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## Book and Media Review

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## BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEW

### Review Essay

Exceptionalism or Universalism?: The Social and Environmental Consequences of China's Economic Development

*Class in Contemporary China*, David S. G. Goodman,  
Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014, 233  
pp, paperback, \$24.95

*China's Environmental Challenges*, Judith Shapiro, Cambridge,  
UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012, 205 pages, \$22.95

*Consumption in China*, Lianne Yu, Cambridge, UK and Malden,  
MA: Polity Press, 2014, 207 pages, \$22.95

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**Keywords:** China; class; consumption; environment; activism; development; political change; Li Ang; Gender; Sexuality; Politics; Chinese literature; Sinophone Studies

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While class analysis was at the center of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the political mobilizations of Mao's time, in the reform era class conflict has either been dismissed as insignificant or become somewhat of a taboo in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s official discourse, since a socialist country is supposed to be classless. And yet, class provides a unique lens for analyzing and understanding China's transition from a planned economy to a market-driven one.

Changes in the class system in China after the CCP took power reveal, first of all, the relationship between the Party-state and society. In *Class in Contemporary China* David S. G. Goodman skilfully demonstrates how, under Mao, the coexisting notions of class by occupation and class by ideology—the two of which could overlap—gave rise to the Party's fluctuating policies toward different categories of people. While experts with intellectual and technical skills were essential for building the socialist economy after the political realm was normalized and the former class structure overturned, Mao's skepticism as to the trustworthiness of the experts and concern about the so-called “capitalist roaders” within the Party led to an emphasis on “redness” and political loyalty during the periods of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. “Enemies within” were perceived as people who embraced or promoted bourgeois thoughts and could, therefore, undermine the socialist foundation of China, even though in terms of income or property they were not much different from the rest of society. Although people occupying positions of privilege were at times targeted, other times family background (i.e., one's parents' occupations) became the litmus test for classification. Being born into a worker or poor peasant family, for example, could afford political safety and advantages in opportunities, in contrast to being born into a capitalist or landlord family. In sum, in the Mao era people's ascribed status mattered, but individuals' class performance was also important.

Class by ideology was thought to purify the Party-state under Mao; however, since the reforms in 1978, it has been used to explain away the existence of a capitalist class and increasing inequality in a supposedly classless socialist country. This means, above all, that the working class has been expanded to include all

law-abiding citizens who earn their living through some kind of work, be it physical, intellectual, managerial, or entrepreneurial. Furthermore, in order to split from Mao's legacy of class struggle and a politicized, ideology-driven society, the Chinese state analyzes social inequality not through class differences but through occupational hierarchies, separating one's socioeconomic status from his/her political consciousness. As a result, the state has played an important role in framing and constructing the meanings of the class structure in China, both during and after Mao.

Despite tremendous geographic differences and local variations, however, Goodman borrows the three-class division framework drawn from industrial societies to analyze China's class structure today, characterizing it as consisting of "a dominant class based on the ownership of capital, an intermediate class based on the acquisition of education and/or organizational assets, and a subordinate class based on the possession of physical labour" with "constituent classes or subclasses within each of these three main classes and one or more underclasses completely outside of consideration of class position" (29). Within this framework, Goodman highlights exceptions as a result of China still being dominated by the Communist Party-state. For example, property in China is not so much about ownership as it is about the bundle of rights that come with it, including control, income, and transfer. The Chinese economy, Goodman argues, is still largely influenced by the remnants of state socialism (64).

The dominant class, according to Goodman, includes both political and economic elites. He suggests that there are some signs of the embourgeoisement of the political elite (e.g. the formation of interest groups trying to influence policies and local cadres running businesses) and the politicization of the economic elite (e.g. the large proportion of businesspeople joining state-run organizations or becoming CCP members). However, to what extent the two elites overlap and form a coherent ruling class remains an open question to which Goodman does not offer an answer.

