China Urban: Ethnographies of Contemporary Culture

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For Sami—NC
For Chaya—CC
To my sisters, Kelley Gottschang and Michele Meisner—SG
In the spirit of sisterhood that carried this project, to my sweet sister Elizabeth Jeffery—8212; LJ
Editors—8217; Acknowledgments It has been an exciting and stimulating process to bring to fruition a project that began with a series of discussions among the editors and other anthropologists conducting field research in Beijing during the fall of 1995. Since those meetings, we have received intellectual, financial, and logistical support from numerous people and institutions. We want to especially thank Virginia Cornue for her participation in the formative stages of this project. The chapters in this volume were first presented at a workshop held on September 27-8217; 28, 1997, at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Financial support for the workshop was provided by a Pacific Rim Research Program workshop grant from the University of California Office of the President. Additional support came from the Department of Anthropology and the Center for Cultural Studies at UC Santa Cruz and the Center for Chinese Studies at UC Berkeley. The workshop would not have been possible without Cheryl Barkey’s assistance and support. In addition to the contributors in the volume, we would also like to thank Xin Liu, Hai Ren, Dawn Einwalter, and Virginia Cornue for their presentations at the workshop. The presenters benefited from the intellectual insights and suggestions of panel discussants: Ann Anagnost, Aihwa Ong, Lisa Rofel, and Mayfair Yang. Raoul Birnbaum, Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, and Bruce Larkin generously assisted in chairing the
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urbanization processes in 1990s China. An understanding of these changes also requires attention to larger questions raised by the economic reforms that began in 1978. With the spatial inequalities of reform measures in these last twenty years, the Chinese economy has become an ever more influential factor in the world economy. This has given rise to an increasingly visible overlap between constructions of global capitalism and the Chinese economy. The chapters in this volume illustrate that the current influx of transnational culture, capital, and people must be understood from within a cultural and economic framework more complex than the simple adoption of Euro-American neo-liberal capitalism. Four decades ago, Lefebvre, in writing about processes of urbanization then claiming the countryside of France, conceptualized the urban and the countryside as categories that include both imagination and practice rather than simply the notion of an urban society or life that infiltrates nonurban landscapes and ways of life through urbanization and other means (media, stories/myths, migration). It also insists on the cultural specificity of notions of the urban: in China, the urban is particularly framed through two deeply though differently embedded discourses, these being rurality and socialism. Mao Zedong extolled the virtues of rural life in contrast to the corruption of the city, a sentiment also expressed to varying degrees in elite Confucian ideologies, for instance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among landowning gentry (see Wakeman 1966; Skinner 1977; Mote 1977; Murphey 1984; and Whyte and Paris 1984). Based on the experiences of the peasant-fueled Chinese revolution, Maoist theory deviated from Marxism by identifying the peasants as leaders of the revolutionary struggler rather than ignorant masses beholden to the urban proletariat. Moreover, as Meisner suggests, implicit in Maoism was the association of the city with what is foreign and reactionary and the countryside with what is truly national and revolutionary. This theme, the recuperative power of the rural in nation building, prominent in nationalist ideologies elsewhere (Ferguson 1997), shaped a critique of Western imperialism and foreign occupation of Chinese territory (cf. Meisner 1982). The importance of rural China in establishing socialism played out in development policy as the CCP set up communes and industrialized the countryside in the late 1950s. In terms of contextualizing urbanity in relation to socialism, 1990s China presents a situation in which the dynamics between West and East, capitalism and socialism, are not easily categorized. Scholars of urbanization such as David Harvey have focused their analyses on global capitalism—a force characterized by an international division of labor, flexible production controlled by the transnational corporation, revolutions in communications and other technologies, and a shifting of national capital; said to be in the process of completely reshaping local cultural practices from labor and consumption to experiences of time and space (Harvey 1989; Lipietz 1986; Pred and Watts 1992; Jameson 1984). More recently, Asia’s emergence as an increasingly important sphere of global capitalism has necessitated a rethinking of the historical and geographic specificity of this dynamic (Frank 1997). Ong, for instance, has described the discourse on Asian capitalism as a paradigm shift in capitalism as the West knows it. Chinese modernities are new imaginaries and regimes of domination decentering Western hegemony in the global arena (1997a: 359). While these processes are visible in contemporary China, the material and social dimensions of capitalism and foreign consumer cultures are built within the cultural structures already established by Chinese socialism. This is true for both the state and ordinary individuals. The material in this book provides us with a means of going beyond privileging capital as the sole organizing principle of analysis. Chinese landscapes present us with a different intellectual and political history of notions of city and country, and of the role of the state in allocating, designing, and distributing space. In a place where land, bodies, and buildings have only recently been reframed as commodities, the Chinese urban is just as importantly constituted by discourses of socialism, rurality, civilization, gender, ethnicity, class, space and others. And, as ideological and material reconceptions of culture and cities in China are put into place by planners, developers, marketers, and state governing bodies, we believe anthropological critiques should be increasingly important in contextualizing such urban
