

Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC), founded in 1949, has been the longest lasting Communist state in the world.¹ In its formative stage – the Mao era (1949–1976) – the country experienced decades of international isolation as well as political chaos, economic disasters, and cultural and social decay, causing tens of millions of premature deaths in peacetime and leading the economy to the edge of collapse. Yet not only did the regime survive, but, in the post-Mao era, the country became a global power so strong as to convince many observers that China and the United States are caught in what the political scientist Graham Allison called a Thucydides Trap, “a deadly pattern of structural stress that results when a rising power challenges a ruling one.”² Despite the never-ending predications of the “coming collapse of China” and of China’s “peaceful evolution,” there is little sign that either will come to pass in the foreseeable future.

What has given the Chinese and their system the strength to endure decades of turmoil and catastrophe yet not merely survive but thrive? Answering this question requires a multidisciplinary examination of every layer and aspect of the Communist system and Chinese society. This study, unlike most other works that try to account for the strength and endurance of China's Communist system, does not examine politics at the top level nor on a national scale, but instead explores the quotidian aspects of people's lives during the Mao era in China's largest and arguably most cosmopolitan city, Shanghai. A micro social history can be a powerful lens for perusing the real lives of people, and thus provide a human face for politics and society. And, as a Chinese metaphor puts it, by looking at one spot, the whole leopard may be inferred.

Few cities in the world have generated so many strikingly different images as Shanghai. Since the late nineteenth century, Shanghai, literally meaning “upper sea” for its location at the outlet of the Yangzi River to the Pacific, has been known as a preeminently Westernized city, a city “in China but not of it,” a city that was “another China.” Shanghai has been considered a key to understanding modern China and, in

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the eyes of most Chinese, a portal through which virtually everything foreign – which is to say, all things advanced, exciting, dangerous, and Western – flowed into the nation. In popular writings, Shanghai has been depicted as a city of foreigners, compradors, bankers, gangsters, coolies, and prostitutes. It was declared a sin city, an adventurer’s paradise, and a gigantic dye vat in which everyone was tinted the same color.³ A standard guidebook published during the heyday of the city in the 1930s describes Shanghai as a “city of amazing paradoxes and fantastic contrasts,” calling it “the beautiful, bawdy, and gaudy; [a] contradiction of manners and morals; a vast brilliantly-hued cycloramic panoramic mural of the best and the worst of Orient and Occident.”⁴ US journalist Edgar Snow (1905–1972) called it “the wickedest and most colorful city of the old Orient.”⁵ Such contradictory images also exist in the Communists’ descriptions of the city. For the Communists, Shanghai, the birthplace of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was a city with a glorious revolutionary tradition and stood at the forefront of the party’s anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism mission. At the same time, it was a “parasitic” city, the bridgehead of imperialist aggression against China, and the headquarters of China’s domestic reactionaries.⁶

Shanghai’s Fall ... or Liberation

In the middle of the night on May 24, 1949, a detachment of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) crept into Shanghai. Since there was a 9:00 p.m. curfew that day, which silenced “the city that never sleeps,” their arrival was unknown to most of the slumbering population. At dawn the next day, the troops occupied the city proper and two days later, the Communists officially declared the city “liberated.”

This was not the first time the city had experienced war and occupation. A century before, during the Opium War of 1840, Shanghai, then a prosperous port specializing in the cotton trade, was attacked and occupied by British troops, leaving the town, as an eyewitness described it, with “no pedestrians on the streets and no dogs barking.”⁷ Since then the city has been caught up in numerous wars, both domestic and international. In the early 1860s, the Taiping rebels attacked Shanghai three times and occupied the suburb of Xujiahui, just five miles west of the walled town at the center of the city. In the Republican Revolution of 1911, troops occupied the city’s Chinese districts and declared them independent of the imperial Qing dynasty. Shanghai was a battlefield in the 1924 war between the warlords of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Eight years later, Japan attacked and bombed Shanghai. During the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945, Japan occupied the Chinese portions of the city for

four years before it moved to take the core of the city – the International Settlement and the French Concession – after the outbreak of the Pacific War. The Japanese occupation continued till the end of the war in 1945.⁸

