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Adding new narratives to urban imagination: an introduction to New directions of urban studies in China'

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Abstract

Rapid urban development in China provides rich cases for urban research. Current urban studies in China are heavily influenced by an urban imagination embedded in the West. Using the cases of land management and environmental governance, social transformation, spatial and regional dimensions of urbanisation, this paper tries to rethink some surprising findings from empirical research in Chinese cities and contribute to theoretical understandings of urbanisation beyond contextual particularities. Following the narrative of 'planning centrality, market instruments' in China, this paper highlights the political logic behind managing growth and environmental governance, social differentiation produced by interwoven state and market forces, and new geographies of Chinese cities beyond economic-centred imagination.

Keywords

Chinese development, environmental sustainability, housing, migration, politics, urban China

This special issue of *Urban Studies* is an addition to earlier special issues on China in this journal but takes on a different mission. The special issue on 'Producing and consuming China's new urban space: state, market and society' proposes a narrative of consumption in addition to a production-oriented Chinese urban studies (He and Lin 2015). The special issue on 'People and plans in urbanising China' contrasts strong state authority over governing urban development with versatile adaptation of and pushing back by people

towards policy implementation (Logan 2018). The social and anthropological narratives of Chinese urbanism enrich the political economic account of urbanisation. The contradiction between planning-centred policy initiatives and reliance on market instruments to carry out development projects is captured by a new narrative of ‘planning centrality, market instruments’ (Wu 2018). This is a more provincialised narrative of capital accumulation (Leitner and Sheppard 2016), refined from ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’ (Harvey 2005) because the latter still sees China as a variegated form of neoliberalism while the former stresses some additional logic under economic governance. The new narrative thinks the other way round, confirming the pervasive use of market operations but for a quite different purpose than serving a capitalist class.

The structure of presenting Chinese empirical cases here is different: instead of thinking theories and their potential implications for and applicability in a context of the global South, I first present a plain narrative of some ‘empirical’ observations made by the papers in this special issue. This is an attempt to follow comparative tactics for a more global urban studies – ‘thinking cities through elsewhere’ (Robinson 2016). Second, from these concrete descriptions, I strive to identify surprising accounts – in the sense of their particularity. With no intention to universalise the findings, I try to think through their theoretical implications. In the remainder of this paper, I discuss the findings in the three sections of this special issue and their contributions.

Managing growth and environmental governance: the lingering state and multiple logics

The first section examines institutional dynamics in growth management and rising urban environmental governance in China.

China has developed a quite unique land system. The marketisation of land for urban development has been extensively studied in China urban studies. The state controls the appropriation of collectively owned rural land for urban development. The revenue from selling the development rights to developers constitutes an important source of local public finance, which is commonly known as land-based finance (Lin 2014; Tao et al. 2010). However, in contrast to the sale of state-acquired rural land, rural land is not tradable in the land market. Land-centred development has led to rampant encroachment

on rural land as local governments compete to acquire cheaper rural land to finance urban development. To strengthen land management and the protection of agricultural land, the Chinese government has adopted a new land policy which requires the local government to maintain agricultural land overall and 'link' the quantity of land developed with the reclamation of equivalent agricultural land elsewhere. This 'linkage policy' has opened up the trading of rural land, or the transfer of development rights (TDR) (Shi and Tang 2019). In terms of knowledge gaps, Shi and Tang (2019) describe the recent change in the Chinese rural land system, enriching an extensive literature on rural-to-urban land conversion in China. In practice, the policy has led to a great variation in rural land markets. Chengdu in the western region of China is one of the cities that have developed a quite mature rural land market and this is their case study. On the surface, this transfer of development rights is a further step in the marketisation of rural land, which allows rural collectives to sell their development rights to other developers (by converting their existing non-agricultural land into agricultural land) and also gives an opportunity for developers other than the government to acquire land development rights to supply developable land to the urban land market. In Chengdu, the agriculture equity exchange has been set up to facilitate the market transaction of rural land entitlements.

