

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-47943-1 - Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China

Edited by Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth J. Perry
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Introduction:
Urban China

DEBORAH S. DAVIS

CITY LANDSCAPES BEFORE AND AFTER MAO

Chinese urban spaces were transformed during the 1980s. The number of cities multiplied, and the formally registered urban population grew to nearly 240 million.¹ In addition, at least 70 million transients abandoned life in the villages to settle in urban areas. Though officially considered temporary residents and therefore uncounted in government statistics, these rural sojourners became an integral part of city life and dramatically increased both the density and heterogeneity of urban settlements.²

Demographic shifts, however, capture only one dimension of the transformation of urban spaces; equally important were changes in the political economy that altered the lines of authority and the flow of

¹The total number of residents officially registered as living in cities and towns is actually rather poorly defined. For example, the total number registered by the government as living in towns and cities grew from 191 million to 301 million between 1980 and 1990, but that number does not accurately measure numbers of urbanites because a looser definition of urban used after 1984 included millions of agricultural households who were not treated as urban residents. If one restricts the definition of urban to include only those in non-agricultural households the total of urbanites between 1980 and 1990 jumped from 168 million to 239 million, and it is this latter number that I assume most closely represents the urban population for the purposes of government services and planning. There are also problems in making comparisons because some reports use end-of-year totals, while others use mid-year figures or do not give month of census. *Zhongguo renkou tongji nianjian 1992* (Chinese population statistics yearbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1993), 451; *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1993* (Chinese statistical yearbook) (hereafter ZGTJNJ) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe; 1994), 81; *Renmin ribao* (hereafter RMRB), November 30, 1984, 1.

²RMRB, December 18, 1990, 4; and Roger Chan, "Challenges to Urban Areas," in *China Review 1992* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1992), 12.12.

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resources between the central government and the municipalities. When the central plan dominated, city economies were directed by Beijing's priorities. City enterprises were cut off from their natural hinterlands and, in a clear departure from earlier Chinese experience, cities developed "hard edges" that segregated rural and urban populations as clearly as any moated city wall. After 1980, the new enthusiasm for markets, decentralization, and foreign investment undermined barriers between urban and rural populations. Cities became economically more autonomous from Beijing and more embedded in their immediate locale; the visual result was an urban-rural sprawl reminiscent of that observed during years of rapid industrialization in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

Within urban areas, land use and allocation of space also changed in response to the new economic and political priorities. For example, in the years immediately after 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership systematically denigrated religious and ritual spaces by either closing them to the public or transforming them for secular use. By the mid-1980s, urban leaders had relaxed this censorship and even deliberately encouraged city bureaus and private citizens to return temples, shrines, and churches to their pre-Communist functions. They also tolerated more diverse and spontaneous uses of parks and sidewalks, and public spaces again became available for a wide range of nonstate—even antistate—activities, which at times antagonized local officials, but which ultimately further accelerated the pace of transformation.

Decentralization and greater reliance on market mechanisms also altered the urban topography environment built within city centers. Between 1950 and 1976, most cities were designed to expand in increments of self-sufficient industrial "cells" (*danwei*), a plan that China copied from the Soviet Union of the 1950s. By contrast cities of the early 1990s grew around specialized nodes of commerce, finance, and trade, and the new construction created skylines that contrasted dramatically with the uniform, gray horizons of the 1960s and 1970s.

These transformations in the material dimensions of urban space had parallels in the social world of Chinese cities. When self-sufficient enterprises typical of the *danwei* system defined boundaries of ownership and control, Chinese citizens spent most of their lives living and working behind gated walls. Every unit had a limited number of entry points; most could be locked, and almost all were staffed by security personnel. After commercial activity returned to the streets, and skyscrapers towered over six-story walk-ups, the walls that had dominated urban terrain

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could no longer regulate human and material traffic as effectively. Some *danwei* walls were dismantled, and others were breached by newly constructed stores and restaurants that burrowed through the walls into once exclusively *danwei* space. As a result of such architectural reconstructions, previously protected interiors became more accessible to the general public, and city landscapes throughout China developed more in response to individual taste and market competition than administrative fiat.

PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND
EMERGENT COMMUNITIES

In the gated *danwei* of the Maoist era, city residents lived under close scrutiny of neighbors and employers; individuals rarely experienced anonymity, and they enjoyed only a modicum of social autonomy. So extreme was the immobility and absence of privacy that even leisure time was closely regulated. After 1980, the depoliticization of the workplace and deregulation of economic life created very different conditions. There were fewer hours of political study at the workplace, and large portions of each day previously claimed as the domain of the party-state became private, or at least less regulated. In city neighborhoods a wide range of new public premises—billiard parlors, bars, and beauty shops—permitted urbanites to spend a larger percentage of their day congregating with friends, or—equally important—enjoying time alone. Most people continued to work in state-owned enterprises as permanent workers, but the retreat of politics and the new legitimacy of commodification (*shangpinhua*) revolutionized consumption patterns and fostered a new range of individual preferences.³ Leisure time and leisure choices multiplied, and within the less regulated urban spaces, a vibrant urban (*shimin*) culture evolved in directions too diverse to be controlled by party or government censorship.

The decline in the power and reach of the Maoist party-state and the proliferation of new economic and social organizations unquestionably enlivened city life and opened up new venues for both public and private interaction. Yet the retreat of the state did not create the organizational and legal buffers necessary to sustain open criticism of the regime. Nor

³In 1980 there were 80 million state employees in an urban labor force of 105 million. By 1990, the state labor force had grown to 106 million in a labor force of 153 million (ZGTJNJ, 97).

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Table 1.1. *Changing fertility trends*

	CBR	Rural TFR	Urban TFR
1950	37	5.9	5.0
1955	32	6.3	5.6
1960	20	3.9	4.0
1965	37	6.5	3.7
1970	33	6.3	3.2
1975	23	3.9	1.7
1980	18	2.4	1.1
1989	21	2.7	1.4

CBR = Crude birth rate TFR = Total fertility rate

Note: After 1984 urban TFR included birth in *xiang* government settlements, which previously had been counted as rural.

Sources: For CBR 1965–89, *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1992* (Chinese Statistical Yearbook) (ZGTJNJ), p. 78; for CBR 1950–60 and TFR 1950–1980, Judith Banister, *China's Changing Population* (Stanford University Press, 1987), 243; for TFR 1989, *Renmin ribao*, December 18, 1990, 4; ZGTJNJ 1992, 78.

had the central government and the CCP renounced their power to intrude coercively into everyday life. Rather, as is evident in the design and subsequent implementation of the one-child family campaign and in the arrests of politically or religiously heterodox individuals, the authoritarian party-state maintained its ability to intervene in the most private areas of urban life or to decimate collective challenges to the CCP's political monopolies.

In the realm of personal life, the 1979 policy decision to limit each woman to one child radically altered the family life of fifty million young urban couples. In rural areas, citizens resisted the official quotas, and by the end of the decade the government was forced to accept a two- or three-child norm for rural families. In urban areas, by contrast, the populace was unable to reject the most draconian birth control policy of the entire post-1949 era. In 1980 the total fertility rate (TFR) of urban women was an extraordinary 1.1; in 1989, when the definition of urban had expanded to include the newly incorporated suburban and township areas, average TFR had risen to only 1.4 (Table 1.1). And in the large metropolitan cities like Shanghai more than 95 percent of all births were first (and only) children.⁴

To some extent urban couples found it easier to comply with the one-child policy because urban parents “needed” children less than their ru-

⁴RMRB, December 18, 1990, 4; June 17, 1991, 1.

