Contesting Spatial Modernity in Late-Socialist China

by Li Zhang

A new master plan to restructure the city of Kunming in southwestern China in the context of China’s transition to a progrowth, commercialized consumer society has led to massive destruction of century-old inner-city neighborhoods and the displacement of tens of thousands of families. The combination of a sense of lateness (lagging behind national and global development) and an emerging progrowth coalition between local governments and real estate developers is shaping post-Mao urban redevelopment. Several forms of civic opposition and popular discontent have been elicited by the restructuring. Although largely marginalized, these alternative views of urban forms and counter-practices help sustain a much-needed critical point of view that questions and destabilizes the seemingly inescapable machine of development. The insights emerging from the Kunming example help deepen our understanding of late-socialist power dynamics and suggest a new way of understanding state-initiated projects of modernity and development by giving serious attention to their spatial and temporal aspects.

During the summer of 1999, when I returned to my hometown, Kunming, China, to conduct research and visit my family, my parents, both long-term residents of the city, insisted on taking me to revisit their wedding site—a teahouse located in the heart of the old Kunming downtown district. They had not been there for many years and had suddenly become afraid that it would be gone because of the recent massive demolition of old neighborhoods for urban renewal. To our delight, this beautifully constructed old courtyard house was still there. Touching the wood framework of the house, my father, a retired university professor in his 70s, said, “It is all coming back now, my memory! It was a simple wedding, but I can remember everything now, standing right here.” He started to tell me the details of the wedding that took place some 40 years ago—the guests, the music, the food, and the happiness. He then asked me to take as many pictures as I could because he feared that this place—a physical inscription of his past life—would soon vanish. He seemed to be trying to cling to some tangible things to anchor his memory as the world around him changed. The nostalgia I sensed in him was far from a form of trivial romantic sentimentality; rather, it had transformative power that created a material link with the past through specific spatial objects, “items that create and sustain our relationship to the historical” (Sere- metakis 1994, 3).

Kunming is just one of many Chinese cities undergoing the massive demolition of the old and the hasty construction of the new in the effort to become modern (xiandai). The city itself is sprawling rapidly into surrounding areas that were once green fields of rice and vegetables. Mushrooming high-rises have forever altered a low-profile cityscape. The old narrow alleyways and traditional residential houses with their dark-blue tile roofs are quickly disappearing, giving way to multilane boulevards, gigantic shopping plazas, up-scale housing compounds, luxury hotels, and neon-lighted entertainment centers, all powerful physical markers of modernity in today’s China (figs. 1, 2). But spatial and architectural reconfigurations do not merely reflect recent socioeconomic changes in China; they also transform the very modes of social life, local politics, and cultural identities. The impact of these spatial changes in the name of progress and development goes far beyond the scope of the built environment; it penetrates into every aspect of the social. In short, urban planning—a powerful instrument of social change—is being deployed as a key strategy of post-Mao economic development. It is also a contested arena for articulating different senses of community and sociality.

In this article I explore the cultural logic and politics of late-socialist spatial restructuring in the context of China’s transition to a progrowth, commercialized consumer society.1

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1. I consider China a late-socialist state because of its one-party rule...
More specifically, I analyze how a new master plan for restructuring the city has led to massive destruction of century-old inner-city neighborhoods and the displacement of tens of thousands of families. I argue that it is the combination of a sense of lateness (lagging behind national and global development) and an emerging progrowth coalition of local governments and real estate developers that is shaping post-Mao urban redevelopment. At the same time, I seek to understand how ordinary people make sense of such changes and how dislocated city residents cope with or subvert the new spatial order. My research reveals the ways in which some long-term residents and disenfranchised citizens critique recent spatial changes, make use of certain spaces for their own ends, and even pursue legal action against the government-developer coalitions to defend their homes and their place in the city. The larger aim of this article is to deepen our understanding of late-socialist power dynamics through the lens of spatial change.

My study is situated in the broader concerns of the political economy of the built environment, particularly the relationship between space and power. In the past several decades there has been growing interest among anthropologists in understanding the social production and cultural meanings of space and place in diverse contexts (see, e.g., Rotenberg and McDonogh 1993; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003). It has been widely acknowledged that city planning can be a powerful means of social control and political ordering (see, e.g., Holston 1989; Rabinow 1982, 1989). Therefore, we cannot treat urban aesthetics and spatial forms as natural or neutral physical objects but must examine them as the product of social and political struggles (see also Davis 1992; Massey 1994; Soja 1989; Tuan 1977; Smart 2001; Caldeira 2000; Pellow 1996; Tang 2000). In his powerful critique of Brasília, Holston (1989) shows that while this modernist city was created by the Brazilian government to advance national development and transform social life for an imagined future, in the end its paradoxes evoked various forms of subversion. His analysis of the dilemma of urban space is pertinent to our understanding of a late-socialist city politics that is increasingly centered on land use and spatial reorganization.

Urban planning and architectural designs have long been a critical arena for conceiving and implementing desirable and its official ideological claim to socialism despite the profound changes that have taken place in the economic, social, and cultural realms (see Zhang 2001).
visions of the future for Chinese society. Bray’s (2005) refreshing study of the origin of the socialist work-unit (danwei) system reveals that the Mao regime actively pursued Soviet-style modern planning to transform Chinese urban space so as to implement a new form of socialist governance and social institutions. The post-Mao reform regime also hopes to engineer socioeconomic changes through a radically different spatial reorganization of the city, but the new restructuring projects often produce tensions between historic preservation and economic development. This tension has intensified since the 1990s with the commercialization of land-use rights and the development of the real estate industry. To what extent can Chinese cities maintain their unique cultural heritage while transforming themselves into modern metropolises? Is it possible for them to take a dualistic approach in which traditional and modern spatial form are treated not as opposing forces but as mutually constitutive evolving elements that allow a locality to develop economically while maintaining its uniqueness? These are challenging questions facing Chinese cities today.

In many ways the story of China appears similar to what has been told in the vast literature on inner-city renewal and urban restructuring in Europe, Latin America, and North America (see Mollenkopf 1983; Greer 1965; Palen and London 1984; Fainstein et al 1983; Logan and Molotch 1987). What is informative about the Kunming case is not its newness but its sense of urgency, inherent radicalism, and lack of strong, organized civic counterforces. These three features are all tied to the sense of lateness, which I want to explore further.