With the extensive documentation of China's land marketisation and land-based financing it is no surprise that in the rural area sophisticated market tools such as the transfer of development rights are experimented with and deployed. The finding of continuing marketisation of rural land is timely but not surprising. However, the intention behind using this technique is not to maximise land income but rather to implement land consolidation in places where rural villages are left vacant (Long and Liu 2016). Similarly, in suburban Shanghai land consolidation is implemented to curb urban sprawl (Tian et al. 2017). The narrative of the transfer of rural land development rights thus deviates from the widely narrated 'urban entrepreneurialism'. It fits better the narrative of 'planning centrality, market instruments' as the market instrument is used to relocate resources and manage growth. The implementation of this policy, however, has led to 'unexpected' consequences because, although some economic benefits are returned to the rural users who gave up their development rights, the region that acquires the development rights performs much better than the region that produces the quota of development rights. This specific practice is considered here along with other case studies on environmental governance.

Faced with environmental challenges, China has strengthened its environmental governance. This has been achieved through the restoration of vertical management, for example, land development quotas (Xu and Yeh 2009). The implementation of environmental policies varies across different localities. To build an environmentally friendly city, local government has strengthened environmental education. Besides economic growth, environmental protection targets have become a key performance indicator for local officials. Rising environmental concerns from the middle class also force the local government to pay more attention to local environmental quality. In this context, local district governments try to promote green urbanism. Luova et al. (2019) investigated the creation of 'green schools' in the districts of Tianjin and observed variation in terms of applying for green school entitlements in these districts. In addition to teaching environmentally friendly lifestyles, green schools demonstrate their efforts to improve the greenness of their campus and reduce waste. Some poorer inner urban districts are more enthusiastic towards the entitlement of green schools as being green helps them negotiate a better deal in resource allocation, while outer districts only fulfil the basic requirements of environmental education. The traditional working-class area with stronger government capacity but tighter budget constraint is actually more willing to implement a stringent government requirement for environmental education.

While it is not a surprise that economic returns are taken into consideration when the local government implements environmental policies, the case of green schools shows how environmental education has been seriously implemented in a way that is independent from economic governance. There are also significant variations across local districts in terms of implementation. The consideration depends upon local conditions and is more nuanced than a simplified narrative of using the green agenda to promote economic growth. Building more green schools may help the district government gain recognition from the municipal government for achieving key performance indicators. Environmental policies are not subordinated to economic targets, and being green has become an objective in itself.

With a rising awareness of environmental quality, Chinese cities strive to develop green infrastructure. Originating in Guangdong (Chung et al. 2018), greenways are a popular type of environmental project because they enhance a green image, green amenities and

access to green spaces. In the city of Maanshan in Anhui province, massive greenways of more than 250 km are being planned and constructed (Zhang et al. 2019). The development of greenways is a requirement by the provincial government which in turn follows the guidance of the Ministry of Housing and Urban–Rural Development. The project was initially conceived as beneficial to local tourism. While there is no evidence to suggest substantial impacts on economic development and city marketing, greenways are helping the city gain recognition as a Chinese garden city, turning away from its past as a steel city. Some sections of greenway in rural areas are not extensively used. But the greenways inside urban areas are widely used, promoting active travel and non-motorised commuting. The green infrastructure brings material benefits to residents.

The surprising finding is that the Chinese government does treat environmental governance seriously, which represents a shift away from the earlier policy of ‘growth first, treatment second’ to a new narrative of ‘ecological civilisation’. The latter recognises the importance of nature and the need to develop a ‘harmonious relation’ between humans and nature. For a long time, the literature on China’s environmental governance has stressed the discourse of sustainability and ‘green washing’ and the green spectacle as environmental imagineering in China, as well as the economic motivation behind green projects such as eco-cities (Caprotti 2014, Chien 2013, Wu 2012). Greenway projects are initiated by a variety of considerations in different cities but they all bear an imprint of political legitimisation. As a political project, the development of greenways demonstrates the alignment of the local state with the central government mandate of ‘ecological civilisation’ and state power in environmental governance. There is an environmental turn in China’s urban development, although actual implementation is compounded with local adaptation and various resource constraints. The actual environmental benefits are not always obvious, despite an initial policy desire to achieve green development. The greenway project adds a new narrative to the ‘sustainability fix’ (While et al. 2004) as the latter recognises the need to fix the environment constraint for capital accumulation. Here, the motivation of green projects is compounded.

