The Enriched Field

Urbanising
the Central Plains
of China

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Crossing Luohe River in Luoyang, 2019.

Three Narratives

Although Chinese urbanisation has garnered increasing attention, it is not easy to frame the phenomenon within a more general body of research on contemporary urban transformations. The two contrasting readings that dominate the current literature on China do not help in this case. On the one hand, the Chinese city is regarded as a banal mix of emulations and distorted international models (Bosker et al., 2013; King, 2004; Sklair, 2006, 2006). On the other hand, Chinese urbanisation is seen as a sort of *Wunderkammer*: the result of "Chinese characteristics" that produce an accumulation of exceptions unrelated to any conventional definition of urbanity (Ebanks & Cheng, 1990; Furlong, 2021; Glaeser et al., 2017; Timberlake et al., 2014; Y. Wu et al., 2018). Both approaches, however, confine themselves to establishing how much China adheres or differs from pre-determined categories and consolidated interpretative models. Their result is "to acknowledge that Western urban theory is unsuited to narrate (and understand) Chinese cities" (Governa & Sampieri, 2020, p. 369), with little regard to the complexity of Chinese space. However, engaging with this complexity is vital, and helps us understand how to address issues that go beyond Chinese exceptionality (and, vice versa, how other contexts help us to comprehend the urbanisation processes in China).

Following this line of thought, another approach is employed: while provincialising and contextualising the research on China (Roy & Ong, 2011; Sheppard et al., 2013), the findings are also positioned within a wider genealogy of narratives which have sedimented around past urbanisation processes in other spaces. In this way, it becomes possible to form an interpretative hypothesis by recombining the similes and metaphors, ambiguities, and contrasts that arise from the interaction of different contexts. Here, a flexible and open interpretative framework emerges from studying three narratives: the formation of the middle landscape that has characterised the United States since the 1950s, the process of urban diffusion that has been taking place in Europe since the 1980s, and the emergence of logistics and infrastructure spaces from the overall globalisation of the last 30 years. As with Chinese urbanisation, these prove elusive and difficult to decipher. For instance, North American suburbanisation is often considered a "mega assemblage of urbanity […] [where] the prefix mega- speaks to their scale, their incomprehensibility, and their resistance to be recognised as a stable or singular identity" (Thün et al., 2015, p. 2). Likewise, the European territories appear to be a jumble of heterogeneous fragments in which it is impossible to recognise any principle of rationality that may make it intelligible (Secchi, 2000). Similarly, the infrastructural space is said to be "a set of constantly evolving systems or networks, machinic assemblages which intermix categories like the biological, technical, social, economic, and so on, with the boundaries of meaning and practice between the categories always shifting" (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 78).

In a nutshell, no matter what the context, urbanisation processes everywhere put up stiff resistance to being described. They can, however, be carefully documented and interpreted, which helps us to construct narratives that form the foundation for a common theoretical framework for discussing the meaning of current and future transformations. This, while being conscious that the narratives of the urbanisation processes selected here stem from origins that are profoundly diverse in terms of time, place, and the imaginaries used to recount and mythologise them. However, this same diversity may prove useful in that it provides much-needed perspective by preventing the eye from catching sight of its subject too soon and allowing new prospects for research through novel interpretations.

Middle Landscape

In *International Perspectives on Suburbanization* (2011) Nicholas Phelps and Fulong Wu highlight how today's suburbanisation processes are taking place on a global scale. These centrifugal forces are turning the city inside out, creating a new space: the middle landscape. Its roots lie in the suburban expansion that has characterised North America since the post-World War II era. At that time, the middle landscape was based on precise principles: "the idea of median line between 'primitivism' and 'civilisation'" (Thomas, 2000, p. 38). The space where humanity and nature coexist in harmony, and where conflicting forces are merged into a new environment between nature and the city (Machor, 1987; Marx, 1964). Overall, the outcome is a "collective effort to live a private life" (Rowe, 1991, p. 290). Based on these principles, several North American projects theorised and built the middle landscape based on a modern pastoralism that seeks to overcome the urban–rural dichotomy through an agrarian urbanism, envisaging the entire landscape as a single ecosystem.

