

Mapping Modernity in Shanghai: Space, Gender, and Visual Culture in the Sojourners' City, 1853–98. By Samuel Y. Liang. London: Routledge, 2010. Pp. xviii + 218. £90.00 hardback, £28.00 paperback.

Shanghai is still often seen as the “key to modern China,” and accordingly, studies of the early Shanghai experience have been flourishing in recent years. Samuel Liang’s *Mapping Modernity in Shanghai* is one more welcome addition to this important and burgeoning field. Liang’s book focuses on space as an important element of Shanghai’s modernity, arguing that “modernity first arrived in late nineteenth-century Shanghai via a new spatial configuration” (p. i). Liang contends that the “[city’s] colonial capitalist development ruptured the traditional spatial configuration of self-contained households, towns, and natural landscape . . . producing a new set of fragmented as well as fluid urban spaces” (p. 181). He further argues that these innovative spatial arrangements also transformed traditional hierarchies. By mapping Shanghai’s space of leisure and everyday life, the book hopes to examine “the implied paradoxes between, and the hybrid culture of, colonial modernity and indigenous innovation, the reinvention of traditional ideals and adjustments to the new industrial culture” (p. 10).

Rather than considering questions of time, or a “temporal dialectic of progress and decline” in a juxtaposition of “tradition” and “modernity” (p. 26), his book considers the “new” spaces created in modern Shanghai, such as the residential neighbourhood, and “new” conceptions of these spaces, such as that of the street as public space open to all, elite and non-elite, or the “new” idea of the courtesan house as “surrogate home.” The book uses a variety of sources, textual and visual, titbits from the print media, newspapers and pictorials (*Shenbao* 申報 and *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 most prominently among them), courtesan novels, city guide books, and others, to support these arguments.

This choice of materials shows that the author is quite familiar with most of the important scholarship on Shanghai, yet he is quite critical about it too, arguing, for example, that literary scholarship mainly examines literature for its own sake and thus does not bring any historical depth to it (p. 7), something which must be distinctly denied, not only quite generally, for writings that use the methodologies of New Historicism, for example, but more specifically, for the works by Catherine Yeh, Alexander des Forges, and Paola Zamperini—to mention but a few with direct bearing upon Liang’s work on Shanghai. While he is quite fast in criticizing others, he himself does not actually come up with substantially new readings of the sources he examines, either. Indeed, in some of his interpretations he seems to be reading literature for “fact,” rather than deliberating the different levels of representation that it offers. A realist novel on Shanghai like the ones quoted by Liang is distinctly *not* reality, as the work of Lu Hanchao 盧漢超 on Shanghai everyday lives amply

illustrates. In his discussion of courtesan novels in Chapters 2 and 3, Liang speaks from the evidence of these novels, however, in a rhetoric that sounds distinctly “factual” (e.g. pp. 58, 148). And he says, “The historian’s task is not to put a period to rest by revealing the complete, objective picture of it, which often results simply in piling up historical information, but to interpret some genuine experience” (p. 41).

But what is a “genuine experience” after all? A discourse about indiscreet behaviour in Shanghai (and not just her theatres) as it develops in the city’s media as Liang shows (pp. 128, 156–58), cannot be read as a “genuine experience” but must first be read as rhetorical: from this finding, then, one can make a conjecture about intimacy acted out more openly in Shanghai than elsewhere and this causing a potential or perceived threat to social order which is then echoed and reflected in this kind of alarmist rhetoric which, precisely because it is making a point, in turn probably exaggerates the factual finding—if there is any. So in spite of the fact that Liang’s book uses many of the materials that may be apt to write a history of mentalities, drawing on evidence that reflects the mind-set of a particular people at very particular times and, most importantly, according to the author’s logic, in a very particular space, the book falls short of being a history of mentalities. Liang remains bound to questions of “realism” and “authenticity.”

In analysing a rather limited pool of already well known primary materials relevant to the study of Shanghai, Liang is able to provide only few new insights. What makes this worse is the fact that instead of taking his materials directly from their original source, he makes use of collections which are often faulty and selective (e.g. in the use of *Zhuzhici* 竹枝詞 [Bamboo Rhymes] from the *Shenbao* which are quoted after Gu Bingquan 顧炳權,¹ rather than the originals in the *Shenbao* in several chapters). Liang also does not do much to situate the interesting voices and images that he quotes: it would have been very illuminating to hear more about the authors of these sources, about the media in which they appear (p. 91) or about the sources themselves as genre (what is the relation of the *tingzijian* 亭子間 as a peculiar type of space, for example, to the genesis of *tingzijian* literature, for example, and how does this relate to the generalizations made about the *tingzijian* as space proffered by Liang, p. 106?). His argumentation, therefore, is nowhere based on a truly comprehensive understanding of the kinds of materials relevant to address the questions he sets out to ask.

