I remember very well how surprised I was when one of my old friends Chen told me during one of my recent visits to China that if he had money he “wanted to live in a new UK town in a suburb of Shanghai.” As someone who wasn’t well aware of how much the housing situation in China has changed since the reform and opening up in the late 1970s, I thought Chen was just kidding. First and foremost, for various reasons, I didn’t think that a (still) socialist country could have a “UK town.” Second, for middleclass white-collar workers like Chen, I didn’t think it was possible for him to privately own a house in a housing system that for several decades was controlled and therefore provided solely by the state. I later found out that what Chen meant by “UK town” wasn’t really a town for British expatriates, but a new peri-urban gated community that was designed to look “British” to attract new middleclass Chinese residents “with good taste” (as advertised by the salesperson when we visited the showroom). Thanks to my curiosity, I got Chen to go along with me on a ride to do look at some of this new “UK town” along with several other towns named after European cities and countries, such as “German town,” and “the New Venice” (lo and behold, it has many manmade canals). Chen was, in fact, very lively when showing me around. Although, historically, China has been looking to the West as a model despite its effort to eventually overcome the development of the West itself, I still wasn’t sure what to make of the situation: what’s wrong with a Chinese town? Here we see China filling up its urban space with private properties, which neither correspond with its previous housing system nor serve to create a new social safety net for its skyrocketing urban population.

After reading Li Zhang’s *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*, Chen’s situation became clear to me – in Zhang’s terms, we see in the newly emerging “middle-class,” a phenomenon called the “spatializing of class,” and new sets of subjectivity as a result of the changing forms of urban governance. The emerging middle class is not in China’s mega cities like Shanghai or Shenzhen but in Kunming, a provincial capital in the south of China of which Zhang herself is a native. *In Search of Paradise* discusses the deep contradiction that lies within the new and the old systems of housing provision. After the reform and opening up in the early eighties, many cities were faced with the same problems, namely how to provide housing for the increasing population attracted to urban areas by the employment opportunities granted by Post-Mao China’s paramount leader Deng Xiaoping’s (in)famous economic scheme “let some people get rich first.” Many social scientists (mostly quantitative) have argued that it was natural for China to do what it has been doing since then, which is to let the market take over the responsibility from the state in providing housing to those who need it (e.g., Peng 1986; Wang 1992; Wang and Murie 1999; Wu 2001). The Chinese state sees the market as a solution to the problems of insufficient as well as low-quality housing that existed in the old socialist system. The state is moving toward the direction of privatizing most of its urban housing to correspond with the new market of private housing, such as apartments. Driven by the apparent benefits of letting the private sectors handle the issue, the danwei, or the work-unit, which was once the flagship of equality and social welfare, is slowly dissolving itself by offering its housing to the residents, usually those with close ties to local officials at prices that are below the market value.

To puzzled observers of Chinese society, this was where many problems piled up: Who gets the house? What does it take to qualify for housing subsidies? China has moved from a egalitarian housing system to one now marked by inequality. Whereas in the past housing was...
guaranteed and provided by the states, the current system creates disparities not only between the economic haves and have nots but also on the basis of guanxi, or “personal ties.” This is where previous quantitative studies on housing and surveys could only do so much to shed light on the current state of housing in China. In Search of Paradise portrays what was going on in the process of negotiation, from the fight for compensation and survival, to struggle to maintain one’s property rights in the quasi-collective system, to the attitudes toward the new “private sphere,” among others.

Chen always wanted a house because in the society he lived in a house means everything. As a man, a house is a prerequisite for marriage. It also means privacy and freedom from what he calls “noisy life” that he had experienced for almost thirty years living in his parents’ house, where everyone knew each other and wanted to know about each other’s affairs. Chen was nagged everyday by his neighbors and sometimes by his parents themselves about the fact that he still had not moved out and did not have his own house. Although it was not uncommon for a son to live with his parents in China in his case, the first generation of singletons under the one-child-policy, Chen felt the pressure from his extended family to be more successful than the previous generations to save the face of the family (mianzi).