The role of the state in environmental governance can be clearly seen in the case of post-disaster reconstruction. In 2008, Wenchuan experienced an earthquake of 8.0 on the Richter scale. The earthquake caused a huge loss of lives and damage. The central government mandated a swift reconstruction plan. The speed of reconstruction was

remarkable. Although multiple agents were involved, the administrative system demonstrated a significant leading role in post-disaster reconstruction. The central government invented a 'pair assistance programme' which paired a better-off province with a county that suffered the disaster. The province was required to allocate 1% of its revenue to support reconstruction. The reconstruction plan has been led by the state, especially the National Development and Reform Commission and Ministry of Housing and Urban–Rural Development. The capacity of top-down planning has been mobilised. The state has been directly involved in relocating and resettling affected residents, planning and reconstructing new settlements. To cope with the complex and challenging task of reconstruction, the planning procedure was simplified and cross-border collaborations were established. While the central government provided 30% of the reconstruction cost, it mobilised local governments and non-state sources to fulfil the funding requirement.

It is not a surprise to find that the state plays a critical role in environmental governance, in particular coping with natural disasters. However, thinking about the narrative of resilience, Xu et al. (2019) argue that, while resilience often implies the adaptive capacity of individuals and social capital of their communities, the Chinese case suggests an indispensable role of the state in leading and coordinating post-disaster reconstruction. Post-reconstruction planning shows some flexibility and adaptability among engineering-minded professionals, and the state managed to pull resources from different places and across various administrative hierarchies. Going beyond technical issues of disaster management, the narrative is not confined within 'resilience' but interrogates the state–society relation. The post-disaster reconstruction plan is first and foremost a political task, legitimising state power in environmental governance.

Marketisation and environmental crises are explained by the narratives of entrepreneurialism and the subordination of the nature to capital logic. The cases of land management and environmental governance produce new narratives of lingering state power and legitimacy in managing economic growth and environmental politics that are related to but not determined by economic imperatives. These more nuanced narratives help us more convincingly criticise China's environmental policies and practices. In a wider imagination of urban environmental governance, these narratives enrich existing narratives of urban sustainability fix and eco-state and politics. While the institutional

dynamics and geographical settings are quite specific to China, the narratives of the cases present multiple logics, revealing that it is imperative to understand the context-specific logic in growth and environmental governance.

Social transformation: beyond dichotomous state or market narratives

The second section examines the social transformation of Chinese cities. The theme is a core concern of urban studies. The papers in this section resonate with well-established topics in urban China studies of rural migrants (Wu and Logan 2016), residential satisfaction (Li and Wu 2013), neighbourhood attachment (Zhu et al. 2012), and many other articles in a virtual special issue in *Urban Studies* (He and Qian 2017) where three frontiers were identified: urban enclaves, consumption and culture, and urban activism. While focusing on specific topics of residential changes, the papers here interrogate state–market narratives.

Chinese cities have witnessed a housing boom over the last two decades. Housing affordability is becoming a serious challenge. Cui (2019) compares skilled migrants and locals regarding how they get onto the property ladder. Skilled migrants often have to move out to the suburbs in order to become homeowners. Although they are better educated, their educational attainment does not help them much or even constrain them. She explains this surprising finding through the timing of entering the property market and the intergenerational transfer of wealth. Longer education delays people getting onto the property ladder. The parents of skilled locals in large cities benefited from the housing boom and thus accumulated assets which may help the second generation into the housing market. These are quite complex narratives about urbanisation, housing marketisation and social inequalities. They present the reproduction of housing inequalities across generations and geographical regions, and are thus more complicated than narratives of hukou (household registration) division between urban and rural areas and of disadvantaged, poorly educated migrants. The inequality is created by neither marketisation nor policy discrimination. Rather, it is an outcome of interwoven state–market dynamics.

