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confessions of an accu(r)sed neoliberal

EVALUATING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE AS NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE



Author: Aaron Kyle Dennis
Supervisors: Christer Gunnarsson, Stefan Brehm

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Abstract

The practice of social development is situated within a broader phenomenological context known as the “development paradigm”—a grand milieu of institutions, policies, projects, and agents. Increasingly, social science discourses equate the development paradigm to a hegemonic project of empire epitomised by the moniker “neoliberalism”. As one such social development practitioner, I explore the question “Are we all neoliberals now?” In the course of this investigation, I review the historical emergence and semantic associations of the term “neoliberalism” and problematize its usefulness for describing complex and heterogeneous phenomenological categories like “social development”. The case of neoliberalism in China is invoked in the attempt to demonstrate 1) the validity of my argument that definitions of research setting a critical when deploying the term “neoliberalism” in academic discourse and 2) the relevance of this argument for reconciling varied readings of social development as “neoliberal”.

Keywords: neoliberalism, epistemology, social development, China

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1. Problématique

After decades of incremental reforms, today most international financial institutions (IFIs) maintain policy frameworks mandating their government and private-sector clients to attend to social issues. Supporting the implementation of these policy frameworks is a field of practice known as “social development”, which involves the application of academic theory and methodology (anthropology, sociology, geography, etc.) to analyse social consequences of the development process, to help avoid or mitigate potentially negative project-induced impacts, and to attend to the concerns and interests of project-affected communities.

Social development has long been criticised as failing to achieve its aims of protecting the livelihoods and interests of target populations. Some of the earliest critiques of social development remain the most forceful. In 1968, Austrian philosopher and Roman Catholic priest Ivan Illich’s keynote address to the Conference on Inter-American Student Projects (CIASP) proclaimed “To Hell with Good Intentions”. For Illich, the very notion that ‘do-gooders’ of the developed world can offer any form of help to their impoverished neighbours is hypocrisy given our inability to address the problems of our own societies and countries—problems such as unabated consumerism, greed, violence and warfare. Are these problems not themselves the very causes of the “under-development” we are attempting to cure?

Contemporary critiques of social development interventions also cut deep. Recalling Brecht¹, David Rieff’s *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2003) echoes Illich’s condemnation of the overreach of aid and development organisations and their creation of cultures of dependency. Recalling Kipling², William Easterly’s *White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (2006) similarly criticises the logic that ending global poverty may be achieved simply by increasing international humanitarian interventions and observes that the practice of development is first

¹ Bertolt Brecht “Die Nachtlager”, written ca. 1926-33.

² Rudyard Kipling, *The White Man’s Burden*; originally published in 1899

and foremost the practice of generating reports. Have we merely institutionalised this arrogance in the profession of social development?

Despite drawing on an increasing amount of the theoretical work and field experiences across countries and sectors—and despite collaborations among social development practitioners being increasingly methods-oriented and systematised—social policy is often viewed critically as culpable in the often disastrous social consequences of the development process (Carroll 2009; Gray 2010). Social development practitioners (of which I am one) ultimately must reconcile that the very institutions that employ us—institutions like the World Bank, the IMF and related families of international lending and financial aid institution—indeed appear to re-allocate class power to benefit the rich by exploiting the labour and resources of ‘the third world’ (Stiglitz 2002: 145). We must confront the allegations levelled against international financial institutions as régimes deployed for the propagation and enforcement of ‘free market fundamentalism’ and neoliberal orthodoxy (Harvey 2005: 29). We must ascertain if the practice of social development is serving as an agent of a crushing neoliberal economic doctrine.

Are we all neoliberals now?

2. Study Purpose and Methods

2.1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

My motivation for this thesis extends from characterisations of the development paradigm as a “neoliberal” phenomenon in academic social science discourses. It struck me as curious how scholars critical of the development paradigm often linked it to a neoliberal project of governance that sought to (re-)structure economies to the benefit of an élite economic-political class (and often with devastating social consequences). Working for the past several years to design, implement, and monitor the efficacy of social interventions in communities affected by the development process, these characterisations stood in stark contrast to the development process as I encountered it. I was aware of periods of structural adjustment in Latin America in the late 1970s and early 1980s and in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet

Union in the early 1990s that advocated rapid market expansion (“shock therapy”) to promote economic development and resulted in rather devastating social, economic and political outcomes. Yet it was my understanding that from these failed experiments came that the recognition that “development” is inherently a social concern and that economic development cannot be realised in the absence of commensurate attention to social concerns—giving rise to the very practice of “social development” among international financial institutions (IFIs). That is, witness to the social “shocks” and resultant discord that so often accompanies initiatives to effect large-scale (national) development and resource production, social development practitioners seek to effect better outcomes for people vis-à-vis (indeed because of!) the forward march of economic development initiatives.

I turned initially to anthropological discourses of neoliberalism to identify and articulate the kernel of theoretical continuity that I imagined must transect applications of the term³. As might be expected, some scholars treated neoliberalism very technically, while others conjured vague spectres of capitalism run amok. Reflecting on ways that social development practice can be interpreted as an accursed agent of neoliberalism, I found that most accusations are premised on the notion that the institutions within which we operate—especially projects backed by funding from international financial institutions—link unfettered capital markets to human prosperity. Yet in spite of our contextual culpability, to judge social development practice as an agent of neoliberalism also requires one to reconcile its essential function of imposing mandatory corrective behaviours on these macroeconomic policy regimes—a fundamentally anti-neoliberal endeavour.

As I continued to de-construct the concept of neoliberalism in terms of differences of conceptual associations to it evidenced in anthropological discourse, my research problem took shape: *Is it possible to reconcile such contradictory interpretations of social development as a “neoliberal” phenomenon?* I identified three guiding questions as central to this investigation, each of which I hope is clearly reflected and treated in this monograph:

- What is meant by the term “neoliberalism”?
- In what ways can social assessment be read as “neoliberal”?
- Is there an appropriate way to deploy “neoliberalism” as a category of analysis?

³ Further details on methods are given in Section 2.2.2.

2.2. STUDY DESIGN

2.2.1. Strategies of enquiry, paradigms and perspectives

This monograph is a non-experimental, explorative review of social science discourses of neoliberalism. This exploration is framed by reflexive critique of my role as a practitioner of social development. While this choice might be interpreted as contravening the methodological guidance provided by Lund’s Center of East and Southeast Asian Studies, it is in keeping with the postmodernist discourse (Mills 1970: 14; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 11; Gubrium and Holstein 1997: vi, 38; Holliday 2007: 19) and their argument that “Every act /.../ of ‘seeing’ or ‘saying’ is unavoidably conditioned by cultural, institutional, and interactional contingencies’ (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: vi; cited in Holliday 2007: 19).

In essence, this monograph endeavours a critical phenomenological⁴ review of neoliberalism and the epistemology of social science discourses (Holliday 2007: 25). That is, the core issue I address is how social scientists construct “neoliberalism”⁵. Reviewing social science literature to develop a grounded understanding of the historical origins of the term (i.e. “thick description”; see Holliday 2007: 74-75), I treat scholarly texts as discursive semiotic ‘artefacts’ (Holliday 2007: 68-60) in order to establish an archaeology of knowledge in the Foucauldian tradition⁶.

In certain respects, my approach also articulates with participatory action research, including by “emphasis[ing] the political aspects of knowledge production /.../ [and] involv[ing] the individual practitioner in continually reflecting on his or her own behaviour-in-action /.../ [so

⁴ Holstein and Gubrium (2005: 485) define phenomenology as the “focus on the ways that the life world—the world every individual takes for granted—is experienced by its members; /.../ attention to this life world is to first ‘bracket’ it’, /.../ to set aside belief in its reality in order to bring its apprehension into focus”.

⁵ Atkinson (1990: 7) writes “Texts do not simply and transparently report an independent order of reality. Rather, the texts themselves are implicated in the work of reality construction /... /There is no possibility of a neutral text. The text—the research paper or monograph, say—is just as much an artefact of convention and contrivance as is any other cultural product.”

⁶ I refer here to the methodological approach for interpreting statements (*énoncé*) developed by Michel Foucault in *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (1969). My approach articulates with Foucault’s in its attention to the conditions in which speech acts emerge and exist within a field of discourse, the bracketing of conditions of existence for meaning, and the differences that develop within discourses over time. My research problem differs from Foucault in that I place less emphasis on avoiding interpretation of meaning (though I try not to extend my discussion beyond a problematization of neoliberalism)—i.e. this monograph does not contribute directly to advancing an anti-humanist critique of the human sciences.

that] other members of the community do the same” (Reason 1994; 328, cited by Holliday 2007: 16). Holliday (2007: 23-24, citing Reason 1994: 324-325) argues that the integration of research and work is part of “an emerging world view, more holistic, pluralist and egalitarian, that is essentially participative” in which researchers come “to understand their own worlds’ and take ownership of knowledge and ‘define the reality’”. This monograph, however, does not attempt to address social issues or problems, and so diverges from being participatory action research *per se*.

2.2.2. Methods of collecting and analysing data

As noted, my initial plan was to examine anthropological discourses to identify unifying assumptions of the meaning of “neoliberalism” in anthropological discourse. In an attempt to ascertain the range of ways anthropologists use the term, in October 2009 I recorded, reviewed, collated and redundancy-edited a list of article ‘hits’ containing the terms “neoliberal”, “neo-liberal”, “neoliberalism” and/or “neo-liberalism” in a search of AnthroSource⁷—a database of peer-reviewed anthropology journals maintained by the American Anthropological Association. The results yielded 106 articles and 24 book reviews written between September 1995 and August 2009. Reviewing this corpus of literature, however, I was overwhelmed with the variety of renderings of things “neoliberal” and unable to identify any unifying aspects across the corpus of discourses. I found myself even more bewildered about the meaning of “neoliberalism”.

