

Shanghai Urban Life and Its Heterogeneous Cultural Entanglements

Xiong Yuezhi. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022. 425 pp. €175.00 (hbk). ISBN 9789004511101

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The history of “Old Shanghai” (circa 1840s–1940s) defies simplistic categorization and dichotomous conception. For over a century, Shanghai in its treaty port incarnation was characterized by a tripartite administration: the international settlement, the French concession and the Chinese city. In addition to political fragmentation, the city’s population was divided across various races, languages, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, occupations and political allegiances. Shanghai’s remarkable diversity and hybridity defined itself both as a physical space and a human community. For this very reason, commonplace, if not overused, analytical frameworks such as “East vs West,” “colonizer vs colonized,” “oppression vs resistance,” “Sino vs foreign,” or “modern vs tradition” cannot adequately explain the city’s rich and dynamic past.

There is little doubt that Shanghai has occupied a predominant position in the study of Chinese urban history. Although scholars have generally recognized the importance of looking beyond Shanghai to gain a fuller understanding of China’s modern urban landscape, scholarly interests in the metropolis near the Huangpu River are yet to subside. The city’s history has been told and retold from the perspectives of modernization, Westernization, imperialistic encroachment, issues of defence and conflict, as well as rapid economic development and demographic growth. A critical challenge that has confronted Shanghai specialists revolves around how to unravel and untangle the complexities inherent in a city that was so fundamentally defined by its cultural heterogeneity.

Shanghai Urban Life and Its Heterogeneous Cultural Entanglements by Xiong Yuezhi and his research team examines modern urban Shanghai as a site of cultural exchange. At the heart of this book is the question of “how heterogeneous cultures interacted, coexisted, communicated, and intermingled” within Shanghai’s urban setting (xv). Throughout the book, Xiong and his team attach a great deal of importance to the role of foreign settlements in shaping Shanghai’s distinctive political, social and cultural history from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. As Xiong explicitly claims, “a key factor in creating modern Shanghai’s heterogeneous cultural entanglements was the presence of the largest foreign settlements in the country” (p. 395). The juxtaposition of both foreign settlements and Chinese territory within the city meant that Shanghai lay on a “marginal zone” between “Anglo-American, French, and Chinese power” (xii). The division of administration and fragmented sovereignties contributed to a high degree of diversity in Shanghai in the areas of population, education, religious practices, judicial systems, transportation networks and forms of currency.

Organized in a manner that is both chronological and thematic, the substantive part of the book comprises 12 chapters written by a constellation of Shanghai scholars based in different local institutions and trained in various disciplines, and it covers a remarkably wide range of topics related to modern Shanghai’s social life. While detailed discussions of all these chapters would simply be too unwieldy for the present review, a notable strength of this book is its contributing authors’ meticulous discussion of distinctive historical phenomena to which Shanghai’s cultural heterogeneity gave rise. Topics such as public parks (chapter three), interracial marriage and Western discrimination against the local Chinese (chapter four), foreign language fever and pidgin languages (chapter six), as well as non-state actors navigating fault lines between different administrations (chapter nine) are



some of the most prominent examples. Overall, these chapters unravel various interactions between imperialist powers, foreign settlers and Chinese communities, while drawing attention to consultation and cooperation (chapter seven), as well as contradiction and conflicts (chapter eight) within Shanghai's urban space. The contributing authors' decidedly empirical approach is also noteworthy: the near 400 pages of this volume reveal numerous less commonly known source materials about Shanghai's past, and its extensive footnotes and bibliography give its readers a sharp sense of the scope of secondary literature on Shanghai that has been recently produced in the Chinese academy.

Despite its impressive research scope and rich empirical data, this book's repeated assertions underscoring Shanghai's "uniqueness" have made me rather uneasy. Granted that many elements of "Old Shanghai" did make the city unusual or indeed in some sense "unique," is it productive to claim, however, that "no city in the history of the world, whether foreign or Chinese, has ever been as rich in implications and complex in circumstances as modern Shanghai," as Xiong states in his opening paragraph of this book (ix)? An overemphasis on the incomparability of the city, I would argue, runs the risk of preventing scholars interested in Shanghai's past from situating the city into a broader comparative framework. To name a few potential avenues for comparison: Shanghai as an economic hub can be compared and contrasted with Beijing, China's political centre; Shanghai can be compared to nearby Yangtze Delta cities such as Suzhou, Hangzhou or Yangzhou; useful analogies can also be drawn between Shanghai and other former treaty port cities such as Tianjin, Hankou and Canton; if we stretch our comparative framework beyond national boundaries, we can detect important comparability between Shanghai and other former colonial port cities across Asia and beyond.

The above quibble aside, *Shanghai Urban Life and Its Heterogeneous Cultural Entanglements* represents the collective labour and wisdom of a team of seasoned historians of Shanghai and offers many empirically rich insights into the city's past during the treaty-port era. For decades, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences has been an important centre for historical research on Shanghai, and it has played an indispensable role in translating and introducing English academic works on Shanghai for the Chinese readership. With their superb translation and fluid prose, this book's translators, Lane J. Harris and Mei Chun, are to be applauded for allowing readers in the Anglophone world to gain some glimpses into recent historiographical developments on Shanghai history in Chinese academia. This book is a welcome addition to the already considerable body of scholarship on Shanghai and will be of great interest for scholars working on Shanghai studies, urban history, modern Chinese history and, more broadly, cross-cultural interactions.

doi:10.1017/S0305741023001431

Shifting Sands: Landscape, Memory, and Commodities in China's Contemporary Borderlands

Xiaoxuan Lu. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2023. 344 pp. \$50.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781477327555

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Shifting Sands is a truly beautiful object. Printed on high gloss paper, in full colour and including over a hundred illustrations and maps, the book offers a visual palimpsest of China's borders