THE CASE OF *DWELLING NARROWNESS:* AUDIENCE COMMODITY, THE SPECTACLE, AND CLASS FORMATION

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the process of class formation depicted in and through the popular 2009 television drama series *Dwelling Narrowness* against the backdrop of spectacular accumulation in neo-liberalising urban China. The article points out the lines of tension and affinity that are emerging out of the processes of class formation inside China's "society of spectacle": the divide between the aspiring middle class and the working class, and the alliance between the urban middle class, the ruling political class, as well as the domestic and transnational capitalist classes. On the one hand, one witnesses a reified class interests-based hegemonic unity of party-state power holders, domestic private capitalists and transnational capitalists, and the emerging middle class. On the other hand, profound economic divisions and social injustices continue to arouse resistance amongst the working class, which are largely mediated by the Chinese state's socialist ideological legacies.

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Introduction

In September 2008, the world was awakened by the infamous global financial crisis, which erupted in the U.S. and quickly spread around the globe. It resulted in the busting of the housing bubble, the collapse of large financial institutions, the bailout of banks and industries by national governments, and prolonged massive unemployment. However, China, the world's second largest economic entity, seemed to represent a different story. China was not immune to the economic downturn, as factory closures in the coastal cities and the resulting lay-offs forced tens of thousands of migrant workers to return to their hometowns in the rural areas. China's growth rate dropped from 13 percent in 2007 to 8 percent in 2008. Compared with the plummet of the U.S. real estate market, which led to numerous evictions and foreclosures, the housing market in China remained prosperous. Because the local governments in China have used the commodity housing sector as the backbone to boost overall economic performance, property prices continued to rise against the backdrop of the financial crisis. For instance, the average price of commodity housing in Shanghai spiked 35 percent from 15,457 Yuan per square meter in 2009 to 22,370 Yuan per square meter in 2010 (Wenxin 2011). This represents the period when the financial situation deteriorated and when the State Council implemented property market tightening measures to curb escalating property prices. In contrast, the average monthly wage in Shanghai remained steady from 2009 to 2010, as low as 3,896 Yuan (China Daily 2011). Rocketing property prices became a major concern for the Chinese government and buyers as purchasing a flat has become an unrealistic dream for many ordinary urban dwellers. It was in the context of the global economic storm and the increasing unaffordable housing prices that *Dwelling Narrowness* (*Woju*), a hit television drama centring on purchasing a property by a young urban middle class couple, caught viewers' attention.

The 33-episode *Dwelling Narrowness* premiered in Shanghai and Jilin and achieved instant success in fall 2009. The hit drama focuses on the plight of two Guo sisters who come from a small town and resettle in a metropolis called Jiangzhou, which is believed to be a simulacrum of Shanghai. A series of events resulted from Guo Haiping's (the elder sister) intention to own a condominium home in the city. Longing for the splendid façade of urban dwelling, Haiping and her husband Su Chun aspire to buy a home after graduating from the city's top university. Therefore, they live an austere lifestyle and rent a tiny room in a decrepit old alleyway neighbourhood, sharing the kitchen and the sanitary facilities with their apparently working-class neighbours. Even though they lead their life pinching and scraping, they soon realise that their lofty goal has become more and more unapproachable. The real estate prices are skyrocketing. In the end, they end up buying a modest apartment and becoming "mortgage slaves" (*fangnu*), spending two-thirds of their combined monthly income on their mortgage payment. Meanwhile, Haizao (the younger sister) follows the footsteps of Haiping to relocate herself in Jiangzhou after university. Feeling obligated to alleviate Haiping's financial burden because Haiping had funded her university education, she betrays her boyfriend Xiaobei and develops an intimate relationship with Song Siming, a high-ranking corrupt official in the mayor's office, beginning her journey as a "professional mistress." Song exercises his power to assist Haiping and Su Chun through various difficulties.

A side story concerns Haiping's poor neighbours, Grandma Li's family, whose members have lived in the alleyway house for more than three generations. As laid-off workers struggling to make ends meet, Grandma Li's son, Lao Li, has a night shift job in an Internet café, while his wife Aunty Zhang works as a maid for a stingy bourgeois family. In the name of urban renewal, Song Siming colludes with developer Chen Sifu on a plan to turn Li's neighbourhood into a park and then modify the building permit to erect upscale condominiums, which will lead to a handsome profit margin. Knowing that the compensation payment that has been offered to them is meagre, the Li family stands out as a "nail household" (dingzi hu) to resist the demolition process. Grandma Li is killed by the violent tactic of the forced demolition implemented by Chen.

Dwelling Narrowness drew a great deal of attention from its targeted urban-oriented audiences, who generated a wave of heated discussions on the popular media. On the Internet, various social networking sites, searching portals' discussion sites, bulletin board services sites, blogs, and audio-visual file sharing sites were flooded with Chinese netizens' passionate comments as they performed their role as "active audiences." For a period of time, phrases such as "mortgage slave," "mistress" (xiaosan), "Song Siming" and "corrupt official" (tanguan) were the most popular online search terms. Apart from discussions in the virtual world, the DVDs and a novel version of the hit series, written by the show's screenwriter Zhang Xin, also garnered wide popularity.

Notwithstanding the sweeping success of the show, the broadcasting of the hit drama met with pressure from the government. After the full 33 episodes were broadcast in Shanghai and Jilin in late 2009, Beijing TV, citing "technical difficulties," pulled the drama series off the air after showing only 10 episodes. However, immediately after cancelling the show, Li Jingsheng, the director of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), criticised *Dwelling Narrowness* for depending on vulgar "bone-baring" plots of sex and official corruption in order to mobilise public sensations. This official rhetoric triggered intense fury among netizens, who questioned whether the government was in fact embarrassed by the show's somewhat "authentic" representation of official corruption. The show's portrayal of official corruption is so vivid that commentaries posit that the character of Song Siming is modeled on the former Shanghai party secretary, Chen Lianyu, who had 11 mistresses and was charged for the misappropriation of pension funds after lending $3 billion Yuan to a number of real estate and construction companies. Meanwhile, a widespread online rumour citing *The 21st Century Business Herald* pointed out that Beijing TV was pressured by real estate developers to pull the show off the air, as the show would damage the reputation of the real estate industry. Nevertheless, even though the government seemed to have adopted the new tactic of "cold treatment" toward the show (Yu 2011, 36), the multiple forms of the show's distribution, including books, DVDs, and the digital versions online, were available for wide circulation and avid consumption. It remains unclear why the SARFT would ban the drama despite its high ratings and potentially lucrative commercial revenue. However, one thing is for sure – the ban has sparked discussions precisely because the show's "realistic" representation of the urban housing plight resonates with the netizens.