This time, things were different. The occupation was part of a great regime change and marked the beginning of what was essentially a rural-based revolution that seized and reshaped China's most industrialized and Westernized city. As the sociologist Martin King Whyte has pointed out, "China's new leaders were not, of course, country bumpkins: Most had had considerable urban experience before they took to the hills in 1927. Still, the task of bending the cities to suit the programs of the new government appeared formidable."⁹ The Communists were well aware of the challenges facing them, especially in Shanghai. The Communist leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) worried that a military occupation of Shanghai would paralyze the city. Just two months before the battle for Shanghai, Mao expressed his hesitation to Ivan Kovalev (1901–1993), the CCP's top Soviet advisor, saying it would be more difficult to govern Shanghai than to occupy it. In particular, Mao asked the Soviet Union to send experts to help with governing the city.¹⁰

The takeover of Shanghai turned out to be surprisingly uneventful. For two months before the Communist military attack, the PLA had troops stationed in Danyang, a town in Jiangsu about 130 miles north of Shanghai. The battle of Shanghai was fiercely fought, but mainly in the rural areas surrounding the city. To avoid "being caught like rats in a china shop," as war in the city proper was described, the Communists adopted a strategy of luring the Nationalist army in Shanghai to fight on the outskirts of the city, and it worked. Meanwhile, the CCP's subversive cells, which had actively operated underground for decades in the city, also played a crucial role. They managed to incite a number of defections of Nationalist military leaders, including an army corps commander who ordered his more than 10,000 troops stationed in the city to put down their weapons. The CCP's strong underground network within various trade unions played a key role in preventing the Nationalists from implementing an intended scorched earth plan, leaving the city to fall into the Communists' hands largely intact.

By the time the PLA reached the city proper after midnight of Tuesday, May 24, it was remarkably quiet. George Wang (1927–), a local resident who was at the time employed by the *China Weekly Review*, an American edited English-language newspaper published in Shanghai, recalled that while he was on his way to the office in the morning of May 25, "apart from the fighting along [Suzhou] creek, everything else downtown seemed perfectly normal. There were cars and trams on the streets; people were walking to work or back from the market

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as usual.... Everything looked the same as ever, even the policemen on the street.”¹¹ Just two days earlier, the Nationalist government had organized a parade on Shanghai’s streets to celebrate its “victory” in defending the city. Although people were skeptical of the claim of victory, no one realized that it was completely ridiculous, nor that the fall of the city to the Communists was imminent, not to mention that it would be uneventful.

“Shanghai was the greatest colonial city the world has ever known,” historian Ian McLachlan melodramatically wrote, “but when it fell, nothing happened.”¹² Mak Lai-heung, then a journalist in Shanghai, recalled that the radio was still broadcasting music after midnight on Tuesday, only it went on and on – apparently no one was at work in the studio. The music was Beethoven’s Ninth, and Mak literally hailed the day – and the historical event – amid that music:

By two there was nothing happening, so we switched it off and went to bed. The next morning I ventured out into the street and I saw the Liberation army men sleeping right there at the entrance to our lane. I went over and talked to one of them who was awake. I said “When did you get here?” He said “one o’clock in the morning.” We were still listening to the radio at that time and they were already outside. They made no noise at all (see Figure I.1).¹³



Figure I.1 Communist soldiers resting on the sidewalks of Shanghai after taking over the city during the night of May 25, 1949. The soldiers’ pillows are their bags of millet and each soldier carries an enamel bowl for food and water. The PLA issued a “do not disturb the residents” order upon entering Shanghai, contributing to the military’s reputation as a genuine “people’s army.” *Source:* Shanghai Municipal Library.

It was all over by Wednesday morning. Residents noted that by 9:00 a.m., “shopkeepers in the side streets were even taking down their shutters and opening up for business.”¹⁴ Robert Guillain (1908–1998), a French journalist who was in Shanghai at the time, sent a cable to *Le Monde* reporting what he saw:

Shanghai, 25 May.—This morning, I saw the Communist spearhead arrive at the heart of Shanghai along the Nanking Road and the Bund. At the foot of the giant buildings, small, khaki-clad, mud-spattered young men advanced methodically. They were moving in small groups, hugging the walls in the empty streets and jumping from one crossing to the next.... During their short periods of rest, these peasant-soldiers craned their necks to stare at the tops of the 15- or 20-storey buildings, an obviously unfamiliar sight to them.¹⁵

Soon thousands of Communist soldiers and cadres, mostly from rural Shandong and northern Jiangsu, were handed responsibility for running the city. Parades were organized on the major boulevards of the city, ceremonially announcing the birth of a new regime (Figure I.2). By the



Figure I.2 Spectators at a government-organized Liberation parade on October 8, 1949, at Bubbling Well Road (West Nanjing Road) near the corner of Gordon Road (Jiangning Road). Unlike Communist propaganda that portrayed the audience as enthusiastic citizens welcoming liberators, most people in the city had little idea of what to expect in the new era. Anxiety, apprehension, and curiosity were the main chord of the day. Photo by Jin Shisheng (1910–2000). *Source:* Shanghai Photographers Association.



