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**Review of Dwelling in the World: Family, House, and Home in Tianjin, China, 1860–1960,
by Elizabeth LaCouture**

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Dwelling in the World: Family, House, and Home in Tianjin, China, 1860–1960 by Elizabeth LaCouture (review)

Irene Cieraad

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**Dwelling in the World:
Family, House, and Home in Tianjin, China, 1860–1960**

By Elizabeth LaCouture. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. Pp. 364.

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A fashionably dressed Chinese lady leaning on the railing of a balcony decorates the cover of this book and seems to suggest a lighthearted topic, but *Dwelling in the World* is far from cheerful. The historic frame of the book—from 1860 to 1960—is uncommon, which is only evident to readers with knowledge of China’s turbulent nineteenth-century history. In China, the era is known as “the century of humiliation,”

starting in 1860 when the Chinese imperial army lost the naval battle with the English to put an end to the influx into China of British-Indian opium, which had addicted large portions of the Chinese population. China had to pay dearly for its defeat in the Opium War, not only financially but also territorially, by consenting to the foreign occupation of Chinese port cities, of which the city of Tianjin was most affected. Not only the English occupied a part of Tianjin but also the French, Italians, Germans, Austrians, Americans, and three other nations. The foreign occupation of Tianjin resulted in a patchwork of nine foreign districts or concessions, each with their own national architecture and legislation. This explains the main title of the book, at least from the perspective of the Chinese elite who were fortunate enough to buy or rent houses in the foreign districts.

Although the occupation put an end to the trade war, it was the start of a cultural war, with modernity and Western science fighting against traditional Chinese culture on all levels. On the urban level, it entailed the demolition of Tianjin’s old inner city with its narrow streets for being unhygienic and unhealthy. The only remaining traditional Chinese one-story house, or rather walled compound, is now Tianjin’s city museum. The Westerners labeled as backward not only the traditional extended households based on polygamy but also the compound’s symbolic architecture with an altar dedicated to the ancestors, resulting in the promotion of the Western-style nuclear family and the multistory family house. On the legal level, the traditional family property rights shifted to individual male ownership, which allowed Chinese men to buy houses in the foreign districts. In due course, Chinese men owned most of the houses. According to the author, this led to one of the most significant revolutions in Chinese everyday life, as Chinese property owners were introduced to the Western lifestyle and foreign domestic architecture.

The attempts of the Chinese elite to adopt a Western lifestyle and blend in with the foreign elite is described in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms as a competition over distinction, and the possession of either economic or cultural capital. The latter, however, is far more difficult to acquire than economic capital as it involves education. Chinese girls were allowed to attend schools in the foreign districts and were taught Western subjects like home economics. As

such, they were confronted with the domestic efficiency movement. Although the efficient kitchen was copied in Chinese housing designs, it did not make servants redundant, for labor was cheap and abundant in China. Bilingual ladies' magazines catered to an eager female readership who wanted to learn about Western home life and interior decoration. In gathering cultural capital, a self-conscious middle class created a Chinese version of modernity. A fusion of Chinese and Western design was mirrored not only in their interior decoration but also in the exterior architecture: their multistory houses in the foreign districts had a Chinese pavilion on the rooftop, laid with imperial-era yellow tiles.

Returning to the cover illustration, the modern Chinese lady in a close-fitting dress on the balcony of a multistory house reflects the Chinese version of modernity. Behind her is a window half-covered by a curtain, both Western features, and another balcony where a servant dressed in traditional black trousers and blouse is hanging the laundry. Despite many state interventions and failed attempts to collectivize the socialist household in the 1950s, the foreign ideals of home celebrated by China's modern elite and middle class prevailed. After a century of humiliation, China's rise as a superpower was propelled by its desire for rehabilitation.

IRENE CIERAAD

Irene Cieraad is an anthropologist and senior researcher affiliated with the Faculty of Architecture, TU Delft. She is the editor of *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (Syracuse University Press, 2021). Her most recent publication is "Tell Don't Show: The Invisible Plague in Dutch 17th-Century Paintings of the Domestic Interior," in the edited volume *Interiors in the Era of Covid-19* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

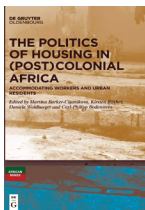
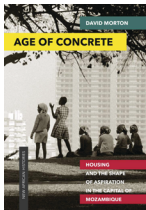
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Age of Concrete: Housing and the Shape of Aspiration in the Capital of Mozambique

By David Morton. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019. Pp. 336.

The Politics of Housing in (Post-)Colonial Africa

Edited by Kirsten R  ther, Martina Barker-Ciganikova, Daniela Waldburger, and Carl-Philipp Bodenstern. Boston: De Gruyter, 2020. Pp. 228.



What the two books in this double review have in common is their focus on the politics of housing in colonial and postcolonial Africa. In form and content, however, they are significantly different. Regarding form: *Age of Concrete* is a monograph devoted to one city (Maputo, Mozambique) and written by one author (David Morton), while *The Politics of Housing* volume has