Representing the imagined city: Place and the politics of difference during Guangzhou's 2010 language conflict

Junxi Qian [a,b], Liyun Qian [c], Hong Zhu [a,*]

[a] Center for Cultural Industry and Cultural Geography, South China Normal University, Guangzhou 510631, China
[b] Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9XP, UK
[c] School of Geography and Planning, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou 510275, China

ABSTRACT

In this article we investigate local citizens' place politics and discourses of place identity during the 2010 language conflict in Guangzhou, China. Drawing on geographical scholarship on the relational construction of place and the progressive politics of difference, we conceptualize place as an assemblage of trans-local connections and disparate trajectories which constitute the radical hybridity of any particular place. In concretizing a relational rethinking of place into a local politics of difference, we suggest that Doreen Massey's thesis of a global sense of place provides an important epistemological basis for destabilizing the normative local/non-local boundary in order to realize a relational constitution of place-based cultural identity and subjectivity. Based on a social and political campaign against state-led hegemonic language standardization, the 2010 language conflict in Guangzhou is a socially and culturally constructed process in which the Guangzhou locals' imagination and representation of place and identity are reproduced within a local geometry of social relations involving the state language policy, the local community and the city's migrant population. Both exclusionary and progressive discourses of place identities have been articulated in this process of re-negotiation and re-imagination of place-based identities. This paper acknowledges that some place-bounded politics may demonstrate a counter-hegemonic dimension and are therefore not inherently regressive. But we also contend that any place politics needs to ask which elements are to be welcomed and which can be excluded in a fluid regime of politics within specific networks of social relations. The cultural boundary of insiders/outsiders must be constantly re-negotiated and rendered relational with the attentiveness to ethical responsibility towards otherness.

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1. Introduction

1.1. A progressive sense of place as a question of difference

Place nowadays is often treated as a social site which is less an individual than a multi-dimensional, collective engagement of diverse, mutually implicated identities (Longnan, 2002; Smith and Katz, 1993). Doreen Massey's thesis of a global sense of place has been influential in underscoring the relatedness and connectivity between places, as well as the openness and internal diversity constituting any particular place. In challenging nostalgic sentiment over the loss of idealized and homogenous place-based communities in the global era, Massey appeals for "a sense of place to be progressive; not self-enclosing and defensive, but outward-looking" (Massey, 1994, p. 147). Massey's approach towards place is to situate the construction and production of place in a constellation of social relations and connections. With such an epistemological intervention, Massey (1994) shows us how social networks and social processes that are beyond the realm of the "local" act upon the social construction of sense of place, and the conceptual reconfiguration contends that the specificity of any particular place is not some internalized history or enclosed layers of local cultural production. Massey's (1994; 2005) thesis established that any place is constructed out of a networked system of connections and relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus (Amin, 2004; Darling, 2010; Allen, 2004; Schueth and O'Loughlin, 2008; Corbridge, 1998; Natter and Jones, 1997; Popke, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2002). It shows how various social networks and systems can be present and interrelated in one place and how cross-cutting local, translocal and transnational practices can come together in the countless unfoldings of one particular place (Gielis, 2009; Smith, 2001; Doel, 1999).

In this paper, we will explore how this relational reading of place can be employed to inform the reconfiguration of the local politics of difference (Massey, 2007). As Massey (2004) suggests, the relational rethinking of place not only situates place in a global

* Corresponding author. Address: Shipai Campus, South China Normal University, Guangzhou 510631, China.
E-mail addresses: J.Qian-4@sms.ed.ac.uk (J. Qian), zhuh@scnu.edu.cn (H. Zhu).

network of connections, it also turns our imagination of place *inwards* in order to appreciate the internal multiplicities and fragmentations embedded in the constitution of any particular place. Any "local" place should be treated as an assemblage of disparate elements and trajectories which stretch beyond the local in multiple, unpredictable directions. However, even though we are now able to think of place in these radically de-centered ways, we cannot neglect that most of us continue to be categorized as local or non-local with reference to any given place. As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) so trenchantly point out, the conventional construction of cultural identity is deeply rooted in particular places. Different cultural identities, in this vein, are thought to be readily mappable into separate, enclosed places in a jigsaw-like spatial structure: spatiality works to determine the boundaries of difference (Harvey, 1996). Thus when disparate elements converge in one single, particular place, a normativized divide of local/non-local is often discursively exercised to produce cultural distinctions and boundaries. The local is discursively constructed as the aggregate of a series of essentialized cultural elements imagined to be outside the network of relation and connection (Massey and Jess, 1995), while the non-local is categorized as essentially the other, the outsider to be excluded from an imagined local community. From this viewpoint, a normativized binary of local/non-local has become an increasingly powerful dimension in constituting a self-other divide within a local politics of difference, and it is intrinsically interwoven with local communities' responses to ever intensifying local–global engagement.

