Cities
Surround
The Countryside

URBAN AESTHETICS IN POSTSOCIALIST CHINA

Robin Visser

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For Qingguo

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Introduction

Cities Surround the Countryside

> Chairman Mao creatively laid down the general line and general policy of the new democratic revolution, founded the Chinese People's Liberation Army and pointed out that the seizure of political power by armed force in China could be achieved only by following the road of building rural base areas, using the countryside to encircle the cities and finally seizing the cities, and not by any other road.
>
> "Text of Announcement Issued by Peking Reporting Death of Chairman Mao," *Xinhua*, 10 September 1976

Mao's mandate that the countryside encircle the cities has been irrevocably reversed during the past three decades in China. Although Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms started in the countryside, in 1978, with the household responsibility system, policy shifted to urban development with the establishment of the first Special Economic Zones, in 1980. Urbanization is now dominant in China, both demographically and ideologically. The question that first provoked my inquiry into postsocialist urban aesthetics is a simple one: what happens culturally when those in a historically agricultural civilization start to identify primarily with the city? China has maintained a rural population of nearly 90 percent for millennia, its poets rhapsodizing on glad retirements to rural abodes, its culture characterized by an "attachment to the soil." Yet both the soil and the values associated with it are swiftly transforming. The modern urban-rural dichotomy, a legacy of nineteenth-century imperialism, is being rapidly reconfigured in a

Skyscrapers are supplanting village forms in China. Pudong, Shanghai, was once farmland. Courtesy Marilyn Shea.

postsocialist, global environment. The capitalist city—denounced as parasitical under Mao and devalued by the norms of traditional Chinese ethics —now functions in China as a site of individual and collective identity.

Take the soil. The central government's decision, in 1990, to develop Pudong transformed sparsely populated farmland in eastern Shanghai into an urbanized zone seven times the size of the old city of Puxi. Beijing has likewise been ballooning concentrically since the Second Ring Road was first situated along the contours of the former city wall, in the 1980s; a Sixth Ring Road has been completed, and planners have even proposed a Seventh Ring Road, which would exceed the city limits and not only link very distant districts and townships but expand into neighboring provinces and cities. Throughout China, municipal officials pushing lucrative development projects confiscate rural land by guile, fiat, or force, with tens of millions of farmers having lost their land in the past decade. Qin Hui, a leading authority on rural China, contends that "if the government wants to take land, it can take it more or less at will. Farmers often not only haven't benefited from the process of urbanization, they are losing out because of it."[1]

Hong Village, Anhui Province, 2005. Photo by author.

Take culture. While claiming that we can bid "farewell to peasant China," as some scholars assert, may overstate the extent of China's urbanization, there is no question that cities increasingly envelope the countryside, not only geographically and demographically (40 percent urbanization in 2005), but in terms of cultural influence.[2] In 1994 Kam Wing Chan, a geographer who has been analyzing China's urbanization for decades, predicted accurately that "if an annual urban population growth rate of 4% to 5%, similar to that of the 1980s, is maintained in the coming decades, China's urban population will be hitting the 50% mark around the year 2010. In less than one generation's time, China will be transformed into a primarily urbanized society, both in demographic and occupational terms. Not only will these changes have a profound effect on the way of life of most Chinese people and the way Chinese society is organized but the outcome of such a mammoth transformation will also create a drastically different dimension in the future global political economy."[3] The way of life for "most Chinese people" is undergoing fundamental transformation because even everyday life in the countryside is impacted by urbanization. A

noted ethnographic study demonstrates, for example, that new rural housing designs, directly influenced by exposure to urban markets, are radically altering life in the countryside by fostering youth autonomy, individual rights, and privacy while enervating patriarchal power structures.[4] The cultural effects result in part from a structural change in administration called *shidaixian*, literally, "cities leading counties," a program first deployed, temporarily, in the 1950s and reestablished in 1983 to effect the economic dismantling of the urban-rural dichotomy. In abandoning prefectures and transferring their subordinate counties to the leadership of cities, "the leading role of the city has been explicitly established to usher in an epoch of city-led regional development for the first time in Chinese history."[5] Despite China's limited urbanization during the twentieth century, it fully embraces urbanization in the twenty-first.[6]

By all accounts, the sustained economic, ideological, demographic, and material priority of the city in China is a very recent development. In this book I examine how the transformation of Chinese cities over the past three decades informs the cultural imagination as manifest in fiction, cinema, visual art, architecture, and urban design. Following Guy Debord's interpretation of aesthetics as new ways of seeing and perceiving the world, "urban aesthetics" refers to how the city is envisioned, experienced, and assessed. Proceeding from the premise that the built environment is not an autonomous realm, but rather an economic and social field with important political implications, I consider how the aesthetics of the urban environment shape the emotions and behavior of individuals and cultures, and how individual and collective images of and practices in the city, whether consciously organized or not, produce urban aesthetics. Drawing on interdisciplinary tools of urban studies, literary and cultural theory, and field research (empirical observations and interviews), I situate postsocialist urban aesthetics within broad economic, historical, ideological, and material contexts. My method for elucidating the urban imagination is to first analyze its general manifestations in postsocialist urban planning, economics, and critical inquiry, and then interpret its particular expressions in works of fiction, film, and art.

