

# The relative contributions of ideas and power: what is at stake when ‘globalisation’ is simplified

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## Abstract

This essay seeks to challenge dominant representations of globalisation, particularly those within the A-Level geography curriculum, which often describe globalisation in a deterministic and reductive way. Instead of explaining globalisation through neoliberal economic policies alone, this essay offers concurrent explanations by using the example of China as a significant outlier, where the descriptive narrative of the country simply ‘opening up its markets’ detracts from the underlying role of ideas. Acknowledging regional variation, it combines historical, economic, environmental, social, and political explanations. The inspiration for my examination of China comes from the recent film documentary *Can’t get you out my head* by the filmmaker Adam Curtis (2021), where he brings to light the relative importance of power and ideology in China’s development which could enlighten geography students about the complexity of globalisation. It concludes that an inevitable globalised future is non-existent affording scope for alternative future outcomes that offer greater equity.

## 1. Introduction

Globalisation is often understood as an inevitable, singular process which privileges the neoliberal lens when describing recent trends and events. While A-Level geography representations may acknowledge the interconnectedness of global processes and factors such as trade partnerships, they continually fail to recognise the relative contributions of ideas and power. Therefore, this essay argues geographers must understand the complexity of globalisation through also examining past trajectories, ideas and power struggles, and varying regional impacts to assist and give deeper meaning to A-Level textbook representations. To help geographers envisage this complexity, I draw on the recent film documentary *Can’t get you out my head* by Adam Curtis (2021), that aptly spotlights China’s unique historical trajectory and brings to light the power relationships that have shaped the present. In doing

so, it offers a valuable new insight to globalisation and moves away from projecting a false singular universal experience (Massey, 2006).

This essay firstly considers how neoliberalism is the dominant theory for understanding globalisation, exploring the way in which this lens cannot apply to the outlier of China with aid of Curtis' insights from the documentary. Moving from a temporal to spatial focus, it then examines the varying impacts of globalisation through regional analysis of China. Finally, it explores the lack of an inevitable future trend of globalisation, re-thinking A-Level geography's narrow conclusion of 'de-globalisation' towards alternative trajectories (Massey, 2006). I refer to neoliberalism as a conceptual lens of critique for understanding globalisation in Geography. Although the term has several meanings in terms of social relations and new forms of citizenship, I will focus on neoliberalism as a set of economic policies. I also define ideology as a set of beliefs and ideas guiding an individual, group, or society. It is important to distinguish between ideology on a global scale, like neoliberalism, and in a specific context, like the ideology underpinning China's Cultural Revolution.

## **2. Globalisation as a neoliberal process**

As a paradigm of thought, neoliberalism emphasises freedom from state intervention and is valuable for understanding current economic policies (Harvey, 2007). Since the 1970s and 1980s, neoliberalism has been the dominant influence for economic policies such as the deregulation of financial markets and reduced tariffs and quotas (Harvey, 2007). In this way, our understanding of economic policies within globalisation has usefully developed through a neoliberal perspective (Milojevic, 2006: 76). However, understanding globalisation through this lens alone has excluded alternative reasons for economic growth in countries like China, revealing the Western focus of neoliberalism that is 'being dominated by the thinking of those within leading economies and societies' (Butt, 2011: 30). What is more, even within neoliberalism, versions exist separately across America, the UK, and Europe (Nonini, 2008: 147).

Gibson-Graham (2006) further argues that a 'variety of different economic development paths' (2006: 139) coexist within globalisation. Maintaining the view of neoliberal dominance also fails to discern non-capitalist policies within the new global economy, such as production of goods within collective enterprises (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 138-246). To deconstruct an understanding of a false 'unified economic world' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 248), it is thus imperative to incorporate many other complex economic policies within A-Level geography representations and underline non-economic factors.

## **2.2. Did China simply ‘embrace globalisation’, or is there something deeper going on?**

China demonstrates there are alternative ways to integrate into the global system beyond a neoliberal lens. Undeniably, the country has experienced success, rising as a military and trade regional power with average economic growth rates of 9 percent annually since the end of the 1970s (Silva-Ruete, 2006). Some argue that neoliberal policies are relevant to China, evidenced by marketisation policies in the countryside, which contributed to the decline of individuals living in extreme poverty (Buckingham, 2017) from 40 to 25% between 1990-2010 as described in the A-Level geography textbook (Oakes, 2019). For example, the marketisation policy of Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs) has created new business opportunities, bringing prosperity to the villagers and reducing reliance on agricultural development.

However, this neoliberal lens only partially explains China’s rapid economic growth, as the Communist Party of China (CPC) has created its own domestic policies alongside neoliberal ones (Buckingham, 2017: 300). While China may be ‘championing global-free trade’ (Horesh and Lim, 2017: 438), it shapes its own path from within. Moreover, only focusing on neoliberal policies undermines the importance of its historical trajectory, threatening to erase past events that have enabled China to rise as a global influence today (Dirlik, 2012: 282). Therefore, if we continue to view China in light of post-economic reforms, over-emphasising the present and future, we ignore the reasons behind its economic growth, that is, the ‘active struggles that produced it’ (Harvey, 2010: 148).

