

## Urban Renewal and Spatial Justice in China's Changing Urban Governance

WU Ling<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

China's urban governance has been undergoing the formation and transformation of urban entrepreneurialism, within which urban renewal has emerged in the forefront of the conflicts between urbanization of neoliberalism and social resistance since 1990s. This study aims to discuss the problems of spatial justice in the post-socialist and post-political China's cities through the lens of the neoliberal urbanization and its relation with authoritarianism operating within the frontier of urban renewal and resistance. This study not only contributes to the understanding of China's neoliberal urbanization, but also has multiple implications for urban governance and spatial justice studies in general.

**Key words:** Urban governance; Urban renewal; Spatial justice; Neoliberalism

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### INTRODUCTION

A marked urbanization of neoliberalism has been occurring, as cities have become strategic targets for an increasingly broad range of neoliberal policy

experimentation and implementation, institutional innovations, and politico-ideological projects since the 1990s. In short, cities play a key role in neoliberal restructuring (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Smith, 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Keil & Brenner, 2003; Mayer, 2003). At the same time cities become sites of concerted resistance to global, national and local neoliberalization projects (Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009). Against this backdrop, many scholars have interpreted contemporary urban transformations and urban governance both in the North and South as expressions and outcomes of broader neoliberalization processes. However, neoliberalization as a variegated, geographically uneven and path dependent process is neither monolithic in form, nor universal in effect (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Each neoliberal transition is a institutional and geopolitical hybrid of "actually existing neoliberalism" which is shaped by national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles (Larner, 2000; Brenner & Theodore, 2002, 2005; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Especially East Asia, in which neoliberal rationality has been adopted outside the West, offers a rich empirical context for illuminating how neoliberal logic is inveigled into constellations of authoritarian politics and cultural ethics (Ong, 2007). However, some scholars hesitate to pin the neoliberal label on the Chinese economic reforms because of the significant role of the state in marketization process (Nonini, 2008; Xu, 2010; Li & Liu, 2011). Some others recognize the neoliberalization in China to some different extent, but they all combine it with authoritarianism. Harvey (2005) sees the compatibility between authoritarianism and the capitalist market. According to him, China is the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control. Ong (2006, 2007) regards

neoliberalism as a technology of governing “free subject” that co-exists with other political rationalities has floated beyond advanced liberal countries, and neoliberalism as exception is deployed in political settings as varied as garrison state, postsocialism, and authoritarianism. There are similar terms to describe hybridized character of China's neoliberalization, such as “a quasi-neoliberalism market economy”, “characteristics of both neoliberalism and Keynesianism”, “developmental neoliberalism in urban policy”, “late-socialist neoliberalism”, and so on (Chu, 2002; Heng & Wang, 2009; Hoffman, 2010; Li & Liu, 2011). Wu (2008, 2010) argues that market re-orientation in China is a societal modernization project, and recognizes China's experience with market development as “actually existing neoliberalism”. This study seeks the answers of these questions and discusses the “actually existing neoliberalism” in post-political China's urban governance through micro-analysis on the neoliberal governmentality and its relation with authoritarian resilience within large-scale urban renewal which is in the forefront of counter-neoliberal projects.

## 1. CHANGING URBAN GOVERNANCE IN CHINA

Before the launch of China's reform and the Opening Policy in 1978, the city in China was just the place where socialist state-owned work units—“dan wei” were located and worked. Chinese cities lacked locality and always played a supporting role in the field of Chinese politics. State-centred urban politics, which functioned as welfare distribution for the socialist state, was just the extension of state power in the city.

Since the 1990s, however, against the backdrop of decentralization, globalization and interurban competition involved in the transition process from state socialism to market-oriented economy, China's urban governance has experienced profound restructuring characterized by the formation and transformation of urban entrepreneurialism (Chien & Wu, 2011; Yu, 2009; Wu, 2002). On the one hand, Chinese urban governance as a decentralized form of adaptive authoritarianism seems to have helped party-state power sustainability in the globalizing market economy. On the other hand, the transformation to urban entrepreneurialism as a regulatory governance sustains the transition of capital accumulation regime from the socialist regime of production to the new accumulation regime in which Chinese city is a territorial entity playing an active role in capital accumulation and local entrepreneurial state plays a crucial role in economic development. Under state-led urban entrepreneurialism, urban government strives to attain the goals of economic growth through a series of urban policies and institutional arrangements, including planning, the reconfiguration of urban space, place-marketing, the formation of public-

private coalitions or growth machine, planned migration, and the marketization of land use rights to generate developmental capital.

