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Sociological Perspectives on Urban China

From Familiar Territories to Complex Terrains

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Abstract This article provides an integrated review of sociological perspectives and research on seven areas of inquiry regarding change and continuity in urban China over the past two decades or so. We begin with an assessment of the sociological literature on stratification and inequality in light of the state–market debate and its extensions. Then we evaluate the research on social networks as a resilient resource that can influence social stratification and social change. Next we examine the more interdisciplinary research on migration and migrant labor, highlighting its sociological insights. This is followed by a critical look at housing studies that have revealed a new residential landscape in the Chinese city. Then we present our take on the scholarly contributions to urban consumption, followed by a presentation and appraisal of studies of changing urban governance that have focused on the *danwei* and community. Our final review focus is the critical work on different forms of mobilization and resistance in response to tensions and conflicts from uneven reform and market transition. Following this extended albeit selective review of the rich and diverse literatures, we offer an overall assessment of their dominant themes, disciplinary weights, and diverse approaches. Finally, we advocate for more theorization, comparison, and integration as ways of advancing both sociological and interdisciplinary research on urban China.

Keywords inequality, networks, migration, housing, consumption, governance, resistance

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The sociological literature on urban China is rich and varied, just as the other disciplinary literatures reviewed in this special issue of *China Information*. These literatures have intersected to such an extent that they have turned research on urban China into a complex field with fuzzy boundaries and overlapped layers. Any attempt to wrap a sharp border around the sociology literature on urban China makes less intellectual sense than taking a somewhat broader approach. Instead of isolating the work by sociologists only, we focus on what we consider as broad sociological perspectives that include

some studies from other social science disciplines represented in this special issue. Despite potential overlaps, this approach better complements the other review articles in illuminating the diffused and expansive field of urban China research.

Our approach to this review reflects two parallel shifts. The first shift refers to the rapid changes and transformations in Chinese cities and towns, which are fundamentally different from their antecedents before economic reform or even the early stage of urban reform in the mid-1980s. The second shift has taken place in how researchers view and study the first shift by becoming more adaptable within their disciplines, more interdisciplinary, and more aware of one another's work. For example, anthropologists have shifted their focus from minority regions to urban centers (see Smart and Zhang, this issue). In the following sections, we will review the literatures on seven topical areas based on two guiding rationales. First, these topics, in different and complementary ways, reflect most of the crucial and significant scholarly debates or issues of contention regarding urban conditions and change in postreform China. These issues of contention include but are not limited to: (1) the relative and intertwined role of the state and markets in shaping social stratification and inequality in Chinese cities and rural–urban migration; (2) how global forces interact with local conditions to bring about increasingly differentiated urban housing and consumption; and (3) how uneven reform and widened inequality contribute to and are manifested in different forms of tension in urban governance and resistance to the state. Second, the chosen topics have drawn such large, albeit uneven bodies of published research in English by sociologists and nonsociologists of both Western (mostly US) and Chinese backgrounds that they deserve a broad review for both Western and Chinese readers. As we work our way through the seven topical areas, we attempt to draw cross-area connections and references in order to accentuate the thematic issues running through them.

Urban stratification and inequality: the state vs. market and beyond

We begin with the sociological literature on urban stratification and inequality, which reflects a central debate about the relative role of the state and markets and their interactions. While sociological research on Chinese stratification is not exclusively urban in focus,[1] urban stratification and inequality in China have drawn much more sociological attention than

corresponding processes in rural China. Urban society has become more stratified than rural areas in terms of class hierarchy and income differences. (While urban-rural income inequality has grown rapidly from a 2.3:1 ratio in 1994 to 3.3:1 in 2004, and is a critically important sociological gauge, this review focuses on cities. See other reviews, especially the geographical contribution on the literature on different scales of spatial inequalities.)

Pioneering research on emerging stratification in postreform urban China focused on ranking occupational prestige and analyzing social mobility.[2] While the type and quality of data for these studies were new for sociological research in and on China, albeit from one or two individual cities, the theoretical and analytical approaches were skillfully adapted from mostly research traditions in the United States to the Chinese context. For example, using the well-established concept and measurement of occupational prestige on the very first survey data collected in Beijing, Lin and Xie[3] created prestige scores for 50 occupations for the first time.

Meanwhile, the emerging theoretical debate on the relative role of the market vs. the state began to inform and guide empirical research on urban stratification and inequality. The debate and empirical analysis focused on whether the inequalities in income, status, and power among different social groups and individuals could be accounted for by their relative positions and shifts within and across the state hierarchy, the market sector, levels of human capital, and entry and exit in individual work.[4] The earlier debate pitted Victor Nee's argument that markets became the dominant mode of economic allocation against Andrew Walder's contention that the state remained the more dominant redistributor, both of which yielded supportive empirical findings. The theoretical debate quickly moved beyond viewing the state and market as simple dichotomies. Walder pointed to varied institutions, especially property rights that define markets rather than markets per se as crucial,[5] while Nee came to recognize the state's role in establishing the institutional framework of a mixed economy in order to legitimize reform policies.[6] Jean Oi's work also helped crystallize the dualist or intertwined entrepreneurial (market) and government (redistributive) functions of the decentralized corporatist local state.[7]

Empirical findings bearing on the debate continued to be mixed and open to different interpretations. Xie and Hannum questioned Nee's earlier results from rural data in favor of market coordination in rural areas as inapplicable to urban China.[8] Xueguang Zhou noted that both markets and bureaucracies reward human capital, and the Chinese government has in actuality

made a continuous effort to raise pay for state officials and professionals during market reforms.[9] Parish and Michelson argued that inequality in income and social services between different segments of the population depends less on the market than on the bargaining power of different social groups.[10] By developing rent-seeking ability from public power as a new variable, Xin Liu has added another dimension to the persistence of redistributive power and market dynamics for explaining social stratification.[11] This line of survey-based research and theorizing has illuminated the complex set of mechanisms shaping the socioeconomic structure of urban Chinese society.

