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# Shanghai Spaces and Histories: Thoughts on Reading Qiu Xiaolong's *Years of Red Dust*

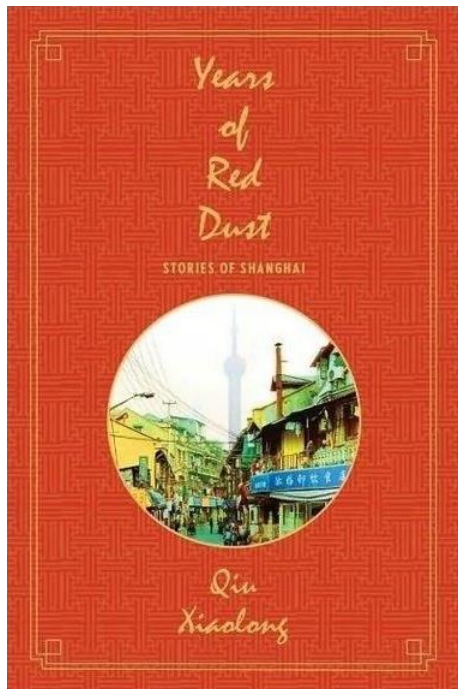
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By Daisy Yan Du

In *Shanghai Modern*, Leo Lee, a prominent specialist in Chinese literary studies, focuses much of his attention on urban space as a marker of modernity in Republican Shanghai (1912-1949). His mappings of the city include places that are located mostly in the concessions, where Western (and later Japanese) influences dominated: the high-rise buildings in the Bund, the department stores located on or near Nanjing Road, and the cafes in the French Concession, as well as dance halls, public parks, race clubs, and cinemas. Lee also touches upon the lanes populated by native Chinese, but his main focus is on the elite literati culture of the pavilion rooms (*tingzijian*) inhabited by poor yet talented Chinese writers and artists. Lee's mappings of Shanghai can be recapitulated in a sentence from Mao Dun's famous novel *Midnight (Ziye)*: "one saw with a shock of wonder on the roof of a building a gigantic NEON sign in flaming red and phosphorescent green: LIGHT, HEAT, POWER!" (Quoted in Lee, p. 3).

In *Beyond the Neon Lights*, by contrast, social historian Hanchao Lu, after noting that most previous studies of Shanghai were internationally oriented, stresses the importance of depicting sufficiently the daily lives of ordinary people from the lower classes. The purpose of Lu's book is "to portray the quotidian aspects of the lives of the people of Shanghai in the first half of the twentieth century, with particular attention to everyday life in the city's residential quarters" (Lu, p. 2). The residential quarters Lu centers on are the lanes populated by "petty urbanites" (*xiaoshimin*) from the middle and lower-middle classes and the shantytowns inhabited by the urban poor struggling for survival. Spatial politics is therefore intertwined with the socio-economic stratification of people.

If read side by side, the two strands of scholarship exemplified by Lee's and Lu's books—one focused on the neon-lit literati active in the most glamorous places of the city, the other on the obscured lives of ordinary people living in marginalized lanes and shantytowns—can delineate a more comprehensive picture of the urban spaces of Shanghai. They can provide the background for reading *Years of Red Dust: Stories of Shanghai*, the latest work of fiction by Qiu Xiaolong, an author previously best-known for his whodunits featuring Inspector Chen (who does not make even a cameo appearance in this work, though it takes place in the city where most of the crimes he solves are imagined to take place). In this new book, Qiu, a Shanghai native now living in the United States, approaches a typical street, Red Dust Lane, and treats it as a public space where ordinary people from different social, economic, and educational backgrounds mingled and lived out socialist modernity in Shanghai from 1949 to 2005. Revolving around the lived experiences of the people residing on the lane, this collection of linked short stories suggests new openings in terms of how hidden histories are written in relation to localized space (the lane) and to the genres of memoir and fiction.



The lane as an alternative public space is first visualized in the cover picture of *Years of Red Dust*. In this round photograph—calling to mind the view through a peephole on a door—the foreground features a lane flanked by old, worn buildings dotted by electrical cables, shop signs, and hanging clothes. In the background the Oriental Pearl TV Tower looms large but fuzzy, as if out of focus. The Tower in mainstream Chinese media is usually represented side by side with high-rise buildings to symbolize a modern and prosperous Shanghai rising on the global stage. The cover of *Years of Red Dust* presents a different image of Shanghai by foregrounding the dilapidated lane as an alternative public space.

The spatial juxtaposition of the shabby lane and the monumental Tower on the cover vividly illustrates the layout of the two strands of narrative in each chapter of the novel: the personal histories of the ordinary people living in the Red Dust Lane juxtaposed with the grand narrative of China's socialist history. Whereas the first type is associated with oral histories—stories told during evening talks on the lane—the second one is bound up with written history, which is a paragraph recorded on the blackboard brought to the lane by one character in the book. While the first strand of history is narrated by multiple voices, the official history has a depersonalized, godly, and univocal voice typical of the narratives in the government's newspapers. While the personal histories are positioned in the foreground with sharp focus, the homogeneous history is pushed to the background and almost out of focus. It is from the perspective of intimate histories that the official history is discerned at a distance, though the two historical narratives are constantly mixing with each other. As a landlord on Red Dust Lane says, this narrative method is "a way of seeing the world in a grain of sand" (p. 7).

