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Agency Beyond Precarity: Platforms and the
Multiplication of Labour Regimes in China

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Book reviews

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The City after Chinese New Towns: Spaces and Imaginaries from Contemporary Urban China.
 Basel: Birkhäuser.

JUDITH AUDIN

Since the mid-2000s, the development of Chinese towns has brought about radical change not only to urban and rural spaces but also to temporalities and scales of reference. In parallel to the Belt and Road Initiative that “aims to create places, alliances and investments” (p. 21), the urban development policy at the “megapolis-region” (chengshi qun 城市群) level, the development of which centres on three main areas, namely the “Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei” (Jing-Jin-Ji 京津冀) megapolis, the “Yangzi River Delta,” and the “Pearl River Delta,” has created multiple contrasting dynamics of suburbanisation and plans for new spaces and infrastructures. In 2006, the city of Shanghai initiated the pilot project “One city, nine new towns” with Songjiang, an example of the tendency of Chinese architecture to copy European urban forms. In 2007, communications concerning the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City centred on sustainable urban development with a low carbon footprint. In 2012, the desolate “Kangbashi new district” in Ordos became the epitome of the Chinese “ghost town” (guicheng 鬼城). In 2013, the Beijing city government announced its project to establish a “subsidiary administrative centre” (xingzheng fuzhongxin 行政副中心) in “Tongzhou New Town” (Tongzhou xin cheng 通州新城). More recently, in 2017, the “Xiong’an New District” (Xiong’an xin qu 雄安新区) was designed at the central government level as a devolution hub for some of its prerogatives. The Chinese and foreign press have highlighted these cases from a sensationalist angle, but the new towns phenomenon carries with it more complex politico-administrative, economic, social, and environmental issues.

The fruit of a three-year research project begun in 2015, this collective work edited by Michele Bonino, Francesca Governa, Maria Paola Repellino, and Angelo Sampieri reconsiders the Chinese new towns phenomenon using a transversal and multi-disciplinary approach. In doing so, the authors remain cautious as to the use of existing categories, favouring

instead the need to examine, describe, and narrate the processes at work (p. 23) via three case studies: Tongzhou, presented by Filippo Fiandanese as an example of the process of decentralisation and suburbanisation of Beijing (pp. 123-9); Zhengdong, a new town that progressed in stages with a view to strengthening the economic and demographic development of Zhengzhou (pp. 115-22); and Zhaoqing, introduced by Astrid Safina as “marginal” in the light of the Pearl River Delta’s vast conurbation (p. 107). These three geographically and statutorily contrasting urban contexts enable the authors to maintain their focus on Beijing, on the ongoing processes in the Pearl River Delta zone, and above all, on a more central region – Zhengdong, as a new district of Zhengzhou, destined to attract no fewer than 1.5 million inhabitants.

The new towns are examined here through history, comparative analysis, public policy, urbanism, and design. The book begins with an analysis of public policies and discourses. Liu Jian and Xu Gaofeng review the genealogy of China’s new towns from the satellite town development policies of the 1950s up to the new towns of the 2000s and including the new cities of the 1990s, demonstrating their importance in China’s socio-economic development strategy (p. 70). This trajectory is placed in an international comparative perspective by Filippo De Pieri and Davide Vero, who reflect on the increasing role of European consulting firms in the creation of China’s new towns (p. 74). Mauro Berta and Francesca Frassoldati conduct a closer analysis of the “new urbanisation” and development policies in West China, taking as examples the new towns of Lanzhou, Xi’an, Luoyang, Shijiazhuang, and Xiangjiang and underlining their role as hubs within the infrastructures that link the coast with the regions of Central Asia and Europe (p. 81). New towns also generate more narratives on urbanism. Florence Graezer Bideau and Anna Pagani (pp. 90-6) contend that since they are grafted onto very different existing physical and social realities, these new spaces require us to go beyond traditional concepts for analysing the city such as the urban/rural and centre/periphery binaries, whilst Michele Bonino highlights the role of architectural design involved in making new towns (pp. 97-103).

