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Enticing the Global Gaze, The Contention for Urban Spatial Rights in China

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The issue of Chinese poor people's right to "the city" is actually much more a matter of their access to the streets. This question, however, cannot be fully addressed without some background. Indeed, the whole topic of poverty in the cities of China was one that was largely neglected by scholarship up until the very recent past.<sup>1</sup> For over the years of the country's "socialist" phase -- when the economy was largely planned, most urban citizens were well ensconced in their factory compounds-cum-residences, and the level of municipal employment was very high -- the seriously impoverished represented only a tiny portion of the populace in cities.

It has been only since the 1990s, when China's marketization took off with great energy, and as the nation's political elite pressed the country to merge its economy with the business of the developed regions of the world, that problems of large-scale unemployment and subsequent destitution became severe. This happened as firms and employees unfit to compete internationally were judged best eliminated from the contest. At the same time, it was also only in that decade that urban political leaders commenced acquiring a concern about how their own particular areas appeared to outsiders. Local-level politicians increasingly grew inclined to bulldoze the buildings that had been markers of their spaces for decades, and started to worry about turning their roadways and pavements into spectacles for sightseers, and into a kind of bait for investors from abroad. One could say that it was at this point that urban administrators across the nation each became fixated upon enticing the global gaze into their own metropolises.

With this major alteration in vision, people who were obviously of a lower grade -- those whose new and sudden joblessness disposed them to continue wearing old garments and to have a hungry look about them -- were no longer welcome to use the avenues to bolster their sorry incomes. The poor had a right to go on dwelling in the cities, but were meant to become invisible within them.

In the paper that follows, I first briefly review the policy history in the People's Republic that has produced this outcome; I then examine the concept of the "regime of property" and its implications for the poor of China. I go on to inquire about what rights are at stake when a regime of this sort is managed by a business-governmental coalition in the cities of China. Finally, I take a look at what poor people themselves seem to think about their own rights in this realm.

My approach is mainly historical and analytical. Wherever possible, however, I draw upon my interviews with the recipients of a government program initiated a little over a dozen

years ago that aims to keep these individuals alive, if barely. While my general approach and my standpoint are influenced by nearly 100 such interviews in eight cities over the five summers from 2007 to 2011, I draw mainly on those conversations I conducted in 2011. These interviews were all facilitated by contacts in the cities who had connections in communities [*shequ*] where social-assistance targets reside. While these discussions are not products of random sampling, there was sufficient diversity in the cities and among the subjects to afford a reasonably wide perspective on the situations of people subsisting under the circumstances of urban poverty in China.

### **Charting the Changes in State Mission: Impact on the Streets**

In stages, since the late 1970s, the Chinese state has shifted its mission, away from social justice (writ large and, perhaps, idiosyncratically understood) and economic growth on to modernization and global reach (Greenhalgh 2010). We can chart these changes by observing their manifestation in the regime's stance toward its cities' streets, toward what can take place thereon, who is welcome and who is not.

To start: In the days of yore, when today's "*dibaohu*"<sup>2</sup> (the Chinese term for the poverty program targets of the present) were the putative bosses of the political realm, the streets of China were relatively clean and pure, pretty much devoid of observable economic behavior—certainly, at any rate, there was none outside the state's aegis. For the principal players of the state among its social groupings, the supposed "masters" of the others—those "bosses," the urban proletariat—were mostly securely tucked away inside their plants, busily producing industrial goods. And, since the huge bulk of them resided in the apartments provided by their work units (which often also supplied their clinics, goods in short supply, and their offspring's schools), and--because "socialism" so dictated, in the view of the leadership--shops of any sort were few and rare, the workers had little occasion to pass along the roadways, in any event (Bray 2005). But surely when they did so, no one would think to question their right to be there.

Besides, back then, with the nation's mechanized output manufactured in the main just for its own society, and the sales of which largely confined within the country's borders, the issue of what economic activity should transpire on the avenues and sidewalks of cities was not a matter in dispute. Perhaps we can claim that a primary cause of this absence of controversy was simply that local elites were barely, if at all, conscious of the existence of capitalist, global markets; certainly -- given both the state of their knowledge and the intense ideological climate poised against capitalism under which they managed -- they felt no impetus to coax into their own territories the practitioners and the wealth of the businesses that made up those distant and alien marts.

