Introduction

Almost half a century ago, Henri Lefebvre in his book entitled *The Production of Space* discussed the appropriation and reappropriation of space, in which he defined the city as a place of revaluation or market value production. As examples for the elaboration of his point, Lefebvre cited the renewal of *Les Halles Centrales*, Paris, and the reworking of the selected leisure-oriented Mediterranean sites; highlighting that:

> all this seemingly non-productive expense is planned with the greatest care: centralized, organized, hierarchized, symbolized and programmed to the nth degree.

(Lefebvre 1991a: 59)

Comparing cities as conceptual places of wealth accumulation and conflicts, the Lefebvrian approach to socio-spatial theories and politics has enlightened ideas about the ‘right to the city’ and the ‘right to the oeuvre’, which are respectively associated with restricted access to created wealth and use value change (Lefebvre 1996: 34, 66, 158). Lefebvre’s notion of the ‘right to be different’ (1991a: 64, 205) was inclined, however, to reflect acts of neoliberal urbanism and their destructive consequences, producing ‘alienated’ urbanites and ‘alienated’ everyday life in different historical periods, urban contexts, and spatial scales. In citing Marx’s interpretation of the role of the state in the transformation of cities, Lefebvre’s analysis of the capitalist growth and crisis has implied a revolutionary concept of ‘citizenship’, or citizens’ rights when their rights could be restricted by productivist ideologies and developmentalism, with destructive consequences for everyday life (Lefebvre 1982; 2009).

The Lefebvrian critiques of modern capitalism fetishism and the state-implicated mode of production, together with his advocacy of: human-faced development instead of merely economic growth; the right to the city instead of alienation; the right to difference instead of state-imposed homogeneity or consumerism; and the ideal of *autogestion* (self-management of grassroots) instead of state power, have all become part of the theoretical basis for studies of urban politics (Harvey 2008: 2012).
What, then, are the implications of the Lefebvrian notion of the production of space, with reference to the right to the city in China’s modernist urbanism today? There is, indeed, a strong relevance. Drawing on the neoliberal approach adopted by the Chinese authorities in attempts to eliminate slum-like dwellings and upgrade property market values in China’s globalising cities, our analysis employs the Lefebvrian critique, which closely demonstrates the conflicts between the state-controlled spatial order and the sprawling and informal settlements of low-wage migrant dwellers in urban China. The analysis investigates the state’s attempts to reconcile its planning for growth with the peasant workers’ right to habitat and to inhabit. This area of concern resonates well with the Lefebvrian utopia of a new habitat policy, which addresses the interplay of:

- spatial (territorial) autogestion
- direct democracy and democratic control
- affirmation of the differences produced in and through that struggle taking place in the cities.

(Lefebvre 2009: 251)

In citing Lefebvrian urban theories, this chapter focuses on the right to the city in contemporary China which, under state and market-led urbanisation with a strong Chinese character, has rapidly developed into the world’s second largest economy. In this process of transformation, a clash between neoliberal urbanism and slum urbanism in urban China is reviewed, with Beijing offered as an example. It highlights the chronic socio-political injustice and spatial inequality, in terms of the hierarchisation of dwellings, and the opposition of formal and informal habitats. The differentiation in access to formal habitat, by locals and non-locals, has occurred within the paradigm of city image-making, developmental urbanism favoured by Chinese state authorities. Our analysis concludes with a visionary hope for a state-initiated transformation that will shift away from the less popular ‘GDPism’ towards a more people-oriented mode of the production of urban space. Ultimately, the welfare of the entire workforce, including peasant workers, will be considered on the basis of equal citizenship in the cities, in which their contribution will create collective wealth for the urban world. At this stage, nevertheless, peasant workers still face high levels of discrimination in spatial politics.

