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## Theorising with urban China: methodological and tactical experiments for a more global urban studies

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### Abstract

Despite global academic interest, the field of urban China continues to be dominated by exceptionalist theorising. Given that the unique properties of Chinese urbanisation present rich cases for an engaged pluralism in urban studies, we argue for theorising with urban China based on two methodological grounds: 'thinking cities through elsewhere' and conjunctural analysis. This opens space for mid-level theorisation, which has the potential to contribute to the revision of existing theoretical frameworks and/or create new starting points for analysis and conceptualisation between urban China and a wider range of contexts. We propose three tactics for mid-level conceptualisation with urban China cases: generating concepts through bespoke comparisons between cases in urban China and elsewhere; conceptualising from a single urban China case by placing two theoretical frameworks into conversation; and launching concepts developed from inductive research in urban China to develop novel analytical frameworks. We conclude by arguing that theorising with urban China can benefit from collaborative research across borders, with the need to include researchers who are deeply embedded in the field.

### Introduction

China's remarkable urbanisation has been met by a commensurate surge in academic interest (see Wong and Zheng, 2022). However, the field remains at an impasse, providing a "mountain of empiricism" without a commensurate "torrent of (novel) theoretical development" (Ren, 2021: 1; He and Qian, 2017). We argue that the current impasse stems from an embedded statism in urban China research (Taylor, 1996). The Chinese state holds paramount influence over its urbanisation process, and much of urban China research asserts that for this reason the experience of urban China is beyond comparison (Ma, 2002; Hamnett, 2020). This embedded statism has translated into two cultures of exceptionalist theorisation in urban China studies. The first regards urban China cases as exceptional variants of inherited Western models such as neoliberalism (see Harvey, 2005; Wu, 2010). The second strategy, partially as a response to the perceived limitations of the first approach, approaches urban China inductively with its own theoretical frameworks like state entrepreneurialism (Ma, 2002; Hamnett, 2020). These modes of theorisation could potentially exacerbate Chinese exceptionalism in urban studies (Pow, 2012).

There are also researchers interested in understanding China "from a more contextualised global, historical, and relational perspective" (Franceschini and Loubere, 2022: 58). For Franceschini and Loubere (2022: 58), this means "focusing on the linkages and parallels, continuities and evolutions, as well as the ruptures, resulting from the intensification of Chinese entanglements in the global system" to drive novel theorisation. Referencing China's

influence on the world through its Belt and Road Initiative, Bunnell (2021: 271) for instance argues that the BRI serves to bring “previously unassociated project sites and non-place-based infrastructural developments into comparative relation (and theorisation)”. This mode of relational theorisation leverages actual connections between China and the world to expand our understanding of the urban (see Hart, 2018). Other scholars have called for embracing China, or even more broadly Asia, as ‘method’, i.e. to consider China/Asia not only as “an object of analysis [but also] a means for transforming knowledge production” (Chen, 2010: 216). Such is the view shared by Mizoguchi (2016), who articulates ‘China as method’ as an antidote to the prevailing tendencies of using Europe as the only standard to assess elsewhere without privileging China as the new sole measure, and Chen (2010), who argues for “using Asia as an imaginary anchoring point” (p. 212) in order “to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview” (p. 223), thereby overcoming the totalising tendencies of Western frameworks.

Building on Chen (2010) and Mizoguchi (2016), we argue that analytical and theoretical insight developed with urban China can also have relevance elsewhere without necessarily having to focus only on theorisations of *actual* links between China and the world (although this is no less important). We follow Robinson’s (2016a: 15) provocation that we can also “imagine a *virtual* terrain of processes, phenomena and ideas concerned with producing the urban, [...] equivalent to placing all cities within a potentially shared analytical terrain.” Our goal of ‘theorising with China’ comes in the context of growing interest in taking forward the agenda of a more global urban studies, which entails building theory from, with and through different contexts, including urban China, and developing understandings of an expanding and diverse world of cities and urbanisation processes, while being attuned to the limits of always located insights (Roy, 2009; Robinson, 2016a, 2016b; Cox and Evenhuis, 2020).

Methodologically, we are inspired by approaches of ‘thinking with elsewhere’ (see Jacobs, 2012; Myers, 2014; Robinson, 2016a) and conjuncture in urban theorisation (see Peck, 2017; Cox and Evenhuis, 2020; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020). These methodologies have been adopted in geography and urban studies since the 1980s, largely influenced by Tilly’s (1984) work on different approaches to comparative research (see Robinson, 2011; Cox and Evenhuis, 2020). In previous invocations, however, the general (that is, theory) is often taken as something that pre-exists its parts (empirics). This meant that researchers adopting such methodologies to urban theorisation often sought to gain deeper insight into generalities by “identifying deeper regularities, principles of variation or causal mechanisms that seem to exist across various cases” but tended to leave the general itself unquestioned (Cox and Evenhuis, 2020: 435). Over time, as seen for instance in the case of neoliberalism and urban China, certain theoretical frameworks become the ultimate reference point in understanding contemporary urbanism, obfuscating different and more nuanced conceptualisations inspired by conversations between China and other contexts.

We are thus inspired by recently reformatted approaches to thinking ‘with elsewhere’ and conjunctural analysis, where parts (cases, analyses, and conceptual elements) are seen to “form in relation to one another and it is through their relations that the whole, or general, is formed” (Cox and Evenhuis, 2020: 436). We follow Peck’s (2017: 14) call for an urban theorisation that is “(s)ceptical both of universalism and particularism,” calling “for close and reflexive interpretations of the mutual constitution of situated circumstances and structuring conditions, moving in and out from immediate (or proximate) contexts to the (constitutive) contexts of those contexts.” We aspire not

only to better understand Chinese urbanism but to put forward insights from Chinese urbanism as one source of extending conversations on contemporary urbanism more generally.

Thinking cities ‘with elsewhere’ entails taking a particular case study, rather than the city or the nation-state as a unit of comparative analysis and thinking. Here concepts are emergent rather than pre-given, assembled through placing cases from anywhere in analytical conversation with other cases, contexts or emergent conceptualisations and frameworks (Robinson, 2016a). This is a lateral form of theorisation, generative of novel concepts, by purposefully drawing on but not subsuming the process within more established and dominant ways of thinking, both Northern and Chinese (Lawhon, 2020). Notwithstanding this, we argue that the vertical aspect of theorisation cannot be ignored. This entails embracing also a conjunctural approach, which involves developing relational analyses of cases and their political contexts as a complementary strategy to working laterally, ‘between’ cases only (Peck, 2017). This opens space for mid-level theorisation, which produces a nuanced version—and not merely variation—of existing macro theoretical frameworks. Mid-level concepts can contribute to the revision of existing theoretical frameworks (see Leitner and Sheppard, 2020) and/or create new starting points for analysis and theorisation across a wider range of cities and contexts (see Ren, 2020; Robinson et al., 2021).

