

Jaros, Kyle A.: China's Urban Champions. The Politics of Spatial Development

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Review by Christina Maags

Uneven development does not just “happen”; it is actively “produced” by political, social and economic forces. In his book “China’s Urban Champions”, Kyle Jaros examines these processes by focusing on how uneven development is produced through spatial policies in PR China. Conducting an in-depth comparative analysis of four Chinese provinces across time, Jaros argues that it is the relative economic performance as well as the relative political strength of different government levels and their leaders in each province which determine whether provincial spatial policies emphasize metropolitan-oriented development, attempt to balance regional development or pursue a mixed approach which combines elements of both. He finds, firstly, that provinces which are economically lagging behind are more likely to emphasize metropolitan-oriented development than economically prosperous provinces. Secondly, as actors on different government levels have different interests, policy outcomes heavily depend on the ability of political actors to dominate policy-making. By focusing on provincial governments as key players in spatial development, the book sheds light on why the central government continues to struggle with achieving a more regionally balanced urbanization across China.

Overall, the book is an excellent read for anyone interested in understanding the complex nature of spatial policies in China. A key tension underlying spatial policies — in China as elsewhere — arises out of the necessity to allocate scarce resources across space. Should prosperous metropolitan areas be further supported to make use of competitive advantages and spill-over effects? Or should they be allocated across the province, particularly in economically backward areas, so as to ensure a more balanced, yet potentially less rapid, economic development? Jaros outlines how the Chinese party-state’s response to this tension has changed over time (Chapter 2), and explains why it is necessary to examine multi-level politics to understand spatial policies in China (Chapter 3). The heart of the book lies in the four case studies of Hunan, Jiangxi, Shaanxi and Jiangsu provinces (Chapters 4 to 7) in which Jaros meticulously retraces how the two factors, relative economic development and political power, have influenced spatial politics over time. In each case study chapter, Jaros first provides an overview of the case before introducing key findings in regards to his two factors. He then proceeds to compare the influence of these factors on spatial policies across time, comparing the late 1990s with the early 2000s and the late 2000s. The comparative case study results are summarized in Chapter 8 where Jaros tests his findings through a regression analysis of 26 Chinese provinces and by comparing the findings to Brazil and India — details of which are provided in extensive Appendix Chapters A and B.

The book has many strengths, three of which will be highlighted here. Firstly, it is based on a sound methodological framework which not only allows for in-depth comparisons across space and time, but also tests the generalizability of the findings through supplementary analyses of China and beyond. In addition, each case study is based on meticulous historical process tracing, using statistical data, spatial policies and plans, qualitative interviews as well as Chinese and English academic literature. Both the detailed analysis and continuous testing of assumptions make the book's argument very compelling and convincing. Secondly, the study's focus on provincial governments as embedded in multi-level politics draws attention to the bargaining and contestation surrounding spatial development in China. As the scholarly literature tends to focus either on the central or on local governments, the book's study of provincial governments adds to our understanding of Chinese bureaucratic politics. Thirdly, Chapter 2 and each case study provide a thorough historical analysis of spatial development in China, shedding light on its larger implications for domestic migration, urbanization and the rural–urban divide.

The book's many strengths also have resulted in certain weaknesses. First, due to the detailed analysis across time which covers, for instance, pre-existing historical economic conditions, different spatial development plans, different industries and regions, their negative policy effects as well as different actors and bureaucracies, the case studies are very dense, at times overshadowing the main findings. This relates to my second point: While Jaros seemingly tries to counteract the overpowering nature of details by providing "key takeaway" points at the beginning of each chapter and then presenting a thorough discussion of the details, this at times creates the impression of an anachronistic and repetitive analysis. However, this "weakness" appears to be a result of the complex nature of spatial policies and the study's comprehensive research focus itself, rather than of a poor presentation of the findings. Finally, the quantitative analysis of 26 Chinese provinces appears rather late in the book. While Jaros draws on statistical data used in the quantitative analysis throughout the book, the study could have benefitted from the context and larger comparisons a more integrated mixed-methods study would provide. Yet, conversely, as each chapter is already full of detailed intra- and cross-provincial as well as intertemporal comparisons, the additional national comparison might have breached the scope of the book.

Despite these research design-related challenges, this is an excellent study which offers many novel insights not only for a reader interested in spatial policies, but also for the wider political science and China studies community.