Spatial politics: developmentality versus right to habitat

From 1949 to 1978, the Chinese communist government adopted an anti-urban approach by restricting the size of the population of cities to be engaged in industrial production, public administration, and other services. The residency system (hukou) introduced in the mid-1950s was aimed at controlling the rural population’s ability to migrate to the cities, which were organised into danweis or work units, from the communes established in the rural sector. Free choice of workplace or residency, and of rural-urban or inter-city migration, was virtually forbidden during the period 1949 to 1978, until the rigid socialist conformity was dismantled by the reformist leader, Deng Xiaoping. Since this opening up and pro-market reforms, a new city-centred, export-oriented, and state-dominated urbanism mode has been introduced to China, which has witnessed an influx of surplus farm labour to the coastal provinces and primary cities as migrant workers offer their cheap labour to help build the urban economy. These people are considered sojourners rather than full citizens, as they are only given provisional residency permits (Chan 1994; Solinger 1999).

In terms of residence, the low occupational rewards of unskilled or low-skilled migrant workers have restricted them from moving into strategic and prime areas which fetch high land values and rentals. Instead, they are typically found in illegally built housing clusters in urban villages within the cities, and in the suburbs. China’s pro-growth developmental urbanism has
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sought to exploit the high-profit returns from urban land and other resources, which are seen as key national assets in wealth creation, as well as instruments to consolidate state authority and legitimise the reformist ruling communist party (Wallerstein 2005; Lin 2007). Lefebvre, in his Critique of Everyday Life (1991b), extended the Marxian notion of the alienation of labour to a cognitive form of every aspect of life associated with spectacular commodities in the modern world. This has created a false consciousness (‘mystification’) in the minds of workers, which deprives them of an objective vision in relation to their roles in the reproduction of labour. Accordingly, the ideological tenet of developmentalism has become subservient and dehumanised (1991b: 91), like the cogs in the great clockwork wheel of the state, which have been set in motion in the interests of rapid urban growth and national wealth accumulation.

Thus, the alienation of ordinary workers is not only economic, social, political, ideological, and philosophical; but also spatial, as space can be defined in terms of a reifying alienation which itself has become a commodity to be sold, in both wholesale and retail markets (Lefebvre 1991a: 50; 1991b: 249). When developmentalism and urbanism are combined, developmental urbanism is a novel form of urban development. Such development is characterised by a pro-growth orientation by state- and urban-led entrepreneurialism, with:

a strong relationship with modernist place and image making, and supported by sustainable spatial planning and design leading to a highly compact, highly vibrant and livable city environment.

(Wong and Liu 2016: 3)

Since the advent of tax sharing and land conveyance reforms between the Chinese central government and municipal governments in 1994, China’s emerging real estate market has employed city imaging practices aimed at enhancing national competition in the international marketplace, including in the area of financial services. In this respect, Fulong Wu (2005: 7–8) raised an interesting question: does the making of new urbanism in China, enriched by Western-style architectural motifs and transplanted cityscapes, such as gated communities, enclosed villas, golf communities, nightscape, and skyscrapers, reflect real globalisation? Wu suggested that this is more a sort of imagined globalisation, using global motifs to sell off local products, and an opportunity to give the pro-growth elite ‘the credibility that they are the builders of a vision of the good life’.

In elaborating the mirage effects (mystifications) which are comparable to those in the production of the unique space of Venice, Lefebvre (1991a: 76, 189) pointed out the illusion of a new life by including cityscapes in an aesthetic scenario to suit the tastes of people who have dominated the grand designs and projects. Whether city imaging is really as rational as the urbanists or planners claim, Lefebvre (1991a: 317) argued that:

The dominant discourse on space – describing what is seen by eyes affected by far more serious congenital defects than myopia or astigmatism – robs reality of meaning by dressing it in an ideological garb that does not appear as such, but instead gives the impression of being non-ideological (or else ‘beyond ideology’). These vestments, to be more specific, are those of aesthetics and aestheticism, of rationality and rationalism.

City imaging and eviction of socially weak groups

Legitimised within a developmentalist paradigm, city imaging has acted as a growth engine to attract increasingly mobile global investment, talent and tourism revenues, enhance the city’s
liveability and beautification, and further strengthen civic cohesiveness. China’s major cities have undergone development with megaprojects and property-led regeneration in prime locations. Such developments have included skyscrapers, magnificent squares, Economic Development Zones, high-tech parks, five-star hotels, villas, golf courses, and other entertainment centres. Looking at these areas of improvement and at the spectacular mega events in the cities, the negative aspects of commercial gentrification have been concealed in order for the developments to appear positive and constructive (He and Wu 2009).

