

China at large, Chinas for comparative conversation:

A commentary on “Urbanizing dynamics of global China”

Tim Bunnell

Asia Research Institute & Department of Geography

National University of Singapore, Singapore 119260

Email: geotgb@nus.edu.sg

Published in *Urban Geography*, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2022.2140968

Abstract

This commentary puts diverse and dispersed urban geography analyses of global China into conversation. I show that findings from the pre-COVID-19 research presented in the four articles that comprise the special issue on Urbanizing Dynamics of Global China beg comparative questions of each other, both retrospective and future facing. My hope is that the collection of articles will thus provide grounds for new comparative, and perhaps collaborative, research across urban Chinas that have previously been examined separately.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), comparative urban tactics, comparative conversation, continental metropolitanization, global China

China may be detected in urban geographies that are both highly diverse and dispersed. The four articles that comprise this special issue locate urbanizing dynamics of global China in contexts ranging from a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in south India to a luxury residential development at the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia, and from a city marketplace in West Africa to a metropolitan growth pole in the western region of China itself. Urban development in and across the four contributions involves not only China's central and local governments, but also banks, multinational corporations, planning consultants and real estate developers. The main commonality among the papers – and what I most appreciate about them as a collection – is the attention that they give to both territorialized experiences and relational dynamics. Each paper examines a distinct set of situated urban geographies, and in doing so brings into view further actors involved in the performance and negotiation of global China – from rural Indian factory workers to a Malay Sultan, to leaders of an association of Ghanaian market traders, as well as a host of local and national government figures in countries outside the PRC.

The global urban dimensions of China and other Asias before the BRI

Prior to the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), consideration of the nexus of China and urbanization overseas would most likely have brought to mind efforts to draw upon the country's experience and expertise with Special Economic Zones (SEZs). A central component of Goodburn and Knoerich's article is the infrastructural underdevelopment of their case study "industrial city" in southern India when compared to its aspirational model in China, and how the shortfall may be explained partly by national level differences (pre-eminently the relative role and responsibilities of private capital and different levels of government). However, what is most interesting to me about their paper is that it takes us far beyond binary comparative assessment of failed emulation. Goodburn and Knoerich (2022)

draw attention to multiplex relational geographies of influence and axes of comparison. One example concerns the labor recruitment strategies of firms in the Indian SEZ, which, like earlier stages of development in China, focused on young, rural women (in ways that have been elevated to a kind of “model” internationally). Goodburn and Knoerich associate this primarily with Chinese multinational companies that are based in the Indian SEZ, although they also note that it was a feature of the recruitment strategies of some of the non-Chinese MNCs too, including those which had previous manufacturing experience in China or were part of Chinese supply chains. This, along with Goodburn and Knoerich’s identification of similarities and differences between their (anonymized) case study site and SEZ-style developments elsewhere in India, exemplifies more widely that multiple vectors of Chinese influence are in play, even in a seemingly straightforward attempt at master planned township replication.

The need to attend to situated specificity and intra-national variability in the study of global China applies as much within the PRC as it does to urban developments in worlds outside its borders. While Shenzhen became the “flagship” of the initial set of Chinese SEZs in the early 1980s, Goodburn and Knoerich note that “China now has a wide range of other economic ‘zones’ of different shapes, sizes, locations and nomenclatures”. Proponents of their Indian case study industrial city looked to a selected (again, anonymized) major industrial zone in China which had begun on the outskirts of an existing city, in contrast to Shenzhen and the other original SEZs. So multiple and continually proliferating Chinese urban and industrial development models have long been in circulation, nationally and internationally. We may even say that there have long been multiple (global) Chinas. In this regard, Nick R. Smith’s contribution to the collection of papers is particularly significant. Smith (2022) focuses not on the established success stories of China’s SEZs, but on the country’s western interior and efforts there to “catch up” with the more urbanized and industrialized coastal regions where

the early SEZs were located. In particular, Smith considers the city (and special municipality) of Chongqing, and how it ultimately pursued global city aspirations through a developmental strategy distinct from China's coastal cities. In the absence of maritime access to global markets open to the likes of Shenzhen or Shanghai, the in-land urban development of Chongqing entailed building (land-based) infrastructural and logistical linkages to Eurasia. According to Smith, such "continental metropolitanization" formed the foundations – distinctly *urban* foundations – of the BRI.

