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# LOCATING THE “REAL” CHINA

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## INTRODUCTION:

Matthew Christensen’s *Decoding China*, in his own words, “deals specifically with Chinese behavioral culture, that is, the codes that people live by and use in their day-to-day behavior.”<sup>1</sup> Christensen argues that one needs to decipher Chinese cultural practices in order to best negotiate modern China. The book, in his mind, is “a hands-on guide for anyone planning to spend time in China, whether you speak some Chinese (even a little) or not. It is for those who want to live and work independently among the Chinese, and not live in some secluded expatriate housing compound with Western standards while relying on Chinese colleagues or friends to get things done for them.”<sup>2</sup> Christensen’s rhetoric reveals that he believes there is a right way and a wrong way to be in China, and that he knows the right way: to live and work independently among the Chinese – good; to live in secluded expatriate housing while relying on others to get things done for you – bad. Christensen has standards, it would seem, and they have to do with authenticity. He writes, “Going to China for the first time can be an intimidating experience, even for those who have studied the language. In fact, going to China for the second, third, or fourth time can also be a challenging experience, especially if you intend to be fully immersed in daily life, get off the beaten path, and experience the real China.”<sup>3</sup>

The real China. How do we know what that China *is*? How does the real China announce itself or make itself know? Is there a fake China, an inauthentic China? If so, what would that inauthentic or fake China be or look like? It’s a question worth asking, I believe, for Christensen – an expert on China, a Ph.D. in Chinese Linguistics, and someone who regularly brings undergraduates to that country for study-abroad and internship learning opportunities – articulates his belief in a real China as a certainty, as something that one can experience directly. I want to interrogate this assertion and trouble his means of elevating some types of experiences and spaces and dismissing others in his quest for the real. To construct a notion of a “real” China, with its attendant implication of an inauthentic China, is to define the country in terms of mystification and nostalgia that too readily fails to incorporate the ways that the country has changed in the last 30-40 years.

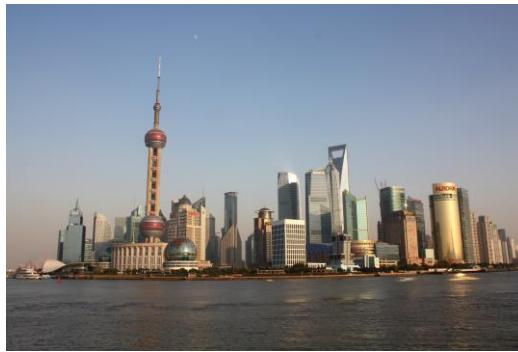
In the summer of 2013, I travelled to Beijing to teach two sections of “College Writing” to Chinese nationals who attend universities in the West, but who had returned home for the summer break and who hoped to use the summer to get some college credits for their university education. I travelled to China with my wife – who was teaching in the same program that I was – and our two children, ages ten and twelve. Our stay in China lasted seven weeks; while we mainly resided in Beijing, we also visited Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Xi’an. My experience was determined by the challenges I faced as a scholar, a teacher, a husband, and a father living there and making sense of what I was going through.

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My experiences were somewhat determined by the expectations that emerged both from discussions with other people but also from what I read in advance of travelling there.

I first encountered the country as a mystery, a code – in Christensen’s terminology – that I was unable to decipher. In preparing for my trip I did not have the time to learn the language, but I did spend some time reading about the different places in the country that I knew I would be travelling to and reading some of the vast history of the country. And, of course, like many other people, I went to my local bookstore to seek out guidebooks – Fodor’s and National Geographic Traveller and Lonely Planet – that would help me in my preparations. I knew that China’s economy had boomed from the 1980s onward and that it was much more contemporary, modern, and sophisticated than I might have once imagined. This was – this IS – what is often referred to as the New China, symbolized, best, perhaps in pictures of Shanghai’s Pudong skyline. The buildings in Pudong tend to emphasize a striking verticality that speaks to an emboldened vision of the future and tend to take on surreal forms, such that the designs feel as if they are in competition with one another in terms of ambition and offbeat style. Pudong is playful and enlivening and ever-expanding upward.



The architecture in this skyline looks to the future and away from the past, symbolized by The Bund, with its early twentieth century buildings inspired by European neoclassical, Beaux Arts, and art deco traditions, which tend to be more squat, if still often ornate.



