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Shanghai: Capitalists, Communists, and the Jewish Dynasties Who Helped Build the City

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Jonathan Kaufman (2021). *The Last Kings of Shanghai: The Rival Jewish Dynasties That Helped Create Modern China*. New York: Penguin Books. xvii + 350 pp., notes, index, \$14.39 (paperback).

Hanchao Lu (2023). *Shanghai Tai Chi: The Art of Being Ruled in Mao's China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xvii + 358 pp., appendix, notes, references, index, \$39.99 (hardback).

John Pal (2022). *Shanghai Saga: The Story of a City*. Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books. 260 pp., \$18.86 (paperback).

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Shanghai, treaty port, capitalism, communism, Jewish dynasties

Books on Shanghai's history tend to fall broadly into two categories: nostalgia for the “colonial” era and descriptions (often grim) of the Communist period that followed. Shanghai was not, in fact, a colony; it was a Treaty Port, one of five opened by the British after the end of the First Opium War in 1842 (the others being Canton [Guangzhou], Amoy [Xiamen], Foochow [Fuzhou], and Ningpo [Ningbo]). These ports increased in size, wealth, and number until 1943 when the system was ended with the Treaty for the Relinquishment of Extra-Territorial Rights in China.

Treaty Port Shanghai had a complex geopolitical landscape, with an International Settlement, operating like an independent city-state (what Jonathan Kaufman calls “a republic of business”; p. xxviii). There was also a French Concession (which was a colony). And a vast Chinese city; in fact, two: the original walled city and the sprawling suburbs that had grown around the foreign enclaves.

By 1930, Shanghai was the world's fifth largest port and one of the world's biggest cities, with three million inhabitants, most of them Chinese, ruled by a tiny minority of foreigners, c. 150,000, of sixty different nationalities (including 90,000 Japanese). Most foreigners were not liable for prosecution under Chinese law under a system known as “extra-territoriality” (“extrality” for short) and the Chinese authorities' reach was severely curtailed in a city notorious for its gangsters, prostitutes, and drug and gambling problems, not to mention the corruption that kept it all going.

Many came to Shanghai to make a fast buck and leave. These sojourners, foreign and Chinese, were known by different names: Shanghailanders for the foreigners and Shanghainese for the Chinese. Three recent books give fascinating insights into the daily lives of these different groups: (1) *Shanghai Saga: The Story of a City* by John Pal (2022) shows the day-to-day life of a Shanghaileander. Here, we have the authentic voice of a journalist who lived in the city in the 1920s and 1930s. Although something of an unreliable narrator (but an otherwise likable rogue),

his first-hand accounts have a freshness and authenticity rarely found in recent books about the era. (2) *Shanghai Tai Chi: The Art of Being Ruled in Mao's China* (2023) is by Hanchao Lu and traces the ups and downs of life under the Communists. Lu is a most reliable narrator, being a highly respected academic and well-known expert on the city. His meticulously researched book offers often surprising insights into what life was like under the Communists. Finally, we have (3) *The Last Kings of Shanghai: The Rival Jewish Dynasties That Helped Create Modern China* (2021). This is by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jonathan Kaufman and combines a journalist's eye for a story and the telling details that show the influence of two famous Jewish dynasties on the development of the city in the Treaty Port era, namely the Kadoories and Sassoons.

Between them they tell the story of this fascinating city from the point of view of the people who lived in it. They show how the city was built, by, among others, philanthropic Jewish families who were always treated as second-class citizens in this all too British enclave, despite their wealth and influence. We also see the daily lives of ordinary people through John Pal's richly anecdotal accounts of daily life in the city in the run up to World War II. Finally, we get fascinating insights into life under the Communists with Lu's book which shows a surprising degree of continuity for the colonial-era elite (at least until the Cultural Revolution). But first, we begin with Jonathan Kaufman to see how the city developed in its early days as a Treaty Port.

Two Jewish Dynasties

Jonathan Kaufman has reported on China for thirty years. His book *The Last Kings of Shanghai* is a well-written and well-researched account of two famous Jewish dynasties: the Kadoories and the Sassoons. Immensely readable, Kaufman's journalistic skill gives his book a story-telling drive, while his own Jewish heritage adds a note of poignancy, especially when recounting the relatively little-known story of the 18,000 Jewish refugees who fled to Shanghai in the run up to World War II and who, against all odds, survived. The stories of these two remarkable families are so fascinating that if they were not true, one could be forgiven for thinking they came from the lush pages of a James Clavell novel.