Smith's claims about the wider implications of extended metropolitan development in (and from) Chongqing are one of several ways in which the collection of papers rubs up against the inherited EuroAmerican-centrism of Anglophone urban studies. For Smith, Chongqing's territorial urban "intensification" is dialectically related to its relational urban "extensification" in ways that are about more than competing for secondary or tertiary tier positions in a capitalist system centred in Europe and North America, and which suggest new, planetary alignments driven by a Chinese state-led model of urbanization. Moreover, in Smith's view, recent urban and economic developments in (and *from*) western China anticipate ontologically the epistemological shifts that have been called for by proponents of postcolonial urban studies. I do not doubt the geoeconomic and geopolitical significance of the developments that form that focus of Smith's attention, nor their value as resources for contributing to new geographies of urban theory. However, I am less convinced that continental metropolitanization in/from western China marks a turning point for a less EuroAmerican-centred urban studies. The development of Shanghai's Pudong New Area – involving, as Smith notes, a party-state cadre who went on to serve as Chongqing's mayor – may initially have sought to move up a global city financial centre hierarchy topped by New York and London, but Shanghai has itself been listed among the "Alpha+" tier cities on the Globalisation and World City (GaWC) roster since 2008 (GaWC, 2008). By then, perhaps

more transformatively, Shenzhen had become established as a rather different kind of “world hub” based on “hardware creatives” with spatially-extensive supply chains, as well as “a model of urban development elsewhere in China and the world” (O’Donnell, 2018: 247). Chinese urbanization, then, has been on – and served to redraw – global maps of academics as well investors and the “global intelligence corps” (Olds, 1997) since well before the official launch of the BRI.

If China provides several pre-BRI examples of globally-significant urban and economic developments – achieving in practice, as Smith puts it, what postcolonial urbanists have been striving for in principle – Asia more widely offers many more such examples, and over a longer period. Singapore is one place to start, both as an object of analysis and as the institutional base of several scholars who have carried out such urban and economic analyses. Rather than following – or *merely* following – the way of London or New York, for example, Singapore was recognized by geographers based in the city-state as having charted a different pathway to world cityness almost two decades ago (Olds & Yeung, 2004). Even earlier than that, scholars elsewhere had examined Tokyo and Seoul as “state-centred and political-bureaucratic” world cities (Hill & Kim, 2000, p. 2177) that were engaging global capitalism in ways distinct from the pre-eminent cities of Europe or North America. The developmental state more widely featured in work on an economic “global shift” to the Asia Pacific before widespread appreciation of global China, let alone the official advent of the BRI (Dicken, 1998). And while that work clearly did not foreground extended or planetary urbanization, the sheer weight of numbers of people living in cities in Asia mean that scholars and multilateral institutions have long seen it as the planetary centre of gravity in demographic terms (see Martinez et al., 2021). From my own vantage point in Singapore, it appears that the global economy and urban hierarchies, as well as academic examination of urbanizing dynamics, had undergone substantial decentring from Europe or North America before the

BRI, and arguably even before China took centre stage in the story of Asia-Pacific industrial production or urban population growth. If my situated perspective has any validity then Smith's continental metropolitanization narrative of the BRI may contribute less to the postcolonialization of urban studies than to a recentering of longstanding work on Asia-Pacific urbanization in China.

Situating global China in urban theory and practice

Brief reflection on the reference points found in academic and extra-academic realms of comparison may also be useful here. In grossly abbreviated form: while inter-urban comparison has become well established as a means through which urban scholars adopting postcolonial approaches have sought to de-centre academic urban studies from canonical sites of theory in Europe and North America, it is also part and parcel of extra-academic practices that often already appear to be far from EuroAmerican-centered. On the one hand, there has now been well over a decade of influential scholarship pushing beyond usual suspect comparative theoretical starting points, promoting the cosmopolitan diversification of comparative urbanism (Robinson, 2011, 2022), including comparison between world regions other than Europe or North America (Roy, 2009), and within those regions (see Chen, 2010 on Inter-Asia comparativism). On the other hand, those of us interested in actually-existing relational dynamics of urban development in Asia have found that practical processes of city-making and remaking are almost always already eclectic in the geographies of their learning, inspirations, or comparative borrowings (Bunnell, 2018). Asian "inter-referencing" practices are a very well known feature of urban transformation within the region and globally (Ong, 2011). My own conclusion about the implications of this for the postcolonialization of comparativism in scholarly worlds back in 2015 was that "academics interested in less EuroAmerican-centred urban studies have at least as much learning to do from policy worlds

as the other way round” (Bunnell, 2015, p. 1996). Are we – academic urbanists – catching up or moving on? Innovative recent comparative work on collaborative housing experiments in London and Shenzhen has focused on generating new concepts without reference to geographies of origin or emulation (Teo, 2022a).

