

“There Are No Cities in China” and the Paradox of Urban Theory

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ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Abstract

In *The Communist Postscript*, Boris Groys identifies convictions in question when concepts assumed to be valid are revealed to contain a certain paradox. Among these in China, the concept of the city stands out. Since the imperial era, the Chinese state has organized subnational territory and governed society and space through the administrative divisions (*xingzheng quhua* 行政区划), but only in the 1980s, with economic reform, did cities become administrative divisions. Urban theory does not recognize the primary power of reterritorialization in China's urban process. Framed by dialectical reason, this analysis plumbs the history of territorial transmutation that has redefined cities in the reform era. It gives attention to the establishment of cities as vast rural-urban territorial-administrative areas, the special economic zone, and the special administrative region. Through changes to the administrative divisions, party-state power to change the map propels the urban-industrial transformation in the national interest.

Keywords: administrative divisions, cities, dialectical reason, urban ontology, urban theory, China

Introduction

In “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History,” the historian Frederick Mote contemplates the space-time paradox of the North Temple Pagoda in Suzhou. The problem, in Mote’s telling, is that the modern structure is not original. Its historical documentation dates to the third century, the period of the Three Kingdoms (220–80 CE), but the pagoda has been ruined by fire, rebuilt, redesigned, and even locally relocated. In an unflattering comparison, Mote (1973: 50) writes, “The building would not count for much as an authentic antiquity even in the United States.” The multiple incarnations of the monument trouble the temporal distance between its third century origins and the much younger extant structure. Mote wants the pagoda to manifest the depth of history that it only stands for.

Instead, Mote identifies the historic significance of *city space* and the continuity of the textual record in China. “Chinese civilization did not lodge its history in buildings,” writes Mote. “Even its most grandiose palace and city complexes stressed grand layout, the employment of space, and not buildings.” He argues that China’s ancient cities are “‘time free’ as purely physical objects. The past was a past of words, not stones” (Mote 1973, 51). In Mote’s understanding, the spatiality and the historical record of the built environment are more important than the built environment. Temples, bridges, government edifices, they were always documented in local histories. Noting that China has “kept the largest and longest-enduring of all mankind’s documentation of the past,” Mote proposes that the textual record, widely reproduced in compendia, encyclopedia, and gazetteers at all levels, allows state documentation “to function in the life of its present.” Their contemporary versions also routinely repeat history across centuries and even millennia. In a past of words, the original pagoda in northern Suzhou has featured in all local histories of Suzhou. This relational geography—between the built environment, space, place, and textual reproduction—invokes the geographical imagination.

The implications of Mote’s suggestive analysis challenge assumptions of normative and critical urban theory. Can we accept that the idea that space (*kongjian*) and place (*difang*) are more important than the built environment and urban agglomerations in China? Is it even possible to conceptualize across the vast expanse of city space from imperial to contemporary China? What timeframes and what ways of seeing the city might be brought into view? A near-geographer among historians, Mote (1995) was also a critical historiographer in debates over spatial thought in China studies. Let us first consider the problematic of the paradox in dialectical reason and return to parse these questions in “The administrative divisions as state space” and “City as paradox.”

Paradox as philosophy and method

In logical reason, which Mote implicitly adopts, a paradox is a problem of incongruous qualities based on logical fallacy or contradiction. In *The Communist Postscript*, Boris Groys (2009, xii) sees things differently. He analyzes the history of paradoxical logic in dialectical reason and identifies convictions in question when

concepts or arguments previously taken to be valid are revealed to contain a certain paradox. In this line of sight, the paradox becomes central to general analysis.

The paradox exists at the core of dialectical reason. Paradox as method conceives the whole, the totality, in order to grasp the full range of the situation, past to future: “the paradox is what first allows this totality to take shape” (Groys 2009, 16). A dialectical method understands that “a paradox consists in simultaneously holding A and not-A in the mind as true.” Dialectical reason contrasts with the logical regime of non-contradiction and one-sided argumentation in Western philosophy.