The Sassoon dynasty was established by David Sassoon. Born in Baghdad in 1792, he was destined to head a family that had been pre-eminent in the city for more than eight hundred years (p. 3) but a power struggle among Ottoman rulers led to Jewish hostility (p. 7) and he was forced to flee penniless to India in 1829 where he had to start from scratch. Despite being unable to speak English, within a decade he was one of the richest men in India (p. 16) and poised to profit from Britain's forced opening of China, particularly in the opium trade (p. 19).

David's second son, Elias, went to Shanghai in 1850, expanding the Sassoon's business into a global enterprise (p. 25). Within two decades he had "pioneered many of the tools of modern capitalism and applied them ruthlessly, deploying steamships, the telegraph, and modern banks" (p. 49) to seize control of the opium market (p. 28). Then, in 1867 (after his father's death), he resigned from the family firm to set up his own in Shanghai (p. 35). This was after the Second Opium War (1856-1860), which not only swelled Shanghai's population but also legalized the opium trade, changing the family business from a crime to legitimate commerce (p. 38). The Sassoons' connections to India (the source of the drug) also gave them an end-to-end monopoly (p. 38) while their early adoption of new technologies gave them an edge in setting prices (some of the first telegrams in Asia were sent by Sassoons as coded messages; p. 39). Profits from opium, and the fact that the British government of India relied on taxes from its sale, gave the family real power in British Asia (p. 40).

Kaufman says that "[c]ritics of the opium trade expected it to be conducted by gangsters. Instead, it was creating a new class of Chinese business entrepreneurs" (p. 39). By the 1890s, the British were thinking of banning opium (p. 41) and the Sassoons used their wealth and society connections to try and counter this, but it was eventually phased out from 1912 (p. 45).

Once banned, the Sassoons invested “in real estate and factories, building an even greater fortune” (p. 46).

Meanwhile, Elly Kadoorie, also from Baghdad, and a distant cousin of the Sassoons, was sent to one of their business schools in China by his widowed mother in 1876. He was only fifteen but “[h]is determination and agility would impress many Chinese, who saw in his hunger and battles against the British establishment some of their own struggles and aspirations” (p. 51). Sent to Weihaiwei, where an outbreak of plague led him to disinfect the company’s buildings, he also let some Chinese employees use it, agreeing to take payment later (p. 52). Family legend has it that his superiors reprimanded him so he resigned on principle (pp. 52-53). Setting up his own business, a lack of capital prevented him from joining the lucrative opium trade meaning he was forced to diversify from the very beginning (p. 54). He also, unusually, befriended the Hong Kong Eurasian businessman Robert Hotung (p. 55), a relationship that “extended across the generations” (p. 55) and led to “an intimacy with the Chinese that no one in the Sassoon family could match” (p. 55).

Elly married Laura Mocatta, whose family was one of a group of wealthy Jews in England known as the “cousinhood” (p. 56). Considered plain and long past marrying age (she was several years older than Elly) (p. 56), they had two (surviving) sons and a “marriage that was far more a partnership than many others of its time” (p. 57). Laura, unusually, accompanied her husband to China as well as on his travels as he expanded his business, including into rubber, which made him a millionaire (p. 64).

Laura Kadoorie is one of a number of remarkable women who feature in these families’ histories: the Sassoons had Flora, wife to one of patriarch David’s sons who single-handedly ran the business after her husband died. Succeeding beyond all expectations, she was ousted in a family coup (xiii), while Rachel Sassoon Beer was a pioneering feminist and editor of *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times*. Scorned by her family, she became depressed after her husband’s death in 1901. Her brother then had her declared of “unsound mind” and she spent the rest of her life alone, looked after by nurses and died in 1927.

The rubber trade, apart from making the Kadoories rich, “turned out to be one of the sparks that ignited the 1911 Chinese revolution” (p. 66). Chinese officials had been using government funds to speculate and when the rubber bubble burst the emperor seized control of the railways intending to sell them to foreigners to raise cash. This angered the businessmen who had been profiting from them and riots broke out. The emperor called in the army which led to the uprising that toppled the Qing dynasty and established the Republic of China (pp. 67-68).

