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Book review

Housing East Asia: Socioeconomic and Demographic Challenges (2014), by Doling, J., Ronald, R. (Eds.) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

This is a comprehensive book that not only provides an update of the evolving housing systems in the major East Asian countries, but also evaluates the impacts of the recent economic, social and demographic changes on the housing sectors in the nine cases included. The editors have rightly drawn our attention to less developed linkages between studies on policy and welfare regime in this region on the one hand, and the housing studies on the other, which underlines the theoretical contribution of this volume. The nine empirical chapters following the introduction, written by recognized experts in housing in their respective countries, enriched the theoretical concepts especially regarding the most recent transformations undergoing in China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand. It is therefore a good resource for those with prior knowledge and interest in housing issues in this region

It is a challenging task to sketch the ever evolving social-economic environment in these fast growing countries, let alone identify their common/diverse features. Based on their established knowledge and the contribution of local experts, Doling and Ronald had done a good job in presenting a relatively coherent picture in this volume. Two aims were explicitly stated in their introduction. One was to consolidate the growing literature on East Asia and to update an earlier publication on *Housing Policy System in South and East Asia* (2002); the other was to posit housing sector within the broader transformations unveiled in these societies (p3-4). The editors and the contributors have accomplished the first task well. In particular, the seeds of changes planted during the late twentieth century, such as economic volatility, aging, dropping fertility and household formation rates, and migration, were well documented and policy responses (or the lack of it) specified in most empirical chapters. But the discussions on the impacts of democratisation and neo-liberalisation were slightly weak compared to the other factors. For democratisation, although this trend was most noticeable in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, it has not become a salient feature in the others, which undermines the effort of generalisation to some extent. For neo-liberalisation, it is perhaps one of the most noticeable economic environmental changes in developed and developing countries alike, and has become a common policy choice for the past three decades. Most of the governments in East Asia have also started embracing some deregulation and market-oriented reforms, as recognised in this book. Yet some of these changes were proactively initialised by these economies as a response to the intensified global competition; some were however imposed by supranational institutions such as the World Bank. The economic and social impacts of these endogenous and exogenous forces might be very different, so do the mechanisms through which these reforms could trigger housing system change. Nonetheless, this volume fails to distinguish these internal and external forces, as well as the corresponding policy implications explicitly. Individual chapter has given more or less attention to this neo-liberalisation trend, which makes it difficult to grasp the overall picture.

The second focus of this volume, namely embedding housing system within the wider social-economic background, is highly applaudable. But it is somewhat disappointing to see the conceptual discussion on this matter terminated at the developmental states and productivist welfare regime literatures, and the mentioning of emerging debates around post-developmental state was neither fully developed nor evidenced. As the empirical chapters revealed, there were noticeable diversifications within East Asia in terms of their starting points (e.g. sovereign states or post-colony; strong or weak government interventions) and reform rationales (privatisation as in Japan and Taiwan or restructuring public engagement as in China and Singapore), both could impact the way housing systems are conceived and how the systems are integrated into the wider social-economic contexts. Therefore how these diversities came into play in the conventional developmental model needs further elaboration. In the individual empirical chapter, the contributors uniformly adopted an evolutionary approach in their exploration of the respective housing system, which exemplified the impacts on and reactions of housing policies to the wider social-economic changes satisfactorily. Nonetheless, there was an

asymmetric attention given to the two most recent economic crises in 1998 and 2008 among the cases. Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea and Thailand had witnessed both economic and political restructuring after the 1998 crisis; Japan had its own 'bubble-bust' cycle earlier on so the impact of the Asian financial crisis was less noticeable compared to the Great Financial Crisis in the 2008, whereas in China and Taiwan, there was not much mentioning of the two crises, leaving readers to wonder whether there were any significant impacts there.

As it becomes clear by comparing the different case studies, the heterogeneities between the East Asian economies are perhaps as striking as their similarities. However the editors took it as their starting point that East Asia shares a distinctive housing model which differs fundamentally from the western ones (p4, p10-11). This East Asia housing model tends to follow a state-planned approach, progresses through a bureaucratically coordinated manner and is generally subordinated to the priority of economic growth. The case of Taiwan, and to a lesser degree of Thailand, however, immediately stood out with a less-engaging government in their earlier days, especially in the sphere of social housing. Besides the difference in the degree of public engagement, the evolution of individual case also falls into two broad categories. On the one hand, we have China, Hong Kong, and Singapore, who used to have a dominant public housing sector but since the late 1980s had undergone noticeable restructuring; On the other, we have Indonesia, Taiwan and Malaysia, where the authorities were gaining experiences in engaging with the market and balancing economic and social priorities. Although the editors admitted some of these intraregional divergences, as shown by their distinction between the 'newest of the newly industrialising societies' and the more developed ones (p12-13), their classification was mainly based on economic performance which did not necessarily correspond to their housing systems. Moreover, the uniqueness of this East Asia housing model as compared to the west is an important question and deserves a dedicated section to elaborate. As it currently stands, this volume made no detailed comparison; neither was there any reference to the changing western housing systems. This might become even more problematic if we accept one of the main statements in this book that, democratisation and neo-liberalisation have spread all over the world, and have pushed the East Asian regions to be more market-driven. Therefore for how long this 'unique' East Asia housing model could sustain, and whether there are already some societies becoming more western-like, are some of the crucial questions left unanswered.

Albeit these downsides, this is a worthy reading book for someone hoping to get an up-to-date picture of the housing systems in East Asia. The individual chapter in particular provides some good reference materials in this ever changing region. The editors have done a good job bringing these different cases under a relatively comparable structure. The introduction concisely summarises the major changes in this region, although the integrity of the book would have been enhanced further with a conclusion at the end.

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