

EMERGING CLASS PRACTICES

I. Private Homes, Distinct Lifestyles

Performing a New Middle Class

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The post-Mao economic reform has brought about unprecedented wealth and remarkable economic growth, but the income gap and social polarization have soared in this rapidly commercializing society. A small group of the newly rich—including private entrepreneurs, merchants, well-positioned government officials, and managers of large profitable corporations—is taking up an enormous share of the new wealth and cultivating a luxurious lifestyle beyond the reach of the majority of ordinary Chinese. At the same time, millions of rural migrant laborers, laid-off workers, and other disadvantaged citizens (*ruoshi qunti*) are struggling to make ends meet, a situation leading to widespread discontent and even public protests.¹ Despite such rising social problems, neoliberal practices centered on the privatization of property and lifestyles are being increasingly naturalized and valorized in the urban public sphere.

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One of the most important changes in China's urban landscape is the formation of a new social stratum—the “new middle-class” (*xin zhongchan jieceng*)—made possible by this privatization.² The demise of the public housing regime and the rise of the commercial real estate industry have opened up new opportunities for urbanites to seek differentiated lifestyles, status recognition, and cultural orientations. Thus, recent reconfigurations of residential space have proved vital to the formation of a new urban middle-class culture. My central argument here is that private homeownership and the increasing stratification of living space are not merely an expression of class difference or an index of status but also the very means through which class-specific subjects and a cultural milieu are being formed. Drawing from my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Kunming in southwest China, I analyze this dual cultural process of space making and class making by examining how, on the one hand, self-conscious middle-class subjects and a distinct “class milieu” (*jieceng wenhua*) are being created under a new regime of property ownership and living, and how, on the other hand, socioeconomic differences get spatialized and materialized through the remaking of urban communities.³

Rather than treating class as a given, fixed entity, I approach it as an ongoing process of “happening.” As E. P. Thompson nicely put it, “I do not see class as a ‘structure,’ nor even as a ‘category,’ but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.”⁴ This approach is particularly important to my understanding of class making after Mao because, as a private real estate developer pointed out, “one may be able to see the emergence of social stratification based on people's economic status, but it is still very difficult to speak of any middle class because there has not emerged a distinct class culture shared by those who have accumulated certain material wealth. Class making after Mao is still in its very early, amorphous stages; this is going to be a very long and confusing process.” Thus it makes more sense to speak of the formation of middle-class subjects (oftentimes fragmented) than to assume a clearly identifiable class already in place. It is this cultural process of making and happening, in which a group of people attempt to articulate their interests and stage their dispositions, that I hope to unravel.

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What is central in the formation of middle-class subjects in China is the cultivation of a distinct “cultural milieu” based on taste, judgment, and the acquisition of cultural capital through consumption practices.⁵ In this open, unstable process, competing claims for status are made through a public performance of self-worth, while at the same time what is considered suitable and proper is negotiated.⁶ Class making thus takes place not only within the domain of relations of production but also outside of it, namely, through the spheres of consumption, family, community, and lifestyle.⁷ Although Marxist-inspired scholars have long recognized place as an important constituent of class, the emphasis has been on how the workplace serves as the primary arena for working-class politics. As a result, not enough consideration has been given to the cultural process that occurs within other social domains. The importance of community life in the formation of class is well illustrated by E. P. Thompson's seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class*, which delineates everyday practices of the working class in their community, family, church, school, leisure, and consumption.⁸ For him, class is as much cultural as it is economic. Even though the situation of Thompson's (English working-class) subjects is very different from that of the middle-class Chinese I am writing about, and even though his notion of class is deeply rooted in the fundamental conflict between capital and labor, I find his willingness to locate class politics in a much broader social and cultural realm and treat it as a dynamic process extremely fruitful. This cultural and processual approach opens up a new space for rethinking class beyond economic terms and rigid structural divides.

I take the culturally oriented approach toward class further here by focusing on two social spheres *outside of* direct economic production—community-making and consumption practice—in order to shed new light on the cultural formation of the new Chinese middle class.⁹ Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of “habitus,” I argue that the emerging forms of living and everyday consumption play a critical part in constituting the social dispositions of class-specific subjects, and not merely in displaying their status.¹⁰ It is in this sense that I see lifestyle choices and consumption as productive forces. More specifically, my ethnographic account demonstrates how commercialized real estate development and exclusionary residential space provide a tangible place where class-specific subjects and their cultural milieu are created, staged, and contested.¹¹ In delineating this mutually constitutive relationship among space, class, and consumption, I also consider how the rapidly expanding advertising of housing has become a vital engine in manufacturing and disseminating the dreams, tastes, dispositions, and images of the new middle class.¹²

