Guest editorial

Interrogating unequal rights to the Chinese city

China’s economic development and accompanying social changes are attracting considerable research interest. The literature on China’s sea change in this regard has sparked a proliferation of books, book chapters, and journal articles. Indeed, the unprecedented scale and speed of the changes China is experiencing offer a number of research topics relevant to Western theoretical debates. With the rise of an ‘urban age’ accompanying the birth of ‘the new Chinese city’ (Logan, 2002), China’s new urbanism is rapidly taking shape (Ma and Wu, 2005; Wu, 2007). As capitalist globalization sweeps across the globe, the attendant neoliberal urban policies and programs are fundamentally transforming cities in China and elsewhere, simultaneously creating both urban poverty and marginality and suppressing the appearance of these (Chen, 2011; He and Wu, 2009; Ma, 2009). China’s 1978 reforms, coupled with the forces of globalization and neoliberalism from the outside world, have given rise to a brand-new urban China characterized to a great extent by two important developments: the influx of massive waves of rural migrants to the cities and the rapid reshuffling of the urban population resulting from large-scale urban redevelopment. Although these urban phenomena are not entirely new, their unprecedented scale and speed have rendered the Chinese city much more heterogeneous in its spatial and social structures than at any time in the nation’s history. Nevertheless, the resulting sociospatial patterns are by no means the same as those in the cities of advanced capitalist nations, and it can be argued that many of the seemingly similar socioeconomic and spatial forms in different nations may have arisen from different processes and kinds of logic, a view that challenges the Western-centric “convergence thesis” (Ma and Wu, 2005, pages 10–12). In China the underlying dynamics of change are challenging the explanatory power of the theoretical paradigms that originated in the West. It is, therefore, high time for urban researchers to contemplate the contribution of China’s urban experience to “charting the path” (Harvey, 1973, page 314) of contemporary patterns of urban restructuring.

This theme issue aims to make sense of the rapid remaking of the Chinese city by linking China’s emerging urbanism to important questions of the ‘right to the city’ (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1996). Most of the papers included were selected from the contributions by a group of enthusiastic researchers who presented research papers in triple special sessions devoted to the theme of rights to the Chinese city organized by Chen and He at the 2010 AAG meeting in Washington, DC. These papers address various urban social groups’ rights to the city, including the right to housing/community, employment/livelihood, and public resources, as well as the right to inhabit and thrive in an increasingly globalized and rapidly commodified urban society, where socioeconomic inequality is expanding at an alarming speed.

Locating the ‘right to the city’ in Urban China

In Western literature the ‘right to the city’ thesis often rests on a set of academic and practical quests for social justice. Formulated as the “right to urban life” by Lefebvre, the original idea speaks about the right to “renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses” (1996, page 179). At the heart of the thesis lies the recognition that use values function as organizing principles of city spaces and that they have gradually been replaced by exchange values, thus leading to the appropriation of city spaces by the dominant classes. According to Harvey (1973), social justice inheres in three criteria—need, contribution to common goods, and merit—and as such it justifies a person’s claim to
distributed social goods. The right to the city refers to the “right to housing” (Lefebvre, 1996, page 179), but also to the right to inhabit or to “the uses of city spaces” despite the “exclusivity of property” (Mitchell, 2003, page 19), and it has been addressed on different scales, from the individual, household, and neighborhood levels to the macrolevel (Imbroscio, 2004; Parnell and Pieterse, 2010). To many, the right to the city is a powerful quest for social justice—the antithesis of the widely implemented neoliberal agenda. To Harvey (2008, page 23) the right to the city is broad, encompassing people’s “freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves.”

In the Global South the right to the city deals more precisely with citizenship and housing rights, including protection against forced eviction and protection for squatting (Davis, 2006; Fernandes and Varley, 1998; Smart, 2001), together with the right to make a living invoked to protect small-scale trading in public spaces (Brown, 2006). In the context of the systemic transition from socialism to a market economy, the right to the city covers a broad set of collective and individual rights for the poor and the middle classes in relation to the party state and its neoliberal policies (Gainsborough, 2002; He, 2007; Smart, 1998; Sykora, 2005). Thus, the city is a highly contested space where diverse interest groups seek the right to inhabit, to seek their fortune, or simply to survive. Some claims to the city are modest: for example, those that center on acquiring a living space of one’s own. Others are general, and potentially harmful: for example, those that center on reclaiming urban spaces amid surging tides of privatization and commodification in the name of public welfare or economic progress where crevices of institutional restructuring or administrative fiat have allowed certain privileged groups to benefit immensely at the expense of less advantaged urban groups. Such large-scale claims and the resulting harmful effects are rarely reported or analyzed. The results of these claims are often decided by people highly placed in the urban social/political hierarchy, a practice rooted in both the colonial period and the socialist era (Perreault and Martin, 2005; Ward, 1992). Yet, all city rights are indispensable to the poorest urban residents in their efforts to bring about a better life—efforts that, if successful, can reshape the urbanization trajectories of cities where elite groups are steering urban change under the imperatives of the prevailing neoliberal accumulation regime.