First, my research examines how a sense of being late or behind in economic development and modernization is largely transformed into the spatial reorganization of the city. In other words, being “modern” (xiandai) as opposed to “lagging behind” (luohou) is increasingly expressed and realized through urban planning that rejects both the traditional cityscape and the Soviet-style spatial modernity introduced to China under Mao. Kunming experiences a double sense of lateness in that it needs to catch up not only with the Western world but also with the more developed coastal regions, special economic zones, and major metropolitan areas in China that opened up earlier and benefited first from reform. For decades Kunming has been regarded by people of the heartland and the coastal areas as a remote, underdeveloped, slowly changing borderland city. Anxiety about being late and the widespread desire to catch up economically and representationally have largely shaped local governments’
decisions to wipe out old infrastructures deemed incapable of serving the new economy centered on the service industry and mass consumerism. In this context, a new cityscape is seen as a crucial part of the making of a cosmopolitan, forward-looking Kunming. To speed up this transition, a radical approach involving the wholesale destruction of old structures and street patterns is preferred by the government to relatively gradual renewal strategies such as renovation or restoration.

Second, the concept of lateness highlights a unique historical moment that is shaping the politics of urban transformation in China. Although market forces are expanding rapidly, the party-state retains hegemony in certain domains such as city planning and land allocation. The reason that most of the major urban restructuring and family relocation can be carried out swiftly is linked to the state-dominated land-ownership regime. Despite the privatization of many other social and economic domains, the state is still the sole legitimate owner of urban land (guoyou or quanmin suoyou). Since the late 1980s some important changes in land-use rights have taken place. Although individuals or entities (such as danwei and private developers) are not allowed to own or trade land, they are now entitled to various degrees of use rights and can transfer such rights on the market. The commercialization of use rights has made it possible for the real estate market to flourish, but it has also made property rights a complex topic. For example, a private citizen may own a residential structure without owning the land on which it is located. Since use rights are considered secondary to ownership rights, when conflicts of interests occur in urban renewal projects ordinary residents are often at the mercy of the state, which has the ultimate power to decide what to do with the land in question.

Further, the late-socialist moment is characterized by the formation of a strong progrowth coalition between local governments and the real estate sector. Through land development and redevelopment, officials and developers are able to accumulate political capital and/or financial profits at the expense of ordinary city residents’ interests (see also Zhang T. 2002). The incentives for government officials to promote urban restructuring are enormous. With fiscal decentralization, local governments have gained more autonomy in decision making regarding land use and economic development, but at the same time they have to be responsible for generating their own revenue. A new strategy for doing so is to become a broker of urban and suburban land by selling use rights to developers (see also Fang and Zhang 2003). Use-rights fees are levied in a lump sum at the time of the transaction, making it possible for local governments to assemble a huge amount of cash quickly to finance other projects. Further, while party loyalty and ideological struggle used to be the basis for political capital under high socialism, today it is economic achievement and the ability to transform the city into a cosmopolitan center that count more in political advancement.

The dramatic urban spatial restructuring of recent years has to be explained therefore not only in terms of the cultural logic of spatial modernity but also in light of politicians’ new orientation in building up political capital and popularity.

By focusing on the politics of lateness and its spatial articulation in China, this article suggests a culturally and historically specific way of rethinking modernity and development. While some scholars have located the crux of modernity primarily in a fundamental shift in the human experience of time and temporal consciousness (see Habermas 1987; Dirks 1990), others have explored another critical dimension—a deep rupture in people’s spatial experiences and spatial consciousness that often leads to a radical remaking of locality, social relations, and power geometry (see Appadurai 1996; Mitchell 1991; Miller 1994; Massey 1994; Soja 1989). Daniel Bell (1978) has convincingly argued for the centrality of the problem of space (as opposed to the problem of time) in the development of modernism and capitalism (see also Lefebvre 1991; Harvey 1990). Marshall Berman’s All That Is Solid Melts into Air (1998) nicely captures this overwhelming sense of spatial rupture in modern times. The dialogic relationship between the spatial, the social, and the historical is clearly articulated in Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of an “urban problematic” and Soja’s (2000) notion of “cityspace,” among others. Both chart a tension-filled, contested process of spatio-temporal restructuring by calling to our attention the spatial specificity of modernity. In short, temporal and spatial dimensions are by no means separate; instead, they are integral parts of people’s experiences of modernity and postmodernity.

My account of China’s pursuit of xian dai through spatial restructuring seeks to delineate precisely how spatiality and temporality inform one another at a particular moment of socialist history. It does so by analyzing how temporal measures of the standing of a locality such as “progress” and “backwardness,” “modern” and “lagging behind” have produced a particular kind of city restructuring. The deep-seated feeling of being late in commercial development and yearning to catch up with the “modern” world thus constitute part and parcel of the rationale for recasting the Chinese cityscape.

The ethnographic material presented in this article is drawn from 12 months of fieldwork for a larger project exploring the spatial, social, and political ramifications of recent housing privatization and the rise of the real estate industry in China. Fieldwork was conducted in five summers from 2000 to 2004. Since I grew up in Kunming and returned to visit almost every year, I have witnessed the process of spatial change over a long period of time and developed a sense of local social transformations, political dynamics, and cultural sentiment. The field methods combined long-term participant-observation of spatial and social change in the city, open-ended interviews with 12 city officials, planners, and developers and

6. Most rural and suburban farmland is collectively owned (jiti suoyou).
7. See Hsing (n.d.) for a detailed account of land politics in China, particularly regarding the complicated negotiations among multiple actors (i.e., different levels and divisions of the government, developers, danwei, individual urban residents, and suburban farmers).
Recasting Kunming

Located on the Yun-Gui plateau in southwestern China, Kunming is the capital of Yunnan Province and had approximately 1.5 million official registered residents in the city core in 2000. Established over 1,000 years ago, it has been experiencing enormous social and spatial changes over the past two decades. Historically Kunming had frequent contact with regions throughout Southeast Asia via the Dian-Yue railway, built in 1910, but its interaction with other parts of China was limited. For decades Yunnan Province as a whole was viewed as off the beaten track of modernity—a place south of the clouds (as the word “Yunnan” implies).

Before the economic reforms launched in 1978, the tobacco industry was a pillar of the local economy, but the reform brought unprecedented opportunities to the region. While tobacco production continues to be important, tourism, trade, and the service sector have become the engines for economic growth. An expanded railway system, interregional highways, and improved air transportation now directly link Kunming to other cities in China and Southeast Asia. Further, because of its rich historical heritage and diversity of ethnic groups, the province attracts millions of tourists looking for the exotic “old China.” The rise of what has been broadly called the “consumer revolution” (Davis 2000) has led to an urban development boom because new commerce, tourism, and services require more and better hotels, shops, restaurants, banks, office buildings, and housing. The boom has lured tens of thousands of migrant workers and petty traders from the surrounding counties and other provinces to the city. Meanwhile, social polarization has increased significantly between the urban poor (mainly lower-income families and laid-off workers) and the newly rich (primarily independent entrepreneurs and merchants) and between rural migrant laborers and officially registered permanent city residents (see Zhang 2002). Multiple tensions between interest groups have emerged, one of which is the conflict between historic preservation and commercial development.

