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Speaking gentrification in the languages of the Global East

Keywords: gentrification, global east, urbanism

Staking a claim for gentrification in the Global East

This commentary sets out to make a claim for gentrification to be understood from the Global East. I argue that a regional approach to gentrification can nurture a contextually informed but theoretically connected comparative urbanism, contributing to the comparative urbanist project by providing an appropriate point of contact between local context and universalising theories. In the process, I attempt to partially destabilise the concept of gentrification and then re-centre it in the Global East. Any comparative exercise is not a straightforward process; on the contrary, it is fraught with epistemological, theoretical and methodological stumbling blocks -- regions are slippery and often diverse; diversity can be hard to bottle and label along theoretical lines; methods work more smoothly in discrete settings. But it is an exercise worth undertaking; the regional is the middle stratum that allows the locally specific to speak to planetary trends, and planetary trends to find local purchase. In the pages that follow I map out a number of recognisable types of gentrification in East Asia. I then use these to transcend the region and cut across the Global North/ Global South binary that bedevils so much theory-making. The aim, addressed specifically in the final section, is to use these claims for gentrification in the Global East to speak back to and, hopefully, enrich urban theory-making and contribute to discussion of what is becoming known as planetary gentrification (Lees, Shin and López-Moralez, forthcoming).

A regional perspective on gentrification

Once again, regions, for all their ambiguities, have become central conceptual building blocks in much geographical and related research (for a summary, see Jones and Paasi, 2013). It is the very