This seemingly ‘rational’ spatial practice, however, has led to massive land grabs and the dispossession of many low-income residents in the inner cities and suburbs. Rhetorically disguising such activities as environmental improvements, Chinese local governments have promoted the re-imaging of their cities by commercial gentrification, land acquisition for renewal. There is denial of the claims of low-income residents for affordable housing and territorial rights, despite their protests against eviction (Hsing 2010; Wu 2016). Citing such acts that occurred in central London, New York, Delhi, Seoul, Mumbai, and Beijing, Harvey (2008: 34) referred to them as an ‘accumulation by dispossession’, characterised by ‘the mirror-image of capital absorption through urban redevelopment’. These acts have given rise to numerous conflicts between profit-making ventures via land revaluation and displacement of underprivileged low-income migrant tenants.

From ‘city as spectacle’ to ‘city as oeuvre’

In Lefebvre’s view, there were state-led hegemonic forces that had segregated urban space and alienated urbanites into different worlds where grassroots transgressed the state hegemony and fought to build a more just city. In this regard, Lefebvre (1991a: 23) wrote:

In this same space there are, however, other forces on the boil, because the rationality of the state, of its techniques, plans and programmes, provokes opposition. The violence of power is answered by the violence of subversion... State-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable... These seething forces are still capable of rattling the lid of the cauldron of the state and its space, for differences can never be totally quieted. Though defeated, they live on, and from time to time they begin fighting ferociously to reassert themselves and transform themselves through struggle.

A similar spatial opposition and struggle is observable in China’s metropolises today. In the modernist and image-building Chinese state, new urbanism is deemed to be a good way of satisfying the needs of capable consumers or property stakeholders (as gentrifiers); while slum-like urban villages (chengzhongcun) are treated as transitional landscapes with impending elimination, where the peri-urban peasants have built substandard informal houses for low-income earners. When the demolition of this informal housing begins, sharp land use conflicts arise between the state-dominated city-branding movement and the great need for low-rental areas. While new private estates have edged out low-income tenants, the informal habitats are replicated in ever more peripheral sites (Wu et al. 2013; Liu 2015). In this sense, the dispersion, segregation, and dispossession of low-income migrants can be decoded as the spatial consequences of ceaseless social contradictions and inequalities, dominated by the top-down strategic aims of the highest order, which is pro-growth oriented. These current state-initiated spatial practices in China are classified as ‘planning for growth’ (Wu 2015: 192), and demonstrate the limitations of planning in achieving a more sustainable and just urban future within the present context of state- and urban-led entrepreneurialism.
Arguably, this tremendous change and development in urban space has proven to be a very critical area for political control and grassroots struggle. Accordingly, Lefebvre (1991a: 416) again argued that the whole issue lies:

in space, on a worldwide scale, that each idea of ‘value’ acquires or loses its distinctiveness through confrontation with the other values and ideas that it encounters there. Moreover – and more importantly – groups, classes or fractions of classes cannot constitute themselves, or recognize one another, as ‘subjects’ unless they generate (or produce) a space.

Therefore, the notion of the appropriation of space is far more exigent than in his previous thesis, taking space as a mirror (Lefebvre 1991b). These oppositions and antagonisms were conceptualised in the famous Lefebvrian perceived-conceived-lived triad (in spatial terms: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces), wherein the:

‘lived experience’ (i.e., spaces of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’) is crushed, vanquished by what is ‘conceived of’ (i.e., dominant spaces and modes of production by planners, urbanists, bureaucracy.

