

**CHIN 562**  
**Post-Mao Urban Culture & Arts**

*Journals*



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*Peking, Peking*  
《北京，北京》

As we noted in class, one element that persists throughout the entirety of *Peking, Peking* was the sense of inevitability. This atmosphere is played up in a number of realms: Zhu Ming express a dislike for the city, and yet he returns to it. Hé harbors a deep fear of falling into the same descent into mental illness as her mother did, and she feels that this descent is deeply connected to her environment and would have been an inevitable conclusion if she had stayed in her hometown.

Hé's story struck a stronger chord in me than Zhu Ming's or Zhang Dali's. How much of who we are is influenced by our surroundings? Or, how much of who we are is influenced by how those around us react to, and have reacted to, our surroundings? Different cultures and groups have different ways of organizing and shaping their worlds, and our cities, homes, and societies reflect those different systems of organization. It's no surprise, then, that movement to a different surrounding often accompanies, or even marks, a decision to change one's life and one's mental well-being, and Hé's escape into Beijing illustrates that.

Furthermore, Hé could have escaped from her hometown to any other place, but, instead, she chooses to run to a big city like Beijing. Part of this may be due to the sense of anonymity that the city lends. In Hé's hometown, everyone knew each other, and, subsequently, everyone knew of Hé's mother's mental illness. However, in the city, people are packed so closely together, and the population is so huge in the first place, that a sense of anonymity persists throughout the city. In the city—at least, the sense that I got when I was in Beijing and in Singapore—one is never really alone due to the denseness of the population, and yet alienation

and personal disconnect run throughout the city.

How much of this alienation is due to rapid urbanization and due to the rapid restructuring of life, the changing conceptions of home that characterize new cities such as Beijing? The stark contrast between the artists' hometowns and Beijing show this sharp division. The structures in the artists' hometowns are more run-down and hug the ground more closely, but they carry with them a history, whereas the buildings in Beijing are high-rises that are relatively recent and perhaps lack the sense of time and "home" that the buildings in the village have. Furthermore, space is partitioned such that each person/family occupies a smaller unit, and the units are divided in a way that makes interaction more difficult and makes each person's life more closed, whereas the roads and structures in the village seemed to be more open and lent themselves more to interaction. If we return back to the notion of our selves being shaped by our group's reactions to space and our understanding of life through our classifications and subdivisions of space, then we can see how the different structures that characterize the city lend themselves to imbuing urban culture with a sense of alienation and division.

## *Campanella/Fei*

Campanella highlights six traits of Chinese urban development: speed, scale, spectacle, sprawl, segregation, and sustainability. These traits are intersectional: the scale of development supports the sense of spectacle; sprawl facilitates segregation; speed and short-term goals make it questionable whether the model of the city is sustainable, and whether sustainable practices are being employed.

The impression from the text was that China seeks to expand and urbanize as a way to maintain face, to provide an image to the rest of the world that it is developing, that it is sophisticated and just as capable of being a superpower as any other country:

*This yearning for “face” plays out on a larger, global stage as well. China is a nation on the rise, keen on making its mark on the world and erasing the legacy of its past humiliation at the hands of the West and Japan. Like the self-made parvenu, China is striving to outbuild and outshine those who long kept her on her knees. This is, of course, the prime motive force behind China’s fervent preparations for the 2008 Olympic Games. It is also clearly at work in the preparations for World Expo 2010 in Shanghai. (Campanella 291)*

The lingering question in the Campanella reading for me was: How much of China’s urban development is defined by the West and by outside cultural forces? In razing traditional sites such as *hutong* and *siheyuan* to clear a path for development, is China sacrificing its cultural heritage to adhere to some global norm modeled under outside standards? Is China’s desire to push back against its Western and Japanese humiliators instead a perpetuation of the privilege placed on those cultures as the ideal for which China strives?

