

authors but an intellectual kinship with them that enables him to participate in the discourse as an ongoing pursuit, energized and articulated by a never-flagging *after*.

Klaus Hofmann

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***Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China.*
By Robin Visser. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. x + 362 pp.**

"Better City, Better Life" was the theme and slogan of the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, a city that has become postsocialist China's showcase city and window to (and on) the world. The host city was as exotic and attractive as the Expo itself to the visitors, many of whom hailed from rural areas of the country. As anyone who has been to Shanghai can attest, the transformation of Pudong—patches of farmland to the east of Shanghai proper (or Puxi)—over the past two decades (complete with a new landmark, the Oriental Pearl Tower) is nothing short of extraordinary. The 2008 Beijing Olympics ushered in what might be called city envy among mainland China's rural residents, as well as an onslaught of billboards with slogans that equate city life with "civilized" (*wenming*) ways of living. Behind the grand narrative of modernization are competing narratives about urbanization and rural development—untold, censored, repressed. Fueled by a new market economy, China has undergone rapid urban and social transformation since the 1990s, shifting to rapid urbanization from a predominantly agricultural society that viewed cities as parasitic sites that worked against "the norms of traditional Chinese ethics" (2). But whither China? How can one balance sustainability and urban planning, collectivity and individualism?

Robin Visser's *Cities Surround the Countryside* addresses these questions in a literary context. It is a welcome contribution to the production and reception of the city in contemporary Chinese cultural imagination. Like its predecessors, such as Yomi Braester's *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, Visser's book emphasizes contemporary developments in Beijing and Shanghai. However, Visser's study distinguishes itself as an ambitious project on a broad range of media and genres, from fiction, film, architecture, and visual art to urban design, with contemporary urban fiction as its focal point.

The book's case studies, framed by an introduction and a conclusion, are grouped in three pairs. Visser focuses on "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 . . . produce urban aesthetics" (4). Extensive work has been done on the economic and sociological aspects of such transformations, but Visser shows us the power of expressive art and narrative. Part 1, "Conceiving the Postsocialist City," identifies both the theoretical and historical foundations of the urban as a realm "embedded in but ultimately transcending the material" (27). Chapter 1 argues that, while a large Chinese population has been forcefully relocated and "urban Chinese will never again be rooted" (81), arts and literature can create "a sense of place through attention to lived, historical space" and can mitigate "the capitalist violence," or what Walter Benjamin calls the "mechanical reproduction," now prevalent in the global city (83). This, among other factors, is the reason that few forms of urban art celebrate urbanization (38). Chapter 2 lays the theoretical foundation and provides contexts for subsequent analysis of urban fictions, films, and artworks that "parody the manufacture of desire" and "reveal the barren ethical terrain on which urban modernity is constituted" (128). In reaction to explanations by Wang Xiaonong, Xudong Zhang, Gloria Davis, and other scholars, Visser turns to Chinese public intellectuals' reaction to urban consumerism in the context of cultural studies and neoliberal discourse. While some postmodern scholars may "celebrate popular urban culture as a democratizing influence" (116) and use cultural studies to legitimate ongoing market reforms, neoleftist scholars remain pessimistic about these reforms and do not believe that China is moving toward capitalist democracy. "[The] diversity of intellectual opinion," Visser writes, "is . . . an expression of the new urban consciousness in post-Reform China" (88).

Part 2, "The City as Subject," delineates how Beijing is imagined as "a space for performing identity," in contrast to Shanghai, "a space to be consumed" (21). Chapter 3 identifies how the boundary between high and low cultures is blurred in the "new Beijing flavor" (which "arose partially out of [the] nostalgia for the Beijing of the Republican Era" and "is best characterized by art conveying the effect of post-1949 developments on the contempo-

rary urban milieu" [134]), which is found in Qiu Huadong's novel *City Tank*, the Sixth Generation director Wang Xiaoshuai's film *Frozen*, and the performance, photographic, and installation artworks by Zhang Huan, Zhang Dali, and others. Visser argues that the literary, film, and visual artists based in the nation's capital engage in a self-perpetuating cycle of "perform[ing and reforming] the *nation*, rather than the global or personal" (133), because cultural production serves as "a site of resistance against the effects of global capitalism while simultaneously . . . expanding spaces for public dialogue and critique" (134). Chapter 4 follows with studies both of canonical works (Wang Anyi's novel *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, Lou Ye's film *Suzhou River*) and of works of interest that are rarely taught in Chinese literature courses (Shi Yong's decadelong *Shanghai Visual Identity Project*) but that are informed by the urban aesthetic of depoliticized and "de-revolutionized daily life" (179). Such works expose the narcissism besetting the Shanghai dream of middle-class consumerism.

Part 3, "The Subject in the City," concerns urban subjectivity in the light of psychoanalytic theory about melancholy and of Georg Simmel's urban sociology. In Liu Heng's *Black Snow* and Zhu Wen's *What's Trash, What's Love?* (set in Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing), alienated characters construct "their own private utopias in order to offset the exterior chaos of the metropolis," then gradually descend into melancholy, paranoia, and narcissism through their "self-imposed isolation" (227). Chapter 5 argues that "the privileging of privacy and interiority" and the melancholy in city narratives reveal "the discontinuity between socialist norms and utilitarian market realities" (253) and thereby become "alternate modes of empowerment" and tools to combat cultural loss (254). Chapter 6 addresses a tension in postsocialist China, namely, the perception that the Chinese tradition of regarding literature as a source of moral authority is under attack by "a market-driven popular culture often unmindful of moral mission" (256). With rapid urbanization came the demise of socialist work units or *danwei*, which in turn ushered in new ethical questions. Increased autonomy among urbanites compelled writers such as Qiu Huadong and He Dun to reexamine the tension "between individual authenticity and public ethics" (286). Should one indulge in hedonistic, materialist desires, or hang on to moral ideals in a world that is no longer hospitable to them? There are no easy answers, as Visser notes in the conclusion, and it is futile to predict the future paths of Chinese urban aesthetics. However, city designers, public intellectuals, and urban artists are adapting quickly to their changing cityscapes. They seem to be on a trajectory to move "beyond the censure of human failing to the fostering of human flourishing" (292).

While the rapid development of Chinese cities and the eradication of local cultures may seem a well-rehearsed story to those who are well-read in urban studies, the emerging "urban aesthetics of sociability" (293) and the capacity for self-reflection and revitalization among Chinese artists are both

surprising and encouraging. While certain key terms, such as *new Beijing flavor*, might have been more clearly defined for generalists (the failed etymological exercise in which the Chinese characters for *xiaoqu* [community] and *danwei* [work unit] are said to “prioritize the spatial over the social” [293] does not help, either), and while the sections on lesser-known works or on works not available in English translation may presuppose a knowledge of contemporary Chinese art, language, and literature, all readers can learn from these stories of cultural loss and market-driven moral decline, because, as Visser reminds us, “urban planners working in China will have more experience at solving global issues in urban design than anyone in the world, and their knowledge will shape future worldwide practices” (84).

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