Rethinking Globality: The Geography of Exemplar and Exclusion in Post-socialist China

Tong Lam

Department of History

University of Toronto

(Work in progress; please do not cite)

In recent years, a new mode of urban development has emerged in China. Instead of simply creating an urban landscape dominated by automobile traffic and anonymous apartment buildings, theme-based urbanism is increasingly being appreciated by municipal leaders, planners, investors, and residents. In addition, many business, industries, and research facilities have also moved to the so-called "parks," introducing not just efficiency, but also a sense of exclusiveness and uniqueness. The introduction of these "parks" and especially theme-based gated communities as a more desirable and distinct urban and suburban spaces than the older model of creating anonymous residential, office, and industrial buildings particularly coincides with the rise of the global city discourse within China.

This paper studies the theme-based gated community as a new commodity and technology of government. Using examples of gated communities in Shanghai's satellite cities and Zhuhai in the Pearl Delta Region, Guangdong Province, this paper investigates the underpinning logic and function of this new commodity form, particularly how such theme park urbanism helps construct new social spaces and political subjects for China emerging neoliberal order. By emphasizing the role of the state and the specific historical contexts through which these developments emerged, I seek to engage the current debate on the validity of the global city framework in understanding the contemporary urban development in China. [I hope, in the expanded version of this paper, I will also cover the rise of industrial and science parks as the parallel developments, as these designated economic zones geared toward high-tech and knowledge based industries increasingly play a crucial role in Chinese economy.]

The exemplars of advanced socialist culture

During his visit to Shanghai in 1990, Deng Xiaoping specifically indicated that the importance of developing the Pudong District as a new Special Economic Zone (SEZ) with

national and global implications. Short after that, in order to prepare Shanghai to fulfill its ambitions to expand its population, wealth, service-oriented industries, and global influences, the surrounding counties outside of the Outer Ring Road were redefined as "urban" spaces. A major rationale behind this was that new urban residents who would be moving into these developing suburbs would not lost their existing special privileges associated with their urban status as defined by their household registration, which, needless to say, has always been a crucial instrument for the state to manage the population, especially to regulate its movement between the rural and urban areas.

In 1999, as part of the overall strategic plan to make Shanghai a global metropolis for the new millennium, the idea of the so-called 1-9-6-6 model was first unveiled in the new twenty-year Master Plan. Briefly, the proposal envisions a hierarchal spacial order that would involve a service oriented new "central city," nine decentralized but strategically located administrative "key cities" each with a population from 300,000 to 1,000,000, sixty towns with 50,000-100,000 residents, and six hundred central villages averaging about 2,000 residents each.[1] Yet, novelty aside, it is important to emphasize that the emergence of these theme towns--all linked by commuter trains or highways--do not represent a deviation from the existing Taylorist and Fordist principles of urban planning, but can be considered as an updated version of it. Indeed, although the French architect and planner Le Corbusier's rationalist and purist vision of the urban design has long been discredited in the West, Chinese urban planners continue to embrace those underlying principles, believing that such rationalized social space could facilitate high speed economic growth.

Soon after, this abstract 1-9-6-6 model was translated into a more concrete "One City, Nine Towns Development Plan" for immediate implementation. Most of these strategically located satellite cities are adjacent to science and research parks, universities, and high-tech manufacturing centers. Without any doubt, they are intended to be the exemplary models of what the government called the "advanced culture" of socialist civilization. Chen Liangyu, the mayor of Shanghai at the time especially insisted on making this pilot project as a showcase for the city's cosmopolitan and foward-looking character by hiring leading western architects to

---

[1]Hartog, Harry den."Urbanization of the Countryside." In *Shanghai New Towns: Searching for Community and Identity in Sprawling Metropolis* edited by Harry den Hartog, 7-42. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2010, 23.

develop most of these new theme towns with European spatial and architectural qualities.[2] Some municipal officials even proudly declared that in these theme towns, "foreign visitors would not be able to tell where Europe ends and China begins." In doing so, they hope that these residential enclaves could create a familiar and comfortable environment for foreign residents, overseas Chinese, and returnees on the one hand, and a secure and prestigious home address for domestic urban elites on the other.