It is Curtis who illustrates these reasons behind economic growth in China most effectively through his documentary series. He argues China had certain reasons to integrate into the financial system. In particular, Deng Xiaoping actively ‘turned away from these big ideas’ after the horrors of the ideology that emerged from Mao’s ideas during the Cultural Revolution, with a ‘brutal struggle for power,’ extreme suffering, and poverty depicted in Figure 1 (Curtis, 2021).



Figure 1. Children in China involved in the power struggle of the Cultural Revolution (BBC: Curtis, 2021).

Instead, he turned to the pursuit of wealth for a deeper reason than a neoliberal consensus: for security. In Curtis' words, referring to Xiaoping, 'His goal was simple – money would replace old revolutionary dreams – it was less dangerous' (Curtis, 2021). This shift from ideology turned into a new form of power: flows of capital. As ideology disappeared, individualism emerged from corruption and greed among Communist party elites pursuing their own interests. Here, Curtis argues this shift facilitated 'the growing force of individualism, a force that had the power to eat away all the collective ideals that had held the society together' (Curtis, 2021). China's growth, however, was only possible through a 'new system of global lending' in the West (Curtis, 2021). This underlines interconnectedness of ideas worldwide and strengthens the need to recognise a spatial and temporal range in interpretations of globalisation.

What Curtis perhaps oversimplified, however, is the idea of a 'switch' to money away from ideology. China may have materially integrated into the global system, but the CPC is still at its core as Curtis demonstrates in Figure 2, with Jinping encouraging ideology in new ways.

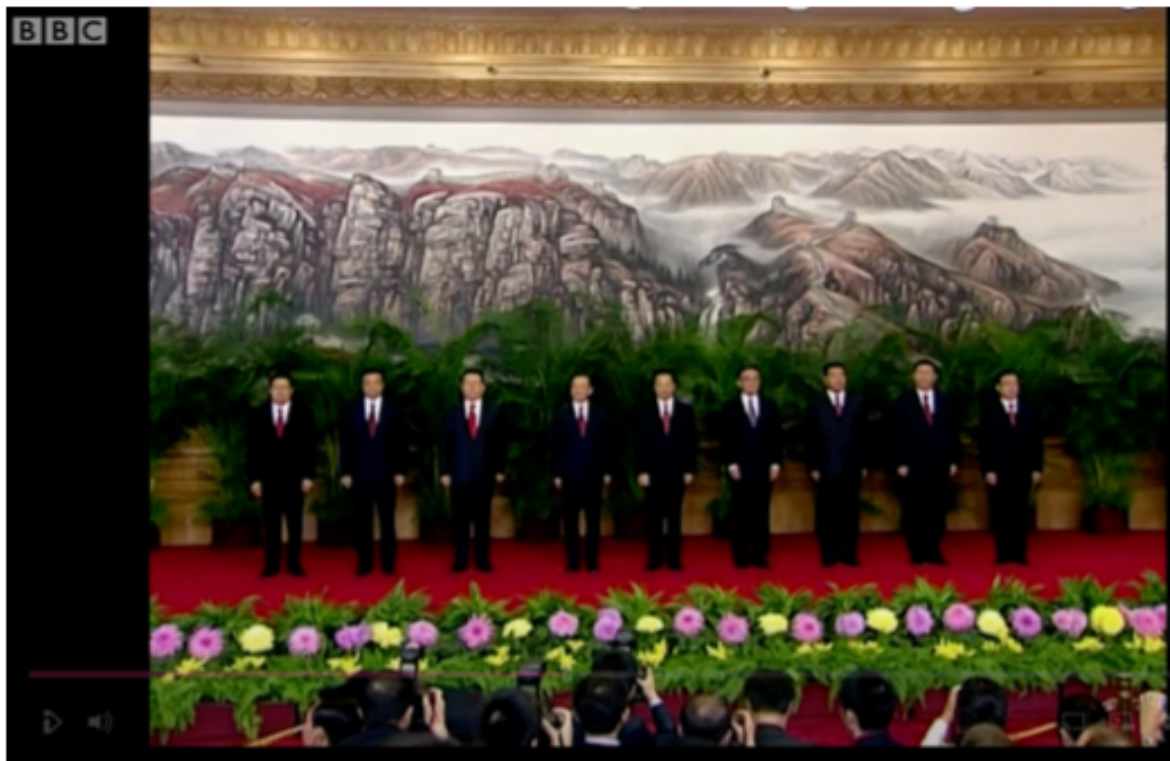


Figure 2. The CPC Leaders of China who were the children of the Cultural Revolution (BBC: Curtis, 2021)

For example, political messages now spread the suspicion of ‘foreign enemies’ outside China, as opposed to previous ‘class enemies’ inside (BBC Sounds, 2021). Therefore, examining the power of ideology alongside complex policies in China allows for a greater understanding of economic growth.

### 3. Regional Variation across China

Despite offering a real insight into factors underlying China’s economic growth through meaningful cinematography, Curtis’ visual approach lacks geographical depth about the ‘switch’ to money which is portrayed as homogenous across the country.

