Cities and Urban Society in China in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Review Essay in Western Literature

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Introduction

The history of Chinese cities and urban society represents a new field of the historiography of China. For a long time, urban history has been neglected to the benefit of a research that focused massively on the great political events. Over the last decade, however, it has gained increasing respectability.

Research on China was for a long time dominated by what used to be called the orientalist tradition. One of its main features was the philological study of ancient texts. As a consequence, research centered on the imperial institutions and, by predilection, on the formal content of these texts rather than on the political and social reality that underlined them.¹ Moreover, since these documents were produced by the literati who ruled the country, they conveyed a system of values and a discourse that gave emphasis to the ideal of a frugal and industrious rural society. There ensued from this a lack of interest in urban society in the historiography of ancient China that reflected the anti-city bias and the attitude of distrust the literati harbored against urban settlements and their populations, especially those who were potentially more dangerous in political terms, the

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¹ The other traditional fields of orientlist studies were the philosophy and religion in classical China.
merchants. Cities, moreover, did not formally exist in the Chinese administrative hierarchy. On the opposite, the administrative organization was designed to limit the influence and power of urban entities.\(^2\) It should also be noted that orientalist studies failed to pay any attention to the contemporary world and did not take the opportunity the free access to China before 1949 and the accumulation of materials by foreign residents and travelers since the mid-nineteenth century provided to observe Chinese society \textit{in vivo}.

The political history of China herself also greatly influenced the orientations of research toward contemporary society. The fall of the Qing dynasty, the 1911 revolution and the breakup of the country provided the ground for an approach that focused on the impact of the forced opening of China by Western powers and on political history. Above all, the takeover of power by the Communist party in 1949 led the specialists of China, especially historians, to center their work on the origins and the process of the victory of communism. In fact, historical research took as its target the communist movement under its various aspects, with a predominantly political history, and peasants, the social springboard of the Communist party. The world of cities, which was regarded as unworthy of consideration in the process of the Chinese revolution, was practically forsaken by historians.

In reality, urban society was not completely excluded from research, even if initial works were irregular and partly determined by political concern. Therefore, a choice had to be made in the historical production of the last decades to determine what legitimately came under this heading and to highlight the possible filiation that existed between the various works produced at different times. Although such an approach may be somehow artificial, it is evident that the historiographical unfolding which led to the emergence and structuring of a

\(^2\) Large cities were often divided among two different counties (\textit{xian}) and had no official administration at the municipal level.
specific field of research did not take place by accident. Such a development is related to the influence of the historians of Western Europe and to the specific evolution of China historians.

In this paper, I have privileged a chronological approach that should highlight more clearly the transformations of this field of historiography and its stages. Within this framework, I have selected only the works which truly dealt with urban phenomena — monographs of particular cities or studies of specifically urban social groups. At the end of this presentation, I shall sketch out a summary of the research directions currently under investigation and the “black holes” which await the historians’ attention.

**The pioneers’ works**

The first works that relate to urban history were not produced by historians, but by other social scientists. They were all concerned with China’s key city — Shanghai —on which, as we shall see later, the largest number of studies has concentrated. In 1940, Chen Yao-sheng produced in a little known doctoral dissertation, the first academic study of the International Settlement in the perspective of international relations. The author tried to understand the specificity of this territory that existed as an autonomous entity — a kind of *imperium in imperio* — within a Chinese city which was itself divided into three distinct administrative and political jurisdictions (International Settlement, French Concession, and Chinese municipality). Chen’s approach focused exclusively on the power relations between the various authorities to the detriment of the city’s actual urban management.

At the same period, another work focused on the fate of Shanghai under the

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Japanese occupation, especially with a view to assess its economic impact. The author, Robert W. Barnett, attempted to demonstrate how the state of war caused by Japanese aggression had led to a sort of kidnapping of the city, to an increasing stifling of its economy — following the blockage of all land and maritime routes — and to the decline of the city as an international commercial and financial center. Barnett’s study, which ends in 1941 before the seizure of the International Settlement by the Japanese army and the relative “freezing” of the autonomy of the French Concession, emphasized the particular status of Shanghai in China and its inability to survive as a large cosmopolitan metropolis without the preservation of its links with the outside world. The Sino-Japanese conflict initiated a decline that the communist takeover only accelerated and brought to an end.

