

On May 5, 2016, I hosted a topical lunch on The Nature of Deindustrialization.

The following was pre-circulated to invitees:

“Deindustrialization – the term provokes images of poverty, economic decline, and abandonment. In regard to the environment, however, deindustrialization presents a potential contradiction: on the one hand, deindustrialization often leaves landscapes of environmental contamination and ruin, while on the other hand, deindustrialization may not only pave the way for a more sustainable landscape, but may in fact be necessary for long-term sustainable development. In this topical lunch, I invite participants to share their own research around three questions: What are the environmental causes and consequences of deindustrialization? What are the different pathways out of heavy industrial production (such as automobile manufacturing or even agro-industrial production), and how do those pathways contribute to or detract from sustainable development? How do political, economic, and social factors shape the environmental make-up of deindustrialized landscapes?”

At this topical lunch, I will begin by sharing some observations from preliminary field research I recently undertook in the automobile city of Shiyan in central China, a hinterland city that was once the country’s largest commercial vehicle producer and that has been experiencing a bout of deindustrialization since the early 2000s with the relocation of much of its manufacturing to more accessible areas. This is part of a larger comparative Sino-American urban history project I have just begun on the rise and decline of motor cities in China and the United States. After these brief remarks, I hope to then move quickly into a discussion centered on the three questions above.

The purpose of this lunch is to bring together scholars of industrial and urban systems who are interested in the environmental dimensions of deindustrialization and how these intersect with broader social and economic processes. We aim to open up a conversation about (and perhaps even seed collaboration around) integrative approaches to grappling with the nature of deindustrialization and, with that, the very ecology of late capitalism.”

The event went ahead as planned. I set up the problem of deindustrialization and the environment, I briefly presented on the case of Shiyan—particularly mountaintop removal to create industrial zones so as to halt capital flight and to attract in new capital to this hinterland automobile city--and I then opened the floor to questions and comments.