The One City, Nine Towns proposal, not surprisingly, immediately faced oppositions. After all, the celebration of Shanghai as a cosmopolitan city by showing the urban and architectural designs from many of the former colonial powers invoked a peculiar, if not perverted, interpretation of Chinese history. Specifically, it downplayed that this specific version of cosmopolitanism was a product of foreign incursions in the age of high imperialism since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, not only that these residential theme towns were used to advance a outward-looking image of Shanghai; officials and heritage experts in Chen's government similarly worked to transform the city's famous waterfront or the Bund, where rival industrial powers once strove to use their unique architectural style to showcase their power and prestige, into a designated heritage site to showcase Shanghai's cosmopolitan roots. They also proposed to evict all the corporate offices in the heritage buildings along the Bund, and convert those spaces into upscale entertainment zones, hotels, and even casinos, arguing that such a move would result in opening those private spaces for the "public" twenty-four hours a day.[3]

Although the Shanghai government maintained that these projects of urban reconfiguring were indications that the city was a leader in promoting the "advanced culture" and "advance productive forces" of China's "socialist civilization," such an attempt to construct a new narrative for Shanghai as a global city is still at odds with the Communist narrative that portray China as a victim of Western imperialism. This is particularly the case since 1989 when the regime desperately seeks to use nationalism to legitimize its existence. Still, in spite of the initial

---

[2] In a way, this highly rationalized and legible developmental scheme eerily resembles G. William Skinner's analysis of the market systems in imperial China. Based on Walter Christaller's abstract geometry of central place theory, Skinner suggests that China should not be understood as a single entity, but as marcoregions organically formed by based on the optimal spatial distribution of cities, towns, and villages based on the logic of market and limits of transportation. Although Skinner's marcoregion involves a much larger area than Shanghai and its vicinity, these two models--one supposedly derived from empirical data and the other a product of topdown planning are also similar in that they are based on a somewhat economic driven and functionalist logic. Therefore, one wonders, as Skinner's critics have charged, whether Skinner's model, which certainly make China highly legible in a certain way, is just a nice idea.

[3] [TBA]

oppositions from Chen's critics and even officials from the Urban Planning Bureau, the One City, Nine Towns plan was officially incorporated into the tenth five year plan in 2001.

Under this new plan, Songjiang was selected to become the model central city as envisioned by the 1-9-6-6 framework. The development will include the construction of an upscale gated community called the Thames Town that would carry a British theme. As for the nine towns or decentralized cities serving as district administrative centers, they are Anting, Jiading District (German), Luodian, Baoshan District (Scandinavian), Zhujiajiao, Qingpu District (traditional Chinese), Fengjing, Jinshan District (Canadian), Pujiang, Minhang District (Italian), Gaoqiao, Pudong District (Dutch), Zhoupu, Nanhui District (USA), Fengcheng, Fengxian District (Spanish), Chengqiao, Chongming District (traditional Chinese). While the USA town was ultimately cancelled due to the optimization of the plan, constructions of other towns were forged ahead.

Although the Thames Town seems to be over the top in its imitation of the classic English market town, other theme towns tend to be ultramodern and contemporary in design. Nevertheless, compelled by the overall context of the master plan, designers often try to find ways to articulate some supposedly national themes to satisfy the desires of the Chinese clients and users--municipal leaders, investors, and residents--to have a foreign and exotic feel. For example, the Italian Town, designed by Augusto Cagnardi, includes Italian motifs such as columns and canals. The German Town, meanwhile, received extra attention as it was designed by Albert Speer, the son of Hitler's favorite architect. Speer also won the contract to design the new central axis in Beijing that extends the old imperial axis from the Forbidden City to the Olympic campus, which was no doubt the focal point of China's historic coming out party. The Jiading District where Anting is located, of course, is also the home of the Volkswagen plant in China. In short, whereas architects generally highlights the use of smart design, sustainability, and other amenities, the Chinese users like to essentialize and consume these design products as the cultures of foreign nations.

