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REVIEW ESSAY

Where Is the City? Excavating Modern Beijing and Shanghai in Textual and Visual Cultures

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William Schaefer. *Shadow Modernism: Photography, Writing, and Space in Shanghai, 1925–1937*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 304 pp. \$95 (cloth); \$27 (paper/e-book).

Weijie Song. *Mapping Modern Beijing: Space, Emotion, Literary Topography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 320 pp. \$74 (cloth).

In recent years, it has become something of a cliché to note the radical changes in China’s cities. Everywhere, demolition and redevelopment have been ongoing seemingly for decades without any end in sight. Meanwhile, migrants from the countryside and small towns continue to venture to the metropolises in search of work and new lives, though they are all too frequently met with hostility from the city’s residents as well as various others keen at turns to exploit and expel them. As testified by Beijing’s recent campaign to purge migrant tenements and “brick up” mostly migrant-run businesses, Chinese cities often present a challenging terrain for newcomers.

And yet, the draw of the city is as powerful as ever. Amid all this agonizing change and growth, it can be easy to overlook the continuity in China’s urban convulsions. The disorienting maelstrom of urban life that certainly characterizes this current moment and has inspired a surge in scholarly interest in Chinese cities and artistic experiments was also very much a defining feature of life a century ago. Indeed, given the political instability of that earlier moment—the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the rise of the Republic, the spread of warlordism, the formation of communist insurgent groups, and encroaching European imperialism and Japanese militarism—the social shifts that played out in Chinese cities were perhaps even more troubling to those who

experienced it contemporaneously. China's impressive urban cultural ferment during what we might call the "long turn of the twentieth century" would, at least, seem to support such a view. And, indeed, a great amount of exceptional scholarly work on China has focused on precisely that pivotal period, when the country was perpetually on the cusp of revolution.

Two new books have recently contributed to the body of research focused on Chinese urbanism in the early twentieth century: William Schaefer's *Shadow Modernism: Photography, Writing, and Space in Shanghai, 1925–1937* and Weijie Song's *Mapping Modern Beijing: Space, Emotion, Literary Topography*. As their titles suggest, both books are directly concerned with one of China's great cities, each of which has received lavish attention from scholars in the past. But the approaches of these books do not fit in the genre of urban biographies; instead, Schaefer and Song treat their subject cities as social-spatial artifacts generated through a host of material and symbolic presences articulated in an array of visual and literary cultural productions, a fair portion of which has been overlooked in the existing literature. As such, each author's respective city takes shape as a space through which to advance intricate and highly original arguments about images, representation, text, culture, space, history, and, of course, the city.

Yet, although both these books centrally place their subject cities in their analyses, they are conceived in quite different ways determined by the kinds of materials analyzed, the disparate groups on which the authors focus, and the divergent histories of these two cities. Another, hardly trivial, difference between these texts is the palpable affection for place, what Yi-Fu Tuan (1990) called *topophilia*, that resonates through Song's work in contrast to the more detached position taken by Schaefer—a product, perhaps, of the theme of fragmentation that more forcefully frames the latter's analysis. Like many of the world's great cities, Beijing elicits profound affect, which Song charts in a wide collection of literary works and quite clearly shares with the writers he carefully, even lovingly, unpacks. In Schaefer's telling, Shanghai is haunted by the specters of history and semicolonial daily life, a circumstance he shows to be deeply alienating and alienated.

William Schaefer's *Shadow Modernism* is particularly concerned with excavating modernist visual and literary experiments undertaken by a fairly small cast of Shanghai-based intellectuals during an uncertain, and ultimately disrupted, Republican consolidation from the late 1920s into the 1930s. Through these various works, Schaefer shows that Shanghai occupied a unique position from which thinkers were able to comment on the sudden tectonic shifts then remaking China. But rather than regarding Shanghai as a gateway mediating an encroaching

modernity or articulating some indigenous Chinese modernity, the crucial politics of the intellectual work carried out in this place and time were aimed at questioning, Schaefer says, the “historical and geographical assumptions” (10) that have informed the structuring tropes of historical rupture and unity, as well as spatial exclusion and incorporation within an emerging world system. Schaefer’s inspired analysis of Shanghai modernists is squarely aimed at such conventional, arguably teleological interpretations of urban modernism brought to China. He reveals how a group of influential thinkers plunged into ongoing transnational debates about representation and images and, in the process, gave expression to novel, pluralistic redefinitions of modern life that were not, as is often assumed of intellectuals of the era, intent on cleanly resolving Chinese history and geopolitical standing. On the contrary, Shanghai modernists engaged in more probing examinations of the confusing multiplicity of the modern age.

