From Revanchism to Ambivalence: The Changing Politics of Street Vending in Guangzhou

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Abstract: By focusing on Guangzhou’s street-vending policy transformation, this article explores how exclusionary practices of urban politics in China are undermined by those who it seeks to exclude and the progressive political climate that questions the exclusionary framework. The exclusion of street vendors in Guangzhou has been led by the National Sanitary City campaign as a revanchist project. It has been discovered that while the exclusionary strategies are rendered difficult to operate due to the resistance of street vendors who develop a flexible, individualized and small-scale activism to maintain their livelihoods, the discourse of social harmony at national level has driven local authorities to seek alternatives expected to alleviate social resistance and address people’s livelihoods. However, rather than an overturn of the punitive framework, an ambivalent approach, recognized in a recent critique of revanchism, has been adopted to mediate the tension between the needs to retain attractive city images and address the livelihoods of the poor in Chinese cities.

Keywords: revanchism, street vendors, resistance, social harmony, Guangzhou

Introduction
The processes of socio-spatial exclusion of subordinated groups driven by punitive urban polices have been observed in contemporary cities around the world (Crossa 2008; van Eijk 2010). Spurred on by neoliberalism, globalization and urban entrepreneurialism (De Verteuil 2006; Macleod 2002), the exclusionary policies have sought to erase urban spaces for some sectors of the population, such as street vendors, the homeless, beggars and sex workers. One particularly influential perspective in understanding such an issue has been the theory of urban revanchism first coined by Smith (1996). Revanchism represents the reclaiming of a city’s prime spaces by the dominant classes from the deviant social groups. Many researchers have taken up the issue of the applicability of revanchism to different urban contexts in the North and South (eg Aalbers 2010; Papayanis 2000; Schinkel and van den Berg 2011; Swanson 2007; Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008). In recent literature, however, there has emerged a discomfort with the revanchist assumption framing urban policies. Scholars have argued that the evidence of supportive approaches to address subordinated groups represents both an empirical and a theoretical counterweight to the revanchist thesis (DeVerteuil 2006; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010; Laurenson and Collins 2007). DeVerteuil, May and von Mahs (2009) thus suggest that the nature of urban political responses to the subordinated should be understood as multifaceted and ambivalent rather than only punitive/
revanchist. The ambivalence mixing punitive and supportive strategies has been termed as the post-revanchist approach (Murphy 2009).

This paper aims to understand the development of punitive urban policies from the perspective of focusing on the roles of the counter forces to exclusionary practices of revanchism. As Smith (1998:17–18) suggests: “Top-down revanchism will not go unchallenged…it is equally important to retain a sense of how alternatives might emerge, where the sparks of change might come from.” In the literature, concerning the understanding of revanchism practices in the global South, the street-vending problem has presented a particularly apt litmus test (Bromley and Mackie 2009; Crossa 2008; Popke and Ballard 2004; Swanson 2007). In Guangzhou, the recent change in street-vending policy relates to a critique of revanchism that suggests ambivalent forms of urban policies for the subordinated. Since 1990, the management of street vendors had long been directed by the exclusionary approach driven by the National Sanitary City (NSC) campaign as a revanchist project that seeks to eradicate the undesirable from public space. Recently, the exclusion-oriented approach has been mixed with the provision of inclusionary vending places, which suggests an alternative future for street vendors. The key question of this paper is therefore concerned with what drives the transformation of the exclusionary street-vending politics to the ambivalent or post-revanchist one. In a sense, it is an attempt to take up Smith’s suggestion by conducting an empirical examination of the ways in which the exclusionary urban policies are undermined and reshaped with alternatives in Chinese cities. Specifically, we will examine how the street vendors, the targeted group facing official removal, resist and challenge the exclusionary policy, and how this defied policy is tempered and reshaped by the emerging discourse of social harmony at national level. By examining the characteristics of the inclusionary approach, we also reveal the nature of the ambivalent street-vending politics in Guangzhou.

The paper starts with a review of the literature on urban revanchism with an emphasis on the understanding of the counter forces that it faces. In the subsequent sections we first examine in what sense the exclusion of street vendors in Guangzhou is understood as a representation of revanchism, and then explain how both the resistance of street vendors and the harmonious discourse challenge and reshape the exclusionary street-vending politics. Conclusions follow in the final section.

Understanding Urban Revanchism

Urban revanchism was fuelled by the economic recession and a discourse of “spiral-ing urban decay” in the 1990s New York City that has dismantled its liberal urban policy since the 1980s (Smith 1998). Revanchism essentially represents the city’s intent to eradicate undesirable populations from prime urban spaces in order to create positive images, thereby attracting highly mobile capital in an era of intense interurban competition (DeVerteuil, May and von Mahs 2009; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010). Revanchism operations are practiced through actions concerned with removal and zero tolerance (Smith 1998), the punitive or coercive purification of public space (DeVerteuil 2006) and the employment of illegalization, discursive stigmatization,
and physical manipulation of spaces and their surveillance (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010). Embodying “the ugly cultural politics of neoliberal globalization” (Smith 1998:10), revanchism performs a principle of the neoliberal city, namely that the government will repress some segments of the population if there is a conflict between creating a good business image and their personal well being (Harvey 2007). However, rather than existing in the homogenous form (Smith 2001), the adapted versions of revanchism have been developed by applied research in different urban contexts (see van Eijk 2010 for comprehensive reviews). They assume “actually existing” revanchism (Macleod 2002) in the context of the emergence of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Attempting to detect different manifestations, Atkinson (2003:1833) identifies certain competing strands in the understanding of revanchism: the economic objectives to attract capital investment, a prophetic and dystopian image of urban decline, a set of programs to secure public space, and a mode of governance to dictate recognized uses for urban spaces. It is therefore possible to speak of a certain “degree of revanchism” given that policies more or less fit these strands (van Eijk 2010).

