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The geopolitics of knowledge circulation: the situated agency of mimicking in/beyond China

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ABSTRACT
China has long positioned itself as the ancient civilization of the Far East, which only makes geographical sense through the lens of the West. The literature on China resonates with this geographic illustration, about which, critical scholars have cautioned against the imperial hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge. In this paper, we attempt to answer the call for a Global East through the situated agency of the others in the geopolitics of knowledge circulation. The circulation of knowledge foregrounds transnational flows in a multifaceted and multidirectional process, and mimicry calls for attention to political/soft subversions beneath the camouflaged behavior of coping. By investigating scholarship on the particular topic of shanzhai, we probe into two layers of knowledge production: how the variegated scholarly citation behaviors reflect the situated agency that bears the effects of asymmetric power relations formed through multiple flows of people, idea and capital, but nonetheless demonstrates an endeavor of autonomy.

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Introduction

I just want to urge us to be a bit stingier; apart from “sending over,” we must also “take in” – this is “grabbism” (拿来主义) . . . But we’ve been frightened by what has been “sent over.” First, there was England’s opium, Germany’s cast-off weapons, and then it was France’s perfume, America’s movies, and all sorts of small stuff from Japan stamped “100% Domestic Product.” So even those youth who have awakened are terrified of foreign goods. Actually, this is because they were “sent over” rather than being “taken in” . . . So, we should use our brains, open our eyes outward, and take things ourselves!

(Lu 1973, 29)

China is anything but “off the map”. In the very recent “centurial debate” on Happiness: Capitalism vs Marxism,1 Slavoj Žižek deployed China to illustrate happiness in a state that pushes its authoritarian governance and liberal economy to their extremes. In the first 6 months of 2019, The Economist2 had already
published three coverage-stories on China entitled *Red Moon Rising, Can Panda Fly* and *A New Kind of War*. However, the story of China is more often read through a foreign lens or framed in reference to the West. This is also true for Chinese president Xi Jinping in his speech announcing the waking of a sovereign power, in which he quoted Napoleon Bonaparte’s metaphor of a sleeping lion. Indeed, China has a long history of positioning itself in reference to the West, and its use of terms such as the ancient civilization in the “Far East” makes geographical sense only in reference to the “West.”

At issue here are the geopolitics of knowledge production. Cautions have been regularly issued against the imperial hegemony of the Eurocentric framework, through which a parochial territory is formed with Anglophone ontologies and epistemologies squarely occupying the center (Szanton 2002; Paasi 2005; Howitt, Richard, and Sandra Suchet-Pearson 2003). While Anglo-American scholars are expected to theorize, their non-western counterparts are reduced to suppliers of empirical data. Such uneven power relations in knowledge production have paid little attention to the agency of authors from the world of Others (Timár 2004). As Rose (1999) cautioned, it merely serves to construct halls of mirrors, in which self-confirmation is misread as conversation. A fair intellectual conversation, instead, requires approaches that take the agency of non-western scholars seriously. The past two decades have witnessed a growing movement to provincialize “western” knowledge (Chakrabarty 2000) and to seek alternatives to capitalist development trajectories – other worlds must be possible (Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Santos 2008). From this vantage point, critical social science must be provincialized, such that the door is open for us to think through all areas as ordinary, including both those on the map and those off the map (Roy 2009; Robinson 2016b).

On the other hand, we also caution against the approach that treats other worlds as “intellectual ghettos sanitised from any contacts with the West” (Wang 2011, 3), exemplified by the assumptions of “China as exception”, or “the Third World Radical” (Bilgin 2008). As Tsing (2005) has insightfully demonstrated, other worlds do not evolve in isolation. Rather, transnational capital has easily reached the clan-managed forests in Indonesia, which were often assumed to be self-fortified, bringing with it a western middle-class taste for consumption and ways of thinking about development and politics. The flow of politics, economic power and the generation of knowledge are inevitably intertwined (Foucault 2008). This is particularly crucial for China Studies, as some scholars have alerted, and a search for exceptions might merely forge another parochial territory with its center placed in China (Callahan 2015; Agnew 2012). In this context, while the call for provincialization of regional knowledge has an imperative agenda that encourages theorizing from those places off the map (Roy 2009), it must not form a collection of ghettos that are isolated from each other.

Based on this concern, this paper attempts to draw insights from two concepts: the poststructuralist concept of circulation of knowledge (Mitchell 2002;
Agnew (2007) and the postcolonial concept of mimicry (Bhabha 1994, 126). The former explores the circulation of knowledge that is multifaceted and multidirectional, and the latter depicts a world that is “almost the same, but not quite”, as if a mimic to its model, with political/soft subversions beneath the camouflaged behavior of coping. Their combination allows us to probe into the situated agency of non-western scholars in the circulation of knowledge, namely, how non-western scholars cite and in what manner, situated in the tangled circulations of economic and political interests, people and knowledge.

First, in this process, multiple actors take actions to construct networks and to channel the flow of ideas. By multiple actors we refer to not only scholars who construct individual networks for knowledge mobility through citation but also universities, the institutions of higher education and behind them the political and economic forces that weave together institutional networks for the mobility of people, ideas and others. The multiple networks are always entangled and reshaping each other.