I exclude Chinese cities such as Taipei, Hong Kong, and Singapore from my analysis. In addition to a practical need to limit the scope of my examination, the theoretical thrust of my analysis examines the cultural ethos created by capitalist urban transformation in the wake of socialist modernity. The central dynamism of social and intellectual life in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1990s was, as Xudong Zhang points out,

due to the new social and power relationships produced by a market economy initiated and administered by the state bureaucracy.[7] Socialist systems and sentiments not only constitute the historical basis for urbanization in the PRC, they also continue to inform, in part, its ongoing processes and policies. The hybrid state of many of China's postreform sectors is epitomized, for example, in the mixture of socialist, market, and globalization rhetoric informing the "New Housing Movement," a self-described "urban real-estate development market cooperative network" that nonetheless uses the socialist mechanism of a "movement" (*yundong*) to mobilize itself.[8] The urban aesthetics produced under such conditions often engender a distinctive psychic lacuna, an aporia resulting from the coupling of socialist monumentality rhetoric with the quotidian ethos of consumer culture.

The tripartite structure of this book establishes the major epistemological paradigms that govern my inquiry into postsocialist urban culture. In the first section I examine what Henri Lefebvre called the "urban question" of late capitalism, both in how it is formulated by urban theorists and in how it is resolved by urban practitioners and intellectuals. In particular, I attend to dynamics of neoliberal globalization in building the new Chinese city, in inciting critiques of urban consumerism by literary and visual artists, and in enabling alternative intellectual strategies in the academy. Like Lefebvre, many Chinese intellectuals are particularly critical of how enlightenment rationality is used to justify spatial conquests by global capitalists. These intellectuals are particularly well positioned to confront the issues posed by neoliberal discourse and developmental strategies in part because China's search for modernity was shaped from the start by the historical context of imperialist expansion and a crisis in capitalism. The legacy of socialist egalitarianism in popular thought, coupled with the increasing influence of market-embedded activism, is starting to reverse the tide of indiscriminate ecological and heritage destruction that characterized China's first two decades of postsocialist urban development. The phenomenon of public-minded artists and intellectuals enacting social critique via commercial venues is itself constitutive of a new urban cultural aesthetics informing urban governance. Because urban development dominates questions of global sustainability, Chinese intellectual inquiry now extends beyond saving the nation (*jiuguo*) to saving the world from its present untenable developmentalism.

In the second section of this volume I explore how the city, and how specific cities, figure in the contemporary cultural imagination, as aesthetic depictions are often at odds with portrayals by sociologists or urban geogra-

phers. For example, while the scholar Paul Knox argues that global cities have more in common with each other than with features of their own state, Wang Anyi's literary evocation of Shanghai contrasts that city with the dominant, male-gendered, political culture represented by Beijing, rather than with other global cities. Again, while geographers such as Victor Sit argue that Beijing's recent development as a global city at the center of finance and corporate decisions mirrors its traditional role as the national center of communication and control, they fail to fully address the impact that capital, rather than political symbolism, is assuming in urban planning. Beijing writers, filmmakers, and artists depict the ruins predicated on development, protesting the commercial exploitation of traditional culture while appropriating market devices for their ends. Although prevailing theories of globalization continue to portray cities as spaces of cultural homogenization where place and community are disappearing, most cities are characterized not so much by homogeneity as by unevenness in places which anchor concrete social, political, and spatial projects. The disparate urban aesthetics of China's two major cities—Beijing as a space for performing identity, Shanghai as a space to be consumed—arise from distinct local urban histories and spatial forms that produce unique cultural identities. For example, urban aesthetics fostered by Internet literature (*wangluo wenxue*)—which includes conventional literary works uploaded to cyberspace and writings enabled by technology (such as hyperlink-packed articles, and material written specifically for posting on the Internet)—promote nationwide fantasies of the *xiaozi*, or "petty bourgeois" urban consumer.[9] Yet the use of local dialects and region-specific terms in online rap music, blogs, and literature continues to promote local urban identities.

In addition to examining cultural production that features the city as subject, I analyze works that portray the subject in the city. In the third section of this book I draw on urban sociology, psychoanalytic theory, and philosophy to query how urban subjectivities are produced by—and produce—urban space. Urban subjectivity in the fiction of the late 1990s is closely associated with the flux of metropolitan crowds, patterns of destruction and urban renewal, altered economic configurations, and the introduction of new technologies of transportation, communication, and socialization. In a rapidly transforming metropolis, the "walking through the city" so vaunted by de Certeau becomes, for some, less an exercise in staking spatial claims than the gendered experience of melancholy-inducing loss. The persistent metaphor of "flying" invokes a sense of breathtaking freedom and empowerment in some works, reckless speed and rootless disorientation in

others. The waning influence of the work unit (*danwei*) and local street committee (*jiedao banshichu*), which were the socialist organizational mechanisms that had once circumscribed nearly all forms of urban life, provoked widespread reflection on autonomy, as urbanites came to make their own decisions about livelihood and lifestyle. The fiction of the 1990s attends in particular to the formation of the moral subject and new forms of citizenry as the logic of the marketplace supplants earlier ethical and regulatory paradigms. These narratives query the ethics of market utilitarianism in the wake of the radical deconstruction of the moral dictates of Confucianism, May Fourth Enlightenment, and Maoist socialism. The late twentieth century was a transitional period characterized by postrevolutionary dystopia and urban ambivalence, indicative of residual identifications with rural forms of social organization.

