

In the tiger's Lair: socialist everydayness enters post-Mao China

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Review essay on

Streetlife China

Michael Dutton

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998

320.pp, ISBN 0 521 63719 8, US\$19.95

[339]

Michael Dutton's *Streetlife China* immediately recalls for us not only the historic break between modernity and everyday life Henri Lefebvre recognized as a necessary condition for grasping capitalist transformation, but more importantly, the now long-forgotten prehistory that once had been associated with revolutionary agency. In Lefebvre's meditations on everyday life, hinted at as early as the 1930s but fully amplified after World War II, the category of everydayness, already uncoupled from an earlier experience identified with the Soviet revolution, had become a repressed history. This ghostly revenant punctually resurfaced with every transformation announcing a new and modern industrial order, thus reminding its agents of the promise of vanished possibilities. It was the singular aim of the Soviet achievement to replace an understanding of everyday life that had been linked to the 'daily' and the 'contingent' with one demanding political, social and cultural transformation. This was to lead to a massive dehierarchisation of life and the establishment of a democratic order[1]. With this transformation of everydayness into an active concept came also a radical rethinking of Marxist philosophy and theories of culture that would lead, everywhere the everyday was discursively contested, and to an abandonment of older practices based on naturalism and positivism. Moreover, it would pose a serious challenge to a second international historicism that still holds Marxism hostage to the fantasy of progressive, linear story-lines and the domination of stages [2], instead of urging historians to attend to an analysis of the 'current situation'. In Germany and Japan, this reorientation led to envisaging the everyday as a philosophic 'scene of 'actualization' (Benjamin) and as a philosophic concept of primary and urgent utility (Tosaka Jun). Hence this revolutionary experience of the everyday was transmuted into what Benjamin called an 'afterlife' that came to be intimately identified with capitalist consumer society.

In Lefebvre's reckoning, the Revolution 'had already failed' and its 'tasks and goals ... are being accomplished during the course of modernity, but badly and clumsily, in an indirect, disguised way ... within the world turned topsy-turvy and always out of synch with what is possible'[3]. Under this view, he saw 'modernity' as the 'ghost of revolution', its left-over after its course ran to ground, its 'dispersal' and 'caricature.' Yet he was, at the same time, persuaded [340] to differentiate the space of the everyday from modernity itself, what he called the 'verso' of 'modern life and the site of vast uneven development for both 'socialist and bourgeois countries' [4]. It was this division between everydayness and modernity, he believed, that would supply the occasion for a critique of alienation lived within the unevenness produced

by the ceaseless and momentous encounters between the ever new and same and the durational present, where the 'riddle of recurrence intercepts the theory of becoming' [5]. Lefebvre was also convinced that the very incompleteness of a present demanding continuation constitutes an 'incomplete dehistoricisation' that provides the everyday with the potential of actualization and thus the capacity for rehistoricising experience. The production of the new functions as a 'repetitive gesture' masking the regular cycles of everyday life 'as surely as the monotony of everydayness constrains the new'. In this explosive confrontation of repetitions, 'everything changes'. It is interesting to note that this was precisely the same understanding Tosaka Jun invested in the conceptual everyday life in Japan during the 1930s.

Lefebvre's formulations of everydayness as social agency empowered to disclose the possible, echoed Lukacs' earlier observation concerning the regime of reification and how the proletariat might overcome its mediating force in achieving its own disalienation. The historical example of the Russian Revolution persuaded Lukacs to embrace the everyday, which he had previously discounted as inauthentic, as the space of living contradictions. Not long after, Walter Benjamin, prompted by this Lukacsian valorisation of everyday life as the space for overcoming commodification, identified in the degraded ruins of the Paris arcades, the utopian promise of early capitalism. Behind the new importance accorded to the everyday (already recognised by 'bourgeois' social thinkers like Georg Simmel and Max Weber and the philosopher Martin Heidegger as the place of ceaseless rationalisation, distraction and inauthenticity) was the authority of Lenin who had, in Lukacs' view, already transformed Marxism by increasing its 'grasp of the intimate, visible and momentous connection between individual actions and general destiny —the revolutionary destiny of the whole working class. It merely means, that every question of the day, precisely as a question of the day, at the same time becomes a fundamental problem of the revolution'. In fact, Lukacs added, Lenin saw how 'the development of capitalism turned proletarian revolution into an everyday issue' [6]. By the time of Dutton's tableau of everyday life in post-Mao China, this Leninist formulation has been inverted, so to speak, so that the development of the proletarian revolution has turned capitalism into an everyday issue. To enlist a trope from Mao's trove, the entry of socialist everydayness into a market economy resembled the experience of being obliged to enter the tiger's lair in order to capture the tigercub. As Dutton shows so clearly, what apparently had been a move to enhance yet maintain a socialist everyday has instead risked becoming captive to it. One could not seize the tigercub without entering the tiger's lair and returning with the prize. But, as we shall see, the Chinese do not seem to have returned from this dangerous place.