In this chapter I frequently use the Chinese term *jieceng*, instead of *jieji* or the English words “class” and “status,” for important reasons. Since the end of Mao's regime, Chinese people have largely avoided the term *jieji* in talking about social stratification because this concept was highly politicized and closely associated with the brutal and violent class struggle that caused pain and suffering for many

under Mao. It is another term, *jiēcēng*, that is now commonly used to refer to socioeconomic differentiation. This vernacular term allows one to speak about various newly emerged socioeconomic differences without quickly resorting either to a set of preformulated, historically specific categories such as “capitalists” versus “proletarians” largely determined by one’s position in the relations of production, or to the Maoist conceptualization of class as a form of political consciousness. But at the same time, *jiēcēng* refers to more than just status. The term is deeply intertwined with one’s ability to generate income and to consume. It is most commonly used by Chinese today to refer to an emerging social group called *zhōngchān jiēcēng* (literally meaning “the middle propertied stratum”). Although this group is still in a rudimentary stage of formation and thus lacks a shared identity, its members have begun to explore and cultivate a new culture of living as a way to articulate their economic and social location in society. Thus my intention in using the term *jiēcēng* (rather than “class” or “status”) is *not* to erase politics and ideology from my account of the mounting socioeconomic differentiation in China, but to render a culturally and historically specific concept that mediates between the two distinct yet related analytical terms “class” and “status.” The slippage between them is thus intentionally retained in the discourse of *jiēcēng*, which allows the simultaneous consideration of economic and cultural processes.¹³

In what follows, I first briefly trace the spatialization of *jiēcēng* as a result of a recent neoliberal move to privatize property ownership and lifestyle, and then turn to an ethnographic account of how different cultural milieus and class-specific subjects are cultivated within the stratified living space by focusing on consumption practices and a sense of social insecurity. I then briefly analyze the role of real estate advertising in shaping the cultural meanings of the new *zhōngchān jiēcēng*. In the conclusion I reflect on some implications for rethinking the cultural politics of class, space, and consumption at a time when certain neoliberal strategies are being utilized by the state to transform Chinese society, and on their unexpected consequences.¹⁴

From *Danwei* to Stratified Living Space

Under the socialist regime the majority of urban Chinese could not own private property; instead they lived in state-subsidized public housing allocated by their work units (*danwei*).¹⁵ In Kunming, a city of approximately 3 million residents and the capital of Yunnan Province, residential communities prior to the housing reform were largely organized into two forms: (1) mixed, non-*danwei*-based neighborhoods, under the control of the municipal housing bureau, which included mostly renters of diverse social backgrounds; and (2) *danwei*-based communities, which included relatively large housing compounds constructed, owned, and regulated by work units, which acted as de facto landlords and managers. In other

words, it was *danwei*, not specific street names and numbers, that served as the most important spatial indicators for social mapping. Inequality in the public housing system was expressed mainly through the quality and size of apartments. Such differences were largely determined by the scale, strength, and status of work units and one’s position within a given work unit rather than by private wealth. Such concepts as “poor working-class neighborhoods” or “upscale neighborhoods” were virtually nonexistent in most Chinese cities under socialism.¹⁶

Then in 1998 the State Council launched its reform to privatize public housing. Under the new policy, families were encouraged to buy their apartments from their work units at a discounted rate significantly below market value. Initially many urban residents were skeptical about the privatization scheme. Their main concern was whether private homes would be protected by law, since at that time the Constitution did not recognize private property ownership. Under these circumstances, the Chinese government launched several campaigns to ensure its urban citizens that privatized housing would be treated as a form of commodity and protected by the state. It urged people to abandon the welfare mentality and adopt a commodity-oriented perspective. As one slogan put it, “Housing is no longer a welfare item; it is a commodity.” By 2000 most *danwei*-based public housing had been privatized in Chinese cities.

At the same time, there has been rapid growth in the construction of new private homes that have little connection with the *danwei* system.¹⁷ The real estate industry centered on housing construction has become the primary engine of economic growth in China. The emerging new communities (*xiaōqu*, literally meaning “small neighborhoods” or “small quarters”) are rapidly transforming the Chinese urban landscape into a highly stratified and socially segregated environment marked by income. The new homes offer many choices in price, quality, style, service, and location for consumers in different socioeconomic positions. In Kunming today, the striking differences between the wealthy and lower-income neighborhoods can hardly be overlooked.¹⁸ Lower-income housing consists mostly of matchbox-like apartments in buildings that are poorly constructed and poorly maintained. There is little public space between buildings and virtually no green areas. The low-quality exterior paint is easily washed away by rain, making the surface of buildings look like “crying faces with running tears,” as one informant put it. By contrast, the commercially developed upper- and middle-class neighborhoods feature a variety of architectural styles and high-quality construction materials, and are spacious, clean, and well protected. The colors of these new buildings are bright and cheerful. There are plenty of well-kept lawns, flowers, plants, and parking garages.

Factors that further differentiate urban residential space today include property values, community services, and the social characteristics of the residents. Let us take a closer look at the three kinds of communities into which the residents of Kunming are stratified.