In the past decade social scientists, historians, and geographers have produced an impressive array of detailed English-language scholarship on economics, sociology, planning, architecture, and housing reforms in the new Chinese city.[10] I offer an aesthetic dimension to these historical and sociological studies. My approach is informed, in part, by interdisciplinary methodologies in Chinese-language scholarship which more broadly characterize urban culture.[11] In the growing English-language scholarship on Chinese urban fiction, cinema, and art, this volume is distinguished by its close attention to the built environment, offering a sustained analysis of cultural production relative to new material, economic, intellectual, and psychic forms of organization in the postsocialist city.[12] This study aims to situate postsocialist Chinese urban aesthetics within a nexus of local and global economic and intellectual trends that inform literary, cultural, and urban studies more generally. For example, it identifies the emergence of cultural studies in Chinese universities as a form of urban aesthetics, whereas few studies of Chinese critical inquiry focus on the city.[13]

A historical overview of the shifting connotations of the city in the cultural imagination of modern China may be useful. Perhaps the most remarkable cultural change wrought by new identifications with urban market values is in relation to China's unique experience of modernity, in particular, that experience governed by the ubiquitous question "whither China?" This question, which has plagued Chinese intellectuals since the mid-nineteenth century, may very well become irrelevant in the near future. Not in the real sense—as an epistemological inquiry the question of China's fate is more pressing than ever—but as a philosophical hermeneutic guiding everyday life. Consider, as a minor but telling example, the

Tourists pose in front of Olympic venues, proud to be on an equal footing with other nations. Beijing, 2008. Photo by author.

demeanor of the Olympic track star Liu Xiang, in 2004, after each qualifying stage of the 110 meter hurdles event. The Shanghai native breezily dismissed innuendoes by the Chinese media that he might feel the burden of becoming the first Asian male to medal in a short-distance track event. Instead of expressing cautious optimism about his success in the qualifiers, he affected an air of blithe confidence. While undoubtedly patriotic, Liu Xiang's drive for success, like that of many in his generation, derives as much from his personal goals as from his desire to gain glory for the nation. Such cosmopolitanism is also exemplified by Wang Liang, a twenty-nine-year-old Beijing native and principal oboist for the New York Philharmonic, who expressed genuine shock to learn that people identified him as "Chinese" before "musician": "The thing I don't understand is why it should make a difference. I am a Chinese guy when I look in the mirror, but I'm a world citizen of music."[14] Among many young urban Chinese there is a sense of being modern, a taken-for-granted quality embedded in everyday thinking and behavior. Marx's characterization of China as the "sick man of Asia" is defunct. The schizophrenic inferiority-superiority complex epitomized by the prominent writer Lu Xun's depiction of the

Chinese national character in "Ah Q" is replaced with a prevailing sense that one is a member of a global community of modern urbanites, that one is on an equal footing with other nations and cultures. This is not to suggest that nationalism is on the wane in the People's Republic of China— far from it—but rather that its valences are shifting in relation to alternative narratives of identity.

China today is a hybrid society where traditional agricultural practices coexist with postindustrial cities that coordinate worldwide production and consumption, where state-run institutions and private enterprises operate side by side in most sectors and regions. Older Chinese who have lived most of their lives dominated by a "native soil" (*xiangtu*) mentality have a mixed sense of fascination with, and hostility toward, the spatial, social, economic, and political mutations within their cities. The literary critic Li Jiefei speaks for many when he discusses the unanticipated "raising of [his] urban consciousness" in the 1990s.

> From my personal history I had no knowledge of anything outside the city, but that doesn't mean I knew the city. That confused me and I began questioning this. The city had failed to inspire me even during the 1980s —I never gave it a second thought. For years I simply had no incentive to reflect on the city. After consideration I realized that my only impressions of the "city" had been formed by watching films set in New York, Rome, London, Tokyo, or Hong Kong. But in 1993 and 1994 I suddenly became fascinated with urban space. I began to pay attention to the city landscape and urban events. Better put, the city started to change in such a way that I *had* to notice it. In the second half of the 1990s the trends in literature seemed to support my observations. Of all the new literature written since 1995, probably 80–90% is on the topic of the city. This is not to say that rural literature is dying out, but that the real vitality is clearly to be found in urban literature.[15]

The predominantly rural aesthetic featured in much of the cultural production of the 1980s—Fifth Generation film, root-seeking and avant-garde literature, and post-Mao pop art—represented place not chiefly for what it was, but for what it signified. By the 1990s, however, the city had become a subject in its own right, examined without recourse to rural values or national allegories. This altered mentality is encapsulated, in Qiu Hua-dong's novel *Yingyan* (Fly eyes, 1998), by a character who insists that "we need to return to our roots."[16] She is not referring to the countryside imagined by root-seeking writers and artists in the 1980s; rather, this new

transplant to the capital concludes that her "roots" are in Beijing. The postrevolutionary generation that comes of age in the city feels itself to be firmly ensconced in the metropolis.

The rejection of metaphors of the nation-state, the main aesthetic strategy from the May Fourth period until the 1980s, is a key aspect of postsocialist urban aesthetics.[17] To understand the significance of the radical *absence* of nation-state metaphors in the urban aesthetics I analyze, it is necessary to briefly review how these images played out in the cultural geopolitics of national identity in modern China. It was to an earlier generation of urbanites that Fei Xiaotong addressed his classic account of Chinese society, *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (Rural China, 1947).[18] In it, he uses the rural-urban contrast as a rhetorical device to enable his urban readers to understand their cultural roots, long since severed. Fei characterizes fundamental aspects of Chinese society in relation to its uniquely rural features, in opposition to Western culture, which equates civilization with the metropolis. Although Fei's account exaggerates the contrast, cultural historians have long pointed out the etymological distinctions between Western and Chinese notions of the city. The English term *city* is derived from the Latin *civitas* (city-state), closely associated with *civilization*, whereas the term *country* is derived from *contra* (against, opposite side), referring to land which is set off from the observer. The closest approximation to a city in ancient China was the walled town seat (*guo*) at the head of a fief during the early Zhou dynasty. Frederick Mote points out that while the walled town may have represented civilization in that it was an island surrounded by hostile peasantry, the sharp division into distinct urban and rural civilizations disappeared in China altogether following the breakup of the Zhou dynasty. Rather, geographic and social mobility was achieved very early in Chinese history, a fact which "must be related to the existence of an urban-rural continuum, both as physical and as organizational realities, and as an aspect of Chinese psychology."[19]

