conceptualise globalisation in terms of place making (Wu, 2000). The considerable investment made in fashioning (a number of) global cities has reworked the urban socio-spatial fabric of those cities thoroughly. Transnational urbanism, for example, can be seen in signature elevated landmark architectures, which connect various important issues such as real estate speculation, megaproject construction, residential displacement, historical preservation, housing provision strategies, etc. Epitomised by the slogan of the Shanghai EXPO, 'better city, better life', urban lifestyle packages, with distinctively marketed images, are produced en masse and sold to Chinese urbanites at massively overheated prices. As Cartier (2002) argued, urban landscapes and spaces have been designed and built to symbolise China's embrace of global identities and values. High-end office and consumption spaces are prioritised in urban development initiatives, so that the rising middle class polity can have a taste of symbolic capital and globally circulated cultural simulacra

(Gaubatz, 2008). Both private developers and local government officials find niches for transnational architectures through iconic designs from prestigious international architects as part of the Chinese state's ambitious project to recast the image of 'the thousand years' old country' on the modern world stage (Ren, 2011).

Meanwhile, transnationalism manifests itself in a diversification of lifestyles and landscapes, the latter now acting as a material expression of new cultures and identities. This trend often involves large-scale gentrification and a subsequent production of consumption spaces, a process in which historical neighbourhoods invoking nostalgic sensations are targeted by development agents and converted into iconic spectacles and/or spaces of luxurious consumption (Shao, 2013). In fact, rampant gentrification via 'urban regeneration' is one of the most salient arenas for exploring the entrepreneurial aspirations of Chinese local states (Shin, 2009; Yang and Chang, 2007, this issue). Of equal interest is the introduction of gated communities to meet the rising demands of the middle class for high quality housing and bespoke goods. Luxurious gated communities, packaged with American or European cultural simulacra and lifestyle accoutrements, have been extensively transplanted to Chinese cities. The rise of such hierarchical communities showcases how globalisation is imagined, pursued and exploited in the processes of local economic growth and socio-spatial differentiation in China (Pow, 2007, this issue). Developments of this nature are likely to continue to inspire critical urban China studies in the near future.

Land and housing development

The questions of land and housing are essential to the analysis of the production of urban space. Urban development is rooted in the nexus of land and capital, and in this line of inquiry, Western urban theories, especially Marxist perspectives, can be brought into engaged dialogue with the Chinese context. After the establishment of land and housing markets in the reform era, property rights has been recognised as an important lens for comprehending the feverish pursuit of land and housing development, and associated conflicts and problems in Chinese cities. A basic theoretical premise is that China's transition from dispersed town development and rural industrialisation, to urbanisation led by large cities, is centred on land development, that is, the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural use (Lin, 2007b, this issue). A no less notable new development is that along with the commodification of land, the use of tender, auction and listing in the transfer of land use rights has created a major source of public revenue (Lin et al., 2014; Tao et al., 2010; Xie et al., 2002, this issue). The massive financialisation of land in urban China adds new twists to classic theories of land rent, calling urgently for further in-depth analyses.

An important theoretical point of entry for understanding the process of land development in China is the fact that development and property rights in China are notoriously ambiguous and hybrid. By disentangling important institutional changes Zhu (2004/this issue) clarifies a dualist land development mode – involving land leasing and land development right (LDR) respectively – in urban (re)development processes. The land leasing system has stimulated rapid real estate development in suburban areas, whereas the socialist legacy of land use right constrains the emerging land market for urban redevelopment. Yet, the emergence of an informal institution of LDR has significantly resolved such constraints by unlocking the land redevelopment process in the inner city and properly compensating the land use right of original land users. Ambiguous development and property

rights also profoundly shape peri-urban development, as villagers valorise rural collective land to try to keep up with the wider accumulation of property-based wealth. Here, new investigations of peri-urban China open up the possibility of theorising property rights as a localised and context-contingent practice that is fluid and flexible (Haila, 2007). Property rights can be defined as either a form of shareholding that allows access to benefits generated from land conversion, or largely improvised, self-help strategies to meet the demands for de facto homeownership in the absence of de jure sanction (Po, 2011, this issue; Song, 2015).