Further, we are committed to exemplifying active steps that can be taken to this end. Inspired by these methodological grounds, we turn to a critical reflection of our own research tactics with a particular emphasis on the process of generating new insights that may lend well to theorising aspects of urbanisation more widely. The first involves composing bespoke comparisons between cases in urban China and elsewhere based on their shared features. This involves using two cases to question one another and form lines of analysis which might otherwise not be formed in single case study research. This can help deepen understanding of both cases but also create conceptual elements which can be assembled to form mid-level concepts for thinking across other cases which share the same features. The second involves theorising with a single Chinese case by bringing two different theoretical frameworks together. This attempt to bring different theories, rather than cases, into comparison can help demonstrate the promise of a synthesis of theories for understanding both the urban China case and cases elsewhere with shared features. The third involves taking a mid-level concept developed from inductive research in urban China and expanding it into a bigger theoretical framework that draws on but also better explains similar urban phenomena around the world. The purpose of the three tactics is not simply to present novel empirical data but to reflect on how our research can lend itself to theorising with China. In the conclusion we argue theorising with China can benefit from collaborative research across borders, with the crucial need to include researchers who are deeply embedded in urban China.

### **Embedded statism and Chinese exceptionalism in urban China studies?**

Most urban China researchers agree that inherited urban paradigms are inadequate for fully making sense of China’s urbanism (see Zhou et al., 2019). One response has been to frame China as a unique variant of Northern urbanism (Ren, 2021; see Zhou et al., 2019). This can be conceived as a variation-finding approach to theorisation (Tilly, 1984), where the relationship of different cases to an overarching theoretical framework is used to provide more insight into the cases themselves, as well as into the possible hybridised and variegated nature of the framework itself (see also Robinson, 2011). Given the Northern bias of academia, urban China researchers are

often pressured to make their research more intelligible to a global (read: Northern) audience. Ren (2021: 4) argues that most papers on urban China follow a certain format: they present a particular model of the “West” and go on to “invalidate it for the Chinese case.” By writing in reference to the established canons of Northern theory, most urban China researchers position urban China as an exception to the global North and thus worthy of wider interest.

Urban China’s engagement with neoliberalism is an example in point. Following Harvey (2007: 34), China’s emerging urbanism has been framed by many as a “particular kind of neo-liberalism interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control”. In this line of theorising, important convergences with neoliberal theory are identified in Chinese urbanism, such as land commodification, neoliberal subjectivities, and their associated socio-spatial inequalities (Zhou et al., 2019). However, it is often the divergences with Northern invocations of neoliberalism that inspire the theorisation of urban China. For instance, in the realm of urban redevelopment, because the state retains full ownership of all urban land, the commodification of land is predicated upon the state rather than the market (He and Wu, 2009; Lin, 2014). In the realm of governmentality, while Chinese citizens have been indoctrinated through familiar neoliberal principles such as individual responsibility and self-improvement, such norms crucially come up against deeply rooted Chinese Confucian values (Culp, 2006; Wan, 2016).

In his earlier work, Wu (2010) argues that while it is controversial to regard China’s urbanism as strictly neoliberal, there are imprints of neoliberalism in Chinese urban governance, and thus that the concept continues to be important for understanding urban China. Ong (2007) further argues that neoliberalism is itself a hybridised conceptualisation; it is not a preconceived ideology that fundamentally “instructs” the Chinese state, but simply a strategy amongst others which the state deploys to achieve extra-economic ends. In this reading, inherited paradigms like neoliberalism might be viable for theorising China’s urbanism if enough of a conceptual twist is invoked. It also means, crucially, that there is potential for shearing meta-narratives like neoliberalism itself through urban China research (see Wu, 2010).

Nevertheless, the less-than-comfortable theoretical fit between neoliberalism and the fundamental realities of urban China uncover what Taylor (1996) calls an embedded statism in urban China research. For Pow (2012), this means that urban China researchers tend to take the state as a fundamental reference point. Much of work on urban China stresses the indubitable presence of the state in all scales and aspects of the urban (see Wu and Zhang, 2022 for a comprehensive review). This is often accompanied by the argument that if urban China is so unique, no amount of conceptual twisting of neoliberalism can adequately capture its nuances (Zhou et al., 2019). Researchers like Hamnett (2020) thus argue that rather than as a destination for Northern-inspired theory, urban China needs to be theorised inductively. Opposed to a variation-finding approach to theorisation, this is a particularist approach which stresses the importance of the “singularity of cities and regions and the processes going on there” (Cox and Evenhuis, 2020: 435).

For instance, Wu’s (2018, 2020a) more recent work presents state entrepreneurialism as a governance form that combines planning centrality with market mechanisms. Wu (2018: 1396) argues that the intention of the Chinese

state “has never been to use neoliberalism to reduce state power but rather, through institutional reform and innovation, to deploy diverse governance techniques.” State entrepreneurialism thus allows us to understand how in China “local development and politics may not be limited to the (neoliberal) growth machine and machine politics but may include the need to maintain state power” (Wu, 2018: 1385). Similarly, in *The Great Urban Transformation*, which unveils the nuances of China’s land-driven urban development, Hsing (2010) presents ‘the urbanisation of the local state’ as a theoretical framework to understand how consolidating land, rather than capital accumulation itself, drives the aspirations and practices of the state’s approach to urban governance and redevelopment in China. What is interesting about Hsing’s (2010) book is the complete absence of the term ‘neoliberalism’ in the text—this perhaps encapsulates a more explicit approach to theorising Chinese urbanism inductively without any recourse to what is supposedly *the* literature (that is, neoliberalism) to engage with in urban studies.

