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The China Difference: City Studies Under Socialism and Beyond

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Chinese cities since socialism's emergence in 1949 have been more or less the creature of the state's designs: more so, surely, in the decades when the doctrinal dicta of the state truly held sway (up through 1978), less so as that other great organizing principle, the market, came progressively to entrench itself in urban space. As a consequence, urban research on China has not been driven by trends and fads in scholarship so much as it has been shaped by the nature of China itself, as fashioned by the state (and later the market), and by the momentous shifts the nation has weathered because of political decisions. City studies have also been the product of changing data sources and much improved access for researchers as state controls receded as a function of the state's economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, given the obstacles posed by China's version of socialism, by its adherence to a Marxist political economy framework for understanding the world, and by the lack of transparency of its internal affairs right up until quite lately, the China urban studies field has been little affected by scholarly fashion, but much influenced by Chinese politics and state policy.

The Impact of Politics

During the first three decades of the People's Republic, a number of factors affected research on cities (and, in fact, research of any sort about China). In the first place, a phenomenally well-organized Communist Party rather quickly imposed an overarching dominance and stultifying uniformity upon culture, manifestations of gender, social categories, economic life, and even food (through rationing in the cities and through control of what was planted in the villages) and clothing. Daily life in cities for ordinary people was determined by life within the *danwei* (or work unit), with work patterns, housing, and mobility relatively undifferentiated throughout much of urban society. Moreover, outsiders could only sense regional variation among cities through

careful inspection of the choice of wording in local leaders' official speeches. These various circumstances meant that, while this regime lasted, there was no space for studies of cultural outputs as creative products of the populace, since for much of the time little or no scope for originality existed.

Furthermore, omnipresent surveillance — if often enforced by co-workers and neighbors, not by the police — ensured tight control over revelations of aberrant or even personal feelings and behaviors to outsiders (or even to insiders, in the severest periods). Except during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), official documentary materials virtually never fell even into Chinese citizens' hands, and even the chief newspapers were not available for purchase on the street by anyone, but were simply distributed by the government to all work units and neighborhoods. All forms of news media were heavily censored and strictly homogeneous, bearing only messages approved by the highest levels of the Party. Besides, Americans could not even visit the country until the 1970s. Statistical data, moreover, were for the most part kept secret; those which were published were often suspect at the time and later found to be misleading. So research sources and methods were seriously compromised.

These facets of the regime made work on the politics and society of the time a mix of reading between the lines, consultations with refugees in Hong Kong, and varying degrees of pure guesswork. Only for short times in the mid-1950s (the Hundred Flowers movement), a year or so in the early 1960s, and during the late 1960s did ordinary people have a chance to speak their minds. But even then, there was much use of ellipsis and euphemism.

Once the post-Mao leadership wrenched Chinese society in a totally new direction after 1978, it wantonly overrode with increasing boldness all the values Mao Zedong had held sacred (collectivism, anti-materialism, anti-consumerism, egalitarianism, anti-elitism, to name some of the most central ones). In order to stimulate productivity and satisfy long-pent-up urges among the populace for a life of more commodities and leisure, the Party decentralized much of the decision-making and financial powers it had long monopolized, activated the marketplace, and initiated global economic involvement.

The opening of the country, in a bid to bring China up to par internationally — intellectually, economically, and technologically — allowed for the entry of foreign teachers and businesspeople, who, of course, carried in their wake new lifestyles, new ideas, and novel values. Interchange with outsiders loosened up access, making interviews and survey research by foreigners possible by the mid- and late 1980s; such exchanges, plus the upgrading of the quality and accessibility of Chinese data, led to a vastly heightened accuracy of research materials.

Meanwhile, society itself underwent a startling conversion, as diversity, consumerism, enhanced personal autonomy, and cultural creativity began to appear with growing force. But though the state markedly lessened its hold, even into the early 1990s anthropologist Mayfair Yang's fieldwork was

shadowed by ongoing political sensitivity, a "culture of fear," the "politicization of daily life," and a "large realm of secrecy" (Yang 1994: 15–25). Thus, an uneasy blend of consumption and policing still marked the end of the century and continued to cause Western researchers to work with a healthy dose of caution, even as their sources opened up and their subjects for legitimate examination multiplied (Mackerras 1998: 22).

