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**Book Review: Peri-Urban China: Land Use, Growth, and
Integrated Urban–Rural Development**

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Li Tian and Yan Guo, *Peri-Urban China: Land Use, Growth, and Integrated Urban–Rural Development*. Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2019; ix + 221 pp. with figures, tables, notes, references, and index: 9780815349112, US\$140.00 (hbk)

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Peri-Urban China is a study of the characteristics of land-use change in the peri-urban areas of China, and its underlying social and economic driving forces. It adopts a case study approach focused on the three most developed regions of China (Pearl River Delta, Yangtze River Delta, and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region) and its ultimate aim is to unveil how to achieve policies for sustainable land development in China.

The theoretical framework employed is based on the new institutional economics, widely used in planning theory to link the functioning of institutions with the concepts of property rights and transaction costs. Each case study relies on a variety of methods of investigation, such as GIS mapping, indices of landscape ecology, and urban planning tools, thus providing suitable comparative understanding of different peri-urban dynamics across the country.

The book is structured in seven chapters. The introductory chapter presents the overall rationale of the book. Chapter 2 offers an interesting historical review of theories and debates of urban–rural development. Here, it is correctly argued that China does not entirely follow a universal pattern of urbanization, but its evolution is rooted in the ‘desakota model’, where a mixture of non-agricultural and agricultural activities coexist outside the formal boundary of cities (T. G. McGee, Globalisation, urbanisation and the emergence of sub-global regions: A case study of the Asia-Pacific region, in R. F. Watters and T. G. McGee (eds) *Asia Pacific: New Geographies of the Pacific Rim*, London: Hurst & Company, 1997, 29–45). Chapter 3 provides a historical overview of the Chinese urbanization process and it describes the diversity of development patterns of peri-urban areas: while bottom–up rural industrialization has been central to the development of the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta, top–down investments have mostly shaped the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. Along these lines, Chapter 4 unpacks different governance arrangements and resulting land-use fragmentation in the three regions. Chapter 5 examines cases of formal and informal institutions under a regime of ambiguous property rights in collectively owned rural areas. It concludes by providing insights into how the interactions between rural actors and local governments have determined incremental changes and adaptations of rural land institutions. Chapter 6 instead primarily focuses on a detailed case study in Guangdong Province where a new policy has been piloted to facilitate the redevelopment of peri-urban land. While some efficiency has been achieved, it is argued that the institutional change introduced has also come with social costs. In conclusion, the book acknowledges land-use fragmentation as the main problem of peri-urban areas and advocates new policies for multilevel coordinated development, compact urbanization and urban–rural integrated governance.

This book is an important addition to the existing literature on Chinese cities, because of its focus on peri-urban dimension. This is still a relatively new field of research in China, which scholars have started to address only in recent years (Giulio Verdini, Yiwen Wang, and Xiaonan Zhang (eds), *Urban China’s Rural Fringe: Actors, Dimensions and Management Challenges*, Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2016).

The rigorous analytical framework, relying primarily on ‘rational choice institutionalism’ and ‘path dependency’ theories, is one of the book’s merits. When applied to urban planning, this has generally meant to investigate private-led planning and its transaction costs, assuming that actors involved tend to maximize their own benefits (André Sorensen, New Institutionalism and planning theory, in Michael Gunder, Ali Madanipour, and Vanessa Watson (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Planning Theory*, Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2018, 250–63). The advantage of such an approach in Chinese governance studies is understandable, given the country’s gradual, although tortuous, transition from a centrally planned towards a market-oriented economy (Fulong Wu, China’s changing urban governance in the transition towards a more market-oriented economy, *Urban Studies* 39(7), 2002: 1071–93).

While the book is internally coherent, however, such an approach might not fully grasp the complexity of Chinese urban–rural fringes. The lack of references to local social and cultural contexts in which institutions and their actors operate is regrettable, as it prevents to observe, for example, the potential emergence of place-based collaborative planning processes. The conclusion speaks mainly about the Chinese government’s agenda and its efficiency rather than the endogenous distinctiveness of Chinese peri-urban areas.. More effort is

required to study and conceptualize the Chinese patterns of peri-urbanization from different perspectives to envision a broader space for policy innovation.

Nevertheless, the methodological value of this book and its contribution to understanding Chinese urban growth make it highly recommended reading for students, scholars and practitioners in urban planning in China.