This paper illustrates the process of class formation surrounding *Dwelling Narrowness* against the backdrop of spectacular accumulation in neo-liberalising urban China. The article first utilises Dallas Smythe's concept of the "audience commodity" to ground a materialist analysis of the formation of the middle class in the political economy and cultural politics of the show's production, distribution, and consumption. To deepen the analysis through the show, the article then draws upon Guy Debord's concept of the "spectacle" to theorise the politics of land privatisation and resultant "class struggle" surrounding the process of urban renewal. The analysis reveals the lines of class unity and division within the "society of spectacle." On the one hand, one witnesses the emergence of a reified class interests based hegemonic unity, consisting of the transnational class, the state, the private capitals, and the emerging middle class. On the other hand, profound economic divisions and social injustices continue to arouse resistances amongst the working class, which are largely mediated by the Chinese state's socialist ideological legacies.

The Aspiring Middle Class as the Audience Commodity

Dallas Smythe visited China twice in the 1970s to study ideology and technological development. These trips resulted in a well-known report entitled "After Bicycle, What?" in which he suggested that the answer should be "in favour of public goods and services and against goods and services for individual, private use" (Smythe 1994, 243). At that time, television did not exist in China, and the Chinese government was eager to plan a truly nationwide television system. Smythe's advice to China was to avoid the western one-way model system and to design a "two-way system in which each receiver would have the capability to provide either a voice or voice-and-picture response to the broadcasting station" because, he wrote, "the existing TV technique had been developed under capitalism to make possible the sale of motion pictures and other commodities to people in their home" (Smythe 1994, 231-2). The "[issues] of the class character of technology, the ideological character of consumer goods and services, and the ideological character of innovation/investment" (Smythe 1994, 232) were at the heart of his concern against the television system developed under monopoly capitalism. As Yuezhi Zhao has discussed in some detail in relation to Smythe's engagements with China (Zhao 2007; 2011), the Chinese government, of course, did not take Smythe's aphoristic advice seriously, and it drastically changed its policies toward capitalistic reintegration with the West. After 30-odd years of "reform and openness," the Chinese communication industry today has wholeheartedly embraced a market imperative similar to the western model, making its contemporary mode of production more relevant to Smythe's other well-known piece on "audience commodity." Although the Chinese state remains on the "commanding heights" on collective ownership, ideological work, and content regulations, the profit-driven communication industry has submitted to the capitalist system of consumption (Zhao 2008).

In "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," Smythe argues that, under monopoly capitalism, the primary commodity of the media is the "audience commodity" (Smythe 1977). As he argues, in a materialistic way, the audience commodity is created by the media to lure advertisers; thus, in this sense, the labour performed by the audience when engaging in consumption during their leisure time is the chief effort to articulate the communication system's economic function

in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. The political economy of production and consumption of *Dwelling Narrowness* serves as a perfect illustration of the "audience commodity" concept.

Dwelling Narrowness is a product of China's private-capital friendly media policies, which introduced the mode of co-production between the state broadcasters and private media companies. The show was co-produced by Shanghai Media Group (SMG), Jilin TV, Huayi Bros Media Group (Huayi), and Jindun Shengye Film and Culture Co. (Jindun). SMG is one of the major state media conglomerates in China. The marketisation and conglomeration path of SMG can be traced back to the late 1970s, when Shanghai was positioned in the forefront of media commercialisation in China. In February 1979, advertising first appeared on Shanghai Television (Zhao 1998, 53), which marked the beginning of a new era that turned "the people" into the market-oriented "audiences." After pursuing various measures of commercialisation and desperately seeking audiences for two decades, SMG was formed in April 2001, on the eve of China's World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession. SMG was a result of a merger involving the Shanghai People's Radio, Shanghai Oriental Radio, Shanghai Television, and Shanghai Oriental Television. Since its formation, SMG has consistently undergone aggressive expansion. By 2011, it had become the second largest media conglomerate after China Central Television (CCTV), operating a multimedia platform and related cultural productions. To expand beyond its status as a regional monopoly, SMG has also forged significant international partnerships with major global media players, such as DreamWorks Animation and MTV Networks to distribute its programs around the globe. Jilin TV, a minor player in the co-production, is operated under the state-owned Jilin provincial media conglomerate Jishi Media Co. Ltd. Similar to SMG, Jishi Media was formed in 2001 under the pressure of China's WTO accession. Huayi Bros Media, formed in 1994, is one of the largest privately-owned media production houses in China. It owns a portfolio of film production and distribution, television production, advertising and marketing, recording and music production, artist management, game publishing, and theme park operations. *Dwelling Narrowness* was produced and directed by the well-known director Teng Huatao, who contracted with Huayi. Jindun Shengye is a relatively small private production house which specialises in the production of police drama.

Co-production is now a common practice in the television drama industry in China. The state broadcasters, which almost monopolise the production permits licensed by the SARFT, tend to prefer purchasing shows produced by private production houses or contracted producers, "rent-seeking" from the process of outsourcing production (Zhao 2008). However, by implementing the mode of co-production, the contracted private production houses have "to do the heavy lifting" (cited by Zhao 2008, 205) by financing the production and selling the advertising slots to potential advertisers in advance. Under these circumstances, the production houses have to intensify the shows' capacity to mobilise sponsorships in order to survive under the profit-seeking mechanism of the entertainment industry. Thus, this has propelled the private production houses, as noted by Zhao (2008, 211), to "[play] a major role in China's media's decisive reorientation toward entertainment." It is beyond dispute that the "rent-seeking" behaviour of state broadcasters and profit-making private media capital find common ground on serving their *de facto* "patrons" – advertisers – who provide the media subsidy.

