Development and dissent in China's 'urban age'

Blog entry

Development and dissent in China's 'urban age'

Hyun Bang Shin 25 February 2013

Subjects: Democracy and government Conflict China Cities in Conflict The Insurgent City Cities of Exception

As China enters an 'urban age' for the first time in its entire history, a new set of urban conflicts over identity, development and inclusion are emerging across the country.

The sight of houses standing alone in cleared construction sites has captured the media’s attention both in and outside of China in recent years. A recent case featured a five-storey house that stood in the middle of a newly constructed road in the city of Wenling in Zhejiang province. The house-owners were reportedly frustrated with the inadequate compensation they were offered by the local authority, and unlike their neighbours, refused to relocate. After sparking an internet sensation, the house was demolished in early December 2012: the owners eventually accepted compensation, reportedly around one third of what they claimed to be the original construction costs.

The case of the ‘Wenling couple’ is one of the many examples of what the Chinese popularly refer to as ding-zi-hu, or nail-households; a Chinese neologism that refers to those households which stubbornly refuse to vacate their properties, hindering the progress of urban development projects.

Houses awaiting demolition in Hongkou, Shanghai.Paul Kretek/Flickr

Disputes over urban development projects are becoming increasingly prevalent in mainland China. Dilapidated neighbourhoods or those standing in the way of infrastructure projects are frequently threatened with eviction and demolition by development-minded local states looking to exploit a booming real-estate economy. In rural areas, media reports occasionally cover stories of violent protests against land expropriation, launched by villagers whose collective land ownership provide them with a stronger sense of property rights than those in urban areas. The most recent widely publicised case was the worker protest in Wukan, Guangdong province.

Accumulation by dispossession in China

These protests by residents and workers are direct reactions to China's rapid urbanisation. It has been the case for many years that China depends heavily on investment into fixed assets in order to boost its economic growth, expressed frequently in terms of gross domestic product. The investment in fixed assets includes money flowing into constructing factories and infrastructure facilities such as airports, motorways and high-speed railways. Real estate projects have also become an important element in fixed assets investment, occupying more than 50 percent of total fixed assets investment in cities like Beijing during the first half of 2000s according to the municipal statistical yearbook.

The abundance of such development projects has contributed much to China's accumulation, but in most cases directly translates to land assembly, and therefore the displacement and relocation of an area's existing residents. In other words, displacement is synonymous with development.

The uneven geographies of 'One China'

While the intensification of developmental projects in China is a top priority at regional, provincial and national levels of government, the extent to which such accumulation unfolds in a geographically uneven way further complicates the nature of urban conflicts in China.

For instance, in order for China's government to address the country's multiple needs; accumulation, reduction of regional inequality, expansion of domestic

markets and exploitation of natural resources, there has been increasing emphasis placed on developing the central and western regions of the country. Such development is spurred by a strategic influx of the dominant Han population in the autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, and heavy prescriptions of the nationalist 'Harmonious Society' and 'One China' programmes. The resulting discontent among local communities, particularly among growing separatist movements in the targeted development areas, has led to numerous cases of deadly protest and a series of self-immolations in the region.

Property-rights activism

Shifting to the more affluent eastern coastal provinces, we witness more localised mass and individual protest launched by factory workers against poor working conditions and low wages, by villagers against the unfair/corrupt expropriation of their collectively owned land, and by urban citizens against demolition of their properties in the wake of urban redevelopment.

Demolition of an urban village in Guangzhou. Hyun Bang Shin. All rights reserved.

Protests by villagers or home-owners against the expropriation and/or demolition of their properties has been characterised by some such as Ching Kwan Lee and You-tien Hsing as 'property rights activism'. While these forms of protest vividly demonstrate community outcry for broader social justice, their impact and scope are considerably limited and deeply contingent on China's history and political economy.