Downplayed in the literature, however, are the ways in which those who face removal resist, challenge and even subvert the exclusionary practices of revanchism (eg Crossa 2008). In the light of Lefebvre’s notion of social space, revanchism could be understood as the governmental conceived, regulated representation of space, which is in contradiction with representational space actually used by various groups and individuals (McCann 1999). The contradiction represents the class struggle between the dominant and subordinate, exposes counter voices and opens up the possibilities for alternatives. Revanchism is thus inherently unstable. Consequently, Macleod puts forward an important theme to be concerned when analyzing the unfolding of revanchism in particular cities:

to explore the spatializing practices and “counterspaces” of resistance and transgression that can sometimes unshackle the padlocks of “purified” urban sites and thereby challenge their official, growth-machine-dominated representations of space (Macleod 2002:618).

Nuanced forms of resistance to structural constraints by the subordinated, other than political and social movement, have been explored (Bayat 2000; Kerkvliet 2009). Scholars have distinguished the political and collective actions mobilized by street-vending organizations and a more flexible, individual and small-scale activism in different contexts (Bayat 2000; Cross 1998a). Bayat (1996) identifies a mixed form of resistance as “quiet encroachment” that involves the everyday silent, prolonged and atomized actions, and the episodic collective protest without structured organization. In addition, Crossa (2008) highlights street vendors’ torear resistance through mobility to resist the entrepreneurial city. The flexible activism is also celebrated by DeVerteuil, Marr and Snow (2009), who explore a range of homeless resistance behaviors along a continuum from exit (leave the contested situation) and adaptation (modify behaviors) to persistence (neither leave nor modify behavior) and voice (social protest). Emphasizing the roles of the resistance, this paper first discloses the structural roots of the persistence of street vendors in current China to understand the necessity for their resistance—a question rarely concerned in the discussion on the counter responses to revanchism. It then differentiates the vendors’ resistance
strategies for escaping, bribing and confronting the powerful, and subsequently explains their different impacts on the policy. Nevertheless, the resistance here is generally understood as a form of resilience, a range of actions opposing the exclusionary policy in order to survive rather than to effect change. This builds on Katz’s significant distinction between different countering responses. Katz (2004) contrasts forms of resistance that involve subversive actions and emancipatory consequences, with forms of reworking that alter oppressive and unequal circumstances, with resilience that enables people to survive without really changing exploitive and oppressive conditions. In effect, resilience is not inconsistent with Cresswell’s “transgression” that diverts and manipulates rather than deconstructs the power of established boundaries and spaces (Cresswell 1996). This definition of resistance allows us to understand, at least in this study, why the counterforce from below is insufficient to effect policy change.

In examining the unfolding of revanchism, scholars have argued urban political responses to subordinated groups are not always framed by the forces of neoliberalism. Murphy (2009) argues, for instance, that a progressive political climate that frequently undermines the neoliberal imperatives renders it unacceptable to simply remove the poor. This gives rise to an ambivalent new benevolence evident in new urban polices. Likewise, in their critique of the punitive city, DeVerteuil, May and von Mahs (2009) contend that the fact that the state cannot be reduced to the handmaiden of capital leads to a possibility for developing supportive policies for the poor. The existence of the benevolent roles of the state is thus counteractive to the unfolding of revanchism in neoliberalization processes. In China, though neoliberal shifts have penetrated urban development since the introduction of market-oriented reforms (Liew 2005), it is argued that neoliberalization processes are inconsistent (He and Wu 2009). Harvey (2005) further asserts that the Chinese state is required to depart from neoliberal orthodoxy and to act like a Keynesian state if it is to achieve social and political stability. Nonini (2008) similarly argues that the Chinese state is trying to keep a dialectical balance between capitalist accumulation and socialist values. Indeed, the Chinese state’s concern with this balance is manifested in its recent decision about “building a harmonious society”, which has required local governments to resolve social conflict in ways that benefit social stability and take people’s livelihoods seriously. Our interest is how the national discourse of social harmony mediates the exclusionary street-vending politics at local level and reshapes it with an alternative.

**Methods**

The choice of Guangzhou arises from its position on the street-vending issue in China. In addition to the fact that the management of a huge number of street vendors (about 0.3 million) has been one of the focuses of urban policies and has received considerable national attention, Guangzhou is also one of the pioneer cities in China that has undergone the latest transformation of the street-vending policy. This transformation was not observed in other cities. We do not claim that the city’s street-vending problem mirrors the national profile given considerable regional differences among Chinese cities, but rather that it offers a relevant and
significant case for understanding the possibilities of, and driving forces for, the change of exclusionary urban policies. As our interest is in using an in-depth case study to examine the ways in which the exclusionary practices of revanchism are challenged and transformed, we do not aim to theorize generally about urban revanchism in the Chinese context. Rather, as part of this research, we detected elements of revanchism from the evidence of the exclusion of street vendors in Guangzhou. We approached this task by examining the relationships between the objectives of urban politics, the NSC campaign, and the exclusion of street vendors. Specifically, we explore the questions concerning what drives the NSC campaign and how the exclusionary practices are mobilized.

This research involves a long term observation of Guangzhou’s street-vending issues. We triangulated a wide range of materials drawn from the interviews, participation observation and archival research. In 2007 and 2012, we spoke with the urban management officers at different levels of administration, including the municipal officers involved in the policy decision-making process and the district and sub-district officers who implement the policy in order to understand the government’s motives in making and adjusting the exclusionary policy, and to what extent the vendors’ resistance affects the policy. From October 2011 to February 2012, we conducted semi-structural interviews with 200 street vendors in 20 main vending locations in Guangzhou. We selected the samples based on the gender of the vendor and types of goods sold in an attempt to analyze the diversity within this social group. Asking questions about what drives them to engage in street vending and how they experience the old and new policies, we sought to understand the need for their resistance, the ways in which they challenge the exclusionary practices and the characteristics of the inclusionary strategy. This research was further supplemented by archival research and analysis of newspaper articles to examine the development of the NSC campaign, the effects of harmonious discourse, and the formation of the ambivalent approach.

