



Chinese Exceptionalism in Architecture and Urban Design: A Book Review

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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews three books on contemporary Chinese urbanism. The first book, *Designing Reform*, understands the exceptionalism of Chinese reform through architectural evidence. The second book, *The Shenzhen Experiment*, further argues for the exceptionalism and non-replicability of Shenzhen reform. The third book, *The City After Chinese New Towns*, similarly highlights the unprecedentedness of Chinese new towns. These three recent publications collectively aim to demystify contemporary Chinese urbanism, and have done so with a sensibility towards space, geography, materiality, and infrastructure. These authors and editors are mainly architectural researchers leveraging disciplinary contributions to the discussion of post-socialist China. In turn, they have also contributed to the field of architecture and urban design with rich case studies in China. This review essay aims to understand (i) their geographical and spatial perspectives, (ii) their architectural design perspectives, and (iii) how they address social justice issues. It seeks to formulate contemporary Chinese urbanization as an object of inquiry, to “exceptionalize” Chinese phenomena, and to argue for the pedagogical contribution of Chinese case studies to architecture and urban design.

Keywords: Chinese new town, reform and opening-up, political economy, hotel, neoliberalism, Shenzhen

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The City After Chinese New Towns: Spaces and Imaginaries from Contemporary Urban China. By Michele Bonino, Francesca Governa, Maria Paola Repellino, Angelo Sampieri (Eds.). Basel, Birkhauser. 2019, 240 pp. ISBN 9783035617658

The Shenzhen Experiment: The Story of China's Instant City. By Juan Du. Cambridge, Harvard University Press. 2020, 384 pp. ISBN 9780674242227

Designing Reform: Architecture in the People's Republic of China, 1970-1992. By Cole Roskam. New Haven, Yale University Press. 2021, 296 pp. ISBN 9780300235951

1. INTRODUCTION

David Harvey famously uses “Neoliberalism ‘with Chinese Characteristics’” to describe China’s economy under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership in the late 1970s. The post-Mao movement broadly known as Reform and Opening-up, manifests in “the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control” (p. 120). Harvey understands China as embarking “its own peculiar path” (p. 122), seeking to reconcile a socialist banner with capitalist class power, while being part of a global history of Western-led neoliberalism^[1]. These three publications are chosen as they expand on this Chinese peculiarity through geographical and architectural observations, and argue for a third path beyond the outmoded Cold War binary of Western capitalism and Soviet socialism. Echoing the title of the article, Chinese exceptionalism is a lens that spreads across all the books concerned. This paper expands on how this theme is explored using disciplinary evidence, while having interdisciplinary evidence on contemporary Chinese scholarship. This review is done through close readings of texts and referencing other seminal literature in this field.

2. SPACE

This section examines how the three books frame spatial transformations as defining the expression of Chinese exceptionalism. Spaces are defined as both naturally occurring (natural and historical landscapes) and as designed (authored and unauthored architectural transformations).

2.1 Spaces in Zhaoqing, Zhengdong, and Tongzhou

Architect and professor Michele Bonino, and editors Francesca Governa, Maria Paola Repellino, and Angelo Sampieri believe that by rejecting the conformity to a Western category, one could free impressions of urban China of Western preconceptions of what constituted a city, and question every element that made the city. This “Chinese exceptionalism” applied to urbanization thus constitutes a “third space” worthy of its own analytic apparatus (p. 20)^[2], warranting a new set of lexicons for describing and designing urban spaces in a Western-dominated discourse, much of which lie within their analysis of Chinese new towns.