The Republican era was turbulent but, as Kaufman says, “[a]s China fell, Shanghai rose” (p. 77). This was because it “enjoyed what most of China lacked: a stable government that could protect its citizens” (p. 77). A government “designed by its business leaders to create the stability, prosperity, and lack of government interference yearned for by foreign capitalists” (p. 78). In other words, the “republic of business” we saw earlier.

Despite their wealth, the British looked down on the Kadoories, privately mocking their semitic appearance (p. 82), yet they were “cracking open the establishment and making room for ambitious and talented outsiders to elbow into the clubby world of colonial Shanghai” (p. 86).

The Sassoons, meanwhile, had fallen into disarray. Then came Victor, the most famous of them all. He pioneered “the idea of the businessman as celebrity” (p. 129) and his “affectations and frivolous pursuits hid a shrewd business mind” (p. 108). A forty-year-old playboy when he took over the family business in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1921, he surprised everyone not only with his acumen but by moving the business to Shanghai within a few years. “By 1935, Victor had recouped his entire investment in Shanghai through property alone” (p. 121). His portfolio included landmarks such as The Cathay Hotel, whose “success ignited a building boom that transformed Shanghai” (p. 121). Yet, “[w]hile Victor increased his bet on Shanghai, Elly Kadoorie began to move some of his investments [. . .] to Hong Kong, which, unlike Shanghai, was a

British colony” (p. 126). Then when the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek effectively nationalized Chinese banks in the mid-1930s, Victor was trapped (p. 141). His real estate holdings were worth more than a half billion dollars, but “he was no longer free to send his profits out of the country” (p. 141). And even worse, looming over “the politics, economics, and divisions of Shanghai was the growing specter of Japan” (p. 136).

Elly Kadoorie “was the biggest Jewish benefactor in Shanghai’s Jewish community and its de facto leader” (p. 153) and when “groups of Jewish refugees began arriving in Shanghai starting in the mid-1930s, Elly and other Jewish leaders began organizing and donating money to help them” (p. 153). Shanghai was “the only place left in the world that would take in Jews fleeing the Nazis” (p. 145) because “[n]o one needed a visa to enter. No one could be turned away” (p. 145). Elly recognized that the growing influx of refugees required a united front (p. 154) and enlisted Victor Sassoon’s help, who “approached the refugee crisis with the same confidence and verve he applied to building his hotels or planning his parties” (p. 155). In 1939, the Japanese (who controlled Chinese Shanghai since 1937) announced that no more Jews would be allowed into the city. There were 15,000 there already, with another 3,000 on the way, but those 18,000 would be protected (p. 171). Despite German insistence that their ally Japan should “deal with” the “problem” of the 18,000 Shanghai refugees (p. 190), with suggestions ranging from hard labor in Manchuria to making a concentration camp for “medical” experiments, or even loading them onto ships and sinking them (p. 190), the Japanese were appalled and offered a compromise; creating a ghetto in Hongkew (Hongqiao) (p. 190). The people in Hongkew only “realized the war was over because the Japanese guards manning the gates abruptly disappeared, leaving the barbed-wire gates open” (p. 195). Having miraculously survived, Shanghai’s Jews now learned of the horrors that had befallen their fellows in Europe (p. 196).

Victor Sassoon spent the war in India, raising money to help wounded British soldiers and traveling the world to speak on behalf of the Allies (p. 192). Elly Kadoorie died in Shanghai’s Chapei prisoner of war camp in 1944 (p. 195). Then, once the Communists took over, they “began a slow, inexorable takeover of the Sassoon and Kadoorie businesses” (p. 214). “China had undergone a ‘century of humiliation’ at the hands of capitalists like the Kadoories and the Sassoons. Now it was the foreigners’ turn to be humiliated” (p. 214). In addition, the “Jewish presence that had once shaped and enlivened Shanghai was being erased” (p. 218). “There were just a few elderly Jews left in all of Shanghai; the rest had left for Israel, the United States, or Australia” (p. 218).

