



In Search of Paradise: Middle-class Living in a Chinese Metropolis

Li Zhang

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A new revolution in homeownership and living has been sweeping the booming cities of China. This time the main actors on the social stage are not peasants, migrants, or working-class proletariats but middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs in search of a private paradise in a society now dominated by consumerism. No longer seeking happiness and fulfillment through collective sacrifice and socialist ideals, they hope to find material comfort and social distinction in newly constructed gated communities. This quest for the good life is profoundly transforming the physical and social landscapes of urban China.

Li Zhang, who is from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, turns a keen ethnographic eye on her hometown. She combines her analysis of larger political and social issues with fine-grained details about the profound spatial, cultural, and political effects of the shift in the way Chinese urban residents live their lives and think about themselves. *In Search of Paradise* is a deeply informed account of how the rise of private homeownership is reconfiguring urban space, class subjects, gender selfhood, and ways of life in the reform era.

New, seemingly individualistic lifestyles mark a dramatic move away from yearning for a social utopia under Maoist socialism. Yet the privatization of property and urban living have engendered a simultaneous movement of public engagement among homeowners as they confront the encroaching power of the developers. This double movement of privatized living and public sphere activism, Zhang finds, is a distinctive feature of the cultural politics of the middle classes in contemporary China. Theoretically sophisticated and highly accessible, Zhang's account will appeal not only to those interested in China but also to anyone interested in spatial politics, middle-class culture, and postsocialist governing in a globalizing world.

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