As the centre of economic gravity has moved progressively eastwards and with the unprecedented scale and scope of Chinese urbanization, urban theory has been under increasing challenge. To what extent can the concepts and processes developed in western settings be applied in the East Asian context? Similar questions have been raised, of course, with regard to other regions, perhaps most notably in relation to Latin America. But these debates about comparison, difference, specificity and challenging western-centric ideas have taken on greater urgency in recent years with regard to East Asia because of the undeniable global significance of the pace and pattern of urban development in the region. Moreover, the scale of new building has been dramatic with major cities emerging from modest sized towns or even villages in a couple of decades. There has been a fundamental transformation of the lived experiences of the millions of people who have moved from the countryside to the city. In the case of China, the changed relationship between home and work has been both deep and pervasive as the old work unit system has been dismantled. This has changed relations between neighbours, neighbourhoods and has gradually reshaped the entire urban fabric. In such a context, it is no surprise that concepts such as gentrification have come under close scrutiny.

This collection is part of the response to these kinds of concerns. In particular, does the concept of gentrification provide a useful departure point from which to explore the urban process in an East Asian context? In doing so, are we guilty of conceptual stretch, concept dilution or ethnocentrism as has been suggested by various others (See, for example, Butler, 2007; Maloutas, 2011; Zukin, 2010) or does such an engagement offer a productive and constructive exploration of the tension between the specific and the generalizable? In doing so, this special issue contributes to evolving debates around comparative urbanism. My simple understanding of this would be the need for a skeptical and cautious approach to the transfer of concepts from one socio-spatial context to another-and indeed, from one temporal context to another. So
something that looks like ‘gentrification’ may well be produced by a quite distinct set of processes and with quite different consequences. Equally, an apparent absence of ‘gentrification’ may go hand in hand with less evident processes of the displacement and dispossession of the poor by the rich (Atkinson, 2015: Shaw and Hagemans, 2015). I refer to ‘gentrification’ in parentheses because of the additional difficulties of concept translation. This adds a further complication to comparative or globalized study. Some terms simply do not travel well and this can lead to misunderstandings about the presence or absence of a set of processes or phenomena. For example, ‘neighbourhood’ is a notoriously difficult word to operationalize as a concept in China (Forrest and Yip, 2007,51-52).

A strong feature running through all these papers is the active and very visible role of the state in its various forms and the close relationship between governments and the real estate sector. This apparently unashamed cosiness between state and property capital has been shaped by distinctive institutional and policy histories but, with some exceptions, all the papers underline the centrality of land-based accumulation in the contemporary East Asian city and the continuing neglect of pressing housing needs. Informal land is formalized and commodified. Shopping malls and high rise luxury apartments and gated enclaves proliferate. Surplus capital fuels round after round of speculative activity which generates underused and often empty apartments-exchange value minus any use. What these days is referred to as the affordability gap widens. A headline last December in the South China Morning Post read “Hong Kong’s ‘tiniest flats ever’ go on sale for HK$2 million” (SCMP, 2014). On the one hand, we have these unoccupied or certainly under-occupied, spacious, upscale receptacles for spare wealth. On the other, the middle masses are offered flats of less than 200 square feet. The underlying narrative in this special issue is of real estate capitalism-state led, developmental or otherwise. This resonates for me with Merrifield’s evocative reference to the parasitic city. ‘Parasites hatch land and infrastructural grabs and get their friends in government to issue “eminent domain” edicts, legalizing their parasitic predilections. Parasites thrive in both the private and public sectors and especially flourish where those sectors merge as one’ (Merrifield, 2014:110). Provocative stuff indeed and this collection of very nicely nuanced papers engage well with the ‘parasitic city’ theme.

