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# Field Notes: Beijing Markets

**Kirsten Seale**

**Abstract**

Few public spaces are more universally touted as representative of the parochialism of place than the market. What then does the narrative of a city's markets tell us about narrative of place and space in that city itself? A field trip to some of Beijing's markets becomes a meditation upon the role of markets in the construction of place in a 21st century urban context.





In 2011 I attended a workshop in China organized by an international collaborative research network that looks at urban street markets. Fuelled by the discussion with my colleagues regarding the role of street markets in urban spatial economies, I planned some field trips to [Beijing's markets](#). Unlike the ragpickers' market that [Michael Dutton](#) visits in *Beijing Time* (2008), which is 'off the city map' (142) in Bajiacun, the first three markets on the itinerary were central, highly visible, and well-marked on the tourist map. Each is a different type of market – Donghuamen Night Market sells street food; Xuishui 'Silk Street' Market stocks clothing and accessories; and Panjiayuan or 'Dirt Market' trades in antiques and curios. Currently none of these three could be considered an 'everyday' market, though according to their recent histories they originally (re)emerged as an organic part of the post-Reform mercantile landscape.

The accompanying narratives used to currently situate the markets historically, socially, and culturally might belong to the type of objectification of the city that Henri Lefebvre (1996) detected in contemporary textual mediations of the urban:

The text is moving away. It takes the form of a document, or an exhibition, or a museum. The city historically constructed is no longer lived and is no longer understood practically. It is only an object of cultural consumption for tourists, for an estheticism (sic), avid for spectacles and the picturesque. (148)

All are presented in promotional material and guidebook entries as exhibiting a distinctive Beijing character, so in this sense they are branded in that they are being used to promote the city, yet the goods on sale are not always distinctively local, nor are the marketplaces themselves particularly parochial. All these markets have, however, been redeveloped in the last decade, clearly with the middle-class tourist and consumer in mind, therefore the conception and presentation of the experience of consumption might be considered an articulation of the local in its equivalency with the dominant paradigm of middle-class consumer practices in China today. Moreover, the modes of regulation acting upon the spatial and social organization of the markets are also clearly susceptible to local and localized forms of governance and governmentality.

The first stop was Donghuamen Night Market in the L.E.D.-lit streets of central Dongcheng.





From late afternoon, turn off Wangfujing Dajie, the pedestrianized shopping avenue whose shops run from Armani to Zara, and head west down Dong'anmen Dajie where you will find a series of permanent stalls of identical size, with standardized signage in Mandarin and English listing set prices for street food from around China. Staff at every stall wear the same red aprons and visors.

