

the study draws on shipping and commerce investigation reports produced by officials from both the Chinese Nationalist government and Japanese diplomatic establishments, focusing on major river cities along the middle section of the Yangtze River system. Notably, Xiangtan's historical records have remained remarkably intact, having withstood major conflicts – including the Taiping Rebellion, the Xinhai Revolution, World War II, and the Chinese Civil War – without significant destruction. As a regional historical study, the continuity and completeness of these materials enable the book to present a richly detailed reconstruction of historical events, which is rather rare in other similar inquiries.

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Clé Lesger, *Power and Urban Space in Pre-Modern Holland. Arenas of Appropriation in the Netherlands, 1500-1850* (London [etc.]: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024). 312 pp. ISBN 9781350412378.

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In *Power and Urban Space in Pre-Modern Holland*, Clé Lesger builds on his impressive, career-long research into the urban history of premodern Holland and, in particular, Amsterdam. Here, however, he goes beyond his earlier focus on the spatial aspects of economic exchange by adopting a new perspective on how urban space was appropriated by different groups and how the unequal relations between them were expressed and reproduced in this process. In fact, this book addresses the political economy of early modern Dutch cities, asking why their inhabitants accepted the political and economic inequalities that characterized urban society. In doing so, Lesger distances himself from a “consensual model of society”, articulated in recent studies of citizenship and broader political participation. Instead, he subscribes to a “conflictual model”, seeing contradictions of interest, conflicts, and tensions as rooted in structural inequalities between “social classes”. Early modern Dutch urban society was composed of three classes – elites, middle classes and working classes – whose members occupied similar positions in the social space and, as such, shared interests, dispositions and resources. The key objective of the book, then, is to understand how the power relations between these

classes were expressed through and perpetuated by residential, violent, and discursive appropriations of urban space.

In the first chapter, Lesger sketches the skewed distribution of wealth and power in Holland's cities. As an act of power, the elites articulated a self-image that justified the existing social hierarchy in which the working classes were constructed as the negative 'other'. Despite the structural inequalities between the social classes, they were embedded in a "web of alliances", each having the resources to exercise power over the other, limiting antagonistic interactions. The elite relied on the support of middling groups – the militia in particular – to maintain order; the middle classes were, in turn, offered the protection of institutional care. Similarly, the working classes could break the peace, but were also indebted to the higher classes for support in times of hardship. This economy of power, and this is Lesger's main point, played itself out spatially.

In the second and third chapters, he illustrates this dimension by examining the residential appropriation of urban space by the different classes. Lesger first discusses two well-known models of social segregation in premodern cities that follow a social or an economic logic, which he then critiques on the basis of his analysis of residential differentiation in the cities of Alkmaar, Edam, Amsterdam, Leiden, The Hague, and Delft around 1830, concluding that in those places there was no rigid spatial segregation between the social classes. Subsequently, he explains why socially homogeneous residential areas did not emerge in these towns in the early modern period, with the possible exception of Amsterdam. With a careful reconstruction of long-term residential patterns, based on fiscal and cadastral records, Lesger shows continuity between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. At the macro-level, the elite appropriated the most suitable or central areas for habitation early on, but differentiation was more pronounced at the meso-level of streets. While wealthier urban dwellers were able to acquire the best locations, poorer households had to settle around the corner in alleyways. This pattern was reproduced through the crystallization of street networks, via fixed blocks of houses, fragmented land ownership, and urban policies. The unequal distribution of wealth produced unequal power relations that found expression in the residential appropriation of urban space, which in turn made these inequalities look like a given, contributing to their acceptance and continuation.

The fourth and fifth chapters deal with two other forms of spatial appropriation. The first was one of ephemeral violence, in which all

classes participated. The working classes could riot, the militia belonging to the middling groups could be mobilized to maintain public order, while the elites could stage public corporal punishments. In all these cases, Lesger argues, violence was a communicative act, often of a ritual or theatrical nature, aimed at preserving the existing power relations. His spatial analysis demonstrates that the Dutch cities were suited for collective violent action and that their urban spatial organization influenced the manifestations of this form of appropriation. The final form of spatial appropriation was discursive. Drawing on the work of the geographer John Allen, the author analyzes city descriptions, maps, and cityscapes to show how the “background people” were “smothered” out of texts and images. This discursive appropriation of urban space confirmed the ways in which the elites imagined ideal social reality.

Lesger argues persuasively that the spatial organization of urban space in premodern Holland perpetuated prevailing inequalities and contributed to their acceptance. Through the innovative use of GIS and Space Syntax Analysis, he is able to demonstrate how space as an independent variable explains certain aspects of early modern urban life. This original study stimulates a further exploration of intersecting inequalities in urban societies, but raises a number of questions, too. First, the snapshots of residential differentiation conceal the sometimes high degree of residential mobility behind the patterns, which – together with the more general movement of people and their daily uses of space – imply the existence of interactions that limited the elite’s effective appropriation of urban space. Second, the categorization of urban society into three classes, based on wealth, is probably too rigid to capture the complex divisions and alliances at work, such as those based on gender, employment or (residential) status. Third, the book offers surprisingly little theoretical reflection on the concept of space – it is mainly conceived as physical space, but also as constructed through ‘appropriation’. Finally, the answer to the question of how the appropriation of urban space contributed to the acceptance of unequal power relations by forming the ‘habitus’ of the social classes – the author refers to the work of Pierre Bourdieu – could have been elaborated more systematically. More remains to be said about the ways in which economic inequality between urbanites translated into class formation through the consumption of urban space.

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