The papers range across Taipei, Hong Kong, Hanoi, Seoul, Manila, Singapore, peri-urban Indonesia and Mainland China-a fair spectrum of different socio-spatial contexts in East Asia. In my view, gentrification serves as a useful unifying concept in drawing together these geographically disparate examples of the urban process and urban conflicts. It also sharpens the narrative by posing a common set of questions, implicitly and explicitly. What is driving this particular urban outcome? Who are the winners and losers? Who is being pushed to the margins, literally and metaphorically? For Choi (2014/ this issue), on Metro-Manila, the gentrification lens enables a more interconnected perspective linking the developer/state led
upscale developments on the one hand with the displacement risks faced by the urban poor on the other. La Grange and Pretorius (2014/ this issue) highlight the particular character of the Hong Kong developer-state nexus and show how the sheer scale of the public sector led development projects reduces the amount of affordable housing available to rent or buy. Hong Kong is perhaps a unique example of a city in which the process of capitalist urban development is starkly and unapologetically exposed. A relatively large public housing sector is, however, a major concession made to enable the process of revalorization to continue relentlessly with little opposition to the logic of the market in relation to land use. Shin and Kim (2015/ this issue) explore, as do others, the distinctive legacy of the developmental state in the Korean context and the close relationship, as in Hong Kong, between real estate capital and the state.

State capitalism provides a rather different socio-political context for the discussion and analysis of gentrification. Yip and Tran (this issue) take up a common theme in the East Asian context (and a widely argued question in the gentrification literature), namely whether the construction of luxury enclaves on brownfield sites can be argued to involve displacement. If no one was living there, who is being displaced? The attraction of brownfield sites is, of course, precisely the lack of any people to be relocated and thus fewer potential conflicts. But then there are the potential indirect impacts on adjacent sites although Yip and Tran say in that in the case of Hanoi these have yet to be observed. More strikingly (and closer to the original focal point of the impact of gentrification on older inner city neighbourhoods) are the observations on the collective impact of the many small scale changes in Hanoi`s small shops and buildings. Rather than heritage, tradition and established residents being bulldozed aside, Yip and Tran suggest that strong user rights, more grassroots led innovation and a state with relatively weak administrative capacity drives a more incremental pattern of urban change in which the local aesthetic has been preserved. As Shin (2015/ this issue) shows, no such weak administrative capacity exists in China where a distinctive legacy of local land use rights has given a particular shape and brutality to the process of land grabs and displacement. Specifically, collectively owned land has to be liberated for the market. It has to be commodified as a precursor to any gentrification occurring. Dispossession therefore precedes gentrification and is enabled and orchestrated by local governments. Dispossession enables urban accumulation.

Jou, Clark and Chen (2014/ this issue) also develop the theme of facilitating governance in their exploration of the appropriateness of applying notions of revanchist urbanism and gentrification in Taipei. They conclude inter alia that revanchist urbanism provides part of the explanatory frame for recent processes of urban restructuring in Taipei. But, predictably, there are distinctive twists and turns in the narratives, specificities which are explored and explained and particular engagements with neoliberal policies and processes. In the same vein Shin and Kim (2015/ this issue) argue that gentrification is not necessarily
coincident with, or simply a product of, the spread of neoliberal policies—that the Korean case emphasizes the need to explore contingent relationships between real estate capital and states. And Jou et al talk about a more ‘vicious’ process of displacement in the history of Taipei’s state owned land but also offer some distinctive insights into the way in which emancipatory and alternative movements can form part of the preconditions for gentrification by corporate finance and property capital.

Reading these papers, the late and greatly missed Neil Smith was inevitably very present. In this case, however, I thought not about his extensive and influential contribution to the gentrification debates but a paper he wrote in 2000 titled, *What happened to class?* (Smith, 2000). I recalled two elements of the arguments in this typically combative piece which struck me as relevant to the discussion in this special issue. First, Smith observed that from a western perspective, proletarianisation and mass rural-urban migration (and indeed industrialization), were viewed as largely historical phenomena. But some of these papers serve to remind us further that in many parts of the world, and certainly in parts of East Asia, these processes remain important transformative drivers of change. There was certainly nothing postindustrial about urbanization in East Asia when Smith’s article appeared in 2000. Here we had many of the features of the original version of primitive accumulation, dormitories of rural migrants and the kinds of living conditions associated with 19th century European cities. Smith was reminding us that, from a global perspective, the urban condition had not changed as much as many western commentators assumed and that we should be very conscious of our vantage point in our understanding of contemporary urbanisation. Second, and this was really the nub of the article, he argued that ‘difference’ had been captured and sanitized by global corporate interests. It had become fashionable. Class had been eclipsed by gender, race and ethnicity. And these conceptions of difference had been progressively stripped of much of their critical content. I wondered about the term gentrification in this context and whether it risked being emptied of critical content through overuse. There is always the danger that, as the forms of gentrification multiply, the proliferating taxonomy may obscure common underlying processes of inequality and exploitation. To a degree, gentrification has become fashionable. Some corporate advertising for new luxury enclaves in global cities comes close to a shameless and explicit promotion of gentrification and La Grange’s paper hints that in Hong Kong it is as likely to have positive as negative associations.

