

**Streets as Suspect:  
State Skepticism and the Current Losers  
in Urban China**

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Phone: 949-854-2872  
August 2012  
Word Count: 10,770

Streets—or to be specific, those who seek to situate themselves on them in order to earn their sustenance—are suspect in the eyes of the leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and have ever been so.<sup>1</sup> The issue is not just one of seemingly associated disorder and potential instability; it is hardly a case of criminality; it has rarely been about rebellious protests; and it is only just partly a matter of transport obstruction. Instead, the two critical concerns have been, in pre-1980 days, the ideologically impure implication of capitalism that most actions on the avenues lent, and, in more recent days, the alleged unsightliness that the indigent sellers at work there afford. There is a paradox here: while concerns about doctrine were once all-determining, today the poor (the one-time celebrated proletariat) are to be sacrificed on the altar of the ultra-wealthy.

Rural migrants have been a constant irritant for urban officialdom—and there has long been a cat-and-mouse contention at play between these two parties<sup>2</sup>--but this paper will not address them, in the main. Instead, it targets a set of authoritatively-affiliated urban dwellers, those holding the city-*hukou*, those who, by law and regulation, would supposedly entertain the right not just to live in but to subsist comfortably in the city.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998) examines citizen action and government reaction on China’s roads and streets and related policies and institutions from a different angle.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 80.

These people, the chief urban-registered victims of the regime's suspicions of people on the streets today are the *dibaohu*, a group that numbered some 22 to 23 million persons as of 2011, the recipients of a Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (the *zuidi shenghuo baozhang*, for short, the *dibao*) program instituted nationwide in cities in 1999. This scheme is administered at the municipal level and is provided only to permanent urban registrants within the given city.<sup>3</sup> As with social assistance elsewhere, this is a form of protection in which the benefit bestowed is means-tested, meager, stigmatizing, and offered as a last resort.<sup>4</sup> It supplies the poor with cash transfers and does not entail contributions, as its beneficiaries – who generally have no work nor any employer prepared to take responsibility for their fate – are totally unequipped to pay into it.<sup>5</sup>

After annual visits beginning in 1983 to the city of Wuhan, one of China's aspiring "global cities,"<sup>6</sup> in the autumn of 2001--on the eve of China's entry into the World Trade Organization--I first became aware of the city's leaders' seemingly sudden preoccupation with well-groomed grounds. What alerted me

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<sup>3</sup> Dorothy J. Solinger, "The Urban *Dibao*: Guarantee for Minimum Livelihood Guarantee or for Minimal Turmoil?" in Fulong Wu and Chris Webster, eds., *Marginalization in Urban China: Comparative Perspectives* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010), 253-77; Mun-young Cho, "On the Edge between 'the People' and 'the Population': Ethnographic Research on the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee," *The China Quarterly* No. 201 (2010), 20-37; and Qin Gao, "Redistributive Nature of the Chinese Social Benefit System: Progressive or Regressive?" *The China Quarterly*, No. 201 (2010), 1-19.

<sup>4</sup>Athar Hussain, "Social Security in transition," in Vivienne Shue and Christine Wong, (eds.), *Paying for Progress in China* (London and NY: Routledge, 2007), 109.

<sup>5</sup> Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 22; Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor* (NY: Vintage Books, 1993) (updated ed.), 409.

<sup>6</sup>Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991).

was the conversion of what had been an ordinary shopping street into a pedestrian mall. Also, at that time I was treated to this informal speech by a laid-off cadre from a local factory, who was much in tune with the then-current Communist Party line:

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 (the new mall; a fancy, lit-up Bund along the Yangzi; and the ring roads around the city center)... 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.)

Further evidence of this proclivity for pristine roadways and for attracting prosperous outsiders (and local wealth) were the moves taken by the politician Yu Zhengsheng, appointed Party Secretary of Hubei province at the end of 2001 (and later promoted to the Party Secretaryship of Shanghai, no doubt as a reward for exemplary behavior in Hubei), who advocated developing Wuhan by encouraging much building of infrastructure. "I guess he wanted to make the city look better, so doing small business on the streets was not something he wanted to see," related a Chinese scholar.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Email conversation, November 23, 2008.

This aspect of contention for urban space has not been addressed in the literature, to my knowledge. Rather, analysts have focused on a different sort of battle over city spots, “the new ‘land war’” in the words of Li Zhang,<sup>8</sup> a terrifying and sometimes violent clash involving real estate developers and local governments on the one side, intent on tearing down structures to make way for their money-grabbing ventures, versus residents and homeowners living in these structures, on the other.<sup>9</sup>

This paper will illuminate the conflict between state and salesperson-on-the-pavement engendered by the nearly incessant suspicions that Communist Party elites have visited upon the streets of China, starting with the moment of their takeover of the state in 1949. My argument is that shifting policies over the course of time have dictated disparate – but mostly hostile – stances to salespeople’s streetlife in the cities. Moments when open marketing and official tolerance toward vendors reigned appear in retrospect to have been more stopgap than sincere in inspiration, intended briefly to stimulate the economy, to cater to dissatisfied consumers, or to resolve pressing problems of large-scale unemployment, temporary solutions meant more as a sop than as a statement.

In short, one can even read authoritative postures toward society and the economy in the municipalities, along with the state’s mission itself at any given juncture, just by checking who--and doing what--is permitted to find employment outside. The bottom line amounts to a profound ambivalence

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<sup>8</sup> Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 149.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* and You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

toward marketers on the avenues on the part of the administrators, one which is expressed most often as negation. I wish to situate today's official skepticism toward social assistance beneficiaries appearing on the roadways within a long-standing mistrust of marketing--or indeed of any enterprise undertaken out in the open within urban areas. My material comes from historical research and from nearly 100 interviews in eight different cities over the summers of 2007 through 2012.