Both examples are persuasive attempts at theorising urban China inductively, providing a more nuanced understanding of the multiplex role of the state in China’s urban transformation, and have proven to be highly influential. However, an overwhelming bulk of researchers which cite Hsing and Wu’s work comprises scholarship on urban China; their work has not found considerable traction among authors working in other contexts (see Harms, 2012; Datta, 2015; Whiteside, 2022 for notable exceptions). This perhaps reflects the trend where many researchers—both of urban China and elsewhere—continue to conflate embedded statism with Chinese exceptionalism. Indeed, a new generation of research increasingly focuses squarely on urban China, seemingly illuminating a growing acceptance that innovative theorisation of urban China itself is a viable end. This methodological nationalism, Ren (2021) argues, can be identified in the ways many papers on urban China gesture to ‘Chinese cities’, ‘the Chinese case’, or ‘urban China’ in their titles. This reveals, to name a few, how research on mega urban projects (Shen et al., 2020), state-led development corporations (Jiang and Waley, 2020), and financialisation of housing (Wu et al., 2020), notwithstanding the very diverse Chinese cities they take place in, all aim to advance theoretical and empirical understandings of China’s emergent urbanism with respect to the landed state (see He et al., 2017). This is opposed to such research seeking to connect with and contribute to broader debates about the type of cases themselves and their associated literatures, even though these are certainly shared features of the urban in general. Indeed, many China-focused papers feature in leading geography and urban studies journals which are supposed to push the boundaries of the discipline in more global terms (see Jiang and Waley, 2020; Wu et al., 2020; Furlong, 2022 for recent examples). There has also been a plethora of journal special issues focusing on China (see He and Qian, 2017; Logan, 2018; Wu, 2020b).

Bettering our understanding of urban China is undoubtedly important, but to stop there is a missed opportunity to push forward a more ambitious theoretical agenda. Wu (2020b: 459) argues that inductive research on China can provide “surprising accounts” of Chinese urbanism which can add new narratives to the urban imagination. For instance, the emphasis of urban China studies on state entrepreneurialism has prompted some researchers to “bring the state back in”; Whiteside (2022) offers “an elaboration of the ‘state-led’ label and applies these Chinese insights to cutting edge state-led initiatives unfolding in Canada and the UK,” using insights from China’s state-led financialisation to extend understandings of how state activities can hinder the influence of financial markets more generally. By drawing on urban China as a source of theorisation, we might think of the issue of the lingering

state and its multiple, emergent logics in urban governance and transformation, which is certainly not an issue restricted to China. Perhaps then, “the value of urban China studies is not to generalise them into a universal theory but rather to present “new narratives” which contribute to new ways of thinking the urban (Wu, 2020b: 471). We offer some insight on *how* researchers might go about doing this.

### **Theorising with China, advancing urban theory: thinking with elsewhere and with conjuncture**

Our aspiration to theorise with China is predicated upon a combination of two methodological approaches in urban studies. The first is what Robinson (2016b) calls ‘thinking cities through elsewhere’, inspired by the postcolonial critique that inherited concepts are no longer adequate for explaining and exploring 21st century urbanism (see Roy, 2009; McFarlane, 2010). As Roy (2009: 820) argues, if the “parochial experience of Euro American cities has been found to be a useful theoretical model for all cities, perhaps the distinctive experiences of (all cities) can generate productive and provocative theoretical frameworks for all cities.” This approach argues that conceptual innovation can emerge from any urban situation, not just those in the usual suspects of the ‘global North’, and that such conceptual innovation can drive wider theoretical conversations in new and unexpected directions (Robinson, 2016b). While open to the revisability of existing concepts, ‘thinking cities through elsewhere’ is also inclined toward the formulation of new concepts, “inspired by a very different repertoire of cities and ideas from those which shaped 20th century urban theory” (Robinson, 2016b: 187).

The goal of ‘thinking cities through elsewhere’ is predicated upon rethinking the relationship between the case study and theory, or between the particular and general (Robinson, 2016a). Robinson (2016a: 21) argues that if cases were seen as singularities—“distinctive outcomes on their own terms rather than particular examples of pre-given theories like neoliberalism”—then they could be, notwithstanding their geographical context, “opened up for conceptualisation through a wider array of available interpretations, related cases or emergent concepts” (see also Cox and Evenhuis, 2020). This is possible because cases in the urban share features of urbanisation—one could think about how a case of urban entrepreneurialism or displacement in urban China, for instance, inevitably shares features with those in any other city. Inevitable differences present themselves across cases and their contexts, and it is this difference that is crucial for creative theorisation (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016). Here Robinson (2016a) takes inspiration from Deleuze (1994), who argues that we only come to know the diverse world through the operations of its differences. Concepts can thus be thought of as composed of intersecting and resonant elements, expressed by Deleuze (1994: 348) as a multiplicity (rather than generality) made up of “differential elements, differential relations amongst those elements, and singularities corresponding to those relations.” Put simply, difference can be put to work through analysis not only to trouble existing interpretations of the urban but offer alternative theorisations.

In this reading, urban China is unique but not exceptional, and it is this uniqueness which lends it its theory generation potential (Wu, 2016; 2020b; Zhou et al., 2019). The distinctive institutional practices, landscapes, relations, and transformations embedded in China’s urbanism, albeit at a greater speed, scale and extent, provide fruitful opportunities for ‘thinking with elsewhere’, based on shared features of the urban. An example of this is Zhao’s (2020) research on *jiehebu*, which he defines as the spaces in the interface of rural and urban China. Centring his analysis on Wangjing, a *jiehebu* in Beijing, he finds that it is impossible to draw any useful

equivalence between his case and the Anglo-American suburb. It is precisely this impossibility in translation, he contends, which conditions productive dialogues between disparate cases and contexts. Zhao demonstrates how *jiehebu*, as a provisional concept, provides an opportunity to think about how such ‘suburban’ or ‘frontier’ formations are not simply a function of inherited understandings of the Anglo-American urbanisation process, but a more specific ‘urbanisation of the state’, where land consolidation and urban expansion is central to the Chinese state’s developmental goals (Hsing, 2010). In so doing, Zhao (2020: 539) argues that thinking through different kinds of rural-urban interfaces—a shared feature of the urban—we can “make use of alien or foreign mediates (e.g. the term *Jiehebu*) to enrich the vocabularies of the urban.” Zhao’s (2020) work shows how we should be open to dialogues, rather than simply equivalences in our attempts to think Chinese cases ‘with elsewhere’.

