



Urban History

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Toby Lincoln, *An Urban History of China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. x + 273pp. 7 figures. 14 maps. 2 tables. Bibliography. £22.99 pbk.
doi:10.1017/S0963926823000305

Perhaps the greatest achievement of this book is the way that Toby Lincoln manages to convey a great enthusiasm for the vibrancy of Chinese cities. Author and reader alike are seduced by these exciting concentrations of humanity where government was concentrated, societal change was accelerated, culture was nurtured, commerce and crime flourished and religion and ideology were played out physically in the architecture and design of public space. To convey the thrilling energy of Chinese cities is particularly impressive in a textbook format, covering a vast stretch of time – the best part of four thousand years – and geography in an accessible style. Significant amounts of information are conveyed clearly, with the crucial knowledge students need to understand urban development and life in China alongside telling details that enliven what could be a dense read. We are invited to picture nine chariots side-by-side ‘thundering past, splattering pedestrians with mud on a rainy day’ to appreciate the urban plan dictating such wide thoroughfares (p. 40) and read contemporary accounts of ‘onlookers as dense as threads in a cloth’ enjoying the spectacle of elephants in imperial processions (p. 95).

Organizing so much material was necessarily challenging. Lincoln’s chapters succeed one another through time chronologically but each chapter is divided according to three themes: the urban system, urban planning and governance and urban life. This format requires a degree of back-and-forth and some repetition, but it means that individual chapters could be set in a course without the need for students to read the whole book. The Introduction summarizes not only the approach to Chinese urban history, but the guiding principles of urban history as a field, such as that urban historians accord cities agency in their own construction and study how urban spaces shape the human relationships that take place within them. The physicality of cities is apparent in the very word for ‘city’ in Chinese: the characters *cheng*, wall, and *shi*, market.

The first chapter draws on the scant archaeological and written evidence to outline the most relevant staging posts in the development of what Lincoln identifies as China’s ‘urban civilization’, with its origins in the Shang dynasty (approximately 1600–1050 BCE), when settlements were closely connected to the capital. Incessant warfare in the Warring States period (481–221 BCE) prompted the basis of imperial bureaucracy to be forged in newly conquered cities for the administration of the surrounding area. By the emergence of China’s first empire in 221 BCE, there were up to nine hundred cities in just the area of central eastern China under Qin rule.

Under the succeeding Han dynasty, the urban plan for Chinese cities mirroring cosmological beliefs about the organization of heaven emerged: a walled square with gates, temples, palaces and roads positioned in a grid. This idealized form is associated most often with Chang'an, the capital of the Western Han dynasty whose walls were finished in 190 BCE and encompassed one million people. Acknowledging debate over whether these early cities changed primarily with political or religious trends, Lincoln presents evidence of both forces, while highlighting commercial influences too. It is the combination of these factors and how they shaped cities across China that he identifies as the 'urban system'.

Chapters 2–4 trace how the urban system, planning and governance developed in imperial China, and how urban life changed according to the culture of the period. Sources range from archaeology, censuses, guidebooks, memoirs and descriptions by sage Mencius and ancient historian Sima Qian, to poetry, mediated through a broad base of historiography. Chapter 5, on the nineteenth century, outlines the impact of foreign imperialism, which was focused on the urban treaty ports, alongside indigenous forces in the creation of what Lincoln terms 'urban modernity'. Chapters 6 and 7 continue the exploration of urban modernity in Lincoln's primary period of expertise, the twentieth century, nodding to the devastation of war on the way to the recreation of urban space to reflect communist power. Rapid urbanization characterized the post-1978 reform era, with the emergence of megacity regions and the tipping point in 2015 when China's urban population reached 771 million and 50 per cent of the population, making it 'the world's largest urban society' (p. 227).

There are necessarily many omissions and topics addressed too fleetingly in a book of this scope. Lincoln highlights the environment, gender, children and disability as areas that deserve more attention. Instructors will need to point students to other publications for these topics, including Susan Mann's excellent *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, published in the same Cambridge University Press series of New Approaches to Asian History. Tantalizing mentions of crucial developments, such as an underground sewage system pre-dating imperial China, are left dangling, requiring the intrigued reader to follow up the footnotes. But no textbook can be comprehensive and the book balances coverage with readability well.

An Urban History of China should be read by urban historians wanting an introduction to Chinese cities for themselves or their students, and by scholars and students of China seeking an overview of Chinese urban history from antiquity to the present. Newcomers to the subject will be richly informed while specialists will appreciate the masterful synthesis across time and space – and all will appreciate Lincoln's enthusiasm for China's 'urban civilization'.

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