6 Conclusion

Beginning with the simple goal of understanding how a particular complex spatial phenomenon (Beijing's contemporary artworld) has come about, endured and transformed in the contemporary Chinese urban context, this research has taken a big but necessary detour. The contemporary artworld, just like many social-spatial entanglements recently emerge in China's first-tier cities, has been formed by a multiplicity of contemporaneous processes. Yet, until recently, spatial phenomenon situated in contemporary urban China are mostly described and explained via learned notions, linear laws (see, e.g., Ma and Wu 2005b; Chen 2018; Wang and Liu 2015). There are rarely any methodological reflections made on generating context-sensitive knowledge regarding such situated, complex but common, social-spatial phenomena.

At this point, a logical solution is to simply avert substantial lenses, resort to the relational theories, or grounded theory for space-related knowledge production. Nevertheless, the relational position is broad and far from coherent. The grounded theory renders one's research particular, hence insignificant. I have shown the epistemic complexity in thinking of space relationally. The three prominent traveling relational spatial theories under scrutiny here (see chapter 2) build on divergent social ontological and epistemological footings. Meanwhile, the traditional Chinese thoughts – Confucianism and Daoism – demonstrate inherent relationality on both ontological and epistemological levels (see chapter 3). Moreover, chapter 4 has shown how local epistemic context and communicative rules play out in the recontextualization and production of spatial knowledge.

For a pragmatist, this problem could be solved by employing mixed theories and methods, carrying out multi-linear research to triangulate one's arguments and knowledge produced. However, to me, this 'solution' is chaotic at best, if not conducive to acute epistemic conflicts and confusions. The applications must be done in such a way that differently defined epistemic forms do not get conflated, and epistemic rules are kept coherent. One shall also attend to the *limitations* of their explanatory power and the *possible incompatibilities* with the contextual knowledge hold by subject-to-be-known. In this concluding chapter, I first re-address how I have employed CR ontology, developed a roadmap to engage with method-

ological pluralism without reproducing epistemic fallacy. Following this, I conclude on the challenges of conceptualizing space relationally for studying contemporary urban China.

6.1   Critical realism and compressed modernity
     studying space relationally with plural social-spatial theories

When facing plural (European and Chinese) theories and Chinese reality, one would inevitably experience epistemic uncertainty, and ask, which ones shall I employ for best understanding my subject, and how? Like all important questions, there are no easy answers. This question has been raised previously mostly by researchers whose research subjects locate in a culture/social context other than their own. In this book, this question is raised in the Chinese urban context, in condition of compressed modernity. It means, the constituting entities of the urban phenomenon (materials, capital, social actors, technology, nominative rules, practices, and so on) may have travelled from different corners of the world (mainly from the Global north). Moreover, the phenomenon-relevant events on the actual level may be generated by both trans-local and local structures. These challenges are common for researchers whose research subject locates in the rapidly transforming regions in the global South, where development processes unfold in a relatively untransparent and compressed manner: post-plural knowledge and entities entangle temporally, converge partially and evolve quickly. Particularly in the context of the late-moving developing countries, although every social actors' experience is ultimately touched by global social processes, but only the social elites get well informed and entitled to act reflectively. As I have indicated in the introductory chapter, amidst the challenges of epistemic uncertainty, this research resorts to CR's meta-theoretical position to build a sound methodological pluralism approach, for studying space relationally, and context-sensitively under compressed/late/second modern conditions.

    Following CR, to overcome epistemic fallacy, I see the social-spatial reality as stratified and intransitive. It entails hierarchically ordered domains of the real, actual, and empirical. Bhaskar distinguishes the "transitive" and the "intransitive objects of science" ([1975] 1978, 36–38): between categories, theories, and conceptual frameworks on the one hand, and the real entities, mechanisms, structures, and relations that make up the natural and social world on the other. In other words, CR is pluralist in terms of epistemology. One is thus disillusioned from engaging static, substantial 'transitive objects of science' to define the 'Chinese reality.' One is also freed from equalizing 'social reality' with presupposed or empirical imageries, normativity, representations of essential (political, economic, and cultural) attributes, or demarcated territorial entities. One is further disillusioned from characterizing

the mechanisms of any observable social-spatial from *either* the informants' *or* the researcher's perspectives.

