

Contextualising the Right to the City in China

在中国语境中讨论城市权之概念

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Abstract This paper revisits the concept of the right to the city by Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) and contextualises it in the context. Different from previous debate that focused on the issue of right within this concept, this paper highlights the significance of city per se within this concept and argues that as according to Lefebvre, only when the city has been produced as an oeuvre, the use value of the city can be prioritised over its exchange value and thus guarantees the right to the city. This paper then visits the mechanism of urban development in China before the Economic Reform to explore the possibility of understanding socialist city as an oeuvre and how it could contribute to our contemporary research agenda.

Keywords Right to the city; China; Oeuvre

Introduction

Among the literature on gentrification, there is an increasing effort to eliminate the Western-centric scope found in traditional studies. Actually, the term *gentrification* itself is rooted in the Western context, specifically the particular experience of inner London in the 1950s and 1960s (Lees et al., 2016: 1-2). The term ‘gentry’ is of British origin. As noted by Lees (2012) and Shin et al. (2016), similar urban processes are labelled as ‘embourgeoisement’ in France, ‘aristocratización’ in Spain, or more generally as ‘urban renewal’, ‘urban regeneration’ and ‘urban redevelopment’ outside the Global North. Even though we can use gentrification as an abstract concept to capture a wider urban process that occurs beyond national boundaries and is embodied in variegated ways (Shin et al., 2016), contextualising this concept and its consequential implications in regional and historical particularities is an essential step away from considering the gentrification process in several cities in the Global North (such as London and New York City) as the prototype. For example, when considering people’s experience with gentrification, it often involves dispossession and the loss of neighbourhood in a physical sense, the deprivation of historical meaning and attachment in an emotional sense (see Slater, 2012: 188-189), and generally, the dispossession of the right to the city (see Shin, 2016: 484). The original

Received: 13th Nov, 2023

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concept of the right to the city proposed by Henri Lefebvre (1996), nevertheless, is also embedded in the unique history of Western Europe, as I will indicate later. This article argues it is possible to appropriate this concept in a broader context to debate the consequences of gentrification, but only after conducting an in-depth exploration of this concept and keeping in mind the regional, historical and social particularities of the new context.

In a former discussion on gentrification, some researchers (Shin et al., 2016) put forwards a novel way for geographical categorisation as ‘the Global East’, indicating their effort to move away from the prevailing dichotomy of ‘the Global North’ and ‘the Global South’. Although this dichotomy primarily highlights the peripheral position of the Global South in sharp contrast with the Global North as the centre, an implicit logic buttressing this division is the colonial/post-colonial background (Shin et al., 2016: 465). Thus, in some recent in urban studies in urban studies (Robinson, 2006), or in research on gentrification in particular (Lees, 2012), scholars propose to shift towards ‘a post-colonial agenda’, which refers to moving away from regarding urbanisation in the Global South as an imitation or repetition of what has happened in the Global North, towards considering the possible implications of the urban process in the Global South for the Global North. However, the post-colonial approach may not only constrain researchers’ perspectives but also encounter some difficulties when confronted with the specific history associated with colonialism in some countries, such as China. Thus, the category of the Global East seeks to move beyond merely focusing on the gentrification process in America and Western Europe, but also calls for attention to the limitations of the prevailing North-South dichotomy. According to the authors (Shin et al., 2016), besides their geographical proximity, countries in the Global East, or namely East Asia, share the following similarities: ‘rapid urbanisation, export-oriented economic development and strong developmental states with authoritarian pasts or inclinations’ (et al.: 456). These traits may differentiate the gentrification experience in these countries from the traditional model.

At the same time, categorising around the division between the East and the West may inevitably remind us of the two blocs during the Cold War. The East Bloc refers to the Soviet Union and those countries in Eastern Europe. Cities under the socialist regime also share the experience of the strong intervention by the state. During the gentrification

process in these post-socialist countries, the socialist legacy also adds uniqueness to the post-socialist cities (see Hirt, 2012). China bears the identity as a post-socialist country and a developmental country in the Global East simultaneously. This article seeks to contextualise the concept of the right to the city in China's context and explore how this concept can facilitate our understanding of the gentrification process in China, or more broadly, in the Global East, and how the evidence from the Global East can extend the mainstream discussion on the right to the city in turn.

Revisit Lefebvre's the right to the city: to what kind of City?

