

## Book Review



**Luca Gabbiani (ed.)**

*Urban Life in China (15th–20th century). Communities, Institutions, Representations,*  
Études thématiques 27, École française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris, 2016, pp. 359,  
ISBN 978-2-85539-147-2.

This ponderous and fine volume stems from an international conference held in Paris in 2008 that aimed to discuss recent research on urban history. Twelve of the Chinese, European and American scholars who reunited there present their work examining different facets of the urban kaleidoscope of Chinese cities.

The twofold scope of this volume—as phrased by Gabbiani in the introduction (p. 18)—is to “address the question of what late imperial Chinese cities actually were in their own terms” and “to bridge the gap within the field of Chinese urban history itself between the important body of works centered on the ‘golden age’ of Republican-era municipal cities and their late imperial counterparts.” These perspectives make readers heave a sigh of relief because for too long China cities have suffered from the continuous and sometimes forced comparison with European urban realities and have thus been relegated to a secondary position in the frame of global history. As for the second scope, even more so, as the traditional view maintained that it was due mainly to European impulse—i.e. after the treaty ports were open because of the Opium war- that Chinese cities boomed from the second half of 19th century: Shanghai is the greatest example of the so-called modernization of Qing Empire. A huge bibliography has been written on the cosmopolitan features of this city, focusing especially on the early Republican times. Nothing of the sort can be found in this stimulating volume, that is divided into six thematic sections, each with two articles.

In ‘Cities as Space’ Siyen Fei discusses “A late Ming sociology of urban space” focusing on Nanjing as described in Gu Qiyuan 顧起元’s (1565–1628) treatise about the Ming southern capital. The urban, modern dimension appears as Gu adopts the traditional concept of *fengsu* 風俗 (local custom) to highlight

the differences between two major groups of populace, natives and sojourners, who share the city spaces in specific ways. Lillian Li examines the visualization of urban space along four centuries of late imperial history (1400–1800) drawing some comparisons with contemporary Islamic world and Europe.

The second section ('Urban consumer culture') deals with cities as commercial centres and in particular with the development of market and consumption: Wu Jen-shu analyses trademarks and commercial strategies in late Ming showing convincingly how both gentry and literati played a role in shaping taste through the advertisements they wrote for shops and trades. "The function of advertising was not only to sell merchandise and promote consumption, but also to convey social and symbolic meanings linked to specific social strata." Wu argues brilliantly (p. 91). Ming cities were dynamic realities, bursting with official, economic and cultural activities and a variegated population, with a merchant class growing terribly fast, able to sponsor its sons' bureaucratic careers, increasing needs and money to satisfy them. Some two centuries after, the 18th century witnessed a different situation: the consumption of luxury goods—especially food—had become a subtle way to show one's culture and taste, as the Qianlong Emperor revealed himself in several occasions. Joanna Waley-Cohen masterly guides us through the secrets of gastronomy and its hidden social meanings, including the Emperor's quest for power and control of every aspect of public and private life.

Yangzhou is subject of the third section, (Cities 'envisioned') by the works of Li Wai-yee and Lucie Olivová. The first ("Gender, memory, and historical judgement in early Qing Yangzhou") examines the images of the city after the terrible "Ten days of Yangzhou" through local women, seen in turn as heroines or prostitutes for their behaviour toward Manchu invaders. Imaginary itineraries drawn from Li Dou's 李鬥 (d. 1817) *Yangzhou huafang lu* 揚州畫舫錄 give Olivová hints to show how Yangzhou urban space was intended to include much more than its walls would contain, as gardens where an important place for meeting and various social activities.

Undoubtedly, religion deserves a key role in every urban reality, as demonstrated by Lai Hui-Min's article on "Temple Fairs in Beijing's Tibetan Buddhist Temples during the Qing dynasty" and "Temple Worship and Guilds in Old Peking: A case study of Xisi's Zhenwu Temple and its Associations, 1779–1952" by Ju Xi. By a close and richly documented analysis both illustrate the close connection between spiritual practises and commercial activities.

Jérôme Bourgon and Luca Gabbiani provide much food for thought with their contributions in the "Cities administered" section. Bourgon focuses on the surprising lack of official information and description about death penalty procedures and main actors, compared to the rich documentation available for

European countries. Actually, nearly the only extant eyewitness descriptions of such dreadful events were written by western observers. Bourgon successfully shows how this extreme form of punishment was crucial to power control by the government and therefore had to be displayed in crowded places, while literati found it disgraceful to write about these matters.

Ordinary management of Beijing in Xinzheng period (1901–1911) is analysed by Gabbiani in both its reform and continuity aspects. This study reveals how superficially the previous works have dealt with this seminal period of Chinese history, as some scholars have underlined only the negative aspects of what it could have been achieved and was not actually completed or, on the contrary, some others have exalted the unfortunate beginning of the modernity that led to the Republican regime. Focusing on Beijing's local government in those years, Gabbiani's perspective appears much more effective, shedding light on some functional aspects of the capital management as a municipality.

"Urban forms of sociability" is the title of the last section, that encloses the valuable contributions by Xavier Paulès and Christian Lamouroux. Opium dens and gambling houses have always been depicted as mean places, where addicts to different vices could give way to their crave and destroy their finance and lives. Taking examples from his broad and thorough research on Canton from the end of 19th century to the first half of 20th, Paulès aptly shows how these places were also crucial for making new friends or acquaintances, discussing personal matters or businesses, relaxing with other people, much as our contemporaries go to the bar or the pub. Drawing mainly from local newspapers, Paulès provides also a clear evidence of the scarcity of violence and crimes on these venues, compared to that registered for restaurants and other public establishments.

A long field work through Beijing administrative archives of the early fifties have enabled Christian Lamouroux to present the first results of his project about commercial culture in the western downtown area of Beijing. Putting under his lens a specific street, Baochansi 寶禪寺, Lamouroux illustrates the system of *pubao* 鋪保, or shop warrantors, revealing a fascinating net of personal relations and public engagements among the shop-keepers and merchants in the years between 1952 and 1954.

Much more could be said about this extremely rich and well-written volume, that addresses so many stimulating aspects of the urban world. It contains also an impressive bibliography and an index. I am sure that it will be praised not only by sinologists but also by historians who specialize in other areas.

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