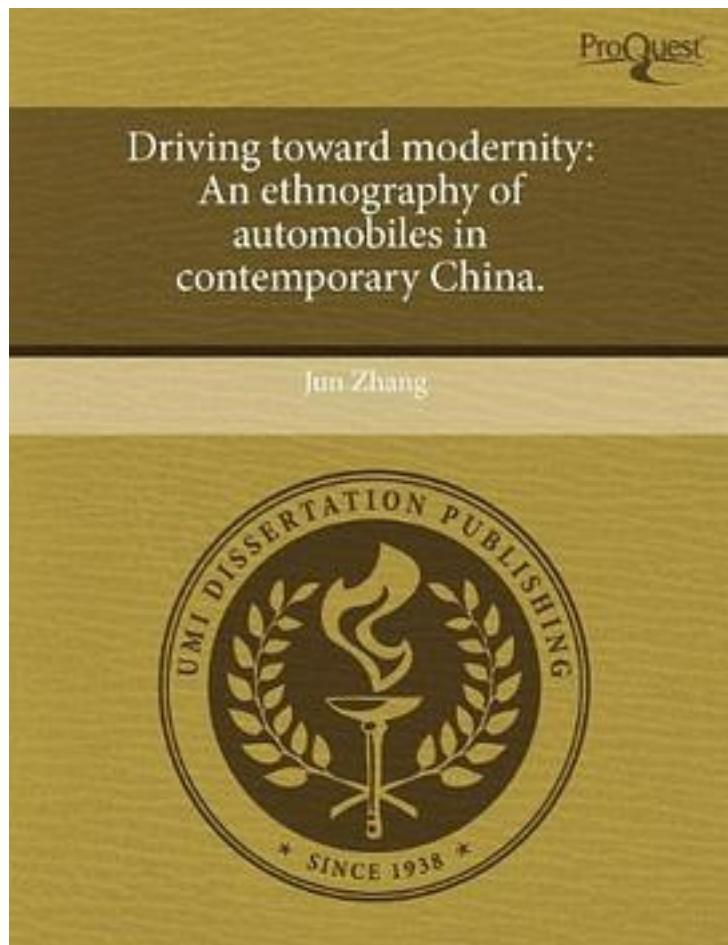


# Driving toward modernity



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Based on a total twenty-month multi-sited fieldwork in Guangzhou in contemporary South China, my ethnography examines the unique experiences of automobile, as a way to understand the changing relationship between the state and individual, and

between the polity and the economy in a socialist country with a market-oriented economy.

I draw on and re-examine the concept of automobility developed by Urry and others. By automobility I mean a “hybrid assemblage”, a project that comprises individuals, cars, infrastructural construction, representations, regulations, and related businesses and other institutional features. I develop a three-level analytical framework to capture the multi-dimensionailities of automobility.

Through examining the unique experiences of automobility, I argue that the state, the individual, and the market are mutually constitutive in contemporary China. During the process of economic liberalization, the state, as an institution and policy provider, has configured the market. The institutional transformation of the state is accompanied with people's self re-fashioning, learning to be self-reliant and self-motivated individuals. The significance of such institutional transformation is also ideological. The market-oriented economy has led people to thinking that the state has distanced itself from people's quotidian life, which, however, is misrecognition. People's conscious choices of consumption often unconsciously bring them back to an intimate contact with the state. Meanwhile, the economic liberalization is coupled with the new ethos that accentuates self-interested individuals, competition and the “survival of the fittest”, an ethos both advocated by the state and accepted by the common people. This market logic rationalizes the practices of the state with an entrepreneurial mindset, and both the state and the public blame the market for the resulting social polarization. Such shared understanding diverts the social dissatisfaction and agony from the state to the specific individuals. With the institutions and the language of the market, the state has transformed from an all-encompassing entity to a polity that governs its citizen-subjects at a distance.

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