Symbolic economy and subjectivation

The conversion of the Bund into an exclusive space as well as the creation of exemplary gated communities for the consumer elites is hardly an isolated phenomenon. Increasingly, Chinese cities have become what Engin Isin calls the "difference machine" for the production of

alterity.[4] Among other things, buildings with historical and cultural features—old and new—are being used to enunciate symbolic statements of exclusion and entitlement.[5] In his study of the militarization of urban space in American cities, Mike Davis has further shown how militaristic and offensive techniques are increasingly being mobilized to privatize public space in order to meet the middle-class desire to construct a utopia free of dangers and chaos in our ever-exacerbating culture of fear.[6] In these Chinese residential colonies in Shanghai and elsewhere, spatial demarcations are not only accomplished through the massive presence of walls, gates, surveillance cameras, and security guards, but also the architectural manipulation of cultural and historical symbols. For instance, the Thames Town in Songjiang features cobblestone streets, Victorian terraces, as well as a church directly copied from Clifton, Bristol, and a pub and fish and chip shop from in Lyme Regis, Dorset. Here, buyers of these new homes are reportedly attracted to the exotic appeals of these theme towns for they regard these exotic cultural and historical motifs as expressions their cultural sensibilities. In the Pujiang, in addition to its Italian motifs, the main entrance near the sale center is marked by a suggestive art installation, a golden businessman holding a cell phone in a fountain to appeal to its middle class buyers.

In addition to the picturesque building façades and public spaces, interior design and lifestyles are integrated aspects of the cultural and historical spectacle. Homeowners, for instance, are constantly being coached to live a spectacular life themselves by reading colorful interior design handbooks as well as attending seminars run by designers and architects, all supplied by the developer. Moreover, luxury lifestyles mean more than just acquiring detailed design knowledge on color schemes, lightings, and furniture styles. For example, in addition to shopping in "public" spaces called Venice Rivera and Torino Plaza in their local simulacrum, residents of Pujiang are encouraged to learn about Italian art, architecture, music, literature, history, as well as wine and food. They could even learn about the life of the famous Italian writer and semiotician Umberto Eco and his works, and curate their own collections of opera albums.[7] As well, residents are encouraged to perform, reenact, and share their spectacular

---

[4] Isin, E. F. (2002). City as a Difference Machine. <u>Being political : genealogies of citizenship</u>. E. F. Isin. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press**:** 1-52.

[5] Zukin, S. (1995). <u>The Cultures of Cities</u>. Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishers.

[6] Davis, M. (1992). Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space. <u>Variations on a theme park : scenes from the new American city and the end of public space</u>. M. Sorkin. New York, Hill and Wang**:** 154-180.

[7] [TBA]

lives through events such as interior design competition and photo competition organized by the management company.

In many cases, middle class visitors too are welcome into these control and semi-public spaces as spectators. For example, in Thames Town, the most visible business is wedding photography. Here, young couple can act out their Occidentalist fantasies by adopting the "exotic marriage customs" in which they exchange vows in front of a pastor inside a church.[8] They can also use the town's Victorian architecture to stage their wedding photos. In short, even if these visitors are not yet ready to purchase their homes in these exclusive enclaves, they are at least invited to imagine their own spectacular lives in the backdrop of a perfectly harmonic, utopian, and majestic film set.

Significantly, despite their obvious universal connotations, the cosmopolitan and environmental ideals embodies in these suburb master plans are demonstrated through the idea of "national" culture based on the problematic notion of the system of the nation-states. This was especially accomplished through the essentializing use of starchitects, technologies, and designs. According to the promotional material, Albert Speer regards his new town, which includes a town center with shopping, hotel, convention facilities, and even a church, as an expression of an ideal city in which all evil elements of urban life are being eliminated so that the organic and natural order between nature and human could be restored. In order to reinforce a sense of a harmonic sanctuary vis-à-vis the chaotic and rapidly changing Chinese cities with roaming migrant workers, hoardings around the construction site also showcase images of people relaxing in various Berlin parks. All these, the promotional material claims, are made possible using the "the fruits of German architectural art and technology."[9]

The One City, Nine Towns project in the suburb of Shanghai is of course only the tip of the iceberg. All over China, the proliferation of amusement and theme parks has been accompanied by the spectacularization of commercial and residential real estate developments. Another case in point is the Huafa New Town located in the southern city of Zhuhai in the Pearl River Delta region in Guangdong Province, which has been considered as one of the thirty most influential residential communities in China. Built by a prominent Hong Kong developer, the project markets itself as a utopia of ecological balance and sustainability, as well as a place that embodies the "essence of Western thinking and Eastern aesthetics."[10]

