Change was afoot in China’s cities in the years before 1900. The expanding number of ‘treaty ports’, discussed by William Rowe (above, Ch. 17) in this volume, and the growth of Hong Kong as a predominantly Chinese city under British control brought many Chinese into contact with new urban phenomena like newspapers, streetcars, electricity, and department stores, as well as foreign ideas about urban administration. Although material life in China’s coastal cities had changed greatly by 1900, the Qing dynasty bureaucrats who ruled the country never articulated a new vision for the place of cities in the Chinese socio-political order. Despite the evolving economy and technologies, officialdom remained committed to a conception of the realm in which a central ruler posted outstanding civil servants to administrative centres in every region to ‘care for the people’, maintain order, and collect taxes. Even the reformer Kang Youwei, writing in exile after an 1898 palace coup, predicted China would avoid the social problems of industrial Western Europe by spreading economic development evenly across the country, minimizing distinctions between city and countryside.

As Rowe argues (Ch. 17, p. y), this vision of a bureaucratically managed, socially homogeneous Chinese society, with little difference between rural and urban life, was always largely a myth. Nevertheless, as much as the history of Chinese cities since 1900 has been marked by ruptures—the collapse of the imperial order, rapid integration into the world economy and the crisis of the Great Depression, warfare on a staggering scale, Maoist revolution and Cultural Revolution, and the recent phenomenal industrial and commercial surge—there has been considerable continuity in thinking among political leaders and theorists about the role of cities. Depending on the era, cities and their residents were called on to ‘strengthen the nation’, ‘serve the people’, or ‘create a harmonious society’, but, except at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), they were to be firmly controlled by the central state. China’s distinctive modern urban history reflects the tensions between the statist goals of its leaders, who sometimes welcomed foreign influences and sometimes shut them out, and the entrepreneurial and creative energies of its diverse people.
The following pages offer a chronological account of changes in Chinese urban life and in the political and economic environments that shaped the urban system in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The first section discusses urban administrative reforms and technological transformations set in motion in the Qing dynasty's final decade and urban developments in the chaotic years after the Qing collapse in 1911. The next section examines the new era of Soviet-influenced urbanism that began with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The final section surveys city life in the post-Mao period of 'reform and opening' since 1978. Changes in the Chinese urban system since 1978 are also examined in some depth by Hung and Zhan (Ch. 34). For the spatial pattern of cities around 2000 see Regional Map III.5.

Readers should bear in mind that the narrative of Chinese urban history since 1900 that follows has been constructed in the face of numerous methodological challenges. Compared to other world regions discussed in this volume, modern China has been characterized by a remarkably dense urban system, with many hundreds of urban areas of various sizes, including small towns serving as market centres for agricultural communities, regional trading hubs and administrative centres, and huge industrial cities and ports, such as Shanghai and the Pearl River delta urban conglomeration with Guangzhou at its core. The various national governments that ruled China in this period have claimed a major role in shaping Chinese urbanism, instituting policies such as the mobility-restricting hukou (household registration) system discussed below. Statistics on city size and other aspects of urban life also reflect national politics. For the first half of the twentieth century, when China lacked a stable national government and/or was engulfed in wars, urban populations and the networks connecting them fluctuated wildly. Although individual cities have been examined in some depth, scholars have yet to offer a careful, comprehensive overview of urban change in that period. For the post-1949 period, geographer Kam Wing Chan has analyzed how official statistics over-report the urban population, due to the state's unusual definition of urban administrative areas, which include both high-density residential zones and large areas of primarily agricultural hinterland. In recent decades, though, migrant workers have often been excluded from urban population statistics, leading to underestimates of Chinese city size, particularly for industrialized coastal cities and provincial capitals, which attract millions of migrants. The modern history of Chinese urbanization, in short, is a complex, highly politicized topic that this chapter can only begin to outline.

**Changing Urban Politics, Networks, and City Life, 1900–1948**

In 1901, the Qing government launched a programme of 'New Policies' reforms that rapidly reshaped Chinese provincial capitals and other major cities. The reforms, forced on the dynasty by foreign powers occupying Beijing in the wake of the anti-foreign
Boxer movement in 1900, were intended to increase the government’s capacity to control society and so prevent further attacks on foreigners, but the scope of the New Policies quickly expanded to resemble Japan’s Meiji-era reforms (see below, Ch. 29). Provincial governors created and experimented with new urban institutions: Chambers of Commerce, professional police forces, a hierarchy of government schools, and local assemblies.²

The collapse of the imperial system in 1911 resulted largely from changes in Chinese cities introduced via the New Policies. The creation of new urban institutions like chambers of commerce and provincial assemblies established new platforms for prominent local men to challenge central policies, such as foreign loan agreements. Politicized students and military officers, many trained in Japan, congregated in provincial capitals. New tax levies to support reforms added rural discontent to the mix. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has labelled the 1911 Revolution ‘bourgeois’, but anger at the dynasty crossed divisions of class and region. The Qing collapsed amid widespread uprisings.

