



Interpreting gentrification in Chengdu in the post-socialist transition of China: A sociocultural perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article explains the gentrification process in Chengdu, China, during the 2000s from a sociocultural perspective. It examines the spatial pattern of and correlations within gentrification in the inner city of Chengdu and embeds the gentrification process within the context of post-socialist societal transition in major Chinese cities. The research reveals that while state-led urban strategies provided the initial impetus of gentrification in Chengdu, the consumer revolution has awakened personal consumption as a force sustaining its development. Gentrifiers in Chengdu were constituted by a cohort of high-income consumers of varying socioeconomic backgrounds but collectively motivated by a new urbanism privileging the accumulation of social and cultural capital. Moreover, political-economic elites have led the creation of this new urbanism and oriented the sociocultural change of inner-city gentrifiers. Consequently, this article argues that a consumer class, replacing a socioeconomic class, has nurtured class-related urban change and, consequently, social conflict in certain inner-city areas. State and society interactions, rather than state or society domination, have determined the characteristics of gentrification in Chengdu.

1. Introduction

The gentrification scholarship has expanded from a period concentrating on European and North American cities to an era where urban studies in regions outside the usual suspects claim considerable regional variation in this process. Three leading figures have contributed to a substantial advance in studies on gentrification at a global scale (see Lees et al., 2015, 2016; López-Morales et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2016). This global discussion of gentrification has generated a consensus that contextual dependence is inherent to the formation of the gentrification process. Based on this understanding, the authors aimed to explain the regularities of urban change connecting different regions and involving both structural changes and regional contingencies.

The globalization of gentrification is believed to accompany the globalization of capital, specifically, capital shifting from industry to the secondary circuit of accumulation “in forms of fixed capital and, more specifically, the built environment” (Lees et al., 2016, p. 45). To incorporate regional variations, a wider scale of capital reinvestment is now included in gentrification, as seen in the mega-regeneration projects in some Southern cities. In addition to economic actors, scholars have emphasized the role of state and authoritative instruments in impacting the creation of rent gaps, such as through place

stigmatization based on state-led, discursive practices.

Social and cultural forces are reduced to a secondary issue in the explanations above (see the review by Ley and Yang, 2017). This reduction is also found in the current literature on China, which suggests that state-led land and housing marketization is a dominant force driving gentrification in the transitional economy of China (He, 2007; He & Wu, 2005; Lees et al., 2015, 2016; Shin, 2009, 2016; Zhang & Fang, 2004). Unlike post-industrial societal transformation in European and North American cities, the post-socialist societal transition in Chinese cities is questioned by researchers about generating strong thrusts of gentrification (Ren, 2015; Zhang et al. 2014). The new middle class in the city is regarded as a segment of those who are impacted and motivated by gentrification, which is seen as led by political-economic actors (Wang and Lau, 2009; Huang and Yang, 2017). The middle-class newcomers to the redeveloped neighborhoods are referred to as gentrifiers in this study.

Our research is inspired by the genre of research on the globalization of gentrification. With an in-depth case study of gentrification in Chengdu, a subprovincial city in China, this study will enhance the understanding of gentrification from the sociocultural perspective. Specifically, we examine the regional sociocultural force underlying gentrification and the contextualized characteristics of gentrification in

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the Chinese city. To support conceptualization, we take a meso-level approach to the gentrification process at the city level rather than confining our study to individual neighborhood changes. Starting with the sociocultural perspective by no means suggests that we assume the dominance of consumer power in leading gentrification. The study will equally analyze the close relations between both consumers and political-economic agents in leading urban change.

This article builds upon the consumption-side explanations applied to post-industrial cities, which have established a framework for understanding the relationship between societal transition and gentrification. Following an introduction of the methodology and the case study city, section four calls attention to two broad contexts of social transformation in the post-socialist period of urban China. Section five measures and maps the spatial pattern of social upgrading in the inner city of Chengdu from 2000 to 2010. Section six elucidates the gentrification process based on a correlation analysis. The study ends with a discussion of the sociocultural forces and characteristics of gentrification in Chengdu during the 2000s and the implications of this study.

2. Societal transition and gentrification

Although various approaches have been taken to explain gentrification, scholars generally treat the post-industrial societal transformation as an important backdrop to the phenomenon during the 1970s and 1980s in European and North American cities. Ley (1996) propose three sets of theories on societal transition to draw conceptual boundaries for its explanations. The three sets of broad theories are post-industrial society, post-Fordism and post-modernism. Respectively, they represent, more or less, the contexts of social, economic and cultural transition at that time.

