Review - Shanghai Gone: Domicide and Defiance in a Chinese Megacity

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Shanghai Gone: Domicide and Defiance in a Chinese Megacity
By: Qin Shao
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The image of a lone *dingzi hu* or 'nail-household', [1] slated for demolition and standing precipitously amid a sprawling construction site, has become commonplace in media perceptions of the scale, speed, and consequences of China's urban development. Nowhere has this transformation been more visible, or more drastic, than in the case of Shanghai, China's wealthiest city and symbol of its debut on the world stage. Behind the pictures, however, lie hundreds of human stories whose similarity betrays an altogether more sinister aspect of rapid development – a systematic violation of rights and dignity, which Qin Shao's volume catalogues with an almost obsessive attention to detail. Put simply, if Shanghai is China's face to the world, this book pulls off its mask to reveal the activities of powerful and unaccountable players in the city's drive to modernity, as well as the human cost associated with it.

Beginning with an introductory chapter which places the category of domicide (the destruction and loss of one's home) in an international context, comparing it especially with the forced depopulation of the Chagos Islands by the UK in the 1960s and 70s, Shao sets the tone for the following chapters as an exploration of injustice and the ways in which injustice can be redressed. Each of the chapters centres around one or two individual stories of people who have lost their home, but refused to take the (often paltry) compensation and move to the suburbs to make way for modernity. Each also introduces a specific course of action, be it petitioning, legal means, use of cultural memory (especially Maoist legacy), or appeals for historical preservation. This division is, naturally, not absolute, as many victims of domicide resort to a combination of approaches. Indeed, the variety of means protesters employ is a testament both to their resourcefulness, as well as the impervious character Shanghai's authorities, which makes extraordinary activists out of ordinary citizens.

Focusing on *domicide* and *defiance* as the two main analytical categories, Shao carefully constructs a narrative that is both particular in the biographies of the victims of urban redevelopment, as it is also general in documenting the widespread practices of intimidation and lack of regard for the rule of law. Most importantly, however, the analysis of resistance allows the book to transcend a mere cataloguing of injustice. Building upon work on tactics of resistance in China (O'Brien and Li's *Rightful Resistance* (2006), Elizabeth Perry's *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven* (2003), or Patricia Thornton's *Framing Dissent in Contemporary China* (2002), to mention a few), Shao takes the ethnographic approach to great lengths, following her interviewees over the course of several years and constructing their personal histories as fragments of the whole. Shao expresses her hope that glancing through their perspective, through the many human stories she has collected and described, the reader can gain a better understanding of enormous changes affecting China's urban space. It is the opinion of this reviewer that the book lives up to this hope and represents an important contribution to the bottom-up approach to the study of politics and urban space.

The tactics of defiance

When confronted with injustice, resorting to legal means may seem like the natural choice, but many of the

residents/protesters facing eviction in China often turn to petitioning authorities as their first course of action. While reasons such as an evolving legal system, prohibitively expensive lawyers, or lack of faith in local courts all influence the decision to try petitioning as the first course of action, the author also emphasises the popular belief that somewhere in the hierarchy of officialdom, a virtuous 'blue sky official' will take note of the plaintiff's case and intervene to stop the injustice. The truth, sadly, is often far more painful than this Confucian idyll; petitioning is an exhausting, expensive, and sometimes dangerous route. Many petitioners attempt to seek justice in Beijing, where hundreds have taken to sleeping rough while waiting to either file petitions or harangue local officials as they travel to attend meetings in the capital. A telling anecdote is that many petitioners don't even bother budgeting for a return ticket, since the authorities often round them up and send them back to the provinces, 'courtesy of their local government' (p.45). Some are not as lucky and instead might find themselves in black jails or detained in specially designated hotels where trouble-makers are held during important events. One of these is the protagonist of the first chapter, Zhou Youlan: the 'perpetual petitioner'. Having lost her family's home in 1996, she serves as a powerful reminder of how destructive the petitioning system can be, trapping people in a vicious spiral of pursuing ever more desperate means in the face of widespread corruption and indifference, a trap perhaps made more cruel by the hope to which many petitioners cling. Having been intimidated, surveyed, arrested, and beaten, Zhou Youlan has not given up. Even amid family troubles and national controversy over the mental sanity of petitioners, she perseveres in her Don Quixotian battle, attesting to the persistence of what are essentially imperial Chinese mechanisms of redress.

Taking the legal route can be just as frustrating as petitioning, and just as ineffective. Turning her attention to trendy Xintiandi, arguably Shanghai's most famous case of urban redevelopment, Shao introduces the He family, whose elegant 1920s house was taken away twice: first in 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, and again in 1999, when Hong Kong-based developer Shui On and the district government pressed ahead with their ambitious redevelopment plan. Their case is peculiar in that the house was taken by 'eminent domain' (a type of repossession order which is ostensibly in public interest), slated for demolition, only to be finally exempt from destruction and sold off to Shui On weeks later. It still stands, now housing a luxury restaurant, following a deal between the district and the developer – the details of which remain a mystery to the family. In the years following this second dispossession, the He family has unsuccessfully sued the local authorities at district and higher courts, and has since even attempted to take the legal fight to Hong Kong, despite the prohibitively high costs. Even though the Hes' home was taken under what clearly seem to be false pretences, local judges appointed by city cadres are hardly likely to rule against their benefactors. In the meantime, Xintiandi has become a by-word for gentrification and historic preservation in Shanghai, Shui On's boss Vincent Lo is fêted around the region as a visionary entrepreneur, and the district government has benefitted enormously from the neighbourhood's commercial success.

