Introduction

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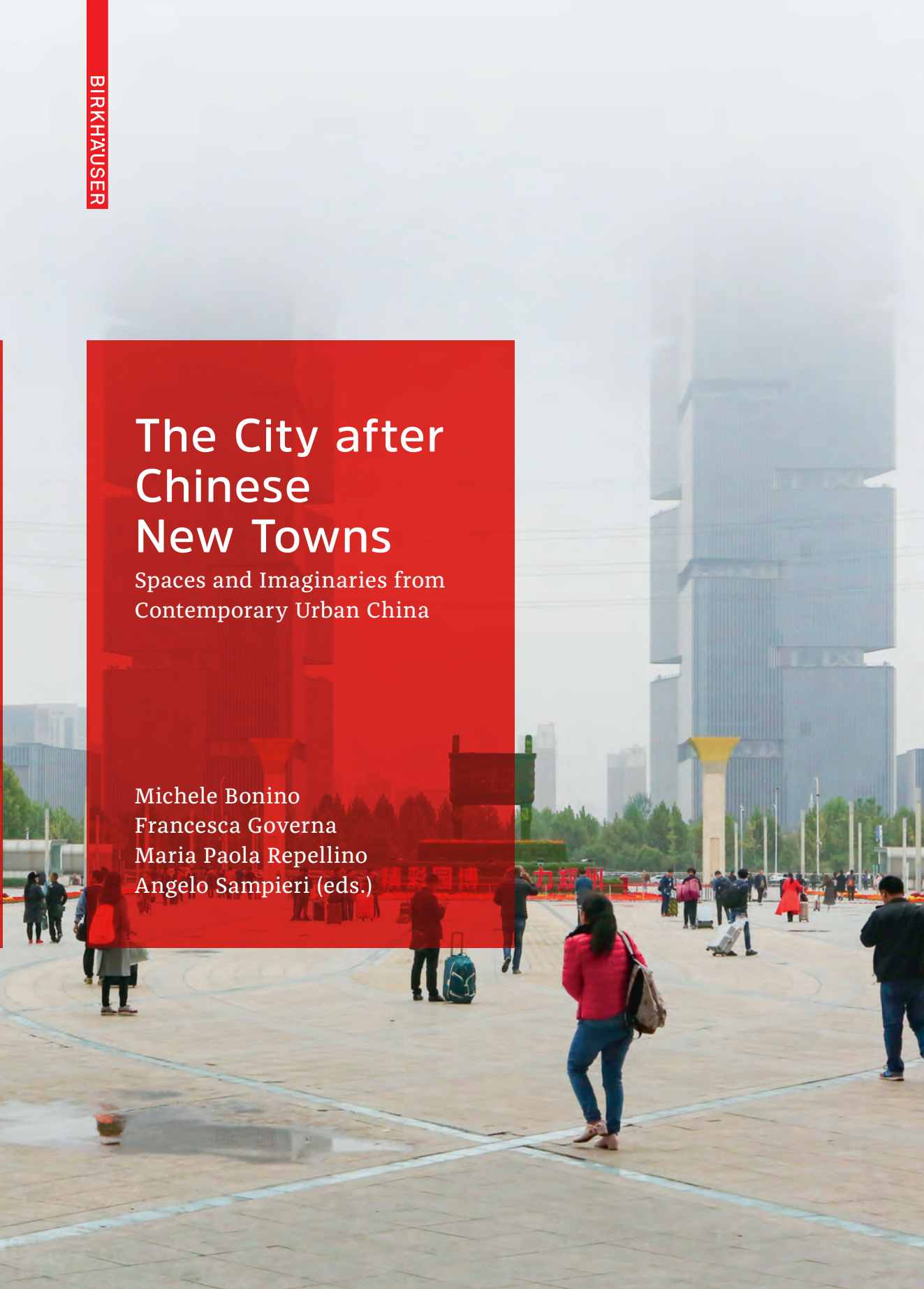
The City after Chinese New Towns

Spaces and Imaginaries from Contemporary Urban China

Michele Bonino
Francesca Governa
Maria Paola Repellino
Angelo Sampieri (eds.)



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I. Introduction

Questioning New Towns

Michele Bonino, Francesca Governa, Maria Paola Repellino, Angelo Sampieri

In the early twenty-first century, the Chinese Government announced its decision to build twenty new cities every year for the next twenty years; in total, approximately four hundred new cities were to be designed and built before 2020 (Shepard, 2015; Fang and Yu, 2016; Wakeman, 2016).[1] While this is a substantial financial and organisational undertaking, the proliferation of new towns is not limited to China but involves most of the regions of the world with the highest urbanisation rates (India and other countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East; Keeton, 2011; Moser, 2014; Greenfield, 2016). In fact, the current period can be considered "the most intensive period of new cities building (…) since the peak of colonial expansion" (Moser, Swain and Alkhabbaz, 2015, p. 74).

New towns are not a novelty: they have an established history and theoretical framework, and they provide well-known experiences (Hall, 1988; Hall and Ward, 1998; Wakeman, 2016). Building new planned settlements in China is one of the strategies of "city making", at least since the mid-twentieth century.[2] However, these strategies change over time, as do the results. The *satellite towns* built between 1950 and 1980 were part of a policy of "industrialisation without urbanisation" (Pow, 2012; Ren, 2013). Their main role was to encourage industrial enterprises to locate their plants around big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (Gu, Wei and Cook, 2015; Wu, 2015 a, p. 29 *et foll.*; Shen and Wu, 2017). After the 1970s, with the advent of economic reforms and the opening up of the market, new towns became one of the tools to not only implement economic development strategies, but also attract businesses and investments as well as promote real estate to overcome public housing provisions and invest in special economic zones (Cao, 2015; She, 2017). In particular, urban housing became a type of commodity and, from the nineties onwards, the housing reform became "in essence, a campaign to privatise the country's state-owned housing" (Cao, 2015, p. 24).[3]

Many elements must be combined and superimposed in order to establish a framework of policy and actions in which, unlike the period prior to the eighties, cities become a country's economic growth engine, both as regards production and consumption (Wu, 2007; 2016 a). To exploit the comparative advantage provided by the huge pool of relatively cheap labour, the national economic policies adopted during the first economic reform period focused chiefly on investments in the production of goods for export, the adoption of a market regime by cities on the east coast and the launch of the Special Economic Zones of Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen (Wu, 1999; Yeung, Lee and Kee, 2009). However, economic development (and policy) was organised only at the national scale; cities were considered to provide undifferentiated support to locate State industries (Yusuf and Nabeshima, 2008; Wu, 2016 a). Later on, institutional reforms – especially decentralisation processes and the fiscal reform of the nineties – redefined the relationship between central and local governments, more specifically as regards fiscal and economic matters.[4] In turn, *land reform* in the year 2000 prompted

local governments to implement entrepreneurial strategies and "land-based local development" (Wu, 2016 a, p. 1139), which was, to a great extent, land-based *urban* development. All these reforms sparked not only a political-institutional set-up, but also a new spatial organisation that acknowledged urbanisation, and thus urban expansion, as one of the undeniably most efficient mechanisms with which to facilitate economic growth. These changes underscored the city as the place in which, and through which, it was possible to support and facilitate capital accumulation (Shen and Wu, 2017).[5] "Urban entrepreneurialism [gradually] drove the city to expand its territory, to enter into coalitions with development partners and to compete with other cities in order to gain the central position in the region" (Wu, 2016 a, p. 1139).

The chiefly urban-based "rampant" entrepreneurialism of local Chinese governments has often been linked to the market-oriented urban policies David Harvey wrote about in 1989, labelling it a sort of "inevitable destiny" of Western countries in a late capitalist age. The *growth machine* became the reference model required to understand Chinese urban governance (Wu, 2015 a). However, institutional conditions radically called into question the destiny acknowledged as inevitable in the West, giving rise to the "Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" (Wang, 2003; later also cited by Harvey, 2005) created by the merger of Party, State and the market: a mix of "asymmetric political and fiscal concentration and decentralisation of economic decision-making" (Wu, 2016 b, p. 340). Within this complex game of relationships between central and local governments, "the central government uses economic performance indicators (especially growth domestic product – GDP – growth rate) to measure and promote local government officials" (Wu, 2016 b, p. 340). In turn, by controlling the use of *urban land*, local governments control a key resource of economic dynamics; at the same time, an increasing slice of the tax revenues of local governments comes from the transfer of land use rights to *developers* (Glaeser *et al.*, 2017).

