

BOOK REVIEW

China's Age of Abundance: Origins, Ascendance, and Aftermath

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China's Age of Abundance: Origins, Ascendance, and Aftermath explores how the population of China experienced very profound economic changes from the 1980s until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a scholarly text with more than 40 figures, almost 200 references and over 400 footnotes. It is authored by Wang Feng, a professor in sociology at University of California who has been working on the links between economic and demographic changes in China for decades.

The first chapter of the book sets the stage. Since the end of the Mao era, China has experienced considerably faster economic growth than was anticipated by its leaders and many Nobel laureates in economics. Chapter two discusses developments in China's population, notably as a result of better health and the elimination of illiteracy. It also covers the urban–rural divide and its demographic characteristics. Chapter three shows how during the decades after Mao the Chinese population came to eat better, grow taller, own better clothes, live in larger and better housing and benefit from increased access to communication. To take one example: in 1978, 300 people shared one telephone, but in 2011 there were on average almost two mobile phones in each household.

Chapter four addresses the question: how did all this happen? China followed the path of industrialization and urbanization taken earlier by Japan and Korea. However, “Chinese farmers were not lifted out of poverty, they broke out of poverty and elevated their own standard of living with their own minds and hands, often with great sacrifice” (p 107). In this process, many young adults migrated from villages to cities to engage in manual labour. As a result, many constructions in urban China today are the product of work by migrant labourers.

Chapter five deals with urban China and its changes. After price reform was introduced, the state came to take a smaller role in the economy. This led, however, to the appearance of unemployment in cities. Housing in urban China became private. Concomitant with those changes, migrant workers entered urban China in very large numbers. While it is true that they earned considerably more than if they had stayed in their native villages, the economic and social situation of migrants was on average considerably less favourable than it had been for their peers who had grown up in an urban area.

Wang has done a great job in those first five chapters, and I would recommend them to be widely read. However, my problem as a reader appears in chapter six where the author attempts to take a life-cycle approach to consumption. Many calculations are reported that aim to show how the relationship between age and economic activities in China has evolved over time and by gender. Without question, a life-cycle perspective to consumption can be useful. However, I am not always convinced by the author's arguments in this chapter. For example, most researchers probably agree that it is difficult to define and measure labour force participation in a self-sufficient economy. It is well known that during the first part of the period studied in the book most adult household members in rural China took part in farm work. Such work was typically intensive during parts of the year. However, it is also true that during other periods of the year underemployment was

widespread in rural China. As a consequence, I could not understand what Figure 6.1 and Table 6.1, on China's labour force participation rate since 1982 (p. 172), attempt to show.

I am fully aware that a book dedicated to the development of Chinese households over a period of four decades cannot explore all topics, but I noted that *China's Age of Abundance* has very little to say about how gender inequality evolved during the period covered. Furthermore, in 2020, 8.9 per cent of China's population (126 million people) were classified as belonging to one of the 55 ethnic minorities, but the book does not address how economic well-being has evolved by ethnicity during the period under review.

In brief, the strong aspect of this book is that it focuses on households and their members in China. In addition, it covers a relatively long period, which starts roughly after Mao's death. The explanations are easy to follow in most chapters – reading the book does not require advanced skills in statistical and econometric methods, which should make it accessible to many readers. I think that the first five chapters can be used as a textbook, particularly for courses in China studies and in sociology.