

# BOOK REVIEW

Modern in China. By Paul Willis (2020), 196 pages. ISBN: 9781509538300  
Cambridge: Polity Press

Paul Willis is renowned in China (as elsewhere) for his work *Learning to Labour*. The present work, based on three years of living in Beijing and teaching at Beijing Normal University, takes many of the concerns of that earlier work and transports them to the Chinese context. Willis skilfully draws upon that experience, using the postgraduate students in his seminar as his primary sources of information, to draw a rich picture of the impact of modernity on the lives of young people in China.

Many of the preoccupations of the earlier work persist in this volume. There is a concern over how young people negotiate their place in society, and in particular how those who fail in, or are failed by, the system manage their position in the system. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the overpowering competition in the education system, the choices present themselves as delaying gratification in order to secure a comfortable economic position that rarely if ever arrives, or opting instead for immediate gratification, but without the necessary economic wherewithal to gratify. This is at the core of the paradox Willis describes as consumerism without consumption.

Overall, then, this delightful book works on three levels. At the middle range, Willis offers his interpretation of the phenomena described by his student-informants. He does this through the three 'arrows of change': urbanisation, consumerism, and the rise of the internet. This account is not so much about the material manifestations of change and technology, as about the place of these changes in the imagination of Chinese youth. For example, the urban-rural divide is important in the imagination of these young people, but it is not a simple dichotomy between urban good and modern, rural old and backward (even if one chapter is titled 'City Good, Country Bad'). Rather the city and the country offer different aspects of modernity, and the losses and costs are keenly felt, both by those who move to the city and those who do not. Willis expertly captures the texture of this complexity in his account.

But where the text really comes alive is when Willis allows the reader to hear the voices of his informants directly, as he does with generous quotes in the main text, and a separate section devoted to longer statements. It is here that one can see the subtle evaluations of ordinary, admittedly well educated, young Chinese adults, as they reflect on their reading, and look back over their formative years. These are no one-dimensional figures bullied or brainwashed into conformity. They are carefully balancing the demands of the teachers with the responsibilities of family and solidarity with their less successful peers in school.

At the most general level, Willis claims to offer 'cultural and sociological insights of the approach I have taken and lessons learned to encourage and enable further work along the same lines'. This may be necessary academic hubris, to claim to blaze a trail that others could follow. But it is at this level that I find Willis least convincing, and I doubt that his approach could easily be duplicated by one who had a less deft touch. As it is, his personal and idiosyncratic scholarship, and careful avoidance of claiming to have a monopoly on interpretation, are an enjoyable companion through the intricacies of the text.

Willis set out with the intention of writing a text that would be of interest to both the specialist and the generalist. My pleasure at reading his work may well be enhanced by the time that I spent in Beijing Normal University, talking with him and sharing some experiences with him. But even allowing for that, I would say that he has produced a work which deserves the wide readership that he was aiming for.

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