The main features of the Chinese transition or, better still, of the transformation of China "away from state socialism" (Ma, 2002; Yeoh, 2010 a) are: the shift to a State-regulated market economy; the growing role of local governments in fiscal administration and economic management; industrial manufacturing development triggered to a great extent by the global market; and the "commodification" of land and houses.[6] This institutional, economic and political transformation was boosted by the dynamics of urbanisation in which "the relationship between the central city and its suburbs [shifted] from one characterized by scattered industrial satellite towns with a vast rural area for vegetable cultivation, to one of suburban new towns and a globalizing central area that formed a unified global city region" (Wu, 2016 a, p. 1139). New towns thus become part of a new, emerging space; they not only act as a multifunctional "planned support" for the market, but also as the new centres of the spatial reconfiguration of regional urban systems based on the *global city-regions* model (Xu and Yeh, 2010; Shen and Wu, 2017).[7]

Although Chinese new towns are part of this physical, institutional, political, economic, local and global framework, they are less well-known and difficult to include in a

discourse, tradition and process that has already taken place. It is not easy to even define exactly what new towns in China really are. This is neither a purely linguistic problem, nor is it exclusively linked to the difficulty of circumscribing – in the restricted space of a new town masterplan – the accumulated transformations typical of an explosive urbanisation process that saves nothing. Nor does it depend on their differences to a theoretical framework and experiences on which the West has built a precise narrative that is not followed here. The misunderstandings, ambiguities and opaqueness that Chinese new towns create, compared to something we believe we are already familiar with in terms of definition, space and history, makes both the new town and our subjective evaluation ambiguous.

In contemporary China, the term new town indicates spaces that are different, even institutionally different: *new towns*, *new districts*, *new areas*, *new cities*, etc.[8] These nouns share the adjective new, but the adjective can always be replaced by something even newer (cfr. Shepard, 2015, or the studies by the International New Towns Institute on *new* new towns).[9] Furthermore, Wakeman (2016) considers *new* to be a very vague term that can be used as an interpretative category or, more radically, "is enabled by an assertion of distinctiveness which is frequently framed by forgetfulness or denial, not innocent of power relations" (Robinson, 2013, p. 663). In fact, imbuing the adjective *new* with its own interpretative content necessarily means specifying why it is new (compared to what). It involves a comparison, a differentiation and a here and there. As a result, the ambiguity intrinsic to Chinese new towns is the ambiguity of an observation suspended between the upgrading of theoretical and conceptual frameworks (and experiences) of Western urbanism and the openness towards an urban theory "beyond the west" (Edensor and Jayne, 2012).

Instead, many descriptions of contemporary new towns in China date to the heyday of the twentieth-century *new town movement* (between 1945 and 1975). Using Ebenezer Howard's *garden city* as a banner, they are included in a long story which, going backwards and forwards in time, focuses on planning and utopian theories (cfr. the more or less critical views by Yuen, 1996; Tan, 2010; Hoffmann, 2011; Shao, 2015), and then provides several examples of new towns in relation to the different phases of Chinese urbanisation processes. It is not clear what links twentieth-century new towns in the West to the many, albeit different kinds of contemporary new towns. Probably this question has no answer, so it is pointless to ask. In Chinese new towns the desire for a city is not utopia and, above all, it is not *newtopia*, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon megalopolises (Rodwin, 1956) or American new urbanism (Katz, 1994).[10] Rather than a sign of bourgeois utopia (Fishman, 1987) or some *suburban dream* (Allen, 1977), it is the opposite (Taylor, 2015). Chinese new towns are not the product of univocal specialisation – city of entertainment, science, institutions – even if they are often labelled with the name of some of the brands that characterise them.[11] They are not exclusive, closed spaces like the new towns crossed by secular and religious utopias, or marked by apartheid. They do not colonise land in order to use its resources, like many colonial or mining cities, but are instead new settlements that gradually occupy all available land, transform property rights, shatter administrative boundaries, modify the

country's economic structure as well as the status and lifestyles of the people. Unlike the history of European satellite cities, they were built to create new expansion, not to limit it. Again and again, the roots of this expansion lie in new towns; a nucleus used by urbanisation to consolidate in order to continue and be acknowledged and recognised. The real stakes seem to be available land and the real game to be played is to proudly and allusively show (and sell) new towns on the global market.

New towns, *new districts*, *new areas* and *new cities* are found almost everywhere. Settlement logic and strategies do not leave much room for generalisation on the right location, the right topography, the most rational relationship with the surroundings, or the most balanced economic and demographic equilibrium. Moving westwards, new expansions are undoubtedly one of the key tools of national strategies to rebalance the traditional gap between eastern, central and western regions (according to the regionalisation formally adopted by the Seventh Five-Year Plan dated 1986), and reduce the concentration of the population and activities in coastal megacities.[12] But where exactly? In which areas? In consolidated cities, on their outskirts, hundreds of kilometres away from old centres, between big industrial settlements, in the empty spaces between new infrastructures, or in free piecemeal sites of suburban expansion where once there were forests, water, deserts and the countryside? The new towns in each of these areas create patterns that model reality according to standard classifications and accumulation.

Social, political and economic processes are present in these spaces (whichever they may be and however bounded), but at the same time they have nothing to do with the context in which they take place. The masterplans displayed in exhibition halls, and hung here and there in new expansion areas, refer to a physical space that acts only as a purely technical support: strict zoning alternates Central Business Districts, shopping centres, residential areas – villas, gated communities, towers – scientific parks, etc. These areas socially and physically separate residential districts from shopping, working and leisure spaces. Within polymorphic sequences of internally homogeneous environments, the designed space of Chinese new towns challenges every principle of hierarchy, density, proximity, *mixité*, compatibility and incompatibility of functions, social relationships, uses and practices due to the way in which these principles have been developed and studied within compact and scattered twentieth-century morphologies: from the *megalopolises* of Geddes (1915), Gotmann (1961) and Hall (1966) to the *world cities* of Braudel (1985), Friedmann (1986), Sassen (1991), Castells (1996) and Taylor (2004). Space in Chinese new towns is not defined and designed based on modern urbanity models that continually compose and recompose differences and heterogeneous features around a centre or within an isotropic space outside the centre (Sieverts, 2003; Secchi, 2005). Likewise, they do not involve only the reproduction of the ingredients of a uniform and unifying global urbanity (Thrift, 2000). At the same time, physical and social frameworks move beyond the traditional idea of the city as a bounded and universally replicable settlement and reflect the differentiated, varied and multi-scalar nature of contemporary urban reality (Brenner and Schmidt, 2015).

A new physical and social urbanity is planned and presented using material infrastructures, new technologies, rhetoric and official speeches. This urbanity invents and communicates its differences and alterity vis-à-vis the past; it builds and changes reality and creates alternative urban orders. By so doing, Chinese new towns reflect a morphologically homogeneous model reminiscent of the imaginary, capable of providing an immediate and direct form to the (global) myth according to which the main road leading to economic growth involves "building big and fast" (Datta, 2016).

Sorace and Hurst (2016) highlight the fact that most studies on Chinese new towns underscore the role they play (or are asked to play) to accommodate the rural population that emigrates annually towards cities, and to tackle the needs created by the sheer numbers of internal migrants. Nevertheless, these new settlements tend to focus primarily on satisfying the demand for housing, consumption and production by the new urban elite. They are one of the key tools in national economic development strategies aimed at sustaining growth and attracting businesses and activities. They are an extraordinarily effective mechanism to boost the revenue of local authorities and, more generally, to promote the Chinese urban dream (Taylor, 2015).[13] This is an ambitious dream that often turns either into a nightmare or into the materialisation of a contemporary urban dystopia, as in most stories and photographic reportages about ghost towns.[14] A dream in which the material construction of new towns is accompanied by a social engineering plan aimed not only at creating a new middle class with increasingly global consumption and behavioural patterns, but also an economic growth programme for a country not content to be the "factory of the world", but which assertively wishes to conquer the frontiers of innovation and research (Tomba, 2004; Gerth, 2010).

