



PROJECT MUSE®

## Introduction

You-Tien Hsing

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, Volume 1,  
Number 1, May 2012, pp. 1-11 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ach.2012.0003>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/478979>

# TERRITORIALITY AND SPACE PRODUCTION IN CHINA

## Introduction

YOU-TIEN HSING, GUEST EDITOR

*University of California, Berkeley*

Analyses of the local state in China in the past three decades have made a major contribution to the theorization of the state. By observing the active role of the local state in the economic transformation in post-Mao China, we have learned that the local state can no longer be treated as a passive agent, subordinate to the principality of the central state; nor is it sufficient to view the local state merely as a crisis manager.<sup>1</sup> Because of the dynamic interaction between different levels of the Chinese state and the blurry line between policy making and implementation, we have also learned that the relationship between the central and local states can not be adequately portrayed as a dichotomy. Furthermore, the organization of the Chinese state compels us to recognize that a decentralized form of authoritarianism seems to have helped state power sustainability in the globalizing market economy.

A growing number of studies on the unprecedented pace and scale of urban expansion in China since the 1980s have been undertaken in parallel with the theorization of the local state. Researchers have focused primarily on the motor of urbanization, mechanisms of rural-urban migration, and changing regime of land rights. The key role of the local state is made plain in this body of research, as most changes are invariably dominated by the state and its policies. The concept of “state-led urbanization” is representative of this analytical thrust. It posits that state-based planning power, state land tenure, and state control over rural-urban mobility establish conditions in which the local state supersedes the market and consequently dictates the direction and pace of urban growth in Chinese cities today.<sup>2</sup>

In this special issue, we take this direction of investigation further and try to bridge the studies of the state and the studies of the city by employing the concepts of space production and territoriality. We define *space production* as the spatial dynamism of the politics of accumulation and distribution and *territoriality* as spatial strategies and strategization to consolidate power and secure autonomy. In such spatial analyses, the relationship between the state and the city is treated as a set of power processes among the state, the market, and society over the control and occupation of places, hence turning a place into a territory.

We use the following set of tools to operationalize these concepts: First, following the geographical tradition of treating space as more than a passive container of social processes,<sup>3</sup> we see the city as a territorial entity playing an active role in the making of China's post-Mao political economy. Instead of regarding the city as being "led" by the state or by any other source of higher-order power, like the "market," we see the urban process as a formative force in social transformation and a definitive element in the making of the local state. By this alternative logic, the city and the local state build each other. More specifically, while the local state mobilizes resources to try to expand the city, the very struggle over urban expansion comes to define, legitimize, and consolidate urban-based local state power.

For sure, there are many cases of unsuccessful, scandalous, and even disastrous urban projects undertaken by the local state, some of which delegitimize and destabilize local states and their overly ambitious and/or incompetent leaders. Successful or not, however, urban construction has become the key mechanism of local state building. Local accumulation is dependent on land sales and land development, whereas the local state apparatus grows in tandem with urban expansion. New towns, high-tech industrial zones, and university towns start off as development-oriented construction projects, but are completed as territorial additions under the jurisdiction of urban governments. Local state leaders aspire to be landowners, planners, financiers, builders, and boosters all at once. As a result, local politics come to center on the politics of urban development projects, which then define the dynamics of the local state and its relations vis-à-vis the market and society. As local state building is inextricably linked to city building, the local state can also be undone by failure in urban construction. This uncertainty underscores how urban processes do not merely reflect sociopolitical agen-

das, but initiate them as well. Therefore, it is the dialectical “urbanization of the local state,” more than the linear concept of “state-led urbanization” that characterizes the relationship between the local state and the urban process in China today.<sup>4</sup>

Second, we expand the concept of the city to encompass the notion of territoriality, defined as spatial strategies to consolidate power in a given place and time and to secure autonomy.<sup>5</sup> Territoriality is the single most important aspect of the local state’s power strategy and the key channel through which its power is materialized. The local state can be seen as a territorialization of state power. Hinsley (1986) has framed territoriality as “local state sovereignty” and saw the local state as the site that brings together the “sovereignty abstraction” and the “territorial concrete.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the “territorial concrete”—which is secured through access to and control over land, resources, and population in a jurisdiction—is indispensable to the materialization of the local state’s power. Local state building and territorial control are integral and defining dynamics of the state. Securing territorial control is also a highly contentious process among local states. It triggers competition, negotiation, and strategic collaboration aimed at defining and defending jurisdictional boundaries, or at reducing gaps between nominal and actual authority over the jurisdiction. Territorial contestation is unusually intense when the premises of state authority are underdefined and local state territorial jurisdictional boundaries shift frequently, as has been the case in China over the past thirty years.