In a different theoretical take on social stratification in urban China, Alvin So argued that economic reform led to rapid class differentiation in the city. A relatively homogeneous urbanite is now split into a capitalist class, an old middle class of self-employed and small employers, and a working class subdivided into permanent urban workers and temporary migrant workers. In urban private and collective enterprises, temporary migrants had to work very long hours, were paid only minimum wages, had to obey strict work disciplines, got hired on a day-to-day basis, and were unable to form labor unions to protect their interests. This class perspective has shed light on class differentiation in terms of income, lifestyle, social status, and influence in the community.[12]

Incorporating an emphasis on class but moving beyond it, Tang and Parish[13] developed a broader framework using the concept of *social contract* to account for the increasingly varied life chances available to urbanites during the transition from secure and full-benefit state employment to that based on market remuneration and individual consumption. Moreover, they conducted a full range of statistical analysis on different trends and changes in urban life, revealing new attitudes and behaviors and unequal positions of social groups and individual residents in Chinese cities as a result of varied demographic, human resource, and socioeconomic characteristics. They found that changes associated with marketization, especially the increasing importance of education as a means of social mobility and the emergence of a class of entrepreneurs whose success is predicted by their human capital, coexist with carryovers from the established system. These findings have shown how far and away urban China has moved from the broad profile of the prereform urban society portrayed by Whyte and Parish.[14] The research on stratification and inequality with or without an explicit class orientation has offered a strong sociological perspective on urban China.

Urban social networks: a lasting valuable resource?

If research on stratification and inequality laid much of the sociological ground for understanding both change and continuity in urban China, that understanding has been advanced by the literature on urban social networks. A popular and profitable area of inquiry in the mainstream sociological literature, social network analysis in the Chinese urban context has shed much light on the social mechanisms that influence such outcomes as increased stratification and inequality. In other words, while the research on stratification and inequality has focused on measuring and explaining salient socioeconomic outcomes of a changed urban China, the literature on urban social networks has clarified the role of a crucial factor or mechanism in inducing those outcomes and complicating the interaction between the state and markets dynamics discussed earlier.

In the prereform, planned urban economy, *guanxi* or network was not merely a relationship but was a tie (strong or weak) through which the parties exchange valued materials or sentiments. Although exchanges through *guanxi* networks are not formally or legally institutionalized or tolerated under and by the political system, they function as an informal but nevertheless necessary and effective mechanism for exchanging favors and obtaining resources in Chinese urban society. Via a systematic theoretical and empirical analysis, Nan Lin[15] showed that as a rich asset or resource embedded in social networks, social capital is both differentially accessed and this access or possession is a key determinant of economic returns or benefits such as good jobs and high salaries in urban China.

Research by Yanjie Bian and others has examined the role of social network ties in searching and obtaining urban jobs. While the government used to control and allocate urban jobs in China and most urbanites were guaranteed life-long employment, they were given neither legal rights nor personal freedom to search for jobs. Drawing from the theoretical argument of sociologist Mark Granovetter, Bian found that weak ties are used to gather job information in a market economy; strong ties, or *guanxi* networks, are used to access influence from authority in a state socialist economy where labor markets are either greatly altered or nonexistent.[16] Government officials were the center of personal networks in China and thus essential for job mobility.[17] Entrepreneurs with strong network ties to state firms and state bureaucrats also are greatly advantaged in accessing sources of economic capital, raw materials, business licenses, marketing outlets, and official

protection.[18] However, as market reforms deepen and widen, the emergence of labor markets in urban China may lead to diminishing returns of network resources in job search.[19]

From a more historical perspective, urban social networks were also related to groups with native-place identity in Chinese cities, notably Shanghai. Elizabeth Perry found an enormous use of native-place bonds in labor recruitment, collective actions, and organizational apparatuses in earlier Shanghai.[20] Bryna Goodman's research indicates that native-place awareness and identity provided a social network for new immigrants in Shanghai.[21] Emily Honig revealed how native-place identity worked to define Subei (northern Jiangsu) identity in Shanghai.[22] Reading these studies suggests that the native-place divisions in old Shanghai were a form of social network that contributed to the integration of the city.

Other studies have introduced further wrinkles at different levels of analysis. Doug Guthrie emphasized the importance of *guanxi* as an institutional social network, arguing that markets do not exist in the abstract, but are to be seen as social constructions shaped by political, cultural, and social environments. Chinese firms' decision-making processes are shaped by a combination of the social networks and political institutions in which they are embedded and the economic uncertainty they experience.[23] From a comparative perspective, Blau, Ruan, and Ardelt found that interpersonal networks in urban China are less diverse than in the United States, making Chinese more likely to make in-group choices than Americans. Conversely, the lower job turnover makes it more likely for Chinese than Americans to be sufficiently intimate with coworkers to discuss serious problems with them, reinforcing the in-group character of interpersonal social networks in China.[24]

