Preface

This book originates from an ESRC\(^1\)-DFID\(^2\) funded project entitled ‘Urban poverty and property rights changes in China’. The project allowed us to conduct social surveys in multiple cities, on a scale which is impossible for unfunded scholarly activity. So the support is duly acknowledged. Before we started the project, we had conducted various pilot studies that investigated China’s urban poverty distribution and the nature of and variation in the country’s impoverished neighbourhoods. Our interest in urban poverty originates from three different roots. The first is a theoretically-oriented quest to understand the emergent social spaces of the Chinese city. The second is a more practical concern about the plight of laid-off workers and migrant workers. The third is an interest in the links between the evolution of property rights, entitlements and poverty in the transitional economy. Through the course of this research, we began to appreciate the complexity of China’s urban poverty. Rather than using borrowed terminology and concepts from the West or from other developing countries to describe the Chinese urban poor as outcasts and their places of living as ghettos or slums, we have sought to characterize the poor in ways that specifically acknowledge the institutional roots of poverty. Poverty groups are diverse and so are their places of residence. We thus attempt to link specific poverty profiles to the processes of poverty generation, in particular to institutional changes and the changes in property rights and entitlements that such institutional changes bring about. We analyse these matters at both the household and neighbourhood level.

During the writing of this book, the global credit crunch and associated financial and then real economy downturn has unfolded into a profound economic crisis. Of the perturbations in the world’s economy since China’s opening up, this one is unprecedented in terms of its global spread into emerging markets. Millions of rural migrant workers have suddenly lost their jobs, and the stress put on the urban labour market is enormous. It might even mean the end of China’s current model of export-oriented accumulation. Much will depend on the degree to which the rate of growth in China’s domestic demand can be stimulated. At the early stage of the crisis, there was much talk of a decoupling of emergent markets from the troubled economies of the advanced industrial states.
It is now quite apparent that the two parts of the global economy are too intrinsically coupled to prevent the spread of the problem. Whatever shape China’s economy takes post-recovery, the processes and patterns of urban impoverishment identified in this book are likely to enter a new phase. Our research is by no means conclusive, therefore. But the trajectories of the livelihood of the poor in the future will inevitably be linked to the processes of economic and institutional change and socio-spatial reconfiguration that we discuss in some detail in this book. In this sense, the book lays down a benchmark for the future studies of China’s urban poverty and socio-spatial change.

The book is very detailed. We have chosen to write it in this way so that it provides not only a rich storehouse of analytical insights but also a wealth of data that others might themselves use for their own analysis. The 25 poor neighbourhoods in six cities that we have surveyed are identified by name and location and described in some detail, making it possible for other researchers to undertake follow-up studies. The survey of 1803 households in these neighbourhoods is available as a digital dataset via the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) of the UK Data Archive (www.esds.ac.uk).

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NOTES
1. UK Economic and Social Research Council.
2. UK Department For International Development.