Zhang’s In Search for Paradise helps me to understand his situation. In her study that spanned over seven years in her native hometown where she speaks the local dialect and knows the place and culture very well, Zhang unpacks this phenomenon with energy and wit. Her reading of the situation in China, from both as a native and as an expert anthropologist, takes into account both the changing housing policy and the relationship between state and the society – now with the market mediating between them – and the actuality of the situation, namely how people deal with the change. Zhang uses statistical housing data to shed light on new forms of subjectivity, especially in the emerging process of “class-making.” This is the most exhilarating part of her work. Stories about how residents feel about their living condition and expectation for the future read naturally and livelily in Zhang’s ethnography.

The book begins by outlining the authors position as both native and anthropologist. The ethnography is based in her own hometown and reflexively engages with the data she collects. Most of the theories that she uses are familiar to anthropologists, but some are drawn from other fields of social sciences especially those on space and spatiality such as Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1973; 2003), and Manuel Castells (1983). The first chapter “Farewell to Welfare Housing” outlines the change in the system of housing provision from the socialist danwei to the present privatization. It is a thorough and thoughtful review of literature for anyone interested in understanding the housing market in China. Chapters 2 -5, “Unlocking the Real Estate Machine,” “Emerging Landscape of Living,” “Spatializing Class,” “Accumulation by Displacement,” take the reader right into several key issues of class-making vis-à-vis private property and urban space, such as compensation for relocation (and therefore the contestable use of eminent domain) and conflicts between the residents and the developers in Kunming. The last three chapters, “Accumulation by Displacement,” “Recasting Self-Worth,” and “Privatizing Community Governing and Its Limit,” Zhang argues that the focus on housing and “regimes of living” brings to the surface many issues in the myriad social changes that undergird China’s political and economic forces.

The area the book does not touch upon very much, ironically, is the area of “space” itself. In her theoretical discussion of the new concept of “spatializing of class,” Zhang goes as far as to underline how urban space is created as a private sanctuary (i.e. gated community) and dwelled in by those who have the means to do so. In other words, her ethnography discusses matters in space, yet it does not really discuss how those matters are related to space. This leads to the question: what is/are the form(s) of individual, social, or collective activities that take place in space because of the space itself? In the entire book, there are
several photographs of her sites, but no single illustrations of the architectural floor plans or the zoning charts of the spaces that she discusses. For instance, some simple site plans of the housing project she discusses would provide the readers with some insights on how buildings are clustered – how segregated they are from each other despite the “green space” in the middle that is supposed to bring people together. In addition, a comparison of floor plans of popular units of the “private oasis” and typical seven-story walk-up danwei housing would tell us more about how the new forms of subjectivity requires the new middle-class’ realm of spatiality to be different from before. For instance, do everyday activities in the space of the new private paradise differ from that of the traditional state-provided housing? In my own research, I have encountered numerous instances where people are practicing the same activities in the new space, which shows not only the flexibility of the residents, but also how the notion of “private paradise” is materialistic (see Arkaraprasertkul 2012).

To summarize, In Search of Paradise fulfills the goal that it sets out: the book unpacks many of the crucial concepts of post-socialist China such as class, status, welfare, social space, and collectivity. Unlike Zhang’s previous work that focuses on an enclave of migrant workers in Beijing (Zhang 2001), In Search of Paradise examines the situation of the wealthy in the opaque political system of the People’s Republic of China. Zhang leaves the big question of how some people get the opportunity to choose their private paradise while others are still living below the poverty line to others but she signals the problem throughout her ethnography. The book supplements Zhang’s recent pursuits on understanding the effects of neoliberal governmentality and privatization (Zhang and Ong 2008). She makes sure that we know that there is no other place where the effects are more obvious than in China. In addition, like the late pioneering anthropologist G. William Skinner (1964; 1965a; 1965b) who placed great emphasis on physical space, as it is where social activities take place, Zhang’s ethnography allows us to see not only the middle class’ social imagination of private life under unique socio-political circumstances, but also their lived experience in space. This book is a major contribution to the studies of not only, what Michael Herzfeld (2001) calls, “ethnography in urban context” but also housing as a whole. Although housing experts as well as architects will probably not find any major differences in the book from their findings through quantitative research, the main contribution of the book lies in its careful and thoughtful penetration of the actuality of lived experience through ethnography. In other words, In Search of Paradise reminds us of what housing studies usually take for granted – that housing is about people, not about simplified statistics. If there is any major criticism of this wonderful work, it would be the cover of the book, which is truly horrifying – Cornell University Press, you can do better than that!

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