Once the concept of "reforming" the economic structure entered the mentality and the modes of governing of the political elite after 1978, however, a significant change occurred. Outdoor markets and their private-sectoral purveyors were permitted, if sometimes persecuted, and they spread broadly and widely across the thoroughfares (Solinger 1984, Chapter 4). Back in those times, a case can be made, the root of the harassment of these sellers lay not so much in a desire of officialdom to keep the city pristine (as is the case today) as it did in an ambition to reserve urban commerce for the state's cadres to manage, and to keep the still-suspect private sector at bay.

The economy was to be enlivened then, but its proper participants were propagandized and popularly perceived as being only publicly-affiliated ones. As evidence of the badgering marketers outside the state sector sometimes suffered, in Tianjin, there were reportedly 50 percent fewer small businesses in early 1981 than there had been a year earlier; one critique explained the withdrawal in these terms: “In general, the local cadres have this kind of viewpoint: ‘Only permit the individual firms to open a business, but don’t let them earn any money.’” Indeed, at the time there were reports of instances when officials sent to investigate the work of the small-time operators stole their tools of trade, threatened their customers, ransacked their premises, and ruined their materials, not stopping at capriciously confiscating the merchants’ licenses (*Ibid.*, 1984, 203-04).

In those days, and, in fact, right up through to the present, there was yet another issue about people on the pavement struggling to make a living: As the ‘80s wore on, it was principally the peddlers who lacked a license -- especially those who were peasant migrants from elsewhere trying to eke out a living in a town that was not their home -- who were made the butt of the street patrol’s discretion, as in this example of a father and son collecting scraps on the streets of Nanjing in the early 1990s:

A case of a very common phenomenon was provided by a father and son collecting scraps on the streets of Nanjing in 1992. They told of trying to register, hoping to purchase their temporary residence certificates and a business license, so they could operate according to the law. But the police, advising them rather to go home to tend the fields, preferred repeatedly confiscating their cart to selling them the certificates--an act which, by contrast, would net only the one-time fee (Interview, Nanjing, May 20, 1992).<sup>3</sup>

This was the era of embryonic marketization, well before the global phase hit the cities in force.

But, following the arrival into the late 1980s and 1990s of China’s large-scale awareness of the potential of markets beyond its boundaries to glorify the nation (Shue 2010), the leadership at the top of the polity as well as that in the municipalities increasingly – and foundationally -- shifted their missions. From simply meeting quotas embedded in a plan (as they had had to do for three or so decades by that time) and from embezzling exactions (a function they took up once markets opened up in the initial steps), administrators turned their sights and their strengths to alluring investors from abroad to enter their geographical domains.

This development ran in tandem with the nation’s prolonged exercise to win entry into the World Trade Organization, a battle beginning formally in the mid-1980s and not finding its success until a decade and a half later, in 2001. During the long haul of striving to make their country commercially credible to its Western interlocutors, Chinese leaders repeated and continuously lowered tariffs, wrote new legislation, and started out upon the onerous process of demolishing and rebuilding their cityscapes. Indeed, these acts, both destructive and constructive, were all undertaken in the interest of impressing the powers-that-be in the world economy (Lardy 2002; Pearson, 1999).

As an ineluctable offshoot of this new consciousness, what began to matter to an overwhelming degree in the urban areas and especially on their pavements was a consuming concern among municipal managers with prettifying their landscapes and bringing them up to world aesthetic standards, so as, they thought, to attract the eye of the international investor, along with his/her capital (Mitchell 1997).<sup>4</sup> Beautiful space was to replace urban public space, as characterized by Don Mitchell (*Ibid.*). As he has noted, “It actually does not matter that much

if this is how capital “really” works: it is enough that those in positions of power believe that this is how capital works” (*Ibid.*, p. 14)