Nevertheless, in the heady days of high utopian hope for the new socialist everyday (called *byt*) following the revolution, Leon Trotsky, in his *Problems of Everyday Life* (1924) identified everydayness as the site of revolutionary [341] accomplishment and the place where its dynamics must be deepened and its goals completed [7]. While 'the older generation learned its communism in the course of a class struggle', Trotsky wrote, 'the new generation is destined to learn it in the elements of construction of everyday life!' [8] It is important to recognise that the construction of everyday life was the principal program that drove the constructivist project of the 1920s and was explicitly theorised by Boris Arvatov who called for the reunification of art and production aimed at coupling production and consumption in order to transform exchange value into the use value of objects as the basis of a new, socialist everyday. On his trip to Moscow a few years later, Walter Benjamin testified enthusiastically to the implantation of this new productivist driven '*byt*' which

Stalinism, would soon destroy. Arvatov's conception of constructing and producing different uses for the same object (picked up in Japan in the 1920s by Kon Wajir) was invalidated once everydayness was transformed from socialist hope into Soviet terror and spiritual impoverishment. Sheila Fitzpatrick, in her recently published book *Everyday Stalinism* proposes that the 'most extraordinary aspect of Soviet urban life, from the perspective of those living it, was the sudden disappearance of goods from the stores at the beginning of the 1930s [9]. For her, the *homo sovieticus* forged in the Stalinist crucible was 'a species whose most highly developed skills involved the hunting and gathering of scarce goods in an urban environment' [10]. At the heart of this system of production, distribution and circulation was the ubiquitous state, the massive site of non-everydayness, that ultimately defined everyday life. At the moment that the promise of a socialist everyday life in the Soviet Union was being refigured by everyday Stalinism, thinkers in Japan were in the process of envisaging a new everydayness inaugurated by state supported and managed capitalism as the social space of the industrial masses and the promise of an enlightened future. Social researchers like Kon Wajir saw in the streets of Tokyo and its strolling shoppers the formation of new subject positions, consumers who exercise rationality in determining the use value of a commodity for themselves, while Marxists like Tosaka Jun were beginning to imagine everydayness as a minimal spatial unity bounded by daily routines that would, from one day to the next, yield differences and a change of convention and 'custom'. Like the Soviet Union and the turn to Stalinist everydayness, the Japanese state intervened in the 1930s to curb the everyday of its 'excess' by redefining it as the place of a timeless folk and their enduring custom.

This brings us back to Michael Dutton's *Streetlife China*. In this account, there are audible echoes of these earlier historical moments when the first flush of industrialization invariably led to attempts to conceptualize the everyday as an experience of large numbers of people who had migrated from the countryside for the cities in search of work and a better life. Yet, as Dutton's study of this process in post-Mao China shows, what China shares with Russia, Japan and even West European societies is an industrial transformation that would effectively mobilize whole populations, centralize the masses and designate everyday life (the streets) as the minimal unity through which to grasp this momentous event. Like Benjamin, Dutton locates this life in the streets and designates consumption as its principal preoccupation. Yet a different historical temporality marks off the Chinese experience from preceding models. Earlier, I suggested [342] that post-Mao, China appeared to have inverted a Leninist observation that pointed to why the actuality of the revolution necessitated the study of daily problems with concrete reference to the 'sociohistoric whole', i.e., the development of capitalism. With China, the revolution has already been actualised in such a way as to constitute the sociohistoric referent that now, owing to the implementation of state policy, problematises capitalism into an everyday issue. Capitalism is the tiger's lair, the place of danger China must enter to snatch the prized tigercub and its resources used to enhance the socialist experience. This is, in fact, the subject of Dutton's important book, which concentrates on the formation of street life produced in the wake of China's dramatic turn to market capitalism and commodity consumption. The streetlife Dutton spotlights is not the old backstreets inhabited by traditional artisans but rather the flow of tens of thousands of consumers, a space of primitive capitalist accumulation located literally behind the people's square, the showpiece of socialism,

