



Jos Gamble, Shanghai in Transition: Changing Perspectives and Social Contours of a Chinese Metropolis

London, Routledge Curzon, 2003, 250 pp.

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- 1 Here is a new monograph on Shanghai, this publication being distinguished by the originality of its angle of analysis. In order to report the numerous and profound transformations which are drastically changing Shanghai in the era of reforms, Jos Gamble has chosen to give a voice to the lower classes of Shanghai, its *laobaoxing*, thus aiming, as he states in the preface, to establish “the ethnography of a city”.
- 2 After a succinct reminder of Shanghai’s history, the author proceeds, in the first chapter, to an analysis of the new expressions which have appeared in Mandarin to describe the changes brought about by the policy of reform and opening up. This introduction through lexicography can prove instructive and even amusing to readers who have no direct contact with reforming China or its inhabitants. However, despite what is suggested by the title of this chapter, *Representation and Metaphors of Reform in Shanghai*, metaphors such as “*duo yi ge pengyou, duo yi tiao lu*” (another friend opens another prospect), “*ziji zhao chulu*” (to find your own way out, i.e. to manage on your own when you are unemployed, for example) and “*zou houmen*” (to use the back door to avoid bureaucratic obstacles) are all expressions which were already current in China before the reforms, and are therefore in no way specific to that city. These expressions, produced in common parlance or taken up from official discourse, such as *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening up), are known to all researchers or businessmen who frequent China, whether close up or at a distance, through Chinese interlocutors or in the media. It is also to be regretted that there are so few examples in Shanghainese dialect which would have much better illustrated the author’s ethnographic approach and justified his undertaking of a monograph.
- 3 In the second chapter, “Global and intra-national cultural flows: renegotiating boundaries and identities in contemporary Shanghai”, the author, starting from the

idea that the Chinese identity is not singular but multiple and shifting, seeks to define the particularities of the Shanghailander as the product of the mutual cultural penetration between Shanghai and the rest of China, as well as the outside world. The third chapter, “The walls within: Shanghai inside out”, explores further this Shanghainese identity and shows that it also is multiple, varying according to the profession and place of residence of each person.

- 4 The new modes of consumption, which are the subject of chapter four, “Consuming Shanghai: hairy crabs, ghosts, and Christmas trees”, are another marker of these identities. The introduction of leisure and of other consumer products—such as karaoke, expensive restaurants and luxury clothing—is in the process of altering the life habits of Shanghailanders. Gamble attacks the thesis maintained by some writers, especially Linda Chao and Ramon Myers¹, according to which the varying modes of consumption, in defining new social values and feelings of belonging, strengthen the social, economic and political links of the various strata in Chinese society. To Gamble, on the contrary, consumerism helps to make disparities in wealth increasingly visible, with, at one extreme the *nouveaux riches*, who can afford whatever they fancy, and at the other, those left behind by the reforms, whose purchasing power is constantly shrinking. Without minimising the social tensions which these disparities can produce and which the author puts forward, one must recognise along with Chao, Myers and Goodman² that the reforms have indeed given birth to a middle class, with its own characteristics.
- 5 But, contrary to what one might believe, as Li Jian and Niu Xiaohan show, the feeling of political belonging of this middle class, at least to a large extent, goes to the Chinese Communist Party and the system it represents, since this middle class itself stems from it and is making full use of the advantage it offers³. What is more, the author, in reproducing in his monograph the accounts of Shanghai’s *laobaixing* whom he has frequented and interviewed, gives a sort of general idea of this emerging middle class, even though he does not identify it in those terms.
- 6 Chapter 5, “Share dealers, trading places and new options in contemporary Shanghai” deals with the Shanghai stock market and the way in which dabbling in the market has altered the perceptions and the lives of Shanghailanders who indulge in it. The book ends with a chapter entitled “Concluding impressions” which summarises Gamble’s general survey, but also shows its limitations. For the ethnographic approach, which here consists of reproducing what Shanghai’s *laobaixing* said without confronting their point of view with other sources, such as official data or academic studies of Shanghai’s development, offers only a partial and not always truthful vision of the development of the metropolis, of which one will retain only impressions, hence the title of the conclusion. Even if the slices of life of the *laobaixing* might interest those who are not familiar with Shanghai or China in reform—from this point of view, *Shanghai in Transition* does indeed constitute an account of the turn the metropolis took in the early 1990s—, on the other hand, informed readers, their expectations raised by the alluring title, will be left unsatisfied on closing the book.
- 7 In fact, the statements of the Shanghailanders reproduced in this book published in 2003 are extracted from interviews which Gamble conducted in 1992-1993, that is to say at the time when Shanghai had just boarded the reform bandwagon, after Deng Xiaoping’s tour of the South. Gamble, as he writes in the preface (p. xv), returned there four times between 1992 and 2000 ; one strongly regrets that he did not bring up to

date the descriptions he gives of life in Shanghai, when one knows the transformations which the city and its inhabitants have experienced all through the 1990s.

NOTES

1. Linda Chao and Ramon H. Myers, "China's consumer revolution: the 1990's and beyond", *Journal of Contemporary China* 7 (18), 1998, pp. 351-368.
2. David S. G. Goodman, "The New Middle Class", in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFacquhar eds., *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 241-261.
3. Li Jian and Niu Xiaohan, "The New Middle Class(es) in Peking: A Case Study", *China Perspectives*, No. 45, January-February 2003, pp. 4-20.