Furthermore, the point that Campanella makes that concerned me the most was the

sustainability of these cities. I was not so much concerned with the environmental sustainability, which is still an important point, but rather the sustainability of China's growth model as it is right now. This particular quote illustrated that problem to me particularly well:

*In Xi'an, city officials built a spectacular new plaza to showcase the Tang Dynasty Big Goose Pagoda. But what really makes the scene is a vast fountain complex whose hundreds of shooting water jets, synchronized to music and illuminated at night by lasers and floodlights, is a sight not soon forgotten (nor is the incongruity, sharply noted by local residents, of such aqueous indulgence in an arid region and a city challenged with perennial water shortages).*

In its attempt to urbanize, does China end up being self-destructive? It appears as though China is attempting to construct a certain face, to simply put on an air of progress, but that the actual underlying structure is bowing under the weight of this rapid development. We have often characterized the city as something artificial and contrasting with other, more "organic" structures of life, but is that really the case? It seems to me that cities also have an organic and natural way of developing and growing, but that China is attempting to force that development and accelerate the normal cycle. And that premature acceleration, while pleasant now, may have its consequences in the future.

## *Visser*

In “Designing the Postsocialist City,” Visser discusses the various upheavals and changes that Chinese cities are experiencing. Among those changes are (1) the rapid changes in culture, with the biggest shift being from rural to urban, (2) changes to space and to structures as older *hutong* and other traditional structures are demolished to make way for more “modern” buildings, and (3) rapid demographic changes, both with regards to ethnicity, place of origin, economics, etc.

The discussion of migrant workers in particular piqued my interest. Visser notes that first-generation migrants to the city are generally optimistic and hopeful about their futures, whereas second-generation migrants—the children of the first-generation migrants—are much more pessimistic. This pessimism is informed by a number of sources. For one, these second-generation migrants, as Visser notes, have internalized the prejudice against them. Secondly, there is a disconnect on both cultural ends for second-generation migrants. They are removed from their rural roots, but, at the same time, they are not fully accepted and integrated into their urban settings.

I feel like this shift in attitude is not limited to the city. This narrative is representative of a broader narrative of migration and diaspora: this trajectory is characteristic of a number of hyphenated American groups (e.g. Chinese-American, Mexican-American, etc.). I wonder, then, if this is simply a generalizable narrative of movement as a whole. The first generation, pushed by some external force to move, retains a hopeful attitude toward the transition and will make significant sacrifices to ensure a certain quality of life. The second generation, however, becomes the transitional generation and must struggle to integrate two often competing forms of

life. Subsequent generations may steadily become more and more integrated depending on the political climate and how pervasive negative institutionalized ideologies towards certain groups are.

Visser also notes throughout the chapter that China has a long history of synthesizing foreign cultural influences and Sinecizing outside motifs and structures to match Chinese culture. However, I found that to contrast with later commentary, such as that by Feng Jikai, to contrast with that evaluation: Feng Jikai notes with alarm at how quickly China is uprooting its heritage and history in the name of urbanization. I think that characterizes the nature of the conflict: on one hand, China seeks to join in the global urbanization race. However, at the same time, China strikes a difficult balance with how to maintain its cultural heritage and legacy while adhering to a globalized urban culture that does not in particular place any emphasis on local history and tradition. This is a struggle that I have seen play out over a number of “global” cities, and I think it is a question that China needs to seriously consider in its frenzy for urbanization. I don’t think it’s enough to represent Chinese culture through shallow connections to historical motifs; urbanization should not be and does not need to be mutually exclusive with cultural preservation and heritage. If this question is not adequately dealt with, then I feel that China may feel a sense of cultural loss and disconnect in the future not unlike that following the Cultural Revolution.

## *Invisible Cities*

What struck me about *Invisible Cities* was the multiplicity of experience represented in Marco Polo's descriptions of Venice. To me, it is not so much the descriptions themselves that capture the essence of the city, but the very fact that there are so many narratives and descriptions in and of itself. Every individual's experience is not the same, and there are no two life stories that follow the same pattern and set of events. Even if this insight can be applied to every aspect of life, there is still a contrast between a rural or suburban life, where certain trajectories tend to be more common, and an urban life, where the density of people and multitude of possibilities allow for a huge variety of experiences.