For instance, dialectical reason does not adopt the universality argument that is common to debates over the general and particular in geography. Groys (2009, 42) writes, “Those who claim for their one-sided and logically valid propositions the status of universality thus act contrary to the dialectical reason of the Party, which does not think universally, but totally.” Universality is the *not-A* of totality. Through the universality lens, for instance, economy-led theorists who theorize the capitalist city and bracket the role of the state in the urban process write contrary to dialectical reason (cf. Storper and Scott 2015; Walker 2018). The slash in A/not-A represents the dialectics of party thought in which A is the totality and the realm of not-A may not recognize its partiality.

Groys distills the operation of dialectical reason from conceptions of state power in communism and dialectical materialism. The party-state approach embedded in dialectical materialism, dedicated to revolutionary change, first needs to take “the whole to be its object,” i.e. politics, economy, and society. The Party “seeks to grasp life through paradoxes so as to be able to govern over it” (Groys 2009, 41), i.e. govern the nation and its range of interests. Only subsequent to this conceptualization can a uniformly integrated governing program issue forth. Paradoxes of material implication “can only be administered, and this administration must be real and material,” writes Groys (35). Party-state programs address general and specific paradoxes, seeking to recognize, define, and govern the full scope of interests. Groys and Mote concur on the role of authoritative texts and textual circulation in grounding the system.

The object of general socialist planning, taking place, in Groys’ theorization, through the linguistification of communism, is the nation at large. The origins of socialist planning under Stalin, seeking to attain rapid industrialization, “rejected the liberal ‘principle of limitation’ on governmental intervention” in society (Collier 2011, 38). Socialist *total* planning “ignored ‘objective’ constraints” (60) of social and economic autonomy (not-A). There would be no autonomous society or liberal economy outside the scope of the whole (A). In the Soviet process, the city and its materialization became the respective idea and reality through which modernization and development goals of socialist total planning became articulated. The Soviet program coordinated the transformation of society and economy through “city-building” for industrial modernization over “national space” (79). Cities in states with histories of socialist planned economies continue to demonstrate conditions of general socialist planning (Drummond and Young 2020).

The Chinese Communist Party adopted Marxist-Leninist thought under Soviet tutelage based on Stalin's *Short Course*, formally the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (Li 2010). China accepted the Stalinist model of socialist construction in general and central planning for the industrial model in particular. The Soviet Union sent some 10,000 advisors to serve in ministerial units of the PRC and supported the implementation of the PRC's First Five-Year Plan (1953–57) (Bernstein 2010). One of the prominent Sino-Soviet exchanges, demonstrating the key role and significance of cities in socialist general planning, focused on planning and rebuilding Beijing (Wang 2011). But the transfer of Soviet planning ideology to China is not our focus. The longer history of the territory known as China is more significant for identifying the paradox that the contemporary city in China represents.

The administrative divisions as state space

The history of the system of administrative divisions in China demonstrates the relationship between subnational territory, the hierarchical state structure of general governance, and state power to adjust the administrative divisions or change state space for emerging state interests and goals, in which urban-industrial transformation for national modernization and development has dominated since the 1980s. The currency of the deep territorial history of the administrative divisions appears in the PRC's textual refrains about places on frontiers having been part of China since the Qin dynasty (e.g. Millward and Perdue 2004, Feng 2022).

The origins of state space in China antedate the original pagoda on the temple grounds of northern Suzhou by half a millennium. Chinese history records that the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) implemented a multi-level governing system based on two territorial-administrative institutions, the commandery (*jun* 郡) and the county (*xian* 县). The Qin strategically emplaced *jun* and the *xian* on frontiers to unify territory. The Qin dynasty was short-lived, yet nevertheless “bequeathed to its successors the concept of emperorship, the idea of universal polity, and manifold administrative arrangements” (Pines 2016, 1). Significant in Chinese history and world history, the Qin unified control over the East Asian sub-region that became China.

The historical record narrates the emergence of a system of administrative divisions (*xingzheng quhua* 行政区划) with the consolidation of empire and its articulation of a territorial system. The commanderies, occupying the level of what became contemporary prefectures, hierarchically governed the counties in a relationship called the *junxian* system. Commanderies were the pivotal level of state communication before the provinces started to become established in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). They acted for the capital to maintain local administration, extract fiscal revenue, organize water resources for permanent agriculture, and quell breakaway interests (Whitney 1970, 131–40). Counties were the strategic unit of territorial consolidation. But the reality was far less systematic on historic frontiers where new administrative divisions were practically ephemeral until the next colonial campaign clawed them back into empire.

