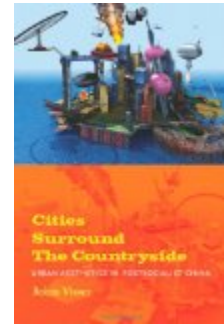


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Uneven Urban Aesthetics in Contemporary China

In *Cities Surround the Countryside*, Robin Visser investigates the transformation of Chinese urban aesthetics in the postsocialist period, a time in which, she contends, urbanization has become dominant. Tracking the manifestations of urbanization in fiction, cinema, visual art, architecture, and urban design, this study argues that the built environment has important political, social, and cultural implications. In part 1, Visser looks at urban design, architecture, and urban planning, theorizing the dynamics of a “place-space tension” (p. 20). Part 2 reads urban film, art, and literature to develop a comparison of Shanghai and Beijing, arguing that the Chinese urbanization is bringing about unevenness, not homogeneity. Part 3 looks at the relationship between space, urban aesthetics, and the production of subjectivity; in other words, it investigates the internalization of urban aesthetics within the consciousness of the individual. A plethora of well-reproduced images benefit the text.

In terms of periodization, Visser contrasts the new urban aesthetic that she finds with an earlier imperial urban-rural continuum, the May Fourth metaphors of the nation-state, and the rural aesthetic of the 1980s. Frederick W. Mote’s urban-rural-continuum thesis, which Visser reiterates, has been met with less consensus than is implied, however.[1] Visser, likewise, poses 1990s urban aesthetics as a break from the 1980s, when national allegories and a rural aesthetic in film and literature dominated. In the 1990s, by contrast, “the city had become a subject in its own right” (p. 9). Yet here we could note

that the peasant question returned along with national allegories since the new millennium, and discussions of urbanization are again linked to questions of rural values and the persistence of the peasant mode of life. One wonders if what Visser’s work registers, therefore, is a particular moment—the 1990s—or a more long-term trend. Visser cites figures suggesting that China will be 70 percent urban by 2030 (p. 28)—a figure that seems somewhat high. Like recent media remarks on the enormous “urban” population of Chongqing, what counts as urban is not an easy question to answer, and Visser notes that the definition of the urban in China is somewhat ambiguous (p. 33).

Chapter 1 maps the relationship between urban planning, China’s changing political economy, and urban art. Visser makes good use of ethnographic anecdote to attend to how the urban is lived and to the class dynamics of urban space, theorizing the rapidly changing urban landscape of destruction and creation with the help of Ackbar Abbas’s concept “aesthetics of disappearance,” in which the past is erased (p. 38). She notes the developing critique of the urban planning processes in China by professionals, citizens, and artists, the latter of which is the most detailed and theoretically elaborated in Visser’s account. Yet, tellingly, Visser notes that “by the twenty-first century Chinese experimental artists had moved from their highly marginalized position in Chinese society to center stage, largely due to their prominence in the international art market” (p. 76). As a form of critique,

therefore, the artists, too, are shaped by capitalist forces—the same could be said of the filmmakers described in the book. Visser argues that this has meant that they are “increasingly being seen in the city,” but how this process shapes the production of art, especially the critical art that is focused on, is less than clear from the discussion (p. 76).

Visser contextualizes Chinese urban planning and urban aesthetics within the context of twentieth-century Chinese history as well as the dynamics of capitalist restructuring—primarily the latter. While China is certainly integrated into global capitalism, the extent that the Chinese city is “neoliberal,” as Visser argues, is open to debate, even for the period of the 1990s, and she spends more time discussing the meaning of neoliberalism globally than she does for China (see chapter 2, for example) (pp. 32, 92). More work needs to be done on this difficult question. She also calls the economy “hybrid,” but goes into little detail as to how this actually operates in practice (pp. 5, 9). One wonders, for example, how a major development project with an “unlimited budget”—unlimited by the constraints of the profit motive—fits into the neoliberal model (p. 62). The actual urban decision-making process—opaque as it is in China—is likewise less discussed than seems necessary.

Focusing on Chinese critical inquiry, chapter 2 traces debates on neoliberalism and the “loss of humanistic spirit” in the 1990s, attributing the birth of urban cultural studies “to a Leftist rejection of Weberian specialization and depoliticization of the intellectual in an urban market economy” (p. 21). This is a nuanced account of the position of the intellectual in contemporary China—strongest in its discussion of Shanghai University’s Wang Xiaoming, whose influence marks the whole book—although at times the focus on the urban sphere seems to drop out. Also problematic is the naming of Chinese liberals “neoliberal,” eliding important differences in political position.