I resolved to broaden my literature review to learn more about the origin and etymology of the term. My strategy of inquiry also began to take a slightly different tack: rather than looking for unifying assumptions, I began instead to pay attention to different ways that neoliberalism was being constructed in academic discourses, and to evaluate these constructions in terms of how they relate to one another. In was through this process that I

⁷ This search method did not yield an exhaustive list of journal articles written by anthropologists during that period. Further work with this corpus of literature revealed that several articles within the journal indexed in AnthroSource were not returned in the searches, making it difficult to make defensible quantitative use of this data set. The Hoffman et al. (2006) article used to frame this discussion is but one example.

arrived at my observation that one's scope of analysis (i.e. research setting⁸) is a central concern for how any phenomena may be interpreted as “neoliberal”.

In writing this monograph, my three primary methods for collecting and analysing data were i) content analysis, ii) interpreting documents, and iii) semiotic analysis.

2.3. DISPOSITION

The overarching objective of this monograph is to problematize the term “neoliberalism” as an appellation for régimes of governance. I begin with an historical deconstruction of the term “neoliberalism” to expose its varied semiotic configurations [Section 3]. My research indicates that a discursive shift occurred at some point after the late-1980s by which the term moved away from signalling a particular variety of pro-capitalist economic doctrine and instead became equated with the pro-market policy prescriptions of the international financial institutions more broadly written. It was around this same period that social development started being read as culpable in the “neoliberal project” of governance within social science discourse.

Examining discourses of ‘neoliberal’ governance in China [Section 4], I call attention to the issue of scale—arguing that broad definitions of one's research setting discredit the usefulness of affixing the term to meta-phenomenological categories such as régimes of governance. To do this, I construct a historiography of the post-1978 economic reform of the Chinese state and argue that the Chinese Communist Party⁹ (CCP) has steered a course of development that, while increasingly “pro-market”, is not necessarily “neoliberal”.

I return to the question “Are we all neoliberals now?” [Section 5] and argue that social development can be read a sort of ‘double agent’—serving to legitimise a macroeconomic agenda of privatisation and free trade while simultaneously effecting market-correcting interventions at micro- levels. I draw from this discussion, as from its points of articulation with the Chinese case, that using “neoliberalism” as a descriptive category for

⁸ Holliday (2007: 33) writes that a research setting can be understood as, “definable setting in which phenomena can be placed meaningfully within a specific social environment. Such an environment can be groups of people, institutions, cases, geographical areas, communities, texts and so on.”

⁹ 中国共产党 *Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng* [alt: Communist Party of China (CPC)]

institutionalised régimes of governance is problematic and requires considerable attention to contextual nuance and discursive subtexts [Section 6].

3. Neoliberalism (Un-)Defined?

From an historic perspective, the term “neoliberalism” first appeared in 1938—coined in Paris at the Colloque Walter Lippmann by German sociologist and economist Alexander Rüstow. At its naissance, neoliberalism aimed to reconstruct ideas of classical liberalism after their decline in the 1920s and 1930's, and proposed that free markets, free trade, and unrestricted capital flows would produce the greatest social, political and economic good. One among several schools of thought (modernisation, structuralism, dependency, etc.) vying to steer the course of the emerging Bretton Woods system of international finance (Hettne 2008:8), the neoliberal¹⁰ school lost to other platforms, including those advocated by John Dewey, Woodrow Wilson, John Maynard Keynes, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the British Liberal Democrats. While all camps of economic theory made significant compromises during the formulations of both the Atlantic Charter and the Bretton Woods Conference, Keynes’ structuralist doctrine by-and-large carried the institutional rise of the international financial system from the late 1940s through the 1950s and 1960s. Keynesianism was increasingly challenged by competing theoretical camps of the late 1960s, including *dependency theory* and *world systems theory* (Hettne 2008:8). These schools of thought coalesced around two camps: one that advocated “social democracy and central planning on the one hand” and another “concerned with liberating corporate and business power and re-establishing market freedoms on the other” (Harvey 2005: 13).

Harkening to economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, neoliberalism¹¹ postulates that unfettered markets are the best vehicle for efficient and movement and allocation of productive resources (be they physical, natural, human or financial labour and materials)

¹⁰ Literally “new liberalism”, neoliberalism represents a re-thinking of classical liberalism (i.e. neo-classical liberalism); in American parlance, neoliberal economics is closely associate with political neoconservatism, as opposed to the political camps referred to as *new liberalism* (a.k.a. “embedded liberalism” and “social liberalism”) which advocate limited intervention in the economy. Outside of the United States, the term neoliberalism is equated with other political camps advocating liberal economics, such as the “Third Way” (a.k.a. social-democracy under the New Public Management movement).

¹¹ A terrific primer on neoliberalism—very articulate of central definitional concerns—is hosted on the *Global Issues* website <http://www.globalissues.org/article/39/a-primer-on-neoliberalism> [Accessed 02 February 2010] (Refer especially to §2 “[Neoliberalism Is..](#)”)

(Canclini 1995; Healy & Paulson 2000). Applied to governance, free movement of goods, resources and enterprises would, according to the theory, foster competition for cheaper resources by eliminating controls and regulatory measures (such as tariffs and production standards). Relative to development economics, the Keynesian school argued that a certain amount of intervention was considered necessary due to institutional conditions that “made growth in the poor areas less automatic than it was assumed to be in the so-called developed countries” (Hettne 2008:8).

The Keynes-inspired Bretton Woods system was falling into ill repute by the end of the 1960s and collapsed as the world entered into a tumultuous period of fiscal crises, including oil price increases between 1973 and 1979. (Simon 2008: 86) With most of the Western world facing increased capital accumulation, unemployment, economic stagnation coupled with inflation (dubbed stagflation), Hayek and his colleagues (especially those from the Chicago School¹²) diagnosed the crisis as a result of “client governments being corrupt, interventionist, bloated by bureaucracy and weighed down by inefficient, often loss-making state enterprises” (Simon 2008: 87). By late 1981, Brazil and Mexico announced that they could no longer service their official debts. Poland followed soon thereafter. The so-called ‘debt crisis’ of 1981-1982 ensued, affecting Northern creditor governments and the IFIs that had advanced enormous commercial loans to debtor countries. Economic policymakers among these institutions feared that “if rapid countermeasures were not taken and strict penalties imposed, there could be a domino effect among debt-ridden countries that would drive the individual banks into bankruptcy and undermine the entire international financial system” (Simon 2008: 87).

Disillusioned with state-led economic development, the political leadership of Margaret Thatcher (a disciple of Friedrich von Hayek) as British prime minister (1979-1990) and Ronald Reagan (advised by Milton Friedman of the Chicago School) as president of the United States (1981-1989) again deployed untested, naïve but theoretically-inspired policies, such as privatising nationally-owned enterprises and introducing public spending cuts

¹² The Chicago School of Economics refers to a neoclassical school of thought popularised by economics faculty of University of Chicago. The school emphasises government non-intervention in in laissez-faire free markets—rejecting regulation as inefficient. In the late 1960s, the Chicago School contributed the ‘efficient market hypothesis’ to the field of finance. In the mid-1970s, the School was associated with libertarianism, neoclassical price theory, and the rejection of Keynesianism in favour of monetarism, and by the late 1970s was promoting “new classical economics” based on the “rational expectations” hypothesis.

(particularly on social services such as health care, education, and housing). In contrast with the interventionist bias of the earlier developmental discourse (*modernisation, structuralism, dependency*) (Hettne 2008: 9), economic governance under neoliberalism sought to diminish the role of the state and to reduce tariffs, regulatory measures, and restrictions on capital flows and investment in order to free international trade markets to balance themselves. This model of governance rapidly became economic orthodoxy in the North¹³. Aid policies formulated to address the debt crisis and structural adjustment measures requiring indebted countries to implement institutional reforms such as cuts in welfare expenditures, more flexible labour market laws, and privatisation were exported to the global South (Simon 2008: 87). The Washington Consensus replaced Keynesian developmental discourse and tied neoliberal prescripts¹⁴ with arguments for necessity of export promotion based on the notion of comparative advantage.

With the 1997–98 Asian economic crisis, however, structural adjustment became the focus of fierce criticism within the development paradigm. Policymakers and bureaucrats thus once again sought alternate paths to achieving development and economic growth that emphasise social capital and social safety nets as a means of buffering communities against volatile markets and situations of economic dislocation. Yet even as the leaders of major international financial institutions—most notably, Joseph Stiglitz¹⁵, former chief economist of the World Bank—called into question the assumption that “markets are naturally and universally efficient” (Rodan 2004:6), pervasive and properly-functioning markets remained central to the equation for economic growth. The major change was in how these new policy packages

¹³ In practice if not in theory

¹⁴ Incidentally, John Williamson, lead author of the Washington Consensus, contests its neoliberal appellation:

I specifically did not believe that most of the “neoliberal” innovations of the Reagan administration in the United States or the Thatcher government in Britain had survived the demise of the former (Mrs. Thatcher’s government was still in its death throes at the time). The exception was privatization, which was Mrs. Thatcher’s personal gift to the economic policy agenda of the world, and which by 1989 had proved its worth. But I thought all the other new ideas with which Reagan and Thatcher had entered office, notably monetarism, supply-side economics, and minimal government, had by then been discarded as impractical or undesirable fads, so no trace of them can be found in what I labelled the “Washington Consensus.” (Williamson 1989: 2)

Williamson’s argument is that the practices of economic governance prescribed by the Washington Consensus was not designed as a practical test of neoliberal doctrine and its mandates do not proceed in direct alignment with many of economic neoliberalism’s core theoretical precepts. For Williamson, the Washington Consensus should be read more as an historic relic—a list of a list of policy instruments that appeared to “muster a reasonable degree of consensus [among the] political Washington of Congress and senior members of the administration and the technocratic Washington of the international financial institutions, the economic agencies of the U.S. government, the Federal Reserve Board, and the think tanks” (Williamson 1989: 2, citing Balassa et al. 1986).

