Wade Shepard, *Ghost Cities of China: The Story of Cities without People in the World's Most Populated Country*

London: Zed Books, 2015. 192 pp. $95.00 hardcover, $21.95 paperback.

Shih-Yang Kao

In *Ghost Cities of China*, American journalist Wade Shepard takes readers on a tour of a China whose society, economy, and culture have been drastically transformed during the past two decades by processes of urbanization. The tour highlights the emergence of the so-called ghost cities, or newly constructed urban places that are found to be having "drastically fewer people and business than there is available space for" (40). The book's nine chapters are organized around the central message that urbanization is a *project* that the Chinese state is determined to accomplish, even if it means using unorthodox measures such as actively populating a place if needed. By following such an argument, the book interprets China's ghost cities as a *phase* of the country's urbanization process that will eventually be followed by a fuller realization of urban potential.

Ghost Cities of China is part of Zed Books' "Asian Arguments" series: short books about contemporary Asia that will highlight, in the publisher's own words, "community involvement from the ground up in issues of the day usually discussed by authors in terms of top-down government policy" (French n.d.). Shepard is a media contributor (to such major news outlets as Forbes, the *South China Morning Post*, and *The Diplomat*) who has been reporting on China since the mid-2000s. The book is written in a language that is accessible to general readers, and its length is moderate. As such, *Ghost Cities of China* would be an ideal resource for learning and teaching about China's post-Mao urbanization.

Shepard's main objective in this book is to dispute the critique of the emerging ghost city phenomenon in China. Such critiques take Chinese ghost cities as signs of developmental failure and argue that China's property boom is unsustainable, if not fake. Shepard's response is that the alleged ghost cities are in fact a bit of a misnomer. The book shows that, once built, a newly urbanized area often stays unpopulated for a couple of years because it would be expensive for investors to properly fit out and rent out their flats, so they sit on them until the government starts to induce businesses to move to the area. In the best chapter of the book, titled "When Construction Ends and the Building Begins," Shepard vividly describes how Chinese officials make the

S. Kao
Department of Geography, University of Hong Kong, PRC
email: shiyangkao@gmail.com

alleged ghost cities come alive. The government's populating strategy often starts with the opening of a new campus of a university or the extension of a metro line to an alleged ghost city. Such capstone investments are then followed by various relocation incentives such as free transport and rent discounts (or even a couple of rent-free years), which, according to Shepard, are usually effective. For Shepard, then, critiques of Chinese ghost cities are way too impatient to see how new city-building projects eventually play out. In his version of the story, Chinese officials have too much at stake in such projects and will not easily let new cities just stand idle forever.

In offering a fresh perspective on the alleged ghost city phenomenon, *Ghost Cities of China* has provided a valuable account of the major and profound shift in China's post-Mao political economy that is the urbanization of the Chinese state. In short, this process began in the early 1990s amid dissatisfaction with the previous reform initiatives by Deng Xiaoping that had culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations. Since then, urbanism has risen to become a major paradigm of growth in China, with municipalities rushing to construct new cities and to rebuild old urban cores. In this respect, two of the book's earlier chapters, "Clearing the Land" and "Of New Cities and Ghost Cities," very helpfully tease out the driving forces behind this particular urbanization process, namely the reform of the country's land system and changes in fiscal relationships between the central and the local. In a later chapter, "A New City, a New Identity," Shepard further provides an account of how the urban turn in local governance has been followed by the successive waves of urbanization fever— including the eco-city, the central business district, and industrially themed cities— which have fundamentally transformed the landscape of China.

Ghost Cities of China describes urbanization as a project of the state and refuses to interpret unpopulated urban spaces in China as signs of developmental failure. In a ghost city near Shanghai called Anting German Town, Shepard meets a local woman who is happy with the lack of population there because her kids can play outside freely. In Kangbashi, the newly constructed urban center of the Ordos region, he meets a teacher from Guangzhou who is also pretty satisfied with her life in a ghost city because no one is at her back looking to take her job. For Shepard, then, the alleged ghost cities are in fact full of new opportunities and potential. They are not signs of economic decline, but places of becoming.

No book is perfect, and as a student of Chinese cities I found the urbanization process described in *Ghost Cities of China* to be overly mechanic, organized, and predictable. In Shepard's account, the process of urbanization in China is purely a function of the country's fast-evolving state-market relations. And yet, as many writings on the so-called urban villages have revealed, village communities located at the fringe areas of Chinese cities are not merely passive actors in the urbanization process. Instead, they have actively turned their collective-owned farmlands to commercial uses in order to take advantage of the market that has come closer to them. And, as such, they have brought about a process of urbanization from below that further expands "the city" into the countryside. In other words, urbanization in China is in reality far more spontaneous and messy than Shepard might be willing to admit.

I had also hoped to see in his book more discussion of city building as a material process. Urbanization is not just a sociospatial transformation. It requires the work of construction that transforms material stuff such as concrete into buildings and infrastructure. And yet, this crucial aspect of urban development is largely left out in

Shepard's story. In fact, while reading the book I kept wondering if Shepard would still describe the ghost cities as places of potential and opportunity if he had considered how the construction workforce relates to the newly built urban places. In China, most of the people working in the construction industry are migrants from rural areas, who are unlikely to be able to afford the apartment complexes they help build. After an urban development project is complete, they often just move on to work on a new building project in a new place. I can hardly imagine such migrant construction workers seeing these newly constructed urban spaces as places of opportunity and potential. For them, city building is more of a cyclical process of alienation and displacement that deprives them of the opportunity of climbing the social ladder.

Nonetheless, *Ghost Cities of China* is a wonderful book to read and from which to learn about China's ongoing urban transformation. Shepard is passionate in describing and explaining the urbanization process that is unfolding around him. Though it would benefit from more images, maps, and figures, Shepard's writing is clear and exciting, and his analysis of the issue is accurate and well balanced. I would highly recommend this book to all those with an interest in urban China.

Reference

French, Paul, ed. n.d. "Asian Arguments." www.zedbooks.net/shop/series/asian-arguments/ (accessed 15 May 2019).

Shih-Yang Kao is a lecturer in the Department of Urban Planning and Design at the Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University. His research interests include the political ecology of China's post-Mao urbanization and urban responses to climate change.