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Re-Envisioning Gender in China: (De)Legitimizing
Gazes

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Tim Oakes

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Tim Oakes

- 1 I first visited the southwestern Chinese city of Kaili 凯里 in 1987. At that time, the city, with its many secretive Third Front factories, was still closed to foreigners, and I was quickly picked up by local public security officers and put on the next bus out of town. But Kaili – existing as it did in the midst of Guizhou's Miao 苗 minority heartland – intrigued me, and in 1993 I returned to conduct dissertation research on ethnic tourism development in the region. I was again shoed out of town, but this time due to local officials' insistence that if I wanted to study ethnic tourism I would have to spend time in the villages. "Kaili is just an industrial city," one municipal cadre told me, "there's no ethnic tourism here." I ended up spending most of the rest of the year living in tourist villages, returning to Kaili only to catch a train to Guiyang, meet with

prefectural tourism officials and guides, or check in with village friends who had opened businesses or worked there.

- 2 As he relates in his ethnography *The Sounds of Social Space*, Paul Kendall was told something similar when he first went to Kaili to study the relationship between everyday musical practices and the social production of space. He begins the book with a quote that sounded very familiar to me: “Don’t waste your time in Kaili” (p. 1). But unlike me, Kendall stayed put, and ended up spending nine months in the city between 2011 and 2012 (with follow-up trips over subsequent years). *The Sounds of Social Space* is, in part, about why Kaili’s residents continue to view their city as an inauthentic cultural space that visitors should have little interest in compared to the surrounding countryside, despite the government’s sustained efforts to transform the city from the grubby industrial place I caught a glimpse of in 1987 to a branded “ocean of song and dance” (*gewu haiyang* 歌舞海洋) (p. 4) for tourists. The central, and most compelling, issue that Kendall explores is this tension – he variously calls it a contradiction, a gap, a conflict – between the government’s efforts to brand Kaili as a destination of authentic ethnic culture, on the one hand, and the rise of leisure consumption and high decibel public spaces, on the other, which has rendered the outdoor production of that “authentic culture” nearly impossible. Put in more general terms, this is a tension between state development planning and the chaotic processes of rapid urbanisation, a theme on which there are countless variations throughout China.
- 3 Kaili’s branded “authentic culture” of minority song and dance is mobilised by the broader Chinese discourse of *yuanshengtai* 原生态, which as Kendall notes, conceives of authenticity in terms of an almost primeval original-ness and connection to the natural environment. This renders *yuanshengtai* implicitly rural and distant from “civilised” cities, making any effort to brand an urban space as *yuanshengtai* fraught from the start. Kendall’s ethnography demonstrates ably that Kaili’s residents understand this problem. Not only do they insist that the urban space of Kaili is definitely *not* *yuanshengtai*, but they celebrate – with a certain sense of superiority *vis-à-vis* the villages – their own inauthenticity as “fake” minorities. As Kendall reminds us, cities are after all not meant to be ethnic, even as Kaili’s government has gone out of its way to make the city look like a *minzu* 民族 theme park. Perhaps my favourite moment in the book comes in the form of an extended quote from a Kaili hip-hop dancer disparaging the Miao cultural “brainwashing” of the city’s residents by the incessant ringtones on everyone’s mobile phone playing jingles by the Miao singing star Ah You Duo 阿幼朵. For Kendall, the key to understanding the gap between branded and lived Kaili lies in the city’s *soundscape*, rather than in the built environment that has received the bulk of state investment for tourism promotion. While the city might *look* ethnic, its chaotic soundscape reminds us not of *yuanshengtai* authenticity but rather of the high-decibel environment of cities throughout China.
- 4 But *The Sounds of Social Space* is not just about a gap between state branding and the everyday musical practices of residents, for Kendall is astute enough to understand that an oppositional relationship between “the state” and “the people” is not only simplistic but also inaccurate. In this context he offers a critique of Lefebvre’s well-known spatial triad that otherwise animates the book theoretically and conceptually. Kendall’s book offers an ethnographically informed engagement with Lefebvre’s theories of social space. While I would quibble with his claim that China Studies has seen limited engagement with Lefebvre (works by Wing Shing Tang, Hyun Bang Shin,

and Yingjin Zhang come to mind), I applaud Kendall's insistence on not "applying" Lefebvre's framework to a Chinese "case" but rather engaging with the conceptual limitations of Lefebvre on an empirical level. Those limitations revolve around the obvious difference between the contexts of Lefebvre's post-War French urbanism and contemporary China. Kendall questions what he finds to be Lefebvre's tendency toward an oppositional understanding of the relationship between lived and conceived space. He argues instead that "an examination of the relational production of lived space in fieldwork settings indicates a blurring of the lived and the conceived that is not altogether recognized by Lefebvre" (p. 137).

- 5 *The Sounds of Social Space* is nevertheless not a theoretical book, and Kendall's reading of Lefebvre, while mostly on target, is brief. More philosophically inclined readers will probably find themselves wanting more theoretical engagement to bolster Kendall's arguments about social space. But the book offers a strong ethnographic account, and in my reading anyway, just enough engagement with theory to be useful but not so much that it gets in the way of the empirical story being told. That empirical story is a rich one about how the social soundscapes of the city are produced and contested, how public spaces emerge in the wake of declining industry and work-unit sociality, and how folk musical production becomes a transient casualty of breakneck urbanisation. Kendall insists that this "small city" has a great deal to tell us about many of the larger processes transforming urban China today, and he's right. I for one am glad he didn't listen when encountering that familiar message: "Don't waste your time in Kaili."

AUTHOR

TIM OAKES

Tim Oakes is Professor of Geography at the University of Colorado Boulder. UCB 260, Boulder, CO 80540 USA. toakes@colorado.edu