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The End of Postcommunism? The Beginning of a Supercommunism? China's New Perspective

Abstract: Some scholars think that the term postcommunism is now useless because the outcomes of transition in the former state-socialist European countries have been consolidated. However, ongoing transformation in China, particularly the recent return of the influence of the state in both economic and social welfare domains, makes this country a specific model of “transition” that negates the end-of-postcommunism thesis. I argue that even after more than two decades of moving away from the classical socialist system, postcommunism is not a redundant concept. Instead, for comparative research on East Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, recognizing the past of actually existing socialism as well as its legacies would considerably contribute to our understanding of countries’ diverse trajectories and performances.

Keywords: postcommunism; super-communism; comparative analysis; China.

Introduction: The Crisis in Comparative Sociological Studies of Postcommunism

Gone are the days when the subject of “postcommunism” was a flourishing public platform for sociologists around the world to discuss pressing theoretical and empirical issues they were facing in the 1990s, particularly those who studied Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and East Asia (EA). The comparative sociological research of postcommunism is now in crisis. In Central and Eastern Europe, postcommunism has been declared dead. A large number of Chinese sociologists, including some eminent scholars who were active in the study of European postcommunism during the 1990s, are now focusing almost exclusively on Chinese domestic issues. For them there is no need to take the initiative to keep themselves up-to-date on what is happening in normalized CEE countries—though Russia might be an exception. As renowned scholar of Eastern Europe studies, Yan Jin wrote in an *Economic Observer* column: “It seemed that even those so-called well-informed persons had shifted their interests to elsewhere; for Eastern Europe, ‘no news is good news’” (Jin 2009: 13). Overall, the intellectual interaction between domestic Chinese and European-American scholars of postcommunism is strikingly insufficient.

How has this happened? The underlying crux of the crisis of postcommunist sociological study comes to a larger extent from intellectual indifference—a large number of researchers think the comparison between East Asian and Eastern Europe

today is much less intellectually exciting and intriguing than they were two decades ago. For Chinese scholars and students, transformation in postcommunist Europe is believed to be settled; thus there would be no strong demand to compare these “former socialist comrades” to transitional societies. In other words, as one of my colleagues put it, “If the European former socialist countries have become a consolidated part of the West, why bother to focus on these small countries, smaller than a province in China?”¹

Post-postcommunism: A European Bias?

With the fall of Soviet Union in 1991, the era of postcommunism spread over Eurasia. Two decades later, as people celebrate or mourn the end of all the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, some scholars have been suggesting for years that postcommunism itself is also coming to an end. András Bozóki has maintained that “just as neither Germany nor Italy were called postfascist countries in 1960, fifteen years after the Second World War, so Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have shed the title of postcommunist states, fifteen years after Communism fell” (Bozoki 2005: 34). And he is neither the first nor the last to share this idea (Gross and Tismaneanu 2005; Holmes 2001; King 2000; Kubicek 2009).

What exactly does the word “postcommunism” mean?² Literally, it is a negative concept: an economic system understood through the termination of its past (Zolkos 2004) or by “what preceded it rather than by what it actually is” (Stroehlein 1999: 11). In this sense, postcommunism is a timeless term, because it indicates the death of the communist system and a shift toward “a more open and ‘discursive’ type of politics” (Sakwa 1999: 1). Hence, it might not be off base to argue that we can use this term as for long as we like unless these countries become communist again. Postcommunism also has the connotation of a transient “dissolution of order” (Staniszkis 1992: 16).

Therefore, it is reasonable to coin an appropriate term for the time-point at which the transitional course is finally over. To some social scientists, that day comes when European postcommunist countries become “normal.” And here we have the first def-

¹ Due to language impediments, Chinese sociologists, and perhaps the whole Chinese intelligentsia as well, rely heavily on English or translated materials to get up-to-date information on Central and Eastern Europe. Some senior researchers learned Russian in high schools, but almost none of them, to my knowledge, have kept up the skill. Ignorance about Central and Eastern Europe occurs once the “mainstream” media stop paying close attention to the area and researchers fail to keep themselves updated. In 2009, however, reports on Central and Eastern Europe became torrential again, almost exclusively focusing on the fiscal crisis of these economies and sometimes produced as propaganda for the “successful” Chinese way to build a socialist market economy. This state-orchestrated journalism could not stimulate real academic research for the long term.

² The term “postcommunism” of course has a subtly different connotation than “postsocialism.” I personally dislike the label “communism” because it sometimes involves negative ideological connotations. A more neutral term like “state socialism” (Szelényi 1978) or “classical socialism” (Kornai 1992) would be more preferable. But still, the terms “postcommunism” and “postsocialism” are used in this article for building a platform for discussions of substantial issues. In addition, these two words, as well as other similar terms like “post-Soviet,” are interchangeable in my article, because after all, they are talking about the real, existing socialism rather than a utopian system that so far has only existed in textbooks.

ition of the *end* of postcommunism—the end of transition. In the case of the former socialist countries, the starting point of the transition was communism, and the end point was market and democracy of a Western type. What underpins this statement is an evolutionary mode of the globalization-as-convergence thesis, that is, the process of globalization would generate a single homogenous world capitalist system. To advocates of this idea, communism (in Central and Eastern Europe and/or Eurasia)³ was merely an interlude (for a refutation of this position, see Wallerstein 1999). Once the normalization has been achieved and has stabilized, the long transition is over; the new problems of the region are not transitional matters anymore.

