

CONCLUSION

Exclusion and Rivalry, Lasting Inequalities, and Neoliberal Provision



This book has explored the spatially and temporally uneven process of China's urbanization through the lens of its graduated provision of public goods. The provisioning of public goods is a critical social issue in the unmaking of rural villages and the making of new urban communities. The state takes over the responsibility for provision when rural villages are administratively converted into urban communities, or *shequ*. Due to the stigma associated with their mixed population of former peasants and floating migrants—the latter making up the majority—and because these villages were initially excluded from the urban planning surrounding them, the process of statizing social goods is often messier than the vision of a clean break with the past suggests. Urban villages' rural past, inherited from the rural-urban dichotomy of the collectivist era, and their function in housing the huge floating migrant population generate tensions in the provision of public goods that highlight China's broader social and political issues.

In their introduction to a recent volume on infrastructure in the Global South, the anthropologists Nikhil Anand, Hannah Appel, and Akhil Gupta ask the essential questions: "To whom will resources be distributed and from whom will they be withdrawn? What will be public goods and what will be private commodities, and for whom? Which communities will be provisioned with resources for social and physical reproduction and which will not?" (2018: 2). Their use of the future tense makes sense, as they examine the "promises of infrastructure" at a rather discursive level. This book, too, has asked these

questions about urban public goods, including urban infrastructure, but has opened them up diachronically and less discursively by looking at the changing paths of their provisioning.

Taking a pragmatic and historicized approach to actual provisioning practices in China's urbanized villages avoids overstating the differences between commons and public goods and shows that public goods can be subject to commoning and clubbing practices. Although their provision is no longer based on the classification of Chinese citizens as rural or urban, lasting legacies of this dichotomy are manifest in the inequalities and tensions that exist in China's urban villages. The concept of graduated provision highlights the contradictions between the authorities' economic and social policy goals, accounting for the ways in which the extension of public goods provision is highly uneven and conditional.

Exclusion and Rivalry

The extensive role of the state and limited role of civil society make China a special case in the growing literature on the urban commons. Considering the state's crucial role in setting the conditions for the functioning of capitalism and the enclosure of the commons, it is arguably understandable that following this line of thought, public goods are not only overlooked but even rejected. It is also true that Marx himself made no attempt to integrate within his theory of capital circulation the fact that when public goods are provided by the state, a significant proportion of capital passes through the state apparatus (Harvey 2017: 17).

Occupy Movement theorists (e.g., Graeber 2014; Pickerill et al. 2015) advocate "commoning" in the reclamation of public city space—space owned and delimited by the state—for self-organized collectives to share according to their own rules. For Dardot and Laval (2014), anti-capitalist revolution will consist of turning all social organizations, including associations and enterprises, into self-governed commons, resulting in a federation of commons based on rights of use that replaces state-backed property rights and therefore requires the abolition of the state itself as a political entity. David Harvey takes a different stance; while he acknowledges "the struggle to appropriate the public spaces and public goods in the city," he points out that "in order to protect the common it is often vital to protect the flow of public goods that underpin the qualities of the common" (2012: 73).

Neglecting public goods to focus exclusively on commons poses several problems. Much of the recent literature tends to focus on the struggles, external to urban commons, against the market and the state—assuming that the creation of a community of users is unproblematic—rather than concentrating on struggles inherent in the definition and shaping of such communities. It also loses sight of the commons' actual workings and at best remains fuzzy in dealing with the practical conditions that allow them to endure (Narotzky 2013). Furthermore, there are no intrinsic reasons why commons should be more just than public goods (Jongh 2021). Equality of access on one scale (a small group of neighbors holding use rights) can entail exclusion on a larger scale (newcomers without such local use rights). Questions of scale and scope inevitably underpin “the uncommons” that constitute the “condition of possibility for the common good and of commons” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2017: 186).

China's rural property rights regime is based on the kind of collective rights of use that Dardot and Laval (2014) favor. For these authors, the instruments required to reach postcapitalist equality are the abolition of the state coupled with the generalization of use rights at the local level. However, Dardot and Laval recognize the limited purview of localized social movements. Local, communal use rights require protection, and a federation of commons requires resource transfers and the redistribution of the fruits of collective labor on various scales.¹ It is doubtful that local civil-society initiatives can connect and impose a radically different order of things without adopting some sort of vertical mode of functioning and institutional mechanisms (Harvey 2012: 84; Kalb 2014; Nonini 2017).