Housing is another important topic, inspiring a large volume of scholarly work. It offers an important lens to appreciate China's emerging hybrid urban modernity, which contains features of marketisation within an as yet uncompleted transition to a full market-housing model (Stephens, 2010). The role of the state and the market in housing provision has been hotly debated in post-reform China ever since new policies to commercialise the housing sector were introduced. Wang and Murie (1996, this issue) systematically reviewed the process of housing commodification, with a particular focus on attempts to privatise public-sector housing in urban areas. Such housing reform has brought profound changes to state-dominated housing provision in China, introducing rent increases, sales of public-sector housing, compulsory housing saving schemes and commercial housing development/distribution. Notably, Wang and Murie argue, housing reform in China has been carried out under a socialist framework that mixes a market economy with some macro-economic planning and regulation, and is thus fundamentally different from its eastern European counterparts where capitalism took root more radically. Wang and Murie's argument has been echoed in many subsequent studies. For example, housing

tenure choices in post-reform China are similarly subject to the impacts of market and institutional forces (Huang and Clark, 2002, this issue). In contrast to the pre-reform period when households had no housing choice at all, the post-reform housing market grants some freedom of choice, although such freedom is limited and mainly constrained by the transitional nature of the housing provision system. In spite of the rising importance of market factors resembling advanced capitalist economies, institutional influences persist, as seen in the significant role played by *hukou* status (*hukou* is a record in a government system of household registration which determines where people are allowed to live and controls their access to spatially defined social welfare status), job rank and work unit rank in housing tenure choice. Han and Wang's (2003) study of the property market in Chongqing provides a fresh regional focus on the state/market debate, arguing that the property market in this inland Chinese city remained highly dependent on state involvement, since the local government not only set the rules and conditions of housing development, but also actively participated in the generation and sharing of economic benefits.

Despite these provisos, the profound consequence of the commodification of housing cannot be dismissed as marginal to academic inquiry (Huang and Li, 2014; Li and Huang, 2006). Because of the prevalence of commodity logics operative in the conception of 'home' and the financialisation of housing as a target for investment, paradoxical urban outcomes are ubiquitous in China's highly unequal urban housing market: a high percentage of ownership and serious problems of affordability; housing as necessity (use value) but also as commodity (exchange value) and marker of identity (status symbol); the complex relation of ownership types (tenure) and limited or singular track

housing trajectories. Against this backdrop, the latest studies on housing development have shifted to topics such as property taxation (Tang et al., 2011), housing price variation (Qin and Han, 2013), homeownership and affordability (Fu, 2015; Ying et al., 2013), and affordable housing provision (Chen et al., 2010). The picture is complex, but what is clear is that housing will remain central to urban China studies.

Urban poverty and socio-spatial inequality

The spectacular economic growth in China over recent decades has brought wealth and prosperity to some, but it has also generated social disparity and polarisation (Sato and Li, 2006). China has begun to address and ameliorate its rural poverty, but in the cities poverty is on the rise. This exacerbation of urban poverty is bound up with institutional discrimination, ubiquitous land-grabs, urban redevelopment processes, and widespread rural-urban migration. Poverty in Chinese cities has traditionally been concentrated among the 'three Nos' (those without stable income, working capacity or family support), but a new subordinate class, mainly consisting of rural migrants, laid-off workers, and urban unemployed people has formed, bolstered by the discriminative *hukou* system and economic reform which, to a large extent, has tilted towards the interests of vested groups (Pun and Lu, 2010; Solinger, 2006).

