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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/602>

DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.602

ISSN : 1996-4617

Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 avril 2006

ISSN : 2070-3449

Référence électronique

« Yosemite Villas–Mirror of Emerging Capitalism? », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 64 | march - april 2006, mis en ligne le 01 avril 2009, consulté le 14 novembre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/602> ; DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.602

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Yosemite Villas–Mirror of Emerging Capitalism?

An American-style gated community in Beijing

- 1 Yosemite Villas (Youshan meidi bieshu), an American-style gated community on the outskirts of Beijing, is an exception. The publicity materials acquired there in October 2003, are unusually inventive and go well beyond the usual commercial appeal.
- 2 This article will analyse the various representations contained in this discourse, and consider to what extent they might provide a key to understanding certain features of China's emergent capitalism, and the collective imagination of some of its elite.
- 3 For fifteen years, the number of areas of luxury villas (bieshu qu) has increased around the Chinese metropolises¹. Most are inspired by the architecture and a type of house style influenced by foreign models². In this respect they testify to the progress of the multi-sided process of globalisation in China.
- 4 Not only do each of these styles (Australian, Japanese, Spanish, French, American...) correspond to particular forms of architecture but also to a lifestyle. In their sales pitch, the advertising documents handed on the spot to potential owners or tenants systematically put forward this exogeneity. This commercial strategy is particularly active in the case of American-style residential enclaves. Insofar as the globalisation process is often assimilated to the Americanisation of the world (for instance Dragon Villas or Guangming Villas in Beijing), the American aspect is more often reduced to mere scenery and a string of stereotypes.
- 5 Very few of them have developed any deep thought about their American features. On the other hand, in the case of Yosemite Villas (Youshan meidi bieshu), the advertising documents prove to be of remarkable interest for they present a wealth of values and myths, and even a totally new interpretation of history regarding the Gold Rush. Collected on the ground within the framework of fieldwork in October 2003, these sources provide rich matter for the geography of representation and the issue of the globalisation process³.
- 6 This article will broaden the analysis on three levels. It will outline the general characteristics of this gated community and its American aspects in terms of

architecture, conception of the environment and values. This permeation into the American identity will largely be based on American mythology especially of the large expanses of the American west, the Gold Rush and various stories of success.

- 7 The article will also show how the advertising documents go beyond a simple marketing strategy and reveal aspects of the current Chinese politico-economic system and of the aspirations of some of its elite.

An American-style gated community at the doors of Beijing
Elements of methodology and epistemology

- 8 The geography of representations can deal with images or texts without any particular purpose beyond being affective, cultural or aesthetic. However in some cases, the representations have a political purpose, corresponding to the propaganda of non-democratic regimes or to the promotion strategy of a territory for electioneering purposes.
- 9 In other cases, the representations take place within the context of a commercial transaction. As a result, they are given the role of stimulating the demand for such a product or urging the consumer to buy—the role of advertising. The representations are there at the heart of the market economy. Advertising applies to products but also to territories. It aims to improve their attractiveness.
- 10 Nonetheless, if the advertising document aims to maximise the profit of the seller (in the broadest sense of the term), the means it uses to achieve its goal are often linked to the dreams of the society itself or of a particular social category.
- 11 G. Durand⁴ understood well that advertising constitutes in its way a mirror of our world. This mirror is often distorted. But even, and even especially, when advertisements manipulate reality, they provide materials relevant to this analysis. They highlight the dreams of those who produce them and of those at whom they are targeted. Also they can more widely give a general idea of the dreams of a given society (or one of its social strata) at a given time. Therefore, the advertising images and the accompanying text constitute a source exploitable by the geography of representations.
- 12 In China, advertisements have often constituted a choice source for commentators insofar as they reflect the major issues with which China has always been confronted, i.e. the link between private and public as well as between national and international.
- 13 Thus, historian S. Cochran⁵ analysed the modes of construction of commercial culture in the Shanghai of the first half of the twentieth century. He presented the development of advertising in modern Shanghai, then an economically booming city thanks to the development of the private sector and to the investments of greedy foreign multinationals in the semi-colonial context of the time.
- 14 Nowadays, advertising often offers original and clarifying views of the process of post-communist transition and current globalisation. Thus, D. Fraser⁶ studied advertisements for luxury accommodation in Shanghai and identified some of their mechanisms of commercialisation. More recently, S.W. Lewis⁷ tackled the issue of globalisation and Westernisation through the study of advertising in the underground public transport networks of large Asian and notably Chinese cities (Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing).
- 15 The validity of the advertising materials as a whole scientific source is fully verified in the case of Yosemite Villas. During fieldwork carried out in October 2003, we were able

to collect on the site three types of advertising documents, meant for a potential clientele of owner-leasers, owner-residents and tenants (mainly foreigners).