This argument sounds plausible, particularly for the EU-10, the ten post-socialist states that completed the accession process to the European Union from 2004 to 2007: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania. In addition, Eastern Germany can, in some sense, can be included for consideration (Slomczynski and Shabad 1998). Slomczynski and Shabad make a point that in the 1990s the situation of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania was quite different than other former European republics of the former Soviet Union (Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova) and European non-Soviet communist countries the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania. Still the situation of Slovenia, as a part of the former Yugoslavia was different than the rest of the EU-10.

One influential scheme sets out three major indicators of the success of transition: (1) (stabilized) liberal democracy; (2) an (institutionalized) market economy; and in some cases, (3) a clearly demarcated political community and national identity.⁴ Theorists of normalization suggested that the EU enlargement in 2004 was a landmark that has brought the EU-8 to a new stage in its development, a stage that could be interpreted as the end of postcommunism (Bozoki 2005). They would probably extend this suggestion to the entire EU-10 as well.

However, a large number of scholars disagree. They claim that postcommunism should not be framed as a transition that represents a temporal, unilinear, and teleological model of social change; instead, what exist in the real world are complex,

³ To distinguish between Central Europe and Eastern Europe would be intellectually beneficial for understanding the current configuration of European postcommunism. During the Cold War, the label “Eastern Europe” basically applied to the formerly communist European states outside the Soviet Union, and was more or less synonymous with the term “Eastern bloc.” This definition is outdated because countries across the region have been on vastly different trajectories out of state socialism. The variously defined term “Central Europe” has come back into fashion. For most scholars, this is not a purely geographical name, but a political and socioeconomic concept defined by different stages of marketization and/or democratization. In this paper, following the idea of Ivan Szelényi (2008), I use the term “Central Europe” to describe the EU-10 countries, while “Eastern Europe” refers to Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. It is disputable how to classify the countries of the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans. Arguably, as they join the European Union, they are shifting from Eastern to Central Europe. In this paper, they are temporally categorized as “Eurasia postcommunist countries,” a concept that also encompasses Mongolia and former socialist countries in Central Asia.

⁴ In addition to this “triple transitions” scheme (Offe 1991), there is another dimension: a transition from a rank society to a socially stratified class society (Eyal et al. 2003). This dimension, which focuses on the change of social structure, is a typically sociological concern. Due to space constraints, however, I will not discuss it in this article. Issues of comparative analysis on class formation in postcommunism merit their own article.

multidirectional, heterogeneous, indeterminate, and even back-and-forth dynamics. Sometimes, they would prefer the term “transformation” which has fewer teleological implications than “transition” (Bridger and Pine 1998; Pickles and Smith 1998). For some scholars, the “return to diversity” rather than the “return to the West” provides a legitimate reason to abandon this useless idea of postcommunism. For example, as early as 2000, Charles King declared that “as the individual countries move in different directions, consolidating forms of government ranging from prosperous social democracies to sultanistic or even dynastic regimes, there is little utility in continuing to treat all twenty-seven (or more) transition countries as a natural set,” “the label (postcommunism), ten years into the transition, now seems bizarre as a moniker for governments, societies, and economies as vastly different as those of Poland and Tajikistan” (King 2000: 168; 154). As an alternative, “post-postcommunism” or “post-posttransition” is used to describe the scenario of multiple paths out of communism (Buyandelgeriyn, 2008). Here, we get a second definition of the *end* of postcommunism. The end point is a multifarious world rather than a capitalism system based on the Washington consensus.

To sum up, the phrase “end of postcommunism” actually refers to two mutually negating ideas. For transitologists who believe in normalization, it means the completion of an accession process of “joining or returning to Europe or the West” through a liberal regime. Such scholars might only apply this phrase to EU-10 countries, though sometimes include “post-Orange Revolution” countries (e.g., Ukraine and Georgia). I prefer to call this sort of argument “a neoliberal version of the end of postcommunism.” By contrast, to comparativists who advocate for a wider range of communist/postcommunist contexts—including, at the least, Russia and other south-east European countries—the long decade of postcommunism ended when the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union became increasingly differentiated. In my terminology, this is a pluralist version of the end of postcommunism, which at the same time is a negative version of the neoliberal version of the end of postcommunism.

These two versions of the end of postcommunism, however, do share one assumption in common: after moving away from communism for two decades or more, the transition or transformation, for good or bad, have been to a large extent been consolidated. The term “consolidation” is employed by social scientists to distinguish the early transition phase of fundamental regime change and reform from the subsequent deepening of the reform process, though the distinction between “transition/transformation” and “consolidation” is a definitional conundrum (Sasse 2005). By highlighting the divergence between postcommunist countries and other “normal” European countries, the European and Eurasian postcommunist world is divided into two groups, or borrowing a more radical term from the debate on the new Iron Curtain, into two “camps.” The first camp is the EU-10. Unsurprisingly, most comparative work on the collapse of communism and its aftermath has focused on these states, though these so-called consolidated democracies in fact constitute the minority of the former socialist nations. The second camp consists of Russia, leaving Albania, Moldova, the former Yugoslavia, Ukraine, and Belarus less discussed targets

in comparative conversations. As for Central Asia, Mongolia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, they appear even less often on the comparativists' map.