The lack of any single great urban center strengthens awareness of rural China. Mote asserts that "the rural component of Chinese civilization was more or less uniform, and it extended everywhere that Chinese civilization penetrated it. It, and not the cities, defined the Chinese way of life. It was like the net in which the cities and towns of China were suspended."[20] Chinese cities were never separate and discrete from the rural areas that supported them. Both rich people and poor often moved to the city and later returned to villages. Inside the cities, social structures were often arranged along the lines of native place and common dialect, which helped

reinforce ties to rural origins. Thus the Chinese terms for *city* and *country* refer to various levels of activity or administration on an urban-rural continuum. Furthermore, these terms have taken on affective associations which are the reverse of those in the West. In his study of early-twentieth-century urban literature and film, Yingjin Zhang points out that *cheng* (walled administrative city), *zhen* (unwalled market town), and *shi* (market) are terms which denote the more impersonal functions of administration or commerce, as opposed to the term *xiang* (an administrative unit ranking between county and village), a word which has strong personal connotations when used in combination such as *xiangtu* (native soil) and *xiangsi* (homesickness). On the other hand the term *shimin* (city dweller), far from implying the sense of the English word *civilized*, became a derogatory term used in phrases such as *xiao shimin* (petty urbanite) or *shikuai* (Philistine), "connoting a contempt on the part of the speaker for the 'lower' taste the majority of city dwellers display in their everyday practices."[21]

If an urban-rural continuum best describes the relationship between city and country for most of China's history, this continuum was disrupted at the approach of the twentieth century; the reasons for this schism remained under dispute. A widespread view, which informed Mao's opinion of cities as "parasitic," was that the pronounced polarization between urban and rural occurred after the Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60), due to the establishment of treaty ports, cities whose development resulted solely from Western exploitation and at the expense of the hinterlands.[22] Rhoads Murphey concurred that treaty ports never built effective ties with the hinterland, but merely drained the provinces of goods for export abroad, to the detriment of national self-esteem: "London and New York stock exchange reports were more important in Shanghai than news from Sichuan or Hunan. Treaty ports never functioned as an operative part of a larger system, and many Chinese suffered from foreign arrogance, treated as inferior or 'uncivilized.' "[23] Indeed, the conventional Western view held that Shanghai had been merely a fishing village prior to its opening to the West, in 1843, and that its subsequent development as a treaty port incorporated it into the modern world to the benefit of the nation as a whole. Ernest Hauser, for example, who wrote "Shanghai: City for Sale," a regular series in the *New York Times* in the 1920s and 1930s, promulgated such views by stating that "when it came into English hands Shanghai was a third-rate market town."[24] While this idea has been thoroughly discredited, its stereotype persists, even in Shanghai's contemporary promotional literature. A recent feature on Pudong quotes a foreign investor who states, "Shanghai

is solidly based, and in addition it has the *blessed virgin land* of Pudong. It is rare for a big city to have such a large area of *exploitable land*. This will undoubtedly make it attractive to investors."[25] The fact that the Shanghai municipal government welcomes such imperialist rhetoric recalls Rey Chow's argument that processes of global commodification continue to inform discourses of ethnicity, as China gladly offers its physical capital (labor and land) to the West in order to secure better trade agreements in the international marketplace.[26]

Other images of cities emerged as well. Rather than accepting that Shanghai, for example, was a city bred exclusively of Western influence, which either greatly contributed to or irreparably damaged China's attempts at modernization, subsequent historical scholarship argues along other lines. Some scholars consider Shanghai to be representative of an "other China" which has always existed as a marginalized sector alongside the dominant, rural, and bureaucratic tradition resuscitated under the Nationalist Party and later under Mao.[27] The historian Li Tiangang, on the other hand, contests the idea of Shanghai as "other," stating that "if one must think in terms of centers and margins Shanghai has to be in some senses situated near the center," given its location in Jiangnan, the most developed cultural area of the Ming and Qing dynasties.[28] Characterizations of Shanghai as "marginal," says Li, erroneously insist on rigid dichotomies either between China and the West, or between the provinces and the coast. In addition to its complex fusion of Eastern and Western culture, he argues, Shanghai must be understood in terms of its larger situation in a network of Jiangnan towns and cities where market economies had flourished since the Song dynasty, creating cultural differences between commercial practices in the south, with its mix of high and low culture, and the officialdom of the north. This is the way that Wang Anyi understands Shanghai as well, conveying its "essence" in her novel *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* in terms of its long-standing contrast with northern official culture, rather than as an inauthentic, exotic Western creation.

Even if intricate ties between city and countryside existed prior to the twentieth century, the cultural and economic gaps between former treaty ports and rural locales, particularly during the pre- and post-Mao eras of decentralized economic growth, became greatly exacerbated during that century. In the wake of Western infiltration the concept of the city became increasingly problematic in China, acquiring a number of predominantly negative qualities. Like the long-standing anti-urban tradition in India, which derives from the same anti-imperialist roots, anti-urbanism in China