The modern sensibility of Western social science clings to organizational periodization with few leaps or discontinuities in temporal narration. But the Chinese scholarship embraces temporal variation and reach. The historian Wang Hui, for instance, asks why didn't the twentieth-century Chinese revolution overturn the *junxian* system? "Why," he writes, in debate over transformation from empire to nation-state, "did this new society [the PRC] require and even expand on the aspects of centralized power found in the *ancient regime*?" (2014, 33, 138). Wang identifies the root of "the real problem" in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) when the empire intensified power relations through the *junxian* system. The historical geographer Zhou Zhenhe similarly characterizes the Song as "the absolute imperial autocracy in Chinese history, and "the beginning of absolute centralization of power" (Zhou 2005, 73). The political philosophy of the Song dynasty, in these evaluations, informs authoritarian conditions of the PRC. Through the prefecture-county relation, imperial or modern, the central state has adjusted its grip on power (Liu 2014).

Counties, more numerous than prefectures and more stable over time, have been the main context of social and economic organization in the regions. Like territorial bedrock, many counties in eastern China have occupied the same general areas for centuries and some sixty have had two-millennia-old names (Zhong 2003, 19). In the state's own narration of governing relations, *zhongyang* 中央 and *difang* 地方 or center and local relations, *zhongyang* is the central government and *difang* is a place with local government, usually the county. Whatever its place, *difang* is not any place, or place in the broader sense of geographical theory and spatial philosophy. Place in China is a local place in the governing structure. This fundamental meaning of place in Chinese draws closer the meanings of space and place.

The idea of state power in China generates debate because it varies in the state structure in relation to central government directives and local implementation. The authoritarian reach of the central state, imperial and modern, fragments in practice. Episodes of the decentralization and recentralization of state power punctuate the history of party-state organization in both the Mao era and the reform era (cf. Unger 1987; Wu 2016). What has remained constant is the central state power to change the meso-scale administrative divisions.

The PRC as a territorial state is a unitary state system holding constitutional power over subnational territory. Item 15 of Article 89 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC 1982) establishes powers to change the administrative divisions. Only the central state can approve changes to the administrative divisions at the province, prefecture, and county levels. The administrative divisions, border to border nationwide, are subject to constitutional powers of adjustment including boundaries, areas, functions, rank, governing relations, toponyms, and even fundamental ontology, i.e. an administrative division can be cancelled, its government repealed, and its territory merged into an adjacent jurisdiction (Cartier 2015, 2016). Provinces usually have control over these changes in towns and villages.

Theorists of the contemporary may not immediately see it, but the system of administrative divisions has grounded the continuity of state space in China from the imperial era to the present. The areas, numbers, levels, types and technologies of mapping the administrative divisions have only changed and proliferated over time (Zhou 2005). The prefecture demonstrates the greatest variation, showing up across the dynasties under different names with somewhat different functions. The *zhou* of Suzhou, a suffix of many large imperial-era and contemporary city names, indicates this meso-level. The historic territory of Suzhou was established as a *jun* and contemporary Suzhou is a prefecture-level city (Hu and Cartier 2021). Yet unlike the province and the county, the prefecture does not appear in the PRC Constitution as a legal level of government. Not recognized in law, it demonstrates the flexibility of the reform era and the arbitrary power of the central state to define and change subnational territory.

Scholars will assume that China, like other states, implements political-economic policy or economic reform through the governing ranks of the administrative divisions. This is true for routine and general administration. What is not generally understood is that the party-state implements major reforms with regional implications, and specific, consequential reforms with targeted goals, through the anterior process of changing the administrative divisions. Party-state general planning for the urban transformation in China has depended on strategic subnational territorial change (Cartier 2015; Martinez and Cartier 2017). Strategic territorial transmutation is the spatial dialectic of state power in practice.