- 16 Two have quite ordinary content, being a presentation folder for the villas (I) and their features with thirty-six pages and plates, as well as an eight-page summary leaflet (and a CD-Rom) dealing with the financial aspects of the development (II)⁸.
- 17 However, the third document (III) is of great interest. It is presented in the form of a fifty-page booklet, bound and richly illustrated, concerning great American myths and above all the notion of “the spirit of wealth creation”⁹. Obviously, the length, depth and reach of such a text is greatly disproportionate to what a simple commercial process would need, going well beyond a simple advertising document and promotional text.
- 18 This rich corpus of texts and images, based on a coherent and organised vision includes great political, historical and philosophical meaning. Its content aims to give another interpretation of the contemporary history of humanity.

American-style luxury villas

- 19 The majority of the components of the luxury secure residential enclave as seen around the capital or in other Chinese megacities are also to be found in the Yosemite Villas. The basic elements of what has become a truly standard territorial model are largely present there. Yet most of these common characteristics are integrated into an American type of general vision, or pretend to do so.
- 20 Yosemite Villas are part of the group of the gated communities concentrated in the southern part of the Shunyi district. They are situated between two main roads serving the north-east of the capital, i.e. in the west the Jingcheng Expressway (Beijing-Chengde) and more notably in the east, the motorway leading to the airport. Like many other similar villa areas, they are thirty minutes from the CBD and the embassy district in Beijing. On the whole, one can find the main location factors that have led to the emergence of what property developers now call the CVD (Central Villa District) (zhongyang bieshu qu). As a result, in this part of the outskirts of Beijing, a territorial system has been developing for the last fifteen years centred on a high concentration of areas of luxury villas. There is a real “club system”¹⁰ where various educational (international schools) and leisure facilities (golf courses, equestrian clubs...) are distributed around residential spaces (gated communities).
- 21 Yosemite Villas occupy a total surface area of 59 ha, but so far, only a first stage of 81 villas has been built, centred on a lake and a club house. Once completed, this residential enclave will include 600 villas. As some other enclaves have more than 1,000 villas, it is therefore only a medium-sized property development compared with the scale of the Municipality of Beijing.
- 22 The future owners can choose between eight types of villa from 468 m² to 596 m²). The Villas have high grade service and leisure facilities. The impressive five-star Yosemite Club House covers 12,000 m² on four levels (with mini theatre, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, spa-therapy, sauna, gymnasium, restaurant, bar, leisure centre for children, beauty salon, playroom, reception room). Outside the community other leisure activities are possible, notably thanks to a golf club and a horse riding club. Shunyi International School situated nearby constitutes another asset. Nonetheless, this long list is part of the inevitable pre-requisite conditions for a demanding clientele, within the context of a hyper competitive economic environment. The prices

themselves are in line with the standard of this micro real estate market, with a rent of US\$8,000 per month for the largest villas and a sale price of US\$2,200/m².

- 23 Yet Yosemite Villas is not a development of luxury villas like any other. The concept of luxury is deeply influenced by “the American spirit”. Their American-ness is explicitly and insistently claimed. The presentation folder for the villas is thus entitled “Permeation of the American living concept”. The text itself qualifies this residential enclave of “American living”. The integration with nature is particularly highlighted. This site is called “romantic ecological homeland” (gousi langman jiayuan). It is also planned that the Wenyu river is to be transformed into an “ecological corridor”. As a result, an important role is granted to the relationship between the gated community and the Wenyu river. On page 4, the leaflet stresses that fact through three slogans: “Unique Wenyu river”, “Beautiful Wenyu river”, “Wenyu river of Yosemite”.
- 24 “Unique Wenyu river”: out of the four water streams that the city of Beijing has, only the Wenyu flows throughout the year.
- 25 “Beautiful Wenyu river”: the document stresses the width of the valley, the quality of its water and its tree-lined banks. It also adds that 75% of the trees have survived ten years or more after being planted.
- 26 “Wenyu river of Yosemite”: the Yosemite Villas are situated just 60 metres from the north bank of the river, the central part of the luxury villas.
- 27 But the notion of environment is not reduced only to a simple respect of nature. As for many villa areas, the advertising documents note the special features of the environment. In this case, however, the sales pitch focuses particularly on this and inserts this ecological preoccupation into a larger concept connected to a style, even a philosophy of life. The folder declares that the Yosemite Villas project has been inspired by the American culture of relaxation and leisure. The objective was to recreate an American-type environment, defined by “the elements of simplicity, kindness, health and dignity into all scenery within the community”.
- 28 This vision of life is found in the very architecture of the villas. The plan of the villas elaborated by an American design office underlines the integration between the inner and outer environment into an organic whole. Thus the villas are composed of a cathedral-type living room (6m high), which opens out widely onto the outside with large bay windows. The leaflet stresses the “pure independent” features of the villas as well as the presence of a private garden (200m² to 400 m²) around each of them. The concept of this area of American-type villa relies on the association between the idea of community, individualism and nature.
- 29 On the whole, the American-ness of the Yosemite Villas clearly appears through diverse elements both material and non-material. Although it is stressed even more in the omnipresent references to some of the great myths of the American nation.
A territorial identity based on great American myths
- 30 Yosemite Villas fully claims its American-ness. The advertising documents are clearly based on great American myths to promote the sale or rental of the luxury villas. Resorting to American mythology means the advertising taking on a particularly elaborate form. It is through these documents that the developers endeavour to fire potential customers’ imagination.
The large expanses of the American west

