Introduction

Metropole Power: Approaches to Centre and Periphery in Contemporary China

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1. Introduction

The 2012 edition of the Chinese Academy of Social Science *Blue Book on Social Development: China's Social Situation, Analysis and Forecast for 2012* declared that sometime in the same year China's urban population would cross an historic milestone to constitute more than 50 per cent of the overall population. Bearing in mind that we should take such claims with a grain of salt knowing that the measurement of what is and isn't "urban" is sometimes more a matter of administrative decree rather than rigorous academic reasoning, it is plainly obvious even to the casual observer that China is indeed urbanizing at an extremely rapid rate. This process is having profound effects on the nature of social, cultural and economic life and will rightly be the focus of intensive research in the decades to come. Indeed the subject has already been well explored from numerous angles in the academic literature thus far (Bray, 2005; Davis *et al.*, 1995; Friedmann, 2005; Jacka, 2006; McGee, 2007; Oakes and Schein, 2006).

Yet urbanization as a phenomenon does not only impact on the immediate geographical and social space of the urban, the influence of its economic and cultural power extends far beyond the city limits. The factories and construction sites of China's eastern seaboard are a beacon attracting tens of millions of migrant workers. The remitted income and acquisition of associated urban values of the rural-to-urban migrants, the *nongmingong* 农民工, in turn effect physical and cultural change back upon the villages. The strongly urban biased consumer and ideological values of the media, particularly through advertising and entertainment (such as popular television dramas and matchmaking programmes) are also an important conduit for the transfer of an urban worldview to the broader society. The rapidly developing and improved transport infrastructure is likewise enabling a mass exodus in the other direction from the urban to the rural in the form of the urban tourist,

an increasing number of whom are driving their own vehicles on pleasure jaunts through the countryside. In a country as vast as China not all of these effects are even, nor indeed is the scale and pace of urbanization, but they are significant enough to be worthy of critical attention and each is a piece of the broader mosaic.

Nonetheless the process of urbanization does not render everyone equally urban, even those newcomers who enter the city in search of a future find that they are often treated as "second-class citizens" (Pun, 2005; Solinger, 1999). Urbanization in China has gone hand in hand with significant social stratification, a phenomenon also well researched (Goodman, 2008; Li, 2010; Otis, 2011; Whyte, 2010). In many places the cityscape has expanded so fast that, in an ironic reversal of Mao Zedong's famous guerilla strategy, the city has come to surround the countryside. In so doing the neologism of the "urban village" (*chengzhongcun* 城中村) has now entered the Chinese lexicon. The *chengzhongcun* is not akin to the "urban village" of trendy downtown Beijing (Soho Sanlitun for example) or other such global cosmopolitan visions of gentrified inner-city community living. Rather, it is a hybrid zone where the urban meets the rural, or, as I shall argue below, where the "centre" meets the "periphery". It is in these hybrid zones that the lives of the urban "other", that is, the *nongmingong*, are played out and new identities forged and contested. It is also in these liminal zones that state power seeks to assert its authority and shape the social landscape according to its will (Dutton, 1998).

I argue here that there is another way in which we can consider the relationship between the urban and rural in the context of a rapidly changing China. That is, as an uneven power relationship between the metropole centre and the non-metropole periphery. The notion of the "metropole" has been used to describe the relations between the Western colonial centre and the spaces "outside" which were subject to various forms of colonial power, and of the multifarious ways in which the "periphery" also reflected back upon the "centre" (especially in terms of constituting notions of progress, race and nation) (Webster, 2006). With some modification I argue that the notion of the metropole as a heuristic device can help clarify central aspects of the power/ knowledge relationship between the Chinese party-state (that is, a one-party nation-state) and Chinese society at large, especially those sections of society outside the immediate physical and social scope of the Chinese metropole. In this instance "metropole" not only refers to the physical manifestation of all that is urban but also, and perhaps more importantly, to a specific form of governmental reasoning emanating from the centre that seeks to condition and shape the periphery.