China, as well as Vietnam, constitutes the third camp of postcommunism.⁵ I am not a specialist in Vietnam studies; thus this article will focus on China.⁶ One thing is sure: China does not fit into both the neoliberal version and the pluralist version of the end of postcommunism. China does not embrace Western liberal democracy and thus fails to satisfy the standards for normalization or democratization set by liberals. With respect to the market economy, as I will elaborate in the following sections, it is also too early to claim market economy is completely consolidated, particularly at this potential turning point when (re)nationalization is seemingly in the air in China. In other words, it is at most legitimate to allege the end of postcommunism in Europe only, though the so-called transition in Europe has been debatable (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Carothers 2002; King, 2000; Outhwaite and Ray 2005; Ray 2009; Szelényi 2008). My view is that postcommunism is still a useful concept to characterize the ongoing complicated economic, social, and political transformation in China since it started to move away from classical socialist system in the 1990s. In this view when scholars discuss the end of postcommunism without considering East Asia, they are indeed displaying a European bias.⁷

Major Sociological Debates on Postcommunist China

Nevertheless, this article is not meant to be a denunciation of European sociologists. As I will elaborate in this section, both foreign and Chinese scholars are responsible for this situation. In other words, a Chinese bias also exists: interest in both regional and thematic topics in the study of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia are

⁵ Some people, however, would argue that China and Vietnam are still communist, because in these two countries the original communist parties still rule in the name of socialism. This argument, in my opinion, is a fallacy. It merely focuses on names rather than substantive change. Not only does it ignore China's and Vietnam's moves toward a market economy since the 1990s, but this school of thought also neglects the fact that Marxism-Leninism is basically an ideological shell for the common people now. China and Vietnam are certainly authoritarian regimes, but they are not necessarily less democratic or more authoritarian than Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Albania. If these regimes can be characterized as postcommunist, why not China and Vietnam?

⁶ Reports often claim that Vietnam is "another China" or might be "the next China" because these two countries have a number of similarities in terms of their economic, political, and social systems. I believe most theoretical discussion of China in this article can be applied to Vietnam, especially the ignorance in the field of comparative postcommunism about Vietnam. On the other hand, some caveats must be acknowledged. More and more contextualized comparative analyses between Vietnam and China have indicated that Vietnam often has forged its own path rather than following the Chinese model (Chan 1999; Guo 2004). For sociologists of market transition, it is particularly noteworthy that the countries' difference shaped different income distribution results. Solid empirical research finds that small family enterprises dominated rural development in Vietnam, whereas China's development was dominated by larger firms, initially established by rural governments. Consequently, while cadre income advantages have kept pace with those of private entrepreneurs in China, they have declined rapidly in Vietnam (Walder and Nguyen 2008).

⁷ This comment actually came from Andrew Walder, an eminent and veteran sociologist who has devoted himself to the study of China for a long time, when he was having an informal conversation with me in his temporary office as a visiting scholar at Beijing University in October 2008.

declining in China. There is nothing wrong with focusing on locality; in fact, it can cultivate a solid ground against the presumptions of hegemonic or incommensurate knowledge-cultures. On the other hand, limiting intellectual inquiry to the local does not decrease ethnocentrism by keeping our eyes open to the remaining world, and in this sense, it is inadequate. As a result, the comparative study of postcommunism is being marginalized as the debate of transitologists or area specialists. As a Chinese adage says, “It takes more than one cold day for the river to freeze three feet deep;” ironically, the current downturn of postcommunist studies in Chinese sociology, to some extent, has its root in the flourishing period in the 1990s. Thus, reviewing the development of postcommunist studies in the last two decades is important for finding a new momentum in the comparative analysis of East Asian and Central and Eastern European postsocialist regimes today.

In this article I much focus on highly cited comparative sociological studies of China.⁸ It has been widely accepted that sociological analyses of postcommunist China can be divided into two stages in the terms of knowledge production and dissemination. The first stage began in 1989, when Victor Nee published a landmark paper, “A Theory of Market Transition: From Redistribution to Markets in State Socialism” in the *American Sociological Review* (Nee 1989) based on his previous empirical research (Nee 1986). This article and his subsequent papers (Nee, 1991; Nee, 1996) provoked a torrent of positive and negative responses, mainly from oversea Chinese sociologists and foreign scholars who had devoted themselves to studies of communist China. In 1996, the *American Journal of Sociology* published a special issue on market transition, signaling the climax of and a “truce” in the first stage of debates. After that, more and more domestic scholars and students entered into the field, making the second stage of postcommunist China studies more diverse.

