Urban Anthropology in China

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Greg Guldin and Aidan Southall, editors. *Urban Anthropology in China*

This volume is a collection of papers presented at the First International Urban Anthropology Conference in Beijing in December 1989. Although the title is *Urban Anthropology*, most of the contributions are from other disciplines including urban planning, sociology, and history. Each of the twenty-two substantive papers (divided into four sections) stands alone. As editor Greg Guldin points out, "there is a distinct gap in the traditions of scholarship and stylistic formulae between the Chinese and foreign contributors, but there is no unanimity among the Chinese participants as well. *Urban Anthropology in China* thus encompasses scholars from Europe, Asia, and North America, each variously pursuing their own individual and national versions of urban anthropology." Indeed, there is virtually no discussion of the many empirical and conceptual differences that emerge between the various essays except for the introductory remarks which editor Aidan Southall provides for each of the four sections.

If there is one theme that runs through this disparate assemblage of essays, it might be the question of the uniqueness of Chinese cities in view of Western-derived models of modernization and urbanization. One point that emerges in most of the essays concerns the nature of both the distinction and the relationship between the words "rural" and "urban" when applied to China. There seem to be three distinct approaches to addressing this question. First is the Marxist approach, which views changes in the city as caused by changes in the mode of production. Aidan Southall, the strongest proponent of this view, takes a very long-term historical—and thus highly generalized—look at how the form and function of Chinese cities have oscillated between the centralizing forces of the "Asiatic" mode and the decentralizing forces of the "Feudal" mode of production. This analysis is too generalized and inconclusive to convince me of its theoretical merit. On the other hand, Southall makes a number of pithy observations to the effect that the Marxist ideal of creating a society in which the city and the countryside merge into a unified field of economic and cultural activity has been accomplished to a much greater extent in the advanced capitalist countries than in China or the other "socialist" countries.

This raises the question of just what impact the socialist mode of production has had on cities. Ivan Szelenyi holds that, compared to capitalist development, socialism in the industrializing cities of Eastern Europe limited economic and
cultural diversity and lessened the pressure to economize on space, and this resulted in lower population densities and a lowered level of social marginality. On the other hand, the experience of the Soviet Union, according to Ovsey Shkaratan, was somewhat different. Contrary to Marxist expectations that socializing the means of production would give planners leverage to reallocate economic and cultural assets beyond the urban centers, the very centralization of decision making, especially with the rise of Stalin, concentrated most of the assets and people in a few huge urban centers.

One of the problems that socialist societies encounter as they rejoin the capitalist system is how to reclassify and recalculate the value of state-owned and other forms of socialized land used for productive and consumptive purposes. Vesna Vucinic discusses this in terms of the ideological rationalizations behind China's urban land-reform movement of the 1980s. Three positions were staked out—the orthodox Marxist, the capitalist liberal, and the pragmatic compromise. The pragmatists borrowed the "capitalist" mechanisms and renamed and modified them to fit into a reformed socialist system.

The second approach taken by contributors to this volume is an applied systems approach, which is the provenance of city planners. These authors are concerned with modeling the political and cultural interventions that shape the material conditions of urban society. Two of the contributors discuss the need to develop models of urban planning and development that reflect the particular and regional cultural realities of Chinese, Asian, and Third World cities. Tridib Banerjee uses the dual-economy model (an economic system composed of "informal" small-scale enterprise and "formal" large-scale enterprise) to compare the postcolonial developments of Shanghai and Calcutta. His analysis challenges current interpretations of that model by describing the continuity and interaction (as opposed to the separation) of the two levels of economic activity. In Hong Kong, which is the focus of R. Yin-wang Kwok's essay, the prewar dual economy of international trade and the "informal" bazaar—even the agricultural sector—has been physically marginalized but not supplanted by a postwar colonial regime geared to promoting the interests of export manufacturing and information processing. While committed to a laissez-faire system, the Hong Kong government nevertheless supports this newest sector of private enterprise with the necessary social overhead capital. In Hong Kong, intervention strategy is geared to support proven productive enterprises and does not follow current concepts of Western planning with its eye on improving the physical environment. However, the next essay by Kiyotaka Aoyagi, on the development of planning strategies in Tokyo, suggests that economic success coupled with political democracy, apart from Western models, may address quality-of-life problems in terms of environmental improvement.

