

Book Review: “Shanghai Rising: State Power and Local Transformations in a Global Megacity.”
Globalization and Community, Volume 15. Xiangming Chen, ed., with Zhenhua Zhou. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. xxv and 267 pp., tables, references, and indexes. \$25.00 paper (ISBN 978- 0-8166-5488-8).

Review by: [Susan M. Walcott](#)

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Article:

Shanghai deservedly attracts much scholarly attention, both inside and outside China, as a striking exemplar of China’s resurgence onto the world scene. This edited compilation emphasizes the dimension of comparison with other developing and developed world cities, beginning Part I with both a strength and a weakness of this volume: contributions from scholars whose background is not in studying Shanghai. It is a laudable effort to engage non-China specialists but shows the risks involved. Although the contributors are well known for work on global city theory, aerotropolis complexes, Bangkok, and high-tech clusters, their value for understanding Shanghai’s development is less convincing.

Urban comparisons are fraught with controversy; claims for comparability must be carefully delineated and defended at the outset. A historian known for his China scholarship and comparative studies in revolutions points out the significant impacts of Shanghai’s “stop and go” development and prefers the category of “a reglobalizing post-socialist city” (Wasserstrom 2007). Holding Shanghai up to a series of “one-size” standards to measure the city’s contemporary fit with numerical indicators such as multinational corporate regional headquarters, type and number of service functions, and global linkages with other advanced firms and financial networks implies that convergence is more important than points of local adaptation.

A striking aspect of this book is the frequent cross-referencing of authors to other chapters of the book. This indicates that authors read other chapters, and were encouraged to cite them in their own contribution. This is a bit unusual for an edited volume, where most of the connecting is left to the editor who solicited the contributions, usually written solely with their own work in mind. The editor also co-wrote several of the chapters, adding to the remarkably even coordination.

Part II begins with what is probably the strongest chapter in the book, by a well-published expert on Shanghai, Fulong Wu’s examination of the role of government entities on the institutional and physical reconstruction of the city. He agrees with Wasserstrom that Shanghai is a globally integrating rather than a global city. Although its “telematic infrastructure” (referencing Sassen’s chapter within the book) is not up to Tokyo’s, Shanghai is certainly an Asian urban leader. The subject of this chapter goes to the heart of the book’s examination of Shanghai’s two-layered role: the external exemplar face of New China to the global economic community and on the other hand its significance for the internal power structure. Wu succinctly outlines the historical evolution of Shanghai’s “Chinese characteristics” that make its development—and by proxy urban China’s—both similar to and yet distinctly different from capitalistic processes. An example is his treatment of gentrification and land development (p. 136), with the Chinese government decreasing its investment to match the increase in foreign direct investment and private funds.

The Chinese management of urban development involves the decreasingly visible hand of the State but is driven by State-designated projects such as the ongoing strengthening of Pudong. Two chapters in this section further illustrate the increasingly two-way nature of power impacting the direction of Shanghai's development: becoming "a global city from below" (Zhang, pp. 167–90) and "downward pressure, upward bubbling" (Lu, Ren, and Chen, pp. 191–214). Political and economic structures in the post-Mao era seek a workable balance for China from centralized planning initiatives to more market-responsive measures. The process is enriched and complicated as China opens up to outside influences, delicately balancing internal and external pressures. As Zhang points out, China sees globalization as a less problematic positive goal than many do in more developed countries—possibly because China has greatly benefited economically in the process so far. His use of the urban growth machine framework, like Stone's earlier study of Atlanta, offers an interesting theoretical application to the picture of political and business leaders networking illustrated in this chapter. The relative level of human capital in education and financial importance applies to the relative success of urban district leadership interfacing with municipal-level authorities. This examination is less clear about whether and how political power might be applied to benefit the economic ties of the network members.

The next chapter logically follows with a rare look at the even lower level of the community, to consider the effects of globalization on this micro-society and the internal spatial structure of the city. The discussion of the impact of NGOs cuts across both scales. Examples of lifestyles modified by globalization, from international marriages, retail chains, and fast-food outlets, illustrate the local–global penetration that forms the focus of the next chapter. Insights utilize data gathered by funded surveys from eight years previously. The basic recommendation is that more community-level group organizing is needed to rebuild ties due to the disruption and rearrangement caused by the inclusion of new international individuals and global influences at multiple scales. The following chapter conducts regression analysis to validate the observation that the strength of global influences varies by age and income—which one might also imagine are proxies for education and exposure to foreign influences.

The final chapter tries to synthesize contributions into a "Shanghai model" suitable for emulation, under the influence of "the global economy and state power" (p. 237), another model of what was termed the "Interventionist State" in studies of Japan and several Asian Tigers. This study claims to contribute to elucidating both Shanghai's exceptional distinctions and its theoretical power. The uneasiness of scholars as to Shanghai's "fit" is characterized by the variety of global, world, and international city terms used in various studies and the final chapter. The author tries to have it both ways by acknowledging the need to appreciate a city's distinctive historical evolution and the role of the interventionist state. He then goes on to predict that Shanghai will furnish a new (since not presently realized) form of global city within a "grounded relational view" that looks for the extent of global forces percolating down to the individual and community levels.

Numerous examinations of Shanghai over the past two decades pinpointed the same areas of interest: the interconnected maturation of economic and political institutions and practices, legal and environmental concerns, and impacts on the rural–urban relationship via migration, moving through a succession of opening up, reform, and stabilization as China (and its urban spearhead cities such as Shanghai) increasingly grows into global systemic participation. This book is worthy of taking its place in the bibliography of that debate, with its laudable efforts to include the individuating local history of a city with an eye on its evolving articulation with broad global forces.

Reference

Wasserstrom, J. 2007. Is global Shanghai "good to think"? Thoughts on comparative history and post-socialist cities. *Journal of World History* 18:199–234.