Firstly, to refer to an oft-quoted statement from Lucien Pye (1992: 235), China is "a civilization pretending to be a [nation-]state". In this instance for

"civilization" read "empire". I do not have the space here to examine in detail the pros and cons of this argument; suffice to say that present-day China does indeed represent the only remaining nineteenth-century, that is "premodern", multi-ethnic empire (Crossley, 2002). To forge this gargantuan entity into a modern nation-state requires an enormous act of will from the centre upon the periphery. This includes the processes, both violent and nonviolent, of incorporating the non-Han regions into the fold of the nation, a process well documented elsewhere (Mullaney, 2011).

Secondly, taking ethnicity out of the equation, the biggest divide in contemporary China (or indeed "modern" China) is itself between the "urban" and the "rural". In 1947 in the seminal classic *From the Soil* (*Xiangtu Zhongguo* 乡土中国) Fei Xiaotong (1992: 37) wrote that "Chinese society is fundamentally rural". Fei (1992: 40) further described the (Han) farming communities as being fixed and immobile. "Being fixed in space, people live in solitude and isolation," he wrote. The post-1949 *hukou* 户口 system of household registration did certainly perpetuate this condition of relative isolation, at least directly from urban China if not from the ideological reach of the Maoist party-state. However, the rural in contemporary China is certainly no longer "fixed and immobile". As mentioned above, farmers have *en masse* migrated to the cities and many a rural community has been absorbed by an expanding urban landscape. Yet the *hukou* system is still firmly in place perpetuating a system of second-class citizenship, forever marking out the *nongmingong* as "Other" and bearing all the associated connotations the term implies.

The essays in this collection explore different facets of this so-called metropole power, of which urbanization is a correlate phenomenon, right from the very epicentre in places like the Pearl River Delta and cosmopolitan Shanghai, to a small village in Anhui – Xiaogang – which in the late 1970s was the site of the first experiment in "household farming" that would in turn help trigger a nation-wide shift in agricultural policy in the 1980s. The contrast between the Pearl River Delta and the Anhui village of Xiaogang could not be greater. It was in the Pearl River Delta that China's experiment with urban reform first began in the late 1970s transforming the bucolic landscape of what is now known as Shenzhen into a bustling metropolis in the short space of three decades. Xiaogang, by contrast, despite its historic role in laying the way for reform was for much of the last thirty years of reform clearly on the outside, but it too now has been thrust into the trajectory of nation-building modernization in efforts to create a "new socialist countryside" (*shehuizhuyi xin nongcun* 社会主义新农村), and to ensure that no point in the nation-state remains unconnected from the centre.

It is through this grid of profound social change in which the centre works upon the periphery (to greater and lesser degrees of success) that the essays

here examine the intersection of government, space and power. Government is understood in the broad Foucauldian sense of the "conduct of conduct", that is, in the heterogeneous ways in which state power in China comes to impose its will on the citizen-subject. The essays collectively point towards a form of Chinese governmentality, what I have elsewhere playfully described as a form of "liberal despotism" (Sigley, 2004). Space in these essays represents the point at which government and subject meet in the contested zones. These spaces take the shape of villages in the heartland of Anhui, of urban villages in the Pearl River Delta and of the cityscape of Shanghai. Power is the concrete manifestation of opposed wills, one seeking to control and order, and another to resist and evade. In what follows I briefly consider how each of the papers relates to the central themes outlined above.

