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THAMES TOWN IN SONGJIANG COUNTY, CHINA: A PHOTOGRAPHIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

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Synopsis:

This paper is part of a larger book in progress, *THE 2ND COMING OF CAPITAL IN CHINA*, which is a sequel to my *ECONOMY, EMOTION, AND ETHICS IN CHINESE CINEMA: GLOBALIZATION ON SPEED* (Routledge, 2016). *THE 2ND COMING OF CAPITAL* is designed as a photographic and philosophical critique of capital as the dominant global culture. My presentation will use photos shot in China to show how suburbanization and heritage industry develop side by side and how this affects people's experience of space/time.

Thames Town in Songjiang County, China:
A Photographic and Philosophical Critique

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This paper is part of a larger book in progress, *The 2nd Coming of Capital in China: A Philosophical and Photographic Critique*, a sequel to my *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalization on Speed* (Routledge, 2016). Capital's 1st coming originates in the rise of British industrial capitalism, which leads to an imperial domination of the world where the sun is supposed never to set. While post WW 2 decolonization results in the formation of postcolonial nation-states, the post-Cold War and Post-Tiananmen Massacre era secures an American hegemony of global capitalism, where the logic of the market saturates all spheres of social life. While the 1st coming of capital rules through conquest, the 2nd coming governs by near worldwide consent. In the case of the People's Republic of China, it means a welcoming return of a political economy it once rejects with resolution. Such enthusiastic embrace of capital invites us to see it as an economic as well as cultural mode of production, driven by what Schumpeter calls "creative destruction." One aspect of the cultural assimilation and renewal is the market dissemination of the "ancient" and the "modern," a two-pronged "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Rainer).

In this essay I use documentary photography to focus on new Chinese suburban developments in western urban form. These construction projects are much larger in size than the reproduction of famous city symbols in such amusement parks as "The World Park" outside Beijing and "The Window of the World" outside the southern city of Shenzhen. While the Disney type of architectural sampling in "The World Park" serves the need of tourism, "See the World in 24 Hours" as its ad -line goes, the building of western-styled township has its objective to manufacture Chinese demands for high-end real estate. Build it and they will come, and sell it with signs of Western wealth and social status with Chinese

characteristics. What used to be the object of proletarian condemnation in Mao's communist era is now posh and hot. The symbolic capital of Europe and the U.S. is appropriated to yield economic capital of the investors.

While the profit motive may not necessarily translate into realized gain at least for now, the booming "ghost towns" in their fresh sheen do produce unintended effects that reveal the miscalculation of venture capitalism and the contradictions in contemporary Chinese development.¹ The case in point is "Thames Town," another new city completed in 2006, designed by the architectural firm of Atkins in UK and financially backed by Songjiang New City Construction and Development and Shanghai Henghe Real Estate. It is built on farmland that used to belong to the county of Songjiang, now a district of the metropolis of Shanghai with a subway line connecting both for easy commute.



f.1



f.2

Going beyond the gated and sentineled entrance of Thames Town, manned by a guard in British uniform without the bearskin is the Total Fitness club fronted with a non-functional phone booth (f. 1). No communication of the Alexander Bell kind will take place there but the decorative red box does connect visually and spatially with the gym to suggest in specific a modernized British way of life and in general the lifestyle of the western professional managerial class to which their Chinese counterparts aspire. The rise of the fitness regime is a rather recent social practice that relegates physical labor to the exclusive domain of the rural migrant

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2015/jul/23/shanghai-china-european-style-ghost-towns-in-pictures>

labor or local peasant labor that actually build the structure. They also build the multiple glass and steel office towers of the Shanghai financial district where the fitness class is in need of toning their heart and limb muscles, otherwise atrophying within their cubicles and in front of their computer screens.