The culture of urban poverty often associated with distinct racial and ethnic experiences in North American (and some European) cities does not play out with the same dynamics in China. However, other significant neighbourhood effects (Galster, 2001) do exist, with socio-spatial inequalities being commonly observed and measured, in general terms, in three different types of poverty-stricken neighbourhood: dilapidated inner-city neighbourhoods, degraded workers' villages and urban villages (Liu and Wu, 2006). Tracing the history of the transition of a socialist industrial district to an impoverished neighbourhood in Nanjing, Wu (2007) argues that the making of concentrated poverty should not only be attributed to marketisation, but also to new institutional arrangements, such as: the deindustrialisation of the state sector, the absence of state welfare covering rural migrants, housing privatisation and a new minimal living standard regime. His thesis that the production of urban neighbourhoods is overdetermined by a wider context of market transition but directly shaped by institutional factors, sheds light on other types of poor neighbourhoods. In particular, property rights redistribution through land requisition has given birth to urban villages, or villages in the city (ViCs), which are the by-products of city government policy based on the appropriation of agricultural land and the retention of residential land as a means to avoid costly compensation to villagers (He et al., 2009, this issue). The ViCs provide alternative housing choice to rural migrants, but they have also become an eyesore for local governments, who accuse them of creating chaotic landscapes and social problems, and thus aim to eradicate them. Yet ViCs are not entirely characterised by problematic social and economic issues, and should be evaluated more positively through the lens of integration, which is essential to the survival strategies of rural migrants and the potential constructive redevelopment of ViCs (Lin et al., 2011, this issue).

As urban processes and spatial logics become increasingly dispersed, poverty and marginality have also diversified. He et al. (2009, this issue), for example, investigate a distinct process of pauperisation inflicted by market transition, affecting peri-urban villagers whose lands are expropriated for urban expansion, thus depriving them of their means of economic production and subsistence. While the comparative tale of two villages in Xi'an, as recounted by He et al.

(2009, this issue), exposes how urban-centred economic growth was at the expense of rural farmers' de jure rights to collective land, Huang and Yi's (2015) work on basement living in Beijing starkly reveals how inhabitants of China's emerging cosmopolitan centres are equally subject to lived, embodied experiences of being subordinate to, and dominated by, the socio-spatial division wrought by capital and market. The multi-faceted nature of urban-based hardships and marginality will undoubtedly continue to be an area of inquiry worthy of deeper expansion in future research endeavours.

Rural migrants and their urban experiences

Following the slackening of the rigid *hukou* system and the housing allocation system from the Maoist era, the Chinese population is experiencing rising physical and social mobility. Yet, the long-lasting imprint of the *hukou* system remains, and continues to exert a potent influence on the Chinese citizenry, especially the urban subaltern class, i.e. rural migrants (Chan, 2009). The double-divide, namely, rural versus urban, and non-local versus local, leaves rural migrants with very limited choice relating to housing, employment and social services. They therefore endure multiple forms of marginalisation, precarity and hardship. The *hukou* system, which contributes to rural migrants' economic marginality, low educational attainment and cultural inferiority, also prevents rural migrants from accessing employment opportunities and the urban consumer culture of the cities. The same system also leaves migrants susceptible to flexible work regimes that facilitate the exploitation of migrant labour by both transnational and domestic corporations.

Early research on rural–urban migration in China typically focused on migrant trajectories per se along with an examination of their survival strategies, while their families' wellbeing, identities, rights claims and citizenship were underemphasised. More recent studies have started to pay attention to the social and cultural impacts of migration. The reference points for such studies include: the employment and income of migrants (Gravemeyer et al., 2011; Zhang and Xie, 2013), the social integration of migrants within urban society (Yue et al., 2013), residential satisfaction (Tao et al., 2014), the experiences of migrant children and youth (Kwong, 2004; Ling, 2005), the experiences of migrant households (Fan et al., 2011), migrants' social networks (Yue et al., 2013, this issue), and interactions between the state and migrant-run NGOs (Hsu, 2012, this issue). From these studies, we can ascertain a broad picture (albeit by no means universally applicable) of migrants' urban lives and experiences. These studies show that: (1) migrants have lower chances to access high-income employment, largely due to the restriction of non-productive factors such as the *hukou* system, while hometown- and kinship-based spatial concentration ameliorates life chances; (2) kinship- and hometown-based social ties still overwhelm migrant-resident ties, although the latter contribute more to social capital and resources; (3) the level of migrant integration in urban society is generally low; (4) migrants' expectations and aspirations for housing and urban living are not high because of institutionalised marginality; (5) plans for the education and socialisation of migrant children face immense challenges, because lack of access to educational resources casts a shadow on their prospect of social mobility; (6) the rights consciousness of migrants, albeit still embryonic, is nonetheless rising. Each facet of this very general description deserves deeper exploration in future research.

