Uncorking the Neoliberal Bottle: Neoliberal Critique and Urban Change in China

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Abstract**:** Neoliberalism's theoretical ascendancy within urban geography coincided with the rapid growth of scholarly attention to Chinese cities. Therefore, it is unsurprising that neoliberal causality has been a widely used tool for interpreting China's spatial transformation. This paper critically reviews some of the most prominent debates on neoliberalism in the Chinese context. China's Leninist political hierarchy and Dual Structure, crucial institutions for the management and regulation of society and economy under Mao, are now reduced to the quirks of "actually existing neoliberalism." Neoliberal critique applied to China, however, fails to adequately explain China's spatial development because it assigns causality for social and economic inequality to globalized processes of capital accumulation while ignoring the continued importance of Maoist institutions in China's present-day political economy. Uncritical acceptance of neoliberalism's explanatory power for spatial change has led to flawed and inaccurate portrayals of the development and future trajectories of Chinese cities, and misrepresents the sources of social injustice in Chinese society.

Keywords: China, neoliberalism, urban geography, development, Socialist institutions

Introduction

Under the assumption that capitalism's ascendancy in China is inevitable, if not complete, many scholars employ a structuralist framework of capitalism to explain its spatial change. According to this logic, China's present-day spatial organization is the outcome of a globalized process of capital accumulation where the state engages primarily as the organizer of "urban entrepreneurialism" and place-making to attract capital. This approach is appealing because it links China research with an established tradition of critical scholarship, loosening the bonds of "Chinese exceptionalism" that have long plagued Area Studies. In short, neoliberalism gives urbanization a familiar and recognizable shape in a wide variety of local contexts.

Yet it also limits how complex social relations that give shape to urban spaces are imagined. For Gibson-Graham, the identification of neoliberalism in diverse locales "affords the pleasure of recognition, of capture, of intellectually subduing that one last thing; it offers no relief or exit to a place beyond," (Gibson-Graham 2006, 4). Strict adherence to capitalist spatial logics leaves many features of China's urban landscapes unexplained. The uninterrupted rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), no matter how decentralized and even fragmented its authority might be, continues to dominate China's political and economic order, preventing free market economics from achieving the ideological hegemony that is often presumed in the English-language literature. Moreover, the legacies of state socialism continue to dominate China's spatial political economy in the form of the dual structure that divides rural and urban China. Neoliberal critique is yet to adequately address the foundational role Maoist institutions continue to play in the regulation and organization of Chinese space. To understand the development of Chinese cities we must explore the complex interrelations among agents nested in state

hierarchies, among cities and individuals inside and outside China, and the strong and weak networks that constitute social life and economic activity.

Neoliberal Critique and the Geography of China's Development

Following Brenner and Theodore (2002) and Peck and Tickell's (2002) calls for greater attention to the intersection of neoliberal discourse and practices of urban governance, urban geographers have increasingly identified cities as the critical site of neoliberalism's implementation. Within China studies, the preponderance of neoliberal theorizing has coincided with increased attention to the role of cities in China's changing political economy (Wu 2004, 2007; Ma 2005; McGee et al 2007; Tang and Chung 2002). Given these overlapping agendas within China and urban geography, locating the intersection of neoliberalism and city development is an inevitable target of China scholarship.

However, there are some inherent contradictions between a theory that gives primacy to the market as the ultimate arbiter of sociopolitical conflict with private property rights as an ultimate social good; and China, a country where the market arguably remains subjugated to the priorities of the central and local state, and all land is legally owned either by the state or rural collectives (while remaining effectively under the control of the CCP). Yet neoliberalism is frequently employed by China geographers with little critical debate over its basic assumptions. The nuances of its diffusion, implementation, and evolution are debated, but its essential character is rarely called into question *within* geography. While there are a handful of exceptions (Gibson-Graham, 2006, Barnett 2010) the tendency is toward two extreme poles where neoliberalism is either ignored altogether (as found with a good deal of quantitative geography), or assumed as *the* causal force for a wide range of urban affairs. Research calling neoliberalism's explanatory

power into question or demanding greater precision in the substance of neoliberal critique takes place primarily in the pages of sociology and anthropology journals.

China and Neoliberal Hegemony

Framing Chinese development in the reform era under the umbrella of neoliberalism rests on the premise that Chinese policy has been ideologically swayed by the insidious spread of neoliberal ideology. At the heart of critical anti-neoliberal theory's ascendancy in geography is David Harvey. Harvey has written extensively over the past two decades on the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism throughout the globe, with a critical eye frequently turned toward China (Harvey 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009). Neoliberalism, for Harvey is:

> "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices . . . if markets do not exist then they must be created, by state action if necessary. *But beyond these tasks the state should not venture*," (Harvey, 2005, 2).