For Governa, Chinese New Towns are the spatial embodiment of such exceptionalism. Governa noted that they were “relational spatialities.” “They cannot be delimited; they are neither close nor static; they continually shift the fine line of distinction between urban and rural” (p. 224)^[2]. Governa identifies the ability of Chinese New Towns to challenge rigid binaries of the Western urbanization discourse. As Brenner and Schmid seminally argue, one of the most delimiting binaries to talk about development are that between the urban and the rural; they instead propose a planetary urbanism model that views urbanization not as a category but a process^[3]. As evident in the title, *The City After Chinese New Towns*, the editors were clearly searching for insights from these new spaces for the larger discussion on China. The contributors were tasked to examine three case studies, namely Zhaoqing, Zhengdong, and Tongzhou. This selection is emblematic

but not exhaustive of the nuanced nature of Chinese New Towns. Astrid Safina studied Zhaoqing, a third-tier city situated on the Western edge of the Pearl River Delta, one of the fastest growing regions in China. She notes that a major takeaway from this case study is the promotion of an “ambiguous polycentrism” (p. 107) ^[2], that challenges the reductive frameworks of centralization and decentralization. Leonardo Ramondetti studied a Henan province infrastructural hub Zhengdong that represents the inlands, a less privileged area for the studies of reform. Instead, he frames Zhengdong as an interesting mixture between “urban entrepreneurialism” and the “so-called socialist countryside planning” (p. 121) ^[2], a region highly receptive of spatial innovations, including renowned architect Kisho Kurokawa’s polycentric city plan. Filippo Fiandanese researched Tongzhou, an industrial suburb of Beijing. Responding to Soviet ideologies, he formulates Tongzhou as the regional convergence of political centeredness and industrial production, which challenges the utilitarian land use segregation of Western conventions. The aforementioned contributors heed to the editors’ call for proclaiming “Chinese characteristics” in their own rights ^[2]. In writing about the marginal and up-and-coming spaces of China, they identify critical innovations, the urbanistic specificities of which are suggestive of larger ideological shifts.

2.2 Spaces in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone

Architect and professor Juan Du (2020) tackles Deng’s famous theory, “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” on which Harvey’s term is based. She quotes *The Story of Spring*’s (famous propaganda song) lyricist Jiang Kairu in saying, “in the past, we viewed the planned economy and the market economy as enemies out to kill each other, unable to get along. Within the circled area, this flourishing development subverted that notion and created a miracle of human civilization. This is the significance of this

circle” (p. 39) ^[4]. This quote illustrates two things at the same time. First, it attests to a conceptual exceptionalism of Shenzhen in embodying ideological extremes. Second, it centers on how Shenzhen is mythologized as “a circle by the sea,” a “zone of exception” (p. 39) ^[3], and how this Dengist popular narrative could often be misconstrued for replicating the Shenzhen model in any geography, China or elsewhere.

Du reveals that this zone of exception is actually exceptional in its conception. Fighting against the misconception that Shenzhen could be a “circle” anywhere in the world, a vacuum space void of irrelevance, Du notes instead that Shenzhen’s geographical history and reality had been instrumental to its success. She gathers that the natural and human geography are factored into any theorization of Shenzhen as a “Special Economic Zone.” She theorizes Shenzhen not as a clean slate, but as a place of “centuries-old agrarian spatial patterns” (p. 60) ^[3], going as far back as 100 BCE. She traces the indigenous village settlements that have existed way beyond 1979, a year commonly noted for the “establishment” of Shenzhen, and she understands how these settlement patterns has impacted the city’s growth and development into an economic capital as it is today. In addition, she maintains that the 1982 Master Plan, an early masterplan for Shenzhen and indeed China, considered environmental resources shaped by these settlements in nature, including “rivers, canals, and marshes” central to irrigation of rice fields and fishery ponds. Du thus refutes Shenzhen to be lumped together with the world’s neoliberal ports such as Rotterdam and Hamburg that Easterling proposes in *Enduring Innocence* ^[5], or with China’s own Special Economic Zones in the 1980s including Xiamen, Shangtou, Zhuhai, and Hainan in *Extrastatecraft* ^[6]. This provocation comes from a deep understanding of Shenzhen’s uniqueness, stemming from both coincidental and artificial conditions miraculously converging in the physical territory.

