The Chinese City

A Profile of Weiping Wu’s Upcoming Book
March 2012

CEME Fellow Weiping Wu is a professor of urban and environmental policy and planning at Tufts University. A respected urban specialist and China scholar, she has served as a consultant to the World Bank, a fellow in the Public Intellectuals Program of the National Committee on United States-China Relations, and a research fellow at the Brookings Institution. She is the (co)author and co-editor of four books, including Pioneering Economic Reform in China’s Special Economic Zones, The Dynamics of Urban Growth in Three Chinese Cities, Local Dynamics in a Globalizing World, and Facets of Globalization: International and Local Dimensions of Development. This feature discusses a new book by Professor Wu (co-authored with Professor Piper Gaubatz) entitled The Chinese City, to be published by Routledge this summer.

The Chinese City fills a critical gap in current scholarship related to the rapid and complex process of urbanization in China, taking a unique spatial science approach (with a focus on geography, urban studies, urban planning and environmental studies) in comparison to the much more common political and economic approach taken by the majority of researchers. By grounding the research in history and geography, The Chinese City also provides a counterpoint to the largely Eurocentric approach in much of urban theory.

The Chinese City is divided into four parts and 13 chapters. The book can be read as standalone sections or in its entirety. It can be used as both a textbook in connection with a course on Chinese urbanization or as an introduction to Chinese urbanization for the general reader. For China scholars who seek to enrich their understanding of the urbanization process, The Chinese City provides an entry point into cities and urbanization; for urban policy scholars, the book will provide insights into the unique attributes as related to the Chinese context. Importantly, the breadth of the book makes it accessible by lay audiences while the depth provides a nuanced approach for experts seeking a further appreciation of the complex dynamics underpinning Chinese urbanization.

Part I sets the context, describing the geography of the country, China’s historical urban system, and traditional urban forms. Part II covers the urban system since 1949, the rural-urban divide, and interactions of Chinese cities with the global economy. Part III
outlines the specific sectors of urban development, including economic restructuring, social-spatial transformation, urban infrastructure, and urban land and housing. Finally, Part IV discusses urbanism through the lens of the urban environment, lifestyle and social change, and urban governance.

The book focuses on spatial connections between different levels of socio-economic environments; that is, how rural-urban migration has been a critical part of the Chinese urbanization; how the urbanization experience differs across different regions in China with strong growth trajectories in the East compared to lagging urban concentration in the parts of the West. The book also explores the burgeoning connections between Chinese cities and major global cities in the developed world set against the backdrop of increasing globalization. Ten of the world’s fifteen fastest growing cities are in China, and at current growth rates China could add as many as 350 million people – more than the population of the United States – to its cities over the next two decades. Indeed, since 1949 the amount of people who live in cities has exploded from 10 percent to approximately 50 percent of its population.

Urbanization is by no means an entirely recent phenomenon in China. China has one of the most enduring urban systems in the world, growing in tandem with the development of empires, the extension of the Silk Road and the establishment of foreign Treaty Ports in the 19th and 20th centuries. Before the death of Mao Zedong, more than two-thirds of the population lived in rural areas, with central authorities exercising nearly complete control over distribution of the largesse (financial and material) and the economy (especially production planning for key industries). During this period, national policies discouraged the growth of large cities, encouraged the growth of industrial and urban centers away from coastal areas, and controlled rural-urban migration through food rationing and household registration.

The development of Chinese cities was fundamentally altered with the economic reform process initiated in the late 1970s. At that time, China transitioned from a command economy to a market economy, and the country began to welcome some degree of foreign investment. In addition, fiscal allocations to the municipal level were decentralized, providing real budgetary and planning power to local authorities. These changes were accompanied by phenomenal industrial and manufacturing growth that took advantage of China’s low labor costs and massive rural-urban migration (probably the biggest in human history). Finally, the economy was impacted by the growing importance of globalization, increased interdependence between China and the rest of the world and the development of a network of worldwide production system and supply chains favoring lost-cost developing countries as manufacturing centers. All of these processes have been tempered by the still very state-centric approach taken by China. Reforms are incremental and reactionary, responding to immediate problems with short-term fixes.
With such a unique historical trajectory, the Chinese City is indeed a very different phenomenon when compared to the European or American cities. In the United States, for instance, in popular literature, “city” often is used as a genetic term representing all things urban. In China, there are two types of urban places or settlements: Cities (>100,000 in population) and officially designated towns (>20,000). Counting urban population is no simple matter. First off, Chinese official statistics are collected on both the city proper (shi qu) and the entire designated urban place (di qu, including rural counties under the city’s jurisdiction). Second, as a result of the long-standing rural-urban divide, residents are classified as non-agricultural or agricultural through a household registration system. Within a city’s jurisdiction, there are both types of population. As can be expected, urban population data is inconsistent and problematic, although there are no good alternatives.

In The Chinese City, Professors Wu and Gaubatz demystify the process of Chinese urbanization for a range of audiences. The book’s interdisciplinary approach will be useful for students, academics and policymakers, providing a platform that covers essential information about Chinese cities and urban patterns. The book is very readable and will provide a starting point for further research into this dynamic topic by other scholars. No area of study could be more important to an understanding of the possible future direction of China for as the book makes clear Chinese politics and the Chinese economy are impacted by, and in turn impact, the evolving urbanization of the Chinese nation.

Kyle Muther, MALD Candidate, 2013