Place Attachment, Social Memory, and Neighborhood Gentrification in Post-Reform Shanghai:

Ethnographic Perspectives

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Abstract

Under the conceptual umbrella of "Shanghai nostalgia," I examine in this article the impact of the collect memories of the city's neighborhoods dichotomized as the "upper and lower quarters" on community-building and place-making processes in both Puxi (West Bank of Pujiang River) and Pudong (East Bank). The large-scale changes that affected many parts of Shanghai since the early 1990s made it easy for us to assume that territoriality has become less an issue than it was in the recent past. Over the course of my field research conducted intermittently between 1999 and 2007, however, I came to realize that the age-old dichotomy between the lower quarter and upper quarter had hardly been blurred by the profound social transformations. I found, rather, that the notions of the "lower uppers" and "upper quarters" were among the most meaningful categories of articulating one's status and position in a rapidly stratified late socialist society. Such a binary opposition between the high and low, as I will show in this article, has not lost its currency in the everyday discourse. The persistence of the dichotomy points to the limits of the post-1945 social engineering attempts at eliminating inequality and disparity within and between residential quarters.

Mapping "Shanghai nostalgia" in time and space, this article attempts to locate the cultural symbols in actual sites so that upper quarters and lower quarters as imagined communities come to be attached to imagined places. I argue that in making and remaking downtown as a city center, older ideas of downtown often inform our current understandings of what it could and should be. These urban ideologies are manifested in the dichotomy of high/low quarters and intersect with material processes that have shaped downtowns in Puxi and Pudong the past and recent appropriations and transformations of those spaces based on current interests and designs.

Making explicit links between local history, structural power, and places-making processes, this article investigates the intertwined relationship between globalization, urban revitalization, and neighborhood gentrification in downtown Shanghai. Echoing anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's call to "put hierarchy in its place," I probe the local grounding of the ongoing place-making processes in terms of the "lower/higher quarter" dichotomy reminiscent of the colonial era and the apparent contradictions in the politics of planning. Using the intimate perspectives provided by ethnographic fieldwork, I examine the significance of locality power embedded in the dichotomy – the ways in which it is exploited, the memories to which it is linked, and more importantly, the explanations it provides for present-day reconfigurations of social space and redistributions of cultural resource in China's most cosmopolitan city.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s infrastructural reconstruction has affected every corner of the city of Shanghai: ring roads, suspension bridges, tunnels, viaducts, subways and inter-city commuter
rails, and maglev trains were built simultaneously along with thousands of high-rise apartments and office buildings. These large-scale changes have significantly altered the landscape of one of the most cosmopolitan cities. Dazzled by such time-space compression, one would be tempted to assume that territoriality which used to characterize Shanghai as a city of neighborhoods will become much less an issue for the local residents. Based on ethnographic research and field observations conducted intermittently in different urban communities from 1999 to 2007, I contend that the profound social and economic transformations have failed to blur the age-old dichotomy between the lower quarter (low end) and upper quarter (high end). From the colonial past to socialist present, the “lower quarters” and “upper quarters” were among the most meaningful categories of articulating one’s status and position in society. In everyday discourse, the lower/upper quarter dichotomy has remained a linguistic device strategically appropriated by the Shanghainese to map out their neighborhoods and their perception of the social and economic reality of where they belonged. Such a binary opposition between the high and low, as I will show in this article, has hardly lost its currency in contemporary Shanghai. The persistence of the dichotomy points to the limits of the social engineering attempts (1949-1978) and post-reform community development efforts (1978-present) aimed at eliminating inequality and disparity within and between residential quarters.

Under the conceptual umbrella of “Shanghai nostalgia,” I examine in this article the impact of the social memory of the city’s neighborhoods, dichotomized as the “upper and lower quarters (shangzhi jiao, xiazhi jiao),” on community-building and place-making processes in various localities. I argue that the ongoing historical reconstruction and spatial reconfiguration have answered the strategic need of the local elites in their bid for a global metropolis. The urban ideologies are manifested in the dichotomy of high/lower quarters and intersect with gentrification practices that have shaped the city’s neighborhoods in the past and recent appropriations and transformations of those spaces based on current interests and designs. Mapping neighborhood Shanghai in time and space thus helps me to locate the cultural symbols in actual sites so that upper quarters and lower quarters can be observed as both imagined and geographical communities. Using the intimate perspectives provided by ethnographic fieldwork, I explore the significance of locality power and place attachment embedded in the dichotomy – the ways in which it is exploited, and the individuated memories to which it is linked, and more importantly, the explanations it provides for present-day spatial reconfiguration and resource redistribution.
Shanghai Nostalgia and the Ideological Management of Individual Memory

From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, urban China witnessed the rapid growth of a cultural industry of nostalgia. A shared history of post-1949 China dominated by monumental events such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and Cultural Revolution (1966-76), provided a space for the construction of a culture of nostalgia. Paralleling the two major trends of nostalgia in post-socialist Russia – the nostalgia for the Communist past and that for the Russian Imperial past, nostalgia in urban China was expressed in two contrastive forms: the nostalgia for its recent revolutionary past or “Mao nostalgia” and “Shanghai nostalgia” for the heritage connected with city’s colonial past. Shanghai’s nostalgia was not for its recent revolutionary past (i.e. “Mao nostalgia”) but for its colonial heritage. Moreover, Shanghai’s nostalgia was actively promoted by the city’s social and political elites such as government officials, writers, and real estate developers who assumed a pivotal role in the ongoing processes of privatization, stratification, and liberalization in many spheres of everyday urban life. This was rather striking because until very recently, Shanghai’s colonial past, as represented in the official textbooks, was nothing but a “century of humiliation,” beginning with China’s defeat in the Opium War (1840-42).

Under state socialism, colonial Shanghai was often referred to as the site of foreign domination over the Chinese people prior to the 1949 revolution. The sign that reputedly read “No Dogs or Chinese” at the gate of a public park in the Bund became a symbol of imperialist oppression as if it summed up the total history of pre-revolutionary Shanghai and vindicated its semi-colonial status. Remembering the bitterness of the city’s colonial past was an integral part of the socialist program aimed to increase political consciousness among its citizenry (especially the youth) through education and indoctrination.

