



Revisiting *Building for Oil: Daqing and the Formation of the Chinese Socialist State*

JING ZHANG 

Jing Zhang currently works at the Centre for Sustainable Structural Transformation, School of Oriental and African Studies, on international political economy, urbanization, global China, infrastructure and green transition. Previously she worked at the Development Planning Unit, Bartlett School of Built Environment, University College London (UCL). She finished her PhD at UCL on the topic of policy learning between China and Africa on the development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Prior to her PhD, Jing worked as a research fellow and project manager at the China Development Research Foundation (CDRF), affiliated with the Development Research Centre of State Council, PR China. Her previous research experiences have covered a wide range of development and policy issues pertaining to China's land reform, urbanization and female entrepreneurship. Jing holds a master's degree in Urban Development Planning and a bachelor's degree in Public Policy.

Address: School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London
– Centre for Sustainable Structure Transformation,
10 Thornhaugh St, London WC1H 0XG, UK; email: jz9@soas.ac.uk

ABSTRACT This review provides a brief introduction and examination of Hou Li's book *Building for Oil: Daqing and the Formation of the Chinese Socialist State*. It highlights the historical background of the book, identifies its research questions and summarizes its key themes. The review concludes with a discussion of the book's distinctive contributions and critiques that may further enrich the analysis or inspire future book projects on the subject.

KEYWORDS China / Daqing / oil industry / political ideology / state–society relations / urbanization

I. INTRODUCTION

Under the leadership of a socialist state, China's oil industry saw a period of significant development from the 1950s through the early 1980s. Many of China's most important oil fields were discovered in the 1950s and 1960s. Crude oil production achieved a spectacular annual growth rate of 20 per cent from 1968 to 1978. By the end of the 1970s, China had already transformed itself from an oil importer to an oil exporter. Despite political struggles and social turmoil during the formative years of the People's Republic, this dramatic growth in the supply of oil did indeed save China from an acute energy shortage, rescuing the national economy and legitimizing the path of early state-led industrialization.

Hou's book presents a detailed historical account that explains the achievements and challenges for the country's oil industry of this period. Beyond emphasizing energy and industry development, this book also strongly integrates the dimensions of urban planning, political ideology, international relations and day-to-day lived experiences in reconstructing history. For scholars like Hou, who see the Revolution and the Reform in China as a continuing process, politically, economically, socially and spatially, the substantial question driving this book is "*What was the contribution of the first three decades of the republic to the subsequent years?*"⁽¹⁾ While urbanization had been stagnating, the overall performance of economic growth was still quite substantial. For example, GNP output more than doubled from 1960 to 1979. How was that possible, Hou asks. "*How was such growth achieved against the backdrop of the so-called de-urbanisation processes? What was occurring at the local level?*"⁽²⁾

II. A MODEL CITY

To address these bigger questions, Hou focuses on the production of the Daqing Oil Field – a model “city” and an industrial landmark characterizing the first three decades of PRC’s history. According to the book, from 1964 to 1980 the Daqing Oil Field contributed more than 50 per cent of China’s annual crude oil production, leading in the country as the industrial enterprise with the highest annual financial payments to the state. More than just an oil town, Daqing was also a place where the physical landscape and people’s everyday lives were deeply intertwined with state interests and ideological debates. It was exalted as an exemplar of the tenets of Maoist ideology, maintaining the country’s revolutionary spirit of self-sacrifice to reject bourgeois society and challenge the Soviet socialist construction. It was also propelled as a model nationwide by the political leaders, who hoped that the entire country would learn from it to build an industrialized future and a society with principles of equality, productivity and revolutionary progress.

Specifically, posing the research question of “*how communist ideology, political conflicts, urban planning discipline, and popular attitudes were all articulated in the creation of Daqing – as lived and experienced on a daily basis and as a political entity?*”,⁽³⁾ the book is divided into six chapters with parallel narratives. On the one hand, the story of Daqing, including its discovery, construction, rise as a model and its fall, provides a microcosm of PRC history in the first 30 years. A wide range of national and international economic and political events are referred to that impacted urban and industrial policies, planning and city buildings. On the other hand, there is the personal account of Hua, a female planner who lived in Daqing from 1962 to 1975. Her individual story adds texture and nuance to the larger historical narratives, epitomizing the twists and turns in many ordinary lives struggling in that particular time.

Through this parallel storyline, this book highlights the connection between the state and society in successfully building the model of “Daqing” and forming a Chinese socialist state. While the working conditions were extremely harsh, every individual was mobilized to live communally and was integrated as a part of the group, becoming both an object of and an agent for revolutionary change (Chapter 3). The oil field became a battlefield, and the factories served as both production machines and training schools. Various groups, including male and female workers, dependants and intellectuals, were transformed and educated into a new socialist working class with the values of “*higher productivity, greater discipline, more sacrifices, and deeper commitments*”.⁽⁴⁾ The boundaries between state and society, public and private, were removed, in order to implement extensive state-led industrialization based on the principles of “*production first, livelihoods second*” (Chapter 2).

