BOOK REVIEW

Finding leisure in China, by Geoffrey Godbey and Song Rui, State College, PA, Venture Publishing, Inc., 2015, 223 pp., $29.95 (softcover), ISBN-13 9781939476081/ISBN-10: 1939476089

From ancient times, China has had a celebrated leisure legacy. Consequently, the title of the book Finding leisure in China is a quandary. Does one have to uncover what is already there? No. The history of China is one of social and political upheavals affecting the daily living of its people. Daily life is seen through work, family and leisure. This book is concerned with leisure. Throughout history, leisure has been affected by agriculture, wars, conflicts, revolutions and industrialization. Sifting through these happenings, the authors of the book strive to suggest what to retain, restore, reject and develop in leisure. Hence the word “finding” is in its title.

The book has eleven chapters. Each is written in two parts – one by Geoffrey Godbey and the other by Song Rui. The chapters spanned a variety of themes, including: leisure as an enjoyable addition to work and family; the meaning of leisure in China and the US; the progression of leisure; improving leisure in everyday life; the concept of the leisure city; what people want, learn and how they are empowered; carrying capacity of large numbers; the street as a leisure space; reforming the environment; and imagining and building the future.

In the first chapter, Godbey sets the scene by stating that China has leaped as a consequence of: the one-child (now two) policy; increases in gross national incomes; and an expansion of pastimes and leisure activities. The expansion of leisure occurred in the home and out-of-home. The cities had the five-day working week and vacation periods. Consumer culture started to take hold with the advent of discretionary time and increased income. Matters in the countryside were different: work dominated; leisure was limited. The mandarin concept of leisure as rest is understandable when one worked hard, but concerning if one did nothing. It is the rural areas that Godbey suggested that the Chinese philanthropists fund the shortfall of leisure facilities such as learning institutions, young people’s programmes and new forms of leisure. He criticized the non-use of public facilities when closed, breaches in recycling and lack of seating in public places.

Song titled her part of the chapter as “unveiling, embracing and enjoying leisure”. Reform policy had liberated productivity and triggered economic and social development through commerce and industry. Government realized the promise of leisure as a boost for Gross National Product (GDP). As a consequence, it was keen to add leisure as a key component into the economic portfolio. Increased discretionary time, disposable income, new public holidays and an upward spike in consumption signalled the advent of new leisure in China. Mayors developed plans to develop leisure cities. The role of leisure education, according to Song, was to empower individuals though institutions of learning, community organizations and voluntary agencies to increase participation. For individuals, vitality, vigour and creativity needed to be harnessed to develop meaningful leisure. Problems that arose damaged leisure through transport systems, crowding at sites and environmental degradation. Restitution was economically and socially costly. Song supported the sharing of responsibility between providers and consumers.

The second chapter dealt with the cognitive (US) and affective (Chinese) attitudes to each other. Social differences by Americans (mentioned first) and Chinese (second) were highlighted between: abstractions and practicalities; individual and collective action; individual
distinctiveness and harmonious blending; egalitarian/achieved status and hierarchy/ascribed status; universal and particularistic approaches; and recent and distant past events. Migration of Chinese to the US, though difficult at first, has increased now, constituting 22% of Asian migration – the largest percentage. Godbey concluded that the affective power of the Chinese had more strength than the cognitive and therein lies the future of leisure.

Song pointed to social differences in everyday living between Americans (mentioned first) and Chinese (second): Americans more open to be critical of teachers than Chinese; young people more prone to use credit cards than save to buy commodities; going “Dutch” rather than cost being borne by an individual. Although social differences had been strong, a narrowing was occurring. According to Lin Yutang, leisure time is a space where better understanding can be achieved. Humorous, beautiful and relaxed activities can be shared with energetic, challenging and dangerous recreation, and so can passive activities of older generations. In- and outbound tourism has contributed to better understanding. Competition, even in the family, is intense. Parents reward and penalize their offspring for winning and losing, respectively. The flow-on into adulthood is similar. Intense efforts that dominate work carry over into leisure. Song feels that recreation mediates between ethics of leisure and work, and propinquity is a key to understanding separate and disparate cultures.