Second, a focus on China, usually envisioned as a receiver of hegemonic knowledge, lets us pay more attention to the ways in which Chinese scholars encounter western ideas. We draw on the concept of mimicry to explore how Chinese scholars have cited other ideas and why, as a situated agency that bears the effects of asymmetric power relations – the historically accumulated relationship between the “West” and the “East” – but nonetheless demonstrates an endeavor of autonomy, such that Chinese scholars would, in Lu Xun’s (1973, 29) words, “either use it, leave it, or destroy it”.

This paper has three sections. The first section reviews the geopolitics of knowledge production and the two concepts used in our framework. The second section briefly addresses the transnational education mobility from the late Qing dynasty to the present time, examining the tangled flows of students, knowledge and political and economic interests. The third section looks at three instances of scholars’ adopting, adapting, bypassing and rejecting western concepts. We choose to investigate scholarship on the particular topic of shanzhai (山寨, fake), the Chinese term for copying and faking that resembles mimicry in multiple shades. With studies on shanzhai economy, the shanzhai city, and eventually the intellectual attempts of theorizing the shanzhai model, we explore how the geopolitics of knowledge circulation, in terms of understanding the Chinese urbanization process in globalization, is itself an inherent element of this process and in turn is reshaped by that process. The article disentangles two types of mimicry: one is the agency of scholars in the circulation of knowledge, and the other is the agency of practitioners in the circulation of ideas on development and urbanization, both of which are embedded in the circulation of populations, ideas, political and economic interests. By integrating mimicry and circulation of knowledge, this paper aims to open a new line of inquiry into China as part of the global and further, to contribute to the
Geopolitics of knowledge circulation

The geographies of knowledge production have been featuring a center-periphery divide (Keim 2011; Rossi and Wang 2020). Empirical studies have revealed, first of all, the dominating role of Anglophones in authorship, institutional affiliation, geographic locations. For instance, a growing body of analyses on English-language publications seems to confirm the relatively limited contribution of scholarship from South America (Parnell and Pieterse 2016), the East Asian (Kong and Qian 2017) and the post-socialist areas (Borén and Young 2016; Sjöberg 2014; Pobłocki 2020; Ferenčuhová 2020). Additionally, citation analyses of academic publications have revealed a geographic pattern of parochialism: Anglophone ontologies and epistemologies are universalized, and non-Anglo-American studies are frequently considered exotic stories meant to feed the former with evidence and, at most, to supplement the former with context-confined deviations (Szanton 2002; Bański and Ferenc 2013).

From Eurocentric parochialism to the circulation of knowledge

The evidently uneven power relations in knowledge production have historical roots (Marzec and Zysiak 2020). Bilgin (2008) revisited the history of founding the discipline of area studies in the 1940s, when “the political scientist Gabriel Almond called on his colleagues to study the ‘uncouth and exotic’ regions of the world to make political science a total science”. It is then less surprising that the many projects in area studies might have largely served the purpose of buttressing the wholeness or universality of “western” theories by providing data about the “non-western” parts of the world, where the existence of differences is assumed to be natural, but nonetheless nonstructural, such that differences do not disrupt the wholeness of western theories (Ferenčuhová and Gentile 2016; Bernt 2016; Ouředníček 2016).

The hegemonic status of Anglo-American scholarship is an effect “accumulated through a long historical time, from the Enlightenment movement, industrial revolution technologies, to the political processes of imperialism, colonialism, war and displacement” (Howitt, Richard, and Sandra Suchet-Pearson 2003, 2). During each period, other knowledges were devalued in the power hierarchies of the world system (Wallerstein 1976). While many social science disciplines, such as political science, anthropology and sociology (Mbembe 2017; Connell 1997; Bilgin 2008; Ilchenko 2020; Pope 2020), emerged and evolved through global expansion and the colonizing gaze of European empires, the articulation of uneven power of different civilizations eventually penetrated into the very field of higher education in the early 1900s. A deliberate construction of Anglo-American authority in the intellectual endeavors on the Global East (Chan et al. 2018; Müller 2018; Trubina et al. 2020; Müller and Trubina 2020).
very field of higher education emerged in American universities, in their pursuits of converting higher education to an industry. In the discipline of sociology, for instance, the then-emerging norm of professionalization required the effort of creating a canon of foundational theories, demarcating the boundary between theory and research, the classic and the marginal (Szanton 2002).

Today, the effort to widen the geographic gap in knowledge production is becoming more intensive, such that particular western conceptions become increasingly globally mobile, or “fluid” (Prince 2011; Wang and Tan 2020). Borén and Young (2016) look beyond the few academic celebrities to caution the much broader neoliberal transformation of universities, which has created a bulky troop of entrepreneurial academics who serve as creative policy intermediaries. The direction of knowledge flow is crucial, which, for Peck (2011), reflects the constant search for a new spatial fix using transnational capital. The spread of theories on creativity has been exemplary, featuring a flow from an Anglo-American core to cities in the south, “across the post-socialist world, from the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, through Russia, and including China” (Borén and Young 2016). What has been stressed is the interaction of three types of global mobility: mobility of theses, mobile restructuring of universities and “urban studies theorizing itself as a set of globally mobile concepts and practices” (Borén and Young 2016, 599). Anglo-American knowledge, after all, is frequently derived from a regional European and/or North American context but “habitually imagine[s] a single path to capitalist development and prosperity to be followed by all (Sheppard and Leitner 2017)”. Alternatives ways must be possible.