- 31 In his innovative study on advertising and areas of luxury villas in Shanghai, D. Fraser identified the symbol of the oasis as a permanent feature of the property developers' sales pitch of luxury individual residences in China¹¹. He talked of a rhetoric of an "oasis process" (lüzhouhua). This theme was confirmed several times through case studies¹².
- 32 But in the case of Yosemite Villas, there is a true change of scale, and even of the nature itself. The rhetoric is no longer only that of the oasis but of the large open expanses. It is inspired by the myth of the Great West in California and the wilderness.
- 33 The name "Yosemite Villas" refers to the Yosemite national park, one of the symbols of nature conservation in the United States. It is a vast mountain park between 600m and 3,980m high (Mount Lyell) covering over 3,100m² in the Sierra Nevada, to the west of San Francisco. The granite rock was sculpted by the last Quaternary glaciers and left a young landscape of rock peaks, waterfalls and trough valleys sometimes cluttered with moraine. The emblem of the park is the giant sequoia. So, one can find them at the heart of the golden medals that represent the symbol of Yosemite Villas.
- 34 It is also in Yosemite that the notion of natural heritage was coined. After an unregulated tourist exploitation by private interests in the 1850s, Abraham Lincoln, pushed a decree through Congress giving Yosemite Valley the status of inalienable public property. Some time after Yellowstone national park in 1872, Yosemite was created in October 1890. In 1984, the Yosemite national park was registered as a UNESCO world heritage site. As a wild space, Yosemite park is a highly popular tourist destination in the west of the United States. The advertising booklet shows an extract of a tourist map of the park in the form of a yellowish parchment with torn ends. It also includes pictures of mountain landscapes.

1. General Characteristics of the Villas

Types of villa	Floor surface (m ²)	Rent/month (US\$)
B 1	295	7,000
B 2	357	8,000
B 3	376	9,000
B 4	360	8,500
B 5	355	8,000
B 6	327	7,500
B 7	328	7,500
B 8	349	8,000

Source: Yosemite Villas (Youshan meidi), advertising

The Gold Rush

- 35 But the reference to the Yosemite national park aims not just to exalt the wide open spaces of the American west. It is not only about an adherence to ecological principles. Nor is it an updated and nostalgic version of the transcendentalism of R. W. Emerson and H. D. Thoreau, fathers of a long tradition in American literature of "nature writings" of the early nineteenth century, where nature was sublimated and idealised¹³.

36 The Yosemite Valley is the cradle of the Gold Rush. As a result, gold and golden shades are present under various forms throughout the advertising documents. The colour prevailing in the pages is based on an association between gold and brown. Either the letters of the text are of a golden shade on a brown background, or the inverse, the letters or drawings are brown on a golden page.

37 The documents are strewn with diverse golden objects by way of a theme. The symbol of Yosemite Villas is a medal with the words “Yosemite Villas. Beijing. China”. An old chest clearly evokes a treasure hunt. Further, a cup full of golden coins stamped with the name Krugerrand refers to the world epicentre of gold extraction in South Africa, while an old spade as well as a shining nugget at the bottom of a gold panning sieve easily recalls the Gold Rush epic. The natural landscapes themselves have been shaded in gold, like the cliff at the head of a waterfall. The other pictures of mountains cleverly use the play of sunlight to refer to the gold colour.

