

INTRODUCTION

Particularities and Complexities: Unpacking State Policy in Local China

Mi Shih and Carolyn Cartier

Media and business descriptions of China's transformation over the past three decades regularly appear in spectacular terms. Most attempts to capture the scale and scope of change focus on economic growth and the size of the economy in geopolitical perspective. People want to know – is the rise of China inevitable? Will China overtake the United States? Is the Australian economy dependent on growth in China? Such questions dominate headlines, even though they treat the world's largest countries as if they are uniform subjects with internally coherent conditions. Such geopolitical analysis, i.e., country-to-country comparison, reflects the ups and downs of the global economy and sound bytes of the information economy, but such portrayals are rather superficial.

By contrast to focusing on China as if a container of general change, without significant internal variation, *Provincial China* features scholarship that examines the diversity of China from perspectives that understand China from the inside out. Articles in *Provincial China* examine different urban and regional contexts, revealing how social and economic change is highly variable among different places and regions. Such realities have significant implications for understanding China in the world economy: on the one hand, China's development is highly uneven, and on the other, provinces and cities in China often negotiate directly with international sources of investment. The regional approach to China's transformation demonstrates how regions and peoples are experiencing uneven development.

In this issue, *Provincial China* features work by UTS China Research Centre scholars and associates. The four articles together problematize another assumption about political economy in China – the idea that state policy is top-down, unidirectional, and omnipresent.

Working on different topics and from different disciplinary perspectives, each author analyzes a specific state policy to reveal how, rather than supporting a monolithic state structure, policy dynamics demonstrate regional particularity, temporal variability, and institutional complexity. The spatial conditions of policy dynamics vary regionally as well as in relations of scale, i.e., between national interests and their relations with provincial, urban, and local governments. Since China's developmental model had depended on a strong state, how should we understand conditions of particularity and complexity in state policy? How should we potentially reconsider understanding the state in light of policy variation? These articles generate insightful outcomes, and while they differ in topics, analysis and results, their common contributions emerge in three aspects:

A relational approach

To date, much of the interdisciplinary scholarship on China has dealt with rapid development by using either one of two interrelated approaches: how the state works through the market, or how the market works through the state. The former focuses on explaining how the state has relegated its previous socialist functions to market mechanisms. Studies from this perspective usually point to and reinforce the rationale and discourse of China's headlong leap into marketization, privatization, and globalizing modernity (e.g. Naughton, 2007; Nee, 1996). The latter approach shows how market mechanisms cannot exist independent of the role of the state. Informed by the model of the East Asian development state, these studies explain how the Chinese state has paved the way for its path to a market economy through reallocating political and institutional resources to different societal sectors (e.g. Oi, 1992; Unger and Chan, 1995).

We suggest that these two approaches, whether independently or considered in relation, have produced a binary mode of conceptualizing China's transformation, which runs the risk of failing to capture the dialectical relationship between state and society, structure

and agency, central government and local governments, and between state policy and how it works in reality on the ground. What are the particularities of the implementation process that are essential to understanding why certain policies have worked and others have not? What are the complexities that are crucial for our understanding of contemporary China?

These questions are increasingly important as recent scholarship continues to affirm how unprecedented transformation in China – everything being turned on its head (*fantianfudi*, ‘sky and earth turned upside down’) – is a context-sensitive process (Abramson, 2006; Walter and Howie, 2011). The ‘with Chinese characteristics’ of the expression, ‘capitalism with Chinese characteristics’, has real meaning in the process of development. Approaches that significantly incorporate empirical realities contribute to more analytically relevant understandings, answering why China’s differences are critically important to understand. Here we present how a relational approach, i.e., the power of the state as the power of forces acting in and through historic and shifting state interests (Jessop, 1990, 269), trains focus on dynamics and contingencies of the state policy process. The articles in this issue reflect this direction in scholarly inquiry.

The first article, by Carolyn Cartier, provides a strategic-relational understanding of dynamic state powers associated with post-socialist decentralization policy. This analysis shows how decentralization does not diminish the power of the state. Instead, decentralization is revealed as a complex process of territorial rescaling that propels accumulation of political and economic resources through urban growth. The analyses by both Minglu Chen and Maurizio Marinelli show how the contemporary municipal state, as a product of historical-geographical developments, also demonstrates relational characteristics through selective marshaling of historic resources.

Urbanization and urbanism as a way of life

Much current research on China's rapid economic development draws links to intensive urbanization. China is now 60 percent urbanized, compared to just over 40 percent at the start of the reform era (United Nations, 2009). However, what 'becoming urban' or 'urbanization' means to ordinary Chinese people – whether as an ideology, a political project, or as a way of organizing everyday life – has not been adequately studied. As historian Wang Gungwu (1991, 2) argues, this is especially relevant to China since “as a society, China has been primarily agrarian and yet much of what is distinctive had been developed in Chinese cities.” After all, Louis Wirth (1938, 1) reminded us long ago how “the urban mode of life is not confined to cities.” It is important to understand how urbanization has impacted places and people, including places that are not officially categorized as urban, and people who are not officially defined as urban residents. In contemporary China, rural-urban migration and rural-urban integration are ubiquitous processes, as well as policy arenas, and urban modes of life increasingly characterize rural areas.