Most recent research has brought the analyses of social stratification, social class, and social networks in urban China more tightly together. Using network data on visits during the Chinese New Year celebration from four cities in the late 1990s, Bian and his collaborators found a clearly differentiated occupation-based structure in terms of social exchange along both economic (market) and political (authority) dimensions. In addition, they have shown that this more differentiated class hierarchy has created more segmented social networks, especially isolating manual workers socially from those with authority and wealth. This finding has turned social networks, which are generally treated as an independent variable, into an important dependent or outcome variable that represents new facets of urban life. The

increasing integration of social stratification and network analyses has created a broader and more powerful sociological perspective for understanding urban life at the institutional, group, and individual levels in postreform China.[25]

Migration to and migrant labor in the Chinese city: adapting to a new world

The literature on migration and the Chinese city has moved some distance away from the heavy sociological approaches reviewed in the preceding sections to a more interdisciplinary treatment. One indication of this is that while research on social stratification and social networks was carried out primarily by sociologists, migration studies have attracted other social scientists working on urban China. The massive internal rural-urban migration in China carries multiple and layered impacts on the migrants themselves and the cities of their destination. Research has addressed these impacts by covering the scale and trends of migration, the reasons for migration, gender differentials in migration, job attainment of migrants in cities of destination, and living and working conditions of migrants. We draw attention to a few studies by sociologists and other social scientists to highlight their sociological contributions to the understanding of migration and its broad impact on urban China.

Cindy Fan (a geographer), among nonsociologists, has been one of the most consistent and engaged researchers on migration in China, and she has done most of her empirical work using quantitative data on Guangdong Province, which drew more than one-quarter of China's total migrant population in 2000. Fan proposed a parsimonious dichotomy of plan vs. nonplan migration to account for the heterogeneous types of migrants during the socialist transition toward a market economy. While plan migration refers primarily to "job transfers" through state regulation of population movement based on the *hukou* system, people moving for "industry/business" purpose primarily and "marriage" secondarily belong to nonplan migration. The former type of migrants is more educated, urbanized, and comprises fewer females than "industry/business" and "marriage" migrants.[26] Sociologists Liang and White[27] identified the effects of aggregate factors capturing market transition and state policy on interprovincial migration. While there is less migration from provinces receiving foreign direct investment, people are more likely to migrate out of provinces with well-developed rural enterprises,

which is nevertheless ameliorated by education. Despite using earlier data from the late 1980s, these studies have revealed the ways in which sustained state intervention and growing market forces interacted to create varied types and characteristics of rural–urban migration.

The bulk of the empirical research has focused on migrant outcomes of sociological interest at the place of destination such as gender differences or disparities in occupational attainment, income, and benefits. Using data from a 1% sample of China's 1990 Census, Huang revealed a nationwide pattern of female migrants' disadvantage in the urban labor market due to their rural identity and outside status, as defined by the *hukou* system. More specific findings of this study include: (1) *hukou* and marital status, especially the former has a stronger constraint on female migrants than their male counterparts in the labor market; and (2) female migrants are more likely to concentrate in occupations with lower prestige such as agricultural, industrial, and service jobs.[28]

Some of these broad findings have been confirmed by locally focused studies using both recent survey data and Census information. Using a 1998 survey from Guangzhou, Fan found the persistent effect of resident status on income and benefits (e.g., medical care) after such achieved attributes as education are taken into account, as permanent migrants have higher income than both nonmigrants and temporary migrants who have inferior benefits.[29] Using Census data on Shenzhen (a city of massive in-migration) from an origin–destination linked approach, Liang and Chen found that floating migrant women in Shenzhen are less likely to obtain professional and managerial jobs than their male counterparts and nonmigrant women at their places of origin in Guangdong, controlling for socioeconomic attributes and returns to education. Marriage also reduces floating migrant women's chances of finding professional and managerial jobs.[30]

Just as research on migrants' occupational attainment (conducted by mostly geographers) is of great interest to sociologists, studies on migrants' residential patterns and impact in cities of destination offer further sociological insights. Armed with the "power of place" perspective,[31] Ma and Xiang analyzed how native-place-based identity and social networks played a crucial role in creating different but spatially distinctive migrant enclave communities in Beijing. They traced the beginning of large numbers of migrants from specific places such as Wenzhou (or specific areas in and around Wenzhou) in such provinces as Zhejiang in Beijing to a chain process anchored at and facilitated by native place. In the Wenzhou (Zhejiang)

village in Beijing, for example, the kinship and dialectic ties of native place was key to recruiting new laborers from back home into the profitable garment production and retailing sectors and thus contributed to spatial occupational specialization, while generating local or internal multipliers in terms of other activities and jobs. The diversity and vitality of these peasant enclaves made some of these migrants members of a new urban class of entrepreneurs, challenging the conventional depiction of rural migrants as belonging primarily to the trapped or isolated bottom of urban China.[32] Despite the geographically peripheral location of peasant enclaves (in urban–rural transitional zones at the edge of large cities) and their substandard housing and facilities, their residents—the migrant workers—have contributed to the urban society in different ways. They have taken on the dirty and demanding jobs, brought income to rural house owners around the cities by renting their rooms, and created revenues for some *danwei* and local governments by leasing their land and premises to live and work.[33] The challenge of these peasant enclaves in terms of control and regulation, coupled with the contributions of migrant workers in these temporary communities, present a dilemma to the municipal authorities of large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which struggle to balance between accepting or rejecting them.[34]