Scholars have made significant efforts to understand China’s dramatic economic, social, and urban transformations, predominantly through empirical analysis. Interpretations tend to focus on at least one of the following: globalization, marketization, deregulation, and decentralization (Ma, 2007). Similarly, four theoretical prisms—modernization, world system/dependency, the developmental state, and market transition—are most often used to conceptualize China’s urban changes (Logan, 2008). However, theoretical expositions of critical urban issues are relatively rare. China’s dazzling economic growth has brought with it alarming urban poverty and thus tremendous social unrest: manifested through dispossession and marginalization resulting from the phenomenal wealth accumulation process, they are often accompanied by collective resistance (Cai, 2010). Some of these adverse outcomes of the economic reforms are documented in studies on urban poverty and social inequality (Chen et al, 2006, Davis and Wang, 2008; Liu and Wu, 2006; Wang, 2005; Wu et al, 2010), landless farmers (He et al, 2009; Hsing, 2010; Lin, 2009), rural migrants (Fan, 2008; Solinger, 1999; Wu, 2008), laid-off workers (Cai, 2006; Solinger, 2002), and forced residential relocation (Shin, 2009; Wu, 2004). Yet, this research is far from sufficient to fully understand China’s urban pathologies in regard to the loss of rights.

It used to be rather rare for urbanites in China to seek any kind of right to the city. The recent rise of the weiquan (meaning defending rights) movement in Chinese cities, however, suggests heated contests revolving around rights to urban spaces, although the movement is still limited to a very small proportion of the urban population, mostly homeowners. When a state and its elites have voluntarily subscribed to the neoliberal urban ideology with its
intense commodification of urban spaces, and when the mass media are strictly controlled by the state, social movements are underreported at best. However, several tiers of citizenship rights are evident in China. At the lowest social level, migrants in Chinese cities exist as de facto urban residents instead of de jure urban citizens with basic citizenship rights to inhabit the city and access to its use values. De jure city dwellers are more likely than are de facto urban residents to face a trade-off between the native right to the use values of city spaces and the right to profit from the exchange values of city spaces, in order to maintain or redefine their class status in a rapidly changing society. As the new market structure becomes more entrenched, former socialist workers, many of whom lost their jobs during the state-owned-enterprise reform, have become almost invisible in the city. Yet, understanding their suppressed rights to the city is important to tracking the path of the Chinese city, which is born of the dual forces of institutional inheritance and market reforms.

Despite recent efforts to relax the hukou system, the stratified bifurcation of citizenship rights has not undergone a fundamental change (Chan, 2009). However, some of the underprivileged have found alternative ways to access resources under the ambiguous property rights regime (He et al, 2009). Compared with earlier times during which rural residents were not allowed to migrate to or sell their labor in the city freely and urban residents were stratified according to their affiliated work units and positions in the political system, presentday Chinese society may not necessarily be worse off. Nevertheless, economic growth has undoubtedly been accompanied by a new urbanism in which heterogeneous social classes, diverse urban spaces, and intensified inequality/marginality figure prominently. This is a key perspective in this theme issue for understanding the remaking of the Chinese city.

**Interrogating unequal rights to the Chinese city**

In the wake of China’s dramatic urban growth and increasing social inequality, a new urban sociospatial order and a number of new sociospatial elements are emerging. By addressing the critical issues of unequal rights to the city, this theme issue draws attention to current dimensions of the sociospatial landscape in globalizing Chinese cities. Specifically, the papers herein, most of which are based on first-hand empirical data and fieldwork, go beyond critiquing the lack of citizenship rights to various resources to offer new interpretations pertinent to urban marginality by situating rights in the unequal social power structure in order to understand contests over rights and to examine the wrestling between institutional and market forces in constituting unequal rights and their changes over time.