Dutton's streetlife, then, faintly recalls the figure of Benjamin's arcades which, despite their degraded state, were still found to reveal the sign of a now, vanished utopian aspiration.. This decayed landscape was, however, the scene where past and present fought it out in a standstill dialectic, the image of a choreography of opposites frozen in the present, precisely what is now missing from Dutton's Beijing streets. What I mean is that with Benjamin, the past is hidden in some material object which is easily overlooked yet will yield to historical analysis and give up its secret in the now: a prehistory, a lost desire. The past releases meanings it had held but repressed, daring not to speak their 'truths' which when juxtaposed to the present, disclose the immense contradictions being lived in the now. But in Dutton's streets we detect another order of contradiction produced in a present in which the state has unleashed the promise of consumption but still seeks to keep people fixed to place and work unit. Beijing today is vastly different from Paris of the 19th century. The state appears as the agent determined to congeal a past in such a way as to co-exist with a different and jarring present. In fact, the state is that past. The contest is between the state's claim to agency and the challenge offered by the new everyday it has created.

Even those ascendant places of primitive accumulation in China are already imperiled by the state's determination to reorganise street life and assimilate it to the hegemonic system. It is thus one of the deep paradoxes of post-Mao China, and its most enduring living social contradiction, that the state has forwarded a program of market capitalism that has led to massive demographic dislocation and the development of forms of primitive accumulation within the constraints of a restrictive structure seeking both to keep people in their place of registration and work unit and to prevent accelerated economic growth from spilling over into the streets to take on a life of its own. In order to catch hold of the spectacle of this dynamic contradiction, Dutton employs the method of photomontage, as if he were strolling these back streets, and punctuates his own narrative of wandering with Chinese voices speaking through valuable translations and interviews. The effect is stunning and captures the polyphonous sounds of the streets, in the same way that *in Street Noises*, Adrian Rifkin enabled us to hear the streets of Paris of the 1930s. What emerges from the vast tableau is an [343] account of state driven development and mass commodification as a not always intended effect which, according to Dutton, reveals forms of dissidence and resistance; an effect of an effect, perhaps. Commitment to market capitalism could only lead to changes where the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on cultural production and the form of the masses on its public. Yet we know that in the twentieth century, all of the characteristic political forms and their variations - communism, socialism, fascism and liberal democracy - have attempted, each in their own way, to resolve the representational aporias roused by the twin challenge of commodification and mass society and thus define a stable relationship between politics and culture. Post-Mao China is simply the most recent inflection of this modern and modernist imperative.

Hence, Dutton's photomontage seeks to show how consumption exceeded the goals of state planners and worked to provide, a la Michel DeCerteau, tactical forms of resistance. At the end of the book, Dutton returns to remind us of this conviction: 'Nevertheless, consumption does attempt to direct our desires, so that even resistance works within its fold. In fact, it can do nothing else. This, however, does not make commodified resistance "packaged", tame or lame. It simply makes it tactically and potentially effective' (p. 282). What Dutton wants us to see in a tactically effective