The Republic of China established early in 1912 remained weak for many years. Regional militarists who paid only pro forma respect to the central government controlled most of the territory the Qing had ruled. In some ways, the weakness of the centre spurred development in provincial cities. Chronic warfare and banditry encouraged those who could to move to relative safety in the cities. Wishing to be seen as potential national leaders, many militarists encouraged economic growth in their urban bases and sponsored elaborate construction projects, such as new commercial streets and public parks.

This focus on urban development largely continued the agenda of the New Policies era. However, those connections were not stressed: under the Republic, newness was a value in itself. Beginning in the late 1910s, some regional administrators embraced the burgeoning international planning movement. Students returning from study in Japan, Europe, and the US established university departments that taught urban administration and journals that propagated city planning principles, introducing, for example, the ‘garden city’ concept and standards for road and building construction used in European, Japanese, and American cities.

Despite regional militarists’ efforts to transform their cities into monuments to their rule, the provincial capitals, and even Beijing itself, were overshadowed between 1912 and 1949 by Shanghai. Shanghai’s ascent as China’s most important economic and cultural centre was rapid. By the early 1860s, the city comprised a Chinese section, an International Settlement dominated by the British, and the French Concession. Between 1910 and 1930, the total population of the three zones tripled to about three million. The vast majority were Chinese migrants from the city’s hinterlands, attracted by new employment opportunities in industry, transport, and other sectors, including sex work and domestic service. Demand for textiles and other products during the First World War buoyed the city’s economy. Chinese and Japanese industrialists built factories in Shanghai. It became a centre of finance, trade, and shipping. Shanghai-based publishers and movie houses spread the city’s fashions and culture nationwide.³
Shanghai’s fragmented political configuration, large population, and wealth attracted political activists and criminals, who moved between jurisdictions, playing authorities off one another. Migrants to the city often joined native-place associations that eased their integration into urban life, organized commerce, and sometimes played a role in urban and national politics (see above, Ch. 17; below, Ch. 35). The CCP was founded in the French Concession in 1921 and expanded after the May 30th Incident of 1925, when International Settlement police killed demonstrators protesting the treatment of workers at a Japanese factory.
Urban anti-foreign sentiment fuelled the rise of both the CCP and the Nationalist Party (Guomindang or GMD), which entered into a partnership brokered by the Comintern in 1923. Comintern agents helped train the Nationalist army at its base in Guangzhou, near Hong Kong, from which it challenged the legitimacy of the Beijing-based regime. In 1926, Chiang Kai-shek led this army on a 'Northern Expedition' to bring the whole country under Nationalist control. His rapid victories in major Yangzi valley cities led to the capitulation of his rivals and the establishment of a new government in Nanjing, west of Shanghai along the Yangzi, in 1927.

Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime revived much of the agenda of the late-Qing New Policies, attempting to bring order to cities through new police, building regulations, street paving, and construction of schools, public parks, and jails.\(^5\) As in the late Qing, although government initiatives were supposed to reach communities of all sizes nationwide, most money and effort was expended in the largest cities, including the new capital, which immediately attracted a wave of job-seekers and refugees from war-torn, bandit-ridden areas.

National statistics are very poor for this tumultuous period, but it is unlikely that urbanization increased substantially nationwide. Besides Nanjing, Shanghai and other treaty ports like Tianjin grew rapidly, as did British Hong Kong and Japanese-administered Manchurian cities, including Dalian and Harbin. Other cities grew slowly, if at all, but many acquired features of the 'modern city': electricity, cinemas, streetcars. A rail network connected the major cities of eastern China, reorienting the economy to focus more heavily on Shanghai, China's main gateway to the outside world.

Urban government under the Nationalists continued to be authoritarian. GMD ideology called for democratic rule, but only after a period of 'political tutelage' to prepare people to be good citizens. City regulations issued in the early 1930s thus gave only advisory roles to urban residents, whose views were to be shared with city leaders through organizations like the chambers of commerce and labour associations that were required to register with the government. City governments were headed by mayors appointed by provincial governors, who were themselves appointed by the Nationalist leadership from among the military commanders allied with Chiang Kai-shek.

As this top-down urban administrative structure was consolidated in the 1930s, however, social and cultural movements that had developed over previous decades continued to transform the urban experience in China. Already in the last years of the Qing, advocates of women's education and family reform had established girls' schools. By the 1930s, women supplied much of the factory labour in Shanghai, and well-off women adopted more public roles as professionals and housewifely consumers.\(^6\) Middle-class housing in coastal cities began to be designed, like Shanghai's extensive housing blocks, for nuclear families rather than the extended families that had been the cultural norm.\(^7\)

Economic growth led to structural changes in many cities. The walls around Shanghai's old city were demolished in 1912 to make circulation easier. In the 1910s, industrialist Zhang Jian created a new model factory town next to his hometown Nantong, north of Shanghai, with a prominent clock tower, factory dormitories, schools, and museums. Lu Zuofu, founder of the Minsheng Shipping Company, did the same in Beipei, near
Chongqing on the upper Yangzi. Both model towns received much publicity in planning journals and the popular press, welcomed thousands of visitors, and inspired the construction of clock towers, museums, and factory complexes in other cities. Steamships and railroads made long-distance travel possible for increasing numbers of professionals and students. Tens of thousands of young people took steamers to Japan, the US, and Europe to study in the first half of the twentieth century. Shanghai and Hong Kong were among the world’s most active ports for passenger lines and freight shipping in the 1930s. Chinese entrepreneurs who made good in Hong Kong, South East Asia, and beyond invested in industry and commerce in Shanghai and their home provinces.