City as paradox

China is one of the centers of primary urbanism but the city in Chinese history was not an administrative division and did not have its own government. Prefectures and counties maintained state administration and located their offices in cities and towns, but they did not represent cities as distinct from their much larger territorial-administrative areas. Some cities in commercialized areas of imperial China served as centers of state administration for two counties (Skinner 1977, 343–4). The administrative system divided these cities into respective county areas in which the administrative office located. One city, Suzhou, uniquely had three county governments. In a paradoxical yet accurate elocution, late imperial Suzhou had three spatially distinct county administrations but lacked a government. Unlike the *polis* in the history of the classical Western city, and with the short-term exception of the municipality experiment in the Republican era (1911–49), led by Guangzhou (Cody 1996, Stapleton 2022), cities in China did not develop as centers of municipal autonomy.

We nevertheless have assumptions about cities as centers of economic growth. Urban theory is based on them. From location theory and urban growth theory to agglomeration theory, urban theory treats the space of a city like an asset of market activity in which its space is the theoretical plain of economic liberalism, frictionless and barrier-free, welcoming flows of labor and capital. The role of space in liberalism is to get out of the way—we already know this annihilation of space by time. Is this China's city space?

We tend to forget the primary question about understanding city space, despite Lefebvre's clear-cut injunction in *The Production of Space*: what is the spatial ontology?

To picture space as a 'frame' ... is probably the initial error. But is it error, or is it ideology? The latter, more than likely. ... The theoretical error is to be content to see a space without conceiving of it, ... without assembling details into a whole 'reality', without apprehending contents in terms of their interrelationships within the containing forms (Lefebvre 1991, 94).

Lefebvre, dialectically engaged, observes the emergent "theoretical error" in the *absence* of taking into account the "whole 'reality'" (A). In dialectical reasoning of socialist general planning, where state space is organized and administered by party leadership, economic activity of the economy of reform is the not-A. If the A of city space in socialist general planning is *not* the space of economic liberalism, then what is it and what does it mean for the urban process?

At the meta-level of conceptualization, Groys and Lefebvre both operate within dialectical reason. They focus on different contexts while their complementarities support the quest for China's city space. Groys sees dialectical reason in the project of communism as language, turning politics into routine, repeated, interlocked texts designed to administer the whole of the country's developmental scope. Lefebvre sees dialectical relations in the production of space, framing the pulses of spatial transformation, conceiving space in relation to the capitalist political economy. This analysis conceives space in relation to China's political economy. I see the conjoined conceptual potential of Groys and Lefebvre in the evolving textual project of the party-state and its bureaucratic project that defines and territorializes the administrative divisions for city space.

The early PRC established goals and modes of seeking to govern the whole of the socialist project, but city space was not yet its basis or scope. During the period of the planned economy, governing the whole focused on the social relations of production through separated or "divided governance of rural and urban areas" (*cheng xiang fen zhi* 城乡分治). Existing cities were reorganized to support industrial production. New cities were relatively small areas, described in the language of *cut* from the county (from *qiekuai sheshi* 切块设市 or cut a piece to establish the city), which evinces the sharp power of ordering territorial arrangements. The practice of cutting out a city marked an administrative center, usually in the historic county town (Liu 2014). This city was a place of administration in a vastly larger prefecture and county.

Dialectical episodes of city reterritorialization took place in the 1950s. The socialist city of the Mao era would contribute to alleviating the contradictions between town and county, manual and mental labor, and agriculture and industry. For instance, in

1958, with onset of the Second Five-year Plan and the Great Leap Forward, the central government ordered rural counties to come under the jurisdiction of adjacent large cities to meet needs for food production (Wu 1981, Sit 2010, 247, 264). Shanghai gained from southern Jiangsu province ten counties at this time, which form its current area (Cartier 2015, 6). Richard Kirkby (1985, 64-7) adopts the term annexation from international urban planning to describe these expansionary changes. But annexation suggests an urban growth boundary extending to encompass some unincorporated area. This is not the landscape of the Chinese administrative divisions. We need to think instead of existing administrative territories and central state power to rearrange the map, adding (and subtracting) entire counties and even entire prefectures (e.g. Brown 2012, 62) under central state directives.