The state under neoliberalism must limit its market interventions due to the supposed superiority of market signals and the state's susceptibility to powerful interest groups aiming to distort the market. Due largely to political shifts under Thatcher in Great Britain and Reagan in the United States, and the opening and reform of the Chinese economy begun in 1979, Harvey argues that neoliberalism has achieved hegemonic status in shaping political institutions and policy decisions. It is first and foremost, a *global* ideology determining political discourse from the United States to Sweden, from Brazil to Malaysia, becoming “incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world," (Harvey, 2005, 3).

Anti-neoliberal critics of Chinese development, including Harvey, rely on several characteristics of the reform period that restructured scale-relations to conclude China is, if not a fully neoliberal country, at least headed in that direction (Walker and Buck, 2007). Of particular interest are the processes of fiscal decentralization, the "privatization" of public goods as a means of primitive accumulation, and urban entrepreneurialism. Although, these processes bear only superficial commonality with similar trends in Western and other developing countries, the arguments follow a very simple, if tautological thread: neoliberalism over the past 30 years, in the words of Harvey, has "swept across the world like a vast tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment" (Harvey, 2005). China *has* undergone sweeping institutional reform and discursive adjustment over the past 30 years. Therefore, China's institutional reform is neoliberal by nature.

Harvey's analysis, however, leaves quite a few dots unconnected. Following Michael Peter Smith's general critique of Harvey (Smith, 2001), Harvey's focus on the global scale creates a lack of specificity that overlooks the local political and social relations that mediate class relationships. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, we see what Tilly (1988) earlier identified as a glaring shortcoming in Harvey's work: an inattention to the structure and agency of the state and other social actors that conflates the mere existence of capitalist interests with the full realization of neoliberal capitalism (quoted in Smith, 2001). Corresponding with the emergence of corporate power in China, a disenfranchised and exploited labor class is also visible (Gong 2013; Chan et al 2013; Ngai et al, 2010). However, corporate power and labor dynamics are imbued with profound social, cultural, and political dynamics that are not captured by the linear diffusion of neoliberalism across space.

Anthropological Skepticism Toward Neoliberal Hegemony

Donald Nonini (2008) argues that the only evidence actually offered by Harvey for the case of neoliberalism in China is that its market reforms coincided with a neoliberal turn in the United States and Great Britain. While there are most certainly neoliberal *influences* at play in China particularly among certain elements of the ruling class and economic elites, neoliberals represent only one of many voices creating domestic economic policy. Even among economic elites benefitting from privatization and liberalization within the Chinese economy, it is arguable whether or not they retain enough independence from the Chinese state to truly be considered part of a transnational business class that pays no heed to the reference of international borders suggested by Castells (2004) and Sparke (2005) among others (Dickson, 2003; Chen and Dickson 2010). Hoffman (2010) for example, shows how many professional Chinese use international connections, especially education and training in Western universities to supplement, not replace, their identity as Chinese citizens. Many of the wealthiest people in China are either directly or indirectly supported by the Party-State, and continue to rely on connections to the state to expand business empires (Dickson 2007).

Nonini is critical of what he sees as a general conflation of *neoliberalism* with *capitalism*. The difference for Nonini is that neoliberalism is inherently about transforming governing practices within existing capitalist states, specifically "the relationship between capitalist markets, the individual, and the state," (149) whereas what is underway in China today is the creation of economic, technical, legal, and political arrangements to “invent capitalism”. We might also extend Nonini’s critique to include a conflation of capitalism with markets. One of the first events to herald changing times under Deng Xiaoping was the reemergence of spontaneous farmer’s markets in Chinese villages, towns, and even cities. The availability of alternative and

more diverse sources of food and other goods coming from the countryside in urban areas weakened the state's control over the allocation of goods and, especially price controls, but such markets operated independently and differently from state-regulated capitalism that would develop under Jiang Zemin in the 1990s. The emergence of flexible, market practices in some areas of China, therefore, does not *ipso facto* translate into neoliberal restructuring simply because Reaganomics and Thatcherism were simultaneously rolling out in the West. That China's current system is conducive to accumulation does not mean that it is defined by it—capitalism "does not dictate its own conditions of existence" (Nonini 2008, 150)--it can and does operate in a variety of contexts, but its causal impact on states, cities, and cultures is not predetermined. Capitalism need not be fetishized as immune to the contextualization that any other social phenomenon is routinely subjected to in critical scholarship. Capitalism is acted on by local agents, subjected to manipulation by diverse interests with motives and desires that may or may not be strategically aligned with capitalist goals. It is out of the interrelations among a multitude of actors, institutions, and ideas, not the simple variations of global capitalism that the Chinese city emerges.

