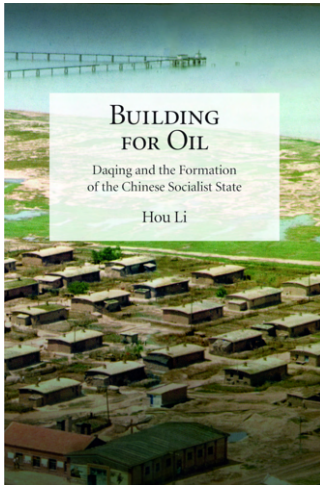

Book Reviews

Li Hou 2020: Building for Oil: Daqing and the Formation of the Chinese Socialist State. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press



Daqing is a city located on an oil field in the Songliao Basin of Heilongjiang province in northeastern China. Established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1950s for crude oil production, the Daqing oil field was seen as hugely important to save the People's Republic of China (PRC) from starvation and promote the industrialization and modernization of the new state. The way Daqing was planned and developed combined with the revolutionary spirit of the people is held up as a model for building the ideal socialist city. It reflects the strategy of 'production first, livelihood second' in the context of Maoist urbanism and socialism, whereby the ambitious goals of the state are achieved thanks to the people's devotion and extreme self-sacrifice.

In this regard, Daqing's experience is representative and deserving of more scholarly attention, yet until now, a comprehensive historical account of urban development during the Maoist era has been notably absent. *Building for Oil: Daqing and the Formation of the Chinese Socialist State* by Li Hou helps fill this lacuna. Articulating communist ideology, politics at both the national and local levels, individual sufferings, and urban planning and governance, it offers a timely and detailed understanding of the development and transformation of Daqing. In doing so, it makes a significant contribution to the Chinese urban studies literature.

The book's narrative is concise and easy to understand and the stories in Daqing are organized in chronological order with an explicit thematic focus in each chapter. The first chapter introduces China's long history of searching for crude oil from the late Qing period to the republican period and into the modern period when the CCP initiated a series of concrete strategies that eventually led to the successful discovery of the Daqing oil field. Chapter 2 then describes the total mobilization by the leadership at the central and local levels during the Daqing oil campaign and how the oil workers suffered under the harsh living conditions at the time but were educated to put the collective interest above any self-interest.

Chapter 3 shows the political economic practice of urban planning and construction in the 1950s and 1960s in China and explains how Daqing became a model not only for discovering rich oil deposits but also for its revolutionary approach to integrating agricultural production with industrialization and combining work with living. This theme is continued in chapter 4, which highlights Daqing's 'revolutionary management' and the 'heroic spirit' of its people. The chapter explains how the Daqing model was held up as an example of the correct path for building socialism in China, especially its 'industrialization without urbanization' and

‘centralized leadership, integrated management, and a combined system of administration and enterprises’.

Explaining Daqing as a production machine, a work-study school and a battlefield, chapter 5 presents the daily lives of some representative groups of people living in an urban-rural heterotopia in the oil field and how different people and the process of oil production were affected by the political movements during the Cultural Revolution. Chapter 6 discusses how the development model in Daqing started to be challenged more and more, as it demanded too much sacrifice from local workers in terms of their personal lives. This challenge was a prelude to the reform of Maoist political economy and the introduction of new economic development policies. The chapter chronicles the dynamically changing international relations and some individual perceptions concerning the politics of oil.

As Hou explains in *Building for Oil*, the period during which Daqing developed as a model of socialist construction is one of the most controversial periods in the history of the People’s Republic. While one group regarded the Maoist ideology as the foundation of the regime, another group believed that economic growth and prosperity needed to give more consideration to humanist concerns and market values. Accordingly, the author presents substantial details about government department restructuring and decision-making and the implementation processes related to the development of Daqing. The book also contains many intriguing elements that will be of interest to urban planning and governance studies, including topics such as: institutions, power, (de)centralization, land, migration, settlement, justice, state-society and centre-local relations, and the politics between party leaders and elite ministerial cadres.

However, the book is largely descriptive, and there is insufficient critical engagement with the broader and more recent literature on political, economic, sociological and geographical understandings of urban development and transformation. The theoretical significance of the book is therefore unclear. For example, the selection criteria for cadres to develop the oil industry under the centrally planned economy are still relevant for today’s political economic system. Likewise, China continues to rely on engineering and a capital-intensive approach to solving its environmental problems and promote industrial upgrading, and the ideology of the overarching collective interest and self-sacrifice is still encouraged.

The question remains as to how the politics of planning and construction in Daqing speaks to these ongoing issues. There is also a problem with the book’s flow of logic and clarity of key arguments, which need to be more rational and specific. Similarly, the book contains a great deal of historical information that does not seem to have any direct link with the Daqing stories, or at least, for which there does not seem to be a clear theoretical justification.

Nonetheless, throughout the book, the revolutionary period and the reform period are seen as one continuous process because there was no reconstitution of the system or refinement of the underlying ideological beliefs. Therefore, although the development model in Daqing discussed in *Building for Oil* happened almost half a century ago and has already faded from the reform era, it does provide new insights for people to understand the issues and coping strategies present in China today.

Chen Li, Nanjing Normal University