In short, there is more to new towns than meets the eye: They represent an evolving urban world; they are Chinese and also global; they are physically peripheral compared to consolidated centralities and yet also define "new" centralities in a broader urban field. It doesn't matter if they are beautiful or ugly, empty or filled. They ask questions and question us: Where are their boundaries? What is their relationship with the urbanisation processes they are part of? Which economic, political and design mechanisms create and legitimise them? For whom are the houses, streets, stations, start-ups, skyscrapers and shopping centres intended? What kind of city and architecture is designed and built in and by these new settlements? What orders, rules and hierarchies exist in these spaces which, taken together, deny what exists and assert an alleged novelty? New towns are designed and built; they are real and virtual; they are specific and generalised examples of an urbanity that cannot be pigeonholed, placed into predefined categories, or inserted into consolidated interpretation and design models. They elude attempts to include their characteristics within the vagueness of *tabula rasa*, negation, mistake and defect: cities built from scratch (Herbert and Murray, 2015); examples of *fast urbanisation* disconnected from its physical and social context, global in form, logic, players and the imaginary (Datta and Shaban, 2016); experiments of a dystopian urban future, with no depth or quality (Pow, 2015).

We can either make light of this challenge or accept it as part of the history of cities, full of contamination and hybridisations in which "the centre of our urban imaginary has often shifted" (Secchi, 2005, p. 168). The ambiguity of new towns is not only an ineliminable fact, it is also a possibility to shake up categories and models and question these simultaneously simple and complex objects as if they were litmus tests absorbing and reverberating the characteristics and contradictions of Chinese urbanisation processes, quite beyond the exceptionality of demographic data. Retracing the processes that provide material and symbolic form to these places allows us to question the spatiality of transformation as if it were an outcome greater than the object in which it is implemented, both physically and in terms of the impact it creates, thereby encompassing multiple scales and dimensions. By adopting a flexible, open interpretative framework, Chinese new towns become a laboratory in which and from which we can observe the characteristics and current changes in contemporary cities (Wu, 2016 b): Questioning new towns is a way to question what cities are (and what have they become) in China and elsewhere.

What Are We Talking about when We Talk about Cities?

Starting in the early twenty-first century, Koolhaas's revisitation of Mao's *The Great Leap Forward* (Koolhaas *et al.*, 2002) was the mantra behind a wave of studies, research, scientific publications, photographic reportages and newspaper articles describing Chinese cities and the great urbanisation that spread across China since the late seventies (including: Friedmann, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Wu, 2006 and 2007; Logan, 2008; Ren, 2013; Wang, Kee and Gao, 2014; Zhang, LeGates and Zhao, 2016; Liang *et al.*, 2016). If, in the early days, everyone concentrated primarily on the Pearl River Delta and Shanghai, after the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and the increasing presence of international professionals and scholars, the focus rapidly shifted to other cities. And it's still going strong. As strong as the endless increase in settlements and the non-stop housing boom covering the landscape with railways, dams, bridges, motorways, gated communities, skyscrapers and shopping centres, making China "the largest construction site in the world today" (Zhu, 2009, p. 169). This astonishing transformation involves not only the cities which the complicated institutional set-up in China classifies as first-level centres – Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongqing – but also other big and small cities, villages and rural areas meandering and spreading everywhere, from Inner Mongolia to the provinces of Gansu and Guizhou (Lin, 2013). In many cases, urban models of central cities are reproduced in detail based on a mechanism that considers repeatability and emulation to be two of the most important values in an age-old culture in which the transmission of models in this vast territory has always been a key element. For example, in 2009, the government-sponsored Binhai New Area provided Northern China with a port as big as the ones in Shanghai (Central China) and Shenzhen (South China). The logistic and functional rationale behind the settlement included the construction of a Central Business District similar to that of Pudong in terms of image, size and spectacularity. However, the activation and role of the new

port cannot be taken for granted: in fact, the enormous infrastructures that are still being built along the port actually bypass it, transporting the containers directly from the port to the central cities of Beijing and Tianjin.

The signature style of urban China is the concentration of people, institutions, businesses, emulation, dynamism, speed, gigantism, spectacular buildings and events. Many books and articles begin by talking about numbers and the speed with which change takes place: between 1978 and 2014, the urban population increased from 18 % to 54.8 % of the total population of China. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2014), annual migratory flows involve over sixteen million inhabitants who move from rural to urban areas. The objective of State policies and the 2014–2020 National Urbanisation Plan is to achieve a 60 % urbanisation rate and an increase of one hundred million new inhabitants in urban areas by 2020 (Chan, 2014; Zhang, LeGates and Zhao, 2016).[15] Huge numbers, exceptionally rapid changes and a violent process "unprecedented in the history of humanity" (Miller, 2012; World Bank, 2014) or, as David Harvey (2005) writes, "the largest mass migration the world has ever seen" (p. 127). But what amazes Harvey most (2012) is the "speculative scale" of Chinese urban development: although "urban development since the mid-nineteenth century, if not before, has always been speculative, (…) the speculative scale of Chinese development seems to be of an entirely different order than anything before in human history" (p. 60). Chinese exceptionality thus finds further confirmation.

The data describes unquestionable processes of change which are, however, more questionable than they may appear at first sight. They are ambiguous and complex; they can be interpreted in different ways and refer to incomplete and contingent "objects" – urban population, cities – that are defined based on objectives, power relations, different institutional organisations and economic and social practices. What Roy (2016) highlights about India holds true for China: "The rural, like the urban, is not a morphological description, but rather an inscription of specific regulations and logics of territory, land and property" (p. 818). Rather than antinomic representations to more or less faithfully describe what exists (e.g., the different densities of the population and built), urban and rural are first and foremost organisational categories established by the State. These two words refer to different land regimes: urban land is owned by the State, while rural land is collectively owned.[16] There is often no correspondence between Chinese urban delimitation and Western-style urban features: "The limit of the city (*shi*) administrative unit (…) generally comprises both city districts and counties. Thus, this 'city' includes both an urbanized core (high-density built-up area) and extensive rural areas, primarily agricultural but with occasional towns (*zhen*). The urban core, together with some close-in areas, is administratively divided into 'city districts' (*shiqu*), and the surrounding rural areas (with towns) into counties (*xian*). The city districts comprise the administratively defined urban area (…), while the counties are administratively rural" (Chan, 2007, pp. 386–387).

Chan (2007, 2010 a and 2014) has repeatedly emphasised how, in China, not only the system used to collect and process socio-economic and demographic data, but also

the delimitations of cities are extremely confused and complex, so much so that answering an (ostensibly) simple question, "What is the biggest city in China?", is rather embarrassing. In fact, it's possible to choose between eight different urban population indicators. To answer the question, we would have to solve two dilemmas and then crosscheck them. The first dilemma is the traditional division of the Chinese population based on the household registration system established in 1958 (known as *hukou*). The *hukou* system divides the population into rural and urban residents; this has an important fallout in economic and social terms as well as for access to services. The system is behind the origin of the substantial difference between "urban population *de facto*" (i.e., the population in a city) and "urban population *de jure*" (i.e., the population in a city with an urban *hukou*).[17] This differentiation involves data that is neither marginal nor negligible considering that roughly 20 % of the current urban population *de facto* does not have an urban *hukou*, and is therefore not an urban population *de jure* (Zhang, LeGates and Zhao, 2016). The second dilemma concerns the different "city types" in the Chinese institutional system: provincial-level cities, deputy-provincial cities, provincial capital, prefecture-level cities, county-level cities and towns (Ma, 2002; Chan, 2010 a).[18] So which city and which urban population?