The division of labor and the differentiation of class and culture are also visible on the main street of Thames Town with its Tudor style buildings anchoring the corner (f 2). Not surprisingly, the occupants of the buildings in prominent display are real estate offices. Playing the role of an “overseas Chinese buyer,” I was able to tour a few of the many vacant condo and townhouse units and learned their market value. At my visit in the spring of 2011, the per square foot cost in Thames Town is equivalent to mid-size U.S. cities, while the medium income of the salaried class in Shanghai is roughly less than a quarter of their American comparable class. No wonder the street traffic is sparse, betokening the kind of country leisure to which the owners of those speculative properties running the rat race in the city center can potentially escape. Yet, uncongested as is, the means of transportation cannot but mirror the recent economic, technological, and social change. Just a couple of decades ago, the dominant vehicle of conveyance over China is the bicycle. Though bicycle is not entirely obsolete even in Shanghai, purportedly the most modern city in 1930s Asia and now vying prestige with that of Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Singapore, it is absent in Thames town. The young courier in the middle of the street is on a motorized scooter, defying traffic rules as many city dwellers do. The business people in their dent-free paint-fresh cars, however, outnumber him.

The reproduction and transplantation of Tudor architecture cannot ensure the reproduction of a British way of life that has evolved through a much slower historical process. What modernization of the West has taken place in three centuries is accomplished in China within three decades. The instant cities that spring up since the radical political and economic reform after the Tiananmen massacre have made the predominantly rural Chinese population a thing of the past. The People’s Republic presently boasts a majority urban demography. The overnight construction of conventional cities and suburban towns like Thames Town cannot, however, but retain everyday habits and practices in what seems an

immediate bygone age. The black grids of the imitation Tudor House are not the exposed wooden frames that give the building its structural support (f.1). Instead, they are superficial and ornamental, emblematic of the entire Thames Town project of surface simulation. The real heart of residential living lies in fact in the quilts hanging out to air, basking in natural solar energy. I overheard a Brit commenting to his Chinese girlfriend as they walk by on how incongruous the sight is. When articulated in a more academic language of the West this reaction simply characterizes “the contradiction of tradition and modernity,” specific to the catching-up modernity of the rest.



f.3



f.4

Of great intrigue are the kinds of phenomena both architecturally pronounced and anthropologically particular in the West that somehow manages to escape such characterization as “contradiction” and “incongruity.” I think of Koi ponds in suburban American backyards, Thermoplastic elastomer (TPE) yoga mats rolled out on your carpeted floor, and that ubiquitous stone Buddha with a plastic tube enabled dripping fountain, greeting your guests at the front door. Such similar appropriations of cultural symbols and practices other than originally your own are not deemed as retrograde in the western context of modernity. Deracinated from their homelands, transplanted across the Pacific Ocean or the Himalayan foothills, the ancient and still perceptible cultural practices of the East can be seamlessly

incorporated into a forward-looking modernity, Deepak Chopra-ed as it were. When we look at the think of cross-cultural migration, the crucial question is whose modernity it is and how it reinvents itself in capital's different comings. If modernity is an accumulation of traversed world cultural forms and practices, does the West have exclusive ownership? If so owned, does the West's industrial capitalism turned finance capitalism the global trajectory of development, both economically and culturally? Is the today of the West the tomorrow of the rest? More importantly is this question: if the difference of cultural forms and practices are assimilated into the same logic of capitalist growth and commodity production, tangible or digital, what is the contradiction? Where does the contradiction lie?

The open airing of beddings and laundries appears a Chinese residual of cultural practice that is at odds with a contemporary industrial capitalist modernity. It is in the normative judgment of this now globalized modernity that the Chinese development is contradictory and inauthentic. However, as soon as we look at the historical process of western modernization that has evened out its older dependence on solar energy in the practice of everyday life, we realize that the contradiction is perhaps not in China's recent and rapid modernization. Rather, it is within a global modernity originated in the West that has been fossil fueled forward, as it were, towards ecological extinction. In the logic of this West-led and worldwide-spread modernity, the solution to an old technological problem and its disastrous aftermath has to be the birth of a new technology, a new growth industry to overcome the threat of death. This faith in the redemptive power of technology is in fact consistent with how Joseph Schumpeter aptly describes the nature of capitalist culture, i.e. its helpless compulsion towards "creative destruction." We already know the effects of the fossil fueled destruction through climate change, despite Trump Inc.'s constant denial. We also know manufactured "risk" is simultaneously a wonderful business opportunity (Giddens). Thus, creativity is pouring into "innovative technologies" and "carbon trading," that shall keep the cycle of boom and bust in perpetuity. In the unending supply of market miracles there is and will never be tipping points or doomsdays. It is this consistency of faith without reason that is at the heart of industrial modernity, extended from the 1st

coming of capital to the 2nd. In this consistency we find the contradiction between capital's desire for growth and its death wish.