This local/non-local divide speaks much to our empirical study on the construction of place in China, as traditionally Chinese people are usually labeled as rooted in a particular place and being a non-local often means both cultural alienation and exclusion. Place politics in China therefore is usually structured around the axis of the local/non-local divide. The boundary between the self and the other is articulated through the discursively practiced categories of local and non-local. The project in this paper places its emphasis upon face-to-face engagement between those social groups which have a shared turf of localness but are nonetheless differentiated through a constructed but simultaneously negotiated local/non-local divide. The tension between the local "self" and the non-local "other" shapes and conditions the place politics discussed in this paper.

In order to destabilize the normative local/non-local boundary, our cultural identity, which is always bound up with place (Tilley, 1994), needs to be radically re-envisioned and rendered relational. A place-based cultural identity represents the ways in which our identity is created through our imagination of place (Keith and Pile, 1993). Massey's visioning of places in networked connections provides a pivotal epistemological basis for de-constructing the cultural boundary around the structuring of place-based cultural identity. It serves to destabilize and disrupt any naturalized link between place-based identity and essentialized cultural elements assigned with a pre-determined, ontologically enclosed location. In this formulation, place-based identity itself is seen as relational and not grounded in an enclosed, bounded place. "My" identity is negotiated and destabilized through a geographical network of connection. "My" subjectivity becomes an incoherent construction in networked relations beyond the confine of the local by incorporating non-local otherness in the construction of "my" place-based cultural identity. The politics of belonging to a particular place always-already implies the identification with many trajectories and geographies which were previously considered as ontologically non-local. With such an epistemological intervention, the link between place and the construction of cultural identity is seen as co-shaped and co-produced by cultural elements which were constructed as either local or non-local in a dichotomous discursive production. In a relational thinking of subjectivity, no one is seen

as inherently local and the constitution of a sense of localness is interwoven with diverse trajectories beyond an enclosed localness. The local and the non-local are not seen as essential, enclosed cultural categories but as relational constructs negotiated through the complex networks of interactive relations.

This radical hybridity of place-based identity dictates a sense of responsibility towards "non-local" otherness. As the empirical analysis will reveal, a sense of responsibility towards the other has the potential to contribute to a more inclusive, progressive local structure of cultural signification, resource distribution, social rights and various other institutions. As Massey (2004, 2007) suggests, an ethical sense of responsibility urges us to take into account the claims and concerns of the other in the construction of the self. It conjures up an ethically loaded conviction that every single individual in a particular place has a legitimate right to contribute to the ongoing formation of place. Encountering otherness in place, in this sense, becomes not a romantic political ideal, but rather an imperative, an inescapable responsibility of human existence.

1.2. Place and the unsettled dynamics of exclusion/inclusion

Place-based cultural politics, of course, unfolds in many different forms embedded in the realm of everyday cultural and political experiences. Hence, Massey's work on place cannot be applied to the *realpolitik* without close attention to particular social, cultural and political contexts. The geometries of power and social relations have enormous implications for configuring the politics of difference and the relationships between self and other. On the one hand, as Escobar (2001) and Castree (2004) correctly pointed out, in some cases place-bounded politics can be well employed to counter hegemonic forces from the outside. For particular social groups the claim to place-based identity needs to be mobilized through a less cosmopolitan reading of place, in order to challenge the external forces that can rapaciously threaten indigenous claims and interests. Derrida (2000) also contends that in real world politics the other is always greeted as a named Somebody rather than an anonymous Nobody. The extent to which the other can be included into the construction of a self is not without limit. Derrida (2000) argues that the fluidity in the self-other divide lies in the "finitude" of boundaries, but not their erasure. Therefore, sense of place can hardly be purely and ideally inclusive as Massey (1994) envisaged. In other words, our attitudes towards the "non-local other" are always subject to mediation within particular social relations and power structures (Naas, 2003). This argument indicates that the possibility of a global sense of place cannot be conceived outside the social dynamic in which social relations are negotiated and in which the meanings of place are discursively restructured. An ethical appeal for a global sense of place cannot neglect the actually existing dynamics of exploitation, vulnerability and struggles.

This paper acknowledges that some place-bounded politics may demonstrate a counter-hegemonic dimension and are therefore not inherently regressive. However, in saying so, we are not arguing that counter-hegemonic place politics is naturally unproblematic. Instead, this paper intends to further complicate our understanding of the dynamics of exclusion/inclusion by revealing that counter-hegemonic place politics can also lead to new forms of cultural oppression if it mobilizes absolute boundaries in the constitution of place-based identity. To bolster this argument, we adopt Levinas' thesis on ethical responsibility and the relational constitution of subjectivity to frame the ethical contour of this paper, in an attempt to utterly subvert and destabilize monolithic, absolute self-other boundary. Rejecting human subjectivity as a coherence which is managed and maintained to define and classify the "other" (Popke, 2003, 2007), Levinas suggests that subjectivity is constituted always in relation with the other, and must always be affirmed in