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ral peers. In old age, urban residents—whether employed in state or collective enterprises—were guaranteed a pension, while rural elderly had to rely totally on their adult children, typically a co-resident son. City women remained close to their parents after marriage and provided care and support almost as often as did their brothers. Rural women married “out” of their natal villages, and daughters could not easily substitute for a son either economically or in rituals of honor or mourning. For these reasons, city families could more easily tolerate the risk of an only child, and found the consequences of having only a daughter less problematic than did village families. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake either to deny the opposition to the policy within the cities or to ignore the unrelenting coercion that guaranteed the high levels of compliance over the decade.

In the public realms of politics and organized religion, the persistent power of the Communist party-state is also evident. The pervasive repression of the 1970s was no more, but the retreat of state surveillance was relative and often unpredictable. For example in 1976 it would have been inconceivable for the wife of a man who had already been arrested for—among other things—speaking to foreign reporters subsequently to announce in an interview with the *New York Times* that she was considering suing the government over her husband’s arrest. But in July 1993, this is exactly what Li Liping told *New York Times* correspondent Nicholas Kristoff when her husband, Fu Shenqi, was detained.⁵ It is also equally true that in 1981 Fu had been arrested for his participation in the Beijing Spring pro-democracy movement and spent the next five and half years of his life in prison.

After 1978 government and party officials altered their relationship to ordinary citizens. They did not control consumer choices as tightly, restrict physical and social mobility, or monitor social relationships as they had in earlier decades. Yet the state (*guojia*) retained substantial, authoritarian powers that sharply limited personal autonomy and denied legitimacy to most nonstate organizations. Even in the realm of commerce, where one might have found the first signs of an emergent public sphere parallel to that mobilized by eighteenth-century European merchants, increased commodification did not serve immediately as a catalyst for social empowerment. Instead, as David Wank and Yves Chevrier discovered in their studies of the new urban business class, the largest

⁵*New York Times*, July 12, 1993.

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financial gains often were made by those still deeply embedded in party-state bureaucracy, rather than by those working independently in lightly regulated competitive markets.⁶ The “spoiler state” of the high Maoist era was in retreat, but both CCP and government officials continued to exercise such unbridled powers that ordinary urbanites were unable to define the limits of either the possible or the probable without attention to persistent state and party privileges.⁷

Decentralization and deregulation created the physical and social space for individuals to seek personal satisfaction more openly than had been true for several decades. They did not, however, grant the freedom to escape entirely CCP or government supervision and intrusions. Even less did they enable citizens to challenge or resist state monopolies by organizing around antistate or antiparty ideals.

The subordination and powerlessness of ordinary Chinese urbanites during the late 1980s were modest in comparison to the oppression endured by slaves or prisoners. Yet James Scott’s study of rebellion and resistance among these two populations suggests one scenario in which the new—if limited—freedoms to escape the narrow political rhetoric of official Maoism may have created the foundation for fundamental realignments of power in urban China.⁸ In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott focuses on the power of hidden transcripts—both the deeply felt criticisms subordinated groups share when they are away from their overseers, masters, and prison guards and the equally hidden transcripts that circulate among elites when they are not in a socially heterogeneous public space. Scott argues that the persistence of domination rests on an unspoken acceptance of the transcripts’ remaining hidden; but when they are suddenly articulated in public, even one act of speech can galvanize power previously checked by the superior resources of the dominant group:

⁶David Wank, “Merchant Entrepreneurs and Development of Civil Society,” paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the Association of Asian Studies, April 1991, and Yves Chevrier, “Social Autonomy and Civil Society,” paper presented at the Euro-American Symposium: “Society versus the State in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese Traditions,” Paris, May 1991.

⁷Jan T. Gross created this term to describe the soviet state of the Stalinist era, which gained its power and maintained its hegemony in a zero-sum exchange wherein each increment of state power represented an equal evisceration of society. I find it an apt description of the oppressive state of the high Mao era (*Revolution from Abroad* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988]).

