



**Luigi Tomba, *The Government Next Door:  
Neighborhood Politics in Urban China,***

Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2015, 225 pp.

**Judith Audin**

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7496>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.7496

ISSN: 1996-4617

**Publisher**

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 December 2017

Number of pages: 64-65

ISSN: 2070-3449

**Electronic reference**

Judith Audin, « Luigi Tomba, *The Government Next Door: Neighborhood Politics in Urban China*, », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2017/4 | 2017, Online since 01 December 2017, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7496> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7496>

---

This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.

© All rights reserved

---

# Luigi Tomba, *The Government Next Door: Neighborhood Politics in Urban China*,

Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2015, 225 pp.

Judith Audin

---

- 1 A residential neighbourhood can appear as more of a domestic than a political domain; it nevertheless constitutes a space governed by power relations that are interestingly structured in authoritarian regimes. From the 1950s, the Chinese regime introduced and strengthened social control mechanisms extending into the city's lanes and residential units. During the market economy reforms period, the local modalities of government recomposed. How can one study them in the current urban context? Breaking with theories of "governing from a distance" and the liberal prisms of autonomisation of individuals in the framework of housing commodification, the latest work of Luigi Tomba gets to the heart of power relations to unscramble the tangled web of fragile equilibriums of domination stemming "from below" to better conceptualise the Chinese state's formation. He highlights "everyday practices of power in the neighbourhood" (p. 3), meaning daily manifestations of the rationalities of local level administrative action (p. 11), where principles such as segregation, social distinction, and quality (*suzhi*) are detailed and



accepted (p. 12), reinforcing governmental legitimacy. The author introduces the political consensus concept (p. 19)—a set of local government-produced declarations. The consensus, which can be divisive and selective, stems not only from coercion but also quite simply from acceptance of values underlying an administrative technology, meaning that the locality is the place for exercising daily rationalities that contribute to local and national governance. The book records “the different experiences of the state that neighbourhoods promote as well as the role they play in maintaining social stability while creating new dependencies and loyalties to the state” (p. 5). Bearing in mind the great diversity of Chinese localities (p. 9), each chapter studies one specific government rationality and practice.

- 2 Chapter 1 deals with social classification resulting from “social clustering” in residential neighbourhoods, comparing different localities and showing that residents are differently affected by government techniques through class, given their social characteristics.
- 3 Chapter 2 describes formal administration and government structures (residents’ committees and community committees) in Shenyang City (Liaoning Province), which, during the process of deindustrialisation and *de-danweisation*, redefined residential governance to foster allocation of social services needed by the unemployed. This transition from *danwei* to neighbourhood has converged towards basic organisations, developing a governance model quite different from that of Shanghai. The author conducted a quantitative study of community residents’ committee directors to more precisely gauge the process of urban industrial reconversion and the ways in which demobilised factory personnel found job niches and thus assumed responsibility for some social assistance missions while remaining relatively legitimate in residents’ eyes. Tomba also analyses apparently more informal forms of socio-cultural performances in the sociability spaces of Tiexi District such as public parks, in reality organised and financed by local cadres (p. 81). The “borrowing of credibility” (p. 82) from higher-level leaders who rely upon the residents’ committee agents to initiate and maintain a dialogue with the residents is an extremely useful notion to grasp the dynamics of local Chinese politics.
- 4 Chapter 3, focused on “Hopetown,” a neighbourhood located in northeast Beijing, reveals a new type of social fabric of Chinese citizens formed through the production and appropriation of new types of “commodity” residential compounds (*shangpinfang xiaoqu*). Noting different stages of housing sector liberalisation in urban China, as well as hybrid forms of marketization such as the public sector coexisting with the new real-estate sector to then cede place to it in the name of a new paradigm of social distinction, Tomba demonstrates that the formation of a middle class of homeowners is one of the essential factors of neighbourhood consensus.
- 5 The next chapter plunges into the issue of homeowners’ class, analysing how homeownership conflicts do not affect the state’s legitimacy, as they evolved in the relatively independent context of the neighbourhood and do not lead to the formation of an enlightened middle class seeking regime democratisation, unlike what many studies have suggested. Based on an instance of collective action by Hopetown apartment owners, Tomba retraces the causes and consequences of ownership conflicts that erupted in the first decade of this century. He holds that interests linked to local conflicts determine configurations of solidarity among neighbours and could strengthen collective demands. However, the self-government of homeowners through

the direct election of homeowners' committees is not a smooth process, as pertinently explained in the section on "pains of self-administration" (p. 136). Thus, the form of both physical and social borders makes the neighbourhood an "internal space" with limited autonomy where conflicts and collective action paradoxically form part of the neighbourhood consensus.