Kunming is one of the 24 “renowned historical-cultural cities” (lishi wenhua mingcheng) designated by the State Council in 1982. This special status gives a city a significant advantage in marketing itself as a desirable tourist destination, and its creation reflected a growing concern on the part of the state that many heritage sites were at risk because of the blind pursuit of economic development and modernization. As competition for urban land grew more and more intense, massive destruction of old neighborhoods and reorganization of cityspace began to take place in most Chinese cities. Under the new master plan (1993–2010), the majority of Kunming’s century-old neighborhoods have been systematically demolished and replaced by multilane boulevards, massive shopping centers, commercial high-rises, and luxury housing compounds. The demolition peaked between 1996 and 1998 as the city was getting ready to stage the 1999 International Horticultural Expo. Seeing the Expo as a rare opportunity to promote tourism, trade, and foreign investment, local governments invested heavily in real estate and construction. In less than three years, the total amount spent on such projects exceeded what had originally been planned to cover the next ten. In a speech in 1999, Mayor Zhang Chenyin stressed the significance of “the city image project” designed to turn Kunming into a modern regional economic hub: “Recasting Kunming through a new face-lifting and quality service sector is a critical way of displaying to the world our new economic achievement and forward-looking, open spirit.”

Unpacking the Master Plan

The narrative of urban space in China is largely situated in the grand narratives of progress, development, and modernity, in which the past is often treated only as a precursor to the future, something ultimately to be overcome. According to this way of thinking, historical change is a process of constant negation of the past so that the new and better can be constructed on the ruins. Together, this linear vision of historical

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8. These numbers include only persons I interviewed for this part of the research, not the total number of interviewees of the larger project.
9. All interviewees’ names are pseudonyms.
10. The total official population of the Kunming municipality (including peripheral cities and counties in its jurisdiction) is about 4.5 million.
11. Some scholars trace the initial establishment of Kunming as an urban center to the eighth century (see He and Qing 1999).
12. Its isolation was due to the region’s extremely underdeveloped ground transportation (see Skinner 1997).
13. Yunnan is home to some 25 ethnic minority groups. Another feature that attracts many tourists is Kunming’s year-round mild and pleasant weather, reflected in its being called “the spring city” (chuncheng).
progression and the desire to become xiandai have become the paradigm for conceiving urban space under the reform regime. According to this development narrative, the old cityspace can no longer meet the new demands of a modernizing and commercializing society and is therefore a physical as well as a symbolic obstacle to development and progress.

Kunming’s master plan (chengshi zongti guihua) provides a compelling example of the way the grand narrative of development and historical progress shapes contemporary urban restructuring. The aim of the plan is to “redefine the nature of the city [Kunming] in order to set the proper goal of city development under new circumstances.” Of its 17 chapters, the first is devoted to highlighting three key aspects of Kunming: (1) It is the provincial capital and therefore a political and administrative center in the southwestern region. (2) It is a heritage city with a rich cultural and historical tradition. (3) It should be quickly developed into an international commercial hub by capitalizing on tourism, commerce, and trade. The third aspect is the focal point that is further elaborated. An acute sense of being late in developing and a desire to catch up are clearly articulated in this opening chapter as follows: “By 2020, Kunming should have moved into the rank of highly advanced cities in the country in terms of its social, economic, and technological capacity. . . . This plan will lay the foundation for turning Kunming into an advanced international metropolis (guojihua dushi) by the mid-twenty-first century.” Although Chapter 7 offers some basic ideas about the protection of historical-cultural heritage sites, it tends to focus on parks, scenic spots, and reproductions of historical objects (such as tower, gates, temples, and arches) while largely ignoring the traditional residential/commercial neighborhoods—the living historical space. It mentions several traditional neighborhoods in passing but completely overlooks the question of how to protect and restore these distinctive neighborhoods. Essentially the new plan is a pro-growth blueprint premised on commercial development. The remaining chapters are devoted primarily to modernizing various aspects of the city’s infrastructure and making more room for commerce, tourism, and mass consumption. As urban land became scarce and construction for the Expo speeded up in the late 1990s, even the neighborhoods that were classified for protection in this plan became targets for demolition.

Up to the early 1980s, a large portion of the old streets (laojie) and residential neighborhoods still existed in Kunming. In these neighborhoods, houses were located along the street and physically connected to one another. There was no clear spatial division between commercial and residential zones. A typical old house was a two- or three-story structure with wood siding and a gray tile roof. The ground-level rooms facing the street were usually used as shops while other rooms were reserved as living quarters (fig. 3). The demolition of old neighborhoods and the widening of streets began slowly in the 1980s, but the mid-1990s witnessed systematic, large-scale demolition. In only three years prior to the Expo, over 90% of the old neighborhoods were destroyed and tens of thousands of residents were forced out of the city. A high-school teacher described to me a major demolition he had witnessed in November 1997:

My friends and I went to see the demolition of Wucheng Road and Jinbi Road, the two main streets and largest traditional commercial and residential areas. Even when we were still far away from the site, we could see the dust flying everywhere in the air. When we got there, I saw house after house crumbling to the ground. The scene was incredible. You know, some of those houses had beautifully carved and painted wooden beams, window frames, and door panels. Some people rushed in and tried to drag some pieces out. You could buy them for very little money. Nowadays they are considered antiques, because it is hard to find them any more.

Justified in the name of modernizing the city and accommodating commercial growth, the scale of destruction this time was greater than ever. By mid-1999 Kunming looked very different. Old residential communities had been replaced by large banks, hotels, department stores, and commercial plazas. Streets had been widened, rerouted, renamed, or completely rebuilt. Many long-term residents told me that they could no longer find their way around. The state-controlled media and officials’ speeches celebrated the restructuring as a giant step forward toward city modernization, and the city and provincial governments were not the only ones to express such enthusiasm. Young people and the rising middle class also embraced this vision of spatial modernity and were proud of the new cityscape. They had grown up in a time dominated by the media, the Internet, and the new entertainment industry, which constantly provided images such as skyscrapers, freeways, shopping malls, and Western-style villas. These images were the main source of their imagination of xiandai. Further, members of the new middle class were the ones who directly benefited from urban redevelopment that provided them with luxury downtown housing, shopping opportunities, and roads for private cars.

