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Chinese Women: Becoming Half the Sky?

Zhao Yeqin, *Construction des espaces urbains et rénovation d'un quartier de Shanghai: la problématique de la migration et du changement social*

(Construction of urban spaces and renovation of a community of Shanghai: The problematic of migration and social change) Shanghai, Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 430 pp.

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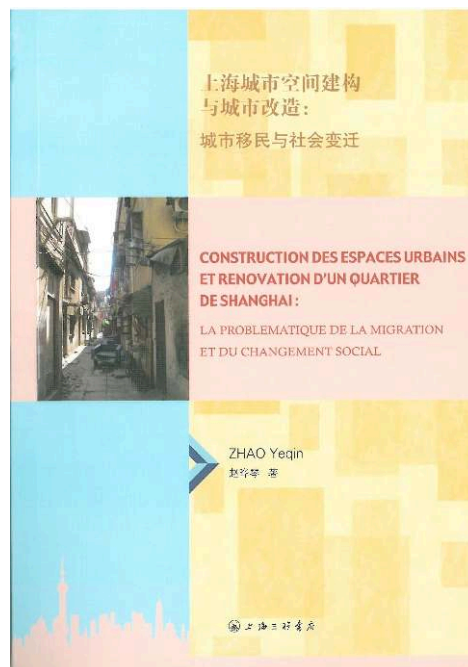
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- 1 Over the past two decades, Chinese cities have undergone extremely rapid change, first due to major internal migratory waves towards urban areas following a loosening of the *hukou* system, and second due to the burgeoning renovation projects and urban development on a mammoth scale. Zhao Yeqin's book deals with the joint effect of these two phenomena on an old neighbourhood in urban Shanghai "earmarked for renovation" and where many migrants live. The ethnographic survey carried out over two periods of ten months between 2004 and 2007 provides a window for observing social changes underway. The main subject of the study, relations between urban residents¹ and migrants, goes beyond China by looking at a recurring question in urban sociology,



namely cohabitation of different social groups within the same space. The author adheres to a rich sociological tradition, tapping sources in the Chicago school as well as French urban sociology. The exigencies of the Chinese context have not been overlooked: the author has taken pains to set out the historical context, both national and local, that led to the evolution of the situation studied.

- 2 It should be noted that this book, published in French by a Chinese publishing house, is based on a thesis completed in 2008 for ENS Cachan and East China Normal University. No doubt the choice of publishing in French in China deprived the work of editing that would not only have helped clarify arguments developed but also would have improved overall readability. The first part (chapters 1 and 2), focusing on theory and methodology, often overlaps with the second part containing fieldwork analysis. The richness of references certainly testifies to a concern for showing the theoretical bases for the reflection, but it is regrettable that not all are rendered operational through direct linkages with empirical findings. The quality of the findings, however, testifies to the author's immersion in the field. In-depth interviews with both migrants and urban residents are well-detailed and enable the author to tell their life stories and clarify the thesis.
- 3 The second part, containing two-thirds of the book, begins by introducing the neighbourhood studied, Yuanhenong (chapters 3 to 5).² The people there are described in minute detail, and photographs supplement physical descriptions of the places. To start with, recent changes in the neighbourhood are presented in the context of its longer history. Its origins as a slum in the early twentieth century,³ its development following the establishment of a textile factory nearby, and its closure in the early 1990s resulting in major unemployment among residents, are all narrated. In this context, the arrival of migrants from many provinces – mainly Anhui, Jiangsu, and Henan – is superimposed on ongoing transformations, setting off a movement of residents renting out their dwellings, and in some cases moving out of the neighbourhood.
- 4 Using life stories, the author details migrants' residential trajectories after arriving in Shanghai and notes typical tendencies: 1) installation in the neighbourhood at the “end of a process punctuated by intermediary halts”; 2) “sojourn awaiting a move to a posher neighbourhood”; and finally, 3) the “result of a direct migratory trajectory.” The details of these trajectories are of major interest as they help delineate the inflection points – change of job, conflict with a lodger, etc. – that led to the change of accommodation. The above typology, is however, less convincing by itself, as it seems to neglect the dynamic nature of these trajectories, presenting the first and third type of installation in Yuanhenong as the end of the residential trajectory.
- 5 Apart from the change induced by migrants moving in, the redevelopment of the surroundings of Yuanhenong into new residential complexes contributes to “enclaving” the neighbourhood. The difference between Yuanhenong and these new residential complexes is as much architectural – individual houses on one side and 20-storey buildings on the other – as it is social. Yuanhenong's urban residents are older by a generation, and the active population consists mostly of workers as against an active population of mostly office-goers in the newly-built residences. It is actually a double difference, as the migrants in Yuanhenong differ socially from the two previous groups. A great majority of migrants had been farmers before moving to Shanghai and are also a generation younger than the urban residents. The predominance of migrants

gives the impression of an “immigration area” (p. 240), with the media and nearby residents dubbing Yuanhenong a dirty place given to criminality. These representations affect urban residents’ perception of themselves, and they come to see their place of habitation as a “stigma” in the Goffmanian perspective, impelling them to move out. For migrants, on the other hand, living in the neighbourhood is seen as an improvement, by the simple fact of having been able to move to Shanghai.