The death of Chairman Mao in 1976 and the return of Deng Xiaoping to the center stage of the nation’s political life in the late 1970s provided an opportunity for local historians to reflect on the city’s colonial era. Under the auspices of Shanghai’s former mayor, Wang Daohan (a survivor of Cultural Revolution and mentor of President Jiang Zemin), hundreds of books on Shanghai society under colonial rule were published in the name of facilitating academic research and meeting the needs of the reader who wanted to know more about Shanghai pre-1949. The local reconstruction of colonial Shanghai has suggested a revisionist view that emphasizes the role of colonialism in facilitating if not initiating China’s transition to a modern industrial nation-state. The growing interests within Chinese and western academia have effectively turned the study of colonial Shanghai into a well-defined scholarly enterprise. The easy access granted by the Municipal Government to the newly renovated
Shanghai Archives enabled overseas scholars to amass a sizable body of historical data from all the pre-1949 files.

For the first time in post-Mao Shanghai, the local people came to the realization that their colonial past was no longer a baggage to carry but a gift, a rich resource to be fully utilized. Colonial Shanghai or “old Shanghai,” depicted in the imaginative world of personal narratives, scholarly papers, motion pictures and TV series, fiction and dramas, and on countless web-sites, has become a “saturated symbol” for the local social actors deeply involved in the multi-faceted cultural process of manipulating collective memories for the rediscovery, reevaluation, and reinvention of Shanghai’s past. More importantly “Shanghai nostalgia,” the nostalgia for a selectively remembered and re-imagined pre-1949 past, serves as prologue for the Shanghai’s late socialist transition toward a global city.

One of the most notable aspects of the industrialization of “Shanghai nostalgia” was the development of writings about old Shanghai during the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Prior writers and commentators have focused on deciphering the multiple layers of meanings in the “Shanghai nostalgia” literature (e.g., Lee 1999; Zhang 2000). In this article I intend to go beyond textual production and situate my inquiry in the broad social and political contexts within which the culture of nostalgia was cultivated and promoted. Instead of offering a literary critique of “Shanghai nostalgia,” I choose to examine the instrumental role of two different generations of Shanghai nostalgia writers and the extent to which family history and individual life trajectories shaped the ways in which “colonial Shanghai” was represented and represented in their works. Both generations of writers have contributed significantly to the abundant textual production of “Shanghai nostalgia” in their own rights. Their writings were usually fictional accounts of interesting events that took place during the colonial period. Written in the form of simple, vernacular language, the texts resembled fiction and historical books.

According to my observation, the older generation of authors was primarily descendants of the bourgeoisie families who either fled Shanghai on the eve of the liberation or chose to remain in the city and consequently became victims during the political campaigns in the decades that followed. Some of these writers visited Shanghai in the late 1970s and early 1980s for the first time since childhood and discovered their calling as a writer. For them, remembering old Shanghai clearly indicates a profound regret for a past that was irretrievably vanished. Utilizing a network of renewed kinship and social relations (guanxi), writers such Lynn Pan turned childhood memories and post-1980 Shanghai experiences into best-selling popular books such as In Search of Old Shanghai (1982) and Shanghai: a Century of Change in Photographs 1843-1949 (1993).
Whereas Lynn Pan made a career by writing and publishing outside China, her Shanghai counterpart, Shen Ji, in his early 90s now, offers autographical and historical accounts of what he believes to be the lived experiences of real people in real places such as the untold stories of Hardoon the legendary Jewish merchant and Du Yuesheng, the notorious head of the Shanghai triad (criminal gang) from the 1930s to the 1940s. Under socialism, Hardoon was treated as the agent of the colonial domination in Shanghai’s economic sphere and Du, a vilified imperialist collaborator or simply, the Al Capone of Shanghai. As a departure from previous one-sided characterizations, Shen Ji’s depictions of Hardoon and Du are multi-dimensional with a focus on the impact of the particular social environment and political climate on the life of these historical figures.

The rebellious son of a local comprador, Shen Ji had vivid memories of frequenting the gardens and mansions of the tycoons as an adolescent who later became an angry youth and a communist sympathizer. As a teenager, Shen quit school and left Shanghai for an “anti-Japanese revolutionary base” in the mountainous areas of Anhui province occupied by the communist New Forth Army. After spending a few months with the guerrilla soldiers, Shen was sent back to Shanghai to work for the underground resistance movement led by the Communist Party. Shen paid a dear price for severing the links from his parents and relatives, whom he had despised as members of the class of exploiters. His active involvement in political activities made it impossible for him to concentrating on writing stories and fiction for newspapers and literary magazines. After terminating contracts with the publishers, Shen Ji worked as a part-time script-writer for several film studios and became friends with many directors and producers who made “left-wing films” under the guidance of the Communist Party. During the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in the early 1940s, Shen Ji was imprisoned and severely tortured by Japanese collaborators. When Shanghai was liberated in 1949, Shen Ji was in Hong Kong working as a staff member of a film studio under the control of leftist intellectuals, directors, and artists who were originally from the mainland. Shen told me that like his colleagues and friends in the studio, he had a special mission as a sojourner in Hong Kong – to serve as one of the special representatives sent by the CCP to persuade Du Yuesheng to return to Shanghai. The British colonial administration could no longer tolerate the presence of the communist controlled film studio in Hong Kong and decided to deport what it deemed as the most dangerous activists in 1952 (Shen Ji was the youngest member of this group). Ironically all the communist sympathizers and supporters in this group of activists expelled by the British colonial authority became convenient victims during the series of political campaigns waged in mainland China. Shen Ji was subject to struggle sessions and labor reform during the anti-rightist campaign (1957)
and the Cultural Revolution (1966). His family background and "checkered past" looked dubious in the eyes of the party secretary of the work unit. Shen Ji was never fully trusted and many of the film scripts he wrote were kept under the wraps.