Dwelling Narrowness, which was deliberately crafted to recruit the desirable "audience commodity," serves as the "inducement" (free lunch), in Smythe's term. The show was pulled off the air; however, it has produced an army of committed members of the "audience commodity" as the show's digital form has remained highly accessible. Then, the issues that surface here are that of the labour of the audience and the class containment function of commercial media, which turn citizens into consumers. In the case of *Dwelling Narrowness,* one should ask, what particular class consciousness and material practices does the show aim to reproduce? How does the labour of the audience contribute to the process of class formation? To avoid absolute "commercial indoctrination" (Meehan 2007, 163), it is also necessary to make a further scrutiny into the "free lunch" to reveal what, exactly, has been packed in the show to set the class agenda that best serves the interests of China's neoliberal-oriented market economy.

For Smythe (1994, 246), the free lunch "functions as a lure or bait to catch and keep people paying attention" to advertising messages. Nowadays, television programming employs the method of "product placement," in which "the product is woven directly into the story so it is unavoidable and its messages can be smuggled in when the viewer's guard is down" (McChesney 2004, 147). Namely, the "free lunch" itself is explicitly advertising in content so the labour of the audience is intensified. In *Dwelling Narrowness,* the storyline has been virtually "branded" to exhibit the values, tastes, aspirations, and lifestyles of the elite and the aspiring middle class. For instance, Haizao and Xiaobei discuss the pronunciation of the upscale luxury fashion labels "Salvatore Ferragamo" and "Giorgio Armani" while they are window shopping at the airbrushed boutiques. To showcase Haizao's "petty bourgeoisie complex" (*Xiaozi qingjie*), a plot highlights how she is virtually alienated by the seduction of the expensive Häagen-Dazs ice cream, and another plot shows how she is delighted at receiving an iconic doll crafted by the well-known Japanese artist Nara Nishitomo as a gift from Song Siming. Likewise, although Haiping subsists on a diet of instant noodles, her desire for consumption is further realised by her insistence on purchasing brand name (such as Disney) baby clothes and food for her daughter. As for the ruling elite, the possession of flashy cars, countryside villas, and mistresses are perceived as the status symbols by which their social and economic prestige is measured. A lengthy plot that features Song Siming cruising in a Land Rover (Luhu) with Haizao helps to build up such an image. As a passionate fan of the Land Rover, Song Siming boasts the car's unique specifications and glorifies the brand as "the British royal family designated vehicle," making this plot a quasi "infomercial" within the show. As of today, three years after the show's broadcasting, searching "Song Siming" and "Luhu" on Baidu, China's most popular search engine, still results in more than 44,600 entries. Of course, this "infomercial" was not inconsequential. The sales of Land Rover shot up 100 percent in 2010 (Chen 2011).

The show's popularity is tied to its realistic engagement with a few contradictory issues implicated in China's rapid neoliberal urbanisation. Since the introduction of the commodity housing market in the early 1990s, the commodification of urban spaces has been accompanied by rising property prices and class polarisation. Issues such as "nail households," illegal land grabbing, and official corruption are often convoluted with the entrepreneurial mode of urban redevelopment.

The consequence is an environment of spiralling real estate prices that fetters the emerging white-collar or middle class as "mortgage slaves." Besides the housing issue, the extramarital relationship portrayed by Song Siming and Haizao has been a common phenomenon among China's rich and powerful elite classes. The fact that the mistress, who accepts financial support from her elite class lover, tends to come from the middle or lower social stratum has generally revealed the class nature of asymmetrical gender relations and the ugly truth of male chauvinism. The mistress phenomenon has further belittled the role of women, casting them merely as men's sexual obsessions.

Television dramas in China usually shape public discourses, and *Dwelling Narrowness* is no exception. The audience's labour has generated a plethora of decidedly middle class-aspired discourses in both new and old forms of popular media, as the vast majority of the online commentaries, discussions, and postings focused on the issues such as the plight of the "mortgage slaves," the aspiring middle class' dream for home ownership, the love choice of being a mistress of the rich and powerful, and the conspiracy of the corrupt official and the developer to speculate property prices. It is worthwhile to note that a few online surveys launched by China's web media confirm the middle class orientation of the public discourses. For example, Tencent.com conducted a poll that drew more than 36,000 online voters. The result showed that the majority of the participating netizens agreed with the statement: "happiness is closely related to owning a home" (Feng 2009). Another survey run by Sina.com, one of China's major portal sites, showed more than 60 percent of 15,000 netizens agreeing that *Dwelling Narrowness* reflected the public sentiment on "mortgage slaves" (Feng 2009). Even CCTV, the state's flagship media, ran an online survey that asked netizens to state which love choice they would make between Song Siming (material security) and Xiaobei (untainted love). The result was predictable, with 32.61 percent voting for Song while 26.34 percent voted for Xiaobei. This seemed to suggest that the middle class feels desperation and will use any means to rise out of their situations. These examples also show the ways in which the online media, which did not produce the television drama, have been engulfed into the triad of "free lunch," "audience commodity," and advertisers. By providing space for online discussions, the online media have further valorised the labour of the audience in the effort to reinforce the middle class-centred discourses, and by spinning the related discourses, the online media proliferate more "audience/netizen commodities."

The effect of the labour of the audience/netizens on class containment is apparent. It has been very difficult to find comments and discussions regarding the unjust treatment toward the show's working-class Grandma Li family amongst the countless postings concerning "mortgage slaves" and "mistress." Even on the leftist website Utopia (wuyouzhixiang), one could locate no more than two Grandma Li- and demolition-related entries. Given the enthusiastic public discourses on *Dwelling Narrowness,* commentators from the side of audience studies can (and have) celebrate(d) the emancipatory discursive power of the "active audience/netizen." Yet, the truth is, if the criticism of the impact of corruption on the inflated property prices serves only to address the plight of the middle class "mortgage slaves," leaving behind the working class who have been forced from their homes, then the issue of "mortgage slaves," which functions to forge and even consolidate middle class formation, seems to be a hypocritical agenda.