In contrast to the two previous works, the classical book of Rhoads Murphey, *Shanghai: Key to Modern China*, represents the first comprehensive approach to an understanding of the place and role of Shanghai in the opening of China in modern times. The author combined a geography and history to determine the city’s pattern of development after the arrival of Westerners in the nineteenth century, its weight in the regional economy and, above all, the contribution of the metropolis to the economic progress of its hinterland and more generally to the whole country. Shanghai was said to have been the privileged vector of modernization in a lethargic and tradition-bound China; it opened the doors to an economic and social transformation inspired from Western models. Rhoads Murphey has since then reneged on his own interpretation, although in my view it still holds a certain relevance.

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6 I shall not develop the arguments of this debate here. The reader shall refer to the later works of Rhoads Murphey, *Treaty Ports and China's Modernization. What Went Wrong?* Michigan Papers in Chinese
It is clear that the three works presented above relate to urban history only imperfectly. They all took a city as their object of study, though without really penetratint into it. Nevertheless, these authors laid the ground for more history-oriented approaches of Chinese cities. And it is the field of social history that gave birth to a few innovative works in the 1960s. Their main axis was not urban history *stricto sensu*, but they were to contribute [partake to] to this fields in a fundamental way. This is the case, most notably, of Jean Chesneaux's state doctoral dissertation on the Chinese labor movement which explored the then unknown world of urban proletariat, especially in the industrial metropolis Shanghai of the 1920s.\(^7\) Although his work was flawed by an approach that suffers from a political bias, it was an essential contribution to the history of a still ill-defined and numerically insignificant group. The proletariat was, however, very present and active in the cities of twentieth-century China. Paradoxically, Jean Chesneaux's work had no sequel. It was not until the 1980s that a series of original works offered new perspectives on Chinese workers (see infra).

At the same period, Marie-Claire Bergère was undertaking the study of another group that took the lead in the modernization of the country — the bourgeoisie or its forebears.\(^8\) The forced opening of China had induced a transformation of the Chinese economy, especially in the treaty ports open to foreign trade, and generated a radical social restructuring. The fusion of the traditional literati class and the merchants gave birth to an élite which was more concerned about modernizing and adapting the country to the new international order and responding to the challenge of the West. Politically, the bourgeoisie rejected the imperial system dominated by the Manchus and, according to Marie-

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Claire Bergère, embraced the revolutionary cause without being able to play a central role.

These pioneering works uncovered important aspects of Chinese history that heretofore had been neglected by orientalist studies. They brought a new light on original issues, either out of political concern (Chesneaux), or out of questions based on French historiography (Bergère). They also represented, with Lucien Bianco’s work on peasants, an attempt by French historians to a systematic approach of the social groups which were the products and the engine of the Chinese “revolution”. This research on the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, although it was not based on a particular city, centered in fact very much on Shanghai, China’s experimental social “melting pot”. More generally, these works opened the way to more focused monographs of cities and urban social strata.

This review of innovative works would not be complete without mentioning the only work which marked the genesis of Chinese urban history, namely Mark Elvin’s doctoral dissertation on the first municipal institution set up in Shanghai between 1895 and 1914. At the crossroads of the history of the city and that of its elites, the author took pain to document the emergence of a new urban elite in Shanghai. One that was very much involved in the affairs of the city and, taking advantage of the weakening of the imperial regime, managed to establish an autonomous power base with the tacit assent of the local authorities. Mark Elvin’s study dealt as much with the actual realizations of this municipal body in the urban field as with the nature of this administration and the trends that underlay this movement. Mark Elvin’s conclusions largely agreed with those of Marie-Claire Bergère, although his put more emphasis on the genuinely native elements of such an evolution.

