

Richard Belsky, *Localities at the Center: Native Place, Space, and Power in Late Imperial Beijing*.

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Localities at the Center is a useful work that adds to our knowledge of late imperial urban history by examining the role that huiguan 會館 (“native-place lodges”) located in Beijing 北京 played in mediating local and national interests. The author, currently an associate professor of history at Hunter College (CUNY), earned his doctorate from Harvard University in 1997 under the guidance of Philip Kuhn and William Kirby, and this book represents the revised version of his Ph.D. thesis (originally entitled “Beijing Scholar-Official Native-Place Lodges: The Social and Political Evolution of Huiguan in China’s Capital City”).

Belsky sets out his goals in the book’s Introduction, as well as Chapter 1 (“Placing this Work”), where, after an extensive review of relevant secondary scholarship, he states that his book’s main contribution is to determine how late imperial Beijing elites who resided in and/or managed huiguan both “rethought and renegotiated the respective roles of the imperial center and provincial peripheries” (page 3). Chapter 2 (“Native-Place Lodges beyond Beijing”), which again draws extensively on previous research, provides necessary historical background by tracing the origins of huiguan and their distribution throughout China.

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In Chapter 3 (“Characteristics of Scholar-Official Native-Place Lodges”), the book’s focus shifts to the city of Beijing, beginning with an analysis of the number of huiguan in this city during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and followed by an account of the state of its lodges in 1949. Belsky also discusses previous typologies of late imperial native-place lodges, before settling on the dichotomy of scholar-official and merchant lodges. This chapter also contains an informed account of lodge clientele, as well as a stimulating discussion of late imperial perceptions of scholar-official lodges.

The next two chapters center on the spatial characteristics of huiguan, as well as the broader issue of their place in late imperial urban life. Chapter 4 (“Huiguan in Space”) demonstrates that the spatial arrangement of Beijing lodges “both affected and reflected scholar-official identification with the imperium” (p. 74). Belsky also makes the important point that one unique aspect of late imperial Beijing was that its Xuannan 宣南 ward (home to approximately 70% of the city’s huiguan and also the locus of scholar-official activity) was characterized by the absence of regional subdivisions. In Chapter 5 (“Huiguan as Space”), Belsky presents a detailed description of the layout and architectural features of huiguan, including their kitchens and stages, while also providing further data to support his argument that lodges served the interests of an “elite cosmopolitan community” and functioned as both conduits to the capital and links to native place.

This section of the book also contains a valuable supplemental perspective to G. William Skinner’s model of Chinese urban ecology, which posited the existence of two nuclei, one associated with merchants and one with the gentry. Belsky points out that this model of urban ecology may be too static, and also claims that Skinner misidentified the location of Beijing’s scholar-official nucleus (pp. 77-79). These arguments are quite persuasive, although, to be fair, Skinner’s work focused mainly on

Qing Beijing, while Belsky includes quite a bit of Ming data.

Chapter 6 (“Native-Place Rituals”) opens with Belsky’s treatment of how to define corporations in late imperial China, but is mainly devoted to the religious activities of huiguan members, particularly mortuary rituals and the worship of patron deities. Chapter 7 (“Corporate Character of Lodge Property”) concerns the types of property owned by huiguan, as well as their finances and administration. This chapter concludes with a thoughtful analysis of the corporate nature of lodges.

In Chapter 8 (“State-Lodge Cooperation in Maintenance of Order”), Belsky turns to the function of huiguan in negotiating the relationship between state and society. The theme of this chapter appears to be what Belsky refers to as the “increasing state penetration of huiguan” (p. 168), as can be seen in the state’s trying to enforce mutual responsibility by issuing “chopped bonds” (yinjie 印結). He also explores the ways in which lodges helped the state to maintain order, and presents a fascinating analysis of the (apparently limited) judicial authority that these organizations enjoyed.

Perhaps the most important part of the book in terms of providing data to support the arguments advanced in the book’s Introduction is Chapter 9 (“Articulation of Regional Interests in Beijing”), which uses data on provincial lodges to explore how “native-place channels of communication were institutionalized in Beijing” (p. 194). Here, Belsky provides a nuanced account of the importance of native-place connections in gaining access *to* officials, as well as the usefulness of such connections *among* officials. This is followed by Chapter 10 (“Native Place and the Reform Movement of the 1890s”), which contains a path-breaking analysis of the links between huiguan and the 1890s reform movement. Belsky clearly shows that scholar-officials from the Xuannan ward who took part in this movement included many individuals who had close links to or even resided at huiguan, like Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936). The data in this chapter also reveals that, despite state attempts at

control described in Chapter 8, huiguan functioned as sites for the formation of political societies.

Chapter 11 (“Beijing Huiguan in the Twentieth Century”) opens by describing what happened to native-place lodges after the Qing state eliminated the examination system in 1905. Belsky makes the interesting point that, once fewer students needed to come to the capital for the exams (and reside in huiguan), some institutions chose to open their doors to women, which caused its own share of problems. This chapter also features an account of charitable and educational activities managed by huiguan during the twentieth century, as well as how China’s drive towards modernization caused changes in some elites’ perceptions of huiguan. Belsky concludes with an account of how huiguan fortunes declined during the Republican era, and how the PRC dissolved all Beijing huiguan and took possession of their property during the 1950s. There is also a postscript describing huiguan sites in Beijing today (including some striking photographs), as well as a single appendix listing huiguan located in Beijing during the Ming dynasty.