Based on existing literature reviews by leading sociologists who specialize in China’s transition (Bian 2002; Bian, Wu and Li 2008; Keister 2009; Nee and Opfer 2009; Zhou 2000),⁹ we can see two dominant areas in the Chinese sociology of postcommunism: (1) social stratification and social mobility—or more concretely speaking, “stratification outcomes during market transition,” as Keister (2009: 1) accurately pointed out, and (2) economic sociology, especially organizations and socioeconomic networks. There are of course other issues that Chinese sociologists of postcommunist studies showed great interest in and in which individual sociologists have produced individually important works, but they have not yet been as effective as these two issues in capturing the whole discipline’s cutting edge. Thus, the question is: why did these two agendas become mainstream?

Given the fact that these two subfields of sociology also have a preeminent place in American sociology, it is not surprising that they gained a discursive hegemony

⁸ A wonderful review of the key debates in economics on transition can be found in Havrylyshyn (2006). In addition, Kubicek (2000) provides a thought-provoking review of relevant works in political science—some of them did having considerable resonance in sociology—during the first decade of postcommunism.

⁹ Technically speaking, statistical analyses of publications in these fields could be more persuasive. A quantitative description, however, is not fully necessary in this article due to space limitation and the digression from the main argument it would cause.

in China's highly Americanized sociology.¹⁰ In particular, the leading scholars of market transition shaped the main debates (Guthrie 2000) and intellectual pedigree of their students.¹¹ Moreover, another factor played a formidable role in provoking these debates: their comparability with similar debates concerning the European postcommunist region. The “market transition debate” in China had an intellectually reciprocal impact on the research on social stratification and social mobility in Central and Eastern Europe (Burawoy 1996; Róna-Tas 1997; Stark and Bruszt 1998; Szelényi and Szelényi 1995). This win-win communication eventually boosted an unprecedented (and probably unrepeatable) accumulation of major journal publications on actually existing post-socialism in the mid-1990s.¹²

However, there were two thematic shortcomings of the mainstream sociological studies of postcommunist China during the 1990s. First, the majority of works focused on status/income attainment, career mobility, and the roles of social networks in occupational processes. Second, the leading sociologists, consciously or unconsciously, put a premium on a certain sets of subjects, like rural China, private entrepreneurs, and local-level politics and economic activities. This was particularly true for research prior to 1996, when capitalism from below (Nee and Opper 2007), particularly rural collective and private firms, was booming and the privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) was still moderate.

Luckily, this situation has been improving recently. A burgeoning number of methodologically rigorous and theoretically innovative works focusing on urban China, the national arena, and newly emerging social classes are published in recent years. Yet influential and comprehensive comparative analysis between European and Asian post-Soviet regimes is still sporadic. Even worse, as described in the first section, the use of comparative frames across the former socialist world is being jeopardized by the “transition-is-over” argument: some projects are more like decontextualized area studies than comparative studies guided by theoretical agendas toward transitional societies.

¹⁰ Since its reestablishment in the 1980s, sociology as a discipline in mainland China is still fledgling and influence from American sociology is increasing. For a brief history of Chinese sociology and its relationship with its American “masters,” see an interesting article by Chen Nabo and Zang Xiaowei (Chen and Zang, 2009), in which the authors illuminate how the American view shaped the introduction and dissemination of the theories of a European sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, in China. A more informative review of China studies and American sociology, see Tsai (2009).

¹¹ The term “transition” actually is more widely used than “postcommunism” in China. Besides its intellectual pedigree, there is also another reason that Chinese sociologists, as well as economists, prefer “transition:” this term is less politically or ideologically sensitive than “postcommunism” or “post-socialism.” But sometimes even “transition” or “transformation” is criticized, if the author hints of a predetermined end of capitalism (there is no difference between “transition” and “transformation” in Mandarin). Hence, some researchers consider the term “post-reform” to be the safest, which extends the beginning point of “reform” to 1978 instead of 1989.

¹² Substantial cross-national projects comparing European and Asian postcommunist regimes were sporadic within European or Asian geographical boundaries. The most influential sociology project on post-communist China so far took place in 1996, and was sponsored by Andrew Walder, Donald Treiman, and Iván Szelényi. Because the survey was designed to parallel a survey of Russia and five other East European nations (completed in 1993), direct comparisons with other nations were then possible. Substantial cross-national projects after that point did not demonstrate a considerable increase, though it is reported that some new programs are in incubation.

Therefore, we are at an interesting juncture: in the wake of new social, economic, and political changes in both China or Central and Eastern Europe since the 2000s, are there new comparable sociological issues of postcommunism that will be in the spotlight? If so, merely extending geographical boundaries is not enough. What matters is to retain the history of actually existing socialism and its “legacies” as a substantial explanatory factor. In fact, including China in the project of postcommunist studies is not simply about geography. Research including all the former socialist countries could be a cross regional study that would have nothing essentially different from research comparing East Asia and Latin America. In other words, the number of comparative analyses between East Asia and Central and Eastern Europe probably will continue to increase, but it is not only comparative sociological studies of postcommunism that I am advocating. I do not dispute the importance of cross-national area studies, but those that display a “*contextualized* consciousness of postcommunism” (Pierson 2003: 354) must have more sociological imagination. Over two decades after 1989, continuing to consider these European and Asian countries under the umbrella concept of postcommunism is to demonstrate the fact that their multiple trajectories out of the classical socialist system constitute a unique comparative set with respect to that system. Doing so is also to value and rethink their pasts of state socialism as a significant variable in explaining the diverse scenarios across this zone.