17. This linear vision of history is not a unique product of this historical period in China but part of the Enlightenment and the thinking of the Chinese Nationalists as well (see Duara 1995).
18. Such decisions are usually influenced by the rationale of the so-called highest and best use of land (see Derbes 1981; Blomley 2002).
19. The terms “traditional” and “old” usually refer to neighborhoods and streets built in the early twentieth century and their distinctive styles and materials. The structures created since the establishment of the socialist regime have a different appearance, largely influenced by Soviet urban planning and architecture (see also Bray 2005; cf. Buchli 1999 and Bater 1980).
This grand restructuring suddenly slowed down in the summer of 2000, when the State Council announced that all the officially designated “renowned historical-cultural cities” would be inspected and reevaluated. If a city failed to protect its historical sites and structures, its special title would be immediately revoked. This announcement was prompted by increasing concern over local abuses of heritage sites reported in the media and pointed out by international heritage agencies such as UNESCO. Local governments in many regions had begun to panic because their urban redevelopment projects had destroyed distinctive cultural sites. Kunming was no exception. Because tourism had become a vital part of the Kunming-centered regional economy, losing the special status would have had a direct negative impact on the entire provincial economy. In order to show that something good was being done for historic preservation, the city government hastily created a special agency and took three symbolic measures, developing plans to rebuild several key historical symbols of the city (fanggu) that had been destroyed, preserve three remaining century-old streets (Luofeng Street, Huashan South Street, and Huashan East Street), and restore the only traditional neighborhood left in the city (Jingxin Street). A special fund of 6 million yuan was set aside for these projects, and the city’s master plan was revised to reflect an increased awareness of historic preservation. The director of the Kunming City Planning Bureau claimed that the guiding principle for urban development was “to strengthen the protection of our renowned historical-cultural city” while “balancing the relationship between protecting historical-cultural sites and modernizing the city” (Li 1999, 26). Ironically, this concern emerged only when the majority of old neighborhoods had already been destroyed.

A master plan is more than just a blueprint for modernization; it has concrete social, political, and economic consequences. It guides urban development, channels the flow of capital, and defines who can live where. While bringing enormous profits to some real estate developers, entrepreneurs, and government officials, it displaces and marginalizes others. The makeover for the 1999 International Expo forced tens of thousands of Kunming residents (mostly factory workers, service-sector employees, and small business operators) out of prime commercial districts and into poorly planned relocation communities in the western suburbs. It was very difficult for relocated families to commute to workplaces or schools located far from their residences. Small business owners mostly

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20. The State Council had named 99 additional national-level “renowned historical-cultural cities” since 1982 and required them to adopt preservation measures.

21. The current exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the yuan is about 1:8.
lost their businesses as their shops were eliminated along with their old homes. Zhao Wei’s family was one of the many that were pushed out of their homes. His family had owned a courtyard house and lived there for four generations. Two of the rooms facing a busy street had been rented out as stores. In 1996 his family was told that the entire neighborhood was to be demolished for renewal projects sponsored by the government and that they had no choice but to follow the relocation plan. Zhao recalled:

We were basically ordered to leave and had very little say in where we were to go and what kind of housing we would be put in. My family was assigned to Zhenhe Xiaoqu, a poorly constructed relocation community in the middle of nowhere. When it rained, the roads turned muddy. There was no bus line connecting us to the city at that time. We had to bike for nearly an hour to get to where we worked. People call such resettlement communities nannminying (refugee camps).

A result of such large-scale relocation and the privatization of housing is the new spatialization of class in the city. The newly rich, including business elites, higher-level managers, and well-positioned officials, are taking over the urban core, while lower-income families are being pushed out into the peripheral areas. This new geography of class is manifested in a highly differentiated pattern of residential communities that offer quite different living spaces and lifestyles.22

Why do government officials promote urban restructuring? What do they gain from pursuing spatial modernity? My research suggests three possible answers. First, as one professional planner explained to me, “The leaders want to accumulate political capital by demonstrating their achievements in modernizing the city. They do so at the price of destroying the old sectors because in their eyes these structures and streets represent backwardness and are incompatible with the image of modern metropolis.” A female researcher from the city-planning institute pointed out that the redesign of the city was being directed by officials who had little professional training and knowledge in planning; professionals like her were expected to work out the technical details but were excluded from the decision-making process.

Second, research has shown that business-state clientelism has increased rather than declined under the market economy (Wank 1999; Pieke 1995; Zhang 2001). Government officials can obtain great profits by promoting land development and engaging in various businesses activities and at the same time provide their entrepreneurial clients with political backup, convenience, and advantages. It is estimated that the income generated by land leasing accounts for a significant part of the revenue of many local governments. The entrepreneurs involved also become important political constituencies for their patrons. Such clientelist ties between bureaucrats and entrepreneurs are becoming a more and more powerful force in Chinese city politics. On the individual level, government officials in certain posts gain enormous bribes from real estate developers in exchange for favors in land leasing and paperwork processing. In Kunming the former governor of Yunnan Province, Li Jiating, and his son had close personal ties with several major housing development companies in Kunming. One of the favors Li did for a developer was to give tacit permission for the construction of a luxury condominium high-rise complex near the Green Lake—a designated primary culture and scenery protection site—despite the fact that the master plan clearly prohibited any high-rises in this area. Three years ago Li was forced to step down in the wake of a number of corruption charges, many of which were tied to the real estate operation.

A third explanation, offered by some Western observers, is that the nationwide urban construction boom is a strategy to “create jobs and stimulate enough growth to ensure social stability and to keep the Communist Party in power” (Kahn 2003). Construction projects (especially commodity housing) can stimulate the entire economy in several ways: increasing the demand for construction and interior remodeling materials, stimulating mass consumption in home-related spending, and generating jobs to mitigate the discontent of millions of laid-off urban workers and rural migrants. It is this national economic growth that provides the Chinese reform regime with its political legitimacy. Some economists warn that this can be a risky strategy, given the possibility of budget deficits associated with the financing of these costly projects, but my research indicates that the local governments that promote and sometimes undertake these projects have gained revenue from leasing land and taxing the real estate sector.