The so-called white collar or aspiring middle class is the core of the class discourse represented in *Dwelling Narrowness.* The show has painstakingly painted a crude yet vivid picture of this class. Best represented by the characters of Haiping and Su Chun, the members of this class are considered the beneficiaries of China's economic reform. They have obtained college or university degrees in the city, and they have secured white collar jobs and have stable incomes. On the one hand, this is a class that desperately distances itself from the working class, primarily based on the class distinction of education. As Su Chun boasts of his middle-class credential of graduating from "the most prestigious Fudan University," he says to Haiping, "Just ignore those narrow-minded and shortsighted petty urban residents (xiaoshiming). They don't even finish high school … You shouldn't condescend to care what they say." Clearly, education is regarded as a form of cultural capital. Without higher education, the working class has been looked down upon or even despised by the middle class. Yet, on the other hand, this is a class that sides with the ruling elite and the transnational capitalist class. While Haizao is willing to be sexually subordinated to Song Siming's chauvinistic charm in exchange for material comfort, Haiping is unabashedly accepting of Song's financial and legal aids to meet her reified class interests.

Regarding the class relationship with the transnational class, the Guo sisters make no effort to disguise their aspirations to Mark's elite superiority. Mark is an American lawyer and Song's close friend, a minor character in the show, yet one who plays a decisive role in influencing the fate of the two female protagonists. Through Song's recommendation, Haiping makes good use of her middle class cultural capital to be able to teach Mandarin in Mark's expatriate community. It is through Mark's financial help that Haiping elevates her class position from a white collar "mortgage slave" who was once exploited by her Japanese transnational employer to an entrepreneur, the CEO of her own international language school, a joint venture with Mark's network of transnational capital. Similarly, at the end of the show, Mark assists the traumatised Haizao to relocate in the U.S., thereby helping her to acquire a membership of the transnational middle class. The transnational capitalist class represented by Mark, who is able to mobilise political and financial power inside and outside China, is indeed a "magic class," the ultimate "saviour" of the aspiring Chinese middle class.

More importantly, the construction of the consciousness of the white collar or middle class in the show is centred on the ownership of private property, the cardinal feature of neoliberal thought (Harvey 2007). Perplexed by her own class identity, Haiping said to her husband, "At least, we are university graduates. People would see us as white collar or the middle class. Why couldn't we afford to buy a house? I heard that in the United States, you would be considered as middle-class, as long as you own a house." Haiping's hysterical obsession with buying a home is compelled by an urge to acquire a self-proclaimed membership in the middle class to place herself in the dominant social strata of neoliberalised China. Haiping's idea is far from arbitrary. The focal point here is the newly enacted The Real Rights Law (the Property Rights Law). As Zhao (2008) reveals, the Property Rights Law was the subject of heated controversy in the aftermath of a media and Internet-based challenge against the further neoliberalisation of the Chinese political economy in the mid-2000s. Nevertheless, the ruling Chinese elite pushed it through at the

2007 National People's Congress (NPC) and the law went into effect on October 1, 2007. The newly sanctioned law, for the very first time in the history of the PRC, places private property on par with the state and collective ownership. Article 64 of Chapter 5 goes into detail about the legal rights associated with private ownership: "Private individuals have ownership rights to all legally obtained incomes, housing, daily use items, production tools and materials, and other movable and immovable capital." Wang Zhaoguo, the Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the NPC, said that the stipulation of the property law was to stimulate "people's initiative to create and accumulate wealth" (Yardley 2007). The stipulation has been welcomed by entrepreneurs and the urban middle class (Zhao 2008), and it has played a pivotal role in shaping the middle class consciousness and the direction of class re-composition in China's new "economic and social realities" (Yardley 2007). It is precisely against this background that private home ownership becomes the most desirable feature of the newly emerging middle class.

The proliferation of the public discourses on the middle class is observable. The discussion generated by *Dwelling Narrowness* is just a small part of the ascendancy of the class discourse that widely pervades the popular media whose desirable audiences are the avid consumers of their program sponsors. The intellectual and elite discourse has not been absent from this "middle class fetish" (Guo 2009). A plethora of literature from inside and outside China, ranging from economic and sociological descriptions to anthropological studies, have contributed to define or to characterise this emerging social class. Many argue that the middle class has achieved a higher profile as China's economic growth has proceeded apace, while some remain sceptical and assert that the actual existence of this class is still very disparate and elusive.

For example, the work of Lu Xueyi and his colleagues represents a liberal paradigmatic model on the rise of the middle class in China. Lu optimistically points out that China's class formation has gradually transformed from the unequal pyramid shape to the onion (or olive) shape, indicating that the majority of the population will be predominately middle class. Following the onion model, Lu (2007) posits that China's middle class accounted for 15 percent in 1999 and 23 percent in 2008. Additionally, Lu maintains that the middle class grows steadily at 1 percent per year and that, in the year 2020, the size of the middle class should reach 38-40 percent. Disapproving of Lu's optimistic prediction, Philip C.C. Huang is emphatic that, given the increasing expansion of China's informal economy, the combination of peasant workers, non-agriculture workers, and laid-off workers has reached over 60 percent in the urban areas, growing faster than Lu's estimation of the alleged middle class (Huang 2009). Therefore, it is naïve to model after the U.S.-inspired onion-shaped structure that assumes the agriculture population would gradually convert into the middle class stratum (Huang 2009).

Huang's account sharply points out an uncomfortable truth of China's rapid urbanisation. While it is correct that there has been a growing prominence of the so-called "new rich" or well-off middle class emerging out of China's steroidal economic development, the increasing "proletarianisation" of the urban population seems to display more serious concerns. Grandma Li's son and daughter in-law, who depend on meagre income from the informal sector, which offers no job security, represent this tendency. Altogether they earn approximately 2,000 Yuan

a month. This figure is considered high amongst the wages offered in the informal labour market, simply because they are local residents. Migrant workers would earn much lower wages than the local labour force. In China's large cities like Shanghai and Beijing, the growth of the formal economic sector cannot be sustained without exploiting the informal sector, which hires laid-off workers, the urban poor, and migrant workers. It is almost impossible that persons like Lao Li and Aunty Zhang, who work as a store clerk and a maid respectively, could have any opportunity for upward social mobility by holding informal sector jobs.

Within this context, it is also important to understand the official scheme of income characterisation of the middle class. The National Bureau of Statistic (NBS) defines the households that have an annual income from 50,000 to 60,000 Yuan as "middle income" households (Xinhua 2005, cited by Guo 2009). Needless to say, Haiping and Su Chun, who have an annual income of 108,000 Yuan (with 9,000 Yuan a month), are definitely well-positioned above the middle rank designated by the NBS income scheme. As Zhao (2010) observes, the "middle class" in China still belongs to the upper rank of the society.

