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To cite this article: Hyun Bang Shin, Yimin Zhao & Sin Yee Koh (2022) The urbanising dynamics of global China: speculation, articulation, and translation in global capitalism, Urban Geography, 43:10, 1457-1468, DOI: [10.1080/02723638.2022.2141491](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2141491)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2141491>



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Published online: 12 Dec 2022.



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Introduction



The urbanising dynamics of global China: speculation, articulation, and translation in global capitalism

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ABSTRACT

The assembled papers in this special issue jointly explore the urban manifestation of “Global China” at different scales and involving diverse actors, discussing the ways in which the urban has been reconfigured by China’s global expansion and uncovering the differentiated modes of speculative and spectacular urban production at present. Observing from Ghana, India, Malaysia and China, these papers collectively make theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to recognise the dynamics of speculation, articulation and translation in global capitalism, where China plays an increasingly significant role. In this introduction, we first set out to explain our standing point with *China as method*, which is an attempt to situate China in our comparative studies endeavour and to make self-reflection on what it means to study China as both an optic and a process. We then introduce the three main themes that have guided our interrogation of what global China implies. These include: (a) transplanting models and urbanism; (b) multi-scalar construction of temporality; and (c) situating the urban China model in global capitalism. These aspects are at the core of our engagement with the contributing papers in this special issue that together extend the critique of our changing urban conditions at present.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 October 2022
Accepted 24 October 2022

KEYWORDS

Global China; China as method; urbanisation; global capitalism; China urbanism

Introduction

The overseas expansion of China’s economic influence has long been foregrounded in media reports and policy debates, especially with the rise of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that has turned China into one of the key investors in the global South. The term *Global China* has been widely adopted to depict the geopolitical dimension of this immense flow of capital. In this special issue, we particularly focus on the *urban* dimension of global China or its urbanizing dynamics, especially regarding its impacts on the (re)imaginings and manifestations of urban futures – within and beyond China.

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Our focus on the *urban* manifestation of global China is based on our recognition that this has been an area in need of further attention. We observe that the current scholarship on global China tends to exhibit two features. The first is the tendency to view China's role in global capital flows as bounded by Africa geographically and to theorise this in terms of neo-colonialism (Alden, 2005; Carmody & Murphy, 2022; Carmody & Owusu, 2007; Power & Mohan, 2010; Sautman & Yan, 2009). While they shed light on our awareness of the extent and scale of global China, these approaches delimit further reflections and deeper understandings of its mechanisms and effects (Lee, 2014, 2018) vis-à-vis the urban dimension in particular. The second feature is the overt focus on the role of "Chinese capital" in industrial sectors – for example, through discussions of labour conflicts (Giese, 2013), labour regimes (Lee, 2009), and workplace regimes (Fei et al., 2018). Some discussions on the spatiality of global China emerge here (for instance, see Fei, 2017), yet they are still closely linked to industrial sectors only.

By contrast, this special issue situates global China in contemporary global urban change by understanding the rise of global China as tightly interconnected with various urban processes. We build upon the emergent body of the literature that has recently engaged with the infrastructural and real estate turn of African cities (Gillespie, 2020; Goodfellow, 2022), which has placed China as a significant source of investment and development aid (e.g. Carmody & Murphy, 2022; Omoruyi, 2021; Wan et al., 2020).

The assembled papers in this special issue jointly explore the urban manifestation of "Global China" at different scales and involving diverse actors, discussing the ways in which the urban has been reconfigured by China's global expansion and uncovering the differentiated modes of speculative and spectacular urban production at present. These papers collectively make theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions using their case studies from Ghana, India, Malaysia and China. The special issue benefits further from a perceptive critique from Bunnell (2022, this issue), who provides his engagement with the meaning of global China from a postcolonial urban studies perspective.

In this introduction, we first set out to explain our methodological approaches framed as *China as method*, which is an attempt to situate China in our comparative studies endeavour and to make self-reflection on what it means to study China as both an optic and a process. We then introduce the three main themes that have guided our interrogation of what global China implies. These include: (a) transplanting models and urbanism; (b) multi-scalar construction of temporality; and (c) situating the urban China model in global capitalism. These aspects are at the core of our engagement with the contributing papers in this special issue.