The cluster of Marco Polo's various interpretations of Venice, then, serve to echo this multiplicity of experience. The city is so vast, so multi-layered and dense, that there is no one narrative that can capture the entirety of its experience. Each narrative captures a different way of interacting with the space and captures a different facet of life, and no one narrative is privileged as being more true or more characteristic of a city than any other. Despina in particular highlights this trait of the city:

*Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveller arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea.*

While it is true that the city physically displays different faces depending on the different vantage points that the traveler takes, this imagery—of the ship, and of the camel—describes not only the physical vantage point, but also one's personal vantage point. Not only does Marco



Polo describe the physical path to the city, but here, Marco Polo describes the individual path to the city: the individual's background and personal history; the individual's experience prior to the city.

Such personal experiences shape one's view of the city. It is impossible for humans to take in every aspect of experience and existence: there are simply too many details, and to try to take in every single one would overwhelm us. Instead, we filter the data we receive and pick out what is most important to us to construct our own interpretation of reality, and the way we filter that data pulls from the sea of experiences that have constructed our worldviews and what we prioritize as important.

I am reminded of a writing exercise given to authors: view a scene, whether it is via a picture, in-person experience, etc. Observe this scene for five minutes. Then, detach yourself from the stimulus for a minute. After the minute has passed, describe all the details that you feel made up the atmosphere of the scene. The exercise is meant to show authors that the essence of a scene is not in all the tiny details, but rather a few crucial details that frame the whole scene. What Italo Calvino has done with *Invisible Cities* is exactly that—but from dozens of different perspectives, and it is the choir of different voices and experiences that make up the experience of Venice.

Finally, the narrative surrounding Irene also captures this essence of the city:

*At this point Kublai Khan expects Marco to speak of Irene as it is seen from within. But Marco cannot do this: he has not succeeded in discovering which is the city that those of the plateau call Irene. For that matter, it is of slight importance: if you saw it, standing in its midst, it would be a different city; Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes.*

*For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is*

*another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name; perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene.*

There is no one narrative, no one way to capture a city. Our understanding of cities shifts, and this particular passage also highlights another aspect of the city: as we interact with it—with the space, the people, the atmosphere that is at once constructed and being constructed by the city’s inhabitants—we reshape it, and the city that we know when we enter it becomes something altogether different from the city we know as we leave it. This is a notion that ties in with the following quote:

*You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.  
Or the question it asks you, forcing you to answer...*

What this quotation evokes for me is my various study abroad experiences. I have studied abroad in Singapore, Bangkok, and Beijing; these three cities are at once similar as Asian cities, and yet also incredibly different in their mood and atmosphere. In the end, it was not so much the various sights and sounds that the three cities offered that was valuable to me—rather, it was what the city forced me to confront: who I was as an individual. What this passage evokes for me, then, is the question: Who am I? And furthermore: How do my surroundings define me?

What I discovered when I was abroad in these cities was exactly how easy it was for me to pass. The Chinese diaspora is vast; in China, in Singapore, in Thailand, my phenotype lends me an experience of the city that my non-Chinese classmates did not experience. But what my phenotype lent me was also a sense of alienation: a sense of being caught in between. The cities

were at once familiar and yet also unknown, and they left in me a sense of disconnect even in the embrace of something familiar.

When transplanted into another setting, the influence of environment on one's sense of self becomes more obvious, manifesting sometimes as a feeling of discomfort, a feeling of strangeness, of a lack of belonging. I felt invisible, like I was drifting, and the city forced me to really sit down and try to figure out the essence of my being. While I had never before seen my surroundings as something that really defined me, I finally came to the conclusion that my original home—a Californian suburb—still ultimately defined a significant portion of who I was, and that, while I consider the bulk of who I am to be defined as something location-external, my location still conditions even the way those parts define me.

## *Simmel/Visser*

Simmel traces the nature of human change and response to the city and to urban life. First and foremost, Simmel conceptualizes the city as something that is heavily rooted in economics and in the abstract exchange of money instead of the more concrete exchange of goods and services (although money can, of course, be changed for goods and services, but the act of purchasing is more removed than the act of trade). This is a point that I had not previously considered—I had seen the city as an extension of human society and a natural development of human interaction, and also as a response to population growth and density increase, but I had not explicitly tied the city to the economic. However, after reading Simmel’s lecture on the city and urbanization, I began to see this connection and to understand how the city roots itself in economics and monetary trade.