The advantage of mobility of knowledge is that it opens the door to alternative trajectories. As Agnew (2007) argued, “knowledge is made as it circulates; it is never made completely in one place and then simply consumed elsewhere”. In this context, detecting western ideas is inevitable in studies of the East, just as there must be ideas from the East flowing to the West. Timothy Mitchell (2002) provides a few of the best examples of “the non-Western origins of ostensibly Western ideas, such as ‘modernism’ (which emerged in a Guatemalan journal), ‘postmodernism’ (born in the 1930 s Hispanic world) and ‘liberalism’ (born in India)” (Bilgin 2008). Instead of tracing the “original sites” of knowledge, in this study we focus on the production of knowledge through the multidirectional circulation of knowledge (Wilson and Connery 2007).

**The situated agency of the Other**

Aside from the broader context of uneven power relationships in the world system, the unequal treatment of agency of the non-western scholars warrants scholarly attention. The hierarchy in knowledge production, argues Bilgin (2008), resides in the division of labor, which treats “non-western” studies as a mere object, compared with western studies that firmly seize the role of a subject. More often than not, Anglo-American scholars are viewed as more
“authoritative voices” with subjectivity and are therefore naturally expected to assume the responsibility of theorizing and agenda setting (Kong and Qian 2017). On the other hand, other scholars frequently fall prey to totalizing western hegemony, as they are expected to either share empirical evidence from other areas or focus on local-context specific particularities (Simonsen 2004; Bański and Ferenc 2013).

Situated in this concern, we revisit the concept of mimicry, which was borrowed by Homi Bhabha (1994) from evolutionary biology, in his effort to reveal a strategic double articulation by the colonized during the expansion of Eurocentric modernization. While the colonized were learning and practising European-style metropolitan manners, they articulated European culture through two layers: the mimicking behavior marked the reception of modernity through a similarity of forms between the mimic and the model, and the mimic at the same time derived an advantage from this process and subsequently exercised self-elevation. Mimicry is thus a strategic adoption, as it narrows the distinction between model and mimic; mimicry is also an evolutionary rebellion by the unauthorized, given that mimicry is “at once resemblance and menace, … is a part-object that radically re-values the normative knowledge of the priority of race, writing, and history (Bhabha 1994, 123)”. As Bhabha (1994, 130) states, “the fetish (of the colonized Other) mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it de-authorizes them”. Through mimicry, the Other is transformed from a mere value-receiver to a subject, serving a “desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 126). By being “not quite”, mimicry poses an imminent threat to authority via mockery, as the colonized “gladly received Bibles, not to read and follow, but to use as wrapping paper”.

To sum up, we suggest a focus on the situated agency of the other scholars in the other worlds: the situatedness calls for attention to the historically accumulated relationship between the “West” and the “East” through flows of politics, economic interests and knowledge (Foucault 2008). In order to examine the agency of the non-western scholars, we call for an in-depth study to understand why they cite and how they cite. In this sense, Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry” helps us to ponder the rationale behind the concept of borrowing behavior of non-western intellectuals in knowledge production. It is through the “not quite” part of mimicking projects (Bhabha 1994), i.e. the distinction between the copied knowledge and the situated practices of urbanization, that we can better understand how the western knowledge is “grabbed” and appropriated for non-western agendas.
The tangled circulations of students, knowledge and political and economic interests: a historical overview

The three waves of educational mobility

Educational mobility can be traced back to the late Qing dynasty, when the gates of China were forced open by the opium war. Since then, three major waves have been detected (Ye 2001). The first wave was part of the Self-Strengthening movement. After the Opium War, Wei Yuan, then an official at the National Navy Bureau, finished his book Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms, suggesting transnational education to “subdue the enemies by learning from their strong points” (Liu and Turner 2018). Given the explicit objective of national salvation through “learning the strong points”, the educational mobility of students was featured with a pre-defined direction of flow. The first cohort of students, chosen mostly from Foochow Arsenal Naval College and Tianjin Beiyang Naval Academy, were either sent to France for their advanced development in maritime technology and shipbuilding industry or to Britain for their personnel training in their world-renowned navy (Ye 2001; Liu and Turner 2018).

State-channeled mobility became less dominant around the turn of the twentieth century, after which there was a drastic surge of individual cases of students themselves seeking overseas education, mainly to Japan and the United States. This was widely reckoned as the second wave of educational mobility, driven by two major factors: the abolition of the Chinese imperial examination system (keju) and the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program in the United States, both of which concerned membership of the “modern” world (Ye 2001).

The abolition of the imperial examination system largely implies the Qing regime’s pursuit of western “modernity” by learning from Japan, the neighboring country that had recently completed its own transformation from a Confucian to a modern civilization. Terminating the traditional Chinese system of education was a strategic initiative to encourage overseas education in Japan, which was taken as an accepted shortcut to learning western knowledge. Official charters of rewards were also issued as a supplementary measure to encourage the outflow of students to Japan. Students going to Japan reached a peak in 1906, when the number of Chinese students in Tokyo alone amounted to over eight thousand (Liu and Turner 2018).

Meanwhile, the United States became a steady and growing competitive destination for Chinese students, especially after the founding of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship in 1906 and the Tsinghua School for Overseas Education, a specially designed preparatory school in Beijing, in 1911. Aside from the good reputation of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship, based on its competitive selection procedure and high academic standards, the financial support offered by the scholarship itself is considered the most important factor. The establishment of the scholarship, as argued by Michael Hunt
(1972), stemmed from a geopolitical calculation in terms of authorized modern power in the Pacific region.