1
2
3 ambiguity of regional definition that allows for the development of regionalist discourses, the
4
5 pursuit of elite projects via regional institution-building, and the transformation of national into
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7 global capital using regional centres as staging posts (Ching, 2000). These ambiguities are very
8
9 much present in the global region called Asia-Pacific, Pacific Asia, Pacific Rim or East Asia
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11 depending on the ideological loading one wishes to impart. Commentators have generally seen this
12
13 region as market-infused or state-dominated, depending on their outlook. If arguing that it is market
14
15 infused, they point to family-based Chinese business operating across the Taiwan Strait and from
16
17 Singapore, to a history of Japanese corporate investment in China and South East Asia, to Korean
18
19 infrastructure and city-building investments in China and Cambodia, and so on (Yeung, 2009;
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21 Percival and Waley, 2012). For many others, the hallmark of the East Asian development process is
22
23 the strong (if actually quite small) developmental state (Johnson, 1982; Wade, 1990). What is
24
25 clearer is that, ironically perhaps in this context, there has been only a hesitant process of regional
26
27 institution-building, a consequence in part of Washington's spoiling tactics and in part of regional
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29 contestation (Beeson, 2007). China and Japan are the main regional protagonists, and at the same
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31 time the principal antagonists.
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36 In this commentary on the papers published in this special themed issue, I use the term
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38 Global East to refer to East Asia, however the boundaries are drawn and embracing the porosity of
39
40 the concept of region.¹ The Global is a marker of theoretical avoirdupois, setting East on a par with
41
42 North. Global East serves therefore both to re-focus debate and destabilise preconceptions (Lees,
43
44 Shin and López-Morales, 2015b). With its regional focus and its theoretical load, Global East is
45
46 intended as a discursive device designed to calibrate (or perhaps re-calibrate) the balance between
47
48 the expertise that comes from area specialisation and the engagement with theory without which
49
50 knowledge will always be partial and painstakingly incremental. The contextualisation that a
51
52 regional perspective allows for ought to be broad enough to lead to cross-fertilisation rather than
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54 fossilisation (Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2015a). At the same time, it needs to guard against
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3 producing a continental exceptionalism that is little better than country level exceptionalism (Peck,
4
5 2015; Pow, 2013).
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7 Looking from the Global East and reading the papers in this special issue, it soon becomes
8
9 clear that none of them describes a process that conforms to a London or New York-centred Global
10
11 North understanding of gentrification. Many authors specifically raise this point, and with varying
12
13 agendas -- one actually questioning the relevance of the concept (Yip and Tran, this issue).
14
15 However, to obtain a fuller view of gentrification in the Global East it is necessary also to look
16
17 beyond the papers in this special issue and extend discussion and incorporate further work on China
18
19 and Japan.
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22 The paragraphs that follow will attempt to do this by building a typology of gentrification,
23
24 bearing in mind the importance of a conceptual structure for meaningful comparative work (Tilly,
25
26 1984; McMichael, 1990; Peck 2015). A reading of the papers in this special issue together with
27
28 other papers especially on China and Japan, would suggest a four-fold typology of gentrification in
29
30 East Asia. The first is what might be called slash-and-build gentrification, a massive process of
31
32 accumulation by dispossession in the inner city, one that is clearly discernible, widely evidenced
33
34 and orchestrated by the state, a combination of state-led and new-build gentrification (Shin, this
35
36 issue).ⁱⁱ In Shanghai and Beijing, state agencies have overseen the displacement of hundreds of
37
38 thousands, mainly to the urban periphery, to create space for apartment blocks for the wealthy
39
40 middle class (He, 2007; Broudehoux, 2007). This has often been a violent process, the violence
41
42 sometimes psychological as evidenced for Guangzhou by Shin (this issue). Shin and Kim (this
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44 issue) identify similar processes in Seoul, where the South Korean state has engineered completely
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46 new housing landscapes designed almost exclusively for the rising middle classes. While the
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48 primary role is played by the state, a closely related property-hungry corporate sector forms an
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50 important accomplice, particularly in Seoul.
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55 The second type involves the selective conversion of districts with characteristic vernacular
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3 housing into chic city quarters with upmarket restaurants and boutiques. This project of
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5 aestheticisation might be called orientalisng gentrification because it attempts to sell a version of
6
7 the past using an aesthetic that, ironically, sometimes harks back to the colonial era. There are
8
9 numerous sites of orientalisng gentrification in East Asian cities. In this issue, Jou, Clark and Chen
10
11 write about the gentrification of the Yongkang–Qingtian–Wenzhou area of inner Taipei as
12
13 ‘commodification of cultural and historical heritage’, partly abetted by eco-conscious civil society
14
15 groups. Dihua Street and its surrounding district in Taipei’s historical centre appears to be