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Modern Pastoralism. Machines in the Garden

Modern pastoralism refers to the effort to synthesise the myths of pastoral primitivism and utilitarian modernisation with a healthy, harmonious society in a way that combines the best of both city and country.[1] In North America, such aspirations led to the "suburban grand compromise" (Mozingo, 2011, p. 34). This was based on two main factors: the progressive displacement of businesses to the urban fringes, and the construction of housing developments outside of city centres that solidified race and class segregation. As a result, during the second half of the twentieth century, the American landscape evolved into an ensemble of independent cultural artefacts, including retail areas, corporate estates, and residential settlements (Easterling, 2001; Rowe, 1991; Tunnard & Pushkarev, 1964). These tame the land, operating as "machines in the garden" (Marx, 1964).

Modern pastoralism was initially driven by pastoral capitalism, causing most industrial and commercial activities to abandon overcrowded and unsafe urban centres. Supporting this decentralisation, new corporate campuses, business estates and office parks revived the myth of pastoral progressivism, "[the] civility of bucolic small towns, technological modernity in service to life-enhancing progress, and the nuclear family ensconced in material comfort" (Mozingo, 2011, p. 42). These developments were rem-
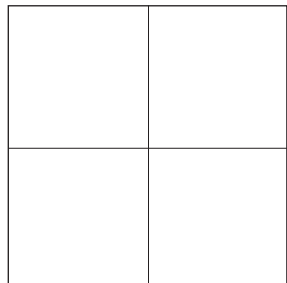
Fig. 12. The Central Plains of China.
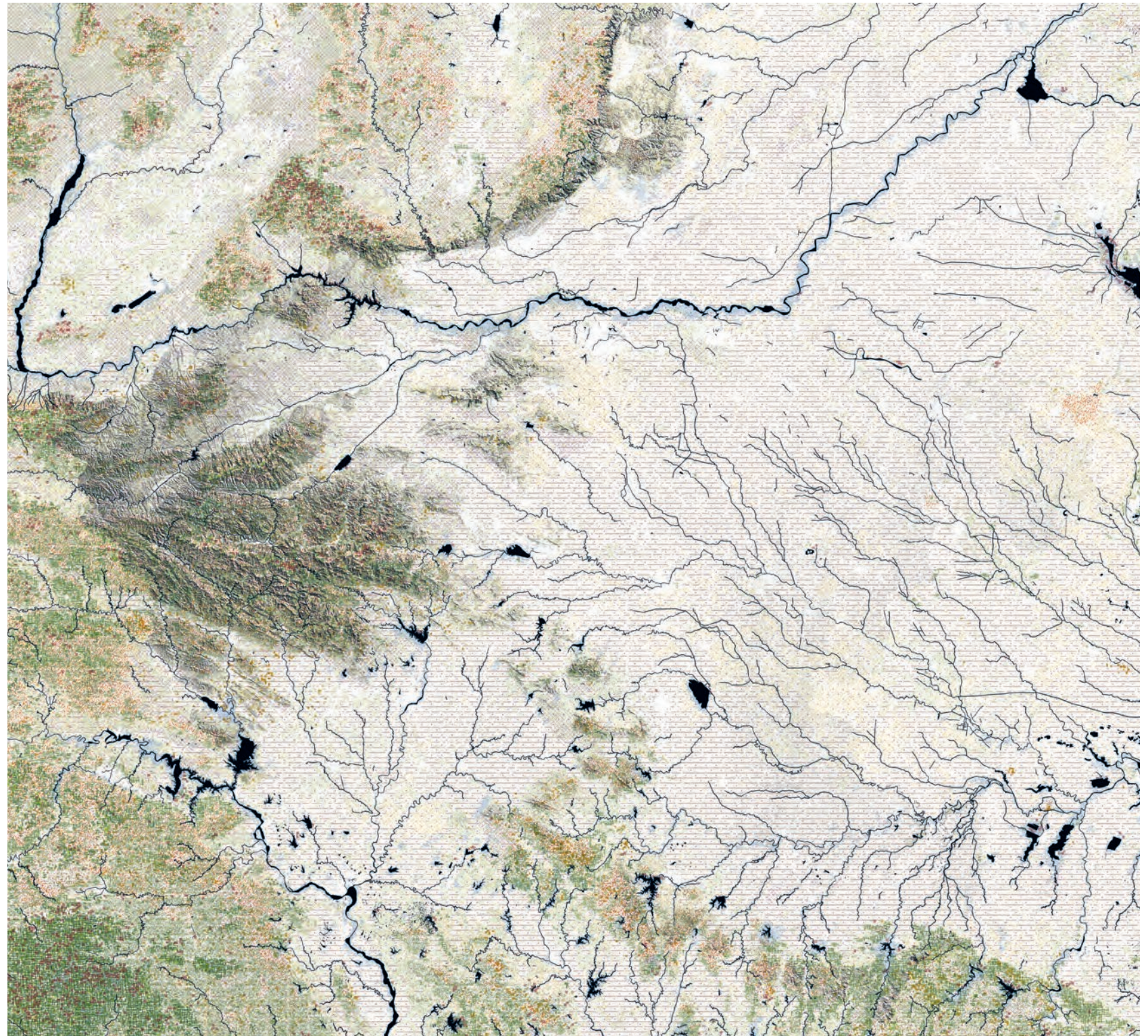
Agricultural Land and Vegetation

