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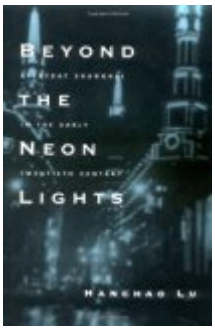
Lu Hanchao. *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xvii + 456 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-21564-1.



Reviewed by James H. Carter

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In *Beyond the Neon Lights*, Lu Hanchao has given us an authoritative, lively, and detailed account of the lives of lower-, working-, and middle-class Chinese living in Shanghai following the fall of China's last imperial dynasty. Although less theoretically ambitious than many of the other recent monographs on Chinese urban history (and the history of Shanghai especially), the book does make important contributions to theoretical debates such as the role of the public sphere in China. Most importantly, the book succeeds in bringing to light the lives of ordinary citizens, protagonists often absent from those other works.

Chinese urban history has exploded in recent years, with more than a dozen monographs and conference volumes appearing in the last decade. Beijing, Tianjin, Chongqing, Chengdu, Harbin, Suzhou, Hangzhou and other cities have been included in this scholarship, but studies on all these cities can at best equal the amount of scholarship devoted to Shanghai.[1] The diverse foreign and Chinese population, commercial vitality, and rapid modernization of the city, as well as its near-mythic status as the most exotic of Asian ports, all help account for the city's popularity as a subject of study.

Shanghai's emergence as a trade entrepot and modern city coincided with the growth of Western domination and semi-colonialism in China. Because of this, Shanghai is frequently used as a lens through which to analyze and theorize on broad institutions present in modern China. Imperialism, race, colonialism, modernity, orientalism, all these and others have been studied with great success by looking at Shanghai.

This is not, however, the topic of Lu's book. Although the author does theorize on the relationship between Shanghai and modern China in general (he sees "pragmatism" as the driving force behind the survival of both in the 20th century), this is not the book's great value. Rather, this book vividly describes the daily lives of most Shanghai residents during the early 20th-century. This book belongs on the short list for anyone seeking to understand modern China, not to mention modern Shanghai.

The book also has value for comparativists. Chapter 2, "The World of Rickshaws," provides in-

sights and analysis of dealings between foreign rickshaw passengers and lower-class Chinese pullers. These encounters, often apparently struggles between pullers trying to cheat their customers and customers trying to similarly cheat their employees. Likewise, scholars of migration can find comparative examples in chapter one, "Going to Shanghai." Although this chapter does not systematically engage much of the theoretical work done recently on native place ties [for instance Bryna Goodman's *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937* (University of California Press, 1995)], it does illustrate the practical roles such ties played in people's daily lives. Scholars of economic history can assess the models and examples of China's growing middle class in chapter 4, "The Homes of the Little Urbanites," while Chapter Five, "Behind Stone Portals" and Chapter Six "Beyond Stone Portals" portray politics at its most local, useful for political historians and political scientists. Architectural historians will find especially useful the detailed assessment of the "shikumen" homes of the growing middle class.

But to use this book for only its comparative value would be to miss its primary contribution. Nowhere else in the modern literature is there such a detailed portrait of the lives of ordinary individuals, from rickshaw pullers and nightsoil disposers to peddlers and small shopkeepers. Other books, like Honig's *Sisters and Strangers*, Hershatter's *Dangerous Pleasures* or Wakeman's *Policing Shanghai*--have given detailed accounts of more specific segments of the city's population, but Lu's book is valuable precisely for its breadth. Anyone wanting a broad understanding of how people in Shanghai actually lived should look here. For example, instructors of undergraduates who want to lecture on daily life in Shanghai or daily life in the Republican-era city will find here more than enough anecdotes and characters to make their points.

Although Lu is insistent that, "for millions of peasants, an urban life, no matter how arduous and difficult, meant a better life,"(66) his images of the urban poor are among the book's most compelling. No one who has spent significant time in China can fail to be moved by the tale of people like Liu Zhikang, a dockworker whose home was a public lavatory from the ages of twelve to sixteen (126).

The book is not a theoretical work, and its weakest moments come when it tries to be one. The model of "pragmatism" as the driving force in modern China was too vague to convince this reviewer of its utility. The book's concluding chapter, which attempts to project forward through the People's Republic, lacked the specific evidence that made the rest of the book so valuable, and is thus a weak ending to an otherwise authoritative volume.

The author is more successful seeking a theoretical contribution to the public-sphere/private-sphere debates that have figured prominently in the last decade or more of scholarship on modern China. He argues that a fuller understanding of existence or relevance of a public sphere in requires the sort of thick description of quotidian life that he seeks to provide here. The author's insistence, concluding his introduction, that "we need a more detailed and nuanced picture of the life of the ordinary people before we can that any theoretical construct has meaningfully framed the nature of Chinese history" (21) may strike the more theoretically inclined as an attempt to explain away the overall lack of theorizing in the book. Yet, to this reviewer it is a sound and valid call to ground theoretical work in empirical research.

These should not distract, though, from the book's fundamental importance. In _Beyond the Neon Lights, Lu Hanchao sets out to show readers what life for everyday people in Shanghai was like. Using newspapers, archives, contemporary

accounts, and interviews, he has succeeded admirably.

[1]. As just some examples of this literature, see Joseph Esherick (ed.), ***Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900-1950*** (University of Hawaii Press, 1999); Xu Yinong, ***The Chinese City in Space and Time: The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou*** (University of Hawaii, 2001); Kristin Stapleton, ***Civilizing Chengdu: Chinese Urban Reform, 1895-1937*** (Harvard University Press, 2000). On Shanghai specifically, see Gail Hershatter, ***Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*** (University of California Press, 1999); Emily Honig, ***Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949*** (Stanford University Press, 1992) Christian Henriot, ***Shanghai, 1927-1937: Municipal Power, Locality, and Modernization*** (University of California Press, 1993); Frederick Wakeman, Jr., ***Policing Shanghai 1927-1937*** (University of California Press, 1996); Leo Ou-Fan Lee, ***Shanghai Modern : The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*** (Harvard University Press, 1999).

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