Firstly, as scholars such as Elizabeth Perry and Minxin Pei have argued, rights awareness in China is conditioned by the long established 'collective membership' state welfare system which divides urban and rural residents. Under the collective system, urban residents' work units channel welfare provisions for employees and family members, while rural residents' collectives, organise rural welfare arrangements. In this regard, those who protest tend to invoke the state's historic responsibility to provide necessities for particular membership groups rather than calls for cross-societal change, and are further often premised on criticism of corrupt officials, cadres or village leaders rather than criticism of the state itself.

Secondly, rights awareness in China, albeit in its ascendancy in times of accelerated urbanisation, is very much associated with rights to subsistence. This notion of rights awareness has a history dating back to the imperial period when the legitimacy of the ruling emperor/empress was secured through their capacity to feed the population and protect their livelihoods against enemy intrusion. Demands for *distributional* justice, therefore, have a long history in China and are more readily accepted by the State than explicit claims to political rights (including Tibetan protests for independence) or bottom-up demands for political reform; which are more likely to be met with direct repression from the state.

Thirdly, as the scale of migration from rural to urban areas and from poorer cities to more prosperous ones increases, China's household registration system is transitioning and will likely face further calls for reform. The household registration system, known as hukou, has been in place since the late 1950s, and acts to determine one's access to welfare entitlements depending on the location of one's household. The system was notorious for ring-fencing urban benefits for those whose household registration was classified as urban. This has resulted in the great urban-rural divide, and in the past acted as a control mechanism to discourage migration to cities. Household registration has evolved over the years, and while there are signs that barriers between rural and urban hukou holders within the same locality are fading, new walls are being erected in the form of 'localized citizenship' giving *local* citizens preferential entitlements over non-locals.

Discontent in China's 'urban age'

In China, cities are now key sites of accumulation. They denote prosperity, modernisation and development. Party leaders and officials pursue land acquisition, in order to bring in finances for the local state's purse, which may then in turn be used to finance further development projects. Unfortunately, more land means more displacement, and potentially more discontent. For the moment, as explained above, expressions of discontent and in particular protest on the

basis of rights awareness tend to focus on distributional justice which, without scaling up to a national level, are isolated and more than often fail to make any marked influence on broader politics. The same can be said of workers' protests, which face harsh repression by the state, particularly should workers seek to form cross-class alliances or expand geographically. The ethnic conflicts of the western provinces in Tibet and Xinjiang in similar respects face difficulties in overcoming their isolation from broader struggles.

Chinese cities are increasingly becoming sites of discontent and polarisation, as the rising affluence enjoyed by some is achieved by the exploitation of the many. The state pursuit of land resources and promotion of investment in fixed assets will continue to bring about radical changes to the ways in which people access and share any accrued wealth in cities. With the majority of the national population now classified as urban as of 2011, China has entered an 'urban age' for the first time in its entire history, the future prospect of China's social, economic and political development will depend on how these rising urban conflicts are addressed. The lonely nail-household is a telling image of how China's isolated protests fail to bring about meaningful change to the lives of those worse effected in the rush to urbanise.

About the author
Hyun Shin is an Assistant Professor in Urban Geography at LSE. He is also an Associate at the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE and a Research Associate at the White Rose East Asia Centre, University of Leeds.
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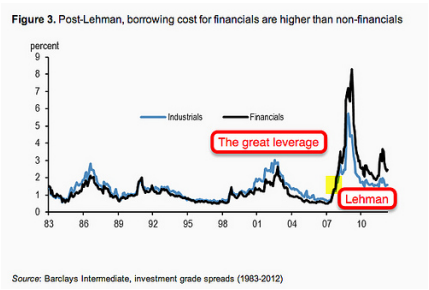

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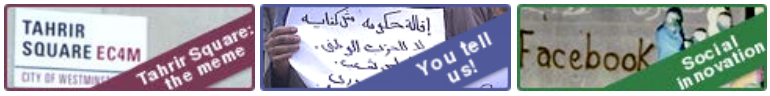

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