Third, we expand the analysis of territoriality from the realm of the state to that of society. In the geopolitical literature, territory is often associated with state sovereignty and is aligned most closely with the nation-state. In our view, territory is contested not only between the ruling elites of the state but also between the state and society. Societal actors develop territorial strategies for self-protection, which may contradict the territorial logic of the state. In my work, I have found that Chinese local governments use urban redevelopment powers to destroy old neighborhoods, displace inner-city residents, and rebuild downtowns. Inner-city protesters respond by making legal and moral claims over their rights to property, housing, and a livelihood in the city. Similarly, as urban governments initiate expansion into neighboring villages, villagers at the urban fringe strategize collectively and individually to avoid displacement. They engage in urban real estate markets

and occasionally manage to secure a relative territorial autonomy in the metropolitan center. Meanwhile, in remote rural fringe areas, large numbers of displaced villagers lose economic, social, and cultural resources, resulting in their deterritorialization.

In such cases, territoriality is central to societal actors' cultivation of collective identities, to their framing of grievances and demands, and to their options and choice of collective actions. Territoriality also shapes the results of their struggle, leading to territorialization or deterritorialization in varying degrees. I call societal actors' conscious cultivation and struggle to build territory at physical, political, and discursive levels "*civic territoriality*." Territoriality, when viewed from the ground up, is as much a tool of resistance as of dominance. While the local state uses urban construction to consolidate and legitimize its territorial authority, societal actors use territorial strategies for self-protection and for assertion of their rights to the city. These territorial struggles are a critical platform for social activism. The notion of civic territoriality brings society to the center of territorial politics and puts territoriality at the root of collective actions.

With these analytical tools, authors in this special issue present their studies of China's territorial politics in three interrelated directions: territorial order and state power, territorialization of capital, and civic territoriality. While most of the papers focus on contemporary China, one of the authors broadens our scope by bringing in a case study of the Republican era. The four papers in this print issue are selected from the inaugural issue of the *Cross Currents* e-journal published in December 2011. Readers are encouraged to find the complete set of papers with color images online at <http://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/inaugural-issue>.

## TERRITORIAL ORDER AND STATE POWER

In the online counterpart to this print volume, George C. S. Lin's study of local governance in Guangdong goes directly to the core of capital accumulation and the roots of the local state's "territorial concrete" in China today: the land. Lin uses Guangdong, the forerunner in China's market reforms and urban expansion, to investigate the connections between urban expansion and rural land appropriation. A richly territorial story, it centers on the physicality and the politics of land. By showing that Guangdong's

urban jurisdictional expansion has taken place mostly in existing large cities rather than newly created cities, Lin argues that urban governments forcefully expanded the jurisdiction into rural hinterlands through annexation and incorporation in order to gain control over land in the countryside, and hence profit from the conversion of land from agricultural to commercial use. Jurisdictional expansion is a common form of territorial consolidation in which higher-level urban-based local states use administrative and jurisdictional authority to extend control over rural governments and their jurisdictions with a clear goal of controlling land and land rents. Meanwhile, the urban government's imposition of forced mergers of jurisdictional units inevitably meets with resentment and protests, sparking a contentious process of territorial consolidation.