Simmel also notes that humans, in response to the city, become more calculating and precise; the nature of the city partitions human experience into the objective and the subjective. Furthermore, the urban pushes individualization, a point which I find interesting: cities foster anonymity, the melting of individuals into one nameless whole, and yet they also foster the development of individual identities. These concepts do not appear to be mutually exclusive: the trend toward individualization may indeed be a response to the anonymity that the city grants.

Simmel also describes the effects that the amount of stimulation has on the human psyche. Cities and metropolises provide a seemingly endless stream of stimulation. Simmel describes a “blasé” urban life and notes how a life based on stimulation will eventually get to the point where the stimulations fail to prompt any sort of reaction—and yet, paradoxically, the tension and noise of the city also create large reactions to seemingly insignificant stimuli.

Simmel's characterization of the nature of urban stimulation has elucidated part of the overall atmosphere of cities that I have frequently had difficulty capturing. The city, then, is a site of tension and pressure. The amount of stimuli is overwhelming and must be filtered, and the defense mechanism that kicks into place is that of self-preservation, which lends itself to a sense of disconnect and anonymity. Despite the denseness of the city, then, it is still possible—easy, even—to become invisible and anonymous, and that kind of splintering of self builds stress. The individual becomes a site of conflict, and the process of individualization is the means by which an individual filters all these stimuli and comes to create a meaningful existence despite the various pressures and tensions that tug the individual in different directions.

*Private Life*  
《私人生活》

I found that my initial impressions of *Private Life* were negative: my opinions aligned with critics who found the novel, and those like it, to be melodramatic and solipsist. Part of this impression was influenced by the language; the translation itself was rather stilted, and the clunkiness of the translation made the already flowery prose even more purple. I did not find myself identifying with the character at all and found it difficult to sustain interest in the story. However, as the novel went on, the prose seemed to shift to becoming more subtle, and I began to become more interested in both Niuniu and the story. This may have also been due to a shift in Niuniu's character from a naïve young girl to a more mentally mature young woman.

Part of the criticism leveled in class discussion against Niuniu was that she didn't appear to "question herself" or what she experiences. Additionally, at least one person during discussion criticized Niuniu for not discussing the troubles that she's going through with her mother. However, I found that discussion to be culturally biased—I find it to be a Western concept, particularly a strong American concept, to place emphasis on deconstructing the individual experience and to take an active stance toward one's life experience. So I wonder how much of this criticism is valid: is it indeed a problem that Niuniu reacts passively to her surroundings, at times not even taking any action at all against the events that occur in her life, or is it simply a matter of cultural difference? As Chen Ran notes in Visser,

*When I interviewed Chen Ran a year after the publication of Private Life, she insisted that it was attacked primarily because of its focus on an individual (geren), "which is disparaged by default since Chinese value*

*writing about social issues. The first 'mistake,' according to Chinese cultural values, is to write about something private, something individual. But my perspective is exactly the opposite; I think the more individual something is, the more universal it is."*

The stigmatization of the story of the individual perhaps contributes to the difference in the aesthetic of the Chinese novel as expressed through Chen Ran's *Private Life*. Furthermore, I found Niuniu to be highly introspective—Niuniu's behavior did not strike me as problematic in the same way that it struck my other classmates; perhaps this is because I, like Niuniu, am also an introvert. Introverts are not energized by interaction with others, but rather prefer reflection and solitude. I feel that to examine Niuniu's life and experiences through a frame that prioritizes interactions with others is counterproductive and misrepresents the nature of Niuniu's character.