The third chapter on whether the meaning of leisure in the West was right for China is rousing. Godbey shows that leisure values are universal – not Western or Chinese but human. He referred to a paper by Ma and Liu that was presented in Yokohama in July 2014. (I was there when Ma Huidi presented.) She said that the 5000-year-old history of Chinese culture played an important role in passing on Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ideas. Leisure as a cultural form had often permeated people’s lifestyles and behavioural patterns as a force that was direct, intimate, free, sentimental and humanizing. Leisure not only recouped physical strength and energy from hard work but also, through meaningful activities, had borne fruit of spiritual sublimation, human concern and creativity – ideas that Western scholars such as Joseph Pieper and Sebastian De Grazia had readers reflect on. The wisdom that leisure bestowed was considered to be a product of the carefree mind and not limited to the privileged. This legacy of leisure as a right of all humans may have been the forerunner to statements of universality that followed. Ma Huidi lamented that Chinese traditional culture was diluted as a consequence of the rising materialism, tardy entertainment and exclusive shopping. The prevailing “beer and skittles” philosophy had tarnished traditional Chinese leisure.

It took some reflection and thought to distinguish between leisure as freedom (US) and leisure as freedom and in harmony with nature (China). The rhythm of the Samba is iconic of Brazil. The combination of steps and movements of partners dancing the Tango reflects the prime recreation of Argentina. The classical Kathak is India’s showpiece of exotic dance. What is China’s centrepiece? At the opening of the Beijing Olympics 2008, the artistic section featured leisure in antiquity: scroll painting; written characters; opera; silk road; ritual and music; starlight (the Yellow River – cradle of Chinese civilization); and nature – Tai-Chi performances that showed fluid human movements when in harmony with nature. It was the ancient art of tai chi that conveyed to me the meaning of leisure in China. The imagery of human movement balanced and in step with nature satisfied me that Tai-Chi captured the concept of leisure in China. Recall the imagery of movement harmonized with willows in the wind on ceramic dishware originating from the country.

Traditional leisure values have relaxed, but modernity has not taken away free time. Song’s survey on leisure attitudes of the Chinese reveals that decisions on leisure participation may be taken after earning money and after career objectives are achieved. Preparing for leisure participation – if pursued concurrently with the prudent arrangement of time – would neutralize
the notions of “grow first, clean up later” and “get rich first, enjoy life later”. If “work” is distasteful, then leisure refreshes. If “work” is desired engagement, then leisure induces pleasing internal states.

Song identified Chinese leisure activity characteristics as tilting towards: passivity; spectatorism; indoor activities; work-orientation; individual pursuits and low-degree organized activities. All these characteristics were cloaked in two major schools of thought: Taoism and Confucianism. Taoism is associated with nature. Confucianism linked to free and relaxed minds with concerns for what people do. The Cultural Revolution dulled social progress. However, in the last three decades, reforms had opened up the country to the world complementing and expanding the limited repertoire of Chinese leisure.

How then can leisure improve the everyday life of Chinese with agriculture as the base for living, family as the core of life and Confucianism as the root of thought? Generally, urbanites have the resources (money) but rural inhabitants have not. For all core activities that are close to home, inexpensive and have a low degree of organization need to be encouraged. Parents need to instil in their children the importance of play for enjoyment in existential living. Utilitarian goals of accomplishment and status are likely to follow with effort and diligence. Balanced activities (such as tourism, mass events, celebrations) that the Chinese government has paid attention to need support as well. I support the cooperative strategy (suggested by Godbey) which is employed in many countries. They involve government, corporations, private and voluntary organizations that enable citizens to have balanced activities. Song’s suggestions of taking into account and adjusting constraints are also valid in improving leisure for everyone. More time, more money, respite from family duties, concern for the environment, better facilities and spaces will improve leisure of citizens. If commercial facilities are not affordable for some, public ones at reasonable prices should be alternatives.