Critics have argued that such an approach to theorisation ignores manifestations of structural power (Peck, 2017). Furthermore, Sayın et al. (2022) caution that the eagerness to generate new concepts cannot come at the expense of considering, renewing and reworking tried and tested paradigms. Here we take additional inspiration from conjunctural analysis, which prioritises the dialectical relationship between the general and particular. Sceptical of both universalism and particularism, conjunctural analysis calls for interpretations of the mutual constitution of any given theoretical generality and particular on-ground realities (Cox and Evenhuis, 2020). As Peck (2017: 22) notes, while conjunctural analysis is attentive to the role of pre-given theories in analysis, it never resorts to “its complacent use or, for that matter, to its ham-fisted ‘insert[ion] into the here and now’” (Grossberg, 1996: 148). Instead, this approach defines a space for mid-level theorisation underpinned by “reflexive interpretations of the interplay between grounded circumstances, mediating conditions and contingent effects on the one hand, and their enabling conditions of existence, operational parameters and connective circuits on the other” (Peck, 2017: 13). Given that macro-level theoretical frameworks such as neoliberalism and state entrepreneurialism can only ever produce a partial account of any case or context, the target of conjunctural analysis is often the development of mid-level concepts, positioned between more macro-level, abstract accounts of urbanism, and grounded analysis across a wider array of cases and contexts (Peck, 2017). Mid-level concepts enable more nuanced readings of cases within their own contextual existence; they hark the potential of the revisability of existing macro-level theories; and they also enable analysis and subsequent conceptualisations across a wider variety of cases and contexts which share features with the initial case in question (Robinson, 2016a; Peck, 2017; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020).

We take Wu and Zhang’s (2022) recent critical review in *Progress in Human Geography* to speculate how the field might proceed in terms of ‘thinking with elsewhere’, while attentive to conjunctural analysis and mid-level theorisation. The paper argues for a rethinking of China’s urban governance beyond a habitual characterisation of neoliberal urbanism or state entrepreneurialism—which Wu and Zhang find too generic and limiting—and suggests a more nuanced understanding of the role of the state in the dynamic state–market–society nexus. The paper illuminates various examples from existing urban China scholarship which has produced mid-level concepts through their conjunctural analyses of neighbourhood, urban and regional governance. For example, the idea of ‘microregeneration’ (*weigaizao*) (Wu et al., 2022) in urban neighbourhoods can be seen as a mid-level concept which can create analytical dialogues with other such forms in different contexts sharing similar features, such as incremental regenerations identified in post-socialist cities (see e.g. Keresztély and Scott, 2012). We are thus

neither suggesting to ignore state entrepreneurialism in analyses of urban China nor proposing to produce radically new theoretical frameworks to replace it. Rather, we take a more modest approach, calling for emphasis on mid-level theorising. We see mid-level concepts not only as ‘explanatory theory proper’ (Harding and Blokland, 2011), but also as what Ren (2020) calls ‘sensitising schemes’ that can reorient inquiry and analysis and drive research in new, unexpected directions.

We are thus returned to our aspiration of theorising with China: taking the Chinese case study as a starting point for innovative conceptualisation by thinking with ‘elsewhere’, attending to how these cases frame and are framed by the existing theoretical frameworks in which they commonly sit, and remaining open to the possibility of generating new mid-level concepts which can spark dialogues across different cases and contexts around the urban world without obviating the influence of the political contexts within which they sit.

### **Three tactical experiments in theorising with China**

Peck (2015) rightly laments that at current state there are few studies that offer demonstrations of tactics in pluralistic urban theorising (see Myers, 2014; Lancione and McFarlane; 2016; Wood, 2020; Brill, 2021; Robinson, 2022a, b for important exceptions). Perhaps the way forward, as Robinson (2022a) suggests in her recently published book, *Comparative Urbanism: Tactics for Global Urban Studies*, is to focus on the tactics and agents of comparative analysis and urban theorisation more generally. Indeed, the exploration of “the situated assembly of the comparative...act itself” (Deville et al., 2016: 102) is important if we are to better understand *how* we might theorise with urban China.

Ren’s (2020) comparative work on art spaces in Beijing and Berlin pays particular attention to the tactical aspects of mid-level comparative theorising. She adopts a relational approach to theorising, which focuses on how “key processes are constituted in relation to one another through power-laden practises in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life” (Hart, 2018: 374-375); and that “clarifying these connections and mutual processes of constitution—as well as slippages, openings, and contradictions—helps to generate new understandings” (Hart, 2006: 996). Tracing and interrogating the connections between art spaces in Beijing and Berlin, Ren (2020: 135) reveals “how circulations of actors, resources and practices render the question of an ultimate reference point rather inappropriate” (or unhelpful) for making sense of these spaces. Here Berlin is not seen as a ‘model’ for Beijing to emulate, but both are “lowered from the pedestal of having to represent a standard of ‘global’ and become ‘ordinary’ places” amenable to wider theorisation beyond the state entrepreneurial or the neoliberal model (Ren, 2020: 126). Ren (2020) demonstrates how allowing the field to guide her tracings between both cases as well as operationalising coding practices eventually produced themes to guide her analysis. In so doing, she was able to develop mid-level conceptual connections between art, aspiration and urban change for understanding and thinking about the nature or the drivers of urban change more generally in a world of cities.

We instantiate with examples from our own work three other possible tactics for operationalising urban China cases for mid-level conceptualisation. All our examples share the same understanding of urban China as developing within a governance context of state entrepreneurialism but without adopting the concept as our main theoretical framework. For Wu (2018, 2020), state entrepreneurialism involves a state that is deliberate and direct

in shaping the trajectories of urban development; the state is entrepreneurial not in the sense that it ideologically embraces market instruments or that it is only obsessed with economic growth, but that it is willing to opportunistically adopt a variety of means, market-oriented or otherwise, to achieve its goals, many of which are extra-economic ones.. The pursuit of extra-economic objectives through a mixture of market and interventionist measures can be clearly observed in our three cases, where the state seeks to govern informality, improve environmental qualities and maintain post-resettlement social stability, all of which are problems shared by urban China and many other contexts. Through our examples, we hope to show that studies of urban China cases, with their particular emphasis on the state, yield valuable theoretical insights that help us re-examine urban cases in other contexts, Northern or otherwise, where the theoretical lens of neoliberalism has naturalised a view that the state is a less interventionist, if not also less influential, actor to urban socio-spatial transformation, and thus downplayed the theoretical relevance of the state for contemporary urbanism.

*Composing comparison: from Shenzhen to London and back again—by Shaun Teo*

If concepts are thought of as multiplicities assembled through placing cases, as singularities, into analytical relation (Robinson, 2016a), then there is scope for urban China researchers to compose comparisons which—based on identifying their shared features—place an urban China case on a level analytical plane with any other case in the world. My research takes interest in state-society collaborative urban experiments in Shenzhen and London, and their potential for progressive urban transformation. I deliberately started my comparison in Shenzhen because the idea of the Shenzhen municipality as political entrepreneurs, daring to take responsibility for pushing reform and innovating policy (O’Donnell, 2017), served as a good starting point for thinking against the dominant notion of disempowered and disenfranchised local authorities in the context of the UK’s neoliberal urbanism (Clayton et al., 2016). However, I also endeavoured to move beyond conventional comparative tactics which simply reverse the direction of analysis to highlight the gaps and limitations of extant theorisations—that is, starting a comparison outside the heartlands of theory (Shenzhen) and taking London as a destination for theories generated elsewhere. As Peck (2015: 179) argues, comparative theorisation should “be a continuing conversation across shifting terrains, dialogically conducted, not an act of spatialized inversion or a unidirectional ‘corrective’.”