Figure I.3 (a) *Left*, Huang Jinrong (1868–1953), Shanghai’s most senior gangster, confessed to his role in the 1949 Liberation and submitted a confession to the authorities. Nicknamed “Pockmarked King,” he was a prominent figure in the French Concession and, as one of the leaders of the so-called Green Gang, operated in cahoots with Chiang Kai-shek. Huang’s confession, which was published in the *People’s Daily* on May 20, 1951, read in part, “to return the great kindness of the People’s Government to the counterrevolutionaries.” (b) *Right*, To show the public that Huang had totally reformed himself, he swept the street with a broom and, at the age of 83, he swept the street in front of the Great World Theatre. *Source*: Xinhua News Agency.

summer of 1949, not much seemed to have changed. Shanghai was still ablaze with neon lights and its major boulevards were still lined with luxury shops and nightclubs. Soldiers patrolling the streets downtown exclaimed, “Even the wind on Nanjing Road smells fragrant.”¹⁶ But thereafter changes came quickly. Just eight months after the takeover, an American who flew on a Nationalist air raid over the city proclaimed, “From a Chinese air force B-25 over this Communist held metropolis, it is plain that Shanghai is a dying city.”¹⁷ On the ground, the city crawled with rich conspirators who believed in the power of corruption and whispered to each other: “The Reds are arriving in Shanghai, but they will soon become black here.”¹⁸ According to private reports from the city, many Shanghainese were “still denouncing the existing Government in private while cooperating with it in public and hoping for deliverance by somebody else.”¹⁹

But all those who thought Shanghai was dying, or that it would seduce the Communists, or that “deliverance” was just around the corner were soon to be disappointed. In fact, after Liberation (as the Communist takeover is commonly called in China), as one author put it, “Shanghai made the transition to life without John Bull and Uncle Sam quite smoothly.”²⁰ Within just a few months, the Communists had established a well-run government and successfully crushed currency speculation and contained inflation, two huge problems that to a great extent led to the downfall of the previous regime. In less than three years, the new government had decisively eliminated the major social vices of prostitution, drug trafficking, and gambling. The city’s notoriously powerful gangs were pulverized (Figures I.3a and I.3b). Shanghai, the city where the CCP was secretly founded with just twelve delegates twenty-eight years earlier, was now firmly in the grip of the Communists.

In the next three decades, the city, like the nation, was largely cut off from the rest of the world and became a major locus of Maoist politics and programs (Figures I.4a and I.4b). It bore the brunt of numerous political campaigns and finally became the breeding ground of the Gang of Four, the Maoist radical clique that was a mainstay of the disastrous Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Economically, the Communists vowed to transform Shanghai from a city of consumption to a city of production. Building on the city’s manufacturing foundation inherited from its colonial past, new industries, especially light industry, were developed. For decades after 1949, “made in Shanghai” meant quality and style, and consumer products from Shanghai were coveted by customers throughout the country.

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Figure I.4 Mao's regime excelled in mass mobilization and propaganda. (a) *Left*, Residents of two alleyways on Pingliang Road in northeastern Shanghai listen to a radio broadcast about China's new Marriage Law, implemented on May 1, 1950. The law 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. (b) *Right*, Teaching revolutionary songs in a Shanghai alley, ca. 1952. *Source*: Shanghai Municipal Library.

However, under the socialist planned economy, the central government treated Shanghai as a cash cow. For more than three decades, the city contributed an astonishing one-sixth of the central government's annual revenue, leaving little for the city's own needs. By the end of the Mao era in 1976, Shanghai was a jam-packed metropolis of over ten million people. It has remained China's largest and most industrialized city, but its urban infrastructure very much lagged behind: By the end of the 1970s, average residential housing space per capita was 4.5 square meters and average paved street space per capita was only 0.8 square meters.²¹

The State–Society Paradigm

China's most capitalistic and cosmopolitan city was thus engulfed in the Maoist rural-based revolution and run by a zealous Communist administration. Two decades after the takeover, in the words of historian