Culturally, cities experienced considerable turmoil. Aided by its movie producers and popular fiction writers, Shanghai became symbolic of jazz age insouciance and callowness, with famine refugees begging at the doors of fashionable nightclubs. But, as in Beijing and the provincial capitals, Shanghai’s universities also fostered leftist groups, with earnest students teaching workers to read and to recognize social injustice. The Nationalist government in nearby Nanjing launched the neo-traditionalist New Life Movement in 1934 to combat what it condemned as Western-inspired decadence and to stave off radical political ideas propagated by the CCP, which it had driven underground and out of the cities in a bloody purge in 1927. The Nationalists’ attempt to combine Confucian rhetoric with Fascist-inspired military discipline had little impact on urban life beyond periodic rallies where Party leaders lectured to assembled students and soldiers.

After only ten years in their new capital, the Nationalists abandoned Nanjing in 1937 in the face of an all-out Japanese invasion of China. All the cities of coastal and east China fell under Japanese control between 1937 and 1945, suffering much devastation. Millions of Chinese refugees spent the war years crowded into provincial cities of the west and south-west, which the Japanese were unable to conquer. Factories and schools were evacuated to the temporary Nationalist capital, Chongqing, and to Guilin, Kunming, and Chengdu. After 1941, the Allies established air bases in these cities, ending the horrific Japanese aerial bombardments they had endured in 1939 and 1940. In many ways, the infusion of resources into western China during the war with Japan accelerated the economic and cultural transformation of China’s interior cities, a process that continued, in different form, under the post-1949 Communist government.

Japanese defeat in 1945 brought the Nationalists back to eastern cities—including Taipei in Taiwan, ruled by Japan since 1895, and north-eastern cities that had been developed into industrial centres as part of Japanese-controlled Manchukuo since the early 1930s. Re-establishing stable administration in these urban areas proved an insurmountable challenge for the Nationalists, however. Infrastructure was in shambles. Treasuries were depleted. Returning refugees sought restoration of property and demanded punishment of ‘collaborators’ who had stayed behind. Inflation spread panic. The Nationalist government lost credibility in its core cities, even as its Communist rivals advanced across north China. After surrounding and fighting their way into the Nationalist-held Manchurian cities, in 1949 the Communists marched south and took the rest of Nationalist territory with surprising ease. War-weary residents of cities across China lined the streets to welcome incoming Communist troops with a mixture of trepidation, curiosity, and hope.
Two million Nationalist leaders, soldiers, and supporters left the mainland for Taiwan, establishing another temporary capital for the Republic of China in Taipei as the Communists declared Beijing the capital of the new People’s Republic of China (PRC).

**Cities in the Maoist era, 1949–1978**

China’s Communist leaders had little experience administering large cities before 1949. Three decades of civil war, however, had sharpened their skills in organization, discipline, and propaganda and gained them an ally in the Soviet Union. The role of Soviet advisers in PRC urban history has not been adequately studied. Certainly the large central squares and monumental government buildings constructed in Beijing and provincial capitals in the 1950s owe much to Soviet models. Many city walls were torn down and replaced with ring roads and, in Beijing, with a subway system. Following the Soviet model for economic growth, the CCP’s first Five Year Plan emphasized centralized decision-making and heavy industry. The government quickly issued its own money and ended the hyperinflation that had panicked the cities. Nationalization of private enterprises quickly followed. The lively associational life that had characterized nineteenth-century Chinese cities (above, Ch. 17), and which the Nationalists had failed to fully control, was almost completely suppressed in the first years of Communist rule.

The new institutions that framed urban life in Mao’s China were the work unit (*danwei*) and the neighbourhood committee (*juweihui*). Every factory, school, hospital, store, and government bureau organized its personnel into a work unit, with an associated CCP branch to provide leadership. The work unit provided access to housing, medical care, and ration coupons. Not all work units provided housing at a central site, but many did—huge, six-storey apartment blocks in walled compounds dominated many Chinese cities. In large work units, housing compounds contained shops, schools, and clinics, so residents had little need to go outside. Shanghai, with its dense housing developments from the 1920s and 1930s, retained its stylistic distinction, but apartments built as single-family homes were divided among many families. Neighbourhood committees played a more important role in areas without large work units. Residents in such neighbourhoods met regularly to learn about and discuss government policies. Retired residents often served as officers for neighbourhood associations, watching for unusual events and reporting to the local public security office.