Following this, my goal was neither simply to better understand London through Shenzhen nor challenge neoliberalism through selectively adding interpretations of state entrepreneurialism. Rather, I adopted a recursive approach I call comparative conversation, where I went back and forth between both cases and used them to question one another and inspire lines of analysis. As Robinson et al. (2021: 3) note, “studies of London can both learn from insights generated in other contexts—as a destination for theory generated elsewhere—and in turn inspire innovative analysis in the context of comparative reflection.” My approach is thus also incremental, where each stage of the comparison is informed and inspired by its previous one, and contributes to the process of conceptualisation (Teo, 2022a). Following McFarlane and Lancione (2016: 2404), this is “an effort to reveal at the same time interconnected trajectories and differential patterns” between both cases. This is a move to develop a better understanding of both contexts, through each other, as well as a more generalisable mid-level concept which can create new explanatory and exploratory lines along a particular urban issue/ topic without necessarily seeking to improve understandings of neoliberalism and/ or state entrepreneurialism *per se*.

My interest lies in the politics of urban village redevelopment in Shenzhen. Urban villages are informal settlements which house a significant proportion of migrants in Chinese cities, and are constantly threatened with demolition. Yet, in the context of the Chinese state's push towards alternative forms of urban redevelopment (Wu et al., 2022), I encountered, in 2017, the case of Nantou Village: an urban village earmarked by the Shenzhen planning bureau as a site for the experimental production of a model of microregeneration. Because the municipality needed local expertise on the project, they enlisted the collaboration of socially invested architects who had experience in urban village advocacy work, potentially working on behalf of village migrant tenants who had no official right to participate in such a project. Through six months of fieldwork, and inspired by Jessop's (2010) idea of state projects, I conceptualised this experiment as a "shared project": a selectively delineated collaborative platform by the state for solving particular urban problems (Teo, 2022b). For these architects, being able to stake influence in policy making was an important incentive for their participation. Both parties thus needed each other to achieve a broadly shared interest—urban village microregeneration. I argued that the municipality-defined shared project provided a formal platform for "symbiotic bargaining" between the municipality and their professional collaborators—that is, a neat division of labour where both parties collaborate to turn individual constraints into a collective opportunity (Teo, 2022b). In Nantou Village, appointed architects would focus on the material and technical aspects of upgrading, while officials would focus on advocating for this policy shift to their superiors in the municipality. This potentially allowed the architect-advocates to critically engage the state on behalf of marginalised populations, even if they were cognizant of their role in facilitating gentrification (Kochan, 2018). Symbiotic bargaining on a shared project partially informed the eventual formalisation of a municipal-wide approach to urban village microregeneration.

As I returned to London, where I was based, I found it opportune to compare the Shenzhen case with another collaborative urban housing experiment in the capital: the Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS), the first Community Land Trust (CLT) in London to secure a site for developing an affordable housing neighbourhood (Church Grove) in collaboration with their local authority, Lewisham Council. I found the concept shared project an innovative conceptual starting point for thinking more pragmatically about collaborations between local authorities and their communities delivering urban solutions (such as community-led affordable housing) in a context of austerity, where the literature largely foregrounds the impossibility of positive state-society collaborations (Clayton et al., 2016). Unlike in Shenzhen, however, I found that it was only through months of everyday deliberation initiated by RUSS that both parties came to frame Church Grove as a shared project. That is, Church Grove would function as a proof-of-concept for more community-led housing projects to be collaboratively developed in future, to justify Lewisham council entering into an unprecedented and risky partnership with an unproven community-led developer, RUSS. Framing Church Grove as a shared project justified working towards a more positive collaboration which seemed unlikely and unviable in the context of austerity (Teo, 2022a).

However, I found that symbiotic bargaining could not accurately capture the transactions between RUSS and Lewisham Council. I found that both parties, unlike in Shenzhen, worked in a way which exceeded predefined roles and responsibilities. The complexity of navigating the land acquisition and planning application process meant that they had to work on the same side of the table. I conceptualised this messy, problem-solving oriented

way of working as “symbiotic deliberation,” where out of necessity collaborators work to turn individual constraints into a collective opportunity for problem solving (Teo, 2022a). This gestures to the potential development of a new political relationship, where usually disenfranchised actors can stake a direct claim in the project building process (Bang and Esmark, 2009). RUSS and LBL’s ‘successful’ symbiotic deliberation has since been acknowledged by various local authorities and their communities as a necessary politics for a more effective localism (Locality UK, 2017), and has allowed London’s CLT sector to grow in the form of smaller-scale, tentative policy reforms.

So Shenzhen informed my thinking of London, and vice-versa. Having witnessed the efficacy of a deliberative working relationship between state and society in London, I wondered if Nantou’s migrant tenants could stake a similar claim to the microregeneration process (Teo, 2022a). I found that most migrant residents did not participate in the formulation of upgrading plans, as they were cognizant that microregeneration was simply a subterfuge for gentrification. I thus conceptualised the politics of participation in Nantou as one where professional curators planned both on behalf of and for ‘the people’ (Li and Zhong, 2020). Given the circumstances, this was a pragmatic form of advocacy where it was hoped that within gentrification migrant residents who could keep up with the concomitant rise in rents could stay put. The eventual model of microregeneration, which entails renovation of infrastructure, public spaces, and tenement buildings co-sponsored by village landlords, state-owned developers, and municipal and district governments, was institutionalised in municipal policy. Ultimately, this project could be seen as a form of state entrepreneurialism—a means of the municipality making plans to keep up with the Chinese state’s recent ambitions to provide more affordable housing as a means of social reproduction of talented labour (Zhan, 2021).

By identifying convergences and divergences between cases in Shenzhen and London, the mid-level concepts of shared projects and their accompanying symbiotic relations (that is, bargaining and deliberation) were produced (Teo, 2022b). In the analysis the cases were taken as primary sources of data, but not without being informed by the accompanying political contexts of state entrepreneurialism and austerity localism. The concepts showcase the differentiated and residual grounds from which shared projects and symbiotic relations can emerge and evolve within state contexts which tend to be criticised for their regressive tendencies (see Martin and Pierce, 2013). They demonstrate the state’s potential relevance for variegated form(ulation)s of progressive urban transformation, underpinned by variegated pathways of negotiation and collaboration between different segments of state and society. In Shenzhen, we see municipal-wide policy change underpinned by pragmatic political relations; in London we see a more direct, deliberative politics giving rise to modest growth in the broader project of localism (Teo, 2022a). These mid-level concepts can be re-inserted into discussions of state entrepreneurialism and austerity localism to trouble and rethink these frameworks themselves but can also act as ‘sensitising schemes’ for thinking about experimental collaborations across the state-society divide in other urban contexts.

