Gentrification in Chinese Cities? Speaking to the Context-versus-Concept Debate in Regional Terms

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Abstract
Taking as its starting point a recent call for greater attention to context in urban research, this article is pitched within the dichotomous dialogue between concept and context. It uses this dialogue as a springboard to the generation of ideas around potential gains from a regional comparative urbanism. The article reviews how gentrification has been applied in China and considers alternatives, highlighting difficulties inherent in attempts to articulate conceptualizations that are not North-centric. It identifies various contextual settings for urban China research, and examines in particular the widespread commercialized restructuring of city-centre leisure districts, referring as an illustration to one such network of streets in a provincial Chinese city. Drawing of parallels with cases elsewhere in East Asia, the article argues that many of the constitutive elements of gentrification are present and that the universalizing nature of the concept lends itself to 'accessible' engagement. It suggests, however, that observations stemming from grounded work can help create a regional vocabulary that adds contextual depth to higher-order concepts like gentrification, potentially providing a more contextually rich interpretive handle for comparative research. The article concludes by suggesting that the promise for theory-making lies in the debate itself, between contextual embeddedness and conceptual engagement.

Introduction: Universalizing concept against orientalizing context
Debate over the conceptual validity of applying gentrification to East Asian cities was sparked by Ley and Teo (2013) in an article in which they argued for the relevance of the gentrification concept to Hong Kong despite what they appeared to suggest was the perverse and even wilful absence of the term from academic and newspaper commentaries. A few years later Cartier and fellow authors wrote a number of ripostes in a forum published in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, including the charge that Ley and Teo had "marginaliz[ed] … existing critical work" and "fail[ed] to identify scholarship on urban redevelopment in Hong Kong and its significance while promoting gentrification as a general approach" (Cartier 2017, 476 and 470). They argued that: "[gentrification] is a highly specific piece of language yet has not been subject to relativist assessment in the urban studies field" (Cartier 2017, 468); that "at the heart of the debate over gentrification is a changing meaning and the absence of a precise, anchoring empirical reference" (Lui 2017, 480); and, most damningly, that "pressure to reframe analysis in terms of gentrification reinforces Anglo-American academic hegemony" (Smart and Smart 2017, 518). They and other contributors combined their criticism of the unqualified use of gentrification as an explanatory concept with a call for a more context-based theory-making. Their arguments echoed Tang's separate, rousing attack on "random conceptual indigenisation," of which he saw gentrification as a prime example (2014: 49).

These and other similar articles can be seen both as a push for greater contextualization and less resort to North-centric theory, but also as a direct attack on the stretching of concepts, especially that of gentrification (Cartier 2017; Mossberger and Stokes 2001; Sartori 1970).[1] In

this article, we refer to events in a small Chinese city as a building block on which we construct a dialogue and search for a meeting point between concept and context, and thus establish a balance between global relevance and local embeddedness (Robinson, 2016b; Teo 2023). This, for reasons we set out below, works best at the regional scale, and it is in the foregrounding of the region that our principal contribution to debates about conceptualizations of the urban lies.

We use the concept of gentrification as a sounding board, setting it alongside more contextually grounded concepts. As Cartier and fellow authors have indicated, applying gentrification in extra-Western contexts raises a number of concerns. These have been further elaborated as "the recreation of a (conceptual) periphery in the image of a centre (of existing concepts)" (McFarlane 2010, 734) and the "obscur[ing of] a more contextually relevant understanding of urban inequality" (Ren 2015, 342). On the other hand, contextual embeddedness without conceptual engagement, while providing historical validity, can lead to exceptionalist interpretations, talking to oneself, and failing to provide explanatory power (Pow 2012). The task is to sail between the contrasting dangers of concepts without difference (over-stretched North-centric concepts) and difference without concepts (contextual richness with no external reference), while acknowledging that the (global) North and its Other are highly uneven ontological terrains (Robinson 2016b).

The route we chart between concept and context is tentative, but we believe it helps resolve dichotomies between the need for contextual embeddedness and the search for conceptual engagement. We advocate urban study at the contextual scale of the region as a means of generating material for comparative conceptual insights. Context is spatial as well as temporal, and we see the regional scale as an appropriate element in bringing concept and context together as a narrative and heuristic force. The regional scale allows for a pooling of experiences across territories bearing at least some commonalities, and serves therefore as a point of intersection between the global flow of ideas and this pooled assembly of grounded settings.

'Region' is a much debated concept – a socially constructed and therefore contested imaginary (Tuvikene 2016). The dangers of a regionally based context-heavy comparative urbanism are several. It is necessary to guard both against cultural determinism and against orientalizing tendencies to use an aestheticized version of the past (Waley 2016). Equally, the exercise serves little purpose if region is used as a new and enlarged form of exceptionalism (Ren and Luger 2014; Shin 2019). We acknowledge the existence of various epistemological approaches to the term and the ambiguous nature of 'region' (Jones and Paasi 2013), but rather than parse these approaches and the scales at which they can operate, we here sidestep debate and adopt an unproblematized reading of the East Asian region to refer to China and Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan, focusing on their cities.

