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**Édition électronique**

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/615>

DOI : [10.4000/chinaperspectives.615](https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.615)

ISSN : 1996-4617

**Éditeur**

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

**Édition imprimée**

Date de publication : 1 avril 2006

ISSN : 2070-3449

**Référence électronique**

Valérie Laurans, « Laurence J. C. Ma and Fulong Wu (eds.), *Restructuring the Chinese City : Changing Society, Economy and Space* », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 64 | march - april 2006, mis en ligne le 21 décembre 2006, consulté le 21 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/615> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.615>

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## NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 This collection of articles edited by Laurence J. C. Ma<sup>1</sup> and Fulong Wu<sup>2</sup> is one of the first publications from the dynamic *China Urban Research Network*. There are seventeen contributors, mostly Chinese, who are geographers, resource managers, or anthropologists working in universities in the United States and Hong Kong, and in the Xi'an institute. They tackle a wide range of topics, such as the management of urban development, the real estate market, the architectural environment, the impact of industrial restructuring on urban spaces, the ways in which business quarters operate, and the transformation of residential areas and housing. The fourteen separate contributions share a common ambition, to update knowledge in the United States about urban development in China since the start of the reforms. They raise four main questions : 1) By what means were the market mechanisms set up in the main coastal cities, and how has this affected the use of urban space ? 2) What is the role of government, or what might be its role, in land management and in providing a judicial framework for the market ? 3) How do the long-term residents view the changes in their cities ? How is a sense of local identity recreated ? 4) What is the extent of the social divisiveness brought about by the new segregation of residential areas ?
- 2 This volume challenges the accepted view that Chinese cities are becoming increasingly westernised. It proposes instead a more nuanced view of the emergence of complex cities, which requires a new theoretical approach to urban reorganisation in China.

According to the authors, the Chinese economic reforms cannot be summed up as a simple transition from a planned to a market economy. The interest in these studies of the new urban spaces lies in what they reveal about the way the different factors behind the changes work together. The authors reject overhasty conclusions which assert that China's cities are being Americanised, merely on the grounds that commercial centres are multiplying, gated communities are appearing, car use is increasing, and the cities are expanding. These changes need to be understood in the framework of an enquiry into the link between urban formations and the forces producing them. In their view, the impact of globalisation, which is an extraneous factor, is not sufficient to explain the ongoing changes in the cities. On the contrary, we are witnessing the simultaneous activity of many forces, but the determining character of these internally generated factors is all too often overlooked. There is therefore no possible comparison to be made between the current transformation of China's cities and the development of urban centres in the West. How, then, should the restructuring of Chinese cities be described? To answer this, they invoke the concept of cities in transition. However, this is not patterned along the same lines as its economic model, which usually suggests a convergence of socialism and capitalism in the movement towards a market economy<sup>3</sup>. The transformations in China's cities remain incomplete and unfinished. They tend towards multiform combinations and hybrid modes of operation, which by their very nature cannot be defined in advance. Because of this, the authors insist at length, both in their introduction and in their conclusion, that attention must always be paid to the differences between China and the West in terms of their socio-economic and their historical and political contexts. Before plunging into new interpretations, the research scholars in their various fields are urged to forge new theoretical tools (from criteria for selecting facts to analytical apparatuses) distinct from those applied in the West.

- 3 The most satisfactory response to this challenge seems to come from the macro-geographical studies which adapt the theory of comparative scales to interpret the administrative hierarchy of urban spaces in China<sup>4</sup>. The analysis of the phenomenon of illegal constructions departs considerably from expectations based on European post-communist states, and suggests a situation comparable to that of other emergent capitalist countries<sup>5</sup>. The most rewarding lines of argument seem to me to be those arising from a close scrutiny of the regulations (such as those governing the real estate market<sup>6</sup>), precise empirical studies (migrant housing<sup>7</sup> or the collective imaginary creating the various sites in Shanghai<sup>8</sup>), and the similarities between China's coastal cities and the urban centres in the west of the country<sup>9</sup>. Since the sale of land rights is at the heart of China's rapid urban expansion, that is where an analysis of market mechanisms becomes most relevant.
- 4 The management of needs created by the massive influx of low income workers also brings up the key issue of social equity. In this respect, nostalgia for old Shanghai is frequently evoked, both in Shanghai itself and in Taiwan. But the spatial segregation that is usually denounced under the cover of this nostalgia is not reducible to the way in which certain historical quarters are turned into museums. The imaginary at work in constructing the city's new public areas reinvents on a larger scale the structures inherited from the past. To study this social imaginary is to be able to identify the different types of gentrification which contribute to the overall remoulding of the city. And if the current development of Xi'an (a leading interior centre of production before

the reform period) is analysed in the light of the transformation of the coastal cities, it reveals significant parallels between these comparable situations.