2. Government

In terms of government the contributions provide different angles on a complex question. However banal it sounds there is no getting away from the dominance of the party-state when it comes to government in China. Although much "space" has been opened up for private life since the onset of reforms in 1978, the party-state still continues to play the determining role in government at all levels. Yet whilst this remains the case it would be incorrect to suggest that since 1978 nothing has changed. In parallel with the development of a market economy, albeit a "socialist market economy", the scope for individual agency in terms of choices relating to lifestyle has created new sites for self-expression and subjectivity both within and beyond the emerging consumer culture. As I have argued elsewhere (Jeffreys and Sigley, 2009) we can understand the shift that has taken place in China as one of "government" to "governance". That is, the party-state has divested itself of some authority and direct administrative control in favour of allowing certain sections of the population to practice greater degrees of self-autonomy (see also Hoffman, 2006). In the analysis of deeply embedded concepts such as *suzhi* 素质 (human quality), for example, we see that the terrain of government has widened considerably and that not all citizens (or we might say "citizen-subjects" to capture the dual sense of autonomy and heteronomy implied here) are treated equally. In terms of the discourse of *suzhi*, for example, some are seen to possess the attributes of "high quality" (*gao suzhi* 高素质) and are thereby able to govern themselves, whilst others are in the "low quality" (*di suzhi* 低素质) category and in need of "self-improvement" (Sigley, 2009).

Li Lingling examines in her contribution the resistance on the part of rural-urban migrant writers who critique and mock the sanitized vision of the urban landscape proffered by the local government and urban property

developers. These urban-migrant writers inhabit the hybrid zone of the urban/rural in two senses. Firstly, they are themselves rural migrants who have come to the city in search of employment opportunities. Secondly, due to strained financial circumstances, they must reside in the *chengzhongcun* (urban villages) which whilst now surrounded by the urban still retain a sense of being "outside", "marginalized" and even "dangerous". The status of being "rural" is thus saturated in terms of both place of origin and place of residence. Whilst the urban authorities and property developers look upon the space of the *chengzhongcun* as unruly, disordered and unsafe, Li notes that for the urban-migrant writers these liminal spaces become the battle-ground for contesting their sense of new identity and in so doing offer a valuable critique of metropole reasoning that would wish to ignore and eradicate the presence of the *chengzhongcun* altogether. We can detect here some similarities between the experience of writers from the "colonies" who vented their rancour against the metropole establishment (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2002). Li's work reminds us that government is much more than the act of policy formation and implementation but just as equally about the formation of conceptual categories of "the governors" and "the governed". In her work we gain unique insights to subaltern voices critiquing the efforts of urban authorities to make the city in the image of a "middle class utopia".

In continuing to focus on government, Thao Nguyen in her contribution examines "citizenship" in Shanghai where authorities focus their attention on the process of "civilizing" the new rural-to-urban migrants, seeking to improve their *suzhi* (human quality) and cope with a rapidly changing urban social landscape. Nguyen's work is somewhat sympathetic to the tasks confronting government in contemporary China. The very success of the reform process in creating a more plural, dynamic, mobile China are also the very processes which make it more difficult and challenging to govern. She notes that, "*Shequ* [community] building should therefore be viewed as an attempt by the party-state to build formal institutions of political participation to ensure that collective actions against the state can be organized in a politically acceptable manner and that they do not spill onto the streets and pose a threat to social stability."

Through an examination of the "civilization campaign" (*wenming huodong* 文明活动) and "community building" (*shequ jianshe* 社区建设) Nguyen outlines how government in Shanghai has adapted its strategies in the shift from the "work unit" (*danwei* 单位) to the "community" (*shequ* 社区) as the terrain of urban government (which can also be understood in terms of the aforementioned shift from "government" to "governance"). According to government statements, the "community" promises to be a site of increasing local autonomy and self-governance (*zizhi* 自治). However, Nguyen notes that such claims need to be understood in terms of a limited autonomy that

is graded and granted according to the level of *suzhi*. For instance, we see in this transition a state-led effort to incorporate the large influx of migrant workers into Shanghai through a process of encouraging them to develop a sense of "being urban" and "being civil", what Nguyen refers to as a process of cultivating an "inner urbanism". In this regard Nguyen argues that, "Civilizing campaigns at the *shequ* level should be understood as attempts to rectify the 'deficient' component of China's urbanization process as manifested in the 'poor quality' (*di suzhi*) of its vast workforce of rural-urban migrants."

