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**BEYOND PLANETARY URBANISATION:  
A CHINESE 'DIALECTICAL' ANALYSIS OF  
URBAN (RE)DEVELOPMENT IN HONG KONG**

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## **BEYOND PLANETARY URBANISATION**

### **A Chinese ‘Dialectical’ Analysis of Urban (Re)development in Hong Kong**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Urban Studies debates have recently been dominated by Euro-American-centric, universalised theories such as planetary urbanisation (and its derivative, planetary gentrification). One underlying problem of this literature is its reliance on the concept of dialectics. Implicit in the latter is the dualistic philosophy. Unlike it, the Chinese *tongbian* thinking of dialectics does not conceive of polarities as dualistic. Polarities do not exclude each other; logically they entail each other and their complementarity and contradiction constitutes a totality. They always involve correlation and continuity over time. Negation of the negation does not mean clear separation, but continuity of one event before and another one after. Town is mutually embedded in the country, and the converse is true. This *tongbian* thinking of town-country relation is empirically elaborated by deciphering Hong Kong’s high-density (re)development as a product of the spatio-temporality of British colonialism. Urban (re)development is accordingly conceived in this light. Capital and the Government could manage to privately appropriate the exchange values of land (re)development because the Government has been able to administer the production of urban space within the somehow frozen mutually embedded town-country relations. In sum, it is the ‘hegemonic’ manipulation of these relations, neither planetary forces nor the worldview gentrification, that can articulate an emphatic account of urban (re)development in Hong Kong.

**KEYWORDS:** dialectics, *tongbian*, urban (re)development, Hong Kong.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This is not another paper in support of the planetary urbanisation thesis and its related formulations such as planetary gentrification. Conversely, its objective is to summarise the problems of such a thesis, to propose a Chinese-informed dialectical analysis and to elaborate it with reference to Hong Kong. The following has been organised accordingly for this purpose.

## 2. EVERYTHING PLANETARY: NON-DIALECTICAL, METHODOLOGICAL CAPITALISM

### 2.1 The planetary thesis

Urban Studies has a long history of making universal propositions since Simmel and Park. These scholars, according to Robinson (2006), merely ignored the colonial reality in their formulation and fantasised the West. Cities represent modernity while the country is deemed as traditional. In response to the increasing activities at the world/global scale in the 1970s, this literature had coined new concepts such as world/global cities. Accordingly, the world city has been employed as the yardstick to evaluate not only New York, London and Paris, but also Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai and Shanghai. As policies of the new right had started to dominate in a number of states, the concept of neo-liberalism was coined. Once the mostly British and American experiences are superimposed on other countries of the world and found wanting, academics do not hesitate to embellish the differences as variegated neo-liberalisms (Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010). For example, Harvey (2005) even rushed to characterise the Chinese experiences as 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics'. Within this super-umbrella, neo-liberal urbanism excels if the focus is on the cities. Again, there are no hesitations to extend this proposition everywhere around the world. While Smith (2002) has generalised gentrification as a global urban strategy, He and her colleague (He, 2007; He and Wu, 2009), for instance, have deciphered China as experiencing gentrification under neo-liberalism and Harris (2008) has done the same to Mumbai. Are the forces of development and the outcomes the same as those of gentrification for cities colonial or socialist in nature, where the latter have a different past? We really wonder (Tang, 2014a, 2014b).

It is within this tradition that we can interpret the emergence of various strands of the formulation of planetary urbanisation. Since the writings of Henri Lefebvre have been translated into English, his thesis of complete urbanisation has gained prominence (Lefebvre, 2003: 7-16). Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid are two of the scholars who have popularised his thesis most in Urban Studies. Seldom discussed is, however, the fact that deep in his formulation is Europe alone, be it from the political city, the merchant city, the industrial city to the urban society (Tang, 2014b: 72). To elaborate Lefebvre's implosion/explosion metaphor, Brenner and Schmid (2015) argue that there are three moments of urbanisation under the relentless forward motion of capital accumulation: concentrated urbanisation, extended urbanisation and differential urbanisation. "The urban fabric of modern capitalism is ... best conceived as a dynamically evolving force field in which the three moments of urbanization continually interact to produce historically specific forms of sociospatial organization and uneven development." (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 169) In other words, the three moments can be found everywhere in the world. This commitment to an universal capital logic has found parallels in the discussion about gentrification. To Lees (2012), gentrification is everywhere, and whatever differences among various cases can be analytically interpreted in terms of a geography of

