

Sarah Williams Goldhagen on Architecture: Valuable China

Sarah Williams Goldhagen

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It has a centralized, repressive government for which its citizens do not vote. Local authorities come to people's houses in the middle of the night to arrest them on bogus charges. Censors control access to information, monitoring the Internet and approving or even writing elementary school textbooks. Corrupt government officials routinely elevate to power the obedient, the well-connected, and the cash-plentiful above the meritorious. Laborers, skilled and unskilled, work breathtakingly long hours. The country occupies foreign territory and affords its colonized people freedom neither of

speech nor of worship.

It's China, and part of you—maybe the best part of you—wants to dislike it. In all likelihood you do not wish its government well, even, or especially, as its economy flourishes, extending the country's political reach and perhaps portending the progressive diminution of the United States as global leader. A number of the articles that you read and the newscasts that you hear fortify your unease, although you concede that, while poverty levels in the United States have become a rising tide, the Chinese People's Communist Party (PCP)—less ironically named than you might imagine—has decreased the share of its rural population living in poverty by over 35 percent in fifteen years. Indeed, in the past twenty-five years, 70 percent of all the world's peoples who have been lifted out of poverty were Chinese: to a people who have had their feet stuck in the mud of rice paddies for generations if not centuries, paying jobs, improved schooling, and homes with running water and electricity sound like a very good deal.

Modernization goes hand in hand with urbanization, riding on new infrastructures for transportation, power, and waste removal; growing with industries high, medium, and low; heavy and light; service and financial. This means building. Industries need manufacturing plants and offices. The people who work in them need housing, and their children need schools, parks, and playgrounds. Everyone needs service and retail establishments where the newly un-impovertished can spend their RMB.

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