Having survived these trials and tribulations, Shen Ji began writing what he called an unofficial and "untamed history" (or yeshi) in the 1980s out of a strong sense of responsibility. He attempted to write back for the sole purpose of passing his memory of the real Shanghai on to the younger generations. During our conversation, Shen repeatedly made the claim that the standard or official version of history was hardly authentic (zhengzong) or even accurate for reasons that had to do with the lack of academic freedom and institutionalized censorship. The "untamed" history that he produced was more truth-telling. Shen Ji belonged to the same generation of Shanghai enthusiasts who offered sure-footed narratives that convey an in-depth understanding of colonial Shanghai.

Because of his expertise, Shen Ji was asked to serve as an advisor for Hong Kong film director Stanley Kwan's Center Stage (1992) and Ann Lee's Lust/Caution (2007). The effort of elderly writers like Shen Ji to impart "authentic" knowledge and preserve the memory of everyday social life under colonial rule, however, is in strong contrast to that of the new generation of writers who have authored numerous fictional and non-fictional accounts subsumed under the category of "Shanghai nostalgia." Born and grown up in the 1950s, these young writers have stimulated new interest in Shanghai's colonial era. Making ingenious use of old travelogues, guidebooks, magazines, and newspapers, they recount the rise and fall of the rich and famous with great admiration, even though they are not remotely connected to these powerful lineages. During a meeting of Shanghai's writers association one of the leading young writers made the strong assertion that Shanghai's golden age was its colonial era. Shen was in the audience and could not help from commenting on such a sweeping generalization. It seemed to Shen Ji that these young writers were ignorant and overly obsessed by the images of affluence and decadence of the 1930s' Shanghai as "Paris of the Orient," an "open" city, or the city of sins and lust. Shen further pointed out that their assertions belie the fact that most of these up-and-coming writers themselves were the sons and daughter of communist generals and officials who conquered Shanghai in 1949.

It strikes one as an historical irony that the descendents of the communist victors rather than the "oldies" who survived socialism became the major force in the cultural production of "Shanghai nostalgia" during the post-Deng era. Residing in the abandoned manor houses in the former French concession located in the city's "upper quarters" (see explanation below), these young writers spent their childhood learning to obtain the lifestyles of the
bourgeoisie inhabitants of their house. Despite their inability to grasp the basic facts and inattention to the historical details in their work, the young authors of bestsellers such as *Shanghai Memorabilia* (Chen 1998) expressed a greater sense of loss and longing for the "Shanghai’s golden age under colonialism" than oldies like Shen Ji. These young nostalgic writers derived their understanding of Shanghai, the historical place, primarily from the novels and short stories written in the 1930s. For them, nostalgia was also a response elicited by the simplified, stylized if not stereotyped images of the material culture of the colonial world.

My purpose in this article is not to argue with the accuracy of individual memories but to reiterate Joanne Rapport’s point that the locus of reconstructed historical memory is not the past but the present and future (Rappaport 1990: 15). The commercial success of the new generation of “Shanghai nostalgia” writers who lacked the “authentic” knowledge of old Shanghai can best be explained by their strategic manipulation of historical memory as they repositioned themselves and reasserted their identities in a rapidly stratified late socialist society. For the young writers what really matters is not the reliability of the historical information but the symbolic value of the colonial legacy that they are eager to appropriate. Moreover one should not lose sight of interconnections between “Shanghai nostalgia” and the suppression of individual memories of social suffering under Mao (for example, Kleinman 2006: 80-122). For example, Shen Ji’s proposals to publish his diaries written during his days spent in the labor camp have been turned down several times by the editors who insisted that writing about pre-1949 Shanghai was the only sensible thing for him to do.

**The dialectics of the “upper quarters” and the “lower quarters”**

The continuing relevance of the age-old upper/lower quarter dichotomy allows me to link the cultural production of “Shanghai nostalgia” with neighborhood gentrification schemes that involved officials, artists and entrepreneurs. In the local dialect, the “upper quarter,” was the Chinese equivalent of the English terms “uptown” or “the right side of the tracks.” Similarly the term “lower quarter” was the equivalent of “downtown” or “wrong side of the tracks.” The acute sense of place embedded in such notions as “upper” and “lower quarters” have enabled generations of Shanghai residents to create in their mental universe special terrains corresponding to the particular socio-economic echelons in which they situated themselves. In many ways, the dichotomy between the “lower quarter” and the “upper quarter” in Shanghai is the Chinese equivalent of such metaphors of “upscale sections” and “ghetto” that encode the race and class relations in many American cities.

As products of urbanization and industrialization, the spatial dichotomy indexes two
social echelons representing radically different lifestyles, individual and family histories, native place identities, and living environment for the past one hundred and fifty years during which Shanghai was transformed from a rural county seat into a cosmopolitan metropolis. Social historians never failed to take note of the general social bias or snobbery based on “quarters” or “corners” (Honig 1992; Lu 1999: 15, 376). As reflections of both historical imagination and social reality, the two “quarters” have remained the key terms used self-consciously by the local residents, municipal officials, and real estate agents as a strategic device to position themselves in the web of social relationships. In short the divide between the upper quarters and lower quarters only reflects the widening disparity between the upper and the lower echelons in post-reform Shanghai.

As a burgeoning cultural industry, “Shanghai nostalgia” is largely concerned with those whose past experience was an integral part of the “upper quarter” and is hardly relevant to the everyday life of the ordinary people, especially the underclass in the “lower quarter.” Within academe scholars have paid scant attention to the city’s peripheral area, the working class neighborhoods that formed the “lower quarters” of the city – home to hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers and refugees in pre-1949 Shanghai. The works of a handful of sinological fieldworkers such as Emily Honig (1992), Lu Hancho (1999), and Elizabeth J Perry (1993 and 1997) best represent the systematic research focus in the social life of Shanghai “beyond the neon lights” (Lu 1999). Because of their efforts, Shanghai is demystified and stripped of its stereotypical images as the “Paris of the Orient,” the “Whore of Asia,” and the “Paradise of Adventurers.” Their insights have effectively directed our attention to the part of Shanghai that is not always associated with the tales of magnates, gangsters, writers, artists, and prostitutes as I proceed to examine the largely under-researched “lower quarters” in this article.