We can locate the A or the whole of China's approach to developmental transformation through city space at the turning point of administrative reform in 1982–83. *Administrative reform?* Administrative reform does not feature in the standard accounts of China's reform and opening, which narrate economic reforms, economic regions, rapid growth, and special economic zones—terms that are sensible to global capitalism. Administrative reform is the bureaucratic process that changes the governing arrangements of the administrative divisions.

Territorial-administrative cities

Two interrelated administrative reforms established the scope of contemporary city space. The “Notice on Reform of the Regional System and Implementation of the City Leading Counties System” (CCP Central Committee 1982), known as city-leading-counties (*cheng lingdao xian* 市领导县), articulates the hierarchical governing relationship between a city at the prefecture level and county-level administrative territories in the prefecture—counties, county-level cities, and city districts. The “Notice on Several Issues Concerning the Institutional Reform of the Party and Government Organizations in Prefectures, Cities, and Autonomous Prefectures” (CCP Central Committee 1983), specifies merging the governments of the prefecture and its leading city (*dishi hebing* 地市合并), yielding one government for the city and the prefecture—the prefecture-level city. This merged government, holding forms of administrative power over the whole area of the former prefecture, shifted the political-economic model from rural-urban divided governance (*cheng xiang fen zhi* 城乡分治) to rural-urban conjoined governance (*cheng xiang he zhi* 城乡合治). Conjoined governance would administer and propel new economies of circulation between rural and urban areas.

The 1982–83 administrative reforms articulated the future of governing the administrative divisions that would be declared cities at levels of government. They do not mention space or place or urban morphology. They conceive, through party-state governance, the context of the reterritorialization of state space in which to implement and administer the reform economy. In this new city space, local governments would lead the transformation of rural land for the future of urbanization. In this process, cities in China have become province-level administrative divisions, prefecture-level divisions or

county-level divisions. Where cities already existed, instead of cities existing in administrative divisions, cities became administrative divisions.

Concomitant with these reforms, the central government began to declare new cities, over 450 since 1980. Table 1. The word for it is *jianzhi* (建制) or designate, the designation of the prefecture-level city (*diji shi* 地级市) and the county-level city (*xianji shi* 县级市). The declaration of old rural prefectures and counties as cities reterritorialized governing jurisdictions in the name of future cities. Suzhou became one of the first prefecture-level cities (Hu and Cartier, 2021). New cities suddenly governed large rural areas, gaining powers to generate the land-development economy. They became what Liu Junde (2006) calls administrative division economies (*xinzhengqu jingji* 行政区经济), or territorial cities as the basis of economic development—local party-state administrations governing economic development to the boundary. In the A/not-A relationship, this *state space* of socialism with Chinese characteristics (A) accommodated liberalizing economic reform (not-A).

Table 1

about here

Laurence Ma collapses the historical distance between contemporary cities, the era of the planned economy, and the imperial administrative divisions in the form of the problem that it represents. Ma (2005, 478, 494) writes, “China’s spatial system for urban administration” is challenging to understand because the “market-oriented reform programs have been implemented through the traditional administrative system originally designed for socialist territorial administration.” The key terms here are spatial system, urban administration, traditional administrative system, i.e. the imperial administrative divisions, and socialist territorial administration. This transhistorical reality about the city in China, transforming in the twenty-first century in relation to different eras and different regimes, profoundly complicates the ontological question.

Changing the administrative divisions to establish cities has generated a process of territorial urbanization to declare, develop, and expand cities (Cartier 2015). In the contradiction between the reality of territorial urbanization and the story of rapid growth in China, we can see how urban theory, absent capacity to recognize dynamic state space, reveals the problem of ideology that Lefebvre identifies: urban theory’s market ideology (not-A) sees “a space without conceiving...the whole ‘reality’” (A) of the socialist political economy. The PRC conceives the total spatiality of its developmental vision through the administrative divisions in which the current program has established city space for urban-industrial transformation, governing rural-urban relations for new state capital formation.

