

Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life
by Jie Li, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

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Ever since Shanghai was announced as one of the five treaty ports for foreign trade at the conclusion of the Opium War in 1842, the city has emerged as a dazzling global metropolis in East Asia. Shanghai is not only a window to China's amazing economic transformation, but also an active example of China's rapid urbanization. In *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life*, Harvard assistant professor Jie Li takes readers to the local history and private stories of two Shanghai alleyway homes located in the industrial Yangpu district, where she lived with her grandparents before moving to New York at age eleven. Adopting a palimpsest approach, which is usually used in the study of architecture and ancient manuscripts, Li vividly depicts the ways in which political and economic shifts altered or failed to change the patterns of daily life and interpersonal relations over the course of the twentieth century through family letters, faded photos, intimate recollections, personal interviews and her own childhood memories.

Bracketed by an introduction and a short conclusion, the core of the book consists of four chapters, each devoted to a different theme. The first chapter, "Foothold," delineates the territorial and spatial changes of

the two houses and their neighborhoods from the 1930s to the 1990s, in particular during the Republican, Mao and reform eras. Focusing on the family histories of her paternal and maternal grandparents as they gained a foothold in Shanghai in the early 1930s, Li carefully traces the varied experiences of different individuals in a given era. For example, while the coming of the Communists brought opportunities for her maternal parents, the socialist era was a complicated time for her paternal parents, who were considered a “Rightist family” in the 1950s (pp. 44, 77). Through the decades, shifting political, familial and social circumstances resulted in spatial changes in the home, especially the ever-diminishing divisions of space to accommodate more people.

The second chapter, “Haven,” moves forward to examine the emotional aspects of the residents. Li opens the chapter with a pictorial description of a series of daily-life items, ranging from her maternal grandmother’s grain bed and her paternal grandfather’s writing desk to sewing machines kept in the homes and the radio waves that “permeated Shanghai’s alleyways and connected its domestic spaces to a broader world beyond” (p. 105). As Li convincingly argues, it is these material artifacts that made these homes into “psychological havens” (p. 89). Observing these things as living records, Li then recounts the sad stories of a number of women who had lived in the alleyway homes during the Cultural Revolution. Entering the reform era, these things again became witness to growing concerns about privacy and material comfort, and they still carry with them all the memories of alleyway lives even after the residents moved into new modern apartments.

Probably most readers will find the third chapter, “Gossip,” particularly interesting. Gossip, as in many other parts of the world, dominates and characterizes the restricted living space and close relationships between residents in Shanghai alleyways. For Li, accompanying her maternal grandmother on visits to relatives and neighbors in the alleyways is always a pleasant event. Here we read how

effectively her maternal grandmother's "pout" expressed "pity and envy" and "life's delectability and bitterness" (p. 141). But these are not the major objects of Li's observation. More important is how the lives are actually told and received in themselves, and how gossip served as a different mode of narrative production. What emerges from the alleyway gossip, Li forcefully argues, is not merely rumors of individuals, but often an "antithesis to official historiography and the state's memory of itself," which therefore can be utilized as "a privileged mode of narrative production in this metropolis from the late Qing to the present" (p. 143).

The last chapter, "Demolition", turns to Shanghai's recent urban renewal projects, which demolish the traditional alleyways to make room for modern buildings. Concentrating on the so-called "nail households," referring to those "who refuse to move and are otherwise forcibly evicted," Li outlines how some alleyway residents negotiated with the municipal government for better compensation (p. 192). As Li notes, the actions of these "nail households" mark the burgeoning awareness of the value of private property rights in current China.

As China's largest and most cosmopolitan city, Shanghai has always attracted both scholarly and amateur attention, and there has been a wide array of histories and stories of the city.¹ Full of participant observations and personal experiences, Li's book is not an objective account of Shanghai's history, urbanization or family life. Rather, by narrating stories of how life is lived and experienced from the perspectives of local residents, Li's study adds other important aspects and nuances to our understanding of Shanghai. It builds upon her own experiences and memories, and is an engaging account of Shanghai neighborhoods

¹ See, among others, Joe Gamble, *Shanghai in Transition: Changing Perspectives and Social Contours of a Chinese Metropolis* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Rob Schmitz, *Street of Eternal Happiness: Big City Dream Along a Shanghai Road* (London: John Murray Publishing, 2016).

through time. The book is mainly devoted to two Shanghai alleyways, but it also offers detailed insights into the broader cultural and historical tapestry of the city. In doing so, Li applies the evocative palimpsest approach, which treats the old homes as palimpsests of the lives and memories of many families who have inhabited them over decades. Different people have left different traces, and such traces are not to be completely erased despite wars, revolutions and reforms. Thus, the old homes are “layered ruins of their private lives, woven into but not subsumed by larger historical events” and even when people left, the past still “persisted in the form of artifacts and whispers in domestic realms” (p. 2). With the rapid demolition of the old alleyways since the 2000s, these palimpsests are valuable records of Shanghai’s micro-history that would otherwise have been soon silenced or forgotten.

In her effort to guide the readers into the lives and stories of the Shanghai alleyways, Li shifts between different genres. Outlining her research objects and methods, the introduction is written in standard academic prose. The four main chapters, however, are in general more impressionistic, consisting of many personal experiences and feelings. Often there are also long passages of direct quotations, complemented by proper photographs and illustrations, some of them line-drawings by her parents, making reading this book a real joy. Certainly this method of narrative is not the most preferred in dealing with other topics, but in this familial auto-ethnography Li has successfully demonstrated that “one’s own home and family *can* be a valid source of scholarly inquiry,” revealing “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, italics in original text). Li shall be particularly marveled at for having masterfully combined private emotions, personal memories, and historical contextual examination in her study, which is based on her undergraduate thesis at Harvard.

Meticulously researched and clearly written, this book stands as a

living human story, both global and local, that showcases the colors, textures and tastes of homes, neighborhoods and individual lives that unfold over time and across generations. Such a charming book bears interdisciplinary appeal to both scholars and general readership interested in local history, social history and city urbanization, as well as the modern history of China.