revisions (cf. Ellin 1996; Low 1996). One outcome of the volume is that contributors present multiple readings about culture in contemporary China. For example, the chapters on the development of new markets and industries such as multilevel marketing, rock music, and the university graduate labor market illuminate the cultural construction of the socialist market within the context of global capitalism. Such disparate realms as a fashion-modeling competition, maternity practices in the hospital, sex tourism, and marriage introduction agencies are examined by other contributors, highlighting the intersections of consumer culture, gender, and the body in a network of socialist institutions and market forces. Themes of morality, place, and the symbolic meaning of space are explored through research on new social geographies of health care and medicinal consumption, the shifting social position of railway workers, and the destruction of Beijing's largest migrant neighborhood. Other contributors consider the nature of the urban as cosmopolitan, a subject approached via studies of cultural production among minority youth, the distinction of the rural and the urban through television programming, and the cultural construction of urban and anonymity. Urbanization and the Chinese Socialist City Chinese cities and their inhabitants were radically reconstructed after the revolution of 1949 through a blend of Soviet and Chinese Marxist ideology and praxis. As was the case in the development strategies of other socialist countries, Chinese urbanization was initially assessed in terms of cost-benefit analysis (Naughton 1995: 62). The Chinese Communist Party still sought to promote urban industrialization, but as inexpensively as possible since its large cities had been devastated by the Japanese occupation and the civil war with the Nationalists (Kirkby 1985). State goals to transform cities from consumer (xiaofei) to producer (shengchan) status, and to reduce economic disparities between city and countryside, affected industrialization efforts and mobility policies. The policy became one of industrialization without much urbanization(K. W. Chan 1992: 57; Naughton 1995). As Kwok notes, industrialization in many developing countries has been concentrated in large cities and has been associated with high levels of urban economic and population growth (1992: 66). With Chinese socialist goals of wealth distribution and social equity, however, the links between industrialization and urbanization took a quite different form. Postrevolutionary urban policy addressed several concerns: cost, rural-urban leveling, national security, and a wariness of large cities. The CCP was not opposed to large cities themselves, but rather to their associations with foreign imperialism and capitalism (Meisner 1982; Pannell 1992). Party authorities considered cities to be wasteful centers of consumption that demanded huge capital expenditures on infrastructure, public transport, electricity, and social services. For these reasons, urban development strategies focused less on the industrialized Northeast and coastal regions (the treaty port cities) and more on creating smaller, less costly urban centers in inland regions closer to the supply of resources (Lewis 1971; Pannell 1992: 218211;25; Johnson 1995: 191). Overall, a primary focus on rapid heavy industrial production, at the expense of developing consumer services and city infrastructure, guided the Party's policies of urbanization after 1949 (Chan 1992; Johnson 1992). The discontinuation of traditional handicrafts and rural factories, which used scarce raw materials and labor, and the channeling of most rural labor into agriculture (97 percent of the rural labor force in 1965) created an agricultural surplus that was transferred to the urban industrial sector (Kwok 1992: 68). At the same time, the state worked to control urban growth and population movement into urban areas by implementing the household registration system (hukou) in the late 1950s. For the most part, the system effectively restricted individual mobility, excepting the mass rural movement into the cities during the Great Leap Forward (19588211;60) and the urban outflow of youth to the countryside during the decade of the Cultural Revolution (19668211;76). The hukou instituted a binary legal and inherited distinction between peasants and nonpeasants (Cohen 1994: 158). Historically, those born into agricultural families (the majority of the population) have had great difficulty converting to non-agricultural status and have been denied perquisites given to those in the urban, state-supported sector (Potter 1983; Kipnis 1997). Despite the CCP's goal to reduce rural-urban social and economic inequality, the nonpeasant hukou marked the difference between who would or would not receive guaranteed employment, education, medical insurance,
