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Notes from the alleyway: Zhang Jishun’s A City Displaced and the promise of archival research

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When I was a graduate student and for many years afterward, Chinese history stopped at 1949. Anything that occurred after that date was too recent to be history; it was a subject for political scientists and sociologists. During the ensuing decades, even as China scholarship grew and deepened, most work by historians in China and abroad continued to center on the pre-1949 period. It is only in the past decade or so that historians of modern China have begun to transcend the 1949 divide. In the United States, Dilemmas of Victory and Maoism at the Grassroots introduce some of this work. In China, the work of Yang Kuisong and other scholars at East China Normal University has been particularly stimulating, especially about the national-scale political context of the 1950s. Chen Jian’s work introduced a historical perspective on the Cold War political context of the 1950s to Anglophone audiences. Of course many other historians have also contributed to this new domain (new, that is, for the discipline of history).

However, it is still unusual to have a historian such as Zhang Jishun, who has spent many years researching Shanghai before 1949 and who is so familiar with the city’s archives, turn her attention and her skills to the post-1949 period. Her 2015 book, A City Displaced: Shanghai in the 1950s, is a groundbreaking, rich, beautifully crafted book. Like all good books, it answers some questions and also provokes new questions as yet unanswered. In this short essay I will concentrate on the book’s first chapter, which explores reform of the Shanghai lilong in the first years of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) administration, from 1949 to 1955. The term lilong is variously translated as lanes or alleyways, but lilong were sizable neighborhoods containing several thousand people, demarcated by arched gates.

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1Brown and Pickowicz, Dilemmas of Victory.
2Brown and Johnson, Maoism at the Grassroots.
3Notable books include Brown, City Versus Countryside in Mao’s China; Day, The Peasant in Postsocialist China; DeMare, Mao’s Cultural Army; Gao, The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou; Gross, Farewell to the God of Plague; Schmalzer, The People’s Peking and Green Revolution.
4Yang Kuisong, Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jianguo yu jianzhu.
5Chen, Mao’s China and the Cold War.
6This is not the place for a comprehensive review of the historically inflected work on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) done by political scientists including Perry, Anyuan; Diamant, Revolutionizing the Family and Embattled Glory; and Dillon, Radical Inequalities, or by more than a few sociologists and anthropologists. My purpose here is not to police disciplinary borders, but rather to track where historians have drawn their chronological boundaries and how those boundaries are shifting. During the past decade or so, political scientists as a group, excepting the aforementioned scholars and a few others, have begun to concentrate almost exclusively on the post-Mao reform era.
7Zhang Jishun, Yuanqu de dushi.
Building on but also departing from Zhang’s work, I offer some observations about the various forms of class politics that emerged in the first years of the PRC. I end with a brief reflection on what archives can and cannot do for our understanding of what happened when a revolutionary program arrived in an alleyway.

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Zhang Jishun shows us that when the CCP moved into the cities, it found a world where its previous strategies about class alliances, devised in the villages, did not work. Of course, in the villages, class relationships were also very complex, and it is debatable whether the demarcations of class background developed by the CCP were nuanced enough to adequately describe social relationships in the countryside either. However, in the  lilong of Shanghai, Zhang Jishun tells us, the situation was far more complex. Every  lilong had a somewhat mixed population in class terms, and much of that population was recently arrived or transient. Paradoxically, relationships in the  lilong were characterized on the one hand by disrupted social networks – people didn’t necessarily live with others from the same class, native place, or occupation – and on the other hand by active and sometimes competing groupings of native place, occupation, gangs, and religious practice. Furthermore, the  lilong were not exclusively residential areas; they contained many small manufacturing and service businesses.

It is not surprising that it took the Communists a long time – about six years – to establish a form of local governance in the  lilong that came close to CCP standards of political reliability. A change in state power does not change everything overnight. The 1949 divide that used to mark the boundary between history and political science did not transform Shanghai until the Party and its nascent state began to inaugurate change, and that took time. In my own research on prostitution in Shanghai, I learned that only in late 1951 did the city government begin to round up prostitutes for a program of reform. Prior to that, in spite of the Party’s position on prostitution, the new municipal leadership did not have the time or the cadre power to undertake such a campaign. As Zhang Jishun shows us, reorganizing the  lilong was in many ways more complicated than reforming prostitutes.

What is surprising in Zhang Jishun’s account is that the CCP managed to produce a significant amount of change in the  lilong before the Party had a reliable group of people installed in the Residents Committees, the new local governance organizations. As it turns out, politically unreliable people often made a big contribution toward stabilizing life in the  lilong. They included former heads of the neighborhood security  baojia, gang members, members of religious sects, manufacturers, and business people. These people staffed the committees set up by the CCP to clean the lanes, prevent fires, register the unemployed, and sell government bonds. When their perception of their own interests overlapped with the Party–state agenda, they could be very helpful allies. They might have been politically impure, but they were effective at collecting the garbage, administering rudimentary social welfare, and even raising funds to support the new state. The rationale behind the Party’s mobilization of these people appears to have been derived less from formulations about the United Front or New Democracy

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8Hershatter, Dangerous Pleasures, 304–310.
and more from a practical, untheorized dictum to use all available human resources in a situation of extreme need and instability.

