RETHINKING SOUTHERN URBANISM FROM THE PERIPHERY

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Abstract

Global urban studies have seen a peripheral turn, as researchers shifted their gaze from the central city to the peri-urban areas. This shift in perspective is crucial for studying cities in the Global South, as most urban growth in the Global South has taken place on the urban fringes. This essay surveys the evolving scholarship on urban China and considers how China as a case study may illuminate the peripheral turn in global urban studies. It argues that urban China research needs to move beyond the largest cities in the country and study a wider range of peripheral regions and urban experiences. Northeast China is used as an example to illustrate how the narrative on Chinese urbanism can be enriched by taking a peripheral view. It then proposes some comparative questions to rethink southern urbanism from the periphery.

Keywords

Global South; Urbanization; Urban Space; Periphery; Southern Urbanism; China; Comparison.

REPENSANDO O URBANISMO DO SUL A PARTIR DA PERIFERIA

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Resumo

Os estudos urbanos globais têm testemunhado uma virada periférica, à medida que os pesquisadores vêm mudando seu olhar da parte central das cidades para as áreas periurbanas. Essa mudança de perspectiva é crucial para estudar cidades no sul global, já que a maior parte do crescimento urbano nessa região ocorreu na franja urbana. Este ensaio analisa a evolução dos estudos sobre a China urbana e considera como a China enquanto estudo de caso pode lançar luzes sobre a virada periférica nos estudos urbanos globais. Ele defende que as pesquisas sobre a China urbana precisam ir além das maiores cidades do país e se debruçar sobre uma gama mais ampla de regiões periféricas e de experiências urbanas. O nordeste da China é usado como exemplo para ilustrar de que maneira é possível enriquecer a narrativa sobre o urbanismo chinês ao se adotar uma visão periférica. Em seguida, são propostas algumas questões comparativas para repensar o urbanismo do Sul a partir da periferia.

Palavras-chave

Sul Global; Urbanização; Espaço Urbano; Periferia; Urbanismo do Sul; China; Comparação.

RETHINKING SOUTHERN URBANISM FROM THE PERIPHERY

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Global urban studies have seen a "peripheral turn", as researchers shifted their gaze from the central city to the peri-urban areas (Ren, 2021). This shift in perspective is crucial for studying cities in the Global South, as most urban growth in countries such as China and Brazil has been taking place on the urban fringes. Brazil urbanized rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, whereas China urbanized two decades later from the 1980s and the 1990s. In both countries, the urban periphery has received sustained research attention, but the debates in urban China and urban Brazil studies have developed in a parallel fashion with little exchange with one another. This commentary aims to bring the two fields closer to one another by discussing Chinese urbanism from a peripheral angle. By doing do, it also aims to generate some comparative questions with which to rethink Southern urbanism from the periphery.

1. Urban China

Rapid urbanization in China since the 1990s has turned the country into a frontier of flourishing comparative urban research (Ren, 2020). This can be seen in the large number of publications on Chinese cities in the English-language urban studies journals. Inside China, an even larger body of scholarly work, in Chinese-language journals, examines urban structures and processes of Chinese cities since the market reforms of the 1990s. The main topics studied include housing privatization, land-market deregulation, rural-to-urban migration, mega-projects and mega-events, and more recently, eco-cities and emerging technologies. But despite this scholarly output, the gaze of urban China studies has mostly rested on the economically most dynamic regions–Shanghai in the Yangtze River Delta, Beijing in the Jing-Jin-Ji capital region, and Guangzhou and Shenzhen in the southern Pearl River Delta. The rest of China has largely remained a flyover zone, even though it comprises vast urban territories with many vibrant cities.

In my view, the next phase of research should address three sets of issues which have constrained the debate in the urban China field. First, the genre of topics under study is limited. Most of the urban China literature addresses the privatization of housing (Huang; Li, 2014), land speculation (Lin, 2009; Wu, 2015), and migration (Fan, 2008, 2022; Li; He; Chan, 2017), specifically, their effect on low-skilled migrants in cities because of China's *hukou* system (Chan, 2018).[1] These topics are significant, but the fixation on them ignores other acute changes underway in the country, such as rural-urban integration, rising nationalism, youth unemployment, digital commerce, and energy transition. Second, the interpretive framework in the urban China field is far too narrow. Inspired by critical geographers, the field has adopted local state entrepreneurialism as the main interpretive framework (Harvey, 1989). Empirically, this focus has generated extensive if not exhaustive analyses on municipal governments. The role of municipal governments has been examined, for example, in housing reforms, land market regulation, infrastructural investment, environmental protection, and in building megaprojects and hosting megaevents. But the emphasis on municipal governance has blurred the role of the non-state actors, such as the private sector, civil society groups, and residents. What's more, this focus on local governments perpetuates the myth that China is a monolithic authoritarian state. Although the state's influence can be seen in every sphere of urban life, especially under Xi Jinping (2013-present), China's strong private sector and active civil society warrant more scholarly attention (Spires, 2024). Third, a narrative emphasis on the structural forces of the state and the market obscures the daily lives of ordinary urban dwellers – how they make sense of their built environment and claim their rights to the city. The next phase of research needs to broaden the empirical and theoretical repertoire, and spotlight the lived experience of the people.