Other cases, where residents combined forms of legitimate protest with legal means, have proven more successful. Mr. C, after being evicted from his home, used the 2010 Shanghai Expo to simultaneously pressure officials with veiled threats of stirring up trouble while also emphasising his readiness to negotiate with the District. Fearing an incident during the all-important event, the authorities caved to his demands for an apartment downtown to replace his demolished home. Mr. C now owns two properties, one downtown as well as one in the suburbs, the latter originally offered as compensation for his original home. Other protesters using a flexible view of the law were equally successful. A self-taught legal expert and community organizer named Shi Lin is for example no stranger to bending the law and its interpretation – by mere stubborn insistence, he managed to hold on to his illegally built house, even expanding it and renting parts of it out. Now sitting on a property valued upwards of 10 million yuan (around a million pounds sterling), Shi Lin is, not surprisingly, a great believer in the real-estate market and China's economic reforms. Here, perhaps, the author reveals the contradiction between the sympathy she (rightfully) feels for her interlocutors and the methods some of them use. Although she does concede Shi Lin often bends the rules to suit his case, a more unsympathetic view would have identified in his actions the same disregard for the law of which the author accuses China's rich and powerful. While the reader will inevitably sympathise with the resourceful, self-made entrepreneur 'sticking in to the Man', one cannot ignore that his success is but another side of the same coin. Justice, it seems, has to be taken.

Aside from individual struggles, many residents threatened with eviction work together, forming ad hoc groups in an effort to influence the authorities. Especially in cases where the main tactics of defiance are appeals to heritage preservation or to a cultural memory of revolutionary legacy, as described in the third chapter, self-organized groups

such as a Legal Study Group (of which Mr. C was also a member) have taken to using Maoist iconography to frame their appeals for justice. Betting that authorities won't bulldoze or destroy a house adorned with the national flag, many 'nail households' often fly the red banner to forestall evictions and demolitions. In a similar vein, singing 'The Internationale' and other revolutionary songs is commonplace during the groups' meetings or confrontations with the authorities as a way to frame their activities as not only legal, but also as legitimate action in accordance with the law and the spirit of the Party.

The media are another potentially powerful ally; the national broadcaster CCTV has, in fact, developed a reputation as a tool of the central government to control and uncover corruption and malpractice in local government, with the appearance of a TV crew often being enough to send local officialdom into retreat. What works in backwater provinces, however, may not intimidate Shanghai's independent and powerful bureaucracy. A group of residents from Lincoln Lane, the last of Shao's case studies, managed to invite a well-known CCTV reporter to report on their historical preservationist efforts, only to effectively unite the various government agencies against them and alienate preservation specialists unwilling to get involved in a conflict with the municipality. As Shao quotes one of the residents remarking, 'The more we appeal for preservation, the faster they destroy our lane' (p. 260). Ultimately, any appeal for redress requires a delicate negotiation with city authorities relying on land deals to fund their diminished budgets: putting them in a corner often proves more dangerous than measured negotiation.

From defiance to a movement?

No matter what course of action the protagonists of Shao's cases take, success is never guaranteed. Shao's research suggests the most tenacious and outright daring protesters can achieve a degree of success if they also bend the rules, engaging in what is essentially a high-stakes poker game with local officials. This being said, most protesters tend to avoid criticising the Communist Party and, in fact, often legitimate central authority by their chosen tactics of protest. Petitioning, invocations of justice, or patriotic flag-waving can be mistakenly interpreted as criticism of China's developmental path, but Shao's interlocutors often make it abundantly clear they are pleased with market-led reforms. Rather, it is corrupt local officials and developers that bear the brunt of their ire. While the aforementioned belief in righteous 'blue sky' officials does account for some of this reluctance to criticise the regime as a whole, Shao perceptively identifies a curious mix of values in Chinese protesters' tactics: Confucian, Maoist, capitalist, democratic. Their protests thus elude crude attempts to locate in them either stubborn insistence on bygone ideas or some inevitable progression towards a western-style civil society. Group action in China remains a sensitive topic and expectations of a rising civil society need to be tempered by empirical evidence from the ground, which often suggests protest tactics can legitimate central Party rule as much as they challenge it.

Setting protest in China against a wider backdrop of movements such as Occupy or the various incarnations of the Arab Spring, Shao provides a global context to the on-going debate about whether protest in China has the potential to challenge the Communist Party's rule and fundamentally open up political space in the authoritarian country. Wisely, she decides to stay on the fence in regards to this question in her conclusion, underlining instead the often conflicting results that decentralisation of power and pluralisation of the political system have brought. While mass action such as environmental protests in Xiamen and Dalien have, for example, been successful in pressuring the local government, the increased independence of wealthy cities from Beijing also brings new challenges as it reinforces entrenched relations between the powerful and the wealthy in cities such as Shanghai. It seems her dedication to a local, ethnographically exhaustive perspective is well placed to address the shifts between local and central power, the study of which is, in many ways, more rewarding than a constant fixation on the emergence of civil society as a challenge to authoritarian rule.

Lastly, the shift of emphasis from the national to the local also has important methodological implications. The examination of local politics with an interpretive approach is more than just desirable; it is outright necessary if we are to understand the changes occurring in Chinese society and politics. Shao's book provides a rich texture complementing the canonical work on China's urban transformation by authors such as Fulong Wu, Anne Broudehoux, or John Friedmann, to name but a few. Filling the gap in interpretive approaches to China's complex and fascinating urban landscape, *Shanghai Gone* is a remarkable book that will interest both China-watchers and urban scholars, as well as those interested in protest and global civil society movements.

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[1] The term ‘nail household’ refers to any structure slated for demolition which is occupied by residents contesting the eviction and demolition orders. Etymologically, the term is rooted in a comparison of such households to a nail that sticks out of a plank.

About the author:

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