The return to the city

Because the mainstream of research was oriented toward the great political events and the revolutionary process, however, this first group of works was followed by a long latency period. The urban phenomenon in China failed to take roots in historical research. In the United States, however, a renewed interest in cities and urban society began to develop through a series of three conferences that permitted to go backward in time. The starting point was the conference held on Chinese cities under communism which gave birth to a collective volume edited by John Lewis.¹⁰ It was followed by two similar meetings on the city at the end of the Qing dynasty and in the Republic. The two remarkable volumes that came out of these debates brought, in William G. Skinner’s view, “a more eclectic and imaginative use of sources, improved methodologies, a more rigorous approach to argumentation, and, above all, an augmented sense of problem”.¹¹

Each of the two volumes referred to above comprised contributions which studied various segments of Chinese urban society. In a significant departure from previous works, a wide array of specific groups or political, economic, and social organizations became the central object of a more careful examination in order to highlight the structure, the components, as well as the mechanisms of transformation of urban society. The final result was far from balanced. Local elites (literati, merchants) benefited — this was an effect of the availability of sources — from the privileged attention of historians. One should distinguish among these contributions the papers written by William G. Skinner in the volume devoted to Late imperial urban society. The author raised issues both in qualitative and quantitative terms that are still at the core of current research.

Altogether, it is no exaggeration to state that the topics and the problems examined in these volumes have paved the way later studies followed.\(^{12}\)

The evolution of Chinese urban history has therefore constantly oscillated between two poles: monographs of cities and studies of social groups increasingly located in a particular urban center.\(^{13}\) The study of the city of Jinan by David Buck constitutes the first genuine attempt at providing a comprehensive view of the fate of a whole city over a relatively long period of time (1890-1949).\(^{14}\) His ambition was probably excessive, but it can be explained by the novelty of his enterprise. David Buck tried to highlight the process of modernization of the city at the economic and educational level with an emphasis on the leading role of the local bourgeoisie. This process could not mature because of political instability, especially the difficulties created by the warlords, the stifling effect of the Nationalist regime, and finally the war with Japan and the civil war. Although he tried to give a dimension of social and economic history to his work, David Buck produced a piece of research in which political issues and political history dominated.

In the field of social groups, production was much more substantial. On the one hand, Marie-Claire Bergère carried on her study of the Chinese bourgeoisie, in particular its Shanghai component, from the perspective of social and economic history. Her research found its final outcome in a state doctoral dissertation whose topic — an uncommon one at a time when French historical research

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\(^{12}\) "We have aimed to open up a new field of study — the historical sociology of Chinese urbanism. I think we have succeeded in establishing the main dimensions of the subject, in suggesting the intellectual excitement it affords, and in demonstrating its importance for social science as well as for sinology". William G. Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), p. vii.


privileged the *longue durée* — allowed her to explore large sections of Chinese economic history in the twentieth century and to develop a reflection on one of the most important categories of urban society.\(^{15}\) Moreover, through her use of a method — prosopography — unknown in the China field where the lack of appropriate sources made such an attempt a hazardous enterprise, Marie-Claire Bergère brought into her narrative a very dense human dimension. She was able therefore to demonstrate the emergence of a group which was clearly aware of its existence and its responsibilities toward the nation. Through their commercial and social practice, they were bound to what can be called the tradition, but they were at the same time the carriers of a modernist project which the decay of the state, or its authoritarian tendencies under the Guomindang, eventually brought to failure.\(^{16}\) In the same vein, a mention should be made of the unpublished dissertation of James Sanford on Shanghai commercial organizations, the first monograph on the merchant community in a single city.\(^{17}\)

As in the previous period, the other pole of society — workers — was again the object of a study with a still politically inspired *problématique*, although it was also emblematic of a desire to define more precisely the nature of this group in Chinese society. Chan Ming-kou's work dealt with the labor movement at Canton, Hong Kong and in the main urban centers of the Pearl river delta. One of the originalities of his dissertation was to take as a starting point a period that preceded the formation of modern political movements, especially the Communist party. Chan Ming-kou has skillfully delineated the contours of a milieu that tried

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to organize and defend its rights by itself. He has demonstrated the obviously decisive influence of modern trade unions, both nationalist and communist, while emphasizing the limits of their power due to the communal divisions among regional groups and their inability to groom genuine grass-roots leaders. Although it highlights a central aspect of a region much neglected in current historiography, Chan’s study did not however observe the workers in their cities and in their workplace.¹⁸