"Gardens" and "Villas"

The newly constructed luxury neighborhoods are commonly referred to as "gardens" (*yuan* or *huayuan*). Most of the housing consists of spacious condominiums in high-rises or multistory structures in convenient prime downtown areas or the core urban districts (*shiqu*). There are also town houses and detached single-family homes, called *bieshu*, located in the developing suburbs. All of these are "commodity housing" (*shangpinfang*), which can be bought and sold freely by private individuals. Located in well-protected gated communities, each unit costs about half a million yuan or more, far beyond the reach of the majority of ordinary citizens. Some of the luxury single-family houses cost as much as 2 million yuan. Jade Garden, located near Green Lake in Wuhua District, is one of the upscale gated communities that I visited frequently. Because it is near downtown, adjacent to a beautiful park, and located in the best school district, Jade Garden is one of the most expensive properties in the city. It consists of a high-rise tower and several large six-story buildings forming a completely enclosed residential compound of some two hundred units. The sale price per unit ranges from 600,000 to 800,000 yuan, depending on the view. Each unit measures roughly 150 square meters, which is considered spacious by Chinese standards. This complex is run by a private property management agency that is known for its high-quality customer service, modeled on that of its Hong Kong-based parent company. It has an indoor swimming pool, gym, and clubhouse and meticulously maintained landscaping.¹⁹ Like most other upscale compounds, this fortress-like complex is protected by surveillance cameras and private security guards. Residents use their own keys to open three sets of gates: the large metal front gate (which is closed at night), the building unit gate, and the house door. During the daytime the main gate is open, but the guard stops and questions anybody who does not appear to be a resident there. I was stopped twice and had to wait until the guard called my friends and confirmed that I was indeed their guest.

Mr. Zhao, who lives in Jade Garden, runs a specialty sports and leisure clothing business which is well-known among middle-class families and expatriates looking for high-quality Western-style clothing. Zhou, who is in his late thirties, graduated from a well-known college in 1987 but decided to give up his intellectual career for private business in 1991. He was able to pull only several thousand yuan together for startup, so in the beginning the operation was small. He rented a stall of less than 10 square meters on a street near a local university. Four years later the city government decided to widen several roads and thus demolished all the stalls and shops on them, including his. By then he was already making good money and was able to rent a larger store on a main commercial street. Between 1995 and 1997 his business took off, and he made about 1 million yuan annually. He attributed his success to three things: knowing how to select high-quality products in classic leisure styles, offering superior customer service, and starting

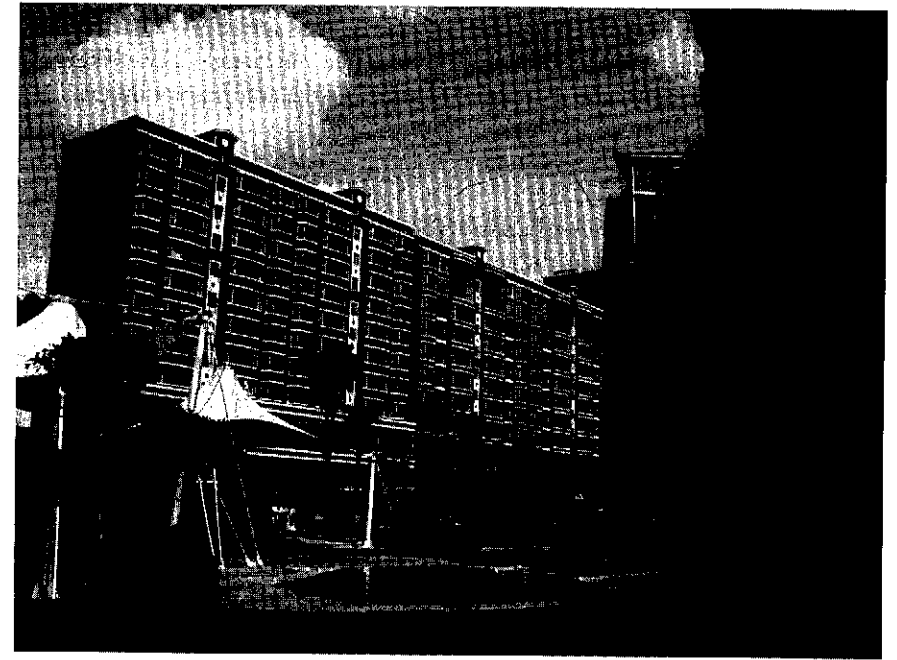


Figure 1. An upscale gated condominium complex. Courtesy of Li Zhang.

the business early. By the time I met him, his business had grown into a three-store chain operation with ten employees.