The third approach taken by contributors to this volume is "cultural adaptation," a concept that crops up in many of the essays, especially ones authored by
Chinese sociologists and anthropologists. Several authors argue that the cultural differences between rural and urban China are empirically real and conceptually significant. Chen Guoqiang, for example, presents a case in which the marriage customs of Chongwu, a town on the southeast coast of Fujian Province, are entirely different from those of the surrounding villages. The people of the town follow the form of postmarital residence familiar to most Chinese while the villagers practice a delayed-transfer type of postmarital residence. Chen vigorously denies any suggestion of an “ethnic” difference between town and village but offers no alternative explanations. He also fails to address the problems that such differences might pose when townspeople and villagers intermarry, if indeed they do.

Martin King Whyte argues on a more general and conceptual level that the cultural gap between rural and urban China deepened as a consequence of Mao Zedong’s socialism. Whyte offers into evidence the results of a survey on marriage and family in Chengdu, Sichuan. The respondents were women divided between those who were married in the countryside and came to live in Chengdu in the 1950s and those who were born and reared in the city. The data show that urban marriages were distinct insofar as they underwent a dramatic shift from becoming greatly simplified in the 1950s to becoming increasingly elaborate after the 1970s. This is evidence for Whyte’s assertion “that rural and urban areas have experienced more divergent trends since the revolution than before.” Also, while the mode of entry into marriage was very different for the women with rural roots than for those with urban roots, the two groups did not differ in their postmarital urban experiences and attitudes. Whyte believes these data provide “strong evidence” for the “homogenizing power of urban life in China” despite the cultural gap between the city and the countryside. This “homogenizing power” was the “demanding new organizational system” which the communists established in the 1950s. And the centerpiece of this new system was—and continues to be—the danwei (or work unit) system, which another author, Li Bin, describes as the institutional basis for “urban culture” in modern China.

If women migrants to Chengdu revealed few problems adjusting to city life prior to the 1980s, the post-1980 rural migrants to urbanizing areas of the Canton Delta have, according to Zhou Daning. Indeed, many experience severe problems of “cultural adjustment.” Some of the cultural differences are old and deep—as deep as differences in the spoken vernacular—which became manifested in social discrimination. In suggesting ways to help the migrants adjust, Zhou indicates the underlying causes of the problem. One is the lack of educational and recreational opportunities. Another is the breakdown of “management controls.” This theme of urban breakdown and weakening social controls is expressed in several other essays. Tan Shen and Li Dun, for example, ascribe the rise of urban crime to the post-1980 loss of social values, the drive for profits, and the increased rootlessness of rural migrants. An essay by Liu Bingfu and another by Deborah Pellow look at the crowding due to housing shortages, which pushes the old
together with the young and newly married in makeshift rooms.

The post-1980s period has also seen the frenetic pace of industrial development of rural China which, in Wang Xiaoyi’s view, has “finally breached the forbidding barrier between the cities and the countryside.” By the end of 1988, 20.3 percent of the Chinese population was nonagricultural, and a third resided in small towns. Wang’s succinct review and evaluation of the impact of rural enterprise is very informative and provocative. Although the industrialization of the countryside has had many positive benefits, Wang is concerned that this development is taking too much land and labor away from agriculture and actually poses a threat to the nation’s food supply. Even now, according to Vesna Vucinic, China has become the third greatest grain importer in the world. In a comprehensive review of the urban industrial development of the Canton Delta, Graham Johnson questions the very utility of the rural-urban distinction on both theoretical and empirical grounds. As the global economy incorporates ever more territory, the validity of the urban-rural distinction is being blurred. In China, this is coupled with an extensive redefinition of terms and changes in administrative designations for rural areas.