In the wake of the Boxer incident of 1900, the Qing government signed the Boxer Protocol with the Eight-Nation Alliance. The United States was entitled to a 7.32% share of the indemnity of 450 million taels of fine silver. The following nationwide boycott against American goods in China and the subsequent plunge of American trade gave the Roosevelt Government a hard time. Moreover, Liang Cheng, then Chinese minister to the United States, imposed diplomatic pressure on the Roosevelt Government for the return of the excess of the indemnity (Hunt 1972; Ye 2001). What the American government had to take into account at the same time was the rising power of Japan in the Pacific, with its newly modernized military, industry and education. As a result, Roosevelt announced the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program in 1906. Educating Chinese students in America, Roosevelt envisioned, was “a chance for American-directed reform in China that could maximise the U.S.’s profit by improving U.S.- China relations, bridging China with American culture, and promoting the U.S.’s international image (Hunt 1972)”. As a matter of fact, the number of Chinese students studying in America reached as high as 15,000 to 20,000 during the entire period of the Republic of China. The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program was viewed as, in the words of Ye (2001), “the most important scheme for educating Chinese students in America and arguably the most consequential and successful in the entire foreign-study movement of twentieth century China”.

A new round of nationwide state-channeled educational mobility began in the late 1990s, which is the third wave of educational mobility stemming from another reform of the higher education system in China (Liu and Turner 2018). At the ceremony marking the one-hundredth anniversary of Peking University in May 1998, Jiang Zeming, then general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter the Party), introduced his idea of “advanced universities” to build Chinese domestic equivalents to the Ivy League universities in the United States (Peters and Besley 2018). An official program, subsequently named project 98–5, was institutionalized to offer privileges to elite universities on a variety of dimensions (Han and Fugui 2017). In 2015, a new project called “Double First-Class Universities” was undertaken to further boost the transformation of universities from national elite to world-class status (Peters and Besley 2018). In the authoritarian state of China, the programs require the effort of borrowing and arbitrating foreign ideas, for which the former party-dominated education regime was dismantled to accommodate new members and to construct the transnational education network (Han and Fugui 2017; Peters and Besley 2018; Carney 2009).

Institution reform to lower the bar for transnational higher education is a crucial measure enabling cross-border communications (Han and Fugui 2017; Carney 2009). This process entails sending students/scholars to
institutions overseas and inviting overseas institutions to establish joint universities. This is perhaps best exemplified by Confucian institutes being sent overseas, an endeavor carried out by the Ministry of Education to publicize the Chinese language and Chinese thought. Since the establishment of the first three Confucius Institutes in the United States, South Korea, and Sweden in 2004, a further 548 Confucius Institutes have been established and 1,193 Confucius classes have been conducted in primary schools scattered across 154 counties. The domestic education market is also open to foreign institutions, having witnessed a substantial increase from 2 in 1995 to 1,176 in 2016 (Zhu and Jian 2018). This category includes eight Sino-foreign cooperation universities, including Liverpool-Xi’an Xiaotong University, Nottingham University (Ningbo), New York Shanghai University, Wenzhou-Kean University and Duke Kunshan University. While the outflow of Chinese culture via Confucian schools seems to radiate in all directions, the influx of educational ideas via joint university projects is almost exclusively from the Anglo-American region, and in particular from the United Kingdom and the United States.

**Mobile knowledge**

Given the initial goal of national salvation through subduing enemies by learning from their strong points, educational mobility in the first wave included a narrow attention to technology and technologically advanced countries. Students concentrated on a few subjects, such as English, maritime technology and shipbuilding. With its attention shifted to the Meiji Reform that claimed a successful journey toward western modernity, the mobility to Japan generated completely different interests in academic subjects. Popular subjects ranged from education, law, medicine and politics to military science, largely pursued by political dissidents such as Sun Yat-sen and his colleagues (Liu and Turner 2018). Areas of interest were gradually further broadened among students in the United States. Students were widely scattered, from the sciences to the humanities and social sciences, where they encountered a clash of civilizations, from the idea of liberalism to the Westphalian conception of a modern state (Ye 2001; Davies 2009). Directed by its special agenda of projecting Chinese universities onto the global stage, the third wave of educational mobility has been more active in borrowing and promoting global ranking systems, allowing Chinese universities to be assessed against their overseas counterparts (Peters and Besley 2018; Carney 2009). Examples include the indexes of World University Rankings (Times Higher Education) and the THE-QS Ranking from the United Kingdom, and with them the technology of performance-based governance. The national Twelfth Five-Year Guidelines on Science and Technology Development (hereafter The Guideline) formally institutionalized the culture of auditing. In the language of governing by
numbers, The Guideline published the national criteria for the evaluation of 4,166 discipline-schools in 363 higher education institutions in China “to turn China into one of the top five countries in terms of aggregated scientific paper citations” (Tian, Yan, and Xin 2016). The new performance-oriented technology of governance thus formally throws thousands of Chinese intellectuals into a survival game of either publishing on English Journals or perishing.

**The tangled flow of research and practice**

What illustrates the enormous impact of educational mobility is the mentality and practices of Chinese students, and through them the development of higher education and research, which account for the overall “modernisation” of China (Davies 2009). Debates surrounding how to treat western ideas and Chinese thoughts have been going on ever since. Advocates of western theories underlined the “ice-cold reasoning” of EuroAmerican scholarship, which “liberated them from their previous captivity to an empiricist mode of inquiry (Davies 2009, 36)”. Others, however, warned about China’s civilizational decline in the asymmetric power relations between the West, depicted as advanced, and China, depicted as a land of darkness. The latter rejects western theories almost completely, tracing back to vernacular Chinese wisdom the uncrossable epistemological parity between China and the West. The moral request of a nationalist vision, namely, “how to restore Chinese scholarship to a state of health sufficient to make it globally relevant (Davies 2009)”, has burdened Chinese intellectuals for generations.