CR offers no specific explanations for empirical inquiries. It requires one to resort to substantive theoretical lenses to redescribe and analyze the phenomenon of interest. I consider the phenomenon to be laden with theories, but not determined by them, in the sense that all theorizations are potentially fallible, but some may be closer to represent the structures of reality than others. I claim the reality of Beijing's artworld to be also *stratified*. In the empirical domain, it consists of the narratives, experiences, and practices I see, hear and sense during my field trips. From this fragmented information immediately gathered in the empirical domain, and epistemic forms derived from the initial theories, I manage to reveal and capture the artworld constituting events in the actual domain. These events are generated by plural mechanisms and structures with enduring properties in the real domain.

In the empirical section, the chapter five of this book, I have demonstrated the procedure and utility of such a methodological approach at a full length. I have taken three relational (social) spatial theories as initial theories, whose levels of analysis are prescribed on the level of political-economic structure, of practice and of pre-cognitive, affective sensations. The postulated causal agents are 'the law of accumulation,' 'the recursive practical structure,' and 'the relational affective and sensual structure.' I have also introduced my own hypothesis of the hierarchical sense and cognitive structure (derived from chapter 3.3) as an initial causal agent. When deploying these multi-scalar initial theories retroductively, various visual, discursive, and sensible data *become* relevant, which helps the researcher (me, in this case) to picture out the different but complementing field-constituting events.

Subsequently, more and more transitive empirical materials and intransitive notions are revealed and mobilized into redescribing an event with enough details for comprehensibility. Following the prescribed causal agents in a selected conceptualization, one can ask the "what if" questions and identify demi-regularities. For instance, while engaging with the political-economic lens (by Harvey), following the principle of accumulation based on methodological holism, one is led to picture and redescribe the occurrences of events around the material and knowledge distribution, monetization and materialization, labor division, and modes of production. I am led to ask, what if the laws underlying the production of *tizhi-nei* and *tizhi-wai*; art district, biennial, public and individual art, are accumulation of social, cultural capital, and economic capital? Can I identify the tendencies of stratified social class, labor division, and spaces of distinction?

As indicated in 5.3.4, I argue, the relation between the normative ensembles of *tizhi-nei* and *tizhi-wai*, does not reflect dialectic forces and relations of production since its inception. Moreover, as time goes by, one can identify the increasing fluidity across the previously segregated nominative artworlds, in their forms of

productive means (state-funding or market; domestic cultural domain or international one) and modes of production. Individual bodies come to occupy multiple positions across these normative artworlds, engage more intricately with differentiated forms of capital accumulation to maximize the sum of their own capital gain. The art district, biennials, and independent art institutions are produced by coexisting, mutually disparate modes of cultural, economic and political productions. I can identify an overarching political principle, ordering the distribution of state-assigned material and immaterial resources across these normatively distinct art fields. But to reduce the layered productive forces (especially cultural ones) in each field (e.g., the art district) to the engaging social bodies' economic/political class status obstructs the understanding of their mosaic material forms being produced.

Conversely, as I have shown in 5.4, the tendencies prescribed by the principle of repetitive social doing (by Löw) based on methodological individualism correspond closely with the formation of typical consolidated spatial forms (e.g., the loft studio, studio agglomeration in art village) in Beijing's artworld. They are constructed by art individuals or groups exhibiting similar cultural indoctrinations. However, it offers only partial explanations to spatial forms that either result from highly reflective, creative practices (e.g., artwork) or mediated interactions that occurred in obscure, provisional, and dynamic settings (e.g., Caochangdi art village).

Finally, complementary to the analytical dimensions and causal explanations offered by the first two lenses, the assemblage conceptualization from the non-representational theory (by Thrift) is built on pluralist ontology and weak epistemology. It enables me to attend to and redescribe the dynamic empirical occurrences in Beijing's artworld, capture the emergent interactions and relational features exhibited among the art community and the heterogeneous social entities in transformation and movement. In the case of Caochangdi, where art community live in close proximity with the migrant workers and local rural community, I have captured different spatial and temporal processes that drawn some of them together at particular conjunctures. A few identifiable junctures of social-material assemblages are made stable through shared weak and mediated social ties at regular times and get destabilized in the event of demolition and eviction. An emergent hierarchical sensible-cognitive structure can be identified in generating fear and conformity to political authorities.

I would not like to repeat the detailed empirical findings, as they have been presented at length in chapter 5, at the end of each sub-sections. I want to address, by deploying three theoretical lenses at distinct analytical levels, I was able to give a fuller account of Beijing's artworld's central and peripheral constituents (disparate material objects, social actors) and the plural mechanisms (normative rules, frames of meaning, habitualized practices, material affordances, and contingent perceptions and emotions), and the way in which they weld them together in generating the events observed. Such a multi-level retroductive analysis could reveal deep

causal mechanisms and their interactions, which have actually *affected* the happenings of the events we can observe in a local context. Thus, I would claim, it helps to generate context-sensitive knowledge of space production/constitution/assembling.