Accepting the hegemonic status of neoliberal discourses in China as a matter of course leads to misunderstanding the basic function of China's economy, faulty interpretations of reform outcomes, and misdiagnoses of the primary challenges facing continued social and economic transformation. For example, on the "proletarianization" of China, Harvey writes, "In so far as neoliberalism requires a large, easily exploited, and relatively powerless labour force, then China certainly qualifies as a neoliberal economy," (p. 144). This is spurious reasoning--neoliberalism "requires" a large exploitable labor force, China has a large exploitable labor force, therefore China is neoliberal. But how is this labor force kept exploitable? What techniques of political

power are employed to create and sustain this class of workers? How do workers accommodate or resist their exploitation? For Harvey, it is the neoliberal "tsunami", an external force imposing its will on the Chinese labor force. Yet, China's labor force is kept powerless and exploitable not by the ravages of a neoliberal order, but by the resilience of the *hukou* system, an institutional foundation of China's decidedly non-market economy under Mao that maintains an unequal balance between the registered population of cities and rural areas. What is crucial to recognize is that the *hukou* system sustains a low-wage labor force for China's factories, but its greater function is in reducing state costs of urbanization. Resistance to *hukou* reform stems primarily from local governments fearing the social and fiscal costs of unregulated migration. Thus, it is as much a system of state regulation as it is of protecting capital interests.

One of the *hukou* system's key functions in the 1960's and 1970's was to serve as an institutional basis for the redistribution of wealth from rural to urban areas. This was accomplished by linking access to state-provided goods, especially grain-rations, to household registration. In the present environment, access to public housing has been a key service linked to the place of *hukou* registration that has maintained a division of labor in the present context as well as a means of determining eligibility for certain types of employment (see Wang 2005). Furthermore, Huang (2008) argues that the central government put a credit squeeze on the rural sector in the 1990's, hindering entrepreneurial prospects for peasants. The lack of available credit and other barriers to entry in rural entrepreneurship created a condition where the only reasonable means of obtaining non-agricultural income for rural residents was through migratory searches for wage labor. The intense competition for wage labor that resulted combined with the institutional prejudices inherent in the *hukou* system to severely suppress wages for rural-urban migrants (Huang 2008 122-3; Meng and Zhang 2001). The unfair and unjust environment for

migrant labor has given China a tremendous advantage for its participation in the global market (it is the primary reason for the so-called "China price", see Harney 2008), but it is an outcome of state socialist policies seeking to *control* the market, protect urban residents, control population, and reduce state costs and obligations for urban workers (Chan 2009a, 20009b; Young 2014).

Neoliberal theory purports that local societies and political structures are so inherently weak that *any* engagement with capitalism inevitably leads to their assimilation (Smith 2002). Yet China has taken advantage of globally predominant neoliberal trade policies without adopting a neoliberal stance for itself. Rural-urban inequality in China does not derive from privatization or the supremacy of free market ideology, quite the opposite. Huang (2008) points out that the 1980s was a period of wide-scale *marketization* of the countryside, and the outcomes lifted hundreds of millions of peasants out of poverty as they engaged in productive entrepreneurialism, creating new wealth and opportunities for improved livelihoods without significantly undermining the collective culture of the village. The shocking inequality that for many defines China's development model today did not emerge until the state reasserted its power to divert resources from the countryside into the city. Instead of a *tabula rasa* for the institution of free markets, the state had at its disposal a legacy of interventions in practices of land ownership, distribution, and access to public goods built over the preceding decades of state socialism. Especially after 1992, local governments proved adept at utilizing the peculiar spatial governing practices and policies of the Chinese state that directed the fruits of reform and development away from rural households toward municipal governments and quasi-private developers (Tang and Chung, 2002).

However, for Harvey and others, a country need not be committed to capitalism at all in order to be in "the embrace of neoliberalism." The history of neoliberalism for Harvey, is an exploration of either "a Utopian project providing a theoretical template for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a political scheme aimed at reestablishing the conditions for capital accumulation and the restoration of class power," (Harvey 2007, 28). He goes on to claim, "the principles of neoliberalism are quickly abandoned whenever they conflict with this class project." Neoliberalism, then, when it is not a system of economic organization, is a convenient ideological tool with which a wealthy elite can easily subjugate the majority with a rhetoric of individual liberty and freedom. Harvey's sleight of hand here is a neat rhetorical trick. If a country is advocating and implementing policies in accordance with neoliberal doctrine, then we can reasonably assume it is neoliberal. If it is advocating and implementing policies that diverge from neoliberal doctrine, then it is also neoliberal, so long as its ultimate aim is to divert resources into the hands of a privileged class. Neoliberalism, in this vein, is an elite strategy for the control of wealth, empty rhetoric to justify "class restoration."