The architecture of The Bund, with its solidified forms and styles that bespeak Western strength, trustworthiness, and stability, bespeaks the financial center that this area was for Western interests in terms of banking and trade in the early and mid-twentieth century. While these buildings seem to serve

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as a testament to Western attempts to make inroads into China and to influence the country's politics and economy a century ago, Pudong's skyline, in contrast, offers a vision of the New China. The Chinese government set up the Special Economic Zone in Pudong in 1993 and the area has grown into the financial hub not only of Shanghai but also of the country.<sup>4</sup> As a literal and a financial space, Pudong is not reliant on the West and asserts its own power and vision, as encapsulated in that forward-looking architecture. Moreover, it has little to do with an older Chinese past, which can be found a short walk away, in the Yuyuan Gardens, first built in the 1600s and refurbished many times over the ensuing centuries.



In these gardens we can locate a traditional Chinese architecture and use of public and private space, especially in relation to the surrounding environs. Unlike the buildings in Pudong and on the Bund, the architectural spaces in Yuyuan Gardens meet one's expectations of the "real" China, at least in terms of its aesthetics. The buildings were designed with ornate doorways and woodwork, tiled roofs and dragon motifs, the gardens brought a sense of peace with quiet ponds and fish, and the rockeries held secret caves and nooks for individual reflection. Although there are many people walking about, the space seems to encourage quietude and respect and the Gardens offer a sense of sanctuary from the city outside the walls. With even a fairly rudimentary knowledge of Chinese history and understanding of Eastern spirituality, one can decipher this space and its public and private functions. And while on The Bund one can recognize the Western desire for expansion, with Pudong it is much more difficult to discern a connection to a past tradition or history.

Janet Carmosky, who has lived in China for twenty years, argues in her introduction to Charis Chan's *China: Renaissance of the Middle Kingdom* that, in China, "time proceeds in a fashion that is cyclic, not linear, and which refers always powerfully back to the past."<sup>5</sup> She goes on to say, "Visiting China reveals a paradox of time, where every economic and social system of the past 1,000 years is still in practice, where villages built around a well hum along just hours outside a city where people ride a magnetic levitation train to the airport."<sup>6</sup> To understand the culture of China, to "get it," Carmosky suggests, one needs to recognize how the past and the present are interwoven:

Building an understanding of China requires a framework of some kind. Try the following: yin representing the weight of the reflective past, yang portraying the busy, technology-laden future; yin for ancient temples and world monuments, yang for skyscrapers and maglev trains; yin for China's spiritual traditions, yang for China's materialistic culture; yin for Asia, yang for West.<sup>7</sup>

For Carmosky, to understand contemporary China is to understand that it is a space where the new and old commingle. But I would argue that Carmosky privileges a type of binary thinking in this

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formulation that seems ultimately rather limiting in its dichotomous framework: yin/yang, past/future, spiritualism/materialism, Asia/West. Carmosky doesn't allow for fluidity, for complication in how we think of the relationship of the past to the present and even to the future. In other words, Carmosky's assertion that time proceeds in a cyclic and not linear fashion in China, where ancient traditions are still contemporary in practice, is provocative and perhaps even has an element of truth to it, but doesn't really help us think about the more complicated dynamics interwoven in the relationship between the figuration of the New China and the "real" China.

The guidebooks that I read in preparation of my visit positioned China's deep and rich past as crucial in terms of how China defines and imagines itself, that "the past" is never just "in" the past. Even as much of the contemporary country –the younger generations especially – embraces the present and the future, emblemized in that Pudong skyline, traditions still matter, even as the country speeds into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ancient past seemingly receding out of view:

China is modernizing at a head-spinning pace, but slick skyscrapers, Lamborghini showrooms and Maglev trains are little more than dazzling baubles. Let's face it: the world's oldest continuous civilization is bound to pull an artifact or two out of its hat. You won't find history at every turn – three decades of full-throttle development and socialist iconoclasm have taken their toll – but travel selectively in China and rich seams of antiquity pop into view. With tumble-down chunks of the great Wall, mist-wreathed, temple-topped mountains, quaint villages, water towns and eye-catching ethnic borderlands, China is home to one of the world's oldest and most remarkable civilisations.<sup>8</sup>