Along with this mindset, a sensibility was born that city streets needed to be sanitized, scoured of the unsightly, especially emptied of those whose “*suzhi*” (Kipnis, 2007; Yan 2003; Murphy 2004) or quality was thought to be inferior, whether unlicensed peddlers, migrants from the countryside, or, with time, the less educated workers who were soon to be thrown aside by their old employers in the state-owned firms. And so in order to be alluring to one particular audience, the owners of mobile, internationally active capital -- to entice the global gaze, so to speak -- a number of actions were set into motion. Before long, but definitively by the late 1990s, many millions of those once so-called commanders of the class hierarchy, the members of the “leading class,” were deemed to be an obsolete drag on the common prosperity and a barrier to the building of the “modern” metropolises which alone were considered capable of drawing in foreign capital.

With that, those who had long “led” the urban multitude, the old putative *bosses*, suddenly metamorphosed in the public imaginery into nettlesome, even pitiable *burdens* (*fudan*, [负担], a piece of vocabulary literally and liberally used in this context from that time ever since) for the enterprises, and, one might venture, for the country at large. Remarkably, the rhetoric of burdenhood and of branding the onetime workers as an encumbrance upon and not a contributor to, the creation of national wealth even found its way into the speech of the new underdog. This striking alteration is exemplified by this explanation given by a laid-off textile worker when queried about why her state company had failed in 1998:

The workers were too much burden, private companies were more competitive. This burden was really heavy in state-owned enterprises. Private companies can get more profit doing retail business than our company (the biggest export company in five northwestern provinces) could earn doing wholesale. Private companies’ business is much better—they have no burden, no pressure (Interview, Xi’an, July 25, 2011).

Given the national-level policymakers’ new outlook, it appeared reasonable to manufacture an epidemic of bankruptcy in loss-making firms (theretofore supported with liberal bank loans, regardless of their drain on the treasury), accompanied by a mammoth manmade surge of structural unemployment across the country,<sup>5</sup> almost in one fell swoop, marginalizing from the labor market untold millions and re-construing their labor as wholly without worth (Lee 2007; Gold, Hurst and Won 2009).

Initially following the massive layoffs in 1997-98 of these multitudes of once-workers now taken to be worthless, it was publicized that they could be reabsorbed into the world of work through a three-year so-entitled “Reemployment Project,” heralded at a special convention in May 1998 (Chen 2000; Solinger 2002b). Supposedly, the program offered monthly stipends, gratis training and contributions into the various social security funds to which the workers’ employers had formerly paid. The monthly hand-outs from the project were not uniform, especially across cities, but, more importantly, were invariably trivial.

As a consequence, many of these cast-asides were forced to make do, if barely, by scraping together odd jobs, most of them out on the streets, at odd hours and on irregular schedules, for one peripheral private operator after another, as each of the petty businesses failed in turn (Solinger 2002a; *idem.*, 2002b; *idem.* 2003). These pursuits included running stalls, acting as

shop hands, polishing shoes, making and serving breakfast for neighbors, assisting in restaurants and, in a seemingly more stable vein, driving pedicabs with dirt-cheap fares.

At the height of this effort, streets in major cities were often clogged with hordes of what Marx has dubbed “the stagnant group in the industrial reserve army,” those no longer were seen as suitable for the state-of-the-art economies that city leaderships across the nation began in force to aspire to forge (Hall and Hubbard 1996, 272). But what is remarkable is that the furloughed on the streets were handled with some patience and lenience in the early years after their dismissals, presumably out of fears of their protests, actual and prospective, if not out of basic decency.

But the Reemployment Project ultimately failed to restore the wherewithal of existence to massive numbers among the redundant (Hammond 2010). This miscarriage, combined with nearly constant outbreaks of protest from the newly unemployed, in spite of the charity and the forbearance of the politicians (Tanner 2004; Hurst 2009, Chapter 5), eventually led the then-Premier, Zhu Rongji, in 2002 to authorize a vast expansion of a Minimum Livelihood Guarantee program. That scheme had been first pioneered in Shanghai in 1993, next extended on a trial basis to many cities in the mid-1990s, and then proclaimed formally on a nationwide basis through State Council regulations in the fall of 1999 (Solinger 2010; Mun Young Cho 2010; Gao 2010).