In terms of migrant agency, as urban living gradually sharpens their political consciousness, the relationship between migrants and the state becomes more contested and

uncertain, making their subordination less monolithic and irresistible. Hsu (2012, this issue), for example, examines the relationship between migrant NGOs and state agents at different scales. This study unveils varying types of relations across different levels of the state, including the symbolic cooperation of municipal authorities with migrant NGOs, the dynamic engagement of district level authorities, and strategic collaboration offered by street office committees and residents' committees. Moreover, recent studies suggest that while migrants' intentions to settle in the cities have increased, the two primary choices for most migrants involve returning to their place of origin or seasonal migration (Zhu and Chen, 2010). This is probably because there is a wide gap between the desired ideal of remaining in cities and the sobering realism of limited access to urban citizenship, since institutional and socioeconomic barriers deter migrants from turning intention into practical action.

Overall, the sheer magnitude of migrants to urban China has prompted increasingly more refined and updated research in recent years. The advancement of migrant studies in China has generated multiple insights on return migrants, inter-generational differentiation among rural migrants, migrants' access to homeownership, and migrants' subjective and emotional experiences of cities and neighbourhoods. An emerging body of research, focusing on migrants' place/community attachment and sense of belonging, offers a complex and nuanced picture of rural migration to cities as lived, practised and experienced spaces (Qian et al., 2011; Wu, 2012; Wu and Logan, 2016, this issue). Notably, while migrants are considered a floating population, which implies that they are unlikely to develop strong local ties and neighbourhood social connections, Wu and Logan (2016, this issue) find that migrants are actually inclined to socialise and exchange support with neighbours more than has hitherto been suspected. There is

evidence that the development of such neighbourhood relations helps strengthen the attachment of migrants to new neighbourhoods. This line of study suggests that, without denying the actually existing socioeconomic inequality that migrants have to negotiate, newcomers do actually find merit and instantiate favourable experiences in new urban conditions, notably in the form of generating communal ties and participating in communal life. This in turn fosters a positive emotional bonding with urban neighbourhoods, and enhances migrants' will to stay in the city.

Entering the new millennium, a distinctive new generation of rural migrants began to emerge, growing to become a significant proportion of the migrant population in urban China. The study of Yue et al. (2010) shows that when the new generation returns home to rural areas they are more likely to pursue jobs outside agricultural production. At the same time, they generally tend to view migration from rural to urban areas as a route to self-improvement and a form of investment in the accumulation of human capital and social capital. This generation has higher aspirations for economic and social achievement in the city, and they are less likely than their predecessors to become self-exploiting, docile subjects (Cheng et al., 2014). While this distinctiveness of new-generation migrants is significant, there remain remarkable similarities between the generations in terms of social marginality – the new generation is not necessarily better integrated within urban society than its predecessors were, owing to the dull compulsions of persistent institutional and social discrimination (He and Wang, 2016; Zhu and Lin, 2014).

Emerging frontiers of research

To the four very well established themes in the literature just considered, we must add

three important emerging frontiers of research: (1) urban fragmentation, enclaves and public space; (2) consumption, middle class aestheticisation and urban culture; and (3) the right to the city and urban activism.

