



On Shifting Foundations and spatial strategies in and of China

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Book review symposium: On Shifting Foundations

Kean Fan Lim, *On Shifting Foundations: State Rescaling, Policy Experimentation and Economic Restructuring in post-1949 China*, Hoboken, New Jersey, USA: Wiley Blackwell, 2019; 256pp.: ISBN: 978-1-119-34455-1, £60.00 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-119-34456-8, £24.99 (pbk)

Commentary I: *On Shifting Foundations* and spatial strategies in and of China

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Kean Fan Lim's *On Shifting Foundations: State Rescaling, Policy Experimentation and Economic Restructuring in Post-1949 China* provides a thorough analysis of how policy experimentations in post-Mao China are shaped by the interactions and tensions between state rescaling initiatives and the inherited institutions and regulatory logics, or in other words, the tendency of path dependency. It demonstrates that state rescaling in China is an outcome of the Chinese central government's or the Communist Party of China (CPC)'s negotiation with the global neoliberalizing capitalist political economy on the one hand and subnational governments' developmental agendas on the other hand. And it examines state rescaling in China in relation to both the CPC's need to maintain and reinforce its ruling and legitimacy in China and the multi-layered presences and influences of inherited institutions and institutional changes. As a multifaceted study, this book makes important contributions by not only offering a detailed and grounded examination of state rescaling through the case of "nationally strategic new areas" but also constructing a nuanced understanding of China and its party-state apparatus.

The rest of this review consists of three sets of questions, reflections, and propositions generated through my reading of this book. I regard this book as a constructive addition to the broader field of researching the political economy of post-reform China, and my intention in this review is to use this space to discuss how this book may inform further conversations in this field and may be built upon.

The first set of questions and propositions concerns the policy experimentations and reforms in Chongqing. Lim's analysis of Chongqing and especially the Liangjiang New Area shows two interconnected strands of policy experimentations and reforms taking place roughly simultaneously: one is of economic or industrial and the other is of social. The economic/industrial strand is exemplified by the Chongqing government's investment in infrastructure, especially transportation infrastructure, which, as Lim's analysis shows, is enabled by the strong state involvement in Chongqing's economy as a result of past reforms and institutional changes in China, and results in "an almost total territorialisation" (p.167) of all levels of the production networks of computing notebook manufacturing. The social strand of

policy experimentations and reforms in and through the Liangjiang New Area focuses on urban-rural integration, which manifests through the provision of public rental housing to lower-income groups, especially migrant workers, and “the flexible conversion of rural migrant workers’ hukou into ‘urban’ status” (p.180). These reforms are justified as serving the economic/industrial strand by releasing investors from the “burden” of social reproduction. From these policy experimentations, the Chongqing government, as Lim writes, “began to argue that it is possible to perpetuate and proliferate industrialisation (spearheaded by the Liangjiang New Area) without exacerbating the socio-spatial inequality that already exists at the national scale” (p.192).

This claim made by the Chongqing government leads to some questions that remain to be answered: To what extent is this vision of socially equitable developmental pathway realized in Chongqing? What are the effects of the policy experimentations on urban-rural integration in Chongqing, especially on rural migrant workers? The “Chongqing model” has attracted much attention, most of which, however, is due to and on the components of the model that create a spectacle resembling the Cultural Revolution. This book offers a much-needed starting point to probe into the policies and politics of the “Chongqing model”, from where more in-depth examinations of its effects and possible alterations are needed. Such examinations are particularly necessary given, as Lim points out, the implications that the socioeconomic reforms in Chongqing potentially have for the vision of national spatial egalitarianism, which is supposedly to be central to the CPC’s political economic agenda.

There are, however, also the questions of to what extent spatial egalitarianism or “coordinated” regional development actually is a vision that the CPC aims at achieving and to what extent it is merely rhetoric for performing the “socialist” part of the “socialist market economy”, especially considering the significant role played by uneven development in China’s economy. These questions lead to my second set of reflections and propositions based on this book. Lim’s analysis of the cases of Guangdong and Chongqing together show that the three “nationally significant new areas” examined here all function as spatial strategies or fixes in response to certain challenges or crises that the CPC faces. In particular, the Liangjiang New Area in Chongqing functions as a spatial fix to the challenge and pressure that the Chinese central government faces after the 2008 global financial crisis in terms of retaining firms in China while some of them contemplating leaving China’s coastal city-regions. To some extent, this spatial fix was made possible due to uneven development between the coastal seaboard and the western interior of China that results from past rounds of reforms. Given China’s need to continue participating in the global neoliberalizing capitalist economy, uneven development across China is arguably a necessity for China to be able to maintain its attraction to transnational capital and to mitigate potential crises. Therefore, it is questionable to what extent the CPC’s vision of spatial egalitarianism can be realized or is intended to be realized.

In addition, as Lim argues, “the generation of new subnational borders ... has become a necessary precondition of China’s engagement with the global economy” (p.203). It is then important to consider to what extent the CPC’s reliance on spatial strategies, especially state rescaling, as a fix to crises is a sustainable solution. As Lim highlights in the concluding chapter, which I strongly agree, “How – or whether – place-specific policy experimentation could pre-empt or contain crisis tendencies would thus be an important focal point in future research agendas on socioeconomic regulation in China” (p.203). To this point, I would like to add that, it may also be necessary to consider the limits of this solution to crises, namely to consider what kinds of crises or challenges emerged in the CPC’s simultaneous negotiations with transnational capital and subnational governments’ developmental agendas can be mitigated through this spatial strategy and what may not be. The Chinese central government was (and has been more or less continuously) facing two noticeable political economic challenges when this review was first written in mid-2019, with Hong Kong on the one hand and the US on the other hand. While some forms of mitigations have already been applied by the CPC, it remains to be seen whether, how, and to what extent spatial reconfigurations will be employed to respond in the longer term.

Following from this point on the role played by generating new subnational borders in China’s engagement with the global economy, my third and final set of reflections and propositions take Lim’s thesis to a different space and scale, namely the presence and actions of the “global China”. While there have been strong scholarly interests in examining the increasingly global presence of China across the global North and global South, there is still a need for more research that looks into the rationales, causes, and justifications for different Chinese actors’ choices to “go global”. And the answers to these exist as much in China’s global footprint as inside China. In *On Shifting Foundations*, Lim demonstrates how one type of spatial strategy, namely generating new subnational borders, plays a significant role in China’s participation in the global economy and in the CPC’s attempt to retain political power. It is then worth asking, whether, how, and for what objectives that the “global China” functions as another type of spatial strategy. This research avenue could also enrich the inquiries on the effects of the “global China”. After all, the “global China” phenomenon cannot be disassociated from the political economy of and in China, and analyses of the “global China” need to be built upon understandings of “What is China”.

In this regard, I would like to conclude by highlighting one main contribution of *On Shifting Foundations*, which is its construction of an understanding of “What is China” through deconstructing “China”, namely through moving away from regarding China as a unitary state. This book shows that both continuities within changes and the many inconsistencies, uncertainties, and spontaneities exist in and constitute “China”. This kind of more nuanced and grounded understanding of “What is China”, I argue, is a necessary basis and an important task for future research that concerns China, to which this book can act as a valuable example.