

Suburban Beijing: Housing and Consumption in Contemporary China

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Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010

xxxv + 219 pp. \$25.00

ISBN 978-0-8166-6587-7 doi:10.1017/S0305741011001330

Wangjing, on the way to the airport in north-eastern Beijing, is a typical example of those non-descript suburban residential districts that have mushroomed on the fringes of China's rapidly expanding cities. The breakneck pace of urban redevelopment in China is much hyped, but attention has tended to focus on the startling new landmark buildings created by global "starchitects" (Koolhaas, Andreu, Foster and others), or on the struggles to preserve what little remains of a once unique urban material culture; places like Wangjing, on the other hand, are barely acknowledged and largely ignored. After all, we already know everything we need to know about monotonous suburban sprawl. Right? Well, no; as Friederike Fleischer demonstrates in this innovative study, suburbanization in China only superficially resembles the phenomenon elsewhere; if China is "reinventing the city," as Thomas Campanella (*The Concrete Dragon*, 2008) has argued, then this book shows that it is also reinventing the suburb.

Wangjing has gained notoriety as a hotbed of new middle/upper-class (or "new rich," if you prefer) consumer lifestyle. But as Fleischer shows, the real situation is far more complex. Describing her book as "an ethnographic study of a suburb in the making" (p. xi), she argues that three distinct groups of people have played key roles in the making of Wangjing: affluent professionals who form the new residential upper stratum; the ageing working class who occupy the remnant industrial work-units (*danwei*) that once dominated this part of Beijing; and migrant entrepreneurs who run the markets stalls, small shops and services that keep the place going. Through ethnographic case studies of individuals representing each of these groups, the book seeks to demonstrate that despite asymmetrical power relationships, the various actors each deploy forms of strategic agency which contribute to the ongoing restructuring of Wangjing's social and spatial environment.

The first two chapters provide background on the history of the Wangjing area since 1949, describing, respectively, the Mao-era emergence of the *danwei* system and post-Mao era reforms: covering economic restructuring, the influx of migrants, the rise of a private sector and the commercialization of housing. China specialists will find few surprises or new insights in these chapters, as it seems that the history of Wangjing closely mirrors the familiar narratives of PRC history. Chapter three, "Daily life in Wangjing," describes the variety of housing types that now exist within the suburb and how various social groups gain access: new master-planned estates (*xiaoqu*) for the affluent professionals, the run-down *danwei* compounds for the old working class, and cheap rental rooms on the rural fringes for migrant entrepreneurs. The significance of these different residential environments becomes clearer in chapter four, as Fleischer argues that the increasing socioeconomic differentiation between these key social groups is reinforced through "a real and symbolic spatial dimension" (p. 108). Hence, the everyday experience of life within a particular spatial setting strengthens the individuals' primary identification with their core group, but, equally significantly, bolsters the distinctions between the social groups.

In chapter five, this point is extended by focusing on consumption as a key mode of agency contributing to the emergence of what the author calls "the geography of space and social status." Agency through consumption of course only heightens the asymmetries between the three groups; where the affluent professionals can remake their lives in comfortably appointed and well-serviced *xiaoqu*, the migrant

entrepreneurs channel most of their resources into consuming education for their children while the ageing *danwei* residents engage in limited “re-decoration” of their simple homes while saving hard for the future (presumably for medicines and health services, though this is not mentioned). If consumption really can be understood in this context as a form of “agency,” it is an “agency” that reinforces the existing tripartite social hierarchy rather than enabling any significant forms of social mobility. Even if we focus only on the affluent professionals, it seems to me that the high degree of uniformity and standardization in the design and management of *xiaoqu*, suggests that buying into one of these developments, in Wangjing or anywhere else, is much less about agency or choice than about the consumption of a highly regulated lifestyle underpinned by a narrowly delimited repertoire of behaviours and identities seen as appropriate for reproducing this social stratum.

While I find the argument on agency somewhat overdrawn, there are many strengths in this book; particularly in the rich and diverse ethnographic data which amply illustrate the underlying complexities at play in the making of an ostensibly “middle-class” suburb. The book is also accessible to non-China specialists, as the emergence of Wangjing is carefully situated within the broader narrative of China’s urban transformations since 1949. Finally, whilst entirely supportive of the author’s stated objective to integrate spatial factors into the analysis of social stratification (p. xviii), I felt that the physical spatiality of Wangjing did not come through clearly enough in the text. I would have liked to see more detailed description and analysis of the lived spaces in order to show more conclusively how spatial form is central to structuring the contours of social relationships.

DAVID BRAY

Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation

Edited by ADAM YUET CHAU

London and New York: Routledge, 2011

xvii + 244 pp. £80. 00

ISBN 978-0-415934-1

Local Religion in North China in the Twentieth Century: The Structure and Organization of Community Rituals and Beliefs

DANIEL L. OVERMYER

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009

Xiv + 219 pp. €105.00; \$140.00

ISBN 978-90-04-17592-1 doi:10.1017/S0305741011001342

Almost a generation has passed since the dawn of the reform era started to allow Chinese religions to revitalize, and gradually even to allow Chinese and overseas scholars to observe this revitalization, so that now academic writing in this area is frequently built on a considerable first-hand knowledge of the evolving situation – and quite a complex situation it certainly is, at that. Adam Yuet Chau’s edited volume draws together contributions from nine researchers working across a very wide range of varieties of religion, yet even so does not touch for example on Islam, and scarcely on the editor’s area of temple religion in the north, since the impressive essay on religion in North China by Stephen Jones, though fully aware of the complexities even of quite small sections of the