Historically the “upper quarters” were the neighborhoods with enclaves of foreign populations – the French, the British, the Americans, the Russians and East Europeans of Jewish origins, and the Japanese. In 1843 the western powers started to divide and rule their own spheres of influence within Shanghai, a treaty port forcefully opened to foreign trade after China lost the Opium War (1842). For example, the British victors became the rulers of the International Settlement, which was later jointly governed with the Americans. Within the boundaries of the International Settlement (created in 1863) was the old downtown area built on both sides of Nanjing Road, the nation’s busiest shopping street. To its east was the waterfront financial center known as the “Bund.” One could hardly lose sight of the prideful display of bank buildings and hotels with distinctive European styles. As a contrast to the hustle and bustle of the International Settlement, the French Concession occupied a
substantial section of the “upper quarter” as a residential area with a poetic flavor as indicated by the buildings of distinctive French architectural design and tree shaded boulevards. The French Concession, established in 1849, was home to the colonial officers and Chinese compradors. Under socialism the western style buildings located in the Bund continued to perform their former functions as banks, trading companies, customs office, municipal courts, and other government institutions for over fifty years. Within the “upper quarters,” a beautiful house with a garden and backyard well protected by an iron-gate and thick walls is often the residence for a top government official. Yet in the same neighborhood an apartment building of colonial style could be occupied by more than a dozen families who moved in after its landlord fled Shanghai on the eve of Communist takeover in 1949.

Owing to the historical legacy of the Maoist urban planning scheme which aimed at both limiting population and controlling residence (Ma and Hanten 1981; Whyte and Parish 1984), inner city neighborhoods in Shanghai have retained their “upper quarter” status despite the profound changes of Shanghai’s city landscape brought forth by the construction boom during the 1990s. It is important to note that for most of the ordinary residents living in the former International Settlement and the French Concession, their sense of superiority is derived from the very location (jiào) of their home and not necessary their actual housing conditions. The old Chinese city, officially referred to as Nanshi (i.e. South City District) which occupies the middle ground between the “upper quarters” and the “lower quarters,” is a good case in point. Now part of Huangpu District (previously the International Settlement) as a result of recent redistricting, Nanshi has been turned into a site of tourist attraction, exhibiting a reinvented local culture with an origin that could be traced back more than seven hundred years. While feeling proud of the Temple of City Gods, a garden and tea-house, and the Confucian Temple restored to its original site, the local residents are rather embarrassed by their living environment. Until very recently, the Nanshi District had been the most densely populated residential area in the city. Age-old wooden houses and alleyway houses have been the major forms of housing. Despite the inconvenience of having to put up with communal kitchens and public toilets, many would choose to remain in the District for both nostalgic and practical reasons. On the one hand, their sense of belonging originates from being the residents of a unique place rich in history. Living within walking distance of the “upper quarter,” on the other hand, makes them feel protected from the bad influences from the “lower quarter,” only minuets away to the west of Nanshi.

In local terms, the “lower quarter” is essentially a synonym for shantytown housing or simply shacks (penghu) and has always been associated with stereotypical images of narrow lanes inhabited by the Subei people, the descendents of migrants and refugees from northern
Jiangsu speaking a dialect distinctively different from the Shanghainese. The derogatory term “Subei” might be just a term that was conceived by those residents elsewhere in the city and not necessarily an objective description of their place of origin, as Honig (1992: 28-35) has rightly argued. Yet the “lower quarter,” the very source of prejudice against the Subei people in Shanghai, has remained a material reality and a mental category for decades. Like the popular misconceptions about shacks and squatter settlements, Shanghai’s penghu (lower quarter) is perceived as the armpit of the city, and stereotyped as where one could expect to see a vicious cycle of urban poverty, illegal housing, family breakdown, and social disorganization. If the “upper quarter” stands for modernity and civilization, then the “lower quarter” is no more than a symbol of backwardness and underdevelopment.

As a type of metropolitan knowledge about individuated experiences, the dichotomy between “lower” and “upper” quarters has been a key reference point for the city administrators as they proceeded to identify the social and economic characteristics of a particular neighborhood and mark out the boundaries of residential enclaves. After 1949, the Districts within the entire Shanghai Municipality were reorganized so that a District became an administrative region of several sub-divisions referred to as “streets and avenues” or jiedao in Chinese. Each sub-district formed a constituency governed by the Street Office appointed by the District Government. Because of Communist city-planners’ desire to minimize if not eliminate the inequalities in income and housing conditions between districts, the goal of redistricting was to combine administrative spheres that fell into the pre-1949 categories of the “lower quarters” and “upper quarters.” The boundaries that separated poor districts from rich ones disappeared on the city map of new Shanghai after 1949. Yet, within each newly configured district, the boundaries that used to separate the “lower quarters” from “upper quarters” in the pre-1949 past continue to exist.

While demarcation lines between the “quarters” such as the walls, fences, and paths, became less visible, the establishment of sub-district street offices served to reify the difference between the social and economic status of those inhabiting neighborhoods that represented two totally different social worlds. In everyday bureaucratic practices, as Lu Hanchao notes, the leaders of the Street Office usually acknowledged the existing differences by establishing residents’ committees based on the types of neighborhood, the living conditions, and even the native-place origins of the inhabitants (Lu 1999: 316). The networks of alleyways and lanes that each street office formed as well as the allocation of space to particular uses and sizes of buildings therefore became an overt expression of the total gamut of behavior characteristic of a certain residential quarter within its jurisdiction. As if to rid the city of its colonial past and to reflect the changes brought by the founding of
New China, the English and French names of the streets within the “upper quarters” were changed into Chinese ones. Ford Lane became Fujian Road and Route Lafayette, Fuxing Road (meaning “the street of revitalization”). The street names within the “lower quarters” for the most part remained unchanged with the same connotations for their place origins and status.