*Charting the changes in state mission from 1950 through the '70's: impact on the streets*

Immediately upon the entry into the major metropolises of the country of the victorious People's Liberation Army in the second half of 1949, a ban was imposed on unregistered peddlers, along with one on beggars. In Shanghai, the end of the year 1949 saw the city home to 150,000 hawkers; Beijing was housing about a third that many. In both cities, managers, intent upon setting up disciplined and efficient production, and upon clearing impoverished outsiders from their thoroughfares, struggled to chase such persons out. But once expelled, they tended to return.<sup>10</sup>

Still, while simply emptying the sidewalks of struggling poor people—difficult as that was—was, definitely, one objective of the new regime, there was at first apparently little hope of achieving a grander goal, that of gaining full mastery over the workings of the marketplace. That project required a period of

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<sup>10</sup> Janet Y. Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 225-26. See also Kenneth G. Lieberthal, *Revolution and Tradition in Tientsin, 1949-1959* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).

another five or six years before the Party engineered successive campaigns against bureaucrats, businessmen, factory and store owners and other capitalists before accomplishing the “socialist transformation of industry and commerce” in mid-1956.

Over the years 1952-1956, periodic movements eventually targeted even the smallest-scale businesspeople, in the interest of attaining total state ownership of and domination over the nation’s economy,<sup>11</sup> in preparation for consolidating a completely planned economic system. A few years later, in the apotheosis of the effort at an ideologically-driven metamorphosis of Chinese society, the “Great Leap Forward” of 1958-60--in which the goal was not just socialism but the enactment of the next stage, communism--the stricture against commercial activity was so stringent that Vice Premier Li Xiannian was pleasantly surprised to discover that, “In many places, there’s not a single small merchant or peddler. Such is the case of Xushui county, Hebei as a whole,” he marveled.<sup>12</sup> At that time, absolutely all private enterprise was eliminated, and the petty holdings of even the very smallest traders were confiscated.

The devastation and massive starvation occasioned by that disastrous gamble brought to the fore leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, then both Party Vice Chairmen whose writ concerned the economy, and whose chief objectives were to get the economy operating normally again in order to restore the production vital to mass livelihood. At the Ninth Plenum of the Eighth Party

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<sup>11</sup> John Gardner, “The *Wu-fan* Campaign in Shanghai: A Study in the Consolidation of Urban Control,” in A. Doak Barnett, *Chinese Communist Politics in Action* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 477-539; Dorothy J. Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Chapter Four.

<sup>12</sup> *Extracts from China Mainland Magazines* (Hong Kong), 149 (1958), 36.

Central Committee held in January 1961, in line with a new policy of “readjustment, consolidation, filling out and improvement,” plus a decentralization of management in the people’s commune, free marketing was briefly permitted for the most tiny types of firms, those whose operators had been eliminated as independent traders in the prior several years. For instance, in the city of Xi’an stalls and pole-peddlers reappeared, and in Nanjing, over 4,000 market “operations points” resurfaced, including mobile carts and service workers who graced the streets in force. By mid-1962, Nanjing reported the presence of more than 33,000 small merchants and peddlers, while Guangzhou had over 50,000 of them.<sup>13</sup>

These restorations, however, because of the corruption they appeared to have enabled, were destined to be short-lived. For they soon struck fear of a return of capitalism into the consciousness of the omnipotent Party chief, Mao Zedong. His reaction was to wage a “socialist education campaign” to eradicate these correctives within not much more than another year. Investigations got underway by 1963, and it was not too long before Mao’s demons drove him to launch the similarly destructive “Cultural Revolution” in 1966. This crusade, even while choking the streets with youthful parading and ravaging partisans, nonetheless erased all visible emblems of capitalism and its culture, rendering even the stuff of the tiniest outdoor fresh food marts contraband.

All told, throughout these decades from the early 1950’s, and to some extent on through the 1980’s and even into the 1990’s, workers, many of whom later turned into today’s “*dibaohu*,” were busy at their posts, for the most part

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<sup>13</sup> *Gongren ribao* (Workers’ Daily), September 5, 1961 and May 26, 1962.



inside. Thus the streets of China were relatively clean and pure, pretty much devoid of observable economic behavior; certainly in most years there was none outside the state's aegis. Those principal players of society, 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, rationed 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, 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 generally not a matter in dispute. Perhaps thus we can claim that a primary cause of this absence of controversy was simply that local urban elites were barely, if at all, conscious of the existence of capitalist or global markets; certainly -- given both the state of their knowledge of the world as well as the intense ideological climate poised against capitalism and competition under which they labored -- they felt no impetus to coax into their own territories the practitioners and the wealth of the businesses that constituted distant and alien marts. Consequently, the content of what went on on municipal streets was most of the time quite uncontroversial.

*The era of “reform,” 1980 and after*

Following Chairman Mao’s demise in 1976 (along with the collapse of the immense legitimacy for anti-capitalism/anti-commercialism that his ideology commanded), leaders who had saved the day in the early 1960’s (but who had been purged during the Cultural Revolution) again emerged after 1978 to reorient the content of commercial life, as part of their thrust at stirring up economic life. Besides re-animating the economy, another critical motivation for their permissiveness toward petty capitalism taking place out of doors was to supply working situations for the millions of youths “sent down” to the countryside during the prior decade who, returned to the cities, would otherwise have constituted a huge unemployed mass.