*Re-engaging the “already-given”: Chinese cities as conjunctural cases—by Calvin Chung*

While Teo chose to start from the ground in theorising about and from China, I follow Sayin et al., 2022 (p. 266) to revisit existing theoretical tools in my own theorisation. Sayin et al. (2022: 267) propose an alternative approach to comparative urbanism, under which existing theories, instead of empirical instances, are compared. This

involves stress-testing the “explanatory veracity” (Peck, 2015) of multiple urban theories in a single-city case for two purposes: to expose each theory’s blind spots that obfuscate certain particularities of the case, and to explore whether and how these theories can come together to overcome their respective limits. This approach contrasts the common research strategy in urban China studies of putting one or more Chinese cases into dialogue with a particular theory. To be sure, some urban China researchers have engaged with multiple theories in their works (e.g. He et al., 2018). However, they have often done so in what Sayin et al. (2022: 276) labelled as “scoping cities conjunctually”: they decide a priori to draw on multiple perspectives bearing different theoretical potentials and limits, thereby achieving a more nuanced understanding of urban China. A path less taken is to “synthesise cities conjunctually” (Sayin et al., 2022: 276), which requires researchers to remain open to the possibilities of further theoretical triangulation emerging from their empirical investigation. Following this twofold approach, I have intentionally brought together urban sustainability fix (USF) and scalar politics, two perspectives that have separately gained wide currency in the study of the politics of urban sustainability (an attempt of “scoping”), to make sense of the city of Guiyang, whose developments inspire me to conceptualise the construction of urban sustainability fix as a process of ‘jumping scalar hierarchies’ (an attempt of “synthesising”) (Chung & Xu, 2021).

USF was While, Jonas and Gibbs’s (2004) conceptual invention, based on their UK study of the changes in urban economy-environment relations. They use USF to denote attempts to selectively incorporate environmental goals into a city’s governance agenda to satisfy appeals for sustainability without compromising economic growth, and generalise that entrepreneurialism persisted as a framing constraint to urban environmental governance. Many studies have subsequently drawn on USF to interrogate the motivations of green projects in many Western cities, which—according to these studies—share with their UK counterparts similar economy-environment tensions (Miller & Mössner, 2020; Walker, 2016). However, when I began researching China’s urban environmental politics in the 2010s, the notion of USF had hardly filtered into the country (Pow & Neo, 2013 being a notable exception). Convinced by my work in the Pearl River Delta (Chung & Xu, 2016; Chung et al., 2018) that some—if not all—Chinese cities were not so different from the Western ones regarding their economy-environment tensions, I have engaged with USF in my inquiries on the mushrooming of green projects. In the spirit of conjunctural analysis, I engage with the conceptualisation of urban environmental initiatives as USF more as a hypothesis to be tested “elsewhere” (Robinson, 2016) rather than a universal fact waiting to be found and hope to rethink how relevant USF is in making sense of sustainable urbanism with urban cases in China.

Meanwhile, as a well-established perspective in urban studies, scalar politics locates changes in urban governance within a multi-scalar polity. It has inspired critical urban researchers to unravel the various pressures for and against urban environmental protection stemming from rounds of redistribution of powers and responsibilities across multiple scales of governance in various policy areas (Bulkeley, 2005; While et al., 2010). Existing work on the rescaling of environmental governance has often been cited by studies of USF to explain why a city’s growth regime is compelled to selectively engage with environmental concerns. For example, While et al. (2004) attribute the greening of urban governance in English cities to the UK government’s simultaneous devolution of fiscal and environmental responsibilities. However, this is also often only how far scalar politics has informed research on USF: the multi-scaled framework of socio-environmental regulation in which a city is embedded is relegated to the backdrop. Accordingly, the search for an USF is reduced to a localised and ‘inward-looking’

process, in which urban growth regimes work environmental improvements into the (re)development of urban centres (Leffers & Ballamingie, 2013; Rosol, 2013).

For two reasons, this treatment is inadequate. First, as the literature on scalar politics has demonstrated (Cox, 1998; Jessop, 1997), while many actors materially depend on the urban for realising their interests, they have also related their interests to actors and institutions operating at other scales that are privileged in existing scalar structures. Second, there is growing evidence that scale is drawn upon as a strategic framing device to bolster a city's environmental reputation. In the West, some city governments have sought to articulate their territories as national or international environmental exemplars to dismiss environment-related challenges to local development trajectories (Hodson & Marvin, 2007; McCann, 2013). Similarly, Chinese city governments have fought hard for recognition by central-level ministries as national environmental model cities to reimage their cities as environmentally friendly ones. Given these observations, I believe that the study of USF needs to be further integrated with that of scalar politics by paying more attention to the scalar responses of urban actors in their search for sustainability fixes.

Accordingly, I examined the interplay of urban entrepreneurialism and environmentalism in Guiyang, a city in southwest China. I chose Guiyang because its achievements seem too good to be true: since the 2000s, the city has witnessed a panoply of local state-led environmental initiatives (from implementing the circular economy paradigm to building more parks) and earned the central government's confidence to be the pilot city of building an ecological civilisation, all while continually maintaining a GDP growth rate above the national average. Reviewing local leaders' speeches and interviewing local officials, I established that the Guiyang government intended to draw on its wide-ranging environmental initiatives to rebrand its city as an ecological exemplar, which can then attract higher-level policy support and more investments from green-savvy businesses. Given their underlying pro-growth motivation, Guiyang's green initiatives certainly represent an example of USF. However, what matters more is that this fix is also a scalar one, for it fixed Guiyang's pressure to achieve sustainability through upscaling its position from a little-known inland city to a nationally-reputed green metropolis. As a result, I proposed that USF is constructed not only due to, but also through, scalar politics, and argued for the presence of "urban sustainability fix as scalar fix" (Chung & Xu, 2021: 692).