For the time being it must be recognized not only that the Chinese state is not likely to be abolished anytime soon but also that we scholars need to recover a critical stance toward existing empirical situations: “pervasive processes of political economy that channel and constrain the politics of actors within and beyond the state” (Nonini 2017: 36). Such critique has paradoxically been partly lost in the emphasis on commons and alternative forms of governance, which amounts to “normalizing the socio-historical causes of resource scarcity as well as the ‘exogenous violence’ imposed by the process of capitalist valorization” (Bresnihan and Byrne 2014: 37). Foregrounding citizens' attempts to self-organize in the context of shrinking budgets risks losing sight of necessary critique of the policies that lead to such defunding in the first place. The exclusive preoccupation with commons and commoning is paradoxically forgetful

of a critical stance that considers the shortcomings of provisioning in the context of neoliberal policies.

Even more problematic is the ambiguous flirtation with neoliberalism in the literature on the commons and its self-governing ideal (Lazzarato 2009; McShane 2010; Pithouse 2014; Enright and Rossi 2018). The discourse around the commons is deeply informed by the “moral turn” characteristic of neoliberal governmentality (Enright and Rossi 2018: 42). Third-way policies in Western countries often promote forms of local self-governance based on altruistic volunteering and sharing as a new route between the redistributive welfare state and market-driven economic liberalism (*ibid.*: 41; see also Muehlebach 2012). Similarly, China’s community-building policy encourages communities to become self-governing by drawing on their own resources.

The literature on urban commons not only suffers from misplaced idealism in its emphasis on external struggles (Kalb and Mollona 2018) but also is often misguided by public-sector economists’ schemata resting on the notion of inherent properties of goods such as rivalry and excludability. For instance, Charlotte Hess (2008), a disciple of Ostrom, locates the difference between urban commons and public goods in the former’s inherent vulnerability to enclosure and overuse, although Ostrom saw in commons a solution to these problems. On the other hand, Borch and Kornberger (2015) expand the urban commons, or what they term a city’s “atmospherics,” to comprise all spaces of urban sociality including shopping malls, underscoring their absence of rivalry, contradicting Ostrom’s notions of rivalrous common-pool resources and closed commons.

Rather than considering public goods inherently accessible and available to all (i.e., nonexcludable and nonrivalrous)—intrinsic qualities that public-sector economists have used to justify the governmental provision of public goods—the introduction to this book has argued for a political-economy approach, viewing public goods as goods provided following political decisions. The need for a realist rather than an idealistic perspective (Kalb and Mollona 2018) based on existing empirical situations further arises when considering the full range of occasions when commoning practices occur: white supremacists’ self-funding and self-organization of militias to maintain their own idea of order is a form of commons. Public-sector economists overlook one major reason why private actors generally do not build roads wherever they see fit or ensure their own safety by forming militias: it is not because private provision is not optimal

but because they are generally not, and indeed should not be, free to do so.

While this focus does not discount commoning practices, it does de-idealize them. Bringing public goods back into the equation requires recognizing that they are not inherently different from commons or club goods; there is no difference in their nature. However, public goods differ from commons in that they are provided by the state or local government. State-provided social goods such as state schools and public parks differ from self-provided neighborhood commons such as coresidents' helping one another with care activities, which is in turn distinct from privately provided, commodified private goods such as shopping malls. Redirecting attention to public goods avoids eschewing the role of the state and takes account of its lasting role as a provider. The Chinese state claims a monopoly on the provision of many public goods, although it may be reluctant to assume responsibility for providing them. Looking at actual processes of provision and distribution opens up a way of looking at the circumstances in which commoning and clubbing logics surface. This book has identified some of the claims made on the state by people's explicit expectations in terms of public goods—for instance, when citizens feel proud that the state has stepped in to create a public space, articulate demands for public toilets, or protest against the privatization of parking fees. Principles of equality, however, are rarely voiced: even though both newcomers and natives recognize that state-provided spaces should be accessible to all, such principles of social justice are disputed by other grassroots principles that foreground natives' priority rights of use and view welfare distribution as a reward for those who have contributed to economic growth (chapters 4 and 5). Redistributive principles are contradicted by reciprocal moralities.

