

Three decades of transformation in the East-Central European countryside

edited by Jerzy Banski, Cham, Switzerland, Published by Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019, 106 pp., 99€ (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-030-21236-0; 59,49€ (eBook), ISBN: 978-3-030-21237-7

Gabor Nagy

To cite this article: Gabor Nagy (2020) Three decades of transformation in the East-Central European countryside, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61:2, 197-200, DOI: [10.1080/15387216.2019.1678048](https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1678048)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1678048>



Published online: 28 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 92



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

in chapter 7 (p. 163, the second paragraph). In the 1990s, TVEs produce 40% of the total national industrial product and offer jobs to 112 million people (Chang and Wang 1994). The discussion of TVEs can help readers understand better how the majority of China's small and medium enterprises were established, why these companies succeeded or failed, what socio-economic and environmental consequences were due to the emergence of TVEs. Third, the book provides a comprehensive picture of how China has established its links with (East) Asian production networks through Special Economic Zones (SEZs), trade and FDI. What the authors failed to mention is how overseas Chinese networks – the so-called Chinese diaspora or the “bamboo network” play a crucial intermedia role in helping China build up the East and Southeast Asian production networks (Bun 2000). Not only did they become the earliest investors from outside of China but also brought advanced technology, market knowledge and dared to take risks in an uncertain investment environment. This earlier collaboration helped establish a stronger trade relationship between China and East Asian as well as ASEAN countries.

Overall, this book provides good insights into China's economic transition, policy development, lessons and struggles along with its rising as an economic powerhouse. It can be used as a textbook for undergraduates or graduates to understand the complexity of such a process. It can also provide academics with rich information who seek to understand how China developed its economic foundation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Reference

- Bun, C. K., ed. 2000. *Chinese Business Networks: State, Economy and Culture*. Singapore: Prentice Hall.
 Chang, C., and Y. Wang. 1994. “The Nature of the Township Enterprises.” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 19: pp. 434–452. doi:10.1006/jcec.1994.1111.

Yawei Chen

*Department of Management in the Built Environment, Faculty of Architecture and the
 Built Environment, Delft University of technology, The Netherlands*

 Y.Chen@tudelft.nl

© 2019 Yawei Chen

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1643250>



Three decades of transformation in the East-Central European countryside,

edited by Jerzy Banski, Cham, Switzerland, Published by Springer Nature

Switzerland AG, 2019, 106 pp.,99€ (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-030-21236-0; 59,49€ (eBook), ISBN: 978-3-030-21237-7

This book is a very ambitious project, because it covers three decades confused period starting from the very early steps of transformation (crash of Soviet dominance, communist regimes with centrally planned economies), and continuing into the first 10–15 years of membership of the European Union. The spatial focus of the book are “rural” areas and the scope covers a broad range of topics including agriculture, land cover and land-use

phenomena, rural development issues, rural societies, migration processes, basic services' networks, voting behavior, demographic trends, educational gap (comparing highly urbanized areas), functional transformation (including peripheralization, remote pathways, suburbanization). In this sense, the book offers unique insights based on statistical data, fieldwork experiences and observations of the authors.

The chapters cover the Central European (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), East Balkan (Bulgaria, Romania) and the Baltic (Estonia, Lithuania) states. The authors represent institutions of national academic networks (Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation – Warszawa, Poland; Institute of Regional Studies, RCERS – Kecskemét, Hungary; Institute of Human Geography and Demography LSRC – Vilnius, Lithuania; Institute of Geography SAS – Bratislava, Slovakia; National Institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography BAS – Sofia, Bulgaria; Institute of Geography RA – Bucuresti, Romania), or from top universities (Charles University and Czech University of Life Sciences – Prague, Czechia; Mendel University – Brno, Czechia; University of Tartu and University of Life Sciences – Tartu, Estonia; University of Kosice – Slovakia; Sofia University – Bulgaria; University of Wroclaw – Poland), or even from state agencies (Regional Energy Agency – Tartu, Estonia) of the region.