16
17 undergoing a similar process (Jou, Clark and Chen, this issue; Tan and Waley, 2006). In Singapore,
18
19 as Chang relates (2014/ this issue), the state has engineered an analogous situation where old
20
21 shophouses in Little India are preserved and turned over to artists to be used as studios. The old
22
23 centre of Hanoi around Nha Tho Street too has undergone an aestheticised transformation, but one
24
25 that perhaps relates more closely to Singapore’s Chinatown than it does to Little India (Yip and
26
27 Trang, this issue). In China, the principal sites of orientalisng gentrification (among many others)
28
29 include Xintiandi and Taikang Road in Shanghai and parts of Beijing around Beihai Park
30
31 (Broudehoux, 2007). Qin Shao’s (2013) moving account of the dispossession of a family from its
32
33 home to make way for the Xintiandi development highlights how the state and the corporate sector
34
35 can act in unison, but often with the initial key input coming from the state. While Tokyo has
36
37 figured much less in gentrification debates, a process of orientalisng gentrification can be
38
39 discerned in many parts of inner city south west Tokyo such as Harajuku and Shibuya. These and
40
41 similar neighbourhoods were once mixed communities. However, during the bubble economy of the
42
43 1980s, many residents were driven out, sometimes violently (Waley, 1997). In their place came not
44
45 only housing for the increasingly prosperous middle classes but also the boutiques, bijou cafes, and
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47 bistros where they could shop and eat.
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54 Both the above two types of gentrification are likely to affect city blocks and even whole
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56 areas, as for example in inner city Shanghai. Gentrification in East Asian cities, however, can also
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3 be isolated, discrete -- a tower block here, another over there. This tower-block gentrification,
4
5 piece-meal and jagged, is readily discernible in Japan. Lützel (2008) has identified gentrification
6
7 of city centre and waterfront areas in Tokyo, where he shows a process of 'gradual and spatially
8
9 isolated forms of residential displacement' as a result of the construction of upmarket
10
11 condominiums in previously industrial areas, often on the site of displaced factories and yards (p.
12
13 298). Hirayama (2005)'s reference to high-rise gated communities scattered around the city
14
15 supports this reading of a gentrification process in Tokyo, while in Kyoto Fujitsuka (2005) has
16
17 described a process of lot by lot gentrification of the traditional kimono-making quarter of Nishijin
18
19 in the 1980s. The case is further strengthened by the work of Sorensen, Okata and Fujii. (2010) on
20
21 the regulatory environment that has precipitated the construction of high-rise residential towers
22
23 throughout Tokyo and other Japanese cities. In Hong Kong, it is also at the scale of the individual
24
25 high-rise building, sometimes constructed on consolidated lots, that actual or potential gentrification
26
27 occurs, as detailed by La Grange and Pretorius (2014/ this issue; see also Ley and Teo, 2014).
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32 Slash-and-build and orientalisng gentrification are both processes that occur in city centre
33
34 and inner city areas. Tower-block gentrification is likely to follow a similar locational pattern. But
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36 gentrification occurs too on the edges of East Asian cities, where the transformation of the
37
38 environment has in many places been rapid and violent. In particular in China, accumulation by
39
40 dispossession and displacement have occurred on a massive scale (Webber 2002; Shin, 2013).
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42 Farmers have been dispossessed of land and livelihood in order to realise the utopian fantasies of
43
44 growth-obsessed politicians and developers who construct all sorts of monuments to urban
45
46 ambitions (Jiang, 2014). This might be termed rice-paddy gentrification, in reference to its location
47
48 in the paddy fields that surround many of the major cities of East Asia.ⁱⁱⁱ The rampant
49
50 transformation of urban peripheries occurred at an early point around Jakarta (Dick and Rimmer,
51
52 1998; Leisch, 2002; Firman, 2004). More recently, not least thanks to the involvement of
53
54 Singapore-based Indonesian companies, a similar process has been observed around Phnom Penh
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3 (Percival and Waley, 2012), Saigon (Douglass and Huang, 2007) and Hanoi (Monthéard, 2010).
4
5 Interestingly, in this issue, Hudalah, Winarso and Woltjer describe a somewhat different form of
6
7 gentrification on the edge of Bandung. Here, low-income residents stand in danger of being
8
9 deprived of their land rights by the forces of incoming property developers allied to civil society
10
11 groups. The accumulation by dispossession characteristic of what I have called rice-paddy
12
13 gentrification occurs not only on the urban edge but also in the marginal spaces that border the
14
15 North-South Rail Link in Metro Manila. Here, as Choi (2014/ this issue) observes, lack of land
16
17 rights has facilitated and hastened the removal of low-income residents without formal title.
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21 These types cannot of course be definitive or all-encompassing. They interpret gentrification
22
23 in spatial terms and, for example, take no explicit account of the motives of gentrifiers in terms of
24
25 cultural reproduction (Wu, Zhang and Waley, forthcoming). The construction of a typology can only
26
27 avoid the accusation of being itself an orientalising instrument if it is exploited to inform the project
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29 of comparative urbanism -- made to work, that is, alongside and in contrast to gentrification
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31 processes elsewhere in the world. It is to this comparative engagement that we turn now.
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36 **Comparing gentrification from East outwards**

