

Avoiding “Compulsory Automobility” in Asia’s Open Cities

As I understand its use at this conference, the term “open city” connotes transparency, cosmopolitanism, and at least intimates distributive justice in the postindustrial world. It gestures toward the utopian.

COTTEN SEILER
Dickinson College

There’s a second, more ambivalent meaning of open city, which I won’t have time to go into much here; that is, the city rendered “open” by corruption, lax law enforcement, poverty, and segregation by race, class, and/or sexuality. These pathologies enable the urban spaces of vice and cultural exchange that the historian Kevin Mumford has called interzones: these are the sites at which, put simply, slumming members of the merchant class encounter, cultivate, and extract the cultural products of the marginalized.¹ I’m thinking most specifically here of 1920s Berlin, Shanghai, Paris, and the Paris of the Plains, Kansas City, Missouri, where jazz flourished under the brutally corrupt regime of Boss Pendergast. But the immiserated South Bronx of New York in the 1980s also springs to mind.

But the meaning of open city I want to stress here at the outset is the military one. An open city is one whose defenses are exhausted or overmatched and which seeks to avoid the worst by opening its gates before it is besieged. This meaning stresses the often violent act of opening rather than the volitional condition of being open that anchors the other two meanings. Remember that in the 1850s Britain opened Chinese cities through the violence of the Opium Wars; and the US Navy opened two cities in Japan with steamboat gunships. In imperial terms, opening cities is about accessing markets—resource, labor, and, most recently, consumer—and about rendering spaces legible to and like those of the imperial metropole. The capitalism that European and American imperial powers brought to Asia, indeed, requires that cities be “open”; that is, that they facilitate flows of financial, human, and cultural capital.

I’m specifically interested in how we might think of the ongoing installation of automobility in Asia. The term automobility names a normative practice, a mode of subjectivity, a built environment, and a political and social imaginary organized around owning and driving automobiles. A redoubled critique of automobility, emerging around the turn of this century, has gained traction among urban

planners, architects, and policy makers around the world, especially as more Asian nations install automobility inspired by the US iteration on their urban and suburban landscapes. Automobility arrived in Asian cities under the auspices of imperial powers and later, accelerated under a putatively stateless but still Western-oriented forces of global capitalism. While I don't want to suggest that Asian cities have been powerless to resist the automobility paradigm that has prevailed in the United States—many indeed have resisted it—I do want to emphasize the force and pervasiveness of that paradigm, given its association with modernity and that indispensable, chimerical condition called “freedom.” This is an association now so ingrained as to go unremarked, but let's historicize it.

Given its signification of a given nation's political and economic modernity and of the empowerment of its citizens, it comes as little surprise that in recent decades automobility has also begun to be established in the developing juggernauts India and China. These two nations are remarkable for a few reasons: first, the dynamism of their economies, the immensity of their urban populations, the disparity of their political systems, and their mania for automobility. I'll focus on China here.

In mid-century China, Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-Tung's preference for bicycles was not only a matter of economic viability; it was politically charged. That is, it conveyed an understanding that, aside from the more obvious differences of power, size, speed, and range, the car possesses a privatizing interiority the bicycle lacks. By contrast, the car is an individuating space conducive to imagining one's agency and anonymity in a social field of competition and advantage—traffic in its double sense. On this latter point Mao and the American celebrants of automobility would have been in total agreement. Recently, the rejection of velomobility in contemporary Chinese cities (Shanghai recently prohibited bicycle traffic on its busiest thoroughfares, and Beijing stopped requiring bicycle registration in 2004) illustrates the repudiation of the collectivist political vision Mao championed. It has unquestionably reoriented the built environment, to say nothing of its effects on the natural environment.

If driving inculcates market dispositions, car ownership and the class performances of driving (and driving particular makes of cars) make visible the social hierarchies amplified by capitalism. But in the decidedly closed cities of twentieth century China the car was also cast as ambiguous symbol of an imported modernity, or even an agent of subversion.² Mao and the CCP exploited these strong associations of the car with effete and foreign contamination through popular culture and political rhetoric. But Maoism also added to such associations a more doctrinaire disdain for how “motorization's privatized and individualized consumption ... changes public space [into a landscape that] denotes a private social life enclosed within vehicles and homes.”³ Owning and driving a car, then, meant not only performing counterrevolutionary class subjectivity, but contributing to the disintegration of utopian socialist society.

But China is modern now, and open, as evidenced by its installation of automobility, which will necessarily inflect rather than imitate the American model. Automobility emblemizes the open cities of post-socialist—read, capitalist—China, as its promise coheres around unfettering and fulfilling individual desire, a subject taken up by Lisa Rofel's recent study of sexuality and neoliberalism in China. Rofel notes that “[a]fter the June 4th crisis of legitimacy, the constitution of a post-socialist humanity entailed not merely the demolition of those politics

portrayed as hindering human nature but a positive encouragement and elaboration of people's sexual, material, and affective self-interest in order to become cosmopolitan citizens of a post-Cold War world."⁴ The multitude of literary, artistic, cinematic, and advertising "pitches" for the automobile in China supply instructions on how to desire and how to climb the ladder of class, and how to be autonomous and free. Most partisans of automobility in China (both foreign and domestic) narrate the opening of China to the automobile as a nearly hydraulic eruption of the limits to desire, mobility, and distinction unjustly imposed by Maoism. "Chinese people have a desire for a car deep in their hearts," claims an engineering professor in Beijing quoted in a 2005 *The Christian Science Monitor*; and a Beijing automotive journalist averred to the *New York Times* in 2006 that "[t]he desire for cars here is as strong as in America, but here the desire was repressed for half a century."⁵ What is the position of automobility in the "open city?" What does it enable, and what does it preclude? As we celebrate the rise of the open city as potentially utopian space, we need to reflect on what and who openness serves.

Perhaps most Asian nations, particularly China, come too late to mass automobility for it to colonize the physical and cultural landscape to the degree that it has in North America and other locales, where the practice and built environment of automobility has a compulsory character. For even without the clear limits to petroleum stores and the planet's capacity to absorb toxins, population growth and other factors would eventually reveal a paradox: once it has saturated an environment, automobility's power to produce the affect associated with modern freedom, as well as its social and economic utility diminishes.

In the United States, most drivers' experiences contradict the ceaselessly broadcast imagery and rhetoric of liberation, empowerment, and distinction still plied by the auto industry, popular culture, and most policy makers. But that vision is still seductive, especially in the rising car culture of China, where landscapes of compulsory automobility are proliferating within and on the outskirts of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other cities. The 62-mile, 12-day traffic jam on a highway into Beijing in 2010 was a stark reminder of the sclerosis and "commuter pain" of so many Asian cities. Faced with a truly global automobility problematic, a number of scholars, architects, and urban planners are developing ways of seeing and structuring urban environments beyond the reign of the automobile. Asian cities can take the lead in showing what post-automobile open cities might look like.

ENDNOTES

1. Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
2. See Geremie R. Barmé, "Engines of Revolution: Car Cultures in China," in *Autopia: Cars and Culture*, eds. Peter Wollen and Joe Kerr (London: Reaktion, 2002), 177-183; and Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
3. George Martin, "Global Motorization, Social Ecology, and China," *The Royal Geographic Society* (with the Institute of British Geographers) 39 (2007): 68.
4. Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 12-13.
5. Amelia Newcomb, "In Land of Bicycle, Car Boom Brings Freedom of Open Road," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 3, 2005; and Ted Conover, "Capitalist Roaders," *New York Times* July 2, 2006.



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