The urban cultural realm was dominated by the CCP, which quickly took control of schools, publishing, broadcasting, and film-making. Brothels, gambling houses, and opium dens were closed; sex workers and drug addicts were ‘re-educated’ in ‘reform camps’ and prisons. Churches, temples, and mosques were disbanded or forced to submit to Party supervision. Foreigners, except for friends from the Socialist bloc, were mostly expelled. Maoist slogans appeared on banners throughout cities and towns and were painted on the gates of schools and work unit compounds. Workers’ and soldiers’ uniforms became a badge of revolutionary zeal, and by the 1960s had completely
replaced the long scholarly gowns and tight-fitting dresses of the previous era. Work units kept dossiers on personnel that specified their ‘class background’—whether they had come from a ‘good’ family of workers or a ‘bad’ family of capitalists or landlords. Class background and demerits for bad behaviour could stand in the way of a housing assignment or permission to marry, which were obtained from the work unit.12

In the first decade of Communist rule, the percentage of the Chinese population living in officially designated urban areas almost doubled, reaching 19 per cent or 125 million people (see Table 28.1). Of these, however, many were engaged primarily in agriculture, since urban administrative areas usually included both an urban core and the surrounding countryside, much like the basic unit of territorial administration in Qing times, the ‘county’ (xian). Nevertheless, the number of industrial workers rose from 5.1 million in 1952 to 23.16 million in 1958. Many workers moved from the countryside to existing or new industrial areas in the north-east (Manchuria), coastal regions, and provincial capitals.13

| Table 28.1 Nonagricultural, Agricultural and Total population of China’s Cities and Towns, (expressed as total percentage of national population) 1949 to 2010 % of total population of China |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year | National Population (millions) | Nonagricultural Population of cities & towns | Agricultural Population of cities & towns | Total population in urban administrative territories | Total urban population based on refinement of urban zones |
| 1949 | 541.67 | — | — | 10.6 | — |
| 1955 | 614.65 | — | — | 13.5 | — |
| 1961 | 658.59 | 16.1 | 3.2 | 19.3 | — |
| 1970 | 829.92 | 12.7 | 4.7 | 17.4 | — |
| 1975 | 924.20 | 12.6 | 4.8 | 17.3 | — |
| 1980 | 987.05 | 14.0 | 5.3 | 19.4 | — |
| 1982 | 1016.54 | 14.5 | 6.3 | 20.8 | 21.1 |
| 1985 | 1058.51 | 17.0 | 19.3 | 36.3 | 23.7 |
| 1990 | 1143.33 | 17.7 | 35.2 | 52.9 | 26.4 |
| 1995 | 1211.21 | — | — | — | 31.7 |
| 2000 | 1265.82 | — | — | — | 36.2 |
| 2005 | 1306.28 | — | — | — | 43.0 |
| 2010 | 1339.72 | — | — | — | 49.7 |

Note: In 1982 the PRC began to refine population figures for ‘urban’ administrative units to exclude more of the non-urban areas included within the administrative territories of cities and towns.

Like the late-Qing reformer Kang Youwei, Mao Zedong believed China could avoid the social problems associated with rapid urbanization that had accompanied industrialization in Western Europe and elsewhere; industrialization, he thought, could occur throughout China simultaneously. Growing tension with the Soviet Union in the late 1950s isolated China from world trade, pushing Mao to launch his own distinctive economic development programme, the Great Leap Forward, in 1958, and to shift strategic industries to interior cities, out of reach of a potential Soviet invasion. Although Shanghai remained the most productive manufacturing city through the 1970s, substantial investment in infrastructure turned languid towns in western China into industrial centres, as part of this ‘Third Front’ initiative beginning in 1964. Mianyang, in western Sichuan, for example, became the headquarters of China’s nascent nuclear weapons industry. In the less sensitive industrial sectors, local and regional ‘self-sufficiency’ was emphasized, rather than national economic integration.

The Great Leap Forward was intended to unleash productivity in the countryside by creating large communes that would better manage resources to support more intensive agriculture as well as local industrialization. The horrendous failure of the Great Leap had profound effects on China’s cities. Most importantly, the restrictive ‘household registration’ (hukou) system was written into law, institutionalizing the divide between rural and urban people. The hukou system was intended to prevent mobility, particularly rural migration into the cities. During the great famine of 1959 to 1961, the state continued to requisition grain from the starving countryside to distribute to urban hukou holders, who were issued ration coupons by their work units. The imperative to maintain urban social stability contributed to the deaths from starvation of millions of rural Chinese and created a system of exclusively urban citizenship rights that continues to restrict mobility and access to resources in contemporary China.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966, convulsed Chinese cities, as Mao called on young people to rise up as ‘Red Guards’ to ‘bombard the headquarters’ and destroy all traces of ‘feudal’ and ‘bourgeois’ culture. Students and young workers organized Red Guard groups, seizing teachers and supervisors and accusing them of seeking to restore capitalism or other counter-revolutionary actions. Officials at all levels of government were purged. During the height of the Cultural Revolution, in 1967 and 1968, Red Guard patrols monitored public behaviour—city residents who wore colourful clothes or unusual hairstyles were subject to attack—and ransacked homes of suspected counter-revolutionaries. Temples and other symbols of the pre-revolutionary past were destroyed; universities shuttered. People greeted each other by exchanging Maoist slogans from the ubiquitous ‘Little Red Book’. Crowds gathered at public rallies to denounce ‘capitalist roaders’. In some cities, rival Red Guard factions fought each other with guns obtained from the military.

