



Puzzlement

My Chinese lessons usually take place in a hipster café called Groove. Located in the part of Beijing where many media companies and foreign embassies are, the place has all the generic ingredients of an urban paradise: green plants, rough concrete walls, an assortment of mostly wooden chairs, clients behind Macs sipping one of their many different kinds of coffee. With China ushered into what can be termed a compressed modernity within a time span of only a few decades, the savvy clientele of Groove seem to be at the forefront of the process. And this modernity is dressed mostly in black. In Groove, one will frequently come across youngsters dressed in the stylish and often black clothes of the Hangzhou-based designer labels Croquis and JNBY (*suxie* 速写 and *jiangnan buyi* 江南布衣), whose flagship stores are just a few blocks away in the Japanese-designed shopping district Taikoo Li (previously The Village).

Groove is on the edge of a shopping mall called Yoo Lee Plaza. If what I just penned evoked in you a groovy space of vibrancy and liveliness, I did that to underline a puzzle that struck me time and again: the sheer absence of people in the mall. Its eerie emptiness seemed to undermine prevalent stereotypes about Beijing being an overpopulated city. With its 20 million plus inhabitants, it is – but for sure, they are not to be found in its downtown malls. Stories of China’s rise and dazzling economic growth, in conjunction with the human magnitude and multitude, conjure up images of crowds shopping in busy malls. Hong Kong lives up to this image; Beijing does not – why? This essay aims to insert a visual *but* to the often spectacular and spectacularized celebration of China’s rise and economic growth; it ushers us into the empty Chinese shopping mall, inviting us to pause and interrupt this teleological narrative.

Spectacles

When going to the toilet in Groove, I would have to walk through the mall. The mall is cheerfully decorated, with staging that would change time and again, often smacking of a grotesque fascination with abundance and kitsch. Around the time of Valentine’s Day, for instance, these decorations would be connected to a notion of love.

▽ Yoo Lee Plaza
around Valentine’s Day



△ 情人节期间的永利
国际购物中心

困惑

我的中文课通常在一个叫 Groove 的时髦咖啡馆进行。这家咖啡馆地处北京诸多媒体公司和大使馆所在区域，有着“都市天堂”的所有常见元素：绿植，粗旷的水泥墙，多为木制的各式椅子，以及在苹果电脑后面喝着各种不同口味咖啡的顾客。中国可谓在短短几十年内迎来了“压缩的现代性”，Groove 咖啡馆里的达人顾客群似乎站在这一进程的前沿，而且这一现代性基本上都穿着黑色。在这里，经常会看到年轻人穿着杭州设计师品牌速写，或江南布衣的时髦服饰，以黑色为主。几条街外由日本建筑师设计的三里屯太古里（曾名三里屯Village）购物区内就有这两个品牌的旗舰店。

Groove位于一个叫永利国际购物中心的商场角落。如果我以上的描述让你以为这是一个充满活力的时髦场所，那是因为我想要强调一个一直让我很困惑的问题：商场里总是人迹寥寥。这种诡异的冷清感似乎与人们对北京总是人满为患的印象不符。北京有着2千多万常驻人口，但可以肯定的是，他们都不在市中心的商场里。有关中国崛起和令人瞩目的经济增长速度的故事与庞大而多样的人口联系在一起，让人联想到拥挤的人群在繁忙的商场中购物的画面——香港符合这样的想象，北京却没有。为什么？本文旨在为壮观且景观化的中国崛起与经济发展赞歌提供视觉批判，将读者带到中国空寂的购物商场，邀请大家暂停并打断以结果为导向的叙事。

▽ Yoo Lee Plaza
around Valentine’s Day



△ 情人节期间的永利
国际购物中心

舞台陈列

我去Groove 咖啡馆的洗手间时，需要穿过商场。商场里总是被装点得喜气洋洋，经常更换的展台陈列常常散发

着对富足和刻奇的怪执迷恋。比如，在情人节期间，这些装饰被用来表达爱的含义。

▽ The Shimao Gongsan mall



△ 世茂工三商场

▽ The Yoo Lee Plaza



△ 永利国际购物中心

At the end of the year, Christmas ornaments dominate the mall, prompting some, probably the older generations, to remember the recent past when Christmas decorations were forbidden by the Party as spiritual pollution from the imperialist West. With consumption, such regulations have evaporated.