By the time that new project was promulgated and upgraded in the first few years of the new century, its beneficiaries had traveled the lengthy distance from putative boss to practical burden and on to poverty program target. The discussion that follows recounts the implications of this switch in state orientation with respect to what has been termed the urban “regime of property” which, in turn, governs what may occur on the city avenues. Bound up with this regime, of course, is the concept of the “right to the city” (and associated rights), and the understandings among the empowered about who possesses that right and why, all of which are the products of that regime.

### **“Regime of Property”**

Lynn A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell conceive of a “regime of property” as “the prevailing system of laws, practices, and relations among different properties.” They go on to explain that, “this regime, the relatively settled and socially agreed upon rules that govern how property operates-- is a crucial determinant in how power will be deployed and in whose interests” (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008, 142). In the newfound vision of the urban establishment (a conglomeration composed of political figures and also of business interests, such as real estate developers, property managers, and state-affiliated industrial magnates), it was up to themselves to set the terms for what was valuable to the city’s changed vocation (Zhang 2010).

This amounted to an elemental re-crafting the city’s chief goal: where, under the socialist regime this had been to embody social justice through the enactment of *use value*, the aim of the city turned instead into enhancement of *exchange value* (Mitchell, 1997, 13; Purcell 2002, 103). That substitution of objectives rendered entrepreneurial talent and entrepreneurs’ perspectives paramount, since it was they alone who, it appeared, had the requisite expertise to hone exchange to perfection (Hall and Hubbard 1996; Logan and Molotch 1987).

This meant first of all that arresting and unsullied landscapes – designed and then constantly sustained, in an effort to compete for mobile, globalized finance -- took priority over social expenditures, as if in a sort of zero-sum calculation.

For instance, we have the following representative quotation spoken by a laid-off cadre from a local factory in one of China's aspiring "global cities" (Sassen 1991), who was much in tune with the official Communist Party line of the time:

We're 50 years behind the US, but it won't take 50 years to catch up... Wuhan is a thoroughfare for nine provinces, has lots of communications [*liutong*, 流通] with the outside, the city government has no choice [*meiyou banfa*, 没有办法]. The city spent money on infrastructure (a pedestrian mall, the fancy, lit-up Bund along the Yangzi, and the ring roads around the city center).

*We don't have money to spend on laid-off workers, we've spent it on infrastructure.* Society has to go forward [or, perhaps put otherwise, to progress], we need money to build a civilized environment, for sanitation to develop a good environment, to clean up the shopping area, to build basic construction facilities necessary to create a better livelihood for people in the future. All cities have pedestrian malls or are building them, it will give Wuhan more competitive ability, for business and tourism. People will come here. We've also built a beach along Yanjiang Road and it did attract tourists here during the National Day vacation (Interview, Wuhan, small private apartment, October 27, 2001). [Emphasis added.]

But for the populace affected, the new property regime, firmly in place by around 2004, meant a great deal more than just beautified boulevards, especially in the best and the biggest metropolises. For the *dibao* handout was far, far from enough to survive upon, and so the *dibaohu* needed to find additional sources of income.<sup>6</sup> But suddenly within just a few years of the massive severance spree, laid-off workers who had been free to ply their new service trades without much interference were summarily hounded off the streets. Night markets were shut down or shunted onto the back-street alleyways in major cities, pavements in the heart of town were cleared of anything resembling commerce. Stall-keepers were herded into tall buildings, where, of course, their interactions with potential purchasers were necessarily cut back, as the passersby who were their customers were much less likely to go indoors than they were to stop by an outdoor stall to seek out what they needed (Interview, social scientist, Wuhan, August 2, 2011).<sup>7</sup>

Granted, within a few years, the newly impoverished were thence provided with make-work, part-time positions. But these trivial jobs—or, better put, chores -- tended to be situated within the walls of the person's own community, and included such activities as guarding the gates to the area, sweeping the earth and the pathways within the community, cleaning out common toilets, and tearing down out-of-date posters from the community walls. In short, the *dibaohu* were given placements that were away and out of sight from the city's pavements.