Despite most debates around the concept of the right to the city focusing on the aspect of 'the right', this article argues that understanding the specific type of city referred to in this concept is equally, if not more, important. When formulating this concept, Lefebvre adds the definite article 'the' (or in French, '*la*') before the word 'city', indicating that his concern may not be a city in general, but a particular type of city. For him, '*oeuvre*' is a central characteristic of this specific sort of city. To elaborate on this point, Lefebvre adopts a historical perspective and looks to the medieval city in Western Europe as the prototype. According to him, the medieval city was not only the site where several activities creating *oeuvres* congregated, but also a sort of *oeuvre* itself (1996: 66). On one hand, before the advent of industrialisation, the medieval city 'was principally related to commerce, crafts and banking.' They were 'centres of social and political life where not only wealth is accumulated, but knowledge (*connaissances*), techniques, and *oeuvres* (works of art, monuments)' (1996: 66). On the other hand, the medieval city was shaped by different social groups within the city. Furthermore, it should not be merely viewed as a material product, but one that involved people's efforts, devotion and affiliation over a period of time. As Lefebvre puts it, '[T]he city is an *oeuvre*, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product. If there is production of the city, and social relation in the city, it is a production and reproduction of human beings by human beings, rather than a production of objects. The city has a history; it is the work of a history, that is, of clearly defined people and groups who accomplish this *oeuvre*, in historical conditions.' (1996: 101)

Besides, for these social groups involved in creating such *oeuvres*, it is the use value rather than exchange value that characterises the product (1996: 66, 75, 101). For those medieval merchants and bankers, they did not alienate the *oeuvre* as something to be

exchanged for speculative benefits. Instead, they ‘loved their cities like a work of art and adorned them with every kind of works of art. ... [T]he city of merchants and bankers remains for us the type and model of an urban reality whereby use (pleasure, beauty, ornamentation of meeting place) still wins over lucre and profit, exchange value, the requirements and constraints of markets’ (1996:101-102). Thus, the city is practically *used* by people as the place to inhabit, encounter, confront differences, reciprocal knowledge and acknowledge, et cetera (1996:75).

By deeming the medieval city as an oeuvre, Lefebvre does not romanticise it by ignoring the class struggle within it. However, according to Lefebvre, even if class struggle did exist in the medieval city, it actually strengthened people’s relationship with the city, as Lefebvre writes: ‘Violent contrasts between wealth and poverty, conflicts between the powerful and the oppressed, do not prevent either attachment to the city nor an active contribution to the beauty of the oeuvre. In the urban context, struggle between fractions, groups and classes strengthen the feeling of belonging. ... These groups are rivals in their love of the city.’ (1996:67) During this era, artisans with their own crafts were irreplaceable. Their crafts were unique and highly valued. In general, by considering the city as oeuvre, Lefebvre emphasises the subjectivity of people from different social groups in the actual creation of the city and the prevalence of use value over exchange value in the city thus formed.

However, the advent of the industrial era not only diminished the significance of crafts and skills (as Lefebvre puts it, ‘[w]hen exploitation replaces oppression, creative capacity disappears.’ [1996: 66]), but also terminated the city’s role as an oeuvre, as Lefebvre argues, ‘city and urban reality are related to use value. Exchange value and the generalisation of commodities by industrialisation tend to destroy it by subordinating the city and urban reality which are refuges of use value, the origins of a virtual predominance and revalorization of use.’ (1996: 67-68)

On the one hand, the remnants of old cities, if any, have been transformed to meet the requirements of consumption. They no longer exist as vivid oeuvres resulting from people’s common contributions, but merely cater to aesthetic consumption. As Lefebvre reveals, ‘They do not only contain monuments and institutional headquarters, but also spaces appropriated for entertainments, parades, promenades, festivities. In this way the urban core becomes a high-quality consumption product for foreigners, tourists, people from the outskirts and suburbanites. It survives because of this double role: as place of

consumption and consumption of place. Thus, centres enter more completely into exchange and exchange value, not without retaining their use value due to spaces provided for specific activities. They become centres of consumption.’ (1996: 73)