In the context of longstanding concerns over the siting and relational geographies of academic conceptualization, Asante and Helbrecht’s contribution to the special section is at one level a throwback to an earlier era of urban studies. While the authors provide a rich account of the multi-scalar politics of a Chinese-funded marketplace development in Cape Coast, Ghana, the main conceptual counterpoint for the “hybrid entrepreneurial urban governance” that they identify is based on experiences in (particular parts of) the North Atlantic world in the 1970s and 1980s (Harvey, 1989). Of course, I am referring here to a classic contribution by David Harvey that has to be read and taken seriously by anyone wishing to carry out work on (re)conceptualizing entrepreneurial urban governance. But during the more than three decades since that article was first published, countless other studies have been carried out in other regions of the world noting myriad hybridizations of the entrepreneurial urban governance identified by Harvey, and various other spatio-temporally variable dynamics. I recognize that Asante and Helbrecht (2022) include summary acknowledgement of works on EUG elsewhere that “do not fit into the established north-centric theories and concepts of urban studies”. However, I think that they have missed an opportunity to bring their Ghana-based work into conversation with a wider world of documented “varieties” of urban entrepreneurialism (Phelps & Miao, 2020), including in China (e.g. Wu, 2018) and elsewhere in Asia. Clearly, areal partitionings of expertise make such conversations difficult, and I acknowledge that meaningful reference to scholarship on West Africa is almost non-existent in urban research on Asia, including my own. But to me, one of the key affordances of the scholarly attention being given to global China is precisely

that it allows dispersed and otherwise academically partitioned instances to be brought into conversation with each other, rather than speaking back to supposedly pure Western points of origin (Bunnell, 2021).

How much “China” has to be in an article for it to be seen as being about global China, or to be included in a special section on associated urbanizing dynamics? Asante and Helbrecht’s piece has a clear China element in that Cape Coast’s market redevelopment was funded through a loan from Exim Bank of China and was carried out by China Railway Construction and Engineering Group Limited. This raises important questions about how Chinese capital and expertise touches down and engages cross-scalar politics of urban development in (and beyond) Africa. Ultimately, however, not only is the conceptual contribution of Asante and Helbrecht’s article about differentiating the local-national relations of urban governance in Ghana from those on either side of the north Atlantic in the 1980s, but the ground-level case study components of their article give little attention to Chinese actors or influences. We do learn that the market design – originally drawn up by Ghanaian architects based on “Western-styled shopping malls” – had to be scaled down to suit the size of the Chinese loan. But to what extent did this also entail Sinocization of the building and its environs, whether in terms of aesthetic expectations or material design? It would also be fascinating to read more about the Chinese bankers’ expectations of how central-municipal government relations (should) play out in Ghana. What foreknowledge were their assessments and calculations based on? And to what extent were their understandings of municipal government norms or ideals based on experiences in China? The last of these questions strikes me as particularly interesting given that central-local government connections in China appear to have been highly varied. We know from Smith’s article that this has included instances where urban development initiatives have been driven by municipal governments in defiance of the central state, despite the fact that Chinese local leaders are centrally appointed (as is also the case in Ghana).

Many of the questions I have concerning Chinese involvement in the urban and political developments that assume centre stage in Asante and Helbrecht's article were stimulated by reading Koh Sin Yee and colleagues' contribution on the Forest City project in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia. Koh et al. (2022) note for example that mainland Chinese developers involved in projects in the state of Johor more widely struggle to transplant knowledge and practices based on prior domestic experience. Such struggles are commonplace when businesses internationalize and encounter unfamiliar national/local political dynamics, but the latter are unusually complex in the case of Johor owing to the historical mode of its incorporation into the Malaysian federation, and the ongoing power of its Sultanate. This appears to explain how ecologically destructive land reclamation for the Forest City project began before environmental impact assessment checks or approval. While Forest City's "green and smart" marketing tagline can thus be read as a straightforward case of private sector greenwashing, I am also intrigued by coverage of the Guangdong-based developers' wider tropical eco-urban (self-)understandings, and how they relate to local and national eco-aesthetic discourses in China (see also Pow, 2018). As Koh et al. note, their case study of the "micropolitics" of Forest City invites further comparison of eco- and green urbanisms associated with globalizing China, and how they rub up against often very different imaginings of "sustainable" or even desirable futures elsewhere.

Looking back at, and forward to, possibilities for comparative conversation

This collection of articles emerged from a comparatively framed initiative (Shin et al., 2022) and, in turn, gives rise to many further questions and possibilities that are comparative in nature. An overarching set of questions has to do with impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most simply, how has this affected developments in each of the four documented contexts, especially in Johor, given that 70% of the buyers of residential units in Forest City are

reportedly from China (Koh et al., 2022)? One might also ask how pandemic-driven bordering practices have differentially affected a variety of global Chinas. No doubt it is currently easier for consignments of notebook computers to continue to travel from Chongqing to Rotterdam (Smith, 2022) than it is for Chinese investors in Forest City to visit their “green and smart” apartments in southern Malaysia (Koh et al., 2022). But what do ongoing COVID-19 restrictions in China mean for Chinese MNCs in southern Indian SEZs (Goodburn & Knoerich, 2022) or for Chinese firms banking on construction projects in Africa (Asante & Helbrecht, 2022)? While these are matters of updating for authors to address in their own respective field sites, I have sought to show that the pre-COVID-19 findings presented together in the four articles beg new comparative questions of each other and elsewhere, both retrospective and future facing. I hope that by having brought diverse and spatially dispersed global Chinas into conversation, this collection will thus provide grounds for further innovation with comparative urban tactics and collaborations, including in ways that have recently been highlighted in this journal (Teo, 2022b).