Despite its contested nature, the regional scale enables comparative work to be undertaken on contextual ground in which some political, economic, and cultural elements are shared (Tuvikene 2016). This in turn enables a more fine-grained comparative analysis, in which points of similarity and difference are more sharply etched (Waley 2012). To illustrate the conceptual issues around gentrification with which this article grapples, we refer to ongoing research in Tunxi, a small but important urban settlement in the south of Anhui Province, about 400 kilometres west of Shanghai. Events in Tunxi can be pitched against developments elsewhere in China, and these in turn can be compared with occurrences in East Asia (Wu 2016a). This accumulation of evidence provides an extended layer of context facilitating clearer conceptual intervention. Working through Robinson's observation that use of a case study is "perhaps the most useful comparative tactic in urban studies" (2016b, 20), we can both generate concepts from below by identifying commonalities across a reasonably flat contextual plain and at the same time test the case against existing conceptual frameworks such as gentrification (Teo 2023).

This article therefore intervenes in two deeply intertwined debates: the first concerns the applicability and utility of the concept of gentrification and its engagement (or lack of it) with diverse local contexts; the second, as an upshot of the first, the possibilities for conceptualizing from outside 'the West/global North'. Conceptualizing from anywhere can be seen as one of the ultimate aims of comparative urbanism. However, vital though these attempts are, they are dogged by issues of language – English from anywhere? – and behind that by the more persistent problem of epistemological and institutional hegemonic power, which we return to in the conclusion.

Can theory be 'made in/from China', even from small provincial cities? Or, more specifically, to borrow Ren's words (2015, 342), "How can research on urban China inform an understanding of … 'Urbanism', with a capital 'U'"? If the answer lies in providing a fuller contextual embeddedness, it is necessary to confront the many potential contextual starting points for comparative urban research involving China: (post-)reformist, socialist-Maoist, pre-1949. As a generator of theory, China poses some specific challenges because it falls outside easy categorization – is it, for example, post-socialist or market socialist or state capitalist (Wu et al. 2024)?. This is tricky also because of China's size and diversity of practice, a hotbed of pilot studies, recalcitrant local authorities and exceptionalism, even if Xi Jinping's firm grip on power levers has worked to minimize local diversity. It is challenging yet potentially rewarding. After all, if the theory-making power of the Western academic and intellectual edifice cannot be challenged from China, then from where can it be?

At a broader level, various tactics have been adopted to unsettle and shift theoretical moorings in order to move away from concepts such as gentrification seen to be rooted in Western/global North settings. Ong (2011, 11) has applied the concept of "worlding practices", in which new models and solidarities, to use her terms, grow out of the metropoles of Asia. This is partly effected through inter-referencing, which "refers to practices of citation, allusion, aspiration, comparison, and competition" (2011, 17). Ghertner (2011) refers to "rule by aesthetics" to define the way in which a global aesthetic has been used to effect slum clearance and urban restructuring in Delhi. Oakes (2013) and Pow (20118) too have placed aesthetics at the centre of their understanding of the drivers of urban change in China. For them, an aesthetic governmentality permeates Chinese urbanism. Others have adopted conceptual tactics with different emphases: urban informality (McFarlane 2012; Roy and AlSayyad 2003), speculative urbanism (Goldman 2011; Leitner and Sheppard 2023), value grabbing and livelihood dispossession (Potter and Labbé 2021), amongst others. Finally, some authors have preferred what they see as less conceptually laden terms such as urban redevelopment and urban renewal in order to let the work on the ground do the talking (Smart and Smart 2017), but no term is neutral.

Material on Tunxi is derived from interviews with 12 local government officials, including senior members of the company overseeing the project, seconded from local government, as well as planners and housing officials working for both Tunxi District Government and Huangshan City Government. In addition, we interviewed 15 displaced local residents and 25 displaced restaurant owners and storekeepers, who were identified through a conventional snowball approach. The interviews were conducted during numerous visits starting in 2016, finishing with final follow-up visits in May and December 2023. Much of the data comes from 18 interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with business owners and officials from the city and district governments, including in particular the seconded officials in charge of the project.

Our article takes the reader on the following itinerary. We proceed with a review of the conceptual territory within which gentrification has been deployed in China, referencing some of the difficulties that occur. We then consider the fields that a more deeply contextualized reading of urban change in China can traverse, emphasizing in particular the widespread

conversion of old city centre housing into tourism-led commercialized leisure districts. We evidence this by providing an account of how these processes play themselves out in Tunxi. In the last substantive section we set this in the context of similar developments in other parts of East Asia, arguing that embeddedness in this regional context augments the potential for a fruitful engagement with the concept of gentrification.