On the other hand, new cities cease to be the passive containers of productive activities but rather emerge as centres of decision-making, controlled by specific social groups or capital, “henceforth enter[ing] into the means of production and the systems of exploitation of social labour by those who control information, culture and the powers of decision-making themselves” (Lefebvre, 1996: 178). In these new cities, oppression was replaced by exploitation. According to Lefebvre (1996: 109-110), this exploitation extends over the entire society: not only is the working class exploited, but also other social classes that are not dominant. As for the working class, they are completely subordinate to the dominant power. They become not only subordinated in the production process but also consumers whose consumption is manipulated by the dominant power. As Lefebvre reveals, the working class may enjoy the ‘make-believe’ joy of living (1996: 84). When the working class becomes subordinate in consumption, ‘[a]ll the conditions come together thus for a perfect domination, for a refined exploitation of people as producers, consumers of products, consumers of space’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 85). In this context of a ‘bureaucratized society of organized consumption’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 178), the working class is deprived of its subjectivity. It is no longer a dynamic agent participating in the making of the city but merely plays a passive role.

Given this context, it may not be accurate to dismiss Lefebvre’s claim of the right to the city as an ‘empty signifier’ as David Harvey (2013: xv, 136) does. By formulating this concept, Lefebvre seeks to emphasize the essence of the city as an oeuvre where use value prioritises exchange value. According to him, the right to the city is not ‘a simple visiting right’ or ‘a return to traditional cities’ (1996: 158). ‘It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*.’ (1996:158) What he anticipates for the ‘renewed city’ is definitely the oeuvre. To put it differently, the right to the city is the right ‘to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete *usage* of these moments and places’ (1996: 179), or more broadly, the right to ‘freedom, to individualisation in socialisation, to habitat and to inhabit’ (1996: 173). Despite his repeated denials that the right to the city is not meant to be nostalgic or a return

to some old types of cities¹, we can still recognise a strong sense of reminiscence, as mentioned earlier. Lefebvre takes the medieval city as the prototype of the city in this concept. For Lefebvre, the working class should cease to be passive in the urban but rather reassure its subjectivity in the making of the city. As Lefebvre says, '[o]nly the working class can become the agent, the social carrier or support of this realization' (1996: 158). It may not be the sole contributor in the city, nevertheless, it is the decisive agency, 'without it nothing is possible' (1996: 154, or see 1996: 180). The working class should be able to participate in and appropriate the city, or more simply, to use it. Such rights are inherent to the city as oeuvre.

However, regarding the approach towards the realisation of this vision of the city, Lefebvre's argument is somewhat vague. He just highlights the significance of science, technology, art and philosophy. These features characterise medieval cities (Lefebvre, 1996: 66) and are still important in the city in Lefebvre's vision, especially art: 'art brings to the realization of urban society its long meditation on life as drama and pleasure'; 'art restitutes the meaning of the oeuvre, giving it multiple facets of appropriated time and space; neither endured nor accepted by a passive resignation, metamorphosed as *oeuvre*'; 'if the sciences discover partial determinisms, art and philosophy show how a totality grows out of partial determinisms' (1996: 156-157). '[Using] all the means of science, art, technology and the domination over material nature' (1996:180), the proletariat or the working class can make the city and workers' everyday life in the city as oeuvre. However, the approach proposed by Lefebvre, or 'a permanent cultural revolution' proposed by him (1996: 180) seems impractical, leaving a significant gap for successive scholars to debate and appropriate the concept of the right to the city.

Successive debate: What kind of right? Whose right?

To some extent, proponents of the concept of right to the city focus less on 'the city' in this concept, which this article argues is the key to understanding Lefebvre's concept, and instead emphasise the debate around 'the right' (see Attoh, 2011), such as what kind of right, whose right, and so forth. Following Lefebvre's discussion, Purcell (2002) highlights two principal rights: the right to participation and the right to appropriation. According to

¹ Lefebvre uses a poetic sentence to express his denial: "This right slowly meanders through the surprising detours of nostalgia and tourism, the return to the heart of traditional city, and the call of existent or recently developed centralities." (1996:158)

Purcell, the right to participation implies that ‘*citadins* (urban dwellers) should play a central role in any decision that contribute to the production of urban space’ (2002: 102), while the right to appropriation includes ‘the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space’, and the right ‘to produce urban space so that it meets the needs of inhabitants’ (2002: 103). Dikeç (2001: 1790) also contends that the right to participation is not merely ‘the participation of urban citizen in urban social life’ but rather ‘his or her active participation in the political life, management, and administration of the city’. It is a kind of ‘enabling right’ that is to ‘be defined and refined through political struggle’ (2001: 1790). Dikeç further suggests that the construction of urban citizenship – an identification with the city rather than a legal status – through political struggle should be complemented by another right, namely the right to difference (2001:1790). Likewise, Marcuse (2009) claims the ‘right’ is not meant to be a legal claim but more of a moral sense (2009: 192). It is ‘the right to totality, a complexity in which each of the parts is part of a single whole to which the right is demanded’ (2009: 193).

