

Restructuring the Chinese City

A sea change has occurred in China since the 1978 economic reforms. Bringing together the work of leading scholars specializing in urban China, this book examines what has happened to the Chinese city undergoing multiple transformations during the reform era, with an emphasis on new processes of urban formation and the consequent reconstituted urban spaces. With arguments against the convergence thesis that sees cities everywhere becoming more Western in form, and suggestions that the Chinese city is best seen as a multiplex city, *Restructuring the Chinese City* is an indispensable text for Chinese specialists, urban scholars and advanced students in urban geography, urban planning and China studies.

Laurence J. C. Ma is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Akron. **Fulong Wu** is Reader in the School of Geography at the University of Southampton.

Restructuring the Chinese City

Changing society, economy and space

Edited by Laurence J. C. Ma and
Fulong Wu

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Preface

This volume is one of the early fruits of the Urban China Research Network. With support from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, a diverse group of scholars from several different countries have met regularly over the past three years with the goal of advancing our knowledge of how urban development is proceeding and how it is changing the face of China. The Network has managed a small grant program for young faculty members and for graduate students that has supported about twenty projects every year. A more ambitious initiative has been the creation of interdisciplinary working groups to assess the state of the art and mount collaborative research projects on major issues of urban change.

Fulong Wu is the leader of one of these working groups, and Laurence Ma, one of few senior statesmen in this field, has been a key participant. This edited volume springs from meetings of the group in 2002 and 2003 in Albany, Southampton and Hong Kong. The chapters focus especially on the phenomenon of spatial transformation. All of the contributors emphasize the built environment – land development, business districts, neighborhood change, housing. Chinese cities are evolving so quickly that what we know about their physical and spatial structure soon becomes urban history, and there are surprises in these chapters. In the United States, for example, there has been a considerable decentralization of city functions over the last century, though central business districts have retained a large share of business and financial service employment. In Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, by contrast, new business districts were established in just the last decade, and they have already redefined the “center” of these cities.

Beyond the new portrait that these chapters draw of the Chinese city, they also provide new insights into how these changes have come about and how they affect the lives of residents. There are several themes here, every one leading to a question still to be answered. How strongly have market processes taken hold in the main coastal cities, and how do they affect the use of space? What is and what can be the role of governmental planning and regulation of land markets – or can we even distinguish between private and public spheres at this point? How do longtime residents perceive the changes in their city, and are the history and culture of city districts being

swept aside or are people re-establishing connections to place? What is the extent of new social divisions – by social class and by local residence rights – and how are they expressed in where and under what conditions people live?

The contributors have not directly confronted the policy choices that are being made or that need to be made to ensure a better urban future in China. But urban policy concerns are embedded in every chapter. Rarely do scholars have the challenge of studying a system that is so evidently dynamic, where even the participants are unsure of how best to play their hands, and where our interpretive skills as social scientists are so likely to influence the future that is being made before our very eyes.

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