Foreword

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In 1949, at the beginning of the People’s Republic of China, official statistics indicated that only 10.6 per cent of China’s population, 57.65 million people, resided in urban areas, with the remaining 89.4 per cent, most of them farmers, resident in rural areas. The actual city population may have been even smaller because Chinese urban population statistics include farmers living within the legal boundaries of cities. By 1978 the urban population had risen to 172.45 million but was still only 17.9 per cent of the total population. The rural population of farmers and related occupations, in contrast, had grown from 484.02 million to 790.14 million, an increase of over 300 million families farming roughly the same amount of arable land as the smaller number in 1949. This accumulation in the rural areas of what amounted to a kind of surplus labour occurred despite two and a half decades of large-scale investment in industry in China’s cities.

Then in late 1978 there was a dramatic change in government policies towards the economy and increasingly over the next decades towards urban development. The urban population by 2013 had risen to 731.11 million, 53.7 per cent of the total, and the rural population, after peaking in 1995, began to decline through to the present. The true urban population total in 2013 was probably even larger because the official urban totals include only some of the rural-to-urban migrants whose official residence is still in the rural areas although they are employed in cities. Surveys suggest that 90 per cent of the registered rural population aged between 18 and 40 is actually working outside of agriculture, mostly in urban areas. China as recently as three decades ago was primarily a rural society. Today it is predominantly urban and becoming more so by the day. Over the next 16 years a Chinese government–World Bank forecast has the urban population share rising to 70 per cent.¹ The urban population of China by 2030 would thus be equivalent to that of the European Union, North America and Japan combined. This book resulting from the UrbaChina Project explores both this recent past urbanization history together with the challenges that China’s continuing transition to a mainly urban society presents.
China’s revolution that brought the Communist Party to power in 1949 did not start out to transform China into a primarily urban society within well under a century. The government, in fact, particularly after the failure of the Great Leap Forward in 1958–59, instituted a number of measures that attempted with considerable success to limit the growth of the urban population while at the same time investing heavily in urban industry. The motivation for these restrictions on rural-to-urban migration was partly economic: the government did not want to spend more money than absolutely necessary on urban infrastructure. In fact there was a general neglect of such infrastructure and particularly of urban housing. By 1978 urban housing per capita was only 7.2 square metres.

This approach to urban development was sometimes presented as an alternative to the kind of urban development that had occurred in the West and elsewhere, with large urban slums and the other problems of urban life in the nineteenth century. But it was also an approach that created deep division between urban and rural society, a division that China is still working to overcome to this day. A number of the chapters in this volume deal at length with this issue, notably with the inequalities and inefficiencies created by the household registration or *hukou* system. The policies of the pre-1978 era also created an enormous pent-up demand for urban housing that has fueled an equally large housing construction boom that is only now beginning to slow down.

The post-1978 urbanization effort, therefore, involved both the reversal of many of the urban policies of the past together with consideration of a wide range of altogether new policies to meet the new challenges. The chapters in this book thus focus on the urbanization issues that China has faced and dealt with since the beginning of the reform era, but these chapters also look forward to the challenges that China needs to deal with if it is to have the kind of urban society that its people desire. Many of the chapters are written jointly by both the Chinese and European members of the UrbaChina Project. Others have individual authors, but all of the chapters are a result of a collaborative effort.

There are many dimensions to a successful urbanization policy. To begin with, cities in China were first created primarily to meet a political and social need. Throughout two millennia cities were the seats of government and of the groups that government officials depended on, including those who provided their food, built their homes and offices, and protected them from hostile forces. Wealthy individuals who lived on rents as absentee landlords also frequently congregated in cities. In China during the dynastic era there were also a few cities that grew for economic reasons, port cities as centres of China’s mainly domestic commerce and
even a few industrial cities such as Suzhou, the country’s major centre for the manufacture of silk.

Throughout the twentieth century, and particularly since 1978, however, the growth of cities has been primarily driven by economic development, notably rapid industrialization, but increasingly also the development of a modern service sector. It is the availability of jobs more than anything else that has attracted over half of the nation’s population to the cities. Unlike many parts of the developing world, there are relatively few in China who leave the rural areas for cities even in the absence of many urban employment opportunities, driven by landlessness and extreme poverty. The Chinese government during the reform era, however, has sometimes tried to direct migrants to smaller cities and has put particularly tight controls on migration to mega-cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. These efforts have not been particularly successful, however, because it is increasingly market forces that are determining where the jobs are, and that has often meant large cities.

