Chinese City and Regional Planning Systems

by Li Yu, Ashgate, 2014, ISBN 9780754674993 (pbk)

*Chinese City and Regional Planning Systems* is a much needed volume to help understand the development and performance of China’s regional planning systems. To planning students, scholars and people who are generally interested in public policy, the book provides an overview of the operation of the planning system in the rapidly changing urban landscape of Chinese cities with detailed case studies on the Liaoning Coastal Area, South Fujian region and Xiamen. The book opens up with detailed description on Chinese society, culture, economy and urban challenges which sets the backdrop for planning governance. It then sketches out the development trajectory of planning concepts and the vicissitude of the planning system in modern and contemporary China. Chapter 3 introduces the hierarchical administrative structure of the government in relation to plan-making and implementation. The following three chapters then focus on the statutory plans that constitute the planning system: the Integrated Urban System Plan at the regional level, Urban Comprehensive Plan at the municipal level and Regulatory Detailed Plan at the district level to examine their objectives and contents. The non-statutory plan, Urban Development Strategic Plan is investigated as an innovative tool to deal with uncertainty and fast changing situations in the market economy in Chapter 7. The next chapter explains the administrative mechanism of planning management or development control, and the final chapter employs an evaluation system from planning literature to examine the effectiveness of the Chinese planning system. As a result, a host of problems and challenges is revealed.

Li Yu explains the ways through which this planning system is transformed along with the transition of a centrally planned economy to a market economy which has been associated with ‘devolution, globalisation, marketization, rapid urbanization and economic growth’ in China (pp.41). Essentially, the planning system has changed from a mechanism of allocating resources by the central government before the 1980s to a media of coordinating complex and often conflict interests of market stakeholders at present. It is interesting that those changes have been brought up by local governments at the bottom and gradually altered the top-down structure, for instance, the emergence of the Regulatory Detailed Plan inspired by the American zoning plans and the Urban Development Strategic Plan. Furthermore, regional coordination in development in the form of City Alliance emerges in recent years to promote regional competitiveness which intends to direct the dynamic flows of investment, immigration, technology and information under the influence of globalization.

The book is a necessary piece contributing to the theory of planning culture (Friedmann 2005) and the doctrine of ‘path dependence’ in planning (Booth 2011). Both theories reckon that the formation, institutionalization and enactment of spatial planning are deeply embedded in the political culture of the country or cities, and traditional approaches have significant impact on contemporary practice. The transformation of China’s planning system perfectly demonstrates the close tie between the planning management structure and the overall political and administrative system. The dynamic relationships among the central government, local authorities and civic society, determine the delivery of the hierarchical plans. Within this transition, Li Yu points out that strong urban entrepreneurialism leads local authorities’ actions such as the adoption of the pragmatic planning approach by Xiamen authority where only developers and investors’ interests are considered. This will inevitably present pressure on social equality and public good as the essential tasks of public policy.

The book perhaps presents more questions for China’s regional planning system than it answers. The evaluation framework adopted at the end provides multiple perspectives to identify the challenges. In particular, planning do not seek a consensus vision for all users but being a process of elite action; local authorities have ambiguous roles as regulators and facilitators of development; plans do not promote communication and coordination of conflict interests of stakeholders; they fail to protect public interest but merely to benefit economic growth; plans neglect sustainable issues and there is problematic resilience to plan delivery. The author calls for an ‘eclectic solution’ (pp.273) between planning flexibility to deal with uncertainty and planners’ value, principles. However, it is not clear what exactly the ‘eclectic solution’ is and how it could be achieved. Participatory planning has also been mentioned repetitively in the book, however, the reviewer believes it is a complex issue and needs intensive investigation on approaches and implications. Moreover, the book does not cover topic-related plans such as the Historic Conservation Plan which is also an important element of the planning system. The book opens up the discussion, although brief, on the impact of generic technical norms on the making of the Regulatory Detailed Plan and the empirically generated control indices in those plans. The reviewer proposes that extensive discussion is needed and the current approaches of plan contextualization and development control in China need further examination and innovation in practice.

# References:

Booth P, 2011, “Culture, planning and path dependence: some reflections on the problems of comparison” *Town Planning Review* **82** (1) 13-28.

Friedmann J, 2005, “Globalization and the emerging culture of planning” *Progress in Planning* **64** (3) 183-234.