

# Introduction

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This special issue of *Urban History*, which brings together a set of six case-studies of Chinese cities, all with a focus on the Republican era (1912–49), has different things to offer discrete sets of scholars. For example, to specialists in urban history who have only a passing interest in Chinese themes, the three works by scholars based in the People's Republic of China (PRC) offer a rare glimpse into the way that cities are studied in what remains (though not for long, if trends in India continue) the world's most populous country. The editors of *Urban History* are to be commended for making these articles, all of which were originally written in Chinese, available to Anglophone readers. When read beside other recent translations of pieces on cities by PRC-based authors in varied fields, such as the city-focused writings of cultural critic Xu Jilin and the journalist and oral historian Dai Qing that have appeared in the lively online journal *China Heritage Quarterly*, they give a sense of some of the main contours in contemporary Chinese discussions of and debates about the country's modern urban past.<sup>1</sup>

When taken as a whole, though, perhaps the main thing the articles collected here offer to both China specialists and urban historians in general is a powerful reminder of how far we have come from the days when historical work on Chinese cities being done inside the PRC was completely out of step with that being undertaken in other parts of the world. In 1988, while still a graduate student, I was lucky enough to attend the first major international conference on Shanghai history. Held in Shanghai itself and hosted by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, it was a stimulating event, which was organized around local scholars working on a given topic being paired with a foreign one (most of us Americans, but with Japan, Australia and France among the other international venues represented) dealing with the same general subject.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Xu Jilin, 'Shanghai culture lost', *China Heritage Quarterly*, 22 (Jun. 2010) (no pagination), translated into English by Geremie R. Barmé, [www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=022\\_lost.inc&issue=022](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=022_lost.inc&issue=022); and Dai Qing, 'How peaceful was the liberation of Beijing?', *China Heritage Quarterly*, 14 (Jun. 2008) (no pagination), translated into English by Geremie R. Barmé and John Minford, based on an initial draft by Anne Gunn, [www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=014\\_daiqing.inc&issue=014](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=014_daiqing.inc&issue=014). My focus throughout these footnotes will remain on material available in English. Relevant works in Chinese can be found, though, in the footnotes to the articles that follow and in the citations and in some cases bibliographies that accompany the English language books and articles I cite.

But only very rarely did the papers delivered by these duos of scholars dovetail neatly. There was often a disconnect, due in part to the degree to which, in the PRC, historical work on modern cities was still at that point structured around fitting urban developments into pre-set Marxist categories and a master narrative of political change.<sup>2</sup> In this special issue, by contrast, despite the differences in locales and issues addressed by the contributors, and indeed contrasts in the methodologies the authors employ, we see a great deal of overlap between the approaches and concerns of the scholars based in the PRC and those based in other parts of the world.

The articles to come would be of value no matter when they appeared, but it is worth pointing out that, for two reasons, this is a propitious moment for *Urban History* to publish its first special issue devoted to China. One is simply that the country now looms so large in the global imagination, making all aspects of its past seem more worthy of attention. The second is that the country has probably just become, for the first time in its long history, one in which more people live in cities than villages. I say 'probably' because the figures for the 2010 census portray the nation as still having a slight rural tilt, with 51 per cent of its population living outside and 49 per cent inside cities.<sup>3</sup> Still, given the speed with which villagers, particularly young ones, have been moving to established urban centres and the country's many new 'instant cities' (to borrow Peter Hessler's evocative term for the conurbations that spring up seemingly from nowhere when some factories open near a river or highway) in search of new opportunities, there is every reason to think that the tipping point that reversed those rural vs. urban statistics came between the time the census takers were collecting and releasing their data.<sup>4</sup>

To inject a second personal note, one way to highlight just how ripe the current moment is for a special issue of this kind is to look back at how different things were in the late 1970s, when I took my first courses on China. One notable contrast between then and now is simply that to pay attention to China some 30 odd years ago seemed purely optional, lacking in urgency, at least if one lived, as I did and still do, in the United States. Yes, we all knew that it was a giant country that seemed to be undergoing fascinating changes in the wake of the death of Mao Zedong (1893–1976), the rise of the reform-minded and modernization-seeking Deng Xiaoping (1904–97), and the moves toward normalization of ties between Beijing and Washington. It did not, however, make headlines with any frequency, and

<sup>2</sup> This may help explain why the English-language publication that emerged from the conference, Frederic Wakeman, Jr, and Wen-hsin Yeh (eds.), *Shanghai Sojourners* (Berkeley, 1992), was made up exclusively of chapters based on papers presented by scholars from outside the PRC.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Buckley and Michael Martina, 'China's population grows older and more urban', Reuters (28 Apr. 2011); [www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/28/us-china-census-idUSTRE73R0T420110428](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/28/us-china-census-idUSTRE73R0T420110428).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Hessler, 'China's instant cities', *National Geographic*, 4 (Jun. 2007), 88–117.

when China stories appeared in newspapers, they were nearly always in the front section set aside for politics, whereas now they are just as likely to show up in the parts of the publication devoted to entertainment, business or even sports. One result of this was that, whereas now one might take for granted that to be a fully informed global citizen, it is crucial to know something about China, taking a Chinese history course when I first did seemed a bit eccentric.