We appear to be faced with an enigma, a huge puzzle that changes over a period of time and is practically impossible to solve.[19] Between 1978 and 2003, the number of cities shot up from 193 to 658 (Liang *et al.*, 2016); between 1983 and 1999, 380 *counties* were (administratively) turned into cities (Ma, 2002); between 1996 and 2006, 171 *counties* (mostly in suburban areas) were converted into *urban districts* (Wu, 2016 a). One of the city making modalities adopted in China is to administratively change the status of a place. The different forms of political action with which to pursue this "administrative urbanization" include: abolishing a county to establish a city, an entire county becoming a city and changing a county to a city, city-led counties (i.e., the decision to place the counties adjacent a city under the jurisdiction of said city) and changing suburban counties into city districts (Ma, 2002, p. 1560 *et foll.*).[20] According to Sorace and Hurst (2016), administrative urbanisation is part of an extensive ensemble of tools used by local governments to achieve urbanisation: "from administrative border-drawing to expropriation of rural land and investment in expanding urban infrastructure" (p. 305); from the construction of an urban façade that looks like a city but has no "typically urban" infrastructures and economic activities, to the replica of famous cities and *themed cities* (like the very famous programme in Shanghai entitled "One city, nine towns").

Since 1996, UN statistics have testified not only to a relentless increase in urban populations all over the world, but also to the imminent arrival of a veritable crossroads in history (urban population exceeding rural population; UNFPA, 2007). Much like the *urban age* thesis based on this data, so too does the extraordinary increase in urbanisation in China warrant a word of warning.[21] The methodological and empirical limits as well as the theoretical and more radically ontological aporias which, according to Brenner and Schmidt (2014), contradict the *urban age* thesis, appear to also be the limits and aporias of the attempts to reliably certify urbanisation processes in China.[22] One

aspect of our traditional difficulty is understanding what we're talking about when we talk about urban populations (and cities) – i.e., whether we are talking about the population *de facto* or the population *de jure*, a provincial-level city or a town. This problem is compounded by the difficulties we have with the following: an extremely stratified and unstable institutional organisation; the enduring urban/rural differentiation used to define several populations; different regimes of land ownership and different rights; the "city making" modalities that cannot be pigeonholed into consolidated categories and, finally, the way in which cities are traditionally defined, studied and designed (Brenner, 2016).

Between the Exceptional and the Ordinary

Reforms and opening up the market are behind the transition (or transformation, cfr. Ma, 2002) of the Chinese economic system and its declared objective: the construction of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Yeoh, 2010 b).[23] Although vague, the objective reveals a rejection of the predefined categories of Western capitalism and the processes of change in former Soviet Bloc countries. It indicates "a trajectory (...) that is neither 'communist' nor 'capitalist', but a third path in which the state plays a synthetic leadership role which does not subject itself to the market capitalism" (Zhu, 2009, p. 169). This "third path" determines an even more vague "third space" (Wang, Kee and Gao, 2014, p. 6) ostensibly defining the hybrid statute of contemporary Chinese urbanisation; for years it has been repeatedly interpreted in an attempt to identify the forces and players behind this change.[24] In many ways, the results of these studies remain unclear, but tend to converge in the hypothesis that the third path coincides with the advent of a "post-capitalist world system" (Tu, 1996; Ikeda, 2003; Nolan, 2004; Harvey, 2005). The system is apparently powered by a merger between the dominant role of the State, the socio-spatial methods used to organise urban life and regulate the rights of the population (in particular, the *hukou* system that creates the specific hukou-based urbanization described, for example, by Chan, 2014), and the ideological justification behind economic reforms and forms of urban growth (an emergent suburbanisation in which the most important centres would maintain a dominant administrative and functional role; Zhou and Logan, 2008; Pow, 2012). Merging all of the above would justify the exceptionalism of Chinese urbanisation, given "the often *unique* patterns of urbanization and urban growth (...), the *unique* measures and policies taken by the Chinese State to restrain urban growth and the *unique* future goals of national urban policies" (Ebanks and Cheng, 1990, p. 30).

The thesis of Chinese exceptionalism applied to urbanisation – supported by many scholars, albeit each with their own viewpoint (Lin, 1994; Ma, 2002; Friedman, 2005; Logan, 2008) – facilitates our ability to acknowledge that Western urban theory is not suited to narrate (and understand) Chinese cities. From an interpretative point of view, this thesis forces us to move beyond the traditional notion of modernisation that considers a systemic process – triggered by emulation (of the West) and above all by a bottom-up approach (local entrepreneurialism) – as a repetition of similar processes

in all so-called developing contexts.[25] According to Fulong Wu (2016 b), for example, the merger of different, divergent and contrary interpretative models, in particular Western neoliberalism and the Asian-Eastern developmental state could help to tackle the physical materialisation of Chinese cities ("fast urbanization" and impetuous economic growth) as well as the presence of forms, processes, dynamics etc. that cannot even be named using Western interpretative categories, be they traditional – Third World cities – or coined to tackle the changes in post-socialist cities.

The hybridisation mentioned by Wu and many others is, however, achieved and determined by the hybridisation of different action models of the State (and more in general of public actors). This leads to a significant espousal of the exceptionalism thesis that tends to almost exclusively underline the role of the State and its institutions. Cities are thus hidden, neglected, "often treated as staging platforms where national urban policies are articulated and enacted" (Pow, 2012, p. 48). So when we consider urban China as unique and exceptional, we disregard everything which, in a more or less analytical and precise manner, we recognise as being the elements that make the city (as described, for example, by Iossifova, 2012 in Shanghai), whether or not they are the more or less direct products of the omnipresent and omniscient State. So how can we account for this merger between the exceptional and the ordinary, between Chinese specificities and global traits? Traits that are not global because they have been induced by current globalisation, but because they are inscribed in the city as a specific form of socio-spatial organisation, unlike (in what way?) other forms of spatial organisation (which forms?).[26]

These questions are not easy to answer when looking at China through a Westerner's eyes. China is different, both as regards our Western urbanisation canons and the ones provided by subaltern and post-colonial theories that reject Eurocentrism, propose the so-called "provincialisation" of urban theory (cfr. for example, the manifesto drafted by Sheppard, Leitner and Maringanti, 2013), and encourage us to consider the cities that are "off the map" or in the lower part of global city rankings (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009).[27] China is not here. It is not off the map. Beginning in the late nineties, "more than forty-three Chinese cities had announced plans to become global cities" (Ren, 2011, p. 12). Chinese cities (and doubtless many projects for and in Chinese cities) are well and truly inscribed in the map of global cities, albeit with "Chinese characteristics" (Timberlake *et al.*, 2014). On the contrary: Chinese cities are the most global, the most homogeneous and the most alike. Chinese exceptionalism therefore lies in the exceptionality of the new, urban, economic and political global centrality of China that converges in the New Silk Road strategies aimed at creating places, alliances and investments.[28] In fact, the "One Belt One Road" worksites are the material symbol of a new geopolitical vision that claims leadership on the international stage by seeking centrality rather than hegemony. As a result, infrastructures and urbanisation play an absolutely crucial role. More than in any other location, this role is obvious in a place which has so far been marginal compared to the intensely developed coastal areas: Lanzhou new area, a new town approved by the Central Government. In the geographies of the New Silk Road, the desert valley where this new town is under

construction is in many ways an unusual protagonist and, in fact, is programmatically projected to be in the focus of a global vision. The brochures for potential investors describe Lanzhou new area as a logistics hub in the centre of the world, serving Asia, Africa and Europe. While this network concept would seem to make any local identity superfluous, the images in the brochure focus on the traditional features of the new town, mindful of the role played by these regions during the many centuries when trade passed along the old Silk Road.

The "Chinese characteristics" refrain is perhaps indicative of a possible mediation which, however, should be applied everywhere and at all levels: neoliberalism, global cities, new towns, etc., with "European characteristics", "Mediterranean characteristics" and "Italian characteristics". As a result, generalisations are determined within national or at least areal canons; they define a tradition, a specific story capable of limiting extensions. Most of the literature about Chinese cities redefines their specificities, especially their links, affiliations, origins and roots; it is a reasoned attempt to preserve a deeply eroded heritage that is not only spatial. However, this kind of approach does not help us understand the way in which an ensemble of albeit localised specificities surpass local transformation processes. Say more, and speak of other things. Doreen Massey in *For Space* (2005) asks: "What if we open up the imagination of the single narrative to give space (literally) for a multiplicity of trajectories?" (p. 5). This kind of incitement encourages us not to lend less weight to a single narrative or a single place, but to focus more on its ability to say things that surpass it, that (also) speak of other things, that link places and issues in an unusual, open manner.

