
This book is a collection of essays by a panel of Canadian, French, Swiss, Chinese, and Australian authors. It is divided into three parts (1. Le développement économique de la Chine peut-il être durable?, 2. La Chine et le monde, dialectique d’une intégration en marche, 3. Une société en mutation) and no less than 21 chapters. Written mainly by geographers and political scientists, it also includes contributions from economists, sociologists, city planners and demographers, philosophers, and jurists. A useful reference for students as well as teachers the volume covers numerous aspects of China’s development: agriculture, employment policies, water resources management and environment.

The issues of growth sustainability, energy waste, and massive degradation of the environment occupy a large part of the work. Since environment has become a crucial issue as China’s fast industrialisation makes the country a major polluter such an elaborated reflection is a timely contribution to our understanding of imbalances generated by China’s economic development. However, one would like to know more of the juxtaposition of divergent, if not conflicting visions of economic growth in China. Production as an end in itself has been a long lasting aftermath of the Soviet-style economic model, clashing with a more market-driven growth.

Although China remains a rural country, peasants are now a minority. De Koninck & Leblond are dealing with agricultural development stressing, among other topics, the question of the chronic under-evaluation of land surfaces in order to make yields appear higher and therefore justify requests for subsidies. Zhan Su’s critical analysis of “China, factory of the world” including comparisons with Great Britain, the United States and Japan when they were at the apex of their manufacturing strength, focussing on highly value added products, is particularly illuminating. Products made in China are not made by China, although the country is exporting a very wide range of lower-end products. While China is able to produce most goods she is not yet able to innovate and anticipate products not yet available for consumers. In this perspective the volume is lacking a substantive chapter on innovation and R&D systems.

How to make China’s transportation networks compatible with those of the world? Valuable research is presented here in a chapter by Wang, Olivier and
Ng on the high level of complexity reached by ports governance with a very diversified capital structure and tensions between foreign participation and growing economic nationalism. The issue of China's frontiers receives a long treatment. Sébastien Colin argues that “unequal treaties” imposed on China after the Opium War have actually served China’s territorial ambitions in its peripheries—Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. These treaties consolidated Chinese prerogatives in areas where China’s domination was still unstable and not definitely asserted.

Peter Rimmer’s piece examines the growing competition between maritime and land corridors linking China to Europe. The issue of how countries and trans-border systems in the southern part of inner Asia gain access to ports on the China coast overlaps with geopolitical questions such as the strategic importance of pipelines.

Another highly debated theme is urbanisation. After recalling the multi-layered structure of China’s urbanisation, the colonial model between 1842 and 1949, and the strong anti-urban bias of the Maoist regime, Guillaume Giroir focuses on the evolution of the social control system from the danwei towards more mobility for the urban population, and on the strong spatial segregation in the new urban policy. Perhaps it would have been useful to remind the reader that urbanisation has been a highly politicised question. The urban scene is dominated by a conflict between an administrative and political scheme, on the one hand, and a network-type urbanisation where market forces are playing the major role on the other.

Demographic changes receive substantial treatment with two chapters, by Michel Cartier, dealing with China’s demographic model compared with those of Japan and Korea and questions regarding the real size of the country’s total population. Although similarities exist between the three countries problems are rising in a very different way in the case of China, due to the size of its population. China is not simply lagging behind in its demographic transition. It also suffers from difficulties in creating dozens of millions of jobs in the secondary and tertiary sectors and is plagued by a long lasting under-employment in rural areas.

Useful chapters on the frontier issue, geopolitics of China in its Asian environment, philosophic and religious questions, administrative and legal issues complement the volume, which constitutes an up-to-date synthesis with solid bibliographic references at the end of each chapter. In some cases, however, documentation is heavily relying on journalistic sources like Libération, Le Monde or L’Expansion, while valuable first hand materials, mainly in Chinese, are often quoted in the bibliography. Sometimes there are also problems in