household grain allocations, and other subsidies, creating a broad two-tiered system of privilege. Although the urban economy was composed of state-owned, collective, and independent sectors that provided a variable range of benefits, in general urbanites as a group received the greatest share of any resource distribution in Maoist China (cf. Whyte and Parish 1984; Lü and Perry 1997). The state-owned work units (danwei) further maintained the hukou system as the main way to control and distribute privileges and necessities, especially housing. The multifunctional danwei, often resembling a walled miniature city, became an integral part of the dramatically reorganized socialist urban landscape (Gaubatz 1995: 30). Residents lived, worked, and socialized within the work unit space. Through the urban danwei, the state controlled urban society and also mobilized residents into political participation (Lu and Perry 1997: 8; Li 1993). Both the hukou and the danwei systems were particular socialist institutions that minimized the movement of Chinese citizens. Especially after the Cultural Revolution, boundaries marking cities and their surrounding countryside were transformed into inflexible lines of control that were difficult for individuals to cross without extensive documentation (Whyte and Parish 1984: 26). State mobility restrictions also held in check the development of the kinds of large migrant settlements that surrounded metropolises and infused city centers in many Southeast Asian countries (Kirkby 1985; Guldin 1992a). The result of the hukou system was that the city was the preferred place to live and became a steadfast destination of desire for rural dwellers and exiled urbanites. With fairly strict regulation of movement and little state investment in urbanization, large cities experienced almost no growth from the mid-1960s through the late 1970s, retaining their compact physical forms and definitive edges between city limits and countryside. Indeed, Naughton comments that before economic reforms the city centers of Guangzhou, Tianjin, and Shanghai possessed an almost museumlike quality, where building facades remained unchanged since the 1930s (1995: 70).

Urbanization Compared

The process of urban development in China also can be compared productively with that in other countries and regions. Unlike many Latin American countries, which have experienced high levels of urban growth and rural-urban migration since the 1930s (de Oliveira and Roberts 1996: 254), China’s urbanization trajectory has been discontinuous. For instance, during the 1960s and 1970s China experienced what may be called underurbanization, as planning policies advocated a containment of urban growth and rural-urban migration (Chen and Parish 1996: 64). A super concentration of population in large metropolitan centers has characterized urbanization in Latin America and the Caribbean, such that three-quarters of the populations live in urban areas. In contrast, in places such as sub-Saharan Africa, India, Indonesia, and China, two-thirds or more of the population still live in rural areas (Gugler 1996: 2). The high rates of urbanization in Latin American cities have been intimately linked with the restructuring of state and society, as was the case for many Asian countries. In post-Mao China, rapid in-migration of ruralites and other people without access to what are considered urban rights has sharpened existing inequalities and engendered a hierarchy of citizenship. Thus, cities have become arenas for the making of new kinds of citizens. Solinger describes this condition at the end of the century as a contest over citizenship; between a socialist state in transition and a complex, mobile population that is deeply altering the structure of urban society (1999: 3). Urbanization patterns in reform-era China remain distinct from those in Western industrialized countries. Far from withering under the sweep of city-based urbanization, small towns, primarily through the development of nonstate township enterprises, have contributed to rural-based urbanization (Lefebvre 1996; Guldin 1997: 62). China’s prominent anthropologist Fei Xiaotong has noted that the release of surplus labor after rural decollectivization in 1978, which cities couldn’t absorb, led a portion of this labor force to migrate and participate in the growth of small rural towns (1992). These towns have become critical nodes in national development processes whose goal has been to keep people in the countryside but not necessarily working the land (Lin 1997). As Dirlik and Zhang note, one sees that the industrial penetration of the rural also gives rise to a post-urban, decentralized and place-based mode of development that promises to narrow rural-urban disparity and to rebuild rural communities in the market environment (1997: 6). The industrialization of small rural centers is not unique to China. Scholars stress the
similarity of the urbanization of China’s countryside to processes occurring in Asian countries such as Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, and Japan (Costa et al. 1989; Jinnai 1995; Kim and Choe 1997; Seabrook 1996). In these countries, the majority of industry is concentrated not in urban centers but in hinterlands serviced by cities (Naughton 1995: 83). A new process of settlement termed desakota may be distinctive to Asian regions; it is a form neither urban nor rural, but a blending of the two wherein a dense web of transactions ties large urban cores to their surrounding regions (Guldin 1997: 62). And yet, desakota formations in China do not always reduce rural-urban differences. As the ethnographies in this volume suggest, communities in this market environment are not rebuilding on a level playing field, but along historically and culturally specific axes of urbanity and rurality. For example, the coastal cities have regained their preliberation status as dynamic centers in the forefront of economic growth. Deng era policies have continued to promote the development and investment in these areas, resulting in irregular patterns of wealth accumulation. Southern and seaboard provinces attract far more foreign investment than the Northwest. Moreover, each province is internally marked by highly variable patterns of wealth and poverty. Chinese Cities in the 1980s and 1990s