The concept of “Leisure City” is a Chinese phenomenon. A leisure city signifies the desirable amenities and services offered to visitors. For mayors, their city being ranked highly is a sign of elevated status. Godbey sums of the concept of a leisure city aptly:

A Leisure City in China ... may be combination of wonderful sites and high quality attractions and facilities, a clean environment, a dedicated and trained hospitality sector, and a citizenry that understands the tourist and the mutually beneficial relations that their support can bring about. (p. 125)

Song’s analyses of 10 cities revealed important criteria for becoming one. They included: human values and human development; a range and scale of facilities for enjoyment; the roles of government and the market in promoting leisure development; economic benefits generated from city’s offerings; the support for resources from government, markets and society; and highlighting the uniqueness of the city.

Song used Hangzhou as an example of a Leisure City because of its incomparable advantage in leisure development. I was present in Hangzhou for the World Leisure Expo and subsequently at a second conference. I liked the city for its cleanliness and what it offered by way of shopping and facilities. But fond memories lingered as I reflected on the high quality of service and friendliness received from staff at hotels, teahouses, restaurants, shops, entertainment sites and West Lake. I support the concept of leisure cities as long as they are developed along the principles of sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development is normative. It calls on societies to balance economic, social and environmental objectives in a holistic manner.

I commend both authors on what they write about leisure education and empowerment. They focus on the main ideas of the use of leisure, namely creativity, learning and pleasure. Song gives suggestions on the promotion of leisure: to appreciate and learn leisure skills for
better health; the inclusion of leisure in the form and informal education system; and the inclusion of leisure education across the entire life span. I wish to comment particularly on the last suggestion. The literature informs us that the lifespan may be categorized as the era of dependence, socialization and education; the era of independence, maturity and responsibility; and the era personal fulfilment.

Children and adolescents in the first category are dependent. They live through a character-moulding socialization process and are absorbed in the education process. During this phase, parents, teachers, coaches and others play their part in teaching leisure skills, the acquisition of which enhances creativity and pleasure.

Those in the category of independence, maturity and responsibility experience pronounced physical change. They have to adjust to that change. Limits are placed in what they can do in some leisure activities. They are likely to experience the emergence of disease, sedentary living and changes to cognitive abilities. People in this category may find that some activities become redundant. Sportspersons in contact physical activities may cease the activity. If those are the only leisure pursuits, they have to substitute or learn new ones that will enable an expansion of activities. The case for lifelong learning strengthens.

I think of older persons in the third category. They have a certain kind of freedom. It is a transformation of “freedom from” from being fettered to the work process towards “freedom to” participate in activities of choice – new ones. It is a positive freedom to do whatever they like and whenever they feel they should do them. Activities of choice may require preparation and learning. Again, the case for lifelong learning is evident.

Let me be clear, lest I be misunderstood. Not all leisure activities are subject to the concerns of the ageing process. Some physical activities (golf, bowling) can be played well into later life. Activities in the arts category are generally immune to quirks of ageing. They include: literature; music in all forms; theatre and opera; dance in all forms; performing arts (circus, puppetry); art festivals; visual arts and crafts; arts education; community arts development; and other emerging arts. Add the foregoing to the repertoire of Chinese fine arts handed down through the centuries and nation has a package that is comprehensive but not always complete.

The carrying capacity of a dense population presents enormous challenges. Godbey paints a picture of China with a quarter of its land being desert and sand. The prognosis of the near future is bleak, given desertification, burning of soft coal, dumping toxic chemicals on the soil, mass migration to the cities, automobile culture and ignorance of ecology. Reversing these actions on a grand scale will be required to redress carrying capacity. I suggest a solution that is implemented in some countries to stem rural–urban migration. The establishment of satellite townships that provides good quality of living might retain countryside residents in their homes and hopefully attract others from urban parts. However, three steps need to be taken: setting up new industries that attract a workforce, particularly the locals; establishing learning institutions for quality education; and providing discretionary time for leisure involvement. Recruiting people for industry and education should request applications to include other interests (leisure activities) besides work skills so that people with “other” skills are able to back up a voluntary battalion to teach and educate. Preferences for applicants with “other” skills must be seen as contributions to improved conditions of living.