Instead of proposing a historicist or isolated understanding of postcommunism, I am arguing for translating the past into the present, a theoretical stance that is echoed by many scholars. For example, as early as in 1998, Iván Szelényi and his colleagues (Eyal, Szelényi and Townsley 1998; Eyal, Szelényi and Townsley 2001; Eyal, Szelényi and Townsley 2003) added postcommunist capitalism to the list of different types of capitalism. Some people might say there is nothing new in their work because other authors have identified various forms of capitalism (Abuza 2001; Albert 1993; Esping-Andersen 1990). However, unlike these variants of the ideal type of classical capitalism, postcommunist capitalism constitutes a unique category because the present era is the first time in history that market order has developed in a society that had formerly abolished private property, and that did not have even an embryonic class of private proprietors. Previous theories of the transition to capitalism provide little insight into this unique circumstance because they invariably assume that a propertied class always exists *before* there is a capitalist system. This difference,, also distinguishes the transformation of East Asian state socialism in the 1990s from the transition of other authoritarian regimes in East Asian and Latin American to developing economies in the 1970s, therefore providing an innovative theoretical implication of comparing countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America.

As Valerie Bunce notes, “the impact of region, far from being fixed, depends on the research question being asked” (Bunce 1999: 163). Szelényi and his colleagues’ work demonstrate how research through the lens of communism and its legacies could make extraordinary contributions to comparative studies in general. This is exactly the essential meaning of continuing to use the term postcommunism in the midst of diverse national outcomes: to remind us of the peculiarity of state socialism and its enduring legacies. I would argue that to reaffirm China as an indispensable part of the

world of postcommunist studies is to call for more and more scholarly engagement with comprehensive comparative research beyond European boundaries.

In my opinion, there are at least two lesser-studied fields that should be highlighted: first, the ongoing reforms of the social welfare system, and second, the increasing state invention in markets, particularly factor markets. These two fields invite us to examine what really happened during the 1990s and even to rethink the nature of the reform socialism of the 1980s. As Falk (2003) says, situating ourselves “between past and future,” we can more meaningfully examine new knowledge of the 1989–2012 period, while simultaneously recognizing that further clarity and revisionism assists us in understanding postcommunism.

More Comparative Research Looking Forward

“Second Transitional Crisis”

For sociologists in Central and Eastern Europe, this disciplinary compartmentalization probably was not intellectually harmful at first, because the reforms of the 1990s were arguably “one-sided” (Szelényi and Wilk 2009), that is, mainly concerned with economic institutions. For example, in Hungary and Poland, which experienced radical “economic restructuring” in the 1990s, a large number of richly documented works have indicated that old social welfare systems—for example, the pay-as-you-go method—were basically intact (Seeleib-Kaiser 2008). As Tomasz Inglot notes, these two postcommunist *entitlement states* “not only preserved the preexisting social insurance systems but also made considerable efforts to enhance these benefits schemes during the period of regime transitions” (Inglot 2003: 211). With respect to Russia, though a liberalized reform of social welfare was executed during 1991–93, this effort was basically stopped or thwarted by opponents until 2000 (Cook 2007; Manning, Shkaratan and Tikhonova 2000).

Things have changed dramatically in the new millennium. Facing inefficient and financially unsustainable inherited systems, Russia, Poland, Hungary, and even Kazakhstan tried to institute reforms based on a liberal paradigm of reduced entitlements and subsidies, means-testing, and privatization (Cook 2007; Inglot 2008). These proposals, understandably, provoked resistance and even rioting from pro-welfare interests, like the large demonstration in Hungary in 2006. Iván Szelényi called it “the second transitional crisis,” coming after the “first transitional crisis” of the sharp drop of GDP and substantial loss of jobs caused by the radical transformation of property rights and economic institutions in the first phase of transformation (Szelényi and Wilk 2009). Despite these rebellions, market-oriented reform—though quite neutralized—is in process, either stimulated under desperate fiscal pressure, or enforced by powerful political leaders like Vladimir Putin.

At this time, it is indeed intriguing to examine China. What is happening to the Chinese social provisioning system? Is there also a similar privatization or monetization reform? A quick answer is that when liberalizing reform of the social welfare

system was blocked in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s, marketization and decentralization was being undertaken in both rural and urban China (Ho 1995; Huang 2002). The reform of the health-care system was so radical that it was portrayed as a “Great Reversal” (Chen 2001); however, as European postcommunist countries started to abandon their inherited public health system, the financially strong Chinese party-state was in the process of establishing a universal health-care system, proposing to spend \$124 billion by 2011, which they actually have invested more by July 2012, to subsidize basic medical coverage and overhaul hospitals (Rösner 2004). Chinese leaders promised a bigger government role in public health, with the goal of everyone enjoying basic health-care service in response to the fierce complaints about the commercialized and marketized health-care system. Overall, at either historical phrase of reforming the social welfare system, China was on a trajectory opposite of most Central and Eastern European countries—in the 1990s, there was a weak market in Europe but strong commercialization in China; in the 2000s, the state is retreating in Europe while big government is coming back in China. The question is: so what?