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41 The comparative urbanism project has been criticised for highlighting contextual difference, telling
42
43 many stories but failing to provide an overarching narrative, a point cogently made in recent papers
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45 by Peck (2015) and López-Morales (2015). At the same time, it has struggled to create a centre of
46
47 theory making in the South (Roy, 2009). Intra-regional comparative work provides a forum for the
48
49 extraction of a number of dynamic elements that can then be deployed in inter-regional urban
50
51 comparison. In this sense, the intra-regional inquiry can be used to provide a structure for inter-
52
53 regional comparative work by drawing attention to the modulations which give local shape to state
54
55 and capital. This can be related to McMichael's "incorporated comparison", which seeks to use
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1
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3 conceptual threads to make sense of varying conditions around the world (1990). Certainly,
4
5 conceptual footholds of some sort are required in order for comparative work to be more than the
6
7 sum of its parts (López-Morales, 2015; Peck, 2015; Waley, 2012). It also requires a field of inquiry
8
9 within which the comparative work is conducted. Gentrification fulfils this role well.
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11
12 This commentary now attempts to undertake an exercise in comparative urbanism by
13
14 looking out from the Global East and fitting the East Asian experience into a narrative of planetary
15
16 gentrification. The exercise is necessarily cursory and exploratory. The slash-and-build
17
18 gentrification of a city like Shanghai or Seoul has significant common denominators with the type
19
20 of far-reaching predatory state-led gentrification that López-Morales (2011; 2015) identifies in
21
22 Santiago de Chile. It finds echoes too in the revanchist gentrification of south central London in
23
24 areas like Elephant and Castle and Lambeth (Lees, 2014; Hodkinson and Essen, 2105). These forms
25
26 of new-build gentrification speak of the state's leading role in precipitating gentrification, in
27
28 London locked into a strategic alliance with private capital, in Shanghai occasionally "cross-
29
30 dressing" as capitalised corporation, in Seoul working in conjunction with construction companies
31
32 associated with the country's leading corporations (Shin and Kim, this issue).
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36
37 Orientalising gentrification can be seen as an instance of worldwide retail gentrification and
38
39 tourist gentrification. Similar processes have been evidenced by writers in various cities around the
40
41 world. Zukin (2008), for example, argues that preservation in parts of Brooklyn means a
42
43 commodified consumption of space that excludes residents of long standing. History can be
44
45 referenced too (Jacobs, 1999), but sometimes the references are inverted, as when bars and
46
47 restaurants sport fake colonial décor. Orientalising gentrification finds a Latin American equivalent
48
49 in the favela chic that Cummings (2015) sees as an accompaniment to favela tourism and a
50
51 harbinger of gentrification. While the state is involved through its pacification programme, its role
52
53 is in no way comparable to the prominent if divergent state interventions to create Xintiandi in
54
55 Shanghai and transform Singapore's Little India. The urban aestheticisation process that this type of
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3 gentrification entails can in places -- for example, Lagos and Accra -- be transposed from a
4
5 neighbourhood to a pan-urban scale, with accompanying use of violence to enforce the moral
6
7 imperative of a clean (read elite-oriented) landscape (Gillespie, 2013). In Singapore, the state
8
9 facilitates aestheticisation; in Accra and Shanghai, it enforces it, whether directly or indirectly via
10
11 private developers.
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13
14 The process of tower-block gentrification and the human dilemmas and suffering it can
15
16 cause is vividly described in Aravind Adiga's novel *Last Man in Tower* (2011), in which he tells the
17
18 story of one man's struggle against property developers intent on replacing his cooperative housing
19
20 with an apartment block for Mumbai new money, part of a process similar to that analysed by
21
22 Harris (2008) in his ubtra-regional comparative work on gentrification in Mumbai and London. Not
23
24 only is tower-block gentrification the outcome of a relaxation of state planning rules, but it is at
25
26 least the Japanese context the product of a change in the housing regime that has seen the state
27
28 withdraw from provision and financing (Hirayama, 2007). This is, however, less geographically
29
30 focused and less sharply etched on the urban terrain but nevertheless bears some similarities to the
31
32 process of rent-gap capture by urban developers seen by López-Morales (2015) as occurring in
33
34 certain Latin American cities. Tower-block gentrification through the construction of concentrated
35
36 swathes of large-scale condominiums is a primary characteristic of gentrification processes,
37
38 especially but not uniquely in North American cities like Toronto (Kipfer and Keil, 2002). In all
39
40 these cases, state strategies are apparent; it is the task of a planetary comparative approach to paint a
41
42 more nuanced picture of the state's involvement and strategic alliances.
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47
48 Gentrification on the outskirts of cities is inevitably path dependent in its development. This
49
50 is clear, for example, when relating the rice-paddy gentrification that finds form in the gated and
51
52 'bundled cities' that dot the periphery of Jakarta to the sort of gentrification that occurs when
53
54 injections of capital disrupt former urban-edge apartheid townships, such as that of Gugulethu as
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56 discussed by Teppo and Millstein (2015). Different again in the type of gentrification that they
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2
3 represent are the *barríos privados*, the gated complexes, that have sprung up around Buenos Aires,
4
5 often in close proximity to shanty towns (Thuillier, 2005; Carroll, 2007). Comparative work might
6
7 focus on who has been or is being dispossessed in these processes and what is the provenance of the
8
9 capital being depolyed.
10