Spectacular Accumulation and the City

Dwelling Narrowness is based on Jiangzhou, believed to be a fictionalised alias for Shanghai. This "rendezvous" manifests the intricate relationship amongst the major characters over the issues of power, morality, affection, as well as monetary accumulation. Thanks to Jiangzhou's enthusiastic urbanism, gigantic skyscrapers are placed closely in a serrated formation throughout the city. At night, the city is adorned by sparkling lightshows of billboards, which brim with energy, glitter, and excitement. The fanciful window displays created by boutiques and department stores stop shoppers at their tracks. Dazzling as it is, this is the spectacular "image" that attracts the Guo sisters to leave behind their hometown and resettle in such a dynamic metropolis. However, this "image" of the metropolis is not unique. This is the "image" of a globalising city that all Chinese cities have deliberately crafted since the 1990s. Still, the term "image" cannot explain the process of rapid urban transformation that Chinese cities have experienced over the past two decades. The "image" of Jiangzhou is not what it appears to be. In envisaging the spatial and social transformation of a globalising city like Jiangzhou, the need becomes apparent to bring Guy Debord's critique of "spectacle" to bear upon this task, in order to identify the spatial logic of power.

Debord uses the term "spectacle" to refer to the reified social relations in capitalist society. In the society of spectacle, the power of spectacle and spectacle as image were realised as *commodity;* and both images as commodities, and commodities as images, permeate all areas of life. However, spectacle does not equate to images. Debord clearly states that "spectacle is capital accumulation to the point when it becomes images" (Debord 1995, 34). Images conceal their power by cloaking themselves within commodities.

For Debord, spectacular representation displays an affinity with commodification. Here, Debord's argument has close links to Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism," and to Georg Lukács' notion of "reification" (1968). The notion of spectacle is, in fact, a reformulation of both earlier concepts. Debord uses the concept of spectacle to illustrate the commodity structure, and the reified relations

of humans, produced and existing under the logic of capitalist accumulation. As long as commodities are produced, reproduced, and circulated, the modern society pacifies and mesmerises its citizens, turning them from subjects into objects, and from actors into spectators.

Debord's theory of spectacle was developed in the late 1960s; it was in an age where prominent social theorists had proclaimed "the end of ideology" (Bell 1962). He unleashed a savage polemic against the positive view of post war capitalism and liberal democracy when North America and Western Europe reinforced a consolidated ideological front opposing the socialist regimes of the Soviet Unions, Eastern Europe, and China. The Utopian mood of developed Western societies seemed to be confirmed by optimistic and opulent images – a spectacle created by commodities. Nevertheless, Debord's bleak assessment paradoxically anticipated the turbulent ride of capitalism beginning in the early 1970s. Some forty years later, by revisiting the concept of spectacle against the backdrop of the new cycle of the economic crisis and China's post 1992 "no-debate-on-ideologies" neoliberalisation, we find that Debord still has something to teach us.

The rapid urban transformation that most Chinese cities experience today is based on the principles of spectacular accumulation, as can be seen in the example of Jiangzhou's real identity – Shanghai. The Shanghai Pudong project, "grand in concept and bold in design" (MacPherson 1994, 61), has been positioned at the forefront of national reform since 1992. Jiang Zemin, the former Secretary General of the CCP and Chinese President, assigned Shanghai a role of leadership in China's "new" spatial economy. He stated, "Shanghai Pudong must be the principal economic 'dragon head' of Yangzhi River Valley." A slogan was then formulated by the Shanghai Municipal Government: "Revitalising Shanghai, Developing Pudong, Serving the Country, and Marching toward the World." To restore Shanghai's financial significance in the global economy, the Lujiazui Finance and Trade Zone was set up to replace the Bund in Puxi as the city's new business core. It is a flagship project within the Pudong mega plan. Moreover, Lujiazui was proposed as a "Manhattan of the East," the city's new international trade and financial district. The analogy to Manhattan is deliberate and meant to connote an "image" of a "global city." As Shanghai Pudong was "marching toward the world," Lujiazui was meant to appropriate images of a world-class city into its own system of representation.

The making of the global city does entail an aspect of media. From 1992 to 1993, the Shanghai Broadcasting Bureau took a bold step in establishing a commercial-oriented multimedia platform including Shanghai Oriental Radio, Shanghai Oriental Television, and Shanghai Cable Television. Shanghai's broadcasting reform largely resulted from Deng Xiaoping's famous southern tour talks in 1992, which aimed to further liberalise China's economy and to restore Shanghai's economic importance (Zhao 1998). Pudong, where Shanghai Oriental Television is based, has quickly transformed into a global vanguard city, with the Oriental Pearl Tower striving to become the new landmark. In light of this, Shanghai's broadcasting reform and the later conglomeration of the broadcast sector bore an additional profound strategic aim to secure Shanghai's role not only as a world-class city, but also as a flourishing cultural and media centre.

Over the past 20 years, Shanghai's cityscape has been transformed from a former industrial-agriculture site into a "Blade Runneresque city that [satisfied] the SMG's

[Shanghai Municipal Government] desire for a 'distinctive skyline' and the symbol of the reform era" (Olds 2001, 112). The consequence of these changes was quite apparent. The new skyline is coming into being right before everyone's eyes, like a theatrical play constantly adding new scenarios with international recognition, and with each one vying with the others for attention. The current and past mayors of Shanghai all have endeavoured to "mobilise urban spectacle" (Harvey 1990) in the city, from inviting elite architects to erect magnificent new edifices to hosting events such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in 2001 to showcase Shanghai's cityscape in front of the world's political and economic leaders and the spectacular World Expo in 2010 to draw consumption dollars and the attention of the global media. The tangible and intangible flows of the spectacle have converged in Shanghai. The city has become the biggest construction site in the world. During 2002, it was estimated that almost three-quarters of high-rise construction cranes in the world were operating in Shanghai (Huang 2008, 223).