In other words, Chinese cities have become to be independent interest subjects and political entities, when urban government has characterized as entrepreneurialism. Urban governance in China has changed from “distribution of welfare” to “politics of growth” and it is preconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension. Chinese cities have come to be dominated by the practices of entrepreneurial governance. Post-socialist urban governance is not only a perfect expression of such a post-political order, but in fact, the making of entrepreneurial cities is one of the key arenas through which this post-political consensus becomes constructed, when politics proper is progressively replaced by expert social administration (Žižek, 2005). Most of political demands have been suppressed and reduced by the state in the name of “economic growth” and “social steady”, and transformed to other demands which are absorbed by the administrative sector of the city. Swyngedouw (2010) argues that urban governance has assumed a post-political configuration. Contrary to popular belief that these new forms of neo-liberal urban governance widen participation and deepen “democracy”, he insists that this post-political condition in fact annuls democracy, and evacuates the political proper. Today's urban politics in China relies on a violent gesture of depoliticization, depriving the victimized other of any political subjectivization. Post-politics mobilizes a vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content and it is no wonder that this suffocating closure gives birth to irrational outbursts of violence as the only way to give expression to the dimension beyond particularity (Žižek, 1999b, p.204, in Swyngedouw, 2010).

How to understand the transformation of Chinese urban governance and post-politics in Chinese cities under a western framework of neoliberal urbanization or urban neoliberalism? First, Ong (2007) argues that Harvey's neoliberal typology is focused on economic management scaled at the level of the state; on the contrary, the market mechanism has been extended beyond the economy to the society, and rescaled from the state to cities, especially to the fields of public education, healthcare, housing, and urban renewal in Chinese cities, all of which runs increasingly following the logic of capital and creates social inequality. The result is a shift from state-led industrialization to a more urban-based accumulation, the regime of which is more like a new model of urbanization, namely neoliberal urbanization. Second, indeed, neoliberalism cannot be reduced to a simple process of replacing states with markets because, in practice, markets still have to be managed and policed often by a new breed of neoliberal technocrats (Peck,

2002). Neoliberalism hinges on the active mobilization of state power, and does not entail the “rolling back” of state regulation and the “rolling forward” of the market; instead, it generates a complex reconstitution of state-economy relations in which state institutions are actively mobilized to promote market-based regulatory arrangements (Brenner & Theodore, 2005). In China, there is also a state restructuring from a legacy of totalitarian institutions though it remains the character of authoritarianism which sustain the state’s control on society. Moreover, technique of neoliberal governing has been embedded into the local social and political context, and combines with resilient regime of authoritarian control. Governmentality approaches to neoliberalization studies saw state intervention as central to produce a responsible, governable, and entrepreneurial citizenry, as well as properly functioning markets. A version of this argument applies specifically to some analyses of the discourse of *suzhi* (quality of population) in China, where the hyper-disciplined, over-achieving only child in an urban Chinese middle-class family is seen as one of the intended results of neoliberal governance (Anagnost, 2004; Kipnis, 2007). Hoffman suggests that the emergence of urban professionalism and volunteerism do not represent the “end” of state governance, but rather the emergence of neoliberal techniques wedding with socialist political norms in Chinese cities (Hoffman, 2010). He and Wu (2009) recognize a localized neoliberalizing process in China’s urbanization, which legitimizes the growth-first strategy and promotes extensive urban redevelopment. A strong state presence shapes China’s neoliberal urbanization in a moderate and hidden form, and makes it quite responsive and resilient to tackle the intrinsic problems of neoliberalism.

In conclusion, first, it is too simple to regard Chinese changing urban governance as a process of neoliberalization based on the market liberalization and privatization, nor does it deny an actually existing neoliberalism in China’s urbanization according to the existence of strong state’s intervention. Second, even if neoliberal rationality is compatible with authoritarianism in China’s urban development, it does not mean that authoritarian control may well be part of neoliberal governance technology, or that marketization is just an instrument of the state. There are inherent tensions between each other. Those views above neglect social consequence of neoliberal urbanization and its challenge to the authoritarian state’s governance.

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## 2. SPATIAL INJUSTICE IN CHINESE URBAN RENEWAL

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Since urban space constitutes a critical component of China’s new growth strategies especially in the economic context of overcapitalization, urban government has

formulated various competitive strategies through place-making. The creation of housing and land markets is rapidly changing the face of Chinese cities. However, radical marketization coexists with the ever-present state control. In Chinese urban governance towards local entrepreneurial state facilitates market formation. City planning has been transformed from allocating state resources to place promotion; and municipal governments have formulated various competitive urban strategies through place-making. In Chinese cities, policy emphasis is on favouring large-scale demolition and property-led renewal, somewhat similar to post-World War II patterns of slum clearance, gentrification, and urban renewal in western cities. The resulting changes in urban structure are manifested in the renewal of the city centre and urban sprawl at the periphery, creating a “novel” urban landscape of redeveloped central districts, university towns, science parks, and “urban villages”. City Planning has changed in fundamental ways in post-politics (Richard Ek, 2011). First, spatial planning has come to create conditions for economic growth, even if the consequences of these actions have been spatial disparity and uneven development (Hudson, 2001). The second, the planning apparatus, has become more business-and market-oriented (Brenner, 2000).