I am not saying that we should not harvest solar energy, neither am I denying the fact that China is the leading producer of solar panels. Rather than examining its own non-competitive performance, US industries of the same are charging Chinese manufacturers and their state backing with unfair trading practices. Does ecology require an economy of national competition rather than transnational collaboration? The obdurate resistance of the Trump administration to sign onto a global climate agreement in Paris, of which China is a willing party and a measurably significant player, perhaps highlights the contradiction within a global modernity that is still caught in the trappings of medieval tribalism. While this contradiction between global economy and national interest is beyond the scope of this essay, I think it worthwhile to return to the airing of clean laundry and quilts under a winter sun on site in Thames Town, and return as well to the fact that those laundered flags of residual China are still flying high in Shanghai's many instant apartment towers, hugging the smoggy sky.

The historical dependence on nature and its attendant habits is not contradictory to a trajectory and pattern of modern progress that are authentically and substantively sustainable at heart. The decorative surface of the Tudor house could indeed be considered as in harmonious co-existence with the open airing of laundries, a practice of deep ecology. The display of private and existential necessities ought to be publically acknowledged and collectively endorsed by a new world political and cultural norm that truly cares about the health of the earth. The non-contradictory co-existence of ancient lowbrow technology and the new highbrow technology of appropriating the sun's rays is to be received wholeheartedly instead of being ridiculed.

The Thames Tram Car turned into food vending caboose, though, speaks of culinary form of hybridity meant for consumption solely (f. 4). It is a form of world multiculturalism as liberalization of your tastes buds. The mixture of French and English in lettering is semantically appropriate; "La Gare" means "Train Station," though the missing "I" in the "LIMITED" might betray an unintended effect of

skipping a step in the trajectory of global industrial capitalism. Isn't skipping a feature in China's simultaneous construction of the old and the new with its UNLIMITED possibilities? The "La Gare" could sell "crepe," or "fish and chips." It can also peddle, as the menu on the blackboard shows, "roast sausage, roast beef ball, roast squid ball" to be accompanied by "ice coffee, ice black tea, Coke, Sprite, and black plum juice." Diverse choices of food and drinks are on the offer. They are to be consumed just like fossil fuel: the supply of both seems limitless. The Thames Town experiment seems a more innovative if not radically revisional use of Mao at a time when the Eastern communist block and Western capitalist one divide the world. In that world of equal opportunity poverty on the one hand and the discrepancy between the obscenely wealthy and the abject poor on the other, the Mao Zedong thought on Chinese history and western modernity is committed to unyielding ideological egalitarianism, however aberrant in practice. It also entails a philosophy of conservation and a frugal practice of available resources.



f. 5

The current Chinese adoption of the foreign, read the West, is not merely in its form as in Thames Town's architecture and layout. It is more an incorporation of the West's cultural logic of differentiation on the market, stylistic variation in consumption and its correspondent production of social status. The red of the newly uniformed peasant from a nearby village evokes the royal red of Queen Elizabeth's Guard. At a different age, those who stand at Buckingham, St. James Palaces, or the

Winsor Castle would be the guards of Queen Vitoria, who was partially responsible for the downfall of China's last dynasty. While the Manchu empire lost its war against the drugs to the British Empire, the latter along with other western powers did partially open the Chinese market. Mao nipped this opening in the bud. With a self-willed opening to global capital and the in-flood of foreign investment today, China has replaced U.K. as "the factory of the world." Accompanying this industrialization of capitalism in China is both the burgeoning of the market and the rise of its native bourgeois, newly minted in China. As the supply of U.S. grains begins to substantially satisfy the Chinese demand in the WTO regime of transnational trade, the farmer has to be de-commissioned. Some have become the massive construction labor force that builds edifices ancient and modern, while others are transformed into security guards, donning the peaked and red British army cap to serve such Chinese owners of capital as the Thames Town has projected.