When discussing ‘right’ in the urban context, it tends to be directed towards property rights, as Harvey (2013: 3) reveals, the world we are living in is such a circumstance where ‘the rights of private property and the profit rate trump all other notions of rights one can think of’. As for property rights, they consist not only of the right to use but also of the right to dispose of the property, or in Demsetz’s sense, the right to transfer or alienate (1967). As mentioned earlier in this article, in Lefebvre’s sense, the right to the city prioritises use value to exchange value. Lefebvre explicitly claims that ‘[t]he right to the oeuvre, to participation and *appropriation* (*clearly distinct from the right to property*), are implied in the right to the city’ (1996: 174; emphasis added). In the debate around the right to the city, researchers particularly focus on property rights and critically analyse its triumph over other sorts of rights in contemporary cities. Harvey (2013) exposes one of the consequences brought in by strengthening property right in the urban context. According to Harvey (2013: 23), in the past thirty years, the neoliberalisation process has been directed towards privatisation of control over surplus value. Meanwhile, ‘the right to the city’ is appropriated by ‘private or quasi-private interests’ (2013: 23). Taking Harvey’s example (2013: 23-24), in Manhattan, a small group of political and economic elites monopolise the reshaping of the city in a way that is favourable to ‘their own particular needs and hearts’ desire’. As a consequence, the city has been transformed into a huge ‘gated community’

for the rich. The property right, or even ‘the right to the city’ in some sense, are strengthened, but only for a particular minority. Harvey asserts that the right to the city could be the right to ‘change the world, to change life, to reinvent the city more after their hearts’ desire’ (2013: 25, also see 2013: 4), but he also advocates for ‘greater democratic control’ over this right (2013: 22), rather than letting it fall into the hands of the ‘upper class’.

On the other hand, in his research on public space in American cities, Mitchell (2014) discusses another consequence of the triumph of property right in the city, namely, when the right to the city is shared by property owners, who constitute the majority in the city, how can disadvantaged minority, say the homeless, participate? Mitchell highlights Lefebvre’s argument that the city as oeuvre is ‘a work in which *all* citizens participate’ (2014: 17; emphasis added). Nevertheless, we live in such cities where some members ‘are not covered by *any* property right’ (Mitchell, 2014: 20). Meanwhile, the once oeuvre city is alienated. Property is ‘the embodiment of alienation, an embodied alienation backed up by violence. More accurately, property rights are necessarily exclusive: the possession of a property right allows its processors to exclude unwanted people from access’ (2014: 19). In this sense, if the right to the city is replaced by property right, it will pose a moral dilemma ‘to protect a minority against a malicious (or simply selfish) majority’ (2014: 28). According to Mitchell, as an essential part of the right to the city, ‘[t]he right to housing needs to be dissociated from the right to property and returned to the right to inhabit’ (2014: 20). Although Mitchell’s research targets on securing the right of participating in public urban space justly for the social minorities, such as the homeless, his perspective on the relationship between the majority and the minority also sheds light on the debate around what kind of right we are arguing for in the concept of the right to the city.

In the previous discussion on the question of what kind of ‘right’, another question, namely, whose right it concerns, already emerged. As highlighted by Mitchell (2014: 17), when defining the city as an oeuvre, Lefebvre includes all urban inhabitants participating in the making of the oeuvre. In this regard, the right to the city should be the right of all who inhabit in the city. For example, Harvey (2013: 4) claims that the right to the city is ‘a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization’. Purcell (2002) replaces participate on with contribution. According to him (2002: 102), it is those ‘who