The first part of the book, titled “Modernism and Photography’s Places,” develops this argument in two chapters through explorations of photography and image-inspired texts produced within Shanghai’s modernist milieu. Of particular interest in the first chapter of this section are intellectual debates engaged in by critics like Feng Zikai, Zong Baihua, and Fu Lei, which centered on critiques of photography’s ostensible objective transcription of reality and the mapping of such claims onto essentialist notions of China and the West. Recognition among these intellectuals that photographic technique could create highly abstract compositions, as revealed in the artistic images and layouts created for the popular illustrated magazine *Liangyou huabao* (Young companion), inspired readings of the medium as echoing Chinese ink painting traditions, the essence of which was held to be the creation of abstract tableaux through compositions of line, form, and empty space unconstrained by the realism that characterized Western painting’s perspectivalism. It’s through this lens that Feng came to herald postimpressionism and abstract expressionism as Western recuperations of ancient Chinese pictorial concepts, a perhaps dubious analytical maneuver, but one that nevertheless helped to carry forward other penetrating insights into the nature of images and their expressive possibilities. For example, the understanding of photographic images as emerging through eminently material processes involving the camera, photosensitive film, chemical solutions, and paper spurred keen attention to the materiality of photography and images and the creative possibilities of photographic plays with light, shadow, shape, and opacity. “Photographs were revealed to be characterized not so much by their fixity as by their strange powers of mutability and deformation and synthesis,” Schaefer writes (51). It is,

then, through this power of abstraction that successful photographic images achieve the critical quality of “enlivenment” (*shengdong*), which Feng adopts from the ninth-century thinker Zhang Yanyuan and filters through the writings of Wassily Kandinsky to refer to the avoidance of deadening formal likeness in favor of expressing vital “spirit resonance” afforded by the pictorial manifestation of interior worlds.

Chapter 2 picks up on the theme of enlivenment to engage a number of intensely close readings of photographs printed in *Liangyou huabao* and experimental texts that appeared in a handful of influential but small-circulation and short-lived journals. Here Schaefer draws attention to a number of pictorial innovations facilitated by the photographic medium and magazine layout. In particular, he finds *Liangyou huabao* to be a space where tensions between transparency, depth of field, opacity, and realism were front and center. Two of the magazine’s layouts from 1930 nicely bear out this problematic. In the first example, two full-page facing images show, on the left, a picture of New York’s Broadway through a portico and, on the facing page, an image of the Great Wall also seen through an opening in a guard tower. In this instance, juxtaposition is generated as a comment on essential civilizational difference. Yet, Schaefer notes, modernists like Feng were fully attuned to how the design of this type of juxtaposition is also an artifact of image manipulations whose stimulating contrasts actively produce new human experiences and awarenesses—or enliven the image in profound ways by first undercutting the notion that photographs are transparent windows upon reality (ironic, given the window framing of these particular images). The potential of such mutability is reaffirmed in the second layout, which sets up an image of birdcages on one side and a picture of lotus leaves on the other. The repetition of the circular forms overwhelms the specificity of the represented objects, transforming images of specific things into abstract visual displays of line and form. In text, as well, poetry by writers like French poets Pierre Reverdy and Guillaume Apollinaire, translated by Shanghai modernists and published in the journal *Xiandai (Les Contemporains)*, was dissolving the boundary between word and image through an emphasis on fragments and surfaces, themes that resonated to the disjunctive development of these thinkers’ adopted city.