assumed political as well as cultural priority. In 1927 Zhou Zuoren ridiculed Shanghai culture in his essay "Shanghai qi" (Shanghai style), reasoning that Shanghai was a "culture of compradors, hooligans, and prostitutes, fundamentally deprived of rationality and elegance."[29] In 1934 another Beijing-based writer, Shen Congwen, culminated a year-long series of cultural debates between *jingpai* (Beijing-style) writers and *haipai* (Shanghai-style) writers by lambasting the latter for their crass opportunism.[30] And in 1946 Fei Xiaotong barely conceals his resentment toward compradors in treaty ports that "live in, and take advantage of, the margin of cultural contact. They are half-caste in culture, bilingual in speech, and morally unstable. They are unscrupulous, pecuniary, individualistic, and agnostic, not only in religion, but in cultural values."[31] It is not coincidental that these provocative comments were penned by Beijing intellectuals during the two decades in which Shanghai had attained the height of its cultural glory. They reflect, among other things, anxieties about Beijing cultural identity, as the national center of culture shifted to Shanghai and the capital shifted to Nanjing, in 1928. Similarly, the marginalization of intellectuals under the commodification of culture in the 1990s resulted in a desperate attempt to mine the legacy of Chinese tradition in hopes of regaining a humanist spirit that had been "lost" in urban fiction and film. Those writers esteemed as advocating humanist spirit amid the cultural "ruins in the wilderness" include Zhang Chengzhi, Zhang Wei, and Shi Tiesheng, whose spiritual narratives were invariably set in rural locales.

In addition to the fear of cultural pollution, the fact that treaty ports were dominated by industry and trade leads Yingjin Zhang to conclude that early-twentieth-century Chinese cities underwent a recategorization from that of continuum to that of dichotomy: "On the one side is the traditional 'administrative city' (like Beijing) where space is highly managed and where politics and culture prevail, and on the other side is the modern 'economic city' (like Shanghai) where time becomes an increasingly important factor and where industry and trade dominate."[32] Although Republican Beijing was a large metropolis, Zhang situates it "in the middle of the urban-rural continuum," as its lifestyle, architecture, and aura reflected those of the traditional Chinese city. He concludes that in Beijing, with its emphasis on nature, traditional rural values prevail in its residents' mentalities. In such essentials as design, materials used, style, and ornamentation, Chinese urban structures were indistinguishable from rural structures, and "the typical Beijing '*sihe yuan*' (a compound of four houses built around a courtyard) bears little difference from a typical country house in

that both are one-story, spacious, natural, and accessible to interpersonal communication."[33] Rather than simply indicating a certain population density, the "urban" that dominated early-twentieth-century cultural debates referred primarily to the China of the treaty ports—to a China that was changing, either by corrupting Chinese patterns or by rejecting them altogether in favor of adopting an artificial Westernized society. Such polemics cast the urban as inauthentic, implying that rural China was a metaphor for genuine Chinese society.

Although the notion of the modern city remained suspect in the Chinese cultural imagination, the pace of urban change increased dramatically in the twentieth century; to interpret the cultural aesthetics of the contemporary Chinese city one must trace its material and social development in addition to understanding its history as a cultural construct. Piper Rae Gaubatz describes how the historic structure of cities was eroded by the abandonment of traditional institutions that accompanied the fall of the Qing dynasty, by the rapid introduction of foreign methods of building and city planning, and by the need for urban change to accommodate the implementation of modern transportation systems such as automobile and rail transport.[34] During the Republican Era "the points and lines of urban China grew and thickened," and "one sign that cities had come to exist as a separate category of thought, policy, and culture [was that] municipal studies emerged as a scholarly and administrative discourse."[35] As urban residents became consumers of public services and private housing, their "urbanite" (*shimin*) consciousness was raised, the new media providing outlets for expressing opinions on urban design. As early as 1912 a newspaper editorialist blamed the "mentality of tearing down walls" (*chaicheng de sixiang*) on "great political reformers" who believe that "because a dictatorial form of government has been overthrown, nothing in China that is old may be left standing."[36] This historical perspective highlights that the incredible destruction of urban fabric today is not only a function of global capital, but of longstanding practices appropriated by new Chinese regimes attempting to forge their own symbols.

Chinese life under socialism also privileged urban modernization, although in a highly regulated and circumscribed manner. Cities, according to Communist Party ideology in the 1940s, were to serve the people and the economic objectives of "New China" as productive entities that accelerated the growth of industrial output. The economic activities of cities were to support the population of the country, and the city as a social system would be leveled, with the stratification of neighborhoods eliminated in favor of

classless spatial structures. Differences between countryside and city were to be reduced, and the frivolous urban activities associated with high rates of personal consumption and lavish living were to be expunged. Mao especially reviled the commercial, trading, and service activities associated with capitalist market economies. His legacy at death remained champion of the rural, his victory based on "encircling the cities from the countryside," his revolutions aimed at leveling urban-rural distinctions, his campaigns enforcing the reeducation of urban elite by the peasantry. Mao on the one hand called for his comrades to learn about the management of the urban economy and, on the other hand, feared that urban amenities would corrupt the spirits of revolutionaries like "sugar-coated bullets."[37]

Although the Chinese Communist Party tried to adjust its attitude toward cities after it attained the power to rule the country, the disdain for large, sophisticated cities was clearly revealed by the categorization of most metropolises as "consumer cities," where urban life was perceived as parasitic and unhealthy. A major tenet of Maoist socialism was that cities be cast in the mold of producers, rather than of consumers living off the surplus of the rural economy. Heavy industry was viewed as the sign of economic strength and consequently received the largest allocations of capital through the state plan, with urban infrastructure, particularly urban housing, remaining vastly underfunded. In the dictum "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" (1957), Chairman Mao censures cities as parasitic and consumption-oriented, a characterization with potent ideological force in evolving party policy on city development. While Shanghai's industrial output was the largest in the nation, for example, 90 percent of its enterprise earnings went to the central government, leaving the municipality perennially cash-poor. By 1982, due to the growth in urban population and lack of investment in housing stock, nearly half of all urban Chinese families had inadequate housing, and one-fourth were virtually homeless, with married couples forced to squeeze into parents' apartments or to live separately in work-unit dormitories. These abysmal conditions set the stage for the unprecedented speed at which housing and city centers transformed in the 1990s, in what Rem Koolhaas has called a "maelstrom of modernization," which has led to the creation of a completely new, and still evolving, urban substance.