The urban planners and government-employed architects I interviewed are critical of the master plan but often feel overwhelmed by political power and have become cynical or indifferent. In China today it is bureaucratic power, not professional knowledge and skill, that ultimately determines urban planning. Liu, who worked in the bureau of city planning, was trained at a top Chinese university. When he graduated in 1980s, he was ambitious and wanted to do something good for his hometown, but as time went by he became disillusioned with planning politics. Several times his suggestions and creative ideas about saving the old neighborhoods were brushed aside by higher officials. By the time I interviewed him, he had become a corrupt civil servant who lived on bribes from developers. Even though he was not highly placed in the bureaucracy, he was in the strategic position of reviewing and approving applications for construction. One day he invited me to an expensive Japanese dinner at a five-star hotel. While sipping sake from a delicate ceramic cup, he said:

22. For a detailed account of relocation politics and the spatialization of class in Chinese cities today, see Zhang (2004a, 2004b). This pattern is, as one reviewer said, quite different from that found in the United States, where “inner city” and “suburb” map conceptually onto “poverty” and “affluence.”
You should know what it is like in China today. It is the officials with bureaucratic power (quannl) and developers with money (qian) who have the final say. But they do not know anything about city planning and construction design. It is extremely difficult for real planners and architects like us to fulfill our dreams because we have neither power nor money. . . . I cannot say these things to my superiors at work, but I can tell you my true opinion here: The so-called protection of the old city is a total fiasco. It is meaningless to talk about protecting the ancient city at this point, because there is not much left to protect. It is too late; the destruction is irreversible. What we have today is the product of short-sighted policies driven by some officials’ political interests and desire for quick economic gains and personal fame.

Other planning professionals have simply left their posts and started private businesses. Wang was once a professor of architecture at a local university and a consultant for the city government on planning and design issues, but three years ago he decided to quit his job and “jump into the business sea” (xiahai) because his ideas were often discounted by officials and he had become frustrated with the direction of the city’s planning. He started a home remodeling company and made a large fortune. By the time I interviewed him he was driving a brand-new black Buick and had bought two luxury condominiums in a new residential community. He said that he cared little about what the city would look like; all he wanted to do was to get rich and live a comfortable life.

Despite the power of the progrowth forces, the implementation of the master plan has not always gone smoothly. The profound changes it has initiated in the built environment have invoked debates, critiques, and counterpractices from certain sectors of the local population. In the following pages I will examine how these alternative views and practices seek to sustain a different sense of community, place, and sociality while questioning the often taken-for-granted value of development and xiandai.

In Search of Old Kunming

One critical voice comes from cultural elites and professionals in the city (for example, professors, journalists, writers, poets, artists, medical doctors, engineers, and architects) who see the demolition of old neighborhoods as an irreversible historical mistake. They view themselves as being symbolically uprooted or deprived of historical memory. A university professor in his 70s put it this way: “The city is the physical container of our memory. So many past events and recollections that were once clearly inscribed in the cityspace are now all gone. I can only trace them by looking at those faded black-and-white photographs in archives.” This sentiment is widely shared by other disheartened intellectuals who see the old city streets and neighborhoods that had once sustained their memories of the past being bulldozed and sacrificed on the altar of modernity.

The discontent is also articulated through a rising concern for Kunming’s identity. A popular local newspaper known for its daring approach to social problems opened up a telephone hotline in July 2000 specifically devoted to a public debate on the theme “Kunming, What Is Your Soul?” Readers including students, workers, teachers, and entrepreneurs participated in the debate and expressed their concern that their city was losing its uniqueness. A taxi driver told me that he was upset when a friend of his who had come to visit from Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, said, “After all, your Kunming is not so different from our Urumqi!” But then, as he thought it over, he had to admit that his friend’s remark was not far from the truth.23 These people are not all opposed to development—many of them in fact support commercialization—but have grown increasingly anxious about its impact on the uniqueness of their city and its historical legacy. This concern has led to the spread of popular interest in “old Kunming.”

An exhibition of 365 old photographs of Kunming and its surrounding regions taken by a French consul, Auguste François, during the late Qing and early Republican periods opened to the public in the summer of 1999. Entitled “A Century’s Recollection” (shiji de huishou), the exhibition attracted tens of thousands of viewers, creating a new cultural fever for discovering old Kunming. Walking through the display hallway, one was immediately captivated by the vivid photographs about a wide variety of things in and around Kunming: scenery, street life, architecture, marketplaces, beggars, merchants, artisans, peasants, and so on.24 This exhibition, which lasted for two months, was widely advertised throughout the city and on the World Wide Web. Every day thousands of local residents and tourists came to the exhibition. A VCD containing all the works displayed and a catalog were available for purchase. An exquisite picture album entitled The Gaze of History sold out quickly despite its high price (256 yuan). Postcards featuring selected photos were also very popular at local bookstores and post offices. A middle-aged viewer told me that he had seen the show three times and had bought the album so that he could revisit the old sites of the city in virtual reality. He was saddened by the loss of the traditional cityscape that had sustained a clear sense of local culture and history.

23. As one reviewer pointed out, his dismay may have been caused not only by the implication that Kunming was becoming more generic but also by that fact that his friend was comparing it with a peripheral city viewed by most Chinese as backward and underdeveloped.

24. François spent much of his time in Yunnan at the turn of the twentieth century (1890s–1920s) and took more than 1,600 photographs of Kunming and other parts of the province. These photos were discovered in a cellar in rural France in 1985. Two Kunming residents who visited France saw these photos in several local museums and raised a large sum of money for the purchase of copyright for the exhibition and reproduction of a portion of these precious pictures in China. Some of the pictures also captured the grim historical reality of prisoners, the homeless, and war suffering.
cois’s pictures is inseparable from the nostalgia for the old, authentic Kunming among local residents and tourists. One of the main organizers/sponsors of this event told me that he had predicted its success because of this widespread sentiment. Of course, not all viewers interpreted the exhibition in the same way. Those with strong national pride and younger visitors tended to regard the images as a reminder of China’s backwardness and the national humiliation inflicted upon it by foreign colonial powers. In their eyes, the images of old houses, narrow streets, and horse-drawn carriages represented the opposite of the xiandai and progressive.

**Rescuing Renqi**

The second trend of critique regarding recent spatial changes is based on personal memories and experiences of the city that articulate a very different sense of urban life and human-space relationship. For residents who have lived in Kunming for more than two or three decades, the most startling change is perhaps the disappearance of bustling street life. In the different context of Brasília, Holston (1989) has described a similar process as “the death of the street.”