Western Literature: Disciplinary Approaches

For the reasons of governmental policy and the unreliability and unavailability of source material noted above, in the past, practitioners of certain disciplines – such as economic geography – found it more possible to pursue their craft (albeit with inferior data) than did others – such as anthropologists. Scholars with explicitly cultural interests never really bothered to explore the Chinese metropolis until recently. Urban anthropology, too, is a field that only appeared in China at the very end of the 1980s (Guldin and Southall 1993: 3).

Indeed, of the more than thirty books examined in preparation for writing this chapter, about a third (ten) were written or edited by geographers and urban planners, only six by political economists and political scientists, six by sociologists, six by anthropologists, and just three by cultural studies scholars. One conference volume has such a range of disciplines represented among its contributors that it cannot be classified as belonging to any one discipline (Davis et al. 1995).

Books by anthropologists on the city began to be published only in 1993 and none of the three volumes by cultural studies scholars covered in our survey was published before the mid- to late 1990s.[1] Moreover, it is fair to say that, although the work of sociologists and political scientists goes back to the 1960s, the quality, depth, and accuracy of their early research unavoidably suffered from the limited sources upon which they were compelled to base their analyses and their absolutely total lack of access to the place.[2]

Comparisons can lend these observations concrete form. For instance, there are vast differences between two volumes of urban sociology on China, one relying on data from the 1970s and the other using material from the late 1980s and early 1990s (Whyte and Parish 1984; Tang and Parish 2000), in terms of the nature of their sources as well as their findings, despite the very similar content they share (family employment, education, interpersonal relations, quality of life). For, whereas the scholars in the first used interviews with *émigrés* living in Hong Kong who were asked to recall the circumstances of their neighbors, those in the second volume were fortunate enough to gain access to semi-annual urban social surveys undertaken over a five-year period. And while the former had as themes the weight of bureaucracy upon daily

lives and the widespread equality and economic security existing before 1980 – if marred by political pressure – that then obtained in cities, the latter delved into the ongoing social, cultural, and political liberalizations that accompanied the economic transformation of the 1980s and 1990s from a planned to a market society, as well as the difficulties and complications of this shift.

Another contrast is between the volume edited by John Wilson Lewis, published in 1971, and the collection edited by Deborah Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth Perry that came out in 1995. Both compilations aim to comprehend notable features of the cities of their day, but, as Lewis quite humbly notes in his introduction: "It is a sad commentary on our times that none of the authors represented in this volume has actually set foot in a city in Communist China." He goes on to acknowledge the necessity of working with "data that blur distinctions" and the "many gaps in our coverage"; he also laments that, "we have not always escaped the biases found in the published record" (Lewis 1971: vi–vii).

The 1995 jointly edited volume, on the other hand, contains the output of scholars all of whose chapters relied on actual fieldwork within China, once Chinese leaders opened their society. By then, massive alterations marked the object of their study, as compared even with a decade or so before. These researchers were able to address such disparate topics as changing urban form in the era of reform, the new regulatory state at the county level, filmmaking, the suddenly popular martial arts, and avant-garde art, perhaps in part in recognition of the turn to culture in scholarship of the 1990s about other places. But this changed approach probably came about even more in response to the radically transformed nature of city life in China itself at that point.

For a third comparison, two books about the same city, Guangzhou, researched some two decades apart, evince huge disparity in the mode of conducting research from the 1960s to the 1980s. The first relies on conversations with former residents who left China for Hong Kong before the late 1960s and on old issues of the city's official newspaper; its author even concedes that the primary sources on which he relied "do not meet high standards of objectivity" (Vogel 1968: viii). And the second, founded on fieldwork and interviews conducted on the spot in the late 1980s and in 1991, was blessed with sponsorship by the provincial social science academy and excellent personal relationships with local cadres working in resident committees. Besides, this second project was enhanced by the author's familiarity with contemporaneous television programs and her perusal of an array of official and nonofficial daily papers, in addition to local yearbooks and records, all of which had become open, if one had the right "connections" (Vogel 1968; Ikels 1996, respectively).

