

Book Review: Urban China

by Blog Admin

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Currently there are more than 125 Chinese cities with a population exceeding one million. The unprecedented urban growth in China presents a crucial development for studies on globalization and urban transformation. This book examines the past trajectories, present conditions, and future prospects of Chinese urbanization, by investigating five key themes – governance, migration, landscape, inequality, and cultural economy. **Sin Yee Koh** finds that this book is an excellent resource for anyone interested in obtaining a succinct and updated overview of China's urban transition. **Xuefei Ren's** coverage of urban consequences would appeal to readers interested in urban governance, architecture and rural-urban migration.



Urban China. Xuefei Ren. Polity. March 2013.

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While bottles of champagne were opened, ribbons were cut, and millionaires and billionaires were made, many ordinary residents lost their homes and relocated to the urban periphery, joining the army of the poor.

Ren (2013: p. 164)

China's economic miracle, closely related to its urban transition, is both fascinating and mind-boggling. On the one hand, China's GDP grew at an average of 9.99 percent per year from 1978 to 2010, and its per capita GDP in 2010 is 79 times higher than in 1978 (p. 1). On the other hand, China's Gini coefficient is [0.474 in 2012](#), higher than the warning level of 0.4 set by the United Nations. China's super-large cities (with populations of more than 2 million) increased in number from 10 in 1995 to 42 in 1992 (p. 11). China's migrant population, defined as people living in a different place from that of their [hukou record \(i.e. household registration\)](#) for six months or more increased by 83 percentage points from 2000 to 2010 (p. 10).

In *Urban China*, [Xuefei Ren](#) provides an accessible and engaging overview of China's urban story for expert and non-expert readers. Her concisely-written book addresses four key themes: firstly, how China's urbanisation came about; secondly, the mechanisms that perpetuate China's urbanisation processes; thirdly, the consequences of the urbanisation process; and finally, some pointers to emergent problems as well as early signs of spaces for social change.

However, Ren's intention stretches ambitiously beyond the sole focus on China. As she explains in the Preface (p.xiii-xx), China's urban story offers opportunities to reflect about broader urbanisation and political economy issues. These include China's economic miracle, the interconnectivity of the global economy, and implications for urban theory developed from predominantly Western contexts. Her book is also intended to caution against "fast policy transfers" (p. xx) typically adopted by other cities aspiring to model themselves after the success stories of some Chinese cities. This cautionary insight is informed by Ren's parallel work on comparative urban governance and citizenship rights in China and India.



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The book is clearly structured into six chapters, with a separate preface and conclusion. Chapter 1 provides the contextual introduction: firstly, China's historical development; and secondly, the relationship between the urbanisation process and the global economy. Chapters 2 to 6 zoom into individual themes of what can be termed 'urban consequences'. The themes cover urban governance and shifting power structures (exemplified in land rights, the housing market, infrastructure development, and the governance of regions and communities); new forms in the urban landscape; the housing and labour rights of rural-urban migrants; social, spatial and urbanisation-induced inequalities; and new developments in the cultural economy. These themes emphasise Ren's reading of [Brenner's \(2013\) "Theses on Urbanization"](#) – Ren sees the urban as a *process* with positive and negative "moments" and "effects" (p.191).

What I find useful is that some chapters are written with a combination of 'big stories' and 'small stories'. The 'big stories' provide the broader social, economic and political forces and trends at work, while the 'small stories' provide personal and individual accounts to contextualise what the broader phenomena meant to individual social agents. For example, in Chapter 2, Ren provides her family's housing evolution "from a self-constructed house in a work-unit compound, to five apartments in three cities in north, central, and south China" (p.66) to illustrate the impact of China's housing-market boom for some Chinese families. In Chapter 5, Ren uses the rise of a real-estate developer to demonstrate "how the once egalitarian society has become increasingly divided between the haves and have-nots" (p.146). Finally, in Chapter 6, Ren describes a Beijing woman's lifestyle changes to offer a glimpse into the emergence of China's urban middle class and their increasingly globalised consumption lifestyle.

The short conclusions at the end of each chapter are also useful features. These provide excellent summaries of ideas discussed in the chapter. The contents of the chapters are also complemented by informative maps, tables and graphs. However, the book lacks photographs, which could be useful in illustrating the different urban landscapes. For example, Chapter 3 mentions new developments such as the 798 Factory in Beijing, the redevelopment of historical buildings in Qianmen Avenue in Beijing, Guangzhou University Town, and Tianjin Eco-City. These could be visually contrasted with old and neglected urban spaces such as inner-city neighbourhoods and degraded workers' villagers mentioned in Chapter 5.

Despite Ren's suggestion to "[use] urbanization in Asia to prove, reject, or revise Western urban theory" (p. xvii), this has unfortunately not been delivered in this book. While she rightly points out that "the frontier of urbanization has unmistakably shifted to Asia" and that we need "new theoretical tools and vocabularies" (*ibid.*) to understand this process, her book has not made any steps in advancing her call to urban China studies. An additional chapter, or at least further elaboration in the Conclusion, could have elevated this book from merely a concise account of China's urban story to a significant contribution opening up important debates about the continued dominance of urban theories developed from Western perspectives.

Overall, this book is an excellent resource for anyone interested in obtaining a succinct and updated overview of China's urban transition. Ren's coverage of urban consequences would appeal to readers interested in a range of related themes, including urban governance, urban politics, architecture and urban forms, rural-urban migration, citizenship rights (in relation to housing, land and labour rights), urban inequalities, urban economy (particularly arts, culture and heritage), and urban theory.

Sin Yee Koh is a PhD Candidate in Human Geography and Urban Studies at the London School of Economics, and founder/editor of [Urban Vignettes](#). Her [doctoral project](#) is a critique of British colonial legacies on contemporary skilled migration and citizenship practices in Malaysia. She believes in research and teaching drawing from in-depth understanding of local contexts and epistemologies. With prior professional experience in the public and private sector, she enjoys crossing boundaries and linking seemingly unconnected dots. [Read more reviews by Sin Yee.](#)