So the point is not the adjective qualifying the different places, but the characteristics that require increasingly refined, pertinent, critical and accurate descriptions in order to try and elaborate on a few risky generalisations. It involves careful scrutiny. This is not easy when you look at objects, e. g., Chinese new towns, that move and change continuously. Nor does attention to detail help, since in the end it finds exceptionality in any ordinary fact. Of course, people in China live, play, dwell, work and play sports very differently in different contexts, and undoubtedly very differently compared to the rest of the world. However, Chinese cities, and Chinese new towns in particular, are so varied that they contain everything found elsewhere: in the recently finished pristine spaces in new towns, along the roads, in the squares, gardens, parks and subway stations, between the shops and new houses where people are just moving in; it is here that the pioneers (i.e., the middle class) re-establish customs and practices very similar to the ones present in inhabited spaces in many other old and new cities, near and far.

Architecture and urban design play a key role; they introduce increasingly qualitative experiences into the international debate, experiences that are no longer exclusively determined by the exceptionality of some buildings, but require the autonomy of a broader critical discourse. This discourse initially involves the role of design; the latter is used in new towns not to solve problems that have already been posed, but as a simulation to build and structure the problem, and with it reality. The maquette of Tianfu new town in 2030, displayed at the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall in Chengdu,

shows the future city even before a decision had been taken as to the number of its inhabitants, activities and functions: iconic and concise, the design takes into account the fact that it is impossible to foresee them, but will instead help to define them. In Tianducheng new town, near Hangzhou, a decision was taken to design Parisian-type architectural districts, thereby pre-empting many political decisions. By providing them with a shared identity, it was instrumental in accelerating the creation of an urban community made up of immigrants with different backgrounds (Bosker, 2013). Another field in which architecture plays a key role is the construction of new leisure centres. As a way to compensate the scale of the transformation, almost every new town has oversized recreational areas and amenities. Often the creation of an artificial natural environment and the design of new landscapes within the city produces excellent results (from lakes to wetlands – for example, the park designed by Turenscape in Qunli New Town near Harbin). Experience after experience, new town after new town, through emulation and competition, the framework of the implementations and innovations tends to change radically or, at least, to radically change the way we view them. The season of exceptionalism in urban China appears to be at an end, and the season of its stigmatisation seems to have run its course. A much quieter urban China is on the horizon; a transformation process which, although ambiguous, problematic and suspect, needs to be examined, described and narrated.

What Does a New Town Do?

For roughly two years, between 2015 and 2017, a group of architects, urban planners, geographers, anthropologists, landscape historians and urban historians studied Chinese new towns starting in three places. The first is Tongzhou New Town located on the edge of the eastern suburban expansion of Beijing. The second is Zhaoqing New Area, the new town currently being built 20 kilometres from the old city of Zhaoqing, in the Guangdong Province, at the western end of the Pearl River Delta. The third is Zhengdong, near Zhengzhou, (Henan Province), a new town that is almost completely finished.[29] Although awareness of the differences between district, city, area and town, Tongzhou, Zhaoqing and Zhengdong seem to be good examples for studying issues that go beyond the specificities of each location and examine broader, problems and trends,[30] the three new towns have not been chosen based on a classic logic of comparison.[31] Besides, they have absolutely nothing in common: location, size, spaces, economies, inhabitants and when and how they were built. The aim was even less to dissect their complexity – a traditional approach that turns the subject into a case study. The aim was not to deconstruct, critically interpret or present an interpretative hypothesis. It is difficult to understand what a new town is. Providing atlases and definitions, or identifying characteristics and superimposing models, does not help to clarify an ambiguity that is partly constitutive and partly contingent.

However, it's also true that new towns can be extremely simplified, for example by circumscribing them within the limits of a masterplan, or within a body of instruments regulating their construction or existence. We've already mentioned this dual state: a

complexity capable of rapidly contracting into a simple image that is easy to narrate and often ostensibly neutral and clear-cut, just like the simulations that put new towns on the market. As in many other discourses about new towns, this research has also tried to instrumentally use the simplicity of these strange objects in order to understand not what they are, but *what they do*. So, if indeed it is possible to shed light on an action without revealing all the opacity of those who produce it, the guiding light of our research has been the question *what does a new town do?* What role does a new town play in the incredible urbanisation process of which it is a part? What can help us understand this process? What does it reveal?

Tongzhou, Zhaoqing and Zhengdong are certainly not places ignored by literature on urban China. Most studies performed in the last twenty years have focused on Beijing and the Pearl River Delta. Likewise, Zhengzhou has been repeatedly studied after the important transformations that have taken place there. We could have chosen less well-known and unfamiliar places, just like many current studies have opted to do (e. g., Kendall, 2015). The research hypothesis was that questioning new towns starting in Beijing, the Pearl River Delta and Zhengzhou allowed us to discuss the new spaces currently under construction (including) in relation to what has already been said and demonstrated about these three enormous conurbations. We could even go so far as to re-examine consolidated interpretations and analyses. So, ours were *three revisitations* to understand what the three cities – under construction, on the drawing board and recently finished – are doing in these three well-known places.

Tongzhou means revisiting Beijing, its logic of expansion and decentralisation. The district dons the image of a new town, at least in the *Overall Planning of Beijing (2004–2020)*, followed by the plan drafted in 2005, completely redesigning the existing area which has now been completely built. Since then, the gradual erosion of the old city has led to the construction of the new town which in fits and starts has continued up to the present day. While the transformations were initially rather slow, in 2010 Tongzhou was relaunched by the Tenth Congress of the Municipal Committee as "the new international modern city", a city in which the capital was meant to invest heavily. And so it came to pass. So much so that in 2012 the city topped the ranking of new towns "with the highest investment value in China" (Shao, 2015, p. 377). However, it was in November 2015 that Tongzhou grew in both size and quality. That year the government announced it wanted to shift the offices of the Beijing municipality to Tongzhou, an important decision that would double its population. Tongzhou will be a new town for more than two million inhabitants. It will also be the seat of the new administrative centre of the Beijing Municipality and have a new CBD. Finally, apart from being new, it will be *international and modern*, completely redesigned by a team of designers selected after an international competition.

Zhaoqing means revisiting the Pearl River Delta after studies concentrating on its densification and saturation. Like Tongzhou, Zhaoqing will double in size and population, and the administrative centre will be shifted. However, the numbers differ in comparison to Beijing. The new area – or at least the area earmarked in the 2012 masterplan

to cover an area of 115 square kilometres which until then had been chiefly agricultural – will accommodate 600,000 new inhabitants before 2030. However, the numbers differ radically if we consider the seamless urbanisation extending east along the Xi Jiang River from Zhaoqing to Foshan and Guangzhou, occupying all available flat land. In fact, in 2010, Zhaoqing was included in the *Development Plan of Guangzhou-Foshan-Zhaoqing Economic Circle*, i.e., in the *Development Plan of the Pearl River Delta Region (2008–2020)*. Being part of the plan makes all the difference. It allows the city to become a protagonist (which it previously was not), and gives it the confidence to play a strategic role in the entire region. The main role of the Zhaoqing New Area, currently ensured by increasingly widespread regional infrastructure, appears to be that of a small city, an *ecological and healthy liveable city*: a park providing a good life, close to big rivers and mountains still covered in woods.