¹⁵ See especially Stiglitz (2002).

focused especially on compliance to normative behavioural codes—often referred to as “best practices” for project design and implementation—that sought to bring together both governmental and non-governmental institutions (i.e. civil society) to maintain market efficiency and sustainability. A marked shift from the preceding developmental paradigm, a new appellation formulated by economists to signify this period: Post-Washington Consensus (PWC).

For many scholars, however, the PWC social policies for economic development are still of the neoliberal ilk¹⁶—tools “to establish a political order that maximises support for, and privileges to, market relationships and values” (Rodan 2004: 3-4). In this reading, the new social orientation of developmental policy is “a necessary attempt to insulate interests tied to such an order from effective contestation and challenge” (Rodan 2004: 3-4).

As Rodan’s analysis suggests, scholarly interpretations of “neoliberalism” today are no longer bound strictly to Hayek’s vision of free trade and unfettered markets (e.g. van Zanten 1997; Mayer & Glave 1999; Stevenson 1999). Most still encompass certain pro-market policy prescriptions such as efforts of states to decrease their size, to promote privatisation and reduce corporate interference, and to foster among citizens the ‘market values’ of individualism, entrepreneurship, and self-improvement (e.g. Babb 1999; Barth 2002; Hyndman 1999). Yet the term “neoliberalism” is now also being discursively linked to ulterior political and economic motives (among which is exposure of national economies to multinational corporations) that are seen as contributing to a hegemonic project of empire (Cammack 2004; Cerny 2004; Rodan 2004; Harvey 2005; Duménil & Lévy 2005). The argument of this latter category of analyses is that many state-led reform initiatives of the past decade have served to benefit the interests of governments and corporations at the expense of the society-at-large¹⁷ by attempting to shape not just economic relations, but also social relations and institutions to make markets more competitive.

¹⁶ According to Kanishka Jayasuriya and Kevin Hewison (2004), the PWC policies being implemented in post-crisis East Asia have four major characteristics: i) concern with the management of social and economic dislocation; ii) embedding of structural adjustment policies; iii) packages of social policies / switch to social safety nets; iv) a focus on “desirable forms of conduct”.

¹⁷ Harvey (2005: 122) writes that neoliberalism is “eventually something that looks uncomfortably like the reconstitution of capitalist class power”. Saad-Filho & Johnston (2005: 2) contribute to this characterisation of neoliberalism that: “it is not difficult to recognise the beast when it trespasses into new territories, tramples upon the poor, undermines rights and entitlements and defeats resistance, through a combination of domestic political, economic legal, ideological and media pressures, backed up by international blackmail and military force, if necessary”.

The divergence among associations of neoliberalism is especially pronounced when one narrows in on anthropological discourse. Donald Nonini observes:

In recent publications and intellectual production circuits of anthropology (conferences, paper titles, etc.), the term 'neoliberal' has recently appeared so frequently, and been applied with such abandon, that it risks being used to refer to almost any political, economic, social or cultural process associated with contemporary capitalism. If one does not simply declare from the outset as a matter of theoretical fiat that the entire global economy is now neoliberal, then it is appropriate to ask: what is neoliberalism, and what are its specificities, limits, and scope? And is there more than one form of neoliberalism? (Nonini 2008: 149)

Also facing disparate renderings of neoliberalism in anthropological discourse, Lisa Hoffman, Monica DeHart and Stephen Collier note:

/.../ anthropologists concerned with neoliberalism tend to focus on specific effects of, and resistances to, neoliberalism, not on the phenomenon itself. /.../ very little attention has been devoted to specifying what "neoliberalism" means in anthropological inquiry. It would be most accurate to say that, although ever more anthropological studies are concerned with neoliberalism, there have been few steps made toward an anthropology of neoliberalism, that is, an anthropology in which the very definition of neoliberalism is put in question and made an object of investigation. (Hoffman et al. 2006: 9)

The challenge raised by Hoffman et al. (2006) is that to deploy “neoliberalism” as an analytical concept is helpful only to the extent that it allows for comparability across cases (external verification). In order to enable cross-comparability, however, social scientists must first articulate the semantic boundaries and historical lineages of the concept of neoliberalism as we choose to deploy it in our research and writing.

Also, part of understanding the variations in scholarly accounts of neoliberalism is acknowledging that an evolution has occurred in the semantic imaginaries of the term. Whereas “neoliberalism” once signalled a particular economic doctrine, scholars are now using the term to reference what they view a hegemonic set of assumptions guiding modern-day economic governance. Just as with any economic theory put into effect, the practical (phenomenological) manifestations of neoliberal doctrine also are shaped by the political necessity of compromise and respond to experience. It is precisely because this shift in semantic imaginaries is rarely (if ever!) systematically analysed that that neoliberalism now appears as “a dynamic and at times problematic amalgamation of interests and ideologies” (Rodan 2004: 2).

By identifying the manner by and extent to which neoliberal ideology came to bear on the economic rationale of current and past régimes of governance and how it has subsequently influenced policy design one may begin to evaluate whether a given phenomenon is or is not “neoliberal”. The remainder of this thesis monograph is dedicated to the argument that accomplishing such (if at all possible!) requires careful attention to both the scale of one’s analysis and the definitional contexts upon which the idea of “neoliberalism” is constructed.

4. Point by Proxy: Neoliberalism in Chinese Contexts

Before continuing with my discussion of whether or not we as social development practitioners are ‘all neoliberals now’, I shall make a rather lengthy digression. This section uses the case of China to establish the argument that the extent to which something can or cannot be read as “neoliberal” is very much dependent on the breadth of one’s inquiry. By focusing on the bounded case of the Chinese state, this digression explores the limits within which phenomena deemed “neoliberal” can be reconciled with the original context of the term. Although a somewhat unorthodox juxtaposition, the aim of this analysis is to establish the point that reconciling contradictory interpretations of “neoliberal” phenomenon is possible only if the phenomenological category (or “research setting”) is limited in scale—a discussion that will be developed in relation to social development in Sections 5 and 6 monograph.

Examining the Chinese state’s post-reform macroeconomic trajectory, Harvey (2005: 1, 120-151 *passim*) argues that over time, the Chinese economy was brought into increasing correspondence with the external economic systems of the “the core neoliberal states”. The challenge one encounters when reading Harvey—and this is characteristic of the social science discourse of neoliberalism in China more broadly speaking—is that it is difficult for the reader to infer exactly what is “neoliberal” about China’s pro-market reform strategy and to what extent has neoliberal economic ideology gained credence within the Chinese state over time.

To evaluate how changing policy configurations in China accord to prescripts of neoliberal economic doctrine, the next sections will develop a rough historical summary of the CCP post-1978 reforms and will evaluate both macro- and micro-phenomenological aspects of China as a “neoliberalising” state.

4.1. CHINA’S (NEO-LIBERAL?) POST-REFORM MACROECONOMIC POLICY

1978–93: Crossing the River by Groping for Stones

In 1978, after three decades of Soviet-style development strategy reliant of heavy state intervention (Lin et al. 1996: xxiii), the Chinese state resolved to expand the scope of the market for resource allocation, and so took on a complete overhaul of its development strategy (Naughton 1995: 75). Focusing initially on the growing urban-rural divide¹⁸, the CCP reform experiment adopted a number of measures to reduce the role of the state in micro-economic administration and resource allocation. Such measures included decentralising agriculture¹⁹ under the household responsibility system (HRS)²⁰; reducing the scope of mandatory delivery outputs by farm producers; raising purchasing prices on requisitioned grain products; promoting greater consumption in the rural areas; promoting rural industry, especially via the Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs)²¹; and allowing some state-owned enterprises to retain profits (surplus value) as an incentive for good performance. (Prasad 2004: 13; Alessandrini & Buccellato 2008: 3) In order to open-up trade with the outside world, to attract foreign investment and technology and to promote exports

¹⁸ Five major expressions of this “urban-rural divide” are: 1) gaps in political power, where rural populations are governed in political, economic, cultural, and other aspects by non-rural representatives—officials and implementers alike; 2) gaps in economic position, where industrial and rural product prices are set in order to develop the accumulation of capital in industry while monopolies in economic resources and opportunities limit the establishment and growth of rural industry; 3) gaps in income, where the ratio of difference between urban and rural incomes is between 3:1 and 6:1; 4) gaps in social benefits and services, where residents of cities and towns receive free medical care, are eligible for pensions, and receive stable grain, oil, and meat rations, while peasants receive none of these benefits and services; 5) gaps in social position, where urban residents’ social positions are far above those of rural people. (Wang & Zhang 1993; Li 1995; Zhang 2000; cited in Wang & Karl 2004: 58)

¹⁹ By the late 1970s, food supplies and production had become so deficient that government officials were warning that China was about to repeat the “disaster of 1959” - a reference to the famines which had killed tens of millions during the Great Leap Forward (Brandt et al. 2008:8).

²⁰ The household responsibility system allowed farm families to work a piece of land under contract, to keep whatever surplus they produced, and to sell surpluses on the open market.