It is the Debordian society of the spectacle that reified the Guo sisters and led to their being spectators (not actors) of their lives. "One should become an urbanite!" Haiping preaches to Haizao, trying to convince her to stay in Jiangzhou because it offers museums, concerts, the Oriental Pearl Tower, and Isentan (a Japanese department store). In a similar vein, Haiping argues with Su Chun, "There is no reason to move back to our hometown. Are there mansions, high-rise buildings, bustling and lively streets? Is it a dynamic metropolis?" The tendency of the educated youth to choose not to return to their hometown implicates an asymmetrical urban and rural divide in China. The spatial bias of China's neoliberal development, which prioritises the consumption demands of the new rising urban middle class, has made the Chinese countryside invisible on the theatrical stage of China's spectacular accumulation.

Song Siming, the sagacious official who signifies the power of the state to manipulate urban plans and speculate real estate values, understands the naked logic of spectacular accumulation too well. When Haizao complains of the sky-high property prices, Song responds with a Debordian overtone:

> *Underneath the bright colours, there are only shabby clothes. A big international city is like a theatrical stage, and everyone concentrated their focus on where the spotlight is, what they see is the beautiful, the splendid, and the surging. As for the backstage, where the light does not shine, even if there is dust, or even dead mice, who would notice? This is not specific to Jiangzhou, and has nothing to do with any particular social system; it would be the same even in New York, Paris, and Tokyo. All these cities bear a sensibility of decadent charm, and the real estate prices are skyrocketing – unaffordable for their residents, but never stopping the newcomers to settle there. The burdensome pain behind the glamour of the city is hardly perceptible … The game of capitals is not deemed to be played by ordinary people … One has no choice but can only struggle to survive.*

What Song Siming has hesitated to reveal is the profound unity and division of the spectacle implicated in China's rapidly globalising cities. This is the subject addressed in the next section.

The Unity and Division of the Spectacle – the Class Struggle

The spectacular accumulation that most Chinese cities experience today rests on the principles that run deeply contrary to any progressive socialist sensibility. As a drive for global integration, the entrepreneurial mode of urban development reveals the extent to which the state and private capital have formed a close partnership to generate lucrative profits from the commodification of space and the introduction of private home ownership, while the welfare of the disenfranchised classes is barely considered. As a result, urban development has produced spatial apartheid (Davis 1992) and class polarisations. For instance, to establish the "Manhattan of the East" has meant to relocate 60,000 residents and over 800 work units in Lujiazui to the further outskirts of the municipality (Huang 2008, 223). Not only have the evicted residents been eradicated from the social networks of their everyday lives, they are forever excluded from the valorised spaces of the spectacle – sleek skyscrapers, sumptuary malls, upscale condominiums, villas, golf courses, and industrial zones – which come to replace their homes. In *Dwelling Narrowness*, Grandma Li's case reflects a far cry from the financial suffering of the middle class "mortgage slaves."

To begin, Grandma Li perceives the urban renewal project as a "class struggle" between the capitalist class and the disadvantaged working class. When the demolition company tries to persuade her to accept the compensation plan, she dismisses the offer and says:

> *Relocation is a business that would make the poor cry and put a smile on the faces of the rich. They [developers] are businessmen. How could you possibly gain any advantage from them? … Our house is located in the heart of the city, taking full convenience of transportation. It is within walking distance of the hospital that I visit. For those low income and low social security families like us, wherever it could save us money is considered a good location. How can I afford to move to the suburbs? … Foreigners and new immigrants have kicked us out of the city. Now they are living in the best locations. We, locals and the poor, have become more and more despicable!*

Indeed, not only is urban renewal a process of spatial apartheid that makes the city centre the enclaves of the elite and the transnational capitalist class while it displaces the urban poor to the suburbs, but it is also a process of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2003), whereby the developer encroaches upon the commons for the aim of capital accumulation. If the Maoist collective land and the public housing policy were meant to eliminate class differences, then the new run of the land reform since the early 1990s, which unleashed the "land use right" (LUR) to the regime of market imperative and introduced the commodity housing market, means to restore class division.

Shanghai's urban renewal process epitomises a vivid example of the "class struggle." In 1990, the State Council officially sanctioned the LUR. Land still remained a form of state asset, but the LUR had become the new commodity, subject to trade, auction, and mortgage under private treaty. Under this new regulation, the state came to monopolise newly marketised property relations. In Shanghai, both municipal and district governments are the two state institutions administrating

urban land development. While the regulation requires all acquisitions to occur only by public auction, in actual practice, a vast majority of the land leasing is conducted by private negotiations before the development project goes public. This implicates the potential for (and actual) corruption between the state and private developers. As in *Dwelling Narrowness*, government officials like Song Siming, who wields enormous power, can hand pick a developer like Chen Sifu to win the land contact, and it becomes necessary for private capitalists to establish "patron-client" relationship with senior officials. Because there is big money to be made on the booming property market, bribery is rampant and has been formalised.

Leasing land to developers accounts for a major source of government revenue to finance urban infrastructure and to generate funds for new urban housing. During the high tide of land leasing and housing commodification, land leasing provided up to 50 percent of the district government's income (Olds 2001, 85). The lion's share of leasing fees have effectively encouraged bureaucratic entrepreneurial administration and an intense competition among districts within Shanghai because the level of administrative achievement has been evaluated simply by measuring the pace of redevelopment projects and the prosperity of the real estate sector as well as the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) in comparison with other districts. Under these circumstances, the district governments have competed to invite symbolic and profitable projects into the areas to heighten property and land values.

What is at stake here is the relationship between the ruling elite and transnational capital. Chun Lin reminds us of the interlock of these two classes: "The biggest beneficiaries of the boom [of China's economy] have turned out to be transnational profit seekers and those local power holders who abuse public positions for private gains, and these two [classes] are often connected with each other" (2009, 230). In China's economic reform process, transnational capital has been used to jumpstart the economy and, thus, has been granted privileges over domestic capital. It is unequivocal that the involvement of FDI is fundamental to urban development. Beginning in the 1990s, the inflow of FDI has been directed largely to land and real estate development. This tendency is particularly true in Shanghai. By 1998, it was estimated that approximately half of the inflow of FDI in Shanghai was directly linked to property development (Ramo 1998, 68). As the making of the transnational class is intrinsically bound up with the flows of FDI and the globalising of corporations, the transnational capitalist class remains as a class which has vested interests in China's rapidly expanding capital accumulation process. Moreover, the alliance of these two classes is reciprocal. For the transnational capitalist class, their primary concern is to mobilise policies favourable to their economic interests, while for the power holders, the linkage would serve as a reliable channel for corrupt officials to stash the embezzled wealth and families (including mistresses and love children) overseas. As a lawyer on *Dwelling Narrowness*, Mark's job is to provide legal services regarding local professional codes and governmental regulations for his transnational clients, namely, to ensure that his clients reap profits in China. To that end, he would have the inside track by being affiliated with prominent officials like Song Siming. It is based on such intimate class alliances that Song Siming entrusts Mark to launder funds and move his mistress abroad.