Although migrant workers have become contributors and increasingly long-term residents in large Chinese cities, they have not been treated fairly and respectfully by employers and authorities, and they fare worse than permanent residents and workers in a variety of rights and amenities such as getting paid and accessing decent housing. In 2004 alone, unpaid wages for migrant workers totaled an estimated RMB 20 billion (US$2.5 billion), as total unpaid wages have amounted to around RMB 100 billion (US$12.5 billion) over the last few years. In Beijing, up to RMB 3 billion (US$375 million) was owed to 700,000 rural migrant laborers working on construction sites in 2004. To deal with this serious problem under broad pressure, the Chinese government stepped in and up by helping migrant construction workers to retrieve RMB 33.2 billion (US$4.2 billion) of defaulted wage in 2004. It also introduced a series of strong measures such as improving job services for migrant workers, strengthening their training for employment, and reinforcing the management of labor contracts as well as law enforcement concerning labor security.[35] The real and sustained effect of these administrative measures aside, migrant workers have constantly faced strong institutional barriers in accessing the most fundamental and expensive urban necessity—

housing in the cities of destination. Without local *hukou*, temporary migrants in both Beijing and Shanghai are less likely to own a home and they suffer from overcrowding and low quality in their housing conditions, even though better education and higher household income seem to facilitate home-ownership and better housing conditions. These housing disadvantages also were attributable to migrants' lack of desire and plan to stay permanently in the cities.[36]

Housing differentiation: a new residential landscape with a global imprint

Migrants' housing disadvantages serve as a suitable transition to a more focused look at urban housing. We begin by acknowledging that research on urban housing in China has varied in substantive focus, level of analysis, and data used. Some scholars have studied the causes and consequences of housing differentiation in major cities by examining reform policies and market mechanisms in land and physical infrastructure development.[37] This focus has provided a broad context for understanding how spatial differentiation bears on changes in the urban housing sector. Other studies have focused on the macro reform policies and practices as well as their local variations and how they affected the types of housing investment and provision.[38] While some researchers[39] examined the (re)commodification of urban housing as a result of marketization and clearer property rights, others have shown that housing inequalities within cities and work units persisted or even worsened due to the unequal control and allocation of valuable resources within the entrenched redistributive system and power hierarchy.[40]

With better data, research on urban housing differentiation has become more refined and varied at and across district, community, and neighborhood levels, especially in the largest and most prominent metropolises such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou where large-scale morphological transformation has already taken place and created multiscaled spatial parameters for residential differentiation.[41] The more fine-grained spatial analysis of housing inequality has focused on the increasing individual residential mobility and choices within cities in response to more varied housing types, housing tenures, traditional and shifting values of certain inner-city locations, and different income levels.[42] Most recent studies have found income, social status, differential price, neighborhood security, living

convenience, and the lingering *hukou* system to be important determinants of residential choice and differentiation.[43]

While the bulk of the research already mentioned was informed by the broad theoretical perspective on the relative role of the state vs. market in transition from socialism, the work by Deborah Davis has developed new theoretical and empirical subtleties about the economic and social aspects and implications of the changing urban housing sector. Davis used a more nuanced approach to differentiating four different rights associated with urban housing as it had been converted from welfare benefit to capitalized asset from the early 1980s through the late 1990s. Through in-depth interviews with a cross-section of families at multiple time points, Davis found that after the sale of user-rights to existing residents began in 1993, working class families fell behind their professional and managerial counterparts in housing possession and wealth due to the heavier financial burden and weaker claims on housing discounts they had.[44] The incremental evolution from partial to full property rights, coupled with the entrenched differentials in power and access between managers and workers, has enlarged inequalities in both housing space and ownership rights. Davis and Lu introduced another analytical dimension, that is, residents' perception and adjudication of property ownership claims in light of the multiple constraints of party-state influence, market mechanism, and family tradition. Based on a focus group's responses to a dispute over housing ownership between brothers as covered in a legal advice magazine in Shanghai, Davis and Lu argued that the responses to property claims reflect an interesting mix of the moral logics of the party-state, the property market, and family justice embedded in precommunist family inheritance of estate.[45]

Urban housing research has also provided an avenue for better understanding the varied local impact of globalization on the Chinese city, which also appeals to sociologically minded scholars working on urban China. We bring attention to the work by Fulong Wu (a geographer) as representing a creative way to conceptualize and analyze the global–local nexus in the urban housing sector. Having examined the emergence of high-end townhouse development projects carrying the names of transplanted cityscapes such as "Cambridge" and "Orange County" in suburban Beijing, Wu argued that this phenomenon reflects a local imagination and social construction of globalization or a global lifestyle that developers promoted and sold to the new rich consumer in a niche property market. In addition, these townhouses plus villa-style single houses and high-rise apartment complexes have

been built into gated communities, which are intended primarily for foreign residents, especially expatriates and their families. Besides their stylistic appeal and high social status, these enclave-like housing compounds help ensure or enhance the residential safety of foreigners, which is a high priority to the local government in order to keep foreigners happy and ensure continued investment.[46] The spatial concentration of these gated communities in the northeastern suburbs of Beijing has contributed to further residential segregation.[47] The local impact of globalization on residential differentiation has spread beyond transplanted housing types and foreign gated communities to Chinese residents more broadly. Chen and Sun found that residents with stronger personal global connections in Shanghai (e.g., having been abroad and worked for a foreign company locally) are more likely to live in luxury apartments and villas. This finding has added to an integrated sociospatial understanding of both institutional and individual consequences of housing differentiation due to the deeper penetration of global economic and cultural forces in China's cosmopolitan centers such as Shanghai.[48]