In the quest for a fresh national economic identity, Chinese leaders in the early 1980s endorsed the creation of special economic zones (sezs) in southern China, hitching their development image to that of the economically successful Asian Tigers (Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong). Several of these zones have developed into booming industrial and commercial cities that represent modernity and progress to Chinese citizens and to the world. With economic reform, these special economic zones have reshaped older models of cities as largely manufacturing bases to centers of commerce, services, consumption, and recreation. The decentralization of taxation authority and control of foreign funds has favored large coastal cities and their surrounding regions (Chen and Parish 1996: 67). For instance, after more than a decade of concentrated foreign-funded development and heightened focus by state officials, Shanghai has regained its pre-1949 cosmopolitan reputation. Chinese authorities have relaxed strictures on population mobility, which has created movements of between 70 and 100 million people throughout the country and has accelerated urban economic and population growth (Solinger 1995, 1999). Although cities and special economic zones have attracted substantial in-migration, China’s small towns also have drawn large numbers of migrants. This has been spurred by state policies of rural urbanization and industrialization. Such large-scale mobility has profoundly changed rural and urban social space and is reshaping the future of China’s cities and rural regions. In sum, urbanization, large-scale migration, extensive township and village development, and the increasing presence of transnational cultural forms in China have ruptured boundaries and altered former physical and social distinctions between city and country. This volume emphasizes the fluidity of rural, urban, and global forces and offers a mosaic of anthropological perspectives on contemporary Chinese urbanity. The book is arranged in four parts: Xia Hai: Ethnographies of Work and Leisure, Gender, Bodies, and Consumer Culture, Negotiating Urban Spaces, and Expressions of Urbanity and the Urban. Part One: Xia Hai: Ethnographies of Work and Leisure Xia hai, literally entering the sea, is the popular term given to participation in China’s market economy. In the mid-1980s, most urbanites still viewed the petty merchants of street stalls with more contempt than envy. Yet by the early 1990s many people were feeling pressured to and sometimes exhilarated by taking the plunge. Opportunities seemed to lie just at the surface. As the century closed, another wave of changes occurred with the massive layoffs of state-industry workers, and the ocean looked choppier, more dangerous. Unemployment and underemployment are potentially the most serious threats to Chinese market socialism. The chapters in part one speak to changes in Chinese cultural-economic relations and to new regimes of difference produced by the emerging Chinese market. The chapters deal with the creation of new markets and industries, an understudied area that foregrounds the constructed nature of economic reforms and thus of personal experiences of the market. In analyzing different representations of the market in China (here the network, the labor market, and the social market for Chinese rock and roll music), we
take the market to be a cultural product as well as a form of cultural production. All three authors posit an intimate relationship between a Chinese socialist market and the urban, but one that remains unequal and local nonetheless. Jeffery and Efird's chapters outline how the parameters of various markets are drawn through extant cultural categories and an urbanity that is spatially associated with the foreign. Hoffman traces the channeling of the nation's most desirable labor pool into urban labor markets. While much has been written about the disempowerment of the nation-state in the face of increasingly flexible and mobile capital, in China we see a process of negotiation between the state and new kinds of economic actors (Anagnost 1997). The state and the market are sometimes mutually constitutive, as in Hoffman's chapter, where labor markets turn out to be neither naturalized nor autonomous but a process through which different agents (university employment counselors, employers in state and other institutions, and college graduates) act as interlocutors and constituents of both the state and the market. In other instances, these categories are more ambiguous, more explicitly oppositional, and less state initiated, as in Jeffery and Efird's chapters. In both of these cases, new markets (direct sales and rock music, respectively) sprang up at some distance from the gaze of the state through the efforts of individuals who identified themselves as bearers of indigenized transnational culture. However, neither were wholly independent of the state but were established through the efforts of local and national-level officials. The equivocal and contradictory position of the state, where officials increasingly find themselves representing the interests of capital, is ironic at the very least given that the nature of relations between labor and capital has been one of the founding moral narratives of the entire socialist era. Hoffman and Jeffery's chapters posit employer-worker relations as a critical moment of struggle over basic values of appropriate