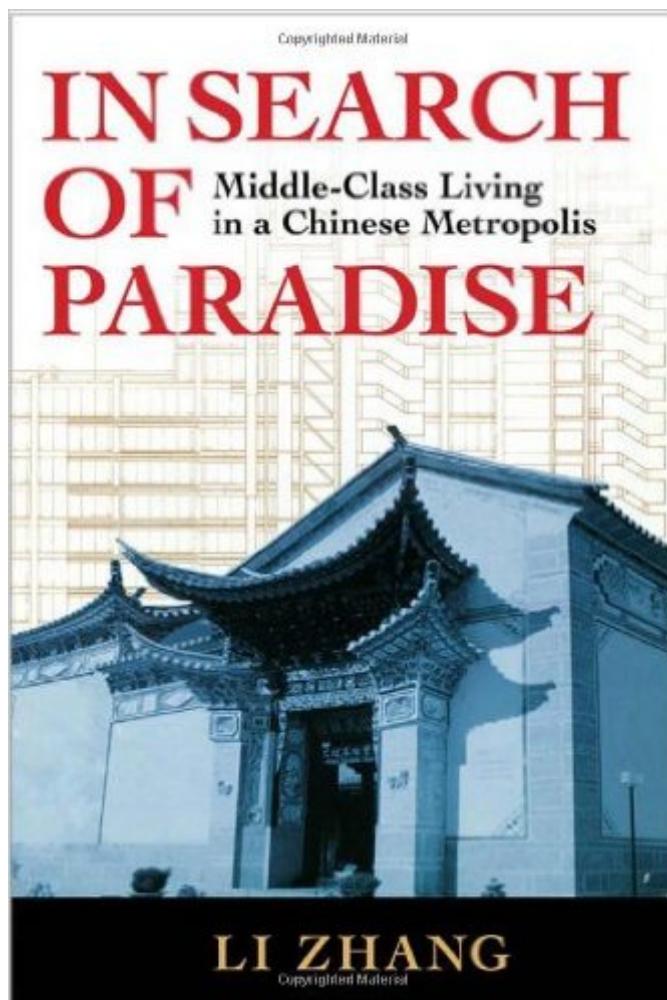


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In Search Of Paradise: Middle-Class Living In A Chinese Metropolis



Synopsis

A new revolution in homeownership and living has been sweeping the booming cities of China. This time the main actors on the social stage are not peasants, migrants, or working-class proletariats but middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs in search of a private paradise in a society now dominated by consumerism. No longer seeking happiness and fulfillment through collective sacrifice and socialist ideals, they hope to find material comfort and social distinction in newly constructed gated communities. This quest for the good life is profoundly transforming the physical and social landscapes of urban China. Li Zhang, who is from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, turns a keen ethnographic eye on her hometown. She combines her analysis of larger political and social issues with fine-grained details about the profound spatial, cultural, and political effects of the shift in the way Chinese urban residents live their lives and think about themselves. *In Search of Paradise* is a deeply informed account of how the rise of private homeownership is reconfiguring urban space, class subjects, gender selfhood, and ways of life in the reform era. New, seemingly individualistic lifestyles mark a dramatic move away from yearning for a social utopia under Maoist socialism. Yet the privatization of property and urban living have engendered a simultaneous movement of public engagement among homeowners as they confront the encroaching power of the developers. This double movement of privatized living and public sphere activism, Zhang finds, is a distinctive feature of the cultural politics of the middle classes in contemporary China. Theoretically sophisticated and highly accessible, Zhang's account will appeal not only to those interested in China but also to anyone interested in spatial politics, middle-class culture, and postsocialist governing in a globalizing world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In less than two decades, China has changed from a predominantly public-housing regime to one with one of the highest private home ownership rates in the world. Class distinctions are emerging via location, spatial exclusion (gated communities) in the socialist land. The new trends have also spurred public engagement among homeowners confronting the encroaching power of developers. The author primarily focuses on changes in his home town of Kunming, but also has more general material from elsewhere in China. Prior to 1950, private housing had been largely concentrated in the hands of a small number of landlords, with ordinary citizens living in poor, over-crowded conditions on the edge of towns - often made of mud, and self-constructed. In 1950, all private property was taken by the state, and upper-class housing was subdivided, with the original owners given a few rooms (if anything). Conflicts over shared kitchen, courtyard, bathroom space were common, as well as noise and cleanliness. The average living space/capita in urban areas was 3.1 square meters in 1960, rising to 5.2 in 1985. Shanghai and Beijing often had three generations in one room, subdivided by hung sheets. Cooking often took place on portable stoves in the hallways. Restitution for those original seizures has been rare in China because the records were largely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Public housing in units of 5 - 15,000 became the rule for 80-90% for those in urban areas, distributed and managed by one's work unit. This was perhaps the most important welfare benefit up to the late 1990s. One's rank, as well as the strength of one's employer, affected rooming assignments. Corruption was also a factor.

This book is an ethnographic study of the emerging urban middle class in China through an in-depth investigation of the emergence and development of commodity housing market in a metropolis in South West China and how the housing market reconfigures cultural, social, and economic characteristics of this social class. Kunming is a tier 2 city in South West China where it is also hometown to the author so that it should be relatively easier for the author to make access to important information and to say closer to informants (i.e. real estate players, real estate agents, government officers, and local residents) for personal interviewing purpose. Undertaking ethnographic study is a mounting challenge to scholars and researchers when the research topic is too sensitive to investigate (i.e. power terrain dynamics in the government, clientele ties between government and real estate players, violent conflicts between developers and the residents). The

author is the Department Chair and Professor of Anthropology of UC Davis and her specialized research interests include urban studies, middle-classes and consumption practices, critique of post-socialism and neo-liberalism, and China. The theoretical premise of this book is that the social, political, and cultural repercussions of market reform and socialist transformations in contemporary China are significant and it does seem to be a relationship between class formation and spatial production (P.14) as the Chinese government has taken measures to substitute the growth of public for private housing market since the 1980s (space making, class making™ hypothesis).

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