(Lefebvre 1991a: 38–39: 51)

In his spatial triad, Lefebvre elaborated the two oppositional spaces – abstract space, which is produced and manipulated by the authorities as a logical system of power in the world of commodities – and the new differential space, as the ‘right to be different’, and the struggles to establish differences within the existing abstract space (Lefebvre 1991a: 53, 64). The developmental urbanism of Chinese character falls into the domain of the Lefebvrian abstract space, the most dominant force, which Lefebvre criticises for being: violent, illusory, political, and institutional. But why did Lefebvre call this kind of institutionalised space and its instrumental homogeneity an illusion? Lefebvre (1991a: 285) explained thus:

Its practical character vanishes and it is transformed in philosophical fashion into a kind of absolute. In face of this fetishized abstraction, ‘users’ spontaneously turn themselves, their presence, their ‘lived experience’ and their bodies into abstractions too. Fetishized abstract space thus gives rise to two practical abstractions: ‘users’ who cannot recognize themselves within it, and a thought which cannot conceive of adopting a critical stance towards it.

But how have the ‘contradictions of space’ compelled people into different lives and to be engaged in different modes of production? Lefebvre (1991a: 55) advocated that it was the outcomes of class struggle that have generated such differences, which are not intrinsic to the nature of economic growth itself. In the case of migrant tenants renting illegally built premises, such a ‘difference’ is rooted in the distinction between formality and informality. Slums, or slum-like housing without legal title, are typical informalities to be dealt with (Davis 2006), based on which urban dwellers (citadin) are deprived of the right to habitat as citizens and as users of multiple services, inclusive of those available in the city centre as a privileged place (Lefebvre 1996: 34).

Harvey (2008) shared the Lefebvrian notion of the right to the city beyond the range of city space, touching more on the citizen’s right to participate in the process of city building, and sharing a greater democratic control over the production and utilisation of the surplus value created. In summary, such struggles would bring a revolutionary new mode of production, whether gradual or sudden, moving away from ‘the city as a spectacle’ to the ‘city as an oeuvre’, to respond to people’s claim to ‘totality’ instead of being alienated or mystified by illusionary fetishism (Lefebvre 1995: 86).
The next section turns to the contention in Chinese metropolises between the state-led pro-market forces and the poor-image habitats of the low-income residents that are in conflict with the state’s city branding ambitions. We examine how developmental urbanism, as a typically top-down abstract space, has justified the exclusion of migrant workers in the urbanisation process in China recently.

**Right to the city in China’s urban space**

Unlike the spontaneous squatting behaviour in Latin America and South Asia, which is largely free from state control, urban space formation in China is characterised by the state’s artificial control of admission, which prevents rural non-local migrants from permanently and automatically settling in the cities where they work. Local peasants who live in the rural zones within the municipal boundary can only convert their residency status from rural to urban once their farms are formally urbanised and integrated into the municipality. In this rapid urbanising process, a broad range of dispossessed local residents, who were living in low-quality apartment blocks in the inner-city areas and the dilapidated work-unit compounds, have been displaced or relocated as their areas of residency are redeveloped to modernist norms.

In the present-day growth-driven city imaging and spatial-sectoral upgrading, a ‘permanent’ right to the city is conditional and selective. Welcomed social groups include: investors, those who possess a talent, property owners, and the traditional work-unit workers and their families, who are expected to best adapt and contribute to the neoliberal market forces and newly alienated but modernised city spaces (see Huang and Jiang 2009). Together with these groups, peri-urban peasants who are apparently disadvantaged but rightful rural property owners and holders of local residency are accepted and provided with government assistance and other benefits. Their right to ownership of private property is deemed by Lefebvre to be the ability to enjoy the same real rights as private individuals (Lefebvre 1982: 130). Such rights, which are supported by the Property Law of the People’s Republic of China and new regulations over property expropriation and compensation, made a decade ago, have marked a remarkable milestone in China’s legislative progress in rights recognition (Hess 2010). The rights of citizens are for those having an imaginary sovereignty (Lefebvre 1982: 130); those who are of rural origin, however, are denied.

Low-wage migrants’ access to shelter is predominantly dependent on illegitimate lease deals, whereby local landlords are their ‘patrons’ and migrant entrepreneurs are their agents. In the book *Strangers in the City* (Zhang 2001), a story is told about Zhejiangcun in the 1990s, which was once Beijing’s most famous migrant enclave, in which Wenzhou migrant entrepreneurs struggled to develop their own community and control over the key social spaces (residential areas, working sites, and market places). The Beijing government, however, took prompt action to eliminate the presence of the enclave. It was seen as an emerging informal and illegitimate social space. It was perceived by political authorities as a potential threat to state control, and a violation of the modernist norms of aestheticism and rationalism (Lefebvre 1991a: 317).

