Chapter 8

Shifting Territorialities of an African Space in China

Karsten Giese and Kelly Si Miao Liang

Introduction

Territorialisation in a globalising world has provoked much theorisation at the crossroads of human geography and political science since the late 1990s (Ruggie 1993; Brenner 1998; Anderson and O’Dowd 1999; Elden 2006). In the effort to overcome the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994) that has plagued modern social sciences by imposing an invisible but omnipresent state-centric conceptualisation of the social world, scholars have reflected on the historicity and formation of nation-state territories as a political reality (Elden 2010, 2013). A critical approach emerged based on Foucault’s writings on governmentality (Foucault 2009) and Soja’s analysis of the behavioural aspects of boundary-making (Soja 1971, 2005). Instead of understanding territory as a static, bounded and uniform space encircled by state borders, we need to adopt a conceptualisation of territory as a political technology controlling not only land and terrain but also the bodily spaces of its human subjects regardless of their geographical location within or outside of state boundaries (Elden 2010, 13).

The increasingly frequent and widespread movements of people, capital and goods have created various forms of transnational flows challenging the pertinence of understanding state borders in the conventional static way. Such time-space compression (Harvey 1990), however, did not simply result in de-territorialisation. Rather, mechanisms of reterritorialisation are also at work producing new bodies of authority and more flexible political technologies governing space and people under their influence while continually transforming conventional political economic government entities (Brenner 1999, 2004). Contrary to the claim that mankind has entered a post-nation-state era (Ohmae 1995), territoriality still permeates every facet of our social life but is now governed differently with more actors and influences active at scales beside the national level. Not only are transnational institutions, regional organisations, non-governmental organisations increasingly influential, sub-national authorities have also come to acquire more decisive roles in various highly globalised

Sassen (2013, 23) takes this argument further by asserting that associating territory-making solely with the state’s sovereign authority is a “misalignment” (see also Sassen 2008; Agnew 2005). Neoliberal policies and market mechanisms do not exist in a borderless world; instead they have created space for a host of non-nation-state players to remake and redefine borders, including international institutions, transnational firms, sub-national and regional organisations and even individual actors. Underlying these changes are new global social phenomena so that the state’s territorial jurisdiction is challenged by the rise of places and issues outside of control of the nation-state, while new types of borders, not necessarily political or administrative, are intersecting and undercutting traditional interstate boundaries.

Recent theoretical progress on territoriality has been applied mostly to large-scale social phenomena such as regional political economic integration (Heeg and Ossenbrügge 2002; Brenner 2004), post-Fordist neo-liberalisation of developed countries (Arrighi 1999; Peck and Tickell 2003; Sassen 2003) and interdependence of territoriality and extra-territoriality (Comaroff 2007; Opitz and Tellmann 2012). Applications on a smaller scale remain few, but they are no less relevant for understanding the multiplayer and multi-scalar nature of 21st century territoriality.

In this chapter we do not focus on supra-national actors and their impacts on territoriality. Rather we take the opposite approach and concentrate on a miniscule urban space and the social actors that have constructed it as an “African” place in China. Although the sub-Saharan African population in the area covered by our study is highly diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, and class, among others, such differences are hardly recognised, acknowledged or referred to by the large majority of Chinese host society actors in the field. Hence “African-ness” serves as a common denominator for “black people” (hei ren) who are generally perceived as sharing a specific set of characteristics: behavioural practices and bodily movements, economic and social demands, and the timing of daily routines that are experienced as contrasting with local “Chinese” realities. By using the term “African” we wish to preserve this widespread essentialisation of the various groups of sub-Saharan Africans by the imagined Chinese Self in this area.

Through the analytical looking glass our focus will be the various layers of overlapping and conflicting territorial orders that have shaped the everyday life of numerous transnational actors. Central to the Xiaobei neighbourhood