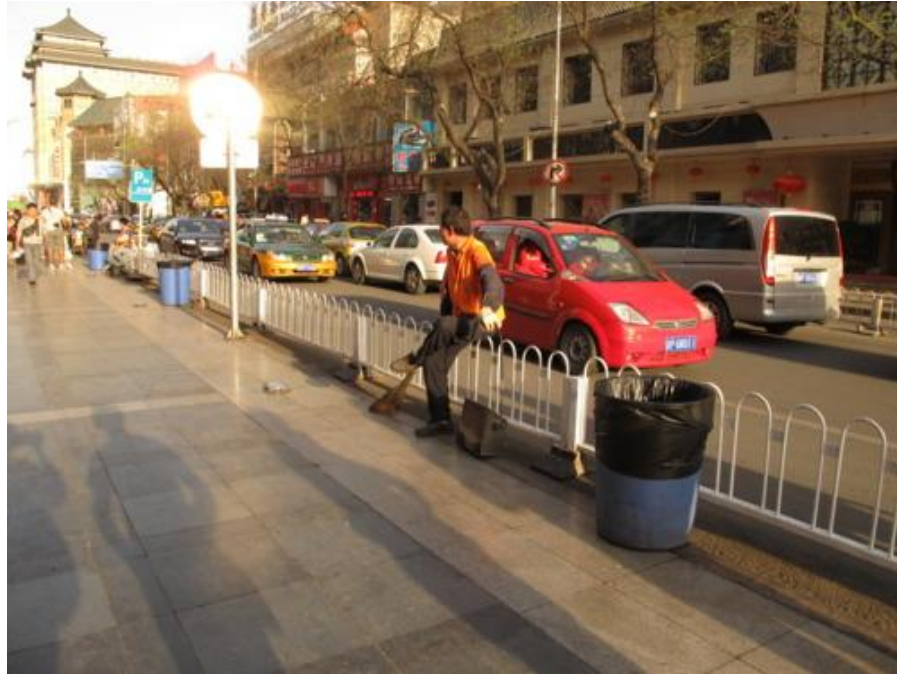






A booth at the eastern end promises to oversee the health and safety of the market. The man inside is dressed in the militaristic uniform that is *de rigueur* in China for anyone employed to police public conduct and practice. He has his feet up and is reading a newspaper, probably because his domain appears to manage itself. There is very little of the mess and detritus that accumulates on the ground at other food markets. The stalls are immaculately presented, the food neatly displayed. Waste is disposed of discreetly by the vendors, and street sweepers efficiently whisk away any litter that falls to the ground.





The street sweepers are not the only ones on guard. The market is set up in the fenced-off lane of a busy road. Outside the perimeter, scavengers eye the diners and wait patiently for them to throw away their rubbish. They are representatives of the 20,000 refuse collectors Dutton describes in *Beijing Time*:

With listless and weathered faces, the Bajiacun ragpickers pedal around town in business suits. With their slightly underweight bodies, their drab and grimy suits, they present a parody of the successful besuited businessman who watch them from their Audis. Indeed, twenty years earlier, the observers could very well have been those observed. From the rear, this traffic looks like a peasant army on bicycles, tricycles, mopeds and on foot. (148)

Avatars of the usually out-of-sight Bajiacun ragpicker's market reach into the bins and collect recyclable bottles, cans and packaging. One man is scavenging for something else: dinner. He leans over the fence and pulls out skewers with remnants of meat on them. He samples them. They look like lamb. Would he be as interested in his find if it were the leftovers of some of the other fare on offer such as scorpion and beetle? (The market's inclusion in this television shows about extreme food suggest that these might be here partially for spectacle.) Others who linger on the other side of the fence are unlicensed merchants undercutting the prices charged by the licensed stalls within the demarcated market space.



On the side of the fence licensed for commercial activity, a man holds in his fist a bouquet of snakes threaded on sticks. His girlfriend pops some fermented tofu in her mouth with a toothpick. Some of the food on sale, like the tofu, is what you would find elsewhere on the streets of Beijing. A tourist in a fedora hat takes a foodblogger-style close-up photo of the skewered chargrilled animal flesh that he had bought at prices significantly higher than what you would pay at your average streetside stall. Earlier in the day we had seen a woman at a food cart on the side of a frenetic roundabout selling some little fried buns stuffed with spiced minced meat. At Donghuamen they cost 15 yuan; on the street, a third of the price.

At the end closest to Wangfujing Dajie, from where most of the foot traffic is funnelled, a man asking for spare change sits underneath an illuminated sign. The sign details the market's history, its transformation from a collection of stalls in the 1980s to the tourist destination that it is now:

In 2000, to carry forward the Chinese culinary culture and enhance the friendly exchanges with foreign countries, the peoples government of Dongcheng District rebuilt the night market for dainty snacks with the objective of integrating the traditional delicacies with the modern business facilities, combining the culinary culture and sightseeing.

I am surprised that Donghuamen has such a short history (as do Panjiayuan and Silk Street), because I had imagined that the night market behind me was the theme-park version of a traditional marketplace that had occupied the spot for



centuries. Of course, my assumption makes no sense: the small privately-owned businesses that the emergent markets supported were not possible during the Communist era prior to Reform. (I have been unable to ascertain whether the sites where markets are currently located in Beijing had hosted markets prior to 1949.)