The problem is, different countries have different class histories, and the basis for conflict over class claims on national resources frequently rests on legacies of the Maoist social order. Indeed, class conflicts that have emerged in recent years are often waged between social groups and state representatives. This can be witnessed in struggles, for example, between *danwei* workers and SOE reformers, villagers and village cadres, migrant workers and police, and *chengzhongcun* residents and municipal governments. These contradictions cannot be reduced to oversimplified relations among capital, bourgeoisie, and the proletariat, but must be cognizant of how these factors are interwoven with the social and political identities constructed under Maoism. But for Harvey, local difference does not alter the core truth of neoliberalism, it may

only change its superficial form, becoming, in his words, “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics.” As much as recent Marxist geographers have deplored the aspatial nature of neoliberal advocates like Thomas Friedman, the concept of space and local difference in Harvey's vision of neoliberalism reduces local difference to dependent variables of the particular form neoliberalism will take in different national contexts, or economic reductionism on a global scale. Pickvance succinctly unsettles Harvey’s interpretation of Chinese neoliberalism by pointing out that “to call it neoliberal with Chinese characteristics is to fail to see that the Chinese characteristics are in contradiction with neoliberalism” (Pickvance 2011: 56).

Actually Existing Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics

“Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” is used by Harvey to acknowledge the adaptation of neoliberalism to China’s specific political economy. I find the phrase, along with its many variants, disingenuous, a means of exonerating the author from explaining local imperfections of the neoliberal model, subordinating local agency to the hegemony of neoliberal urbanism rather than exploring the specific processes through which it is operated? Such a framework is the descendant of Brenner and Theodore's call to study "actually existing neoliberalism" (2002) that aims to give greater attention to the specific processes through which neoliberalism works in divergent societies, especially at the urban scale. This had a profound impact on urban scholars of China who could now readily link their empirical work to a theoretical package with universal claims, overcoming the criticism of "Chinese exceptionalism" in China scholarship. It also gave influential geographers the authority to describe China's reform and development as "decidedly" neoliberal despite apparent contradictions (Ma 2005; Harvey 2005), and gave China's urban scholars a renewed focus on processes of primitive accumulation and urban entrepreneurialism (McGee et al, 2007; Lin 2009).

It is my view that “actually-existing neoliberalism” is among the most detrimental concepts to emerge in urban geography in recent decades. In practice, it serves as little more than pretense to explain away local differentiation as part of a generalized patchwork of capitalist practices. As Brenner et al criticize assemblage for decontextualizing cities from global capitalism (2011), “actually existing neoliberalism” decontextualizes cities from their individual histories and relations which are subsumed as variants of capitalism and capitalist structures. He and Wu (2009) argue that "actually existing neoliberalism" is a useful framework for interpreting the production of urban space, as cities "have become increasingly important geographical targets and institutional laboratories for various neoliberal experiments, e.g. place-making, urban development corporations, public-private partnerships, new forms of local boosterism, and property-led redevelopment," (He and Wu 2009: 283). The last of these, "property-led" redevelopment, is the focus of their 2009 paper, approached implicitly as a process of primitive accumulation whereby ownership of collective land is wrested away by private development companies. He and Wu consider three elements of China's urban development as decidedly neoliberal: shifting decision-making to local state authorities (decentralization), commodification of urban land, and the privatization of housing provision (ibid. 285). While the former is an explicitly political move, it has facilitated accumulation through the commodification of land and privatization of housing. Shifting local decision making and responsibility for revenue generation encouraged local political units to become economic decision-makers, and fostered urban entrepreneurialism. Urban development, "which used to be the obligation of the state," they argue, "has now been transferred to the pre-mature market," (ibid. 290). The resulting transformation of land and housing corresponds directly with central features of traditional accumulation: the commodification and privatization of land, the forceful expulsion of peasant

populations and the conversion of various forms of property rights into exclusive private property rights (Harvey 2001).

Inserting "neoliberal urbanism" as explanation for urban development does not do justice to the complexities of land acquisition and development that takes place within a decidedly unique, local context. Here, we see the fundamental flaw of what Tang calls "random conceptual indigenization". That is, "searching for those Western concepts that seem to depict approximate patterns, and applying them to urban China. A Western concept is chosen merely on the basis that it exhibits more or less similar descriptive features to the concerned Chinese phenomenon," (Tang 2014, 47). The resulting studies do not explain Chinese difference. Instead, their primary purpose is to explain those differences away:

> "Not having undertaken a critical understanding of the Chinese context and processes, the China researcher conceives of urban space in China as if it were a spatial container that we fill with features identified by the Western concept *rather than perceiving it as a structure that the context and processes help produce*," (Tang 2014, 47-48, emphasis added).