Anthony Kubek (1920–2003), the thriving metropolis known as “the New York of the Far East” was reduced “from the fourth largest port in the world and great international clearinghouse for trade and ideas, to a sullen Chinese provincial town under the iron heel of a Communist agrarian bureaucracy with little sympathy for urban peoples in general and none for those in Shanghai in particular.”²² Despite its Cold War tone, this assessment was largely correct. But a key question, even after another half a century has passed, remains: How did ordinary people cope with the extraordinary changes brought by the regime change and Mao’s continuous revolution thereafter? To what extent did the city’s old cosmopolitanism survive? Does Shanghai’s stunning resurgence as a global megacity today represent a complete break with the Maoist “dark ages” half a century ago or might it have its roots there? What does Shanghai’s experience tell us about the nature of Communist rule in China, and, despite its twists and turns, does any of that experience remain relevant today?

For decades, writings about the Mao era have mostly looked at the politics within the Communist Party, political campaigns, and their ramifications in society. Given the Communists’ one-party rule and limited information on a society that was largely closed at the time, this approach was appropriate and sensible. In recent years more scholars have started, with good reason, to treat the period as a historical subject and to view the Mao era from a bottom-up perspective. Chronologically speaking, inasmuch as the era ended with Mao’s death nearly half a century ago and epic changes have occurred since then, it is now truly a part of history. Practically speaking, the opening of various archives in China (though in many cases the opening is still partial), the possibility of conducting fieldwork at the local level, and the availability of unofficial materials (*minjian ziliao*) via unconventional channels, such as flea markets and private collections, have greatly diversified scholarly approaches to the era and contributed to a new trend of exploring Mao’s China from below.²³ A more profound reason, however, has to do with philosophy: In attempting to know the history of a nation, the lives of the common people and the everyday rhythm of grassroots society are now seen as important as – if not more important than – elite politics.

The result is that research in the field has revealed a more complex and multidimensional picture of Mao’s China, exceeding what we knew just a decade or so ago. One area of particular concern has been the limits of the state versus society paradigm, an issue raised by Elizabeth Perry some twenty-five years ago.²⁴ As has now been well documented, for most of the Mao era, a radical ideology based on the notion of class

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struggle reigned supreme in the party and dictated the course of the party's policies.²⁵ In the CCP's post-Mao political language, there had been a persistent "left" deviation in the Mao era, which obstructed the party's "correct line."²⁶ We now also know that the factionalism within the party was not limited to a struggle among the party's top leaders, but involved all levels of the party-state apparatus.²⁷ Sporadically, moderate party leaders were able to implement some relatively mild or pragmatic policies on the ground while legitimizing them with Mao's own words. Simply put, the state itself had a split personality.

Society was also divided, and in fact in its dealings with the party's politics it was more variegated than the party itself. First of all, the majority of the people were all too ready to take advantage of the divisions at the top and find nooks and crannies where they could, to one extent or another, think and act as they wished. Then, there was a considerable portion of the population who were eager to swim in the mainstream of Maoism in order to advance their own interests. Furthermore, there were people who wangled and finagled in order to get on in the system no matter what direction the wind blew. All these various responses were frequently entangled with the party's own fractures and inconsistent policies that, like a pendulum, swung from one extreme to the other. Any view of Mao's China that sees no more than simple dichotomies cannot help but be blind to the heterogeneity in society and to some of the most intriguing, revealing, and significant aspects of society in those years.

Building on this understanding, this book aims to provide a multidimensional portrait of daily life in Shanghai during the Mao era, with a "thick description" (to use anthropologist Clifford Geertz's term) of how a wide array of people, including industrialists, intellectuals, students, factory workers, and what were generally called "petty urbanites" (*xiao shimin*, or "little urbanites"), denizens of the city's crowded alleyway house (*lilong*) neighborhoods, actively coped with "high socialism" in the search of material well-being, social status, intellectual satisfaction, and aesthetic pleasure.²⁸ This search was not always in compliance with the party's dictates; quite the opposite, it often defied political orthodoxy, even if the defiance was mostly unintentional.

There were a number of the party's proclaimed principles and their associated policies that facilitated the above-mentioned activism at a time of Maoist political oppression and material scarcity. Before perusing snapshots of how these policies were implemented on the ground and the contextual details of how people exploited the party's policies for their own benefit, it is necessary to put into perspective the party's principles and policies that helped make grassroots-level activism possible.