Vogel's study is more a political history than a work of sociology, despite his disciplinary training, as it traces in some depth the intricacies and machinations of the Party's grapplings with the remaking of Chinese society

through a series of campaigns from 1949 through the late 1960s. Ikels, by contrast, is able to use her skills as an anthropologist to the full by the late 1980s, given her contacts and the new openness of China. She depicts living standards, leisure activities, and family and household activities and relationships, demonstrating in great detail how economic reforms were altering the material circumstances and general well-being of urban residents at that time.

Other pairs of books illustrate a separate point. True, later studies yielded more accurate and culturally relevant information, gleaned from research at a far closer range. But this was so because the political environment within China had been grossly altered and not because of any international trends in scholarship. Nor did all scholars of Chinese urbanism in the 1990s suddenly succumb to vogues *au courant* among those studying other places. Though Mayfair Yang's 1994 anthropological treatment of social networks, culture and power, modernity and the state is replete with Foucauldian influences (Yang 1994), Kam Wing Chan's work of geography of the same year looks at such comparatively traditional topics as migration and urbanization, policy and population growth, investment patterns and services. And while the late 1990s saw the appearance of Dorothy Solinger's configurative, largely qualitative examination of peasant migrants in large cities, which concerns itself with themes such as community, citizenship, and identity, her political science colleague Tianjian Shi's survey-research-based work on political participation in Beijing (1997) had no cultural leanings at all.

Another political scientist, Jae Ho Chung, in 1999 produced an edited, quintessentially political economic collection of essays on pairs of cities in China, emphasizing the impact of their endowments (location, history), their administrative arrangements, the policy treatment they received from the central government, and their leaders' strategies as decisive factors in their economic development. The next year, sociologist Deborah Davis published an edited work on the new consumerism in Chinese cities, which, while containing cultural themes, in the main eschewed cultural analysis. All of these works consider the enormous metamorphosis that marketization and enhanced personal local autonomy have meant for the cities and the actors they describe. At the same time, while Davis's and Solinger's publications discuss culturist issues and do have a bit of overlap with the concerns of cultural theorists who study other places, in style they are probably more akin to the more political economic approach found in the Chung and Shi studies.

The point is that three decades of fairly idiosyncratic socialist ideology and practices in China have made a big difference. Beliefs and behaviors instilled by the Communist Party radically differentiated urban studies projects in the Chinese case from those done on other societies. We proceed to look more closely at the evolution of each of the five principal disciplinary approaches to work on urban China over four decades, bearing in mind that many

individual pieces of scholarship have had not simply a disciplinary but often an interdisciplinary bent as well.

Geography and Urban Planning

Geographers and urban planners could ply their trade without needing the same level of access to people as did researchers in other disciplines, and some of their findings could be reached without on-site observation. Thus, despite problems with insufficient or sometimes inadequate data, their work progressed throughout the reign of socialism. Some of their topics of study – the historical development of cities and of industrialization; governmental policies on cities; urban planning and development trends; and state decisions on housing, industrial location, and rank-size relationships among cities – could be explored and estimated even before good access became available (Ma and Hanten 1981; Kirkby 1985; Sit 1985).

Nonetheless, with better connections to Chinese geographers living in China – indeed, volumes such as Sit (1985) grew out of conferences in which Chinese geographers participated – to geography departments in universities, and to research institutes as the 1980s wore on, Western scholars began to feel more and more certain about their data and their findings. So, whereas Sit's personal visits to departments of geography in the early 1980s could not yield more than "piecemeal information" (in lieu of the systematic and comprehensive data that would have been desirable), by the middle of the next decade he was able to write a book on Beijing drawing upon unpublished documents, reports, and working papers (1995). Conference volumes from this late 1980s/early 1990s period were able to address small towns, land utilization, patterns of resource flows between urban and rural areas, and shortages of infrastructure and services with some accuracy (Kwok et al. 1990). One more study about geographical subjects, which came out in 1987, offered statistical data on housing, transportation, and migration (Kojima 1987). Also, following Kirkby's (1985) initial work on reinterpreting Chinese urbanization strategy, nine years later, Chan (1994) provided a systematic and theoretical treatment of the "Chinese urban model" based on more reliable urban population and economic data. While the approaches of these two works are different, they have established the relationship between China's industrialization strategy and rural–urban segmentation. Their work has shattered the once-dominant myth of Chinese pro-rural development in Western literature.