During the first half of the 1950s, hundreds of thousands of professionals and workers were relocated from older industrial cities to new key cities (*zhongdian chengshi*) planned as important producer cities. Shanghai "ceased to be a 'world city' with diverse functions and became instead an

industrial workhorse for a plan-bound economy."[38] The Ministry of Construction Engineering, established in 1952, took charge of building new cities and decreed that Beijing was to be restructured from a traditional cultural and administrative city into a heavy industrial city. The imperial North-South axis shifted to a socialist East-West axis in Beijing's urban structures. Under the socialist slogan "eliminate the old in order to build the new" (*pojiu lixin*), ancient city walls and buildings nationwide were relentlessly torn down to make way for new structures: "Nearly one-fifth of the existing buildings and dwellings in Taiyuan and Lanzhou were taken down to make way for new construction, although these buildings were still in good condition."[39] From 1954, when rental fees for land usage were waived, to 1984, when they were restored, land was considered free resource rather than a commodity, and large-scale industry developed haphazardly, without the coordination of urban planning. Jieming Zhu points out that it was "not uncommon to see factories located in a city's central business district, even in the 1980s in Shanghai. . . . [L]and squandering was prevalent, and many [key cities, such as Lanzhou, Luoyang, and Harbin] uneconomically adopted great squares in their city plans."[40] The excessive land supply in such "new industrial cities" contrasted sharply with the parsimonious land-use plans applied to "old industrial cities," those traditional manufacturing bases denounced as "consumer cities" by Mao. Socialist monumentality, where "bigger" is deemed "better," continues to dominate municipal design in China, to alienating effect.

Despite the fact that socialist modernization relied on urban industrialization and that most PRC leaders and cadres moved to the cities, during the Maoist era ideological identity was planted firmly in the countryside, its cultural values fundamentally informed by the customs of rural society. Mao Zedong's Yan'an talks, in 1942, formalized the primacy of rural literature and other cultural arts for the next four decades, as he mobilized intellectuals to "go down to the countryside" (*xiaxiang*) to carry out cultural work in direct contact with the rural masses. Mao also called for arts whose "source" (*yuan*) derived from "national forms," as opposed to following the "current" (*liu*) of foreign influences.[41] What had begun as cultural debates in the 1930s between the nativist aesthetics of *jingpai* writers and the cosmopolitan *haipai* became explicitly politicized in favor of indigenous forms with rural content. The rare literary depiction of the city during the Maoist period, such as in Zhou Erfu's *Shanghai de zaochen* (Shanghai dawn, 1958), is fanatically intent on depriving the urban space of its capitalistic functions (Zhou's novel concludes with the entrepreneurs donating all of their capital

Socialist monumentality. Shanghai University Baoshan campus (est. 1994), 2006.
Photo by author.

to the peasants, as their infrastructure has collapsed). It is only in the late 1970s that remnants of a merchant economy are reintroduced in literature, and then only cautiously, in terms of a town rather than a metropolis, such as in Gu Hua's *Furong zhen* (A town called Hibiscus, 1979).

For all the symbolic rebuilding that followed the collapse of the Qing dynasty and that continued under Mao, the material expansion of Chinese cities and destruction of historic fabric was greatest during Deng Era decentralized urban reforms, when market mechanisms were introduced into urban development, and cities accelerated the replacement of their "old and dilapidated housing," the vast bulk of which were located in the cities' historic centers.[42] The neorealist urban fiction, gritty documentaries, and "Sixth Generation" urban film produced concurrent to such material developments convey an immediate sense of the complex interactions between spatial configurations and subjectivity. Two of the earliest post-Mao urban novels, Fang Fang's *Fengjing* (Landscape, 1987) and Liu Heng's *Hei de xue* (Black snow, 1988), set in traditional neighborhoods in, respectively, Wuhan and Beijing, express deep-seated ambiguity about modernity relative to topological change. The Beijing author Chen Jiangong claims that in reorienting Beijing's visual landscape from horizontal courtyard houses to vertical high-rises, municipal leaders have engendered "a city where it's

impossible to find a spot to hang up one's birdcage."[43] The Beijing gentleman and his birds, the shadow-puppet plays, the bathhouse culture, the cricket fights, the "rice-sprout" dances, and other traditional urban hobbies had virtually disappeared by the late 1990s for, as a character in Zhang Yang's film *Xizao* (Shower, 1999) states, "to raise crickets you need to live close to the earth." These sentiments are further examined by the aesthetics professor Cheng Xiangzhan, who draws on Kevin Lynch's theory of urban elements to analyze profound cultural differences between the village and city image ("urbanization"), the traditional and modern city image ("modernization"), and the Western and Chinese city image ("globalization"). In one example, Cheng analyzes Lynch's element of "path" in relation to "major roads" (*dalu*) in Chinese villages and traditional cities, where they are sites for inauspicious activities, such as funeral processions, which are conducted on public routes so as to not contaminate private space. Yet, as lanes and alleyways are destroyed in traditional cities so are their sacred spaces, leaving taboo forms to all but define the postsocialist city.[44]

In addition to the extreme makeovers of urban landscape and housing during the Reform Era, the privatization of Chinese enterprises, and concomitant debilitation of the socialist work unit, is a key contributor to the new cultural logic of China's postsocialist urban space, as increasing numbers of individuals become responsible for their own livelihood and lifestyle. The work unit had comprehensively circumscribed urban life under socialism by regulating, controlling, and providing for its members. Lu Feng indicates that the work unit functions much like a lineage or clan organization: it exercises patriarchal authority over members; the responsibility of individuals to the group is more important than individual rights; the group is responsible for the care of its members; relations are based on connections (*guanxi*); public opinion and moral condemnation forces individuals to adhere to accepted norms of conduct.[45] The postsocialist fiction and cinema analyzed in the present study reveal that in the absence of the regulation provided by the state-owned work unit, the individual is afforded so much autonomy that he is almost at a loss. Not only must he determine his daily routines and coordinate his social activity, but with the deterioration of ethical norms inherent in socialism it becomes incumbent on him to develop an entirely new value system.