Another topic that deserves a more active exploration — foreign communities — did not generate much interest. David Krantzler has devoted his book to the fate of the Jews in Shanghai during the Sino-Japanese war.¹⁹ His work appears more as a contribution to Jewish memory — a legitimate concern undoubtedly — than as an attempt at a social history of Westerners in China. Because of its sensitive and poorly rewarding character in a political and historiographical context of denunciation of imperialism and its evils, this topic has suffered from disrepute and did not become the object of research except for a short and general essay on foreign communities in China²⁰. More recently, however, a few historians have looked into this promising field of research (see infra).

After years of eclipse, the world of cities has progressively come back to the front stage of historical inquiry on China. Although works were more numerous, better defined and, for some of them (Marie-Claire Bergère) fundamental contributions to the field, they were still unrelated monographs to which one can a posteriori attribute a certain consistency. It is not totally artificial, however,

and it does reflect the development of a new research trend and the beginning of clear and coherent movement.

The maturation of the field

The maturation of urban history into a field of research is the natural outcome of the spate of works that have accumulated during the last decade and a half. One can now speak of an explicit and conscious movement around issues that have become the object of intense debates among historians and have considerably enriched and renewed our knowledge of Chinese urban society in modern times.

The presentation of this field cannot begin without mentioning the fascinating and exemplary study of Hankou by William T. Rowe. With a deliberate commitment to rehabilitate the role of cities in Chinese history, the author has painted a masterly portrait of economic activity in one of the major emporia of China over near a century. He examines with great finesse the complex structures of commercial networks and the close interaction between merchants and imperial power. The other side of his study is the analysis of the city’s social organization with an emphasis on the composition of the local population — it was made of the juxtaposition of regional communities of sojourners with a strong identity — on the extraordinarily integrative role of the guilds for their own constituencies and between the various communities. Above all, William T. Rowe attempts to demonstrate the reality of a fusion of the city’s various groups of elites into a unique urban elite. This elite was able and willing to invest a local power neglected by the representatives of the imperial state and to take into their own hands the management of the city. William T. Rowe also

emphasizes the native nature of this process which in the absence of the Westerners' economic invasion, could have led to the emergence of a genuine Chinese bourgeoisie and to a political evolution much different from what actually happened in China.

In a second volume, William T. Rowe has shifted his interest from the elites to the whole population on the one hand, and to what may be labeled the patterns or modes of social control. The city of Hankou, as all the large urban concentrations, had a potential for serious crisis such as natural calamities or social conflicts. Quite strikingly, it appears that the setting up of structures for social welfare and public services by the guilds in the city represented the more blatant expression of the conquest of the public domain to the expense of a state which was neither capable nor willing to get involved in these matters. This new field of action, which came under the public domain but was dominated by private organizations, formed an intermediary social and political arena — the so-called "public sphere" in Jürgen Habermass' terms — between public (the state and its servants) and private (individuals, families, and enterprises) in which the elites found the road to the exercise of power. Hankou was also remarkable in that it had a low occurrence of social conflicts in spite of numerous potentially dangerous issues (food crisis, labor unrest, inter-community riots) which can be attributed to the efficacy of this form of social organization.

In her study of Shanghai native-place organizations, Bryna Goodman tends to support in part the analysis of William T. Rowe. She emphasizes the powerful integrating capacity of the guilds (huiguan) and the native-place associations (tongxianghui) in a society which was subject to an unprecedented demographic upheaval and a very rapid economic transformation. Despite such instability, the


floating or even unruly segments of the Shanghai population remained marginal. Most individuals, whatever their social status, achieved their integration through the networks formed by each community of sojourners. On the opposite, however, Bryna Goodman supports the idea that these communities, including their leading strata, were not necessarily on the way to a fusion into an undifferentiated and cosmopolitan urban elite. A vertical partition based on native place continued to override the horizontal social divisions, even if in the twentieth century one can perceive a splitting up of native-place ties and the emergence of diverging interests between the ruling elites and commoners. The more recent work by Kwan Man-bun did not exactly contribute to this debate. His study dealt more specifically with the relations between the merchants and the state in Tianjian where the salt merchants involved the state monopoly on this commodity dominated the local stage. The role of the guilds seems to have been much less significant, although the author noted the involvement of merchants in public works or local welfare organizations.  