Beginning in 1968, Mao turned to the army to restore order in the cities and instructed Red Guards to leave for work on state farms and in villages in the poorest parts of the country. This rustication policy, which affected 16 million young people, was justified as a way to deepen revolutionary experience through manual labour and learning from the peasants. Recent analyses, however, many by former rusticated youth, suggest that,
having used the Red Guards to topple his political rivals, Mao sent these volatile supporters into internal exile for practical reasons. After some economic disruption at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, industrial and agricultural output steadily increased in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but absorbing millions of politicized young people into urban employment would have been difficult. Mao’s death in 1976 ended the Cultural Revolution. Gradually most of the rusticated youth returned to the cities.

The Maoist stress on heavy industry, collective living, and publicly monitored homogeneity in revolutionary culture ensured that, physically, Chinese cities resembled those of other anti-consumerist socialist states. Dingy state-run shops and restaurants opened for limited hours, often with little to sell. Public buildings and apartments, constructed mostly of low-quality concrete, were often neglected, and buses tended to be overcrowded. Although the terror of the Cultural Revolution created social rifts, crowded urban conditions meant people lived in close contact with neighbours, often setting cots on sidewalks in summer to escape the heat indoors. Bicycles were the most prized possessions in the Maoist city. In the years after Mao’s death, as his grand mausoleum rose on the south edge of Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, more and more bicycles appeared on the wide streets around it. China’s post-Mao economic boom began with a shift to light industry and consumer goods, as the bicycle-filled cities of the 1980s demonstrated.

**China’s New Urban Era, 1979 to the Present**

Three decades of double-digit economic growth completely transformed China’s cities beginning in the early 1980s. Growth was spurred by reforms that decentralized economic decision-making, legalized previously banned forms of private and semi-private enterprise, opened China to foreign investment and trade, and encouraged workers to move to coastal centres of industry. Deng Xiaoping, Mao’s successor, presided over this ‘reform and opening’ policy until his death in 1997, and it has been maintained with modifications.

The post-Mao reforms dramatically increased the overall level of urbanization: China’s State Statistical Bureau cites rates of 18 per cent for 1978 and 43 per cent for 2005; for 2010 the figure approaches 50 per cent. As Hung and Zhan discuss in detail (below, Ch. 34), government policies favoured the growth and proliferation of smaller cities in the 1980s, but more recently have led to greater concentration of population in the largest cities. In the densely populated coastal provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangzhou, medium and small cities like Wenzhou and Yiwu (discussed below, in Ch. 41) have mushroomed as they have become specialized centres of commodity production.

The most spectacular urban experiments of the early 1980s were the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) for export-oriented industrialization. The central government authorized
special regulations and a favourable tax structure to encourage foreign investment in the SEZs, following the model of export-processing zones in Taiwan and other parts of Asia. But Chinese SEZs expanded beyond expectation to become giant factory towns in the Pearl River delta north of Hong Kong. The first and most impressive SEZ, Shenzhen, bordering Hong Kong in Guangdong Province (see Figure 28.1), grew from a community of 30,000 in 1980 to a city of 9 million legal residents in 2010, when it had the fourth-largest GDP and the highest per capita GDP of all China’s cities.18

Two major political events in the last thirty years raised doubts about Shenzhen’s viability. First, in 1989 mass protest rallies in cities across China challenged the Communist leadership. After these were violently suppressed on orders from Deng Xiaoping, international exchange plummeted for a time. In 1992 Deng toured Shenzhen and reaffirmed the central government’s support for SEZs, indicating that the model would be extended to other regions, including Pudong, adjacent to the port of Shanghai. The pace of development picked up. Second, in 1997, shortly after Deng’s death, Hong Kong was incorporated into the PRC. Many predicted the collapse of Hong Kong’s economy, with dire effects on Shenzhen. That did not occur. Despite the fact that Shenzhen built an international airport and huge container port a short distance from Hong Kong’s, the two cities work together more than they are rivals.19

**Figure 28.1** The Pearl River Estuary (redrawn from a map by Xianming Chen).
Hong Kong investors and agents are a major conduit for foreign business in Shenzhen and the entire booming Pearl River delta region. In 2004, provincial leaders in Guangdong, heartland of the Pearl River delta, together with their counterparts in Hong Kong, spearheaded the creation of a pan-Pearl River delta economic region spanning nine provinces and two Special Administrative Regions (Hong Kong and nearby Macau, a former Portuguese territory incorporated into the PRC in 1999) to coordinate infrastructure investments and compete more effectively for industry and tourist dollars with the rapidly developing Yangzi delta region centred on Shanghai (see below, Ch. 41). Further north, a new international port at Tianjin (one of China's four centrally administered cities, equivalent administratively to a province, with a 2010 municipal population of 13 million) is connected to nearby Beijing by high-speed rail; together those two cities form the core of a north China planning unit, with links to Korea, Japan, and the Russian Far East.

