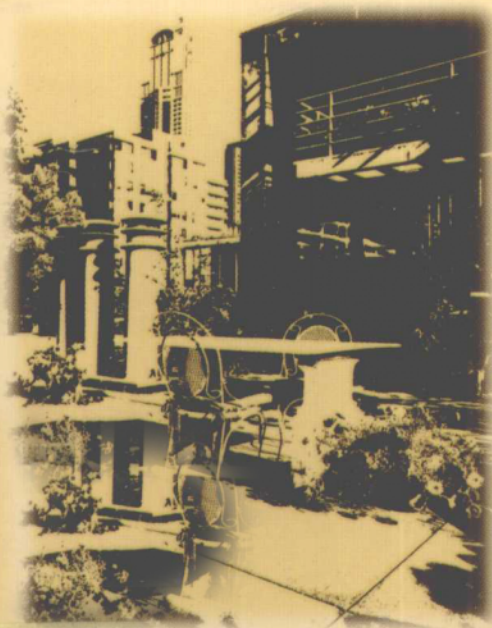

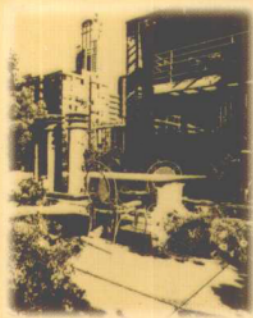


# Neighborhood Shanghai

● 潘天舒 著



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# Introduction

Arriving in Shanghai on a late summer day in 1998, I felt as if I were ushered into the biggest and busiest construction site in the world.<sup>①</sup> Ring roads, suspension bridges, tunnels, viaducts, subways and inter-city commuter rails were built simultaneously along with thousands of high rises. Urban development activities undertaken on both sides of Huangpu River significantly altered Shanghai's landscape. Infrastructural reconstruction at such a frenetic rate and on such a large scale was unprecedented in the history of Shanghai, one of the most populous cities on the Pacific Rim.<sup>②</sup> Shortly after China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping completed his carefully orchestrated and well-publicized "inspection tour of the south" in

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① For discussion of the difficulties of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in contemporary urban China, please refer to the introduction in *China Urban* (Chen, Clark, Gottschang, and Jeffery 2001: 1 - 7).

② According to the most recent census data, the total population of Shanghai is estimated as 16.4 million (Shanghai Economy Yearbook 2001: 272).

1992, the Shanghai government officials took the initiative of launching a series of ambitious projects that aimed to rebuild Shanghai's pre-1949 status as the financial center of East Asia.<sup>①</sup> The official guideline for city planning dictated that Shanghai should have "a new image every year, and every three years, a completely different image." In the futuristic visions of the city administrators, the degree of their social and economic development had to be measured in terms of the numbers and height of the skyscrapers in order to demonstrate Shanghai's immense potential and unfathomable strength as a new millennial city.

As someone who had spent most of his childhood playing among the narrow lanes of the stone tenement houses, I could barely reorient myself and come to terms with a sense of nostalgia mixed with humor while witnessing the disturbingly rapid changes the city underwent in the composition and conditions of its neighborhoods. The dual process of rapid construction and ruthless destruction overwhelmed me to such an extent that I was hardly surprised to find that the two residential communities that I had carefully chosen as the field sites during the summer of 1997 no longer existed. It looked as if the entire neighborhood of more than 10,000 residents had simply "evaporated" overnight — along with my network of inform-

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① See Deng Xiaoping's comment on his regret about not having included Shanghai as the first four special economic zones in the initial stages of the economic reform in *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan / Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (Beijing 1993) Vol. 3: 376.

ants and interlocutors established for the proposed project on food rationing and consumption practices in pre-reform Shanghai.