年末时，商场里满是圣诞装饰。让一些人，尤其是老一辈想起圣诞装饰曾因被认为是西方帝国主义的精神污染而遭到党的禁止。随着消费主义的兴起，这些规定已经消失。

然而，当观众缺席时，这些光鲜闪亮的陈列开始变得格外诡异。仿佛在提醒着我们寂寞的圣诞时光和没有爱的单身生活。然而，这一带有超现实感的空间中的确存在着真实或现实的部分。在蜘蛛侠照片的背景里，我们看到一位清洁工，一位带着扫帚、抹布和地面清洁工具，持续活动在商场中的外来务工人员。

空无一人

大衣按颜色摆放，仿佛一道彩虹——是在吸引同性恋顾客吗？然而它们的陈列让人倍感凄凉，色调也似乎因为无人欣赏而变得暗淡。这些大衣也许在等待着，但等待什么？等待谁？

而这种空寂和缺席，正是商场让人悚然的原因……而且不仅是这家没有顶级品牌入驻的商场，几条街之外的世茂工三商场里，虽然大概因为有受欢迎的星巴克和无印良品的原因而人流稍多，但也完全称不上繁忙或热闹。

▽ promoting Spider-man and other superheroes in the Yoo Lee Plaza



△ 永利国际购物中心陈列的蜘蛛侠等超级英雄

▽ Clothes waiting for a customer in the Yoo Lee Plaza



△ 永利国际购物中心里等待顾客的衣服

However, all these glittery spectacles become rather eerie when they are erected for an absent audience, as if they are there to remind us of a lonely Christmas time and a single life devoid of love. This almost surreal sense of space is nonetheless constituent of the real or reality: on the backdrop of the Spiderman image we see a cleaner, the migrant working force that continues to inhabit the malls with brooms, cloths and floor cleaning gadgets.

Ghostly Absence

The coats are ordered like a rainbow - a lure for the gay consumer? But they hang there in a rather desolate way; their hues seem less colorful when no one is there to see them. The coats are maybe waiting, but for what, for whom?

And this emptiness, this absence, is what haunts the mall... And it is not just this mall, one that does not host top end brands. Just a few blocks away one can find Shimao Gongsan, another mall. There are a handful more people around, probably attracted by the popular Starbucks and Muji, but it is hardly busy or lively.

Strangely, an object used for working out is standing there, something supposedly energizing, now lethargic in the desolation of the mall. The shining marble of the floor radiates a sense of luxury, but the surrounding void makes them shine no longer in vanity, but in vain. What is left are faceless mannequins with downcast black eyes, shy and embarrassed, not quite knowing how and why they ended up here...

奇怪的是，一个健身器材被放置在路中间。这本该是一件让人精力旺盛的东西，现在却无精打采地躺在空荡荡的商场里。地面光亮的大理石散发着奢侈感，然而周围的空洞却让它们闪耀的不再是荣光，而是枉然。余下的只有长着沮丧的黑色眼睛，害羞又尴尬的无脸塑料模特——不知自己如何沦落于此。

当然，时而还是会有人经过，只是他们短暂停留，转眼便不见踪影，让人想起那些塑料模特。相比之下，清洁工则要目标明确和真实得多。顾客们魅影般的存在非但没有减轻，反而更加突显了商场的空虚。

At times, of course, people do pass by, yet fleetingly, ephemerally, spectrally, reminiscent of the mannequins, less purposeful or real than the cleaner. Their ghostly presence serves not so much to alleviate but to accentuate the void of the mall...

Aside from the spectral people who come and go and refuse to consolidate into a shopping crowd, a mass – and aside from the mannequins with their white masks and frozen posture – I also see movie stars flattened to life-size cardboard, aiming to attract, in front of a Thai restaurant...

Many malls in China seem to be haunted: by images of people, not real; by passers-by who hardly leave a trace; by cleaners and guards, reminding us that this is not an open, public sphere, but one that is governed by invisible rules and regulations; by the eerie absence of consumption. Amidst this betwixt and spectral heterotopia we will find the shopkeepers, who are perpetually waiting.