Urban fragmentation, enclaves and public space

The emergence of enclave spaces, increasing residential mobility, and socio-economic inequality, coupled with the increasing commodification of urban space, has resulted in visible socio-spatial segregation, fragmentation and division. In this context, the rigidly hierarchical structure of urban governance inherited from the Maoist era is no longer feasible, as the state needs to deal with fragmented, locally based spatial logics and demands (Wu, 2002). As the urban fabric is constantly reworked via the tropes of large-scale urban redevelopment, the distributional allocation of diverse social groups has been redefined (He, 2013). This process is captured by Feng et al. (2008) who observe intensified socio-spatial differentiation between residential neighbourhoods vis-à-vis urban social mixing. The general trend involves gentrifying inner cities and rapidly expanding suburbs that mingle middle class homes, industrial zones and rural migrant settlements. In the modern Chinese city, a patchwork of various types of enclave is woven from layered historical periods and planning tendencies, comprising *danwei* compounds (production units), gated communities and urban villages (He, 2013; Qian, 2014a). However, the importance of neighbourhood has not simply faded away. On the contrary, the neighbourhood is often transformed into a social institution for taking over the work units, maintaining control and performing social welfare functions within the rubric of state-led 'community building' (Lin and Kuo, 2013). Under different circumstances, then, the neighbourhood

can be variously deployed as a technique of exclusion, self-empowerment or self-privileging.

Featuring a high degree of heterogeneity within and between different types of neighbourhoods, enclave urbanism in China entails a complex relationship between urban form and social fabric. In addition, for various social groups, the different types of urban enclave living are endowed with very different socio-cultural meanings. First of all, in gated community housing estates, enclave living is an expression of a safe, high-quality and privileged lifestyle (Pow, 2007, this issue). Middle class residents of gated communities not only savour the extreme privacy endowed by secured domestic space (emblematic of their departure from Maoist collectivism), but also indulge themselves in a sense of moral superiority over less well-off groups. In addition to residential functions catering to the rising demands of the new Chinese middle class, the physical and social functions of gated communities must be interpreted as an emerging moral geography of differentiation and exclusion (Pow, 2007). This perspective moves beyond the issues of housing choice and spatial segregation, which are exemplary of the conventional accounts of gated communities.

Second, in urban villages, enclave lifestyles are the result of a compromised choice that instigates makeshift urban living through the suppression of access to urban services and resources. The urban village as an assemblage of varied and distinctive socio-economic activities has given rise to theoretically and empirically productive debates, not only in terms of the institutionalised marginalisation of migrants' housing niche, but also their bottom-up agency (Hao et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2015, this issue; Song et al., 2008). Thus, a theoretical approach that we would like to advocate in this editorial is to attend to the articulation between institutional and economic driving forces

(Hao et al., 2013) and the active agency migrants enact to augment their pool of resources and achieve social mobility (Liu et al., 2015).

Third, the work-unit (*danwei*) compound is home to a residual lifestyle to which people have been collectively assigned, with no exercise of their own choice, and from which they are now often emotionally estranged. Work-unit housing compounds, however, are not simply built environment structures inherited from the Maoist era. Employees in work units with sufficient funding are blessed with new-build subsidised housing. To some extent, the persistence of work-unit compounds attests to the centrality of the Chinese state as a mediator between market and society amidst the tempest of rapid transformation. The continued involvement of work-units in housing provision has even invited arguments that China's reform is tainted by a lack of proper market mechanisms defining clear property rights. But, the study of work-units also offers a theoretical opening for exploring the ambiguous meaning of property rights as a means of territorial control over urban space, and also the consolidation of political power (Hsing, 2010).

Before concluding this section, we must touch on the idea of an 'urban public', since one consequence of socio-spatial fragmentation is the encroachment of public space (Merrifield, 2013). Existing studies generally imply a dire picture of urban-based encounters and associations in post-reform China (Qian, 2014a). However, despite the rampant trend towards privatisation and spatial enclosure, a rather optimistic delineation of the 'alive and well' public citizen in urban China is offered by commentators such as Orum et al. (2009) and Qian (2014b). In this journal, Richaud (forthcoming) brings the Chinese context into a useful and much needed dialogue with the classic thesis of the modern city as a site of anonymity and indifference. With a study of collective leisure activities in Beijing's public parks, Richaud argues for a delicate balance between the ethic of indifference and the situated relations of friendship and familiarity, with the latter, it appears to us, counteracting to some extent the highly divisive effect of enclave urbanism.

