

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

Book Review: Understanding China's Urbanization. The Great Demographic, Spatial, Economic, and Social Transformation

Verdini, G.

This is an author's accepted manuscript of a book review published in the Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal, 11 (1), pp. 1-3, 2017.

Details of the final version are available online at:

<https://www.henrystewartpublications.com/journals/journal-urban-rege...>

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk

Title of Publication: **Understanding China's Urbanization. The Great Demographic, Spatial, Economic, and Social Transformation.**

By: Li ZHANG, Richard LeGates, Min ZHAO

Publisher: Edwar Elgar Publishing

Year of Publication, Number of Pages, Price: 2016, 426 pp., 100 £

ISBN: 978 1 78347 473 8

Review

Publications on Chinese urbanization have flourished in recent years and one might legitimately ask which element of novelty another book on this topic could bring. After pioneer attempts to unveil the urban features and contradictions of the opening-up of China towards a market economy (Friedmann, 2005; Logan, 2007), scholars from different fields have provided insights into one of the most complex, yet fascinating, processes of social, economic, and therefore urban, transformation of the history.

Emphasis has been primarily given to interpret the urbanization process and to study its impact. Among the most important contributions it is worth mentioning: the study of the particular politics of land and ownership regime of China as a driver of development (Hsing, 2010), interpreted with the western lens of the urban entrepreneurial theory (Wu, 2015); on the other hand, the persistence of Chinese cultural traditions in city development, despite the influence of western ideologies (Li, 2014). Concerning the impacts of urbanisation most studies have focuses on the *hukou*, the dual system of rural and urban household registration, and its social implications (Ren, 2013) or, more broadly, on the institutional arrangements of city development and its social and environmental effects (Gipoloux, 2015).

‘Understanding China’s Urbanization’ from Zhang, LeGates and Zhao, is a thoughtful research into a deeper understanding of the ‘Chinese urbanization with Chinese characteristic’, which can convincingly complement the existing literature offering, at the same time, new perspectives.

The reason for that is due to the successful cooperation between Chinese and Western scholars, which has resulted in the establishment of a solid correlation between macro and micro aspects of the urbanisation. This relates effectively the analysis of the impact of globalisation in China with an accurate reading of regional patterns of urban development. Based on extensive field research in five areas of eastern, central and western China, between 2010 and 2015, the authors have provided a comprehensive picture of current urbanisation trends today, which can shed a new light on future patterns of development of the country.

The book is divided into ten chapters. From chapter 1 to 4 a background of Chinese urbanisation is reported together with a systematic review and reframing of some of its key features: the history of *hukou*, the system of governance and administration at different levels, the evolution of regional urbanisation policies. Chapter 5, at the core of the book, analyses how globalization has influenced regional urbanisation and regional migration. From chapter 6 to 8, the authors tap into their research findings to highlight new migration trends in relations to both policies and household choices, its impact on city clusters reorganization and on towns and villages development. Chapter 9 discusses these findings in light of potential future urban scenarios due to the current stage of development of China and the ‘middle income trap’. It provides credible urban alternatives by taking into account the role of indigenous institutions within the changing state-market relationships and the still uncertain question of quantity versus quality in the future urbanization of China. In the conclusion of the book, the authors argue that the pressure of urbanisation is likely to become less intense in the traditional areas of urbanisation, opening up opportunities to rebalance

regionally the economic growth and, overall, to reconsider quality urbanisation as a realistic development option.

This book is timely as China has clearly entered a new phase of development. The New Urbanisation Plan (*Guojia Xinxing Chengzhenhua Guihua*), released in 2014, has indeed set up a path which could potentially reconcile the social and economic reasons with the economic ones. The book is also very much needed as most of the existing literature is deeply influenced, conceptually and methodologically, by the paradigm of growth, which was indisputable since few years ago. However, releasing this book now, might be also risky, as the current political system appears, more than before, unpredictable. The question of whether the Chinese Communist Party will manage the economic slowdown of the country without curbing individual freedom and achieving real and wider sustainability is currently under discussion (Shambaugh, 2016).

Nevertheless, this book has the clear chance to survive this uncertain period, without being soon obsolete, whatever will be the future of China. As a matter of fact, it is an invaluable source of information for those who are keen to achieve a broad understanding of the Chinese urbanisation, relying on meaningful and extensive data and useful graphs and tables. This book has also the undeniable merit to shift the attention from the growth of mega-cities, largely predominant in Chinese urban studies, to the development of more complex city-regions and, contextually, the strengthening of smaller urban and rural formations. It is an area of research which will deserve greater attention in the future.

It is a recommended reader for scholars interested in China and for those interested in discovering how the Chinese model could become a reference for other emerging countries. It is indeed of interest for students, from different disciplines, which are approaching the study of urban China for the first time, and which are looking for data and methodological

suggestions for their advanced research. It is ultimately of great interest for the reader of this journal, as it is an example of applied policy-oriented research, avoiding the trap of just being confined to academic circles.

References

- Friedmann, J. (2005), 'China's urban transition', University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.
- Gipouloux, F. (2015), 'China's urban century. Governance, environment and socio-economic imperatives', Edward Elgar Publishing: Cheltenham, UK.
- Hsing, Y-T. (2010), 'The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China', Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Li, S. (2014), 'Understanding the Chinese city', Sage: London.
- Logan, J. (2008), 'Urban China in transition', Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford.
- Ren, X. (2013), 'Urban China', Polity Press: Cambridge.
- Shambaugh, D. (2016), 'China's future', Polity Press: Cambridge.
- Wu, F. (2015), 'Planning for growth: urban and regional planning in China', Routledge: New York.

Reviewer's name, Job Title, Affiliation

Giulio Verdini, Senior Lecturer, University of Westminster – Department of Urban Planning and Transport