11
12 Comparative urbanism is an explicit attempt to move away from Anglo-American centred
13
14 theory (Robinson, 2011; Lemanski, 2014). The space created by the Global East can be used to
15
16 sidestep or better to deconstruct the dominant dualism of Global North and Global South. Seeing
17
18 gentrification from the Global East also blunts the inherent Othering of the Global South that the
19
20 dominant dualism enshrines. Put differently, it provincialises the script emanating from the Global
21
22 North by shrinking it so that it fits within a busier conceptual space. To place Seoul alongside
23
24 London and Jakarta beside Buenos Aires within a structured framework forces a train of thought
25
26 that goes beyond a facile recognition of difference and undertakes a search for the place of
27
28 universals like social injustice and the exercise of power (Lees et al., 2015a). In this quest,
29
30 gentrification, as a mid-level theory, helps us seek a balance between the general and the particular,
31
32 and travel beyond obstacles posed by the unique versus universal debate that (perhaps inevitably)
33
34 characterises so much work in social theory.
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41 **Comparative gentrification and the quest for theoretical purchase**

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45 What does gentrification in the Global East tell us about gentrification more generally? How does it
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47 inform our understanding and help us re-theorise gentrification? Should we indeed amend
48
49 definitions of gentrification? I will argue here that there are four constitutive elements to
50
51 gentrification: neighbourhood class conversion (referred to by Lees, Shin and López-Morales as
52
53 social cleansing, [2015b, 444]), displacement of lower-income residents, the exploitation of rent
54
55 gaps for profit, and the upgrading of properties and neighbourhoods (Smith, 1996; Clark, 2005;
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3 Slater, forthcoming). As in the Global North and Global South, so in the Global East, gentrification
4
5 generally adheres to at least three of these elements. Nevertheless, the dynamic forces that
6
7 destabilise and reconstitute urban neighbourhoods are not consistent across global regions, nor even
8
9 in some cases within global regions.
10