Yet this loose confederation of alleyway interests was not to last. Zhang examines the Party–state’s move to reorganize the *lilong* in 1954 and 1955 through a political campaign that followed a strict class line. When the city government tried to purify the Residents Committees, it found quite a few unorthodox committee members. One 1955 city report quoted by Zhang mentions an alley neighborhood where 34 of 47 committee members (72.3 percent) had “serious political historical problems” (*yanzhong zhengzhi lishi wenti*). This dismal catalogue of miscreants included three vice-chairs, of whom two were special agents and one a local bandit. The two have been arrested and the one put under surveillance. As for the chair and vice-chair for culture and education, one was a special agent and the other a threat to social order. The chair in charge of mediating conflicts had been a backbone cadre in the enemy puppet special agent organization [during the Japanese occupation]. The chair in charge of hygiene was a criminal narcotics trafficker. The chair in charge of public security had been a military officer in the puppet regime. The chair in charge of welfare was a hoodlum, the women’s chair was a madam (already arrested), and the vice-chair for women was a prostitute undergoing reform through labor. Aside from these, there were still 23 other ordinary committee members who had serious political historical problems.9

The campaign to reorganize the *lilong* was followed by one to implement an urban grain supply system. Because grain was distributed by household and later by individual, this required investigating who ate where, one alleyway dwelling at a time. This would not have been possible without the Residents Committees, who did the investigative work. Housewives, who were by this time an important part of the committees, played a crucial role.10 Their activities became the basis for a new bond between the alleyway populations and the emergent Party–state in Shanghai.

When we think about the role of the Party in 1950s cities, putting *lilong* at the center of the inquiry pushes us to reconsider the relationship between a class line and an effective political strategy. With a class line, the central questions are straightforward: Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? But a political strategy, even one devised with a careful analysis of class, can ignore or accommodate class differences. It can work with uncomfortable situations, such as the fact acknowledged in many archival reports that city officials found more political problems with Residents Committees in lower-class districts than in upper-class ones. The flexible political strategy adopted by the Party prior to the *lilong* reorganization campaign not only put dubious characters to work ensuring order in the alleyways, but also built unexpected coalitions, turning unemployed men and housewives into very effective extensions of local government.

Zhang Jishun calls the speed and smoothness of the transition to Communist rule the “Shanghai miracle” (*Shanghai qiji*).11 Perhaps the “Shanghai miracle” is that so much change happened before 1955, with such a motley crew of people implementing Party policy in the alleyways. It appears that the CCP’s flexible strategy – use what you have – actually drew upon a wider and more effective range of human resources than a strict class line based on clearly defined labels would have permitted. It could be argued

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10On this point, see also Wang, “State Feminism?.”
that the very early years of Party–state governance in Shanghai exhibited a relatively open sense of political process, albeit one produced by necessity rather than preference: a willingness to regard politics, including class politics, as an evolving and unstable series of relationships, rather than reverting to an inert system of labels.

Perhaps an extension of this flexible approach was not imaginable, given the international situation and the extended process of securing parts of the former Qing Empire that had slipped from central control during the decades preceding 1949. Reading the final part of this chapter, however, I cannot help but wonder whether the class-line policy was really more effective than the earlier, more flexible political strategy. It did establish a higher degree of control and planning, and it eliminated certain kinds of corruption and extortion. Yet it also produced new social tensions, even if they were not always openly expressed. These tensions then necessitated more political control, in an unvirtuous cycle that had many later consequences, both for Shanghai and for socialism. Not least among these, for the rest of China as well as for Shanghai, was the ossification of class labels that became obsolete even as they were bestowed, an ossification that foreclosed the possibility of a more supple political analysis and a language that could articulate post-1949 inequalities. What was lost with the tightening of criteria in 1954–1955 is a question worth exploring.

In short, Zhang Jishun’s analysis of the Party–state’s strategy in gaining control of the lilong evokes a new appreciation of how mixed and transient local-level society was, and how difficult it was to understand, much less to control. Her close tracing of the logics of lilong governance also provides a new perspective on the narrower campaigns that many Shanghai scholars have studied, such as (to take an example from my own research) the campaign to end prostitution. In the campaign documents I examined, the story of brothel closings and prostitute reform tends to end with the women’s reintegration into society: some were sent back to their rural places of origin, some were shipped off to settle in Xinjiang, and some were reintegrated into Shanghai neighborhoods. The narrative of the campaign, assembled from archival documents, news reports, and oral histories, models a successful trajectory. But among the many stories of reorganizing the lilong in the archival reports, Zhang finds information about secret prostitutes continuing to operate into 1953 and probably beyond, along with many other unsavory elements: disciples of former Green Gang leader Huang Jinrong, drug dealers, hoodlums, petty thieves, underground dancing girls, one “black lawyer” (heilūshi), a hotel that catered to men looking for sexual services, and various delinquents (afei). If we start from the perspective of the alleyway rather than the reform campaign, prostitutes (sichang), not necessarily the same women who went through the reform process, can be found thriving side by side with small numbers of petty criminals of all sorts. Starting from the lilong as a complex and unstable community allows us to evaluate the success of Party–state projects in a way that a campaign-focused archival research strategy does not.