I support the steps suggested by Godbey (and by Song, later in the chapter) in limiting crowding at public facilities: registration in advance; caps on admissions; shortening use period; limiting use to days in the week; dispersing users to various functions of a facility; variations in vacation periods; limiting parking; discounting during low use periods; and raising rates for reserved spaces. These are reasonable actions to control crowding.

Song raises problems on the demand and supply sides of carrying capacity. From the demand side, she suggests, firstly, that Chinese have a higher tolerance for crowding than
Westerners. Secondly, data suggest that some employers place a blind eye to regulations supporting annual leave. Thirdly, seniors and those from rural regions are tentative about booking tickets in advance. On the supply side, Song also mentions three reasons: undersupply of facilities; the importance of tax generation at sites for governments; and the lack of measuring techniques for ensuring policy for carrying capacity. That the author recognizes the limitations on demand and supply sides is encouraging. Steps should be taken to rectify situations accordingly.

Godbey suggests that the street is used as a leisure locale in many countries for multiple uses. China does it, but the idea needs to be exploited more. Use of cars needs rethinking in terms of size and fuel. There needs to be a continuation of public transport systems that are efficient and quiet. Godbey commends those that are effective and inaudible. The implications of reducing the work-week would limit the use of cars and raise expectations for increased core leisure. These suggestions on rethinking use would make the streets more community friendly.

Song’s reticence in linking leisure with the streets is understandable. But seeing seniors doing Yangko folk dancing under a viaduct is a practical example of the street–leisure relationship. A few years ago, I went for a formal New Year’s Eve dance at a fish and vegetable market in Goa (India). People in their finery attended and danced to the music of the best band in the land. That it occurs in rural China is known, but is it a common occurrence in urban China and not only for special occasions? Testing the idea will strengthen the street–leisure relationship. More green spaces in public and business precincts, limited to pedestrians, suggested by Song have my support.

Pollution in China is grave concern that has implications for leisure participation, particularly in the outdoors. There is evidence that number of inbound tourists has reduced because of polluted air. To lessen pollution, it is suggested that China will need to develop renewable energy measures and take steps to reduce electricity demand. Song recognizes the concern of pollution in environmental destruction. Despite efforts by governments, Song places the responsibility of containing pollution and environmental destruction on the individual. She suggested several tips (from recycling to planting trees) to improve daily living.

Imagining and building a leisure future for China must be done against a background of huge challenges: transportation; environment; migration; food and agriculture; housing; the countryside; the third sector – non-government organizations; and leisure. Godbey concludes that as a society, meaningful leisure must be fully realized so that the future is bright. Song recognizes that the background against building a future is: population ageing; family structure; rural–urban migration; change from work- to community-based society; the rich–poor divide; the rising middle class; technological revolution; and global connectivity. Song concludes the book by imagining that in 2035 she is living in close proximity to a leisure centre involved in music, art and painting. Asked by youngsters what she has done in the past two decades, she can proudly say that Song Rui has tried to find leisure in China.

The book impressed me. It provides information and education. It complemented and added to my knowledge of leisure in China. I like the way it was written. Geoffrey Godbey is a respected international author. One would have thought that Song Rui was his understudy. But I like not only the way she agreed with his perceptions, but also how she contested and contradicted them. She agreed that a lot can be learned from the US, but China has its own and rich heritage, which needs to be further developed despite the rise of abnormal forms of leisure. Her writing is scholarly and I would class her as one.

I recommend the book to all readers interested in and those wanting to find out about leisure. It is valuable to students of leisure who in their own countries have the challenges the Chinese face. Developing countries must embrace sustainable development objectives in preference to solely economic ones. The world now knows what damage can single economic
objectives do. Libraries of all kinds should acquire copies of the book. It will help form respective platforms for leisure development.

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