The learning/teaching experience of Chinese student/returnee intellectuals itself, however, is too embedded in the transnational flows of various things, from techniques, values and theories, to military forces and imported goods. As Lu (1973, 29) perceptibly noted, what the Chinese encountered were not only western thoughts but also “England’s opium, Germany’s cast-off weapons … France’s perfume, America’s movies, and all sorts of small stuff from Japan stamped ‘100% Domestic Product’”. What is more pertinent to the mobility of things in the asymmetric power relationship is perhaps the tangled flows of knowledge generation and practices, both of which serve each other. While we acknowledge that the transnational trade of goods is to be enhanced by an unequal power of knowledge, there is “an element of truth to this characterisation in that being exposed to U.S. or other ‘Western’ training leaves its mark on the thinking as well as professional practices of its students” (Bilgin 2008, 13). How Chinese has practiced in development, industrialization and urbanization bears the feature of hybridity and complexity (Dielik 2007). If knowledge production is to explain social, political and economic practices, there must be generic elements across different locations, as no practice in any location evolves in isolation. Embedded in the tangled flow of knowledge and practices,
genuine knowledge of China is not radically different, but rather something almost the same but not quite.

In this context, Lu Xun coined the term “grabbism” (拿来主义) to “exhort his readers to exercise intellectual rigor in adopting foreign ideas (Bilgin 2008, 24)”. Lu (1973) argues for the subjectivity and autonomy of intellectuals, such that “we should use our brains, open our eyes outward, and take things ourselves!” Through a proactive and selective choosing and assessing, Chinese intellectuals have the options of “either use it, leave it, or destroy it (29)”. “Grabbism”, perhaps paves the roads toward an “habitual appropriation of Western theory in the instrumentalist sense of its value to Chinese thought” among Chinese critical intellectuals in the following decades (Davies 2009; Wang 2011).

**The mimicking intellectuals: scholarship on shanzhai**

The Chinese practice of shanzhai is valuable here to explore the tanged flows of knowledge and practices in relation to mimicry. Shanzhai, or known as the discourse of “China fake”, is an umbrella term that encompasses an enormous variety of economic, social, cultural and developmental activities, from shanzhai electronics, shanzhai films, to the shanzhai spring festival gala (Chubb 2014). Actually, the expression “China fake” may simplify the meaning of shanzhai. When shanzhai is deployed, as an adjective, noun or verb, to define particular activities of copying, it highlights a deliberate effort to make the mimicry almost the same as its model, but not quite. Shanzhai illustrates resemblance between mimic and model, but with differences that are easily discernible. Therefore, what’s more, evident in almost all cases is the asymmetric power relationship, in which the shanzhai product is assessed as being of lower quality, informal, underground, unauthorized, subordinated. The practice of shanzhai witnessed a surge of academic attention in the late 2000s and has since been explored by scholars in the great China region, eventually catching the attention of Anglo-American scholars.

**Use it: distinguishing state, society and capital in globalization**

Beginning with the purported accusation of a fake Ferrari made in China that spread quickly in the media, Hong Kong scholar Pang (2009, 2012, 2008, 2005) interrogates the myth of “China fake” rhetoric. Pang frames her study with German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s conceptual argument on aura and mimes, allowing her to differentiate between two territorial actors who fear global capitalism: western enterprises, which view China as a huge market and “a major competitor that does not necessarily play by the rules” (Pang 2008, 120), and China, which is “keen on becoming a major player in the new economy” and hence “internalised this pirate image” (121). She then continues her interrogation through appropriating another German philosopher, Adorno
and Rabinbach (1975), and his assertion that copying is an inherent part of industrial production crucial to the profitability of the creative economy; thus, the concern is by who and where. Pang (123) goes on to argue that “the West fears China’s copying power, while China is concerned that it can only copy”. In this context, China, the state, chooses to respect the global authority of the capitalist rules to legitimize its own eligibility to join the game, merely to shift the burden to the Chinese people. In the commentary piece reacting to the Ferrari case in the China Daily, the commentator urged ordinary Chinese to “help China by not making and buying fakes (121)”.  

In her book Walking Between Slums and Skyscrapers, Taiwanese geographer Tsung-Yi Huang (2004) examines copying as an urban development phenomenon. Calling Shanghai “a copy of global city”, Huang scrutinizes the official behavior of planning well-recognized global cities, which entail “nice airports, prime-site business districts, and a large variety of leisure establishments . . . [in the eyes of] multinational business people” (Sassen1996, p.220). The idea is to build a global image of Shanghai, as if it was a symbolic reflection of Manhattan, by “Manhattanising Pudong”. In her interview, the Shanghai officials in the planning department explained: “It [Lujiazui] will be the CBD [central business district] of Pudong, and the new CBD of Shanghai. It is to be developed as the Manhattan of Shanghai (Huang 2004, 180)”. This research, through the lens of French sociologist Henry Lefebvre’s (1991) three triads of space, argues for the fetishized power of planning and its deceiving power of fostering a city spectacle for its inhabitants. Similar to Pang’s study on how the transfer of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) to the Chinese population nurtured a collective of consumer–citizens who buy IPR-certified products to feel part of the global civilization process, the study by Huang unravels that copying urban landscapes in western global cities fosters an atmospheric setting for urban dwellers, who feel as if they have also become global citizens and are living their life as such (Rofel 2007). As Huang (2004, 189) wrote, “we feel able, from within everyday life, to reach out and grasp it, as though nothing lay between us and the marvelous reality on the other side of the mirror”.