I decided instantly to relocate my field research into other parts of the city. Songhai, who had agreed to serve as the primary contact person for my original thesis research on food rationing practices, explained to me apologetically that his grain bureau had been down-sized owing to the recent structural reforms initiated by Premier Zhu. In other words, it would not make sense to rely on his bureau or work unit as my institutional affiliation during my stay in Shanghai. For well over three decades, Song had served as the section chief in charge of designing and issuing coupons of staple grain and cooking oil within the District. Although his workload had declined because of the demise of nationwide food rationing for registered urban residents, he was still responsible for designing the pilot project of food stamps (nicknamed “green cards”) issued to those living below the poverty line which was officially set at 250 yuan per person per month. Relieved to be free of the burden of working at the grass roots level, Songhai was rather content with such changes. Although he was not yet sixty, he was even ready for early retirement so that he could focus more time and energy on his hobby — collecting and writing about state-planned grain coupons. Songhai complained to me that his bureau chiefs and other administrative superiors hardly supported his effort in both moral and monetary terms to preserve the historical memories of everyday economic life under

austerity and the young colleagues failed to appreciate his sense of nostalgia.

Looking out of his office window, I saw debris where one normally expected to find clusters of old and dilapidated houses. Songhai told me the neighborhood where his office building was located was known as Shanghai's "lower corner" (slum locality). "You should study the history of lower corners before they disappear, like the ration coupons." Song reminded me that the "lower corners" of Shanghai were among the last remaining "urban villages," the localities with well-defined institutional and territorial boundaries, ideal for my "community study" — a term he came up with after I explained to him what conventional ethnographic fieldwork was.

I must say I felt a bit amused at how urban anthropology made sense to a local cadre like Songhai. And I was rather taken aback by the very notion of "lower quarter" which should have become irrelevant and obsolete since Shanghai as a mega-city was experiencing the greatest historical transition of the century. Indeed the large-scale changes that affected every part of Shanghai city since the early 1990s made it easy for us to assume that territoriality or the idea of "place" was less an issue than it had been in the past. Over the course of my research, however, I came to realize that the age-old dichotomy between the lower quarter and upper quarter had hardly been blurred over the past decade of profound transformations (see Farrer 2001). Such a binary opposition between the high and low, as I will show in the following chapters, had hardly lost

its currency in the everyday discourse. I found, rather, that the lower/upper quarters dichotomy remained a linguistic device strategically appropriated by both local residents and municipal officials, and real estate agents to position them in everyday social life and map out residential communities in their mental universe. In some way this age-old dichotomy became my key point of entry to Bay Bridge, a territorial subdivision of Shanghai's Luwan District where I conducted field research on community-building practices intermittently between 1998 and 2005.

## **Community-building in neighborhood Shanghai at the dawn of the new millennium**

Building on previous studies of Chinese cities (Davis, Kraus, Naughton, and Perry 1995; Elvin and Skinner 1974; Ikles 1996; Lewis 1971; Whyte and Parish 1984) and the insights of anthropologists working in other urban geographical settings (Bestor 1989; Leeds 1994; Low 1999), this book investigates the intertwined relationship between social re-stratification, gentrification, and community-building practices in Bay Bridge located in Shanghai's Luwan District. Through an ethnographic examination of the community construction schemes implemented in Bay Bridge and the local perception and management of community building strategies, I explore the discrepancy between the scientizing and modernist visions of the City administrators and the harsh conditions of a gentrifying

neighborhood. Rather than forging a sense of belonging among the local people within a re-imagined socialist “community,” community-building practices in Bay Bridge served to justify the existing social and economic differentiation within a neighborhood. On the one hand, my study seeks to understand why well-intentioned plans for improving the human conditions went awry as the resilience of both social and cultural diversity that overcame the state’s attempt at simplification, standardization, and legibility (Scott 1998). On the other hand, it offers a riveting account of the innovative strategies that highly motivated actors in the neighborhood developed to muddle through and maximize power even though social engineering failed to achieve the intended goals.

