Review of the book “Driving toward Modernity: Cars and the Lives of the Middle Class in Contemporary China” by J UN ZHANG Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2019

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Driving toward Modernity: Cars and the Lives of the Middle Class in Contemporary China

JUN ZHANG

Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2019

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Cars became a central element of Chinese modernization in the 21st century as the number of privately owned cars increased sharply from six million in 2003 to 85 million in 2013. This is approximately the period covered in Jun Zhang's book, *Driving toward Modernity: Cars and the Lives of the Middle Class in Contemporary China*. Despite these significant developments in mobility, the advent of the car as part of the new middle-class lifestyle in contemporary China has not been the subject of significant scholarly attention. This makes Zhang's book a pioneering study which sheds new and deep light on a highly relevant phenomenon. A main argument put forward by Zhang is that the lure of the car culture in China has to be seen not only as an individual choice deriving from middle-class aspirations, but also as something which is intertwined with the influence of the car industry and the symbolic power of the car as an epitome of modernity, as well as national pride and state interests. The book covers a wide range of relevant themes which are tackled through qualitative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. The core group of informants consists of classmates from Zhang's high-school and college years, a group characterized as middle class and generally quite well educated. However, the book lacks more precise sociological information about the sample and the dates of the interviews and encounters.

Zhang scrutinizes the car as a vital component of the new middle-class lifestyle, as well as the pleasures and new risks that come with it. She also analyses the changes brought about by the automobile regime in contemporary China. The chapters span a variety of themes, such as the social role of the car, encompassing both status and convenience, the car in the context of the Chinese family and what Zhang calls "filial consumer-citizens," as well as more general aspects of car culture. These include the car market and new anxieties around accidents, access to car purchase, number-plate bidding and the contentious issue of parking. The author demonstrates how the car has been domesticated and made part of the new consumer-citizen lifestyle, entangled with middle-class group solidarity and status, as well as with family relationships.

Theoretically, Zhang departs from influential Western mobility researchers such as John Urry, who saw the automotive regime as both a social and technical assemblage that reconfigures the entire urban landscape, political, economic and social environments, and people's daily lives. Following influential ideas of class deriving from E.P. Thompson, Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, Zhang considers the making of the middle class as a social process invoking various emotional, rational and ethical considerations which go beyond the notion of achieving a certain social status. Her claim that the middle class lacks stability is convincingly demonstrated throughout the chapters and adds new perspectives to the existing scholarship on the Chinese middle class (by Li Zhang and Luigi Tomba, among others). Through her able ethnographic analysis, Zhang challenges one of the prevalent myths about the current Chinese middle class, namely that they are "crazy" consumers, in particular when it comes to their love for oversized cars. Zhang and her informants explain this as the craving for convenience rather than status. This claim could have been qualified by including the parameter of gender, referring to various recent masculinity and mobility studies (e.g. Geng Song and Derek Hird, *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*, Brill, 2014). These studies show that there are competing ideas and practices among middle-class men in contemporary China; hyper masculinity and status-

seeking are also part of the picture (see my article “The lure of car culture: Gender, class and nation in 21st century car culture in China,” *Women, Gender & Research* 1, 2015, pp. 96–110). In general, consideration of gender differences in the daily use of cars is missing in Zhang’s book, which could have brought in the more complex concept of new inequalities within a class. For example, in 2013 Chinese women drivers only made up 22 per cent of all drivers in China. How does this affect daily practices and preferences among this interview sample?

Last but not least, it has to be appreciated that Zhang provides an empirical study of the coming of the car era in the southern province of Guangdong. This account challenges the big narrative of the early reform period of the 1980s and 1990s as wild and free. She demonstrates how the arrival of cars – including from the outset smuggled cars in Guangdong – was connected to various institutions and a certain informal legitimacy. Zhang’s book invites further comparative studies of significant metropolises such as Shanghai and Beijing which may have taken slightly different paths, not least with the development of the metro system and smart-bike sharing in recent years.

Driving toward Modernity provides a nuanced inroad into a significant dimension of contemporary middle-class practices and shows how the car-driving middle class has become part of the new social order. Yet, this work invites further studies in terms of location, class, gender and generational divide, as well as the air pollution and noise brought about by the automotive regime.

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Mirrorlands: Russia, China, and Journeys in Between

ED PULFORD

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Ed Pulford’s recent book *Mirrorlands*, based on several years living and travelling in the region, as well as formal training in social anthropology at the University of Cambridge, offers a fascinating account of a region that is of strategic interest but remains poorly known. Pulford’s rare linguistic skills – he speaks Korean in addition to being fluent in both Russian and Chinese – give him unfiltered access to local interlocutors, and thus place him in a unique position to write this much-needed account.

The book opens in Moscow and closes in Beijing, the first and last chapter devoted to each capital city respectively. The bulk of the narrative however coils its way around the border itself, taking the reader back and forth between Russia and China, shining a light on the lives of borderlanders. While the majority of the latter are Russians and Chinese, numerous ethnic groups also call the region their home. From Tatars to Evenks, Oroqens to Koreans, Pulford expertly reveals the complex ethnic mosaic of the people who live in the region as well as their histories on both sides of the border. Chapter two on multiethnic Siberia and chapter four on Inner Mongolia in particular provide an excellent overview of this ethnic diversity.

The two chapters that bookend the journey also seek to highlight the many political, social, and cultural entanglements between the two countries. Pulford’s account of Moscow reveals various layers of Chineseness and, conversely, the Beijing chapter