

Analysing China's changing society

Over the last thirty years China has opened up to the world and the global market. From a largely rural society under socialist rule the country has seen intensified urbanization throughout the past three decades during its transition to a – what the Chinese authorities call – socialist market economy (Wang, 2004; Friedmann, 2005).¹ The effects of China's economic reformation are undeniably recognizable throughout the world. Nevertheless, great attention in the academic world has gone to the effects on China itself too.

C.M. de Boer

Reviewed publications:

Wan, Guanghua (ed.) 2008

Inequality and Growth in Modern China

Oxford: Oxford University Press

211 pages, ISBN 9780199535194 (hardcover)

Li Zhang (ed.) 2010

In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis

Ithaca: Cornell University Press

248 pages, ISBN 9780801475627 (paperback)

ESPECIALLY IN THE REALMS of urban geography, economics, sociology and anthropology, this has caused a tremendous increase in material on the rise of China. The works under review here, each belong to one of these realms and both provide a complementary view to the many and various effects of China's reformation. What makes this particular set of works all the more interesting though, is that the publications each approach China's economic transition and its effects on inequality and social stratification from a different methodological angle. The work of Zhang is strictly qualitative, whereas the work of Wan, which is the outcome of a two-year UNU-WIDER project, is solely based on quantitative analysis. This analytical contradiction renders the two highly suitable for a comparative review.

A closer look at the contents

Firstly, it must be said that both of the publications cover slightly different themes. Where Zhang focuses on the development of housing, the housing market, government policy and the spatialization of class, predominantly within urban centres, the Wan publication exposes the changes in nationwide inequality and poverty since the 1978 economic reformation, specifically stipulating the urban-rural divide.

In her ethnography, Zhang aims to illustrate what implications the economic transition in China has had on housing in general, but in particular on the division of space, governmental housing policy and the social and cultural class reformation. She does so by providing a multitude of real-life examples from

interviews she has conducted in her hometown of Kunming – in the western (rural) province of Yunnan – through which the impact of three decades of rapid economic growth on housing becomes clear.

What Zhang manages to do particularly well is to provide the reader with a well-supported and informative account of the effects that the transition from a socialist to a capitalist economic system has had on the middle classes and their attitudes and preferences towards housing. According to Zhang, the Chinese middle class is feverishly trying to establish a culture based on their newfound wealth and thus glorify materialism, mainly regarding their residences. Housing developers are keen to fill in the demand and are among those whose wealth has skyrocketed over the last few decades. As the stories of both developers and the more 'well-to-do' citizens are taken into this account, Zhang sheds light on the effects on a multitude of Chinese citizens.

Not unexpectedly, however, this development frenzy and materialistic focus has had profound negative effects within Chinese urban centres as well. A large chunk of *In Search of Paradise* is dedicated to the fear, uncertainty and injustice it produces, which includes transcriptions of personal experiences with rising inequality, social polarisation and stratification, labour exploitation, spatialization of class, bribery and unfair preferential treatment of real-estate developers.

The incorporation of multiple angles in her work definitely is one of the strengths of Zhang's publication. It deepens the understanding regarding the various sides of the transition story. However, it also gives the work a naturally high pace, as she seems to 'hop topics' to cover various sides of the story.

The UNU-WIDER (World Institute for Development Economic Research of the United Nations University) publication contains the combined works of several studies conducted for two 2005 conferences on *Inequality and Poverty in China* held in Beijing and Helsinki. The group of

authors attempts to compose causal theories on inequality in contemporary China by deconstructing growth into a variety of supporting factors. The main focus lies on China's interregional differences and explains why the (urban) coastal areas in the East continue to outperform the (rural) inland areas in the West in terms of economic growth.

A multitude of factors – ranging from innovation and financial capabilities, to earlier governmental development and poverty reduction strategies – is meticulously analysed by Wan's contributors. While there is an abundance of factors that are analyzed throughout the various chapters of the work, and extensive attention is given to legitimize their use, the results are often compiled into a very brief section of a chapter, which seems to seriously undermine the strengths of the models. Furthermore, the link with reality consists of an equally brief policy recommendations section, which again leaves a rather poor first impression.

But beware, let there not be a misunderstanding. In the meticulous deconstruction of inequality and poverty into numerous causal factors, *Inequality and Growth in Modern China* provides a more than thorough and useful analysis of the increase in regional inequality over the past few decades. As such, it proves essential to the academic with a specific interest in China's reformation, urbanization and the great variety of problems regarding poverty and inequality that the country subsequently has had to face.

The methodological clash

A quick glance at the affiliations of the author(s) before reading already hints at the differences in methodological approach in both publications. The anthropologist Zhang naturally opts for a qualitative approach, including numerous semi-structured interviews with renters, homeowners, housing developers and community leaders over an extensive period of time. The group of contributors to the UNU-WIDER publication consists mainly of economists, managers and development strategists, resulting in a clear quantitative approach, using statistical data to find answers. The reader can thus expect both publications to have their fair share of limitations, as either method has its inherent shortcomings.

On the one hand, Zhang's ethnography provides the reader with a number of deeply insightful recordings of personal and real-life experiences from various people involved, however, her statements are often based on a small number of respondents, leaving her with a merely moderate ground to generalize upon, which she does only in combination with newspaper publications or other accounts of a widespread conception.

On the other hand, the UNU-WIDER survey data analysis supplies a very legitimate basis for a generalization of results – in particular considering the effort that has been made to explain and legitimize each chapter's theoretical model and the selection of data – but simultaneously fails to adequately exemplify the human and social aspects of the poverty/inequality story.

Naturally it is a matter of academic field or methodological conviction that is decisive for the degree of reliability one wants to ascribe to a certain method of analysis. Both methods have their respective strengths and weaknesses. However, analysis based on qualitative data generally results in more pleasantly readable publications.

Concluding remarks

The comparison between two works that use a completely different methodology on a roughly similar topic was not done to eventually 'pick a winner'. Both the Zhang and Wan publications have their respective strengths and weaknesses and both are definitely useful accounts for understanding the inequality problems China faces today. Indeed, the works can even be complementary to one another.

The peak of China's growth might still be far away. Therefore, those interested in the country will need to maintain a broad field of vision to its developments, which includes educating oneself through works from a variety of fields with varying methodological approaches. As such, *In Search of Paradise and Inequality and Growth in Modern China* would both be a good way to start.

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Notes

¹ Friedmann, J. 2005. *China's Urban Transition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Wang, Y.P. 2004. *Urban Poverty, Housing and Social Change in China*. London: Routledge.

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Chinese housing
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