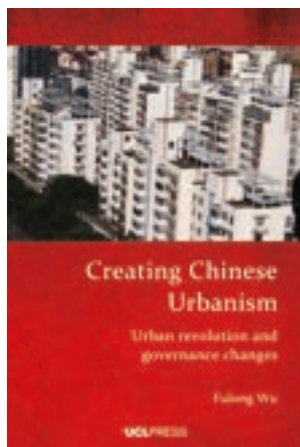


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# Book Reviews

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## **Fulong Wu 2022: *Creating Chinese Urbanism: Urban Revolution and Governance Change*. London: UCL Press**



In *Creating Chinese Urbanism*, Fulong Wu takes us on a journey to explore the ongoing urban revolution of post-reform China, where he finds that the urbanized Chinese society shows a trend of ‘leaving the soil’ and ‘separating from the state’ (p. 12). Wu emphasizes that he does not ‘seek marketisation or its related manifestation such as residential differentiation of consumer-driven diversity as the explanation for changing governance’ (p. 15), but instead explores how the ‘totalised societies in which the state and society were embedded’ are changed under urbanization (p. 113). While both traditional social ties and state power continue to play out in the spatial setting of urban neighbourhoods, these social relations that once wove the fabric of the totalized society have nevertheless

been restructured by emergent urbanism.

The book is arranged into seven chapters: five in-depth case studies documenting the variety of neighbourhood changes, framed by an Introduction and a Conclusion. In the Introduction Wu offers a critical review of the renowned Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong’s thesis on ‘the differential mode of association’, which facilitated the formation of an ‘earth-bounded’ society in pre-urban China (p. 1). Wu also notes a conceptual distinction vis-à-vis the city between Western and Chinese scholars, whereby up until the beginning of market reform the latter regarded cities as administrative centres of social control rather than spaces of capital accumulation. Having borrowed Henri Lefebvre’s term of ‘urban revolution’, Wu reconsiders the impact of urbanization on the ‘earth-bounded’ society, where reshaped residential landscapes, changed forms of governance and migratory flows characterize the emergent urbanism.

Chapter 1 explores the social geography of four types of urbanized neighbourhood: pre-socialist traditional neighbourhoods, socialist workplace neighbourhoods, enclaved migrant neighbourhoods, and middle-class gated neighbourhoods. The residential landscape of urban China was once integrated rather than class-based and represented variations in residents’ occupations between neighbourhoods. The later marketization, state retrenchment of welfare housing and influx of rural migrants, however, accelerated the differentiation of housing and segregation in urban China, where today’s mushrooming migrant enclaves and gated

communities spatially represent the consolidated distinction between different urban groups in relation to housing conditions, homeownership and forms of governance.

Chapter 2 examines the transformation of two types of inner-city neighbourhood: traditional alleyway neighbourhoods where the housing was once privately owned but then turned into public rentals, and workplace neighbourhoods which were developed as residential areas for socialist urban workers. Traditional neighbourhoods are organic communities characterized by mess and intimacy, where formal social control is built upon and extended by traditionalism. Workplace communities, in comparison, combined employment and state-led residential distribution, representing 'the advance of the state into social life and social relations' (p. 70). Traditional neighbourhoods are undergoing rapid gentrification amidst capitalist urban regeneration, while residents in workplace neighbourhoods are experiencing a decline in the provision of state support following housing privatization. The state consequently initiated policy movements such as 'community construction' and 'grid governance' to restore some redistributive functions of the post-reform state in dilapidated neighbourhoods, although these efforts might also frustrate the social foundation of traditionalism at the urban grassroots.