Chapter 3 looks at Beijing artists and writers, discussing Wang Shuo, Wang Xiaobo, and the “New Beijing flavor”; Qiu Huadong’s novel *City Tank* (1996) and Wang Xiaoshuai’s film *Frozen* (1997); together with conceptual and performance artists. All are placed alongside a discussion of the transformation of Beijing’s urban fabric. For Beijing artists, Visser argues, the city is a space to perform hybrid identities. Chapter 4 follows a similar format in its focus on Shanghai artists, writers, and filmmakers: Shi Yong’s *Shanghai Visual Identity Project* (1997–2007), filmmaker Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* (2001), and

novelist Wang Anyi’s *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (1996). Shanghai, unlike Beijing to which it is compared, is a cosmopolitan space to be consumed, producing an aesthetics of simulacra in which the city and the Shanghainese must constantly remake themselves as an international commodity. Visser’s Shanghai discussion shows the potential of her analysis as the subjects of that chapter better reveal the importance of the urban moment in their art, in part because Shanghai artists seem to focus more directly on the city as a city. It is her strongest chapter, and her discussion of Shi Yong is particularly enlightening.

Analyzing four novels set in Beijing, Shanghai, and to a lesser extent Shenzhen—Liu Heng’s *Black Snow* (1988), Sun Ganlu’s *Breathless* (1993), Chen Ran’s *Private Life* (1996), and Mian Mian’s *Candy* (2000)—chapter 5 examines the relationship between urban space, notions of privacy, and the construction of subjectivity and gender. Visser argues that postsocialist urban space produces feelings of alienation; that “characters regularly construct their own private utopias in order to offset the exterior chaos of the metropolis”; and that “this self-imposed isolation often results in psychopathic symptoms of melancholy, paranoia, and narcissism” (p. 227).

Also analyzing a set of postsocialist novels, chapter 6 looks at the intersection of narrative and ethics in the urban commercial context, arguing that “the intensely commodified post-Mao popular culture has challenged literary culture’s ability to suggest a distinct moral mission” (pp. 260–261). This chapter discusses the humanism-postmodernism debates of the 1990s, retreading some of the ground already covered in chapter 2, before it turns to analyze the novels of three writers: Qiu Huadong’s *Fly Eyes* (1998); Zhu Wen’s *What’s Trash, What’s Love* (1998); and He Dun’s *Hello, Younger Brother* (1993), *Life Is Not a Crime* (1993), and *I Don’t Care* (1993). The sharp contrast between Beijing and Shanghai of chapters 3 and 4 seems to washout in the last two chapters even though most of the novels discussed are set in those two cities.

Yet the Beijing-Shanghai comparison forms the backbone of the book, as important to chapter 2 on critical inquiry as it is to chapters 3 and 4. This highlights one of the limits of this work: the tight focus on Shanghai and Beijing as urban China obscures other forms of urban aesthetics that might be equally dominant within China. We could ask, for example, how would Visser integrate the cinematic work of Jia Zhangke into her argument? Most of Jia’s films take place away from the urban centers of Beijing and Shanghai, in county-level

towns, where, as Xudong Zhang notes, “socialist underdevelopment meets the onslaught of marketization.”[2] This calls into question the metaphor of Visser’s title, “cities surround the countryside.” In China, actual urbanization is taking place within county towns and even villages within the countryside. What are the aesthetics of that urbanizing China? The title metaphor also implies that it is only in the postsocialist period that the urban begins to dominate the rural, and Visser states that the pre-reform period was “organized around ... collectivist, agrarian values which ... dominated its urban socialist work units” (p. 33). While this did become a hegemonic view during the postsocialist period among urban intellectuals, it is not substantiated in the actual political and economic practices of the socialist period. This could

open a new line of questioning for this project. That said, Visser’s study develops a new perspective on critical inquiry and urban culture in the postsocialist period by situating them within the tension between place and space in a rapidly changing urban environment.

Notes

[1]. Mote argued that there was no strong division between urban and rural civilization during much of imperial Chinese history. See Frederick W. Mote, “The Transformation of Nanking, 1350-1400,” in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. William Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 101-154.

[2]. Xudong Zhang, “Poetics of Vanishing: The Films of Jia Zhangke,” *New Left Review* 63 (May-June 2010): 73.

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