In this print issue, Carmen Tsui's study shows that state territorial projects are always controversial, but success is rarely guaranteed. Tsui's research on Nanjing during the Republican era is a case in point. Despite the Nationalist regime's effort to demonstrate and consolidate its power through grandiose redevelopment projects in Nanjing, it faced repeated setbacks and finally aborted its plans. At a time of great political instability, the regime's organizational, financial, and legitimacy capacities proved incommensurate to its territorial ambitions. One should not take for granted, therefore, the coherence between intentions and consequences of state territorial projects. Meanwhile, the case of Nanjing illustrates how elaborate urban development plans demonstrate the aspiration of state leaders and may be used for political persuasion and inspiration if the circumstance permits. The very process of urban planning is itself a territorial process in which the state tries to claim authority, designate and allocate land, make allies through zoning, and inevitably stir divisions between those who profit and those who lose as a result of the plan. The controversies surrounding the capital plans for Nanjing and the eventual failure of the project tell us as much about the territorial ordering of the state as a plan that is successfully implemented.

#### TERRITORIALIZATION OF CAPITAL

This section provides spatial accounts of China's accumulation politics from the perspective of the territorialization of capital. While geographer David Harvey brought our attention to the *urbanization* of capital as a process

through which the circuits of capital expand from industrial production to the urban real estate sector, here we incorporate capital accumulation into place-based political power, and treat the occupation and control of territory as an integral aspect of capital accumulation. Territorialization of capital comprises different types of capital, including industrial, financial, and symbolic capital. It also encompasses different types of spaces: urban, rural, metropolitan, and spaces in between. Territorialization of capital is at the center of territorial politics, and capital operates and accumulates through territorialization. In post-socialist China, where spatial planning has superseded economic planning as the primary tool of accumulation, what needs to be further explored is how different types of capital are territorialized in different types of spaces. In this issue, we have three articles addressing this question.

In the e-journal, Crison Chien and Fulong Wu's project uses the case of Kunshan Municipality in the lower Yangtze River Delta to examine the transformation of China's urban entrepreneurialism. Their story of territorialization of capital starts with the multi-scaled territorial politics in the competition for capital among state actors at different jurisdictional ranks.

As all local state leaders push for urban expansion to facilitate capital accumulation, competition becomes particularly explosive when it comes to the question of which state actors, at what ranking in the jurisdictional hierarchy, have the legitimacy to dictate this process and hence command the results, and how others could and should respond. The stake, which is quantifiable in terms of the area of land and unit rents, largely conditions the degree of the contention. The territorial politics of accumulation become even more entangled as local state leaders face the impulse to engage in capital expansion across territorial boundaries. Besides competition, it is also urgent for local leaders to collaborate and coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions in the interests of market expansion and scale economy. Regional-level coordination led by, and often imposed by, higher authorities becomes necessary through measures like spatial division of functions for individual territorial units, designation of specialization zones, assignment of complementary roles for different cities of the same region, and redrawing of jurisdictional boundaries between territorial units. Regional coordination is mobilized under the rationale of seeking a more efficient allocation of resources—especially land, in this case—for capital accumulation and

expansion. The new urban entrepreneurialism in China today, the authors argue, features the politics of state-directed capital expansion across territorial boundaries.

Jenn-hwan Wang and Tse-kang Leng's contribution on high-tech industrial parks in Beijing and Shanghai, included in this print issue, offers an intriguing twist in the story of the territorialization of capital. Here, accumulation is materialized through aspiration, motivated and inspired by a sense of place. The discursive meanings of place are attached to the production and consumption of the place. According to the authors, high-tech parks in Beijing and Shanghai are as much a part of the local state's real estate schemes as they are expressions of the central government's technological advancement programs.

In Beijing, the physical seedbed of the microelectronics industry in China, no less than ten high-tech zones, scattered throughout the municipality in both urban and peri-urban areas, are collected under the umbrella name of Zhongguancun, also known as "China's Silicon Valley." The original Zhongguancun, the boundaries of which are themselves murky, was an area of less than ten square kilometers located in northwestern Beijing's Haidian District, where major universities and research institutes are clustered. Now the total area of all parks under the name Zhongguancun in different pockets of the city is 233 square kilometers. The image of modernity, centrality, and prestige associated with high-tech parks in Beijing's Zhongguancun helped build a direct connection between the label of high-tech parks and property values. The connection is made not only in and around the designated park site but also far beyond its original physical location. The discursive meaning of innovation and technology in national development is converted into the commercial value of real estate projects in the metropolis.