This initiative entailed sanctioning trading, peddlers and personal service providers as well as their street-side sites, along with formally removing the blot that those doing business had had cast upon themselves decades before. Although yet suffering uncertainty and intermittent harassment,<sup>14</sup> practitioners of pavement business generally experienced what was really a major turnabout in the 1980’s, following the landmark December 1978 Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Central Committee, when class struggle was replaced by measures to mobilize any mode of economic action.

So once the concept of “reforming” the economic structure entered the mentality of the political elite and their modes of governing after 1978, a

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Young, *Private Business and Economic Reform in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995); and Linda Hershkovitz, “The Fruits of Ambivalence: China’s Urban Individual Economy,” *Pacific Affairs*, 58, 3 (1985), 427-50.

significant change occurred. Outdoor markets and their private-sectoral purveyors were permitted, even if sometimes persecuted, and they spread broadly and widely across the thoroughfares. Back in those times, a case can be made, the root of the torment 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. That is, though the economy was to be enlivened then, its proper participants were periodically pronounced in the state-dominated press to be only those who were publicly-affiliated. This meant that an open field for free marketing in the streets in the '80's did have its limits.

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.<sup>15</sup>

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 '80's wore on, it was principally those peddlers who lacked a license – and this would be especially those who were peasant migrants from elsewhere trying to

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<sup>15</sup> Solinger, *Chinese Business*, 203-04.

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 case of a father and son collecting scraps on the streets of Nanjing in the early 1990's:

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.<sup>16</sup>

But with the arrival in the late 1980's and 1990's of China's politicians' awareness of the potential that market engagement beyond its boundaries had for glorifying the nation,<sup>17</sup> the leadership at the top of the polity as well as that in the municipalities, increasingly – and foundationally -- shifted their missions once more. From meeting quotas embedded in a plan (as they had had to do for three or more decades by that time), and from simply striving to embezzle exactions (a function they took up with gusto later, once markets opened up), urban administrators turned their sights and their strengths to alluring investors from across the nation and from abroad to enter their geographical domains in order to enable cities to garner funds on a massive scale.

This shift came about in stages, following the late 1970's, as the Chinese state turned decisively away from social justice (if under Mao quite idiosyncratically understood) and heavy-industrially-biased economic growth for

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<sup>16</sup>Interview, Nanjing, May 20, 1992. 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, *Contesting Citizenship*, 87-88).

<sup>17</sup> Vivienne Shue, "'Legitimacy Crisis in China?'" in Peter Gries and Stanley Rosen, eds., *Chinese Politics: State, Society and the Market* (NY: Routledge, 2010), 41-68.

the state, on to modernization in all its forms, and toward extending a seriously global reach.<sup>18</sup> We can chart these changes by observing their manifestation in the regime's stance toward its cities' streets, toward what could take place thereon, and toward who was welcome at various moments and who was not.

*The 2000's: Regulating the streets for beautification, and why*

It has been only since the mid-1990's, as China's internationally-oriented marketization and internal commercial competitiveness 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,<sup>19</sup> that problems of large-scale unemployment and subsequent urban destitution became severe.<sup>20</sup> This happened as firms and employees viewed as unfit to compete internationally were judged best simply eliminated from the contest. The numbers of discharges involved and the resultant figures of the suddenly redundant and indigent range from the 20 millions to the 60 millions, depending upon whether open or internal sources are consulted.<sup>21</sup>

Initially following these massive layoffs in 1997-98 of once-workers abruptly 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,"

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<sup>18</sup> Susan Greenhalgh, *Cultivating Global Citizens: Population in the Rise of China* (Harvard University press, Cambridge, MA, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas G. Moore, "China and Globalization," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *East Asia and Globalization*, (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield), 105-31, which explains that entering the WTO fit with the political elite's dream of acquiring world-class stature for their country.

<sup>20</sup> I have written on this in a number of places, most recently in *States' Gains and Labor's Losses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 117.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas B. Gold, William J. Hurst, Jaeyoun Won, and Li Qiang, eds., *Laid-Off Workers in a Workers' State* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

heralded at a special convention in May 1998.<sup>22</sup> This program was to offer 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. Moreover, many failed to receive any funds at all.

As a consequence, what must have been hundreds of thousands 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 that had hired them failed in turn.<sup>23</sup> 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 dubbed "the stagnant group in the industrial reserve army," those no longer seen as suitable for the state-of-the-art economies that city leaderships across the nation began in force to aspire to forge.<sup>24</sup> But what is remarkable is that the furloughed on the streets were handled with some patience

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<sup>22</sup> Feng Chen, "The Re-Employment Project in Shanghai: Institutional Workings and Consequences for Workers," *China Information*, 14, 2 (2000), 169-93 and Dorothy J. Solinger, "Labor Market Reform and the Plight of the Laid-off Proletariat," *The China Quarterly*, No. 170 (2002), 304-26.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*; *idem.*, "From Master to Marginal in Post-Socialist China: The Once-Proletariat as New Excluded Entrepreneur," in H. Ku and M. K. Lee, eds., *Social Exclusion and Marginality in Chinese Societies* (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Centre for Social Policy Studies, Hong Kong), 1-14.

<sup>24</sup> T. Hall and P. Hubbard, "The entrepreneurial city: new urban politics, new urban geographies?" *Progress in Human Geography* 20, 2 (1996), 272.

