
Book Reviews

**Li Zhang 2021: The Origins of COVID-19: China and Global Capitalism.
Stanford, CA: Stanford Briefs**



Published in 2021, Li Zhang's short book provided a timely and swift intervention into discussions about the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic. It remains a pregnant and relevant contribution today, making a series of valuable connections that tie the agency of the smallest organisms to the political economy of the world's most populous country. In a nutshell, the book is ultimately about revealing the structural conditions of global capitalism that give rise to novel infectious diseases with pandemic potential. Along the way, it lays bare the limitations of biomedical approaches and ecomodernist frameworks and exposes the urgent need for agro-ecological and sustainable transformations that will improve public health and the common good (p. 144).

This ambitious programme, drawn here from the epilogue but repeated in various forms throughout the book, is pursued through five topical chapters framed by the introduction (Prelude) and the epilogue. Chapters 2 and 3, cleverly titled Emergence and Emergency, respectively, present a narrative of the origins (or what we know of them) and early unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a focus on events in China in 2020, mostly in Wuhan and Hubei Province. The drama's peripety and conclusion are presented in chapters 4 (Surge) and 5 (Victory), which provide another set of closely related discussions, again from a Chinese perspective. Chapter 6, Persistence, details the questions that remained when China's infection rates had dropped but the country heaved under the pressures of zero Covid restrictions, international isolation and closed borders.

Zhang's intellectual home is in global and international studies and she sets the Covid narrative from emergence to persistence against some of the major themes related to China's internal course and its place in the world. Global capitalism—a term which is never satisfactorily explained in the book—gives her argument the contextual background and logic from which she takes analytical energy. She riffs off earlier iterations of similar arguments—for example, Mike Davis' idea of 'structures

of disease emergence’—but also points to the need to move beyond a mere critique of capitalism towards considering debates about ‘modernization, development, environmental degradation and the prospects for global health and sustainability in the new century’ (p. 6). By the end of the book, it will have become clear that some of the enduring contradictions of the pandemic response have to do with the persistence of the complexities that Zhang discusses here. The pathways China chose to move out of the pandemic danger zone are the same ones that led to the problem in the first place. Changes were neither envisioned nor implemented at any stage.

Given that this is a review written for an urban and regional journal, I will now focus on what Zhang has to say about the role of cities and urbanization in and beyond the pandemic. We learn, for example, that in the early months the central government in Beijing ‘punted responsibility to the local and provincial level’ (p. 23) and embraced a denialist position that had often characterized China’s previous pandemic responses (cf. SARS in 2003). What cannot be denied, of course, is that it was one of China’s foremost industrial and urban centres—Wuhan in Hubei Province—that, if not the actual origin, was at least the place of the first outbreak of Covid-19. Wuhan, the ‘fulcrum in China’s efforts to connect its hinterlands with the global economy’, had recently been ‘awarded the status of “national civilized” and “hygienic city”’ (p. 32).

Zhang notes that the latest ‘round of urban expansion and industrial modernization in Wuhan explains why it could be the site for an infectious disease outbreak’ (p. 32) and the source for a wider pandemic. She subsequently doubles down on that argument, insisting that urbanization and industrialization are celebrated accomplishments in China with their own set of socio-ecological problems that remain largely out of control. Denial of the public health risks brought about by industrial urbanization allows and ‘justifies the continued expansion of this modernist, urban-focused and industrial-dependent development model into the most remote corners of the earth’ (p. 35). Zhang surely has a point here, but the theme is not particularly expanded or developed beyond the model’s associated ‘benefits’ of consumerism and political stability (p. 66). This may be because—as it appears to this reader at least—Zhang presents both global capitalism and the state as mostly aspatial institutions and processes, which largely leaves the (urban) geography of the crisis outside its core explanans.

Zhang clearly knows about the importance of urbanization, even if she does not explicitly engage with its significance on its own terms. In a powerful section on an outbreak of Covid in Beijing’s Xinfadi market in June 2020, for example, Zhang bemoans once again ‘the growing concentration of production, processing and distribution for the rapidly rising populations of major cities’, yet avoids a broader discussion about the relationship between urban and environmental degradation leading to potential ‘risks of new infectious diseases jumping species’, also referred to as zoonosis (p. 126). Zhang is right to speak here about the wider implications of urbanization as a socio-technical process which includes ‘the expansion of infrastructure, mining, wildlife farming, and tourism in peri-urban and remote rural areas’ (p. 126).

I like this book for its tight argument and clear narrative and I recommend it for all who seek wider explanations of what brought the Covid pandemic into the urban world and what might produce even more devastating disasters in years to come. Beyond the urban theme highlighted and critiqued here, I was also particularly interested in Zhang's excellent arguments about the pitfalls of ecological modernization and technological advancement that have guided China's approach. These are issues that could certainly be taken up in an additional conversation that reaches beyond the scope of this fine short book.

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