The Kadoories regrouped in Hong Kong. Elly’s two sons, Lawrence and Horace, bided their time and kept themselves busy with post-war rebuilding. The colony, like Shanghai before it, became China’s window on the West, offering a way of doing business and earning foreign exchange without allowing capitalism to infect the rest of the country (p. 258). Soon after President Nixon’s breakthrough visit in 1972, Lawrence Kadoorie was approached by the Chinese government to help “negotiate the purchase and construction of two nuclear reactors for China’s first commercial nuclear power station” (p. 261). Lawrence saw “an opportunity to prove his worth, expand his power, and restore the Kadoories as a bridge between China and the West” (p. 263). He even predicted that “the Chinese would indeed meet their targets by the year 2000 and be on the verge of becoming a major world economy” (p. 264).

Lawrence, however, never visited China again; he died aged ninety-four in 1993 (p. 282) and the Chinese government sent official condolences (p. 283). Horace died two years later and Michael Kadoorie took over the family business. Like Victor Sassoon, he was first dismissed as a playboy but “turned out to be deft in negotiating with and working with China’s leaders” (p. 284). When the former British consulate site on Shanghai’s Bund came up for sale Michael “ nabbed it,” backed by the Chinese government who remembered that the family had never spoken ill of them “even during the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square” (p. 286) and, furthermore, had invested more than \$1 billion “when many investors were still unsure how reliable

a partner China would be” (p. 286). The Sassoons, whose fortune had been tied up in Shanghai’s real estate, fled the city losing almost everything; the Kadoories, by contrast, hedged their bets in Hong Kong and remained “committed to China’s rise, and reaped the benefits” (p. 297).

The Capitalists

If the Jewish dynasties of the previous section seem to have come from the pages of a James Clavell novel, here we have someone more at home in a short story by W. Somerset Maugham. John Pal was the pseudonym of Alan Palamountain (so we are told by Graham Earnshaw in his Foreword). Born in Australia in 1903, he worked his passage to Shanghai (via London) to get a job with the Chinese Customs service at age seventeen (p. 1). He left under a cloud (p. 3) and seems to have been involved in some other shady dealings, including embezzlement (p. 3), before tuning his hand to journalism, joining the *Shanghai Times* and writing as John Pal because he presumably did not want to be associated with its pro-Japanese stance (p. 3). He married in 1938 and, shrewd enough to see the writing on the wall, left Shanghai in 1939. His memoir was first published in 1963 and “almost disappeared” (p. 1). Pal/Palamountain died in Australia in 1991 and his book was reissued in 2022.

Like Jonathan Kaufman, Pal’s skill as a journalist means he can tell a story with point. His book is immensely readable but is perhaps more for the general reader than the academic (there is no index, references, or footnotes). It does, however, contain some never-before-seen (at least by this reviewer) illustrations. The Boys’ Own Story-style chapter headings (“Smugglers’ Paradise,” “Day of Fate”) indicate the different themes, each chapter ending on a hook that keeps the reader engaged. The reminiscences (some of which should be taken with a grain of salt) are not only fascinating but, because Pal was “far from being a prominent member of the foreign community in Shanghai” (p. 5), they also have an authentic, everyday feel to them. Here, we have first-person reportage showing insights into daily life that add real color to historic events.

John Pal was a Shanghaileander and tells us that “Shanghai was an exciting place, justly famous as one of the wickedest cities of the world, a place where two civilizations met and where neither prevailed” (p. 22). Its constitution “was a model of brevity and tolerance. It consisted of a set of Land Regulations or municipal bye-laws, drafted to meet the needs of a group of pioneer international traders” (p. 16). This was a city charter “drafted by traders, for trading purposes” (p. 16)—the “republic of business” we saw highlighted earlier by Kaufman. Shanghai was “neither English, American, nor South American, but a truly international melting-pot whose motto was ‘tolerance’” (p. 16) and “[f]or a city of its size and importance, Shanghai had the most alluring small-town atmosphere, friendly and intimate” (p. 15).

Chapter Two, “Smugglers’ Paradise,” gives a glimpse into the inner workings of the Chinese Customs service

which, besides collecting import and export duty on behalf of the Chinese Government, also assumed control of inland transit trade, coastwise traffic, pilotage, lighthouses, coastal surveying with responsibility for navigation aids, emigration, weights and measures, harbour control and the compilation of China’s trade statistics. (p. 59)

Here, we learn that “there were two distinct branches of the Customs service—the indoor staff, representing the ‘snooty,’ socially eligible members, and the outdoor staff” (p. 64). “The indoor boys [. . .] wore civilian clothes [while] outdoor members did all the dirty work, took all the risks, wore uniforms, occasionally got tossed in the harbor or ‘bumped off’ when [they] looked like hitting a gang of smugglers too hard in the pocket” (p. 64). Living quarters were “provided free for unmarried members of the outdoor staff” (p. 64), where a “Number One boy [was] able to produce anything from a meal at midnight to a bed partner” (p. 65).