This approach does not mean that the ideational criteria established by economists should be discarded; instead of using them a priori to classify different types of goods, it is more fruitful to use them to assess the situation observed. The distinction that matters relates to modes of provision—communal self-provisioning, state provisioning outside market logics, or clubbing—which are the outcome of political decisions. Furthermore, rather than labeling the intrinsic nature of goods, the notions of exclusion and rivalry help to name some of the social and political problems that underlie situations discovered in the field. Although the Chinese state and its local representatives are nominally committed to equality of access, exclusion and rivalry are widespread.

Exclusion arises when goods are subject to commoning and clubbing practices and to logic. The introduction called attention to the resemblance between these: while commoning aims at defending a good from appropriation by outsiders, whether individuals or the state, clubbing limits the use of public goods and services to those with the ability to pay. Both practices can jeopardize their equal delivery among all potential users. This is one of the major challenges in the transition from a rural village that is accustomed to managing its own common-pool resources to an urban community where the local state steps in. This book identifies some public goods, such as cemeteries and public spaces, that are still commoned, i.e., kept by the former rural community for itself and used for care and sociability. Moreover, in the context of local governments' budgetary scarcity, in a form of state-sanctioned commoning, urban communities (*shequ*), as grassroots management bodies, are encouraged to rely on local internal resources, including volunteering, in the name of community-building.

Furthermore, private developers increasingly provide public goods such as green spaces and parking spaces in residential complexes (*xiaoqu*): here exclusion operates on the basis of ability to pay, a clubbing logic that denies access to many. In the largest Chinese cities, which grant urban citizenship to restricted quotas of the population, club logic prevails in access to public goods such as education and health insurance. Shenzhen represents this trend best among the three case-study cities.

The question of rivalry in the city is mainly spatial. Although one can concede to Borch and Kornberger's (2015) "atmospherics" theory that sociality is highly valued in itself—for instance, a lively crowd participating in a festival is a good thing—this does not contradict the many instances of rivalry. The absence of rivalry in urban settings is highly contestable, since public transport, public space, housing, and schools are often overcrowded, reducing their quality (Harvey 2012: 74; Nonini 2017: 35). More generally, urban space is highly saturated and thus under strong pressure from competing uses, particularly where land is utilized as an investment vehicle (Huron 2017). This saturation of and competition for space can make public goods rival one another, as in Harvey's example of a community garden taking up land that could be used for affordable housing (2012: 102). Conversely, but by the same logic, peripheral space deemed impractical for real-estate projects finds the state and developers passing their responsibilities off onto one another, as in the case of unused land that has become a loosely self-governed quasi-commons in Chengdu's South Gate.

Everywhere else, the state seeks to claim its monopoly of public space by forbidding street vending and job posting and creating new, visibly government-run public squares for propaganda and displaying its attentiveness to citizens' leisure and sociability needs. Yet in China's newly urbanized neighborhoods, the small size of the public squares inherited from rural villages can give rise to tension regarding their use rights, with native villagers tending to monopolize them and reluctant to share them with new arrivals in the city. The continuing legacy of the rural past means that those with local urban citizenship rights are more likely to have access to, and a voice in, decisions about the use of such spaces.

The Enduring Legacy of the Rural-Urban Dichotomy

Although the Chinese state has, with a great fanfare, vowed to abolish the rural-urban dichotomy in access to urban public services, its legacy is strong, particularly in urban villages. In the collective era urban work units (*danwei*) provided a comprehensive array of public goods, including housing, medical care, kindergartens, and shops (Bray 2006), while rural collectives financed their own village-level social goods. Although located in urban territory, villages-in-the-city (*chengzhongcun*) have long been expected to continue to provide their own social welfare services and other public goods such as public security and sanitation, even once they have become both physically and legally urban. Now the *shequ* are charged with delivering key local public services, including public health, culture, sports, and security, while keeping the costs to the minimum and receiving little funding from the government.