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.<sup>25</sup>

That the new urban poor, once shut out of their workshops, would welcome the opportunity to make a living in sales on the streets quickly became evident in the first half decade after the dismissals of the late 1990's. For when sidewalks were unlocked to placate those rendered redundant, former-workers thronged the thoroughfares, successfully pushing aside rural migrants who might otherwise have been their rivals, as this description from 1999 depicts:

Seeing city workers shining shoes, pedalling pedicabs, and cruising in taxis in the thousands along the roads and lanes, while the peasant street merchants (the shoe-repairers, snack stallkeepers, vegetable vendors) are nowhere to be found (at least temporarily, in preparation for the Party's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary presentation), one senses instantly that the citizens of Wuhan are meant to patronize laid-off urban workers, but to starve out outside peasants.<sup>26</sup>

But this favoritism for the laid off, even when fitted together with the Reemployment Project, failed to restore the wherewithal of existence to massive numbers among the redundant.<sup>27</sup> Stunning bits of data dramatize this point, such as the "re-employment rate" published officially at the time—which is open to

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<sup>25</sup> William J. Hurst, *The Chinese Worker After Socialism* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009, Chapter Five; and Murray Scot Tanner, "'China Rethinks Unrest' *Washington Quarterly*, 27, 3 (2004): 137-56.

<sup>26</sup> Dorothy J. Solinger, "Labor in Limbo: Pushed by the Plan Towards the Mirage of the Market," in Francoise Mengin and Jean-Louis Rocca, eds., *Politics in China: Moving Frontiers* (NY: Palgrave, 2002), 32-33. For evidence that this same thing occurred in other cities, see Lorien Holland, "Poor, and Poorer," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 21, 1999, 26, a discussion of the peasants being thrown out of Beijing too. For more on favoritism toward laid-off urban workers at the expense of rural migrants during these years, see Dorothy J. Solinger, "Policy Consistency in the Midst of Crisis: Managing the Furloughed and the Farmers in Three Cities," in Barry Naughton and Dali Yang, eds., *Holding China Together: Diversity and National Integration in the Post-Deng Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149-92.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel R. Hammond, "Explaining Policy Making in the People's Republic of China: The Case of the Urban Resident Minimum Livelihood Guarantee System, 1992-2003," Ph.d. dissertation, Department of Politics, University of Glasgow, 2010.

serious doubts—indicating the declining fruitfulness of the efforts. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions reported, on the basis of local labour departments' statistics, that there was a trend of annual deterioration: in 1998, the re-employment rate was 50 per cent; in 1999, 42 per cent; and, in the first eleven months of 2000, down to a mere 16 per cent.<sup>28</sup>

And according to an item put out by the official Xinhua News Agency, the rate had dropped to just nine per cent by the first half of 2002.<sup>29</sup> It was at this point that then-Premier, Zhu Rongji authorized a vast expansion of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee program: The *dibao* was extended to a population numbering under three million recipients to nearly 20 million people, in the hope of keeping these people sustained, if barely, and, ideally, quiescent.

Besides the new international and domestic commercial competition that played such significant roles in shifting cities' activities, there was another element that put pressure on the municipalities of the country: this was a

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<sup>28</sup>Quanguo zongtonghui baozhang gongzuobu (All-China General Trade Union Security Work Department), "Guanyu xiagang zhigong laodong guanxi chuli ji shehui baozhang jixu wenti di diaocha" (Investigation on Handling Laid-off Staff and Workers' Labour Relations and Social Security Continuation), *Zhongguo gongyun* (Chinese labor movement), No. 5 (2001), 14. Also, Mo Rong, "Jiuye: xinshijie mianlin de tiaozhan yu jueze" (Employment: the Challenge and Choice that the New Century is Facing), in Li Peilin, Huang Ping and Lu Jianhua (eds.), *2001 nian: Zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce* (Year 2001: Analysis and Forecast of China's Social Situation) (Beijing: shehui kexue wenxuan chubanshe, 2001), 218, cites a figure of 26 per cent for the first nine months of the year. Two other sources, however, claimed that the year's rate was about 35 per cent, which is still uncomfortably low (these were Laodong he shehui baozhangbu, Laodong he shehui baozhangbu, Guojia tongjiju (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, National Bureau of Statistics), "2000 niandu laodong baozhang shiye fazhan tongji gongbao" (Statistical Report of 2000 on the Developments in Labour and Social Security), *Laodong baozhang tongxun* (Labor and security bulletin), No. 6 (2001), 36; and Jiuye jiegou zhuanbian, jiuye xingshi yansu: 2001 nian shengyu laodongli 1400 wan ran" (Transformation of the Employment Structure; the Employment Situation is Serious: In 2001 There Were 14 Million Surplus Labourers), *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan* (Outlook Weekly), No. 46 (12 November 2001), 15.).

<sup>29</sup>Terence Tan, "China's Jobless Can't Get New Work," *The Straits Times*, 27 September 2002.



decentralization of responsibility for most municipal functions from the 1980s that forced urban administrators to become increasingly fixated upon enticing capital into their own metropolises and to jockey to prepare plots of turf for new construction,<sup>30</sup> a project that would almost certainly appear threatened if the indigent citizens of the late '90's and after were out in plain sight.

Given these several factors, urban political leaders commenced to be concerned about how their own particular areas appeared to outsiders. Local-level politicians 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, as the citation near the start of this piece illustrates, as a kind of bait for investors from outside the city—as well as to satisfy local coalitions of real estate magnates, city managers and development corporations. This would entail the installation of expensive and elegant edifices, shopping malls, luxury condos, top-class boutiques and skyscrapers, places that were not to be marred by the sight of rejected staff and workers from the past.