There is a faint echo of Christensen's "real" China in this passage, the notion that if you can get out of the burgeoning cities and get out of the tourist-designated sites, you can get access to an experience that is somehow authentic. And that authenticity is connected somehow to the past or to a space not yet touched by the New China. That space, though, is shrinking. The forced urbanization of the populace is changing the country and changing what is available for visitors to see. China is the one of the most visited countries in the world. In the last forty years, the rate of people travelling to China has increased by dozens of millions of people, and domestic tourism is tremendously high. And while increased tourism can mean spaces and sites more amenable to Westerners with the types of conveniences that they have come to expect when they travel – more Western amenities, in other words – it can also mean a greater emphasis on what those Westerners might come to expect from the "real" China.

Let's return to the Yuyuan Gardens in Shanghai. These gardens have a rich history and provide visitors with a sense of how these spaces would have looked centuries ago. At the same time, because of military operations that have brought troops into Shanghai, the buildings have often suffered severe disrepair many times over the years. But the spaces have always been repaired and are now reconstructed to be what they once would have looked like: simple structures with traditional Chinese rooflines that house rooms designed for meditation and quietude, with peaceful ponds, gardens, rockeries, and pavilions. The Gardens, real enough, are also a testament to an authentic past, albeit one that has been constructed over and over again for tourists to visit. They look similar to how they would have once looked and still have the same potential for quietude and meditation that they were designed for. However, now they have many more people roaming the walkways. Connected to the Gardens is the City God Temple, which is over 600 years old and which has a long and important history in the city of Shanghai. But also abutting the Gardens is the Yuyuan tourist mart, a vast retail center built over

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the last thirty years to capitalize on the increased tourism, with multiple stalls and stores and eateries, all selling traditional food and goods, though often mass-produced goods. We were surprised to even find a Starbucks. The past in this broad space is alive and present, but it is also packaged and sold and interwoven with commerce and the elements of the New China that is less traditional and more capitalist and market-driven. Being there was certainly dislocating and disorienting in terms of how to read the space, but the contemporary elements didn't make it feel inauthentic in my eyes. It just felt like it didn't fit a predetermined notion of what authenticity looks like in contemporary China.

“In the US,” Sarah Banet-Weiser argues in her recent book, *Authentic*, “the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity, that we are governed by superficiality.”<sup>9</sup> I would suggest that this hunger that Banet-Weiser identifies in the United States applies just as well to China, or at least to how Westerners often frame China in terms of the “real.” Banet-Weiser studies how “areas of our lives that have historically been considered noncommercial and ‘authentic’...have recently become branded spaces.”<sup>10</sup> The naming of a “real” China, as much as the very imagining of it, it seems to me, is an attempt to brand an experience or a space as “authentic,” as long as that experience or a space fits certain elements and principles and discounts others – living and working among the Chinese, good, living in secluded Western housing and relying on others, bad. And, curiously, it is Westerners, more so than the Chinese themselves, who are actively defining those spaces and experiences as authentic, according to how well those spaces and experiences meet their expectations of what “China” should look like, be, and mean.

In encountering China, John Pomfret argues, we must be careful not to mythologize it or to fall into a wistful longing for the ancient and traditional in such a way as to discount or to exclude the reality of what has happened in the last twenty-five years. In a *Foreign Affairs* review of a collection of essays by a group of scholars, politicians, and intellectuals – entitled *My First Trip to China* – Pomfret takes to task those who too easily fall into a nostalgia about the old China. In this essay, entitled “In Search of the Real China” and published in November 2013, Pomfret condemns the way that “disillusion and nostalgia flow through the book like a river.”<sup>11</sup> He points out that “China scholars and average citizens alike still cling to their own personal notions of the ‘authentic’ China, deeply rooted in the soil of their imaginations.”<sup>12</sup> As an example of this he offers a story, centered around one of the more commercialized parts of contemporary Beijing:

My wife runs a travel company in China and marvels at the discomfort that her American counterparts feel toward this different China. She once suggested that one of them advise her clients to visit a Starbucks in our neighborhood, Sanlitun, one of the hipper corners of Beijing, and people-watch as eager shoppers stream through the cavernous Apple store next door. “Why should I send my clients to see that?” the agent asked. “That’s not the ‘real’ China.” Everyone wants his own personal rickshaw and rice paddy.<sup>13</sup>

Sanlitun is a bustling commercial area in the Chaoyang District of Beijing, housing many of the embassies in the nation’s capitol, that has boomed in its growth since the 1990s. It is home to up-to-date malls, including an Apple store and the largest Adidas store in the world, and many upscale restaurants, as well as a number of less refined street bars and clubs. The area is exceedingly popular with expatriates and also with Chinese, especially the younger generations who have witnessed its growth.

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With its vast commercial offerings of worldwide commodities, while also being home to a wide variety of people from many different countries, Sanlitun is a clear emblem of the New China.<sup>14</sup> I went to Sanlitun on a number of occasions, mainly for general shopping with my family but also for shopping at bookstores that carried English-language books. It was always crowded with people of many different nationalities (including Chinese), shopping, eating, walking, and headed to nearby Workers Stadium to watch a soccer match. To be in Sanlitun and not to recognize that there is little here of ancient China, and yet to dismiss it as not of value in seeing and understanding China as it is now, is to be blinded by nostalgia and disillusion – to use Pomfret’s terms.

The reality of contemporary China is just how hard it is to define what it is – not merely because it is so vast in size and population, as well as because of its complex relationship to the past, but also because it resists classification. Next to the Sanlitun mall is the Yaxio Market, a five-story building full of goods – clothes, leather items, pashminas, electronics, and jewelry. While there, we bought soccer jerseys there and sneakers for my children and fended off those trying to hawk the latest DVDs made from films still in the theaters. Like the DVDs, the jerseys and sneakers were not actual FIFA-approved club jerseys for Real Madrid and Manchester United nor actual Nike hightops, but instead were knockoffs – styled after the originals but not made with the same material or handicraft. At the Silk Market in Beijing, my wife bought headphones for my children, who wanted the latest versions of Beats by Dre. She wasn’t willing to pay the hundreds of dollars that these headphones sell for, purchasable at the Sanlitun mall or on Wangfujing Street. Instead, we went to the Silk Market, where different vendors competed for our attention by promising us that their fake headphones were the best fakes that we could buy. My children know that these aren’t authentic Beats by Dre headphones and that their Nikes weren’t either, but they also told us that their friends wouldn’t be able to tell that they were fake, which in their mind lent the goods an actual authenticity. Tourists flock to the Yaxio Market and the Silk Market, in part because they can purchase quality knockoff goods there, but also because they can purchase high-quality tailored clothing for reasonable prices. These items are not counterfeit but are well-made clothes tailored specifically for the individual purchasing them. The fact that these tailors work next to and on the floors above and below other merchants selling knockoff goods makes one’s judgment about the worth of these markets more complicated. One does not see many native Chinese at these markets – mainly visitors – but that doesn’t make these goods somehow less “real” or even necessarily less valuable, depending on how we define these terms.

Arjun Appadurai has suggested that “Commodities represent very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge [including the knowledge] that goes into the production of the commodity; and the knowledge that goes into appropriate consuming the commodity.”<sup>15</sup> While some consumers privilege the knowledge of the craftsmanship that went into the production of the commodity, others do not necessarily do so. Instead, they may prefer not so much the craftsmanship of the good, but the utility of it. Brian Spooner, in writing about the cultural function of oriental carpets, has argued, “Authenticity cannot be determined simply by detailing the objective material attributes of the artifact. It has to do not only with genuineness and the reliability of face value, but with the interpretation of genuineness and our desire for it.”<sup>16</sup> Spooner complicates our assumptions about the way we interpret material attributes – such as the quality of craftsmanship – by reminding us that “the history of the craft is poorly documented [and] is open to continual revision.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the “values ascribed to craftsmanship ... have also changed significantly over the past hundred years.”<sup>18</sup> When we place Spooner’s thinking