- 6 The next two chapters (6 and 7) deal with the emergence of two residents’ groups in the neighbourhood and their relationship. The author notes that while the “migrants” category is based on *hukou*, it is socially constructed. Thus, despite migrants’ different origins, their common experience of migration lends the group a collective identity. At the same time, the recurrent distinction made by urbanites has created a sense of division of the population locally. In the interviews cited, urban residents systematically set themselves apart from those they deem “country bumpkins” (*xiangxiaren*), although they are themselves former migrants – or descendents of migrants – who moved in some decades earlier. This distinction is far from neutral, the author holds, urban residents having a “superiority complex” with regard to migrants (p. 295).
- 7 Given that for urban residents, “the very presence of the migrant population amounts to a symptom of degradation of community life in the neighbourhood” (p. 283), the question arises of cohabitation between the two groups. The links between urban residents’ perception of migrants and the reality of their interpersonal relations with the latter are complex. Thus good relations with a migrant neighbour do not necessarily challenge an overall negative perception. The migrant is thus an “ideological actor,”⁴ as “subsequent observations and events will not be retained, will not even really be perceived, if they do not reinforce a negative image of this actor” (p. 292). Of the many tension points, those most prominent are issues of sanitation and appropriation of common areas in the neighbourhood. The author shows that urban residents tend to give up use of public space they had frequented prior to the migrants’ moving in. These include public toilets, playgrounds, and passageways where urban residents traditionally gathered to interact with neighbours. In the case of public toilets, such spurning is a way of refusing to be part of a degradation of the area, while in other cases, the very presence of migrants puts paid to the social function of these areas, i.e., creating a close-knit community. Commercial establishments – shops and restaurants – run by migrants are also given wide berth, whereas cultural activities by residents’ committees (*juweihui*) are reserved for urban residents only, weakening their role in setting norms applicable to all. Thus the committee’s rules are poorly applied and effective norms are produced through – sometimes tense – interactions between migrants and urban residents. Other than its mediation role, which sometimes helps resolve sharp conflicts, the committee’s ability to act is limited. An initiative for organising regular cleaning of common areas has consequently been a non-starter, given the difficulty in collecting a fee from homeowners, many of whom no longer live in the neighbourhood.
- 8 The last chapter (Chapter 8) deals with the neighbourhood’s “renovation” and its effects on housing strategies of urban residents. Since a redevelopment project including the neighbourhood’s demolition was suspended in 2003, residents have been divided between those who view the planned redevelopment positively and those who are attached to the neighbourhood. The former stress the poor condition of housing

and the neighbourhood's degradation due to migrants, whereas the latter are attached to their homes because of the social ties they have with neighbours and proximity to the city centre. Migrants, as tenants, are left out of the redevelopment process, although over the years they have grown into large communities and the existing cheap accommodation is necessary for their stay in the city. As compensation offered to urban residents is insufficient for buying an apartment in the city centre and replacement accommodation is offered in the suburbs, housing strategies depend largely on each family's financial means. The neighbourhood's degradation and forced cohabitation with migrants is a factor that adds to such constraints and impels some families to move out faster than others.

- 9 The neighbourhood's being "earmarked for renovation" clearly weighs on urban residents' decisions to move out, but the interlinking of this factor with that of tense relations between the two groups of people in the areas is less clear. The author's residential categories mix these two parameters with other considerations, such as residents' financial means. This helps in understanding the complexity of parameters influencing residential choices but does not help clarify the respective effects of the two phenomena. On the whole, the book opens up several highly interesting lines of thought: migratory trajectories and residential trajectories, challenging the link between physical and social proximity, influence of redevelopment projects on relations among residents, etc. Alas, not all these lines of thought are followed through to the end, and the conclusion does not manage to gather them together. The quality of ethnography, for its part, contributes to a better understanding of the characteristics of such a neighbourhood, facilitating comparisons with other areas to which many migrants have moved, in particular villages in the city (*chengzhongcun*).

NOTES

1. The author uses the word "native" to refer to those who have the Shanghai *hukou*.
2. The author changed the district's name to guard anonymity.
3. The author prefers the term *penghuqu* (棚户区), which local people also use to refer to the neighbourhood studied.
4. The expression is from G. Althabe's "Éléments pour une analyse des relations interpersonnelles dans l'espace commun d'immeubles HLM (Bellevue-Nantes)" (Elements for an analysis of interpersonal relations in common areas of rent-controlled buildings in Bellevue-Nantes), *Vie quotidienne en milieu urbain* (Daily life in urban milieu), Colloque de Montpellier, 1978.

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