By redescribing the reality of the artworld in Beijing as stratified and plural, engaging systematically with this theoretical and conceptual pluralism, this research has confronted the traditionally defined social scientific rigor as a methodological-epistemological link. I admit, however, that to carry retroductive strategy to a full account – examine the powers and liabilities that infinite epistemic frames would possibly give to an empirical event – may prove extremely complex, if not impossible. Thus, a thorough elucidation of the selected theories, their epistemic forms, causal agents and levels of analysis, as presented in the first section (chapter two to four) of this book, is necessary.

6.2   Thinking of space relationally in local context

In the first section of this research, I have elucidated several forms of 'thinking of space relationally,' firstly in the domain of philosophy and then in social sciences. These elucidations serve two functions, 1) to specify the form of space and relationality embedded in various spatial conceptualization and discourses; and 2) to identify the 'initial theories' to be employed in the retroductive empirical research on the artworld in Beijing, in the second section of this book.

The metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality and social-spatial knowledge are essential to understanding how the form of 'space' and 'relationality' are conceptualized. The social science paradigms have also imposed explicit epistemological rules on social scientists regarding what one can know, how one knows about it, and criteria for validifying the knowledge produced. Following the CR's meta-position, I have employed the sociology of knowledge approach in deconstructing the epistemic forms and rules, unraveling the core presumptions and causal mechanisms embedded in three prevailing (European) conceptualizations of relational space (chapter 2). Through a revisit to the normative discourses in traditional Chinese thoughts (chapter 3), I have made several claims about the epistemic postulations regarding 'social subject' and 'relationality,' 'things' and 'symbolic orders.' As it turns out, the shared epistemic building blocks of subject, object, relationality, and their inferential orders are divergently postulated in the European theoretical and Chinese traditional normative discourses. It leads to very different causal explanations about the form and formation of social space.

For David Harvey, the form of space (the space of the political and economic system) is produced by the political-economic structure as a whole. On the ontological level, material resources are assumed to have the intrinsic and differentiated

capacity to circulate. The political and economic structure is aligned with how these material resources are valorized, circulated and accumulated. The principle of accumulation is conceived to drive the production of economic space. As a result, social actors' knowledge, way of knowing, and productive and reproductive forces and practices are supposed to be interpreted by their relative positions in such a totality.

For Martina Löw, social space (the space of everyday life) is constituted through the repetitive social practices with regard to the social actors' habitual perceptions. On the ontological level, repetitive human doings are conceived to be real, as the generative mechanism for space constitution. Social actors are assumed to internalize and embody the social structures (symbolic rules and the distribution of material resources) prevalent in their surroundings. In the first order, relational space arises from individual social actors' synthesis (holistic habitual perception) of the symbolic meaning configuration attached to social beings and goods. It then materializes through practices, as a relational placement of social bodies, which are in constant physical movement.

Finally, Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory conceives social actors and things to be on the same ontological footing, meaning that their agencies do not lie solely in predefined or preexisting structuring attributes but rather emerge from more or fewer contingent interactions. 'Joint action,' 'affect,' 'emergence' and 'context' are deemed more real than the essential attributes of the subject, object, and their internal relations. Space (phenomenal) and the assemblage (material), thus, are conceived to emerge from the never-ending interactions between the actors and things. The former arises in the eyes of the experiencing social actors. Assemblage get territorialized in the interactions of the participating actors. Researchers are impelled to code and interpret the ways in which the social-spatial arrangements of assemblage come to be and transform without a presupposed cause.

Ontologically speaking, I claim that in the context of classic Confucian normative discourses, a two-dimensional relational sensible and cognitive structure is deemed as real, which orders the emotional, perceptual, and practical activities of the social actors. Two sets of intensive properties can be identified in the prototypical social relations prescribed in Confucianist normativity. One is *ren*-affection-intimacy, and the other is *li*-reverence-hierarchy. On the emotional and perceptual level, the social actor is assumed to be endowed with both *ren*-intimacy and *li*-hierarchy sensible and perceptual orientations. They are strengthened during primary socialization in the family environment, enable the social subjects to give meaning to extended forms of relationships. Following this logic, a broader set of horizontally (intimate-distanced) and vertically (fearful-revered) differentiated, asymmetric social relations can be identified, produced and reproduced by the participating social actors' minds and senses in the course of their encounter.