The presentation of urban development in China as led by capital is a purely subjective and, in this case, arbitrary position defining the transfer of urban real estate to private developers as central, but the transfer of property and wealth within the organization of the state is equally important.[i] Indeed, the claim that urban development is taking place under the *authority* of the market and not the state is premature. The development of commercial real estate that supposedly integrates Chinese territory with global circuits of capital is at times incidental to the opening of new spaces of state-sponsored and imagined urban modernity, and the local state's imperative to generate revenue for social spending and other centrally mandated projects for local governance. Understood in this light, capital accumulation in China represents a transfer of wealth from individuals and collectives *to the state*. Yet there is no contradiction between a

theory that purports to shift state resources to private ownership, and a state practice that manipulates its property rights regime to ensure *state* accumulation because once capital "penetrates" a society, its dominance is ensured. In other words, "China's neoliberal urbanization optimizes market operations and maximizes the interest of the state-led regime of accumulation," (He and Wu 2009: 296). While China's urbanization may be highly problematic for conditions of equality, fairness, and social justice, the idea that it reflects optimal market operations is indefensible. The conditions under which land transfers take place guarantee the state's involvement and capture of revenues. How can a system be portrayed as neoliberal while simultaneously seeking as its primary aim to "maximize *state-led* accumulation," which is antithetical to the most primary tenets of neoliberal dogma? I believe there is a need to distinguish accumulation undertaken to advance state (or some other actor's) goals and accumulation undertaken purely for profit. Doing so would enable us to interrogate the assumption that the existence of accumulation is necessarily in support of capitalism or neoliberalization.

Without disputing any of the most basic claims about *how* urban development takes place in China, the utility of neoliberalism as an explanatory concept is lacking. He and Wu suggest that once we accept neoliberalism as *the* predominant paradigm of urban political economy, then we can readily link Western and Chinese logics of urbanism. They claim that "similarities can be found" between China and the West "in the most essential aspects of neoliberalization." This "essential aspect" is the "institutionalization of growth as the primary goal of the state," (299). They further point to similarities in local state tactics for "neoliberalization" introducing "new elements such as capital subsidies, place-promotion, supply-side intervention, and local boosterism, into its central urban policy," (ibid.). What we do find, however, is that China

continues to rest on a mixture of "market logic and state authority logic." However, this state authority is only employed when it is necessary to balance neoliberalism's progress with societal contestation. While neoliberalism's progress in China is halting, its ascendancy is inevitable and irreversible.

Perhaps it is the concept of a neoliberal essentialism that is most troubling about their arguments in that it effectively erases any significance of local variation for understanding how Chinese cities work. "Neoliberal theory," writes Daniel Goldstein, "may be sketched on the backs of cocktail napkins from the Washington Hilton, but that is not the extent of it," (Goldstein, 2012). Yet to deny neoliberalism its essentialist nature is not to trivialize capitalist influences on urban development. It is to investigate "neoliberalisms" as:

> "not merely locally variegated instantiations of global ideas but fully lived realities in which people and states have their own theories, and elaborate their own discourses and critiques, about the worlds they inhabit and the ways in which these should be organised. 'Actually existing neoliberalism(s)' are more than curious local manifestations of global norms, but sets of theories and practices about the world that are fundamentally the products of local history and experience . . . and impactful of lived daily reality," (Ibid. 305).

If there is not one core element of neoliberalism that can characterize a "neoliberal city", then it is more fruitful to explore the diverse strands of intellectual discourse that embrace, reject, and adapt a wide set of theoretical, cultural, and moral beliefs into the production of urban spaces.

Spatial Fixes: Land, Accumulation, and Property Rights

According to Harvey, the role of the state under neoliberalism is to "create and preserve an institutional framework" of free markets for the exchange of private property (Harvey, 2005). Asserting private property rights over public goods, which then monetizes collective property

and integrates it with "global flows of capital" is the very definition of primitive accumulation (Harvey, 2001; Glassman 2006). In China, the expropriation of rural land for urban construction is central to the current accumulation regime. George Lin, one of the most prominent geographers writing on China's urbanization and land development today, is strongly influenced by Haevey's work on "accumulation by dispossession,"(McGee et al 2007; Lin 2009). His work is most often empirical, and grounded in the experiences of the Pearl River Delta (Lin 1997, 2001, 2004). Lin's well-received 2009 book *Developing China: Land, Politics, and Social Conditions* is rich in empirical data, providing an ambitious overview of land development over the past two decades. Central to debates about the nature of Chinese capitalism, and a central focus of *Developing China*, is the definition and development of property rights.