The book then goes on to examine the characteristic elements of new towns: Maria Paola Repellino explains that exhibition halls play a fundamental role in their design (pp. 133-42); Alessandro Armando and Francesco Carota dissect apartment tower blocks from the level of the apartment unit up to the community (pp. 143-55); although invisible once the project is completed, underground construction is exposed in the planning stage, which according to Valeria Federighi and Filippo Fiandese testifies to the essential role of infrastructure in the Chinese property market (pp. 156-65); and lastly, urban parks are seen by Bianca Maria Rinaldi as products intended to respond to aesthetic criteria and to the challenges of environmental sustainability (pp. 166-75).

A third contribution of the book lies in its high-quality illustrations

– photographs, development plans and diagrams – that complete the analyses of the projects by providing the reader with essential information on the spatial, environmental, and architectural aspects of the case studies. The series of photographs on Zhengdong by Samuele Pellicchia (pp. 33-57) reveal, in particular, the ambiguous aesthetics of the spaces – a layering of textures, local social practices, and contrasting urban visions.

Although the book includes valuable data on new towns from the point of view of urban development, urbanism, and public policies, its lack of a sociological dimension is regrettable. It seems that its perspective centred on the planning and ongoing construction of new towns supports a bias – that of a state of incompleteness regarding these spaces that are nevertheless already, in reality, the object of practices and appropriations. The top-down planning approach remains highly descriptive, modelled, and flat, disconnected from concrete social processes and from the conflicts and power games that shape the space. A deeper engagement with local realities as a starting point, contextualised by the three case studies, is therefore lacking. Finally, the absence of Chinese transcription in the book proves problematic for a study of “narratives” and “imaginaries.”

All that being said, this coherent collaborative work that provides detailed, in-depth, and meticulously illustrated synthetic data represents an undeniable contribution to the literature on new forms of urban life in twenty-first-century China. It is suited to a readership of students and urban design and development specialists, as well as a broader audience of researchers in geography and urban studies.

■ Translated by Elizabeth Guill.

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LEE, Ching Kwan and Ming SING, (eds). 2019.
Take Back Our Future: An Eventful Sociology of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement.
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

JENNY CHAN

Take Back Our Future offers a detailed account of the 79-day Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong's contemporary political history. Using an interdisciplinary approach of social movement studies, the book's 10 authors look into China's "recolonisation" of Hong Kong and explain the opportunities that gave rise to the unprecedented protest. To begin with, Ching Kwan Lee draws on William Sewell's formulation of an eventful sociology to comprehend the multiple causes and transformative outcomes of the Umbrella Movement (Chapter 1). At the historic juncture, "events" – defined as a "rare subclass of happenings" – would constitute and empower "new groups of actors," or re-empower "existing groups in new ways" (p. 2). The rupture in contentious politics has awakened tens of thousands of protesters to the popular demand for genuine universal suffrage in electing the Chief Executive of Hong Kong.

In retrospect, Wing Sang Law concurs that the shared "master frame" among Hongkongers was forging a reunion with mainland China with greater democratic representation toward 1997 (Chapter 4). In the aftermath of the 4 June 1989 repression in Beijing, however, "the confidence crisis caused by Hong Kong's uncertain future" was imminent (p. 76). How would "one country, two systems" – the constitutional blueprint established by the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration – actually operate? The Basic Law, a mini-constitution that came into force on 1 July 1997 in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, is purported to guarantee Hong Kong citizens' rights to freedom and "high degree of autonomy." In practice, as Ming Sing makes clear, Beijing has increasingly tightened control over Hong Kong by restricting electoral competition (Chapter 7). Facing the institutional impasse in law-making and the protracted struggle for democracy, a critical mass of university students and intellectual activists took matters into their own hands when the People's Congress of the People's Republic of China announced a Hong Kong political reform on 31 August 2014.

According to the reform proposal, only two to three candidates (nominated by the Election Committee, which could be easily manipulated by Beijing) would be allowed to run for the 2017 Chief Executive elections. Anger exploded, as clearly manifested by week-