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China's Third Revolution: Tensions in the Transition towards a Post-Communist China,
Ian G. Cook and Geoffrey Murray
Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 2001. 280pp. photo plates, index. £50 (hbk)
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Dramatic economic growth and social transformations in urban and rural China have been the focus of many studies by scholars in and out of China. The pace of political reform has been much slower than the economic and urban reforms although intensifying economic restructuring, social as well as regional polarization have been of great concern to Chinese leaders, scholars and the public. Ian Cook and Geoffrey Murray have followed closely on the recent social, economic and spatial developments in China as the first author makes frequent visits to China while the second author has been stationed in Beijing for years. In this book, two authors proposed an interesting thesis that a third significant revolution is going on in China following the 1911 upheavals ending the imperial rule and the civil war leading to the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The authors presented and discussed the progress and problems in a selection of key areas to support their thesis. Although it is debatable whether the scale of change taking place amounts to a revolution or to a gradual transition from a planned economy to a (socialist) market economy, the various facets and problems documented, described and analyzed in this book will be of great interest to readers who like to discover the rapidly changing China.

The book has ten chapters in total. Except for the introduction and concluding chapters, the authors examined the reform of public sector and a case study on steel industry in chapters two and three. Chapters four and five considered the issue of regional disparity. The sensitive issue of ethnic minorities in China was examined in chapter six.

Chapter seven and eight turned to the issues in urban areas with a case study on housing reform. The environmental challenges in China were discussed in chapter nine. Throughout the book, the authors presented rich empirical data and observations to readers from a variety of sources. The authors made a right balance in terms of reporting both good and bad news of China and the views from Chinese government and officials and the views of dissidents and western observers on some critical issues. For example, on the issue of ethnic minorities, the authors documented the extensive autonomous rights and the economic development in autonomous regions concentrated with ethnic minorities. On the Tibet issue, arguments reflecting the view of Chinese government were extensively cited while the alternative view of some Tibetans in exile was also included. The authors argued that a great deal of foreign comment on Tibet was misinformed although they also pointed out that the firm position of Chinese government on state security might cause western observers to be suspicious of Chinese goodwill in Tibet. The book also includes 31 useful boxes each providing concise information on a specific case. 32 photo plates are also valuable in illustrating the Chinese reality and changes.

However, the book lacks a theoretical framework to account for the social and political development in China with only a brief reference to the struggle between leftist/quasi Maoist conservatives and liberal academics, legislators and government consultants (p. 246). The idea of “third revolution” is eye-catching but the link between economic/spatial transformation and the political revolution was not clearly identified in the book. The authors hinted in various pages that communism’s survival in the 21st century was not assured, hence the “China deconstructs” scenario, and that China would not be an easy country for the rest of the world to deal with (pp. 76&253). Various tensions, conflicts and problems in the Chinese society documented in detail by the authors may contribute to such a tendency. But no plausible logic was proposed by the authors other than their goodwill for a complete abandonment of SOEs (p.238) and a democratic society with a transparent, clean and efficient government full of informed debate among the public.

Some of authors’ arguments are not logical or in conflict with each other. For example, being much concerned with the social cost of reform such as increasing unemployment and poverty, the authors argued that the pace of reform should be adjusted

while insisting complete abandonment of SOEs mentioned above. It also appears meaningless to insist that the socialism in post-reform period should continue to guarantee job security (p. 40). The largest employment pressure actually came from rural sector that was not a problem of SOEs. High-tech economy so far was still a small faction of Chinese economy. Problem of urban unemployment was largely resulted from the closure of SOEs rather than the quality of labor force as millions of unskilled rural migrants found jobs in Pearl River Delta (pp. 38-9). In the steel industry, it is arguable that mini-mills could be an important alternative at the local level concerning low efficiency and high environmental cost (p. 60), prevailing in rural township enterprises (p. 209). The authors reported that there had been increasing complaints about irrational government policies, local protectionism and the poor quality of Chinese officials since 1996 (p. 241). These might be real. But a close examination is surely needed to see whether the situation has become worse or the expectation of foreign firms has increased. The same page acknowledged that foreign firms were keen to replace expensive expatriates with local staff to reduce staff cost. The authors noticed the cultural imperialism or westernization coming along with the rapid urbanization (pp. 166-73). While it is important to conserve historical tradition and heritage like Beijing's Hutong, the book did not touch upon considerable interaction and integration between Chinese cultural and western culture and the process of embedding western cultural locally that may be taking place.

Apart from the major issues above, there are also some minor problems. For example, the reference that "towns should be reclassified as cities" was likely referring to "counties" rather than "towns" (p. 148). The term Hong Kong-Guangdong-Shenzhen Triangle may not be appropriate as Shenzhen is part of Guangdong (p. 60). A proper term is Hong Kong/Shenzhen -Guangzhou - Macao/Zhuhai Triangle. It would also be preferable to indicate the all place names and dates for all photo plates.

Overall, this is an interesting and highly informative book for a wide range of readers. In the meantime, readers will wait anxiously for more rigid and critical analysis of the on-going political-social-economic transformations in the country, a daunting task for any scholar due to the extremely complex processes and diversities in China.