NSC Campaign and the Exclusion of Street Vendors
In socialist China (1949–1977), street vendors were viewed as the “tail of capitalist economy” and forced into cooperative groups and cooperative stores as part of the socialist economy. Since the reform and opening up in 1978, they have proliferated rapidly in cities due to rapid urbanization and deregulation of private economies. Meanwhile, the responsibility for street vendors has shifted downwards to local state authorities in the general process of power decentralization as a response to market-oriented reforms (He and Wu 2009). Management of street vendors then becomes an urban issue that is not considered in national policy. In the 1980s, street vending was generally tolerated by city authorities because of its significant roles in alleviating serious poverty and supporting the undeveloped urban retailing system (Bannan 1992). Since the 1990s, however, street vendors have been faced with total exclusion as a result of the campaign to build the NSC launched in many Chinese cities. The campaign was originally initiated by the National Patriotic Health Campaign Committee in 1989 to encourage local governments
to improve urban environments. These latter had become one of the burning problems in China due to rapid urbanization and industrialization. The city will be entitled to be an NSC if it passes a committee appraisal based on the given criteria. Although it is not a mandatory policy, there have been an increasing number of cities engaging in the campaign because of its economic and political position in urban politics.

**Drivers for the NSC Campaign**

As the development pressure confronted by the central state is transferred to the local state apparatus in the process of market transition (Wu 2002), economic and urban growth becomes the overriding goal of urban politics in post-reform China. Meanwhile, local authorities are now capable of using various strategies to attract investment and to regulate local development due to power decentralization. One of these strategies has been the competition for local and global capital. Due to public investment in infrastructure, designation of development zones, preferential treatment to investors and land-leasing instruments, increasing municipalities have engaged passionately in the enhancement of city images to create favorable investment climates (Wu 2003). The NSC campaign represents part of the image enhancement strategy in Guangzhou in particular, and in Chinese cities in general.

In Guangzhou, the image enhancement strategy was adopted as one of the political responses to its development situation in the 1980s. This decade witnessed a decrease of its GDP in Guangdong Province from 23.1% to 20.8%, with the comparative annual growth rate of GDP reducing from 15.4% to 4.8% (Guangzhou Fifty Years, http://data.gzstats.gov.cn; Guangdong Statistical Yearbook 2010). This does not suggest, given its positive economic growth, that Guangzhou experienced urban decline, rather that its economic competitiveness was falling compared with other cities in the province, especially in the PRD region. As urban planners asserted, Guangzhou might have been losing its central status in the region because it was faced with internal growth constraints and intense external competitiveness (Wang, Zhang and Zhao 1993). As a response, the municipal government put forward the strategy of environmental improvement in order to construct a modern city with images of a beautiful environment, good order, civilized citizens, a booming economy and livability (Lin et al., 2005). To assist in the promotion of this strategy, the government established a guideline in 1998, called “three times change”, meaning “one year a small change, three years a moderate change, in 2010 a big change”. By achieving these changes, Mayor Lin declared: “The central status of Guangzhou in PRD is unshakable and Guangzhou will become the most livable city with the capability of accumulating wealth” (Wang 2000).

It is in this context that the NSC campaign was launched in 1990 and has been promoted strongly since the late 1990s. The city’s new Mayor Zhang has repeatedly emphasized that the campaign is necessary in achieving a “big change” in city images, and to accelerate the building of Guangzhou as an international modern metropolis. Specifically, the campaign is positioned as a key device to enhance city images, improve favorable investment climate and thereby accelerate economic growth (Guangzhou NSC Plan 2003:18). In the campaign, the government takes
a series of actions to beautify city landscapes (for example, keep public space clean and in order), to protect the environment (for example, control pollution below a certain level), to guarantee food safety, to eradicate the pests (rats, flies, cockroaches, mosquitoes), to prevent infectious disease and to promote good hygiene behaviors. By carrying out these actions, it aims to reshape the urban environment that had long been characterized by images of dirt (zang), disorder (luan) and badness (cha), and to create a sanitary, beautified and orderly city with the NSC title that would benefit city branding. However, what has long worried the Guangzhou municipal government is that other PRD cities, such as Shenzhen (one of Guangzhou’s main competitors), had already secured the NSC title. These cities were found to attract increased inward investment after entering the NSC club (Guangzhou NSC Plan 2003:11). This has made it more urgent for Guangzhou to promote the campaign in order to avoid the loss of economic competitiveness in an increasingly competitive world.

The NSC campaign is therefore driven by economic motives to accumulate capital. Nevertheless, unlike Western cities attempting to reverse economic recession by spatial purification (eg Aalbers 2010; Atkinson 2003; Smith 1998), the campaign as a similar project is driven by the city’s intent to accelerate economic growth. Moreover, in accord with the argument that the exclusionary policies are not only driven by economic factors (Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008; van Eijk 2010), the campaign is additionally fueled by a political motive held by local politicians to enhance political performance. In China, a city’s mayor is not elected by the citizen, but appointed directly by the higher-level government. This appointment system makes local politicians much more accountable to the higher-level government than the people. Hence, urban politics is largely directed by local politicians’ pursuit of political performance. As the success in the campaign is counted as a political achievement and may even result in a direct promotion, local politicians are highly enthusiastic about pushing it forwards. This is often with stark disregard to people’s interests. As a result, some problems (for example, relating to street vendors) hindering the campaign are simply removed if they cannot be solved within a politician’s 5-year term of service.