However, on further reflection, the dangers of emptying out the critical content of gentrification as a concept through overuse or conceptual stretch are outweighed by the bland euphemisms which are its alternative-neighbourhood renewal, urban redevelopment, area improvement and social mixing. Here I side with others that using gentrification processes as the analytical lens places class at the centre of the analysis—or at least it should do if it is being deployed correctly (in this context, see Slater, 2006). There is certainly less risk of missing this point in many of the urban contexts which are examined in this collection.
Again with a backward glance to Neil Smith’s paper, there is often nothing subtle about the remaking and revalorization of space for wealthier classes in East Asia. It may be presented as modernization and the consequences of rising affluence but the visceral drivers of greed and profit are all too visible. Capital accumulation is not some abstraction but an observable part of the everyday life of the city. This is partly a product of the sheer pace of urban change in East Asia, and especially in China as the rural fringe is rapidly devoured and the obsolescence of the older urban areas accelerates. Here, the exploration of processes of gentrification connects to a broader narrative of disenfranchisement in which housing assets and the dynamics of housing markets are driving a wedge between the propertyed and the property-less, between the asset rich and asset poor in cities (Forrest and Hirayama, 2015). It also resonates with critical and popular references to the rise or re-emergence of economic elites as symptoms of a globalized financial capitalism in which a new superrich seem to have little apparent allegiance to place or civic responsibility (Urry, 2014; Freeland, 2012). As with gentrification, however, these broader narratives have to be highly sensitive to ethnocentric conceptions, assumed meanings and to the particularities and specificities of time and place (see discussion in Koh, Wissink and Forrest, 2015). The essays contained in this collection and in other related works on gentrification (Lees, Shin and López-Morales, forthcoming) can provide significant inputs into these wider discussions of the growing tensions between cohesion and commodification in cities. There is a growing literature on gentrification as universal, global (Bridge and Atkinson, 2005) or indeed planetary (see Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2015, forthcoming). This collection adds to this corpus and also adds to the growth of a more contextualized understanding of the variegated processes of displacement and dispossession which have occurred.

As has often been observed, there is nothing new about gentrification. It has been called different things in different places and it long preceded Ruth Glass’ observations about Islington. Moreover, the need for much greater sensitivity to the application of concepts across different cultural contexts and socio-spatial regimes applies just as forcefully over time as over space. London is being reshaped and remade by a very different constellation of drivers and influences than in the 1960s. Different conceptual tools are required to understand contemporary processes of class displacement and replacement in today’s London—perhaps most notably in relation to planetary financial flows and the pivotal position of real estate as the preferred home for nomadic capital investment. The question remains, however, as to how much added value is offered by the application of a gentrification lens in a comparative context. It seems to me that provided it is acknowledged as one of many urban processes at work, then it provides a very useful analytical point of entry for comparative analysis.
The contributors to this collection all approach their particular investigations with a healthy wariness of hegemonic discourses and the misappropriation of western centric concepts. These latter concerns apply as much to references to neoliberalism as to gentrification-another concept accused of misuse and overuse. Robinson (2010) has, for example, argued that the application of neoliberalism as an ideology and policy to explain much of social change in recent decades has run the risk of overstretch and of ‘re-hegemonizing’ the theoretical discourse. That may well be, but an important part of the value of this collection is that it forces some timely reflection on western oriented debates around gentrification and neoliberalism - as a reminder of the fundamental but sometimes less clearly visible processes at work in the cities of the so-called global North. With regard to neoliberalism the essays serve as a forceful riposte to the idea that it is laissez-faire market liberalism which is shaping the contemporary city. The ‘free’ market may have been discredited after the 2007/8 global financial crisis, but neoliberal policies and processes have been reinvigorated and reasserted. The explorations of variegated gentrification here, and the variegated but central roles of states in the process help to explain this apparent resilience and reinforce the conception of neoliberalism as a rationality (Dardot and Lavall, 2013) rather than a mere economic project of privatization or marketization.

References


*South China Morning Post* (2014) Hong Kong’s ‘tiniest flats ever’ go on sale for HK$2 million. 15 December.