The development of historiography followed a chronologically illogical path which resulted in the completion of the above mentioned works after the publication of several monographs on the twentieth-century bourgeoisie, especially under the Nationalist regime. Parks M. Coble has drawn a remarkable portrait of the Shanghai capitalists, demonstrating their lines of force (regionally based networks) on the one hand, and their contradictions toward the nationalist regime on the other. After its staunch support of the Guomindang in its enterprise of conquest of the whole country, the Shanghai bourgeoisie was dragged into providing continuous financial assistance to the extent that its fate was bound to that of the regime. Although it was molested by the nationalist

regime's heavy handed methods, the bourgeoisie put up with this situation until the economic crisis shattered the fragile unity of this group, wiped out its economic influence and subjected it to the goodwill of the state. Through the examination of the relations between the state and the bourgeoisie over a longer period (1890-1930), Joseph Fewsmith has also observed the strategy of domination of the Nationalist party on urban society and its elites, although it failed to achieve it because of the personal relations the members of the elite entertained with the major national political leaders.26

Xu Xiaoqun's study of the "middle classes" in Shanghai in the 1920s-1930s has for the first time contributed to fill in the gap between the two extremes of the social spectrum.27 It deals with the groups which were the vectors of the nascent middle classes: professionals and the organizations they have established in order to acquire an identity and to defend or promote their interests: lawyers, physicians, engineers, accountants, journalists, and university professors. The main argument of the author is that these groups whose numbers were on the rise enjoyed a lifestyle that placed them in a favorable position in relation with the majority of the population, although they did not equal that of the political and economic elites. They created their own autonomous organizations to assert their identity, to give more cohesiveness to the profession, and to be recognized by the state. These initiatives were an element of the formation of civil society in China. These groups were not homogenous, especially because of their short history, but the sum of their actions was symptomatic of the maturation of Chinese urban society. Their associations were born out of the development of a modern and capitalist economy at the same

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26 Joseph Fewsmith, Party, State and Local Elites in Republican China, Honolulu (The Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1985).
time as they met and even looked for a recognition by the state. Both needed each other: the associations longed for an official recognition to defend their interests; the state was willing to co-opt these groups for its state-building and modernization policies.

In a sense, the link between the merchant communities in the nineteenth century and the bourgeoisie of the next century remains to be established. Joseph Fewsmith was the first to use the notion of "public sphere" (gong) as an intermediary arena between the state and the individual. He emphasized the leading role of the merchant organizations. The debate, however, was by then limited to the rivalry between the Nationalist regime and the bourgeoisie. David Strand's book, a late outcome of his original dissertation, broadens this perspective through the study of the participation of various social groups (rickshaw pullers, merchants, etc.) to Beijing's political and social life.\(^{28}\) While the former were before all the recalcitrant victims of technical progress — they vented their anger and frustrations through violent demonstrations — the latter played a major role in the management of a city subject to the recurrent intestine struggles between warlords, military officers and corrupted politicians. In the absence of the state, the elites not only guaranteed the preservation of social order, they also contributed to weave the framework of a social and political arena that carried the germs of a genuine civil society. Such a role, however, was basically denied to them by the Guomindang as Michael Tsing has shown in his study of Canton in the 1920s. What he perceived during this period was an emasculated merchant community and an immature working class hardly dominated by a fledgling political power. Neither managed to articulate a convincing discourse and to find a real basis for cooperation. In the end, Chinese society failed to nurture the institutions most needed to support the development

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of a democratic political system.  

