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# Specifying elsewheres and middles

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## Abstract

The approaches proffered by Teo et al. in ‘Theorizing with urban China’ are constructive ways forward that also provoke a number of questions about the qualitative distinctions between generalizing and universalizing when it comes to theory. While supportive of the gestures to think with elsewhere, to generate theory for the mid-range and to work with researchers who are embedded in the contexts of study, some specifications are desired: If not everywhere, then which specific elsewheres are relevant? How big is the middle of mid-range theorization? How deeply embedded should collaborators be?

## Keywords

Conjunctural analysis, mid-range theory, urban theory, urban China

Sympathetic to the approaches proffered by Teo et al. (2023) in ‘Theorizing with urban China’ the paper also provokes a number of questions that highlight the need for some qualitative specifications: if not everywhere, then which specific elsewheres are relevant, how big is the middle of mid-range theorization and how deeply embedded should collaborators be? Especially if we are invited to think critically about urban theory as the product of a rigged system that might threaten epistemic violence (Oswin, 2018, 2020), if universalizing theory has been displaced by a practice of generalizing theorizations, are ‘other’ generalizing gestures necessarily less violent?

Questions about theorizing the urban have a quality of intransigence, recurrent in new contributions to urban theory that deal with the comparative position of China, the uneven epistemological power dynamics of ‘elsewhere’ and the nature of difference (Bunnell, 2022; Palat Narayanan, 2021; Randolph and Storper, 2023; Robinson, 2022). They are also some of the central uncertainties

I have been grappling with in the wake of my own forays into urban China and urban theory (Ren, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). Given the thoughtful application of new propositions for urban theorization (Peck, 2017; Robinson, 2016) in Teo et al.’s paper (2023), I take this chance to expand on three areas of concern that the paper touches on and posit many of the questions that I have been sitting with.

## Which elsewhere?

Teo et al. suggest that ‘theoretical insight developed with urban China can also have relevance elsewhere’. Yet implicit in this claim is that theoretical insights from urban China are not relevant everywhere.

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This accentuates the difficulties of how to assess the condition of relevance, and how to determine the ‘shared features’ that would place those elsewhere into the purview of this relation. In other words, who should care about theories from urban China (if not everyone)?

Moreover, are shared features more about empirical similarity or more about institutional commonalities? An example of shared features based on empirical similarity would be the comparative work of Xuefei Ren and Liza Weinstein, who have studied the issue of mega-projects and scalar transformations in China and India (Ren and Weinstein, 2012). In contrast, shared features rooted in institutional commonality might consider the insularity of knowledge production in different language communities, contexts of academic freedom, or positions of epistemic marginality that would shape the nature of urban theory and its relevance elsewhere. An example here might include the work on the ‘Global East’, which is as much about the geopolitics of knowledge production as it is about post-socialism (Trubina et al., 2020). Are there further ways to identify, delimit or expand the audiences for whom insights from urban China are relevant?

### **How big is the middle?**

As Jennifer Robinson’s extended analysis of comparative urbanism reminds us, ‘unfortunately, simply placing concepts in the “middle range” is not a self-evident solution’ but rather only a signpost to the problem area (2022: 15). The middle might feel safe because it exceeds particularism and does not make claims to the universal, planetary or global. Yet there is a great deal of ambiguity about where the ‘middle’ begins and ends. How often must a concept be relevant, and how many ‘repeated instances’ are required (Montero and Baiocchi, 2021) in order to move beyond the particular?

Agreeing with the position on the nature of urban theory that theories of global urbanism should not be conflated with theories of urbanization found in the ‘West’ (Robinson and Roy, 2016), this also does not quite resolve the question about the actual ‘nature’ of urban theory. For instance, what does it

mean to be generalizable? To what extent is generalizing a practice of creative interpretation, a result or condition of the translational capabilities of the scholar? If the degree to which ‘insights’ become theoretical are a result of generalizing beyond the individual case and relating it to a ‘relevant elsewhere’, it seems the scope of the middle is rather reliant on the abilities and limits of scholars themselves.

### **How deeply embedded is the collaborator?**

Indeed, the constellation of authors raises important considerations about the position of the scholar. The call for more collaboration is both a collegial and also a self-reflective way to conclude the paper; as the authors point out, they are none of them ‘from or working in mainland China’. I am myself not working in mainland China, and while I was born there, I inhabit the privileged position of being raised as part of the Chinese diaspora. I have long felt the strains of distance and appreciate the value of collaboration for both conducting research and interpreting findings. Yet I was a bit thrown by the qualifier of a ‘deeply embedded’ collaborator as it provoked me to contemplate how researchers are always embedded, and a situated view of knowledge always reflects the limits of our positions (whether it is made more or less explicit) (Rose, 1997). It recalled Jane Jacobs’ critical perspective on the concept of the ‘authentically local’ (Jacobs, 1996: 36), and I wondered whether the reliance on those ‘deeply embedded’ might over-simplify the solution.

The authors’ call for efforts to bring together ‘domestic and international scholars’ made me want further specification about the value proposition of collaboration across ‘borders’. Why is the border the most relevant marker of difference and not academic discipline, language or region, for instance? There are some hints about the institutional structures of knowledge production within China – so the border, as delimiting a specific publicly-funded academic landscape and as a site of censorship might indeed be important. As it stands, these conclusions leave a lot to the imagination. If the authors would be willing to explore

questions around academic freedoms and responsibilities, however, this could be a powerful reflection on positionality and the role of urban China researchers outside of the mainland.

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