Older streets in Kunming tend to be narrow with pedestrian walkways on both sides. Shops immediately border the pedestrian walkway so that people can walk and shop simultaneously. This is essentially a space designed for human activities rather than for cars. In a sense, the street and the marketplace are virtually the same space; shopping and walking are overlapping activities. The phrase guangjie, “strolling and shopping,” nicely captures the essence of this kind of space. For older residents such street life is more personal, lively, and intimate because it integrates commercial activities into everyday life. As urban redevelopment proceeds and the number of cars multiplies, the majority of old streets have been replaced by wider, multilane roads designed primarily for automobiles. As a result, street-based marketplaces are disappearing. The new streets now have up to six lanes and allow high-speed traffic. Pedestrians are required to use dedicated crosswalks, which tend to be placed too far apart. All major streets are divided by long metal fences that make crossing outside the dedicated zones nearly impossible. Although this new method of traffic control appears rational,

25. In recent years nostalgia has become a means of collective identity building, but its specific forms and contents vary from place to place (see Davies 2002). In contemporary Shanghai, for example, the search for modernity is often oriented not toward the future but toward the past—a lost golden age in the 1930s when Shanghai was known as “Paris of the East” (Eckhardt 2001; Zhang 2000).

26. The disappearance of street life is a common effect of the modernist city planning experienced by many other countries during the shift from preindustrial to industrial urbanism.
it has significantly altered the dynamics of the local shopping experience (figs. 4–6).

Jinbi Road used to be a long, narrow street lined with hundreds of beautiful broad-leafed parasol trees. It was Kunming’s most prosperous commercial area, full of small shops and restaurants. Residents loved shopping there, and businesses flourished. In 1996, however, this area became a target for demolition, and a year later it had been replaced by a multilane boulevard, office high-rises, shopping malls, and up-scale housing complexes. A large public square was created for strolling and admiring the newly completed reproductions of two historical symbols of the city—the Jinma Biji Arches. The two arches are, however, completely overshadowed by the surrounding modern high-rises (figs. 7 and 8). A reporter from the city television station explained to me: “The reason these two elaborate arches were taken as the unique symbol of our city in the past was that they stood out among other structures. But today they are overpowered by high-rises and thus have completely lost their significance and charm.” To revitalize local businesses nearly destroyed during the restructuring, a vast underground shopping plaza was established so that it would not interfere with the surface traffic, but something went seriously wrong. Although the shopping plaza had shining glass counters, marble floors, and fancy elevators, it attracted few buyers. Twice I visited this place and found myself among only several dozen customers. Some counters had already been shut down because of lack of sales.

The death of the street can be understood in terms of the popular Chinese concept renqi, which means the breath or energy of human beings but also implies human vitality or dynamism and is derived from the Daoist notion that the ideal state of being is one in which human beings are harmoniously immersed in nature (or the physical surroundings). The presence of strong renqi in a given place is inseparable from its spatial form and is crucial to business prosperity. Since the old cityscape was designed for intense face-to-face human interactions, it was capable of containing vigorous renqi. By contrast, the new modern avenues designed for vehicles tend to “kill” crowds and are unable to generate or maintain renqi. A woman who taught at a local high school explained the relationship between renqi and spatial design this way:

Business at the Jinbi Plaza is so bleak because there is no

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27. Both are reproductions of structures built in the Ming Dynasty. “Jinma Biji” literally means “Golden Horse Jade Rooster,” two legendary creatures. The magic of the two arches was that at a particular point in the lunar calendar the shadows they cast momentarily overlapped.

28. This traditional Chinese concept has reemerged in popular urban discourse with the revival of private businesses and commercial activities in the reform period.
renqi there at all. It is extremely inconvenient to get to the underground shops. So most people stay above the ground to get things done. . . . You want to know where is still a good place to wander around? Shuncheng Street! Renqi is still very strong there. It is bustling and noisy. One can buy all sorts of things such as BBQ stuff to eat while walking and shopping on the street. Stores are right there in front of you, and you are surrounded by people bargaining with one another. It is much more fun than going to a big shopping center.

The place she mentioned was one of the few old neighborhoods that had escaped the massive pre-Expo demolition. It was also the home of a number of Muslim families of the Hui minority. Because of its lively traditional street life and distinctive Islamic food, it appealed to a large number of local consumers and tourists. I have visited this bustling neighborhood several times since 2000 and always found it packed with consumers. Renqi is derived not only from the density of people in a given place but also from a state of being at ease in a space that is capable of mingling everyday living experiences with commercial activities. New urban planning, by contrast, tends to overpower and alienate individuals and kill renqi. In sum, the death of the traditional street in China also means the demise of renqi and the eventual disintegration of a way of urban life centered on intimate human dynamics and close-knit communities.

Recently, because of the growing public demand for the revitalization of traditional commercial activities and the return of convenience to the lives of ordinary city dwellers, the city government has created several special pedestrian markets or “walking streets” (buxingjie) downtown. These pedestrian-friendly market spaces are, however, far from adequate to meet the daily needs of the majority of citizens and merchants. As a result, street hawkers often make use of spaces unintended by the plan to create spontaneous markets and engage in constant “guerrilla wars” with the patrol officers who try to drive them away.

**Ditan: Unruly Spatial Practice**

A street scene often encountered in Kunming may be described as follows: Street hawkers carrying baskets full of fruit, vegetables, combs, shoelaces, wallets, or mugs for sale occupy an overpass or part of a boulevard, turning it into a temporary marketplace. They are, however, vigilant, constantly looking around as if danger might present itself at any time. When government patrol vehicles appear, the vendors pack up and

29. A U.S. equivalent to buxingjie would be the farmers’ market, which has a similar spatial layout with stalls on both sides of a walkway, but a buxingjie is more permanent and the stall owners are not necessarily farmers.

30. Many of the government intervention strategies and hawkers’ counteractics that I have observed in Kunming are very similar to what Smart (1989) describes for colonial Hong Kong.
run to avoid fines and confiscation, and fruit, vegetables, and other things fall out the containers and scatter across the ground.

Highly mobile, spontaneous trading sites known as *ditan* can be found everywhere in Chinese cities. From the government’s perspective, they are simply a sign of disorder and disruption because they run against the official effort to establish a regulated and formalized spatial order. *Ditan* are described as “cancers” growing on the streets, and peddlers are seen as waging a “guerrilla war” with patrol officers. One newspaper report (*Chuncheng Wanbao*, November 26, 1997) depicts the tactics and persistence of street hawkers as follows:

There are too many hawkers in Kunming today. Since they like to engage in a guerrilla-style war, they are very difficult to control. . . . When a hawker is caught, he is fined only several yuan or several tens of yuan and is let go. No wonder he is not afraid and will come back again. He plays a game of hide-and-seek: when you come, he runs away; when you take a break, he comes back to the street again.