China as method

... in this pluralistic world, China, already in a substantial way, no longer needs to aim at the "world." For better or for worse, China has now only to show the world a world in which China itself is also a part ... If we wanted to, we could gaze at Europe through the lens of this world of a China now, for better or for worse, unique. In so doing, we could also criticize the conventional "world." (Mizoguchi, 2016/1989: 517)

In exploring urbanising dynamics of global China, we would like to start by thinking about what it means to examine China in critical urban studies. This is a question of how and how far China can be turned into a method for critical enquiries into urban processes at multiple scales. Such an enquiry is a crucial concern for us because China, as both the subject and object of the cases we observe, is often treated in an essentialist way, reduced into such elements as “state capitalism” or the “Belt and Road Initiative,” and with “Global China” branded as the coming of an *other* (see also Franceschini & Loubere, 2022). However, investigating Global China in such a way misses the opportunity to problematise the existing vocabularies associated with studying China, often derived from a Western gaze. We, therefore, call for the adoption of *China as method* which aims to problematise China first before putting it back into the historical-geographical conjunctures under observation for further analyses from within. *China as method* is a call for a shift of focus in the relational investigations of the urban mechanisms associated with the rise of Global China, understanding China as an urban arena co-created by global and local forces rather than seeing this China as an object simply measured against “universal” principles.

To elaborate further on the above proposition, we turn to the earlier debates involving two Japanese sinologists, both of whom have been struggling with the concept of *China* in their China studies in the second half of the twentieth century. In a lecture in 1960, Takeuchi interrogates different approaches to modernisation in Japan and China and suggests that Japan’s modernisation was “introduced externally” while the case of China was instead “forged on the basis of its own ethnic-national characteristics” – and hence modernised “more purely” (2005, p. 164). Though inflected by the then popular narratives on (staged) modernisation, Takeuchi’s reflection sheds new light in the sense that he vividly connects the politics of knowledge with the formation of subjects: “one sees nothing if one simply goes somewhere without problematizing oneself” (Takeuchi, 2005, p. 163).

Starting from this recognition but also moving beyond it, Mizoguchi proposed in 1989 a “free sinology” that takes China as a method rather than an object. For him, previous discussions in Japanese sinology, including that of Takeuchi, still take “the world as method to look at China,” while “this ‘world’ was nothing but a conceptualized world,” which is “in fact Europe” (2016/1989, p. 516). And by making China a method instead, an immediate effect would be the downgrading of the “vertical principles” and the foregrounding of “parallel positions” in a horizontal way (Mizoguchi, 2016/1989, p. 518). This endeavour not only locates China firmly as a constitutive element of the “world” but also invites us to acknowledge the plurality of this world and the relativisation of principles that used to be seen as “universal.” In this sense, “to take China as a method is to take the world as a goal” (Mizoguchi, 2016/1989, p. 516) and “to move towards creating the principles impinging on the very creation of the world” (Mizoguchi, 2016/1989, p. 518).

In line with Chen Kuan-Hsing (2006, 2010), the foremost step to making China method would involve transforming how China is self-understood. Deviating from the postcolonial framework, which in Chen’s view is constrained in its analytical scope by the target of its critiques, making China a method implies the abolishment of both imperial desires (either from the West or from within China) and the Sinocentric way of thinking (Chen, 2006, p. 18). It means to go beyond China to look back at China and, in so

doing, to restructure the understanding of China. For those who are Chinese and those conducting China studies, this implies a process of self-(trans)formation in the knowledge project of “taking the world as a goal.” In turn, such a renewed self-understanding would also contribute to forming new perspectives, scopes and routes in making global dialogues between China and other places and peoples (see also Zhao, 2020).