Not all of the chapters openly foreground space, Chapter 2 (“The convergence of writing and commerce”), for example, does not seem to do so, even though it considers, as its source materials, travel writings. In Chapter 3 (“Ephemeral households, marvelous things”), Liang focuses on the interesting idea of the displacement

¹ Gu Bingquan, *Shanghai yangchang zhuzhici* 上海洋場竹枝詞 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1996).

of family, due to the large number of sojourners in Shanghai who have left families behind elsewhere. I am wondering, though, how new the idea of moving (p. 55) from a permanent home to a rather more fragmented space is and whether this is an experience necessarily specific to and typical of (only) Shanghai. Are Shanghai's *huiguan* 會館 and *tongxianghui* 同鄉會 as well as her courtesan houses (which are frequented by those who have a home and family in Shanghai as well as others who do not) in fact so very specific and different from those in other commercial cities in China's hinterland since the beginning of China's commercial revolution in the Song?

While space is crucial to his argument, what the author talks about, equally frequently, in this chapter, is time: the timeless quality of the courtesan, for example, the continued use of particular tropes of beauty to describe her, plays an important role (p. 77). Here, it may be most obvious that Liang sometimes falls prey to the dangerous trap of declaring things in Shanghai "new" without tracing their genealogies back. Had he traced these, neither the imaginations about courtesans nor the mixing of commercial and residential patterns in the typical Shanghai alleyway residential neighbourhood housing would have needed to be marked as all that "new" after all.

One of the important points in the book is that of the democratization of space. Liang argues that courtesan houses actually offered to the commoner what the magnate would usually get exclusively, they opened up the possibility of living the dream, the possibility that this dream could become a reality at least for the moment of visiting Shanghai for the commoner (Chapter 4 "The meeting of courtyard and street" and Chapter 6 "The Mingling of magnates and masses"). The same argument is also made for gender relations as Liang argues that formerly male-dominated spaces would become accessible to women in Shanghai. While I do not find the arguments about lesbianism (p. 148) substantiated enough, and especially not reflected in the sources—and here, again, there is a lot of reading of fiction into fact—the idea that Shanghai's new spaces offered new vistas for new types of meetings and exchanges between the sexes, and thus new avenues for the development of gender relations, is certainly well taken (p. 180).

The author is also on to something very important when he considers how the visual representation of Shanghai actually changes its spatial conception in reality. He makes very interesting remarks of how the real space of the bund is transformed through the iconic rhetoric of processions for example (p. 167). He also makes an interesting observation about how the many windows in the modern buildings erected in Shanghai created a much more open-minded sense of seeing and being seen than had been imaginable earlier and in other locations (pp. 98/99, 108, 124–27).

In his reading of a variety of different source materials, the author demonstrates, sometimes more, sometimes less convincingly, how, what he calls the "colonial capitalist development" (a terminology which is in no way discussed or problematized

in detail, but appears only implicitly as the backdrop to the scene to be observed in the discourses he studies) in Shanghai somehow changed (if not “ruptured” as he puts it), previous spatial configurations and their meaning. He argues that it was the Chinese sojourners of Shanghai themselves who generated this transformation, by actively appropriating or domesticating new technologies and products imported from elsewhere. In his interpretation, visibility and openness are hallmarks of the inclusive and democratic mind-set somehow materialized in the adapted architectural structures created in Shanghai (p. 182). I would agree with these arguments, although I sometimes see a bit too much harmony in Liang’s analysis: he does not really read the conflicts (see Bryna Goodman, Rudolf Wagner, Natascha Gentz, and Pang Laikwan 彭麗君) which are in fact also so very important to the relationship between Chinese and foreigners at the time but relegates them to later moments: “The tension between the local and the colonial was also played out in these spaces, anticipating the conflict between nationalist and imperialist interests of the later periods” (p. 182).

In the end, it is not entirely clear, from the readings given, how the spatial modernity—and especially “the decay and decline as a spatial and material process” which, according to him “is always part of modern life” (p. 182) Liang is out to describe actually maps itself onto the modernity as progress that he denies. None of the chapters actually have closing argumentative conclusions and the conclusion to the book itself, too, leaves some questions unanswered. So, in a way, the book is “titillating like a courtesan”—never quite giving what one could have expected.

A few more formal remarks some of which may go more to the press and less to the author himself: (1) The book is extremely poorly edited. The English (not only, but especially in the translations) really would have required more careful attention, it is rather unidiomatic in many places and uses a lot of skewed grammatical constructions and superfluous “the.” (2) Many of the illustrations do not quite match the text or are put in in appropriate locations. If, for example, one of the protagonists in the novel *Flowers of Shanghai* 海上花列傳, Huizhen 惠貞, has not been mentioned in the text but is already shown in the illustrations with no explanation given as to who she is, this is quite confusing to the reader (e.g. pp. 61/62). (3) While the book must be lauded for providing the Chinese terminology for many important items, it would have been even better to add characters, and to consistently provide explanations of the Chinese terms mentioned (e.g. on pp. 80, 96, 118).

To sum up: this book, unfortunately, is a mission unaccomplished: Samuel Liang sets out to write a truly interesting study, he begins with an important question of how changes in space precipitate and accelerate other transformations in the experience of Shanghai’s modernity. Unfortunately, the book falls short of its promises on many counts. One can only hope for a next try.

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