

Book Review

Aspects of Urbanization in China: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Guangzhou

Editor: Gregory Bracken.

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Reviewed by Cecilia L. Chu, The University of Hong Kong (clchu@hku.hk)

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Over the last two decades, accelerating urban transformation in China has attracted growing attention from researchers from different fields, leading to an expanding body of literature on Chinese urbanization. Yet, for the most part these writings tend to remain siloed, referenced only by those associated with their respected disciplines. This is the case for works in architecture and planning, which have yet to receive substantial attention from scholars in the humanities and social sciences. *Aspects of Urbanization in China: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Guangzhou* represents a welcomed effort to bridge this disciplinary divide. As pointed out by the editor Gregory Bracken, the aim of the volume is to present some aspects of urbanization in China by bringing together the work of researchers from several disciplines with a shared interest in architecture and urbanism. It is argued here that the “architecture-urbanistic point of departure” of the chapters can enable a useful snapshot of the rapidly developing discourse of Chinese urbanism. Bracken further explains that the strategic focus on Shanghai, Hong Kong and Guangzhou – three metropolises that went through different historical experiences but were all once “interface of empire” in the early 20th century – offers a comparative perspective of different responses to urbanization and globalization.

The book is organized into three main parts. The first part, titled “global ambitions,” examines various city branding efforts amidst accelerating capitalist globalization. It opens with a chapter by Leslie Sklair, who examines the production of architectural icons and provides a sharp critique on how symbolic built forms have been made to reinforce the cultural ideology of consumerism and serve the capitalist interests. The second chapter by Jacob Dreyer resonates Sklair’s critique by elucidating how the Shanghai Expo and other city branding campaigns project images of a “dream city” that foster aspirations for an imagined, better future amongst Chinese citizens. The last chapter, authored by Xiangmin Guo and Changtao Liu, turns to revisit the long history of Guangzhou as a port of foreign trade and discusses the challenges the city faces in its attempt to become a “global city” in the present.

The second part of the book, titled “cultural expression,” explores how urban changes have been represented in film and literature. These include Ana M. Moya Pellitero’s chapter, which discusses the work of 5th and 6th generation Chinese film directors that encapsulate the changing, precarious relations between the city and countryside in the post-Mao period as well as the human struggles entwined in these transformations. This is followed by Tsung-yi Michelle Huang’s piece on the production of local identity in postcolonial Hong Kong, a subject that Huang explores through different metaphors associated with architecture and urban space in the film “Little Cheung.” The third chapter by Lena Scheen focuses on the changing meanings and associations with Shanghai’s traditional *longtang* houses through a popular novel by Wang Anyi, “Song of Everlasting Sorrow,” which depicts the life of a woman living in this type of dwelling and the growing sense of collective nostalgia attached to it amidst ongoing modernization.

The third and final part of the book, titled “architectural expression,” focuses on the significance of particular architectural typologies in the shaping of urban life and sense of community. Non Arkaraprasertkul’s chapter discusses the problem of housing in Shanghai and the changing perceptions and values of the *Lilong* (alleyway houses). The chapter calls attention to emergent tensions between preservation and development and the need for further research on these buildings. Finally, Jonathan Soloman examines podium shopping malls in Hong Kong. Although these buildings are often seen as icons of capitalist globalization, the fact that they provide functional linkages to the city’s major infrastructure also help bring different groups of people together, thus constituting new social spaces that are invariably integrated into local contexts.

As Bracken rightly acknowledges, a major challenge for a book aiming to be a multi-disciplinary endeavor is the unevenness of analytical approaches and framing of subject matter in some of its chapters. Referring to Solomon’s piece as an example, which includes many drawings but less text than other chapters, Bracken argues that such forms of communication which are commonly used by architects can nevertheless shed light on important spatial aspects that tend to exude non-architectural scholars. Indeed, the bringing together of works with different analytic lenses to the three cities is arguably a necessary step for identifying gaps of knowledge in the study of Chinese urbanism. That said, given the richness of the case studies presented in the book, it would have been fruitful to have more discussions on the linkages between the eight chapters -- their themes, choice of subject matter and analytical approaches. This could have been achieved, for example, by the inclusion of a short introduction to each of the three thematic sections explaining the

disciplinary backgrounds of the authors and their positions. This discussion could also help raise further questions on the intersection of different domains of knowledge. One might ask, for example, what different “aspects” of urbanization have been emphasized in the works of architects, anthropologists, sociologists and cultural studies scholars and how might their research complement each other?

While the introductory chapter touches on several overarching themes relating to urbanization and emerging social problems in China, the analysis remains rather general and could have been made more connected with the specific concerns of the chapters as well as with the contexts of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Although its reference to Peter G. Rowe’s work is useful, the chapter would have benefited from providing a brief survey of more recent works on Chinese cities and emergent theoretical debates over urbanization. This would also augment the book’s main argument that attention to architecture and urban space can provide a better understanding of the “rapidly developing discourse” of urbanization in China. While this argument is inherent in some of the chapters that deal more explicitly with the role of architecture and built forms (for example, Skalir on skyscrapers, Arkaraprasertkul on lilong houses, and Solomon on shopping malls), it could be made stronger by using these examples along with others in the book to pinpoint more clearly their contribution to ongoing debates in existing social science scholarship, such as those concerning preservation, displacement, collective nostalgia and emergent new urban forms and spaces, etc.

Taken in its entirety, this book represents a much-needed effort to bridge the long existing disciplinary divide in the study of Chinese urbanism. It has provided a useful overview of some of the most topical issues of urbanization in China and certainly serves as a catalyst for further research in the coming years.