

**Kjeld Allan Larsen:** *Regional Policy of China, 1949-1985*. Manila: Journal of Contemporary Asia Publishers. 1992. 413 pp.

This is quite an ambitious book, even if it does not have the full scope suggested by its title. The author, a geographer who was connected with the Center for East and South East Asian Studies in Copenhagen, outlines the economic policies of the Chinese central government over a period which is not only very long, but also characterized by major breaks. The First-Five Year Plan, Great Leap Forward, Retrenchment, Cultural Revolution, Opening to the West and Economic Reform all brought major changes in socialist planning. Larsen concentrates exclusively on the economy, and does not go into other regional issues such as devolution of central government power, treatment of national minorities, or social policies such as education and health care. He has derived his information mainly from Western-language books and Chinese articles of the early and mid-1980s translated by the Joint Publications Research Service.

The portrayal of government policy in this book (reflecting its heavy reliance on official Chinese sources, but also a sympathetic attitude towards socialist planning) is a rather idealized one of top-down commands or at least consensus-decisions. Nowhere do we find deviance or conflicting policies within the Centre or conflicts of interests between Centre and provinces. Nevertheless, there exists a great deal of evidence of debates and conflicts between policy-makers and regions about most issues of economic development, much of which has been produced since the CCP's reevaluation of its former policies in 1981. The omission of such divergences, and the adoption of much of the language and bureaucratic-socialist outlook of the Chinese planners by the author tend to obscure the

dynamics, flexibility and give-and-take between different levels of the Chinese economic planning system (with the value of hindsight, these characteristics may have helped to save it from a Soviet-type collapse). Also, by sticking too close to his official sources, the author forgets to pose some most relevant questions as to the human and economic costs of failed policies such as the Great Leap Forward or the economic effect on rural areas of the state monopolies of trade and most industries instituted in the early 1950s. Where the Cultural Revolution fits into his conventional scheme of four different developmental strategies (classic Soviet, mass mobilization, adjustment, and reform) is not very clear. The heavy reliance on statistical data (particularly on industrial output) underlines the authors' quantitative rather than qualitative perceptions of economic development and growth.

Nevertheless, a great deal of useful information has been presented here, both about policies and about economic and, in particular, industrial growth in China's provinces. The final chapter "Results of Regional Policy" takes up one-half of the book, with 200 pages and 37 tables with provincial statistical data, for selected years. Sometimes, the author ventures beyond the descriptive and presents some interesting reflections on Chinese economic growth and the way it used to be planned. He concludes that in industry, inherited regional inequalities have narrowed since 1953, but that in agriculture, "divergent regional inequalities" have emerged. The development of growth poles, a major component of the Chinese government-led development strategy, is contrasted with the industrialization of rural districts by semi-autarkic local communities, but no firm conclusion is drawn about the effects of various policies on inter- and intraregional inequalities.

The book is useful as an introduction to Chinese socialist thinking about economic planning and to a variety of western articles about the industrial aspects of China's economic development and also as a collection of economic data. However, our present state of knowledge about China's economic development and its policies before the 1980s still has major lacunae. Larsen's ideas and conclusions about the effect of government policies on regional inequalities in China could use some more reflection, integration and a somewhat wider base of source materials. The many issues

Reviews

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raised in this book should challenge economic geographers and socialist planning specialists to think again about socialism with Chinese characteristics.

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