---

[8] [TBA]

[9] [TBA]

[10] [TBA]

Not unlike those real estate projects mentioned above, security apparatus is vitally important to the symbolic economy of Huafa New Town. Specifically, the community is carefully protected a large security force staffed by cheap migrant workers, include even ex-soldiers from the People's Liberation Army. Lived in a specially built compound at the edge of the community, these security personnel are subjugated to a rigid military style work environment and training regime in their daily life. Indeed, when showing me around the neighborhood, one informant proudly told me that the abundance of cheap labor is contemporary China's advantages over other countries. These "advantages," needless to say, speak to the core of the sentiments of exclusion and entitlement of China's new urban elites. For instance, all incoming and outgoing private cars entering the area would be greeted by a military salute by a security guard, which, needless to say, was reserved for leaders during the Communist era. Likewise, community newsletters prepared by the management also frequently report vivid stories of how properties of the residents are protected by the heroic acts of security guards. One such story recounts how a security personnel with photographic memory helped to track down a briefcase of cash accidentally left in a taxi by a prospective investor.[11] Oddly enough, while all residents are expected to feel a sense of pride and security for being a member of the larger Huafa New Town, they do not always enjoy the same privileges. The development, which involves expensive villas as well as more moderate middle-class high-rise apartments, is actually made up of multiple districts marked by different cultural and natural themes. The resident's privileges to access to each district are recorded in a magnetic control card that he or she needs to carry in order to move around the community. In a sense, this is essentially a gated community with sub-gated communities, and a city within a city.

On the surface at least, although the emergence and proliferation of these residential enclaves in China seems to resemble the parallel developments elsewhere, including those in North American analyzed by Davis, there is also a long tradition of using gated residential neighborhoods as a form of social control and governance in twentieth century China. During the Communist period, Chinese society was organized into self-sustaining social and economic units known as *danwei* as part of the total mobilization for the revolution and the Cold War. This practice, as many historians have argued, was itself reminiscent of the much older institution known as *lijia* and *baojia* employed by successive imperial regimes for the purposes of communal surveillance, local defense, and tax collection centuries ago. Although the older

---

[11] There is of course a discrepancy between the reality and the utopian image created by the management and developer. In 2008, for instance, a resident was accidentally run over and killed by security guard who was on motorcycle patrol.

communal surveillance system became increasingly ineffective by the nineteenth century and abandoned by the Chinese dynastic state, it was hardly out of fashion. In the second half of the nineteenth century as well as the first half of the twentieth century, the system was appropriated and transformed by the British and Japanese colonial administrations respectively in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as by the Nationalist regime first in China and later in Taiwan into an integral component of the modern technologies of government.[12] The continuous vitality of the old system in different times and contexts perhaps explain why the globally circulating idea of gated communities embedded with modern security apparatuses and spectacular architectures as a new mode of urban governance proliferates so quickly in contemporary China.

David Bray has especially shown how the Chinese government stated to promote the idea of gated housing estates made up of several thousand households as early as the 1980s. Commonly known as *xiaoqu,* these enclosed neighborhoods do not just make the social world legible for the state, they also help to promote communal cohesion, improve local hygiene, and produce citizens with good quality (*suzhi*).[13] In short, these urban designs are never just residuals of the past. They are also longstanding practices being reactivated and reconfigured for modern governing purposes. During the SARS crisis in 2003, the system was even mobilized to fight against epidemics.[14]

The rise of theme-based urbanism as a new form of commodity, however, does not mean that China is simply experiencing a shift from production to consumption. Rather, domestic consumption, which has been actively promoted by the state since the 1990s and particularly after the recent global financial crisis, is directly related to China's rapid industrialization. In fact, the ascendency of China as the so-called "factory of the world" has to be comprehended alongside with how consumption has increasingly become a vital instrument for disciplining and managing the general population in the rapidly expanding neoliberal economy.