This sense of China's lack of centrality – and the fact that the global turn in the human sciences was still to come – also meant that it was routine for scholars working on broad topics to ignore Chinese cases. Whereas now it might strike one as odd to see no mention of any Chinese city in a book about the modern urban condition (for it is so often mentioned in newspapers that China has more cities with over a million inhabitants than any other place on earth), then this still happened routinely. Certainly, no one outside China would have thought then, as many do now, of using a photograph of Shanghai or Beijing as the cover image for a book on metropolises of the world.

A second contrast, which contributed to the low profile China had within urban studies, was that it was still back then such an overwhelmingly rural country. Textbooks mentioned in passing and lecturers stressed that roughly four out of five Chinese people had generally lived and still did live in the countryside. The past events deemed worthiest of attention were generally thought of as having taken place outside cities. And the most dynamic fields of historical study (and the ones with the most potential to attract any interest outside of Sinology) dealt with rural concerns. Jonathan Spence's *The Death of Woman Wang*, which creatively evoked a long ago village setting, was the one book I was assigned in an early course on China that showed up routinely on bookstore shelves. And within purely academic circles, the works on the modern period that generated the most interest within and beyond Sinology dealt with topics such as peasant rebellions and the Communist Party's efforts to mobilize support for their cause in the countryside.<sup>5</sup>

When it came to scholarship, the situation began to change in the 1980s, as more historians began to focus on urban settings, but even when I taught my first courses on China at the end of that decade, I still found myself describing the country as one that had long been and seemed likely to stay much more rural than urban. It was only during the following two decades that the old lecturing standby phrase of an 80 per cent to 20 per cent village to city ratio began to seem hopelessly dated, as the mechanisms that had kept rural-to-urban migration firmly in check throughout the Mao period (1949–76) and into the first part of the Reform era (1979–) were partially dismantled and increasingly ignored.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang* (New York, 1979); for a valuable survey on trends in Chinese studies before the mid-1980s, see Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China* (New York, 1984).

One of the bracing things about urban studies has long been its tendency to be less prone to geographic parochialism than many other fields, as witnessed by the global purview of classic works by authors such as Lewis Mumford that appeared in the 1960s or indeed before. Still, as the publication history of this journal as well as other English-language periodicals in the field shows, there has often been a slippage between generalizing about 'urban life' and generalizing about 'urban life in the west' – a tendency that has downplayed or ignored the importance of not only Chinese cities but also those located in many other parts of the world. It is a very good sign indeed, then, that recent years have seen an upsurge in interesting collections that place previously neglected parts of the world of modern cities front and centre, as part of a new 'urban turn' (as Gyan Prakash has put it) that is more genuinely cosmopolitan and internationally minded than those we have seen before.<sup>6</sup> This adds to the timely feel of this special issue, which appears not only just as China has become more urban than rural, but also in the wake of United Nations' predictions that by 2030, the world as a whole will be one in which 60 per cent of all people live in cities. If in the late 1970s, paying attention to China seemed purely optional to many in the west, and the need to be mindful of Chinese cities seemed even less crucial, in an increasingly globalized and urban world, in which the PRC figures centrally, this is certainly no longer the case now.

Turning briefly to the articles themselves, I would like to suggest one or two ways in which readers working on places other than China will find a great deal of comparative food for thought, regardless of the place of origin of the author. This is not to place any limitations on how they might be read, but rather to illustrate how China's urban turn might usefully be employed in comparative perspective.

Consider, for example, historians of American cities who are used to thinking about the important role that ties between groups who came to the United States from specific foreign countries have played in structuring urban life. They will find much that is familiar about the emphasis in Toby Lincoln's article on how, during times of crisis, organizations linking migrants to Shanghai from particular Chinese provinces and regions played central roles in establishing networks of support. All that is required is realizing that a metropolis may best be approached as a 'city of immigrants' even if, as in Shanghai's case as opposed to New York's, many of the 'immigrants' have stayed within a linguistically and culturally varied country, rather than travelling across an ocean and going from one nation to another.

<sup>6</sup> Gyan Prakash, 'The urban turn', in Ravi Vasudeven *et al.* (eds.), *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life* (Delhi, 2002), 2–7; and, for an example of the kind of recent collections I have in mind, see *idem* and Kevin Kruse (eds.), *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics, and Everyday Life* (Princeton, 2008).

Similarly, there is much that is similar – though by no means identical – about the debates over race and access to ‘public’ spaces in American cities that specialists working on Jim Crow South know and the situation Xiong Yuezhi describes in his careful look at the shifting meaning of one of Shanghai’s most important gathering spots. In Shanghai, as opposed to the US, imperialism and nationality figured centrally, of course, and legacies of slavery were not an issue. Still, an attentive Americanist reader can find connections worth pondering – even though the special importance of a race course in the Shanghai’s history (built by Britons soon after they were granted control of part of the port) is something that will resonate more immediately with scholars working on the British empire than with the Jim Crow South.