Universalizing concepts? Looking for gentrification in China

Gentrification has frequently been applied as a heuristic for change in urban China, eventually occasioning the critical appraisals we have already noted. These issues relate back to gentrification's 'double bind' – criticized for being either spatially and temporally confined or stretched beyond significance (Shin et al. 2016; Potter and Cruz 2021). Knieriem's recent intervention, however, provides a different and possibly more convincing approach, arguing that gentrification's shifting meanings make it hard to grasp as a phenomenon, adding that "the phenomenon changes as a result of the grasping" (2023, 18). This section takes the reader through an examination of the ways in which gentrification has been applied as a concept in China. It then moves out of the gentrification box to ask about other conceptual lenses that have been used to interpret urban change, concluding with an allusion to the difficulties involved in building a conceptual framework from China's historical terrain.

Understandings of gentrification have developed through various waves, several of which have special resonance in East Asia (He 2019; Sigler and Wachsmuth 2020). One of these has been to recognize the leading role of the state as promoter and executor of projects that cause gentrification (Hackworth, 2002). This is the neoliberal state that pursues policies of commodification, marketization, and privatization in close alliance with leading corporations. Another relates to new-build gentrification (Davidson and Lees, 2005; Lützeler, 2008). Gentrification, it is argued, not only involves conversion of old buildings but also the construction of new condominiums in place of existing housing for low-income populations. Both these insights resonate with developments in Chinese cities over the last few decades (He, 2019). Displacement of existing users by others with better resources is therefore taken as a central element in gentrification in China, and it comes alongside a number of other processes: place commodification, the extraction of profit from a rent gap, and evidence of social injustice (Lees et al. 2016). All four of these elements have been applied in China and elsewhere in East Asia. Equally, however, they have been debated and contradicted, both individually and as an interpretive whole.

That notwithstanding, much research on urban restructuring in China is written up in terms of gentrification, far more than can be done justice to through a brief summary here. The mainstream tendency in the urban studies literature – but not among area specialists – has been to relate urban restructuring in China to the workings of market-led forces directed by the state: to gentrifying forces contained within and deployed by the forces of state entrepreneurialism (Wu 2018). Already in 1997, Wu was writing of "the emergence of gentrified communities [as] one manifestation of the reshaping of social areas. Gentrification here refers to the replacement of original residents by new wealthier buyers of commercial housing through redevelopment of central areas" (Wu 1997, 658). Wu's research and that of He has retained gentrification as a central concept, applying it both to the reconstruction of the inner city for the benefit of wealthy new residents and to the culture-infused commercial gentrification of Xintiandi and surrounding areas in central Shanghai (He 2007; He and Wu 2007). Their emphasis, like that of many other writers, has been on the role of the state and its ties to property-led redevelopment, their argument, that the state utilizes its monopolistic powers over urban land to manipulate property prices so as to extract maximum benefit.

Academic research on urban China adopts at least four different levels of engagement with gentrification as an explanatory concept. In the first place, much work is built around

gentrification but does not engage in critical debate over its relevance (Shin 2016; Wu and Wang 2017; Zhang 2017a). For example, the recent policy shift toward micro-regeneration (*wei zaigao*) projects with their attention to the livelihood of residents in more sensitively regenerated neighbourhoods has elicited widespread discussion over its gentrification impact (Wu, Zhang, and Liu 2022; Teo 2024). Has it succeeded in renewing neighbourhoods without occasioning gentrification, writers ask (Zhu and Ye 2024). They do not, however, question the applicability of the concept to this apparently new policy approach. Secondly, researchers argue that in China gentrification differs in certain revelatory ways from 'the West'. The work of He and Wu cited above follows this approach, as does a welter of subsequent research (Wu 2016b; Wu et al. 2016; He 2019; Kan 2020).

Thirdly, some writers warn against an unthinking application of gentrification. Yawei Zhao (2019), for example, writing in the context of a rural setting, argues that references to gentrification risk obscuring the active involvement of some local villagers in the process of profit extraction from tourism resources (Teo 2024). Others, such as Su (2015), argue that gentrification in itself is a concept of insufficient breadth to encompass the extent of urban change in China, while Tomba (2017) sees gentrification as part of a broader party-state urbanization project to transform Chinese society. Finally, and only rarely, writers stand back and attempt a critical evaluation of the relevance of gentrification to China. Among those who do, Ren questions the appropriateness of the concept when applied in a Chinese context (2015, 340). She warns of the dangers of envisioning a gentrification "with Chinese characteristics" while suggesting that applying gentrification "limits the possibility for developing new theoretical insights".