2.3 Spaces in Beijing and China beyond

Professor of architectural history, Cole Roskam, clarifies early in the book that “reform was not an exercise in neoliberalism” (p. 17) ^[7]. He cautions against the blind application of the global neoliberal turn in the 1970s and 1980s, and instead notes the specificity in Chinese society, including its socialist roots and authoritarian ruling. He writes, “reform... was above all, an act of unprecedented creativity” (p. 250) ^[7], as he details the innovative state apparatuses and public-private collaboration models that came out of a spirit of experimentation and improvisation, birthing spaces of unlikely consequences. As he perceptively calls early on, “architecture helps to produce contributing citizens of societies and the social structures upon which people depend, regardless as to whether those structures are capitalist or socialist in their ideological composition” (p. 14) ^[7] — simply put, architecture is not the same as ideology. Echoing this quote, Roskam’s spatial analysis does not try to pigeonhole spaces into global, ideological patterns, but digs deep in everyday practices in which common people transform and adapt spaces into individual, concretized pockets of expediency, makeshift-ness, and contingencies. Roskam offers a phenomenal account of a post-socialism landscape brimming with Chinese characteristics. One of the most illustrative moments is his analysis of the early reform choreography that the government carefully curated to foreign guests coming to experience socialist China. It includes exclusive hotels with elaborate amenities, those that were considered bourgeois luxuries in the then impoverished China. He takes fascination in the ideological chasm contained in an urban space, documenting the spatial protocols such as hotel security and built barriers of access, segregating the proletarian locals from foreign visitors. He contrasts between elaborate hotel interiors, such as the East Addition Dining Room of Beijing Hotel, with the outside geography suffering from the Cultural-Revolution-induced poverty. This image he constructs

move us away from a simplistic category of neoliberal freedom to a situatedness of uneven economic and social agendas. He analyzes that Chinese exceptionalism is a spatial project from the start, and as is known today that it continues to implicate spatially.

3. ARCHITECTURAL TYPOLOGY AND AUTHORSHIP

The last section concludes spatial observations and elaborates on how the three books use architectural and urban design examples in further explicating Chinese exceptionalism. Here, architecture is defined through a cross-examining reading between the interrelated lenses of typology and authorship.

Architectural historian and critic Anthony King’s perspective is drawn to unfold the infrastructural qualities of architectural practice, which as he defines, the former both shaped and is shaped by the latter. In *Building and Society*, he poses first and foremost two questions at once: “What can we understand about a society by examining its buildings and physical environment? What can we understand about buildings and environments by examining the society in which they exist” (p. 1) ^[8]? Rather than treating architecture as aesthetic objects, King reacts by highlighting architecture as simultaneously socially conditioned and conditioning society. This influential stance is undeniably essential in understanding these authors.

The interrelated questions of architectural type and authorship surface in discussions of an architectural infrastructure. Type and authorship are in fact two faces of the same question for architecture. Consider Mario Carpo’s provocation of conceiving an authorial ambition of architecture parallel to a process of technological advancements ^[9], together with Anthony Vidler’s invitation to think typologies through a need for an ontological validation ^[10], both questions point to a consolidation of architectural expertise and institution of knowledge as politically motivated. These authors tackle this double emergence of architectural type

and authorship within the exceptionalist concept of Chinese reform, the deductions of which challenge the Western self-referential system of knowledge. Therefore, these books make contributions not only to Chinese studies, but also to the architectural field where a Western perspective is dominant.

3.1 Architecture in Chinese new towns

The City After Chinese New Towns notes the emergence of architectural typologies around the same time expertise emerged in the new towns. The editors foreground “spaces” that have “their own functional and aesthetic centrality” (p. 131) ^[2], including exhibition halls, high-rise apartments, underground spaces, and urban parks. Repellino suggests exhibition halls as spaces that facilitate the circulation of an architectural commodity in a speculative housing market. These spaces host mock-ups, models, renderings, and other architectural representational forms, and are visited by the public, authorities, developing companies and agencies. Alessandro Armando and Francesco Carota categorize high-rise apartments as a depository of expertise, as common unit types and layout logics recurred in a trend of housing commodification. In new towns, real estate companies commission assignments that emphasize speed, feasibility, and profitability. Valeria Federighi and Filippo Fiandenesi single out underground spaces as crucial to new towns. They remark that a well-designed underground that successfully integrated infrastructural elements like parking and subway networks achieves a market efficiency for these projects (p. 156) ^[2]. Finally, Bianca Maria Rinaldi reviews the role of urban parks in satisfying China’s “virtuous urban model, focused on sustainability and capable of tackling environmental risks” (p. 167) ^[2]. A display of environmental awareness through green spaces is tasked to satisfy a governmental mandate.