Where the central state names cities before they exist, “there are no cities in China.” This paradox invokes the role of language at the heart of Groys’s analysis. “A

paradox,” he writes, “is an icon of language because it offers a viewpoint over the totality...what first allows the totality to take shape” (Groys 2009, 16). The party-state declares a city, which entrains the area that it nominalizes to the vision of unfolding industrial development and urban modernization. And because communism particularly depends on the repetition and circulation of formulaic language—*declaring* cities and new territorial arrangements—the power of language to rule over society as a whole “does not differ from the implements of production” (57). The state language of designation and declaration brings cities into existence, and it is the role of their party-state governments, at all levels, to administer the new city space of transformation.

Zone language

Dialectical reason contends with contradiction and paradox. But successful formulaic language works without appearing to be paradoxical. When this is achieved, “a paradox that conceals its paradoxical nature becomes a commodity” (Groys 2009, 4). The commoditized paradox generates acceptance and replication because it conforms to an ideological vision, which invites Lefebvre’s concern with ideological framings of space. At this intersection of Groys’s and Lefebvre’s thought, the linguistic and the spatial, we find the special economic zone in China. The Chinese word represents the administrative divisions. The English-language translation represents the challenge—“is it error, or is it ideology? The latter, more than likely”—that Lefebvre (1991, 94) has cautioned us to assess.

The word *qu* 区, third word in *xingzheng quhua* 行政区划, the administrative divisions, means area, district, region or zone. The word *hua* 划 means to divide, making *quhua* 区划 a division of territory, the territorial space of an administrative area (Cartier 2020). But the *popular* translation of *qu* is zone—and the idea of zones in China has travelled globally, even spectacularly. Jonathan Bach (2011, 98, 99) characterizes zones not only as an economic phenomenon, “foundational for the development of the global economy,” but also as a cultural phenomenon with “discursive power as a modernist fantasy of rationality and new beginnings.” Capitalizing the significance of the concept, Bach makes Zone a proper noun. Where *qu* in the administrative divisions represents state space, Zone signals new arrangements of economic de/reregulation for networked capitalism.

The export processing zone, a leading institution of mid-twentieth century Asian regional development, gained updated nomenclature with China’s formulation of *jingji tequ* 经济特区 (economic special area), rendered special economic zone (SEZ). The SEZ debuted in 1980 with the designation of Shenzhen on the Hong Kong border and grew rapidly as a receptacle for the relocation of Hong Kong manufacturing. Shenzhen became the Zone, in Bach’s rendering, the geographical symbol of China’s internationalized economic reform. Bach (2011, 115) writes, Zone “fantasies express themselves through the constant comparisons to China’s SEZs.” The Chinese central government designated five SEZs in south China, but only Shenzhen, the most successful in its category, gained

international iconicity. Category? The special economic zone is a functional category of the administrative divisions.

Zones are common in China but the official SEZ category has only six, five of which were established in the 1980s in the transboundary region of the south China coast. In the system of administrative divisions, predictably, the SEZs are also more than SEZs. Shenzhen *the city* is a prefectural city at the sub-provincial level of government, another limited category in which most are provincial capitals. The sub-provincial rank gives the Shenzhen party-state higher powers to govern and administer, on par with Guangzhou, the capital of the province. Shenzhen is also a member of the unusual class of administrative divisions with direct state financial support, the single-line item city (*jihua danlie shi* 计划单列市), a direct line in the central budget. In this political-economic matrix, high levels of state power and financial resources make Shenzhen special, supporting the administration of the SEZ and ensuring its developmental transformation.

The Zone paradox begins to emerge. Successfully commoditized, Zone appears as both a “national showpiece” and a “transnational, or even ex-national, phenomenon.” The former provides a “pure space of development,” the latter is the “smooth space sought by capital” (Bach 107-9), attained in the widespread demolition of historic sites. Bach compares Shenzhen with “hybrid zone/cities” based on the assumption that Shenzhen’s zone status is a “dissolving” designation as it becomes one among major cities in China.

