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# Wen-hsin Yeh, Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, 305 pp.

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- 1 This study looks at the daily life of employees in Shanghai and the ways in which they tried to establish the respectability of their professions and, more generally, of the modernisation effort to which they were allied. The emergence and social and cultural evolution of this new middle class of “petty urbanites” is charted over a long period – from the Opium War (1839-42) until the 1949 revolution. Closely linked to and subject to employers’ whims at first, the middle class distanced itself when confronted with the effects of the Sino-Japanese war: submission to paternalistic patrons was replaced by confrontations with capitalists deemed predators and willing collaborators with the enemy. The author points out that Shanghai, which emerged as the centre of economic modernisation as well as the place from which the new urban culture took shape and spread, owes its pre-eminence to the emergence of this new middle class.
- 2 The book contains seven chronologically and thematically arranged chapters. After setting out what she calls “the material turn” in Chinese society as it opened itself to more materialistic and rational conceptions of the world, the author goes on in the second chapter to describe the development of the science of management (*shang xue*), at first on the initiative of institutions and social networks – chambers of commerce, associations, technical colleges – and then, from 1927, under the direction of the Nationalist government, which placed special emphasis on standardising accounting procedures.
- 3 The third chapter, “Visual Politics and Shanghai Glamour,” picks up themes already considered at length in works such as *Inventing Nanjing Road: Commercial Culture in*

Shanghai: 1900-1945, edited by Sherman Cochran (Ithaca, New York., 1999) – advertising, the growth of department stores, new sales techniques, new ways of consumption, and adoption of concepts and products through anti-foreign boycotts and campaigns favouring “national products” (guohuo). Then follows an evocation of the daily life of employees, governed by clockwork corporate discipline. The straitjacket this put them in was such that employees, confined to residential areas built and run by enterprises such as Bank of China, were obliged to follow their bosses’ precepts even in planning their leisure. The paternalistic ideology that buttressed such social control, at once Confucian and modernist, was disseminated by the press. One of the most influential press organs in this respect, the Shenghuo zhoukan (Life Weekly), is examined in the sixth chapter.

- 4 However, the press also echoed the mounting difficulties faced by “petty urbanites” during the 1930s. Using readers’ letters and social vignettes published at the time in the crypto-communist bi-weekly Dushu shenghuo (Reading and Livelihood), the seventh chapter brings out the anguish felt by employees who, confronting an economic crisis, turned to collective action and increasingly put their faith in intervention by a benevolent state. After 1937, the hardship of war and occupation pitted the middle class against the bosses, who were often suspected of collaborating with the enemy. This evolution is illustrated through the story of Gu Zhun, an expert accountant whose social activism and patriotic zeal led him to join the Communist Party in 1936 and to a major role in the municipal administration following the revolution. In conclusion, the author evokes the wave of nostalgia for Old Shanghai that has drowned out historiography and politics.
- 5 One gets a sense of *déjà-vu* from this book. It has no surprises, being based largely on research carried out in the 1980s and 1990s and published at that time in numerous works and articles, including by the author herself. These texts are not merely referenced, but are often quoted at length verbatim. Of greater value are newly-mined documentary sources, such as the internal correspondence of the Wing On Company or the diaries and autobiographical notes of Gu Zhun. The second chapter focusing on the development of scientific management likewise seems to be the result of recent research and is thus of great interest. The bibliography, despite updating, suffers somewhat from time lag.
- 6 For good or for ill, the work illustrates the predominant culturalist current in American historiography on China in the late twentieth century, Yeh herself being one of its more prominent representatives. One notes with pleasure the qualities that have contributed to the success of this historian and her articles on Bank of China employees, on Shenghuo weekly, or on collaboration in Shanghai: an abundance of archival and documentary sources, narration of significant anecdotes, psychological examination, and vivacious style. But there are also the chronological and historical imprecision and vague sociological definitions that often characterise the culturalist approach.
- 7 Having tapped a vein near exhaustion, the work appears, like its subject, a bit “retro.” It will nevertheless be useful to those who have not followed the developments in historical work devoted to Shanghai. The book is pleasant reading and offers some penetrating observations on the process of modernisation, while serving as an accessible reference for those wanting to understand the reasons for Shanghai mania.