With concerns for rural-urban relations, Jenny Chio's article addresses how state tourism policy promotes rural economic development while seeking to maintain conventional rural imagery. To attract tourism, the rural must not urbanize too much. Inherent in rural tourism policy is the promotion of 'quality' (*suzhi*) of rural farmers and 'civilization' (*wenming*), of rural villages. Rural tourism destinations serve urban tourists, likely tourists from relatively wealthy urban areas, who seek to consume a different, distant and desirable rural experience. But maintaining rural landscapes can be a challenging project, since widespread urbanization depends on transferring rural land to municipalities for industrial and housing development. This part of the urban process, as Cartier's article highlights, is also a political project through which local cadres seek to accumulate administrative and economic resources. These papers treat urbanization as multifaceted processes of

redistribution of political and economic resources, and resocialization from rural to urban citizenship and identity – processes through which China gains its modern futures.

Maurizio Marinelli's portrayal of the past and present in Tianjin conjoins not only discordant temporalities, but also different state interests in the space of the historic foreign concession. An array of colonial governments in nineteenth century Tianjin produced an urban built environment of representational utopias, which the contemporary municipal state has conserved and repositioned to represent visions of globalizing modernity. Where the socialist state turned its collective back on the Westernized semi-colonial cities, contemporary China finds symbolic capital in the new city characterized by international architectural forms. The findings of these papers underscore how urbanization is never simply a project of redrawing urban boundaries.

Legacies of the socialist state

As China has become more urbanized and capitalistic, the post-reform era has increasingly dominated the temporal focus of current scholarship. Much of the social science scholarship on China's urbanization, economic development and social transformation tends to treat 1978-1979 as a new starting point, with few meaningful references to consequential events of prior decades. This severance may be very well born out of research manageability, but it also constructs a temporal watershed that risks failing to capture important state legacies relevant to explaining China's contemporary condition.

Minglu Chen's paper on the Third Front Construction, a national policy implemented in interior regions under the socialist state, especially addresses this problem. Chen shows that for Mianyang, Sichuan, it is impossible to fully understand the city's contemporary high technology development without examining effects of the socialist legacy on local development. Mianyang, in the western province of Sichuan, is not a major city and does not resonate with contemporary centers of modern science and technology. Yet infrastructure left

by Third Front Construction has enabled Mianyang to successfully transform into a significant center of technology-based urban growth. In the case of Mianyang, the shift from socialism to market economy continued many historic state conditions in new forms.

The analyses by Cartier and Marinelli demonstrate different ranges of historical reach. That the socialist state invested more in Third Front regional cities than coastal cities meant that the built environments of the treaty ports were, as Marinelli shows, paradoxically left largely intact, yielding cultural capital for the contemporary state. Cartier's analysis of the spatial administrative hierarchy draws out the significance of transhistorical state institutions by showing how the political geography of millennial empire has transformed to become the modern territorial system of China's new cities.

In sum, this issue shows our intent to better understand the complexities of state policy and institutions in China, and how they are received and implemented in local contexts. We believe that examining state dynamics as a dialectical process, as shown by the four articles, sheds important light on our scholarly inquiries and contributes to current research directions in contemporary China Studies.

References

- Abramson, D. 2006, *Urban Planning in China: Continuity and Change*. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 71, no. 1, 197-215.
- Jessop, B. 1990, *State Theory: Putting Capitalist States in Their Place*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Naughton, B. 2007, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth*. MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Nee, V. 1996, *The Emergence of a Market Society: Changing Mechanisms of Stratification in China*. *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 100, 908-949.

Oi, J. 1992, Fiscal reform and the economic foundations of local state corporatism in China. *World Politics*, vol, 45, 99-126.

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Available:

<http://www.un.org/esa/population/unpop.htm>

Unger, J. & Chan, A. 1995, China, Corporatism, and the East Asian Model. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 33, 29-53.

Walter, C. & Howie, F. 2011, *Red Capitalism: The Fragile Financial Foundation of China's Extraordinary Rise*. John Wiley & Sons.

Wang, G. 1991, *The Chineseness of China*. Oxford University Press.

Wirth, L. 1938, Urbanism as a Way of Life. *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. XLIV, no. 1, 1-24.

Mi Shih is a postdoctoral research fellow at the China Research Centre at University of Technology, Sydney. She received her Ph.D. in Planning and Public Policy from Rutgers University, USA (2010). Her research interests and areas include urban redevelopment, civil society, capitalist property development, and state governance strategies in China and Taiwan. Her work has been published in *The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Urban Geography* and elsewhere.

Carolyn Cartier is Professor of Human Geography and China Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney. She works in critical human geography on a range of topics concerning urban and regional change and co-leads the Urban China research group at UTS. She is currently completing *Geographical Thought and the Macroregion in China: Research Design and the Ethnography of an Idea* for Hong Kong University Press and *Vast Land of Borders: Territorialization and the State in China*, an edited collection.