China's property rights, especially with respect to land, are commonly understood as ambiguous. This ambiguity has been a focus of research on China's spatial changes over the past decade (Ho 2001, Ho and Lin 2003, Whiting 2001, Clarke et al 2008,). In particular, scholars have explored how agriculture, industry, and real estate have expanded despite the lack of full privatization advocated by classical economic theory. For students of political economy, the question becomes, how has China managed to sustain capital accumulation without full privatization? Lin adroitly critiques the positioning of ambiguity within the property rights literature on China from two perspectives. First, in an approach clearly influenced by Douglas North, ambiguity is seen as the source of inefficiencies and social conflict because legal definitions of rural property rights are easily overwhelmed by the political power of the state (examples include Putterman 1993; Tian 2008). On the other hand, Peter Ho argues that ambiguity gives the state flexibility to adapt to markets, intervene when necessary, and maintain a large measure of control over development patterns (Ho 2001).

Harvey identifies land development as the primary "spatial fix" for capitalist overaccumulation, the means through which land is brought into the mainstream of capital accumulation. Lin does not dispute the primacy of capital accumulation in spatial change, but he does argue that Harvey overestimates the role of global capital, suggesting that capital formation and sources of production and consumption are far more domestically-driven (Lin 2009: 45). Still, land development is fundamentally driven by the "imperative of accumulation by dispossession." The politics of land development for Lin revolve around coalitions of local state agents and private developers forming in competition with rural collectives for the capture of capital accumulation. I believe Lin misses the opportunity to explore an aspect of the relationship of capital, politics, culture, and space that are obscured whenever capital is given a dominant position in any localized "hybrid" of these layered social forces. Just because a phenomenon or local practice may be of use to global (or even local) capital accumulation that does not mean that the phenomenon itself is caused or driven *by capital*.

Lin acknowledges that the central state has multiple goals for land development that *include* capital accumulation, but he does not address the motive for accumulation by the different actors. In Marxist land economics, accumulation occurs for its own sake, as a "spatial fix" for overaccumulation, but what is the motive for local governments and rural collectives to accumulate? What are they accumulating, and for what purpose? In standard political economy, accumulation is not seen as a strategy but as *the goal*. But is this always the case? Furthermore, Lin has created an overly simplistic division between urban governments and peasants, ignoring the interweaving of rural and urban society at the urban fringe and the tremendous transformations that have taken place within rural society. China's *de jure* rural population is too diverse for motives to be ascribed to a unified "peasant" class.

Developing China opens with a direct quotation from Marx on primitive accumulation, thrusting Marxist political economy, and by extension, Harvey, to the forefront of his analysis. Lin recognizes the hybrid character of China's land system, and queries how land use and land systems are shaped by localized social, economic and political conditions. However, due to the tautology of Marxist political economy, Lin cannot escape the limiting binaries of structure and agency and the historical inevitability of capitalist ascendancy. Thus, social conditions are determined in response to "historical change", economic conditions are confined to capitalist penetration, and political conditions are only understood in terms of central-local dynamics within the state. In each of these, a discrete and static "inside" is acted on by a dynamic external force: global capitalism acts on the state, which in turn acts on society to create the social conditions under study. Indeed, capitalism is regularly used as a synonym for history, the history that the Chinese state has rejoined following Mao's death. Before the 1978 watershed, China was a "rare" place where the "natural course" of the evolution of the economy and society were distorted and disrupted (Ibid. 72).

Land, as Lin recognizes, is subject to considerations beyond the scope of either classical economics or neo-Marxist political economy. Lin is right to assert that neoliberal frameworks for land development in China are too simplistic because in China, capitalist logics are mediated by cultural views of land as fundamental for social security, livelihood, and by the ideological prominence of land in the construction of CCP legitimacy. Land is not simply a commodity, he argues, but has multiple and conflicting meanings for individual farmers, village cadres, municipal governments and the central state. Unfortunately, this assertion, as well as the substantive critique of "ambiguity" is soon forgotten as his analyses returns to a rational-choice model of resource contestation where social conditions are confined to responses to historical

change, economic conditions are confined to capitalist penetration, and political conditions are only understood in terms of central-local dynamics within the state. In each of these, a discrete and static "inside" is acted on by a dynamic external force with global capitalism acting on the state, which in turn acts on society to create the conditions under study. Where he begins his work with a critical exploration of the assumptions about land and property in political economy, his own analysis becomes trapped by the limited agency allowed any force other than capital when accumulation by dispossession is taken as the driving force of history, and when central-local relations are reduced to a binary, scalar analysis.

A focus on material processes of land development obscures the intentions and outcomes of relevant actors who may engage or accept accumulation processes in order to achieve other desirable outcomes. It is thoroughly demonstrated that China's accumulation process encourages inequality, political oppression and socioeconomic exclusion, but it is ontological fallacy to assume that the creation of capital surpluses shares a causal relationship with social injustice. More attention needs to be given to how ideas about social justice, equality, and social integration are constructed differently through localized relationships of space, power, and culture, and how the negotiation among those forces determines and legitimates the creation and distribution of capital surpluses (Gibson-Graham 2006). Instead of engaging these complexities, Lin too casually substitutes the agency of domestic capital for that of global capital.

