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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

History in China's Urban Post-Modern

By Helen F. Siu, Yale University

You-tien Hsing. *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 256 pp. \$80 (cloth).

Li Zhang. *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010, 272 pp. \$84 (cloth), \$24 (paper).

Building upon decades of global market flows, population migrations, digital technology, and accelerated interconnectedness, the twenty-first century is facing remarkable urban transformations (Harvey 1990, 2005; Sassen 2001; Holston 1999; Brenner 2004). In 1800, 3 percent of the world's population lived in cities. In 2008, that figure reached over 50 percent (Population Reference Bureau 2011). These transformations are most evident in the emerging nodes of an interreferencing urban Asian renaissance (Roy and Ong 2011). Eight of the world's ten megacities (those with populations over ten million) are in Asia. In postreform China, which is conscious of its rising power and eager to catch up with worldly pursuits, city building has reached the scale, intensity, and audacity of a revolution (Campanella 2008; Ren 2011). What characterizes this dramatic urban transformation in China? Who are its major players and winners, and who is marginalized or excluded? What cultural meanings and lifestyles are visibly forged? How are these processes intertwined with nationalistic aspirations, social divisions, and political contestations? What analytical insights and theoretical reflections can we gain at this historical juncture from an urban postmodern linking China, Asia, and the rest of the globe? These are some of the issues in the minds of Asian scholars across the disciplines. I hope this

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review will provide an opening for us to engage in multiple conversations, hence my citing the works of many colleagues.

Zhang and Hsing have well established records of research in postreform urban China that explore the empirical and theoretical concerns of anthropology and human geography (Zhang 2001, 2002, 2006; Hsing 2006a, 2006b; Hsing and Lee, 2009). Reviewed here are two timely books addressing questions that urgently need answers. Both books privilege the issue of urban space: the power play and cultural meanings attached to its acquisition, ownership, and control, and the institutional and discursive strategies arising from its contestations. Hsing and Zhang engage a critical scholarly tradition on the social life of things, the semiotics of materiality, and the constructionist qualities of boundaries and identities (Appadurai 1986; Bourdieu 1984; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Lefebvre, 1991). They join other China scholars in treating *space* not as a passive repository of social content, but as a series of material and symbolic forces that interact with regional histories, livelihoods, subjectivities, and political contestations (Cartier 2009; Oakes and Schein 2006; Siu 2005; Wang 2005). The two works also complement each other. Hsing turns to laws, regulations, and institutions related to commodifying land and property that have triggered a new wave of local state-making and territorial civic actions. She offers a view of macro political economy across regions. Zhang takes a close-up look at identities forged out of consumption practices in a few city neighborhoods. Perceiving that the privatization of housing since the 1990s has driven new regimes of living and sociality, Zhang devotes her attention to the aspirations, cultural styles, and agendas of increasingly assertive homeowners whom she characterizes as an emergent “middle class.” Together, the two authors highlight the complex dynamism and contingencies of what Michael Herzfeld terms, on the back cover of Zhang’s book, “wholesale spatial restructuring of Chinese society and subjectivity” and capture processes of creative destruction in every imaginable dimension.

Hsing conducted her research from 1996 to 2007. Beginning in coastal cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, she extended her sites to capitals of inland provinces such as Changsha, Zhengzhou, and Chengdu, and supplemented this body of data with interviews in Jinan and Nanjing to examine diverse state and societal actors. She observes that “the new theater of accumulation and distribution” for China’s political economy has moved from industrial development to urban construction. Urban expansion builds on acquisition of farmland

