



2008

Between Heaven and Modernity: Reconstructing Suzhou, 1985-1937 (Book Review)

Thomas D. Curran Ph.D.

Sacred Heart University, currant@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/his_fac



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), and the [Chinese Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Curran, Thomas D. Ph.D., "Between Heaven and Modernity: Reconstructing Suzhou, 1985-1937 (Book Review)" (2008). *History Faculty Publications*. Paper 32.

http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/his_fac/32

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

the millennia. Indeed, Chinese fascination seems to transcend that in the West, because for many Chinese, disputes and their litigation begun during life might continue in the hereafter, not toward a remote Judgment Day, but toward concrete justice in an underworld tribunal.

University of California, Davis

Benjamin E. Wallacker

Carroll, Peter J.: *Between Heaven and Modernity: Reconstructing Suzhou, 1895–1937*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), xvii + 325pp., \$60.00. ISBN 0–8047–5359–8.

This work explores the intricate ways by which architectural and other symbols of China's traditional urban culture were transformed in the minds of Chinese living in the lower Yangzi River city of Suzhou in the early 20th century. Either artifacts of China's intellectual and cultural heritage were seen as impediments to modernization and reminders of economic stagnation and cultural decay, or they were viewed as cultural ornaments imbued with meaning as emblems of past greatness and anchors to which China's modern identity might be linked. Either way, as urban reformers, investors, and city planners reconstructed Suzhou's urban landscape they had to deal with an extraordinarily rich deposit of relics – walls, streets, temples, gardens, historical monuments [*guzhi*], and graveyards – that were of great significance to Chinese and others (e.g., Japanese) who were deeply influenced by Confucian culture. Tampering with them inevitably raised important questions that pertained to China's evolving national identity and its search for a path to security, prosperity, and standing in the world.

Peter Carroll approaches the subject by studying the history of city planning and reconstruction in Suzhou from the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) to the second (1937–1945). As he analyzes the changes that took place and considers the political and social dynamics of reconstruction, he finds that generally speaking there were two distinct and contending reform models. Each of them resided in a distinct vision of modernity that saw the city's cultural heritage in a different light. Advocates of first formula, the "preservationist mode," were prompted to preserve the architectural and other features of Suzhou's urban environment out of an intense desire to rescue symbols of China's "national essence." These preservationists were not acting for antiquarian reasons. Rather, they were responding to their appreciation of the value of such cultural artifacts as elements of a framework upon which to construct a new national identity that was inclusive, popular, and nationalistic. Also, such individuals assumed that preservation of a nation's cultural treasures was by itself a mark of modernity. Hence, their impulse to preserve the city's cultural heritage was rooted in distinctly modern impulses. Incidentally, Carroll is careful to take note of the irony of an effort to advance a modernist agenda by rescuing from destruction architectural features that in the eyes of many people served as reminders of China's relative backwardness.

Those who took the second approach, proponents of what Carroll has termed "economist modernization," were inclined to regard the city's spatial features both as impediments to urban growth and as embarrassing signs of cultural backwardness. The city's walls and narrow streets, for example, were obstacles to the movement of people and

goods that the reformers associated with modern economic development, and their removal was considered to be both necessary for commercial expansion and desirable for the purpose of erasing the legacy of a discredited, and hopefully bygone, era.

Capturing much of what must have been a turbulent political process, Carroll demonstrates that with respect to particular developmental or preservation projects various interest groups in the city tended to align themselves in accordance with their self-interests as well as their understanding of the patriotic implications of what they were doing. A common thread that tied together the preservationists and the economists was their desire to build in Suzhou a modern platform for the enhancement of China's national unity and identity. Yet, while the preservationists saw the city's cultural relics as bulwarks of national culture, the economic modernizers subordinated whatever they found of value in Suzhou's cultural heritage to the larger goal of urban reconstruction. There was tension between these two strands of reformist thinking – indeed, Carroll demonstrates that such tensions exist even now (p. 239) – and one of Carroll's more important contributions is to examine the ways by which these tensions played themselves out in a process that yielded various results.

The book is a wonderfully thoughtful piece. Rooted in archival research, employing a wide variety of Chinese and Japanese sources, and informed by contemporary analyses of urban spaces and their impact on culture, it adds greatly to a growing, and fascinating, corpus of scholarship on urban change in China.

Sacred Heart University

Thomas D. Curran

Brokaw, Cynthia J.: *Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 280. (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), xxv + 673pp., \$44.95. ISBN 978-0-674-02449-6.

This extraordinarily detailed analysis of the commercial publishing industry that was centered in remote areas of western Fujian Province covers virtually all aspects of book production and distribution in the south Chinese hinterland during the Qing and Republican periods. It shows that the use of low-cost technologies, family labor, and lineage-based distribution networks enabled producers to offer a wide range of inexpensive texts that penetrated rural areas far beyond the reach of the more heavily capitalized publishers who operated in the densely populated and culturally advanced centers of north China and Jiangnan. People living even in frontier areas were able to acquire books produced and sold by Fujianese (Hakka) producers, and Brokaw proposes that the result was to enhance China's cultural integration.

Inevitably, the discussion of publishing raises the somewhat contentious issue of literacy in traditional China. Ever since Matteo Ricci noted the widespread circulation of written texts in the sixteenth century, observers have speculated about the breadth and depth of literacy in China; estimates run from a high of 45% to a low of 10% male literacy. Although Brokaw brings to the table a great deal of evidence testifying to the widespread circulation of texts, she tends to side with those who offer a low estimation of popular literacy. On the other hand, her scholarship indicates that the issue is too complex