The success stories

38 The advertising booklet of Yosemite Villas accords a special place to the stories of people or firms embodying American success. These success stories achieved by rapidly self-made men gave birth to hallmarks among the symbols of American capitalism. The documents present a series of famous names that were established in 1851, each chosen for a special quality. In the case of Levi’s, it is said that Levi’s has represented the image of the cowboy for 150 years and become the symbol of American spirit. The jeweller Tiffany is in the top list in this pantheon of success stories. According to the document, this firm exemplifies “the originality and the calmness, the transcendence and sincerity of the American spirit in each piece”. Likewise “in 1851, the New York Times arrived in the world with a bang”. Praised for its “chemistry based on high quality, sobriety and seriousness”, it is among the top ten American groups of daily newspapers. The Yosemite Villas also emphasise the success of Reuter Press. It says that in 1851 Reuter Press only had 45 pigeons and an eleven-year-old employee at its disposal. Today, “thanks to their professional skill and an advanced perception, the trust in Reuters is stronger”.

American mythology, a marketing tool

39 Resorting to some of the great American myths is not incidental. The aim is not to highlight them in order to exalt the greatness and unique destiny of the American nation. The use of these great American stories means the transfiguring of reality and causing customers to dream of buying a house like these. Obviously, this is in line with a real estate market strategy. Property developers use representations for commercial purposes and several means of exploiting myths are identified.

40 The documents make great play of the notion of a dream. One of the chapters is indeed entitled “Dream”. Thus the Gold Rush is analysed as the search for wealth but also the pursuit of a dream. It is said that people searched for gold, and dreamed of a new life. The text comments on the discovery of a giant nugget and the story of two American gold seekers and specifies: “more exciting than 2.7 kilos of gold!”. It draws a conclusion from the story, “if you have a dream, to fulfil it you have to do everything with passion!”. Dreams have a de-realising and de-territorialising function. The text aims to distance the commonplace reality of the outskirts of Beijing and take the reader to faraway places.

2. Example of Calculation of Profitability

Floor surface	Sale price/m ²	Total investment	Deposit	Settlement/month	Rent/month	Rate of profitability
350 m ²	2,200 \$	770,000 \$	30%	4,720 \$	8,000 \$	11.7%

Source: Yosemite Villas (Youshan meidi), advertising leaflet, no date, 8 p.

NB: The calculation is made for a B 8-type villa with a loan of 70% of the total sum over 15 years.

- 41 It enables residents to identify themselves with the mythic heroes that are talked about, whatever the—often trivial and sometimes doubtful—origin of their fortune. The owners become the protagonists of a glorious epic.
- 42 Thus, one of the keys to interpret the texts lies in its conclusion itself:

“Through the History and Regions.
2003. Popular China. Beijing. The Banks of the Wenyu River.
It is the Same Beautiful Place
The Same Persistent Dream
The Same Brave and Intelligent Gold Seekers
The Same Devout Adoration of the Wealth Creation Spirit
That Wrote the Legend of Wealth Creation
Why Not Call Such a Place ‘Yosemite’?
Yosemite Villas, a Reward for you!”

- 43 A constant parallel is established between the Yosemite national park and Yosemite Villas, between the residents of (or investors in) the villas and the gold seekers, both sharing in the cult of money. It clearly deals with a well-tried marketing technique consisting of the creation of forms of identification through the call to dream. Flattery and over-valuing are fully part of this manipulation for commercial ends. The investors, even though preoccupied with financial calculations and not necessarily adventure-loving, are metamorphosed into the much more gratifying mythic figure of the gold seeker. They become the heroes of a new cult and take part in the same legend. Likewise, the modest 69 hectares of this residential enclave and the very ordinary banks of the Wenyu river are found elevated to the status of the impressive Yosemite national park.
- 44 The advertising may resort to American mythology, but this reference is mainly a pretext for a more commonplace financial interest. The leaflet justifies the attractiveness of such real estate investment:
- 45 “The high quality of the residents and the central situation in the CVD offers a huge investment potential. The most important factor is that the Yosemite villas are situated nearby Shunyi International School where there are more than 1,600 foreign students. Thus, investors will have a guaranteed source of several hundred international families as residents. An area full of foreigners is often a place with a high reward on investment, this has been constantly proved”.
- 46 Thus the gold mine is mainly made of a high concentration of foreign customers. Generally the villas are bought by Chinese investors, to be rented to expatriate families. Rather than taking part in a risky adventure as at the time of the Gold Rush, property developers (Beijing Bishuiyuan Real Estate Development Co, Ltd and Beijing Lushuiyuan

Real Estate Development Co, Ltd) offer potential investors a regular income. The chart of estimated profitability shows a rate of return on guaranteed investment of 11.7% a year (see Table 2).