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that much work on contemporary urban China is cast in terms that do not make reference to gentrification. Ironically, however, many researchers nonetheless use conceptual frameworks taken from a North-centric copybook – for example, right to the city (Qian and He 2012), gated community (Pow 2007), place branding (Yawei Zhao 2015), and growth coalition (Wu and Waley 2018). Only occasionally does the reader come across new and imaginatively different conceptual constructs such as Zhang's bulldozer urbanism (Zhang 2015). More often, however, the monumental changes that have overtaken Chinese cities are presented in terms that run the risk – as Ren (2015) has argued for gentrification – of failing to take into account specificities of the Chinese context.

Orientalizing contexts? Temporal settings for Tunxi and China's changing cities
As Cartier and her fellow contributors to the *IJURR* forum argue, Chinese cities need to be studied and understood in their historical context (Cartier 2017); without such an understanding, how, it might be argued, is one to make sense of Chinese phenomena such the administrative-territorial hierarchy, villages-in-the-city (*chengzhongcun* 城中村), shantytowns (*penghuqu* 棚户区), or gated communities (*shequ* 社区)? There are, however, not one but various contexts in which to set a study of contemporary urban China. One relevant context can be found in the Maoist era and its neglect of housing and other consumption needs; a second context, in the reform era of high unfettered growth (from the early 1980s to around 2010 to 2015) with its the state-led policies and programmes; and a third, the contemporary era, characterized by the 'restoration' of commercial city-centre districts, latterly to some extent aligned with an emphasis on small-scale projects supposedly more attuned to the needs of residents (Ling and Wang 2024; State Council 2021). These are not mutually exclusive contexts, but are better seen as a spatial palimpsest in which the present-day city forms the ground on which these developments are played out. Tunxi's Old Street and Riverfront speak to several of these historical contexts. This article directs its focus in particular to the third layer of this contextual palimpsest and reflects on certain elements of the 'traditional' urban landscape that figure centrally in contemporary attempts to 'orientalize' Chinese cities, in other words, to root them

in what Jou et al. (2016, 570) have referred to as a commodified "cultural and historical heritage" (see also Waley 2016).

Tunxi is the main urban settlement (officially an urban district) within the prefecture-level city of Huangshan, to which millions of tourists flock each year, making it one of China's most popular tourist destinations. They come to enjoy Huangshan's celebrated granite mountain peaks, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Nearly all of them arrive from the relatively close population centres of the Yangtze delta, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Suzhou, and others (Figure 1). They come by high-speed train and then travel by coach northwards to the peaks, many of them ignoring Tunxi to the south of the station. This situation had, in the view of officials, exacerbated a state of neglect and slow economic decline in Tunxi, which the renovation project sought to reverse.

-- Figure 1 about here –

Until 1987, the prefecture was called Huizhou, a name that was – and still is – known throughout China for its cultural and gastronomic associations, with Tunxi as its commercial centre (Xie and Heath 2019; Chen et al 2024). Standing at the confluence of the Xin'an River and one of its tributaries, the old part of Tunxi is built around the Riverfront (*binjiang* 滨江) and a pedestrianized commercial thoroughfare (*laojie* 老街) that runs for about 1.2 kilometres parallel to and just behind the river. This 'Old Street' is lined by shop fronts, many of them built in distinctive Huizhou style, and is now one of China's designated historic cultural streets (*zhongguo lishi wenhua mingjie* 中国历史文化名街) along with other famous examples such as Guozijian Street in Beijing and Pingjiang Road in Suzhou (Xie and Heath 2019). Old Street and the Riverfront are linked by a number of transversal side streets (Figure 2). These form the sort of nexus of commercial streets that can be found in the centre of so many Chinese cities whether large or small, and beyond in cities like Taipei and Singapore.

-- Figure 2 about here --

Tunxi is a small settlement by Chinese standards, with a resident population of 245,000 in 2019, located in Anhui Province's poorest prefecture-level city. Local government has long attempted to attract more visitors to Tunxi as well as to the mountains. But its attempts have been criticized for an over-emphasis on hotels and car parking and for excessive commercialization while leaving the buildings behind Old Street to decay. It was in this context that the city and district governments decided to take action. The project they devised involved the demolition of backstreet housing, and the 'restoration' of a traditional waterfront along the Xin'an River (Figure 3). The Riverfront buildings had been built, for the main part, in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; they were cheaply built but functional. Apart from a few that were restored, they have been replaced by 'traditional' Huizhou-style buildings. These new 'old' buildings house local, national, and international bars, inns, and eating places, and look out towards steps, a stage, and a new 'port,' designed to replicate the wharves of historical Huizhou.