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about oriental carpets in the context of the goods at sale in the Yaxio and Silk markets, we can recognize the ways that the notion of exchange that is happening in these spaces is more complex than a consumer looking to buy some stuff on the cheap that he can bring home. Visitors to these markets know that they are buying knockoff goods and counterfeits, but they still do so, which suggests, in Spooner's terms, that their "desire for genuineness" and the import of strong craftsmanship might not be primary. Those sneakers and headphones may not work as well as the "real" ones, but they will function well enough. Appadui argues that in order to understand the "social life" of a commodity, we need to recognize its "commodity situation" and think about commodities and goods not only in terms of production but also in terms of exchange/distribution and ultimately consumption.<sup>19</sup> The confluence in the markets in China of the stalls selling knockoffs next to the tailors who are crafting well-made goods, in some ways, only serves to lead one to interpret the usefulness and value of the knockoffs as higher and more respectable.

Another narrative from a trip to a market further illustrates the challenge of defining authenticity and value. As we neared the end of our stay in Beijing and in China, my wife and I travelled to the Panjiayuan Market, known also as the Beijing Antique Market and as the Dirt Market. Although this market only came into existence in the early 1990s, it is already Beijing's largest arts, crafts, and antiques market, with over 4,000 stalls and 10,000 merchants and dealers. The number of visitors is in the tens of thousands each day and the market is central in the growth of folk culture and antiques. My wife and I went on a Friday to buy items for our family members back home and we were especially interested in jade jewelry. For thousands of years, jade has had a prominent place in Chinese culture and is often thought to represent beauty, grace, and purity – thereby connected, in many minds, to the realm of the soul. Jade is a frequent gift and one we thought appropriate for our loved ones back home. Our experience of shopping, however, was challenging in that it was quite difficult to discern the quality of the jade we were shown and therefore to determine its worth and appropriate price. Vendors all claimed that their jade was real and the best and demonstrated certain tests to authenticate it – banging the pieces together so that we could hear what it sounded like, holding it up to the light to show what it looked like in that context, and banging it against stones. We had some sense of how to go about shopping for jade but we were easily overwhelmed by the process. To demonstrate that it wouldn't shatter, like slate, some vendors would hurl it to the ground to show how hard it was or bang on it with a hammer. Some would hold a flame to it to show that it wouldn't melt like plastic. After recognizing that we most likely would not be able to be fully sure of the status of the pieces' authenticity, we decided that what mattered most to us were issues of aesthetics – did we like the look of the piece, did we like the narrative of its provenance, did we like what the jewelry symbolized? In other words, we decided that, in Appadui's terms, the "commodity situation" for us was more on the utility of the objects for those who would be wearing them. Our desire for genuineness was less pronounced than our desire to please our family members with an attractive piece of jewelry. Moreover, the story of going to the market, of wandering between stalls, haggling over prices with different vendors, and eventually buying these specific pieces would all be part of the "social life" of the jewelry – for us and for those who would wear them. We realized that we could not be sure whether the jade was real (though the prices suggested it was!), but that we could be sure that we had just had a real, authentic experience of shopping and haggling and purchasing. And that experience was the thing that ultimately mattered the most to us.

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This story points to the problem of privileging notions of the real and authentic. How can one determine “authenticity”? What type of expertise do you need to have in order to make that determination? The actuality of China is much more complicated than what the guidebooks might tell you and how the writers of guidebooks and scholars like Carmosky and Christensen present China to their readers as a package too readily defined through the terms of mystification and too readily dismissive of the value of experiencing the place through one’s own subjectivity. Subjectivity is a necessary component of meaning-making and we should recognize that what’s going on in all of these various spaces – markets, temples, hotels and restaurants – as a *type* of authenticity. As cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and James Clifford have suggested, the very nature of our interventions in the places we visit determines much of our experience of that space; however, the nature of that mediated experience need not render that experience limited in the meaning we make of it, but should instead be a central element of the meaning-making process.<sup>20</sup>