Localities at the Center contributes to our understanding of the formation of modern Chinese identities by showing that huiguan were key nodes in urban networks of power that could encourage native-place sentiments while not necessarily precluding the formation of national identity. Belsky also deserves credit for his stimulating discussion of the corporate nature of huiguan in Chapters 6 and 7. In Chapter 6, he notes that the term “corporation” generally has two meanings: 1) Groups that enjoy legal rights; 2) Groups that hold property in common (pp. 120-121). Then, using data in Chapter 7 pertaining to huiguan property and its administration, he concludes that native-place lodges may well have fit both definitions. Belsky demonstrates that some huiguan estates had become legally-recognized corporate bodies by at least the eighteenth century, with some even being constituted as 財團法

人 during the early twentieth century. Thus, his assertion that it might be worth reconsidering John K. Fairbank's argument that traditional China "had no idea of the corporation as a legal individual" (pp. 164-165) is highly convincing.

Another important feature of this work is its attention to the importance of religion and ritual in huiguan life, as can be seen in the fact that Belsky devotes an entire chapter to this topic. Belsky's analysis also raises some intriguing questions about religion's role in the formation of different identities. On the one hand, Belsky stresses "the role played by altars in the replication of regional culture and construction of scholar-official identity" (p. 113). On the other hand, he also notes that "the religious activities of these lodges simultaneously promoted identification with one's native region, identification with an empirewide elite, and even with the imperial project itself" (p. 137). Exactly how huiguan rituals contributed to the formation of diverse identities is a topic worth researching in the future.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of this book is its lack of new analytical or conceptual frameworks to interpret the fascinating data available on Beijing huiguan. Belsky opens *Localities at the Center* by describing a color map of Beijing dating from 1909, claiming that it "presents Beijing as a symbol of Qing-led modernity" (p. 3). A few pages later, however, he announces that "this study rejects the measurement of historical significance according to teleological models framed in terms of capitalism and modernity" (p. 16), a somewhat contradictory position to say the least. He subsequently adds that, "while endeavoring for theoretical engagement, I have tried to keep this study empirically grounded" (p. 17).

Clearly one should avoid the gratuitous and uncritical use of theories and concepts unsuited for the study of late imperial Chinese society. At the same time, however, by keeping one's feet firmly planted on the ground one runs the risk of producing a work that tends to augment previous scholarship rather than surpass it.

This tends to be the case for Belsky's book, which in some ways seems most valuable for its detailed assessments and measured reevaluations of previous scholarship on Chinese urban history. Thus, in addition to challenging Fairbank's assessment of traditional Chinese corporations and the details of Skinner's binuclear model, Belsky corrects Ho Ping-ti's assessment of gazetteer coverage of Beijing huiguan by using local gazetteers from regions whose residents had established native-place lodges in the capital (p. 68), and supplements Frederick Mote's discussion of huiguan cuisine by noting that it featured dishes from both native places and the capital (pp. 110-112). Even the book's main concern—the ways in which native-place associations like huiguan linked localities and the capital while also mediating regional and national identities—can hardly be considered a novel one in the context of late imperial and modern Chinese social history, as is readily apparent from many works on this topic cited in Belsky's substantial bibliography.

Another problem involves Belsky's tendency to view the interaction between state and society from a top-down perspective, as can be seen in his frequent (and perhaps unfortunate) use of the term "penetration" (pp. 168, 231). This argument is advanced most clearly on pages 231-235, where, after describing the role of huiguan political activities during the late Qing and early Republican era (including the May Fourth Movement), Belsky emphasizes that the state responded by attempting to increase its regulation of huiguan activities. However, one wonders if the Republican authorities actually had the power to enforce their will on urban communities, and there is no shortage of examples of native-place organizations and their elite managers assuming functions the state was unable to handle, particularly in the realm of charitable activities. Thus, Belsky observes that, despite being labeled as "vestiges of a backward past" (p. 248), "native-place lodges remained an important social center for the educated elite of Beijing" (p. 251), with the state not being able to

fully assert its authority over their existence until the post-1949 era (p. 256).

Finally, the book's structure occasionally appears somewhat haphazard. For example, the section of Chapter 3 about the state of Beijing huiguan in 1949 seems out of place for a chapter devoted mainly to the late imperial era, and might have fit better in the Postscript. The discussion of definitions of the term corporations in Chapter 6 could have been combined with the reassessment of Fairbank's argument about traditional Chinese corporations in Chapter 7, while the description of the nature of provincial lodges in Chapter 9 might have made more sense as part of Chapter 3.

Despite its lack of new analytical concepts, *Localities at the Center* deserves recognition as a worthwhile endeavor that enhances our knowledge of late imperial Chinese cities with accurate information and balanced interpretation, while also raising key questions for future scholars to consider. One such question involves the uniqueness of Beijing's urban ecology. Belsky's cogent analysis of the absence of regional subdivisions within the Xuannan ward, a place that brought together scholar-elites from different regions (pp. 92-94), makes one wonder if such a phenomenon occurred in other cities that attracted elites from many parts of China. Similarly, his observation that Shanghai huiguan resembled official compounds (yamen 衙門) while Beijing scholar-official huiguan had more in common with residential walled courtyards (siheyuan 四合院) (p. 99) should prompt future scholars to pay more attention to the significance of architecture as a means of expressing identity. Finally, the question of whether a sense of Beijing identity was more prominent among Manchu elites than their Han Chinese counterparts (pp. 117-118) is certainly a topic worth further study.