The urban renewal process has been described by the media as "relocation is gold" (Shao 2010, 205) to legitimate the relocation. The underlying message is

that "relocation [is] an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for [the evicted residents] to gain financial freedom, and that they should grab it and set for life" (Shao 2010, 205-6). However, it is proven to be gold only for the state, corrupt officials and their patronised client companies. While the developer is responsible for the cost of the demolition and relocation compensation in Shanghai, the amount must be approved by the district government. According to municipal regulations, this amount must account for 70 percent of the land acquisition fee. However, it is impossible to prove that any final settlement follows the rule because no area of the process is subjected to any democratic oversight. So, how the cost of demolition and relocation is determined remains notoriously mysterious. Moreover, although the district government adopted a method to calculate the compensation package, the reality is that the actual compensation received by the residents seemed far lower than the officially alleged amount and revealed multiple standards as a result of "negotiations." Since the compensation standard is "negotiable" and there is no universal standard to follow, and since there is virtually no official channel for residents to know exactly how much compensation fee is settled with each household, the residents have to undergo an exhausting process of "negotiation" to acquire a favourable compensation package. With their own interests in the gentrification project, district governments have been unlikely to offer fair arbitration between demolition departments and evicted residents.

The compensation payments actually allow state and private interests to abstract more direct profit from the relocation process. Monetary compensation forces relocated residents to put money back into the real estate market, thereby increasing demand for housing and enhancing the market imperative. Relocated residents in Shanghai found they no longer enjoyed the low rental fees of public housing, yet they are also deprived by the pricey real estate market of living close by. Households with moderate stable income might manage to buy a home in a distant area, but the low-income families would be forced to move far out from the city by the dint of economic circumstances. In addition, as the land acquisition fee has risen along with the real estate market, the local government has profited enormously by maintaining relocation compensation at a low level. This is exactly Grandma Li's situation. The 200,000 Yuan compensation fee offered by the demolition company is far from enough to purchase a flat even in the suburbs of Jiangzhou.

A household that refuses to move out from the site is stigmatised as a "nail household" and has often been portrayed by the news media as demanding inflated compensation fees. Technically, the evicted residents can sue the evictor, but they have no legal right to stop the demolition process. In many cases, the residents who pursue lawsuits are denied justice and never receive the promised compensation. In the worst situation, when the negotiation reaches a deadlock, the demolition companies use verbal intimidation, threats, and physical attacks to solve the dispute. Demolition companies have often hired local hoodlums to threaten and beat residents, while the police stand on the side and turn a blind eye. If the residents still refuse to move out, the demolition company will apply for permission to proceed with a forced eviction. Violent incidents are the usual strategies in forced evictions. For instance, it has not been unusual for arson to force residents to flee.

The plot of the grassroots resistance of the "nail household" is one of the focal points in *Dwelling Narrowness*. As a veteran of political campaigns throughout her

life, Grandma Li utilises her organisational skills to mobilise a collective action amongst neighbours against the demolition. By so doing, she is labelled as a sleek, shrewd, and unruly person from the bottom rung of the society by the developer and the local authority. The show particularly emphasises her tenacity to hold up resistance. She stands out as a "nail household," even when the demolition team cuts the supply of water and electricity and even when she is paralysed in her bed. The point is that Grandma Li's resistance to demolition is far from incidental. Her spirit clearly derives from the engrained socialist working class legacies, which champion egalitarian social relations, as she believes that "labour processes should tell no class distinction." Therefore, her stance on the compensation payment should not be simply attributed to thinking in entrepreneurial terms. Instead, she is strategically waging war on the uneven "class struggle" that places her family in a disadvantaged position. Still, the ways in which the show handles the discontent of the unwelcome spectacular accumulation is notably ironic. In fact, the show gives Grandma Li's clearly left-leaning political position a right-wing spin. Specifically, Song Siming tries to co-opt and neutralise Grandma Li by attributing her spirit to her pre-socialist class identity as part of the landlord class. He discovers that she was born to a wealthy landlord family who once owned the entire neighbourhood. Her uncle was one of the "six gentlemen martyrs" in the One Hundred Days Reform (the Coup of Wu Hsu Year in 1898). Thus, Song concludes that it is her "blue-blooded" class background that leads to her sophisticated skills of resistance. The message is clear: Grandma Li's socialist subjectivity has been denied. Song Siming, the alleged socialist state power holder, sanitises the leftist messages by making her a member of the declined gentry class rather than a potential revolutionary proletariat.

From the above analyses, we see the unity of the spectacle in the case of the urban land reform consisting of the bureaucratic party state power holders, the transnational capitalist class, and the domestic private capitalist class as a newly constituted hegemonic profit-seeking bloc that is antagonistic to the vast majority of the working class. The question remains: how does the white collar or the emerging middle class position themselves in the process of spectacular accumulation? Is the middle class allied with the working class? The answer that *Dwelling Narrowness* reveals is rather disappointing. Not only does Haiping show no sympathy toward the Li family's grievances, she is even self-pitying for having to live in a working class neighbourhood. For that matter, she rants, "I believe that my future must be brighter than theirs. I am not going to stay in this shabby alleyway house and mingle with the laid-off and the hourly-paid workers downstairs, and the clerks and the plain cooks on the second floor." Haiping's lament suggests that today's emerging middle class has consciously forsaken the idea of egalitarianism and is eager to formalise the possession of private property as the prerequisite of their class status. Indeed, the middle class in China is currently obsessed with the ownership of private cars, houses, and consumption goods. Although they have been vocal about the issue of "mortgage slaves" under the repression of the rising property prices, they are apathetic to the plight of the urban poor, who are also suffering from the same market compulsions. The proliferation of private home ownership comes with the homeowners' desires to insulate their property values. In urban areas, there have been collective actions of the right-conscious middle class homeowners to resist the violations of homeowners' rights by the local government or the private developers (Cai 2005). As they are class-based movements, we see no

sign of convergence between the resistance of the dispossessed working class and the activism of the emerging gentrifiers. Despite the lack of class alliance with the working class, the terms and conditions of the class relationship between the middle class and the hegemonic power bloc are mediated by their reified class interests. As prised customers, the middle class sides with the transnational and domestic capitalist classes, as the commodities and services produced by the capitalist class alliance help to consolidate the middle class entitlement based on class distinction and exclusivity. As the class which has identified its own interests with China's neoliberal-oriented reform, the middle class continues to rally their support for broadening economic openness as long as the policies safeguard their class interests, as seen in the enactment of the Property Rights Law.