Zhou owns a spacious condo on the tenth floor with a sweeping view of Green Lake. I was greeted at the door by a young live-in nanny who did the cooking and cleaning and took care of his little boy. The furniture was good but not lavish. His family could easily live on the income generated from the clothing business, but his wife also wanted to have a career. She worked as a cashier at a major bank. I noticed a Bible on the coffee table and a statue of the Virgin Mary on the bookshelf—items not commonly found in Chinese homes. Zhou explained to me that informal Bible study groups are emerging among the urban middle class. The new private communities provide a safer space for religious activities because there is less direct governmental surveillance.

Although residents in the upscale neighborhoods have one thing in common—wealth—their occupational and educational backgrounds are diverse, and they are not considered "elite" by the larger society. As merchants, entrepreneurs, or what David Goodman calls "owner-operators," they tend to be lumped into one of two categories: *zuo shengyi de* (businesspeople), as opposed to those

working in the state sector, and *da laoban* (big bosses), as opposed to the wage laborers in the private sector.²⁰ The secret of their success is that they started their businesses relatively early and thus were able to take advantage of the emerging private market for rapid capital accumulation before the competition intensified.

Mid-level Neighborhoods

The "middle-stratum neighborhoods" (*zhongdang xiaoqu*) consist of commercially developed housing, but the ways in which the families obtain them vary, and the social composition is complex. Over half of the units are sold as straight commodity housing to private buyers at prices ranging from 200,000 to 400,000 yuan, depending on the size, quality, and location. The rest are bought in bulk by large *danwei* which then sell them to their own employees at a subsidized rate.²¹ *Danwei* are able to negotiate a better price than is offered to individual buyers. Communities of this type are also gated and protected by security guards, but the controls are not as stringent. A well-dressed person with an urban professional appearance is likely to pass without being questioned by the guards. Catering to emerging middle-class families, this kind of neighborhood attracts firm managers, independent business owners, and highly specialized professionals and intellectuals who earn substantial sideline incomes.²²

Ms. Tang lives with her husband and daughter in a 110-square-meter condo in Riverside Garden, a large, newly constructed residential community in the northern part of the city. This area used to be farmland but is now covered by new gated communities. Prior to purchasing this home, they lived for over ten years in a small, rundown apartment assigned by her work unit. After graduating from college in the late 1980s, Tang became a high school teacher, bringing in a monthly salary of about 1,500 yuan. Her husband first worked for a state enterprise and then "jumped into the sea of private business" and went to work for a small firm selling personal therapeutic equipment. He soon became the marketing manager of this national distributor's regional office, earning 5,000 to 10,000 yuan a month, depending on sales. By the time they purchased this apartment in 2001, they had saved enough cash for a large down payment (50 percent of the 200,000 yuan total) over a ten-year mortgage. Tang was very happy with the additional space and her new living environment. But she also felt isolated and disappointed in her neighbors because, she claimed, "they are not well educated and their *suzhi* [quality] is low."

Gongxin Neighborhoods

Lower-income neighborhoods in China are usually called *gongxin jieceng xiaoqu*, which literally means "salary/wage-based communities," because most residents there live on relatively fixed incomes (ranging from meager to moderate

salaries or wages). There are varied types of housing constructed under different conditions, and the body of residents is more diverse. A large proportion of such housing is developed by commercial real estate companies under direct contract with specific *danwei*, and there is also some lower-cost yet reasonably nice commodity housing priced at just under 200,000 yuan per unit. The second type of housing is created by the city and provincial governments to house relocated families that were pushed out of the city core by several large-scale urban redevelopment projects in the 1990s.²³ The third type of housing is that built under the state-promoted "Stable Living Project" (*anju gongcheng*), which gives developers special loans, tax breaks, and other benefits in order to keep the costs down, but at the same time requires that these housing units be sold to qualified lower-income families at an affordable price. In recent years, as a result of the state-owned enterprises reform, many factory workers have been laid off (*xiagang*) and no longer have any stable income.

Jiangan Xiaoqu is a large lower-income community located in the northern part of Kunming. Until the early 1990s this entire area was all farmland. The first several buildings were put up at that time by the Panlong District Real Estate Development Company for some three thousand relocated families driven out of the inner city. Later on this company constructed eight more apartment buildings for a nearby university. Jiangan residents are mostly factory workers, clerks, service sector workers, migrants, schoolteachers, and university professors and staff. There are also local farmers who were given replacement housing when their land was appropriated for development. Initially the *danwei* assigned these housing units to their employees as part of their welfare allocation, but later employees were asked to buy back the ownership from their *danwei* at extremely low cost. In recent years social polarization within the community has deepened. Some residents were laid off by their failing state enterprises, while others have gained more consuming power and are able to move into better and larger commodity housing elsewhere by renting their Jiangan housing to migrants. Unlike the fortress-like upscale neighborhoods, Jiangan is more open and lively, without walls and surveillance cameras. Every day elderly men gather around small stone tables in open public areas to play chess and smoke pipes; retired women and men congregate to sing Chinese opera.