In a flash, the circumstances of the newly poor came in some ways to match those of the homeless and the disabled in other societies, about whom searing depictions have challenged the moral legitimacy of the reigning "regime of property" in the West

(Staehele and Mitchell 2008; Gleesen 1998; Dikec 2001) . For Western societies can hardly be seen to exclude those misfits more decisively than better-off Chinese urbanites and their political elite scorn older and unskilled, discarded workers who are victims of the scourge of poverty. One could even see disablement as a kind of metaphor for the new effectively disenfranchised of the Chinese city; indeed, Brendan Gleeson has made the point that:

Disability may be used to refer to a considerable range of human differences—including those defined by age, health, physical and mental abilities, and even income status—that have been associated with some form of social restriction or material deprivation (Gleesen 1998, 90).

Thus were laid-off workers, previously allowed to earn their keep on the streets, soon enough transformed into *dibaohu* who were fined or who frequently saw cutbacks in their allowances should they be discovered to have dared to essay to earn money outside. In some places these people were even denied any support at all if they were of such an age (under 45 in Wuhan, as of 2011, according to an interviewee in that city) (Interview, Wuhan, July 30, 2011)<sup>8</sup> or of such a state of physical well-being that they were (or should be) labor-capable, never mind that no one was willing to hire them. Street officials in Wuhan in 2011, having noted that the *dibao* is based on income, went on to admit that of the causes of poverty, “lack of labor ability is the most important (Interview, Wuhan, August 2, 2011).” As lamented a once-SOE oil depot employee, now laid off and living on the *dibao*: “Everything requires a high educational background, I only have primary school education, naturally they won’t hire me, talented people are numerous, so they won’t take me (Interview, Guangzhou, June 30, 2010).” Or, in the words of another *dibao* recipient:

You say go sell things, that requires start-up money; private businesspeople wouldn’t hire us, private bosses have no reason to ask a person who’s both sick and old [nearly 50 years of age, in his case] to work [for them], right? I’ve already tried to find work, but it’s no use, no one hired me, I’m too old, and I’m sick. The main reason is I’m sick, when the boss hears you’re sick he wouldn’t want you; being young is much better, this is the way it is (Interview, Guangzhou, June 30, 2010).

Similarly, a 49-year-old male in Xi’an in 2011 bemoaned that, “as for trying to *dagong* [打工, do odd jobs or otherwise labor under informal employment conditions], they [referring to business owners] look down on you [*xian ni*, 嫌你] because you’re old, think you’re useless. I’m *genben dou buyong* [basically completely without any use, 根本都 不用] in the labor market” (Interview, Xi’an, July 25, 2011).

The early *dibao* days were also the heyday of a new institution, the *chengguan* [城管], or urban management officials. These functionaries efficaciously – and, one might add, single-handedly -- engineered the effective contraction of urban space for the *dibaohu*, and, taken to an extreme, the criminalization of attempts by the destitute to earn a living, given the scant chances for becoming hired for many among them—what Mitchell has referred to as “the annihilation of space by law” (Mitchell 1997).

The *chengguan* are agents who are charged with keeping the sidewalks sterile and with ensuring that the core of the roadways in cities is washed bare of any wheeled



vehicle (save a bicycle) that is not an automobile. A dismissed former worker now employed in this job remarked in an interview that, “We are in charge of space on the street. We do not allow people to *zhandao jingying* [occupy the road doing business, 占道经营].” Even having a license won’t help because “there is no license for doing this, it’s simply not permitted.” Clearly, this individual had bought into the official discourse, justifying his occupation with these words: “*Meiyou chengguan, jiu buxing* [without the *chengguan* things wouldn’t be right] (Interview, Xi’an, July 25, 2011). A provincial Civil Affairs officer in charge of the *dibao* indicated that he agreed with this statement: “Yes, poor people need to make a living,” he granted; “but the street will be crowded and dirty if they do it” (Interview, Xi’an, July 27, 2011). As a recent *Los Angeles Times* article describes their job, the *chengguan* are to enforce municipal codes on ever more crowded streets.” “Hardly a day goes by,” the journalist writes, “without a new controversy involving the municipal officers, a rung below the police, beating an unlicensed hawker or smashing a street vendor’s stand.” (Pierson 2011)