This large-scale regional planning points to one of the distinctive features of China’s reform-era urban boom. Even while encouraging entrepreneurship, leaders at central, provincial, and local levels retain an astounding power to shape development. The keys to that power are institutional, such as the hukou system and the land-use-right regime that allow the state to demolish unauthorized housing of migrant workers, for example, and clear city blocks to make way for subway stations, office towers, apartment buildings, and shopping malls. Pervasive public security forces ensure authorities can enforce their dictates. But force has usually been unnecessary. The Communist leadership has successfully instilled confidence that it can promote economic development and learned to manage potential challenges by, for example, expanding Party membership to co-opt successful entrepreneurs.

The central government sees urbanization as part of the big picture of economic development. The CCP views itself as guardian of the Chinese people as a whole. As in the old imperial bureaucracy, regional officials look to superiors for assessment and promotion: loyalty to the centre is valued more than exceptional service to a particular locality, although effective local administration as defined by the centre is usually a prerequisite for promotion. Administrative divisions are drawn not to encompass communities with common interests and levels of urbanization, but as much as possible to create standard units containing a mix of urban and rural conditions. In the Maoist era, the hukou system produced a sharp distinction between city and countryside, even while commune-based industrialization was promoted. Since the beginning of the reform period, the government has stressed ‘integrated governing of urban and rural areas’ (chengxiang hezhi). Centrally administered and provincial-level cities in the PRC encompass territories with several types of subdivisions, including counties and urban districts. Geographically the largest, Chongqing was declared the fourth centrally administered municipality in 1997, in part so planners of the Three Gorges Dam, east of Chongqing on the Yangzi, could bypass the Sichuan provincial government. In 2006, Chongqing was slightly smaller than Austria: 82,000 km². Its population of over 28 million, most of them farmers, exceeded that of Venezuela.
The centre’s ability to restructure provincial and local administration and incentivize it in support of economic development is clear. There were fewer than 100 provincial-level cities in the Maoist era. In the reform period, that number tripled, and hundreds of new county-level cities were created. Geographer You-Tien Hsing argues that in the twenty-first century urbanization has supplanted industrialization as the main marker of administrative success for regional officials, with important impacts on the nature of local government. Municipal governments throughout China garner the majority of their revenue by granting development rights to land, sometimes doubling the built-up area of a city within a decade, as in Guangzhou. To attract investment, they publicize grandiose visions of new central business districts, hiring famous foreign architects to design signature skyscrapers and new streetscapes. To spur tourism in a post-revolutionary era of renewed cultural nationalism, famous historical districts and sites are refurbished or rebuilt from the ground up, including churches, synagogues, and Buddhist temples visited by busloads of overseas Chinese and other foreign visitors.

The New Urbanism that Hsing analyses has enriched city governments and developers and totally obliterated socialist cityscapes across China, as well as most of Shanghai’s pre-1949 urban fabric. The rapid construction has tended to make cities more homogeneous in appearance, although extensive older districts in such famous scenic cities as Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Yangzhou have been preserved with an eye to tourist dollars. Conflict over land confiscation has intensified, pressuring the government to clarify property rights and re-evaluate the hukou policy. Hsing has shown how land-related conflict differs in urban core, urban fringe, and rural fringe: at the core, demolition to make way for development leads to highly visible neighbourhood protests and lawsuits. In the urban fringes of the industrializing Pearl River delta cities, communities strike bargains with municipal governments that grant them rights to build their own collectively run rental housing in congested, high-rise ‘urban villages’ in exchange for forfeiting most of their land. People living in rural fringes of municipalities tend to lose control over their land for construction of industrial development zones or new satellite cities with little or no compensation.

