

Preface

In 2015, one hundred years passed since Robert Park published his seminal article “The city: Suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the city environment” in *The American Journal of Sociology*. It provided an agenda for the nascent Chicago School of urban sociology, which came to shape urban research for decades to come. One hundred years later, much has changed, both in the urban world itself and in the urban research that reflects on those changes. Globalization and accelerated urbanization have involved a remarkable transformation in cities around the world, and nowhere as dramatically as in China. Chinese cities have undergone a transition marked by unprecedented scales and speeds, across economic, political, and social systems, and with extraordinary variations from ghost cities to urban villages and megacity regions. As a result, it is the Chinese city that is now under the spotlight—as was the American city a century ago.

In urban research much has also changed. The human ecology approach that Park and others initiated has lost most of its allure, and heated discussions on the parochialism of urban theory have dominated journal pages. Meanwhile, new urban forms, new urban economies, and new urban geographies have instigated new literatures and new research agendas. Enormous changes in China have resulted in a rapidly growing scholarship investigating the “great transformation” of cities in China, as well as the urban experience and the relevant policy responses to the challenges that cities face today. The emergence of this and related literatures on cities in a variety of social and cultural settings has resulted in pleas for a more worldly urban studies, encapsulating the experience of cities extending beyond the “West.”

Against this background, this book invites specialists on urban China to reflect on the relevance of Park’s article on “The city” for today—for cities in China, for urban research, and for questions about studying the social life of the city. After all, China’s cities, with their unprecedented growth and massive urban–rural migration, today display characteristics that in certain ways are remarkably similar to America’s cities like Chicago one hundred years ago. Again, radical urban changes are supported by

technological innovations for transport and communication: the Internet, the high-speed train, and global logistics systems. Again, mass migration brings a diversity of urbanites together in unfamiliar settings; their mobility again uproots established traditional patterns of Chinese social life. But while many themes picked up by Park seem relevant today, at the same time the Chinese city has a radically different urban structure than the mid-century American city. And while the physical transformation of China's cities and the applied research developing its infrastructure and planning its resources are well charted, urban sociology is only starting to catch up with the dynamics and contours of Chinese urbanism. The aim of the book is therefore to take Park's essay as a point of departure to offer a critical reflection on both the research on urban China and the issues that Chinese cities face.

Coming from a diversity of specializations, the contributors engage with Park in different ways. The first half of the book considers Park more explicitly, discussing how Park's questions can be transplanted, and whether they should be. Chapters 1 and 2 offer reflections on Park in his time, providing some historical context for his work and reminding us of much earlier connections between his urban sociology and Chinese scholars. These explicit engagements reflect also on the nature of urban research and theory, particularly for urban China as illustrated in Chapters 3 and 4. Throughout, the questions of comparativism and commensurability are raised both theoretically and empirically by Chapters 5 and 6, and also in Chapter 1.

The second half of the book presents more distinct perspectives that reflect the varied and subjective directions that research on cities in China is now beginning to take. These chapters focus more on empirical investigation in order to reflect back on cities in China. They offer insights into urgent issues around new forms of urban inequality, and new approaches to studying the city. Chapter 7 scales back the lens to the neighborhood while Chapter 8 takes a cultural studies approach to the Beijing ring roads. Chapter 9 offers a rich empirical study of subjective well-being while Chapter 10 takes a qualitative approach to studying the "psychophysical" realm of rural migrant workers. Chapter 11 explores the way middle-classness is constituted and experienced in the Chinese city amid a broader process of social restratification. The final chapter concludes with thoughts on Chinese exceptionalism, arguing that instead of seeking out new dominant models or urbanisms, ethnographic approaches may offer more valuable and novel theoretical insights.

The book thus aims to offer readers a timely respite from the eruption of urban China research, to reflect on what the city in China contributes to urban studies more generally. Though Park was a starting

point and inspiration for this volume, the contributors represent a range of perspectives that would disrupt any notion of a monolithic “Chinese School” that follows in the footsteps of Chicago. Indeed, the very idea of “following” in a developmentalist trajectory is roundly rejected throughout this volume. Yet many voices simultaneously reiterate that the experiences of displacement, segregation, or social class are not isolated.

This book is intended for a broad audience of urban studies scholars from geography and sociology, as well as policy makers and planners. These contributions will hopefully find an audience beyond China area specialists, as they provide a valuable addition to scholarship on urban theory, and the endeavor of theorization. For a constantly evolving field, *The city in China* serves as a reflection on how to engage with a giant of urban studies without an agenda of rehabilitation or rejection.

This book emerged from a workshop organized by the Urban Research Group at the City University of Hong Kong in 2016 with the theme, “‘The City’ One Hundred Years On.” Contributors were asked to submit papers reflecting on the relevance of Robert Park for their research. Taking place over two days, the workshop also offered substantive discussion about issues around conducting research in urban China, and theory and discipline more generally, as well as issues of commensurability, methodology, and the institutional and historical settings of doing urban studies in the US and China. This book comprises revised papers from this workshop.