▽ The Shimao Gongsan mall



△ 世茂工三商场

▽ The Shimao Gongsan mall



△ 世茂工三商场

Waiting and Waiting

While the cleaners are forever cleaning the empty mall, the shopkeepers face a different task: waiting for the customer. Waiting and queuing is part and parcel of modern life. We wait while applying for a new passport, we stand in line for the latest fad at lunch and we line up for a newly released iPhone or tickets for the Korean boy band BTS. Yet we are told that speed is what characterizes high capitalism. While this narrative glosses over the many hours of waiting and queuing, as well as the multiple other ways in which we idle our time away, it is fair to say that China, with its extensive bureaucracy and its quantity of people, often makes people wait. And the shopkeepers in these malls may well be considered the true virtuosos of waiting culture, gazing endlessly at their mobile phones so as to expel the boredom of the everyday.

▽ Cardboard movie stars in the Yoo Lee Plaza



△ 永利国际购物中心里的电影明星传招牌

▽ Waiting in the Yoo Lee Plaza



△ 在永利国际购物中心等待

除了如魅影般来去匆匆、不愿汇聚成购物洪流的人们，戴着白色面具、姿态凝固的塑料模特，我还是一家泰国餐厅门口看到了一些真人大小，意在吸引顾客的电影明星纸板广告。

中国的很多商场似乎都被魅影笼罩：人物的图像，而非真人；擦肩而过不留一丝痕迹的路人；清洁工和保安提醒我们这不是一个开放的公共领域，而是被无形的条款和规则管制，且消费行为诡异缺席的空间。在这幽灵般游离的异托邦之间，我们发现了永远在等待中的店员。

等待，无尽地等待

当清洁工不停地打扫着空寂的商场时，店员们则面临

These shopkeepers seem to put capitalism on hold; they pause the narrative of growth and success and confront us with the flipside of the rise of China. They remind me of a scene in the nine-hour long documentary *West of the Tracks* of Wang Bing (2002). There, we witness a lottery in a village town, and a man who wins a television set is being interviewed. The host asks him what he is doing now, and the winner responds that he is waiting for a job. Being asked how long he has already waited, he responds that he has been unemployed for ten years already. The laughter of the host is one of discomfort and embarrassment. These shopkeepers do have a job – but one in which waiting for the next customer seems to be the main preoccupation.

▽ Waiting in the Shimao Gongsan mall



△ 在世茂工三商场里等待

▽ Waiting in the Shimao Gongsan mall



△ 在世茂工三商场里等待

Their jobs without labour in the malls may seem like reminders of a communist period that passed long ago, a time in which there were often more people than there was labour. But “all that was once solid - the stable job, the safety net provided by the State, referred to as the iron rice bowl of China - has melted into the thin air of a nationally endorsed global capitalism. The iron rice bowl at most lingers on in the fantasies of the workers, as a figure alike Beckett’s Godot, for which one simply has to wait” (de Kloet 2009). This destruction of the rice bowl, and in its slipstream the emergent precarious politics of waiting, are mirrored in the urban processes of destruction and reconstruction.

Destruction and Construction

The malls themselves are in a constant flow of reconstruction: decorations come and go, as do the shops. Part of the mall experience is thus its constant reconstructing and flow of ownership. The mall operates here as a microcosm of what is going on in China at large. The speed of destruction and construction in China is often reflected upon, but remains as timely as ever. The character *chai* – announcing the fu-

着一个不同的任务：等待顾客。排队和等待是现代生活不可或缺的一部分：我们等待新申请的护照；午餐时排队点近期的热门菜；排队买最新推出的 iPhone 手机或韩国男子组合防弹少年团 (BTS) 的演唱会门票。与此同时我们却被告知：速度是高度资本主义的特征。这样的叙事掩盖了冗长的排队和等待时光，以及时间悄然而逝的各种方式。可以不失公允地说，在中国，繁复的官僚主义和众多的人口让等待成为常态。这些商场中的店员可谓深谙等待文化的专家，无止尽地盯着他们的手机来打发每日的无聊时光。

▽ Reconstructing the Shimao Gongsan mall



△ 世茂工三商场里正在进行的装修

这些店员们似乎让资本主义遭到了搁置，暂停了发展和成功的叙事，让我们直面中国增长的另一面。他们让我想起王兵九小时长的纪录片《铁西区》(2002年) 中的一个场景。在那一幕中，我们见证了一个村镇上的抽奖，一位赢得了一套彩电的男人正在接受采访。主持人问他目前在做些什么，获奖者回答说他在等待一份工作。被问及他等了有多久时，他回答说自己已经失业十年了。主持人的笑声显得不适而又尴尬。这些店员已经有了一份工作——一份等待下一位顾客似乎是主要内容的工作。