Against this background, the emergence of gentrification was associated with the consumer culture of a new emerging “service class” in the tide of structural change in occupations in post-industrial society (see, typically, Butler, 1997; Hamnett, 1989, 2003; Ley, 1980, 1996, Savage et al., 1992; Zukin, 1982). The service classes, particularly the professional, technical and managerial classes employed in quaternary industries, are, first, highly paid and economically capable of affording inner-city residences and, second, culturally different from the conventional suburban middle class in terms of their lifestyle and consumption preferences. Gentrification occurred out of a search by the service class for a new urbanity that would be the antithesis to the trend of middle-class suburbanism and an embodiment of emerging post-modernist cultural currents (Ley, 1996; Zukin, 1982). The relationship between broader societal transition and changes in the urban landscapes thus shapes a basic explanatory framework for gentrification, which gentrification researchers call the consumption-side explanation in contrast with the production-side explanations led by Smith (1996).

In parallel with economic liberation since 1978, the post-socialist society in urban China has experienced a fundamental transition in socioeconomic structure and consumer culture. The interaction between economic reforms and gentrification has been the main starting point to explain gentrification in Chinese cities (He, 2007; Leaf, 1995; Shin, 2016, Zhang & Fang, 2004)—a trend also found in the literature for other post-socialist cities (e.g., Badyina & Golubchikov, 2005; Kovács, 1998, Kovács et al., 2013; Sýkora, 2005; Yip & Tran, 2016). Nevertheless, the relationship between post-socialist societal transition and gentrification has barely received a systematic examination. Instead, the distinctive trajectory of societal transition in Chinese cities from post-industrial societal transformation has evoked skepticism about the sociocultural force enabling gentrification in urban China.

First, the phase of employment restructuring in large cities in China, which have not yet become advanced service economies, creates uncertainty about the source and number of gentrifiers (Zhang et al., 2014). Against this background, residents in post-redeveloped neighborhoods may include not only government officials and enterprise managers but also skilled workers, officers and salesmen (Song et al.,

2010). Pertaining to the reform of state-owned enterprises, an increasing number of residents living in post-redeveloped neighborhoods in Shanghai since 2000 have been working in the private sector, and at foreign companies and joint ventures in particular (He & Wu, 2007). Additionally, Chinese gentrifiers may include a more senior population with high economic capital but not necessarily university degrees (Zhang et al., 2014).

An additional question is whether a demonstrable consumer culture is shaping the collective motivation of the Chinese middle class to settle in the inner cities. Ren (2015) suggests that the sociospatial upgrading in Chinese cities may be an immediate result of the expanding number of affluent middle-class families in urban society, accompanying the national economic takeoff. Ren (2015) asks what motives might drive “the amorphous, disjointed, and unstable” (Zhang, 2010, p.3) middle class in China towards “class conquest of the city” (Smith, 2008, p. 25). A professional middle class in Shanghai’s inner city may be heterogeneous in their lifestyles. Professionals who use urban amenities frequently may live in the suburbs, while those who live in the inner city may use urban facilities rarely but be optimizing their commuting costs (Wang and Lau, 2009). Huang and Yang (2017), whose work proactively focuses on Chengdu, find that middle-class newcomers are motivated to resettle in the redeveloped neighborhoods in the inner city by the high quality of life, security and social reputation of the neighborhoods.

Ambiguity as to the general character of Chinese gentrifiers has encouraged some researchers to formulate a typology of gentrification in Chinese cities by classifying gentrifiers. For example, studentification describes a process wherein students possessing lower levels of capital move into the rental housing in older neighborhoods (He et al., 2011; He, 2015; Smith, 2005). Rural gentrification refers to the concentration of artists in urbanized villages in Guangzhou (He et al., 2011). *Jiaoyu* (education)-fication captures the sociospatial upgrading driven by a feverish pace of housing purchases by consumers seeking neighborhoods with access to high-quality education (Wu et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2017). This body of work has meaningfully expanded the imagination around alternative appearances of gentrification, but it risks reducing gentrification to a contingent process with numerous variations.

Gentrification researchers thus face difficulties in developing a coherent explanation for China that is comparable to the consumption-side explanations provided for European and North American cities. The above authors are clearly correct in that gentrification emerges in societal contexts in urban China that are different from the contexts of post-industrial cities. Nevertheless, it is problematic to underrate the sociocultural forces enabling gentrification in Chinese cities by referring to the uneven *status quo* of societal transition between the post-socialist and post-industrial cities. Divergent trajectories of societal transition accordingly engender discrepancies in the forces, processes and landscapes of urban change that vary with regions and cities. Therefore, the specific ties between the post-socialist societal transition in China and the advent of gentrification should be established.

3. Case study city, data and methodology

Chengdu is a central city of western China and the capital city of Sichuan Province. Since 2000 Chengdu has been at the forefront of the national strategy of “developing China’s west” (Yeung, 2004, p. 20), which has aimed to transfer the development focus from the eastern and coastal areas to the inland and western areas. Recently, benefiting from the One Belt and Road Initiative promoted by President Jinping Xi, Chengdu’s economy has grown sufficiently to make it one of the fastest-developing inland cities in China. During the last two decades, the leadership of Chengdu has advocated various strategies for urban redevelopment, with great ambitions to merge into the global economy. In the meantime, the city is taking advantage of its livable environments, comfortable lifestyle and youthful aesthetics, which has sustained an animated consumer market. In 2008, Chengdu Shanghai,

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