But the zone status of Shenzhen has never dissolved. Herein lies the challenge and the solution: there were two Shenzhens: Shenzhen the zone was one-fifth the size of Shenzhen the city for three decades, until 2010, when the State Council declared them coterminous (Du 2020, 315). Shenzhen named a city and zone, just as the SEZ is a functional status of select administrative divisions. The SEZ as Zone, the successful linguistic commodity, is the global capitalist face of this much larger territorial-administrative project.

This paradox reveals the theoretical problematic that Groys and Lefebvre identify: Groys’s challenge of articulating the A/not-A relation, and Lefebvre’s caution about assuming we see space without truly conceiving it. Groys insists that we cannot understand the philosophy of Marxism–Leninism without understanding how the party-state scopes the whole of its programmatic and through party-state texts and declarative language. In his parallel argument, Lefebvre insists on tackling the whole reality of the spatial dialectic or risk error, or ideology, in theorizing the political economy.

In the case of China, the theoretical error is the assumption of frictionless networked space, the space that the notion of zones is assumed to transmit. The space of capital mobility, space annihilated by time, is the not-A in party-state dialectical reasoning. It assumes that Shenzhen operates as a neoliberal zone on the market end of the state-market spectrum. This is, the not-A of it, *partially* true. Such conceptualizations lack the whole reality of dynamic party-state administration that defines and governs new city space through restructuring the administrative divisions for urban-industrial transformation. The whole grasps the multiple dimensions and characteristics of

subnational territorial governance in which Shenzhen plays a functional part. The language shows us and deceives us: *qu* represents the total reality of space, in which zone is one of *qu*'s partial representations. The fantastic success of Zone in the global economy demonstrates the commodity borne of the paradox that Groys predicts.

Governing the SAR

The paradoxical provocation—there are no cities in China—implicates two cities, Hong Kong and Macau, that are special administrative regions (SARs) in the state system at the province level. (The discrete category of province-level cities includes only Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing.) The SARs currently exist on a central state-defined limited time horizon of fifty years. The constitutional basis of the Hong Kong SAR is the Basic Law of Hong Kong, which states, in the preamble and general principles, “the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years” under a “one country, two systems” arrangement (Basic Law 1990). The language of the agreement shows the built-in mutability of space-time that characterizes the PRC's governance by administrative divisions. And the SAR concept is not fundamentally new; it revises the imperial-era concept of establishing special administrative regions on frontiers. Reflecting these conditions, the constitutional law scholar Zhu Guobin (2012) evaluates the PRC as a “composite state.”

Hong Kong, one of the great global cities, storied mercantile center of the south China coast, is not a city in contemporary China. The global city-ness of Hong Kong (not-A) coalesced with the rise of Hong Kong as the financial center for China's external economy since the 1980s, and the diminished role of Tokyo with the decline of the Japanese economy in the 1990s. Knowing Hong Kong as one of the leading global financial centers contributes to misunderstanding its condition in the territorial-administrative system of the PRC. The party-state treats Hong Kong as subnational territory, and like all administrative divisions, it is subject to change in space and time. China's authoritarian governance of administrative territory runs contradictory to meanings of global city urbanism—inheritor of the municipality concept—imbued with ideas about autonomous networks and local-global relations.

Chinese central government intervention in the Hong Kong SAR has reflected ideological assumptions about globalization that contrast with its state precepts of power and authority. The diagnostic representation appears in a defensive geopolitical term, foreign forces. In the late 2010s, the central Chinese government prepared to enact a so-called national security law in Hong Kong because it “believed that Hong Kong's anti-extradition movement of the latter half of 2019 was marked by the intervention of foreign forces into HKSAR affairs” (Lo 2021, 1). The 2019–20 social movement in Hong Kong concerned the Extradition Law Amendment Bill and relations between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China. Compelled by the central government, the Hong Kong SAR implemented a far-reaching state security law in 2020. Among “a string of vaguely defined crimes,” it would allow the charge of “collusion with foreign forces” (Hui 2020, 122). The government's translation of law in English is the National Security

Law. Yet its name in Chinese, *Guojia anquan fa* 国家安全法, also translates as state security law, a law of or for the state.