One of the central issues I had to face in China was that my subject position consistently shaped my reading of situations – I was a father in one moment, a teacher in another, a tourist in a third – and that my position was often multifold. My experiences were filtered through these factors and the concept of the mediated experience was fundamental to my learning that making sense of this foreign space was not a matter of moving beyond the barriers to making sense of things but instead integrating my multiple subjectivities as meaning-makers of my experience. My experience was often similar to my colleagues teaching in my program – like them, we went and did all the tourist-y things one does in Beijing, going, for instance, to the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Lama Temple – but my experience was often different in that I had my wife children with me and few other colleagues had their partners, let alone their children, with them. I found out quickly that how I experienced public spaces in China tended to be different than my colleagues because of my anxieties as a father and my concerns for my children’s well being, as well as their level of boredom/frustration with what their parents were asking them to do. There are many Chinas, not just one, in that there are many ways in which we interact with a space – be it the traditional tourist spaces, the upscale stores in Sanlitun, or even just street culture or the subway. And indeed, there might be considerations of how people in that space interact with US – the fact that I had my children with me created moments and experiences that colleagues never saw or had happen.<sup>21</sup> The notion that there is a “real” China disregards the actuality that none of us experience it, or any space really, in the same way. It also disregards how the Chinese themselves think of their own past and what it might mean to see the “real” China.

One of the ways that we can understand how the Chinese think about their own past is through their embrace of the theme park. In Kaifeng, for instance, one of the seven ancient capitals and the cultural and political center during the Northern Song Dynasty, Millennium City Park serves as a memorial to the ancient past. The park recreates the past, with temples and gardens and recreations of folk customs, along with a number of performances that culminate in a night-time spectacle with hundreds of performers dancing and playing music, dressed in traditional costumes. This performance retells the story of the city, highlighting Kaifeng’s importance and allowing visitors to have a sense of the past – or at least a particular type of sense of the past, one strongly tinged with nostalgia for the glory of China’s ancient traditions.<sup>22</sup> What is perhaps of most interest to me in the context of this paper, though, is not just that this park exists but that it is wildly popular, with nightly performances that are heavily attended. The past has been commodified and put up for sale. Thomas Campanella has written about



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these spaces as a “spatial delivery mechanism for manufactured euphoric experiences” and has identified the rising middle class as a “particularly eager consumer of this ethereal commodity.”<sup>23</sup> Campanella describes a number of theme parks and highlights Splendid China in Shenzhen, which opened in 1989 and which comprises a number of landmarks and landscapes from the Middle Kingdom in miniature, ultimately compressing 5,000 years and 10,000 miles of Chinese ancient civilization into one space. Much of that compression edits out complexities or complication, especially of the recent past. Campanella writes, “Splendid China presents a much-edited version of Chinese space and time, an unblemished and politically neutral vision of national heritage...Splendid China is the China of the deep past – the Celestial Empire or Middle Kingdom. There are no tiny statues of Chairman Mao, no state-owned factories or Great Hall of the People.”<sup>24</sup> This is a space of and for nostalgia, of something lost but still magical and revered, a space of celebration. The past here is of a particular type. Much as with Millennium City Park, Splendid China packages and presents the past in a very particular fashion – to best appeal to the visitor and tourist. And not all of those tourists are foreign, as Campanella points out. Many of them are native Chinese. These parks, built in the last 25-30 years, mean to take advantage of the emerging middle class and their new leisure time and disposable income. The past authenticates the New China, in some regards, because it is still an integral part of it. But the New China authenticates the past by keeping it so vital and present in the contemporary.<sup>25</sup> It’s a nuanced relationship and the nostalgia for the past, for the rural and sacred traditions, belies the ways that that past has always been packaged, especially for Western eyes and experiences.

One day, while teaching, I mentioned to my students that I was going to the Great Wall, but that my family and I were going to be hiking the Wild Wall, not the part that had been rebuilt and refurbished. I told my students that we were hiking the Wild Wall because I wanted to experience the “real” China, as a number of my colleagues and my guidebooks had been advocating. A funny thing happened. My students looked at me stupefied. They had no idea what I was talking about or what the “real” China would mean. It was only after going to the wall that I fully understood why they might be so confused. We went on a hike of the wild Wall at Mutianyu, that part of the Wall that had not been rebuilt. The trail is challenging to climb at times, overgrown with vegetation, charming in its “rundown-ness.” I saw what Fodor’s described as the “chunks of the Great Wall” in person. It was an interesting and powerful way to see the Wall, to recognize the overwhelmingly difficult task of what it meant to build it, to understand its function at the time. It was hot and humid and it was a sweaty four-hour hike. It ended at the very point where it met up with the refurbished wall. This part was clearly a reconstruction of the Great Wall and it is a well-known tourist destination, designed to be a commodification of China’s past. Some visitors choose to avoid this part as a way to engage more directly with that past, to see the wall as it has become, where we had traversed. However, our experience was through a tour with a guide who took us up and along the wall and talked to us about certain sections and certain parts of the history and eventually led us to the refurbished part hours later. We would not have known where to start or in what direction to head. We would have been lost without his guidance, and his commentary certainly added to the allure of the trip. Although our hike and our experience was off the beaten path – literally, people are not supposed to go there – that “authentic” past was still packaged for us and we paid for our experience of moving through it.