The text emphasizes the market as a space subject to productive government intervention. In the case of Donghuanmen it is to ensure food safety and hygiene, and thus to provide a reassuring environment for consumers who might be cautious or anxious about street food, a perhaps misdirected anxiety given the [recent scandals regarding mass-produced food](#). The largest proportion of visitors strolling the market appeared to be middle-class domestic tourists for whom a sanitized, approximated street market experience might offer a more attractive alternative to visiting an actual street market. We saw this phenomenon at work in Qibao, a canal town on the metro line just outside of Shanghai, where crowds of visitors clung tenaciously to the grid of attractively recreated ancient food stalls that constituted the designated tourist precinct.



Step only one street outside the zone and the tourists disappear. In this parallel alleyway the hole-in-the-wall type establishments that sell similar food to local residents for a fraction of the price are deserted.

In any case, one is hard-pressed in Beijing to find any street markets in the central tourist district of the city, where most of the marketplaces have been, to deploy official terminology, 'streamlined'. Regulation is the stated rationale for the current arrangements at all three central markets I visited.



The government's narrative on the demolition of the streets of Silk Alley, a textile and clothing market in Chaoyang, and on the subsequent construction of the single edifice 'Silk Street' that replaced it, maintains the necessity of regulating commerce, and, in this specific case, IP violations and the distribution of counterfeit designer goods. Signs, notices on bulletin boards and plaques reiterate this objective, and certainly, knock-offs are not *overtly* exhibited.







However, as one walks through the emporium, vendors frequently whisper famous European designer brand names and flash a Louis Vuitton wallet or similar object discreetly folded into a piece of cardboard or paper. On the sole occasion we agree out of curiosity to look, we are led to a locked and alarmed back room where the designer brand handbags and accessories are lined up along the wall. Since the redevelopment, the market has continued to be in the news for IP violations, a concession that does not admit the [futility of policing piracy](#), so much as it is designed to illustrate that piracy is being managed by the government. The 2010 [arrest of a former manager of the market for IP violations](#) focuses on a single perpetrator, and is thus a smokescreen obscuring a diffuse, widespread and global informal economy.

The spatial re-configuration of the market from a series of alleyways to a consolidated six-storey shopping centre is positioned on the website as a continuation of the [brand of Silk Street](#): an evolution that simultaneously incorporates a 'Century-Old shop' and an 'international shopping mall'. The original market's existence barely stretches back thirty years, let alone one hundred, so this ambivalent appeal to nostalgia has no basis in the Silk Street's own history, just as the appeal of the street market has been obliterated in all but name in the new edifice. It is the modern attributes of convenience, amenity and safety that are underlined as advantages of the new market in the promotional material. This is the only tourist market I visited which had off-street parking for visitors, which facilitated the tour groups who are constantly unloaded from buses and channeled through the center.







The new market has diversified and visitors can try Beijing specialties such as Peking Duck, as well as purchase calligraphy, antiques, jewelry, carpets and handicrafts. Silk Street therefore intertwines the globally ubiquitous consumption of brand-labelled goods (regardless of their authenticity) with cultural consumption and tourism. The website also positions the act of bargaining, which is central to most transactions at the centre, as a cultural particulate of the city and, even as [one of Beijing's famous scenes](#). This is one way to present the ever-shifting and, at times, uncomfortable power dynamic between well-rehearsed vendors and their unpracticed customers - who nonetheless wield leverage in the form of the yuan in their wallets. Effectively, a universal act of capitalist exchange is rearticulated as a local customary act, whilst also claiming to preserve one of the pleasures of the street market mode of consumption.