The narrative of the housing career of skilled migrants goes beyond the issue of the housing of specific social groups. It maps the effect of market transition but also the

complex historical and material conditions within which social and housing differentiation are created. The narrative of skilled migrants' housing enriches the debate over market transition and state persistence and housing inequalities (Logan et al. 1999). More generally, the narrative highlights the need to understand the reality of urban life and socio-cultural institutions in order to understand housing inequalities.

Rapid urban development in China has led to significant neighbourhood changes. When rural migrants move into urban areas, they have to choose particular neighbourhoods to suit their needs. In other words, they sort themselves into different neighbourhoods. On the other hand, they have different satisfaction levels in different residential environments. Their residential satisfaction is affected by their choices. The issue of self-selection is more than just a methodological difficulty but reflects the fact that their choice and satisfaction might be related. Their residential satisfaction may also be a result of their choice. Chen and Dang (2019) find that in Beijing migrants rank residential satisfaction in order from commodity housing, to work-unit housing, and finally to urban village housing. The order is similar to the rank of the quality of these environments. But interestingly, because the selection of residential environment follows socioeconomic characteristics, the migrants who live in urban villages would be happier in commodity housing because they have a lower expectation regarding the living environment. Homeownership makes migrant residents happier only in commodity housing neighbourhoods, not only due to the ownership per se but also because of the choice they made in residential locations.

While homeownership is regarded as a major determinant for residential satisfaction, the effect only holds in a particular type of residential environment in China, the commodity housing neighbourhood, because migrants who do not have local hukou may be restricted from home purchase and hence have to remain as renters and consequently report lower levels of satisfaction. Some migrants manage to buy property in a commodity housing neighbourhood and become very satisfied. In other neighbourhoods, there are very few migrant homeowners. In the informal housing market, migrants can still buy and become homeowners but compared with renters they are not significantly happier. Although these findings are very specific, the narrative is more complex than a universal one about the advantage and satisfaction of homeownership.

Over the last four decades, Chinese cities have experienced profound residential changes. A large number of residents have been relocated owing to urban renewal and suburbanisation. Residential mobility is a 'classic' field of urban geography but also an established topic in China urban studies (Li and Mao 2017; Li and Song 2009; Wu 2004). The findings from a longitudinal study in Beijing largely confirm what we know about residential relocation: over 73% of residents are happier after relocation (Wang and Wang 2019). Improvements in housing and neighbourhood living environment make relocated residents more satisfied. The change from renter to homeowner greatly raises residential satisfaction, although those who move from old neighbourhoods to commodity housing areas, usually in the suburbs, reported lower levels of satisfaction, probably due to the loss of neighbourhood attachment and involuntary relocation. The findings that not only housing attributes but also neighbourhood characteristics matter are plausible, as residents may be pursuing a particular preference for more private lifestyles (Shen and Wu 2013). Better design and maintenance certainly improve the quality of living.

It is a surprise that a quantitative residential survey has not led to unexpected findings. It is sometimes contradictory to qualitative studies which often focus on cases of forced relocation, demolition and property dispossession (Shih 2017; Shin 2016; Zhang 2017). Except for the sampling bias (more middle-class homebuyers), the quantitative research covers a larger sample of relocated residents. It reveals that Chinese urban renewal has improved the residential conditions of most residents, although some social groups have suffered severe negative impacts. Considering the initial rehabilitation of dilapidated housing in Beijing or the renewal of old alleyway housing in Shanghai, the living conditions of the old neighbourhoods were appalling. Urban renewal and residential relocation have been major steps to solving the housing shortage. But increasingly in order to finance redevelopment projects, market instruments have been used, which give a greater power to developers to generate more land profits. While the state has tried to regulate the practices of demolition and relocation, in reality rampant redevelopment occurs from time to time. In the redevelopment process, there is always a tension between a modernisation vision and financial logic to fulfil project finance and contribute to the local fiscal balance. Therefore, the quantitative survey and qualitative case studies, rather than being contradictory, present different aspects of China's urban transformation.