The hukou system, which had once sharply divided those with a state-financed safety net and those without, continued in the reform period, but transferring residency registration became somewhat easier. Municipalities began offering urban hukou to migrants who bought housing in new developments. Most of the tens of millions of migrant labourers working in urban industries in the early twenty-first century, however, maintained ties to their home villages, returning to celebrate the New Year and to marry. Their village hukou provided claims on collective property they would have lost if they registered where they worked. Political scientist Fei-Ling Wang notes that restrictions on mobility under the hukou system are increasingly criticized as a violation of Chinese constitutional rights; however, he argues that powerful municipal governments find it a valuable tool for excluding unwanted populations. The central government’s modest attempts to reform the system have not led to significant change (for further discussion of hukou by Leo Lucassen, see below, Ch. 35).
In addition to conflict over land confiscation by local governments and the status of migrants, industrialization and the rapid growth of Chinese cities have created other tensions and challenges (see below, Ch. 34, for more on this topic). In the early 1990s, income levels varied greatly between coastal and inland China, stimulating a flood of migrants and building resentment in the interior. In 1999 the central government announced a major initiative to ‘Develop the West’, improving transportation infrastructure and encouraging foreign investment in interior cities. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam, which resulted in the relocation of several cities and over a million people, is part of that effort, and the dam’s hydroelectricity is intended to power the region’s further development. Likewise, the new railroad connecting Lhasa to points east opens cities and towns in the Tibetan Autonomous Region to development and greater integration into the Chinese economy. As a result of such government investment, the income gap between coastal and western China did not widen significantly around the turn of the twenty-first century, but that between rural areas and cities in the west did.

Pollution and environmental degradation are serious problems in China. Poor air quality threatens the health of city residents. Industrialization has absorbed much of the water along the eastern course of the mighty Yellow River, in whose basin arose many of the ancient cities Steinhardt discusses (above, Ch. 6). The central government has launched an ambitious project to divert water from the Han River, a central China tributary of the Yangzi, to supply Beijing and other northern cities. As with the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the long-term ecological consequences and impact on Yangzi-basin cities are sure to be complicated and quite possibly catastrophic. Environmental issues, while very much on the mind of Chinese leaders and people in general, have mostly taken a back seat to economic development. Many Chinese firms have entered the arena of ‘green technologies’, and municipal governments claim to promote their use, but measures of environmental quality show there is much room for improvement.

**Daily Life in Contemporary Chinese Cities**

In contrast to life in Maoist cities, contemporary Chinese urban life is characterized by considerable socio-economic and cultural diversity. Besides physical differences like skyscrapers and traffic jams, the most striking difference is the presence of migrants from rural areas, the so-called ‘floating population’ (liudong renkou). Migrants are accommodated in Chinese cities in several ways. In the early reform years, provincial and county governments organized teams of rural labourers whom municipal governments and agencies hired for construction and other projects in cities. These labourers often lived in temporary dormitories on construction sites. Government agencies also recruited and trained rural women to serve as nannies and housekeepers; they almost always lived in the apartments of their urban employers. Over the past two decades,
migrants have increasingly travelled to cities independently, although often with assistance from relatives and neighbours who preceded them.

Migrants to industrial zones near Guangzhou find cheap rental housing in ‘urban villages’ there. In other cities, migrants have rented and built housing without approval from urban authorities. The most famous example is Beijing’s Zhejiang village, a community of 90,000 migrants from Zhejiang province engaged in small-scale commerce and services such as tailoring. In 1995, Beijing authorities ordered the entire community to leave and demolished forty-eight large housing compounds that had been constructed without permits. Community schools for migrants’ children, who are ineligible for public schooling, are regularly shut down. Anthropologist Li Zhang concludes that the complicated restrictions migrants face make them extremely vulnerable. Many long-term urban residents see them as a source of crime and social disorder.31

The substantial income gap within Chinese cities (see below, Ch. 34) affects infrastructure, housing, and social life in general. Estimates of the number of ‘middle class’ urban Chinese in the early twenty-first century range up to 350 million, but are disputed—subsidies to urban residents are hard to measure, and many urban families have sources of substantial ‘grey income’ not included in official statistics. In 2001, the central government recognized the existence of urban poverty, particularly among workers laid off during the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, and instituted a welfare system that is supposed to provide a minimum income. In 2007, almost 23 million urban residents (migrants not included) were eligible for such payments. Geographer Fulong Wu and his colleagues analysed the distribution of poor households via welfare data and found poverty to be increasingly spatialized among districts within the same city.32

Members of the new middle class are most likely to live in very new, gated apartment complexes with amenities like parks, clubhouses, and supermarkets. The real estate development companies that create these complexes work closely with municipal governments, often sharing personnel and profits. Families buy completely unfinished spaces in a new building, and pay an estimated one-third of the purchase cost to install fittings, appliances, flooring, etc. In 2006 in the Yunnan capital Kunming, 2,000 firms specialized in finishing apartments, employing 50,000 migrant labourers.33

The geographic expansion and growing socio-economic segregation of Chinese cities has increased private automobile use. Bicycle use has steadily declined in major cities since the 1990s. Shanghai even banned bicycles in its downtown core. Subway systems were expanded in Beijing for the 2008 Olympics and in Shanghai for the 2010 World Expo. Most provincial capitals are building new subway lines and expanding old ones. Buses continue to be a popular, inexpensive option for urban residents, and on the outskirts of cities unlicensed taxis compete with and often outnumber licensed ones.