²¹ Initially commune and brigade enterprises (CBEs), which had been around since the 1950s as part of Mao’s Great Leap Forward campaign to “run industry by the masses” and in 1976 numbered around 1.1 million. CBEs were renamed township-village enterprises, TVEs, after the dissolution of the people’s commune system in 1984 (Zhang 1996: 12).

and to create laboratories for testing broader market-oriented reforms, the Chinese state also conferred preferential status upon special economic zones (SEZs)²² (IMF 1993: 3).

The CCP's early experiments with incremental reform (the process referred to by Deng Xiaoping as “crossing the river by groping for stones²³”) achieved instantaneous success from a macroeconomic perspective—generating high growth and eliminating production shortages (Shen 2000: 58). Price adjustments and protection of small markets secured domestic agricultural products. Agricultural gross output value grew around 9 per cent per year between 1978 and 1984; the annual growth rate of per capita output of grain rose from 0.2% in the period of 1957-78 to 3.8% in the period of 1978-84, cotton from -0.06% to 17.5%, edible oil from -0.9% to 14% (Riskin 1987: 292). Small market relations gradually eased, allowing greater flexibility in production (Wang & Karl 2004: 12). Partly as a result of the early success of reforms, the people's commune model (the hallmark of Chinese socialism for over twenty years!) was repudiated and the communes subsequently dismantled. By 1984, approximately 98 percent of all farm households were under the household responsibility system. (Alessandrini & Buccellato 2008: 5) TVE profitability continued incentivising rural industrialisation (Qian 1999a: 10-15), perpetuating a boom in investment and entrepreneurship that lasted well into the mid-1990s (Alessandrini & Buccellato 2008: 5). In fact, so swift were the initial investment booms in 1978 and 1979 that as early as 1981 the CCP was investigating measures to cool the economy (Xinhua 2008).

Throughout the initial period of rural reforms, the economy remained principally organised as a socialist system and directed by a central planning structure. The predominance of state and collective ownership, firm central control over the financial system, redistribution of resources among regions, rationing of grain, and subsidised provision of housing achieved a pattern of income distribution that was much narrower than those in almost all other developing countries (Worden et al. 1987). There was little private ownership of productive assets. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Party retained primary control over land distribution practices. Agricultural land was farmed under lease by farm households but was formally owned by villages, towns, and townships—the collective units that had replaced the rural commune system. Intellectuals were co-opted in the reform

²² Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Shanou in Guangdong province, Xiamen in Fujian province, and the entire province of Hainan.

²³ 摸着石头过河 mōzhe shítou guòhé [*alt*: feel one's way; test each step before taking it; advance cautiously]

process, contributing to the CCP strategy of adaptive governance by helping to reconcile traditional socialist and reform ideologies. (Wang & Karl 2004: 18).

Following on the initial success of the rural reform experiment, in December 1982 the CCP officially ratified their Sixth Five-Year Plan. Advanced under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, the plan was premised on continued progress towards a market economy (USITC 1985: 26-27, cited in Jaggi et al. 1996: 10). Movement toward a market system, however, was complex and difficult. The post-1978 surge in investments had contributed to problems of inflation, and the economy remained far from modernised; further reforms were designed to extend the reform process to urban industries—especially those industries dominated by monolithic and inefficient state enterprises (Jaggi et al. 1996: 12). These urban reforms prescribed drastic reductions in role of the state in resource allocations so as to “decentralise power and interests”²⁴ (Wang & Karl 2004: 23), which meant converting the economy from an administratively-driven command economy to a price-driven market economy (Prasad 2004: 31; Alessandrini & Buccellato 2008). The urban reforms also sought to increase foreign trade as a source of investment funds and modern technology. China’s Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were thus extended to another fourteen major cities in the coastal areas²⁵ (Prasad 2004: 52; Alessandrini & Buccellato 2008: 5). Restrictions on commercial flows were relaxed. Joint ventures with foreign firms were encouraged, and over time productive exchanges between foreign firms with advanced technology and major Chinese economic networks were cultivated. (Lai 2006: 73, 82; Alessandrini & Buccellato 2008: 5)

By 1985, GDP per capita²⁶ (current US\$) had risen from \$154.97 in 1978 to \$291.77, but over 60 percent of the Chinese labour force was still employed in agriculture²⁷, and the

²⁴ 放权让利 *fàngquán rànglì* [*alt*: delegate power and yield profit to a lower level; grant more power to enterprises and allow them to keep a bigger share of profits]

²⁵ Dalian, Qinhuangdao, Tianjin, Yantai, Qingdao, Lianyungang, Shanghai, Ningbo, Wenzhou, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Zhanjiang and Beihai. The Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong was also signed by Zhao and Thatcher in 1984, formalizing plans to cede Hong Kong to China as a Special Administrative Region in 1997 (Jaggi et al. 1996: 12).

²⁶ Data are in current U.S. dollars. Source: World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files. Available at: <http://databank.worldbank.org/> [14 September 2010]

²⁷ As indicated by World Bank estimates for 1987, and noting that every year afterwards this proportion decreased. Data available at: <http://databank.worldbank.org/> [14 September 2010]

agricultural sector overall contributed only around 30 percent of the value added to GDP²⁸. China's economy remained characterised by low averages for labour productivity (Dekle & Vandenbroucke 2006: 7, 31). Facing this situation, China's economists were in debate²⁹ about whether to lead on-going reform efforts with price adjustments³⁰ or instead to focus on systems of state ownership³¹. The conclusion reached was that price adjustments were necessary to create suitable market conditions, but that the government could reform systems of enterprise ownership (mainly through the contract system) without risking too much social instability. (Wang & Karl 2004: 15) Thus, the reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s focused on creating a two-track (*alt.* dual-track) price system³² to decrease the role of the state in resource allocations was introduced alongside the 'Contract Responsibility System'—an effort to give enterprises sufficient autonomy and incentives to allow them to respond to market forces while still requiring a set amount of profits to be paid to the government. A labour contract system was also introduced for new recruits to state-owned enterprises.

The two-track system failed to operate as anticipated. Excesses grew between the prices for public resource and the cost of their production and distribution (i.e. increased rents) and their relative private market values reached upward of 3.5 trillion yuan by 1988—roughly 30 percent of that year's gross national product (Hu 1989 cited in Wang & Karl 2004: 16). With the Chinese state relinquishing its coordinative prerogative in industry and commerce, urban industrial reform gave rise to questions of resource ownership that had consequences for the whole national economic structure (Guo 1992, cited in Wang & Karl 2004: 15). Relaxing restrictions on economic activity while retaining systemic forms of inequality in terms of the state's allocative and regulatory capacities enabled tax evasion, kickbacks, abuse of public

²⁸ Agriculture includes forestry, hunting, and fishing, as well as cultivation of crops and livestock production. Value added is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or depletion and degradation of natural resources. The origin of value added is determined by the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC), revision 3. Note: For VAB countries, gross value added at factor cost is used as the denominator. Source: World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files. Available at: <http://databank.worldbank.org/> [14 September 2010]

²⁹ The principle contours of this debate are summarised in 吴敬琏, 楼继伟, 周小川, 郭树清, 李剑阁. 1988. 中国经济改革的整体设计. 北京:中国展望出版社 [Wú Jìngliǎn, Lóu jìwěi, Zhōu Xiǎochuān, Guō Shùqīng and Lǐ Jiàngé 1988. *Zhōngguó jīngjì gǎigé de zhěngtǐ shèjì / The Overall Design of China's Economic Reforms*. Běijīng: Zhōngguó Zhǎnwàng Chūbǎnshè / Prospect Publishing House (cited in Wang & Karl 2004: 59)]

³⁰ I.e. moving away from the old planned-economy pricing system and toward a market economy.

³¹ I.e. large-scale privatization of state-owned enterprises.

³² Under the two-track price system, state plan prices were mixed with market prices. At first, rural enterprises were allowed to sell over-quota product at market price; Later on, industrial goods and labour services were gradually also permitted to be allocated at market prices, until by the early-1990s nearly all prices were set by the market. (Alessandrini & Buccellato 2008: 5)

funds, the conversion of power into money (e.g. to solicit bribes), mandatory fundraising for local government expenses^{33,34} and so on (Worden et al. 1987). The position and interests of workers as a group were undermined. Workers' benefits stagnated³⁵ and the "iron rice bowl" came under threat, incomes dropped and unemployment increased—affecting especially workers in state-owned enterprises. Reforms in housing, health care, salaries, and other social benefits stalled. (Wang & Karl 2004: 17) This systemic inequality quickly turned into income differences among classes and social strata, which gave rise to social polarisation.

Reacting to the over-heated economy, rampant inflation and mounting social discord in mid-1988, the CCP returned to its previous policy of strengthening state supervision. (Wang & Karl 2004: 16) Authorities re-centralised many price controls producing a sharp slowing in the economy, mounting losses in state-owned enterprises and rapid increases in inter-enterprise. (Prasad 2004: 2) Political campaigns to suppress dissent were re-instituted, including policies of retrenchment and "rectification". (Jaggi et al. 1996: 13) Yet within a year of implementing cool-down measures, the threat of economic crisis had re-appeared, and the CCP turned again to fiscal and monetary stimuli to reverse the economic slowdown. Within government, this volatile situation in turn gave rise to clashes in interests between different state departments, and different power centres, as well as contradictions between the localities and the centre. Across the country, Chinese citizens began questioning the legitimacy of the course of the redistribution process (Wang & Karl 2004: 18). Continued poverty in rural areas and the glaring disparities between urban economic élites began to constitute a new crisis of legitimacy for the Chinese state.