Another market on the tourist trail is Panjiayuan, a flea market that Lonely Planet's *Beijing Encounter* guide (2010) touts as one of the capital's top

attractions. Panjiayuan initially started out in the early 1980s as an articulation of the ghost market. Dutton explains:

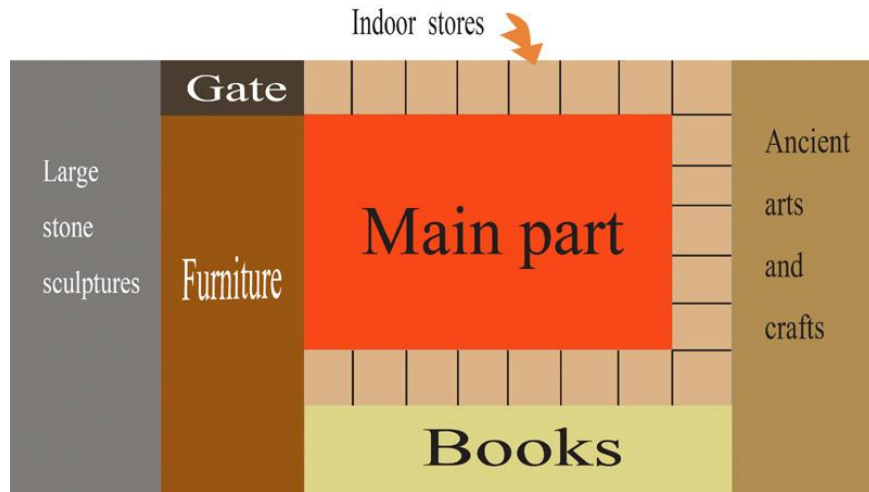
Ghost markets enabled aristocrats to maintain their social face, while secretly engaging in that most un-Confucian of activities, commerce. Today in China there is no longer any shame attached to commerce, and the ghost market of Panjiayuan no longer masks an aristocratic secret. (216-7)

Panjiayuan was a co-ordinate in an informal economy where the proletariat illicitly sold off the family heirlooms and household treasures before the trade in art and antiquities was legalized in the mid-90s. As it expanded and gained government recognition and permission, it evolved from an actualized street market located in a Chaoyang *hutong* [laneway] to a site-specific marketplace.



The space underwent re-development in the mid-2000s in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, and there is none of the haphazard disorganization of accumulated junk that confronts the visitor to a genuine flea market. As with the merchandise, the space is neatly ordered. A hierarchical gradation of traders and commercial spaces begins with a cloth on the ground, to undercover stalls, and established shop fronts around the perimeter.





Map of Panjiayuan





For Dutton, the definitive Panjiayuan narrative is the search for the real, the authentic, the genuine among the endless row of fakes (2008, 220). Dutton, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, compares the quest to that of the literal ragpickers at Bajiacun. Ironically, present-day ragpickers might be disappointed not at the absence of treasure amongst the trash, but at the absence of trash amongst the orderly and meticulous stalls. Nevertheless, Dutton detects at Panjiayuan some of the flea market's promiscuous and indiscriminate meetings of refuse and commodity: 'From traders in antique porcelain to those who trade in the paraphernalia of the Mao years, the significant and the insignificant, the fake and the real, the artistic and the kitsch mix so effectively.' (221)









The heterogeneity of Panjiayuan's Cultural Revolution memorabilia is where I rediscover the marketplace's heterotopic rupturing of categorization that has so far eluded me. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) elaborate:

[a]t once a bounded enclosure and a site of open commerce, [the marketplace] is both the imagined centre of an urban community and its structural interconnection with the network of goods, commodities, markets, sites of commerce and places of production which sustain it. A marketplace is the epitome of local identity and the unsettling of that identity by the trade and traffic of goods from elsewhere. At the market centre of polis we discover a comingling of categories usually kept separate and opposed: centre and periphery, inside and outside, stranger and local, commerce and festivity, high and low. In the marketplace pure and simple categories of thought find themselves perplexed and one-sided. Only hybrid notions are appropriate to such a hybrid place. (27)