-- Figure 3 about here --

The project, which was announced in 2015 and was completed in 2023 covered an area of 4.3 hectares and, after a significant overrun, cost about 1 billion yuan (almost US$150 million), funds that came from district and city governments and from bank loans, as well as from a central government redevelopment scheme. The project was led by the Huangshan and Tunxi governments, which, following normal procedure, created an arms-length urban investment and development company, known for short as Wenlü, to oversee the project. Wenlü then formed a joint venture with Yitian, a prominent private company specializing in tourism-led urban redevelopment projects. Yitian won the right to develop cleared land, most of which lies on land encompassing the Riverfront and Old Street (Figure 4).

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How does Tunxi relate to a contextualization of China's urban development? Here we examine the reconstruction of Tunxi's historical centre in terms of the three historical phases

sketched out below, relating local developments to a broader pan-China picture in order to provide a richer contextual setting.

In the first place, much of Tunxi's urban tissue reflected the neglect experienced generally in Chinese cities during the Maoist era and the attempts, especially during the early high-growth years, to build things up quickly. The houses behind Old Street had remained outside the embrace of the state and were in poor repair, prime examples of the sort of low-lying often privately owned housing that has been demolished in Chinese cities to make way, in many cases, for expensive high-rise apartment blocks. While most state employees were frugally housed in work-place compounds (*danwei*), another legacy of the Maoist period, other urban residents lived in ramshackle housing often without clear title to ownership. This neglect of housing and consumption more generally stemmed from the prioritization of industrial production, expropriation of rural produce, and control of population movement, all strongly influenced by Soviet state planning norms (Chan and Wei 2019). Residual non-*danwei* housing, much of it in poor condition, has tended to be taken by the state as part of urban 'improvement' projects (Shin 2016). Having 'at its disposal' such large swathes of inner city land greatly facilitated the state's restructuring of Chinese cities. When industrial facilities were moved out of inner urban areas, the land on which they had stood was generally converted to housing, and very often to high-cost high-rise housing, to the ultimate profit of the local governments and state-owned enterprises who owned the land, as well as private property-development companies (Wu 2018).

Secondly, there are elements of the Tunxi project that reflect reform-period policies and practices. The rapid provision of basic housing was followed later by a more orderly approach, including the promotion of urban restructuring through specific government programmes. In this case it is the central government's Shantytown Redevelopment Scheme (*penghuqu gaizao* 棚户区改造) that has part-funded the work to demolish their houses and resettle Tunxi residents. This scheme is only a recent instance of a number of national and local government programmes that have characterized the reform period. Among others are the Shanghai 365 Project and the Redevelopment of the Three Olds (*sanjiu gaizao* 三旧改造) programme (He 2019; Shao 2013). Indeed, reform-era urban restructuring in China can be seen as being 'programme-guided', 'project-led' and associated with prestige events such as the Beijing Olympics held in 2008 and the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010. These programmes, as so much of urban life in the reform era, have involved the controversial and sometimes violent process known as *chaiqian* 拆迁, *chai* meaning 'demolish' and *qian* 'move' (Smith 2020). This was the everyday context of urban restructuring in China for some decades, and to some extent remains so in the 2020s.

The third contextual phase, with its focus on the restoration of city-centre leisure districts (discussed below), dovetails significantly with the earlier high-growth-focused era. Thus, while compensation terms have tended to improve, with more cash on offer in compensation, the element of coercion often remains present. Anomalous outcomes abound, and many schemes led to a disinheritance of local people from their accustomed life-spaces, where they benefitted from proximity to neighbours and superior services (He et al. 2020; Zhang 2017a). The picture, however, is a mitigated one. Some residents express satisfaction at being moved into modern apartments (Tian et al. 2017). Others use a host of strategies to wring maximum compensation out of the authorities during these processes (Wang et al. 2017). Still others have benefitted considerably from urban development, although they tend to be former farmers rather than urban residents (Yimin Zhao 2018).

The Tunxi project covers the old city centre and reveals elements of both the second, high-growth era and the third, traditional 'restoration' phase. A total of 116 residents and 48 restaurant and store keepers were moved out as part of the project; they were 'offered' cash compensation ranging from 1.2 million to 1.5 million yuan, based on the size of their house

and the number of family members. They were encouraged to use the compensation to buy an apartment in newly built compounds with government-listed discounts, but these compounds were located some 15 kilometres from the city centre, near the high-speed train station. This has occasioned habitual tensions (Wang and Aoki 2019). We heard on repeated occasions a similar refrain: the compensation was too little and the new dwelling consequently too small; they were far from the high-quality city-centre infrastructure that most Chinese urban residents cherish; and they were forcibly deprived of the cultural roots and social status attached to living in an older city-centre house (interviews, May and December 2023).

Unhappiness figured prominently among restauranteurs and shopkeepers along the Riverfront. They had either to close their businesses or find new storefronts to start again. Most of them rented their premises and had weak negotiating positions when faced with displacement. Another specific grievance was felt by homeowners who saw their homes being demolished while buildings owned by local government were restored. The renovated buildings were then rented out to private investors to be used as a business for profit. Private commercial interests benefitted, with support from government, but the state too stood to profit from increased revenue through raised rents and increased tourist numbers – a form, it might be argued, of rent gap extraction.