Peter Carroll’s discussion of prostitution in Suzhou could be read with profit by scholars working on sex work, culture and politics in a wide variety of urban settings. The last two decades have seen the publication of studies of the topic concerned with cities located in a broad spectrum of countries and continents, so it is hard to pin down any particular sort of non-China-focused urban historian for whom his analysis would be especially useful.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most of all, though, in comparative terms, it might be of most obvious interest to scholars focusing on Paris and London, two urban settings that stand out when it comes to the richness of the historiography on prostitution and related issues in modern times.

When we turn to the articles that deal with the way Shanghai’s bicycle industry was affected by the Japanese invasion (Xu Tao’s article), the city of Dalian’s complex transition from a Russian-run to a Japanese-run to a Chinese-run port (Christian Hess’ piece) and the control of water in a subdivided Tianjin (the focus of Liu Haiyan’s contribution), the biggest pay-off may be to scholars working on divided cities and colonial settings. One thing that makes Chinese urban history of the 1840s through the 1940s unusual – though not completely unique – is the importance of cities that were partially but not fully colonized (the case with Shanghai and Tianjin, as well as other ports along the China coast) or were located in areas controlled by first one foreign power and then another (the case with Dalian and some other northern centres, such as Harbin). The articles just mentioned, while not explicitly engaged with using Chinese cities as a basis from which to theorize about the nature of partial or multiple kinds of colonialism (something that Ruth Rogaski has done, for example, in her groundbreaking work on Tianjin), do provide a good deal of new grist for the mill of anyone dealing with the widely varying manners in which imperialism and urbanism can be intertwined.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a survey of this literature, which brings in books on China, Africa and Latin America as well as Europe and the United States, see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, ‘Prostitutes in history: from parables of pornography to metaphors of modernity’, *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 117–41.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty Port China* (Berkeley, 2004); see also her chapter, ‘Hygienic modernity in Tianjin’, in Joseph Esherick

Turning to scholars in Chinese studies, my own field, the articles offer many other kinds of attractions. For urban historians interested in China, one source of appeal is the way they contribute to the long ongoing and still vibrant debate over the nature of associational life in Chinese cities of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and the Republican period.<sup>9</sup> They also add new dimensions to our picture of the impact that the wars of the 1930s and 1940s had not just on individual lives but at times on whole cities, a topic that has recently been generating an increasing amount of interest.<sup>10</sup> The articles also have much to offer scholars interested in China's present rather than its past, for the Republican period, especially the last two decades or so of it when Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party was in control of the central government, has some intriguing similarities with the contemporary era. Chiang, like today's Chinese leaders, was the head of a party organized along classic Leninist lines (albeit in his case, it was Leninism without any lip service to Marx). Then, as now, many Chinese cities were expanding (though in that case due partly to influxes of refugees as well the flow in of people seeking new opportunities). And then, as now, the authorities were struggling to modernize China, while simultaneously appealing to traditional values (Confucius was sometimes celebrated in state rituals of the 1930s just as he was during the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics) and harping on nationalist themes.

In short, then, the richness of these articles, and the explicitly urban studies perspective that they take, reveals how far Chinese history has been influenced by the urban turn, which in itself is a reflection of the pace of that country's urbanization. How fitting, then, that *Urban History* provides urban historians with a special issue devoted to China at this particular moment in time.

(ed.), *Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900–1950* (Honolulu, 1999), 30–46. Esherick's introductory essay for that same volume, 'Modernity and the nation in the Chinese city', 1–16, remains the best place to turn for an overview of the nature of China's urban scene and the variation among the country's urban communities in the first half of the last century.

<sup>9</sup> Important early contributions to these debates includes various chapters in Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner (eds.), *The Chinese City between Two Worlds* (Stanford, 1974); David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing* (Berkeley, 1988); several chapters in Wakeman and Yeh (eds.), *Shanghai Sojourners*, including the one by Bryna Goodman on native-place societies; William T. Rowe, *Hankou: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City* (Stanford, 1992); and Linda Cook Johnson (ed.), *Cities of Jiangnan in Late Imperial China* (Albany, 1993). More recent significant additions to this literature include many of the chapters in two edited volumes: Esherick (ed.), *Remaking the Chinese City*, and Nara Dillon and Jean Oi (eds.), *At the Crossroads of Empire: Middlemen, Social Networks, and State-Building in Republican Shanghai* (Stanford, 2008). Mary Lee McIsaac, Mingzheng Shi and Kristin Stapleton (eds.), 'Special section: Chinese urban history', a set of short articles by North American-based scholars, many of whom address this theme in some fashion, *Journal of Urban History*, 27 (2000), 50–124.

<sup>10</sup> The impact of these wars on Chinese society have been the focus of an ambitious multi-year project based at Oxford University under the direction of historian Rana Mitter, with which one contributor to this volume, Toby Lincoln, has been involved. For a multi-faceted look at the Japanese invasion's impact on one city, see Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh (eds.), *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai under Japanese Occupation* (Cambridge, 2009).