Zhengdong means once again examining the optimisation of an inland area believed to be crucial for the Rise of Central China Plan (RCCP) adopted in 2004. Actually, the history of Zhengdong began a little earlier. The new town was announced and designed in 2001 as an addition to Zhengzhou, capital of Henan: a million new inhabitants and, again in this case, a doubling of the surface area (more than 150 square kilometres of new built space), several buildings, the new CBD and, above all, the new high-speed train station. In fact, Zhengdong is part of the reinforcement of the infrastructure system in China, which in recent years has led to the construction of a new airport, a new subway, new railways and stations for high-speed trains, as well as a fourth ring road connected to the main Beijing-Guangzhou road along which Zhengzhou is a crucial intersection. A large area of Zhengdong has been built and most of it is inhabited, but it still continues to grow and spread: Zhengbian is the linear city, designed between 2006 and 2009. It will cover roughly 300 square kilometres and will merge with Zhengzhou and Kaifeng, more than 50 kilometres east. Finally, it will gradually absorb many other small and big cities in this central region. Once again, the construction of new towns should be interpreted as part of much bigger areas and plans – for example, the project by the Zhongyuan City Group that in Henan promotes integrated programmes for the cities of the Central Plains of China. Its ambitious aim is to make Zhongyuan one of the richest and biggest conurbations in the country.[32]

Three revisitations in three places that have been extensively studied as regards their form and the processes of their urban expansion; the new towns have contributed by *decentralising* (Tongzhou), *densifying* (Zhaoqing) and *enhancing* (Zhengdong). Revisiting to these places means trying to re-discuss these narratives and possibly chip away at them. How does Tongzhou affect Beijing? How does it decentralise and rebalance? How does Zhaoqing contribute to the saturation of the Pearl River Delta? How can we say that Zhengdong enhances the centrality of Zhenzhou, of Zhongyuan? Tongzhou and La Défense certainly have different histories; likewise, Zhaoqing is not part of the Vinex programme for the Randstad, and Zhengdong is not Euralille. And yet, in a sort of enlarged exploded diagram, the narratives and representations of Chinese urban expansion chiefly continue to feed on this kind of image, incapable of recognising distances and differences, save the ones involving scale and measure: in China

everything is bigger, but if we change the lens we use, we basically always see the same objects. So in this book, revisiting Beijing, the Pearl River Delta and Zhengzhou is a way to get a better understanding of what these new towns do in these spaces, how they affect them and how they change them (if they do). It also allows us to re-discuss any old categories which are perhaps no longer suited to describing contemporary cities, whether in China or elsewhere. By adopting this approach, Chinese new towns become an object of study as well as a specific viewpoint with which to examine contemporary urbanisation and tackle the fact that we need to radically rethink the vocabulary, conceptualisations and even the epistemology of the urban (Amin, 2013; Amin and Thrift, 2017).

About This Book

This book is divided into three parts divided by three primarily iconographic sections: a photographic essay by Samuele Pellecchia, who has travelled for a long time through the spaces under construction of the new towns; three synthetic profiles of the new towns of Zhaoqing, Zhengdong and Tongzhou, in order to provide information about their short history and present the spatial features emerging in these places; and a series of maps to highlight the complexity of the space in which the new towns are inserted. The four chapters in the first part of the book focus on several general issues related to the new town phenomenon, while the more significant results of the fieldwork are provided in part two and part three.

In part one, several authors discuss the contradictory role that *new towns*, *new districts*, *new cities* and *new areas* play in urban expansion policies in terms of programming and planning tools; they focus on the relationships between *"go-west" policies* and new town building; they discuss the role of architecture and design practices; they examine the position Chinese new towns occupy in a contemporary narrative which, working backwards, focuses on the return to Western genealogies; they also reflect on the relationships between social change and urbanisation processes.

Part two concentrates on several specific spaces. Each space can be considered a sort of spy: it provides clues about the relationship between the new town and the greater urban area where it is situated. The photographs help identify telltale traces and signs. The selected spaces are almost "everywhere"; they are continuously seen and used and have their own functional and aesthetic centrality. They are the exhibition halls that sell parts of the city at every street corner. They are the high-rise apartments on the top floors of the homogeneous nuclei of buildings constructed exclusively to be inhabited. They are the underground spaces: indeed, there is a new town under the new town, just as big and just as lived in, made up of infrastructures for the mobility and functioning of the city above ground. Finally, they are the big and small parks that between broad, extended supple forms create a spatial layout which in other respects is rigid. What do these spaces do? What do the exhibition halls do? They undoubtedly sell the city, but which part of the city? The district? The metropolis? The region? What do

the underground spaces do? Do they amass? Redistribute? Are they designed based on a logic of densification? What do the apartments on the top floors of residential blocks do? How do they fit (if indeed they fit) in a new town? What do the parks do? Do they insert an ecological approach in the design of new towns?

The last section of the book asks in which space is the urban organised; it examines the relationship between new towns and the somewhat broader undefined space around them in order to understand the logics, orders and imaginaries that create this new urban world.

The goal of our research is to *open* the new towns and rediscuss excessively simple narrations that force them into conceptual models that are too old, too poor and too standard. The traditions behind new towns are outdated; the models currently used by the market to renew them are ephemeral and transitory (eco-city, techno city, low-carbon city, healthy city, smart city, etc.); the morphologies that inspired their spatial functions are poor; the expansion strategies tasked with decentralisation, completion and enhancement are standard. Perhaps it's true: Chinese new towns are neither very exemplary nor new. When viewed from the point of view of the relationship they create with their environment, new towns do however appear more interesting than when observed within their boundaries. This is not due to any original traits they may have when compared to the external environment, but rather to the way in which their contradictory assertion pries open a world, and with it the language to describe it. Considered thus, yes, new towns are new. They oblige us to radically rethink how to interpret and make the city.

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1 Although the number of new cities being built or under construction is unknown, it is nevertheless considerable. For example, according to Fang and Yu (2016), "by the end of January, 2014, there were 106 various new urban districts under construction. Among them 13 were approved at the national level, 38 were approved at the provincial level, and 64 were approved at the municipal level. 19 such new districts occupy total land area over 1000 km² each, 10 are within 500–1000 km² and 40 are within 100–500 km². At the national level, there were only 3 new urban districts approved prior to 2010, namely, Shanghai's Pudong New District (1992), Tianjin's Binhai New District (2006), and Chongqing's Two-Rivers New Districts (2010). The Zhoushan Islands New District in 2011, and Lanzhou New District and Nansha New District in 2012, and Xi'an-Xianyang New District and Guiyang-Anshun New District in 2014 were added afterwards in a hope to replicate the successful experiences in the three previous new districts. (…) Not only are many cities seeking to expand their development spaces via the proposal and construction of new urban districts, but also do the ones that have already got approved seek further expansion of their new districts. (…) Many cities deem new urban district construction as a golden opportunity to expand their urban spaces, hence accelerate their urbanization rate (again, a typical 'more the better,' 'quantity over quality' mindset from the planned economy legacy). Some cities even have more than one new urban district. (…) The immediate consequences are that there are more new urban districts than needed" (pp. 34–36). **2** Wade Shepard (2015) emphasises how "nearly 600 new cities have already been established across China in roughly sixty-five years, and there is no sign of a slowdown yet. (…) 114 cities in just twelve of China's thirty-two provincial level areas were in the process of building over 200 new towns. (…) [N]early every city in the country is expanding – some are doubling or even tripling their size" (p. 5). **3** Since the mid-2000s the real estate sector, an industrial pillar in China's economic development, has been heavily affected by an increase in the demand for investment and, thus, by the financial strategies of families, even when faced with weak (or lack of) other possible investments (Ong, 2014; Cao, 2015). Regarding the characteristics of the Chinese real estate market and its connotation as a "real estate bubble" cfr. Glaser *et al.*, 2017. **4** From the eighties onwards, decentralisation processes