Therefore one should not be much surprised if “revolutionary leaderships, consciously or unconsciously, come to play the lord of manor,” as Benedict Anderson (1991: 160) has cautioned us. Anderson makes it clear that it was the leadership not the ordinary people who came to “inherit the old switchboards and palaces” (ibid: 161). As Chairman Mao Zedong and his marshals took residence in Beijing in the imperial mansions in the vicinity of the “Forbidden City” of China’s last Dynasty, his comrades in Shanghai quietly moved into the colonial style villas and gardens located in the section of the former French Concession that had always been off-limits to the ordinary people. The marble mansion that was the headquarter of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation in the former International Settlement remained one of the most imposing office buildings on the Bund and served the administrative needs of the Municipal Government until 1999. Such privileges the Communist victors enjoyed made a mockery of the socialist ideal of egalitarianism and illustrated what Bahro refers to as “social stratification under actually existing socialism” (Bahro 1978: 163-182; see also J. Watson 1984: 1-15; R. Watson 1994).

The socialist citizenship was not only defined by class affiliation but also reflected in the official spatializing strategies in neighborhood Shanghai. Redrawing administrative boundaries between the urban districts and renaming streets and lanes after the Communist takeover in 1949 never blurred the “upper/lower quarter” dichotomy which was not only reflected on the social and political maps but also materialized on the ground level. Luwan District, the primary field site for my study, is one such example in which one could see reclaimed gentility in its “upper quarter” and the debris of socialism down in its “lower quarter.”

After 1950 Luwan had within its jurisdiction four subdistricts under the control of four street offices. Three of the four subdistricts were located in the former French Concession (1842-1945). Within these subdistricts Avenue Joffre was renamed Huaihai Road commemorating a military campaign that led to the revolutionary victory in the Civil War (1947-49). On the one hand, the “upper quarter” remained the upscale section of the residential areas of Luwan where the District leaders lived and worked. On the other hand, Bay Bridge, the fourth subdistrict added to Luwan after 1949, had retained its “lower quarter” status inhabited by the descendants of migrants, refugees and farmers who were not
able to speak the Shanghai dialect properly. Moreover, as I describe in the next section, Bay Bridge seemed to share all the defining characteristics of a “lower quarter” in terms of the geographical location, native-place of origin, and the social composition of the local population.

**Bay Bridge: the Social Life of a “Lower Quarter”**

Having grown up in a mixed neighborhood in Huangpu District (a borderland between the pre-1945 International Settlement and French Concession) that was separated from the northern section of Luwan District by one street, I myself had never heard of Bay Bridge as a teenager even though I did go to a dental hospital on its east end (belonging to another District). When I appeared rather embarrassed at such an oversight if not ignorance of the actual existence of real communities, my cadre friends and residents assured me that there was no reason why one should know about Bay Bridge in the first place because it was a “lower quarter after all.”

The “lower quarter” status of Bay Bridge was reified, as I gradually learned over the years, because of the additional sources of stigma attached to the entire locality. First, a well-developed funeral service prior to the 1949 Communist takeover was believed to have disrupted the system of geomancy that regulated the forces of “wind” and “water” (*fengshui*). The locality was further “polluted” in the aftermath of the notorious Japanese bombing of Shanghai in 1937 that had effectively turned Bay Bridge into one of the city’s biggest graveyards where thousands of dead bodies were discarded without proper burial. During the Civil War (1947–49), the “ghost land” of Bay Bridge became a haven for both the bandits evolved from the defeated Nationalist Army (KMT) and the landlords who had fled their home villages in the aftermath of the Communist Land Reform (1945–1950). Even during the present construction boom, the inauspicious indications of an unspoken *and* unspeakable past often disturbed those living in the present as human bones and skeletons were unearthed in virtually all the sites upon which high-rise office and apartment buildings would be built.

The pre-1949 Bay Bridge had more than enough attributes to qualify as the lowest of the city’s “lower quarters”—graves and garbage, dirty ponds and stagnant creeks, squatter settlements, beggars and tramps, mosquitoes and flies. The historical connection with death, funerals, filth as well as the starving beggars became a major source of stigma that reinforced the marginalization of the area even after 1949. The lack of a decent school confirmed its social and economic status. As “the people without history,” to paraphrase Eric Wolf (1982), the people of Bay Bridge could never expect to be treated equally by the legitimate
Shanghainese in the “upper quarters” even though they were legally registered as permanent residents of Shanghai under the hukou system. Small wonder that the local cadres dispatched from the District Government (which was, ironically, located in the “upper quarter,” the former French Concession) referred to Bay Bridge as “Luwan’s Siberia,” a “heart-broken island.” In the eyes of these civilizing agents, Bay Bridge was a special reserve for the disenfranchised people who had no culture, no traditions, no history (Wolf 1982).

What set Bay Bridge apart from other comparable underclass neighborhoods in the city’s periphery was, however, its proximity to the northern section of Luwan District, which attained its “upper quarter” status by virtue of being the former French Concession. To the best knowledge of the urban planners I interviewed, Bay Bridge was among the very few “lower quarters” in the city that was in the vicinity of historical landmarks, the architectural representations of “monumental time” (Herzfeld 1991) of modern Shanghai. To its north was the restored holy site of the “Birthplace of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)” where the First Congress of the CCP was held in July 1921. To its south was Jiangnan Shipyard (which began as an Arsenal during the later Imperial era), which was called the “Cradle of China’s Proletarian Class” in the official historiography. To its east, the “City of Temple Gods,” the old walled city for the Chinese residents in the colonial days, was showcase exhibiting the Shanghai local cultures and customs. Located to its far west was a Catholic cathedral known for its pivotal role in promoting the Chinese understanding of the West three centuries ago.