With the increase in entrepreneurialism and rural-to-urban migration given the loosening of certain restrictions on the *hukou*, or household-registration system, Chinese society is reorganizing as a class system based on wealth, rather than maintaining its "caste system" composed of urban

and rural residents.[46] Just as "the Dutch, more than anyone else, made making money respectable" during the mercantile modernity of the seventeenth century, the Chinese, under accelerated market reforms in the 1990s, "became willing to state openly that the reason they worked so hard was for financial gain, no longer considering it immoral to do so."[47] Commercial advertising began to blatantly flaunt class difference. For example, in 1994, an advertisement for Kangxing Park, an exclusive complex in southwest Shanghai, directly appealed to elitism via economic status by linking success to desirable professions: "A paradise for successful entrepreneurs, scientists, and artists, the key to the main gate of Kangxing Park will be the symbol of a successful man [*chenggong renshi shenfen*]."[48] The ubiquitous use of the phrase "successful man" in advertising came under attack in a series of articles by Leftist intellectuals such as Cai Xiang and Wang Xiaoming who argued, following Althusser's notion of ideology, that promoting the myth of the "successful man" serves to mask the social realities of the widely divergent classes.[49] In the past decade Chinese intellectuals have reengaged class analysis, not merely as a way to remind the party of its socialist roots, but to stem what many consider immanent social threats posed by vastly increasing gaps in income levels, sanctioned under the umbrella of "modernization."[50]

Writers, filmmakers, and artists have also been probing the class contradictions inherent in China's "urbanization" and "modernization" rhetoric, starting with neorealist fiction and art in the 1980s. Powerful paintings, photographs, performance, documentaries, and installation art have contrasted prevalent forms of glitzy urban "renewal" with the government's irrational inattention to a livable urban infrastructure. Neorealist film, documentary, and fiction have tended to focus on neglected spots and isolated individuals in the modernizing city. These works eschew the didacticism that characterizes earlier (critical and socialist) realist aesthetics in the PRC, while still enacting a powerful social and political critique. Ban Wang insists that film aesthetics featuring the fraying social fabric of the city "make us share with the characters an unabridged, prolonged interval in their daily life and force us to take a long, hard, estranged look at the space they move in, until the space's intrinsic, unredeemed, untold banality and triviality leaves an indelible imprint in our consciousness."[51] As one of several prevalent aesthetic strategies in the postsocialist era, neorealism challenges commonsense assumptions about the efficacy of modernization. While the documentary realism that typifies much postsocialist urban cultural production shares a drive to address anxieties relative to dislocation, most

artists deconstruct the present with a conspicuous absence of nostalgia. The fact that so many unique urban forms and their corresponding life-styles have been indiscriminately uprooted in Chinese cities, compounded by the urgent and understandable need to modernize, has resulted in cultural production best characterized by what Ackbar Abbas, drawing on the work of Paul Virilio, has termed an "aesthetics of disappearance." The renewed preoccupation with "reality" in urban aesthetics, in addition to its function as counter-Maoist discourse, can also be attributed to a rising skepticism about the massive commercialization of culture and about the drive by the transnational cultural industry to turn reality into simulacra. In contrast, the new realism engages with the neglected, concealed strata of the city, spurning the portrayal of perfect bodies and venues in commercial ads as much as it rejects the idealized heroes and vibrant settings of social-ist realism.

To analyze the synergies of global capital, class distinctions, and realism in contemporary urban aesthetics, the three sections of this volume each illuminate one aspect of how the postsocialist city functions in the cultural imagination. In part I I consider the question of urban image-making in relation to urban design, providing historical background on urban plan-ning and architecture in postsocialist China, and analyzing salient aspects of cultural debates relevant to urbanization. The frenzied and often oppor-tunistic development of cities in China today is creating social and political ruptures to which literary and visual artists are particularly sensitive. Ed-ward Soja and Henri Lefebvre both tend to theorize the production of space to the exclusion of place, yet a primary source of modern ambiguity derives precisely from the merger of these two processes, in what Peter Taylor calls the "place-space tension" between the producers of space and the makers of place. In part I I theorize dynamics underlying this tension.

In chapter I I discuss dynamics between three decades of urban-planning practices and urban art which conveys cultural sentiments running counter to official discourse on Chinese urbanism. After addressing the particular challenges posed by the urban question in China today, I examine works from collaborative exhibitions that have fostered dialogue between artists and architects on contemporary Asian urbanism, such as "Cities on the Move," the Vienna Secession exhibit of 1997. These works expose contradic-tions inherent in the speed of demolition and urban renewal and seek resolution to these problems. Even as experimental artists depict a city that erases individual and cultural identity under global capitalism, experimen-

tal architects attempt solutions that enable culturally specific urban practices and provide aesthetic continuity despite the rapid demolition of new structures due to shifting market priorities for space. They are creating innovative designs as alternatives both to kitsch, with its stock emotions and instantly identifiable themes, and to a global architecture devoid of local characteristics. In hastily transforming cities where architectural images are rapidly reproduced and circulated, experimental Chinese architects focus more on the spatial and temporal effects than on the monumentality of the architectural edifice. In chapter 2 I discuss debates over urban aesthetics that emerged as the market increasingly defined cultural production. I trace the global and domestic impact of neoliberalism, to contextualize the cultural debate over the "loss of humanist spirit" in the 1990s and the birth of urban cultural studies in late-twentieth-century China as a means of recovering it. I attribute the rise of cultural studies to a Leftist rejection of Weberian specialization and depoliticization of the intellectual in an urban market economy.

