

Book review: Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life by Jie Li

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/03/17/book-review-shanghai-homes-palimpsests-of-private-life-by-jie-li/

17/03/2015

In the dazzling global metropolis of Shanghai, what has it meant to call the city home? In this account – part microhistory, part memoir – Jie Li salvages intimate recollections by successive generations of inhabitants of two vibrant, culturally mixed Shanghai alleyways from the Republican, Maoist, and post-Mao eras. Tim Chamberlain reviews.

Book Review: Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life by Jie Li.
Columbia University Press. 2015

Find this book: 

Shanghai is a city which has undergone a rapid transformation over the last few decades, with shiny new skyscrapers seemingly going up just as fast as colourful but shabby old *shikumen* lanes have been coming down. There has been a lot of interest in China's recent economic development and the urgent drive towards urbanisation which has followed. There have been frequent laments for the loss of historic architecture with the clearance of some dilapidated old treaty-port era buildings, as well as amazement at images of so called "nail houses" holding out against state driven demolition and redevelopment programmes. Jie Li's *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* documents the transformation of the city through the intimate lives of several generations of her own family, from the Republican period through to the Communist liberation, Cultural Revolution and the present day.

Now an assistant professor of East Asian languages and civilisations at Harvard University, *Shanghai Homes* originally developed out of Jie Li's undergraduate dissertation. The book, as she describes it, is 'part microhistory, part memoir', but in truth it is much more than this, and, as such, it will likely have a broad interdisciplinary appeal to scholars in a variety of different academic fields: in sociology, anthropology, social history, cultural and women's studies, as well as for historians of modern China.

Li's study focuses on two of Shanghai's *longtang* or Alleyways, often referred to as *shikumen* after the 'stone portal gate' which forms the front entrance of each alleyway and the front doors of the many houses located within. Initially constructed as single-family units for the managerial staff of British and Japanese factories when Shanghai was a semi-colonial settlement, these residential areas became 'public housing' with each house being divided up internally amongst multiple families, resulting in ever greater overcrowding.

Li examines how the distinctions between public and private spheres in China have changed over time, and in particular she seeks to define how Mao Zedong's campaign to eliminate the private sphere actually impacted upon the lives of individuals. With reference to the writings of Hannah Arendt, Li notes that the etymological origins of the word "private" can be found in the Latin word for 'deprived' (p.20), which she feels is particularly apt considering that the Maoist regime's drive to obliterate the private realm by enforcing collectivity actually reinforced people's 'obsession with individual possessions, escalating the stakes and theatricality of personal conflicts, and thereby eroded civility in the public sphere' (p.21). As Li persuasively demonstrates through her individual case studies: 'visceral memories of deprivation forged the most intimate bonds between family members, neighbors, classmates, and colleagues' (p.21), thereby creating a complex and densely layered palimpsest of urban private lives which meshed inexorably together in a way which was unprecedented before and pales by comparison to the present day.



Shanghai (Credit: [Matthias Ripp](#) CC BY 2.0)

Through “familial ethnography” – extensive interviews with her relations, their neighbours, and other former residents, along with her own participant observation and contextual historical study – Li has sought to demonstrate that ‘one’s own home and family *can* be a valid source of scholarly inquiry’, thereby enabling a better understanding of ‘the multiple and inextricable dimensions of “home,” from the architectural to the affective, from the literal to the figurative, from the socioeconomic to the psychological’ (p.5). She does this by focusing each chapter on a different theme. The first chapter examines housing primarily as a social space, mapping territorial and spatial change over time as social and political circumstances necessitated the ever diminishing division of these spaces to accommodate ever increasing numbers of people when offspring got married or other families moved into the alleyways.

Housing is then examined from the psychological dimension, an aspect which particularly comes to dominate and characterise the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, a time in which the alleyways became ‘voyeuristic and exhibitionist’ theatres of everyday life. Here Li focuses on the lives of a number of women, marginalised over time due to circumstances of marriage, concubinage, or having lost their husbands to the vicissitudes of the revolutionary period, whose stories and memories are recounted at length in their own words. Li’s concern here, as she states, is centred on how these lives are told and received in themselves, to illustrate how ‘gossip’ served as a different and more powerful kind of education than that in schools or mass media.

The last chapter which brings the book right up to date struck me as particularly resonant. It contrasted the “selfless bolts” of the Maoist era to the “nail houses” which characterise the present micropolitics of redevelopment. The resistance against the so-called “domicide,” or ‘the murder of the home, against the owner’s will,’ has been promulgated as former proletariats suddenly becoming aware of the value of private property, asserting their individual rights for adequate compensation, such that they hold-out in the face of varying incentives of coercion and intimidation in order to get the best deal, aptly characterised by the folk wisdom that: “Children who know how to cry will get the milk” (p.205).

This burgeoning awareness of private-property rights has found its expression in a re-purposing of revolutionary rhetoric, pointedly lampooning present day corruption through puns and word play. These “nail house” protesters adorn their houses with banners bearing slogans which are reminiscent of those issued during the Cultural Revolution. “Revolution is Not a Crime” becomes “Corruption is Not a Crime”. “Without the Communist Party There Would Be No New China” becomes “Without the Forced Demolition of Private Housing There Would Be No New China” (p.202). These nails which need to be hammered down stand in stark contrast to the revolutionary bolts which never rust – a description popularised in the 1963 official movement to emulate Comrade Lei Feng, a model

soldier and automobile mechanic, who described himself as wanting to be just such a “rustless bolt” (p.205).

Shanghai Homes is a rich auto-ethnography which analyses the confines of a small enclosed community weathering and adapting to the broader changes around it, continually being shaped by external forces, yet which manages to preserve a private continuity through kinship connections and personal property, as well as collective and individual memories. As microhistory it adds nuance to what Li describes as the ‘sweeping grand narratives’ of standard historical enquiries (p.4). As personal memoir, wonderfully illustrated with drawings done by her parents, Jie Li manages to balance a genial tone with detached scholarly rigour where it is called for. This book is a remarkably engaging interdisciplinary achievement.

Tim Chamberlain gained a BSc in Anthropology from the University of East London, and an MA in World History from Birkbeck College, University of London, where he is currently undertaking a PhD looking at Western travellers in East Tibet during the early 20th century, exploring themes of science and empire. He is also a project coordinator for international touring exhibitions at the British Museum. He tweets at [@eccentricparab](#)

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books