Wang and Leng's study of Beijing's Zhongguancun and Shanghai's Yangpu demonstrates the importance of differentiating the physical, organizational, and discursive dimensions of territoriality, and of looking at the connections and gaps among them. In Beijing and Shanghai, the gap between the physical and discursive location of a place was exploited as a tool for territorial expansion at the discursive level that benefited various district governments of individual locales. The elasticity of the discursive location of high-tech zones and the commodification of the label of innovation has encouraged dispersed claims over "high tech," which symbolizes not only



technological advancement but also social prestige and cultural superiority. Although the symbolism still needs some form of substance for support, that substance is not necessarily the technology content of the firms in the science park, but rather the increase in real estate values of the project. From a policy perspective, the irony of the real estate-framed high-tech park, as Wang and Leng suggest, is that the increasing rents of the parks and neighboring areas eventually drive out truly innovative firms. Indeed, capital accumulation did take place in the high-tech parks, just not necessarily in actual high-tech activities.

Max D. Woodworth's article, featured here, takes us to Ordos Municipality in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, a place in stark contrast to the leading metropolitan centers of Beijing and Shanghai. Historically poor and marginal, Ordos has transformed into a major center of accumulation in the last ten years primarily as a result of coal mining. Many of the territorial strategies employed by the autonomous region's government, including upgrading Ordos from a peripheral and Mongolian-sounding "*league*" to the modern and prestigious status of a *municipality*, is hardly a novel move in China today. Nor does the grandiose scale of real estate projects in Ordos's new town differ drastically from the mega urban spectacles found in cities along China's east coast. Yet it is the very replication of such strategies in Ordos that are of interest. Capitalist expansion through territorial consolidation can be found even in remote Inner Mongolia, where the frontier of capital coincides almost too perfectly with the nation's territorial frontier. Replication of urbanizing schemes in Ordos further demonstrates the universalizing impulse of modern urbanism.

But the specificity of place still matters, even under the spell of a supposedly universal urban modernity. In Ordos, a frontier boomtown, the pace of urban expansion is faster and the scale greater than in anywhere else we have seen. Ordos's desire to efface its history as a backwater and catch up with the model cities of the coast is so strong that measures taken by its leaders to create modernity overnight in the desert are unprecedented. The mammoth new town, along with new railways and highways in the desert, is being financed by a sudden, massive surge of state investment and coal revenue. At the same time, private capital rushes headlong into local financial markets, sending local property prices skyrocketing. The fast pace and large scale of growth in a frontier town seem to exceed the capacity of the existing regula-

tory regime, irritating tensions in Mongol-Han relations and underscoring threats to environmental sustainability. It is unclear whether such tension can be reconciled by the local state, though the design of the new town's central plaza attempts this feat by incorporating motifs of ethnic harmony and environmental balance into a space dominated by the Ordos municipal government.

## CIVIC TERRITORIALITY

Territory is contested not only between state actors but also between the state and society. Civic territoriality, defined as societal actors' conscious cultivation of territorial awareness and struggles to build their own territory at physical, political, and discursive levels, is central to the analysis of space production and territoriality in China.

In the e-journal, Jingyuan Du and Max D. Woodworth's study of the irrigation system built in Hetao (the Yellow River loop in today's western Inner Mongolia) in the late Qing and early Republican periods marks a departure from the state-centered analysis of territoriality. Du and Woodworth find that, in late-Qing Hetao, a place at the periphery of the empire and the frontier of agricultural expansion, the process of building an irrigation system defies Karl Wittfogel's model of hydraulic empire. Their story of Hetao's extensive and expensive irrigation, instead, is closer to Clifford Geertz's thesis on the irrigation society. The authors bring various non-state actors into the picture: the land-owning Mongol aristocracy, Han Chinese immigrant cultivators and traders, as well as the capital-rich European Catholic Church. These actors formed a network of land conversion, labor supply, construction management, and finance, and were decisive in building hydraulic projects and shaping a multicentered form of territorial politics in the northern frontier of the empire.