In Wuhan, to take a prime example, some 40,000 colloquially branded *mamu* [the vernacular term in that city for the pedicab], a particular prey of these cops, disappeared as if overnight in 2004, their drivers totally chased away and then presented with a stipend -- and sometimes with a paltry-paid pastime -- to take the place of their former livelihood, bare though it might have been. The cause for their ban was that the patience of the city elite gradually wore raw, as numbers of these conveyances multiplied, traffic order became threatened, and the generalized havoc that emerged on the streets (despite that such havoc was every bit as much the product of a simultaneous explosion of private cars) was eventually taken to be their handiwork (Interviews, Wuhan, July 30, 2011 and August 2, 2011).

Other cities, especially the larger and more pretentious ones, also mandated the ban of these cabs around the same time, or at least substantially thinned out their ranks. This situation precisely matches the concerns with “security” and “order” in highly developed, industrialized urban areas held by “housed residents and visitors” in Don Mitchell’s presentation. In another of his works, he refers to the “order” of the bourgeois investors for whom an “ordered urban landscape” is, he assumes (and, apparently, thinks that city officials presume to be) a “positive inducement to continued investment” (Mitchell 2003, 4, 14). These people’s interests, he charges, are to be placed above those of marginalized and poverty-stricken people wherever beguiling the global gaze is paramount (*Ibid.*, 14, 230-32).

### **What Rights are at Stake?**

Several authors have given thought to what rights the inhabitants of cities should -- or, perhaps better put -- DO possess. These include the basic right to survive or, otherwise stated, to exist (*Ibid.*, 9; Mitchell 1997, 12). Following upon this, clearly, is a right to livelihood, which, in turn, calls for the right to work (Lefebvre 1993, 435). That right then demands the right to the use of city spaces (and, ideally, within the limits of the law that everyone is charged with observing, whatever one does in these spaces ought to be permitted) (Mitchell 1993, 19). The next right -- or, one could say, the next necessity -- would be the right of abode, of housing (Lefebvre 1993, 435). And lastly, among the

other most fundamental rights, if one is to survive and become a true part of the city, must be the rights to at least some rudimentary medical care and to elementary education, at a minimum (*Ibid.*).

As Henri Lefebvre understood it, all of these needs (and even more needs, in his view, such as culture and leisure, which other analysts might well disregard) require fulfillment in order to satisfy the conditions for a person's "practical participation" in the city (*Ibid.*, 432). Lefebvre's seminal formulation, according to Mark Purcell, went even further than what others would consider essential for the elementary features of municipal living: he called for those in residence in a city to enjoy a right to participate by "play[ing] a central role in any decision that contributes to the production of urban space", plus a "right to appropriate," meaning to physically access, occupy, and use urban space" (Purcell 2002, 102-03). Indeed, Lefebvre appears to endorse a conception of urban membership that goes beyond simple citizenship in the political unit, but is instead – or in addition -- one that includes dignity, the wherewithal for sustenance and a measure of equal recognition for every individual's humanity and worth.

But what can justify assigning, and granting, these rights to dwellers in a city? Various grounds have been put forward. According to Mark Purcell, Lefebvre judged that the grounds for such rights were, simply, that one *inhabited* the city, as in this statement:

It is those who live in the city – who contribute to the body of urban lived experience and lived space—who can legitimately claim the right to the city.. It is earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city (*Ibid.*, 102).

Another means of determining a person's right to the city could be to ask whether or not the individual has met one of three criteria, as set forth by David Harvey: these are *need*, *contribution to the common good*, and *merit*, with all of these terms being understood with reference to the allocation of social justice within a territorial or regional context. For instance, Harvey argues that one's contribution can be valued only with reference to larger distributional consequences across society, and one's merit is to be perceived in terms of what compensation one should receive because of the degree of social and natural environmental difficulty with which one lives (Harvey 1973, 101-05). These three standards could serve as markers to measure whether or not someone deserves a place in the city.