gentrification, which, in the words of Ley and Teo (2013: 4), “takes seriously variations in the presence/absence, landscapes, political alliances, causal trajectory and local meanings shaping the phenomenon in different places.” Once these variations have been well taken care of, it is, so the argument goes, enlightening to comprehend urban redevelopment across the world as planetary gentrification (Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2016).

## 2.2 Critique

To the post-colonialists, the planetary urbanisation thesis and its associated arguments like planetary gentrification has committed the serious problem of universalism. Robinson (2006) has rejected more than a decade ago the employment of one yardstick, the western one, to study the whole world. Since every city is ordinary, it is necessary to comprehend the difference as diversity. The best version of the post-colonial argument advocates the co-presence of a great diversity of developmental logics. As a corollary, the thesis of planetary urbanisation is problematic, as it has, according to Robinson and Roy (2015: 4), “a tendency to universalization ... - the too-quick alignment of urbanization with global capitalism, limiting the scope for diverse processes shaping the urban to emerge into theorization.”

The issue is: can we really improve our understanding of cities by acknowledging the prevalence of diversity and, then, underscoring the explanatory power of the concept of ‘co-presence’ or some other similar ones. Very often, there is a critique of the planetary urbanisation thesis or alike for emphasising on capital at the expense of gender, ethnicity, nationalism, religion, race, etc. For example, to understand urban and regional practices in Asia, Bunnell and Maringanti (2010) call for more case studies and then theorization. Kipfer (2008) does the same to correct Lefebvre’s Eurocentrism. But, as Tang (2014b: 88) argues, “quantity cannot be a substitute for a more informed qualitative understanding.” This is especially the case for more inward-looking post-colonialists, who insist on separating the western experiences from their colonial counterparts, or in terms of History 1 and History 2 (Lazarus and Varma, 2008). What is actually needed is to pay heed to the interaction with others while taking into consideration how one has developed over time.

Our argument is to interrogate how the planetary urbanisation formulation has developed the universal statements methodologically and epistemologically. Lefebvre’s dialectics is the important source of debate. He excels in bringing the material/mental divide by creating the third term real-and-imagined (Elden, 2004, especially 181-92) and in transcending Hegel’s ‘thesis-antithesis-synthesis’ or Marx’s ‘affirmation-negation-negation-of-the-negation’ dialectic. As a result, the town-countryside contradiction under capitalism is given way to the new contradiction of centre-periphery in the *longue durée* of the production of space towards planetary urbanisation. But Lefebvre’s trialectics still remains somewhat dualistic with an imminent essence, and the best one can get is some kind of mutual and co-constitution. This is best illustrated in Brenner and Schmid’s elaboration of his implosion/explosion metaphor into three moments of the imminent capital logic. In short, to avoid universalism informed by planetary urbanisation, we need a dialectic that avoids dualistic binary and the prevailing essence. To this, we turn to the Chinese ‘dialectics’.

## 3. CHINESE ‘DIALECTICAL’ ANALYSIS

Deep in the Chinese tradition is the correlative thinking. Unlike its logical counterpart, which stresses the explanatory power of causation, the latter is, according to Hall and Ames (1998) “grounded in informal and *ad hoc* analogical procedures presupposing both