**Leave it: gaze upon the shanzhai folks**

More in-depth studies on society have been carried out by scholars who cast their gaze on a wide variety of industrial sectors, for example, trade painting (Wong and Yin 2010; Wang and Si-Ming 2017; Wang 2016; Wang and Yan 2018), shanzhai spring festival galas (Zhang and Fung 2013), shanzhai electric appliances (Chubb 2014), and, most recently, start-ups in smart industries (Lindtner 2014).

The year 2008 witnessed the growing popularity of the practice of shanzhai among the general public and subsequent comments by mainland scholars in newspaper reports or special columns. What has fueled the debates on shanzhai might be traced back to two events: the shanzhai film *A Murder Caused by a Steamed Bun* and its model *The Promise*, and the shanzhai spring festival gala.
and its model the spring festival gala hosted by the China Central Television channel. To the surprise of the Party-supervised mass media, mainland scholars, from Zhu Dake, Zhang Yiwu, to Xie Xizhang, ascribed the practice of *shanzhai* to a grassroots long-repressed cultural production and consumption and subsequently urged the state to exercise tolerance. Zhu Dake argues for another interpretation of “grabbism” by Lu Xun, which underlines the active re-appropriation of economic and cultural authority for diverse local purposes. Zhang Yiwu draws a parallel with the folk novel “Outlaws of the Marsh” (*Shuihu Zhuan*), in which *shanzhai* initially appeared. Literally meaning “mountain fortress”, *shanzhai* refers to a self-established fortress constructed by a collective of 108 warriors who were either persecuted or marginalized by the royal court during the Song Dynasty. Therefore, when the term *shanzhai* suddenly gained currency in cultural consumption, it was not deployed to refer to plagiarism or replication. Rather, *shanzhai* implies resistance to and rebellion against authority and perhaps depicts a utopian dream of the subordinated.

The images of *shanzhai* artists and makers are multifaceted, comprising such topics as divisions and hierarchies of labor (Wong and Yin 2010), (self-)exploitations and alienations (Wang and Yan 2018), rural migrant workers, poverty and precariousness, sex inequalities (Wong and Yin 2010), and, most of all, the ever-lasting disciplinary power of “authenticity” (Wang and Yan 2018; Wang 2016; Wong and Yin 2010; Wang and Chen 2019). Through her ethnographic work at a Vincent van Gogh specialty workshop, Wong and Yin (2010) challenge the separation of painting labor from conceptual labor, which has its roots in the western definition of creativity. Wong further questions the dichotomy whereby Chinese officials believe that “China is a totalitarian society made up of automatons who make and consume copies, whereas the West is made up of liberal and free-thinking individuals who create and collect original things (9)”. Nevertheless, in the eyes of Chinese officials, the image of *shanzhai* artists is contingent on how it is perceived in the West (Wang 2016). After *Time* magazine named Chinese workers, in particular Shenzhen migrant workers, as one of the four runners-up in their “Person of the Year” award in 2009, the Shenzhen government chose Dafen migrant trade painters to showcase the Shenzhen spirit at Shanghai EXPO2010. The design of the Shenzhen Pavilion evokes a narrative of the innovative and entrepreneurial migrant workers whose image appeals to the neoliberal idea of self-responsible individuals brought to China by creative gurus such as Richard Florida and Charles Landry.

Theories that lend their conceptual lens to this strand of studies are usually from the postcolonial or poststructuralist schools, which question the imperial hegemony of western-distilled theories. The conceptual reflection of postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Rey Chow, Aihwa Ong and Anna Tsing has been appreciated for their own indulged experience in the contact zone where West meets East. Mainland Chinese scholars, from Zhang
Yiwu to Zhu Dake, move beyond the postcolonial theories to Chinese history, unraveling the repeated occurrence of events. The focused attention to *shanzhai* folks foregrounds the concept of terrain, on which the tension is between the ruggers who disrespect the rules of the authority and the authority that exercises a technology of discipline by borrowing foreign symbolic power from afar. Critical as they are, there is an element of truth in the idea that geographic delimitation might confine them to street politics in a relatively isolated territory, whereas the impact from the outside world remains in the background.

**Delete it: theorizing *shanzhai***

An effort to theorize *shanzhai* is emerging among studies on China fake by a few leading experts from the West. Through their participatory work in *shanzhai* production in Chinese cities, American computational specialists Lyn Jeffery, Silvia Lindtner, Anna Greenspan, and David Li (Lindtner 2015; Lindtner and Lin 2017) use the term *shanzhai* as an alternative model to capture the “less formal manufacturing ecosystem comprised of a horizontal web of component producers, traders, design solution houses, vendors, and assembly lines” (Lindtner 2015, 4). They argue that the *shanzhai* model of production may bridge critical gaps in the participatory design model now widely promoted in the West because the latter ironically denies the legitimated roles of factory workers, producers and mechanical engineers in the so-called democratization of the production processes. The *shanzhai* model, instead, provides room for full participation through sharing, such as by using a public board or public mold, and thus intervenes in the des-killing of labor. Moreover, *shanzhai* is also a means of devaluing the big brands and bringing similar, but much more affordable, products to those at the bottom of society who are usually blocked by the digital divide. *Shanzhai*, in the words of Lindtner and her colleagues (2015, 4), has the spirit of Robin Hood and “is a bit of an outlaw, but [it’s] really about autonomy, independence, and very progressive survival techniques”.