Urban consumption: local living in a global age

The literature on urban consumption has documented the rapid shift and growing inequalities in lifestyles that can be attributed to the impact of globalization. Although foreign gated communities mentioned in the preceding section are for the few super rich, mass consumption of other goods and services besides luxury housing has come to define and differentiate the urban landscape in postreform China, and in a more striking manner since the early 1990s. A rising standard of material possessions has brought color, hustle and bustle, and vitality to China's cities, especially the booming coastal centers. The onset of urban consumerism, often manifested in its conspicuous forms, contrasts sharply with puritan communism in Maoist China when urban residents were encouraged by Party leaders to inculcate a proletarian lifestyle of "hard work and plain living" (*jianku pusu*), when fashion, regarded as bourgeois in origin and surplus to authentic human needs, was abolished, causing people to dress in gray, black, white, army green, and navy blue—the color scheme of Chinese puritan communism.[49] In light of where urban China was then, the speed and scope of the spread of consumerism have amounted to nothing less than a revolution with many facets and widespread social consequences.

A book edited by Deborah Davis[50] captured the multiple facets and consequences of the consumer revolution in urban China through a diverse set of studies that covered such topics as child spending, advice hotlines, wedding attire, greeting cards, fast foods, dance halls, bowling alleys, and so forth. While all chapters in the book could be gleaned for sociological insights into the meaning and pattern of urban consumption, we highlight a couple of examples that, together with other studies, illustrate the distinctive features of Chinese urban consumerism.

Focusing on the coincidental but significant link between the growing up of the one-child generation and the growing intensity of urban consumerism, Davis and Sensenbrenner found that Shanghai families spent roughly one parent's monthly wage just to cover the routine expenditures for their only child around the mid-1990s, and this spending was certainly higher if expenses on toys and after-school entertainment and enrichment activities were included.[51] While the single child may be the main consumer in the family, the identity and behavior of the latter in the marketplace, coupled with how consumer goods are labeled and pitched to the family, have turned it into a new collective mass consumer. Families buy *jiayong diannao* (family computers) rather than *geren diannao* (personal computers), for example. Despite this feverish consumption of modern and materialistic products, it carries the imprint of China's traditional values concerning families and human relations to be characterized as Confucian consumerism.[52]

While families are an active consumer unit, youth in Chinese cities are at the leading edge of the consumer revolution, especially when it comes to enjoying Western goods and lifestyles. However, they pursue these things for a mixed set of purposes and experiences. Shanghai's young men and women go to the discotheque to embrace its anonymity and to escape the limitation of their fixed social relations, rather than as a blind imitation of Western youth's resistance to mainstream culture.[53] McDonald's restaurants in Beijing are frequented by young consumers (many high-school and college students) who view the place as a new social space in which they can relax and socialize with friends and colleagues. This local interpersonal orientation aside, these McDonald's goers also look for a special occasion and space that connects to America and the outside world via a feeling of indirect but "instant emigration."[54] While globalization generates tendencies toward the widespread standardization of consumer products, consuming globally standardized products in local places may not appeal to all consumers alike

but depend on their demographic and socioeconomic attributes and if they are globally connected in any way. Using survey data from Pudong, Shanghai, collected in 2001, Chen and Sun found that Shanghai consumers with personal global connections are more likely to have been to McDonald's or KFC and bought foreign brand-name clothes, while age and income also foster these behaviors. Education is shown to be a less important predictor of the consumption of fast foods and acquisition of brand clothes, whereas women are more likely to have had fast food but are no different than men in having purchased foreign-brand clothes.[55]

Regardless of the different methods and data used, these studies have converged in showing the complex local–global interactions in how and why urban residents, especially those in cosmopolitan cities, think and behave as both individual and family-based consumers with a blend of common tendencies of consumers elsewhere and China-specific characteristics. While some may see the globally oriented conspicuous consumption in the cosmopolitan Chinese city as all negative in terms of subordination and exclusion, Deborah Davis has argued that Chinese urban consumers represent a highly diverse group with contradictory experiences of both emancipation from an impoverished past and disempowerment by the cruel market forces of high prices.[56] These differing views will undoubtedly stimulate further empirical research.

The eroded *danwei* and community re(development): changing urban governance

The rise of a mass consumer culture in urban China has been extremely rapid if viewed against the dominance of the *danwei* system, which provided a full range of goods and services to urban residents only two short decades ago. More importantly, the *danwei* or work unit played a persistent role in allocating housing and other benefits even as its powerful position began to weaken with economic and administrative reforms (see earlier sections). This is indicative of the resilience and inertia of the *danwei* as the long-standing omnipotent governing institution that controlled the social spaces, community resources, and life chances of urban residents. Outside of the far and wide reach of the *danwei* into the working and everyday lives of urban residents, their limited sociospatial space was further encroached upon by the grass-roots influence of the party-state reaching down through the tiered system of municipal, district, street office, and neighborhood committees.

The *danwei* and neighborhood committee formed the mutually reinforcing twin pillars of urban governance that shaped the spatial boundary and social content of urban community, even though both institutions have been weakened by continued reforms, alternative organizations, reconfiguration of neighborhoods, and new mixes of local residents.