Developing this proposition further, I delved into another intriguing observation: despite its green city aspirations, Guiyang's city centre doubled its built-up area between 2008 and 2020 by encroaching on its rural hinterland. This rampant expansion was made possible because the Guiyang government framed it as a necessary move to promote the city's development as a regional economic locomotive designated by the provincial government. The significance of Guiyang and its expansionist move was understood within another urban hierarchy—one that differentiates cities by their scale of economic influence. In short, one may see that the Guiyang government fixed its city's emerging tensions between growth and sustainability not by materially integrating economic and environmental initiatives but by discursively keeping them apart in different scalar hierarchies that best provide discursive enclosure to them respectively. I therefore proposed that the construction of a USF should not be analysed only as a process of 'jumping scales', but as one of 'jumping scalar hierarchies', seizing inconsistencies between different scalar hierarchies in their regulatory expectations to different scales (Chung & Xu, 2021: 693).

My work demonstrates the value of a conjunctural cities approach to strengthen our capacity to decipher urban processes through bringing different perspectives into dialogue. If the study of Guiyang's USF construction did not consider the proactive engagement of local actors with their scalar context, one might only focus on the greening projects within Guiyang without realising the equal importance for these projects to be linked to particular scales of regulation. More importantly, this study also shows the potential to leverage China to reflect on "already-given" Northern concepts by exploring their complementarities and synthesising them. As Pow (2012: 58) reminded us, "[i]n arguing for the uniqueness of China's urbanisation, one must bear in mind that claims of uniqueness and divergence need to be balanced with areas of convergences"—one of which is the growing centrality of the environment in urban governance. To recognise such convergence is not to endorse concepts generalised from the West about sustainable urbanism as unproblematic for Chinese cases. Rather, such recognition is to make space for researchers to give equal attention to urban China as both a destination and a starting point for contributing to further theorisation of and with a variety of globally relevant issues at the intersection of sustainability and urban governance.

*Launching mid-level concepts: From China to the world—by Zheng Wang*

Teo and Chung's examples demonstrate how cases in urban China can function as a node for generating and innovating mid-level concepts. What happens when such concepts are put to work elsewhere, or in Robinson's (2016a) terms, "launched" into another context, which can often be quite different? This is an important question to consider if we are to assess the utility of mid-level concepts developed with urban China cases. Schindler's (2014) work in Flint, Michigan demonstrates the utility of launching. He takes Roy's (2011) concept of subaltern urbanism, developed from inductive research in Indian cities, and seeks to locate the forms of subaltern urbanism in Flint, Michigan. He does this by first disentangling subaltern urbanism from the spectre of the slum, and ultimately demonstrates that inductively looking for subaltern urbanisms in the global North can help to broaden the concept of subaltern urbanism itself. These "socio-spatial variants of subaltern urbanisms—each influenced by the uniqueness and history of local institutions—could facilitate the comparison of places that seem wildly different at first inspection" (Schindler, 2014: 800). Launching, however, need not solely be an exercise in equivalence. Going back to Zhao's (2020) work, oftentimes it is difficult, and perhaps counterproductive, to look for equivalences across different political contexts. Rather, I follow Ren's (2020) idea that such concepts can be 'sensitising schemes'. As my work shows, this means that what begins as a mid-level concept can instigate bigger questions in a particular field of study and culminate in something "bigger"—such as an analytical framework—as it travels across contexts.

My research focuses on the social impacts of Chinese mega urban projects. Existing studies argue that displacement is a ubiquitous social consequence of mega urban projects (Orueta and Fainstein, 2008). Without denying the existence of displacement in my case study in Shanghai Lingang new town, interviews with residents and government officials revealed that the biggest conflict between residents and the Lingang government stems not from displacement resistance but rather local residents demanding to be resettled. The reason for this is because of a problem termed 'in-situ marginalisation', first used by Shih (2017) and upon which I expanded. In-situ marginalisation is not about physical uprooting and displacement pressure (Atkinson, 2015). Instead, it is a "process whereby residents are not being physically uprooted by urban (re)development but instead experience a

gradual decline of their physical and social living environment.” (Wang and Wu, 2019:1643). Residents living in neighbourhood 57, a settlement inside Lingang’s industrial zone, suffer from air and noise pollution from nearby factories and the loss of public amenities (e.g. post office, banks). Since residents cannot afford to move out, they have been asking the Lingang authorities to resettle them for nearly two decades with no success. Recognising that the social problem in Lingang is not displacement but rather in-situ marginalisation also opened up alternative interpretations of the causes of this problem, including Lingang’s state entrepreneurial governance (ibid).

The identification of residents suffering from in-situ marginalisation helped me realise that there are social problems of urban (re)development that cannot be understood as displacement and inspired me to examine the experience of other affected resident groups who are outside the scope of displacement studies. My subsequent research project focused on residents who have already been resettled in Shanghai and discovered that they face a series of challenges, including a severe lack of public infrastructure and being socially isolated due to the remote location of their new residence in state-developed relocation settlements (Wang et al., 2022). Studying the post-resettlement life of residents revealed the long and arduous process of reterritorialization where residents attempt to improve their post-resettlement environment and rebuild a sense of community under the leadership of the state (Wang, 2022). My findings from China, brought into analysis with my reading from the UK and other contexts, led me to develop an open-ended ‘post-displacement’ framework which considers two aspects (Wang, 2020). This framework not only allows researchers to better arrest the grounded realities of the politics and implications of China’s shifting urban redevelopment but hopefully instigates new inquiries that work beyond the usual gentrification-displacement analytical lens.

1) *In-situ marginalisation*: This line of thinking does not presume that the physical removal of residents is the final or only outcome of urban (re)development but instead pays attention to the challenges of being left behind. The notion of being left-behind entails being physically *stuck in* socially and physically deteriorating areas which are undergoing redevelopment and being left behind by the progress and improvement that urban (re)development purports to bring. Launching in-situ marginalisation conceptually into the UK context allowed me to find parallels between left-behind residents in Shanghai and residents living in London’s public housing estates that are undergoing regeneration and so far have been studied mostly due to their experience of displacement (Elliot-Cooper et al., 2021). Estate residents have to live through years of ‘slow violence’ in the form of a physically deteriorating built environment due to local government-sanctioned disinvestment and ‘managed decline’ of council estates (Watt, 2021:269). Drawing on the case of Salford, Wallace (2015) calls this experience of living through urban regeneration as ‘living in limbo land’, as the area’s piecemeal and protracted urban renewal left residents in great uncertainty over whether they will be displaced. The stress and suffering of living through in-situ marginalisation should be interpreted in their own right rather than as precursors or by-products of displacement.