It is in this context, the significance of these theme-based gate communities becomes apparent. Unlike in the Communist era when gated communities more or less enjoyed similar status, these new gated neighborhoods highlight social distinction and difference. Moreover,

---

[12] Lam, Tong "Policing the Imperial Nation: Sovereignty, International Law, and the Civilizing Mission in Late Qing China *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 4 (2010): 881-908.

[13] Bray, David *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

[14] [TBA]

instead of calling for vigilance against class enemies as they did in the height of the Cold War. Instead, these theme-based communities seek to construct a harmonious society by cultivating self-consciously cosmopolitan and sophisticated middle-class citizens. As Luigi Tomba has demonstrates, residential communities in contemporary China, especially those of the middle class are becoming an important instrument of governance.[15] But what is particularly significant is that these urban spaces do not just produce "high-*suzhi*" citizens, but to compel those who live there that they are having higher-*suzhi* in the neoliberal context of competition and accumulation.

By the eleventh five year plan (2006-2010), the One City, Nine Towns project, after a period of intense construction, was abruptly put on hold. Since then, many of theme towns remain incomplete, many of those completed buildings remain largely unoccupied, and are in the hands of domestic and overseas Chinese speculators. As such, these theme towns have joined China's growing list of ghost cities caused by overdevelopment and poor planning. While the Thames Town has also become nothing but a stage for wedding photography, the greater Songjiang new city, now with a population of close to a million, along with other two other equivalent "central cities," continues to flourish as it was built on a previously growing satellite city.

The decline of Chen Liangyu's political fortune, to be sure, was a crucial factor to the abandonment of the original One City, Nine Towns project.[16] Part of its failure must also be the result of the hasty manner through which the plan was devised and executed. This later problem is particular symptomatic of the kind of what James Scott calls the topdown "high-modernist" planning.[17] Yet, failures aside, spectacular theme-town developments such as these and gated communities in general are increasingly common in China. While many of these new gated communities continue to include massive residential towers, along with mid-rise buildings and town houses, it is not uncommon that they use cultural and historical themes to create a sense of uniqueness and exclusiveness. In other words, developers of these theme-based communities like to present these new urban spaces as alternative to the early form of

---

[15] Tomba, Luigi "Of Quality, Harmony, and Community: Civilization and the Middle Class in Urban China *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 17, no. 3 (2009): 592-616.

[16] Chen was stripped of all positions in the same year when the plan was put on hold. He was later convicted of corruption.

[17] Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State*. Edited by James C. Scott, Yale Agrarian Studies Series. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

anonymous apartment buildings that emphasize sameness. In fact, these projects seem to be popular enough that even lower middle class and working class residential apartments in city's outskirts also begin to deploy similar spectacular architectural languages to create a false sense of luxury and cultural sophistication.

Beyond finance capital

As novel as theme park urbanism is in China, they do not deviate from the Taylorist and Fordist principles of standardization and efficiency. Indeed, as I mentioned above, the rise of the theme based gated community as a form of commodity as well as the general rise of consumerism do not suggest that consumption, albert it has become more and more visible in China's urban landscape, has replaced production as the primary logic of development. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin in contemporary China. In this sense, although recent studies of the global city, which emphasizes networks, flows, and deterritorialization, have departed considerably from the older modernization theory, it is still largely grounded on the Euro-American experience. Many scholars particularly emphasize the importance of financial capital, and the roles of New York, London, and a handful of mostly Western cities in the process of financialization. It privileges certain visible aspects of development (such as media, creative industries, and so forth) that render services to the process as the yardstick of globalization. As such, these analyses have often failed to account for the types of networks and modes of development that are actively shaped by regional and local forces.[18]

More specifically, granted that financialization encourages the migration of capital from production to speculation, and it generates paper wealth without any meaningful input of product and service, this does not automatically mean that production is no longer important. In the case of Shanghai, as the city becomes arguably the most rapidly globalizing metropolis, and its economy becomes increasingly service-oriented, its return to the global stage is inseparable from the corresponding expansion of the Lower Yangtze Region as an important global manufacturing and industrial hub. After all, as historians have long argued, from the very beginning, the "opening" of Shanghai by the imperialist powers in the nineteenth century and its subsequent ascendancy into a global city in the first half of the twentieth century was very much grounded on the fact that the region had already been playing a vital role in the global economic system centuries before.