Soon into the 2000's then, on the main streets of prosperous metropolises one rarely encountered such people (the *dibaohu*) in “jobs” entailing sidewalk selling of one sort or another—the mode of earning cash that would be especially prevalent were the lately laid-off laborers to have their choice. Though no official regulations explicitly prevented such people from finding work, a disincentive against their doing so was written into the rules about the *dibao* and appears to

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<sup>30</sup> Shahid Yusuf and Kaoru Nabeshima, “Optimizing Urban Development,” in Shahid Yusuf and Tony Saich, *China Urbanizes: Consequences, Strategies, and Policies* (Washington, D. C.: The World Bank, 2008), 1-40, and Tony Saich, “The Changing Role of Urban Government,” in *ibid.*, 181-206 both outline how and why attracting funding became vital for urban administrators in the 1990's and thereafter. See Hsing, *The Great Urban* and Zhang, *In Search* on these processes.

be most vigorously enforced in the wealthier cities, those best placed to draw in capital.

So with this new perspective, the period of palliation of the ejected was terminated, as municipal cadres discouraged informal pavement business by deducting money from a *dibao* recipient's outlay when even one member of a household was engaged in part-time, temporary labor. Several of my interviewees did find their families' *dibao* funds cut back or cut off when a member took on any wage-earning work. In one case a wife's street-sweeping led to deductions that left four people to survive on some 500-plus yuan per month.<sup>31</sup>

Another informant, a woman aged 34, lamented that, "People like us are at the age for working, but we have no skill or culture, basically can't find any good job." The questioner pointed out that the woman's husband was out of the city doing odd jobs (*dagong*), and that she was managing a stall, and inquired whether their monthly quota was therefore decreased. "Yes," she replied, and continued:

It's a no way affair (*mei banfa de shiqing*). In my stall in one month I can earn only so much money, his work also isn't stable, but now our work is calculated into our income, and then they have to cut the subsidy. But this income fluctuates, sometimes we have it and sometimes we don't, only relying on the *dibao*, that little money, means that basically there's no way to live.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Interview Wuhan, mid-2007. At the time, this amounted to about \$75 US.

<sup>32</sup>Interview Wuhan, mid-2007.

Another device to diminish street selling was to increase the cost of engaging in it: a talented but hard-up woman in Wuhan complained in 2007 that the fees for displaying her artwork on the streets had escalated substantially over time, so that she was forced to abandon the effort to try to make sales.<sup>33</sup>

In light of the decades' long stigma under which capitalism once labored in the PRC, there is thus a stunning irony in the current official unease with people doing business on the boulevards, for markets are surely in vogue in this era. That is, given the palpable—if not the discursive--abandonment of doctrine, it should clearly be kosher today to try to eke out a livelihood in petty commerce. But what has transpired, especially in the past decade or so as China became a very serious player in the global economy,<sup>34</sup> nurturing giant firms and enticing international investors, and as domestic competition has ratcheted upward in step, while auctioning off choice real estate has become a fundamental source of cities' income<sup>35</sup>--is that local officialdom has taken to putting a very high premium upon “modernizing” and “beautifying” its visage (*shirong*, urban appearance).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Interview, August 26, 2007. Wuhan.

<sup>34</sup> Hongying Wang, “Linking up with the International Track’: What’s in a Slogan?” *The China Quarterly*, No. 189 (March 2007), 1-23.

<sup>35</sup> According to Hsing, *The Great Urban*, 41, it was estimated that “land-derived revenue accounted for 30 to 70 percent of total revenues for most municipal and submunicipal governments” by the late 1990’s; it is very likely to represent an even larger percentage today.

<sup>36</sup>Zhang, *In Search* 149. Zhang considers these aims to be a matter of discourse and justification, but I would instead view them as qualities urban managers value in their own right, as means to attracting attention and investment. Similarly, Hsing, *The Great Urban*, 54, notes that, “Municipal leaders consolidate their power base through land reserves and urban construction projects, establish their political identity as urban builders and promoters, and build political legitimation through urban modernity, construction-based GDP growth, and city image making.”

Thus, all things considered, sights that city authorities deemed would seem ugly to observers may not have been officially politically incorrect but was, simply speaking, seen as bad for “modern” business. As a part of this mindset, a sensibility was born that city streets needed to be sanitized, scoured of the unsightly, especially emptied of those whose “*suzhi*”<sup>37</sup> or quality is thought to be inferior, whether unlicensed peddlers, migrants from the countryside, or, finally, the less educated workers thrown aside by their old employers in the state-owned firms after the mid-1990’s.

The dismissal of the less-competent among the proletariat after 1995 or so, of those who had long “led” the urban multitude, the old putative *bosses* who worked the machinery in the state’s manufacture, now in the regime’s mouthpieces and in the public imaginery have suddenly metamorphosed into nettlesome, even pitiable *burdens* (*fudan*, (负担), a piece of vocabulary literally and liberally used in this context from that time ever since. Thereupon, these people were popularized as an encumbrance upon the enterprises, and, one might venture, upon the country at large.

