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Urban Space and Cultural Imagination: Representation of Working Girls in Theodore Dreiser's Novels by Yuping Wang
(review)

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Studies in American Naturalism, Volume 11, Number 2, Winter 2016, pp. 92-95 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/san.2016.0032>



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Urban Space and Cultural Imagination: Representation of Working Girls in Theodore Dreiser's Novels, by Yuping Wang, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2016. Foreword (in Chinese) by Jincai Yang, i–ii; Preface (in Chinese) by Yuping Wang, iii–iv. 168 pp. ¥20.00 (approximately \$2.90 in U.S. dollars).

IRENE GAMMEL AND JASON WANG

In 2014, one of the authors of this review, Jason Wang, visited China and was surprised to discover that Theodore Dreiser was among the most popular early twentieth-century American writers as evidenced anecdotally in sales numbers and scholarly citations. There are ideological reasons: Dreiser was fascinated with communism, probing into themes of social justice and economic inequality in ways that resonate with current-day China, which is run by the communist party but has adopted many capitalist principles. Unlike other American authors of the era, such as Richard Wright, Claude McKay, or John Dos Passos, whose social agendas were often about rebellion and reforms, Dreiser was a chronicler and observer, whose profession as a storyteller also provided an outlet for many of his social ambivalences. Dreiser's sympathy for his fictional working girls Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt, and Roberta Alden is off-set by his fascination with financier-womanizer Frank Cowperwood, a ruthless figure of power based on Chicago street car magnate Charles Tyson Yerkes while anticipating the moral ambiguity of America's 45th President Donald Trump. Dreiser's imagination regarding social change is often more about individual economic advancement than radical political reform. There is a poignant connection to be made with today's China, whose egalitarian politics coexist side by side with its tremendous global market growth, and the individualistic successes of its home-made billionaires.

There are similar parallels in the domain of gender and Dreiser's approach to women's issues speaking to Chinese readers on multiple levels. In her analysis of *Jennie Gerhardt*, Yuping Wang, the author of the book under review, writes that Jennie fulfills traditional women's roles as "a filial daughter, a dutiful wife, and a loving mother," and as a result finds herself caught in efforts of identity construction that "exemplify the conflict between rampant materialism and traditional values [that] pose the moral dilemma for working girls in the city" (74, 75). This kernel fits into a set of traditional Chinese women's moral principles derived from Confucianism, called "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" (Chinese: 三从四德). The Three Obediences for a woman determined her relationships as a daughter

to her father, a wife to her husband, and a mother to her son (when she is a widow). Jennie Gerhardt is a traditional figure, much like Roberta Alden in *An American Tragedy*, for whom the upward social mobility is tethered to her relationships with men rather than her own efforts in revamping herself. She often sees Clyde Griffiths as her superior, even though the pair share a similar working-class background. Dreiser's depiction of women is never queer or eccentric or truly radical, and the consistent imbrication of female figures in traditional values makes them familiar to Chinese readers facilitating the adoption of Dreiser's work into Chinese culture.

Yuping Wang's book *Urban Space and Cultural Imagination: Representation of Working Girls in Theodore Dreiser's Novels* is a revised doctoral dissertation, submitted at Nanjing University, China. In this study of working girls in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), and *An American Tragedy* (1925), the author pays particular attention to the contradictory images of working girl characters in cities, who are portrayed as "a newly emerged cultural force that threatens to disrupt the established cultural order and paradigm" (27), but who, at the same time, are highly vulnerable to the new challenges brought by mass industrial urbanization during the progressive era due to their gender and socio-economic status. The concept of the working girl works perfectly in Dreiser's effort in helping his readers understand the material reality of the city through female characters. Among the three novels, the female characters are all migrants to the big city where they seek material and romantic opportunities. However, these three women experience vastly diverse encounters and destinies even though they share a similar pattern of relying on male figures as they strive to reconstruct their identities. As Wang states, *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, and *An American Tragedy* "attest to Dreiser's lasting concern with the working girl issue and document the evolution of Dreiser's position as well as cultural attitudes toward this issue" (9).

