



## ChinaMade Review

Review of Leonardo Ramondetti. 2022. *The Enriched Field: Urbanising the Central Plains of China*. Basel: Birkhauser.

Tim Oakes, September, 2022

In an essay on the concept of materiality in urban history, Chris Otter noted that urban studies have long privileged the immaterial dimensions of the city (Otter 2010). From Karl Marx to David Harvey, critical scholars have focused on abstract processes of capital rather than the physical texture of urban space. This has tended to reduce the city to the outcome of abstract capitalist forces, the congealed result of capitalist logic. While most of Otter's essay lamented what is lost when cities are dematerialized in urban studies, he did briefly explore the possibilities of more socio-technical approaches, noting for

example that foregrounding the material agency of urban infrastructures might yield a better understanding of one of the more basic problems of political economy: the uneven access to material forms of empowerment and experience.

In his book *The Enriched Field: Urbanizing the Central Plains of China*, Leonardo Ramondetti has seemingly taken up Otter's call for a foregrounding of the physical materiality of the urban. "Most of the research conducted in the field of urban studies in recent years," he notes, "has been based on non-spatial readings, discounting the materiality of urban space" (p. 9). As a geographer I would have to quibble with Ramondetti's claim about the prevalence of non-spatial readings, but his argument that the materiality of urban space has been neglected is just as true now as it was over a decade earlier when Otter offered his own critical assessment. And if there is any place on earth where the physical landscapes, spatial arrangements, and material infrastructures of urbanization command our attention, it's China. Since the early 1980s, the number of cities in China has increased from 190 to 674, but even this does not adequately reflect the sheer territorial scale at which urbanization is now being pursued in China. Vast swaths

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of the landscape have been turned over to construction zones, with new grids of roads and highways platted out in farm fields, high-rise commercial housing developments popping up out of nowhere, and heaps of rubble marking what used to be villages. As Ramondetti puts it in the book's first paragraph, "China is currently urbanizing an area approximately eight times the size of Italy, with a population about three times that of the United States, and a GDP almost twice that of Japan" (p. 8).



Road under construction in Zhongmu County, Henan (Source: © Leonardo Ramondetti 2019)

In an earlier *China Made Brief*, Ramondetti (2020) offered the following context for appreciating the importance of the Central Plains, and the rapidly urbanizing corridor between Kaifeng and Zhengzhou, for how we understand urbanization and infrastructure development in China: "[T]he Central Plains is now a regional-level urban agglomeration, the so-called Zhongyuan City Group, one of the most densely populated areas in the world: an area of 58,400 square kilometers made up of nine prefecture-level cities, 23 cities and 413 townships. The space produces 3.06 percent of China's GDP and is home to 45.5 million inhabitants (3.39 percent of the population of China)." What happens when we foreground the *materiality* of this huge transformation? One answer implied by Ramondetti's study is that the new landscapes of Chinese urbanization are qualitatively different from those that came before and that this difference compels us to rethink some of our basic assumptions about the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of urbanization as well.

Ramondetti's book proposes that we view the urbanization of the Central Plains of China as an 'enrichment' project whereby a process of comprehensive infrastructural urbanism produces an 'equipotential surface' in which different functions can be arranged with any multitude of orderings, which are always subject to modification and adjustment (or 're-narrating'). He develops a solid historical context for understanding the emergence of this built environment, tracing earlier urban formations in the Republican, Socialist, and reform era phases of Zhengzhou's planning and development. Indeed, the historical work underlying the analysis of urban morphology of the Zhengzhou region – richly illustrated with maps and images – is remarkable.

Zhengzhou, it turns out, is a city that owes its significance to infrastructure, developed as a railway crossroads and then built around the main railway station. The ‘new town’ development of Zhengdong which was initiated in the late 1990s on the outskirts of Zhengzhou marks an era of relatively uncontrolled urban development throughout China, an era which Ren (2013) has called “city-centered urbanization.” Zhengdong’s highly-planned, and centrally-oriented urbanism became outdated and fell out of favor politically even before it was fully realized. In its place came Zhengbian, a vast urban development initiative stretching from Zhengzhou all the way to Kaifeng. Zhengdong had been imagined as a series of integrated clusters driven by a holistic comprehensive plan. It was the ultimate modernist master planned city, an updated Brasilia. Zhengbian, by contrast, is a series of localized projects in a big sprawling space; the master plan focuses not on a comprehensive and elegant city, as was the case with Zhengdong, but simply on infrastructure: grids of roads, highways, high speed rail, rivers, canals, parks, drainages, pipelines, and wires.

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Planning in Zhengbian, Ramondetti claims, is based on indistinct tools, capable of containing everything. Thus, he argues, if Zhengdong offered the spectacle of a complete city built from scratch (a spectacle never completely realized), Zhengbian is instead devoid of meaning altogether. This contrast between Zhengdong and Zhengbian tells us much about how processes of urbanization have shifted from ‘centripetal’ to ‘centrifugal’ tendencies. “Zhengbian New District,” he tells us, “is the result of new policies which endeavor to redesign more malleable and pervasive spaces, instead of investing in the creation of strong polarities” (p. 96). This is a “rhizomatic and polymorphic” urbanization pattern that creates a highly diverse yet also relatively non-hierarchical landscape of urban development, where intensive agriculture mixes with recreation mixes with industry mixes with housing, all within pre-established infrastructural grid.

