

Books

Samuel Liang

Mapping Modernity in Shanghai: Space, Gender, and Visual Culture in the Sojourners' City, 1853–98

Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2010, 218 pp., 41 b/w illus. \$130.00, ISBN 9780415569132

Increased international scholarly interest in China over the past twenty years has helped reposition Shanghai as a consequential site, not merely in the history of modern Chinese architecture and urbanism but also in the analysis of the complex interplay between empire, capitalism, and architecture. Despite such attention, however, critical and discipline-specific English-language studies of the city's built environment remain relatively few.¹ Samuel Liang's *Mapping Modernity in Shanghai: Space, Gender and Visual Culture in the Sojourners' City, 1853–1898* thus represents a noteworthy addition to an active and quickly expanding field.

Liang eschews the city's most recognizable architectural landmarks as well as the traditional periodization of its history as an international treaty port (1843–1943). Rather, his argument centers on a series of “everyday” spaces frequented by the city's Chinese population during the late nineteenth century, including courtesan houses, alleyway or *li* dwellings, the street, as well as restaurants, theaters, and gardens (3). Liang traces the origins of a spatially rooted, uniquely Chinese form of modernity to these

sites and the transformative practices, activities, and behaviors taking place within and in relation to them.

Each of the book's six chapters is loosely structured around one of these spaces. Chapter 1 begins by briefly tracing the subversive effect of literati culture on the neo-Confucian household over the course of the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties as a potential source of Chinese modernity. Chapter 2 jumps ahead in time to discuss the rise of print journalism in nineteenth-century Shanghai, its relationship to preexisting literati conventions, and its impact on the city's nascent public sphere. The rest of the book depicts the gradual erosion of traditional demarcations of private and public realms in the city brought about by new notions of gender, commerce, and social status among Chinese residents. In chapter 3, Liang sheds new light on the significance of the courtesan house as a surrogate domestic space for migrant Chinese entrepreneurs. The intimate yet ultimately transactional nature of the boudoir subverted notions of the Chinese “home” in important ways that would eventually spill out into the street itself, as demonstrated in chapter 4, which focuses on the development of Shanghai's pleasure quarter and its gradual encroachment into ostensibly residential neighborhoods of Shanghai's foreign settlements. Chapters 5 and 6 turn to notions of the spectacle in Shanghai embodied not only in its prominent Bund but also in the city's teahouses, department stores, restaurants, opium dens, and theaters.

The book's strengths lie in its vivid reconstructions of the treaty port's urban milieu from an array of Chinese-language travel accounts, guidebooks, newspapers, lithographs, and literature from the era. In detailed descriptions of these works, Liang

reveals the extent to which residents both adapted to and helped to construct, in literal and figural ways, a cityscape of disconcerting volatility. In engaging with these materials, the author productively shifts the field away from the stylistic analysis that has dominated the study of Shanghai's skyline and privileged its Western-style façades.

In his admirable efforts to challenge preexisting paradigms, however, Liang's work raises several questions. Liang acknowledges that although the opening of the city to European and North American merchants following the first Opium War (1839–42) attracted thousands of Chinese merchants to the city and affected its development, the new social and spatial configurations did not necessarily derive exclusively from foreign-induced change, nor did Chinese residents passively accept them. Liang thus tries to understand Shanghai's urban landscape as one shaped not only by “Western ideals, technology, and style,” but also by mutually responsive processes in which average Chinese residents played a critical and proactive role (11).

It is an important claim, yet one that requires more analysis of how tensions and allegiances developed in the city, both between Chinese and foreign residents and within the Chinese population itself, during the period in question. Liang fails to take into account the plethora of heated interregional rivalries, professional tensions, and newfound loyalties engendered by the confluence in the city of entrepreneurs, prostitutes, and migrant workers from every corner of the Qing realm. For all the author's stated interest in locating issues of race and gender in the broader reformulations of public and private space in the city, equally problematic and contested categorizations based on class or nationality go

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unquestioned. Ultimately, Liang's reliance on reductive categories like "Chinese" and "Western" do little to reveal the subtle fissures and inconsistencies embedded in them or the impact they had on the production and experience of the city's spaces.

It should also be noted that much of the book's source material has already been examined by scholars of Shanghai history, literature, and art.² Liang distances his work from these previous studies by situating it specifically as a study in architectural history and visual culture. In the absence of visual aids in reconstructing textual descriptions of the spaces in question, however, the reader might have a difficult time identifying the specifics of his case studies.