Although discussion of a dominant or upper class is often avoided by the Chinese state, since admitting to the existence of such a class may undermine the legitimacy of the Party, the goal of building a middle-class society appears frequently in the official discourse. Nonetheless, “middle class” is defined in such a vague way that it is not clear who exactly belongs to it. Goodman points out that the less-than-precise definition of the middle class makes that category more inclusive. By reviewing the existing literature, Goodman finds that most scholars agree that the middle class in China includes those with a good education, holding high-status occupations, and adopting a certain lifestyle. What complicates the analysis of class in China specifically is the lack of consistency across dimensions that usually define the middle class, such as income, education, occupation, and consumption. Because the concept of a middle class grew out of reforms in the midst of drastic social and economic change, people may meet one or more criteria. Depending on the size and nature of their business, for example, entrepreneurs may belong to the dominant, middle, or subordinate class, as they vary tremendously in terms of knowledge, education, and access to power and resources. Furthermore, the unevenness of development makes it difficult to homogenize standards of living across China. The existence of a substantial number of industrial workers, migrant workers, and agricultural workers additionally renders it impossible for China to become a middle-class-dominated society. Therefore, according to Goodman, the “ever-expanding middle class”, or the middle class making up the majority of Chinese society, seems to be nothing but a myth (103–109). Nevertheless, the pursuit of a middle-class society not only offers political safety, drawing attention away from economic polarization and potential class conflicts, but it also creates a consumer society in which a middle class lifestyle becomes the standard to emulate. It is somewhat ironic that class in a Marxist-Leninist socialist country has become depoliticized, and the grand political narrative of class has largely been replaced by a discourse on lifestyle.

Lianne Yu's book, *Consumption in China*, focuses specifically on the urban middle class, especially those living in the megacities, as they are the champions of

consumption. Rather than look at the structural factors of class as Goodman does, Yu views class as fluid, constantly being reinvented, negotiated, and expressed through everyday practices. In this way she follows the intellectual tradition of Bourdieu on the search for social distinction and a post-modern analysis of consumption that emphasizes consumers' agency in framing their own identities. Yu describes the forms of sociality between urban Chinese consumers as "neo-tribes" that are spontaneous and impermanent, using a term borrowed from Michel Maffesoli (23, 102–108). Unlike Goodman, whose book builds primarily upon reviewing the existing literature, Yu includes some first-hand interview and ethnographic data that she gathered while conducting consumer research on behalf of global companies. However, she does not discuss her methodology in any detail, so readers do not know how representative those data are. Similar to Goodman, Yu argues that middle class identity in China is at the moment primarily a marketing concept, since consumers do not define themselves in such a way, and there are varying interpretations of the designation (90). Instead, she posits that Chinese consumers refuse to view their status as entrenched in a fixed structure but instead are constantly striving to improve it.

Although Yu paints a picture of Chinese consumers creatively muddling through state control and corporate power in the hope of achieving and expressing their identities, recognizing them as neither victims nor perfectly liberated, it would be beneficial to discuss in more detail the state's role in the creation of such a consumer society and the relationship between the state and the capitalist economy that both liberates and constrains consumer power. Moreover, consumers in China are not a monolith, not even just neo-tribes, but are embedded in the specific structural locations they occupy with tremendous regional and urban/rural variations. Without such a discussion, the discourse on differences between consumers in China and their counterparts in Western and other East Asian countries—which includes Yu's invented terms like "conspicuous accomplishment" and "consumer public sphere"—seems to be insubstantial.

Furthermore, Yu takes an overall positive view of consumption as a tool for expressing and negotiating one's identity and asserting one's agency, but underplays the social and environmental consequences of consumption in terms of labor, conflict, and justice. In other words, as Yu tries to move away from the Marxist depiction of consumers as passive players and from his predominant focus on the theme of production, she fails to link consumption and production in a critical way.

Although Judith Shapiro's *China's Environmental Challenges* does not focus on class or social structures, inequality is unavoidable in any discussion of environmental problems created by economic development and globalization. Environmental risks are unevenly borne both globally and domestically, and class often dictates accessibility to resources and support in fighting against environmental ills. Citizen activists, without the backing of social organizations or state agencies, are often met with political repression, and lack the power and knowledge to effectively navigate the political system; among them, middle-class citizens are more likely to succeed than peasant-farmer activists (129–133). Environmental issues are thus unequivocally political and social, and China's political system poses unique challenges and opportunities to solving its environmental problems. On the one hand, the obsession with "face", stability, and legitimacy may lead to the regime's support for an alternative model of development that the world has not yet seen. On the other hand, the same obsession and its attendant conflicts across administrative levels may cause the suffocation of environmental activism and reluctance in truly committing to sustainability, especially when at the expense of economic growth.

So how much does China deviate from the general social theories on social classes, consumption, and environmental activism? Will economic development lead to China's political change and eventual democratization?