In Luwan’s northern section (the “upper quarter”), colonial style villas, hotels, and clubs were well preserved and restored, while the red brick terrace buildings that used to house the pre-1949 middle class were carefully renovated. Although within walking distance of all these historical landmarks that monumentized the city’s glorious past, Bay Bridge remained marginalized. More importantly, it was never a part of the pre-1945 French Concession. Xujiahui Road (now a four-lane expressway) had always served as the demarcation line separating the “upper quarter” of Luwan District from the unfashionable south, where Bay Bridge was located.

As I walked from northern Luwan to Bay Bridge, I could detect a gradual change in housing patterns, from the fancy little European style villas sandwiched between the postmodern high rises, to the more traditional terraced houses which blended into rows of match-box-shaped apartment buildings. Within Bay Bridge, the match-box-shaped buildings (five or six story walk-ups) and the century-old and poorly maintained wooden houses were the most representative form of housing for the local residents. Occasionally, one could even find traces of squatter settlement in Bay Bridge’s oldest residents’ community called “the commoners village” (a homonym with “the paupers village,” all pronounced as “pinmin” in the
Shanghai dialect).

Until it became an officially designated "Model Community" in 1995, Bay Bridge had rarely been considered as a place worth writing about. As the biggest territorial subdivision of Luwan occupying an area of 3.07 square kilometers and inhabiting 81,634 registered residents, Bay Bridge is given hardly any attention in the District Gazette of 244 pages — merely two pages of introduction to its population and neighborhood organization structure. For the District officials who set their visions high, Bay Bridge could not possibly match the standard of the prosperous Luwan District that has been often associated with images of colonial gentility and postsocialist prosperity.

The conspicuous absence of an official account of everyday life in the city's underclass neighborhood can be explained by the social and political context of post-Deng Shanghai's relentless bid for the status of a global city in the Asia Pacific region. Yet how could a "lower quarter" like Bay Bridge represent itself in an increasingly global city? In the summer of 2000, I presented a street officer with a report on the undocumented history of the pre-1949 past of Bay Bridge with the hope that he could use some of my findings for an upcoming exhibition on the past and present of the neighborhood. To my surprise and dismay, the street officer and his colleagues acknowledged the time and effort I took in "writing so much about so small a community" but showed very little interest in what I wrote about. They implicitly criticized me for being too obsessed with the past of Bay Bridge. That past had practically nothing to do with their present, let alone the future they envisioned for themselves.

My cadre friends' lack of interest in my work could be conveniently explained by the fact that the newly acquired knowledge of Bay Bridge's past had allowed me to intrude not just into the private lives within the communities, but also into the privacy of their collective space, which Michael Herzfeld referred to as "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld 1997). However, after several follow-up visits to Bay Bridge, I realized that aside from the potential damage that such intimate knowledge of a previously polluted locality could do to the image of Bay Bridge, there is serious economic interest at stake. The difference in the sales value of a housing unit located in the lower quarter and that of a unit in the upper quarter, literally on the right side of track (or toward the north end of Bay Bridge), could be as significant as 1,000 yuan (approximately $120) per square meter. Unfortunately the local cadres could not stop the fengshui (geomancy) masters from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan from collecting and disseminating such "dangerous" information about the fact that Bay Bridge was once a highly polluted locality haunted by "hungry ghosts."

Like their counterparts in charge of "lower quarters" in neighborhood Shanghai, the
cadres of the Bay Bridge would seize every possible opportunity to improve the social and
economic status of their neighborhood and develop various strategies of competing for
community resource, media coverage and attention from the municipal officials. The
community construction movement, beginning in the early 1950s, offered them opportunities
to change the images of a “lower quarter” by erasing its unspeakable past and monumentalizing
its present for the sole purpose of creating a community as the model for a civilized and
scientific way of living in a modernist city. Each generation of street officers shared the same
idea: that as a typical “lower quarter,” Bay Bridge was like a blank sheet of paper on which
they could paint beautiful pictures. Some of the pictures, as I show in the remainder of this
article, became faded as time went by, while others turned into mere showcases, figments of
their imagination.

**Upscaling Bay Bridge: Community-building in a Gentrifying Neighborhood**

Since the early 1990s, large-scale infrastructure reconstruction and various urban
revitalization projects have reconfigured Chinese social space in both the coastal and inland
regions. The frequently updated city maps of Beijing and Shanghai are the most obvious
manifestations of the gentrification process that is transforming everyday life of ordinary
neighborhoods. The current transition toward a post-socialist civil society has thus changed
the nature of urban experiences and reshaped power relationships between different localities
in the Chinese cities.

China’s urban landscape has been redefined not merely by the constant construction of
roads and buildings, but more importantly by massive demographic shifts in the past decade.
With the acceleration of post-Mao reform in the late 1980s, the Party-state has been taken
over by a new generation of technocrats who readily abandoned conventional strategies of
urban development that limited the size and population of the cities. Urban sprawl has given
rise to unprecedented migration that is beyond the capacity of the local authorities to control
and monitor the flow of the so-called “floating population” (Solinger 1999; Zhang 2001). Meanwhile the restructuring of the poorly managed or bankrupt state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has created millions of unemployed industrial workers through the layoff (xiagang) system.

As casualties of the structural reform, millions of unemployed industrial workers in China
find themselves in a painful process of adjusting to a new way of life centering on their
community rather than their workplace. Unemployment has drastically enlarged the marginal
section of the Chinese society officially labeled as the “hardship population” which
traditionally included the elderly, disabled, and sick in the neighborhood. Despite the fact
that Shanghai has arguably the most sophisticated social welfare scheme in China, the fight against urban poverty has been an uphill battle. City officials have identified unemployment as one of the greatest sources of social instability. This is largely because of Shanghai’s historical position as the nation’s industrial base, the locus of hundreds of state-owned textile factories, steel plants, shipyards, and mechanical works. The local cadres have to devote considerable amount of time and energy to accommodating the needs of the unemployed and underemployed inhabiting the “lower quarters” because both parties are well aware of the tradition of rebellion in the birthplace of the proletarian class and the Chinese Communist Party (Perry 2002).