The emergence of expertise on these spaces in new towns is mapped against seismic changes in architectural practices in China. In Armando’s and Carota’s account of

high-rise apartments, they note the diminishing agencies of architects as they are tasked to replicate features and compositions of commercially successful projects (p. 147) ^[2]. Put differently, these apartments within new towns tend to design themselves, either as a result of stringent governmental regulations on the design of units, or the inflexible and highly predictable demands of Chinese consumers. Apartments are thus designed as generic spaces, assembling “minor differences in their spatial and architectural features” that are abstracted products (p. 147) ^[2]. Bonino echoes this view by noting the influence of commodification on architectural production. He compiles, on one hand, architectural mimicry examples such as the miniature world tour in Lanzhou New Area or an Eiffel Tower replica in Tianducheng New Town (Sky City), and on the other hand, highly branded projects like the Zhengzhou Kurokawa urban design and a Xiaoqing urban park competition that brought together designers like Standard Architecture, Vector Architects, Pei Zhu, Teamminus, and so on (p. 99) ^[2]. In both scenarios, architectural authorship either reproduces or produces a marketable iconicity, as architects recede to having no real agency in designing these new towns.

3.2 Architecture in the Special Economic Zone

Du’s chapter “Towers by the Hong Kong Border” unpacks the tower typology that dominates Shenzhen’s skyline and public image. She understands typology as a contentious category based on a discriminatory definition of expertise that excludes the contribution of the subaltern. She narrates the early establishment of Shenzhen in the late 1970s and early 1980s, where Shenzhen Infrastructure Corps were among the first builders to build towers in the city. However, behind the typological triumph, Du documents the labor-intensive constructions and the lack of shelter for the migrant workers. Comrades such as Yang Hongxiang were living in regiments that offered horrific living conditions while

constructing Electronics Tower, “First Tower in Shenzhen” (p. 163) ^[4]. More importantly, she notes the towers work debuted neoliberal work contracts with employees, as well as “a variable pay system and floating wages” (p. 166) ^[4] that quickly assumed local and national importance as a precedent of labor conditions. She acutely reads that the rise of tower typology accompanied an emergent financial model that spearheaded labor exploitation, spelling an “end of the communist Iron Rice Bowl policy” (p. 167) ^[4] both within and beyond architecture.

Du’s discussion on authorship followed a similar logic. Overall, she notes the alternative lens of history that deviates from official narratives and popular discourses. In addition to the ignored perspectives of construction workers, she notes that tower as a new typology in China also omitted the contributions of indigenous urban villagers in Shenzhen. She uses the example of Kingkey Financial Tower (KK100) as a case study of such omission. She ridicules British architect Sir Terry Farrell, who is hailed as the single author of this architectural centerpiece. Instead, she outlines the violence behind the displacement of Caiwuwei Village, where a house protested vehemently against the forced land acquisition as a “nail house” (holdout). Subsequently, she argues that Caiwuwei urban villagers like nail house owner Zhang Lianhao, are co-authors to Shenzhen’s shinning towers and development. In her convincing account, she accredits urban villages for providing timely shelters for migrant workers in Shenzhen factories (an appropriate and affordable alternative to poor workers’ dormitories) during Shenzhen’s most ambitious phase of industrializations. Du rejects an advanced capitalist mindset to owe buildings to single authors like Farrell, and instead gestures towards an expanded mode of authorship.

3.3 Internationalized and privatized architecture in post-socialist China

Roskam’s chapter “The International Hotel” identifies hotel as an architectural typology concurrent with the rise of the Special

Economic Zone and a “modernizing agenda” (p. 149) ^[7]. The hotel was the first spatial interface of foreign exchange and served to facilitate foreign direct investment. The demand for these spaces however initiated many scales and levels of reform. For example, joint ventures between the Chinese state and foreign companies were allowed to facilitate funding of projects, while foreigners/overseas Chinese could participate both through investments and expertise in architecture and finance. Famously, diasporic architect I. M. Pei made ideological departures in building the Fragrant Hill Hotel that risked upsetting reform ideologies. Like the questions posed by King, hotels in reform China constituted both the infrastructure of foreign interactivity and the making of it. Like Du’s account of construction workers, Roskam notes a similar housing shortage for hotel housekeeping staff, which in addition to other imbalances in the coastal cities, sparked national protests in the late 1980s.