First, China’s trajectory provides a powerful evidence for the claim that the transition is *not* over. For each of the three major postcommunist regions—Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and East Asia—it is still too early to recognize distinct welfare regimes or welfare states. Since the early 1990s, several authors have tried to locate European postcommunist cases on the map of the worlds of welfare capitalism, particularly the typology set by Esping-Andersen (1990). In 1996, Esping-Andersen himself rejected the idea of a “new” welfare model in Central and Eastern Europe, suggesting that the differences between these countries and his proposed three welfare types were only of a transitional nature (Esping-Andersen 1996). But after twenty years of transformation, it is clear that welfare systems are still in a transitional stage. The lukewarm consensus among researchers today is that the postcommunist welfare states differ significantly from any type that are distinguished by Esping-Andersen, but whether a new and distinctive model of postcommunist welfare states has emerged is still unsolved. Some scholars are skeptical (Fuchs and Offe 2009); still others insist that a distinguishable fourth type of welfare state is emerging (Szalai 2006); others divide the welfare states in postcommunist countries into three groups: a group of former-USSR countries, including Russia and Belarus; a group of Central European countries; and an East Asian or Confucian welfare system (Fenger 2007). In any case, for questions like this, the answer remains open, especially at a time when essential reforms are just beginning.

Second, the study of changing welfare systems in East Asia and Eastern-Central Europe matters because divergent transformations of the social welfare system constitute a integral part of comparative sociological postcommunist studies, not just for sociology of the welfare state or medical sociology. Comparison of welfare regimes can be complementary to preexisting, dominant research on socioeconomic inequalities. For example, Szelényi (2008) claims that all economies by nature are mixed; therefore, “failures” in their dominant mode of integration will have to be compensated for by some secondary mechanism. Concretely speaking, in market-integrated economies (e.g., advanced capitalism or postcommunist Central European capitalism), inequali-

ties are primarily generated by the marketplace, but a secondary, redistributive mechanism would correct inequalities; by contrast, in redistributive economies (e.g., state socialism) inequalities are created by redistribution and those who are “negatively privileged” have to rely on the marketplace (e.g., “second economy”) to compensate for their disadvantages (Kligman and Szelényi 2002; Szelényi 1978). Given the proliferation of both economic and social inequalities in China during the 1990s, this general rule might be challenged: when some laid-off workers of SOEs were suffering because of marketization, the economic redistribution mechanism was expanding the economic disparities by enhancing the privileges of cadre members and their children; even worse, the welfare redistribution system did not help but exacerbated inequalities by commercializing health-care services. In other words, the inequalities induced by redistribution and by the market began to reinforce rather than to counteract each other. A seemingly similar phenomenon actually had happened in Hungary in the 1980s and Szelényi had noticed this (Szelényi and Manchin 1987), but the “cogs and wheels” (Elster 1989: 3) that have brought about the dual inequalities vary according to country. In this sense, an asynchronic comparative analysis between China in the 1990s and Hungary in the 1980s, as well as a synchronic analyses of these two countries in the 1990s, would considerably further our understanding of the mechanisms that generated inequalities during market transition.

Due to space constraints, I cannot list all the other comparative agendas that would emerge from bringing social welfare transformation into the existing literatures of the market transition debate. The essential point is that the transition or transformation of social institutions in the postcommunist world is not over; on the contrary, the drama is just unfolding. More important, for better or worse, market is not the only field in which that change is occurring; the further transition of economic institutions probably is lying in the womb of time.

Renationalization?

As early as the end of the first decade of postcommunism, debates on whether the market transition is over emerged. The plethora of available literature reflects the confusion among economists and sociologists about the precise definition of the end of (market) transition. A book edited by Annette N. Brown (1999), which gathers several transition experts’ opinions on the topic, provides an interesting response that scholars from even similar background cannot agree with each other. During the 2000s, more and more individuals and institutes engaged in measuring economic indicators, investigating domestic economics, and conducting cross-national surveys (Meksi and Pasha 2003; Suhrcke 2000). Generally speaking, even after a decade, Brown’s summary is still valid: most economists “generally consider that transition would occur in two stages: the first primarily involves liberalization and stabilization, the second encompasses a myriad of structural reforms. ... They roughly agreed that the first stage is complete in many of the countries, but that progress and success in the second stage have been quite mixed” (Brown 1999: 3).

Most leading sociologists of postcommunist studies also share this idea, though with a subtly different focus. Declaring an end to (market) transition might be an overstatement, but the big trend—“third-wave marketization” (Burawoy 2006)—is undeniable. For example, Victor Nee (2008) claims that China made the transition to a market economy around 2002, especially a complete market transition in the stock markets. Overall, after decades of market transition, an increasing number of scholars agree that “the transition to markets may be rapid or gradual, but the contours of the path are well established” (Walder and Nguyen 2008: 252). These observations, however, are mainly based on what happened in *product markets*, where production, circulation, and pricing of almost all the products have indeed been, to a large degree, dominated by market economy principles.¹³ What happened in the 1980s is usually portrayed as a story of “entrepreneurial capitalism” or “reform socialism,” and the 1990s is believed to have been an era of privatization, decentralization, and marketization (Lin and Liu 2000; Zhao and Zhang 1999).