This third contextual phase, driven by a greater policy focus on historical referents, links the present back to a reading of the pre-1949 past, characterized by a pastiche of architectural styles, used to bring commercial animation to certain older parts of city centres in what might be called an act of planned orientalization (Waley 2016). Tunxi Old Street and the Riverfront illustrate well the principal characteristics of these city centre 'restoration' projects: the state plays the leading role closely allied to private business, and it pursues a profit-driven process entailing the mass dislocation of local residents and small businesses. These are elements that play out widely across China.

Indeed, a striking feature of contemporary Chinese cities is the way that a historical aesthetic has been created through an alliance of party-state and commercial interests. This has been accomplished both by creating project-specific state-owned enterprises, as in Tunxi, and by forging alliances with private capital. The coordinating and scripting of this aesthetic has been undertaken through strict control exercised by Wenlü, the state-owned company overseeing the project. A senior Wenlü official whom we interviewed noted that there were no formal written rules. Strong controls were nevertheless in place, he assured us. These were two-pronged: firstly, shops must retain their traditional architectural features, including wooden embellishments; and secondly, shops had to meet a quality threshold, meaning that those selling daily consumption items were not allowed, nor were shops and restaurants that failed to reflect Huizhou culture. Ironically, however, he also told us that he and his colleagues were searching for domestic and international chain stores to fill the remaining Riverfront vacancies alongside (interview, 5 May 2023).

Xintiandi is the earliest and most celebrated example of orientalized commercial leisure districts (He and Wu 2005). Xintiandi's apparent success made it a template and a frequently copied regeneration model in other cities. The number of 'restoration' projects that share features in common with metropolitan Xintiandi and provincial Tunxi is legion, from Qianmen in Beijing to Laochengnan in Nanjing to Yujie in Hangzhou (Zhang 2013; Chen et al. 2019; Xie and Heath 2019). They are commonplace in all Chinese cities, large and small. They tend to have a standard form of organization, standard set of aims, and standard priorities and approach to design. They normally involve one or several urban investment and development companies, owned by the local state, which undertake some or all of the required demolition, resettlement and (re-)construction work (Jiang and Waley 2020). In keeping with the economic logic of these projects, the promotion of tourism and thus of domestic demand is an intrinsic priority.

These projects have given rise to considerable controversy. This has gravitated both around the means and aims of conservation – around issues of authenticity and presentation – and around the social consequences in terms of displacement and marginalization (Wang 2012). In this way, 'traditional' (that is, pre-1949) elements drawn from the built environment of Chinese cities are used as tools in projects to regenerate city centres.

Many of the developments in Tunxi, mirroring those in other parts of China, resonate closely with the central precepts of gentrification. Residents are displaced to peripheral parts of the city, with no choice over the location of their destination living quarters, thus generating a deep sense of social injustice. Tunxi Old Street and surrounding districts, including the Riverfront, are the subject of a place-commodification process and are rebuilt along the lines of an imagined (if not quite imaginary) precursor, giving rise, as suggested above, to a rent gap.

The above account has been cast in terms that lend themselves to a gentrification-inflected analysis. The question is, however, to what extent this obscures the contextual connectivities that have been outlined above. Do the specificities surrounding the role of the party-state lose their salience? Does the nature of a Chinese policy reading of 'shanty town' become excessively generalized? Where in this account does the *hukou* residence permit system sit? Much else too that is distinctive to the Chinese setting might be at risk of being obscured if gentrification is applied as a conceptual straitjacket. Perhaps, then, a more nuanced conceptual framework better reflects this commercialized rewriting of city centres drawing on a 'traditional' iconography of the built environment.

Orientalizing contexts? Regional settings for China's changing cities
This article grapples with the issue of how to understand urban change in China through a conceptual interpretation leveraged through a knowledge of context. We argue that a promising step in this direction is to place Chinese cities within their regional setting in order to establish wider points of contextual commonality. In this way, we situate Chinese cities within a lively and by now longstanding discussion around the mutual inter-referencing relationships among Asian cities, distinct from 'Western/Northern' influences (Ong 2011; Bunnell 2013).

Attempting to establish conceptual intra-regional engagement involves identification of salient characteristics and following on from that, of commonalities. It is our contention here that, regardless of how one references them, the cities of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan share a number of characteristics with Chinese cities. Principal among these is the active involvement of large corporations and state developers in exploiting urban capital (Lee 2018; Shatkin 2014; Shin and Kim 2016). Corporations are often state-owned, as in China, or enjoy close ties with the state, as in Japan and South Korea, and they have sizeable chunks of readily available capital invested in property (Jiang and Waley 2020). Shatkin (2016) has referred to this as a "real estate turn" in East Asian urban politics. The property-driven capital growth and urban expansion in these territories has been accompanied by state policies of infrastructure construction. McCormack (2002) called Japan a construction state, but the designation might equally be applied to China and South Korea, thus providing a foundation for a distinctive conceptual framework for East Asian cities (Doucette and Park 2018).