The organizational network and the form of local governance examined in the context of my ethnographic fieldwork are known as the subdistrict office (*jiedao*) or the equivalent of “ward government,” and the subordinate residents’ committees (*juwei*). Neighborhood organizations that functioned as a means of managing community life and a nexus of social relationships with varying degrees of autonomy can be found in many parts of the world, most notably the Japanese *chonaikai* residents’ associations (Applebaum 1996; Bestor 1989). As a stark contrast to its counterparts in other geographical regions, the Chinese subdistrict office and residents’ committees are deeply rooted in the socialist system of civil administration. According to the stipulations stated in the *Organic Law of Residents’ Committees of People’s Republic of China* (revised

in 1994), any Chinese city with a population of 100,000 is required to have a subdistrict office, overseeing the lives of approximately 50,000 to 100,000 legally registered residents on a daily basis. Affiliated with each subdistrict office are residents' committees exercising discretion over the communities under their jurisdiction. The subdistrict office was also the major funding source for welfare relief within the neighborhood and for volunteer and recreational activities. In megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai, as many as 1,000 households formed the constituency for a residents' committee essentially appointed by the subdistrict office.

After 1949 China initiated a series of "civilizing" projects aimed at transforming the social and political landscape of urban China and rebuilding the power structure of the local society. The official neighborhood organizations became the cornerstone institutions of the socialist state and assumed the role that was previously filled by the lineage organizations, native-place associations, artisan guilds, and *baojia*, a self-administering mechanism of maintaining order within the residential communities. For over half a century, the neighborhood organizations have served as the primary agent facilitating the social and economic transformation of the localities under their jurisdiction.

Until very recently, locality-based neighborhood organizations in China have received relatively little scholarly attention. One reason, perhaps, was that subdistrict officers and residents' committee workers, who worked closely with the

ward police station as community guard, made themselves and their organization difficult subjects of research. Yet few researchers would fail to notice the omnipresence of the staff members and volunteers of the residents' committee within the walls of various housing compounds.

The everyday life of Chinese urbanites prior to the post-1978 reform was simply not a regular topic of anthropological inquiry owing to the fact that there are no such subjects as sociology and anthropology in academic field. It was often assumed that the industrial workers, who made up the dominant status group of the city-dwellers under socialism, were affiliated primarily with their workplace (*danwei* or work unit) and not necessarily the residential community they lived in. In practice, its major components, the subdistrict office and residents committees functioned as the primary provider of social welfare services for the elderly and marginal groups in Chinese cities (Chan 1993; Wong 1998).

Since the early 1990s sociologists, local historians, and political scientists have devoted considerable attention to Shanghai's hundreds of neighborhood organizations under the jurisdiction of subdistrict level offices. The new interest has enabled fieldworkers to turn their anthropological gaze to the social life of the Chinese urbanites within their residential quarters in recent years. Indeed China's unprecedented transition toward an increasingly diversified and stratified society thus altered the nature of urban experiences begs for a new perspective on the changing nature of urban experiences and



power relationships between different localities in both the inland and costal regions. Paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's constant refrain "only (economic) development is the hard truth" (*zhiyou fazhan caishi yingdaoli*) gave rise to a hegemonic discourse (Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1994) in all spheres of the nation's social and political life and exerted a deep impact on the urbanization process.

As James Scott rightly points out, socialist leaders shared the same developmentalist logic as most believers in the transformative power of high modernism as more and more professionals, technicians, and engineers replaced amateurs after the revolutionary party achieved power (Scott 1998: 166 - 167). Since early 1990s, large-scale infrastructure reconstruction and various community development projects have reconfigured Chinese social space in both coastal and inland regions. The frequently updated city maps of Beijing and Shanghai were perhaps the best manifestations of the gentrification process which had been transforming the everyday life of ordinary neighborhoods. As beneficiaries of the construction boom unprecedented in the history of contemporary China, the world's finest architects were drawn to the various ambitious projects and became active players in the planning process.

Urban China's emerging landscape was redefined not merely by the constant construction of roads and buildings, but more importantly by massive demographic shifts during the reform era. Urbanization led to unprecedented migration beyond the capacity of the local authorities to control and moni-