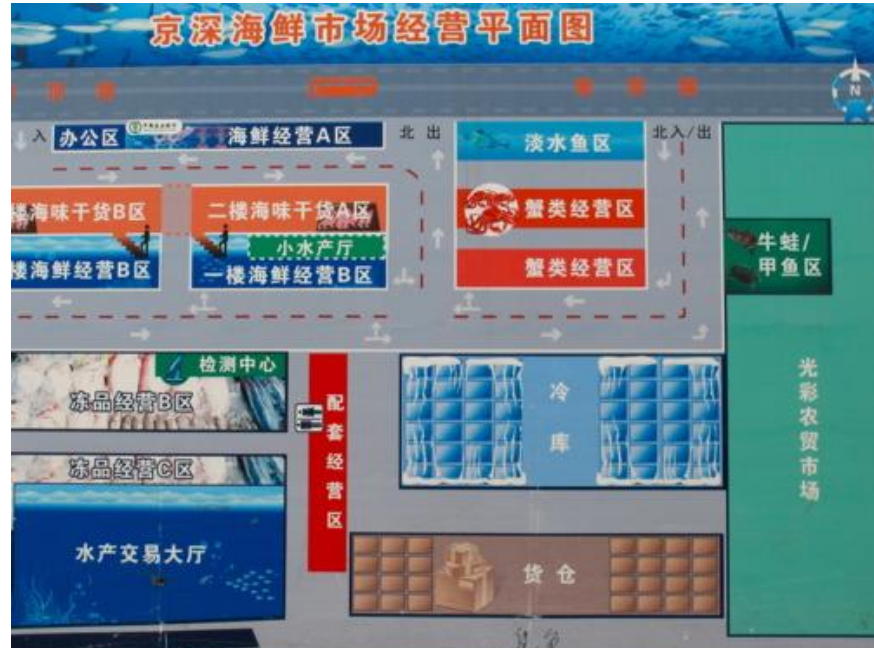
I visited two other markets in Beijing: the city's wholesale fish market and a neighborhood market in its proximity. Jingshen Seafood Market does not have the same profile as the previous markets because its patrons are mainly local and commercial. It is located in a residential district south of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ring Road. Beijing is inland, and unlike coastal cities like [Sydney](#), which capitalize upon their proximity to the ocean and therefore a perceived immediacy with the provenance and consumption of seafood, its fish market is not a tourist



destination despite seafood being a characteristic feature of China's cuisines. When I asked the staff at the hotel to translate the pinyin address into characters to direct our taxi driver, they told me that they had never heard of it. Information in English language about Jingshen's history is hard to come by, but one piece of information I did glean is that it used to be situated underneath the [Hong Qiao Pearl Market](#), which has also been redeveloped as a five-storey retail extravaganza opposite the Temple of Heaven in Chongwen. (Again the redevelopment of Hong Qiao was predicated by the regulatory aim of limiting informal economies and illicit trade.)

The infrastructure appears fairly new, if well-worn, and like Panjiayuan the space within the market is organized with a hierarchy of vendors that goes from those who sell out of the back of vans, to small stalls in the main building and at the top of the heap, larger fitted out concerns at the edge of the car park.











It is well set up for distribution with a whole section dedicated to packing and shipping. There is not as much care put into presentation at Jingshen as at the branded markets. There is ad hoc invention at work everywhere, the resourceful fashioning of tank and filtration systems using materials to hand. Refuse and polystyrene packing piles up in the corners and on the floor. The less polished aspect is due to its messy business as a wet market, and to the large scale of its operations. (The dried goods section that took up the first floor is much tidier, though underlit in an attempt to conserve energy; the clerks slumped over their desks or heads thrown back, slack-jawed, are also conserving their energy after the morning rush.) Above all, it is because Jingshen is not instrumental in branding the city.





Down the street from the fish market is the Guancai neighborhood market, which carries fruit and vegetables, meat, dry goods and household wares.