3. Space

From the villages of the remote rural areas to the *chengzhongcun* of urban China, space itself is both an artefact of government and a contested zone. Space in this sense is a problematization, something that governments wrestle with in determining the desirable, at least from the view of the authorities, dimensions, and of making spaces that are more amenable to surveillance and intervention, especially in terms of securing "social stability" (Sigley, 2013). Just as equally, however, space is also seen as a significant site of resistance and negotiation between the party-state and the citizenry. Two of the contributions focus squarely on urban China and investigate the social consequences of rapid urban expansion and rural-to-urban migration.

David Wang's study of the urban villages of Shenzhen serves as an informative introduction and overview of the phenomenon of the urban village. Shenzhen is itself a product of reform, a city that did not exist before 1978. As one of the first, and without doubt the most significant, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), it is fair to say that it is the birthplace of modern Chinese state capitalism. And in a measure of how fast Shenzhen has grown, it is also the first city to confront the "urban village". With a focus much more on the native villagers rather than the urban-migrants, Wang's study shows that in the case of Shenzhen the native villagers have been able to resist and deflect to varying degrees the developmental intentions of government urban planners. We see that the local villagers have been able to effectively adapt to changing circumstances and maintain a sense of collective identity through the creation of village companies. Wang concludes that the case of the urban villages in Shenzhen, at least as far as the native villagers are concerned, is a positive model for urban villages in other parts of China (many of which have little space or power of negotiation with the city government and property developers).

Li adds to Wang's informative overview by focusing on the rural-to-urban migrant, the *nongmingong*. Whereas Wang provides a view of the urban village from the perspective of the native villagers, Li comes at the

problem from the view of the rural-to-urban migrant, and in particular the urban migrant writer. In this case quite a different perspective emerges. In her study of urban alienation and identity, Li examines the relationship between the rural migrants and the urban spaces (typically the urban village) they occupy, and those spaces from which they are excluded. Drawing upon the voices of the subaltern through interviews and "labour literature" (*dagong wenxue* 打工文学) we are given privileged access to the phenomenon of the urban village from the point of view of the *nongmingong*. Instead of seeing the urban village as a "cultural wasteland" (*wenhua shamo* 文化沙漠) we instead see them as spaces of "cultural production". Li adroitly highlights the battlelines drawn over identity in the contest to make meaning and (dis)order out of urban space. The neat and imposing blueprints of the urban developer and city official are pitted against the wit, sarcasm and passion of the pen of the migrant worker. Li calls upon urban residents and officials to look at the space of the urban village in more favourable terms. She holds that, "Demolishing urban villages means destroying the cultural cells of the organic city and excluding the cultural possibilities and diversity of life in the city that everyone can call 'home'."

Hongguang He, by contrast, focuses our attention back on rural China. His paper reminds us that the social transformation underway in China is not just confined to the urban areas and highlights the planning intentions of the centre upon the villages in the "new socialist countryside" (*shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*) campaign, a governmental campaign of enormous significance yet one which has received very little scholarly attention in the anglophone academy. Hongguang He examines spatial change in the village of Xiaogang, which – as mentioned above – is famous for being the first village to switch from collective to household farming in the late 1970s. We see in Xiaogang the strong hand of the state concerned as it is with "modernizing" the village by bringing order and meaning to village space. In a paper that straddles both the themes of space and government, Hongguang He outlines what he refers to as the "spatialization of government". In so doing he asks: how has space been (re)designed in a particular way to govern or manage the village? Whilst acknowledging the rise of individual forms of subjectivity even in rural China during the reform period, Hongguang He also argues that "a collectivized form of subjectivity still persists and that this collective family identity is built into village public and domestic spaces". Through his case study we gather that the development of public space forms an ongoing site of negotiation between the government and the local villagers. Hongguang He argues that "new forms of space continue to bolster collectivized rather than individualized forms of subjectivity". This contrasts with Yan Yunxiang's (2009) work on the "individualization" of rural China and will serve as a useful addition to this important area of research.