- 47 However, if the sales pitch presents an obvious commercial end, it is far from being reduced to it. Many elements of representations it contains go well beyond this classic exploitation. They clearly appear disproportionate in relation to this commercial objective. As a result, the advertising documents of the Yosemite Villas development fit into a larger vision.

Yosemite Villas, mirror of emerging capitalism in China?

- 48 The reference to the major American myths does not stand alone. American mythology is put into a much larger perspective, and it is exploited in the service of a new interpretation of history. So to what extent does this material provide a clue, however incomplete, about the social strata at which it is aimed—and even about the socio-political system as a whole?

- 49 This enquiry is subject to two methodological constraints. On the one hand, an analysis of these publicity brochures, like that of any single documentary source, obviously has its own limitations: Yosemite Villas is only one among hundreds of other gated communities scattered around the major Chinese cities; the brochures' intended readers are only a fraction of China's elite; and, finally, the promoters have their own particular outlook on the world.

- 50 On the other hand, the demonstrable richness of these documents and the sheer number of historical references, their organised structure, and their clear intention to present an all-encompassing vision, prevent them from being treated as though just mere publicity material. These factors impose the need to try to identify the nature of the relations between them and the wider social system to which their intended readers belong.

- 51 Accordingly, my use of the term “mirror” as a conceptual tool is an attempt to establish the nature of this relationship between the particular and the general. It is intended to raise certain questions, and should be understood as a metaphor, expressing relationships and analogies, but also suggesting at the same time many possible ways of extrapolating from the language and the representations deployed within these documents.

Beyond the American dream, the “Wealth Creation”

- 52 The American myths have an important place in the sales pitch. But they are systematically integrated into a larger perspective focused on an essential and omnipresent notion, that of “wealth creation”. In this way, the historical and geographical specifics of the myths are put into perspective. The American-ness of the images, becomes an element within a discourse of a more global reach. This partial de-Americanisation process has several forms. The reference to the Yosemite park is treated solely as decorative and exotic. The pictures of mountain landscapes are not there only for aesthetic purposes. They stress the notion of “wealth creation”. One shows a waterfall flowing from a golden-shaded mountain, with in the right hand corner a bucket full of gold coins. The caption specifies: “Double Achievement of Values and Dreams”.

- 53 The Yosemite park is presented with a plan showing the campsites, picnic areas, car parks, trails and ranger stations. But the tourist element is insignificant. In the general

presentation, the national park is defined according to the criteria of wealth creation: “Sacred place of wealth creation”. The beauty of the landscape is secondary, for the Yosemite Valley is “there where the dream started in 1851”.

- 54 Likewise, the Indian aspect of Yosemite Villas turns out to be particularly discreet. The name “Yosemite” is that of an Indian tribe. One of the documents specifies only in the caption for a picture of the park that it has been “Sacred Indian land for 3,000 years”. But there is no reference to the forced transfer of the Indians to reservations in 1851. No Indian is represented. The only Indian aspect appears in the form of two arrowheads and spearheads in the lower corner of the picture. More generally, the name of the place clearly does not match reality. There, the term “Yosemite”, both a name of an Indian tribe and a national park in California, appears somewhat alien in the Chinese context, and especially to the part of Beijing it is supposed to designate.
- 55 One way of going beyond the American-ness of the evoked myths consists of universalising them. This is what prevails in the metamorphosis process of the Gold Rush. The Gold Rush is not only presented as a historical event set in space and time but as a symbol of the ability to extract wealth. Thus the booklet quotes the story of Brunan, a figure who made his fortune by selling spades to gold seekers, thus the text draws the conclusion from this anecdote that: “one cannot say that the gold beneath the ground is not true gold, but there is the ability to extract gold from the ground. Sometimes, wealth cannot be created from hard work”.
- 56 The leitmotiv of this text relies on the notion of “wealth creation”. Its content seems both rich and vague. It includes financial but also psychological and philosophical, even spiritual aspects. In the advertising text, wealth creation is first introduced as a kind of spirit. Thus, the year 1851 is “the first year of wealth creation, when the page was turned, history changed. The strength of this spirit started to rule the world! This wealth creation spirit is characterised by passion and dreams that can go beyond history and space”.
- 57 Those who have this spirit are supposed to be part of a new aristocracy associating material wealth and spiritual values. “Wealth, freedom and spiritual sublimation represent nirvana, and are symbols of the noble people of the age”.
- A new vision of history
- 58 The advertising document offers a new interpretation of world history. Before and after 1851. The Gold Rush would imply a departure point in History, breaking with the four main traditional chronological periods (Antiquity, Middle Age, Modern era and Contemporary era).
- 59 The title of the booklet is indeed “Dating back to 1851, the first year of fortune”. On the second page, it says “welcome to the 152nd anniversary of the wealth creation spirit”. Further, the singularity of this year 1851 and the historical break it is supposed to stand for is highlighted elsewhere: “...it is clear, in retrospect, that 1851 is not just another year in the flow of history, but also the declaration of the beginning of the spirit of wealth creation”.
- 60 The year 1851 is established as the beginning of a new historical period. The discovery of gold is not considered simply as one event among many others. It heralds a new era. “In 1851, the gold nugget found in the Yosemite Valley triggers the start of the gold mining era”. “The influence of the Gold Rush went beyond US borders. At the same