Regarding the *danwei*, an earlier edited volume[57] included a set of historical and comparative studies of the origin, functions, and influence of the *danwei* during the prereform era, as well as its declining role through the earlier stages of reform. Beyond the comparative insights, the contributors shared an emphasis on the rather unique character of the *danwei* system as a controlling institution in the Chinese context without a sharp and deep enough focus on its impact on urban space. David Bray took on this task through a systematic and penetrating analysis of the *danwei* in relation to social space and urban governance. Through an apt application of Foucault's concepts of power, governmentality, and social space, Bray demonstrated that the *danwei* has been effective in shaping social space and relations in urban China because it carried symbolic and functional meaning of power, knowledge, and discipline of the party-state through its walled compounds. This built form of the *danwei* could be compared to the Confucian family compounds of traditional China as both were ruled by and endowed with political and moral significance and mechanisms for controlling social space, despite the differences in the communist and Confucian ideologies. While acknowledging that the *danwei* has experimented with market activities such as leasing space outside their exterior walls to commercial (often retailing) use, Bray placed more emphasis on the persistence of the *danwei* as a collective and communal form that has merely attempted to adapt to market reforms.[58] In Beijing, where there were 25,000 compounds of varying sizes in the early 1980s, many big compounds refused to let public roads run through their hall walls and thus forced the already terribly congested traffic to go around them, citing reasons of security, protection of state secrets, the need for tranquility, and so on. In this sense, the *danwei* as an old bastion of power and exclusivity tries to hold on to its privileged social space.

To the extent that the *danwei* pillar of urban governance may still be strong, albeit no longer dominant, the pillar anchored to the neighborhood committee has also been chipped away by new forces and actors at the community level to carve out more autonomous and flexible spaces for local residents and services. The first powerful force of change has come from within the system where different models of administrative reform in different cities

have created different features of local community restructuring and redevelopment. In Shanghai, the reform model introduced in 1996 was characterized as "two levels of government and three levels of management," which made the street office the most important and local level of managing and coordinating all community affairs below the two levels of municipal and district government. One street office, for example, set up four separate but complementary working committees, (public administration, community development, community safety and governance, and finance and economics), which worked well together to improve the collective welfare of the broad community. In Shenyang, a reform in 1999 aimed at rezoning communities into areas smaller than the subdistrict divisions and larger than the previous neighborhood committees, with the number of households ranging from 1,000 households for most new communities to about 3,000 for larger ones.[59]

Beside these administrative initiatives, the marketization of urban housing and consumption have created two alternative organizations at the community level, namely, property management companies and homeowners' committees, which have begun to exercise some of the functions that used to be under the residents' committees. However, as Deborah Davis[60] has shown through an ethnographic study of a commercial housing complex in Shanghai, there has developed a complex web of both converging and conflicting interests and relations among a residents' committee, a management company, and a homeowners' committee. On the one hand, the local government and media and developers recognized the economic interest of homeowners as consumers, and the residents' committee willing and the property management company designed to serve that interest. On the other hand, there seemed to be an alliance between the residents' committee and the developer of a gated residential complex where the former had obtained a large private space from the latter and shared it with the office of the management company. In the meantime, the residents' committee tried to prohibit the formation of the owners' committee in the new phases of development when the latter committee became more autonomous. The power and capacity of the owners' committee are also constrained by its new and still ambiguous status and residents' concerns about its monetary responsibilities and representation of diverse residents who either own units or just live in them as renters or family members of the owners. Therefore, while local communities have gained more relative autonomy and residents have asserted themselves as homeowners and through their representative

committees, the still powerful residents' committee with its tendency to cooperate or collude with private developers and management companies continues to play a bigger role in community governance.

Mobilization and resistance: the makings of a civil society

While changes in the *danwei* and community may be the crucial foci for research on urban governance, actors and their behaviors within and beyond this pair of key institutions have become an important subject of study for some sociologists working on China. The main actors are students, labor, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs), while their collective action involves mobilization, resistance, and protests in response to the backlashes and conflicts resulting from rapid economic growth and uneven reform such as social inequality, unemployment, loss of welfare, and lack of political freedom. Unlike popular protest in earlier Chinese history, which was based largely on kinship, village, and religious communities, postreform patterns of resistance have occurred along primarily class but also gender, ethnicity, generation, and regional lines.[61] Ironically, the student movement of 1989, as argued by Dingxin Zhao, took on a traditionalist outlook of state–society relations as the students hid their real demands and goals behind safer and culturally congenial action to avoid immediate repression. Zhao attributed this to three structural conditions: (1) a strong and unified state then; (2) weak independent civil organizations; and (3) moral and economic performance-based legitimization. His explanation went against competing ones built on the rise of a civil society, a factionalized governing elite, and the influence of international media.[62]

While the student movement was short-lived, worker discontent and resistance have emerged and endured in response to growing unemployment and the loss of government benefits, irrespective of the strong state and managerial mistreatment on the shop floor. Through detailed ethnographic research, Ching Kwan Lee showed that labor resistance involved work stoppages, deliberate negligence against rigid work rules and procedures, financial penalties for violating them, and shrinking pay. While this form of resistance may appear tame and localized in comparison to the student rally in Tiananmen back in 1989, it represents what Lee called "postsocialist labor radicalism or insurgency." Her theoretically more important contribution is that China's

political stability can be accounted for by the precarious balance between labor activism and its partial incorporation by the state as a regulatory regime that has institutionalized "a rule by law."[63] The potential for this labor activism to grow into a larger-scale and more organized movement is hampered by workers' divisions based on age (young vs. old), origins (local vs. outside workers), socioeconomic backgrounds (country vs. urbanites), and status (migrant vs. nonmigrant workers).[64]