Method, in this sense, could better be defined by the intermediation processes rather than any given approaches or frameworks to follow (Chen, 2006, p. 336). Building on these transformed understandings, we may be able to foreground different positions – the “Chinese” and the “European” are but two among many – in world history and geography so as to bring them together to look into each other and through the others’ views to see the world differently. In this new approach, global dialogues are to be developed with alternative inter-referencing systems, and Europe (the West more broadly) is not any more the origin of principles against which China (or other places) is measured (see also Chakrabarty, 2000; Robinson, 2006, 2022; Shin, 2021; Song & Hae, 2019).

With China as method, we gain additional reference points to look at each other and debate with each other. This is also – and more so – evident in our discussions to unpack “Global China” in this special issue. China going global is not simply a geopolitical moment where an emerging country is (trying) to challenge the world order. Instead, for us, it is to take “Global China” more as an epistemological invitation and a theoretical entry point to rethink the latest conjuncture of global capitalism. Under the prevailing conditions of uneven development at the planetary level, we see significant changes in terms of the ways in which such unevenness is (re-)produced and sustained, and now with the rise of new actors, including China, playing critical roles in many aspects.

On the other hand, China’s presence is not in *totality* anymore. While it is now popular to recognise this China as an inherent entity with clear strategies and objectives, as evidenced in such narratives as “state capitalism” and the “Belt and Road Initiative,” we suggest instead that such a one-dimensional reading would render invisible the underlined power dynamics and political economic logics. It would make more sense to recognise China as “leaping fragments” (cf. Chen, 2006, p. 359, who treats the West in this way) and explore the mechanisms through which such fragments are articulated and intertwined with other elements and dynamics – often following the logic of supplementarity (Chungu & Dittgen, 2021). In this sense, we could eventually recognise China as an urban arena co-created by global and local forces, which is more than an object – model, ambition, strategy, player, spectre or trouble – and should be examined in ways beyond the “universal” principles or popular narratives. In the following sections, we will elaborate further on this point with cases from this special issue.

Transplanting “Chinese” models and urbanism?

One of the key questions we ask in this special issue from a comparative urbanism lens is: how and to what extent has the urban at destination cities of the “Chinese capital” been produced relationally?

The policy transfer literature has highlighted that transplanting urban development models from the source country or city to the destination is politicised and never

straightforward (for a review, see Temenos & McCann, 2013). During the transplantation process, models and their underlying ethos and objectives become inevitably “deterritorialized from their original context and later reterritorialized as they ‘land’ in a different city” (Kennedy, 2016, p. 97). This process necessarily entails mutation and creative adaptation of the original model to suit the particular socio-economic and legal-political frameworks operating in the destination context (McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010). More often than not, the development models have been discursively co-opted and, at times, superficially implemented to meet the prevalent political and economic aims of the time.

With regard to the contemporary (read: BRI era) transplantation of “Chinese” urban models and urbanising practices to other geographical contexts, the extant literature has highlighted some common themes. First, instead of unitary, top-down transplantation of a “Chinese” urban model, there is evidence of multiplicities of origin and developing/ed models. For example, many urban projects in destination contexts have clambered onto the BRI wagon even if the Chinese central state did not initiate them; in fact, their purported transplantation of the so-called “Chinese” urban model was typically motivated by the politico-economic interests of local state actors and elites (Loughlin & Grimsditch, 2021). Moreover, even if such projects involve Chinese state actors and/or financing, they “do not [necessarily] embody a Chinese global vision” (Goodfellow & Huang, 2021, p. 655). Instead, as a result of complex city-making processes, the produced urban form, spatialities and relations are diverse and textured, often a mutant and contradictory outcome that reflects neither the original source nor the local norm (see Dittgen & Chungu, 2019). In this sense, the transplanted global China model can be understood as operating on a “logic of supplementarity – present and absent, identifiable and imperceptible [yet] constantly operating within the core” (Chungu & Dittgen, 2021, p. 1).