³³ 摊派政风 *tānpài zhèngfēng*

³⁴ Wang Shaoguang writes: "The reform policy of decentralizing power and interests did not in any way reduce the power of public entities (governments of all levels and their organs) in the distribution of people's revenue; it merely reduced the power of the central government over this. /... / Accompanying the expansion over the power of finance by local governments was their ability to use administrative means to interfere in economic life, which was not in any way weakened, but rather strengthened: moreover, this type of interference was even more direct than that of the central government. The decentralization of power and interests in no way led to the disappearance of the traditional command economy; it merely led to the miniaturization of this traditional structure." (Wang 1991:15-17, 20, citation and translation from Wang & Karl 2004: 58).

³⁵ See: Carl Riskin, 赵人伟, 李实 (合编). 1999. *中国居民收入分配研究*. 北京: 中国社会科学出版社 [Zhào Rénwēi et al. 1994. *Zhōngguó jūmín shōurù fēnpèi yánjiū / New Research On the Distribution of Income in China*. Běijīng: Zhōngguó Shèhuì Kēxué Chūbǎnshè / Beijing: China Finance & Economic Press]; 冯同庆等. 1993. *中国职工状况, 内部结构及相互关系*. 北京: 中国社会科学出版社 [Féng Tóngqīng et al. 1993. *Zhōngguó zhígōng zhuàngkuàng, nèibù jiégòu jí xiānghù guānxi / The Situation of Chinese Labourers, Internal Structure and Mutual Relationships*, Běijīng: Zhōngguó Shèhuì Kēxué Chūbǎnshè / Beijing: China Social Science Press]; 张宛丽. 2000. «中国社会阶级阶层研究二十年» *社会学研究*. [Zhāng Wǎnlì. 2000. "Zhōngguó shèhuì jiējí jiēcéng yánjiū èrshí nián." / "Twenty Years of Research on Social Class in China" *Shèhuìxué yánjiū / Research in Sociology, Vol. 1*]

At the end of 1980s, the Chinese economy was very much a mixed system. Neither a centrally planned economy nor a market economy, it was later defined by the XIV Congress of the Chinese Communist Party as a “socialist market economy”. The state owned and controlled the largest non-agricultural enterprises and major industries continued to be guided by the central plan (Worden et. al. 1987; Alessandrini & Buccellato 2008: 5), but the CCP leadership was committed to further expansion of the reform program as a requisite for satisfactory economic growth. Under these circumstances, forces in the economic system worked against each other, producing what the Chinese leadership called internal “contradictions” (Worden et. al. 1987).

1993-Present: Embedding the Socialist Market Economy

In the early 1990s, the official ideological line in China began to change. In the spring of 1992, Deng Xiaoping made his famous Southern tour to mobilise support for further and more radical reforms. Shortly afterwards, at the Fourteenth National Congress in October 1992, the CCP agreed to endorse the "socialist market economy" as China's goal of reform. (Qian & Wu 2000: 8) Then, in November 1993, another watershed event in China's pro-market transition: the "Decision on Some Issues Concerning the Establishment of a Socialist Market Economic Structure" (hereinafter the “1993 Decision”) adopted by the Third Plenary Session of the Fourteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Accepting Deng Xiaoping's argument that the market system is not incompatible with the ideals of socialism, the 1993 Decision was to abolish the planning system altogether—replacing it with a modern market system. (Qian & Wu 2000: 9) To effect this transition, the 1993 Decision called for market-supporting institutions such as fiscal federalism³⁶, a (re-)centralised monetary system, and social safety nets³⁷. The 1993 Decision also addressed enterprise reform by way of property rights and ownership and paved the way for privatisation of SOEs. (Qian & Wu 2000: 3, 9-10) Subsequently, the CCP began making pro-market adjustments. Yet while CCP leadership embraced pro-market economic institutions, their approach to

³⁶ E.g. separation of central and local taxes and their administration.

³⁷ Party leaders and intellectuals recognized that harnessing China's domestic markets could be dangerous to justice and social order and concluded that the Party must forcefully guide the economy and regulate social protections (e.g. monthly allowances, housing, health care) to guard against the shocks that accompany transition to unregulated markets (Nonini 2008: 164).

governance (especially under Zhu Rongji) has consistently been associated with stronger, more authoritative government institutions (Naughton 2007: 100).

Between 1994 and 1999 the CCP attempted several radical reforms: unifying exchange rates, reorganising the central bank, including establishing cross-province (i.e., regional) central bank branches; liberalising trade, issuing labour laws, and encouraging comprehensive commitments to World Trade Organisation principles (Jaggi et al. 1996: 14; Qian & Wu 2000: 15-16; Prasad 2004: 2). The process of realising these reforms, however, has been tumultuous. In 1994, WTO accession plans derailed and inflation remained high. By 1995, the CCP was exploring new options to steer a middle course between international pressures to liberalise the economy ahead of WTO membership and the domestic social pressures and political demands that such liberalisation might incur. (Jaggi et al. 1996: 14) Privatisation of small-scale state-owned enterprises (SOEs) was experimented by local governments in, Sichuan, Guangdong, and Shandong (Qian & Roland 1998: 1157), marking the beginning of a period of large-scale layoffs of state employees (Cao, Qian & Weingast, 1999: 105; Naughton 2007: 106-107). Inflation was tamed after 1996, although cycles were not completely eliminated (recurring after 2002). The overall macroeconomic context swung sharply toward price stability and increased competition, which intensified the product market pressure on Chinese firms, especially public enterprises. (Naughton 2007: 105) In September 1997, private ownership was elevated to an important supplementary component of the economy³⁸ (Qian & Wu 2000: 10) and a dramatic downsizing of the state-enterprise sector ensued³⁹ — contributing to the emergence of a “reform with losers” (Naughton 2007: 101). State-enterprise workers, who had been a relatively privileged group in the past, were subject to employment uncertainty and for the first time since the founding of the PRC. Less sheltered from competition than in the past, many state workers suffered precipitous losses in income and social standing. (Naughton 2007: 106-107).

China’s post-1993 transition toward a market economy was far more profound and thorough than during the early reform period, but market-supporting institutions remained underdeveloped from a liberal economic perspective. At the end of the 20th century, the financial

³⁸ Private ownership and the rule of law were later incorporated into the Chinese Constitution in March 1999.

³⁹ Industrial SOE profits were 15% of GDP in 1978, but fell below 2% of GDP in 1996–1997. By the end of 2004 the urban private sector, without counting foreign-invested firms, employed about twice as many workers as the traditional state sector: 55 million, compared with less than 30 million in SOEs. (Naughton 2007: 105-106)

system was still dominated by state-owned banks and subject to influence by government. Weak legal accountability in the financial system was evident in the large number of non-performing loans and bad assets, corrected only by government bailouts. Chinese regulatory agencies remain dependent on the government management bodies from which they originated. (Naughton 2007: 108) In more recent years, the CCP has re-tightened its control over some parts of the economy. A Quarterly Update issued by the Beijing field office of the World Bank in June 2010, for instance, reported increases in both the proportion of industrial production by companies controlled by the Chinese state and investments by state-controlled companies. (World Bank 2010; Wines 2010)

4.2. WE'RE (NOT!) ALL NEOLIBERALS NOW: REMARKS ON CHINA'S MACROECONOMIC TRAJECTORY

Since 1978s, the CCP has pursued a liberalising policy of reform and opening up⁴⁰ to bring market forces to bear internally within the Chinese economy. The crux of many interpretations of China as a neoliberal state appears to be that many of these reforms, while carried out under a banner of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”⁴¹, were actually predicated on a Hayekian-inspired⁴² model of economic governance: privatisation of state enterprises, emphasis on reducing the role of government in the market, and the gradual elimination of “iron rice bowl” labour guarantees. The outcome of these reforms, to borrow on the language of David Harvey (2005: 120, 144), has been “the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control”—that is, “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics”.

The limitations of many such analyses of neoliberalism in China, however, are that these neoliberal elements appear to be identified *ex post facto* by policy consequence rather than policy impetus and design. For instance, as local government agencies were realising greater autonomy and discretion over foreign capital being invested in their localities throughout the early 1980's (Wang 1991: 15–17), local cadre and officials discovered

⁴⁰ 改革开放 gǎigé kāifàng f.e. reform and opening-up to the outside world

⁴¹ 中国特色社会主义 Zhōngguó tèsè shèhuìzhǔyì

⁴² This statement is included in deference to the philosophical lineage of neoliberalism in China. For example, in October 1980, at the dawn of China's so-called neoliberalization, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference under Deng's administration hosted Milton Friedman to lecture top Party leaders and ministerial-level officials about how inflation and slow growth are the results of intrusive government policies that hinder the functioning of a free market economy.

opportunities to leverage the dual-price structure to their advantage and convert products within the state plan into products outside the plan (i.e. market products). As a result, a majority of state-owned resources were transferred, legally and illegally, to benefit interests of a privileged minority (Wang & Karl 2004: 15). For Harvey (2005: 147, 160), this outcome exemplified neoliberal “accumulation by dispossession”. Harvey’s reading, however, does not reconcile how the dual-track system was initially developed to avoid the transitional failures experienced in Eastern Europe, where neoliberal theory promoted a “big bang” strategy of price liberalisation and ignores the fact that the period of reform during which the dual-track system was in operation also realised significant additions of protein and fats to the average human’s diet in China (Qian 1999b: 18 -22; Riskin 1987: 292; Zhang 1996: 11).

Similarly, in the mid-1980s, the central government delegated financial responsibility for social services to local communities (previously provided by village and commune-level collectives)—especially in the fields of basic education and primary health services (Davis 1989: 578). As a result, investment for basic education and health care was reduced. (Zhang 1996: 11-12) Again, Harvey (2005: 160) links these outcomes to “the neoliberal project” but does not acknowledge how Chinese reform process was also responsible for establishing other forms of social services, such as the prioritisation of social safety net via pension, health care, unemployment insurance, and minimum living standard support under the 1993 Decision (Qian & Wu 2000: 26-27). Party leaders and intellectuals recognised that harnessing China’s domestic markets could be dangerous to justice and social order and concluded that the Party must forcefully guide the economy and regulate social protections to guard against the shocks that accompany transition to unregulated markets (Nonini 2008: 164).