contribute to the body of urban lived experience and lived space' that can 'legitimately claim the right to the city'. Actually, it is the everyday life of all urban inhabitants that constitutes 'the body of urban lived experience and lived space', thus this definition does not exclude anybody. By defining it this way, Purcell indicates that the concept of the right to the city seeks to empower (all) urban inhabitants, which sharply contrasts with conventional right that enfranchises 'national citizens' (2002: 102), whose rights are secured by political and legislative authorities. But what these researchers mainly concern is in a situation where a disadvantaged majority is deprived of the right to the city vis-à-vis a small group of elites that are preying on urban space for valorisation. The contrary dilemma is unveiled by Attoh (2012). Based on the analysis of Mitchell (2014/2003) and the dispute around legal rights, Attoh (2012: 672) illuminates the possibility of considering rights as 'trumps against democratic tyranny'. This opinion arises from regarding the right in the right to the city as 'a collective right rather an individual' one, as Harvey (2013: 4) does. According to Attoh (2012), for the socially peripheral, they may not be capable of organising together to claim for their own rights, especially when their rights to some degree conflict with those of a possible majority. Even if they succeed in voicing out their claims for right through protests, 'a democratic majority that may view such protests as nuisances, or disturbances' (Attoh, 2012: 677). In this regard, when calling for the right to the city, it may in some cases not be 'in the name of democratic management or in the name of "collective power"; quite the contrary, instead we are doing so by defining democracy in far broader terms than some might accept' (Attoh, 2012: 677). Once again, all participants in the urban process need to be taken account.

In general, the appropriation of the right to the city is expanding. It has been used to some extent as a political slogan to embrace all claims for urban justice in anti-capitalist struggle (Harvey, 2013: 136), even if the approach to its realisation is somewhat vague in Lefebvre's sense. But for our academic discussion, the strength of this concept lies in its internal tensions, such as the relativity of majority and minority in the urban context, and how the right to the city differs from the prevailing property right, all of which can be traced back to Lefebvre's original discussion (1996) on the city as an oeuvre. For one thing, the city as oeuvre is the outcome of people's collective efforts and contributions. It is not a product from an assembly line but emerges in the era of craft, and it per se is a sort of crafts made by all urban inhabitants. For another thing, the city as an oeuvre prioritises use

value over exchange value, which calls into question the widely cherished notion of property rights. The remaining part of this article will take these points as the cornerstone to discuss why it is possible to migrate the Western-based concept of the right to the city in Chinese context, how it makes a difference in understanding the ongoing gentrification process in China, and how the experience of China will in turn elaborate on the debate around this concept.

Cities under socialism as a kind of oeuvre

Some researchers define the current era in China as ‘post-socialist’ in their discussions around urban issues (see for example, Davis and Lu, 2003; Lin, 2004), although it is not easy to identify a particular point that divides the socialist era from the post-socialist, as China is still a socialist country, which sharply contrasts with the situation in Eastern Europe (see Andrusz et al., 1996) and former Soviet Union countries. Although economic reform in China was initiated in 1978, it was not until the late 1990s that fundamental changes occurred in the previous restrictions on urban dwellings (Davis and Lu, 2003: 78), thus initiating the privatisation process of urban housing thereafter. Therefore, cities under socialism in China, as discussed here, are not restricted to the cities in the pre-reform era but also include those that operated under the basic guidelines formulated prior to the recent fundamental changes. To some degree, remnants of this kind of city still exist sporadically. Many researchers have indicated that cities under socialism in China were organised around the work-unit (or *danwei*) system (Bray, 2005; Perry and Lü, 1997). Two inherent issues in the work-unit system makes cities under socialism in China share some similarities with the city as an oeuvre, despite the divergent backgrounds.

Firstly, in the cities under socialism in China, the ownership of urban housing was kept in the hand of the state, similar to other socialist countries (Hirt, 2012). Within each work-unit, housing for its members was built and managed by the work-unit on behalf of the state. Each household of work-unit members was allocated with a house and paid a small sum of rent to use it. Changes in housing within the work-unit, such as the construction of new buildings or members leaving the work-unit for any reason, could lead to the re-allocation of housing based on a comprehensive consideration of work-unit members’ backgrounds, such as family size, length of service, rank in the hierarchy inside the work-unit, and previous contributions (see Wang and Murie, 2000). In this regard, state

ownership rigorously maintained urban housing as a form of use value, excluding the possibility of transforming it into exchange value for speculative purposes.

