

Managing the city of difference: (b)ordering space in Shanghai



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Abstract

China's cities have been changing dramatically since the country adopted the "opening-up and reforms" strategy three decades ago. The commodification of the housing market, urban renewal accompanied by massive displacement of original residents, and rural-to-urban migration are but a few of the processes contributing to a growing socio-spatial diversity in the contemporary Chinese city. The hence emerging "city of difference" – a notion broadly discussed in the Western context – poses new challenges to post-Mao decision makers and planners in terms of urban management and design. While Lefebvre's "right to the city" and "right to difference" have been used to construct an argument for the resolution of (not only) cultural conflicts in the city of difference in the West, these concepts have yet to be explored when it comes to their applicability within the context of a transitioning Chinese society. In this paper, I will use the case of spatial ordering on the borderland between Old and New in the city of Shanghai to demonstrate that local planning practices here not only are far from acknowledging the potential of diversity in the emerging city of difference – but are working aggressively towards its annihilation instead.

The city of difference in China

Recent economic reforms in China have been targeting the engineering of a “highly consumer-oriented professional middle-class” by virtue of redistributing public assets and housing in particular (Tomba). Commodification of the housing market and the subsequent phenomenon of property-led, state-sponsored gentrification (He) have caused the disappearance of mature neighbourhoods and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of original residents for the sake of segregated residential neighbourhoods and affluent new homeowners (Tomba). Furthermore, the wealth gap between rural and urban has triggered massive internal migration. Similar to the ways in which cities of the West have excluded and segregated the immigrant groups who have helped to build them in the first place (Sandercock), rural migrants in the Chinese city – apart from being subject to prejudice and everyday discrimination by local urbanites – are legitimately excluded from services such as insurance, health services, or education. Because of China’s *hukou* system, which only entitles citizens to public services at their place of official household registration, their access to the regular urban housing system is restricted, and their choices limited to (cheapest) rental housing (Li). In summary, the country’s economic and socio-spatial transition has brought about a new (or rather, long forgotten) diversity in China’s cities, scrutinizing established socialist strategies to planning and posing new challenges for the management of citizenship and associated rights.

Sandercock, referring to Lefebvre and his conceptualisation of the “right to the city” – namely through the right to voice, the right to difference, and the right to human flourishing –, argues that the “building of a peaceful co-existence based on respect for differences has been, and remains, among the most important challenges facing all urban societies”. Based on a case study of “cultural imperialism” (Young) on the borderland between Old and New, in this paper I will demonstrate that current practices of urban management and planning in Shanghai are far from meeting the challenges posed by the emerging city of difference.

The right to the city?

WY was born in 1980 in a small town in Jiangsu Province, about 600 kilometres away from Shanghai. She came to the city in 2002 and after her marriage in 2004 moved to a small, run-down neighbourhood, located in Putuo Qu (one of the city’s central districts) on the north bank of the Suzhou Creek. At this time, the area had

already been subject to property-led macro-gentrification for several years. As the municipal government took measures towards the improvement of living conditions and environmental quality along the riverside of the Creek, a gated high-rise residential compound emerged literally across the street from WY's new home, the old shantytown.



Figure 1 - WY's daughter playing in the park of the gated compound (photograph: WY).

When I first met her during an initial phase of intensive fieldwork in April 2007, WY (a radiant young woman of well-groomed appearance), her husband, and her then two-year-old daughter lived in a makeshift hovel right at the entrance to the local wet market on the street separating the old neighbourhood from the new compound. The street was lined by crude structures to the side of the Old – accommodating a variety of improvised dwellings, convenience shops, small businesses, and soup kitchens, spilling on what once must have been the pavement –, and by an actual, broad pavement along the monotonous see-through fence marking the perimeter of the New. Local residents would habitually conquer the generously sized pavement across the street and spread their furniture and belongings, gathering to play a game of billiard or mah-jongg – activities for which, occasionally, they would be joined by the newcomers living in the new compound. In short, the borderland acted as a “melting pot” for a large array of people, who

shared this public space, appropriated it temporally, and programmed it provisionally to meet their differing demands (lossifova "Blurring the Joint Line? Urban Life on the Edge between Old and New in Shanghai").



Figure 2 - Micro-gentrification on the borderland: the entrance to the market in April 2007 (1), October 2007 (2), and October 2008 (3).

WY would get up at five thirty every morning to pull up the roller shutter that constituted the street-side façade of her home, hence transforming the crammed ten-square-meter interior into a small retail business and expanding it over the pavement for the duration of the day. While her husband would leave the shop in order to make deliveries or pick up supply, WY would spend most of her time attending to customers, caring for her child, and doing chores. Due to the lack of space inside, most acts of housework and personal hygiene would be performed alfresco on the pavement. Occasionally, squatting around a low provisional table, the family would have lunch or dinner with the couple of shopkeepers and their young daughter next-door. The two families maintained a close relationship of

mutual support and friendship. After dinner, WY would take her daughter for a walk along the riverside or across the street to the little park inside the gated community (despite access restrictions manifest in the surrounding fence and guards on twenty-four-hours duty, Figure 1).

"If you know the security guys, using the greens is not a problem at all. It is so clean and beautiful. It's the best place for my daughter to play" (interview with WY, October 2007).

