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The traveler who passes from Hong Kong into Canton knows that he has entered a distinctive world. The flamboyant commercialism and hurried pace of capitalist society give way to a more uniform, ordered way of life which is replicated in each city that he visits in China. Features familiar in other parts of the Third World — bulging populations, slums, squatter settlement, beggars, crime, prostitution — seem to have disappeared. Unemployment is not apparent. Families and neighbourhoods seem intact. The traveler may well wonder, as have some students of urbanism in the West, whether China has found a solution to urban ills that might be instructive for other parts of the world.

This is one of the questions that have stimulated Professors Whyte and Parish in this splendid dissection of the contemporary Chinese city. As in their earlier study, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago, 1978), they obtained their primary data from long interviews in Hong Kong, in this case with 133 former residents of cities in various parts of China conducted in 1977-78. The authors organize their analysis around the themes of political economy, family behaviour and quality of life (the three sections of the book), and draw comparisons with pre-1949 China, the capitalist West, European socialist states and the Third World. Although they stress the distinctive character of Chinese cities, their comparative approach should interest students of urban society everywhere.

Chinese cities are distinctive for their tight controls on residence, the result of Communist efforts after 1949 to make them spartan, ordered centres of production. Restrictions on migration, a rigid registration system, and periodic campaigns to move sections of the population “down” to more rural areas, have combined to reverse trends “so typical of other developing societies” and China’s own past. Urban population remains at 21 per cent of the total population, creating a residential stability “unusual for cities anywhere in the world.” Jobs, goods and services are all allocated through a dual hierarchy of neighbourhoods and work units (*danwei*: “something like a company town complex” within the city). Urbanites average eighteen years in the same dwelling, generally sharing kitchen and bathroom facilities. There is a sense of “rootedness,” with little of the mobility and spontaneity of the urban West. One knows one’s neighbours well.

This exception social solidarity does not bring all the advantages that students of Western urbanization might expect. For example, the Chinese neighbourhood offers no “buffer” for the individual against the power of government. Indeed, neighbourhoods with the greatest solidarity tend to

be the most subject to bureaucratic control. Leaders are appointed from above and cannot be ousted, and the state security apparatus permeates the structure. Whyte and Parish illuminate government control over urban neighbourhoods by comparing it to that in Chinese village communities, which can select their own leaders and manipulate or even reject them by popular pressure. Thus the Western notion of escape from rural constraints to the “freedom” of the cities has no application in China. A second finding about social solidarity is that it is not a significant variable in social breakdown (which belies another idea prevalent in the West). Far more important, the authors find, is the availability of “legitimate opportunity” for persons to advance themselves through their own efforts, a point that should interest those concerned with crime control in the West.

The analysis of urban ills is complicated by the timing of the research. The richest data refer to the period immediately following the Cultural Revolution, as reflected by the atrocities that fill informants’ transcripts. The data are thus skewed from the “norm” of China’s development — as though one were to study French cities just after the Reign of Terror. The authors make the best of this situation by arguing that the distinctiveness of Chinese cities is best examined in its “purest” (“Maoist”) form, and then by comparing this form with recent trends to assess what directions urban policy may be taking. Thus in the mid-1970s they find that vast numbers of Chinese urbanites had come to feel themselves victims of the system, not its masters as promised by socialism. A malaise of alienation — a sense of powerlessness and detachment from central values — pervaded urban life. The authors have little information with which to update these findings, and they wonder whether the young may have lost their dedication to the nation so that “China may be forever impaired in its efforts to modernize in a hurry.”

Does Chinese urbanism offer a model for other societies? The authors view the question in the context of the dilemmas that confront any urban system. In China the release of market forces would create problems that the leadership is committed to avoid, yet social planning through an authoritarian, centralized bureaucracy has had a deadening effect on people’s lives which the Cultural Revolution only worsened. Any society that adopted elements of the Chinese model would confront similar dilemmas. “The Chinese experience,” the authors conclude, “shows that reforming the nature of modern cities is a complex business.”

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