12-15-2009

In Case You Missed It: Learning From Hangzhou

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I took this photo on my first day in Hangzhou when I arrived there in July 2005 for a six-week Chinese language course. I didn’t find the billboard especially interesting, but one of my friends hails from Kohler, Wisconsin, and I thought he might enjoy seeing that his hometown is known in a Chinese city that I’m fairly certain he had never heard of before I announced I would be spending the summer there. At the time, I didn’t give much thought to the billboard itself, or the thousands of other advertisements affixed to the sides of buildings, encircling construction sites, or coating the exteriors of Hangzhou’s buses. They simply surrounded me, providing a backdrop for the city’s more compelling sights; the moody and misty West Lake, I thought, was far more photogenic than the façades of the luxury car dealerships lining its shore.

In a photographic collection titled Learning From Hangzhou (Timezone 8, 2009), however, Mathieu Borysevicz places the focus squarely on those car dealerships, as well as innumerable other signs throughout the city. Images of billboards, store awnings, and digital marques fill the book, which is beautifully printed on high-quality glossy paper (although that paper makes the book quite heavy — it’s not a good candidate for airplane reading).

Learning From Hangzhou, though, is not only concerned with advertisements — Borysevicz’s work examines the ways in which public spaces are filled, as well as how city residents appropriate and change those spaces through their interactions with them. As he explains in the volume’s introductory essay,

The goal of this case study is to index a moment in China’s evolutionary transition as it occurs in Hangzhou; to index through an extended visual essay the physical manifestations accrued by economic transition and to examine where sociological change and urban development overlap (23).

In addition to thousands of color photographs taken between 2003 and 2008, Borysevicz reflects on Hangzhou’s constant state of flux in small essays — some only a paragraph long — throughout the book, which are printed in both English and Chinese, making Learning From Hangzhou a truly bilingual work.

As I paged through Learning From Hangzhou, I was struck by the fact that while each vibrantly colored photo spread verges on sensory overload, Borysevicz’s book is also tightly organized. He pulls
the pictures into double-page spreads that revolve around a particular object or theme, grouping together, for example, sixteen different shots of water dispensers that call attention to their ubiquity while also demonstrating the range of brands and models available to consumers shopping at different price points (144-145). Water dispensers are shown to be objects that reside in a variety of locations throughout the city: standing alongside a leather sofa in an immaculate home, shoved onto an already-crowded kitchen counter, and squeezed into the narrow space between a door and stack of crates. Time and again, Borysevicz’s camera is directed at everyday items that are, like the ever-present billboards and bus ads, more often than not overlooked by the casual glance.

The book itself is divided into six sections, moving from the ground up and from the inside out: Part 1 features demolition and construction sites (portraits of construction workers create a particularly striking spread on pages 44-45), while Part 2 examines the architectural styles of the structures built on those sites. In Part 3, Borysevicz emphasizes “The Performative in Architecture,” looking at how activities such as hanging clothes out to dry changes the landscape of the city. Part 4, the book’s longest section, is devoted to signs, beginning at eye-level with paper ads pasted onto buildings and lampposts and gradually moving up to the billboards that rise high above our heads. While people are present in the first four sections of the book, human figures are not the focus of photo spreads until Part 5, which spotlights the urban canvas. Borysevicz initially assembles collections of constructed figures — mannequins, women in beauty advertisements, couples posing for wedding portraits — before he moves into a sub-section on ordinary “Hangzhou-ers” as they go about their daily business. Part 6 looks at the city’s markets, from hidden DVD stores to massive Carrefour.

While *Learning From Hangzhou* certainly highlights the increasingly globalized nature of Hangzhou, the book does not argue that Hangzhou is becoming more Westernized, or Americanized. There are few obvious foreigners walking through Borysevicz’s pictures (I must confess, I looked for my own face among the crowds), and his photo spread on coffee shops shows as many local brand names as international. Nowhere does Borysevicz call attention to poor English or strange pictures on the signs he photographs; he is not interested in capturing the weird or outlandish, but rather the omnipresent urban clutter that pervades cities around the world. Borysevicz normalizes Hangzhou, taking what might be seen by outsiders as an alien or exotic metropolis and revealing it to be just another globalized city:

. . . it could’ve also been “Learning from Omaha” or Manila or London or the many other cities of the world permeated with outdoor signage. . . . The idea is not to present what is novel, but on the contrary, to codify what is ubiquitous and subsequently what has become invisible to us (319).

*Learning From Hangzhou* prompted me to revisit my own Hangzhou photographs, which primarily center on tourist attractions. I see, however, that around the edges of my photos, the subject of Borysevicz’s work often intrudes, as signs and billboards hover alongside snapshots of the West Lake and Lingyin Temple. If I had edited the photos immediately after taking them, I would have probably cropped out those snippets of commercial life, attempting to preserve a particular (certainly romanticized) image of Hangzhou that is still the first to come to mind when I think of the city. *Learning From Hangzhou*, however, fills in the negative spaces of my photographs, as Borysevicz aims his lens at the objects that I overlooked or avoided. His book is a fascinating glimpse into the city, and one that, I am sure, will prompt me to think more carefully when I raise my camera in the future. If I shift my attention a few feet in any direction, I realize, an entirely different archive can be created, and a different city comes into focus.