While labor activism has been fairly localized and open worker protests rather limited, various brands of NGOs have become a highly active, open, and widespread force of social mobilization and action. To attribute the rapid growth of NGOs to official sanction is to underestimate broader conditions that favor them. In fact, NGOs have not only filled the larger public or civic space vacated by the retreating state but also help to provide advocacies for and solutions to social concerns and problems that cannot be addressed by market approaches. One of these problems that has drawn attention and involvement of NGOs is environmental degradation, and environmental NGOs are the focus and case of Guobin Yang's research. Using a field perspective, which pertains to groups of actors who frame their actions versus one another, Yang showed that environmental NGOs have interacted with politics, media, international organizations, and the internet to facilitate civil society development. By giving analytical primacy to the organizational entrepreneurs running the environmental NGOs and their capacity to mobilize resources, Yang has offered an alternative to the state or market-oriented explanation for the rise of a civil society or the lack of it.[65] Civil society development has also benefited from the increasing use of the internet as a powerful communications medium or channel. The relationship, however, is not one-way. Guobin Yang demonstrated a mutually reinforcing and coevolutionary connection between the internet and civil society activities. While the former strengthens the latter by fostering citizen participation, civil society facilitates the development of the internet by providing citizen and citizen groups who use the internet to communicate and interact.[66] Taken as a set, the sociologists' studies reviewed in this section have revealed a variety of elements, some more active and visible and others more latent and hidden, that are critical to the development of a civil society. This is a fruitful area of inquiry that can generate additional insights into the dynamics of urban Chinese society beyond research on the state and markets.

Conclusion: dominant themes, disciplinary weights, and diverse approaches

Almost certain to have left out studies that could fit under the seven headings, we have nevertheless covered a set of broad and interconnected territories endowed with rich sociological perspectives on urban China. How do we draw meaningful conclusions across these distinctive areas of inquiry? One way to do it is to identify central or dominant themes that may weave through these domains, and two stand out most. First, the state–market debate that drove much of research reviewed in the first section (urban stratification and inequality) looms behind and through the studies in the other areas to differing degrees as illustrated by studies showing the relative role of lingering state institutions and growing market forces in determining migrants' status in cities and local housing differentiation. As its influence has spread, the original state–market debate, cast in simple dichotomous terms, has taken on more sophisticated dimensions through conceptual and empirical advances in research on stratification and inequality. Instead of merely evaluating the relative strength of state and market-related independent variables, scholars have begun paying attention to the effects of changing policies and institutions at different points in a reform sequence or trajectory and more specific institutional factors within the state and market sectors.[67] On the dependent variable end, inequality has appeared as a shared outcome of interest to scholars in most of the reviewed topics, catching especially strong attention in research on migration and housing. This has led to theoretically promising analytical cross-overs and integrations. In this regard, it is worth noting the work by Li Qiang, a prominent sociologist at Tsinghua University in China working on both stratification and migrant labor. Li argued that the presence of a large migrant population in Chinese cities has created an emerging *sanyuan* (tri-polar) society in China, consisting of the existing urban and rural sectors plus the migrants who have a foot in each.[68] The argument has broader implications for researching more complex and nuanced dimensions of inequality and class formations within and beyond urban China.[69]

While the dominant themes such as inequality reflect broad sociological perspectives on urban China, the reviewed studies in each area, irrespective of the authors' disciplinary backgrounds, have brought out a rich array of sociological insights into the main facets of urban change in China. Sociologists have clearly dominated the areas of stratification and inequality

and social networks, which are their familiar territories. They have not only adapted theoretical perspectives on stratification and mobility and the state vs. market from Western sociology to the urban China setting, but have also demonstrated the increasingly sophisticated use of analytical methods and data collection in their empirical research. In the areas of migration and housing research, geographers and some planners may have claimed a larger territory than sociologists. Yet a close look at this body of geographers' work reveals their use of independent and dependent variables common in sociological analysis such as education and income as predictors and occupational status as an outcome. Geographers have also shown an analytical sensitivity to the gendered dimension of migration and housing that is near and dear to sociologists. In the research domains of urban consumption, sociologists have shared territories more with anthropologists who have contributed subtle and deep insights into the identity and symbolism of urban consumption through fine-grained ethnographic studies. This research locus of anthropologists has indeed brought them off the mountains and from the fields to meet sociologists in the urban centers (see Smart and Zhang's review in this issue). In the last section on the *danwei* and community development, political scientists have made important contributions as exemplified by the most recent book by David Bray,[70] while sociologists could have done more on community (re)development where urban renewal and residential mobility and other dynamics call for the adaptive use of community-based approaches rooted in classical urban sociology. While the attention and contribution by sociologists may be uneven across the seven areas, they have received valuable help, mostly unsolicited, from other social scientists in weaving together a broad sociological tapestry of urban China.

Another unifying force strengthening the sociological insights from the reviewed research in the seven areas is the diverse but integrated and complementary analytical approaches and data used. In the more familiar sociological domains of stratification, inequality, and social networks, earlier empirical research by sociologists Nan Lin, Yanjie Bian, and John Logan relied on data from surveys in single cities such as Tianjin and Shanghai. Later studies by Deborah Davis, Andrew Walder, and others benefited from multicity surveys and almost nationwide representative samples, while more recent ambitious data collection initiatives such as the China General Social Survey covering the entire country by Yanjie Bian and his Chinese collaborators will surely yield more reliable and generalizable studies on a broader variety of urban (and rural) topics. Better data have also facilitated the use of

more sophisticated analytical techniques such as event history analysis in the work of Xueguang Zhou[71] and multiple-level analysis by Xie and Hannum.[72] In addition, the integration of multiple surveys allowed Tang and Parish to put together the most comprehensive quantitative profile of urban life in postreform China to date.[73] Researchers of migration (e.g., Zai Liang) have alternated between data from Census and local surveys. The studies on housing, consumption, and community development reviewed earlier have a mixture of either quantitative analysis of survey data or ethnographic case studies involving participation and interviews, which have been conducted in multiple cities. While the sociological work in the first two areas of review is heavily quantitative and survey-based, there is enough, albeit uneven, diversity and complementarity in methodology and data across all seven areas to have enriched the sources and spectrum of sociological insights on urban China.