---

[18] Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006; Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N. *Global Shanghai,1850-2010*. London: Routledge, 2009;

In other words, if we prioritize finance capital as the primary category to locate the importance of a city in the global hierarchy of decision making and division of labor, we naturally would get one ranking of global cities. If we consider other extra financial matter, we are likely to get a rather different story. However, it is not my intention here to produce an alternative list of global cities. In fact, ranking (of cities, universities, products, wealth, and so forth)--itself an important instrument for making the world legible and calculable--is a historical product and cultural symptom of our times, especially the neoliberal economy. Instead, it is more important to examine the ways in which globality is imagined and how globalization unfolded. Specifically, without seeing globalization as an one directional or diffustionist process, as advocates of the modernization theory have done, this paper suggests that we need to consider how and when local conditions are enlisted by and merged into the global forces.

Such as endeavor is often difficult as it is uncommon that local agents of globalization seem to accept the diffusionist premise of globalization. Take, for instance, the urban planning of Shanghai. Since the 1990s, municipal leaders, academics, and planners have repeatedly emphasized the importance of the city to join the global world. Rhetorically, from the planning of the One City, Nine Towns project to the redevelopment of the Bund mentioned above, officials and pundits seem to recite the manual for building a global city drafted by their Western counterparts. In fact, the same consultant firms are often hired by Chinese municipal governments to tries to transplant those projects. [A perfect case in point: Beijing] Yet, what is often missing in many of the existing studies is the determination to "follow" the supposedly established pattern of development often, perhaps always, entails adaption, adjustment, and innovation in which the local processes are not simply the received events of predefined programs. Rather, these local processes are the driving forces of global circulation.

China as a social laboratory

In a sense, the recent debate among scholars who are interested in China's emerging global cities is reminiscent of a previous debate on how to approach the history of modern China.[19] In that older debate, some leading historians, who regard their methods as "China-centered," have rejected the earlier tendency to see modern China as nothing but a reaction to the West that began with China's violent encounter with the European industrial powers in the

---

[19] See Chen, Xiangming, and Zhenhua Zhou *Shanghai Rising: State Power and Local Transformation in a Global Megacity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, including the essay by Sakia Sassen; Hill, R. C., and J. W. Kim "Global Cities and Development States: New York, Tokyo, and Seoul *Urban Studies* 37 (2000): 2167-95.

nineteenth century. In other words, they refuse to characterize the so-called "traditional" China as stagnate and argue that we need to make sense of China's modern transformation in terms of indigenous and long term causes that existed prior to and independent from the arrival of Western influences.[20] While the "China centered" approach is intended to be culturally sensitive, and it tries to make sense of China in its own terms and to give agency to the local people, it often unconsciousness reinforces the problematic assumption that the East and the West are two separate histories and civilizations with limited interaction until the modern era. Recent historical works, such as those by Kenneth Pomeranz, Bin Wong, and others have showed rather convincingly that it would be more productive to see how mutual influences, interactions, and circulation have created the modern world.[21]

Not unlike the debate between those who embraces the "China centered" approach and those who like to see modern China merely as a response to the West, the debate on the rise of Chinese and East Asian global cities often include views that see globality and globalization as brand new phenomena, as well as views that maintain that there exists a unique pattern of development within East Asian societies. Perhaps, not unlike the previous debate on modern Chinese history, there is more fruitful way to think about how globalization unfolded and how globality is imagined. Indeed, even in the turn of the 20th century, Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Beijing were used by competing colonial authorities and American Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to test their styles of governance, medical research, and public health programs. For instance, in her study of Tianjin, Ruth Rogaski has shown how the coexistence and rivalries between different colonial authorities often made the Chinese modernizing drive far more intense than those equivalent processes in European metropoles and colonies.[22] Not surprisingly, the conventional narrative of modernization, which embraces a linear and diffusionist view of history, can hardly capture the complexities of China's modern experience in the global context. At one level, China certainly had a long history of urbanization and commercialization that existed long before the nineteenth century. In a way, as Pomeranz and others have showed, China's urbanization in the Lower Yangtze Region was an important

---

[20] Cohen, Paul A. *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

[21] Pomeranz, Kenneth *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton Economic History of the Western World. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.