With that said, however, there is still no denying that many commentators have noted that Niuniu shows a degree of fragmentation of self and body that goes beyond the typical experience. I do, however, find it difficult to analyze this fragmentation or to comment on it, as it is something that I experience as well, so I did not actually find her behavior to be all that unusual. However, I did find the Visser analysis to be enlightening. I feel that there is truth to the concept: with our lives constructed around so many different spaces and, more importantly, around the division of those spaces, and with the urban increasingly pushing an emphasis on separation between the mental and the physical—by emphasizing the intellectual, by restructuring life to be less attached from the physical and the ground into more artificial structures—our lives become more fragmented.

Niuniu's fragmentation of self, then, is in part a reaction to the overwhelming amount of stimulation that the city and the crowds of people in the city provide. It is also a reaction to the

difficulties of integrating self into the city: the structure of the novel hinges on a slightly linear, but still disjointed sense of time that waxes and wanes; narratives of Niuniu's experiences are scattered and embedded among the various "hallucinations" that she experiences. Visser notes that Niuniu is "unable to sustain identification with a holistic image rooted in time and space", and the structure of the novel—with its lack of any clear trajectory, and with its meandering structure through various memories and experiences—reflects the fragmentary nature of Niuniu's mental space.



## *Shower* 《洗澡》

*Shower* discussed issues of urbanization and the pressures to “modernize” in current Beijing. The older brother, Daming, symbolizes the typical forward-thinking Chinese professional: he works in Shenzhen, the bustling technological capital of China, and he has a wife and successful career. Initially, he expresses a detachment from his roots and from the family business of maintaining the bathhouse. The father, meanwhile, represents the older way of life: that of tradition and of upholding the family business.

It is interesting to note that we never once see Daming’s wife or a glimpse of Daming’s life. This is not because there was no artistic license or space for that—despite the fact that Daming, Erming, and their father are in Beijing, there are subplots that relate scenes and stories from other places, including the story of Erming’s mother as well as the story of the grandmother who wished to bathe in the lake. So the choice to leave out Daming’s life was deliberate, and not because the directors were unwilling to cut to flashbacks or embedded stories.

Daming, then, is alone and isolated from his life in Shenzhen; meanwhile, the bathhouse in Beijing is lively and bustling with a number of characters that band together and have deep relationships. The regulars visit frequently, and they keep up-to-date with each others’ lives; when Daming & Erming’s father dies, they all band together to mourn him. This contrast appears to be deliberate and a commentary on the changing structures of life between the traditional and the modernized: Daming, the symbol of the urban and the progressive, is shown to be alienated both from his own family and from his life at home, a point that is further reinforced when his wife refuses to accept the fact that Erming is mentally handicapped.

However, Erming and Daming & Erming's father, symbols of the traditional, have strong social networks and strong friendships that they work to maintain. The implication here is that Daming, the herald of the urban, is in fact missing out on significant parts of what makes life meaningful.

*Shower* also shows a passive interaction between the subject and his surrounding space. We saw previously in *Private Life* another instance of this passive interaction: Niuniu goes through the motions of life and does not really challenge the environments in which she finds herself until close to the end. Similarly, the characters of *Shower* appear to accept the news of the impending destruction of the bathhouse with little resistance, and this quiet acceptance of the changing environment is reflected in other small actions throughout the whole film. Most notable is the scene with the storm; the characters' actions—patching up the roof—show more of a passive response to the environment, a reaction that requires the environment to act first. There is no proactive attempt to fix the roof permanently, and Daming & Erming's father even explicitly states that there is not much of a point, as the building, like a person, will eventually grow old, with the implication that the death (i.e., destruction) of the building is natural. So, like the quiet and slow death of Daming & Erming's father, the bathhouse is expected to recede as part of a natural urban life cycle.

This naturalization of the destruction of the old bathhouse serves as propaganda for the demolition projects throughout Beijing. Although the government-sponsored demolition projects are embedded in the film as something negative—with, for instance, the irony of the pro-demolition banners, and the sense of impending doom that permeates the latter half of the film—the overall message is clear: urbanization is natural and inevitable. It is simply a natural part of

life and the order of a city. Ultimately, then, the film serves as propaganda supporting the demolition projects.