It is in urban villages that the continuity between Mao-era village self-governance and economic autonomy in the provisioning of public goods is strongest. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the contradiction between the rhetorical importance accorded to community-building and the dearth of direct funding for building inclusive communities serving all residents is at its starkest in urban villages.

Redevelopment has occurred in different ways and at different speeds across the three cases considered in this book: it began early in the process of urbanizing South Gate in Chengdu, where the local municipal government funded the resettlement of the former villagers, and only later in River Hamlet in Xi'an and Pine Mansion in Shenzhen, where the government saved money by creating partnerships with commercial developers. All three cases have retained

some form of collective social organization inherited from the Maoist rural past—i.e., the production groups and brigades, corresponding to “natural villages,” which continue to frame sociability between the native villagers and account for their enduring identification with their village. The state of local governments’ finances and considerations about what redevelopment projects will yield in terms of state revenue explain the differences in timing of redevelopment.

This timing, combined with local particularities in social organization, accounts for the varying degrees to which former village collectives have continued to exist and play a role in the provision of public goods. In Pine Mansion, powerful village shareholding companies have retained the collective use rights to former agricultural land, the urban use of which yields income that finances villagers’ health insurance and pensions, while in South Gate all such land was expropriated by the state early on, the only remaining collective source of income being rental from shop spaces on the resettlement estates, with social welfare provision distributed by the local state. In Xi’an, an intermediary case, there has been little collective organization at the scale of the former administrative village, and as a result there is little income to reinvest, with much of the former collective agricultural land having been gradually sold off to developers, leaving both villagers and migrants vulnerable to sudden and brutal eviction in 2018. Basic welfare benefits are distributed by the local state, but villagers are strongly encouraged to seek employer-funded pensions and insurance (chapter 1).

Despite the administrative fiat that redefined rural villages as urban overnight, the prevailing idea is that only redevelopment can truly transform the villages and rid them of their chaotic (*luan*), insanitary and unsafe characteristics. The urgent need for their obliteration is seen as justifying the violent eviction of villagers, as occurred in River Hamlet. Yet such projects can be successful only with a certain amount of investment in parks, transportation, and schools to make them attractive to future buyers. Public-goods provisioning is highly conditional on the path followed by villages-in-the-city: municipal authorities do not start financing public goods immediately after a village is turned into an urban administrative entity, but only when the redevelopment plans have been launched.

Yet this notion of readiness for demolition and reconstruction, again in spite of the state’s demiurgic discourse about turning urban villages into “proper” urban communities, is also conditioned upon the village’s rural past and its investment in public goods prior to its administrative urbanization. While River Hamlet and South Gate

had little in terms of a legacy of prior village social goods, Pine Mansion, with its long tradition of support from its diaspora, was left to its own devices to finance its public goods until the local state made it a primary target of its redevelopment policies. For the same reason, Pine Mansioners were able to cleverly circumvent the funeral reform by maintaining their cremated ancestors' remains within the limits of their village territory, commoning a public good for the free use of all native villagers. The poorer and much less unitary villagers in River Hamlet were only able to negotiate transport to the new and remote public cemeteries. Pine Mansion is a primary instance of how the state expropriates existing village social goods based on village commons and converts them to urban public goods to create favorable conditions for forthcoming redevelopment projects (chapter 2).

Changes in provisioning paths follow the pace at which urban communities are redeveloped, and redevelopment projects generally put a definite end to many village commons, such as roads and transportation funded by village collectives. The authorities allow urban villages' informal economies to thrive as long as they generate value; but when this value falls below what can be expected in the surrounding city's real-estate boom, as it did in Xi'an, or with the impact of the global financial crisis on export manufacturing, as in Shenzhen, they resort to the wholesale demolition and rebuilding of entire areas. While village infrastructure has been left in the hands of the collectives in urbanized communities for as long as an informal real-estate economy was tolerated, redevelopment projects trigger state intervention in matters of garbage disposal, electricity, sewerage, street lighting, greening, cleaning, and security; that is, the public goods closely associated with the broader Chinese discourse on urbanization as a civilizing process. The provision of these infrastructural goods, mainly by the Chengguan (urban management unit) and the Wangge (grid surveillance unit), performatively shapes the new urban environment as a primary means of creating a civilized urban community (chapter 3).