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———————— waterways and river basins

mountainous areas

forests

meadows and shrubs

crops and arable land

Graphic Scale

100 km

Zhengzhou. Building the Chinese Modern City

Historically, China was an agrarian society with the majority of the population living in rural areas and an economy based on agriculture (Kirkby, 1985; Kuhn, 2002). Chinese cities were chiefly consumer-oriented administrative centres, their authority based upon political and military power, rather than commerce and industry (Haiyan & Stapleton, 2006; Skinner, 1977). If not for the Opium Wars, China would have continued to reject foreign trade. However, that event, followed by the construction of an infrastructural network, fostered interregional integration and boosted commercial activity (Ren, 2013). Canal cities, treaty port cities, and railway cities flourished along these commercial routes, spurring local governments to commence planning. These, influenced by the garden city movement and other modern theories, led to a poly-nuclear development based on organic urban patterns and low-density settlements (Cody, 1996). However, the wars of the 1930s and the Japanese occupation interrupted this urban growth, preventing the implementation of most of the plans from that period.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, planning activities regained momentum. From 1945 onward, industrialisation policies sought to transform the major cities from "centres of consumption" to "centres of production" (Lo, 1980). With the financial support of the Soviet Union in the early 1950s, the central administration promoted 156 key industrial projects. These were based on large stated-owned enterprises that, by providing infrastructure and services to their workers, were more influential than local governments in the urban and economic development of the cities. This, however, led to disorderly urban growth. The Urban Construction Committee was established in 1953 to counteract this trend, and several Soviet experts were asked to collaborate in planning activities. This cooperation resulted in a decentralised industrial development based on satellite towns, the implementation of cellular urbanism through the construction of independent *danwei* (work units), and the adoption of socialist monumentality to celebrate workplaces and public institutions (Bonino & De Pieri, 2015; Fisher, 1962; Liang, 2014). Such operations were at the core of numerous plans drafted both for minor centres (such as Zhengzhou and Luoyang) and major cities (such as Beijing and Shanghai).[1]

Despite these initiatives, the industrialisation campaign did not achieve the desired results. Consequently, the second Five-Year Plan (FYP) (1958–1962) and the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) rejected the Soviet model of development in favour of an agropolitan strategy that fostered industrialisation without urbanisation. Instead of siting heavy industries in large cities, this policy promoted economies based on light industry in small to medium-sized centres (Craciun, 2001; Su, 2009). This was behind the establishment of 26,425 communes, encompassing more than 98 percent of the 122 million rural households in the country (Knapp, 1992). The successive FYPs (1966–1975) exacerbated this anti-urban bias, which had been at the core of the Third Front Movement (1964–1978) to decentralise major industries into the mountainous and desert

areas of China. Furthermore, several policies to restrict urban growth and to stem migration from rural to urban areas were adopted, above all, the establishment of the *hukou* (household registration system) (F.-L. Wang, 2005).[2] The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) added to this trend and during that period all planning activities were progressively abandoned. As a result, by 1976, the number of cities and towns had decreased to 169 and 2,902 respectively, and the urbanisation level (i.e., the percentage of the population living in cities) had dropped to 17 percent (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