This attitude toward once workers is clearly reminiscent of what we mark as “neoliberal” in the West. Remarkably, the rhetoric of state burdenhood and of branding the onetime, state-supported workers as a sort of albatross upon, and

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<sup>37</sup>On *suzhi*, see Andrew Kipnis, “Neoliberalism reified: *suzhi* discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People’s Republic of China,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13 (2007), 383–400; Hairong Yan, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing *Suzhi*/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks,” *Cultural Anthropology* 18 (2003): 4, 493–523; and Rachel Murphy, “Turning Peasants into Modern Chinese Citizens: ‘Population Quality’ Discourse, Demographic Transition and Primary Education,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 177 (2004), 1–20.

not a contributor to, the new project of creating national wealth through “modernity” even found its way into their own speech of those cast as underdogs. This striking alteration in state discourse toward factory labor and in former workers’ self-perception 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.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, given the national-level policymakers’ new outlook, along with fiscal pressures induced by competitive involvement in the market, it had appeared reasonable to mass produce 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>39</sup> almost in one fell swoop, marginalizing from the labor market untold millions and re-construing their labor as wholly without worth.<sup>40</sup> So even in an age of apparent capitalism, state policy morphed from promoting markets of any kind (in the 1980’s and most of the 1990’s) to fostering colossal companies whose success was not to be undermined by the petty

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<sup>38</sup> Interview, Xi’an, July 25, 2011.

<sup>39</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. The most explicit announcement of this order came at the Party’s 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, held in September 1997, which called for “reducing the workforce and raising efficiency” (*jianyuan, zengxiao*).

<sup>40</sup> Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor protests in China’s rustbelt and sunbelt* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007) and Gold, Hurst, Won and Li, *Laid-Off*.

capitalists who would ply their trade outside. The poor has a right to go on dwelling in the cities, but are now often meant to become invisible within them.

The discussion that follows recounts the implications of this switch in state orientation for what has been termed the urban “regime of property” of the West, a fixture that appears also to govern what may occur on the city avenues of China today. Bound up with this regime 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 issues are the products of that regime.

*Implications for the “right to (the) city” streets of the urban poor and the new “regime of property”*

Given the Chinese state’s ongoing allegiance to “socialism” at the level of rhetoric (but only at that level), “neoliberal” values—and, surely, the word itself—have rarely been explicitly enunciated by officialdom. But some of the central concepts connected to this ideology cropped up as early as a late 1990’s speech by then-Premier, Li Peng:

The government will encourage the establishment of large enterprise groups to in order to increase their *competitiveness* in both domestic and foreign markets”; “We should continue to implement..preferential policies that support enterprises when they carry out mergers and bankruptcies and try to increase *efficiency* through reducing staff size”; and “We should make sure that..small enterprises..can adapt themselves to the market in a more *flexible* way.”<sup>41</sup> (Emphasis added)

In the same vein, outgoing Party General Secretary and state President Jiang Zemin, addressing the Sixteenth Party Congress four and a half years later in Fall 2002, announced that he favored “efficiency” over “fairness” in economic development, to be

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<sup>41</sup>Summary of World Broadcasts FE/3168 (March 6, 1998), S1/9, from Xinhua (New China News Agency), March 5, 1998.

achieved, he emphasized, by “bringing market forces into play and encouraging part of the people to become rich first.”<sup>42</sup>

As both Hairong Yan and Yin-wah Chu with Alvin Y. So have pointed out, the marketization, privatization, and deregulation that are now omnipresent across China’s economy--even if the state sustains its own centrality in terms of ownership, preferential policies, and macro-direction--would justify applying the neoliberalism label in branding that country, though perhaps altered to read “state neoliberalism,”<sup>43</sup> as Chu and So suggest. Joe Soss and his coauthors draw upon a similar understanding in characterizing the concept in the U.S., when they write that, “Neoliberal reforms have strengthened the state’s capacities to serve markets, restructured its operations around market principles, and extended its reach through collaborations with civil society organizations.” For them, “neoliberalism,” joined with patriotism, have “redefined poverty governance around a disciplinary agenda that employs self-mastery, wage work, and uses of state authority to cultivate market relations.”<sup>44</sup>

I adopt this reasoning to segue into the realm of cross-national urban studies critique. For as an ineluctable offshoot of the Chinese state’s new consciousness,

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<sup>42</sup> The report can be found at [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200211/18/eng20021118\\_106983.shtml](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200211/18/eng20021118_106983.shtml).

<sup>43</sup> Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 17, 23, 114, 132, 136, 140-41, and 273, and Yin-wah Chu and Alvin Y. So, “State Neoliberalism: The Chinese Road to Capitalism,” in Yin-wah Chu, ed., *Chinese Capitalisms: Historical Emergence and Political Implications* (NY: PalgraveMacmillan, 2010), 46-50.

<sup>44</sup> Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording & Sanford F. Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6. In the Chinese case, it is not civil society organizations with whom the state colludes, but private entrepreneurs. On this, see Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson, *Allies of the State: China’s Private Entrepreneurs and Democratic Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Bruce J. Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and *idem.*, *Wealth into Power: The Communist Party’s Embrace of China’s Private Sector* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

what began to matter to an overwhelming degree to municipal managers, as noted above, was a consuming concern with bringing the panoramas of their cities and also their pavements up to what they believed to be world aesthetic standards. Their purpose was to attract the eye of the investor, along with his/her capital, just as Don Mitchell has described for urban areas in the United States.<sup>45</sup> Beautiful space was to replace what had just a few years before – in the heyday of relieving the newly redundant—had been what could be visualized as urban *public* space. And just as Mitchell has commented, “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.”<sup>46</sup> This reasoning leads on to a consideration of the alliances that undergird that working, in China in ways not so different from in the U.S.