The field of social history was also enriched by a new approach based on the study of the morphology of cities. Chang Ying-hwa was the first to undertake a comparative analysis of four major cities from the point of view of the structure and use of urban space. His work obviously brings to light important differences between Beijing, the administrative capital, and Shanghai, Asia's first commercial, financial and industrial metropolis. This line of research was carried over in a slightly different vein by Lynda Cooke Johnson in her dissertation of the urban structure of Shanghai (1756-1896). She has documented how a relatively important commercial center in the eighteenth century benefited from the destruction brought about by the Taiping rebellion to the other regional urban centers and from the transformations of the regional economy after the opening of China to foreign trade. Lynda C. Johnson not only emphasizes the quantitative change, the modifications of the urban space, but also the process of progressive integration of the Chinese city and the foreign settlements.

Studies of specific urban centers taken as a whole unit has also experienced a revival. Lai Jeh-hang has touched upon this topic in his dissertation on Sun Fo (Sun Ke) in which he examined the municipal policy of the Nationalists in Canton in the early 1920s. Lai Jeh-hang has pointed out phenomena whose more detailed and systematic study was carried out by Maryruth Coleman and Christian

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Henriot. These two authors have selected the same period — the Nanjing decade — and they have examined in two different cities, Nanjing and Shanghai respectively, the means and effects of the modernization effort of the Guomindang.\textsuperscript{33} Beyond the study of the major accomplishments of these municipalities in the fields of urban management (education, public health, tax system, urban planning) which demonstrate the reality and the relevance of the modernizing project of the Nationalist elites, Christian Henriot has explored the complex web of power relations between the party, the state and the local elites. His conclusions challenge the interpretations put forward by the specialists of this period (especially Parks M. Coble and Joseph Fewsmith) and play up the contradictions between the Guomindang and the state apparatus, the increasing ascendancy of the latter as well as the autonomy a fraction of the local elites was able to preserve.\textsuperscript{34}

With the International settlement of Shanghai as her target, Kerrie MacPherson has reconstructed the genesis of foreign power which she argues came out from an increasing concern for public health issues.\textsuperscript{35} The necessity to protect the health of the residents in an ecologically (the settlement was located in an area made of marshes, canals and paddy fields) and socially (the fear of riots by the Chinese population) hostile environment (the settlement was located in an area made of marshes, canals and paddy fields) contributed to the emergence of a solidarity and common interests. On this basis Westerners organized themselves into a sort of local state power that took over the establishment and maintenance of public services. In the same vein, a mention


should be made of Noel Miners’ work on the particular case of Hong Kong, a colonial city-state. The author presents the structures of power and singles out a few outstanding policies the administration implemented in the social arena (prostitution, drug, bond-servants). On Tianjin, Lewis Bernstein has produced an interesting, though unbalanced study which outlines the demographic situation of the city at the end of the empire. It also examines the conquest of Tianjin by the Western armies after the Boxer rebellion as well as the brief experience of foreign municipal administration that followed. There is no specific issue in this work that can relate it to current debates in Chinese urban history.

The fate of intellectuals as a social group has not attracted many historians. The peculiar nature of this group makes it more difficult to study it in a given locality. Intellectuals are most often regarded as producers of ideas for whom a geographical definition is not relevant. Nevertheless, a monograph can also be useful for studies that deal not just with the leading figures, but try to insert this community into its environment. For instance, Noël Castelino has reconstructed the intellectual, professional, and social development, and even the geographical itinerary, of a group of Shanghai-based non partisan intellectuals who established political journals during the civil war. Prospography has proved to be especially relevant and fruitful. For the period of the Sino-Japanese war, a mention should be made of Edward Gunn’s work on Beijing and Shanghai writers, although the author does not deal with the intellectual milieu per se. Another

contribution has been made by Fu Po-shek on intellectuals in Shanghai in which he tackles the neglected issues of resistance and collaboration.\textsuperscript{40} Shanghai students have been studied by Jeffrey Wasserstrom. His focus, however, was more on their political action than on their place in an urban setting.\textsuperscript{41}