- 5 Although it is formulated with a number of theoretical caveats, these two authors' enquiry draws mainly on debates concerning the physical consequences of the process of accumulation in capitalist societies. The main thrust of their reflections is provided by their analysis of neo-liberal market mechanisms<sup>10</sup>. But if one sets out to show that, despite appearances, China is not developing towards a kind of Westernisation, is that not already to descend to a rather facile criticism of the uninformed ? (Or perhaps the authors consider the latter to be particularly common in the United States, which might justify their project ?). The theoretical approach followed by this volume dismisses any comparison of China with the West, and it seeks to forestall such superficial interpretations. However, the conceptual approach to the reality of China relies on references to Western experience, whose recurrence in China must be either confirmed or disconfirmed. This procedure leads to a double contradiction. On the one hand, it runs the risk of obliterating the specificity of the very processes that the different research papers set out to emphasise. On the other hand, it is overhasty in its own theoretical analysis of urban development in China. The exploration of this vast field of endeavour is still at an early stage, and the concept of "cities in transition" needs refining. The set of problems outlined here frequently err in the direction of an excessive preoccupation with the effects of market mechanisms. In some cases they are weakened by referring more to phenomena which affect Western countries (particularly the United States) than by basing themselves on observations of the reality in China. Some chapters repeat well-worn themes like the proliferation of business centres<sup>11</sup>, and residential mobility<sup>12</sup>. Others take the opposite approach, and simply describe or enumerate concrete phenomena without any convincing account of what is at stake in such issues as the unequal development of the urban areas of Shanghai<sup>13</sup>, or the inequality in housing, from the workers' villages to the condominiums<sup>14</sup>. This can lead to disappointing conclusions, which sometimes verge on simple banality.
- 6 Despite my reservations about the use of interpretive apparatus which are sometimes ill suited to the Chinese context, this volume provides a good introduction to current urban developments. Although some empirical chapters lack consistency and fail to advance the book's ambitions, by contrast others have the real merit of opening up still unexplored terrain.

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## NOTES

1. Laurence J. C. Ma is a geographer and emeritus professor at Akron University, and a director of the Urban China Research Network, Albany University, U.S.A.

2. A Reader at Southampton University (U.K.), Fulong Wu was the organiser of a recent international symposium entitled "Continuity, Transition, and Transcendence : Urban

Reform and Development in China”, which was held in London in August 2005 at the Royal Geographic Society, in collaboration with the British Institute of Geographers.

3. Cf. p. 260, where “transition” is defined as a process of change from one state or set of circumstances to another without this implying any “convergence” or “reconversion” towards a preconceived or predefined model.

4. Cf. Carolyn Cartier, pp. 21-38 ; Jianfa Shen, pp. 39-58.

5. Cf. Alan Smart and Wing-Shing Tang, pp. 80-97.

6. Cf. Anthony Gar-On Yeh, pp. 59-79.

7. Cf. Weiping Wu, pp. 222-242 ; Li Zhang, pp. 243-259.

8. Cf. Tianshu Pan, pp. 121-137.

9. Cf. Huaiting Yin, Xiaoping Shen, Zhe Zhao, pp. 155-174.

10. Cf. p. 276, which states that many Chinese urban formations resemble those to be found in the West, but their underlying processes do not correspond purely to the logic of globalisation. The restructuring of Chinese cities only partially reflects the activity of shared neo-liberal trends. That is because the transition does not constitute a smooth normalising shift (from socialism to free market capitalism), but rather one deeply rooted in the “accumulation regime”, meaning extensive accumulation, or state-organised industrialisation, as opposed to post-Fordist accumulation. Tracing this transition to its roots makes it possible to get beyond ideological labels (socialism or capitalism) and achieve a sharper insight into the complexity of the post-reform urban restructuring in China.

11. Cf. Piper Gaubatz, pp. 98-121.

12. Cf. Si-Ming Li, pp. 175-191.

13. Cf. Tingwei Zhang, pp. 138-154.

14. Cf. Youqin Huang, pp. 192-221.