

## BOOK REVIEW ■

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Jia Gao and Yuanyuan Su. 2019. *Social Mobilisation in Post-Industrial China: The Case of Rural Urbanisation*. Edward Elgar: Cheltenham, U.K. ISBN 987-1-78643-258-2. 242 pp. + xvi. \$112.50 (hardcover).

Reviewed by: George Pomeroy, Ph.D., AICP. Geography – Earth Science Dept., Shippensburg University, USA\*

There are many challenges in writing a timely and useful book on social mobilization in China. First, and very obviously, the jaw droppingly rapid pace of economic development, social change, and urbanization in China means that most topically related research quickly becomes “out of date.” There are, however, three additional interrelated and much less apparent reasons. One, it isn’t just rapid change that dates research, but that some “crucial changes in China’s socio-political system, bureaucratic structures” and central-state relations have been underappreciated. Secondly, earlier research oftentimes presented institutions and dynamics in overly simplistic and monolithic terms that undersold the importance of lower level governments and emerging market forces. Third, a lack of on the ground research like that done by the authors has led to an overreliance on older materials. This book, *Social Mobilisation Post-Industrial China*, cuts the gordian knot of these challenges, providing a sensible and penetrating examination of that captures the emerging stakeholder dynamics, policy nuance, and cultural insights surrounding social mobilization at large and in the context of urbanization policy.

Even as the book is subtitled *The Case of Rural Urbanisation*, its content, while focused on “rural urbanization,” is more broadly applicable to economic life, political life, and public policy at large. For this reader, one of the more valuable points, made repeatedly throughout the book, is that social mobilization is “neither a top-down nor a bottom-up process” and “no longer ideologically driven” process (p. 31), but rather one characterized by “tensions and negotiations among different social groups and forces” (p. 21) in an era of *boyi* (strategic game playing) in a setting that is economically and politically dynamic (and as the book title notes, more complexly “post-industrial”). The most underappreciated role players in this strategic game playing are the private sector players and various prefectural / local administrative bureaucracies. With respect to urbanization, urbanists, planners, and other astute observers who visited any major city in China in the early 2000s can easily calibrate the book’s arguments with what they saw happening on the ground in terms of the development dynamic that was occurring.

The book consists of eight logically sequenced chapters, along with a preface that provides some helpful transparency in how the co-authors put the book together. The preface reveals that Jia Gao is the seasoned academic based in Australia who framed much of the book and his Nanjing based co-author Yuanyuan Su’s leading contribution was the case study field work conducted in Shandong Province. Chapter 1 starts with an historical overview of both social mobilization and rural urbanization, as well as a digest of how researchers have approached both topics. As the chapter wraps up, it proposes the approach to social mobilization argued for in the book followed by a chapter by chapter preview. Chapter 2 then looks at the post-1978 evolution of “political realities,” major political and economic reform efforts, and how & why of rural urbanization strategy. A well-known urban-rural development divide demanded

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\* [gmpome@ship.edu](mailto:gmpome@ship.edu)

action, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Chapters 3 through 6 respectively address the roles of provincial officials, market forces (“the invisible hand”), prefectural level bureaucracy, and the “awkward roles of county and township governments” as key stakeholder groups. Chapter 7 reviews the participatory responses, including protests, to initiatives. In chapters 3 through 7, discussions are built around Shandong Province and sub-municipal region of Laiwu as case study areas. While challenging to understand do the complexity, these chapters provide the observational insights necessary in making the author’s overall arguments. The reader comes away recognizing the distinctiveness and unique, sometimes at conflicted or at-odds roles of these groups. For example, in examining participatory responses, the authors note that mass protests, are not uniformly “uncooperative or even antagonistic, resistant, and oppositional” but rather an inherent part of the mobilization process (p.180).

Chapter 8 closes as a summary of the book, including a presentation of “a better understanding of social mobilization” (192). The chapter also makes the case for further research on market forces, market & bureaucratic collusion, and “rapidly changing behavior of the state bureaucracy” (p. 197).

The book is well organized. A deliberate effort is made to clearly outline content for the book (in chapter 1) and for each chapter at its respective outset. A purposeful writing style underscores this sense of organization. Such organizational clarity is needed given the depth and complexity of the topic, as well as the cultural nuance peppered throughout. The organization allows the complexity of the discussions to challenge the reader but doesn’t overwhelm.

The cultural insights and unique terminologies offered are especially valuable, but they may confuse those who aren’t Sinophiles. An example of phrase that is useful in describing a policy issue is *jiuming daocao* (“last straw to clutch at;” p. 55). It was used to characterize efforts to pursue every last possible reform, including addressing rural issues, to perpetuate higher GDP growth. Another term that aptly used is *tai caizheng* (“land finance;” noted throughout the book), which refers to using land development rights transfers to generate revenue for local governments. This was a leading revenue generator for local governments. At other times, the phrases are unwieldy (and in the following case, even by the authors’ admission). For example, *Yigong cunong; yicheng daixiang; chengxiang hudong; xitiao fazhan* is used to describe a policy of “facilitating agricultural development through industry; advancing rural development through urban activities;” p. 127). One the whole, these phrases and terms are very helpful in understanding the authors’ discussions.

Citations are extensively and appropriately used. Cited research (38 pages) is wide ranging across fields of sociology, political science, geography, and generalized social science. It also has a good blend between emerging “domestic,” China based research and international perspectives.

One challenge was ascertaining the nature of the local research. Certainly, it offered valuable insights, but there is no concrete sense of who was interviewed, what was asked, how the interviews were executed, or even how many interviews occurred. The interview lessons seemed to be more drawn from keen insightful conversation and anecdote rather than from a systematic research program.

As implied above, this is a valuable and central contribution to the literature on social mobilization and should serve scholars as an important resource in understanding policy dynamics in China at large. Its leading arguments are logically drawn and well crafted.