Furthermore, my analysis of the philosophical discourse about things and names in chapter 3.4 sheds light on a unique form of relational epistemology about natural objects. I have claimed that the conceptualizations and categorization of things in the traditional Daoist thoughts do not follow the subject-predicate principle nor linear causal rules. Symbols do not represent the concrete, static, singular thing, nor the general form of such things. Things are primarily conceived to be in constant motion or interaction with those that surround them. The symbols of naming things reflect the normative, correlative orders assigned by privileged authorities, usually within a political system. I have made two claims. The first claim is that thing(s) is assumed to possess emergent transformative capacities, exhibits in a relational and interactive context, than substantial attributes independent of other things and human perceivers. Names are conceived according to a correlative logic. Hence, the names of things fall between the abstract and concrete, or purely conceptual and exact representational categories. A correlative logic of ordering things is demonstrated by the normative systems of *yin-yang* and *wu-xing*. The placement of empirical things that align or misalign with such order is believed to either enhance or interrupt their mutual resonances hence the efficacy of the overall normative order, enabling the name designator to maneuver the motion of things. The second claim is that naming is deemed a privileged agency entitled to authorities. They mobilize such agency to either reproduce a normative social order or enforce the start of a new reordering process.

Having the danger of essentialism in mind, examinations of the recontextualized spatial knowledge (chapter 4) prevalent in the contemporary Chinese scientific field reveal features of spatial knowing and doing that affect the appropriation of traveling spatial theories by scholars. Most notably, scholars implicitly assign the causal primacy to vertical spatial relations when translating and adapting scale theories onto Chinese realities, which confirms my claim in chapter 3. In addition, I argue that, the communicative agency is asymmetrically distributed between actors embedded in the fields of politics and science. It reinforces the reproduction of spatial concepts and forms under the logic of centralized, top-down governance.
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In section two, I have carried out retroductive empirical research on disparate field-constituting events of Beijing's artworld. For me, Beijing's artworld represents the emerging hyper-complex spatial phenomenon in major China cities and cities in the global South, where disparate social actors, discourses and material entities come together in close proximity, entangle under unprecedented rules. A plurality of mechanisms interacts and generates possible effects in the empirical domain, which manifests, in the eyes of the situated perceivers, as distinct mosaic social-material ensembles. To generate context-sensitive knowledge about this particular, situated phenomenon, I would argue, the researcher shall uncover the co-existing generative mechanisms at work. One shall also elucidate how certain mechanisms

co-function and affect the events' observable parts in the empirical domain. I have elaborated in depth in chapter 5, about how initial theories help to code locally observable events and grasp the demi-regular tendencies.

In my analysis, I have shown, the same mechanism (e.g., the law of accumulation) may underlie different events and generate particular social-material manifestations (e.g., the art biennial and art district). Conversely, a particular social-material phenomenon (e.g., Caochangdi village) is synthesized as a multitude of (emergent) names (the village-in-the-city, the art village, the Caochangdi art community, Cao-cun) by different actors at different times. These plural forms of Caochangdi's constitution, and the underlying generative mechanisms, may appear irrelevant to the discipline specific (e.g., art history) study of the artworld. However, if we have an action-oriented goal in mind, say, preserving the community space (in symbolic and material senses) constructed by the freelancing artists in Beijing, we have to attend to these entangled structures at work. Only by grasping the events in the actual domain, uncovering these structures and the way they interact in the real domain, can we develop local strategies for enabling, suspending, or blocking the *enactment* of them. We must always be alert about the actualization of a contingent event (e.g., the anti-demolition struggle in Caochangdi) emerge from social actors, things and their interactions (e.g., social actors resorting to principles of hierarchy) in the context of intrusive elements. These generative mechanisms revealed may play out in the re-demarcation of parts and wholes in future terms. In such cases, a method of causal disaggregation will not help.

Based on my limited theoretical elucidations and empirical demonstration, I will not make general substantive claims about what forms of social and material relationalities shall be recognized, to render the spatial analysis and interpretation valid in the local context. My manifold empirical study of the artworld in Beijing, has affirmed the possibility of uncovering several co-existing, co-articulating, and enduring necessary, contingent, and emergent relationalities on the material, normative, perceptual and affective levels. The corresponding underlying structures generate the complex phenomenon of the artworld in Beijing. For studying future complex spatial phenomena situated in urban China, in addition to the elucidated relational spatial theories traveling from Europe, I have also recognized the following structures as the initial causal agents, 1) a hierarchical sensible and perceptual structure that exist inside the individuals; 2) an asymmetrical normative structure for distributing discursive and material agency, exist inside and/or outside the individuals' cognition and senses; and 3) the emergent properties of things that exist outside the individuals' cognition.