Theft, however, is a major problem in this rural-urban transitional zone as people of different kinds frequently flow in and out, while the police are virtually absent because this area is not fully incorporated into any urban jurisdiction. Although the property management agency is supposed to take charge of public security and community services, its manager claims that it is impossible to fulfill such responsibilities because of the lack of funding, as it has encountered strong resistance in its efforts to collect the regulation fees from the families. The security team is substantially understaffed and cannot afford any high-tech surveillance devices. Individual families are left to protect themselves by installing metal bars

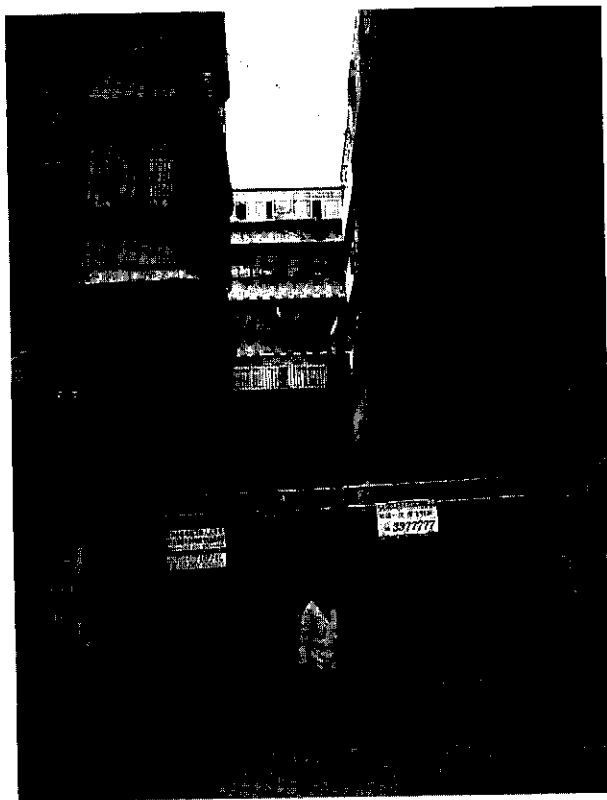


Figure 2. A lower-income housing compound protected by iron bars. Courtesy of Li Zhang.

over their windows and balconies. Residents in the eight buildings initially owned by the university have organized mutual watch groups and installed metal fences and gates around their buildings. These gates are locked between 11 P.M. and 6 A.M. but are wide open during the day.

While urban residential communities have become more and more stratified along lines of personal wealth, it is far from clear whether people in the non-*danwei*-based neighborhoods share much in common. No longer “comrades” (*tongzhi*), residents in the new communities are merely “strangers” surrounded by walls and gates. Are they capable of developing any sense of common social and cultural identification beyond material wealth? Can we speak of any identity of interests, habitus, and dispositions, or even an emerging class consciousness among these “strangers”? Can shared spatial experience lead to a particular kind of class-specific subject? The next section seeks to grapple with these questions.



Figure 3. Social life and public space in a *gongxin jieceng* community. Courtesy of Li Zhang.

Cultivating *Jieceng* and Respect

One afternoon in the midst of a light summer rain, three of my former high school classmates came to pick me up in a silver Volkswagen Passat to go see a new upscale housing compound called Spring Fountain in the western suburb of Kunming. One of them, Ling, who was recently promoted to the head of a local branch of a major bank, had just bought a home there. The condo Ling purchased is spacious, about 200 square meters, with three bedrooms, a large living room, a dining area, and two bathrooms. This compound of 150 households is not considered large in comparison with other recent developments, but it is nicely designed with trees, grass, and plants. The center of the compound features a goldfish pond, a Chinese-style pavilion, a miniature stone mountain, water lilies, and fountain display accompanied by light Western music. These things are not merely an aesthetic veneer but are important in locating one's *jieceng*. Though impressed by the landscaping and generous living space, the other two friends began to feel uneasy. Both of them (and their spouses) worked for state entities, so they could not afford such a place. When I asked what they thought of it, one of them replied:

Envy! I wish someday I can live in such a community and be part of this group! But if I rely on my salary, I will never be able to afford a place like this. Look at the environment here—plants, water, flowers, and music. . . . This is where human beings should live. My place has none of these, but is surrounded by street noise, dust, and cooking smells from the street hawkers outside my window.

They then said in a semi-teasing tone that even though they still considered Ling a close friend, he really belonged to another *jiēceng* now. The other friend, a woman who worked in the provincial health education office, explained to me:

Even though before I knew that he [Ling] made good money, I still felt he was one of us because he lived in a community not so different from mine. We could go knock on his door whenever we wanted. But now things are different. Every time I came here, the security guards would stop and question me, especially because I do not drive a private car. I would not want to come to visit him here as often as I did before. It just makes me feel inferior and out of place.