Somewhat more ironically, Harvey’s review of the history of neoliberalism (2005: 21) acknowledges that neoliberalism, as conceptualised by Hayek and his colleagues of the Mont Pelerin Society, fiercely opposed theories of centralised state planning—arguing that state decisions on matters of investment and capital accumulation were bound to be wrong because the information available to the state could not rival that contained in market signals. While clearly regarding markets as part of a capitalist stage leading to socialism, CCP reformers never appear to have accepted the core neoliberal claim that unregulated markets maximise social well-being. Instead, during the first fifteen years of reform the official ideology of the Chinese Communist Party was the one of "combining plan and market." (Qian & Wu 2000: 8) Modernisation through the development of productive forces has been permitted only within

the overall framework of Party rule (Meisner, 1999: 475). Up until 1993, the CCP retained control of management and strategic decision-making among the state-owned enterprises—preventing them from privatising and ensuring that nearly all remained financially solvent. The state sector expanded in absolute terms in employment, output, and assets. (Naughton 2007: 105) Most non-state enterprises, such as TVEs, were organised as joint ventures and essentially controlled by local government officials (i.e. not truly private)⁴³. Truly private enterprises were generally small in scale (most were less than 8 employees in 1993) and the private sector accounted for less than 15 percent of industrial output. After 1993, as greater autonomy was divulged to the private sector, Chinese state intervention in the economy continued in the form of subsidies to strategic industries to make them globally competitive vis-à-vis foreign firms as well as restrictions on foreign investors who might compete with Chinese domestic firms. (Nonini 2008: 166) Neoliberal postulates of the desirability of unimpeded movement of capital and goods across national borders without were also widely rejected. In fact, China’s extensive control over the movement of capital—a radical departure from IMF/World Bank and WTO dictates—appears to be one reason that it remained largely unaffected by the capital flight that wrought havoc throughout Thailand, Indonesia, and Korea during the 1997–8 Asian financial crisis (Stiglitz 2002: 125-6).

I would like to clarify that the above examples are given not to attack David Harvey’s scholarship; indeed, Harvey has a nuanced and sensitive appreciation of neoliberalism that has guided my own thought on this subject. Yet reviewing the history of China’s economic reform has informed my impression that micro-contextual analysis, as compared to a more broadly-oriented investigation, is far more helpful in accounting for how “neoliberalism” is manifest in a particular setting. How can one identify the extent to which the Chinese domestic economy has embraced neoliberal economic approaches to governance during the reform period? One might start with an examination of how soviet-style economic presuppositions were revisited during academic exchanges between China and Western countries throughout the 1980s and then contextualise the ways that so-called “western economics”⁴⁴ began to emerge within state decision-making. Intellectual research into the reform process drew not only on neo-classical economics and new institutional economics,

⁴³ C.f. Huang Yasheng

⁴⁴ This includes detailed studies on new fiscal and monetary systems, transitional monetary policy, currency convertibility, state commercial bank reform, financial restructuring, social safety nets, corporatization, the changing role of government function in the economy, etc. (Qian & Wu 2000: 17)

but also incorporated the lessons learned from China's earlier reform experience and the experiences of Eastern Europe in the 1980s (Qian & Wu 2000: 16-17); thus, the operative question becomes how the fusion of economic theory and experiential data resulted in the particular constellation of policy approaches adopted by CCP leadership, as well as how compromises were brokered. The "integrated reform" school (Wu, Zhou, Lou, et al., 1988), for instance, championed market-supporting institutions (such as tax system and financial system) and emphasised the importance of coordinated reform in several key areas such as liberalisation of prices, building a market-oriented tax and fiscal system, and monetary and financial reforms. Their proposals were entertained but ultimately rejected by CCP leadership in the 1980s, but later came to bear on the formulation of the November 1993 Decision. (Qian & Wu 2000: 17-18) What contextual dynamics impacted on the reception integrated reform arguments among CCP decision-makers at different periods?

One researcher who has been particularly successful at this sort of micro-contextual analysis is Aihwa Ong. Examining "neoliberalism as exception", Ong cites the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Special Administrative Regions (SARs) as neoliberal policy operationalised by calculative choice to realise the specific goals of proliferating cross-border trade networks—"exceptions" to contemporaneous strategies of governance in the PRC (Ong 2006: 97-98). Ong's clearly defined focus enables her to examine a broad range of socio-economic consequences of a clear phenomenological manifestation of neoliberalism, i.e. how creation of these spatial (territorially-defined) enclaves of economic experimentation has affected the exercise of state sovereignty. Such scholarship, in my mind, is a model for analysis of how specific policy interventions accord to neoliberal economic theory and what outcomes these policies generate when put into practice.

The point I am attempting to make is that gross characterisations of China's reform process as "neoliberal" are difficult to reconcile with a Hayekian understanding of neoliberalism. Focusing on the macro-phenomenological category of 'Chinese economic governance', for instance, obscures complex dynamics such as of the internal heterogeneity and numerous overlapping jurisdictions and webs of authority of the Chinese state. Examinations of governmental decisions and policy choices and their consequences via micro-level investigations of contending ideologies, power brokers, and agents, or of how the expressions related to other political and economic pressures over time, may lend themselves better to articulating the linkages between economic theory, political practice and social consequence.

5. Social Development amidst Neoliberal Developmentalism

Section 3 of this monograph attempted an historical deconstruction of the term neoliberalism in order to expose and explain the variation in semiotic associations assigned to it. Section 4 examined arguments that China evinces a host of neoliberal contexts in spite of being, overall, an authoritarian state in order to show the importance of scale when interpreting a case as “neoliberal”. This section will build from both of these discussions. I will attempt to generate a thick description of the place of social development within the greater developmental milieu by detailing how the macro-political environment of international law coincided with the institutionalization social development policy among international financial institutions—focusing on the example of policy frameworks for the protection of indigenous peoples. I present this contextual data to show that while semantically a subset of the “development paradigm”, historical evidence suggests that social development policies and practices among IFIs are not necessarily an extension or adaptation of neoliberal strategies of governance *per se*. Instead, the space made for the practice of social development within the IFIs was opened initially (and remains open to this day) as a measure to correct for market-induced shocks and social dislocations⁴⁵.

Yet it is also undeniable that major advances in IFI social policy frameworks coincide temporally with the resurgence of neoliberal economics in the post-Bretton Woods international system of development finance, and that arguments for more socially aware approaches to development were couched in the language of market values—i.e. as tools to improve the “effectiveness” of development projects (Davis 2004:1). For these reasons, several scholars read social development as advancing a neoliberal project of governance.

By providing different interpretations of the culpability of social development in more broadly written assessments of neoliberal governance, however, my intention is not to

⁴⁵ Harvey (2005: 73) acknowledges that the pillar principles of these institutions stand in distinct contrast to core neoliberal tenants: “The IMF in effect covers, to the best of its ability, exposures to risk and uncertainty in international financial markets. This practice is hard to justify according to neoliberal theory, since investors should in principle be responsible for their own mistakes. More fundamentalist-minded neoliberals therefore believe that the IMF should be abolished. This option was seriously considered during the early years of the Reagan administration, and Congressional Republicans raised it again in 1998.”

establish one or the other view as correct. Rather, I aim to demonstrate the complexity of ascribing the ‘neoliberal’ appellation to any broadly defined phenomenological category.

5.1. ALTERNATE AND CONTENDING NARRATIVES

This monograph earlier introduced [Section 3] that the naissance of neoliberalism as an economic doctrine occurred at a moment just prior to the formulation of the Bretton Woods system of international finance, but only began to play a predominate role after the original Bretton Woods system fell into disrepair and was dismantled in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Incidentally, it was during this same period that the case was being advanced within the World Bank for systematically addressing social concerns as obligatory components of project design and operations (Davis 2004: 1-4). Much of the justification advanced for the inclusion of social development measures rested on arguments about improved performance and efficiency of project operations (Davis 2004).

Yet one must be cautious not to conclude directly from their temporal convergence that social development is a simple extension of neoliberal developmentalism. While the next section will detail further how social development *can* be read in a neoliberal framework, it is equally important to acknowledge how such arguments tend to ignore a great deal of nuance about the varied groups of stakeholders and the multiplicity of interests at work within the IFIs as well as the tremendous influence of international civil society and the role of international law in the formulation of IFI policy frameworks. As is commonly the case with investigations into the ‘public sector’ of any country (e.g. Abrams 2006), the full governmental logic behind the political economy is not one of a unified voice. Rather, it is a negotiated logic. Focusing briefly on how a sub-set of social policy, namely protections for indigenous peoples (my particular area of professional specialisation), emerged in relation to changing international legal policy frameworks, this section makes the case that the history and practice of social development may also be interpreted in an alternate and contending, anti-neoliberal frame.

It was 1982 that policy protections for tribal and indigenous peoples began to formally emerge among the IFIs. Acknowledging that tribal peoples were more likely to be harmed than helped by development, the World Bank adopted *de facto* provisions to safeguard the

rights of indigenous peoples⁴⁶ by requiring projects in tribal areas to afford special consultations with project-affected tribal communities. By 1991, the Bank had replaced that policy with its first *de jure* indigenous peoples policy⁴⁷ which provided that, beyond consultation, indigenous peoples should benefit from project initiatives.⁴⁸ The Asian Development Bank's (ADB) policy in 1998 followed suit, adopting a loose set of operational parameters that enabled application of their policy in some cases to non-indigenous minority ethnic groups.