and, at times, on forceful dispossessions of rural and inner-city residents by local governments. This shift in policy priorities has been complicated by a general liberalization of the economy, a reduction of social benefits, and the state's roles, simultaneously, legislator, regulator, planner, profiteering developer, and consumer to capture land markets. Hsing highlights the aggressive territorial projects of municipal governments as "urbanization of the local state." The process pits new territorial interests against the lingering state units that she terms "socialist land masters"—a conglomeration of state-owned enterprises, military and industrial units, and other bureaucratic *danwei* (units) that were allocated prime sites and land reserves in the prereform era (chapter 2). It also triggers a form of place-based resistance that Hsing labels "civic territoriality." At the inner-city core, social activism centers on the *chaiqianhu* (evicted households), who suffer abrupt dislocation and disruption of their life-worlds due to the razing of homes and neighborhoods. Activism generated by the *biaozhunzu* (standard rent housing) and *jingzufang* (state-managed rental housing) in Beijing, on the other hand, stresses the residents' ownership rights based on legal, historical, and moral claims (chapter 3). Although these grassroots petitions and litigations have had limited success, they signify new discourses on territorialized identities and citizens' rights. At city edges, where the rural and urban interact, villages engulfed by the construction tsunami develop "village corporatism" to negotiate favorable terms of compensation (chapter 5). Similar to what Siu (2007) observes in Guangzhou, villagers shrewdly use new land laws and their collective rights to village land to negotiate a profitable share in the urban revolution. They dig in their heels to reinforce a past rural regime to gain from what has become prime real estate. However, at rural fringes where township governments dominate as brokers of power and property, Hsing sees resistance from displaced village households as fragmentary and localized (chapter 7). She cites Yu Jianrong, a scholar on social protests, who reports that between 1980 and 2003, 13 percent of China's total cultivable land was appropriated by state agencies, affecting fifty million to sixty-six million villagers. Although the number of the aggrieved is large, their subsequent relocation, deterritorialization, and identity rupture have prevented them from maintaining effective social or political solidarity.

Covering many sites of action in her research design allows Hsing to generate typologies of state-making and civic resistance. However, as a consequence, she has forgone nuanced human details that could have enriched the institutional study by locating unique regional or

local configurations of state power, market, and social alliances for deeper comparative analysis. Her study contains many of the ingredients needed to examine new “class” formations tied to territorial processes of capital accumulation and disenfranchisement, yet the concept is surprisingly absent in the book.

Rethinking the “class” concept through space-based consumption is a major focus of Zhang’s book. Zhang begins with policy reforms that facilitated the startling growth of urban commercial housing since the 1990s. She turns her attention to Kunming, her hometown and a thriving metropolis in southwest China, and to officials and professionals in city planning and governance, real estate agents, home buyers, and inner-city residents facing dispossession. With diverse historical baggage, and empowered or disenfranchised by market reforms, all of these actors maneuver, collude, and collide in energized worldly pursuits. Zhang focuses on the “paradigm shift in the way that people live their lives and think about themselves, a dramatic move away from yearning for social utopia under Maoist socialism and toward building a private paradise in postsocialist times” (p. 1).

Zhang argues that the radical reconfiguration of urban space and home ownership is associated with changing land laws, lingering bureaucratic power, and market dynamics. It produces means of amassing private capital and triggers scales of exclusion and contestation not unlike the enclosure movement in Europe centuries earlier (chapter 1). Like Hsing, she stresses the power of a state-market alliance that dispossesses the urban and rural poor and devalues labor, creating sharp social cleavages (chapter 2). The real estate machinery, with its immense concentration of capital and official connections to build commodity housing, aggressively markets a secure space and “vernacular modern” culture for eager consumers (chapter 3). Zhang uses the concept of the “spatialization of class” to explore how wealthy individuals are now able to converge in residential communities and cultivate distinctive life-worlds. Privacy is not understood as creating a sense of isolation; instead, it nurtures the inner self. “Such emerging places,” she says, “offer a tangible location for a new class to materialize itself through spatial exclusion, cultural differentiation, and lifestyle practices” (p. 3). In short, Zhang sees this as China’s new middle class in the making (chapter 4). She is well aware of the homeowners’ diverse sources of wealth and lack of coherent ideology, organization, political security, and symbolic capital. Nonetheless, she argues that their properties have become bases of their

identity, causing them to recast their self-worth; shaping their dating, marriage, and divorce arrangements (chapter 6); and mobilizing them to launch civic challenges to the government, developers, real estate agencies, and private management bodies that might have encroached on their priced oases (chapter 7). Contestations over broader entitlements have extended to widespread and often violent urban activism in inner-city neighborhoods that face aggressive demolition and relocation (chapter 5).

Zhang makes some ambitious theoretical claims. She invokes the concept *jieceng* (social strata), often used by her informants, and exploits the ambiguous meaning of the term as both differences in lifestyle and inequality in capital accumulation. Riding on previous studies of consumption, class, and the powers of the self (Miller 1987; Bourdieu 1991; Rose 1999; for China, Chen et al. 2001; Davis 2000, 2005), she attempts to enrich Marxist notions of class identities based on production relations by showing how a rising “middle class” in China uses its consumption of private housing to build identity, cultural capital, and political activism. Moreover, in treating class not as a structured reality but as a process of happenings, as E. P. Thompson (1964) argued for in *The Making of the English Working Class*, Zhang tries to highlight everyday practices that rearticulate the Chinese homeowners’ class interests and civic consciousness.