2. Views from the Periphery

A shift in perspective from the center to the periphery can advance the study of Chinese cities. Elsewhere, I've discussed the meaning of "periphery" in contexts such as the geographical (e.g., urban fringes, smaller cities, rural hinterland), the conceptual (e.g., theoretical frontiers, postcolonial urban theory), and the social (e.g., marginalized groups) (Ren, 2021). The peripheral perspective most needed in urban China studies, first of all, is geographical, i.e., the smaller cities and economically less developed regions outside Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and

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1. The *hukou* system is China's national household registration system that divides the country's population between urban and rural, often privileging the urban over the rural in matters such as access to better social welfare.

Shenzhen. If Chinese cities have served as sites for decentering urban theory from the West, then the field of urban China studies itself also needs decentering. Considering a more diverse range of cities and urban experiences can also lead to analytical breakthroughs and broaden the interpretative framework.

China's northeast serves as a good example of peripheral regions from which to rethink Chinese urbanism. The northeast (formerly called Manchuria) borders Russia and includes three provinces. It covers a territory of 350,000 square kilometers and has many vibrant cities–colonial sites (Changchun and Dalian), railway hubs (Harbin and Qiqihaer), automobile centers (Shenyang), and many resource-based locales (Hegang, Yichun, Fushun). In the late 19th century, the region was a cultural crossroad, absorbing waves of immigrants from Europe, central Asia, Japan, and Korea. It was a strategic industrial outpost for China's industrialization and modernization in the second half of the 20th century. From the 1990s, as China joined the WTO and poured resources into the Special Economic Zones in the south, the industrial northeast started to decline. Factories were shut down and workers laid off (Lee, 2007). Although the region is often called China's "rustbelt," that moniker captures the deindustrialization only to a certain extent, as economic restructuring and outmigration here differs much from postindustrial cities in the West. In terms of population decline, for instance, the region has lost residents to the south, though its largest cities continue to attract migrants from nearby smaller towns, stabilizing their population. Far from being abandoned and emptied out, the major cities in the northeast (Harbin, Changchun, Shenyang, and Dalian) compete with the coastal cities for investment in infrastructure and subsidies to lure private investors. Economic restructuring, which began in the late 1990s with the privatization of SOEs (State-Owned Enterprises), has by now completed. The primary pillar for urban growth in the region no longer is manufacturing, but instead business services, real estate, and tourism. The region is trying to reinvent itself, yet its growth lags the south. The region's sluggish growth, in turn, has led to development strategies different from those in the top-tier cities.

Recently, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the northeast has attracted renewed attention in China. As the Chinese economy has stalled, the country has looked to the northeast for reflection – on what it means to slow down. Journalists have traveled to the region to report on the urban life in slow-growing cities. Literary works on northeastern cities – often themed on loss, unemployment, and family breakdown – climbed the national bestseller charts. Some northeastern cities have enticed digital nomads, as artists and other creative workers relocate from the south, lured by its low housing and living costs. The northeast has also drawn climate migrants. As summer has become unbearably hot across the country, families with means snatch up properties in the region as summer homes.

And tourism has discovered the northeast: in 2023, the city of Harbin received 135 million tourists – most drawn to its annual Ice and Snow Festival between December and February. The city has become a "*wang hong*" (influencers' city).

If Shanghai presents an image of China at its peak of globalization, then the northeast represents the country in its post-pandemic, post-growth phase – a country in search of a new narrative to imagine its uncertain future. The urban processes in the northeast region entail both growth and decline, hope and disappointment. It calls out for comparison, not only with other Chinese cities but also more globally. How has the vast urban territory of China's northeast been made and remade? How is its future imagined? How do people make sense of and invest meaning in their cities and towns? And what can a peripheral view from China's "rustbelt" tell us about urban governance, fortunes, and futures of other cities? This sort of comparative thinking, from a peripheral region, can change the way we recount the story of Chinese urbanism–by shifting the perspective from the extraordinary to the ordinary, from grand narratives to the everyday, and from the state to the private and the individual.