Looking ahead: challenges to theorizing, comparing, and bridging

Advances in analytical methods and data collection further illustrate how much progress has been made in research on urban China. The most striking sign of this progress, however, is the voluminous body of work that has been built up, which simply could not be fully reviewed from the sociological vantage point or any other disciplinary angle, for that matter. The volume of the extant literature aside, we see three challenges ahead facing sociologists and most likely other disciplines as we continue the enterprise of studying and understanding the urban experience in China and its broader implications.

The first challenge concerns how to engage in more theorizing about the many new and fascinating phenomena of urban change unveiled by the growing body of empirical work. Are we close to the point where theorizing needs to catch up with cumulative findings? If there is a theoretical lag, what is the best way to redress this deficiency? Laurence Ma called for context-based country (China)-specific theorization of urban change in light of the argument that the Chinese trajectory of urban development is more different from than similar to the experiences of other transitional economies. Ma also suggested that a political economy perspective ought to be the starting point for this theorization given the inherently political or state-dominated nature of Chinese urban development.[74] The gist of this advocacy was perhaps

foreshadowed or predated by what lies in the heart of the state–market debate between sociologists working primarily in the first two of the seven areas reviewed here. Even as the overall findings appear to favor the side of the debate emphasizing the sustained power of state institutions, the debate itself has evolved into more nuanced theoretical arguments about the interpenetration and blurred boundaries between the state and the market, as well as how they are further complicated by uneven and varied reform sequences.[75] While this line of theorizing has provided the seeding for some of the empirical work in the other areas of inquiry, it has not generated explicit theoretical offshoots for making sense of the urban topics in question. This weak link between theorizing about market transition and urban development more generally may be partly attributable to the fact that most of the main contributors to the state–market debate are not necessarily urbanists but China-focused disciplinary scholars. On the other hand, urban analysts specializing in China have not been slow in adapting theoretical elements in the state–market debate to their research topics such as migration and housing. And they are likely to draw more heavily from theoretical models from their respective disciplines to help theorize the urban phenomenon under study. The challenge and opportunity therefore may involve more focused theorizing within each area of inquiry instead of the generic country-specific theorizing about urban China.

Better theorizing should and could come from more explicit comparative perspectives and analysis in future research. We see three different types of comparative or reference cases (cities) that should draw attention and parallels from researchers who have thus far focused only on Chinese cities, especially major coastal centers. The first, familiar type refers to what we used to and still could (for convenience and consistency of reference) label as Third World or developing country cities. In an overview article a decade ago,[76] we suggested that as market reforms deepened and widened in Chinese cities, they would take on more economic and sociospatial characteristics of Third World cities with regard to rural migrants-turned-residents, the rise of the informal economy, and urban housing differentiation. Tang and Parish reminded us of these increasing similarities, particularly involving Latin American cities through their comprehensive analysis with an extension to the urban experience on Taiwan.[77] The second, equally familiar type is the former socialist or postsocialist cities of the old Soviet Union and East-Central European countries. Despite the similar political-economic contexts of urban transition, there has been relatively little comparative research on

East-Central European and Chinese cities, except for a few general cross-references in the literature review sections of some articles. Ma attributed this to the narrow focus of scholars on these cities as country specialists and the steep learning curve of understanding each other's complex backgrounds and institutions.[78] But these need not be insurmountable barriers to comparative research that could generate mutually beneficial understanding of the variations of the postsocialist city. The third front of a comparative research agenda should give more coverage of the lesser studied smaller and remote cities within China, often located in border and minority regions. While we are not advocating to move away completely from the "coastal bias" in the urban China literature, recent efforts to compare a larger set of coastal and remote border cities have uncovered region- and location-specific processes and outcomes of urban transition that might be missed by the familiar and heavily used analytical lenses of globalization and market reform.[79] This in a way may be a necessary sociological move toward the research sites from which urban anthropologists have begun to turn away (see Smart and Zhang, this issue). The within-country extension of comparative research will also benefit from a greater sensitivity to the different and shifting scales of analysis induced by continued urban administrative restructuring.[80]

Finally, better theorizing, more comparative analysis, and continued growth of the field of urban China research will depend on successfully meeting the challenge of building stronger bridges across the disciplines represented in this special issue. The existing literature has included collaborative multidisciplinary efforts as typically represented by several edited volumes on urban China involving different disciplinary contributions.[81] One of the most comprehensive books on urban life in postreform China by Tang and Parish was a joint product of political science and sociology.[82] Having looked back through the sociological lens here, we see the need to bridge different disciplinary perspectives and approaches in closer and more varied ways as we move forward from our comfortable and established disciplinary territories. While sociologists have had a strong hold on the first two areas reviewed earlier, they should be able to contribute even more in the other four research domains and beyond through stronger and deeper cooperation with other disciplinary scholars. As the field of urban China research becomes more complex and layered, it will demand, not just require, more interdisciplinary collaboration—a development from which we all will benefit.

Notes

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