Discussion and Conclusion: Uncorking the Neoliberal Bottle

In this paper, I have argued that cramming China's developmental experience into a neoliberal framework is fruitless for understanding that experience. It is the hallmark of Tang's "random conceptual indigenization". Moreover, the analyses identified above are quick to adopt the language of neoliberal critique, but they do not actually contribute to a more nuanced

understanding of neoliberalism. Instead, they simply force Chinese materialities into a recognizable, yet ultimately inadequate package of neoliberal urbanism.

As Dirlik (2012) suggests, however, it is not enough to simply declare that China is not neoliberal. To have theoretical relevance, urban geographies of China must be generative of new theories and new frameworks. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to do so here, I would like to close the paper by highlighting two points of emphasis that might begin to move urban geography away from "random indigenization and appropriation": history and the lived realities of urban life.

In the analysis of space, China geographers face a seemingly intractable problem of time. The linear and progressive view of history imbues nearly every commentary on China's developments. The existing focus on the diffusion of neoliberalism frames China as a generic spatial fix for crisis capitalism with market transition a catch-all for the particular forms of creative destruction underway. In the cases explored here, there is a burdensome assumption that socialism was China's past, and capitalism is China's future. Harvey's narrative says nothing about the pre-Deng era, as if China emerged from behind the bamboo curtain freed from three decades of Maoism, awaiting the welcoming arms of global capitalism. He and Wu describe an exploitative system of expropriation and dispossession as if these were inventions of neoliberalism rather than long-standing features that not only predate the reform era, but have roots in imperial practices of spatial governance. Most explicitly, George Lin characterizes China after 1978 as having "rejoined history". All of these examples emphasize an institutional context of neoliberalism that is utterly divorced from China's own institutional and historical context that must include the tremendous social, political, and economic transformations of the Maoist era for any understanding of what is actually happening in China today (Dirlik 2012).

When the influence of socialist institutions and the party-state are acknowledged, it is often characterized as path-dependence (i.e. 'path-dependent capitalism' or 'path-dependent neoliberalism', see for example, Wu 2010, Young 2014). While acknowledging that the past will influence the present and future, it is inherently misleading to describe history as path-dependent. It reaffirms the linear movement of countries through historical stages by allowing for a token amount of diversity in the final outcomes. But the path and history still have an end, and in China's case, this is largely seen as a quirky, yet ultimately recognizable variant of capitalism (Peck and Zhang, 2013). The past is held as something that happened "before", and its lingering effects simply the result of institutional lag. That the contradictions of the present will dissipate as more fully capitalist institutions are established is the underlying assumption of market transition theory and has informed the research of prominent commentators on China (Nee 1989; Lardy 1998). It is a logic that is deployed to justify dispossession, expropriation, inequality, forced evictions, environmental destruction, and massive layoffs for the sake of a harmonious future. Under Mao, repression and violence against the people was similarly justified as necessary for building socialism.

Maoism and neoliberalism, then, both carry a promise that the violence and injustices of the moment will be erased once the next stage of history arrives. Yet the landscape of the present is shaped as much, if not more, by the past as it is an indeterminate future. For this reason, philosopher Manuel deLanda has argued for a "geological" approach to the city that not only recognizes but actively interrogates the historical "layers" of urban space. Here, social entities, including cities, are products of "specific historical processes, and whatever degree of identity they have, must be accounted for via the processes which created them and those that maintain them" (DeLanda et al 2013). The city (or for that matter, the region, nation, and so on)

“emerges” as a whole from the multiplicity of its components (built environment, infrastructure, individuals, organizations and institutions, government), and must be continuously maintained by the interactions among the parts.

Theories about China’s present must more consciously engage how it is built on the past. Lin’s perspective erases three decades of Chinese history, and leaves no room to consider how the transformation of China under Mao continues to shape the trajectories of its development, to say nothing of thousands of years of dynasticism. Holding the past and future as stark and contrasting moments in a teleological evolution of capitalism "shuts down the terrain of transition itself to critical inquiry" and risks overlooking the internal continuities, contestations, and mechanisms of social change (Martin 2007). Forcing Chinese cities and urbanization into the neoliberal bottle severely limits our ability to understand a relationship between past and present that is deeper and more complex than the simple institutionalization of capitalism.

There are existing examples of this kind of work that are sensitive to the continuities between so-called “pre” and “post” reform China, yet the degree to which they challenge the temporal bifurcation of China Studies is not widely recognized. Chan has extensively detailed how the *hukou* system that developed in the first decade of the PRC has been foundational to China’s ongoing economic transformations. Cartier’s recent work has focused on how administrative divisions, many of which can be traced to imperial governing rationalities, shape the developmental trajectories of many of China’s spatial units, showing how historical spatial practices produce the inter-city competition and urban entrepreneurialism typically attributed to neoliberal ascendancies (Cartier 2013, 2015). More than just an example of path-dependence, these works underscore a deep-seeded spatiality to Chinese governance that transcends our

standard temporal markers, and are necessary for any effort at understanding China's developmental trajectories.