On the other hand, preexisting literatures, to some extent, underestimated the consequences of the simultaneous centralization effort by the Chinese central government to enhance the global competitiveness of giant SOEs: reform since 1995 has actually taken place on two tracks, seen in the “hold on to the big and let go the small” guideline that finally created a multitude of super-SOEs in the twenty-first century (Lin, 2008). The problem is not whether the state holds monopolistic shares of the finance, electricity, petroleum, and telecommunication sectors (and it does), but rather whether the government still specifies the sources of supplies, sets the prices of products, subsidizes unprofitable firms, and guarantees employment. In these terms, though monopolistic state-controlled giant enterprises, especially stock market listed companies, have made considerable progress toward a marketized governance structure, their dominant mechanism of operation is still in the style of a planned economy (Lin 2008). I have no comprehensive data on factor markets in other postcommunist countries, but some research shows that the scenario in Vietnam and Russia is similar, and probably even worse (Collins, Zhu and Warner 2009; King and Treskow 2006). This not only means that market transition is not over, but also forces us to pay close attention to other countries’ up-to-date trends. Is any possible that “backsliding” will happen in the future?

Nobody knows the answer yet. For some scholars who have sympathy for the socialist economy, there always is life yet in Chinese socialism (Lin 2007). This idea underscores the fact that social welfare system is not the only field in which the state has come back since 2002. Despite of these strong state interventions, until 2008, most leading economists in China still took statism as a side story or temporary stage on the way to a complete capitalist economy.

Discussions of the rebirth of a new kind of Chinese socialist or even communist economy, however, are becoming more serious in the wake of the current global

¹³ When evaluating economic reform in China, it is wise to make an analytical distinction between production markets and factor markets. The concept of the factor market is broadly defined here, referring to the market for factors of production. The factors, also called inputs, include productive factors (land, money, and labor) and various raw materials (e.g., oil, electricity, coal, and steel).

economic recession. According to some estimates, around 90% of the stimulus capital so far is directed toward state-controlled entities (Lee 2009). By 2009, China had become an economy driven almost entirely by state investment, which in the first half of 2009 accounted for 88% of GDP growth—a share for which it is hard to find any parallel, in any country, at present—and state-controlled companies represented around 70% of the major stock markets (Foroohar 2009).

In the factor markets, the state control is clearer. The state owns more than two-thirds of all fixed assets like telecommunications lines, power plants, and real estate in the country. Recently, more and more media reports have started to express concern that the Chinese central government may be launching a (re)nationalization movement in these sectors (as well as the milk industry, civic aviation, and other sectors). For example, in October 2009, just after forcing the biggest *and* most profitable private steel company to merge with a state-owned enterprise (SOE) that was in the red, the Chinese government announced that the once-booming private coal companies would be closed down or merged with larger, government-owned businesses. Another recent example is the controversially privatized Lu-Neng Group, one of China's largest energy conglomerates “renationalized” by the government in 2008.

Besides these domestic economic policies, the subtle changes of the international economic landscape make liberal scholars worry that the revitalization of the Chinese state-socialist economy would be unstoppable when governments are increasingly using nationalization as a tool for control of energy, basic products, and financial assets, not only in China, Russia, some Islamist states, and leftist Latin America, but also in the European Union and the United States.¹⁴ Scholars and columnists, from both left-wing and right-wing camps, maintain that the worldwide spread of nationalization as a new recipe for world domination would make the Chinese Communist Party more and more fascinating with “the hand of the state.” Some intellectuals foresee the so-called Beijing Consensus (Ramo 2004), a new development mode (Arrighi 2007), or new civilization state (Jacques 2009). For others, given the continuous nationalization of private assets and government propaganda portraying Central and Eastern European economies as “failed,” they have good reason to ask whether we are witnessing a renaissance of communism or the creation of super-communism—a new type of communist civilization with a planned capitalist economic infrastructure led and sometimes manipulated by a communist superstructure.

My intention is to call for more research in communist and postcommunist studies because communism is not history but a living system. Because of this, we perhaps cannot classify whether super-communism is emerging right now, but as I suggested for the social welfare system, a series of comparative studies should be conducted to help us to understand the contemporary economic tendency in China and other postcommunist countries alike. For example, given that most sociological research of

¹⁴ Britain took the lead, declaring its intention to take equity stakes in banks to steady them. Then France, Germany, Italy, and Spain announced rescue packages for their banks that include state shareholdings. Finally, the United States followed with Europe, not only in the banking system, but in auto manufacturing industries as well. Though most Americans avoid using the term “nationalization,” these moves are indeed routinely called nationalization programs elsewhere.