Also interesting to note is the representation of the rural in the film. In a multitude of Chinese films, the rural is portrayed as a simpler form of life, and is framed as something nostalgic. The loss of the rural lifestyle is framed as something to be mourned, and the rural, the traditional, is romanticized. However, I found the portrayal of the rural and traditional—through the scenes of Erming's mother and the scenes of the grandmother and her granddaughter visiting the lake to bathe—to be problematic. These scenes seemed to exoticize and almost fetishize these ways of life, and to simplify them as well; these places are constructed as far-flung locales that are removed from the urbanization issues framed in Beijing or in Shenzhen. But this is not the case in reality—all parts of China face urbanization and face the struggles to develop and preserve a sense of identity, place, and home in the face of massive upheavals and change. There appears to be a strict division constructed between these two ways of life which sets up a false dichotomy and implies a break that may not actually exist. As we saw in Fei's reading, the influence of the rural and traditional social structures persists even to modern times, and the pressures and interactions between the two run in both directions.

## *Mei Shi Street* 《煤市街》

What struck me about *Mei Shi Street* was the dichotomy between what I had imagined the hutong and the historical portions of Beijing to be and the reality of the districts. When we first discussed hutongs, and when I had first heard of them, I had conceptualized them as old, traditional-style architecture that embodied a certain kind of Chinese history. However, as I saw in *Mei Shi Street*, these buildings did not reflect the structures that I had imagined—they looked like the other structures in the area, like regular apartment buildings that were simply a bit older. As far as aesthetic value goes, the buildings are not much different than those around them, and they do show clear signs of aging and breaking down. I could see why people may have wanted to demolish the *hutongs* because they did not fit their aesthetic ideal of what Beijing should look like.

That thought brings me to one of my main thoughts throughout the film: If not for aesthetic value, then why preserve the *hutongs*? Why is it that the film *Mei Shi Street* strikes an emotional chord in the viewer? There is, of course, the reason that Zhang Jinli's story and struggle resonates in us. But beyond that, when we even hear about *hutong* razing, what is it that sparks a response in us? Is there an inherent value in the structure, or does the value extend beyond the physical building? This particular quote is especially apt:

*This act of privileging site over building as the prime locus of value deviates from the prevailing Western concept of historic preservation, in which the burden of significance is more evenly distributed between the site and the original structure (and often leans toward the latter; many historic buildings moved to new sites retain much of their cultural value).*  
(Campanella 152)

If China's sense of preservation and of historical sites is different from that of the West, is it fair to impose pressure to preserve historical sites as is? As we discussed early in class, it is also a long-standing Chinese tradition that new regimes and large transitions are frequently marked by the razing of old structures and the construction of new ones. Is it ultimately all that problematic that China is razing its old structures to replace them with new ones that are emblematic of new ideals?

It is not so much the structure, then, that is fundamentally important, but rather (1) what the structure represents, and (2) the space that the structure occupies. Ultimately, it is the personal ties to the space that are important and that lend the space and structure any sort of meaning. Through films such as *Mei Shi Street* and *Shower*, the nature of the interaction with that space is revealed: these are communities, with people who live their lives and form close ties both with each other and with their surroundings. The demolition of these sites, then, is not just a demolition of the buildings, but also a demolition of everything that has been built up to lend the space meaning and significance.

Another issue that *Mei Shi Street* and the Nornes reading brought to my attention was the nature of the dynamic between the filmed and the person filming in *Mei Shi Street* and other contemporary Chinese documentaries. The impression I get from *Mei Shi Street* is that Ou Ning does a good job of crediting Zhang Jinli with the role he played in filming his story and contributing to the documentary. However, Nornes noted a number of other examples in which the subjects of the documentaries were not as aware of their involvement in the documentary and the scale to which the documentary would be shown. This is an ethical issue that I feel must be

addressed and should be considered. In sociolinguistics, which is my primary academic field of study, there is a creed that says that it is not merely enough to document the phenomenon and people of interest to your research—ideally, one would also make contributions back to the community and to use the results of one’s research to aid improvements to the quality of life for the documented group and to help alleviate whatever issues the research/documentary originally sought to address. I feel that this mentality is also something that should carry over to the production of documentaries, and also to the production of art. We saw early on in *Peking*, *Peking* the way that Zhang Dali makes plaster casts of villagers and residents of the *hutongs*—and yet it seemed that few, if any of them understood the purpose of these casts. Artists and filmographers cannot simply exploit their subjects to further their own research and interests; there is a sort of hypocrisy in claiming to represent these stories while at once not acknowledging or informing the community at hand.