Finally, this volume features Jin-yung Wu's article about an immigrants' self-built settlement in the periphery of metropolitan Taipei. The paper is unique in our discussion of civic territoriality for at least three reasons. First, it is our only case from contemporary Taiwan, a society of substantial civil autonomy and institutionalized electoral democracy. The discussion of civic territorial mobilization in Taipei provides a lens through which to compare urban social mobilization in mainland Chinese cities. Second, settlers who

migrated to metropolitan Taipei from aborigine villages in the mountains of eastern Taiwan scored an unprecedented victory in their mobilization to earn their rights to settlements and livelihood in the city. This happy story of civic territorialization offers yet another set of lenses through which to examine the conditions and contradictions of success in territorial struggles. Finally, Wu provides special insights through a reflection on his research methodology. From his position in the planning school of National Taiwan University, Wu has played the triple role of researcher, planner, and activist in the cause of the community in question. This paper represents his effort to delineate his multiple roles in the community's struggle and serves as his own reflection on the benefits and contradictions generated from performing such multiple roles. His paper ends with a critical question on the relationship between research and practice.

**YOU-TIEN HSING** is professor of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley. The author notes that this special issue came out of a workshop of the same name, held at the UC Berkeley campus in May 2011 as a joint project of UC Berkeley's Center for Chinese Studies (CCS) and the Center for China Studies of National Chengchi University in Taiwan. She and the co-organizer of the conference, Jenn-hwan Wang of National Chengchi University, wish to thank the following discussants, who attended the workshop and provided insightful and constructive comments on the papers: Professors Laurence Ma, Ching Kwan Lee, Xin Liu, and Wen-hsin Yeh. They would also like to thank Professor Wen-hsin Yeh, the co-editor of *Cross-Currents*, for providing guidance and support; Elinor Levine of Berkeley CCS for program management; Mary Trechok for poster design; and Keila Diehl of *Cross-Currents* for editorial management.

## NOTES

1. The local state is said to comprise "institutionalized avenues of conflicts and compromises to minimize the risk of unpredictable crises." See Hinsley (1986).
2. For a "state-led urbanization" argument, see, for example, Chan (1994), Fan (1999), and Chan and Zhao (2002). For a recent elaboration on China's urbanization in the era of market reform, see Lin (2007). For a comprehensive review of the studies of Chinese cities, see Ma (2002 and 2006).
3. Castells (1979), Harvey (1985), Lefebvre (1991 and 2003), Smith and Katz (1993).

4. For a more detailed elaboration of urbanization of the local state, see Hsing (2010).
5. Delaney (1998 and 2005).
6. Hinsley (1986).

## REFERENCES

- Castells, Manuel. 1979. *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Chan, K. W. 1994. *Cities with Invisible Walls: Reinterpreting Urbanization in Post-1949 China*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Chan, Roger, and X. B. Zhao. 2002. "The Relationship Between Administrative Hierarchy Position and City Size Development in China." *GeoJournal* 56: 97–112.
- Delaney, David. 1998. *Race, Place, and the Law, 1836–1948*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- . 2005. *Territory: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fan, Cindy. 1999. "The Vertical and Horizontal Expansions of China's City System." *Urban Geography* 6(20): 493–515.
- Harvey, David. 1985. *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hinsley, F. H. 1986. *Sovereignty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hsing, You-tien. 2010. *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 2003. *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lin, George C. S. 2007. "Reproducing Spaces of Chinese Urbanization: New City-Based and Land-Centered Urban Transformation." *Urban Studies* 9 (44): 1827–1855.
- Ma, Laurence. 2002. "Urban Transformation in China, 1949–2000: A Review and Research Agenda." *Environment and Planning A* 34: 1545–1569.
- . 2006. "The State of the Field of Urban China: A Critical Multidisciplinary Overview of the Literature." *China Information* 20: 363–389.
- Smith, Neil, and Cindi Katz. 1993. "Grounding Metaphor: Towards a Spatialized Politics." In *Place and the Politics of Identity*, edited by Michael Keith and Steve Pile, 66–81. New York: Routledge.