China's transition still emphasizes change of ownership, more extensive and subtle analyses of the mechanism by which state-owned or state-controlled firms operate are required. After all, as the prevailing paradigm in sociological studies of postcommunism asserts (Szelényi 2002), it is the dominant mechanism, rather than ownership, that constitutes the touchstone of whether market transition is over, because SOEs can be quite marketized. As Walder and Nguven echoes, "Market transition does not refer to tinkering with market mechanisms as a supplement to these structures; it means a transition to a system where market mechanisms are dominant, if they have not completely supplanted government plans altogether" (Walder and Nguyen 2008: 252). Particularly given that strong state intervention or state ownership manages to survive in not only authoritarian regimes like China, but also some supposedly liberalized country like Poland (King and Sznajder 2006; Shields 2004), mechanism-based comparative analyses can be insightfully reveal what really happened during the radical wave of marketization in the 1990s and the strengthening of state invention and ownership in recent years. At any event, China's ongoing transformations challenge the notion of the end of postcommunism and possibly open a new era, though it is perhaps still too early to apply a fixed label.

Conclusion

"Are we in the midst of the 'transition from transition,' is it 'transformation,' 'posttransition,' even 'integration,' or just plain 'development'? Does anybody care anyway?" Suhrcke (2000: 105) asks a good question. It would not be worthwhile to care if it were only a discussion of terminology. But the debate is not merely rhetorical. The process of naming is not important in and of itself; rather, it prefigures a still-useful comparative framework for understanding the ongoing multilateral (political, economic, social, national) changes in former socialist countries.

Kornai (2001) claims that transition will be over when three criteria are met: a communist party no longer has monopoly power, the dominant means of production are in private hands, and the market is the dominant coordinator of economic activities. In addition, reforms to the welfare state are important. As demonstrated in this article, no former communist country in either Central and Eastern Europe or East Asia can fulfill *all* of these standards at present. First, for the EU-10, their liberalized reforms of welfare state regimes are described by some scholars as only now having accelerated after a decade-long block, while the stability of market institutions is fragile and structural transformation has slowed down in some. Second, for Russia, Gorbachev criticized Putin's party in 2009, saying that it is like "the worst of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union;" this might be an exaggeration, but managed democracy is indeed declining. With respect to reforms for liberalizing market and social institutions, Russia has probably lagged behind even further than China. Third, postcommunist authoritarian regimes in East Asia, that is, China and Vietnam, are still ruled by one party and the dominant mechanism in factor markets is absolutely not the free market. The rapidity of ongoing changes across the entire postcommunist

world has meant that speaking of the end of transformation is inherently slippery, especially given that utopian hopes for a better future continue to influence contemporary social and political developments in Central and Eastern Europe (Ray, 2009) and China (Walder, 2009). Moreover, if we shifted our focus from changes of macroscale social, political, and economic institutions to the mundane spaces of everyday life, particularly social memories, we would discover even more evidence of the persistence of postcommunism (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008). By all means, it is still too early to declare the end of postcommunism, because what the social, economic, and political of these countries would look like in the near future is still an open question.

This article reaffirms that the differences across this former socialist world today are striking. But as Outhwaite and Ray (2005: 23) noticed, “Postcommunism is not rendered redundant as a concept simply because the former communist nations have followed diverse paths of social development since 1989.” Instead, as Sakwa (1999: 125) wrote, postcommunism “is part of a larger group of ‘post’ philosophies reflecting the uncertainties of our age.” Thus a certain degree of humility is still in order. More importantly, the term “postcommunism” reminds theorists that comparative analysis across this zone could be and should be framed with a consciousness that the legacies of communist civilization cast a long shadow on our current compelling problems. In the extremely diverse postcommunist world, comparing Central and Eastern Europe, Eurasia, and East Asia is not comparing apples and oranges—though even apples and oranges can be compared in a contextualized approach (Locke and Thelen 1995). As illuminated in this article, there are a handful of pressing issues that could not be fully or correctly understood without considering the transformative characteristics of a state-socialist system: income disparities or welfare systems are not only the consequences of the privatization of state assets or the commercialization of socialist health care, but also should be understood as linked to the inherited privileges of special interest groups, or using a more accurate term, “*situs*” (Bell 1991: xxv); varying economic performance at the firm or national level is not merely a story of development, but a complex problem simultaneously caused by industrialization, globalization, and different transformation strategies out of a planned economy.

Due to space constraints, I cannot extend my argument to a more empirical level—this will be a task for a different time. In addition, the comparative strategy of contextualizing communist legacies and postcommunist peculiarities is not appropriate for all questions and is not inherently superior to other approaches. Whether focusing on domestic issues or extending inquiries to an international scope, all disciplines should reflexively examine their provincial or civilizational concerns to reduce implicit or explicit ethnocentrism. In this sense, the comparative analysis of various states across the postcommunist zone could be a stepping-stone for cultivating more international perspectives. After three decades of transformation in postcommunist world, however, this sort of analysis is becoming underrepresented in the field despite its potential intellectual payoffs, especially as subtle changes have been being taking place in every aspect of our economy, society, and politics. Would the (re)nationalization of private assets or the centralization of economic power in some countries lead to a new type

of communist economy? Probably not. Is it necessary to remain sensitive to temporal and spatial contexts while also aiming to identify the alternative causal mechanisms behind divergent trajectories of postcommunist change? Definitely yes!

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