The Exclusion of Street Vendors
We consider the NSC campaign to be a revanchist project. This is because it seeks to eradicate undesirable groups from urban public spaces to satisfy the economic and political intents of the local ruling class as explained above. In the sense that street vendors are explicitly targeted as such a group, the exclusion of them is viewed as a representation of revanchism. Similar to the revanchist discourse in other contexts (eg Smith 1998; Swanson 2007), street vendors are identified as a sign of dirt, disorder and low quality as they litter urban landscapes, produce unsanitary foods, obstruct city traffic and disturb the market order. They are thus incompatible with the images of the NSC. Although the campaign has affected the lives of other populations (for example, the homeless, beggars), it is the street vendors that are blamed as “a lion in the way”. They are viewed as one of the major causes for the failure of the campaign, given their huge number and visible spatial impact.
Therefore, based on the regulation of city landscapes, statements concerning “no street vending”, “no disorderly hawking”, and “no hawkers in public space” are repeated in the plans and working programs in the campaign. Attempting to strengthen the control, the government added a penalty clause to the street-vending aspect in the new regulations of city landscapes in 2007, presenting an intention of “annihilation of space by law” (Mitchell 1997). Furthermore, street vendors were perceived as “invaders” that do not belong to Guangzhou. A municipal urban manager declared: “Today if we do not restrict them, but provide them with 10,000 jobs, then tomorrow there will be 100,000 vendors coming over ... Guangzhou, if undefended ... even the fool will come to Guangzhou” (Yangcheng Evening News 2009). This hostile voice has its seeds in China’s household registration (hukou) system that divides the urban population into local residents, who have the right to welfare system and immigrants, who do not. The former usually fears that the latter will grab their limited public resources, such as jobs or education. Given that most street vendors are immigrants, it is understandable that some citizens embrace the sentiment held by the city manager: “They evade tax and occupy limited public resources without contribution to the city. Why do we welcome them? They should earn their living in legal ways; otherwise, the injured are Guangzhouses.” Therefore, while ethnic and racial factors fuel the hostile stigmatization of subordinated groups in the revanchist practices in Western and Latin American contexts (Swanson 2007; Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008; van Eijk 2010), in China, the hukou system functions as a binary population-division line that gives implicit support to the perpetual exclusion of street vendors perceived as the “outsiders”.

The NSC campaign declared a “spatial war” against street vendors. The Urban Management Composite Law Enforcement Bureau (UM or chengguan) was established in 1997 to enhance the control of public space and to take direct charge of the campaign. In particular, the UM is appointed by the government to take over responsibility for repressing street vendors with zero tolerance from the departments of police, taxation, business and sanitation. The UM officers carry out everyday policing of public spaces to restrain street vendors, using electronic monitoring systems and patrol techniques. Moreover, special and periodical repressive actions with the slogans of “Hundred Days’ Action” or “Spring Action” are mobilized to eradicate street vendors in the short term. Hundreds of UM officers, sometimes with the joint participation of the police, taxation, business and environment departments mentioned above, suddenly attack selected areas, hitting street vendors by forcefully confiscating their goods. These actions are often mobilized just before the NSC Appraisement Time as well as prior to mega-events such as the Asian Games. However, these exclusionary practices are challenged and negotiated by street vendors who develop various survival strategies.

Street Vendors’ Resistance: Forms and Effectiveness

Street Vendors’ Resistance as a Necessary Act in Transforming China

The street vendors’ resistance is driven by the force of necessity—the necessity to survive and improve their life. This necessity arises from the effects of the particular
socio-economic transformation characterizing post-reform China. On the one hand, street-vending is the only way of survival for both surplus laborers, who have been released as a result of the reform of state-owned enterprises since the mid 1990s, and marginal groups such as the disabled, homeless and ethnic minorities (for example, Miao or Uygur ethnic groups) that are excluded or discriminated against by the rising segmented urban labor markets. One of the laid-off workers complained, for instance, “I am old now and have no way out. Doing this is just for surviving, a way of ‘begging for food’, like stealing, robbing or begging” (interview 2011). On the other hand, street-vending is also the optimal way of supplementing their income and leading a better life for the following segments of the population: the peasants, who are confronted with rural poverty resulting from the state’s development bias on urbanization, and who have to move to urban areas in non-busy farming seasons to increase their income because as most of them expressed, “farming makes no money” or “farming is only enough for eating”; the rural migrant workers, forced by the extreme working conditions (long working hours, low wages, insecure workplaces and inhumane factory regulations) that arise from the industrialization pattern characterized by low-cost, low-end and labor-intensive industries, and who quit the jobs to seek better livelihoods; and the urban workers, who are hardly able to survive and support their families in conditions of increased income disparities and creeping inflation in globalizing cities, such as Guangzhou. On the whole, despite the heterogeneity of these groups, street vending is a last resort in securing better living conditions. This is expressed in light of their common sentiment that “I don’t know what to do if I don’t do the vending”. Confronted with the prospect of removal, street vendors seem to have no alternative but to take up resistance as natural acts to maintain their existing livelihood—selling in the streets—that enables them to adapt to the transforming social processes. This allows us to understand the persistence of street vendors’ resistance to exclusionary practices in Chinese cities.

**Forms of Resistance**

With the absence of organizational power, however, street vendors cannot oppose the policy by negotiating with the government and having their voice heard in formal ways. They are unqualified by the government to join any formal association, such as China Private-Owned Business Association, because they are unlicensed. Nor can they establish their own associations due to the restrictive regulation of civil society organizations in China. Consequently, they demonstrate a flexible, atomized and small-scale activism to survive exclusionary practices.