Whereas the first part of *Shadow Modernism* is attentive to the production and qualities of images and modernists’ reactions to them, its second part, “Landscapes of Images,” consistently locates space and spatial metaphors as a central concern for modernists in Shanghai. Building on the previous chapters, this section carries the dominant motifs of fragmentation and disjuncture

through analyses of fictional text and artistic photography. Chapter 3 revolves around Shi Zhecun's short story "Mo dao" (Devil's way), a tale of a man's descent into mental degeneration sparked by urban anomie and driven by specters of the past, which the man sees all around him. As with the materiality of photographic images, Shi's text plays with the elements of light and shadow to depict a Shanghai beset by spectral presences from China's past. By bringing disparate Chinese places and times into the frame of contemporary experience, Schaefer argues, Shi's modernist fiction signifies intellectual projects aimed at disrupting linear narrations of the past and thereby also bringing into question historical national continuity. Fragmentation drives the analysis in chapter 4 as well. This chapter focuses on montage depictions of Shanghai published in *Shidai manhua* (Modern sketch) and *Liangyou Huabao*, photographic artwork by Lang Jingshan, and fiction and critique by such figures as Fu Lei and Mu Shiying. Drawing on contemporaneous techniques of montage derived from film, modernists sought to decipher and present Shanghai and China through composite impressions of dismembered artifacts. Thus, in a montage layout titled *Ruci Shanghai* (Such is Shanghai) in *Liangyou huabao* and another collage image titled *Shanghai fengjing* (Shanghai landscape) in *Shidai manhua*, both from 1934, the city is generated through bits and pieces of bodies and built environments violently taken apart and recomposed in incongruous ways. Schaefer sees analogous reordering of space in two other images published in *Shidai manhua*: one, from 1936, shows Shanghai's Bund with Mt. Fuji looming in the background; the other, from 1937, depicts a radical juxtaposition of a Western-style skyscraper and a slum dwelling adjacent to a racetrack. Nonexistent landscapes composed through montage, exemplified in these images, Schaefer notes, became a powerful tool for modernists to comment at once on Shanghai's position at the margins of empires and history.

The final chapter of *Shadow Modernism* is similarly concerned with China's geographical situation and its relation to civilizational definition at this critical moment. The chapter explores this question in terms of representations of race and how such representations in modernist texts and images hinged upon depictions of the "savage" and geographical mappings of center-periphery coordinates. What Schaefer finds most curious about representations in Shanghai's popular media of Caucasians, African Americans, and various ethnic "others" in China itself is the conspicuous invisibility of the Han dynasty in the construction of racial identities. Against a tendency to see the crystallization of Chinese identity in contradistinction to racial others, however, Schaefer regards modernist racial representations, including the absence of Han, as

undercutting any such stability, presenting instead an implicitly fragmentary and shifting notion of Chinese identities. From the vantage point of semicolonial Shanghai, where geopolitical power and racial identities were intimately intertwined, such a complex disjunctive reading of the cultural moment is both refreshing and compelling.

Weijie Song's *Mapping Modern Beijing* treads some of the same thematic terrain as *Shadow Modernism*. Fragmentation, dislocation, anxiety, and irresolution reverberate throughout the book's five chapters, each of which follows various writers' charting of changes in daily modern life in Beijing. Yet, more than in Schaefer's book, the central city figures as a key character in the diverse fictional plotlines, becoming absorbing fixations of the writers and the characters they create. Taking urban spaces as "sociocultural constructs and always overlain by affective attachments" (2), Song shows how Beijing's geographies of emotion detailed in urban literature plotted a distinctive modernization path in the first half of the twentieth century. Much of the material Song surveys is well known and was popular during its own time, including Lao She's play *Chaguan* 茶馆 (*Teahouse*, 1957) and Lin Huiyin's Beijing-inspired writings. But the approach here is original for its explorations of the complex, often tender relationships between authors and Beijing and how these relationships draw upon and nurture a structure of feeling that brings to the city that which makes it so singular in its unique multiplicity. As Song avers, the "literary creation of an aesthetic Beijing is a crucial part of the formation of Chinese literary modernity" (26).

The chapters of *Mapping Modern Beijing* are structured in a roughly chronological fashion, tracking the production of Beijing stories from the end of the Qing to the height of the Cold War. Thus, it begins with Lao She and his popular fiction *Luotuo xiangzi* 骆驼祥子 (*Rickshaw Boy*, 1937), *Longxu gou* 龙须沟 (*Dragon Beard Ditch*, 1949), and *Teahouse*, works that document the descent and degradation of post-Qing Beijing. Setting his stories in a Beijing plundered by foreign forces, beset by a cast of venal politicians and scoundrels, and even demoted from its position as capital, Lao She, Song argues, displays a deep empathy for a city and society sundered by overpowering currents of Chinese history yet persist all the same. Tumultuous times are a continual source of disappointments, ecstasies, and torment. These are particularly strong in Zhang Henshui's popular eighty-six-part serial fiction *Chunming waishi* 春明外史 (*Unofficial*

History of Beijing, 1924–1929) (chapter 2) and Lin Yutang’s idealized portraits of the city (chapter 4).