Second and relatedly, a plethora of actors are involved, both “Chinese” and “local”, in materialising the actual transplantation and implementation of the models. In addition to the usual suspects on both sides of the transplantation – state actors (including central, regional, municipal and local government officials), semi-public actors (e.g. those working in state-owned enterprises) and a wide range of private ones. Recent studies in Africa, for example, shed light on the key roles played by private firms, individual entrepreneurs and various types of intermediaries in the adaptive replication of Chinese SEZ models (Goodfellow & Huang, 2021, 2022) and their on-the-ground operationalisation (Fei, 2017, pp. 842–843). This is similarly seen in other destination contexts, such as Southeast Asia (Loughlin & Grimsditch, 2021).

Two articles in this special issue, in particular, offer detailed and nuanced contributions to the points above. Using a south Indian “industrial city” as a case study, Goodburn and Knoerich (2022, this issue) show that the attempt to translate the Chinese special economic zone (SEZ) model was messy, unpredictable and diffuse in both process and outcome. For a start, land ownership and the role of the state are different: in China, the state plays a major role in SEZ development in terms of land ownership transfers and SEZ promotion, while in India, the state’s roles in these areas are much more curtailed. In terms of varied outcomes, the transfer of SEZ young women migrant labour recruitment and management practices do not seem to result in more agency for the women, as in China’s case, due to the role of patriarchal families and

hostel regimes in India. Furthermore, due to different rural-urban geographies, the Chinese SEZ model of generating the development of urban villages is not seen in the Indian case.

Drawing from the case of Forest City in Iskandar Malaysia, Koh et al. (2022, this issue) show that two divergent strands of speculative green urbanism models operate simultaneously at two scales. On the one hand, at the scale of the development project, there is the *intra-company* (but cross-border) transplantation of a successful “green everywhere” development and marketing model from China to Forest City. On the other hand, at the scale of the urban region, there is the *international* transplantation of the low-carbon society green urbanism model from Japan to Iskandar Malaysia. Notably, the two seemingly divergent strands of green urbanism models share the same logic of (fast) speculative city-making, with their transplantation and transfiguration supported by influential local elites. As a result, the speedily produced city intrudes upon local human and environmental life – despite the proclamation of its green urbanism model.

The contributions by Goodburn and Knoerich (2022, this issue) and Koh et al. (2022, this issue) highlight the fact that China models cannot be transplanted or replicated in their entirety and are inevitably subject to modification, alteration, mutation and translation as they interact with local political economies. To a large extent, this perspective also applies to the intra-China transfer of developmental models, as described by Smith (2022, this issue). Together, these articles highlight the need to pay attention to (1) the *dynamic interactions* between the deterritorialised urban development model and the destination-specific factors, including local political economy, that shape its reterritorialised landing; (2) the *specific mechanisms and network of actors* through which the development model is being translated and transplanted; and (3) the *discrepant outcomes and impacts* to local resident groups. While these points are relatable to the broader transplantation of urban models, in the case of global China, these interactions, mechanisms, networks and outcomes may materialise in specific forms, which the next section turns to.

From China models to the multi-scalar construction of temporality

In thinking about the transplantation of Chinese models of urban development, one may ask what they consist of. China’s economic growth has often been characterised by the leading role of the Party State and the heavy investment in fixed assets, including infrastructure (Harvey, 2005; Shin, 2015; Wu, 2018). The concentration of such fixed-asset investments has enabled China’s speedy growth since its economic reform and facilitated its transformation into a rapidly industrialising and urbanising society. Speed has been identified to be such a paramount factor for understanding China’s urban transformation that Chien and Woodworth (2018) put forward the concept of the “Chinese urban speed machine”, which incorporates the Party State’s system of evaluating its cadre performance, growth-oriented authoritarian planning mechanism, and ease of securing development finance backed by land reserves. The emphasis on speed has arguably entailed a “temporal mode of governance” that is combined with continuous “ideological imposition of futurity of development” (Shin et al., 2020).

The speed of urban construction has also provided the impetus for the rise of Forest City in Iskandar Malaysia, which Koh et al. (2022, this issue) examine in this special issue. As they note, for a large-scale housing project built on reclaimed land, residents took hold of the keys to their new flats only three years after land reclamation commenced, the speed of which residents in neighbouring Singapore, where land reclamation has been a mode of urbanisation, would not usually be accustomed to. The high-speed construction of Forest City by the Chinese developer also results in the “speedy destruction of the natural habitats upon which the new city stands” (Koh et al., 2022, p. 1489), defying the green urbanism the new city was to transplant from the developer’s homeland.