Land reform has created significant impacts on both urban and rural households. In rural areas, collectively owned land rights have been reformed. Village economic collectives (jingji hezuoshe) have become shareholding cooperatives (Po 2008). Villagers are entitled to land shares as 'shareholders'. However, women who have 'married out' are excluded (Po, 2019). Land marketisation thus has created gender inequalities. Thus, married-out women have begun to defend their entitlements through lodging complaints with state agencies and suing their villages in court. The state has eventually supported their claims. However, it is difficult to implement the law as the villagers were protesting against a government decision, which threatens social stability. As a result, although many women received their shares through state-subsidised purchase, the delivery of dividends to women is not guaranteed. The narrative of married-out women's activism is an extremely complex one. Different from the hukou policy which restricts the entitlement of the rural population, married-out women lost their entitlements because traditional culture and social practices affected the process of land marketisation. Gendered inequality resulted from complex interaction between marketisation and social division.

The surprising finding of gendered inequalities in the Pearl River Delta is that the root cause is more complicated than unfair state redistribution or market-based injustice. They are created through the interaction of social norms with a process of market development, as in post-colonial India where social divisions and inequalities are formed between different segments of caste, religion, language, identity, family and community (Chatterjee 2004). Considering the existing literature of 'the right to the city' (Purcell 2003) and their application to Chinese cities (He and Chen 2012), it is not straightforward to classify these women's activism as the right to the city or a citizen movement to gain recognition from the state. The women activists contest their rights and argue for the recognition of their community. On the other hand, their claim is clearly limited to land entitlement, at least at this stage, rather than connected to a wide range of citizenship such as participation and decision in local politics and entitlement to social benefits. The specific research topic of women's activism is not just about the gendered outcome but also about their contests against exclusion from land rights allocation, which is outside the remit of state policy. However, claims for property rights and citizenship are related because through claiming their property rights, the women became aware of their citizenship and resorted to protesting against customary discrimination. They engage with different social and political processes and become 'active citizens'.

New geographies of Chinese cities: a city-regional dimension

The third section examines the regional dimension of Chinese urbanisation, in particular an emergent form of mega-city region. While the urban system has been a classic topic of urban studies, recent research has begun to interrogate interrelated urban and regional governance and explored suburbanisation, polycentric city-regions, and new geographies of the metropolis (Roy 2009; Keil 2018). In China urban studies, the research goes beyond regional inequalities (Wei 2000) and rather seeks to understand the process of urbanisation beyond individual cities (Li and Wu 2017; Luo and Shen 2008; Wu 2016; Xu and Yeh 2005). The papers in this section cover the changing dynamics of urbanisation in the Pearl River Delta, economic restructuring and new spatial development, new science and technologically based cities, and urban clusters in the Yangtze River Valley.

China's open-door reform in the late 1970s led to export-oriented urbanisation in the coastal region, in particular the Pearl River Delta (Sit and Yang 1997). The towns and cities in the region present some similar characteristics but this is not equivalent to 'regionalism' because linkage and interaction among cities were very weak. In the PRD, villages and towns linked directly with overseas investors rather than nearby cities. They were production sites for export-oriented manufacturing industries and presented mixed urban and rural uses similar to *desakota* in Southeast Asia (Lin 2006). But the Global Financial Crisis marked the collapse of foreign direct investment (FDI) driven 'exo-urbanisation' and triggered spatial restructuring (Yang 2019). Some industrial towns and villages experienced financial difficulties (Xue and Wu 2015), while the provincial government promoted industrial relocation and the municipal government attempted to shift towards high-tech industrial parks rather than scattered village-based economies. Yang (2019) provides a detailed narrative of industrial dynamics and consequent spatial transformation.

Industrial restructuring and uneven spatial effects in the PRD are convincingly narrated through a particular angle on production networks which provides additional insights beyond territorial dynamics. The surprising finding is that 'strategic coupling' (Yeung 2016) in this case is more than a metaphor that indicates the matching of production networks with regional assets. It is literally a 'strategy' – an intentional plan to reshape the

course of urbanisation and spatial production. The city of Dongguan deliberately proposed Songhuahu High-tech Park as a new development strategy, which attracted the relocation of Huawei, China's high-tech giant, from Shenzhen to Dongguan. The narrative of 'strategic' thus implies more than a network dynamic and rather reflects more strategic guidance and intervention from the local state in economic development. Therefore, the narrative goes beyond the economic geographical description of industrial dynamics, requiring the interrogation of territorial governance, as shown in other strategic developments of high-tech spaces in China (Zhang and Wu 2019).