2) *Post-resettlement*. The post-resettlement lens treats the physical uprooting of residents not as the end but the beginning of its inquiry. Firstly, focusing on the post-resettlement challenges and opportunities reveals that resettlement and compensation practices vary greatly geographically and significantly impact the livelihood outcomes of resettled residents (Meth et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). In China, generous compensation

schemes have improved the living quality of residents suffering from overcrowding (Wang and Wang, 2020), whilst in Ahmedabad, Chennai and Johannesburg, residents are resettled to under-resourced urban peripheries with limited access to public transport (Meth et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). Secondly, post-resettlement also draws attention to the reterritorialisation of residents, which I define as a contested process carried out by different actors, including the state and resettled residents, in regaining territorial control and belonging over the new space they inhabit. In the UK, Watt (2022) finds that public estate residents, who have been resettled in-situ, struggle to regain their place attachment as they have little interaction with new residents who moved into the area after regeneration and the disappearance of familiar local amenities. In Colombia, residents deploy spatial tactics of reterritorialization, such as the establishment of a Humanitarian Space, to contest dominant and violent deterritorialization processes (Lombard et al., 2021). In China, reterritorialization is led by the state with the aim to reshape the social norms and relations of residents in a way that would render resettled residents ‘more governable’ (Rogers and Wilmsen, 2020).

Focusing on the biggest concerns of residents living in Lingang led me to develop the mid-level concept of in-situ marginalisation and a larger analytical framework of post-displacement. Launching post-displacement into other contexts allowed me to shed light on under-researched experiences and social outcomes of development projects in China and other contexts that were only understood as precursors or by-products of displacement. The purpose of post-displacement is not to deny the relevance of displacement in China or elsewhere but rather to show that displacement is one of many possibilities of urban redevelopment globally and at times needs to be “understood only alongside other drivers of change” (Parnell and Robinson, 2012: 596).

## **Conclusion**

While the ‘postcolonial’ turn in urban studies has accumulated more than a decade of momentum, how engaged pluralism can be put into practice in/ with the field of urban China has not been given adequate consideration. Urban China provides useful ‘cases’ for contributing to a more global urban studies (Wu, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022), not least because of the continued dominance of the state in the governance and transformation of the urban. Recognising that cases in urban China are unique but not exceptional, it becomes possible to construct analyses with urban China cases by relating them with other cases and contexts to develop mid-level concepts. These concepts can be re-inserted into debates that contribute to the rethinking of existing theoretical frameworks and also instigate new lines of analysis across geographical contexts.

In this article, we have briefly demonstrated three tactics for mid-level conceptualisation. All three tactics revisited one or more well-researched urban topics but with a comparative and inductive approach. These experiments illustrate different ways that urban China can be leveraged to advance the broader agenda of urban theorisation. First, Teo researched an urban village in Shenzhen and a CLT project in London. However, rather than approaching both cases with pre-assigned and well-known labels of ‘state entrepreneurialism’ and ‘austerity localism’, Teo chose to think recursively across the cases of Shenzhen and London. This comparative conversation allowed for the conceptualisation of shared projects and symbiotic collaborations which showcases the political potential for the emergence, operationalisation and effects of experimental state-society collaborations in moving towards more progressive forms of urbanisation despite largely regressive political contexts. Second, taking

Guiyang as a ‘conjunctural city’, Chung was able to explain how the local government works towards aspirations of urban sustainability by jumping scalar hierarchies. Both urban sustainability and scalar politics are well-rehearsed theoretical frameworks but have rarely been studied in conjunction. A conjunctural approach allows for putting together two discrete theoretical frameworks to explain urban governance at the intersection of sustainability and entrepreneurialism. Finally, by purposefully launching the mid-level concept in-situ marginalisation into a wider range of contexts and literatures in urban redevelopment and displacement, Wang created a post-displacement framework. This framework argues for moving beyond the usual gentrification-displacement conceptual link in studying urban redevelopment and its politics of possibility.

The comparative and inductive approaches of our three tactics also help to better understand urban China without conflating the significance of the state with Chinese exceptionalism. Teo and Wang’s research show a less authoritarian side of the Chinese state as they try to tackle longstanding urban challenges of informal settlements and post-resettlement community rebuilding not via forceful top-down measures but rather through pragmatic collaborations with civic groups and residents. Chung describes how the Guiyang government adopts tactics of scalar and sustainability fixes to reposition itself for the strategic goals of environmental protection and economic growth. Existing urban China research underlines the importance of the state and tends to ossify the imagination of an omnipotent state ruling over a dependent and submissive market and public. Yet, our research reveals that the dependence between state, market and society in China is (unsurprisingly) mutual. At times, the Chinese state has little choice but to adopt entrepreneurial *and* collaborative measures in order to achieve its strategic objectives. Such pragmatism can open space for meaningful community engagement and some degree of social and environmental improvement, albeit unequally. Regarding the starting point of the three examples, some begin with tried and tested paradigms from the global North, while some choose to start anew with China by approaching China inductively. As for their theoretical contribution, some develop novel concepts that challenge existing paradigms, while some enrich existing ones by demonstrating the value of their synthesis.

As three researchers who are not from or working in mainland China, we believe that Chinese researchers based in mainland China are crucial to the project of theorising with China. Such researchers are often more attuned to the country’s most pressing urban issues, and can gain better access to important stakeholders. We recognise, however, that the realities of funding in China mean such researchers are often required to be more problem-focused in their research so that the knowledge garnered can inform and shape state discourse and policies that are deemed relevant to China (see Fan, 2022). This may result in urban China research focusing largely on applied knowledge rather than cutting-edge theoretical debates (Qian and Zhang, 2021). Nevertheless, we believe efforts to develop situated explanations for China are crucial for theorising from/ with China; these can be taken up by researchers elsewhere as readily available cases for comparison, or through collaborative projects between researchers based in China and elsewhere, or indeed, by researchers in China who are seeking to push the envelope of urban studies. The point is that rather than treating situated explanations as an end, inductive analysis and conceptualisations in and of China should be considered as points of inquiry into other contexts. We also acknowledge that being embedded in China’s policy-oriented system of knowledge production can be limiting in some ways. For instance, certain topics that are currently being promoted by the state (e.g. developing an ecological civilisation) may also be prioritised by Chinese funding bodies over other issues such as workers’

rights, gender equality or the livelihood of ethnic minorities. As such, understanding and theorising with China will require the efforts of both domestic and international scholars.

If the key to a more global urban studies lies in navigating between the universal and the particular, this paper has hopefully demonstrated that urban China represents a fertile ground to develop mid-level theorisations through comparative and conjunctural analytical approaches. We look forward to more tactical experiments in urban China, if not also in other parts of the global East and South that remain downplayed in theory-building, to 'add new narratives' to a more global imagination of the urban and offer new modes of inquiry.

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