took place, in different ways and different forms, all over the world (Rodríguez-Pose and Sandall, 2008). Everywhere, legitimisation of these processes involved three topics: identity, good governance and economic efficiency. In China, in particular, "the advantages of decentralisation lie in the economic potential to be unlocked through local knowledge. In this, the Chinese case shares a key feature with (…) other cases and the unusual Chinese political context does not seem to have resulted in a particularly unusual discourse on decentralization" (*ibid.*, p. 65). According to Harvey (2012), "decentralization is one of the best ways to exercise centralized control. The idea was to liberate regional and municipal governments, and even villages and townships, to seek their own betterment within a framework of centralized control and market coordinations. Successful solutions arrived at through local initiatives then became the basis for the reformulation of central government policies" (pp. 63–64). **5** In Western countries, more specifically in Europe, political-institutional decentralisation processes were accompanied by the gradual reorganisation, restructuring and redefinition of the spatial scales involved in economic-spatial transformations and relative levels of government (Brenner, 1999 and 2004), thereby facilitating not only the gradual "emergence" of supranational and infra-national territorial subdivisions, but also "networks of power" not linked to explicit processes of institutional reorganisation and restructuring of functions and competences (Strange, 1998). According to Wu (2016 a), in the Chinese context these rescaling processes are "not (…) a continuation of decentralization of state governance but rather (…) a countermeasure towards localism (based on individual cities). It is not an outcome of the politics of distribution *within* the city-region (Jonas, 2012) but rather the central state's endeavour to reverse decentralization and identify a specific scale (the urban cluster, or the networked city-regions) to impose its regulatory control" (p. 1148). **6** "Because the concept of 'transition', as used in the literature on post-socialist development, assumes a process of change toward a preconceived and fixed target, it is not entirely appropriate for China where economic reforms seem to have aimed at a number of moving targets. Instead, I prefer the concept 'transformation', which avoids the implication of the inevitability of 'transition'. Moreover, China's economic transformation away from state socialism should be viewed as a prolonged process of change with unpredictable consequences, instead of as a transitory short phase leading to a Western capitalist system of production" (Ma, 2002, p. 1546). **7** Regarding global city-regions as spatial units of global economic dynamics, see the very famous book by Scott (2001), in which, in chapter 1, the authors write: "The concept of global city-regions can be traced back to the "world cities" idea of Hall (1966) and Friedmann and Wolff (1982), and to the "global cities" idea of Sassen (1991). We build here on these pioneering efforts, but in a way that tries to extend the meaning of the concept in economic, political and territorial terms, and above all by an effort to show how city-regions increasingly function as essential spatial nodes of the global economy and as distinctive political actors on the world stage. In fact, rather than being dissolved away as social and geographic objects by processes of globalization, city-regions are becoming increasingly central to modern life, and all the more so because globalization (its effects magnified by shifts in technology) has reactivated their significance as bases of all forms of productive activity, no matter whether in manufacturing or services, in high-technology or low-technology sectors. As these changes have begun to run their course, it has become increasingly apparent that city in the narrow sense is less an appropriate or viable unit of local social organization than the city or networks of cities in regional context" (Scott *et al.*, 2001, p. 11). From the point of view of spatial organisation, "whereas most metropolitan regions in the past were focused mainly on one or perhaps two clearly-defined central cities, the city-regions of today are becoming increasingly polycentric or multi-clustered agglomerations. (…) Moreover, in virtually all global city-regions there has been a rapid growth of outer cities and edge cities, as formerly peripheral or rural areas far from old downtown cores have developed as urban centers in their own right. The blurring of once rigid and clearly defined boundaries has been an integral part of the globalization process and the new information age, and this is now reflected in the increasingly ambiguous meaning of what is urban, suburban, exurban, or indeed rural or not urban at all. Thus, what has been happening can be described as a simultaneous and complex process of decentralization and recentralization of the city-region" (*ibid.*, p. 18). **8** "New districts, also called new areas, are typically massive, county-level administrative zones that have been marked for large-scale urbanization projects or simply added on to an existing municipality. New cities are just that: new, centralized, 'downtown', urban areas that consist of a commercial core, and oftentimes, a CBD (Central Business District), which are surrounded by residential areas, schools, hospitals and green spaces. (…) New cities can be their own county-level division or a part of a district. (…) New towns are smaller scale, centralized areas that tend to have a diminutive commercial area that is surrounded by residential neighbourhoods. They are generally built within districts, counties or county-level cities" (Shepard, 2015, pp. 44–45). **9** Cfr., http://www.newtowninstitute.org/spip.php?rubrique52 (Accessed: 29 August 2017). **10** For a critique of the Chinese "adoption" of North American new urbanism, see Wu, 2007 and 2009, where he highlights how the principles of new urbanism were adopted by developers to "package and brand" real estate initiatives in suburban areas (thereby sparking the radical critique of new urbanism by, for example, Harvey, 1997; Smith, 2002). **11** As in the case of the eco-cities studied by Austin Williams (2017, p. 20) who, citing the ambiguous (to put it midly) definition of the government's 2015 Green Book – "ecocities are ecological cities with Chinese characteristics" – underscores how they can be considered new city brands rather than brand new cities. **12** The Seventh Five-Year Plan assigned specific tasks to each area: "export-oriented industrialization and foreign trade in the eastern region; agriculture and energy development in the central region; and animal husbandry and

mineral exploitation in the western region" (Fan, 1997, p. 623). By doing so it contributed to the increase in regional inequalities. In fact, even if the economic growth of recent decades has led to a significant reduction in the poverty rate (with a drastic reduction in the percentage of the population living in extreme poverty, from 39.5% of the total in 1981 to 1.32% in 2011; see Zhang, LeGates and Zhao, 2016, p. 20), it has increased regional imbalance, with a large gap in growth and income between the coastal and inland regions. During the nineties, for example, real GDP pro capite went up by 95% in inland regions and by 144% in coastal regions (Fu, 2004). **13** The expression "Chinese dream" was introduced by Xi Jingping in 2012 and reused since then in "domestic" official speeches and international meetings. However, it remains a vague expression which, as highlighted by Wang (2014), is reminiscent of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (p. 6) used in the early nineties to which, however, a "positive" approach is added in order to make China – and Chinese cities – "a better place, with more strength, prosperity, and advancements" (*ibid.*, p. 11). **14** The pathologies of Chinese urbanisation are emphasised in many reportage and articles about ghost towns. Regarding their media construction, cfr. Woodwort and Wallace, 2017. Ordos Kangbashi in Inner Mongolia is probably the most photographed and narrated "ghost town"; see, for example, http://edition.cnn.com/style/article/china-ordos-ghost-town/index.html; http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1975397,00.html; Shenfu New Town, in the north-east Province of Liaoning: http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/asia/2016/09/china-ghost-towns-developers-run-money-160914084316042.html; http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-hard-hit-rust-belt-reflects-the-countrys-economic-woes/2015/08/24/d5d82752-45bf-11e5-9f53-d1e3ddfd0cda_story.html?utm_term=.7b5c6e8c9127 or Lanzhou New Area in the Gansu Province, see, for example, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/along-the-new-silk-road-a-city-built-on-sand-is-a-monument-to-chinas-problems/2016/05/29/982424c0-1d09-11e6-82c2a7dcb313287d_story.html?utm_term=.0842263c00bb or http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/mar/21/china-west-ghost-city-comes-to-life-lanzhou-new-area, which highlights, half amazed and half incredulous, that the ghost town has mysteriously filled up. (Accessed: 21 March 2017). For a different presentation about Chinese ghost cities, questioning the time required for a new town to be filled up with people and life before being able to stigmatise it as a failure, see Shepard, 2015. **15** "A Blueprint for China's new urbanization: 2014–2020", outcome of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), November 2013. **16** This is specified in Article 8 of the Land Administration Law (originally approved in 1986, and then modified several times. The last modification was in 2004). Obviously the land-ownership regime has multiple effects on the organisational forms and modes of the real estate market and on the way in which local authorities can act. While reference to state property is clearer and straightforward, reference to the "collective" ownership of rural land is more controversial, even despite the gradual evolution in the institutional and social structures of rural areas (Ho, 2001; Cao *et al*., 2008). **17** According to Chan (2014), "hukou-based urbanization has helped China to generate a huge army of cheap laborers (…) who work and live in the city, but are not part of the urban population by law" (p. 3). Intense, internal migratory flows have sparked a revision of the *hukou*. The *National Urbanization Plan (2014–2020)*, presented by Prime Minister Li Keqiang (2013) (according to Shepard, 2015, "the architect of China's broader new city movement", p. 49) as the tool with which to promote a "people oriented" urbanisation, in fact envisages a gradual redefinition of the *hukou*, so as to increase, amongst other things, the purchasing power of the new urban inhabitants and facilitate an economic shift in the country from an *export-driven* economy to a *consumption-driven* economy (Chan, 2014; Liang *et al.*, 2016). Before 2020, one hundred million rural migrants, in particular those who move to small and medium-sized inland cities, should be guaranteed an urban *hukou* (Liang *et al.*, 2016). **18** "In the contemporary era, four main administrative levels form the hierarchy of the governmental system. (…) At the highest level is the central state in Beijing. At the subnational level are provinces (*sheng*) (including the four centrally administered municipalities (*zhixia shi*, Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing) and autonomous regions (*zizhi qu*, autonomously governed areas of ethnic minority groups). At the next level are cities (*shi*) of different types, followed by counties (*xian*) and county-level cities. Below counties are towns (*zhen*) and townships (*xiang*) or villages, which form the top echelon of the rural administrative hierarchy. (…) While city-level appears to be one administrative rank in the four-level hierarchy, four different administrative ranks exist *within* the city-level. These are the centrally administered municipalities or province-level cities, subprovince-level cities, prefecture-level cities and county-level cities. The state also organises cities by three different types of administrative characteristics or legal status, which are the province-level cities, cities with districts (subprovince- or prefecture-level) and cities without districts. Moreover, there are currently six different categories of special administrative status for select cities; these include the four province-level cities, the special economic zones, coastal open cities, and cities designated to experiment with new economic programs, among others" (Cartier, 2005, pp. 24–25). The cities included in the first two levels have considerable political and administrative power as well as extensive representative power nationally and internationally. Although most Chinese cities are small to medium in size, and are therefore included in the last three levels of the administrative hierarchy, a description of urban China takes into account only the cities in the first two levels, as highlighted by Ren (2013), a big part of international literature has focused chiefly on the interpretation of the transformation processes of the main cities, and placed the social and spatial changes that have occurred in less important cities on the back burner. **19** "In fact, frustrated observers over the last quarter of the 20th century proclaimed the Chinese urban popula-