While the actual royalty of the nouveau riche is yet to take full possession of the sumptuous residences there, the site is already swarmed with a special kind of tourists, who are dressed up in white suits and gowns, a symbolic purity originated from the descendants of the Caucasus, who have given capitalist modernity its particular whiteness (f. 5; f. 7). But the reflective whiteness is not merely embodied by the young couple or enhanced by the reflective light shield at the corner under the arch. It is also echoed in the young man's posture, a near mirror image of the Winston Churchill bronze replica transported in form, as it were, from London's Parliamentary Square (f. 6).

By coincident, the image of the original Churchill statue is shrouded in pale Luna light, while the one in Thames Town basks in bright solar light. Though proportionately smaller than the monumentalized Churchill, the young man's figure with its straight back and confident stand seems to impose himself upon Churchill's hunched back (f. 5). One wonders if this appears emblematic of the 2nd coming of capital: the sun of the British Empire has set in the West while the sun again rises in China. It is not the Savior Mao Zedong this time. While the Helmsman is entombed in the mausoleum, probably restless through the night, capital has annihilated space through time; history has reversed its course in the People's Republic of China as it does in the other former states of socialism on the Eastern block. Not ironically, the Georgian style Christ Church of St. Ewen in Bristol should make its reappearance in Thames Town, Songjiang New City, to be ensconced at the center of the town square. It has also become the iconic setting for the Chinese newly-weds or yet to be newly weds to consecrate their deep union and commemorate it in the shine and surface of photo pages. The aspirational residents today certainly wish to actually inhabit the fantasy space of bourgeois kitsch in a modern village, translating their present picturesque background into the forefront of their lifestyle. Day visitors shall as well become real homeowners and stay the nights. Would the Chinese "ghost towns" of specular and speculative capital be unoccupied forever, its material value forever unrealized (f. 7)?



f. 6



f. 7

Thames town is eventually neither “fake,” “bizarre,” or “ghostly,” as generally reported in Western media. The Disneyfication of tradition and modernity in contemporary China reflects a turning of post-Cold War nation states into what Guy Debord identified and theorized half a century ago as *The Society of the Spectacle*. At the time of the French Situationist’s writing, it largely refers to national societies of the Euro-North-American West, where the spectacle does not, however, mean “a collection of images.” Instead, “the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance” (12, 14). Historically speaking, the kind of mediated social relationship through images is no longer the particular domain of western culture per sé, as my examples have shown. It has been disseminated globally in the 2nd coming of capital. Images and relations of images are now centrally constitutive of a new economic mode of production as well as the subjectivization of new individuals. To look and be looked at in the seemingly infinite variety of images and theaters, old media or new, is to sustain a representational regime and the cycle of endless production and consumption. The fantasia of white wedding shootings in Thames Town appears the realization of Debord’s worst fears. From a different perspective, this materialization is also what Francis Fukuyama celebratorily called “the end of history,” when a transnational society of capital’s 2nd arguably dominates the world and terminates all other social and economic alternatives.

I think both Debord’s pessimism and Fukuyama’s euphoria are too certain and too conclusive in their diagnosis and prognosis. One recalls here the British critic of culture Raymond Williams, who famously formulates a dynamic process of political and social change when the world is still caught in the Cold War. For Williams, the time of capital’s domination also contains within it the existence of “the residual” and “the emergent” (1977). The “residual” is not the “archaic” made obsolete by capital. It represents what is left from cultures rooted in religion and rural ways of life, still existing practices that the hegemony of industrial capitalism has not entirely wiped out. The “emergent,” on the other hand, refers to cultures constantly created both within the dominant culture of contemporary capitalism and may resist it.

The assemblage of newly weds' copying Euro-American style matrimonial rituals under the Christian steeple itself could be read in two ways. We can see it as the power of the dominant to assimilate. Alternately, the collective manner in which the photos are taken can also be regarded as "the residual" of a practice handed down from either Confucian or Communist times. The posing is a group performance, despite its apparent individualist manifestations. To switch terms to Williams' contemporary, French sociologist of culture Pierre Bourdieu, this mass simulation of wedding shows is a still remnant "disposition," internalized from an earlier cultural environment and translated into present practice. It is not different from airing your bedding and laundry in the sun by a Tudor replica. Would that residual disposition and its habitat of cultivation survive the decimation by capital's 2nd coming? This is not a question with easy answers. It is a question, however, we must persistently ask.

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