The rationale for referring to this collection of papers as “anthropology” becomes more apparent in the section on “Chinese Urban Ethnicity.” It is noteworthy that the editors use the word “ethnicity” in the title and that some of the authors, including Chinese, adopt the word in place of the usual “national minority,” especially in the context of Han-dominated urban areas. But there is no discussion of what the difference entails at the theoretical or conceptual level. The first paper by Zhang Conggen uncritically accepts the old Stalinist concept of “national minority” and proceeds to describe the mostly harmonious exchange in which the minorities add to the cosmopolitan enrichment of urban centers while the urban centers provide education, technology, and capital for the development of minority areas. This is in line with the dictum of Ruan Xihu (the Conference Co-Chair) that “the goal of Chinese urban anthropology … should be to promote mutual understanding and respect among [the different urban ethnic groups].” From Zhang’s perspective, “problems” may arise out of cultural misunderstandings, to which official agencies are, however, generally responsive. Zhang’s sense of the problems—such as it is—exhibits some of the same weaknesses that he denounces as the “imperialistic” legacy of “Western anthropology.” To the degree that his denunciation has credibility, it is the increasing tendency among Chinese scholars to adopt the conceptual tools of the status quo—“adaptation” and “social functionalism”—that “Western anthropology” by and large jettisoned decades ago.

All the papers on urban ethnicity begin with demographic facts which show the relatively small population base of the various minorities. It is out of concern for their small populations that the minorities have been exempted from the one-child policy. Yet, as Xiong Yu points out, Beijing’s minorities exhibit a
fertility pattern that is below the replacement level and is comparable to developed countries. Xiong analyzes the lowered rate of fertility among Beijing's minorities in terms of a "fertility culture" that includes higher levels of educational attainment, changes in family structure, and increasing acceptance of family planning.

The largest ethnic minority in Beijing (and other cities) are the Hui (Islamic) Chinese, who, according to Dru Gladney, have sustained a strong sense of identity and community by first accommodating the radical communist reorganization of their businesses in the 1950s and 1960s and then more recently by taking advantage of the "special considerations" which the communists have offered minorities. The Hui communities tend to be centered on mosques, where much of their livelihood is invested in small and medium-sized businesses. Although their religious beliefs and dietary values set them apart from the Han majority, they seem to be remarkably integrated into the larger orbit of Beijing society.

But this is not the sense that comes through the descriptions of urban ethnicity in the regions that have been formally designated as "minority" areas. In Lhasa, Tibet, the Han are one-third of the population, and the differences between Han and Tibetan include both religious culture and language. According to Ma Rong, the impediments that these differences place on interethnic communication are further exacerbated by policy decisions that have the (unintended?) effect of segregating the residential and educational facilities of the different ethnic groups.

In the inner Mongolian capital city of Huhhot, the Han outnumber the Mongolians two to one. Unlike Lhasa, the members of the various ethnic groups are residentially mixed, but the increased opportunity for communication, as William Jankowiak tells it, does not seem to ameliorate feelings of resentment over the fairness of the affirmative action by which the Chinese government attempts to rectify historical inequities. The work unit with fixed quotas for ethnic hiring is, of course, the center of tension. Jankowiak provides a rich description of this tension, which finds occasional expression even in public outbursts. Some ethnic confrontations are lubricated or exacerbated by the use of alcohol. (The widespread use of alcohol in urban—and rural—settings has yet to enter the ethnographic literature.) However, the ethnic situation in Huhhot is not polarized. There are Han who accept the ideals of multiculturalism, and there are a whole range of "life-orientations" among the Mongols which Jankowiak defines as "cosmopolitans," "militants," "traditionalists," and "assimilationists." The different groups live and work together and also intermarry, although "mixed" families must still choose one "nationality" for their offspring.

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