

## Shanghai Tai Chi: The Art of Being Ruled in Mao's China

Hanchao Lu. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xvi + 358 pp. \$39.99 (hbk). ISBN 9781009180986

Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

Independent scholar, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Email: [mauraelizabeth.cunningham@gmail.com](mailto:mauraelizabeth.cunningham@gmail.com)

In his first monograph, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (University of California Press, 1999), historian Hanchao Lu brought readers into the city's alleyway neighbourhoods (*lilong*) to understand the lives of the "little urbanites" (*xiaoshimin*) dwelling in these narrow lanes. Recounting how the vast majority of Shanghai's Republican-era residents lived, ate, worked and interacted with each other, Lu drew attention away from flashy nightclubs and high-end shops to the texture of ordinary, but no less important, daily life in the metropolis.

Nearly a quarter-century later, Lu has returned to thick descriptions of quotidian life in *Shanghai Tai Chi: The Art of Being Ruled in Mao's China*. A follow-up of sorts to *Beyond the Neon Lights* brings Lu's story into the next major period of modern Chinese history, the Mao years (1949–1976). No less concerned with the everyday experiences of Shanghai's citizens, this time Lu writes against histories of the Mao era that concentrate on elite politics to instead consider how regular people encountered, accommodated, resisted and perpetuated the Communist party-state. In this, Lu joins other scholars examining the Mao years at an individual level – for example, Gail Hershatter (*The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* [University of California Press, 2011]) and Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson (editors of *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* [Harvard University Press, 2015]). There are, of course, also dozens of memoirs written by Chinese authors about their own experiences from the early People's Republic through the Cultural Revolution, several of which Lu draws on in his text.

Lu proposes that bringing one's gaze down to street level is the best way to observe the push and pull between the party-state and its citizens. He argues that this relationship was a dynamic one, which "in a way resembled Chinese shadowboxing, tai chi, with its circuitousness, indirection, ingenuity, and accommodation of all parties involved" (p. 18). Despite its authoritarian aspirations, Lu sees in the lowest levels of the state a periodic acceptance of noncompliance among society.

Lu puts forth his argument through seven chapters, divided into three sections, that mine details from newspapers, government documents in the Shanghai Municipal Archives, memoirs, novels and his own interviews with 47 informants born between 1922 and 1954.

Part one, "The Condemned," begins the story with two groups – capitalists (chapter one) and intellectuals (chapter two) – whom readers might expect would have suffered the most, and most immediately, under the new regime. Lu, however, shows that there was a grace period for some members of both groups during the years when the CCP sought to co-opt potential class enemies instead of condemning them. Permitted to retain their pre-Liberation material comforts so long as they went along with party-state dictates, a small number of Shanghai's "national capitalists" and "bourgeois intellectuals" "could be privileged or comfortable under the proletarian dictatorship so long as the regime regarded them as benign and useful" (p. 54). Only with the arrival of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 did they see significant changes in their social, economic and political situations.

Yet capitalists and intellectuals are not truly the *xiaoshimin* at the heart of Lu's inquiry. Part two, "The Liberated," brings the little urbanites onto centre stage, focusing on sub-populations of youth

(chapter three) and women (chapter four). While students during the Mao years were subject to plenty of ideological indoctrination and anti-Western propaganda, Lu also shows that they avidly consumed translated copies of foreign books. Some of these, of course, were works in harmony with Marxist ideologies, such as *How the Steel Was Tempered*, by Nikolai Ostrovsky; others that circulated, however, were copies of banned titles sourced from the shelves of used bookstores or homes ransacked during the height of the Cultural Revolution. Otherwise idle while schools were closed, students spent days furtively devouring whatever books they could obtain. As a result, Lu writes, “This generation of urban youth might be the most widely read in foreign literature in twentieth-century China” (p. 115).

The working women of Shanghai, by contrast, had no need to search for activities with which to fill their days. Prodded by the government to join “socialist construction,” by the late 1950s nearly 300,000 women in the city had responded by joining “alleyway production teams,” or small-scale neighbourhood-based manufacturing and service industries. Their employment was more than compliance with state propaganda, however: women sought out and fought to keep jobs that helped their family’s economic situation and offered flexible work close to their homes. Both the state and the individual benefitted and kept the alleyway production teams going.

In part three, “Under the French Parasol Trees,” Lu turns to qualities that have made Shanghai uniquely itself – its tree-lined streets (chapter five), foreign population (chapter six), and residents’ interest in stylish clothes and tasty food (chapter seven). Each of these elements lessened to some extent during the Mao years but never entirely disappeared: Lu sees glimpses of individuality and resistance in the cultivation of personal gardens and the fashionable cut of a collar worn underneath a standard Mao jacket. Small as they may seem, he argues, such expressions of personal tastes indicate “A powerful undercurrent beneath the surface of Communist asceticism” (p. 251).

Lu concedes that this undercurrent of resistance was not explicitly organized or planned. “At one level,” he explains, “it was a spontaneous struggle for survival; at another, it was a clever and persistent pursuit of comfort and pleasure” (p. 251). Lu posits that this small-scale endurance – though often muted or hidden – of older customs, objects and social status meant that after the deprivations of the Mao era Shanghai was able to bounce back quickly and reclaim its status as a cosmopolitan metropolis. The Mao years undoubtedly left their mark on the city and its people, but in *Shanghai Tai Chi* Hanchao Lu invites readers to regard these decades as an interruption, an extended but ultimately temporary flickering of the neon lights that once again illuminate its skyline.

doi:10.1017/S030574102400050X

## Beyond Citizenship: Literacy and Personhood in Everyday China, 1900–1945

Di Luo. Leiden: Brill, 2022. 282 pp. €160.50 (hbk). ISBN 9789004524736

Lena Henningsen

Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany  
Email: [lena.henningsen@zo.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:lana.henningsen@zo.uni-heidelberg.de)

Readers matter. Reading matters to readers. And to be able to read, future readers have to gain literacy. Literary studies have taught us that texts only come into being and gain meaning when they are read by actual people. Yet, actual readers are ephemeral to researchers. While concrete readings may be crucial to them, even life-transforming, most reading acts go undocumented for posterity