**Everyday Nonviolence: Escape and Bribe the Powerful**

The most prevalent strategy practiced by street vendors is the everyday nonviolent resistance. This is characterized by actions of mobility and temporary compromise to escape the dominating powers, representing an action of *torear* in Mexico City (Crossa 2008) and de Certeau’s “spatial tactic” (Gardiner 2000). Vendors keep vigilant and are prepared to evacuate and hide in nearby safe areas (for example, alleys, backstreet, hospitals) to escape the UM’s routine inspection. Without
physical clashes, they pretend to leave, but in practice either move to the next street
to sell or wait and return to their original places after the inspectors leave. One of
them said: “Retreat when the enemy attacks (Di jin wo tui). Everybody here knows
this. Chengguan may come at any time; you must keep watch constantly, and be
ready to run quickly ... Don’t fight against them, otherwise you will suffer more
losses” (interview 2011).

To reduce the risk of exposure to the inspectors, some vendors choose to operate
their business when the officers finish work between 12 pm and 2pm or after 6pm.
In order to adapt the strategies of retreat and return, they make and remake their
equipment. Some attach their products to their body and sell by using a handheld
basket, while others place their products on a bicycle, mini-trailer, blanket or a
wooden shelf that can be easily opened and folded. This creative practice enables
them to switch constantly between selling and moving, making their behavior
difficult to be clearly defined as “occupying public space”. For instance, in such
prime spaces as commercial areas and railway stations, the vendors stop repeatedly
for a moment to sell, but meekly move up when running into inspectors. Moreover,
street vendors in a given locality spontaneously warn each other about the inspec-
tors by shouting out “zougui”, which figuratively means “escape the ghost”. This
warning system represents a function of a “passive network”, meaning that
atomized individuals tacitly recognize their common identity by the mediating of
space (Bayat 1996). By leveraging this network, they get to know each other and
talk about safe or risky places and the UM activities. This network is strengthened
by the relationship of laoxiang (fellow townsmen) existing pervasively in Chinese
society. It means the street vendors who come from the same region (town, city
or province) recognize each other and engage in a planned mutual-help practice.
For example, some sell goods and some are sent to watch the streets and inform
others about the UM activities by using walkie-talkies or cell phones. If one is caught
by the officers, the others will attempt to disrupt the enforcement by gathering
together to create a disturbance.

In place of escaping, some vendors attempt to penetrate the power by bribing
the UM assistant officers, who are actually responsible for the daily surveillance in
a given locality. These officers are easier to bribe because they are not trained as
well as formal officers, and they welcome the opportunity to supplement their
lower wage. Street vendors bribe them with cash (for example, 5–10 yuan per
day) or cigarettes on a daily basis to obtain permission to sell in return. Sometimes
these assistant officers divulge information about the UM activities in advance.
Nevertheless, in many cases, street vendors are also asked by these officers to pay
for their tolerance. Though such payment is unauthorized and illegal, many
vendors stated that they prefer to pay, because the payment can be offset by the
gain from selling without harassment.

*Episodic Violence: Confront the Powerful*

Violent confrontation is the less prevalent, but not least important resistance
practiced by street vendors defending their gains from the UM’s violent and coer-
cive actions. The individual vendors, particularly those who frequently have their
goods and equipment confiscated, use such weapons as knives, steer pipes or cooking oil to beat back the UM officers attempting to confiscate their assets. Moreover, the vendors may harm their own body, use rope to bind their hands to the law-enforcement vehicle and stand in the way or on the top of the vehicle in order to stop the officers leaving and to claim back the confiscated assets. Though these direct confrontations result in the individual vendors being penalized, injured, imprisoned and even killed, they may choose to do it if it is the only way to protect their livelihood. Many of them agree with such action:

Chengguan are so brutal; like a bandit. I don’t remember how many times I have fought against them. I neither steal nor rob, but why do they take away my goods. This is my living. I have two children to support for their education. I can’t stand it! (interview 2012).

Small-scale and collective activism is also mobilized by the vendors united through the laoxiang relationship. Among the actions practiced by a couple of vendors with an existing laoxiang relationship is the confrontation with the governmental repressive actions, such as bursting into the UM office to reclaim assets back and making a premeditated assault on the individual UM officers for revenge. On some occasions, collective actions may also be launched to protect existing gains. For example, in 2008, the government authorized a property management company to take over the management of Baohua Road within the historical center where street-vending activities have long existed. The vendors in this area are well united as most of them come from Chaoshan and Dianbai regions. The company declared that street vendors would be cleaned up, except for those who pay for management fees of 500–1500 yuan per month. However, this plan caused a collective protest from hundreds of vendors. The protest eventually led to the violent conflict between vendors and security guards from the company. Consequently, the government was forced to abandon this measure as a result of the protests.

**Effectiveness of Resistance**

Although the resistance of street vendors is provoked by their autonomous initiatives to maintain a livelihood rather than to overturn the established rule, it presents unexpected challenges to the exclusionary practices. First, the non-violent resistance weakens the effects of the UM routine surveillance. The authority tried to extend the policing time to respond to the spatio-temporal flexibility of street vendors, but it was found to be unsustainable because the resurgence of vendors always followed the ending of the extension periods. A long-term measure was the establishing of a team of assistant UM officers to reinforce surveillance in the streets. However, these officers tend to extort bribes or to be bribed by street vendors. Through bribery, vendors build a kind of patron–clientage relationship with the surveillance officers, thereby carving out a temporary “safe space” in the official control system. This relationship presents the problem of “weak state integration” (Cross 1998b), which usually cripples the policy in practice. As a result, ironically, it was often found that the UM officers made an unwritten compromise with street vendors by warning them in advance not to appear in specific locations.
during the course of the NSC appraisement. This demonstrates that a partial and temporary alteration has been made to the operation of the exclusionary policy.