⁸James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

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When the first declaration of the hidden transcript succeeds, its mobilizing capacity as symbolic act is potentially awesome. At the level of tactics and strategy, it is a powerful straw in the wind. It portends a possible turning of the tables. Key symbolic acts are, as one sociologist puts it, “tests of whether or not the whole system of mutual fear will hold up.” At the level of political beliefs, anger, and dreams it is a social explosion. That first declaration speaks for countless others, it shouts out what has historically had to be whispered, controlled, stifled, and suppressed. If the results seem like moments of madness, if the politics they engender is tumultuous, frenetic, delirious, and occasionally violent, that is perhaps because the powerless are so rarely on the public stage and have so much to say and do when they finally arrive.⁹

Scott requires that we give serious thought to the power of voluntarism to destroy coercive and enduring institutions; he also directs our attention away from the obvious levers of state power and demands that we consider alternative mechanisms of mobilization. In Scott’s historical overview, individuals, even when severely repressed, retain the ability to envision alternative regimes. In this way people become psychologically prepared to act collectively at that moment when one of their number dares to articulate the alternative. Scott employs this scenario to explain the sudden implosion of East European party-states; if he is correct, then it is possible that despite the successful coercion exercised by the Chinese party-state in support of the one-child family and against political dissent, Chinese urbanites may already be psychologically prepared for radical and successful confrontations against CCP hegemony in the near future.

DEFINING QUESTIONS OF THIS VOLUME

During the 1980s Chinese cities became a critical meeting ground for the new traders, investors, brokers, and customers ready to take advantage of the reduced scope of political controls. Cities provided the physical and social space where previously suppressed economic, political, and cultural activities emerged into public view. The new complexity and openness of city life, however, did not create a Habermasian public sphere of “private people coming together as a public to debate the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.”¹⁰ Neverthe-

⁹Ibid., 227.¹⁰Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 27.

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less, the partial retreat of the party-state and the disorder created by irregularly monitored market exchanges permitted residents of Chinese cities to converse publicly and privately about an ever wider range of subjects and with an ever more diverse group of people than at any time since the establishment of the People's Republic. State monopolies of information—the key resource in postindustrial production and trade—were crumbling, and more privatized ownership of the means of production and of capital empowered individuals and social strata whom the Maoist regime had consistently silenced to act on their immediate self-interest. As a result, China was poised for momentous change as its citizens gathered the knowledge and resources with which to nurture new solidarities and ties of reciprocity.¹¹

Under such circumstances of material and ideological dislocation, the boundaries between public and private “were rendered problematic” and the urban public began to use its “critical judgment” to reevaluate the legitimate scope of state power and the ideal processes of government in ways not dissimilar to what Habermas described for eighteenth-century European cities.¹² As Margaret Somers has demonstrated in her study of the expansion of citizenship among the English poor, civil society and the public sphere need not emerge well defined or neatly compartmentalized from markets or government institutions. On the contrary, Somers found that in the English case “the public sphere denotes a contested participatory site in which actors with overlapping identities as legal subjects, citizens, economic actors, and family and community members form a public body and engage in negotiations over political and social life.”¹³

Working within Somers's perspective, therefore, an examination of the character of contemporary Chinese city life legitimately—even necessarily—addresses questions about the potential for civil society and the quality of the public sphere.¹⁴ Whether one focuses on individuals like

¹¹Anita Chan, “Revolution or Corporatism?” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 29 (January 1993): 31–62; Mayfair Yang, “Between State and Society,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* no. 22 (July 1989): 31–60.

¹²Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 24.

¹³Margaret Somers, “Citizenship and the Place of the Public Sphere,” *American Sociological Review* 58, no. 5 (1993): 587–620.