personal sacrifice and just rewards, talent, and professionalism. Hoffman details the transition from the state bureaucratic distribution of labor to a labor distribution process shaped by market forces, in this instance a particular labor market that valorizes certain kinds of urban labor while stigmatizing others. Her study of students, employment officers, and employers at institutions of higher education, themselves strictly urban phenomena, focuses attention on the construction of desirable labor—that is, highly educated urban male intellectuals rather than less educated, female, out of work factory hands or agricultural workers. Jeffery's study, on the other hand, shows an entire industry pathologized by the state. It is the tension around the relationship between direct sales distributors and their companies, which the state is ultimately unable to mediate due to the spatial and social structure of network marketing, that eventually destroyed the industry in 1998. Efird notes that practices viewed by some as outside or even counter to the interests of the state (in this case the creation of a consumer base for Chinese rock music) are not necessarily outside the interests of the market. Efird's chapter on the development of the Chinese rock music (yaogun) market and Jeffery's on the Chinese direct sales industry also contribute analyses of the indigenization of foreign market practices, narratives, and capital. Efird recounts the processes by which yaogun, a phenomenon that takes place largely within urban spaces, mediated between locally defined notions of art and commodification, foreign cachet and local authenticity, and state intervention and private initiatives. Jeffery describes how the promise offered by foreign and cosmopolitan marketing practices, techniques, and skills extends to all-around personal transformation. The chapters each address the issue of market identities, or new forms of subjectivity that come into being through market discourses, and their relationship to the urban. It is through the practicing and hopeful bodies of university graduates, would-be multilevel marketers, and rock musicians that particular ways of dressing, talking, walking, and other forms of self-expression become authorized at the same time as they devalue older or alternative modes. Ultimately, the contradictions between socialist and market era values are experienced most saliently in terms of identity. Part Two: Gender, Bodies, and Consumer Culture Part two brings together several overlapping themes to consider experiences of the urban: consumer culture, bodies, and representations of gender. Economic reforms in China have brought the Chinese citizen into increasingly close contact with transnational capitalist goods, ideas, and practices, inundating
the Chinese landscape with a consumerism that refigures relationships and self-identities from
the ground up. The four chapters in this section provide localized ethnographic analyses about
the ways in which commodified ideals, narratives, and practices move around the world via
human bodies, technologies, and capital (see Appadurai 1990; Featherstone 1990; King 1997; and
Ong and Nonini 1997). Yet, in considering the growth of a consumer culture, scholars of mainland
China must remain attentive to the continuities and breaks with the pre-economic reform era.
Indeed, thirty years of anticonsumption, antibourgeois, socialist education have been eroded but
continue to shape the present. The 1990s brought about a flood of state-sanctioned and
transnationally produced valorizations of consumption. What comes into being, writes Mayfair Yang,
writes Mayfair Yang, is a culture of desiring, consuming individuals yearning to be
fulfilled (1997: 303). Changing conceptions and experiences of the body and gender emphasize the individual as a project of self-identity and self-presentation; nevertheless, this project is meditated by state and national agendas (Bourdieu 1977; Turner 1994). These chapters highlight important institutional and social contexts as China seeks to enlarge its presence on the international political and cultural scene, maintain political and social stability, and promote economic development. Gottschang’s chapter explores the position of urban hospitals as representations of modernity and bioscience as well as changing regimes of sexuality and feminine body management. Women are subject to contradictory messages about their bodies and those of their children. In a Beijing hospital, Gottschang analyzes the effect of state birth control policies that place the burden of producing healthy citizens upon women and their bodies. At the same time, however, images of sexually attractive mothers used to promote infant formula products and breast-feeding play on new mothers’ concerns with regaining their prepregnancy shapes. In the convergence of motherhood and consumerism in the hospital, self-identity is being reorganized in a way that moves beyond the earlier, socialist model of womanhood, a model that emphasized the strong, asexual woman, to one that also embraces a slim body image and sexual attractiveness. The chapters in this section also highlight an increased commodification of culture and tradition, concentrated in women’s bodies and framed within regional, national, and international interests. Clark describes the production of marriage introduction agency videos that show off young women in Shenzhen to foreign men in which traditional femininity was the most desired quality. Brownell discusses the evaluation of traditional oriental beauty in the context of a mainland supermodel contest held by a transnational modeling agency to choose the next Chinese model for international competition. And Hyde illustrates the construction of an ethnic minority marked as rural, feminine, and