The author also limits his illustrations to lithographs from the Shanghai pictorial *Dianshizhai huabao* (*Dianshizhai Pictorial*), published from 1884 to 1898. He does so because photographs from the era "lack accurate dates, indexes, and provenances," whereas the drawings reproduced in his book "[allow] for much richer readings of the visual experience of the urban spaces than photographic records would" (7). It is a regrettable and an unnecessarily dogmatic position, particularly given the book's title and purported objective. The inclusion of only one general map of Shanghai, for example, prevents readers from connecting and relating the sites at the heart of the author's argument.

As for the images that are included in the volume, meanwhile, the author offers little if any formal reading of their significance as representations of space. Issues of composition, authorship, provenance, display, and dissemination all go largely unaddressed. The social, relational systems at work in representing the city's urban environment, and the generative acts of pictorial "making" that resulted, would seem to warrant greater attention.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the book represents a notable attempt to capture the cultural, social, and economic complexities of Shanghai's built environment. It also brings critical attention to an urban landscape shaped by an array of local, regional, and international forces.

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Notes

1. See, e.g., Edward Denison and Guangyu Ren, *Building Shanghai: The Story of China's Gateway* (London: Wiley-Academy, 2006).

2. See Alexander Des Forges, *Mediasphere Shanghai: The Aesthetics of Cultural Production* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Catherine Vance Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850–1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Rudolf Wagner, *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870–1910* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Robin Schuldenfrei, ed.

Atomic Dwelling: Anxiety, Domesticity, and Postwar Architecture

Abington, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2012, 301 pp., 85 b/w photos. Cloth, \$170.00, ISBN 9780415676083; paper, \$49.95, ISBN 978415676090; e-book, ISBN 9780203142721

The publication of this collection of interdisciplinary scholarly essays, many of which were presented in a session organized by the book's editor, Robin Schuldenfrei, at the 2010 conference of the Association of Art Historians, demonstrates just how far the historiography of midcentury modern architecture and material culture has come since the appearance of Thomas Hine's groundbreaking *Populuxe* in 1986.¹ In the more than twenty-five years that have elapsed since that lavishly illustrated text, replete with bold color images drawn from advertising, movies, and television, suggested to a wide readership that the field was worthy of both broad popular interest and in-depth scholarly study, investigators from a number of fields have contributed to the making of a richly detailed and critically complex historical picture of the period, its architecture, social history, and visual culture. Architectural history and design studies in this area, building on the foundation laid by the earliest research, have generally concentrated on interdisciplinary and syncretic approaches; more important—and perhaps because of the crossover activities of the principal Bauhaus designers and

their followers—architecture, interiors, and material culture have often been studied as interlocking elements rather than as separate entities or areas of study.

Collectors, curators, and researchers, ranging from online bloggers and Flickr posters to museum-based scholars and gallerists, have researched products, designers, and manufacturers, establishing reliable chronologies and identifying the many newly invented materials and production technologies that played such significant roles in the architecture and design of the period. Drawing on new archival research, scholarly monographs on architects such as Richard Neutra (the earliest of which appeared in conjunction with a Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 1982), Philip Johnson, R. M. Schindler, and Eero Saarinen, along with important new studies of the American contributions of Bauhaus masters, added much-needed historical specificity.² Moreover, collections of essays like Kathleen James-Chakraborty's edited volume *Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to the Cold War* (2006) mapped out new territories in mid-twentieth-century American architectural history, and probed deeper into a number of key historical questions, many of which had been brilliantly sketched out by William Jordy in a series of articles published in the 1960s on the aftermath of the Bauhaus and other topics.³

The collection of essays under review here forms part of a relatively recent phase in this historiographic process, one in which the focus of inquiry into the history of midcentury modern architecture has been narrowed to concentrate on in-depth investigation of specific building projects and on the reexamination of period themes and contradictions. Studies of the impact of World War II and the Cold War are obviously essential for this research, because of their pervasive influence on the built environment in general and on the domestic realm and its evolving economics and social conditions specifically. Recent books have described the impact of wartime technologies, economics, and regional experiences on the built environment in the United States from the conceptual and historiographic context in which the research initiatives of *Atomic Dwelling* took shape.⁴ These studies established an international context in which