Such capital-fuelled and state-sanctioned urban restructuring might be seen as an indication, or at the very least a harbinger, of gentrification. While the activities of individual property owners and corporations are also motive forces in these developments (Lee 2018; Ning and Chang 2022), state policies, often in pursuit of 'global city' status (Huang 2015; Waley 2007; Wu and Keil 2020), figure prominently too, and have been seen as agents of forms of rent gap exploitation. This has been posited for Tokyo (Kidokoro et al. 2023) as well as for parts of Seoul and Taipei, and has been often put forward as relevant to the Chinese case (Huang 2015; Shin and Kim 2016; Wu and Waley 2018). Much of this restructuring has taken the form of conversion to high-rise buildings, and has led to the removal of many residents and

their places of employment, often 'traditional' and small scale, and bears all the hallmarks of the displacement that most writers see as central to gentrification processes (Lützeler 2008). That there is an injustice involved is highlighted by a number of writers (Shin and Kim 2016; Zhang 2017b).

The aestheticized urbanism of Tunxi, writ large in countless other Chinese cities, represents the sort of commodification of place that forms a central component of gentrification (González Martínez 2016). The Chinese experience can be inter-referenced with instances from Taipei, Seoul, and Tokyo, as well as Singapore. In Taipei, one of the main streets in the old city centre, Dihua Street, has been refashioned in an assertion of Taiwanese identity (Tan and Waley 2006). Here, a creative economy was inserted into the provision of an approved aesthetic makeover leading to displacement of longstanding businesses and residents (Liu 2016). Other parts of Taipei too present a commodified (re-)construction of a historical imaginary (Jou et al. 2016). In Seoul, Bukchon, a district containing traditional Korean houses, has been the subject of valorization activities by individual speculators, property companies, and large corporations tapping into the district's distinctive traditional cultural patina to open boutiques and hospitality outlets (Jeon 2021). The historical townscape has been appropriated for money-making purposes.

The presumption that these trends should be understood in terms of gentrification has been challenged. For example, various writers have taken issue with a picture of ubiquitous social injustice resulting from urban redevelopment. In China, numerous people benefit from redevelopment projects, even as others lose out (Chen and Zhang 2021; Yimin Zhao 2018). Similar arguments have been wielded in relation to Hanoi by Yip and Tran (2016) and Potter and Labbé (2021). Writing in reference to a renovated central commercial street in Hanoi, Yip and Tran (2016) maintain that local business people and shopkeepers saw themselves as winning out from this development. "The case of Hanoi illustrates," they write, "that an uncritical application of the concept of gentrification to the Global South has to be avoided. It hampers good understanding, and at worst leads to misinterpretation of the actual processes that are taking place" (2016, 502). A similar viewpoint emanates from work by Potter and Labbé (2021), whose research on construction projects in peri-urban Hanoi leads them to argue that gentrification is an inappropriate term for several reasons: because the element of locational displacement is largely missing, because there is no apparent sense of social injustice involved, and because many local residents appear to welcome the changes, preferring the certainties of urban life to the hazards of agricultural work.

More contextually grounded concepts, it might be argued, provide a sharper focus than does gentrification. Among those that could be deployed are bulldozer urbanism, construction state, and aestheticized urbanism. Bulldozer urbanism provides a blunt characterization of the brutal mechanics of urban change in China, one that could be applied in Seoul, for example, but also outside the confines adopted here of East Asia as region, to Jakarta and Manila, and indeed beyond. Construction state draws attention to the primary role of the Japanese – but also the Chinese and South Korean – state in funding infrastructure construction and generating economic growth through borrowing. Aestheticized urbanism highlights the creation, expansion, or large-scale refurbishment of 'retro' commercial and leisure districts in Chinese and other East Asian cities. These districts present a historicized vision that frequently facilitates corporate interests. In this way, "shared features" (Teo 2023) can be used to enhance comparative work across the region, and indeed initiate conversations about conditions in cities beyond.