Even though high-paced development has been one of the key characteristics of China’s growth (see also Dunford & Yeung, 2011), how regions respond to the developmental challenges are, however, variegated, producing uneven geographies of capital and labour that give rise to region-specific “sub-models” of development (Zhang & Peck, 2016). These sub-models can be thought of as commanding their own spatio-temporalities that distinguish each one of them from an idealised universal pathway of development often associated with China and characterised as “Chinese” urbanism. Consequently, we may face many Chinas and multiplicities of Chinese urbanism, an insight that is also eloquently elaborated in Bunnell’s (2022, this issue) commentary.

Chongqing, one of China’s four provincial-level cities and the centre of economic activities in the country’s western region, exhibits one such sub-model, seemingly typifying state-led urbanisation with its infrastructural turn and attention to a greater degree of urban-rural integration (Roast, 2020). While Chongqing’s developmental pathway may not be novel in China’s urban transformation and may have indeed adopted the experiences of regional development rooted in the country’s coastal region, Smith (2022, this issue) makes a perceptive argument that Chongqing’s effort to urbanise its territory through the extensive urbanisation led by infrastructural investments and improved linkages with the Eurasian continent could be seen as an antecedent to the BRI pursued by the central state. In this regard, Chongqing could be seen as a test bed and a site of experiments for the geopolitical economy of BRI, which accompanied the multi-scalar (metro-politan, regional and continental) reorganisation of its resources and networks.

Situating the urbanising China in global capitalism

A further consideration guiding our thoughts on urbanising dynamics of global China is the extent to which such processes at the urban scale cannot be dissociated with the global processes of capital flow and political shift. For this concern, we should maintain relational thinking in analysing the power dynamics associated with Chinese investment. Here, we are particularly inspired by the recent debates on geopolitical economies (see Glassman, 2018), which attempt to overcome the methodological statism that influenced the scholarship on (Asian) developmental states. We are hence mindful of the importance of considering the interconnectedness of multi-scalar processes that shape the urban, regional, national and global development and the historically shaped geopolitical legacies rooted in the pre- and postcolonial era (see Song & Hae, 2019; Wan et al., 2020).

The existing literature on China’s BRI tends to depict the vulnerable conditions of the receiving countries and how China’s financial statecraft supported by the Party State work to China’s benefit in a neo-colonial fashion (Moser, 2018). We defy such viewpoints

and insist that local political economy does matter, contributing to how the terms and conditions of incoming Chinese investment are shaped and circulated. In this regard, we agree with Liu and Lim (2019), who examine China's investment in Malaysia to argue that "the political elites in a relatively weak and small state such as Malaysia are adept in engaging with a rising China to advance key projects, furthering their own agenda" (p. 216). Asante and Helbrecht (2022, this issue) also remind us of the importance of looking into the local hybridisation of urban governance, which turned out to be prominent vis-à-vis China's investment in a marketplace in Cape Coast, Ghana. To compromise for the "capacity of the population to pay" (p. 1522) and the associated political gains, local state agents decide to set a lower level of rents to meet the strong voice of citizen activism, yet at the cost of their own abilities to repay Chinese loans on time.

While the geopolitical economy was not specifically guiding each of the contributed papers in this special issue, the various forms of China capital discussed by the authors have been shaped by a range of stakeholders, which include both incoming capital and its agents (e.g. China's local governments, state enterprises or private companies) on the one hand and the locally vested political and economic interests in receiving countries on the other. Viewed this way, we begin to understand the importance of scrutinising, for example, the key role of the local government and the Sultan as the hegemon of local political interests in Iskandar Malaysia, which collaborated with the private capital from China that developed Forest City in the name of green urbanism (Koh et al., 2022, this issue). We have also witnessed the overseas expansion of Chinese investment in India's SEZs, which involves the crucial role played by the local government in India to facilitate the mobilisation, disciplining and control of gendered labour (Goodburn & Knoerich, 2022, this issue). While India's SEZs can be regarded as a mirror image of how China has been developing such zones of exclusion and exception (Ong, 2006; Roy & Ong, 2011) to pursue its own industrialisation and urbanisation, the rise of India's SEZs is not, to borrow the words of Takeuchi (2005, p. 164), simply "introduced externally" but is forged on the basis of its own political economic demands where the agency of the Indian state looms large.