The planning institutions were finally re-established in the early 1980s. Just after the economic reform, China was characterised by rural industrialisation resulting from fiscal decentralisation, institutional reforms, and overseas investment (Gonghao & Ma, 1999). This led to a grassroots urbanisation that was based on the local-government corporatism of small-scale production clusters known as Towns and Village Enterprises (TVEs) (Oi, 1992).[3] Due to their economic performance, these clusters were supported by the central government, which fostered the development of medium-
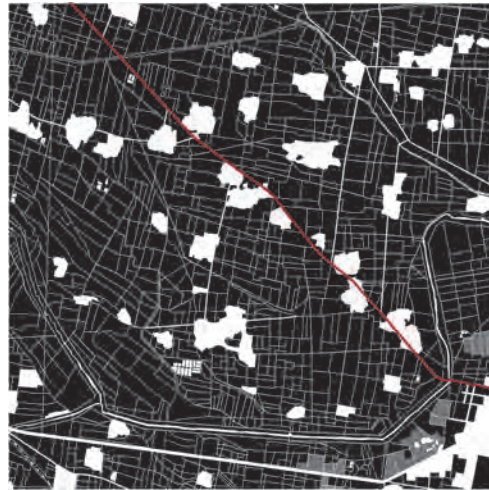

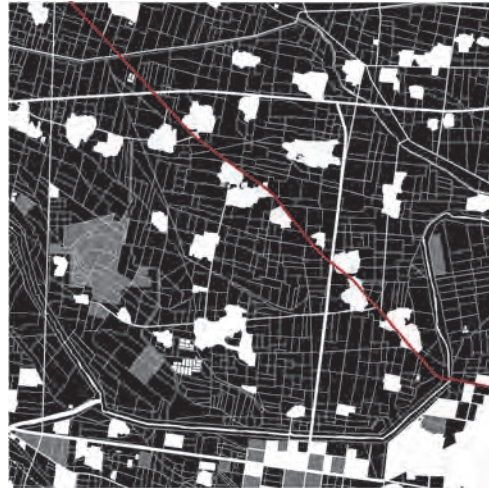Fig. 1. Farmers in Zhengzhou, 1960.

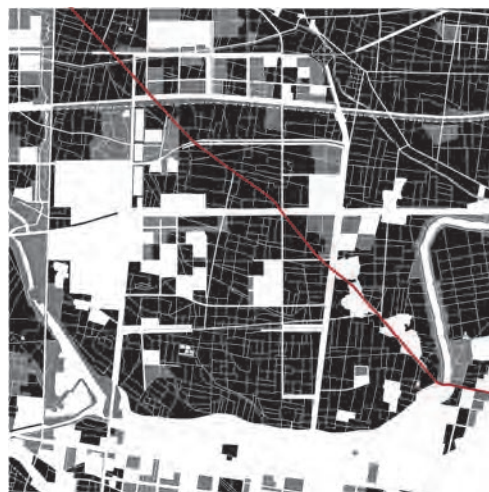Fig. 4. Wentong Road under construction, Zhongmu County, 2019.

2003

2011

2019

Figs. 8–9–10. Sample 1.A over time.
County Road 006

Legend

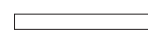|	
————	County Road 006
▨	areas under construction
▯	built-up areas
▬	permeable surfaces

Fig. 11. Track north of Qinggudui Village, Zhongmu County, 2019.

Fig. 29. Yanzhang New Agricultural Town, Zhongmu County, 2019.

Many settlements in the Central Plains of China are still agricultural villages developed in olden times, almost unchanged in the last century. Like Yuezhuang, described in Sample 2.A, these traditional agricultural villages are generally compact settlements occupying 120,000 to 250,000 square metres. Their fringes are marked by vegetation, small artificial ponds, and minor public spaces. Communal spaces for agricultural production, barns, and sites for waste collection are found on the outskirts of such settlements. The main public services, such as the town hall and the school, are generally situated at the centre of the village in small buildings near the main crossroads. Commercial activities, small warehouses, and restaurants are integrated into the dwellings, which are courtyard houses situated side by side and oriented north–south, with narrow lanes running between. There are normally between 350 and 450 of these buildings, housing a total population of 1,000–1,500 inhabitants.