sexual. Clark, Brownell, and Hyde also offer analyses of flows of narrative, imagery, and practice circulated via the media, migrant workers, tourists, athletes, models, and others between countryside and city. Brownell posits the urban as a site for the production of an elite cosmopolitan culture that draws country people to the city with visions of an urban lifestyle and even an imagined cosmopolitanism (Schein, this volume). These imagined lifestyles are part of the promotion of a growing social and economic inequality by urban cultural producers such as modeling agencies, media, and other urban institutions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 4, 5, 12, 15, 177, 78). These are also the bodies that represent the nation in international competitions. As such, they shape and are shaped by both a national Chinese identity and the idea of Beijing as the civilizing center in a country fraught with increasingly powerful urban centers. In the bodies of young, female fashion models who are made, not born, we see clearly the production of a concept of feminine beauty that must answer at once to nationalist, culturalist, and transnational market interests. Clark presents a view of Shenzhen, the bustling special economic zone in the South that draws in large numbers of migrant and other workers every year. Her research centers explicitly on young women who move to the city in search of work, adventure, and love; and whose expectations are often dampened by the state’s refusal to provide them with legal permanent residency. The borders of the city still represent real barriers to nonresidents; and yet the state is willing to lift national bureaucratic barriers to assist the same women in entering into transnational marriages with
Japanese or Singaporean men. Clark’s work among marriage introduction agencies shows how these women, still in the process of becoming urbanites, construct themselves as traditional Chinese women in order to appeal to men in other Asian countries. The very female bodies that are unwanted in Shenzhen become transformed into marketable commodities for relatively wealthy foreign men. Hyde gives an example of an urban site that is developing a marketing niche for itself. In this case, the southwestern city of Jinghong is perceived by the rest of China as an ethnically other, tropical rural paradise brimming with sexually exotic young maidens. At the same time, it operates as an emblem of the urban within the region because of its highly developed prostitution and gambling industries. This city has become a space where migrant women of all ethnicities make a living off rich male tourists by masquerading as eroticized Tai girls and a place where male Han tourists come to fulfill their fantasies of the high life, gambling, and alluring women. Minority Tai, majority Han, and other ethnic groups in Jinghong, argues Hyde, are engaged in a highly disputed process of creating a commodified culture of Tai ethnicity by exploiting and refashioning Tai traditional culture. Together the chapters present diverse ways in which the Chinese female body is being packaged in relation to the growing consumer market, as well as how women are engaged in presentation of a certain bodily self for their own social and economic success. 

Part Three: Negotiating Urban Spaces

Post-Mao economic reforms have fostered dramatic changes in the relationships between space, time, state, and society. Following Massey’s suggestion (1994) that places are never static or empty concepts but reflective of gendered and unequal power relations, the chapters in part three address space, place, and the urban as contested social processes. The transformation of state-society relations and the partial withdrawal of the state from domestic and social life have given rise to increasingly diverse kinds of leisure and personal space. The authors in these chapters suggest that this reshaping of space has been accompanied by changing relationships between the urban, modern, rural, national, and transnational. As new policies displace the planned structures of the socialist order, individuals such as railway workers, migrant laborers, and even ordinary consumers must locate themselves in new markets with vastly different social geographies. The readying of the Chinese population for participation in global capitalism has taken place through a state-initiated civilizing process aimed at remaking subjectivities into those appropriate for a disciplined, efficient work force (Anagnost 1997).

China Urban is an ethnographic account of China’s cities and the place that urban space holds in China’s imagination. In addition to investigating this nation’s rapidly changing urban landscape, its contributors emphasize the need to rethink the very meaning of the urban and the utility of urban-focused anthropological critiques during a period of unprecedented change on local, regional, national, and global levels.

Through close attention to everyday lives and narratives and with a particular focus on gender, market, and spatial practices, this collection stresses that, in the case of China, rural life and the impact of socialism must be considered in order to fully comprehend the urban. Individual essays note the impact of legal barriers to geographic mobility in China, the proliferation of different urban centers, the different distribution of resources among various regions, and the pervasive appeal of the urban, both in terms of living in cities and in acquiring products and conventions signaling urbanity. Others focus on the direct sales industry, the Chinese rock music market, the discursive production of femininity and motherhood in urban hospitals, and the transformations in access to healthcare.
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