Economic transition and infrastructure development have begun to link cities in the same region. The PRD has witnessed a transformation from scattered rural industrialisation, to city-centred land development, and finally to networked service industrial development (Yeh and Chen 2019). The cities are linked to form a mega-city region. Although producer services are linked in the region, collaboration between jurisdictions is weak. As the Chinese economy experiences a rising market of domestic consumption, firms in the region have begun to serve a wider hinterland. At the same time, firms that produce for global markets need financial, logistical and other services in the region. All this activity generates a huge demand for office space. New business districts such as Qianhai, Hengqin and Nansha represent a new generation of new towns which are similar to 'edge cities' based on offices and R&D.

The narrative of the mega-city region in the PRD portrays a regional dimension of new geographies of Chinese cities. The insight from the case is that industrial structures (rural manufacturing industries, urban-centred land development and tertiary industries) and corresponding spatial forms are associated. The development of producer services that serve the production activities and consumers in the region has formed a network of cities (Yeh et al. 2015), which is seen throughout a globalising world (Hall and Pain 2006; Scott 2001). In addition, the narrative of the PRD reveals the materiality of mega-city regions: the development of connectivity through high-speed railways and inter-city railways which has profoundly enhanced accessibility and the reach to a wider hinterland. The surprising finding from the PRD is that it is not a narrative of a 'natural' course of economic restructuring and upgrading. Each economic stage corresponds to specific historical and geographical developments: township and village enterprises (TVEs) in rural industrialisation, the conveyance of urban land in city-centred development, and high-

tech, office parks and new central business districts (CBDs) in the period of tertiarisation. Behind these developments are changing development strategies (Zhang and Wu 2019) and governance rescaling to cope with the crisis in the earlier stage (Wu 2016).

The development of high-tech parks or more recently science and smart cities illustrates the aspiration to modernity. Through the narratives of local people, we can begin to understand mega-urban projects such as Zhejiang Hangzhou Future Sci-tech City as state modernisation projects (Anzoise et al. 2019). Recently, China has tried to transform single function industrial parks into mixed-use new cities with extensive public realms and amenities. This represents a new phase of suburbanisation. Near Xixi Wetland National Park, the Future Sci-tech City in Yuhang district has been designed to become a sub-centre of Hangzhou. The development aims to attract talent and promote innovation. Local people feel that the development has created economic prosperity, employment opportunities, infrastructure and landscape improvements, but they are also concerned over the loss of local cultural identity and of flexible and diverse lifestyles. As in many high-tech parks, a policy aiming to attract talent may lead to the exclusion of low-income social groups and inflation in property prices. There are also concerns over environmental quality concerning whether the place would remain the 'garden' of Hangzhou.

The narrative of this case is illuminating about the process of creating new cities that are oriented towards R&D or service industries in a mega-city region. Like many other places such as the Zhangjiang High-tech Park and the Songhuahu High-tech Park, the development of Zhejiang Hangzhou Future Sci-tech City involves significant policy manoeuvres. China is witnessing transition into high-tech development through the promotion of innovation, especially indigenous innovation capacities. 'Indigenous innovation capacities' does not necessarily refer to Chinese firms but rather signifies the ownership of intellectual property rights. The development aims to create and apply knowledge to advance economic benefits rather than just conducting material processing for MNCs. However, different from a more government-initiated project, the future city has also been driven by private capital and the involvement of leading technological firms. High-tech firm clusters form in the future city. The clustering of internet firms is a recent phenomenon in Zhejiang, usually in purpose-built and upgraded small towns known as 'specialised towns' or 'featured towns', resembling edge cities in post-suburbia development (Teaford 1997; Keil 2018). But the Chinese case reveals the hybridity of

state–market roles in this process. While aiming to create an urbanism which is important for talent and innovation, the approach of mega-urban projects often acts in the opposite direction, creating a homogenous and imagined landscape and the loss of diversity and mixed uses. Despite these concerns, the views of local people towards large-scale development are generally positive.