Regarding the first question, while all three authors strive to demonstrate the nuances that the Chinese case displays, especially under the visible hand of the Party-state, none move away from the Western theoretical framework in their analyses, or offer any new insight into China's political system. Even Shapiro's book, which

tries to include the cultural aspect via a discussion of Chinese national identity and the “superiority-inferiority complex” rooted in China’s encounters with the rest of the world and the communist state’s reinvention of history, does not go beyond a stylized, *ad hoc* account. Therefore, in declaring that China is different from other countries, these authors actually indicate that it is similar, if one looks beyond the authoritarian state.

As for the second question, none of the authors seem optimistic about any radical political change in China in the foreseeable future, even though there is localized, incident-based, rights-focused activism that most likely works within the system rather than against it, no matter whether such collective actions are based on class or consumption, organized by NGOs or via the internet. Of course, the large variations across demographics and regions make it difficult to predict future political and social change in China.

The middle classes have fewer incentives for a regime change because of their vested interests in the system and the co-optation from the state, even though they do rise up to defend their own interests. Goodman puts more hope on the subordinate classes and discusses the rising protests among workers, including workers in public sectors who usually have more resources for organization, and workers in private sectors consisting predominantly of migrant workers who lack benefits, security, and power. The language of class is often used as a tool for mobilization. However, the broad social categories of workers are by no means forming a coherent class, as a result of variations in the experiences of exploitation and deprivation. Not only aren’t they working together to challenge the regime, public-sector and migrant workers often see themselves as in competition with each other. Peasants, who potentially pose the most challenge to the state, according to Goodman, rarely rely on agriculture alone for a living and are disempowered in the process of urbanization and relocation.

Shapiro addresses the role of environmental NGOs in disseminating information (i.e. information politics), holding governments and corporations accountable for their commitments (i.e. accountability politics), and using symbols



and dramatization to mobilize opposition and consumer behavior (i.e. symbolic politics). Even though they often have to work creatively within the boundaries set by the state, rising environmental awareness, which is in line with the government's call for "sustainable development," has opened up space for public participation. Although the environment may be an area in which a civil society is more likely to form, regional inequality could undermine the results of civic activism, as pollution and other forms of environmental degradation may simply be passed onto poorer parts of the country where employment and economic growth are taken more seriously than environmental protection and residents lack the power to voice their discontents.

Yu, meanwhile, focuses on the internet and social media as new platforms for consumers to exercise their power, either exposing corrupt officials and government scandals or boycotting greedy corporations. However, such activities may not always oppose or challenge the state; consumer activism can also align with the state's interests, such as in the case of boycotting Japanese products out of nationalism.

China's class structure, consumption patterns, and environmental problems are increasingly embedded in the global neoliberal system, yet with the exception of Shapiro's book, which situates China's environmental challenges and discourses within that global context, not much analysis of the global dimension or the global-local linkage is offered in this collection of literature. Nonetheless, the three books provide a good introductory overview of Chinese society for undergraduates and professionals new to the field.

## Book Reviews

*Resonances of the Raj: India in the English Musical Imagination*, Nalini Ghuman, Oxford University Press, 2014, 368 pp, hardcover, \$49.95

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In his path-breaking *Imperialism and Music: Britain 1876–1953* (2001), Jeffrey Richards discusses how the British elite invented and institutionalized a national and imperial music that became hegemonic in the public domain. Even so, he pays no attention to the impact of India and its music (theory) on musical practice in Britain. Accordingly, *Resonances of the Raj* is a most welcome addition to the emerging field of British imperial music studies. Following a short introduction, the book is organized into six chapters, each a complete essay in its own right. Successively, Ghuman deals with the India-inspired music of the composers Edward Elgar, Gustav Holst, Amy Woodforde-Finden (who became famous for her “erotic” *Indian Love Lyrics*), and Kaikhosru Sarabji (the eccentric, British-born Parsi composer who sought to create an Oriental musical style that he believed was more authentic than his fellow modernist composers’ inventions). These studies of individual composers are framed by the first and sixth chapters, which concern the activities of two people who, unlike the above-mentioned characters, had a direct experience of Indian music—the violinist and proto-ethnomusicologist Maud MacCarthy, and her second husband, the composer John Foulds, respectively. Indeed, one of the assets of the book is its use of new archival materials from the couple.