In this way, alternatives to neoliberal economic policies are emphasised at the expense of considering regional variation. Massey (2006) exposes this tendency of theories of globalisation to depict ‘only one historical queue – one development model’. This overlooks fundamental geographical variations within place and the diversity of lived experiences.

Although China has a rapidly growing middle class, inequality exists on different scales. Market reform policies, for example, have enabled cities like Shanghai to benefit from international trade more than rural provinces, with TVEs in cities providing higher incomes per capita (Sanders *et al.*, 2007). This points to the uncontrollability of neoliberal policies underlying China’s

precarious growth (Gibson-Graham, 2006). While these neoliberal policies may have contributed to inequality, they have accentuated pre-existing inequalities such as the rural-urban divide. Thus, as Butt (2011) argues, we must understand globalisation as the 're-description of existing processes' (2011: 426).

Specifically, Zhang and Zhang (2003) emphasise the significance of location as a variable affecting the outcomes of global processes. For example, special economic zones have been disproportionately targeted for development and trade over inland provinces. This disparity was emphasised between 1992 to 1998 where the coastal province of Tianjin received 3,468 more GDP per capita in Chinese Yuan than the inland province of Guizhou (Zhang and Zhang, 2003: 52). Additionally, geographical barriers may restrict rural to urban migration, contributing towards unequal distribution of wealth (Butt, 2011).

Furthermore, as Gibson-Graham (2006) imply, there is not one singular economy of China but many fragmented ones. Since the end of the 1970s, there have been a plurality of economic policies across China's regional economies (Yu and Wei, 2008). For example, Greater Beijing has experienced slower rates of economic growth, favouring state-owned enterprises, in contrast to other Chinese provinces with more export-led growth and foreign enterprises (Yu and Wei, 2008). Hence, A-Level representations must also unpack the varying regional growth China has experienced to contextualise the declining numbers of individuals living in extreme poverty.

Therefore, while Curtis' narrative may give deeper meaning to economic growth in China, examining spatial complexity within countries is equally important to avoid a limited understanding of the present.

#### **4. Re-thinking globalisation as inevitable**

Exploring alternatives to neoliberal path dependence in China enables geographers to understand that one fixed trajectory of globalisation is not inevitable (Strange, 2011; Massey, 2006). Once they recognise the contested origin of China's economic growth assisted by Curtis' insights, they can also see globalisation as 'negligible and reversible' (Butt, 2011: 433). This gives hope for imagining alternative futures in other places beyond China.

Escobar (2004) indicates new ways of thinking could be the first step towards reducing genuine inequalities. By moving away from Western-centric neoliberalism alone, theorising can translate into real change. Yet, this is not to say that all aspects of globalisation are inherently bad (Butt, 2011). Rather, existing forms could be amended to extend the reach of social opportunities and equitable growth (Escobar, 2004). Accordingly, 'De-globalisation' as a

solution proposed to A-Level geographers is flawed. This is due to its implication of a linear trend away from economic integration through protectionist policies. In reality, 'other images are available' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 138-139) besides one linear trajectory towards or away from globalisation.

Following new ways of thinking, geographers could then contribute their knowledge towards change (Escobar, 2004). A change could come through raising public awareness of the injustices and inequality that globalisation brings, such as environmental degradation (Borghesi and Vercelli, 2003). This knowledge, geographers acquire, can mobilise citizens via technology to pressurise governments in reforming harmful practices (Borghesi and Vercelli, 2003). This further demonstrates that technological advancement is not merely a measure of globalisation, as it is a way of dispersing information to distant places. Therefore, an alternative to 'de-globalisation' could be spotlighting the role of local activism and global egalitarian movements against injustices (Borghesi and Vercelli, 2003).

## **5. Conclusion**

This analysis draws several conclusions. Firstly, by examining the dominant role of neoliberalism in shaping our understanding of globalisation, it illustrates the importance of appreciating neoliberal economic policies alongside other heterogeneous policies, ideas, power, and varying spatial impacts. These relative contributions have undoubtedly been brought to light through Curtis' narrative of China in his documentary series, which recast my own understanding of globalisation: away from viewing it as an external force towards seeing development through the lens of power and ideas *within* China.

These insights thus hold the potential to deconstruct hegemonic and Western-focused understanding of economic growth, inspiring geography students to think beyond their own lived experiences. Moreover, this analysis has further revealed that textbook descriptions of poverty and growth rates in China are not misleading but incomplete, lacking spatial depth and a critical understanding of the other factors at play. Geographers could therefore refine Curtis' analysis by employing a place-based regional approach to avoid a reductive focus at the global scale.

Ultimately, as meaning of economic growth is subject to change, there is scope for new ideas. Rejecting one inevitable globalised future enables a rethinking towards optimising the opportunities globalisation brings, with the hope of activism pressurising governments to address injustices. Therefore, globalisation may be the future, but it is not the case that there is either



globalisation one way or 'de-globalisation'. Rather, it is more likely there may be progression, stability, and regression all at once.

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