Consumption, middle class aestheticisation and urban culture

The rise of the middle class and the nouveau riche, rich in economic capital but not necessarily powerful in political terms, has generated an immense momentum in the reshaping of urban economies, landscapes and culture in contemporary China (Pun, 2003). Davis (2000) points to a burgeoning consumer revolution in China, unleashed by the de-stigmatisation of individualist consumerism in state ideology. The new middle class imprint can be detected in the polarisation of residential space, and in every aspect of urban society, as tailored goods and services are provided by increasingly responsive housing and consumer markets.

Despite the wide range of consumption practices of China's urban nouveau riche, a research focus on urban landscapes and spaces has been retained by urban China scholars. Housing consumption, reasonably, receives the most substantive scrutiny. In general, the physical textures of middle- and upper-class housing are marked by ostentatious, decorative and aestheticised built forms, borrowing from Western styles associated with modernity and high quality. Home, in this sense, is deployed both as status icon and individualist lifestyle. Notably, both are based on the aversion of state control and Maoist collectivism, leaving a new form of civic engagement, reified by a sharpened consciousness of property interests and property rights, to play out in

a contradictory yet simultaneous way (Zhang, 2010).

In the last decade, cultural regeneration and the cultural/creative industries have become more central to China's urban policy. Culture is exploited as a potentially value-adding asset with the aim of bolstering economic growth and dealing with the profound consequences of deindustrialisation. Cultural and creative industries in China are closely monitored and heavily exploited by state interests, adding a strong flavour of pragmatism and instrumentalism to supposedly creative and non-utilitarian cultural activities (Keane, 2013). In Shanghai, for instance, the creative cluster is viewed by the local state as part and parcel of a holistic agenda to upgrade the city's attractiveness through urban regeneration. Overall, while creative clusters and industries serve the entrepreneurial aspirations of the state, they seemingly contribute little to fostering and supporting grassroots creativity and entrepreneurship (Zheng, 2011, this issue).

Wang and Li (2011) also call attention to culture-led urban regeneration in Chinese cities, where cultural capital embedded in various heritage sites, be they historical or industrial, is considered rife for consumption by the middle classes and potentially readily converted to economic capital. Urban spaces produced by culture-led initiatives are often highly commercialised, resulting in the marginalisation, rather than empowerment, of grassroots artists (Chou, 2012; Li et al., 2014; Wang, 2009). Undoubtedly, local government typically holds the upper hand in creative development, and tensions and contestations among various interest groups are ubiquitous in the development process. Notably, the economic interests of the state, and its unyielding stance on tightened political control, often override the concerns of artists over the breeding of creativity and the fostering of cultural development (Fung and Erni, 2013).

The right to the city and urban activism

Within the extant literature, there is an emergent appetite for analysing urban contestation, politics and social movements. While relatively new forms of urban contestation have been documented, including environment-related NIMBYism and the regulation of street vendors (Huang et al., 2014; Sun, 2015), the bulk of studies so far have property rights and the right to particular urban locales as their foci. In regard to China's emergent land and housing markets, property rights are acknowledged as an important lens for exploring the urban conflict and unrest that often accompanies land and housing development processes. Controversial issues here are roughly encompassed by the term 'rights defending (*weiquan*) activism', with heightened visibility in the extant literature given to the emergence of homeowner associations (Tomba, 2005), and to disputes arising from land and housing redevelopment – notably including conflicts over 'demolition and relocation' (*chai qian*) (Shih, 2010). Campaigns of urban redevelopment, which deprive established residents of their claims to place and neighbourhood, have led to massive displacement and dispossession, in highly contested situations within which coercive state power is demonstrated in spectacular ways (Shin, 2016, this issue).