The 1980s also saw the revival of research on workers. This renewed interest translated into a study of the role of communist activists in Hunan which, although it was not strictly centered on one city, did examine strike movements in Changsha and emphasized the deficiencies of previous works and called for a political and social redefinition of this class.\textsuperscript{42} Two other monographs have simultaneously opened new perspectives. The first one by Emily Honig examined woman textile workers in Shanghai while the other, by Gail Hershatter, dealt with Tianjin workers.\textsuperscript{43} The two authors cover \textit{grosso modo} the whole republican period and they both offer exceptionally detailed pictures of a milieu that appeared by and large very much influenced by its rural origins. It was divided in regional communities that at best ignored each other or at worst fought with each other, causing the failure of the communist activists' attempts at creating a "working class". The quality of these studies is rooted in their anthropological approach which makes it possible to get very close to the tragic reality of this world. Their weakness, however, is a loss of the sense of history. The thesis of


division and stratification among workers has also been illustrated by Lu Hanchao’s dissertation on workers’ neighborhoods in which he examines their residential patterns in Shanghai.44

There is no doubt that the work of reference on this topic is the monumental dissertation of Alain Roux on Shanghai workers. It combines a real concern for comprehensive understanding of the world of workers in order to reconstitute its variety and complexity. It also aims at restoring the history of this group and to give it a place in the social and economic history of that period.45 A specialist of this domain since his doctoral dissertation by political inclination, Alain Roux has rehabilitated the reality of a restive or even combative working class “traditional” historiography had dismissed as irrelevant the anti-Communist repression of the Nationalists after 1927. He has also established the activist and effective role of the trade unions formed under the auspices of the new regime. Eventually, Alain Roux demonstrates that, by an irony of history, the “working class” remained at the periphery of a revolution of which it was supposed to be the vanguard. This topic is certainly not exhausted. The more recent monograph of Shanghai workers on strike by Elizabeth Perry adds greatly to our understanding of the differences and cleavages within the Shanghai proletariat.46 Altogether, there is now a solid basis for the study of workers in twentieth-century China.

The current exploration of Chinese society was enriched by studies of strata

or groups situated at the social periphery. A particular attention has been given to the poorest segments of the Shanghai population such as the Subei people (also called Jiangbei people). They came from the more impoverished parts of Jiangsu and once in Shanghai, they were confined to the less rewarding jobs and ostracized by the local population. Emily Honig has demonstrated how the prejudices accumulated over time and the perpetuation of a low economic status reinforced each other to keep this community apart. The world of prostitutes — a genuine barometer of social change — has been studied by Christian Henriot in his state doctoral dissertation. Operating at the border between the “honorable society” and the world of criminals, prostitutes were patronized by men of all origins and watched over by various authorities. Therefore, they were especially sensitive to the changes in sexual behaviors, gender relations and modes of entertainment. Since prostitution was a matter of concern for many institutional and private actors, the discourse they generated provide as many entries for an understanding of the patterns of social control in Shanghai.

The realm of social control and more specifically of a major institution designed for this purpose has been undertaken by Frederic Wakeman in his wide-encompassing study of police in Nationalist Shanghai. Based on the assumption that the development of a modern police force was a major priority of the new authorities in their ambition to rule the city, to take over the foreign settlements and to create a new political and social order, Frederic Wakeman’s book

47 Although it is not easy to place it in a particular category, the collective volume edited by Yeh Wen-hsin and Frederic Wakeman deserves a special mention. It offers a wide array of perspectives on Shanghai urban society and a good preliminary synthesis of the state of the field. Frederic Wakeman & Yeh Wen-hsin, Shanghai sojourners (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).


examines the reforms that were introduced, the impact of foreign influences and
the various tasks that were assigned to the police.\textsuperscript{50} Although the new force
gained in efficiency over the years, especially though a closer collaboration with
the other services of police, it was also increasingly involved in political
problems — anti-communist repression — and failed to play its role as a guardian
of public order. Frederic Wakeman has capitalized on the rich Shanghai
Municipal Police files he has explored systematically to project himself into the
much confused period of the Sino-Japanese war.\textsuperscript{51} Shifting away from a specific
police force, he examines urban crime and terrorism as it developed in Shanghai,
especially in the so-called Badlands — Shanghai's western extra-settlement road
area — because of the police and administrative vacuum created by Japanese
occupation. His very detailed monographs shows the incredible level of
violence and social disruption that prevailed for a time in the city due to the
merciless struggle nationalist, communist, Japanese and puppet agents engaged in.