This extension of IFI policy prescriptions for the protection of indigenous and tribal peoples coincides with increasing attention to the rights of indigenous peoples within international law. While in 1982 the only binding international legal instrument to focus solely on indigenous and tribal peoples was the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 107 of 1957⁴⁹, the United Nations system that same year established the Working Group on Indigenous Populations as a subsidiary organ of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights⁵⁰. The United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations was then established in 1985—the same year that the Working Group Began Preparing a draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples (World Bank 2005). In 1989, ILO adopted the “Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries.”⁵¹ (Convention 169), which has since served as the key reference point in the drafting of policy and legislative frameworks of intergovernmental organisations for the protection of tribal and indigenous groups (thus extending the reach of this instrument

⁴⁶ These provisions came in the form of Operational Manual Statement (OMS) 2.34, entitled “Tribal People in Bank-financed Projects”.

⁴⁷ Operational Directive 4.20 on “Indigenous Peoples”.

⁴⁸ It was also around this time that the concept of “participation” began to enter into the World Bank’s larger effort to incorporate social analysis into project implementation. I shall return to this point in Section 5.2.

⁴⁹ Ratified by 27 countries, ILO Convention 107 viewed assimilation (“national integration”) as the only way for indigenous peoples to survive. As this sentiment was continuously contested by civil society, and ILO eventually opted to draft the superseding Convention No. 169 (adopted in 1989)—the only binding international legal instrument currently in force dealing specifically with the rights of indigenous peoples.

⁵⁰ Pursuant to Economic and Social Council Resolution 1982/34.

⁵¹ *see*: <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C169>; The fundamental principle of ILO Convention 169 is that of non-discrimination (Articles 3 and 4), and the spirit of consultation and participation constitutes its cornerstone. The Convention takes into account the vulnerability of indigenous and tribal peoples, stipulates that these special measures not go against the wishes of the indigenous peoples, and contains a number of provisions on spiritual, cultural and territorial rights (Articles 13 and 14) While ratified only by 17 countries [as of 2007: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Colombia, Denmark, Dominica, Ecuador, Fiji, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela; states which have submitted it to their national legislatures for ratification or are discussing ratification are Chile, El Salvador, Finland, The Russian Federation, Panama, South Africa, Sweden and Sri Lanka].

beyond merely signatory states). The 1992 Rio Convention on Biological Diversity⁵² (CBD) contributed further to the canon of international law for the protection of indigenous peoples—an approach that has been endorsed by the Inter American Court of Human Rights (IACHR 1997) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights⁵³ (FPP & Tebtebba 2006: 4, 7, 35-36). While not in the form of binding instruments, other judicial organs and activities have since been promulgated and so contribute to the rights of indigenous peoples under customary international law. In relation to resource exploitation which may affect indigenous peoples’ lands and territories, for instance, the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights reaffirms that, “While development facilitates the enjoyment of all human rights, the lack of development may not be invoked to justify the abridgment of internationally recognised human rights” (United Nations 1993). Also in 1993, the United Nations General Assembly issued Resolution 48/163, proclaiming the period 1994-2004 as “The International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People”. This Resolution was followed in 1995 by Resolution 50/157, which adopted a “Programme of Activities for the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People”, and in 2004 the General Assembly issued Resolution A/RES/59/174 proclaiming the period 2005-2014 as “The Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People.” Within the last decade, the UN Economic and Social Council also established the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples (2002) to advise on social and economic development as well culture, education, and health. In September 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which situates the principle of Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) as the preeminent criterion engaging indigenous peoples on developmental initiatives.

Beholden as they are to international law, extension of the international rights frameworks referenced above was clearly one factor spurring IFIs to draft, implement and improve upon their safeguard policy frameworks since the World Bank’s 1982 Operational Manual Statement. After another several years of formal policy review and consultation with civil society, the World Bank in 2005 replaced its policy on indigenous peoples with the current

⁵² *see*: <http://www.cbd.int/default.shtml>; The CBD calls for the recognition and support of the identity, culture, and interests of indigenous peoples and for their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development (Article 10).

⁵³ Referring to the Ogoni case.

OP/BP 4.10⁵⁴. IDB safeguard policies went into effect the same year. International policies aimed to protect indigenous peoples were most recently updated by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2008) the Asian Development Bank (2009), and the International Finance Corporation (2011). Cast in this way, the impetus for social development interventions among IFIs may be read both as a means to improve the efficiency of a problematic and dysfunctional economic system (i.e. arguably as an extension of neoliberalism) and as a response to strengthening social protections under international law (i.e. disassociated from neoliberal logic). On the one hand, social development helps to justify a system that maximises support for, and privileges to, market relationships and values. On the other hand, social policy seeks to encourage the development of regulatory systems in order to mitigate and correct for market-induced shock by compelling governments and private-sector corporations to design and implement social benefits programs in conjunction with their economic investment schemes.

5.2. HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS

IFI social development policies (including their policies on indigenous issues) invoke two related concepts of human agency: participation and empowerment. Participation is both a component and an objective of the process of ‘social assessment’ used to identify critical social issues when designing economic development project initiatives—the process of integrating inputs from diverse actors (defined during stakeholder analysis) during project appraisals in order to increase the ability of marginalised groups to participate in the decision-making processes affecting their lives. Empowerment is the favoured trope for justifying, or at least rationalising, this approach. (Dennis & Guldin 2009: 2)

While heightened participation may result from social development policy, empowerment is debatable. Régimes of cultural rights (such as social policy), As Charles Hale (2005: 13) writes, “when carefully delimited, not only pose little challenge to the forward march of the neoliberal project but also induce the bearers of these rights to join in the march.” As social

⁵⁴ The World Bank policy on indigenous peoples comprises both Operational Policy 4.10 and Bank Procedure 4.10, can be referred to collectively as OP/BP 4.10; these together replace OD 4.20, *indigenous peoples*, dated September 1991. OP/BP 4.10 apply to all projects for which a Project Concept Review has taken place on or after July 1, 2005.

Source: World Bank. n.d. “Safeguard Policies” [www.worldbank.org: Home > Projects > Policies > Safeguard Policies]. Available at: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/PROJECTS/EXTPOLICIES/EXTSAFEPOL/0,,menuPK:584441~pagePK:64168427~piPK:64168435~theSitePK:584435,00.html> [Last accessed 01 May 2009]

development tools (social assessment, environmental assessment, community development plans, etc.) were adapted over time to effect better technocratic policy outcomes, their function expanded to serve also as legitimating processes for the activities of international financial institutions: neutralising contention over broader economic, social and political contexts and activating social behavioural models instrumental for pro-market programs and strategies (Rodan 2004: 3-4). In other words, by enabling a certain degree of community participation, social development policy co-opts the idea of participation as a political tool—a strategy of anti-politics (Jayasuriya & Hewison 2004: 572) that is effectively disempowering, especially for stakeholders formally recognised by the system. From this perspective, while social development policy may initially not have been conceptualised as neoliberal, it can still serve a consequent function as an agent of the neoliberal economic agenda. As Jayasuriya and Hewison (2004: 577-578) argue, such processes “instantiate the discipline of the market at the core of individual participation in civil society”. This reading is also supported by Cammack (2004: 190), who sees the Post Washington Consensus social policy regimes as effecting a transition from a ‘shallow’ form of neoliberalism that emphasised a minimal state to a ‘deep’ form of neoliberalism that shapes social relations and institutions. Cerny (2004: 5-7) and Brodie (2004: 246) refer to this process as an ‘embedding’ of neoliberalism through new forms of governance that penetrate into the social and political realms, while Jayasuriya (2005: 49) contends that PWC programmes of social capital and empowerment foster political structures and ideologies that are intended to legitimate and more securely entrench market relations.

One particularly nuanced and context-specific depiction of how the system of cultural rights upon which social policy is constructed obfuscates real efforts toward community empowerment is Hale’s (2005) treatment of the case of the Awas Tingni versus the Nicaraguan state in the Inter-American Human Rights Court. Hale ethnographically depicts the results of this case as entanglement in a neoliberal grid of intelligibility⁵⁵ whereby “violations of their rights to communal lands and /.../ denial of due process in the national courts in adjudication of those rights”:

Following the legal victory, in September 2001 government negotiators engaged the community and its lawyers in a protracted twenty-month negotiation before finally beginning work on the mandated demarcation of the community’s lands in June 2003. Claiming lack of funds (due in no small part to the fact that the president of the time,

⁵⁵ The concept of a grid of intelligibility was first articulated by James C. Scott (1998).

Arnoldo Alemán, stole untold millions from the government coffers, a crime for which he was jailed), the state turned to the World Bank, who agreed to finance the demarcation. As of this writing, the demarcation study is being “reviewed” by government officials who, according to the negotiated arrangement, are entitled to demand changes until they are satisfied. Whatever the community gains in the final analysis—and it is likely to be substantial—the cost will be an unprecedented involvement of the state and of neoliberal development institutions in the community’s internal affairs: regulating the details of the claim, shaping political subjectivities, and reconfiguring internal relations. (Hale 2005: 15)

Hale’s analysis exposes two countervailing currents with respect to participation and empowerment. Read one way, the Awas Tingni achieved recognition of their communal right to control customary resources—specifically, land resources—and in that sense have been empowered vis-à-vis the state. Read the other direction, however, participation means submission to state bureaucracies, and empowerment is defined only via the formalities of the very state control their case opposed (i.e. further entanglement in a bureaucratic web). In other words, Hale suggests that rather than achieving empowerment, the operationalising social policy (i.e. mandates of participation in communal land demarcation) in the Awas Tingni case merely accomplished a transformation of power relations—effectively co-opting the very struggles of indigenous peoples for cultural recognition to help realise neoliberal agendas.