Concluding thoughts on finding a balance between contextual embeddedness and conceptual engagement

Referring back to the *IJURR* forum articles, we are fully cognizant of the dangers posed by the use of concepts like gentrification hatched in the hegemonic hothouses of 'Western' university worlds. One response to the accusation that this implies would be to suggest that these hegemonic structures are all-encompassing and should be first of all recognized and challenged at higher levels of academic and political power (Governa and Iacovone 2025; Shin 2021). Part of this hegemonic grip stems from the English language and the linguistic difficulties that non-English-language writers have in inserting themselves into debates and publishing in the English language academic domain (Qian 2018; Shin 2021). This is especially pertinent where publication in English is a professional requirement, as tends to be the case in China. The question is how to have one's voice heard within the existing nexus of academic and publishing power allied to epistemological hegemony (Spivak 1988). These difficulties stem from what Ferenčuhová refers to as "global inequalities in knowledge production in urban studies," inequalities that she feels are not sufficiently recognized (2016, 2; Petr 2021). Talking back to existing theory becomes therefore a trusted technique, no matter what the provenance of the theory, especially in light of occupational pressures to publish (Robinson 2016a; Cartier 2019).

Acknowledging the gravity of these issues, we have explored related questions of concept generation. We have laid out contextual settings and conceptual linkages both to test the potential for meaningful use of gentrification as an explanatory analytical framework and also to float different more contextualized concepts such as aestheticized urbanism, construction state, and bulldozer urbanism as potential alternatives. We have argued that, for reasons set out in the introductory section, the practice of a regional comparative study reinforces and helps to validate this process of inquiry by providing greater contextual acuity.

The regional frame employed here creates a meeting place for examination and discussion of characteristics of urban development, a sort of agora of reflections derived from separate case studies. Working from the ground upward, if specific features are identified and found to connect in related (regional) contexts, then they create a shared conceptual vocabulary that can be used to add richness to a concept such as gentrification. Our understanding of gentrification, then, shifts and mutates, following Knieriem's (2023) argument, as the phenomena affect the concept in a feedback loop.

Our point of reference has been the (relatively) small urban settlement of Tunxi in Huangshan, Anhui Province. We have asked how similar projects in China and in the region have been conceptualized and noted a predominant tendency in the Chinese urban context to relate them to gentrification but to adopt a rather more pluralized approach elsewhere in the region, where place commodification appears to be salient. This does not discount the relevance of the concept, but suggests instead that 'speaking to it' is a productive means of enriching debates around the nature and applicability of gentrification. At the same time, gentrification sits alongside other conceptual lenses such as right to the city, accumulation by dispossession, or speculative urbanism, which themselves are linked to higher-order Marxian positions, just as gentrification tends to be. This furnishes them with a certain useful degree of conceptual heft, but leaves them all open to the charge of North-centricity.

We have shown, however, that a more generative form of comparison, drawing closely on local context, can be just as revelatory. Our trawl across East Asian cities, starting in Tunxi, has found widespread examples of commercialized heritage 'conservation' and (re-) construction projects creating a sense of 'orientalization'. We alluded to various conceptual openings including aestheticized urbanism as more precise tools for comparison than gentrification because derived from local contexts. The problem is that they miss the conceptual reach of place commodification and other building blocks of gentrification. We should not simply look, however, either to higher-order gentrification or to more grounded concepts for interpretive handles. It is the potential of the debate itself that suggests, in answer to Ren's question, that urban theory can be made not only in/from China but also the wider

region. Indeed, it is the meta level, that of the East Asian region, that has provided the fertile ground for these insights into comparative urbanism.

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Captions

Figure 1. Tunxi in Huangshan and China. Maps and photos by the authors.

Figure 2. One of the side streets linking Tunxi Old Street and the Riverfront. Maps and photos by the authors.

Figure 3. Tunxi's 'restored' riverfront. The buildings show elements of Huizhou style. Maps and photos by the authors.

Figure 4. Tunxi Old Street and riverfront project. Maps and photos by the authors.

Alt Text captions for the Context or Concept article

Figure 1. The map shows Huangshan Prefecture and its position within China. It also shows the location of Tunxi, the Huangshan mountain peaks and Hongcun within the prefecture, as well as the principal rivers and high-speed railway lines.

Figure 2. The photograph shows festive lanterns and other decorations festooning a pedestrianized side street linking Tunxi Old Street and the riverfront.

Figure 3. The photograph shows a pedestrianized riverfront promenade with, on the left, whitewashed shop facades in traditional Huizhou style, with brown latticework window shutters and raised, crowstepped walls on gray-tiled roofs. On the right-hand side, a raised border with plants and bushes is visible, with the river hidden behind. A few people, dressed in winter clothes, are walking along the sunny riverfront promenade.

Figure 4. The map shows the Tunxi Old Street and riverfront project area. Old Street and the riverfront promenade are shown intersecting the project area.

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[1] In this article, both the terms theory and concept are deployed in ways that reflect the literature we review. We differentiate, where possible, between gentrification, which we understand as a concept, and the broader significance of theory as a body of thought, with reference here primarily to 'North-centric' theory, although we recognize that this is only one of several definitions of the term theory. Some of the work with which we engage refers to gentrification as a theory.