Secondly, the mentorship in the work-unit system, especially in the state-owned enterprises, once created an atmosphere akin to that of the period in Western Europe when crafts were cherished. In his classic research on the internal operation of the work-unit system in China, Walder (1988) observes a patron-client relationship between authorities and activists, which he terms as communist neo-traditionalism. According to Fu and Qu (2015), however, Walder overlooks a more general relationship among workers. They argue that the mentorship is the most ordinary and general relationship among workers in the work-unit system. It is possible to trace the different genealogy of mentorship in Western tradition and Chinese history, but in the work-unit system, particularly in the state-owned enterprises, the mentorship relationship serves a dual function. On the one hand, it is an ethical relationship where masters not merely impart crafts to their apprentices but do so face-to-face. On the other hand, the relationship extends beyond the production process to everyday life. Masters are responsible not only for their apprentices' skills but also for other aspects of their lives, such as marital affairs. In this sense, the practical operation of the work-unit system has a 'quasi-home characteristic' (Fu and Qu, 2015).

Taking into account the two characteristics of the work-unit system, cities under socialism in China did have some essences with the city as an oeuvre in Lefebvre's sense. These similarities may not have arisen by chance but can be traced back to the genealogy of communist ideology for some nuanced linkages. These similarities provide a foundation for appropriating the concept of the right to the city to Chinese context. However, contextualising the right to the city also necessitates considering how cities under socialism diverge from the city as an oeuvre, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the right to the city.

As indicated earlier in this article, according to Lefebvre (1996: 66), the termination of the city as an oeuvre was brought about by the advent of the industrial era. Although Lefebvre does not specify the exact time period, it seems to have been a gradual process. In sharp contrast, in pre-socialist countries in Eastern Europe (Hirt, 2012) and in China, the privatisation of public housing occurred in a very short span of time. Some urban inhabitants in the period thereafter have actual living experiences in cities under socialism, rather than merely being able to imagine the oeuvre city as a remote entity. Therefore, the

legacy of cities under socialism may persistently make a difference. Additionally, in the regime under socialism, urban inhabitants participated in the urban process but they did not have the final say, nor could they appropriate the city ‘after their hearts’ desire’. Moreover, when urban inhabitants seek to imbue meaning into their homes, the ambiguity of property right and potential instability of housing (as mentioned above, housing within an individual work-unit may be reallocated after a period of time) may shape a unique mode of tactics and affiliations among urban inhabitants, or the pursuit of property right *per se* may be the process of making house a meaningful place (see Li, 2014). As Hirt reveals in her research on post-socialist cities in Eastern Europe (2012: 4), “the private home was the sole place of passive resistance against the state” (Hirt, 2012: 4). Thus, property rights are not necessarily the antithesis of the right to the city; on the contrary, they are a feasible way, if not the only way, to claim the right to participation and appropriation in the city under or after socialism. In this regard, the dispute around the negative implications of property right for the right to the city, as mentioned above, will face some explanatory dilemmas when applied to the post-socialist context. Yet, considering whose rights are at stake still makes a difference. Bearing all these differences in mind when exploring the right to the city in the context of the Global East will not only contribute to a renewed understanding of this concept but also help elucidate the limitations of urban inhabitants’ right claims, especially when their efforts are end in failure. The next section will locate the two questions around the concept of the right to the city, namely, what kind of right and whose right, in the context of China.

The Right to the City in China: To what kind of right? Whose right?

The economic reform in China has been accompanied by the rise of popular protests (Perry, 2010). These popular protests are usually characterised by the mobilisation of ‘right’ rhetoric as “*wei-quan*”, meaning ‘the protection of lawful rights’ (Lee, 2008). As Perry (2010) observes, some scholars interpret the appropriation of right rhetoric in popular protests as an indication of ‘a rising rights consciousness’. For example, O’Brien and Li (2006) term peasants’ resistances prior to the abolishment of agricultural taxes in 2005 as rightful resistance. According to O’Brien and Li, rightful resistance is ‘a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorised channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise power, hinges on locating and

exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilising support from the wider public.’ (2006: 2) China is such a country where rights have been protected weakly in tradition. However, with the spread of rightful resistance, it is possible that ordinary people may become more skilled at ‘rights talk’ (2006:127). In this regard, ‘rightful resistance could ... evolve into a far-reaching counterhegemonic project ...’ (2006:126). For Perry (2010), it is unmistakable to notice the utilisation of right rhetoric in popular protests, but to equate the right that the participants of popular protests bear in mind with that in Western tradition (like human rights), and further predict an emergent ‘civil society’ in China is problematic. Perry traces the meaning of rights in Chinese history and concludes that ‘in a country where rights are seen more as state-authorized channels to enhance national unity and prosperity than as naturally endowed protections against state intrusion, popular demands for the exercise of political rights are perhaps better seen as an affirmation of – rather than an affront to – state power’ (2008: 46-47). Some rights are defined and secured by state authorities (for example, the property right), thus the claim for some kinds of right can strengthen the power of the state, which may simultaneously be the source of infringements on rights.