These norms, however, beg the question, so relevant in the case of China today, of temporality: must one's contribution, one's need, and one's merit be appraised solely in the present, such that people who had labored in a city for years but no longer do lose their entitlement to urban rights when they become destitute through loss of a formal work post? Or are the children of the new poor who might one day achieve upward social mobility to be barred in the here-and-now from acquiring schooling adequate to train them for that goal? In other words, is today's identity and one's acceptance into the city as a proper and fully-qualified urbanite to be made contingent only upon one's current contribution and with no reference to one's past work record or one's future promise?

In the case of the former, laid-off workers forcefully lament their precipitous plunge in status, and are left bewildered at the lack of gratitude they appear to have garnered after – in many instances, many decades of drudgery. This sense of temporal disequilibrium is especially keen where former workers have descended into the ranks of the *dibaohu* and, especially when,

because of their age, which is usually over 40, their health, which is often poor and getting poorer (given the huge cutbacks in health care over the years since they held their steady jobs) (Duckett 2011), and their minimal skills, they find it next to impossible to locate livable sources of income. The temporal imbalance also shows up when the city fails to make the necessary financial allowance available for their offspring, who struggle along in inferior schools, no matter what their hidden talent.

### And What Do the Dibaohu Think? <sup>9</sup>

Talking with recipients of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee about “rights” at all, much less about a “right to the city” is literally impossible. The first obstacle is that the word for “right” is pronounced the same way that the word for “power” is spoken. So asking a laid-off worker or a *dibaohu* whether s/he has a “right to the city” produces nothing but bewilderment. Some of these people do, however, seem to have a sense of “citizen rights” [*gongmin quanli*, 公民权利] or even “human rights” [*renquan*, 人权].”

For instance, the 49-year-old Xi’an man referenced above first replied to my query on this topic thusly: “*Jibenshang meiyou shenma quanli*” [Fundamentally have no power]. But he went on to add that, “As for human rights, citizen rights, those I do have.” Among those he included the right to exist, to vote, to be human, and to eat. “It all depends on yourself,” he continued. “You can move around; a free citizen can do anything in any place: “*Ni xiang gan jiu gan* [whatever you want to do just do it],” he concluded (Interview, Xi’an, July 25, 2011). But on the other hand, a 47-year-old male made redundant from the same textile factory as he had a different view: “A worker has no power, just goes to work. Human rights? We have none. No one will obey me. It’s my *chengguan* uniform that gives me power. Without that, people won’t run away from me” (Interview, same date and place, different subject).

If we instead move to the topic of livelihood, however, at least some of these now deprived urban dwellers do appear to feel themselves endowed with a set of basic entitlements. These benefits -- such as the right to livelihood, to live in a house, the right to work and to be paid -- are arguably the legacy of the Chinese state’s gratis (or nearly gratis) bestowal of these goods (or, put differently, the non-monetized benefits for workers) in the days of the socialist planned economy. The privileges enjoyed by workers (especially those employed in the state sector) in that era grew, with time, to ingrain themselves into the hearts and consciousnesses of these laborers. Thus, as told by a poverty researcher in Wuhan, when the *chengguan* attempted to prevent a couple from informally selling breakfast noodles, the husband insisted that they had a “right to livelihood” (Interview, Wuhan, July 30, 2011).

Another case is that of a severely disabled 54-year-old woman in Wuhan, who told the story of her husband’s loss of his pedicab job when the vehicles were banned. The woman went to “the government” (though at which level it was unclear) and outright asked for money. This turned out to lead to an argument, with the family demanding to know how it could manage to eat without some cash. Formerly, this woman had been employed at a welfare factory, whose manager ran off with the assets of the firm, failing to pay his staff. “I had a right to get some money,” she attested (Interview, same date and place, different subject). Another informant alleged that he had a “right to live in his house,” because it had been allocated to his family when his father was at work. “I was born here, grew up here; of course I have a right to live here”

(Interview, Xi'an, July 25, 2011). Without undertaking a survey it cannot be said how prevalent such ideas may be, but one can note that they do exist.