Here, we also get the inside track on smuggling and how

[w]hen pirates captured a ship the first person they looked for was the *compradore*. Not only did he carry the keys to the ship's safe, containing the passage money of all the deck passengers as well as passengers' cash and valuables for safe-keeping; he also kept the ship's cargo manifest and knew just where to lay hands on the most valuable packages. (p. 67)

Ship's *compradores*, therefore, took extraordinary steps at the first sign of a pirate attack to disguise themselves and many provided themselves with secret hide-outs, leaving it to trusted assistants to keep them in food and drink until the pirates left the ship. (p. 67)

We also hear of night inspections on ships, some of which had "life, activity, hot coffee [and] a chance of conversation with interesting people" (p. 81); they sometimes even had "gay parties [and] music" (p. 81). A "quiet" ship, on the other hand, "was filled with boredom and in the freezing temperature of January, out in the middle of the harbour, a period of true penance" (p. 81). Some Customs inspectors had been known to succumb "to the temptation of 'forty winks' in a snug (empty) cabin, and of waking up fifty miles out to sea" (p. 81).

Pal also covers the Russian "invasion" of Shanghai in Chapter Three, when (in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and Civil War) "some 60,000 White Russians commenced their mass migration from Siberia" (p. 92)—as we saw the Jews were later to do. "These refugees made a sudden and unwelcome impact upon the social life of Shanghai" (p. 93), particularly

the refugee Russian girls, many of them blonde, beautiful and bewitching in the eyes of young and exiled Englishmen and Americans [. . .] it was because of the nightly brawls for their affections [. . .] that the [Chapei] district became known as the Trenches. (p. 94)

Pal states that the "Russification of Shanghai [. . .] so lowered the moral tone of [the] city that the then League of Nations became alarmed and formed a special committee to investigate the effects upon Shanghai, and China generally, of female Russian penetration" (p. 95). He quotes the League of Nations as saying that the "appearance of a white woman in such disgraceful capacity as that of a prostitute among natives of the lower classes, affects very deeply the prestige of the Western nations in the Orient" (p. 96). Poor white Russian also "begged from Chinese in the streets, sold newspapers alongside Chinese paper-pedlars and even tried pulling rickshaws for a living" (p. 107). Pal notes later that Shanghai had a special fund to provide free passage home for the impecunious (p. 148), but of course white Russian had no home to go to. Some of them learned enough English to become

chauffeurs, mechanics, engineers, bakers, bootmakers, pastrycooks, shopkeepers, clerks, typists and nurses. Racing men gave them jobs in stables and at the race-tracks; hundreds became bodyguards for Chinese millionaires; several died in defence of their Chinese employers in a city where kidnapping occurred every other day. (p. 103)

Kidnapping, Pal notes elsewhere, had "been practised in China for many centuries" (p. 232) and mentions the Anti-Kidnapping Society of China which had rescued 3,782 persons, mostly children, from kidnappers in the first twelve years of its existence (p. 232). He recounts the horrifying example of a factory raid in the French Concession which revealed "thirty-one missing children discovered chained to the wall, working with their small hands making cheap kitchenware out of tin" (p. 232). The factory owner got fifteen years in jail and his factory was sold "to help educate the children. Widespread advertising throughout the country reunited thirteen of them with their parents, but the remainder had to be placed in an orphanage" (p. 233). The reason

their parents could not be found is probably because they were “illiterate and only chance conversation might lead them back to their children” (p. 233).

Pal became a manager of the Luna Park, a canidrome in the French Concession, one of three such dog tracks in the city. The other two were in the International Settlement but closed when they failed to pay the appropriate “squeeze” to local gangsters (p. 158). The French track, however, was “answerable only to Paris through the French Minister to China” so was able to stand up to the gangsters and stay in business (p. 158), that is until it got bombed in 1939 and Pal, taking it as an omen, “quit the Canidrome and sailed from Shanghai a week later” (p. 254). Within six months, Shanghai’s foreign enclaves had been taken over by Japan. Once the war ended, it was clear they were never to be foreign-run again and when, four years later the Communists took over, it really was the end of an era.