association and differentiation.” Accordingly, concepts are image clusters “in which complex semantic associations are allowed to reflect into one another in such way as to provide rich, indefinitely ‘vague’ meaning.” (Hall and Ames, 1995: 136) This mode of thinking entails an ontology of events, not one of substance. That a person is characterised in terms of events is expressed in a correlative pattern of the agent and his acts. It is situation rather than agency that counts. Besides, in a world without any sense of transcendence, polarity (complementary opposites) is different from dualism. The former stipulates that in a relationship of two events, each constitutes a necessary condition of the other for what it is. Correlativity of the two events underscores interdependence, urging contextual interpretation of the world. *Yijing* is conceived as a kind of correlative thinking that developed in light of many concepts entailing an ontology of events such as *dao* (way), *yi* (change), *yinyang* and *biantong* (change with continuity). *Biantong* can also be read as *tongbian*, also a continuum, implying comprehension and practising for change accordingly. *Tongbian* is a correlative thinking “that tends to preclude the kind of metaphysics, dualisms, ontologies, epistemologies, and even the foundations of objective certainty itself, which include the forms of Plato, the will of God, the spirit of Hegel, and the impersonal reason of Kant.” (Tian, 2005: 12)

Unlike dualistic philosophy, the Chinese *tongbian* thinking of dialectics does not conceive of polarities as dualistic. Instead of dualities of capital and labour in Marx’s dialectic, polarities do not exclude each other; logically they entail each other and their complementarity and contradiction constitutes a totality. They always involve correlation and continuity over time. Negation of the negation does not mean clear separation, but continuity of one event before and another one after. Town is mutually embedded in the country, and the converse is true. The usual notion of rural-urban continuum cannot really capture the ever-changing mutually embedded town-country complementarity and contradiction. To read this complexity, the *tongbian* thinking emphasises the significant role of situational consideration, which, unlike the post-colonial critique, does not need to exclude relations outside one’s domain such as one’s focus, the area of study or the country. This demands us to undertake a meticulous investigation of the historical geography of space.

## 4. RE(DEVELOPMENT) IN HONG KONG

### 4.1 The misled impression and its *tongbian* reaction

When one of us took Neil Smith around the city in December 2012, his instantaneous remark on a number of new high-rise buildings was “this is gentrification, that is gentrification.” While I am sure that Neil Smith would agree with the imperative to historicise, he did not hesitate to decipher urban redevelopment in Hong Kong with the universalised statement on gentrification. In a controversial paper, Ley and Teo (2013: 16) critically profess that ‘gentrification’ has seldom been employed in Hong Kong urban research due to the tenacious ‘culture of property’. It is due to the epistemological oversight by Hong Kong researchers that their apparent inability to make the conceptual leap (Leo and Teo, 2013: 2, footnote 1). Obviously, since they have deployed the concept of gentrification uncritically, their sketch invites ontological, epistemological, methodological clarifications.

Intertwined with modernity, nationalism and other colonisations, and being embedded in the Chinese land question, the historical colonial base of Hong Kong land and property relations has nurtured processes of relentless physical demolition, ever-increasing higher-density and high-rise construction beyond the imagination of the concepts. These different, interrelated processes require us to take into account both historical and geographical

developments of the city in ways that complement poststructural methodologies – historical and ‘life story’ methodologies that eschew the ‘container concept’ of culture, i.e. a notion that a ‘culture of property’ prevails in the city at large. Informed by the *tongbian* thinking, the spatial story approach highlights the mutually embeddedness as well as co-creation of spatial history and transformative developmental forces.