The gradual emergence of transnational and private firms and the death of state enterprises in late socialist Shanghai have made the city a place where different modes of living are displayed under and beyond the neon lights reminiscent of the city’s glorious colonial past. Since the early 1990s the global flow of knowledge and ideas have had a profound impact on local bureaucratic practices in both the upper and lower quarters. Along with the introduction of Western concepts of efficient business management, city administrators have replaced outmoded socialist jargon with such terms as “social work,” “sustainable development” and “community service.” Such terms are used to authorize the gentrification and revitalization processes.

As an observable housing pattern in the postindustrial world, the term “gentrification” has often been interpreted as middle-class settlement or resettlement in older inner-city neighborhoods formerly occupied mostly by working-class and underclass residents (e.g., E. Anderson 1990; Butler 2003; Caulifield 1994). In this article, “gentrification” refers to a social and political process of urban change that must be understood in the historical context of socialist engineering and community development during the reform era (1978-present). As far as space reconfiguration in neighborhood Shanghai is concerned, we are able to discern at least two forms of gentrification in the “upper quarters” and “lower quarters.” Within the former French Concession and the International Settlement, the ongoing gentrification process can be explained in its conventional terms except that inner-city neighborhoods in a socialist city were never a “downtown” despite the signs of urban decay in certain parts. Many such neighborhoods have retained the image and self-image of being in the “upper quarter” (uptown) since the 1949 revolution. Generally speaking gentrification efforts in the former colonial concessions are manifested by the restoration and renovation of old style villas and mansions along with the construction of skyscrapers and modern apartment buildings.

The gentrification process in Shanghai’s “lower quarter” that I describe in this article was
initiated a decade ago after Deng Xiaoping's unexpected post-Tiananmen "tour of the south (nanxun)." As Shanghai engages in a relentless bid to regain its pre-1945 status as the financial center of Asia by renovating the colonial-style bank buildings and constructing high rises for foreign companies, factories located in the city's peripheral areas where most of the "lower quarters" are located are approaching the end of their productive life. On the one hand, gated communities managed by local or transnational real estate developers have made their appearance on the land acquired from the owners of bankrupt or poorly managed SOEs. In a sense the built forms of high-rise apartments in a typical "lower quarter" such as Bay Bridge were literally the sprouts of capitalism grown out of the debris of socialism. On the other hand, the advent of gated communities did not immediately result in the forceful relocation of the local residents. In fact, the process of gentrification was relatively slow especially in comparison with what went on in the "upper quarter." The "upper quarter" (the pre-1945 French Concession), which used to be part of a famous shopping street named after Joffre, a French General, is reliving its glorious past as overseas investors assume an active role in transforming its cultural and political landscape. More and more shopping malls (one of which was Sincere whose owner fled to Hong Kong on the eve of the 1949 liberation) have been put up. The historical building of the colonial French Police Station has been renovated and become home to cafes, restaurants, and stores selling brand name merchandise.

As recipients of a culture of conspicuous consumption, an integral part of "Shanghai nostalgia," the new generation of "yuppies" in Luwan's "upper quarter" are usually employees of joint ventures and foreign companies working in the office high rises concentrated in the district's Pacific-Hong Kong Plaza, which is essentially a recast of its original in Hong Kong. As college postgraduates born in the 1970s, the yuppies are well educated, with good computer and English language skills. The beneficiaries of the economic reform that favors the young, the beautiful, and the affluent, many of the yuppies have become local representatives of transnational corporations and earn an annual income equivalent to what their parents would have made as factory workers in at least ten years. The "upper quarter" of Luwan District allegedly has the highest concentration of "head hunting" companies serving the needs of "job hoppers" working in the adjacent buildings.\(^6\)

The images of affluent "yuppies" that dominated the covers of fashion magazines unabashedly showcasing economic prosperity in the "upper quarter," stood in stark contrast to what went on in the "lower quarter" – Bay Bridge, which witnessed the emergence of a new generation of xiagangers. As more and more state-owned factories (mostly in textile and steel industry) declared bankruptcy, hundreds of thousands of laid-off workers became
members of the “urban poor” eligible for welfare assistance. A sad truth for the District bureaucrats to confront was that the increase of xiagangers has clearly outpaced the growth of yuppies in Luwan and elsewhere in Shanghai. While a yuppie is enjoying a cup of cappuccino in Park’97 (a cafe modeled after its Hong Kong prototype) or recently opened Starbucks and planning to buy a second or third apartment in the old French Concessions, the xiagangers in Bay Bridge are worrying about how to pay their monthly bills. Widely publicized annual events such as the “Rose Wedding”7 in October (organized by the District Tourist Bureau) starring one hundred yuppie couples in shiny limos parading in the “upper quarter” only heighten the sense of loss, betrayal, and despair on the part of the gradually marginalized xiagangers in the “lower quarter.”

In Bay Bridge, many recently unemployed workers are psychologically unprepared for the sudden loss of the “iron rice bowl” of secure lifelong employment. They are afraid of re-entering the labor market because they thought that they had long lost the ability to compete. Whenever they become nostalgic for the “good old days” when the chimneys of their factories were still puffing out smoke, they feel they are being short-changed. They are overwhelmed with a sense of disorientation, betrayal, despair, and misplacement because they could no longer wear the badge of honor as members of the vanguard class. For the ordinary residents of Bay Bridge, “Shanghai nostalgia,” experienced by those living in the “upper quarter,” represents nothing more than a lifestyle and mode of consumption they could not afford to partake.