Urban space is produced as a result of the relationship between (re)production and domination, and its physical outcome falls under the Lefebvrian schema of ‘homogeneity – fragmentation – hierarchization’ (Lefebvre 2009: 212). By analogy, urban politics in transitional China are built on the opposing factors of centre and periphery. Here, the centre:

> exercises its control at all (organizational, administrative, juridical, fiscal, police, etc.) points of view over peripheries that are both dominated and broken apart… [and] link up the peripheries, coordinate them, and submit them to the global strategy of the State’

*(Lefebvre 2009: 215)*
As they are hierarchised at the ‘periphery’, unskilled and low-wage migrants are neither accepted nor given a chance to establish themselves, unless they enter the ‘centre’ as capable consumers or homeowners. In a material sense, city rights may include such basic necessities as decent housing, legalised residency status, and education services. However, in terms of the Lefebvrian notion of the right to the city, associated with urban space formation, city rights are considered to be people’s ability to exercise their ‘collective power over the process of urbanization’ in order to be included as an equal power, and to freely make and remake their cities for themselves (Harvey 2012: 4).

At the periphery of the Chinese metropolises, space is highly fragmented by a diversity of occupiers. It is common to see a division in villages similar to the situation in peri-urban Beijing, where half the villages have been expropriated and redeveloped into villas or gated communities, and the other half into substandard informal tenements for low-income earners. These low use values and informalities at the periphery, however, are expected to disappear as an inevitable result of developmental urbanism, which exerts its authority to homogenise the fragments scattered through space and finally establish an absolute primacy of exchange value (Lefebvre 1991a: 339). The elimination of urban villages therefore becomes the crux of the contradictions between local governments (dominant space with its repressive and assimilative capacity) and low-wage migrants (periphery as dominated space). How to grant the new centrality to the periphery (including everyday life and the lived space of inhabitants) is central to the grassroots practices to reclaim the residents’ rights to the city.

Transitional space for sojourners instead of full citizens

China’s reform and integration into the world market are characterised by large-scale mobilisation of its surplus farm labour and a massive release of land assets into the mainstream of capital accumulation (Harvey 2003: 149; Zhang 2004). This mobilisation and release has created a situation of ‘man’ being ‘in transition’, moving towards being a ‘total man’ crossing through alienation; in other words, this transitional man is ‘disalienating’ himself (Lefebvre 1991b: 66).

At the present post-reform historical juncture, the debate on the Chinese right to the city focuses on two major issues: the problematic lack of a proper residency status of migrants in the city; and the absorption of local urban and rural residents in the municipal areas when cities undergo renewal and expansion, respectively (Wang 2005; Hsing 2010; Liu et al. 2012). For the first issue, the hukou system, a residency card system, was innovatively reinvented in 2016 to be more inclusive and aims to better serve municipal interests (Xinhua News 2015). Residency control has continued to be harsh in China’s first-tier cities, however, where migrants are required to satisfy a five-year residency period, and to have made social security contributions and paid taxes in order to qualify for subsidised public housing or property purchase in the host cities. Additionally, migrants’ children are admissible only to inferior local schools and are barred from participating in local college entrance examinations. This implies that large numbers of migrant workers will be forced to continue to seek cheap informal habitats. The second issue impacts local citizens who are affected by renewals and the urbanisation of rural zones. These people have witnessed a similar conflict-laden ‘transition’ of their right to the city, which lies in closely-negotiated power relations with the state authority. Such relations are being dealt with by the state on two fronts: with inner-city residents over their resistance to demolition and eviction; and with local peasants over their claims to land value gains.
Conclusions

