

## BOOK REVIEW

Wang Di,

*The Teahouse Under Socialism:*

*The Decline and Renewal of Public Life in Chengdu, 1950-2000*

(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018)\*

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Wang Di's meticulously researched study of teahouses in Chengdu during the second half of the twentieth century describes how the Communist Government has been able to dramatically affect the daily lives of the city's people. However, the increased capacity of the state does not mean that long established traditions have been eradicated or that people have not had the space to express themselves, even during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. This story of the role the teahouse plays in Chengdu's urban culture is best read in conjunction with Wang Di's earlier work that discusses these spaces before 1949, because it demonstrates how the interactions between state and society that occupy so much of our scholarship on the Communist regime had antecedents in the early twentieth century. Moreover, considering Wang Di's work as a whole provides a history of Chengdu over one hundred years, something that is indispensable to studies of urban change in China, which still tend to focus on large coastal cities, both past and present. It is therefore a little disappointing that Wang Di's comments on the changing nature of urban identity are somewhat confusing, and comparisons with other cities in China remain undeveloped.

Wang Di theorizes the state-society relationship in terms of the public sphere and civil society, and his idea that people lived out a private life together in the public space of the teahouse neatly resolves much of the debate around this issue, since it allows for multiple types of social interaction, including the possibility of political debate. It also binds the book together, as successive chapters describe how the scope for personal expression in teahouses narrowed during the Maoist period, but then broadened again after the Cultural Revolution. This story is familiar to scholars of China, but much of our understanding of specific spaces in cities focuses on sites of production, particularly *danwei* (work units), and not sites of leisure. Wang Di's intimate knowledge of teahouses and access to some excellent archival material means that he is able to reconstruct the process by which the Communist Government exerted control over these spaces, describe acts of resistance during the Maoist period, and explore how market forces have provided new opportunities for Chengdu residents to reclaim these spaces for themselves. I particularly like the focus on the period of military control during the first few months of the new regime in 1949 in chapter one. This describes how tax evasion hampered urban revival after over a decade of war, and in the case of Chengdu teahouses was solved through registration and

then replacement of the guild with a state-run business organization. The conclusion to this chapter points to a need to re-evaluate the political campaigns of the early 1950s, and while it is important to remember that the Chinese Communist Party's authoritarian mode of government, which was established before it came to power in 1949, later gave rise to terrible atrocities, it is also crucial to understand the very real problems the new government faced when it came to power. Of course, from the outset the party-state sought to dominate and reform people's attitudes and behaviour, and so opera performances and other long established public cultural practices in teahouses were a particular target for policy makers. Even here though, initial efforts to establish experimental theatres in teahouses took time to yield the results the party wanted, and during the Hundred Flowers Movement and the early 1960s, operas were performed more freely, showing how at times there was still some scope for public expression. It was still important to watch what one said, however, especially if you were designated as having an undesirable class background, as Mr Luo found out to his cost during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (107-108).

As the narrative moves into the Reform Period, it provides a rich description of how the teahouse has adapted to maintain its place at the heart of Chengdu's urban culture. The account of different types of teahouse catering to clientele with different means and tastes reminds me of the work of Andrew Field and James Farrer on nightlife in Shanghai.<sup>1</sup> There is also clearly a geographical element to the revival of teahouses as the city of Chengdu has expanded. This suggests that Wang Di's work could provide the basis for an historical GIS project, creating a virtual Chengdu, which would be a valuable counterpart to the virtual cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and others.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of the second half of the book is given over to experiences of teahouse patrons, clientele, and workers. We learn that it has been relatively easy to establish a teahouse, but often hard to make even the most lavish and well-funded businesses profitable, even though some 10% of Chengdu's population visit regularly. I was particularly struck by the way in which some teahouses are places of business, with the Friday Tea Club becoming a de facto commodities exchange in the early Reform Period (143). Wang Di's attention to detail in recounting the life experiences of workers in teahouses is also impressive. Many are migrant workers, who have found an identity in the city, and in doing so have revived long-established practices in teahouses,

such as ear wax removal. The final chapter on mah-jong is for me the most interesting. Although not specifically about the teahouse it narrates how a lawsuit against a household committee that supported the playing of mah-jong set the individual rights of Yu Yongjun, who complained about the noise, against those of the group of mostly retired mah-jong players. This case, which received national recognition, demonstrates the complex interplay between the private and the public, both in a particular physical space within the city, and in the wider social space of public opinion. The City Government for example was caught between concerns that mah-jong was seen as slightly disreputable, in part because it often involves gambling, and the importance of supporting a game that is viewed as part of Chinese culture. In this case, the book comes full circle when considering the relationship between the state, the public and the private realm, and it is clear that while people in Chengdu enjoy much more freedom than at any time perhaps since before the war with Japan, this freedom continues to be negotiated, both with the Chinese state and now in the court of public opinion.

The freedom to have a private social life in a public space is part of what many scholars believe constitutes urban modernity, and I think that Wang Di would agree with this. However, his discussion of the nature of Chengdu's identity is confusing. In the introduction, the way in which teahouses have adapted to

the increased pace of life in Chengdu and the changing social habits that new innovations such as KTV have brought is described as modernity (7-11). Later, these changes are attributed to the influence of Western post-modernity, as opposed to Maoist-era modernism that eschewed bourgeois consumption in favour of an austere productive urban lifestyle (202). Western post-modernity is then confused with geoculture in the conclusion, although this is taken to mean top-down state planning based on Western ideas of urban design and development, rather than imported urban cultural behaviour. (218). The notion of urban modernity, how far it is coterminous with Westernization, the extent to which it may now be global, and the capacity of people to adapt or resist to it are questions that have and will continue to exercise scholars for many years to come. Perhaps Wang Di can offer some thoughts on terminology to be used, and some insights into how residents of other cities in China may be navigating these complex issues.

*\*Editors' Note:* Unfortunately, Wang Di declined to offer a response, so we had to forgo our usual formula for this review.

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<sup>1</sup> James Farrer and Andrew Field, *Shanghai Nightscapes: A Nocturnal Biography of a Global City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://beijing.virtualcities.fr/>, <https://www.virtualshanghai.net/>, and <http://tianjin.virtualcities.fr/>.