The first story, "Welcome to Red Dust Lane," tells the origins of the lane's blackboard and its use in recording socialist history. The first "I" narrator is a landlord introducing Red Dust Lane to a potential subtenant. They join the evening talk that night and listen to the story of Old Root, the second "I" narrator in this chapter. In his story, Old Root runs a small business pedaling a tricycle. One day he has a passenger named Xiao Dong, a famous Beijing opera actress who is leaving Shanghai for Hong Kong. She carries a blackboard with the names of Beijing operas written on it—it is the blackboard program for her first day on stage. Since she cannot carry many things aboard the plane taking her out of the city, she passes on the blackboard to Old Root at the airport. The next morning Old Root hears on the radio that Shanghai had been liberated the previous night—the night of May 25, 1949. Old Root realizes that he has experienced this great event unknowingly: "History passed by as I huddled under the bed like a bamboo-leaf-wrapped Zongzi dumpling" (p. 16). Old Root then brings the blackboard to the lane's evening talk that day and proposes to use it as a Soviet-style blackboard newsletter to post significant events as part of the socialist education for residents who are unable to read newspapers or listen to radios. The blackboard therefore functions as a historical transition:

memories of old Shanghai are irrevocably erased and the history of socialist New China is gradually recorded on the blackboard from 1949 to 2005.

Between the two strands of historical narrative in each story of the collection, there is always a disjuncture that opens a space for irony. "Return of POW 1 (1954)" revolves around Bai Jie, a pretty young nurse who enthusiastically volunteers to join the Korean War. In early 1953, she sacrifices her life during a retreat and becomes a model martyr of the nation. Her family and the residents of the lane bask in the glory of her martyrdom. However, Bai Jie unexpectedly returns to the lane in the middle of 1954. It turns out that she was wounded, captured, and sent home by the Americans. Bai Jie is not welcomed by her family and neighbors as she had expected; in fact, all of the residents of Red Dust Lane try to avoid her. Alienated from her community, Bai Jie looks like "a stuffed scarecrow, gesticulating in the wind, trembling amidst the crows of terror as darkness came falling over the field" (p. 32).

In sharp contrast, the history recorded on the blackboard for the year 1954 is very optimistic and encouraging. It is a year "full of significant events for the young republic": Mao Zedong was elected Chairman of the PRC; Zhou Enlai attended the Geneva conference on a peaceful solution to the Korean question; and the Xikang-Tibet and Qinghai-Tibet Highway "triumphantly opened to traffic" (p. 27). The flourishing of the young country contrasts sharply with the living death of Bai Jie, a young daughter of the new China.

The most ironic moment of the book takes place in "Return of POW II (1992)," which narrates the story of Xue Zhiming. Also a volunteer during the Korean War, Xue Zhiming was held in the same prison as Bai Jie, where Taiwanese agents have attempted to persuade them to betray the P.R.C and go to Taiwan. Xue Zhiming flees to Taiwan, where he later becomes a very successful businessman. When Xue Zhiming returns to Red Dust Lane in 1992, he is well respected because he is rich and willing to invest a lot of money in Shanghai. Nobody cares about his political disloyalty in the early 1950s. In contrast, while Bai Jie resisted the temptations of Taiwanese agents and was determined to be loyal to her motherland, after she finally manages to return to Red Dust Lane she is treated as a national enemy. On the day when Xue returns gloriously to Red Dust Lane, Bai shuts up herself in a small room, "mumbling as always to the faded portrait of Mao on the wall" (p. 145).

Xue's and Bai's different fates reflect the changed value systems in postsocialist China. In Mao's era, political struggle was the norm, while business and capitalism were condemned. This value system was completely reversed in postsocialist China. That is why Xue is well respected as a businessman in contemporary China; nobody cares that he betrayed his motherland in the past. The story "Eating and Drinking Salesman (2003)" further illustrates this change with ironic twists. The protagonist is a poor factory worker named Wei, whose talents are limited to eating and drinking. Even his wife despises him. With the advent of the market economy, Wei's fate is completely changed because he is needed to entertain clients and clinch business deals with sumptuous meals and bouts of binge drinking. Ironically, Wei's expertise in eating and drinking earns money and wins him the respect of his wife. Through these intimate personal stories that take place on the lane, *Years of Red Dust: Stories of Shanghai* portrays the changing histories of Shanghai from 1949 to 2005.

*Daisy Yan Du is a PhD candidate in modern Chinese literature and visual culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is now completing her dissertation on Chinese animated film between the 1940s and 1970s.*