Their sense of exclusion and uneasiness derived mainly from their inability to acquire a place that demands consuming power beyond their reach, a place that so tangibly demarcates socioeconomic differences through concrete spatial forms. Furthermore, through much-enhanced new surveillance devices (heavy metal gates, closed-circuit cameras, laser sensors, professional security guards, and so on), upscale communities have heightened their social isolation and segregation as they exclude unwanted intruders outright. Such exclusion is often justified by the fear of urban crime and by a neoliberal rationale that valorizes private property, personal wealth, and the pursuit of a privileged lifestyle at the expense of public space and social intermingling.²⁴ Through such highly visible spatial demarcation, it externalizes and foregrounds previously invisible or less pronounced socioeconomic differences. Community is thus deployed as an active element in structuring class differences.

Places like Spring Fountain are generally perceived by urbanites as *furen qu*, a place where wealthy people congregate, yet those living within these places sense a lack of any social and cultural cohesion among the residents. One question I asked my interviewees was, "Do you find anything in common with others living here?" Nearly all answered no or not much. Many used the word *za* (diverse, mixed) to describe the social components of their community. As Ling put it:

People here have quite different social backgrounds and experiences. They are indeed a hodgepodge [*da zāhui*]. The only thing they have in common is money and consuming power. But I guess a *jiēceng* is much more than that. Perhaps after one or two decades of living together, these people will gradually form some sort of

common lifestyle, tastes, and dispositions. But for now I do not feel that I share much with my neighbors.

Residents in these communities tend to have a strong sense of privacy and rarely interact with one another. Among some thirty people I interviewed, only two said that they had visited their next-door neighbors once or twice, and then only to see the interior remodeling before they and their families moved in. The rest said that they never visited. One elderly woman who lived with her well-to-do son's family told me that her son had specifically warned her not to invite neighbors in or to say much about his business because strangers were not trustworthy. I asked where they would seek help in case of an emergency. None of my interviewees mentioned neighbors. When I asked why, some said it was because they had their own car and did not need others to help with transportation. In case of a medical emergency, they would rather call a fee-based ambulance service. Others said that they would rather hire a *baomu* (caregiver) to take care of a sick family member than ask for help from neighbors because, as one woman explained: "I do not even know my neighbors. On what basis do I ask for help?" She continued:

We used to live on a *danwei* compound and knew almost everyone. We paid visits to neighbors and friends in our spare time. But since I moved into this new community, things have changed. I have not been to any neighbor's home so far. They would not invite you. At best they say hello to you when running into you outside or playing with kids at the playground. I would not feel comfortable going to their home or chatting, as we really have little in common. After all, we are strangers to one another.

What we see here is a dual process at work: the spatial differentiation of people by community based on private wealth, and the atomization of individual families within each housing compound based on a heightened sense of privacy.

In upscale communities, residents tend to engage in conspicuous consumption. The ability to consume the right kinds of things is taken not only as the measure of one's prestige (*zunrong*) and "face" (*mianzi*) but also as an indication of whether one deserves membership in a particular community. If one's consumption practices are not compatible with the kind of housing or community in which one lives, one would be seen as "out of place." Such social pressure does not emanate from any identifiable organization or set of written rules, yet it is all-pervasive and embedded in the everyday cultural milieu. Although homeownership and community choice constitute the core of this new consumer culture, other realms such as private car ownership, interior design, children's schooling, leisure activities, clothing, food choices, and manners are also important spheres

through which *jiēcēng* is performed and conceived. While China's newly rich get ahead economically, they share a gnawing sense of social insecurity and thus long for respect.

Ms. Liang and her husband had just bought a home in the luxury community of Jade Garden. Though only a high school graduate, her husband was able to make a substantial living from his small-scale gasoline and industrial oil trading business. She explained to me how they had ended up here and her perception of the lifestyle suitable for a place like this:

A few years ago we had already saved enough money to buy a unit in another up-scale [community], but we eventually decided on a lower-level community. Why? Because even though we could afford the housing itself, we could not afford living there at that time. For example, when most families drive their private cars, I would be embarrassed if I had to ride my bike to work every day. Even taking a taxi is looked down upon there. If our neighbors see my parents coming to visit me by bus, they will be laughed at too. Since my rich neighbors go to shop for shark fins and other expensive seafood every day, I cannot let them see me buying cabbage and turnips. All the families there seem to be competing with one another. If you do not have that kind of consuming power, you'd better not live there, because you will not fit in well.

By the time I interviewed her, her family was in a stronger financial situation, and thus she felt that they were ready to reside in an upper-level community and learn to live like their well-to-do neighbors. They bought a car and completely remodeled the entire house with gleaming redwood floors, marble tile, fancy lighting, modern kitchen appliances, and luxurious furniture. She stopped working outside the home in order to devote all her time to her husband and toddler son even though they already had a full-time nanny. Her sense of readiness for community membership was closely tied to her family's ability to demonstrate a certain degree of consuming power in everyday life.