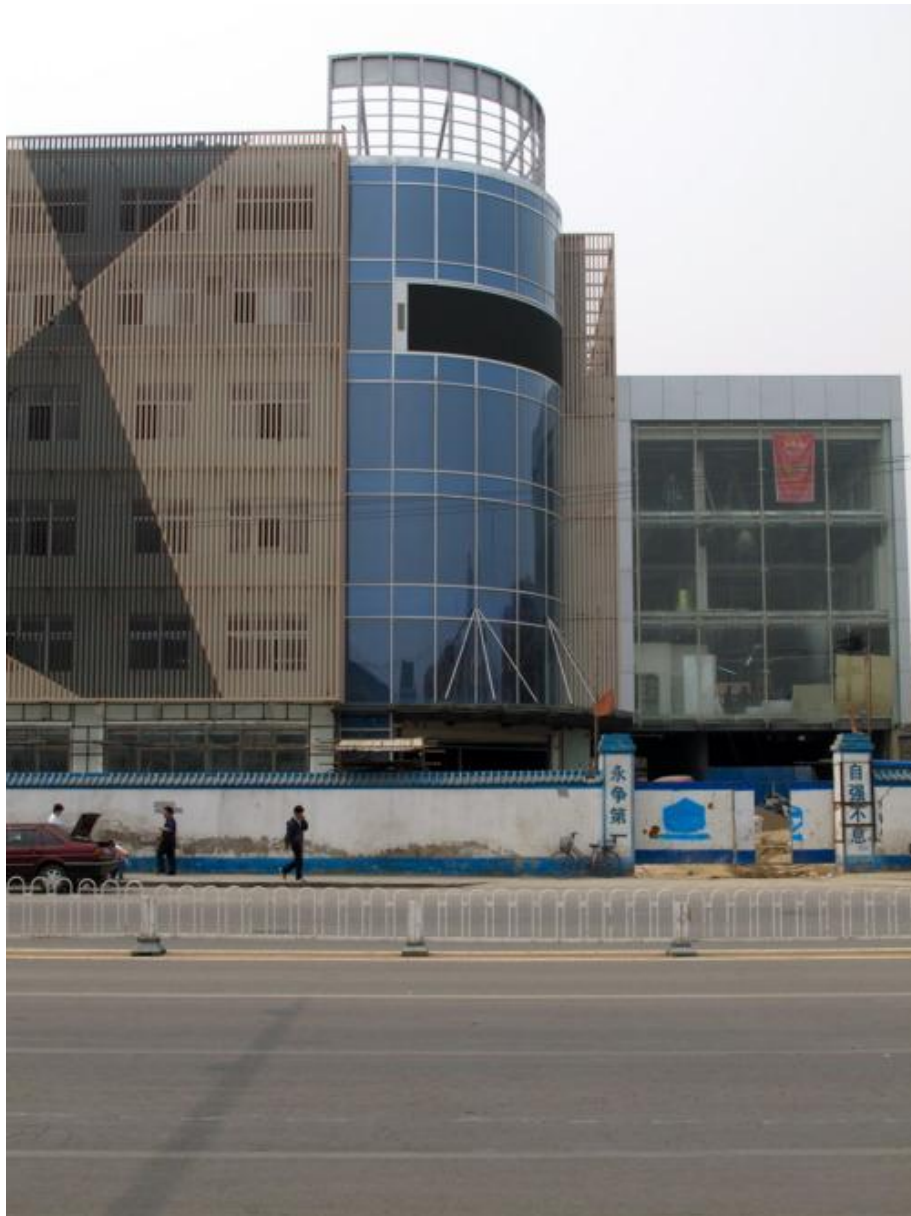








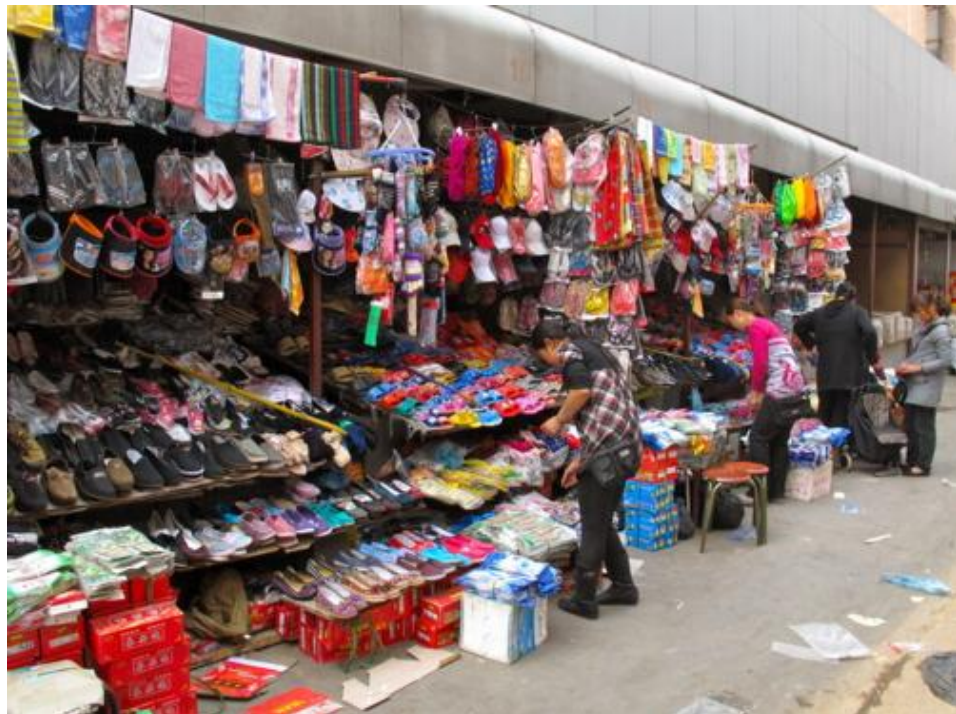
Here we are observers of the everyday life of Beijingers in a neighborhood that is unexceptional in every way—down to the McDonalds being built across the road.





If one was looking for the 'real' local character of the Beijing market Jingshen and Guancai might reveal that, but the very act of outside scrutiny of place causes the everyday to re-arrange itself around our presences, however minutely. I doubt Guancai is going to be appropriated by tourists seeking sites/sights where they can witness the other's everyday anytime soon. The aestheticization of the banal that Pierre Bourdieu (2003) observes at work in the construction of middle-class taste succeeds at markets like [La Boqueria in Barcelona](#) or [Queen Victoria Market in Melbourne](#). They exist before and beyond tourism, yet they simultaneously possess mitigating attributes which attract outside visitors: they are proximate to other centers of tourism; they have architectural merit; they trade in specialty local products. Guancai, on the other hand, is surrounded by dusty, car-choked main roads, empty lots, and sells mass-manufactured pots and pans and plastic shoes.





There are countless other markets like Guancai—in Beijing, in China, in cities throughout the world. In spite of their ubiquity, their ordinariness, is it possible to construe the market elsewhere through anything other than the tourist gaze?

Tourist experiences involve some aspect or element that induces pleasurable experiences which, by comparison with the everyday, are out of the ordinary. [...] There is the seeing of ordinary aspects of social life being undertaken by people in unusual contexts. [...] Visitors have found it particularly interesting to gaze upon the carrying out of domestic tasks [...] and hence to see that the routines of life are not that unfamiliar. [...] There is the carrying out of familiar tasks or activities within an unusual visual environment. [...] Shopping, eating and drinking all have particular significance if they take place against a distinctive visual backcloth. The visual gaze renders extraordinary, activities that otherwise would be mundane and everyday. (Urry, 2002: 12-3)

John Urry's inventory is nevertheless situated and apprehended within the tourist/tourism complex. What are the consequences for the tourist gaze and for the object of that gaze when one is examining everyday life that is positioned within no other context but the everyday? Perhaps this breakdown in ontological and spatial demarcation is the reappearance of one of those heterotopic moments and relations that Stallybrass and White observe in the marketplace, and which we had to look hard to find, but were still able to glimpse in the regulated spaces of Beijing's markets.

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## About the author

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