

Round Table Remarks 12/15/07

“Entering the Chinese City”

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Having entered the Chinese city on Thursday, I leave on Saturday overwhelmed by disparate impressions; whirling details spin from the particular and specific into a hazy field of generalizations. To use a phrase invoked in my 19th century sources (and surely elsewhere as well): We have entered Treasure Mountain and we will not leave empty-ended (入了寶山不空手回家). We now share richly varied impressions of shops, teahouses, gardens, theaters, a catalogue of memories compiled by a literatus (who may or may not be traditional), late Ming memories of the Wei and Jin. Fur trimmed clothing, Japanese lacquer boxes, and a lovely lake. Laws carved in stone for public display, women playing men on stage and in film. What conclusions can be drawn from so many details painstakingly, even lovingly, pulled from a remarkably broad range of sources? What do these papers share? And how can we begin to synthesize the treasures that we have encountered here?

I am struck by the absence of unifying frameworks or overarching theoretical agendas. And at the same time I am happily surprised by the refreshing cacophony of definitions and conversations that have resulted from this relatively fluid frame. We have achieved no consensus it seems, on what exactly we collectively mean by “city.” And this is not a bad outcome. Rigid definitions and protocols can occlude more than they include—even as they demarcate a shared space, they also determine who is to be left out of it. Here, we have been more inclusive and so we have piled up a grand assortment of images and ideas. In so doing, we have allowed the goods that we each have brought with us to shape the interpretive space in which they will be housed. Now we might want to do the work of sorting the “goods” or details into categories in order to make them tell a collective story about the “warehouse” we plan to build around them. Perhaps subsequent conversations can serve as the forum for a more self-conscious discussion about the “perspectives from social and cultural history” that we hope to bring to the task? I have much to learn in this regard from all of you—and would like to have the opportunity to eavesdrop on just such a conversation.

The title of the conference is “Jin ru Zhongguo chengshi 進入中國城市”—elegantly translated into English as “Entering the Chinese City.” But due to the structure of the two languages, something is inevitably lost in translation through absolutely no fault of the translator. English grammar requires that we choose whether to “enter” “a” Chinese city or “the” Chinese city—or “Chinese cities.” Thus, the English grammar demands a decision among several possibilities—singular

or plural, one among many—or an archetype. “The Chinese City” sounds both singular—and archetypal—perhaps with an implied gesture toward Weber (and thus the un-Chinese, or Western city). In Chinese a range of interpretive possibilities are able to coexist: “a” Chinese city (one among many), “the” Chinese city (an archetype a la Weber, defined against an idealized Western City, or even “Chinese cities”—in general—or in a regional constellation. The papers presented this week have been true to the inclusive spirit of the conference’s Chinese name. It might be useful to consider more explicitly the ways in which participants have thought about Chinese cities—and how the category “city” has functioned within their papers.

Type 1: City as venue or setting (passive or presumed) for a particular category of activities which may—by extension—be part of the definition of “a city”—or part of what differentiates one city from other cities—or something that we associate with urban life. The action or activity itself thus becomes the main focus of the paper—and so we have seen shopping, tea drinking, animal protection, theater, and the administration of vaccines placed front and center with particular cities—or cities in general—forming the backdrop. Interestingly, many of these activities related to consumption, rather than production, signaling the ways in which we have come to imagine the city in relation to the emergence of consumer culture. Should production-related activities be occupying more space in our urban imaginings? And I wonder: is it the city that gives meaning to the activity—or the activity that makes a place urban?

Type 2: City as symbol in a discourse—and again, “city” refers either to a specific city or cities in general. Papers in this group examined how a person or people in the past used the notion of “city” in a conversation about something else—as a signifier in a moral debate or as a vehicle through which to articulate anxiety about status.

Type 3: Urban environment as a setting for every day life—or more specifically, how do the particular circumstances and demands (economic, spatial, etc) of urban life shape human experience of the everyday. These papers emphasized space and the role played by urban space in structuring human experience.

Type 4: The city as public space—as arena for political expression and status performance, as point of interface between “State” and “Society” variously constituted and conceived.

Type 5: Sites in cities as symbols invoked—or evoked-- in the formation of urban or

class identities. Here I think we can interpret the term “sites” to include material sites such as West Lake—and historical moments or events (the Taiping Rebellion, the Wei-Jin period) that may serve many of the same functions. We might call these places and moments “memory sites”—but at the same time, I wonder what value the term memory (with its heavy baggage of associations!) really contributes and what precisely we mean by it?

Type 6: The city as site or node in an individual’s life trajectory -- literally as experienced and symbolically as the life is narrated and invested with new meanings. We have seen the city (in biography, fiction, film, and Yue opera) as an opportunity for anonymity and sociability, as closely identified home town, as site of transformative experiences, corrupter of morals, a place passed through, or the venue for the construction of new social networks.

In addition, and perhaps more concretely, the papers have considered a range of types of cities. We have seen the neon lights of the great metropolis (and heard the bells of its electric trolley car!). We have looked at the capital, the Treaty Port (but not as Treaty Port per se), one very small city, several big cities, and clusters of cities grouped geographically (Jiangnan cities), or typologically (market towns). The spatial distribution of the cities discussed reflects a larger imbalance in the field: Jiangnan seems well-represented, with North China nearly overlooked. We have experienced the Chinese City in some of its many manifestations—and in spite of the old story about the morphological features and administrative (or market) functions of the Chinese City, I am struck as much by what these cities do not have in common as by what they do. So is it only the presence of a wall—and significant agglomeration of population-- that made a city in Ming-Qing China? What else does it take for a place to be called a Chinese city? Does “the Chinese City” have to be in China (or do Diaspora communities count as well)? And finally, again, I would like us to speak more explicitly to the question of perspectives from social and cultural history—how has their presence in our toolkits informed our experience of this Treasure Mountain that we have entered—and enabled us to go home with hands (and minds—and stomachs!) full.