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.”<sup>47</sup> In the newfound vision in China of the urban establishment (a conglomeration composed of political figures paired with business interests, such as real estate developers, property managers, and state-affiliated industrial magnates), city officials are empowered to set the terms for what is valuable to the city’s changed

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<sup>45</sup>Don Mitchell, “The Annihilation of Space by Law: the Roots and Implications of Anti-Homeless Laws in the United States,” *Antipode* 29, 3 (1997): 303-35.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> L. A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell, *The People’s Property? Power, Politics and the Public* (Routledge, NY, 2008), 142.



vocation. That this Western model fits China is evident in the work of Li Zhang and You-tien Hsing, both of whom tell of the heady demolitions and luxury constructions constantly in progress in China's aspirant modern municipalities.<sup>48</sup>

In Chinese cities, as in the U.S., the forging of this property regime signified on the ground an elemental re-crafting of a prized new goal shared by central and urban officials alike: where, under the socialist regime a chief goal had been, along with economic growth, to embody social justice through the enactment of *use value*, the aim of the city turned decisively into enhancement of *exchange value*.<sup>49</sup> That substitution of objectives rendered the entrepreneurial talent of the major players and their perspectives paramount, since it was they alone who, it appeared, had the requisite expertise to hone this exchange to perfection.<sup>50</sup>

This meant first of all that arresting and unsullied landscapes – designed and then constantly sustained, in an effort to compete for finance took priority over social expenditures, as if in a zero-sum calculation. As Tony Saich, recently writing about China, has pointed out, “Most local governments lack the financial capacity to provide the same level of public services provided in the past.<sup>51</sup> This is

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<sup>48</sup> Hsing, *The Great Urban* and Zhang, *In Search*.

<sup>49</sup> Mitchell, “The Annihilation; and Mark Purcell, “Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant,” *Geo-Journal* 58 (2002), 103.

<sup>50</sup> John R. Logan and Harvey L. Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: the political economy of place* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997); and Hall and Hubbard, “The entrepreneurial city.”

<sup>51</sup> Saich, “The Entrepreneurial,” 202.

in part the result of reasoning such as the following: “We don’t have money to spend on laid-off workers, we’ve spent it on infrastructure.”<sup>52</sup>

For the populace affected, the new regime of property, firmly in place by around 2004, meant a great deal more than just boulevards beautified by glamorous buildings and gardens, especially in the best and the biggest metropolises. The issue that arose was that the *dibao* hand-out was far, far from enough to survive upon, and so the *dibaohu* needed to find additional sources of income.<sup>53</sup> But suddenly within just a few years of the massive severance spree, laid-off workers who had been free to ply service and commercial trades from 1998 to around 2003 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 business. Stall-keepers were herded into tall buildings, where, of course, their interactions with potential purchasers were necessarily cut back, as the passersby who might have been their customers were much

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<sup>52</sup> Remark by a former factory cadre (who seemed to be a Party member) during interview with out-of-work people in a small private apartment, Wuhan, October 27, 2001.

<sup>53</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.

less likely to go indoors than they were to stop by an outdoor stall to seek out what they needed.<sup>54</sup>

Granted, within a few years, by the end of the 2000's, many of the newly impoverished furloughed were provided with make-work, part-time, and temporary positions. But these trivial jobs—or, better put, chores -- tended to be situated within the walls of a person's own community, and included such activities as guarding the gates to the area, sweeping its grounds and pathways, cleaning out common toilets, and tearing down out-of-date posters from the community walls. In short, *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.<sup>55</sup> 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:

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<sup>54</sup>Interview, social scientist, Wuhan, August 2, 2011. It is notable that the speaker went on to praise Singapore's model for achieving this arrangement.

<sup>55</sup> Staeheli and Mitchell, “The People's Property”; Brenden Gleeson, “Justice and the Disabling City,” in R. Fincher and J. M. Jacobs, eds., *Cities of Difference* (Guilford, New York, 1998), 89-119; and M. Dikec, “Justice and the spatial imagination,” *Environment and Planning A* 33 (2001): 1785-1805.

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.<sup>56</sup>

Thus were laid-off workers, previously allowed to earn their keep on the streets, soon enough transformed into *dibaohu* who were fined or who could well see cutbacks in their allowances should they be discovered to have essayed 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)<sup>57</sup> or of such a state of physical well-being that they *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.”<sup>58</sup> 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.”<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Gleeson, “Justice,” 98.

<sup>57</sup>Interview, Wuhan, July 30, 2011. My interviewee was a 54-year old woman, who averred that this was a national policy, but I had not heard of that before.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a community official, Wuhan, August 2, 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Interview, Guangzhou, June 30, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, Guangzhou, June 30, 2010.

Similarly, in 2011 a 49-year-old male in the large northwestern city of Xi'an 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."<sup>61</sup>

The early *dibao* days were also the heyday of a new institution, the *chengguan* (城管), or urban management officials. These functionaries police the effective contraction of urban space for the *dibaohu*, in a manner much akin to what Mitchell has referred to as "the annihilation of space by law."<sup>62</sup> These are agents charged with keeping the sidewalks sterile and with ensuring that the roadways in cities are 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 a recent 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 (against the interests of his own fellows) had bought into the official discourse, justifying his present occupation with these words: "*Meiyou chengguan, jiu buxing* (without the *chengguan* things wouldn't be right)."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Interview, Xi'an, July 25, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Mitchell, "The Annihilation."

<sup>63</sup> 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.”<sup>64</sup> 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.”<sup>65</sup>

In Wuhan, to take a prime example, some 40,000 pedicabs, once a particular prey of these cops, disappeared as if overnight in 2003, their drivers totally chased away and then presented with a stipend – or else with a paltry-paid part-time pastime -- to take the place of their former livelihood earned at the wheel, bare though it might have been. The stated cause for the 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.<sup>66</sup>

Other cities, especially the larger and more pretentious ones, also barred these cabs around the same time, or at least substantially thinned out their ranks. This situation precisely matches the concerns with

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<sup>64</sup> Interview, Xi’an, July 27, 2011.