Conclusion

It is not adequate to view *Dwelling Narrowness* simply as a television drama that unveiled the plight of the aspiring middle class "mortgage slaves" caused by official corruption in the environment of escalating property prices. Instead, it reveals a Smytheian sense of "free lunch" whose chief aim is to, materialistically and ideologically, reproduce the formation of the middle class through the labour performed by the show's targeted viewers as its active "audience commodity." It is precisely the profit-seeking mechanism of the Chinese popular entertainment industry that guarantees the show's class containment function. To nurture and captivate the "class consciousness" of China's seemingly swelling rank of urban middle class, *Dwelling Narrowness* has accentuated the significance of property ownership as class distinction and entitlement. Consequently, the financial predicament of the "mortgage slaves" roils the aspiring homeowners and becomes a vocal issue. Namely, it is a moment when the "class consciousness of the bourgeoisie [or middle class] is geared to economic consciousness," as pointed out by Lukács (1968, 64), and it is precisely in this moment that the middle class truly becomes conscious of themselves as such – that is, it is the formation of the middle class. The members of this class are aspirational class climbers. As China's economy increasingly integrated into neo-liberal global capitalism, the class consciousness of the middle class has been deeply shaped by the commodities, including media and cultural commodities, created by domestic and multinational corporations. It is in this context that Zhao has spoken of the formation of "a newly constituted power bloc – consisting of the bureaucratic capitalists of a reformed Party state, transnational corporate capital, and an emerging urban middle class, whose members are the favoured consumers of both domestic and transnational capital" (2003, 53). In addition, the middle class is not only upwardly mobile but also Western-ward. The important characteristics ascribed to the urban oriented middle class in China tend to be "postcolonial" in nature. To the extent that the West-inspired concept of white collar or middle class has been associated with the current "middle class fetish," and to the extent that the middle class cultural predispositions and the consumption priorities have predominately constructed by Western goods and brands, the issue of the "new imperialism" implicated in the process of the middle class formation and even the transnational class re-composition cannot simply be ignored.

Yet, paradoxically, the grievance of the disenfranchised working class strikes no chord with the middle class "audience commodity." On the one hand, this

demonstrates how successfully the commercial media has worked so closely with monopoly capitalism to reproduce the "right" kind of audiences. On the other hand, this reflects the antagonism and a profound divide between the middle class and the working class. Henry Kissinger also confirmed such a divide, as he felt that the "selfishness of the Chinese yuppies" would bother Mao, who truly believed in egalitarianism (Schama 2011). Indeed, in the broader politics of class discourses, this also indicates the decline of the leftist discourse of class analysis and class struggle (Anagnost 2008; Guo 2009; Zhao 2010). Compared to the flattering media portrayal of the middle class, the working class has been represented as an inferior and burdensome class, a loser of China's miracle economy. The power holders and the capitalist class see the urban poor as a pariah class, the burden of the society and the obstacle of their profit making. Unmasking the logic of the urban renewal is the poverty cleansing game to eliminate the working class from the city centre as their presence mismatches the city's glamorous image.

In light of popular protests, Grandma Li's resistance is remarkably symbolic. However, the working class has taken more radical approaches in the Maoist-inspired real life protests common in China. For instance, the relocation of the East Eight Lots (*Dongba kuai*) in Shanghai caught media attention in 2004. The residents employed tactics, rhetoric and actions that stemmed from the Maoist repertoire to frame their collective resistance to negotiate the better terms of compensation (Shao 2010). They "formed a 'Legal Study Forum' (*xuefu yuandi*) in the fashion of small study groups under Mao, sang 'The *Internationale*' in front of the authorities, flew the red flag on their apartments, and linked the violence in the housing disputes to that of the Cultural Revolution" (Shao 2010, 209). Another case is in Beijing. Song, a local resident whose house is located in a migrant worker neighbourhood along the city's central axis "that has been gutted to beautify the city for the Olympics," hung three red flags and set out Mao's poster on a wicker chair to scare away the officials who had threatened him to move (Hooker 2008). Protests of this kind often serve as critical responses to the problems of glaring inequality and social injustice. It is undeniable that there is an embedded belief of egalitarianism derived from the socialist legacies underpinning the working class resistance. It is troubling to note that under the current liberal (or perhaps neoliberal) economic and political *milieu*, the society of the spectacle (including public discourses and popular media) is reluctant to recognise the left-leaning class struggles. The tendency is the retreat from class, except for the middle class (Guo 2009).

Still, the crux of the problem behind the political economy of the spectacular accumulation is the privatisation of land and property. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx warned us that

> *... the landed property, the root of private property, [would] be dragged completely into the movement of private property and that it becomes a commodity … property becoming merely objective, material wealth; … it is essential that in this competition landed property, in the form of capital, manifest its dominion over both the working class and the proprietors themselves who are either ruined or raised by laws governing the movement of capital* (Marx 2000).

This is exactly what has happened in China. Evidently, once the LUR was unleashed from the collective ownership, landed property has become subjected to

competition and speculation. The possession of capital and property stratifies the society into class lines. The political elites, developers and the associated businesses connected through cronyism can deploy their class power over the aspiring middle class "mortgage slaves" and the working class by appropriating public assets and speculating the real estate prices to their own advantage. It is precisely the reified middle class aspiration of being a homeowner that makes the "mortgage slaves" willing to submit themselves to the capitalist system "that is based on class antagonism [and] on the exploitation of the many by few," as proclaimed by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1998, 67). In this sense, the enactment of the Property Rights Law has the effect of deepening the class stratification and intensifying the tendency of "proletarianisation."

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