Moreover, a project on China's coastal cities that began in 1984, involving collaboration with institutes of geography at the Chinese Academy of Science and elsewhere, was able to include information on port and industrial facilities, satellite towns, population density; the status of infrastructure, land usage, and spread effects of urbanization in thirteen coastal cities, despite continu-

ing deficiencies in the level of information then available (Yeung and Hu 1992). Yeung's work in organizing thematic papers led to a relatively comprehensive volume on China's largest city, Shanghai (Yeung and Sung 1996).

By the second half of the 1990s, China's linkage with the World Bank enabled two World Bank researchers to publish a reasonable account of the dynamics of urban growth in Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou (Yusuf and Wu 1997). Their volume included data on the impact of economic reform policies upon the structure and infrastructure in cities, the cities' financial arrangements with the central government, their resource endowments, levels of technology, and the capital flows to which each was a party.

But even up to century's end, some China geographers remained faithful to the Marxian political economy approach, which has always had a strong influence in the urban studies field (see Harloe et al. 1998). In particular, Tang's (1994) and Wu's (1997) articles in the *IJURR* follow this tradition as they applied its concepts and vocabulary to study the role of capital in Chinese urban land development and urban economic restructuring. While about two decades ago, articles on China in the same journal adhered to the Chinese socialist model under Mao (e.g., Basso 1980), Tang's and Wu's have come to a more nuanced understanding of Chinese socialist urban complexities. As Tang noted with some amazement:

It is widely believed among the social critics in the capitalist countries that once land is nationalized, all sorts of urban land development problems will disappear. One of the shocking findings of this paper is that although a socialist form of land ownership is important, it cannot eliminate the problems. (Tang 1994: 412)

Thus, as time passed and China became more open, geographers and urban planners took advantage of the increasing availability of data and the progress that had been made in the collection of more sophisticated data to pursue essentially the same topics they had studied in the past, but to study them better.

Political Science

Political scientists were at work attempting to understand Chinese urbanism already in the 1960s. As noted above, the first product of their efforts was the conference volume edited by John Wilson Lewis that came out in 1971. Though half the essays in the book were composed by scholars from other fields, five political scientists wrote, respectively, on issues such as law and order, cadre recruitment and mobility, trade union worker cultivation, commerce and education, and the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai. Their sources

were usually documentary, though a few had spoken with refugees in Hong Kong, and their findings necessarily entailed a great deal of creativity in trying to piece together bits of not always reliable material.

Two other books from that early period were on individual cities, Kenneth Lieberthal's on Tianjin (1980) and Lynn White's on Shanghai (1978). Both authors were able to interview (in Hong Kong) former residents of their cities, and both had access to reams of local newspapers (both official and non-official), radio broadcasts, governmental policy statements and organizational files, Chinese journals, and translation series. These were ambitious books, Lieberthal's tracing the impact of interpersonal relations (*guanxi*) on the Party's conduct of mass mobilization and organizational control; White's showing the various incentives that local political cadres utilized to "guide" young people into following career routes devised by the Party. But despite the ingenuity of their methodologies and conclusions, White had to admit that his "most reliable sources were official ones" (White 1978: 5). Given the level of rhetoric and propaganda in such sources, this was a sorry claim.

In the 1990s, regardless of cultural studies' incursion into the social sciences in other fields, political scientists who worked on Chinese cities retained the concerns of their predecessors: they were still interested in political participation and the political dimensions of daily life (Shi 1997), larger concerns over order in the cities and the workings of bureaucracy among officialdom (Solinger 1999), and policy-making (Chung 1999). But, as noted above, their ability to rely on survey research (Shi), interviews with officials and migrants (Solinger), and a vast multitude of local documentary sources plus talks with urban politicians and sometimes even political gossip (Chung) both enriched and helped to substantiate their claims.