Like Liang, many other *zhōngchān* residents I met also felt obliged to engage in the proper kind of consumption in order to validate their status and gain respect from their peers. But since everyone is learning to become a member of an emerging *jiēcēng*, what is considered proper and suitable is mutable and unclear. Oftentimes there exist competing notions of suitable consumption, which generate anxiety among the residents. They watch and compare their own activities with their neighbors' in order to get a better sense of what and how to consume. For example, it has become popular to join the exclusive fee-based club (*huísuǒ*)—a new site of prestige that sets *zhōngchān* families apart from the mass of others. Children have become another focal point for cultivating the skills and manners deemed necessary to become true members of the affluent class. In Shanghai as well as other cities, for instance, affluent parents send their children

for expensive private training in golf, ballet, music, horseback riding, skiing, and polo, even to finishing schools run by foreigners to learn how to become proper ladies and gentlemen.²⁵ I went once to a lavish, members-only golf club in Kunming with my friend Ling, the bank head, where he was teaching his twelve-year-old son to play golf.

Another distinct trend in middle-class consumption is the emergence of multiple pastime sites catering to a small group of "leisure women." Although the majority of urban Chinese households today are two-income families, this is not always the case for the newly rich. Women in some well-to-do families have quit their jobs to stay home and thus have plenty of free time. Since their husbands are usually preoccupied by business and entertainment away from home, these lonely women seek out such leisure activities as hair styling, manicure, and facial treatments, which have flourished in the wealthy *xiaoqu*. One of the most popular activities in recent years for both men and women with disposable income is to frequent "foot-soaking entertainment centers" (*xijiao chēng*). These are small, specialized salons where customers can soak their feet in warm fluid brewed from special Chinese medicinal herbs and then receive a long foot massage. Some of them are covert sites for sexual services catering to men. Such salons tend to be concentrated in the new private neighborhoods, where the residents have the time and money to patronize them.

In sum, new consumption practices have come to play a crucial part in reshaping people's tastes and dispositions, creating a privileged lifestyle.²⁶ As my ethnographic account shows, *zhōngchān jiēcēng* is not a static thing one possesses, nor is it predetermined by one's position in the social structure; it has to be constantly cultivated and performed through everyday consumption activities. To be able to consume certain commodities in certain ways is a key mechanism in the making of *jiēcēng*. In this particular context, homeownership and one's subsequent spatial location in the city have become the most significant components of social differentiation and subject formation in the reform era.

Why is consumption so important in cultivating and performing *jiēcēng* in China? This is partly due to the difficulty nowadays of pinpointing the exact sources of personal wealth or gauging one's income simply by knowing one's occupation. In fact, it is a social taboo among the newly rich to ask how someone generates income because many business transactions take place outside the bounds of law and official rules. During my fieldwork, one of the most difficult problems I encountered was the reluctance of relatively wealthy people to talk about the source of their income or the nature of their business. When the production of wealth has to be kept secret and intentionally made opaque, then conspicuous material consumption serves as a viable way to assert and maintain one's status.²⁷ Another important factor to consider is the sense of social insecurity among the emerging upper and middle classes in their quest for propriety and respectability. The cultivation of habitus (or *jiēcēng wēnhuà*) through various

consumption practices is in a sense a form of social experimentation in an uncertain cultural field and a strategy for getting ahead in an increasingly competitive society.

Advertising *jiēcēng*

The making of the *zhōngchān jiēcēng* goes beyond the spatial reconfiguration of communities and consumption practices. It is also realized through another closely related domain: mass advertising for new homes. Real estate developers in China not only manufacture homes but also construct and disseminate new notions of *zhōngchān jiēcēng* and a distinct set of ideas, values, and desires. Through the powerful tool of advertising, these widely circulated ideas and images become a primary source of social imagination through which the urban public comes to understand what "the middle class" means and how its members should live. Advertisements for private housing frequently make explicit linkages between a particular lifestyle (embodied foremost in one's housing choices), a set of dispositions, and one's class location. In sum, they are not just selling the material product (houses) but are also selling the associated symbolic meanings and cultural packages. As a result, China's new "housing revolution" has not only made possible a comfortable form of luxury living but also provided new meanings and spatial forms for a new social class.