他们在商场里无需劳作的工作，让人在恍惚间想起了那个早已逝去的，人通常比活儿要多的共产主义阶段。“但曾经稳固的一切——由国家提供保障，被称为‘铁饭碗’的稳定工作——已经在国家支持的国际资本主义中烟消云散了。‘铁饭碗’最多还萦绕于工人人们的幻想之中，就好像贝克特书中的戈多一样，人们只能等待。”(见2002年Jeroen de Kloet的文章)“铁饭碗”的打破及随之而来的令人不安的等待政治，也同样反映在破坏与建设的城市化过程中。

破坏与建设

商场本身也总是不停地在改造：装饰和店铺出现又

ture demolition of a place, has become such a familiar sign in China that some have suggested changing the name of the country into *Chaina* (拆国). The government is presenting such processes as the inevitable outcome of the country’s modernization. The slogan depicted below was taken in an area in the center of Beijing where the old hutongs were demolished to make way for a subway station. It reads “The government appreciates your cooperation, the city remembers your contribution.” Subtexted in such empty government propaganda is the pace of change of Beijing, its constant demolition and rebuilding, the never-ending flow of people, turning the city into a highly unstable entity, a place of flux and disjuncture.

The analogy between the mall and the city is becoming even more disturbing in the light of events over the course of 2017. The Beijing government decided to rid the city of what were termed illegal buildings, a coded term for the small shops and restaurants that had sprung up all over the city, giving the city its vibrant feel. In its aspiration to become a modern global city, the government decided to clean away all these spaces, to replace them with empty walls and pavements or clean facades. One case in point is the wall close to the malls shown in this essay, on Xingfu Lu. There, a line of small shops and restaurants was, within a timespan of three

▽ Chai – announcing demolition



△ 拆——宣告拆迁

▽ Chai – announcing demolition



△ 拆——宣告拆迁

hours, fenced off, before being destroyed in a fortnight. In return, a white wall with Chinese characteristics was erected, neat and tidy, but devoid of life.

According to many Beijingers, the policies towards the small shops and restaurants in Beijing are not only directed towards tidying up the city; they are also meant to drive out the migrant workers in the city. These are the people that have built modern Beijing, they were the ones who constructed venues imagined by the global “starchitects” of the Beijing Olympics. They were labelled a “low end population” (*diduan renkou* 低端人口) by the politicians, and ordered, in the fall of 2017, in their tens of thousands, to leave their urban villages in Beijing

消失。因此，不停地装修改造自身和商铺所有权的流转也是商场所面临的一部分。商场的运转可以看作是中国总体状况的缩影。中国拆迁和建设的速度经常被审视，如今也情况依旧。“拆”字在中国随处可见——宣告着某处即将被拆迁的未来，以至于有人建议把中国的名字改成“拆国” (Chaina)。政府把拆迁当作国家现代化过程中不可避免的产物。以下是在北京中心城区拍摄的口号，这里的老胡同因为建地铁站而遭拆迁。横幅上写着“政府感谢您的配合，城市铭记您的付出”。这样空洞的政府宣传口号之下所暗示的是北京变化的速度，不断的拆迁和重建和永无止境的人潮，将城市变成了一个高度不稳定的整体，一个流动和支离破碎的场所。

商场和城市的相似性在2017年发生的一系列事件中显得更为让人不安。北京市政府决定拆除城市所谓的“非法建筑”——而这用词指涉遍布城市大街小巷，为城市带来活力的小店和餐馆。为了成为现代的国际性城市，政府决定清理这些空间，并以空白的墙和走道，或干净的外立面取代。其中一个例子，就是这篇文章中所展示的商场附近一条叫做“幸福路”上的墙。在那条街上，一排小店和餐馆在短短三小时之内就被围了起来，并在接下来的两星期内拆除。取而代之的是一面带有中国元素，毫无生命力的整洁白墙。

▽ “The government appreciates your cooperation, the city remembers your contribution”



△ “政府感谢您的配合，城市铭记您的付出”

很多北京人认为，北京针对小商店和餐馆的政策并不只是清理城市环境，也是为了将农民工赶出城市。然而正是这些人建设了现代北京，他们才是把“国际明星建筑师”设计的北京奥林匹克场馆实际搭建出来的人。这个群体有上万人之多，他们被政府官员打上“低端人口”的标签，并于2017年的秋天被下令在两天内搬离所居住的城中村。这是政府为了“清理”城市、减少人口所进行的大规模清退

within 2 days. It marked the start of a massive eviction scheme of the government, meant to "clean up" the city and cut down its population (Buckly 2017). Just as the malls are clean to the point of being devoid of life, so Beijing runs the danger of being cleaned up to the extent that its essential vitality fades away.