The Lefebvrian catchphrases of the right to the city and the urban revolution (1991: 147–159; 2003) have endured as visionary democratic ideals. They have even evoked participatory and collaborative approaches towards city planning in the Global South (Esther 2010). In the eyes of the modernising state and developmental cadres of China today, however, slum urbanism is seen as a form of ‘subversion’ and an ‘uncivilised’ part of the city (Lefebvre 1991a). Although pro-growth measures since the 1980s have attracted over 200 million rural migrant workers into Chinese cities, the largescale spread of informal settlements has been avoided as a result of absolutely state-controlled land ownership, residency control, and the state and local authorities’ firm belief in city image building. In particular, developmental urbanism is a novel form of growth-led pathway which places a strong emphasis on modernism and image making, supported by sustainable spatial planning and design concepts aimed at eventually building a long-term liveable and slum-free city environment (Wong and Liu 2016). In this urban-led pro-growth paradigm, developmentalism has created two differentiated populations administered under local hukou status and non-hukou status. They exist in differently regulated spaces of tradeable urban land and untradeable rural land, as well as in the space situated in between and referred to as urban villages (chengzhongcun). This space is a ‘transitional’ space for the ‘transitional man’, who is ‘alienated’ in the urbanisation process, but trying to ‘disalienate’ himself towards a ‘total man’ (Lefebvre 1991b: 66, 90).

Backed by an improved economy and as a developmental state, there is now an awareness in China of the social conflicts arising from the widening gaps. As a result, China is becoming more responsive to migrants’ misfortune by granting them access to more public services and welfare, albeit in a progressive manner. By virtue of the hukou reform, issued by the State Council since 2014, a more people-oriented development path under a ‘new urbanisation model’ is being implemented during China’s 13th Five Year Plan (2016–2020). During this period, up to 100 million rural migrants, and regular residents from other regions, will be issued local residency permits in their host cities, which will provide the basic welfare and services according to their financial capacity (State Council 2014). These increased rights for migrants are deemed the ‘Six Services and Seven Advantages’ in an innovative residency card system which has, since 2016, begun to replace the present segregative agricultural and non-agricultural hukou system (Xinhua News 2015). Access to affordable housing, however, has not been included as a requisite right of these migrants. Easily removed by a developmental regime, the migrant workers are largely too disorganised to act through their collective claims and lack recognition as formal and localised actors in the use of city space (Wong and Liu 2016).

Until recently, providing migrants with a decent home has been a challenge for local governments, especially for the first-tier ‘paradigm cities’, characterised by their world-class image buildings and high-value property developments (Huang and Tao 2015). The fear of the rising collective strength of migrant enclaves is another driving factor towards the elimination of the spatial grouping of low-end migrants. What has previously occurred in the low-income concentrations of the French suburban towns or the inner cities of American major cities, which are characterised by a vicious circle of poverty and high rates of crime and riot, has provided a further justification for a ‘clear up’ instead of a ‘beef up’ (Merrifield and Swyngedouw 1996). If the spatial formation of migrants is not allowed, a full usage of places for a renewed urban life, inclusive of a self-management scheme, would not be permitted (Lefebvre 1991a: 416).

China’s reformist model aims to ultimately remove discrimination and injustice towards the identity of migrant workers and extend full rights and equal welfare to all citizens. Preference will be given to those who have resided in the city for a longer period, and to those people who...
possess a higher calibre of employability and job adaptability. The grading system converting local hukou to migrants has been introduced in Shanghai and Beijing, wherein higher points are given to investors, overseas trained professionals, highly educated workers, and those hired by high-tech or large-scale enterprises. Understandably, by virtue of their lowest ranking in the queue, unskilled and poorly educated migrant workers may have to wait a long time for full rights to decent housing and higher quality public services. Apart from the conversion of more qualified migrants to full citizens, a new type of urban habitat politics should be constructed to entail equity-based development instead of growth; the right to the city instead of alienation or dispossession; and the ‘right to the difference’ instead of state-imposed homogeneity or consumerism.

**Funding statement**

This research is supported by the Humanity and Social Science Youth Foundation of the Ministry of Education of China (Grant Number: 16YJCZH060).

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‘Right to the city’ vs neoliberal urbanism