At a larger scale, urban clusters have appeared in China in coastal, central and western regions. For example, in the Yangtze River Valley, many smaller city clusters can be identified (Li et al. 2019). These clusters present different spatial configurations with varying levels of productivity and population densities. In the upper reaches, cities with low productivity are adjacent to each other, while in the Yangtze River Delta, cities with high productivity cluster together. The result is significant inter-region inequality and intra-cluster differentiation. The narrative here presents a regional dimension of China's urbanisation which is presented as a cluster of cities, or a city-region. The research expands recent interests in the city-region in general (Harrison and Heley 2015; Jonas and Moises 2018). The city-regions described in the Yangtze River Valley may be different from the megalopolis as seen by Gottman (1961), or mega-city regions (Hall and Pain 2006). The whole region of the Yangtze River Valley presents different levels of economic development and economic structures.

What is significant in China's urban clusters is the government strategy behind their vision and formation. They are created as a new state space to manage inter-city competition through rescaling and networks (Lim 2019; Wu 2016). Some may not be directly implemented by the state, but through market instruments and operations. The narrative of economic agglomeration stresses the firm and production networks, while the narrative of rescaling emphasises the territorialised governance or a regional form of urbanisation (Jonas and Moises 2018), which is now increasingly becoming planetary (Brenner and Schmid 2014). Also, as illustrated by high-tech parks, smart cities and future cities, their development involves political actors enabling city regionalism (Jonas and Moio 2018), often initiated as a modernisation project by the state. The development of Chinese city-regionalism thus provides a narrative beyond economic-oriented description. The concept of Jing-Jin-Ji is envisioned as 'the project of thousand years' for China's revitalisation. These are specific imaginations. Further, building regional infrastructure such as high-speed railways and regional greenways provides investment opportunities

within an overall development strategy. What is different is that the megalopolis is not a vision or an object of state intervention. It is a more or less geographic description of the distribution of cities. Here, Jing-Jin-Ji is more than an academic concept. These visions present the centrality of state power, while market instruments (networks of cities) are used to achieve this objective. City-regionalism is associated with economic dynamics but they go beyond firm-level interactions. Proximities matter, but they are conditions rather than determinants for linking cities.

The emergent urban clusters in China are not imagined based on statistical measures or inter-city connectivity as usually applied to 'measure' and define the boundaries of city-regions. The narrative of the Chinese city-region contributes to a rescaled and territorialised governance of the nation state (Brenner 2004). The development uses economic agglomeration but goes beyond an imagination of firm clustering, agglomeration, diversity or urbanism. These elements may indeed matter and even be important in the formation of 'urban clusters' in China (Wu 2016). But at the same time, building urban clusters reflects 'state spatial selectivity' and the centrality of state power along with economic transition (Wu 2018). Some urban clusters such as the Great Bay of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao may resort to more market-based and intercity collaborations, while others such as the development of Xiong'an new city in the Jing-Jin-Ji region for Beijing is driven by the vision of the central state for China's new capital. Urban clusters are created by particular local contexts and hence show different levels of economic development and spatial configurations (Li et al. 2019) but are beyond an imagination of economic linkages or pure state mandate – they reflect an urban process.

Finally, as shown in the two critical commentaries, Chinese cases provide new narratives for urban research. Hamnett (2019) asks whether Chinese cities are unique and argues that, because Chinese urbanisation is so different from both western and other developing countries' experiences, we should not simply incorporate China urban studies into an existing literature. Jonas (2019) uses the geographies of city-regionalism to illustrate that Chinese urban development processes are not exclusively unique. They are essentially comparable. China's city-regionalism is produced through China's reposition in a globalizing world, consequential sub-national administrative adjustments, and the imperative to manage new territorial politics of dispersed and cross-boundary developments. From these commentaries, we can see a consensus that the value of

China urban studies is not to generalise them into a universal theory but rather to present new narratives which contributes to our understanding of the cities. This means it is more interesting to stick to original observations from the field and add the narratives to expand an imagination of the urban.

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