Because it is typically circumscribed by a persistently unequal relation of power between state-capital coalitions and grassroots groups, rights-defending activism has generally achieved only modest results (Shao, 2013; Shin, 2013) and newly emerging social organisations have played only a very limited role in fostering resistant civil society in China to date. Meanwhile, while the idea of 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1996) has inspired struggles against global capitalism worldwide, it remains as yet to be fully exploited by scholars in China as a theoretical tool (He and Chen, 2012; Qian and He,

2012). A number of recent studies have, however, moved to theorise power as embedded in rationalities and technologies of rule, and to the analysis of social inequalities not only in terms of the distribution of material benefits, but also in terms of uneven relations of power (Qian, 2015, this issue; Wan, 2016). Such ideas are especially worth exploring further, given that state power is now being produced in radically different ways than it was in the Maoist past. Decentralisation to actors operating on behalf of capital and civil society now gives rise to proliferating and differentiated forms of urban conflict and contestation.

Conclusion: Gaps in and future directions for urban China research

Based on the preceding framing of urban China research activity to date, we urge the future advance of urban China studies in several directions.

In relation to recent developments in urban studies, and tremendous changes in Chinese society, respectively, two types of shortfall can be identified in urban China studies currently. The first type lies in the disjointed progress of urban China studies compared with general advancements in the field of urban studies. Theoretically, urban China studies insufficiently engage with the latest developments in urban and social theories. The field of urban studies has long appreciated and welcomed research that adopts ideas developed outside of the urban academy (Paddison, 2013). Yet, urban China scholars have not engaged in active dialogue with post-modern, post-structural, post-colonial and feminist academic literatures, although the richness and diversity of urban transformations in China provide great potential for rethinking, refining or even challenging such approaches. Curiously, while most studies on urban China dwell on

relationships between the state, market and society, relatively few of them engage in re-conceptualising these entities to provide more nuance or destabilise conventional theories and thoughts (see, e.g. Abramson, 2011 and Yang and Wang, 2008 as notable exceptions).

We further see a need to re-shape urban China studies into a more politicised, critical and socially relevant field of research. As demonstrated in this VSI, the themes of social justice, marginality and the right to the city have recently begun to attract scholarly attention in urban China studies. Yet, there is an urgent need to examine the multiple forms of deprivation and exclusion that work through registers of gender, places of origin, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. and to tease out the uneven relations of power and multiple strains of inequality that inhere in modern urban China. Critical concepts in urban and social theory have begun to influence urban China studies, yet greater efforts must be made to advance these nascent developments.

Methodologically, a salient gap can also be identified in the insufficient attention paid to examining the *lived* dimensions of urbanisms, namely, everyday practices and embodied experiences, which have been widely researched elsewhere in the field of urban studies. For instance, while scholars have taken pains to examine Chinese cities' integration into the global economy using sophisticated statistical models and analyses at relatively macroscopic scales, there has been limited engagement with the flourishing debates on transnationalism concerning the ways in which ordinary social actors practice and negotiate their relationship with globalisation. Similarly, while extant studies have acknowledged the institutionalised marginality of rural migrants in China, few have explored in diverse and context-specific ways the governance and regulation of migrants as a group whose deprivation and exclusion are institutionally and discursively constructed

and socially reified (but see Huang and Yi, 2015; Qian, 2015, this issue as notable exceptions). Moreover, scant attention has been paid to the active agency of migrants, who respond to social marginality through their mundane everyday practices, potentially inaugurating progressive changes in social relations and institutions (see Liu et al., 2015; Wu and Logan, 2016, as exceptions).

