Carlos Rojas and Ralph A. Litzinger (eds.)

In the opening line of this edited volume, readers are told—paraphrasing Marx—that a spectre haunts contemporary China. Rojas articulates the haunting is multiple: the “ghosts of capital, shades of Mao, and spectres of Marx” (p. 4). Capitalism, which began as an “experiment” in localised regions during the earliest days of post-1979 economic reforms, has now permeated the country as omnipresence. It is celebrated as development, modernity and credited for mass poverty uplifting. On a global scale, China has already surpassed Japan as the second largest economy in 2010. While protectionist and anti-globalisation platforms have “seized” (or are in the midst of doing so) electoral politics in Europe and the United States, President Xi Jinping assures that China remains a strong advocate and initiator of globalism. Within China, capitalist production has wreaked severe environmental and food pollution, widening socioeconomic inequality and, to varying degrees, contributing to widespread discontent or outright social unrest amongst the disenfranchised. In spite of the deepening of capitalist processes, institutional legacies of Maoist China or what Rojas termed the “shades of Mao” have lingered; for example, the hukou (household registration), which remains a factor in furthering inequality under the capitalist order. Referencing Derrida, the convergence of effects—both by the capitalist present and a socialist past—invokes Marx to haunt; or specifically, necessitates a “critical Marxist analysis” in order to generate emancipatory possibilities (p. 3).

Utilising “protocols” as an investigative apparatus, the chapters in Ghost Protocol illuminate the intersections of global capitalist development and the enduring legacies of Maoist China, as well as the structural contradictions which arise. Rojas defines “protocols” as “discrete practices and procedures” that generate both real-life consequences and imaginaries interpellating subjects into an ideological consensus with the demands of capitalist development (pp. 6–7). On the other hand, the contradictions between reality as experienced and imagined worlds imbue protocols with subversive potential. Thus, “protocols” function as an analytic tool that is much needed to imagine (future) emancipatory possibilities to be realised. The chapters are categorised under three themes: (i) urbanisation, (ii) structural reconfigurations, and (iii) migration and shifting identities. Each chapter focuses on respective protocols, such as the logic of urban development, energy production, legal regulations or religious/moral order; in what ways they are haunted by forces of capital and socialism, and the contradictions that are consequently produced.
Studying the spectral, ghosts and haunting is in psychoanalytic tradition to bring forth the invisible: That which is unseen but experienced as real and powerfully so (Gordon, 2008:42). This quality of absence-presence is what causes the haunted great anxiety. How does one resolve what is unseen, but which impact is present, real and observable? Ghost Protocol could have benefited from a more thorough conceptual discussion. Furthermore, they are positioned as central to the analysis but are given an uneven treatment across the chapters. In Yomi Braester’s analysis of Lu Hao’s art installation, titled Duplicated Memories, the spectral is visually present. The past—Old City gates demolished in the remaking of Beijing as a global city—is a transparent structure that hovers over a transport map of contemporary Beijing laid on the ground. It is a literal haunting. In Robin Visser’s chapter on China’s latest formulation of eco-cities as the new developmental strategy, what haunts is unfulfilled aspirations of the greening of urban governance. Rhetorically presented as eco-technology, green spaces and sustainable futures, Visser argues—through her case studies—that these centralised plans are more often conjuring acts to attract foreign investment. Those displaced spatially and economically serve as reminders that the “greening” of urban planning is merely—to reference David Harvey—accumulation through dispossession. In addition, the ecological footprint incurred to construct these new cities has worsened environmental conditions, threatening the very “sustainable future” it promises. As pointed out by the author, eco-cities like Lingang in Shanghai and the Tianjin Eco-City have seemingly joined the ranks of China’s notorious “ghost cities” like Ordos in Inner Mongolia: Neither attracting the foreign capital it aspires to, nor a critical mass of residents necessary for urban vitality (Lingang New City was renamed as Nanhui New City in April 2012). The unrealised global future these eco-cities represent thus haunts the materiality of built cities, awaiting its realisation; if ever. The absence-presence of the spectral is well-utilised in both Braester and Visser’s chapters.

In other chapters, this quality of the absence-presence is not clearly articulated. Also, it is debatable if utilising the “spectral” adds conceptual value to the analysis. For example, in Kabzung and Emily T. Yeh’s research on Tibetan yak herders, the religious-moral order has been reconfigured to converge and complement local developmental protocol. “Modernist” Buddhist leaders now preach for slaughter renunciation; herders are to “modernise” through educating themselves and their children. Wage labour or entrepreneurship are promoted since livestock slaughter is avoided: A moral dictate that transforms a pastoral subject to one of capitalist modernity. The industrialisation of yak herding is perceived as “sinful” by religious leaders. On the contrary, the local government’s idea of modernisation is participation in the yak herding indus-