[22] Rogaski, Ruth *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

contributing factor to the rise of the early modern world system that, in turn, provided a crucial condition for the rise of industrial capitalism. But even more importantly, in the era of colonialism and imperialism, China, not unlike much of the non-Western world, was never a passive recipient of modernity and progress. On the contrary, as scholars who use the concept of "colonial modernity" have showed, modernity and colonialism are essentially the same process.[23]

Here, I would like to offer two examples to illustrate my thoughts on this subject. First, while colonial administrators and social scientists openly talked about the needs of bringing civilization to the world, their everyday practices often tell a rather different story. That is to say, their desire to "civilize" others always involved the development of new technologies of government that would ultimately reshape the metropole itself. The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, even explicitly described China as a "social laboratory," believing that its experiments and interventions in China would generate universally applicable knowledge that could help to transform the future of humanity.

If Western social engineers regarded China as their playground for creating a future for mankind, Chinese intellectual-elites, too, regarded China as a laboratory of modernity. Although Chinese reformers and revolutionaries frequently asserted that China was different from other societies and therefore required its own developmental models, they also envisioned or at least implied that their new China could potentially become a model for the rest of the world. And their social engineering projects of making a new China were not just grounded on a certain vision of urban China, but also certain visions of rural-urban relationships. For the Communist leader Mao Zedong, the peasantry was the driving force of the revolution. For the Nationalists, their dream was to build a mostly urban based industries. For the rural reconstructionists, whose rural social experiments actually inspired the social scientists of the Rockefeller Foundation to revamp their own practices that would ultimately shape the most prominent postwar development models. In this respect, if we do not just focus on the city simply in the narrow and literal sense, but to see the idea of the city in the context of the rural and urban relationships-- real or imagined, then urban China was always an indispensable factor for imagining the global future for Chinese and Western social scientists, experts, and engineers.

---

[23] Barlow, Tani."Introduction: On "Colonial Modernity"." In *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, edited by Tani Barlow, 1-20. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Second, even the high modernist approach to development and planning mentioned earlier should not be seen merely as a Western model. Le Corbusier, the famous French architect and urban planner who championed for a purist and rationalist model of urbanism drew inspirations at least in part from his (mis)conception of the non-Western Other. From the perceived simplicity of the Ottaman houses and the symmetrical order of the imperial garden in Chengde, the Qing empire's summer capital to the seemingly chaotic urban structures in French Algeria and exotic spaces in Istanbul, Le Corbusier formed his positive and negative imaginaries of the Other in order to create his own theory of a purist, rationalist, and universalist urban order. Although Le Corbusier's proposal to "rationalize" the slums of Paris based on his "Plan Voisin" (1925) was never implemented, his urban designs such as the Contemporary City (1922) and the Radiant City (1933) do not lack followers in many developing countries. Driven by the same underlying principles of Taylorism and Fordism in management and production, urban planners in Asia, including China, often insist on the importance of reorganizing the city to facilitate the movement of people and products. They fear the filthy and cramped conditions urban slums could become the hotbeds for diseases and political dissent, disrupting the economic and social order of the state.

Significantly, while Le Corbusier's vision was discredit at in the West, these high modernist urban planning ideas appeal not only to native elites of the global south, but also colonial administrators who prioritize development, stability, and social control over the quality of life and political participation. The urban development in colonial Singapore since the interwar era is a case in point. Since its full independence in 1965, the government further invested its public housing projects and rationalize its urban space using such high modernist principles. Interestingly, instead of being seen as a disaster, the Singapore style of urban development is generally regarded as a success for it facilitate a sociality associated with a middle class society and high growth economy. It inspired British architects at home and colonial officials in Hong Kong. The housing projects in Hong Kong, in truth Le Corbusier spirit but updated and refined, ultimately become one of the major sources of inspiration for China's urban development in recent decades.[24]

Conclusion

---

[24] Some of these Hong Kong housing projects, also found its way to shape many of the upscale highrise residential projects in Vancouver and Toronto.