Next, Roskam cites authorship as the major contention between Western and Chinese ideologies. It is known that Western observers would come to admire “an alternative development model in action that neatly aligned with certain aspects of architectural work, including collaborative teamwork” under late Maoism (p. 61) ^[7]. Under the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, architecture in China was moving cautiously from being a “collectively made art,” and its architect did not rush to distinguish themselves from the “laborer and engineer within a work unit” (p. 63) ^[7]. In the chapter “Architectural Education and the Profession,” Roskam shifts the authorship from design institutions to private and individual practices. He observes a lack of authorship to be symptomatic of an excessively rigid collectivity stemming from “state-run design organs” (p. 216) ^[7], and sees the liberation from them an improved condition for creative production. Roskam comments how post-reform Chinese practices perform differently than “starchitects” rampant in the neoliberal West. He focuses on the “amateurism” that lingers in the works of

Pritzker-Prize-winning Wang Shu, Liu Jiakun, and same-generation architects who come from backgrounds of historical revolution^[7]. They generally hint towards more variegated forms of authorship that forge more connections with the commoner and their craft.

4. URBAN SOCIAL JUSTICE

This section consists of the analysis of how these three publications provided three different but comparable approaches of architectural type and authorship to argue for the exceptionalism of contemporary Chinese social justice issues. Urban social justice is defined as the points of contestations in urban development, where different stakeholder groups in the city compete for resources, and in the process of which their interests are being (de)prioritized over others. Besides, this section examines what is at stake in this exceptionalism, particularly how Western terms are insufficient to cover phenomena in Chinese spaces. It is argued that terming is a way of explicating social justice issues, out of which arise potential solutions. In other words, a Chinese urbanscape that could only be accessed with the right words for its issues. While Western theories such as the Lefebvrian idea of the “right to the city”^[11] or Susan Feinstein’s concept of “the just city”^[12] can offer us general provocations, distinctive theories rooted in the Chinese context, and circumstances should be invented for more direct solutions. More about this exceptionalist discourse could be read from human geographer Wing-Shing Tang’s *Tongbian* philosophy^[13]. In an architectural context, it means to explore the conduits of typology and authorship.

A Western tyranny of architectural typology hindered our assessment of a milieu of social justice issues across different strata of society. In the book, Chinese new town as a typology is decidedly vague and open to interpretation. Governa notes that the typological fluidity of the Chinese new towns overcomes “the predefined horizons of the city and its transformation” (p. 216)^[2]. For example, residential and industrial uses are

mixed, regardless of a region’s definition in the urban, rural, or suburban. Du is also interested in unsettling architectural typologies. In criticizing purpose-built towers and “Technology Parks,” she instead takes interest in urban villages as promising spaces of inspiration, where a mix-use program and informal land use foster diverse and vibrant human activity. Lastly, for Roskam, parallel to the rise of the international hotel is the simmering of societal imbalances and inequality. He insists that the segregationist tactics of foreigner-only hotel as emblematic of the asymmetric policies and contradictions of reform. Thus, one way of dismantling class divide is to deconstruct the givenness of these architectural typologies.

Furthermore, these authors demonstrate the many Chinese exceptionalist authorship models alternative to the Western, single-authored architect. As Bonino shows, the proliferation of architectural objects by Western brand names sustains a speculative economy that thrives on inequality. As Du urges, the ethnographic voices of migrant workers and indigenous urban villagers add friction and texture to a city narrative, hailing Deng as the visionary, or Farrell as the master builder. As Roskam traces, architectural authorship has always occupied a contentious position from the Cultural Revolution to early-reform foreign interactivity, to recent Chinese private practices. These authors simultaneously look to architectural history for insights to democratize/equalize a deeply stratified society that is China today.

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