¹⁴Thus in terms of the debate over whether or not West European experience with civil society is relevant to the Chinese case, this volume more consistently agrees with the arguments of Mary Rankin, William Rowe, and David Strand. For an example of this debate, see Symposium in *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (April 1993), and David Strand, “Protest in Beijing,” *Problems of Communism* 39, no. 3 (May–June 1990):

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Fu Shenqi and Li Liping or on emergent associations such as those in Tiananmen Square during the spring of 1989, one observes urban Chinese from many walks of life debating the ideal form of government, the limits of privacy, and the definition of public responsibility more openly than since the 1940s. Even within the CCP and especially within the government bureaucracy, not only discussion but explicit efforts have taken place to routinize political power and to renegotiate the Maoist boundaries between public and private interests.¹⁵

After the massacre on June 4, 1989, optimistic predictions about the ability of social forces to redefine the Chinese polity seemed naive, and both within China and without, many postmortems attributed the debacle to the weakness of societal associations and more broadly to the historical absence of a civil society.¹⁶ In most of this post-1989 literature, however, the focus was on the primary political actors. Rather little attention was given to how the transformation of everyday life or organizational innovations in areas not directly drawn into the Beijing confrontation and final military attack had begun to reshape urban society more generally. To my knowledge no one focused on altered roles of cities or attempted an integrated study of urban life in the 1980s comparable to what Martin Whyte and William Parish did for the 1970s.¹⁷ In part, the absence of such a general examination of urban life is explained by the lack of time to reflect on the turbulent decade and the accelerating pace of institutional and ideological change after 1990. Yet as the twentieth anniversary of Mao's death approaches, such broad overviews of the social consequences of the post-Mao reforms should begin. Otherwise, an important opportunity will be lost for understanding how this decade of fundamental social upheaval prepared the way for subsequent events.

In terms of pace of change and numbers of people affected, rural China could claim priority for such a scholarly review. Yet if the focus of interest is the transformation of the boundary between state and society, and more narrowly the emergence of a public sphere, urban spaces and city life have equal claim on our attention. Political power is concentrated in Chinese cities, and it has been urban residents who have

¹⁵See for example the study by Melanie Manion, *Retirement of Revolutionaries in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁶One of the earliest and still most comprehensive discussions of different views is Strand, "Protest in Beijing," 1–19.

¹⁷Martin Whyte and William Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

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been most visibly involved in political debate. Moreover, urban society is more accessible to outsiders and the published record is denser and more easily available. For these several reasons, the goal of this volume is to use a broad overview of city life after 1979 to explore the many ways in which shifting boundaries between public and private, and between state and society, have created the conditions for an emergent public sphere.

The contributors first met on the weekend of May 4, 1992. To each participant, the organizers posed two simple questions: In reference to the sphere of contemporary urban life that you know best, where have been the greatest gains for personal autonomy? And if relevant, to what extent did you observe associational ties that signaled emergent urban communities or nonstate institutions? The organization of the volume reflects the priority given to these initial questions. It also reflects the debate and discussion of the conference itself. Thus in addition to the shared focus on questions of individual autonomy and collective associations, there are chapters on the transformation of the physical urban environment, as well as on the creation of distinctive post-Mao urban cultures and identities highlighting the altered relationship between state and society.

Part I, "Urban Space," focusing on the changing allocation and use of physical space, begins with geographer Piper Gaubatz's portrait of the socialist city as seen from the perspective of Chinese city planners. In this chapter, she documents how new market forces as well as greater openness both to the outside world and to China's pre-Communist traditions rapidly undermined the cellular landscape of Maoist cities and created a new urban environment built around functional specialization. In Chapter 3, Barry Naughton, though primarily dealing with the Chinese city as an economic actor, addresses the phenomenon of physical sprawl to illustrate his larger theme of increased integration between urban and rural markets. In Chapter 4, Vivienne Shue also emphasizes "urban sprawl," but in contrast to Naughton, who associates the attendant sprawl with the retreat of the state and the extension of markets, Shue attributes it to the new regulations that control tax revenues and land use. In the final chapter of Part I, Dorothy Solinger analyzes the life chances of the rural immigrants who have transformed street life with their stalls and tarpaulins, as well as staffing the construction teams that have created the new physical environment. Despite their obviously