Sociology

Like political scientists, sociologists did not alter their research subjects or even their perspectives over the years so much as they simply availed themselves of better sources and better access, as China opened up to foreigners and became progressively less authoritarian. As already discussed, Whyte and Parish produced the first genuinely sociological study of Chinese cities (if we discount Vogel's more politically oriented history of Guangzhou), though their research mainly drew upon materials from and the reminiscences of ex-residents of only two provinces (Guangdong, Guangxi). In accord with the nature of China at the time, their foci were the bureaucratization and equality that stamped existence in cities then, as they essayed to capture the ways in which cities were organized and the nature of social relationships within them in a work they characterized as "collecting urban ethnographies, but at a distance" (Whyte and Parish 1984: 5).

The field had to wait another twenty years for further tomes in this discipline to appear. Two came in quick succession, Cecelia Chan's on welfare delivery in urban neighborhoods (Chan 1993), and Yanjie Bian's study of work and inequality (Bian 1994). The first was made possible by the generous cooperation of local cadres, who gave the author information on policy and introductions to officials in the street offices. This assistance permitted Chan to challenge the previously all-pervasive rhetoric of the superiority of socialism, as well as some myths about neighborhood care that had infected even the work of such careful and objective scholars as Whyte and Parish. Chan was also able to assess the actual extent of service provision and the changes that economic reform were making to welfare planning. Her work rested on opinion surveys of citizens and in-depth interviews on the spot, neither of which Whyte and Parish had been able to conduct.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the possibility of doing systematic social surveys in Chinese cities had opened up many opportunities for mainstream empirical sociologists, armed with statistical packages, to test Western-based sociological hypotheses in China. This is exemplified by the work of Logan and his former students on urban housing (e.g., Logan, Bian, and Bian 1999). In an earlier piece, Bian's key data came from a 1988 representative sample of 1,000 adults in Tianjin and from official statistics and in-depth interviews in 1983–5 in that city, as well as from 1988–92 talks with Chinese *immigrés* in the United States. He was able to use analyses of his material to reach conclusions about the impact of work organizations on social stratification in the cities, and to demonstrate how these organizations determined the often unequal distribution of resources and opportunities for urban workers. He gleaned a great deal of information on job mobility patterns, work compensation and benefits at different units, political life, and housing. Although many of these topics had been covered in Andrew Walder's 1986 book on networks and power relations in factories, Walder was forced to rely just on the accounts of refugees living in Hong Kong in 1979—80 when he conducted his research, who could only recount from memory their experiences of the early and mid-1970s.[3]

The last two works by sociologists appeared in the year 2000, one effectively an updating of Parish's earlier socioethnography with Whyte (Tang and Parish 2000), and the other Deborah Davis's edited volume on consumerism. As explained earlier, the two ethnographies of cities shared many concerns, and their chapters' objects of study are often identical: they address the same issues of urban life, from family behavior to political organization and social relations to patterns of employment. But superior data sources and fundamental alterations in the nature of China by the 1990s altered the content considerably. While the first grounded its analysis in assessing the realization (and difficulties therein) of socialist ideals, the second confronted the redefinitions of the bond between the state and the individual in the wake of

economic transformation, and explicitly compared the pros and cons of socialist versus market societies.

Davis's work is the outcome of over a dozen carefully crafted investigations of activities now prevalent among the newly well-to-do who have profited from the economic reforms in Chinese cities. These behaviors include buying wedding dresses, taking vacations, eating at McDonald's, dancing, feasting, and bowling. As in Davis et al's 1995 conference volume, this one too – despite its cultural topics – is written to describe contemporary consumption more than to subscribe to cultural theories. Again we see that the concerns of sociologists – just as those of geographers and political scientists – remained more or less constant over the decades, shifting only to encompass corresponding changes in the nature of Chinese society once markets reemerged after 1980, and to take advantage of the presence of new opportunities for researchers.