consumer culture is the figure of the 'marginal character' who is always on the make, so to speak, looking for new opportunities to 'consume, subvert, rebel against or steal' (ibid.). China's streets offer a vivid panorama of new forms of consumption which often qualify as Benjamin's *ur-form* of consumerism, revealing the scene of consumption at its creation where everydayness shows itself as a presentation that exceeds and confounds its representation. But we must remember that Benjamin looked upon the arcades and streets of early 19th century Paris as if they were a dreamscape and a 'dreamtime' (*zeittraum*), where new shops housed under roofs flaunted commodities that interpellated willing buyers through a new form of empathy. Dream and desire marked Benjamin's Paris, just as its heroes were the peculiar inhabitants of its streets: ragpickers, putschists, prostitutes, hawkers, street vendors. Imagined from the degraded remnants of the early 19th century, the mental picture held the secret and dream of a more humane capitalism Benjamin wished to recall in his present. But it was still more dream and desire than its Other: state, production, distribution and circulation. In Benjamin's Paris, there was more poetry than political economy (despite his use of 'correspondences'), more romance than the gritty reality of everyday existence, despite his heroising of the ragpicker. Even so, he was still able to alert us to how this everydayness shows itself instead of being shown, how it is lived instead of represented. Not surprisingly, it was Henri Lefebvre, not Benjamin or DeCerteau, who saw in it the vast unevennesses, that would produce alienations and the occasion for critique capable of generating possible forms of resistance.

Dutton's streets are filled with drifters, hawkers, vendors, con-men, thieves, maybe a few rebels, the ever growing residuum of the vast army of migrants who abandoned the countryside for the cities, driven by necessity and the hope of a better life. But I think he may have overstated the newness of this street scene in China and thus overlooked the importance of Shanghai in the late 1920s and 1930s until the Japanese Occupation, not to mention smaller cities [344] that had also been drawn into the world market and the domain of commodity culture. Everyday life and the regime of vernacularity were indistinguishable from new forms of cultural production such as the novel, cinema, dancehall and other recently established practices of entertainment, all driven by the peculiar combination of an emergent mass constituency and commodity consumption. The streets of Shanghai, like Tokyo or Sao Paulo and even colonial sites like Bombay, Seoul or Cairo were dominated by the new and endless opportunities for constructing new and different subject positions and identities.

If we restore this prehistory to Dutton's account, then, streetlife in Beijing must necessarily be reconfigured as the most recent moment and perhaps an accelerated continuation of this earlier experience in which China was delayed by the war with Japan, Civil War and the Cultural Revolution. This move would require attributing to it the status of an 'ur-form of consumerism' and thus an historical past from which its forgotten meaning must be wrested from its hiding place and resituated in any consideration of the dynamic present. Nevertheless, Dutton is right in proposing that the vast spectacle of consumerism in China going on before us is eroding the political edifice of Chinese socialism. Whether it constitutes a classic transition, as he seems to believe, or simply socialism's accommodation to commodity culture, where the 'material girl' now co-exists with the 'materialist girl,' it seems to be

more a testimony to the capacity of the commodity form to live under any political regime than it is to the power of consumption to generate tactics of resistance.

The emergence of the dynamic streetlife of post-Mao China captured so brilliantly by Dutton's photomontage is directly linked to new policies promoting the expansion of the market economy, and the production of consumer goods. Dutton shows how this turn has thrown the regime into the paradoxical position of creating conditions that induce a rural population to swamp the cities at the same time that it is seeking to enforce the sanction and constraints of registration in order to stem the tidal migrations from place and work unit. This is a grim story because the migrants are immediately classed as subalterns when they have left their places of registration (in any earlier historical time, they were called lumpen or even the masses.) For these migrants, as it was for their predecessors earlier and elsewhere who made the great trek to the cities, the city was seen as a foreign place, alien and alienating, throwing thousands of strangers together and stranding them as hostages to new political forms and economic practices they scarcely understood. As subalterns, working for a pittance in squalid conditions that strip them of all dignity, they are punished, policed relentlessly and incarcerated under horrific conditions for being where they shouldn't be. They are called 'floaters' (and have yet to be even registered as passing blips on the screen of bourgeois human rights groups), an immense flow of human flotsam and jetsam that each wave of "market modernization" washes ashore on its 'beaches', the streets and back-alleys of boom towns. According to Dutton, these are the people existing in the dangerous and uncertain terrain outside of the work-unit, now 'without place', living marginal and fugitive lives of criminality. It is this move away from the work-unit and its resources for supplying identity and security outside of it that is at the heart of streetlife China defying the state's efforts to curb the overflow, [345] the 'surplus labour in the countryside but also the surplus labour in the cities' (p. 65).