The city government has repeatedly mobilized to curb the spread of *ditan*, with particularly intense campaigns involving over 800 officers taking place in late 1997 and late 2001. The goal has been to “restore the city’s image by cracking down on any illegal occupation of streets for business activities” (*zhengshi shirong, daji zhandao jingying*). The official argument has been that spontaneous business activities are untidy, unregulated, and block traffic, thus damaging Kunming’s modern, orderly metropolitan image. The campaigns, which represent a form of “spatial governmentality,” target not persons but spaces, excluding “offensive behavior from specified places rather than attempting to correct or reform offenders” (Merry 2001, 16). Patrol officers conduct raids to disperse the crowds and clear the area, but they do not detain the vendors. Despite repeated efforts to eradicate *ditan*, street hawkers return because of the demand for their services and goods.31

The spontaneous informal markets created by mobile vendors are very much like the previous farmers’ markets embedded in residential neighborhoods. They are extremely convenient and provide fresh and affordable produce. Sellers and buyers can bargain with one another and even get to know each other on a personal level over time. The centralized market buildings constructed by local governments are time-consuming and tiresome for families to travel to, and since retailers (mostly farmers from the suburbs) have to pay a monthly fee to rent space in them (*tanwei*), their goods cost more. As a result, many residents in the city rely on street vendors for their daily food supplies.

Middle-class families may opt to shop at the transnational super stores (Wal-Mart, Price Mart, and North-Mart) that...
have appeared over the past decade, but the majority of working-class families cannot afford to shop there on a daily basis. These mega-stores also offer a very different kind of shopping experience that can be alienating to some people. When Wal-Mart opened a branch in Kunming in 1998, Ms. Li, a retired high-school teacher in her early 70s, went there with her daughter. This was her first visit to a Western-style superstore. At the entrance she was asked to leave her bag at the counter because no bags were allowed inside. This made her feel very uncomfortable, because she thought she was being suspected as a thief. Then, on entering the store, she became totally disoriented and could not find what she wanted. The four-story building was packed with other confused customers moving in all directions. Ms. Li was more accustomed to the two-way flow of crowds in the street-side market. After nearly being hit by a runaway shopping cart, she left saying, “This is not shopping; it is like going to a battle. Everyone is in a big hurry. You cannot bargain or chat with the sellers.” The destruction of the traditional spatial form and lifestyle had not only annihilated local history and memory but also created a deep rupture in the experiences of older residents.

Emerging Property-Based Activism

Perhaps the most direct confrontation with urban restructuring comes from evicted homeowners who struggle to defend their property and place in the city. Since 2000, especially with the recent constitutional amendment to protect private property ownership, urban Chinese have become more aware of their rights as property owners and willing to fight for them. The various forms of civic activism that have emerged among displaced residents in recent years tend to be articulated not in the language of antiredevelopment or antigrowth but in terms of defending one’s property rights. Property-based activism tends to occur in projects involving private real estate developers rather than in these directly initiated by the government. Elsewhere (Zhang 2004a) I have offered a detailed account of the various strategies that residents use to delay demolition in order to gain better compensation from the government or private developers. For example, the so-called nail households simply refuse to leave their homes long after the surrounding houses have been demolished, and some even resort to threats of suicide in bargaining with the developer or the local government for fair compensation.

Another, more promising trend lies in the growing number of small-scale protests, public petitions, and legal actions organized by evicted residents against developers and even local

32. The standard compensations offered by developers or local governments come in two forms: cash or housing elsewhere. The amount of cash offered is, however, often far from adequate for a family to purchase another modest apartment in the city on the commercial market, and the alternative housing provided is usually in distant suburbs without basic community services.
government. A report by the Chinese Construction Ministry indicates that 28% of the 4,820 complaints and 70% of the 1,730 formal appeals it received between January and August in 2002 were related to urban housing demolition and relocation (Zhao 2003). In Kunming, for example, the government’s efforts to redevelop the Muslim neighborhood Shuncheng Street elicited protests from the residents there, and the city government, concerned about the potentially volatile nature of ethnic relations in this case, halted several attempts at renewal. Ultimately, however, the protests were unable to stop the encroachment of powerful commercial interests into this potentially lucrative area at the very heart of the city. During the summer of 2004, a government-backed commercial development project was able to clear the area to build a new shopping/apartment complex. To minimize resistance, the district government made a deal with the developer to offer Muslim homeowners there an appealing compensation plan—about twice the amount of cash compensation offered to evicted residents in other parts of the city and the possibility of moving back.

In cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, evicted residents have gone even farther by filing lawsuits against developers. Lawyers are increasingly willing to take such cases on behalf of the “weak” despite the enormous obstacles they involve. Although suits against developers are often rejected by the local courts, they represent an important direction and a new possibility in citizens’ efforts to preserve their rights.

Situating the story of Kunming in a larger comparative-historical context helps to clarify the nature and extent of civic opposition to post-Mao spatial restructuring. In many ways, Kunming’s experience echoes that of European and East Asian cities facing the choice between urban renewal and historic preservation and, to a degree, that of postindustrial American cities in the 1960s. There is a high degree of government intervention in redevelopment, frequent demolition of central-city neighborhoods (mostly poor and ethnic), and subsequent relocation of residents in the spirit of “growth at any cost” (see Mollenkopf 1983; Zhang and Fang 2004). Yet, the differences between China and these other places are suggestive. Renewal projects elsewhere tend to produce better-organized local opposition from well-established civic entities such as neighborhood associations, religious groups, and other types of citizens’ groups (see Herzfeld 1991; Brumann n.d.; Heckart 1989). In some cases residents of threatened neighborhoods are able to mobilize and engage in community-based activism to halt or alter development plans. In postcommunist Eastern European cities, according to Szelenyi (1996), although social inequality and spatial segregation are increasing sharply, the old inner-city neighborhoods have not been replaced completely by new development; instead they are undergoing a process of gentrification by the new bourgeoisie and the professional class. By contrast, the speed and scale of demolition and redevelopment in post-Mao Chinese cities are extraordinary. Often entire neighborhoods and their social fabric are destroyed within a few months. There is no established civil society that residents can rely on to defend their communities while facing development backed by the government. The social and spatial violence experienced by millions of Chinese people is justified in terms of neoliberal market rationality; resistance and opposition are stigmatized as irrational action against the logic of growth and the free market.