The Communists

This final book is a scholarly gem and has a distinctly Shanghainese perspective. In it Hanchao Lu describes everyday life in Shanghai after 1949 where we see a startling degree of continuity, even for the elite, up the Cultural Revolution in 1966. That year saw the real Chinese revolution (as we more usually understand the word). Mao’s ideology, waxing ever more dogmatic, led to a quasi-religious madness. Yet, throughout it all, we see the Shanghainese show patience, grace, imagination, and even a little daring in responding to the grotesque absurdities Maoism unleashed.

Lu’s book is organized into three sections, with numerous interesting (and also previously unseen) illustrations. It also contains an endnote section rich in additional detail. Its different themes allow us to see the surprising continuities of post-Liberation Shanghai. These are illustrated by brief but telling vignettes where we see the personal histories of survivors and victims: the intellectuals, the business and social leaders, as well as the ordinary citizens of the city. Their ways of dealing with the many challenges Maoism threw their way is the *tai chi* of the title: “an often invisible and instinctively roundabout resistance against a tyranny that, paradoxically, had its own pliability and elasticity” (p. 18).

The Communist victory of 1949 was surprisingly practical and ushered in real improvements to people’s lives. The new Marriage Law of 1950 “stipulated that men and women have equal rights, prohibited concubinage, and contained a host of other provisions to end the patriarchal practices of China’s ‘feudal’ society” (p. 8). This was, Lu says, “a landmark in women’s liberation” (p. 97), freeing them from “the four authorities—‘the state, the clan, religion, and the husband’” (p. 97). “The marked increase in gender equality is among the least controversial legacies of the Mao era” (p. 97) because by the end of it “nearly all working-age women in urban China were employed” (p. 97). The Great Leap Forward is rightly seen as a major catastrophe, it claimed tens of millions of lives and was “without question a result of Mao’s policy and even the CCP has acknowledged that the campaign was one of the key mistakes made by the party during the Mao era” (p. 139), yet the year 1958 also “gave rise to the new norm in urban China that practically all working-age women should work outside the home” (p. 140). “By the 1980s, nine in ten able-bodied urban women were employed” (p. 139). However, as Lu also shows, “the state’s reasons for promoting the employment of women involved more than their ‘liberation’” (p. 98) because (ever pragmatic) the Communist rhetoric masked the “sober calculation to employ women in low-paid jobs, with no fringe benefits, in order to supplement state-run industries” (p. 140). Women, however, did experience material benefits and, themselves practical, “exploited the party’s own slogans to legitimize their drive for financial independence, social status, and self-esteem” (p. 140).

Another sign of Communist practicality was how it dealt with business. Unlike the Soviet Union, “where the state simply confiscated private businesses altogether” (p. 22), Chinese

capitalists became “employees of what used to be their own businesses, now [. . .] known as the ‘joint state-private enterprise’” (pp. 23-24). This unexpected continuity (at least until the Cultural Revolution) reveals “a hitherto largely hidden phenomenon, a product of the complexity and paradox in the Chinese Communist system [which] helps correct the lingering oversimplification since the Cold War era that dismisses the Chinese revolution as nothing more than tragedy” (p. 26). Lu by no means intends “to downplay the cruelty of the regime, nor to overlook the suffering it caused” (p. 26), but he does show that “there were nuances and variations in the Communist system that were not always readily apparent, nor always consistent with the regime’s political rhetoric” (p. 26). In fact, once the foreigners and compradors were gone, China, thanks to campaigns like the Five-Anti Campaign of 1952, which weeded out bad business habits like “bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts, and stealing state economic secrets” (p. 21) meant that “some former business owners felt their lives had become simpler and more peaceful under the new regime” (p. 28).

The Communists also sought to engage Nationalist Party figures and capitalists into a “united front.” It knew it needed their expertise “to carry out its project of socialist nation-building” (p. 13). “The united front made sense given the country’s practical need for the knowledge and resources of the relatively small number of industrialists” (p. 50), with the result that these “personages” (*tongzhan duixiang*) “enjoyed high salaries, kept their garden homes, still employed servants, and indulged in luxuries” (p. 11) despite being “condemned and politically disadvantaged” (p. 12). This led to the paradox that “the politically condemned might well at the same time be among the socially privileged” (p. 20).