The struggle in China is between a floating population and a sedentary and - stable one, a contradiction driven by the desire for generating consumer prosperity and applying the breaks of bureaucratic socialism, entering the tiger's lair and returning with the tigercub. This contradiction has been produced and sustained by the state and its effort to retain the household registration system as an instrument of surveillance and control. Dutton sees in it a frozen countenance that promotes the conditions for an inequitable system that would strengthen the disparity in wealth between city and countryside (p. 84). He rarely considers, however, the effect of primitive capitalist accumulation produced when new migrants begin sending back a portion of their earnings to their families in the villages. Is the new inequity Dutton fears simply a refiguration of the kind of unevenness necessitated by capitalist laws of development?

If this particular story lacks the poetry of Benjamin's dreaming, Dutton manages through the implementation of the technique of photomontage, juxtaposing his own observations to the voices of Chinese to signify a poetry of form, if not content. Hence the narrative he has constructed has no beginning or ending, no penultimate moment or thunderous climax carrying the plot to its conclusion. The reader can enter this narrative at any point, pause or plunge on and become embedded in an endless present (and sense of presence) more spatial than temporal. Benjamin imagined a kinship between the poet and the putschist, poetry and gunpowder and what he called a 'correspondence', indelibly inscribed in Parisian streetlife between a spleen splattered by the poems of Charles Baudelaire and the shrapnel and splinters

made airborne by the bombthrowing of Auguste Blanqui. In Dutton's Beijing that relationship seems to have vanished. All that is left is the memory of its moment in Shanghai (if we can believe Malraux and Mao Tun) which the war with Japan effaced. Only at the formal level is it possible for Dutton to link poetry to revolutionary promise, which he momentarily realizes by deploying the aesthetic technique of photomontage. There are consequences of this resolution for the question of commodification and consumption.

The problem encountered when consumption is transmuted into a tactic of resistance is the difficulty in knowing what people are resisting and why. Are these street vendors, hawkers, con-men, the denizens of Beijing's new streetlife, demanding a greater expansion of capitalism and fewer political constraints? Are they thinking of individual resistance or collective action? If resistance is individual and solitary, then we have evidence that the commodity has done its work thoroughly and broken down social ties and relationships that had been previously grounded in collective life. The form of social relationship is thus transferred to the thing. In this regard, consumption will work against a state that bases its authority on the maintenance of collective relationships, an observation that persuaded Stalin to keep commodity and commodification outside of Soviet life in the 1930s. In other words, it is not always clear what would constitute for Dutton the purpose of consumption as a tactic of resistance. Given the logic of the commodity form, we can only assume that resistance means resistance to a state for some liberal, bourgeois replacement. Is the transition Dutton envisages [346] one from socialism to full capitalism, reversing the traditional order of stages, or will it inflect a more familiar arrangement in which state bureaucracy and central planning aim to control the market from above (similar to the historical example Japan before and after World War II) rather than having the market directing polity from below? Unless Dutton can explain the nature of the meaning of transition that is now being lived and what, in fact, street capitalism is resisting, he risks, I believe, romanticizing its everydayness as heroic. Unless we're in a position to grasp the nature of the erosions apparently undermining socialism in China, his concern for the subalterns of streetlife China will never rise above the anxious fear that everyday life is being integrated into the larger cultures of control. In this regard, the putative late capitalism of Euro-America and Japan has already embarked upon the course to make sure that everyday life fully incorporated into the structures of capital. This is epitomised today in the celebrations of 'globalisation', where everydayness can no longer retain its form of modernity (an ideological misrecognition of capitalism) and its as an 'irreducible remainder'.

