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China's Urban Revolution: Understanding Chinese Eco-cities, Austin Williams, *London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 220 pp, £55 (hardback), £17.99(pbk/ebook), ISBN 97813500 03248*

The synopsis suggests that this volume offers a review and critical examination of China's rapid urbanisation and more poignantly China's government-led eco-city building programme. In nine chapters, starting out with a review of definitions and interpretations of what cities and eco-cities might be to a conclusion, the reader is presented by a rich and entertaining combination of cultural, political and socio-economic lenses through which to view urban development in China. The chapters thus offer more than a mere factual review of China's urban revolution as Williams seeks to contextualise and juxtapose development stages with key political events and movements that have shaped China's society and development over the past half century or so. Throughout the book there is a conscientious effort to shed light especially on the different philosophical approaches that guide life in this vast and diverse nation. It is stressed that western logic, rationality, sustainability concepts, and especially the idea of consumer restraint in respect to environmental protection are perceived differently. Thus, what might seem a contradiction from an outsider's perspective may therefore be none in the Chinese mind set. This is done in a journalistic – almost light hearted and at times annoyingly repetitive - manner, enlivened by personal anecdotes and observations from the author who has seemingly criss-crossed China on his quest to ground-truth media reports and statistics of emerging eco-cities.

Each chapter contains some key messages. Chapter one examines definitions of eco-cities and while there is no (globally) agreed definition, the Chinese government's 2015 definition of eco-cities being "ecological cities with Chinese characteristics" (p. 20) is poignantly illustrated by the example of a city achieving national Eco-city certification based on the fact that its main drinking water sources are 'adequate' and the air quality is rated 'good' on 1/3 of the days of the year (p. 21). Chapter two titled "Man must overcome nature" focuses on the human – nature relationship and its implication for urban development and eco-city conceptions. Whereas in ecological urbanism elsewhere, humans tend to be seen as the cause of environmental problems, in China "... transformation of nature in order to create a better, more effective location for human growth, economic development and social expansion is welcomed with a nonchalance that is absent from the Western discourse" p. 31. Chapter three labelled "Growing pains" relates that growth – particularly providing more and better housing – is necessary and welcomed as there are still millions of Chinese living in cave-like conditions which is not an acceptable state. By now, at the very latest, one can see a pattern emerging in that the eco-city building program is a branding exercise and label under which the Chinese government flexibly tests and promotes various urbanisation strategies in respect to cleaning

up heavily polluted industrial cities and modernizing rural backwaters (Chapter four) while also changing population attitudes and behaviour (Chapter 5) – i.e. to “civilize” them. Chapter six to eight cover under headings of “Getting there”, “Fake Eco, Failed cities”, and “Urban Experiments” offer further examples of different eco-city development efforts – some more, others less convincing leaving the reader – or at least me – somewhat baffled why one case is presented in one and not the other chapter. The final, ninth chapter concludes that overall Chinese eco-cities are often “not really cities” or “eco” in any acceptable Western sense of the word’ (p. 189) but nevertheless interesting as experiments and “intended to serve as role models of sustainable urban living in the future” (p. 190). Objectively speaking, China has made significant advances in terms of environmental clean-up and developing renewable energy resources in a relatively shorter time frame when compared to other countries’ industrial and urbanisation transitions.

Journalist and associate professor Austin Williams has without question created an interesting and thought provoking volume. In many ways, however, the text is not your typical academic book. One of its shortfalls is that it feels more like a collection of extended essays on Chinese urbanisation than a systematic analysis and synthesis that forms a coherent narrative on the subject. Conceptual leaps between political and cultural context, the seemingly random selection of cases, cynicism and critique in regards to eco-city criteria and a (overly?) generous certification processes in conjunction with an endearing defence of Chinese urban development can leave the reader in somewhat confused and irritated state of abandonment.

This is not to say the book is not worthwhile reading – especially for those only vaguely familiar with China’s urban revolution there is much insight to be gained. It might also make for a good introductory text in an urban studies or human geography course, bound to spur on seminar discussion in light of the different and possibly controversial claims made in respect to Chinese eco-city achievements.

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