Another group enjoying precarious favor under the new regime were intellectuals, that is, “college faculty, school teachers, scientists, engineers, technicians, journalists, actors and actresses” (p. 55) who accounted for “less than 1 percent of the population” (p. 55) and found themselves lumped in with the bourgeoisie (p. 55). But in “the capricious political climate of the Mao years, an individual’s fortunes could change drastically and virtually overnight” (p. 57). During the Cultural Revolution, they were “subjected to condemnation, purge, and even imprisonment” (p. 57). Lu highlights the sad case of Fu Lei; he and his wife hanged themselves “becoming the first well-known victims of the Cultural Revolution” (p. 57). Yet, “underneath the turmoil, a sense of conscience and moral integrity quietly existed. Cadres had to carry out what the party dictated; but deep inside, their sympathies at times still leaned toward the intellectuals” (p. 68) because “there was an undercurrent of sympathy for intellectual works” (p. 70) and China’s “time-honored culture of respecting literati trumped the party’s anti-intellectualism” (p. 71).

One of the oddest anomalies of life under the Communists was the flourishing of “bourgeois literature, in particular nineteenth-century European classics” (p. 97). Lu tells us (in what is for this reviewer the most remarkable of many notable chapters) that “in the Mao era more Western literature was published than at any other time in Chinese history” (p. 97). This can partially be explained by the fact that “Marx and Engels had expressed their appreciation of European literature. This created a niche where translated foreign literature could thrive in the midst of pervasive anti-Western and anti-bourgeois rhetoric” (p. 97). Even during the Cultural Revolution, when “nearly all literary classics were dismissed as feudalistic or bourgeois and were banned” (p. 105), “a strong undercurrent of reading ‘forbidden books’ swept up Chinese youth to an extent the nation had never before seen” (p. 105). Famous classics were circulating through “all kinds of channels” (p. 113), including books “taken (or rather, stolen) from libraries” (p. 114). With all secondary schools and colleges closed for four to five years from 1966, “books were destroyed or sealed as ‘collections of feudalism, capitalism and revisionism,’ but theft was common” (p. 114). “Ironically, it was the Red Guards who had sealed the libraries and warehouses that availed themselves of these books” (p. 114). First, they confiscated the books from “private homes in the name of revolution; then, they were thieves who stole these books from official holding places and put them into illegitimate circulation; and finally, they were the keenest readers of forbidden

books” (p. 114). And, with schools closed, they “had plenty of time on their hands” (p. 114). “Reading forbidden books, in particular foreign literature, filled the vacuum” (p. 115). Ironically, the Cultural Revolution generation “might be the most widely read in foreign literature in twentieth-century China” (p. 115) with even factory workers reading Tolstoy, Chekhov, de Maupassant, and Brontë (p. 117)—hardly the reading one might expect from Western factory workers at the same (or indeed any) time.

Lu insightfully explains this seeming anomaly by saying that “[i]n a society where the political authorities closely scrutinized individual lives, including what individuals read, the ‘experience-taking’ in reading was a quiet but powerful force that molded thoughts and behavior that often diverged from party orthodox” (p. 132) and that “[r]eaders’ stubborn desire for the humanities in the most general sense was an unlikely yet true inheritance of Mao’s China and one of the most telling stories of the concealed spirit of a city in its time of decline” (p. 138).

One other interesting aspect of Communist control was tree-planting and park-building which “became an important buttress of the state’s claim to legitimacy and a mechanism for extending its control of public space” (p. 169). There had been few public parks in colonial-era Shanghai. Some of them, notoriously, had even banned Chinese, so the verdurisation of the city was “a sign of modernization and an essential step in nation-building” (p. 169). Shanghai had fourteen parks, covering ca. 163 acres in 1949. By 1958, that number had increased to fifty, with a total acreage of 568 (p. 174).