Let us take a closer look at one such advertisement published in a major newspaper in Yunnan Province. Titled "Town Houses Are Really Coming!" this advertisement, taking up an entire page of the newspaper, was sponsored by a real estate corporation that was building a large residential community of four hundred new homes. The lower half of the page is a picture showing a smiling young Chinese woman embracing rosy flower petals while standing on the seashore. The caption below reads: "The platform of the middle class's top-quality life: Though not villas, the Sunshine Coast Town Houses are a special, tasteful living zone that specifically belongs to the city's middle class." The upper half of the page contains a carefully crafted narrative explaining what town houses are, where they come from, and what they stand for. Since most Chinese people are unfamiliar with the history of the town houses and its social index in the West, developers can easily manipulate the symbolic importance of this kind of housing. The opening section of the text identifies the town house as a preferred way of life for the new middle class: "In the year 2000 a brand new living space called the 'town house' ignited the buying zeal of China's middle class. From Beijing and Tianjin to Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, town houses have caught the eye of all urban middle-class people and become their top choice in reforming their lifestyles. Town houses signify the beginning of a truly new way of life in China." It further claims that "town houses are extremely popular in Europe and America, and are becoming the classic residential

space for the middle class. . . . They can foster unprecedented 'community culture' and a strong sense of belonging among a distinct group of residents." Such claims suggest that if one can afford this type of home and lifestyle, one will automatically become part of China's new middle class as well as of a privileged global social class marked by Euro-American modernity. What is so appealing about town houses to the Chinese is that they offer not only private property ownership but also extended private space (such as a small private garden) beyond the limits of the "bird cage"—like *danwei* housing. Developers can thus market town houses (with their small private gardens) as a "perfect independent space that allows one to touch the sky and the earth"—the true pleasures of the new middle-class lifestyle. The connection between private space and personal freedom is important here. Owning one's own home, spatially and socially detached from the *danwei* and from the neighbors, is taken as a sign of true liberation because it enables one to break away from the usual social constraints and surveillance. The crux of this advertisement is that to buy a home is to buy class status, and community membership is all about class membership.

. . .

As socialism is profoundly transformed by privatization, market forces, and consumerism, class politics takes on a specific contour that requires a closer look at the interplay of property ownership, space making, and consumption practices. While the shop-floor experience is central to the formation of a working-class identity and class consciousness among factory workers, laid-off state employees, and migrant workers,²⁸ this is not the case for the emerging upper- and middle-class subjects. Once spatially dispersed under the public housing regime, urbanites in China could not be easily identified as distinct social groups. But today, under the new commercialized property regime, individuals who have acquired personal wealth are able to converge in stratified private residential communities. Such emerging places offer a tangible location for a new *jiēcēng* to materialize through spatial exclusion, cultural differentiation, and private lifestyle practices. It is in this sense that residential space does not merely encode socioeconomic differences but plays an active role in the making of class and social performance.

As China increasingly embraces neoliberal reasoning and strategies, such reemerging class differentiation is portrayed as a natural and progressive move away from Maoist absolute egalitarianism. The sacredness of private property, the desire for privacy, and the possibility of pursuing personal freedom and happiness are deployed as the building blocks of a neoliberal way of life at the expense of equality, public space, and social responsibility for the poor. In this context, the political potential of the emerging middle class remains unclear. So far there is little evidence to suggest the formation of a meaningful independent political and civil space to counterbalance state power.²⁹

The way that *jiēcēng* is increasingly spatialized and performed in the cities of post-Mao China reflects a global trend toward the privatization of space, security, and lifestyle in the neoliberal era as states are passing on more and more of their responsibilities to private entities and individual citizens. Increasingly, upper- and middle-class families in the United States and Latin America, for example, are being drawn into what Teresa Caldeira calls “fortified enclaves”—privatized, enclosed, and monitored residential spaces—to pursue comfort, happiness, and security.³⁰ As people retreat behind gates, walls, security guards, and surveillance cameras, spatial segregation and social exclusion are intensified.³¹ The fear of crime and violence and the right to protect private property are often used to justify these moves. But social exclusion based on such spatial practices is not only eroding public space but also giving rise to new forms of social differentiation through the explicit act of living and staging.

2. Property Rights and Homeowner Activism in New Neighborhoods

Benjamin L. Read

The idea that private property forms a basis for freedom and empowerment is deeply rooted in the Western liberal tradition. John Locke famously believed that the right to property was so fundamental that government’s primary purpose was to protect the individual’s claim on his possessions; moreover, only the possession of land and goods (“estate”) qualified people as full members of the political community.¹ Friedrich Hayek, in his critique of socialism, wrote that “the system of private property is the most important guaranty of freedom.”² The British conservatives of the Thatcher revolution carried out privatization policies designed to expand individual households’ ownership of assets, in part out of the belief that “possession means power, the kind of power that matters to ordinary people—power to make choices, power to control their own lives.”³ China’s own liberals, epitomized by Liu Junning, embrace such ideas as well.⁴

While most passionately expressed by extreme liberals and libertarians, the basic logic of these ideas is so widely accepted as to be quite commonplace. Much analysis of China’s transitional economy is unquestionably informed by the belief that expanding ownership is increasing citizens’ autonomy and power vis-à-vis an authoritarian state. There are in principle a number of mechanisms through which private property might lead to this result. Secure ownership of assets could reduce individuals’ dependence on the state, leaving them more at liberty to say