Violent confrontation has forced the authorities to acknowledge the suppressive approach as a battle in which both sides lose. It was said that the 5 years from 2005 to 2009 witnessed 2626 cases of violent resistance by street vendors, of which 1679 UM officers were hurt. More importantly, the confrontation resulted in many incidents of street conflict, which exposed the ugliness of the revanchist politics. These incidents have attracted continuous attention from the news media and have aroused wide public concern. With the increasing exposure of incidents of violent conflict, particularly those involving collective protest and the death of vendors, the UM has been censored for abuse of power and labeled with “cold-bloodedness”, “ruthlessness”, and named a “bandit” in public opinion. On the contrary, the attitude towards street vendors is sympathetic as they are considered to be “the disadvantaged” and “the poor” for their “survival”. Furthermore, incidents of conflict have provoked local reflection on urban development and a desire to see the street vendors treated with kindness. “Why should street vendors pay a sacrifice for the national sanitary city?”, “Does the city’s right to be clean outweigh the street vendor’s right to live?”, and “Is city image more important than people’s livelihood?” are among the public questions that directly query the crackdown policy. As a response to public pressures, the authorities have had to advise enforcement officers to retreat when confronted with violent resistance. This was in a bid to reduce the conflict as well as the officers’ risk of injury. Nevertheless, although the resistance of street vendors renders the exclusionary strategies difficult to operate in original ways and produces a counter discourse against the legality of the policy, its limit lies in the fact that it is unable to subvert the established circumstances. As will be explained, the emerging discourse of social harmony plays a crucial role in driving the policy transformation.

Harmonious Society and the Ambivalent Street-vending Politics

Harmonious Discourse and its Influences on Street-vending Politics
The growth-first strategy taken by the Chinese state has caused various social problems including uneven regional development, unequal distribution of public resources, a widening income gap, rural poverty and urban unemployment. These problems have given rise to serious social contradictions, which the Communist Party of China (CPC) thought might shake social stability and block future reform (Chen and He 2008:408). The rising of social contradictions made the CPC realize that China, with the rising of per capital gross domestic product from $1000 to $3000, has been stepping into a crucial development stage characterized by the coexistence of golden development opportunities and rising social contradictions. The latter must be taken seriously to secure the former. Therefore, the CPC made a major decision in respect of “building a harmonious socialist society” in 2006. The
core objective of a harmonious society is to maintain social consensus and stability. As Chairman Hu claims, the party and people should “take more initiatives to face and resolve contradictions, increase harmony as much as possible, decrease disharmony as much as possible” (2008:410). This harmony ideology actually represents the intention of the state party to alleviate the inherent tensions and controversies of neoliberalism. According to the decision, the key work for alleviating social contradictions and achieving social harmony is “to address the most direct and the most realistic interest problems that the people are most concerned about” (2008:414). Hence, social justice and people’s livelihoods (minsheng) should be taken as seriously as capital accumulation. Hu’s “social harmony” soon became one of the focuses of urban politics. For instance, Guangzhou Municipal Party Secretary Zhu highlighted the importance of social harmony in the major report of CPC Guangzhou’s 9th Congress in 2006 entitled “Building Harmonious Guangzhou”.

At the level of urban politics, the discourse of social harmony has required local governments, on the one hand, to resolve social conflict in ways that benefit social stability rather than intensify the conflict, and on the other, to pay attention to people’s livelihoods in addition to the goal of rapid economic and urban growth. Accordingly, the exclusionary street-vending politics is questioned in two areas: first, that politics triggers street conflict and increases elements of social instability due to its practice of violence; and second, it completely denies poor people a livelihood given its zero tolerance of street vendors. Nevertheless, as a result of the devolution of power in the regulation of street vendors, there are various local responses to the demand for social harmony. In Guangzhou, the process by which exclusionary politics is mediated and reshaped by the new political climate is embedded in the progressive responses of local authorities to the issues of people’s livelihoods, mitigation of social resistance and harmonious urban management.

Two months after the decision, in an open meeting sponsored by a local media institution New Express with the topic of “unlicensed vendors and urban management”, the UM authority insisted that the exclusionary approach would continue for securing public space order despite its limited effects. This standpoint was opposed by a provincial CPPCC (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) member Meng. He contended that the government should be responsible for the livelihoods of street vendors as disadvantaged individuals and resolve such problems as food hygiene and spatial disorder rather than simply erase the activity itself. This argument put in question the revanchist ideology that seeks to remove rather than tackle social problems in order to “clean up the city” (Atkinson 2003:1831). As Meng critiqued, this ideology “only cures the symptom but not the diseases”. In line with the wishes of street vendors who supported Meng’s view, the solution should lie in the opportunity to use spaces as a basic resource for vendors’ living. However, the authority responded that it was practically beyond the government’s capability to support thousands of street vendors who are mostly migrants. Nevertheless, the supportive idea has started to emerge in similar meetings with a rising concern for people’s livelihoods in urban politics.

Meanwhile, the presence of street vendors’ resistance, particularly violent confrontations provoked by punitive practices, has been considered increasingly unacceptable in harmonious discourse. In 2008, the Standing Committee of
Guangzhou NPC (National People’s Congress) launched a consultative meeting in an attempt to mediate the tension between street vendors and urban management. The UM’s violence, denounced by the vendors in the meeting, was taken seriously by the authorities, who promised to decrease violent actions through improved training of enforcement officers. However, the more fundamental concern is that of extinguishing the possibilities for social resistance. The provision of permitted vending spaces was proposed again as a way of changing the contradictory relationship between urban managers and street vendors, and also as a way of improving people’s livelihoods. The authorities did not oppose the idea as they did 2 years ago, largely because of the unsustainable nature of the exclusionary framework in the new political climate. As a municipal urban manager said, “complete suppression does not really work in practice because of constant violent resistance. You can’t help it. If you coercively suppress, they may desperately fight against you. It just leads to violent conflict, going against social harmony” (interview 2012).