The subsequent sections address three dimensions of the postsocialist "urban subject": the city as subject, urban subjectivity, and the subject as citizen. In part 2 I examine how China's two major cities are imagined in very different ways: Beijing as a space for performing identity, and Shanghai as a space to be consumed. The disparate aesthetics of these two major cities suggests their very different histories and characters. Shanghai, like Taipei and Hong Kong, is best described as a hybrid "glocal city," a city which attends simultaneously to the forces of globalization in identity formation and to what Roland Robertson describes as the reconstruction of "locality" in the same process. Beijing, on the other hand, is seemingly organic and unitary, identified with its long history as the imperial and national capital of an ancient civilization. Where the aesthetics of both cities converges is in their profound ambivalence vis-à-vis urban modernity.

In chapter 3 I discuss the Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo phenomena that engender a postsocialist *"xin jingwei"* ("New Beijing flavor"), informing an aesthetic which performs Beijing identity on behalf of the nation. After sketching the transformation of Beijing's urban fabric and demographics, I analyze the performance of postsocialist national identity in Qiu Huadong's novel *City Tank* (1996), Wang Xiaoshuai's film *Frozen* (1997), and late-twentieth-century works by conceptual and performance artists. Beijing cultural production of the 1990s exhibits a gradual shift away from preoccupation with conceptual conflicts between artifice and nature, tech-

nology and spirituality, modernity and tradition, West and East, to identity grounded in the hybrid effects of these cultural admixtures. In chapter 4 I examine a corpus of works—including the artist Shi Yong's *Shanghai Visual Identity Project* (1997–2007), the filmmaker Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2001), and the novelist Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (1996)—that reveal an aesthetics of simulacra. I trace how the post-Mao resurrection of the Shanghai dream of middle-class consumption exploded during the city's post-Deng transformation into virtual forms of consumption that find aesthetic expression.

In part 3 I question how subjectivity is produced by space, examining cultural aesthetics that portray not so much the external signs of the city as the city internalized in the consciousness of the individual; in other words, these works explore the psychic rather than material topology of the city. I scrutinize the production of subjectivity in relation to psychic theories of ego and gender, and the impact of market utilitarian ethics on everyday life and notions of urban citizenry. In chapter 5 I examine complex dynamics between urban space and the construction of subjectivity and gender in four novels set in Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing. Liu Heng's *Black Snow* (1988), Sun Ganlu's *Breathing* (1993), Chen Ran's *Private Life* (1996), and Mian Mian's *Candy* (2000) privilege an interiorized subjectivity where postsocialist urban history, memory, and space induce melancholy and loss, figured in relation to the gendered categories of the feminine, the homosexual, and the narcissist. Finally, in chapter 6 I analyze the narrative ethics in the urban fiction of the 1990s, wherein characters negotiate postsocialist ethical terrain defined by the utilitarian logic of the market. Novels by Qiu Huadong, Zhu Wen, and He Dun are dominated by one of the key questions debated by ethical philosophers: the relationship between individual morality and the social good. Although satisfactory ethical answers to their characters' foibles do not readily present themselves, these authors persistently probe a variety of thorny ethical issues dominating everyday life in postsocialist China.

During the course of this book I identify three major trends in postsocialist Chinese urban aesthetics. I suggest that despite neoliberal urban development's undeniable devastation of ecological systems and cultural heritage, it has also fostered new realms of agency by provoking creative solutions to urban development, new forms of critical engagement, and nascent civic governance. Chinese urban aesthetics (the practices of artists, intellectuals, and urban designers) increasingly underscore the importance of more holistic forms of design and intellectual inquiry that make explicit the

dynamics between scientific and economic theories and the ethical, social, and environmental resources that sustain them. Ultimately I suggest that as urban development dominates questions of global sustainability, Chinese urban aesthetics and the dilemmas posed by the postsocialist city extend beyond the historical modern dilemma of "whither China?"

Conceiving the Postsocialist City

Designing the Postsocialist City

Urban Planning and Its Discontents

1

> Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says
> when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but . . . only
> in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through
> the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so
> subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing.
>
> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Italo Calvino's classic montage on the character of cities opens with the eloquent insight that urban essence lies in the intangible. The aptly titled *Invisible Cities* suggests that a city is not so much its physical structure as the movements of its inhabitants, the impressions it imparts to its visitors, the odors and hums oozing from its cracks, its timeless pattern so subtle it can escape the termites' gnawing. Identifying the urban, embedded in but ultimately transcending the material, is the subject of this chapter. Defining the quality of the city has become one of the most pressing issues in China today, and it has global consequences. A civilization that has for millennia maintained a population that is nearly 90 percent rural, China's physical and cultural attachments to the soil are visibly transforming as its urban population moves into the majority by 2010.

To contextualize the roles of urban cultural studies, literature, film, and art in the modern urban landscape, I begin with a broad overview of the issues involved in urban development in China. I examine what Henri Lefebvre theorized as the "urban question" of late cap-