11
12 We can however draw a few approximate conclusions. First, state-led gentrification is
13
14 practiced throughout the Global East (Ley and Teo, 2014). It is overt in Chinese and South Korean
15
16 cities and evident but less overt in Taipei (Huang, 2015; Jou et al., 2014/ this issue), while in Japan,
17
18 the state sets the regulatory parameters that encourage various forms of gentrification. Slash-and-
19
20 build gentrification is rendered simpler to execute not only because of the power of the state, but
21
22 also because of the frequently sub-standard nature of the housing that is demolished (Shin,
23
24 2015/this issue). These factors together help to explain both the greater physical and psychological
25
26 violence of the process but also an apparent greater readiness to accept displacement. Secondly,
27
28 there is a distinctive culture of property (Ley and Teo, 2014; Shin and Kim, 2015/this issue).
29
30 Property-hungry capital, often in the form of very large corporations (including in the construction
31
32 industry), sees urban land as a terrain for money-making (Machimura, 1992). In Japan's bubble
33
34 years, corporate profits were invested in property. More recently, the Chinese state has created
35
36 exchange value out of property on a massive scale. It follows from this that the ownership of land is
37
38 of crucial importance. In Chinese cities, land is owned by the state and either allocated or leased
39
40 out. In Taipei, the state owns about 40 per cent (Huang, 2015). But in Japan, land is largely
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42 privately owned (often in Tokyo by corporations), and here the rights of land and property holders
43
44 are relatively strong (Sorensen, 2010).
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49
50 These conclusions highlight two worldwide processes: the state's quest for a form of
51
52 economic growth impervious to social justice issues and the empowerment of capital that sees a
53
54 profitable berth in land and property. But at the same time, looking from the Global North, they
55
56 might suggest some paradoxes. If gentrification tends to involve large-scale, and sometimes quite
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3 violent displacement, why would it *appear that* there has been less resistance? And why has there
4
5 been so little discussion and so sparse mention of gentrification, with the discursive focus on
6
7 emancipatory terms such as urban renewal (Ley and Teo, 2014). Both these paradoxes are apparent
8
9 only when seen from the Global North. In the case of the first, a combination of strong state and
10
11 weak housing has conspired to limit resistance to displacement. In China, protests against land
12
13 grabs and property demolition have been widespread but ultimately futile, while in Japan as in
14
15 Korea resistance has, in the broadest of terms, been successfully coopted (Shin and Kim, this issue).
16
17 At the same time, the obstacles (whether material or cultural) to onsite upgrading of vernacular
18
19 houses, especially in Japan, have led to a greater degree of acquiescence among some occupants to
20
21 distant relocation however ostensibly inconvenient and unjust. It is, however, vital at the very least
22
23 to bear witness to the falsity of the paradox, and to chronicle resistance.
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27 The second paradox can be, if not explained, at least approached by considering both the
28
29 institutional structure behind the use of the term and by the term gentrification itself (Marcuse,
30
31 2015). The institutions -- the wealthy centres of 'learning' and publishing -- are located almost
32
33 exclusively in the Global North. Hegemonic theories are inevitably expressed in the languages of
34
35 the Global North (predominantly English). English's status as a world language only serves to
36
37 reinforce the power of Anglophone theoretical constructs (albeit occasionally translated from
38
39 French or German) (Paasi, 2005; Aalbers, 2006; Ley and Teo, 2014). The power of capital that
40
41 emanates from the Global East might shift paradigms somewhat, but the languages of 'learning' are
42
43 likely to remain those of the Global North, and this will tend to perpetuate the monocentric terrain
44
45 of theory-making unless there is constant vigilance, a vigilance that can be materialised in the form
46
47 of working and writing ties among researchers from different regional berths. As for the term itself,
48
49 gentrification is hard to translate into language worlds that are distant from English. In English the
50
51 term's very specificity has enabled it to become a cipher for the damage inflicted by global
52
53 processes of urban change. When translated into languages like Chinese or Japanese, as Shin (this
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3 issue) points out, it becomes either quaint or pedantic. If transposed, it is traduced, losing its critical
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5 edge. Merrifield (2013) has proposed the term neo-Haussmannisation, which in some ways better
6
7 reflects the extent and violence of the process in many parts of East Asia, but fails to resolve the
8
9 problem of translation. The paradox, however, is artificial. As in some other parts of the world, the
10
11 term might be absent but the process it describes is painfully present.
12

13
14 This commentary has embraced comparative urbanism as a decentring of theory-making
15
16 (Robinson, 2011; Lemanski, 2014). Yet if decentring is total, it leads to incoherent fragmentation
17
18 (Peck, 2015). By formulating a regional perspective through the lens of a Global East, the
19
20 commentary has suggested a way beyond a conceptual map that is either flat or characterised by
21
22 one peak.
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their comments, which have helped me develop and refine the ideas expressed in this commentary.

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ⁱ The term Global East is just beginning to make its appearance in the academic literature (Lees et al., 2015a.). It is used here quite differently from another new coinage, Global South-East, which is seen by some as a better articulated contrast to Global North/ West (Peck, 2015). By way of contrast, Roy and Ong (2011), as well as other contributors to the volume they edited, pick up on the web of policy and practice in Asian cities to describe a more-or-less Singapore-centred Asian urbanism.

ⁱⁱ Slash-and-build as a term is designed to refer both to slash-and-burn agriculture with its image of the clearing of land for crops and scrap-and-build, the approach to housing seen in Japan, where houses have a short shelf life and are routinely torn down and rebuilt, often using similar materials.

ⁱⁱⁱ The reference here is to McGee's (1991) concept of *desakota*, the distinctive peri- and inter-urban areas of mixed urban and rural land use and combined household employment that, according to McGee, characterise East and South East Asia.