Most of the oldest houses in these traditional agricultural villages are one of two types that share similar features. Both are courtyard houses with a total footprint of 200 to 250 square metres. The house is a rectangular one- or two-storey structure located on the north side of the court, with the entrance and the windows facing south. The floor plan consists of about 95 square metres divided into six rooms, organised as follows: at the centre is the living room (about 18 square metres), which is connected to three smaller spaces, commonly used as the kitchen (about 9 square metres), and two bedrooms (about 14 square metres each). The buildings on the western and eastern sides of the courtyard are smaller structures not directly connected to the main block. The interior is divided into small rooms used as workspaces, storage areas, henhouses, or small barns. Finally, the southern side of the courtyard is enclosed by walls with a gated entrance. Each block of the courtyard house is made of brick with wooden trusses supporting a pitched tiled gable roof. Apart from decorations on the roof ridge and the courtyard gate, the form of the complex is simple and linear.

Although these traditional typologies are still dominant in traditional agricultural villages, the New Socialist Countryside programme has been replacing them with modern buildings since the mid-2000s. Still greater changes have occurred since 2010, when owners were allowed to add steel structures clad in prefabricated concrete or corrugated steel to their buildings. Such structures often completely cover the entire courtyard, adding up to six or seven storeys to the existing dwelling. As a result, some villages are now composed of rows of massive compact buildings (20 × 15 metres) separated by dark narrow lanes.

0 km   0.5   1.5

Fig. 30. Sample 2.A.

Yuezhuang Village

Inhabitants: about 900 people   Total area: 180,000 sq. m

Construction period: NA   Total housing units: about 250

Legend

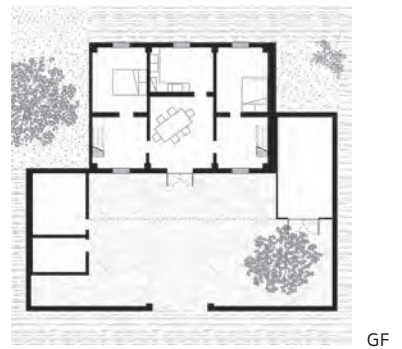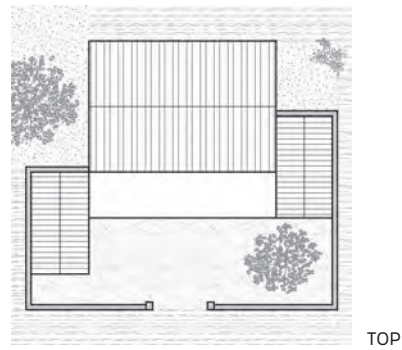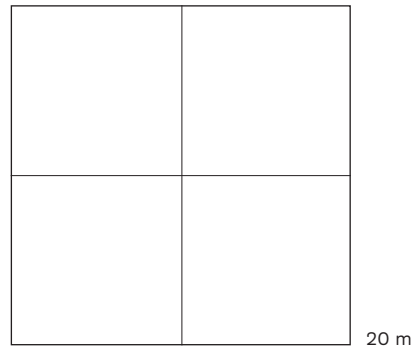|	fishponds		trees and vegetation
	roads		bare land
	built-up areas		crops and arable land
	water		non-permeable surfaces

Fig. 31. Housing types in Sample 2.A.
Yuezhuang Village

Type A
House area: 200 sq. m
Number of houses: about 500 units

Type B
House area: 250 sq. m
Number of houses: about 300 units

20 m

TOP

TOP

1F

GF

Type A

GF

Type B

Fig. 32. View of Yuezhuang Village, Zhongmu County.

Fig. 33. Lizhuang Village, Zhongmu County, 2019.

Fig. 34. Yuezhuang Village, Zhongmu County, 2019.

Fig. 55. Western square of Zhengdong Railway Station, 2019.

Over the last twenty years, unprecedented urban growth
has been transforming China: new towns dot the landscape,
suburbanisation is exploding everywhere, and new ways of
building on and living in agricultural spaces are transforming
rural areas. The Central Plains in Henan Province is at the
frontier of these developments. The formerly agricultural region
is undergoing radical changes that are giving rise to a new
landscape unlike anything ever seen in twentieth-century China
or anywhere else in the world.

This publication explores these new conditions based on
four years of research and fieldwork. It examines the socio-
spatial implications of national and local policies and planning,
and investigates the newly built infrastructures, housing,
and production spaces. With a rich collection of original maps
and photo essays, this book offers a fresh perspective on the
Chinese city and a stimulating basis for reconceptualising urban
and architectural design.