Urban renewal in Chinese cities has changed in fundamental ways in post-political urban governance transformation. First, spatial planning has come to create conditions for economic growth, even if the consequences of these actions have been spatial disparity and uneven development. The second, the planning apparatus, has become more business-and market-oriented. Urban practices like city planning and urban renewal become embedded in liberal conduct and unfold as discursive practices that aim to influence the citizen’s formation of a subject. In sum, city planning is a biopolitical practice with the intention of creating a set of norms that then influence the process of subjectification as an individual level (Richard Ek, 2011).

As Lefebvre (1976) argued, urban space is political, not only a field of conflict, but also is an objective of contention. Historically, urban renewal has been an instrument and expression of social and political tendencies and power relations. Disadvantaged citizens including millions of migrant workers, millions of Land-deprived peasants and millions of poor dwellers have long been the main victims of urban renewal and urban sprawl in Chinese cities. While the creation and development of housing and land markets has been launched into the Chinese version of local boosterism, overheated property-led renewal and large-scale demolition deprives disadvantaged citizens of the right to choose where they live and produces spatial discrimination, exclusion and segregation in employment, education, housing, and the provision of urban amenities and other public services. These problems of spatial justice aggravate the

poverty, inequality and social exclusion in Chinese cities. Increasingly, disadvantaged citizens realize that spatial injustice is becoming one of the origins of oppression.

### 3. RESISTANCE FOR SPATIAL JUSTICE IN URBAN CHINA

As a result of the problems of spatial injustice in urban renewal, spatial resistance in Chinese cities is emerging in various types, like individual struggle, collective action based on communities and in everyday life. And it struggles against spatial injustice which is brought about by large-scale and property-led urban renewal in Shanghai. These movements are often initiated by action groups, NGOs and community leaders or existing social networks which use lobbying, pamphlets, door-to-door canvassing, campaigns, town-hall meetings, advertising, social networking, numerous BBS, blog or rising urban newspapers, and other invisible methods to generate support.

However, China's urban authoritarianism has a resilient feedback mechanism to cope with social resistance and counter-neoliberal practice. Social redistribution and public investment are selectively deployed to relieve social conflict. The state partially balances its multiple needs and temporarily slows down the pace of urban renewal. The slogan of sustainability in urban renewal that does not lead in its conceptualisation and therefore implementation has been enacted by local government. Nevertheless, these policies did not mean the state is giving up the goal of growth first or giving priority to social-spatial justice (He & Wu, 2009). On the contrary, aiming for the maintenance of rapid urban growth and social stability, the neoliberal governmentality replaces debate and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus and technocratic management (Swyngedouw, 2008). The bottom-up emerging grassroots movements and resistance are absorbed into the citizen participation in the "authoritarian populism" to evaporate the dissent to the hegemonic projects of neoliberalization in China's cities. In contrary to be constrained from the democratic participation, Citizens are allowed and encouraged to participate in the process of city planning, but not essentially make their voice heard in the project of urban renewal. The decision making activities in which citizens, especially leaders of protest, experts and middle-class citizens are engaged, such as public hearing, community planning and public consultations, are just tricks played by the local government to ensure urban renewal projected through wider "consensus" and a tool used to obtain the legitimacy in the name of public interests. Therefore, the spread of participatory practices does not necessarily lead to citizen empowerment. The resistant voice and dissensus are muffled and marginalized by the consensus of 'harmonious city', and, moreover, the political subordination of disadvantaged citizens is actually legitimized.

The changes in urban politics, especially the decentralization and growing civil society, have brought out political opportunity and space for urban movements. However, it seems that spatial resistance can not be successful in taking the value of spatial justice into the process of urban renewal in post-political cities in China. They have been depoliticalized and reduced before they can influence the decision and policy of the government. Citizens still could not participate in the process of decision making, like city planning, and aloud their voice. Occasionally they may be involved in the decision making activities, often public hearing, which is just a trick played by the government to ensure urban renewal projected through "consensus" and a tool used to obtain the legitimacy. There are numerous examples of failure in spatial resistance seen in Chinese cities. Therefore, it is the fact that spatial resistance has not yet succeeded in influencing governmental decisions, and they even could not increase the level of democratic participation in urban politics.

### CONCLUSION

These questions of spatial injustice and spatial resistance essentially have to revert back to the fundamental questions that have consistently defined urban politics: Who speaks for the city? Whose vision of the city is privileged and who is not? In their new guise these questions form the core of the debate surrounding Lefebvre's dictum, "the right to the city". For neoliberalism the city is a key testing ground for innovative practice; what we need to know is how the state is accommodating these shifts and its impact on democratic processes in the city. Re-centring the politics is a necessary condition for tackling questions of urban spatial and environmental injustice and for creating equilibration socio-ecological urban assemblage.

Though urban social movements including spatial resistance in China have not succeeded in political participation and brought spatial justice to disadvantaged social group, they provide important opportunities to re-centre the political to urban politics of China. The key problem is how to contest citizenship and fulfill justice in post-political cities of China. It should be always remembered that the future of the city is for justice, not for profit or growth.

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