David Wang in his contribution on Shenzhen also highlights the collective function of the urban village. Wang argues that the villages as a form of collective agency have played an important role in providing a safety net and form of collective representation for villagers as the society and landscape around them undergo a dramatic transformation. In this regard, the urban villages that Wang describes are kinds of liminal spaces between the urban and the rural, and during the process of urbanization they become hybridized zones. Wang argues that both Ferdinand Tönnies's terminology of *Gemeinschaft* and *Geselleschaft*, often used to characterize rural and urban communities respectively, could both equally be applied to the urban villages. As Wang notes, "In the urban village we find both the kind of *Gemeinschaft* rural community and *Geselleschaft* modern urban society." This fascinating blend of the "rural" and the "urban" right in the heart of the metropolis that is now Shenzhen is only possible because of the continued existence of the space of the urban village, itself a product of the specific form of land tenure that, until recently in Shenzhen, distinguished between rural and urban households. Wang's study is thus a testimony to the divergent possibilities available to city planners in the context of China and that in the process of urbanization Chinese cities do not have to become an undifferentiated homogenous space of sameness. But perhaps more importantly the form of collective ownership found in some of Shenzhen's urban villages points to the possibility of different forms of grass-roots associational life and empowerment that may be helpful in the transition towards more broader participatory forms of political life. To simply destroy the urban village is to eradicate this possibility. This brings us to the final theme of the papers, "power".

4. Power

As I noted in the introduction we could understand this form of power as extending from the "metropole", a term I modify here to denote the significant omnipresence of an urban-based party-state in contemporary China. Power in this sense finds its strength both in the physical apparatus of the state in implementing and enforcing policy but also in the forms of knowledge and expertise which assist in rendering the social terrain visible and amenable to intervention. Yet as other contributors note, even when subjects meet this condition for self-improvement it does not guarantee that they will be welcomed into the arms of the urban citizenry and aspirational middle class. As Li argues, "The different worlds of the rural and the urban have become the most significant symbols of social class and cultural identity in China." All of the essays explore this divide in one way or another. Li, Wang and Nguyen examine those spaces of the "urban" and "rural" which overlap. As a result of a system of household registration (*hukou*), which divides the population

administratively into either a "rural" or an "urban" resident, it is very difficult for rural migrants to officially change their status. Even if they could change residency from "rural" to "urban" they are still marked out as different.

Nguyen's paper adds to Li's insofar as it goes beyond the "migrant" versus "resident" divide to note that even within the "migrant" category there is a stratification of "high quality" (*gao suzhi*) and "low quality" (*di suzhi*) migrants, thus bringing to our attention the significant process of social stratification within urban China and the varied responses of government in "managing" these different groups. One of the key problems confronting this metropole power is how to incorporate "the other" into urban space, that is, to welcome them not just as migrants but more importantly "new citizens" (or in the case of Shanghai, the "new Shanghainese", a label which is only currently applied to the "high quality" migrants).

The papers are thus collectively describing a form of power emanating from the metropolitan centre seeking to shape and condition the conduct of China's citizenry. Even in the remotest corners of China, at least in the papers in this collection, local governments, whilst having some leeway to implement to suit local conditions, must at the end of the day comply with prefectural, provincial and central directives. Power in this sense is not applied evenly; it uses dividing practices to distinguish between the "quality" (*suzhi*) of different subjects and to impose different regimes. But at the same time through the use of the pen or in other acts of evasion those who are the target of such transformative agendas can and do speak back. Collectively the essays in this collection offer as a cross-section of contemporary China and the conflicts, tensions and contestations between state and society.

Note

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