<sup>65</sup> David Pierson, “China’s hated municipal officers seek empathy” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Interviews, Wuhan, July 30, 2011 and August 2, 2011; also, interviews with a scholar and with a real estate management official, both conducted on September 26, 2003, Wuhan.

“security” and “order” in highly developed, industrialized Western urban areas entertained by “housed residents and visitors” in Don Mitchell’s presentation. In one of his works, Mitchell 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.” These people’s interests, he charges, are obviously to be placed well above those of marginalized and poverty-stricken people.<sup>67</sup>

### *What rights are at stake?*

Several authors have considered 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.<sup>68</sup> Following upon this, clearly, is a right to livelihood, which, in turn, calls for the right to work.<sup>69</sup> 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).<sup>70</sup> The next right -- or, one could say, the next necessity -- would be the right of abode, of housing. 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

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<sup>67</sup> Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (NY: Guilford Press, 2003), 4, 14, 230, 232.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; Mitchell, “The Annihilation,” 12.

<sup>69</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “The Right to the City,” in Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture Culture, 1943-1968: a documentary anthology* (NY: Rizzoli, 1993), 435

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell, *The Right*, 19.

some rudimentary medical care and to elementary education, at a minimum.<sup>71</sup>

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.<sup>72</sup>

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 how best to actualize social justice within a territorial context. Harvey argues that one’s *contribution* can be weighed only with reference to larger distributional consequences across society, while one’s *merit* is to be counted in light of the degree of social and natural environmental difficulty with which one lives.<sup>73</sup> These three standards could serve as markers to measure whether or not someone deserves a place in the city, according to Harvey.

These norms, however, beg the question of temporality, so relevant in the case of China today: 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

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<sup>71</sup> Lefebvre, “The Right,” 435.

<sup>72</sup> Purcell, “Excavating,” 102.

<sup>73</sup> David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1973), 101-05.



years but no longer do so must lose their entitlement to urban rights when they become destitute through a forced loss of a formal work post? Or are the children of the new poor, due to lack of making a contribution, to be barred in the here-and-now from acquiring schooling adequate to train them for possible future upward social mobility? In other words, is today's value – which might determine one's acceptance into the city as a proper and fully-qualified urbanite - - to be made contingent only upon one's current contribution, with no reference to one's past work record or one's potential future promise?

As things stand in China now, laid-off workers lament their precipitous plunge in status, and are left bewildered at the lack of gratitude they appear to have garnered after, in many instances, decades of faithfully fulfilling their assigned factory duties. 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),<sup>74</sup> and their minimal skills, they find it next to impossible to locate livable sources of income, and thus to offer any contribution at all to the urban community. 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 in nearly abandoned dilapidated neighborhoods,<sup>75</sup> no matter what their unfulfilled talent.

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<sup>74</sup> Jane Duckett, *The Chinese State's Retreat from Health: Policy and the politics of retrenchment* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>75</sup> On "dilapidated neighborhoods," see Fulong Wu, Chris Webster, Shenjing He and Yuting Liu, *Urban Poverty in China* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2010), 126ff.

*What do the dibaohu themselves think?*

If we move to the topic of livelihood, at least some of these now deprived urban dwellers appear to feel themselves endowed with a set of basic entitlements. Their expectation of benefits -- such as the right to livelihood, to live in a house, the right to work -- are arguably the legacy of the Chinese state's gratis (or nearly gratis) bestowal of these goods (or, put differently, lifetime employment and 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 become ingrained 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."<sup>76</sup>

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 these 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.<sup>77</sup> Another informant alleged

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<sup>76</sup> Interview, Wuhan, July 30, 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Interview, same date and place, different subject.

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.”<sup>78</sup> Without undertaking a survey it cannot be said how prevalent such ideas may be, but one can at least 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 the poor believe to be the insufficient size of the allocation they were given. Others who are denied admittance to the program protest if they feel as deserving as another who did get the aid.<sup>79</sup> 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 bygone 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 a socialism-informed, state-planned, and a rudimentary but nearly-universal beneficence in the urban areas, first permitting small-scale markets in the cities and then gradually becoming

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<sup>78</sup> Interview, Xi’an, July 25, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Interview, social scientist, Wuhan, August 3, 2011.

steadily more capitalist on a progressively grander scale, its own – and its lower-level deputies’ – position on the proper use of urban space and streets went through a series of metamorphoses.

From being largely bare places, owing to the pre-1978 anti-capitalism-inspired absence of private entrepreneurship and of 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 relative freedom for transacting in public was extended further for urbanites in the mid- to late-1990’s and into the early 2000’s, when unskilled, middle-aged workers by the millions suddenly were seen as superfluous, and politicians grew nervous about the havoc such people were causing and might well continue to 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- and intra-local competition for capital, the elite at least of the larger, more ambitious metropolises felt compelled to fight for glamour and for the cash that would make it possible. 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 of current days. For the poorest of the poor, the *dibaohu* of the cities, this switch has meant that, very soon after these former workers had lost their livelihood along with their jobs, and often, in time, their health, they became barred from trying 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 hand-out 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 spacious urban avenues, they were quickly to discover, were to be reserved for the demolition teams and for the shopping sprees of the well-off; the very poor had no right to the city streets themselves.