Previously, there were some edited series summarizing major transformation trends of the 1990s, or the pathways from the socialist era towards the EU (e.g. *Czech Geography in the Dawn of the New Millennium*; *Spaces and Places* – about Hungarian regional development from 1990 to 2003). However, their thematic scope was much wider and did not focus on rural issues. The initial point of the idea of this book went back to ESPON EDORA project (2011), in which some authors began to summarize the major paths of transforming rural areas in the ECE region. It is important to see that 8 of the 16 chapters were financed from different national sources (UMO – Poland, VEGA – Slovakia, CzSF – Czechia, IUT – Estonia, IoG – Romania), or international (EEA – Hungary), which makes the editor's task much challenging, because all of these projects had specific theoretical background, thematic scope, and even spatial limits.

Instead of giving a chapter-by-chapter summary, the reviewer will try to focus on some crucial shared elements of the studies, also indicating their possible limitations.

It comes as no surprise, that as a result of the wide thematic range and authors' diverse interests, scientific background and theoretical commitments, there is no single well-defined theoretical framework, working as a "backbone" of the whole volume. There are common elements, such as peripheralization and center-periphery relations, uneven development, and geometry of power. In some chapters, the authors argue for the use of path dependency with, or without referring to post-socialist transition theory. Other chapters demonstrate a stronger focus on developmental issues (e.g. endogenous development, place-based development, etc.) criticizing neoliberal and production-based paths of local development.

There are three main thematic focus in the book, which offered an opportunity to the editor to organize the chapters. First, based on agriculture, agri-business, land-cover issues, including land ownership and land-use. The national level and comparative studies marked the major turning points of the three decades period after the transition: the period of turmoil transformation from partly or mostly large-scaled cooperatives and state-owned companies dominated structure onto private owned owner structure, in parallel, a serious decrease in agricultural output from the beginning of the 1990s. The second turning point (mostly) connected with the overall economic stabilization, but in particularly in agriculture, it linked to the formation of national sectoral policy with its special preferences and newly founded subsidy systems in the late 1990s. These policies were forming under the emerging influence of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), as

the negotiations with the individual states came closer to the final agreements. The last phase of the development in agriculture in all investigated countries was the period of EU membership (from 2004 to 2007), but we must split this era into two parts, the converging years (from the joining to 2013) and the years of development with totally embedded into Common policy. The later phases involved lots of common phenomena in ECE region, e.g. concentration of ownership of arable lands, changes in land-use, emerging importance of certain plants, increasing effectiveness in production, and later, the increasing importance of environmental issues in agriculture. It was interesting to read the emergence of “post-productivist” ways of rural development in the Baltic and Central European countries.


The decreasing importance of agricultural activities in rural spaces was a common phenomena in all studied countries, however, the dominance of the sector at the beginning of the transition, the speed of transformation and the existing role of agrarian sectors are different. The overall consequence of the process, that even in some small-scaled units, the development opportunities of agriculture and the future paths of local societies and economies became increasingly independent each other.

The second set of processes covered the demographic, migration trends, and the changing faces of rural areas. The most revealing consequence was that, the rural space is highly divided in all countries in East and Central Europe. The suburbanization process seems one of the most powerful issues re-forming the face of former rural societies and land-use patterns. The rural tourism increased in the last decades and commodified a wide range of smaller settlements with their local resources. There are well-defined areas of highly effective agricultural (mostly cultivation of plants in large-scaled plots) zones, and in the same time, we saw the increase of woodlands and extensive husbandry production dominated by small-scaled family businesses. At the end, the authors identified marginal, peripheral rural spaces with local societies in very bad conditions, even rural ghettos, not independently with high rates of the Roma population living there. There are common paths for rural areas in the region, but the mixture and rate of major types, the compact or dispersed localization of certain units are differ from each other, based on the strength of the forces forming the countryside.

