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Deconstructing Modernity: Unsettled Urban Living in a Changing Shanghai

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Morphologically, Shanghai was a walled county along the Huangpu River until the mid-nineteenth century. Over the next one hundred and seventy years, urbanization and modernization reshaped its physical landscape, social structure, and culture. A layered urban system gradually formed as development was pushed bit by bit by different generations, but long-term stability has been interrupted in recent decades. This photo essay presents three typical situations—involving, respectively, demolition and relocation, remaining in place, and uncertainty—in which a vulnerable community has been displaced, constrained, and abandoned. Through the lens of daily social life, the images examine how modernity is hurt by capital in Shanghai.

Self-Eating: An Inevitable Cycle?

Capitalism effectively built the community and autonomy of Shanghai, but it could also be its ruin. A global commercial center since the establishment of the original custom in 1075, Shanghai was officially developed as a treaty port after the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 (Gamewell 1916, 14). As "the paradise of adventurers" (Miller 1937), Shanghai offered so many opportunities that the city attracted numerous domestic and overseas migrants (Sang 1982, 29). The city's sufficient population and energetic labor force ensured the rapid development of industry and production and the manufacture of the best and newest products. Modernization of industries in the service sector, such as entertainment, led to the evolution of new lifestyles (Yeh 2006), and the well-developed infrastructure included vehicular traffic, water supply, and sewage and streetlamp systems (Lee 1999, 6–7). In response, the municipal administration was subdivided into units, including general planning, law enforcement, and daily operations, such as fire, police, and postal services (Gamewell 1916, 20–41). The growing city became one of the world's first-class cultures, as evidenced by its architectural arts (Lee 1999, 7–13) and people's fashionable purchases (Wagner 2008).

In Shanghai, a unique local culture that absorbed different influences was created, resembling a melting pot. For example, Shanghainese is a blend of not only various dialects in the Yangtze River Delta and other parts of China but also foreign languages such as English, French, and Japanese (Bickers 1998; Yeh 2006, 310–327). As an urban community, the middle class lived in the city center and shared newly developed conventions such as civilized manners, public-hygiene habits, and legal codes.

Culminating in the 1920 and 1930s—the city’s “Golden Age”—Shanghai became one of the most accomplished and attractive metropolises in the world due to its open society.

Modern Shanghai was established partially due to the accumulation of capital. But several decades later, capital dramatically swallowed what it had created, just like the legendary tail-devouring Ouroboros. Today, the economy of Shanghai, like that of the rest of China, has been booming since the mid-1990s. Mayors and developers have embraced the impressive economic achievement and brand new urban appearance of the country’s cities. State-owned lands were a valuable and controllable resource, turning real estate development into one of the most profitable businesses for both developers and the government (Wu 2000). Before issues such as market rules and residents’ rights had been settled, overseas capital began to flood into the heart of Shanghai with the permission of the local government. The lands with the highest rents were usually the oldest residential areas in the city center, neighborhoods where people had been living for generations. Although their traditional lifestyle had already disappeared years earlier, now the residents had to physically leave to make room for imposing new office towers and high-end apartments. The positive reports of the mainstream Chinese media described urban renewal as reasonable and hopeful (Lee, He, and Huang 2007). But, what has been the cost of this thorough transformation of the cities? Is the new necessarily better than the old? Can Shanghai’s spatial pattern, cultural significance, and social system survive the drastic transformation and endure?

Fading Splendor

The historic districts and buildings, as well as the lifestyle emblematic of Shanghai, are disappearing. As far as capital is concerned, there seems to be only one logic: pursuing profits. Even if the old structures are beautiful, if they are unable to be used for profit, or if the process of producing profit is too time-consuming, they mean nothing to the developers. Compared with historic preservation and long-term planning, urban renewal is a more efficient path to economic growth, which has been wrongly conceived of as equivalent to “development.”

Demolition and relocation, well known as *chai qian* 拆迁, are familiar phenomena in Shanghai as in other Chinese cities. Through this process, numerous historic districts have been torn down. Year by year, memories about the city’s history are fading. Displaced residents normally get one of two kinds of subsidies: currency or an alternative flat. In either case, they have no choice but to move to the outlying edges of the city. Thus, social networks are disrupted, and people who move to the suburbs are charged more money and require more time to commute to their jobs in the city center (Cervero and Day 2008). Through this displacement, middle-class communities, as well as their collective memories, are excluded from the city center. Even though some residential neighborhoods still exist in historic districts, they are already cleared in the developers’ eyes.