time, it eventually reached all human society and changed the historical course of the world”.

- 61 As these documents mainly address Chinese investors, the text implies that from now on this form of capitalism is expected to thrive in a privileged way, especially in China.
- 62 The text is not concerned with historical truth. It makes no reference to the many failures of the Gold Rush, to the often risky and poor living conditions of the prospectors. It twists historical fact into a series of success stories. Moreover, the sales pitch gives a disproportionate role to the Gold Rush in the contemporary or even American economic history. Attributing this event the status of a major watershed in the history of humanity seems caricatured and unfair.
- 63 The text also forgoes any reference to the Industrial Revolution and the colonial period which, doubtless much more than the Gold Rush, enabled the creation of values and accumulation of capital in developed countries. And again, history itself is reduced to a question of money and its accumulation.
- 64 It is therefore appropriate to note that while in California 1851 was the year of the Gold Rush, it also corresponds to a dramatic period in China, marked both by natural disasters (the south-east of the country was devastated by typhoons), and above all by the great popular rebellion of the Taipings (1851-1864), which started a long period of crisis for China.
- 65 The promotional materials do not risk taking explicit political positions. Nevertheless, there are political and ideological references. In some cases, it is their very absence that mark them out. In that sense, the text must be analysed for what it says as much as for what it does not say. Indeed there is no reference to the official Marxist-Leninist historical context. It makes no concession to CCP revolutionary ideology. Chinese history itself is totally ignored.
- 66 In other—very rare—cases, the central issue of the relationship between money and power is approached in a quasi-subliminal way. Thus, the text specifies:
- 67 “Restless explorations and discoveries have favoured diverse historical and social progress. However the real symbol of human progress is neither what some adventurers have found, nor how they have fulfilled the desire of some emperor¹⁴, most had the opportunity to dream and the possibility to fulfil our dreams”.
- 68 The message is clear, enrichment is mainly motivated by individual interest and not by adherence to a patriotic objective or submission to a ruling power. It is far from the Confucian image of the elite in the service of its country or the cultured intellectual class. The only ethic consists of granting an eminent value to the ability to accumulate wealth as quickly as possible.
- China’s emerging capitalism and its foundations
- 69 In some respect, the advertising materials offer precious information not only about the dream of the villa owners but also about the spirit and the very nature of the capitalism emerging in China. Globally, it deals with an economic system characterised by a mix of tradition, mercantilism and ultra-liberalism.
- 70 First, one of the characteristics that comes out of these documents is the fascination for gold. There is a real “mining capitalism” or “extraction capitalism”. This attachment to the yellow metal, traditional in most Asian societies is largely a cultural fact.
- 71 Yet the text also gives a broader vision:

- 72 “Because of the dreams, the Gold Rush rapidly spread throughout the world, not only in the Yosemite Valley, not only in California, not only in the United States, but everywhere on earth, the world became a giant ‘gold mine’ and everyone became a prospector for gold, Levi’s, Patek Philippe, New York Times, Reuter Press...”.
- 73 The Gold Rush myth thus becomes a metaphor. The historical event becomes the basis of a fantastical even fantasised vision of enrichment. The model offered to villa investors is not that of the nineteenth century bourgeois or the capitalist self-made man, it is that of an adventurer motivated by the dream of instant wealth. Monetary profit is disconnected from the notion of work, enterprise and innovation: between this game of chance and fortune seeking, wealth comes from no sort of creation at all.
- 74 This search is alluded to as a fever. Significantly, the text states: “History froze in 1851. From the start of the Gold Mining Era, a fever gripped the world”.
- 75 Like C. Levi Strauss who made his famous distinction between “cold societies” and “hot societies”¹⁵, the text opposes a long, cold even glacial historical period to a more recent hot period. This fever is comparable to the economic takeoff that China has been experiencing for the last twenty years. It resounds with the vertigo the Chinese economic elite might have regarding the quasi-unlimited prospect of growth of the country.
- 76 When the text evokes the American-like success stories, it underlines how fast they made money: “Levi’s, Patek Philippe, New York Times, Reuter Press and the other legends of the wealth creation of the Gold Rush Era, all of them have proved the following statement: as long as you put your hands in the right place, bravery and luck will bring a myth of quick fortune”.
- 77 The wealth creation is not only an economic objective to reach. It has become a cult object. Beyond materialism itself, it includes a metaphysical dimension. As the document does not wish to make special reference to the Christian God, completely alien to Chinese investors or residents, it quotes instead other terms which are more general and / or more adapted to this Asian context: “nirvana”, “totem”, “spiritual”, “devotion”. “The kiss of God: extracting gold will bring wealth to those who fulfilled their dreams with spades and empty hands. No-one thought they were so favoured as to find gold. They were called ‘kissed by God’. But reality reminds us that the lucky gold seekers were neither faithful worshippers of God nor called ‘favourite sons of God’. On the contrary they sincerely followed and loved another spiritual force in the form of a totem! Through many legends, they told the world that this was neither gold or God, but the ‘wealth creation spirit’. The devout adoration of this kind of spirit meant that many gold seekers naturally became rich and liberated their spirits of noblemen. Because God only kisses the strongest!”
- 78 This cult of wealth creation is that of a fanatic individualism and social Darwinism, as opposed to the Confucian principles of the traditional elite or the post-Maoist type of paternalism, and is expressed through an exaltation of the individual and his capacities. The villa owners become the flame-bearers of a new cult and at the same time the members of a minor elite able to fulfil their dreams and, according to the text, endowed with remarkable and exceptional qualities.
- 79 If this vision of the world seems to remove the political dimension to favour an exclusively economic vision, it furtively picks up history again. Like many gated communities in China, the references to the manor lifestyle and to the imperial period

are omnipresent¹⁶. The location itself is called “imperial” (zhizun weizhi). Life there is also qualified as “imperial” (zhizun shenghuo ganshou). The clubhouse is built in the “European palace style”. There it is qualified as “Noble Manor, Noble Club” (zungui bieshu, zungui huisuo). The booklet specifies: “Not only will you enjoy quality services but also the noble feeling of manor life” (bieshu shenghuo de guizu ganjue).

- 80 American-ness is battered down. The reference to the European or Chinese Ancien Régime seems to be so little in line with the foundations of American democracy that the residential complex claims to belong to. The sales pitch only keeps a partial and reduced American-ness, taken from its democratic dimension. In the manner of this current emerging capitalism in China, it uncouples the economic sphere from the political sphere. In this way, it achieves a singular and unlikely combination between American mythology and Chinese imperial tradition, between an imported capitalism and a deep fascination for the past.
- 81 In conclusion, Yosemite Villas and its advertising documents that endeavour to assure the villas’ promotion, clearly exhibit several levels of meaning. If restricted to a limited interpretation, one may consider these sources a particularly intellectually elaborate document, but which nevertheless remains simply a promotional document and therefore of essentially commercial function. According to this point of view, it would be excessive or at least risky to over-interpret these materials and uncover deeper promotional meaning. A second interpretation consists of giving scientific credit to this advertising, but limiting the reach to the special case of Yosemite Villas. Booklets, leaflets, folders would make an exceptional but unique group of documents. A third approach assumes that the meaning of these documents goes beyond both the advertising genre and the case of Yosemite Villas, implying that the designers of these documents are only expressing the unconscious of the target group of their message, or even more widely the collective unconscious of the social strata that this target group belongs to. In this way, the villa owners embody the new face of some of the Chinese elite. It offers information about the way that a sector of the economic elite think about themselves and think about history. It enables one to gauge the vertigo experienced by the Chinese elite faced with the violent speed of the economic take-off and the huge potential of future development.
- 82 But the underlying representation of the documents also gives insights—particular, fragmented, but striking—into the capitalism emerging in China. Deprived of an ideological or religious dimension, and of unions and political counter-power, rooted in a multi-millennial imperial tradition and fed by a booming growth which never again will be cyclic, in many ways this capitalism embodies a novel form of political economic system. One may wonder whether it is the case of just the first stage of a capitalism likely to evolve over time or whether it is to represent a novel mode of long-term and original development, a veritable syncretism between a quasi-universal capitalism and multi-millennial civilisation.