Anthropology

Urban anthropology was unknown within China until Gregory Guldin and Aidan Southall chaired a meeting in Beijing in December 1989 and invited some native anthropologists to contribute (Guldin and Southall 1993). Before the country opened up, Western anthropologists had to resign themselves to working in either Hong Kong or Taiwan, as there was absolutely no possibility for doing fieldwork on the mainland. Even when Western anthropologists began to examine China in the 1980s, they turned to the countryside at first.

Only in the mid- and late 1980s did a few of them switch their attention to city life, and four ethnographies resulted, the first two seeing the light of day in 1993. Ole Bruun's 1987–91 fieldwork in Chengdu, Sichuan, examined the social context of the private business that began to flourish in the economic reform period, and he treated conventional themes in political anthropology, such as local community interaction, bureaucratic power, and household strategies.

The other 1993 work is by William R. Jankowiak, on the city of Huhhot in Inner Mongolia. Though Jankowiak did his work in a minority "autonomous" region, he draws no distinctions between the culture of the minority Hui people and that of the majority (80 percent in this city) Han Chinese, and indeed, he finds little difference between them. Jankowiak takes up the usual topics of cultural anthropologists, including kinship and family, social hierarchy, sexuality and cosmology; funerary rites, folk beliefs and behaviors, and thus his book displays no particular awareness of the advent of cultural studies. The book by Charlotte Ikels – another typical ethnography – was already noted earlier (Ikels 1996).

Only Mayfair Yang's 1994 study of *guanxi*, based on her fieldwork between 1981 and 1985 in Beijing (with follow-ups in the early 1990s), takes on topics such as a "modern technique and telos of power," writes from a stance of self-reflexivity, and tackles the *problématique* of "culture" as a concept (Yang 1994: 31–45). Though her observations and her data about social interactions and relationships are the stuff of traditional sociocultural anthropology, she interprets them in light of current cultural theories, unlike any other social scientist working on Chinese cities today.

Cultural Studies

While the great majority of works by Westerners on Chinese cities have thus remained quite conventional in cast, still, cultural studies did come to China urban studies, but not until the mid-1990s. Its tardy arrival is in part a function of the largely homogeneous nature of Chinese city life at least up until the mid-1980s, which may well have discouraged research aiming at exploring diversity of any sort. As Mayfair Yang explained, under the rule of Mao Zedong, there was a "tendency to erase gender difference"; the state also exercised hegemony over all manner of classifications and administrative categories (Yang 1994: 44).

Among the books we label cultural studies, two concern popular culture and the city as imagined in literary and film texts, respectively, and both were published in the mid-1990s (Zha 1995; Zhang 1996). The former was written by a scholar who lived in China until 1981 and could build her ideas – on Beijing intellectuals' moods and ethos, the new politics of culture and commercialism, and the emerging cosmopolitanism and consumerism of the big city – on her trust and talks with old friends and their acquaintances. Her subjects include television soap opera, urban planning, filmmaking, the mass media, pornography, and sexual politics. The latter work takes as its theme psychic experiences of the city, as configured in the imagination of writers in modern China, and focuses on topics such as space, time, and gender in the country's two most modern cities, Beijing and Shanghai.

There is also Michael Dutton's collage of urban street scenes and the kinds of behaviors one might find on them today in his 1998 book, *Streetlife China*. In it he consciously adapts the mode of Walter Benjamin, who, he notes, "wanted to 'write' using snip-bits of work stolen from the pens of others" (Dutton 1998: xii). His bits include material from his own interviews, translated clips from newspapers, fragments of Chinese journal articles, segments of Chinese books, excerpts from Chinese literature, and governmental regulations on matters that tend to appear on the streets – including prostitution,

beggars, wanderers, architecture, and ordinary city slang among them. His iconoclastic perspective smacks of novel angles on what, for China, are largely 1990s' phenomena.