Ideologies of participation and empowerment may also be read through cultural encounters with forms of neoliberal governance and economic policy. Investigating how the developmentalist Indian state is being re-imagined in contradictory ways by the neoliberal ideologies of self-rule and self-care, Aradhana Sharma (2006) depicts the Indian state as simultaneously withdrawing from its role in social welfare functions while expanding the scope of its control over potentially volatile points of political contestation. One of the results of this entanglement is the blurring of state and non-state boundaries and added complexity to the grid of neoliberal intelligibility:

The coming together of GONGO [government-organized non-governmental association] structure with empowerment strategies in the MS program [Mahila Samakhya; a women’s empowerment initiative] /.../ degovernmentalizes the state and proliferates nodes of governance outside of its formal structures. This neoliberal shifting of responsibility for governmental functions, such as development programs, to rapidly multiplying quasi- and non-state entities in the Indian context, however, is partial. The examples above show that these processes do not imply independence for non-state actors but point instead toward these actors’ increasing entanglement within the webs of governance as instruments and not just targets of rule /.../ Instead of working as an alternative means for consciousness raising, a spontaneous

mobilization tactic, or a loosely defined blueprint for radical action against oppression, empowerment is increasingly becoming mainstreamed and packaged into government-sponsored development programs—it has, in other words, become a “category of governance” (Chatterjee 2004:69). Governmentalization entails a bureaucratization of empowerment in its professionalization as an expert intervention and in its objectification as a measurable variable. Rendering empowerment into a development program requires setting up appropriate hierarchical structures and bureaucratic procedures. These processes can go against the very spirit of change and equality that empowerment is supposed to connote and engender. (Sharma 2006: 78-79)

From the above discussions one can see that when assessing whether a phenomenon is neoliberal, one must account for a tremendous amount of contextual nuance. Examining how different agents and agendas have converged to shape decision-making processes as well as how these processes, in turn, have affected human agency to further propagate or constrict further manifestations of neoliberal logic is the very crux of the analytical endeavour. In many cases, a phenomenon can be read as simultaneously enabling the onward march of neoliberalism as well as checking it—depending on the level and focus of analysis.

6. Neoliberalism and Subtext

The study of neoliberalism, I have argued, requires considerable attention to subtext, e.g. How has neoliberal ideology factored into political decision making? What are the mitigating factors in the application of neoliberal logic in governance? Does political compromise dilute neoliberalism, or help to more deeply embed it? Exposing the subtexts of political phenomenon may be useful for avoiding overly simplistic assumptions about the practical ways in which neoliberal logic manifests itself within a political system.

In many ways, the principle subtexts among studies of the phenomenological manifestations of neoliberalism are concerns with legitimacy and ideology of governance. In the Chinese case, as summarised in Section 4 of this monograph, the CCP can be read as carefully re-casting its ideological foundations while attempting to maintain its *raison d'être*: an historical mission to realise a modern socialist society in China. The CCP's changing costs-benefit analysis of maintaining socialist ideological commitments⁵⁶ is evinced by the extent of

⁵⁶ It should be noted that the intention of these reforms is not political liberalization *per se*, but rather to strengthen normative and functional basis of one-party rule by shifting the centre of its legitimate hold on power (Holbig, 2006: 12).

reforms of CCP ideology in the post-Mao era—particularly the more recent emphasis of formal elements of law (constitutionalism) and the notion of popular sovereignty⁵⁷. While calls for cadre to behave as “authentic communists” (O’Brian & Li 2006: 9) hearken back to communist ideological commitments like commune-based collective welfare and cradle-to-grave social welfare for the industrial working class (Saich 2004, chapter 10 *passim*), the Party has long since abandoned these for newer, more capitalist (and arguably neoliberal) arrangements. To maintain public buy-in of the legitimacy of the CCP’s changing ideological commitments, the Party must decide how to deliver on core “communist” commitments to the old ideology of socialism built on the pillars of Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. Witnessing the everyday struggles of farmers being confronted with grossly higher costs for maintaining production-oriented agricultural lifestyles (purchasing seed, fertiliser and water rights, etc.) or having lands seized for urban and industrial development (Kwong 2006), further research of neoliberalism in China might explore the ways the ways that CCP has attempted to offer solutions to challenges of access to capital and markets or mechanisms for enabling individuals to acquire staple commodities. From such a basis, it may then be possible to evaluate how experiments with the extension of neoliberalism have affected Party legitimacy: How well can the Party deliver on its new ideological commitments (focused on the creation of a strong market-economy and global political power) alongside its old ones (focused on the teleological justifications for one-party rule under the Communist vanguard)?

Douglass North (1990, referenced in Holbig 2006, pp. 7-8) postulates that ideological and institutional commitments change relative to the perceived price of maintaining the status-quo (i.e. ideological cost-benefit analysis). For example, maintaining a commitment to ideological discourses during periods of transition can augment perceptions that government is secure and credible (read: legitimate) and capable of attending to the common interests of society-at-large. Similarly, if the costs of maintaining ideological or institutional continuity rise too much, prudence might necessitate that a government reverse on ideological positions. Keeping with the Chinese case, much scholarship might be re-examined with an eye to neoliberalism’s discontents. As the CCP re-deploys “rights” discourses to pressure local cadre into providing better governance, improved protection of constitutionally-provided

⁵⁷ Examples of such include the commitments propagated under campaigns to ‘clean up the government’, ‘struggle against corruption’, ‘build a socialist democracy’, ‘build a country ruled by law’, ‘promote citizenship rights’, and ‘protect human rights’. In Chinese: 廉政建设 liánzhèng jiànshè; 反腐败斗争 fǎn fǔbài dòuzhēng; 建设社会主义民主 jiànshè shèhuìzhǔyì mínzhǔ; 建设法治国家 jiànshè fǎzhì guójiā; 公民权推动 gōngmínquán tuīdòng; and 保护人权 bǎohù rénquán.

rights, and greater accountability to state-conferred ideological commitments, the appeals of “rightful resisters” (Kevin O’Brien & Lianjiang Li 2006) and increased reliance of Chinese citizens on the legal system and the central government’s “rule-of-law” project together suggest that attempts to transition away from socialist ideological commitments come at a steep cost to the CCP in terms of popular legitimacy (Gallagher 2006: 784-785). That is, alongside the Party’s increasing emphasis on legalisation is the disappointment and frustration⁵⁸ that citizens generally experience after being confronted with the inequalities and dysfunctional aspects of China’s burgeoning legal system. Local cadre’s control over formal political and legal institutions—including local legislatures, courts, Party disciplinary committees, and the media—creates disincentives for these institutions to take on cases that challenge either Party members themselves or their interests (such as income generation schemes involving land seizure and re-leasing). These structural impasses, in turn, create incentives for citizens to resort to extra-legal recourse, such as petitions to the *xingfang* system, which, although addressing only a 0.2 percent of petitions as of 2004 (Zhao 2004, cited in Minzner 2005: 14), have the advantage of alerting Central officials to local cadre malfeasance and can result in stringent disciplinary sanctions⁵⁹.

In this analysis, attention to the subtexts of legitimacy and ideology of governance further expose how state governments are themselves heterogeneous entities wherein the ideological commitments of one group impacts—and at times infringe upon—the perceived legitimacy of other factions. In the face of this complexity, social scientists must confront the enormous challenge of assessing the extent to which any singular ideology of governance (neoliberal or otherwise) is manifested within an institutional system.

7. Concluding Remarks

Pursuing the question, “Are we all neoliberals now?” my research revealed that the practice of social development can be read simultaneously as an agent and opponent of neoliberalism. Attempting to reconcile this conundrum, I reach the conclusion that the term “neoliberalism” is not very useful for describing broad phenomenological categories—a case I make by

⁵⁸ C.f. Gallagher’s (2006) discussion of *informed disenchantment*.

⁵⁹ Refer to Minzner’s (2006: 15) description of the 2003 Anhui provincial regulations disciplining local Party officials.

problematizing constructions for two régimes of governance (post-1978 economic governance in the PRC, and the policy frameworks protecting indigenous peoples among IFIs). I also elaborate on a major theme that emerged in the process of data analysis: that a focus on human agency is critical for understanding neoliberalism’s phenomenological manifestations. Specifically, I develop the synthesis that only by focusing on how people engage with neoliberal discourses alongside other forms of economic and political governance—that is, by paying to subtexts—can a researcher appreciate complexity of neoliberalism’s phenomenological manifestations.

Throughout the entire process of research and writing for this thesis monograph, I have remained cognizant of my own role as a social development practitioner and how it affects intrinsically my engagement with the term “neoliberalism”. I have come to believe that the critical question is not whether ‘we are all neoliberals now’, but rather how social scientists and development practitioners can justify our roles within an arguably problematic macroeconomic régime of governance. While I strive to realise a more just and equitable world, I must acknowledge my own limitations for predicting and evaluating the efficacy of my work and consequences it has for the local populations I aim to serve. I operate within a context where very notions of “good” and “bad” social policy are wrought with controversy, where access to robust and comparable datasets is severely constrained, and where no static control cases exists to help evaluate social development interventions. Beyond addressing whether social development practice is complicit in perpetuating neoliberalism, the process of writing this this thesis has convinced me that the more pertinent question is whether the spaces opened to social development practitioners may be used to leverage the power of global capital in the favour of poor and vulnerable segments of our global population and allow us to work with these peoples and communities to help them to realize their own capability to effect positive social change.

I hope to maintain a self-reflective and self-conscious disposition and to continuously re-evaluate my social development engagements in ways that might later be open to integrated and comparative analyses.

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