In a similar manner, de Kloet and Scheen (2013) use *shanzhai* city to redefine what Huang (2010) calls “the copy of global cities”. Pudong might be more than a copy of Manhattan. Through foreigner lenses, Pudong is “a statist monument for a dead pharaoh (the late Deng Xiaoping) on the level of the pyramids” to Milton Friedman (de Kloet and Scheen 2013, 9) and “future cities” to Paris Hilton, and “Manhattan on acid” or “Manhattan on steroids” 2013. Such drug-oriented analogies unravel “how the alleged ‘fake’ Manhattan has actually surpassed its ‘real’ prototype”, as summarized by de Kloet and Scheen (2013, 9). The phenomenon of Pudong – “build it and they really come!” – challenges the model of global cities that have been distilled from Manhattan. After a critical appraisal of the generic city by Rem Koolhaas and fake globalization by Abbas, de Kloet and
Scheen argue that *shanzhai* is perhaps the proper concept to capture complex urbanization. As a hybrid, *shanzhai* comprises multiple layers, for example, grabbism with a rogue spirit, resemblance with a desire for emergence, creation of alternatives, and open challenges of established norms. De Kloet and Scheen thus argue that *shanzhai* offers an approach to avoiding a validation of the alleged original (Chow 1990) and a justification of the global regime of copyright (Pang 2005), and allows all ordinary cities to be treated equally (Robinson 2002), which “recuperates the locality, fluidity and peculiarity of the global city” (de Kloet and Scheen 2013, 15).

**Geopolitical terrain of knowledge circulation**

Through the three instances of citation behavior, namely, “using it, leaving it, deleting it” (Lu 1973), western theories have been disseminated through the academic citation networks and made visible in the knowledge generated about Chinese cities, while an interrogation of shanzhai against Chinese history eventually paves the way toward a theorization of shanzhai and its dissemination beyond China. Articles by American scholar Lindtner are published in China Information and CoDesign: International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts, and that by Dutch scholars de Kloet and Scheen is published in the European Journal of Cultural Studies. Knowledge eventually circulates back to the West. The three instances of “using it, leaving it, and deleting it” illustrate the journey of theorization by the Other, which must be read through two tangled mimicries of research and practice (Parnell and Pieterse 2016): the situate agency of both is embedded in, and in return reshape, the circulation of people, capital, ideas and geopolitical-economic interests (Bilgin 2008; Roy and Ong 2011).

**The almost same: flow of ideas, capital and population in the uneven geography of authority**

Neither the East nor the West has been evolving in isolation. Instead, both regions are connected by multiple flows of human and non-human things in the long history of urbanization. As Robinson (2016a) maintains, this “might be thought of as genetic, tracing the interconnected genesis of repeated, related but distinctive, urban outcomes”. The historically accumulated asymmetric power between western civilization and the East has its material impact on the geography of authority in knowledge production, exemplified by the educational mobility of Chinese students toward Europe, Japan and America, and through their return, the impact of western-style industrial practice and urbanization in China. While the western impact on the modern education system in China has been widely acknowledged, it is rarely linked to the further impact on the practices of development and urbanization in China. As a matter of fact, the majority of students work in the industry after their return; therefore, what they
have encountered in their overseas experiences, from knowledge to socialization, has an impact on the daily operation of development and urbanization (Ye 2001; Wang and Wang 2018). This is also true for students educated in the modern education system in China, which, as Davis explains, has been largely created based on western knowledge and foreign coinages. The behavior of learning and using western concepts by Chinese people is not be confined within the domain of higher education. It is the application of western ideas to the process of urbanization in China, by both returned students and home-bred students, that gives birth to something generic in urbanization process of the world of cities. The entanglement of education and practice matters (Hae 2017).

The domination of western ontologies and epistemologies helps to establish the authority of western countries in the domain of higher education, which not only promotes their education industry alone but promotes particular ways of industrial practices and urbanization in general. As articulated by Theodor Adorno, how modernization is practiced concerns profitability by who and where. Roosevelt’s narrative is even more straightforward: “bridging China with American culture … will maximise the U.S.’s profit” (cited in Hunt 1972, 545). The western-style practice of development and urbanization in China enables the flow of capital in a particular direction. In the case of the alleged fake Ferrari, transnationally mobile capital must “coerce China to play by international rules” to smooth its journey toward the Chinese market (Pang 2012). What’s more, the impact of western-style modernization on the practice of development in China is also evidenced by the strategic appropriation of the western idea of authority construction itself. The promotion of Double First-Class universities by Jiang Zeming might be another distant copy of Roosevelt-style geopolitical strategy, with an expectation of articulating China-directed modernization. Given these repeated, related urban outcomes across interconnected locations, endeavors to theorize Chinese urbanization as something completely vernacular, or radically different, will probably be in vain. Rather, understanding Chinese urbanization is to situate China in the broader interconnected world of territories, acknowledge the cross-border flow of things that has been enabled by differentiate multiple territorial actors.