Zhang claims that her study bridges the conceptual divide between economic and cultural capital. However, her treatment of broader legal and political frameworks for the intertwining of market and state in the postreform era is light, as is the examination of different sources of economic capital for the homeowners. Without detailing the multiple channels available for building wealth, apart from their investments in symbolic capital associated with a volatile property market, the “class” nature of these protagonists seems analytically incomplete. In order to take E. P. Thompson’s class analysis seriously, one would need to give more attention to the structural positions of homeowners/consumers in the larger political economy (see Verdery 1999 on property rights in postsocialist Russia; Davis 2004, 2006, 2010 for postreform China). Investment in commodity housing could very well be a “paradise” of exclusive harmony for some to mask other means of primitive accumulation through displacement, exploitation of labor, or corruption. It is a source of social strife, moral debate, and political tension, rather than the basis for collective civic action.

Furthermore, the ideologically transient and fluid nature of the symbolic capital the homeowners strive to cultivate may need to be more effectively linked to their precarious class positioning. Without adequately contextualizing how certain (foreign) cultural styles can be turned into vernacular modern at one political moment, it is difficult to anticipate that such styles may become a liability at another juncture, say, of nationalistic closure. Whether these spatially and temporally localized interests will develop into broader political alliances and progressive social mobilization remains intangible. It may not be a question of the homeowners' positioning being "emergent," but a structural weakness, in political, economic, and discursive terms.

On a more philosophical issue, what Zhang sees as a double movement of individualized desires and the need for collective action to protect (Polanyi 1944) goes beyond class or space and speaks to exciting discussions of individualization and individualism in postreform China (Yan 2009; Ong and Zhang 2008). But one may question whether present-day atomization is the result of a conscious choice for privacy or indicative of an irreversible decimation of past social relations and moral universes brought by the Maoist revolution (Siu 1989; Faure and Siu 2003). Coupled with profiteering impulses guided by popular (mis)conceptions of market logic and instrumental action today, such a history has generated among the general public a peculiar juxtaposition of an acute sense of socialist entitlements and an ethic privileging the survival of the fittest. The China century seems to be in a fast-forward mode with heavy historical baggage (Siu 2006).

Zhang and Hsing have made unique contributions to understanding how local governments and middle-class consumers have shaped the urban landscape in China today. One would hope that their works will inspire future studies to pay attention to other stakeholders in the urban revolution. As cities expand and real estate prices rise, the relocation of villagers at the urban edges is urgent. Hsing has devoted a chapter to describing how villagers bank on their collective land rights to bargain for compensation from local governments and developers. Zhang is troubled by silences in the official plans and records. As cities run out of old neighborhoods and factories for redevelopment, the sites of explosive contestation will be at the rural-urban juncture. Many villages, known as *chengzhongcun* (urban villages), are pressed against malls, highways, and new gated communities. Drawn into the urban tsunami, villagers no longer cultivate fields. Instead, they build substandard dwellings on private plots and rent them

cheaply to the hundreds of thousands of rural or ethnic migrants flocking into cities for petty businesses and construction and menial jobs. These enclaves are labeled by city officials as areas of crime, health risks, and rural backwardness. If the villagers are fortunate enough to negotiate favorable deals from developers, they may have a share of windfall profits. If they lose their land through the corrupt practices and greed of village leaders, they will have nothing left but labor deemed unfit for a modern economy. Guangzhou, for example, has 138 urban villages. Each enclave has thousands of villagers and often ten times more migrant tenants. Although physical boundaries continue to blur, villagers and officials are locked into a lingering administrative rural-urban divide and its associated discursive “incarcerations.” Fifty-three of Guangzhou’s urban villages are targeted for demolition in the next five years. How villagers comply, negotiate, and contest to create their own spatial sense of collective rights and cultural belonging will significantly complicate politics and emotions in the city’s transformation (Siu forthcoming; see Harms 2011 on Vietnam).

Equally important are overseas developers and consumers who have invested in China in major ways. They have partnered with national and local governments and developers to produce the physical hardware of municipal landmarks and gated communities. They have helped institutionalize professional codes, business models, and market-driven operations and have inscribed and translated foreign cultural imaginaries into cosmopolitan tastes and meanings for good living. Their presence differs in China’s regions and cities. It will be fruitful to explore how these styles and practices spread and circulate through copying and interreferencing to become core to China’s postreform urban revolution. Moreover, in view of China’s rising global economic power, how these processes are re-exported to city-building in the global south is a story waiting to be told (Rupp 2008; French 2010).