▽ Reconstructing Xingfu Lu in Beijing



△ 北京正在改建的幸福路

▽ Reconstructing Xingfu Lu in Beijing



△ 北京正在改建的幸福路

Empty Cities

Once the malls triggered me to couple China with emptiness, however unlikely that may seem at first sight, the theme returned, not only in observations of waiting and demolition, but also when visiting Thames Town, a real estate project close to Shanghai. There, the buildings are mostly empty, with perhaps 10-20% occupied. What is left is a façade of Britishness, a spectacular background for wedding pictures and events. Low occupancy has not stopped all the apartments being sold, and their value rising significantly. The empty houses serve as symbols for a bubble economy, their emptiness signifying the lack of real value, the absence of materiality, confronting us with the virtual values of a casino capitalism.

Mobile Consumption

To wrap up, allow me to venture into musings on the emptiness I found in Beijing's malls. Rapid processes of digitalization have given rise to a digital economy in China in which goods are traded online, meals are delivered at home and second hand items are sold without touching the shops. This may be one explanation why the malls in Beijing are so often eerily empty. Everyday Beijing is now characterized by the constant coming and going of delivery vans.

The emerging online delivery market and its offline manifestations that change the cityscape attest to the transformations of consumption in China and, probably, beyond. The empty malls may force us to rethink contemporary practices of consumption, these cathedrals of consumption may not

Empty Malls

计划的开端。(见2017年储百亮的文章)就像干净到毫无生机的商场一样,北京也面对着过度清理导致失去重要活力的危险。

空旷的城市

从商场触发我把中国和“空寂”这一乍看似不相关的概念联系起来开始,这一主题便反复出现。它不仅在等待和拆迁的观察中,还在我参观上海附近一个叫做泰晤士小镇房产项目时再次出现。在那里,大多数楼盘都是空置的,入住率只有百分之十到二十。剩下的,则是适合作为活动或婚纱照拍摄背景的壮丽英式风情外墙。低入住率并没有影响公寓的销售,这里所有的楼盘均已售空,房价也显著上升。空置的房屋是泡沫经济的象征,它们空置彰显了实际价值的缺失和物质性的缺乏,让我们直面赌场资本主义的虚有价值。

▽ Reconstructing Xingfu Lu in Beijing



△ 北京正在改建的幸福路

▽ Thames Town in Shanghai



△ 上海泰晤士小镇

网上购物

作为总结,请让我发散思考一下我在北京的商场里所感受到的空寂感。迅速的数码化进程引发了中国数字经济的增长,商品在网上交易,餐食被递送到家中,二手物品无需经过实体店就完成了交易。这或许是可以解释为什么北京的商场总是空荡到令人悚然的原因之一。如今北京日常的特征,正是不断来来往往的快递小面包车。

▽ Thames Town in Shanghai



△ 上海泰晤士小镇

▽ Delivered goods waiting to be picked up



△ 等待领取的快递

work in all localities as well as we think. Above all, this essay tries to interrogate and pause the rhetoric of the rise of China and its alleged dazzling economic growth that has triggered a consumption revolution. Clear economic figures of growth hide complex realities, in which shopkeepers wait in vain for customers, in which malls are eerily devoid of life, in which towns are built and yet unoccupied, in which people are labelled "low end" and kicked out of a city, and in which the display of conspicuous consumption conceals a more precarious reality.

▽ The delivery service at the gate of Beijing University



△ 北京大学门口的快递服务

在线递送市场的兴起,及其改变了城市景观的线下呈现形式,证明了中国消费的变迁,或者其他更深层的东西。空荡荡的商场迫使我们重新思考关于消费的当代实践,这些消费的大教堂或许并不像我们想象的那样适合所有地区。人们通常盛赞中国崛起及其所谓触发消费革命的耀眼经济增长,本文则试图审视并暂停这样的修辞。清晰的经济增长数字背后隐藏着复杂的现实:店员徒然地等待着顾客;商场诡异地缺乏人气;小镇被建造却空置;人们被打上“低端”的标签赶出城市;花哨的消费展陈掩盖着越发不安定的现实。

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