Conclusion

In focusing on the urban dynamics of global China and approaching (global) China as method instead of an essentialised object, this special issue contributes towards an alternative understanding of the so-called "Chinese" urban development model in contemporary conjunctures of global capitalism. Through their respective case analyses, the papers collectively demonstrate that "global China" is varied and situated in each geographical and political economic context. More importantly, this special issue highlights the need to understand and interpret what might be perceived as manifestations of global China as outcomes of global-local interactions in a capitalistic system.

We are mindful that global capitalism is not only variegated but also hybrid. There are as many manifestations of such geo-political-economic dynamics as the number of ways we live our urban lives differently. Taking China as *method* means to recognise both variegation and hybridity and, in so doing, to look into the actually-existing conjunctures where the leaping fragments (whether from the West, China or elsewhere) are interconnected with each other before they are articulated further with the differentiated urban

conditions in the process of planetary urbanisation. We concur with Sheppard's (2019, p. 4) reminder that global capitalism should not be seen as Eurocentric anymore since "globalizing capitalism's raggedy fringes" are with their own agency. On top of this, the urbanising dynamics of global China further require us to attend to the nuanced ways in which such agencies of the "raggedy fringes" can manage to jump scales and contextualise themselves simultaneously and reshape and consolidate the variegation and hybridity of global capitalism accordingly.

The study of global China and the debates on the outreach of the China model are subject to various challenges arising from the shifting dynamics of contemporary global capitalism and geopolitical economies. For instance, while we have identified speed as one of the key characteristics of China's development and the country's global engagement, it is increasingly subject to slowing down and, in worst situations, suspension of production, as can be seen in the recent cases of real estate crisis that call into question the efficacy of debt-driven, speculative urbanisation (Li, 2022). China's own share of economic difficulties compounded by the persisting measures against the Covid-19 pandemic questions the long-term prospect of its surplus channelled to overseas destinations in the way it used to as part of the BRI. The prevailing geopolitical tensions rooted in increasingly souring relationships between China and the West also render the concept of global China more likely to be selective in its geographical reach. More work is needed to follow up and further examine the evolving experiences of global China, with particular attention paid to the multi-scalar agents of capital and the globally vested and hybrid conjunctures, so as to understand better how and how far the urbanising dynamics of global China can be sustained (or disrupted) and what new relations are put into work in the ever-evolving global capitalism.

Acknowledgements

We thank the contributors to the themed session, *The Urban Spectre of "Global China" and Critical Reflections on its Spatiality*, at the RC21 Delhi Conference in September 2019 and the audience therein who provided helpful feedback on presented papers. We also thank our project advisors (particularly late Choon-Piew Pow) and those who contributed to the two workshops in June 2019 and January 2022 as part of our project, "The Urban Spectre of Global China: Mechanisms, Consequences, and Alternatives for Urban Futures". For discussions on China as method, we appreciate the various conversations that took place over the years, including the panel sessions that the guest editors co-organised with colleagues. These include: "China as methods" for the 2017 Annual Conference of the American Association of Geographers in Boston, and the panel sessions on "Asia as Method: Knowledge Production, Praxis and Academic Activism" for the 6th French Network for Asian Studies International Conference in Paris in June 2017. Particular thanks are also to Jesook Song, Yang Yang and Tim Bunnell as well as the special issue editors whose support is much appreciated. The usual disclaimer applies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

The work was supported by the British Academy's Tackling the UK's International Challenges Programme (Grant Number IC3\100155).

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