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In her introduction to A City Displaced, Zhang Jishun expresses her desire to move beyond an overly simple bifurcation between state and society. Yet this first chapter on the alleyways is inevitably structured around what the Party–state tried to do in the
and how Party-state organizations assess their own success. This is partly because of the nature of the sources. They are largely archival reports from the city administration, often including investigations of the social conditions in particular lanes. The archives are a record of the state talking to itself. So if we stay with archival documents, it is difficult to escape the framework of what we might summarize as “the state tries this policy, and here is what it encounters in the way of local response.” The archives tell us what the state was interested in at a particular conjuncture. They do not tell us everything we want to know about the lilong. What changes were most important to local residents? How did they understand their own role in changing the environment of their families, their neighborhoods, and Shanghai in the 1950s? From their point of view, what were the moments of most intense change, or the moment when those changes became the new normal? It is very difficult to get at such questions through archival documents generated by the state as it tried to refine and improve its work. This is not a shortcoming in the work of Zhang Jishun. It is just a limitation of the sources, one that historians have to accept.

Nevertheless, even given these limitations, in her overall strategy for the book Zhang Jishun makes an important contribution to developing a more satisfactory approach to the process of social change. She does this by changing the focus of her book in each chapter. Chapter 1, about the lilong, establishes that governing them was not a single project, but rather a cluster of partially overlapping projects. Chapter 2 talks about the general elections (puxuan) of 1953–1954, in the process providing insight into the intersections between residential life, work units such as factories, and lower-class society. Chapter 3 traces transformation in a single industry, as the private news press was converted to one controlled by the Party between 1949 and 1953. Chapter 4 approaches the cultural history of Shanghai through the biography of two cosmopolitan intellectuals, brothers educated at St. John’s University, widening the temporal lens to cover their activities across the tumultuous three decades from 1930 to 1960. Chapter 5 explores the cultural life of Shanghai in the first decade of the PRC, with particular attention to the popularity of Hong Kong films and movie advertisements. Each of these chapters is a terrific contribution on its own, but the whole is greater than the sum of its very good parts. This is because, in reading these essays as an ensemble, we become aware of just how complex Shanghai’s “displacement” was from its pre-1949 time and space.

The word “displaced” in the English title is not used in a psychoanalytic sense, but rather in the sense of “displaced persons.” The revolutionary process, in the alleyways and elsewhere, certainly jarred many aspects of Shanghai life loose from their previous moorings. And yet neither the English title, “a city displaced,” nor the Chinese title, which can be read as “a city that has gone far away,” is completely satisfactory, because Zhang consistently directs our attention in each chapter to aspects of earlier daily life that have left profound traces or have returned in new forms. To reconstruct that faraway, long-ago city that nonetheless retains much of its former self, an urban history

12Recently, several fine studies of the Shanghai lilong after 1949 have begun to explore memoirs and oral narratives as sources, with compelling results. See, for example, Shao, Shanghai Gone, and Li, Shanghai Homes. Such sources, compiled or collected decades after the events they describe, are invariably inflected by the passage of time and by the effects of subsequent events. For a discussion of the complicated nature of oral narratives in a rural setting, see also Hershatter, The Gender of Memory.
of the 1950s needs to keep all of Zhang’s different topics, state projects, angles of view, and temporalities in mind.

Through her meticulous historical practice, Zhang Jishun shows us why we cannot reduce the history of the 1950s in China to a series of national political campaigns or simple transformations. Place mattered, and within a place like Shanghai, location, class position, education, type of work, and many other factors also mattered. Zhang Jishun shows us that “Shanghai” was not a unitary, homogenous place and that “liberation” or “reorganization” or “displacement” was not a unitary process, but rather one entailing different temporalities, as reflected in her different chapters. Evocative as it is, the title of this book should not be understood as suggesting that the city of Shanghai was displaced in a single moment or moved in a single direction. Zhang Jishun has pioneered a fine-grained analysis of urban change. A City Displaced challenges us to continue exploring the questions she has raised and to seek further answers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Gail HERSHATTER is Distinguished Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a former president of the Association for Asian Studies. Her works include The Workers of Tianjin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986; Chinese translation 2016); Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s, coauthored with Emily Honig (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution in Twentieth-Century Shanghai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; Chinese translation 2003); Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011; Chinese translation forthcoming). She is writing a history of women and China’s revolutions, 1800 to the present.

Glossary

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