The disappearance of state factories and plants in the city’s depressed industrial areas coincided with the neighborhood gentrification of “lower quarters” such as Bay Bridge. By the 1990s, the state factories in the neighborhood were either shut down or on the brink of declaring bankruptcy. A gated community in Bay Bridge is often located in the mist of several “workers’ new villages (gongren xincun)” made up of dozens of six-story walk-ups in the typical form of government housing projects built during the 1970s. For the current generation of technocrats of the District Government and subdistrict street offices, the gated community, whose residents are total strangers in the neighborhood, represent the ideal form of a “model community”—a perfect showcase for cultural citizenship. The most active gentrifying agents at the local level were the young and well-educated street officers who formed an alliance with property and real estate developers, local entrepreneurs, and urban planners with the same visions of high modernity and scientizing principles divorced from the social realities of a locality that had yet to live with its unspeakable past as a “lower quarter” of Luwan.

In eyes of the young and forward-looking street officers, it would thus make perfect sense
to showcase a garden-like “model community” (often known as “civilized community”) supervised by an elected neighborhood council or owner’s association. In so doing they would help the local residents forget their unforgettable past, restore their confidence in the present, and envision the future of Bay Bridge as a transformed locality. However, balancing the needs of managing the debris of socialism and showcasing citizenship is no easy task. With mountainous unresolved problems such as unemployment and housing shortages, Bay Bridge does not seem to stand a chance in the city-wide model community contest and beautification campaigns. As a result the street officials have to adopt a selective strategy by showcasing one or two newly established gated communities such as the “Volkswagen Town,” home to the staff members of the German automobile company in Shanghai, to attract media attention and official recognition.

The new technocrats who have taken control of the entire neighborhood were pleased with the presence of “Volkswagen Town” and “Redbud Pavilion” because these gated residential communities were essential to a rapid process of gentrification that would “improve” the neighborhood by attracting more prestigious kinds of cultural citizenship. By choosing only a couple of new housing communities to represent a significantly improved “lower quarter,” however, the technocrats have also reminded the remaining majority of those living in Bay Bridge of “what we used to be” not “what we are supposed to be.” Seemingly the “urban villages” in Luwan’s “lower quarter” are now airbrushed from the social and political map. Underneath the false façade of a harmonious, hygienic, and crime-free environment, Bay Bridge continues to be treated as an atypical “lower quarter,” or just another “dirt” (Douglas 1966) – a matter out of place in the everyday discourse of a rapidly stratified urban society.

Conclusions

Echoing Arjun Appadurai’s call to “put hierarchy in its place” (Appadurai 1988), I have in this article probed the local grounding of “Shanghai nostalgia” in terms of the “lower/higher quarter” dichotomy reminiscent of the colonial era and the apparent contradictions in the politics of planning. Making explicit links between local history, structural power, and concrete places, I have thus explored the ways in which “Shanghai nostalgia” was reified and spatially manifested in dichotomized “upper and lower quarters” as a consequence of the conscious efforts by local residents and municipal officials. In conclusion I would like to argue that “Shanghai nostalgia” should be looked not as a nostalgia for all aspects of Shanghai’s colonial past but as the prologue for planned change and the realization of the modernist dreams that had lived with the city from its colonial era.

In the futuristic visions of Shanghai’s ambitious leaders, “Shanghai nostalgia” could be
employed as a selective political strategy and served the long term goal of turning an increasingly global city into a commercial hub of East Asia. Community building, while being translated into various schemes of revitalization and reconstruction, thus served the official interests of beautifying both the “upper quarters” and the “lower quarters” so that the Shanghainese could reclaim the prestigious kinds of cultural citizenship associated global standards of affluence and wealth that have always been associated with the popular imageries of “colonial Shanghai.”

In everyday practice, revitalization schemes as a series of civilizing projects aimed to upscale the city’s lower quarters have become the top priority of neighborhood organizations. Participation in model community contests in particular has captured the attention of the party-state, the mass media, and academics across the nation. The modernist visions of the young technocrats who began to dominate the leadership of the Street Office were in great tension with the harsh conditions of a lower quarter neighborhoods like Bay Bridge. Moreover, the publicity of such events as showcasing citizenship and model community contest has never altered the structure of inequality exemplified by the spatially dichotomized “upper quarters” and “lower quarters” and the strong degree of place attachment among the generations of residents of China’s most cosmopolitan city.

Notes

1) Back in the 1930s, Shen Ji was identified by major literary critics in Shanghai as one of two “most promising writers of our time.” The other writer was the legendary Eileen Chang, probably the most important women writer in pre-1949 Shanghai.

2) Feeling torn between the two major forces (the winning CCP and losing KMT), Du eventually made the decision to spend the rest of his life in Hong Kong as an ordinary person much to the disappointment of both parties.

3) In “Citizenship and Exclusion in Old Shanghai,” Jeffery N. Wasserstrom questions the prevalent views of prior writers that Shanghai’s colonial settlement was a thoroughly modern place in which one would expect to see strong evidence of the development of modern citizenship (Wasserstrom 2002). While acknowledging his historical insights and sharing his doubts about the uniqueness of the Foreign Concessions in Shanghai, in this article I place my emphasis on the impacts of the essentializing the differences between the two quarters in terms of their symbolic meanings and the strategies of utilizing such a dichotomy between the high and low ends.

4) In the summer of 2003, I accompanied my former landlord, a Shanghai enthusiast who was fascinated with the colonial style houses for a sightseeing tour in the heart of the former
French Concession. One morning as we began to take pictures of the quiet and well-preserved neighborhood of Kangping Road, we were immediately cornered by several policemen stationed at the crossroads and then taken to the local police station for interrogation. We should have realized that as the home to generations of top government officials (including the retired Chinese President, Jiang Zemin), the Kangping (meaning “healthy and peaceful”) community became such a symbol of power that no visitors would dare even to appear curious as they passed through the neighborhood.

5) The exchange rate between USD and RMB (Chinese Yuan) was approximately 1: 8.30 in 1998. The current rate is around 1: 6.80.

6) Most of the “head hunting” companies had connections with large corporations in the US. For ethical reasons I cannot reveal their names because these “head hunting” companies operated in a gray area and circumvented the control of the official Shanghai Foreign Services.

7) In 1999 the event took place in Hong Kong, Shanghai’s twin city because the young elite couples were not satisfied with the recreated romantic surroundings in the former French Concession.

References


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