Past commons are not only used as assets for the generation of economic value: the rural past becomes a valuable resource in itself, an object of consumption for middle-class native villagers turned rentiers and incoming property buyers. In Chengdu's South Gate a mural displayed at the community center depicting the agricultural fields and labor of the rural past attracts both local and international visitors. In Pine Mansion the position of the new apartments in the redevelopment project next to the ancestral temple, to whose renovation the real estate developer contributed, makes them particularly desirable. The temple not only embellishes the neighborhood but is

also the main reason behind middle-class Pine Mansioners exchanging their old houses for apartments in that precise location. In both South Gate and Pine Mansion, funds are granted to communities able to capitalize on the affective dimensions of nostalgia for the rural past. The state's livable community projects in urban villages capitalize on their past, reframing it in terms of Confucian values while aiming to convert them into respectable, modern, urban communities populated by law-abiding, self-governing, high-quality (*suzhi*) citizens (chapters 4 and 5).

Public space features centrally in livability projects. However, state-provided urban public space is generally limited in former villages and overlies former rural public space. In this recombinant urbanization (Kipnis 2016), native villagers tend to maintain certain communal activities in former village spaces, monopolizing them and relegating migrants to their margins. This segregation in the use of public space is most marked in River Hamlet and Pine Mansion, but it is also present in South Gate. This is one less visible but crucial marker of migrant and native inhabitants of urban villages' unequal entitlement to the benefits of urbanization (Webster and Zhao 2010).

Native villagers whose land is requisitioned for redevelopment projects maintain a sense of entitlement and can turn prior assets into value-generating capital. Moreover, local authorities consider that natives' expectations of priority rights to senior care, among other benefits, are grounded not only legally in *hukou* policy but also morally, in reciprocity for their past contribution to economic development and city growth. This was most explicit in Pine Mansion, where such a logic of the countergift legitimizes the provision of free care and lunches for elderly local former villagers by a private senior-care social enterprise. In contrast, many migrants find a source of security in their landholdings in their place of origin, considering their poor chance of being granted *hukou* for the village-in-the-city in which they now live. Some claim a right to the city based on their contribution to building it, and others subscribe to the literal "right-to-the-city" points system for earning *hukou* that has become prevalent in China's largest cities (chapter 5). This framework rests on deliberately unequal recognition of the value produced by different categories of citizen.

Neoliberalism as Graduated Provision

Neoliberalism's usefulness as an analytical lens is increasingly questioned, mainly because it is seen as an all-purpose explanation for a wide range of disparate phenomena (Parnell and Robinson 2012;

Ferguson 2015) due to its lack of internal coherence and mutability across locales (Ong 2006, 2007; Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2012; Peck and Theodore 2019; Maszkovsky and Brash 2014). China's neoliberalization continues to be hotly debated (Anagnost 2004; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Ong 2006; Kipnis 2007; Arrighi 2008; Nonini 2008; Chu and So 2010; Wu 2010, 2017; Peck and Zhang 2012; Pieke 2012; Trémon 2015; Zhang and Bray 2017; Duckett 2020). Despite the state's adoption of capitalist market logics embracing capitalist modes of production and its role in accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005), it is very clear that its continuing and even increased commitment to providing public services and social welfare runs counter to the Euro-American narrative of neoliberalism entailing the state backtracking from commitment to redistribution. Moreover, the 2008 global financial crisis triggered a turn, if not a return, to a politics of state intervention and redistribution, especially in countries with authoritarian regimes and/or developing states (Parnell and Robinson 2012; Parnell and Walawege 2014; Collier, Mizes, and von Schnitzler 2016).