Probably the best indication that these targets of social assistance understand that they have some rights is their not infrequent complaints about the fairness of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee scheme and its disbursements. Some not only grumble over the difference in allowance between themselves and their neighbors but may even attack their local community [*shequ*, 社区] officials because of what they believe to be the insufficient size of their take. Others who are denied admittance to the program protest if they feel as deserving as another who did get the aid (Interview, social scientist, Wuhan, August 3, 2011). One can infer that this sense of what is fair was nurtured in the period when everyone lived “from one big pot,” as a slogan indicting the provisions of pre-“reform” days dubbed the socialist urban setup. While these assessments may not amount to a notion of a “right to the city” per se, they do suggest some stirrings in that direction.

### Conclusion

As the Chinese leadership moved from state-planned, if rudimentary, beneficence, first permitting small-scale markets in the cities and then gradually inserting the country's economy more and more deeply into the world of global exchange, its own – and its lower-level deputies' – position on the proper use of urban space went through a series of metamorphoses. From being largely bare places, owing to the absence of private entrepreneurship and interpersonal, unregulated commerce, streets became accessible to sellers and traders within a matter of months after 1978, and thereafter there was a steady expansion in the scope of what could be done out in the open. This freedom for transacting in public was extended further when unskilled, middle-aged workers by the millions suddenly were seen as superfluous, and politicians grew nervous about the havoc the former might occasion were they to lose all hope and all chance of obtaining a livelihood.

But as leaders' indulgence for simple trading as a means of invigorating the economy mutated into their wish that China's wealth could be expanded through a merger with the global economy, things on the thoroughfares changed decisively. Goaded by inter-local competition for foreign investors' capital, the elite at least of the larger, more ambitious metropolises felt compelled to fight for the global gaze and the bankrolls that were likely to come in its wake. Once that drive was on, the official stance toward the municipal avenues of the nation fit more and more aptly into the framework that has been developed to criticize pure capitalism in the West, even as China itself, quizzically, carries the self-characterization of “socialist,” despite there being no evidence left to support that label.

An excellent illustration of this point shows up in the plight of the poverty-stricken. For the poorest of the poor, the *dibaohu* of the cities, this switch has meant that, just at the moment that these former workers had lost their livelihood along with their jobs, and often, in time, their health, they became more and more unable to support themselves outside. Indeed, before they had had the time even to fully understand what “rights” they possessed, if any, they were to learn that they stood likely to lose part or all of their meager handout from the state if they should attempt to set up a stand on the sidewalk or to pedal a cart in the open road. The urban space, they were quickly to discover, was to be reserved for the demolition teams and the shopping sprees of the well-off; they had no right to the city themselves.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> A major corrective to this gap is the Wu et al. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The term “*dibaohu*” refers to the recipients of a social assistance program launched officially nationwide in 1999 under the label “*zuidi shenghuo baozhang*,” or, in English, Minimum Livelihood Guarantee.

<sup>3</sup> Officers in Wuhan took the same approach, according to an interview with a pedicab driver, May 28, 1992, Wuhan. A fine of 50 yuan for failure to register business activity on the streets was a national regulation at the time, according to an official from the Tianjin public security’s household registration management office, in an interview, June 10, 1992 (Solinger 1999, 877-88).

<sup>4</sup> I read a web-based version of this piece, which was numbered from 6-18, but no publication data was provided. This discussion is on p. 9 of that version.

<sup>5</sup> Yes, the economy did have much latent structural unemployment (“hidden unemployment”) at that time. But it was leadership diktat then that latent joblessness be turned into open unemployment for tens of millions of workers, all at once.

<sup>6</sup> The calculation of the amount of the allowance a *dibao* receiving family can obtain is based on the following formula: Each city determines the minimum per person income an individual requires to survive in that city. Then, each household where the average per capita income falls below that line is entitled to receive the shortfall between the minimum income for survival in the city and that family’s average per person income multiplied by the number of household members living together. This usually comes to a few hundred yuan in total.

<sup>7</sup> It is notable that my interviewee praised Singapore’s model for achieving this arrangement.

<sup>8</sup> My interviewee was a 54-year old woman, who averred that this was a national policy, but I have not heard of that before.

<sup>9</sup> These observations come from nearly 100 interviews with *dibaohu* in eight different cities of varying sizes and levels of economic development in inland China over the past five summers.