III. INDUSTRIALIZATION WITHOUT URBANIZATION

As Obeng-Odoom points out at the beginning of this symposium, the resource curse literature claims that oil extraction tends to create “*urbanization without industrialization*”, a rigid notion of “*premature urbanization*”.⁽⁵⁾ But, in the case of Daqing, it was the idea of “*production first, livelihoods second*” that led to the phenomenon of industrialization

1. Hou (2021), page xx.
2. Hou (2021), page xxi.

3. Hou (2021), page xxi.

4. Hou (2021), page 135.

5. See also Obeng-Odoom (2023).

without urbanization for that period. Specifically, urban construction and buildings were a product of industrial production, and the focus was on function and economy rather than aesthetics and amenities. Housing standards were kept very low and houses were built according to rural styles to save costs (*gandalei* houses). As the production sites were scattered throughout the oil field, the “settlement points” also followed a dispersed pattern, which was “*convenient for production, convenient for living arrangements, convenient for the children’s education and future employment, and convenient for integrating town and countryside and workers and peasants*”.⁽⁶⁾ This low-budget path, consisting of decentralized villages and identical houses, represented a spatial attempt to be consistent with the communist ideology. With the petroleum leaders being brought to the political centre in Beijing for national planning, the Daqing experiences had also risen as a model and a solution that would control urbanization, thereby limiting the costs of industrialization and satisfying ideological demands.

6. Hou (2021), page 87.

The end of the book discusses the fall of the Daqing model, as the international environment and national politics changed dramatically in the late 1970s. Hua and her family finally left Daqing in 1975, having been participants and observers at the individual level and a part of history. Ideologically, production was no longer considered as the end by the top leadership, but rather the means of socialist development. The ultimate aim of socialist production was set to meet the people’s consumption needs, not to increase production.⁽⁷⁾ This later fundamentally changed the way in which the country’s industrialization and urbanization were organized during the reform age.

7. Hou (2021), page 198.

IV. CITY, INDUSTRY AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The book’s unique contributions lie in its detailed reconstruction of a controversial period in the People’s Republic of China’s history – a significant legacy that has not yet been sufficiently studied. Indeed, history is subjected to interpretations. Despite intermittent social turbulence and economic stagnation, this time can be interpreted as a period of glory and victory for China’s oil industry. Starting from this point, this book has been able to incorporate multiple perspectives and scales to answer its research questions and explain the complexities of history in China’s modern petroleum industry. Specifically, switching between personal journeys and broader political and economic changes both nationally and internationally, the book records the rise and fall of Daqing. As an oil town and a national model city, Daqing presents a fascinating case that enriches our understanding of how China managed to conduct socialist production and create a pathway to industrialization and urbanization.

In particular, the book provides insights into the roles and tools of the Chinese state, whose effectiveness may appeal not just to a Chinese readership but also to larger audiences from other developing contexts that are interested in drawing lessons on industrial and urban development. For example, it may be of interest how the socialist state was able to apply various ideational strategies to mobilize important actor groups from society; and how China received its most valuable return on investments in modern knowledge and human resources. After all, Daqing’s “success” benefited considerably from continuous political attention from the top

leadership, given its abundant resources and strategic importance for the country. As the book details, there were particular conditions that made the Daqing model effective. Outside Daqing, living and production conditions in China were more severe. Without the same level of natural blessings and policy privileges, it is hard to imagine this model could be replicated on a larger scale.

V. CONCLUSION: HISTORICIZING SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Hou Li's book is a brilliant work that revives the Maoist past of China. As she highlights, "*Our knowledge of the past constructs who we are in the present and helps us to proceed better into the future.*"⁽⁸⁾ In this sense, there are important questions for future projects in terms of how the recipe for building Daqing might inform our current transition to a low-carbon economy. Is this interaction between the state and society from the past still relevant today? What are the roles and tools of the state in sustainable urban development, highlighting greener urbanization and industrialization? Overall, for those who are interested in the history of urban and industrial development, food and energy, political ideology and everyday lives in China, I strongly recommend the book. With its parallel storyline, this book is both academically insightful and literarily engaging. Reading it was a true joy for me. I have learnt a lot from this retelling of an extraordinary period of history.

8. Hou (2021), page xx.

ORCID ID

Jing Zhang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0406-0687>

REFERENCES

Hou, L (2021), *Building for Oil: Daqing and the Formation of the Chinese Socialist State*, Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Obeng-Odoom, F (2023), "Spatial political economy: the case of metropolitan industrial policy", *Review of Evolutionary Political Economy* Vol 4, No 1, pages 137–163.