Although the programs were more political than ecological, and “many of them were not well planned or implemented, they did make Shanghai significantly greener” (p. 170). Ordinary people also “had their own ideas about the role of greenery in their daily lives—ideas that were often different from, and sometimes counter to, those of the state” (p. 170). Gardening became “a retreat from the harsh political reality of the Maoist revolution and, in some instances, a form of resistance to an all-pervasive state” (p. 170). Of course, the Cultural Revolution changed all that, with flower planting being condemned as “bourgeois” (p. 185). Yet, home gardening “became a circumspect maneuver for coping with tyranny [. . .] that eventually triumphed over the state’s rhetoric” (p. 200).

One major goal of Mao’s revolution was to try and eliminate individualism. From the very beginning “Mao’s China was known for the monotony of its clothing” (p. 217). The Zhongshan (or Mao) suit was unisex, the idea being “that clothing should not reveal the outlines of the human body, lest it be sexually provocative and lead to bourgeois debauchery” (p. 221). Yet “people had their own tastes, sense of practicality, and lifestyles, all of which did not always follow the dictates of the party-state” (p. 219). Shanghai’s distinctiveness in this regard could be seen as a “sign of dissidence” (p. 203). Lu shows “how people acquired, consumed, and deployed daily necessities, and in the process confronted the government’s rationing and also the Communist Party’s interference in everyday life” (p. 216). This is exemplified by the fact that the Shanghainese were “far better dressed than [people] in other cities” (p. 203). Ultimately, this “was more a manifestation of the human need to express individual identity and tastes than a political statement” (p. 221). But it was in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution “when political control of daily life was at its height, that resistance to state-imposed uniformity became most subtle and innovative” (p. 222). As Lu points, this “was not limited only to Shanghai but was [a] national phenomenon” (p. 223). “By the end of the Mao era, clothing had become a visible sign of the failure of the Cultural Revolution” (p. 234).

Conclusion

Jonathan Kaufman thinks it revealing that, “in almost two hundred years of living in China, none of the Sassoons or the Kadoories bothered to learn Chinese” (Kaufman, xxxi). And for all their political and economic acumen, neither of them saw the Communist revolution brewing on their

doorstep. So much so that when the Communists took over in 1949, they lost almost everything (xxx). The Sassoons, who had been instrumental in stabilizing the Chinese economy in the 1930s, had to leave most of their wealth behind when the Communists took over. The Kadoories, however, having hedged their bets in Hong Kong, and partnering themselves with Chinese factory owners fleeing Shanghai, helped reignite the colony's economy and set the stage for China's export boom of the twenty-first century (p. xxx) from which they benefited handsomely.

John Pal shows how Shanghai was a meeting place of East and West, where people from "all nations could live in harmony" (Pal, 254). Yes, it may have been home to adventurers, but it was also a safe haven for Chinese fleeing the upheavals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It even did a lot of good, with its "Anti-Kidnapping Society, Rickshaw Pullers' Welfare Organization, Anti-Opium Society, Corpse Collecting Society and hundreds of charitable bodies" (p. 256). Pal's years in Shanghai "saw old China fade away—indeed beat a hasty retreat—before the progressiveness of young, modern China" (p. 256).

Finally, Hanchao Lu shows how, even though Mao's regime was one of the most contentious in history (causing tens of millions of people to starve to death not because of war or natural disaster but from failed government policies; p. 249), ultimately "its accomplishments were remarkable" (p. 249). It ended a period of "constant warfare, political turmoil, and natural disaster [and] instilled in the Chinese people a sense unity and national rejuvenation" (p. 249). By the end of Mao's regime, life expectancy had grown from thirty-five to forty years to 65.5 and illiteracy had dropped from 85 to 90 percent to ca. 25 percent (p. 249). Yet Mao's attempt to challenge, even eliminate, traditional Chinese authority ultimately failed (p. 250). Lu's book shows that "small manifestations of individuality reveal a type of everyday resistance to party-dictated norms in private life" (p. 251) where "the pursuit of a simple pleasure [. . .] became a powerful undercurrent beneath the surface of Communist asceticism" (p. 251). The Shanghainese "developed an art of being ruled" during the Mao era (p. 255) and "this hidden legacy prepared the way for the dramatic and widespread resurgence of 'bourgeois' pleasures after Mao" (p. 255). This actually makes "the decades of Maoist isolation seem like an unfortunate but easily forgotten interlude in the city's long history of openness and adaptation" (p. 256). Let us hope that this openness will continue to allow the city to thrive.

Author Biography

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