Partly responding to the continual contention of the street-vending politics, Secretary Zhu made an important written instruction in 2009 requiring the UM to “explore a new path of constructing a lawful, people first, civilized and harmonious urban management” (Luo and Huang 2011). This made it imperative for the UM to seek alternative street-vending politics that fit into the new direction of urban management. In addition, with the purpose of guaranteeing social stability, the central state required local states to pay attention to urban unemployment resulting from the global financial crisis which began in 2008. This requirement has also urged a new approach to street-vending as a way of employment. However, while the idea of inclusion has been put on the agenda, the accompanying problem is to what extent street vendors should be included in urban spaces given that, as the authorities worry, full toleration would contaminate city images, disturb urban order and go against the NSC goal (Guangzhou UM Liwan District Branch 2010). This concern reveals the contradiction between elements of social harmony and principles of current urban development. A solution to the dilemma was then proposed in an official report, namely “treat stubborn disease by setting permitted space and promote social harmony by mixing inclusion and exclusion” (Guangzhou Urban Management Committee 2009). The report wrote:

From the perspective of Mao’s Contradiction Theory, the contradiction between urban managers and street vendors is the one among the people. We should adopt the measures of education, guidance and accommodation, rather than “you chase I run” like “cat and mouse”. Therefore, in order to solve the contradiction between the notions of “purify the city image” and “fill the belly”, we advocate an approach with a mix of inclusion and exclusion.

This ambivalent approach functions by including street vendors into some areas of the city, but excluding them from others. It reflects the needs of local government to, on the one hand, mitigate conflict and take people’s livelihoods seriously, and on the other, secure attractive city images for capital investment. In the words of the UM authority, “the municipal government aims to acquire a balance between mianzi (city face) and lizi (people’s livelihoods)” (interview 2012). Hence, the ambivalence addresses the NSC goal by retaining the exclusionary strategies that signify that Guangzhou is not a paradise for street vendors or “the fool”
migrants. Meanwhile, the extent of inclusion can be controlled by defining who can be included, how many, and where inclusion can occur. This thereby addresses the government’s concern about its inability to solve everybody’s livelihoods.

**Characterizing the Ambivalent Politics**

According to the notice of “Forbidden Area for Street Vendors” issued by the UM authority in 2010, street vendors will continue to be suppressed without exception in the red area showed in Figure 1. It consists of 250 zones in the city, including 145 main roads, 56 key places and 49 sites around Asian Games stadiums. These zones are defined as “key areas” representing the city image, such as the administration area (in historical city center), city parks, CBD, the exhibition center and train stations. In struggling to achieve harmonious urban management, however, current repressive actions are not as harsh as before as regards tackling the violators. In addition to the use of softer measures such as advising, educating and surveillance, female officers have been increasingly employed to implement the policing of public space as they appear to be friendlier than their male counterparts.

The “Interim Measure for Street Vendors Management” policy was then issued to include street vendors in urban spaces. The authority promised to establish 120 permitted vending places providing secure and hygienic infrastructures within 3 years. As showed by green color in Figure 1, nowadays there are 65 permitted vending places with 29,515 m² of established areas and 3596 stalls put into use. Street vendors are free to apply for a stall in appointed sites from the government. Once permitted, they must sell from the fixed stall, pay management fees and

![Figure 1](source: drawn by the authors according to the data provided by Guangzhou Urban Management Committee, http://www.gzcgw.gov.cn)
operate regularly as formal merchants. The “cat and mouse” relation between urban managers and street vendors has thus been replaced with “state and market” in these spaces. Some of the vendors welcome this approach because they no longer worry about governmental harassment despite the imposition of some constraints. However, this inclusiveness is conditioned to give priority to a specific city image and urban order. The authorized sites are restricted to locations where city landscapes, public space order, formal retail businesses and residential daily life are not affected by vending activities. Moreover, these sites are to be subjected to demolition for supporting urban construction projects in the future. However, the street-vendors’ needs are not considered in the process of decision-making in regard to the organization of vending spaces. As a result, most authorized sites locate in peripheral or invisible areas such as villages-in-the-city, backstreets in old communities and rural–urban interfaces, which are not as profitable as expected. With doubts about the nature of the inclusionary measure, therefore, many vendors choose to sell in the red areas and continue to challenge the exclusionary practices. Therefore, what this inclusiveness endows street vendors with is not the right to sell, but rather the temporary, partial right to sell in given localities. It enables the local state to address the livelihoods of the poor, while securing prime urban spaces. With more green areas established, one might expect more street vendors to be integrated into the formal system. However, it by no means suggests an end to the struggle given the nature of inclusiveness. Rather, new spatial practices by street vendors have emerged due to the ambivalence around the production of exclusionary and inclusionary spaces.

Conclusion
Urban revanchism will not go unchallenged, but invites various counter responses to it in practice. From the perspective of focusing on the roles of counter forces to revanchism, this paper presents theoretical and empirical support to assist the understanding of the ambivalent policies for the urban poor. It has explored how some of the counter forces render the exclusionary practices of urban politics in China unstable, difficult to sustain and changeable. It argues that the landscape of exclusionary urban policies could be reshaped by the excluded group and the progressive political climate questioning the exclusionary framework. As we have shown, the street vendors, as the targeted group the policy seeks to exclude, are able to mobilize various survival strategies that exhaust the authorities and render their exclusionary strategies ineffective. The defied policy is finally tempered and undermined by the discourse of social harmony at national level. Hence, the existence of the agency of the subordinated in surviving structural constraints and the benevolent role of the state entails instability and difficulty for the punitive form of urban policies. This opens up the possibility for the emergence of supportive approaches within spaces of revanchism. Nevertheless, our case does not show an overturn of the punitive framework, but confirms an ambivalent or a post-revanchist approach recognized in a recent critique of revanchism.