So, for the most part, cultural studies have so far become the realm only of those who work specifically on culture, but not of the social scientists who study Chinese cities. But this was not because social scientists studying the People's Republic of China (hereafter, PRC) in its earlier years followed a fad of political economy in deference to (or in sympathy with) trends in urban studies elsewhere. Instead, scholars of China's urban areas spent their energies first struggling to make sense of propagandistic documents and faulty and insufficient data, and attempting to use refugee interviews to understand China. Later, such scholars were bent upon capturing the complexity of a country undergoing massive transformation. As the leadership and the market worked in tandem to pry away the veil of secrecy and uniformity that had obscured and even obliterated the customs and the choices of the populace before 1980 or so, scholars progressively found their subject more and more palpable, more genuine, and also more comprehensible and coherent. This new reality became what they wished to depict, and it was this that drove their researches.

Urban Studies in the PRC

Urban studies has evolved to become a substantial focus of research in the PRC only in the last two decades (Yeung and Zhou 1991; Chan 1994). This late start reflects not so much the data and source material constraints that faced China researchers working in the West and in Hong Kong. It was, instead, more the result of policy and paradigm shifts that came about as China opened its door to the world, and as PRC scholars looked outside the country for new ideas, theories, and methods of social science research. At the beginning phase in the early 1980s, scholars in the "urban studies" field in the PRC were few, concentrated in geography and urban planning, and narrowly preoccupied with a set of issues directly related to China's population and regional policies and national development strategy. However, by the end of the twentieth century, urban researchers in the PRC had become a sizeable group spread over several disciplines and engaged in a variety of topics, in some ways similar to those pursued by their colleagues in the West.

Geography,[4] with its pragmatic and empiricist orientation to urban issues, was the first major discipline to devote a significant amount of energy to urban topics in the country, while many other social science disciplines (such as sociology) were still in the process of being reestablished as or were

focusing on other more pivotal issues.[5] Reflecting many of the policy and urban planning concerns of the state at that time, geographers with an urban interest did research mainly on urban definitions, urbanization trends, and urban development policies. In the early 1980s geographers started to look outside China, through some limited comparative work, and began to notice some special features of Chinese urban development and/or to question its "irregularities" (such as Wu 1981; Zhou 1982; Yao and Wu 1982; see also papers in Yeung and Zhou 1988).

Urban research by geographers started to gain visibility around the mid-1980s in China. A count of the articles on urban geography in major geographic and urban planning journals in the PRC yielded an annual output of thirty-four articles in 1986 and thirty-nine articles in 1987, compared with only two in 1980 and ten in 1981 (Gu 1999), in addition to several books (such as Xu et al. 1987). While focus on urbanization and related policies remained strong, urban systems and urban spatial structure also became major areas of study in Chinese geography/planning publications. In the 1990s Chinese geographers continued to broaden their interests. By the year 2000, they had added a number of notable subfields – including migration, urban environment, and urban social geography – to the field of urban geography. These changes have broken the past domination of economic perspectives in this field. Still, urban research in China by geographers and planners remains heavily empirical and descriptive.

Outside geography and planning, other disciplines have treated urban research mostly as a marginal pursuit. Though in lesser quantity, economists, demographers, and sociologists also debated national, macro issues of urbanization strategy (see, e.g., Fei 1984; Liu 1990). However, this does not mean that there is a dearth of interesting and provocative works. Mirroring trends in urban studies in the West, these studies have often taken an interdisciplinary tilt. For example, in economics, Gu Shengzu's (1993) work on China's development strategy and urbanization policies in many ways echoed Chan's (1990, 1994) research in the West. The popularity of new institutional economics among young economists in China in the 1990s led to a number of systematic economic works on such topics as institutional change and urbanization (Liu 1999) and urban labor markets and institutions (Cai 1998). Increasingly, as PRC scholars of urban society developed their work, they also turned their attention to more micro-level, and more contentious, issues of urban society and politics. This appears in a number of works on urban income distribution, stratification, poverty, and social welfare by economists (such as Guan 1999; Zhao et al. 1999), and studies done within the general area of the rapidly expanding "community studies" subfield in sociology (see Wang 2000). The sociologists explore urban social issues, such as the power transformation of the work-unit system, urban governance, civil society, changing social structure, occupational mobility, migrant networks in cities,

and "working girls" (female migrant labor) in urban areas (some of the recent examples are Xiang 1998; Li and Li 1999; Tang and Feng 2000). The spurt of rural–urban geographical mobility in China over the last two decades has also generated volumes of migration studies in China. Many of these are conducted by demographers, whose primary concerns are often with measuring the migration (a very complex subject in itself) and examining policy issues. These migration studies often touch upon questions about the socioeconomic impacts of migrants on cities.