The second type of shortfall concerns the constantly evolving nature of urban society. Thus, for instance, the rise of consumer culture and middle class aestheticisation is currently generating an increasingly important set of power relations that is shaping the form of urban landscapes and urban culture in contemporary China. While the extant literature has made progress in documenting the aestheticised consumption and lifestyles of middle class subjects, the same comprehensiveness of analysis has not been apparent in the portrayal of the everyday urban experience and consumption patterns of marginalised social groups and subcultural groups, such as the urban poor, or the homeless (some exceptions include He, 2015; Huang and Yi, 2015).

Another line of inquiry that deserves further exploration is the multi-dimensional study of mobility. In present-day China, following the introduction of the contemporary housing market and, more recently, automobile cultures, increasing residential and physical mobility among the urban middle class has been documented (Li, 2003; Li and Huang, 2006). Studies of mobility in urban China have now been extended to encompass the daily activities of urban residents, especially in the fields of travel behaviour, transportation and behavioural geographies (e.g. Pan et al., 2009; Zhao, 2014; Zhao et al., 2016). Yet, studies on the social mobility of Chinese urbanites, especially the marginalised and the transient, as well as the long-term social relations produced in their daily lives, remain sparse.

While studies on the dimensions of gender and sexuality inequality have developed in the urban studies field over the last decade (e.g. Davis and Friedman, 2014; Fan, 2003; Ho, 2010), sex and gender issues remain to be fully developed as a ground for deeper urban China inquiry. In particular, further exploration of how the Chinese city has been turned into an arena in which oppressive socio-cultural norms are asserted, negotiated or contested is badly needed. Studies on female migrant workers in China have shown how the market economy can liberate, but also exploit women in the workplace (Fan, 2003; Pun, 2005). However, there is still a dearth of publications on related themes, seriously curbing a fuller theorisation of gender and sexuality within the socioeconomic systems of urban China. How gender restructures the political economy and the division of labour in a transitional society, and how sexuality is constitutive of urban spaces and experiences, remains largely unexplored.

There are yet other subject areas that deserve further investigation. These include environmental issues (He et al., 2012; Hu et al., 2014; Xu, 2016), the effects of urban life on the wellbeing of the elderly (Li and Shin, 2013), and on children and youths, including students (He, 2015). Such research endeavours are still at an embryonic stage, lacking the diversity and richness found in the wider spectrum of urban studies elsewhere. Enriching urban China studies in these directions will entail nuanced analyses of shifting, often mundane, social and spatial practices at relatively micro scales, and a sharpened sensitivity to small-scale snapshots of actions, relations and meanings. Yet, such studies should also not lose sight of the macro picture of power relations and domination that characterises China's highly neoliberalised political economy.

These recommendations invoke a 'cosmopolitan' approach to researching urban

China, rather than a simple convergence with the 'paradigms' of the Global North (Robinson, 2011a; Roy, 2009), or an over-emphasis on the 'exceptionalism' and 'particularism' of urban China (Kong, 2010; Pow, 2011) – the latter of which would inevitably presage a new form of parochialism (Ren and Luger, 2015). We specifically anticipate that scholarship currently emerging from the Global South will demand fresh starting points in epistemological and methodological efforts to theorise urban China. Postcolonial, comparative urbanism and assemblage urban theories already provide inspiration for this work, encouraging more experimental and critical methodologies (McFarlane, 2011; Robinson, 2011b; Roy, 2009, 2011). The heated debates on the 'worlding of urban analysis', which upholds a cosmopolitan/generalised approach to urban studies (Peck, 2015; Storper and Scott, 2016), and the 'provincialisation of urban theory' which emphasises distinct theories for different contexts, and their possible dialogues/comparisons (McFarlane, 2010; Ong, 2011; Robinson, forthcoming; Roy, 2011, 2015; Sheppard et al., 2013) can also stimulate deeper theorisation of Chinese urbanism. Nonetheless, these theories and debates cannot provide either a convenient middle ground in the shifting terrain of urban inquiries nor a ready-made formula for Chinese scholars to position, design and operationalise their research. Urban China study must fashion its own paradigms, borrowing only what is necessary and where it is justified to do so.

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