

## 2006 Indiana University Roundtable on Post-Communist Public Spaces

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### Overview and Caveat

Let me begin by stressing how sprawling and dynamics is our assigned topic, how limited are my powers of observation, and how particularly unruly is my subject of public space in contemporary China. China is a continental nation with 1.3 billion inhabitants where real per capita incomes have quadrupled in twenty years and more than 150 million people have left their natal (usually rural) place to start new lives in unfamiliar (usually urban) surroundings in the past decade. Driving the movement of these many millions and shaping the rapid transformation of the built-environment and the meaning of public space is an accelerating process of re-commodification. I deliberately stress the fact that for China the key economic dynamic is not market transition but the return of markets after a relatively short period of de-commodification.

Historically China had one of the most fully marketized pre-modern economies and the most enduring centralized imperial bureaucracy. The concept and practice of a central capital city, usually walled and set along a north-south axis made public spaces remarkably legible and enduring in official ritual and everyday practice. Moreover, the imperial spatial hegemon was reproduced at lower levels of administrative government and even within the ancestor rites of the household. But even in eras of great imperial strength, public space was occupied and celebrated through commerce exchange.

During the thirty years of socialism between 1949 and 1979, the Leninist vision of the Communist victors of the civil war drastically reduced the possibilities for Chinese citizens, particularly those living in the tightly policed cities, to create an authentic self within public space. Radical decommodification encapsulated almost all urban residents into a cellularized urban landscape in which publicly owned workplaces upwardly linked to public bureaucracies regulated the rhythms and the horizons of life both on and off "the job." In many ways the re-commodification of land, labor, and capital since 1980 has destroyed the cellular economy with its sprawling reach of public power. But unlike most of the post-socialist world in Europe, China remains a communist party-state with coherent Leninist leadership and thus post-socialist spaces in China exist within the oversight and discipline of political monopolies and considerable police power.

While as an ideology communism no longer offers a clear blueprint, CP leadership systematically defends its monopolistic controls over the actual and symbolic use of public space. Although it lacks Bentham's central tower, Tiananmen remains a public space where systematic surveillance never lapses and the party-state vigilantly exercises its asymmetric powers to see without being seen.

Once beyond the Capital, however, concern and control over citizen activity in public areas relaxes and public space intermittently returns to "the public". In part, a general de-politicization

of everyday life has diversified the use and meanings of space, but in particular, the Party's tolerance --- even enthusiastic embrace--- of commercial culture and consumeristic freedoms has complicated the party's objectives. Within a diversified if chaotic commercial landscape, individuals and small groups have carved out multiple locations for unofficial sociability in public venues. In these spaces ---and across the temporal continuum of day and night, weekday and weekend--- there is a new freedom to develop loyalties that support ever more personal networks of exchange and reciprocity. There are thousands of compelling examples of the proliferation of such potentially invidious networks in commercial venues supported ---or ignored--- by party-state agents, but one of the most evocative examples comes from Purdue sociologist Fenggang Yang's description of Christian evangelicals who occupied one corner of McDonalds to run their "Timothy Training Courses," one table for each of the nine progressive lessons.<sup>1</sup> After the police discovered the Timothy Tables, they arrested the organizers on grounds of holding illegal religious gatherings and forced them to sign a pledge not to hold Bible study at that McDonalds. However, as one leader subsequently told Yang when he inquired how they would regroup: "there are dozens (of other McDonalds) in this city."<sup>2</sup>

With this one vignette, I am not arguing for the collapse of the socialist public and the liberating power of consumerism. On the contrary, I want to supply a vivid snapshot to illustrate my argument for the theoretical and methodological necessity of incorporating time into the study of public space. Particularly when one addresses post-socialist public spaces in a country where all land still belongs to the "state" and "the people" remain more virtuous than individual citizens, definitions of public space must allow for gatherings of the public that occur, persist, and can be repeated, but may leave no enduring edifice to mark the public space.

### **Fleeting Public Spaces**

Last year David Bray published a brilliant analysis built upon Foucault's genealogical method to explain the creation and decline of the enterprise communities (danwei) that characterized social space in urban China between the mid 1950s through the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Bray is most interested in explaining how the Chinese as opposed to the Soviet regime produced a collectively oriented subject. However, because he one of a few who have taken spatiality and spatial practice in China seriously, I want to bring him into our conversation. He, like most who write about modernity and space, stands theoretically and methodologically firmly within a Foucauldian tradition, and within that tradition he succeeds. I particularly like his summary of his initial analytic point of departure and emphasis on spatial practice:

"To analyze a particular regime of spatial practice, it is necessary to consider the logic and rationality that informs it, the particular spatial forms that it attempts to realize, as well as the historical and social context into which these interventions are made." (Bray: 12)

However, like Foucault, Bray never spoke with his subjects nor directly observed their lived experiences. He relied exclusively on the published text of architecture journals, urban planning

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<sup>1</sup> Fenggang Yang, (2005) "Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald's," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44(4):423-41.

<sup>2</sup> Yang (2005):423.

<sup>3</sup> David Bray, (2005) *Social Space and Governance in Urban China*, (Stanford" Stanford University Press)

documents, and the work of ethnographers. His understanding of social spaces, therefore, is necessarily anchored in the written word and even as he argues for the unpredictability of generational layering to explain the spatial construction of the urban subject, the account fails to capture or incorporate the dynamic through which space is marked public or private or allow for the possibility of multiple publics.

### **Methodologies: an epilogue**

In 1978, Murray Melbin wrote "Night as Frontier."<sup>4</sup> Melbin's theoretical assumption was that time could be occupied like space, and he created field experiments that subsequently confirmed his hypothesis that people's behavior toward strangers at night would resemble the sociability of the frontier than it would during the day. I first read Melbin's essay as I was analyzing family histories collected from interviews with Chinese refugees living in Hong Kong. I could not directly incorporate Melbin's insights in that analysis, but when fieldwork in China became possible, I could consider sociality, diurnality, and the spatial parameters of "public-ness."

I began trying to think systematically about the built environment and the boundary between public and private spaces in the mid-1980s.<sup>5</sup> In those years I spent several summers interviewing Shanghai women in their forties and fifties in their homes. Supervision was close, phones were public and all conversations were monitored. It was necessary to keep all notes on my person for weeks at a time, and anyone in an official capacity was asked to report to their superiors as to what I said and whom I had met. At one level, all space I traversed was public. But as I reflected on the experience of traveling for hours on city buses and passing in and out of hundreds of homes, I realized that time modulated and inflected the character of public spaces, and that at dusk and in the deep gloom of barely lit nighttime sidewalks, the public spaces of the night were polyvalent because the censoring "panopticon" was allowed to rest. In contemporary China, time still alters the character of public space and creates of necessary parameter of any research design.

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<sup>4</sup> *American Sociological Review* 43(3) (February 1978): 2-22.

<sup>5</sup> "My Mother's House," Pp. 88-100 in *Unofficial China* eds.Link, Madsen, Pickowicz (Westview)