In most cases, the protest of urban inhabitants in Chinese cities is a sort of ‘property right activism’ (Lee, 2008). First, in the urban regeneration process, some urban inhabitants are faced with unfair housing expropriation. They act as ‘nail-households’ to resist displacement or fight for the confirmation of their property rights (see Shin, 2013). Second, conflicts may occur between homeowners and real-estate developers or their affiliated management companies (Lee, 2008; Zhou, 2014). The latter infringes homeowners’ property rights by converting promised green areas into additional housing units; surcharging management fees, et cetera. Homeowners thus protest to resist these practices (Lee, 2008). Property rights are either the target that protesters are fighting for or the auspices of protesters’ living habitat. When seeking to appropriate the concept of the right to the city to Chinese context, the antithesis between property right and the right to the city ought to be reconsidered. One major factor that contributes to this difference may be the property right situation under socialism. As Hirt reminds us, under socialism, ‘the private home was the sole place of passive resistance against the state’ (2012: 4). However, when urban inhabitants’ claims for the right to the city are closely associated with property rights, it may be followed by the situation that is criticised by some scholars as mentioned above:

a sort of 'intense possessive individualism' (Harvey, 2008) will arise among homeowners; on the contrary, those urban minority who do not have property in the city will be excluded from the right to the city. For its broader effect on urban social movement, Shin (2013: 1183) argues that 'with vested material interests in the exchange value of owned properties, homeowners' political interests are centred around preserving (and increasing) property values, leading to fragmented forms of collective action with broken links with wider societal movement'. For another thing, when property right triumphs over other sorts of rights in cities, or the use value is defeated by exchange value, urban inhabitants may be willing to sell their properties while unaware of the loss of other modes of rights. The introduction of the logics of market exchange is regarded as one tactic of the Chinese state to preserve stability and maintain domination (Lee and Zhang, 2013). The society thus becomes fragmented.

Another significant issue associated with the right to the city is whose right it concerns. As we discussed earlier in this article, the city as an oeuvre is the collective crafts of all urban inhabitants. But Lefebvre does not elaborate on this point in the context of an urban-rural continuum. A further question is whether everybody can be urban inhabitant? China is on the trajectory of urbanisation, thus a huge number of rural people migrate to cities as labours. As Shin (2013) observes in the case of Guangzhou, migrant workers do make contributions to the development of cities, but they usually reside in rented houses, namely they lack the property rights to the housing, even though they may have lived in city for long. When the neighbourhoods they lived in are faced with demolition, should the migrants be granted compensation? If so, should the compensation be the same as those for homeowners? The situation may be further complicated by the mixed ownership situation among urban inhabitants. Although the privatisation of public housing in China was launched around the end of the last century (Davis and Lu, 2003), some houses remain public due to specific reasons, thus inhabitants of this kind of housing still lack the ownership of their housing. If they were confronted with the similar situation like those migrants, should they be granted compensation? If so, should their compensations be equal to those who obtained ownership? If so, can this sort of equality be perceived as fair? All these questions remain to be explored in further empirical study based on China.

Concluding discussion

This article seeks to contextualise the concept of the right to the city within the Chinese context, aiming to provide a theoretical framework for future on gentrification in contemporary China, or more generally, in the Global East. By emphasising Lefebvre's discussion on the city as an oeuvre, this article demonstrates that a similar condition in socialist cities makes it feasible to appropriate this concept, originally embedded in the history of Western Europe, to a broader context. By extending this concept to China, this article does not attempt to assert urban generality across country borders or propose an oriental counterpart for this concept. Instead, it aims to use successive discussions around this concept as a theoretical framework to enhance our understanding of the current urban processes in China and in the Global East. This, in turn, will contribute to the broader discourse on this concept.

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[Editors: Rui ZHOU, Fanghao CHEN]