Conclusion

The politics of spatial restructuring in Kunming points to a dilemma in the pursuit of xiandai encountered by Chinese cities in general in the late-socialist era. Centuries-old neighborhoods in Beijing and Shanghai have also been eradicated for urban redevelopment. In preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing’s remaining distinct hutong (alleyway) and siheyuan (courtyard houses) are in danger of disappearing, forcing millions of ordinary residents to the outskirts of the city. The increased tension between historic preservation and commercial development epitomizes a long-standing predicament facing the Chinese nation-state. On the one hand, a nation burdened by its past desperately hopes to move beyond its own historical shadow and measure up to the developed West; on the other hand, it clings to its cultural heritage in an effort to alleviate the looming national and local identity crisis in the process of becoming xiandai.33 What my research reveals is a concrete articulation of this ongoing tension at the level of the built environment. In particular, it shows how the widespread sense of being late and the desire to catch up with the modern world is transferred to the spatial realm and plays a decisive role in reshaping the late-socialist cityspace, at the same time creating the conditions under which a new progrowth coalition can emerge.

Since the disintegration of state socialism worldwide, there has emerged a large body of literature that celebrates the withering of state power and the rise of the free market and civil society, but this overly optimistic view of postsocialist states has been called into question by recent studies. Research indicates that the post-Mao state is not rolling back but has actually expanded its bureaucratic capacity in many domains and is refashioning its art of governance (see Mueggler 2001; Shue 1995; Rofel 1999; Oi 1991; Yan 2003; Zhang 2001). My study shows that the late-socialist state is reinventing itself as what I call an “entrepreneurial” state, participating in enterprises such as leasing out land-use rights and promoting development to strengthen themselves financially and politically. The city in this context is not only the object of regulation but a business to be managed for profit. A hegemonic momentum that valorizes unlimited growth and development has emerged, and a localized progrowth coalition premised on real estate has become a central force in the remaking of the post-Mao governmentality. But spatial restructuring is also

33. For more analysis of this cultural predicament see Rofel (1999), Yang (1988), and Zhang (1997).
a process that simultaneously generates displacement, disorientation, and social conflict. Even though the several forms of civic opposition I have identified tend to be marginalized under the reform regime, they help sustain a much-needed critical point of view that questions the logic of late-socialist spatial restructuring and destabilizes the seemingly inescapable machine of development.

Acknowledgments

Early versions of this article were presented at the annual symposium of the Center for Chinese Studies, University of California at Berkeley, March 2–4, 2001, and at the Workshop “Remembering to Be Chinese: History, Commemoration, and Identity in Greater China,” Fairbank Center, Harvard University, May 15–16, 2004. I thank Rob Culp, Marisol de la Cadena, David Eaton, Sara Friedman, Mark Robert Miller, Aihwa Ong, Eileen Otis, Roger Rouse, Ann Russ, Carol Smith, Suzana Sawyer, Alan Smart, Terry Woronov, and the participants in the Berkeley symposium and the Harvard workshop for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to the reviewers and editor of Current Anthropology for their useful critique and suggestions, which helped strengthen my argument enormously. Fieldwork for this research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, a Faculty Research Grant, and an Institute of Governmental Affairs Junior Faculty Research Grant from the University of California at Davis.

Comments

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Zhang reminds us that modernity, although a temporal concept, has frequently involved ambitious projects of spatial reordering. Cities in particular have been central sites for such projects, and not only in landmark cases such as Brasilia or Chandigarh, and these have often been motivated by very optimistic assumptions about the possibility of remodeling society by remodeling urban space. Now that many of these assumptions have been called into question, one often finds the other extreme of blaming the architecture and urban planning of high modernism for a wide array of social ills. In truth, I think that there is little empirical research to support either contention. Therefore, while we may be tempted to assume, for instance, that the “spatial violence” of the Parisian banlieus must be related to the physical violence that erupted there last year, there is not much to give us certainty here.

All the more welcome, then, is Zhang’s spirited contribution on the creation and perception of modern urban spaces in China, in particular since it is informed by ethnographic observation of how people talk about and appropriate the changing cityscape of Kunming (down to the emic concepts such as renqi that they are employing for this purpose). This is a lively account of power, corruption, resistance, and loss. In fact, Zhang could have gone even farther, mapping in more detail how the enthusiasm for the new and the nostalgia for the old are socially distributed. Ascribing a preference for modern architecture to “youths and the rising new middle class” in their undifferentiated entirety, for example, appears suspiciously general to me, and Zhang’s own values become rather prominent at times. I argue for digging deeper, however, not for abandoning the approach. Urban anthropology stands to gain from inquiries into how society and the built environment shape one another, and here I think that there is nothing but ethnographic research (e.g., in addition to Zhang’s, Holston 1999; Low 1999; Wildner 2003) to go by.

Zhang’s article throws up two points that I am particularly curious about. One is why the modernist, automobile-centered city is embraced so enthusiastically in China. This could simply be a phase through which all industrialized societies must go. Yet given that the international mainstream of urban planning has long been struggling to move away from this paradigm—even as close by as in Japan—there are also alternative models for “catching up,” such as the trendy renovation-cum-gentrification of historical quarters or the return of the pedestrian to central-city space. These alternatives cannot be entirely absent from the mass media, the Internet, and the entertainment industry that Zhang holds responsible for shaping the views of young people in particular. Could it be that Western modernity reaches Kunming in a mediated version, via Hong Kong, Shanghai, or Tokyo (with their high levels of car dominance and relative absence of built heritage), rather than directly from London, Paris, or New York? A closer analysis of how architectural tastes are being made in present-day China—with special attention to the architects who actually design the new structures—appears to be called for.

But tastes and planning may go only so far in Kunming. Reading about bureaucratic corruption and the cynical resignation of architects and planners and looking at the cityscape in figure 2, I wonder whether it is a particular planning orientation or rather the absence of planning that is responsible. As other “wounded cities” (Schneider and Susser 2003) such as Palermo (Schneider and Schneider 2003) or my own field site of Kyoto (Brumann n.d.) vividly demonstrate, it does not require a consensual architectural ideology—such as “catching up” with Western models—to devastate a historical cityscape. Giving free rein to individual real-estate proprietors’ fancies or simply to their desire to realize maximal profits with minimal investments is fully sufficient. Central Kyoto, for example, is dotted with high-rises that almost everyone—including the investors—views as eyesores. In the case of Kunming, much more central coordination in demolishing entire neighborhoods, mercilessly displacing their inhabitants, and laying out the new street grid is made possible by an