The rise of cities and mega-cities also raises fundamental issues of governance. China historically and up to the present has relied on a decentralized form of authoritarian governance. The centre sets the policy but within broad parameters that allow for considerable modification at the local level. But how does one decentralize decision making in a unit that has 50 million people with a wide variety of shared services and infrastructure? China on its current course is likely to have several such mega-cities. Is there a way short of full democracy on a Western model that can give urban residents meaningful participation in decisions that affect their lives? Will cities of this magnitude, however governed, continue to be an efficient vehicle for maintaining the future ability of China’s economy to remain internationally competitive? These are large questions, but several of the chapters dealing with the experience of individual cities describe how they are grappling with some of these questions as well as many others.

Probably the most immediate urban challenges are those that involve the elimination of what amounts to a two-class system where urban residents have major advantages over their rural brethren even though many of the latter are in fact living in cities; many of the chapters in this book deal with one or another aspect of this problem. The issue of the household registration system mentioned earlier is one of the several dimensions to this. It is desirable to get rid of this barrier to migrants receiving welfare benefits, but abolishing the *hukou* system is only the first step. Creating pension and health insurance systems available to all people, rural and urban, migrant and non-migrant, is much more difficult. Similarly, low-cost housing for migrants is essential if they are to bring their families with them to the cities, but most low-cost urban housing to date has been available mainly
to registered urban residents. Solving the problem by building more low-cost housing is only part of the solution. If costs to the government are to be kept down, migrants need to cover at least some of the costs. The main asset of migrants, however, is their use rights over arable land, but it is difficult to sell these rights on the market at a fair price. Thus solving the rural land-sale problem needs to be part of the solution to the migrant urban housing problem. In addition, rural land-sale issues are at the heart of much of the rural discontent and open hostility toward local officials. China is making progress on all of these fronts but the issues are far from resolved at the time of writing.

Another immediate and unresolved issue is the problem of heavy air and water pollution, particularly but not exclusively in the cities. Beyond that is the whole question of China’s contribution to global warming, but that is a national and international issue, not just an urban one. China is not the first country to experience severe air and water quality problems, but the challenge for China is coming at an earlier stage in the development process than was the case in most current high-income countries. And China’s heavy dependence on coal makes solving this problem all the more difficult. Greater reliance on solar and wind for energy is a part of the solution, but the current considerable efforts by China along this line will make it possible to reduce coal use by only a few percentage points of total energy consumption. Natural gas and nuclear energy will also help reduce coal, but those also require enormous investments and agreements, for gas at least, with some of the country’s gas-rich neighbours. So far the main solution to the urban air pollution problem, particularly in Beijing, has been to close down factories and prohibit citizens from using their automobiles a few days a week, as was done for the Beijing Olympics and the 2014 APEC meeting, but that approach has not been sustainable.

This book explores spatial and scale issues as well as the social and economic challenges that affect the quality of urban life. Housing and where it is located, for example, involves careful location planning, among other reasons to avoid long commuting times, a major quality-of-life issue around the world and likely to get larger in China as the cities themselves become larger. Cities structured in ways that promote urban sprawl and hence increased dependence on the automobile not only affect commuting time but make control of the environment more difficult. Dealing with these spatial-scale-efficiency issues is particularly urgent because, unlike changes in many social and economic efforts, it is typically very difficult to change the physical and spatial structures of cities once those structures are in place. China’s rapid GDP growth in the absence of careful consideration of spatial-scale-efficiency issues is increasingly limiting future options.

The water problem is not just a pollution problem. For the cities of
northern China there is a basic shortage of water. Rainfall has always been sparse and over the past five decades the underground water table has fallen substantially as tube wells have been used to mine the water at rates far above what can be replaced by natural forces. The Yellow River is of limited use either for irrigation or urban needs because of its very high silt content. The government, therefore, has begun to spend over RMB 200 billion on diverting water from the Yangtze River to the north. It remains to be seen what the unintended consequences of that effort may be. The main alternative to these kinds of measures would be to begin shifting more of the urban population to the south where water is more plentiful.

There are several quality-of-life issues that particularly affect urban residents. Many of these involve the preservation of important parts of China’s heritage. China, like Europe, is an ancient civilization with a rich collection of buildings and other structures that are many centuries old. The Cultural Revolution did major damage to some of this heritage but the construction boom of the post-1978 period has unearthed more than was destroyed, and is continuing. The fact that so many of the historically significant buildings were constructed with wood rather than stone, as in Italy and Greece, makes their preservation more challenging. At the present time China has also begun an effort to create more parks and to improve the look of the roadways.

Finally, there is the question of how one approaches the analysis of these issues in China and elsewhere. At one level one can look at national policies and how they have played out in the country as a whole, and several of the chapters in this book are of that type, including this foreword. But one can also go into greater depth by studying how various interventions worked out in a particular location. In this book there are many chapters of this latter type, particularly as regards the coastal city Shanghai and the interior city Chongqing, but also Kunming and the resort area of Huangshan.

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