The third meeting point of published research results is about possible future development paths of rural areas from different perspectives. In these chapters, there is hardly find certain trends, or development paths, however, the reader could find some common elements, e.g. the increasing gap between diverging rural areas with different set of local/regional resources, the emerging control of metropolitan centers over the widening suburban areas, the increasing role of post-material lifestyle and behavior in environmentally protected zones and the strengthening role of human capacities in renewing local societies.

In a more than 350 pages book, there are some deficiencies and issues, which the reviewer, as a researcher with approximately three decades of fieldwork experience may criticize based on the results of Hungarian, Romanian, Slovakian and even Serbian experiences. The most important issue is that, definition of “rural” is missing. Reading the chapters, it seems, some of the authors have their own categories, differ from others. In the agricultural chapters, I missed the role of wholesale and retail companies in re-intergration of value-chains. The aging of agricultural entrepreneurs received less attention, however, in some post-socialist countries, the replacement of elderly farmers with new generation does not work well. In the chapters belonging to rural local societies, the newly emerging patron-client relationship is missing, just as depending from the local decision-makers (e.g. unemployed persons, public workers). We got limited information about welfare and well-being issues of localities. The importance of housing trends and housing markets was not discussed, although, their role in shaping migration trends seems crucial.

Finally, I would recommend the book to every reader who interested in rural areas, agriculture, local development, local societies and economies, and to all researchers and teaching staff whose interests are connected with post-socialist transition and/or Central and Eastern European region.

Gabor Nagy
Regional Studies Institute, RCERS, Hungary
Department of Economic and Social Geography, University of Szeged, Hungary
 nagy@rkk.hu

© 2019 Gabor Nagy
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1678048>



China's Eurasian dilemmas. Roads and risks for a sustainable global power, by R. James Ferguson, Cheltenham, UK & Northampton, MA, USA, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018, 352 pp., £90.00/\$126.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 78643 381 7, eISBN 978 1 78643 382 4. The eBook version is priced from £22/\$31 from Google Play, ebooks.com and other eBook vendors, while in print the book can be ordered from the Edward Elgar Publishing website.

The author argues that the Eurasian involvement of China has been insufficiently addressed by the academic literature. The book seeks to fill this gap by a systematic analysis of this topic. Chapter 1 offers a stimulating overview of the economic, political and military activities of China in Eurasia. Rightfully, the author warns against considering Eurasia simply as “a single geo-strategic chessboard” (1). He further stresses the importance of connectivity in any conceptualization of this region. Eurasia is in his view the stage where various complicated processes take place, with some important ramifications for world politics. What enriches his analysis is that the author does not only refer to material aspects such as policies and outcomes, but also to discursive aspects such as perceptions and narratives (19). Telling examples are the presence of words such as partnerships, co-development and friendship in China's foreign policy documents (7–8). Another example later in the book concerns the re-framing of the Sino-Russian relationship from one between a dragon and a bear to one between a panda bear and a teddy bear (131).

Two features of chapter 1 weaken the central claims of the book somewhat. The first one concerns the under-conceptualization of geopolitics and geo-economics (1 and 3). Both concepts are not explicitly defined or positioned within the academic debate, although their meanings and the underlying assumptions can widely vary (Van Efferink 2019; Cowen and Smith 2009). Second, the text does not make crystal clear which territories belong to Eurasia (and which do not). The first page suggests that Eurasia consists of at least China, Russia, Central Asian states, India, Afghanistan and Syria. Although here India, like the European Union, is suggested to be part of Eurasia, South Asia is seen as not being part of Eurasia later in the book (43). The lack of a clearly demarcated Eurasia makes it difficult to interpret related phrases in the book, such as “a future Eurasian order” (27). The map that depicts Eurasia (x) does not take away this confusion since it does not show a boundary of Eurasia. Neither does the map attribute a particular colour to the territories that are assumed to be part of Eurasia. Moreover, the map does not completely include China, which may imply that China is not completely part of Eurasia. Furthermore, this map and the other one (xi) at the beginning of