Chapter 3 discusses the territorialization of enclaved migrant neighbourhoods in what were once villages beyond the city. Wu argues that the commercialization of village lands during urban expansion has undermined rural collectivism, because collectives have now become just one form among many within collectivism, and are used by villagers to negotiate various benefits from the land appropriations. Incoming migrant tenants who live in reserved village dwellings mobilize their social networks with fellow migrants and claim the villages as a space of production. For local villagers, this is their opportunity to become a new urban class of rentiers. As a transient type of neighbourhood, urban villages are often seen as informal spaces, where in many cases the disappearing traditionalism persists as the dominant socio-cultural structure and the territorial foundations are still backed by the rural-urban dualism under state socialism. Rather than interpreting such changes as a result of Chinese authoritarianism, Wu approaches these experiences as 'a state and society co-evolve[d] process under the impact of marketisation' (p. 19).

Chapter 4 investigates gated neighbourhoods, which have become the mainstream residential form for China's rising middle class. For private developers, developing gated communities is a cost-effective way to establish secure and exclusive residential environments for well-off customers who want more privacy than that offered by collectivism. Gated communities constitute a spectacle of plotting urbanism, in which massive housing estates are built up plot by plot in the midst of vast rural tracts. Regarding its governance, Wu recognizes Chinese gated communities as a build-form product rather than a governance form, not only because private governance is not expected of property owners, but also because of the absence of civil society coalescing around common political demands. In this commodified type of neighbourhood, emergent homeowners' associations, together with developer-centred property management companies, take over the maintenance of neighbourhoods. As a result, community solidarity is built upon shared property interests rather than personal acquaintances and social interactions.

Chapter 5 summarizes the context of Chinese neighbourhood changes with reference to three recent debates in the field of urban studies: 'the nature of cities', 'the city as concentrated form versus the urban as assemblages', and 'particularism

versus generalization'. By adopting a historical and contextualized view of neighbourhood changes, Wu argues that while cities have long existed in China, Chinese urban society has only just left its rural roots. At the neighbourhood level, a city of 'complexity, diversity and heterogeneity' marks the collapse of collectivism, showing a trend of 'leaving the soil' (p. 209). Wu's findings can be seen as complementing those of Fei Xiaotong, whose conceptualization of an earth-bounded society is derived from observations of pre-urban China. The consumer revolution which accompanied the expansion of Chinese capitalism has not promoted the imaginary of self-governance as it did in post-Keynesian Western contexts. Although not entirely totalized spaces, it is clear that the Chinese state has invested hugely in rebuilding community governance and surveillance since the 2000s.

In the final chapter, Wu concludes his findings about Chinese emergent urbanism. Concurring with the transition debate, he argues that inner-urban neighbourhoods and urban villages are experiencing the disappearance of traditionalism built upon their differential mode of association. However, the end of collectivism is not followed by private governance. A form of state power persists in the sphere of neighbourhood governance, albeit with a revamped imaginary and functionality. Specifically, Wu indicates that this co-evolved state-society relationship should be interpreted neither as the 'continuation of socialist institutions' nor 'a complete shift of paradigm' (p. 248), but rather a state of changed governmentality under urban revolution.

Alongside its ethnographic nature, *Creating Chinese Urbanism* can be seen as a culmination of Fulong Wu's work as an urban geographer over the last three decades. Readers may find traces of previous arguments from his earlier publications, such as that of 'state entrepreneurialism', with which he tried to explain the dynamics of the state and capital during urban development, along with speculation about China's turn from 'neoliberalism' to 'state developmentalism' since the 2010s (p. 251). In the same way as an ethnographer, his approach to comprehending distinctive urbanisms is to explore the complexity of social relations on the ground. By doing so, and with a specific focus on changes within neighbourhoods, he contributes original insights which shed light on the overlooked urban roots of Chinese governance. With a deep knowledge of both Chinese cultural contexts and Western urban literature, Wu not only explains China's urban process on its own terms but also develops a comparative angle to explore China-specific urban questions within the broader debate around planetary urbanization.

This book is arguably one of the most comprehensive and illuminating works on Chinese urbanism. With its accessible writing style, vividly documented case studies and cutting-edge analysis, anyone who wants to learn more about the historical geography of urban China would benefit greatly from reading it.

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