Secondly, there is a notable dearth of investigations into how China's urban spaces are occupied, inhabited, and otherwise used in favor of cookie-cutter analyses that prioritize developers' intentions to "appeal to capital," (See Ong 2006, 2011 for a general critique). In short, the neoliberal intent of urban development is now all but taken for granted, but the unintended consequences of new urban spaces are rarely explored.[ii]

Faced with a similar theoretical challenge, another group of regional urban scholars working in sub-Saharan Africa have launched a far more generative approach to urban studies. Despite obvious differences, African and Chinese cities share a long history of *in situ*, pre-modern urban spatial developments, a recent history of diverse experimentation with multiple modes of economic, spatial, and political governance, and a variety of contemporary practices that challenge the applicability of a neoliberal urbanism framework. In the provocative words of Parnell and Pieterse (2015), urban scholars under these conditions are faced with a choice: "Either Africa must be ignored or the theory, method and data of urban studies must change," (241). This caution has not been heeded in the China context. Rather than challenging the theoretical and methodological bases of Western urban studies, urban scholarship in China has settled for the neat packaging of neoliberalism where details and divergences are less important than the repetition of shared tropes of urban entrepreneurialism and capitalist penetration.

This also necessitates more direct engagements with the ways in which socialism continues to be constructed in China's development (Dirlik 2012, Lim 2014). Descriptions of Chinese socialism understandably tend toward cynicism, a reflection of both disillusionments with Maoism and skepticism over the concept of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Yet

Lin (2006) draws on the ideals of Chinese socialism that exist independently of party elite constructions, ideals of justice, commitment, and social interdependence that inform contemporary contestations of state policy. Dislocation and expropriation described by He and Wu (2009) casts neoliberalism as the villain. Yet, amid the countless protests against expropriation across the country, capitalism itself is rarely an explicit target. Residents of China's villages-in-the-city do, however, frequently cite historical sacrifices, Maoist valorizations of peasants, and their own personal contributions to building Chinese socialism while simultaneously drawing on "market value" calculations in their claims against state-led expropriation of village property (Buckingham 2014). For the most part, residents' demands are modest in that they do not challenge the state's authority to expropriate, instead calling for more favorable relocation allowances. This is hardly the equivalent of anti-capitalist struggle (Harvey might describe it as "militant localism"), but it does reflect a framework for justice, rights, and fairness based on historical relationships between individuals and the state that is not recognizably Western. These relations are clearly not defined singularly by capitalism, rather, capitalism is integrated into a larger understanding of social relations connecting individual, community, state, and market actors.

Urban studies, whether centered in Europe or Asia, must be understood in the ways in which the city is embedded in structures, networks, and processes larger than itself (Cinar and Bender 2007). However, this is not to *reduce* the city to those external relations, which is what happens when urban geographers become singularly focused on identifying the neoliberal. We must be aware of *competing* narratives of the city that relate not singly and consistently to global capital, but also to nationalist projects, projections of state power, and cultural symbols that do not follow a narrowly Westernized conception of urbanism that is and always shall be construed

as neoliberal (Ong 2011). In addition, the agency of residents of China's villages-in-the-city, migrant workers, and dispossessed farmers, and their role in assembling the Chinese city deserves greater attention. At the same time, diverse motives drive the actions of state agents, party-members, and the intellectual elite in both enabling and resisting acts of primitive accumulation. Greater attention to the ways in which neoliberalism is contested in China, and the alternative tropes, ideologies, and worldviews actors employ not just in overt opposition to neoliberal policies but in the daily contestations over urban development and urban imaginaries could serve to decenter neoliberalism from Chinese analysis, and give a more complete picture of how urbanism takes shape in different societies.

Notes

[i] Hsing (2006, 2010) for example, has documented the tensions between governments and what she calls "socialist land masters", agencies, party and military offices, universities, and State Owned Enterprises with direct access to large quantities of urban land. Additionally, there are sharp conflicts over land disposition among the Bureau of Land Management, Urban Planning Bureaus, townships, and municipalities. The transformation of land and real estate development is not simply a story of linear privatization, that is the transfer of public goods into private hands. Instead, Hsing identifies a complex mix of multiple state actors, private, and foreign owners, and socialist land masters who cause urban growth to be organized around competition and coalitions within the state.

[ii] There are outstanding exceptions including Ong (2011) on reactions to Rem Koolhaas' CCTV headquarters building in Beijing.

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