Our trip along the Wild Wall, in other words, was still a package, a commodified experience perhaps not so different than the ones enjoyed by visitors to the refurbished parts of the Wall. Indeed, as we

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came out of the Wild Wall, we saw a sign alerting people that this area was forbidden to visitors. But many people were entering this forbidden area, curious to see what was there. They didn't stay long, but they could have had they had the wherewithal to do so. Nothing was really stopping them. The border between the artificial and refurbished past and the authentic and "real" past was slight. And even the "real" past is sometimes constructed. I would argue, though, unlike Christensen and Carmosky and so many others, that the fact that it is packaged for us does not mean that we cannot have a meaningful experience with and through it.

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Matthew B. Christensen, *Decoding China* (Tokyo: Tuttle Books, 2013), 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> The Bund has returned to serving as a financial center, but of Western interests and financial institutions more than of Asian ones.

<sup>5</sup> Janet Carmosky, "Introduction." *China: Renaissance of the Middle Kingdom*. Written by Charis Chan, revised by Jeremy Tredinnick. 9<sup>th</sup> edition. (Hong Kong: Odyssey Books, 2008), iv.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>8</sup> Shawn Low and Damian Harper, *Lonely Planet China*. 13<sup>th</sup> edition. (Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet, 2013), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic* (NY: NYU Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> John Pomfret, "In Search of the Real China." *Foreign Affairs*. November 1, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140168/john-pomfret/in-search-of-the-real-china> (accessed June 6, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Pomfret, "In Search of the Real China," <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140168/john-pomfret/in-search-of-the-real-china> (accessed June 6, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Pomfret, "In Search of the Real China," <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140168/john-pomfret/in-search-of-the-real-china> (accessed June 6, 2014). Moreover, speaking of authenticity, rickshaws were not even invented in China. The etymology of the term is Japanese, and Japan is where the first rickshaw was put to use, though by the late nineteenth century there were thousands operating in China.

<sup>14</sup> It is not as grand a shopping area on and around Wangfujing Street, in central Beijing near the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, which has even more international stores and malls than those in Sanlitun. (In Shanghai, the equivalent would be East Nanjing Road, which ends/begins on The Bund and extends to People's Square and then continues as West Nanjing Road to the Jing'an District.) Still, as home to so many of the embassies in the city, Sanlitun has something of the atmosphere of the West. In other words, it is not merely a commercial area, it is a place of residence and a destination site for locals and visitors both.

<sup>15</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things*:

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*Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed., Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Spooner, “Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed., Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 199-200.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” 13.

<sup>20</sup> For more on such types of interventions and the theories behind them, see Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* and Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*.

<sup>21</sup> It turns out that many of the people we met while out and about were absolutely fascinated with my children, and this created a number of signature moments in public spaces that shaped how we have thought of our China experience.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Youd spoke of Millennium City Park at the 2014 ACLA Conference in New York City. I thank him for sharing his observations on the nighttime performance.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon: China’s Urban Revolution and What it Means for the World* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 253.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>25</sup> In my experience, tradition is still very much a part of Chinese culture. Like so many young men and women, in China and elsewhere, my college-age students enjoy lifestyles of the twenty-first century that have nothing to do with the past – going to clubs, singing karaoke, drinking and dancing. However, in their essays for my classes, these same students often wrote about traditions that they participated in with their families and they wrote about these traditions with great respect and fondness. The past is very present in their lives in terms of how they spend time with their families, for instance. Students often wrote about rituals around food and around holidays as signature moments for them in their relationships with their families and in how they thought about their homes.

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