#### **4.2 ‘Hegemonic’ urban re(development), not gentrification**

Informed by the *tongbian* thinking of town-country relation, Hong Kong’s high-density (re)development can be deemed as a product of the spatio-temporality of British colonialism. Because the British were interested in Hong Kong not in herself but for the promotion of China trade, they demanded the colony to be financially self-dependent at the embryonic stage of colonialism. Land was proclaimed Crown-owned and was to be leased to users for fixed periods. These formative conditions paved the way for a land market and property regime in which the colonial government, i.e. the landlord, was keen to maximise land sales and related revenues, whereas the users were interested in maximising revenues from landed and property activities within a limited tenure. The other fact about British colonialism is that it rolled on a space regulated by the Chinese spatial administrative hierarchy of town-within-country and customary land practices, in stages. Hong Kong Island was ceded after the Treaty of Nanking in 1842; the tract of land in the Kowloon Peninsular south of Boundary Street was ceded after the Convention of Peking in 1860; and the rest – the once New Kowloon plus the nowadays New Territories – were leased for 99 years after the signing of the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory in 1898. The consequential meaning is that about 90% of the land area of the colony was, according to international treaty, for temporary occupation only over a medium term. This temporal consideration manifested as spatialised problems incurred by the then Chinese customary land system. The Chinese practised a ‘perpetual hereditary tenancy’ system as well as one with layers of ownership. In a nutshell, arable land was divided into two landholders: topsoil and subsoil. Owners of the former were free to inherit, mortgage, transfer and dispose of the land, irrespective of any changes in the ownership of the subsoil. Besides, ownership was sub-divided into red deed or white deed, depending on registration with the local government or not, respectively. Moreover, landholdership could be individual or collective such as the clan or village community as a whole or an ancestral ‘trust’. Finally, the topsoil may be rented to individual villagers who may pay rent to either another villager or to the ‘trust’ (Tang, 2014b: 79-80). Thus, right from the beginning, development took place on the mutually embedded town-country relations, on the one hand, and colonial leaseholdship and the Chinese customary freehold landownership and practices, on the other, and reproduced them. British spatial colonialism also means that development had concentrated in the so-called urban area for almost a hundred year, leaving the countryside as town-within-country. In totality, the government, as the biggest single landlord, has administered the production of space in earnest, including formulating knowledge and invoking modalities of power to perpetuate its hegemony.

Two related characteristics of this regime are worth highlighting (Tang, 2015). Given its ability to own and regulate land, the most precious resource, the government plays a predominant role in the production of space. It is the logic of the government, not capital *per se* that counts. The concern for the effectivity of the network of government, including the appropriate mixture of modalities of power, is a priority over the logic of capital accumulation. There are undoubtedly occasions in which the government cannot ignore the circulation of capital, but the government is always the centre of the hegemony. This

was the case 160 years ago, so is nowadays. The proclaimed predominance of the secondary circuit of capital as the centre, as advocated by scholars like Harvey and Lefebvre, has not changed this nature. Having monopolised land, the government can regulate the fictitious capital from monetary capital, productive capital to commodity capital.

This prompts us to elaborate the other characteristic: property development has dominated the society since early colonialism. Its prominence can never be considered secondary to industrial capital accumulation, as a result of the switching of capital from the latter. Besides profitability in industrial production, there are many other somewhat discrete socio-economic forces affecting property development, among which is, one must underscore, the intricate land ownership system inherited from the Chinese during several stages of colonisation. The resultant high-density development, characterised by the intertwining property ownership and occupancy, has too complicated the redevelopment process.

Later developments in the Cold War, export-led growth and communist China have led to the formation of the land (re)development in Hong Kong, which have focused on the redevelopment of the urban area, by means of bulldozing and building new structures, into an ever-increasing – world renowned – high density. As time proceeds, the physical high density (more floor space with higher plot-ratio) has been complicated with population high density (more people per square metre of floor space), with the proliferation of *Tong Fang* ('sub-divided flats' – subdividing a whole flat into a number of small units). Recently, we have observed that this kind of sub-division has been taking place, not only in residential, but also industrial buildings (people reside, decently or otherwise, in buildings originally designed and built for industrial activities). The physical quality of these *Tong Fang* may further deteriorate in the course of sub-division or may receive an up-grade into so-called high-end ones, which can command a higher than usual asking rent. Or, developers have started to erect new residential buildings (and industrial too) with the smallest unit size being reduced to that of a *Tong Fang* in order to maintain the acceptable rate of profit at a time of exorbitant land and housing prices while the purchasing power of potential buyers have comparatively dropped. Irrespective of the type, the commodified flat size is going to drop over time anyway. Besides the displacement of the working class, the whole society suffers, and, more importantly, there is no sign of curtailing this declining trend. This phenomenon is more complicated than, say, planetary urbanisation and its derivative planetary gentrification can capture; it is nonsensical to call it a variegated form of the West. Capital and the Government could manage to privately appropriate the exchange values of land (re)development because the Government has been able to administer the production of urban space within the somehow frozen mutually embedded town-country relations. In sum, it is the 'hegemonic' manipulation of these relations, neither planetary forces nor the worldview gentrification, that can articulate an emphatic account of urban (re)development in Hong Kong.

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