The exclusion of street vendors in Guangzhou represents a form of revanchism because it is driven by the NSC campaign that seeks to erase the undesirable from
public spaces to create good city images and enhance urban competitiveness. This exclusion is not driven by the intention to reverse economic recession or dystopian images of urban decline as suggested by the revanchism thesis based on Western cities. Rather, it is driven by the desires of local politicians to accelerate economic growth and accumulate political achievements. The economic and political desires are respectively spurred on by the established goal of growth first and the top-down cadre promotion system in China. The hukou system with an effect of binary population-division—other than ethnic and racial factors—supports the revanchist condemnation of street vendors, who are perceived as “outsiders” of the city. Hence, though outright vengeance is not detected, the exclusion of street vendors represents the essence of revanchism connoting the intention of the ruling or upper classes to remove the undesirable.

However, the revanchist practices, such as the NSC campaign, ignore the agency of the social groups they seek to exclude. We have shown the resistance of street vendors is driven by the necessity to survive, or specifically, their natural consciousness to maintain the existing livelihood strategy that enables them to adapt to the harsh circumstances resulting from the particular socio-economic restructuring. This necessity has grounded the persistence of their resistance to state repression, attaching instability to exclusionary street-vending politics in current Chinese cities. Therefore, even if collective actions in China are not as possible as in Latin America (Cross 1998a), the vendors with lack of associational power develop a flexible, individualized and small-scale activism. This involves the strategies concerned with escaping, bribing and violently confronting the state power to retain the right to public spaces. Social networks based on laoxiang relationships are mobilized to support these actions. Their resistance not only renders the exclusionary policy difficult to continue in original ways in practice, but also produces a public critique against it. Nevertheless, a limitation of this resistance lies in the fact that it is an autonomous act for surviving exclusionary circumstance without change. In other words, it is not a deliberate political act, but a moral one. As shown in Creswell’s transgression thesis (Creswell 1996), this form of resistance is limited by its inability to deconstruct spaces of the dominant power. This limit explains why the role of the central state matters in the policy transformation in our study.

In China as a centralized country, the transformation of urban policies cannot be fully understood without taking into account the influences of the national political climate. Despite the devolution of power in the regulation of street vendors, the exclusionary street-vending policy is found to be mediated and reshaped by national harmonious discourse. This process in Guangzhou is driven by the responses of local authorities to the issues of the vendors’ livelihoods, mitigation of their resistance and harmonious urban management according to the aim of reaching a “harmonious society”. In addition to capital accumulation, the Chinese state has been increasingly concerned with social needs in order to maintain social and political stability. This concern is reflected in the decision to build a “harmonious society”, and consolidated recently in the proposal of inclusive growth in the 12th Five-Year Plan. Nevertheless, social harmony does not mean the goal of growth first is being given up. Rather, it connotes the attempt of the central state to keep a balance between capitalist accumulation and socialist values (Nonini
2008), and between neoliberal urbanism and social stability (He and Wu 2009). Therefore, local authorities did not choose to abandon the exclusionary policy, but to adopt the ambivalent one by mixing inclusionary and exclusionary practices in a geographical sense. This ambivalence reflects the intention of the local state to mediate the current contradiction between the aim to create good city images for capital investment, and the need to address the livelihoods and interests of street vendors. This emerging policy is not inconsistent with the post-revanchist strategy in San Francisco’s homelessness case that enables the state to mobilize space while addressing the poor’s livelihoods (Murphy 2009).

However, because securing prime city spaces rather than truly solving the problems is the goal of the post-revanchist approach, new practices of resistance by street vendors continue in Guangzhou. As retaining social consensus and stability are also an important task of the regime, the Chinese state does not always serve as “the handmaiden of capital” regardless of the interests and resistances of the subordinated, but promptly tackle the conflict between neoliberal practices and social resistance. It is argued that the landscape of the street-vending policy in China would be largely shaped and reshaped by the tension among the politics of capital accumulation, vendors’ resistance and the state’s increasing concern on social needs. Therefore, this study suggests a dynamic or historical perspective for understanding the nature of urban political responses to the subordinated. It calls for a research on counter forces at local and supra-local levels in examining the unfolding of punitive/revanchist urban policies, which might be tentative and changeable under the influences of the former. In particular, it is worth exploring various forms of resistance of local people in surviving, negotiating and challenging political practices in neoliberal cities. Hence, contrasted with the examination of contextualized forms of the revanchist politics, this perspective focuses on the driving forces for a change of them, the directions they move towards and the emergence of alternatives that will be more inclusive for the subordinated.

Acknowledgements
Many thanks to three anonymous reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments and suggestions. This research is supported by the National Natural Sciences Foundation of China (Ref: 41130747). The usual disclaimers apply.

Endnotes
1 Prof. Dr. Desheng Xue is the corresponding author of this article. He contributed to the conceptualization, ideas and structure of the article, as well as the concrete work regarding the policies of Chinese central government and the local government of Guangzhou City.
2 The similar project regarding urban landscapes and environment is the National Civilized City campaign, generally pushed forward after the success in the NSC campaign.
4 It writes: “the vendors, who occupy public space and affect city landscapes and sanitation, are subject to be corrected; if refusing the correction, they are subject to a fine of 50–200 yuan”.
5 Cited from the most popular BBS in mainland China—Tianya Community Forum: http://bbs.city.tianya.cn/tianyacity/content/5004/1/12226.shtml (last accessed 5 March 2012).
Inclusive growth means everyone benefits from economic development. It reflects the attempt of the Chinese state to take social justice seriously in addition to economic growth.

References


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