- 6 Finally, Tomba presents the last dimension of the consensus: the promotion of civilised and urban values in residential space. He studied the production of social norms through the notions of exemplarity, quality (*suzhi*), and civilisation. The demonstration is useful in that it takes into account not only municipalities' educational materials that are put at people's disposal, but also concrete experiences defining citizenship, especially the housing segregation process initiated in part through urban renewal operations (p. 154). The case of the Shenyang industrial district's "revitalisation," wherein any reference to industrial labour is no longer available, aptly characterises the phenomena of Chinese cities' planned gentrification (p. 161-162), lending Wang Bing's film *West of the Tracks* an archival status.
- 7 The book's strength and relevance stem from the author's ability to paint a "canvas"<sup>1</sup> of neighbourhood governance that helps to quite fully visualise the social, spatial, political, and economic factors that contribute to this "consensus." The book thus not only contributes to studies on local urban government in China but also addresses general issues in political science such as deindustrialisation, legitimisation of political regimes, social stratification, housing reform, residential segregation, bureaucratisation of para-administrative organisations, and the dynamics of collective action.
- 8 While the book is exhilarating, some reservations must be noted. First off, in regard to research methodology, the book lacks ethnographic "matter." Urban neighbourhood fieldwork would have gained from more direct observation, especially interviews with those studied. Moreover, the research needed a deeper investigation of the spatial dimension of the studied phenomena. Locally produced consensus varies according to the social profiles of inhabitants, as well as the type of property and their relation to the urban space, that is to say, the sensory and social experience of living. A few valuable references would have helped complete this reflection, especially those of David Fraser on the *oasification* of Shanghai's residential compounds and the briefly mentioned work of Zhang Li on Chongqing's residential subjectivities and practices. Furthermore, the neighbourhoods studied during fieldwork (a series of studies carried out throughout the previous decade) do not allow for visualising a political environment and the local production of consensus in a specific context. The chapter on the problems of social assistance extended to Shenyang's public sector workers is juxtaposed with the one on conflicts of co-ownership in new residential compounds in Beijing. Tomba could have broached the issue of middle-classification of neighbourhoods in Shenyang instead of Beijing, as he explained in the previous chapter that the city had undertaken major urban renovation work in the city-centre in order to boost reconversion towards a "competitive, global, and post-industrial city" identity (p. 157). Moreover, the notion of autonomy introduced in the comparison of different types of neighbourhoods would have benefited from a more critical elaboration, as the chapters seem to be heading towards contradictory conclusions: on the one hand the reader learns that "poor" urban spaces are under greater control of cadres than middle class residential areas, but on the other, the author states that the middle classes face

“patterns of dependence” more complex than in the past (p. 127). It is also regrettable that conflicts in the recent residential compounds have not been studied mirroring the demolition-displacement (*chaiqian*) conflicts characterising old neighbourhoods. Further, the historic dimension, which represents a mere sub-section, could have gained consistency by extracting the genealogy of the neighbourhood consensus through the dual process of housing reform and *de-danweisation* in Chinese cities. Finally, some notions are difficult to grasp, especially “consensus,” which while relying on a profusion of actors and practices, is limited to a state-society binary dialectic (not being clear what precisely the author means by “state” or “society”), whereas a more fascinating reflection could have been attempted on political processes “from below” in the Chinese context and more specifically on the subjectification concept.

- 9 However, given its empirical and theoretical contribution, this book undeniably contributes to research on urban China at the crossroads of political sociology and political economics of domination based on case studies of a subject both ordinary and heuristic—the residential neighbourhood. Various aspects of power relations are finely dissected, making for a highly interesting analytical work in a socio-political arena in which “the existence of a space where bargaining between state and society and within society is made possible through formalized institutions, routinized practices, and discursive boundaries” (p. 169). To conclude, the neighbourhood is an “incubator of political processes that have implications for our understanding of Chinese politics, both local and national” (p. 4).

---

## NOTES

1. This reviewer dealt with the “neighbourhood” issue in a thematic study of different facets of power relations traversing such geographic and social spaces in her doctoral thesis. See Judith Audin, *Vie quotidienne et pouvoir dans trois quartiers de Pékin: une microsociologie politique comparée des modes de gouvernement urbain au début du 21e siècle* (Daily life and power in three Beijing neighbourhoods: a comparative political microsociology of urban government in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century), PhD thesis, political science, Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2013, <http://spire.sciencespo.fr/hdl:/2441/dambferfb7dfprc9m28294h86> (accessed on 18 October 2017).

---

## AUTHOR

### JUDITH AUDIN

Judith Audin is a researcher with CEFC and chief editor of *China Perspectives* (jaudin@cefc.com.hk).