To this we may add that Dreiser explicitly addresses women's issues in relation to economic development. With China's dramatic economic rise in our own era, women's professional ambition and participation in the workplace becomes significantly recognizable. Dreiser, especially through *Sister Carrie*, provides a woman-centered narrative regarding the economic and social capital for underprivileged women from the rural areas who manage to reconstruct their own identities in the city, propelled by their desire to move from the outside to the inside of society. This echoes China's migrant culture and social-economical pursuit—Dreiser's focus on the city life anticipates China's fast-paced modernization and urbanization in our own era. In fact, the urban space in Chinese cities like Beijing, Shang-

hai, and Shenzhen seems more New York than New York itself, and it comes as no surprise that according to *Forbes*, these Chinese megacities have appeared on the list of the top cities with the most billionaires. As we contemplate the hyper-modernity in China, Dreiser's cities provide a proto image of modern industrial cities, revealing the dynamism of desire that fuels these modern urban economies.

The book's three major chapters are organized in a thematic and chronological order. Chapter One explores Dreiser's debut novel *Sister Carrie* in the discussion about the self-fashioning image under the logics of consumerism. A country girl moving to the big city, Dreiser's heroine Carrie Meeber not only seeks to make a living but restlessly craves for upward mobility. With a strong instinct for self-preservation and strong adaptability in the city, Carrie fashions her own self-image by taking inspiration from the material world. Wang argues that such a self-image "demonstrates an elevated status for Carrie on the scale of material possession" (66). While joining in the urban crowd as an unprivileged migrant without material and cultural status, Wang believes Carrie succeeds in looking for her own position in the city, thus departing from the conventional working girl's image which is often permissive and lacks agency in self-constructing the identity.

Chapter Two explores the moral dimension of the working girl in Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt*. Deeply rooted in Victorian gender roles, Jennie is unable to fully control her identity reconstruction. As a working girl who is subject to economic and sexual exploitation in the city, Jennie uses her body as a resource for the commodity exchange as her lover Lester Kane financially supports her; however, he eventually abandons her to recuperate his social status. Through the figuration of Jennie, Wang argues, Dreiser considers the decline of morality as a reflection of the ruthless materialist values in the modern world.

Chapter Three probes the pseudo-imagination of the American Dream for working girls in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Largely focusing on the character of Roberta Alden in fashioning her identity through marriage and work, Wang reveals that the social reality of the city does not leave any space for working girls like Roberta to pursue their socio-economic and romantic dreams. The so-called American Dream proves illusory in promising a bright and comfortable future for working girls, all the while callously repressing their sexuality and freedom and exploiting their labor, bodies and moralities. Wang maintains that "the American Dream pilgrimage is almost an impossible journey in view of the obstacles they [working girls] have to surmount in order to actualize their American Dream." As the ti-

tle of Dreiser's novel emphasizes, "the pursuit of the American Dream will likely land in a territory of tragedy" (145).

While the idea of urban space is subtly developed in the discussions about the culture of consumption in her book, Wang does not explicitly explore the cultural intersectionality of the changing social values and mores during Dreiser's progressive era and today's China, leaving us with questions. How does the urban space afford the resources for the working girls to negotiate their identity construction then and now? How are modern metropolitan culture's challenges and sufferings confronted by the working girls in Dreiser's fictional representation through the lens of contemporary Chinese readers? Where the book excels, however, is in quietly making us ask questions about Chinese cultural intersections in Dreiser's engagement of gender, work and the urban space. Dreiser's fiction appeals to readers who realize "how much the city held" (47), affirming Dreiser's relevancy in a global world today.

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Jason Wang is a doctoral candidate in Communication and Culture at York University and an Executive Team Member at the Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre at Ryerson University. His dissertation, "Urban Walking: Configuring the Modern City as Cultural and Spatial Practice," includes a chapter on urban walking in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*.