Challenged Dignity

Compared with residents who suffer the negative effects of being relocated, those left in the surviving historical districts are far from fortunate. Trying to stay the same has never been an easy task, especially in an isolated space suspended in time. A strong sense of community had been an intensive part of daily life in the *lilong*, the Shanghainese version of a row house. Although each dwelling unit of the *lilong* was originally designed for a single middle-class family, more and more families ultimately had to share the space due to constant wars, population explosion, and economic depression. However, the residents became accustomed to the overcrowded situation and devised many strategies to cope and make everyday life endurable (Lu 1999). In *lilong* alleys, the atmosphere was usually peaceful though energetic.

Lilong districts were lively not only because of the internal social structure of the neighborhood but because of its close relationship with the urbanized space beyond it. The shops interacted with the sidewalk, the complex alleys stretched to the main streets, and the social connections were tied into the holistic urban system. The plentiful growth of small businesses within the *lilong* districts helped to provide a subtle balance between dwelling and consumer convenience and maintain a sustainable ecosphere of community (Lu 1995).

Nowadays, the old *lilong* districts are not as polished as they were when they were originally built. Outdated infrastructure and extremely high population density have led to poor living conditions. The impact of an aging society and segmentation between classes and groups are intensified by the shortage of public space. Small shops are no longer permitted. The meaning of the term “community” has gradually changed; it is now an administrative concept rather than an indicator of social ties and a sense of belonging. The island-like blocks that have survived are now surrounded by either dazzling skyscrapers or demolished ruins in the city center. Despite the huge amount of real estate investment, there are no available funds for residents in historical blocks to improve their everyday life. No better than their so-called lottery-winner counterparts who have been relocated to the suburbs, the inner-city residents suffer as well.

Everlasting Uncertainty

To move, or to stay? Both options are relatively acceptable in contrast to the sense of “uncertainty” in which people experience the feeling of “waiting for the other shoe to drop” while anticipating eviction or demolition. Even worse is the condition in which residents are abandoned—forgotten or even intentionally discarded.

Shanghai could be called an immigrant city, as immigration has always powered the city’s development. It brought a labor force, consumer markets, and social interactions to the city. But the city’s attitude toward new migrant workers does not lend itself to inclusion (Meng and Zhang 2001). On the one hand, these newcomers’ opportunities are more likely found in the suburbs, areas that are not considered to be mainstream or even part of Shanghai, thus casting long-term negative effects on the migrants (Shen

2017). On the other hand, if migrants find jobs in the city center, they might face even more severe challenges. To find affordable housing close to their work, they need to share subdivided flats in condos with many other migrants or find incredibly small units in *lilong* or urban villages, where they might be able to enjoy an acceptable cost of living, convenient location, and tight network of fellow countrymen (Goodman 1995).

In a capitalist society, land implies potential profits, without any obligation to the people living on the land. Under the pressure of economic growth, city beautification, or simply expelling the “low-end population,” urban villages have been slated for demolition long before the construction begins. This tentative status creates an uncertain atmosphere in which people don’t know how long they will be able to stay in their homes. In such an unstable situation, it is difficult to plan for a family’s long-term welfare, and even harder to develop and care about a community. Families might have the chance to stay in place for years, but each day they experience a mood of temporary occupancy, and their sense of responsibility to care for the public realm gradually disappears. Even though the dwellings remain, after a community is discarded by the city the residents have already mentally abandoned the place.

As the images and captions in this photo essay show, Shanghai society is at a crucial moment in which the old is dramatically being replaced by the new. In the process, the displacement of the residents has irreversibly broken the social ecosystem. Although these changes are taking place in an epoch featuring rapid growth, modernity is not necessarily being reinforced. Conversely, it is undercut by the city’s transformation. On the one hand, the changes are visible and easily observed in the city’s new skyline and building forms. On the other hand, Shanghai’s social configuration and cultural formation, which were largely kept intact and even strengthened during decades of war and social reform, have been permanently destroyed.

Ideally, modernity in Shanghai should be not about new things or fashionable concepts, but about people, the ways they behave, and the things they believe. The core of modernity, which can successfully cultivate community in the burgeoning city, has been inclusiveness integrated with civic society and legal morals. At its best, it is defined by vital urban life and collective memory, fulfilled by the well-being of and opportunities for a healthy community, and perpetually regenerated by people. When all those foundations are shaken by urban redevelopment, it is hard to estimate the cost and loss to a city, now and in the future.

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About the Photographer

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