Elgar’s much celebrated ‘Englishness’ had an Oriental component, Ghuman argues, because the musical materials that Elgar used in *The Crown of India* (1912) were similar to those he employed in later works. Likewise, she underlines that Holst’s India-related music, such as the *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* (1910), provided compositional techniques that he subsequently used in his best-known

work, *The Planets* (1914). In fact, Ghuman continues, Holst's "engagement with Indian musical culture was unprecedented at the time" (153) and, hence his compositional style transcended the musical Orientalism of composers like Cyril Scott and Granville Bantock. However, while Holst certainly knew more about Indian philosophy, Sanskrit, and Indian music theory than these other composers, I would argue that he too had no real knowledge of Indian (art) music practice. As in the case of other modern British composers, Holst's India remained imagined and largely part of a search for an individual (modernist) musical language, if not for an alternative worldview. Be that as it may, Ghuman rightfully emphasizes that Western interactions with Indian music practice did not begin in the 1960s, as is commonly thought, but rather during the early twentieth century, through the lecture-recitals of MacCarthy, Ratan Devi (the assumed name of Alice Richardson, second wife of the Ceylonese English art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy), and a few others. In fact, Ghuman is currently preparing a monograph on MacCarthy, as she believes that the scope and extent of her work might lead to "a re-evaluation of the history of modern ethnomusicology in Britain" (45).

Between late 1907 and the end of July 1909, MacCarthy studied Indian music with several teachers in the subcontinent. Her subsequent lecture-recitals in Britain were not only pioneering but also had an impact on Holst and, of course, Foulds, with whom she fled to India in 1935 (he died there in 1939). Still, Ghuman is too idealistic about MacCarthy's knowledge of Indian music. Similar to her lecture-recitals, for example, numerous critics also praised those of Ratan Devi and Arnold Bake, the Dutch proto-ethnomusicologist. But can one take these reviews literally, as Ghuman does in MacCarthy's case? Undeniably, MacCarthy knew more about Indian music than Devi, who only learned some Indian (folk) songs from a local teacher during a few months in Kashmir. Bake, nonetheless, studied Indian music much longer than MacCarthy and, from 1930 onward, gave hundreds of successful lecture-recitals in India, Europe, and the United States. Moreover, recordings of his singing show that there was a great discrepancy between his actual knowledge

of Indian music and what he was praised for in reviews, and I suggest this would have been much the same in MacCarthy's case. The intricate techniques of Indian art music require many years of training, not merely a few. Rather than the performance of *ragas* (the Indian tonal frameworks for composition and improvisation), therefore, early twentieth century composers like Holst and Foulds, as well as Western students of Indian music like MacCarthy, were principally preoccupied with (Greek) modes, the 22 *shrutis* (the Indian microtones which cannot be sung consecutively as a scale, as MacCarthy wrongly claims), and so on. I do not state this historical context to diminish the achievements in cross-cultural communication of MacCarthy and Foulds, but solely to emphasize that the relationship between Indian music and the West predominantly was and remains one of musical imagination. Alternately, I doubt whether the orchestra established by Ravi Shankar at Delhi's All India Radio station during the late 1940s truly was a direct follow-up, as Ghuman argues, of Foulds's Indo-European orchestra, which he created ten years earlier at the same institution. For had Shankar not been influenced much earlier by the Maihar Band of his guru Ustad Allaaddin Khan and the orchestra of his brother Uday, with which he himself toured extensively in the West? In any case, typical for the book, Ghuman does not problematize Foulds's paternalistic viewpoint that the musicians of his orchestra had to adopt harmonization and staff notation in order to progress in their mastery of Indian music (287).

Altogether, however, *Resonances of the Raj* is a very useful textbook, especially if I may say so, when used in discussion with my own *Music and Empire in Britain and India: Identity, Internationalism and Cross-Cultural Communication* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013). Particularly beneficial on the companion website are the sound clips of the Indian performances of songs which MacCarthy collected and Foulds arranged in 1932–35 for his *Indian Suite* (also included) for the light they shed on the gap that remained between Indian music and Foulds's second-hand appropriation of it. Unfortunately, the book does not contain a glossary of Indian musical terms.

*Li Ang's Visionary Challenges to Gender, Sex, and Politics*, Yenna Wu (ed.), Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2014, 174 pp, hardcover, \$80

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Edited by Yenna Wu, *Li Ang's Visionary Challenges to Gender, Sex, and Politics* serves as the first collection of English essays related to the influential Taiwanese writer Li Ang, whose real name is Shih Shu-tuan [Shi Shuduan]. For decades, Li Ang has been famous for her controversial and radical writing on politics and gender matters. This book can be regarded as a critical review that chronicles Li's achievements and breakthroughs, from her canonized feminist story *The Butcher's Wife* (1983) to her more recent works. In response to Li's discourse on local consciousness, this volume deals with such diverse issues as nationalism, biopower, feminism, and gender politics. In the past decade, there have been a mere handful of English books focusing on Taiwan's literary and cultural production. Two notable publications are Hans Tao-Ming Huang's *Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan* (2011, Hong Kong University Press) and Sylvia Li-chun Lin's *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* (2007, Columbia University Press). Wu's text is an important addition to the scholarly discussion of Taiwanese literature.