**The not quite: situated agency that embodies opposition**

There is the “not quite” part in both academic and industrial practices, which might loom large. In her book *Creativity and Its Discontents*, Pang (2012, 24) defends her focus on the case of China fake, which is viewed as too particular to generalize theoretically:

If my focus on China is seen as a particular case study, the numerous and transient (anti)creative acts taking place in China and their products are particulars of a particular, whose theoretical values, so to speak, are ostensibly even lower. However, these small acts and objects attract my attention not just because they
manifest the failure of the dominant ideological structure, but because they also embody the most radical structure of opposition …

In interviews by the party-supported media, mainland scholars from Zhang Yiwu to Zhu Dake bypass western concepts and reorient their arguments to Chinese history, unraveling the repeated occurrence of events and the norm of time as circular in Chinese thought. Such a narrative situates the globally mobile discourse of China fake to the vector of Chinese history, unraveling the hidden threads of *shanzhai* that cuts through the recurrence of events, namely, the resemblance to “Outlaws of the Marsh”, *shanzhai* electronics, *shanzhai* film, and trade painters and makers, among others. Digging deep into the history of China, the temporal dimension brings out an imperative factor that is usually ignored in the globally mobile discourse of China fake: the mocking play of mimesis and, behind it, the resistance of the subordinated.

The power of mimicry materializes when it poses an imminent threat to both “normalised” knowledge and disciplinary power. Despite its often-elusive political subversions, the core of *shanzhai* rests on the initiative to emerge and participate in official political, economic, social or cultural spheres (Chubb 2014; de Kloet and Scheen 2013; Zhang and Fung 2013). To achieve that goal, *shanzhai-ing* frequently leads to relentless interactions, negotiations and struggles between the ruler and the subordinated, the powerful and the powerless, the mainstream and the sub-cultural (Zhang and Fung 2013), including but not restricted to a spatial dichotomy of the colonizer and colonized, the Global North and Global South, and the Global West and Global East (Roy and Ong 2011). In that sense, it is no wonder that Anglo-American scholars find the concept valuable, as the hybridity of *shanzhai* explains the variegated encounters between flows and situated aspirations and practices (Roy and Ong 2011; Wang, Oakes, and Yang 2016). Scholars have revealed that *shanzhai* entails multiple layers, from resemblance to subversion (Chubb 2014; Zhang and Fung 2013), while the *shanzhai* global city may be a valuable field to reveal the situated urbanization of worlding cities (de Kloet and Scheen 2013).

Indeed, the concept of mimicry has been found of utility to explore alternative ways of practices by individuals, communities and political organizations as a strategy of survival, and perhaps emergence, in a world with established regulation and norms (McConnell, Moreau, and Dittmer 2012). This brings out another issue of mimicry – namely, the wide variety of actors and their variegated interests. The aspiration to emerge and participate in global political, economic and cultural activities has propelled not only the subordinated but also the government apparatus to exercise mimicry. The endeavors of Chinese critical scholars to explore alternative practices, through Lu Xun’s principled approach of grabbism, might as well feed into the state salvation program of “subduing the enemies by learning from their strong points” (Ye 2001; Davies 2009; Liu and Turner 2018). China’s official agenda of Double-First Class Universities legitimizes itself as a state-led endeavor to compete against western hegemony and to “reshape the global higher education
landscape” (Lo and Wai 2011). Thus, the endeavors of intellectuals to restore Chinese scholarship might be frequently veiled by state actions for the emergence of a sovereign power. Frequently, the state construction of China-directed modernism casts shadows on the intellectual interventions of Chinese scholars. A reversed flow of knowledge, that is, the dissemination of Chinese thoughts to the West, might be interpreted as a nationalist vision to “assume a position of global authority equal to and perhaps even exceeding its Western counterpart” (Davies 2009, 8). However, the fact that efforts to theorize shanzhai were taken up by Anglo-American scholars might render the assumption plausible. The moral request of nationalism, in this case, might be used somewhat conveniently to comment on the outflow of Chinese concepts.

Conclusion

The call to provincialize theories, distilled from the West or from the East, requires a repositioning of area studies whereby all regional works must be treated as subjects of analysis in their own right (Gentile 2018; Robinson 2002; Borén and Young 2016). Hence, the Global East proposes to read through areas as part of the global sphere where epistemological and ontological endeavors distilled from all areas become ordinary regional knowledge (Chan et al. 2018; Müller 2018). To understand the nature of scholarly conversation, we propose an approach that integrates mimicry and circulation of knowledge to study the geographies of knowledge flows in terms of who enables and how. The study of Chinese scholars must be traced back to historical asymmetric power relations between east and west civilizations and the entangled flows of people, knowledge and political-economic interests. Institutional and individual networks have been constructed to mobilize western ideas and Chinese concepts to serve the emergence of China, whereas the question of how, or in what manners, helps unravel the different meanings of the geopolitical terrain of knowledge circulation.

We argue that mimicry is multifaceted and multidirectional. The networking and mimicry approach foregrounds transnational links and the geopolitics of knowledge and representation. Rather than confirming a hegemonic force that places Chinese scholars in roles as mere followers, our investigation into the circulation of knowledge reveals heterogeneous attempts at mimicking and grabbing by actors working on multiple scales. The point of using mimicry is not to limit this study to postcolonial countries, but for the concept’s utility to provide more room for the agency of the colonized, the subordinated, the marginalized in the recognized asymmetrical power relationship.
Notes

4. At the time, this was equal to US$335 million gold dollars.

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