NOTES

1. Cf. David Fraser, "Inventing Oasis: Luxury Housing Advertisements and Reconfiguring Domestic Space in Shanghai", in D. S. Davis (ed.), *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000, pp. 25-53. See also Guillaume Giroir "Le phénomène des *gated communities* à Pékin, ou les nouvelles cités interdites", *Bulletin de l'Association de géographes français*, Paris, December 2002, pp. 423-436; "The Fontainebleau Villas (Shanghai), a golden ghetto in a Chinese garden" in Fulong Wu and Yaping Wang (eds.), *Globalization and the Chinese City*, London and New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2006, pp. 208-233; "The Purple Jade Villas (Beijing): a golden ghetto in red China", in Klaus Frantz, Georg Glasze, and Chris Webster (eds.), *Private Cities: Global and Local Perspectives*, London and New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2006, pp. 142-152; "The phenomenon of gated golf communities: the case of China", in Fulong Wu (ed.), *Spaces of China's New Urbanism*, London and New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2006; "'Hard' and 'soft' enclosure in gated communities: some theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence in China", *Urban Geography*, 2006 (submitted). For a discussion of middle class residential enclaves, see Luigi Tomba, "Creating an urban middle class: social engineering in Beijing", *The China Journal*, No. 51, January 2004, pp. 1-26.
2. Cf. Fulong Wu, "Transplanting cityscapes: townhouse and gated community in globalization and housing commodification", in Fulong Wu and Yaping Wang (eds.), *Globalization and the Chinese City*, London and New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2006, pp. 190-208. Foreign influences often combine with Chinese culture; writing about the Fontainebleau Villas (Shanghai) where Western style buildings are incorporated into a space laid out in accordance with *feng shui* principles, I use the terms "cultural hybridity" and "intermingled civilisations" (see Guillaume Giroir, *op. cit.* 2006).
3. This paper was first presented in English at the First World Forum on Chinese Studies, Shanghai International Convention Centre, Pudong, August 19th-22nd, 2004. I would like to record my special thanks to the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) and in particular to the Assistant Director, Mr. Tu Qiyu for the honour of being an Invited Scholar.
4. Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Bordas, 1959.
5. Sherman Cochran, *Big Business in China: Sino-Foreign Rivalry in the Cigarette Industry, 1890-1930*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1980; and *Inventing Nanjing Road: Commercial Culture in Shanghai, 1900-1945*, Ithaca (N. Y.), Cornell East Asia Series, 1999.
6. David Fraser, *op. cit.*
7. Steven W. Lewis, "The Media of New Public Spaces in Global Cities: Subway Advertising in Beijing, Shanghai and Taipei", *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, September 2003, pp. 261-271. See also Cheng H. H.-I, "Consuming a Dream: Homes in Advertisements and Imagination in Contemporary Hong Kong" in Mathews G. and Lui Tai-Iok (eds.), *Consuming Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2001.
8. *Villa Yosemite (Youshan Meidi): Intelligence in Wealth Creates Excellent Achievements*, in English and Chinese, undated, 8 p.; *Villa Yosemite (Youshan Meidi)*, in Chinese on some pages, and in Chinese with English on others, undated, 36 p.
9. *Beginning from 1851, the First Year for Fortune. Villa Yosemite (Youshan Meidi)*, in Chinese and English, undated, 50 p.

10. Guillaume Giroir, “Gated communities, clubs in a club system. The case of Beijing (China)”, Proceedings of the Glasgow international conference: *Gated Communities: Building Social Division or Safer Communities?*, September 18th-19th 2003, Glasgow University urban geography department, Centre for Neighbourhood Research, www.gla.ac.uk/departments/urbanstudies/gated/gatedpaps/gatedconfpaps.html.
 11. David Fraser, *op. cit.*
 12. In the case of Purple Jade Villas I show how this “oasis building” strategy on the part of the promoters, and supported by the residents themselves, conflicts with the disruptions and urban spread engendered by the developmental dynamic of the cities; see Guillaume Giroir, *op. cit.* 2006.
 13. Alain Suberchicot, *Littérature américaine et Ecologie*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002.
 14. My italics.
 15. Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Claude Lévi-Strauss*, Paris, Plon-Julliard, 1989 (first published, 1961).
 16. Guillaume Giroir, “Les *gated communities* en Chine : civilisation, transition et métropolisation”, in Guillaume Giroir, *Transition et territoire en Chine. Le cas des périphéries de Pékin*, “habilitation à diriger des recherches” (accreditation to supervise research), Université d’Orléans, 2003, pp. 198-216.
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RÉSUMÉS

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Over the last fifteen years or so, several hundred gated communities have been built around China’s major cities. Most of these tightly policed luxury enclaves follow a standard social model and physical layout. In the advertising brochures, the sales pitch shows little variation.