However, as macro-gentrification in the vicinity progressed and existing neighbourhoods were torn down to give way for new high-rise compounds, the borderland was not spared the effects of ongoing, smaller-scale micro-gentrification. When I revisited the site in October 2007, I was baffled to find that not only had the large wet market received a major makeover, but also had familiar faces largely disappeared, and the simple sheds along the street had been replaced with sturdier structures. WY's little shop, in particular, had been transformed into a modern-looking soup kitchen. I found WY at their new shop inside the wet market, utterly excited:

"It is so bizarre to see you here again! I just told my friend that everything has changed... but you are still here" (interview with WY, October 2007).

She led me to her new "home", a place located on the same street and very similar to the old shop, but significantly smaller. Apparently, a new decree issued by the local district government had ordered WY and the tenants of adjacent structures – predominantly rural migrants – to find appropriate, purpose-built housing following the renewal of the wet market. Despite the profound changes in her socio-spatial environment, WY still felt optimistic about her future prospect.

"We have to pay more rent now that we have a shop and an extra room to live in - but the renovation of the wet market was a good thing! It brings in more people to buy from us. It is good for my family!"

"The girl next door has been sent back to the countryside by her parents – they had to move during the renovation and are now struggling to find new business elsewhere" (interview with WY, October 2007).

As the makeshift structures were successively renovated and upgraded into "proper" business locations by new tenants, shopkeepers/tenants who were unable to afford the double burden of renting two separate spaces had to move out of the

area (lossifova "Place and Identity on the Borderland between Old and New in Shanghai: A Case Study").

Further significant changes had taken place when I returned in October 2008. A head-high concrete fence had been erected along the entire length of the street in minimal distance from shop fronts on the side of the Old (Figure 2). The different degrees to which businesses behind "the fence" had been able to adapt to this new challenge were evident: while some had closed for good (Figure 3), others had invented ways to incorporate the fence into their spatial layout (Figure 4). Again, I found WY at her shop inside the market. Yet this time, she did not invite me to her home, but proposed a walk along the riverside with her daughter instead.



Figure 3 – The soup kitchen in October 2007 (left), and October 2008 (right).



Figure 4 - The fruit shop in October 2007 (left), and October 2008 (right).

"They said it is because it is dangerous for the traffic and inconvenient for pedestrians. They gave us a one-week notice! Everybody was afraid that they would build a real wall, not just a fence. But it was bad enough... it became so inconvenient to live there, to get in and out, to do the cooking!"

"We are lucky because we have the shop inside the market. Things are going downhill for the businesses along the street" (interview with WY, October 2008).

WY and her family quickly escaped the worsened living conditions and moved to a place nearby. They had to move yet again because of its demolition just a few weeks later. At the time of the interview, separated by cardboard partitions, they shared the only place they could afford with several other migrant families. When our walk reached its end, WY – by far not as joyous and energetic as when I first met her – expressed deep insecurities about the future. Watching her little daughter play, she explained that the girl had been assigned a place at the local kindergarten:

"But the way things look right now, we will not be able to afford the fee of 400 yuan [app. \$60] per month. We decided to send her back home to our parents. I will only see her twice a year. But it will be easier like this... Just, when she is old enough to go to university, it will be hard for her. Shanghai has its own set of exams, you know" (interview with WY, October 2008).

The little girl came running towards us, pointing in the direction of the old neighbourhood as she was shouting: *"Yao chai le!"* – "It's going to be torn down!"

Managing difference

The case demonstrates that the three defining dimensions of Lefebvre's "right to the city" are not part of the lived experience of (migrant) urban poor in Shanghai. The right to voice, or, in Sandercock's terms – "the right to be heard in planning and design processes", is not granted to certain groups, diminishing their chances to respond to sudden changes (e.g., "the fence") and leaving them even more vulnerable. Nor is the right to difference – the "struggle for public policies that acknowledge and value socially constructed group differences" (Sandercock). In a society with a traditional divide between the rural and the urban, lifestyles not compatible with a "civilised way of life" fall prey to the "moral ordering" (Miao) of an urban elite – the dominant group – resulting in the labelling of subgroups as, e.g., "dangerous", and hence worthy of exclusion, or even annihilation. Young defines this social process as "cultural imperialism". The effect can be spatial (as the example of the fence has shown) and, worse, act as an amplifying force to existing

stigmatisation (Iossifova "Place and Identity on the Borderland between Old and New in Shanghai: A Case Study"). Migrants in the city are sometimes being downright denied the last dimension of the right to the city: the right to human flourishing, defined as the "struggle for access to the material bases of life, for housing, work, health and education in a life-sustaining environment" (Sandercock). As I have shown, "small" spatial interventions can not only have devastating effects on livelihoods today, but also vitiate the life trajectories of their children, the next generation.

With increasing spatial, social, and cultural diversity, Shanghai has been emerging as a city of difference and co-existence. The role of urban planning, as Healey puts it, is managing "our co-existence in shared spaces". Local decision makers have not yet managed to meet the challenges of governing co-existence. To the contrary, planning on the scale of the local rather works towards the stigmatisation and annihilation of difference. Decision makers here need yet to develop strategies towards the recognition as well as the successful promotion of recognition among citizens: towards a "difference sensitive governance" (Cattacin).

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