Rather than bringing us to the conclusion that China is not neoliberal in any sense, as the CCP Central Committee (2013) would have us believe (see introduction), conventional accounts of neoliberalism may need revision. Saving on expenses in China's urban communities (*shequ*) is intended not to reduce the level of public goods provision but rather to deliver public goods at the lowest possible cost. As several scholars recognize, neoliberal theories (including Buchanan's club goods theory) and reforms have aimed at rationalizing rather than putting an end to established forms of social provision (Hartmann 2005; Collier 2011), and this rationalization is still shaped by moral commitment to redistributive principles (James 2015). However, in the case of China, conditionality based on social and moral worth, rather than universal unconditional redistribution, prevails. Points-based access to *hukou* rewards those who have anticipated the future by buying social insurance and houses, and also volunteers (I expand the discussion of conditionality below). It is now recognized that neoliberal policies tend to appeal to grassroots values such as moral tropes of deservingness and merit (Gledhill 2004: 339; Mikuš 2016; Makovicky, Trémon, and Zandonai 2018), legitimizing them by either suggesting or emphasizing their continuity with older histories and social and cultural dynamics (Narotzky and Smith 2006; Muehlebach 2012).

Of course, neoliberalism as an ideology has Euro-American roots. Many scholars and observers agree that it is not the dominant ideology in China and that if there is neoliberalism in China it is articu-

lated with everyday practices of personalism (Nonini 2008) and of other ethical regimes, e.g., Confucianism (Ong 2006: 9; Kipnis 2007). However, the notion that neoliberalism is either an ideology or a hegemonic discourse also needs rethinking, because it prevents our looking at existing empirical situations and locks us into culturalist approaches. The empirical materials used in the debate on China's neoliberalism deal more with issues of ideology, culture, and ethical regimes than with the actual changes to political and economic organization as they happen on the ground. This results in a false debate; as I have argued elsewhere (2015: 82), while it is clearly not the case that neoliberalism has become the dominant way in which people everywhere make sense of their lives, as Harvey wrote in an awkward foray into culturalist terrain (2005: 3), this does not mean capitalist neoliberalization is not a powerful force. The type of governance that is taking form in China is grounded in both socialism and neoliberalism (Sigley 2006; Pieke 2012).

The doubt cast on the analytical value of neoliberalism is largely due to irreconcilable political-economic and governmentality approaches (Barnett 2005; Hilgers 2012) increasing the impression that in addition to its variegated character, discussed above, neoliberalization describes too wide a range of phenomena: the unleashing of market forces, class formation by dispossession, new public management techniques, moral subject shaping, etc. However, the concept remains useful for capturing and criticizing the only apparently contradictory processes whereby the state allows market logics to prevail everywhere, tempering them only when they become socially unbearable, and fosters capitalist accumulation while remaining firmly in place. This makes capitalist neoliberalization perfectly politically compatible with right-wing populism (Hall 1988; Kalb 2012; Peck and Theodore 2019) and socialist authoritarianism (Duckett 2020).

Since the global recession of 2007–2009, China's economic growth has increasingly been sustained by massive investment in urbanization. This has generated huge fiscal debts for local Chinese governments (Xue and Wu 2015; Harvey 2012: 62–68). The maximization of real-estate value as an instrument for capital accumulation translates into a mode of welfare and public goods provision that ties such provision to the generation of value. As a result, despite the party-state's strong commitment to improving and providing equal access to urban public goods, its provisioning is graduated—that is, uneven and conditional.

It is uneven because it continues to *de facto* discriminate against the poor while supporting the propertied middle class. City infra-

structure planning and resource allocation have largely been carried out with little regard for the needs of many residents, because until recently only the *de jure* (urban-*hukou*-holding) population was considered in budget allocation. This has changed, but urban welfare benefits in the form of retirement pensions and health insurance schemes remain highly unequally delivered due to city governments' lack of funds, slowness in implementing reforms, and the selectiveness of their points systems for extending urban benefits to non-*hukou* holders. As several other recent studies have shown, social security, old-age pensions, free basic education, and a minimum livelihood guarantee scheme (*dibao*), although granted to enlarged beneficiary groups, remain conditional and selective (Heberer 2009; Frazier 2010; Wong 2010; Solinger 2012; Cai 2016; Duckett 2020; Dong and Goodburn 2020; Huang 2020).