To put the two contemporary studies in the context of a long history of China’s urban transformation, one finds a distinguished scholarly genealogy from the imperial dynasties to the mid-twentieth century. Cities were not only seats of administration but also multiethnic arenas for cultural exchange, nodes for interregional trade over land and sea, and centers for advances in industry, finance, religion, the arts, fashion, theater, scholarship, and leisure. To mention a selected few, Changan in the Tang (Benn 2002; Xiong 2000; Lewis 2009); Kaifeng, Hangzhou, and Quanzhou in the Song (Shiba 1969; Gernet 1962; Chaffee 2008); and Beijing, Guangzhou,

Wuhan, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Chengdu in the Ming to the early Republican era (Naquin 2000; Rowe 1984, 1989; Fei 2010; Brook 1999; Yeh 2006; Strand 1989; Wang 2003) all made their mark in the livelihoods and moral imaginations of residents and visitors. One could almost see Marco Polo in the twelfth century marveling at Hangzhou as the greatest city in the world, or Ibn Battuta, a jurist from Tangier fifty years later, discussing Islamic faith with fellow scholars at Guang Ta, a mosque built in Guangzhou in the Tang dynasty (Dunn 2005). Moreover, audacious lineage building in the booming market towns of the Pearl River Delta during the Ming and Qing was the result of shrewd maneuvers by local elites to combine commercial and landed estates to facilitate business and officialdom (Faure 2007). One could also appreciate the powerful merchant guilds in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hankow negotiating with city officials and using social and cultural means to keep a migrant workforce in place for transporting grain and other agricultural commodities across provinces (Rowe 1984, 1989). A survey of the China trade collections at the Peabody Museum in Salem illuminates the fact that Guangzhou in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was already a “world factory” where craftspeople produced ceramics, silverware, wallpaper, furniture, and exotic curiosities for markets in North America, Europe, and the Middle East (Crossman 1991; Wilson and Liu 2003). Despite China’s dire political circumstances as a nation in the Republican period, Shanghai’s commerce, industry, and conspicuous consumption were built on massive rural-to-urban migrations, speculative domestic and foreign investments, institutional openness, and cosmopolitan exposure (Yeh 2000, 2007; Dikötter 2006; Finnane 2008; Hershatter 1997; Lee 1999).

Such a history makes us appreciate that cities in China and their residents have experienced many “revolutionary” transformations. Thomas Bender (2010) uses the concept of “urban assemblages” to explore contingent layers of sociality and historical persistence that make up metropolitan spaces and substantiate individual creativity. He argues that a city with cultural depth and human diversity will reinvent itself and remain dynamic and “unfinished.” Compared to China’s historical cosmopolitanism, life in the socialist cities of the Maoist period was economically stark, culturally bare, and socially homogenized (Whyte and Parish 1984). The question is whether the socialist urban revolution had any structuring impact on the spatial and cultural dynamics we observe in the postreform period (Davis et al. 1995; Davis 2000). One asks if Hsing and Zhang should not have taken the end of the Maoist period as the starting point of

their narratives. Rather, should the socialist transformations be crucial ingredients in their analyses? It seems that, despite an upsurge of new freedoms and mobility, three decades of market reform have not diminished the overwhelming power of the state (national or local). Instead, state offices at every level of administration have captured the market to enrich themselves in unimaginable ways. They continue to shape the discourse of modernity and the rural-urban divide, build national spectacles and municipal landmarks to legitimize their leadership, keep the country's villages relatively cellularized (which has enabled village officials to be brokers of power and property), and maximize economic accumulation by defining hundreds of millions of migrant workers as devalued labor. The atomization of urbanites and their precarious class identities, and the entrenched corporatism of villagers at urban edges, in fact reinforce the Maoist structures that have long locked them in their circumscribed positions to face a well-networked and well-endowed state apparatus. Would such civic activism lead to new and sustainable class consciousness and trigger fundamental structural changes in power relationships? Or is today's urban revolution a process of "state involution"? Whatever the answers, we may add the works of Hsing and Zhang to the genealogy of studies on China's long urban history. The authors should take credit for providing new ways to understand a crucial moment of social transformation and for sparking conversations about digging deeper into the historical assemblages of China's urban postmodern in decades to come.

Helen F. Siu is professor of anthropology at Yale University. The author would like to thank David Faure for providing useful references, Deborah Davis and Erik Harms for great suggestions to clarify ideas, and the editors for their patience and good humor.

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Note: English sources are limited to some that have inspired broad discussions of China's urban history. The author has not included the specialized or Chinese sources.

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