The papers represent the first concerted collective effort by geographers to understand the urban changes in contemporary China from the perspectives of unequal rights and efforts to claim the right to the city. More broadly, these geographic studies on social and spatial inequality significantly enrich the social science literature on social unrest and the politics of contention in China (Cai, 2006; 2010; O’Brien, 2008; O’Brien and Li, 2006; O’Brien and Stern, 2008; Solinger, 1999; 2002 ). In keeping with the pioneering work of Lefebvre (1996; 2003), Castells (1977), Harvey (1973), and Mitchell (2003) and recent work by Brenner et al (2009), the papers herein interrogate how the remaking of the Chinese city is being shaped by the imperative of capital accumulation and by the subordination of social interests and marginal groups to neoliberal forces at different spatial scales. Nevertheless, we have tried to avoid framing these papers purely in terms of theories derived from Western European and North American experience. To accomplish this, these papers compare different types of rights for different social groups at different points in time, examine how the disadvantaged groups negotiate their rights to the city through collective and individual strategies, and explore new methods/frameworks to measure unequal rights to housing in China’s cities. We hope this collection gives rise to new ideas relating to China’s sociospatial transformation, in particular to theorizing China’s urban transformation.
This theme issue starts with a critical reappraisal of the concept of the ‘right to the city’ in the Chinese context by situating it within the complex geometries of the power relations in China’s emerging urbanism (Qian and He, 2012). Through a detailed examination of three marginal groups’ rights to the Chinese city, Qian and He (2012) argue that unequal rights to the city are generated and perpetuated by the uneven distribution of social power and resulting institutionalization of social control. Hence, a more meaningful claim for the right to the city necessitates a fundamental structural change beyond the quest for material goods and social welfare.

Focusing on a particular geographical area, Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta, one of the most important powerhouses of China’s postreform economic development, the next four papers present concrete examples of contested and unequal rights to the Chinese city. He and Po each address the stratification and contestation of rights/citizenship in China. He (2012) examines how low-income residents’ basic rights to live in and earn a living in the central city are overridden by the claims of the growth-seeking state and the emerging middle class, amid the two waves of gentrification in Guangzhou. Her paper explores the ways in which the deprived defended their rights to the city and the constraints of the dominant power structure as defined by increasingly neoliberalizing urban policies. Po (2012) addresses another kind of ‘differential citizenship’ (Wu, 2010): that is, urban villagers denied social membership to urban society and access to public resources. Urban villages are physically a part of the city and a contributor to urban growth and, most importantly, a shelter to tens of millions of migrant workers. Yet, they must shoulder the heavy burden of providing public services without any support from the city government. Po (2012) rightly points out that the ‘asymmetrical integration’ of these urban villages into the city, manifested in their unequal access to urban services, social and political exclusion, and stigmatization, result from an unequal power structure between rural and urban inherited from the socialist period and consolidated in the postreform era.

Li and Chen each focus on one of the most important aspects of the right to the city, the citizens’ stratified rights to inhabit the city. Li (2012) uses up-to-date large-scale survey data from Guangzhou to gauge the variations in housing consumption among urban households and to reveal the degree of housing inequality after the 1998 urban housing reform, which had ended the welfare allocation of housing. A general increase in housing inequality is evident, with significant differences reported according to social groups as defined by housing tenure and sociodemographic attributes. The Guangzhou case indicates that market reforms exacerbate unequal rights to housing, yet the inherited inequality from the central-planned system remains important and is further complicated by the lingering hukou system. Based on structural equation modeling and the Pratt index of relative importance for linear regression, Chen (2012) analyzes the structural pathways of housing inequality affected by non-market institutional forces and provides quantitative measures to evaluate both the direct and the indirect effects of biased institutions on housing outcomes. With particular reference to Guangzhou, this paper shows that institutional factors impose a much stronger influence than do market forces on most aspects of housing differentiation, of which homeownership and physical housing conditions demonstrate the largest effects of institutional bias.

China’s urban population now exceeds 650 million, twice as large as the total population of the United States, and more than a third of this population comprises rural migrants. If nothing else, the sheer size of China’s urban population demands critical examination in regard to the question of the right to the city. This general thesis provides a valuable platform where specialists can exchange views on China’s urban inequality. For scholars with different regional interests, explorations of how issues pertaining to people’s rights issues are manifested in Chinese cities can shed much light on the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis which until now has been almost entirely the province of Western scholars basing their
ideas on Western urban experiences with little reference to China, a large transitional country undergoing dramatic economic, social, and spatial transformations. As the issues surrounding the right to the city are multifaceted and complex, there is a need for concerted collective efforts toward in-depth analyses and reflexive work to interrogate the institutional structures and underlying causes shaping China’s urban economic inequality, social exclusion, and spatial fragmentation. Detailed empirical work is needed to examine the ways in which dominant ideologies in the transition from a socialist economy to a market economy, state policies, and neoliberal projects have caused deprivation, displacement, conflicts, and suffering to certain groups of residents in the city. Through such efforts, we hope that the suppressed voices of the marginalized and underserved can be better heard and their struggles for a better life brought to the fore. The papers in this theme issue were collected with these goals in mind. We also hope that these papers can spur the interest of more urban scholars in China and elsewhere to critically examine the overarching issue of social justice in China (Ma, 2007) and “social justice and the city” in particular (Harvey, 1973). After all, cities are for people, not for profit (Brenner et al, 2009).

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