Urban public goods provision is graduated—i.e., differentiated—along class lines and according to the stage that an urban community has reached in the authorities' evolutionary thinking, which combines civilizational discourse about the need to rid villages of their rural backwardness with developmentalist thinking in terms of value-generating potential. Provision is adjusted locally according to both policies decided by upper-level authorities and local authorities' vision of not only what remains to be done but also what can potentially be achieved, considering the community inhabitants' "maturity"—their position in the evolutionary scheme of things. As a result, considerable variation can be found in both urbanized communities and their component neighborhoods, although the governing techniques used for selecting and targeting particular people and places are remarkably similar.

Graduated provision openly prioritizes middle-class residents based on a residential clubbing logic that privileges the idea of the self-governing middle class while serving to prevent conflict and temper potential sources of social instability. This is clearly the case in Chengdu, where the socialist tradition of regulating prices has been reinvigorated to fund community-scale wet markets and guarantee affordable food. Meanwhile, migrants are subjected to minute surveillance, but they are also the beneficiaries of charity events and the main targets of projects aimed at building solidarity. In these projects, funded via a competitive project-based system, some (mainly migrants) are encouraged to care for others (mainly natives), resulting in the graduated provision of care. Value extraction and recognition of the value contributed by diverse categories of the population are highly differentiated, both as economic valorization and as political acknowledgment of social worth (Collins 2017).

Provisioning is conditional because of the way in which public goods provision itself is partly tied to market-value-generation goals resulting from an entrepreneurialization of governance, leaving city dwellers to their own devices to provide or institute the commoning of public goods. Villages-in-the-city are seen as passing through a transitional phase. To reach the modernist civilizational goal of urbanization, some are singled out as “model villages” and are subject to intense attention and priority funding, as happened to South Gate in Chengdu and Pine Mansion in Shenzhen. In an effort to eliminate the remains of the rural villages, a homogenous, civilized urban landscape is being actively shaped via infrastructural improvements that reward the citizens and communities that come closest to the civilizational ideal. Infrastructural intervention is also used conditionally as a governing technique, as when sewerage and electricity services are cut off to compel native residents to accept relocation and compensation plans and to drive out unwanted migrants, as in River Hamlet in Xi’an. This conditionality is perhaps best illustrated by the case of Pine Mansion’s public primary school, which was a village commons until it was taken over by the state. State funding turned it into a public good, but a conditional one: the school’s extension was conditional on the shareholding companies’ acceptance of the redevelopment project, and while enrollment is open to *hukou* and non-*hukou* holders, it excludes poor migrant workers from the points-based system for access to public schools.

Conditionality also underlies community-building policies more indirectly. Urbanized villages are primary targets of such policies, which appeal to Chinese citizens’ desire to improve their own quality and to their moral imperative to care for others. Recognition of citizens’ social worth or quality (*suzhi*) is conditional on their contributing free labor in the form of volunteering for caritative events and projects to improve the urban environment. Paradoxically, municipal governments promote caring work and volunteering precisely as a means of creating a sense of belonging to the city, shaping migrant-subjects’ life plans and incentivizing them to apply for urban citizenship while continuing to control who is eligible for it.

While the Chinese authorities endeavor to neutralize class struggle by limiting inequalities in access to public goods, so far they have not succeeded. On the contrary, the inequalities are becoming increasingly caste-like as the more privileged members of society continue to benefit more from public transfers in education, health-care, and pensions (Wang 2018). Although China’s income inequality has declined since 2008, it remains among the highest in the world (Kanbur, Wang, and Zhang 2017; Picketty, Li, and Zuckman 2017;

Jain-Chandra et al. 2018; Solinger 2018). The National New Urbanization Plan (2021–35) aims at deepening the reforms initiated by the 2014 Urbanization Plan; among other goals, it seeks to further rebalance urban growth to benefit county towns and to change the development mode for megacities.² The points system for accessing basic urban benefits will be generalized, and the new plan is therefore likely to deepen and extend the graduated provision of public goods in China's fast-growing cities.

Notes

1. For critiques of Dardot and Laval's (among others) project of replacing private ownership rights with rights of use, see Harribey (2015) and Jongh (2021).
2. Notice of the National Development and Reform Commission on issuing the Key Tasks for New Urbanization and Urban-Rural Integration Development in 2021, 8 April 2021. <https://finance.sina.com.cn/china/2021-04-13/doc-ikmyaawa9355317.shtml>.