

Book Review: *Urban China*

Ren, Xuefei, *Urban China*, Polity, 2013, 218 pp, \$22.95, ISBN 978-0-7456-5359-4

Urban China offers a thorough examination of the urban condition in today's China that engages both specialists and nonspecialists. For specialists in urban studies, this is a book that aims to understand how China has urbanized within a short period and what urbanization means for its citizens, while addressing broader issues such as Chinese economy, globalization, and urban theories. For nonspecialists, such as undergraduate students, this book introduces the current conditions in urban Chinese society with an emphasis on shifting landscapes, transforming lives, and changing culture.

The book starts with a review of existing scholarship on urban studies of China. Chapter One introduces the debate about China's emergence as a world power and evaluates two explanations—one relates the rise of China to worldwide neoliberalization, while the other focuses on local institutional arrangement. It is followed by a brief study of urban demographic shifts. The chapter then traces the evolution of Chinese urban systems from ancient times to the present day based on secondary literature. The second chapter offers further general information about the changing government structures and institutions in China, and therefore lays a foundation for better understanding other topics in the rest of the book that are specifically related to urban studies. Changing institutions such as danwei, hukou, and the Chinese Communist Party are examined in the context of postreform Chinese cities. Changing government structure is also analyzed in regard to the three sectors of land, housing, and infrastructure—aspects that have affected cities most during the recent decades.

The remaining four chapters offer detailed descriptions of different aspects of urban life in China after the first decade of the twenty-first century. Chapter Three focuses on the changes in the urban landscape and identifies two forces that shaped the remaking of Chinese cities: Chinese state power and transnational flows of expertise. Chapter Four discusses recent developments related to China's migrant workers. Issues such as working and living conditions, protests and the government's subsequent responses, and migrant non-governmental organizations are well studied in this chapter. A particularly interesting detail is the description of villages-in-the-city (VICS), which are special residential quarters that attract migrant renters in big cities. The story of VICS in Shenzhen reflects both the conflicts between the city government and the migrant workers and the social impact of urban renewal projects.

Chapter Five deals with the inequality issue. Ren first attempts to explain China's inequality by introducing the "market transition" debate, then maps major patterns of social inequality based on work done by both sociologists and geographers, and at last examines how urban renewal programs have contributed to the widening gap between rich and poor. The same chapter also points out, again based on secondary literature, that the popular

attitudes toward inequality have gained surprisingly high levels of acceptance, especially among rural residents. This is likely due to improved living standards for farmers and the newly acquired social mobility that grants them access to cross the rural-urban divide. The final chapter includes a brief description of the changing cultural scene in urban China. It paints a vivid picture of leisure time in Chinese cities by emphasizing three cultural milieus: urban consumption, nightlife, and arts districts.

Despite the fact that the book is largely based on secondary literature, it does offer new insights into issues such as social inequality and transforming lives in shifting landscapes. It also expands our knowledge of Chinese cities by including many examples from understudied smaller cities, towns, and villages. In fact, the book is filled with anecdotes and examples that help to illustrate urban life and make it more approachable to the audience. It is also appreciated that the chapters often open with a specific story, and new subjects are sometimes introduced with a discussion on imperial legacies to add historical perspective.

Overall, *Urban China* is an enjoyable read filled with interesting stories about urban life in today's China. It can be used as an undergraduate textbook for courses such as "Contemporary Chinese Society" and "Urbanization and Development in China." It should be recommended to anybody interested in contemporary China in general or the urban conditions in today's China in particular.

Juanjuan Peng, Assistant Professor, History Department, Georgia Southern University.