



Berlin East Asia Review

BEAR Volume 1, Number 1, February (2017)

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Rethinking Urbanization in Modern Chinese History

Lincoln, Toby. *Urbanizing China in War and Peace: The Case of Wuxi County*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 280 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-4100-3.

Rural-urban relations are one of the most intractable sources of social inequality in the People's Republic of China today. As the chief beneficiaries of rising prosperity, urban communities have grown rapidly to now hold more than half of the country's overall population. Meanwhile, those left behind as registered residents of the countryside continue to receive dramatically lower levels of income and public services. Historians have long traced the origins of this rural-urban divide back to at least the early twentieth century, when the growing influence of global capitalism and modern state-building was disproportionately concentrated in China's treaty ports and other urban centers. A concomitant deepening of impoverishment in rural areas helped set the stage for the Communist revolution that eventually engulfed the cities and swept Mao to power by mid-century. However, a new study by Toby Lincoln of urbanization in the first half of the twentieth century challenges this conventional narrative of divergence and dichotomization in rural-urban relations.

Lincoln's book is part of a new phase of diversification in the field of modern Chinese urban history. Whereas a focus on Shanghai once dominated English-language scholarship, recent work on a number of other cities has now enriched our understanding of a wider variety of urban types and patterns of development across China. However, this research has continued to focus on major metropolitan centers such as Beijing, Nanjing, Chengdu, and Guangzhou. Lincoln's study of Wuxi — a city in Jiangsu province with approximately 170 thousand residents by the late 1920s and around another 800 thousand living in the larger county bearing its name — is one of the first to excavate the vast layer of medium-sized urban communities situated between the major metropolises and rural towns. As the book is well designed to capture and convey, such intermediary cities offer fresh perspectives on urban-rural relations. Departing from previous urban histories that rarely venture beyond city limits, Lincoln sets the entire county of Wuxi as the scope of his study, and alternates chapters between its rural and urban areas. He argues

that both areas were significantly transformed by urbanization, defined here not simply as an increase in population density but rather as a process of total societal reorientation from the countryside to the city.

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, discussed in the first three chapters of the book, urbanization in Wuxi County was driven primarily by industrial capitalism. While the central government remained relatively weak and fragmented in the years following the 1911 Revolution, local elites led the way in transforming Wuxi City from a small trading center into a large manufacturing hub that earned the nickname of “Little Shanghai”. Taking advantage of access to international markets through the nearby treaty port, merchant families such as the Rongs and Zhous made fortunes in manufacturing local commodities like silk, cotton, and flour. As Wuxi’s rising leaders, these industrial capitalists bankrolled the construction of new roads, schools, hospitals, and other urban infrastructure projects that, significantly, did not stop at the city limits. In a particularly vivid example of the impact that such investments had in the countryside, Lincoln uses travel guidebooks to trace how the development of tourist sites made rural areas more accessible to urbanites, and even reshaped the natural environment in accord with urban tastes. In other words, the expansion of industrial capitalism was a process that transformed the built environment and daily life in both the city and the countryside simultaneously in the early decades of the twentieth century.

After 1927, the main impetus for urbanization shifted from local elites to the new central government established by the Nationalist party in nearby Nanjing, which Lincoln follows William Kirby in conceptualizing as a “developmental state”. The new government initially asserted its control over urban affairs in Wuxi City by installing a municipal administration under the direct jurisdiction of the Jiangsu Provincial Government. However, changes to national regulations in 1930 withdrew this municipal autonomy from medium-sized cities like Wuxi, which were instead now subsumed under county-level governments. Rural and urban areas alike thus became subject to a unified bureaucratic and regulatory apparatus that promoted their increasing integration through the construction of roads, irrigation, electricity, and other forms of infrastructure. Yet Lincoln qualifies this picture of expanding state capacity in the Nanjing decade with a chapter showing that native place associations continued to provide both the key links tying Wuxi to other nearby cities in a wider regional urban system, as well as essential public services within Wuxi itself, such as relief in times of natural disasters and warfare.

The most traumatic disaster to befall Wuxi during the first half of the twentieth century was undoubtedly the war with Japan, during which the county spent eight long years under foreign occupation. However, despite the extensive destruction suffered during the initial invasion, industrial development led by silk manufacturing recovered quickly after 1937. Lincoln relies on archival reports, newspapers, and survey data produced in the context of the foreign occupation to argue that it was the local Chinese who were responsible for this rapid economic recovery. Although Chinese officials now served within an occupation regime, the Japanese authorities did not significantly hinder their efforts to reconstruct both the city and the countryside. The local bureaucracy was thus not only able to successfully repair damaged infrastructure like bridges and roads, and restore services such as street lighting and the water supply. It also found new opportunities to undertake some projects that had been impossible before the war, including constructing a ring road around the center of Wuxi City. Even when the Japanese occupiers did

project force onto the local populace, for example by placing the city under martial law or locking down the countryside to wipe out resistance, this too had the effect of further extending the machinery of urban-based government and its regulatory apparatus throughout the county. In Lincoln's words, urbanization had by this time become such "an unstoppable force" in Wuxi that even the disruptions and impositions of modern warfare could not derail it.

This book's narrative of unimpeded urbanization in both city and countryside throughout the first half of the twentieth century provocatively complicates the more familiar story of a fundamental division in one of the world's most demographically significant societies. It will therefore be of interest to students of both modern China and of urban history more generally. However, as Lincoln acknowledges in the conclusion, the experience of Wuxi may have differed in certain respects from other parts of China. Two factors that appear to set Wuxi apart are its location at the heart of what was already the most densely populated and prosperous region of the country in the late imperial period (Jiangnan), and its close proximity to the premier treaty port of the early twentieth century (Shanghai). With the lack of other studies that similarly consider Chinese cities together with their rural surroundings, it is therefore difficult to evaluate the general representativeness of the Wuxi case. Nevertheless, Lincoln's pioneering effort will hopefully inspire researchers working on different regions to take up the questions his book raises in terms of rethinking rural-urban relations in modern China.

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