The pathos that animates the emotional topographies Song sets out to chart in relation to texts on Beijing is at its most poignant, however, in texts that register profound senses of loss and longing. For Lin Huiyin, as for her husband Liang Sicheng, Beijing was more than a city; it was a repository of ancient grandeur and aspirations, yet always under threat (chapter 3). Something lugubrious hangs over the city in Lin’s intricate detailing of the pace and mundane features of city life, placing the city deep in the heart but somehow also unreachable. These sentiments for Lin were, of course, amplified during her flight from the city during the war with Japan and her subsequent struggle to preserve the ancient city against Soviet advice to tear it down and build it anew. Given her attachments to the city, the newly installed Mao regime’s rejection of her and Liang’s preservation plan for Beijing struck a devastating blow, Song argues, leaving her in a state of mourning. Song notes, “What was left for a poet to hear—the sorrowful silent sighs emanating from deep recesses of old Beijing?” (150). Loss and distance also characterize the atmospheres of Beijing in fictional works by Princess Der Ling and Victor Segalen (chapter 4), both of whom are distanced from the actual city and thus create essentialized, Orientalized, and inscrutable fantasies in its place. Song finds much the same effects registered in the works of Zhong Lihe and Lin Haiyin, Taiwanese writers who spent years in Beijing and produced memorable accounts of their experiences of the city as outsiders seeking rootedness in an imagined civilizational hearth (chapter 5). In Lin Haiyin’s bestselling *Chengnan jiushi* 城南旧事 (*Memories of Beijing: South Side Stories*, 1960), Beijing is a space of reminiscence in disparate fragments colored by the fondness of youth and bitterness of the political turmoil that punctuated her quarter-century stay in the city. But it is arguably Liang Shiqiu’s nostalgic cataloguing of Beijing’s rich gastronomic culture that most plainly exhibits the affective experience of loss of the city (chapter 5). Having relocated to Taiwan after 1949, Liang shows how smells and flavors become place markers for a kind of memory mapping aimed at keeping alive a city that had become increasingly remote with time.

Given the centrality of the city in the two books reviewed, a question asserts itself in these texts, one that follows urban studies like a shadow: where is the city? Of course, definitions of the city are multiple and contradictory and have been for a long time. Much excellent theorizing,

including the work of Georg Simmel, Lewis Mumford, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and David Harvey, has shown the impossibility of pinning down such a restless geography in time and place. Little wonder, then, that Song quotes Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* (1972) at several points to evoke the city as a dreamscape, at once material and utterly invisible. So, too, Schaefer finds modernists' fascination with Shanghai articulating itself as an elusive presence full of shadows, whispers, and unknowable corners that seem to contain within them the traces of the actual, lived material city just at the limits of perception. Hence the recurring effort to faithfully represent space through arrangements of deracinated, anachronic, and placeless fragments. In this light, there is little use in asking "what" precisely a city might be. Rather, one might ask where the city exists and what makes up its content in space and time.

As a geographer reading these texts, I am struck by the mediated encounters with the city that they provide; one is in the position of reading writers, who write about writers writing about the city. At this point of remove, in reading about a city, one performs a sort of archaeology, sifting through layers of sediments that reveal the city only in pieces—much as one is obliged to discover any city, even one with which we are intimately familiar. It is perhaps for this reason that Schaefer describes his methodology as an excavation of a "geologic core sample" (17) of Shanghai modernist culture.

The careful treatments of these cities and people's relationships with them make *Shadow Modernism* and *Mapping Modern Beijing* eminently rewarding reads. They shed new light on much familiar material while unearthing work that has escaped the attention of scholars to date. They also underscore why it is that these two cities, like a handful of other "world cities," have persisted as motors of cultural change down to the present. Both books are remarkable contributions and deserve close attention from historians, geographers, and urbanists well beyond the field of Chinese studies.

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References

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