If everydayness is, as Dutton and many others believe, the space of subalternity —the voiceless— it was also, as both Benjamin and Tosaka Jun envisioned, the time of dreaming. This meant that it was the place of 'actualising' (putting into practice a political intervention) rather than merely the space for getting through one day to the next by resorting to tactics of survival that masquerade as forms of resistance. In this sense, the idea of tactics of resistance is simply another name for everyday routines. Resistance, here, must entail something more than a rewriting of dominant culture (inverting the strategy of the ruling class) within the symbolic spaces of capitalism, something more akin to a Gramscian 'war of position' which already presupposes the existence of an hegemonic arrangement and the necessary absence of predetermined subject positions.

Such a recoding throws the everyday as both mediation and site of critique into the domain of representation, far from the Benjaminian conception everyday that

shows itself and constantly escapes our grasp. An interpretative strategy devoted to employing tactics of resistance based upon rewriting and recoding the cultural dominant to explain what, at bottom, has been determined by the force of exchange value but that still might have different uses can only recuperate the exemplars of capitalist social formations. The uncoupling of consumption and production drives a wedge into the everyday and separates it from utility and culture from politics. As consumption thrives on objectification and the repression of history (real difference), there can be no guarantee that rewriting its practices will accomplish more than satisfy a desire simulating a figure of resistance. More importantly, the effort to recode capitalist cultural symbols presumes that everyday life is already indistinguishable from the dominant structures and institutions of society and can only lead, like the idealized colonial subject of postcolonial discourse, to 'mimicking' it.

What is troubling about Dutton's extraordinary account of streetlife in contemporary China is, in fact, the recognisable degree to which everydayness as the site of unevenness and the irreducible remainder has already been assimilated to the prevailing social and economic structures. As a result, it has been stripped of precisely that autonomy once perceived by Tosaka Jun in prewar [347] Japan and Henri Lefebvre in postwar France that would allow everydayness to write its own history, both as the agent and place of an actualization—a rehistoricization—that would recall its original vocation as the space of democratic (read as socialist) transformation. To recall the memory of that inaugural purpose, lingering in traces of forgotten yearnings of everyday life in Shanghai in the 1930s, would require not only a recognition of how social abstraction had induced forgetfulness but also a revalorization of those experiences and things that had once marked the place of everydayness lived by the masses but which the state, whether Euro-American bourgeois or post-Mao socialist, had all but excluded. What Dutton's study portrays is a fearful configuration that is already casting its shadow over the world. It is called globalisation.

As I've already suggested, it is in Dutton's own effort to reactivate the aesthetics of montage, once the hallmark of everyday life, that we are mournfully reminded of what might have been and of the identity of this space of actualisation once inhabited by the masses, as Tosaka optimistically observed, or the voiceless subalterns Dutton wishes to invest with agency in the present and the power of a poetry of the future. In post-Mao China, subaltern voicelessness, according to Dutton, refers increasingly to those who do not have the means to participate in the culture of consumption, the 'poor and blank'. Here, denied of 'speech' is seen as an equivalent to being outside the domain of consumption. They must, as a result, resort to theft, embezzling and ripping off in order to find an 'accented' voice to express their exclusion. Consequently this can mean no more than a replication of the worst features of established capitalism and its law of uneven development, where the poor and the homeless compensate for their exclusion by appealing to the same 'practices'. Unfortunately, the poetic ambition of this text reflects Dutton's own desire more than the logic of the events in contemporary China, which seem on their way to reproducing the prose of the past.

Notes

[1] See J Roberts, 'Philosophizing the Everyday.' *Radical Philosophy*, 99 (November/December) 19". p. 16.

[2] While Walter Benjamin had already marked this historical practice as a historicism so different from the kind performed by non-Marxists before world War II it has locked academic Marxist historiography in Great Britain, United States and Japan in a discourse that has worried about the 'transition' from feudalism to capitalism and subsequently discouraged concern for analyzing the everyday, the current situation and the role played by the commodity form.

[3] H. Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, J Moore (trans.). London: Verson 1995. p. 237.

[4] *Ibid*

[5] H Lefebvre *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, New Brunswick NJ: Tansactions Publishers 1994. pp- 25, 18.

[6] G Lukacs, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought*, London Verson, 1997 p. 13.

[7] Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

[8] Quoted in *ibid*.

[9] S Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, Oxford Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 2.

[10] *Ibid*

[11] See Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 28.