3. Entry Points

Most urban China literature has adopted local state entrepreneurialism as the interpretative framework. Scholars of China's peripheral regions can build on this rich literature, but they also need to be receptive to exploring new entry points. I will mention three examples: the rural, the hyper-periphery, and climate. These new entry points can enrich the narrative on Chinese urbanism that is overly focused on the local entrepreneurial state.

First, we need to consider the rural when analyzing urban change. In China, urban fortunes are often linked to the larger restructuring of the agricultural economy. The northeastern case is especially relevant because industrialized agriculture in this region is the most advanced in the country – in fact, it is heavily subsidized by the central government. In this region, large areas of flat and fertile farmland under state ownership are widely available for industrialized farming. The central government, having identified food security as a national priority, has singled out the northeast as the country's "food reserve." Most farmland in the region is barred from use for urban construction. Local governments, reliant on land-based financing (leasing out land to investors to make revenue), must seek other ways to grow and expand. What urban forms and processes will result from the restructuring of agriculture and this repositioning as the nation's "food reserve"? Are we seeing signs of "agrarian urbanism"?

Second, the hyper-periphery offers a useful lens to decode urban change. By hyper-periphery, I mean the fringe areas of cities in peripheral regions.[2] Even for the second-, or third-tier cities, fringe areas exhibit heterogeneous land use patterns and increasing spatial fragmentation similar to the "poly-periphery" of Brazilian cities invoked in this special issue (Richmond et al., 2025). In summer 2024, I visited the peri-urban zone of the northeastern city of Harbin. I saw single-family villas in gated communities, apartment compounds, a work-in-progress "development zone," an airport economic zone, theme parks targeting weekend trippers from the city – all surrounded by rice fields. I also visited two large new towns, built to accommodate half a million people. Most of the new housing has been developed by the local government working together with private investors. Prior literature has detailed the role of municipal governments in land, housing, and infrastructure development, but what is the involvement of other stakeholders in the making of the hyper-periphery – such as private developers, lower-level governments (in towns, townships, and villages), villagers, migrants, and second-home owners? How do these inhabitants imagine the urban futures of the hyper-periphery? And how are these places represented in mainstream media, social media, maps, and official plans?

Finally, climate change offers another vantage point to think about the urban future of the periphery. For instance, Chinese northeast has the country's coldest climate zone – winter temperatures plunge below minus 25 Celsius. The cities in the region have been a magnet for both winter tourists from the warmer south and climate migrants seeking to escape the summer heat. Betting on the "winter economy," the cities and towns in the region have been investing, with debt, in tourist infrastructure such as hotels, short-term rentals, and public transit, as well as ski resorts, winter sport venues, and "ice and snow" theme parks. Can "climate" change their urban fortunes? Will they become new climate boomtowns? How is this urban region being remade by climate migration and tourism, and what does this mean for the locals?

4. South-South Comparison

For urban China studies, the field could benefit from a decentering–from the most studied megacities to the peripheral rest of the country. I've used the northeast as an illustration to highlight some of the blind spots in the field. Perhaps the same questions would apply for urban inquiry in other countries in the Global South,

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2. Torres and Marques (2001) use the term hyper-periphery (hiperperiferia) to denote areas of extreme poverty in Brazilian cities, which have not benefited from investment and upgrading.

from India to Brazil to Africa. In these regions, large metropolitan regions and their peri-urban zones have received most attention, but little has been written about the transformation taking place in peripheral areas outside the largest metropolitan regions (Mukhopadhyay; Zérah; Denis, 2020).

Another way to substantiate the peripheral turn is through comparisons among cities in the Global South (Robinson, 2022). If heterogeneity is the focus of study, as seen in the contributions to this special issue, then perhaps it would be helpful to start with seeking variations, and compare how heterogeneity takes different forms in China, India, and Brazil. What explains the different degrees of informality in the peri-urban areas? How does the dynamic of co-production of heterogeneity–by private and state sectors–vary across the contexts? How is the peri-urban differently integrated with the central cities? And what is the role of the rural in shaping the peri-urban change in both cases? Are there climate issues that strain urban life and what actions are launched by the local governments and community organizations for climate adaptation? To move from variation-seeking to relational comparisons, one can look at how the peri-urban regions in the Global South are transformed by transnational infrastructural investment, such as the impact of China's BRI (Belt Road Initiative) in Latin America. How, for instance, is Chinese investment in electric vehicles remaking the urban periphery from Sao Paulo to Bahia?

In short, southern urbanism can be reimagined and reconceptualized from the periphery. If the prior scholarship has focused mostly on the largest cities, we now need to turn our lens toward the more neglected regions. In addition to local state entrepreneurialism, we need different entry points from which to comprehend the periphery. From northeast China to peri-urban Sao Paulo and hinterlands in Brazil, the peripheries in the Global South present excellent sites to comparatively think about how the urban is made, imagined, and inhabited.

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