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The City, Laboratory of the New China

Editorial

Jean-François Huchet

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Editorial

Jean-François Huchet

- 1 While the countryside had pride of place in China's twentieth century history as the backdrop for the rise and practice of communist revolution, the twenty-first century will be dominated by cities and by major transformations linked to urbanisation. Never before in human history has such a phenomenon been seen, especially in such a short space of time. The figures speak for themselves: China's (officially recorded) urban population rose by 422 million, from 172 million in 1978 to 594 million in 2007. In addition, the cities host 148 million rural migrants who are not deemed residents in China's official figures. The statistics for physical infrastructure are equally impressive. China has more than tripled the number of its cities since 1978, with 655 now against 193 three decades ago (cities at the district level or higher in the administrative hierarchy). The number of cities with more than a million residents has risen four-fold during the same period, from 29 to 119. There are 20 cities with five million or more people, including five megacities of more than 10 million. Shenzhen, which served as the test for Chinese capitalism after being established as a special economic zone in 1979, has seen its population multiply by 33, from 310,000 in 1978 to a little more than 10 million now.
- 2 Moreover, this urbanisation of Chinese society is still ongoing. Official projections indicate that the rate of urbanisation will increase to 60 percent by 2025, and 70 percent in 2030. This increase is less rapid than over the preceding 30 years (i.e., 1 percent annually, as compared with 4 percent between 1978 and 2007), but even so, the urban population will grow by another 400 million. In 2030, the symbolic figure of one billion urban Chinese residents will be reached! It is quite possible that the authorities have underestimated this trend, given the cities' attraction for people in rural areas and the structural changes needed in Chinese agriculture (consolidation of land holdings, mechanisation, and increased productivity).
- 3 Many developing countries would have been overwhelmed by a phenomenon of such magnitude. Contemporary examples of India, Brazil, or Egypt, to name but a few, have eloquently demonstrated the state's difficulty in dealing with such large-scale human migrations. Bearing in mind the inherent limits to comparisons of a historical nature, it

can nevertheless be noted that European cities in the grip of the industrial revolution were hardly better off, as a reading of Dickens would attest. Thus the situation in Chinese cities is by many counts much more satisfactory than in a number of other developing or industrialised countries during their takeoff stage, so much so that China is often cited as an example in urbanisation matters in United Nations forums. However, this success is not uniform. Chinese authorities have to a large extent failed to contain problems of air and water pollution and waste disposal. Moreover, they have curbed the basic freedoms of Chinese rural folk in matters of residence and access to urban public services such as education and health. For better or for worse, Chinese urbanisation has been and will be for decades to come a vast laboratory for social, political, and economic experimentation, not only in state policy but also in new practices engendered by citizen action.

- 4 In order to better grasp the importance of this phenomenon in contemporary China's evolution, the editorial team of *China Perspectives* decided to devote a special issue to the city. This issue opens with a general analysis of urbanisation by Jean-François Doulet, who observes and deciphers the structuring of Chinese cities through the prisms of hypermodernity of social contestation and of state regulation. Nicolas Douay's article uses a study of Shanghai to examine changes in the practice of urban planning since 1949, with a special focus on recent years, when China's economic capital was profoundly transformed. He dwells at length on the emergence of a new practice in Chinese urban planning that is more "harmonious," and that would give more of a voice to different social groups affected by urban renewal and redevelopment. The article by Ting Xu and Tim Murphy looks at milestones in the privatisation of landed property and real estate, major areas of economic reform that have unfortunately been neglected in academic literature. The authors focus on the development of the real estate markets straddling urban and rural areas, a phenomenon that raises many questions on the evolution of private property in China, and on the separation between cities and countryside that lies at the heart of Chinese public policy. Dorothy Solinger's article takes stock of reforms aimed at establishing a minimum social safety net to limit the effects of the recrudescence of urban poverty since the 1990s. Drawing on her work on the evolution of the social protection system in Wuhan, Solinger stresses the eminently political character of the reforms, which seek to merely limit the risks of social instability, rather than to set up a universal state-guaranteed system similar to those of advanced democratic countries since the 1930s. Luigi Tomba's article examines the political impact of privatisation in the residential sector. Contrary to what might be expected, this privatisation has led to greater segregation of urban social classes while boosting the legitimacy of the regime's authoritarian discourse. Benjamin Guinot, for his part, looks at how the air quality of cities has been affected by industrial activity and the exponential growth in the urban population. With a special focus on Beijing, he shows how the Chinese authorities have taken note of the gravity of the air pollution problem and have adopted policies aimed at reducing pollution sources. However, he also points out the limits to these measures, given an economic development model that is turning much too slowly in the direction of a greater respect for the environment. The special issue closes with Piper Gaubatz's article on the emergence of new public spaces in Chinese cities. The author considers the slow disappearance of a partitioned social space linked to the socialist work unit and the appearance of new areas such as shopping malls and parks and more

ephemeral types such as zones awaiting reconstruction, or new means of transport that give rise to new social experiments.

5 Given the complexity and scope of the urbanisation phenomenon in China, we could not hope to be exhaustive. We hope nevertheless that the articles in the issue will provide a better grasp of this major phenomenon in contemporary China's evolution.

6 Good reading!

7 Translated by N. Jayaram

AUTHOR

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HUCHET

Director of Publication and Director of the CEFC