## *San Yuan Li* 《三元里》

*San Yuan Li* continues with the exploration of space and the city. *San Yuan Li* presents an entirely different tone and approach to the question of urbanization than *Shower* and *Mei Shi Street*: While *Shower* is a mainstream, plot-based film, and *Mei Shi Street* is a documentary, *San Yuan Li* is instead an art film, and a silent one at that; furthermore, *San Yuan Li* focuses on a southern Chinese city, and much of the aesthetic of the film reflects that.

Additionally, *San Yuan Li* focuses not so much on the destruction of the city or on the disappearance of older ways of life, but rather on the city itself as a character. Whereas in *Shower* and *Mei Shi Street* we saw a clear division between the old—represented by the *hutong* and buildings slated to be demolished—and the new, there is no such division in *San Yuan Li*. Instead of a division, there is a stronger sense of movement between the city and *San Yuan Li*, which ties together with our discussion of the south in Chinese media as something more fluid and soft, although I would need more context to decide whether this contrast between Hong Kong and Beijing is deliberate.

One particular scene that stuck out to me was the part close to the beginning when the camera focuses on the space between the buildings where the sky peeks through, and the cameraperson follows a path along the street while filming the sky. Not only is the visual component a remark on space and the filmographer's attempt to not only capture space but to understand how space is constructed—how buildings both use and define space—but the audio component adds another layer of commentary as well. The sounds playing during that segment are evocative of the sound of trains rolling over tracks. This effect combined with the journey

down through the alleys and the streets reinforces the sense of movement and flow that is pervasive throughout the film's portrayal of the city. Space itself becomes a path that the filmographer traces, and the claustrophobic feeling of the narrow slit of sky becomes equated with movement and progress. However, there is a dual layer of meaning on the audio track as well: not only does the sound of trains enforce a feeling of movement forward, of progress, but it also suggests an attempt to escape and leave, reinforcing the common contrast between the city and the rural.

Finally, while *Shower* and *Mei Shi Street* end with the destruction of the respective neighborhoods, *San Yuan Li* does not and instead ends with portraits of the various people in the film. There is, then, a sense of hope in the film, a contrast against the inevitability that runs through *Shower* and *Mei Shi Street*. Instead of showing a surrender to urbanization, *San Yuan Li* provides a portrait of how older ways of life can be integrated into the urban. While the traditional way of life is not preserved in its entirety—in part due to the lack of space in the city—elements still remain.



## Chen, lecture

I was already familiar prior to today's lecture to the recent rise of social media in political movements. During the 2009–2010 Iranian election protests, Twitter became a vehicle for protest and social change; not only was it used as a tool of communication between those in Iran involved in the protest, but it was also used as a tool for people worldwide to show their solidarity and support for Iran. Much of the success of the Occupy Wall Street movement probably owes to the widespread use of Facebook and other social media to organize and stage the campouts. As we saw in class today, Weibo and text messaging in China have served similar functions in organizing and staging protests.

One part of the lecture that struck me as particularly meaningful was the comparison between the plainclothes police that patrol Tiananmen Square and the “plainclothes” moderators of Chinese forums and websites. Throughout this class, we have been conceptualizing the physical aspect of space and how that physical space impacts and shapes culture, arts, and identity. However, the Internet has radically changed and challenged our perceptions of space: The Internet in itself is a space that defies traditional spatial boundaries, and the Internet has its own culture, rules, and norms.

How does the nature of cyberspace redefine our notions of space? We cannot rule out cyberspace as an invalid form of space; communities exist in cyberspace, and many of them are more tight-knit than local communities even as they span the globe. Furthermore, as the Internet and as technology become more and more everyday in our lives, cyberspace will become a larger and larger part of the fabric of space that we interact with.