A little-observed antecedent change justified procedurally the implementation of the law. Described as a “change of the subordination relationship” (*lishu guanxi de biangeng* 隶属关系的变更), the change alters the lead governing rank relationship of administrative divisions, i.e. under what administrative bureaucracy the jurisdiction exists. In April 2020 it was declared that the PRC Liaison Office in Hong Kong was not bound by Article 22 of the Basic Law, which disallows interference by PRC mainland units and departments. The so-called clarification rescaled the Liaison Office from subsidiary to outranking the Hong Kong government (Cheung and Wong 2020). At its origins, “The office was never supposed to play a role in Hong Kong’s policymaking and day-to-day administration, let alone become a centre of power” (Chan 2020). This statement reflects the challenge of mutable power relations, and the opacity of their arbitrary implementation, through changes to the administrative divisions.

Narratives of globalizing capitalism have failed to grasp the reterritorializing powers of China’s administrative-territorial system. International perceptions of Hong Kong compare to other world and global cities. But contrary to its global city profile, the Hong Kong SAR means something other than a city in China. On a fifty-year timeframe, the SAR is a medium-term state territorial project with mutable elements.

Conclusion

The state space of the administrative divisions, forming contemporary city space, antedates China’s modern and contemporary governments. In the late twentieth century, the PRC began to redefine and reterritorialize the meso-scale administrative divisions as cities—large rural-urban territories at levels of government—to introduce and govern economic reform and land development. The declaration of these new cities nominalized entire prefectures and counties as future urban places. In this process, the party-state began to transform the administrative divisions to advance the general political economy (A) while generating new economic activity (not-A).

The paradox of urban theory in the sightlines of China is the presumption of theory for all cities in the mode of not-A. Not-A conceives cities in the history of capitalism and its varieties in the absence of authoritarian state power to change the national map for general governance of society and economy. It may attempt to resolve its incomplete nature by stretching through local-global rescaling or forms of network relations, but its reach camouflages the dynamics inherent in the PRC’s resolute commitment to the whole, the total project of national transformation. The conception of this space, the whole of the reality, finds Lefebvre’s error or ideology in not-A. China’s reterritorialization of state space for the reform economy demonstrates the A of contemporary socialist general planning through transformative urban-industrial development.

Does the designation of new cities confirm the significance of city space in China, the one that Mote predicted? The answer to this question lies not only in relational geographies at the meso-scale, seeing the city in formation through territorial administration, but also in thinking dialectically across the state-market spectrum to conceptualize what urban theory answers only in part. Urban theory's assumptions about economic space see the SEZ or the global city and limit from inquiry how and why China defines and forms city space through changes to subnational territory. Territorial urbanization answers the conceptual problem that compels retooling territorial concepts for the urban transformation.

Generalizing the urban process in China depends on evaluating the relation between subnational territory and the transformation of cities. It relies on seeing historically like a party-state. In recognition of the significance and complexity of the bureaucratic apparatus, it incorporates analysis of party and state documents and declarative texts that permit and frame future urban-economic conditions, naming cities before they exist, denying cities for other terms. The language of the SEZ, globally accepted, is the most successful of its paradoxical products.

The timing of administrative division reform in the early 1980s, anterior to the onset of the urban-industrial drive, suggests reconsideration of the role of the state in the reform era in general. On the state-market spectrum, the configuration of subnational territory as cities and cities as subnational territory is a state move. It represents the meta-paradox in which territorial-administrative reform structures state space for economic liberalization.

Where the party-state treats the administrative divisions as moveable pieces of the political economy, city space represents central state power to declare and place cities on the map of national territory. Periodic changes to the administrative divisions recalibrate territorial-administrative conditions for political and economic change. All together they represent the party-state production of space for the political economy of the whole of national transformation.

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Table 1

Province-level, Prefecture-level and County-level Cities

Year	直辖市	地级市	县级市	Total
1980	3	107	113	223
1985	3	162	159	324
1990	3	185	279	467
1995	3	210	427	640
2000	4	259	400	663
2005	4	283	374	661
2010	4	283	370	657
2015	4	289	373	666
2020	4	293	388	685

Source: Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Handbook of the Administrative Divisions of the People's Republic of China* (中华人民共和国行政区划简册), annual editions.