tion to be an insoluble "enigma" (Oreleand and Burnham, 1982), or, at the very least, an "immense puzzle" (Forshall, 1989). The situation has not improved tangibly in the early 21st century" (Chan, 2007, p. 384). **20** "Because a city formed under the policy 'changing county to city' contains an extensive rural area as well as a large rural population, and its areal extent is greatly expanded, it is a city only in the legal sense. There is also the problem regarding the meaning of 'city population'. To the uninformed, the city's total population could be misconstrued as 'urban population' whereas in reality only a small percentage of people living in the urban core are actually urban" (Ma, 2002, p. 1560). **21** The *Global Report on Human Settlements* (1996) drafted by the United Nations Center for Human Settlements begins as follows: "As we approach the new millennium, the world stands at a *veritable crossroads* in history" (Un-Habitat, 1996, p. xxi). The forecast of veritable crossroads was confirmed in 2007: "In 2008, the world reaches an invisible but momentous milestone: for the first time in history, more than half its human population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas. By 2030, this is expected to swell to almost 5 billion. Many of the new urbanites will be poor. Their future, the future of cities in developing countries, the future of humanity itself, all depend very much on decisions made now in preparation for this growth" (UNFPA, 2007, p. 1). Since then, all UN reports always (or almost always) start by indicating a point of no return: the urban world population has exceeded the rural population and, according to the 2014 statistics, 54% of the global population resides in areas defined as urban (United Nations – Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014). The tone of these statistics, and the comments and indications accompanying them, swings between triumphalist and alarmist: the advent of the "urban era" and the "century of the city" (Brenner and Schmidt, 2014; Gleeson, 2014). The *urban century* or *urban age* thesis spread quickly and pervasively, so much so that, in Brenner's words (2013), "it has become one of the dominant metanarratives through which our current planetary situation is interpreted, both in academic circles and in the public sphere" (p. 85). **22** "Despite its long history in urban demography and its increasingly widespread influence in contemporary scholarly and policy discourse, the urban age thesis is a flawed basis on which to conceptualize contemporary world urbanization patterns: it is empirically untenable (a statistical artifact) and theoretically incoherent (a chaotic conception)" (Brenner and Schmidt, 2014, p. 734). **23** According to Wei (2015) in particular, the Chinese transition is in fact a triple transition in which decentralisation, the opening up of the market, and globalisation intersect and are superimposed. Their role is in itself incomprehensible; it only assumes a specific "Chinese characteristic" when combined with the other factors. For another view about if and when China can still be considered socialist, one which focuses less on "models of socialism" and more on the possible "descriptive characteristics" of a socialist system (especially: capacity, intension, redistribution and responsiveness), see Naughton, 2017. **24** Wang *et al.* (2014) attempt to summarise the most important interpretations. They identify three dominant theoretical perspectives behind the recent discourse about contemporary Chinese cities: *the institutional perspective*, which can be used to retrace the decentralisation process leading to current *pluralist institutionalism*; *the rational choice perspective* focusing more on *bottom-up* processes and on *urbanization from below* (Ma and Li, 1993; Lin, 2007 and 2011); *the procedural-dynamic perspective*, more inclined to emphasise the merger of multiple forces. In this trend, for example, Webster (2002), identifies at least *four-level drivers*, in other words: external forces (international investments, role of the World Trade Organization and World Bank, *global imprintings such as the "American Dream"* etc.); central government policies; regional and provincial policies; and actions promoted locally by individual municipalities (Wang *et al.*, 2014, p. 5). **25** This idea was part of the convictions of the theorists of development in the fifties. Lasch (1991) disagreed and reiterated the fundamental role of the State in economic and social change and its ability to assume different initiatives vis-à-vis internal and external forces. **26** The distinction between city and non-city is radically questioned by the thesis of *planetary urbanization*, in other words the contemporary version of the "complete urbanisation of society" predicted by Henri Lefebvre in the seventies (cfr., Brenner, 2014; Brenner and Schmidt, 2014 and 2015). The great merit of the planetary urbanization thesis is that it radically deconstructs the urban and city categories: the city – delimited, agglomerated, territorialised – is no longer considered notable as a significant theoretical and empirical object because the differences between city and non-city appear to be increasingly vague given the now widespread global dynamics of urbanisation: "there is, in short, any outside to the urban world; the non-urban has been largely internalized within an uneven yet planetary process of urbanization" (Brenner and Schmidt, 2014, p. 750). Nevertheless, according to Scott and Storper (2015), "even in the twenty first century, when, for the first time in human history, most of human existence is geographically contained in cities, not all or even the greater part of this existence – *pace* Lefebvre – can be described as being *intrinsically* urban" (p. 13). For a critique of the planetary urbanization by Brenner and Schmidt from the point of view of *southern urbanism*, cfr. Schindler (2017) and, more specifically, regarding the persistence of the distinction between urban and rural, cfr. Roy, 2016. **27** Ong and Roy (2011) adopt a similar position in their study of the "ongoing art of being global" of Asian cities that challenges both the *political economy* of globalisation and the centrality assigned to the *subaltern agency* by post-colonial studies. By trying to understand how an urban situation can be both specific and global, and by considering the city as a continuous place of change and experimentation, the "wordling practices" of Asian cities are thus seen as "projects that attempt to establish or break established horizons of urban standards in and beyond a particular city" (Ong, 2011, p. 4). **28** Cfr. *Special Issues of East Asia*, 2015 edited by Shen, 2015 a and 2015 b. **29** For a more detailed description of the characteristics of these three places, and additional

literature about the towns, cfr. the contribution by Fiandanese, Ramondetti and Safina in this book. **30** Tongzhou is generally labelled as both *new town* and *new city*, even if it is a district. Zhaoqing is a *new area*, as per its toponym. Administratively speaking, Zhengdong is a *new district*. **31** Regarding the limits of traditional comparative urban studies to understand cities in "a world of cities", as well as the possibility of innovating the comparative approach, cfr. Robinson, 2011. **32** "At the provincial level, Henan Province is among the most active. From February 2010 to January 2013, in less than 3 years, there were 14 new provincial districts approved. With the existing Zhengzhou and Luoyang new districts, there were 16 approved new urban districts in Henan Province alone (over 40% of the national total)" (Fang and Yu, 2016, p. 34).

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By 2020, roughly 400 Chinese new towns will have been built, representing an unprecedented urban growth. The government is making a substantial effort to absorb up to 250 million people, chiefly migrants from rural parts of the country. Unlike in Europe and North America, where new towns grew in parallel with local economies, the construction of contemporary Chinese new towns is almost completed before people are allowed to move in. As a result, some of these massive developments are already inhabited while others are still empty.

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