The book’s exploration of Zhengbian’s development is organized around three key relationships in the landscape: overlapping infrastructural networks, the juxtapositioning of different settlement types, and the reassembling of land-uses.

These are analyzed through a selection of sample spaces which are illustrated with maps (both historical and contemporary) and images. The first, overlapping infrastructures, draw our attention to the ways new infrastructures are not added to the existing network but rather overlap and replace it. The most prominent example is the grid of new 4-lane roads laid indiscriminately throughout the region, well before any other building or development occurs. These roads create blocks that divide the land into discrete but seemingly interchangeable megaplots while allowing rapid mobility between distant elements and slow mobility within each megaplot. “[T]his infrastructural grid,” Ramondetti argues, “is a means of homogeneously equipping the whole area, shaping a vast, open landscape to assure the correct functioning of programmes and morphologies that are radically different from one another” (p. 124).

The second, juxtaposing settlements, involves four distinct types of settlement extant in the Zhengbian region: traditional agricultural villages, modern agricultural villages, new agricultural towns, and commercial

residential compounds. The juxtaposing of these settlements suggests “a shift in dwelling typologies, manifesting how rural zones are increasingly being integrated into the urban dynamics, to the point that the distinction between urban and rural areas is being progressively blurred” (p. 130). The third key relationship involves the reassembling of land uses so that a diverse array of production uses share the same space. Examples include a university town, a Foxconn assembly plant, and an agricultural park.

In entreating us to pay particular attention to physical space, Ramondetti leads us through an initial exploration of three narratives the might be useful for interpreting the material transformations of the Central Plains. These are the ‘middle landscapes’ of US suburbanization since the 1950s, the process of urban diffusion in Europe since the 1980s, and the more recent emergence of logistics and infrastructure spaces, especially in the Global South, over the past 30 years. While the theoretical framing is meant to dispel the tendency to treat urbanization in China as exceptional or extraordinary in some way, the book is ultimately devoted to demonstrating how each of these narratives fails to capture the complexities of contemporary urbanization in China. This, then, leads Ramondetti to ‘the enriched field’ as a possible alternative.

The enriched field is a concept drawn from Boltanski and Esquerre’s 2020 book *Enrichment*. It describes a shift from the production of new things to the enrichment of existing things, particularly through narrative and performativity, whereby these things are turned into spectacles intended for the wealthy. Ramondetti sees something like this going on in the urbanizing landscapes of Zhengbian, “where all material elements and every transformation are part of an attempt to base an economy on the symbolic value of material goods” (p. 203). He considers three types of enrichment going on: environmental, everyday life, and experience. Interestingly, enrichment allows him to offer an account that is open to the ways benefits might accrue for people living and working in the enriched field. That is, Ramondetti’s book appears somewhat less polemical than Boltanski and Esquerre’s. Whereas many accounts of urbanization in China raise critical questions about dispossession, waste, ‘ghost cities’, environmental greenwashing, ‘face projects’ with little purpose beyond advancing the careers of their champions, and many other pathologies (see e.g. Sorace and Hurst 2015), Ramondetti seems much more willing to highlight the ‘equipotential’ qualities of Zhengbian. My reading of *Enrichment* suggests that it offers a potentially provocative lens through which to see urbanization in China as a spectacle exacerbating existing and past inequalities and exploitations. While the enriched field is narrated with spectacle and, indeed, marketed as a commodity, it remains something of an open platform for Ramondetti, capable of reshaping livelihoods in potentially beneficial ways.

While I found *The Enriched Field* a fascinating account of the history of urbanization in China, an important illustration of why materials and landscapes matter in urban studies, and a compelling analysis of the ways urbanization in China is being reorganized around new spaces of infrastructure, I missed a more sustained ethnographic account of everyday life in Zhengbian. How do people *inhabit* these physical spaces, to how they actually *use* the enriched, equipotential surface? The book contains several fieldwork vignettes, but leaves us wanting to learn more about ‘life in the new town’ (which, of course, Henri Lefebvre many years ago condemned as oppressively boring). Of course, this is an unfair critique of an analysis that focuses on the built environment rather than the social relations formed within that environment. But what seems so fascinating about urban planning and design in China is the way physical space gets appropriated and used in ways never intended, and the way that urban space is more of an experimental dialogue between planning and practice in which the outcome is never certain. If the enriched field is indeed a space subject to constant appropriation and modification, as is being suggested in Ramondetti’s book, then it would be good to know more about the spatial practices going on as people inhabit that field.

But if the mark of a good book is to leave the reader wanting more, *The Enriched Field* has certainly achieved this. It offers an important analysis of infrastructural urbanization in China and makes a significant argument for understanding how urban development there is functionally different from what it was just a decade ago. We learn this, the book demonstrates, by paying attention to physical space and to the materiality of the urban.

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