This book gathers together nine thought-provoking chapters regarding Li Ang's nuanced critique of female sexuality and Taiwan's politics. Chapter One cleverly connects Taiwan's political development with Ang's literary creations, from her early works like "Flower Season" to her 2009 novel *Seven Prelives of Affective Affinity: Taiwan/China Lover*. This chapter functions as a crucial overview of Ang's career with respect to the discourse on gender and politics. It is also worth noting that the chapter concludes with a discussion of Ang's transitioning focus from "local" to "global." Chapter Two, as the editor states in her Acknowledgments, is a condensed and revised version of Murray A. Rubinsten's previously published article. This chapter provides a unique sociopolitical view of Li Ang's multiple roles as influential writer,

social critic, and active feminist. What makes this chapter special is its combined focus on both Ang's political agenda and her life experiences. In summary, Chapter Two argues that Li Ang's literary trajectory can be associated with the development of the evolving female consciousness and women's movement in Taiwan.

Chapter Three examines another essential topic in Li Ang's writing: extramarital affairs. This chapter successfully brings into focus how Li critiques the extramarital affair with the support of sociological statistics in her 1992 book, *Extramarital Affairs*. More interestingly, this chapter extends beyond the sociologist's domain and combines reality and fiction in an intertextual analysis of Li's literary works, including "The Chain" and *Dark Nights*. Chapter Four revisits the biggest milestone of Li Ang's writing career—*The Butcher's Wife*. The most intriguing part of the chapter is a literary review related to the critical debate over whether or not this story is feminist "enough." Pointing to Li's connection with "equity feminism," this chapter not only reconfirms the feminist agency represented in *The Butcher's Wife*, but also attempts to "broaden" the scope of scholarly discussion about the novel. Chapter Five goes beyond the "feminist controversy" pertaining to *The Butcher's Wife* and introduces a new reading of the work by re-interpreting Michel Foucault's concept of "biopower." This chapter thus takes into account the "physical, ideological, and psychological power" imposed on a character's body and mind and further explores the artistic complexity of the story beyond the one-dimensional feminist criticism of the male-dominated ideology (74).

Chapter Six is one of the most interesting chapters in that it analyzes a profound state of localization as observed in Li Ang's 1990 novel, *The Labyrinthine Garden*. This chapter transcends the traditional dichotomy between Chineseness and localization. To be more specific, it focuses on the complex concept of "post-national biogeography," which deals with subtle differences between an imagined Chineseness and Taiwan's local consciousness in citizens' process of adaptation and transformation.

Chapter Seven starts with a political review of the 2012 presidential election in Taiwan and moves on to discuss more holistically the state of women, politics,

and national identity with a focus on Li's 1997 four-story collection, *All Sticks Are Welcome in the Censer of Beigang*.

Chapter Eight underscores the power struggle between China and Taiwan via the cross-strait romance in Li's *Seven Prelives of Affective Affinity: Taiwan/China Lover*. This chapter emphasizes Li's attempt to present the possibility of mutual understandings despite varied political views. Only under this circumstance can "Taiwanese culture" be appreciated and "embraced by China and the world" (144). The final chapter elaborates with a spectral twist on Li's popular topics of Taiwan's national identity, local consciousness, and gender politics. Revolving around the short story "Mountain-pass Ghost," from Li Ang's *Visible Ghosts*, this chapter sheds light on the concept of "ghostland" as a symbol of Taiwan. Furthermore, (the ghost of) the aboriginal heroine serves as a female agent to deconstruct "the Sinocentric, mainland-centered, male official perspectives" of Taiwan (163).

It is surprising to note that this edited volume has not yet been thoroughly reviewed by the academy given the fact that Li Ang is one of the few internationally recognized writers based in Taiwan. The editor and contributors of the book should be applauded for their great contribution to Chinese studies and beyond. To conclude, *Li Ang's Visionary Challenges to Gender, Sex, and Politics* is a scholarly volume that appeals to a wide readership and especially to those who share the diverse agendas and interests of Li Ang herself. With its engagement with Li's (trans-) localist writing, historical overviews, and cross-cultural links, this book reflects upon Taiwan's evolving feminist movement and literary trends and can be further connected to the scope of Sinophone literature as a whole.

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### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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