References

- Asante, L. A. & Helbrecht, I. (2022). Hybrid entrepreneurial urban governance in post-colonial Ghana: an analysis of Chinese funding of the Kotokuraba market project in Cape Coast. *Urban Geography*, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2022.2036525
- Bunnell, T. (2015). Antecedent cities and inter-referencing effects: Learning from and extending beyond critiques of neoliberalisation. *Urban Studies*, 52(11), 1983-2000.

Bunnell, T. (2018). Theory versus practice in learning from elsewhere: Unsettling hierarchies of value. In M. Grubbauer & K. Shaw (Eds.), *Thinking through Urban Research: Across Theory and Practice* (pp. 43-50). Jovis.

Bunnell, T. (2021). BRI and beyond: Comparative possibilities of extended Chinese urbanisation. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 62(3), 270-273.

Chen, K. H. (2010). *Asia as method: toward deimperialization*. Duke University Press.

Dicken, P. (1998). *Global shift: Transforming the world economy* (third edition). The Guilford Press.

GaWC (2008). The World According to GaWC. *Globalization and World Cities Research Network*. Retrieved October 13, 2022.

<https://www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/geography/gawc/world2008.html>.

Goodburn, C. & Knoerich, J. (2022). Importing export zones: processes and impacts of replicating a Chinese model of urbanization in rural south India. *Urban Geography*, DOI:10.1080/02723638.2021.2014669

Hill, R. C. & Kim, J. Y. (2000). Global cities and developmental states: New York, Tokyo and Seoul. *Urban Studies*, 37(12), 2167–2195.

Koh, S. Y., Zhao, Y., & Shin, H. B. (2022). Moving the mountain and greening the sea: the micropolitics of speculative green urbanism at Forest City, Iskandar Malaysia. *Urban Geography* DOI: [10.1080/02723638.2021.1999725](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.1999725)

Martinez, R., Bunnell, T., & Acuto, M. (2021). Productive tensions? The “city” across geographies of planetary urbanization and the urban age. *Urban Geography*, 42(7), 1011-1022.

- O'Donnell, M. A. (2018) Excavating the future in Shenzhen. In T. Bunnell & D.P.S. Goh (Eds.), *Urban Asias: Essays on futurity past and present* (pp. 247-262). Jovis.
- Olds, K. (1997). Globalizing Shanghai: the 'global intelligence corps' and the building of Pudong. *Cities*, 14(2), 109-123.
- Olds, K., & Yeung, H. (2004). Pathways to global city formation: a view from the developmental city-state of Singapore. *Review of International Political Economy*, 11(3), 489-521.
- Ong, A. (2011). Introduction: Worlding cities, or the art of being global. In A. Roy & A. Ong (Eds.), *Worlding Cities: Asian experiments and the art of being global* (pp. 1-26). John Wiley & Sons.
- Phelps, N. A., & Miao, J. T. (2020). Varieties of urban entrepreneurialism. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 10(3), 304-321.
- Pow, C. P. (2018). Building a harmonious society through greening: ecological civilization and aesthetic governmentality in China. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 108(3), 864-883.
- Robinson, J. (2011). Cities in a world of cities: the comparative gesture. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35(1), 1-23.
- Robinson, J. (2022). *Comparative urbanism: Tactics for global urban studies*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Roy, A. (2009). The 21st-century metropolis: New geographies of theory. *Regional Studies*, 43(6), 819-830.
- Shin, H.B., Zhao, Y. & Koh, S.Y. (2022). The urbanising dynamics of global China: Speculation, articulation and translation in global capitalism. *Urban Geography*

Smith, N. R. (2022). Continental metropolitanization: Chongqing and the urban origins of China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Urban Geography*, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2021.2014670

Teo, S. S. K. (2022a). Shared projects and symbiotic collaborations: Shenzhen and London in comparative conversation. *Urban Studies*, 59(8), 1694-1714.

Teo, S. S. K. (2022b). Doing comparative urbanism: comparative conversation as tactic. *Urban Geography*, DOI: [10.1080/02723638.2022.2054605](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2054605)

Wu, F. (2018). Planning centrality, market instruments: Governing Chinese urban transformation under state entrepreneurialism. *Urban Studies*, 55(7), 1383–1399.