As the existence of unauthorized construction and unlicensed taxis suggests, Chinese cities are not as well regulated as their extensive official regulations would have them be. The dismantling of the old socialist system has produced serious concerns about corruption, exacerbated by the frenetic economic growth and dislocations of the 1980s and 1990s. The 1989 political movement that filled the central squares of Beijing, Shanghai,
and other cities with angry protestors was animated by accusations of corruption against CCP bosses. After the harsh crackdown on that movement, few activists have openly challenged the Party, and the press is monitored very closely. Still, by working with sympathetic elements in the Party, some journalists have brought to light intra-Party conflicts and bad news that would have been suppressed in the Maoist period.34

In particular, high-profile incidents have exposed abuses perpetrated by 'city management' (chengguan) bureaus responsible for enforcing urban regulations regarding vendors and other aspects of street life. Increasingly sensitive to bad publicity and frightened of the potential destructive power of urban crowds, some municipal governments have launched initiatives to make these bureaus more acceptable to the public. The most striking innovation was the 2010 decision of a city district in Chengdu to hire tall, attractive women aged 18 to 22 as chengguan officers.35

The changing nature of Chinese families is reflected in city life. In 1979, new family planning regulations limited most couples to one child. This restriction has since been relaxed in rural areas. In the cities, though, one-child families have become the norm. As a consequence, family life often revolves around the child, simultaneously pampered by doting parents and grandparents and required to excel at school and at music lessons. Food quality is a flash point of Chinese political life, due to parents’ fears that tainted food will harm their only child.36 Parents often identify marriage partners for their

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**Plate 28.2** A construction site in Shanghai. The Shanghai World Expo 2010 billboard in front of a temporary workers’ dormitory states that ‘cities make life even more beautiful’.
grown children. In many cities, parents gather regularly to exchange information about marriage prospects.

The ‘one-child policy’ has led to fears that parents will lack support in old age. As in Japan, the aging population and the crumbling of assumptions that family members will care for the elderly have forced society and policymakers to contemplate new approaches to eldercare. In Chinese cities, district governments designate funds for community centres where older residents can meet and seek support. Municipal governments have begun collecting fees from employers to provide pensions to retirees, but pension funds have sometimes been diverted to other uses.

Urban cultural life has become much more diverse over the last thirty years. Karaoke clubs and internet cafes are ubiquitous. Officially approved temples, churches, and mosques attract worshippers and tourists. Rapid expansion of higher education has created ‘university cities’ on the outskirts of large municipalities like Shanghai and Nanjing. While cultural diversity within cities has increased, to some extent regional distinctiveness in Chinese urban life has declined as all regions of China have been integrated into global markets.

**Conclusion**

Thirty years of ambitious planning and investment in infrastructure, along with a willingness to accept foreign influence, have put Chinese cities at the centre of contemporary urban studies. International businesses and foreign entrepreneurs have flocked to Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. A 2009 report by the international consulting firm McKinsey predicts one billion Chinese will live in cities by 2030 and advises businesses to prepare for the opportunities China’s expanding cities will offer. This urban growth could happen in a number of ways, the report’s authors note, but they recommend that the government encourage creation of several ‘supercities’ with populations of 50 million to use land efficiently and minimize energy costs for transport. They express confidence that government regulation and incentives can shape the urbanization process to this end.

Other analysts, however, question the power of the Chinese government to achieve the dreams of urban planners. Fulong Wu argues that China’s urban boom was enabled only by the historical condition in which an ‘under-urbanized’ post-socialist state employed the legacy of earlier social policies—most importantly the *hukou* division between rural and urban—as an advantage in the global economy. The cheap labour of migrant workers denied urban benefits will not be available forever. Demographic change and rising worker expectations are forcing up wages in the Pearl River industrial region. Labour unrest is rising, as is anger over land requisition for urban development.

Will Chinese cities continue to astound the world? Will they continue to be managed by a combination of central government fiat and partnerships between municipal bureaucrats and local developers? Or will urban residents, including recent migrants,
gain more control over their environment? Critics of contemporary Chinese urbanism emphasize that, although, as Xiangming Chen and Henry Fitts (below, Ch. 41) note, the top-down approach to municipal administration makes regional infrastructure planning easier, it may hinder the growth of the ‘creative’ urban space analysed by Marjatta Hietala and Peter Clark in Ch. 38 below.

**NOTES**

15. Fei-Ling Wang, Organizing through Division and Exclusion: China’s Hukou System (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 44–6.
23. Tse-kang Leng, ‘Centrally Administered Municipalities: Locomotives of National Development’ in Chung and Lam, China’s Local Administration, 40.
25. McGee, Lin, and Wang, China’s Urban Space, 94.
26. Hsing (The Great Urban Transformation, 129) notes that one such urban village housed 174,450 people per square kilometre.
32. Fulong Wu, Chris Webster, Shenzing He, and Yuting Liu, Urban Poverty in China (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010), 3, 117.


**Bibliography**