This review would not be complete without the mention of an axis — the
study of foreign communities — that was embryonic in previous works, such as
those by Kerrie MacPherson or Kathryn Meyer, but that have become more
concrete in two series of works. Paradoxically, although foreigners were often
disparaged in the name of the imperialist aggression they embodied, the
communities living in Chinese cities have not yet received the attention they
deserve. Nicholas R. Clifford has brought some light on the foreign community in
Shanghai in the 1920s. He has emphasized the social isolation of national groups
who lived among themselves although they harbored a unanimous and
condescending distrust toward the Chinese. Nicholas R. Clifford's book, however,
has more to do with political events, especially the reactions of foreigners to the

\textsuperscript{50} Frederic E. Wakeman, \textit{Policing Shanghai, 1927-1937} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{51} Frederic E. Wakeman, \textit{The Shanghai Badlands: Wartime Terrorism and Urban Crime, 1937-1941} (New

\section*{Conclusion: political history, elites and social history}

The development of Chinese urban history reflects to a certain extent the questions raised in Western historiography with an important interval due to the particular difficulties of historical research in China (uncatalogued or unidentified archival materials, recent and still restricted access to archives related to contemporary history). From this point of view, one should not be surprised by the shift of the objects of research and of the \textit{problématiques} from the history of political events toward a history of the social groups who played a role in these events, then to a social history of urban society that took a whole city as its target. This was not the only notable change in urban history. There was also a growing autonomization from Western historiography and an increasingly "auto-centered" development on the basis of issues that were brought out by the nature of Chinese society herself.

While the revolutions have inspired many historians — they first regarded
them as responses to Western intrusion in the nineteenth century — the inherent mechanisms and transformations at work within Chinese society have determined the orientation of the more recent works. For instance, the 1911 revolution has led historians to examine the role of local elites and from there to reflect upon the political and social arena that was generated by the growing investment of these elites in public affairs. Although such concern can be found in older works, they were formalized only recently in a few thoughtful monographs and papers. The central concept around which much debate has developed is that of "public sphere" drawn from J. gen Harbermass' work, and for the twentieth century that of "civil society". In other words, Chinese society would have given birth spontaneously to a movement in which the elites played an increasing role in the affairs of the city in a context of decay (19th century), or even complete collapse (20th century) of the state. The debate on the nature and the extent of this transformation is not yet settled, but it has contributed to a renewal of Chinese social and urban history thanks to its application to new fields and to the new perspectives it offers.

What perspectives of research are now open to the historians of China? The


progress made during the last few years in terms of issues and materials have laid the basis for the exploration of aspects that heretofore have been neglected. There is first a need for a geographical extension of research through studies of other cities than Shanghai — currently the target-city of historical research — especially more minor cities (Wuxi, Ningbo, etc.), inland cities (Xi’an, Chengdu, etc.) and coastal cities (Canton, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Dalian, etc.).

Another possible axis in cities for which there are abundant archives is the study of spatial or social “micro-milieus”. In other words, it is time to undertake the exploration of specific corporations and to break away from the traditionally large social categories (bourgeoisie, workers) as has been done in European history (the study of particular corporations such as peddlars, bakers, etc.) or to select a more restricted space (for example, a district, which is possible on the basis of the police archives) in order to have a more precise understanding of the daily life of the individuals, families, and communities which formed urban society. A field of research does not define itself solely in terms of objects, but in terms of problématiques and methodologies. The developments of the last decade show that Chinese urban history has now become a clearly unidentifiable domain bound to be enriched by the innovative works the opening of archives in China is calling for.

57 Several studies in Chinese urban history have appeared recently that confirm the trend toward a sustained interest in this field of study. Since I did not have them at the time of writing this essay, I shall limit myself to indicating their reference: Clausen Soren & Thogersen Stig, The Making of a Chinese City: History and Historiography in Harbin, (M.E. Sharpe Armonk, Inc., 1995) (a collection of essays by various authors on pre- and post-communist Harbin); Wolff David, “To the Harbin Station: City Building in Russian Mandchuria, 1898-1914” (unpublished dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1991).