Unlike their Western colleagues studying urban China, whose work is often significantly shaped, if not dictated, by the accessibility of information, research in the PRC is often driven by policy concerns and the availability of government funding on particular topics at a given time. This situation, no doubt, continues to reflect the strong influence of the government pon academic work in China, and the constraints faced by researchers there. Urban studies in China is still in the formative stage, but there is rapid development, especially in sociology. What Yeung and Zhou (1991) noted about human geography in China ten years ago is by and large still true today, and can be generalized to urban studies as well. For various reasons, pragmatism and the neglect of theoretical and methodological explorations and innovations still prevail in social science studies. In theory and methodology, the gaps between the scholarly literature in the PRC and that in the West are still quite large. However, this does not mean that one can ignore Chinese urban scholarship; rather, one could make just the opposite argument. Given the immense size of the Chinese urban populace, and the rapid pace with which it is changing, eventually, the PRC scholars, many of whom are quickly absorbing outside knowledge, will become the core researchers in investigating, understanding, and theorizing their own society.

The Future

What are the implications for future research on Chinese cities in the West, given the motivations and situational factors that have brought it to its present juncture? One approach to such speculation is to look at the most recent scholarship and then extrapolate potential directions from it. If we follow this route, we might conclude, with Tang and Parish (2000), that China is marching along the same path that other industrializing, modernizing societies (such as Taiwan) have taken in the late twentieth century, and that, to chart a future course, we need only to look at any other society presently at later stages along the same trajectory. In some ways the concerns of the Davis (2000) volume speak, if only very implicitly, to the same image. For, as she cogently concludes her introduction:

Whether or not the millions of apolitical market transactions have realigned institutional power and authority, the multiplicity of horizontal ties and the increased invisibility and privacy of personal life have already created a society for which the past conventions of the authoritarian rule appear ill-suited. Eating a Big Mac will not bring down a dictator, but it can send a million daily messages that old ways have changed. (Davis 2000: 22)

The work of other authors, however, presages a very different prospect. Another recent edited volume on conflict and contention in Chinese society discovers dissension and opposition at nearly every turn (Perry and Selden 2000). Solinger's and Dutton's studies highlight marginality and hint at possibilities of resistance in the time to come. They also indicate that there are serious social issues to be resolved in the cities – such as coping with masses of in-migrating but out-caste peasants there, and confronting and addressing criminality and poverty of various derivations – before Tang and Parish's smooth progress toward liberal outcomes can be achieved. Given these discrepant outlooks, probably in order best to conceptualize the city in the offing researchers will need to develop theories that encompass and interrelate both the new urban vitality, as citizens thrive on the new consumption, along with the various types of social breakdowns that are accompanying the evisceration of past and ruptured solidarities.

Notes

1   See the bibliography. We also include some journal articles to cover areas not reflected in the books.
2   There have also been a couple dozen articles published with cities as their theme over the past three decades. Their topics and approaches are pretty much identical with those of the books surveyed in this chapter: job allocation and mobility, housing, stratification, educational attainment, gender, inequality, the family, labor markets, marriage, urbanization, social networks, income distribution, power, and mate choice. Those who have contributed to this literature include Yanjie Bian, Montgomery Broaded, Deborah Davis, Yok-shiu Lee, Nan Lin, John Logan, Margaret Maurer-Fazio, Dwight Perkins, Danching Ruan, Andrew Walder, David Wank, Martin Whyte, and Xueguang Zhou. An excellent bibliography can be found in Tang and Parish (2000).
3   Whereas Walder's concern was with politics within the typical state-owned factory, Bian's is with stratification of workers city-wide.
4   Economic geography and urban planning in the PRC are fairly intermingled. Economic geography is the most dominant subfield of geography in China.
5   Economists in the early 1980s were preoccupied with issues such as price, productive forces, and the role of the market.

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